

A Hawk in Dove's Feathers: Colombian Civil-Military Relations Under Santos

Colombian president Juan Manuel Santos has claimed a new approach to security politics in the violence-ridden South American nation. This Insight reviews Santos' approach to civil military relations, and suggests that despite his carefully crafted image as a peace-maker, there are hawkish tendencies that still determine his government's plans for development. An end to the 55-year long internal armed conflict in Colombia is closer than ever, but will a peace accord really end the violence? This Insight suggests that the Colombian conflict must be analyzed in relation to broader political and economic interests held by both civilian and military actors. Here securitization, privatisation and extraction remain the dominant tendencies guiding the Santos government's and Colombian armed forces' vision of the future.

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Hawks and Doves in Colombia

It is difficult to distinguish between hawks and doves at the top of contemporary Colombian politics. The 2014 re-election of President Juan Manuel Santos to the Colombian presidency promises the continuation of an administration that has actively pushed to end the country's 55-year internal armed conflict. Starting in February 2012, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC)¹ and the Santos government have met for peace talks in Havana, Cuba², to search for a resolution to the armed conflict. This is a conflict that to date has resulted in the death of over 600,000 people, the displacement of over 5 million people and a legacy of recorded human rights abuses (Marcos & Pineda Ariza 2013). Whilst it is true that the Presidency of Juan Manuel Santos may mark the formal end to the internal armed conflict³, this CMI Insight suggests that the search for peace in Colombia needs to stretch far beyond current negotiations with guerilla forces. Indeed, reflecting on Santos' position within past and

present civil-military relations in the country, it is suggested here that we should not assume from this alone a drastic change in security logics from Alvaro Uribe, his widely recognized hawkish predecessor. The militarization of all aspects of Colombian society and the armed conflict's causation of deep imbalances in social and economic relationships in the country have consciously been left out of the talks in Havana by the Santos government. Recognizing this, qualitative evaluation of the current government's *peaceful* intentions requires attention to the persisting balance of civil-military relations in Colombia and of the tight relationship that exists between their set-up and wider questions of the country's political economy.

At arm's length?

Civilian-military relations in Colombia contrast strongly with other nations in Latin America. Unlike other countries in Latin America, Colombia's armed forces have never supplanted,

or even forced a power-sharing arrangement with the country's traditional elite (Isacson 2014). The most powerful Colombian civilians have nearly always wielded more political power than the top generals. Indeed, until the 1990s civilian political leaders always held military leaders at "arm's length" (Isacson 2014: 2).

The military has governed modern Colombia only once, between 1953 and 1958, at the height of the civil war between the Liberal and Conservative political parties. Following La Violencia, a period in which political violence caused the deaths of over 20,000 Colombians, military officers under the leadership of General Rojas Pinilla took power bloodlessly, and at invitation of political and business leaders (Sotomayer 2008). However, the General quickly and peacefully left the presidential palace after national elections were held to re-establish democratic order. The winner of those elections, Alberto Lleras Camargo, set out broad principles that would aim to guide Colombian civil-military relations for several decades. In this regard the famous discourse of Alberto Lleras made on behalf of the National Front government in the Teatro Patria in 1958 is instructive. The Lleras doctrine proposed two simple parameters for relations between the government and the military: the undesirability of the participation of the military in politics, balanced with an acceptance that civilians should not intervene in issues of concern to military institutions (Andrade 2012: 150).

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This civil-military pact held until the late 1990s, but dwindling defense budgets and the expansion of the guerilla by end of the decade made it evident to the military that the Lleras civil-military pact had failed. A new relationship with the civilian state had to be established where the military would more actively offer their autonomy in exchange for a largely unquestioned praetorian position behind the civilian state. With its indoctrination in Cold War ideology—particularly prevalent within its top ranks—the military was adamantly opposed to the "nightmare" of having to give space to a militarized left wing (Richani 2003).

The US and *Plan Colombia*

This was a vision that was also largely supported by the United States, who had provided the Colombian military training in counter-insurgency techniques since the 1950s. In line with the Colombian military, in August 1999 US envoys warned against the concessions being granted the guerilla, but also offered the Pastrana government a deal to make the government's acceptance of a military lead acceptable. The US offered the Colombian government a substantial increase in US military aid if they would accept a comprehensive plan designed to revamp the military and reinvigorate the drug war. *Plan Colombia*, approved by the US Congress in July 2000, broadened the magnitude and scope of US involvement in Colombia's war system. In total, from 1999 to 2002, the US gave Colombia 2.4 billion dollars in aid, 81% of which was used for arms. The US commitment of such resources brought Colombia into the orbit of strategic importance just below Israel, Egypt and Iraq.

With this new assistance the military shifted gear from a defensive to an offensive position⁴. The number of professional soldiers increased from 22,000 to 55,000 and regular soldiers from 46,000 to 73,000. The government deployed two US trained anti-narcotics units before the end of 1999 (Richani 2005). By 2001, military-initiated attacks against the guerilla outnumbered the attacks initiated by the rebels. The changing perception of the military articulated by the top brass was that the war was now winnable. Indeed, this position was given increased political credibility with the change of government in 2002, and the election of Alvaro Uribe to the Presidency.

Plan Colombia was expanded under President Uribe and connected to the governmental strategy of Democratic Security Policy (PSD)⁵. This strategy drew directly from the logic and language of the Bush administration's War on Terror (Marcos & Pineda Ariza 2013). According to Uribe the Colombian state had theoretically granted all liberties to citizens, but "terror had overcome these liberties". Uribe regularly painted his government's actions as a war against terrorists, rather than placing the current internal armed conflict in historical perspective and

thereby recognizing the political, social and material foundations of the conflict. Uribe stated "There is no armed conflict here... there was armed conflict in other countries when insurgents fought against dictatorships. Here there is no dictatorship; here there is a profound, complete democracy. What we have here is the challenge of a few terrorists" (Hanson & Romero Pena 2005).

What is crucial to acknowledge in relation to the Presidency of Uribe is the practice of a much tighter relationship between civil government and the military, and one where the President was actively involved in security and defense policy-making. Civilians—at least President Uribe and his conservative cohort—were now fully engaged in the day-to-day management of Colombia's security strategy (Isacson 2014:5). Uribe placed the armed forces on permanent offensive, pressing officers for results against the guerilla. Generals and officers were fired or forcefully retired if they failed to demonstrate results than during that of any other Colombian president. However, despite this pressure, there was little conflict between Uribe and the military command. He shared with them their conservative, pro-landowner political views, as well as their discomfort with peace talks and their disdain for human rights defenders. The elite no longer held the military at quite the same "arm's length" as they had. Indeed, Uribe instituted a "war tax" on the wealthiest Colombians, which was used to procure helicopters and other expensive equipment.

Civil-military relations under Santos

Prohibited by Colombia's Constitutional Court from running for a third term, Uribe left office in 2010. He was succeeded by Santos who, despite not enjoying the same level of affection from the military as Uribe, has shown no real desire to reconstruct the Lleras "arm's length principle".

In the recent national elections, Santos was running against the Uribe-oriented opposition candidate Oscar Zuluaga. Whereas there were clear differences between the two with regards to their willingness to enter into negotiations with the guerilla, there was less to distinguish between them with regards to other issues. Although Colombians listed their main concerns as unemployment, health and security in polls held in the run up to the national elections, neither of the two electoral candidates particularly emphasized either of the first two of these issues. Rather both candidates respond to concerns about poverty and inequality in the country by emphasizing the linkages between security, growth and private investment. Both also emphasized the continued role of the armed forces in securing these markets and material assets.

In Santos' first term of government, formal recognition was made of the human costs of the internal conflict, and Victim's Centers (*centros victimarios*) were established to provide assistance to displaced and affected families. Nevertheless no real change was made to domestic security policy. Instead of a return to the protection of the citizenry and national borders, the armed forces' efforts remain largely directed towards the protection of the state from perceived internal threats and the securing of infrastructure and sources of natural resource wealth seen as vital to national economic ambitions.

The placement of a Naval Commander in the position of Chief of the Armed Forces, reform of the military justice system, and support for peace talks have raised concerns and complaints within the military regarding Santos' loyalties. However, none of these actions cut too deeply into the close civil-military relationship generated by Uribe and *Plan Colombia*. Recent discussion of the possible outcome of a new Santos government suggests for example that "the problem of Santos is that he wants transformation but by using the old coalition of power"⁶. Indeed, whilst concerns are voiced about Santos' history of firing 27 military officers following the "false positives" scandal in 2008, acknowledgement is also made of the fact that he was the acting Minister of Defense at the time. The "false positives" scandal refers to the public discovery of the military's strategy of hiring "recruiters" to lure poor, young and often mentally impaired people to remote locations where they were murdered. These killings were then reported as guerilla deaths as a means to evidence increased statistical success of military gains.

Acknowledgement of the costs and limitations of the PSD—including international diplomatic concern and condemnation of human rights abuses—led to a revision of national policy. The new National Consolidation Policy (PNC) implemented under the first Santos administration was to lead to what was called a "social recovery of territory". The idea was that military methods would be concentrated on certain consolidation zones (i.e. vulnerable areas where poverty, absence of rule of law, illegal armed group activity, drug trafficking and cultivation, recognized ethnic territory disputes, and human rights violations are most pronounced) to be followed later by the presence of civil institutions of the state⁷.

New humanitarian actions by the military (following increased training in human rights) were also envisaged as a way to "win

the hearts and minds" of populations (with a particular emphasis on indigenous populations) in consolidation zones. However, neither the PSD nor the PNC has led to any real improvement in the presence of civilian institutions in these areas because the military component remains pre-eminent. Indeed, military-led humanitarian action has led to increasing confusion over the difference between assistance and military action, which some analysts see as having raised the risk of retaliation by the FARC against the populations involved. There has also been no abatement of military action under the Santos administration⁸. Indeed, the Santos administration does not see a politics of peace and democracy as being realistic without military oversight (Velasquez 2012).

Persecuting guerillas

Santos inherited a military that had grown by approximately 75% since 2000, thanks to *Plan Colombia* and Uribe's "Democratic Security" policy. The military budget has also continued to grow under Santos, albeit at a slower pace (Isacson 2014). Whilst the ex-president Uribe began criticizing Santos for softness on security shortly after his election, a review of the current president's speeches "reveals that, like his predecessor, he has called the military our heroes and urged them to remain on the offensive dozens of times" (Isacson 2014:6). Indeed more top FARC leaders have been killed under Santos than in the eight years under Uribe.

As revealed in a recent Washington Post article⁹, new covert action led by the CIA and funded through a multibillion-dollar black budget outside of the 9 billion USD official package of military support granted by the US since 2000, was stepped up under Santos. Started under the US Presidency of George Bush and continued on into the Presidency of Barack Obama, the covert operation has used new data tracking technologies and smart bombs to speed up the efforts and success of the Colombian military to track down and kill guerilla leaders. Measures of armed conflict and domestic security are not dropping as fast as they were during Uribe's first term, nor are they worsening (with the exception of extortion, attacks on infrastructure, and localized para-military/organized crime violence)¹⁰.

Although the violence of the armed conflict continues¹¹, and much remains in terms of the negotiation of an eventual peace agreement, landmark agreements on land reform and political participation have encouraged a new wave of cautious optimism amongst warring parties and the civilian population regarding the possibilities of achieving peace¹². Interestingly, despite their earlier protests against peace negotiations and the continuing daily protestations of ex-President Uribe on his Twitter account, the military also so far appears to take a tolerant stance on the current process. This is clearly explained in part by the way in which Santos had crafted the talks in a manner in which the military do not lose face and are an active part of the process (Isacson 2014).

The peace talks

The talks are taking place in a foreign country, meaning that the armed forces do not have to pull out of any Colombian territory to allow them to occur. The talks are proceeding without

a cessation to hostilities in place. The military remain free to attack the enemy at any time, and have done so even during the periods in which FARC have declared a brief unilateral cease-fire. The future role, size and funding of the armed forces and the police are not included in the peace negotiation agenda. Two of the most prominent retired security officers of the past decade have been included in a five-person principal negotiating team¹³. The Legal Framework for Peace, a constitutional reform Santos convinced the Congress to approve in 2012, sets boundaries for the transitional justice arrangements to which government negotiators can agree. The framework does not allow amnesty for the worst violators, but, as Santos frequently reminds critics, the framework would allow military personnel accused of serious violations to receive light (or suspended) sentences (Isacson 2014).

Despite these proposed changes, President Santos has in general made a point in his Presidency to take the armed forces' side on the issue of human rights prosecutions. Although he had moved hundreds of human rights cases to the civilian justice system when he was the Minister of Defense, as President he has launched a constitutional reform aimed at sending all cases back to the military justice system. It was only in response to the outcry of Human Rights NGOs, the United Nations, the Organization of American States (OAS) and the US government that this legislation was watered down before ultimately passing. In 2013, the Constitutional Court struck the entire reform down on procedural grounds. As of 2014, civilian jurisdiction over human rights remains a key point of friction between the military and civilian justice system.

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Civil-military economics

Whilst Santos has successfully drawn on his wealthy urban publishing and media background to generate a reconciliatory outward image, his history as a politician and current wider political platform indicate a desire to retain and improve rather than scale-back the state's security apparatus. Moreover, the Santos government has persisted with economic reforms and new international trade agreements that carry the country further in the direction of economic liberalization and extractive practices—despite broad awareness in his government of its potential for further fuelling social unrest and confrontation. The Santos government's particular emphasis on a heightened level of energy production and resource extraction—which it calls the *mining and energy locomotive (locomotora minera energetica)*—have a series of inevitable consequences in the context of Colombia. Local communities become increasingly pitted against the state and private corporations, and the guerilla, cartels and organized criminals have increasingly fixed their attention on the taxation and control of resource extraction and transport.

For the Colombian government the “national interest” in protecting a major source of state revenue has provided new forms of discursive legitimacy for counter-insurgency actions, and more importantly has reshaped forms of military deployment with an increasing number of troops and resources deployed to protect energy infrastructure. Under the Santos administration

these deployments have continued. Indeed, in recent years the government's economic commitment to expand resource extraction premised on the need to fill a dwindling public purse and secure economic growth in a future post-conflict context have encouraged this further.

Resource conflicts

In 2002 the Bush administration granted Colombia financial and technical support to develop an elite Colombian army brigade “to protect the country's economic lifeline, an oil pipeline” from attacks by the FARC¹⁴. In later years these activities have continued and expanded as the extractive activities in the country have boomed in line with the high prices of commodities over the last decade¹⁵. As exploration pushes deep into the country's eastern lowlands, oil companies face a familiar problem in rural Colombia (i.e., security). Attacks on oil infrastructure more than doubled between 2008 and 2011, according to the Centre for Security and Democracy at Bogotá's Sergio Arboleda University¹⁶. In January and February 2012 there were 13 separate attacks on the country's main pipeline,

from Caño Limón to Coveñas, which was able to pump oil for only 20 days in that period. The trans-Andean pipeline in the south was attacked 51 times last year. In February the ELN, a smaller guerrilla group, kidnapped 11 men in Casanare who were building the Bicentenario, a new pipeline. The recent spate in violence is in part a reaction to a reform of royalties by the government. Distribution of a percentage of royalties used to be paid directly to mayors in oil areas, and was often stolen by guerrillas or paramilitaries. Royalties now go to the central government, which hands them out according to stricter criteria. As a result the gunmen have switched to extorting directly from oil companies rather than local mayors¹⁷.

In this economic climate, the counter-energy-terrorism expertise of the Colombian military has become an important product in its own right. Whilst the Colombian military have for some time been involved in weapons research and development through the INDOMIL and COTECMAR corporations, it is only in recent years that they have established a programme to combine contracts for maritime technology, bombs and small arms with military and strategic training. Recent reports tell of the current programme to reproduce the Colombian security model in another eight countries of the region¹⁸. Colombian and multinational corporations have themselves also seen the need to become directly enmeshed in domestic security provisioning and have brought in new actors, such as private security agencies, some of which also serve as US government contractors.

Mass displacement

With the Santos government's clear message of including and protecting the energy sector in its economic model, a series of new trade agreements have also been recently signed with the US, the EU and Israel. New investment has not only fed directly the expansion and further exploration in the oil sector, but also stimulated infrastructure construction including the expansion or building of new roads, bridges and ports key points

throughout the country. Inevitably, it is these points together with the pipelines and extractive locations that have become the new focus of the geography of the war in Colombia, (i.e., the Pacific Coast, the border areas with Venezuela and the Amazonian territory). It is in these areas that atrocities such as the *chop-up houses* established by criminal gangs in the city of Buenaventura¹⁹ continue to take place. It also is from these centers of conflict that the mass majority of the country's displaced population is now produced. With every passing day hundreds of people move out of these conflict zones, swamping the Victim's Centers the Santos government has set up in the marginal neighborhoods of cities, such as Cali, Medellin and Bogotá, to provide a minimal response to their basic needs.

Of course as the conflict continues and takes on new economic form, the numbers of military combatants need to be sustained. Whilst discussions are carried out in Havana about the possibilities for decommissioning arms and personnel in the post-conflict period, in the present and immediate future recruitment remains essential. For some time there has been both national and international attention given to the guerrilla's use of forced recruitment of minors into its ranks²⁰. However, it is only in the recent years of the Santos government that national media and international human rights groups have recognized the *batidas ilegales*, or illegal recruitment strategies of the Colombian military²¹. In the peri-urban areas of Colombian cities the military carry out regular checks of the military service documents of young men. Young men failing to show the correct documentation are trawled into the back of their trucks and relocated to the red (active) zones of the conflict. Although illegal according to the national constitution, and a matter for recent critical Congressional debate, it is of note that whilst the state talks peace, the economy of retaining dominance in the field has largely meant that forced recruitment continues largely with impunity.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the Santos government's promotion of peace talks and policies aimed at economic growth have spurred a justified wave of optimism about the near prospect of peace in Colombia. However, as this CMI Insight has attempted to highlight, it would be wise to err on the side of caution when evaluating the position of Santos as a peace-maker and the realistic outcome of his government's wider stance on matters of political and economic development. Whilst not as rabidly pro-military as his predecessor, Santos has nonetheless actively sought to retain the form of civil-military relationship established in the period of Plan Colombia. In this relationship the President, state and legislature clearly have more say in guiding national security policy, but the military are also tightly woven into the fabric of national politics and development. Whereas they have lost the autonomy they may once have had in the days of the Llera pact, the military retain the praetorian position granted to them by Uribe and the US. As a praetorian force, national security comes second to securing the position and economic interests of urban

In the peri-urban areas of Colombian cities the military carry out regular checks of the military service documents of young men

and rural economic elites. Indeed, even if the peace talks are successful, there is no sign in the current set up of the talks or the legal framework for peace that any efforts will be made to drastically reign in the military's size, spending and political significance. Whilst extreme abuses of human rights will no longer be tolerated, action will not necessarily be taken to curb extra-legal forms of military action or severely punish those responsible for transgressing the law²².

Given the particular nature of the armed conflict—now as much about oil and minerals as it is coca, land and ideology—and of the Santos's governments strategy to fuel economic growth through a significant expansion of natural resource exploitation that attracts trouble (by armed and non-armed civil society actors), it is also unlikely that any change will be made to the military's counter-insurgent modality. Indeed, there is every sign that a "post-conflict" Colombia will be far from a "post-violence" scenario (Isacson 2014: 10). Much as has occurred in some other Latin American countries (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras), current discussions of peace and demobilization are largely limited to the conflict at hand and make insufficient consideration of larger democratic and developmental challenges²³. This is seen as an explanatory factor for continued violence in other contexts (Suhrke & Berdal 2012). There remain vast disparities in wealth from the country's cities to its rural areas, and the current extractive model of the government is exacerbating tensions in many of these areas. As fights between armed actors become focused on natural resources, and the government attempts to replace the threat of coca with palm oil plantations, thousands are being displaced²⁴ and pushed into marginal conditions in the peri-urban areas of Colombian urban centers. In some cases, such as the city of Buenaventura on the Colombian Pacific coast, visited in the course of research for this article, the violence spurred by the trade of natural resources and expansion of the port had risen to unprecedented levels²⁵. The government has sent 700 additional troops to try to quell the violence in the city, but residents say they need more than boots on the ground. With situations such as Buenaventura multiplying throughout the country, economic returns are high, but developmental and humanitarian condition extremely problematic. Acknowledging the violence that accompanies new economic growth and the expansion of ports, infrastructure and resource extraction also makes claims (e.g. Wiig 2013) that new international trade

agreements and regional integration are keys to the country's further development extremely appear overly simplistic.

As long as the military retains responsibility for securing the nation's economic infrastructure, it is unlikely that their size and position in the country will be reduced. Indeed, with fears that after the peace talks many post-guerrilla will join organized criminal bands, it seems more likely that the country will remain militarized. Certainly whilst President Santos talks peace, his government does not at present give any wider policy signals of a desire for civil-military relations in the country to return to a significantly less hawkish orientation.

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Endnotes

- ¹ The Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN), Colombia's other major guerilla force, have also entered into discussions to follow through with a similar process following the conclusion of talks with the FARC
- ² The governments of Norway, Canada and Cuba are the third party guarantors of the peace talks.
- ³ <http://bit.ly/1DxJluj>
- ⁴ Reinforced by newly acquired Black Hawk helicopters, troop-transport aircraft, silent planes with night-vision equipment and reconnaissance planes
- ⁵ Under Plan Colombia a series of special-forces units were established. The South Combined Task Force, integrated the Army, National Navy and Colombian Air force with the objective of neutralizing in an effective way drug traffickers and outlawed armed groups. In December 1999 the Quick Deployment Force was created with the mission of conducting a high mobility counter insurgency offensive. A series of counter-narcotics battalions were also established in 2000. A high mountain battalion was also created in 2001 with the purpose of maintaining the control on the Sumapaz region, a strategically important zone in terms of operations against guerrilla groups in the South of the country. The Agrupación de Fuerzas Especiales Antiterroristas Urbanas (Urban Counter-Terrorism Special Forces Group, AFEUR) is an elite unit of the Colombian Army whose primary mission is to perform counter-terrorist (i.e. counter subversive) operations and hostage rescues.
- ⁶ See <http://bit.ly/1dgHiYz>
- ⁷ <http://1.usa.gov/1LL25Yq>
- ⁸ President Santos, who was defense minister under Uribe, has greatly increased the pace of operations against the FARC. Almost three times as many FARC leaders (47 vs. 16) have been killed under Santos as under Uribe. See <http://wapo.st/1cmreJu>
- ⁹ <http://wapo.st/1cmreJu>
- ¹⁰ Government of Colombia. Ministry of Defence (2014) Logros de la Política Integral de Seguridad y Defensa para la Prosperidad-PISDP. Bogota.
- ¹¹ See recent kidnap and return by the FARC of a military general. This resulted in the momentary suspension of the peace talks. See: <http://bbc.in/18MJx18>
- ¹² <http://bit.ly/1u6UVYN>
- ¹³ General Jorge Mora, who led the anti-guerilla offensive during Uribe's first term and General Oscar Naranjo, Colombia's chief of police from 2007 to 2012.
- ¹⁴ Trained by US green berets or contract employees, the brigade would incorporate approximately 2000 troops and a mobile infantry unit specialized in surveillance and rapid deployment tactics, moving beyond the missions against narcotics to protect the 480 mile long Caño Limón-Coveñas pipeline.
- ¹⁵ Colombia's output of crude has nearly doubled in the past six years, from 525,000 b/d in 2005 to a daily average of 914,000 last year. In all, foreign direct investment in the oil industry jumped from \$278m in 2003 to \$4.3 billion in 2011, according to the Central Bank.
- ¹⁶ <http://econ.st/1xedWnc>
- ¹⁷ <http://econ.st/1xedWnc>
- ¹⁸ <http://econ.st/1xedWnc>
- ¹⁹ <http://bit.ly/1jce9SG>
- ²⁰ <http://bit.ly/1jce9SG>
- ²¹ <http://cnn.it/1vhXSmt>
- ²² Despite the widespread media reports of its practice amongst the guerilla, it is of note that it is under the Santos government's administration that a civil society campaign has been launched to stop forced conscription (batidas) by the military.
- ²³ Colombia has made great strides in recent years to reduce poverty: 47.4% of the population lived below the poverty line in 2004, and by 2013 that proportion had fallen to 30.6%.
- ²⁴ Colombia is widely considered to be the country with the second or third largest displaced population in the world after Somalia and Syria.
- ²⁵ More than 50,000 city residents have been forced from their homes in the past three years, fleeing extortion, death, and forced recruitment into one of the gangs. See <http://econ.st/1gnnBEd>

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