Unintended Consequences

The Failure of Honduran Drug Policy[1]

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On January 27, 2014, newly inaugurated Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez stated that the United States must take responsibility for Honduras' elevated homicide rate;[2] at 79 homicides per 100 thousand, Honduras has been dubbed the "Murder Capital of the World."[3] Hernandez claimed that these levels of violence are directly caused by U.S. demand for drugs—more specifically: cocaine— and must increase efforts to reduce and eventually eliminate drug trafficking in Honduras. With this support, Hernandez promises to govern with an iron fist to eliminate drug trafficking, thus reducing levels of violence.[4] This rhetoric is not new in Honduras; Hernandez's predecessors, Ricardo Maduro, Manuel "Mel" Zelaya, and, Porfiro "Pepe" Lobo Sosa all relied heavily on the U.S. to support its efforts in combating drug trafficking in the state. With this consistent support of the U.S., both financially and strategically, why does Honduras still suffer from high levels of drug trafficking? Simply put, it is the permissible environment created by corrupt Honduran officials, diminishing the rule of law in the state.

In this paper, I discuss prominent factors that have created this permissible environment for drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) in Honduras. I begin by introducing a brief history of drug trafficking in Honduras leading to the current state as of 2014. Thereafter, I analyze U.S.-Honduran foreign policy as it relates to drug trafficking from 2005-2014. Additionally, action, successes, and failures of this policy will be discussed, including factors such as corruption, influence trafficking, and a

general disregard by Honduran leadership. Finally, I analyze the "unintended consequences" of the failed Honduran drug policy, including the recent mass migration crisis, high levels of violence, and high citizen insecurity.

DRUG TRAFFICKING IN HONDURAS: A BRIEF HISTORY

The introduction of drug trafficking in Honduras dates back to the 1970s. With U.S. attention focused on wars in Guatemala, Nicaragua, and later, El Salvador, Honduras became a successful bridge state[5] for narcotics moving from Colombia to Mexico, and into the United States.[6] Furthermore, under autocratic military rule, Honduras was among the most stable countries in Central America, second to Costa Rica, and received far less attention from the U.S. In the 1980s, Honduras returned to democracy; however, Honduras' shaky transition to democracy, the regional instability caused by the Central American civil wars, and strong demand for cocaine in the U.S. produced the political and economic space for increased drug trafficking through Honduras. The U.S. amplified its successful interdiction of drugs moving through the Caribbean in the 1980s, and into South Florida—a reaction to the 1981 Time Magazine article titled "Paradise Lost" and the 1984 Traquilandria Raid in Colombia.[7] As a result of U.S. interdiction, Colombia producers began to increase the movement of drugs through the war-torn Central American region, and into Mexico. This would give rise to Mexican cartels and solidify Honduras' future as a key transit country in the post-Central American civil war period.

The surge in cocaine trafficking and violence prompted increased U.S.-led efforts to combat DTOs. As Colombia emerged as the leading source of coca cultivation, the U.S. implemented "Plan Colombia" in the 2000s, which supported Colombia's counternarcotics efforts.[8] Similar anti-narcotic initiatives emerged in order to combat

drug trafficking and organized crime in Mexico throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s—leading to the Mérida Initiative in 2007. Drug interdiction efforts on the part of U.S., Colombian, and Mexican governments, would lead DTOs to subcontract Honduran DTOs to move drugs from South America to Mexico.

The socio-economic and political instability caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998 further taxed an already weak Honduran State and attracted DTOs—both Honduran and foreign criminal organizations. Hurricane Mitch caused at least 5,000 casualties, destroying 70 percent of the country's crops and causing an estimated $2 billion in damages.[9] Following Hurricane Mitch, two things occurred: DTOs focused the majority of drug movements through Honduras, and Honduras saw a sharp rise in *transportistas*[10] moving drugs through the country. To minimize the risk, DTOs began hiring *transportistas* to transport drugs across Honduras, paying in drugs rather than money. These *transportistas* would then hire smaller criminal organizations and local gangs to move the goods, increasing the pervasiveness of illicit networks throughout the country.[11] With Honduras still reeling from Hurricane Mitch, the collapse of Honduran governance and its socio-economic institutions, and U.S. efforts focused on Colombia and Mexico, DTOs successfully established enough social, economic, and political space for their operations.

As of 2014, Honduras remains central in the fight against drug trafficking. Most drugs— primarily cocaine— move through the Northeastern part of the state, from the Gracias A Dios region towards Copan before entering Guatemala.[12] Most cocaine is transported via small aircrafts, landing in makeshift airstrips in remote parts of the state.[13] Drug trafficking has steadily increased, most recently following the political crisis that

led to the ousting of Honduran President Manuel "Mel" Zelaya in 2009.[14] Political crisis combined with poor socio-economic conditions and rising levels of violence have further weakened the state's ability to combat DTOs.

Primarily a transit point, Honduras is home to a number of criminal organizations including Mexican DTOs, particularly the Sinaloa Cartel and Los Zetas.[15] These organizations moved into Honduras following the Mexican government's escalation of its anti-organized crime campaign in the 2000s. They have been joined by Honduran criminal organizations Los Cachiros and Los Valles; both groups are tasked with transporting narcotics through Honduras into surrounding states. Free movement throughout the region allow for easy transportation of goods, legal or illegal, in and out of Honduras. These organizations charge even smaller criminal organizations and gangs to move shipments across the country, most notably Mara Salvatrucha [MS-13] and Barrio 18 [M-18].[16]

One of the most notable groups, Los Cachiros, is a violent DTO based in Colon. In 2013, under the U.S. Kingpin Act, the United States Department of Treasury (DOT) sanctioned seven high-level individuals of the organization, including brothers Javier Eriberto Rivera Maradiaga and Devis Leonel Rivera Maradiaga.[17] DOT identified, and Honduran officials seized five of the organization's businesses used to launder money, including *Inversiones Turistas Joya Grande, S.A. de C.V.,* a zoo and eco-tourist park.[18] Los Cachiros is one of the largest DTOs in Honduras with a net worth of nearly $1 billion. Their network runs from Gracias A Dios, South to Olancho, and West to San Pedro Sula. In addition, Los Cachiros has networks in neighboring Nicaragua.[19]

Soon after, the DOT turned its focus towards Los Valles. On August 20, 2014, DOT designated Los Valles a DTO in Honduras, and targeted sanctions towards leader Miguel Arnulfo Valle Valle, and brothers Jose Reynerio Valle Valle and Luis Alonso Valle Valle.[20]These sanctions came a month after Digna Valle Valle, sister and associate of the Valles brothers, was arrested in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. She was charged with conspiring to traffic cocaine from Colombia, through Guatemala and Mexico and into the U.S.[21]Los Valles operate out of Copan, moving cocaine from South America into Mexico, primarily to the Sinaloa Cartel.[22]

As drug trafficking continues to weaken an already fragile Honduran State, crime and violence continues to increase at alarming levels. Honduras is the most dangerous, non-warring country in the world, registering 79 homicides per 100,000 residents—Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula recorded 169 and 101 homicides per 100,000, respectively.[23] Levels of violence are highest along the drug route states of Colon, Atlantida, Yoro, and Cortes, and the border states of Santa Barbara, Copan, and Ocotepeque. The rise in crime and violence has created calls for the state to respond to violence itself. However, in reality, the pervasiveness of DTOs is rendering the state inept at effectively combating drug trafficking, largely because of the high levels of corruption and weakness of the very institutions charged with addressing the issues.

UNITED STATES—HONDURAS RELATIONS: DRUG POLICY, 2004-2014

With the rise of drug trafficking in the state, Honduras has remained dependent on the United States in its efforts to combat DTOs, primarily due to lack of economic capability. In turn, the government on Honduras has settled into a reserve role, simply acting in conjunction with the U.S., rather than significantly improving its own areas of concern.

High levels of corruption within the judiciary and national police have led to soaring impunity. In addition, internal conflict within Honduras has further strained the state's ability to combat DTOs, increasing its reliance on the U.S.

Nearly all counternarcotics policies enacted between 2004-2014 in Honduras has been U.S. led or supported creating a perception of dependence by Honduran government officials. During Honduran President Ricardo Maduro's term (2002-2006), the Stanford graduate implement the so-called "*mano dura*" approach in an effort to combat gangs, an action that was met with a rise in violence in the region.[24] The administration focused on issues of security, in turn, allowing the U.S. to maintain a heavy military presence in the state, but counternarcotics initiatives were consistently compromised. In 2004, U.S. Department of State officials stated that "endemic corruption continues to impede effective counternarcotics law enforcement" in Honduras.[25] Nearing the end of his term, Maduro, with pressure and financial support of the U.S., stripped impunity of high-ranking government officials, developed a criminal database, and created a new internal affairs office in the national police.[26] These initiatives intended to reduce corruption in the most prominent government institutions, but met little success.

Running on an anticorruption platform, Manuel "Mel" Zelaya narrowly won the presidency in a hotly contested election. True to his word, President Zelaya worked with the United States to improve anti-corruption measures, and fix a weak judicial system, which had hindered the state's ability to prosecute known drug traffickers. During his term (2006-2009), Zelaya successfully reformed the national police, increasing the number of officers from 7,000 in 2005 to 13,500 in 2008, passed the "Transparency Law", which allowed public access to government operations, and passed the "Organic

Peace Law" that strengthened police units and internal affairs.[2728] In 2009, he proposed and passed the "Ministerial Agreement 246", which prohibited the importation, production, distribution, transport, use and marketing of pharmaceuticals; a growing problem in Honduras.[29]

On January 28, 2009, the Honduran military at the orders of the Honduran Supreme Court, stormed the presidential palace, awoke Zelaya, and forced him on a plane destined for Costa Rica.[30] Roberto Micheletti, the president of Congress, replaced Zelaya for the remainder of his term.[31]U.S. President Barack Obama denounced the removal of Zelaya, as the U.S. suspended its assistance to Honduras. In addition, the Organization of American States (OAS) and *Sistema de la Integracion Centroamericana* (SICA) suspended Honduras membership in protest of what they deemed an "illegal coup."[32] It would not be until July 2010 and June 2011 that Honduras would be readmitted to SICA and OAS respectively.[3334]

Honduras shifted its focus from combating drug trafficking and crime, to cleaning up internal matters. With U.S. rescinding its assistance, and Honduras focused internally, DTOs were able to create space for their operations. This period coincided with a sharp rise in homicides, primarily along drug trafficking routes. Highly scrutinized elections would bring Porfiro "Pepe" Lobo Sosa to power, with a dire need to mend international relationships, and repair the state's broken political institutions.[35]

2010 would serve as a rebuilding year for counternarcotics efforts in Honduras. Increased violence in the state, and a U.S. mediated compromise with ousted President Mel Zelaya created pressures on Honduran leadership to increase its effort to combat DTOs. Lobo Sosa's administration relied on the Central America Regional Security

Initiative (CARSI) to develop a plan of action for counternarcotics operations, strategy, and security sector development in Honduras.[36]CARSI, originally part of the Merida Initiative, was founded in 2008 with the focus of countering DTOs and narcotics trafficking through the region. Led by the U.S. State Department, CARSI promotes its five goals for Central America: (1) Create safe streets for the citizens of the region; (2) Disrupt the movement of criminals and contraband to, within, and between the nations of Central America; (3) Support the development of strong, capable, and accountable Central American governments; (4) Re-establish effective state presence, services and security in communities at risk; and (5) Foster enhanced levels of coordination and cooperation between the nations of the region, other international partners and donors to combat regional security threats.[37]

Lobo Sosa move swiftly to rebuild the relationship with the United States. During his time in office (2010-2014), Lobo Sosa implemented a revised forfeiture law to seize assets from DTOs, established a Financial Crime Task Force which received logistical and technical support from the U.S., and created a Public Security Reform Commission which reformed the national police and the judiciary procedural process.[3839]In 2011, Honduran government created the "Integrated Policy for Social Harmony and Citizen Safety." This program endorsed by the U.S. and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), maintained three goals: (1) Violence prevention with an emphasis on human rights; (2) Police capacity building; and (3) Community and business involvement in a localized security plan.[40]In a counternarcotics focused initiative, the Honduran Congress passed a constitutional reform allowing for the extradition of Honduran nationals charged with drug trafficking was passed.[41]

A hotly contested 2013 presidential election saw rise of then-President of Congress, Juan Orlando Hernandez who campaigned on eliminating crime and violence, and the return of ousted President Mel Zelaya. While Zelaya himself was not allowed to run for president, Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro, did run under the newly formed LIBRE party, breaking up the traditionally dominant two-party system seen since Honduras' return to democracy. Also running was son of former President Ramon Villeda, Mauricio Villeda, and popular TV personality, Salvador Nasralla. In a close race, Hernandez edged out his competition to become president.[42]

Once inaugurated, Hernandez called on the United States to take responsibility for the high levels of drug trafficking and violence hindering the state's ability to improve socioeconomic conditions. Prior to being elected, Hernandez had passed legislation to create a militarized police force aimed at eliminating those individuals perpetuating crime and violence. Upon his election, the newly formed military police were thrust into action, taking guard along drug trafficking routes. In his short stint as president (2014-Present), Hernandez has taken charge of the military police, and much to the dismay of the U.S., enacted its own, anti-narcotic law, allowing for the state to shoot down airplanes suspected of trafficking drugs along popular drug trafficking routes.[43]The human rights implications led the U.S. to halt intelligence sharing, primarily the exchange of radar information of suspected planes.[44] This law has created tensions between Washington and Tegucigalpa, impeding U.S.-Honduran security cooperation. Soon after, President Hernandez, in coordination with leaders from nearby Guatemala and El Salvador, proposed to the U.S. a "Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle"; essentially a Central American version of Plan Colombia.[45]

Despite the ebbs and flows of U.S. direct assistance and pressure, Honduras has failed to successfully implement sustainable solutions to combat drug trafficking. Issues of corruption in its political institutions have hindered the efforts to combat drug trafficking. Rather, it has created a permissible environment for DTOs to operate.

ACTIONS, SUCCESSES, AND FAILURE OF HONDURAN DRUG POLICY

Cooperation between Honduras and the United States, primarily in anti-narcotic operations, has proven successful between 2004-2014. Military operations have successfully contributed to record drug seizures and, in more recent cases, allowed the Honduran government to seize DTOs assets, and reinvest in their security sector. The failure of Honduran drug policy lies not in its bilateral anti-narcotic operations, but rather, in the implementation and execution of drug policy by the Honduran government. Corruption, influence trafficking by DTOs, and general disregard by Honduran leadership has created a permissible environment for DTO operations.

In the first regionally focused initiative, the U.S. with assistance from its Central American partners implemented "Operation All Inclusive", a U.S. government interagency counternarcotics operation. Working with the U.S. Coast Guard, the Honduran navy successfully seized over 6,636 kg of cocaine at sea, while counternarcotics forces seized 736 kg of cocaine, 807 kg of marijuana on land.[46]

Following the Honduran political crisis of 2009, a joint operation involving the Honduran Air Force destroyed a drug camp in the La Mosquitia region. "Warunta 09" successfully spotted clandestine airstrips hidden in the jungle region, and seized ammunition, food, aviation fuel, and other drug trafficking equipment.[47]This operation

mended U.S.-Honduran political relations, with the overarching focus on combating DTOs.

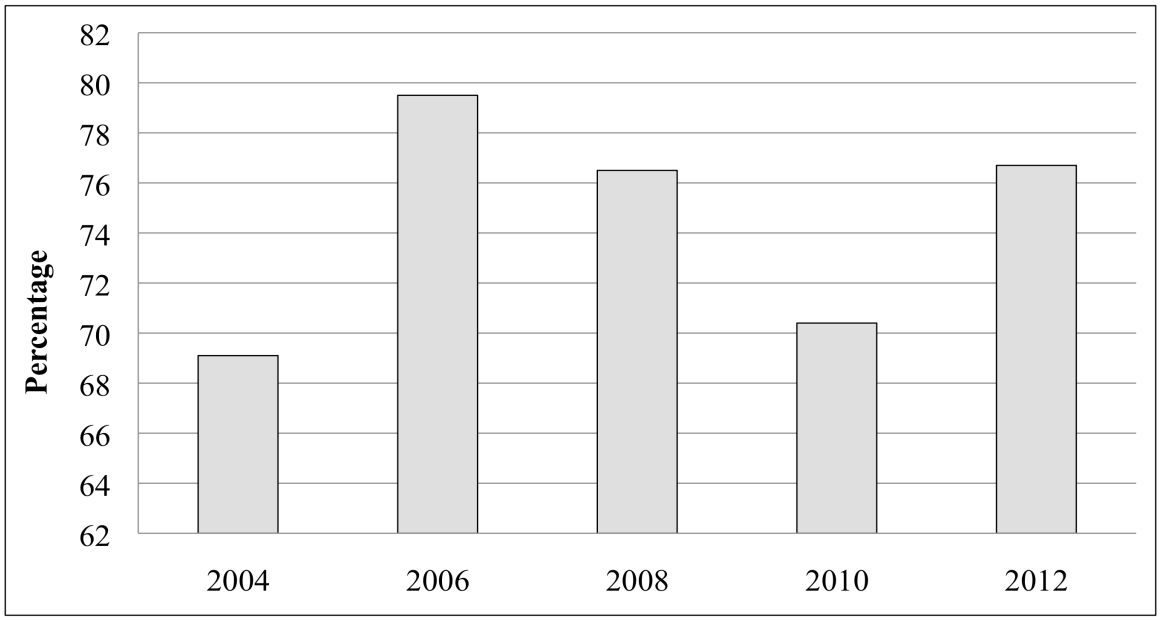
2012 served as a low point in U.S.-Honduran counternarcotics relations. A joint operation involving U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) and Honduras National Police Tactical Response Team (TRT) known as "Operation Anvil" was implemented in the Gracias A Dios/La Mosquitia region. On 11 May, a firefight broke out between leading to the death of four people. Locals claimed that victims were innocent civilians merely walking at night.[48]In a letter by Eric J. Akers, Deputy Chief at the Office of Congressional & Public Affairs, he stated that contrary to local reports, none of the female victims were pregnant, and that DEA agents did not fire their weapons during the exchange.[49]Nonetheless, this episode forced the U.S. to adjust tactics to ensure little to no civilian casualties in future operations.

The United States increased its pressure on DTOs in 2013 with "Operation Three Points" and "Operation Armadillo." Operation Three Points was a one-day operation where Honduran National Police raided Choluteca Prison, seizing weapons, ammunition, and drugs, while setting up mobile checkpoints along the southern section of Honduras.[50]Operation Armadillo sought to destroy illicit airfields, primarily in the Gracias A Dios region.[51]

These joint operational successes have contributed to a reduction in illicit activities, but have failed to produce desired results, mainly due to paralyzing corruption levels. Honduras faces some of the highest levels of corruption in Latin America, which is a byproduct of weak institutions. As a result, politicians often enrich themselves as opposed to focusing on improving the quality of life of Hondurans. In addition, the rule

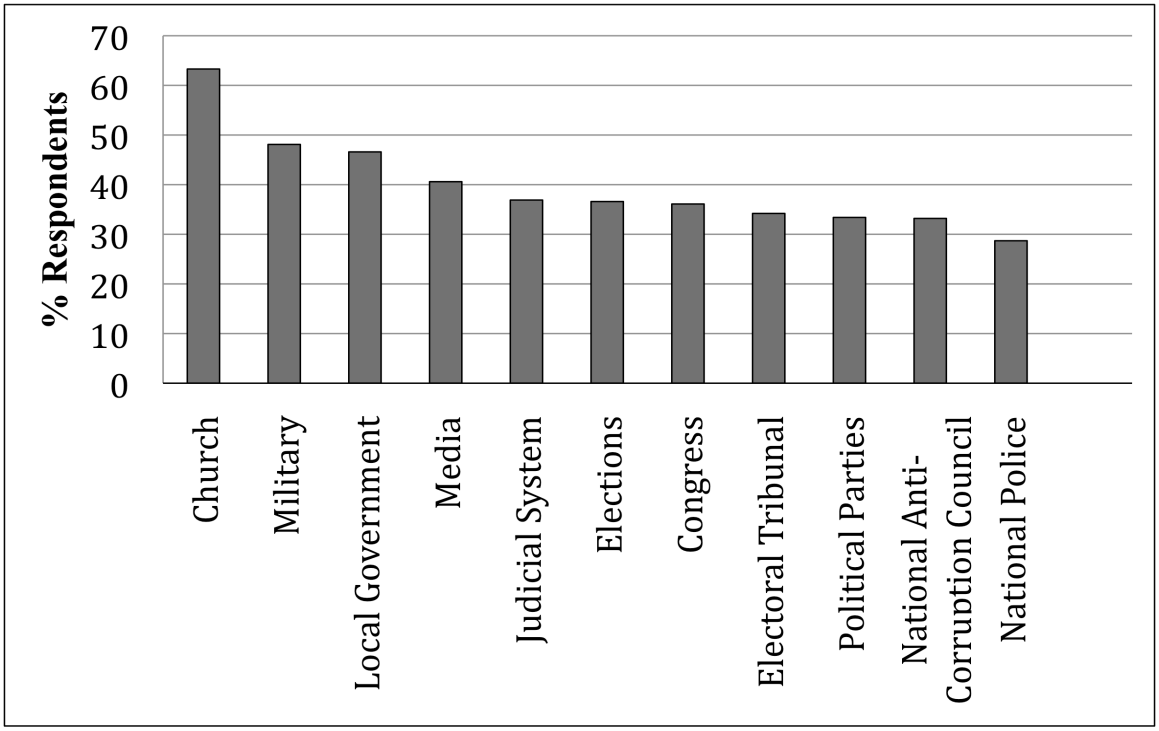
of law remains weak throughout the state as demonstrated by the extremely high levels of impunity. Perceptions of corruption in the state have remained above 70 percent and have increased since 2010 (See Figure 1).[52] Thus, the preeminent national security threat is not drug trafficking, but rather influence trafficking because the latter enables the former and undermines the government's capacity to effectively combat drug trafficking, violence, and overall insecurity.[53] In Honduras, DTOs have co-opted influencers at all levels of government in order to maintain the drug trafficking enterprise. This has rendered the government ineffective at mounting a national, sustained effort in fighting drug trafficking, violence, and overall insecurity. In turn, state institutions suffer from low citizen favorability (See Figure 2).[54]

Figure 1: Honduran Perceptions of Corruption



Source*:* 95% Confidence Interval. LAPOP, "Political Culture of Democracy in Honduras and in the Americas,2012: Towards Equality of Opportunity," LAPOP, 2012

Figure 2: Perception of Honduran Institutions, 2012



Source: 95% Confidence Interval. LAPOP, "Political Culture of Democracy in Honduras and in the Americas,2012: Towards Equality of Opportunity," LAPOP, 2012.

Honduran leadership has maintained that drug trafficking is a United States issue, further hindering the states ability implement positive and productive counternarcotics policies. In a regionally focused initiative, President Hernandez, with leaders from nearby Guatemala and El Salvador, proposed to the U.S. a "Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle". This plan calls for regional investment in state-building measures including improving educational and economic sectors, while encouraging foreign investment in the region.[55]This plan, in theory, would discourage gang membership and illicit activity by improving socioeconomic conditions, and creating economic opportunities in the state, thus, reducing violence.[56] While positive in nature, the document is filled with rhetoric, with zero mention of corruption. Further, the request for assistance, primarily financial support from the U.S. confirms Honduras' willingness to

assist in counternarcotics activities as long financial assistance is guaranteed. This disregard of one of the states most pressing issues, corruption, and unwillingness of the state to take legitimate action without concessions, speaks to the failure of Honduran leadership.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

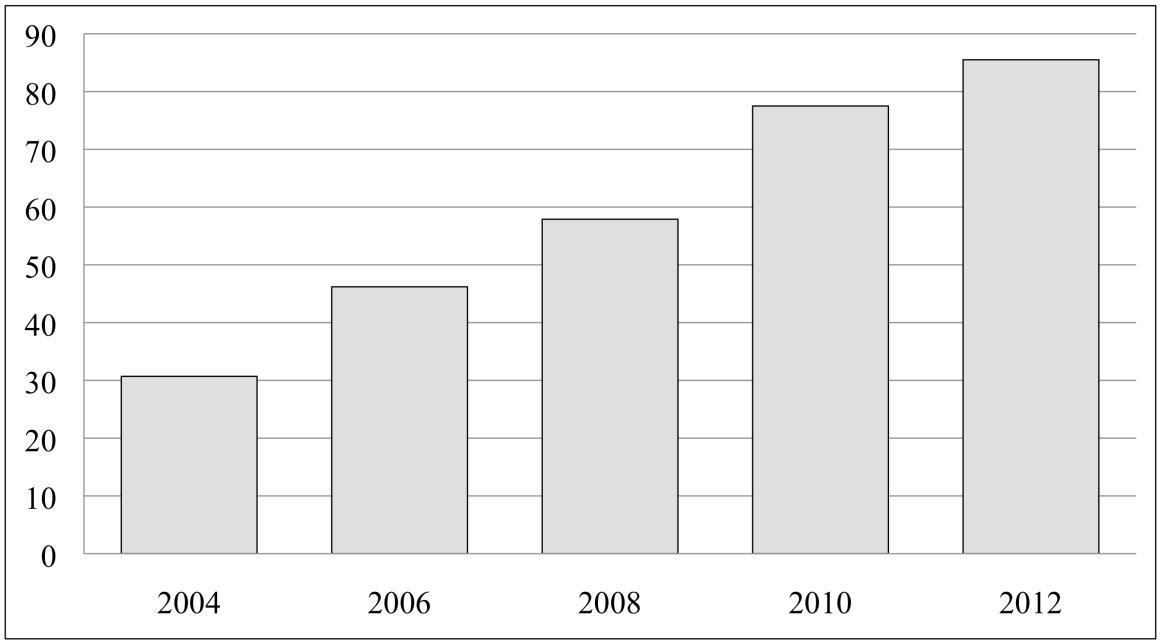
High levels of violence and citizen insecurity has led to Honduran officials taking a security-first initiative, rather than eliminating the root cause of violence in the state: drug trafficking. This failure of Honduran drug policy, primarily with maintaining accountability and responsibility, has had unintended consequences on the population. As evident by the 2014 Central American Migrant Crisis, the population is desperate for an improved state of life. Simply put, the lack of socioeconomic opportunity, combined with high levels of violence and insecurity has been mired by the state's failures.

On July 25, 2014, President Barack Obama met with presidents from Central America's "Northern Triangle" (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras) to discuss the surge of unaccompanied minors from Central American crossing the U.S. border in what has been called the "Central American Migrant Crisis."[57] It is estimated that more than 57,000 unaccompanied minors have been detained at the border, the majority of whom will be returned to their home country.[58] Northern Triangle leaders, in their "Plan of the Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle," cite a lack of high-paying jobs, the absence of educational and employment opportunities for young people, high rates of malnutrition, extreme poverty, inequality and rising crime as major causes for the massive flow of migrants towards the U.S. border.[59] Honduran President Juan Orlando Hernandez led the rhetoric and blamed ambiguous U.S. immigration laws and drug

trafficking as primary factors. That position highlights another important component of the crisis: the absence of accountability. As mentioned earlier, Honduran leadership repeatedly fails to acknowledge that long-existing levels of corruption in their country increase vulnerabilities and create favorable environments for drug trafficking, other criminal activity, and violence.

Just as troubling is the consistently elevated levels of violence in Honduras (See Figure 3). At 79 homicides per 100 thousand, Honduras is the most-violent, non-warring country in the world, with San Pedro Sula as the most-violent city in the world at 169 homicides per 100 thousand.[60] While Honduran leadership has made improving security conditions its primary objective, they have failed to address the causal factors leading to these conditions. Further, the state's return to strong handed and aggressive response to violence is reminiscent of Maduro's policies, which coincided with a rise in violence.

Figure 3: Homicides per 100,000, Honduras



Source: IUDPAS "Observatorio de la Violencia: Mortal y Orthos, Edition No.32," UNAH (2014).

CONCLUSION

It is evident that Honduras faces an uphill battle to improve state conditions. The decision to prioritize security, rather than the root cause of this violence, creates a revolving door of issues that Honduran leadership has been unable to solve. Further, the failure of Honduran drug policy despite continued U.S. assistance shows unwillingness by Honduran leadership to take a legitimate stand against drug trafficking in the state. Corruption, influence trafficking, and a general disregard by Honduran leadership of the issues facing the state, has continued to create a permissible environment for DTOs in Honduras. While the short term successes of U.S.-Honduras operations have dented DTO operations, lack of Honduran independent efforts to improve the state have compromised these successes. Overall, though, the failure of Honduran drug policy has placed the state on a downward trajectory with little improvement in sight.

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[1] Brief portions of this research paper are from a book chapter co-written by Brian Fonseca and myself titled "A Symptom of Crisis in Honduras: Drug Trafficking". The majority of this paper, however, is new information and added material to reinforce the main theme. I want to thank all those who contributed to the writing of this paper including those I had the pleasure of interviewing at Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Honduras (UNAH) in Tegucigalpa. Your insights and hospitality were vital to the success of this research paper.

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[3] Maya Rhodan, "Honduras is still the murder capital of the world," Time Magazine, February 17, 2014 accessed August 30, 2014, http://world.time.com/2014/02/17/honduras-is-still-the-murder-capital-of-the-world/.

[4] Alberto and Cuevas, "Juan Orlando Hernandez Sworn in as President in Honduras."

[5] A bridge state refers to the use of a country, in this case Honduras, as a midpoint from distributer to destination country.

[6] Julie Marie Bunck, and Michael Ross Fowler, *Bribes, Bullets, and Intimidation: Drug Trafficking and the Law in Central America*, (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 2012), 271.

[7] Tranquilandria was the largest cocaine-processing lab constructed for the Medellin Cartel and confirmed consolidation of Medellin Cartel's manufacturing operation. Located in the jungles of Caqueta, Colombia, it was destroyed in 1984 in a joint operation with the U.S. DEA and Colombian National Police. This operation confirmed the United States' seriousness on its war on drugs; See also Robin Kirk, More Terrible Than Death: Violence, Drugs, and America's War in Colombia, *Public Affairs*, (2004) 86.

[8] Gabriel Marcella, Plan Colombia: The Strategic and Operational Imperatives. (DIANE Publishing, 2001), 2-4.

[9] BBC News Staff, "Honduras Profile," *BBC News Latin America & Caribbean*, May 6, 2014, accessed August 6, 2014, http://www.bbc.com/new/world-latin-america-18954311.

[10] Transportistas are a local organized crime groups specialized in moving contraband and stolen goods amongst and within countries. They are tasked with receiving, storing, and transporting drugs safely through the region on the way to the U.S.
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[18] Ibid.
[19] Stone, "With Extradition Law, Honduras Outsources Justices to US."
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[26] Ibid.
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