The Maras as a Threat to Sovereignty

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to understand if the Maras are a threat to sovereignty in the Northern Triangle countries of Central America and, if so, how they are threatening the state. In order to do this, the paper will firstly work to understand what sovereignty is through scholarly works defining and debating the concept. Then, by studying the historical and political context of the three countries, it will analyze what sovereignty looked like in the states before the Maras existed and what it is like now. Finally, once it is understood how much of a threat the Maras really are, the states’ responses will be identified in order to measure their success and see how their responses could be unproved. The theoretical chapter is divided into three sections: what sovereignty is, how states lose sovereignty, and how they can regain it. Definitions on fragile states and insurgencies will be taken from the CIA and the Fund for Peace in order to then use these definitions, as well as the theories from the literature review, to develop a conclusion on how much of a threat the Maras pose to sovereignty. The paper finds that the Maras, while they are not the underlying cause of state fragility in the Northern Triangle, are a growing threat to sovereignty. It will also conclude that the state responses have failed because they have not tackled the root cause of the issue and have not collaborated amongst themselves, and it will provide some policy recommendations based on to the conclusions made in previous chapters.
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<td>FARC</td>
<td>Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia</td>
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<td>FMLN</td>
<td>Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front</td>
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<td>IGO</td>
<td>International Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>IDP</td>
<td>Internally Displaced Person</td>
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<td>Maras</td>
<td>Pandilla [Gang] Mara Salvatruchas</td>
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<tr>
<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-Governmental Organization</td>
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<td>Northern Triangle</td>
<td>El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras</td>
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<td>SICA</td>
<td>Central American Integration Agency</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNODC</td>
<td>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime</td>
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<td>US</td>
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1. Introduction

The Mara Salvatruchas are a street gang that has grown in the last few decades, to the point that it has thousands of members and large portions of controlled territory. They are credited for high crime rates in Central America, and for running Organized Crime rings all over the American continent. Areas where the Maras have high presence tend to be plagued with violence, high murder rates, and low life expectancy (UNODC, 2017). Areas the Maras tend to succeed most in are also generally characterized by inequality, poverty, state-sponsored violence, and fragile public institutions. It is unclear if the Maras are causing the situation around them to decay, or if the situation around them is what causes their success. Scholars such as Manwaring (2007) and Boraz and Bruneau (2006) argue that the Mara’s growth and power are overwhelming the governments of the Northern Triangle countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras). Other sources such as the International Crisis Report (2017) argue that the Maras are a consequence of decades of violence, fragile states, and dictatorships.

Considering the lack of consensus among scholars on why the Maras are successful in Central America, this paper seeks to understand what the relationship between the Maras and the sovereign state is, and how the state interacts with them in return. The ultimate objective is to try to understand why the states are failing in their current approach and how they can do better. This works under the assumption that what the states are doing is not working, and this assumption has been made by considering rising crime rates, increasing membership in the gang, and the fragility of the states, which was measured with the Fragile State Index (Fund for Peace, 2017). This paper
hypothesizes that the Maras are a consequence of already weak states, but they are exacerbating the situation.

This research is important because there is very little known about the Maras and few works have sought to analyze them according to definitions of insurgency, whether or not they are the ones causing the state’s they work in to lose their sovereignty or if they are a consequence of a violent history, and what the states are doing wrong. Considering that the states tend to deny the gravity of the issue, foreign scholarship on the issue is not encouraged and journalists struggle to obtain primary information from governments. Also, journalists struggle to get first-hand information on the Maras themselves because of how dangerous such investigations are, resulting in little research on them. Scholars, governments, and even UN branches all tend to define them as different things - gangs, insurgencies militias, etc. Therefore, it is important to determine what they actually are as a first step, and work from there. I also want to have a clear understanding of why the states of the Northern Triangle are fragile, and how the Maras play into that. This will be investigated in chapter II and III by looking at the historical and political context and studying how the Maras interact with the state. Once all of this is done, it will be possible to identify what the countries are doing wrong in their response and provide policy recommendations, which will be an important contribution to the field as the Maras are a rising threat, at the end of Chapter III.
Methodology

Before tackling the question of what the states are doing wrong, this paper first examines the historical and political backgrounds of the three countries, in order to establish if they had problems with sovereignty before the Mara’s existence. Then, the paper will try to understand how the Maras are overwhelming the three respective governments. To do this, the paper also assesses what the Maras are as a group, using the CIA’s guide to the ‘Analysis of Insurgency’ (2012) to do so. By identifying the Maras as a group that fits a definition, such as an insurgency or militia, it is easier to comprehend what kind of activity the state is fighting in order to evaluate the relative successes or failures in their respect. This leads to the last part of the paper, which will look at how the state has responded to the rising threat, why the response has not worked, and what it could be doing better.

It is important to study the literature on sovereignty and weak states in order to make the necessary analysis. The scholarly debate will be divided into three categories. The first section explores what sovereignty is. There is no consensus among scholars on what sovereignty actually looks like, but for the purpose of this paper it is important to have a definition that can be used to analyze the three countries. Once this has been done, the paper will analyze works that talk about how sovereignty is lost. Some of the scholars in this section talk specifically about the case of the Maras and some do not, but all the theories are useful in identifying why the states are struggling with their sovereignty. In order to understand not only why the states are losing sovereignty, but how we can prove they are, the Fund for Peace’s ‘Fragile State Index’ (2017) will be used as a measurement of what constitutes a fragile state. The last section of theories explores how states can reclaim their sovereignty. All of the theorists in this section specifically focus on about the
Northern Triangle, and their texts include several policy recommendations and examples of successful responses from other countries that faced similar threats.

In terms of empirical data, information will be taken from academic journals, texts from foreign government agencies (notably the United States, Canada, and the European Union), United Nations texts, and documentaries about the issue. Documentaries are an important source of information because interviewing the poor, rural populations affected by crime is sometimes the only way to get their insight and opinion. Academic texts are generally produced by people that come from elite communities within the Northern Triangle, or by foreign scholars, and they rarely provide the direct voices and experiences of locals. It is difficult to find consistent empirical information about the Maras, but interviews and NGO texts treated here are a trustworthy source of information. Government texts from the Northern Triangle tend to be biased and there seems to be a trend of systematic denial of the issue, so it is difficult to get any information at all about the Maras from the governments themselves. Because of this, Chapter III in particular will focus on information gathered from NGOs, foreign government agencies, and documentaries. Another important obstacle is that theorists working specifically on the Maras tend not to be from the Northern Triangle, meaning there are very few scholarly opinions on the Maras from people that have an insider perspective. Regardless, there are some scholarly works that focus on the area, and there are several more general theories that can be applied to the Maras.
2. Theoretical Approaches

The central goal of this thesis is to analyze the Mara Salvatruchas and their relationship to the state, and, in turn, how the state engages with them. The Mara Salvatruchas have been considered a threat to sovereignty by scholars such as Manwaring (2007), and Boraz and Bruneau (2006). This chapter is divided into three parts that encompass all the dimensions of the central question. Part 1 will discuss the literature on sovereignty, Part 2 will discuss the literature on how states lose their sovereignty both in general and in the specific case of the Mara Salvatruchas in the Northern Triangle countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras, and Part 3 will discuss debates on how states can reclaim their sovereignty.

Part 1 - Literature on Sovereignty

The definitions and understandings of sovereignty vary largely and have substantially changed since the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648. The definition in the Treaty of Westphalia is very simple compared to broader understandings of contemporary scholars. Sovereignty was understood as power over a territory, and that territory’s right to self-determination. (Croxton 2010). Fundamentally, while modern definitions vary extensively, the key pillars of a sovereign state are that it provides control of violence within its territory, controls its borders, and provides the basic needs of the population.

It is important to keep in mind that much of the literature defining sovereignty is based on the examples of Europe, where the majority of nation states have held a strong hand on their sovereignty. The Northern Triangle countries however, have always been weak states with
relatively low control of their sovereignty, as I discuss in the Historical Chapter that follows, perhaps making it harder to identify what sovereignty is in their context.

Croxton (2010) outlines that while the Treaty of Westphalia is interpreted as the origin of sovereignty, it did not provide a satisfactory definition of sovereignty. He states that sovereignty has become characteristic of our global system of politics, and we have spent the past hundreds of years trying to refine and understand the concept first outlined in the Treaty. Similarly, Bartelson (2006) argues that after years of having a presupposed idea of sovereignty, scholars have tried to redefine it according to contemporary challenges. He argues that while there are increasing threats to sovereignty in contemporary times, it continues to be a fundamental aspect of global politics. Supranational governance, modern warfare, and insurgencies only highlight its success as a widely understood concept. However, in the case of the Northern Triangle, insurgencies have existed since the creation of the state. This would make Bertelson's point difficult to apply to this context as insurgencies are not a modern threat to sovereignty, but rather as a historically rooted force continuously undermining it.

Annan (2006) argues that state sovereignty is being redefined because of globalization, which has brought new methods of warfare and the introduction of non-state actors. He also argues that common norms and shared values are reshaping the idea of sovereignty as something that is not always a right, but more of a privilege which can be de-legitimized in cases of human rights abuses or in cases where the state has not performed its basic responsibilities. In traditional terms, the state had legitimacy without conditions, and its people were there to serve the state. Annan argues that nowadays, the state is there to serve the people and if it fails to do so, it loses its legitimacy. This means that a non-state entity that satisfies the needs of the people may gain more legitimacy, and in turn sovereignty, than the state itself. Perhaps Annan would argue that states
like those of the Northern Triangle do not have strong legitimacy because they have not performed their basic functions for portions of the population and have, throughout history, seen various governments blatantly violating human rights.

Krasner (1999) argues that the idea that sovereignty has always been respected is not entirely true, and challenges this using historical examples. Globalization, technology, supranational organizations, and international treaties are often seen, by scholars that Krasner refers to, as modern challenges to sovereignty. While these examples may be symbolic of the contemporary world, he argues that sovereignty has always been challenged one way or another. He points out that on the one hand this makes the concept of sovereignty weaker than if it had been uncontested until contemporary times. On the other hand, this also means it has had to be fluid, in order to adapt to the challenges it has faced, making it stronger. This means that sovereignty is ambiguous, not fixed, and relatively adaptable. Krasner notes that sovereignty is a concept whose definition depends on the circumstances of the time in question. He indicates that the importance given to sovereignty is relative depending on the country’s power. Weaker states put more emphasis on it than stronger states tend to. He uses the example of Latin American states convening in 1826 and 1848 and ruling against foreign intervention even in extreme cases such as debt enforcement. He also notes that consolidated democracies with a sound respect for human rights are more likely to trust supranational entities and forfeit some of their sovereignty, using the European Union as an example of this. Democratic states are also more likely to see sovereignty as a privilege rather than a right, and to believe that it can be forfeited in certain cases. Krasner’s work gives a fluid idea of sovereignty, implying that there is no universal concept, which makes the quest to understand when sovereignty is being lost or jeopardized more difficult. However, his work is perhaps more fitting to the case-studies analyzed here, as a universal concept of
sovereignty based on traditional European definitions of a modern nation state are difficult to apply to Northern Triangle countries with such a different history and such a controversial relationship to sovereignty.

**Part 2 - Literature on how states lose sovereignty**

Stumpf (2007) investigates the convergence of immigration and criminal law. He argues that crime escapes sovereignty as it is fluid and can rely on migration, meaning states are in danger of losing sovereignty because of transnational organized crime. In order to explain this idea, Stumpf uses the ‘membership theory’, which restricts individual rights and privileges to those who are members of a social contract between the government and its people, and by default laws and responsibilities are restricted to a social contract as well. His article highlights that since crime can be transnational, it holds power above national law. Crime can migrate, it can work in several states at once, and it can work in one state while operating elsewhere at the same time. This is particularly relevant to criminal gangs in Central America that use their transnational nature to their advantage and manage to escape the law by operating in several countries at once.

The Crimmigration theory most likely works under weak states. Weak states are an important aspect of loss of sovereignty in general. The Fund for Peace has a Fragile States Index that categorizes each state according to its level of strength. It uses four groups of indicators to decipher what makes a state weak: Cohesion, Economic, Political, and Social indicators. Each indicator includes a set of pillars and if a country shows one or more problems within those pillars, it can be considered weak under that indicator. Cohesion includes *security apparatus, factionalized elites, and group grievance* as the three pillars of this indicator. *Security Apparatus* considers the different security threats to the state, so it is generally measured by monopolization of the use of
force, relationship between security and citizenry, force, and arms. *Factionalized Elites* measures the fragmentation of society by looking at equality and equity, resource distribution, representative leadership, and identity. *Group Grievance* focuses on divisions in society by looking at post-conflict response, equality, divisions, and communal violence. Economic indicators include *economic decline, uneven development, and human flight and brain drain*. *Economic decline* is measured by looking at debt, inflation, interest, and other economic factors that determine decline. *Uneven economic development* is measured by looking at economic equality (economic justice, equal rights, etc.), economic opportunity (equal education, fair housing, access to job training), and socio-economic dynamics (the existence of ghettos or slums). *Human flight and brain drain* considers how the state uses social capital. It looks at retention of capital, which is measured by looking at how much of the working-age, educated population is leaving to work abroad, and then it looks at remittances. If the country is highly dependent on remittances, it can be considered weak. Political indicators *state legitimacy, public service, and human rights and rule of law* as its main pillars. *Public service* analyzes trust in the political process, political opposition, transparency, openness and fairness of the political process, and political violence. *Public Services* refers to basic state functions, including health, education, infrastructure, and shelter. It also checks if the access to public services is equal, and what the quality of the services is. *Human rights and rule of law* considers how the state treats its people by studying the civil and political rights and freedoms, violations of rights, openness, equality, and justice. The last indicator is the social one, which regards *demographic pressures, refugee IDPs, and external intervention* as its pillars. *Demographic pressures* studies what kinds of pressures the population and environment of the country put on the state by analyzing population, food distribution, public health, environmental considerations, and resources. *Refugees and IDPs (internally displaced peoples)* simply calculates
the numbers of refugees coming out of the state, the number of IDPs, and studies the state’s responses to displacement. Lastly, external intervention argues that if intervention is strong, the state is weak by default because it is losing part of its sovereignty to another force. It studies intervention by looking at intervention by force, political intervention, and economic intervention. Chapter 3 will compare the Northern Triangle countries to the different indicators provided by Fund for Peace to understand if they are weak states.

Anderson’s theory (1983), challenges the idea of sovereignty with his theory that nations are built through a perceived sense of community in a group of people. His theory is relevant to the previous paragraph as imagined communities are probably more likely to form in weak states. This is because weak states often have, as seen in some of the indicators of the Fund for Peace, a lack of strong national identity, and perhaps other overriding identities. It also fits into the cohesion indicator of the Fund for Peace theory, as it relates to fragmentation and identity. In his text, Anderson argues that before a structure of nationalism is formed, there has to be a history that creates a culture. This means sovereignty is largely dependent on an imagined sense of belonging that comes through history, culture, and, in some cases, grievances with the current state. He puts a strong emphasis on language: communities with similar languages within a country form their own imagined communities. However, this can also be true within single-language areas. For example, in the Northern Triangle, because of mass inequality and lack of access to education, a notable percentage of the population is illiterate (UNESCO 2015). It appears that since the Maras tend to belong to the low-income sectors of society, among them are very high and therefore an alternative accent of Spanish is formed and this creates a sense of belonging within this ‘imagined community’. The idea of an imagined community places a threat on sovereignty as it means
imagined communities could claim more legitimacy than the state. This is more likely to happen in a weak state where fragmentation already exists.

In order to understand the next theoretical contribution, by Manwaring, it is important to define insurgent groups, as he understands the Maras to be an insurgency. The CIA’s *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency* provides a definition for insurgency and a guide to identifying one. There are many definitions of insurgencies that often contradict each other, so for the sake of practicality, this paper will only use the definition provided by the CIA. This definition considers an insurgency to be a “Protracted political-military struggle directed toward subverting or displacing the legitimacy of a constituted government or occupying power and completely or partially controlling the resources of a territory through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. The common denominator for most insurgent groups is their objective of gaining control of a population or a particular territory, including its resources. This objective differentiates insurgent groups from purely terrorist organizations. It is worth noting that identifying a movement as an insurgency does not convey a normative judgment on the legitimacy of the movement or its cause; the term insurgency is simply a description of the nature of the conflict” (CIA, 2012). It differentiates an insurgency from counter-insurgencies, militias, terrorist groups, and guerrilla warfare. Counter insurgencies are defined as the measures taken by the government to fight an insurgency. A militia is defined as an armed group that represents an identity group (ethnic, religious, ideological) and serves the government directly or indirectly or “operate independently to combat other militias or insurgent groups, pursue criminal activity, or support an insurgency” (CIA 2012). A terrorist group is defined as a group that uses premeditated violence against non-combatants. Guerrilla warfare is a tactic used to “operate independently to combat other militias or insurgent groups, pursue criminal activity, or support an insurgency”. As we will see in Chapter
III, it appears the Maras have similar characteristics to the definition of a Militia as well as those of an insurgency. The text goes on to provide a framework for analyzing an insurgency. The framework includes looking at insurgency characteristics (goals, structure, grievances, sanctuary, external support, finances, unity, life cycle stage), preexisting conditions (history, terrain, polarization, government discrimination), government characteristics, insurgent actions, net assessment, and government actions. Chapter 3 will apply these definitions to aim at defining the Maras beyond a “youth gang”.

Manwaring (2007), as well as several of the scholars I discuss subsequently, focuses on the loss of sovereignty specifically in the Northern Triangle. Manwaring argues that these states are in danger of losing their state sovereignty and their national security, perhaps even affecting regional security, because of the threats of street gangs. He argues that gangs are more than non-state armed groups, but rather insurgent groups. He acknowledges that there are differences between the “traditional” understanding of insurgencies and this specific form of gang-related insurgency, particularly in motives and goals. Gangs such as the Maras tend to enforce control over the government using a mixture of violence and bribery, in order to facilitate the trafficking of drugs, people, arms, organs, and counterfeit products. A common theme in Manwaring’s work is the competition for power between the governments of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras and gangs. In these cases, the government does not have a monopoly of power over the people and its territory.

Sobel and Osaba (2009), on the other hand, argue that gangs are not the underlying threat to sovereignty, but rather that state-sponsored violence is. They argue that gangs form a net of protection from pre-existing violence. Therefore, the significant threat to sovereignty comes from systematically subduing certain areas of a country through violence, causing them to retaliate,
organize themselves into groups, and one day pose a threat to state sovereignty, as the Maras have. This is particularly relevant considering the Northern Triangle’s long history of state-sponsored violence and deprivation.

The International Crisis Report (2017) explains how the Northern Triangle countries became weak states. The Report states that the civil war and military dictatorships that devastated the region in the late 21st Century are the main factor. The authors believe that after the military dictatorships and civil wars in the three countries, the states did not have the resources to properly disarm the rebels and guerillas that had formed. As a consequence, when the civil wars ended, there were still groups of people that were armed and trained to fight, and, in many cases, had been brought up in an environment of conflict and somewhat desensitized to the concept of war. There was also no strong initiative to regain public trust in the police, the military and the government. After the civil wars, a large part of the population trusted ex-guerrilla or vigilante groups more than the institutions of their state, because the government was disconnected from the people. The government was made up of elites that had been educated and brought up in wealthy environments, while the majority of the people lived in completely different situations. The gangs and vigilante groups were composed of people that were much more connected to the poor, rural populations of society. All of this, along with mass poverty and corruption, facilitated the strength and growth of the Maras and, in turn, weakened the states and jeopardized their sovereignty.

Part 3 - Literature on reclaiming sovereignty

Manwaring (2007) outlines how the Northern Triangle countries can reclaim their sovereignty from the gangs. He highlights that gangs, as well as their Transnational Criminal Organization allies are becoming more political as they gain strength. In fact, he believes that a
trend among gangs is that the more strength they gain, the more they start resembling politicized insurgents. However, unlike insurgent groups seen in the region’s past conflicts, they live by a sort of “criminal anarchy” (Manwaring, 2007, Pg. 48), meaning that there is no significant code to how they obtain their goals and they are prepared for any level of violence. Manwaring believes the answer to battling gangs is not found in military firepower or in police combat but requires all the instruments of power of the state to be used alongside help from international allies. He believes the approach ought to involve “Soft, multidimensional, multilevel, multilateral, political, psychological, moral, informational, economic, and social effort”. (Manwaring, 2005, Pg. 47) He argues that the current way states fight the Maras is only benefitting the Maras themselves, because they have become experienced in fighting back, and they have infiltrated governments by corrupting officials and using the systematic denial within government to their advantage. He believes that the key to societal peace, strong national sovereignty, and successful institutions can be found through this unified effort of all the instruments of power in the nation state, this multidimensional approach, and the idea of collaborating with international allies.

Boraz and Bruneau (2006) argue that the threat to sovereignty imposed by the Mara Salvatruchas must be fought using a network structure because the gang itself is a network. They argue that a multinational approach is essential as the issue expands throughout a large part of Central America and beyond. While the 1991 SICA-sponsored agreement between Central American countries and the Dominican Republic to bolster efforts against the Maras is a good initiative, they believe it lacks successful implementation. There is a lot of work to be done in each country to ensure that the regulations of the accord are enforced, and there is a serious problem of lack of personnel, conflicts with local jurisdiction, corruption, and it is an approach that is too centered on military activities rather than long-term solutions. Fundamentally, Boraz and Bruneau
argue for multinational cooperation, intelligence sharing, and tackling the issues of lack of enforcement, corruption, and fragile institutionalism in order for the Northern Triangle countries to reclaim their sovereignty from the Maras.

The International Crisis Report (2017) provides recommendations on how the states can reclaim their sovereignty. Firstly, the report states that many people born in areas controlled by gangs are labelled as outcasts since birth, often giving them no choice but to follow in the footsteps of their families. Also, any rehabilitation efforts of ex-gang members are stifled by society, as they are generally denied jobs or housing contracts because of their tattoos signifying previous gang membership. An important step to decreasing the danger of the Maras is to promote acceptance of children born into gang families and of rehabilitated ex-members, through education. The report also argues that while it is important to keep police and military presence active in order to protect civilians, the mass incarcerations and violence from police do not contribute to sustainable peace but may even cause more resentment. The report proposes acknowledging the socio-economic roots of the problem and attempting to address them. It also argues for improving conditions in prisons, and funding projects that aim to rehabilitate incarcerated gang-members. Lastly, the report strongly posits that tri-national collaboration in intelligence, prosecution, identification methods, and rehabilitation projects will help to strengthen the states, help battle the issue of the Maras and, consequently, strengthen each nation’s sovereignty.

Conclusion

It is difficult to define sovereignty in the context of these three countries because of their long and complicated relationship with it. One could argue that the three countries have never had a strong grasp on sovereignty and have always been weak due to the many dictatorships and wars
that they all suffered. This makes it difficult to blame the Maras for undermining sovereignty, but rather makes them seem like a consequence of a long history of grievances. The literature on how states can regain sovereignty, specifically the texts that focus on the Maras, is useful to understand what the states are currently doing wrong and why the problem is not diminishing. It can be argued that the states need to go through a process of strengthening their institutions, battling corruption, and facing past grievances, before they can focus on specifically tackling the Maras.
3. Historical Background and Political Context

The aim of this chapter is to study the history of the three Northern Triangle countries in order to better understand the evolution and current functioning of the Maras. Since many of the theorists discussed in the previous chapter put a large burden on history, it is important to know the history of the Northern Triangle. The three Northern Triangle countries all have similar trends in violence, but strikingly higher rates to the neighboring countries of Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama. (Gagne, 2017). This means the violence issue is not necessarily a regional one, but a Northern Triangle problem. The three countries have had a similar trend in military dictatorships and violent civil wars that have not occurred in the same way in other Central American countries, so this might be a key variable underlying contemporary violence. This chapter will look at the origins of this violence by analyzing the social and political context from the 1930s until the present day and relate back to the theories from Chapter 1 to connect them to specific events.

Part 1 - Historical and Political Context of El Salvador

The history of El Salvador has been complex since before independence. However, for the purpose of this paper, it is only relevant to study its history from the 1930s (marking the start of the Hernandez Martinez military dictatorship) until the present day, because the consequences of dictatorships and wars from the 1930s onwards are what have possibly led to the situation of El Salvador today, as well as decades of colonialism and a violent independence process. The several military dictatorships and civil war left El Salvador with high rates of poverty, grievance, and weak institutions, and theorists such as Manwaring (2007) and the International Crisis Report (2017) argue that these events are partly responsible for the violent situation in El Salvador today.
El Salvador had a military coup by General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez after the great depression of 1929. During his military dictatorship, Martinez was a brutal suppressor of any protest – there was a famous “matanza” in 1932 where 10,000 suspected participants of a communist demonstration were killed. After the matanza, it was clear this dictatorship was not afraid to use violence (Browning, 2016). While the dictatorship was a big destabilizer for the country, it is important to remember that El Salvador did not have strong institutions or a prominent democratic system before the Martinez years. Its transition to independence was not smooth, as for decades the elite Spanish families and descendants of the Conquistadors were in power and stifled any democratic process. The International Crisis Report (2017) argues that this is what caused groups like the Maras to emerge and grow, and the underlying issue is the violent history and lack of strong institutions because of violent coups and wars.

The military government suppressed opposition from the left and from the native “Indio” culture. Hernandez looked up to fascist dictators in Europe and modeled his rule according to them. In 1944, there was an attempted coup against Hernandez but the military dictatorship survived it. The following month Hernandez was forced to resign because of a strike led by University students. When the protests became too big and violent for the army to control, there was no choice for Hernandez other than resignation (Browning, 2016). The exclusion of the Indio culture and the left from the political arena, and its violent oppression, might have been the start of a marginalized group creating a sovereign identity of their own, similarly to what Anderson says about identity dynamics. The UNODC (2017) reports that many members of the Maras in rural areas come from indigenous groups, possibly signifying the “Indio” grievance turning into a search for new identities and channels of protest.
In 1948 a military junta led by Major Oscar Osorio organized the “Majors’ Revolution” and took power in 1950 under the Revolutionary Party of the Democratic Union. Osorio led the country through economic reforms meant to benefit the middle class and cause economic growth. The term ended in 1956 and he was replaced by Jose Maria Lemus, who continued these reforms. (BBC, 2017) The economic situation of the country improved under the reforms led by Osorio and continued by Lemus, but there was general discontent because the situation for laborers was not improving. Laborers worked long hours with low pay, and sometimes did not receive their salary on time, or were forced to camp outside their work because their time off did not allow them to go home. In 1960, this discontent turned into open protests, and Lemus resorted to oppressive means. A military coup led by Julio Adalberto Rivera in 1960 deposed Lemus. (Browning, 2016) Lemus left by resignation for reasons that are still not clear to the public (Martin-Baró, 2015). The many different coups and government changes seem to support Krasner’s (1999) idea that sovereignty has, in some cases, never been accepted or respected and so its demise is entirely predictable. His theory seems to be relevant in this case because history shows that sovereignty was never taken seriously in El Salvador, and therefore the Mara’s disrespect to sovereignty is not something new, but rather a continuation of a historical trend.

Rivera was in power from 1962 until 1967. He dismantled the party created by Osorio and replaced it with the National Conciliation Party. He advanced economic reforms aimed at growth under a platform he created called “Alliance for Progress” and took advantage of trade opportunities with the recently created Central American Common Market. On the one hand there seemed to be some liberty under Rivera, specifically when he allowed the rise of the Christian Democratic Party, which was winning municipal elections and gaining momentum. On other hand, Rivera created a paramilitary group called Democratic Nationalist Organization that was a looming
repressive presence in the country. They extorted people for money, took over certain neighborhoods, and threatened to carry out a coup. (Martin-Baró, 2015) One of the categories of a strong state according to Fund for Peace (2018) is that the state has a monopoly on the use of violence, and this group shows that the state of El Salvador has not had control over violence since times before the Mara’s existence. This makes one wonder if the Maras are the issue, or if the underlying issue is that countries like El Salvador have been weak for decades and the Maras are only a result of that.

Fidel Sanchez Hernandez was appointed as President by the army after Rivera. The country was facing economic difficulties because the coffee and cotton industries were competing with declining prices in other markets. However, the country’s attention was less focused on the economy at this time because of the “Soccer War” with Honduras. The artificial cause of this war was a tense soccer season in the World Cup, but the deeper reason was a territorial dispute over small portions of the border between the two countries and an immigration crisis of 300,000 El Salvadorians moving to Honduras illegally. There was a cease-fire in 1969, but El Salvador only implemented it after the Organization of American States threatened economic sanctions. A peace treaty was finally concluded in 1980 despite the war ending earlier. This war cost many lives and tension between the two countries that may not yet be fully mended (BBC, 2017). This war reinforced poverty and grievance in a society that had already dealt with many coups, dictatorships and violence. The war seems to be a supporting pillar of the remarks made by Sobel and Osaba (2009) about state-sponsored violence being the main reason groups like the Maras gained so much public support.

In the elections of 1972, there was an attempted coup by Duarte, leader of an opposition party (the Democratic Christian Party) which eventually led to him being exiled. The military
government stayed in power under President Arturo Armando Molina from 1972 to 1977, and then under General Carlos Humberto Romero from 1977 to 1979. Under Romero the country experienced protests and expressions of discontent due to growing human rights abuses. This also caused opposition by Catholic clergymen, who openly condemned the government’s abuses, which led to the famous murder by the military of Archbishop Oscar Romero as he celebrated mass for his open condemnation of the dictatorship (Browning, 2016). The killing of an Archbishop was very shocking for the Salvadorian people, and deepened mistrust towards the government. People were already skeptical of government institutions, but after this event, people started creating their own sort of vigilante groups and informal “courts” in their homes (BTI 2016). Scholars such as Crus (2015) believes these vigilante groups then transformed into guerrilla groups during part of the civil war (the late 1970s), and eventually into gangs. This could mean EL Salvador’s instability with gangs and loss of sovereignty has deep historical roots from the times of Romero and before.

Romero was ultimately ousted in 1979 – a year that marked the beginning of a civil war that would last for 12 years. During this civil war, the military lost monopoly over the country to communist guerrillas. The United States became involved by providing financial and military aid as part of its cold war intervention efforts across Latin America. By 1981, smaller guerrillas across the country had, for the most part, joined forces to form a mass guerilla group called Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front. Elections occurred in 1982 that allowed Duarte (who had been in exile in Venezuela), to become president. His presidency, although less repressive, was not successful as he was unable to instill peace. Duarte was replaced by Cristiani, who was more prone to using harsh methods, yet willing to examine proposals for peace. (Browning, 2016)

After a constant offensive and failed peace talks, the UN moderated peace negotiations in 1990 and managed to promote the Chapultepec Peace Accords signed in Mexico City in 1992. By
then, 75,000 people had been killed, most of them non-combatants and the country had suffered high levels of infrastructural damage. All of this caused grievance and economic struggles in the country, making the post conflict era a difficult one (Browning, 2016).

The peace agreement required dissolution and disarmament of the guerrillas, and a reduction of the armed forces of El Salvador. A commission was dedicated to investigating human rights abuses during the war (BBC, 2017). While the peace process had some successes, the people of El Salvador were left with deep scars. While the main guerrilla group disarmed for the most part, many smaller groups did not disarm, meaning the country was full of young men with weapons that had become accustomed to fighting and had deep grievances. The war had also left rural areas with no infrastructure and very little effort of reconstruction, exacerbating poverty and grievance. All of this made it more possible for gangs to form that would further jeopardize an already weak state. Sobel and Osaba’s (2009) theory seems to work well with this example, as the grievance and resentment after years of violent war, and the rising rates of poverty, displacement, homelessness, and failed institutions could be the root cause of groups like the Maras growing and gaining power.

In the 21st century, El Salvador’s presidents have faced several issues of violence and poverty. Reducing violence after the war was a challenge as the country was still very polarized, and new social challenges arose. In 2009 the FMLN took power for the first time, and rising above becoming a guerrilla group to being a political party. The FMLN president, Mauricio Funes, worried right wingers and conservatives because of his sympathy for Venezuela’s President Chavez but gained general popularity for his efforts at post conflict reconciliation by accelerating and emphasizing investigations of human rights violations during the war.

Today, the main violent actors are no longer political groups or guerrillas, but street gangs – the most violent and powerful ones being the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the 18th Street Gang
(Mara 18). The escalating violence has caused high levels of emigration, and some families have started sending children to Mexico or the United States in hopes that they may find a better life, thereby often unknowingly facilitating human trafficking of minors (Martin-Baró, 2015).

Today, the government continues to be a Presidential Republic and still has high crime rates and weak institutions (UNODC, 2017). El Salvador’s long history of violence and grievance shows it has always been a weak state. The Maras jeopardize its sovereignty, but it could be argued that El Salvador never had a strong hold over its sovereignty because of the many coups and the lengthy civil war. The Fund for Peace’s ‘Fragile State Index’, which has four indicators, touches on some of the trends that El Salvador showed throughout its history. Among the several subsections within each indicator, El Salvador’s post-war and post-dictatorship society was left with a vacuum of power, weak institutions, poverty, inequality of wealth and power, economic decline, group grievances and a lack of a monopoly on the use of power. All of this leads to my conclusion that EL Salvador has been a weak state for a long time, and the Maras are only exacerbating this reality.

**Part 2 - Historical and Political Context of Guatemala**

Guatemala, similarly to El Salvador, is a country with a violent history of political instability and conflict. In contrast to El Salvador, though Guatemala has a strong societal divide between the indigenous populations and the non-indigenous populations, and indigenous groups have a long history of persecution and repression (BTI, 2016). In fact, Guatemala sees the highest numbers of indigenous members of the Maras rather than a mix of membership, possibly due to the high levels of oppression and segregation throughout the centuries. This was a theme throughout most of the dictatorships, and all of this seems to parallel Sobel and Osaba’s (2009)
idea that grievances and state sponsored violence are usually the underlying reasons that youth gangs emerge in several cases they studied.

It could be said that, similarly to El Salvador, Guatemala has never had a strong hold over its sovereignty and has never had a long period of uninterrupted consolidated democracy. All of this may help to explain why Guatemala has some of the highest levels of Mara membership in the world, and why the violence supersedes most countries (UNODC, 2017). Annan (2008) writes about how globalization is redefining our definitions of sovereignty, and about how countries that never had a strong grasp on sovereignty, which usually happen to be former colonies, are even more likely to have trouble maintaining legitimacy within parts of the population. This is the case in Guatemala, as many of the indigenous populations do not recognize the sovereignty of the state, either because they are members of the Maras or because they live in villages that want autonomy after decades of violent repression (BTI, 2016).

This section focuses on the political history of Guatemala from the 1930s onwards. Jorge Ubico became president after a military coup in 1931 and represents the fourth extended dictatorship of post-colonial Guatemala. His platform was based on economic development, improvement of the agriculture industry, and the construction of roads. While he was seen as less repressive towards the indigenous populations compared to previous dictators, his vagrancy law of 1934 caused workers, particularly indigenous ones, to be subjected to forced labor. An opposition formed due to his disregard for human rights, and the economic decline during the Second World War (Stansifer, 2016). Some of these costs of the war fall under the Fund for Peace’s sub-sections of indicators of a fragile state, signifying that Guatemala has been a fragile or weak state since before the Maras existed, and possibly, for the most part as a result of the many dictatorships the country faced since the time of independence.
Guatemala had been promised aid from the United States, prompting it to declare war on Japan, Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy in 1941, furthering the economic decline it was suffering. This caused general strikes and, during a large one in 1944, Ubico was forced to resign. A military junta took over which organized elections, electing Juan José Arévalo, whose brief period in power marked a hopeful time for democracy to prosper. During this Presidency, Communist groups started organizing and gaining popular support, which caused a military officer with strong communist support, Jacobo Arbenz, to win elections in 1951 (BTI, 2016).

Arbenz’s political structure was based on socialist ideals. He performed a large-scale agrarian reform and expropriated unused portions or “excesses” of land from landowners, and distributed them to landless peasants. Communist support and left-leaning reforms troubled the US in a time where Communist expansion was feared. This caused the CIA to start projects to destabilize the government. They recruited exiled Guatemalan citizens that were living in Honduras to conduct an invasion led by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas. The invasion began in 1954 and caused Arbenz to resign (Stansifer, 2016). This caused grievance and resentment among the Guatemalan people against the Hondurans because of Honduras allowing the CIA to work in the border, and this is partly why the two states have never been keen on fully cooperating. The International Crisis Report (2017) believes the problem of the Maras could be more efficiently solved if the three countries cooperated, but it also outlines the difficulty in this because of resentment and lack of trust between the people and governments of those countries.

Colonel Armas became the provisional President following the invasion and then the official President after a referendum. He had a tough stance on communism, he expatriated and exiled former communists, repealed the agrarian reforms that Arbenz had introduced, and violently split unions. This Presidency was marked by brutal violence and complete disregard for human
rights (Stansifer, 2016). Armas was assassinated in 1957, forcing the military to rule the country for the next few years, each leader being chosen solely by the military, who ruled without respecting the other branches of government or the institutions in place, and also acted with considerable violence and disregard for human rights. During the military regimes following Armas, it is said that 55,000 people died (BTI, 2016). The civil war in Guatemala began during this period, in 1960, when, inspired by the past strength of communism in Guatemala and by Fidel Castro’s victory in Cuba in 1959, rebels and guerrilla groups formed in retaliation against the regime.

There was a spike in guerrilla activity in the late 1970s that led the military to retaliate and, in 1981, assassinated roughly 11,000 people (BTI, 2016). As the guerrillas grew stronger, the military separated into factions, causing two military coups between 1981 and 1985 and several leadership changes. The guerrillas were mainly composed of people from the countryside, causing there to be larger scale repression and violence in rural areas (UNDP, 2016). This is key because most people in the first years of the Mara’s growth came from rural areas and eventually moved their families all over the country, and this connection between membership and rural populations could be linked to the repression and poverty felt during the war in rural areas.

There were many coups and regime changes during the civil war. There were brief democratic periods too, but the vast majority of the leadership in this period was composed of military regimes. The total death toll is believed to be 200,000 with hundreds of thousands more people disappeared, tortured or severely injured (Stansifer, 2016). This left Guatemalan society divided and faced with long-lasting grievance and resentment. There was also a strong earthquake in 1976 that is believed to have left around one million people homeless and killed tens of thousands of people, which exacerbated the situation of poverty in the country (Stansifer, 2016).
The road to peace started when Jorge Serrano Elías, elected in 1991, was forced out of office for attempting to create a new dictatorship. He was replaced by Ramiro de León Carpio, who suspended negotiations started by Elías, and eventually Alvaro Arzú Irigoyen, elected in 1996, who reinstated negotiations started by Elías. The negotiations between the government and the Guerrillas resulted in the cease-fire in 1996 and an agreement to finally end the war. The war lasted 36 years in total. Manwaring (2007) puts emphasis on the war because he believes the effects are still being felt, in terms of destroyed infrastructure, weak institutions, resentment, grievance, and poverty. He believes the war is key to understanding why people were willing to join a violent youth gang in such high numbers.

After the war, the country was left divided and the implementation of the peace agreement was not entirely successful. A 1997 UN-sponsored Truth Commission exposed instances of torture, forced disappearances and murders at the hands of the army (Stansifer, 2016). This caused an exacerbated situation of distrust in Guatemalan people towards the army and the government in general, furthering the creation of vigilante groups, home courts, a lack of legitimacy of the Guatemalan government, and the expansion of street gangs (Stansifer, 2016). Moreover, the situation in Guatemala attracted foreign criminal organizations to use its ports for drug and human trafficking (UNODC, 2017). This seems to reflect Stumpf’s (2007) theory on the importance of immigration and fluid borders when it comes to criminality. Guatemala’s war left the country with thousands of displaced people, a weak law enforcement system that was unable to control the borders, and, consequently, the possibility of criminal groups to grow because of the advantage they have in a country with porous borders, popular grievances, and a fragile state.
Part 3 - Historical and Political Context of Honduras

Honduras, similarly to El Salvador and Guatemala, has a long history of violence, unrest and military regimes. What makes this country’s history unique is that Honduras had a much bigger problem with economic decline, poverty and inequality. The country has focused primarily on agriculture to boost its economy since the 1930s (Leonard, 2011). This means many, if not most, of the uneducated people living in rural areas became farmers and most of the land was dedicated to this. Along with many other factors, this large concentration on agriculture could explain the Mara’s ability to produce large quantities of the drugs they traffic in Honduras rather than in El Salvador or in Guatemala. Honduras never had a strong state or a strong grasp on sovereignty, and never had a consolidated democracy for long periods of time. Before the long dictatorship of the 1930s Honduras was essentially run by fruit companies from the US and mercenaries from tribes that tried to topple the government (Browning, 2016). Since the government did not have control over the territory, it is not surprising that Honduras has problems maintaining sovereignty today. Krasner (1999) mentions that because of colonialism, it cannot be argued that states have always taken sovereignty seriously. In his eyes, sovereignty has been a privilege exclusive for rich countries, and that poor, post-colonial countries are doomed to struggle to maintain their sovereignty, legitimacy, and are often weak states at some point in history. This seems to parallel with the example of Honduras, as its process of decolonization was not entirely successful and it has struggled to maintain sovereignty ever since. The current trend of the state fighting to maintain its sovereignty against a threat, in this case the Maras, is not an anomaly but rather part of a trend in Honduran history.

In 1923, General Tiburcio Carías Andino was elected president but prevented from taking office by mercenaries funded by the United States. This prompted a civil war that ended after US
Marines landed in Honduras to protect Americans living there and American properties (particularly fruit companies growing bananas). In 1932, General Carías Andino took office and the war seemed to come to a pause. Roosevelt passed an act called the Good Neighbor Policy which established that the US would stop interfering in Honduras. There were high levels of unrest and poverty after the civil war and with the start of the Great Depression, and Carías Andino took advantage of the situation and stayed in power for 16 years, marking a long and brutal dictatorship. During his dictatorship Honduras declared war on Japan, Germany and Italy in loyalty with the United States after they were promised aid in return for a war declaration. This further increased the economic downfall and distress among the people, as money was invested into the war effort rather than in public services for the people, and this made people very resentful (Leonard, 2011).

Resentment turned to organized opposition, and eventually there was a revolution in 1947 that caused Carías Andino to resign and hand power to his minister of defense, Juan Manuel Cálvez in 1949. He was brought down by a military revolt in 1957 and replaced by Ramón Villeda Morales, who attempted to modernize the country and improve working conditions for banana laborers after 60,000 of them went on a long strike. Villeda Morales was overthrown in 1963 and replaced by Colonel López Arellano (Clegern, 2016). As we can see, Honduras faced a long period where the only form of power transition was with coups and military revolts, showing that the government was unable to ensure control of violence and power. Under López Arellano’s term, Honduras went to war with El Salvador in the Soccer war of 1969, which Honduras eventually lost. This war had a big economic cost for Honduras, it caused lots of resentment between Salvadorans and Hondurans and halted hopes of possible economic and political integration in Central America. The toll of the war was disproportionally felt by the poor and the people living in rural areas, as broken infrastructure and lack of state organization made it so communities living
outside the city were completely isolated from the rest of the population. Inequality also grew, which contributed to a vanishing middle class and expanding lower class (BTI, 2016). Manwaring (2007) describes how post-war conditions incited fear, anger, and resentment, and this caused many to either leave the country or resort to violence to try and improve their lives.

After the war, the country continued to be ruled by the military regime of López Arellano until in 1971, Ramón Ernesto Cruz was elected and worked alongside López Arellano. In 1972, López Arellano felt threatened by Cruz and forced him to leave office, marking the end of a very short democratic era for Honduras. Lopez continued his brutal dictatorship but was forced to resign after an international bribery scandal in 1975. He was replaced by Colonel Juan Alberto Melgar Castro in 1975, who helped Honduras enter the global coffee market, ultimately strengthening the economy. There was another coup in 1978 and General Policarpo Paz García attained power and attempted to continue Melgar’s policies (Leonard, 2011). As we can see, Honduras was ruled by several military regimes and constantly facing coups, which strengthened distrust in society towards the military and the government and, similarly to its neighboring Northern Triangle Countries, prompted people to create their own courts at home, their own vigilante systems, and eventually organized guerrillas and violent street gangs. While the majority of the armed forces were loyal to the government, the forces working in rural areas dominated by vigilante and opposition groups started becoming disloyal to the government and working with the opposition. This further aggravated the situation of chaos and violence and placed a burden on the legitimacy of the government, as people saw that even the armed forces did not fully trust the government (Clegern, 2016). The CIA’s ‘Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency’ (2012) classifies armed groups with trained expertise or dissidents of the military as a militia. This means that, under this definition, the mobilized groups composed of former army officers were militias, and as they
eventually gained a network and gained land, they could be considered an insurgency under the same guide’s definitions. This is key because it shows that insurgencies threatening sovereignty existed long before the creation of the Maras, and, in fact, according to Manwaring (2007), the Maras were born out of pre-existing insurgencies and militias.

In 1981, Roberto Suazo Códova was elected, which marked the first non-military and democratic government after many years of military regimes. He wanted to strengthen relations with the US, so he allowed the US to establish Nicaraguan Contras (anti-Sandinista guerrillas) to work in the Honduran-Nicaraguan border. The US also established camps in Honduras to train civilians as part of an anti-communist program during the Cold War, which would be responsible for battling communist guerrillas such as the FARC in Colombia. This caused many to feel betrayed by their government, as foreigners were using their land, and mass protests ensued. However, Suazo was able to maintain power because he received aid from the US in exchange for letting them use Honduran land (Clegern, 2016).

Suazo was succeeded by José Azcona Hoyo in an election that appeared to be won through bribery and extortion (Clegern, 2016). Because of this scandal, elections were held again shortly after and Rafael Leonardo Callejas won and took office peacefully and without scandal, for the first time in 57 years. Under his administration, the country saw a rise in violence as guerrillas and vigilante groups formed over the years started to transition into street gangs, because they were influenced by deported US gang members that had created their own gangs in the US. The 1980s and 1990s marked a democratic era, albeit many charges of corruption, bribery, and extortion in the government, and rapidly growing violence and cases of organized crime in the social arena. A hurricane in 1998 exacerbated poverty and inequality, and left millions of Hondurans displaced. This caused many people to pledge allegiance to gangs or vigilante groups that had become
pseudo-guerrillas, in return for housing and welfare and some kind of a salary, as the government was unable to provide goods for everyone, especially people in rural areas. A large number of people also emigrated towards the United States, creating a fluid trafficking route between the Northern Triangle and the US, facilitating all kinds of trafficking and profit for street gangs. This meant that when people who had crossed this route to get into the United States were deported back to the Northern Triangle, they were very familiar with the route and were able to use it for drug trafficking, eventually monopolizing the trade in Central America. (UNODC, 2017). Today, Juan Orlando Hernández is in power despite many corruption scandals and violent mass protests against him. Violence rates are high and gang membership has increased since the 1990s (BTI, 2016). Due to its strong agricultural past, Honduras also produces high quantities of drugs for the Maras in the Northern Triangle and has become a key area for the gang. Manwaring (2007) considers Honduras the production hub of the Maras because of its particularly fertile soil and vast amounts of jungle used for the Maras to hide drugs and trafficked people. Therefore, the gangs cannot survive in only one country, as without Guatemala and El Salvador they would lose the majority of their members, but without Honduras they would lose their largest reserves of illicit substances and farming lands. This supports Stumpf’s (2007) idea that criminal groups both thrive and depend on immigration and transnationalism.

Conclusion

After studying the complex histories of the three Northern Triangle states, it is clear that the issues they are facing are not new, but rather a consequence of many years of violence and instability. The three countries all faced lengthy wars and violent dictatorships that contributed to deteriorating conditions, and, if the indicators from the Fund for Peace (2018) ‘Fragile State Index’
are considered, to becoming fragile states. It is also clear that, considering the same indicators, the states are not recently fragile because of the Maras, but rather have been fragile since their independence. Analyzing sovereignty in these three countries in relation to the Maras might be difficult considering none of them have ever had strong sovereignty. Considering that it is clear the Maras did not cause the states to be fragile, it can be concluded that the Maras are a consequence of much deeper issues, but perhaps they are contributing to an even deeper struggle with sovereignty. It seems the theory of Sobel and Osaba (2009), who claim that states that struggle with maintaining their sovereignty against youth gangs tend to have deeper underlying issues that are the root of the problem is correct, and those need to be addressed in order to fix the situation with the gangs. The International Crisis Report (2017), which talks specifically about the three countries in question, places strong emphasis on the importance of historical factors and underlying issues such as grievance from the war, poverty, inequality, and collapsed institutions, rather than placing the blame on the Maras for the fragility of the states. After the discoveries made in this chapter, the next chapter will have to analyze the Mara’s relationship to sovereignty while maintaining that the root of the states’ struggles with sovereignty can be found in the violent dictatorships that followed independence.
4. The Maras and Their Relationship to the State

This chapter will focus on the Mara Salvatruchas’ relationship to the state, and, in turn, how the state has responded. The Mara Salvatruchas are a street gang that have taken over streets and larger areas in Central America, particularly El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. They are partly credited for high murder rates and rising violence by NGOs and local governments (InSight Crime, 2017). They are also seen as a threat to sovereignty by some scholars mentioned in Chapter 3, and as a consequence of weakening states by scholars such as Sobel and Osaba (2009). They are variously defined as insurgencies, street gangs, guerrilla groups, or just Organized Crime groups by the different scholars mentioned in Chapter 1, so this chapter will aim to properly define their relationship with the state by looking at their methods and structure.

This Chapter will analyze when they replace the state and when they undermine it, in order to understand the effect the gang has on sovereignty in the Northern Triangle. Then, it will study how the state is responding and aim to provide policy recommendations. It will use empirical data on the Maras and relate it back to the theories from Chapter 1. It is important to understand if the Maras are creating weak states, or if they are products of weak states by looking at the Fund for Peace definitions. It will also aim to see if it is accurate to call the Maras an insurgency using the CIA definitions (2012), in order to understand what exactly the state is fighting.

Part 1 - When the Maras replace the State

An important factor to consider in the gang’s relationship with the state is how the Maras are replacing it, as this weakens the state further and possibly jeopardizes its sovereignty. The Maras have structured their gang to provide members with several services that the state is
normally in charge of. Manwaring (2007) explains that groups like the Maras aim to replace the state in certain sectors to both strengthen themselves and to weaken the state. As a consequence, people have either started turning to the gangs to get some of their basic needs met and promise of opportunity or have resorted to leaving their country often through human smuggling (BTI 2016).

The main ways in this the Maras replace the state is by providing their own citizenship and documentation, which disincentivizes people from getting state citizenship. This allows the Maras to create their own sense of identity and belonging, stability, justice and law, and leadership.

One way the Maras replace the state is through vital records. People born in Mara territory or near it often do not record births or deaths with the state, but with the Maras instead. This means the state does not know how many people are actually in the gang or how many people live in the areas dominated by them. The gang seems to have its own records of births and deaths, and it often marks babies that will be future gang members with tattoos that record their birthdate and location (BBC, 2006). The gang also has a concept of Mara Citizenship, meaning people living near the gangs or in the gang’s territories consider themselves Mara citizens and, in some cases, they even have documents given by the Maras indicating they are members. These people generally do not have their country’s citizenship. In fact, some people interviewed by Al Jazeera apparently did not even know how to get citizenship or register for a passport, so they resorted to get Mara documents and register with the gang (Al Jazeera, 2017). Identity documents and recording births and deaths is an important duty of the state, and in this case, it is clear that the state is not delivering.

Considering the theory of Sobel and Osaba (2009), one could argue that this is not because the gangs specifically wanted to take this task into their own hands, but rather that they filled a void and completed a task the state was incapable of fulfilling. After the civil war and increased inequality between the rich and the poor, the state did not create infrastructure connecting rural
areas to cities and did not reach out to the poor, often ignoring problems in slums and not bothering
to document births and deaths. Manwaring’s theory, on the other hand, might support the idea that
this is a technique the gang is using specifically to strengthen itself, gain legitimacy, and grow. By
having its own form of citizenship and documentation people feel more belonging to the gang and
perhaps become more loyal to it (Manwaring, 2007).

The gang generally provides a sense of belonging, other than Mara citizenship, that the
state seems to have failed to develop for the poor, marginalized and indigenous portions of society.
A common theme among interviews with ex-gang members or current gang members is the sense
of belonging, family, and the idea that no one is discriminated against within the gang (Al Jazeera,
2017). Discrimination is a big problem in the Northern Triangle (UNDP, 2016). People with darker
features or of indigenous descent are often cast out from society and made to feel like they do not
belong. They are not hired for jobs, they are often physically or verbally harassed, they have a hard
time renting homes in non-indigenous areas, and their children are often not accepted to private
schools (TVE, 2015). There is also a lot of classism, meaning that belonging to certain families
can ensure success, while belonging to other families can mean never accessing high-paying jobs
or never being accepted into universities. In gangs, none of this exists, according to people that
were interviewed. There is no hierarchy according to race, class, family name, religion, etc., so
people feel they can find a large family in the Maras (Government of Canada, 2014). If members
are loyal to gangs, they receive benefits, welfare, and protection. The protection aspect has been
particularly attractive to marginalized groups that were highly affected during the civil wars,
because they feel the government is not their ally, so their options are either to leave, form a
guerrilla, or join an existing gang or guerrilla. In the lens of Sobel and Osaba’s theory (2009), it is
possible that people are joining gangs for protection as a response to historical state-sponsored
violence. The gang has also, through time, become so isolated from the elite and the traditionally non-member population, that is has created many other indicators of its own identity. The form of Spanish spoken in the gang, for example, is unique and often called “Mara dialect”. Maras have also developed their own wedding traditions, funeral traditions, and even forms of museums. People’s homes are often used as museums for past Mara heroes. People can see pictures of those heroes, see how they lived, and hear stories passed down to the descendants. They also seem to believe in a Mara afterlife, where all the Maras that remained loyal until death are believed to have lots of wealth and prosperity and peace (Univision, 2017). All of this contributes to young people being raised to look up to them and one day want to be a Mara. The opposite is also true, as people outside the gang are raised to hate and resent the Maras. Keeping Anderson’s theory of identity in mind, one could argue this is a fundamental challenge to the sovereignty of the Northern Triangle, because identity is a pillar of sovereignty. Weak states such as the three in question are more likely to produce imagined communities isolated from the identity of the state. This later on causes problems for the state as it undermines its legitimacy and replaces the sense of belonging that is needed to keep a state together. The Maras are becoming an imagined community completely separate from the state, and this is jeopardizing the sovereignty of the Northern Triangle countries. In the Northern Triangle the idea of imagined communities has always been important because guerrillas, while their main goal is to gain power, tend to base their movement on an idea of community which then makes people trust them more than their state. Also, the shared grievances of people in the Northern Triangle after years of war and dictatorships makes people reject the state and look for other identities to join.
The third way the Maras are replacing the state is by providing people with stability. People in El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala were left in a state of poverty and insecurity after the civil wars, and the Maras were often seen as a solution for having the needs the state would not or could not provide. According to interviews from TVE, Univision, and BBC, the Maras provided people with jobs, welfare, a salary, a pension, food, shelter, and protection. Everyone in the Maras is given a home, either of their own or shared with other members, that belongs to the entire Mara community. They also receive packages of food and share it among themselves, and make sure every member is well fed so they can be useful members. Loyal members are provided with a salary, their wives are provided with pensions in exchange for educating children that will be future Maras or for acting as drug mules, and there is a structured form of welfare controlled by leaders of districts (small towns where only Maras live and are in control). Not all districts have the same wealth or structure, but they generally act under the principle that all members should be rewarded for their loyalty. They also have protection for themselves and their families if they remain loyal, and this has been an attractive benefit for people feeling state-sponsored violent discrimination (Government of Canada, 2014). Interviews by Univision showed that Mara members found their promises had been kept so long as they stayed loyal to the gang. The price is great, as they had to kill people to remain in the gang and live in constant fear of being deemed a traitor, but they were able to feed their families and ensure a pension that they otherwise would not have been able to access (Univision Noticias, 2017). Young children also join the gang if they are orphaned or grow up in poor households as they are designated new guardians when they join the gang if they are orphans or displaced from their families and provided with a sense of financial security. The gang also recruits young boys by promising them luxuries that are completely out of the average budget of a young man from a lower-class family, such as designer shoes and gold watches. The Fund for
Peace’s indicators of a weak state include several economic factors, among which are inequality, economic decline, and uneven development. It also includes a lack of public services as an indicator of a weak state. It seems the three states in question fit these indicators as they are not providing public services, even development, economic growth or equality for all their people, and so people seek these benefits from non-state actors. (UNDP, 2016). This means the state cannot intend to maintain strong sovereignty against the Maras until they provide all the things people seem to join the Maras for, or at least provide enough opportunity for people to legally acquire the stability they need. This would appear to confirm what Sobel and Osaba theorize, as the gangs are only filling a void that the state did not fill, which is inevitable as people will do anything they can to have their needs met. (Sobel and Osaba, 2009). Similarly, The International Crisis Report, which talks directly addresses the Maras, argues that solving underlying issues is key, as providing public services to marginalized people would make membership look less attractive (International Crisis Group, 2017).

The fourth way in which the Maras replace the state is through justice, law and leadership. In an informal way, they have managed to replace branches of government with Mara laws, leaders, and a sort of Mara police. Manwaring (2007) sees this as the most dangerous form of state replacement, as he believes the Maras are delegitimizing the governmental institutions of the state, which will lead to institutional collapse and a loss of sovereignty. The Maras have their own form of justice. If someone breaks a Mara rule or is seen to be disloyal, there are several forms of punishment they might face according to the district Leader’s discretion. The Maras also have a very strict set of laws, and people are very well acquainted with them. In fact, residents of Mara territory (“half” members or trusted non-members) that were interviewed by Al Jazeera said that while they respect authority, they always obey gangs out of fear (Al Jazeera, 2016). Some of the
people interviewed by TVE were only aware of Mara laws and could not name any state laws. This shows the Maras not only created their own set of rules and forms of justice, but for some people, they have replaced the state in this way as some members are not even aware what the state expects of them. (TVE, 2017).

The Maras also have their own form of hierarchical leadership. Members are not usually aware who the top leaders are, but they always know who their district leader is. A district leader controls a portion of Mara territory, generally a small neighborhood or a rural town. They decide the laws of that district, the punishments, and they distribute money to members. Districts are clearly marked with graffiti, and each district has an election process (a sort of direct democracy among men) for district leaders. The districts see themselves as a family and in the past, when districts have felt neglected by the gang, they have branched out and created their own gangs. Generally, however, districts remain loyal to the gang and the higher leadership. TVE noted that all Mara members interviewed knew who their district leader was, but many could not answer who the President of their country was. (TVE, 2017). Manwaring finds this very worrying and he states that the fact that the Maras is replacing these government functions makes them more than a gang, but an insurgency that could potentially try to take over the state to maintain its position or grow. (Manwaring 2007). If we consider the CIA’s *Guide to the Analysis of an Insurgency* and the definitions outlined in it, we can say that the fact the Maras are replacing government functions, and maybe entire government branches by making their members unaware of laws and state leadership, and untrustworthy of the police, would qualify them as an insurgency. In order to be an insurgency under this definition, the Maras would need to have the objective of taking control of a population or particular territory and to delegitimize the government, which, as is seen in this section, the Maras have been successful in doing in terms of gang members.
Part 2 - When the Maras undermine the state

This section will aim to understand when the Maras undermine the state, by looking at ways they threaten the state or escape it. Escaping the state indirectly threatens it as it means the Maras can disregard laws and, therefore, not take the state’s power seriously. Manwaring believes an important way the Maras grow is by purposefully undermining it and escaping it when they can. (Manwaring, 2007). The main ways the Maras do this is by corrupting and extorting state actors, using violence and intimidation, and continuously breaking the law. All of these methods are threatening the state’s sovereignty and, according to the Fund for Peace indicators, contributing to weakening the state.

The Maras have managed to infiltrate the governments of the Northern Triangle through corruption, bribery, extortion, and sometimes even violence. This allows them to undermine the state, as they end up having some control and influence over it, and also to escape it, as they can force the state to turn a blind eye to their trafficking activities. TVE noted that politicians are usually very disconnected from what actually happens in slums and areas controlled by gangs, so when they accept bribes or become corrupt, they have no idea how much damage they are truly doing. Politicians tend to be from elite, educated portions of society that have never come in to contact with gang related violence, so they often ignore or are unaware of how much the poor of their country fear gangs and violence (TVE, 2015). In 2016 there were mass protests across the Northern Triangle because leadership all the way up to the executive was accused of taking bribes from gangs or turning a blind eye to human trafficking, drug trafficking, and rising crime rates. (BTI, 2016). There are exceptional politicians that try to get involved in solving the issue and do
not deny the Maras are a serious threat, but they face threats from the gang and are ostracized by other politicians who do not want to admit the gravity of the situation (Farah, 2013). Besides corrupting politicians, the Maras also corrupt local leadership, such as chiefs of police or by infiltrating prisons. In fact, the Maras have managed to take over and completely control several prisons across the Northern Triangle (Farah, 2013), using these to their advantage. They use prisons to recruit new members, plan attacks, corrupt new officials, and sell illegal drugs, weapons, or people. (BBC, 2006). The prisons resemble cartel headquarters, and sometimes, entire Mara districts are located in prisons. People even get sent to prison according to whether they are a member or not: if you are a member sometimes the Mara corrupts the judicial branch to get you sent to the specific prisons you want. (TVE, 2015). Keeping in mind what Sobel and Osaba argue about institutions, it can be said that the large-scale corruption in the Northern Triangle is not due to the gangs wanting to corrupt them, but rather to weak institutions that have always been corrupt. The solution does not lie in repressing the gangs, but rather in creating incentives for politicians to not become corrupt and in strengthening institutions. In terms of prisons, we can take Sobel and Osaba’s lens and say that police and prison guards are not trained properly to avoid the situation that exists. (Sobel and Osaba, 2009). The International Crisis Report states this is a direct consequence of the civil wars and many military dictatorships, as there was not a fluid transition to democracy that would decrease the possibility of corruption (International Crisis Group, 2017). Considering this argument, it is perhaps possible that the Northern Triangle countries have still not transitioned into democracy, as corruption has always been a problem, and the Maras are not the underlying issue. Manwaring, on the other hand, says that a response needs to revolve around the Maras in order to be solved. He argues the Maras are only growing and strengthening by corrupting
politicians and prisons, so in order to weaken them, they need to be forcefully restricted from controlling the government and prisons. (Manwaring, 2007).

Another way in which the Maras are undermining or escaping the state is through violence. Since the creation of the Maras, there has been an increase in non-state sponsored violence. (BTI 2016). While the Maras are generally associated with violence in the area, anonymous police officers interviewed by Vice noted that there are police death squads that target potential members or allies of gang members and have been credited with several civilian deaths (Vice News, 2015). This has prompted civilians to respond by joining gangs in larger numbers and creating their own vigilante or guerrilla groups to protect themselves. Considering what was said by both Sobel and Osaba, and the International Crisis Report, one could argue that the Mara use of violence is a response to state-sponsored violence and long, violent civil wars. The Chief of Police of San Salvador stated that El Salvador and its neighbors have always used violence for social movements, to solve problems, or to maintain power, so this is more of a historical and cultural issue than a Mara problem. (Vice News, 2015). Violence is a growing problem in the Northern Triangle. TVE noted that the majority of people in poor sections of society either know someone affected by Mara-sponsored violence or have personally been affected it. (TVE, 2015). It also noted that sometimes hospitals are too full to take all stab-wound or gunshot victims, and that the state does not record disappearances anymore because it is so focused on murders. The Maras also conduct repeated attacks on the police, such as throwing grenade bombs into police stations or, in some districts, killing police officers on a regular basis. This has made the police hesitant to try to stop the violence as it is very risky for them. In fact, arrests of Mara members in particularly violent districts are generally symbolic, as leaders of districts are never arrested. Police say the gangs are very well trained and use military strategies, showing they are advancing in terms of their arsenal.
and skill (Univision Noticias, 2017). Many interviews with civilians living in slums show that people feel they are living in a state of war and constant fear due to the violence (TVE, 2015). Manwaring believes the Mara use of violence is an important threat to the legitimacy of the state and it is important to directly target the Maras and decrease the violence. The CIA definition of insurgency qualifies the continuous use of violence as a factor of an insurgency (CIA, 2012). This means that the violent aspect of the Maras could make them insurgency. The Fund for Peace maintains that states that do not have a monopoly on the use of violence are weak states. Considering the fact that the Northern Triangle clearly does not have a monopoly on the use of violence because of the Mara’s continuous violent practices, they may all be weak states. While Manwaring writes that the Maras have made the state weak through violence, it is possible that they have responded to an already weak state with violence and furthered its weakening. If this is the case, Manwaring could be wrong in this particular analysis on the Mara use of violence.

Another fundamental way the Maras undermine the state is by continuously breaking the law, which de-legitimizes legislation and the entire judicial system. The Fund for Peace considers continuously breaking laws as a threat to the Security Apparatus, making it a factor that can weaken the state (Fund for Peace, 2018). The Maras have a monopoly in the Northern Triangle on drug trafficking, human trafficking, weapons trafficking, organ trafficking, human smuggling, and identity theft (UNODC, 2017). They also regularly conduct extortion for money, corrupt officials, and murder people or use torture to complete their goals. All of this is illegal under Salvadorian, Guatemalan, and Honduran law. Usually the three countries turn a blind eye to systematic breach of laws, deny what is happening, or do not have the resources to properly enforce the law. Sobel and Osaba argue that if the institutions set in place to protect the law are not strong enough, the law will never be respected until those institutions are strengthened and improved. (Sobel and
Osaba, 2009). Manwaring, on the other hand, does not think the issue is weak institutions, but rather he writes that the Maras and their transnational network are undermining the state due to the fact that they can escape to different states to avoid the law. (Manwaring, 2007). If leaders are searched for by the police, they are automatically moved to another country to hide. Sometimes, even entire districts are moved. (BBC, 2017). Also, the intelligence network that the Maras use is transnational, while the three states of the Northern Triangle do not have a transnational intelligence network and share little information with each other. The Maras have a strong intelligence network that works through the internet, graffiti codes, and vigilance all over the area by members or their families. This puts them at an advantage over the state as their intelligence is transnational and not decoded by the police. (UNODC, 2017). Using the lens of the International Crisis Report, we could say that the Maras are able to break the law and use their transnational nature to their advantage because during the civil wars, guerrillas used unofficial trails to leave and enter the country and became used to having a transnational advantage, so the Maras inherited this. (International Crisis Group, 2017). Stumpf’s Crimmigration theory argues that the transnational factor in criminal groups is usually their main strength, and states need to react by becoming more open to sharing information and getting closer to other countries affected in similar ways. Considering his theory, we can conclude that the Maras will always be stronger than the state if it does not acknowledge to the transnational nature of the gang and start cooperating with neighbor states. (Stumpf, 2007).

**Part 3 - How the State is Responding**

Since the Maras have posed such a significant threat to sovereignty and contributed to the weakening of already weak states, the states of the Northern Triangle have had to respond,
sometimes drastically, to try and save face. The three states have always responded differently without taking a collaborated, unified approach, and this is perhaps why the Maras have not gone away. First, I will look at what the states have done, then what they have not done, and then try to make policy recommendations according to my analysis of what went wrong with their approach so far. All of this works under the assumption that what the state has done has not worked, and this conclusion has been made by looking at BTI reports of increasing Mara membership, increasing murder rates, and increasing fear of the Maras within the population. (BTI, 2016). Also, the findings in earlier parts of this chapter that prove the Maras are a threat to sovereignty and that past approaches taken by the state have failed. While making this analysis, it is important to remember that the specific countries in question have, as seen in Chapter 2, always had weak states. This means that their responses mirror their state’s strength, and perhaps this is why they have failed to decrease Mara membership and crime rates. This also means that theories on how states can regain sovereignty found in Chapter 1 cannot always be fully implemented into this situation because of the fact that El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras never really had a strong grasp on sovereignty. Three scholars mentioned in Chapter 1 directly tackle the question of what states can do to decrease the danger of the Maras; Manwaring, Boraz and Bruneau, and the International Crisis Report. Manwaring argues for an effort that starts at the grassroot level, Boraz and Bruneau argue for a reboot of the SICA sponsored agreement, and the International Crisis Report has a four-pronged approach for how the Northern Triangle should decrease Mara membership and crime rates. Using the analysis of how states have responded and what the theorists say, the end of this chapter will focus on policy recommendations for the Northern Triangle.
Each state has responded differently to the Maras, partly because the three countries do not trust each other enough to share techniques, as is seen in the wars mentioned in Chapter 2. Also, they have not cooperated partly because the many different dictatorships that took over in the Northern Triangle have tended to be isolationist and very nationalist in nature, making the countries less susceptible to cooperation with foreign entities. However, one thing all states did similarly is their disregard for the 1991 SICA-sponsored agreements between Central American countries and the Dominican Republic. Boraz and Bruneau talk about the SICA agreement, and they believe the Northern Triangle’s lack of implementation was a result or corruption, and if it had been implemented the fight against the Maras may have been more successful. (Boraz and Bruneau, 2006).

El Salvador has had four main approaches to dealing with the Maras: the denial approach, the arresting approach, the death squads approach, and the current mixed approach. Some of the approaches taken by El Salvador have not only stifled progress in containing the Maras, but sometimes even contributed to the problem (Hume, 2007). When the Maras first started establishing territory and growing in membership in El Salvador in the late 1990s (Ramsey, 2012), the Salvadorian government seemed to take a stance of denial. Public opinion started getting worried over the gang’s growth in power, but the government systematically denied their existence or, if they acknowledged it, denied they posed any danger to the country (Hume, 2007). It is very probable that this approach contributed to the growth of the Maras, because the government’s denial meant they took virtually no action against them. They seemed to believe the problem would go away on its own or that other issues in the country took precedence. Also, the government probably did not have enough resources at the time to deal with the problems of the Maras as the civil war had just ended, and mass deportations from the United States of gang members only
added to an already chaotic situation. In the mid-2000s, El Salvador took a different approach, beginning mass-arrests of anyone that was a member of the Maras (UNODC, 2017). The government declared a state of emergency, which removed the requirement for a trial for each arrest. Suspicion alone was enough to get arrested, and any tattoo signifying membership was a surefire way to jail. This approach failed because the gang started mobilizing inside the prisons and grew quickly with new memberships from other prisoners, taking over prisons, and conducting mass escapes. The government thus recognized that the mass-arrests approach was not working, so administrations from 2003 onwards started a Mano Dura (hard hand) approach of combining mass-arrests with much contested “death squads”. (Univision, 2017). The name “death squads” is a colloquial name put on a branch of police that focused solely on breaking up gang fights, and eventually killing district leaders or randomly killing gang members. This created a situation of general fear of the police by people from rural areas that already feared government after many decades of wars and dictatorships. Consequently, the government was de-legitimized and it is very possible that this exacerbated the use of violence from the gangs, or even prompted more membership out of fear. The current approach in El Salvador is a mixture of mass arrests, death squads, and a newly imposed process of reintegration for ex-gang members (UNODC; 2017). However, the reintegration process has not been largely successful as there is a stigma to being a former gang member, so society does not collaborate with integration programs and tends to shun ex-members, sometimes forcing them to leave the gang and then risk being killed for betrayal. (Hume, 2007).

In Honduras, the state reacted slightly faster than in El Salvador. There was no long period of systematic denial of the gang issue. It is possible that the government did not deny the problem because it was targeted more especially in Honduras. There were several killings of government
officials or policemen by the Maras in the late 1990s, which prompted the government to declare a state of emergency and to categorize the Maras as a terrorist group (Reisman, 2006). This allowed policemen to conduct mass-arrests, and sometimes even legitimized the use of state-sponsored violence. This led to the second approach taken by Honduras - mass violence from the police (Ungar, 2008). In the 2000s, police were reportedly seen beating members, arresting people just for their tattoos, and sometimes even killing members that were not posing a direct danger to them (Reisman, 2006). This led large-scale set of popular protests, and a further lack of trust towards the armed forces, which already existed after many years of war. This strategy clearly delegitimized the armed forces of Honduras and perhaps even helped strengthen the Maras by legitimizing their violent responses to the police. After this strategy, Honduras went through a process of retraining police to de-escalate violence and focus more on arrests. However, the prisons became overcrowded and there was simply no space left to continue arresting people at the same rate. This is what led to the current approach of a combination of mass arrests and reintegration (Reisman, 2006). The reintegration process is perhaps the most successful out of the three countries because many ex-members that go through the government reintegration program are reported to have completely cut ties with the gangs and have even found jobs and built new lives for themselves (UNODC, 2017).

Guatemala has developed similar strategies to Honduras, with the key differences that it has received police training from the United States and has declared a state of emergency many times in the past few years. Guatemala’s first reaction to the growth of the Maras was to appeal to the United States and NGOs for help, as record numbers of police officers were being killed and it seemed the police were largely unprepared for this new threat (UNODC, 2017). Since the 1990s, the US has been training some Guatemalan officials to try to combat the growth of the Maras, and
this program recently grew in 2015 to the point where 500 police officers are trained annually in Florida (UNODC, 2017). Besides receiving training from the United States, Guatemala has gone through three stages of approaches towards the issue. The first was to declare a state of emergency and use violence against the Maras, to the point that government officials in the early 2000s stated that the country was in a state of war with the Maras (Reisman, 2006). Then, the violence seemed to decrease as resentment against the government grew, and another approach was taken, with officials conducting arrests and containing Mara villages so that nothing could enter or leave those villages without supervision. This project was largely underfunded and ended up disappearing with time, leading to the current approach in which, every few months, Guatemala declares a state of emergency, conducts massive arrests and uses violence against the Maras, and then calms down briefly until the next state of emergency. This approach is unsustainable and has created resentment and fear against the government, such people in rural areas are unsure if they trust the government more than the Maras (BTI, 2016).

After having studied what the countries have done to combat the issue of the Maras, it is important to see what they have failed to do, as this could possibly help understand what they should be doing. There are two main things the three countries have neglected to do: they have failed to tackle underlying issues and have failed to collaborate transnationally with each other. Tackling the underlying issues would be important in order to prevent membership. As we saw in previous parts of this chapter, many people join gangs because of poverty, lack of opportunity, and security issues. If people had these needs met, they might not be as tempted by the promises of the Maras. The International Crisis Report directly mentions the importance of going to the root of the problem and dealing with all the underlying issues that face these countries. The Report states that the governments of the Northern Triangle’s lack of acknowledgement of socio-economic problems
has led the Maras to replace the government in these areas, which has contributed extensively to their power (International Crisis Report, 2017). The next main gap in the approach taken by the Northern Triangle is the lack of tri-state collaboration. Since the three countries face the same issues and have a similar history and socio-economic problems, it could be helpful for them to try to battle the issue of the Maras together. As the Maras are a transnational group, the only way to fully tackle them is by using an international strategy. Manwaring focuses on the transnational aspect of tackling the Maras. He underlines that the Maras have always grown because of their transnational nature, and that the only way states can overpower them is if they mimic their transnational, network-style structure. Boraz and Bruneau also focus on this point and mention the 1991 SICA-sponsored agreements that, in their opinion, have not been implemented successfully by the three states. They believe an important first step to battling this issue would be to focus on implementing the SICA-sponsored agreements from 1991, and from that point move to ever closer collaboration.

Part 4 - Policy Recommendations

After studying the failed approaches of the three countries, the gaps in their policy approaches, and the perspectives of theorists focusing specifically on the Maras, I attempt to make some policy recommendations for the three countries, divided into five main pillars. The first part is to focus on integrating people that have been deported from the United States so they do not continue the cycle of joining gangs upon returning to Central America. With the current administration, more people have been and will continue to be deported from the United States, including many Mara members (TVE, 2015). The Northern Triangle should not repeat the mistakes it made in the late 1990s by ignoring the problem of mass deportations to Central America. This
could entail an institution that helps deported citizens find jobs, housing, and perhaps helps them relocate to areas that are not controlled by gangs so they do not feel pressure to join them. Next, I would recommend tackling the underlying poverty, inequality, lack of opportunity, and other factors of a weak state mentioned in the Fund for Peace. In the lens of Annan (2006), one could argue that until these structural problems are addressed, the threat posed by groups such as the Maras will not diminish. Lastly, I agree with Manwaring and Boraz and Bruneau in their emphasis on tri-national collaboration in the matter. However, Boraz and Bruneau’s strong insistence on reinforcing the 1991 SICA-sponsored agreements might not be the most effective as it does not focus mainly on the Northern Triangle, but on the entire Central American region, perhaps making it harder to implement and regulate as more parties are involved.

**Conclusion**

After studying the Mara’s relationship to the state by looking at how they replace it and how they undermine it, I can conclude that the Maras are weakening the state and acting as an insurgency. They are contributing to the four indicators of a weak state provided by the Fund for Peace: Cohesion, Economics, Politics, and Social Problems. They are purposely weakening it in order to continue their illegal activities and make profit. This, as well as their use of violence and their control over territory, makes them an insurgency under the CIA definition provided in Chapter 1. After knowing this and being aware of the dangerous relationship the Maras have to the state, it is clear the state needs to respond, as Manwaring says, to save its legitimacy and sovereignty. After looking at how the state has responded, and the fact that crime rates and membership have not decreased, it is clear the states have not found an effective method of response to growing Mara power. It is also clear the states must focus on tackling underlying
issues, focusing on integrating newly deported citizens, and on tri-national collaboration to successfully strengthen their sovereignty.
5. Conclusion

After more than a year of research and writing, it can be said this paper was both successful and extremely difficult at times. Finding reliable information has been difficult, there is very little first-hand information on the Maras, and the controversy of the topic means few local people write about it in a scholarly setting. Nevertheless, this paper has managed to achieve its goals in terms of findings and has inspired me to continue researching and reading on this topic.

Findings

This paper wanted to understand if the Maras are a threat to sovereignty, and, if so, how much of a threat they pose. This required both an understanding of sovereignty and an understanding of the situation in those specific countries both before the Maras formed and during their rise. The understanding of sovereignty as a concept was taken from scholarly sources attempting to broaden the definition of sovereignty, since the traditional definition of a sovereign nation state could not be easily applied to Northern Triangle countries because of the many coups, guerrillas, and militias throughout history that have threatened the state. Then, the Fragile State Index from the Fund for Peace was used to determine what a weak state looks like and to see if these states are, in fact, fragile. After comparing these definitions to the Northern Triangle, it was determined that they are indeed fragile states. However, the chapter on ‘Historical Background and Political Context’ proved that the states had indicators of weakness far before the Maras emerged. In fact, the existence of those indicators is what caused the Maras to rise up. The reason the Northern Triangle has fragile states that now face a challenge to their sovereignty from the Maras is because of the scars left from decades of war and dictatorships which left the country
plagued with broken infrastructure, a rise in diseases, poverty, and inequality because of the destruction, loss of jobs, and austerity cuts to social services in order to invest in war. The state-sponsored violence left the countries with grievances, resentment, and a lack of trust. The constant instability of governments deteriorated the institutions in place and fueled corruption at every level. Finally, the opposition movements left the countries with armed guerrillas, vigilante groups, and thousands of internally displaced peoples with no jobs and no shelter. Then, when the area was recovering and attempting democratization, it received thousands of deported migrants from the United States of America, which returned to countries that could not offer them any services or help. These are the reasons the Maras rose, and the reasons the states were and still are fragile. This means that, in order to tackle the Maras, the governments will have to tackle those underlying issues as well, as other groups with the same resentment could form.

Regardless of the fact that the Maras are not the main reason the Northern Triangle is struggling with state fragility, they are still posing a strong threat to sovereignty when they replace and undermine the state. As emerged in the Chapter discussing the Maras and their relationship to the state, the Maras replace the state by providing people with services a functioning state would normally offer: jobs, welfare, shelter, and a pension plan. The Maras provide people with a sense of belonging and identity which people lost because of grievances and displacement from war. They provide a family and a sense of protection to people who fear the state and do not know who to side with in a divided country. They undermine the state by using violence against it to get what they want and corrupting it to infiltrate it in order to more easily traffic substances and people through the main ports. They undermine its institutions by replacing them or defaming them, and by blatantly breaking laws without facing consequences because of their transnational nature.
The paper also found that the approach taken by the states is not working. Firstly, they systematically deny the issue or make it seem less problematic than it is. For example, after comparing the Maras to the CIA definitions of armed groups, this paper came to the conclusion that the Maras are an insurgency, and at times a militia. The governments of the Northern Triangle refer to them as youth gangs or as young criminals, which underestimates the true nature of the gang as an organized, militarized group that undermines sovereignty. The governments are also not tackling underlying issues, using violence which is causing more resentment, not collaborating amongst each other, and not providing services and shelter to migrants deported from the United States of America, causing people to resent the state and find comfort in the gang. I would consider the results of this paper successful, as the goal of understanding how much of a threat the Maras are to sovereignty was accomplished and policy recommendations were possible. Perhaps the most unexpected element of my findings is the weight of historical trauma and long term crisis, providing the context of a weak state where the Maras could flourish.

**Difficulties**

While the results of the paper were, in many ways, successful because I was able to answer the questions I had posed, there were several difficulties in achieving these goals. There were difficulties in finding information, applying certain theories to the case, remaining unbiased, and in making policy recommendations.

The topic of the Maras is extremely controversial and reporting on them can often be very dangerous. This means finding reliable information on them is rare, and there is a lot of false or biased information one has to sift through. Government websites from the Northern Triangle barely speak about the Maras, and when they do, their data is at odds with all the data produced
by NGOs and IGOs. It is clear that governments are biased, and probably seek to downplay the issue in order to maintain tourism and the impression of stable state control. Local journalistic sources also seem to not tackle the issue as much as one would expect, most likely out of fear. This is why very little information could be obtained from local sources and, instead, empirical data had to be taken from NGOs and IGOs such as the UNODC, the EU, the Government of Canada, or the BTI. However, it seems that even NGOs and IGOs rarely provide first-hand information on the Maras themselves. This is why all Mara interviews or any first-hand accounts of the Maras were taken from media sources, particularly newspapers from Spain. The difficulty in this was attempting to sift through the media sources that were biased in order to access impartial information, which is rare in such controversial cases as this one. There was also difficulty in texts about the Maras from local scholars, as they all seemed to be foreign. The problem with this is that a local opinion might have been an important element in the theoretical chapter in order to understand the perception of local academics.

This leads to the next great difficulty, which was applying certain theories, such as the texts defining sovereignty, to the specific case. For example, when finding theories that defined sovereignty, it was not easy to find theories that applied to such a complex case as the Northern Triangle. Many definitions of sovereignty model the modern European nation-state, which is strikingly different from Central American nations that had complicated transitions to independence and long histories of struggling with sovereignty. Finding theories that could be applied to the case made the selection process more constrained, which proved to be a challenge, but, in the end, several sources were found that could successfully be applied to the question of the paper.
Remaining unbiased was another important challenge. It is easy to demonize Maras. I grew up hearing about the Maras as something I should fear and hate. However, such an approach is not helpful when seeking answers to why the Northern Triangle is struggling and whether or not the current policies of arrests, lack of integration and murders is working. It would have been unproductive to continue to believe the Maras are the root of every problem of the Northern Triangle, because this would have stifled the possibility of coming to the realization that the root of the issue is much more complex. It is also important to try and change popular resistance to re-integration programs, using the conclusions made here that, after seeing failure in every other approach, those programs might be the key to success.

Lastly, making policy recommendations proved to be very challenging. Often, theories that considered universal are applied to cases that are too unique for that. For example, in the case of defining sovereignty, we often think of a very European concept of sovereignty rather than adapting our understanding it to fit a different context. This leads us to the development of unrealistic recommendations for countries that are strikingly different norm. Current recommendations are idealistic, making our attempts at improvement in vain. My goal was to make policy recommendations that were both useful and realistic. I wanted them to be effective and to ensure that the countries would not continue to fail at solving the issue, yet also plausible enough to be applied to such a complex geographical area. I struggled to find recommendations that fit this criterion, and it may be that they remain unrealistic despite my attempt to find a balance between what is possible and what will work.
Contributions and Future Research

I believe this paper will contribute to my field of research, because after reading through many scholarly writings on the Maras, I have concluded there is not a lot written about them, and what is written about them tends to be very similar in its approach. Most scholarly works I came across took the idea that they are a gang as a given and did not investigate what else they could be defined as, which is why it was important to me to investigate whether or not they can be defined as an insurgency.

Through this work I uncovered that the Maras are sometimes people with no other opportunities, afraid of the government, or want to make money to provide for their children, responding to a system that does not provide for people and has left certain groups of people marginalized. Also, this paper uncovered that the root cause of the Northern Triangle’s problem with state fragility is not the Maras, but the scars from war and dictatorships. Since this is an understudied area, my hope is that this paper inspires future research that focuses on the Maras as a relevant and important example of an insurgency rising out of historical trauma and exacerbating the fragility of already weak states.

Further research should also examine why Nicaragua, Panama and Costa Rica, countries that are very close to the Northern Triangle countries and even have similar historical trends, yet every attempt made by the Maras to gain land and membership has failed due to state responses or foreign aid. It could be essential to understand why this worked in those countries in order to see what the Northern Triangle countries should be doing differently. It might be important to see if the democratization process or the process of healing from war was more successful in these countries, and if this can explain why there is less division and less will to join insurgent groups.
It would also be interesting to investigate the rates of organized crime appear to be similar between the Northern Triangle and Panama, yet Panama does a have one specific group controlling trafficking, unlike the Northern Triangle countries. Lastly, in the future it would be important to study the religious aspect of this issue. Often, Mara members associate a certain spirituality to the gang, very closely related to Christianity. The worshiping of martyrs resembles the Catholic worshipping of Saints. Investigating the “Mara theology” could be a key to understanding a large portion of the appeal to join the gang, and possibly a tool to finally successfully decrease membership.
6. References


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