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How is MS-13 a Threat to US National Security?

by

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

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Lt Col Riney is a command pilot with over 3500 hours in T-37, T-38, and KC-135R/T/A aircraft. He served as the 6th Air Refueling Wing's first Flight Safety Officer and was named Air Mobility Command's Flight Safety Officer of the Year for 1997. In 1998, he was selected to teach at the Combat Crew Training School (CCTS) and upgraded to instruct the Central Flight Instructor Course (CFIC) in 1999. From 2003 to 2005 he was assigned to the United States Joint Forces Command as a Department of Defense Congressional Liaison Officer.

Prior to attending Air War College, Lt Col Riney served as the commander of the 906th Air Refueling Squadron and the deputy group commander of the 319th Operations Group at Grand Forks AFB, ND. Additionally, he deployed in support of Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom as the commander of the 340th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron.

## INTRODUCTION

Street gangs have been a regional problem in the United States for a long time. The Department of Justice estimates there are “approximately 30,000 gangs, with over 800,000 members, impacting 2,500 communities” in the US.<sup>1</sup> Innocent people have been exposed to violence from these gangs for decades, but today’s gangs seem more violent and organized than ever. Some even seem to be growing and evolving into transnational threats. These evolving groups are known as *Transnational Street Gangs* because of their ability to operate across national borders. Spreading throughout the United States, they are assimilating smaller gangs and bringing a culture of violence and destruction everywhere they go. Known for brutality, these groups are already threatening the stability of several countries in Central America. The most widely recognized and publicized of these gangs is Mara Salvatrucha (aka MS-13).

MS-13 first appeared on the streets of Los Angeles in the early 1980s. Started by a group of El Salvadoran refugees, the gang has spread to 42 states and grown to become one of the most violent gangs in America.<sup>2</sup> One of the fastest growing gangs in the US, MS-13 has also spread to six countries in Central America and Canada.<sup>3</sup> Although specific numbers vary, sources estimate there are between 10,000 and 20,000 MS-13 members in the United States and up to 250,000 in Central America.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will look at the international threat from MS-13 by examining the gang’s history and identifying the characteristics that make MS-13 an international problem. The paper will then identify immediate and developing areas of concern and recommend how the US should mitigate the resulting threats.

## SECTION I – PAST & PRESENT

In order to effectively counter the influence and operations of MS-13, the United States must understand the history of the gang, why and how it is spreading, and the nature of the threat the gang presents.

### Origins

MS-13 emerged on the streets of L.A. in the 1980's, but the seeds of violence, revolution, and hopelessness were sown much earlier in El Salvador. From the 1930's the Salvadoran military ruled the land backed by the country's elite. Two percent of the population controlled 60 percent of the land.<sup>5</sup> As the country's population exploded and spilled into neighboring Honduras a border dispute erupted in 1969. When the brief border skirmish ended, the relative economic progress El Salvador had been enjoying came to an abrupt halt.<sup>6</sup>

Amplifying economic stress, political turmoil increased throughout the 1970s. Early in the decade, the Catholic majority formed the Christian Democratic Party (CDP) and even appeared headed to victory in the 1972 presidential election--that is until the military stepped in to suppress the election. When Christian Democrats protested they were thrown in jail.<sup>7</sup> The blatant fraud perpetuated by the military convinced many citizens that peaceful change was impossible.<sup>8</sup> Cementing this feeling of hopelessness, secretive death squads appeared to quell any dissent. In July 1975, the violence went public when the army opened fire on demonstrators in San Salvador. Fraudulent elections in 1977 further enraged the people and state sponsored brutality increased.<sup>9</sup>

In response to the violence and with the approval of Chile, Argentina, Brazil, and Panama, the Carter administration backed a coup to oust El Salvador's hard-line president, General Carlos Romero. The 1979 coup kept the extreme left faction from gaining complete

power, but death squad activity continued. El Salvador's archbishop, Oscar Romero, was assassinated in 1980 by a death squad assassin and became a martyr for the people struggling to overcome oppression and poverty.<sup>10</sup> Security forces attacked the crowd at his funeral and the attack was caught on camera. The footage had a profound effect worldwide, including the United States.<sup>11</sup> Later that year President Carter suspended military aid to El Salvador.<sup>12</sup>

Disillusioned Christian Democrats turned to armed resistance as their only remaining option for opposing the government. They joined guerillas known as the Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN) and civil war raged from 1980 to 1992.<sup>13</sup>

Many El Salvadoran citizens fled to the United States during the fighting. Over 64,500 Salvadorans immigrated to the US between 1981 and 1987, with many settling in the Latino districts of Los Angeles.<sup>14</sup> In LA, the hopeful refugees were marginalized and discriminated against.<sup>15</sup> They quickly became the targets of local African American gangs like the Bloods and Crips as well as established Latino gangs like M18. Salvadoran youths banded together to survive.<sup>16</sup> They organized into a new gang and started calling themselves Mara Salvatrucha (MS). "Mara" is street slang for gang and references the Spanish word "marabunta"--South American army ants known for devastating everything in their path.<sup>17</sup> "Salva" stands for Salvador, and "trucha" is slang for "on alert."<sup>18</sup>

MS's early members included former FMLN guerillas and even some Salvadoran government soldiers with combat experience.<sup>19</sup> These leaders brought weapons experience and a taste for violence.<sup>20</sup> Feeding on their training and war experiences, the early gang members learned about illegal activities on the streets and Mara Salvatrucha quickly gained notoriety for brutality and violence.<sup>21</sup>

While the streets proved to be the primary training grounds for the new mara, the US prison system provided a finishing school.<sup>22</sup> Since the early 1960's a small group of Mexican-Americans known as the Mexican Mafia, or "La Eme," (Spanish for "The M") have controlled the California prison underworld.<sup>23</sup> Although the group splintered in the late 60's into the Mexican Mafia and a new prison gang known as the Nuestra Familia (Spanish for "our family"), the Mexican Mafia maintained control of Southern California's prisons. Early MS members who found themselves incarcerated joined other Latino gang members and aligned under the Mexican Mafia for protection. These gang members started calling themselves "Surenos," or southerners, to distinguish themselves from gangs affiliated with Nuestra Familia.<sup>24</sup> Sureno gang members may have conflict with other Surenos on the streets, but in prison they bond together under the leadership of the Mexican Mafia. From these hardened criminals MS members got a graduate education in drug trafficking and criminal organization as well as forming loose ties with other Latino gangs.

While La Eme controlled gang members inside the prisons, paroled gang members brought their affiliation back onto the streets. Gangs on the street aligned with La Eme often add the number 13 to their gang name in reference to the thirteenth letter in the English alphabet.<sup>25</sup> This was the case with Mara Salvatrucha. After the first incarcerated MS members were released from prison, the gang became more structured and members started referring to themselves as MS-13.

### **US Policies & International Expansion**

Salvadoran immigrants have migrated throughout the United States and so too have the gang members. This movement appears to be both socially and financially important to the gang as a whole.<sup>26</sup> Socially, the members maintain their gang ties as their families move. Financially,

the gang acquires new market territory for drug sales and distribution. As a result, MS-13 is one of the fastest growing gangs in America.<sup>27</sup> The largest concentrations of members are still in large cities, but MS-13 members can now be found distributing drugs in smaller, middle class neighborhoods across the nation.<sup>28</sup>

While the gang continues to infiltrate the United States, its biggest impact has been on Central American countries. In August 2007 the FBI estimated that MS-13 had 50,000 members in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico.<sup>29</sup> Current estimates put those numbers much higher.<sup>30</sup> US policies are partially to blame for the gang's migration. In the early 1990's Federal law enforcement authorities began targeting MS-13 members for deportation.<sup>31</sup> Between 2000 and 2004 approximately 20,000 criminals were shipped back to Central America.<sup>32</sup> Many of these criminals were gang members.

Unfortunately, these deportations were not well coordinated with Central American law enforcement agencies and the home countries were not prepared for the resulting increased violence levels.<sup>33</sup> Because the deportees had not committed any crimes in their home countries, local law enforcement did not hold them when they arrived in country. Gang members were free to establish new gang cliques while keeping their ties to the United States.<sup>34</sup> The problem has not gotten better in the past few years. Early on most deportees were shipped south after spending time in jail, but today US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officials report 70% of arrested gang members are deported before being actually charged with crimes.<sup>35</sup> Some deportees perceive that hooking up with a gang is their only hope for survival. Others use the skills learned in the LA barrios and US prisons to become new gang leaders.

The influx of criminals from the United States is not the only reason for the rise in gang membership and violence in Central America. With the combination of "extreme poverty;

highly urbanized populations; growing youth populations facing stagnant job markets; and an absence of political will to fight crime in a holistic manner;” and some of the highest income inequality indices in the world, it is easy to see why Central American countries have crime problems.<sup>36</sup> Gangs can operate with relative impunity in this environment. The history of violence in countries like El Salvador may have contributed to the increased level of violence displayed internationally by both MS-13 and their rival gang, M18.<sup>37</sup>

In some ways US deportation laws have also amplified the transnational problem. While US law enforcement became efficient at sending MS-13 members back to Central America, MS-13 was developing skills for smuggling its members across borders and back into the US. Today it is estimated that 90% of deported gang members return to the United States.<sup>38</sup> Utilizing these skills, MS-13 has developed an intricate smuggling network and become efficient at moving people and drugs into and out of the United States.

### **Present Situation**

Gary Wilson and John Sullivan identified three generations of gangs in their examination of urban street gangs, basing their analysis on criminal activities, goals, and sophistication. According to Wilson and Sullivan, first-generation gangs are primarily turf oriented, with a loose leadership structure and a tendency to engage in unsophisticated criminal activities. Second generation gangs are more organized and tend to “assume a market rather than turf orientation.” These gangs operate in broader areas with more centralized leadership and engage primarily in drug-centered criminal activity. Third generation gangs are highly sophisticated, “mercenary-type groups” with goals of financial acquisition. Fully developed third generation gangs have a set of political aims, tend to operate globally, and often utilize terrorism to advance their goals.<sup>39</sup>

MS-13 is somewhere between a first-generation and a second-generation gang in the United States, and may have already evolved into a third generation gang in Central America. In the US, the gang's primary focus remains loyalty, protection, and money. Their crimes are all over the map, ranging from kidnapping and murder to petty theft.<sup>40</sup> First and foremost, the gang is a gang. They are focused on protecting the turf they control, expanding into new turfs, and taking care of each other.<sup>41</sup> As they branch out and become more associated with the drug cartels they are evolving into a second generation gang and their criminal activity is evolving to become more drug-centered. As they make more money from the drug trade the gang's organization is becoming more sophisticated and centralized.

In Central America, many researchers point out MS-13's tendency toward indiscriminate violence with the objective to intimidate and coerce as an indication that the gang is closer to a third generation gang.<sup>42</sup> They make a compelling case that the gang has evolved beyond the second generation category by highlighting MS-13's trans-border capabilities, financial motivation, and increased organization. The December 2004 attack on a bus in Honduras is an excellent example of the gang's evolution.<sup>43</sup> In killing 28 people and leaving a note threatening further violence if law enforcement continued to pursue the gang, MS-13 used its international reach in a terrorist act aimed at influencing the country's political leadership. Although researchers in the US do not tie MS-13 to any specific terrorist organizations, it is important to realize that in El Salvador and Honduras the gang is already considered an international terrorist group.<sup>44</sup> Central American governments feel the gang directly threatens their governmental organizations and gang violence already has a significant negative impact on their national economies.

## **Summary**

It can be argued that the origins of MS-13 do not influence today's members. It is probable that the average gang member does not know or care about the 1977 elections in El Salvador or even the Salvadoran civil war for that matter. But the fact is any real solutions to the MS-13 problem in the United States must include cooperation with governments and law enforcement agencies in Central America. The United States must realize that Central American countries like El Salvador will remember and understand the origins of MS-13 including the US government's involvement in the 1979 coup and the subsequent suspension of military aid. Any proposed solutions must include an understanding of how US policies have contributed to Central American problems and acknowledge past communication breakdowns. Likewise, in drafting proposed solutions, the United States needs to understand that the threat posed by gangs like MS-13 in our country are not the same or even the same level as the national threat the gang presents to Central American countries and their governments.

## SECTION II – ASSESSING THE THREAT

With 30,000 gangs in the US what makes Mara Salvatrucha different?<sup>45</sup> Are they truly a transnational threat to the United States? An important step in understanding the threat from MS-13 is an examination of the gang itself. This section will identify characteristics that MS-13 shares with other US gangs and then examine the important differences that make MS-13 a significant problem. Building upon those differences the section will examine the transnational threat that the gang poses.

### **MS-13 Characteristics**

#### *Similarities*

From the outside, MS-13 looks like many other street gangs. Started by a group of youths who liked to hang out together, MS-13's motivation, demographics, and initiation rituals are not unique.

Like other street gangs, active members range in age from 11 years up to 40.<sup>46</sup> Youth are often looking for commitment and say they feel like part of a family when they join the group. Gang membership provides a way to escape their economic problems and taking care of each other gives members a sense of purpose.<sup>47</sup> The gang's ethos of "loyalty to other [MS-13] members first and rivalry to the death with other gangs" was developed early on and clearly demonstrates the members' commitment to each other and to violence.<sup>48</sup> According to Carlos Vasquez, an early MS-13 member, "The Maras offer a code, a family to members, many of whom come from broken homes."<sup>49</sup>

MS-13's initiation rituals are well established. To join the gang, an individual must submit to at least a 13 second beating by other gang members.<sup>50</sup> Any current gang member can "jump-in" and help administer the beating.<sup>51</sup> Once admitted, new members must adhere to gang

rules and are required to commit a crime in order to demonstrate their commitment and capability.<sup>52</sup> These crimes vary from petty theft all the way up to murder.<sup>53</sup> The beating and crime ensure continued commitment and tie new members to the group.

Finally, the gang looks like other Latino gangs. MS-13 members dress alike--in 1983 the MS-13 “uniform” transitioned from heavy metal t-shirts and long hair to baggy trousers, Nike tennis shoes, and shaved heads.<sup>54</sup>

### *Differences*

On closer examination, MS-13’s organization, international reach, violence, and hopelessness set the gang apart from other US street gangs. On the local level the gang is organized into groups called cliques. The leader at the clique level, often referred to as the “shot caller,” controls local activities and determines local gang issues, like reprimands and sanctions, when only local members are concerned.<sup>55</sup> These cliques are integral to everyday operations and provide a foundation on which actions can be coordinated.

The Mexican Mafia (La Eme) also exerts control over MS-13 cliques. La Eme has been around since 1960 and still controls the prison underworld in Southern California prisons.<sup>56</sup> While in prison, MS-13 members align under La Eme for protection and this relationship does not stop at the prison gate or even the country’s borders. All paroled gang members who relied upon the Mexican Mafia for protection while in prison are expected to pay La Eme leadership a portion of any money they make while back on the streets.<sup>57</sup> Eme leadership exercises control by passing notes, known as “kites” or “wilas,” to paroled members through prison visitors, paroled or transferred members, and sometimes even dishonest lawyers.<sup>58</sup>

Above the clique level, regional leaders have emerged. In the past few years attempts have been made to organize inter-regional meetings.<sup>59</sup> As the gang expands, the internet and cell

phones have made communications and coordination easier and kept the cliques tied together.<sup>60</sup> This inter-clique organization has enabled the gang to establish internal distribution networks, facilitated stronger links with narcotics cartels, and made the purchase of weapons like AK-47s and automatic pistols possible.<sup>61</sup>

Although MS-13's organization has enabled them to grow larger nationally they have not reached the numbers of some other US gangs. As of August 2007, the FBI estimated that MS-13 has 10,000 members operating in 42 states. That same report showed between 30,000 and 50,000 members of M18, from 15,000 to 20,000 Bloods and up to 100,000 Gangster Disciples in the United States.<sup>62</sup> When looking internationally, MS-13 numbers and influence go up significantly. In 2007, the FBI estimated 50,000 MS-13 gang members dispersed in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico. Reports now show that number may be closer to 250,000.<sup>63</sup> With the gang's ability to operate across borders and move between the US and Central America, these numbers must be included when considering the gang's influence on and threat to the United States.

The gang's extreme violence also sets them apart. Hard core MS-13 members seem to kill without remorse. "We became quickly known for being fearless and killing without hesitation" said Ernesto Miranda, one of MS's founding members.<sup>64</sup> Evidence confirms this and points to the fact that MS-13 members do not feel that their behavior is legally constrained.<sup>65</sup> True to their heritage, combat experienced members used violence to gain the upper hand over other street gangs. Although able to handle all sorts of weapons, machetes were and still are the weapons of choice.<sup>66</sup> MS-13 used violence to gain respect and fear continues to give them power.<sup>67</sup>

Finally, the gang's culture is different from other gangs. While it is difficult to leave any street gang, the Mara's have made it almost impossible for members to get out. Several factors contribute to this permanence. All original members have tattoos and MS-13 is known for its elaborate body art.<sup>68</sup> Tattoos provide a means for gang identification, and serve as medals of atrocities and badges of violence. Some, like teardrops under the eyes that signify kills, have become internationally recognized.<sup>69</sup> On the other hand, these permanent marks are red flags for law enforcement and make it very hard for gang members to leave their past behind.

Hopelessness stemming from persistent poverty and declining moral values brought on by scarce family and religious orientations contribute to the gang members' commitment to their gang.<sup>70</sup> Members only see three possible outcomes to their lives – prison, the hospital, or death.<sup>71</sup> In death they won't need their gang brothers but in prison or when they are released from the hospital their gang family will be essential to their survival. Finally, gang rules forbid anyone from leaving the gang and the penalty for dropping out is death.<sup>72</sup>

### **Threat Analysis**

Building on the unique characteristics of MS-13, one can address the question "How is MS-13 a national or international threat to the United States?" The remainder of this section will focus on categorizing the gang's criminal activity and capability then discussing the nature of the threat from a transnational perspective.

For the purpose of this discussion a "transnational street gang" is simply a traditional criminal youth gang that has developed transnational capabilities. While sharing characteristics of a common street gang, these transnational gangs have developed vast illicit networks that stretch across country borders.<sup>73</sup> MS-13 is an example of a transnational street gang and its

network extends from El Salvador to Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala, through Mexico and into the United States.

As mentioned in Section I, Wilson and Sullivan categorized gangs into three groups based on criminal activities, goals, and sophistication. In review, first-generation gangs are primarily turf oriented, with a loose leadership structure and tend to engage in unsophisticated criminal activities. Second generation gangs are more organized, “assume a market rather than turf orientation,” and focus on drug-centered criminal activity. Third generation gangs are highly sophisticated, “mercenary-type groups” with goals of financial acquisition, and an established set of political aims.<sup>74</sup>

In the US, MS-13 remains a first or second generation gang. Their primary focus remains loyalty, protection, and money. As they branch out and become more tied with the drug cartels they are moving out of the first generation and evolving into a more developed second generation gang. In Central America, MS-13 is more developed. The gang uses indiscriminate violence to intimidate and coerce, and they significantly impact their host country’s government and economy.<sup>75</sup> Although MS-13 is not tied to any terrorist groups, in El Salvador and Honduras the gang itself is already considered an international terrorist group.<sup>76</sup>

Utilizing this “generational gang theory” Wilson and Sullivan compare the characteristics of third generation gangs with those of traditional terrorist organizations. Recalling the 9-11 attacks, they fuse together the threat from developed international street gangs like MS-13 and the threat from terrorist organizations.<sup>77</sup>

Fred Burton also recognizes MS-13’s violence and the gang’s ability to operate across national borders, but he draws a somewhat different conclusion. Burton compares MS-13 to early 20<sup>th</sup> century organized crime syndicates. Basing the threat posed by MS-13 on the threat

presented by organized crime, Burton recommends controlling transnational street gangs like MS-13 the same way we controlled the New York street gangs of the early 1900s.<sup>78</sup>

While both of these points of view are persuasive and provide a convenient way to categorize the threat from gangs like MS-13, they are both incomplete. That being said, they provide an excellent starting point for examining the threat from MS-13 because the US has experience with both organized crime and international terrorism. In other words, in order to better understand the actual threat posed by MS-13, one should compare it to what we know--the national threat posed by international terrorists and organized crime.

### ***MS-13 and International Terrorism***

The national threat from international terrorism was illustrated in dramatic fashion on Sept 11, 2001. In this case, al Qaeda, an organized, globally oriented terrorist group, used their global networks to cross into US sovereign territory and then committed an act of terrorism to promote their political and ideological aims. At the risk of oversimplification, the bottom line national threat from international terrorist groups is that these groups will utilize weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their global capabilities to threaten and/or strike US citizens and US national interests.

Although they share some characteristics, terrorist organizations are different from international street gangs. The primary difference is in culture and motivation. Terrorist organizations like al Qaeda are ideologically driven while gangs like MS-13 are primarily criminally and financially motivated. Both may resort to terrorism in the form of indiscriminate violence to promote their aims, but their motivation and end goals are different. Secondly, street gangs are overt and visible while terrorist organizations are more covert. Street gangs are visible

and open to capitalize on fear and coercion. Terrorist organizations maintain their secrecy to accomplish their goals.

Based on motivation and ideology, the possibility that a transnational street gang will directly threaten US national interests or large groups of the population is less likely than that of a terrorist organization. On the other hand, because street gangs are not confined by ideological ties they are open to mercenary type enterprises. Thus, the real terrorist threat from MS-13 is that they will cooperate with an international terrorist organization.

### ***MS-13 and Organized Crime***

In many ways organized criminal groups are similar to terrorist organizations. Both tend to have a vertical hierarchy, strong leadership, codes of loyalty, and a “level of entrepreneurial expertise.”<sup>79</sup> Again the difference lies in motivation. The FBI defines organized crime as “any group having a formalized structure whose primary objective is to obtain money through illegal activities.”<sup>80</sup> The threat from organized crime is financially and stability oriented. In contrast to a terrorist organization, organized crime presents a national threat if it becomes so large and sophisticated that it impacts the nation as a whole. An example of this expansion can be seen in the drug cartels currently wreaking havoc in Mexico.

International street gangs like MS-13 are not traditional organized criminal groups...yet. Although they share many traits and are more like organized crime than international terrorists, MS-13 lacks the vertical leadership and the preeminent boss necessary to be categorized as a traditional criminal organization.<sup>81</sup> Additionally, MS-13 lacks the systematic criminal coordination to be categorized as organized crime.<sup>82</sup> The real national criminal threat from MS-13 lies in the gang’s potential growth and development into an organized criminal syndicate.

Unchecked now, MS-13 threatens to grow into a national criminal problem because of size and international reach.

### **National Threats**

Based on this analysis, the national threat from MS-13 can be divided into short term (or immediate) threats and long term (or developing) threats. The immediate threats can be further divided into small scale and large scale threats.

### ***Immediate Threats***

Communities across the US are already experiencing violence and drug trafficking at the hands of MS-13. The gang's impact is centralized in specific communities but "law enforcement at the local, state, and federal level are expending considerable resources to combat this growing problem."<sup>83</sup> This centralized threat represents an immediate threat that is smaller in scale than the national threat posed by terrorist organizations.

The possibility that MS-13 could team up with an international terrorist organization represents the larger scale immediate threat to the US and deserves further examination.

There are several factors that make this cooperation a possibility.

1. MS-13 is financially motivated and not ideologically constrained.
2. MS-13 has demonstrated and is known for its transnational capabilities. The gang is heavily involved in human smuggling and has an extensive network set up on the southern border of the United States.
3. The gang members are easily accessible. Reports indicate that there are already ties between al Qaeda and MS-13.<sup>84</sup>

On the other hand, ideological and practical reasons preclude cooperation between terrorist organizations, like al Qaeda, and transnational street gangs, like MS-13, and make this cooperation unlikely.<sup>85</sup>

1. Lack of central leadership. MS-13s leadership structure is not mature enough to convince al Qaeda that the gang members can be trusted.
2. Better alternatives. There are better organized, more capable, albeit more expensive, options open for international terrorists. For example, on the southern border of the US, drug cartels are operating with more elaborate smuggling operations.<sup>86</sup>
3. Ideological differences. MS-13 does not share a hatred for America with the terrorist organizations that threaten the United States.

### ***Developing Threats***

In the developing or long term threat category, MS-13 could evolve into a pseudo-terrorist group or grow into a global criminal organization. They have the necessary infrastructure and have already demonstrated terrorist capabilities in the international arena. Unless things change, their focus on criminal goals rather than ideological goals makes this transition unlikely.

The gang could also evolve into a global criminal organization. The risk of the gang changing into a true globally organized criminal organization is higher than the risk that the gang will become a terrorist organization. In fact many feel the gang has already started down this evolutionary track in Central America. This ominous evolution depends on the gang further developing its organizational structure and recognizing a central leadership entity.

If MS-13's international organization continues to evolve and the US cliques submit to a centralized leadership structure, the threat to US national security is twofold. First of all the

gang already operates in 42 states nationwide. With better organization and coordination between cliques the threat of violence and drugs transitions from a local or regional threat to a national threat. Secondly, this transition in organization would eliminate most of the barriers that keep international terrorist organizations like al Qaeda from utilizing the transnational capabilities of MS-13.

### **International Threat**

It is not these immediate or developing threats to the US that are the most likely or the most concerning. The most likely large scale threat to the United States from MS-13 originates in Central America. The potential of ungoverned space emerging in the region's struggling countries is a real threat to US national security.<sup>87</sup> The danger of ungoverned space is readily evident in recent events in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The 9-11 attack demonstrated how international terrorists can use sanctuaries in uncontrolled, ignored regions to launch "devastating" attacks.<sup>88</sup> According to the RAND Corporation ungoverned territories pose a threat to US national security as breeding grounds for terrorism and criminal activities as well as launching pads for attacks.<sup>89</sup> This danger to the US is amplified by the proximity of Central America.

Some experts feel that the Central American version of MS-13 has already evolved into what Sullivan described as a third generation street gang.<sup>90</sup> Pointing to their transnational capabilities, more centralized leadership, and indiscriminate violence they make a compelling case that MS-13 is threatening the stability of several countries in Central America.

In a report to congress, Clare Ribando warns that gang violence already threatens the regional stability in both Central America and Mexico. She points out that Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador have some of the highest murder rates in the world with a large

portion of those murders attributed to gang violence. According to Salvadoran police, 60 percent of El Salvador's murders in 2004 were gang related.<sup>91</sup>

Without a change in policy and help from outside the problem will continue to grow. The biggest problems continue to be poverty and lack of adequate security. Law enforcement agencies in these poverty stricken areas are simply out-manned and out-gunned.

### **Summary**

International capabilities and the gang's impact on struggling countries in Central America make MS-13 very different from other US street gangs. Adequate resources and attention must be focused on the regional problem that the gang presents inside the United States in order to keep the gang from evolving into a direct national threat but the solution cannot stop there. The United States must recognize that the gang already presents a significant immediate threat to our neighbor countries and realize that their fate impacts US security. The danger from international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction make any significant threat to Central American countries and their ability to control their territory a large scale problem for the United States.

### **SECTION III - RECOMMENDATIONS**

To effectively combat the influence and growth of international street gangs like MS-13 the United States and Central American countries must address the issue holistically. While Law Enforcement and even the US military have significant roles, all four instruments of power (Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economic) need to be focused and employed. The question is not whether the US needs to address the regional issue; the question is how to effectively employ the military and law enforcement instruments in concert with the other instruments in the international arena. The answer can be found by addressing the root causes of gang growth.

#### **Current Initiatives**

The United States and Central American countries are addressing the issue of transnational street gangs through legislation and law enforcement. These initiatives are primarily punishment-based and provide an important foundation for building a holistic approach.

In general, gang-related crimes in the United States still fall under the jurisdiction of state and local law enforcement;<sup>92</sup> however, national level focus has increased significantly over the past two decades. In the 1990s, Congress federalized many gang related crimes and increased penalties for those crimes. According to Celinda Franco, the Department of Justice (DOJ) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) are the federal agencies responsibility for utilizing criminal and immigration laws in the fight against gangs. Under these two agencies, the FBI's MS-13 National Gang Task Force established in December 2004 and the National Gang Intelligence Center established in 2005, as well as DHS's Immigration and Customs Enforcement are key players in the US fight against gangs.<sup>93</sup> These agencies will continue to

play key roles internationally by enforcing immigration laws and executing information sharing policies.

Central American nations are also focused on legislation and operations to deal with transnational gangs. Figure 1 provides an overview of each government’s focus, key legislation, and major law enforcement operations in the fight against gang violence.

<b>State</b>	<b>Perspective</b>	<b>Legislation</b>	<b>Operations</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
Honduras	Gang problem is severe with international aspects. Homicides are increasing despite anti-gang legislation.	Anti-gang law: Gang leaders face 9 to 12 years in prison and fines up to \$12,000	Operation Liberty: Law enforcement operation to stop gang activity resulting in 15,000 arrests	Very little money is allocated for prevention or rehabilitation
El Salvador	Gang problem is severe and international. Despite punishment focused anti-gang operations homicide numbers are rising.	Anti-gang law: Gang members over 12 years old can be tried as adults & members face up to 20 years in prison if convicted of “gang activity”	Operation Firm Hand: Law enforcement operation to curb gang violence with special focus on young gang members	Prisons are overcrowded due to high arrest rates, however judges do not agree with new legislation resulting in inconsistent enforcement
Mexico	Gang problem is along the borders and not widely recognized. Northern border gangs are working with drug cartels. Southern border gangs are focused on drug, human, and arms trafficking.	No specific anti-gang legislation	Operation Blade: Law enforcement operation resulting in hundreds of arrests	Mexico is the gateway to the US and the key to US security
Guatemala	Gang problem is severe but localized.	No specific anti-gang legislation	No named operations: Law enforcement focused on high crime communities	High arrest numbers but no focus on underlying causes
Nicaragua	Gang problem is relatively minor and localized.	Anti-gang law was considered but rejected by congress	No operations	Focus is on prevention and intervention

Figure 1: Anti-Gang Initiatives in Central America<sup>94</sup>

### **Building on Current Initiatives**

The United States and Central American countries must continue to work together and build a holistic regional approach to the transnational gang issue. Punishment-based approaches

are critical to controlling MS-13 but they only address the symptoms. History shows that time is not on the gang's side and solutions require a long term approach. Rather than striving to eliminate the threat with law enforcement alone, coordinated efforts must address the root causes, combat dangerous capabilities, and influence current and potential gang members. Similar to irregular warfare and counter insurgency operations (COIN), the solution lays in the hearts and minds of the enemy.

### ***Law Enforcement's Role***

Building on the COIN analogy, Law Enforcement is the military arm in this asymmetric struggle. COIN experts know that there are basically two ways to conduct operations. According to Dr. Jeffery Record, the first method is to eliminate the insurgents. This method was tried in both Vietnam and the early days of Iraq with military sweeps through populated areas to identify and eliminate individuals--eliminate enough insurgents and the insurgency will dissolve. Unfortunately, in both Vietnam and Iraq more insurgents always rose up to replace those that were eliminated.<sup>95</sup>

The second operational methodology relies on protecting the population and increasing security.<sup>96</sup> This method requires more manpower and a commitment to live and operate with the local population. By focusing on root causes and the motivation behind the insurgency, the population focus tries to eliminate the source of the insurgency rather than the individual insurgents. While the jury is still out on the overall success of counter insurgency efforts in Iraq, early indications show that protecting the population and focusing on security have been much more effective than killing insurgents.

The point is not that MS-13 members are insurgents battling for legitimacy--the differences are too great and evident; but rather that the key to an effective strategy can be found

in the similarities between law enforcement's goals and the operational goals of COIN. Law enforcement leadership, similar to military leadership in COIN operations, must recognize that long term effectiveness against gang members lies in the hearts and minds of current and potential gang members.

This is not to say that law enforcement officials should to coddle gang members. There is a lot to be said for picking up MS-13 members based solely upon their affiliation with the gang. Similar to Soldiers and Marines who apprehend known insurgents; police officers need the ability to protect themselves and those they serve. On the other hand, police and soldiers fighting against gang growth need to remember that the battle is against hopelessness more than it is against individuals. Making and reinforcing that distinction is leadership's responsibility and leadership must keep the big picture in mind.

One of the most difficult aspects of COIN operations is combating the insurgency without creating more insurgents. This is largely because insurgents are ideologically motivated. Cultural aspects, rather than ideological beliefs drive youth to join gangs; but just like understanding the ideology of the insurgents help soldiers in COIN, law enforcement policies and practices should take these cultural factors into account. In order to combat the ideology of insurgents in Iraq, troops had to work with, live with, and respect the population they were trying to protect. By combating the ideology of insurgency, troops were able to counter the insurgents' lies about American occupation and motivate the population to fight against the insurgency. Similarly, law enforcement leadership must ensure their strategies do not promote the hopelessness that fosters gang growth.

### *Instruments of National Power*

By addressing root causes, the American government can effectively utilize the DIME (Diplomatic, Information, Military, and Economic instruments of power) to compliment law enforcement actions while building a transnational strategy to combat regional gang growth. First of all, the US leadership must recognize that this is a transnational issue and proposed solutions must also be transnational. As the regional hegemon, the United States should take the lead in developing solutions and coordinating these solutions. However, to be effective the US must be aware of its limitations and recognize the need for diplomacy. Trust, communication, and solid relationships are critical ingredients for successfully implementing any regional policies. To foster communication and build trust, the United States should re-look at its deportation policies and also address immigration reform to see how these policies affect the entire region. Additionally, the US must be willing to openly address Central American concerns like arms sales before Central American countries can be expected to address US concerns like drug production.

Information, Economic, and Military instruments should be focused on increasing security, and building capability. According to Dario Teicher, Columbia's recent success against the drug cartels provides an example of utilizing these instruments. The Columbian military used a clear and hold strategy to increase security. President Uribe taxed the wealthy to fund the operations and successfully employed an information campaign to foster public support for both the military and the fight against the drug cartels. While not a complete national success (Plan Columbia's economic stimulus package is struggling) or an international success (the drug cartels simply moved operations to Mexico), Uribe's strategy was successful in fighting the influence of drug cartels inside Columbia.

Regional militaries should be used to augment law enforcement in the battle against gang growth. Although this sounds easy from an American perspective, this will not be a simple endeavor. A key step for Uribe in Columbia was cleaning up the military. The first step in utilizing any Central American military will be in cleaning up each organization's reputation and legitimacy. This is where the US Military and Economic instruments have key roles. While state and local law enforcement agencies control gang growth within the US borders, the US military should focus on building military legitimacy and capability in Central America. In today's fiscally restrained environment, any foreign aid to Central America should be focused on this same goal.

The second step will be increasing the size of the Central American militaries. Similar to COIN operations and Uribe's clear and hold strategy, increasing security while focusing on the hearts and minds of the population will require a large military presence. US aid and diplomacy should be used to encourage increasing the number of military members in Central America. Currently there is not a direct avenue for the US to help Central American countries to pay for a larger military.<sup>97</sup> The US can help by financing building projects and providing equipment through foreign military sales, but the direct avenue to help pay military salaries is not available. This issue should be addressed.

Along with increasing law enforcement capabilities and numbers, the US and Central American governments must work together to provide alternatives to disenfranchised Latino youths. Young men join gangs to earn respect and because they do not have any other prospects. Without alternatives gang growth will continue. One alternative to gang membership is military service. There are several reasons why promoting military service is a good idea. First of all, military service demands discipline. Promoting military discipline provides a way for

governments to address declining moral values while providing a way for individuals to escape economic problems. Secondly, military service requires commitment. The military can provide the family that the young men are searching for. Today's youth are looking for structured discipline and commitment, if there is not an avenue available they will create it and the result will be gang growth.

By focusing the US information and economic instruments of power on promoting military service in Central American countries, the US can have a significant positive impact. While directly helping Central American governments clean up their military's reputation, the US can provide an information campaign similar to the campaigns used to promote US military service. These campaigns have worked in the US and they will work with the searching young men in Central America. On the economic side, the US must help the impoverished countries modernize their military bases with a focus on housing, security, and quality of life. US military presence in the form of advisors will establish legitimacy and provide a means for the US to monitor progress. Bottom line, it is in the US interest to promote military service in Central America and will be much cheaper to do it now rather than waiting to build a military capability in a failed state.

## **CONCLUSION**

The primary threat to US national security from MS-13 and other transnational street gangs stems from the ability of Central American governments to maintain control within their own borders. The potential of ungoverned space emerging in Central America is a real threat and demands immediate attention. Current responses are wide spread but of questionable effectiveness. Relying solely on Law Enforcement to curb gang violence and crime does not

address the root causes for gang violence, and punishment-based responses are inadequate to address the international aspect of transnational street gangs.

In today's globalized environment, future solutions must include international coordination and cooperation. The US needs to concentrate on the international threat and employ its diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of power to effectively address the growing problem. US leadership must focus on root causes and ensure national policies do not hinder progress. As Burton insightfully put it, "it is already too late to completely eliminate MS-13 and other international street gangs but we can control them."<sup>98</sup> The US can mitigate the international threat from MS-13 and build regional security by working with Central American governments and holistically addressing the issue.

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## Notes

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