



The Siren Call of Militarization in Latin America

Written by David Gagne Wednesday, 19 August 2015



Soldiers on patrol

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that the militarization of domestic security is bad for human rights and has little impact on crime and violence in the long term. So what keeps attracting Latin American governments to adopt these "iron fist" policies?

If you were to take a look at Latin America's security landscape, you would find that the most violent countries are applying a more militaristic approach to domestic law enforcement. The three nations topping InSight Crime's homicide ranking (</news-analysis/insight-crime-2014-homicide-round-up>) have all recently taken steps to increase the role of the military in

combating crime and violence.

El Salvador has deployed elite military brigades (</news-briefs/el-salvador-to-deploy-special-forces-to-combat-gangs>) to urban settings to fight the explosion of gang violence (</news-briefs/june-replaces-may-as-most-violent-month-in-el-salvador-since-civil-war>) rocking the country. Honduras

(<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>) has (</news-briefs/military-police-honduras-50>) installed a (</news-briefs/honduras-gives-green-light-to-military-police>) military police force (</news-briefs/honduras-gives-green-light-to-military-police>), and appointed a general (</news-analysis/honduras-militarizes-citizen-security>) to head the country's Security Ministry. Venezuela

(<http://es.insightcrime.org/noticias-sobre-crimen-organizado-en-venezuela>) has also assigned high-ranking military officials to fill security positions (</news-analysis/maduro-announcements-mark-a-return-to-militarized-policing-in-venezuela>) normally reserved for civilians and recently launched (</news-briefs/17-killed-in-massive-venezuela-police-operation>) a joint military-police offensive against gangs.

Meanwhile, Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/9-mexico>) -- a long-time source of drug-related violence -- dramatically increased (</news-analysis/what-to-keep-what-to-throw-away-from-calderon-presidency>) the military's role in combating powerful cartels under the administration of President Felipe Calderon (2006-2012). Despite an initial change in rhetoric, current President Enrique Peña Nieto has done little (<http://www.insightcrime.com/news-analysis/new-strategy-familiar-result-militarization-in-mexico>) to scale back militarization of citizen security.

An Unfulfilled Promise

Despite the seemingly growing popularity of militarization in many parts of the region, there is scant evidence (</news-briefs/experts-seek-end-to-militarization-of-latam-policing>) that turning to the military results in improved security over the long term.

In fact, multiple studies (</news-analysis/nexos-armys-presence-equals-more-homicides-in-mexico-revisited>) have shown violence increased (http://www.upi.com/Science_News/2015/04/02/Study-blames-spike-in-homicide-rates-on-Mexican-drug-war/6631428001126/) in areas where Mexican troops were deployed to battle the cartels. The United Nations came to a similar conclusion (</news-briefs/un-chastises-guatemala-on-militarization-of-security>) about the results of militarization in Guatemala (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/52-guatemala>).

Even in Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>), it is difficult to credit the steep drop in homicides to the initiation of the military police. Hernandez oversaw a 13 point drop in the national murder rate during his first year as president, and homicides have continued to decline in 2015 (</news-briefs/honduras-set-to-lose-title-of-murder-capital-of-world>), according to government statistics.

The drops have come in some areas where Hernandez has deployed the military police. However, attributing these gains in violence reduction solely to these deployments ignores the fact that Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>)' homicide rate fell at an equal clip (<http://www.laprensa.hn/inicio/781826-417/la-meta-ahora-es-bajar-tasa-de-homicidios-a-30-est%C3%A1-en>) in 2013, the year before he took office.

Perhaps even more troubling, the rise of militarization has been closely linked to increased human rights abuses by security forces in the region. In Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/9-mexico>), human rights watchdog Amnesty International tracked a 600 percent rise (</news-briefs/amnesty-tracks-rise-of-torture-in-mexico>) in reports of torture by security forces between 2003 and 2013. Reuters also found human rights abuses by Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>)' military have jumped since 2012 (</news-briefs/using-military-as-police-honduras-abuse>), the same year the government intensified the armed forces' role in policing.

SEE ALSO: Honduras News and Profiles (</honduras-organized-crime-news>)

Soldiers are trained for combat and to kill adversaries (</news-analysis/is-brazil-military-police-training-too-brutal>), not settle disputes or investigate crimes. They do not know how to secure crime scenes and laws often shield them from being prosecuted in civilian courts, leading to widespread impunity for military-driven attacks on civilians.

Militarization can also lead to human rights abuses that extend beyond extrajudicial killings. The military, for instance, often treats suspects like enemy combatants, not like civilians.

"In many cases, the use of the military comes alongside other policies, like arrest without charging, lengthening prison terms, [and] violations of habeas corpus," Orlando Perez, Associate Dean at Millersville University (<http://www.millersville.edu/>) and Co-Coordinator of the AmericasBarometer survey (cited below), told InSight Crime.

What the Pope and a General Have in Common

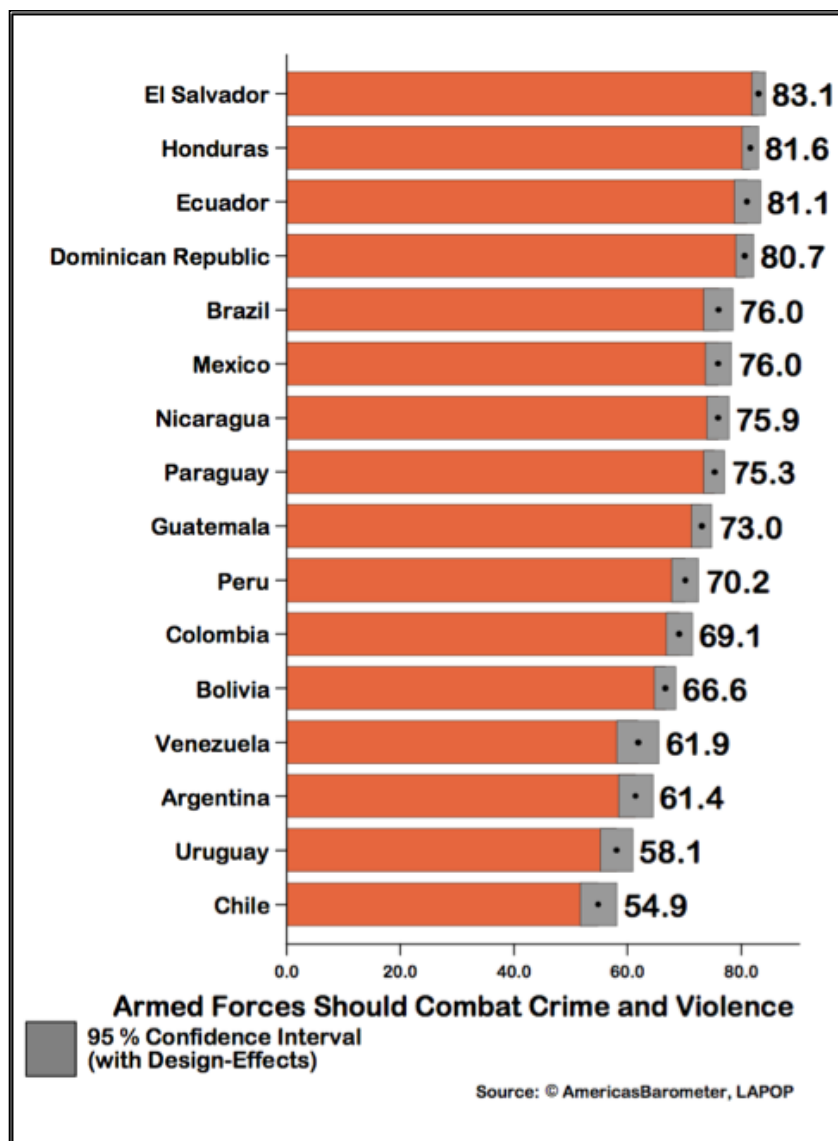
While there are few examples of militarization leading to sustained security improvements, the allure of quick gains through an increased military presence continues to impel governments across the region to adopt this strategy. This is often as much a political decision as it is a security one.

“Even if crime levels don't go all the way down, just seeing soldiers out on the streets sends a strong message,” Adam Isacson, Senior Associate for Regional Security Policy at the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA (<http://www.wola.org/>)), told InSight Crime.

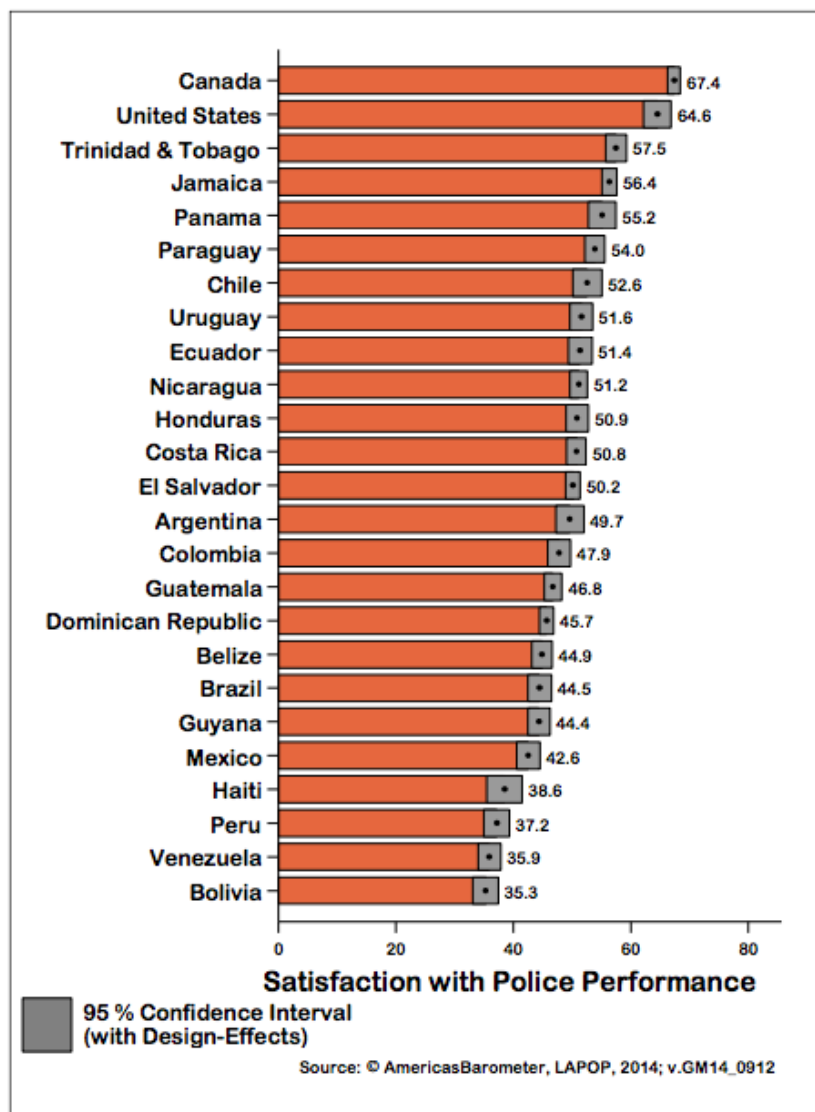
In fact, Hugo Perez Hernaiz, professor of sociology at the Central University of Venezuela (<http://www.ucv.ve/>), said the Venezuelan government's turn towards militarization may be due in part to upcoming elections.

“With a deteriorating citizen security situation and legislative elections slated for December, the government feels it has to be seen as 'doing something' with respect [to the country's high crime rates],” Perez said.

Although these decisions are made by political elites, they often have the support of the general population. According to the Vanderbilt's 2014 AmericasBarometer survey (pdf (http://www.vanderbilt.edu/lapop/ab2014/AB2014_Comparative_Report_English_V3_revised_011315_W.pdf)), a significant majority of respondents from countries across the region said they supported the armed forces being involved in combating crime. Notably, Latin America's two most violent countries (Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>) and El Salvador (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/32-el-salvador>)) rank the highest, with over 80 percent of respondents saying they support the military's engagement in domestic security. (See AmericasBarometer graph below)



This is due to two key, interconnected factors. One is that police forces across the region are widely seen as corrupt, inefficient, and poorly trained. (See AmericasBarometer results for that question below) The other is that the military is one of the most respected state institutions in most Latin American countries; the AmericasBarometer report found the military trails only the Catholic Church in terms of trust. Only the Pope, it appears, commands more respect and trust than a military general in Latin America.



The Past is Never Dead

A growing number of analysts (<http://latinamericagoesglobal.org/2015/08/militarizing-the-police-undermines-democratic-governance/>) see the militaristic approach to security as undermining the region's young democracies. To many (<http://www.coha.org/police-militarization-in-ecuador/>), the current wave of militarization harkens back to the Cold War era, when almost a dozen Latin American countries were ruled by repressive military governments.

“Putting the military back in the internal security role looks like you are walking back some of the progress of the democratic period,” Isacson said.

Even in Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/9-mexico>), which never experienced a military dictatorship, there are questions about the military's outsized role within the government. Jesus Perez Caballero, an independent investigator of organized crime in Latin America, told InSight Crime the military has always maintained a “tutelary role” in Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/9-mexico>)'s democracy.

“There is no doubt the military has the biggest capacity, not only in terms of intelligence but also law enforcement,” Perez said. This creates a strong incentive for the government to permanently rely on the military for policing, rather than as a last resort.

SEE ALSO: Mexico News and Profiles (/mexico-organized-crime-news)

In places like Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/9-mexico>), the military is also an easier option. From a budgetary perspective, the costs fall on the federal and not the state governments, making the choice an easy one for governors in crime-ridden states.

But in some countries, the military's growing influence does not stop just at citizen security. In Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>), military officials have already taken over a number of traditionally civilian government posts, (/news-analysis/honduras-militarizes-citizen-security) including running the country's penitentiary system, civil aviation, and the social service agency.

In Guatemala (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/52-guatemala>), military officials have permeated numerous civilian offices and control large portions of the national government's budget.

In Venezuela (<http://es.insightcrime.org/noticias-sobre-crimen-organizado-en-venezuela>), President Nicolas Maduro has recently appointed (<https://www.stratfor.com/sample/analysis/venezuela-militarys-influence-government-could-block-reforms>) high-ranking military officers to run the Venezuelan Corporation for Foreign Trade, the country's state-owned steel company, and a regional administrative network.

“There's that same instinct that you have with policing,” Isacson said. “Let's pull the military out, because at least they have the resources, they are trained, and they can deploy rapidly. So why not have them fight inflation, or build a sewer system?”

However, some say the military is a reluctant partner.

“Unlike previous eras, they [the military] don't want to be involved in things other than military missions or military roles,” Frank Mora, a professor at Florida International University (<http://www.fiu.edu/>) and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Western Hemisphere, told InSight Crime

The Unholy Trinity: Military, Police, and Military Police

Militarization has several facets, and can go beyond just increasing the military's role in domestic security. In many Latin American countries, it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between police units and military brigades.

“The distinctions between between police and military institutions and between war and law enforcement are blurring,” Robert Muggah, Research Director and Program Coordinator for Citizen Security at the Igarape Institute (<http://www.igarape.org.br/en/>) in Brazil (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/10-brazil>), told InSight Crime.

According to Muggah, the militarization of police forces in Latin America was propelled by the US-backed “war on drugs.” Countries transitioning from civil war or authoritarian regimes in the 1980s and 1990s typically treated crime with an iron fist (“mano dura”) approach, Muggah said.

However, “US investment in counter-narcotics took these repressive policing strategies to another level,” Muggah added.

SEE ALSO: Coverage of Security Policy (</component/tags/tag/157-security-policy>)

The most obvious example of police militarization has been the creation of military police forces. According to Orlando Perez, these hybrid units are trained to handle situations that go beyond the capacities of local police, but stop short of war. Military police in Brazil (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/10-brazil>) are notoriously violent (</news-briefs/sao-paulo-military-police-killed-10000-study>), and human rights groups have flagged the routine use of lethal force (</news-briefs/amnesty-international-criticizes-brazil-police-violence>) by these units.

In Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>), there is some debate about the US' role in the formation and implementation of the military police force. Isacson told InSight Crime there has been a “real shift” on the part of the United States towards limiting support for the military in citizen security roles, and the US embassy has stated publicly that it does not support the Honduran government's emphasis on military police.

Nonetheless, Isacson says other parts of the US government are fomenting this militarization in Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>).

“[The United States] still encourages military internal policing roles through our words. While we are not aiding the PMOP in Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>), I think [US SouthCom Commander] General [John] Kelly has said a lot of things praising President Hernandez's decision to make and deploy [the force],” Isacson said, using the Spanish acronym for Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>)' Military Police of Public Order. “So the message is still there, even if the money always isn't.”

It is a tricky balance that extends beyond local citizen security policies. Mora contends, for example, that the United States is supporting President Hernandez because of Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>)' strategic importance to the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle initiative, and not because of his hardline approach.

“The US is banking on making that plan work in Guatemala (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/52-guatemala>), Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>), and El Salvador (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/32-el-salvador>),” Mora said, adding that the Alliance for Prosperity emphasizes softer approaches to improving security in the Northern Triangle.

Time to Cash the Check

Governments in Latin America have routinely promised to deploy the military only as a stop-gap measure so that they can focus on improving the country's police forces. However, a lack of political will and resources often hinders police reform efforts, and the military remains on the streets indefinitely. To borrow a certain metaphor (<http://www.americanrhethoric.com/speeches/mlkihadream.htm>), governments have offered their constituents a check, but when they go to cash it, the check comes back marked “insufficient funds.”

While rolling out the military is an attractive option in the short term, this may in fact delay the police reform process.

“The use of the military feeds into the weakness of the police,” Orlando Perez told InSight Crime. “If you are using the military, those resources are not being put into building the police.”

Indeed, despite years ([/news-analysis/dynamics-of-honduran-police-corruption-narrow-chance-for-reform](#)) of supposed wholesale reform efforts in Venezuela (<http://es.insightcrime.org/noticias-sobre-crimen-organizado-en-venezuela>), Honduras (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/66-honduras>) and Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/9-mexico>), police forces in all three nations remain woefully corrupt ([/news-briefs/arrests-venezuela-police-kidnapping-reforms](#)). The abduction and killing of 43 students in Guerrero, Mexico (<http://www.insightcrime.org/component/tags/tag/9-mexico>) last year by a criminal gang with the help of local police ([/news-briefs/mexican-police-missing-students-drug-cartel-official](#)) is the most high-profile case of police involvement in criminal activity, but it is hardly the only one ([/news-briefs/police-theft-of-1-3-mn-is-latest-mark-of-honduras-corruption](#)).

Mora notes that Latin American governments must also display more political will to combat the structural causes of violence and crime, such as inequality. “If you train the police, in a sense what you are doing is dealing with the symptom of the problem, not the drivers and the causes of the problem,” Mora said.

Balancing the demands of the here and now with the best long-term security option is a difficult equilibrium for governments to find. The challenges are daunting, but postponing the real work that needs to be done by continually rolling out the military foreshadows a future for Latin America distressingly similar to its present: as the world's most violent region ([/news-analysis/latin-america-worlds-most-violent-region-un](#)).