

# Chronicles of Everyday Lawlessness

SONJA WOLF

In the 1980s, much of Central America saw decades of authoritarian rule culminate in brutal civil wars. The United States played a key role in these conflicts as it sought to stifle revolutionary movements, ostensibly to stop the advance of communism in a polarized Cold War climate. With the transition to peace and electoral democracy, political violence gave way to criminal violence, particularly in the Northern Triangle nations of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Their populations, especially residents in marginalized communities, continue to struggle with chronic insecurity, extortion, and homicide. In 2015, the bloodiest year in El Salvador's post-war period, the National Civilian Police reported a countrywide homicide rate of 103 per 100,000 inhabitants. That same year, the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Statistics showed a national murder rate of only 4.9 per 100,000 inhabitants in the United States.

Some of this violence is the product of narcotics trafficking that permeates the Central American isthmus, which is sandwiched between the world's main producers of illicit drugs and the United States—their leading consumer and the top proponent of the international prohibitionist drug-control regime. Much of the killing, however, is associated with the activities of street gangs, notably Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and the Dicocho or 18th Street Gang. Both groups formed in immigrant neighborhoods in Los Angeles. In the 1980s, many Central American war refugees sought shelter in these impoverished, overcrowded, and already gang-afflicted districts, but were unable to obtain asylum and relegated to precarious clandestine status. Mass deportations of non-citizens, pursued in the mistaken belief that such

measures could irrevocably remove street gangs from the United States, effectively exported them to the Northern Triangle. Thanks to an initial absence of local gang policies in the region, and the subsequent implementation of *mano dura* (iron fist) strategies involving mass incarceration, which inadvertently helped strengthen the gangs, they were able to absorb marginalized youths and gradually evolved into an intractable public-security problem.

Óscar Martínez, the author of *A History of Violence*, is an award-winning journalist with the Salvadoran digital newspaper El Faro.

An investigative outlet founded in 1998, El Faro is committed to asking uncomfortable questions about violence, organized crime, corruption, and transparency. Martínez has received death threats for his intrepid reporting. In his previous book, *The Beast* (published in 2014), he tells the story of undocumented migrants' perilous journey north.

His latest work is a collection of 14 evocative chronicles, previously published in Spanish, which offer perceptive snapshots of everyday life and institutional decay in Central America. This is not a book with a single narrative thread or an explicit argument. Rather, it tries to convey why people feel compelled to abandon their homes and families to travel—often at great risk—to the United States and build a new, often precarious, existence. In the preface, Martínez explains that he wants readers, particularly Americans, to grasp the nature of the violence in the region. He hopes that this understanding may enable more appropriate responses through which the United States could help remediate a situation it is largely responsible for.

The book comprises three sections that address, respectively, the lack of state authority (a vacuum that is filled by street gangs and other criminal networks); the violence that develops in its absence; and the displacement it generates. In previous decades, much of the northbound migration from

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Living and Dying  
in Central America**  
by Óscar Martínez  
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Central America was often attributable to people's quest for economic opportunities unavailable to them in their countries of origin. Martínez is at pains to stress that the current exodus is driven less by choice than necessity. The new refugees, fleeing horrific violence, are undeterred by the dangers ahead because those back home are at least as deadly.

Today, though, irregular migrants face greater risks than before. The smuggling business has changed considerably since the advent of the drug war in Mexico. Migration routes crisscrossing Mexico take migrants through territories controlled by Los Zetas, a group of former elite soldiers and Gulf Cartel enforcers who broke with their bosses. Martínez relates how once-independent *coyotes* (smugglers) had to start paying fees to Los Zetas so that their clients could make the transit unharmed. Many inexperienced migrants, however, fall into the hands of greedy *coyotes* who do not pay the required fees. When Los Zetas feel cheated out of their profits, they send a message to demand compliance with their rules. In one especially gruesome incident in August 2010, they massacred 72 migrants in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, at the border with Texas.

Numbers by themselves do not fully convey the suffering caused by the violence, or its normalization in Central American societies. *A History of Violence* contains a series of haunting photos that document the pain of murder victims' families, the search for the disappeared, marginal neighborhoods, inhumane prison conditions, and the perils facing migrants. The stories, for their part, are sensitive to the contexts that spawn violence. Martínez describes how in the Petén, a vast and largely uninhabited state in northern Guatemala, organized crime groups are increasingly encroaching on nature reserves to accumulate land for airplane landing strips and stash houses. These land invasions have displaced many small-scale farmers, but the government has also targeted their *campesino* communities for eviction, falsely labeling them as drug traffickers to claim victories in its crusade against narcotics.

## WASHINGTON'S SHADOW

The region has long been marred by violence. Martínez's chronicles examine neither its roots nor other practices related to gangs and drug traf-

ficking, such as corruption. Indeed, bribery may have even more pernicious effects since it makes public institutions responsive to criminal actors, rather than to the average citizen. But the emphasis on street gangs and organized crime networks allows Martínez to underscore the United States' role in the making (and possible solution) of these policy problems. Due to its geopolitical interests, Washington has historically wielded great influence in Central America. But instead of helping address shared problems—such as drugs, gangs, and migration—through domestic policies, successive US administrations have typically tackled perceived threats through containment abroad.

Martínez provides an example of this approach when he examines the June 2013 massacre of eight policemen in the Guatemalan town of Salcajá. Some of the murdered officers were corrupt; others were innocent casualties in the conflict between rival drug rings. Local skirmishes had intensified because Guatemala pursues a kingpin strategy of arresting and extraditing its leading drug traffickers. It does so at the behest of the United States, which annually ranks countries around the world based on the results of their anti-narcotics efforts.

Nations that are deemed insufficiently cooperative face sanctions, such as the withdrawal of non-drug-related US foreign assistance and Washington's opposition to multilateral loans they may seek. But a supply-focused drug-control strategy is ineffective: it does nothing to reduce demand, prevent criminal groups from splintering, or make their disputes over illicit markets less violent. Meanwhile, scarce resources are drained from other important policy areas, such as health and education.

Crime and violence in Central America have escalated largely as a result of eroded institutional capacity. Justice systems are unable to successfully prosecute most cases, and the resultant impunity encourages more crime. Martínez does not clarify how institutions became debilitated (a process that had much to do with elite resistance to democratic reforms) or whether he considers capacity to be a question of resources (which may be limited by a narrow tax base, squandering, and corruption), expertise, or a combination of the two.

Martínez makes it very clear, however, that Central American states can offer their citizens nei-

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*Central American states can offer their citizens neither protection nor justice.*

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ther protection nor justice. He describes a scene of gang-induced forced displacement in El Salvador, where police ask the victims to pray and get on with their lives. The families, incredulous and frightened, have practically nowhere to go because they can only afford to live in similarly deprived—and therefore gang-controlled—neighborhoods.

This display of institutional helplessness is recurrent. Martínez tells the story of El Niño de Hollywood, an MS-13 member in El Salvador who decided to enter witness protection when his gang began threatening him for killing the members who had murdered his own brother. The Salvadoran justice system, dysfunctional and mostly unable to obtain convictions through forensic techniques or electronic surveillance, relies on witnesses who plea-bargain for a reduced sentence in return for their testimony. Chronic resource shortages mean that protection for these witnesses lasts only as long as the trial itself, and no special effort is made to keep their identity and location secret and to give them adequate food supplies. Furthermore, their protectors are police officers, often with a grudge against gang members and little interest in safeguarding them. Like El Niño de Hollywood, many of these witnesses get killed. Their deaths discourage others from coming forward to report crimes.

*A History of Violence* contains no explicit policy recommendations, but taken together its chronicles set some signposts. Since displacement, and the factors causing it, affect more than one country, the responses need to be regional in scope and structural in nature. Implementing comprehensive strategies will require alliances. If these include US-based nongovernmental organizations, which are positioned to influence domestic policy making, they could potentially help push along both institutional and policy reforms.

The book succeeds in fostering a better understanding of Central America's crisis of violence and the resulting surge in migration. By itself, such understanding cannot bring about the peaceful future that Martínez clearly hopes for. But if his work raises greater awareness of the situation in the region, and spurs at least some readers into action, it will have accomplished its purpose. *A History of Violence* is a timely publication, and not only because of the ongoing exodus from the isthmus. The new US president's policy agenda portends to have an unprecedented impact on migration and security policies in the Western Hemisphere. The ability to step back, reflect, and stand with vulnerable populations suddenly seems more critical than Martínez may have imagined when he penned these chronicles. ■

Project : Chronicles of Leridia I've been working on the project for 5 years now. So far, the game has been very well received with lot of contents, a deep story and characters, a good atmosphere and a sense of detail. In 0.5 update, Complete story may take around 10 hours or more to finish. Project: Cyberslayers. In 2020, I'm starting a whole new project with Cyberpunk Theme. My experience with Leridia allows me to work on an even more complex, beautiful and profound universe. I learned from my mistakes and kept Leridia's strong points for a concept mixing Visual Novel and rpg elements. Who a In this report, Perilous Chronicle analyzes the first 90 days of prisoner resistance to COVID-19, beginning in March 2020. It describes the context for the wave of unrest, describes major events from this period, and draws conclusions based on the data collected for each event. In this report, Perilous Chronicle analyzes the first 90 days of prisoner resistance to COVID-19, beginning in March 2020. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved."Matthew 24:12-13 In. By definition the lawless person is motivated by personal, selfish concerns, not by any regard for others or for the rules that govern our intercourse with one another. So with the upsurge of lawlessness there is a cooling off of love. The one necessarily involves the other. 8. It is in just such an environment that will facilitate the man of lawlessness of 2 Thessalonians 2 to set up his image in God's rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem. And, it is to just such an act that Jesus's current discourse is moving (Matthew 24:15). END-TIME ENDURANCE.