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Explaining violence against civilians:
Insurgency, counterinsurgency and crime in the Middle
Magdalena Valley, Colombia (1996-2004)

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Abstract

During the last decade there has been intense controversy over the nature of contemporary armed conflicts and their connection with religion, ethnicity, crime and natural resources. Central to the discussion is the question of why armed organisations use violence against civilians. Recent contributions underscore the self-interested behaviour of individuals and suggest that war, violence and collaboration are increasingly driven by personal ambitions rather than political goals. Combatants, warlords and politicians seem less interested in victory than in satisfying their lust for power and money, usually at the expense of the population; meanwhile, fearful but rational civilians try to exploit the opportunities that conflict throws up, engaging in individualistic alliances with armed organisations and even prompting the use of violence against their fellows. These trends, it is argued, are compounded by the convergence between crime and warfare, and the Colombian conflict is often cited as a typical example. This dissertation examines these claims by studying a recent outbreak of violence against civilians in the Middle Magdalena Valley, in Colombia, that left nearly 2,000 civilians dead and more than 110,000 people forcefully displaced. Based on data obtained from official and unofficial sources on conflict and violence, interviews with key informants and news reports, the dissertation argues that violence was used by armed organisations and, to a lesser extent, by the state, to extend and strengthen the territorial and political control they had over the region. Despite the salience of illegal economies, there is no evidence that economic motives have significantly contributed to the production of violence. Furthermore, civilian collaboration went beyond the narrow sphere of private interests as politicians, parties and social organisations took part in alliances with armed organisations and aimed to advance the interests of the social groups they represented. The dissertation thus challenges common misconceptions and influential contributions in the field of armed conflict and political violence; it also sheds light on the nature of the Colombian conflict.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACCU   Autodefensas Campesinas de Cordoba y Uraba (Peasant Self-defences of Cordoba and Uraba).

ACMM   Autodefensas Campesinas del Magdalena Medio (Peasant Self-defences of the Middle Magdalena Valley).

ACVC   Asociacion Campesina del Valle del Rio Cimitarra (Cimitarra Valley Peasant Associacion).

AUC   Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (Colombian United Self-Defences).

AUSAC   Autodefensas Campesinas de Santander y Sur del Cesar (Peasant Self-defences of Santander and South Cesar).

BCB   Bloque Central Bolivar (Bolivar Central Bloc), a paramilitary organisation created in the early 2000s.

CINEP   Centro de Investigacion y Educacion Popular (Centre and Research and Popular Education)

CODHES   Consultoria para los Derechos Humanos y el Desplazamiento (Consultancy for Human Rights and Displacement), a NGO.

CREDHOS   Corporacion Regional para la Defensa de los Derechos Humanos (Regional Corporation for the Protection of Human Rights), a local NGO based in Barrancabermeja.

DAS   Departamento Administrativo de Seguridad (Security Administrative Department), the Colombian national security agency.

ELN   Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional (National Liberation Army).

EPL   Ejercito Popular de Liberacion (People's Liberation Army).

ERP   Ejercito Revolucionario del Pueblo (People's Revolutionary Army).

FARC   Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces, also known as FARC-EP.

FURY   Frente Urbano Resistencia Yariguies (United Front of Resistance 'Yariguies'), ELN's urban militia.

MAS   Muerte a Secuestradores (Death to Kidnappers), a paramilitary organisation created in the 1980s.

M-19   Movimiento 19 de Abril (19 April Movement), an insurgent movement.

N&N	Noche y Niebla (Night and Mist), a quarterly report on armed conflict, human rights and political violence.
OFP	Organizacion Femenina Popular (People's Women's Organisation), NGO based in Barrancabermeja.
PDPMM	Programa de Desarrollo y Paz del Magdalena Medio (Middle Magdalena Valley Peace and Development Programme), NGO based in Barrancabermeja that supports vulnerable communities and organisations.
RSS	Red de Solidaridad Social (Social Security Network), the government's humanitarian agency, later renamed 'Accion Social' or Social Action.
SUR	Sistema Unico de Registro (Unified Registry System), the official registry of victims of forced displacement due to violence.
USO	Union Sindical Obrera, Ecopetrol's workers' labour union.

INTRODUCTION

Violence against civilians has been a common feature of wars throughout history, but it has become especially notorious, in terms of scale and cruelty, in recent conflicts and episodes of political turmoil. Although its salience is, perhaps, partly caused by the unprecedented attention given to humanitarian crises by the media, international agencies and NGOs, it has been argued that there is, in effect, an actual increase in the victimisation of civilians in the context of contemporary wars (e.g. Kaldor 1999: 8, 100). Indeed, in recent armed conflicts large numbers of civilians have been killed, tortured, displaced, forcefully recruited and, in general, subjected to a wide range of abuses, universally regarded as morally unacceptable. In Sudan, humanitarian agencies put the number of civilians forcibly displaced until January 2009 at 2.6 million; in Colombia, the official figure approached the 3 million.[1] Meanwhile, in Gaza and northeast Sri Lanka, civilians recently came under attack as government troops employed heavy artillery in attempts to crush insurgents who sometimes used them as human shields and who, in turn, have perpetrated repeated terrorist attacks against Israeli and non-Tamil civilians, respectively. Likewise, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan have seen notorious increases in the civilian death tolls in recent years in the context of sectarian violence. The civilian death tolls in these crises, however, are dwarfed by Iraq's, which was close to 100,000 by early 2009, according to Iraq Body Count.

Attempts to prevent and outlaw violence against civilians can be dated back at least to Ancient Greece. Attempts to explain it, however, are fairly recent, as scholars have usually looked at these phenomena with more moral revulsion than intellectual curiosity. Often, the issue has been merely touched upon to illustrate the consequences of war in the context of broader enquiries or subsumed into wider analyses about the causes of conflict and political violence in general, with little

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[1] Data obtained from the United Nations Sudan Information Gateway (http://www.unsudanig.org) and

attention to its nature (e.g. selective, indiscriminate, 'collateral') and to the relation between its forms and purpose (e.g. killings, forced displacement, kidnappings). However, more recently debates on the changing nature of contemporary warfare have encouraged scholars to address the specific issue of violence against civilians in a more systematic way. Moreover, the recent comeback of counterinsurgency as a critical issue in the political and military agenda of the West is likely to spur further interest in the subject, as the role of civilians as victims but also as sources of manpower, resources and legitimacy for armed organisations acquires critical importance.[2]

Predictably, the fundamental debate in the emerging literature on violence against civilians in wars concerns its causes. Inevitably, this debate relates to a larger discussion on the nature of contemporary wars and to the issue of 'what are they about'. If violence is deliberate, and most authors assume it is, then it should be instrumental in achieving the warring factions' ultimate goals but, as Ch. 1 shows, they are not always self-evident and the nature of warfare is not necessarily clear. While most contemporary wars are unconventional, it is unclear whether they fit the standard model of irregular warfare—where insurgents use guerrilla tactics against a superior army in an attempt to establish a new government or claim sovereignty over a given territory—or if other goals, economic or political, are being pursued and war and disorder merely provide the ideal environment to accomplish them, as is the case of the so-called 'new wars'. Depending on the scenario, violence against civilians assumes different forms and is used with different rationales.

Since these rationales are unobservable, researchers have focused on formulating testable hypotheses about the determinants of violence and the mechanisms that shape its intensity, spatial distribution and forms. This dissertation goes precisely in that direction: it uses quantitative and qualitative data and methods to explain and lay out the processes by which violence against civilians is produced in the context of an armed conflict.

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[2] American Defence Secretary, Robert Gates has highlighted the urgency of developing the counterinsurgency capabilities of the American army (2009). Worried about the failures in Iraq, military analysts had been working on developing new approaches to tackle insurgencies more effectively, while protecting civilians, since the Bush administration (Gordon 2006).

To this effect, it focuses on a recent outbreak of violence against civilians in the Middle Magdalena River Valley, in Colombia. During most of the twentieth century radicalism and political violence thrived in the Middle Magdalena Valley. Social and economic conflicts, ideological influences and the weak presence of the government, all contributed to the emergence of insurgent groups that challenged the state and private militias, known as paramilitaries, that employed violence recklessly to protect their sponsors, including drug bosses, from the threats posed by the insurgency. The roots of this state of affairs are discussed in detail in Ch. 3; for the moment, it suffices to note that by the mid-1990s both insurgent and paramilitary organisations were stronger and bolder in their actions in the Middle Magdalena Valley and, in general, across the country. Indeed, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the intensity of armed conflict in Colombia reached levels not seen since the 1950s; and different sources have shown a sharp peak in 'political homicides' or conflict-related killings during this period (Restrepo et al. 2004b; Gutierrez et al 2007).

In the Middle Magdalena Valley, the intensification of armed conflict and violence from 1996 to 2004 left a death toll close to 1,000 combatants and 2,000 civilians; according to official data, more than 110,000 peopled fled their homes during the same period as a direct effect of armed conflict—approximately an eighth of the total population of the region. This dissertation addresses the question of *what caused such levels of violence against civilians in the region during this period*. Taking a critical approach on the existing knowledge on the subject, it puts to test some of the hypotheses, concepts and methods developed by scholars in recent years, thus making a contribution to the theoretical debates in the field and to the discussion on the nature of the Colombian conflict.

In response to the question, the dissertation argues that violence against civilians was used by armed organisations and to a lesser extent by the state, to extend and strengthen the territorial and political control they had over the region. Despite the salience of the illegal economies, there was no evidence that economic motives have led to the production of violence. Thus, by contrast with conventional wars, violence and coercion against civilians were deliberate, not a side effect of armed conflict; and, unlike 'new wars' they could not be explained with reference to identity politics

or 'greed'.

Based on this finding, the dissertation tackles a second debate that concerns the role of civilians in armed conflict and, in particular, its involvement in the production of violence against other civilians. The standard model of irregular warfare assumed that civilian collaboration resulted from political and ideological sympathy and could be nurtured through indoctrination; however, scholars have highlighted the selfish behaviour of civilians and their determination not only to survive the war but also to take advantage whenever possible, even if the lives of their fellows are at stake. In this context, civilian collaboration is shaped by fear, expectations about changes in territorial control and alliances with armed organisations. Indeed, it has been suggested that opportunistic civilians play a crucial role in the production of violence by accusing their own foes and rivals of collaboration with the enemy, in the hope that this will prompt selective attacks against them.

The dissertation supports the view that civilian collaboration is based on alliance rather than allegiance: when it comes to providing support for an armed organisation, civilians seem less interested in long-term social change than in improving their chances of survival and their living conditions in the immediate future. However, it challenges the notion that alliances can further only the private interests of individuals and shows how politicians, parties and social organisations may enter as partners in such alliances and shape them in ways that are, at least to some extent, beneficial to the interests of the social groups they represent. While this view of civilian collaboration is distinctly political (in the sense that it involves the aggregation and articulation of interests and the making and negotiation of claims vis-à-vis the state), it does not support the naïve assumption that insurgencies necessarily represent the popular interest.

These findings have important implications for other debates. First, they challenge the assumption that crime and politics are antagonistic by nature, taken for granted in many contributions on the nature of contemporary wars, as they show how the involvement of armed organisations in criminal activities does not mean that they are less willing or able to pursue political ends or engage in political activities. Second, they cast new light on the nature of the Colombian conflict and question the view

that it is plainly criminal or just 'about nothing'. In particular, they show the connection between the struggle for territorial control and the political ambitions of armed organisations and highlight the paradoxical role of the drug trade in the conflict. They also show how, despite its illegal nature, the merger between paramilitary groups and drug mafias was, ultimately, helpful in defusing the threat posed by the insurgency to the state, regional elites and companies, at a fraction of its actual cost.

Compared to other recent contributions to the field, this dissertation displays several methodological strengths: first, it relies on detailed data on armed conflict and takes into consideration different forms of violence and coercion against civilians used by armed organisations—not only lethal violence, as most contributions do. This is an important innovation because some forms of violence are just as effective in terms of military advantage as killings and nearly as harmful in terms of devastating civilian lives and livelihoods. In the particular case of the Middle Magdalena Valley (and Colombia, for that matter), kidnappings and forced displacement have been widely employed by armed organisations and cannot be overlooked in any attempt to gauge the impact of armed conflict on the population. As a second innovation, it explores how armed organisations target people from different social groups and classes; the differences, it turns out, are negligible and suggest that the use of violence against civilians by armed organisations reflects in a limited way the underlying social and economic conflicts in the region. A third innovation is the combined use of quantitative and qualitative methods and data, discussed in detail in Ch. 2.

The dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 1 identifies and discusses different approaches to the debate on the causes of violence and coercion against civilians in the context of contemporary armed conflicts. It also provides a brief review of the contributions that tackle this issue with specific reference to the Colombian conflict; these reflect, to some extent, the lines of argument seen in the international, comparative literature.

Chapter 2 describes and discusses the methods and sources used to address the research question, highlighting their virtues and limitations and describing the challenges found in the process and the way they were tackled. In particular, it

shows how despite their limitations and biases, the datasets used in this work enabled us to gauge with precision the intensity of conflict and the magnitude and spatial distribution of different forms of violence against civilians. It also discusses the rationale that led to study one particular region rather than the whole country or only a town or a village.

Chapter 3 traces the emergence and evolution of the armed organisations existing in the region during the period of study and identifies some of the conditions that led to disorder and insecurity, outlining the crucial social conflicts during the last century and discussing the role of the state in the process. It also provides a brief summary about the situation of political violence in the first half of the 1990s, just before the period of the study.

Chapter 4 provides the reader with a general and yet precise idea of the magnitude and outcomes of armed conflict in the region from 1996 to 2004 and its impact on civilians, exploring several forms of violence (killings, kidnappings and forced displacement) and the way their 'users' employed them. The key contribution of this chapter to the main argument results from the cross-sectional regression analyses, aimed to establish the determinants of different forms of violence and coercion. Overall, they suggest that the use of violence by the warring factions was mainly aimed to shape civilian collaboration and expand and consolidate territorial and political control over the region, rather than to purely economic ends. In that sense, it fits better into the standard model of irregular warfare than into the 'new war' narrative and other alternative approaches to contemporary warfare.

Following this line of enquiry, Chapter 5 tests the most sophisticated model of violence as an instrument of territorial control, developed by Kalyvas (2006). According to this model, the levels of violence used by each faction depend on the levels of territorial control they have reached and civilian collaboration is based on 'alliance' rather than on allegiance, that is, on self-interested cooperation rather than on loyalty or sympathy towards a cause. It is precisely through these alliances that civilians end up playing a substantial role in the production of violence and shaping the spatial distribution of selective violence. The model is tested using data from the urban area of Barrancabermeja, the largest town in the Middle Magdalena Valley but

the results corroborate the model only in a limited sense: while they confirm that violence was used by armed organisations to expand and consolidate territorial control, they suggest that political control was equally important. Furthermore, they show that civilians do not necessarily play a crucial role in the selection of targets of lethal violence, as the model predicted.

Chapter 6 confirms the importance of alliances as a crucial mechanism in shaping civilian collaboration and explaining violence against civilians. It does so by illustrating the efforts of the state and armed organisations in consolidating and expanding territorial and political control in south Bolivar, a rural, isolated zone in the region. It also shows how armed organisations developed alliances with local elites and organisations, promoting social mobilisation and building constituencies to advance and legitimise their struggle and secure political control. Thus, despite their distinct nature, violence and alliances are complementary components of the relation between armed organisations and civilians and key elements of their strategies to increase territorial and political control.

Chapter 7 integrates the findings and arguments put forward in previous chapters, adding new evidence and suggesting a framework that shows how armed organisations and the state may use a variety of means, including violence against civilians, to achieve territorial and political control. The chapter also discusses the implications of the findings in the context of the existing literature on armed conflict and violence, focusing on aspects such as the notion of alliance and its importance in understanding civilian collaboration; the merger between crime and warfare and its effect on the scale and forms of violence against civilians; and the limits and possibilities of methodological individualism in developing theories of armed conflict and violence.

Two caveats must be made at this point. First, this work does not attempt to explain the origins of violence or political violence in general; it is focused, exclusively, on those forms of violence and coercion used against civilians in the context of armed conflict. Accordingly, and to avoid wordiness, the term 'violence' is used in the text in a narrow sense, to refer to situations in which state and armed organisations physically harm civilians or use the threat of violence against them in the context of

armed conflict. In the few occasions when the term 'violence' is used in a broader sense (e.g. political violence), it is explicitly signalled in the text. This narrow usage reflects the boundaries of the subject of study and is mostly a matter of economy of words rather than anything else.

Second, this work does not intend to find the culprits of the crimes alluded in its pages, or to cast moral judgements on their perpetrators; rather, it is concerned with understanding the conditions made them possible as well as the rationale behind the use of violence by armed organisations. At times, the discussions presented throughout this work may seem cynical and the memory of the victims reduced to nothing but cold statistics. While the author cannot but unreservedly condemn all the crimes and abuses mentioned in this work, he takes the view that, when it comes to preventing their occurrence, understanding their causes and the processes that led to such outcomes is just as important as voicing our disapproval.[3]

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[3] As Bauman (1989: 88) put in reference to research on the Holocaust, 'much more is involved in such a study than the tribute to the memory of murdered millions, settling the account with the murderers and healing the still-festering moral wounds of the passive and silent witnesses. Obviously, the study itself, even a most diligent study, is not a sufficient guarantee against the return of mass murderers and numb bystanders. Yet without such a study, we would not even know how likely or improbable such a return may be'.

1. VIOLENCE, ARMED CONFLICT AND TYPES OF WARFARE—A LITERATURE REVIEW

"Man's greatest good fortune is to chase and defeat his enemy, seize his total possessions, leave his married women weeping and wailing, ride his gelding [and] use the bodies of his women as a nightshirt and support."

- Gengis Khan (Keegan 1993: 189)

Violence against harmless, unarmed people has been an essential feature of wars throughout history, as the words of Khan, cited above remind us. From the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) to the English *chevauchées* (1339-1380) to the French Revolutionary Wars (1791-1802) and the bombings of Hamburg and Hiroshima (1943 and 1945, respectively) history provides several examples of widespread violence against people not involved directly, or even remotely, in the waging of war (Grimsley and Rogers 2002).[4] Furthermore, several genocides have been connected with wars, including the Armenian genocide, during WWI, and the Holocaust, to mention just two (Shaw 2003: 41-9).

Similarly, norms restricting the targets of warfare can be traced back to the Greeks, for whom 'war is an affair or warriors [and] non-combatants should not be the primary targets of attack' (Ober 1994: 13).[5] In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church pushed forward moral norms aimed to protect the clergy and the poor in wartime and prevent violence among Christians in general, not least because these 'unprotected

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[4] King Edward III launched several campaigns, *chevauchées*, aimed to destroy French villages and towns during the Hundred Years' War as a way to incite a sometimes 'battle-shy opponent'—Philip VI— and destroy the economic base of the Valois monarchy (Rogers 2002). In the dawn of the French First Republic, the revolutionary army resorted to violence and coercion on Belgian and German civilians—plunder, forced labour and repression—as a way to sustain itself and punish bands of peasants who tried to resist the occupation (Blanning 2000).

[5] However, during the Peloponnesian War, social and political change in Athens led to a breakdown in the pre-existing mode of warfare and also in the rules of war: 'non-combatants were increasingly the targets and victims of strategies based on social disruption and destruction of economic resources' (Ober 1994: 23).

classes' were a source of income for the Church (Cowdrey 1970: 48). Furthermore, in feudal times, the business of war was increasingly restricted to the nobility and thus 'peasants and townsmen ought not to fight all [as] it was the job of knights to protect (and exploit) these non-combatant *pauperes*' (Stacey 1994: 30). Notably, these norms and unwritten codes predate the notion of human rights.

The current approach regarding the distinction between combatants and non-combatants, and the differential treatment granted to them, emerged in the late nineteenth century and was first delineated in the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907. It was developed in a more explicit way in the Geneva Convention IV of 1949, 'relative to the protection of civilian persons in time of war', and the Additional Protocols I and II of 1977. The distinction belongs to a set of principles and rules known as *jus in bello*, which aim to prevent any 'unnecessary suffering' in the conduct of war. In particular, it aims to restrict violence to those who represent a threat, granting 'immunity' to the 'harmless' or, at least, trying to minimise the damage inflicted on them (Detter 2000: 166; Coates 1997: 235; Green 2000: 106).

In legal terms, the status of combatant is currently granted to those who, in the context of warfare, (i) belong to a hierarchical structure, (ii) have a 'fixed distinctive sign recognisable at a distance' and (iii) carry arms openly 'during each military engagement' or during the period previous to such engagements. Of these criteria, the two latter are perhaps the more easily verifiable in the field; however, they 'are still vague and difficult to apply in practice' (Detter 2000: 135-148).

By contrast, civilians comprise those 'who never take part in the hostilities' but also those who, having been combatants, are 'at some stage, *hors de combat* and no longer take part in the hostilities' (ibid: 317). Under the law of war any forms of 'violence to life, health and physical or mental well-being of persons', as well as collective punishments, taking of hostages, acts of terrorism, degrading treatments, rape, enforced prostitution, slavery, pillage or threats against civilians are forbidden (Detter 2000: 319).

Coercion and violence against civilians has been a recurrent topic in the academic literature in recent years, as the interest in contemporary conflicts soared, as

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reflected in the increasing number of publications on the subject.[6] This interest reflects the perception of an increasing victimisation of civilians in the context of war during the twentieth century, often summarised in the claim that up to 85 percent of the fatal victims in recent conflicts are civilians (e.g. Kaldor 1999: 100; Cairns 1997: 17). The impact on civilians is compounded by the fact that these wars tend to be protracted: of the 26 intra-state conflicts active in 2003, only five started after 1993 and twelve had been active for two or more decades (Eriksson and Wallensteen 2004).

However, the interest in the manifestations of violence against civilians is often merely rhetorical in that they are used to illustrate the 'horrors of war' in the context of discussions related to other aspects of armed conflicts (e.g. its causes), thus giving the impression that such manifestations do not need to be explained as if they were a mere by-product or a symptom of wars. As Kalyvas put it, 'fascination and detail abound, but sound theoretical understanding is in short supply' (2006: 34). Similarly, there is a tendency to conflate several forms of violence, as if their motivations and consequences were the same.

Having said this, there is growing number of contributions to the understanding of violence and coercion on civilians in the context of wars. Scholars interested in the motives and means of such conflicts have addressed the issue, not always in a systematic way but, nonetheless, providing insights on the broad motivations behind it. Moreover, an increasing number of scholars have tackled the question in an explicit and more systematic way, suggesting hypotheses and models to explain such violence and, in some cases, backing their findings with evidence, usually from case studies. Furthermore, there is a strand of literature that, despite not being academic, has enormous importance. It consists of manuals and other writings produced by political leaders or official agencies setting up doctrines and rules on the strategic and tactical aspects of insurgency and counterinsurgency. Although rarely based on evidence, some of them have been actually used on the field and in this sense they provide hints on the possible rationales behind specific phenomena.

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[6] Approximately 76 percent of the books and journal articles referenced in the IBSS database including the terms 'war' or 'conflict' in the title were published after 1990. The corresponding figures for terms such as 'economic' or 'politics' were in the range of 46 to 67 percent.

Drawing on this body of knowledge, it is possible to identify three possible sets of explanations for the use of violence against civilians—associated with the three dominant forms of warfare after WWII: conventional, irregular and the 'new wars' warfare. These explanations are presented in the first three sections of the chapter; the fourth focuses on contributions regarding contemporary violence against civilians in the Colombian armed conflict. Based on this review, the last section shows how the dissertation tackles key research challenges and shortcomings in the current literature.

1.1   Conventional warfare

Perhaps the simplest explanation of violence against civilians is that it is an unintended, *side effect* of proper warfare—a negative 'externality' of war caused by technical miscalculations in the planning and execution of military operations or malfunctioning of weapons. This view is particularly suited to explain civilian casualties in conventional wars, that is, in conflicts involving open, large-scale confrontations ('battles') between relatively symmetric armies with a well-defined 'front'. Symmetry, in this context, refers to aspects such as size, equipment and organisation. Moreover, in conventional warfare, the parties display an ostensible level of sophistication in all of these aspects, reflecting the fact that the armies are formally organised and war is conducted by professionals and fought using the most appropriate technology and manpower. Furthermore, the 'front' that separates them is well defined and can be drawn in a map, its changes reflecting the struggle between the parties (Janos 1963; Harkavy and Neuman 2001). Some instances of predominantly conventional wars after WWII include the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and several confrontations within the Arab-Israeli war (Harkavy and Neuman 2001).

In this context, aggressions against civilians are considered unnecessary, contrary to the ethics of war and subject to judicial prosecution, the only exception being the one allowed under the 'principle of double effect', i.e., in circumstances where the conduct of a legitimate operation, aimed to reduce the opponent's military strength,

may lead to foreseeable, yet unintended side effects on civilians (Coates 1997). In this sense, the absence of violence against civilians is both a principle and an expected outcome of this mode of warfare with observable implications such as: (a) absence of military operations aimed at civilians; (b) any instances of violence against civilians would be unintended and linked to specific operations against military targets; and (c) the ratio of civilians to combatants dead would be low—ideally far below the one to one threshold.

The limitations of this explanation are evident, as violence and coercion on civilians have been privileged *means* to the ends of wars. This has been particularly clear during the twentieth century as technical and demographic change, i.e. more deadly weapons, population growth, urbanisation, and the rise of *total* and *irregular* warfare have contributed to increased civilians' death tolls.

In *total warfare*, the economy and the population are massively mobilised towards the war effort; moreover, the war is aimed to the total subjugation of the enemy, including its population (Forster 2000). Therefore, crushing the opponent's economy and morale is as important as winning battles and 'the distinction between military and civilian targets is almost completely ignored' (Luttwak 1971: 203). Although the line that separates total war from genocide is thin, the conceptual distinction remains: unlike genocide, total warfare is bilateral and, most importantly, the factions aim to subjugate, but not exterminate, the population. In this sense violence against civilians remain a means to the ends of war.[7]

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[7] Two controversial examples of this logic are the bombing of Hamburg and Hiroshima. In the first case, Coates argued that it was not justified by 'any vindictive spirit, but from the conviction that this was the best way to defeat the enemy and to bring the war to its swiftest, and least costly, conclusion' (1997: 259). Regarding Hiroshima, it has been argued that the atomic bomb was the best way to crack the will of the Japanese military, while minimising the number of American casualties and, arguably, of Japanese casualties as well.

1.2   Irregular warfare

The concept of irregular warfare is still ambiguous and, indeed, it is not clear why is it called 'irregular' in the first place.[8] However, it is generally accepted that it refers to strategies and tactics specifically devised for situations of asymmetry—when one of the factions is considerably weaker than the other in terms of size, technology and organisation. The lack of a well-defined battlefront is another characteristic aspect of this form of warfare: open warfare can erupt literally anywhere and territorial control remains variable and ambiguous; only a few patches of the geography are *fully* secured and controlled by either factions. However, the crucial feature of interest here is that irregular warfare involves civilians, both as agents and targets. It is perhaps in this sense that it is irregular—it involves people other than 'regulars', i.e., full time soldiers.

Irregular warfare has become the dominant form of warfare after WWII. In this section, possible rationales for instrumental coercion and violence against civilians in the context of irregular wars are presented and discussed. Although some authors equate irregular warfare with guerrilla warfare, neglecting the importance and distinctive nature of counterinsurgency, this section discusses the use of violence in both contexts. The last part highlights the importance of civilian collaboration in the emerging debate and the discusses how recent contributions have modelled the relation between civilian collaboration and violence and attempted to derive testable hypotheses that could explain the levels and forms of violence seen in specific armed conflicts.

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[8] For instance, while Luttwak defines irregular warfare as the combination of guerrilla warfare and subversion (1971: 102), Sarkessian considers unconventional or irregular warfare as one of the elements of revolutionary guerrilla warfare (1975: 7). Harkavy and Neumann (2001) use the terms 'unconventional', 'guerrilla' and 'insurgency' warfare interchangeably but they seem to prefer the idea of 'low intensity conflict'. Smith (2003) lists more than 30 similar terms often used to describe 'low intensity conflict' and suggests to dispose of them altogether, including 'guerrilla warfare', arguing that they do not require a distinctive analytical body of thought, different to the Clausewitzian 'classic strategic theory' (2003). Smith, though, acknowledged the existence of guerrilla tactics within war.

1.2.1 Guerrilla warfare

Guerrilla warfare is a mode of warfare consisting of surprise attacks followed by dispersion on the defensive, high mobility, deceit and avoidance of open confrontation aimed to the 'slow erosion' of the enemy (Harkavy and Neumann 2001). Although guerrilla warfare is not a modern invention, its doctrine was largely developed during the twentieth century. It was aptly condensed by one of its most important theorists, Mao Zedong, in his famous dictum: 'Enemy advances, we retreat; enemy halts, we harass; enemy tires, we attack; enemy retreats, we pursue' (cited by Janos 1963: 643). Guerrilla warfare is based on the premise that conventional armies react slowly and cannot possibly protect every point of a territory on a permanent basis; therefore, guerrillas can choose the place and time of their attacks. Furthermore, the usual response of the stronger army will be to 'scatter troops over many local posts', making them even more vulnerable (Knorr 1962: 55; Kiras 2002: 214-5).

Although, guerrilla warfare is often used in revolutionary wars, i.e., those fought by 'rebels' to overthrow a regime, the two notions are not unequivocally related. On the one hand, guerrilla warfare might be used by conventional armies, including incumbent forces, 'in a supporting role' to conventional warfare (Harkavy 2001: 192; Janos 1963: 638). On the other hand, guerrilla warfare has had a central but limited role in the 'theory and practice' of revolutionary wars as it is too demanding for nascent insurgencies and insufficient when their strength is such that asymmetry disappears. For instance, Mao saw guerrilla warfare was an intermediate stage between a previous phase of propaganda, terrorism and sabotage, and one of conventional warfare, in which the regime will be finally defeated (Sarkesian 1975: 9-10).

While mobility is one of the defining features of guerrilla warfare, it also demands the ability to establish safe operational bases and expand the areas under insurgent control. While this ability is crucial in the case of territorial conflicts, as insurgents seek to found a new, autonomous state over their homeland, it may also be important in conflicts over government (i.e. political change). In Mao's view, for instance, expanding and strengthening territorial control could allow guerrillas to secure areas

and 'establish a formal government, claiming to legitimately represent the people and raising the possibility of foreign support' (Sarkesian 1975: 10). It would also place the insurgents in a better position to launch a decisive, conventional attack on the central government.

Crucially, guerrilla warfare demands a substantial degree of political and operational support from civilians as well as 'effective but covert control' over them—what Luttwak calls *subversion* (1971: 102). This demands a deep 'embeddedness' in local social networks that might be a spontaneous result of the involvement of local population in guerrilla activities or the product of the rebels' political strategy to indoctrinate, mobilise and control the population—as was largely the case in the Latin American guerrilla movements.[9]

The involvement of civilians in guerrilla activities goes far beyond the role the might have in conventional warfare. As Wickham-Crowley put it, 'guerrilla warfare is the most labour-intensive form of warfare […] Massive peasant support means not only bodies for combat but also personnel for all the ancillary activities of warfare: lookouts, guides, civil-defence specialists, food growers and providers, and even munitions manufacturers' (1991: 324). Urban guerrilla warfare also 'takes place among the masses and depends on their sympathy' (Marighella [1969] 1975: 526).

However, the role of civilians is not just 'ancillary': guerrillas disguise as civilians according to tactical needs blurring the distinction between civilians and combatants. For Sarkesian, this is indeed the 'the decisive element' in revolutionary guerrilla warfare: 'the departure from the use of *always visibly distinguishable* combatants in formal battle order' (1975: 7, italics added).[10] This entails a challenge to the war conventions regarding the distinction between combatants and non-combatants: by making difficult to identify the targets, guerrillas put at risk the lives of civilians. As

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[9] In his study of Latin American guerrilla movements, Wickham-Crowley argued that they 'are not best understood as the response of oppressed peoples to government repression […] Rather, they better fit Skocpol's concept of 'marginal political elites', heretofore excluded from full power, who turn to revolutionary organisations' (1992: 47). However, he added, Colombia's FARC are an exception to this rule.
[10] The word 'always' here denotes the ambiguous nature of guerrillas—halfway between individuals participating in a popular uprising and regular soldiers. Indeed, Mao's model of revolutionary warfare entails the transformation of the former into the latter.

Walzer put it, 'guerrillas do not subvert the war convention by themselves attacking civilians […] Instead, they invite their enemies to do it' (1977: 179-80).

But, in fact, guerrillas do attack civilians. While Mao's doctrine encouraged guerrillas to give a fair treatment to peasants and to engage in the defence of popular causes, it did not exclude intimidation and violence to 'suppress the activities of the counter-revolution in the countryside' (Mao 1954: 27). Similarly, Lenin advocated the expropriation of civilians' property—provided it was carried out 'under the Party control and the money was used for the purposes of the uprising'. Indeed, in his words, the socialist revolution was not 'so much a struggle of the people against the government as a struggle of one part of the people against the other'—one that could take the form of 'a protracted civil war enmeshing the entire country' (Lenin 1975 [1906]).

Furthermore, attacks against civilians are often the last resort—the 'weapon of the weak'—in asymmetric warfare. Hultman (2004), for instance, hypothesised that asymmetry increases the chances that the faction experiencing military losses might resort to violence as a way to 'signal resolve', informing the opponent that its will to fight remains, even if the targets are not combatants or even collaborators. Boyle (2009) made a similar case with reference to the escalation of violence against civilians in Iraq after the US-led invasion. And Downes (2006) suggested that violence against civilians is more likely when the warring become 'desperate', in the context of protracted military stalemate.

The epitome of this rationale is, of course, terrorism. Insurgent organisations often launch 'terrorist' attacks to force certain military or political decisions from the government; as such, the targets of these attacks are chosen less on the basis of their allegiance or political leanings than on the impact that death and destruction may cause on political decision-making. 'Terrorism' remains a highly contested, politicised term and its vagueness and ambiguity preclude its use in scholarly debates; as Tilly noted, terror, terrorism and terrorist are terms that 'serve political and normative ends admirably despite hindering description and explanation of the social phenomena at which they point' (2004: 5). However, its underlying logic, i.e. the use of violence against civilians to influence an 'audience', surely goes some

way in explaining specific instances of use of violence in the context of irregular wars.

1.2.2   Counterinsurgency

It is widely accepted that guerrilla warfare cannot be fought using conventional tactics; as E.T. Lawrence put it, that would be 'like eating soup with a knife' (cited by Knorr 1962: 55). Thus, guerrilla warfare has led to the development of counterinsurgency strategies, which are unconventional and yet different from guerrilla warfare. Like the latter, these strategies combine military and political components, although not necessarily in the same proportions.

Generally speaking, the military component is aimed to destroy guerrilla targets and deprive the rebels from access to, and support from, civilians. In Vietnam, for instance, counterinsurgency comprised three kinds of operations to be carried out sequentially: *search and destroy* operations were 'aimed at destroying the enemy's main forces in uninhabited areas and in his base areas, his logistic resources in particular'. *Clearing* operations were aimed to 'drive enemy forces away from populated areas and to allow small units to carry on securing activities among the people'. Finally, *securing* operations, were 'directed at the enemy in the hamlets—at the infrastructure and the farmers by day and at the Viet Cong guerrillas by night— who operated individually as well as in squads and platoons' and included 'saturation patrols and squad-size ambushes' (Hay 1989: 170).

These operations often led to a massive disruption in the lives of livelihoods of people: the creation of 'strategic hamlets' controlled by government forces, for instance, aimed to deprive rebels from popular support, effectively entailed a massive forced displacement of population and demanded a huge logistic effort (Joes 2004: 238-242). Other military tactics include food denial, which might be effective and can been put in practice by imposing severe restrictions to the mobilisation of food but also by spraying defoliants over crops near suspected rebel strongholds. *Scorched earth* operations are more radical, as they are aimed to destroy just about everything in areas controlled by guerrillas (Joes 2004: 222-3, 242).

A recent field manual published by the US Army (2007) offers a similar approach: military operations are structured in three stages: first, counterinsurgent forces must *clear* the area, that is, they must 'remove all enemy forces and eliminate organised resistance' through 'cordon and search' operations, 'saturation patrolling', 'interdiction ambushes' and 'targeted raids' (2007: 175-6). Second, they must *hold* the area through 'measured offensive operations […] against insurgents as opportunities arise, *but the main effort is focused on the population*' (2007: 177, italics added), which must be separated from the insurgents through measures such as a 'thorough population screening to identify and eliminate remaining insurgents and to identify any lingering insurgent support structures' and 'training local paramilitary security forces' (2007: 178-9). During the third stage, aimed to build support, military operations as such are marginal but they may involve the imposition of 'population control measures' such as censuses, curfews, 'limits on the length of time people can travel' and 'limits on the number of visitors from outside the area' (2007: 180).

Summing up, if guerrillas are to civilians as fish are to water, 'the policy must be to destroy the fish either by removing the oxygen from the water or by draining the pond' (Paget 1967: 168). The risks that such operations pose for the lives and livelihoods of people are obvious.

The political component of counterinsurgency aims to 'win the hearts and minds' of the population by strengthening the government's legitimacy. As Thompson put it, 'winning the population can tritely be summed up as good government in all its aspects' (1966: 112), from fighting corruption to investing in people's material well-being, e.g. roads, hospitals, schools, or even in 'prestige projects [of] questionable economic value [that] can play their part in building a sense of national pride' (1966: 66). It also calls for a restraint on the harshness of military operations: 'there is a very strong temptation in dealing both with terrorism and guerrilla actions for government forces to act outside the law […] Not only is this morally wrong, but, over a period, will create more practical difficulties for a government than it solves'

(Thompson 1966: 54).[11]

Thompson considered that the political military and political components of counterinsurgency should go hand in hand in a balanced way. The current official military doctrine of the US Army states, as a principle, that 'the political and military aspects of insurgencies are so bound together as to be inseparable' (US Army 2007: 40). It warns that 'military actions executed without properly assessing their political effects at best result in reduced effectiveness and at worst are counterproductive' (2007: 40). It constantly emphasises the importance of protecting the population and suggests that in areas cleared of guerrillas, 'counterinsurgents should use every opportunity to help the population and meet its needs and expectations' (2007: 181).

In contrast with this well-balanced approach, military considerations often become dominant, so much so that governments may turn to conventional or even total warfare to fight the insurgency (Beckett 2001: 42). Indeed, there are those who advocate a tough approach and suggest that counterinsurgent strategists 'should worry less about winning popular allegiance and more about raising the costs of supporting the insurgency'; therefore, counterinsurgent forces should use 'overwhelming firepower to destroy the adversary and […] armed coercion – including harsh collective punishment—to convince the population to shun the insurgents' (Kahl 2007). But, in some cases, this tough approach has been less the result of the application of a doctrine than the consequence of armies and governments 'muddling through', trying to defeat resilient movements, as was the case of the Japanese in China and, to a good extent, the Americans in Vietnam. In the latter case, it has been suggested that traditional conceptions about the nature of armed conflicts, more suited to conventional, 'big wars', led the military to misunderstand the challenges posed by guerrilla warfare and, furthermore, prevented them from learning from previous failures (Sarkesian 1975: 8; Cassidy 2006: 114-

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[11] The phrase 'winning hearts and minds' was apparently coined by a British officer during the campaign to suppress the Malayan Communist Party in the 1950s, which seems to have embodied the political approach to counterinsurgency. Thompson's book on counterinsurgency is based on the Malayan experience and also on his critical observations on Vietnam, where he served as Head of the British Advisory Mission from 1961 to 1965 (Beckett 2001: 95-104). The case of Malaya is often cited as an example of successful defeat of a guerrilla movement, attributed to the adequate integration of military and political objectives and actions and the moderate use of force. It is important to highlight that approaches that emphasise the political considerations do not necessarily entail negotiations with 'rebels', truces or amnesties.

125). Likewise, it has been argued that 'institutional distortions' generated by internal competition among branches of the army favoured low risk operations, such as the bombing of peasant villages (Kalyvas 2004: 131-133).

1.2.3   Civilian collaboration and violence

As seen above, civilian collaboration is a key ingredient of irregular warfare, essential to achieve both the political and military goals of insurgents and the state. Based on this understanding, scholars have put forward various models and hypotheses aimed to explain how armed organisations and the state use violence (or non-violence), in its different forms and with different intensity, to shape civilian collaboration. Violence, in this context, results from strategic decisions that involve considerations on the costs, risks and potential gains derived from killing, looting or forcing a population to flee their homes. Such considerations are based, in turn, on assumptions regarding the determinants of civilian behaviour (e.g. fear, loyalty, self-interest) and its strategic and tactical value to armed organisations.

Kalyvas for instance, suggested that violence could be used selectively or indiscriminately against civilians, to different effects. In his view, selective violence is superior because it targets only those who fail to comply, but it demands reliable information, always in short supply; indiscriminate violence, by contrast, 'makes everyone fear lethal sanctions regardless of their behaviour: innocence is irrelevant and compliance is utterly impossible' (2004: 104). Therefore, he predicted, the intensity and randomness of violence against civilians are determined by the degree of control of each party over geographical areas and populations: violence would be selective and less extreme in areas where either party's control is stronger and the information about potential 'traitors' is more reliable; by contrast, violence would be indiscriminate and especially brutal in contested areas, where armed actors have poor information about the possible links between locals and opponents. He found that during the Greek Civil War nearly half of the homicides occurred in the Argolid were indiscriminate (Kalyvas 2006: 270).

Although Kalyvas's insight on the effectiveness of selective violence seems quite

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sensible, several authors have found that warring parties, and especially governments, often resort to indiscriminate violence as a means to achieve certain military goals. For instance, Azam and Hoeffler (2002) developed a model to explain forced displacement in which, instead of 'fighting proper', the government uses indiscriminate violence; 'the displacement of a fraction of the civilian population, they argue, reduces the efficiency of the fighters from the rebel group as they cannot hide as easily from the army amidst a lower population, and they get less support' (2002: 482). The authors tested their model with data on refugees from 25 African countries with positive results.

Along similar lines, Valentino et al. (2004) argued that, in fighting guerrillas, governments might resort to 'mass killings' as a way to terrorise collaborators; using data from 147 wars, they found evidence that the probability of 'mass killings' by government forces increases with the level of military strength and popular support enjoyed by guerrillas; in such circumstances, governments find that indiscriminate violence is less costly than other soft-handed alternatives aimed to win the people's 'hearts and minds' (Downes 2004: 403). Based on evidence from the Second Anglo Boer War, the same author came to a similar conclusion, arguing that when the popular support towards the insurgency is too strong, selective violence is ineffective and 'indiscriminate force [may be] required to make it impossible for people to provide support' (2007: 420).

However, insurgents also resort to indiscriminate violence. Attacking civilians in areas controlled by the government undermines their confidence on the ability of the ruler to protect them and, paradoxically, may prompt them to switch their allegiance in favour of the aggressor (Grimsley and Rogers 2002: xiii, xviii). For instance, Eck and Hultman found that in territorial conflicts i.e. secessionist, 'rebels kill almost six times more civilians than governments'; this finding is somewhat surprising considering that they need popular support to succeed, so the authors suggest that rebels may be 'forced to use intimidation and violence to ensure compliance and assistance' (2007: 241). But as Lilja shows (2009), this is not always the case: despite their reputation, the Sri Lankan Tamil Tigers used violence against Tamils in moderate, relatively mild forms, including forced recruitment of youngsters and restrictions on the transit of people in the zones they controlled. Indeed, her findings

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suggest that the LTTE had established deep roots in the Tamil society, which, incidentally, may help to explain the extensive use of violence by government troops during the counterinsurgent campaign of 2009.

In a more complex setting such as contemporary Iraq, where US-led coalition troops face attacks, the escalation of indiscriminate violence seems to reflect rational, strategic decisions by sectarian armed organisations competing with each other as a means to grow a constituency. As Boyle argued, violence 'helps generate more recruits and funding in a competitive environment and convince the population to transfer their loyalties to that particular armed group' (2009: 272); furthermore, in a context of increasing insecurity 'the Iraqi people have a strong incentive to pledge their loyalties to tribes and sectarian communities, as a way of hedging in case the state falls apart' (2009: 276).

While civilian collaboration may involve a wide range of tasks and activities, some authors have focused on the economic dimension of support and on how different forms of reliance on civilian support lead to different levels and forms of violence. For instance, Naylor (1993) suggested that guerrillas' fund-raising activities pose different risks to civilians depending on their relationship with them and their standing vis-à-vis the government. In 'contention zones', where guerrillas have a precarious presence, 'predatory' activities such as ransom kidnappings and bank robberies, activities that resemble petty or 'blue-collar' crime, are predominant. However, as insurgents increase their control, they need more stable sources of income and turn to recurrent, 'parasitical' forms of funding such as extortion. Finally, in zones of total control, 'symbiotic forms of fundraising' emerge: guerrillas begin to provide basic services and impose taxes and fees similar to those levied by a formal government.[12]

Likewise, Le Billon suggested that the nature of violence is linked to 'whether resources involve production or extraction: with extracted resources (e.g. minerals)— violence is most likely to take a physical form to achieve territorial or

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[12] It is worth highlighting how in Naylor's three-zone model, typically criminal activities such as ransom kidnappings and robberies still have a place, if limited, in the activities of rebel movements aimed to seize power or establish a state. This feature will be used to assess the nature of insurgent ransom kidnappings in the Middle Magdalena Valley in chapter 7.

state control [whereas] with produced resources (e.g. crops), violence usually takes a more structural form, such as coercive forms of labour or controls over trade' (2001: 568). By contrast, Azam (2006) saw in attacks by armed organisations against 'their own' civilians—more specifically farmers—as a means to make agricultural production less profitable, thus making cheaper the recruitment of new combatants.

Paradoxically, not having to rely on civilians as a source of economic resources may lead to further violence: according to Johnson (1968) as Viet Minh guerrillas obtained support from China, they reduced their dependency on peasant support and, therefore, could afford to abuse them fearing no consequence. A similar claim is made by Ballentine, who argues that insurgent groups that depend upon 'lootable' resources 'may have less of a need or incentive to generate and maintain social capital among putative supporters and fewer constraints against indiscriminate forms of civilian predation' (2003: 270). Likewise, Weinstein has argued that resource-rich armed organisations attract undisciplined, careless combatants, with little regard for civilians' rights (2007).

While the contributors just cited acknowledge that violence can be used to shape civilian collaboration, a few authors have gone a step further by suggesting that civilians may be actually involved in the production of violence. This finding may seem trivial in the context of genocides, where civilians are often actively involved in producing violence and 'doing the killing', e.g. Rwanda (Prunier 1995: 247-8). Indeed, as Keen argued, violence can be a bottom-up process whereby 'ordinary people' can engage in ethnic violence in response to exclusion, impunity or because there are no strong revolutionary organisations that could channel their grievances (1998: 44-45).

However, irregular wars constitute a different scenario as the use of violence remains in the hands of 'specialists of violence', be they insurgents, militiamen or government troops. It is precisely in this scenario that Kalyvas (2006) developed and tested a model in which civilians are 'the most common and probably effective' (2006: 176) source on information on collaborators. According to this model (discussed and tested in Ch. 5), civilians are not always victims or passive observers of violence: given the chance, they accuse other civilians of collaboration, leaving

the punishment to armed organisations (2006: 203-7).

To conclude this section, some empirical indicators may be of help in identifying instances of violence against civilians that fit the pattern of irregular warfare: (a) coexistence of hostilities (i.e., clashes between the warring factions) and operations aimed exclusively at civilians; (b) presence of military units specialised in attacks against civilians, e.g., death squads; (c) any instances of violence against civilians could be linked to military outcomes and often (but not necessarily) related to suspected or actual civilian collaboration; and (d) the ratio of civilian to combatant deaths would be close to 1:1.

1.3   New wars and pseudo-wars

Although the concept of 'new wars' is commonly associated with the work of Kaldor (1999), it is often used to refer to a broader set of scholarly contributions that share the view that contemporary conflicts are qualitatively different from conventional and irregular wars—hence the label of 'new wars'. These differences, authors argue, are evident in several respects: the goals pursued by the factions, their organisational structure and funding, the level of popular support they enjoy, their relation with the global economy and organised crime and, crucially, the extensive use of violence against civilians (Kalyvas 2001, Newman 2004).[13] Although these features are not necessarily consistent (i.e. a given conflict can display a certain attribute but not others), there is a common thread to all of them: while in conventional and irregular wars the parties in conflict are interested in defeating the enemy, seize power or capture a territory, in these 'new' conflicts they pursue other economic and political goals, *but not victory*. In that sense, while they may resemble

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[13] It is worth noting that it is there is still debate on whether new wars are actually an objective phenomenon or result from changes in the categories and concepts used to analyse conflicts. For instance, Kalyvas has argued that the end of the Cold War 'has decisively affected how civil wars are interpreted' and led to 'an exaggeration of the criminal aspects of recent civil wars' (2001: 117). Likewise, Newman has argued that the extent to which new wars are actually new has been exaggerated: 'all of the factors that characterize new wars have been present, to varying degrees, throughout the last 100 years. […]The difference today is that academics, policy analysts, and politicians are focusing on these factors more than before, and they are understanding the underlying dynamics of conflict – and especially the social and economic factors – to a greater degree than in the past' (2004: 179).

a military contest, they are about something else—hence the term 'pseudo-wars' used in the title of this section. Throughout the dissertation, I will use this term to refer to this type of armed conflicts and 'new wars' to refer, specifically, to those characterised by Kaldor (1999, 2005).

Consistent with the above, armed confrontation in pseudo-wars becomes marginal and force and violence are aimed to other ends, including, sometimes, civilian victimisation. As Keen put it: 'Whereas analysts have tended to assume that war is the "end" and abuse of civilians the "means", it is important to consider the opposite possibility: that the end is to engage in abuse or crimes that bring immediate rewards, while the means is war and its perpetuation' (1998: 12). As a consequence, the ratio of civilian to combatants deaths tends to increase, as has been the case in some recent wars (Kaldor 1999: 8). Furthermore, since the factions are not really interested in defeating an enemy or achieving victory, these crises tend to become protracted; this is particularly true when they pursue economic goals and, therefore, they can derive benefits from a sustained situation of conflict and disorder.

As noted above, pseudo-wars may have political or economic goals. In the original definition by Kaldor, 'new wars' are 'about political mobilisation through violence rather than about achieving specific military objectives. In new wars political mobilisation is achieved directly through violence' (2005: 219). More specifically, politicians might resort to 'political mobilisation on the basis of identity' and try to 'control the population by getting rid of a different identity', resorting to 'mass killings, forcible resettlements [and] intimidation' (Kaldor 1999: 8). Other political motivations include repression, as in Guatemala where, according to Keen, 'widespread attacks on civilians served a much wider function than simply suppressing the guerrillas, namely the suppression of a wide band of political and cultural opposition' (2000: 6).

However, economic goals also may lie at the core of the strategies followed by armed organisations and the state in pseudo-wars. Keen, for instance, suggested that war could be used as 'a way of creating an alternative system of profit, power and even protection' and may turn into 'co-operative conflicts' in which the parties collude to avoid confrontation while they continue exploiting the population (1998:

10, 107). Drawing on evidence from conflicts in several African countries, he noted how militias, insurgencies and government forces rarely clashed in 'battles' between themselves, focusing rather on attacks against civilians; in Sierra Leone, for instance, 'government soldiers and rebels shared important interests in preserving systems of economic exploitation that had flourished under the cover of war' (2000: 4). Likewise, Reno has argued that 'what is new about post-Cold War internal wars and rebellions is the extent to which economic interests appear to predominate, crowding out ideologically motivated mass reform and revolutionary movements' (2002: 837).

A more radical version of this idea, rooted in an entirely different tradition of thought (neoclassical economics), was put forward by Collier, who suggested that rebellions could be better understood as large-scale criminal operations rather than as attempts to address social grievances or promote political change. 'Rebellion is motivated by greed' he argued and, therefore, 'victory over the government is not an objective' (2000: 840).[14] His view has been heavily criticised on theoretical and methodological grounds (Ballentine 2003; Acemoglu 2006; Cramer 2006: 129-135), but most authors agree that the role of resources in starting and fuelling armed conflict and violence against civilians merits further research.

While the strategic goals of insurgencies and other armed organisations in pseudo-wars may lead to more violence against civilians, other organisational traits seem to have a similar effect. One of them is the criminalisation of armed conflict. For instance, although violence in the Bosnian civil war—the prototypical new war—was aimed at political ends, the worst atrocities were committed by paramilitary groups, composed up to 80 per cent by criminals. As Kaldor noted, 'most of the paramilitary groups were involved in black market activities and, indeed, cooperated with each other across supposed confrontations lines in order to profit from the situation in besieged enclaves' (1999: 53).

Likewise, in Sierra Leone, gangs of so-called 'sobels'—government soldiers

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[14] Later, Collier and others argued that 'loot is not usually the root motivation for conflict, but it may become critical to its perpetuation'; thus, while rebellions may be initially aimed at political change, 'over time the daily tasks involved in running a criminal business may tend inadvertently to develop a momentum of their own [and] the organisation starts to attract more criminal types and fewer idealists, so that it may gradually change its character' (Collier et al. 2003: 79).

pretending to be rebels—extorted and looted civilians in diamond mining areas (Reno 1998: 125). However, the often-assumed association between organised crime and violence has been contested and, according to Naylor it is not backed by empirical evidence (2004: 30-31). Arguably, the key lies in understanding the roles that civilians come to play in the industrial organisation of different criminal activities; as Le Billon (2001) noted, some activities are more labour-intensive than others and, therefore, may lead to different forms and levels of victimisation and coercion.

Related with the above, there is another aspect of pseudo-wars that increases the chances of victimisation for civilians: the leeway they give to the motives and emotions of combatants. Conventional and guerrilla warfare entail a significant degree of bureaucratisation within armed organisations: individuals' emotions are suppressed through rigorous discipline and indoctrination; decisions are quickly implemented through a chain of command; and cowardice, insubordination and desertion are severely penalised. In pseudo-wars, by contrast, loose hierarchical structures give combatants room to pursue their own interests and emotions, often leading to abuses against the population. Even when behaviours such as looting and rape are forbidden, their superiors might be unwilling or unable to punish offenders on the field. For instance, in Sierra Leone, Humphreys and Weinstein (2004) found that 'rather than being orchestrated by well-oiled machines capable of committing systematic acts of violence, […] abuses were undertaken by organizations with chaotic, disorganised internal structures that permitted abuse within and outside units' (2004: 33).

Overall, the arguments just mentioned highlight how the behaviour of warlords, combatants and armed organisations in pseudo-wars may lead to a privatisation of political violence. However, the argument can be extrapolated to the civilian side of the equation, leading to the same outcome. As noted above, Kalyvas (2006) argued that 'political actors' rely on civilians as a source of valuable information on enemy collaborators and use it to target their victims more effectively. But, since civilians are not only self-interested but also opportunistic, they use this privilege to accuse their own foes and rivals and, as a consequence, violence is privatised by the back

door.[15] 'Civil war, he concluded, *transforms* often trivial and petty conflicts and grievances into lethal violence' (2006: 351, italics in the original). 'Malicious denunciation', as he calls this phenomenon, has been reported in other conflicts such as Sierra Leone's, where civilians made false allegations against their rivals trying to turn the violence of soldiers against them (Keen 2005: 85).

In any case, and to conclude this section, is worth identifying the empirical criteria associated with violence against civilians in pseudo-wars: (a) predominance of armed operations aimed exclusively at civilians and of military units specialised in such kind of attacks; (b) violence against civilians not linked to any evident military outcomes; and (c) the ratio of civilians to combatants dead would be well over 1:1—maybe near 8:1 as Kaldor (1999) suggested.

Table 1 summarises the empirical criteria to determine whether violence against civilians can be attributed to one of the three broad causes defined above.

Table 1.1. Violence against civilians and types of warfare—comparative criteria

	Conventional	Irregular	Pseudo-wars
Armed operations are aimed mainly against…	Enemy combatants	Both combatants and civilian collaborators	Civilians
Cases of violence against civilians are…	Unintended	Linked to specific military outcomes	Not linked to any specific military outcome
Ratio of civilians to combatants dead	Well below 1:1	In the vicinity of 1:1	Well over 1:1

1.4   Violence against civilians in Colombia

Colombia, that 'bloodthirsty country' as Hobsbawm called it (1969: 63), has attracted the attention of students of violence, in particular at home. '*La violencia*', the emergence of guerrillas, drug mafias and paramilitary groups and, in general, the pervasiveness of violence—on average the country had the world's highest homicide rate from 1980 to 2000 (Shaw et al. 2003)—are some of the topics on which scholars

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[15] The term 'opportunism' is used in this thesis to signify 'self interest with guile' (Williamson 1975: 26).

of different disciplines, often grouped under the label of '*violentólogos*' (*violentologists*) have focused over the last decades. This section focuses on contributions directly related with the magnitude, nature and purpose of violence against civilians during the 1990s and early 2000s in the context of the internal armed conflict.

1.4.1   Nature and purpose

The period under consideration was marked by two important developments in the global and domestic political arenas, which have influenced the evolution of the conflict and the way it has been interpreted. First, the end of the Cold War and the constitutional reform of 1991, which both weakened the ideological basis for the guerrillas' struggle. In fact, several guerrilla groups demobilised in 1990, the most important being the *Movimiento 19 de Abril*, or 'M-19', which turned into a political party and gained a significant number of seats in the Constitutional Assembly elected to reform the Colombian constitution in 1991. Although the new constitution represented a compromise between the expansion of civil and political rights and the access to social services, on the one hand, and the implementation of the neo-liberal agenda, on the other, it was widely seen as a decisive step towards a more inclusive democracy. Of particularly importance were the steps taken towards a further political decentralisation and the creation of several mechanisms of 'participatory democracy'.

Second, the drug business and the internal political conflict became increasingly entangled. While drug bosses and organisations increasingly got involved in paramilitary organisations, the participation of FARC in the business has been based on the taxation of cocaine production in the initial stages and, sources claim, in its distribution to foreign markets. Furthermore, as the American government funded and provided military assistance in the war against drugs, it became more openly involved in counterinsurgent tasks and filed requests for the extradition of several guerrilla and paramilitary leaders on charges of terrorism and drug trafficking to the United States. Thus, as the acting Attorney General of the United States, John Ashcroft commented in 2004, there has been a 'convergence of two of the top

priorities of the Department of Justice: the prevention of terrorism and the reduction of the flow of illegal and deadly narcotics into this country' (Department of Justice 2004).

Against this backdrop, scholars have increasingly seen the conflict as a manifestation of the self-interested and even criminal nature of armed organisations. For instance, Pecaut has argued that, despite its intensification, political violence in Colombia remains 'banal', marginal and hardly distinguishable from other forms of violence, lacking any 'imagined novel future' or any connection with 'class divisions and other collective forms of social identity' (1999: 145, 147).

Similarly, the authors of the UNDP's 2003 Colombia Human Development Report, which was entirely devoted to the internal armed conflict, claimed that it lacked ideological or political content, being largely 'inertial' and resembling a pre-modern and feudal conflict, fought merely over territorial control. Furthermore, they described it as a 'war of losers' in the sense that none of the actors involved has been, or will ever be, close to victory. The conflict was thus deemed as futile, pointless, immoral and 'essentially criminal' (2003: 93). The criminal nature of the factions, they argued, was reflected in the composition of their members: no longer revolutionaries in pursuit of an utopia but selfish individuals concerned with personal enrichment and revenge (2003: 81-94).[16]

Although the Report acknowledged the possibility that armed organisations could gain popular support, it argued that it was based only on fear (2003: 90). In this context, violence against civilians was largely seen as an instrument to control the population and the authors suggested that the increasing 'brutality' seen in the attacks against civilians resulted from the attempts made by the factions to outdo each other in their attempts to terrorise the population (2003: 91). However, they characterised the actions of guerrillas and paramilitaries against civilians as notoriously dissimilar: their 'behaviour […] is so asymmetric with respect to the

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[16] Paradoxically, the Report acknowledges that 'armed groups, having been unable to take over, finished up replacing the State with another state of their own invention, with parallel and precarious legalities and bureaucracies—not a revolution, but a bifurcation of order and legitimacy' (2003: 88). In doing so, they have created fragmented and competing sovereignties, wherein security, justice and even social services and infrastructure are provided (2003: 68-9).

kinds of aggression that it would appear as if each side were refusing to resort to tactics which they consider to be typical of the other' (2003:126-7). Finally, the Report identified seven groups of civilians particularly vulnerable to the conflict: politicians and government officials; union leaders and activists; journalists; human rights' activists; 'afro-Colombians'; indigenous peoples, and women (2003: 128-33). However, this analysis was not based on a comprehensive account of the victims' identities.

In contrast with the views expressed above, other contributions have put less emphasis in the criminal nature of conflict and more on its political and military dimension, highlighting the challenge posed to state's authority by the insurgency.[17] In a study funded by the American Air Force and carried out by the RAND Corporation, Rabasa and Chalk (2001) found that both guerrillas and paramilitaries use violence against civilians primarily as a way to intimidate the population and exercise control at the local level. In the case of guerrillas, the use of rudimentary, imprecise weapons also causes civilian casualties; kidnappings also impose a heavy burden on civilians, especially among 'cattle ranchers, farmers, and merchants' (2001: 33).

In their account of the actions of FARC and ELN, the authors suggested that attacks against civilian targets and infrastructure reflected military weakness. While the former increasingly relied on drug-related incomes, they had been able to build up their military capacity and launch major attacks against military outposts. The ELN, by contrast, relied mainly on kidnappings and extortion, reflected in sabotage of infrastructure (2001: 45). However, guerrillas seemed to play a minor role in the killing of civilians: citing Echandia, the authors asserted that guerrillas caused only fifteen percent of the deaths caused by 'illegal armed organisations' from 1988 to 1997 (2001: 56).

As for paramilitaries, Rabasa and Chalk (2001) see their actions against civilians as attempts to eliminate guerrilla sympathisers, weaken their support networks and,

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[17] Although they acknowledge the involvement of guerrillas in the drug economy, they saw it as means towards 'the long-term goal [of creating] a force of 30,000, which in the FARC's estimation would enable the organization to engage in large-scale offensive operations against the main units of the Colombian army' (2001: 27).

ultimately, gain control of the population. To do so, paramilitaries rely on deserted guerrillas; according to one of their sources, 'there are in fact numerous FARC deserters in the AUC ranks, because of the harsh discipline imposed by the FARC and because the AUC offers protection from retaliation by their former comrades' (2001: 56).

Gonzalez et al. (2003), tried to explain the increasing burden of conflict on civilians in terms of Girard's (1996) theory of violence, that is, as a 'mimetic interaction' between armed organisations, whereby they successively retaliate the aggressions of each other against their own supporters, thus creating a spiral of increasing violence (2003: 72-75).

Gutierrez explicitly rejected the notion that the Colombian conflict in recent years could be characterised as a 'new war' arguing that the increasing involvement of crime and criminals did not lead to more terrorism as Kaldor would have predicted (2006: 138). He also suggested that violence against civilians is more intense 'when [a] given territory is disputed by two or more armed actors that engage in a bid to terrorize the population into acquiescence' (2006: 147). However once one of the factions manages to prevail over the others, it faces the challenge of governing the population and, thus, must establish 'some limit to the arbitrariness and discretion of the warriors concerning the lives of the civilian population' (2006: 147). In his view, this is exactly what happened to the paramilitaries in Colombia, who waged 'brutal offensives to expropriate peasants in the name of counterinsurgent policies' but have learnt that 'the indiscriminate use of violence is counterproductive' (2006: 146).

Likewise, Posada questioned the applicability of the concept of 'new wars' to the Colombian conflict (2001: 43) as well as the notion that it is a 'war against society', as Pecaut (2001) had called it. In his view, the conflict is multi-sided, involving not only insurgents and the state but also drug mafias and paramilitary groups fighting each other. In this context, civilians have been 'caught in the middle', lacking any role in determining the conflict's processes and outcomes. Therefore, he argued, it cannot be called a 'civil war' either as 'we are not faced with a polarized community divided into two opposing groups fighting each other on behalf of alternatives for the organization of society' (Posada 2001: 47).

Richani acknowledged the political and military goals of the armed organisations but argued that all of them, including the military, had adapted themselves to the conflict and reached a 'comfortable impasse' in which war was 'the best available option given the balance of power and the higher costs of peace' (2002: 3-4). Thus, while 'the military developed a containment military strategy instead of seeking the elimination of the guerrillas' threat', 'guerrillas decided on consolidating their political power at the local municipal level instead of seeking an outright military victory' (2002: 153).[18] However, by the late 1990s, the growth of paramilitary groups and the increasing military assistance provided by the US disrupted the existing 'war system' and created the conditions for a solution to the conflict.

Although Richani did not explicitly tackle the issue of civilian victimisation, he suggested that guerrillas were less heavy-handed, as they had a marginal role in the execution of 'massacres' and their 'taxation' system was progressive. By contrast, paramilitaries taxed the population less fairly and had a major role in the killing of civilians, perpetrating increasing numbers of massacres aimed to control coca regions and markets, block the guerrillas' access to funds from 'taxation' and make possible the transfer of lands to both drug bosses and sympathisers brought from other regions (2002: 120-1). According to Richani, by 2002 guerrillas had managed to 'establish political and social control over vast areas' of the country (2002: 86) and were able to control local authorities and prevent the misuse of public funds, which they could punish even with death (2002: 81).

According to Reyes, although violence may be aimed to fight the insurgency, in the long term its true purpose is economic—in particular, the creation of favourable conditions for large *haciendas*. In his view, mafia bosses and large landowners buy farms in areas controlled by guerrillas, where insecurity has caused the price of land to drop. Then, paramilitary groups use violence to eliminate the social base of the insurgency and gain control over the population. In this way, the value of land as a productive asset is restored (Reyes cited by Cubides 1998: 76). Thus, although

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[18] Both Richani (2002) and PNUD (2006) see territorial control as a change of course, rather than a step towards regime change. Ramirez (2001) has made a similar case regarding the FARC. However, these views are at odds with conventional approaches, which see in territorial control an intrinsic element of guerrilla warfare (e.g. Sarkesian 1975, Kalyvas 2006).

counterinsurgency may have military ends in the short term, ultimately it is also profitable, at least for land owners.

Finally, some contributors have suggested, along similar lines with Kalyvas (2006), that armed conflict and violence has become localised in terms of the interests embodied by the parties in confrontation. For instance, Gonzalez et al. suggested that the internal conflict, rather than a dispute over power at the national level, might be 'expressing' disputes among families, villages, towns and social groups (2003: 232). Likewise, Pecaut suggested that careful, historically informed examination of violence at the local level might reveal coalitions and conflicts among a variety of actors, including the state, local elites and guerrillas, which determine the intensity and direction of the conflict (1999).

1.4.2   Magnitude

As anywhere else, most of the analyses of conflict in Colombia have been limited by the lack of reliable data, are often based on press reports and incidental accounts. In general, they report an escalation of conflict and its impact on civilians in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The UNDP (2003) Report shows how the numbers of conflict-related deaths and internally displaced people reported both by the government and NGOs increased during that period (2003: 119-23).

Similarly Gonzalez et al. provided a detailed account of the evolution of conflict during the 1990s and reported an 'increasing involvement of civilians in the war, which contrasts with the lesser intensity of proper belligerent actions', that is, hostilities among combatants (2003: 100).[19] Their contribution is based on data on political violence gathered by the Catholic Church—in particular the Inter-congregational Commission 'Justice and Peace' and CINEP, a Jesuit NGO to which they themselves are affiliated.

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[19] However, they incorrectly identified all violations to International Humanitarian Law with aggressions against civilians and used the frequency of the latter, as reported by their sources, to measure the former (Gonzalez et al 2003: 98). Thus, even violations that did not entail aggressions against civilians were included in their account; furthermore, all violations were lumped together in without any further distinction among them.

Using the same source, Restrepo and Spagat (2004) have provided a detailed picture of the magnitude and nature of civilian victimisation from 1989 to 2003. According to their figures, the number of civilian casualties remained relatively stable until 1997—approximately 500 people dead and 300 injured per year. However, between 1998 and 2002 there was an 'upsurge' of violence—approximately 3,000 civilians were killed in 2000 and 2001 and a 1,500 were injured in 2002.

Significantly, most civilians did not die during 'clashes' between armed groups, but mainly in attacks 'perpetrated by a single armed group, which are often specifically directed against civilians' (2004: 4). In these attacks, paramilitaries 'killed more than twice as many civilians as have the guerrillas [and] more than three fourths of these killings are in massacres' (2004: 17), that is, in events in which at least four people died. The number of civilians killed by paramilitaries in such events increased eight-fold from 1994 to 2001, suddenly dropping afterwards (2004: 19). By contrast, guerrillas were more prone to cause injuries than to kill civilians (more than 80 percent of victims), particularly in bombings. Thus, the authors conclude, while paramilitary violence is selective, targeting only alleged guerrilla supporters, the insurgents find indiscriminate violence more efficient to attain their goals: 'sowing fear, discouraging foreign and domestic investment, forcing expensive repairs and jamming infrastructure arteries' (2004: 20).[20] Restrepo and Spagat (2004) also found that more combatants than civilians have been killed in the period under study, thus rejecting the notion that the Colombian conflict could be catalogued as a 'new war' by the standards of Kaldor (1999).[21]

A similar claim is made by Gutierrez (2006): a long-term time series of civilian to combatant deaths ratio, based on data gathered by the Colombian *Instituto de*

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[20] Interestingly, the work of Restrepo and Spagat (2004) seems to confirm a claim, widely accepted among students of Colombian violence, that the bulk of violence in recent years is not directly linked to the internal armed conflict (Posada 2001: 36-7). Although the authors do not touch on this issue, a simple calculation shows that political violence accounted for *less than eight per cent* of the total number of homicides occurred in the country from 1988 to 2002 (as reported in the official statistics). Only after 1997 that figure rises over ten percent, reaching a peak of 14,5 percent in 2002.
[21] However, the authors claim that the sources overestimate the number of civilian casualties by including events not related to the conflict, and thus they exclude from their dataset an unspecified number of events and casualties. Since their claim is not substantiated, the possibility that their data actually underestimate the magnitude of civilian victimisation remains open.

Estudios Políticos, shows a decreasing tendency from the late 1950s to the late 1970s and oscillates from then on around a ratio of one to one until the early 2000s (2006: 142). As he points out, this trend contradicts Kaldor's hypothesis on the expected behaviour of the ratio and its relation to 'old' and 'new' wars. However, the author warns, the ratio hides how civilian victimisation increased notably in the late 1990s and early 2000s, pushed by the paramilitaries' 'extremely vicious campaign' (2006: 143).[22] The ratio of civilians to combatants dead is briefly discussed by Rangel who, citing a Human Rights Watch dated on 1998, sets the figure in two civilians killed for every combatant dead but warns that it might be higher, as some conflict-related deaths are often 'mistaken for common criminal activity' and others, while not 'politically motivated', are nonetheless related to the conflict (2000: 581).

To conclude this section, it is worth noting that the contributions made by scholars on the use of violence against civilians in the Colombian conflict reflect to some extent, some times inadvertently, the approaches and debates seen in the international literature reviewed in the first three sections of this chapter—where some authors see military and political ambitions, others see crime or a futile disorder. Arguably, the major shortcoming is the lack of substantial empirical evidence that, with a few exceptions, characterise most of the contributions just mentioned. While some authors have made serious attempts at measuring the magnitude of violence and, more specifically the civilian death toll, only in a few cases there has been a systematic attempt to test alternative hypotheses regarding the causes (e.g. Salamanca and Sanchez 2005). But, to end this section on an optimistic note, the lack of reliable, detailed data is now less of a problem thanks to the efforts of organisations such as CINEP and IEPRI as their reports and databases on armed conflict are likely to offer fresh insights on the issue of civilian victimisation in the near future.

1.5   Challenges

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[22] Unfortunately, in this article the author does not provide a separate account of the absolute number of civilian deaths, nor a methodological note on the definition of lethal political violence.

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, violence against civilians in the context of wars is as old as war itself, but systematic research on the issue is still at an early, exploratory stage, as is the development of reliable datasets. However, scholars have made significant contributions to the field over the last decade, clearing ground on conceptual and methodological issues such as the identification and measurement of variables (e.g. selective violence, territorial control). This section shows how this dissertation builds on those innovations and addresses some of the shortcomings and challenges that still remain.

With a few exceptions, most of the contributions reviewed in this chapter are based on episodes of violence against civilians occurred in the context of specific armed conflicts. Indeed, influential contributions are based on single cases, quite useful in generating hypotheses (e.g. Keen 2005, Kalyvas 2006). Other works, by contrast, use quantitative techniques to test hypotheses using datasets from relatively large number of countries and conflicts (e.g. Azam and Hoeffler 2002, Valentino et al. 2004). While the former usually provide a detailed a picture of the processes and actors involved in the production of violence, they sometimes fail to back their claims with evidence, even within the realm of the cases on which they focus. The latter by contrast are usually strong in assessing the empirical validity of their hypotheses but lack a detailed knowledge of the processes and events involved in the production of violence.

In response to this challenge, the option of studying a Colombian region emerged as a methodological compromise that allows the assessment of the relation between violence and a range of independent variables across a set of *municipios*[23] while keeping track on the actors and processes involved in the production of violence, often lost in analyses that rely exclusively on quantitative methods. In this sense, the methodology employed in this work belongs to a 'more recent stream of research on the micro-dynamics of individual civil wars [that has] abandoned the country-level measurements in favour of disaggregated analysis and data collection that traces the behaviour and interactions of subnational actors in individual conflicts' (Cederman and Gledistch 2009: 489)

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[23] *Municipios* are the basic units of the political territorial division in Colombia; each *municipio* consists of a town and the adjacent rural area.

Providing an accurate picture of the magnitude of armed conflict and violence is a second challenge. While most of the recent contributions featured in this chapter focused on specific armed conflicts, including of course Colombia, only a few substantiated their findings with reliable data and none examined how different forms of violence against civilians may be used within the same armed conflict. To tackle this challenge, the dissertation uses three different datasets that offer a detailed view of the changing intensity of armed conflict during the period from 1996 to 2004 and the role of different organisations in attacking civilians; since the datasets cover different forms of violence and come from different sources, NGOs and government agencies, they offer a more complete and balanced picture of the facts. For instance, thanks to the availability of these datasets, it is possible to establish that government forces rarely killed civilians in the region, paramilitaries were relatively incompetent on the battlefield, and guerrillas kidnapped nearly five times as many civilians as they killed.

Furthermore, the dissertation makes use of the data on violence to assess the influence of several independent variables, including economic variables, on different forms of violence. Likewise, it uses data on the intensity of armed conflict to determine the level of territorial control achieved by the state and armed organisations and examines how it shaped the way they used violence against civilians. While territorial control is often mentioned as a key variable in explaining violence, efforts to measure it are rare; Kalyvas (2006) for instance, devised a simple test with five zones of control and coded the villages using qualitative information 'culled from both oral and written sources' (2006: 421). This dissertation uses the same five-zone scheme but applies quantitative criteria to code neighbourhoods and *municipios*; while this method does not guarantee greater precision or accuracy, its main virtue lies in making the coding more consistent, transparent and replicable.

A third challenge concerns the issue of whether the risks inherent in armed conflict are evenly spread across the population and, closely related, whether armed organisations use violence against civilians from different backgrounds or classes with different intensity. To tackle this challenge, the dissertation uses data on the occupations and social backgrounds of victims of killings and kidnappings and finds,

for instance, that paramilitary violence against civilians was more intense in the poorer neighbourhoods of Barrancabermeja, the largest town in the region (see Ch. 5). Hence, it overcomes a tendency, seen in many contributions, to lump together all civilians into a single, homogeneous population. While this tendency probably reflects a morally sensible principle—the immunity of *all* non-combatants, regardless of their social status—it obscures the understanding of how violence affects social groups in dissimilar ways and with uneven intensity, overlooking the transformative (not merely destructive) effect of violence in society and overlooking crucial clues in understanding the rationale of armed organisations in using violence.

Connected with the issue just mentioned, is that of whether violence serves in any way the of civilians themselves. In political theory, insurgency used to be seen as the violent reaction of the many to the oppression of the few and, therefore, violence against civilians was used only against the oppressors, e.g. 'oligarchs', to defend the interests of the masses. The literature on irregular wars (section 1.2.3 above) adopted a more practical view: violence was used to shape civilian collaboration, punishing enemy collaborators and sowing fear among potential traitors; if civilians reaped any benefits out of violence, it was only as a result of the restoration of order or the installation of a new regime. According to a third view, civilians could prompt attacks against other civilians and, thus, take advantage of disorder and violence, making a gain out of war. This view is particularly in tune with a scenario of pseudo-war (section 1.3 above), where individual interests thrive behind the fog of war; but it is also possible in the context of a 'classical' irregular war where, as Kalyvas suggested: 'alliances' between armed organisations and civilians could enable the latter to have a direct role in defining *who* is selectively targeted by armed organisations—an opportunity they would seize, as self-interested individuals, to advance their private interests.

The dissertation explores this issue but does not find evidence in support of the kind of alliances just described; in particular, the observed distribution of violence across zones of control does not match the distribution predicted by the theory. However, it finds evidence of a different form of alliance, in which civilians are engaged collectively (rather than individually), through politicians and social organisations, triggering episodes of social and political mobilisation. Despite their political,

collective nature, these alliances are less oriented by ideological principles than by the strategic needs and opportunities faced by both armed and social organisations, given the expected patterns of territorial control at a given time. To make these points, the dissertation employs the same datasets mentioned above as well as interviews with key informants, news reports published in national and regional printed media and secondary sources. To conclude, the dissertation overcomes some methodological shortcomings prevalent in the literature while building on recent innovations made by scholars. Ch. 2 shows how it combines qualitative and quantitative methods and data, obtained from a variety of sources, to this effect.

2. RESEARCH STRATEGY

This chapter outlines the research strategy employed in the dissertation. The first part discusses the rationale of studying a region (i.e. a subset of territorial units within the same country) and the particular advantages found in studying the Middle Magdalena Valley. The second part focuses on operational aspects and describes the datasets and sources employed, their virtues and weaknesses. The third part shows how different pieces of evidence were employed to tackle the research question and the key issues and debates identified in the previous chapter and discusses the advantages of combining quantitative and qualitative data and methods

2.1   The advantages of studying a region

The geographical disparity in the observed levels of violence is one of the most common—and puzzling—attributes of armed conflicts. Discussing the tactical challenges of the 'protracted popular war', the US Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual warns their readers that 'insurgents may use guerrilla tactics in one province while executing terrorist attacks and an urban approach in another. There may be differences in political activities between villages in the same province. The result is […] a shifting "mosaic war" that is difficult for counterinsurgents to envision as a whole' (US Army 2007: 14). Likewise, Kalyvas begins his study of violence in civil wars by identifying four puzzles, the first of which is precisely, the 'very existence of variation [that] has been cited as evidence, at worst, of the sheer impossibility of making sense of violence and, at best, of the inability to move beyond educated guesses' (2006: 3). Indeed, in recent years, explaining these variations has been suggested as a fruitful way to shed light on the complexities of civil wars; as Cederman and Gleditsch suggested, 'looking at the spatial variation within individual states enables detailed comparisons between conflict and nonconflict sites

with attention paid to detailed subnational processes' (2009: 491).

The spatial disparities in the intensity of violence are evident in the case of Colombia, where the intensity of armed conflict and violence varies across the country, being particularly high in a few scattered patches. For instance, Echandia found that in the early 1990s guerrillas were present in 43 per cent of the Colombian *municipios*, mostly in rural, isolated areas still in the process of being colonised (1992).

Students of the Colombian conflict have argued that local and regional disparities are connected with the particular conditions of the regions where the conflict takes place. This is particularly evident when the structure of armed organisations is considered: although most of them have a national coverage, with 'fronts' and 'blocs' in charge of specific regions or cities, their emergence and evolution have followed different paths depending on local and regional conditions. For instance, Medina has described the dynamics of the National Liberation Army (ELN) from the late 1970s as a 'confederation of regional stories and processes' (2001: 397). In his history of the early years of the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC), Pizarro described the Colombian conflict as a set of 'local wars' (1991: 23). Local and regional heterogeneity is even more evident in the case of paramilitary groups, as different processes and sets of actors have led to their creation and consolidation across the country (Garzon 2005).

Hence, scholars have suggested, understanding the spatial variations in the levels and forms of armed conflict and violence and the processes that explain such variations requires a detailed look to region-specific traits and trajectories. Deas and Gaitan, for instance, argued that any 'inquiry [into the causes of violence] must aim to explore how general conditions unfold in a particular way in each region' (1995: 398). Likewise, Pecaut suggested that a careful, historically informed examination of violence at the local level might reveal coalitions and conflicts among a variety of actors, including the state, local elites and guerrillas, which determine the intensity and direction of the conflict (Pecaut 1999, cited by Gonzalez et al. 2003: 232). This suggestion seems particularly adequate given our interest in exploring the role of alliances and civilian collaboration in the production of violence.

This scenario imposes potentially conflicting demands on the research design. On the one hand, a large-N, quantitative study would be particularly adequate to account for the variable intensity of armed conflict and violence in different local and regional settings; this strategy would involve 'collecting as much data in as many diverse contexts as possible', just as methodologists advice (King, G. et al. 1994: 24). Indeed a nationwide study could include more than one thousand observations (*municipios*) and is viable given the availability of quantitative data (or sources from which data series could be compiled). On the other hand, a large-N study is less suited to trace the processes that led to the observed outcomes: their complexity imposes a limit on the scale of the phenomena to be studied and the number of actors, places and events they involve. Understanding such processes is critical to interpret the results of quantitative analyses, recast hypothesis that may need to be adjusted as a result of such analyses and, more generally, to back causal statements with plausible, evidence-based descriptions of the causal mechanisms involved rather than on speculation. As Elster pointed out 'to cite the cause is not enough: the causal mechanism must also be provided' (1989: 4).

To conclude, the decision of studying a region, emerged as a compromise, a way to balance the advantages and drawbacks posed by the extreme options—a single case or a large-N study. By studying a region, it was possible to carry out quantitative analyses based on a number of observations large enough to avoid indeterminacy (King, G. et al. 1994: 118) without loosing grasp of the region-specific processes, events and actors involved in producing the outcomes of interest in the context of this research. As noted above, this choice reflects a recent methodological trend in the research on armed conflicts and violence (Cederman and Gleditsch 2009). The chosen region, known as the Middle Magdalena Valley, comprises 43 *municipios*; this choice is explained in detail in the second part of this chapter.

Why the Middle Magdalena Valley?

Given the widespread increase in the levels of violence in Colombia during the 1990s, finding a region suitable to explore the issues discussed in the first chapter was not a difficult task. However, two conditions were considered in making a

choice: first, since the research question refers to violence produced in the context of an armed conflict, the region chosen had to have a record of recent conflict, manifested in hostilities and warfare. By 1995, several Colombian regions were in that situation including Uraba, Montes de Maria, Catatumbo, Lower Cauca, Putumayo and the Middle Magdalena Valley (Gonzalez et al 2003: 106-7). Second, the region had to offer relatively favourable conditions to carry out the research in terms of security and access to sources.

The Middle Magdalena Valley satisfied both conditions. It was the cradle of the second most important guerrilla organisation in Colombia, of several paramilitary groups and a source of political and military challenges to the state's authority. During the second half of the 1990s, frequent reports in the Colombia media, as well as bulletins disseminated by academics and NGOs suggested a significant increase in the intensity of armed conflict and violence, reflected in clashes between guerrillas, government forces and paramilitaries, as well as frequent attacks and abuses against civilians, including massacres and kidnappings. However, by 2004, during the preliminary stage of this research, the situation in the Middle Magdalena Valley had improved: the media reported less conflict-related events and a key informant indicated that the levels of violence in the region, although still worrying, had dropped compared with those seen a few years before.[24] In general, these perceived trends were later confirmed by the data (see Ch. 4). With security conditions improving across the region, access to the sources improved as well: it was easier to travel within the region and, it was hoped, there would be less apprehension among the informants about expressing their views on politics and armed conflict to a stranger.

Based on these considerations, in September 2004, I approached a local NGO based in Barrancabermeja, aiming to obtain their support in accessing data sources and local networks. They agreed to hire me as 'analyst' in a recently created 'peace observatory'—a small project aimed to monitor armed conflict and violence in the Middle Magdalena Valley—from February to December 2005. As such, my main duty consisted in making contributions to periodical reports on the security situation

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[24] This informant, a personal friend, was in charge of the regional branch of *Red de Solidaridad*, the government's agency that deals with forced displacement.

in the region, e.g., hostilities and abuses against civilians. The post enabled me to contact a variety of social organisations and key informants, tapping into the networks that the staff of the observatory had already developed.

The NGO mentioned above is the Middle Magdalena Valley Peace and Development Programme (PDPMM) and was founded in 1995 by the Catholic Church, the Oil Workers' Union, the state-owned oil company, *Ecopetrol*, and CINEP[25] to promote peace, reconciliation and development in the region. More specifically, PDPMM provides financial and technical assistance to community-based projects in conflict-ridden zones. While the projects cover a wide variety of areas (e.g., agricultural production, fishing, mining, education, housing, human rights' awareness, sexual health, environmental sustainability and institutional development), at their core, they are all aimed to reduce the vulnerability of poor, isolated communities to the risks of armed conflict. Because the PDPMM had developed important links with the national government, the European Union and national and international NGOs, it became a channel to broadcast 'early alerts' on imminent human rights violations and report past abuses. PDPMM is funded by the Colombian government, the World Bank and the European Commission; its activities are spread over 30 municipalities in the Middle Magdalena Valley.

It is worth noting that, from the beginning, the staff of the PDPMM was aware of the aims and scope of my research; indeed, as the observatory's director helped me in identifying potential informants, I discussed with him the specific issues that I was trying to unveil. Likewise, informants and interviewees outside the PDPMM were always informed of the general purpose of my research and, in most cases, being affiliated with this NGO proved to be an asset, as the organisation is trusted in different quarters, thanks to its reputation of impartiality.[26] This was particularly

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[25] CINEP is a Colombian NGO created in 1972 by the Society of Jesus and funded by the Jesuits and international organisations. Its main activities are: research on social and political issues, monitoring of human rights and educational projects aimed to low-income population.
[26] Of course, this reputation has its limits and being impartial is not always an asset. For instance, while some argue that the conciliatory approach favoured by the NGO is functional to the interests of the paramilitary groups, others see their work on human rights as a signal of sympathy towards the insurgency. Even though the national government funds and oversees the work done by this NGO, in one occasion a formal request of information sent to the Army by an intern working at the observatory, led to a visit by an intelligence officer who interrogated her about her political views and asked for personal details. The Army never replied to her request.

important since, by the time of the fieldwork, many interviewees were still wary about discussing political issues and events, even though they had occurred several years ago—especially with a stranger.

Box 2.1. List of *municipios*

Antioquia	Santander	Bolivar	Cesar
Caracoli	Barrancabermeja	Arenal	Aguachica
El Bagre	Betulia	Cantagallo	Gamarra
Maceo	Bolivar	El Penon	La Gloria
Puerto Berrio	Cimitarra	Hatillo de Loba	Pelaya
Puerto Nare	Carmen de Chucuri	Montecristo	San Alberto
Puerto Triunfo	El Peñon	Morales	San Martin
Remedios	Landazuri	Regidor	Tamalameque
Segovia	Puerto Parra	Rio Viejo	
Yondo	Puerto Wilches	San Pablo	**Caldas**
	Rionegro	Santa Rosa del Sur	La Dorada
Boyaca	Sabana de Torres	Simiti	
Puerto Boyaca	San Vicente de Chucuri	Tiquisio	
	Simacota		

The following chapter provides further details about the Middle Magdalena Valley. For the moment, it suffices to note that this is natural, rather than a political or administrative region, and there is no consensus on its precise boundaries. However, this work adopts a relatively inclusive definition that contains 43 *municipios*, from La Dorada in the south to El Peñon, in the north (see Box 2.1 and Map 2.1). Of them, 39 belong to the valley; the other four are neighbours of *municipios* with high incidence of violence and were included to increase the statistical power of the tests carried out in Ch. 4 as well as to account for spatial autocorrelation (i.e. 'spill-over' or 'contagion' effects).

Map 2.1. The Middle Magdalena Valley
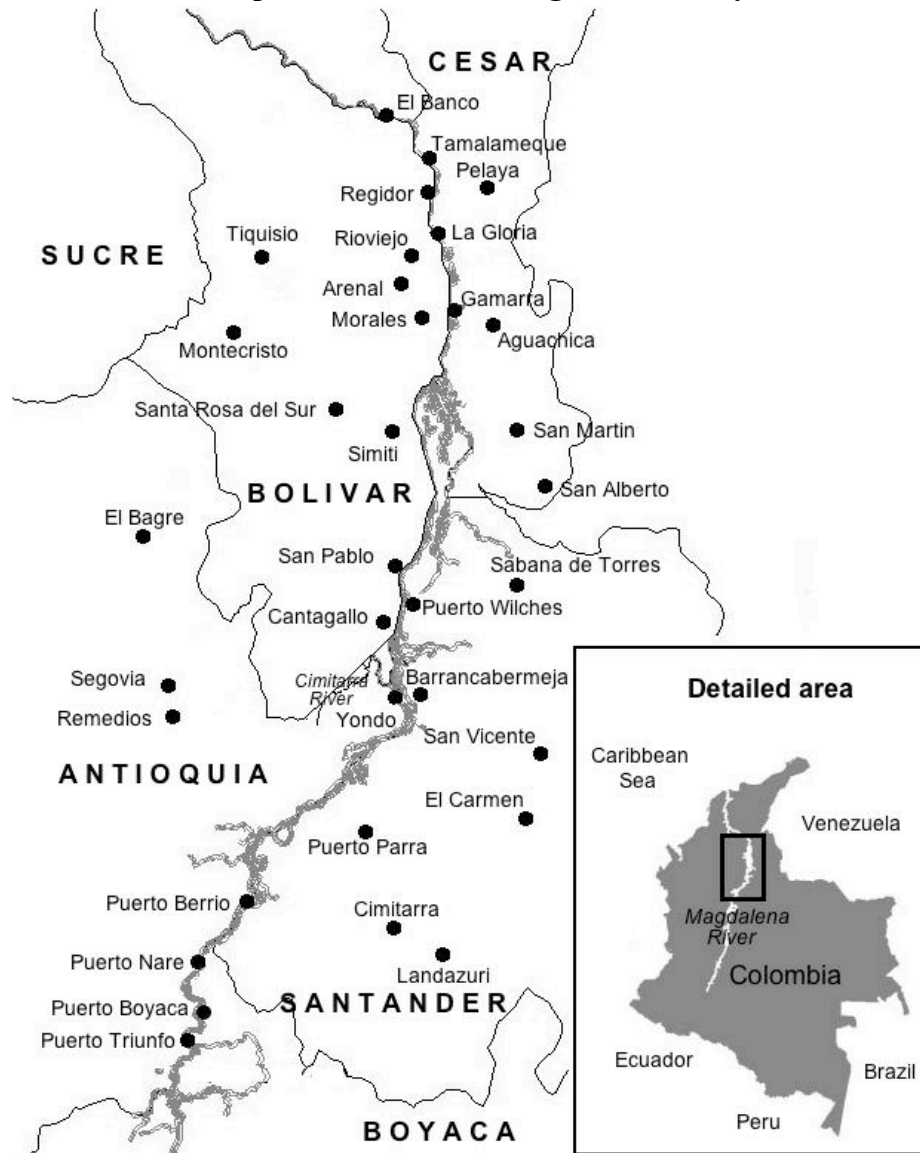
Source: Based on map drawn by Cesar Moreno, used with his permission.

2.2 Fieldwork and data sources

This part details the sources of information employed and the operational aspects involved in collecting and organising the data.

2.2.1   Data and sources

The availability of detailed, reliable quantitative data on armed conflict and violence in the Middle Magdalena Valley was better than expected at the initial stages of this research; three sources were particularly important: the VNN dataset, which covers a

wide variety of conflict-related phenomena, and the official databases on forced displacement and kidnappings. While the first dataset was specifically developed for this research, the other two were already available as databases. The most important qualitative sources were an archive of news reports and a set of semi-structured interviews with key informants. This section describes and discusses the methods used to gather and organise the information and the strengths and weaknesses of the sources.

1) The VNN dataset

The most important quantitative source used in this research is the VNN dataset. It is based on *Noche y Niebla*[27] ('N&N' for short), a quarterly report published since July 1996 by CINEP.[28] N&N reports violent events motivated by political reasons or social intolerance, violations to the human rights and conflict-related, including hostilities and infractions to the international humanitarian law. These reports are based on a review of national and regional newspapers and interviews with local informants such as human rights' activists and priests across the country. The N&N headquarters are located in Bogotá, but team members travel periodically to several regions to gather information.[29]

The N&N Reports. N&N reports and classify events according to a conceptual framework consisting of four general categories:

a) *Violations to human rights.* In particular, violations to the rights to life, liberty and integrity, e.g. killings, massacres, arbitrary detentions, disappearances,

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[27] This name is the Spanish translation of 'night and fog' which refers to the deliberate lack of information regarding the fate of political prisoners captured by the Third Reich.

[28] From now on, I refer to the original reports as 'N&N' and to the dataset as 'VNN'. As shown below, the variables in the VNN dataset are different from the categories used in the reports and exclude some observations contained in the latter.

[29] In many cases, the local priest is the first point of contact for victims of threats or forced displacement. As a member of the 'peace observatory' in Barrancabermeja, I attended several meetings with one of the field workers of N&N. During these meetings, the team discussed the events occurred in the region, focusing on those deemed more significant and also on those in which the motives and actors involved were unclear or several versions of the same event were contradictory. The general impression I gather from these meetings is that the events reported by N&N were subject to a thorough assessment of their accuracy. However, I cannot say whether the same rules and procedures were followed in the past.

torture and other intentional injuries. This category is based on the International
Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the American Convention on Human
Rights. Violations to human rights are classified in three subcategories,
depending on the motivation or nature of the crime: political persecution, abuse
of authority or social intolerance.

b) *Infractions to International Humanitarian Law.* This category is based on the
Geneva Conventions and thus records infractions committed by any armed actor
as a direct result of the waging of war. Infractions are classified in four
subcategories: illicit means of warfare (e.g. landmines), illicit methods (e.g. use
of Red Cross symbols to perform an attack), illicit targets (e.g. bombing a
hospital or a water pipeline) and indignity in the treatment of human beings (e.g.
rape, torture, taking of hostages).

c) *Hostilities or 'belligerent attacks'.* This category includes events in which armed
groups or government forces clash with or attack each other, e.g. combats,
attacks on military objectives, ambushes.

d) *Socio-political violence.* This category includes events very similar to those
recorded in the first category, but where the responsibility is unclear, which is
quite common, as in the case of actions committed by men not wearing any
badges or identification or when corpses or mass graves are found. This category
also includes kidnappings. Events in this category are classified in two
subcategories depending on the motivation of the crime: political persecution or
social intolerance.

This framework, based on legal concepts, reflects CINEP's interest in ensuring that
crimes typified in international law are eventually investigated and their perpetrators
prosecuted, by national or international courts.[30] The classification of events reflects
the views of CINEP on the Colombian conflict and the way the legal frameworks
mentioned apply in the Colombian context. For instance, while abuses against

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[30] Priests associated with CINEP have played a crucial role in bringing cases to the Inter-American
Human Rights Court, which have often led to politically-embarrassing decisions for the Colombian
government.

civilians committed by guerrillas are not classified as violations of their human rights, paramilitary abuses are; this is because, in CINEP's view, only states can violate human rights and the paramilitaries are state's agents. On the other hand, most crimes committed by guerrillas are recorded and classified as infractions to the international humanitarian law and it is under this category that N&N records most crimes committed by guerrillas. [31]

Thankfully, the reports not only include aggregate data but also a description of each event, so it is possible to reclassify and aggregate the events using different variables and criteria (see Facsimile 2.1). For instance, in the particular case of guerrillas' abuses, N&N does report such abuses; how they are classified is a different matter.[32]

Other limitations of N&N as a source of information are related to difficulties in obtaining accurate information on specific kinds of events. For instance, only cases of massive displacement, that catch the eye of the media and the NGOs, are reported by N&N, as well as others caused by specific threats towards individuals, who report them to local NGOs. Hence, individual, anonymous cases of displacement, mostly from rural areas, are not reported. Similarly, data on kidnappings, 'forced disappearances' and other forms of abduction are not entirely reliable because the media and NGOs usually report the moment when the victims are captured but not necessarily follow each case until the victim is released or his or her fate is known.

There are also limitations associated with 'blind spots' in data collection, that is, geographic areas where the access of both media and NGOs is limited and where the local priests showed less interest and disposition in gathering and reporting cases of violence. Interestingly, these blind spots are not necessarily the more violent zones, which journalists, officials and NGOs manage to access usually shortly after a major event has occurred; they are more likely to be zones well under control of a faction

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[31] The classification rules regarding crimes committed by guerrillas and paramilitaries are justified on legal grounds. Although these rules are debatable, a discussion on this goes beyond the scope and methodological needs of this research.

[32] It can be argued that these biases in the categorisation of events might point towards less visible forms of bias, e.g. misreporting or omission of events. However this claim is more difficult to assess a priori, without any reference to specific cases. Whilst it is impossible to triangulate *each* of the events reported by N&N in the Middle Magdalena Valley (more than 2,500), I used other sources such as local newspapers and interviews to check the accuracy of some significant events, as well as the plausibility of the more general trends.

and the population is not likely to denounce any abuse.

Facsimile 2.1. Section of a typical page of a *Noche y Niebla* report

Julio 17/2002

DEPARTAMENTO: **PUTUMAYO**
MUNICIPIO: **COLON**

Guerrilleros del Frente Joaquín Matallana de las FARC-EP secuestraron a Francy Lorena, hija del alcalde de Colón y a la empleada del servicio doméstico, en momentos en que se dirigían a una guardería infantil. Según la fuente los guerrilleros: "Le exigieron al mandatario difundir un mensaje a través del cual recuerdan a los alcaldes del Putumayo y el sur del país que deben renunciar a sus cargos".

Presuntos Responsables: FARC-EP

VIOLENCIA POLITICO SOCIAL

Secuestro
FRANCY LORENA ERAZO
MARCELA GUZMAN

te un panfleto, en el cual les dan un plazo de tres días para que abandonen la región. En el mencionado panfleto, se anuncia la llegada de un grupo denominado "Héroes de los Montes de María" y que según la fuente su misión será: "Darle muerte a los ladrones, atracadores, vendedores de vicio, drogadictos, homosexuales y prostitutas que le dan una mala imagen a tan importante región".

Presuntos Responsables: AUC

VIOLACIONES A LOS DERECHOS HUMANOS

Colectivo Amenazado por Intolerancia Social
POBLADORES OVEJAS

Julio 17/2002

DEPARTAMENTO: **LA GUAJIRA**
MUNICIPIO: **SAN JUAN DEL CESAR**

Miembros de un grupo armado amenaza-

Julio 17/2002

DEPARTAMENTO: **PUTUMAYO**
MUNICIPIO: **ORITO**

Guerrilleros incursionaron en horas de la noche a éste municipio, y dinamitaron la sede de la Alcaldía, además causaron daños en las edificaciones y centros comerciales cercanos. En esta acción un policía resultó herido.

Presuntos Responsables: FARC-EP

INFRACCIONES AL DIH
Bienes Civiles

ACCIONES BELICAS
Incursión

Policía Herido:
PERSONA SIN IDENTIFICAR

Source: *Noche y Niebla* 25: 23.

Beside these limitations and potential biases, there are some virtues worth to mention, such as the fact that there is a 'conceptual framework' in which the categories used in the reports are discussed and defined, providing an accurate picture of the range of events included in the reports. Furthermore, the framework has remained unchanged since the publication begun, allowing inter-temporal comparisons as well as the construction of time series. The most important strength, though, is the detailed account of most events, which made possible the development of a detailed dataset that goes beyond the basic details (e.g. type of events, *municipio* and year) and covers details such as the number of casualties, their occupation and the warring parties involved. Furthermore, whenever a significant event, trend or tipping point was detected in the data, it was possible to go back to the original record and evaluate its significance considering the full details of the situation and the context in which it had happened. This level of detail was not available in other datasets considered at the beginning of this research, e.g. the one held by the National Planning Office.

It is worth noting that this is not the first time that the N&N reports are used for the purpose of analysing the Colombian conflict. CINEP researchers have studied recent trends in political violence in Colombia based on these data (Gonzalez et al. 2003). Also, a team of scholars at Royal Holloway College developed a dataset based on

these reports (Restrepo et al. 2004a). However, the criteria to screen and classify the events, and the variables themselves, are different and both datasets were unavailable by the fieldwork started.[33]

From the reports to the dataset. Although the N&N reports have been published both in print and on the Internet, there is limited access to the database as such and, as noted above, the categories used by CINEP might not be suitable to certain research aims. Therefore, in order to use the data, it was necessary to transform the narrative accounts provided in the reports into actual variables and then record the values in a spreadsheet or database—in this case an MS Access database. To do so, it was necessary to go through all the quarterly reports, looking for events occurred in the region (43 municipalities in six departments), and then fill in the database form (see Facsimile 2.2). This was done during the second quarter of 2005 and for this reason the dataset covers only events occurred between July 1996 and December 2004.

Each record (event) consists of seven sections:

a) Identification, e.g. date, municipality, urban/rural area, issue and page numbers.

b) Factions/actors involved, e.g. guerrillas, paramilitaries, civilians, etc.

c) Description of the event—based on a predefined list.

d) Number of dead, injured and abducted victims in the event, specifying also age and gender when the information was provided.

e) In the case of civilians, a general description about the occupation or social role of the victim, e.g., peasant, student, shopkeeper, politician.

f) General description of the buildings, houses, cattle or any other assets stolen or destroyed.

g) Finally, a set of fields to record how the event was classified by N&N according to their own conceptual framework, e.g. infraction to International Humanitarian Law.

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[33] When I tried to obtain the CINEP's database, I was told the data was already in the public domain, in the reports; this answer was true but not useful. At the time I contacted the Royal Holloway College team, they still were processing the data so I only could obtain data on civilian killings for two *municipios*.

Facsimile 2.2. MS Access data capture screen

EVENTOS RELACIONADOS CON EL CONFLICTO ARMADO EN MAGDALENA MEDIO 1996-2004

IDENTIFICACION DEL EVENTO

Registro No.	N/N No.	N/N Pg	Fecha del evento	Municipio	Sitio	Zona urbana/rural?
3	19	20	01/01/1901	Barrancabermeja–Sant	Registro de prueba.	Urbana

PARTES / ACTORES

	Fuerza publica	Otros	Fuerza publica
☐ Fuerza publica	Guerrilla	FARC–Otros	FARC–Otros
☐ Guerrilla	Paramilitares	Registro de prueba.	Registro de prueba.
☐ Paramilitares			
☐ Combatientes			
☑ Civiles	Si otro(s) cual(es)?	Registro de prueba.	Registro de prueba.
☐ Otro			
☑ No determinado	Iniciativa/agresor	No determinado	

ACCION(ES)

☐ Amenaza
☐ Ataque a instalaciones civiles
☐ Ataque a objetivos militares
☐ Bloqueo de vias/reten
☐ Bombardeo/ametrallamiento
☐ Combate
☐ Desaparicion forzada
☐ Desplazamiento forzado
☐ Destruccion de bienes civiles
☐ Detencion/retencion temporal
☐ Escudo

☑ Homicidio
☐ Hallazgo de cadaver
☐ Hurto/pillaje/pirateria
☐ Incursión/toma en cabecera/caserio
☐ Intento de homicidio
☐ Minado
☐ Reclutamiento forzado
☐ Secuestro
☐ Tortura
☑ Violencia sexual

VICTIMAS

	Muertos	Heridos	D/R/S
Civiles	1		
Militares			
Policias			
Otros Fuerza Publica			
Guerrilla/Milicias			
Paramilitares/autod.			
Mujeres			
Menores de edad			

DESCRIPCION / DETALLE

Descripcion de victimas civiles	
Descripcion de bienes destruidos	
Descripcion de bienes robados	
Nombre instalacion militar/estacion policia/base/campamento atacado	
Nombre/descripcion de instalacion/construccion civil atacada/afectada	

CLASIFICACION N/N

Violaciones a los Derechos Humanos			Violencia Politico-Social	
PP--Amenaza colectiva	1		PP--Amenaza colectiva	5
PP--Amenaza individual	2		PP--Amenaza individual	6
PP--Atentado	3		PP--Asesinato	7
PP--Deportacion	4		PP--Atentado	8

Infracciones Derecho Int'l Humanitario			Acciones belicas
Amenaza colectiva	9		Ataque a objetivo militar
Amenaza individual	10		Bloqueo de vias
Armas prohibidas	11		Bombardeo/ametrallamiento
Ataque a bienes civiles	12		Combate

OBSERVACIONES

Registro de prueba.

After all the events occurred in the region and reported by N&N were recorded in the database, several consistency checks were performed, and in this way a number of

errors and omissions, occurred during the data entry were corrected. Given the importance of civilian killings as a dependent variable, all the records with civilian deaths were double checked against the original reports to ensure their accuracy.

Furthermore, a number of events that could have occurred in the absence of armed conflict were deemed irrelevant and therefore excluded from the subsequent analysis. For instance, events motivated by 'abuse of authority' or 'social intolerance', and committed by government forces, were excluded from the dataset for the purpose of analysis, as they are not directly linked to the armed conflict and, as the definition suggests, they probably would have occurred anyway, even in the absence of conflict. Events classified as 'motivated by social intolerance' and committed by guerrillas and paramilitaries were included, though. A few kidnappings committed by unknown actors, were also excluded, as there is no evidence of political motivation or relation to conflict.

Finally, several killings in which the identities of victims and perpetrators were unknown were excluded from the analysis. In all, 139 events were left aside; the resulting dataset records 2,378 events deemed relevant for analysis. This dataset was used as a source to gauge the intensity and nature of armed conflict (e.g. hostilities, combatants killed in action, warring parties involved) as well as to measure the civilian death toll—one of three key dependent variables used in this research to gauge and analyse the intensity of violence against civilians.

2) The forced displacement registry

The most important sources of data on forced displacement in Colombia are the official displacement registry and the reports produced by the NGO CODHES. However, CODHES only gathers information on the number of displaced people arriving in a town, based on estimates provided by local NGOs, the Church and other sources. By contrast, the official, known as SUR (*Sistema Unico de Registro*, or Unified Register System in English), is based on information provided by the victims themselves, including data on their places of origin and arrival and details on

the members of the household and the assets they left behind, e.g. land, cattle, equipment. Although most of the data are inaccessible under privacy and security considerations, for several years the government published a statistical summary with quarterly data disaggregated at the municipal level, including data on the number of individuals and households leaving and arriving in each *municipio* because of violence. These summaries, published as Excel spreadsheets, were available online and updated periodically.

It is important to mention that the SUR only aims to capture data on displacement caused by violence and not other forms of migration—either forced or voluntary. Thus, applicants to the SUR must provide a brief account of the events that led to their displacement and, ultimately, local officials decide whether the applicant should be included in the registry. In some cases this had led to allegations that officials are excessively restrictive and therefore the aggregate figures underestimate the actual magnitude of the phenomenon. Also, it is often said that some displaced individuals prefer not to be included in the register, as the meagre benefits provided by the state are often outweighed by the costs associated with the stigma of being displaced, as they are often assumed to be guerrillas. The case for an underestimation of the actual figures is backed by CODHES, whose statistics are usually higher than those produced by the SUR.

Furthermore, data gathered during the 2005 Population Census shows that in several rural areas of the Middle Magdalena Valley the population figures were well below the official demographic forecasts (based on the 1993 Census) but the gaps could not be explained by forced displacement; in other words, the observed population losses were larger than the aggregate displacement figures, leaving room for unrecorded forced displacement.[34] Despite these caveats, the SUR remains the most reliable source and the only one that offers figures on the number of households *leaving* each *municipio*.[35]

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[34] This, of course, is assuming that the Census offered a reasonably good approximation to the actual population (something that cannot be taken for granted in conflict zones), and the forecasts did not overestimate the population growth.
[35] Data compiled by CODHES is based on estimates provided by key local informants and, crucially, only reports figures on displaced people *arriving* to a *municipio*.

3) The official dataset on kidnappings

At first sight, kidnapping may look as an unambiguous form of violence. However, this category includes a variety of disparate events that differ in their in crucial aspects such as their duration (from hours to years), outcome (from quick release to death) and the captors (guerrillas, petty criminals, paramilitaries) and consequently, in the way each event is classified. Furthermore, the accuracy of the information on kidnappings and other forms of abduction and detention of civilians depends to a good extent on the ability of the monitor to follow each case until the captors are identified, a demand is made or, eventually, a corpse is found.

Two databases were initially considered as sources of information for the current research: VNN and the official database, kept by *Fondelibertad*, a government agency, and obtained by the observatory. The codification of events in these databases followed different categories—one based on human rights and international humanitarian law, the other on the Colombian penal code. In addition, they relied on different primary sources and, therefore, it is not surprising that their figures do not match.

The main differences between both sources are the following. First, the *Fondelibertad* database records all abductions under the category of kidnappings and only acknowledges non-state actors as captors; by contrast the VNN records two other forms of abduction of civilians—forced disappearances and arbitrary detentions, carried out by state or non-state actors. Second, whereas VNN only offers information on kidnappings related with armed conflict, *Fondelibertad* records kidnappings in general, including those committed by petty criminals; furthermore, *Fondelibertad* classifies kidnappings depending on their motivation—political, economic or unknown—and in several cases offers details regarding the ransom demanded. Third, whereas VNN reports and classifies the events based on information immediately available after the victims are captured, *Fondelibertad* monitors each case, e.g., whether the victim was released, or died or remains captive, keeping the database up to date. Fourth, as should be evident by now, the data gathered by *Fondelibertad* is far more detailed than that recorded by VNN. Fifth, as

the figures suggest (see Table 2.1), there seems to be a bias on both sources regarding the number of cases they report: insurgent abductions seemed to be more likely to be reported by *Fondelibertad* than by VNN and the opposite happened with paramilitary abductions.

Table 2.1. Victims of kidnapping, forced disappearance and arbitrary detention, 1996-2004

Variables	Kidnappings		Forced disappearances	Arbitrary detentions
Sources	Fondelibertad	VNN	VNN	VNN
Guerrillas	965	559	0	56
Paramilitaries	110	1	120	121
Government			1	104
Unknown	276	2	42	1
Mixed			10	57
Others *	61			
Total	1,412	563	173	339

Notes: Based on: *Fondelibertad* and VNN dataset.
* Petty criminals or victims' relatives.

Despite these and other biases, evident when reading the records (e.g. references to the success of the police in liberating or forcing the release of hostages) the *Fondelibertad* dataset was found superior in terms of accuracy and detail. In particular, the fact that it records the suspected motives of each kidnapping and also the sums of money demanded in ransom kidnappings offered a clearer insight into the rationale for this form of violence.[36]

4) Other datasets

Economic, independent variables could play a role in explaining the levels of violence experience in the region. In most cases these time series were readily available from the sources. Dataset on fiscal transfers, local public expenditure, oil and gold royalties and coca growing areas, were obtained from the National Planning Office, the Institute of Mining and Geology (*Ingeominas*) and the local branch of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Finding information on agricultural

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[36] It should be noted that forced disappearances, a trademark of political violence in Latin America, could not be fully taken into account in the analysis. Although both N&N and *Fondelibertad* provide data on people captured by the warring parties, its accuracy is limited either because the sources do not necessarily track the cases, e.g., whether the victims are later found dead or alive, as is the case of N&N, or because they do not provide information about civilians unlawfully captured by the government, as is the case of *Fondelibertad*.

activity at the municipal level for all the *municipios* was less easy as national offices only held information disaggregated at the departmental level. To this effect, it was necessary to visit or contact the departmental agricultural offices in Bucaramanga, Medellin, Valledupar and Cartagena and obtain from them copies of the municipal yearly surveys carried out in the past, from 1996 onwards. Thanks to this information it was possible to test hypotheses regarding the effect of agriculture and cattle ranching on violence.

2.2.2 Qualitative sources

While the datasets just mentioned were invaluable in conveying a comprehensive and precise picture of the forms, magnitude and evolution of armed conflict and violence in the Middle Magdalena Valley, two sources were used to identify and trace relevant social and political events and processes: newspapers and interviews.

1) Newspapers

Using archives of national and regional newspapers stored at CINEP, PDPMM and public libraries, it was possible to compile more than 1,000 newspaper and magazine clips about political and conflict-related events in the Middle Magdalena Valley. The sources include newspapers such as *El Tiempo*, *El Espectador*, *Vanguardia*, *Voz*, *El Nuevo Siglo*, *El Colombiano*, *El Pais*, *El Heraldo* and *El Universal* and the weekly magazines *Semana* and *Cambio*. Some of these papers have national scope and circulation nationwide, but others are restricted to particular departments and regions.

Although the large majority of the clips collected were news reports, rather than editorial or opinion pieces, as any piece of journalism, they reflect editorial lines, political constraints and ideological biases. This is especially so when it comes to the coverage of armed conflict (e.g. the outcome of a combat): most of the clips reviewed echoed the official line and they rarely questioned the accounts produced by the authorities, unless they were reporting critical views made by other actors or

organisations, e.g. civil servants, priests, NGOs, international agencies. This is both a reflection of the journalists' cognitive and political biases and a result of the editorial constraints enforced by media companies, political actors and armed organisations. For instance, during the paramilitary campaign of 2001 in Barrancabermeja, journalists who produced revealing reports from the frontline, later found that they were never broadcasted by news programmes in Bogota; they also have faced threats from officials and armed organisations who objected any sort of media coverage over certain events (CINEP & Credhos 2004: 129, 133).

That said, newspapers were an invaluable source of information for this research, crucial to carry out the analyses presented in Ch. 5 and 6. They were particularly useful in reconstructing the time scale of certain episodes, in obtaining details about significant events detected in the datasets or mentioned by authors and interviewees, and in grasping the perception of various authorities and actors, including members of armed organisations, on the development of the armed conflict.

2) Interviews

The main purpose of the interviews was documenting and tracing certain processes and episodes of interest and, since most of them occurred in the recent past, it was possible to obtain first-hand accounts of episodes of interest from key informants who were actually involved in them. The identification of interviewees was made on the basis of the knowledge that each source had about particular events. Since the research strategy did not involve a systematic comparison of cases, the questionnaires varied across locations depending on the specific experience each source had. Accordingly, each interview started with a limited set of specific queries, which usually led to further questions depending on the answers provided by each source.

The staff at the peace observatory in Barrancabermeja were particularly helpful in identifying potential interviewees depending on the subject. Likewise, the interviewees themselves sometimes suggested names of other potential informants. In all, 33 informants were approached and interviewed in Barrancabermeja, Bogota,

Bucaramanga and Santa Rosa (see Box 2.2). In general, most interviewees were cooperative and the fact that most of them were contacted through informal networks and by trusted friends and former colleagues was of great help in dealing with sensitive issues (e.g. friendship with insurgents) despite the fact that I was an outsider. However, a few refused to be recorded or asked not to be named. One of them denied any knowledge of the issues he was asked (despite reassurances from other sources that he effectively knew about them) and another simply declined the interview arguing concerns over their personal security.

All the informants were civilians and the attempts to contact some mid-level cadres of armed organisations who were in prison were fruitless. For legal and security reasons, I did not attempt to contact any active insurgent cadres. The unavailability of primary sources on the paramilitary side was less of a problem than it was on the insurgent side as the former were interviewed in several occasions by regional and national newspapers; the extensive interviews carried by Aranguren (2001) also provided plenty of details about the paramilitary strategy in the Middle Magdalena Valley and Barrancabermeja. However, there is no doubt that more light could be shed on the issues dealt with on this research if they were available and ready to talk. Although there is hope that the 'justice and peace' process promoted by the Uribe administration will yield significant revelations about the perpetrators and motives of several crimes, so far this expectation has not been matched by the facts.

2.3   From the evidence to the questions and debates: combining quantitative and qualitative sources and methods

Ch. 1 identified three possible answers to the question of why there is violence against civilians in the context of an armed conflict as well as key issues connected with that question, such as the uneven distribution of violence across social groups and classes, the role of civilians themselves in assisting armed organisations through collaboration and so-called 'alliances' and the criminalisation of armed conflict.

Box 2.2 List of interviewees

I-1	Artemio Mejia, PDPMM staff in San Pablo, formerly a politician
I-2	Cecilia Alarcon, leader of an organisation of displaced women in south

	Bolivar
I-3	Delmar Burgos, politician, former mayor of Santa Rosa
I-4	Eduardo Diaz, priest and university professor, based in Barrancabermeja in the 1970s and 1980s
I-5	Eugenio Blanquicet, president of the local association of '*juntas de accion comunal*' in Barrancabermeja
I-6	Teofilo Acuna, president of the south Bolivar miners' federation
I-7	Fernando Acuna, retired, formerly member of the oil workers' union
I-8	Fernando Fontalvo y Daniel Medellin, politicians, leaders from Santa Rosa
I-9	Francisco Campo, human rights activist and politician from Barrancabermeja
I-10	German Bueno, ELN sympathiser in the 1970s and 1980s
I-11	German Plata, director of the PDPMM's observatory, human rights' activist
I-12	Gilberto Guerra, president of the Cimitarra River Valley Association
I-13	Guillermina Hernandez, grassroots leader, Barrancabermeja
I-14	Jacqueline Rojas, member of OFP, a women's Organisation
I-15	Jaime Pena, father of one of the victims of the 16 May 1998 massacre
I-16	Julio Delgado, retired, former member of the departmental assembly
I-17	Luis Briceno, economist, advisor to the PDPMM on economic issues
I-18	Nilson Davila, sociologist, advisor to the PDPMM on forced displacement
I-19	Pablo Arenales, member of a Bogota-based NGO
I-20	Raul Devia, university professor and researcher, he directed a research project on the extraction of timber in the Cimitarra River Valley
I-21	Regulo Madero, human rights activist and politician from Barrancabermeja
I-22	Ricardo Polo, consultant, officer of the National Rehabilitation Plan in the Middle Magdalena Valley in the late 1980s
I-23	Rosario Saavedra, sociologist, she worked with father Eduardo Diaz in Barrancabermeja in the 1970s
I-24	Susana Farfan consultant, officer of the National Rehabilitation Plan in the Middle Magdalena Valley in the late 1980s
I-25	Douglas Alvarado, merchant and farmer, Santa Rosa
I-26	Pedro Fandino, merchant and farmer from Santa Rosa
I-27	A merchant from Santa Rosa, who asked not to be named
I-28	Rosalba Rondon, miner from Santa Rosa
I-29	Jose Felix Montoya, local delegate of a NGO funded by Plan Colombia, Santa Rosa
I-30	Luz Marina Mayorga, miner, Santa Rosa
I-31	Ramiro Barreto, councilman, Santa Rosa
I-32	Alirio Rey, development secretary in Santa Rosa
I-33	A merchant from Santa Rosa, who asked not to be named
Notes:	Interviewees 11, 20 and 26 to 33 asked not to be recorded. Interviewees 27 and 33 asked not to be named. Interviewee 13 made informal commented on the topics suggested but declined a full interview.

It also discussed the methodological challenges associated with these debates. This part specifies how the methods and sources described above were used to address the question and the issues just mentioned. It also illustrates the advantages of combining quantitative and qualitative data and methods to that effect.

Regarding the central research question the dissertation employs quantitative methods to assess the relevance of the alternative explanations outlined. The descriptive evidence provides significant clues, particularly in the case of kidnapping, as the official dataset provides detailed information about the motive behind each individual case. However, the dissertation employs econometric techniques to analyse the spatial distribution of conflict-related violence across the region. Three sets of independent variables are included in the regressions: the first set is aimed to assess whether violence was used in direct connection with the armed struggle and includes variables such as the number of hostilities and combatants killed in action. The second set of variables captures economic variables and includes data on the production of gold and coca as well as on cattle stocks and local public finances; it is aimed to assess whether violence might have resulted from a struggle over such resources. The third set includes control variables. These analyses are presented and discussed in Ch. 4.

The dissertation also uses quantitative evidence to explore other issues mentioned above. The first concerns whether different social groups and classes are unevenly targeted by armed organisations and, if so, what does the disparity tell us about the goals they pursue in using and abusing civilians. For this, the analysis relies on the descriptions and categories reported by the sources about the occupation and social status of victims of killing and kidnapping; after coding, the data show the disparities in the levels of violence faced by people in different occupations. In the case of Barrancabermeja, the analysis takes into account the socio-economic level of the neighbourhoods where the killings occurred, as measured by the local authorities. Despite missing observations and the (sometimes) blurry descriptions provided by the sources, the data sheds light on an issue neglected by most scholars so far. These issues are discussed in Ch. 5 and 7.

The second issue is the prevalence of opportunistic alliances between individual

civilians and armed organisations; according to Kalyvas (2006) the presence of such alliances would lead to higher levels of selective, homicidal violence in disputed areas dominated by either armed organisation, resulting in a distinctive pattern of violence across zones of territorial control. These zones are coded using quantitative criteria and, in particular, data on the intensity of armed conflict (i.e. hostilities and combatants killed in action); based on this zoning the observed and expected patterns of violence are contrasted and discussed. Due to the informational demands of this quasi-experiment, its application is limited to Barrancabermeja, the largest town in the region. The case of Barrancabermeja is discussed in detail in Ch. 6.

The third issue is the criminalisation of armed conflict and violence. One of the aspects that casts doubt over the motives of armed organisations, especially insurgents, in using violence against civilians is the scale of ransom kidnapping. An implication of Naylor's hypothesis on the funding sources of rebel movements (1993) is that those interested in building a constituency and developing a social base would restrict ransom kidnappings to zones they do not control (see Ch. 1). Interestingly, this pattern is not matched by the observed distribution of ransom kidnappings across zones of territorial control in the region, a result discussed in Ch. 7.

Furthermore, quantitative data are critical in providing an accurate picture of the magnitude of conflict and the scale and forms of violence used against civilians by the state and armed organisations; descriptive data provided throughout the document, and especially in Ch. 4, are helpful in keeping the analysis grounded and in taking a critical view on secondary sources.

While quantitative data and analysis provide valuable insights into these issues, qualitative sources (e.g. newspapers, interviewees and secondary sources) are of critical importance to interpret quantitative results, assess their significance and derive theoretical implications. A solid grasp of the actual processes and stories that lie behind the events captured in datasets enables us to re-formulate and adjust the hypotheses based on 'plausible stories' (Elster 1989: 8) rather than on 'educated guesses' (Kalyvas 2006: 3). For instance, the distribution of violence across zones of territorial control in Barrancabermeja (Ch. 5) is at odds, in several respects, with the

theoretical predictions; thanks to the availability of qualitative data, in particular interviews and extensive news reports from local and regional newspapers, it is possible to discuss such 'anomalies' and their significance using evidence, rather than speculation, as a reference.

The nature of collaboration and alliances is also explored using qualitative sources; Ch. 6 in particular relies on interviews, news reports and secondary sources to show how armed organisations build alliances with social organisations, politicians and local elites to extend and strengthen territorial control and political control. Qualitative sources are also used to triangulate quantitative sources; for instance, data obtained from datasets can be crosschecked against accounts obtained from newspapers or secondary sources. Likewise, significant events found in the datasets, e.g. with a heavy weight on the aggregate data or with important implications on the coding of events or their interpretation, are double-checked and further explored using sources such as newspapers, interviews and reports published by NGOs. Moreover, qualitative data were the source of the most important dataset used in the dissertation: the narrative, descriptive accounts provided in a series of reports on political violence and human rights produced by a Colombian NGO, were tabulated and coded into a dataset, as explained above (section 2.2.1).

More generally, qualitative data are used to provide a picture of how certain key processes developed and to get a grasp on the perceptions and motives of the organisations and actors involved and understand the relations between them. For instance, the narrative accounts provided in Ch. 5 and 6 show are crucial to understand the contribution of paramilitary forces to the counterinsurgent campaign as well as their operative relation, on the 'battlefield', with government forces. Likewise, interviews, made by the author or obtained from newspapers or secondary sources, offer an insight into the attitudes of representative members of the local and regional elites vis-à-vis the state and armed organisations and are, thus, helpful in understanding the concrete shape that concepts such as alliances and collaboration acquire on the field.

The use of quantitative and qualitative methods and data in the dissertation is, thus, a response tailored to the specific questions posed by the theory and to the limitations

and possibilities opened by the data. It echoes the views of social scientists who see in this combined strategy an opportunity to provide a 'more complete answer to a research question' (Bryman 2006: 612). Although, strictly speaking, the dissertation does not follow the principles of 'analytical narratives' (in particular the use of game theory and rational-choice formal modelling), it shares with this approach its interest in locating and tracing the processes that generate an outcome of interest and in identifying and exploring the mechanisms involved (Bates et al. 1998: 12).

3. THE MIDDLE MAGDALENA VALLEY: A HISTORY OF CONFLICT AND VIOLENCE

The Middle Magdalena Valley (also known in Spanish as Magdalena Medio) is a natural region rather than an administrative or political unit that comprises the areas along the Magdalena River, roughly speaking between the towns of La Dorada, in the department of Boyaca, and El Banco, in Magdalena. In this sector, the valley is bounded by two mountain chains: the Central *cordillera* on the west and by the Eastern *cordillera* and sierra San Lucas on the east.

The region comprises marginal areas often seen as the 'backyards' of several departments; this is particularly evident in departments such as Bolivar, where the relation between the towns and the capital, Cartagena, is limited to bureaucratic and electoral matters. Even Barrancabermeja, home to the largest oil refinery in Colombia for nearly a century, has remained a marginal town in economic and political terms in the national context. However, throughout the years, the region has been home to radical political movements, insurgencies, paramilitary groups and drug mafias and, as such, has had a history of armed conflict and political violence.

The first part of this chapter examines the factors that may have contributed to the emergence and persistence of political violence in the region. The second describes the emergence and consolidation of the organisations that would play the crucial roles during the period of study, that is, insurgent and paramilitary groups. The third part provides a quantitative account of the magnitude of armed conflict and violence during the late 1980s and the first half of the 1990s in the Middle Magdalena Valley. Finally, the relevance of the research question and debates is discussed with reference to the setting, actors and history of the region.

3.1 The roots of conflict

Until recently, and for decades, the Middle Magdalena Valley was a region where political radicalism, insurgencies, insecurity and violence throve. Indeed, it was the cradle of important guerrilla and paramilitary organisations such as the ELN and the MAS. This section identifies and discusses several factors that may have contributed to this situation and suggests causal connections between recent armed conflict and violence, in its wider sense, and the specific social, economic and political conditions of the region over the last century.

3.1.1 The role of the state

The first factor to be considered is the role of the state. Until the late nineteenth century, most of the region remained unpopulated, with the exception of a couple of towns along the river, which was, for centuries, the main way of communication between the Colombian capital, up in the Andes, and the world.[37] From the 1870s, the construction of several rail lines across the region made easier the transportation of coffee and tobacco from Antioquia, Caldas and Santander and attracted migrations, prompting the development of villages and rural areas along the rail lines. Later, in the first decades of the twelfth century, oil prospects were asserted in different locations along the valley and several foreign companies, such as Texas Oil Company (Texaco), Tropical Oil Company (later Esso Colombia), Socony-Vacuum Corporation (later Mobil Oil Company), Richmond Petroleum Company and Shell, landed in the region to drill and extract oil, attracting even more immigrants.

As the state proved sluggish in providing housing, infrastructure and social services to the population, the development of the new settlements was funded and promoted by oil companies. In Barrancabermeja, as soon as the Tropical Oil Company (Troco),

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[37] Barrancabermeja, for instance, did not appear on the maps until the early twentieth century. It is unclear whether a village called Puerto Santander, displayed in a map by 1851 in a similar location was its actual predecessor (Aprile-Gniset 1997).

a branch of the Standard Oil, begun its operations to explore and extract oil in 1920, the departmental government (*Gobernacion*) created a new municipality and established a local administration so that it could quickly respond to the needs of the company (Aprile-Gniset 1997: 87, 161). Unable to cope with the fast growth of the town during the 1920s, the local authorities had to rely on Troco to build the basic local infrastructure, including water pipelines, the hospital and a prison and even in providing electricity to the town. Thus, Troco became not only the main taxpayer but also the main contractor to the local government, whose actual role seemed to be providing security: by the mid-1920s, out of 300 local civil servants, 190 were policemen (Aprile-Gniset 1997: 153, 226, 231-236).

Likewise, Shell played an important role in developing two new towns across the river—Casabe (later known as Yondo) and Cantagallo (Murillo 1994)—where the company built what locals then called 'a city amid the jungle', including not only homes but a church, a hospital, a school and the embankment that, still today, protects the town from the seasonal flooding. The relative absence of the state meant that, until the 1960s (when Shell returned the oil fields to the Colombian state), the town lived in relative isolation from political trends and events. For instance, the political earthquake caused by the killing of the Liberal caudillo and presidential candidate Jorge Eliecer Gaitan in 1948, which prompted an outbreak of violence across the country, was barely felt in the town (Murillo 1994).

The role that private companies played in some towns, was performed in others by the Church. In Santa Rosa, for instance, Jesuit priests such as Luis Arocena, Anastasio Calderon and Gabriel Caro led the construction of schools, water pipelines and a new church (I-8, I-16).[38] However, in rural areas, grassroots organisations or communities themselves, through informal arrangements, managed to allocate resources, e.g., plots to colonists who arrived looking for land at the edge of the frontier of colonisation (I-16). Likewise, peasants in the Cimitarra River often built their own schools but struggled to get the government to appoint and pay for teaching staff (I-4). As late as 1993, the percentage of homes lacking access to basic services in areas such as south Bolivar was in the range of 40 to 60 per cent,

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[38] A full list of interviewees (I-1, I-2, etc.) is provided in Chapter 2.

compared with a regional average of 10 per cent.[39]

Admittedly, state absence was not the rule across the whole region; some towns and rural areas were better integrated to the domestic economy and enjoyed better access to infrastructure and basic services. Roughly speaking, towns and villages located on the east side of the valley, in the departments of Santander and Cesar, enjoyed better access to basic state services and benefited from the proximity of main roads and rail lines built to connect the Atlantic coast with cities such as Bogota and Bucaramanga. However, the presence of the state in towns, and especially in rural, mountainous areas, on the east side was precarious and the provision of infrastructure and services was often assumed by private actors and communities. Furthermore, in vast rural areas the police and the army were, at best, absent and, at worst, repressive and heavy-handed; this created favourable conditions for the emergence of peasant self-defences who protected the colonists against petty criminals, government forces and voracious land grabbers.[40]

Repression also created favourable conditions for the emergence of insurgencies. The early ELN had in their ranks former members of the Liberal guerrilla led by Rafael Rangel. Rangel was one of the top cadres of the 'popular government' installed in Barrancabermeja in response to the killing of the Liberal leader Gaitan in Bogota in 1948. His death caused widespread political turmoil and prompted the Conservative government to adopt repressive measures. In Barrancabermeja, the national government appointed a military mayor pushing Rangel into clandestinity, where he launched a small guerrilla group to resist the Conservative repression, implemented by the Police and armed bands (Vargas 1989). Although this guerrilla group later demobilised during the Rojas government, some members would later join the ELN (Safford and Palacios 2002: 347-350; Vargas 1989).

3.1.2 Social and economic conflicts

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[39] Figures based on the 1993 National Census; the regional average includes approximately 60 *municipios*.

[40] Although peasant self-defences often turned into banditry, in some regions they were direct predecessors of the guerrilla movements of the 1960s. The origin of the FARC, in particular, is directly related to 'armed colonisation' in areas such as Marquetalia and Sumapaz (Marquez 1990, Pizarro 1991).

Since the late nineteenth century, the Middle Magdalena Valley has been the stage of social conflicts involving urban workers, peasants, landowners, local authorities, the national government, and domestic and multinational companies. Following Alonso (1997), three axes of social and economic conflict can be identified in the region: an agrarian conflict, over land ownership; a labour conflict, between workers and companies; and a urban social conflict, involving poor, marginalised urban communities, over the provision of housing and infrastructure.[41]

1) The agrarian conflict

The development of inner frontier areas in the region prompted conflicts over property rights, which were common all over the country since the 1870s. The nature of these conflicts has been best summarised by LeGrand (1986: xvi):

> Generally, frontier expansion occurred in Colombia in two successive stages. First, peasant families moved into frontier areas and cleared and planted the land, increasing its value by the labour they incorporated into it. These pioneers resembled peasant proprietors in other parts of the country, but with one crucial difference: they did not hold legal title to the land they farmed. In the second stage, well-to-do land entrepreneurs appeared on the scene, intending to form large estates and convert the earlier settlers into tenant farmers by asserting property rights over the land. This basic conflict of interests between self-provisioning settler families and elite investors intent on controlling the settlers' land and labour was intrinsic to the Colombian frontier experience.

These conflicts were a crucial issue in the national political agenda from the 1920s to the 1970s, fuelling social movements and violence at several points of Colombian history. Although the Liberal administrations and the Supreme Court provided legal frameworks favourable to small settlers (*colonos*) in the 1920s and 1930s, the central government was unable to enforce them and the bonds between regional and local authorities and elites hindered those efforts. There are no detailed accounts of how these conflicts evolved in the Middle Magdalena Valley but LeGrand reported that the first *colono* league was established in Berrio in 1921, to challenge a grant requested by a land company (1986: 128).

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[41] Alonso (1997) identifies a fourth axis—political-institutional—discussed later.

To a good extent '*la violencia*' was triggered by events in the national political arena, but local interests played an important role in the materialisation of violence, as 'death threats and burn outs compelled many peasants to sell their fields cheaply or simply abandon them, leaving the land consolidated in the hands of those who initiated such tactics' (LeGrand 1986: 163). That was the case of Cantarranas, in San Vicente, where armed bands hired by Conservatives managed to displace Liberal landowners (Vargas 1989: 40). In Berrio and Wilches, the Police hunted Liberals thereby allowing Conservatives to loot or destroy their possessions and take hold of their lands (Bonilla 1994; Alonso 1994).

Oil companies were also involved in land conflicts, the most notorious of which was prompted by the acquisition of two large estates by Texaco, in 1957, which happened to include both *colonos*' and middle landowners' plots (Medina 1990). Similar conflicts, of lesser magnitude, occurred in lands owned by other oil companies, such as Shell in Casabe (Yondo), and were later reactivated in the 1960s, when several oil fields were handed back to the Colombian government and a wave of *colonos* entered those lands. The role of Shell in these conflicts has been further documented by Zamosc in his work on the peasant movement in Colombia (1986). He identified the Middle Magdalena Valley as one of five geographic areas of land struggle in the 1960s[42] and described how Shell pushed out 'a large number of colonists who were trying to resettle after fleeing from '*la violencia*' in the highlands' and, later, 'organised [a] force of private guards to destroy the crops and evict the squatters' in rural areas close to Barrancabermeja (1986: 43). However, when Shell's contract expired in the late 1960s, *Ecopetrol*, the state-owned oil company, overtook the exploitation of the fields and the agrarian reform agency granted titles to the peasants over 160,000 hectares in rural areas of Barrancabermeja and Yondo such as Campo Casabe, El Tigre, and San Luis Beltran (1986: 43).

These conflicts acquired a new dimension in the 1980s, when drug bosses moved into the region and acquired large extensions of land as well as cattle stock as a way to launder their money into safe, lightly taxed assets. Pablo Escobar, for instance, founded his infamous *Hacienda Napoles*, an extravagant estate with a private zoo, in

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[42] The other areas being southern Atlantico, lower Sinu, the Banana zone and the Casanare *llanos* (Zamosc 1986: 42).

the rural area of Puerto Triunfo. As guerrillas increased the protection fees they charged to cattle ranchers, drug bosses created their own private militias which, together with other paramilitary organisations escalated violence and managed to expel the insurgency from the southern part of the valley. However, in the long term, productivity improved as 'industry-financed paramilitary groups increased the safety of property in the region and the level of rustling declined' (Sarmiento and Moreno, cited by Thoumi 1995: 239). But the cost of these improvements was borne by small landowners and rural workers who had to emigrate because of the violence; furthermore, old landlords who still paid protection fees to the insurgency were targeted by paramilitary groups and, in the end, preferred to sell their lands to the newcomers, reinforcing the ongoing process of land concentration (1995: 239).

Conflict over land and property rights continued in the 1990s, exemplified by the cases of *Hacienda Bellacruz* and the gold mines of sierra San Lucas. In the first case, a dispute emerged between the Marulanda family, owners of the 12,000 hectares estate, and a group of 450 households who occupied about a sixth of the property in 1986; after an inconclusive legal battle, many families were forcefully evicted in 1996 by a militia but the Marulanda family denied any involvement in the these events. However, a Police report cited by the source claims that, in 1995, the Marulanda family may had reached a deal with the paramilitary boss Victor Carranza to bring a paramilitary squad to 'clean-up' the area (Amnesty International 1997). In the second case, the Illera-Palacio family claimed the right to extract gold from a rural, isolated area of south Bolivar, controlled by the insurgency, where small miners had been digging for decades using archaic techniques but lacking legal titles over the mines (Loinsigh 2002: 67). Although miners have feared that the investors' appetite for the industrial exploitation of these mines could prompt violence by private militias or paramilitary groups, or state-enforced expropriations, this risk had not materialised, at least until the mid 2000s (I-6).

2) The labour conflict

Conflicts between workers and companies were common in the region since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Magdalena River was the stage of the first

large workers' strikes in the 1910s, organised by longshoremen ('*braceros*'); in the 1920s and 1930s, rail and oil workers also resorted to strikes as a way to demand improvements in working conditions and found that the government was ready to repress such movements and to back massive laid-offs of workers, as the strikes were deemed illegal. These movements led to the creation of some of the first Colombian workers' unions, including USO, the oil workers' union, founded in 1938, which played an important role in the social and political life of the region since then (Archila 1989).

The extraction and processing of oil generated some of the economic conditions from which social struggle and political conflict would emerge throughout the century: on the one hand, oil workers mobilised to expand their rights and increase their salaries and, after decades of successive strikes and negotiations, managed to reach benefits and privileges above those usually granted to workers in similar jobs in different industries. The first oil workers' strike was held in 1924 and involved 3,000 of them; it led to the creation of *Sociedad Union Obrera*, later rebranded *Union Sindical Obrera, USO,* which would become one of the most important workers' unions in the country.

Communist activists such as Raul Mahecha played an important role in organising the first strikes but the workers' political leanings would turn towards the left wing of the Liberal Party from the 1930s (Archila 1986: 123). This pattern remained throughout the years and a union leader, interviewed in 1986, reported with disappointment that the vibrancy of the labour movement did not translate into electoral success, as workers supported candidates from the traditional parties rather than those in the Left (Delgado 2006: 122).

However, labour unions from the oil and cement sectors actively promoted the organisation of poor urban communities and rural workers. In Barrancabermeja they supported the squatter movement and were involved in the creation of some illegal settlements (more on this below). In Puerto Nare, they tried to organise agricultural workers' unions, but these attempts were often crushed by cattle ranchers, agro-industrialists and merchants, unhappy to see their workers and providers organised (Delgado 2006: 120). Although the unions were politically vibrant in the 1970s and

during the early 1980s, its character gradually changed. While the USO had been an active, if not disinterested, promoter of popular mobilisation in the 1960s and 1970s—civic strikes often started shortly after a labour strike had been declared—in the 1980s they distanced themselves from the popular movement, narrowing their agenda to labour and energy policy issues (Briceno 1993).

According to Delgado, during the 1990s, the most active labour unions in the Middle Magdalena Valley were those in the following sectors and industries: oil, education, cement, palm oil, health and public utilities. Interestingly, less than half of the 123 strikes held between 1990 and 2001 in the region were related to the labour struggle as such, i.e. negotiating better salaries and conditions of work; most were related with political issues, including government policies and human rights. Workers' discontent with government policies was not surprising, as the 1990s saw the implementation of several economic reforms that, broadly speaking, reflected the spirit of the Washington Consensus (e.g. deregulation of labour and financial markets, privatisation of several state-owned companies). As for human rights abuses, it must be noted that labour disputes were increasingly permeated by the armed conflict: on the one hand, threats, and actual acts of violence by the insurgency, against companies and their owners increased during the strikes; on the other, as paramilitary groups gained strength across the region, they targeted union leaders and their headquarters.

The sympathy of the labour unions, or at least of some of their members, towards the insurgency and their revolutionary ideals, was sometimes conspicuous and can be traced back to the Communist ideals of Mahecha and other Communist activists. The affinities between the labour movement and the insurgency led some observers to believe that the strike of 1977 was actually a preface to revolution (Briceno 1993; Delgado 2006). Moreover, workers' strikes often seemed to be backed by kidnappings, bombings and other acts of violence and there are even those who believe that the strikes in general, pacific or not, were orchestrated by the insurgency as a means to destabilise the national economy (I-7). Indeed, Gonzalez and Jimenez (2008) claimed that up until 2000 most, if not all, members of the union's board of directors acted on behalf of the FARC and the ELN and channelled funds towards the insurgency. Although the sources of these claims are obscure, in the late 1990s

and early 2000s, several members of the USO were prosecuted and condemned by rebellion (Delgado 2006).

However, union leaders were targeted by undercover official agents (more on this below) and, increasingly, paramilitary organisations. For instance, in 1986, a paramilitary group based in Puerto Boyaca killed the chief of the *Cementos del Nare* union; during the following years other members of the same union were threatened, killed or 'disappeared' by counterinsurgent organisation such as MAS and AUC (Delgado 2006: 123-5).

3) Urban conflict

Urban conflict was largely confined to the largest towns in the region and, in particular, to Barrancabermeja. As the population grew, urban dwellers struggled to access housing, infrastructure and social services, the provision of which was always lagged behind the needs of the increasing population. *Troco's* work force quickly grew from 100 in 1916 to 4,000 in 1923, attracting large numbers of people looking for jobs and opportunities in the oil fields and the refinery or, alternatively, in the nascent local economy—from the town hall to the shops, from bars to brothels, and from the fisheries to the lands that fed the growing population, which almost doubled from 1928 to 1938 (Aprile-Gniset 1997: 212). Not surprisingly, the provision of housing and local infrastructure, e.g. water and sanitation was insufficient. While the Company provided first-class accommodation to its foreign staff and skilled employees within gated communities, blue-collar workers faced increasing housing costs in poor conditions. The shortage of housing and local infrastructure became a chronic condition of the city during the rest of the century, aggravated by new waves of immigrants pushed by violence in the 1950s and 1980s or attracted by the expansion of the refinery in the 1960s.

During the 1960s, squatters invaded idle plots of land especially on the eastern side of the city and, by 1970, at least fifteen *barrios de invasion* existed (Mosseri 1970: 57). By 1976 Barrancabermeja was the nineteenth most populated city in the country but the fourth with more illegal settlements (Garcia 2006: 136). Politicians, priests,

oil workers and grassroots leaders, all contributed to plan and consolidate these *invasiones*, although not necessarily in a collaborative way. Both the ANAPO party and left-wing Liberals (e.g. FILA and MRL) promoted the creation of *barrios* such as *Chico*, *Maria Eugenia*, *Primero de Mayo* and *Veinte de Agosto*. According to Diaz and Saavedra, 'representatives of traditional political parties are involved at the initial, planning stages of an invasion. However, as the invasion takes place and squatters clash with the authorities, they disappear, only to reappear later, when the invasion has been consolidated; some times they create *juntas de accion comunal* to gain sympathy for their [political] movements and get votes' (1986: 47). This patronage was reflected in the names of the neighbourhoods: USO promoted the *barrio Fermin Amaya*, named after a union leader killed in the 1970s, but as the FILA gained political control over the neighbourhood it was given a less politically charged name: *Arenal*—sandbank (I-18).[43]

While the new *barrios* provided roof to many households, the provision of basic and social services and infrastructure, e.g. water and sanitation, electricity, roads, schools, advanced at a painfully slow pace. Moreover, even in formal, well-established neighbourhoods, the poor quality of such services, water in particular, was a recurrent cause of dissatisfaction, evident in recurrent demonstrations and 'civic strikes', in which people was supposed to stop their usual activities and gather in public places to show support for the cause.[44]

In early 1975, for instance, popular unrest grew, galvanising the support of several social sectors including workers unions, teachers and the clergy, and a civic strike was organised to demand the investments needed to improve the quality of services. The strike was presided by a directive board and a central committee, with

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[43] *Juntas de Accion Comunal* were created by the law in 1958 as an officially-endorsed form of popular participation and representation at the grassroots level; every *barrio*, in towns and cities, or *vereda*, in rural areas, is allowed to have only one *junta*. The law also set their structure and rules and they must register with the local authorities in order to be recognised. *Juntas* play a central role in local politics, especially in poor areas, where people's needs are still centred on the provision of basic infrastructure; they traditionally perform their function by engaging in patron-client relations with local politicians and, thus, have been usually attached to traditional parties and tend to avoid confrontations with local authorities.

[44] Thus, during an 'ideal' civic strike, no buses or taxis would be seen and schools, shops and offices should keep their doors shut; people would gather in parks to share a meal ('*olla comunal*'), enjoy the entertainment of local artists and, at some point, march along the downtown towards a significant place of the city.

representatives of the participating organisations and neighbourhoods; these organs were linked to *comites de barrio*, ensuring a quick and effective communication and implementation of decisions. Interestingly, professionals and *juntas de accion comunal*, traditionally linked to the political parties, only participated in the first days of the movement, when the negotiations with the government opened; however they disliked the radical stance taken by most of the leaders involved in the strike, withdrawing their support (Diaz and Saavedra 1986: 5).

During the 1975 strike, most of the normal activities in the city were interrupted and the refinery operated only at a fraction of its full capacity; despite the heavy presence of the Army and the Police, the civic strike organisers managed to avoid clashes with them and prevented acts of sabotage planned by radicals. They also managed to voice their concerns directly to President Lopez in Bogota, but no much more than that. Popular mobilisation ebbed down in a matter of weeks (Diaz and Saavedra 1986; I-4). Three years later, only fifty-nine per cent of the population had access to water, still not potable and with 'deficient colour and smell'. Only military and industrial facilities, *El Rosario* estate (home to *Ecopetrol*'s officials and engineers), and the USO headquarters, had access to good quality drinking water (Quiceno et al. 1979). By 1993, almost eight percent of the urban homes still lacked a connection to the local water grid.[45]

While the civic strike of 1975 is one of the most remembered, popular mobilisation over housing and access to basic services continued during the 1970s and 1980s. This was the dominant theme in public demonstrations in those years: more than sixty between 1975 and 1989 (Garcia 2006: 141). Although most of them were articulated around the needs of specific neighbourhoods, wider civic strikes were held in 1977, 1982, 1983 and 1987, prompting some times repressive measures such as the appointment of military mayors, curfews, restrictions to the right of assembly and even the militarization of the USO headquarters, as was the case in 1977 (Castilla 1989).

Interestingly, Catholic priests played a significant role next to unions' and

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[45] The 1993 figure is based on data from the 1993 Population and Housing Census.

grassroots' leaders in both the squatter and the civic movement. Priests became advisors to the squatters and sometimes mediated between them and the local authorities. For instance, in 1971 squatters incited by members of ANAPO, invaded a plot, unsafely close to the railway; after negotiations with *Beneficencia de Santander*, a government body in charge of providing social assistance to the poor, the Church obtained an idle plot of land to which most of the squatters were relocated and thus *barrio La Esperanza* was created (Diaz and Saavedra 1986: 57). Similarly, in 1975, during the development of *barrio Primero de Mayo*, priests mediated between the squatters and the Army during the first hours of the invasion. Although they were evicted, the priests put together a list of households and negotiated a solution with the mayor, an active military officer appointed from Bogota, who agreed to buy the land on which the *barrio* was finally built, with technical support from the local planning office (I-4). Some priests were particularly wary of traditional party politics and tried to keep politicians at bay or at least to prevent what they saw as a negative influence in the squatter movement.

3.1.3. Ideology and the Cold War

The active role of the Church was not a coincidence. Echoing the Second Vatican Council (1962-5), the Latin American Episcopal conference, *CELAM* in Spanish, officially endorsed the doctrine that came to be known as 'liberation theology', put forward by a group of bishops, like the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, who coined the term. During the second half of the 1960s CELAM became 'the major think tank that first formulated liberation theology and the major organisational base from which it was propagated' (Smith 1991: 134). During the 1960s, Liberation Theology reached its heyday and members of the clergy were actively involved in the promotion of popular organisations and unashamedly assumed a more political role.[46]

In Barrancabermeja, *Pastoral Social*, the branch of the Catholic Church in charge of

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[46] However, Conservative bishops managed to regain the top positions within CELAM in the 1970s, reflecting a changing political consensus that favoured a less radical approach to the social role of the Catholic church (Smith 1991).

dealing with social and community issues, declared in a document dated in 1976 that the Gospel 'is a source of enlightenment and encouragement for the development and liberation of the people and the peoples, and should lead Christians to a personal conversion and to a *serious engagement in structural economic, political and cultural change*' (*Pastoral Social* 1976: 1, italics added). However, they acknowledged, the Gospel did not provide them with a 'methodology for action', which could only be found in social sciences, as they contained 'the elements to analyse the reality and undertake effective solutions' (*Pastoral Social* 1976: 2).

This is how members of the local branch of the Catholic Church's *Pastoral Social* described their methodology: 'We begin with the needs expressed by the people and take them seriously; by fighting to overcome those needs, we try to advance a process, an organisation towards a fundamental change, going beyond the solution of the most immediate needs' (*Pastoral Social* 1976: 2). This methodology led, for instance, to the creation of 'housewives clubs' in poor neighbourhoods, where women prayed, learned basic skills (e.g. cooking, sewing, preventive health) and, most importantly, were actively involved in reflections about the political and economic roots of the problems that affected their households. This '*formacion*', as it is often referred, was assisted by priests and counsellors trained by CINEP (I-23). 'Housewives clubs' later evolved into the Women's Popular Organisation (*Organizacion Femenina Popular*), OFP, a NGO that still existed in 2007 and carried out projects in areas such as housing, health, legal advice and access to food at affordable prices.[47] Similarly, *Pastoral Social* was involved in the creation of youth groups in which political discussions were mixed with activities such as sports and cultural festivals. [48]

These activities were not always welcomed by local politicians and activists affiliated to the Liberal party; they felt their turfs invaded by the priests, who openly

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[47] The OFP's radical political stance is captured in their anthem, written on a wall in their headquarters in Barrancabermeja: 'If our daughters starve to die/ if naked they cannot attend school/ the rich are not to be blamed/ but the cowards who refuse to fight/ If we live in slums/ if we cannot earn the bread/ it is because the government/ exploits us and repress us'. It does not rhyme in Spanish either.

[48] In essence, this methodology was the same employed in 'base ecclesial communities' across Latin America, based on Paulo Freire's 'method of conscientisation' to teach 'community members how to do critical social analysis' (Smith 1991: 107).

criticised the patron-client relationships fostered by so-called *politiqueros*—a demeaning term for politicians (*Pastoral Social* 1986: 48). The active role of the Church raised suspicions about their actual aspirations and the reach of their pastoral duties. During the 1975 civic strike for instance, their support to popular mobilisation was interpreted as evidence of 'political, partisan ambition' and some priests were even accused of inciting and carrying out acts of violence; the clergy, led by the bishop, emphatically denied these allegations, arguing that their actions merely reflected the CELAM doctrine (*Diocesis de Barrancabermeja* 1975a, 1975b).

But some priests went further than just political activism. Camilo Torres, for instance, a cleric and university professor joined the ELN in 1965 and was killed the following year in a clash with government forces, as he tried to 'earn' his first rifle. He then became a hero and, curiously, his death beckoned even more students, priests and nuns to join the insurgency (Medina 2001: 169-170). Among them were the Spaniard priests Domingo Lain, Antonio Jimenez and Manuel Perez; the latter would become the top commander of the insurgent group *Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional* (ELN or National Liberation Army) until his death, by natural causes, in 1999.

However, it was the Cuban Revolution, in 1959, which exerted a crucial influence over the minds of a whole generation and, indeed, had a direct, tangible connection with the emergence of insurgent groups in the Middle Magdalena Valley. In 1962, sixty young students were invited by the Cuban government to study in the island; as the missile crisis erupted, most of them flew back to Colombia, but a group of 22 stayed in Cuba receiving military training. In 1964, they returned to the country and founded the ELN, choosing San Vicente, in the department of Santander, as their initial base of operation (Medina 2001: 68-82).

3.2   Emergence and consolidation of armed organisations

This section describes the origin of insurgent and paramilitary organisations in the Middle Magdalena Valley, focusing on those that were still operating at the beginning of the period of study, that is, by the mid1990s.

3.2.1   Insurgencies

The first part of this section focuses on two guerrilla groups established in the region in the 1960s: the National Liberation Army, ELN, and the Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces, FARC. It relies on secondary sources which, unfortunately, are scarce and provide a patchy picture of the events. In comparison with the early years of the ELN, which have been thoroughly documented by Medina (2001), the history of this movement after 1980 and the evolution of the FARC in the region have been studied in lesser detail.

1)   The National Liberation Army

The creation of the ELN was led by a group of young intellectuals, members of a 'brigade' trained in Cuba, who believed that the peasants and not the urban workers had the crucial role in the revolutionary process. Paradoxically, most of their followers were students, USO unionists and priests (Medina 2001: 215-230). They established the first base in San Vicente, in 1964, and launched an attack on the town of Simacota in 1965, when they proclaimed their existence and launched a twelve-points political programme that included reforms aimed at 'giving power back to the people', an 'agrarian revolution' and a broad range of vaguely stated institutional reforms.

In 1965 they blew up an oil pipeline for the first time, near Barrancabermeja, as part of their campaign to nationalise the oil and mining industries; in 1969 they carried out the first kidnapping (Medina 2001: 145, 248). Despite the internal disputes that

characterised the group in its early years, which often led to executions, they managed to expand their operations across the region and by 1972 they already had branches in San Pablo, Yondo, Remedios, Segovia, Amalfi and Anori. However, they suffered heavy blows such as the detention of 210 sympathisers in Bogota, Medellin and several towns in Santander, in 1969, and the counterinsurgent offensive launched by government forces in 1973 (*Operacion Anori*), when they were nearly defeated. Later, they blamed these blows on their excessive confidence on the level of popular support they enjoyed (Medina 2001).

After further internal disputes that led to executions, suicides and even madness among some of their leaders (Medina 2001: 326-341), the organisation re-emerged in the late 1980s and made an effort to increase popular collaboration and to 'make coincide the armed struggle with the interests of sectors of the population', in particular in the areas where they operated (Peñate 1999: 79). A report, published by an active military officer, indicated that the recruitment process adopted by the ELN ensured that not only individuals, but their households as a whole, supported the armed struggle not only politically but also operationally, providing food and shelter to the insurgents. Accordingly, the first step of recruitment was the creation of study groups from which only the most committed individuals were picked, trained and eventually given a gun. Furthermore, they tightened the rules in order to improve discipline and minimise the mistreatment of civilians and developed a vast network of supporters in the cities, most of them belonging to the middle-class (Villamarin 1995).

However, the crucial element in the ELN's comeback seemed to be the funding obtained, via extortion, from the firms in charge of building, operating and maintaining oil pipelines across the country. For instance, is it estimated that the German firm Mannesmann, in charge of building a major oil pipeline across the country, had to pay up to $4 million in protection fees. Thus, since the 1980s, oil pipelines became a lifeline to the ELN, as the group exacted large sums of money from firms contracted to put together new lines or to repair the tubes every time they blew them up; furthermore, they often demanded the recruitment of locals as workers and the provision of aid and public works to rural communities, thus

increasing their standing in the eyes of the population (Peñate 1999: 92-3).[49]

Although we lack reliable figures, this was probably a significant source of funding for the ELN in the Middle Magdalena Valley, as the region is traversed by several pipelines that connect the oil fields with the refinery in Barrancabermeja and the distribution centres were petrol and other derivatives are pumped to the demand points such as Bogota, Medellin and Bucaramanga. At any rate, the impact of ELN's attacks on the oil production was sensible and both *Ecopetrol*, the state oil company, and British Petroleum Company expressed concern about the consequences of such attacks and the sustainability of some operations (*El Tiempo* 3 July 1997).

A second element in the re-emergence of the ELN was their involvement in local politics, a practice they copied from the FARC, which enabled them to access public funds and channel public spending towards their supporters. Until the 1980s, local budgets were often insignificant, but municipalities with mineral resources received significant royalties; however, after the decentralisation reforms of the early 1990s, all local authorities received increasing amounts of funds that, despite being earmarked, could be used to further the political interests of mayors, councilmen and, now, the insurgency. 'Armed clientelism' is the term coined by Malcolm Deas to describe this phenomenon where insurgencies adopted and adapted customary practices of the traditional mainstream political parties and developed alliances with local politicians belonging to those parties. These alliances enabled the ELN to channel funds to areas and populations where they wanted to gain allegiance (Peñate 1999: 79-89).

Although these strategies helped the ELN to grow roots within social organisations and political movements and also to expand their geographic presence, from 22 fronts in 1989 to 45 in 1997, they did not lead to an actual strengthening of their military capabilities. According to Aguilera, this may be explained by the lack of military training and equipment, an excessive interest in local politics over military achievements and, last but not least, by the ELN's reluctance to participate in the coca economy (2006: 228, 235-242).

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[49] It is worth noting a similar sort of racket was later extended to the energy grid and, during the 1990s, insurgents frequently blew up electrical towers in rural, isolated areas.

Furthermore, the ELN's attempts to expand their operations in cities would eventually prove counterproductive and, added to the widespread use of kidnapping as a source of funding and political pressure, would become lethal in the years to come. As noted above, for many years the ELN did not see the cities as crucial arenas in their struggle; cities such as Barrancabermeja were seen as a logistic hub and their sympathisers' homes as guns hideouts, refuges for wounded men or simply as places to have some rest. Furthermore, they were often present at public demonstrations and civic or labour strikes, showing their 'support' to popular mobilisation and carrying out a range of activities, from spreading nails on the roads to ensure the success of 'civic strikes' to actually clashing with police or the army (I-4, I-10, I-23). But this kind of 'support' and its consequences were not always welcome. Skirmishes and fire exchange between the police and militias often meant that pacific demonstrations had to be aborted and negotiations with the authorities precluded. Thus, the use of violence during strikes sidelined the activists and ultimately led to apathy and fear among the people (I-7, I-10, I-11).[50]

Furthermore, these civic strikes disrupted the normal functioning of the local economy. The death of USO leader Manuel Chacon in early 1988, for instance, murdered by an active member of the Navy, provoked turmoil and disrupted the economic activities in the city for five days, causing a shortage of basic goods. Shops and markets could not reopen because of the 'intimidation' and harassment of protesters who stoned any moving vehicle on their sight (Human Rights Watch 1996: 30; *Vanguardia Liberal*, 20 and 21 January 1988). Following this episode, the small merchants' association complained to the government in Bogota about the frequency of civic strikes—seven in eighteen months, according to their own account—and the bad name that the climate of agitation had given to the city. 'These most absurd actions, in the guise of civic strikes, reads the letter, damage the local economy and deprive our land from any possibility of investment, progress, opportunities or jobs' (*Vanguardia Liberal*, 27 January 1988).

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[50] A similar feeling seemed to be held by some members of USO; a former top member, interviewed for this research, suggested that the union's decisions regarding the conduction of strikes and negotiations with the government were manipulated 'from the mountains' (I-7).

To make things worse, the ELN tried to strengthen their foothold in the cities by creating militias of young men. However, these militias had no roots in the existing social and political organisations; they were simply an attempt for the ELN to gain acceptance in the poorest neighbourhoods by using force against petty criminals and street-level drug dealers (Aguilera 2006: 238-9). In Barrancabermeja, the local militia was known as *Urban Front of Resistance Yariguies*, or FURY, and most of its members (*milicianos*) lived in poor *barrios* in the city's northeast. Unlike guerrillas, *milicianos* did not receive significant military training or indoctrination; an interviewee, who used to teach doctrinal issues to militiamen in the mid-1990s, described how the young recruits had no clue about the revolutionary aims of the organisations: 'they did not know about class struggle, or capitalist society or socialism, all they knew was how to use their guns' (I-10). Several interviewees portrayed a similar picture, emphasising the militiamen's lack of ideals and ideological indoctrination (I-4, I-5, I-7, I-9, I-10, I-11).

Soon, *milicianos* were found abusing the population or trying to keep their sympathy with robinhood-esque tactics. Owners of very small businesses, like corner shops, were extorted, causing rows with political activists, union leaders and guerrillas themselves, with whom they were often related. *Milicianos* left bars without paying the bill or fare-dodged in public transport vehicles, whose owners are often low-to-middle income householders, thus denting their livelihoods. Banks and shops were robbed for personal profit, especially near Christmas, with the commanders' approval. Some were available for hire by civilians to settle accounts or intimidate foes. Small cattle-ranchers or raw meat merchants were assaulted to steal their produce to be 'redistributed' in poor neighbourhoods (I-10, I-11, I-15). Furthermore, the scramble for resources was so intense that often guerrillas belonging to different organisations, or even to different units within the same organisation (e.g. ELN's FURY and *Capitan Parmenio*) targeted the same businesses for extortion. According to an interviewee, the ELN units, in particular, were strained by the central command's thirst for resources (I-10).

To conclude, despite internal disputes and heavy blows inflicted by government forces, the ELN managed to stay alive and expand in the Middle Magdalena Valley—and in other Colombian regions; after thirty years of armed struggle they

still did not pose a serious, existential threat to the state and, in fact, had developed local alliances with the traditional parties. However, their operations did impose a burden not only on multinational companies and large landowners but also on small merchants, cattle ranchers and local politicians. As Aguilera put it, throughout its existence the ELN remained 'a not very combative organisation, that does not sustain or diversify its warfare methods, behaves as a kind of insurgent rural police and privileges sabotage (blowing oil pipelines and electric towers, blocking roads) as the main form of combat' (2006: 241).

2)   The Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces

While the FARC has been the largest insurgent group for many years in Colombia, in the Middle Magdalena Valley it has played a secondary role, at least since the mid-1980s; the reasons for this will become evident later. The most important difference between the two groups and, indeed, between the FARC and most guerrilla groups in Latin America is its origin. Unlike most (if not all) of them, the FARC was not created by rebellious intellectuals; rather, it emerged as an armed self-defence movement created by Liberal and Communist peasants in response to the sustained attacks of large landholders, the Police and the Army all over the country, in a process that began before the Cuban Revolution and that finally led to the foundation of the movement in 1965 (Pizarro 1991). In this sense, compared to other Latin American revolutionary movements, the FARC is exceptional. As Wickham-Crowley pointed out, while 'guerrillas and peasants typically came from profoundly different "social worlds", in Colombia we encounter a fundamental exception to this generalisation' (1992: 145). As such, agrarian issues were paramount in their political agenda, which was 'anti-monopolist [in relation to land ownership] rather than anticapitalist' (Ramirez 1990: 66). They formally mutated into a fully-fledged revolutionary movement in the early 1980s.

Although the Middle Magdalena Valley did not lack its own peasant self-defences—two of such groups reportedly operated in the Carare Valley, in Santander, and Puerto Boyaca in the 1960s (Medina 1990)—the creation of a FARC front (their fourth nationwide) in the region was largely the result of a decision made by the

organisation in 1968, during its Third Conference (Ferro and Uribe 2002a: 29, 181). During the early 1970s, the FARC and the Communist Party gained political influence and built a modest military strength in these areas and were welcomed by locals, as they put a halt to petty criminals and cattle raiders (Alonso 1997: 128). But it was in the 1980s when they managed to spread their activities throughout the country and gain visibility in the national political arena; official figures show a four-fold increase in their manpower and fronts, which went from eleven in 1980 to 46 in 1990 (cited by Velez 2001: 223). Despite their vigorous growth, in the late 1990s their peasant origins still permeated their goals and strategies, as Ramirez (2001) has argued: first, because, on close inspection, their political programmes could be better described as reformist ('typical of any nationalist petty-bourgeois group') rather than revolutionary and, second, because of the importance they still gave to controlling, consolidating and protecting territory, just as when they were guardians of the so-called 'independent republics', back in the 1960s.

At any rate, it is widely believed that their expansion was funded with resources obtained from the thriving drug economy. Based on interviews in Caqueta, in the south of the country, Ferro (2000) documented how, back in the early 1980s, the FARC were initially reluctant to allow peasants to grow coca but eventually accepted it and learnt to regulate, police and tax the coca paste market, setting prices and fees, preventing abuses and theft, and forcing growers to keep some staple crops, necessary to feed their troops. Later, they became a part of the drug trade chain, apparently in an effort to prevent the paste to be sold to paramilitary traders. However, as Thoumi noted, while 'guerrilla organisations unquestionably depend on the illicit drug trade financially […] there is no evidence that they have developed significant international marketing networks. In that sense, therefore, there is no guerrilla "cartel"' (2003: 107).

Less uncertain is the importance of kidnappings and extortion as sources of funding for the FARC. Indeed, the pressure put on the local elites to satisfy the voracious demands of the insurgency, led many cattle ranchers and landowners in the Middle Magdalena Valley to sell their lands and leave the region, while others looked for ways to resist and eventually became the social base of paramilitary, counterinsurgent movements. Although paramilitaries and the Army managed to

expel the insurgency from the towns and rural areas in the southern part of the Middle Magdalena Middle Magdalena Valley, the FARC managed to establish several new fronts in the valleys of the Carare and Cimitarra rivers, in Santander and south Bolivar, respectively, as well as in Puerto Wilches, home to large oil palm plantations. Seven fronts operated in the region and adjacent areas by the late 1980s (Medina 1990, Ortiz 2001, PPDHDIH 2002).

Despite the consistent expansion of paramilitary groups across the country, by the mid-1990s the FARC had reached their 'best military moment ever' (Rangel 1999: 48) and were able to launch major attacks on several government's outposts, killing and capturing large numbers of soldiers.[51] Despite their involvement in the drug business, the FARC remained committed to their political and military goals, challenging the state and expanding the areas under their control. Moreover, research carried out in the early 2000s revealed how, despite its growth, the organisation maintained a hierarchical structure, with well-defined deciding bodies and chains of command, a strictly-enforced code of conduct for combatants, and centralised budget and financial arrangements, aimed to ensure even levels of funding to all fronts and prevent excesses by those better able to raise funds (Ferro and Uribe 2002a).[52]

Furthermore, they managed to involve civilians in operational roles through the creation of a two-tier system of militias: members of the 'Bolivarian' militias joined the troops on a part-time basis (up to six months per year) and were given a uniform and a gun; members of the 'popular' militias wore plain clothes and developed tasks of surveillance and control. In general, they enjoyed a less strict regime and need not to give up their family life, as proper guerrillas did (Ferro and Uribe 2002a: 55-6). The very existence of militias made evident FARC's disregard for the distinction between civilians and combatants; indeed, consistent with this principle they did not hesitate to target civilian collaborators and were especially keen on those who provided information to the enemy. As commander Ivan Rios noted during an interview: 'being unarmed does not mean you are not combatant' (Ferro and Uribe

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[51] Some significant attacks took place at Las Delicias, on 30 August 1996; Patascoy, on 21 December 1997; and El Billar, 3 March 1998—most of them in the south of the country.
[52] Since these findings are almost exclusively based on interviews with FARC's top military cadres, they should be taken with a pinch of salt.

2002a: 134).[53]

They also managed to gain influence over local governments in areas where the central state's authority was limited. The La Uribe agreement, signed after the national government first approached the FARC looking for a negotiated settlement, in the mid-1980s, led to the creation of a political party, the Patriotic Union (UP), which was widely seen as FARC's political wing. After modest electoral successes in local and parliamentary elections, members of the UP were systematically targeted and eliminated by paramilitaries and members of the army all over the country. By the mid-1990s the UP had been wiped out of the national and local political arenas, so the FARC developed new mechanisms to influence and control local governments, including sabotage and manipulation of local elections as well as threats and coercive measures against candidates and elected officials, which they justified as attempts to curb the corrupt practices associated with patron-client politics (2002a: 140-1).

The historical accounts of the FARC's expansion and development in the 1990s in the Middle Magdalena Valley are less detailed than those of the ELN; in fact, their military strength in the Middle Magdalena Valley has always been modest compared to fronts based in other regions, especially in the south of the country, and to other insurgent organisations based in the same region, especially the ELN. Of course, they have been involved in kidnappings and extortion across the region as well as in the drug economy, but their role in the 1990s seemed to have been largely defensive and aimed to maintain a strong social and political base in areas such as the Cimitarra River Valley. This is not surprising given the strength of paramilitary groups in the region, which have forced the group to revert the scale and nature of their activities to the self-defensive character it had during its early years.

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[53] Pizarro estimates, rather speculatively, that for every FARC combatant there are four civilians providing some sort of support to the organisation, from bookkeeping to transport and health care (2006: 189-90).

3.2.2 Paramilitaries

As noted above, by the early 1980s, guerrilla organisations had become a matter of concern for the government and some regional elites. Indeed, in the Middle Magdalena Valley, already in the late 1970s, some peasants and landowners had expressed inconformity with the demands and aggressive attitude of the recently created FARC's ninth front. The discontent was such that even members of the Communist Party (e.g. Pablo Guarin), became key promoters of counterinsurgent, self-defence groups. The government also redoubled its efforts to tackle the insurgency by installing new bases in towns such as Puerto Berrio, Puerto Boyaca, Cimitarra, Puerto Parra and San Vicente and by appointing military mayors. Crucially, military officers encouraged the local elites to create self-defence groups, the most notorious of which was based in Puerto Boyaca, the self-branded 'anti-subversive capital of Colombia'. The Middle Magdalena Valley Self-Defences, as the group was called, carried out their operations initially in Puerto Boyaca and then extended their actions to other towns in the southern part of the Middle Magdalena Valley, including Cimitarra, Yacopi, Puerto Berrio, Puerto Nare, Puerto Salgar and La Dorada (Medina 1990). They were backed by ACDEGAM, the Peasant Association of Farmers and Cattle Ranchers of the Middle Magdalena Valley, which turned into a political movement and gained seats in the Boyaca's Departmental Assembly and in the House of Representatives. The first elected mayor of Puerto Boyaca was also a member of the Association, which also funded the construction of several schools and health centres (Medina 1990; Aranguren 2001).

By 1982, the crimes committed by groups like these, and others recently created in other regions, such as the *MAS*, 'Death to Kidnappers', prompted an inquiry by the Colombian *Procurador General*.[54] In his final report, revealed in 1983, he accused 59 army officials of promoting 'paramilitary' groups in several departments and, in particular, of using civilians as spies, informers and assassins to fight the insurgency (Jimenez 1986: 117). Some of these organisations received funding from drug mafia

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[54] The *procurador* is an independent attorney specialised in cases of misconduct by public servants. It is worth noting that paramilitary groups had been employed as part of a counterinsurgent 'civic-military' programme put in place by the government against Liberal and Communist guerrillas in the 1960s and, as Palacios bluntly put it, 'one of their advantages was that they could carry out dirty operations without the involvement of government forces' (1995: 264).

bosses and, in particular from Gonzalo Rodriguez, whose failed partnership with FARC prompted an armed confrontation between the two organisations. Both Rodriguez and Pablo Escobar, the Medellín 'cartel' boss, had bought lands in the region and used it as a hub from where drug shipments were dispatched overseas in small planes. The participation of drug mafias allowed the paramilitaries to buy weapons and hire an Israeli military advisor who trained their militiamen, some of whom would later become paramilitary leaders in other regions, such as Carlos Castaño and Luis Cifuentes 'the *Águila'*. The MAS and the Middle Magdalena Self-Defences played an important role in eliminating political opposition in these towns: the most notable case was that of the *Union Patriotica* ('Patriotic Union' or UP), a leftist political party emerged in 1985 and associated with the FARC, which was virtually wiped after achieving modest electoral successes in local and Congress elections (Medina 1990; Gutierrez and Baron 2005).

However, the Middle Magdalena Valley Self-Defences were increasingly dominated by drug bosses, in particular by Rodriguez, who ordered the murder of one of their founders and most charismatic figures, Pablo Guarin, in 1987. When the government's 'war on drugs' reached a peak, their most important leaders were murdered (Henry Perez) or jailed (Luis Rubio), leading to their demobilisation. However, they were later reorganised under the leadership of Victor Triana (aka 'Botalon') and Ramon Isaza. By that time, in the early 1990s, the southern area of the valley, from Puerto Boyaca to Cimitarra and Puerto Berrio, was relatively clear of guerrillas. However, the San Vicente group remained active during the first half of the 1990s, and a new group emerged in the northern area of the valley—the Self-Defences of Santander and Cesar ('AUSAC'). Other paramilitary organisations involved in the killing of civilians were '*Muerte a Revolucionarios del Nordeste* (*MRN*)', '*Los Masetos'*, '*Muerte a Revolucionarios del Cesar'* and the '*Colonel Rogelio Correa'* squad, as well as others with colourful names such as *Toxicol 90*, *Los Magnificos*, *La Marca del Zorro*, *Mano Negra*.[55] With a few exceptions, these groups were short-lived or were involved in just one operation, including some of

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[55] The names of these commandos may give some hints about their nature: *Toxicol 90*, for instance, resembles the typical name of an insecticide or fungicide. *La Marca del Zorro* refers to the inscription left by El Zorro after his incursions. *Los Magnificos* is the Spanish name of '*The A-Team'*, the American TV series. Anecdotally, the Navy Colonel who masterminded the killings of 1992 was code-named Hannibal Smith, exactly as the '*A-Team'* leader. *Mano Negra* means black hand.

the bloodiest massacres. For instance, the Segovia massacre, in November 1988 was carried out by the first of the groups mentioned above. The MRN killed 43 civilians, apparently in reprisal for the electoral success of the Left in the recent local elections; several police and army officers were investigated for their involvement in this event (Amnesty International 1996). Likewise, the '*Colonel Rogelio Correa*' squad was involved in a single event in July 1988, when fourteen peasants were killed in the rural area of San Vicente.

Other groups were, apparently, more stable. '*Los Masetos*', for instance, seemed to have been involved in several operations from 1989 to 1995, killing nearly 40 civilians, including twelve members of an official commission in charge of investigating a series of crimes committed by the Army and paramilitary groups, killed in January 1989 in La Rochela, in the rural area of Cimitarra (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2007). A group operating under the same name was involved in the killing of eight peasants in January 1995; according to a Police report, they were organised by the Prada family, from San Martin (in the department of Cesar) and funded through protection fees paid by small ranchers (cited by Human Rights Watch 1996: Appendix B).[56]

By the mid-1990s, a new opportunity window for the expansion of paramilitary activity was provided by the Gaviria and Samper administrations. They authorised the creation of 'security and surveillance co-operatives', known as *Convivir*, allowing 'communities' to hire the services of security personnel. However, the regulations regarding the kind of weapons to be used by *Convivir* were not clear and the ability of the central government to supervise their operation, especially in rural, isolated areas was limited—after all, that was the rationale for their creation. Although the Constitutional Court overturned the government's decision in 1997, more than 400 co-operatives were created throughout the country, most of them in Santander, Cundinamarca, Antioquia and Boyaca (Rueda 1997; Romero 2003: 104). By then, paramilitary groups had mushroomed in several regions across the country, going from less than 850 men in 1992 to nearly 4,000 in 1997 (Ministerio de

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[56] However, using the names of these organisations to make inferences regarding their existence and identities may be misleading. The term '*masetos*', in particular, was often used to refer to paramilitaries, even when they did not belong to the MAS movement.

Defensa 2000: 10). As Hernan Gomez, a close friend of the paramilitary leader Carlos Castaño summed it up, there were several 'mini-armies' or 'fiefdoms with armed powers':

> The Castaños in Cordoba and Uraba, the Ramon Isaza's self-defences and the ones in Puerto Boyaca, controlled by Botalon. The forces of San Martin's rice growers in the [Eastern] Plains, the Santander Self-defences supported by cattle-ranchers and merchants, the oil palm growers, the vigilantes of some sugar refineries in Valle del Cauca, the Aguila's self-defences in Cundinamarca, the Guajira group, the cattle-ranchers' group in Yopal, the 'traquetos' in Putumayo and Caqueta, the coca dealers' bodyguards in Arauca and the FARC's and ELN's deserters. All of them outlaws and anti-subversive (Aranguren 2001: 243).

The fragmented but steady expansion of paramilitary groups across the country also continued in the Middle Magdalena Valley. In February 1996, '*Los paracos*', a forty-strong group based in Bellacruz, a 12,000-hectares *hacienda* that spread across the rural area of three *municipios*, evicted approximately 250 rural families that had settled in a legally disputed zone of the *hacienda* (Amnesty International 1997). In April, the '*Northeast Self-defences*', apparently based in Puerto Berrio, killed fifteen civilians in Segovia, Antioquia, on April 1996; the victims lived in a poor neighbourhood with strong presence of the ELN (Amnesty International 1996). Later, in 1997, they killed two people in Segovia and threatened new actions against members of labour unions and civic leaders (*El Colombiano* 2 April 1997). Smaller organisations emerged in the region carrying out sporadic actions: in April 1996, for instance, a group known as *Dignidad por Antioquia* ('Dignity for Antioquia') killed 15 civilians in Segovia, Antioquia, and warned of new actions against guerrillas' sympathisers (*El Tiempo* 24 April 1996). In addition, paramilitary groups from neighbouring departments, such as Cordoba and Sucre, sporadically raided towns in south Bolivar (Duque 1996: 46-47).

As evident from the above, until the mid-1990s the paramilitary structure had grown in a fragmented and clandestine way, but that would change, at least for a few years, thanks to the leadership of Carlos Castaño, commander of the Cordoba and Uraba self-defences. After two years of negotiations with fellow paramilitary bosses across the country, he managed to create a national confederation in April 1997, known as the United Self-defences of Colombia, AUC. The political and military strategies developed by the new organisation had an important impact across the country and in the Middle Magdalena Valley, reshaping the relation between paramilitary

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organisations, politicians and the media, refashioning their public image and preparing the ground for operations, alliances and mergers that went beyond local and regional confines.

Backed by the AUC, Castaño launched a successful public relations campaign aimed to revamp the image of paramilitary organisations, presenting them as grassroots, anti-insurgent, 'self-defence', 'armed civil guards' emerged in response to the inability or unwillingness of the Colombian government to provide protection to the middle class against guerrillas—after all, he argued, the government only cared for the interests of the 'establishment'. He became a public figure and gave interviews in magazines and public TV, underscoring the political nature of paramilitary groups and their role in the provision of security (Aranguren 2001: 245; *Semana* No. 934, 27 March 2000: 24-26).[57] In his discourse, he tried to legitimise the use of violence against civilians, arguing that they were virtually undistinguishable from guerrillas and that they provided essential support for their operation. Recalling the first years of his struggle against the insurgency, just after the killing of his father by FARC guerrillas, he commented:

> We found one of the best mechanisms to fight guerrillas: maybe we could not attack them in their camps, but we could neutralise the people who bring them food, drugs, messages, alcohol, prostitutes and so on. By doing so, we managed to isolated them and this was a very effective strategy. It's incredible. Nobody taught us that. This was back in '82 but we are still applying the same strategy […] with the same excellent results. (Castro 1996:155).

Indeed, although it has been reported that paramilitaries directly clashed with insurgents in the Middle Magdalena Valley using 'mortars, rockets, armed helicopters, and other heavy weapons' (Spencer 2001: 12), the evidence shows that their operations targeted mostly civilians (see Ch. 4), just as the quote above suggests.

But Castaño's mission was not easy, as regional commanders often behaved in ways that were not exactly consistent with the alleged principles and goals of the

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[57] The claim to be treated as providers of security rather than criminals, had been expressed before by regional groups such as the Magdalena Medio Self-defences, which The creation of the AUC did not prevent quarrels and vendettas among paramilitary groups; in fact, it caused tensions between Castaño and regional bosses who did not behave as 'politically correctly' as his vision and aspirations demanded, e.g., the murder of a judicial commission, two DEA agents and two Police detectives (Garzon 2005: 85-86).

paramilitary confederation. For instance, in 1998 he had to ask Ramon Isaza, by then leader of the Middle Magdalena Valley Self-Defences, to stop the embargo he had imposed on the distribution of Coca-Cola products in the region. According to press reports, Isaza was trying to put pressure on the local distributor of Coca-Cola, who owed some money to local businesses, acting in effect as a typical mafia boss. To solve the matter, Panamco (Coca-Cola's subsidiary in Colombia) asked a humanitarian organisation to convene a meeting with both paramilitary bosses, in which Castaño admonished Isaza and asked him not to target multinational companies, as in his view that was something only guerrillas did, and directed him to focus in fighting guerrillas (*Cambio* 8 February 1999). Castaño had other differences with Isaza, over extortions; with Cifuentes, over the existence of facilities for the production of cocaine in Cundinamarca, and with Triana, over the killing of a team of police detectives who were investigating the theft of gasoline in Puerto Boyaca (PPDHDIH 2002).

Another problematic aspect in Castaño's project was the relation between paramilitary organisations and the drug business. It is well known that paramilitary bosses such as the *Aguila* had provided protection to Gonzalo Rodriguez's cocaine laboratories in the southern part of the Middle Magdalena Valley (*Cambio* 26 July 1999). Diego Murillo and Castaño himself, had actively assisted the Police in the hunt and killing of the mafia boss Pablo Escobar, a victory for the Colombian government but also for them and for other criminal organisations who took over Escobar's markets, networks and routes (Aranguren 2001: 149-187; *Cambio* 8 November 1999).

However, Castaño tried to draw a line between himself, a 'counterinsurgent, anti-communist leader', and the drug mafia bosses from whom, he said, he reluctantly obtained funding (Aranguren 2001: 249-254). The funds provided by cattle-ranchers, farmers and businessmen were not enough to support the successful operation of the paramilitary groups; thus, in order to operate and expand, they 'had no other choice' than accepting funds from the drugs business, either by taxing growers or by accepting funds from mafia bosses. Indeed, he even boasted about their ability to take control over coca areas previously held by the insurgency: 'Today we control and collect taxes over 15,000 hectares of coca in Putumayo, taken from FARC

through combat. We also rule in south Bolivar [in the Middle Magdalena Valley], where the ELN did it before. Now we control nearly 20,000 hectares sown by the subversion' (Castaño quoted by Aranguren 2001: 253).

On the military side, Castaño's strategy involved attacks against insurgent strongholds in areas well beyond the original territorial turf of his own regional group, based in Cordoba. For instance, in July 1997 he sent a 120-strong squad to the town of Mapiripan, Meta, where they tortured and killed nearly fifty people (Inter-American Court of Human Rights 2005). Other attacks took place in sierra San Lucas and Barrancabermeja, in the Middle Magdalena Valley; a detailed account is offered in Ch. 5 and 6. For the moment, it suffices to note that although the AUC initially co-operated with the Self-defences of Cesar and Santander, AUSAC, they took control over this organisation in 1999 and eventually created a new paramilitary organisation known as 'Bolivar Central Bloc', or 'BCB', led by Julian Bolivar, Carlos Jimenez and Ivan Duque.

While little is known about Bolivar, the profiles of the other two bosses are telling about the nature of the BCB. After amassing a fortune as a drug boss in the area of Cartago, in the *Valle* department, Jimenez was contacted by Vicente Castaño, Carlos Castaño's brother, who beckoned him to join the AUC and to lead his own organisation, back in 1997 (*Semana* 9 June 2007). Although the details of this partnership are not known, it is likely that the Castaños had seen in him an option to consolidate under a single command the operations in the Middle Magdalena Valley (Garzon 2005: 87). In any case, it is clear that Jimenez did not intend to leave the drug-trafficking business; indeed, he appointed Ivan Duque as his political strategist and spokesman. In contrast with Castaño, Duque advocated the involvement of paramilitaries in the drug business, not only in terms of funding but also because he (said he) believed controlling coca crops areas was an important negotiating card in a future negotiation with the Colombian government and the American administration, as they could confidently offer to eradicate the crops, thus reducing the supply of cocaine to the United States (Aranguren 2001: 247-248).

When negotiations with the Uribe administration started in 2002, with a view to a paramilitary demobilisation, tensions within the paramilitary confederate structure

escalated. Castaño, and those who urged to take distance from drug trafficking were sidelined or simply eliminated. In July 2002, Castaño resigned to the position of commander of the AUC. The next year, the BCB smashed the 'Bloque Metro', whose leader enjoyed the sympathy of Castaño and wanted to purge the AUC of drug traffickers. Castaño himself was killed in April 2004 and, with his death, paramilitary leaders like Adolfo Paz and Jimenez, closely related with the drug business, took the lead of the confederation (Garzon 2005: 87-92). While the new paramilitary bosses were not interested in participating themselves in politics, as Carlos Castaño probably did, they certainly exerted a significant influence over the local and parliamentary elections held in 2002 and 2003. Thanks to this manoeuvring, the ad-hoc judicial procedure proposed by the government to deal with their crimes, was passed by Congress with little opposition. According to this procedure, paramilitaries pledged to demobilise their troops and fully disclose their crimes in exchange for short sentences of up to eight years (Alonso et al. 2007).

3.3   Armed conflict in the Middle Magdalena Valley, 1988-1995

This section provides a brief overview of the magnitude of armed conflict and violence in the years previous to the period on which the rest of the dissertation focuses. It is based on reports produced by the Catholic NGO *Comision Intercongregacional de Justicia y Paz*, which were tabulated and compiled at the Middle Magdalena Valley Peace and Development Programme.[58] This series covered a similar range of events to the *Noche y Niebla* reports but the coding was different. It is precisely for this reason that they were not included in the quantitative analysis presented in Ch. 4. The data presented in this section contains events from January 1988 to December 1995 in 44 *municipios* located in the Middle Magdalena Valley.

During the period, 660 clashes and military attacks occurred in the region—most of them were held in rural areas (78 per cent). In the large majority of cases, the warring parties involved were government forces and guerrillas (95 per cent) with

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[58] The data was tabulated by Viviana Garcia, an undergraduate student of politics at *Universidad Nacional*, during her internship at the PDPMM in Barrancabermeja, in 2005.

the remaining cases corresponding to unknown units or unclear events. The ELN took part in more than half of these events and the FARC in approximately thirty per cent; EPL insurgents were involved in less than five per cent. In the vast majority of cases, these organisations acted separately; only in four events were they involved together and, apparently, they clashed among them only in one occasion. Most events were concentrated in two areas: first, on the east side of the river, from San Vicente to Aguachica, and second, in northeast Antioquia, along the Cimitarra River, including San Pablo.[59]

The total death toll left by these events rose to 1,278, including 99 civilians. Two out three combatants killed in actions were insurgents. Approximately 47 per cent of the insurgent death toll consisted of members of the ELN, 30 per cent were members of the FARC, less than seven per cent were members of the EPL; in other cases their affiliation was unknown. Furthermore, 100 guerrillas were captured in similar percentages to those shown above.

Justicia y Paz reported the dead of 1,909 civilians in events connected to the armed conflict or, broadly speaking, with political motives. Approximately 35 per cent were perpetrated by paramilitary organisations, seven per cent by government forces and eight per cent by guerrillas; however, in half the cases the author is unknown. Altogether, paramilitary organisations killed 672 civilians. The number of civilians killed by insurgents rose to 149—forty per cent by members of the ELN. The majority of these deaths took place in rural areas of the Middle Magdalena Valley. It is worth noting that *Justicia y Paz* also reported 39 kidnappings during this period, of which insurgents perpetrated approximately a half; however, it is likely that these figures underestimate the actual scale of this phenomenon.

According to *Justicia y Paz*, government forces killed 119 civilians for political reasons, in most cases by Army units and, in particular, by members of the *Nueva Granada* and *Luciano Deluyer* battalions; nearly half of those killings occurred in Barrancabermeja and San Vicente, where these units were based. In addition to the cases were they have been directly involved, military units have often been linked to

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[59] *Municipios* such as Puerto Boyaca, La Dorada, Puerto Triunfo Nare, Puerto Berrio, in the south of the valley registered only a handful of events, probably reflecting the success of the counterinsurgent campaign of previous years.

paramilitary organisations or death squads operating in the region. For instance, in Barrancabermeja, in 1992, gunmen hired undercover by the Navy also carried out a series of murders in the city, targeting ELN militiamen but also social activists and journalists (CREDHOS 1999; Human Rights Watch 1996: 30-41; *El Espectador* 20 April 1998). The Inter-American Court of Human Rights found that members of the Army supported the group that carried out the killings of *La Rochela* and obstructed the investigation that ensued (2007).

3.4 Discussion

Now that the setting and the main characters involved in producing armed conflict and violence in Middle Magdalena Valley have been introduced, it is possible to discuss in further detail how the theoretical questions and issues outlined in the first chapter translate into specific puzzles and problems in this region. For instance, the historical account offered in this chapter highlights the importance of various forms of collective action and organisation used by social groups to advance their interests (e.g. labour unions, *colono* leagues, grassroots organisations, squatter movement) and their connection with the emergence and consolidation of armed organisations. However, scholars have predicted (see Ch. 1), the risks and opportunities created by armed conflict may revert this trend leading civilians to privilege their individual interests and behave opportunistically, lying and cheating to protect their lives and livelihoods. Indeed, scholars such as Pecaut have argued that in Colombia, as armed conflict intensifies, civilian collaboration has been increasingly shaped by individual, rational calculation as social organisations disintegrate or succumb to manipulation by armed organisations (1999: 146, 150). The evidence presented in Ch. 6 challenges these views.

Likewise, this chapter raises the question of whether the claims of armed organisations to represent the interests of particular classes and social groups—the middle class in the case of paramilitaries, the peasant and the poor in the case of insurgents—were somehow reflected in their actual behaviour. Scholars have discredited this notion and argued that 'violence is not based on class divisions or other collective forms of social identity' (Pecaut 1999: 145). Thanks to the

availability of data on the social background of victims it is possible to examine these claims using empirical evidence; Ch. 7 examines the distribution of violence across social groups and classes and discusses its significance in terms of understanding the relations between civilians and armed organisations. This chapter also provided a more detailed picture of the involvement of armed organisations in criminal activities and the dilemmas it entailed, evident in internal rifts in the paramilitary confederation; it thus raised the question of the extent to which such involvement actually weakened their will and ability to pursue their stated political and military goals. Ch. 7 discusses this issue and compares the effect of criminal activities such as kidnapping and the production of illegal drugs on the relation between armed organisations and civilians.

As for the core research question of why did armed organisations use violence against civilians, top insurgent and paramilitary commanders openly admitted that their organisations used violence against those who collaborated with the enemy and questioned the notion of civilian immunity, highlighting the crucial role of the population in providing operational support to armed organisations. Indeed, this view was consistent with the systematic involvement of civilians in militias supervised by the insurgency. While the testimonies of commanders Castaño and Rios unequivocally back the hypothesis that violence was used in support of the political and military goals of armed organisations, they should not necessarily be taken at face value. Other possibilities must be explored and, given the availability of various resources, assets and rents in the region, it is worth asking whether violence against civilians might have been used, in fact, to increase control over the markets, networks and organisations, legal or illegal, that managed and traded in such resources.

For instance, as will be shown later, there is evidence that paramilitaries used violence against coca growers who tried to sell coca paste to unauthorised buyers because they offered a better price. And, considering the history of conflicts over access to land and asset stripping by large landowners in the region, it is not unreasonable to ask whether violence, in particular massive forced displacement, was not aimed to depopulate rural areas and expand cattle ranches and oil palm plantations. Hence, violence may have had less to do with collaboration or allegiance

and more with extracting an extra rent from the growers or encroach peasants' lands. Lacking detailed records about the specific causes of each individual crime (e.g. judicial records), the dissertation uses quantitative analysis to determine whether the distribution of violence against civilians across *municipios* is correlated with the distribution of several independent (explanatory) variables, including the magnitude of resources such as gold, coca, local budgets and of armed conflict itself. Ch. 4 presents this analysis and its results.

4. SCALE, TRENDS AND AIMS OF VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE MAGDALENA VALLEY, 1996-2004

Between 1999 and 2001, violence in the Middle Magdalena Valley reached unprecedented levels: the homicide rate grew twofold and only returned to the 'normal' levels (i.e. around 40 deaths per 100,000 pop) after 2002. On average, 166 civilians were kidnapped every year and the number of people forcefully displaced in 2000 was eleven times higher than the previous year. By 2004, more than 110,000 people had fled their homes. In principle, these tragic outcomes should not be surprising. After all, armed conflict, that is, clashes and attacks between armed organisations, also grew in intensity: compared to 1999, the number of combatants killed in action in 2000 and 2001 rose by approximately fifty per cent. Indeed, violence against civilians is often seen as an inevitable consequence of armed conflict. However, as discussed in Ch. 1, contemporary conflicts are not always what they seem to be and, on closer inspection, armed organisations often turn out to be less interested in fighting each other than in the elimination, expulsion or exploitation of civilians. In the Middle Magdalena Valley, as in other Colombian regions during the 1990s, armed organisations seemed increasingly keen on capturing a variety of rents, assets and resources owned, controlled or produced by civilians (e.g. land, fiscal transfers, coca paste). This raises the question of whether capturing these resources, rather than the actual struggle for territorial control, may have been a crucial determinant factor of the scale and forms of violence employed against civilians. Were individuals and communities targeted to weaken the military operational abilities of the enemy or simply to grab their assets or extort them?

This chapter argues that despite the salience of illegal economies and the relative abundance of natural resources such as oil and gold, violence against civilians in the

region was driven by political and military goals and, specifically, by the effort made by the state and armed organisations to extend and strengthen territorial and political control over the region. However, it acknowledges that some forms of violence, in particular ransom kidnappings, were aimed precisely at extracting rents from civilians. It is based on quantitative data obtained from official and unofficial sources, including the VNN dataset described in Ch. 2.

The first part of the chapter highlights a simple but significant point: there was, indeed, armed conflict in the region—a military contest for territorial control manifested in armed clashes or unilateral attacks armed organisations. This point weakens the case for a pseudo-war interpretation of the conflict. This part also argues that despite the presence of several insurgent groups and militias, the conflict was essentially a two-sided contest between insurgents, on the one hand, and government and paramilitary troops, on the other. Although counterinsurgent troops suffered more casualties than guerrillas, they managed to weaken the insurgency, pushing it back to rural areas and reducing their ability to attack towns and kidnap civilians.

The second part examines three forms of violence (killings, kidnappings and forced displacement) and shows that only a marginal proportion was a side effect of warfare, i.e. 'collateral damage'—indeed, most attacks were deliberate. Crucially, it shows that the scale of violence was not disproportionately higher than armed conflict itself, as measured by the civilians' and combatants' death tolls, and in doing so it weakens the case for a pseudo-war interpretation. However, the disaggregated analysis of violence presents a heterogeneous picture that poses further questions about the true purpose of violence: while the average ratio of civilian to combatant deaths in the region was below 3 to 1, in some towns such as Barrancabermeja it was well above 10 to 1, casting doubts about whether armed conflict could actually explain such disproportionate levels of violence against civilians. Or if, perhaps, the regional average ratio may be flattening out local differences and, in particular, hiding localised processes comparable to those seen in pseudo-wars.

The third part examines in further detail the role played by the state and armed

organisations in producing violence against civilians. It shows that their involvement in armed conflict and in violence against civilians do not necessarily go hand in hand: government forces were very effective in fighting insurgents but the scale of their attacks against civilians was marginal compared to other armed organisations; paramilitaries, by contrasts, had a marginal role in fighting insurgents and did poorly on the battlefield but were very effective in killing civilians. Indeed, their ratio of civilians to insurgents killed is consistent with a 'new war' scenario opening the possibility, again, that aggregate data and average ratios may be hiding a more complex story—one in which some organisations used 'the fog of war' as a façade for asset grabbing, plundering and exploitation.

To tackle these questions, the fourth part of the chapter examines the spatial (municipal) distribution of violence, armed conflict and some of the key economic activities in the region. It argues that the distribution of violence fits better into the 'classical' irregular warfare narrative, in which violence against civilians is used to increase territorial control rather than to expropriate assets or extract rents from civilians. However, it acknowledges that economic resources may have played a role in the production of violence in particular areas and cases.

4.1   Pushing back the insurgency: trends and outcomes of armed conflict from 1996 to 2004

According to data from the VNN dataset, from 1996 to 2004 the Middle Magdalena Valley experienced an intensification of armed conflict; in all, there were nearly 500 hostile events during the period: approximately four in five entailed actual fire exchange between combatants while the rest were uncontested attacks (e.g. hit-and-run attacks and aerial bombardment). Although the number of hostilities remained stationary at around sixty events per year, the combatants' death toll increased almost every year, reaching its peak between 2000 and 2002, with approximately 144 deaths per year (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Hostilities and combatant deaths in the Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004
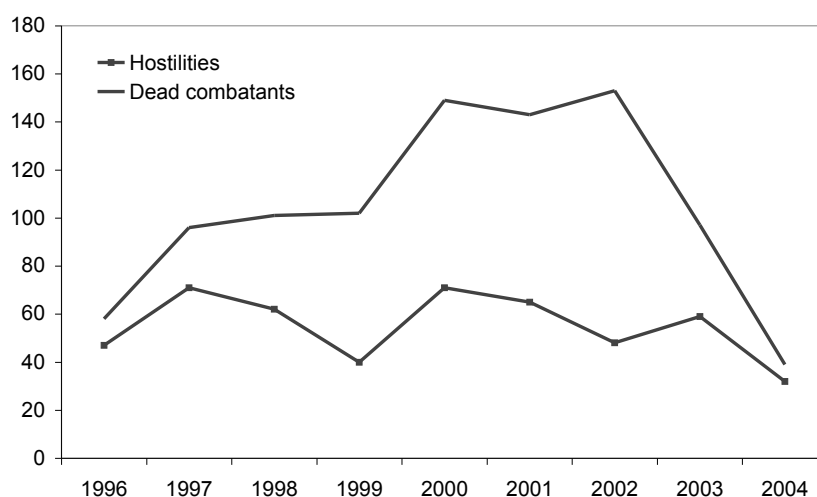
As seen in the previous chapter, the conflict involved several parties: two insurgencies, several paramilitary groups and the government forces. However, this was not an all-against-all confrontation: figures on hostilities and casualties show that the confrontation was effectively two-sided, with guerrillas on one side, clashing with paramilitaries in 68 events and with government forces in 400 events. Quarrels within the insurgent camp were rare and paramilitaries and government forces only clashed in a handful of occasions (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1 Dead combatants according to groups involved in hostilities, 1996-2004

Warring forces	Government forces	Guerrillas	Paramilitaries	Total
Government forces	7	440	0	447
Guerrillas	115	0	244	359
Paramilitaries	1	90	0	91
Unknown group	0	0	0	0
Others/mixed	1	6	0	7
Total	124	536	244	904

Overall, the figures show that this was a period of downturn for rebels, losing 536 combatants. The ELN lost 209 guerrillas, followed by the FARC, with 133 members killed; other 94 guerrillas belonging to these two groups were killed during joint operations carried out by both groups. The rest were members of minor groups such

as the ERP and the EPL or did not have their adscription established or reported. Furthermore, the army captured 47 guerrillas over the entire period—approximately half of them were members of FARC. Government forces were the most effective force in the fight against guerrillas, killing 440 of them, and reporting relatively low losses, especially after 2000.[60] By contrast, paramilitaries played a secondary role but suffered important losses in the course of the hostilities, particularly after 2000, when ELN and FARC insurgents joined efforts and managed to attack paramilitary camps in south Bolivar (more on this in Ch. 7) (see Table 4.1 and Figure 4.2).[61]

Figure 4.2 Dead combatants by group, 1996-2004
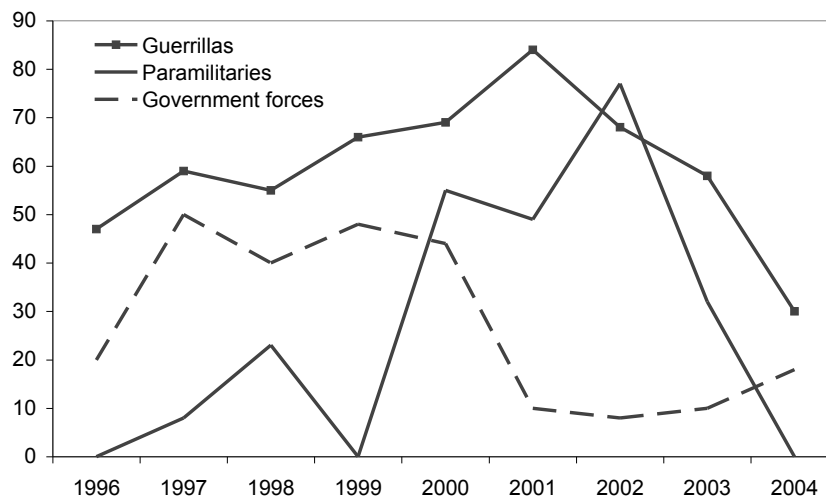
Source: VNN.
Note: Figures for 1996 exclude first half of the year.

A simple way to gauge the impact of the counterinsurgent campaign is by looking at the total number of events in which insurgents were involved, as recorded in the VNN dataset. This is a very rough measure of their ability to carry out all sorts of operations, including hostilities but also other typical guerrilla operations such as road blockades, kidnappings and attacks on oil pipelines, to name a few. Overall, the number of events involving guerrillas dropped from a quarterly average of 33.6 from

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[60] The drop in military casualties may be down to two factors: increased tactical effectiveness of government forces, thanks to investments and training funded by the American-funded *Plan Colombia*, and a weakening in the operational capabilities of the insurgency, e.g. to ambush military convoys and attack isolated police stations or military posts, due to loss of firepower, intelligence and civilian support.
[61] In particular, it is possible that the number of guerrillas and paramilitaries dead is higher, as these groups usually hide their losses. The government, by contrast, usually publicises the number of soldiers dead and injured.

1996 to 1999, to 15.9 from 2002 to 2004. Similarly, guerrilla activity dropped in 32, out of 43 *municipios*, and completely disappeared in 13 *municipios*. Table 4.2 shows data for specific types of events.

Table 4.2. Insurgent activity: quarterly averages of events by period

Events	1996-1999	2000-2001	2002-2004
Checkpoints and road blockades	4.00	7.00	0.92
Raids	0.50	0.25	0.08
Sabotage	1.36	3.25	0.58
Destruction of civilian property	5.50	3.75	0.67
Plunder	0.86	2.88	0.08
Kidnappings (victims)	33.8	40.6	13.9
Hostilities	15.21	16.13	10.75
Events other than hostilities	18.29	19.75	5.17
In towns ('*cabecera municipal*')	9.36	8.00	0.58
In rural areas	16.79	25.25	14.75
All insurgent events	33.57	35.88	15.92

Notes: Based on VNN, except for kidnappings, which are based on the *Fondelibertad* database. The location of some events could not be traced to a specific or unambiguous location within a *municipio*; for this reason towns' and rural events do not add up to the total.

This retreat was far more visible in the towns across the region, where quarterly events fell from 9.36 in the first years of the period to 0.58 during the last. However, in rural areas the story was slightly different, as their operational ability only fell marginally. Even though the army and the paramilitaries did not manage to eliminate the insurgents, they forced them to retreat from the towns, allowing local governments and businesses to operate normally and, most importantly, gaining control over the transit of people and goods across the region, including to and from areas where guerrillas still operated by the end of the period. This was particularly important in south Bolivar, where paramilitaries managed to cordon sierra San Lucas; this enabled them to cut off the insurgents' supply lines, although at a great cost for civilians as will be shown later (in Ch. 6).

As often happens in irregular warfare, hostilities were geographically concentrated. Most took place in four contiguous *municipios*: San Pablo, Yondo, Remedios and Barrancabermeja; together, they accounted for 39 per cent of the events. Similarly, half the combatants' deaths were registered in *municipios* in northeast Antioquia and south Bolivar: San Pablo (16 per cent), Simiti (10 per cent), Yondo (9 per cent), Santa Rosa (7.7 per cent) and Montecristo (6.7 per cent). While paramilitaries clashed with guerrillas mostly in south Bolivar, government forces spread their

action over several areas including Barrancabermeja, Aguachica, northeast Antioquia, south Bolivar and other *municipios* in Santander. Four out of five combatants killed in action died in events in rural areas. While most hostilities took place in rural areas, Barrancabermeja was the town where more combatants were killed.

4.2   Main forms of violence and their scale

This part provides a disaggregated view of three forms of violence and coercion experienced by civilians in the region: killings, kidnappings and forced displacement. There are three considerations behind the choice of these variables.

First, compared to these three forms of violence, other forms reported by the sources are less unambiguous. For instance, raids on towns and villages usually involve attacks against several targets and cause a wide range of damages, including killings, abductions, theft, threats, and so on. Similarly, road blockades and checkpoints are carried out with different purposes and lead to variable outcomes in term of its impact on civilians (e.g. threats, kidnappings, destruction and theft of vehicles). Although massacres have been one of the most visible forms of violence against civilians, they show great variability in terms of the number of victims; furthermore, they do not account for the bulk of the civilian death toll, as most civilians were killed in targeted, individualised attacks. Threats and other forms of intimidation refer to potential rather than actual events and are likely to be unevenly reported. Moreover, since many of them are aimed towards groups or entire communities, an aggregate measure would entail some kind of weighting based on the number of potential victims, which in most cases is unknown. In the case of looting and other events leading to the destruction or theft of goods and assets, the main shortcoming is the lack of precision in the accounting of losses. By contrast, the three variables chosen to gauge the magnitude of violence are relatively unequivocal and well defined.

Second, together they provide a more balanced view of how armed organisations

employed violence against civilians. Indeed, for the sake of simplicity and elegance, it would have been better to choose only one, such as killings—the most definitive and less ambiguous form of violence, as Kalyvas put it (2006: 20)—and surely the one on which most quantitative analysts focus. But this choice would have biased the analysis both in terms of the perpetrators and the victims of violence. This is because, as will become evident later, the warring parties specialised in different forms of violence; insurgent violence, for instance, only can be fully grasped by taking into account their participation in kidnappings. Neglecting this form of violence would lead to underestimate their role in the production of violence.

Third, their political salience in the context of the Colombian conflict: kidnappings have provoked recurrent episodes of social mobilisation, backed by the government and the media and, arguably, have been a key factor in driving the Colombian electorate to the right, in favour of tough measures against the insurgency. Although forced displacement has prompted less social and political mobilisation, its sheer scale—by 2006, Colombia had the second largest displaced population in the world after Sudan (UNHCR 2006: 170)—has attracted international attention from humanitarian agencies and still poses a massive challenge to the Colombian state in terms of providing welfare and ensuring that the displaced can reclaim the assets they lose when fleeing their homes.

4.2.1   Civilian deaths

In parallel with the intensification of armed conflict, during the late 1990s and early 2000s, the Middle Magdalena Valley experienced a steep increase in the regional homicide rate, which rose from approximately 40 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants in 1996, to nearly 90 deaths in 2000 and 2001. According to official sources (*Policia Nacional*), nearly 6,000 people were killed in the region between 1996 and 2004. Although more than half of these deaths were apparently related to petty crime and private quarrels, the increase itself was caused by armed conflict: not only the rise in combatants killed in action, reported above, but also a vast increase in the number of civilians killed in events related, directly or indirectly, with the armed conflict (see Figure 4.3).

Figure 4.3. Homicide rate in the Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004
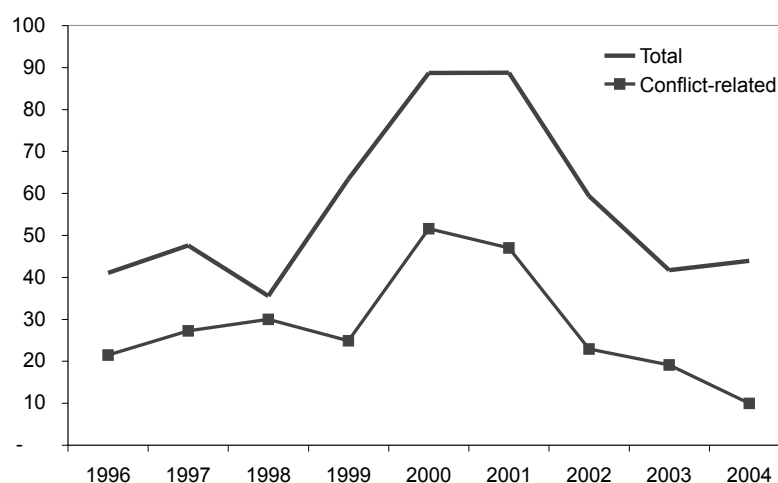
To be precise, the VNN dataset records 1,855 civilians killed in conflict-related events, that is, killed (or believed to be killed) by armed organisations or by the state in connection with the armed conflict.[62] This means that, on average, for every dead combatant 2.05 civilians were killed during the period; this figure was higher in 2000 and 2001, when nearly forty-eight per cent of the civilian deaths occurred and approximately three civilians died for each combatant (see Figure 4.4). While these ratios did not reach the threshold commonly associated with 'new wars', they certainly raise the question of why did armed conflict had such a disproportionate toll on civilians, compared to the combatants' casualties.

Only eighty-six civilians died in the course of hostilities or as a direct consequence of them—that is, approximately one civilian for every eleven combatants. For instance, at least eight civilians died in bombings in areas where guerrillas were suspected to be hiding. Ten were killed while being used as 'human shields' by combatants or in other circumstances that put their lives in risk, e.g., when sharing vehicles with combatants in disputed areas. Predictably, most cases occurred in

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[62] In particular, some acts of violence by government forces against civilians were not connected with the armed conflict and, in principle, could have occurred even in its absence, including cases of abuse of authority and 'social cleansing' (e.g. attacks against homeless or drug addicts).

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contested areas such as south Bolivar (more specifically in San Pablo, Santa Rosa and Simiti), where forty of them died, and Barrancabermeja, where 22 were killed. Moreover, six civilians were killed and 39 injured by landmines.

Figure 4.4 Civilians' and combatants' death tolls, 1996-2004
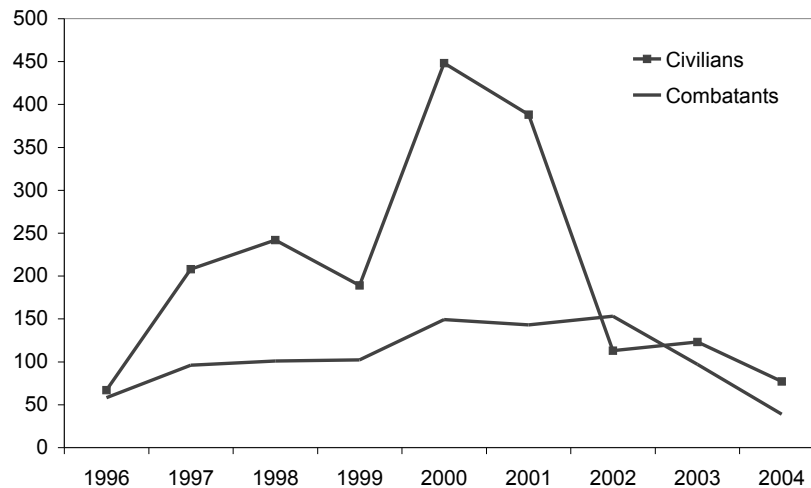
Source: VNN dataset.
Note: Figures for 1996 exclude first half of the year.

The remaining 1,763 civilians were murdered in 1,040 events different to hostilities. In other words, more than 95 per cent of the civilian deaths linked to armed conflict could not be attributed to 'collateral damage'—the bulk occurred in attacks *deliberately* aimed at civilians. In all, paramilitaries killed approximately 43 per cent of the victims and guerrillas accounted only for 12 per cent. Government forces also did their part, some times in partnership with paramilitaries, but their contribution was marginal. In a significant proportion of cases, the crimes were committed by unknown actors or armed organisations, for instance when a corpse was found but the perpetrators were unknown or when they deliberately hid their identities. Table 4.3 shows the number of combatants and civilians killed by each group involved in conflict. The last column shows the ratio of combatants to civilians by armed organisations: while government forces clearly focused on fighting guerrillas, paramilitaries and 'unknown groups' targeted mainly or exclusively civilians; guerrillas killed approximately three civilians for every five combatants. In *municipios* with the highest conflict-related homicide rates, the bulk of the deaths

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were perpetrated by paramilitaries.[63]

Table 4.3 Civilians and combatants killed by group, excluding hostilities, 1996-2004

Warring forces	Combatants	(%)	Civilians	(%)	Civilians / combatants
Government forces	447	49.5	28	1.6	0.06
Guerrillas	359	39.7	211	11.9	0.59
Paramilitaries	91	10.1	765	43.2	8.40
Unidentified group	0	0.0	720	40.7	∞
Others/mixed	7	0.8	45	2.5	7.29
Total	904	100.0	1,769	100.0	1.96

Source: VNN.
Notes: Figures in rows represent deaths inflicted *by* a group. Civilian deaths exclude those occurred during hostilities, i.e., 'collateral damage' deaths.

Although civilians deaths were reported all over the region, they were geographically concentrated in a handful of *municipios*: 38 per cent occurred in Barrancabermeja, the largest town in the region, mostly during 2000 and 2001; and four adjacent towns in northeast Antioquia and south Bolivar accounted together for nearly 24 per cent: Segovia, Remedios, Yondo and San Pablo. Indeed, these *municipios*, had the highest conflict-related homicide rates in the region during the period of study, ranging from 44 to 89 civilian deaths per year per 100,000 people.[64]

4.2.2 Kidnappings

This section is based on the official kidnapping database, kept by *Fondelibertad*, a government agency. It recorded 1,412 victims of kidnapping in the region from July 1996 to December 2004. Only a small proportion of the victims were captured by petty criminals and victims' relatives, 3.9 and 0.4 per cent, respectively; nearly twenty per cent of the victims were captured by unknown actors or organisations, but there is no indication as to whether at least some of them could have had a political motivation or were somehow connected to armed conflict.[65] The large majority, 1,075 (76.1 percent), were captured by guerrillas and paramilitaries: 965 and 110,

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[63] There were two exceptions, though: Segovia, where the Machuca blaze put guerrillas in the first place, and Barrancabermeja, where more than half of the victims were killed by unidentified groups.
[64] As follows: Yondo, 88.6; Remedios, 63.0; Maceo, 48.5; San Pablo, 47.7; and Segovia, 43.7. Barrancabermeja was sixth with 43.3 deaths per year per 100,000 people. Source: VNN.
[65] Unlike N&N, *Fondelibertad* does not make any assumptions regarding the political or criminal nature of these kidnappings.

respectively; nearly half of them occurred in four *municipios*: Aguachica (21.3 per cent), San Pablo (9.5 per cent), Barrancabermeja (9.2 per cent) and Pelaya (8.7 per cent).

Kidnappings in the Middle Magdalena Valley experienced an explosive growth in 1997 and kept occurring at a fairly quick pace until 2001: on average, from 1997 to 2001, one civilian was captured approximately every two days by an armed organisation. As the insurgency was pushed back into the mountains, this trend reversed and, by the end of the period, the number of conflict-related kidnappings was coming back to the levels seen at the beginning of the period. This was, undoubtedly, one of the most important accomplishments of the counterinsurgent campaign of these years (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5 Conflict-related kidnappings in the Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004
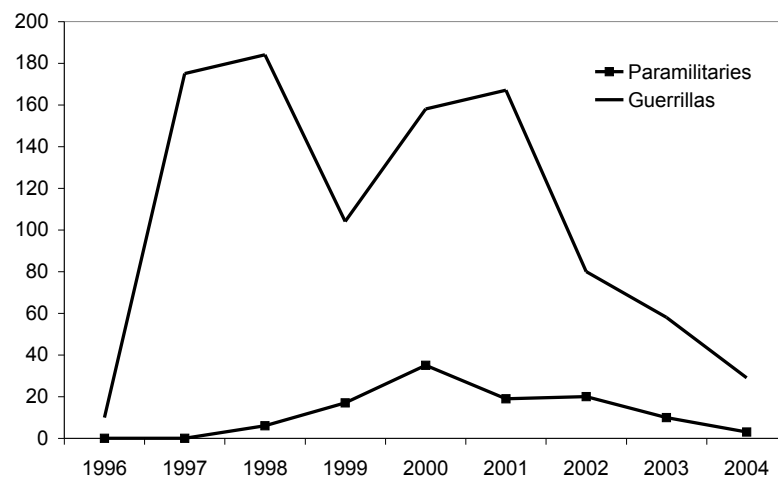
Source: Based on *Fondelibertad* database.

As noted in Ch. 2, one of the crucial advantages of the *Fondelibertad* database is that it records whether the motivation was economic or political based on first-hand information collected by the authorities about each individual case. Although the motives were unknown in more than a third of the cases, the figures show that nearly half of the victims were captured to demand a payment but this proportion was slightly higher in the case of insurgents. In most cases, the motives of paramilitary kidnappings were unknown (see Table 4.4). A more detailed discussion of the use of kidnappings by guerrillas and paramilitaries is presented later in this chapter.

Table 4.4 Civilians kidnapped by insurgents and paramilitaries in the Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004

Motive	Guerrillas	(%)	Paramilitaries	(%)	Total	(%)
Ransom	506	52.4	19	17.3	525	48.8
Political	156	16.2	10	9.1	166	15.4
Unknown	303	31.4	81	73.6	384	35.7
Total	965	100.0	110	100.0	1075	100.0

Source: Based on *Fondelibertad* dataset.

4.2.3 Forced displacement

According to official figures, 112,606 people fled their homes during this period and, in particular, between 2000 and 2001 (see Figure 4.6).[66] Overall, 26,880 migrated within the same *municipio*, usually from the rural area towards the town; likewise, 58,550 people migrated within the region. Of those who left the region, most went to cities such as Bucaramanga, Bogota and Cartagena. The impact on the population growth was evident: census data and projections show that from 1996 to 2005 the population remained almost stationary, growing merely by 0.13 per cent per year. Several *municipios* lost up to a third of their population and in disputed areas, such as south Bolivar, e.g. San Pablo and Morales, there was massive migration (relative to their population) from rural areas and villages to the towns.[67]

One of the most revealing aspects of the data shown above are the significant differences in the way armed organisations engaged in armed conflict and violence: government forces seemed to be particularly good at fighting insurgents, while the latter managed to inflict significant damage to paramilitaries; insurgents were also 'good' at kidnapping civilians, as were paramilitaries at killing them. The specialised patterns of aggression towards civilians revealed by the data call for a more detailed analysis in which the specific goals of *each* organisation are examined separately. This is precisely the purpose of the next part of the chapter.

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[66] However, it is likely that the first peak, in 2000, may actually include households displaced in previous years. These households had not been registered before either because the information system (i.e. forms, procedures) was not fully operational until 2001 or the assistance offered by virtue of being registered was available only from that year on.

[67] Figures based on author's calculations.

Figure 4.6 Internally displaced people per quarter, 1996-2004
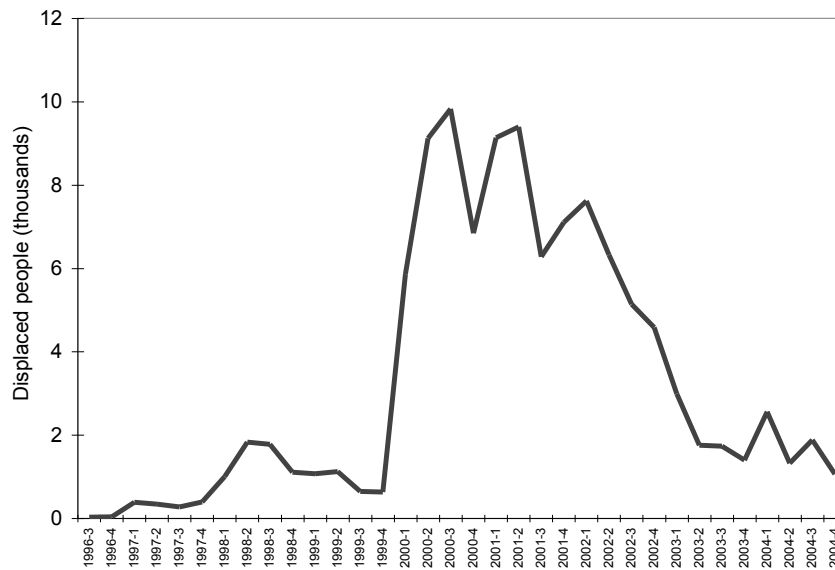
Source: Official registry of displaced people (SUR).
Note: This figure shows the number of persons who reported to have fled their homes at some point during the corresponding quarter because of imminent or actual violence.

4.3 Producers of violence against civilians

This section looks at how irregular armed organisations and the state produced and used different forms of violence against civilians. Although special attention is paid to killings and kidnappings, other forms of violence and coercion such as raids, checkpoints, looting and destruction of assets and infrastructure are also discussed. Forced displacement is not considered because the existing data (available to the public) does not report perpetrators.[68]

4.3.1 Insurgents

Although kidnappings and killings are the most notorious and best documented forms of violence used by insurgents against civilians, road blockades, raids and attacks against oil pipelines were among the most visible manifestations of the

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[68] Information on perpetrators of displacement (and many more details) has been gathered by the authorities as part of the official displacement registry but it is not available to the public.

insurgents' strength in the 1990s and were equally important in grasping their relation with civilians. Road blockades and flash checkpoints in main rural roads enabled guerrillas to kidnap civilians, steal vehicles, destroy buses and trucks, or simply to make their presence and capabilities evident to travellers and to the public in general, as these evens were widely reported by the media.

For instance, in September 1996, insurgents set fire to three trucks and three buses in separate events in Aguachica, Rionegro, Pelaya and Sabana de Torres (N&N 1: 76); according to a local newspaper, all buses belonged to the same company and, although the motive was not reported, it is likely that the attacks were aimed at exacting a protection fee (*El Tiempo* 16 September 1996). Other attacks seemed to be less well-targeted: for instance, during a typical blockade, occurred in July 1998, insurgents forced all vehicles to stop, painted the group's acronym on some of them, stole a pick-up and a 4-by-4, kidnapped three people and killed other two after they dismissed a signal to stop their car (*El Heraldo* 19 July 1998). Other blockades seemed to have merely a publicity purpose, such as the one occurred near the town of Cimitarra, where guerrillas blocked the traffic by parking two trucks in the middle of a highway. It took nine hours to the police to get to the place, and remove the vehicles, which had no explosives as the guerrillas had told everyone (*El Tiempo* 10 April 1997). These examples illustrate how guerrillas, by taking the initiative and by using civilians as a shield, can enjoy tactical advantages on the field. In all, the dataset records 120 insurgent road blockades or checkpoints and the destruction of 89 vehicles.

Raids were less frequent but still significant in political terms, as a challenge to the state. In Simiti, for instance, the ELN attacked the police station in several occasions, forcing the police to leave the town; in one of these raids, they also attacked and looted the state-owned agrarian bank and destroyed files in the district attorney's office (more on this case in Ch. 7). Finally, the dataset records fifteen insurgent attacks on oil pipelines and ten against electrical towers. These attacks were allegedly made by the insurgents to express their concerns regarding the government's energy policy—in particular the participation of foreign investors in the sector. However, there is evidence that they were actually aimed at extorting the

contractors that had to be hired to repair the damage (Peñate 1999: 93).[69] At any rate, these attacks were useful in terms of getting media coverage and displaying their disruptive power even in areas they did not control, as attacks against electrical towers on the national grid could lead to power cuts in several *municipios*.

Insurgent killings

Judging by the number of victims, the elimination of civilians played a marginal role in the insurgent strategy. Although guerrillas were present in most of the *municipios* of the region, their killings were concentrated in a few places—almost half of them occurred in Barrancabermeja and nearly a third died in a single, accidental event in the village of Machuca, near Segovia.[70] The ELN was the most violent insurgent group, accounting for nearly two thirds of the total number of civilians killed by insurgents.

While the Machuca blaze was exceptional, unintended violence against civilians was not. Insurgent attacks against police stations and military facilities located in densely inhabited areas often caused damage to civilian homes and shops and killed passers-by. In Barrancabermeja, for instance, the rudimentary rockets launched by insurgents against the *Nueva Granada* anti-aerial battalion facilities, often landed in homes located nearby. Similarly, peasants often stepped on landmines planted the in rural areas of south Bolivar as a last resource to stop the paramilitaries; the dataset records seven lethal victims of landmines—as many as the combatants killed by this device.

Insurgent kidnappings

If guerrillas had a marginal participation in the killing of civilians, they were by far the most important perpetrators of kidnappings in the region, capturing nine out of

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[69] According to Peñate, these extortions could involve direct payments to the ELN but also demands to hire locals in the reconstruction works, increasing the insurgents' appeal in those areas (1999: 93).
[70] In October 1998, a cloud of gas, released by a pipeline blown up by ELN guerrillas, was led by the wind towards the small village of Machuca where it caught fire, killing more than sixty civilians. Although the initial reaction of the ELN was to blame the army for the fire, they later acknowledged their full responsibility (*El Espectador* 30 October 1998, *El Tiempo* 12 November 1998).

ten victims of conflict-related kidnappings (and two of three hostages when all kidnappings are considered). The top kidnapper was the ELN, with 733 civilians, that is, 68 per cent of all the victims of conflict-related kidnappings, followed by FARC and EPL guerrillas with 15.6 and 6 per cent, respectively.

Three aspects of insurgent kidnappings deserve attention. First, approximately one in two was done for ransom; only one in six had political motives.[71] In absolute terms, the ELN was the top perpetrator of both political and ransom kidnappings; however, in relative terms the EPL and FARC were more likely to kidnap civilians for ransom (75 and 62 per cent respectively) than the ELN (48 per cent).

While these figures highlight the importance of kidnappings as a source of funding, their use as a mechanism of political coercion should not be underestimated. In 1997, for instance, the insurgency sabotaged the local elections and captured several candidates and elected officials in an attempt (successful, in most cases) to force them to resign. In other cases, the insurgents coerced officials in more subtle ways, for instance, by convening meetings in rural areas, where they were held, sometimes for several days, to deal with issues related to the local government. While violence was not actually used in these instances, defiance could have serious consequences.

Insurgents also used kidnappings to punish collaborators. For instance, in 1997, FARC guerrillas kidnapped eight top employees of three palm oil companies and demanded to stop production in reprisal for their alleged support to paramilitary groups. The hostages were released in stages and, according to press reports, the companies were forced to pay an economic sanction and to increase 'social investment' in the region (*El Colombiano* 2 January 1998, *Vanguardia* 31 May 1998).

The evolution of political and ransom kidnappings reflected the declining capabilities of the insurgency and a change in their priorities (see Figure 4.7). As the counterinsurgent offensive progressed, they were less able to reach the towns and

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[71] In the remaining cases the motives were unknown but their distribution (across *municipios*) was strongly correlated with that of ransom kidnappings, so they are likely to have involved economic demands.

main roads where they usually caught their victims. While the marked decline in political kidnappings could be interpreted as a sign of criminalisation, i.e. a shift towards economic rewards, this view is too simplistic. In fact, as it will be argued later (in Ch. 6), insurgents tried (and failed) to increase their control and political legitimacy in the region using a variety of means, not only kidnappings, such as their participation in episodes of social mobilisation or through negotiations with the national government to demilitarise the zone.

Figure 4.7. Insurgent kidnappings in the Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004
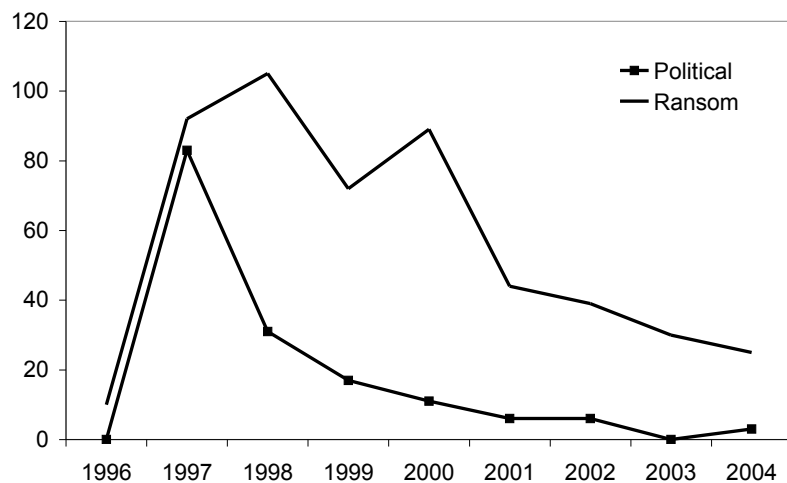
Second, data on the hostages' occupations (available in 77 per cent of the cases) indicates that most were far from the top echelons of the socioeconomic ladder. In fact, the largest group consisted of unskilled workers (29 per cent), including those employed through formal contracts and own-account and informal workers (e.g. merchants, shopkeepers and public transport drivers, who often drive their own vehicles). They were followed by local politicians and officials, both elected and appointed (18 per cent), and by skilled workers, including employees and own-account workers (13 per cent). Less than four per cent of the victims were cattle-ranchers; although some of them may have been large landholders, the database does not provide hints about their assets. Thus, for the most, the victims were members of middle-to-low income groups; this is consistent with the findings reported by Rubio (2003: 25) for the national level, based on the same source.

In line with the above, the ransoms demanded were, in many cases, relatively low;

assuming a proportional relation between them and the actual assets of the hostages' families, it is evident that most of them did not belong to the wealthiest layers of society: out of 184 cases for which data on the ransoms was available (that is 35 per cent of the total number of insurgent ransom kidnappings), in 53 (nearly 29 per cent) the amount was equal or inferior to Col$10 million (approx. $5,000).

Third, in most cases the victims were held captive for a short period. Approximately 86 per cent of the victims captured by insurgents during the period of study had been released by December 2004 and, of those free, 23 per cent had been released or rescued on the same day they had been captured; 60 had been set free within a week, 84 per cent within a month, and 92 per cent within three months. However, nearly twelve per cent of all victims were still captive (by the same date) and the remaining two per cent were dead.

These short periods of detention reflect the tactics employed by guerrillas in taking hostages: they often captured groups of civilians at random, screening them and releasing those who offered poorer prospects of exchangeability. This practice, known as 'miraculous fishing' ('*pesca milagrosa*') was extensively used by the insurgency throughout the country in the late 1990s. In other cases, the kidnapping itself was a form of political coercion on local officials, politicians, journalists and judges, who were captured and forced to resign to a post, abandon a political campaign, disseminate communiqués, render accounts about the use of public funds, leave a town, to mention some examples. In these cases, the victims were often released in a matter of hours or days, as the negotiation did not involve third parties. For instance, some of the politicians kidnapped by the ELN in south Bolivar in 1997, before the local elections, were released after three days.

4.3.2 Paramilitaries

If guerrillas were unbeatable kidnappers, paramilitaries were the champions of massacres and executions; but, like them, they also terrorised the population with checkpoints and raids. However, paramilitary checkpoints had a different nature; they were usually set in isolated locations, halfway between the towns and the most

secluded rural areas, where guerrillas were known to hide; their main purpose was controlling the access of people and goods, like medicines, food and other supplies useful to rural dwellers but also to the insurgents. As a peasant leader from south Bolivar recalled: 'From late in 1999 through 2000 and 2001, the paramilitaries imposed a blockade on the region. If they caught you carrying batteries, or aspirins or even a black training suit they would kill you. More than one died like that. If you carried medicines, canned food or torches you were targeted' (I-6).

Paramilitary raids usually targeted villages in areas believed to be under insurgent control. They could last from a few hours to several days and involve verbal threats, the destruction of goods and homes and the execution or disappearance of civilians. While sometimes they targeted specific individuals named on a list or accused by informants, in other occasions the threats were general. For instance, in March 2000, paramilitaries visited San Luis Beltran, in the Cimitarra River valley, and gave the villagers 72 hours to leave the area, forcing them to escape towards the town of Yondo (N&N 15: 163). In Cerro Burgos, a village over the Magdalena River, paramilitaries entered the village in June 1998, killed three civilians, including one who had received threats in the past and whose home was burnt to ashes; other homes and two offices were looted too (N&N 7: 142). The village was raided again a few weeks later and became a beachhead for the paramilitary campaign in south Bolivar.

Raids often led to massive forced displacement. Although the available official data does not record the group or groups that forced the victims to flee their homes, the VNN dataset records 94 instances of collective or massive forced displacement not prompted by hostile events but induced by the coercion of armed groups. Most of them, 72 to be precise, were caused by the direct action of paramilitary groups; of them, 44 targeted rural dwellers and 21 urban residents.

Paramilitary killings

Although paramilitaries clashed with guerrillas in several occasions, their participation in proper clashes with insurgents was marginal; they took part in less

than sixteen per cent of the hostile events registered in the region during the period of study. Furthermore, their performance was poor—they lost nearly three men for each guerrilla killed. As a force, they specialised in killing civilians: more than eight for every insurgent killed. In most cases, and especially in rural areas, the description of events as reported by N&N was not detailed enough to establish whether the victims were selectively targeted or not. However, there are signs that paramilitary violence became increasingly selective: up until 2000, nearly 40 per cent of their victims died in events where five or more people were killed simultaneously; from 2001, that proportion fell to fifteen per cent. Likewise the proportion of victims killed in attacks aimed at a single person went from 18 per cent before 2001, to 50 per cent from 2001 onwards. This is likely to be the combined effect of two factors: first, the availability of reliable information on collaborators, which probably grew as paramilitaries tightened control over the region but also by the fact that individual crimes attracted less criticism and public attention from the media and, therefore, could help them in improving their image to the eyes of the public, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Paramilitary kidnappings

Only ten per cent of the conflict-related kidnappings reported by *Fondelibertad* in the region were perpetrated by paramilitaries. While half of the victims were released within three days after their capture, one in five had not returned to liberty by the end of the period of study. Thirty per cent of the victims were kidnapped for ransom and thirteen per cent for political reasons; the motives were unknown in the remaining cases. It is worth noting that, compared to the *Fondelibertad* database, the VNN dataset reports twice the number of civilians kidnapped, abducted or temporarily retained by paramilitaries in the Middle Magdalena Valley. This is probably a result of different criteria used in the collection and classification of data; as noted in Ch. 2 2, the N&N reports offer less details about these events and the fate of their victims.

4.3.3   Government forces

Compared with irregular groups, the participation of government forces in attacks against civilians was marginal. They accounted for less than two per cent of the civilian death toll and their ratio of civilians to combatants killed was approximately of 6 to 100—far from ideal but well below the paramilitaries' ratio. According to the VNN dataset, government forces killed 28 civilians (in incidents different to hostilities). In most cases, the victims were reported by the army as insurgents killed in action but their families or human rights organisations dismissed the allegations; so did the *N&N* fieldworkers and, consequently, they were classified as civilians. For instance, in September 1997, the army reported the rescue of the mayor of Barrancabermeja's brother, who had been kidnapped nine days ago; according to the media, four guerrillas were killed in the operation (*Vanguardia* 9 September 1997). However, according to *N&N*, the guerrillas, aware of the presence of the army, abandoned the hostage and escaped and the deceased were actually peasants who lived nearby and were executed by the army (N&N 5: 47). Likewise, in September 2002, the army reported a clash with FARC guerrillas, in which two of them were killed in action; however, their families rejected the army's story and denounced the event as a violation of their human rights (*El Tiempo* 29 September 2002; N&N 25: 117).[72]

Other forms of state violence against civilians were relatively marginal too. Victims of forced disappearances, a trademark of state violence in Latin America, were merely than a handful. Looting was uncommon and most cases of destruction of civilians' goods and assets occurred when aerially sprayed herbicides, used to eradicate coca, actually fell on peasants' staple crops and animals.

There is, however, evidence about the reluctance of government forces to tackle paramilitary groups in their actions against civilians. Indeed, in several instances they seemed to act in coordination. Perhaps the most conspicuous cases were

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[72] It is hard to tell if this was a common practice in the Middle Magdalena Valley during these years. However, by the mid 2000s, apparently it became widespread. A political scandal about the so-called 'false positives', i.e. civilians executed by the army but officially reported as guerrillas killed in action, erupted in 2008 and it is still matter of judicial investigation (*Semana* 27 September 2008 and 27 January 2009).

reported in Barrancabermeja where, despite the heavy presence of the police, the army, the navy and the state's intelligence agency, paramilitary groups were able to attack civilians without restrain (more on this in Ch. 5). Other cases come from San Pablo, where the police locked themselves inside the station during a paramilitary raid in which fourteen civilians were killed (*El Tiempo* 12 January 1999). A few years later, in the same town, the police failed to react to the killing of a local merchant near the police station; in response, an angry mob of locals attacked the station during his funeral, setting on fire three vehicles (Bayona 2005). Likewise, during the paramilitary siege of Montecristo, government forces sent to protect civilians from an imminent confrontation targeted only insurgent-controlled areas (*El Tiempo* 31 August, 5 and 9 September 1998). To conclude, while episodes of open collaboration or cooperation between paramilitaries and government forces were rare or unclear, instances of coordination were more frequent.

4.3.4 Unidentified or unknown perpetrators

As explained above, this category refers to events in which the perpetrator is not known but the event was nonetheless deemed by N&N as conflict-related and thus included in the reports. The decision to include these cases in the N&N reports was based on the nature of events, the identity of the victim and the *modus operandi* of the perpetrators, which are usually different to those reported in quarrels and offences by petty criminals. Indeed, the events on which these unidentified agents took part consisted, in most cases, of deadly attacks against civilians and did not involve any other behaviour such as looting or kidnappings. Thus, it seems unlikely that the perpetrators were petty criminals.[73] But in many cases they could not be identified because they deliberately concealed their identities, for instance by not wearing badges or insignias.

There are two signs that many of these crimes were actually committed by

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[73] If N&N had over-reported the number of conflict-related deaths, including purely 'criminal' homicides (e.g., resulting from quarrels, disputes among gangs, etc.) within the count, the increase in murders committed by unidentified groups from 1999 would have been offset by a decrease in the number of 'criminal' deaths as, in this scenario, the latter would had been mislabelled and counted within the former category. But, in fact, the number of criminal deaths rose in 1999 and remained relatively stable until 2002 (see Figure 4.3).

paramilitaries who did not want, or could not, be identified as such. The first is that nearly half of these deaths took place in the urban area of two *municipios*: Barrancabermeja and Aguachica and, of them, the large majority occurred in 2000 and 2001, when paramilitaries changed their tactics, turning to individual, anonymous executions instead of the scandalous massacres seen in previous years (more on this in Ch. 5). The second is their spatial (municipal) distribution: whereas the correlation between the civilian killings included in this group and the paramilitaries' is 0.536 and statistically significant, the correlation with those committed by guerrillas was not ($n = 33$ and 20, respectively).[74] But these clues are far from conclusive and, since there is no way to determine the precise proportion of killings committed by paramilitaries, these killings are reported in a separate category or omitted in the analyses that follow.

Overall, the evidence presented in this part does not back the claim made by some Colombian scholars that violence against civilians during the late 1990s escalated and 'degradated ad nauseam' because armed organisations 'mimicked' and, at the same time, tried to outperform each other (Gonzalez et al. 2003: 73; UNDP 2003: 91). While both paramilitaries and insurgents did their part, the scale and forms of violence and coercion they used were different. These differences reflected the asymmetric conditions they faced in terms of resources and social support, as the next chapter will show.

The findings of this part give us some clues about the purposes of some forms of violence, in particular kidnappings, but not in relation to killings and forced displacement. The next part of the chapter uses econometric techniques to unveil these motives.

4.4 Explaining the aims of violence through its spatial correlates

Armed organisations often justify their use of violence against civilians as a means

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[74] Partial correlations calculated on the log of variables, as originally they were not normally distributed, controlling for population to exclude scale effects, i.e. large *municipios* have more victims irrespective of who committed the crimes.

to pave the way towards political change or to defend the existing institutional order, e.g. by punishing collaborators and 'traitors' or by executing guerrillas or state agents 'in disguise'. But, as seen in Ch. 1, some scholars have argued that these statements may hide less transcendental ambitions—notoriously short-term enrichment. The true motivations of violence are not directly visible to researchers and even judicial authorities in charge of questioning perpetrators who have submitted to justice find great difficulties in unveiling the truth.

This part of the chapter provides some clues about those motivations by examining the spatial distribution of violence. Using econometric techniques, it assesses whether the municipal patterns of violence and coercion against civilians seen in the Middle Magdalena Valley fit better into those of irregular warfare (as described in section 1.2) in which civilians are killed mainly to achieve or increase territorial control, or into the narrative of pseudo-wars (discussed in section 1.3) in which violence is aimed at other ends, or becomes an end in itself, leading to expropriations, extortion, and other forms of economic exploitation.

Overall, the findings suggest that civilians were killed mainly as a means to achieve territorial control—not as a way to extract rents or capture civilian assets. The test from which these findings are derived follows a very simple finding from the literature on contemporary internal wars: armed conflict is not a sufficient condition—and not even a necessary condition—for violence. Indeed, widespread violence against civilians may occur against a backdrop of little or virtually null armed conflict, as in 'new wars' (Kaldor 1999) and 'co-operative conflicts' (Keen 2005: 107).

At first sight, these notions do not seem to capture the reality of the Middle Magdalena Valley, where combatants did fight against each other and the civilians-to-combatant death toll ratio was not even close to the levels expected for 'new wars', as shown above. But on closer inspection, in some *municipios* the civilian death toll was disproportionately high in relation to the combatants killed in action—in Barrancabermeja, for instance, approximately ten civilians died for every combatant killed in action—raising the question of whether, hidden behind the regional aggregates, there may have been localised processes of production of

violence similar to those seen in pseudo-wars.

Moreover, as seen above, in the Middle Magdalena Valley the organisations most actively engaged in armed conflict were not the same that produced most of the violence against civilians. While the military and the insurgents were the most active organisations in armed conflict as such (i.e. attacking and exchanging fire with each other), paramilitaries and unidentified organisations did most of the killing. Therefore, the assumption that armed conflict and violence naturally converge in the same zones is misplaced.

The analysis covers only civilian deaths and not kidnappings or forced displacement. In the case of kidnappings, the analysis was to some extent unnecessary because the *Fondelibertad* dataset already provided details about the motives behind most kidnappings based on first-hand information on each individual case. In the case of forced displacement, the analysis posed a particular complication: while forcing particular individuals, households or communities to flee was a common form of violence against civilians, not all those who fled due to violence did it under such direct, imminent pressure.[75] Since the official statistics do not make such distinction, it is impossible to discriminate between those whose forced displacement was directly prompted by armed organisations and those who did it for preventive reasons, to escape from the eventual damages and losses that armed conflict and violence could cause. In other words, the available figures capture an outcome that resulted from the combined decisions of armed organisations and households and cannot be used to make inferences about the rationales of the former only.

4.4.1 Identification

The purpose of the analysis that follows is to establish whether violence against civilians was aimed towards resource-rich areas or reflected the factions' struggle to achieve territorial control. If, on the one hand, the spatial patterns of violence during the period resembled the geographic distribution of certain assets and resources then

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[75] Ibanez and Velez (2008) defined preventive displacement as one caused by fear rather than by an imminent threat.

it is likely that violence had been aimed to capture them or to make possible the extraction of the rents derived from the corresponding economic activities via extortion, protection fees or plunder. On the other hand, if those patterns resembled the variable intensity of armed conflict (e.g. hostilities) across different areas (*municipios*), then it is likely that they had both been aimed at the same end, that is, increasing territorial control. The reasoning behind this inference is simple: hostilities entail a willingness from the factions to commit resources (e.g. manpower, ammunition, supplies) to control or protect a given geographical position; they are the most visible manifestation of the factions' appetite for territorial control and reveal the strategic value that different areas have for them. In other words, the more the factions valued a particular piece of territory, the most likely is that they would have fought over it and used violence against civilians living there.

The analysis is based on the following model (equation 1):

$$c_{it} = W_{it} + E_{it-1} + Vc_{it} + p_{it-1} \qquad (1)$$

Where:

c_{it} is the civilian death toll in the *municipio i* during the period of study; it excludes civilian deaths occurred in the course of hostilities (i.e. 'caught in crossfire'), which are often unintended and, therefore, comprises only deliberate killings. Following the rationale outlined above, its level is believed to depend on one or more independent variables, grouped in two vectors and two control variables, as outlined below.

W_{it} is a vector that captures the intensity of armed conflict in the *municipio i* during the period of study *t*, which, as explained above, is a *proxy* for the strategic value of *municipio i* in the context of the armed confrontation during period *t*. It comprises two variables that capture the intensity of armed conflict in different ways:

(i)   The total number of hostile events (clashes and uncontested attacks) occurred in *municipio i* in period *t*. If violence was aimed to achieve territorial control, then this coefficient must be statistically significant

and positive.

(ii)   The total number of combatants killed in action in *municipio i* during
          period *t*. Since a low hostility count may hide a high death toll, this
          variable needs to be considered when gauging the intensity of
          conflict. Again, if violence was aimed to achieve territorial control,
          this coefficient must be positive and statistically significant.

If one or both coefficients turned out to be negative (and statistically
significant), that would mean that civilian killings focused in areas with low
hostilities or low combatant casualties or, in other words, that armed conflict
and violence against civilians did not converge in the same places. This
would be a strong sign that civilian violence, despite being produced by
organisations involved in armed conflict, was used to other ends different to
increasing territorial control. Among those other ends, asset-stripping and
violent rent-seeking are paramount.

E_{it-1} is a vector that captures the magnitude of key rents and resources that could
          have prompted aggressions against civilians, either to strip them of their
          assets or to extract rents from economic activity. Since the magnitude of such
          rents and resources may have changed during the period as a result of
          violence itself (i.e. endogeneity), they enter the equation at the levels they
          had just *before* the beginning of the period of study—hence the *t-1* subscript.
          The vector includes five variables:

(i)   The municipal area of *cattle pastures*. Cattle ranching is by far the
          activity with the largest share of the productive land in the Middle
          Magdalena Valley and, consequently, pastures and cattle are, perhaps,
          the most important private assets for agents in the regional
          economy.[76] Traditionally, cattle ranching has been a relatively safe

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[76] It is estimated that, by 1990, 60 per cent of the productive rural area in the region was used as cattle
pastures (cited by Machado and Briceno 1995: 39). Whereas aggregate crop areas never surpassed
50,000 hectares (for each crop) during the period of study, cattle pastures areas oscillated around 1,8
million hectares. Information on municipal areas was obtained from the agricultural assessments
('*evaluaciones agropecuarias*') held by the departmental offices of agriculture in Cartagena,
Medellin, Valledupar and Bucaramanga. These, in turn, were based on municipal data gathered by
local officials on the field.

form of investment[77] and in the 1980s it was a favourite among drug traffickers (Thoumi 2003: 186, 193; Kalmanovitz and Enciso 2006: 334).[78] While cattle ranching is not incompatible with subsistence farming, in some *municipios*, particularly in the southern part of the valley, it often takes place in large ranches (Machado and Briceno 1995: 41) and, as such, has been associated with different forms of violence against civilians: on the one hand, with insurgent kidnappings and extortion against cattle ranchers (not necessarily the wealthiest) and, on the other hand, with the creation of private militias and paramilitary groups by the latter, including drug lords with lands in the region (see Ch. 3).

(ii)   The municipal area of *oil palm* plantations. Compared to cattle pastures, oil palm crops occupy a marginal share of the regional productive lands. However, since the 1980s, oil palm became the most dynamic (legal) agricultural activity in the region and crops grew more than twofold between 1996 and 2004; by the end of the period, oil palm plantations had the largest share of the agricultural land in the region.[79] Growing oil palm poses high entry costs for farmers: the trees take up to three years to start producing and the fruit requires mills and adequate facilities to be processed. For this reason, its production has been dominated by farmers and companies with some financial muscle.[80] As such, it has attracted violence in a similar way to cattle ranching: owners and skilled staff have been targeted by extorted and kidnapped by insurgents and, allegedly, palm oil companies have paid for private protection from militias and

[77] As Van Ausdal (2009) pointed out, compared to other agricultural activities in Colombia cattle ranching offered substantial advantages such as stable prices and the possibility of managing the ranches from a distance. 'In a country with limited, conservative productive outlets for capital, he observed, cattle stood out as one of the most promising options' (2009: 716). And just as other agricultural activities, traditionally it has enjoyed low tax rates (Kalmanovitz and Enciso 2006: 345-55).
[78] Suarez (1996) reported how in the first half of the 1990s, illegal capitals were used to buy cattle and pastures in the Middle Magdalena Valley, increasing the regional cattle stock and causing a tenfold rise in the price of land in the most safe areas.
[79] This is according to the municipal 'agricultural assessments' cited above.
[80] However, in some *municipios*, mill owners have organised small producers in co-operatives allowing them to develop their own plantations (Machado and Briceno 1995: 63).

paramilitary groups.[81]

(iii)   The municipal area of *coca* crops. The involvement of armed

organisations in the cocaine industry is, according to some scholars

(see section 1.4), a clear sign of the criminalisation of armed conflict

and, as such, a possible factor in explaining violence against civilians.

Moreover, as coca and cocaine are illegal, the state cannot regulate

and police their trade, these functions often have been assumed by

armed organisations, which are likely to resort to outright violence as

a way to enforce their policies. [82]

(iv)   The municipal volume of *gold* production. The extraction of valuable

minerals has been linked to widespread abuses against civilians in

contemporary armed conflicts. Although gold is rarely mentioned as a

significant factor of violence in the Middle Magdalena Valley, in

some *municipios* the mines are located in isolated rural areas

controlled by the insurgency and miners must pay protection fees,

opening a window for penalties against those who fail to pay.

Moreover, paramilitaries have attacked members of miners' labour

unions and miners' associations, apparently as a punishment for their

alleged support to the insurgency. [83]

(v)   Gross local public *expenditure*. The decentralisation process in

Colombia has entailed a substantial transfer of financial resources to

local governments; moreover, some municipalities are paid royalties

by virtue of the extraction and transportation of gold and oil.

Although these funds are often earmarked, local governments have

some leeway in deciding their destination so they are vulnerable to

misuse and theft. Consequently, local coffers became an attractive

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[81] In the Pacific coast, for instance, 'palm plantations have been the scene of combat, persecution and armed violence by all parties. Guerrillas have murdered and kidnapped the palm companies' owners and employees and have dynamited extraction plants. The armed forces and paramilitary groups have become private security corps for palm producers, and have committed many of the extrajudicial executions reported in the palm production areas. Civil society members who have attempted to challenge the expansion of biofuels [...] have also been harassed and threatened [...]' (Houldey 2008: 6).

[82] Data on coca crops areas by *municipio* were obtained from UNODC's *SIMCI* Project; they are based on satellite imagery and produced with technical assistance from the United Nations. However, these data are available only from 1999 onwards; official data from previous years are incomplete, inaccurate and, in general, less reliable.

[83] Data on municipal production of gold obtained from the Colombian government agencies in charge of mining, *Ingeominas* and *Minercol*.

target for armed organisations, leading to several forms of violence aimed to coerce and control the civil servants and elected officials who controlled such funds. [84]

As noted above, in the analyses that will follow the values of these variables are those recorded in the period immediately before the period of study. Following the rationale of the model, if any of the coefficients of these variables is positive and statistically significant, this would mean that violence against civilians was aimed towards resource-rich areas. It would be a strong sign that civilian violence, despite being produced by organisations involved in armed conflict, was used to other ends different to increasing territorial control.

V This is a binary contiguity matrix with elements v_{ij}, where v_{ij} assumes a value of one if i and j are contiguous *municipios* and zero otherwise; hence Vc_{it} is simply the sum of the civilian death tolls of each *municipio's* neighbours. This variable is aimed to control for spatial correlation, that is, possibility that the civilian death toll in *municipio i* may not be independent from the civilian death tolls registered in i's neighbours.

p_{it-1} This is the population in *municipio i* in the period *t-1*; this is control variable that accounts for a possible correlation between population size and the number of victims.

Eck and Hultman (2007) used a similar specification to analyse panel data on civilian casualties from a sample of countries around the world; more specifically, they wanted to examine whether lethal, deliberate violence against civilians was a function of political regime type or could be explained by the intensity of armed conflict. Likewise, Sanchez and Palau (2006) also used a similar specification to explain the incidence of insurgent and paramilitary actions in Colombian *municipios*. However, the specification used here reflects the particular research interests of this

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[84] Data on public expenditure was obtained from the DNP's (*Departamento Nacional de Planeacion*) municipal '*ejecuciones presupuestales*', which contain information about the actual (as opposed to the budgeted) income and expenditure of the local governments. All the data were adjusted for changes in the consumer price index.

work as well as the specific resources, rents and assets that may have been played a role in fuelling violence in this region. Furthermore, while other studies on violence and conflict have included other potentially relevant control variables (e.g. political regime, ethnic fractionalisation), the specification employed here includes only two for two reasons: first, because the relatively small number of observations available (43 *municipios* or less) limits the number of variables that can be included in the analyses and second, because the units of observation are located within the same country and region and, therefore, many potentially relevant independent variable (such as those mentioned before) are in fact constant and, as such, they are already controlled for.

Unfortunately, the option of a panel analysis (with yearly observations) had to be abandoned because of missing data for several variables, years and *municipios*, as it was impossible to obtain data on some economic variables (vector E_{it-1}) for *every* year and *every municipio*.[85] For instance, data on coca crops previous to 1999 is incomplete and unreliable. Likewise, data on gold before 1999 was available only for some years and data series on most crops and cattle ranching had several scattered missing observations for different years and departments. Thus, although data on civilian deaths and conflict-related variables (vector W_{it}) were available for the whole period of study, panel regressions were unbalanced and nearly half of the observations (mostly but not exclusively from the first years of the period of study) had to be dropped because of missing data, making the results unreliable. In essence, the problem posed by the data can be described as a trade-off between observations and variables: the more variables were included in the analysis, the fewer the number of observations that could be actually included in computing the results, and vice versa.

To overcome these limitations, the analysis that follows consists of successive cross-section analyses (instead of a panel), covering different periods depending on the availability of data for economic variables. Regressions including the full battery of independent variables only cover the period 2000-2004 (so the dependent variable is

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[85] As seen above, sources of municipal economic data are scattered across the four '*gobernaciones*' (in four different cities) and in some national agencies, not always under the best conditions of storage and safety.

the aggregate death toll from 2000 to 2004) because data on coca crops is available only since 1999. When coca crops and gold production are dropped from the regression, it is possible to cover a larger period in the analysis, from 1997 to 2004. Thus, by successively dropping variables such as coca crops, gold production and local expenditure, it is possible to include a larger set of observations and a larger period and consequently a larger proportion of the death toll. This trade-off between observations and variables will be evident in the regression results shown below and it certainly calls for a dose of scepticism and caution in their interpretation.

Unless otherwise stated, all models are run using the negative binomial regression, appropriate for over-dispersed count data. Count data consist of non-negative integers and is often analysed using the Poisson regression. However, the Poisson regression is inadequate in cases of over-dispersion (i.e. the variance is significantly larger than the mean), where the negative binomial regression must be employed instead (Winkelmann 2008). Poisson and negative binomial regressions are extensively used in research on crime and homicides, including the articles by Sanchez and Palau (2006) and Eck and Hultman (2007) mentioned above.

4.4.2 Results

Table 4.5 shows four regressions covering two different periods. Regression A includes all the independent variables mentioned above but covers only a limited period (2000-2004) and only 32 *municipios* because of missing data; following this outcome, regression B covers the same period but drops local public expenditure to increase observations (as there are a few *municipios* with missing observations on these variable) to 39 with similar results. The results show that the hostilities, oil palm crops, gold, the control variables and the constant are statistically significant and all show the expected sign. Regression C covers a larger period (1997-2004) but omits two independent variables: the production of gold and coca crops. Regression D covers the same period but drops local public expenditure to increase observations from 28 to 41. Overall, three variables turn out to be significant and show the expected sign: hostilities, oil palm plantations and the production of gold, although the latter was only included in the first pair of regressions.

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Table 4.5. Cross-sectional regression analysis of the municipal civilian death tolls

	A	B	C	D
Hostilities	0.991	0.931	1.525	1.489
	(0.230) ***	(0.211) ***	(0.524) ***	(0.392) ***
Combatants KIA	-0.226	-0.133	-0.319	-0.313
	(0.213)	(0.189)	(0.323)	(0.256)
Cattle pastures (*t-1*)	0.192	0.123	0.064	
	(0.151)	(0.137)	(0.154)	
Oil palm crops (*t-1*)	0.283	0.230	0.198	0.273
	(0.155) *	(0.139) *	(0.195)	(0.158) *
Coca crops (*t-1*)	-0.032	-0.113		
	(0.160)	(0.145)		
Gold (*t-1*)	0.273	0.243		
	(0.126) **	(0.120) **		
Local public expenditure (*t-1*)	-0.044		-0.303	
	(0.338)		(0.519)	
Population (*t-1*)	0.380	0.364	-0.143	-0.318
	(0.346)	(0.142) **	(0.500)	(0.314)
Neighbours' dep var	0.249	0.241	0.231	0.118
	(0.130) *	(0.122) **	(0.195)	(0.149)
Constant	2.106	2.186	0.260	2.851
	(0.143) ***	(0.121) ***	(0.166) ***	(0.138) ***
Period of analysis (*t*)	2000-2004	2000-2004	1997-2004	1997-2004
Observations	32	39	28	41
Alpha	0.418 ***	0.396 ***	0.592 ***	0.669 ***
LR chi-square	49.49 ***	60.88 ***	40.71 ***	48.43 ***
Pseudo R-square	0.190	0.196	0.167	0.131

Notes: All regressions are negative binomial. Independent variables were all standardised.[86]
Standard errors in parenthesis. Probability: $p < 0.1$ *, $p < 0.05$ **, $p < 0.01$ ***.

These results are ambivalent. On the one hand they suggest that violence was certainly used along hostile actions to increase territorial control. But they also indicate that at least two economic activities—the palm oil agro-industry and the extraction of gold—played a significant role in prompting violence against civilians. To explore these outcomes in detail and, in particular, the possibility that different armed organisations may have used violence with different purposes, the following two sections present a separate of analysis of paramilitary and insurgent killings.

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[86] The lines at the bottom of the table show the number of observations included in each regression as well as results for three tests: 'alpha' is used to measure overdispersion and whether the negative binomial regression (as opposed to the Poisson regression) is appropriate—in this case it is. 'LR-chi square' measures whether the model, overall, is statistically significant—again, in this case it is. The pseudo R-square measures the model's goodness-of-fit, which in this case is modest.

4.4.3 Paramilitary killings

Although the paramilitaries' alleged motivation was defeating the insurgency (Aranguren 2001), it has been claimed that their real intention was capturing assets, in particular land, and legal and illegal rents, e.g., intergovernmental transfers to local authorities and those associated with the production and trade of coca paste and cocaine. In order to check whether the evidence backed these claims, a cross-sectional regression analysis of the municipal figures of paramilitary killings during the entire period of study is carried out below. The analysis follows the rationale of the model used before (equation 1) and the battery of independent variables is similar except for two changes, aimed to capture some specific aspects behind paramilitary violence. First, instead of including *all* combatants killed in action, the vector W_{it} includes only *counterinsurgent* losses in the battlefield. Although the rationale of including this variable is essentially the same as above, i.e. gauging whether the distribution of civilian victimisation reflects the pattern of territorial dispute, it also aims to assess whether killings may have followed a retaliatory rationale, that is, a tendency to punish civilians in areas with heavy casualties (in which case the coefficient would be positive and statistically significant).

Second, it includes a new variable: the level of insurgent activity in the recent past. The aim of including this variable is gauging whether paramilitary violence was aimed at increasing territorial control by undermining civilian support towards the insurgency or by punishing communities in *municipios* with a recent track of high insurgent activity. A positive (and statistically significant) coefficient would suggest that paramilitaries were trying to 'kill the fish by draining the pond' (Paget 1967: 168), or to 'neutralise' the people who helped the insurgents, as Castaño described their strategy (Castro 1996: 155). Like other variables in the vector W_{it} this one reflects the use of violence for territorial control but unlike the others this one is lagged—it measures *past* insurgent activity; hence, its notation is different and for this reason only it is not included in vector W_{it}.

The analysis is based on the following model (equation 2):

$$c^a_{it} = W_{it} + g_{it\text{-}1} + E_{it\text{-}1} + Vc^a_{it} + p_{it\text{-}1} \qquad (2)$$

Where:

c^a_{it} is the civilian death toll in the *municipio i* during the period of study caused by paramilitaries;

W_{it} is a vector that captures the intensity of armed conflict in *municipio i* during the period of study *t*. This vector consists of two variables: the number of hostilities and the number of *counterinsurgent* combatants (e.g. soldiers, policemen, paramilitaries) killed in action (in *municipio i* during the period of study *t*). A positive correlation between counterinsurgent losses in the battlefield and the killing of civilians would suggest a retaliatory rationale.

g_{it-1} is the level of insurgent activity in *municipio i* in the previous period (*t-1*), as measured by the recorded number of *recent* events of any sort (hostile or not) in which insurgents were involved. Here recent means during the three-year period immediately before the period of analysis (*t*).[87] If violence was aimed to achieve territorial control, the coefficient is expected to be positive and statistically significant.

Vc^a_{it} is the sum of civilians killed by paramilitaries during the same period (*t*) in each *municipio's* neighbours.

The remaining terms of the equation remain unchanged. The results are shown in Table 4.6.

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[87] The length of this period is to some extent arbitrary but it was seen as a way to the strike a balance between a period too short, in which case many observations would be nil, or a period too long, in which case the observations mix recent and not-so-recent data, undermining the rationale of including the variable. For regressions where this three-year period included events occurred prior to July 1996, I used data from the *Justicia y Paz* dataset, mentioned in the last section of Ch. 3.

Table 4.6. Cross-sectional regression analysis of paramilitary killings

	A	B	C	D
Hostilities	0.743	0.953	0.446	1.165
	(0.215) ***	(0.241) ***	(0.713)	(0.398) ***
Counterinsurgents KIA	-0.283	-0.283	0.326	-0.049
	(0.199)	(0.218)	(0.338)	(0.208)
Insurgent activity	1.291	1.019	0.879	0.604
	(0.453) ***	(0.349) ***	(0.641)	(0.340) **
Cattle pastures (*t-1*)	0.350	0.280	0.011	0.015
	(0.157) **	(0.177)	(0.212)	(0.179)
Oil palm crops (*t-1*)	0.154	0.242	0.101	0.194
	(0.157)	(0.171)	(0.268)	(0.179)
Coca crops (*t-1*)	0.044	0.000		
	(0.170)	(0.197)		
Gold (*t-1*)	0.391	0.379		
	(0.128) ***	(0.146) ***		
Local public expenditure (*t-1*)	-0.624		0.358	
	(0.459)		(0.603)	
Population (*t-1*)	-0.235	-0.589	-0.823	-0.805
	(0.327)	(0.346) *	(0.619)	(0.341) **
Neighbours' dep var	0.247	0.106	0.223	0.078
	(0.182)	(0.187)	(0.288)	(0.185)
Constant	0.739	0.846	1.707	1.853
	(0.194) ***	(0.176) ***	(0.214) ***	(0.163) ***
Period of analysis (*t*)	2000-2004	2000-2004	1997-2004	1997-2004
Observations	32	39	28	41
Alpha	0.293 ***	0.514 ***	0.894 ***	0.809 ***
LR chi-square	50.44 ***	51.67 ***	29.60 ***	41.34 ***
Pseudo R-square	0.263	0.235	0.151	0.142

Notes: All regressions are negative binomial. Independent variables were all standardised. Standard errors in parenthesis. Probability: $p < 0.1$ *, $p < 0.05$ **, $p < 0.01$ ***.

Table 4.6 shows two pairs of regressions; each pair covers a different period. Regression A includes all the independent variables mentioned above but covers only a limited period (2000-2004) and only 32 *municipios* because of missing data; regression B covers the same period but drops local budget (statistically insignificant in regression A) increasing the number of observations to 39. The results show that hostilities, previous levels of insurgent activity (measured from 1997 to 1999) and the production of gold are all statistically significant and show the expected sign. Regression C covers the period 1997-2004 but omits two independent variables: the production of gold and coca crops. Regression D drops local public expenditure to increase observations from 28 to 41. Hostilities, the previous levels of insurgent activity (measured from 1994 to 1996) and one of the control variables are statistically significant and show the right sign.

Again, the results suggest the importance of territorial control as a determinant of

violence against civilians. Not only are hostilities significant in several specifications but, in addition, the previous levels of insurgent activity, also turn out to be significant and show the expected sign. In other words, paramilitary violence converged in the same place with hostile events and, furthermore, was also aimed to *municipios* with a history of high insurgent activity. The results also suggest show that *municipios* with high levels of production of gold in the recent past experienced later higher levels of paramilitary violence. This second finding is more puzzling and its significance will be discussed later, just before the conclusions.

4.4.4 Insurgent killings

This section replicates the analysis presented above focusing on the subset of civilian killed by insurgents. The model follows the same logic as the one used above for paramilitary killings (equation 2) with only a few changes to reflect the specific factors that could be at play in shaping the insurgents' rationale (see equation 3). For instance, vector W_{it} includes the insurgents killed in action to check whether insurgents may have retaliated the population in response to heavy casualties on the battlefield and the level of past paramilitary activity to assess whether they wanted to punish civilians for supporting the paramilitaries—as we noted before, Mao did not rule out the use of violence against civilians to suppress the 'counter-revolution' (Mao 1954: 27).

The analysis is based on the following model (equation 3):

$$c^g_{it} = W_{it} + a_{it-1} + E_{it-1} + Vc^g_{it} + p_{it-1} \qquad (3)$$

Where:

c^g_{it} is the civilian death toll in the *municipio i* during the period of study caused by insurgents; and

W_{it} is a vector that captures the intensity of armed conflict in *municipio i* during

the period of study t. This vector consists of two variables: the number of hostilities and the number of *insurgents* killed in action (in *municipio i* during the period of study t). The second variable reflects how intense were the hostilities but also aims to check whether violence against the population was used to retaliate for insurgent losses on the battlefield.

a_{it-1} is the level of paramilitary activity in *municipio i* in the previous period (t-1), as measured by the recorded number of recent (the same three-year period as above) events of any sort (hostile or not) in which paramilitaries were involved. If insurgent violence (in period t) was aimed to punish people in communities with high levels of paramilitary activity in the recent past (t-1), the coefficient is expected to be positive and statistically significant.

Vc^g_{it} is the sum of civilians killed by insurgents during the same period (t) in each *municipio's* neighbours.

The remaining terms of the equation remain unchanged.

Table 4.7 shows two pairs of regressions; each pair covers a different period. Regression A includes all the independent variables mentioned above but covers only a limited period (2000-2004) and only 32 *municipios* because of missing data; regression B covers the same period but drops local budget (statistically insignificant in regression A) increasing the number of observations to 39. The results show that the hostilities, the production of gold and the control variable are statistically significant and show the expected sign. The extension of cattle pasture areas is also significant but the coefficient has the 'wrong' sign. Regression C covers the period 1997-2004 but omits two independent variables: the production of gold and coca crops. Regression D drops local public expenditure to increase observations from 28 to 41. Paramilitary activity (in the period 1994-1996) and cattle pastures are statistically significant but while the first coefficient has the expected positive sign, the second has negative sign, just as in specification B.

Table 4.7. Cross-sectional regression analysis of insurgent killings

	A	B	C	D
Hostilities	1.160	0.588	0.629	-0.078
	(0.541) **	(0.329) *	(1.274)	(0.531)
Guerrillas KIA	-0.352	0.357	-0.248	0.345
	(0.451)	(0.319)	(0.922)	(0.398)
Paramilitary activity	0.025	-0.043	0.522	1.015
	(0.275)	-0.302	(0.314) *	(0.197) ***
Cattle pastures (*t-1*)	-0.174	-0.554	-0.307	-1.348
	(0.339)	(0.302) *	0.473	(0.368) ***
Oil palm crops (*t-1*)	-0.147	-0.093	0.053	-0.103
	(0.209)	(0.181)	(0.170)	(0.172)
Coca crops (*t-1*)	-0.202	-0.290		
	(0.173)	(0.187)		
Gold (*t-1*)	0.436	0.292		
	(0.172) **	(0.150) *		
Local public expenditure (*t-1*)	-0.301		-1.615	
	(0.389)		(1.931)	
Population (*t-1*)	0.539	0.534	1.155	0.669
	(0.498)	(0.179) ***	(0.758)	(0.382) *
Neighbours' dep var	0.569	0.429	0.313	0.251
	(0.237) **	(0.180) **	(0.222)	(0.201)
Constant	-0.549	-0.476	0.083	0.548
	(0.296) *	(0.250) *	(0.461)	(0.206) ***
Period of analysis (*t*)	2000-2004	2000-2004	1997-2004	1997-2004
Observations	32	39	28	41
Alpha	na	na	0.335 *	0.595 ***
LR chi-square	124.23 ***	131.75 ***	16.63 **	37.14 ***
Pseudo R-square	0.639	0.599	0.169	0.187

Notes: Regressions A and B are Poisson because there was no evidence of over-dispersion; regressions C and D are negative binomial. Standard errors in parenthesis. Probability: p < 0.1 *, p < 0.05 **, p < 0.01 ***.

Again, the results are ambivalent. On the one hand they indicate that insurgent violence occurred either in zones with a record of previous paramilitary activity in the recent past or along with hostile events and, therefore, suggest that it was aimed to increase territorial control. On the other hand, insurgent violence was positively correlated with high levels of production of gold and, unexpectedly, negatively correlated with areas dedicated to cattle ranching. The following section weighs these results and their implications in detail.

4.4.5 Discussion

The results of the econometric analyses presented above suggest that the spatial distribution of violence followed a similar pattern to that of armed conflict: other things equal, more civilians were killed in *municipios* where armed conflict was more intense. Barrancabermeja, San Pablo, Yondo and Remedios, the *municipios* with most hostilities, were also among the top six with the highest death tolls (and the highest conflict-related homicide rates). Conversely, the lower half of the distribution, where approximately ten per cent of the hostilities took place, accounted for less than thirteen per cent of the civilian death toll. Moreover, when the spatial patterns of use of violence by each armed organisation are considered separately, they show how they used violence against civilians more intensely in *municipios* where their enemies had been more active in the recent past. In other words, the patterns of civilian victimisation closely matched either the contemporaneous intensity of armed conflict (as measured by the number of hostilities) or the previous levels of 'enemy' activity or both. These patterns are consistent with the declared goals, expressed by the paramilitaries, of crushing the insurgency in the region and targeting collaborators and 'guerrillas in disguise' (Aranguren 2001). Indeed, 75 per cent of the paramilitary killings occurred in the top ten *municipios* with most insurgent activity (where nearly two thirds of all events involving guerrillas took place). At the other end of the spectrum, the twenty *municipios* with fewer insurgent events accounted only for eight per cent of the paramilitary killings. A similar case can be made in the case of the insurgency.

Together, these results suggest that armed organisations used violence to increase territorial control, either by attacking civilians in the same areas where they fought their enemies or in areas where the latter had been particularly active in the past. In line with this finding, the availability of local fiscal resources and the scale of key economic activities such as cattle ranching and the production of coca and coca paste (traditionally associated with armed conflict in Colombia) did not show significant correlation with the spatial distribution of violence. For instance, while some of the *municipios* with the largest areas dedicated to cattle ranching experienced high levels of violence, e.g. Yondo and Remedios, this pattern is not consistent across the region and others such as Cimitarra, La Gloria and Puerto Berrio suffered relatively low

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civilian death tolls (and low conflict-related homicide rates).[88] By contrast, *municipios* such as Maceo and Tiquisio, with relatively small areas dedicated to cattle ranching, suffered comparatively high death tolls. The negative correlation between the size of these areas and insurgent violence (see Table 4.7), may reflect the fact that, with some exceptions, the latter was more intense in rural, mountainous areas controlled by the insurgency (particularly in south Bolivar), not suitable for large-scale cattle ranching. In other words, this variable may be acting as (an inverse) proxy for insurgent control. The link between control and violence will be explored in detail in Ch. 7.

One of the must surprising results of the analysis is that coca crops were not statistically associated with lethal violence. The illegal trade in narcotics is plagued by bloody disputes and reprisals among dealers and 'cartels' and, since armed organisations in the region were involved in one way or another in this industry, a concomitant rise in the levels of violence would not have come as a surprise. Indeed, the scale of the coca crops in the Middle Magdalena Valley peaked around the same years with civilian deaths and forced displacement (2000-2001). However, when the municipal data are inspected in closer detail, it is evident that coca did not always led to violence: of the five *municipios* with the largest coca grown areas, two experienced relatively high rates of killings and displacement, but in other two those rates were below the regional average. In San Pablo and Santa Rosa, for instance, coca-cultivated areas were larger than anywhere else in the region, but while the former was exceptionally violent, in the latter civilian deaths and forced displacement were well below the regional averages. The role of the coca economy and in the production of violence in the region will be further explored in Ch. 6, which discusses in detail the dynamics of armed conflict, violence and collaboration in south Bolivar, the sub-region with the largest areas of coca crops.

So far, these findings suggest that the patterns of spatial violence are consistent with a 'classical' irregular war, with armed organisations killing civilians as a means to increase territorial control. But, other results cast doubts over this conclusion. First, the production of palm oil was positively correlated with civilian deaths in general (see Table 4.5). However, the correlation is weak and, indeed, it did not show up

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[88] By conflict-related homicide rates I mean the civilian death toll per 100,000 inhabitants.

when the killings of guerrillas and paramilitaries were considered separately (Tables 4.6 and 4.7). In fact, only seven *municipios* in the region had palm oil crops at the beginning of the period (*t-1*) and most of them reported modest civilian death tolls both in absolute terms and in relation to their population. The outliers were Puerto Wilches and San Alberto, two adjacent *municipios* with the largest plantations of oil palm, and with relatively low levels of hostilities but moderately high civilian death tolls (above the average but not among the top). In sum, the effect that the production of palm oil apparently had on violence was circumscribed to a very limited number of cases.[89]

The case of gold is similar: the coefficients are consistently significant across all three sets of regressions (Tables 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7), showing a positive correlation between the volumes extracted in 1999 and the civilian deaths occurred in the years that followed. However, only a dozen of *municipios* in the region produce gold, most of them in south Bolivar and northeast Antioquia. A few of them reported high civilian death tolls and comparatively high levels of hostilities, the exception being Maceo, which only reported three clashes between armed factions during more than eight years. Again, whatever the impact this economic activity may have had on violence, it apparently was confined to a very specific geographical area.[90]

Overall, the results indicate that the effect of economic activity on the production of violence was marginal and manifested itself only in a few municipios. They suggest that the key determinant was the military struggle for territorial control between the insurgency, on the one hand, and the state and paramilitaries, on the other. Paramilitaries and guerrillas, in particular, used violence against civilians in areas with a recent track of enemy activity and along with hostile action to increase territorial control. Therefore, the distribution of civilian deaths in the region during the period of study fits better into the standard model of irregular warfare (discussed in section 1.2) than into the pseudo-war narrative of contemporary warfare discussed in section 1.3.

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[89] Indeed, when San Alberto is excluded from the regressions shown above (A, B and D in Table 4.5), the oil palm municipal areas are no longer statistically significant in the results, while hostilities still are.

[90] The production of gold is no longer statistically significant in the regression results (Tables 4.5, 4.6 and 4.7) if Maceo is excluded from the analysis. The hostilities still are but paramilitary activity is no longer significant in the case of insurgent killings.

However, econometric results are probabilistic rather than deterministic. They are helpful in identifying patterns of correlation and in suggesting possible causal links but they cannot be used to infer sets of conditions that would positively lead to a given outcome. As seen above, while the results consistently point towards territorial control as the key determinant of violence, they also suggest that certain economic activities may have, somehow, created conditions for violence even in *municipios* with relatively low levels of armed conflict, e.g. Maceo and San Alberto. Likewise, *municipios* that apparently met the conditions for a 'perfect storm', such as Santa Rosa (intense armed conflict, vast coca-grown areas, second largest producer of gold in the region) displayed modest levels of violence.

This caveat and the limitations in the availability of data mentioned at the beginning of this part suggest that any conclusions to be drawn from the econometric results should be taken with a pinch of salt, triangulated with other sources and complemented using research methods that may shed light on the specific causal mechanisms behind the correlations revealed by the regressions. This is precisely what the following chapters of this dissertation do.

4.5   Conclusion

This chapter provided a broad but precise overview of the scale of armed conflict in the Middle Magdalena Valley and the magnitude and forms of violence employed by armed organisations and the state against civilians. The chapter has shown how the territorial ambitions of the insurgency were thwarted by an aggressive counterinsurgent campaign that weakened the rebels, pushing them back to rural areas and curbing down kidnappings. While the government forces were very effective in killing insurgents in action, the paramilitaries were less successful and, in fact, suffered themselves heavy losses.

The counterinsurgent campaign produced a peak in the levels of violence against civilians: although kidnappings were already high since the beginning of the period civilian deaths and forced displacement escalated in 1999 and did not ease down

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until 2002. Only a fraction of violence was an unintended effect of warfare itself, i.e. collateral damage. Most civilian deaths and, of course, all kidnappings were deliberate even though their victims were often picked at random.

The spatial (*municipal*) distribution of lethal violence and hostilities were closely and positively correlated, i.e. other things equal, the most hostilities were recorded in a *municipio*, the higher the civilian death toll. As argued in the previous section, the close spatial match between hostilities and violence is a strong indicator that they were both aimed at the same end. Moreover, the results also indicate that both insurgents and paramilitaries targeted more intensely areas with a previous record of enemy activity. They thus suggest that to achieve territorial control the factions fought against each other but also used violence against those individuals and communities who, in their view, were instrumental to the enemy.

The chapter also shows that resource-rich areas did not necessarily attract more violence against civilians. For instance, *municipios* with comparatively meagre resource endowments (e.g. coca, gold, fiscal resources) such as Montecristo and Tiquisio, suffered forced displacement rates well above the regional average. Although some economic activities (the production of gold and the cultivation of oil palm) appeared to have a statistically significant, positive influence on violence, their effect was apparently confined to narrow geographical areas or even to specific cases where violence was intense but armed conflict was not.

Whereas the capture of economic rents and assets did not seem to be the main purpose of most civilian killings, it was the goal of the majority of kidnappings. Insurgents were behind most ransom kidnappings and they targeted a wide range of civilians—not only cattle ranchers and large landowners but also shopkeepers and even unskilled workers, making the region unsafe for almost everyone who dared to travel along its roads. Although insurgent and paramilitaries may have resorted to extortion, protection fees and other forms of economic exploitation of civilians, the lack of information prevents an informed analysis of these phenomena.

Although the evidence is mixed, by and large it is consistent with a scenario of classical irregular war rather than with the narrative of and pseudo-wars. Violence

against civilians occurred in the context of a fairly intense armed conflict and the ratio of civilians to combatants killed was not as disproportionate as in 'new wars'. And despite the presence of armed organisations specialised in killing civilians, their actions seemed to be genuinely aimed to weaken the insurgency rather than to exterminate the population on the basis of their identity or grab their assets. In this sense, their harsh tactics resembled those employed by counterinsurgents in other irregular wars in recent decades rather than those of private armies and militias described in the literature on pseudo-wars.

This chapter gives us strong hints in favour of the hypothesis that violence against civilians was aimed to increase or defend territorial control, but it leaves several puzzles and questions unresolved. The next chapter focuses, precisely, on a case that is at odds with this conclusion: Barrancabermeja. This town suffered disproportionate levels of violence against civilians—for each combatant fallen in action, more than fifteen civilians were deliberately killed by armed organisations— and accounted for thirty per cent of the regional civilian death toll. Just as important, the sources of information on violence and armed conflict and violence in this town are richer than in other towns or rural areas and this make possible a more detailed exploration of the mechanisms through which violence is produced. To this effect, it relies on a theoretical model developed by Kalyvas (2006) to explain the spatial distribution of violence in irregular wars. The model gives crucial explanatory power to the levels of territorial control achieved by the factions and while the results are not entirely consistent with this premise, they provide further insights into the relation between armed conflict and violence, highlighting the importance of civilian collaboration and suggesting that violence was used by armed organisations to expand and consolidate territorial control but also to achieve political control. [91]

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[91] In theory, Kalyvas's model (2006) could have been applied to the entire region but it requires detailed information about the circumstances and specific location of every killing and hostile event. Barrancabermeja was one of the few towns where this information was more complete and detailed.

5. TERRITORIAL CONTROL AND BEYOND: COUNTERINSURGENCY AND VIOLENCE IN BARRANCABERMEJA

Among the recent contributions to the literature on violence in civil wars, Kalyvas's (2006) stands out in terms of formulating an explicit, consistent set of assumptions and testable hypotheses about the use of violence against civilians. Its central tenet is that the state and armed organisations use violence as part of their efforts to expand and strengthen territorial control. To prove the point, the author developed a model that explains the variable intensity of violence across time and space while taking into consideration crucial traits of irregular warfare such as the absence of well-defined front lines and the involvement of civilians as collaborators.

This chapter tests the model and methods put forward by Kalyvas. Because of informational demands, the test covers only the town of Barrancabermeja and not the entire region.[92] There are good reasons to focus the analysis in this town: it accounts for 30 per cent of the civilian death toll and, what is more interesting, it displays a conspicuously high ratio of civilian to combatant deaths—a trademark of new wars and a hint that civilians may have been killed for reasons other than achieving territorial control. Thus, when considered individually, Barrancabermeja does not seem to conform to the conclusion reached in the previous chapter and, in this sense, provides an opportunity to test its robustness.

The chapter provides further insights into the relation between conflict, collaboration and violence. It suggests that violence was used by armed organisations to expand and consolidate territorial control but also to achieve political control; it also questions the notion that alliances between civilians and armed organisations are as

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[92] It requires detailed knowledge about whether each killing was selective or not, and about how the development of armed conflict changed the configuration of the different zones of territorial control (e.g. contested areas, controlled areas).

individualistic and opportunistic as the model suggested. Furthermore, the chapter highlights the relevance of socioeconomic factors and spatial segregation in predicting the distribution of violence. In the process, it sheds light on the use of violence in Barrancabermeja, the largest town in the Middle Magdalena Valley (population 2005: 170,000), where a bloody counterinsurgent campaign developed by paramilitary groups and government forces managed to drive out the guerrillas, even from the poorest neighbourhoods, which they had controlled for years if not decades.

The first part of the chapter summarises the relevant aspects of Kalyvas's model and methods. The second presents the case as such and consists of three sections: a brief historical background of the city; a narrative timeline of the evolution of armed conflict and violence from 1996 to 2004 and its impact on civilians; and a descriptive, statistical account of these phenomena. The third part describes the procedure followed to test the model in the case of Barrancabermeja, as well as the key findings of this exercise. The results and their theoretical implications are discussed in the fourth part and the conclusions. A shorter version of this chapter was published in *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vargas 2009); comments and suggestions from two anonymous examiners from the journal were incorporated in this chapter.

5.1 The 'Logic of Violence in Civil War'

Kalyvas's book (2006) represents a substantial contribution to the understanding of violence against civilians in civil wars.[93] This chapter focuses on two aspects in particular: the notion of 'alliance' and the 'control–collaboration–violence' model, which are briefly summarised in this section. According to the first, violence in civil war results from a 'convergence of interests' between warring factions and civilians. This convergence manifests itself in alliances, that is, transactions 'between supralocal and local actors, whereby the former supply the latter with external

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[93] In 2007, the book was a co-recipient of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award, conferred by the American Political Science Foundation to the best book on government, politics or international affairs published during the previous year.

muscle, thus allowing them to win a decisive advantage over local rivals; in exchange, supralocal actors are able to tap into local networks and generate mobilisation' (2006: 383).

The notion of alliance is further developed by the author in a model that predicts the evolution and spatial distribution of indiscriminate and selective violence, referred to in the rest of the chapter as the 'control–collaboration–violence' model. Briefly stated, the model assumes that 'political actors' (i.e. insurgents and incumbents) want to maximise control and use violence against civilians to do so. Compared with indiscriminate violence, selective violence is more effective but also more demanding in terms of information on who is collaborating with the enemy.[94] Civilians are the main providers of this information, but they only do so when the risk is low; this, in turn, depends on the degree of control the factions have over a given territory. Crucially, civilians are opportunistic and, thus, prone to 'malicious denunciation' for their own benefit. Hence, civil wars enable civilians 'to use 'political actors' to settle their own private conflicts', thus leading to a 'privatisation' of political violence (Kalyvas 2006: 14).

Based on the above, the model asserts that violence in civil wars is a function of territorial control. This distribution is modelled by defining five zones of control: while the extremes, z_1 and z_5, are fully controlled by 'incumbents' or 'insurgents', respectively, the middle zone (z_3) is contested; the two intermediate areas, although disputed, are nearly dominated by one of the factions—incumbents in z_2 and insurgents in z_4. The model posits the following hypotheses (Kalyvas 2006: 169, 204):

> H_1: 'Political actors are likely to gradually move from indiscriminate to selective violence.'
> H_2: 'The higher the level of an actor's control, the less likely it is that this actor will resort to violence. Therefore, no incumbent violence is likely in zone 1 and no insurgent violence is likely in zone 5.'
> H_3: 'The lower the level of an actor's control, the less likely that this actor will resort to selective violence and the more likely that its violence, if any, will be indiscriminate. Therefore, insurgent

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[94] However, indiscriminate violence can still be of use when a political actor is close to obtaining full control over a territory (Kalyvas 2006: 167).

> violence in zones 1 and 2, if any, is likely be indiscriminate and incumbent violence in zones 4 and 5, if any, is likely be indiscriminate (sic).'
>
> H_4: 'Under fragmented control, violence will be exercised primarily by the political actor enjoying an advantage in terms of control: incumbents in zone 2 and insurgents in zone 4.'
>
> H_5: 'Parity of control between the actors (zone 3) is likely to produce no selective violence by any of the actors.'

To support this theory, Kalyvas provided numerous examples drawn from civil wars which occurred across the world during the last two centuries. However, the most systematic test was a study of violence in sixty-one villages in the Argolid region during the Greek Civil War (1943–1949). The results were fairly satisfactory—as he put it, 'optimal evidence does not exist for problems such as those explored in this book' (Kalyvas 2006: 13).

Kalyvas's model focuses on lethal violence only and in some aspects of civil wars, such as control and collaboration, leaving aside others, potentially relevant in explaining violence.[95] As any theoretical model, Kalyvas's merely aspires to provide a 'sensible simplification, a theoretical baseline' against which empirical variations must be compared to improve our understanding of civil wars (2006: 208). The rest of this chapter looks, precisely, at how well this model 'travels' into a different context, using it as a heuristic device in understanding violence against civilians in an urban setting.

5.2 Armed conflict and violence against civilians in Barrancabermeja

This section provides a brief background to the case study, describes the main events that shaped the evolution of armed conflict and violence in Barrancabermeja during the period of study and concludes with some descriptive statistics about the magnitude and trends of these phenomena.

5.2.1 Barrancabermeja—at the edge of the Colombian State

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[95] For instance, Weinstein (2007) focused on organisational aspects such as funding, incentives and the way they affect the behaviour of combatants towards civilians.

Barrancabermeja is located on the flat east bank of the Magdalena River, in the department of Santander. Since its foundation in the early 1900s, its economic and demographic dynamics have been driven by the oil industry, now run by the state-owned company *Ecopetrol* and a variety of domestic and multinational firms. The local economy has revolved around the provision of low-tech services to these companies and never developed as an industrial cluster centred on the refinery. It did attract, though, thousands of men aspiring to acquire a job and earn the legendary wages and perks paid to oil workers.

The oil workers' union, *Union Sindical Obrera* (the Workers' Labour Union), born in the 1930s, is still one of the most important labour unions in Colombia; it has been an active promoter of popular political mobilisation in the city. In the 1960s and 1970s, Barrancabermeja developed an active squatter movement as well as a vibrant network of local organisations, vocal in their demands for basic infrastructure, housing and access to social services, all in short supply due to immigration.

Although not an administrative or political centre, Barrancabermeja is one of the main points of access to a geographic region where the Colombian state always had a precarious presence. Its importance was only paralleled by Puerto Boyaca, in the south of the region; a town that used to boast the title of 'Colombian anti-insurgent capital' after being the cradle of right-wing paramilitary groups (see 3.2.2).

However, for many years, Barrancabermeja did not experience open armed conflict as such. Brawls between the police and urban insurgent militias erupted occasionally during popular demonstrations and militias were keen to enforce civic strikes, punishing civilians who dared to open their shops or go to work when their fellow citizens were engaged in protest. But proper clashes between the army and insurgency only occurred in rural areas. Besides, the strategic importance of the local refinery, the largest in the country, led to a heavy presence of security forces, consisting of three military bases (anti-aerial, riverine and infantry) and a branch of the home intelligence services.

From the early 1990s, insurgent organisations strengthened their urban militias. The new recruits were given guns but little military training or indoctrination; rather than political agitation, their priority was to collect funds, badly needed to support the struggle in rural areas such as south Bolivar. This strategy had pernicious effects: militiamen often abused the population, targeting owners of corner shops or stealing raw meat from small dealers to 'redistribute' it to the poor. The competition among different organisations and 'fronts' often meant that victims were targeted and asked to pay twice, by different organisations. Although they rarely engaged in combat with the police or the army, by the mid-1990s they had managed to establish protection rackets over large, poor neighbourhoods, where the police rarely ventured. Not surprisingly, they became increasingly unpopular, even among those who used to sympathise with the revolutionary struggle, but especially among shopkeepers, oil contractors and local investors. Unable to fight them through regular methods, the navy launched an undercover operation aimed at the elimination of insurgent collaborators but it was eventually exposed and aborted (*El Espectador*, 20 April 1998; Human Rights Watch 1996: 30).

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, paramilitary organisations steadily advanced over the region, raiding villages and killing alleged insurgent collaborators. By the mid-1990s, two groups often roamed the city's hinterland: the *Autodefensas de Santander y Sur del Cesar*, *AUSAC*, in the north, and the *Autodefensas del Magdalena Medio*, in the south. These groups, together with the *Bloque Central Bolivar* (*BCB*), started a series of attacks on city residents from 1998, causing a wave of violence against civilians that only ebbed in 2002, when insurgent activity in Barrancabermeja had been curbed.

5.2.2 Crushing the insurgency

This section describes the main trends and events in the armed conflict in Barrancabermeja from 1996 to 2004. It covers the preamble to the paramilitary campaign, the peak of violence and its aftermath, thus allowing us to explore the relation between the changing patterns of control and violence. The choice of period is also concerned with the availability of data, as the records used to quantify the

number of conflict-related civilian deaths start in July 1996. This section is based on national and regional Colombian newspapers (e.g. *El Tiempo, Vanguardia*); it is organised in six sub-periods, defined by events that significantly shaped the evolution of control in the city.

1) Insurgents galore (1 July 1996 to 15 May 1998)

In broad lines, this period can be characterised by an increasing presence and action of insurgents in the city. Hostilities between guerrillas and government forces averaged twelve per year; approximately half of these events took place in the urban area. A particularly hot spot was *barrio Primero de Mayo*, where thirty ELN militiamen attacked with gunshots and grenades the police station in March 1997, causing its partial destruction and killing a civilian in the process, who fell victim to a stray bullet (*El Tiempo* 18 March 1997). Three months later, the ELN attacked the same police station, firing from a bus and detonating later a truck with dynamite; several policemen and civilians who lived in the neighbourhood were injured (*El Tiempo* 20 June 1997). A few days later, in the same *barrio*, they detonated an explosive device when a military vehicle passed by, injuring twelve soldiers and killing a seven years old girl (*El Tiempo* 10 July 1997). The *Nueva Granada* Battalion, located close to the centre of the city, between the refinery and residential and commercial areas, was also attacked by the ELN using mortars, but the projectiles missed the target destroying two homes in an adjacent neighbourhood, injuring six civilians (*El Mundo* 25 July 1997). The press reported the finding of a mined camp close to a slum in the southeast of the city but its purpose was unclear (*Vanguardia* 6 August 1997).

While attacks against the Police and Army forces often hit civilians by mistake, other guerrilla activities such as bombings and 'armed strikes' deliberately targeted civilians. Buildings affected by explosive devices include the offices of the local association of farmers and cattle ranchers, *Fedagro*, in the commercial zone of the city (*El Tiempo* 18 March 1997); the office of the mayor (*El Espectador* 24 April 1997); the local offices of the Liberal mayor and presidential candidates (*Vanguardia* 10 October 1997) and the local offices of the General Attorney bombed

by FARC (*El Tiempo* 19 April 1998). Several explosives detonated in December 1997 in a market and other places, apparently were aimed to hit policemen (*El Tiempo* 5 and 9 December 1997).

Since the mid-1990s insurgents often declared 'armed strikes' to mark certain dates, voice their disapproval over particular events or decisions and, perhaps most importantly, to show their capacity to bring to a halt the activities in a city or region—and the government forces' inability to prevent such strikes. One of such armed strikes occurred in September 1996, when the city was paralysed for more than a week (*El Tiempo* 26 September 1996). Bus and taxi drivers who failed to comply with these restrictions often found their vehicles burnt to ashes.

In December 1997, the EPL celebrated their thirtieth anniversary burning two buses owned by two private transport companies and other two owned by *Ecopetrol* and *Ferticol*, a local fertiliser factory; they also stole twelve oxen and set up explosives in a cab and a community building which both failed to explode (*El Tiempo* 18 December 1997). Similarly, three *Ecopetrol* buses were burnt by the ELN to commemorate the death of revolutionary priest Camilo Torres (*El Tiempo* 16 February 1998); a few weeks later other three buses were burnt in *barrio Primero de Mayo* (*El Tiempo* 7 March 1998).

In 1997, EPL guerrillas kidnapped the mayor's brother in what the authorities described as an attempt to reassert their weak presence in the city, but the army managed to rescue him alive after a week in captivity (Vanguardia 9 September 1997). At this stage, guerrillas were not very active in kidnapping people in the city; however, the number of kidnappings picked up since March 1998.

Up to this point, the paramilitary presence in the city was often rumoured but rarely confirmed. The existence of two 'security co-operatives'—a legally sanctioned form of vigilantism, often linked to paramilitary groups—was mentioned but not confirmed in 1997 (*Vanguardia*, 9 April 1997). Later, in January 1998, the media reported that men wearing balaclavas had been patrolling the streets of some neighbourhoods in three 4-by-4 vehicles; FURY militiamen warned the residents of *barrios Primero de Mayo and* others and asked them to 'go to bed early, as

something may happen' (*Vanguardia* 5 January 1998).

2) The paramilitary massacres (16 May 1998 to 15 November 1999)

During this period, the paramilitaries launched terrorising attacks against the population and insurgent activity remained stable. While the *Autodefensas del Magdalena Medio* approached the city from the south, the *Autodefensas de Santander y Sur del Cesar*, AUSAC, did it from the north. The AUSAC eventually launched a series of raids and massacres in the city, the first of which occurred on 16 May 1998, when a fifty-strong commando raided several *barrios* during a local fair killing eleven people and capturing other twenty-five who were later murdered (*El Tiempo* 18 May 1998). Although the AUSAC initially refused any responsibility, they later acknowledged the massacre and argued that the operation was aimed to capture the top ELN leader, who was supposed to meet the oil workers' union president that night (*El Tiempo*, 17 June 1998). However, the AUSAC commander, Camilo Morantes, declared later that all the victims were guerrilla collaborators who had been previously identified as such by deserters and other civilians (*Semana* 21 August 1998).

The massacre was certainly a blow for the insurgents, as they failed to protect the population who they were supposed to defend; even worst, an interviewee reported that several militiamen present at the popular fair in *barrio Maria Eugenia*, one of the scenes of the massacre, remained silent while innocent civilians were being killed or kidnapped (I-15). The massacre had a deep, lasting impact in the city, especially because news about the killing of the twenty-five captives were revealed only three weeks later. Two successive 'civic strikes' were held in the city and militias attacked police and military facilities in several *barrios* in June (*El Espectador* 5 June 1998; *Vanguardia* 7 June 1998)

A few days later, the paramilitary groups announced an alliance between AUSAC and the umbrella organisation *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, AUC, based on their 'political and ideological identity', aimed towards 'solidarity and strategic cooperation' and the protection of 'the right to protect life, liberty and property,

threatened and attacked by FARC, ELN and EPL' (*El Tiempo*, 17 June 1998). In the same statement, they named a number of guerrilla collaborators, including the presidents of the human rights NGO Credhos and USO, who were publicly declared as their targets; they both left the country (*El Espectador* 1 July 1998). One year later, they also accused the local administration of collaboration with guerrillas (*Vanguardia* 16 June 1999).

A wave of collective killings followed. In August 1998, ten people were killed in different places of the city (*El Espectador* 4 August 1998). In November, gunmen killed four people in *barrio Primero de Mayo*. (*El Espectador* 10 November 1998). In February 1999, AUSAC men toured the city in two trucks killing eight people (*El Tiempo* 1 March 1999); the victims were not chosen at random: a former FARC guerrilla, known as 'the Baker', who had become a top member of the paramilitary group AUSAC, picked the targets (*El Espectador* 2 March 1999). The last massacre of this period occurred in September 1999, an unidentified commando killed seven people in barrio Minas del Paraiso (*Noche y Niebla* 13:143).

In most cases, these attacks were launched from the rural area: one or several vehicles entered the city, toured the eastern *barrios* and then left again. Indeed, by this time, the city was surrounded by paramilitaries. In an interview, the AUSAC commander confirmed their presence in several municipalities in Cesar and Santander, north of Barrancabermeja, where they had up to 400 men, and their taking over the city, where 'the programme follows' (*El Pais*, 18 August 1998). To the south, the *Autodefensas del Magdalena Medio* had entered the rural village of *Cienaga del Opon* and warned the dwellers about the consequences of collaborating with guerrillas (*Vanguardia* 1 October 1998). Other rural villages, such as San Rafael de Chucuri, in the east, were taken about the same time (I-10).

In response to the increasing paramilitary strikes in the city, guerrillas announced an increase in the number of guerrillas assigned to the city, as well as the upgrading of FURY, from an 'independent militia' to a proper 'front' (*Vanguardia* 4 July 1998). However, insurgent activity in this period followed a similar pattern to the one observed before: attacks on military units, 'armed strikes', bombs and arson continued, often in reaction to paramilitary actions.

FURY militiamen ambushed a military convoy as it patrolled *barrio Chico*, detonating a bomb, then firing on the occupants; a soldier was wounded. Guerrillas had imposed a night curfew in *barrio Maria Eugenia* (*Vanguardia* 23 July 1998). One month later, they attacked a military garrison located next to a water supply station in the northeast during three hours; a grenade fell on a home in the neighbour *barrio Los Alpes*, but no victims were reported (*Vanguardia* 21 August 1998). Three days later, a military patrol was attacked in *barrio* Boston; an EPL militiamen and a civilian, a girl aged fifteen, died in the exchange of fire (*El Tiempo* 26 August 1998).

A 48-hours 'armed strike', declared after a massacre, led to the destruction of two taxis, whose owners did not attend the order (*El Espectador* 4 August 1998). Vehicles were burnt and explosive devices detonated in other occasions (*Vanguardia* 21 and 27 June 1998). Militiamen detonated an explosive device inside a factory injuring four workers (El Espectador 10 November 1998). ELN gunmen killed the chief executive of *Ferticol*, allegedly in reprisal for the harsh policies against the company's labour union (*El Tiempo* 13 June 1998).

In June 1999, men in two trucks killed twelve people in *barrios La Esperanza*, *Granjas* and *Provivienda*. Although AUSAC paramilitaries were initially blamed for the killings, it later emerged that FARC guerrillas had carried out the action as a 'cleansing' operation against EPL militiamen, whose behaviour was judged as anti-revolutionary. This prompted other EPL members, like 'Setenta', 'Prisco', 'Harold' and 'Gabi', to switch to the paramilitary ranks (*El Espectador* 3 June 1999, I-5, I-9, I-10, I-11, I-19).

Besides these actions, a wave of selective killings was carried out by gunmen in the city (*El Espectador*, 29 June 1998). Other attacks, apparently random, also occurred: for instance, a small restaurant and a bar were attacked with hand grenades, killing a woman and injuring six people (*El Espectador* 30 September 1998; *Vanguardia* 11 October 1998).

Understandably, these events created a climate of fear, especially among the residents in the eastern side of the city, beyond the railway, which was seen as

controlled by guerrillas and became the main target of both paramilitaries and government forces (*El Tiempo*, 7 June 1998; *Semana*, 8 February 1999). The police still was able to patrol these areas, as they often did, if only in armoured vehicles. Forensic officials were not allowed to enter the area and the usual procedures following a death could not be performed *in situ* precluding the possibility of any serious investigation; instead, two private funeral agencies collected the bodies and brought them to their facilities, to the west of the railway, where forensic staff identified the victims and pronounced them dead. This situation continued at least for the next two years (*Vanguardia* 20 July 1998; *El Tiempo* 22 August 2000). The wave of killings and violence led the ICRC to open a local office to promote the 'humanisation of conflict' (*Vanguardia* 15 July 1998).

As mentioned before, insurgents increased the number of kidnappings, capturing thirty-five people in this period, the majority of which were later released. Among the victims were a member of the local cabinet, kidnapped by ELN guerrillas but released after two weeks; two months before, a paramilitary group had captured him for four hours (*El Pais* 23 September 1998). Some of the victims were murdered, including a former army officer and a former policeman kidnapped by EPL guerrillas and murdered a few weeks later, apparently in retaliation for the killing of four people in *barrio Primero de Mayo*; the bodies were found in a truck in the outskirts of the city (*El Espectador* 14 November 1998). Kidnappings by purely criminal or unidentified individuals or organisations picked up simultaneously with guerrilla kidnappings, suggesting a link between them; although there is a chance that guerrillas had chosen to keep their identity hidden in some cases, it is also likely that some of them were carrying out 'free-lance' kidnappings, for personal profit.

The reaction of local elites and NGOs to the intensification of violence was twofold. On the one hand, the Church called for a stronger military effort aimed to protect the population (*El Colombiano* 18 November 1999). The massacres prompted a row between the security forces and human rights activists, as the latter repeatedly claimed that the Police and the Army had turned a blind eye on the paramilitaries; their commandos, they alleged, often passed unnoticed through military checkpoints as they entered and left the city (*El Espectador* 18 April 1999). Military officers denied these accusations and said that the government forces were unable to protect

the civilians in northeast Barrancabermeja because the district was a 'hostile battlefield' and soldiers were 'shot from the windows' (*Vanguardia* 17 June 1999).

On the other hand, calls for a 'regional peace dialogue' made by the mayor were backed by the local business sector, echoing the attitude of major business groups in the country, which supported the peace talks held by the ELN and the government in Germany (*Vanguardia* 20 July 1998). However, the *Coordinadora Popular* and other leftists organisations rejected any possibility of talks with paramilitaries (*Vanguardia* 24 July 1998).

Amid this escalation of conflict, a massive peasant demonstration, originated in south Bolivar, took place during the last quarter of 1998. Branded the 'exodus' by the organisers, this mobilisation gathered an estimate of 10,000 peasants who marched towards Barrancabermeja and camped in parks and schools for several weeks, demanding the provision of infrastructure and social services to rural communities, but most importantly, protection against the increasing presence of paramilitary groups. While it is often said that guerrillas were involved in the mobilisation, the demonstrations in Barrancabermeja were peaceful and only some schools were affected by the occupation.

The closing event of this second stage was the killing of Camilo Morantes, the AUSAC commander, in early November 1999 (*El Colombiano* 18 November 1999). His execution, ordered by the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*, was justified as a disciplinary action for their excesses; according to Julian Bolivar, his successor, Morantes's approach was too indiscriminate (Aranguren 2001: 310). However, his death probably signalled the 'hostile takeover' of the AUSAC by the AUC, or at least by some of its top associates, with a view to the creation of what would become the strongest paramilitary division, the '*Bloque Central Bolivar*', BCB, in the years to come. The killing of Morantes led to a significant change in the paramilitary strategy in the city, effectively curbing the insurgent activity but unleashing a massive bloodshed.

3) From massacres to selective killings (16 November 1999 to 23 December

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2000)

During this stage, both insurgent and paramilitary activity changed their nature: on the one hand, guerrillas were more active than ever, but held less hostilities with government forces than in the previous period; on the other hand, paramilitaries changed their *modus operandi*, from terrifying raids to silent, individual crimes. In April 2000, Julian Bolivar, explained to the media that the paramilitaries did not plan to carry out new massacres and were only to target guerrilla leaders 'and their bodyguards, if they are around', but not collaborators. However, asked about the sharp increase in the number of killings in the city he replied: 'Barrancabermeja is going to change; in fact, it is already changing. After Easter we will carry on the cleansing operations' (*Vanguardia* 16 April 2000). He also explained that they executed only two or three people every week as a way to prevent a climate of fear (Aranguren 2001: 312). The new approach was further explained by another paramilitary commander who confirmed that massacres belonged to the past: now they were being very 'careful and selective' in their operations, based on information provided by former guerrillas who had joined their ranks (*Vanguardia* 23 July 2000).

The regional Police commander attributed the increased number of homicides to the confrontation between guerrillas and paramilitaries and announced that victims were being pointed out by former guerrillas who had joined the paramilitary groups. He also declared that the magnitude of conflict was superior to his forces, but his attitude was seen by some sectors merely as an open declaration of unwillingness to put a halt to the paramilitary campaign (*El Tiempo* 30 June and 10 July 2000; *Vanguardia* 12 July 2000). However, in an exceptional operation, the Police chased and reportedly managed to kill one and capture other two members of a paramilitary squad just after they killed seven people, including at least three ELN guerrillas, in *barrio El Campestre* (*Vanguardia* 5 November 2000). [96]

As both the AUC and the Police commanders confirmed, several guerrillas and militiamen had deserted the ranks of the organisation and joined the paramilitaries.

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[96] This version has been disputed, as other sources claim that there was no chase or fight involving the Police (Loingsigh 2000: 14). N&N reported the killing of seven civilians but did not mention any combat or the killing of any paramilitary men in action; for this reason this death is not shown in the statistics based on the VNN dataset.

This was not an uncommon phenomenon—Camilo Morantes, for instance, a FARC middle-rank guerrilla, joined a squad that would later become the AUSAC in 1994 (I-9, I-11). Although it is difficult to establish the proportion of insurgents that switched sides, it seemed to have been a widespread phenomenon, which gave the paramilitaries a significant advantage, as every deserter meant not only a loss for the insurgents, but also a gain for the paramilitaries, both in terms of experienced manpower and, more importantly, as a source of information. According to some sources, entire cells within the ELN ranks crossed the floor, including, critically, 'extortion collectors', who kept records of individual and corporate payers (I-9, I-10).

Lack of indoctrination, threats, pragmatism and money, altogether, seem to explain the quick mutation of guerrillas into paramilitaries. Some interviewees emphasised the dramatic choice they faced—'join us, die or leave the town'—while others pointed out that their new employers offered them a rise in their 'wages' and timely payment. Those who gave the step first were asked to go and ask their comrades to do the same (I-5, I-7, I-9, I-10, I-11, I-13).

Nonetheless, guerrillas continued their attacks against military facilities and police stations but, as in the past, they often hit the wrong targets killing civilians and destroying their homes (*Vanguardia* 4 March and 21 September 2000). They also set up several explosive devices against banks and the local branch of DIAN, the national revenue service, killing passers-by and damaging neighbouring shops (*Vanguardia* 5 September 2000 and 4 February 2001). The customary 'armed strikes' declined, but still occurred, as the one declared after paramilitaries killed one of the top members of the FARC militia in the city (*El Tiempo* 6 October 2000).

Furthermore, kidnappings continued, although at a slightly lower rate than before. Twenty people were kidnapped in thirteen months; approximately half of them were released and the other half rescued by government forces. The cattle ranchers' association launched a proposal to authorise the Police and other security agencies to attempt military operations to release victims of kidnapping; some business associations backed the proposal but the Church and several NGOs highlighted the risks that such operations posed for the victims and suggested that their release

should be discussed in the context of negotiations held with their captors (*El Tiempo* 17 November 2000).

4) The paramilitaries move in—for good (24 December 2000 to 20 March 2001)

On Christmas Eve 2000, paramilitaries launched a definitive operation. In previous years they had launched attacks from the outskirts of the city, entering and leaving the city during the night, or sending gunmen, who usually disappeared as quickly as they got to the crime scene. However, they now moved into the city, setting up headquarters in several neighbourhoods; according to two unnamed journalists, cited in a special report prepared by CINEP and Credhos, that night two paramilitary checkpoints were set up in *barrio Primero de Mayo* and in the bridge that leads to the northeast (CINEP-CREDHOS 2004: 129-131). By the end of January, they were regularly present at *barrios* such as *Villarelis, Altos del Campestre, La Paz, San Silvestre, Simon Bolivar* and *Miraflores* (*Noche y Niebla* 19: 61-63). Their presence in the two latter was so conspicuous that FARC guerrillas asked residents in these *barrios* to leave their homes as they intended to storm the paramilitaries out; ten days later, nine people were killed in *barrio Miraflores* (*Vanguardia* 9 January 2001, *Noche y Niebla* 19: 35, 59).

During the first quarter of 2001, *N&N* recorded more paramilitary death threats than they had during the four previous years altogether. Human rights activists, leaders of grassroots organisations and labour unions, NGOs, families and entire neighbourhoods were the object of imminent threats; some were given merely a few hours to leave their homes. Sixteen families from *barrio Pablo Acuna* flee their homes and took refuge at the OFP's *Casa de la Mujer*. According to official records on internal displacement, more than 450 households—2,236 people—fled their homes during the first quarter of 2001; of them, approximately one in six moved to other neighbourhoods but nearly a half went to larger cities such as Bogota and Bucaramanga.

As homes were abandoned, paramilitaries moved in or gave them to families of their

choice (*Vanguardia* 8 May 2001). Several homes were appropriated in this way in a number of *barrios* in the eastern side of the city—e.g. *La Esperanza, El Progreso, Provivienda, Boston, Granjas, Esperanza, Campin, Maria Eugenia, Puerta del Sol, Kennedy, San Pedro Claver, Altos del Rosario, Nueve de Abril,* and *Danubio* (I-14, I-18). Some of these homes were offered in return to the original owners in 2006, but not all of them took them back, as they were still scared to return (I-14).

Nonetheless, guerrillas were still active in the city. On 6 January, for instance, they detonated an explosive device as a Police vehicle passed by, in a sector known as *Pozo Siete*; three policemen were injured while two civilians died and other thirteen were injured as they travelled in a local bus that crossed the scene at the same time (*Noche y Niebla* 19: 36). The next day they burnt a bus and two taxis in *barrio Primero de Mayo* and blocked a road in the northeast of the city. Later, in March 2001, FARC guerrillas stole three buses in *barrios Antonio Narino, Danubio* and *Boston*. On 19 March, guerrillas and paramilitaries skirmished in a place known as *El Bambu*, leaving no casualties (*Noche y Niebla* 19: 181). These were the last actions involving guerrillas in urban Barrancabermeja.

5) The paramilitary consolidation (21 March 2001 to 13 March 2004)

This period, the longest of the five, was characterised by the absence of any perceptible presence of guerrillas in the city, [97] an increasingly confident, noticeable presence of paramilitaries and a substantial reduction in the level of conflict-related violence and coercion, which nonetheless was not negligible, especially when compared to the levels registered during the first period.

N&N reported two combats between guerrillas and paramilitaries, and guerrillas and government forces in March 2003 and April 2004, in *Los Neques*, approximately twelve kilometres to the south of the urban area. Similarly, guerrillas kidnapped only three people from 2001 to 2004, two in May 2001 and another in January 2002, all

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[97] In 2003, a car bomb allegedly set up by FARC guerrillas, was found and deactivated in the city but the local media reacted with scepticism and it was rumoured that the car had been actually set up by paramilitaries to justify their presence in the city (*Vanguardia* 22 and 25 May 2003).

of them in rural areas. No armed strikes or burnt vehicles were reported in this period. Meanwhile, paramilitaries increased their grip over the city by co-opting and expanding the reach of small private security companies operating under the law; households in *barrios* such as *Los Pinos, Cincuentenario, Limonar, Autoconstruccion, Recreo, Inscredial* and *Palmira*, were asked to pay a fee (approximately one dollar per month) for this service (*Vanguardia* 11 May 2001, 20 March 2003).

Official records on forced displacement suggest that it still was very high during the second quarter of 2001 but receded afterwards. Conflict-related killings also dropped substantially but threats against human rights activists and labour unions' members continued. In an interview, 'Alex', one of the BCB commanders, criticised human rights activists for circulating the notion that Barrancabermeja was a violent city and claimed that the death threats they allegedly received were a fabrication, made up by NGOs to get funds and trips to Europe. He made a similar criticism about local newspapers and finished the interview warning that if they kept doing so, they would have the 'painful duty of executing somebody' (*Vanguardia* 8 July 2002). One of them, '*El vocero*', had to close one month later, after their owners received imminent death threats. Similar cases were reported in 2003: a *Vanguardia* journalist had to quit the job for this reason, and a well-known, polemical radio commentator was murdered (CINEP-CREDHOS 2004: 129, 133; *Vanguardia* 7 April 2003).

This concern with the image of the city seemed to be shared by many, including some army officials who also contacted journalists and editors to express disapproval about the coverage given to 'bad' news and the way they were reported (CINEP-CREDHOS 2004: 129). Even grassroots organisations seemed to be unhappy: during a visit by the Colombian vice-president, dwellers of eastern *barrios* demonstrated against the 'stigmatisation' and 'bad name' of the city, which led to low private investment and lack of opportunities, and asked NGOs to 'speak well' about Barrancabermeja (*Vanguardia* 15 September 2003).

'Alex''s interview also reflected the self-confident, unashamed attitude of paramilitaries and its increasing presence in the public domain. He announced that talks were being held with members of USO and that they aimed to 'change people's

mentality' and broaden their influence over 'the masses'. After defeating the insurgents, he declared, they now 'struggled to fight corruption' in public administration and confirmed their participation in 'social cleansing' operations aimed at petty criminals, drug dealers and addicts and paedophiles. He welcomed people to come forward to denounce their troops' abuses but asked them to keep their private quarrels to themselves and not to bring them to be settled by the paramilitaries, who only could play a conciliatory role (*Vanguardia* 8 July 2002).

This confident attitude was matched by the firm support from local merchants. Interviewed by a Colombian researcher, Dario Echeverry, executive director of the local Chamber of Commerce compared guerrillas and paramilitaries, advocating the pro-business attitude of the latter (quoted by Ruiz 2003: 194-5):

> Both guerrillas and paramilitaries are illegitimate: they kill, they plunder, they kidnap, but there is a difference: whereas guerrillas destroy the productive infrastructure […] paramilitaries build on the economic growth of the city. […] One cannot develop the private sector with the poor, and they made Barranca poorer. Those who had the money are gone. [Guerrillas'] economic model is: the more poverty, the better for them. Paramilitaries are the opposite, they say: 'Come and work my friend! Come and invest! I will give you security, I will protect you, but you are going to have to pay for it, of course'. […] They are bad, yes; they kill, yes; the businessman has to pay them, yes, but he also had to pay to the guerrillas anyway.

His views reflected the thriving, optimistic economic climate that followed the counterinsurgent campaign. According to Gonzalez and Jimenez (2008), more businesses were established in the city from 2001 to 2003, than during the entire previous decade (2008: 113).

6) 'Peace' (14 March to December 2004)

On March 2004, the BCB commanders announced the withdrawal of their troops, 172 men, from Barrancabermeja, prompting a demonstration attended by one hundred people who opposed the measure arguing that they had successfully imposed order on the city. The protesters also expressed fear about retaliations from guerrillas, who might eventually return, in reprisal for their connivance with paramilitaries, who had been 'accepted by communities and associations, especially the merchants' (*El Tiempo* 12 March 2004, *Vanguardia Liberal* 13 and 14 March 2004). The protesters' arguments echoed the words of Echeverry during the interview cited above: 'If the AUC leaves the city, guerrillas will be here at the next minute. The Colombian government is not able to provide security and stability to the Middle Magdalena Valley and Barranca. That is clear, we understand that' (Ruiz 2003: 195).

The Church welcomed the news but some sectors were sceptic about the BCB's intention, especially after considering the small number of troops to be withdrawn (*El Tiempo* 8 March 2004). The withdrawal apparently took place on 14 March but was not verified by any independent observer. Although the BCB may have actually withdrawn some men, its presence in the city still was evident after that date. For instance, only until 2006 they offered to return some of the homes they had occupied since 2001 (I-14). However, conflict-related killings dropped substantially and so did the homicide rate, which nonetheless was still high compared to other cities. In any case, there were no reports of guerrilla activity during this period. Indeed, the city has remained 'in peace' since then and its economic prospects continued to be positive. For instance, in 2007, the president of the association of *juntas de accion communal* (the local federation of grassroots organisations) gave the following assessment (I-5):

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The situation in the city has improved notably. Merchants are coming to the city […] *Exito* [a nationwide retail store] will open a store here. Trade is growing and jobs are being created. I had the chance of talking to people outside the city and they think that Barrancabermeja is now a safe place—and that is very positive. We would not like to go through those dark moments we had with guerrillas and *autodefensas* again. Some people think that the *autodefensas* cured a problem, but that was just an episode of the armed conflict. Now they are demobilised and that is positive. Now we, the *barranquenos*, have the duty of maintaining the city safe and peaceful.

5.2.3 Descriptive Statistics

This section presents a quantitative overview of the magnitude of armed conflict and violence in the period just described. A first indicator of their scale is the notorious increase in the homicide rate from 1999 onwards (see Figure 5.1); although this figure includes deaths caused by quarrels and petty crime, there is evidence that a high proportion of them were conflict-related, that is, they were directly linked to the armed confrontation between insurgents, paramilitaries and government forces. Based on death certificates issued by the Colombian *Instituto de Medicina Legal* (the official forensics department), the Vice-President's Human Rights Office estimated that eighty-nine per cent of all homicides occurring in Barrancabermeja from January 2000 to September 2001 were conflict-related (PPDHDIH 2001: 8).

Figure 5.1. Homicide rate in Barrancabermeja, 1996-2004
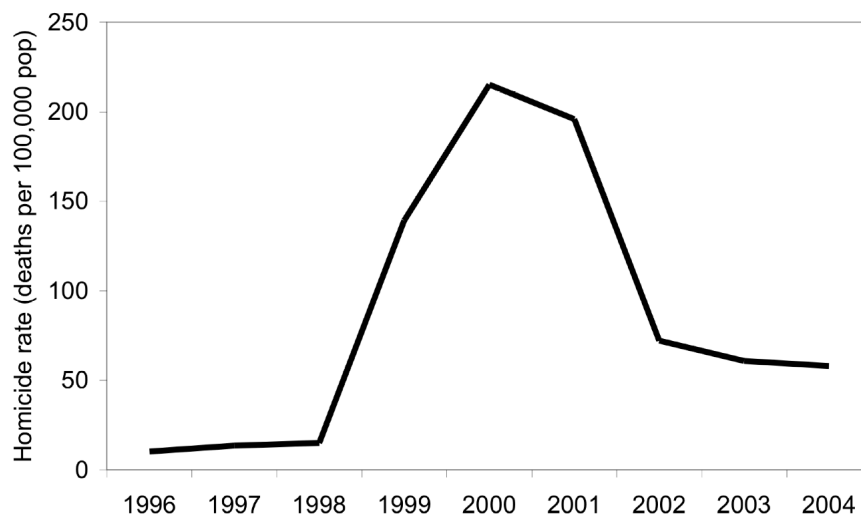
Sources: Homicides, *Policia Nacional*; population, *DANE* and author's estimates.

Compared with that, the dataset used for this research (described below) is relatively conservative, as it suggests that only 55.5 per cent of homicides occurring between 2000 and 2001 were conflict-related. However, it confirms a marked peak in conflict-related violence around the same period, matched by a notorious increase in forced displacement (see Figure 5.2). Approximately 13,000 people fled their homes in Barrancabermeja from 1997 to 2004—that is, about 7 per cent of the total population reported in the 1993 official census.

Figure 5.2. Conflict-related civilian deaths and internal displacement from Barrancabermeja, 1997-2004
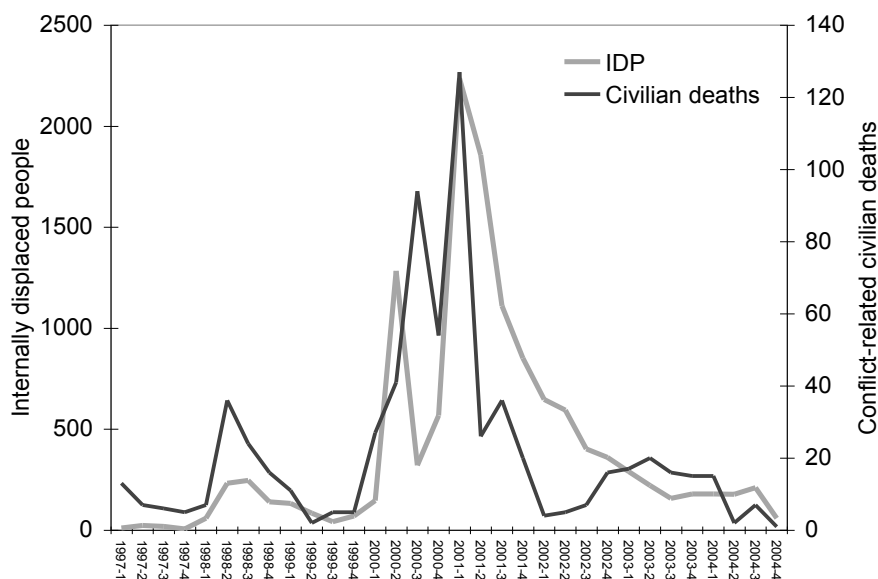
Sources: Deaths, VNN dataset, described below; displacement, *Sistema Unico de Registro*.

Table 5.1 provides an overview of the total number of conflict-related deaths, based on the VNN dataset described in Ch. 2. Forty combatants died during the whole period of study and fifteen of them were killed in internecine disputes within guerrilla or paramilitary groups. Only twelve civilians died as a direct result of the hostilities (i.e. 'collateral damage'); the remaining deaths resulted from deliberate attacks on civilians. Although the ratio of civilian-to-combatants deaths is close to thirteen, this ratio varies between warring parties: while guerrillas were equally prone to kill combatants and civilians, government forces and paramilitaries had specialised roles depending on the target. Paramilitaries in particular were highly specialised in violence against civilians.

Table 5.1. Civilian and combatant deaths in urban Barrancabermeja, 1996-2004

Warring forces	Government forces	Guerrillas	Paramilitaries	Civilians	Civilians / combatants
Government forces	0	11	0	1	0.09
Guerrillas	14	*12	0	25	0.96
Paramilitaries	0	0	*3	161	53.67
Unknown group/s	0	0	0	299	∞
Others/mixed	0	0	0	10	-
'Collateral damage'	-	-	-	12	-
Total	14	23	3	508	12.70

Notes: Figures in columns represent deaths inflicted *to* a group or population; figures in rows represent deaths inflicted *by* a group. The last column is the result of dividing the fourth column by the sum of the first three columns. 'Collateral damage' refers to civilian killed in the course of hostilities. Deaths marked with asterisk (*) occurred out of combat. Strictly speaking, the victims were not combatants, as defined by the International Humanitarian Law, but were active members of armed organisations.
Source: VNN dataset.

Table 5.2 provides a longitudinal summary of the evolution of armed conflict during the six phases outlined above as measured by the number of hostilities, i.e. clashes and uncontested attacks between the warring factions, and combatants killed in action. The total number of hostilities amounted to forty-three, of which forty involved government forces and guerrillas; no hostilities between government forces and paramilitaries were reported by *N&N*.

Table 5.2. Hostilities and combatants' deaths by phase

	t_1	t_2	t_3	t_4	t_5	t_6	Total
Hostilities	12	19	10	2	0	0	43
Combatants' deaths	9	23	5	0	3	0	40

Based on: VNN dataset.

Table 5.3 shows conflict-related civilian deaths, excluding those caused by collateral damage. Each cell contains three figures: the absolute number of deaths, the share of civilian deaths by faction and a yearly average of deaths per phase (to account for the different duration of phases). The third and fourth phases, t_3 and t_4, were the most violent; on average, one civilian was killed every day during the first quarter of 2001. The distribution of violence against civilians in general was unevenly distributed between the parties: 32.5 per cent of victims were killed by paramilitaries while guerrillas killed only 5 per cent; the government forces had a marginal role with 0.2 per cent of the killings (1 victim) and the remaining deaths could not be assigned to any party. Whereas the guerrillas had a marginal and decreasing importance in the perpetration of such crimes, the paramilitaries were responsible for

the largest share of the death toll, especially in the second, fifth and sixth phases.

Table 5.3. Conflict-related civilian deaths by organisation and phase

Perpetrators	t_1	t_2	t_3	t_4	t_5	t_6	Total
	5	4	14	2	0	0	25
Guerrillas	23.8	6.7	8.8	2.2	0.0	0.0	5.0
	2.7	2.7	12.6	8.4	0.0	0.0	2.9
	0	43	9	17	86	6	161
Paramilitaries	0.0	71.7	5.6	18.3	55.5	85.7	32.5
	0.0	28.6	8.1	71.3	28.8	7.5	18.9
	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Government forces	4.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2
	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1
	15	13	137	74	69	1	309
Unidentified/Mixed	71.4	21.7	85.6	79.6	44.5	14.3	62.3
	8.0	8.7	123.8	310.5	23.1	1.3	36.3
	21	60	160	93	155	7	496
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	11.2	40.0	144.6	390.2	51.9	8.8	58.3

Based on: VNN dataset.

Also worth noting in Table 5.3 is the occurrence of paramilitary violence in the fifth phase: although no guerrilla activity was reported in the city, the number of killings was as high as in the second phase—28.6 and 28.8 killings per year, respectively. Finally, Table 3 shows a high proportion of killings in which the perpetrator is unknown; they were reported by the source as conflict-related, based on the victims' identities and the nature of the events. Most of them occurred in t_3, that is, just after the death of Camilo Morantes, when the paramilitaries changed their tactics, favouring discreet operations usually involving one or two gunmen rather than commandos. However, since these killings cannot be rigorously imputed to any of the warring parties, they cannot be fully included in the analysis that follows, as it demands unequivocal information about the perpetrator of each crime—an important empirical limitation of this analysis.

Table 5.4. Conflict-related kidnappings in Barrancabermeja

	t_1	t_2	t_3	t_4	t_5	t_6	Total
Guerrillas	13	34	21	0	3	0	71
Paramilitaries	0	2	12	2	11	1	28

Source: *Fondelibertad*.

While insurgents made a marginal contribution to the killing of civilians, they were the main perpetrators of kidnappings: sixty-eight victims during the first three

phases. More than sixty per cent were made for ransom; less than sixteen per cent were politically motivated (see Table 5.4).

5.3 Testing the 'Logic of Violence' in Barrancabermeja

The first part of this section describes the methods used to replicate the test developed by Kalyvas to the case of Barrancabermeja; the second part presents the main results and highlights key aspects on whether the theory and evidence are consistent or fail to match.

5.3.1 Methods

To start with, the test involves two tasks: first, the territory must be divided and coded in zones of control, according to the five-zone categorisation described above; as these zones are likely to be unstable, the codification should capture these changes following the timeline of events. Second, deaths should be coded in two categories, depending on whether the victims died in indiscriminate or selective attacks and then allocated to the respective zone of control; this involves detailed knowledge about the date, place and nature of the attack.

Regarding the first task, the conflict in the city involved three factions: insurgents, government forces and paramilitaries. Allegations of a coalition between government forces and paramilitaries are hard to substantiate. However, the figures on hostilities show that there were no clashes between government forces and paramilitaries; furthermore, the role of government forces in killing civilians was negligible.[98] Thus, although it might be an oversimplification, it is reasonable to proceed *as if* the conflict had been two-sided, with paramilitaries and government forces fighting the insurgency.

For operational purposes territorial control is defined here as the ability of an armed

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[98] In statistical terms.

organisation or the state to prevent or, failing that, to successfully respond to military challenges (i.e. hostilities) posed by other forces within a given territory. Zones of control were demarcated following the territorial division of the city in *comunas* (see Figure 5.3) and coded using quantitative criteria. The number of hostile events, i.e. clashes and uncontested attacks involving insurgents, were used to gauge whether a *comuna* was being contested or not.[99] Other insurgent events, not aimed to attack military targets or kill civilians, e.g. the destruction of vehicles, were used to gauge insurgent activity within a given *comuna*.[100]

The coding of *comunas* was performed independently for each phase, to reflect changes in control, as follows. First, *comunas* where the number of hostilities exceeded the average plus one standard deviation were classified as highly contested *comunas* and thus assigned to zone z_3.[101] Second, *comunas* where no insurgent activity was recorded during a given phase were assigned to zone z_1. Third, *comunas* where guerrillas were able to operate without challenging the incumbents' control, i.e. with insurgent activity but without hostilities, were coded as z_2. Finally, the remaining *comunas*, where guerrillas were not only active but also able to challenge the incumbents were assigned to zone z_4. Although guerrilla organisations had a strong influence over civilians in the eastern *comunas* of Barrancabermeja, they never had full, uncontested control, even in *barrios* perceived as their strongholds (e.g. *Primero de Mayo*). For this reason, no *comunas* were coded as z_5.[102] These criteria are summarised in Table 5.5.

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[99] Since the periods (t_1, t_2, …) are uneven in duration and *comunas* are different in size (i.e. population), these figures were indexed as events per year per 100,000 inhabitants so that they were actually comparable.

[100] Since these events do not involve selective civilian deaths, the former can be used to code zones of control and predict the latter without leading to a circular reasoning.

[101] Although statistically sensible, this threshold is arbitrary. The effects of setting it at different levels are briefly examined later.

[102] This is consistent with the principles and the actual practice and limitations of urban guerrilla warfare, e.g. the vulnerability to encircling and the inability to establish 'liberated zones' (on this, see Marighella (1975), Lacqueur (1986) and Joes (2007: 157-8)).

Table 5.5. Zones of control in Barrancabermeja and operational criteria

Zone	Definition	Operational criteria
z_1	Fully controlled by incumbents.	Insurgents absent.
z_2	Contested and nearly controlled by incumbents.	Insurgent activity and no hostilities.
z_3	Highly contested.	Insurgent activity and high levels of hostilities (average plus one standard deviation or more).
z_4	Contested and nearly controlled by insurgents.	Insurgent activity and hostilities.
z_5	Fully controlled by insurgents.	Incumbents absent but insurgents present (no *comunas* coded into this zone).

Note: Incumbents are government forces and paramilitaries

Although the coding seemed plausible, it overstated the insurgents' strength in *comuna* No. 1 during the first three periods (t_1 to t_3) when, according to the criteria above, this *comuna* would have been coded into zone z_4. However, the police, the army and the intelligence services all had their local headquarters in this *comuna* and regularly patrolled the streets; moreover, insurgent hostile attacks were sporadic and limited, e.g. hit-and-run mortar attacks on military facilities, and usually missed the target, reflecting the relative weakness of the insurgency in this *comuna*. Hence, their strength was not comparable to the government forces' or to their own position on the east side of the city, where they comfortably challenged the state's authority ambushing police stations and military convoys with temerity. To correct this problem, this *comuna* was coded as nearly controlled by the government forces rather than by the insurgents, i.e. in zone z_2 rather than in zone z_4.

The resulting patterns of control are illustrated in Table 5.6: while in 1996 several *comunas* were nearly controlled by guerrillas (i.e., zone of control 4), by early 2001 only two *comunas* were being disputed (i.e., zone of control 3). After March 2001, guerrillas had no evident presence in the city. *Comunas* 1 and 2 are the ones where the state was better able to prevent or successfully respond to military challenges from the insurgency (i.e. maintain territorial control) and, therefore, are coded as zones z_1 or z_2 throughout the period. By contrast, *comunas* 5 and 7 comprised barrios such as *La Esperanza, Primero de Mayo, El Campin, El Campestre, Maria Eugenia* and *Villarelys,* all of which were believed to be controlled by FARC or ELN

insurgents by the late 1990s and, as result, they are coded as zone z_4 until December 2000. Finally, since most hostilities happened during the second period, it is the one where most *comunas* were coded as highly contested (see Table 5.6).

Map 5.1. Urban area of Barrancabermeja in 2006
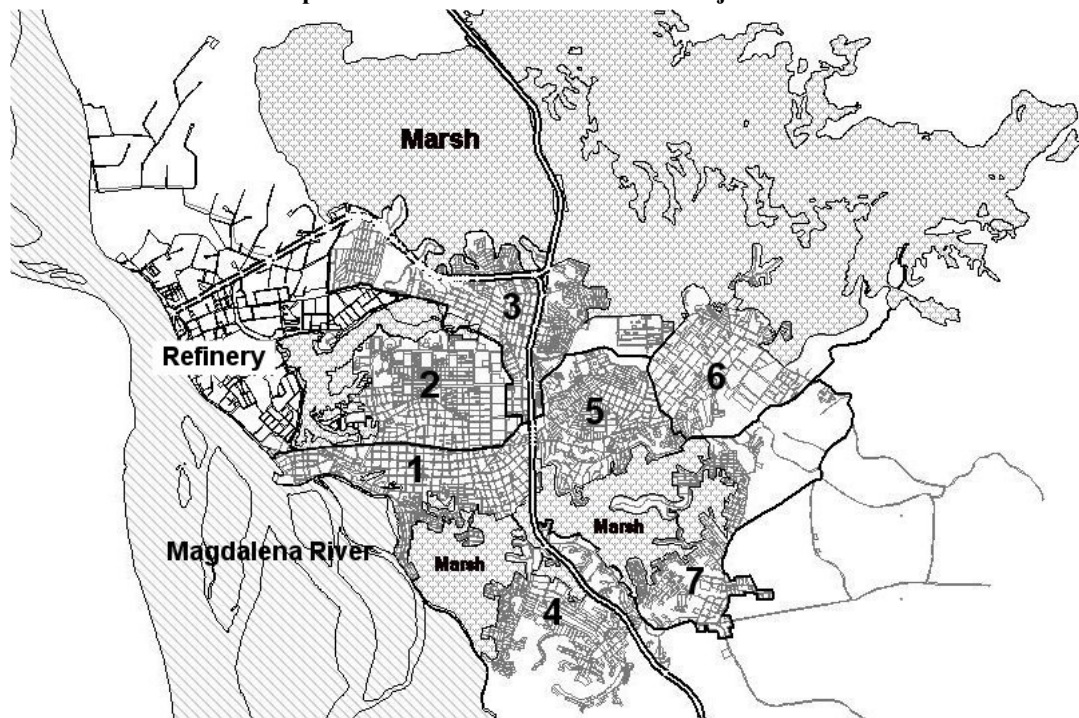
Note: The city is divided into seven *comunas* or districts, signalled with numbers in the map. The railway splits the city in two halves from north to south. Roughly speaking, the areas to the west of the railway have better access to infrastructure, public and social services, as well as a more noticeable presence of the police than other areas.
Source: Drawn by the author based on GIS files generously provided by the Middle Magdalena Valley Peace and Development Programme.

As for the second task, deaths were coded as selective when the victims had been threatened recently, or murdered inside or in front of their home or shop, or abducted and then killed (in which case they were assigned to the zone where the victim was captured), or identified using a list, or finger pointed by an informer or if they had a social/political notable position which made a random murder unlikely (e.g. councilman). Information on the circumstances of each crime was obtained from the *N&N* reports. In all, 200 selective deaths were identified; the remaining deaths were coded as indiscriminate.

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Table 5.6. *Comunas* and zones of control in urban Barrancabermeja, 1996-2004

Phase	Period	Comunas						
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
t_1	Jul-1996 to May-1998	z2	z2	z4	z2	z4	z1	z4
t_2	May-1998 to Nov-1999	z2	z1	z3	z1	z4	z3	z3
t_3	Dec-1999 to Dec-2000	z2	z1	z4	z2	z4	z3	z4
t_4	Dec-2000 to Mar-2001	z1	z1	z3	z1	z2	z2	z3
t_5	Mar-2001 to Mar-2004	z1	z1	z1	z1	z1	z1	z1
t_6	Mar-2004 to Dec-2004	z1	z1	z1	z1	z1	z1	z1

Since it was impossible to obtain data on forced displacement and kidnapping disaggregated at a level lower than the town itself (e.g. comunas or neighbourhoods) it was impossible to include these forms of violence in the analysis. While this does not prevent us from testing the model itself, as it was formulated to account precisely for civilian deaths and not for other forms of violence, it imposes limits on our ability to understand how armed organisations combined different forms of violence to reach their goals. These limits will be evident in the next section and in the discussion that follows.

5.3.2 Results

Each cell in Table 5.7 contains three figures: first, the absolute number of deaths; second, selective deaths as a percentage of total civilian deaths by organisation and phase (that is, how selective was each faction during each phase); and, third, the yearly average of selective deaths per phase (to account for the different durations of phases). Selective deaths amount to forty per cent of the total number of conflict-related civilian deaths and the distribution of selective killings among factions shows a similar pattern to that of the total civilian deaths: forty-four per cent of deaths are attributed to paramilitaries and six per cent to guerrillas. Half of these deaths could not be attributed to any specific group or involved more than one faction ('mixed'). In contrast with the common perception of paramilitaries as indiscriminate murderers, the data show that they were slightly more selective than guerrillas: 54.7 versus 48 per cent, respectively. A third of the killings committed by 'unidentified groups' were selective too.

Table 5.7. Selective civilian deaths by organisation and phase

Perpetrators	t_1	t_2	t_3	t_4	t_5	t_6	Total
	1	4	6	1	0	0	12
Guerrillas	20.0	100.0	42.9	50.0	0.0	0.0	48.0
	0.5	2.7	5.4	4.2	0.0	0.0	1.4
	0	3	7	14	61	3	88
Paramilitaries	0.0	7.4	77.8	82.4	70.9	50.0	54.7
	0.0	2.0	6.3	58.7	20.4	3.8	10.3
	7	5	25	32	31	0	100
Unidentified/Mixed	46.7	38.5	18.2	43.2	44.9	0.0	32.4
	3.7	3.3	22.6	134.3	10.4	0.0	0.5
	8	12	38	47	92	3	200
Total	38.1	20.0	23.8	50.5	59.4	42.9	40.3
	4.3	8.0	34.3	197.2	30.8	3.8	23.5

Based on: VNN.

Table 5.7 provides evidence in support of Kalyvas's first hypothesis that 'as a conflict waxes on, we should observe a shift toward selective violence, especially among incumbents, the ones likely to initiate indiscriminate violence' (Kalyvas 2006: 168-9). In this case, the shift took place after the second phase. As a result, from December 1999 to March 2004 (t_3 to t_5), about eighty per cent of their victims were killed selectively, in contrast to eight per cent or less from July 1996 to November 1999 (t_1 to t_2).

If the results shown above are allocated to the different zones of control, it is possible to determine the number of civilian deaths by zone and thus to examine whether the relation between military control and violence holds in the ways hypothesised by Kalyvas. Table 5.8 provides data on the number of selective deaths by zones of control. The first figure within each cell shows the absolute number; the second shows selective deaths as a percentage of civilian deaths (how selective each faction was in each zone of control). Overall, selective violence was not the predominant form of violence; it was relatively high in zone of control z_1 and lower, but very similar, across zones z_2, z_3 and z_4. Paramilitaries were relatively selective in the zones they controlled or nearly controlled, z_1 and z_2, but also surprisingly selective in zone z_4, where according to the theory they would lack the information necessary to be selective. The pattern of guerrilla violence is even more surprising— being more selective in zones where they had little control, z_1 and z_2, or where the theory predicted that selective violence was unlikely, z_3. In all cases, violence in

zone z_5 is null for reasons already explained.[103]

Table 5.8. Selective civilian deaths by organisation and zone of control

Perpetrators	z_1	z_2	z_3	z_4	z_5	Total
	1	3	3	5	0	12
Guerrillas	16.7	75.0	75.0	45.5	0.0	48.0
	0.1	1.2	2.4	1.6	0.0	0.8
	68	7	6	7	0	88
Paramilitaries	70.1	63.6	15.8	46.7	0.0	54.7
	7.7	2.7	4.8	2.3	0.0	5.6
	52	17	11	20	0	100
Unidentified/Mixed	40.9	4.1	3.5	4.7	0.0	53.2
	5.9	6.5	8.8	6.4	0.0	6.3
	121	27	20	32	0	200
Total	48.8	39.1	30.8	28.1	0.0	40.3
	13.6	10.4	15.9	10.3	0.0	12.6

Based on: VNN

The third figure within each cell shows the number of selective deaths after accounting for the different time spans involved in the aggregation of deaths by zone of control and the different population sizes of the zones of control.[104] It shows the number of selective deaths that would have occurred in each zone during one year if they had a population of 100,000 each. Overall, the intensity of selective violence is relatively flat across zones of control, always in the region of ten to fifteen selective killings per year per 100,000 people. Compared with the expected, theoretical distribution, the observed pattern, shown in Figure 5.3, shows some puzzling results.

On the one hand, the guerrillas' selective violence is very low in absolute terms. Although the theory does not predict any particular level of violence for a given faction, nor symmetry in relation to paramilitary violence, according to its premises guerrillas should have resorted to selective violence in order to stop the paramilitary offensive. Having a significant and long-standing presence in large areas of the city, they probably had good access to information on paramilitary collaborators, so this defensive reaction was at their reach. The distribution of paramilitary violence, on the other hand, follows the expected pattern in a limited way, being unexpectedly high for zones z_1, z_3 and z_4. In other words, paramilitaries seemed to be excessively

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[103] It must be noted that if zone 5 existed, the results would not be very different; it would mean that the selective deaths now allocated to zone 4 would be redistributed between 4 and 5.
[104] Zone of control 1, for instance, is far larger in terms of population and time than zone 3.

violent in the zones they fully controlled (or the government forces) where, according to the theory, violence was unnecessary and surprisingly able to produce selective violence in areas where, so the theory runs, lack of information would preclude selectivity.[105]

Figure 5.3. Conflict-related, selective homicides by organisation and zone of control (annual deaths per 100,000 pop)
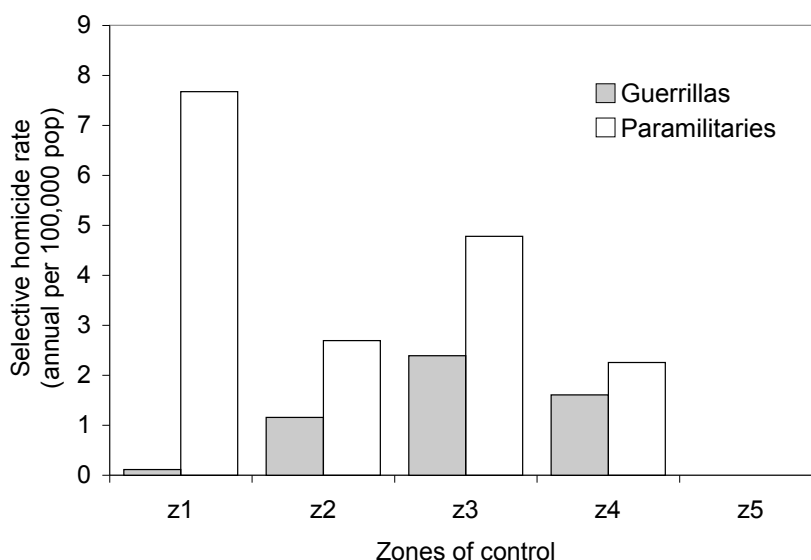
Note: Population estimates by neighbourhood were adjusted to reflect the results of the National Census of Population 2005. Census data available on http://www.dane.gov.co
Sources: Deaths, VNN dataset; population, Alcaldia de Barrancabermeja, 2005.

Thus, when compared with the expected distribution of violence (based on a rational, control-maximising model of behaviour, subject to information constraints), selective violence in Barrancabermeja seemed to be insufficient in some areas, unnecessary in others and even impossible in others. It also seemed to be ineffective as, up until December 2000, it only had a limited effect in curbing the guerrillas' capability to attack civilian and military targets.

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[105] These anomalous results would not change substantially if the boundaries of zone of control 3 changed. This is what would happen: if the threshold were raised by one extra standard deviation (to $\mu + 2\sigma$), the distribution would remain unchanged. If it were raised by two standard deviations (to $\mu + 3\sigma$), the guerrillas' civilian deaths in zone of control 3 would be reallocated to zone 4 (see Figure 4); this would improve the match between theory and evidence. If the threshold is raised by three standard deviations (to $\mu + 4\sigma$), the paramilitaries' civilian deaths could be reallocated to zones of control 2 or 4. Although this change would also improve the match between theory and evidence, it would lead to the disappearance of zone of control 3, which does not seem to be a sound analytical assumption. Thus, although changing these boundaries might lead to a marginal increase in the match between theory and evidence, the key puzzles emerging from the case (see below) would still be the same.

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5.4 Discussion

This section evaluates three key 'anomalies' detected above, explores the relationship between violence and the socioeconomic background of the victims and discusses their theoretical implications. The term 'anomalies' refers to mismatches between the expected and observed results that offer an opportunity to refine and expand the theory, that is, to phenomena that still need to be explained in the context of a research programme (Lakatos 1983: 72).

5.4.1 Guerrillas' selective violence—was it insufficient?

As mentioned earlier, the relatively low level of guerrillas' selective violence in Barrancabermeja poses a question in the context of Kalyvas's 'logic of violence': why did not they kill more people (selectively) in order to stem the paramilitary offensive? There are at least two possible, not mutually exclusive, answers to this question. The first is that by focusing on homicidal violence, the theory may overlook other forms of violence equally effective in punishing collaborators, e.g. kidnappings and destruction or theft of assets. During the first stages of the paramilitary campaign, t_2 and t_3, guerrillas kidnapped on average twenty-one people per year in Barrancabermeja. This also allowed them to capture resources that otherwise might have been directed to the paramilitaries. Although there is no evidence on whether these kidnappings were mainly aimed at punishing collaborators of paramilitaries, it is known that FARC guerrillas used kidnapping, as well as sabotage, to punish palm oil companies accused of funding paramilitary groups in Puerto Wilches, north of Barrancabermeja.

A second explanation has to do with the asymmetric levels of civilian collaboration on which guerrillas and paramilitaries relied. Unlike the insurgents, paramilitaries did not depend critically on broad civilian collaboration to operate in the city. At least until December 2000, they deployed their operations from bases located in the rural hinterland, returning to them after the mission was completed. When those operations involved selective killings, the victims were pointed out mostly by former guerrillas, and not by civilians. Moreover, since the government forces did not

actively pursue them, they did not need any kind of civilian cover for their activities. Thus, although it is likely that significant sectors of the local society were in favour of radical counterinsurgent measures, the number of civilians who provided actual operational support to the paramilitaries was probably insignificant. Therefore, even though punishing paramilitary collaborators was for guerrillas the 'rational' thing to do (in theoretical terms), in reality there were not many of them.

5.4.2 Paramilitaries' selective violence—how was it possible in zones z_3 and z_4?

Paramilitary selective violence in zones of control z_3 and z_4 was unexpectedly high for the theory's standards, as it requires information about guerrilla collaborators, which is to be obtained mostly from civilians who, according to the theory, would not provide it because of fear of reprisal. A possible answer to this question is that Kalyvas's theory may work better in a rural setting, with villages located in close proximity (e.g. as in the Argolid), than in an urban one. In a rural setting, information may be shared among villagers but compartmentalised across villages; therefore, controlling and securing a given village will help a faction to gather information about collaborators in *that* specific village but not about those in the village behind the hill. In a urban setting, by contrast, information may travel more easily as informants may travel across neighbourhoods, from unsafe to safe zones and back, and denounce their neighbours with lesser risk of retaliation. For instance, someone from *comuna* 5 can go downtown (*comuna* 1), discreetly denounce a neighbour as guerrilla collaborator and return home with little risk of being caught by the insurgents.[106]

While such possibility is not farfetched, key informants indicated that in Barrancabermeja paramilitaries were able to identify guerrillas and their supporters even *without* civilian collaboration (I9, I-10, I-11). They relied on former guerrillas who were captured and forced to switch sides, beckoned with the promise of a good position within the paramilitary organisation, or simply bought with money. As shown before, this was a useful mechanism not only to punish collaborators but also

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[106] The author is grateful to J. P. Faguet for this insightful observation.

to ensure that the resources regularly paid by merchants, contractors and companies to guerrillas kept flowing to the paramilitaries, as a 'protection fee'. In fact, as shown in section 5.2, paramilitary cadres such as Camilo Morantes and 'the Baker' had been in the past members of the FARC.

This finding makes evident that the primacy of civilians as a source of information cannot be taken for granted. By incorporating different (alternative or concurrent) sources of information (e.g. official intelligence, paid informants), the model could be able to accommodate a wider range of situations, thus increasing its explanatory power. Interestingly, this finding also draws attention to the asymmetric view of civilians and combatants in the model: while the former are seen as self-interested and opportunistic, the possibility that combatants can behave in a similar fashion, switching sides by force or convenience, is not built into the model.

5.4.3 Paramilitaries' selective violence—excessive in zone z_1?

What was the purpose of so many selective killings in areas fully controlled by the paramilitaries or the government forces, where guerrillas had lost all operational capabilities? Could not these deaths have been avoided considering that these zones had been cleared of guerrillas? Indeed, nearly half the selective deaths recorded during the entire period of the study occurred in zone of control z_1 after March 2001, that is, when no significant guerrilla activity was reported in the city.

Although paramilitaries claimed that insurgent clandestine activities continued in 2002, there is evidence that after 'securing' the city, they continued using violence for a broader range of purposes. As paramilitary territorial control increased, the smuggling of stolen petrol and the protection racket that guerrillas themselves used to run were transferred to the paramilitaries, thus requiring the use of violence for purposes other than curbing collaboration with the enemy. Similarly, social cleansing operations and the enforcement of newly imposed codes of good conduct among civilians, youngsters in particular, also entailed the use of violence and coercion. Finally, social organisations such as the *Organizacion Femenina Popular* (People's Women's Organisation) and trade union leaders were harassed in an effort

to co-opt them or silence them. Indeed, the high incidence of attacks against members of NGOs and grassroots organisations suggests that violence was used to control or eliminate these organisations and reshape a local political arena in which these organisations used to play a prominent role. They had been traditionally involved in political mobilisation and, sometimes, in handling public and international funds that, although meagre, were decisive in gaining influence communities and the electorate within the patron-client regime that prevails in the poorest areas of country (e.g. *juntas de accion communal*).

5.4.4 'Alliances' and socioeconomic segregation

As suggested above, the distribution of violence was linked to the socioeconomic segregation that has characterised the city since its foundation. Table 5.9 shows the distribution of violence across neighbourhoods according to the 'socioeconomic stratum' predominant in each of them; these strata are a proxy indicator of households' incomes, based on the physical conditions of their homes—the lower the stratum, the poorer the household.[107] As the table shows, violence was significantly higher in the lower strata. Paramilitary violence, in particular, was strongly associated with these strata, being more intense in poorer neighbourhoods, where insurgents had a stronger presence.

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[107] The socioeconomic stratum of each home is assessed by the local authorities, following national guidelines, to calculate the subsidies and charges applicable to every household for services such as water and electricity. Stratification was devised as a mechanism for income redistribution.

Table 5.9. Conflict-related violence and socio-economic strata in urban Barrancabermeja: civilian deaths per 100,000 population (annual average, 1996-2004)

		Socioeconomic strata					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
Paramilitaries	Selective	7.0	4.6	5.4	2.4	0.0	0.0
	Indiscriminate	11.7	2.6	2.6	1.5	0.0	0.0
	Total	18.7	7.2	8.0	3.9	0.0	0.0
Guerrillas	Selective	0.8	1.0	0.3	0.7	0.0	0.0
	Indiscriminate	0.0	1.3	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
	Total	0.8	2.4	0.8	0.7	0.0	0.0
Unknown	Selective	10.0	6.1	5.0	0.8	0.0	0.0
	Indiscriminate	10.3	12.9	15.5	15.5	0.0	18.0
	Total	20.3	19.1	20.5	16.4	0.0	18.0
Total	Selective	17.8	11.8	10.7	4.0	0.0	0.0
	Indiscriminate	22.2	16.9	18.6	17.0	0.0	18.0
	Total	40.0	28.7	29.3	21.0	0.0	18.0

Notes: Population estimates by neighbourhood were adjusted to reflect the results of the National Census of Population 2005. Census data available on http://www.dane.gov.co
Sources: Deaths, VNN dataset; population and strata, *Alcaldia de Barrancabermeja* (2005).

Similarly, there is some evidence, admittedly sparse, that shows a relation between violence and the occupational status of victims (see Table 5.10). Two patterns are evident: first, paramilitaries were more likely to target and kill members of social organisations such as NGOs, grassroots organisations and labour unions than any other occupational groups; as mentioned above, this probably reflects their interest in increasing their control over the local political arena. Second, predictably, insurgents usually kidnapped people who, although far from being affluent, lived better off than most in the town: skilled workers ('*profesionales*'), merchants, owners of small businesses, local politicians and civil servants. Nearly two thirds of the insurgent kidnappings in Barrancabermeja were for ransom.

Table 5.10. Occupational categorisation of victims of conflict-related killings and kidnappings in Barrancabermeja, 1996-2004

	Insurgents		Paramilitaries	
	Killings	Kidnapping	Killings	Kidnapping
Peasants, miners and fishermen	0	1	10	8
Cattle ranchers	1	3	1	0
Unskilled workers, employed or own-account	2	5	7	1
Skilled workers	0	21	4	1
Merchants and owners of small businesses	0	13	14	3
Politicians, elected officials, top local civil servants	0	13	0	0
Members of NGOs and grassroots organisations	2	0	27	0
Others	5	2	16	2
Information unavailable	3	13	80	13
Total	13	71	158	28

Sources: Deaths, VNN dataset; kidnappings, *Fondelibertad*.

The association between selective violence and the social background of the victims can be interpreted in different ways. It can be argued that both violence and deprivation came along with the weak presence of the state; thus, violence followed a lack of policing just as water-related diseases would follow a lack of access to basic infrastructure and sanitation. However, this Hobbesian perspective is not consistent with the evidence: homicidal violence and displacement were used to crush the insurgency. Rather than an expression of disorder, violence was used, for the most, to impose (an) order.

Or, maybe, violence was in fact the manifestation of a class struggle between the poor and the local petty bourgeoisie, with insurgents and paramilitaries acting as their respective agents. In Barrancabermeja, the paramilitaries actually managed to provide a safer environment for professionals, contractors, merchants and companies; although they had to pay a 'protection fee' for their services, apparently it was seen as 'good value for money'. However, paramilitaries were never subordinate to the interests of the local elite: the BCB, in particular, was largely an autonomous organisation thanks to the resources they obtained from drug trafficking. Insurgents, on the other hand, hardly embodied the interests of the poor; indeed, after May 1988, their presence only increased their vulnerability.

An alternative interpretation can be drawn from the notion of 'alliance'—if not as developed in the 'control–collaboration–violence' model. As shown above, civilian support was unnecessary in detecting and punishing insurgents and their collaborators. However, civilians were not passive observers of the events. On the one hand, guerrillas preyed on the local elite as well as on companies and oil contractors operating in the city; in this way, they obtained resources to sustain the war in rural areas, where they faced increasing pressure from paramilitaries and government forces. To this effect, they operated from poor neighbourhoods, which they used as a sanctuary. This was possible because the insurgency emerged and grew organically in these neighbourhoods, in particular in those established by the squatter movement in the 1960s and 1970s and in others inhabited by former peasants who were forcefully displaced from rural areas controlled by guerrillas during the 1980s and early 1990s. Throughout the years, insurgent organisations recruited guerrillas from these neighbourhoods and thus were able to tap into their

social networks and territory to run their operations, even though the vast majority of their dwellers gained little from their presence. Although the term 'alliance' does not accurately describe this sort of relation, the neighbourhoods were definitely functional to the operation of insurgents.

Paramilitaries, on the other hand, targeted those neighbourhoods precisely because they provided a platform for the insurgents. Merchants, contractors, skilled workers and some politicians courted and welcomed the paramilitary counterinsurgent campaign and helped them to gain legitimacy. This was evident in the interviews cited above and in the demonstration that followed the announcement of the BCB withdrawal, in March 2004. This support was, to some extent, a predictable effect of the improved conditions of security experienced by them, but also resulted from a public relations campaign launched by the AUC, aimed to portray themselves as a disciplined, quasi-professional army, able to carry out very selective, intelligence-based operations against insurgent collaborators. This campaign included frequent interviews given by paramilitary commanders to the local media and was part of a broader, nationwide campaign led by Castaño. The relation between paramilitaries and the local elite in Barrancabermeja fits better with the notion of alliance, as there was a mutually beneficial exchange involving local and supra-local actors. While this alliance was not essential in operational terms, it was a key part of the paramilitary political strategy, aimed at gaining acceptance from, and integrating into, the local polity.[108]

To conclude, the relation between violence and the victims' socioeconomic background is the correlate of the ability of armed organisations to coalesce with specific social groups and networks, or to create alliances with them, thus making them functional to their operation and legitimisation. Thus, while alliances may enable civilians to 'privatise political violence' (Kalyvas 2006: 4, 332), they may also enable private armies to legitimise criminal violence.

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[108] This was not a new strategy. As Lee noted in 1991: 'The paramilitary movement offers cocaine traffickers a vehicle for acquiring a modicum of social legitimacy. By supporting such paramilitary activities, cocaine dealers have cemented their ties with establishment groups in Colombian society, especially with the land-owning classes and right-wing military factions' (Lee 1991: 19).

5.5 Conclusion

This chapter used some of the ideas and methods put forward by Kalyvas in his *Logic of Violence in Civil War* to explore the use of violence against civilians in the context of an irregular conflict in a Colombian city. Kalyvas's model is a leap forward in defining key variables and laying out the causal links that explain the production of violence in civil wars. In the case under scrutiny, the delimitation of periods and zones of control and the distinction between selective and indiscriminate forms of violence revealed some interesting patterns and anomalies in the motives and mechanisms involved in the production of violence. The evidence presented in this chapter confirms the central role of territorial control, that is, the factions' ability have to prevent or respond effectively to military challenges, in explaining violence against civilians.

However, there are several aspects on which the facts are at odds with the expected outcomes. First, besides territorial control, armed organisations may be interested in achieving other forms of control, depending on their own political and economic agenda but also on the interests of the local social groups. This may lead to new manifestations of violence not necessarily aimed at punishing defectors. In the particular case of Barrancabermeja, political control was an important goal manifested in the killing of members of social organisations that had played a significant role in the local political arena.

Second, some of the anomalies in the performance of the model can be linked to breaches in its assumptions: for instance, civilians are not necessarily the main source of information on defectors and, as other sources become involved, the patterns of violence across zones of control may change. In particular, the hypothesis that violence against civilians would be relatively low or null in contested areas where neither the state nor armed organisations are dominant (because civilians would be too scared to denounce), does not hold.

Likewise, civilian collaboration can be asymmetric: while irregular warfare involves the participation of civilians in the waging of war, the degree to which the warring

parties rely on them may be uneven, thus making the punishment of defectors more likely on one side than on the other. Consequently, any attempt to predict or explain violence, should empirically assess the degree to which armed organisations rely on their collaboration and the particular forms that it takes. While these anomalies do not amount to a 'falsification' of the model, they pose challenges in terms of expanding it to make it better able to account for the unexpected results; in particular, some conditions that were assumed as given in the model, such as the sources of information on collaborators and the level of collaboration itself, may need to be incorporated as variables, and therefore measured, rather than as constants, which are merely assumed.

Lastly, an issue that merits further exploration and discussion is that of collaboration and, in particular, the notion of alliance. As noted in Ch. 1, civilian support is a critical, often decisive input for government forces and armed organisations involved in irregular warfare; this is precisely one of the reasons why they use violence against those who support their enemies. One of the standard assumptions about civilian collaboration has been that it is shaped, by and large, by the major fault lines that defined an armed conflict. In other words, the same motives and causes that prompt a confrontation at a national scale, e.g. toppling an oppressive dictatorship or redistributing land and other assets, would shape the allegiance of individuals, groups, political parties, social organisations and local elites in the local sphere towards the warring parties. Either through indoctrination, propaganda and coercion or by effect of polarisation, the local interests and conflicts would eventually be blurred or subsumed within the major conflict.

By introducing the notion of alliance, Kalyvas made perhaps his most significant contribution to the literature on civil wars. Rather than assuming increasing identity between the interests of armed organisations and civilians, he suggested that they could remain distinct and yet be the basis for collaboration (Kalyvas 2003a). In the control-collaboration-violence model he went a step further, giving civilians a crucial role in identifying the targets of violence and even allowing them to take control over violence itself by the back door, without even having to wield a machete, via malicious denunciation. Thus, although the notion of alliance allows for a variety of agreements between local and supra-local actors, the control–

collaboration–violence model underscores a very specific form of alliance in which civilians take part in an individualistic, opportunistic way. In doing so, he refashioned collaboration in line with the rational, self-interested conception of human behaviour that has increasingly permeated the study of conflict and violence during the last decade and which, until recently had focused on the motives and incentives of combatants.

Barrancabermeja, however, did not offer evidence to back this view. First, because the identification of targets relied less on denunciation and more on information given by former guerrillas who joined the paramilitaries. And second, because informants (for this research) were particularly wary about revealing details about their links or even their sympathy or opposition towards armed organisations. Their prudence was understandable as, by the time the interviews were done, paramilitaries were still in control of the city and investigations about embarrassing links between them and local politicians were launched across the country.[109] From the evidence above it seems reasonable to conclude that whereas paramilitaries did not require substantial civilian collaboration, insurgents relied extensively on it and had deep roots at least on certain neighbourhoods; indeed, as the figures show, the counterinsurgent campaign succeeded precisely after paramilitaries scaled up their campaign of killings and caused the forced displacement of civilians from several neighbourhoods. But, beyond these findings, Barrancabermeja shed little light regarding the nature and extent of alliances.

To explore this issue in further detail, the next chapter focuses on south Bolivar, a sub-region of the Middle Magdalena Valley where alliances between armed organisations, local elites and social organisations acquired particular salience and manifested themselves in episodes of massive social and political mobilisation. As anywhere else, in south Bolivar links between armed organisations and civilians have been surrounded by an atmosphere of rumour and secrecy but, since these episodes were widely reported by the press, there is a decent, if not abundant,

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[109] Links with guerrillas could have deadly consequences. Links with paramilitaries could cause political embarrassment to politicians and local leaders. It is worth noting that while the investigation on links between the mayor and paramilitaries was dropped because of lack of evidence, when his political party announced their own investigation, he resigned his membership effectively aborting the inquiry.

amount of evidence to rely on. Furthermore, south Bolivar was the most contested area in the region: only a handful of *municipios* accounted for half the hostilities and nearly a third of the combatants killed in action across the region.

The chapter will show how events in the national and local political arenas get intertwined creating opportunities for alliances between supra-local armed organisations and local social organisations and local elites. In doing so, it will question the individualistic version of alliances and show how they can go well beyond the individual, private sphere to which they were confined in the control-collaboration-violence. It will also show that, even in wartime, local politics matters and, indeed, has the potential to influence military outcomes, thus tackling an aspect that Kalyvas overlooked, namely, the relevance that contentious politics in general— not only violent—may have in explaining violence (Tarrow 2007: 592). What is more, the next chapter will provide evidence that shows how, despite the involvement of armed organisations in criminal activities, notoriously the coca/cocaine industry, they were able to engage in political negotiation and promote political mobilisation.

6. MORE THAN VICTIMS? CIVILIAN COLLABORATION, LOCAL POLITICS AND ALLIANCES IN SOUTH BOLIVAR

The scale and forms of violence against civilians provide significant clues about the roles they play in irregular wars, as previous chapters show. Explaining violence demands a better understanding of those roles and, in general, of the relationship between civilians and armed organisation. This chapter examines the specific forms this relationship assumed in south Bolivar during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The chapter supports the notion that civilians are not just victims or passive observers of violence as they engage in talks, negotiations and alliances with armed organisations to protect their rights or advance their interests. However, it challenges claims that such deals are primarily individualistic or opportunistic; indeed, it shows that political parties and social organisations still continue aggregating and representing local interests, even amid conflict, and act as a bridge between the population, armed organisations and the state. In doing so, the chapter also questions the dichotomy between organised crime and politics and shows how the involvement of criminals in armed organisations and of the latter in criminal activities (e.g. the production and trade of coca paste) does not preclude their participation in local politics or strip their activity of their intrinsic political nature. This finding is particularly significant considering that the largest coca-cultivated areas in the Middle Magdalena Valley were located precisely in south Bolivar.

The first part outlines the debates addressed in the chapter and its intended contribution to those debates. The second part provides a brief regional background on south Bolivar, an isolated region of Colombia with limited presence of the state and increasing influence of the insurgency. The third part summarises the evolution of armed conflict in this region during the late 1990s and early 2000s and shows how violence against civilians reached unprecedented heights in 1999 and 2000 by effect

of a counterinsurgent campaign in which paramilitary groups and government forces managed to push back the leftist insurgency. The fourth part describes the links between civilian and armed organisations, their visible manifestations and their effects on the evolution of armed conflict.

6.1. Crime and the demise of politics in contemporary armed conflicts

One of the crucial aspects in the debate about the nature of contemporary wars is the relation between civilians, armed organisations and the state in a context of armed conflict. This debate has been permeated by the increasing influence of neoclassical economics on the way the behaviour of combatants and civilians is modelled, which underscores issues of financial feasibility and individual profit over the political projects and social roots of conflicts (Cramer 2002). Furthermore, many recent armed conflicts seem, in fact, increasingly driven by the personal appetites of politicians, warlords and combatants, attracted by the opportunities of power and enrichment that conflict and disorder create.

This chapter focuses on two related aspects of this debate. The first aspect concerns the involvement of civilians in the production of violence. It is well known that civilians can be mobilised for the production of violence and, sometimes, can be formidably effective at it. However, their role is less obvious when violence is produced by members of armed organisations and, therefore, they are not involved first-hand in the process itself. Needless to say, civilians often carry the heaviest burden in recent conflicts: the civilian death toll has usually exceeds that of the combatants, and those lucky to survive are often displaced and stripped of their assets. But civilians often play their part in the production of violence—unarmed, they may seem powerless, but they provide key inputs, necessary for the military and political advancement of armed organisations, particularly in irregular conflicts, where armed conflict takes place amid the population.

In his influential work on civil wars, Kalyvas suggested that civilians participate in the production of violence in irregular conflicts at both ends of the process: they are

victims but also partners in 'alliances' with armed organisations, thus winning 'a decisive advantage over local rivals' while allowing those organisations to 'tap into local networks and generate mobilisation' (2006: 383). These alliances, he suggested, may consist of individual transactions between civilians and armed organisations, whereby the latter use information provided by the former to eliminate enemy collaborators, thus creating opportunities for civilians to take advantage by accusing foes and competitors ('malicious denunciation'). Ultimately, he concluded, political violence is privatised (Kalyvas 2006). While, the previous chapter tested his claims in relation with the spatial distribution of violence, this chapter focuses on whether the notion of alliance adequately captures the relation between civilians and armed organisations.

A second aspect to examine is whether the involvement of armed organisations in criminal activities, such as the drug trade, has transformed the relation between civilians and armed organisations. As we noted in Ch. 1, the standard view on the nature of irregular wars assumed that insurgencies and other forms of collective political violence were aimed to seize power and transform society in accordance with a set of ideological principles. In line with this view, it was assumed that the state would compete for civilian allegiance mainly through rewards, propaganda and indoctrination—resorting only marginally to fear and violence. However, it has been argued, in pseudo-wars predatory behaviour towards civilians becomes widespread—either as a result of the generalised misconduct of combatants or as a planned strategy of economic exploitation, exclusion or elimination. In short, the convergence between armed conflict and crime would lead to a de-politicisation of their relationship and to increasing abuses and violence, manifested in massive forced displacement, asset stripping, slavery or subtler forms of economic exploitation.

Map 6.1. Middle Magdalena Valley and the towns of south Bolivar and Yondo
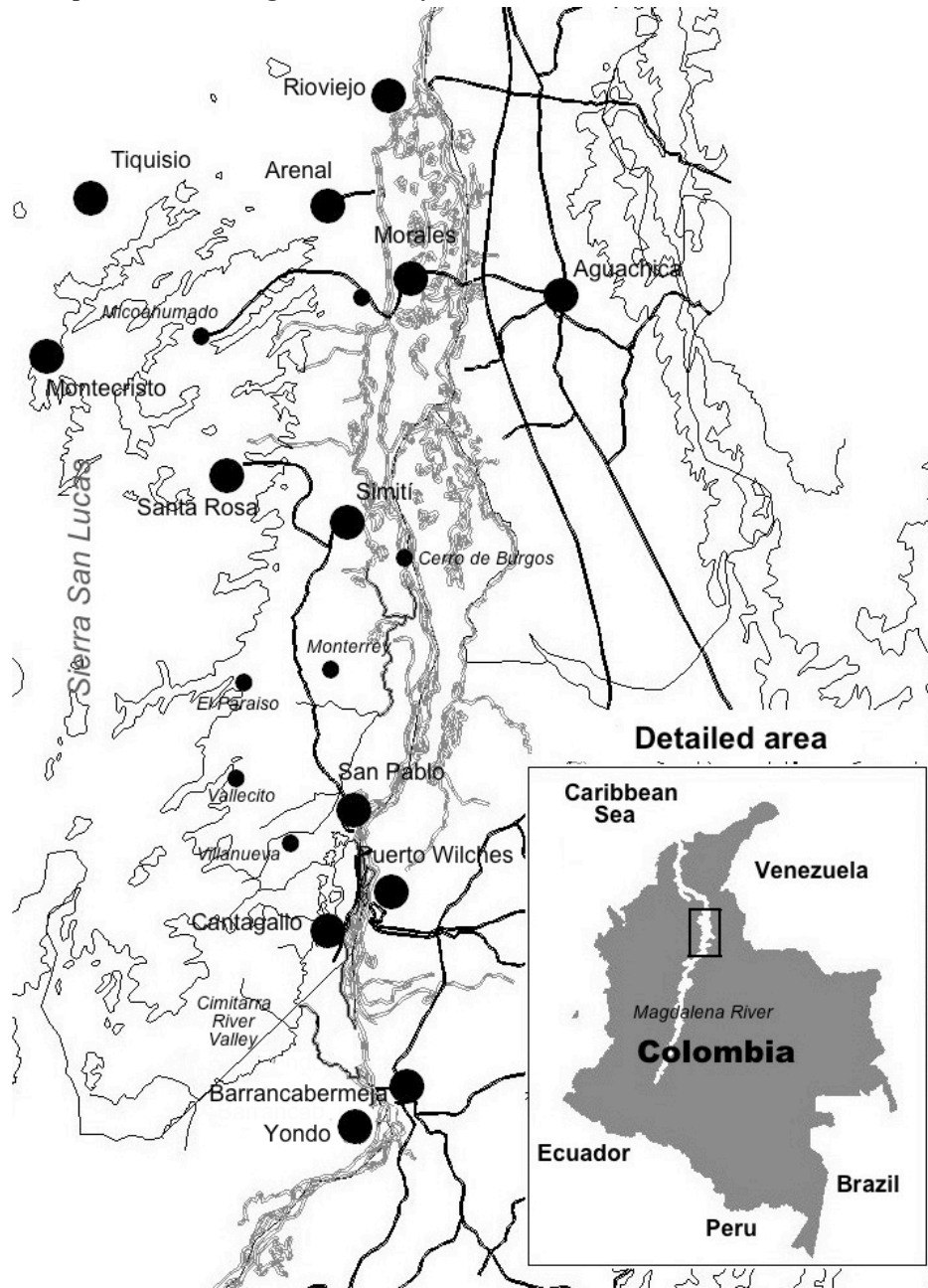
Note: South Bolivar comprises the towns on the west side of the Magdalena River, which splits into several streams or 'arms' (visible in the map between San Pablo and Rioviejo) creating marshes, shallows and some small riverine islands that 'emerge' only during the dry seasons. Source: Map drawn by Cesar Moreno, used with his permission.

This chapter challenges this claim by looking at the alliances between armed organisations and civilians in south Bolivar, a sub-region of the Middle Magdalena Valley where coca crops spread during the 1990s and became a substantial source of income for locals and armed organisations alike—insurgents and paramilitaries. Whilst it may not be representative of conditions across the country, it offers an

opportunity to assess claims sometimes heard in the literature, suggesting the Colombian case as proof of the causal links between criminalisation and violence against civilians. For instance, Bibes argued that 'traditional revolutionary movements [in Colombia] have turned more violent as a result of the drug trade' (Bibes 2001: 244). Likewise, Beardsley and McQuinn recently claimed that the FARC 'originally provided numerous public goods such as education when it began operating, but as it became more focused on narcotic sales it became more of a menace to the local population' (2009: 631). The findings presented in this chapter cast doubts about such simplistic connection and suggest that despite their participation in the drug trade, and their lack of credible, coherent political programmes, their relation with civilians was not reduced to just violence and coercion; they used their power to favour specific social groups and organisations, as well as political parties, and push their agendas in the local sphere and beyond. Moreover, it suggests that policing and controlling the regional coca paste market required a measure of coercion and sanctions rather than a massive use of violence.

6.2. South Bolivar—beyond the edge of the state

South Bolivar consists of ten *municipios* on the west side of the Middle Magdalena River Valley, in the department of Bolivar.[110] Despite its central position in relation to the largest Colombian cities (Bogota, Medellin and Barranquilla) access to south Bolivar is still cumbersome and some rural areas can be reached only by foot or mule.

The two most salient geographical features of this subregion are the Magdalena River, which traverses the region from south to north, and sierra San Lucas, a mountainous area with 'two million hectares of tropical and subtropical forest' believed to be 'the last refuge of a considerable number of threatened species' (Davalos 2001: 71-2). In between, there is a flat area, scattered with marshes, where

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[110] More specifically, the area consists of nine *municipios* of Bolivar (Arenal, Cantagallo, Montecristo, Morales, Rioviejo, San Pablo, Santa Rosa del Sur, Simiti, and Tiquisio), but I also included one in Antioquia (Yondo), because it is part of the Cimitarra Valley, where key events described in this paper occurred.

most towns of the region are located. While some of them were founded in colonial times (e.g. Simiti), in rural areas colonisation took place well into the twentieth century and, in some cases, as late as in the 1980s.

Colonisation has been fuelled by successive economic booms, e.g. oil, rice, gold, coca, and by migrations from regions such as Santander and Boyaca prompted by political violence—first during '*la violencia*' and later by the spread of paramilitary groups in the 1980s. By 2000, the estimated population of the region was 200,000; approximately sixty per cent lived in rural areas.

Although some towns remained firmly controlled by mainstream 'traditional' parties, radical social and political movements exerted significant influence over the population, particularly in rural areas. Given the precarious presence of the state, Catholic priests were very active in organising the provision of basic services and infrastructure and in mediating between these communities and the departmental authorities (I-4, see list of interviewees in Ch. 2). In the heyday of Liberation Theology, some priests encouraged the peasantry to participate in the squatter movement and disseminated revolutionary ideals in their parishes. Likewise, the oil workers' union, USO, and the national peasant association, ANUC, encouraged the squatter movement, which was sometimes successful. In 1967, for instance, the government allocated 160,000 hectares in the rural areas of Yondo (El Tigre and San Luis Beltran) and Barrancabermeja in response to peasant mobilisation (Zamosc 1986: 43).

However, violence and conflict over access to land, characteristic of the colonisation process in several regions, including the Middle Magdalena Valley, had marginal importance in south Bolivar. San Pablo, for instance, 'has not experienced the basic conflict over access to land' as 'no large landowners have attempted to expropriate the peasants' (Restrepo 1994: 210). Three factors may account for this exceptional outcome: first, the geographical features of the region (mountains, marshes, location) are not attractive for intensive agriculture; San Pablo's rice growers, for instance, could not mechanise their crops and could not compete with those from Tolima and Huila, who did (Restrepo 1994). Second, at least until the 1960s conflicts over access to land often involved property owned by foreign oil companies or the state-

owned *Ecopetrol*, which was no longer as valuable for them as the productivity in the oil fields declined; therefore, while land titling still involved peasant protest it was not as politically contentious and volatile as in other zones, where the interest of large landowners were also at stake. Third, in some areas (e.g. the Cimitarra Valley) the presence of FARC guerrillas may have deterred large landowners from attempts to expropriate peasant lands, just as it did in the early years of this organisation (i.e. 'armed colonisation').[111]

Geography and the limited presence of the state made the region a fertile ground for guerrilla movements. Indeed, mountainous terrain, thick vegetation and marshes are textbook examples of the kind of terrain most suitable for guerrilla warfare (Harkavy and Neuman 2001:79). [112] The National Liberation Army (ELN), founded by young intellectuals inspired by the Cuban Revolution, operated in the rural areas of San Pablo and Yondo since the late 1960s. Despite important setbacks, they operated almost uninterruptedly in the region, establishing its headquarters in sierra San Lucas. The Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces (FARC) did not have a significant presence in the region until the 1980s, when they were pushed out from the south by effect of the counterinsurgent campaign that had Puerto Boyaca as epicentre (Gutierrez and Baron 2005).[113] As a result, south Bolivar was flagged by the central government as a 'red zone' and treated accordingly—sometimes with social programmes aimed to strengthen the presence of the state, e.g. the *Plan Nacional de Rehabilitacion* (PNR), but most often with repression especially in areas such as the Cimitarra and Santo Domingo valleys, where FARC and ELN insurgents, respectively, were known to roam (I-22, I-24).

Political and fiscal decentralisation and the institutional reforms introduced with the constitutional reform of 1991 (expansion of civil rights and guarantees, increase in

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[111] Exploring the relative significance of these factors goes beyond the scope of this work.
[112] Guerrilla commanders probably followed Guevara's advice that the most favourable settings for guerrilla warfare were 'zones difficult to reach, either because of dense forests, steep mountains [and] impassable deserts or marshes' (1985: 65). Indeed, insurgent strongholds are often located in rural, isolated areas as they offer several advantages for this kind of warfare (Kalyvas 2006: 132-6) and there is some evidence that mountainous countries are more conflict prone (Collier et al. 2009).
[113] Both sierra San Lucas and the Cimitarra Valley met four of five ideal conditions required to be 'good tactical bases' as defined by Mao: difficult terrain, remote from modern transportation; cultivable land; a friendly local population; and hospitable climate (cited by Harkavy and Neuman 2001: 194).

social expenditure, participatory democracy) had a limited success in strengthening the presence and legitimacy of the state in the region. As in the rest of the country, increased fiscal transfers from the central government funded the expansion of education and health services. But these advances were capitalised by the insurgency, which managed to co-opt the local authorities and, although they did not lack sympathisers, coercion was often needed to enforce their will (Peñate 1999).

In the 1990s, the coca boom reinvigorated the regional economy but reinforced the disconnection between the population and the Colombian state, pushing them into illegality and making them subject to the repressive measures implemented as part of the 'war on drugs'. Although coca crops in South Bolivar never represented more than five per cent of the national estimates, they were a vital source of income for many in the region—not only cultivators but also for guerrillas and the local economy in general.[114] Official estimates based on satellite imagery suggest that crops grew during the 1990s and reached approximately 6,000 hectares by 2001.

Approximately forty per cent of that area was maintained by small cultivators in 2,000 plots of less than three hectares. The cultivation of coca has low (technical and economic) barriers to entry and attracted both large and small landholders and even town dwellers, who rented small plots to grow it. The transformation of coca leaves into coca paste is not technically demanding; it is usually done in facilities close to cultivation areas. It enables growers to transport their produce in an easy and inexpensive way, as a ton of coca leaves can be reduced into a small, light package that can be carried in a handbag and taken to the town to be sold.

At least until 1998, buyers of coca paste could freely access the local markets, competing with each other and paying the producers in cash and on the spot (Fonseca et al. 2005: 61, I-25). In towns like Santa Rosa, coca had a significant economic impact, visible in the housing market—a small three-storey building, with a shop in the ground floor, located near the central square, could cost as much as a flat in a middle-class neighbourhood in Bogota (I-33). Even merchants who were not directly involved in the coca economy amassed a capital over the years and become

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[114] The five per cent estimate is based on data published by the UNODC Monitoring Project of Illicit Crops (SIMCI-II). Available on http://www.unodc.org/colombia/es/ simci_project.html

the 'economic and political elite of south Bolivar' (Fonseca et al. 2005: 69). Insurgents also benefited from the trade: while the ELN charged a fee of Col $50,000 per kilogram (approx. $25), the FARC raised a ten percent of the price paid by the buyer, that is, approximately Col$200,000 (approx. $100) (Fonseca et al. 2005: 63). The rise of the coca economy went hand in hand with widespread illegality; according to a former member of the local cabinet, in the late 1990s more than half of the vehicles in Santa Rosa had been stolen in Venezuela and smuggled into the region (I-33).[115]

6.3. The struggle for territorial and political control in south Bolivar

This section describes the evolution of armed conflict in south Bolivar during the late 1990s and early 2000s. The first part shows how the insurgents challenged the state in the region and, simultaneously, grasped the political opportunities opened by the institutional reforms of the early 1990s to increase their political local power in south Bolivar. The second part shows how the paramilitary forces of Carlos Castaño tipped the military balance against the insurgency forcing it to retreat to the mountains. The third part provides a general idea of the magnitude and outcomes of armed conflict during these years, and its impact on the population. The first two parts are based on press reports obtained from newspapers, magazines and reports (e.g. *El Tiempo*, *Vanguardia*, *Semana*, *Noche y Niebla*) as well as on interviews with locals. The third part is based on the VNN dataset.

6.3.1 The rise of the insurgency

Kidnappings, extortion and fees on the cultivation and trade of coca, among other sources, enabled the insurgency to increase their manpower and challenge the state's authority in several regions during the 1990s. Moreover, the decentralisation reforms, originally aimed at strengthening the capacity and legitimacy of the Colombian state, had a limited (and perhaps counterproductive) effect, as municipal

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[115] Of course, legal crops and other economic activities (e.g. beans, cocoa, mining) persisted.

governments were influenced or co-opted by insurgents in the areas they controlled.

In south Bolivar, the expansion of coca crops during the 1990s improved the insurgency's finances and allowed them to establish themselves as regulators of the coca paste market, playing a role that, for obvious reasons, the Colombian state could not perform (Fonseca et al. 2005: 63-9). Although coca crops in South Bolivar never represented more than five per cent of the national estimates, they reinvigorated the regional economy and became a vital source of income for many in the region. Furthermore, the cultivation of coca reinforced the disconnection between the population and the Colombian state as thousands of peasants, coca pickers and cultivators were pushed into illegality and ostracised as part of the 'war on drugs'.[116]

As noted above, the decentralisation reforms were capitalised by the insurgency as they gained influence over the local authorities through persuasion, negotiation or coercion. In 1997, an intelligence report produced by the military and leaked to the media, tagged several mayors in the Middle Magdalena Valley as linked with guerrillas including the mayor of San Pablo (*Semana* 19 May 1997). Richani reported how in San Pablo, Cantagallo and Yondo, FARC guerrillas organised town meetings in which 'candidates were freely chosen' before the election. Their party affiliation was irrelevant and 'yet, by accepting the rules of the game set by guerrillas, they qualif[ied] for election' (2002: 89). Furthermore, there is evidence that guerrillas regulated and policed local matters in villages and rural areas. For instance, Davalos reported how local environmental groups, endorsed by the FARC, successfully banned hunting and logging near the villages of Santo Domingo, San Luis and Pozo Azul and how the ELN 'created, imposed and enforced the most comprehensive scheme of forest conservation and environmental management measures in San Lucas' (2001: 72).[117]

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[116] The five per cent estimate is based on data published by the UNODC Illicit Crops Monitoring Project (SIMCI-II). The data are available on http://www.unodc.org/colombia/es/ simci_project.html. According to the same source, by 2001, more than 80 percent of the coca plots in the region (out of approximately 2,600 identified using satellite imagery) were less than three hectares in size.
[117] Controversially, the enforcement of this scheme involved what Davalos called 'gunpoint conservation', e.g. planting landmines, and was probably motivated by the strategic value of the forest for guerrillas (Davalos 2001: 74-6). The measures mentioned by Davalos were in place at the time of her visit to San Lucas, in 1998.

In 1997, the insurgents sabotaged the local elections, apparently in an attempt to maintain in power the existing officials, many of whom were under their influence, and also motivated by fears that some of the candidates, who sympathised with paramilitary groups, could win seats in the councils or even be elected as mayors (Gutierrez 2004b: 35). The sabotage also had a symbolic purpose as it showed the inability of the Colombian state to perform one of the fundamental operations in a democracy. The sabotage consisted of kidnappings and death threats against the candidates, destruction and theft of ballots and attacks against electoral staff and facilities. It was widely covered by national and regional newspapers and, indeed, very effective as the elections had to be postponed or repeated in several towns (*El Espectador* 27 August 1997; *El Colombiano* 12 September 1997; *El Heraldo* 3 September 1997, *El Nuevo Siglo* 26 August and 17 September 1997, *El Espectador* 24 June 1998, *Vanguardia* 17 May 1998).

The sabotage faced mixed responses from the population in different towns. In Yondo, it provoked a rift among local politicians as an agreement reached among the contestants to boycott the election was breached and, as a result, the mayor was elected with only seven votes. The opposition formed an alternative government, a local *junta*, apparently backed by the FARC, and demanded new elections. The winners refused to resign their posts but were kidnapped by insurgents and forced to do so. They later denounced an alliance between the insurgency and 'politicians from the Cimitarra River Valley', an area with heavy presence of insurgents (*El Colombiano* 14 March 1998, *El Espectador* 7 May 1998, *El Tiempo* 6 July 1998).

In Santa Rosa, the sabotage was less successful: although the rural polling stations could not open, in the town the elections went ahead as planned. When the insurgents demanded the resignation of the elected mayor and councilmen, the locals convened a meeting with guerrilla commanders and dismissed their threats, supported by a crowd of their followers. The mayor and councilmen took their posts in January, as planned, and no reprisals followed (I-3). As the cases of Yondo and Santa Rosa show, the relation between local elites and the insurgency was marked by dialogue, compromises and veiled partnerships between them; but the use of threats and intimidation during the electoral sabotage of 1997 left a sour taste among

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politicians and, arguably, helped the paramilitaries to cultivate local support (Gutierrez 2004b).

Besides the electoral sabotage, guerrillas escalated their attacks against police and military facilities and, in general, against the state's institutions. The town of Simiti, for instance, was the target of sustained incursions by ELN guerrillas who, eventually, forced the police to leave the town and raised their own black-and-red flag on top of the abandoned police station (*El Heraldo* 19 August 1997). The insurgents also destroyed and looted the local branch of *Caja Agraria*, a state-owned bank specialised in services to farmers and cattle-ranchers (*El Tiempo* 2 July and 17 August 1997). In a sign of their intent on replacing the state, they pledged to protect the town from petty criminals and, reportedly, offered loans to peasants (Aranguren 2001: 334).

The rise of the insurgency during the second half of the 1990s also had consequences beyond the region as they escalated attacks against vehicles travelling along the *Troncal de la Paz*, one of the main roads that connect the Colombian capital with the Atlantic Coast. Buses and trucks were often set on fire to punish companies that failed to pay protection fees. Travellers were randomly stopped in improvised checkpoints and kidnapped for ransom.

6.3.2 The counterinsurgent campaign

Paramilitary organisations mushroomed across the country during the 1980s and 1990s as local collective responses to the insurgency or simply as the private armies of drug-traffickers, cattle ranchers and local patrons. But south Bolivar did not develop their own groups, possibly because it lacked large landholders, agriculturalists or merchants who could finance such force—or who were so badly affected by the insurgency in the first place. Up until 1997, only paramilitary groups based on neighbouring regions occasionally forayed into this region. However, in 1998, things changed radically as Carlos Castaño and the Peasant Self-Defences of Cordoba and Uraba (ACCU) entered the region having the defeat of the ELN as the main purpose—but also well aware of the rents that could be derived from the coca economy and the support that could be obtained from politicians, merchants and

companies targeted by the insurgency.[118]

Roughly speaking, the ACCU's counterinsurgent campaign progressed in two stages: the first aimed to secure the villages and towns in the valley and cordon the sierra; the second, to reduce the rural areas under their control. The first stage started in June 1998 and consisted of raids against town and villages such as Montecristo, Tiquisio, Cerro Burgos, Moralitos, Buenavista and Micoahumado (*El Tiempo* 31 August, 7 March 1998, 5 and 9 September 1998; *El Espectador* 1 September 1998; *Vanguardia* 6 March, 20 September and 22 November 1998; *El Pais* 19 September 1998). The paramilitaries quickly moved into the region and established checkpoints in crossroads and other points of access to the region. They also distributed leaflets, reminding guerrillas of the harsh conditions they had to endure and enticing them to join their ranks. As the insurgency reacted to the paramilitary incursions, the media reported clashes between paramilitaries and combined forces of FARC and ELN in July and September near Monterrey, a village halfway between San Pablo and Simiti (*Vanguardia* 11 and 17 July 1998, *El Tiempo* 25 September 1998).

During the second stage, after securing the towns and setting up bases in the valley, the paramilitaries launched new attacks on rural villages, along tributaries of the Magdalena river such as the Boque, Inanea, Santo Domingo and Cimitarra rivers, until then controlled by the insurgency. In the north, the fighting took place in rural areas such as Regencia and Villa Uribe, near Montecristo, and Colorado, near Tiquisio (*Noche y Niebla* 11: 191; 12: 119; 14: 82). In the south, the action focused in Yondo and the Cimitarra river valley. Paramilitary raids on rural villages along the Cimitarra River were followed by insurgent attacks on paramilitary camps; these, in turn, prompted the reaction of the military, leading to counterinsurgent operations, sometimes supported by riverine units and aerial fire (*Noche y Niebla* 16: 94, 105, 166; 19: 52, 94, 106). During 2002, the fighting continued in the Cimitarra river valley; paramilitaries periodically attacked and plundered villages and occasionally clashed with FARC and ELN insurgents (*Noche y Niebla* 23: 77, 117; 24: 69, 86; 25:

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[118] Unlike most paramilitary organisations, the ACCU launched several operations in geographic areas well beyond their original turf, including south Bolivar and Meta. This seemed to have the double purpose of increasing the rents obtained by the group and buttressing Castaño's political career. Indeed, he promoted a national confederation of paramilitary organisations known as the United Self-Defences of Colombia or AUC, which he used as a vehicle to advocate negotiations with the national government and to promote himself, with great success, in the national political arena.

67, 72).

In contrast with the swift progress made during the first stage, the second was more costly for the paramilitaries and, ultimately, had limited success. As they established permanent bases and outposts across the region, they became more vulnerable to ambushes and the insurgents managed to strike them on several occasions from 2000 to 2003, causing a notable rise in paramilitary casualties (*El Tiempo* 28 December 2002; *Noche y Niebla* 27: 194, 207, 208; *Voz* 14 January 2004). The insurgents also resorted to the use of land mines to resist the counterinsurgent campaign in areas such as Santo Domingo, Villaflor and Micoahumado, but they could not to reverse the progress made by paramilitaries and, by 2003 a stalemate had been reached, with the insurgency alive but confined to the most isolated, mountainous areas and the state and paramilitaries in control of towns and villages in the valley.

Although the counterinsurgent campaign only led to a slight reduction in the level of insurgent activity across the region, it was successful in several aspects. It forced the guerrillas back into the sierra and, as result, the proportion of insurgent events taking place in the towns fell from twenty-six per cent in 1997-1998 to less than ten per cent between 2001 and 2003, and was null in 2004. [119] It also led an ostensible reduction in the number of kidnappings in the region (see Figure 6.1), improving the security conditions of local politicians and merchants and allowing oil palm companies to expand their plantations from 250 hectares in 2000 to 3,600 in 2004. Indeed, in San Pablo, oil palm became the most important crop in terms of planted area, even above coca.[120]

Of course, the campaign imposed a heavy cost on the rural population, especially in insurgent-controlled areas. Beside the risks posed by armed conflict itself (e.g. raids, clashes, killings), peasants had to endure the embargo imposed by the paramilitaries, who rationed the amount of food and other goods that could be brought into the rural areas of south Bolivar. Moreover, the aerial spraying of coca crops often damaged

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[119] The figures provided in this section came from three sources: the VNN dataset and the official databases on forced displacement and kidnapping, developed by *Red de Solidaridad Social* (later known as *Accion Social*) and *Fondelibertad*, two Colombian government agencies. The figures cover twelve *municipios* in south Bolivar and one in Antioquia (Yondo); the latter belongs to the Cimitarra Valley, one of the key theatres in the armed confrontation in this region.
[120] According to figures provided by the Secretary of Agriculture in Cartagena, Boliva.

staple and cash crops, eroding their livelihoods (*Noche y Niebla* 21: 111).

Figure 6.1. Insurgent activity in south Bolivar and Yondo, 1996-2004
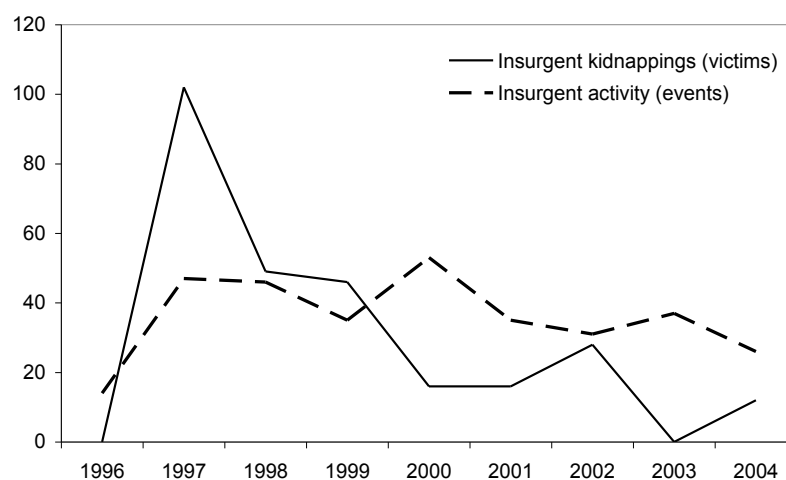
Sources: Activity, VNN dataset; kidnappings, *Fondelibertad*.
Note: Includes 32 passengers of flight kidnapped on April 1999. Excludes first half of 1996.

To make things worse, the paramilitaries reorganised the coca paste market: in the past, buyers from so-called 'cartels' were free to enter the region and producers could sell the paste to the buyer of their choice. Under the paramilitaries, only a handful of buyers were authorised to buy coca paste. The price was set at Col $2 million (approximately US$1,000) per kilogram of coca paste and attempts to sell the coca paste to non-authorised buyers outside the region were severely punished. Furthermore, the authorised buyers often paid their purchases with undated IOU notes rather than cash (I-33; I-8; I-27; Gutierrez 2004b: 35). Although the interviewees could not confirm it, it is very likely that the authorised buyers were all at the service of the well-known drug lord Carlos Jimenez, (aka '*Macaco*'), who was also one of the three top commanders of the *Bloque Central Bolivar*, a new paramilitary organisations which, by 2002, had taken over the previously existing structures in south Bolivar and other Colombian regions (*Semana* 9 June 2007). In this respect, and despite the casualties, the paramilitary campaign was also a success.

In 2002, paramilitary groups signed an agreement with the Uribe administration pledging to demobilise their troops as part of a 'peace and justice' process underpinned by an *ad-hoc* judicial framework that established sentences of up to eight years for their members, conditioned to the full confession of their crimes.

However, the demobilisation process as such in south Bolivar had to wait until 2006, when they formally withdrew their troops from south Bolivar (OAS-MAPP 2006).[121]

6.3.3 Magnitude, trends and outcomes of armed conflict

The intensification of armed conflict and its impact on civilians during these years is evident in the statistics. The number of insurgents killed in action rose steadily during the second half of the 1990s; as noted above paramilitaries suffer most of their casualties from 2000 onwards (see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2. Combatants' killed in action in south Bolivar and Yondo, 1996-2004
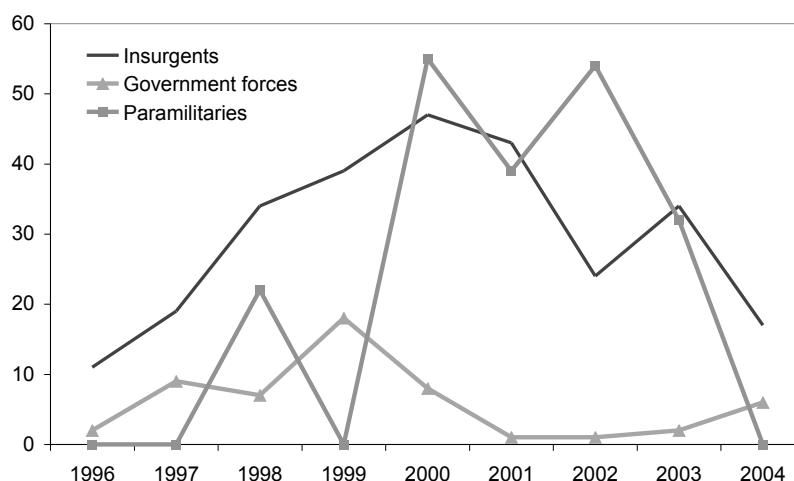
Source: VNN dataset.[122]

Table 6.1 summarises the death tolls produced in the course of the conflict from July 1996 to December 2004. It shows that the bulk of the counterinsurgent campaign rested on the shoulders of the military: approximately two thirds of the guerrillas killed in action died in clashes with government forces. Out of 215 hostile events (clashes and uncontested attacks) registered in the region from 1996 to 2004, only a quarter involved guerrillas and paramilitaries. It also shows that government forces and paramilitaries never inflicted any losses to each other; thus, even though the

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[121] However, paramilitaries continued threatening human rights workers and Catholic priests in south Bolivar (*El Tiempo* 15 April 2008).
[122] This part is mainly based on the N&N dataset, developed for this research, using as a source the *Noche y Niebla* reports.

conflict involved three sets of actors (government forces, insurgent groups and paramilitary groups), in practice it developed as a two-sided conflict.[123] While paramilitaries played a modest role in fighting the insurgency, they were quite effective in killing civilians, accounting for approximately two thirds of the civilian death toll. Most civilians were killed in deliberate attacks; less than twelve per cent died as a direct effect of warfare. However, the ratio of civilians to combatants killed was well below the levels seen in 'new wars' (Kaldor 1999: 8); in other words, despite intense violence against civilians, armed conflict as such (i.e. hostilities) still was the dominant aspect of the confrontation, as reflected in the number of lethal casualties it produced.[124]

Table 6.1. Death tolls according to groups involved in hostilities, 1996-2004

| Warring forces | Combatants | | | | Civilians |
	Government	Guerrillas	Paramilitaries	Total	
Government forces	0	176	0	176	8
Guerrillas	56	0	202	258	61
Paramilitaries	0	86	0	86	227
Others/mixed	1	6	0	7	121
Total	57	268	202	527	366

Based on the VNN dataset. Notes: Figures in columns represent deaths inflicted *to* a group; figures in rows represent deaths inflicted *by* a group. Civilian deaths occurred as a direct result of hostilities are included in the last row ('others/mixed'); the first three rows correspond to killings out of combat. Government forces include members of all forces—not only the army.

Expectably, forced displacement also increased dramatically: according to the official database, nearly 57,000 people fled their homes during this period, most of them in 2000 and 2001; that is approximately one quarter of the population of the region (see Figure 6.3). If the 2005 Census is anything to go by (some areas were inaccessible to census workers), the rural areas of *municipios* such as San Pablo, Santa Rosa, Morales, Simiti and Rio Viejo lost between 50-70 per cent of their population, in relation to the official population forecasts.

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[123] Indeed, in occasions, the army and the paramilitaries acted collaboratively, to say the least. For instance, in January 1999, forty men massacred fourteen people in San Pablo, including a former mayor and a local politician; according to witnesses, the police locked themselves in the station and did not react to the incursion, prompting a row of criticism in the national media (*El Espectador* 10 January 1999; *El Tiempo* 12 January 1999). Furthermore, there have been allegations about government troops wearing paramilitary insignias to commit abuses against civilians.

[124] Recent political violence, at least in this region, is then notably different in its character from the 1950s' *violencia*, when 'relatively few deaths were the result of armed contacts between guerrillas or other unofficial forces' and 'deaths were caused less by acts of war, however unconventional, than by atrocities and vengeance' (Palacios 2006: 137). Indeed, as Gutierrez has noted, the 1950s' violencia fits better into the 'new wars' template than the recent armed conflict (2006: 142-3).

Figure 6.3. Displacement and civilian deaths in south Bolivar and Yondo, 1996-2004
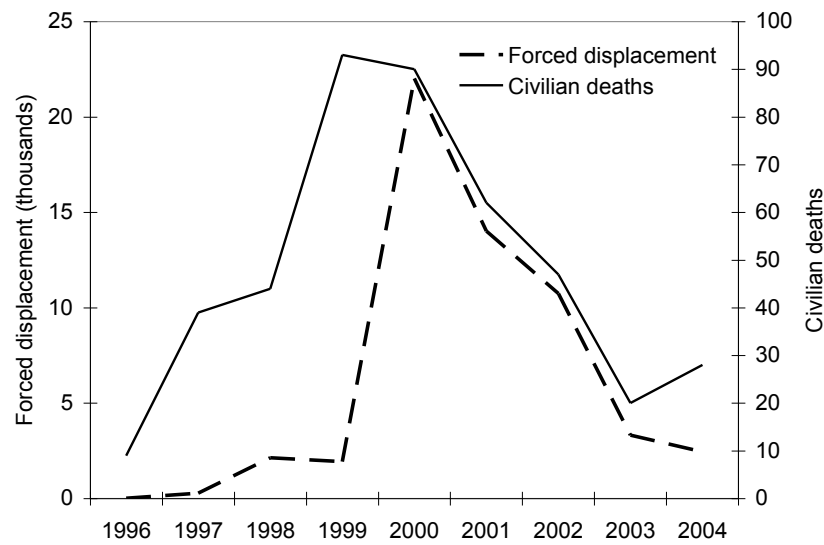
Sources: Civilian deaths, VNN; internal displacement, *Red de Solidaridad Social*.

6.4. Armed conflict and social mobilisation: from allegiance to alliances

Civilians were deliberately targeted by armed organisations as part of their strategies to preserve or expand their control over south Bolivar. However, they were not passive spectators or mere victims of the process. This section shows how social organisations engaged in collaborative arrangements with armed organisations that enabled them to make claims vis-à-vis the state regarding the protection of the rights and interests of specific social groups while reinforcing the legitimacy of insurgents and paramilitaries in the political arena. While these arrangements had different manifestations (such as the electoral deals mentioned above), two episodes of social and political mobilisation were particularly significant in terms of their magnitude and political consequences. This section narrates these episodes and describes the involvement of civilians and armed organisations in the process.

6.4.1 The peasant marches of 1996 and 1998

In 1996, peasant demonstrations took place across the country, in reaction to the government's new, tougher coca eradication policies. In south Bolivar, the protests took place in San Pablo and they also addressed old demands, made in previous demonstrations, on issues such as education, health, infrastructure and loans. Although the departmental government reached an agreement with most of the marchers in October 1996, delegates from the Cimitarra Valley adopted a radical stance and, despite the efforts of Navy's riverine units, managed to gather 3,000 peasants in Barrancabermeja, across the Magdalena River (I-8, *El Tiempo* 3 and 4 October 1996, *Vanguardia* 11 October 1996). The demonstration finished after two weeks of negotiations, when the national authorities agreed to invest US$50 million to improve the living conditions in the rural areas of south Bolivar and pledged to protect the population from paramilitary groups (*El Tiempo*, 28 October 1996; ACVC 1996).

However, as seen in the previous section, the situation in the region quickly deteriorated as the paramilitary offensive became imminent. In 1998, two peasant organisations launched a new massive demonstration, more comprehensive in scope and better coordinated in political and operational terms. The Cimitarra Valley Peasant Association, ACVC, was integrated by *juntas de accion comunal*, one for each *vereda* (i.e. rural community) and drew on the networks of a peasant cooperative created in the 1980s to reduce the costs of purchasing and distributing goods from outside the region. The South Bolivar Agricultural and Mining Association (*Fedeagromisbol*) was created in the 1990s by miners' and peasants' associations from sierra San Lucas who had actively participated in the march of 1996; they were particularly concerned about recent attempts made by an absentee family to assert their alleged legal rights over their mines and evict them. According to one of their leaders they worked for over a year persuading the population about the march and preparing the logistics (I-12).

As in 1996, the marchers chose Barrancabermeja as the place to stage the demonstration (or 'exodus' as they called it), where the local government, the Church, NGOs and the oil workers' union were helpful in providing food, shelter

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and sanitation to the marchers (I-12, I-9). After three months of negotiation, an agreement was reached in the first week of October, when the government agreed to fund a participatory process aimed to formulate a regional plan aimed to promote peace, development and security for the peasants. Helped by a team of technical advisors, the peasant organisations produced the 'Plan for the Development and Integral Protection of the Human Rights in The Middle Magdalena Valley' in February 1999.

At first sight the document resembled a typical 'development plan': it included a diagnosis of the problems faced by the region in a variety of aspects (e.g. education, agriculture, mining, environment, health) and proposed a number of solutions and investments, in most cases vaguely stated.[125] However, a good deal of the document was aimed to question the legitimacy of the Colombian state: the army was repeatedly accused of working hand in hand with paramilitaries to unleash a campaign of state-terrorism against the peasantry. Local authorities were deemed weak and corrupt so the document called for a 'new, popular' institutional arrangement, in which peasant organisations would have the leading role in implementing the development strategy (1999: 30).

The plan's estimated budget amounted to approximately one tenth of the entire national public investment budget for the same four-year period and, as one of the economists involved in the formulation of the plan put it, was more symbolic than practical as, in their view, it reflected the huge 'debt' of the Colombian state with the people of the region, after decades of absence and repression (I-17).[126] Not surprisingly, the plan was not taken very seriously by the national government. Furthermore, members of the negotiating team received death threats (I-17) and two of them were killed by paramilitaries in 1999. Others were formally accused later of having links with the insurgency and, thus, prosecuted and imprisoned.[127]

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[125] In Colombia, national, departmental and local executives are legally bound to prepare 'development plans' shortly after they take power.
[126] The plan had an estimated cost of Col$6,7 trillion (approximately US$3,4 billion). The official national investment budget for the same period (1999-2000) was Col$65,6 trillion, as by Law No. 508 of 1999.
[127] The army captured the leader of the miners' association a few days after our interview, in April 2007. He was accused of rebellion but the district attorney ('*fiscal*') found the evidence insufficient and he was later released (Human Rights First 2009: 24). Other members of these organisations have been killed, allegedly, in clashes with between insurgents and the army but their families have

The question of whether the marches and the plan itself were 'genuine' or were 'manipulated' by the insurgents deserves some discussion. The demands made by the peasant organisations certainly reflected the concerns of the population regarding their security and living conditions. Furthermore, the second march occurred precisely at the time of first stage of the paramilitary campaign, so it is likely that many peasants, truly worried about their lives, had joined the march hoping to get the attention of the national authorities and humanitarian organisations. But some sources suggested that the march had been planned or at least backed by the insurgency. The magazine *Semana*, for instance, claimed that guerrillas were manipulating the peasants and using them as 'pawns in a political chess' (14 September 1998). An interviewee also confirmed that guerrillas put some pressure on the peasants to participate in the march (I-9).[128]

At any rate, both peasant and insurgent organisations found beneficial to promote massive participation in the marches. For the former, they were a chance to raise their profile in the local and national political arenas and present themselves as true representatives of the population. But even if they were successful in convincing the population about the advantages of taking part in the marches, they still had to overcome the risks of free-riding, that is, of people staying at home in the hopes that their neighbours did all the walking and the shouting by them—just as in any other instance of collective action. So a discreet but effective nod from the insurgency was not unwelcome and, arguably, may have helped them in achieving the massive and sustained mobilisation they needed to get Bogota's attention. For the insurgency, in turn, the 'development plan' and the marches themselves were functional to their political and military interests as they questioned the legitimacy of the Colombian state and required a decisive military action against the paramilitaries. Moreover, by backing the march they made themselves stakeholders in their success so, even if a small fraction of the demands made in the development plan had been met by the government, it would have been a triumph for the insurgents.

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rejected such claims (*Semana Online* 28 July 2009).
[128] However, there are no indications that they had used coercion or violence with that purpose: according to the available data, only one civilian was deliberately killed by insurgents in 1998 in this region but his death occurred in September, when the march was about to end (N&N 9: 92).

To conclude, rather than manipulative, the relation between insurgent and social organisations could be better described as collaborative or, following Kalyvas's (2003) terminology, as an 'alliance'.[129]

6.4.2 The local opposition to the demilitarised zone

The election of Andres Pastrana as Colombian president in 1998 offered the insurgents an opportunity window to advance their agenda; peace talks with FARC rebels were his top priority. Quickly after taking power, his government created a demilitarised zone in the south of the country, comprising five large *municipios*, in an area traditionally controlled by insurgents but occasionally attacked by the government.[130] Once the zone was put in place, in early 1999, a vague negotiation agenda was issued and the 'civil society' was invited to participate in audiences held in the zone and broadcasted on national public television. Even foreign diplomats visited the zone and talked with the rebels. While it lasted, it was a political and military success for the FARC.

Although the ELN did not enjoy the same cosy relation with the Pastrana administration, they wanted a similar arrangement in south Bolivar and, as the paramilitary offensive advanced, this aspiration turned into an urgent need. In March 1999, they proposed the demilitarisation of four *municipios* but several mayors quickly showed their opposition. Moreover, according to a regional newspaper, paramilitaries and government forces asked the people to sign a petition against the creation of such zone (*El Colombiano* 14 March 1999). In a sign of desperation, the ELN captured a domestic flight, forcing it to land near Monterrey, and demanded the demilitarisation of this village, recently occupied by paramilitaries as a condition to release the hostages (*El Espectador* 25 April 1999) but they only managed to elicit an aggressive rescue operation.

However, negotiations about a demilitarised continued, facilitated by the Cuban and

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[129] Admittedly, this term suggests a degree of formality that was lacking in this case.
[130] The demilitarisation involved the withdrawal of all government forces, including the police but armed insurgents patrolled the zone.

German governments and, early in 2000, the government put forward a proposal to demilitarise some *municipios*. While some rural communities greeted the idea (e.g. Paraiso, Vallecito and Villanueva, Micoahumado, see *Vanguardia* 31 January 2000), by and large, the reaction was negative. Several demonstrations took place in the towns of San Pablo, Santa Rosa, Morales and Simiti and, in February 2000, the protesters (between 1,000 and 7,000, depending on the source) crossed the Magdalena River and blocked the *Troncal de la Paz* to show their opposition to the demilitarised zone (*El Tiempo* 8 February 2000, *El Colombiano* 9 February 2000).

What followed was a succession of failed proposals in which the government tried to conciliate the demands of the insurgency with the concerns of the local governments and the population, most of whom fiercely opposed the idea. New demonstrations followed in April and May and, in solidarity, 'civic strikes' were declared in *municipios* outside the region such as Puerto Boyaca, La Dorada, Puerto Nare, Puerto Triunfo, Puerto Salgar and Puerto Berrio, which had been controlled by government forces or paramilitaries for more than a decade (*El Tiempo* 14 and 24 May 2000). In 2001, a rumour about the imminent demilitarisation of the zone prompted new demonstrations (*Vanguardia* 18 April 2001). In the end, as talks with FARC guerrillas in the demilitarised zone of El Caguan did not show significant progress, scepticism grew and the idea of a demilitarised zone lost any political feasibility.[131]

The protests were organised by several ad-hoc organisations led by *Asocipaz* (or 'Civil Association for Peace in Colombia') and *No al Despeje* ('not to the withdrawal' of government troops). Behind *Asocipaz* and, more generally, behind the anti-*despeje* movement, there was a broad array of local actors and groups such as politicians, local officials, merchants, agro-industrialists, cattle ranchers, drug-traffickers and business organisations (Gutierrez 2004b). While some were just afraid of the reprisals that could follow if guerrillas regained control over the region, others were content with the new order imposed by the paramilitaries. Coca growers, coca pickers (*raspachines*), drug-traffickers and, in general, everyone involved in the coca economy, were uneasy about the media attention that a demilitarised zone could

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[131] The Pastrana administration suspended FARC's demilitarised zone in February 2002. Alvaro Uribe, a fierce critic of the demilitarised zone, won the presidential election three months later.

bring and the possibility that the insurgency might had to engage in a serious programme to eradicate coca crops in the area within a reasonable period.[132]

Beyond the potential immediate consequences, they were also afraid of the agreements that could be reached in a negotiation, as the ELN had expressed their interest in turning south Bolivar into a special zone where they could put to test their ideology. This could involve experiments like an agrarian reform, which could imperil the existing distribution of property rights. In addition to the local concerns, agro-industrialists and cattle-ranchers in the neighbouring departments of Cesar and Santander were afraid of the impact of a demilitarised zone and feared a new wave of extortions and kidnappings. They joined the anti-*despeje* campaign and made public their views. Similarly, sympathetic politicians from Antioquia, Santander, Cesar and Norte de Santander created their own anti-*despeje* movement.

As in the case of the peasant marches, these demonstrations were followed by rumours of manipulation by armed organisations—in this case, by paramilitaries. Indeed, Castaño claimed to be the promoter of the protests occurred in 2000 (Aranguren 2001: 317-347). Reportedly, they put pressure on the population to participate in the anti-*despeje* demonstrations although, by then, they had managed to build 'wide social support' (Gutierrez 2004b: 38). Moreover, they apparently resisted several calls made by the government to withdraw their troops from the zone but these claims have not been confirmed (Aranguren 2001: 317-347).

At any rate, this episode shows how paramilitaries, social organisations and regional elites acted together and forced the government to shelve a decision that threatened their political and economic interests and their standing in the region. Thanks to the massive demonstrations, local authorities and the ad-hoc organisations mentioned above raised their profile and were recognised by the national government as representatives of the population, taking back a role that peasant organisations, sidelined by the evolution of armed conflict, had assumed in the past years. While they did not sanction the atrocities committed by the paramilitaries, they legitimised their presence in the region. In 2002, one of the leaders of the movement, Carlos

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[132] The FARC, for instance, offered to eradicate coca crops in the demilitarised zone of Caguan in collaboration with international donors (Uribe and Ferro 2002: 74).

Clavijo, was elected senator, backed by the paramilitary organisation *Bloque Central Bolivar* (Valencia 2007: 15).

6.5. Discussion

As seen in previous chapters, civilians were sometimes caught in the crossfire and, more often, deliberately targeted by armed organisations who harassed them, killed them or forced them to leave their homes to gain military advantage. But there was more to their role than being victims, as this chapter shows. Local politicians and peasant organisations engaged in dialogue and negotiations with insurgents and paramilitaries and co-operated in ways that enabled them, both, to better position themselves in the local, and even national, political arenas. The chapter therefore supports the notion that civilians, on the one hand, and armed organisations and the state, on the other, engage in 'alliances', as Kalyvas (2003) suggested.

One of main virtues of the notion of alliance is that it provides a rational basis for civilian collaboration. Most contributions to the study of irregular wars have emphasised ideological sympathy as the basis of collaboration; according to this views, civilian support relies on a vague hope that eventual political change would bring rewards for everyone. The notion of alliance (Kalyvas 2003) sheds new light on this matter by making collaboration part of a transaction in which a variety of possible resources, not necessarily material or economic, are exchanged between civilians and armed organisations. In this way, alliances make possible alignments between national and local interests and, by the same token, connect social conflicts which would otherwise develop independently. This is, precisely, another important virtue.

The notion of alliance is well suited to describe the relation between social and armed organisations in south Bolivar as it highlights the interests of the parties. Insurgents and paramilitaries engaged in alliances with civilians in an effort to expand and consolidate their territorial control and, crucially, to gain legitimacy vis-à-vis supra-local actors, including the national government. Thanks to massive social

mobilisation, social organisations gained visibility and legitimacy as representatives of their constituencies to a degree that would not have been possible without the pressure exerted by armed organisations on the population.

However, by contrast with the alliances described by Kalyvas in the Argolid (2006), characterised by the opportunistic behaviour of civilians, and materialised in 'malicious denunciation', alliances in south Bolivar went well beyond the sphere of the individual, atomised interests of civilians. The peasant marches and the anti-*despeje* movement, in particular, led to the articulation of interests of a variety of local actors and manifested in the episodes of social and political mobilisation described in this chapter. An excessive emphasis on opportunistic alliances as the crucial relationship between armed organisations and civilians, risks overlooking the fact that even amid conflict, local actors 'continue to engage in routine, if still contentious, forms of politics' (Tarrow 2007: 592)

Indeed, even without reference to the evidence, claims about the pervasiveness of malicious denunciation and, consequently, about its prevalence as a form of relationship between armed organisations and civilians seem misplaced, first because they would effectively make selective violence ineffective and second because they would require that armed organisations were unable or unwilling to check the accuracy of the malicious accusations they get. What is more, they are not actually alliances as they do not involve any sort of agreement between the parties (armed organisations kill to punish collaborators, not to honour a deal or please those who accuse) and the benefits accrued to one of them (civilians) are conditional, precisely, on his betrayal of their role as informers.

Regarding the second aspect of the debate—the convergence between crime and warfare and its effects on the relation between armed organisations and civilians—the chapter shows that the involvement of armed organisations in criminal activities does not necessarily mean that they are less willing or able to engage in politics, co-operate with politicians, local governments, political parties and social organisations, and engage in talks, negotiations and deals with them and even with the national government and foreign agencies.

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While the production and trade of coca and coca paste provided armed organisations with financial resources, it also created political opportunities for them. Insofar as coca involves thousands of peasants and provides a substantial share of the agricultural income in the region, it demands a regulatory framework that cannot be provided by the state, creating opportunities for armed organisations to jump in and fill the void, providing and enforcing that framework. Furthermore, as the trade in cocaine sits at the top of the national political agenda by virtue of the 'war on drugs', controlling coca-cultivated areas turned out to be a useful card in a political negotiation with the national government or international donors.[133]

In the case of the paramilitaries, it may seem that the actual purpose of their campaign in south Bolivar was taking over the regional coca paste market and that, after all, they were *merely* acting as a large-scale criminal organisation. However, controlling such market did not entail a use of violence in the scale they did. Reorganising the market required the ability to control the main points of access to the region and use violence and coercion but it did not entail a direct control over the cultivation areas, the crops or the peasants. Moreover, there is little correlation between the scale of the crops and the intensity of violence at the municipal level. Santa Rosa, for instance, where paramilitary violence against civilians (civilians killed, forced displacement) was relatively moderate, had the largest coca-cultivated area in the region. Yondo, by contrast, with about an eighth of that area, had three times more forced displacement and eleven times more civilians killed.

What the evidence suggests is that paramilitary violence was more intense in *municipios* with higher levels of insurgent activity. It was aimed to weaken the insurgents' social base thus reducing the risks for companies, merchants, agriculturalists and cattle ranchers in the region and defusing a threat to the government's authority, making possible the peaceful running of local elections and reducing the chances of terrorist operations such as the kidnapping of a domestic flight in 1999. Thus, paradoxically, they were violent precisely because they were more than just criminals, and it was their criminal nature that made them most valuable in crushing the insurgency.

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[133] As noted above, the ELN offered to eradicate coca crops in the demilitarised zone.

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6.6. Conclusion

This chapter lends support to the notion that, in contexts of irregular war, civilians and armed organisations may co-operate and provide support to each other, in ways that are beneficial to the interests and needs of the former and to the political and territorial ambitions of the latter. In south Bolivar, those 'alliances' involved peasant organisations, local elites and armed organisations and were shaped in response to the challenges and opportunities created by the changing patterns of territorial control and military advantage and by policy changes in the national political arena. The chapter shows that the involvement of armed organisations in criminal activities, such as the drug business, does not make them less willing or able to engage in deals with politicians, political parties and social organisations. It also shows that despite the increasing convergence between armed conflict and organised crime, the political dimensions of the Colombian conflict during the late 1900s and early 2000s should not be underestimated. Hence, rather than a privatisation of political violence, alliances in south Bolivar led to a re-politicisation of a struggle that sometimes seemed to be self-serving at best, or plainly criminal at worst.

7. VIOLENCE AGAINST CIVILIANS AND THE NATURE OF ARMED CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE MAGDALENA VALLEY

During the last decade there has been intense controversy over the nature of contemporary armed conflicts and their connexion with ethnicity, crime and natural resources. The influence of neoclassical economics on how insurrections and civil wars are modelled has led scholars to focus on issues of financial feasibility and individual profit over the political projects and social roots of conflicts (Cramer 2002). Indeed, many recent armed conflicts seem to be permeated by a criminal ethos and driven by the personal appetites of politicians, warlords and combatants, attracted by the opportunities of power and enrichment that conflict and disorder create. Armed organisations no longer seem interested in defeating their enemies and predatory behaviour towards civilians is widespread, either as a result of the generalised misconduct of combatants or as a planned strategy of economic exploitation, exclusion or elimination (Kaldor 1999). Even civilians, usually seen as fearful victims, are said to be instrumental in producing violence against their fellows for their own benefit or as a way to settle personal disputes (Kalyvas 2006).

In sum, both the theory and the facts seem to point towards a new form of war in which individual interests thrive, collective action collapses and only authoritarian or exclusionary political projects succeed. And whereas organised crime and war-making may have inadvertently contributed to the formation of centralised states in Europe (Tilly 1985), the amalgamation of crime and conflict seen in recent times appears to be weakening states across the developing world and contributing to the spread of terrorism and insecurity at a global scale.

In this context, the post-Cold War Colombian armed conflict is often offered as a typical example of how private and criminal motives end up being the key factors behind the continuation of armed conflict and the abuses against the population. While Colombian armed organisations have not relied on identity politics, that is, on political mobilisation 'around ethnic, racial or religious identity for the purpose of claiming state power' (Kaldor 1999: 76), they are often mentioned as a typical example of the convergence between crime and warfare. For instance, Laqueur claimed that Colombian insurgencies spent less than ten per cent of their income in sustaining the war and 'have become capitalists, collectively and, in some cases, individually' (1999: 213). The involvement of insurgents in the coca economy and of drug bosses in paramilitary organisations led some observers to characterise the conflict as a 'war of lumpen elements' (UNDP 2003: 93) or a clash between 'brigands' and 'mercenaries' (Mueller 2003: 509). Moreover, it has been argued, 'traditional revolutionary movements […] have turned more violent as a result of the drug trade' (Bibes 2001: 244).

This chapter highlights the limits of this emerging approach to our understanding of the Colombian conflict and, more generally, of contemporary irregular wars. It is based on findings presented in previous chapters and on new results obtained by analysing the distribution of different forms of violence in the Middle Magdalena Valley. While the region is not representative of the entire country, armed conflict in the Middle Magdalena Valley shared some typical features with other Colombian regions in the 1990s: the most important non-state armed organisations in the country at the time (the FARC, the ELN and the BCB) were present. Indeed, the ELN and pioneering paramilitary organisations such as the MAS were born in this region. Moreover, the production of coca and cocaine, which had a decisive influence on the evolution of armed conflict since the 1980s, was a vital element in the local economies of several *municipios*. And, as seen in Ch. 4, the region saw a fair share of violence against civilians.

The chapter starts by presenting new empirical findings based on a simplified version of the five-zone analytical model of territorial control employed in Ch. 5; rather than tackling new issues, these findings confirm some of the conclusions reached in previous chapters and are the basis for the discussion that follows. The

second part goes through the key concepts and findings tackled in the dissertation, discusses its methodological implications and brings it to its conclusion.

7.1 Zones of control and the rationales for violence

Back in Ch. 4, the analysis of the spatial patterns of violence, armed conflict and economic activity in the Middle Magdalena Valley was used as a basis to make inferences about the aims of armed organisations in attacking civilians. Despite the limitations of the data and the ambiguity of some results, the regressions consistently showed that violence was more intense in the more contested areas (i.e. those with more hostilities) and also in areas where either faction's enemy had a recent track of activity. These results were interpreted as a sign that violence was aimed by the factions to increase or maintain territorial control. Ch. 5 and 6 examined in closer detail two cases that, together, accounted for nearly a 60 per cent of the regional civilian death toll finding, again, evidence in favour of the notion that armed organisations used violence to achieve territorial control but also political control over the region.

Altogether, this evidence reinforced our view that the behaviour of armed organisations vis-à-vis civilians in the Middle Magdalena Valley during these years resembled a 'classical' irregular war rather than a pseudo war. Perhaps more interesting, Ch. 5 showed how a detailed look at the distribution of violence across zones of territorial control in Barrancabermeja could provide significant clues about the aims and strategies of armed organisations in relation to civilians. This section extends the analysis to the whole region using a simplified methodology (see below) and focusing on three specific forms of violence.

To identify these zones, the entire valley is divided in 86 areas: 43 towns ('*cabeceras*') and their 43 rural hinterlands (or '*resto*' in the country's statistical argot).[134] These areas are sorted into five different zones of control depending on the

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[134] This distinction seems appropriate considering the patterns of territorial control in the Middle

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presence/absence of either actor, their level of activity and the frequency of hostilities (see Table 7.1). Compared to the technique used in Ch. 5, this version is simpler in that it follows a yearly periodisation, rather than one based on a timeline of significant periods and events. As in Ch. 5, these areas were assigned to different zones of control following quantitative criteria and assuming the conflict was bipolar. While using quantitative criteria does not guarantee accuracy, at least it provides a consistent way to categorise all the areas using a standard procedure that maximises the use of the information available. It is worth noting that these zones of control are dynamic, that is, the *municipios* allocated to each zone changes from one year to the next.[135]

Table 7.1. Zones of control and operational criteria

Zone	Definition	Operational criteria
z_1	Fully controlled by incumbents (see note).	Insurgents absent.
z_2	Contested and nearly controlled by incumbents.	Sporadic hostilities, insurgent activity low relative to the incumbents.
z_3	Highly contested.	Frequent hostilities.
z_4	Contested and nearly controlled by insurgents.	Sporadic hostilities, insurgent activity high relative to incumbents.
z_5	Fully controlled by insurgents.	Incumbents absent, insurgents present.

Note: Incumbents include government forces and paramilitaries.

The resulting distribution of combatants killed in action follows the expected patterns, with more than half of the deaths occurring in zone of control z_3. The distribution of *municipios* also reflects the asymmetric nature of guerrilla warfare: on the one hand, the number of areas controlled or nearly controlled by insurgents never surpassed eight (out of 86); on the other hand, the number of towns *fully* controlled by government forces or paramilitaries never fell below 32 (in 1998) and was always close to 40 (out of 43).

7.1.1 Violence as a means for territorial control

Magdalena Valley, where guerrillas usually roamed confidently in rural areas and only ventured occasionally into the towns.
[135] The level of activity measures the number of events in which each actor was involved, excluding killings and kidnappings, as these are the dependent variables. The thresholds used to establish whether hostilities were frequent were: over one per year in towns and over two per year in rural areas. Unlike the categorisation used in Chapter 5, some areas were assigned to zone of control z_5, that is, fully controlled by insurgents.

Table 7.2 shows the number of conflict-related civilian deaths by zone of control and perpetrator. Each cell contains three figures: the first is the absolute number of deaths; the second is the percentage of killings committed by the state and armed organisations within each zone of control; and the third is the ratio of killings to population (100,000) per year. The third figure accounts for the different size of the zones of control in terms of population and was calculated just as a regular homicide rate, making comparisons across zones (or even with other conflicts) possible.

Table 7.2. Civilian killings by organisation and zone of control in The Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004

Zones of control	z_1	z_2	z_3	z_4	z_5	Total
Paramilitaries	223	191	272	1	0	687
	32.5	27.7	39.6	0.3	0.0	100.0
	3.7	**13.1**	**17.2**	0.2	0.0	7.1
Government	2	7	5	6	0	20
	10.0	35.0	25.0	30.0	0.0	100.0
	0.0	0.5	0.3	1.4	0.0	0.2
Guerrillas	23	30	48	24	6	131
	17.6	21.4	35.9	20.6	4.6	100.0
	0.4	2.1	**3.0**	**5.7**	2.2	1.4
Total	405	444	784	55	23	1711
	23.7	25.5	45.6	3.9	1.3	100.0
	6.8	30.6	**49.7**	13.2	8.5	17.7

Source: Based on VNN dataset.
Notes: The totals shown in this table (bottom row) also include killings by unidentified organisations. They are slightly lower than those presented in Ch. 4 because the location (town or rural) of some events was unclear or unknown and, therefore, they could not be allocated to any zone of control.

Table 7.2 shows how lethal violence against civilians was more intense in contested zones (z_2 to z_4) and particularly intense in highly contested zones (z_3). While paramilitaries used violence mostly in highly contested zones (z_3), insurgents did it in zones they nearly controlled (z_4).[136] These patterns do not fit the expected distribution of pseudo-wars, in which violence against civilians tends to go hand in hand with few hostilities (thus leading to the typical high ratios of civilian to combatant deaths).

Overall, the evidence confirms two of Kalyvas's hypotheses: first, that 'higher the

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[136] Let us remember that, according to the operational definition given above, in fully controlled zones either opponent is unable to attack or confront the ruler in open hostilities but does not preclude attacks against civilians.

level of an actor's control, the less likely it is that this actor will resort to violence'
and, second, that 'violence will be exercised primarily by the political actor enjoying
an advantage in terms of control: incumbents in zone 2 and insurgents in zone 4'
(2006: 204). However, it is worth noting that paramilitaries, killed nearly a third of
all their victims in zones controlled by them or the government. Although these
figures seem negligible in relation to the population size of the zones of control they
suggest that killings were used for purposes other than territorial control. Political
control, in particular, was paramount, as the following section shows.

7.1.2 Violence for political control followed territorial control

Table 7.3 shows the distribution of killings of politicians and members of social
organisations in The Middle Magdalena Valley. In relative terms, the figures are low
when the population size is considered: 1.5 victims per 100,000 inhabitants per year,
with highly contested zones experiencing the highest rate. However, since politicians
and local leaders are usually just a small fraction of a society, this figure may not be
as meaningful as it seems. From the armed organisations' perspective, things look
different: it was precisely in zones they fully controlled where they killed more
victims from these groups as a proportion of their total number of victims.
Approximately one sixth of the victims they killed in those zones were politicians
and local leaders—that is more than in any other zone.

However, the most notorious example of violence being used for political purposes
was the kidnapping of politicians, particularly by insurgents. Table 7.4 shows the
number of victims of political kidnappings, as categorised by *Fondelibertad*, the
government's body in charge of monitoring these crimes. About a quarter of the
victims held by these organisations were kidnapped for political motives. In absolute
terms, most insurgent political kidnappings occurred in zones fully controlled by
government forces. However, in relative terms, they focused in contested zones
where they were dominant (z_4), where, on average, nearly ten civilians were
kidnapped every year. It was also in these zones where political kidnappings, as a
proportion of all their abductions, reached the highest level (33.1 per cent). Most of
these kidnappings occurred in south Bolivar and Yondo, during the electoral

sabotage of 1997 (see Ch. 6).

Table 7.3. Killings of politicians and members of civil society organisations
by armed organisation and zone of control in The Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004

Zones of control	z_1	z_2	z_3	z_4	z_5	Total
	40	14	29	0	0	83
Paramilitaries	**17.9**	7.3	10.7	0.0	0.0	12.1
	0.7	1.0	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.9
	0	0	0	1	0	1
Government	0.0	0.0	0.0	16.7	0.0	5.0
	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.0
	1	0	1	1	1	4
Guerrillas	4.3	0.0	2.1	4.2	**16.7**	3.1
	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.4	0.0
	69	21	47	5	2575	147
Total	17.0	4.7	6.0	9.1	21.7	8.6
	1.2	1.4	3.0	1.2	1.8	**1.5**

Notes: The first figure within each cell is the absolute number of victims. The second represents their share in the total number of civilian killings by organisation and zone (for instance, 17.9 per cent of the paramilitary victims in zone of control z_1 were politicians or members of civil society organisations). The third shows the magnitude of these crimes relative to the population size, i.e., the number of victims per 100,000 inhabitants per year. Based on VNN dataset.

These results suggest that once armed organisations achieved or were close to achieve territorial control over a given area, they continued using violence to control local authorities, leaders and organisations. The importance of political control in the context of irregular war is discussed below, in section 7.3.

Table 7.4. Political kidnappings by organisation
and zone of control in The Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004

Zones of control	z_1	z_2	z_3	z_4	z_5	Total
	7	1	1	1	0	10
Paramilitaries	50.0	25.0	12.5	100.0	0.0	34.5
	0.1	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.0	0.1
	49	38	23	43	3	156
Guerrillas	23.2	28.1	15.3	**33.1**	8.3	23.6
	0.8	2.6	1.5	9.6	1.1	1.6
	56	39	24	44	3	166
Total	24.9	28.1	15.2	33.6	7.9	24.0
	0.9	2.7	1.5	**9.9**	1.1	1.7

Notes: The first figure within each cell is the absolute number of victims. The second represents their share in the total number of kidnappings by organisation and zone (for instance, 50.0 per cent of the paramilitary victims in zone of control z_1 were classified by *Fondelibertad* as political). The third shows the magnitude of these crimes relative to the population size, i.e., the number of victims per 100,000 inhabitants per year. Based on: *Fondelibertad* dataset.

7.1.3 Ransom kidnappings lacked a political rationale

Although ransom kidnapping has, by definition, an economic motive, it may play a role in the strategies of politically motivated insurgent movements. For instance, funds gathered from the ransoms paid by the victims may be used to buy weaponry or maintain troops on the field; but given the lack of information on the internal finances of insurgent groups it is impossible to check if this was the case. However, Naylor's (2004) theory on the finances of guerrilla movements offers a viable path of enquiry and, as this section shows, indicates that the distribution of ransom kidnappings across zones of control was at odds with the expected behaviour of an insurgency interested in consolidating political control.

Naylor's hypothesis is based on the idea that even an insurgency genuinely motivated by ideological motives and exclusively interested in prompting political change, may resort to forms of violence commonly associated with petty crime, from looting to extortion. The difference with petty criminals, he argued, is that insurgents would employ these means in a politically sensible way and taking into account their 'broader relationship to society and its relative strength vis-à-vis the enforcement arm of the state' (2004: 53). More specifically, he predicted that in areas controlled by the government insurgents would use kidnappings and other typically criminal forms of fund-raising (e.g. bank robbery). As insurgent control increased, fund raising would become more predictable and less based on coercion. At the other end of the spectrum, in insurgent-controlled areas, the rebels would impose regular, predictable forms of collection, similar to those used by the state.[137]

In the case of ransom kidnappings this hypothesis has two alternative observable implications. If insurgents had a long-term interest in consolidating control, establishing authority and gaining popular support in 'liberated' areas, they would have to carry out their kidnappings elsewhere, in areas controlled by the government, just as the author predicted. By contrast, if insurgents only had a short-term economic interest, i.e., if they wanted to get as much resources as possible in the

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[137] Naylor's hypothesis echoes Olson's distinction between roving and stationary bandits, but it does not seem to be inspired by, or based on, Olson's work. In fact, Naylor's theory was first published in 1993—the same year as Olson's article on stationary bandits (Naylor 1993; Olson 1993).

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shortest time and at the lowest risk, with little concern for their acceptance among the population, they would probably concentrate ransom kidnappings in areas they controlled, and would not dare into areas held by government forces. The test that follows is based on these two scenarios.

Table 7.5 shows the distribution of ransom kidnappings by organisation and zone of control. At first sight, it matches the distribution predicted by Naylor, as less than a quarter of their ransom kidnappings took place in areas they controlled or nearly controlled (z_4 and z_5) and nearly a third took place in areas fully controlled by the government. However, when the population size of these zones of control is taken into account, it turns out that the rates of kidnapping per 100,000 inhabitants are significantly higher in zones controlled or nearly controlled by insurgents (see Table 7.5, figures in boldface). [138]

**Table 7.5. Ransom kidnappings by organisation
and zone of control in The Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004**

Zones of control	z_1	z_2	z_3	z_4	z_5	Total
	7	3	7	0	2	19
Paramilitaries	50.0	75.0	87.5	0.0	100.0	65.5
	0.1	0.2	0.5	0.0	0.7	0.2
	162	97	127	87	33	506
Guerrillas	76.8	71.9	84.7	66.9	91.7	76.4
	2.7	6.7	8.2	**19.5**	**12.2**	5.2
	169	100	134	87	35	525
Total	75.1	71.9	84.8	66.4	92.1	76.0
	2.8	6.9	8.6	19.5	12.9	5.4

Notes: The first figure within each cell is the absolute number of victims; the second represents the proportion of ransom kidnappings by zone; and the third shows the magnitude of these crimes relative to the population size, i.e., the number of victims per 100,000 inhabitants per year. Based on: *Fondelibertad* dataset.

Discounting doubts about the validity of the data and the test itself, these results suggest that insurgent ransom kidnappings lacked a political rationale. In particular, by targeting civilians in zones they controlled, insurgents may have undermined their own attempts to consolidate territorial and political control on those zones. This inconsistent behaviour is hard to explain without exploring the inner life of insurgent

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[138] As for the paramilitaries, the distribution runs in symmetric to that of the insurgents, with most kidnappings in areas where they were more comfortable, and therefore it also suggests an interest in economic resources themselves rather than on territorial and political control. However, the number of victims is too small to draw any significant conclusion.

organisations and, in particular, issues of decision-making such as the scale and targets of kidnappings and the way funds gathered through kidnapping were distributed among different units. For instance, units ('*frentes*') or commanders within the same organisation may have had different objectives and therefore behave with different rationales.

7.2   Violence and irregular wars—concepts, evidence and implications

This part discusses the key concepts involved in understanding the rationale for violence in irregular wars as well as the implications of the empirical findings presented in this and previous chapters regarding the place that violence had in the strategies of armed organisations.

7.2.1   Territorial control—the main determinant of violence

Territorial control is the degree to which the state or an armed organisation monopolises the use of the force within a given territory. It depends on their ability to prevent (or successfully respond to) military challenges posed by any challengers. It can be achieved by capturing, securing and policing positions, as conventional armies do, or by exploiting the inability of a conventional army or police force to patrol every corner of a territory, as guerrillas do.

Territorial control is essential, by definition, in armed conflicts over territorial autonomy but it is also critical in conflicts over government as it enables the factions to access resources, protect more effectively their bases and headquarters and, eventually, launch decisive attacks against their enemies. Territorial control is particularly valuable for insurgents, as it allows them to establish a parallel administration and to operate as a state, eventually enabling them to acquire international support from other states. If territorial control is necessary to fight and win a war, it is just as crucial when a peaceful resolution is at sight, as it signals the relative strength of the factions, thus influencing the final outcome of a negotiation.

Territorial control is often achieved by using violence against those individuals and communities that, willingly or not, support the operation of either faction or to extract rents required to fund the military struggle. Civilians provide support to armed organisations in a range of ways, and sometimes unknowingly. While some forms of collaboration demand an active involvement in political and military tasks, the mere presence of civilians in an area might be of use to an irregular force. Trade, travelling and, in general, the day-to-day activities of any community provide a cover for insurgents and enable them to obtain goods or to move around disguised as civilians. Likewise, economic activity enables insurgents to extract rents in a variety of ways, from random looting to regular protection fees. Because of this, the elimination of individual collaborators—but also of entire communities—can be instrumental to the achievement of territorial control, depending on the extent to which the opposite force relies on them. Thus, achieving territorial control involves the use of organised force not only against enemy forces but also against civilians who are instrumental to their operation.

The quantitative analysis carried out in Ch. 4 showed that the intensity of armed conflict, as measured by the number of hostilities, was the most consistent predictor of the magnitude of lethal violence against civilians across the region. Likewise, both insurgents and paramilitaries were more likely to attack civilians in *municipios* where their enemies had been more active in the past. These findings suggest that killings were aimed to increase territorial control. Likewise, some kidnappings were aimed to increase territorial control, such as the capture of a domestic flight by ELN insurgents in April 1999, when they demanded the demilitarisation of a village recently occupied by paramilitaries as a condition to release the hostages. Finally, although the data on forced displacement does not allow a rigorous analysis of the specific motives behind the households' decisions to flee their homes, the N&N reports contain plenty of examples of threats and continued harassment towards communities by armed organisations in contested areas where the presence of civilians, collaborators or not, was functional to the operation of guerrillas.

Even in Barrancabermeja, where the ratio of civilian to combatant deaths was well above 1:1, indicative of a 'new war' scenario, a close look at the distribution of

civilian deaths across zones of control shows that violence was used to increase territorial and political control, rather than to strip civilians of their assets or expel them on the basis of their identity (see Ch. 5).

7.2.2 All politics is local—even in wartime

While political control is a long-term goal of the parties engaged in armed conflict, it is equally important in the course of the conflict itself as it enables armed organisations to redirect resources or mobilise the population in line with their political and military strategies. Political control can be defined as the ability of armed organisations to influence, steer or take over local decision-making processes and mechanisms. While in fully controlled areas either armed organisation may become the sole form of authority, in disputed zones civilian allegiance is still up for grabs and armed organisations must compete for it. Achieving political control often involves coercion and violence against civilians but armed organisations also resort to other forms of political action, e.g. propaganda and ideological mentoring. They can also engage in coalitions and alliances with individuals, groups, parties or social organisations, which are less based on ideological persuasion or long-term expectations (i.e. post-conflict) than on the opportunities, risks and needs faced by the parties in the short-term. Thus, even amid armed conflict, local polities remain alive and may become crucial arenas of the larger confrontation.

By controlling local authorities in the Middle Magdalena Valley, armed organisations were able to channel local public expenditure towards projects, areas and communities of their interest, rewarding collaboration and strengthening social support. Moreover, through their influence in social and political mobilisation, they put pressure on the national government to adopt or abort measures that could affect their political and military stance. As shown in Ch. 6, both insurgents and paramilitaries developed alliances with local organisations with a view to strengthen their political position in the national arena in the context of the peace and demobilisation processes launched by presidents Pastrana (with guerrillas) and Uribe (with paramilitaries). The following two sections show how armed organisations relied on violence against civilians and alliances with social organisations and elites

to increase political control.

Political control through violence

Armed organisations used violence and coercion against civilians in the Middle Magdalena Valley to increase political control, that is, to influence or steer collective action and decision-making processes by local authorities, social organisations and communities. The use of coercion and violence to achieve political control is evident in the harassment and kidnapping of local leaders and politicians. Politicians, journalists and leaders of social organisations were the main targets of this sort of violence. In Barrancabermeja, for instance, the anchor of a radio news programme was killed in April 2003 after he expressed critical views on the paramilitary presence of the city (*Vanguardia* 16 August 2003). Other three journalists were threatened by paramilitaries during the second half of 2003; one of them was forced to leave the city, another was detained and tortured (CINEP 2004: 133-4). Likewise, leaders of *Organizacion Femenina Popular* (People's Women's Organisation) were harassed and threatened by paramilitaries in several occasions; this organisation is well known in the city for their critical views of the government as well as for their work in providing affordable housing to women. According to one of their leaders, rather than forcing the closure of this NGO, paramilitaries wanted to co-opt it and, in fact, they tried to 'seduce' them with offers of funding; when these approaches failed they threatened their leaders and tried to occupy their building ('*Casa de la Mujer*') using the force (I-14).

Although labour unions in Colombia have diverse political leanings, some of them have been seen as particularly close to the insurgency. For instance, Castaño once claimed that members of the ELN had direct influence on the running of several labour unions (Aranguren 2001:139). Echoing that view, 'Julian', one the BCB commanders, explained in an interview that the USO had been 'infiltrated' by the National Liberation Army for a long time (Aranguren 2001: 312). And 'Alex', another paramilitary commander asked those members of the USO who still had links with the insurgency to 'leave them behind and become impartial' (*Vanguardia* 8 July 2002). Besides the USO, members of other labour unions in sectors such as

oil and mining, agriculture, health, education, in both the private and public sectors, were also targeted by the paramilitaries.

Attacks against members of grassroots organisations probably had a wider range of motives but many were aimed to achieve political control. *Juntas de accion communal*, in particular, are the most basic form of collective action and political organisation in Colombia and one of the main points of contact between parties, the state and the poor, especially concerning the provision of public goods, and have become key arenas of competition between political parties and, not surprisingly, between the state and the insurgency. *Juntas*, for instance, were crucial pieces in the machinery that made possible the peasant marches of 1996 and 1998 (I-6, I-12).

But, as noted above, political control does not always involve violence. It may be achieved through persuasion, negotiation and political deals and alliances with civilians, thus helping politicians, local leaders and social organisations to strengthen their position in the local political arena.

Alliances, private interests and collaboration

Achieving political control does not necessarily entail the use of force. Indeed, insurgency and counterinsurgency doctrines usually advocate a friendly approach towards the population, aimed to win their 'hearts and minds', that is, to obtain their allegiance through good deeds and propaganda (as seen in Ch. 1). More realistically, it has been suggested that armed organisations can engage in alliances with civilians, that enable them both to further their interests. In the Middle Magdalena Valley, such alliances enabled armed organisations to increase political control and gain influence over local polities and promote large-scale social mobilisation and collective claim-making on issues that concerned their ability to control the territory, such as the eventual demilitarisation of south Bolivar. Armed organisations also supported social mobilisation in connection with broader issues and claims, connected indirectly with territorial control, such as the provision of infrastructure and services to the population and the eradication of coca crops, as was the case of the insurgency during the peasant demonstrations of 1996 and 1998.

Rather than a result of an innate communion of interests between armed organisations and civilians, alliances in south Bolivar emerged in response to actual or potential changes in the patterns of territorial and political control. They allowed social and armed organisations to advance their agendas, raise their visibility and gain legitimacy in the political arena. Political entrepreneurs played a pivotal role in aggregating the demands of specific social groups and in articulating them with the strategic needs of armed organisations, translating them into claims and voicing them up in the public sphere. For instance, while the 'development plan' put forward by peasant organisations in 1999 demanded better infrastructure and social services in south Bolivar, it also proposed institutional changes that would enable the insurgency to consolidate their control over local authorities.

Similarly, the anti-*despeje* movement embodied the interests of paramilitary groups and a variety of local actors who saw in a 'demilitarised' zone a threat to their assets, income and local power. In doing so, political entrepreneurs, politicians, local leaders and heads of social organisations raised their profile and legitimacy vis-à-vis the national government, armed organisations and their own constituencies. This is particularly evident in the case of some of the leaders of the anti-*despeje* movement, whose political careers were boosted after the massive demonstrations in which they took part.

The notion of alliance correctly underscores the fact that collaboration entails an arrangement in which even the weakest part, civilians, make a contribution (e.g. information, legitimacy) and try to advance their interests in the context of an ongoing confrontation with other armed organisation and social groups. While an individualistic, opportunistic version of the notion of alliance may be accurate in some contexts, it should not lead us to underestimate the possibility that civilians may get involved in ways that go beyond the sphere of their own individual, atomised interests. Insofar as this process may involve the aggregation of interests of different social groups, their articulation with the goals of armed organisations, the making of claims vis-à-vis the state in the public arena (e.g. in the media, in talks with officials) and the actual negotiation with those actors, its political nature cannot be neglected. Thus, as noted before, while alliances may lead to privatisation of

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political violence, they also can also lead to the politicisation of private and even criminal violence.

But if the pseudo-war approach put violent rent-seeking at the centre of our understanding of how armed organisations operate, Kalyvas's model of collaboration and alliances (2006) did the same in relation to collaboration and civilian behaviour in the context of irregular war. To be fair, Kalyvas does not subscribe the 'new wars' hypotheses about the degradation of conflicts (2001); moreover, his original definition of alliances is compatible 'with all sorts of motives ranging from the most ideological to the most opportunistic' (2003: 483). But in modelling the relation between control, collaboration and violence, he gave a central role to the private, individual motives of civilians in shaping alliances and in explaining the distribution of violence and, more specifically, *who* is targeted: civilians accuse foes and local competitors, he claimed, even if they are not collaborators—hence the term 'malicious denunciation'—hoping that they will be eliminated by combatants. In this sense, he does for civilian collaboration what others scholars did for insurrections, namely, emphasising the 'expected private returns to insurgents' (Grossman 1991: 912). In doing this, the model reduces the local sphere to the realm of private interests and equates local conflicts to personal rivalries and vendettas, missing other potential arrangements that may emerge between armed organisations and civilians—considered not only as individuals but also as members of groups, classes and civil organisations.

The mutually reinforcing relation between alliances and violence

Collaboration and violence in irregular wars tend to reinforce each other both at the individual and collective levels: on the one hand, collaboration provokes selective or indiscriminate attacks against those believed to support the enemy; on the other hand, those who fear being victimised by a given armed organisation, look to their opponents for protection and collaborate with them. In the Magdalena Middle Valley, individuals actively involved in alliances with either side were often selectively targeted. For instance, Edgar Quiroga, one of the leaders of the peasant mobilisations of 1996 and 1998, was kidnapped and killed by paramilitaries (*Cambio* 24 January 2000, No. 344: 34); likewise, Jorge Sarmiento, member of the *anti-*

despeje movement in south Bolivar, was killed in 2001, apparently by insurgents (N&N 20: 57).
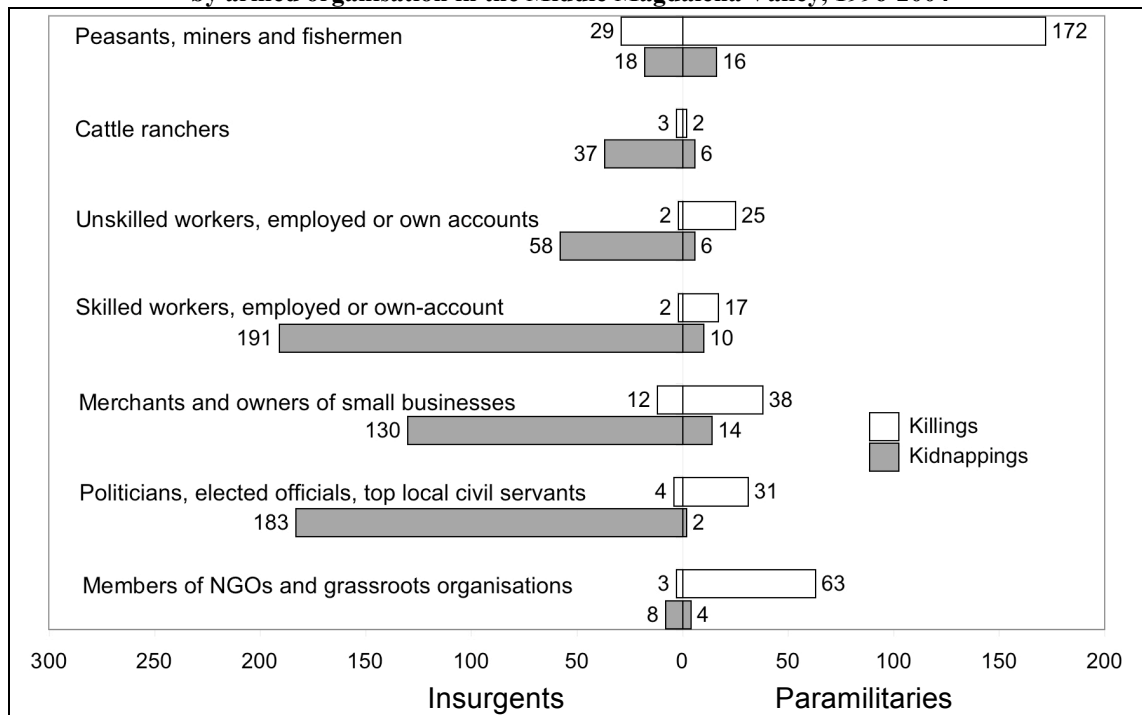
At the collective level, the peasant mobilisations and the anti-*despeje* movement, in turn, emerged in part as a reaction to paramilitary and insurgent violence, respectively. However, alliances and collaboration also reshaped the distribution of risks faced by different social groups. In Barrancabermeja, for instance, poorer neighbourhoods, where the insurgency was deeply rooted, were hit harder by the paramilitaries during the counterinsurgent operations of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Likewise, paramilitaries attacked peasants, miners and rural dwellers in general more than any other social group (while paramilitaries accounted for 43.3 per the civilian death toll, they killed 62.8 per cent of all the peasants, miners and fishermen killed in conflict-related events). This trend probably reflects the perception that many among the rural population were in fact guerrillas 'in disguise' or, at least, functional to the operation of insurgents.

Although the evidence is not compelling enough, the mutually reinforcing effect of alliances and violence is visible when the distribution of violence by armed organisations against different social groups is considered. Figure 7.1 shows the absolute number of victims of killings and kidnappings by insurgents and paramilitaries during the period of study, classified according to their occupational status. On the one hand, rural dwellers and members of NGOS and grassroots organisations, who were (seen as) functional to the operation of (or willing to cooperate with) insurgents, were targeted mostly by paramilitaries. On the other hand, social groups targeted by the guerrillas, such as local politicians and merchants became vocal supporters of the paramilitary presence in the region and actively opposed proposals to demilitarise south Bolivar, as the insurgency demanded.

At any rate, these figures underscore the relevance of social groups and classes as analytical categories in explaining the scale and distribution of violence against civilians. Rather than a challenge to the dominant empirical approaches to the subject, which have tended to look at civilians either as a homogeneous population (and therefore have focused on aggregate variables) or as a collection of

heterogeneous agents with fragmented, disparate interests, these social categories (e.g. Kalyvas 2006) may be seen as part of an intermediate layer that makes possible to specify causal links between micro behaviour and macro events, as advocated by methodological individualists (e.g. Coleman 1990).

**Figure 7.1. Occupation of victims of kidnappings and killings
by armed organisation in the Middle Magdalena Valley, 1996-2004**

Peasants, miners and fishermen — 29 | 172
18 | 16

Cattle ranchers — 3 | 2
37 | 6

Unskilled workers, employed or own accounts — 2 | 25
58 | 6

Skilled workers, employed or own-account — 2 | 17
191 | 10

Merchants and owners of small businesses — 12 | 38
130 | 14

□ Killings
▨ Kidnappings

Politicians, elected officials, top local civil servants — 4 | 31
183 | 2

Members of NGOs and grassroots organisations — 3 | 63
8 | 4

300 250 200 150 100 50 0 50 100 150 200
Insurgents   Paramilitaries

Notes: The left-hand side of the figure shows the victims of the insurgency; the right-hand side, victims of the paramilitaries. The occupations categorised by the author based on descriptions provided by the sources. Sources: *Fondelibertad* and VNN.

Moreover, introducing this layer is a necessary step to unveil the relation between armed conflict and other, previous and ongoing, social conflicts. First, because armed conflict and violence, unlike earthquakes, emerge from societies themselves. As Keen put it, war cannot be understood as 'an external variable, something that is superimposed on a society, rather than something that grows out of the political and economic processes at work in peacetime' (1997: 74). And second, because armed conflict and violence cause more than mere death and destruction. They transform society in a variety of ways: reshaping institutions, relocating populations, reallocating assets and, in general, reshuffling the risks and opportunities that different social groups face. In other words, 'war is not simply development in reverse' (Cramer 2006: 282).

7.2.3 The limits of criminalisation

By the late 1990s, armed conflict in the Middle Magdalena Valley was showing some typical symptoms of a pseudo-war. Private militias lacking a stable chain of command, just as those described by Kaldor (1999: 95), often led by drug lords, committed brutal abuses against civilians. And insurgent and paramilitary groups were involved, in one way or another, in the production and trade of coca paste and cocaine and other criminal enterprises such as the stealing of petrol from pipelines. In spite of this, this section claims that the convergence of criminal and armed organisations did not lead to an outright criminalisation of violence against civilians, that is, to a mutation in the purpose of violence from political and military aims to reckless rent-seeking. True, economic resources were critical for armed organisations to fund and expand their operations and material rewards and expectations surely played a role in the recruitment of combatants. But economic motives did not play a central role in explaining the notorious increase in the number of civilians killed and displaced. In particular, the struggle to control and regulate the coca economy did not lead to widespread violence. However, ransom kidnappings ran contrary to the political ambitions of the insurgency; in particular, its distribution across zones of territorial was at odds with the aim of consolidating political control.

Crime and the true aims of paramilitary violence

The case for a pseudo-war interpretation seems especially strong in the case of paramilitaries: first, because they had only a marginal participation in armed confrontations as such (as measured by the number of actual clashes they took part in and the insurgents they killed in action). Second, they were notoriously involved in the drug trade and, third, were responsible for the largest number of abuses, in particular killings, against the population. But the evidence shown in previous chapters indicates that they their excesses were not aimed to strip civilians of their assets or directly associated with their attempts to control the regional coca paste market or other illegal activities. For instance, in Barrancabermeja, homes occupied by paramilitaries in 2001 did not belong to particularly affluent households or had

significant economic potential; indeed, some were actually returned to their owners in 2006 (see Ch. 5). As shown in Ch. 6, they used violence and coercion to control local authorities and social organisations and to mobilise political support.

This conclusion may come as a surprise given the scale of the coca economy and the involvement of armed organisations in the drug business, traditionally associated with gruesome vendettas and vengeful attacks. Indeed, the restrictions imposed by paramilitaries on the coca market after they managed to control the towns (i.e. forbidding transactions with 'unlicensed' buyers and eliminating competitions), entailed the use of violence against those who breached the new rules. However, these measures did not lead to a massive use of violence against civilians. Not only was widespread violence unnecessary, as peasants grew the crop voluntarily, but inconvenient, since harvesting requires a constant supply of labour to pick the leaves throughout the year.[139]

Consistent with this reasoning, is the quantitative evidence obtained in Ch. 4, which shows that coca crops (municipal areas, to be precise) did not explain lethal violence by paramilitaries in the region. They also indicate that their actions were aimed at *municipios* and communities with a recent track of insurgent activity, presumably with the aim of weakening the social base needed by guerrillas to operate. In south Bolivar, they helped the state in holding and patrolling towns, villages and other positions that, in the past, had been targeted by the insurgents or used as transit points. In other words, if paramilitaries had been interested exclusively in taking control over the coca paste market, the levels of violence reached in the region would probably have been much *lower* than they actually were.

What is more, if we are to believe Castaño's claim that they used funds from the drug trade to fund their operations, as the protection fees paid by merchants and companies were insufficient (Aranguren 2001: 253), they were effectively subsidising the protection they provided to politicians, cattle ranchers, merchants and public and private companies. Hence, it was their ability to use unlawful methods of warfare and criminal forms of funding that made their assistance so welcome,

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[139] Coca is a permanent crop; some varieties yield up to six harvests per year.

valuable and even urgent in the effort to push back the insurgency and enable the Colombian state to increase control over the region. Thus, paradoxically, they were violent precisely because they were more than just criminals and it was their criminal nature that made them most valuable in crushing the insurgency. As Naylor noted, 'mature criminality is compatible with the continued existence of the formal state and can even be employed to defend it' (2002: 55).

That said, it must be acknowledged that the counterinsurgent campaign had notable economic consequences for the region. While forced displacement probably increased poverty and hindered growth, overall, the retreat of the insurgency created a safer environment for businesses and for the regional economy in general, improving its long-term economic prospects. As noted in Ch. 5, the paramilitary presence in Barrancabermeja was welcomed by merchants and unleashed the generation of new businesses. In south Bolivar, oil palm plantations jumped from 250 to 3,340 hectares between 2000 and 2004. In the same period, cattle stocks across the region grew by 15 per cent, offsetting the decline seen in the four previous years. In sierra San Lucas, a subsidiary of the mining company Anglo American launched a project to assess the magnitude of gold reserves. In Yondo, the national government built a bridge over the Magdalena River, connecting the town with Barrancabermeja as a way to promote trade between this traditionally isolated region and cities such as Bucaramanga. All these positive economic outcomes became a crucial factor in buttressing the political stance of the paramilitaries in the region as providers of security and helped them to obtain social and political support despite their ruthless methods and their involvement in the drug business.

The criminalisation of the insurgency

While the extent of the involvement of insurgents in the illegal drug industry is still unclear (Thoumi 2003), it is well known that throughout the period, guerrillas charged a fee on the production of coca and coca paste and policed transactions in local coca paste markets in south Bolivar. Just as in the case of the paramilitaries, enforcing this regime entailed some degree of coercion and, probably, violence against cultivators. But the evidence does not back the idea that this had been a crucial determinant of violence against civilians. Indeed, insurgents did not behave

as the typical organised criminals, who would rather develop friendly ties with enforcement officials rather than fighting them, or as the kind of organisations described in the pseudo-wars literature, which tend to avoid open warfare and even collude with their supposed enemies while attacking civilians.

But there is an aspect of the insurgents' behaviour that shows clear signs of criminalisation, that is, signs of a change in their priorities and strategies, from political or institutional change, along the lines of a 'classical' insurgency, towards violent rent-seeking. This aspect is, of course, the prevalence of ransom kidnappings throughout the period. As noted in Ch. 4, insurgents were the most important perpetrators of kidnappings in the region and only a minority of the victims were captured for political reasons. Indeed, during the second half of the period, political kidnappings dropped to practically zero. Most kidnappings had an economic motivation and targeted low- and middle-income civilians, rather than large landowners, cattle ranchers or 'oligarchs'. Many victims were captured at random in flash checkpoints, means-tested (so to speak), and retained if their families or employers seemed to have the resources to pay for their release. In other words, the choice of victims lacked any sort of revolutionary or 'class-struggle' narrative.

At any rate, the results point towards a fatal flaw in the insurgents' strategy. While they established other predictable, quasi-bureaucratic forms of fund raising such as the fees on coca crops and coca paste in the areas they controlled, they unwisely persisted in kidnapping civilians for ransom in the same areas. To put it in Olson's terms (1993), they continued acting as roving bandits when the most sensible behaviour towards the populations was that of stationary bandits. In doing so, they alienated key local actors and groups, including local politicians, merchants and cattle ranchers who, not surprisingly, saw in the paramilitaries not only an inevitable option but also a preferable alternative in terms of providing a friendly environment for businesses and a less volatile relation with local politicians.

7.2.4   Summing up—violence and the strategies of irregular warfare

Based on the findings made in this and previous chapters, this part reconstructs the main elements of the strategies followed by armed organisations and the state in the Middle Magdalena Valley and suggests that their rationales for violence and, more generally, their behaviour in relation to civilians is consistent with a 'classical' irregular war, rather than with a pseudo-war, as defined in Ch. 1. Table 7.6 outlines these strategies, aimed to achieve territorial and political control through three broad sets of means: armed conflict (i.e. hostilities), violence against civilians and politics (i.e. negotiation, compromise, mobilisation).

The struggle for territorial control manifested itself in military actions aimed to capture and hold geographic positions: insurgents exploited the government forces' inability to fully control the territory, developed strongholds and controlled rural isolated areas and even, temporarily, some towns. Counterinsurgent forces suffered significant losses and initially seemed unable to respond to the insurgents' challenge but eventually managed to push them back, assisted by the growing numbers of paramilitary troops that moved into the region and, probably, strengthened by the investments in military equipment made by the Pastrana administration and partly funded by the US under the '*Plan Colombia*'.

Armed organisations also tried to increase territorial through political negotiation, as the ELN desperately did—and nearly achieved—in 2000 and 2001, when the Pastrana administration agreed to 'demilitarise' south Bolivar as a first step towards a peace process. Crucially, the demilitarisation involved the withdrawal of government and paramilitary forces but not guerrillas, who were close to obtain temporary territorial control over several *municipios*, had it not been for the fierce local opposition of social organisations and paramilitary groups.

The struggle for territorial control also led to attacks and abuses against civilians and their scale and forms reflected the way the factions relied on civilians to operate and succeed. On the one hand, guerrillas, punished suspected collaborators and also coerced civilians from all backgrounds to exact financial resources. On the other hand, paramilitaries resorted extensively to collective and individual killings in

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insurgent-controlled areas in what appeared to be an attempt to weaken the insurgents' social base. While government forces were only marginally involved in direct attacks against the population, they certainly made no attempt to stop paramilitary attacks on civilians.

Table 7.6. Ends, means and actions in irregular warfare

Means	Ends	
	Territorial control	**Political control**
Armed conflict	Attacks against military targets. Landmines.	--
Violence against civilians	Killing or displacement of collaborators and 'functional' groups and populations. Predatory and parasitic rent extraction (e.g., protection rackets, kidnappings).	Kidnappings and killings of politicians, journalists and social leaders.
Politics	'Demilitarised' zones obtained through negotiation.	Propaganda, indoctrination. Alliances with politicians, social organisations and local elites.

Armed organisations also wanted political control over grassroots organisations and local governments across the region as they enabled them to access local resources, mobilise the population, legitimise themselves as representatives of their purported constituencies and act as such in the national political arena. To this end, they killed and kidnapped local officials, politicians, grassroots leaders and journalists. However, they also developed alliances with politicians and social organisations, which were particularly visible in the local elections of 1997 and in the massive demonstrations of 1996, 1998 and 2001.

7.2.5 Methodological implications

Recent contributions to the study of contemporary armed conflicts underscore the self-interested behaviour of combatants and civilians and suggest that war, violence and collaboration are increasingly driven by personal ambitions rather than political goals. In this context, combatants, warlords and politicians seem less interested in victory than in satisfying their lust for power and money, usually at the expense of the population; meanwhile, fearful but rational civilians try to exploit the

opportunities that conflict throws up, engaging in individualistic alliances with armed organisations and even prompting the use of violence against their fellows.

Understanding individual behaviour is surely crucial in developing theories of conflict and violence built on solid micro-foundations and, in particular, in explaining issues such as the recruitment of combatants and the incentives involved in shaping their behaviour on the battlefield as well as in relation to civilians. However, as Tilly (2007: 4) argued, 'collective violence is not simply individual aggression writ large' and surely cannot be reduced to the study of the private, individual motives of the people involved in its production. For instance, the tragic scale of the Holocaust cannot be explained by looking at the personality, emotions or motives of individual Germans and, indeed, researchers have shown how the whole machinery behind it was cleverly designed to make it possible without relying on individual feelings of scorn, hatred or revenge (Bauman, 1989; Browning 1992).

As for civilians, methodological individualism has posed interesting questions about their individual motives in the context of armed conflict. Kalyvas (2006), in particular, showed how their individualistic, opportunistic behaviour could be pervasive enough to privatise political violence. However, methodological individualism cannot lead us to neglect collective and political action through grassroots organisations and political parties. This is particularly relevant in understanding irregular wars where local institutions and organisations continue operating amid armed conflict and indeed, are seen as instruments to control the population and, hence, become themselves an object of dispute between the parties.

Likewise, it is necessary to go beyond the purely individual sphere and incorporate concepts and variables that capture the social and economic divide that characterises communities and societies into the analysis of armed conflicts. As shown in this dissertation, this is a promising path to unveil the connection between armed and social conflicts, the mechanisms through which they feedback each other and the stakes that different social groups may eventually have in the production of violence. Thus, while the distinction between civilians and combatants (or civilians and 'thugs') remains both morally indispensable and analytically relevant, further distinctions between significant social attributes (e.g. strata, occupations, classes) are

necessary to examine the content—the 'what are they about'—of armed conflicts.

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