

CEASEFIRE AS SUBSIDY

Armed-Group Consolidation in Colombia

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The Puzzle

Total Peace succeeded on its primary metric: reducing violence. But armed groups became even more powerful. What went wrong?



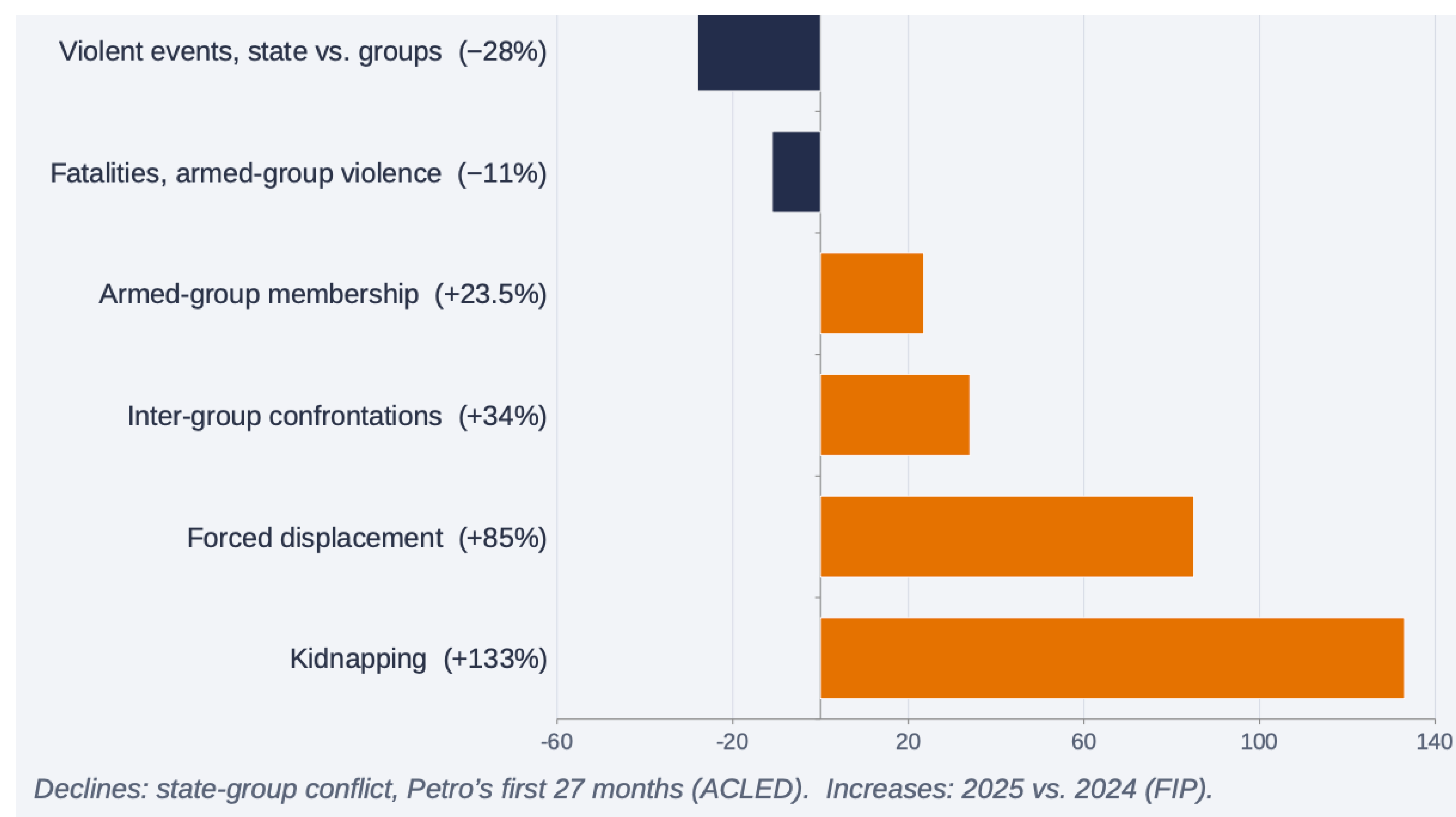
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Background

In November 2022, the Colombian legislature formalized Total Peace. Executive decrees then took effect, establishing bilateral ceasefires with few conditions. As early as 2023, International Crisis Group warned that the agenda could allow armed groups to expand their reach.

Total Peace, Defined

Total Peace represents President Gustavo Petro's flagship initiative to end decades of armed conflict through simultaneous peace negotiations with guerrilla armies.



Findings

According to Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, **violent events involving security forces fell 28%** in the first 27 months of President Gustavo Petro's tenure. According to the same set of data, **overall fatalities tied to armed groups fell by 11%**. The catch is that each bilateral ceasefire was launched without conditions. No verification protocols were established, no territorial demarcation was set up. There were no limits on recruitment or expansion. Groups gained operational initiative at almost no cost. **At least 13 zones are in active armed dispute**, with **hundreds of explosive drone attacks** last year. Overall, armed groups reached a **cumulative membership of more than 27,000**.

What Worked?

The one successful disarmament came from conditioned talks, with one splinter of the National Liberation Army handing over weapons in a sequenced process last year. Armed group expansion predated Total Peace, but the design of the ceasefires meant that no brakes were applied in the zones where military pressure was suspended. Where a more regional process was accomplished in discrete sequences, success did follow.

Implications for U.S. Policy

- **Verification is the price of any ceasefire.** Verification must be a condition of U.S. support. Expansion limits must also be present at conception, rather than belatedly grafted on.
- **Armed group consolidation is a counternarcotics problem.** The two fastest-growing groups are central to cocaine production.
- **The U.S. needs to hold the line.** Officials can support renewed talks, but they can never tolerate violence.