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Director of  
Central Intelligence

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# Growth and Prospects of Leftist Extremists in El Salvador

Interagency Intelligence Memorandum

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GROWTH AND PROSPECTS  
OF LEFTIST EXTREMISTS  
IN EL SALVADOR

Information available as of 21 January 1980 was  
used in the preparation of this memorandum.

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## KEY JUDGMENTS

The continued rapid growth of leftist extremists in El Salvador signals a sharply increasing threat to political stability and portends the outbreak of large-scale revolutionary warfare over the next year—possibly over the next several months. [REDACTED]

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The extreme left appears determined to seize power in El Salvador, although its timetable and tactics may not yet be fixed. It has been expanding its numbers of trained, armed guerrillas and of political activists and organizers. At the same time, it has made significant strides in unification and coordination on both the military and political fronts. [REDACTED]

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The extreme left is very well funded (through ransoms). It has expanded its military capabilities through training in El Salvador and in Nicaragua and Cuba and through increasingly sophisticated hit-and-run raids both on government security posts and on rural and urban “soft” targets. On the political front, it seems to be well led, and its propaganda and other activities are winning support from educated and unsophisticated Salvadorans alike. [REDACTED]

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Leftist extremists are increasing the size and sophistication of their armaments and, with Cuban assistance, are laying the logistic groundwork for resupply, especially through the porous Honduran border. [REDACTED]

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The extreme left has not yet demonstrated a capacity for extended combat against government forces, and the firmness of support for its cause among the masses is open to question. Nonetheless, in view of the lack of unity and indecisiveness of the government and of the forces in the political center and on the right generally, the potential of the extreme left to control the course of events in El Salvador is formidable. [REDACTED]

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Note: This Interagency Intelligence Memorandum was requested by the Department of State. It was prepared by the Office of Political Analysis, National Foreign Assessment Center, under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America. It was coordinated within the Central Intelligence Agency and with the Defense Intelligence Agency and the Department of State. Questions or comments may be directed to the National Intelligence Officer for Latin America [REDACTED]

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[Redacted]

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## DISCUSSION

### Guerrilla Growth

The rise of the left in El Salvador is reflected in the growth of membership in militant organizations, in the size, frequency, and sophistication of operations, and in the armaments utilized over the last two years. Hardcore insurgents have grown from 200 to 300 in 1977, to about 700 in late 1978, and to more than 2,000 today. In 1978, a country that had been free of any sustained guerrilla activity two years earlier faced three principal insurgent groups whose revenues from kidnaping in two years' time totaled \$26 million; ransoms in 1979 alone yielded an additional \$40 million. We now estimate the terrorist war chest, after arms and operational expenditures, to total about \$20 million. [Redacted]

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Terrorist-incited violence surged in 1978, and September of that year was one of the most active periods of insurgency. Of 37 security-related incidents that month, 19 were clearly terrorist initiated, although they resulted in a total of only eight dead. September 1979 witnessed more than double the number of such incidents, however, and left 40 dead and 10 wounded. Other monthly comparisons between 1978 and 1979 reflect the same trend, paralleling the enormous growth in terrorist membership since 1977. In 1978, 150 politically related deaths were reported; in the first six months of 1979, the rate quadrupled, with 300 deaths reported. [Redacted]

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Insurgent boldness and the ability to field larger groups of men reflect similar growth. In September 1978, terrorists carried out coordinated attacks on three police posts, but the largest group of attackers numbered only a dozen men and they were lightly armed. A year later, six National Guard posts—a somewhat tougher target—were attacked in one week, with 40 guerrillas involved in the largest firefight. Significantly, these were combined operations by the two largest guerrilla groups, who employed automatic rifles, handgrenades, and in one instance a bazooka. Today, 50- and 60-man terrorist units, such as those that temporarily seized outlying towns in late 1979, are no longer uncommon. [Redacted]

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### Front Group Activities

Membership in El Salvador's extremist-controlled front groups likely exceeds 60,000. The FPL (Popular Liberation Forces), the largest guerrilla organization, has effectively controlled and utilized its front groups, and, on a smaller scale, the other guerrilla groups have had similar success. Since 1977, militant group activities—marches, strikes, and occupations—have caused monumental problems for the governments in power. Frequently confronted with extreme demands, the administrations have alternated between military response—and an inevitably bloody aftermath that accelerated leftist recruitment—or drawn-out negotiations that tended to undercut and weaken their control. [Redacted]

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The FPL's gradual takeover of the largest front organization, the BPR (Popular Revolutionary Bloc) has intensified the government's problem. The BPR, with 30,000 to 50,000 members, grew out of a bloody 1975 confrontation between students and security forces, with university groups, some peasant organizations, and the militant teachers union forming the original coalition. Like that of the FPL, the dramatic growth of the BPR occurred after 1977, although some early links and dual memberships likely existed between the FPL and BPR. In 1978, outright takeover of the BPR became a well-defined and attainable FPL objective. [Redacted]

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By mid-1978, members of the terrorist group had gained many positions in the Bloc's component organizations and engineered a restructuring of the executive committee, thereby strengthening FPL influence. Early [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Cross memberships in the two organizations appeared more common and the Bloc began serving as the breeding ground for a new Popular Liberation Army guerrilla force. [Redacted]

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The FPL thus has been able to draw on the BPR and make significant progress in its efforts—first begun in early 1979—[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

November of last year, all of the leftist organizations were seriously exploring tactical unification.

[Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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The uneven history of guerrilla cooperation in Central America suggests that the new alliance may be troubled, but the Salvadorans have evidenced more cooperative tendencies than other Central American groups. Moreover, they have the added impetus of the Sandinista success in Nicaragua that followed the unification of rival factions. Recent Cuban urgings toward unity and the prospect of additional external support from Havana are further inducements. On balance, greater tactical cooperation—and more effective antigovernment operations—are in the offing in El Salvador.

[Redacted]

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### Arms and External Support

Just as more sophisticated armament—and a guaranteed source of resupply—played a critical role in the Nicaraguan struggle, so too will these factors be pivotal in El Salvador. An increased arms flow to Salvadoran insurgents since mid-1979 has boosted guerrilla confidence and affected strategic planning for 1980. Last August, the guerrillas assessed their weapons stocks as inadequate for large-scale or prolonged operations, but the groups have budgeted more funds and have had increased success in tapping sources of arms supply and training, both in Latin America and the Middle East. By the end of the year, two reports noted that the second largest group believed it had sufficient arms for a civil war—a claim perhaps exaggerated but reflective of the trend.

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[Redacted] In December, [Redacted] arms—almost certainly of Cuban origin—were transhipped through Honduras to El Salvador. Arms, including antitank weapons and sub-machineguns, have also been received from Sandinista elements in Nicaragua and from Guatemalan guerrilla groups.

[Redacted]

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[Redacted] in late 1978, [Redacted] the FPL sent personnel to Cuba; the tempo increased in 1979, [Redacted]

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[Redacted]

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[Redacted] The FARN/FAPU had sent approximately

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In short, the distinction between parent guerrilla groups and their front organizations is beginning to blur. The assassination campaign under way against lower-level officials is in part a joint effort by the two largest front groups. The second largest guerrilla organization—National Resistance (FARN)—and its front—United Popular Action (FAPU)—reflect a pattern similar to the FPL-BPR merger. The front has stockpiled large quantities of arms in El Salvador and has increased military training for its members, both at home and in Cuba. Even the traditionally softline Communist Party and its front group have turned to more aggressive tactics.

Moreover, through the BPR, the FPL is stepping up its involvement in labor and is laying the groundwork for deeper penetration in this sector. In 1978, it formed a labor coordinating committee which, despite limited membership, wielded significant influence in individual disputes and became a catalyst in the prolonged labor troubles of 1979. Last December, the BPR formally established the Revolutionary Labor Federation to assist in widening its labor influence.

[Redacted]

### Unification

The tactical alliance formed this month by the two leading terrorist groups and the Communist Party—paralleled by the merger of their front groups—is the Salvadoran extremists' most significant effort at cooperation. Despite ideological and personal differences, several of the Salvadoran groups have been inclined toward tactical cooperation for several years. As early as 1977, some of the groups developed an informal liaison; in 1978 and 1979, they jointly engineered several kidnappings and shared safehouses and arms. By

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[Redacted] men to Havana by January 1980 and plans to send more. The Cubans have also played an important brokers' role, both in organizing increased cooperation between Salvadorans and Honduran Communists and in facilitating Salvadoran contacts with Middle East sources.

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[Redacted]

The Salvadorans' need for a guaranteed arms supply and other support, however, will have to be solved closer to home—from Cuba via Nicaragua, Honduras, Panama, and Costa Rica. Governments or leftist groups in each of these countries hold out the prospect of greater help for the Salvadoran insurgents.

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Fidel Castro's personal intervention and call for unity at a Havana meeting with Salvadoran leftist leaders in December parallels his role in fostering an alliance among rival Nicaraguan Sandinista factions last year and underscores his belief that El Salvador is the most promising revolutionary target in Latin America. Castro, more concerned than the Salvadorans themselves with the danger of provoking a rightist counter coup, argued against precipitate armed action and in favor of a political strategy. His tactics, however, are also focused on a seizure of power by leftists this year. Castro admitted that a number of his advisers had argued for an even more aggressive sponsorship of Salvadoran insurgency. Following the collapse of the Salvadoran military-civilian coalition in early January amid charges that the military continues to block any real reform, the arguments of the more aggressive elements in Castro's circle may gain strength.

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Drawing on the success of the regional strategy that channeled support to the Sandinistas, Castro hopes to use neighboring leftist organizations—principally the Honduran Communist Party—as a support apparatus. The transshipment in mid-December 1979 of [Redacted] of arms was apparently the first major Honduran operation on behalf of the Salvadorans. The Hondurans also have agreed, [Redacted] to establish safehavens in Honduras for Salvadoran groups. In addition, the Cubans last year arranged for indirect purchase of a small Costa Rican airline that they are planning to use for covert arms shipments to the Salvadorans, in a manner similar to that which they used to ship some of

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estimated 500,000 tons of arms funneled to the Sandinistas during the final offensive against the Somoza regime.

Although Nicaragua's Sandinista leaders remain of two minds—committed to their revolutionary brethren but concerned that their involvement might jeopardize the badly needed flow of economic assistance from the United States and other Western sources—we believe they are willing to lend some assistance now and to give more extensive aid if the situation should become critical. The Nicaraguans provided some training for Salvadoran insurgents after the overthrow of Somoza, and the Salvadorans have received arms from Nicaraguan sources. The December arms delivery is believed [Redacted] to have transited Nicaragua. In a yearend meeting in Managua, Salvadoran leftists reportedly reached agreement with both the Cubans and Nicaraguans for further delivery of war materiel.

Panama is keeping its options open, fostering contacts with both Salvadoran Government authorities and insurgent groups, and offering advice to both sides. But, while General Torrijos claims to be a mediator with no brief for either side, he views the rise of "progressive" forces in Central America as both desirable and inevitable, and he is most likely to support the side he believes ultimately will prevail.

[Redacted]

The Costa Rican Communist Party could also play a minor supportive role. In the wake of the Sandinista takeover in Nicaragua, the Costa Rican party decided to adopt a more activist stance.

[Redacted] The Salvadorans also reportedly have a communications post in San Jose with a radio network linked with stations in El Salvador.




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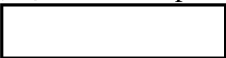


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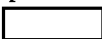
### Strategy and Prospects

In the final quarter of 1979, the strategy of the Salvadoran insurgents began to reflect a pattern of plans for a total offensive within the next month or so—the outgrowth of their increasing strength and perception of a weak divided government. This pattern of predicted “final offensives” is likely to persist in 1980 and translates into gradually increasing terrorist and front-group activities aimed at a flashpoint when the combination of violence, economic disruption, and political divisiveness spark anarchy. 

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If the Salvadoran left can remain tactically united, it will decrease the chances for success of any moderate civilian-military junta, because it would frustrate dialogue with elements of the extreme left and increase civilian-military frictions over repressive tactics. Through intimidation and political pressure, it could prevent much of the center left from cooperating in any government initiatives. 

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The extreme left, increasingly better equipped and engaging in larger scale actions, has developed the capability to directly challenge the Salvadoran establishment, although much still depends on outside actors. In the absence of external aid that substantially strengthens the military-government structure, the extreme left—if its own external support grows at the pace it has over the last six months—will be strong enough in 1980 to topple the government formed in January.\* If external support for the insurgents is half of what it was in Nicaragua, the extremists in El Salvador have a better-than-even chance to seize and hold power after the anarchy and violence they will sow. 

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\*A second Interagency Intelligence Memorandum, scheduled for publication in the next few weeks, will provide a fuller discussion of the other factors that impinge on this judgment. The Memorandum will deal with military-civilian frictions and other political factors and will provide an evaluation of the military as a fighting force.

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SCC on  
El Salvador, Nicaragua

1330-1500

28 January 1980

DCI, NIO/LA

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Date