

Gangs No Longer: Reassessing Transnational Armed Groups in the Western Hemisphere

by Douglas Farah and Marianne Richardson



Institute for National Strategic Studies

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Cover: Inmates at Izalco prison, northwest of San Salvador, during security operation within COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, after President Nayib Bukele decreed maximum emergency in all penitentiary centers housing gang members following intelligence reports that recent increase in El Salvador homicides was registered by orders issued from prisons, April 25, 2020 (El Salvador presidency press office/Notimex/DPA/TNS/Abacapress)

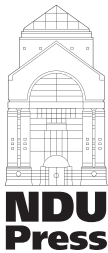
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Executive Summary

MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) in the Northern Triangle of Central America and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC; First Command of the Capital), based in São Paulo, Brazil, are both tier-one criminal/political/military threats to the stability of the Western Hemisphere.¹ These groups—no longer gangs but community-embedded transnational armed groups (CETAGs) in the pantheon of nonstate armed actors—are becoming more deeply enmeshed in the global drug trade, the body politic, and armed conflicts in the hemisphere. These CETAGs, rooted and enduring in their communities of origin, are likely to expand across the hemisphere and are driving multiple types of corruption that President Joe Biden in December 2021 vowed to fight as a core U.S. strategic interest.

This paper compares MS-13 and PCC as particularly enduring variations of nonstate armed groups and assesses each group's evolution and impact on U.S. core interests in the region. It focuses on five aspects of MS-13 and PCC composition and behavior: objectives, constituencies and alliances, capabilities, markets, and impact. Key findings include:

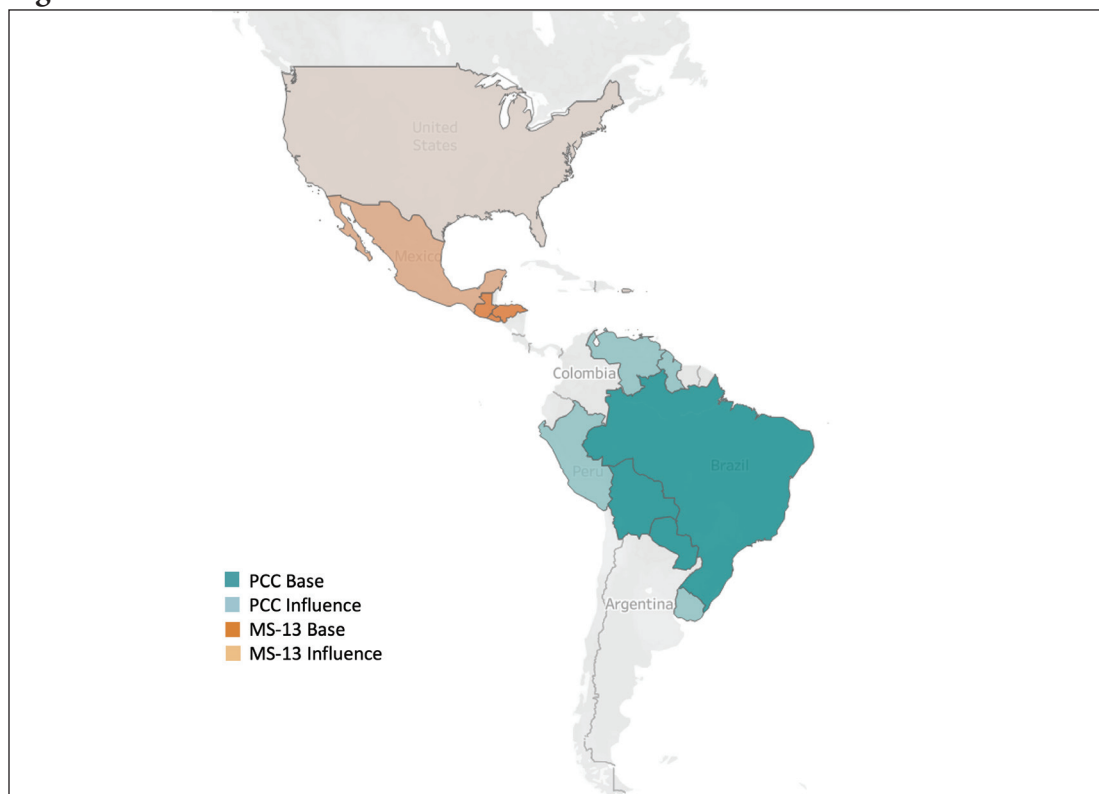
- **Objectives:** Both groups aim to become major criminal enterprises embedded in the state.
- **Constituencies and alliances:** Both groups are rooted in their communities. Both are rapidly amassing formal political power and seeking new alliances with each other as well as state and nonstate armed actors. Both groups have also reached a tacit understanding with the regime of Nicolás Maduro and other allied criminal structures operating in Venezuela to acquire cocaine and weapons. While the PCC has a significant social media presence, MS-13 does not have such an outreach program.
- **Capabilities:** Both groups control territory as a primary claim to legitimacy, and both have largely replaced the state as the arbiter of power across most of the areas where they operate. The PCC has a greater capacity as a multinational economic organization with a wider global reach than MS-13. The PCC also carefully cultivates a public image through spectacular bank and jewelry heists and deliberate social media influencer campaigns. MS-13 is less strategic about its public image and less dedicated to social media messaging.
- **Markets:** The PCC reaches beyond Brazil as a sophisticated, multicontinental cocaine-trafficking structure and completely controls Brazil's booming internal cocaine market. Its

franchises operate in Bolivia, Paraguay, Europe, Africa, and beyond. In contrast, MS-13 is far less involved in the transnational drug trade and remains largely confined to northern Central America and the United States, with a growing presence in Mexico and Belize.

■ **Impact:** MS-13 poses an existential threat to the governments of El Salvador and Honduras and more directly challenges the United States. The PCC is not yet at this stage. Available evidence indicates that the PCC has most successfully penetrated state and local governments and has yet to meaningfully leverage its power against the Brazilian state.

An important first step is to combat corruption and its root causes as well as transnational organized crime. Both are strategic priorities for the Biden administration in Latin America. This effort should be combined with cross-regional law enforcement to fight the PCC's growing presence in Africa. The United States should assist its Western Hemisphere partners to establish closer relationships with allied governments on the African continent and bring shared benefits of new information and lessons learned that could help inform a coordinated multilateral response.

Figure 1. Routes and Areas of Control



Source: IBI Consultants.

Introduction and General Framework

In today's globalized world, corrupt actors bribe across borders, harness the international financial system to stash illicit wealth abroad, and abuse democratic institutions to advance anti-democratic means. . . . Corruption threatens United States national security, economic equity, global anti-poverty and development efforts, and democracy itself.
—United States Strategy on Countering Corruption

In establishing corruption as a “core United States national security interest” in December 2021, President Joe Biden shifted emphasis on U.S. global policy objectives and priorities.² This shift is likely to impact the Western Hemisphere, where democratic governance and the legitimacy of the state are broadly under assault by corrupt actors and where a growing number of states—including El Salvador, Honduras, and Brazil, which are the main focuses of this paper—can be accurately categorized as kleptocracies or criminalized states.

In this paper, we examine the evolution of two drivers of massive corruption and state collapse in Latin America: MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) in the Northern Triangle of Central America and the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC; First Command of the Capital), based in São Paulo, Brazil. Both community-embedded nonstate armed groups began as prison-based gangs, and both have grown into sophisticated transnational criminal structures deeply involved in the global traffic of cocaine, synthetic drugs, weapons-trafficking, and other illicit activities. Both are also driving forces behind the massive destabilizing hemispheric corruption that the Biden administration has vowed to fight as a core U.S. national security interest.³

Because of the groups’ seismic shift in criminal capacity in recent years, we argue they should no longer be referred to as *gangs*, a word commonly understood to describe a local group with limited geographic influence that engages in criminal activity. Rather, we have proposed the term *community-embedded transnational armed group* (CETAG), based on Mortiz Schubert’s *community-based armed groups*, as a subtype of nonstate armed groups.⁴ In this paper, we use CETAGs to describe both groups to shift the understanding of how they operate.

While MS-13, operating primarily in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, was designated as a “significant transnational criminal organization” by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2012, the PCC remains relatively unknown in North America.⁵ Unlike MS-13, the PCC has established transnational criminal pipelines into much of Latin America as well as Africa and Europe. The Treasury Department designated PCC as a “Specially Designated National” in the global drug trade in December 2021.⁶

This paper compares key aspects of MS-13 and PCC composition and behavior: objectives, constituencies and alliances, capabilities, markets, and impact. The paper then assesses the impact on regional stability and implications for U.S. policy.

The M-13 Challenge

MS-13—initially formed in prisons in Los Angeles in the 1980s before being exported to postconflict Central America in the mid-1990s—has long been recognized as a significant strategic challenge for the United States, in part because of its U.S. roots and ongoing proximity and engagement across the Nation.⁷ In recent years, as previous IBI Consultants deliverables have documented, MS-13 branches in El Salvador and Honduras developed different paths to accumulate significant power based on the circumstances of each country. In Guatemala, MS-13 plays a far less central role in regional criminal structures and is not considered here.

In El Salvador, expanding territorial control, infiltration into the police and military, and political-economic pacts with the government of President Nayib Bukele have made the group a major political, economic, and military force with direct access to cabinet-level officials.⁸ In July 2021, the U.S. Department of State took the unusual step of sanctioning and revoking the visas of four senior officials of the Bukele administration, designating them as corrupt actors.⁹ On December 8, 2021, the Treasury Department designated two senior Bukele administration officials as corrupt actors specifically for “covert negotiations between government officials and MS-13,” noting these meetings “were part of the Government of El Salvador’s efforts to negotiate a secret truce with gang leadership.”¹⁰

In Honduras, MS-13 has focused on taking over the cocaine and synthetic drug-trafficking routes as well as producing cocaine (HCl) in increasingly sophisticated laboratories. As the ties to drug-trafficking networks have grown, MS-13’s financial, military, and political power have expanded, and the group’s political engagement and legitimacy with the populations under MS-13 control have grown exponentially as well.¹¹

As striking as the evolution of MS-13 in Central America has been in recent years, the PCC in Brazil, while receiving less U.S. attention, is a more sophisticated organization. Like MS-13, the PCC was founded in prison in the 1990s, and most of the original leadership remains incarcerated. Yet the group has a broad multicontinental reach, direct ties to cocaine-trafficking and distribution across South America, extensive territorial control and military capacity in the most economically significant country in Latin America, a demonstrated ability to carry out spectacular multimillion-dollar heists, and the capacity to achieve social legitimacy through music and social media.

While the PCC, unlike MS-13, does not have operational U.S. branches and does not operate near a U.S. border, this CETAG has a demonstrated capacity to disrupt and destabilize multiple countries in the hemisphere—most notably Paraguay and Bolivia—as well as the operational capacity to deliver cocaine and other illicit products to Brazil, Africa, and Europe. This broad reach—now extending into Colombia, Peru, and Venezuela—in turn drives massive corruption and creates the risk of state collapse in multiple countries. The cumulative effect poses a significant strategic threat to the United States and its hemispheric allies.

We focus on the recent evolution of the groups from traditional gangs to criminal structures rather than providing a full history of each group, which is available in other literature. But we posit that one of the driving forces in the significant changes in behavior, strategy, and levels of sophistication in both CETAGs is that both are now about 25 years old and have a more seasoned generation of leaders who have children and, in some cases, grandchildren.¹²

Our fieldwork on MS-13 in the Northern Triangle over the past 3 years has consistently shown that as gang leaders and members now have families, they increasingly desire a different, less-violent lifestyle for their children and grandchildren while remaining in the criminal world. PCC experts consulted by IBI Consultants stated the same overall trend is occurring within that group as well.

Now, in both Honduras and El Salvador, MS-13 has a group of 10 to 12 “elder statesmen” who are consulted and, in some cases, have the final say over the strategic decisions of the group in both countries. The result has been an increased focus over the past several years on investing growing earnings from drug-trafficking into buying into the political structures through corruption—rather than relying on brute force and intimidation to—to achieve its objectives of impunity, territorial expansion, and increased access to the formal power structures. The group now also invests millions of dollars into legitimate businesses because the drug trade and other illicit economic activities have made money-laundering a necessity. This includes near-total control of urban transport companies in major cities and other cash-intensive businesses that simultaneously move money and enhance territorial control.¹³

Transition from Local Entities to CETAGS

The increased discipline within MS-13 opened the doors to alliances, which has led to a more stable and mature transnational criminal organization. This in turn has led to more revenue, increased territorial control, and an emphasis on economic and political activity rather than inter- and intra-gang violence. Fieldwork in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in November 2021,

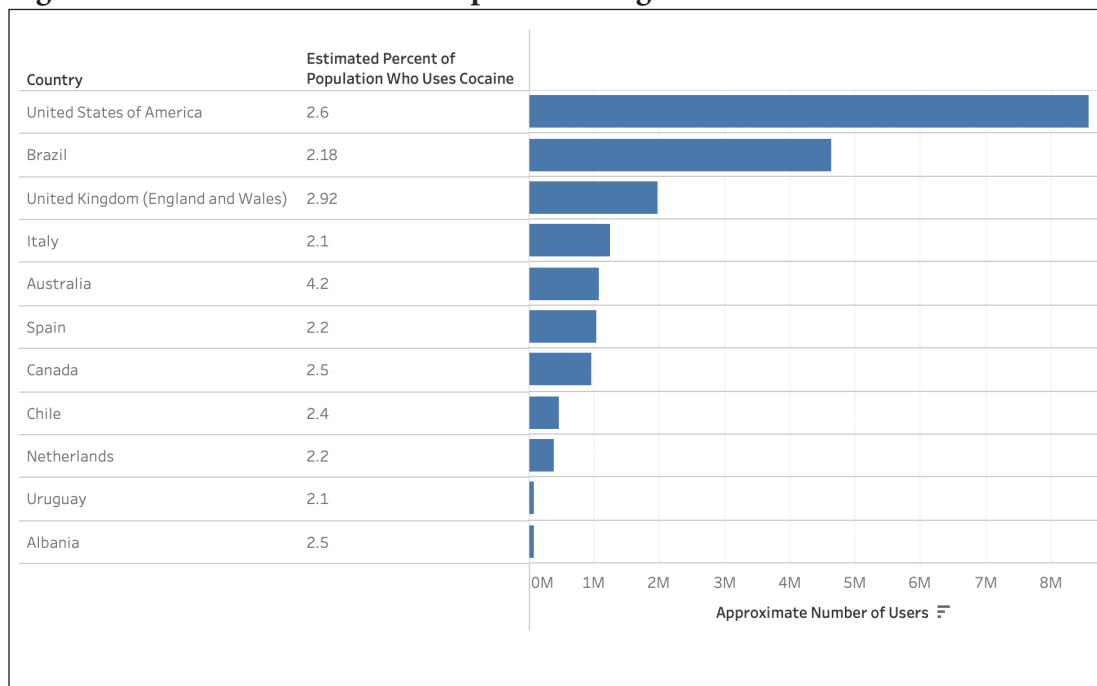
found that MS-13 was negotiating with smaller gangs to incorporate the groups rather than waging war on them.

Violence between MS-13 and the rival Calle 18 gang has also fallen dramatically, in part because MS-13 successfully conquered Calle 18 territory, and in part because of alliances the organization has made with the police to attack Calle 18 strongholds and avoid neighborhood gunfights between gangs that often leave high civilian casualties.

Until recently, the Mexican cartels and other transnational groups viewed MS-13 as undisciplined and unreliable as partners, limiting the group's access to the drug trade outside of local retail sales. Now the restructured and compartmentalized MS-13, particularly the Honduras branch, is moving not only to consolidate itself as a cocaine and synthetic drug-trafficking structure but also to reorganize itself into a disciplined and efficient transportation and retail structure for cocaine and other products.

The PCC has focused on controlling the high-end cocaine market in Brazil and lucrative markets nearby. Brazil is one of the largest cocaine consumers in the world, making the local market extremely profitable, and nearby Uruguay and Argentina are also major consuming nations on a per capita basis. Supply of HCl (refined cocaine) from Bolivia, Peru, Venezuela, and Colombia, all which share porous borders with Brazil, is both cheap and plentiful.

Figure 2. Cocaine Prevalence in Top Consuming Countries



Source: IBI Consultants.

Access to lucrative regional markets has led to growing ties between the PCC and FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) dissident groups based in Venezuela, primarily the Nueva Marquetalia faction, according to the National Police of Colombia intelligence assessments. The PCC needs a stable supply of cocaine, shares borders with both Colombia and Venezuela, and can pay for product. While the megacities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo are the main markets, cocaine is widely consumed across much of the country. In addition to cocaine, the PCC controls a significant amount of the crack cocaine and marijuana markets.

Many of the PCC's most powerful evolutions since 2017 include strategies to expand and consolidate territorial control over Brazil's internal cocaine markets and trafficking routes, both domestically and internationally. This has led to a concerted effort to control the main ports, particularly the port city of Santos, one of the largest in the hemisphere. Due to its geographic location, access to port centers, and a linguistic affinity with some countries in West and South-eastern Africa (specifically Mozambique), exporting cocaine east rather than north has been the PCC's preference.

In some instances, these strategies involve efforts to establish a presence and control Brazilian states located farther from São Paulo, such as Amazonas and Pará. Other strategies involved eliminating competition from other criminal groups in geographic areas where the PCC is already present. These efforts led to higher levels of violence and increased scrutiny from law enforcement, and the PCC also lost several top leaders in 2017 and 2018.¹⁴

In addition to the cultural affinity born of the shared experience of emerging from maximum security prisons and the violence and brutality that entails, there are multiple similarities between MS-13 and the PCC. These underscore the strategic threat that these groups pose, both individually and collectively, and point to the possibility of future alignment of interests, given that both groups are seeking new partners and allies.

Similarities and Differences Between the CETAGs

MS-13 and PCC present several similarities and differences that require closer analysis. Among the many possible points of comparison, we identified key indicators that show compelling reasons why the groups might be interested in collaborating or learning from each other. Some represent fundamental common goals and aspirations among both groups to consolidate power, monopolize the drug trade, and control vertically integrated criminal structures. Others highlight the different approaches each group has taken while working toward these goals and thus key areas where each group might learn from the other. The key indicators include:

- Objectives: Both groups aim to become major criminal enterprises embedded in the state. Both are also seeking to consolidate regional economic power and monopolize multiple phases of the drug trade, namely through vertically integrated criminal structures. This would range from cocaine production to wholesale distribution and prioritization of territorial control to monopolize multiple forms of illicit activity and move beyond the gang stage of development.
- Constituencies and alliances: Both groups are rooted in their communities; in particular, prison culture. Both are rapidly amassing formal political power and seeking new alliances with each other as well as with state and nonstate armed actors. Both groups have also reached a tacit understanding with the Maduro regime and other allied criminal structures operating in Venezuela to acquire cocaine and weapons.
- Capabilities: Both groups control territory as a primary claim to legitimacy, and both have largely replaced the state as the arbiter of power across most of the areas where they operate. The PCC has a greater capacity as a multinational economic organization with a wider global reach. The PCC also carefully cultivates a public image through spectacular bank and jewelry heists and deliberate social media influencer campaigns. MS-13 is less strategic about its public image and less dedicated to social media messaging.
- Markets: The PCC reaches beyond Brazil as a sophisticated, multicontinental cocaine-trafficking structure and completely controls Brazil's booming internal cocaine market. Its franchises operate in Bolivia, Paraguay, Europe, Africa, and beyond. In contrast, MS-13 is far less involved in the transnational drug trade and remains largely confined to northern Central America and the United States, with a growing presence in Mexico and Belize.
- Impact: MS-13 poses an existential threat to the governments of El Salvador and Honduras and more directly challenges the United States. The PCC is not yet at this stage. Available evidence indicates that the PCC has most successfully penetrated state and local government and has yet to meaningfully leverage its power against the Brazilian state. While both groups increasingly use bribery, payoffs, and threats to gain political influence, MS-13 has successfully established itself as a power center inside the national and municipal governments of El Salvador and Honduras, with interlocutors at the cabinet

level. The PCC, in part because Brazil is such a large country with states the size of Central American countries, is focused on regional and municipal government structures.

While the focus on combating corruption is often on senior government officials taking money or favors to allow illicit activities to proceed, MS-13 and PCC show the assault on the state comes from multiple directions, with top down, bottom up, and lateral attacks across local, municipal, and national systems. This often ultimately ends in these nonstate armed groups replacing the state on multiple levels in terms of functionality, territorial control, and, ultimately, legitimacy.

In these cases, the state and CETAGs become enmeshed in ways that make their actions and interests—and at times their behavior—indistinguishable. This intermingling of interests, which drive not only financial corruption but also the erosion of human rights and the rule of law, was detailed in the Treasury Department’s designations of senior Bukele administration officials Osiris Luna and Carlos Marroquín. The designation noted:

In 2020, Salvadoran President Nayib Bukele’s (Bukele) administration provided financial incentives to Salvadoran gangs MS-13 and 18th Street Gang (Barrio 18) to ensure that incidents of gang violence and the number of confirmed homicides remained low. Over the course of these negotiations with Luna and Marroquín, gang leadership also agreed to provide political support to the Nuevas Ideas political party in upcoming elections. Nuevas Ideas is the President’s political party and won a two-thirds super majority in legislative elections in 2021. The Bukele administration was represented in such transactions by Luna, the Chief of the Salvadoran Penal System and Vice Minister of Justice and Public Security, and Marroquín, Chairman of the Social Fabric Reconstruction Unit. In addition to Salvadoran government financial allocations in 2020, the gangs also received privileges for gang leadership incarcerated in Salvadoran prisons, such as the provision of mobile phones and prostitutes.¹⁵

The Evolution of MS-13: Divergent Paths to Power

IBI Consultants has documented the divergent evolutionary paths of MS-13 groups in Honduras and El Salvador over time to understand the different approaches and results of each

Figure 3. MS-13 Territorial Control and Drug-Trafficking Routes

Source: IBI Consultants.

group in its respective countries. There are some important similarities in the paths chosen as well as significant differences chosen by each country's leadership.

MS-13's transformation from a gang to a CETAG is not uniform across all branches; neither is it the same from country to country. This divergence stems not from philosophical differences or radically different agendas but from the specific circumstances and opportunities available in each country. Therefore, the types of corruption and state penetration are also different.

Two Models to Obtain Power

MS-13's evolution offers two distinct models of how CETAGs adapt to government strategies to maximize the exploitation of the geographic and political spaces available to them. MS-13's territorial control now extends throughout most of El Salvador and Honduras. This control is the cornerstone of the group's ability to successfully acquire different types of power. MS-13 has focused on acquiring more formal political power in both countries but faces different political opportunities in El Salvador and Honduras. There are, therefore, different dynamics in the types of corruption dominating each political sphere, requiring differentiated policy solutions in response to each case.

The CETAG in El Salvador focused on gaining power through the Bukele administration's formal political structures, building a more sophisticated model than in the initial truce with the government (2012–2014).¹⁶ Methods include occupying senior government posts, participating as delegates in Bukele's Nuevas Ideas political party, and creating mechanisms for state funds to flow to MS-13 leaders in areas under the group's control. This puts MS-13 at the heart of political corruption, from the municipal government to the national cabinet. Every transaction is negotiated. U.S. Treasury Department sanctions against Luna and Marroquín in El Salvador were part of efforts to combat "corruption networks linked to transnational organized crime," placing two senior officials of the Bukele administration at the heart of a criminal MS-13 political corruption scheme.¹⁷

MS-13 acquires power in El Salvador by directly negotiating clandestine "pacts" with the Bukele administration. The CETAG has thus achieved access to the governing Nuevas Ideas political party structure from the grass roots up and created a mechanism to pay its members millions of dollars through government programs and payouts. This was described in detail in the December U.S. Treasury designation.¹⁸

The heart of the deal is that MS-13 massively mobilized votes for Bukele and Nuevas Ideas in the presidential and later legislative elections and reduced the visible homicide rate. The overwhelming electoral victories for Bukele and Nuevas Ideas legislators achieved with MS-13 support gave Bukele a political advantage—one he used to decapitate the judiciary, illegally fire the attorney general investigating the pact, legalize money-laundering, and eliminate public access to most government financial information.¹⁹ In exchange, Bukele named Luna, Marroquín, and others with close ties to MS-13 to his cabinet. These individuals, under Bukele's direction, negotiate party posts, payments, and prison privileges (including access to cellular phones that were reportedly used to authorize assassinations in the United States as well as an attempt on the life of a Federal Bureau of Investigation agent in El Salvador) in exchange for electoral support.²⁰

In contrast, IBI Consultants' fieldwork shows that in Honduras, the CETAG has focused almost exclusively on becoming a vertically integrated cocaine cartel. This is an aspiration that MS-13 leaders acknowledge, citing a 3-year plan to meet this goal. As part of that strategy, MS-13 has focused on transforming itself from a violence-based structure whose territorial control was predicated on terrorizing and extorting the population to a compartmentalized, structured, disciplined organization with a focus on obtaining the trust of Mexican cartels and retaining political and social legitimacy within the communities under its control.

Different Corruption Models

Corruption strategies in Honduras are therefore less focused on penetrating the formal political structure based on party affiliation (the executive branch, legislative branch, municipal governments, party members) and more on security structures (police, military police, and military judges). Security structures pose potential obstacles to MS-13's aspirations to consolidate as a cartel, making it a target for penetration. MS-13 is also pursuing ongoing negotiations and conflict with other drug-trafficking organizations that pose the same threat. By force and through negotiations, particularly through corruption of the police forces, MS-13 has become the predominant cocaine-trafficking structure in the country.

In Honduras, MS-13 found an opening for growing involvement in cocaine-trafficking as well as the internal market for *Krispy*, a marijuana product laced with chemicals to increase its potency. The opening appeared as U.S. counternarcotics efforts systematically removed the competition from the battlefield. With the capture and dismantling of the traditional cocaine *transportista* structures since 2015—including the Valle group, the Cachirros gang, and the Rosenthal clan—MS-13 found space to begin moving cocaine arriving from Colombia and Venezuela to Mexican drug-trafficking organizations in Guatemala.²¹

The increased revenue from drug-trafficking has allowed MS-13 to experiment with creating new types of legitimacy in the communities where it lives. In making the decision to halt extortions of the small businesses and individuals in its communities—while continuing to extort larger companies not indigenous to the neighborhoods—the structure curbed its economic and social behavior that brought the most resentment toward the organization.

By providing rudimentary but efficient and quick ways of adjudication of disputes and meting out justice in the communities, MS-13 effectively replaced the state in key functions.²² This has generated significant political legitimacy and a widening base of grassroots support and good will to the point where MS-13 is now routinely referred to as *la mara buena* or “the good gang.” In addition, MS-13's decision to provide new economic activities for community members—particularly single mothers who traditionally had long and taxing commutes to work each day while worrying about their children—enabled the group also to acquire significant social capital that IBI Consultants documented in previous reporting.²³

MS-13 in Honduras made significant strides integrating into the regional cocaine trade. Progress includes arranging and receiving loads from Venezuela and Colombia, establishing small cocaine laboratories around Puerto Cortes, large-scale experimentation with coca production, pioneering the use of tunnels like those used by the Sinaloa Federation for storing

product, and forming direct relationships with Mexican drug-trafficking organizations to move cocaine to the United States.

MS-13's new strategy to lessen armed confrontation with the police in the neighborhoods it controls provides a clear example of the group's increasing sophistication and growth. Where armed confrontation with the police has been the norm for years, this is now viewed as disruptive and counter-productive to both sides. Now, police often warn MS-13 members if a patrol will enter a neighborhood, so members can go inside and conceal themselves from passing patrols. When MS-13 members are arrested, there are standing orders for the person or group not to engage in armed resistance. Instead, they surrender because MS-13 has enough money to keep a contingent of lawyers and judges on call, who can get members released under almost any charge within 36 hours, ensuring that violence remains relatively low and the pantomime of law enforcement continues.²⁴

In both Honduras and El Salvador, MS-13 exercises more control than the state in many parts of the national territory. In both countries, MS-13 executed a successful strategy of infiltrating members into the police forces and to a lesser degree the militaries. This increased MS-13's military training while improving its firepower. However, again the different circumstances have led to different strategies. In El Salvador, MS-13's push to expand into the military flows through Bukele's decision to expand the peacetime army from 20,000 troops to 40,000 troops over a 2-year period. The effort was presented as part of Bukele's "Territorial Control Plan," ostensibly to combat MS-13 and reclaim national territory for the state.²⁵ In fact, our field research shows that the plan is a carefully orchestrated dance with MS-13 to allocate government funds and resources to areas under MS-13 control and strengthens the CETAG structure rather than diminishing its control.

The unprecedented expansion of the army in times of peace and during a growing budgetary crisis is economically and politically irrational when viewed through the traditional lens of political cost/benefit. Viewed as part of the pact, however, it adheres to an internal logic that will place hundreds—and perhaps thousands—of MS-13 members into the military to allow them to carry weapons and control territory as part of the government, consolidating MS-13 control under the guise of legality.

In Honduras, MS-13 has primarily relied on recruiting highly trained policemen who resign or are fired from the police for corruption or human rights abuses. MS-13 uses these former police as trainers and intelligence gatherers. Over 2 years, at the insistence of the U.S. Government as a condition for continuing aid, the Honduran government conducted a broad

and hasty purging of its ranks, dismissing some 2,500 members. Hundreds of others have left because of intimidation by criminal groups, burn out, or attrition.

MS-13 targets police officers to upgrade the group's military capacity. Just as important, the former police officers often retain deep ties into the active-duty units and often receive up to twice the salary from MS-13 as they did as active-duty policemen. This has created a network of enmeshed retired and active-duty police connected by a corrupt exchange of information, intelligence, and operational equipment for money, protection, or executions of personal vendettas. This expanding network is a core element of the corruption that is hollowing out the police and military police from the inside.

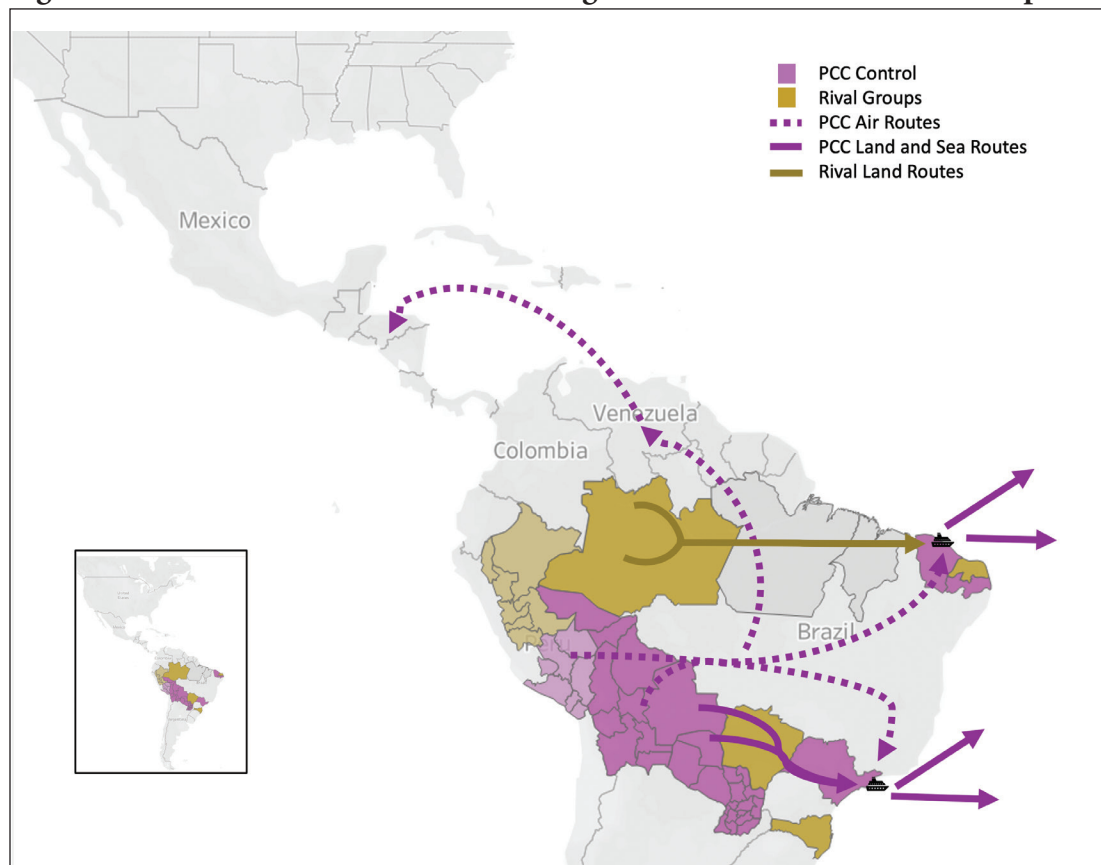
The Evolution of the PCC

The period from 2017 to 2021 represents an important third phase of PCC's evolution from gang to a CETAG. Other academic and journalistic reporting provide extensive context of the PCC's roots as a network designed to resist and control prison violence, express class tension, and profit from criminal enterprises. Since 2017, the PCC, founded in a prison in 1993, grew into a billion-dollar international cartel capable of executing sophisticated attacks and wielding high-level political leverage. The group claims an estimated 30,000 active members in Brazil and exercises control over 90 percent of the nation's prison population of about 600,000 inmates. Alongside its membership growth and strategic evolutions, the PCC also expanded its international reach to a range of countries across Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Studying the PCC's evolution offers strategic insights for developmental trajectories used by other criminal groups. As noted, in December 2021 the United States for the first time added the PCC to the list of Specially Designated National drug-trafficking structures in the hemisphere.²⁶

Overview of the PCC's Origins

The first PCC members were prisoners from São Paulo, which they viewed as Brazil's true capital. As Leonardo Coutinho, a leading PCC expert, wrote:

On August 31, 1993, the Capital prisoners held a self-organized championship soccer tournament, appearing at the first game wearing standard white T-shirts; scrawled in blue ballpoint pen ink on the left breast were three letters—PCC, referring to Primeiro Comando da Capital, or First Capital Command. After the tournament the PCC assassinated the most feared criminals in Taubaté prison,

Figure 4. Territorial Control and Trafficking Routes for PCC and Rival Groups

Source: IBI Consultants, based on information provided by Leonardo Coutinho.

earning the respect and loyalty of their fellow inmates and establishing themselves as the new prison bosses.

In 1993 Brazil's prisons were still reeling from what had until then been the biggest ever outbreak of prison violence. Less than a year earlier, 111 inmates were shot dead by police in an operation to stem a rebellion in the Carandiru prison in São Paulo city. The tragedy began as a banal fight between two rival gangs for possession of a few boxes of cigarettes. In 1993, as they assumed the dominant position within the prison gang hierarchy, the PCC adopted the discourse of unity, arguing that in the previous year's carnage the prisoners themselves were to blame as they were fratricidal and ungoverned by an organization strong enough to keep the peace amongst them and represent them both inside and outside the prisons. An inmates' charter was drafted, and the criminals pledged to the motto,

“Brother does not kill brother. Brother does not exploit brother. The ‘Founders’ are the leaders.”²⁷

This first phase of PCC’s formation was largely defined by the PCC’s two founding principles:

- A commitment in prison by PCC inmates to submit to new rules, while behaving in a more coordinated and less confrontational manner and protecting their own and annihilating their rivals.
- Outside of prison, the PCC would provide legal assistance to incarcerated members through monthly contributions from their families, inspired by the model of trade unions that many members belonged to.²⁸

In its second phase, the PCC, under the leadership of a Bolivian-born bank robber named Marcos Willians Herbas Camacho, better known as Marcola, expanded into multiple types of criminal activity. Marcola successfully leveraged thousands of PCC members outside of prison to consolidate control over illicit activities, carry out bank robberies, and gain territorial control. While the PCC expanded across Brazil, the government denied or downplayed the group’s importance even as it developed capacity to protect its members beyond prison walls.

A major turning point came on February 2001. During this period

the PCC seized the Brazilian public’s attention when 28,000 inmates took control of 29 prisons in nineteen cities in the state of São Paulo. The mega-riot took place on a Sunday, during visiting time. No less than 10,000 people were taken hostage. Sheets painted with the PCC insignia were hung on the windows. In Carandiru—the very prison where 111 people had been killed in a conflict with police a decade before—the PCC held 5,000 hostages. Twenty-seven hours later, the hostages would be freed, and the riot controlled, but the PCC’s relationship with the state would never be the same.

Having demonstrated its capacity for mobilization and upon realizing the impact caused by what would be considered the biggest riot in Brazil’s history, PCC leaders were convinced of their ability to confront, embarrass, and blackmail

*the state. The organization's debut proved so successful that the PCC began to call itself the "Party of Crime."*²⁹

This realization that the PCC could successfully confront and embarrass the state led to a rise in direct attacks on state actors and institutions, including a 9-day spate of 293 attacks on police stations and public buildings and the burning of dozens of buses and other attacks on public transportation. Following clandestine negotiations between the state government of São Paulo and Marcola, the attacks abated, and the homicide rate began to decline.

The bold public attacks proved politically expedient for the PCC, as the armed actions solidified the public profile of the group as one the public and government must respect and fear. An equally important contemporary development involved the PCC's simultaneous expansion into the regional cocaine trade. The group began deriving enormous income by gaining control of Brazil's internal market, even as leaders developed alliances to move cocaine from producing neighbors (Bolivia, Peru, Colombia) to West Africa and Europe.

The Current PCC Structure and Local Advances

The current phase finds the PCC with a decentralized structure, strong independent local leadership, regional hubs, and relative autonomy among geographically or operationally diverse sectors.³⁰ The *sintonias*, or regional leadership structures, benefit from autonomy that allows them to initiate their own business ventures in the PCC's name.³¹ This means that the PCC operates differently depending on the region, country, and sector.³²

The PCC's decentralized structure limits exposure and disruption if law enforcement intercepts communications or arrests a member.³³ It frees high-level leaders like Marcola from needing to make granular operational decisions and ensures there is always someone to replace key members.³⁴ It also generates local and regional autonomy for members to pursue local political influence in a more granular way as needed.

The PCC continues to generate revenue from diverse criminal ventures including bank robberies and trafficking drugs, weapons, and contraband such as cigarettes. However, the PCC's primary source of income is its near monopoly of the lucrative cocaine trade, estimated in 2017 to be valued at USD 4.5 billion a year.³⁵ In São Paulo alone, neighborhoods with high levels of per capital drug use—called Cracolândia by city law enforcement—are almost totally controlled by the PCC and estimated to generate USD 2.4 million per month.³⁶ The PCC is pursuing various ways to launder these funds, and some of their methods, such as *doleiros* or money changers, overlap with methods used by white collar criminals in Brazil's notorious Lava

Cont. on page 20

Funk Proibidão

The PCC uses funk proibidão music to connect with young people and draw recruits into the organization. The PCC has multiple artists who create content that is then shared over YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and other popular social media outlets. These social media platforms and Web sites provide social penetration, share stories of successes, and threaten rival gangs.

History of Funk in Brazil. Brazilian funk music, known as carioca or favela funk, is considered the beating heart of the Rio de Janeiro favela slums.¹ The music, a combination of Miami bass samba and AfroBeat, originated in the working class in the 1970s and 1980s and encapsulates favela life.² As favela funk grew in popularity, so too did the *bailes* funk, or funk dance parties that take place every night of the week in the favelas.³ Favela funk and bailes funk are pervasive in favela life.⁴ Favela funk is generally described as violent, sexualized, and graphic, but the substyle of funk proibidão goes even further with explicit lyrics about gang life, criminal activity, and even murder.⁵ In this way, funk proibidão shares similarities to Mexican *narcocorridos* or even American gangster hip-hop, by glorifying, documenting, and propagating stories of criminal life.⁶ In Brazil, criminal gangs such as the PCC or rival gang TCP (Terceiro Comando Puro) compose songs and albums singing their glory. These songs are then played at bailes funk as well as streamed openly on digital platforms such as YouTube and Facebook.

Brazil attempted to outlaw funk music, but it continues to proliferate on social media and in favelas.⁷ The PCC has singers and rappers who serve as social media influencers, building audiences for propaganda music. These singers influence Brazilian youth to join, or at least, respect the PCC.

PCC Funk Music and Influencers. A YouTube search reveals hundreds of funk proibidão songs, some representing the PCC and some for other Brazilian gangs.⁸ There is little to no moderation of this music, most likely because the songs are in Portuguese. In fact, several of these singer-influencers' songs have millions of views and shares, using easy-to-find hashtags and imagery such as 1533, a common code for PCC, and clown or joker imagery widely used by the group.⁹

One such singer-influencer for the PCC is MC Dinho da VP.¹⁰ His music, available on YouTube since at least 2011, is popular; his official page



Figure 6. Background photograph of a YouTube video titled “MEDLEY PROIBIDÃO 1533 PCC” that is clearly representing Primeiro Comando da Capital.



Figure 7. MC Dinho da VP Facebook photo from February 19, 2020. Note the display of money, three fingers, and joker smile tattoo on his left arm.

has more than a million views.¹¹ PCC imagery runs throughout his videos. Examples include the clown face, which is PCC imagery for the murder of police, as well as people flashing the three-finger hand signal for PCC. MC Dinho da VP has a clown/joker smile tattoo on his left arm that he places in front of his mouth in music videos. It is not entirely clear if MC Dinho da VP is a full member of the PCC or just one of its influencers, but, either way, the singer is spreading PCC propaganda.

MC Dinho da VP has a substantial digital reach. He is on several different platforms including YouTube, Spotify, Pandora, Apple Music, Amazon, and iHeart radio. He also has profiles on traditional social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Twitter.¹²

¹ Sasha Frere-Jones, "Brazilian Wax: Two Top D.J.s Get Together," *The New Yorker*, July 24, 2005; Claire Baker, "The Rhythm of Favelas: Brazil's Booming Funk Music Scene," *Culture Trip*, September 30, 2016.

² Baker, "The Rhythm of Favelas"; "Funk Carioca Music: A Brief History of Funk Carioca," *MasterClass*, February 24, 2002.

³ Paul Sneed, "Favela Utopias: The 'Bailes Funk' in Rio's Crisis of Social Exclusion and Violence," *Latin American Research Review* 43, no. 2 (2008), 57–79; Paul Sneed, "Bandidos de Cristo: Representations of the Power of Criminal Factions in Rio's Proibidão Funk," *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana* 28, no. 2 (Autumn–Winter 2007), 220–241.

⁴ Sneed, "Favela Utopias."

⁵ Ibid.; Raphael Tsavkko Garcia, "Why Is There Talk of Banning Funk Music in Brazil?" *Al Jazeera*, October 16, 2017.

⁶ John Burnett, "Narcocorridos: Ballads of the Mexican Cartels," NPR, October 10, 2009; Tsavkko Garcia, "Why Is There Talk of Banning Funk Music in Brazil?"

⁷ Tsavkko Garcia, "Why Is There Talk of Banning Funk Music in Brazil?"

⁸ Funk Proibidão Music set, YouTube, various.

⁹ "Tudo 3/MC Poze ta Brecado–MC Dinho da VP," YouTube, video, 2:52, May 28, 2020.

¹⁰ In favela funk, singers distinguish themselves with an "MC" for "master of ceremonies" in front of their names.

¹¹ "MC Dinho da VP Oficial," YouTube, n.d.

¹² MC Dinho da VP's Beacons profile, Beacons.ai.

Jato (Car Wash) money-laundering investigation that has reached the highest levels of Brazil's national and state governments.³⁷

The PCC's revenues and territorial control generate leverage within Brazil's political system, and the group is still experimenting with the best way to use that leverage through different types of corruption. The group at times applies direct pressure to achieve benefits for members, such as when violent threats to the Ceará state legislature resulted in delayed passing and then failure to implement a piece of legislation that would have blocked phone use for prisoners in Ceará state prisons.³⁸

The PCC has purchased local and state level politicians, especially in Ceará and São Paulo, the two states where the most valuable drug-trafficking ports are located. They also appear to be pursuing indirect means of political engagement, including in at least one instance where the PCC developed an economic relationship with a national Brazilian political party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT; Workers' Party). Members rented an apartment near São Paulo from the wife of a former PT minister.³⁹

The revenues also give the PCC the resources to recruit new generations, particularly youth in poverty. Members spend resources on social media content, including music videos, where members sing and rap while driving expensive cars, flashing expensive weapons, and wearing expensive jewelry.⁴⁰ Given that many of the youth they target face historic discrimination and corruption in Brazil's economic and criminal justice infrastructure, these tactics generate respect and interest in many communities.

Expansion of a Criminal Empire

The PCC's pursuit of market monopoly in multiple illicit activities has led to threats, intimidation, and the murder of competitors. In 2018, São Paulo police investigated a series of PCC attacks against other criminal groups that the police called a "genocide" in internal investigative documents. Similarly, in April 2021, the PCC used texted threats to intimidate Fahd Jamil Georges, one of Brazil's most powerful drug-traffickers, until he surrendered to authorities stating he feared for his life.⁴¹

The PCC's use of targeted attacks in service of its desire to monopolize certain markets tore apart a longstanding criminal truce and increased conflict with its rivals. For years, the PCC maintained a truce with Comando Vermelho (CV; Red Command), with both groups benefiting from gaps in Brazil's law enforcement and prison systems. The truce started to disintegrate in 2015 as the PCC began encroaching on territory controlled by Família do Norte (Northern Family), a CV ally. By 2017, there was a full-blown war between the groups, with Família do

Norte and PCC initiating prison riots that left dozens of inmates dead and some dismembered beyond recognition.⁴² Conflict between the PCC and CV is ongoing, with CV members venturing into São Paulo territory in April 2021 to coordinate attacks against the PCC.⁴³

While the PCC's economic lifeblood is cocaine-trafficking, the group has also garnered international attention through its use of spectacular bank robberies to raise money. While banks present lucrative targets—the PCC's bank robbery in Paraguay yielded USD 11.7 million—the tactic is also part of what the criminal groups call *novo cangaço* ("new struggle") techniques, where criminal groups compete for status using theatrically violent attacks.⁴⁴ Recent *novo cangaço* attacks include PCC members blowing up a bank in the city of Botucatu, and several other failed attempts at other Brazilian banks. In 2017, the PCC orchestrated a coordinated attack in Paraguay on a security company that transported cash for banks.⁴⁵

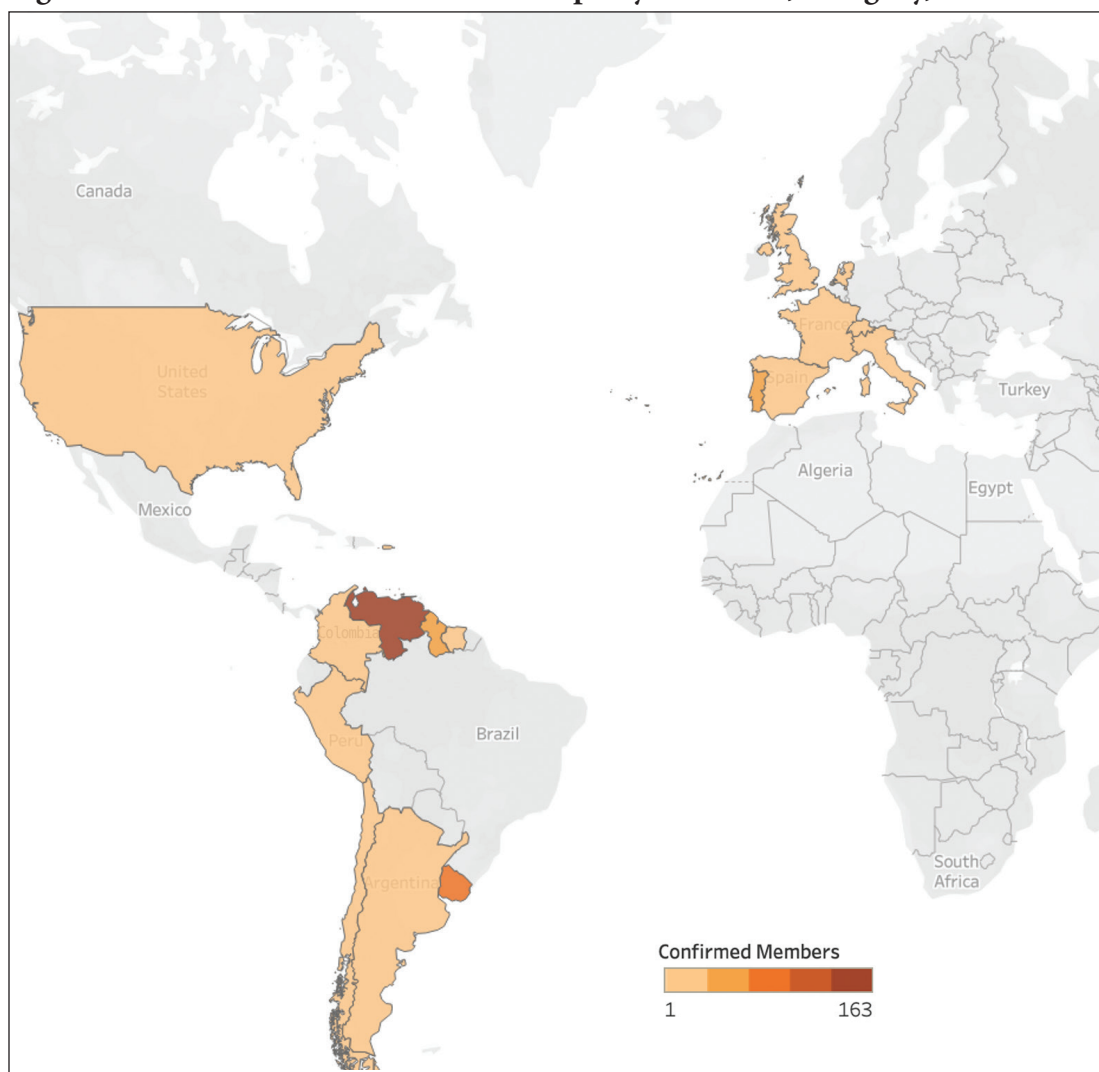
PCC-attributed bank robberies are increasing in frequency. São Paulo reported 23 bank robberies in 2020, which was 44 percent higher than in 2019.⁴⁶ In November 2020, the PCC targeted the city of Criciúma, using 30 armed men to take control of the city center for 2 hours and taking hostages and stealing tens of million of dollars in cash from multiple banks. Hostages were stripped and forced to sit across main roads to prevent a police chase.⁴⁷

In Araçatuba, São Paulo state, about 15 PCC members blocked off streets, used drones to monitor police activity, and planted up to 20 explosives around the city. They marched hostages down the street and tied them to the roofs and hoods of getaway cars to deter fire from helicopters. Three people died and five were injured. Police estimate that the attack took 600,000 *reais* (\$100,000) to plan and execute. However, the explosives activated a new bill destruction mechanism that destroyed most of the stolen money.⁴⁸

International Expansion

The PCC's international expansion phase was clearly visible by 2017, when authorities documented international cocaine shipments through Uruguay; kidnappings and robberies in Bolivia, attempts to recruit dissident FARC combatants from Colombia, and the largest bank heist in Paraguay's history.⁴⁹ The PCC now has operations, routes, or market access across Latin America, Europe, and Africa. An investigation by Brazil's intelligence and security agencies found that outside Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia (the 3 countries with the most members), the PCC had at least 387 active members in 16 other countries.⁵⁰

Geographic proximity, endemic corruption, and lax criminal prosecution made Paraguay an attractive haven for the PCC to expand economic initiatives, and the group established a base there by 2011.⁵¹ PCC members live in Paraguay and regularly cross the border, especially at the

Figure 7. Latin American PCC Membership Beyond Brazil, Paraguay, and Bolivia

Source: IBI Consultants.

border town of Pedro Juan Caballero, where a helicopter carrying 246 kilos of cocaine crashed in October 2021.⁵² The PCC and other gangs frequently battle here for control of drug-trafficking routes. Constant battles have lifted the annual homicide rate to 120 per 100,000 residents.⁵³

In the PCC's current phase, the strength of its presence in Paraguay added new complexity to the PCC structure. As of January 2020, two-thirds of confirmed PCC members in Paraguay are Spanish and Guaraní speakers, meaning that the PCC now has a significant Paraguayan branch.⁵⁴ As the PCC's relationship with Paraguay deepened and consolidated, the organization began to exploit similar growth opportunities in Bolivia, a key source of cocaine and other

commodities. According to Brazilian authorities, 90 percent of cocaine consumed in Brazil is believed to be of Bolivian origin.⁵⁵ In Bolivia, PCC members move freely in the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, where they invest in jewels, medical clinics, ranches, and restaurants. PCC members also have been able to obtain passports from the Bolivian state.⁵⁶

The PCC's pattern of using existing drug-trafficking routes and relationships to eventually exploit weak states and develop regional power generate concern for its presence in Colombia and Venezuela, particularly given its ties with the FARC. As of October 2021, the FARC's Segunda Marquetalia dissident faction maintains alliances for cocaine routes with the PCC, among other criminal groups, including Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación (Jalisco New Generation Cartel) and Cartel de los Soles (Cartel of the Suns).⁵⁷ This builds on the PCC's historic relationship with the FARC, dating back to the 1990s, when the gang exchanged small amounts of cocaine for weapons, triangulating the trade through Suriname.⁵⁸

Unlike other CETAGs in Latin America, the PCC has moved far beyond its South American roots to Europe and Africa. In Europe, the PCC's most important relationships are reportedly in Italy, where the 'Ndrangheta crime group became one of the PCC's first international trade partners since at least 2014. This relationship, documented by Brazilian law enforcement, likely opened doors to relationships with other criminal structures, in part due to the Italian organization's existing ties in Colombia, Mexico, and Argentina.⁵⁹ While the PCC also reportedly has made inroads in Portugal—likely because of the linguistic familiarity—there is little research documenting the scope of this relationship.

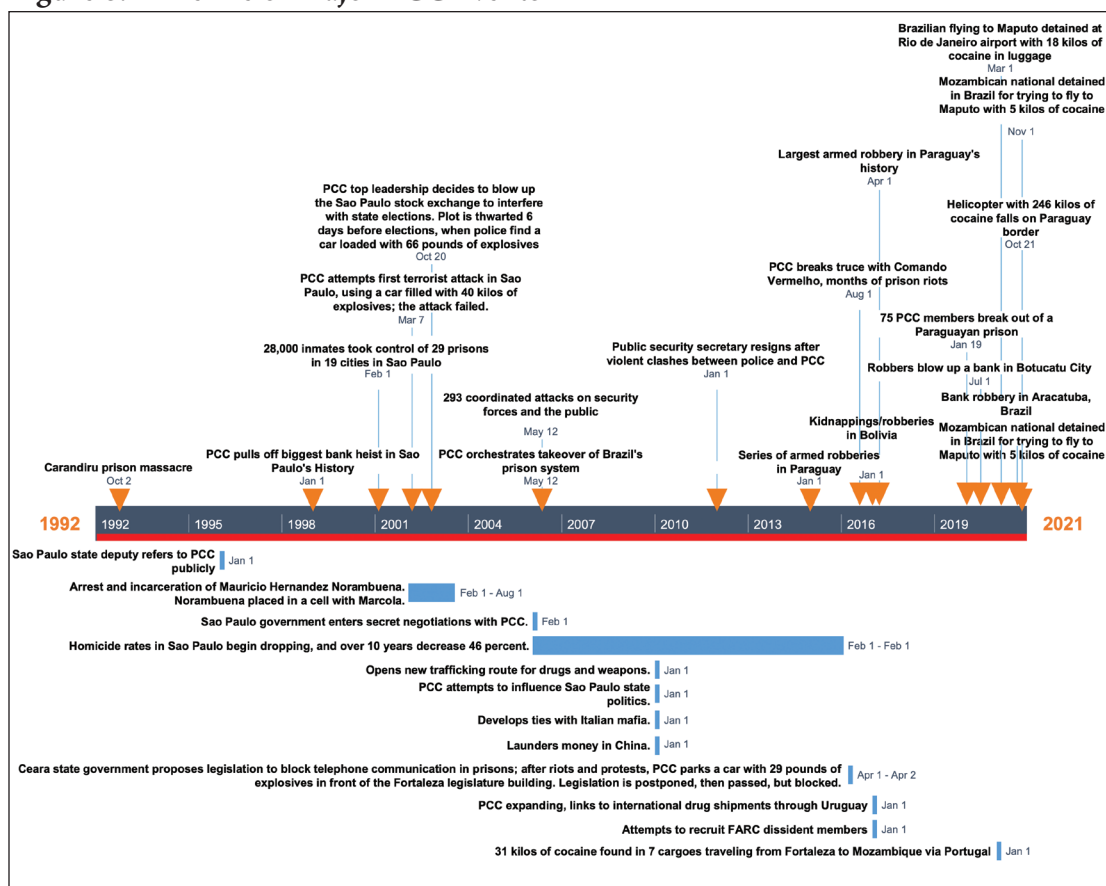
Southern Africa is where the PCC has made the most dramatic and unexpected gains. Since at least 2020, the PCC has established cocaine-trafficking routes from Brazil to South Africa and Mozambique. Transit typically occurs using the seaports at Santos and Fortaleza, as well as Brazil's Guarulhos International Airport. Authorities apprehended individuals or shipments at all three locations that connected Brazil's drug trade to Africa. According to assessments by regional authorities, cocaine transiting through these channels is destined for Europe, the Middle East, or possibly Australia, where prices are much higher than in the United States.⁶⁰

Incidents of cocaine-trafficking through Mozambique have become more frequent in the last 2 years, including two people apprehended by Brazilian authorities in June 2021 for carrying cocaine in their luggage who attempted to fly from São Paulo to Maputo.⁶¹ In March 2021, authorities detained a Brazilian traveling to Mozambique who was carrying cocaine.⁶² And in January 2021, federal police in Fortaleza seized 32 kilos of cocaine destined for Mozambique by way of Portugal.⁶³

South Africa is also emerging as a key player in cocaine-trafficking. In August 2021, authorities at the Port of Durban seized cocaine valued at 500 million rand (USD 32 million) from a container carrying truck parts.⁶⁴ The seizure brought the total amount of cocaine seized since March 2021 to more than four tons, all originating from Santos Port in Brazil. The case is believed to be linked to a similar cocaine seizure on July 9 in Johannesburg, which had also come from Santos Port to Durban.⁶⁵

High-ranking PCC members have also emerged with direct ties to or presence in both countries. In Maputo, authorities captured PCC liaison Gilberto Aparecido dos Santos (known as Fuminho) in April 2020. Fuminho is a high-ranking PCC affiliate who had been a fugitive from authorities for 21 years after breaking out of prison in 1999. He served as Marcola's right hand in the outside world, representing the PCC in arms trades with neighboring countries.

Figure 8. Timeline of Major PCC Events



Source: IBI Consultants.

Fuminho was captured with two Nigerians and had been traveling in Mozambique for some time using a Bolivian passport.⁶⁶ The Federal Police of Brazil also identified André do Rap, a known PCC financial officer and fixer, as a facilitator for a network transporting refined cocaine from Santos Port to Europe, Africa, and Cuba. Do Rap had been on lockdown in a luxury condominium since September 2019, but he escaped in October 2020 and has since vanished from public view.⁶⁷

Conclusions

MS-13 and PCC are among the largest nonstate armed groups in the Western Hemisphere, exercising territorial, political, economic, and military control over large parts of their home regions. They act as engines for and conduits of the growing waves of corruption and instability now washing over the hemisphere. Yet these groups, rather than being understood as hybrid transnational organized crime groups deeply rooted in their communities, are usually still identified as gangs, with the implied meaning that they are small, violent, and isolated actors.

We found that these community-embedded transnational armed groups are important, enduring structures whose strength and longevity reside in the close ties their members have to their home communities and the vise-like territorial control that this brings. With territorial control comes the ability to co-opt state entities through corruption and intimidation, while establishing the groups as legitimate governing entities.

These ties have been strengthened as these groups have developed a much more nuanced and sophisticated understanding of managing political, economic, and social relationships with these communities. As each group now nears three decades of existence, the lessons learned and high cost of living as outsiders in their own societies have produced a new leadership that, as parents or grandparents, feel an urgency to find new, less exclusionary paths to criminal livelihoods. This new maturity of leadership and a willingness to end economic gain from extortion and other hated practices in exchange for political support have in fact led to economic and political gain. As the CETAGs gain community support, most visibly in Honduras, the more access they have to illicit economies with the support of the communities.

This paper maps how different CETAGs exploit the specific advantages each one has in its operational environments. The CETAGs are growing in power and influence while the state is in retreat. The conflicts with these groups cost billions of dollars a year, end tens of thousands of lives, and erode the fabric of society and rule of law in the countries where they are embedded.⁶⁸ What is also clear is that after nearly three decades of struggling unsuccessfully to contain the growth of gangs to CETAGs and, eventually, transnational criminal organizations, there are few

new policy initiatives and little creative new thinking about how to deal with these groups that are wreaking havoc on the hemisphere.

In El Salvador, MS-13 has successfully embraced a path to direct political participation through the Bukele administration and his Nuevas Ideas party. There, the group has successfully negotiated dropping the visible homicides and voting en masse for Bukele and his candidates in exchange for money, access to cabinet-level positions, and favorable prison conditions. This is a paradigm that other groups with territorial control and the ability to offer large blocs of votes will likely replicate elsewhere.

In Honduras, MS-13 has successfully maneuvered to become a dominant organization of the regional cocaine transportation network as well as a significant provider of laboratories to convert coca paste from Colombia and Venezuela to much higher value refined cocaine destined to the U.S. and European markets. Rather than focus its co-optation of the state on the formal political structures as MS-13 in El Salvador, the Honduran structure has focused on building itself into a vertically integrated cocaine cartel. As a result, its corruption campaign has focused on the corruption of the police, military, and judicial structures. This is coupled with consolidating political legitimacy and control over strategically important territory.

Like MS-13, the PCC in Brazil has become increasingly active in the global cocaine trade, expanding to control key ports and trafficking routes across the hemisphere. The size of Brazil's internal market for cocaine consumption has provided a unique economic opportunity that the PCC has used to expand trafficking structures to Africa and Europe. The revenue from this cocaine trade has also given the PCC the means to pursue political protection at the local, regional, and national levels in much of the country. The PCC has also successfully emerged as a cultural force and presence, most visibly through the popular proibidão funk music that further ties the group to the low-income neighborhoods where it has its roots.

These CETAGs present distinct challenges to the states they operate in. The potential solutions, while also distinct, likely fall well outside the two conventional approaches that have been tried so far: either repression and mass incarceration to defeat the groups militarily or negotiations with the groups, which have led to episodic drops in violence. But negotiations have not proved sustainable since the talks are deeply unpopular because they offer no voice to the victims.

In each case, the iron fist/repressive and mass incarceration approach has only made both groups stronger and helped them recruit new members across the prison systems and the world outside prison. The *mano dura* (iron fist) and *super mano dura* (super iron fist) anti-gang policies in Central America led to the group achieving sufficient political and economic clout to

grow into a CETAG. In Brazil, mass incarceration policies have led to the PCC's control of the prisons, and its members, when released, have not only remained loyal but help the group grow in numbers and sophistication.

Government negotiations with the groups also have presented significant challenges, in part because they tend to be clandestine, and in part because they completely ignore the tens of thousands of victims of CETAG violence. In addition, there has been widespread national and international repudiation of negotiating with—and thereby legitimizing—an armed group credibly believed to be responsible for mass murder and drug trafficking.⁶⁹ This leaves few options within the traditional state toolbox to deal with this type of organization.

Recommendations

We can see no viable short-term solutions to eliminating the CETAGs or disrupting their structures enough to significantly mitigate their power or lessen the damage they inflict on the societies where they are entwined into the social fabric, while recognizing that the dynamic is driven by demand for illicit products, both for internal and international markets. However, fully integrating two of the strategic priorities the Biden administration has articulated for Latin America—combating corruption and its root causes and combating transnational organized crime as outlined in the recent executive order titled *Establishing the U.S. Council on Transnational Organized Crime*⁷⁰—would be an important first step.

To achieve any level of sustainable success, the role these CETAGs play in their home communities and broader national social fabric must be understood. There is significant literature on the types of discrimination that permeate enforcement actions against the PCC (for example, where many of the members are both Black and economically disenfranchised). In Central America, where race is a less-visible factor, the socioeconomic factors in the development of CETAGs and their historic, violent interaction with law enforcement is fundamental to understanding the root causes of the growth and attractiveness of the structures. This means coupling significant police reform (to win back state legitimacy and curb ongoing abuses) with anti-corruption measures across the government, while pressuring transnational criminal organizations through legal law enforcement and coordinated intelligence-sharing both within the U.S. Government and with trusted allies in affected countries. This requires coordination and a unity of purpose that is often absent in multifaceted endeavors.

In tackling this complex set of problems that overlap across political, social, economic, and military spheres, it is important to recognize that unintended consequences for policy decisions are frequent. This has led to situations where what appeared to be a policy success, such as jail-

ing tens of thousands of MS-13 members or PCC members, led to the CETAGs' rapid expansion and territorial control.

Portuguese language content moderation for the PCC's social media profiles, especially its YouTube music channels, would be an important first step in curbing the PCC's social penetration. The PCC is currently able to publish content and keep its content online for months or years at a time, giving it an advantage that criminal groups creating content in English or other more moderated languages might not have. Social media content moderation is currently a controversial topic between the tech industry and policy circles and would face many of the same challenges in this context. Few countries or oversight bodies claim to have found the right balance in determining how to handle this relatively new issue. At a broad level, it would require concrete standards for identifying harmful content to be established by the industry, government, or both; deploying better algorithms to flag harmful content; and scaling up moderation by recruiting, hiring, and fairly compensating more human content moderators.⁷¹

Another possible step would entail cross-regional law enforcement collaboration to combat the PCC's growing presence in Africa. The United States has trusted partners among law enforcement agencies in South Africa and could work toward establishing a closer relationship with Mozambique. These relationships could bring shared benefits of new information and lessons learned that would help inform a coordinated multilateral response.

Across the hemisphere, steps to address corruption among guards and protecting new inmates from pressure to become recruits could be a viable way to address the CETAGs' spread among new populations and generations. Other authors have written more extensively on the PCC's role within Brazil's prison and criminal justice systems, including providing more detailed and targeted interventions that could address both dynamics as well as restore a level of public trust in the criminal justice system.⁷²

Making combating corruption and enhancing the tools to fight transnational organized crime are important steps in expanding the options available to combat CETAGs in the hemisphere. However, for new policies to have any chance of changing the current downward spiral, these two priorities must be integrated into a cohesive policy with national partners in each country and tailored to meet the different challenges each CETAG brings to the state.

Notes

¹ A *tier-one* (or *existential*) *threat* is considered to be among the most serious of all threats to national security and has been defined as something that would "deprive the United States of its sovereignty under the Constitution, would threaten the territorial integrity of the United States or the safety

within U.S. borders of large numbers of Americans, or would pose a manifest challenge to U.S. core interests abroad in a way that would compel an undesired and unwelcome change in our freely chosen ways of life at home.” See Louis Jacobson, “Is ISIS an ‘Existential Threat’ to the United States,” *PolitiFact*, November 16, 2015, available at <<https://www.politifact.com/article/2015/nov/16/isis-existential-threat-united-states/>>.

² *United States Strategy on Countering Corruption* (Washington, DC: The White House, December 2021), 4, available at <<https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/United-States-Strategy-on-Countering-Corruption.pdf>>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Moritz Schuberth, “The Challenge of Community-Based Armed Groups: Towards a Conceptualization of Militias, Gangs and Vigilantes,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 36, no. 2 (July 2015), 296–320.

⁵ “Treasury Sanctions Latin American Criminal Organization,” press release, U.S. Department of the Treasury, October 11, 2012, available at <<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1733>>.

⁶ “Issuance of Executive Order Imposing Sanctions on Foreign Persons Involved in the Global Illicit Drug Trade; Counter Narcotics Designations and Designations Updates,” U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 15, 2021, available at <<https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20211215>>.

⁷ In the mid-1990s, as the civil wars in Central America ended, the Bill Clinton administration began deporting thousands of gang members as they completed their prison terms in the United States, primarily California, flooding the Northern Triangle with thousands of violent felons who reconfigured back into the gangs they had formed in the United States. For a detailed look at the policies and history of the gang deportations and enormous difficulties this policy has caused in Central America, see Ana Arana, “How the Street Gangs Took Central America,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 3 (May/June 2005), 98–110.

⁸ For an in-depth look at Salvador MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha) ties to the Nayib Bukele administration, see José Luis Sanz, “Sanciones por pacto con pandillas y corrupción enfrentan a Bukele con Estados Unidos” [Sanctions for pact with gangs and corruption confront Bukele with the United States], *El Faro*, December 8, 2021.

⁹ “Section 353 Corrupt and Undemocratic Actors Report,” U.S. Department of State, July 1, 2021, available at <<https://www.state.gov/reports/section-353-corrupt-and-undemocratic-actors-report/>>.

¹⁰ “Treasury Targets Corruption Networks Linked to Transnational Organized Crime,” press release, U.S. Department of the Treasury, December 8, 2021, available at <<https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy0519>>.

¹¹ Carlos García, “The Birth of the MS13’s Mexico Program,” *InSight Crime*, February 15, 2022, available at <<https://insightcrime.org/investigations/birth-ms13-mexico-program/>>.

¹² The Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC; First Command of the Capital) was formally established in August 1993 in response to the bloody Carandiru Penitentiary riot in October 1992. MS-13 in Central America does not have a precise date of founding, but the first gang members were deported from the United States in 1995. The gangs formed in the region around that time.

¹³ Based on IBI Consultants field work, November 2021.

¹⁴ “Brazil: First Capital Command—PCC,” *Insight Crime*, March 9, 2020, available at <<https://insightcrime.org/brazil-organized-crime-news/first-capital-command-pcc-profile/>>.

¹⁵ “Treasury Targets Corruption Networks Linked to Transnational Organized Crime.”

¹⁶ See William Wheeler, *State of War: MS-13 and El Salvador’s World of Violence* (New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2020); Douglas Farah and Pamela Phillips Lum, *Central American Gangs and Transnational Criminal Organizations: The Changing Relationships in a Time of Turmoil* (Alexandria, VA: International Assessment and Strategy Center, February 2013), available at <https://www.ibiconsultants.net/_pdf/central-american-gangs-and-transnational-criminal-organizations-update-for-publication.pdf>.

¹⁷ “Treasury Targets Corruption Networks Linked to Transnational Organized Crime.”

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Gabriel Labrador, “The Executive and Legislature in El Salvador Have Not Shown a Genuine Interest in Truth and Justice,” *El Faro*, February 11, 2022, available at <https://elfaro.net/en/202202/el_salvador/25999/%E2%80%9CThe-Executive-and-legislature-in-El-Salvador-have-not-shown-a-genuine-interest-in-truth-and-justice%E2%80%9D.htm>.

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⁷¹ Content moderation may face further challenges in Brazil under the current climate of ongoing political polarization and proliferating misinformation. At President Jair Bolsonaro's direction, the Brazilian legislature passed a law prohibiting social media moderation of misinformation in September 2021. It may still be possible to moderate content by transnational criminal groups, if the legislation differentiates between misinformation and communications among criminal entities, but this requires further analysis and strategic planning.

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IBI Consultants, LLC (www.ibiconsultants.net), is a national security consulting firm. Researchers in the firm offer a broad range of expertise and access across Latin America on issues of national security, transnational crime, terrorism, terror finance, and nonstate armed actors. IBI Consultants works with a wide range of clients, from U.S. Government entities to private foundations, and provides analysis, information, scenario development, and access to a broad range of on-the-ground experts.

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