Cultural Tactics of Salvadoran Gangs Offer Chance for US to Weaken MS-13

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CULTURAL TACTICS OF SALVADORAN GANGS OFFER CHANCE FOR US TO WEAKEN MS-13

by

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Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of University Honors in International Studies in the Department of Political Science

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Abstract

This paper uses the Cultural Topography framework employed by the intelligence community to assess cultural factors of the MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) gang organization that have policy relevance to US national security. MS-13, though originally founded in the 1980s in a small sector of LA, has evolved into an international gang with a reputation of ultraviolence with a recent increase in gang activity. By striving to explore components of MS-13’s identity, values, norms of behavior, and perceptions, this research can be used to create a more timely and effective strategy in combatting the present MS-13 threat within the United States. After studying the recruitment techniques, history, rituals, and integrated traits of MS-13, this paper concludes that the US may be better able to tailor US strategy against MS-13 by changing how the US refers to MS-13, encouraging retention strategies of deported gang members, and exploiting key vulnerabilities evident in the cultural traits defined by the cultural topography method. The purpose of this paper is to convey that, by understanding the cultural implications of the MS-13 gang, it will become possible to tailor US strategy in a more effective manner.
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# Table of Contents

Final Written Product

*Key Findings* ................................. 1

*Scope Note* ................................. 2

*Main Body* ................................. 3

*Outlook* ................................. 13

*Endnotes* ................................. 14

Reflective Writing ........................... iv

Professional Autobiography ................ vi
KEY FINDINGS

Understanding the cultural tactics of Salvadoran gangs, particularly MS-13, can help the US decrease gang activity, violence, and recruitment, as well as deters illegal immigration to the US from El Salvador.

MS-13 (Mara Salvartruacha) originated in Los Angeles, California in the 1980s, and became an international organization after deportation tactics in the LA barrios exported the threat to El Salvador in the 1990s. Founded by Salvadoran immigrants fleeing a harsh civil war (1980-1992), MS-13 has evolved into a predator gang with a reputation of ultraviolence, with gang activity increasing in recent years. MS-13 targets the often negative or distant perception of El Salvador that Salvadorans living in the US have and further coerces new members to replace any past identity with a MS-13 identity upon initiation. This new identity demands gang loyalty and encompasses complete cultural restructuring. This identity estrangement and replacement is so thorough, that when MS-13 members are deported from the US back to El Salvador, they feel no attachment and reintegration is difficult, consequentially increasing gang activity and illegal immigration back to the US.

After new recruits undergo this identity estrangement and replacement process, the newly initiated MS-13 gang members are expected to live according to a strict gang code that results in harsh punishment and recruitment methods that are unwanted by many members of MS-13 and their recruitment pool. The US, particularly the FBI and local law enforcement, could capitalize on these unwanted norms, potentially decreasing illegal immigration, MS-13 recruitment, and general gang violence. A potential inhibitor of seizing this opportunity is found in the unchanging fighting culture of MS-13 that necessitates an enemy to be fought. If MS-13 perceives the US to be directly exploiting their culture, they may feel attacked and, viewing the US as a direct enemy, may channel their fighting nature to attack local police forces.

The dichotomous cosmology held by MS-13 is perpetuated by the Salvadoran ‘iron-fist’ anti-gang policy. This US originated policy, which has since been put into action by the Salvadoran government, encourages the police force to use harsh punishment techniques, consequentially strengthening MS-13’s perception of the government as a corrupt enemy. This perception has led to military behavior from gang members and the police force alike, increasing regional violence and illegal immigration to the United States. Just as MS-13’s enemy-centric view of the world explains their warlike nature towards government entities, MS-13’s perception of other gangs is likewise defined by a militarized environment of competition and rivalry. As MS-13 seeks to become the dominant status holder against other gangs, they demonstrate a need for attention that could potentially be unknowingly satisfied by US policy. As US leaders more evenly reference the general gang threat and decrease their references to MS-13 atrocities in public forums, they could weaken the credibility and reputation necessary for MS-13 to thrive.
This paper uses the Cultural Topography framework employed by the intelligence community to assess cultural factors of the MS-13 gang organization that have policy relevance to US national security. This analytic technique strives to explore components of MS-13’s identity, norms of behavior, values, and perceptions to understand which strategy will prove most timely and effective in combatting the MS-13 threat. As policy makers understand the cultural tactics employed by MS-13 and the core components that define this gang, opportunities for exploitation and areas of warning can be found.

It is important to note that when referring to MS-13, this paper is referencing the wide nominal umbrella that covers a complex and loose network of nodes throughout the US and El Salvador. These groups, many of which have no knowledge of each other, are connected by name and cultural components but not by any form of central leadership, making the gang difficult to pinpoint, target, and exploit. As such, only cultural aspects of MS-13 that were evident across multiple regions and nations and are integral to all MS-13 members, are explored. Some policy recommendations may not apply to a specific node if their group culture deviates from the general MS-13 trend. However, the cultural aspects of MS-13 that are tracked throughout this paper are seen as foundational to what differentiates MS-13 from other gangs, and applies to most, if not all, cliques. By targeting the foundational cultural components of an organization that is connected by culture only, outlier cultural cliques will likely weaken as the larger gang identity is exploited.

The author’s basic Spanish skills allowed for sources to be used from both El Salvador and the United States to get a fair representation of the gang threat for, and relationship between, both nations. The majority of sources focus on the origin city of the gang, namely LA, California, but include reports from various cases across the US and El Salvador to test the robustness of the cultural trait present within LA gang nodes. To obtain the cultural components necessary, personal interviews of gang members in both LA and El Salvador conducted by field anthropologists, immigrant asylum legal cases, Salvadoran and US news sources, PhD dissertations, and relevant police force comments, were used. Congressional documents, presidential briefs, news sources, and law enforcement websites all provided an understanding of current US policy toward the MS 13 gang threat.

To track these foundational cultural components, the testimonies of hardcore gang members, or those who dedicate their entire life to the gang, were relied on heavily because they are the shot callers within the organization. Periphery members (those that have a life outside of the gang) may live the culture, but are not responsible for keeping it alive, making the hardcore members the most accurate indicators of cultural norms. Most of these core members were not born in the United States, making the policy implications related to El Salvador poignant. However, many of the younger members are born within the United States, making the recruitment tactics of MS-13 of especial interest. A large portion of strategy recommendations are aimed at making MS-13 recruitment methods less effective, to protect US citizens who may be at risk of forceful gang recruitment within the United States.
MS-13 Identity-Replacement Ritual Increases Gang Activity and Illegal Immigration to US

Gang-coerced identity replacement in both El Salvador and the US estranges members from their Salvadoran identity and replaces it with a MS-13 identity that demands gang loyalty above any other ties, which inhibits reintegration of gang deportees in El Salvador, increases overall gang activity, and precipitates illegal immigration to the US. As many of the core Salvadorans felt deeply betrayed by their home country (El Salvador), they designed gang culture as a way for members to become members, even quasi citizens, of a new MS-13 nation. As part of this cultural structuring, there is a high expectation placed on all members to replace whatever national, cultural, or individual identity upon entering the gang, with the elevated, enticing identity that MS-13 offers. This identity-estrangement and replacement first takes place upon initiation into the gang.

- T.W. Ward, a professor who lived with MS-13 gang members in LA and conducted informal interviews with 80 MS-13 gang members from eight different cliques, noted that many young gang members viewed the glorious jump in (initiation) to MS-13 as a “drastic shift in identity from a plebeian commoner to a holy warrior.”

- The first act following initiation involves replacing your name with a *placaso*, or gang alias. One LA member reported, “I felt like I killed off my old identity as Carlos and replaced it with the gangster status of Joker.”

Despite the majority of MS-13 members being ethnically Salvadoran, their sense of belonging is stronger with their “barrio brothers” in the gang rather than their fellow citizens in El Salvador, a potential result of the distant or negative perspective of their home country.

- Diego Aguilar represents the sentiments of 10 interviewed Salvadoran deportees when he claims he considers himself “American.” Diego migrated to the US at the age of 7 and grew up in New York. It “never occurred to him some could regard him as belonging in El Salvador because he always considered the US his natural home.” He spent a total of 17 years in the US before he was deported at age 24.

- Victor, a deportee a doctoral student interviewed in El Salvador in 2008, expressed; “I was ready to serve my country, ...my whole life was over there, my wife, my kids. I was a total American; I was American in my heart, my mind. And for them to just uproot me and just throw me (away)...I’ve been banished from my country.”

- When asked to write reflective poems about El Salvador, twelve out of twelve hardcore gang respondents referred to El Salvador as violent with no connotation of home or intention of returning. Likewise, the same twelve US members referenced MS-13 as an “adopted family” with a “sense of belonging.”

- Of these twelve members, five of them shared their *placaso* selection process. All five had chosen to change their native Spanish names, to gang names, symbolizing full acceptance of their new ‘country,’ MS-13. Spanish names such as Carlos or Jose, became names such as Joker, Trouble, Happy, and Sniper.
This negative view of El Salvador, the acceptance of the US as their new home, and the attachment to the tight community found in MS-13, causes deportee gang members to refuse reintegration once deported from the US to El Salvador. The inability to reintegrate, and their sense of belonging in their gang node within the US, causes members to continue to influence US gang activity while still imprisoned in El Salvador and to return to the US as soon as possible, undeterred by threat of re-deportation.

- Recent investigations in some regions of El Salvador indicate that deported leaders of MS-13 in El Salvador have been sending representatives to cross into the US illegally to gain control of local MS-13 cliques and reconstitute them. These emissaries then connect the local MS-13 cliques to their jailed leaders in El Salvador by cell phone.11

- PhD Dissertation student Mary Kathleen Dingeman-Cerda spent several months in El Salvador interviewing 100 Salvadorans deported from the US. The vast majority of her study population reported that they had considered the possibility of trying to re-enter the US after initial deportation. One of the interviewees, Ernie Martinez, exemplifies these considerations, as he made 5 attempts to return to the US after initial deportation, despite holding a position of power in El Salvador. He was deported 2 times from Mexico and 3 times from the US but was planning a sixth attempt upon being interviewed in El Salvador.12

- In 2018, an increased migrant flow from the Northern Triangle to the US border formed to escape rampant violence and poverty. One previously deported member of the caravan quoted violence and recruitment by MS-13 in El Salvador as his motivation for returning, this time with his son, to the US, “What I’m truly afraid is that, we go out someplace, we get shot... I want to send [my son] to the States because ... his safety.”13

Current US policy of deporting MS-13 gang members back to El Salvador could be improved by creating a reentry adjustment component for deportees.14 This reentry component could focus on providing deportees with the practical and cultural tools, such as job placement, nationalism development, and citizenship awareness, necessary to reintegrate effectively back into El Salvador. As deportees begin to form cultural, value-driven connections with El Salvador, they will be more likely to smoothly reintegrate into society and less likely to return to the US illegally.

**MS-13’s Tendency to Severely Punish Betrayal Provides Opportunity to Undermine Recruitment**

Decreased illegal immigration, recruitment, and gang violence are possible if US law enforcement effectively exploits the taboo in core MS-13 culture that demands members to never inform on fellow gangsters.15 After new recruits undergo the aforementioned identity estrangement and replacement process, the newly initiated MS-13 gang members are expected to live according to a strict gang ideology, perceived as codified law, that demands complete loyalty to the socially constructed nation-state of the MS-13 gang.
Many founding members of MS-13 perceive the violent environment of El Salvador that forced their removal to the States as a form of betrayal. In their minds, betrayed by their home country, the Mara Nation will never be betrayed again.\(^6\) To ensure this protection, a strict code was created to defend against weak members and shore up gang loyalty. According to this MS-13 ideology, the only proper response to someone who “rats out,” or informs on, a fellow gang member is a grotesque death sentence.

- Informal interviews of 8 hardcore MS-13 members (those who dedicate their lives entirely to the gang but make up the smallest percentage of gang membership), conducted by anthropologist T.W. Ward indicated they take violations seriously, claiming, “If we catch [a member who rats out] we’ll take care of him,” and proceeded to provide several examples of stabbings and murders.\(^7\)

- In April 2015, a seventy-nine-year-old man was dragged out of his house and stabbed to death in El Salvador.\(^8\) After killing him, MS-13 members sent a message to the community by hanging a piece of cardboard around the man’s neck with the phrase “for snitching.”\(^9\)

- Brenda Paz was a member of MS-13 in the US who, after informing on her former boyfriend, also a MS-13 member, was punished according to the norm outlined by the gang. After entering an FBI witness protection program for providing info about a 2002 MS-13 murder case, Brenda’s body was found, apparently stabbed and decapitated by MS-13 members. According to the videotaped testimony she gave to the FBI prior to her death she says, “MS never forgets. If you break the rules, they will hunt you down.”\(^10\)

Brenda Paz’s story represents the narrative of numerous members who have violated this taboo and were punished accordingly.\(^21\) According to a former prosecutor in El Salvador, gangs murdered at least 100 witnesses in 2010 alone, often mutilating bodies in the process.\(^22\) This punishment method is impartial to location, as similar reports are found in both the US and El Salvador throughout the last decade, with the most recent murder of a former witness, within the US found in February of 2018.\(^23\)

This norm of high punishment for betrayal is deeply rooted in the independent identity of MS-13 derived from their negative perceptual lens of El Salvador. Separated from any roots they may have had, MS-13 members value independence and resilience, alongside fierce loyalty to the gang. Gang members correlate this resilience value with toughness and violence.\(^24\) This value system explains the grotesque nature of MS-13 punishment tactics for those who inform on other gang members.

While the “rat out” taboo refers to initiated members, MS-13 also perceives resistance to joining the gang as disrespectful opposition and even betrayal, which, like the “you rat, you die” mentality, has resulted in a “join or die” norm among recruitment of Salvadoran youth. Many Salvadoran youth have no interest in joining MS-13 and some gang members have no interest in continuing violent activity.\(^25\) However, motivated by fear and seeing no way out, they are coerced into delinquent activity or consider fleeing to the US, where they falsely believe there won’t be a strong MS-13 presence, to escape this punishment culture.
• Jorge, an eleven-year-old Salvadoran, is an example of numerous reports from youth regarding recruitment. When Jorge declined joining MS-13 to gang members who infiltrated his classroom in El Salvador, they responded by holding a gun to his head and, pointing to a pile of his former classmates killed by MS-13, threatened Jorge that if he didn’t join the gang, he would join the pile of corpses. Jorge complied but later fled to the US to escape MS-13.

• In 2014, the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) interviewed a total of 104 randomly-selected migrant children in the US from El Salvador. According to the study, 66% of the children cited violence by organized armed criminal actors [gangs] as a primary motivator for leaving. 31 of the 104 children discussed past experiences of violent forced conscription into gang activity.

• Between the months of October 2013 and July 2014, United States Customs Border protection reported that an estimated 63,000 unaccompanied minors crossed the United States border, 75% of whom came from Central America, specifically Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. One minor demonstrates a common mentality found among Salvadoran youth, “If you don’t join, the gang will shoot you... But if you leave, no one will shoot you.”

In El Salvador general gang violence and corruption are so widespread, that leaving seems the safest option. The concept of the ‘American Dream’ is still largely believed and romanticized within El Salvador, making the US the ideal destination spot to create a life free from violence. However, after fleeing to the US, many Salvadoran immigrants land in costal cities where MS-13 has a concentrated, if not internationally advertised, presence. With their Salvadoran descent creating an obvious target, immigrant youth are often met with the same unwanted gang norms and taboos and are likewise coerced into gang involvement within the States.

• Juliana represents one of 8,600 immigrant youth on Long Island who fled El Salvador to escape MS-13, only to be persecuted by Mara Salvatrucha upon arrival in the US. After only a few months in an American school, members of MS-13 began to recruit Juliana and threatened her when she declined. Juliana expressed her surprise at the MS-13 presence saying, “They [MS-13] weren’t supposed to be here.”

• Hannah Dreier, a journalist who has spent the past year investigating MS-13 in the US reports, “Long Island teenagers [many who fled El Salvador to escape gang violence] tell me that when they show up to school, gang members recruit them at lunch and threaten violence if they refuse.”

• A 19-year old MS-13 leader charged with six murders on Long Island told his ex-girlfriend he was not a member when he fled El Salvador to come to the US to escape violence. Instead, He was recruited in the New York suburbs.

Current strategy toward MS-13 often fails to recognize cultural aspects of MS-13 that imply many members are unwilling participants. By working with the Salvadoran government to provide protection and resources to youth still in El Salvador, while simultaneously seeking to
undermine the very culture of “you rat, you die” by working with periphery and veteran gang members seeking a way out of these violent norms, the US could likely decrease gang recruitment and violence, as well as address the influx in illegal youth immigration. The US embassy in El Salvador could specifically oversee advertising the presence of MS-13 within US borders to Salvadorans, effectively demonstrating that the US isn’t a viable escape option, improving educational opportunities to encourage Salvadoran retention, and properly punishing vigilante activity to deter MS-13 recruitment in El Salvador’s schools.

US forces could further undermine recruitment by fostering a strong cultural identity amongst immigrant youth in the US education system. Many immigrant youths flee unaccompanied or live in situations where they are often alone, with family members working several jobs to keep them afloat. At school, they feel ostracized by language and cultural barriers that separate them from their peers. Often the only sense of belonging is found in an actively recruiting gang that, although violent, shares a language and ethnicity that is familiar, as well undivided attention (evident in incessant recruiting) to youth immigrants that feel neglected. Lonely, fearing negative retribution if they refuse, and seeking even a rudimentary sense of community, many immigrant youth eventually give into the active recruiting of their MS-13 peers.

By implementing cultural school programs in US schools that provide a safe space for Salvadoran immigrant youth to foster a community of their shared language, values, and beliefs, as well as space to improve their language and integration ability, the aforementioned MS-13 tactic of identity estrangement and replacement will be less effective. Immigrant youth may build a stronger attachment to the culture that MS-13 attempts to strip, or at least they will have a safer place to find their community, potentially increasing resiliency to violent recruitment methods.

**MS-13 Origin Story Indicates Unchangeable Fighting Culture that Cements Gang Perceptions.**

MS-13’s constant warlike culture, derived directly from their origin mythology, demands an enemy to be fought. This culture, seen in the infamous violent nature of MS-13 is unchangeable and could be a potential inhibitor of seizing the opportunity to undermine recruitment outlined above.

The most prominent myth about the origin of MS-13 amongst gang members is known as the soccer war. The story describes a soccer match between a Mexican and Salvadoran soccer team in 1982 in LA. According to legend, a fight broke out, and, because the Salvadorans were outnumbered, they were severely beaten. The Salvadorans decided to form their own gang for protection and named it after the soccer team, Mara Salvatrucha. This key to this story is how it is referred to as the original “war” rather than match or general conflict. By labeling it a war, and attaching it to their identity and name, MS-13 justifies the integrated need for an enemy and the value of never backing down from a fight that is perceived as a war as an established MS-13 nation.
Of the twelve MS-13 gang members interviewed about the origin story, none of them knew why
the fight broke out, but all agreed that a brawl was a sufficient cause to form a gang, because
backing down from a fight represents a major MS-13 taboo. In narrating the story, each member
also referred the gang as a nation, demonstrating the cemented identity of MS-13 members to
view themselves as MS-13 “citizens.” One of the 12 members interviewed expressed a
requirement before one can enter the gang by saying, “We want to know if he’s willing to fight,
even if you’re going to get your ass kicked. You can’t show fear and be part of our gang.”\(^{38}\)

La *Gloria Brincada*,\(^{39}\) a ceremony commonly known as a *jump in*, is the typical form of MS-13
initiation. Wannabe gang members must endure three to five MS-13 members beating them for
the space of thirteen seconds.\(^{40}\) If they tap out before the thirteen seconds are up, they aren’t
allowed into the gang.

This fighting value continues after initiation, as the gang keeps a careful tally of his fellow
homies who have been beaten, shot, or killed in “battles with the enemy.” The tally works as a
reputation builder (those with the most tallies gain the most respect) and also as a revenge tactic.
If the enemy gets to a gang member, fellow gang members will seek revenge.\(^{41}\)
The fact that MS-13 members refer to anyone who harms fellow members as the enemy, and any
violent interaction as “battles” worth tallying, represent a larger warlike culture and enemy-
centric mindset, as well as further solidifies their concept of nationalism. Because this mindset is
evident in origin mythology, in initiation ceremonies, and in MS-13 behavior, it is very unlikely
that the US could change the fighting identity of MS-13.

Furthermore, if MS-13 perceives law enforcement to be abusing their role, for example, through
unjust treatment of gang members, MS-13 may feel unnecessarily provoked and fight back, even
if they are “going to get their ass kicked.”\(^{42}\) As US policy makers seek to seize opportunities to
undermine MS-13, it is crucial to be aware of the unchanging fighting nature of gang members
despite having no odds of success, and to avoid provoking MS-13 unnecessarily. MS-13
members do have some respect for law enforcement, as long as member of law enforcement
appear to be behaving justly. While officials are encouraged to remain firm towards MS-13,
those tasked to carry out anti-gang strategy should be trained in the cultural tactics employed by
MS-13 and properly trained in peaceful conflict-resolution, understanding that a peaceful
resolution may not always be possible, but with the intent to contain conflicts.

**Strict Anti-Gang Policy Solidifies MS-13’s Enemy-Centric View of Government, Incites
Violence**

The ‘iron-fist’ anti-gang policy, which originated in the US (but isn’t used in the States anymore)
and was put into action by the Salvadoran government, strengthens MS-13’s perception of the
government as a corrupt enemy,\(^{43}\) consequentially increasing regional violence and illegal
immigration to the United States.\(^{44}\)

The enemy-centric view held by MS-13 is perpetuated by the iron fist policy, reinstated in El
Salvador in 2015 and supported by the US, which instructs police to use any means to
incarcerate and disband nascent gang cells. Since the new policy has been in place, the violent cycle of revenge between the Salvadoran police force and gang members has increased violence and corruption in El Salvador.

- In 2013, police in El Salvador killed 39 people. In 2015, police killed 591 people, a 552-fatality difference explained by the "iron-fist" implementation, which warned gang members that officers could shoot them "without any fear of suffering consequences." 45

- In El Salvador, between 2009 and 2013, more than 500 police officers were arrested for corruption and involvement in criminal activities. 46

- In 2015, at the initiation of the new policy, El Salvador became the "murder capital of the world" 47 by averaging almost sixteen murders a day and nearly 7,000 for the entire year. 48 The majority of these killings are understood to be either the result of gang violence or the extrajudicial police killings of gang members. 49

A study by Ignacio Cano, a Brazilian criminologist, found that 17% 50 of El Salvador’s fatal shootings in 2015 were committed by police. Furthermore, Cano defined misuse of force as those exceeding a 10:1 ratio of people killed by police to police officers killed by suspects. According to Cano, for every one police officer killed, the police could kill ten people without exceeding the ethical parameters of their force. In 2016, El Salvador’s figure was 59:1. 51 At least 13 of these cases involved the prosecution of suspected gang members, despite no hard evidence of gang activity, followed by cover-up attempts of the Salvadoran police force. 52

MS-13 views this iron-fist policy as a direct attack and the police force’s corruption as justification for the gang’s lawless and warlike-nature against the Salvadoran government. MS-13, citing the grievances of an unethical government, choose instead to identify as citizens of a “Mara Nation,” justified in abiding by the unspoken code of the gang rather than by legal constraints. 53 The socially constructed nation-state, MS-13, feels entitled to fight against an oppressive government and has responded reciprocally to the harsh government persecution.

- In El Salvador 66 security officers were murdered in 2017 alone. 54

- Organized attacks on police officers and their families are common 55 and fear of gang violence is so prevalent throughout the country that police officers wear masks to conceal their identities from gangs. 56

- Christian Ambrious, a scholar at the Freie University of Berlin who is dedicated to studying gang violence, concludes with econometric evidence that the perceived iron-fist deportation policy has played an important role in spreading gang activity and increasing rampant violence in the El Salvador in recent years. 57

As violence increases in the region, many flee to the US to escape, increasing illegal immigration rates drastically. Additionally, as gang members generalize the warlike nature of the Salvadoran government, they apply the same perceptual lens to all entities that compel them to abide by any
law other than gang code. As such, the justification for lawless behavior and a warlike-nature is also used by MS-13 members in the US.

This correlation of the US seen as an enemy equal to El Salvador is strengthened by the apparent support for the iron-fist policy demonstrated by many policy makers within the US.\textsuperscript{58} For example, Attorney General Jeff Sessions has stated, “Under President Trump, the Justice Department has zero tolerance for gang violence.” In 2017, Sessions traveled to El Salvador to applaud the anti-gang work of his Salvadoran counterparts, calling a recent mass raid of suspected gang members an “inspiration”; a raid that was conducted under the iron-fist policy.\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, Rudy Guiliani, a previous New York mayor and American policy maker, helped legitimize the iron-fist policy when he traveled to El Salvador with his global security consulting firm in 2015 and spoke highly of the Salvadoran approach towards MS-13.\textsuperscript{60} This is enemy perception is concrete as MS-13 views themselves as a nation with as much power and influence as a legitimate nation-state.

Although direct attacks to the police force by MS-13 in the US haven’t yet reached the same levels as their Salvadoran counterparts, mindsets towards US police officials are beginning to mirror mindsets toward the Salvadoran police force, as MS-13 members choose to view any persecution by the US government as acts of an opposing army.

- “The war on gangs gave us exactly the opposite of what we wanted,” said Michael Downing, an officer in L.A. referencing the zero-tolerance policies toward MS-13. “It broke down any trust we had with communities. We were seen as an occupying army. If you’re always in the role of warrior, everything is a state of fear.”\textsuperscript{61}

- A common MS-13 aphorism says, “Above your mother, God. But nothing above the Mara Nation.”\textsuperscript{62} Juan, a US gang member interviewed by dissertation student Alejandro Hernandez Jacky, explained this aphorism\textsuperscript{63} and emphasized the nationality sentiments shared by 8 other independently interviewed members of MS-13, within US borders.\textsuperscript{64}

The MS-13 dichotomous view of both governments as their enemy could soften through joint revision of US and El Salvadoran anti-gang policies. Revisions that could most effectively decrease violence and illegal immigration rates include justice reforms, a legal framework for rehabilitating former gang members, and a shift from the current militarization against the gang. Specifically, if El Salvador changes their anti-gang policy so that police officers will suffer consequences if misuse of force is detected (either in unwarranted arrests or violence), it is likely that gang-associated violence in El Salvador will eventually decrease, despite the short-term uptick in violence as the more radical gang members take advantage of the newly initiated restrictions to obtain a form of revenge. The US can aid in this transition by avoiding voicing public support for the current iron-fist policy in El Salvador and by seeking to properly train US police forces against the domestic MS-13 threat.
Heightened Attention Feeds MS-13 Desire for Status, Increases Gang Threat

Increased MS-13 gang references by the US in the past year satisfies the gang’s need for attention, consequentially elevating MS-13 status and escalating gang activity, as outside gangs compete with the new dominant status that MS-13 holds and seeks to maintain. Just as MS-13’s enemy-centric view of the world explains their warlike nature towards government entities, MS-13’s perception of other gangs is likewise defined by a militarized environment of competition and rivalry. Although all gangs value attention and are consequentially seeking to become the dominant status holder against their competitors, MS-13 specifically values demonic and, sometimes, grossly inhumane behavior to obtain this dominant status; something they believe differentiates MS-13 from rival gangs.65

- MS-13 consistently uses demonic tattoos, graffiti, and gang signs to simultaneously signal territory, or dominance over other gangs, and invoke attention and fear from those around them.66 Of these, MS-13 differentiates themselves by being the only gang to use devil’s horns as their primary hand signal and in their tattoos.67

- Informal interviews of MS-13 members in the LA area conducted by anthropologist T.W. Ward indicated this need for reputation and attention with one member, Sniper, emphasized the unique inhumane reputation sought after by MS-13 by saying, “The other gangs knew we worshipped the devil...and that we were real crazy, crazy enough to sacrifice people. This gave us a good reputation.”68

- The US Center for Immigration Studies mirrors this distinction stating, “All criminal gangs are a threat to public safety, but MS-13 is a unique problem because of the unusually brutal crimes its members have committed,” with 207 MS-13 members charged for murder (out of 506) rather than petty nuisance crimes typical of other US gangs.69

Harsh, dichotomous rhetoric used to reference the gang may be elevating MS-13 gang status over other gangs by giving them the uncontested attention they value, as well as directly rewarding MS-13’s violent and demonic aspirations with attention.

- MS-13 is referenced 40 times in 22 presidential documents pulled from the year 2017.70 References described MS-13 as “violent,” “horrible,” “bloodthirsty,” “disgusting,” “savages,” and “animals.” None of the other 33,000 violent street gangs, motorcycle gangs, and prison gangs that are criminally active in the US were mentioned in any of the 22 documents.71

- In 2018, the “animal” threat of MS-13 was again emphasized72 with un-substantiated warnings that the Central American caravan hosts many MS-13 members, despite MS-13 making up of less than 1% of total gang membership in the US73 and remaining significantly smaller in size than other less-advertised gangs such as the Crips, the Bloods, the Latin Kings, and Gangster Disciples in Chicago.74

- Twitter, a more accessible forum for gang members, further demonstrates this trend with presidential tweets referenced MS-13 twice in the last four months, with none of the other
gangs being mentioned. Furthermore, MS-13 was referenced in the highly publicized 2018 State of the Union address.

This publicized attention from the Trump Administration carries more weight to MS-13 members than other sources, because of their perception of the US. MS-13 views the US as their enemy, and as such, the Trump Administration’s public acknowledgment of MS-13 as a threat is seen as an admittance of weakness. Likewise, members of MS-13 tend to hold the United States on a very high pedestal. Even though they may not like the US government, they do recognize the US to be the most powerful nation in the world. While still viewing themselves as citizens of the Mara Nation, rather than the US one, MS-13 members hold a grudging respect toward the hegemony and power of the US, and are thrilled to be considered a worthy enemy. In the minds of MS-13 members, if the most powerful military player considers them a nameable threat, they have reached ultimate gang status and will seek to maintain this status by increasing the gruesome acts that are getting attention.

If the US seeks to diversify gang references to include other violent gangs, omit the direct challenges to MS-13, and be more selective in descriptive rhetoric, MS-13 may be weakened and denied their lifeblood of attention. It is important to note that directly challenging MS-13 by calling them weak or inferior to other gangs will almost certainly result in a negative retaliation, while a passive approach to diminishing the status of MS-13, through balanced gang coverage and vague descriptions, could prove most effective in weakening MS-13 reputation. Even casting brutality itself as weakness, though initially a compelling idea, may prove ineffective. MS-13 carries a deep-trenched value of fighting that has been consistent from MS-13’s origin and members take a fierce pride in their demonic brutality. If the United States were to call out these brutal acts as a pitiable cry for attention, especially as they use demeaning words that diminish the manhood or strength of MS-13 members such as ‘small,’ ‘afraid,’ or ‘children,’ MS-13 members would interpret it as an attack on their values and may want to fight back. By not engaging in MS-13’s need for attention, instead speaking of the gang threat in measured and balanced terms, the US can snuff out the fire that feeds MS-13’s reputation, rather than fuel it.
OUTLOOK

In order to decrease gang activity, violence, and recruitment, as well as deter illegal immigration to the US from El Salvador, the United States can seek to change current conversation regarding MS-13, work with El Salvador to reform anti-gang policies, encourage deportee retention in El Salvador, and take preventative measures against gang recruitment.

Changing the conversation regarding gangs can be the most advantageous strategy to weaken MS-13 reputation and influence within the United States. Diversifying gang references to include other violent gangs, omitting the direct challenges to MS-13, and being more selective in descriptive rhetoric could be an effective combatant against MS-13’s need for attention. It is important to note that directly challenging MS-13 by calling them weak or inferior to other gangs could result in a negative retaliation, while a passive approach to diminishing the status of MS-13, through balanced gang coverage and vague descriptions, could prove most effective in weakening MS-13 reputation. As US leaders make this shift, news media will follow suit, as most news stories covering MS-13 stem from public comments made by US officials. Likewise, avoiding voicing current support of Salvadoran anti-gang policies could likely soften MS-13’s warlike perception of the US and be an ideal starting point for joint El Salvador-US revisions of anti-gang policies aimed to decrease violence in El Salvador and illegal immigration to the US.

Immigration rates could further decrease as the US works with El Salvador to reform these policies through justice reforms, a legal framework for rehabilitating former gang members, and a shift from the current militarization against the gang. Specifically, the US could encourage El Salvador to changes their anti-gang policy so that police officers will suffer consequences if misuse of force is detected while simultaneously seeking to properly train US police forces against the domestic MS-13 threat. Current US anti-gang policy of deporting convicted members could be further improved if a reentry adjustment component for deportees is applied. This reentry component could focus on providing deportees with the practical and cultural tools, such as job placement, nationalism development, and citizenship awareness, necessary to reintegrate effectively back into El Salvador. Community development programs on the Salvadoran side could further increase Salvadoran retention rates. As deportees begin to form cultural, value-driven connections with El Salvador, they will be more likely to smoothly reintegrate into society and less likely to return to the US illegally.

These combined polices will be integral to addressing the current MS-13 threat. Preventative strategy can also be implemented by combating MS-13 recruitment. The US could work with the Salvadoran government to provide resources to youth still in El Salvador, advertise the presence of MS-13 within US borders to Salvadorans, effectively demonstrating that the US isn’t a viable escape option, and properly punish vigilante activity to deter MS-13 recruitment in El Salvador’s schools. US forces could further undermine recruitment by fostering a strong cultural identity amongst immigrant youth in the US education system through extracurricular programs. These programs could give youth a place to feel included and likely help youth to form a stronger identity attempts to strip, potentially increasing resiliency to violent recruitment methods.


6 Dingeman-Cerda and Coutin 2012

7 Dingeman-Cerda and Coutin 2012: 113-114. 188


8 Ibid, Pg 26-36.

9 Ibid, Pg 64.


15 "Department of Justice Fact Sheet on MS-13";

"Attorney General Jeff Sessions Gives Key Department of Justice Task Force New Tools to Dismantle MS-13."


The gang term for ratting is echar rata, literally to "Throw rat."


18 Jorge Beltran Luna, San Hilario Se Resiste a Vivir bajo Control de la MS, ELSALVADOR.COM (Apr. 2, 2016, 8:30 PM), http://www.elsalvador.com/articulo/sucesos/sanhilario-resiste-vivir-bajo-control-106407 [https://perma.cc/J79P-MDF2] (discussing how witnesses are especially reluctant to come forward in communities where gang members have family) (author translation); Suchit Chavez, "Medio Mill6n" Exonerado de Homicidios por Falta de Testigo, LA PRENSA GRAFICA (Oct. 29, 2015, 6:00 AM), http://www.laprensagrafica.com/2015/10/29/mediomillon-exonerado-de-homicidios-por-falta-de-testigo [https://perma.cc/44PL-CAGZ] (saying that money laundering charges were dropped against a key figure in the MS-13 gang because prosecutors were unable to locate the witness) (author translation).

19 Ibid.


Logan, Samuel. This Is for the Mara Salvatrucha: Inside the MS-13, America's Most Violent Gang. 2009.


29 Ibid.


31 Ibid.


33 Ibid.
Interviewed veterans of the MS-13 gang can often be found telling the youth of the barrio to, “Don’t be an idiot, stay in school!” and to discourage gang activity and violence amongst their youth.

The term brincada, from the Spanish word “brincar” means “to jump.” MS-13 modified this term with “La Gloria” to signify ascension. The idea behind the phrase is that the initiate is ascending to the status of a full-fledged member of the gang.

With Donald Trump in the White House, Salvadoran authorities are receiving even more encouragement from the U.S. to continue with mano dura. “Let me state this clearly,” Attorney General Jeff Sessions said last April. “Under President Trump, the Justice Department has zero tolerance for gang violence.” Three months later, Sessions traveled to El Salvador to applaud the anti-gang work of his Salvadoran counterparts, calling a recent mass raid of suspected gang members an “inspiration.” In meetings with President Salvador Sanchez Ceren and Attorney General Douglas Melendez, Sessions reportedly asked the leaders to “place an emphasis on combating gangs.”


A large number compared to the 10% held by the United States, a country with relatively high rates by the police force.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


68 Ibid, pg 83.


The President’s News Conference with President Juan Manuel Santos Calderon of Colombia," Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents (OS): 1-9; May 18, 2017.
75 Donald J. Trump. Twitter Feed. December 2017 – April 2018.
77 State of the Union address.
Reflective Writing

When choosing the subject-matter for my capstone project, I wanted to encompass key elements of my undergraduate experience while spring-boarding into the next step in my academic and professional career. I settled in on using the Cultural Topography method to explore an issue relevant both to US and Salvadoran security to pay homage to my focus area of my undergraduate degree, deepen my critical thinking and writing ability within this focus area, allow a cross disciplinal approach to a research project, further develop meaningful mentor relationships, and engage with my national community on a subject of critical global relevance. An immense amount of work went into producing this final capstone project and I am grateful that I have a product that reflects the depth and variety of skills I have gained while obtaining my BA in International Studies from Utah State University.

After a semester of exploring within International Studies, I chose my area of focus to be Peace and Security. Throughout my undergraduate experience I have been dedicated to taking classes that have informed on the history of, and methods used by, the intelligence community in the US national security discipline. My favorite and most challenging classes have all fallen into this area of focus and, as such, I was determined to incorporate this integral aspect of my academic career into my capstone. It was difficult to decide on the exact subject matter I wanted to explore, as the discipline is vast, and I have a variety of interests. I proposed several different capstone ideas before settling in on the piece that has been covered by my current capstone. Although my original ideas were interesting, they didn’t quite capture policy relevance to national security nor had the added focus on Latin America, a sub-focus area that has become quite present in both my academic and professional pursuits. In overcoming the challenge of deciding on a topic that was narrow enough to become an expert on, with a concrete tie to policy relevance, and involving Latin America, I turned to my mentor Jeannie Johnson who was invaluable in helping me narrow down my scope. Over the course of exploring this capstone, I was able to add a depth to my undergraduate focus area of Peace and Security by exploring strategy techniques employed by specific national security institutions when confronting a very real and very narrow security threat. I was also able to employ Cultural Topography, a writing and research technique, that is used by the intelligence community I may work for someday. This gave me a concrete skill that added to the more academic foundation I had already gained throughout my undergraduate degree.

In using Cultural Topography, and in using a threat with Latin America ties, I was able to move past my typical academic discipline of International Studies and use a more practical application of the intelligence community. It was difficult to move out of the comfort zone of academic writing and tackle a new writing style, but it was so worth it. I would encourage future students to be willing to take risks in completing their capstone, it proved essential in developing a new writing skill while completing my capstone. I also used some nominal Spanish language skills to do research about ties to El Salvador in their native language. This allowed me to gain depth in a discipline, Spanish, that I didn’t have time dedicated to in my academic coursework. The joy I found in researching in Spanish led me to pursue intern and volunteer opportunities in both Guatemala and Peru which shaped my undergraduate experience. The confidence in my language abilities evolved as I worked on my capstone and led me to apply to research and scholarship positions that necessitate mastery of the Spanish language. In the
process of researching El Salvador, I became acquainted with refugee patterns that also shaped my international experiences and that I am currently seeking to expand on as I seek out future career opportunities. Overall, my capstone experience was integral in shaping key experiences while in my undergraduate degree and in providing me the skills necessary to earn the internship position that acts as the next step in my professional career.

Another key component of my capstone that proved integral in shaping my undergraduate experience and improving the prospects of professional opportunities was my ability to develop relationships with key mentors. My honors capstone mentor, Dr. Jeannie Johnson, has given me a very clear understanding of what life working in the intelligence community would entail, as well as helped me get the writing and research skills necessary in order to compete in this field. Because of my initial relationship I formed in completing this capstone, I was invited to attend her upper-division courses that led to a key networking trip to Washington DC and invaluable writing and research experience. She has graciously provided glowing letters of recommendations that have created success in current pursuits, and I expect in pursuits to come. Overall, she is a ready contact as I continue in my academic pursuits and consider joining a career in the intelligence community. Dr. Johnson also introduced me to mentors Matt Berrett and Briana Bowen who have been integral in completing this capstone and in considering different options for my future pursuits. These two individuals made my undergraduate experience far more stimulating, have given much-needed and appreciated advice, and have pledged their support as I tackle the job force. The biggest piece of advice I could give to future students is to choose a mentor who is dedicated to your success. Completing my capstone in a timely and effective manner would not have been possible without the help of my mentors.

Finally, my capstone allowed me to engage with my global community. By choosing a global issue with security relevance, I was able to relate to people both in the US and abroad. I am excited to present my findings at the research event at Capitol Hill in March, where I will be able to discuss this important issue with key legislators and further engage with my community. My biggest capstone triumph will to be able to talk about what I have dedicated my time to on a larger stage. This capstone was a very long process, but it didn’t seem as challenging or tedious because I was passionate about what I was learning and the conclusions I could convey. In fact, I feel like I could do a lot more on this capstone, if not for the time constraint and other research interests.

For students that are beginning their capstone, in addition to choosing key mentors, take the time to determine what you are passionate about exploring in your capstone. Doing so will allow each completed concept a triumph, make severe challenges easier to tackle, and ultimately makes the amount of work seem feasible. I genuinely enjoyed my Honors Capstone and am grateful for a meaningful product that accurately represents the triumph of my undergraduate experience.

Word Count: 1167
Hannah Penner will obtain her BA in International Studies with a minor in German and an emphasis in Peace and Security in May 2019. She loves understanding different languages and cultures and wants to apply this to a future career either in professional writing or as an analyst. Hannah has been working as a research assistant throughout her entire undergraduate career and has successfully revised a geopolitics textbook, created an annotated timeline of Chinese/Myanmar relations, and completed a comprehensive list of all literature published on the One Belt One Road economic initiative. Hannah is currently the head writer and manager of a geopolitical news-based website through the CHaSS department and presented this project at the Utah Conference of Undergraduate Research. Hannah is further involved at Utah State University acting as a member of Sigma Iota Rho, a teacher’s assistant for the political science department, and as a writing tutor. In addition to her tutoring responsibilities for the writing center, Hannah has also created an extensive curriculum for the center’s Teaching English Afternoon (TEA) Time program. She leads these weekly meetings that provide a setting for international students to improve their English-speaking skills. Last summer, Hannah interned in Peru as a business consultant for local entrepreneurs through the SEED program of the Huntsman School of Business, thus earning the global scholarship designation. Hannah has accepted a position as a global acquisition paid intern for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saint’s history department on their Latin America desk. She is excited to drown in Spanish research for a year before beginning her graduate degree in 2020.