

El Salvador's Gangs & Prevailing Gang Paradigms in a Post-Truce Context

By

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Abstract

This paper examines the relevance of prevailing gang paradigms as it relates to the case of El Salvador. It is particularly concerned with the concept of 'Third Generation Gangs,' which holds that Salvadoran street gangs are becoming sophisticated political actors seeking to maintain an international reach, and are increasingly capable of confronting the state.

El Salvador is in the midst of a violent upheaval. In 2012, El Salvador's two main street gangs signed a truce, which was tacitly endorsed and facilitated by the government. However, following the breakdown of the truce, violence in El Salvador has rapidly escalated, with the gangs increasingly targeting security forces.

This paper discusses whether this rising violence is indicative of the gangs' collective maturation process into a 'Third Generation Gang,' or, alternatively, if autonomous spasms of violence by individual gang factions as a means of self-preservation are being misinterpreted as a collective maturation process.

Executive Summary

El Salvador is experiencing a violent upheaval. Following the breakdown of a 2012 truce between the country's two main street gangs—the *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Barrio 18* (18th Street)—homicide levels have soared. The gangs' leaders are demanding the Salvadoran government revive the truce by supporting peace talks, promising to incite violence and attacks against security forces until this happens. The experience of the truce, and the nature of violence after its disintegration, raises the question of whether the gangs are collectively evolving into more sophisticated actors or if violence resulting from self-preservation efforts by individual gang factions is being misinterpreted as collective maturation.

The concept of 'Third Generation Gangs' has frequently been used to understand gang evolution. It holds that gangs evolve through three generations, with some eventually becoming sophisticated transnational entities with developed political and economic goals. However, evidence suggests that El Salvador's MS-13 and *Barrio 18* are not collectively maturing into third generation gangs, with rising bloodshed occurring more as a result of autonomous spasms of violence by individual gang factions.

Furthermore, in examining the relevance of third generation gang studies as it relates to the current experience of El Salvador, this paper finds the concept is lacking in explanatory power for understanding the current stage of Salvadoran gang development. In other words, it fails to provide an adequate account of the factors and processes driving gang evolution, which would enable a more accurate and predictive understanding of the nuances facilitating gang maturation.

Introduction

In March 2012, news became public that El Salvador's two largest street gangs, the *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18*, had negotiated a truce. Over the next 14 months, El Salvador saw a significant decline in homicide levels. Yet violence began rising in the latter half of 2013 and throughout 2014. So far, 2015 is on track to be the bloodiest year in El Salvador since the end of its civil war, and the country may have the highest homicide rate in the world by year's end. The gangs, whose leaders have been demanding the government reinstitute the truce, are fueling this violence.

The truce has led to concerns that the gangs have become more powerful and sophisticated, transitioning into political actors that are capable of directly confronting the state—a phenomenon potentially manifesting itself in the current wave of violence. To explore this proposition, this paper will examine the concept of ‘Third Generation Gangs’—a leading paradigm for understanding gang evolution—which holds that some gangs evolve through three generations.

To begin, a brief history of the MS-13 and *Barrio 18*’s origins will be presented, followed by a discussion of the factors surrounding the 2012 truce and rising violence in its wake. The paper will then introduce third generation gang studies, briefly summarizing the characteristics of each gang generation. Lastly, the effects of the truce on the gangs—and the nature of post-truce violence—will be explored to examine if the gangs are collectively evolving into third generation gangs, and whether or not the paradigm holds sufficient explanatory power for understanding El Salvador’s gangs in a post-truce context.

Origins of the MS-13 & Barrio 18

The rival *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio 18* gangs both trace their roots to the United States.¹ Formed by Mexican youths in Los Angeles in the 1960s, the *Barrio 18* was the first Hispanic gang in the city to accept members of different races and nationalities.² The gang grew significantly during the late 1970s and early 1980s owing to an influx of Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees fleeing civil wars in their respective countries.³ The MS-13 was formed in the latter half of the 1980s by a second wave of Salvadoran refugees settling in Los Angeles. As outsiders in the United States, young men arriving from Central America as refugees sought to

¹ There are two terms used in describing the Central America gang phenomenon. “*Mara*” connotes a larger, more sophisticated structure with transnational origins. “*Pandilla*” generally refers to smaller, locally-focused street gangs, whose territory may only consist of a neighborhood or series of streets. *Pandillas* are generally considered as having a historical presence in the region, while *maras* are a more recent phenomenon. The general term “gang” will be used throughout this paper when referring to the MS-13 and Barrio 18. Seelke, Clare Ribando. “Gangs in Central America.” *Congressional Research Service*, no. RL34112 (2014). Accessed September 14, 2015, 2.; Jütersonke, Oliver, Robert Muggah, and Dennis Rodgers. “Gangs and Violence Reduction in Central America.” *Security Dialogue* 40, no. 4-5 (2009), 7.

² Seelke, “Gangs in Central America,” 2.

³ The Salvadoran civil war was fought from 1980 to 1992. Guatemala’s civil war was much longer, lasting from 1960 until 1996.

incorporate themselves into the gangs for purposes of inclusion and protection.⁴ By the early 1990s, the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* had become bitter rivals.⁵

Beginning in the mid-1990s, the United States began deporting Central American gang members en masse. This process was accelerated when, in 1996, the US Congress passed the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act, which ensured non-US citizens sentenced to a year or more in prison would be repatriated to their country of origin. As a result, between 1998 and 2005 the United States deported almost 46,000 convicts to Central America—in essence “exporting” a Los Angeles gang culture to El Salvador and neighboring countries.⁶

Upon arriving in El Salvador, many MS-13 and *Barrio 18* gang members found themselves to be outsiders, having spent little (if any) time in their native countries. They therefore perpetuated the gang structures that had provided them with support and security in the United States. Over time, the recruitment of new members—along with the influence of Salvadoran domestic factors—has resulted in the evolution and growth of the MS-13 and *Barrio 18*. Today, the two gangs count a significant number of members among their ranks in El Salvador, and engage in a broad array of criminal activities.

The MS-13 & *Barrio 18* in El Salvador

Membership & Structure

Estimates of total gang membership in Central America vary. A 2012 US State Department approximation put the total number of gang members in the Northern Triangle countries (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) as high as 85,000.⁷ A 2012 estimate from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), however, pegged the figure at 54,000, with 20,000

⁴ Rodgers, Dennis, and Robert Muggah. "Gangs as Non-state Armed Groups: The Central American Case." *Contemporary Security Policy* 30, no. 2 (2009), 6.

⁵ For an account of the gangs' beginnings in Los Angeles and the origins of their rivalry see: Martínez, Carlos, and José Luis Sanz. "I. El Origen Del Odio." *El Faro*. August 6, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.salanegra.elfaro.net/es/201208/cronicas/9301/>.

⁶ Rodgers & Muggah, "Gangs as Non-state," 6.; Jütersonke, "Gangs and Violence," 8.

⁷ Seelke, "Gangs in Central America," 3.

gang members in El Salvador, 12,000 in Honduras, and 22,000 in Guatemala.⁸ In El Salvador alone, 470,000 people have been estimated to have gang connections.⁹

The MS-13 and *Barrio 18* in El Salvador each have a tiered gang structure, although they differ slightly in configuration. Regarding the MS-13, the gang's base is composed of *clicas*, or cliques, that consist of 15 to several dozen members each, and are extremely local in focus and scope, typically only controlling a neighborhood or street.¹⁰ Individual cliques are organized into a larger bloc of several dozen cliques called a *programa*, which is under the authority of a mid-level leader known as a *palabrero*. At the next level is a *ranflero*, a gang leader who is typically imprisoned but whose orders are relayed and carried out. Above the *ranfleros* are *jefes nacionales*, or national leaders, almost all of whom are imprisoned and exercise final decision-making authority on issues affecting El Salvador's entire MS-13 structure.¹¹

The *Barrio 18*—considered to be more violent and less sophisticated than the MS-13—has a somewhat different structure. At the top are *palabreritos*, or gang leaders, that operate from the prison system and coordinate the gang's activities.¹² There are also *palabreritos en la libre*, or those leaders who are outside the prison system and are responsible for carrying out the orders of imprisoned leaders, such as overseeing the extortion system and planning homicides. Below these *palabreritos* are leaders called *canchas*, who each control several *tribus*, or tribes, that each consist of several dozen to hundreds of members.¹³ Furthermore—and of particular importance

⁸ Even low-end estimates of gang membership imply there are more gang members than military personnel in Central America. El Salvador has the highest concentration of gang members, with some 323 for every 100,000 citizens; double that of Guatemala and Honduras. *Ibid.*; Jütersonke, "Gangs and Violence," 5.

⁹ Bargent, James. "Nearly Half a Million Salvadorans Connected to Street Gangs: Study." InSight Crime. May 28, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/nearly-half-a-million-salvadorans-connected-to-street-gangs-study>.

¹⁰ In El Salvador, it has been estimated there are over 2,000 cliques affiliated with six main gangs. Other gangs active in El Salvador besides the MS-13 and Barrio 18 include, among others, the Mao Mao, Maquina, and Mirada Locos 13. *Ibid.*

¹¹ Farah, Douglas. "Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil." 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015, 6.

¹² Dudley, Steven. "Barrio 18 in El Salvador: A View from the Inside." InSight Crime. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/barrio-18-el-salvador-view-from-inside>.

¹³ There are an estimated 28 Barrio 18 *tribus* in all of El Salvador, compared with around 250 MS-13 cliques. This suggests the MS-13 in El Salvador has a much more intimate and coordinated structure than the Barrio 18. Additionally, it is not uncommon for Barrio 18 cells to be referred to as cliques, being something of a general term when referring to local gang groups. As such, "clique" will be used interchangeably throughout the remainder of the paper when referring to the gangs' base-level groups. *Ibid.*

for understanding gang dynamics in El Salvador—in 2005, the *Barrio 18* divided into two major and competing factions, the *Revolucionarios* and the *Sureños*.¹⁴

Despite the gangs' respective hierarchy, however, local MS-13 and *Barrio 18* leaders exercise a broad degree of autonomy (the MS-13's tighter structure suggests it is less autonomous than the *Barrio 18*). The cliques, for instance, exercise wide discretion over the relationships they maintain with other gang and non-gang groups, and the type of criminal activity they conduct. Each clique is largely self-sufficient and responsible for its own financial well-being, meaning it decides for itself how to raise money and distribute criminal proceeds.¹⁵ Rodgers and Muggah explain that, while each clique is explicitly affiliated with either the MS-13 or *Barrio 18*, “neither gang is a real federal structure... That is, neither the *Barrio 18* or MS-13 answer to a single chain of command, and their ‘umbrella’ nature is more symbolic of a particular historical origin than demonstrative of any real unity, be it of leadership or action.”¹⁶

Gang Activities

Taken as a whole, the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* are involved in a broad array of illicit activities. At the local level, this largely involves opportunistic crime, with ‘*la renta*,’ or extortion, being the gangs' most important revenue source. In areas they control, the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* extort virtually all businesses, with the transportation sector particularly targeted.¹⁷ The gangs also engage in—among other crimes—kidnapping, vehicular theft, petty drug dealing, and murder-for-hire in their areas of influence.

There have also been suggestions the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* in El Salvador may be partaking in transnational criminal activities, such as working for Mexican drug cartels to protect drug shipments transiting Salvadoran territory or participating in the region's illicit arms trade—although to date such claims appear to be overblown.¹⁸ Moreover, by the mid-2000s, US law

¹⁴ Martínez, Carlos. "The El Salvador Gang Rebellion That Made Zacatecoluca Bleed: Part 1." InSight Crime. November 12, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/the-el-salvador-gang-rebellion-that-made-zacatecoluca-bleed-part-1>.

¹⁵ Farah, “Central American Gangs,” 6.

¹⁶ Jütersonke, “Gangs and Violence,” 8.

¹⁷ It has been estimated that Salvadorans pay \$400 million annually in extortion, with the transportation sector paying around \$34 million of this amount. Dudley, Steven, and Michael Lohmuller. "Northern Triangle Is World's Extortion Hotspot." InSight Crime. July 1, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/northern-triangle-world-extortion-hotspot>.

¹⁸ According to Jütersonke, Rodgers, and Muggah, the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* “tend to serve as a local security apparatus for the smaller cartels, or as informally connected street vendors. Gangs are seldom involved in the large-scale or transnational movement of narcotics, nor do they wholesale.” Jütersonke, “Gangs and Violence,” 9.

enforcement had discovered evidence of jailed MS-13 leaders in El Salvador ordering assassinations on individuals in the Washington, D.C. area.¹⁹

Gang-driven Violence & Security Policy

The criminal activities of the gangs have significantly contributed to El Salvador's high levels of violence and insecurity.²⁰ To combat crime and gang activity, El Salvador has traditionally favored repressive strategies focused on heavy-handed anti-gang policies. In July 2003, the government of Salvadoran President Francisco Flores enacted a *Mano Dura* (Iron Fist) policy known as the *Ley Antimaras* (Anti-Gang Law). This law made gang membership illegal, and gave complete authority to the police—and sometimes to military personnel—to conduct arrests based on arbitrary evidence.²¹ This resulted in the mass roundup and incarceration of suspected gang members, with roughly 20,000 arrested between July 2003 and August 2004. In July 2004—after El Salvador's Supreme Court declared the *Ley Antimaras* unconstitutional—a new *Mano Super Dura* package of anti-gang reforms was implemented. This stiffened the penalties for gang membership by lengthening prison sentences, and by 2009 El Salvador's prison population had doubled from 6,000 to 12,000 prisoners.²²

¹⁹ The FBI estimates the MS-13 has a presence in almost all 50 states, with a strong presence in Washington DC; Northern Virginia; areas of Maryland; Nashville, Tennessee; New York City; and Houston, Texas. On October 11, 2012, the US Treasury Department designated the MS-13 as a significant transnational criminal organization whose assets will be targeted for economic sanctions. Seelke, "Gangs in Central America," 4.; Franco, Celinda. "The MS-13 and 18th Street Gangs: Emerging Transnational Gang Threats?" *Congressional Research Service*, no. RL34233 (2008). Wikileaks Document Release. Accessed September 14, 2015, 2.; Franco, "MS-13 and 18th Street Gangs," 1-2.

²⁰ In 2000, according to data from the World Bank, the country had an intentional homicide rate of 39 per 100,000 people. By 2011—the year before a controversial gang truce was implemented—this rate had jumped to 70. A homicide rate of 10 per 100,000 or higher is generally considered to be epidemic levels. "Intentional Homicides (per 100,000 People)." World Bank Data. Accessed September 14, 2015.

<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5>; A 2014 study on perceptions of insecurity by the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP) also found 65% of Salvadorans identified security as the most important problem facing the country, and almost 19% identified as having been the victim of a crime in the previous 12 months. Gurney, Kyra. "Perceptions of Insecurity Increasing in LatAm: Report." InSight Crime. December 9, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/perceptions-of-insecurity-increasing-in-latin-america>; Dudley, Steven. "5 Things the El Salvador Gang Truce Has Taught Us." InSight Crime. March 12, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/5-things-el-salvador-gang-truce-taught-us>.

²¹ Evidence of gang membership included tattoos, hand signals, some dress codes, and physical appearances. Bruneau, "Pandillas and Security," 161.

²² Prison terms were lengthened to up to five years for gang members and nine years for gang leaders. In 2011, El Salvador's prison system, with a capacity for 8,000 prisoners, was holding around 24,000 inmates, at least one-third for gang-related crimes. Jütersonke, "Gangs and Violence," 10.; Bruneau, Thomas. "Pandillas and Security in Central America." *Latin American Research Review* 49 (2014): 152-72. 162.

Nonetheless, El Salvador's *Mano Dura* policies served to exacerbate the gang problem. Evidence indicates the violence reduction benefits of heavy-handed anti-gang measures are temporary and tenuous, and actually tend to generate perverse effects.²³ Indeed, repressive tactics have generally encouraged the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* to adapt and become more organized.²⁴ The mass imprisonment of gang members—along with suspected gang members—appears to have facilitated gang organization by turning prisons into “schools of crime” and recruitment centers. This was aided by the Salvadoran government's decision to segregate prisons based on gang membership to avoid inter-gang conflict—meaning MS-13 and *Barrio 18* members were placed in prisons where their gang exercised complete hegemony over inmate dynamics. The prisons also allowed members from various regional cliques of the same gang to establish contact and connections with one another, allowing for stronger gang structure and coordination.²⁵ Bruneau describes the mass incarceration of gang members as converting the prisons into a sort of permanent assembly, where gang members could debate, make pacts, and decide on gang strategy.²⁶ This dynamic was clearly evident in early 2012, when imprisoned MS-13 and *Barrio 18* leaders negotiated and implemented a gang truce.

The Truce

In March 2012, Salvadoran news agency *El Faro* reported that truce negotiations were taking place between the rival MS-13 and *Barrio 18* groups.²⁷ That month, Security and Justice

²³ Lohmuller, Michael. "Should El Salvador Renew the Gang Truce?" InSight Crime. August 3, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/new-study-offers-guidance-for-future-latam-gang-truces>.

²⁴ For instance, many gang members in El Salvador stopped getting tattooed, and began showing less obvious gang signs and symbols to avoid detection and arrest. Jütersonke, “Gangs and Violence,” 12.

²⁵ The prison system has come to play an important role in the culture and functions of the MS-13 and *Barrio 18*. Orders generally emanate from imprisoned leaders to members on the streets, with members on the streets providing revenue and other goods for those in prison. This system rests partly on the logic that all gang members will end up in prison at one point or another, and will need the protection and good graces of incarcerated gang leaders when they arrive—a form of “prison insurance” so to speak.

²⁶ Bruneau, “Pandillas and Security,” 163.

²⁷ The government's relationship with the truce has always been somewhat complicated, with critics consistently deploring a lack of transparency. For instance, immediately after news of the truce first broke, El Salvador President Mauricio Funes said the government did not negotiate with the gangs, but instead “accompanied” the process and “facilitated” the agreement. Martínez, Óscar, Carlos Martínez, Sergio Arauz, and Efrén Lemus. "Gobierno Negoció Con Pandillas Reducción De Homicidios." *El Faro*. March 14, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201203/noticias/7985/>; Ramsey, Geoffrey. "Is El Salvador Negotiating with Street Gangs?" InSight Crime. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/is-el-salvador-negotiating-with-street-gangs/>; Pachico, Elyssa, and Steven Dudley. "Govt-'Facilitated' Gang Truce in Salvador Sets Dangerous Regional Precedent." InSight Crime. March 29, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-president-denies-negotiating-with-gangs>.

Minister David Munguia Payes agreed to transfer around 30 MS-13 and *Barrio 18* gang leaders from maximum-security institutions to less restrictive prisons.²⁸ The prison transfers were intended to facilitate talks between the gang leaders and government-sanctioned facilitators, and enable gang leaders to more easily communicate with members on the streets and order a halt to violence. In exchange for a reduction in violence, MS-13 and *Barrio 18* leaders asked the government to implement rehabilitation and job training programs for gang members, and to improve prison conditions.²⁹

The truce resulted in an immediate and sustained reduction in violence. By April homicides had dropped almost 60%, and violence stayed down through 2012: the Salvadoran National Police (PNC) registered a total of 2,576 murders for the year, a 41% drop from the 4,371 murders in 2011.³⁰ In January 2013, the first of a number of “peace zones” were implemented in municipalities across the country.³¹ In these areas the gangs promised to cease all criminal activity in exchange for a reduction in police harassment and the opportunity to participate in education and job training programs. Homicide levels continued to stay down

²⁸ The Salvadoran government maintained an awkward relationship with the truce throughout its existence, and initially rejected suggestions it had a hand in establishing negotiations. For instance, Minister Payes denied his involvement in facilitating the truce until September 2012. Raul Mijango—a former guerrilla and congressman—and Fabio Colindres—a Catholic Bishop—served as the main intermediaries to help broker the truce. Martínez, Carlos, and Jose Luis Sanz. "Iglesia Católica Asegura Que Medió En Un Acuerdo De Paz Entre La MS-13 Y El Barrio 18." *El Faro*. March 20, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.elfaro.net/es/201203/noticias/8063/>; Looft, Christopher. "Church Brokered El Salvador Gang Truce: Bishop." *InSight Crime*. March 21, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/church-brokered-el-salvador-gang-truce-bishop>.

²⁹ Gang leaders also promised to stop recruiting children, hand over some weapons, and work towards establishing a permanent truce. Stone, Hannah. "Govt Tries to Solidify Gains of El Salvador Gang Truce." *InSight Crime*. April 22, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/govt-pins-hope-on-jobs-scheme-to-solidify-gains-of-salvador-gang-truce>.

³⁰ Stone, Hannah. "El Salvador Sees Almost 60% Drop in Murders in April, As Gang Truce Holds." *InSight Crime*. May 1, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-sees-almost-60-drop-in-murders-in-april-as-gang-truce-holds>. Fox, Edward. "El Salvador Homicides Fell Over 40% in 2012." *InSight Crime*. January 4, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-homicides-fell-over-40-percent-2012>;

³¹ Truce negotiators first proposed the peace zones in November 2012, and gang leaders agreed to implementation in December 2012. Stone, Hannah. "Next Phase of Salvador Gang Truce: Peace Zones." *InSight Crime*. November 23, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/next-phase-salvador-gang-truce-peace-zones>; Pachico, Elyssa. "El Salvador Gangs Accept Proposal to Create 'Peace Zones'" *InSight Crime*. December 5, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-accept-peace-zones>; Wells, Miriam. "El Salvador 'Peace Zone' Launched in Second Phase of Gang Truce." *InSight Crime*. January 23, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-peace-zone-launched-in-second-phase-of-gang-truce>.

through mid-2013, and between March 2012 and May 2013 the Salvadoran government reported homicides declined from an average of 14 to six per day.³²

Despite the reduction in homicides, however, the truce quickly came under public scrutiny and criticism. Questions and doubts surrounded the gangs' intentions in negotiating the truce, as well as the government's lack of transparency regarding its role in bringing the truce to life. Skeptics were particularly concerned the government was inadvertently legitimizing the gangs and granting them status as political actors. Critics also pointed to the truce's inability to reduce other crimes. For instance, the gangs never fully ceased extorting, and gang leaders explicitly refused to do so until the government opened paths for more formal, legitimate means of earning an income. The number of disappeared persons also increased during the truce, doubling between 2012 and 2013.³³ Among the skeptics of the truce was the belief that homicide levels stayed largely the same, with the gangs simply "disappearing" their victims so they could not be counted in statistics.³⁴

Widespread public skepticism fed into El Salvador's election cycle politics—which turned the subject of the truce into a political hot potato—and contributed to the truce's disintegration.³⁵ In May 2013, Security Minister Payes—one of the main architects of the gang

³²This made 2012 El Salvador's least violent year since 2003, when 2,195 murders were registered. Additionally, in 2013, homicides through May were 45% lower than the same period in 2012. Seelke, "Gangs in Central America," 11.; Fox, "El Salvador Homicides Fell Over 40% in 2012."; Bargent, James. "El Salvador Sees 45% Drop in Murders: Police." InSight Crime. March 2, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-homicides-gang-truce-2013>.

³³ Bargent, "El Salvador Sees."; Zablach, Nelson. "Se Duplica Cifra De Personas Desaparecidas En 2013." La Prensa Grafica. December 19, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.laprensagrafica.com/2013/12/19/se-duplica-cifra-de-personas-desaparecidas-en-2013>.; Bargent, James. "Disappearances, Clandestine Graves on Rise in El Salvador." InSight Crime. March 8, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/disappearances- clandestine-graves-rise-el-salvador>.

³⁴ I, for one, find the evidence supporting such arguments convincing. For instance, along with the doubling of disappeared persons between 2012 and 2013 came an increase in the number of clandestine mass graves discovered in the country, some holding as many as 44 bodies. Dudley, Steven. "Mass Graves Burying the Truth about El Salvador Gang Truce." InSight Crime. 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/homicides-mass-graves-and-truth-about-el-salvador-gang-truce>.

³⁵ Ahead of February 2014 elections, politicians from the opposition *Alianza Republicana Nacionalista* (ARENA) party used the gang truce to attack the ruling *Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional* (FMLN) party of President Funes, accusing the FMLN of negotiating with criminals.

truce—was ousted from his position.³⁶ The Funes administration began withdrawing support for truce mediators and negotiators, and violence levels in El Salvador began increasing.³⁷

Violence Peaks

During 2015, violence in El Salvador surged to critical levels, and began to accelerate in January when MS-13 and *Barrio 18* gang leaders were transferred back to maximum-security prisons.³⁸ In February, Ricardo Salvador Martínez—head of police internal affairs—declared that “we’re at war” with the gangs.³⁹ March then set a record as the most violent month since the end

³⁶ The Supreme Court declared his appointment unconstitutional. Silva Avalos, Hector, and Steven Dudley. "Exit of El Salvador Security Minister Puts Gang Truce at Risk." InSight Crime. May 20, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/exit-of-el-salvador-security-minister-puts-gang-truce-at-risk>.

³⁷ Payes' replacement, Ricardo Perdomo, made it clear he had no intention of fostering dialogue between the gangs, and decided to block the channels of dialogue between imprisoned MS-13 and Barrio 18 leaders, as well as between these leaders and their representatives outside of prison. Robbins, Seth. "Can El Salvador Gang Truce Survive Presidential Campaign?" InSight Crime. August 5, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015.

<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-gang-truce-battered-by-electioneering>.; Martinez, Carlos, and Jose Luis Sanz. "How El Salvador's Security Ministry Dismantled Truce, Unleashed Mayhem." InSight Crime. May 28, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/how-el-salvadors-security-ministry-dismantled-truce-unleashed-mayhem>.

³⁸ While 2013 ended with a homicide rate 4% lower than 2012, murders began to rise in the second half of the year. This trend continued into 2014—in March of that year PNC director Rigoberto Pleites declared the truce to be “technically” over— with homicides reaching pre-truce levels by mid-July. By year’s end, 3,912 homicides had occurred—a 57% increase over 2013. Gurney, Kyra. "Homicides in El Salvador Reach Pre-Gang Truce Levels." InSight Crime. July 8, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/homicides-in-el-salvador-reach-pre-truce-levels>.; Lohmuller, Michael. "El Salvador Gang Truce 'Technically' Finished: Police." InSight Crime. March 4, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gang-truce-technically-finished-police>.; Lohmuller, Michael. "El Salvador Murders Fall Slightly for 2013, but Rising Again." InSight Crime. January 14, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-murders-fall-slightly-in-2013-but-rising-again>.; Gurney, Kyra. "El Salvador Homicides Skyrocket After Gang Truce Unravels." InSight Crime. January 9, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015.

<http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-homicides-skyrocket-after-gang-truce-unravels>.; McCleskey, Claire. "El Salvador Police Report Rise in Homicides." InSight Crime. July 2, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-police-report-rise-in-homicides>.; Cawley, Marguerite. "Spate of Killings Shakes El Salvador Gang Truce." InSight Crime. May 9, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-may-homicides-climb-to-65-as-ninth-peace-zone-launched>.

³⁹ In May, Salvadoran authorities also began desegregating prisons, transferring 650 MS-13 members to a prison that had previously only held Barrio 18 members. Gagne, David. "El Salvador Moves Gang Leaders Back to Max-Security Prison." InSight Crime. January 19, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-moves-gang-leaders-back-to-max-security-prisons>.; Gagne, David. "Amid Historic Violence, El Salvador Ends Gang Segregation in Prisons." InSight Crime. May 8, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/amid-historic-violence-el-salvador-ends-prison-segregation>.; Daugherty, Arron. "'We're At War' With Gangs: El Salvador Police Official." InSight Crime. February 19, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-police-at-war-with-gangs>.

of El Salvador's Civil War in 1992, with 481 murders—only to be surpassed by May (622 murders), June (677), and then August (907) as the bloodiest month of the past two decades.⁴⁰

Driving the spike in violence has been the MS-13 and *Barrio 18*, whose leaders are demanding the government revive the 2012 truce and curtail anti-gang legislation and security efforts.⁴¹ Gang-driven violence and threats have thus been viewed as a means of pressuring the government into negotiations. For instance, in late July there was a gang-enforced transportation “boycott,” when gang members (believed to be from the *Barrio 18*'s *Revolucionarios* faction) ordered bus drivers to go on strike or else suffer the consequences.⁴² Attacks against security forces have also increased, with gang members allegedly attacking security personnel over 250 times in 2015 through May—an average of two confrontations per day.⁴³ Police intelligence reports in April asserted the MS-13 ordered cliques in the province of La Libertad to kill two police officers each, and that the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* were planning a combined offensive

⁴⁰ The single most violent day of 2015 so far was August 17, when 42 people were killed. Gagne, David. "El Salvador Sees Most Violent Month in 10 Years." InSight Crime. April 2, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-sees-most-violent-month-in-10-years.>; Tabory, Sam. "El Salvador Sees Deadliest Month Since End of Civil War." InSight Crime. June 1, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-most-violent-month-since-end-of-war.>; Gagne, David. "June Replaces May as Most Violent Month in El Salvador Since War." InSight Crime. July 6, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/june-replaces-may-as-most-violent-month-in-el-salvador-since-civil-war.>; Lohmuller, Michael. "El Salvador Revisits Idea of Security Tax as Violence Peaks." InSight Crime. August 19, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-revisits-idea-new-security-tax-violence-peaks.>

⁴¹ Gang leaders called for a new peace process in both April and July, and on the latter occasion issued a joint statement asking the government for a “mechanism” to allow for dialogue and an eventual peace agreement. Tabory, Sam. "El Salvador Gangs Call for a Renewed Truce." InSight Crime. July 17, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-call-for-a-renewed-truce.>

⁴² The strike paralyzed capital-city San Salvador, and resulted in the murder of least seven transportation workers who refused to comply. Previous to the bus strike, in May and June, two videos surfaced of unconfirmed gang members offering threats of more violence if the government did not reduce its aggressive anti-gang strategies, and promising “war” if authorities refused to engage in dialogue. Lohmuller, Michael. "Gang-Enforced Bus Strike Increases Pressure on El Salvador Govt." InSight Crime. July 28, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/gang-bus-strike-increases-pressure-el-salvador-government.>; Riesenfeld, Loren. "El Salvador Sees Historic Violence as Gangs Challenge the Government." InSight Crime. May 21, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-sees-historic-violence-as-gangs-challenge-the-government.>; Tabory, Sam. "El Salvador 'Gangs' Issue Threats in Video." InSight Crime. June 4, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-issue-threats-in-video.>

⁴³ Gang attacks against security forces began rising in 2014, with two ambushes occurring in April 2014 against police personnel. Bargent, James. "Ambushes of Police Fuel Fears Over El Salvador Gang Sophistication." InSight Crime. April 8, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/ambushes-of-police-fuel-fears-of-growing-el-salvador-gang-sophistication.>; Dudley, Steven. "El Salvador Gangs and Security Forces Up the Ante in Post-Truce Battle." InSight Crime. October 22, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/el-salvador-gangs-security-forces-battle-truce.>; Gagne, David. "250 Gang Attacks on El Salvador Security Forces in 2015." InSight Crime. May 18, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/250-gang-attacks-on-el-salvador-security-forces-in-2015.>

against the government.⁴⁴ In June, police officers discovered a stolen car that had been booby-trapped with a grenade, an apparent attempt at killing police (members of the MS-13 were the suspected culprits).⁴⁵ Then, in August, Salvadoran authorities announced the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* were discussing a potential merger to form a unified gang structure and focus their aggression on state security forces.⁴⁶

In response to increasing violence, the Salvadoran government has been ratcheting up security measures and hardening its rhetoric towards the gangs. For instance, in January 2015 the PNC's director said police should use their weapons against criminals "with complete confidence."⁴⁷ President Salvador Sánchez Cerén then announced in May three battalions of Special Forces soldiers would be deployed to combat the gangs.⁴⁸ Salvadoran judicial officials have also invoked the country's anti-terrorism laws to prosecute gang members, and in August the Supreme Court declared the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* to be terrorist groups.⁴⁹

Accordingly, the experience of the gang truce, and the nature of gang-directed violence in its wake, raises the question as to how current conditions in El Salvador are to be interpreted. Namely, is the truce, and the gangs' continued violent outbursts, indicative of the gangs' collective evolution into more sophisticated actors? Or, is rising violence more an attempt at self-preservation by gang factions in the face of intensified pressure from rivals and security forces?

⁴⁴Daugherty, Arron. "MS13 Launches Police Assassination Campaign in El Salvador." InSight Crime. April 8, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/ms13-launches-police-assassination-campaign-el-salvador>.

⁴⁵ Through mid-August 2015, 41 police officers and 15 soldiers had been killed. Gagne, David. "El Salvador Gang Targeted Police With Booby-Trapped Car: Official." InSight Crime. June 18, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-grenade-car-police-attack>.

⁴⁶ The new "super-gang" was apparently going to be named "Mara 503," after El Salvador's international phone code. Tabory, Sam. "El Salvador Govt Warns of Unified Super Gang: Report." InSight Crime. August 13, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-government-warns-of-unified-super-gangs>.

⁴⁷ Gagne, David. "El Salvador Police Chief Targets Rising Gang Violence." InSight Crime. January 21, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-police-commander-green-light-gangs>.

⁴⁸ Riesenfeld, Loren. "El Salvador Sees Historic Violence as Gangs Challenge the Government." InSight Crime. May 21, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-sees-historic-violence-as-gangs-challenge-the-government>.

⁴⁹ Attorney General Luis Martínez even proposed the idea of extraditing gang members to the United States on terrorist charges. Lohmuller, Michael. "El Salvador Now Using Anti-Terrorism Law to Tackle Gangs." InSight Crime. August 12, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-now-using-anti-terrorism-law-tackle-gangs>; Daugherty, Arron. "El Salvador Supreme Court Labels Street Gangs as Terrorist Groups." InSight Crime. August 26, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-supreme-court-labels-street-gangs-as-terrorist-groups>; Gagne, David. "In El Salvador, Hysteria Trumps Security Policy." InSight Crime. August 17, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/in-el-salvador-hysteria-trumps-security-policy>.

In an effort to reach an answer, the concept of “Third Generation Gangs” will be examined, exploring if its precepts hold sufficient explanatory power for understanding El Salvador’s gangs in the context of recent developments in the country.

Third Generation Gangs

Originally put forward by John P. Sullivan in the 1990s, the field of third generation gang studies seeks to understand the gang phenomenon and characteristics of contemporary criminal street gangs.⁵⁰ It has since become one of the primary models for explaining gang behavior and development. The basic tenet is that some gangs evolve through three generations, transitioning from a traditional turf gang to a market-oriented drug gang, before becoming a third generation gang that mixes political and mercenary elements.⁵¹ Three factors are identified as determining the evolutionary potential of gangs: politicization, internationalization, and sophistication. What follows is a brief description of the characteristics defining each gang generation.

First Generation

First Generation gangs are localized and relatively unsophisticated.⁵² They operate under loose leadership, with ill-defined roles and a focus on loyalty and turf protection (neighborhood or street). When they engage in criminal enterprise, it is largely opportunistic and individual in scope, and tends to be local in nature. First generation gangs operate at the low end of societal violence, and primarily engage in inter-gang rivalry.⁵³ They are limited in political scope.

Second Generation

Second generation gangs are more entrepreneurial and drug-centered, and are organized for business and commercial gain. As such, they are more interested in market than turf protection, tending to focus their criminal endeavors on local drug distribution as a business.⁵⁴ These gangs are also more cohesive, with greater centralization of leadership. They may embrace a broader political agenda—albeit focused on improving market share and revenue—and operate

⁵⁰ Since then, it has been developed and explored by a number of scholars, particularly Robert Bunker and Max Manwaring.

⁵¹ Sullivan, John, and Robert Bunker. "A Crucible of Conflict: Third Generation Gang Studies Revisited." *Journal of Gang Research* 19, no. 4 (Summer 2012), 4.

⁵² Sullivan, John. "Third Generation Street Gangs: Turf, Cartels, and Net Warriors." *Transnational Organized Crime* 3, no. 3 (Autumn 1997), 95.

⁵³ Manwaring, Max. "Street Gangs: The New Urban Insurgency." *Strategic Studies Institute*, 2005. 9.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*,10.

in a broader, sometimes multi-national context.⁵⁵ Violence is typically a means to control competition, but may also be used as political interference to negate enforcement efforts directed against them by police and other security organizations. As they seek to control or incapacitate state security organizations, they may begin to dominate vulnerable communities.⁵⁶

Third Generation

A third generation gang is a mercenary-type group with goals of power or financial acquisition. As they evolve, they develop into more sophisticated organizations with broader drug-related markets—operating at the global end of the spectrum—with ambitious political and economic agendas. Political action is intended to provide security and freedom of movement for gang activities, although quasi-terrorism or true terrorism may be embraced to advance influence and objectives.⁵⁷ As a consequence, a third generation gang challenges the legitimate state monopoly on the use of violence within a given political territory.⁵⁸ Typically, third generation gangs are the result of gangs maturing due to exposure to more sophisticated criminal enterprises, combined with access to an opportunity space conducive to enhanced sophistication and expanded reach.⁵⁹ In short, third generation gangs are in a state of transition from street gang to sophisticated, networked criminal enterprises. They may, however, continue first and second generation actions as they expand their geographical presence and seek to further their commercial and political goals.⁶⁰

To determine if El Salvador's MS-13 and *Barrio 18* gangs are evolving into more sophisticated, internationalized, and politicized entities—transitioning from their first generation origins into full-blown third generation gangs—the effects of the truce on the gangs will be examined. Overall, while there are some signs the truce may have resulted in a reconfiguration of the gangs' self-perception as political entities, there are reasons to believe the gangs' post-truce behavior does not represent their collective maturation into third generation gangs, suggesting

⁵⁵ Sullivan, "Third Generation Street Gangs," 95-96.

⁵⁶ Manwaring, "Street Gangs," 10.

⁵⁷ Sullivan, "Third Generation Street Gangs," 96.

⁵⁸ Manwaring, "Street Gangs," 10.

⁵⁹ Sullivan and Bunker, "Crucible of Conflict," 5-6.

⁶⁰ Manwaring, "Street Gangs," 10.

instead that the increase in violence is more indicative of autonomous manifestations of rebellion and self-preservation by gang factions.

The Post-Truce Context: Collective Maturation or Self-Preservation?

A persistent concern surrounding the gang truce is that it allowed the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* to become more sophisticated. Namely, there have been some indications the truce strengthened gang hierarchy by forcing the leadership to exert greater control in order to ensure the truce was respected. Indeed, the significant drop in homicides following the truce's implementation would suggest a certain degree of command and control on the part of gang leaders over members—although the increase in disappearances during the truce does call this into question. A factor possibly enabling the gangs to become more powerful and organized during the truce was that MS-13 and *Barrio 18* leaders were transferred to less restrictive prisons with greater access to the outside world.⁶¹

Increasing gang organization may in turn have fostered more transnational cooperation and coordination. Even during the truce, there was evidence of imprisoned leaders in El Salvador coordinating with members in the United States.⁶² There have also been some indications that the MS-13 sought to establish a presence in Europe and South America, allegedly attempting to have members deported to countries where the gang was hoping to expand (although the extent of this to date appears limited).⁶³ There were also suggestions the gangs (particularly the MS-13) used the truce to become more integrated into the structures of regional transnational criminal organizations, solidifying ties to *transportista* (drug transit) networks and establishing connections with Mexican cartels.⁶⁴ Notably, in October 2012, seven months after the truce

⁶¹ Cawley, Marguerite. "Gangs Gain Most from El Salvador Truce: Opinion Poll." InSight Crime. August 28, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/maras-gaining-most-from-truce-say-el-salvador-survey-respondents>.

⁶² US surveillance has shown that both the MS13 and Barrio 18 maintain contact with US counterparts, and that the gangs sometimes extort US-based Salvadorans, suggesting a certain degree of coordination between US and Salvadoran members. Cawley, Marguerite. "Phone Tap Shows US - El Salvador MS13 Connections." InSight Crime. October 29, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/phone-call-highlights-el-salvador-gang-connection-with-us>.

⁶³ Parkinson, Charles. "Italy Police Dismantle 'MS13' Gang." InSight Crime. October 10, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/italy-police-dismantle-ms13-el-salvador-gang>; Robbins, Seth, and James Bargent. "El Salvador Gang Members 'Setting Up MS13 Branch' in Spain." InSight Crime. March 26, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gang-members-setting-up-ms13-branch-in-spain>.

⁶⁴ Farah, "Central American Gangs," 8.; Cawley, Marguerite. "El Salvador Gangs Getting Deeper into Drug Trafficking: Police." InSight Crime. December 18, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-deepening-drug-trafficking-involvement-police>.

began, the United States placed the MS-13 on a list of transnational drug trafficking organizations—alongside powerful groups like Mexico's Zetas—and later put economic sanctions on six MS-13 leaders.⁶⁵ In July 2013, Salvadoran Security Minister Ricardo Perdomo said that, over the course of the truce, “there are groups that have increased their drug trafficking activities,” and in June 2014, Alejandro Vila—a special prosecutor for the migrant unit in Chiapas, Mexico—said the MS-13 was deepening its hold on illegal migration routes in Mexico.⁶⁶

Additionally, the gangs’ behavior during the truce suggests a degree of political identity and self-awareness. For instance, the rhetoric of the gangs took on a distinct political quality, with a number of press releases issued exhibiting a diplomatic tone and formality.⁶⁷ This—combined with images of gang leaders holding discussions and negotiations with official intermediaries, in essence a *de facto* recognition by the government of the gangs as political actors—indicates (or gives the impression) of a new level of political awareness. Indeed, it is possible MS-13 and *Barrio 18* leaders began to understand that territorial control and cohesion made it possible for them to extract concessions from the state.⁶⁸ For example, the gangs have declared they have the power to influence elections. These statements were backed up by truce mediator Raul Mijango, who in October 2013 stated representatives of at least two of El Salvador’s top political parties had met with *Barrio 18* and MS-13 leaders, adding that the gangs are “an elector that can define the result” of presidential elections.⁶⁹ In February 2014, *Barrio 18* and MS-13 leaders issued a statement claiming the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front

⁶⁵ Stone, Hannah. "US Ranks MS-13 Alongside Zetas in Gang List." InSight Crime. October 12, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-analysis/us-ms13-zetas-transnational.>; Bargent, James. "US Treasury Adds MS-13 Leaders to Economic Sanctions List." InSight Crime. June 6, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/us-treasury-adds-ms-13-leaders-to-sanctions-list>.

⁶⁶ Various cells of the MS-13 were allegedly attempting to establish control over routes used by migrants in areas of Chiapas state in Mexico, targeting the migrants for extortion and kidnapping. Cawley, Marguerite. "El Salvador Gangs Using Truce to Strengthen Drug Ties: Official." InSight Crime. July 19, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-using-truce-to-strengthen-drug-ties-security-minister.>; Cawley, Marguerite. "MS13 Expanding After Truce Collapse in El Salvador?" InSight Crime. June 2, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/ms13-expanding-after-truce-collapse-in-el-salvador>.

⁶⁷ Stone, Hannah. "El Salvador Gangs Confirm Truce" InSight Crime. March 23, 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-confirm-truce>.

⁶⁸ Farah, Douglas. "The Transformation of El Salvador’s Gangs into Political Actors." 2012. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://csis.org/publication/transformation-el-salvadors-gangs-political-actors>, 1.

⁶⁹ Parkinson, Charles. "El Salvador Meetings Raise Question about Gangs' Political Might." InSight Crime. October 24, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-opposition-leader-meets-with-gangs>.

(FMLN) political party almost lost the 2014 elections because it did not have the gangs' backing.⁷⁰ Douglas Farah has explained the possibility of the gangs becoming increasingly active in politics, not as political parties, but essentially as “votes for rent,” whereby the gangs deliver votes from areas under their control in exchange for political favors.⁷¹

Nonetheless, these isolated signs of the gangs' possible evolution are offset by other occurrences suggesting otherwise, which indicate the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* are not undergoing a collective maturation process.

The cohesion of the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* should not be overestimated. While the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* obviously have a transnational presence—and, to a degree, can link their international network to conduct cross-border crimes—there is little evidence they operate as transnational criminal organizations. And despite the effects of the truce, it remains that the gangs are large, fundamentally loose-knit networks, and are better understood as a franchise of affiliated cliques than as coherent third generation gang entities. For instance, during the truce, certain cliques and factions were difficult to control, being either uncooperative or unwilling to abide by the truce.⁷² There was also evidence of tensions between the gangs' top leadership—who drove the truce process—and rank and file members. The cliques were largely excluded from the truce process, and there were rumblings of discontent among certain cliques that perceived gang leaders as disproportionately benefitting from the truce.⁷³

There have been other signs of disagreement and turmoil within the gangs as well. In August 2015, 14 members of the *Barrio 18*'s *Revolucionarios* faction were murdered at the Quezaltepeque prison. While the motive is unknown, authorities believed the killings were part of an “internal purge” within the *Barrio 18*. Indeed, there have been reports that rising violence

⁷⁰ Gagne, David. "El Salvador Gangs Outline Political Motives of Violence." InSight Crime. March 2, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-outline-political-motives-violence>.

⁷¹ Such a dynamic between gangs and political parties has been observed in Jamaica, with gangs controlling the different areas of Kingston aligning with different politicians in return for benefits. Farah, "Central American Gangs," 8.

⁷² This was observed in the town of La Union, near the border of Honduras, where violence levels stayed high as a result of MS-13 and Barrio 18 cliques refusing to go along with the truce. Wells, Miriam. "Gangs Unable to Enforce Truce in Eastern El Salvador" InSight Crime. March 13, 2013. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/maras-unable-to-enforce-truce-in-eastern-el-salvador>.

⁷³ Following the start of the truce, Douglas Farah noted that “serious splits” in the gangs “surfaced almost immediately,” and that sources within the MS-13 “reported anger with gang leaders, in part because they conducted negotiations without street member input.” Clique members were also said to resent seeing the family members of gang leaders suddenly going on shopping sprees and making expensive purchases, which was taken as a sign the leadership received cash to agree to the truce, but did not share payments. Farah, “The Transformation,” 2.

in 2015 is due to intra-gang competition, with Salvadoran Security and Justice Minister Benito Lara attributing high homicide levels in August to “an internal rivalry between gangs and confrontations by criminals against the police.”⁷⁴

Nor has violence and gang members’ participation in more sophisticated—or transnational—criminal activities since the truce been a collective advancement. For instance, it was the *Barrio 18*’s *Revolucionarios* faction that allegedly enforced the gang-ordered transportation strike in July.⁷⁵ Similarly, in June 2015 there were indications the gangs were involved in an arms trafficking network that smuggled weapons into El Salvador from Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Yet the network only involved 16 of the MS-13’s roughly 250 cliques, and of the 90 suspects arrested in connection to the case only 21 were MS-13 members. It appears these MS-13 members were primarily involved in buying and distributing guns within El Salvador, not coordinating the transnational sale of weapons themselves.⁷⁶

Additionally, during and following the truce, the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* did not demonstrate a developed political agenda or coherent political action. Instead, violence appears to be more a reaction to the transfer of gang leaders back to maximum-security prisons, and a natural response in self-preservation against the government’s increasingly hard-line anti-gang stance—and perhaps against internal gang rivals as well—than an attempt to advance a significant political transformation.

Consequently, the truce, and rising violence in its wake, has not given way to the collective maturation of the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* into third generation gangs. Rather, violence appears to be more indicative of intra-gang rivalries and autonomous attempts at self-preservation during the ongoing fallout of the failed truce. Nonetheless, this does not mean certain segments of the gangs are not demonstrating the potential for evolving into more sophisticated actors. Instead, the third generation gang paradigm may offer only limited

⁷⁴ Gagne, David. "Record Violence and Displacement Echoes El Salvador's War Zone Past." InSight Crime. September 2, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/record-violence-and-displacement-echoes-el-salvador-s-war-zone-past>.

⁷⁵ Gang-ordered bus strikes are not a novelty for El Salvador. In September 2010, in protest of recently enacted gang legislation, the MS-13 and Barrio 18 issued a joint warning for public transportation operators to stay home for three days or face reprisals. Seelke, “Gangs in Central America,” 4.

⁷⁶ Nonetheless, elements of the MS-13 and Barrio 18 have been enhancing their weapons capacities, acquiring automatic rifles such as AK-47s, along with grenades and other military-grade weapons. In the past, it has been common for elements of the Salvadoran military to be implicated in the region’s illicit arms trade and supply such weapons. Daugherty, Arron, and Elyssa Pachico. "El Salvador Gangs Involved in Arms Trafficking Network." InSight Crime. June 19, 2015. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/el-salvador-gangs-involved-arms-trafficking-network.>; Farah, "Central American Gangs," 9.

explanatory power to understanding El Salvador's gangs in a post-truce context, calling for a reconfiguration in how the gangs are assessed.

Third Generation Gangs: Assessing the Paradigm

Third generation gang studies offers a useful guide for broadly understanding and characterizing the different stages of gang evolution in a variety of different contexts. Yet the paradigm is deficient in several respects, especially its lack of interpretation into how gang structure affects evolution processes and outcomes. That is, the paradigm offers little guidance for understanding internal gang dynamics and behavior, and the factors that may promote or lessen a gang's movement towards increasing politicization, internationalization, and sophistication—beyond simply having an opportunity space afforded by weak institutions or exposure to more sophisticated criminal organizations. In the context of El Salvador, it is inappropriate to think of the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* as monolithic organizations. Instead, we should try to understand them as franchised, disperse networks consisting of numerous cliques and factions. As such, perhaps it is incorrect to ask if the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* are experiencing a collective maturation, and instead ask *what elements* of the gangs are evolving, and why.

More specifically, while the truce may not be a sign of the collective evolution of the gangs, it may be a sign of the evolution of certain segments of the gang structure. For instance, it was imprisoned MS-13 and *Barrio 18* leaders that formulated, implemented, and oversaw the truce. Nonetheless, gang leaders had trouble keeping the cliques and violence in check as the truce unraveled—even though they reaffirmed the gangs' commitment to the truce on multiple occasions—with some cliques expressing contempt for the truce and the lack of benefits it brought them.⁷⁷

This leads to speculation that the gangs' hierarchy is being *stretched*, with opposite ends of the gang structure moving in different directions given competing interests and agendas. The gangs' older imprisoned leadership, for example, may be attempting to become more sophisticated political actors, negotiating with the government, while younger members on the street are more prone to violence, recklessness, and opportunistic crime—perhaps an indication of a generational split within the gangs. Or, it may be that, given the large membership of the

⁷⁷ Yagoub, Mimi. "El Salvador Gang Leaders Keen to Maintain Faltering Truce." InSight Crime. March 16, 2014. Accessed September 14, 2015. <http://www.insightcrime.org/news-briefs/why-are-el-salvador-gangs-so-keen-to-maintain-failing-truce>.

Barrio 18 and MS-13 and the territorial expanse of their networks, a separation within the ranks is inevitable, with gang factions that have competing agendas beginning to diverge from one another.

Refining the Paradigm

This leads to the need to incorporate new elements into the third generation gang paradigm to expand both its predictive and explanatory power. Greater tools are needed for assessing how, when, and if a gang—or elements of a gang—is evolving into a more sophisticated entity. This entails several areas in need of further study and development to assess their relevance in determining a gang’s evolutionary potential, as well as their potential inclusion into the third generation gang paradigm in order to enhance its ability to present a more refined understanding of gang evolution.

Pulling from the current case regarding El Salvador’s MS-13 and *Barrio 18* gangs, there are several areas where inquiry should begin. First, we can look at the effects of gang membership: are larger gangs more prone to evolve into third generation gangs than smaller gangs? Or is there a threshold where a gang becomes so large it fractures, with some gang elements evolving while others do not? Second, related to this are questions over what holds a gang structure or network together, be it incentives of loyalty, financial, or fear.

Additionally, what role does the age of a gang play? This pertains not only to a gang’s age from the time of its formation, but also the age of key leaders. It is possible that older, seasoned leaders become more strategic and sophisticated over time, and seek to make the gang more internationalized, politicized, and sophisticated, having the connections from a lifetime of criminal activity to do so. In contrast, younger, less-educated gang members are more prone to excessive acts of violence and localized opportunistic crime.

Moreover, we need to consider how incarceration impacts gang development. For instance, the prison system has played a key role in the ability of the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* to organize and consolidate, serving as a “safe haven” from which to direct and conduct criminal activities.⁷⁸ It may be prisons are an important, if not crucial factor allowing gangs to evolve into more sophisticated entities (and providing them with the necessary contacts to do so). Tied in with this is the role government security strategies play in driving gang maturation, as evidenced

⁷⁸ Sullivan and Bunker, “Crucible of Conflict,” 7-8.

by El Salvador's *Mano Dura* policies encouraging the adaptation of gang members to avoid detection.

Further exploring these questions and incorporating their findings into third generation theory may serve to better understand and predict gang evolution, and therefore aid policymakers and security officials in formulating strategy and efforts to prevent gangs from transitioning into more powerful and menacing entities.

Conclusion

Since their formation in Los Angeles, the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* have grown in size and influence, becoming a persistent cause of violence and insecurity in El Salvador. The 2012 gang truce, and the dramatic drop in homicide levels it precipitated, demonstrated the influence of the MS-13 and *Barrio 18* leadership, and was a potential mark of the gangs' collective evolution into more sophisticated entities: so-called 'third generation gangs.' Yet an examination of the processes leading to the truce's negotiation and implementation, the gangs' structure and criminal activities, and the nature of violence following the truce's disintegration suggests there has not been a collective maturation of the gangs into more sophisticated actors. Instead, it may be that certain segments of the gang structure are evolving in divergent directions, with post-truce violence indicative of self-preservation efforts by gang factions as they come under pressure from rivals and Salvadoran security forces. As such, the explanatory power of the third generation gang paradigm appears to be lacking in several respects that—if developed and incorporated into the existing paradigm—would allow for a more complete understanding of gang behavior and evolution in El Salvador.

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