



Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador

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Principal Findings

What's new? In President Nayib Bukele's first year in office, El Salvador has seen a sharp drop in what long were sky-high murder rates. While the public celebrates his well-known "iron fist" policies, the reasons for success might lie in quiet, informal understandings between gangs and the government.

Why does it matter? It is a major feat to reduce killings by the three main gangs in one of the world's most violent countries. But the precise causes of the decline are complex and often unclear. Recent outbreaks of gang violence and political mudslinging underline the fragility and reversibility of this achievement.

What should be done? Sustaining violence reduction is key. The government should prioritise community-focused development, rehabilitation of jailed gang members and more sophisticated policing efforts, including internal checks on security forces. Should gangs keep violence down and cooperate with authorities during the pandemic, Bukele should consider opening channels for local dialogue with them.

Executive Summary

After decades of harrowing gang crime, homicides have plunged in El Salvador on the watch of the new president, Nayib Bukele. Faced with the growth of the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs, previous governments resorted to “iron fist” policies to crush them, only to find these fuelled a backlash. Since his 2019 election, President Bukele, a self-styled outsider, has won huge public support by presiding over a 60 per cent fall in murders. Yet prospects that this achievement will endure are in doubt. The collapsing homicide rate may stem not only from the government’s public security policies, but also from the gangs’ own decision to curb bloodshed, possibly due to a fragile non-aggression deal with authorities. In addition, Bukele’s confrontational style, which has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, risks entangling his security reforms in political battles. Broadly backed efforts to support affected communities, assist members wishing to leave gangs and encourage local peace-building are more likely to end definitively El Salvador’s cycle of violence.

The Bukele administration argues that the plummeting murder rate – with daily killings now standing at their lowest rate since the end of the country’s civil war (1980-1992) – represents the crowning achievement of a new security strategy. In theory, the government’s Territorial Control Plan couples robust law enforcement with violence prevention schemes. It has reinforced joint police and military patrols in 22 municipalities suffering high rates of crime, while toughening confinement measures in jails in a bid to sever communications between inmates and the outside world. At the same time, the government’s goal of building dozens of “cubes” – glass-walled recreational and education centres – represents the flagship effort to brighten the lives of young people growing up under gang dominion and prevent recruitment into their ranks.

The precise reasons for the nationwide drop in homicides are hard to pin down. Statistical studies show that the Territorial Control Plan is most likely not the sole cause; specific local falls in murder rates do not correspond precisely to those areas where the plan has been implemented. Instead, in large part, gangs appear to have themselves decided to scale back their use of lethal violence. Unassailable control over communities, declining gang rivalry and increasingly autonomous gang leadership outside jails may explain this decision more than the Territorial Control Plan. Yet other government policies might have played a role: numerous analysts and local activists ascribe the gangs’ move to an informal understanding between them and the authorities, who have allegedly ordered security forces to dial back their clashes with these groups.

A sudden killing spree attributed to MS-13 in April illustrated just how precarious the gangs’ commitment to reducing violence can be. Bukele’s reaction to the attacks, which left over 80 dead in a five-day span, reaffirmed his inclination to adopt punitive measures to force gangs into submission. Images shared around the world from inside El Salvador’s high-security jails revealed inmates huddled together or forced into shared cells without any access to daylight. Although murder rates have since fallen again, the risk remains that gangs, now short of extortion income due to lockdown measures and indignant at the government’s crackdown, will once again resort to extreme violence.

Bukele's political struggles reinforce the danger that improvements in security will be knocked off course. Some of the president's moves to subdue his opponents and concentrate power in his hands, including the military occupation of the opposition-held Legislative Assembly in February and repeated fights over the legality of measures adopted during the COVID-19 emergency, have sparked outcry, particularly from foreign powers and civil society organisations. His shows of strength toward the two parties that held a stranglehold on power in El Salvador for 27 years, as well as toward state and judicial institutions, serve his goal of winning a parliamentary majority in 2021. But by turning public security and health policy into a stick with which to beat his adversaries, the president could deprive his reforms of the wide political support they need to be effective and sustainable. Should violence resurge, he might also be tempted to resort to coercive policing in a bid for quick results, despite ample evidence from the tenure of previous governments that such measures usually backfire.

At a time when the national lockdown is starting to taper off, the government should strive to use its high levels of support to ensure that violence reduction becomes a lasting achievement. It should build on its existing programs and officials' extensive networks of local contacts to ensure the needs of violence-affected communities are defined and addressed so as to prevent recruitment of vulnerable young people into gangs. Callous new prison rules should be scaled back, or at least combined with a far greater effort to design rehabilitation schemes for jailed gang members. Security forces, for their part, should continue where possible to reduce their clashes with gangs and young people living in poor communities, and instead focus resources on capturing and prosecuting the most dangerous offenders.

Most importantly, the government could be in a unique position within the next year to decide whether or not to re-engage the gangs in dialogue. The failure of the gang truce in 2012-2013, which prompted an unprecedented spike in homicides after it fell apart, shows the risks of negotiating with hardened criminal outfits before a hostile public. Should the gangs keep murder rates at current lows, however, and cooperate with authorities in ensuring health and humanitarian access to communities throughout the pandemic, then the government could seek to open talks. These might aim at establishing a process designed to address the deep-seated grievances that fuel El Salvador's gang-related violence in exchange for members handing over their weapons. Local initiatives to bring peace and development to marginalised communities could stand at the heart of these efforts. They could help build the trust required to embark on a national dialogue, which in turn should look to promote reforms that can eventually lead to the gangs' disarmament and peaceful reintegration into society.

Bukele still enjoys remarkable popularity and has the capital to make progress on these fronts. Some of his policies thus far provide a good base for an approach that sustainably reduces the horrific bloodshed of El Salvador's recent past. But short-term political calculations and an unnecessarily combative stance toward rivals risk distracting him and undercutting such an approach. Foreign donors and domestic political forces should urge him not to waste a rare opportunity to calm El Salvador's troubled streets.

Guatemala City/Bogotá/New York/Brussels, 8 July 2020

Miracle or Mirage? Gangs and Plunging Violence in El Salvador

I. Introduction

El Salvador has been torn asunder for years by criminal violence. Killings and other crimes perpetrated by the country's main gangs and security forces spiked under the government of former President Salvador Sánchez Cerén, of the left-wing Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). His five-year term in office coincided with the most lethal period in the country's post-war history, leading to a total of 23,000 reported homicides.¹ Over the years, grim living conditions and grinding levels of violence, with around 29 per cent of the country's 6.7 million inhabitants living in poverty, have pushed hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans to flee either within the country or abroad. Almost 90,000 Salvadorans – or 1.4 per cent of the country's population – were detained at the southern border of the United States between October 2018 and September 2019.²

The 2019 election of Nayib Bukele, who portrayed himself as a political outsider, marked a watershed in recent Salvadoran history. Since the country's 1980-1992 civil war, which killed 70,000 people, power had alternated exclusively between the conservative National Republican Alliance (ARENA) and the ex-guerrilla FMLN. Although he started his political career as mayor of Nuevo Cuscatlán and later San Salvador under the FMLN's wing, Bukele exploited a wave of discontent with traditional parties, which had been discredited by various corruption scandals. Leading an anti-system campaign, he ran for president as the right-wing Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU) candidate – even though the Salvadoran public generally perceive him to be a centrist.³

Bukele's election also appeared to augur a fresh approach to crime, the single most important concern facing El Salvador. Over the past two decades, successive administrations belonging to both main parties implemented policies anchored in coercive law enforcement, mass incarceration, joint police and military operations, and harsher laws against gangs. These came at the expense of crime prevention and rehabilitation initiatives aimed at gang members.⁴ A 2012-2013 truce among gangs, supported by officials in former President Mauricio Funes' administration, was the exception. But the government's failure to meet certain gang demands and widespread popular

¹ "Gobierno de Sánchez Cerén cierra como el quinquenio más violento, con más de 23 mil homicidios", *Última Hora*, 31 May 2019.

² In addition, 46,800 asylum requests were filed in 2018 alone, making El Salvador the sixth most common country of origin for new asylum seekers globally, according to the UN refugee agency. Figures from the U.S. Customs and Border Protection website. "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018", UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 20 June 2019.

³ "Los salvadoreños y salvadoreñas evalúan las elecciones presidenciales del 3 de febrero de 2019", *IUDOP-UCA Boletín de Prensa*, vol. 33, no. 2 (7 May 2019), p. 24.

⁴ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°64, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, 19 December 2017.

opposition to the truce led to its collapse. In its aftermath, violence spiked again, an increasing part of it pitting gangs against security forces, while politicians from both main parties reportedly tried to reestablish contact with gang leaders in order to negotiate support ahead of the 2014 presidential election.⁵ El Salvador's annual murder rate rose to 103 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2015 – then the world's highest.⁶

Although this rate later decreased, Bukele inherited a country plagued by violence involving criminal groups, particularly Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street gang's two factions, the Revolutionaries and the Southerners.⁷ Authorities estimate that 60,000 active gang members operate in 94 per cent of the country's municipalities, with each member counting on a network of at least six people, either relatives or collaborators.⁸ Steep falls in homicides and disappearances, which have plummeted by around 60 and 40 per cent, respectively, since Bukele took power, have drawn global attention. At the same time, his intimidation of rival politicians and confrontational stance toward state institutions – such as his February decision to deploy military personnel in parliament or more recent clashes with judicial institutions over measures to deal with COVID-19 – risk hindering the cross-party cooperation needed to sustain the country's security improvements. Such moves may also affect donors' willingness to provide technical and financial support, normally tied to compliance with democratic norms.⁹

This report examines the president's policies, the causes behind the fall in lethal violence and the prospects of preserving these gains amid the pandemic, as well as Bukele's harsh reprisals against gangs. It is based on statistical analysis by Crisis Group and over 50 interviews in El Salvador and abroad from March 2019 to June 2020, including with high-level politicians, security officials and experts, former gang members, NGO staffers, community leaders, humanitarian workers, diplomats and academics.

⁵ Recently, the Attorney General's Office opened investigations into politicians from ARENA and the FMLN for allegedly offering gangs money and other benefits in exchange for votes. "Fiscalía acusa al alcalde Ernesto Muyschondt, al exministro Benito Lara y cinco personas más por presuntas negociaciones con pandillas", *El Salvador*, 1 February 2020.

⁶ "How El Salvador became the murder capital of the world", *The Conversation*, 5 October 2016.

⁷ Internal struggles over control of the 18th Street gang and its resources led to the killing of some of its high-level members and eventually caused its split more than a decade ago into two branches, the Revolutionaries and the Southerners (or Southern United Raza), which function autonomously. "Todas las muertes del Cranky", *El Faro*, 13 October 2011.

⁸ Crisis Group interview, police commissioner, San Salvador, October 2019. Crisis Group Commentary, "Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador", 26 November 2018.

⁹ "El Salvador parliament denounces president's 'attempted coup'", BBC, 11 February 2020. Eric L. Olson, "Bukele's COVID-19 Response is Undermining the Rule of Law in El Salvador", *World Politics Review*, 14 May 2020.

II. A Political Tornado

Bukele's election was a response to the demise of two long-dominant parties, the left-ist FMLN and the right-wing ARENA. Both have been plagued by corruption scandals and burdened by their constituencies' dissatisfaction after years of unfulfilled promises. In his campaign, Bukele used his age – at 37, he became the youngest democratically elected president in the country's history – to prove that he could bring a fresh vigour to political life.

Bukele presented himself as a non-ideological outsider in the 2019 elections, despite his background as a professional politician. A young entrepreneur of Palestinian origin, he worked in public relations, communications and motorbike sales before entering politics.¹⁰ He initiated his political career as mayor of the Nuevo Cuscatlán municipality in 2012, and later of the capital San Salvador in 2015, carrying the FMLN flag. Bukele was a popular mayor who honoured campaign promises, such as the regeneration of the capital's historic centre, and invested in projects in violence-ridden communities.¹¹ After clashes within the FMLN leadership prompted his expulsion from the party in October 2017, he founded a movement called Nuevas Ideas, but failed to register it on time for the presidential election.¹² He ended up running for the right-wing minority party Grand Alliance for National Unity (GANU). Bukele has managed to position himself as a politician who operates beyond traditional ideological or partisan frameworks, and most Salvadorans regard him as a centrist.¹³

As president, Bukele has centralised decision-making and lashed out at critics. Social media are his preferred platforms, which he uses to make public announcements and convey orders to government officials, who reportedly have little leeway to make decisions without consulting with the presidency first.¹⁴ He often attacks the FMLN and ARENA, which still control the Legislative Assembly, as well as critical media outlets and even human rights defenders who protest when he takes extreme measures

¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, academic, San Salvador, March 2019. "Nayib Bukele wins El Salvador presidential election", *Financial Times*, 4 February 2019. "The strange political path of Nayib Bukele, El Salvador's new president", CNN, 10 February 2019.

¹¹ "Nayib Bukele se posiciona con un 73% de aprobación según encuesta de CID/Gallup", SPM News, 5 June 2017. "LPG Datos: Alcalde Bukele cumplió sus promesas de campaña aseguran capitalinos", *Última Hora*, 6 February 2018.

¹² Bukele was expelled for allegedly sowing divisions within the party, violating its values, slandering some of its members and violating women's rights. The latter charge refers to an episode in which Bukele allegedly addressed former FMLN mayor Xochitl Marchelli in an offensive manner, for which he was tried and then acquitted in March 2019. "Nayib Bukele, expulsado del FMLN por estas razones", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 10 October 2017. "Exoneran a Bukele de agresión verbal", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 29 March 2019.

¹³ Crisis Group interview, academic, San Salvador, 11 March 2019. "Los salvadoreños y salvadoreñas evalúan las elecciones presidenciales del 3 de febrero de 2019", *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Bukele allegedly expanded the presidency's communications secretariat, raising its number of staff from ten to 130. Crisis Group interviews, academic, religious leader and political analysts, San Salvador, March and October 2019. "Bukele, presidente 'millennial' que gobierna a ritmo de 'tuits'", *El Tiempo*, 29 June 2019.

against gang members or, more recently, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁵ Bukele's reported goal is to fuel internal divisions within the opposition parties, with the hope that some of their supporters will align with his Nuevas Ideas party in the 2021 parliamentary and municipal elections.¹⁶

Bukele's communications strategy and combative tone toward his adversaries have had diverse effects. He is the president with the highest public approval rating – over 90 per cent – in Latin America.¹⁷ His strategy has pushed the FMLN and ARENA toward burying their historical rivalries to, at times, join forces against the government.¹⁸ Yet human rights organisations have warned that Bukele's confrontational approach is undermining freedom of expression, and that fears of reprisal from the administration and social media trolls may lead to self-censorship by government critics.¹⁹ A recent note by the Inter-American Press Association warned that “freedom of expression and freedom of the press are facing their most serious challenges in recent decades”.²⁰ During the coronavirus pandemic, Bukele has also directed his invective at the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court – which had ruled against the unlawful detention of citizens found defying the government-imposed quarantine – raising some concern over his respect for democratic checks and balances.²¹

Meanwhile, Bukele has shown pragmatism in his willingness to cooperate with foreign partners, security forces and the private sector.²² One of his first foreign policy initiatives was a rapprochement with the U.S. after years of tense relations under the FMLN-led governments.²³ At the same time, he chose to maintain and strengthen relations with China, even though he had been outspokenly critical of its meddling

¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, journalists and human rights defenders, San Salvador, October and December 2019. The last legislative elections took place in 2018, when ARENA won 35 of the Assembly's 84 seats, followed by the FMLN with 31. GANA, the party Bukele ran with, holds only eleven seats.

¹⁶ “Bukele mantendrá una guerra política con la Asamblea hasta las elecciones de 2021, según analistas”, *El Salvador Times*, 28 February 2019. Crisis Group interview, foreign cooperation official, San Salvador, 25 October 2019.

¹⁷ “Bukele cierra su primer año de trabajo con alta aprobación”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 24 May 2020.

¹⁸ In October 2019, for example, they created a special commission to investigate the accusations made by Carlos Marroquín, head of the government Unit of Social Fabric Reconstruction, that the FMLN and ARENA could have been behind a peak in homicides on 20 September, when authorities reported eighteen murders. The commission concluded on 26 November that no evidence was found to support this allegation and suggested that the president dismiss Marroquín. Crisis Group interview, academic, San Salvador, 23 October 2019. “Concluyen que no hay indicios de que partidos políticos estén vinculados al alza de homicidios del 20 de septiembre”, Asamblea Legislativa de la República de El Salvador, 26 November 2019.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives and journalists, San Salvador, October and December 2019. “Quien haga una pregunta incómoda puede verse sometido al espionaje del Estado”, *Revista Factum*, 28 November 2019.

²⁰ “Serious Dangers for Press Freedom in El Salvador”, Inter-American Press Association, 15 April 2020.

²¹ “Engel and Sires Urge Salvadoran President to Respect Democratic Norms”, U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Foreign Affairs, 29 April 2020.

²² Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, San Salvador, 23 October 2019.

²³ The FMLN-led government's decision to sever relations with Taiwan and recognise only mainland China in August 2018 caused tensions with the U.S. to peak. “Bukele en Washington: ‘Estamos alineados con Estados Unidos’”, *El Faro*, 11 May 2019.

in domestic affairs and said he would review the FMLN-led opening toward the country.²⁴ Domestically, he increased budget allocations to the defence and justice and public security ministries by 51 and 30 per cent, respectively, and has often insisted on the need to boost foreign and domestic investment in the country.²⁵ During much of his first year in office, Bukele had strong relations with the private sector. But divergences over the management of the COVID-19 crisis, including the use of emergency funds, resulted in the withdrawal of business representatives from a special committee formed to oversee the use of these resources.²⁶

²⁴ Bukele travelled to China in early December 2019 and secured non-reimbursable Chinese funding for infrastructure projects in El Salvador. “Bukele visita China: el histórico acercamiento de El Salvador a Pekín y la ‘gigantesca cooperación’ que recibe a cambio”, BBC Mundo, 4 December 2019. “China signs on for ‘gigantic’ investment in El Salvador infrastructure”, NASDAQ, 3 December 2019.

²⁵ “La empresa privada consume su giro y aplaude a Nayib Bukele”, El Faro, 27 November 2019. For budget allocations, see the government’s Fiscal Transparency Portal.

²⁶ “Relación entre Nayib Bukele y el sector privado ha sido volátil durante su primer año de gestión”, El Economista, 29 May 2020.

III. Back to the Iron Fist? Bukele's Security Policies

While Bukele's public relations and governing style have heralded striking innovations in El Salvador's hidebound political system, in practice, some of his initiatives in the security realm at least partly resemble those of previous administrations. Others, particularly at the community level, are genuinely original.

A. *The Gang Threat*

Bukele's top priority has been to curb the violence perpetrated by criminal gangs, particularly MS-13 and the two factions of the 18th Street gang.²⁷ These groups sprouted in the 1980s among Central American emigrants in California and spread to El Salvador after the U.S. deported thousands of their members in the 1990s.²⁸ A country in a post-conflict transition, with weak state institutions, deep social divides and high poverty levels provided perfect conditions for gangs to take root among marginalised young people.²⁹ National authorities estimate that gangs are responsible for around 50 per cent of murders and total 60,000 active members, although the tally reportedly goes up to 400,000 people if collaborators and close relatives are included.³⁰ Gang members therefore far outnumber the 25,000 police and 13,000 military officers deployed in law enforcement.³¹ Official figures show that roughly one third of gang members are in jail (around 18,000), including most long-time leaders, or *ranfleros*.³² MS-13 is by far the largest gang, double the size of the two 18th Street gang factions together.³³

Gang violence is by no means limited to murder. Complaints over extortion, which the government believes accounts for 80 per cent of gang income, increased by 17.2 per cent in 2019.³⁴ Studies estimate that one in five micro- and small businesses fall prey to extortion, while the private sector as a whole pays the equivalent of 3 per cent of the country's GDP by way of extortion.³⁵

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, police commissioner, European diplomat, UN agency and government representatives, San Salvador, October and December 2019.

²⁸ Mary Helen Johnson, "National Policies and the Rise of Transnational Gangs", Migration Policy Institute, 1 April 2006.

²⁹ Crisis Group Report, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, op. cit.

³⁰ Many gang members' relatives live off gangs' criminal activities and sometimes actively participate in them. Relatives and collaborators might, for example, serve as lookouts, provide financial support through small business activities, or even take over collection of extortion payments if a gang member is detained. Crisis Group interviews, security expert, former gang member and police commissioner, San Salvador, 22-24 October 2019. Crisis Group Commentary, "Life Under Gang Rule in El Salvador", op. cit. "El país de las maras", *El Faro*, 10 June 2018.

³¹ "Report of the Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons on Her Visit to El Salvador", UN General Assembly, 23 April 2018, p. 4.

³² Information obtained by Crisis Group through a request to the transparency platform of the General Directorate of Penal Centres in February 2020.

³³ Crisis Group telephone interview, Roberto Valencia, journalist, 24 January 2020.

³⁴ Crisis Group interviews, San Salvador, October and December 2019. "Fiscalía reporta un aumento de las extorsiones", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 14 January 2020.

³⁵ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°62, *Mafia of the Poor: Gang Violence and Extortion in Central America*, 6 April 2017. Margarita Peñate, Kenny de Escobar, Arnulfo Quintanilla and César

Violence is often the cause of internal displacement and migration abroad. The Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that violence forced the displacement of 455,000 people within El Salvador in 2019 alone, but the Legislative Assembly only recently recognised this problem. There is no monitoring system in place. Nor are there adequate services to take care of victims.³⁶ According to a recent survey by the Inter-American Development Bank, Salvadorans cited violence or insecurity (48 per cent) as the main reason driving them to consider the journey north much more frequently than other Central American migrants.³⁷ UNHCR reported in 2019 that El Salvador was the most common nationality of origin for asylum seekers in the U.S. in both 2017 and 2018.³⁸

B. *Traditional Responses and Failed Crackdowns*

The preferred state response to El Salvador's gangs has been an "iron fist" policy, which has proven broadly popular.³⁹ Since Francisco Flores' administration (1999-2004), successive governments have focused on tough law enforcement measures – with an increased role for the army in public security – and harsher laws against gangs, which were declared terrorist groups by the Supreme Court in 2015.⁴⁰

This approach, together with the weakness of security forces' internal accountability mechanisms, created a permissive environment for an increase in police and military abuses.⁴¹ These include indiscriminate mass detentions, excessive use of force and even the formation of death squads, sometimes involving active officers, which have reportedly been responsible for a number of extrajudicial killings of gang members as well as civilians.⁴² In 2017, security forces' lethal use of force was behind 10.27 per cent of the total number of violent deaths, a fifteen-fold increase compared

Alvarado, "Estimación del Costo Económico de la Violencia en El Salvador 2014", Red de Investigadores del Banco Central de El Salvador, April 2016. "Soluciones a la micro y pequeña empresa en El Salvador", FUSADES, June 2016, p. 20.

³⁶ Crisis Group interviews, human rights defenders, San Salvador, October and December 2019. "New El Salvador law, a victory for forced displacement victims: UN refugee agency", UN News, 10 January 2020. "Global Report on Internal Displacement 2020", Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, April 2020, pp. 55-56.

³⁷ Emmanuel Abuelafia, Giselle Del Carmen and Marta Ruiz-Arranz, "Tras los pasos del migrante. Perspectivas y experiencias de la migración de El Salvador, Guatemala y Honduras en Estados Unidos", Inter-American Development Bank, December 2019, p. 13.

³⁸ "Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018", op. cit., p. 42.

³⁹ Jeannette Aguilar, "Las políticas de seguridad en El Salvador, 2003-2018", Heinrich Böll Stiftung, January 2019. "La Mano Dura como estilo de vida salvadoreño", El Faro, 7 February 2020.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group Report, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, op. cit. "El Salvador's supreme court declares gangs terrorist groups", AP, 24 August 2015.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interview, academic, San Salvador, 12 March 2019.

⁴² National authorities broke up at least ten "death squads" allegedly involved in more than 160 murders of gang members between 2016 and 2019, and all involving active police and army officers. "Special Report by the Representative of the Office of Human Rights Ombudsman, Raquel Caballero de Guevara, on the Extrajudicial Executions Attributed to the National Civil Police in El Salvador, from 2014 to 2018", Procuraduría para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos, August 2019. "Grupos de exterminio vinculados a 161 asesinatos desde 2016", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 21 February 2020.

to 2011 levels.⁴³ As a result, El Salvador's police and army ranked among the least trusted security bodies in Latin America in 2018.⁴⁴ Mass detentions also meant that El Salvador suffered a 215.2 per cent prison overcrowding rate as of June 2018, as well as the second highest per capita prison population rate in the world, behind only the U.S.⁴⁵

For a time, confronted with the shortcomings of this strategy and worsening insecurity, the first FMLN-led government under President Funes (2009-2014) explored an alternative route. In March 2012, General David Munguía Payés, then justice and public security minister, encouraged a dialogue among the three main gangs' leaders. This dialogue, known as the "gang truce", led to a ceasefire among these gangs, with the goal of reducing killings.⁴⁶ In exchange for the gangs' pledge to reduce homicides – including inter-gang killings, murders of civilians and attacks on security services – the government would commit to meeting some of the gangs' requests, including transferring several of their leaders from maximum security prisons to less restrictive facilities, and creating economic opportunities and social projects in marginalised communities.⁴⁷ After the gangs agreed to the truce, daily homicides plummeted from fifteen to five, and violence levels remained relatively stable for fifteen months.⁴⁸

But the process eventually derailed for several reasons. It was first of all flawed in its design and implementation. While the official homicide rate fell during the truce, disappearances went up, suggesting that the real decline in killings was smaller than reported.⁴⁹ The government lacked support from state agencies other than the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, which launched the initiative, and delivered only on its promised prison measures, failing to address the gangs' other demands.⁵⁰ Finally, it faced widespread popular opposition, with polls suggesting that more than 75 per cent of Salvadorans did not trust it.⁵¹ The government eventually distanced itself from the process, prompting its collapse. After the truce broke down, lethal violence spiked to unprecedented levels.⁵²

⁴³ "Monitor del uso de la fuerza letal en América Latina: Un estudio comparativo de Brasil, Colombia, El Salvador, México y Venezuela (2019)", Monitor Fuerza Letal, September 2019, p. 88.

⁴⁴ According to the 2018 Latinobarómetro survey, only 22 per cent of Salvadoran interviewees trusted the police, and 27 per cent the army. "Informe 2018", Corporación Latinobarómetro, 9 November 2018, pp. 49-50. Crisis Group interviews, security expert and academic, San Salvador, March 2019.

⁴⁵ There are now 590 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants. For more statistics on the prison population, visit El Salvador's country page at World Prison Brief's website.

⁴⁶ Charles M. Katz, E.C. Hedberg and Luis Enrique Amaya, "Gang Truce for Violence Prevention, El Salvador", World Health Organization, 1 June 2016.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, journalist, San Salvador, 24 January 2020.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Ana Glenda Tager and Isabel Aguilar Umaña, "La tregua entre pandillas salvadoreñas: Hacia un proceso de construcción de paz social", Interpeace, 2013, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interview, former gang member, San Salvador, October 2019. "Rise in Disappearances Feeds Doubts over El Salvador Truce", Insight Crime, 1 August 2013.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group interviews, former gang member and truce facilitator, San Salvador, October 2019 and January 2020.

⁵¹ "Evaluación del país a finales de 2014", IUDOP-UCA, 25 November 2014, p. 50.

⁵² "How El Salvador became the murder capital of the world", op. cit.

Between the end of the truce and Bukele's election, there was only one other moment in which homicides fell substantially. Following dreadful violence in 2015 and the slaughter of eight electric company workers and three farmers in early March 2016, the Salvadoran government imposed "extraordinary measures" in jails involving confinement, blocks on communication and a halt to rehabilitation programs.⁵³ Shortly before these measures entered into force on 1 April 2016, masked men allegedly speaking on behalf of the main gangs released a video announcing a unilateral decision to lower homicides in an attempt to prevent the government from carrying them out.⁵⁴ Police data analysed by Crisis Group show that homicides dropped by more than half in the six days after the announcement. The gangs' strategy, however, was unsuccessful in its bid to stop the extraordinary measures: the government went ahead with the imposition of new restrictions on prisoners, after which gangs and security forces continued to clash constantly.⁵⁵

The truce was not the only occasion on which Salvadoran politicians negotiated with gangs. Given the gangs' territorial reach, interaction between them and political leaders is virtually inevitable in any effort to implement social or infrastructure projects, or even to enable politicians simply to enter some localities.⁵⁶ But the gangs' bargaining power has been reinforced by some of the political elite's practices.⁵⁷ Evidence collected by national news outlets, combined with the testimony of a plea-bargain witness and videos released in a trial against more than 400 members of MS-13, led the Attorney General's Office to open investigations of at least seven politicians from ARENA and the FMLN for allegedly negotiating with gangs for electoral support.⁵⁸ These included former ministers, a presidential candidate and the current mayor of San Salvador. Both parties' politicians have repeatedly denied the accusations.⁵⁹

C. *The Bukele Government: Innovation and Coercion*

During the presidential campaign, Bukele said he would change tack in security policy and unveiled his Cuscatlán Plan. It maps strategies for strengthening law and order, such as improving security personnel's working conditions and equipping them with new technologies to boost their investigative resources. It foresees the reactivation of the Rural Police, the creation of communal police units and a battalion of military

⁵³ "Pandilleros asesinan a once trabajadores en una zona rural de El Salvador", Europa Press, 4 March 2016. "Estas son las medidas extraordinarias, dónde y en qué casos se aplicarán", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 31 March 2016.

⁵⁴ "El Salvador Gang Leaders Order End to Killing", Insight Crime, 28 March 2016.

⁵⁵ After plunging from over 600 on average in the first three months of the year to 354 in April 2016, homicides then increased again to over 400 in the following months. It is possible, however, that the extraordinary measures contributed in part to keeping homicide levels lower by hindering communication between jailed and outside members.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, Roberto Valencia, journalist, San Salvador, 23 October 2019.

⁵⁷ "¿Quién enseñó política a las maras?", *El Faro*, 26 August 2018.

⁵⁸ "El Salvador court gives hefty sentences in mass gang trial", AP, 13 December 2019. "Fiscalía acusa al alcalde Ernesto Muyschondt, al exministro Benito Lara y cinco personas más por presuntas negociaciones con pandillas", *El Salvador*, 1 February 2020.

⁵⁹ "Norman Quijano se defiende tras petición de antejuicio en su contra: 'Nunca negocié con pandilleros'", *El Salvador*, 28 January 2020. "Exministro salvadoreño niega haber negociado votos con pandillas", Infobae, 3 February 2020.

police for use in prisons, as well as the establishment of an International Commission against Impunity in El Salvador to combat corruption, along the lines of similar commissions that existed in neighbouring Guatemala and Honduras.⁶⁰ Crime prevention also features prominently in the plan, with a focus on providing opportunities and protection to children and teenagers at risk of being recruited by criminal groups, and strategies for reintegrating into civilian life young people ensnared in gang activities as well as jailed criminals.⁶¹

Once in power, Bukele announced the Territorial Control Plan.⁶² Government officials have stated that this plan consists of seven “phases” or components that mirror those in the Cuscatlán Plan, with a total cost of \$575 million for 2019-2021.⁶³ Neither diplomats nor civil society representatives, however, have seen a document listing all the facets of the Territorial Control Plan, leading some to doubt whether such a document exists.⁶⁴ A government official stated that it was the president’s prerogative to preserve secrecy regarding the plan. When asked if any of the forthcoming phases differed from previous administrations’ security policies, he said one of them will focus on gang member rehabilitation.⁶⁵

To date, the Territorial Control Plan has focused mostly on law enforcement in 22 prioritised municipalities.⁶⁶ Its measures have included the permanent deployment of police and military patrols; mass detentions; and the provision of new personal equipment (such as boots and uniforms) for security forces.⁶⁷ The government also tightened controls on communications and money flow in jails, and confined as well as transferred thousands of gang members.⁶⁸ Prison authorities affirmed in late 2019

⁶⁰ The International Commission against Impunity in Guatemala (CICIG) and the Mission to Support the Fight against Corruption and Impunity in Honduras (MACCIH) halted their operations in September 2019 and January 2020, respectively. Crisis Group Commentary, “Curtain Falls on Guatemala’s International Commission against Impunity”, 3 September 2019. “A Death Foretold: MACCIH Shuts Down in Honduras”, Insight Crime, 22 January 2020.

⁶¹ The plan has a dedicated website at www.plancuscatlan.com.

⁶² “Lo que se sabe del ‘Plan Control Territorial’ implementado este jueves por el Gobierno”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 20 June 2019.

⁶³ The government plans to cover part of its total cost with \$200 million in loans and \$104 million in foreign aid donations. “¿De dónde provendrán los \$575.2 millones para financiar el plan ‘Control Territorial’ hasta 2021?”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 11 July 2019. “Gobierno presenta en la Asamblea Legislativa petición de \$91 millones para seguridad”, *El Salvador*, 5 September 2019.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomat, UN agency official, civil society representatives, San Salvador, October and December 2019.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, government official, San Salvador, December 2019.

⁶⁶ The plan originally included twelve municipalities, then was extended to cover seventeen, and eventually 22 at the end of July 2019. National authorities chose these municipalities because they featured the greatest presence of criminal groups, but since these are also the most populous towns, some critics have suggested the end goal was to appeal to more voters. Crisis Group interviews, government official, police commissioner, evangelical pastor, San Salvador, October and December 2019. “Plan Control Territorial llega a Zacatecoluca, Chalatenango, Cabañas, Morazán y San Vicente”, *La Página*, 1 August 2019.

⁶⁷ From June 2019 to May 2020, the police detained 38,947 people, according to the justice and public security minister, Rogelio Rivas. Most arrests are temporary. See tweet by Rogelio Rivas, @RogelioRivas, 6:53pm, 1 June 2020.

⁶⁸ The government imposed at least three temporary states of emergency in all prisons so far, including one that lasted from the end of June 2019 to the beginning of September, while the law allows

that they had managed to cut all detainees' communications with the outside world, thus blocking orders from jailed gang leaders.⁶⁹ Bukele has also sought to modernise the security forces' equipment and technology, but this project depends on a \$109 million loan from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, requiring approval by the opposition-controlled Legislative Assembly.⁷⁰ The Assembly's refusal to give it a green light heightened tensions with the executive and spurred an institutional crisis in February 2020 (see Section IV.B below).

After an uptick of violence in April, further steps to toughen gang members' prison regime sparked international outrage.⁷¹ Alleging that the killing spree was ordered from the country's jails – apparently suggesting that authorities had not succeeded in cutting communications between prison-based leaders and the outside after all – Bukele announced that prisoners would be confined to cells so that, in his words, “they could not see a beam of sunlight”.⁷² His government also released disturbing pictures of hundreds of prisoners, stripped to their underwear, sitting closely together, which raised concerns about the possibility of COVID-19 spreading in jails.⁷³ Bukele ordered that members of different gangs share the same cells, reversing what had become standard practice in El Salvador's jails over the past sixteen years, with consequences examined in Section VI.⁷⁴ He also endorsed security forces' use of lethal force and offered legal support to officers found killing “in self-defence or in defence of honourable Salvadorans' lives”. Observers worried that such rhetoric could lead to an increase in police and military abuses.⁷⁵

for a maximum of fourteen days. “El Salvador levanta estado de emergencia en cárceles tras baja de homicidios”, *La Vanguardia*, 3 September 2019.

⁶⁹ Between 20 June 2019 and mid-November, prison authorities transferred around 10,000 detained gang members from one jail to another and seized more than 2,000 *wilas*, pieces of paper on which detained gang members write messages to peers on the outside. “Centros Penales realiza mega requisita en Ciudad Barrios”, Dirección General de Centros Penales, 20 November 2019.

⁷⁰ “Bukele presentó fase III del Plan Control Territorial”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 1 August 2019.

⁷¹ On 24 April, the police reported 23 murders in the country, a ten-fold increase compared to the previous two months' daily average. “Bukele autoriza a la policía a matar pandilleros en El Salvador tras un sangriento fin de semana”, *El País*, 27 April 2020.

⁷² The government alleged that an MS-13 gang leader who was released shortly before the uptick was responsible for delivering the order from the prison. “Pandillero que conspiró en el asesinato de 160 personas salió hace 8 días de la cárcel”, *El Salvador*, 29 April 2020. “Estarán adentro, en lo oscuro, con sus amigos de la otra pandilla: Bukele aplica mano dura contra los pandilleros encarcelados”, *Telemundo*, 27 April 2020.

⁷³ “Self-portrait with gang members – on Bukele's prison crackdown”, *El Faro*, 22 May 2020. “Mass arrests and overcrowded prisons in El Salvador spark fear of coronavirus crisis”, *The Conversation*, 6 May 2020.

⁷⁴ In the early 2000s, members of the MS-13 and 18th Street gangs were placed in different jails to prevent clashes, a move that is widely believed to have consolidated stable power structures within gangs and turned jails into operational centres. Early in his term, Bukele ordered members of the main gangs to be mixed in the same jails, “something that nobody dared do before”, said one high-level prison system official. Crisis Group interview, prison system official, San Salvador, 23 October 2019. Jeannette Aguilar Villamarona, “Los efectos contraproducentes de los Planes Mano Dura”, *Quórum: Revista de Pensamiento Iberoamericano*, no. 16 (2016), pp. 81-94.

⁷⁵ “Bukele autoriza a la policía a matar pandilleros en El Salvador tras un sangriento fin de semana”, *op. cit.*

D. Community Action

Soon after taking power, the government also created a Unit for the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric to spearhead all other institutions involved in security policy.⁷⁶ It is headed by Carlos Marroquín, one of the president's right-hand men, who worked closely with Bukele when he was San Salvador's mayor.⁷⁷ The unit's purpose is to tackle the underlying conditions that prompt young people to join gangs, such as social exclusion, economic marginalisation, scarce job opportunities and lack of access to sports and recreation.⁷⁸ According to its director, this part of the government's security policy "is the most important one, because it is going to be permanent, while ... [the current emphasis on] law enforcement will at some point end".⁷⁹ Marroquín said its work will extend to over 60 municipalities, chosen because they are considered the gangs' main recruitment pools, and is grounded in Bukele's conviction that the gangs are an "escape valve" from the parlous living conditions of poor local communities.⁸⁰

So far, the unit has fostered state-sponsored football camps, vocational training and scholarships, among other things. But its centrepiece is the plan to build "cubes", glass-walled centres to be placed in poor and violence-ridden communities, aimed at providing a safe space for entertainment and training for young people.⁸¹ The government plans to build at least 50 cubes, prioritising poor neighbourhoods living under gang rule.⁸²

A community leader of La Iberia, a blighted, MS-13-controlled area in the outskirts of the capital San Salvador, where the only cube in existence has been built, passionately described its significance for locals:

It is a dream come true. It helps deactivate the stigma the community was living under and turn it into something positive. It has boosted human mobility: since it opened [in April 2019], we have received 37,000 visits from 56 different communities, including 'opposite' ones [controlled by the 18th Street gang]. It also prevents the gang from recruiting, as many youngsters spend their time participating in activities here instead of wandering in the streets. Years ago, there were 75

⁷⁶ The unit responds directly to the presidency. Crisis Group interview, police commissioner, San Salvador, 24 October 2019.

⁷⁷ Reports in the Salvadoran press maintain that Marroquín liaised with gang members to help carry out the municipality's projects. "Nayib Bukele también pactó con pandillas", *El Faro*, 28 June 2018.

⁷⁸ "Presidente Bukele lanza la segunda fase del Plan de Control Territorial, denominada 'Oportunidad'", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 2 July 2019.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, Carlos Marroquín, director of the Unit for the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric, San Salvador, 6 December 2019.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interview, Carlos Marroquín, San Salvador, 6 December 2019.

⁸¹ Activities in the cube include art and music workshops, IT and English lessons, and projects tailored to the community's interests. The concept of the cube is similar to that of the U.S.-sponsored "outreach centres", which have allegedly proved effective in reducing homicides in some neighbourhoods of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, but its design is "more attractive", according to Marroquín. Crisis Group interviews, Carlos Marroquín and local community leader, San Salvador, December 2019 and January 2020. Crisis Group Latin America Report N°77, *Fight and Flight: Tackling the Root Causes of Honduras' Emergency*, 25 October 2019, p. 21.

⁸² Crisis Group interview, Carlos Marroquín, San Salvador, 6 December 2019.

gangsters in this community. Today there are around ten, and they encourage their children and relatives to join the activities here in the cube.⁸³

Despite the cube's beneficial impact in La Iberia, a number of problems bedevil the initiative. The construction of the only cube now functioning started in 2018, when Bukele was still mayor, and was completed under the city's current administration. Under the Territorial Control Plan, the government has so far started construction of only two more cubes. Moreover, the cubes' costs are prohibitive and risk undermining the sustainability of the project in the long run. Each requires around \$700,000 in building costs alone, plus an annual \$350,000 for personnel, security, bills and maintenance.⁸⁴

Although the Unit for the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric is also supposed to provide economic opportunities in communities where gangs recruit, there has not been any initiative to this end, with the exception of training programs for young people.⁸⁵ Since the start of the coronavirus outbreak, the Unit's focus has instead turned to handing out food bags to 100,000 households living in extreme poverty, according to its director.⁸⁶

⁸³ Crisis Group interview, community leader, La Iberia, San Salvador, 23 January 2020.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interviews, government official, police commissioner, community leader, San Salvador, December 2019 and January 2020.

⁸⁵ In January 2020, the Bukele administration announced the Economic Take-off Plan, which focuses on attracting foreign investment and cutting red tape around economic activities, but it has not materialised yet. "Bukele lanza plan de despegue económico", *ContraPunto*, 10 January 2020.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Carlos Marroquín, 13 May 2020.

IV. The Political Battleground

Whether in his approach to violent crime or more recently in response to the coronavirus, Bukele has displayed a clear preference for concrete results. His methods, however, have at times involved bypassing democratic procedures or confronting legislative and judicial institutions.⁸⁷ This has bolstered support among those disillusioned by ineffectual leaders, but raised concern over what some see as his disregard for human rights and the rule of law.⁸⁸ By openly antagonising other state institutions, Bukele risks undermining the broad national and foreign support essential to sustaining the security improvements notched up so far.

A. Praise and Criticism of Security Policy

International partners and domestic institutions have welcomed Bukele's personal involvement in security policy. "It is the first time that a president deals directly with the security issue, instead of delegating it to some representative", a UN official told Crisis Group.⁸⁹ Both police and high-level prison officers claim that the current administration has from the start been ready to reverse course when needed and take bold decisions regarding prison management.⁹⁰

Civil society organisations, security experts, political opponents and some foreign analysts, however, have been wary or critical of the government's security policy. Some noticed that the Territorial Control Plan includes "iron fist" policies not dissimilar to those of previous governments.⁹¹ Others complain about the ostensible lack of transparency and virtual exclusion of civil society from its design, and the absence of technical or academic preparation of government officials on security matters.⁹²

Harsh measures in jails could also lead to future problems. Human rights groups have also condemned steps taken in prisons, such as frequent transfers of gang members, strict confinement, suspension of family visits and rehabilitation programs, and food rationing, arguing that such measures violate detainees' and their families' rights.⁹³ According to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, the measures

⁸⁷ As an illustration, when interviewed by *El País* about the February dispute with the Legislative Assembly over the approval of a loan for his security plan, Bukele dismissed the idea of engaging in dialogue with different political and social sectors, arguing that it would be a waste of time and would not lead anywhere. "Si fuera un dictador habría tomado el control de todo el Gobierno anoche", *El País*, 10 February 2020.

⁸⁸ "Bukele, el autoritario", *The New York Times*, 20 April 2020. "El Salvador: COVID-19 Doesn't Excuse Bukele's Attacks on Rule of Law", Washington Office on Latin America, 29 April 2020.

⁸⁹ Crisis Group interview, UN agency representative, San Salvador, 2 December 2019.

⁹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, police commissioner and high-level prison system official, San Salvador, October 2019.

⁹¹ "El Salvador Flirts with 'Mano Dura' Security Policies Again", Insight Crime, 21 June 2019.

⁹² Civil society organisations contributed to the design and monitoring of the implementation of the previous administration's security plan, the Safe El Salvador Plan. Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, journalist, European diplomat, and Mauricio Vargas, ARENA member of the Legislative Assembly, San Salvador, October and December 2019. "Bukele elimina Consejo de Seguridad y centraliza estrategia en su gabinete", *Revista Gato Encerrado*, 31 October 2019.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, San Salvador, October and December 2019, and January 2020.

may be considered torture if they are prolonged.⁹⁴ The Commission also reported excessive overcrowding of both prisons and police station cells, and decried their unhealthy conditions, noting that 60 per cent of all tuberculosis cases in the country are found in prisons.⁹⁵ Mistreatment of prisoners has traditionally been one of the gangs' core grievances.⁹⁶ While it has not yet contributed to reversing the reduction in gang-related violence during Bukele's rule, it risks stoking gangs' hostility toward state institutions.

B. *Increasing Acrimony: Security and COVID-19*

Bukele has turned gang violence and the COVID-19 pandemic into highly charged wedge issues that place him in a better light than his rivals, but increased political polarisation and antagonism between the executive and the legislature could thwart his policies' eventual success. Insecurity has long been at the heart of public anxiety and political competition in El Salvador, even as state policies toward gangs have tended to remain constant. In fact, the two main parties' failure to reduce crime rates – together with many of their representatives' involvement in corruption scandals – has contributed both to their electoral demise and to widespread discontent with democracy in the country.⁹⁷ Presenting himself as an outsider, Bukele identified public concern over violence and corruption as an effective means to discredit his political foes and establish himself as a competent and decisive leader.⁹⁸ On this ground, he has waged fierce clashes with opposition parties as well as the legislative and judicial branches of state, particularly the Legislative Assembly and the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court of Justice.⁹⁹

To dramatise differences between old political elites and his style of government, Bukele has relied above all on security policy. He has accused politicians from the other main parties, which form the majority in parliament, of being corrupt and having a vested interest in letting violence thrive, particularly when they fail to approve his legislative proposals or to ratify foreign loans for his security plan.¹⁰⁰ The peak of this confrontation occurred early in 2020, when Bukele sought the approval of a \$109 million loan from the Central American Bank for Economic Integration to purchase new equipment as part of his Territorial Control Plan.¹⁰¹ Faced with the deputies' reluctance to approve the loan, the government summoned an extraordinary

⁹⁴ "CIDH presenta observaciones preliminares de su visita in loco a El Salvador", Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 27 December 2019.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, journalists and police commissioner, San Salvador, December 2019 and January 2020.

⁹⁷ According to the Latinobarómetro 2018 study, 22 per cent of El Salvadoran interviewees were satisfied with the government, 10 per cent trusted the legislative body, and only 6 per cent trusted political parties. Only 28 per cent deemed democracy the best political system. "Informe 2018", Corporación Latinobarómetro, 9 November 2018.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interview, academic, San Salvador, March 2019.

⁹⁹ "La crisis del coronavirus agudiza el choque de Bukele con el resto de poderes en El Salvador", *El País*, 16 April 2020.

¹⁰⁰ "Bukele urge a los diputados aprobar fondos de Seguridad", *El Mundo*, 2 November 2019.

¹⁰¹ "Siete claves para entender la crisis de poderes en El Salvador", *Revista Factum*, 8 February 2020.

session of the Legislative Assembly over a weekend.¹⁰² Bukele warned legislators that their failure to attend could be interpreted as a rupture of the constitutional order, justifying the people's right to revolt.¹⁰³ Most deputies deemed the summons unconstitutional and refused to show up.¹⁰⁴

Bukele's reaction was belligerent. He ordered security forces to occupy the Legislative Assembly's plenary chamber, a move many observers feared would result in the closure of congress and a lurch toward authoritarian rule.¹⁰⁵ Once inside, Bukele sat on the chair's seat and prayed. He then addressed a crowd outside the Assembly, stepping back from his earlier ultimatum: "I asked God, and God responded: 'patience, patience, patience'".¹⁰⁶ Bukele later publicly denied that his intention was ever to close congress, adding, "If I was a dictator or someone who does not respect democracy, I would have already taken full control".¹⁰⁷ But the event was accompanied by a series of disturbing incidents: journalists reported unjustified restrictions on press coverage, while members of the Assembly said the police withdrew their bodyguards without a clear reason and harassed them into attending the plenary.¹⁰⁸ The Legislative Assembly rejected Bukele's move, which several deputies branded an "attempted coup".¹⁰⁹

The resulting crisis was short-lived, thanks in large part to the warnings of civil society, business organisations and independent media. Those groups sounded the alarm over the potential economic consequences of closing the legislature.¹¹⁰ Judicial institutions such as the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General's Office publicly declared the government's actions inappropriate.¹¹¹

¹⁰² Parties withdrew support for the loan after learning that Osiris Luna, director of the prison system, had connections to a Mexican security technology firm, which raised concern over the transparency of the tender process, given that most of the loan money would have been invested in improving security forces' technological equipment. "Temen aprobar crédito de \$109 millones por vínculos con empresa de videovigilancia", *El Mundo*, 5 February 2020.

¹⁰³ Article 167 authorises the council to convene the legislature "when the interests of the Republic demand it". Article 87 recognises the people's right to insurrection "to restore the constitutional order" once it has been violated. "Siete claves para entender la crisis de poderes en El Salvador", *Revista Factum*, 8 February 2020. See the full text of El Salvador's constitution at the Organization of American States website.

¹⁰⁴ "Ante ausencia de ARENA y FMLN, Ponce convoca a nueva plenaria este lunes", *El Salvador*, 8 February 2020.

¹⁰⁵ "El Salvador necesita más democracia, no golpes ni dictaduras", *The New York Times*, 12 February 2020.

¹⁰⁶ "Ahora creo que está muy claro quien tiene el control de la situación", *El Faro*, 10 February 2020.

¹⁰⁷ "Si fuera un dictador habría tomado el control de todo el Gobierno anoche", *El País*, 10 February 2020.

¹⁰⁸ "Diputados denunciaron acoso de militares en sus viviendas", *El Salvador*, 9 February 2020. On the harassment of journalists, see the tweet by APES, @apeselsalvador, 8:15pm, 9 February 2020.

¹⁰⁹ "Asamblea Legislativa condena la irrupción y toma militarizada de las instalaciones del Congreso", Asamblea Legislativa de la República de El Salvador, 10 February 2020.

¹¹⁰ "El Salvador: Choque de poderes por préstamo para seguridad", *Estrategia y Negocios*, 9 February 2020.

¹¹¹ "Crisis en El Salvador: la Corte Suprema ordenó a Bukele no usar al Ejército para forzar al Congreso a aprobar su plan de seguridad", *Infobae*, 10 February 2020. "Fiscalía investigará hechos sucedidos el domingo en Asamblea Legislativa: Melara reconoce exceso de autoridad de Ejército y Policía", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 10 February 2020.

Meanwhile, foreign partners such as the U.S., the EU, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the UN played a crucial role in calling on the president to show restraint.¹¹² Although Bukele was chastised for his actions and unsuccessful in forcing the Assembly to approve the loan, the episode was popular with his supporters, who saw it as proof that he would not be cowed by traditional political parties in his goal of serving the Salvadoran public interest. According to a poll by the Francisco Gavidia University, around 79 per cent of interviewees backed Bukele's decision to deploy the military in the Legislative Assembly.¹¹³ Meanwhile, the COVID-19 emergency halted the loan discussions.

Disagreement over responses to the pandemic has triggered another acrimonious round of institutional arm-wrestling. Since the virus outbreak, Bukele insisted on the need for tough quarantine measures, arguing that a country with a precarious health system such as El Salvador could not cope with massive contagion and therefore had to act quickly and decisively to contain the virus.¹¹⁴ Besides ordering a total border shutdown and the temporary closure of many businesses, Bukele pressed for tough punishment for those found violating the government quarantine imposed in late March, including their arrest and confiscation of their vehicles.¹¹⁵ In response, the Constitutional Chamber of the Supreme Court reiterated on at least three occasions that any arrests that lacked a legal basis would be unconstitutional – a ruling Bukele said he would not abide by.¹¹⁶ Weeks later, Bukele used the uptick in violence at the end of April to veto a bill to protect human rights and prevent abuses by authorities enforcing government measures during the pandemic, which the Legislative Assembly had approved.¹¹⁷

Bukele's antagonism with the legislature is, to a large extent, an electoral strategy aimed at breaking the grip of the party duopoly that has prevailed in El Salvador since the end of the civil war.¹¹⁸ The president is building his new party, Nuevas Ideas – headed by one of his cousins, Xavier Zablah Bukele – with the aim of winning an outright majority in the 2021 elections.¹¹⁹ According to a February poll by *La Prensa Gráfica*, around 40 per cent of interviewees expressed their intention of voting for Nuevas Ideas in the next parliamentary elections, but this number could rise even higher given solid support for the president and the inability of traditional parties to

¹¹² “Enfrentamiento entre instituciones del Estado en El Salvador ha causado una gran preocupación”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 9 February 2020.

¹¹³ “¿A favor o en contra? Primera encuesta tras la militarización de la Asamblea desvela qué opinan los salvadoreños de Bukele”, RT, 27 February 2020.

¹¹⁴ In his efforts to raise awareness about the danger posed by the pandemic, Bukele even suggested that it could be akin to World War III. Tweet by Nayib Bukele, @nayibbukele, 10:32pm, 22 March 2020.

¹¹⁵ Those who are detained are then sent to government-managed “containment centres” to spend a mandatory 30-day quarantine, where they share the space with deportees and those who are there on suspicion of being possible bearers of the disease. “Albergues salvadoreños son foco de contagio de COVID-19, denuncian ONG”, Deutsche Welle, 6 May 2020.

¹¹⁶ “Bukele mantiene sanciones a quienes violen la cuarentena domiciliar en El Salvador pese a fallo de la Corte Suprema de Justicia”, CNN, 16 April 2020.

¹¹⁷ “Vetos de Bukele dejan en el limbo derechos humanos en cuarentena”, *El Salvador*, 1 May 2020.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, academic and development aid worker, San Salvador, October 2019.

¹¹⁹ “Nuevas Ideas será dirigido por un primo del presidente y funcionarios de Gobierno”, *El Faro*, 2 March 2020.

adapt to the challenge he poses.¹²⁰ Victory would give his presidency unprecedented control over the country's institutions, including both the executive and legislative bodies, at a time when the Assembly will be called upon to elect five representatives of the Supreme Court, the new attorney general and the new human rights ombudsman in 2022.¹²¹

Yet Bukele's clashes with legislative and judicial institutions could still backfire. They have helped consolidate his reputation among many Salvadorans as a defender of their interests and shored up his extraordinary popularity. The two traditional parties, however, are likely to maintain at least part of their electoral sway and influence in public affairs thanks to their well-established apparatus, even if Bukele's party wins the 2021 polls.¹²² Lasting success in reducing El Salvador's violent crime will depend on continuity in security policy beyond the president's five-year term in office, as well as support from municipal governments run by rival forces and cross-party backing in the legislature. Without these, the government risks exposing any security improvements to sudden reversals should Bukele's popularity dip or other political forces come to power. Foreign donors, above all the EU and European states, will also be reluctant to fund the president's efforts if his government fails to comply with basic democratic norms.

¹²⁰ Crisis Group interview, academic, San Salvador, October 2019. "Nuevas Ideas sigue adelante en intención de voto", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 29 February 2020.

¹²¹ These appointments will need two-thirds support in the Legislative Assembly. Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist, 25 March 2020.

¹²² Crisis Group interview, academic, San Salvador, 23 October 2019.

V. The Extraordinary Drop in Homicide

Security policy has provided Bukele with an opportunity to excoriate rival political forces and bypass customary checks and balances on the executive, but only because his feats in this area appear so remarkable. Now his government faces the challenges of ensuring that these achievements are more than ephemeral and avoiding a return to the peaks and troughs of violence that the country has suffered for decades.

Moreover, the precise causes of the dramatic decline in violence are not clear. The government argues that its Territorial Control Plan accounts for the reduction in homicides following the new president's assumption of power in June 2019. But statistical evidence studied by Crisis Group shows that the correlation between the plan and the reduction in homicides is not straightforward. It suggests that, even if the plan has played a role, other elements have also contributed. These include structural changes criminal gangs have undergone in recent years and, potentially, unofficial policies beyond the Territorial Control Plan – namely, an alleged informal understanding between officials and gangs to reduce gang violence and security forces' clashes with gangs.

Drawing a full picture of why violence has declined is important. President Bukele's government should seek to build on those policies that have proven effective and discard or reorient those that have not as it refines its future approach.

A. *An Unquestionable Fact*

While homicides in El Salvador were already on a downward trend when Bukele took office, his government has kept up the drop. The Sánchez Cerén administration had managed to bring the annual homicide rate down to 51 per 100,000 inhabitants in 2018, after it had reached its peak of 103 in 2015.¹²³ Bukele's government claims that homicides have decreased by 62 per cent since he took office, including a 61 per cent drop in femicides.¹²⁴ Data backs up this claim. In May, just before Bukele took office, the average number of people murdered each day was 9.2.¹²⁵ Since July 2019, the daily homicide rates have virtually halved, never surpassing five murders per day on average, which makes Bukele's first year in power the least violent year during any of the last four governments.¹²⁶ According to official figures, the country also recorded the seven least violent months of the last three decades under the Bukele administration, and reported at least 26 days without murders until 25 June.¹²⁷ According to the

¹²³ Crisis Group Report, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, op. cit.

¹²⁴ Justice and Public Security Minister Rivas announced these figures in a 4 June televised cabinet meeting. Informa TV, "Nayib Bukele en vivo cadena nacional", video, YouTube, 4 June 2020. For femicide figures, see the ORMUSA observatory website.

¹²⁵ Statistics formulated by journalist Roberto Valencia, based on National Police figures. See his tweet, @cguanacas, 11:17am, 1 July 2019.

¹²⁶ See Roberto Valencia's tweets on monthly rates and comparison with former presidents. Roberto Valencia, @cguanacas, 11:46am, 8 June 2020; and 8:06pm, 31 May 2020.

¹²⁷ It must be noted, however, that the National Police's data collection system and capacity were different in the first decade after the war. It was only fifteen years ago when it started checking that its monthly figures aligned with those of the Attorney General's Office and the Forensic Medicine Institute. "Gobierno celebra cuarto día sin homicidios en junio y 26 durante la administración Bukele", *Contrapunto*, 25 June 2020.

police, there were 64 homicides in May 2020, the month with the fewest murders since the 1992 peace agreements.¹²⁸

Along with murders, other security indicators also point to reductions in violent crime overall. The Attorney General's Office reported more than 2,500 complaints for disappearances during Bukele's first year in office, compared to 3,500 in 2018.¹²⁹ On 1 June, the minister of justice and public security tweeted that when Bukele's government took power, the country was suffering an average of eight disappearances a day, a rate that has since been brought down to 4.5.¹³⁰ The population's perception of safety also improved: 33.2 per cent of participants in a December 2019 survey felt it was unsafe to go to the city centre of their municipality, compared to 63.5 per cent in May.¹³¹

B. Unclear Causes

Bukele and his entourage argue that these results are the product of his security plan.¹³² The story might be more complicated, however.

Statistical analysis conducted for this report shows no causal relationship between the deployment of police and military officers to the 22 municipalities prioritised by the Territorial Control Plan and the geographical distribution of the drop in homicides.¹³³ Though additional police and military forces were deployed to those prioritised municipalities, homicides have also fallen in other, similarly gang-affected, areas, as displayed in the first graph of Figure 1.¹³⁴ If the drop in homicides was a result of the implementation of the Territorial Control Plan, it would be natural to suppose that these 22 priority municipalities would display better results in security indicators than those not included in the Plan. Moreover, the second graph in Figure 1 shows that the downward trend in homicides appears to have started shortly before Bukele took office, and therefore before the launch of his security plan.¹³⁵

¹²⁸ The measures imposed due to COVID-19 might have influenced these numbers. "El mes más seguro en la historia de El Salvador": Bukele presume de su primer año de gestión tras los 64 homicidios de mayo", RT, 1 June 2020.

¹²⁹ "Más de 2,500 personas desaparecidas en primer año de Bukele", *El Diario de Hoy*, 3 June 2020. "Fiscalía registró en 2018 más de 3,500 casos de personas desaparecidas", *El Salvador*, 8 January 2019.

¹³⁰ See the minister's tweet, @RogelioRivas, 11:56am, 1 June 2020.

¹³¹ "El 7% de las familias fue víctima de delito en El Salvador", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 4 December 2019.

¹³² Justice and Public Security Minister Rivas, among other government staffers, has repeated in public interviews that the drop in homicides is due to the Territorial Control Plan. "Resultados del plan control territorial", Canal 12, 13 May 2020.

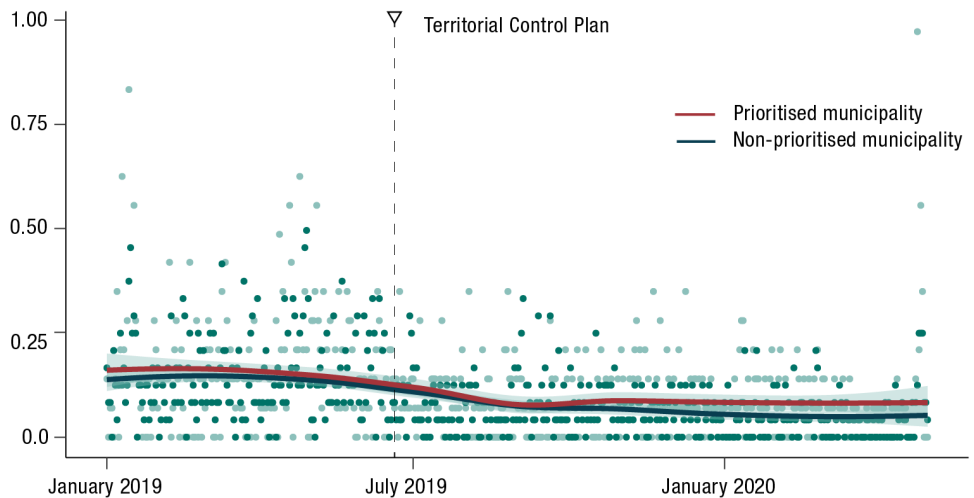
¹³³ More details of the statistical analysis, a fully saturated difference-in-differences model comparing affected and unaffected municipalities, can be found in the methodological appendix.

¹³⁴ The graph compares the daily average per capita homicide rate in municipalities prioritised in the Territorial Control Plan (dark grey dots) and municipalities prioritised during the previous administration's Safe El Salvador Plan (light grey dots) but that do not feature under the Territorial Control Plan. This helps ensure "treated" and "control" units are roughly equivalent. The data are fitted with smoothing lines (here using loess) to show trends, and with 95 per cent confidence intervals.

¹³⁵ The latest daily homicides database available is updated through April 2020. Appendix B provides details on the methodology applied and further evidence of this using a difference-in-differences framework. Note that the first panel of Figure 1 uses per capita daily homicide rates, while the bottom figure uses the overall number of homicides. This report uses daily homicide rates

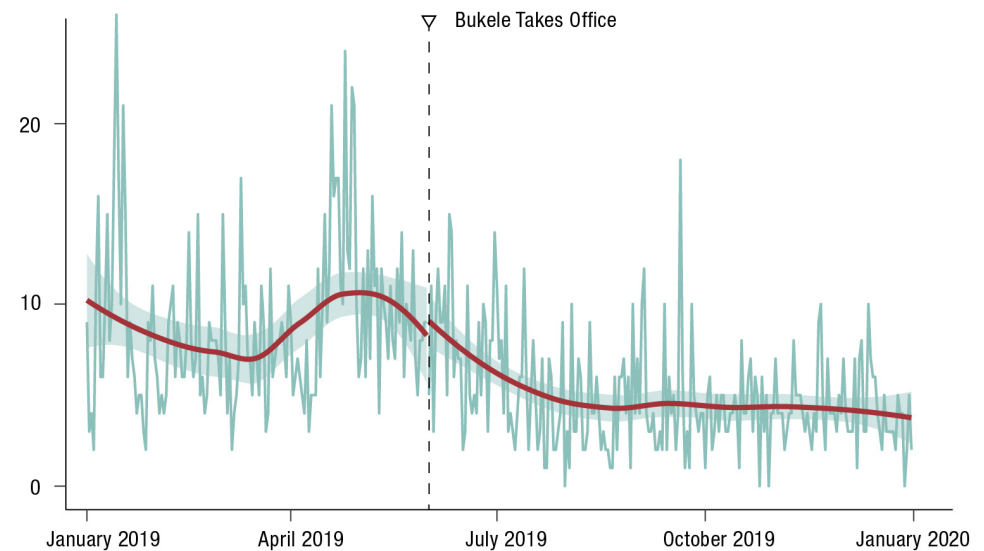
Figure 1: Territorial Control Plan and National Homicides

Territorial Control Plan (Phase 1) and Per Capita Homicides 1 January 2019-30 April 2020



Description of data: Daily per capita homicides (100,000). Points indicate the actual average for prioritised/non-prioritised municipalities; smoothed lines indicate a predicted value; confidence intervals are calculated using standard errors. **Source:** Crisis Group analysis of homicide data from El Salvador's Ministry of Justice and Public Security

Number of Daily Homicides 1 January 2019-31 December 2019



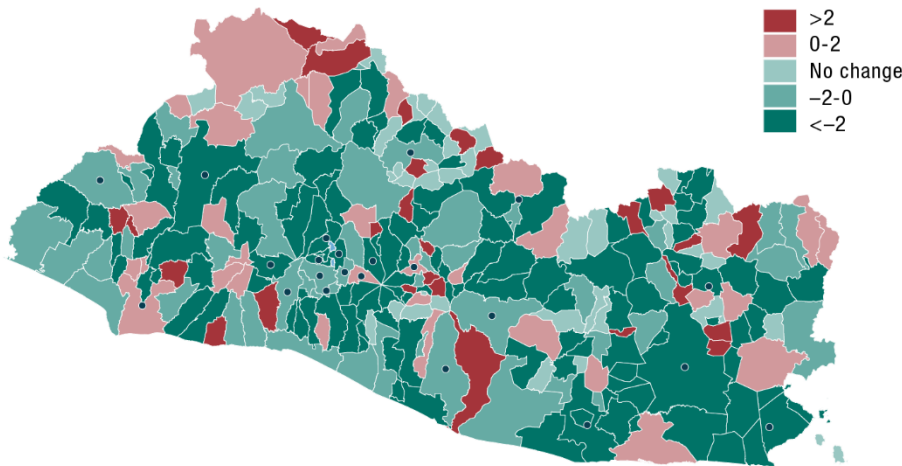
Description of data: Daily homicides. Line indicates the actual daily homicide rate; smoothed lines indicate a predicted value (fitted before and after Bukele took office); confidence intervals are calculated using standard errors. **Source:** Crisis Group analysis of homicide data from El Salvador's Ministry of Justice and Public Security

In addition, as Figure 2 shows, homicides have generally fallen throughout the country. The homicide drop is observable in many municipalities that were not part of the Territorial Control Plan, and the murder rate has even slightly increased in some prioritised municipalities, which are marked with green dots.

to look at national trends as these numbers are easier to understand; it uses per capita rates when comparing municipalities, since very populous areas like San Salvador might otherwise skew the data. See police figures at the Ministry of Justice and Public Security website.

Figure 2: Change in Homicides Per Capita since Bukele Took Office

El Salvador Change in Homicides per 100,000 1 January 2019-30 April 2020



Description of data: Change in monthly per capita homicides before (1 January 2019 to 31 May 2019) and after (1 June 2019 to 30 April 2020) Bukele took office. Territorial Control Plan prioritised municipalities are marked with a dot.
Source: El Salvador’s Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

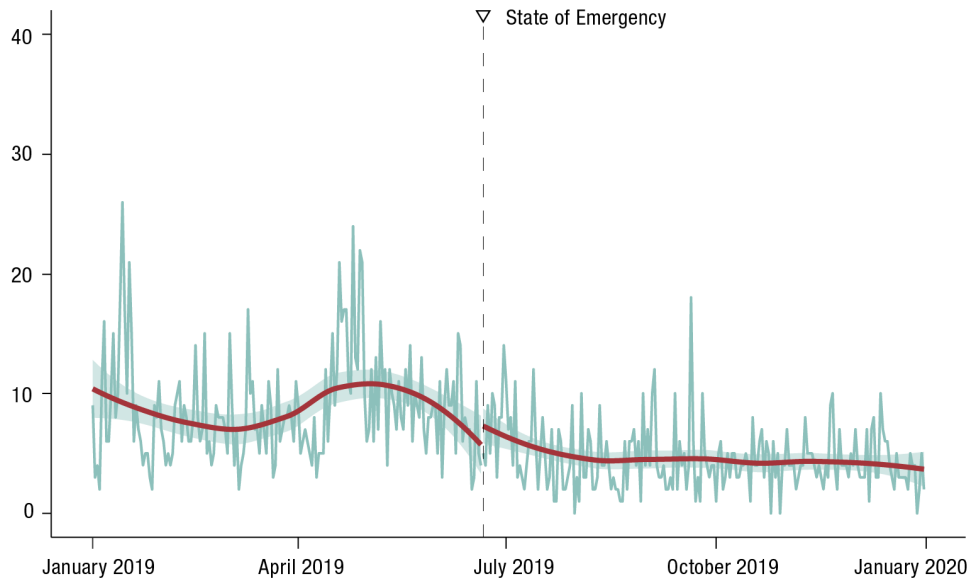
Besides the deployment of the military and police to prioritised municipalities, the Territorial Control Plan also included the imposition of various nationwide states of emergency in prisons. These were intended to curb communication between incarcerated gang leaders and outside members, based on the understanding that up to 80 per cent of the orders to carry out homicides or extract extortion payments come from prison.¹³⁶ The graph in Figure 3 shows that the state of emergency imposed from July to September 2019 did not have an immediate impact on the number of recorded homicides.¹³⁷ The fact that homicides started falling before these measures were put into place makes it unlikely that these were the primary cause, though it remains possible that they contributed to sustaining the drop.

¹³⁶ “Empresas de telefonía tienen 72 horas para cortar señal en penales, advierte Bukele”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 21 June 2019. “Presidente Nayib Bukele anuncia plan de seguridad para atacar al crimen organizado”, Presidencia de la República de El Salvador, 18 June 2019. Crisis Group interviews, government and prison officials, San Salvador, October 2019.

¹³⁷ Graphs show daily homicides (in grey) fitted with two smoothing lines (loess), before and after the date the relevant policies were implemented. If these measures had an immediate impact, it would appear as a large drop between the two smoothed lines. There is also no effect when the state of emergency in the prisons is lifted in September. The methodological appendix describes the statistical analysis, an interrupted time series analysis.

Figure 3: Prison Policy and Homicides

Number of Daily Homicides 1 January 2019-31 December 2019



Description of data: Daily homicides. Line indicates the actual daily homicide rate; smoothed lines indicate a predicted value (fitted before and after the imposition of security measures); confidence intervals are calculated using standard errors. **Source:** Crisis Group analysis of homicide data from El Salvador's Ministry of Justice and Public Security and *El Diario de Hoy*.

The second component of the Plan, focused on the construction of cubes and the creation of sports, arts and recreation programs, is only in its initial phase. According to a police commissioner, no more than 20 per cent of this part of the plan has so far been completed.¹³⁸ While the one existing cube in La Iberia has had an undeniably positive impact in the community, it was built before the launch of the Territorial Control Plan, and as such cannot be used to gauge the impact of the plan. Programs supported by the Unit for the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric, including ones similar to those of previous administrations, have according to various testimonies provided an important space for young people in numerous affected communities, and may contribute in the medium term to reductions in gangs' recruitment. But their relatively small scale cannot account for nationwide changes in violence.¹³⁹

C. Other Potential Factors

If the Territorial Control Plan is not the sole cause of the reduction in homicides, what else might explain the fall? Clashes between state forces and gangs, which had been one of the main drivers of violence in recent years, have fallen in number and intensity since Bukele took office. This indicator, alongside others, has prompted analysts and civil society representatives to suggest that there might be an informal understanding among gangs, or between them and the government, to keep rates of

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, police commissioner, San Salvador, 23 January 2020.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, security experts, San Salvador, October 2019; community leaders, La Iberia, San Salvador, 23 January 2020.

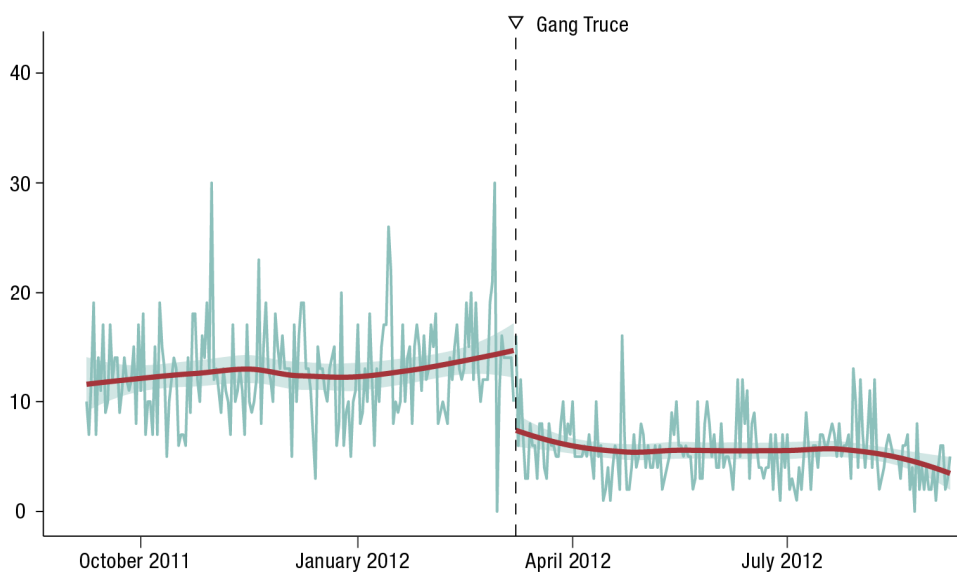
violence down. On the other hand, the killing spree at the end of April 2020 indicated that gangs can still intensify violence across El Salvador through a seemingly snap decision.

1. A fragile, informal understanding?

Many experts in El Salvador concur that the fall in homicides is mainly driven by the gangs' choice. According to one journalist: "In this country, homicides go down only if gangs decide so".¹⁴⁰ Data supports this statement: Figure 4 shows a large, sustained and statistically significant drop in murders both when the 2012 gangs truce began and when gangs unilaterally decided to halt homicides to avoid the imposition of extraordinary measures in 2016.¹⁴¹ The available data indicates that, regardless of what motivates a truce, major reductions in homicides have been associated with the gangs' decision to keep the rates low. In other words, past experience shows that government policies reduce murder rates only when they can change the gangs' own calculations.

Figure 4: Gang Truces and Homicides

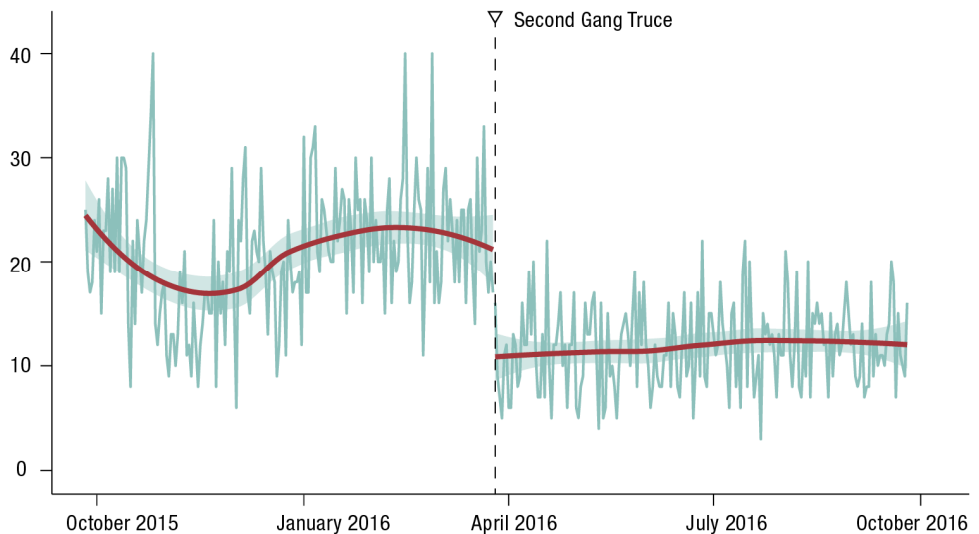
Number of Daily Homicides 8 September 2011-8 September 2012



¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, journalist, San Salvador, 24 October 2019.

¹⁴¹ Interrupted time series analysis was used to confirm the immediate effects of the gang truces on the daily homicide rate. See the methodological appendix for additional details.

Number of Daily Homicides 26 September 2015-26 September 2016



Description of data: Daily homicides. Line indicates the actual daily homicide rate; smoothed lines indicate a predicted value (fitted before and after a gang truce); confidence intervals are calculated using standard errors. **Source:** Crisis Group analysis of homicide data from El Salvador's Ministry of Justice and Public Security and *El Diario de Hoy*.

Indeed, despite the drop in violence, gangs' territorial presence and control do not seem much changed. Testimonies from several people who live in gang-controlled areas in San Salvador indicate that well-known gang members and leaders continued to be seen on the streets before and even during the COVID-19 lockdown, many of them with new motorbikes, phones and electronic tablets.¹⁴² Activities undertaken by gangs during the pandemic, such as reducing extortion payments, handing out bags of provisions or enforcing a curfew, also point at the undisturbed capacity of gangs to control everyday life in their communities.¹⁴³

As a result, several civil society representatives and politicians believe that gangs have decided to lower homicides, possibly as a consequence of an informal non-aggression pact with authorities.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, a spokesperson for the Southerners faction of the 18th Street gang claimed in a recent interview that there was an agreement between gangs to lower homicides, though when asked who else participated, he evaded the question.¹⁴⁵ Salvadorans point to reports that Bukele allegedly negotiated with gangs when he was mayor of San Salvador as a precedent for his government's possible engagement with them.¹⁴⁶ For its part, however, the government has repeatedly

¹⁴² Crisis Group interview, human rights defender, San Salvador, 24 October 2019. Crisis Group telephone interviews, NGO worker and academic, 11 March 2020. "Un reparto de víveres bajo el control de la MS-13", *Revista Factum*, 26 May 2020.

¹⁴³ Crisis Group telephone interview, security expert, 7 May 2020. "Un reparto de víveres bajo el control de la MS-13", *op. cit.*

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interviews, civil society representatives, pastor, Mauricio Vargas and security experts, San Salvador, October and December 2019.

¹⁴⁵ "Bukele busca un conflicto entre las pandillas, pero no va a conseguirlo": Habla la mara salvadoreña Barrio 18-Sureños", *RT*, 30 April 2020.

¹⁴⁶ During Bukele's time as mayor, some members of his staff reportedly established contacts with gang members and brokered deals with them to carry out projects to overhaul the city centre. No proof has surfaced, however. "Nayib Bukele también pactó con pandillas", *op. cit.*

denied, both in private and in public, the existence of any negotiation, and no evidence has come to light showing that it has engaged in direct talks with gangs.¹⁴⁷

It may be that interaction between the Bukele administration and gangs has not involved direct engagement, as was the case in the 2012 government-mediated gang truce, but rather public signalling – an exchange of messages – potentially coupled with more direct local interaction.¹⁴⁸ A few days before Bukele was sworn in, an MS-13 spokesperson argued in an interview that the gang trusted “God and Bukele”, and that the president would address the conditions that have contributed to gangs proliferating in the country.¹⁴⁹ For his part, in a June 2019 press conference, Bukele claimed that the “war” (on gangs) was over, and asked gang members to go back to their homes, “something nobody had ever told them before”, according to a police commissioner.¹⁵⁰ The same commissioner also alleged that government representatives who travel regularly to the areas most affected by violence also received messages from gang members.¹⁵¹ Senior government official Carlos Marroquín said the government’s intention is that “both the populace and the gangs receive the message that the government is willing to bring order”.¹⁵²

If this is the case, such an exchange of public messages might prove an effective way to communicate with gangs and lower aggression between them and security forces without incurring the risks of direct dialogue. Even so, it falls short of providing a durable solution to the country’s chronic violence.

2. A reduction in clashes

Falling violence during Bukele’s first year in power also seems closely connected with a decline in security forces’ attacks on gangs, which had until recently accounted for a rising share of total homicides.

Since the end of the truce in 2014, gangs have “divvied up territories” and thus do not fight each other for territorial control to the same extent as before.¹⁵³ Gangs have focused more on administering those areas and, for the most part, prevented their members from crossing “invisible borders” into rival gangs’ territories. This allocation of areas has reduced animosity among gangs, which had historically been a driver of homicides.¹⁵⁴ This trend has been confirmed by the lack of clashes in jails despite the government’s decision to mix active members of different gangs in the same cells, though the long-term sustainability of this peaceful coexistence has yet to

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Carlos Marroquín, police commissioner, San Salvador, December 2019.

¹⁴⁸ Crisis Group interviews, security analysts and humanitarian workers, San Salvador, October and December 2019.

¹⁴⁹ “Mara Salvatrucha: ‘Confiamos en Dios y en Nayib Bukele’”, *Revista Factum*, 27 May 2019.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, police commissioner, San Salvador, 24 October 2019. “El mensaje de Nayib Bukele a las pandillas: ‘No queremos guerra, paren de matar y váyanse a sus casas’”, *Infobae*, 1 July 2019.

¹⁵¹ Gangs reportedly requested that the government invest in poor, marginalised areas; the police halt abuses against young people; and jail conditions conform with the law. Crisis Group interview, police commissioner, San Salvador, January 2020.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interview, Carlos Marroquín, San Salvador, 6 December 2019.

¹⁵³ Crisis Group telephone interview, former gang member, 12 December 2019.

¹⁵⁴ Crisis Group interviews, journalist, community leaders, former gang member, San Salvador, January 2020.

be tested.¹⁵⁵ In recent years, the reduction in internecine feuds among gangs has been offset to an extent by the targeting of security officers and their relatives, as well as internal purges and attacks on those in arrears on extortion payments.¹⁵⁶

That has changed. Since Bukele took office, there has been a significant reduction in the number of shootouts between gangs and security forces, which in the past tended to include unlawful killings by security forces and even extrajudicial executions.¹⁵⁷ According to official police figures, there were 294 “illicit aggressions” in 2019, compared to 341 in 2018.¹⁵⁸ These clashes were also slightly less lethal to gang members: 193 died in clashes in 2019, compared to 208 in 2018.¹⁵⁹ Locals in gang-ridden areas confirm a decrease in police abuses, though practices such as unlawful detentions or beatings of youngsters based on their “gang-like appearance” have not disappeared.¹⁶⁰ This reduction in clashes between gangs and security forces may also hint at the existence of an unstated non-aggression pact, potentially representing a move to curb the country’s insecurity. According to a police commissioner, before Bukele backed, in April, the security forces’ use of lethal force against gangs, an order to shoot less frequently at gang members had circulated among authorities.¹⁶¹

Whatever the origin of the gangs’ apparent decision to reduce violence, the COVID-19 emergency has exposed its fragility, as well as the risk that gang-driven violence may resurge. In late April, MS-13 spearheaded an escalation in murders that killed more than 80 Salvadorans in five days.¹⁶² The 18th Street Southerners condemned the murders, regretting that although “they had brought down homicides”, given needy families supplies and “suspended illicit activities”, their jailed members would pay the price of tougher conditions.¹⁶³ The motive for the killing spree remains unclear. The justice and public security minister said it was the gang’s attempt to regain territorial control from the state, but other observers believe it more likely that MS-13 was conveying discontent with official management of the pandemic, though evidence to back either claim is scant.¹⁶⁴ Homicides soon returned to historical lows,

¹⁵⁵ Crisis Group telephone interviews, NGO worker and journalist, May 2020. “Bukele ya forzó una ‘tregua carcelaria’ entre pandillas en El Salvador: ¿Cuánto durará?”, *The Washington Post*, 5 May 2020.

¹⁵⁶ Crisis Group interview, journalist, San Salvador, 24 October 2019.

¹⁵⁷ “Special Report by the Representative of the Office of Human Rights Ombudsman, Raquel Caballero de Guevara, on the Extrajudicial Executions Attributed to the National Civil Police in El Salvador, from 2014 to 2018”, op. cit.

¹⁵⁸ “Illicit aggression” is the term the National Police uses for shootouts with gangs. Figures obtained by Crisis Group from the Unit of Access to Public Information of the National Police.

¹⁵⁹ According to recent studies, a higher gang member mortality ratio is an indicator of security forces’ brutality and excessive use of force. Figures obtained by Crisis Group from the Unit of Access to Public Information of the National Police. “Monitor del uso de la fuerza letal en América Latina: Un estudio comparativo de Brasil, Colombia, El Salvador, México y Venezuela (2019)”, op. cit.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interviews, community leaders, La Iberia, 23 January 2020. “Coronavirus May Be Providing Cover for Police Abuses in El Salvador”, *Insight Crime*, 14 May 2020.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, police commissioner, San Salvador, 23 January 2020.

¹⁶² “Piezas para entender la súbita alza de homicidios”, *El Faro*, 27 April 2020.

¹⁶³ “Bukele comparte video de pandilleros en el que se desligan por alza de homicidios”, *El Salvador Times*, 30 April 2020.

¹⁶⁴ MS-13 could have been protesting moves ranging from a reported increase in security forces’ abuses – also denounced by the 18th Street Southerners faction – to unequal distribution of the

with only five killings between 11 and 17 May.¹⁶⁵ Still, the events underlined that the gang's capacity remains intact and showed how easily security achievements can be reversed if one actor decides to change course.

3. The evolution of gangs

Both the reduction in violence and the volatility shown by the April killings might also be the effect of changes within the gangs themselves. In particular, a new gang leadership appears to have emerged in the streets, one less dependent on decisions taken by detained gang leaders.¹⁶⁶

A number of factors underpin this shift. It responds in part to the success of the extraordinary measures implemented by the state since 2016, which had hindered communication between jailed members and their counterparts on the street without severing it entirely.¹⁶⁷ Most gang members outside jail have also suffered the harm of years of clashes with security forces, acknowledging that they cannot match police and military firepower and “will be forever on the losing end”, according to a leading journalist who specialises in gang issues.¹⁶⁸ At the same time, many gang members who live in grim conditions in some of the country's poorest communities have started to resent their leaders, who allegedly personally profited from the truce.¹⁶⁹ As a result, gangs are experiencing a generational turnover, with mid-level leaders who control specific communities and hold the power to bring homicides down gaining more autonomy.¹⁷⁰ Several security experts, journalists and former gang members agree that the decision to lower homicides has been taken outside jails, although possibly with the indulgence of jailed leaders.¹⁷¹

While gangs are not the monoliths they were a decade ago, not all groups have undergone the same evolution. The 18th Street Southerners faction maintains a more hierarchical criminal structure, with historical leaders in jails still having an important role. So does MS-13, though it appears to have nurtured a new leadership cadre on the streets that reportedly does not always see eye to eye with leaders in jail.¹⁷² It would allegedly be willing to consider the group's demobilisation if it were involved

\$300 subsidy from the government to help families most economically affected by the crisis. Crisis Group telephone interviews, security expert and former gang member, May 2020. “¿Cómo se explica el repunte de homicidios en plena emergencia por el Covid-19?”, *Revista Factum*, 26 April 2020. See the minister's tweet, @RogelioRivas, 6:13pm, 2 May 2020.

¹⁶⁵ Influential journalist Paolo Luers suggests the government may have conceded to the gangs' demands. See his tweet, @paololuers, 12:54pm, 16 May 2020.

¹⁶⁶ Crisis Group interviews, security experts, journalist, pastor and former gang members, San Salvador, October and December 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, former gang member, San Salvador, October 2019.

¹⁶⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist, 25 March 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Some gang members, including a plea-bargain witness in the trial initiated by the Attorney General's Office on the truce, allege that the groups' historical leaders received money and channelled foreign aid through NGOs they managed in exchange for giving the order to lower homicides. Crisis Group interviews, former gang member and journalist, San Salvador, October 2019. “Pandillas compraron fusiles con dinero de la tregua: testigo”, *La Prensa Gráfica*, 30 April 2019.

¹⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, journalist, San Salvador, October 2019.

¹⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, journalists, security experts, former gang members, San Salvador, October and December 2019; January 2020.

¹⁷² Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist specialised in gangs, 25 March 2020.

in formal negotiations with the state, something that historical leaders, most of whom are in jail, have always rejected.¹⁷³ On the other hand, the Revolutionaries faction is progressively fragmenting, to the point that “nobody can speak on its behalf”.¹⁷⁴

Changes in gangs have become more evident during the coronavirus outbreak. MS-13 announced at the end of March it would compel communities under its de facto control to abide by a curfew aimed at containing the spread of the virus, promising punishment for those who defy it.¹⁷⁵ This curfew was fully implemented in only a few MS-13-controlled parts of the country, however, hinting at the group’s withering cohesion (traditionally, punishments for disobeying the orders of MS-13 leaders have been brutal).¹⁷⁶ Meanwhile, the 18th Street Southerners faction broadcast a video showing some of its members handing out food bags to locals, distancing itself from MS-13’s approach.¹⁷⁷ Both gangs reportedly suspended extortion payments, at least from taxi and transport employees, as well as small merchants, while maintaining them for medium to larger-scale businesses.¹⁷⁸ Even so, 5 per cent of the enterprises participating in a Salvadoran Chamber of Commerce survey in mid-April reported that they had fallen victim to extortion during the pandemic.¹⁷⁹

The nuances of each gang complicate the design of a generalised approach. As the country’s history shows, engaging in formal dialogue with criminal organisations can lower violence but is ridden with political risks. Studies show that talks can be effective if the state can provide tangible incentives to the criminal outfits. But the spike in violence following a breakdown in talks is costly for politicians involved.¹⁸⁰ The 2012 truce, despite its successes in lowering homicides, made negotiations with gangs a taboo both among state officials, given the ensuing stigmatisation of all those involved, and among gang leaders, who saw unprecedented fragmentation in its aftermath.

¹⁷³ Ibid. The Colombian peace process allegedly set an important precedent for the gang to reconsider their position. “MS-13 pide diálogo al gobierno y pone sobre la mesa su propia desarticulación”, *El Faro*, 9 January 2017.

¹⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, journalist, San Salvador, 24 October 2019.

¹⁷⁵ A few days after, it uploaded videos of its members beating up with baseball bats those who had not respected the curfew. “Pandemia con pandillas en El Salvador”, *El País*, 1 May 2020.

¹⁷⁶ Locals living in other MS-13-controlled communities, such as San Bartolo, in the outskirts of the capital San Salvador, denied that this measure was ever applied in their areas. Crisis Group telephone interview, local resident, 6 April 2020. “Pandillas amenazan a quien incumpla la cuarentena”, *El Faro*, 31 March 2020. “Circula vídeo de presuntos pandilleros que golpean a un hombre por salir a la calle”, *El Salvador*, 1 April 2020.

¹⁷⁷ “Cómo las pandillas MS-13 y Barrio 18 se están convirtiendo en actores clave contra la epidemia del coronavirus en El Salvador”, RT, 11 April 2020.

¹⁷⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, former gang member, 30 March 2020. “Pandillas amenazan a quien incumpla la cuarentena”, *El Faro*, 31 March 2020.

¹⁷⁹ “Encuesta Empresarial #2 Impacto de la ampliación de medidas de emergencia por el COVID-19 en la economía de la MIPYME”, Cámara de Comercio e Industria de El Salvador, 13 April 2020.

¹⁸⁰ José Miguel Cruz and Angelica Durán-Martínez, “Hiding Violence to Deal with the State: Criminal Pacts in El Salvador and Medellín”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 53, no. 2 (March 2016), p. 204.

VI. Ending the Cycle of Gang Violence

Drawing on his extraordinary popularity and the significant reduction in the country's murder rate, Bukele is uniquely well placed to make bold decisions to curb El Salvador's chronic insecurity over the long term. At the same time, aspects of the president's recent behaviour give cause for concern. His apparent disregard for his opponents in the legislature could backfire, depriving him of the domestic political cooperation and foreign backing needed to carry his government's plans forward. His determination to achieve quick results, especially in the security realm, is understandable, but means he may also be tempted to rely on failed "iron fist" policies if faced with setbacks and a rise in gang violence. That would be a missed opportunity. Several of his new policies, combined with the reduction in lethal violence thus far, offer a promising beginning for what could become a broader set of initiatives aimed at ending the country's cycle of gang violence. These should take into account changes in the nature of gangs over recent years that appear to have played at least some role in reducing violence.

Strategies rolled out under Bukele point the way toward better crime prevention in El Salvador's hotbeds for gang recruitment and activity.¹⁸¹ True, even if funds were available for state-sponsored football camps, vocational trainings and scholarships, or building and maintaining dozens of "cubes", these initiatives in themselves would not deter young people who join gangs to escape difficult family circumstances, degrading treatment and limited educational and job prospects.¹⁸² Moreover, the COVID-19 crisis's economic impact, above all on workers in the informal sector, will further complicate efforts to reverse inequality, which will require years of investment in violence-ridden communities.¹⁸³ But the crisis offers the government an opportunity: Unit for the Reconstruction of the Social Fabric officials should use their increased engagement in marginalised communities, now focused on humanitarian aid, to assess needs and labour market shortcomings. Together with civil society, church, private-sector and foreign partners, they can design tailored programs to meet each area's specific requirements.¹⁸⁴

The government should also adopt a more stable and measured strategy to deal with its prison system and detained gang members. Although rehabilitation of gang members, according to various experts, is an essential step toward a lasting reduction in violence, little has been achieved in this regard.¹⁸⁵ Bukele's Cuscatlán Plan sug-

¹⁸¹ Public scepticism, the lack of quick, tangible results and the absence of political will have led to minimal investment in prevention by previous governments. Crisis Group Report, *El Salvador's Politics of Perpetual Violence*, op. cit.

¹⁸² José Miguel Cruz et al., "The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador", Florida International University, 2017, pp. 41-46.

¹⁸³ "Coronavirus en El Salvador: economía caerá 3.5% en 2020, según Fusades", *El Economista*, 1 April 2020.

¹⁸⁴ An aid agency worker had already made this suggestion back in October 2019. Crisis Group interview, aid agency worker, San Salvador, 25 October 2019.

¹⁸⁵ According to a 2017 survey of 1,200 gang members in El Salvador, 68.6 per cent said they harboured intentions of leaving the gang. These numbers were higher among gang leaders. Cruz et al., "The New Face of Street Gangs: The Gang Phenomenon in El Salvador", op. cit. See also David

gested a willingness to expand pre-existing rehabilitation programs for inmates, but prison system officials admit that no rehabilitation activity is being carried out, or even currently foreseen, in high-security penitentiaries, where most gang members are detained.¹⁸⁶ The authorities should take steps to extend these programs to those prisons as well, though they can only do so once the Legislative Assembly has discussed and approved a rehabilitation law, whose many drafts have been bogged down over the years.¹⁸⁷

Meanwhile, the government should be more cautious about harsh confinement measures in jails. It should stop packing members of different gangs into sealed cells, with no access to sunlight, for long periods of time. Even leaving aside the cruelty of such policies, they risk having destabilising psychological effects that could lead to flare-ups of violence.¹⁸⁸ They also heighten the likelihood of COVID-19 contagion.¹⁸⁹ Though hostility between gangs has decreased significantly over the past few years, this waning rivalry has been grounded on the existence of clear spatial divisions, both in and outside jails.¹⁹⁰ Altering either could revive inter-group grievances or, alternatively, enhance joint operability. Either would have serious repercussions for the country's violence levels.¹⁹¹

A police force with stronger investigative and targeted deterrence capacity, enjoying greater trust and respect from its citizens, will also be crucial to breaking the cycle of violence. The technology investments promised by the government could play an important role, as would stronger coordination with the Attorney General's Office in carrying out joint investigations and systematising data. Meanwhile, the government should take steps to improve relations between security forces and the public, particularly in poor and marginalised communities. Despite recent improvements, police abuses, such as unjustified beatings and unlawful detentions of youngsters living in gang-torn communities, still take place and are rarely investigated.¹⁹²

Two steps in the right direction would be for the government to enhance training programs for community policing and to strengthen the police's internal Profession-

Brotherton, *Youth Street Gangs: A Critical Appraisal* (New York, 2015); Sonia Wolf, *Mano Dura: The Politics of Gang Control in El Salvador* (Austin, 2017).

¹⁸⁶ Crisis Group interview, prison system official, San Salvador, 4 December 2019.

¹⁸⁷ The first legislative proposal on gang members' rehabilitation was presented in 2010. Although other proposals were tabled in the years that followed, the law on the proscription of gangs, also approved in 2010, and the 2015 Supreme Court's ruling declaring gangs "terrorist organisations", hindered the progress of any of these initiatives. Noemy Molina, "La respuesta jurídica ante el fenómeno de las pandillas en El Salvador: derecho penal del enemigo versus enfoque de derechos humanos (1992-2016)", FES América Central, November 2017.

¹⁸⁸ Crisis Group telephone interview, NGO worker, 15 May 2020.

¹⁸⁹ Various penitentiaries, including one exclusively for gang members, have reported cases of COVID-19. "Contagio masivo en cárceles: 108 reos positivos de COVID-19 y 945 casos sospechosos", *El Salvador*, 29 May 2020.

¹⁹⁰ The spokesperson for the 18th Street Southerners faction warned in a recent video that their weapons are silent for now, but that if MS-13 did not halt provocations that have repercussions for their members, they would respond with force. "Bukele comparte video de pandilleros en el que se desligan por alza de homicidios", *El Salvador Times*, 30 April 2020.

¹⁹¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, journalist specialised in gang issues, 28 April 2020.

¹⁹² Crisis Group interviews, academic and community leaders, San Salvador and La Iberia, March 2019 and January 2020. "Monitor del uso de la fuerza letal en América Latina", op. cit., pp. 80-95.

al Responsibility Secretariat through additional personnel and resources, possibly through the involvement of the incipient Commission Against Impunity in El Salvador.¹⁹³ The government seems to envisage a Commission primarily focused on assisting the Attorney General's Office in prosecuting high-level corruption cases. But the new body could in theory draw on the experience of the International Commission Against Impunity in Guatemala in supporting new investigative procedures and professionalised policing, which have played a key role in reducing impunity in the neighbouring country.¹⁹⁴

Ensuring that El Salvador's precious security gains are not reversed will also depend on handling their single most important variable: the readiness of gangs to kill. Whether or not the drop in homicides is based on an informal understanding between gangs and the Salvadoran authorities, a lasting reduction in gang murders should give grounds for the government to consider engaging in local or national talks with these groups. The case for such engagement would be particularly compelling if, throughout the pandemic and national lockdown, gangs sustain low levels of violence, limit extortion and collaborate with authorities to allow communities access to humanitarian aid and health services.

A national-level dialogue with gangs still appears a distant prospect after the disappointment of the last truce. Bukele has consolidated his political capital on the basis of a fervent security discourse, and is unlikely to move before the 2021 legislative elections toward a policy widely rejected by Salvadorans.¹⁹⁵ The U.S. remains El Salvador's most influential foreign partner on security matters, and President Donald Trump is unlikely to back such initiatives, having tied the danger posed by criminal gangs to his anti-immigration rhetoric.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, a negotiation of this sort would require both sides to make unprecedented commitments. The government would need not only to boost education and job creation in marginalised areas, but also to invest heavily in rehabilitation and reintegration of jailed gang members and push for greater internal accountability for the security forces. Gangs appear to have shown they are ready to lower homicides, but an effective agreement would require that they abandon extortion and other criminal practices, and eventually disarm and demobilise.

Even if a national dialogue is likely off the cards, peacebuilding strategies at the micro-level could take advantage of the rising autonomy of local gang cliques to broker community-level violence reduction plans.¹⁹⁷ Such local efforts would need to

¹⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, academic and police commissioner, San Salvador, March 2019 and October 2019. "Fiscalía y CICIES ya tienen acuerdo sobre casos a investigar: subsidio al transporte público, corrupción en la presa El Chaparral y carril del SITRAMSS", *La Prensa Gráfica*, 16 January 2020.

¹⁹⁴ Crisis Group Latin America Report N°70, *Saving Guatemala's Fight against Crime and Impunity*, 24 October 2018.

¹⁹⁵ Crisis Group telephone interview, academic, 19 March 2020.

¹⁹⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, academic, 24 March 2020. "President Donald J. Trump is Dedicated to Combating MS-13", White House Fact Sheets, 23 May 2018.

¹⁹⁷ Similar initiatives were envisaged in the the 2012 gang truce, through the creation of "sanctuary municipalities", where gangs would commit to allowing free circulation of people, non-aggression between rival gangs, and the suspension of illicit activities. Despite some successes in lowering violence, the initiative eventually consolidated gangs' spatial divisions and these efforts waned, along with the truce process. Ana Glenda Tager and Isabel Aguilar Umaña, "La tregua entre pandillas salvadoreñas: Hacia un proceso de construcción de paz social", *Interpeace*, 2013, p. 13.

rely heavily on community leaders and civil society organisations that work on the ground, and should grant victims of gangs a role in determining their scope. The failure to involve victims of gang violence in the 2012 truce stands out as one of the main shortcomings of the process.¹⁹⁸

Moves toward dialogue with the gangs will never be easy. They also risk backfiring for those political leaders who make them and jeopardising the gains of any informal understanding that officials already have with gangs – if indeed such an understanding exists. But if the reduction in violence continues, foreign partners, namely the U.S., the EU and UN agencies, should consider supporting measures aimed at making it easier for gang members to give up crime, including by offering them greater opportunities to reintegrate into law-abiding society. Foreign donors, whose financial backing would be crucial to ensuring that reintegration programs have broad reach and are sustainable, should emphasise that improvements in the security realm are welcome, but that their support is tied to respect for democratic norms and can be withdrawn if checks and balances are eroded.¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁹⁹ As an illustration, the government foresees covering more than 50 per cent of the costs of its security plan until 2021 through foreign donations and loans.

VII. Conclusion

El Salvador's new leader has presided over a 60 per cent drop in homicide rates in the year since he took office, generating high public expectations that the country's worst torments by gang crime are behind it. The decline in violence has helped fuel enormous popular support for President Bukele. Some of his policies offer a fresh approach to dealing with the bloodshed that has torn El Salvador apart over the past decades, and potentially the basis for a path toward lasting peace.

But as yet, nothing guarantees that the decline represents permanent progress instead of a short lull. It may owe more to the gangs' evolution and apparent decision to tamp down killings, perhaps based on an informal understanding with the authorities, than it does to the government's official policies. If so, that arrangement appears fragile; as the April spike shows, gangs could reverse their decision without warning. Moreover, the president's partisan approach, while entrenching his popularity among many Salvadorans fed up with politics as usual, risks depriving his reforms of the broad backing they need. His imperative to quieten the gangs could also spur the government to resort to tested and failed "iron fist" anti-crime policies should violence flare up once again.

The precariousness of the falling murder rate, aggravated by the tremendous pressures on El Salvador's economy and health system due to the coronavirus, make it all the more important that the government defend and consolidate the gains it has registered. Targeted support for and attention to gang-affected communities would help shrink the pool of potential gang recruits. Avoiding extreme punitive measures in prisons and supporting jailed gang members' rehabilitation would serve to maintain the momentum of falling violence by addressing some core gang grievances and providing opportunities for livelihoods free of crime. Should violence rates remain low and gangs prove themselves responsible and sensitive to health and humanitarian concerns during the pandemic, the government could also consider reopening some form of dialogue with them, most likely initially at the local level.

Bukele has witnessed close up previous governments' failure to address El Salvador's chronic violence. He faces a choice. He could repeat their mistakes, leaning on draconian "iron fist" policies and a confrontational approach to rivals. Or he could adopt a strategy that builds on his successes so far, seeks to forge broad political support for reforms and stands the best chance of moving El Salvador beyond its recurrent cycles of gang-related violence.

Guatemala City/Bogotá/New York/ Brussels, 8 July 2020

Appendix A: Map of El Salvador



Appendix B: Methodological Note

Prioritised Municipalities

To examine the effectiveness of the Territorial Control Plan, Crisis Group compared trends in homicides in the 22 prioritised municipalities and similar municipalities not included in the plan. To test this statistically, this report uses a fully saturated difference-in-differences (DID) model, including municipality and day fixed effects. The dependent variable is the daily per capita homicide rate in a given municipality. The key independent variable is whether a municipality was prioritised under the Territorial Control Plan on a given date. The 2019 daily homicide data are from El Salvador’s Justice and Security Ministry, and press reports supply the exact date (between 20 June and 1 August) the Territorial Control Plan was rolled out in a municipality.

Crisis Group found no evidence that this aspect of the Territorial Control Plan had an effect on the homicide rate. The central assumption of DID is “parallel trends”, which typically means that in the absence of intervention, treated and control units would follow similar paths. In this case, there may be more reason for concern that, in the absence of treatment, homicides would have risen or stayed the same in treated municipalities – in other words, that treated and control municipalities were fundamentally different. While untestable, the standard way to check this assumption is to look at pre-trends, or whether the two groups looked similar prior to intervention. In this case, Figure 1 shows that homicide rates in treated and untreated municipalities were virtually identical, providing greater confidence in results.

Furthermore, to compare “like” municipalities – those that would behave similarly in the absence of treatment – Figure 1 and the central statistical analysis use as their control group those municipalities treated under the previous administration’s Plan El Salvador Seguro (“Safe El Salvador Plan”) but not under the Territorial Control Plan (see Table 1). Of Bukele’s 22 prioritised districts, all but three had also been prioritised under the Safe El Salvador Plan, which targeted 50 municipalities. The remaining three were still ranked in the top 50 municipalities on the Safe El Salvador Plan index in 2017, though they were ultimately not targeted. Results hold when looking at all municipalities in the country, including a panel of controls from the 2012 census interacted with the date, or using only gang-affected municipalities, measured as whether at least fifteen gang-affiliated prisoners from that municipality were imprisoned in 2018 (based on data from the General Directorate of Penal Centres). Replication files are available through Princeton’s Empirical Studies of Conflict Project.

Table 1: Prioritised and Non-Prioritised Municipalities Included

Prioritised Territorial Control Plan Municipalities	Control Group Municipalities
San Salvador, Santa Ana, Soyapango, Mejicanos, Colón, Ciudad Delgado, San Miguel, Ilopango, Santa Tecla, San Marcos, Zacatecoluca, San Vicente, Chalatenango, Sensuntepeque, San Francisco Gotera, Cojutepeque, Sonsonate, Usulután, Ahuachapán, La Unión, Apopa, San Martín	Jiquilisco, Quezaltepeque, Izalco, Ilobasco, Chalchuapa, San Juan Opico, Nahuizalco, San Pedro Perulapán, Santiago Nonualco, Conchagua, Olocuilta, Tonacatepeque, La Libertad, Armenia, Ciudad Arce, Panchimalco, Ayutuxtepeque, Acajutla, Tecoluca, Cuscatancingo, Metapán, Atiquizaya, Santo Tomas, San Luis Talpa, Zaragoza, El Congo, Coatepeque, Nejapa, Guazapa, San Pedro Masahuat, Santa Cruz Michapa

The State of Emergency

The state of emergency affected the entire prison population in El Salvador, making it difficult to evaluate its impact, as there is no natural “control” group. Though homicides started falling before the state of emergency was imposed, it is difficult to know whether it contributed to further reducing them.

What is possible to evaluate is whether the state of emergency had an immediate effect on the homicide rate, using interrupted time series analysis (ITSA). The key assumption is that expected potential outcomes are continuous around the date that the policy was implemented (21 June 2019).

If there is a discontinuity at this cut-off, it can be said to be the result of the policy itself. To avoid including the end of the state of emergency, Crisis Group used the 60 days before and after implementation. Given that the goal of the state of emergency was to prevent gang leaders from giving orders, it is plausible that the policy would have such an immediate impact.

Regressing daily homicides on an indicator for the days following the state of emergency and a variable representing the time to or since the policy shows no evidence of an immediate effect on homicides, including when using a quadratic term to account for non-linear effects. Similarly, there is no evidence that the end of the state of emergency in September increased homicides. Again, however, this alone cannot indicate whether the state of emergency contributed to the reduction more broadly.

Gang Truces

To formalise the effects shown in Figure 4, Crisis Group again used ITSA, this time to evaluate the immediate effects of the first (8 March 2012) and second (26 March 2016) gang truces. The dependent variable is daily homicides; the key independent variable is an indicator for whether a date falls after a given truce. The report includes an interaction between this indicator and the “running variable,” a measure of the distance between the date and the announcement of a truce, as well as its quadratic terms to check robustness. The main analysis uses only data within 60 days of a truce; results hold when using subsets of the data to cutting off at different dates before and after the truce (eg, within one month, three months or six months). Both truces had an immediate and large impact on homicides.

Appendix C: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

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The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former UN Deputy Secretary-General and Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Lord (Mark) Malloch-Brown.

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