

**GUATEMALA/EL SALVADOR/HONDURAS:
CORRUPTION AND ORGANIZED CRIME IN CENTRAL
AMERICA'S NORTHERN TRIANGLE COUNTRIES
IMPACT ON MIGRATION CRISIS WORSENING REGIONAL
INSTABILITY**

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INTRODUCTION

The United States has recently experienced record-high numbers of apprehensions on its southern border shared with Mexico. This crisis has become a grave security concern for the US and Mexico as many migrants are coming via irregular entry points and often with smugglers. The primary nationalities of those apprehended are from 3 countries that make up what is called the Northern Triangle of Central America: Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

This region is known to have the highest homicide rates in the world. Long-established issues of widespread corruption in the political system and a climate of insecurity created by organized crime has significantly exacerbated issues of poverty, unemployment, gender violence, and climate change, causing tens of thousands of people to emigrate out of the region. The instability has allowed criminal organizations to flourish and maintain more control over certain areas than police and military. In turn, extortion, drug trafficking, targeted killings, and increasingly human smuggling are the primary modus operandi for transnational gangs such as MS-13 which base their operations in the Triangle. Likewise, Mexican organized crime groups like that of the Sinaloa and Gulf Cartels depend on this region for transportation and trafficking for their drug trade operations. The vast corruption in the government and power of criminal organizations has left many ordinary citizens in a vulnerable position with few options and many have chosen to leave their respective countries in an attempt to reach the US via Mexico.

By outlining each country in the Triangle, we will examine the current political situations and ongoing organized crime operations that have impacted security in the region and the Migration Crisis currently facing the US and Mexico.

EL SALVADOR

El Salvador held run-off elections on March 10, 2019, electing Nayib Bukele, a former mayor in San Salvador. He was subsequently sworn in on June 1, 2019. Previously a member of the leftist party, Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), he was eventually ousted in 2017. After his new party was barred from the elections, he chose to run with the right-wing Grand Alliance for National Unity (GAN) party. He ran on a fierce anti-corruption platform, blaming the past administration for the issues of corruption, organized crime, and unemployment. Since taking office, he has publically fired many officials with ties to the previous administration, rejected peace talks with high-level gangs, and attempted to engage with the US over migration issues.

El Salvador is rated as one of the most violent countries in the world by the United Nations with a homicide rate of 50 per 100,000 residents in 2018, slightly down from 60 per every 100,000 in 2017. So far in 2019, the daily average is 8 homicides. A report by the Migration Policy

Institute states that over one-fifth of the population lives in the US. **Customs and Border Protection statistics indicate a dramatic increase in the number of family apprehensions from El Salvador from 13,669 in 2018 to 44,198 so far in 2019.** It is estimated by US Southern Command and the State Department that there are at least 70,000 members in various gangs throughout the Northern Triangle, and at least 20,000 in El Salvador, primarily involved in drug trafficking and extortion. El Salvador has the highest concentration of gang members, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) estimates this to be around 323 gang members for every 100,000 citizens.

The largest gang, **Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13)**, was founded in Los Angeles, California in the 1980s by migrants fleeing the civil wars occurring in the Northern Triangle countries, primarily Salvadorians. Throughout the 90s the gang expanded with the help of other prominent gangs until a large portion of the membership was deported under the Clinton Administration in the mid and late 90s. It is estimated that 20,000 criminals were deported back to Central American countries between 2000 and 2004, allowing the gang to build a deeper network and take advantage of the post-civil war instability. Their largest rival, **Barrio 18** (or 18th Street, M-18) also began in Los Angeles around the same time as a splinter group and was the first Hispanic gang to accept members from other races and countries, making it spread across Central America quickly. Their rivalry and extensive network have become the driving factors behind organized violence and the high homicide rates within the region.

Reports by InSight Crime and the Center for Latin American and Latino Studies indicate **MS-13 has strong ties to Mexican cartels through international drug trafficking**, notably, the Mexican Mafia, of which it pays homage to for its origins. In the previous administrations beginning in the 2000s, El Salvador and other Northern Triangle governments enacted “Mano Dura” (heavy hand) policies meant to crack down on the rampant gangs and enacted harsher punishments for members. The military began operating in public spaces and began a war against alleged gang members, even forming a special “death squad.” This resulted in a series of extrajudicial killings on the part of authorities and created mistrust between the public and security forces. A peace deal was later brokered in 2012 with both MS-13 and M-18 but also failed to contain gang violence and instead shifted the nature of their organized crime from direct conflict with one another towards crimes against the population. Furthermore, harsher sentencing also had the reverse intended effect as studies by the Department of Justice Organized Crime and Gang Section suggest leaders have used the prison system to increase cohesion and discipline among members. This phenomenon was first studied in US prisons where both gangs also operate.

Corruption has also allowed gang violence to continue by creating situations of insecurity for the population and allowing security forces to practice extrajudicial violence as a form of policing. During the recent election, homicides increased, likely as a result of gang pressure on candidates to engage with them for a renewed peace deal. Furthermore, 3 previous presidential administrations have all been indicted on corruption and embezzlement offenses, accused of taking money from public funds for their own gain and to offer bribes. The estimated total is over \$600 million USD. **As of 2018, El Salvador has a score of 35/100 from Transparency International for perceived level of corruption**, zero being the most corrupt, and ranks 105 out of 180 countries in comparison.

Bukele ran on a platform of anti-corruption and anti-establishment with ambitions of addressing the root issues causing the rise of criminal gangs and massive emigration, however, it is not likely that his administration will cause a significant shift in the short-term. His party, GANA, holds only 10 of the 84 seats in the national assembly and 27 of the 262 mayoral offices. Therefore, it is likely that the well-established parties of the FMLN and National Republican Alliance (ARENA) will seek to undercut his momentum and re-establish power, in turn, making his party look weak and ineffective. Bukele has also stated plans to boost employment, education, and tourism but not offered a clear outline of how this is to be completed outside of stating the need for more public-private partnerships. He has pledged to maintain current social assistance programs but does not support adding more or expanding them. He represents an image of hope and a potential break from the long-standing establishment but it is unclear what realistic change Bukele will be able to produce given the deep roots of these issues.

A scenario likely to take place is that Bukele makes sacrifices to his plan on structural reform and fighting corruption in favour of hoping to bring about more social change. He will already have a difficult time in the national assembly and will need to establish alliances. In turn, he will be able to begin projects that will keep him popular among voters in the short-term. This is likely to be something that will be visible, such as healthcare or education, ensuring a solid chance at reelection. It may help to relieve some

push factors for young people to emigrate but the major security concerns related to organized crime will be harder to impede.

Because of the transnational nature of the notorious gangs, it is likely that any pressure from the government will only increase operations elsewhere in the Northern Triangle countries and will be difficult to eradicate without regional support. Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that the nature of crimes are likely to adapt to changing situations, including more extortion and targeted killings, indicating that the gangs will not cease to exist but will only adapt. It is likely that Bukele will proceed slowly with change and take any drop in homicides or emigration figures as success of his initiatives. **However, in the long-term, the situation is likely to continue without adopting a plan to tackle corruption and alleviate the driving factors behind organized crime. The push behind recruitment and involvement must be weakened in order to devalue the organization of the power it holds.**

The US Government has stated to be in favour of more Mano Duro policies, despite their well-documented failure. Additionally, the Departments of Defense, Justice, and Homeland Security have all reported donations and trainings for Salvadoran National Civil Police over the past 4 years. However, little to no support has been offered towards tackling the root issues of organized crime operations or judicial reform within the government. Many citizens are cautiously optimistic about Bukele but migration flows to the US are unlikely to cease until major change can be noticed, a process that may take a few years at minimum.

GUATEMALA

Guatemala is currently in the middle of elections with the run-off taking place on August 11, 2019. The 2 candidates have both ran before and been alleged of corruption and extrajudicial killings. According to polls published by the Council of the Americas, unemployment and insecurity represent 50 percent of voters' concerns and corruption almost 20 percent. Sandra Torres, the former first lady, and third-time contender represents the center-left party, National Unity of Hope (UNE); and her opposition is 4-time contender Alejandro Giammattei of the VAMOS, conservative party.

Torres was barred from running in 2011 and lost the run-off in 2015. She is currently facing allegations of illicit campaign financing from the 2011 campaign but is currently given immunity as a candidate. Giammattei was linked to several extrajudicial deaths that took place when he was the director of the country's prison system from 2004-2008, the courts have since exonerated him.

Corruption in the system continues to be a source of instability as the UN-backed International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) uncovered multiple scandals before it was announced that it would be shut down by President Jimmy Morales in January. The Commission uncovered the then-President Otto Molina and VP Roxana Baldetti to be involved in a corruption scandal known as La Linea in which fake businesses were setup to defraud the Treasury department through customs. President Morales ran and won on a platform of support for CICIG until 2 of his family members were arrested based on CICIG investigations and the President was later accused of illegal campaign financing. Moreover, 160 seats in Congress are also up for election in this cycle where more than 20 percent of its members are currently under investigation for corruption scandals.

A July 2015 CICIG report indicated a large number of political parties are directly linked with business elites and organized criminal groups, relying on them for campaign funding in exchange for favors. This is a phenomenon thought to have long historical roots in the civil war era and afterwards in the 1980s and 90s, thus imbedding the economic elites into the political process and ensuring they have a large sway. The report found that the corruption has resulted in elites managing to inflate their employee numbers, openly buy votes for candidates, coerce politicians for favorable legislation, and to participate in illicit activities. CICIG estimates that elites and organized crime networks fund roughly 50 percent of campaign finances. And those who attempt to fund their own campaign are usually outspent and over powered by those favoring the corrupt path.

Another incident occurred in April 2019, when a presidential candidate, Mario Estrada, was arrested in the US by DEA officials for allegedly coordinating with the Sinaloa Cartel to finance the election. In a report issued by the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York, Estrada pledged to facilitate the cartel's drug transportation from Guatemalan ports if he won.

Based on reports by InSight Crime, the **Sinaloa Cartel has deep ties with a local criminal organization known as the “Huistas” that operate in the border department of Huehuetenango.** This relationship has existed since the 1970s when marijuana and poppy plantations became in demand for the Mexican drug trade. **Groups in the area became important transit and storage points for the Sinaloa and Gulf Cartels in human and drug trafficking operations, forming a transit corridor from South America.** This network expanded routes through to Mexico and beyond, consolidating power under the Huistas and expanding organized crime operations in the region. The Huistas retain a large portion of control over the area through networking with local politicians and the business elite. This network is reported to control municipal and provincial positions and extend all the way up to representatives in Congress and individuals within the Attorney General’s Office. The multi-way relationship established what the CICIG termed “Illicit Political Economic Networks.”

The long line of corruption scandals has exacerbated issues like unemployment, crime, education, and agriculture production across the country. Based on estimates by the National Economic Research Center in Guatemala (CIEN), 60 percent of the population lives in poverty and roughly 70 to 75 percent of the labor force is in the informal economy. This is causing citizens to lose faith that real change will ever occur. They see the candidates appealing to their needs during the campaign but then abandoning them after being elected. Voter turnout during the primaries was barely above 50 percent, in comparison to 70 percent in previous years. Guatemalans instead are choosing to leave the country and flee in order to escape the compounding concerns. **As of May, 37,000 Guatemalans had been detained in the US for 2019, the highest percentage of Central American migrants.**

In addition to the increased crime in urban areas due to lack of public security, **the vast western highlands of Guatemala represent a major source of emigration.** 94,000 immigrants were deported from the US and Mexico back to Guatemala over the past 2 years, and roughly half were from the highlands. Climate change related issues of frost, change in the harvest season, lack of rain, and intense storms have worsened issues of crop harvests and malnutrition within the region. Issues widely ignored by the political leadership. As a result of the lack of resources in rural areas, it is likely that more Guatemalans will move out of the highlands and emigrate to urban areas for more employment opportunities. This will, in turn, have a negative effect on the agricultural production for the country, lowering GDP and plunging citizens further into poverty.

Both candidates have somewhat differing, but equally vague plans on how they plan to address this compound issue if elected. Torres has stated she will work to “clean house” to rid the system of corruption, but outside the need for austerity programs, she has not elaborated. She has also been unwilling to support to the reinstatement of the CICIG. Giammattei is equally uninterested in bringing back the Council. Both candidates also share the belief that the key to targeting gang violence is to reform the prison systems and strengthening police forces. Torres states she would focus on moving prisons into isolated places in order to fight corruption within and make it harder for gangs to operate. However, previous academic studies do not indicate this is a successful strategy. Giammattei is in favor of building more prisons to reduce overcrowding and allow security forces to regain control over operations. However, outside of the vague and holistic goals, neither candidate has given a real strategy for combating the contributing factors that allow organized crime to flourish. Besides of quoting general austerity measures, minor increases in GDP, and international support, there is no real plan. Therefore, it is unlikely that either candidate will be able to alter the status quo very much if elected.

CICIG proved to be a useful tool in publicizing this corruption network and regaining justice over the government, however, it is only as useful as a system allows it to be. In many cases the Commissioner pursued, investigations were sabotaged and the investigative team threatened. Days after ending CICIG, Morales also banned the head prosecutor, Ivan Velasquez, from reentering the country. By not reinstating the CICIG, officials have expressed unwillingness to change the current situation. As a result, **the deeply entrenched network that exists between business elite, organized crime, and elected officials is expected to remain.** This makes it difficult for people attempting to escape the symptoms of the issues as it is not considered “bad enough” to grant asylum claims in the US. Instead, the US considers Guatemala a safe third country for those passing from El Salvador and Honduras. In doing so, both governments ignore the vast transnational organized crime network that exists throughout the region, and instead are attempting to control the symptomatic issues of a wider problem.

HONDURAS

Since early 2018, Hondurans have been protesting the election of 2017 and subsequent measures taken by President Hernandez. So far in 2019, the **World Terror Watch database has reported 78 people injured as a result of ongoing protests throughout the country** against the education and health sector reforms. The protests have been ongoing for months and increased tensions between citizens and the government with the anniversary of the 2009 coup d'état in June. Government forces have reacted violently to protests and attempt to restrict demonstrations as much as possible. This has prompted the UNHCHR to release a statement urging the government to respond to protests via diplomatic means and demanding the respect for freedom of demonstration.

Honduras' most recent election took place in the fall of 2017, but it continues to be affected by the outcome of the 2009 coup and subsequent political climate. On June 28, 2009, President Manuel Zelaya Rosales was forcibly removed from office by the military and exiled, an illegal order from the Honduran Congress and Supreme Court. This was in response to the President allegedly violating the Constitution by seeking another term. Since 2009, the government has been ruled by the National Party and has continuously moved towards an accused dictatorship.

After 2009, all those alleged to have played a part in the coup were given immunity under a change in the law. The current president, Juan Orlando Hernandez, was one of those members. After the coup, he became instrumental in passing legislation that would concentrate power under the president and ensure the National Party's power, most notably, the establishment of the National Security and Defense Council in 2011. This Council is headed by the President and includes the head of Congress, defense and security ministries, attorney general, and chief justice of the Supreme Constitutional Court. By doing so, the President and Council are allowed to target any group or individual it claims poses a threat to the government.

His election in 2013 was characterized by gross irregularities in the ballot counting and showed evidence of fraud as reported by local media. The 2017 election also showed signs of considerable irregularities. Including a pause in the counting when Hernandez was down to be resumed showing him in the lead. Under his administration, he has created a new elite group of military units under his command and created the Military Police for Public Order (PMOP) which could be deployed in public spaces. He also circumvented transparency laws allowing for more corruption and less oversight. Many experts with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace have referred to Honduras as an "operating state" for corruption, one that is entrenched in vast networks of institutions, military, and organized crime.

More recently, the government has cut spending for health care and education sectors and moved it to support the expansion of the military. Additionally, there has also been considerable growth in privatized economic sectors. Honduras has had a long history of privatizing economic sectors and granting concessions to extractive industries, mostly mining. Under this plan, private entities are allowed to own and manage the land they operate on, and most are given to foreign entities. The Honduran government has gone as far as using the military to forcibly remove inhabitants from their land. This has prompted a move in the population, forcing many into urban impoverished areas. In 2010, they began to expand privatization to public entities through awarding contracts. Public goods, such as electricity, soon began to increase in price and experience more problems. An investigation by InSight Crime reports that developments such as this have become an important revenue stream for corruption and money-laundering.

Penal codes weakening the sentences of gang members and organized crime, along with the growth of impoverished people have allowed criminal organizations to flourish. While at the same time, crimes against defaming the government or interfering with the public have increased in sentence terms, targeting journalists and activists. It is also reported that the President's own brother, Juan Antonio Hernandez is an alleged large-scale drug trafficker. Other local officials and congressmen close to the President have been indicted on drug charges and money laundering. Moreover, with the lack of funding to public expenses such as education and health care, many youths are susceptible to become gang members at a young age. MS-13 and Barrio 18 are both active in urban areas where they reportedly control entire neighborhoods and are able to extort the population as the main method of control. Other state-wide activities include drug trafficking and hired killings.

Protests calling for President Hernandez to step down have increased throughout the country. If successful, it is unlikely that his replacement will be much different. The other institutions do not operate

in isolation and are imbedded in corruption. Therefore, any change at the presidency will likely result in just a change in name. Outside influence from the UN and an anti-corruption council like the CICIG in Guatemala could be helpful for the long-term but must be invited by the government, a move not likely to happen in the near future.

For some time after the coup, the homicide rate in Honduras was the highest in the world at 89 per 100,000. It has since decreased to an average of 40 per 100,000, only slightly behind that of El Salvador. **Both Honduras and Guatemala experienced an average of 300 people emigrating per day in 2017, but since 2018 and the reelection of Hernandez, people have begun fleeing in caravans more than before. As of May 2019, just over 31,000 single Hondurans were apprehended at the US border, slightly below that of Guatemala.**

The security situation is similar to that of Guatemala if not more dire as citizens face violence from government authorities and gangs. Likewise, the entrenched issues of corruption and organized crime are widely acknowledged but somewhat ignored, particularly the admission of how extensive the issue has become over the past 10 years. However, as a result of the recent crack-down of the US and Mexico on migration routes, and because of Honduras' geographic location, it is likely that migrants and asylum seekers will attempt to migrate south into Costa Rica and Panama where political situations are more stable. A report by the UNHCR in 2018 stated other Central American countries experienced 308,000 asylum requests in the first 6 months of the year, a 54 percent increase over the same period in 2017. By this movement we can assess that **migrants fleeing out of Honduras and the Triangle will not cease, but instead will change direction as a result of US and Mexican pressure.**

MIGRATION CRISIS

The Northern Triangle countries are responsible for trafficking 90 percent of cocaine that comes from South America and into the US according to UNODC and DEA, specifically from Colombia. Their battle over turf and connection routes is a primary driving factor for violence in the region. **Mexican cartels use the Northern Triangle countries as a major source of their drug trafficking operations and have come to rely heavily on them.** Local media in Colombia and Mexico has documented an increase of Mexican cartels becoming involved in the production of cocaine, among other drugs. This makes it cheaper for cartels, and if they are able to produce it closer to home, it will vastly expand the supply. Guatemalan and Honduran officials have reported finding small plots of coca plants high in the jungle areas over the past year. Colombia production remains higher but this shows that cartels are attempting to bring production closer to home, and thus closer to the US. Therefore, the greater population is at risk of either being caught in the middle of a gang war or becoming a target. Likewise, the younger population, mostly male, are subject to becoming involved with gangs either by force or out of necessity because of other factors such as low economic opportunities.

The political situation has intensified the issues pushing people into poverty and allowed gangs to thrive, reinforcing the driving factors behind crime and violence. It is important to illustrate how entrenched issues of corruption are within the Northern Triangle because it shows a cycle of abuse and reinforced networks of illicit activities. Additionally, the 3 countries share similar developments of democracy in their history and current political climates, demonstrating how organized criminal groups have taken advantage of the precarious situations across the region. In turn, this has developed into a transnational security crisis, requiring the support and contribution of all parties. It is also helpful for illustrating the difficulty of addressing the meta-issue as a collective. With the corrupt status of political affairs and lack of resources targeting production, Northern Triangle countries are inept at tackling the primary issues.

As a result, this has caused large amounts of the population to flee their respective countries in an effort to break the cycle that has been made. This has created a grave security risk for the region's stability and is overflowing the issue into Mexico and the US. Mexico has attempted to curb the activity of cartels by relying on its military, and under President Obrador, a newly created national guard, a combined force of military and police. Mexico has worked closely with the US to inhibit the drug flows into the US, but also lacks resources and so long as there is a demand, there will be trafficking. Tackling gang violence is also difficult because any pressure on one group has typically resulted in the surge of another, meaning the state of organized crime is always in flux as various groups battle to fill the vacuum left by security forces.

The issues in the region have been steadily building to the point of eruption that the US is currently faced with on its southern border. The migrants emigrating out of the region are simply one of the more pronounced symptoms of a progressively worsening situation. As of 2019, security forces have taken a bolstered approach in Mexico, a result of pressure from the US, to tackling the migration that has become a serious consequence of the regional instability. However, this has done little than bring awareness to the overall issue.

The US continues to pursue a policy of zero-tolerance towards organized crime and a hardline approach to migration. That in combination with the pressure it has placed on Mexico to act similarly will likely result in a shift of migration trends south. Likewise, **with drug operations shifting more into Central America, this is likely to result in an increase of violence between groups and over turf. To tackle this issue without first addressing the rampant corruption in the region would be a serious miscalculation.** It is likely that the awareness brought by the current migration crisis will increase international pressure on the Northern Triangle governments to reform and invite more oversight bodies like that of CICIG in to help. El Salvador would be a good country to begin this process, falling in line with the platform of President Bukele. His administration provides the strongest chance of battling the meta-issue from within. If he is to maintain his promise, it is likely that he will continue to seek outside help, as he did by soliciting the Chinese.

For the US, this will remain a hotspot of instability for the long-term. DEA and US Southern Command briefs from 2018 indicate the US is primarily concerned about the growth of transnational actors in unstable regions.

In a report to Congress, the threat of cartels is adapting, diversifying, decentralizing and becoming more of a franchise. This incentivizes the US to act proactively in the region, however, it likely to translate to the same militarized policies the region has been practising for the past 20 years. There are indications that some governments, namely Mexico, will continue to seek support for civil programs targeted at youth to reduce factors enticing involvement with organized crime. However, these initiatives are traditionally underfunded and take too long to see results, therefore, it is not anticipated that such initiatives will be successful and support will be easier to obtain by promoting fast, hard-hitting solutions. Further political moves by the US and Mexico should be watched closely over the coming months as they serve as a good indication for the direction Triangle countries will go as well.