

OVERVIEW

Shortly after taking office, the new Colombian president, Gustavo Petro, opened the door to negotiations with a myriad of armed groups in the country with his Total Peace policy. That said, several issues could derail negotiations, increase violence in the short term, and affect civilians.

Since the new government took office, at least 22 armed groups have expressed interest in joining the Total Peace proposal. Ten other smaller groups agreed on a multilateral ceasefire as an initial demonstration of their willingness to initiate peace talks. Part of the 22 are the National Liberation Army (ELN); the Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (AGC) the FARC dissident group known as the Bloque Suroriental; the two main re-armed groups of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP), La Segunda Marquetalia and the Comando Coordinador de Occidente (CCO); the FARC dissident group known as the Bloque Suroriental; and smaller armed groups, such as the Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada (ACSN), Los Caparros, Los Pachelly, La Oficina, Los Costeños, Los Rastrojos Costeños, Los Espartanos, and Los Shotas. Armed groups’ violations and abuses are concentrated in the rural and semi-rural areas of around 400 municipalities in Colombia. Their actions have been – and continue to be – one of the main drivers of the country’s humanitarian crisis (Indepaz 16/09/2022).

The armed conflict in Colombia has resulted in an unprecedented humanitarian crisis, resulting in more than 7.7 million people in need. The high levels of violence perpetrated by armed groups have caused a devastating impact, particularly on children, women, human rights defenders, and ethnic peoples (OCHA 28/07/2022; ICRC 09/08/2022).

In an attempt to address this crisis, the Government of Colombia has started dialogues with the main armed groups and put the most conflict-affected communities at the centre of negotiations. President Gustavo Petro and the government negotiation team have engaged in discussing the initial ceasefire, with particular stress on improving humanitarian conditions in conflict-affected areas.

Understanding the intentions of the armed groups is foundational to understanding the risks inherent in political dialogue. This briefing note gives an overview of the four largest armed groups in Colombia and examines some of the complexities underlying the peace process.

About this report

This short note provides a general overview of the configuration of the four major armed groups engaged in dialogue and negotiations with the Colombian Government. It aims to give a glimpse of the complexity of these structures and the different challenges facing the negotiation process, including the numerous disputes over territorial control and illicit economies, internal divisions, and the questions raised by the process in a humanitarian crisis mainly resulting from the armed conflict. This note is meant to provide additional information and support the [Colombia Risk Analysis Update](#).

Methodology and limitations

This short note is informed by a review of secondary grey literature and media sources assessing the structure and dynamics of the armed groups. It is subject to the limitations and potential biases of this literature.

The introduction of the armed groups’ structures in this note does not claim to be definitive, as it is based on the triangulation of available secondary information.

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OVERVIEW: STRUCTURES OF THE MAIN ARMED GROUPS

National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional)

Structure and modus operandi

The ELN is active in over 162 municipalities across 14 departments in Colombia, including the Catatumbo subregion in Norte de Santander, northern Cauca, Arauca, northern and southern Chocó, eastern Antioquia, Cesar, northern and eastern Nariño, and southern Bolívar (Defensoría del Pueblo 17/02/2022; Indepaz 06/03/2021 and 30/11/2022).

Their decision-making body is the Central Command or Comando Central (COCE). The COCE oversees all ELN operations: political, military, financial, and international. Organised in a federal structure, the ELN is divided into seven War Fronts, with a set of substructures operating under their coordination. Each substructure is autonomous in their actions and financing (CINEP 08/04/2021; Indepaz 06/03/2021).

Most of the war fronts are involved in drug trafficking control, smuggling, and extortion in the pacific region and along the border with Venezuela (CINEP 08/04/2021; Indepaz 06/03/2021). In subregions like Catatumbo, the ELN previously coexisted with the armed group called “Popular Liberation Army (EPL) but, since 2018, official sources have reported armed disputes between the ELN and the EPL on the Venezuelan border in Norte de Santander, with a possible expansion of the control of the latter (Defensoría del Pueblo 12/09/2022 and 05/08/2020). In rural and semiurban areas of the departments of, Antioquia, Cauca, Chocó and Nariño, the ELN contests territorial control with AGC and FARC dissident armed groups. At present, it is difficult to determine possible alliances or coexistence between the ELN and FARC dissidents, and between the ELN and the AGC. While the ELN is interested in strengthening its illegal economies, there are still disputes over the control of strategic corridors on the Colombian-Venezuelan border (FIP 2018).

Between 2016–2021, the ELN was involved in several incursions, clashes with other armed groups, attacks, and confrontations with security forces. 77% of activities were concentrated in the departments of Arauca, Cauca, Chocó, and Norte de Santander, while 19% were in Antioquia, Bolívar, Cesar, and Nariño (FIP 08/2022). In 2022, 50% of these activities were concentrated in the departments of Norte de Santander and Arauca in Colombia and Apure state in Venezuela. Between January–March 2022, clashes flared with FARC dissident groups for territorial and social control, including over strategic routes for narcotrafficking, smuggling, and cocaine production in Arauca and Norte de Santander along the Venezuelan border (InSight Crime 02/05/2022). In the same year, the ELN was also involved in multiple incursions and clashes with the AGC, re-armed FARC groups, and FARC dissidents

for control over illicit economies and territorial enclaves, with 50% of incidents occurring in the departments of Antioquia, Bolívar, Cauca, Chocó, and Valle del Cauca (JEP accessed 31/10/2022).

Currently, the ELN has 20 representatives involved in peace talks with the Colombian Government, including Israel Ramírez Pineda alias ‘Pablo Beltrán’; Victor Cubides alias ‘Aureliano Carbonell’; Nicolás Rodríguez Bautista alias ‘Gabino’, former commander-in-chief who participated as the ELN negotiator during a round of peace talks with the Government of President Juan Manuel Santos (2016); Violeta Arango Ramirez alias ‘Tatiana’; Maria Consuelo Tapias; Gustavo Martinez; Bernardo Tellez; and Silvana Guerrero (El País 18/11/2022; Infobae 18/11/2022).

The current peace talks use direct channels of communications with ELN leadership and include both members of the COCE and local leaders from ELN War Fronts. Senior leaders, such as Pablo Beltran, Nicolás Rodriguez, and Victor Cubides, who previously participated in peace talks with the Colombian Government, need to be included for their importance and influence. ELN representatives of local fronts – such as Silvana Guerrero, representative of the Northwestern Front in Catatumbo region along the Venezuela border – are key to creating conditions in the field for the peace process. Formerly imprisoned ELN members, such as Violeta Arango, have been released to participate in the negotiation table and can play a very important role as well.

Gaitanist Self-Defence Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia)

Structure and modus operandi

The AGC armed group – also called Clan del Golfo or Los Urabeños – is rooted in paramilitary groups involved in the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration process conducted in 2006. It allegedly resumed its operations in 2008. The group integrates different armed organisations – regional criminal structures, drug traffickers, collection offices, and urban and semi-urban criminal gangs – to control illicit economies (narcotrafficking, microtrafficking, illegal mining, extortion, and paid-for-hire killings) (Insight Crime accessed 21/12/2022; Indepaz 2021).

The AGC operates in at least 326 municipalities in 12 departments of Colombia, including northern and northeastern Antioquia, northern and southern Chocó, northern Magdalena, and Sucre and the south of Córdoba and Bolívar. It exerts territorial control in the subregions of Nudo de Paramillo, Uraba Chocoano and Bajo Cauca in Antioquia. Since 2021, the group has expanded its control in the departments of Bolívar, Cauca, Cesar, Norte de Santander, and Orinoco (Indepaz 28/11/2022; Defensoría del Pueblo 17/02/2022; Verdad Abierta 15/05/2022).

The AGC has been partnering with drug cartels undertaking illicit activity, such as extortion and human trafficking, after the United Self-Defence Forces of Colombia demobilised in 2006 (UNODC accessed 18/11/2022). The group's fronts and cells are mostly involved in transnational drug-trafficking. They manage their own routes and strategic corridors and exert territorial control to regulate the coca base market. In doing so, they provide escort to drug traffickers, cocaine shipments, and processing laboratories. They also provide dispatch services in the Pacific region, and, in certain areas, facilitate cross-border illegal economies between Colombia and Venezuela (InSight Crime accessed 30/11/2022).

After the arrest and extradition of their former leader Dario Antonio Úsuga alias 'Otoniel', the group has been led by Jobanis de Jesús Ávila Villadiego alias 'Chiquito Malo', Wilmar Antonio Giraldo Quiroz alias 'Siopas', and José Gonzalo Sánchez alias 'Gonzalito' (InSight Crime 25/07/2022). The armed groups associated with the AGC, previously linked to paramilitary groups, were created around leaders and commanders who are currently extradited, in prison, or dead – making it less clear which representatives in the peace talks represent the AGC and how their fronts and units respond to the chain of command within and outside the group.

FARC dissidents

Structure and modus operandi

'FARC dissidents' refers to members of the former FARC-EP who left negotiations with the Colombian Government before the signing of the Peace Agreement in 2016.

One of the main FARC dissident groups is the **Bloque Suroriental**. It comprises around ten fronts and operates in the southern region of the country, in northern Guaviare, southern Meta, southern Caquetá, western Amazonas, northern Arauca, and southern Putumayo, as well as some geographical areas in the departments of Caquetá, Cundinamarca, Huila, Vichada, and Vaupés.

FARC dissident armed groups exert control over drug-trafficking and illegal mining. Their leader is Nestor Gregorio Vera Fernández alias 'Iván Mordisco'. Although there is no official information concerning his involvement in the peace talks, his presence is considered essential. Since he was a radical opponent of the 2016 Peace Agreement between the Colombian Government and the FARC-EP and was the first senior commander to abandon the peace talks, his participation is considered strategic for the involved parties to agree with the terms of the peace process and stop their warfare (Indepaz 28/12/2022)

Re-armed FARC groups

Structure and modus operandi

'Re-armed FARC groups' refers to members of the FARC-EP who signed the Peace Agreement with the Colombian Government in 2016 but later re-armed. There are two main factions:

- **La Segunda Marquetalia armed structure** was created in 2019, after several top commanders of the FARC left the peace process. It comprises 13 armed groups in northern and southern Nariño, southern Putumayo, northern and central Cauca, southern Tolima, northern La Guajira, southern Bolívar, northern and western Norte de Santander, western Meta, northern Caquetá, and eastern Arauca (Defensoría del Pueblo 17/02/2022 and 29/08/2022; CORE 2021; Indepaz 13/09/2021 and 16/09/2022). Former FARC commander Luciano Marín Arango alias 'Iván Márquez' leads La Segunda Marquetalia, and most of its operations are associated with extortion and the control of drug-trafficking routes. Luciano Marín, a former FARC second-in-command, took up arms again and attracted several FARC armed groups that abandoned the process or did not want to sign the Peace Agreement in 2016. He quickly established La Segunda Marquetalia base of operations in Venezuela, taking advantage of opportunities to get involved in drug-trafficking, illegal goldmining, and smuggling. At some point, he was presumed dead in combat, until he declared in August 2022 his willingness to negotiate with the Colombian Government. He has been involved in the peace talks since. His leadership in peace negotiations with the Government is crucial, as the units respond to a vertical leadership and respect the chain of command of La Segunda Marquetalia (InSight Crime accessed 05/01/2023; Caracol Radio 02/07/2022).
- **The Comando Coordinador de Occidente (CCO armed group)** includes at least ten armed groups located in southern Cauca, northern Valle del Cauca, western Huila, southern Tolima, northern and southern Nariño, and Putumayo. The CCO emerged at the end of 2019 through an alliance between small dissident and re-armed FARC-EP armed groups, initially forming the Jaime Martínez and Dagoberto Ramos Mobile Columns. After the fragmentation of its armed groups in Cauca and Nariño in 2021 and 2022, the CCO made it one of its main goals to gain control over the geographical areas along the border between Colombia and Ecuador – particularly in Sucumbíos and Esmeraldas in northeastern Ecuador – and establish an enclave in southern Colombia to control strategic corridors for drug-trafficking. Currently, the group controls cocaine production and drug-trafficking corridors (Indepaz 25/11/2022).

After the death of its leader Euclides España Caicedo alias 'Jhonier', the group's leadership and representation in peace talks became unclear. The CCO has a mixed configuration and has expressed in public statements its differences with La Segunda Marquetalia. Although some sources link the CCO with the Bloque Suroriental, there is no official statement that Ivan Mordisco will assume its representation in the peace talks with the Colombian Government (PARES 10/02/2022; Infobae 24/08/2022; Indepaz, 11/2022).

Other armed groups

Other armed groups that have shown interest in negotiations, while active at a regional or local level, also pose threats to communities in these areas. The Autodefensas Conquistadoras de la Sierra Nevada armed group (**ACSN**) operates in northern Magdalena, Atlántico, César, and La Guajira departments; **Los Caparros** in northern Antioquia and Córdoba; **Los Pachelly** in central Antioquia; and **Los Shotas** and **Los Espartanos** in the municipality of Buenaventura in Valle del Cauca department. The operations of these groups mainly include extortion, robberies, kidnappings, and targeted killings (Defensoría del Pueblo 29/01/2021, 25/04/2022, and 17/02/2022; Indepaz 13/09/2021).

TERRITORIAL DISPUTES BETWEEN ARMED GROUPS

The main armed groups in Colombia (the ELN, AGC, and re-armed FARC and FARC dissidents) are engaged in several territorial disputes within the country. Despite negotiations with the Government advancing, these armed groups are unlikely to cease the disputes among themselves. As at January 2023, President Petro had announced a ceasefire from January–June 2023 between the following armed groups: the ELN, La Segunda Marquetalia, the AGC, and the ACSN. The ceasefire will have national and international verification by the United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia (UNVMC), the Mission to Support the Peace Process of the Organization of American States, the Ombudsman's Office, and the Catholic Church.

In the Pacific region, several territorial disputes between armed groups have taken place:

- In northern and southern Chocó and northeastern Antioquia, the ELN and the AGC maintain their dispute, which has been occurring since 2021 (EE 24/02/2022).
- In northern and southern Cauca, clashes between the ELN, La Segunda Marquetalia, and the CCO have affected the municipalities of Argelia, Balboa, Buenos Aires, Caldon, Guapi, and Inzá (JEP accessed 23/10/2022).
- In Nariño, armed clashes and violence between re-armed FARC groups have been affecting communities in the subregions of Pacífico Sur, Sanquianga, and Telembí since 2021, leading to a deepening of the humanitarian crisis in the area (ACAPS 29/09/2021 and 06/10/2022).
- In the urban areas of Buenaventura, in the department of Valle del Cauca, Los Shotas and Los Espartanos have been key drivers of violence (EE 02/11/2022).

In the departments of Arauca, Bolívar, Caquetá, Magdalena, and Putumayo, disputes between armed groups have also continued in the following areas:

- In the border between Putumayo and Caquetá departments, clashes over territorial control between the Bloque Suroriental and a re-armed FARC group associated with La Segunda Marquetalia continue (JEP accessed 23/10/2022).
- In southern Bolívar department, the ELN, the AGC, and a re-armed FARC group associated with La Segunda Marquetalia have been maintaining a territorial dispute since 2021 (Defensoría del Pueblo 12/08/2021).
- In northern Magdalena department, confrontations between the AGC and the ACSN have been taking place since January 2022 (UNHCR 19/07/2022; El Tiempo 10/08/2022).
- In northern Arauca, the ELN and a re-armed FARC group associated with the Bloque Suroriental have been maintaining a confrontation since January 2022 (JEP accessed 31/10/2022).

POSSIBLE INTERNAL DIVISIONS

All members of an armed group rarely favour peace agreement negotiations with or a voluntary surrender to the Colombian Government. When the leadership of a group begins negotiations, their decentralised nature and unwritten codes of conduct make peace agreements difficult to negotiate among various authorities both inside and outside the group. How these divisions manifest depends on the group's particular structures and chains of command and the extent of internal cohesion in their decentralised system. Even when groups are in favour of negotiations, ensuring buy-in to any agreements from all factions is a challenging and lengthy process with much internal negotiation, which itself has the potential to spark violence.

The balance of power inside the **ELN** has shifted in recent years, as the group's leadership faces a generational change. The rise of younger commanders through the ranks has led to the strengthening of a faction inside the group that opposes peace talks with the Colombian Government (FIP 08/2022; NACLA 23/12/2019). Given the ELN's structure, in which each front has a large degree of autonomy, agreements with the Colombian Government will also have to go through an internal voting process. This process is likely to bring to light the differences and opposing interests between fronts, which could cause the ELN to split into pro-negotiation and anti-negotiation factions. Alternatively, to maintain unity, the ELN could adopt a hard-line approach to the negotiations.

The **ELN War Fronts present on the Colombian-Venezuelan border** are particularly likely to undermine the peace negotiations. The Eastern War Front (Frente de Guerra Oriental), which is present in the departments of Arauca and Vichada, and the Northeastern War Front (Frente de Guerra Nororiental) present in the departments of Norte de Santander and Cesar, both have an important presence in Venezuela and are two of the strongest fronts (FIP 08/2022;

Indepaz 06/03/2021, InSight Crime 03/10/2022 a). In the past, these fronts have taken a hard stance in past negotiations, and their strengthening after the demobilisation of the FARC-EP has given them more weight in the internal decisions of the ELN, reducing the probability of the ELN making concessions or accepting a total demobilisation (InSight Crime 03/10/2022 b; CINEP 08/04/2021). In 2019, the Eastern War Front was said to be responsible for the attack on the Escuela de Policía General Santander, leading to the end of negotiations with the Iván Duque Government (Razón Pública 04/02/2019; EE 19/01/2019).

The AGC works under a system of fronts and franchises, with various levels of association and coordination between them (InSight Crime accessed 21/12/2022). This model makes negotiating with the group difficult, as disagreements between commanders could cause talks to reach ineffective solutions or collapse completely. In 2018, after negotiating the conditions for disarmament with the Government, internal discussions between commanders within the group showed a lack of unity regarding the discussion. In 2019, the timeline for their disarmament ended without concrete results (FIP 25/07/2022; Semana 13/06/2020).

The **AGC is also vulnerable to fractioning**. In 2017, the communities of the Bajo Cauca Antioqueño and Sur de Córdoba subregions, in Antioquia and Córdoba departments, were subject to mobility restrictions, targeted homicides, and massacres said to be perpetrated by a splinter group known as Bloque Virgilio Peralta Arenas, also known as Los Caparros, and the AGC as they fought for control over the area (Comisión de la Verdad accessed 21/12/2022). The appearance of new splinter factions remains a possibility during the coming negotiations. Following the publication of a letter declaring the group's intention to negotiate with the Government, a second pamphlet denying their involvement in the peace proposal circulated on social media. Reports have surfaced regarding internal divisions among the group's top leaders over talks with the Government, deepening their risk of fractioning (InSight Crime 22/05/2022).

Re-armed and dissident FARC groups appear to lack a defined command chain and decision-making mechanisms, making the risk of internal divisions higher. The two large factions that comprise most dissident and re-armed FARC groups appear to work as confederations rather than as a vertical structure with a defined hierarchical structure. This loose coordination between armed groups increases their risk of acting contrary to the decisions made by representatives in negotiations, leaving the process, or separating from their faction (Razón Pública 02/10/2022; CORE 2021; La Silla Vacía 13/10/2022).

The increase in violence and a further extension of territorial control by armed groups without a doubt continue to risk fracturing the current peace-building negotiations in Colombia.

SOME CHALLENGES AHEAD

Amid violence and conflict dynamics that worsen the humanitarian crisis, humanitarian responders have faced numerous access-related challenges concerning new parameters included in the overall Total Peace policy. On the one hand, the security issues mean that the humanitarian community faces challenges in gaining access to affected populations, meeting their needs, and providing comprehensive protection measures; on the other hand, there is a need to revise and adopt humanitarian protocols when directly negotiating with armed groups to gain access to territories.

There are several outstanding questions related to humanitarian conditions in conflict-affected regions. Humanitarians will face challenges in following up on the different negotiation frameworks with each armed group that has expressed willingness to engage in dialogue and negotiation with the Colombian Government. In conflict zones, civilian populations will need to participate in public dialogue to discuss the contents of the agreements and validate them and their support for their implementation. In some regions, there is a risk of a deteriorated security situation and increased attacks against civilians. For more information, see the [Colombia Risk Analysis Update from December 2022](#).

Information gaps

- Dialogues and negotiations with the armed groups started in August 2022. Information related to representatives of various armed groups in peace talks with the Government, except for ELN representatives, is kept confidential.
- On 5 January 2023, the Colombian Government set up a working group to determine the profile and structure of the armed groups that have expressed their willingness to lay down their arms (Infobae 05/01/2023).
- As at December 2022, there was no official document giving an account of the points to be discussed with each armed group and the progress that has been made with other armed groups.

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