WHY ARE VIOLENT NON-STATE ACTORS ABLE TO PERSIST IN THE CONTEXT OF THE MODERN STATE? – THE CASE OF THE *MARAS* IN THE NORTHERN TRIANGLE

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Abstract

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras constitute the most violent region on the globe outside a declared warzone: The Northern Triangle. Cities in these countries have dominated the list of most dangerous cities in the world for years. For instance, Honduras' San Pedro Sula had been at the top of the list for four consecutive years - only overtaken by Caracas, Venezuela in the latest report (Seguridad Justicia y Paz, 2016). El Salvador has, at the time of writing, an average of twenty-four homicides per day (Marroquin, 2016), and Guatemala is the fifth country with the highest homicide rate in Latin America (Gagne, 2016). Most of the violence in these countries is generally attributed to the *Maras*, urban gangs that formed in marginalized neighborhoods in Los Angeles, California by Central American migrants and refugees, and then strengthened in the Northern Triangle following mass deportations from the United States, including the expatriation of criminals (Cruz, 2010).

Keywords: violent non-state actors, the *Maras,* private security

The *Maras* have been described as the main public security threat of the region and are also one of the main concerns to the Western Hemisphere as a whole (Aguilar and Carranza, 2008). The governments of the countries in the Northern Triangle have attempted to counter the gang problem in mostly offensive strategies, such as the *Mano Dura* ("Iron Fist") in El Salvador and Guatemala, and *Cero Tolerancia* ("Zero Tolerance") in Honduras. These have included mass incarcerations and an increasing militarization of the police (Jütersonke et. al., 2009), yet have not reduced the violence in the Northern Triangle and have not achieved the disappearance of gangs (Mojica Lechuga, 2014; Ribando Seelke, 2014).

The general diagnosis for the problem of the persistence of violent non-state actors in today's world system is that they exist in states that have empirically failed, because in functioning ones, the state is supposed to be the only actor with the legitimacy to use violence so as to provide security for its citizens (Jackson and Roseberg, 1982; Davis, 2009; Dannreuther, 2013). However, evidence from countries both in the 'Global North' and in the 'Global South' shows that there

has been a global rise in private actors using force (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011). This suggests that the diagnosis is problematic, as violent non-state actors do not only operate in failed states, but also have presence in countries that have relative political stability, clear economic progress and a democratic character, as could be argued is the case of the Northern Triangle (Davis, 2009). If these states have not failed, and are therefore theoretically providing security for their citizens, then why are the *Maras* still persisting?

This essay argues that one of the reasons violent non-state actors are able to persist in the context of modern states is because they can be perceived, paradoxically, as sources of private security. It is acknowledged, however, that the reason being proposed in the paper is not the only cause that armed private actors continue to operate in the modern international system, as each individual case is subject to specific political, social, cultural, or economic factors. Nevertheless, this essay does not seek to give a definite generic answer, but to merely propose a further aspect that should be taken into consideration when studying and dealing with violent non-state actors.

Taking this into account, the essay will proceed as follows: first, the concept of the modern state is going to be explained and it will be argued why it is 'unusual' that violent non-state actors continue to persist. This will be followed by questioning the assumed relationship between state failure and the proliferation of armed private actors, and it will be argued that this diagnosis is rather misleading. The second section will address the question of why, despite that the Northern Triangle countries are not failed states, the *Maras* continue to operate, threatening the citizens' security that the state is supposed to provide. This will be done by engaging with the concept of security, and by illustrating why it has generally been conceived as a public good, and why the paper argues that, in this case, it should rather be understood as a private one. The third section will argue that this condition of security leaves space for non-state actors to be perceived as providers of it. Finally, the essay will conclude with the implications of this analysis for policy and for the general study of private security in international politics.

The Modern State vs. Violent Non-State Actors

When analyzing the use of force in the context of modern politics, Max Weber's understanding of the state is generally the starting point (Avant, 2005). Weber (1946) defines the state as an entity that successfully claims a monopoly over the legitimate means of violence in a given territory. Under this understanding, it is generally assumed that the power to provide security resides within the state, who

is therefore the only legitimate provider of it to a given population (Avant, 2005). Thus, non-state actors' use of violence is commonly conceived as a threat to the current system of sovereign states (Krause and Milliken, 2009).

Nevertheless, this understanding of the state is neither natural nor timeless. The state's monopoly over the means of violence is a relatively modern concept that only started to consolidate in the beginning of the 19th century in Europe (Kaldor, 2012). Most of the analyses and explanations of state formation and monopolization of violence are thus Eurocentric and do not necessarily apply to the consolidation of states in other places of the world, for instance, in the Northern Triangle. However, these studies of the European experience can still offer an insight of the general political thought in the literature on the use of violence in modern states.

One of the main writers on state formation is Charles Tilly (1985), who argues that states were created unintentionally through a process of war, extraction, and protection. In his understanding, rulers in Europe waged war in order to defeat their external enemies and gain territorial control. To finance these wars, they created modes of extraction, or taxation that eventually became institutionalized and began to form relations of power among a population. Moreover, rulers needed to disarm their domestic rivals so as to forbid them to use violence to defend their properties and affect the extraction model. In exchange, however, the state would provide protection from external enemies. Therefore, this process located the legitimate coercive power in the hands of the state. Tilly compares this state-making development to organized crime and emphasizes that it was an unintentional process that resulted from rulers advancing their self-interests (Tilly, 1985).

Nevertheless, before the apparent disarmament of violent non-state actors, these used to have some utility for monarchs and rulers. Force used by different groups was a product in the market, as these groups could be hired as mercenaries to fight wars on behalf of kingdoms, or other entities (Thomson, 1996; Davey, 2010). However, because of the lack of allegiance and loyalty to specific entities, these groups became less useful to rulers and ultimately were perceived as threats. Eventually, this perception and the need of domestic pacification led to the formation of standing armies that were loyal to one single state (Kaldor, 2012). According to Thomson (1996), the abolition of non-state violence was, thus, also a result of the interests of rulers, and not of the society itself. After the consolidation of states, violence and the provision of security were thought to

have shifted from being provided by the market, to being provided authoritatively by state institutions (Thomson, 1996).

In short, according to Kaldor (2012: 22), there were a series of new distinctions that characterized the newly formed European states, which had significant implications for the relation between the state and non-state actors:

> The distinction between public and private, between the sphere of state and non-state activity […], the separation of private economic activity from public state activities, and the removal from physical coercion from economic activities, […] the distinction between the legitimate bearer of arms and the non-combatant or the criminal.

This process, however, did not occur exactly in the same way in the rest of the world, as Tilly acknowledges, because state formation in the post-colonial world did not emerge organically, but was rather imposed by the colonial metropoles (Dannreuther, 2013). Similarly, in the case of Central America, state formation derived as a result of a high degree of foreign intervention from multilateral organizations and from the United States (Montobbio, 2006). A further significant difference is that the use of war to create states the way European rulers did is no longer accepted due to the establishment of the current international system and international law (Barkawi and Laffey, 2006). Therefore, predictions about the process of state making in the socalled 'Global South' cannot be made on the basis of the European experience (Tilly, 1985).

Nonetheless, there are some similarities in the processes and one of them is the advancement of local elite's interests. In Montobbio's (2006) view, the struggles for independence in Central America were fundamentally a result of elite's interests to defeat external forces and consolidate their own power, rather than these struggles being a collective national project. Apart from the wars for independence from the Spanish Empire, Central American states would later undergo their own civil conflicts during the context of the Cold War, which had the main objective to counter communist guerrillas and sympathizers.

Guatemala was the country with the lengthiest civil war, and only became a modern democracy again until 1986, following authoritarian military regimes that were supported by the United States (Richani, 2010). The civil conflict was mainly directed to rural areas –which have been systematically marginalized since the colonial period– where most of the land reform movements originated (Booth and Walker, 1993). The armed forces in Guatemala committed numerous human right abuses, especially against the different indigenous groups, and the

Guatemalan government used 'death squads' to carry out targeted killings and torture suspected insurgents (Richani, 2010). Bunk and Fowler (2012) describe the state of Guatemala as 'the continuation of war by other means' and argue that since its consolidation as a state, it has been characterized by exceptional violent political life.

El Salvador's civil war also developed in a context of repressive military regimes supported by the United States against national liberation fronts with a left-wing agenda. Like in the case of Guatemala, the Salvadoran armed forces also became known worldwide for abuses to human rights in the name of counterinsurgency, and clandestine para-military groups acting as mercenaries were also used a tool for the government to eliminate their suspected enemies (Pedraza Fariña, et. al., 2007).

After the wars, the guerrilla groups in Guatemala and El Salvador were demobilized and integrated into their respective political system (Richani, 2010). In Tilly's understanding, this could be viewed as a way of monopolizing violence by the state through the pacification of internal rivals, and in theory, offering them protection in exchange. The end of the civil wars, however, did not result in the eradication of non-state use of violence. Some groups that were created during the conflict continue to operate today. One example is the Clandestine Security Apparatuses (CIACS) in Guatemala, which are one of the para-military groups that used to serve the military government as mercenaries to repress the guerrilla movements. Today, these groups no longer officially serve the government – although illicit arrangements with some state officials do exist – but rather assist criminal organizations and carry out illegal activities, such as drug- and arms trafficking (Pérez-Brignoli, 1989; InSight Crime, 2016a).

State formation in Honduras was arguably slightly different than in its neighboring countries. The consolidation of the Honduran state was also a result of the interests of local elites and of foreign powers, especially the United States, but Honduras did not experience an official civil war (Booth and Walker, 1993). Nevertheless, it did face twenty years of military rule that repressed left wing sympathizers, and other marginalized groups. The country also served as a military base for the United States and the Nicaraguan "Contras" during the civil conflict in Nicaragua against the established Sandinista government (Bunk and Fowler, 2012). The legacy of militarism continues today, especially considering the provision of security. Honduras is the only country in the Northern Triangle that has a Military Police, which together with the state's armed forces have a

more significant role in policing activities than the National Police (InSight Crime, 2016b).

Since the end of the conflicts, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras saw an apparent proliferation of other non-state armed actors like transnational drug trafficking organizations, and the *Maras,* which joined existing street gangs after mass deportations of criminalized Central American migrants from the United States (Richani, 2010). The wide availability of weapons after the conflicts and the social and economic consequences of them contributed to the strengthening of these groups (Pedraza Fariña, et. al., 2007) Moreover, private security companies also propagated as a result of the security concerns of citizens due to the increasing levels of violence. Currently the number private security personnel in the three countries outnumber the public police forces (Ramsey, 2012). Therefore, this suggests that although relatively stable state institutions have been formed in the Northern Triangle, it does not mean that the provision of security is out of the market and purely under the authority of states. However, this is not exclusive to Central America. According to Avant (2005), a transnational market for force – both legal and illegal – now exists alongside the system of states, and many actors including state forces, multinational corporations, international organizations, and individuals are demanding nonstate forces for the provision of security. This is the case even in European states, despite their 'organic' consolidation of the monopoly over the means of violence. For example, according to Abrahamsen and Williams (2011), private security personnel in the United Kingdom also outnumber the public police, and geographically, Europe alongside North America account for the largest percentage of the global security market.

In short, in theory, modern states are understood to have had monopolized the legitimate means of violence by being able to eliminate domestic rivals, and provide security to their citizens in exchange. However, as evidence suggests, this has not necessarily been the case around the world, and for instance, in Central America, an illegal market for force continues to exist. The next section will discuss whether this is due to the failure of states.

Have States Failed?

One of the main views in the literature for the persistence of insecurity caused by non-state groups in the 'Global South' argues that the nature of the state formation process itself in some countries is the root cause, because their statehood has not been able to fully become 'strong' and 'developed' so as to eliminate the threats from domestic actors (Dannreuther, 2013). By placing their

analysis in Sub-Saharan Africa, Jackson and Rosberg (1982) argue, for example, that empirical state weakness persists in this region because of the imposition of juridical sovereignty by international law, which has not allowed for there to be any major changes in the inherited colonial jurisdiction of these states, or for any new process of state formation.

There are many definitions and understandings of failed states, but the general idea these have in common is that failed states are characterized by a 'collapse of the central government to impose order, and [by] the loss of physical control over territory and the monopoly over the legitimate use of force' (Taylor, 2013; 1). Vinci (2008) goes as far as to argue that failed states are distinguished by the presence of domestic anarchy within their territory, due to the lack of a central policing authority. This results, in his view, in the persistence of autonomous armed groups, as the state is unable to exert authority over them due to its weak institutions. Therefore, the general notion is that as states weaken, violent non-state actors become more powerful (Krause and Milliken, 2009).

Dannreuther (2013) expands the analysis by further dividing the characteristics of states into four hierarchical categories: developed, globalizing, praetorian, and failed. In his view, violent non-state actors would predominantly exist in failed and praetorian states.

There are examples of armed groups having a significant presence and power in states that are considered failed or weak, such as is the case of Somalia, which according to some authors like Sean McFate (2014; 131) has dissolved into anarchy due to decades of conflict, allowing 'warlords, militants, factional armies, and rogue militants' to proliferate. Arguably, because of the lack of a central authority in the country, it would make sense to attribute the persistence of violent non-state actors to the weakness of statehood. Private actors using force, however, also exist in countries that are not considered failed states, as is the case of Brazil. Drug trafficking organizations and urban gangs have a significant presence in the main cities of the country and pose a direct threat to the authority of the state (Arias and Rodrigues, 2006), yet Brazil is defined as a 'globalizing' state by Dannreuther's (2013) criteria. Furthermore, apart from legal non-state actors using force, criminal groups, such as gangs, also pose a threat to security in 'developed' states, – although arguably to a lesser extent – such as is the case of the *Yakuza* in Japan (Siniawer, 2012), and street gangs in major British cities like Glasgow (Fraser, 2013). The problem of gangs, according to (Hagerdon, 2008), is a worldwide phenomenon. State failure does not, however, describe the situation in Japan, or the United Kingdom because,

despite the presence of these actors, there is still a central authority that imposes order.

The conditions for state failure do not quite fit the Northern Triangle countries either. Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador do not experience, for instance, domestic anarchy. The governments in the three countries are democratically elected, which in theory, make them the legitimate authority (Davis, 2009). In terms of the economic growth, – which is an additional criterion for functioning states, according to Dannreuther's classification – according reports from the World Bank (2016), Guatemala has been one of the strongest economic performers in Latin America in recent years with an annual GDP growth of 3 per cent, Honduras's economy is recovering from the 2008 crisis, and El Salvador has been able to reduce poverty by 7 percent in the last ten years. Although these countries have also some of the highest inequality rates in Latin America, their stable – although slow – growth suggests that it is flawed to solely define them as failed states. The Northern Triangle states have further, not completely lost the authority over the gangs, as they do have the capacity to carry out successful operations against them. Therefore, the argument of violent non-state actors persisting in states because of the latter's failure seems not to be accurate to every situation. According to Krause and Milliken (2009), rather than explaining violent nonstate actors through naturalizing categories of state, it is more useful to analyze how state institutions actually work to provide security and public order. Thus, this essay suggests that the question of the paper should rather be approached by analyzing the concept of security.

A further interpretation in a similar framework, argues that violent non-state actors are in their own process of forming a state, and the current states in which they live in are fragmenting because of their 'un-natural' nature (Taylor and Botea, 2008). Mary Kaldor (2012) argues that the new wars in the post-Cold War period will not be about acquiring territory to form states, as was the case in Western Europe, but rather about state fragmentation on the basis of identity. Kaldor's (2012) analysis is based on her experience during the ethnic conflict in former Yugoslavia, therefore her conclusions could make sense when analyzing that specific case, but it is not necessarily applicable to everywhere in the world. Many non-state actors are neither motivated by anti-government ideas or regime change (Davis, 2009), some of these groups are actually entangled with state power and state agents (Krause and Milliken, 2009), like is the case, for example, of cases of illicit arrangements between organized crime groups and political elites in Latin America (Dudley, 2016). It would also not make sense to describe private security enterprises as being in a state formation process, despite them

being considered non-state actors using force, because they operate alongside states, and to some extent depend on them (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011).

El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras are not fragmenting, and the gangs are not in the process of becoming a state either (Krause or Milliken, 2009). In an interview, the Salvadoran leader of Barrio 18, one of the main *Mara* groups, is asked about the political objectives of the gangs, to which he answers they have none. According to him, the gangs see themselves a social group that is still a part of the respective societies of each country, suggesting that they do not aim to create a separate state (Lechuga Mojica, 2013). Furthermore, the two main groups of *Maras* – Barrio 18 and MS-13, who are rivals – are not organized in a way in which they could be able to form a state, as there is not a centralized leadership. Although the structure of the gangs is officially hierarchical, each cell or clique across the continent has an extent of autonomy and does not necessarily follow orders from a main command (Jütersonke, et. al., 2009; Dudley and Pachico, 2015). Moreover, gangs depend on the corrupt nature of the state to further their activities, which is one of the reasons for them not trying to overthrow it (Bunker and Sullivan, 2014). Therefore, arguing that violent non-state actors are able to persist because they are in the process of their own state formation does not seem accurate for the case of every armed non-state actor, as is the case of the *Maras*.

In short, the argument that violent non-state actors are only able to persist in failed, weak, or collapsing states seems to be misleading, as armed private actors are active on a global scale, and to some extent still act on a parallel level to functioning states. That said, even though the countries in the Northern Triangle are not failed states, their attempts to counter the security threat of gangs has not achieved to stop them from using force and from continuing to generate violence. Why are the efforts of these countries failing to provide security to their citizens? The following sections will approach this problematic by taking a step back and critically analysing the concept of security and the role it plays in the persistence of violent non-state actors in modern states.

What is Security?

Traditionally, the notion of security used to be considered in military terms and was concerned mostly with national security and the status quo of the international system. Being secure meant, for modern states, to be in a position where they would be free of intervention by other states, or where they would be able to defend themselves in case of armed conflict (Baldwin, 1995). This view, however, has changed alongside with the end of the Cold War and the

development of critical theories in the social sciences (Dannreuther, 2013). The current understanding of security has been 'expanded' in at least two ways. One is a vertical expansion, as Rotschild (1995) argues, as the objects to be secured are no longer limited to states, but also include individuals. This results in the inclusion of 'human-centric' approaches, which among other aspects, question the assumption that states are inherently sources of security. The other expansion occurred horizontally, as it added further answers to the question of what can be considered as a threat to security, considering that the individual became the center of gravity. Therefore, issues such as poverty, diseases, and natural disasters came to be conceived under the umbrella term of security.

Thus, the meaning of security and what constitutes insecurity is ambiguous. Krahmann (2008) for example, argues that security can be defined in the relation to threats: security can mean the prevention of threats when there is an absence of them; it can be the deterrence of threats, when these have not yet become a reality, and it can also be the protection from threats, once these are an actuality and the only option left is survival. For Luckham and Kirk (2013) the understanding of security depends on the supply and the demand side. For providers of security, it means the creation and maintenance of an authoritative social order. For the receivers of it, security is a basic entitlement to protection by these social orders. Furthermore, the approach of human security understands the concept as emancipation. Being secure means being free from want and free from fear (Kerr, 2010).

Nevertheless, any conception of security will also depend on the following questions: who or what is the object to be secured, for which values, from what threats, by what means, at what costs, and in what time period (Baldwin, 1997). Therefore, because the meaning of security depends on a number of factors, it could be argued that what might be considered as a source of security for some actors does not necessarily mean it is also for others, suggesting that both the meaning of security and the decision of what constitutes a source of insecurity are, to some extent, social constructions rather than natural (Dannreuther, 2013).

Bringing these definitions back to the case of the *Maras* in Central America, the provision of security can be better understood in Krahmann's understanding as protection, since gang-violence is already an existing threat, and most of the policies, like *Mano Dura*, have been a reaction to the problem, rather than a prevention of it (Hume, 2007b). This definition of security as protection is also in accordance to the other meanings given to security by the authors mentioned above, since protecting individuals from the threat of violence is also a way to

address human insecurity, as this threat undermines the freedom from fear and freedom from want of the citizens of the Northern Triangle (U.S. Department of State, 2016). Moreover, it is also a way for the providers of security to create and maintain a social order, and for the receivers to feel protected by it, in Luckham and Kirk's understanding. Thus, for the analysis of this essay and by taking into consideration the different factors that contribute to a definition of security, it will be understood as the protection of individuals from the threat of violence for the value of emancipation, and at the cost of a legitimate use of force. Taking this into account, can security ever be a public good? The answer to this question is necessary to understand why the Maras persist in the Northern Triangle despite the efforts of states to protect their citizens from them.

Is Security a Public or a Private Good?

In the traditional understanding of security and in the context of state formation, it has generally been assumed that states provide public security to their citizens since they are the only legitimate users of force. However, as argued before in the paper, there appears to be a global rise in the private security industry, which seems to suggest that security has been commodified (Abrahamsen and Williams, 2011). However, according to Krahmann (2008), whether security is a public or a private good does not necessarily depend on the provider, but rather on the nature of security itself. By applying public goods theory, Krahmann defines a collective good as one that is neither excludable, nor rival. Consequently, a private is good is one that has the ability to exclude potential users from its benefits, and its consumption can reduce its availability to others (Krahmann, 2008: 384).

For Krahmann, whether security is a collective good or a commodity depends how it is defined. If security is understood as prevention, then it seems to be more accurately conceived as a public good, since preventing a threat, such as an infectious disease, will benefit everyone who could potentially be affected, and its 'consumption' will not diminish the availability of the good. In this case, therefore, it does not matter whether it is the state that is preventing the threat or if it is a private actor, as security will still be non-excludable and non-rival. When security is defined as deterrence, Krahmann argues it can be better understood as a club good, which means that it is excludable but non-rival. An example for security as a club good is the creation of international security alliances, such as NATO, whose security is exclusive to their members, but the joining of further adherents to it will not diminish the availability of the good (Krahmann, 2008: 387). And lastly, security is a private good when it is defined as protection. For

example, according to Pillay (2006), the increase of gated communities in South Africa as a form of protection from the threat of criminal activities, excludes those who are not able to live within them, and also diminishes their security as crime activities concentrate in the areas outside the gated communities.

For the analysis of the essay, the security threat that is at stake in the Northern Triangle is gang-related violence, and therefore security was defined as protection in Krahmann's understanding. Thus, following Krahamann's framework, security would therefore be conceived as a private good, even if it is provided by the state, as the efforts to protect the population have been excludable and rival. To understand why this is the case, it is necessary to refer back to the political history of the region (Hume, 2007b). The states' policies to counter the *Maras* so as to guarantee security have been excludable, because not all the citizens in the countries of the Northern Triangle can equally benefit from them. The legacy of repression and exclusion of certain areas and neighborhoods during the civil conflicts has not been displaced (Aguilar and Carranza, 2008), and the perception that protecting of the hegemony of the elites is the priority of the state continues to persist (Hume, 2007b; Bunker and Fowler, 2012).

According to Hume (2007b) and Aguilar and Carranza (2008), the narrative of the 'war on gangs' has constructed a view where the *Maras* are seen politically as an 'Other', which justifies the use of 'extraordinary' measures by the authorities of the countries in the Northern Triangle. Thus, because of the wide control that the gangs have over neighbourhoods, certain areas are stigmatized and become targets for constant state interventions. This has led to the exclusion of certain groups from the protection of the state, as anyone associated to the *Maras* in any way is a potential target for the application of force. When *Mano Dura* was first applied, it was specifically directed at people who 'looked' like gangsters, which resulted in the targeting of any young, poor, tattooed, or deported man, despite the fact that most of them were victims of gang violence, instead of members of one (Pedraza Fariña et. al., 2007; Dudley, 2010). Moreover, this exclusion of protection is also accompanied with high levels of impunity. The countries in the Northern Triangle have some of the highest impunity rates in Latin America (Human Rights Watch, 2016), and crimes committed in marginalized neighbourhoods are less likely to be processed, due to the relative absence of the state. This has led to individuals taking security in their own hands, like in the case of Guatemala, where lynching of criminals became a common way of dealing with justice, due to the absence of the state's protection (Gurney, 2014). Therefore, the way the Northern Triangle states have attempted to provide protection from the *Maras* has excluded some sectors of

society, which means that the possibility of this type of security being a public good is dismissed.

These security policies in the Northern Triangle can also be understood as rival, because by carrying out the operations against the gangs in the name of protection, the security for some individuals and groups is diminished. As mentioned above, the *Mano Dura* strategies were initially directed at whoever appeared to be a suspected gang member, which resulted in mass incarcerations of innocent people, and also in extra-judicial killings by the police, especially in El Salvador (Hume, 2007b). This common use of public violence by the authorities to counter the gangs has led to the further stigmatization of communities that were already systematically marginalized (Holden, 2004; Dudley, 2010). Moreover, despite the *Maras* being described as an 'Other' by the narrative of the government, they are not 'separate' from the rest of the population, in the sense that many of them live in the same neighbourhoods and even the same houses as their family members and friends who are not necessarily gang members (Hume, 2007a). According to field research carried out by Hume (2007a) in a neighborhood controlled by the MS-13 in San Salvador, non-gang members living in these communities tended to view actions of the state against the gang as a form of protection. However, when these operations targeted their sons, brothers, or fathers who are part of the gang, the state's actions were rather viewed as a threat.

A further way in which the security efforts can be seen as rival, is because gangs can easily move from one neighborhood to another, even if these are in different countries. According to field research by journalist Ioan Grillo (2016), when the state's interventions were being too severe on gangs in one area, they would normally transfer to another *barrio.* Which, suggests that the concentration of security forces for the protection of some, diminishes the security of others. Therefore, efforts of the state to protect the population from the gangs is not only excludable, but also rival, since it can potentially undermine the security of the people already directly threatened by the presence of the *Maras.*

Hence, whether security is a private or a public good depends on the nature of security and not on the provider. In the case of the Northern Triangle, security, even when provided by the state, seems to qualify more as a private good. If certain groups are being excluded from the provision of security by the state, or their security is being undermined, then how does this have implications for the persistence of the *Maras*? The next section will address this question by arguing that, paradoxically, the Maras can be perceived as sources of security.

(In)Security and the persistence of the *Maras* in the Northern Triangle

It is easy to agree that the Maras are generally a source of insecurity in the Northern Triangle. They formed as social networks that exploited grievances of the marginalized migrant population in Los Angeles and in Central America and continue to use this grievance to justify for the illegal activities to capture profit (Bunker and Sullivan, 2014). The two main gangs operating in the urban centers of the Northern Triangle, the MS-13 and Barrio 18, are constantly at war with each other, fighting for the control of territory and extortion networks. The *Maras* extort the transport sector, businesses, and in the case of Barrio 18, even the households in their controlled neighbourhoods, who are charged the so-called 'war tax' (Cruz, 2010). Failing to pay the extortions, normally leads to assassination. The threat of harassment and rape also undermines the security of those living in areas where the Maras operate (Hume, 2007a). Nevertheless, as argued in the previous section of the paper, the state has not been able to provide public protection from the *Maras*, and has even diminished the security of some, with for example, extra-judicial massacres by the police that many times include innocent individuals (Pedraza Fariña, et. al., 2007). If the residents in these neighbourhoods are repressed both by the state and by the gangs, then how can they deal with the ongoing violence around them?

Arias and Rodrigues (2006: 67) analyzed this dilemma in the favelas of Brazil and concluded that one of the ways in which residents could guarantee their own safety was by closely relating to the criminals. The authors name this phenomenon the Myth of Personal Security, since the residents perceive a level of predictability and security under the rule of the gangs, despite not having a guarantee of safety. The case of the favelas in Brazil is to some extent similar to the situation of the slums in the Northern Triangle. The favelas have been constructed as 'spaces of crime' and the Brazilian state has hardly been present in the matter of providing security within them. Moreover, the Brazilian police is known in the favelas for their extraordinary use of violence that has caused many extra-judicial killings (Arias and Rodrigues, 2006). As a consequence of the Andean cocaine flow towards North America and Europe, traffickers have used the favelas as 'safe havens' for their operations due to the relative absence of the state. Disputes over territory and markets between rival gangs and militias have led to high levels of violence and repression (Arias and Rodrigues, 2006).

These high levels of insecurity have forced individuals to create their own spaces of safety. The Brazilian upper and middle class have done this through the construction of gated communities, but those living in the favelas and who do not

have access to that type of security have often relied on the support of the gangs to resolve their local problems and impose order. Through certain imposed norms of conduct, the traffickers manage crime and local disputes, and apply justice when needed. They punish criminals who act outside of these forced norms, and in some sense become a replacement of the absent government. This results in a perceived sense of predictability by the residents of the favelas that allows the gangs and traffickers to continue operating in these spaces. However, when a trafficker breaks the established norms, the myth disappears and the violent reality is revealed (Arias and Rodrigues, 2006). The persistence of violent non-state actors because of the Myth of Personal Security may also be understood, for example, in the context of terrorist groups. For instance, in Afghanistan it could be argued that the Taliban managed to persist despite the violence and harsh measures they carried out because residents did not feel secure with the on-going violence since the occupation of the Soviet Union and later the intervention of American forces (Jones, 2008).

Bringing the analysis back to the case study of the paper, this perceived sense of security by certain individuals might explain the persistence of the *Maras*. In a general sense, the *Maras* can be understood as protection rackets (Cruz, 2010). In a similar way as Tilly (1985) explained how states provide protection, the *Maras* also use sources of extraction as a source of income. These extractions are done through extortions or through the called 'war tax'. By paying these fees, individuals will be 'untouched' by the violence of the extorting gang, but failure to pay can result in their death (Cruz, 2010). Thus, this activity could make individuals perceive this 'order' as a source of security, however, it evidently does not guarantee their safety. The MS-13, nevertheless, has given up extorting households living in their controlled neighbourhoods, which has made them be seen as benevolent in comparison to other gangs (Dudley and Gagne, 2016). Detailed examples of how the gangs impose order can be appreciated in the following field research.

Hume (2007a; 2007b) found that many gang members who joined the MS-13 in the slums of San Salvador did so out of a perceived need for security. By joining the gang, the young men and their relatives living in the same neighborhood would be promised protection against the attacks of rival gangs. Moreover, according to surveys and official polls, despite the disapproval of the gang activities by the residents of the communities, they tended to consider order as more important than civil rights and liberties. The reproduction of violence to impose order becomes, thus, a means of survival.

Douglas Farah (2015) found that in the MS-13 controlled neighborhood of Choloma in the outskirts of Honduras' financial district San Pedro Sula, the gang formed an improvised juridical system that dealt with crime within the neighborhood and allowed for the operation of some businesses that would normally be extorted in other areas of the city. According to Farah, the residents living within this neighborhood, or those working in the enterprises, felt considerably safer than in other areas where they would be vulnerable to gang harassment. This did not mean, however, that the MS-13 had given up its violent behavior, since it still acquired territory through the use of force and impose justice coercively.

This phenomenon is replicated in other neighbourhoods of Honduras, for example in Tegucigalpa's Tela, where the gang is responsible for the resolution of domestic conflicts and disputes among neighbors. For instance, domestic abuse is not tolerated in the neighborhood, and the gang would punish and expel men who commit violence against their wives. In the municipality of Comayaguela, also in Tegucigalpa, the MS-13 protects the local population from extortion from a rival gang called Los Chirizos by attacking the individuals that carry out these extortions (Dudley and Gagne, 2016).

These examples suggest that in the face of high levels of violence and criminality, and the lack of the provision of security by the states has allowed the *Maras* to be potentially considered as a source of security by some individuals, despite continuing to be a cause for insecurity in a general sense and in reality, not guaranteeing safety to the people they 'protect'.

Conclusion

This essay has offered a case-based study about private security by addressing the question of why the *Maras* continue to persist in the Northern Triangle. It has been argued against the assumption that violent non-state actors only persist in failed states, and it has been claimed that one of the reasons for their persistence is because, in an environment where security is a private good, some individuals can perceive the *Maras* as a source of private security, as a way to deal with the on-going violence that threatens them.

Taking this into account the essay will end with three implications for policy and the study of private security. Firstly, the presence of non-state actors does not necessarily mean the failure or the weakening of a state.

Armed private actors should be understood as something that exists and operates parallel to states. Secondly, security should not be considered as a private or a public good judging on who provides it. This case has shown that even states, which are generally conceived as providing public security, might also provide private security in some instances. Lastly, this case has shown the importance of individuals' perceptions of security, and therefore suggests that security strategies, such as *Mano Dura*, should be reconsidered into a more inclusive strategy that does not undermine the security of individuals. Also, if security as protection appears to inherently be a private good, then it is worth considering more preventive strategies for insecurity and address the underlying causes of the threats instead of only containing them.

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