

HONDURAS: A PARIAS STATE, OR INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS TO ORGANIZED CRIME DESERVING U.S. SUPPORT?

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Honduras has long been one of the states in the region most challenged by organized crime and insecurity. Its geographic position has made it an important transit country in the flow of migrants, drugs, and other illicit goods from South America to the United States. This flow has transformed traditional family-based smuggling groups such as the *Cachiros* and *Los Valles* into powerful local *transportistas* (narcotrafficking groups), funded by larger Mexican-based cartels and Colombian criminal organizations that have contracted for their services. The illicit money flowing through the country because of such activities permeated and exacerbated the corruption of already weak government institutions.

In this context of narcotrafficking, corruption, poverty, and inequality, the deportation of Central American migrants with prior criminal records from the United States back to the region helped to give rise to two violent new street gangs, *Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *Barrio-18* (B-18), and they quickly came to dominate the country's major urban areas: Tegucigalpa, Comayagüela, and San Pedro Sula. The gangs forged a synergistic relationship with the *transportista* groups as local drug distributors and hit men unleashed unprecedented levels of crime and extortion to support their growing memberships. The gangs also fought each other for territory, further unleashing unprecedented levels of violence.

The international isolation of Honduras produced by the removal of President Manuel Zelaya from office in June 2009, as well as the significant reduction of the U.S. security engagement, exacerbated such destructive dynamics. During that period, an estimated 80% of drug flights transiting the region landed in Honduras. Although the November 2009 presidential election of Pepe Lobo helped restore the nation's

relationships with its neighbors and the United States, Honduras continued to be a major transit country for drugs and human trafficking. *Mara Salvatrucha* and *Barrio-18* dominated the economy, and the nation's murder rate was the highest in the region.

Juan Orlando Hernandez, elected President of Honduras in 2013, introduced a series of new security initiatives, which he had previously developed when he was the head of the Congress under his protégé, President Lobo. These included a new police force within the military, the *Policía Militar del Orden Público* (Military Police of Public Order [PMOP]), with 3,000 members as of July 2015, as well as a structure for interagency coordination, *de la Fuerza de Seguridad Interinstitucional Nacional* (the National Interagency Security Force [FUSINA]). FUSINA is subordinated to civilian rule through the President and the National Security Council at the national level, and through 18 inter-institutional task forces at the departmental level. Each departmental interaction requires coordination between a military commander; a police deputy-commander; prosecutors assigned to, and who travel with, FUSINA units in the name of efficiency; special protected judges for high-profile cases; and intelligence; along with other resources, drawn from the armed forces, the police, and other state organs, as needed.

Within the framework of President Hernandez's Interagency Security Plan and Operation MORAZÁN, FUSINA achieved impressive results. With respect to gangs and violence, it deployed the PMOP units under its command into urban centers, enabling the re-establishment of state presence in once-marginalized neighborhoods, such as Flor del Campo (Tegucigalpa), and reducing the murder rate from 86.5 per 100,000 in 2011, to 64 per 100,000 in 2014.

With respect to narcotics and other trafficking, FUSINA increased state control over national territory, particularly in the remote and inaccessible eastern portions of the country. The concept of FUSINA focused on an interdependent “maritime shield,” “land shield,” and “air shield.” The maritime shield included an increased number of naval bases on the country’s eastern coast, and new shallow-water and riverine assets for identifying and intercepting smugglers operating within the nation’s rugged coastal zone and inland waterways. The land shield concept featured an expanded presence throughout the national territory, but in particular, enhanced control of the border with Guatemala through the Maya-Chorti Task Force. The air shield included a law passed in January 2014, enabling the shoot-down of suspected drug flights, with the acquisition of three radars from Israel to support such intercepts.

With U.S. assistance, FUSINA and the Honduran government dismantled the leadership of the nation’s two principal family-based drug smuggling organizations, the *Cachiros* and the *Los Valles*, and significantly reduced the use of the national territory as a drug-transit zone, particularly through flights.

Beyond FUSINA, the Hernandez administration has also sought to reform the nation’s national police, albeit with slow progress. It is also reforming the penitentiary system, dominated by the criminal gangs MS-13 and B-18. As part of such efforts, the administration has proposed the construction of two new prisons and the consolidation of 24 facilities to 12.

Honduras has cooperated closely with the United States in implementing its maritime shield, but less closely in other areas, due to U.S. hesitation to work closely with the PMOP or to support its aerial interdiction program.

Honduras also cooperates closely with its neighbors, including Nicaragua, and with Russia and other countries on counter-narcotics matters.

However, challenges still face the Hernandez administration as it struggles against transnational organized crime and gangs. First, persistently high levels of corruption at all levels of government, a substantial presence of organized crime in the private sector, institutional rivalries, and slow police reform all present hurdles. Furthermore, the lack of integration of intelligence capabilities supporting FUSINA, and of an organic intelligence capability by the organization add difficulty. Multiple parallel law enforcement investigative organizations, lack of coordination between police and military

organizations within FUSINA, and the inability to control money laundering also add to these challenges. Next, concerns regarding human rights violations, and reciprocally, legal protection of the military in the performance of law enforcement functions need to be addressed. Lastly, creating alternatives to criminal enterprises as the illicit economy is brought under control, and in the long-term, overcoming the culture of gangs, violence, and poverty that permeates the country presents the final challenge.

This monograph provides a number of recommendations for U.S. policymakers to support Honduras in its fight against organized crime and gangs:

1. Provide adequate levels of U.S. financial support for Honduras, building on the \$750 million in funding for the region approved by Congress for 2016.

2. Engage with Honduras in support of the PMOP and, with respect to aerial interdiction, guide and improve these activities rather than oppose them outright.

3. Focus on supporting Honduran law enforcement through areas of U.S. comparative advantage: providing technology, training, and intelligence support.

4. Consider providing Honduras with innovative material solutions, such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or a greater quantity of flat-bottom boats for riverine operations.

5. Strengthen institutional ties in professional military education by bringing more Hondurans to institutions such as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) and the U.S. Army War College.

6. Support expanded U.S. Coast Guard engagement with the Honduran Navy.

7. Support Honduran international collaboration within the framework of the Inter-American System, in works such as *Sistema de la Integración Centroamericana* (the Central American Integration System [SICA]), in order to strengthen and showcase Inter-American institutions.

8. Leverage access to U.S. markets through the Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA-DR) and other vehicles to promote Honduran development.

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