



# The Gang Truce in El Salvador

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## Salvador's gang truce presents a compelling case of how a society steeped in gang violence might pursue dialogue while also highlighting the threats posed to any negotiation process.

**Authors' Note:** *The views expressed in the article are the views of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of Justice or the United States. This contribution is based on the research conducted for a journal article entitled, "Sympathy for the Devil: When and How to Negotiate with Criminal Gangs—Case of El Salvador" published in Studies in Conflict and Terrorism.*

Gang-driven violence and criminality pose an increasingly dire threat to societies around the world. Governments charged with providing security must contend with global trends such as urbanization, littoralization, and demographic change, which make it easier for gangs to proliferate and deepen their criminal networks. In our [previous article](#) we outlined a theoretical model for negotiation with criminal gangs which posits that negotiation is not only possible, but given correct process design and timing, may offer the best solution for societies plagued by gang-driven violence. The model is composed of a three phased approach, beginning with state-sponsored mediation in secret, followed by public negotiation between the state and gangs, and finally mainstreaming of the reformed structures into society. The success of this process rests on the assumption that through a process of *assisted articulation* and with the proper level of state engagement, the government can cultivate a zone of possible agreement with criminal gangs, and ultimately transform societies plagued by criminally-driven violence. El Salvador is an intriguing case against which to test the assumptions of this theory not only

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because it remains one of the most violent countries in the world, but also for its remarkable, and partially successful, attempt to negotiate with its two largest gangs in 2012. The case study presented here provides deeper insight into the three-phase theoretical model of gang negotiation. The successes and failures of the truce both reinforce the assumptions of our model and provide a window into how future endeavors should be structured.

## The 2012 truce

The gang truce in El Salvador, negotiated in secret and announced in March 2012 is the most notable example in the Western hemisphere of using negotiation as an alternative means to confront gang violence. The achievements of the initiative are undeniable. For the 15 months following the announcement of the truce, the homicide rate in the country dropped by 53 percent, a **remarkable achievement** for what was prior to the truce the second most dangerous country in the world not considered an active war zone. Ultimately, though, the truce proved unsustainable and by early 2014 the country had plunged back into staggering violence. Nevertheless, there are lessons to be learned from this case which can be carried forward into future efforts.

The truce of 2012 was negotiated primarily between the Mara Salvatrucha, or MS-13, and Barrio 18, which are the two largest gangs in the country, with Father Fabio Colindres, a local Catholic Bishop, and Raul Mijango, a former FMLN guerilla, serving as mediators. The government provided the space for the negotiation by allowing the mediators access to gang leaders held in the maximum-security prisons and ultimately consenting to certain conditions demanded by the gangs.

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The impetus for the formal talks began in 2011 with discussions amongst civil society and religious leaders concerned about the inability of a confrontational security sector approach to solve the violence. Conversations focused on how to structure a peace process with the gangs and during these initial talks Mr. Mijango and Father Colindres took an active role. With the government's consent, Mijango and Colindres began shuttling between the prisons, serving as intermediaries between the rival gangs, and ultimately the government. On February 29, 2012, the gangs officially agreed to [the following points](#):

- 1) to cease all types of hostilities between the two gangs;
- 2) to cease attacks on members of the national police;
- 3) to cease attacks on members of the armed forces;
- 4) to cease attacks against members of the penitentiary system;
- 5) to avoid producing any more civilian casualties.

Beyond the cease-fire established by the agreement, a joint statement released by the leaders of MS-13 and Barrio 18 on March 19, 2012, indicates that the mediators were at least partially successful in the process of assisted articulation. In the Spanish statement translated here the gang leaderships state:

“The path to conversion that we have initiated is the result of a profound effort of analysis and discussion guided by the facilitators of the church and civil society, which has already begun to produce positive things which are of benefit to society. We do not ask to be pardoned for crimes already committed, only that the law is fairly applied, that we are treated as human beings, that we

are supported in the social and productive reintegration of our members giving them work and educational opportunities, that they are not discriminated against and not repressed for the simple fact of being tattooed without having committed some criminal act.”

In the following month the truce was made public by the news outlet El Faro and though the government initially denied any involvement it became clear very quickly that it had played a role in sanctioning the process and granting certain concessions.

In keeping with the three-step theory, this would be the point at which the state would move into direct negotiations with the gangs, engaging on a platform established through the assisted articulation process. However, during the following months the truce moved into the implementation phase without any direct negotiation or engagement by the state. Three other large gangs in the country joined the process and “peace zones” were established during this period. In these zones the gangs agreed to a total cessation of hostilities and certain organizations were allowed access to begin serving the community. Police were, however, barred from entering the communities as part of the agreement the gangs struck, a controversial move that created tension internally within the government amongst different factions. Despite concerns about the ability of the gangs to control their membership, within a day of the truce being implemented daily homicides dropped precipitously and stayed low for almost 15 months.

### **The truce unravels**

Unfortunately, after a little over a year the truce began to unravel following a series of fatal blows. The first of these came in the form of a Supreme Court

ruling which removed truce-supporter General Munguía Payés as Minister of Justice and Public Security. General Payés was replaced by Ricardo Perdomo, a staunch opponent of the truce who advocated vigorously for a return to mano dura policies. The state then replaced Mijango and Colindres as intermediaries with a second camp of mediators who did not enjoy the same legitimacy with the gangs and denied the former mediators access to the prisons. The third and final blow to the truce was contextual. Due to the immense hurt that the gangs had inflicted upon society, the idea of the government granting any concessions was extremely unpopular and, as the 2014 election drew closer, the right-wing ARENA party used the truce to paint the ruling FMLN party as soft on gangs. A charge that was hard to refute in part because certain criminal activity continued unabated. In response, and at the urging of those within the government hostile to the truce, the FMLN began to return to its policy of confronting the gangs. The gangs, perceiving this as a breach of the truce conditions began to re-arm in mid-2013 and conditions devolved into a trilateral war between the government and the two largest gangs.

### **Why it failed**

Where the process foundered was two-fold: first the government failed to actively prepare the population for the announcement of the truce, and secondly, the second phase of negotiations between the government and the gangs never truly existed and certainly did not prioritize the social, economic, and political components of a deal that had in fact become part of the gangs' negotiating position.

Therefore, interventions in the peace zones were under-resourced and moved too slowly to ween gangs off of criminal activity. The concessions granted by the state were mainly concerned with the conditions within the prisons and keeping

the police out of the newly established peace zones. While there were initiatives in certain peace zones in which Mijango and others worked with local businesses and gangs to eliminate extortion in exchange for resumption of municipal services, the efforts were not systematic and in most cases the gangs continued to operate. This condition contributed to the public confidence crisis plaguing the government as the 2014 election neared. By endorsing the truce, the government could be accused of the sanctioning criminal behavior that was still occurring, regardless of whether or not this charge was valid. The state also had very little incentive not to return to conflict with the gangs, given the lack of a perceived hurting stalemate. The state in this instance needed to have prepared the public earlier to shift the perception of gang conflict, and to have engaged the gangs on the socio-economic aspects of their negotiating position, while simultaneously making it clear that criminal activity would not be tolerated. Ultimately, the inability to transition beyond the cease-fire doomed the truce.

## Conclusion

As transnational criminal networks continue to flourish and gang activity becomes an increasingly prevalent threat to security around the globe, the predominant reliance on security sector-based measures may not suffice to abate adverse effects of gang-related violence. According to some estimates, the 2012 gang truce in El Salvador, “saved at least 5,539 Salvadorans who would have died had the gang violence not been curtailed through dialogue and negotiation”. The collapse of this truce in late 2013 and the gradual relapse into traditional security sector led measures in the early part of 2014 accompanied an unprecedented surge in violence. By 2015, with **103 deaths per 100,000 people**, El Salvador was second to only Syria in **overall**

rates of annual violent deaths, making it a more dangerous and deadly place than any other ongoing armed conflict around the globe. Confronting a growing threat of gang violence is rapidly demanding a more nuanced approach, and despite high political costs, negotiations may still yield more stable and viable solutions compared to any available coercive measure used until now. The three step model for dialogue with criminal gangs posits a way to contend with the more controversial and politically fraught aspects of negotiation, and the case of El Salvador highlights the potential benefits of dialogue. Correctly sequencing and fully committing to secret state-sponsored mediation, public bilateral negotiation, and the process of mainstreaming, would likely have mitigated some of the threats that ultimately doomed the truce in El Salvador. Going forward, as governments charged with providing the essential public good of security search for ways to confront the ever increasing threat of gang-driven violence, the insights of the three phase model, and lessons from El Salvador, may offer an attractive roadmap for addressing the seemingly intractable problem of gang violence.

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Image credit: Mara Salvatrucha gang member Image credit: [markarinafotos/Flickr](#).

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