



El Salvador's Changing Security Landscape

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gang violence is a globally relevant issue that presents a chronic security risk to businesses and international travelers. In 2015, El Salvador had the highest homicide rate in the world, 105 murders per 100,000 people, and was widely considered to be one of the most dangerous places globally due to endemic gang violence. In 2024, El Salvador reported a homicide rate equivalent to that of Canada, 1.9 murders per 100,000 people, and has been internationally lauded for its transformation into a security haven. This change was heralded by President Nayib Bukele, whose controversial tactics have become an enticing model to some global leaders for potential replication. The circumstances of this evolution were shaped by his consolidation of presidential power and a breakdown in intra-gang hierarchy and communication.



A campaign of mass incarceration utilizing expanded law enforcement capabilities – and simultaneous suspension of civil rights – under a perpetual State of Exception (SOE) has rebuilt El Salvador's security environment, but at a cost. The long-term sustainability and replicability of this strategy elsewhere remains a matter of intense debate. However, El Salvador has become an increasingly attractive regional nexus for investment and business operations, especially within the tech sector, due to its improved safety, growing infrastructure, and technological investments within the context of Central America.



KEY TAKEAWAYS



Low Risk Level

- Endemic gang-related violence has been largely eliminated, although higher risk areas can be differentiated in certain urban neighborhoods and rural areas. Petty crime remains relevant.
- Severely crippled gang structures persist – especially within more rural areas, taking advantage of isolated highways to extort travelers.
- Business investment is increasing as President Bukele seeks to position El Salvador as a convenient regional tech hub and essential ally to the United States.
- Roadways, maritime, and railway infrastructure underwent, or are continuing to undergo, significant improvements, creating a more interconnected and safer environment.
- The “State of Exception” (harsh security measures that suspend certain constitutional rights) has resulted in civil rights rollbacks that have curtailed freedom and made government transparency a more prominent issue.
- President Bukele’s success in rehabilitating the security environment presents challenges regarding sustainability within El Salvador and replicability across Central and South America.





ORIGINS AND HISTORY OF SALVADORIAN GANG VIOLENCE

The two most notorious rival Salvadorian gangs (or *maras* as they are referred to colloquially in Salvadorian Spanish), MS-13 and Barrio 18, were both formed in California, US, from emigres fleeing the violence of the Salvadorian civil war in the 1980s. When the civil war ended in 1992, the US deported thousands of gang-affiliated ex-convicts. Upon arrival in El Salvador, these deportees re-established criminal networks and perpetuated the gang culture they founded in the US. Extortion was the main source of income for the *maras*, while drug trafficking was secondary. As MS-13 and Barrio 18 expanded their territory, authority, and manpower, their manipulation of the local population became increasingly controlling of the most minute movements – retribution for missteps became simultaneously more vicious. Regular clashes between the *maras* also contributed to dangerous conditions. Repeated government efforts to curtail and dismantle the gangs over the 30 years from 1992 to 2022 only resulted in short-term reductions in violence. The gangs effectively entrenched themselves as

wide-reaching and high-functioning organizations that were the ultimate authority within their territories.

The chronic cycle of interaction between the Salvadorian government and the *maras* was a pattern of short-lived crackdowns, drawn-out secret negotiations, and brutal retaliations. Negotiations are highly unpopular with the public because they are perceived as legitimizing the gangs and capitulating to their demands. However, in practice, negotiations worked to temporarily lower homicide rates, even as they failed to dismantle the gangs themselves. Violent retaliations would occur whenever the *maras* were unhappy with the direction of negotiations. This would generate an outcry from the populace demanding justice, which would result in a crackdown by the state. These crackdowns were never comprehensive enough to truly cripple gang networks and would usually stop or lose intensity after a short period. The cyclical relationship between the state and the *maras* was a script few analysts anticipated either party would want to, or be able to, depart from.



THE ENDURING APPEAL OF ‘MANO DURA’

An overwhelming majority of studies and surveys conducted in Latin America show an overwhelming preference for punitive measures versus preventative strategies to combat crime – a rare opinion that cuts across racial, class, and ideological lines. Tough on crime strategies, which include heavily militarized areas, aggressive law enforcement, and mass arrests, in response to rising insecurity, is commonly termed the ‘*mano dura*’ response. Examining past precedent from Latin American countries reveals how harsh *mano dura* policies often backfire and result in increased crime rates. Gang members have a strong incentive to respond with escalating force to protect their lives and livelihoods. Additionally, such campaigns often trigger counterproductive adaptations within the organizational structure of gangs, enabling them to successfully weather state repression and ultimately making them more resilient. Eventually, governments are forced to scale back or end the harsh policies due to the limits of the law, state capacity, or poor results, and so insecurity persists.

Although sweeping punitive policies have proven costly and ineffective, they make for good politics. Populations facing life-threatening conditions want immediate solutions; mass incarceration is a perpetually popular answer that fits that criterion. Investing in sustainable long-term programs to combat the root cause of crime – poverty – is less palatable to the electorate because these measures take time to transform the security landscape. Politicians are incentivized to deliver fast results to sustain their political life. The appeal of *mano dura* is indicative of why President Bukele instituted this strategy toward the gangs in El Salvador. However, his success is a departure from the expected outcome.





A NEW PRESIDENT AT THE NEGOTIATING TABLE

In a clear rebuke of the pervasive corruption within the two major political parties – the conservative Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) and leftist Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) – and demonstrative of frustration with the conventional approach to combating the *maras*, Nayib Bukele – a former advertising executive and previous mayor of San Salvador – was elected to the presidency in 2019. Although Bukele denies it, the international community widely attributes the 50 percent drop in the homicide rate during his first year in office to secret negotiations that allegedly instituted a non-aggression pact with the *maras*. An unintentional result of these negotiations was a wedge that grew between gang leaders – operating behind bars – and the rank-and-file members – operating in the streets.

Gang leaders often leveraged negotiations to benefit their conditions in prison at the cost of the profit margins and freedom of movement for the foot soldiers. This disconnect bred a tension that crippled the gangs' ability to coordinate strategic responses. There were two early spikes of gang violence during Bukele's term – one in April 2020 and another in November 2021 – that followed the established script. Based on this, the *maras* assumed that the state would not resort to violence unless they did so first, and that, if they did not fight back, any repression would be short-lived. This would turn out to be a fatal assumption in March 2022.





DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

There is arguably only one condition of Bukele's ultimately successful crackdown that can be attributed entirely to his decisions and not to luck or circumstance. He systematically dismembered the checks and balances within the Salvadorian democracy during his first few years in office to consolidate power and eliminate meaningful judicial oversight. In March 2021, Bukele used his legislative supermajority to fire the attorney-general, vacate the constitutional court,

purge the lower courts, and gut the dispersed power of local government. He then replaced all vacancies with loyalists. By the start of 2022, President Bukele had seized, dismantled, or co-opted all horizontal checks on the executive branch. These structural changes allowed him to eventually declare a State of Exception (SOE) in response to gang violence and proceed to extend it thirty-eight times as of May 2025.





A FOREVER STATE OF EXCEPTION

From 25-27 March 2022, after a breakdown in alleged negotiations with the government, the *maras* conducted three days of unprecedented bloodshed. Both gangs appeared to indiscriminately kill an ultimate tally of 87 civilians within 72 hours – the deadliest incident since the civil war. President Bukele responded by implementing an SOE that suspended constitutional rights, labeled gang activity as terrorism, loosened the legal interpretation of gang affiliation, enabled mass arrests without warrants, permitted arrests citing questionable or no evidence, extended holding times for arrestees, eliminated the possibility of house arrest, increased jail sentences, lowered the age of arrest for gang related crimes to twelve, and increased military roadblocks. The courts, which Bukele had gutted of the ability to conduct meaningful oversight, allowed this comprehensive rollback of civil rights with no objection.

The SOE's effect on the legal system empowered a tidal wave of law enforcement to conduct mass arrests at a much faster rate and with far less discretion when compared to previous crackdowns. It allowed them to target

aspiring members (*chequeos*) and suspected “collaborators,” for which the definition is incredibly vague. The small geographic scale of El Salvador also helped make this strategy, of total overwhelming force, successful. The broader focus on the gangs’ diffuse networks meant the *maras* could no longer rely on proxies to continue operating their criminal economies while weathering state crackdowns. Many gang members expected this crackdown to follow precedent and relent quickly if they did not actively fight back, which allowed the government to carry out operations with little resistance. Additionally, three years of government negotiations had eroded the intra-gang lines of communication and hierarchy, inhibiting their ability to mount a collective response once the realization set in that this time would be different.

In the first 24 months of Bukele’s crackdown, Salvadorian authorities carried out approximately 1,221 arrests for every 100,000 Salvadorians, or equivalent to around 1.22 percent of the population – a magnitude of force that was the most extreme ever witnessed in Latin America. In February 2023, the government began holding detainees in a new mega prison,



known as the “Center of Confinement of Terrorism” (CECOT), with a currently unmet capacity of 40,000. The extreme subjugation techniques used there have prevented the gangs from capitalizing on severe overcrowding to coordinate behind bars or reorganize their structures. CECOT specifically houses prisoners from opposing gangs together to prevent any reorganization of the *maras*’ organizing structure in prison. In 2024, approximately two percent of the total Salvadorian population was incarcerated, the highest incarceration rate in the world. It is estimated that 36 percent (~42,000) of gang members and collaborators have remained at large, often now residing outside of El Salvador. CECOT has recently made international headlines due to Bukele’s February 2025 offer to house undocumented immigrants and convicted criminals from the US for a fee, stating that this financial model would help make the Salvadorian prison system sustainable. It is unclear what the long-term feasibility or impact of integrating this model would be on the El Salvadorian criminal environment.

The homicide rate dropped to 1.8 per 100,000 inhabitants as of December 2024. Although this figure excludes the deaths of

civilians in armed confrontations, incarcerated people, and people classified as gang members. Encouraging statistics include that El Salvador was named one of the safest countries in the 2023 and 2024 Gallup Safety Reports. Residents no longer fear near-constant surveillance from gangs or extortion rackets, and there is currently a negligible risk of kidnapping. There continue to be sporadic reports of extortion in rural areas that point to remnant gang structures. Overall, the *maras*, which boasted at least seventy thousand active members before the crackdown, had the resources and organizational capacity to extort 70 percent of all businesses, shut down public transportation, influence national elections, and unleash extraordinary violence, have been thoroughly eviscerated and divested of their power. In 2017, seventy percent of the population felt unsafe in their neighborhoods, while in comparison, in 2024, only eleven percent of the population felt unsafe, according to the Global Peace Index. Notably, vulnerable populations like women and LGBTQ people continue to experience a heightened specialized threat of violence due to the socially conservative environment.



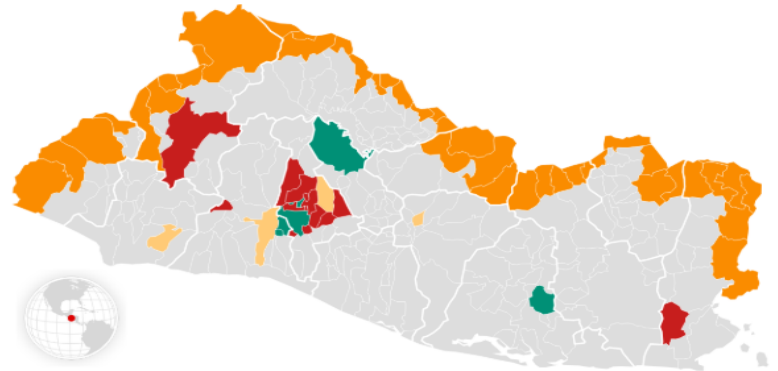
CRIME IN 2025

In 2024, a continued reduction in violent crime was observed in all major areas according to official and non-governmental sources, most notably a reduction in robbery, extortion, kidnapping, sexual assault, and murder. Theft remained the highest type of crime but decreased by 22.41 percent in 2024 compared to 2023. The *maras* no longer possess a tight grip on territory in the capital city of San Salvador or other urban centers. However, there are reports of vestigial gang remnants operating in a reduced manner within rural areas. Additionally, operating near border areas carries an increased risk of crime and violence due to the heightened presence of peripheral trafficking activity.

Law enforcement's occasional clashes with gang remnants can catch bystanders in the crossfire, creating an incidental risk to travelers. However, these types of incidents are more common in the countryside. Criminal activity is more concentrated in regional cities to the north and east of San Salvador, including Apopa, Ciudad Delgado, Ilopango, Mejicanos, San Martín, and Soyapango. Gang-related violence, even in higher-risk areas, is

El Salvador Municipality Risk Map

Red (Severe Risk), Orange (High Risk), Yellow (Low Risk), Green (Safe)



Source: Prosegur GRS vSOC • Map data: © OCHA • Created with Datawrapper

unlikely to intentionally target foreigners – most risk exposure is incidental. This security environment is likely to persist throughout 2025. Given these conditions, utilizing trusted transportation services or securing executive protection can be highly beneficial for travelers in El Salvador. Secure transportation offers services such as English-speaking drivers, high-end vehicles, and armed executive protection officers to ensure safety and efficiency.



HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS

Parallel to the decrease in crime, the SOE has enabled massive amounts of arbitrary detentions, alleged torture, and the deaths of detainees. Human rights violations under the Bukele administration are characterized by integrated coordination between state agencies, the concealment and minimization of abuse, as well as a failure to investigate them properly. People are often arrested based on uncorroborated raw intelligence, rumors, information sourced from social media profiles, and anonymous tips. Conditions in prisons have been heavily denounced as substandard. Additionally, the Bukele administration has created a hostile environment for journalists and members of civil society who call attention to human rights violations by discrediting their work by labeling it in defense of the *maras*. In a January 2024 survey, 62.7 percent of Salvadorians said they were being more careful when sharing political opinions. Women have reported an increased fear of sexual harassment due to the heavy presence of police and soldiers in residential areas, even as the threat of similarly motivated

violence from gang members has decreased.

Bukele's domestic popularity is consistently high and comprises of supporters who are willing to accept limitations on their freedoms in exchange for peaceful streets. In interviews with ordinary Salvadorians, many readily acknowledge that innocent people have been swept up in the mass arrests and that abuses within the justice system exist. However, they describe these broad civil rights violations as an unavoidable cost to increasing overall security. Bukele has successfully pulled off what other charismatic, populist, military-adjacent leaders of competitive authoritarian states want to achieve; he has managed to consolidate power, invoke security as justification for curtailing civil rights, and produce a measurable, dramatic reduction in crime. All the while, most of the electorate express intense support and fervent admiration for him. Bukele has achieved a political victory; few, if any, have managed to do so successfully.



BUSINESS OPPORTUNITIES

El Salvador presents modest but emerging business opportunities, supported by political continuity, easing external pressures, and improving financial indicators. Following a 2.4 percent GDP growth in 2024, economic expansion is forecasted to accelerate to 2.5–3.0 percent in 2025, aided by looser financial conditions and subdued inflation, although this could be negatively impacted by the campaign of global tariffs that US President Trump has implemented. President Bukele's strong mandate after the 2024 elections ensures policy continuity, enabling planned fiscal consolidation of around 1.5 percent of GDP. The approval of a 1.4 billion USD IMF Extended Fund Facility in early 2025, expected to unlock an additional 2.0 billion USD in multilateral funding, marks a key step in restoring investor confidence. The recent stabilization of El Salvador's security environment has also significantly enhanced its appeal as a destination for Foreign Direct Investment (FDI). Notably, Spain and the United States have been leading investors, contributing 97.2 million USD and 69.04 million USD, respectively. Additionally, El Salvador has

adopted a 'Freedom Visa' program - a fast track to citizenship for high-net-worth individuals who invest 1 million USD or the equivalent in Bitcoin. However, structural challenges – including weak productivity, low educational attainment, and demographic headwinds – limit long-term foreign direct investment growth potential. As the US continues to attempt to decouple from China, it presents an opportunity for El Salvador to position itself as an attractive alternative for industries seeking to diversify their supply chains. The government has actively encouraged investment in high-growth sectors, focusing on technology and virtual currency. El Salvador was the first country to adopt Bitcoin as legal tender and has attracted great interest from crypto investors. China's history of investment in Central America is bleak, consisting of large-scale infrastructure projects that remain incomplete or fail to deliver meaningful economic benefits to locals. These projects are frequently staffed by Chinese workers, limiting local employment opportunities and reinforcing concerns about the long-term effectiveness and sustainability of Chinese-led initiatives within the region.



TRANSPORTATION DEVELOPMENT

Tech companies, such as Google's recent entry into the Salvadorian market, have established local offices, bolstering the country's ambitions to develop its digital economy. This partnership extends beyond business operations to include modernizing digital infrastructure, enhancing e-government capabilities, and fostering innovation in health and education. Such innovations align with Bukele's broader strategy to integrate into global supply chains while promoting economic diversification. President Bukele's administration has explicitly positioned the country as a potential tech hub in Central America by leveraging its low crime rates, infrastructure upgrades, and young, digital-savvy population. The arrival of tech-focused initiatives marks the beginning of a potential larger transformation. The peace dividend generated by Bukele has undeniably impacted solid growth. However, the government's emphasis on tech as a growth driver remains constrained by unrealistic reserve estimates and limited human capital, necessitating caution for investors despite short-term gains. While challenges like regulatory hurdles, long-

term stability, and a lack of transparency remain, El Salvador has the potential to become an economic leader in the regional ecosystem, driving further investment and innovation in the years ahead.

El Salvador's roadway infrastructure is undergoing significant development and has seen substantial investments aimed at enhancing connectivity. There are several projects underway to address congestion and safety concerns. Despite these efforts, many rural areas still suffer from poorly maintained or unpaved roads, in addition to a heightened risk of petty criminal activity and residual gang operations. Public transportation, primarily buses, is widely used but often lacks reliability and safety.





El Salvador is making significant investments to enhance its transportation infrastructure, focusing on airports, maritime facilities, and rail systems. In the aviation sector, the government has allocated approximately 2.1 billion USD for projects, including the development of the Pacific Airport, aimed at boosting international tourism and economic growth in the eastern region. Maritime infrastructure is also set for substantial upgrades, with Turkish company Yilport committing around 1.62 billion USD to expand and jointly operate the Acajutla and La Union ports.

This investment seeks to triple Acajutla's capacity and revitalize the currently inactive La Union port, enhancing the country's trade capabilities. Additionally, the government has earmarked over 1.8 billion USD to revive the railway system through the Pacific Train project, which aims to connect key regions and integrate with neighboring countries' rail networks, thereby improving regional connectivity and economic integration. These comprehensive infrastructure developments are poised to transform El Salvador into a central logistics hub in Central America, fostering economic growth and regional integration.



PROSEGUR ON THE GROUND

In 2023, Prosegur traveled to El Salvador to assess the security environment and noted the beginnings of this profound change. Taxi drivers stated that trips between El Salvador International Airport and the capital, San Salvador, which had once been perilous, were no longer so. As such, the risk of highway robbery during transfer from the airport was now negligible. In San Salvador, while foot travel is still not recommended without proper precautions, Prosegur agents could walk through central areas of the city safely and securely. Heavily armed private and public security forces remain a common sight, particularly in the vicinity of businesses, government offices, and upper-class residential areas. This was assessed as reflective of adherence to the old status quo rather than a necessary response to existing insecurity.

Traveling throughout the country, Prosegur saw no signs of conflict or gangs, but instead a country in the midst of transformation. Roadways remain intermittently underdeveloped, especially in more rural areas. Additionally, driving can be difficult due to the more erratic driving norms of locals. Therefore, hiring local private secure transportation is still advised. The development of infrastructure and housing was a common sight in urban centers, reflecting the economic period of renewal that is being driven by President Bukele. Water and food safety standards remain an issue, and avoiding tap water and ice at restaurants is recommended. Overall, the turnaround of the security environment within El Salvador was palpable to Prosegur agents on the ground who expressed optimism about the country's continued development.





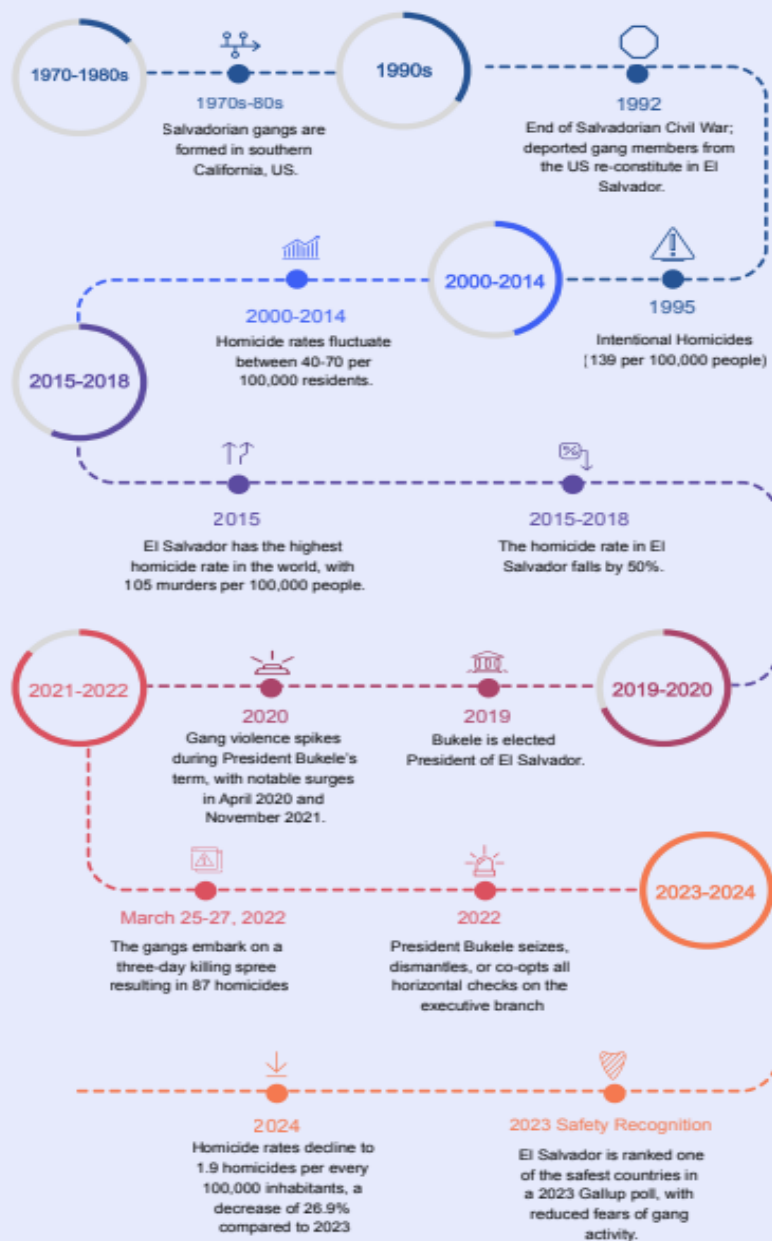
CONCLUSION

The metamorphosis of the Salvadorian security landscape from one of the most well-known, highly dangerous zones to a bastion of safety is an undeniable, if incomplete, victory. As El Salvador's fortune has improved, countries that were once recognized as insulated against gang violence in the region, like Ecuador, have become increasingly plagued by the issue. Although the risk of arbitrary detention has risen, it is mainly targeted toward Salvadorian citizens and not foreigners. It is advised to still exercise caution as access to legal services is not assured, and the ability for outsiders to track a detainee within the judicial system is

limited. Being mindful while expressing political opinions in public spaces is also advised to avoid unintended consequences. Travelers and businesses should be aware of the new opportunities in El Salvador resulting from its transformed environment and take advantage of the comparatively high degree of security in the region and the flurry of investment. President Bukele's friendly relationship with President Trump of the US will produce greater opportunities to deepen economic cooperation between the two countries and counter China's ubiquitous investment presence in the region.



El Salvador Timeline





For questions regarding this report or for immediate assistance, please call:

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