

THREATS TO NATIONAL SECURITY FROM TRAFFICKING NETWORK: FROM URBAN ENVIRONMENTS TO THE TRANSNATIONAL CIRCULATION OF ILLICIT DRUGS

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ABSTRACT

Increased cocaine production and hegemony of transnational routes have strengthened South American drug trafficking networks. This expansion has unfolded into armed violence in Brazil, as Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO) compete over hegemony of drug corridors and distribution not only in metropolitan regions but, especially, in inner cities. Thus, this study aims to analyze how the new territories of South American drug trafficking relate to the nature and spatiality of violence in Brazil, and to assess what type of direct threat this brings to national security. We have collected georeferenced quantitative data in the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the Homicide Monitor of the Igarapé Institute, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC). We built our maps and performed our spatial analysis with the Philcarto software. Finally, we observed that the capillarization and hegemony of drug trafficking territories drive the violence in the internal borders and inland cities in Brazil.

Keywords: Spatiality of violence; Transnational Criminal Organizations; Armed Violence.

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INTRODUCTION

Brazilian drug trafficking networks go back to the 1980s. Their modus operandi has crossed national borders as technical and information means developed, reaching neighboring South American territories³. Thus, this study hypothesizes that the local financing of Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCO) explains their growing networks which allow them relatively “free” access to financial, human and weapon materials and products.

Thus, we aim to examine the extent to which establishing and organizing South American trafficking territories impacts the nature and spatiality of Brazilian armed violence, how it organizes and manifests itself across Brazil, and its main conflict *loci*, i.e., where it is most intense. We initially delimit the spatiotemporal horizon in South America to its municipalities between 2010 and 2015 due to the significant increase in disputes between Brazilian and local trafficking groups over the control of transborder dynamics in this period⁴.

For this, we analyzed data integrating quantitative and qualitative research methods (THALER, 2017). For the quantitative analysis, data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP), the *Atlas da Violência* (Violence Atlas), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) were collected. UCDP data were used to express the more intense armed conflicts, especially between violent non-State actors in South America. Atlas data were used to spatially distribute homicides per Brazilian municipality between 2009 and 2016, and UNODC, for georeferenced information on the seizure of cocaine and its raw materials in South America. Spatial analysis was performed via thematic maps in the Philcarto software, aiming at a relational reflection between trafficking network nodes and the distribution of irregular armed conflicts in South America and, especially, the spatiality of Brazilian violence.

This study is divided into three parts. We first explore the dynamics and articulations of transnational organized crime networks, the nature of cocaine trafficking logistic nodes, and their relation to armed conflicts and homicides in South America. We sought to understand how

³ This study ignores the origins of drug trafficking and its transatlantic connection to Italian mafiosi. Further information in: *Política e Drogas nas Américas: uma genealogia do narcotráfico* Rodrigues (2017) and *CV/PCC: Irmandade do Crime, Amorim* (2003).

⁴ This culminated in the murder of Jorge Rafaat Toumani, the “King of the Border”, in 2016. The *Rota do Solimões* (Solimões route) would later be the object of disputes.

cocaine trafficking profits, and constitutes and operates the transnational organized crime in the region. Then, we evaluate armed violence in Brazil via our spatial analysis of conflicts and homicides in Brazilian international and internal borders, and urban centers. Describing the spatiality and chronology of homicides in Brazil aims to show the inward progress of armed violence in the country, assess its connection to the expansion of transnational drug trafficking, and show how the relation between armed conflicts, homicides, and organized crime is a transnational threat to the Brazilian Armed Forces, whose *Operação Ágata* (Agatha Operation) proves the hypothesis that organized crime does indeed provoke a reaction from the Brazilian State, mobilizing military assets and resources to ensure the safety of our borders and avoid threats from within the national territory. Finally, we describe our conclusions.

DRUG TRAFFICKING NETWORK-TERRITORIES AND THE TWO ROUTES FINANCING IRREGULAR ORGANIZED CRIME IN SOUTH AMERICA

This section aims to describe how cocaine trafficking routes organize themselves in the transnationalization of violence in South America. Transnational drug trafficking implies an increase in both flow of products and raw materials, persons, and cocaine and in the quality of the articulations with State and non-State actors (MACHADO, 2011). The latter entail possible hegemonic arrangements of coercive or consensual practices. Thus, transnational networks are characterized by a precarious and temporary (rather than stable) nature.

To assess how South American cocaine trafficking articulates itself, UNODC data on the seizure of cocaine products (distributed by municipality), UCDP, on South American armed conflicts, and Homicide Monitor, on South American homicides were collected⁵. The literature claims the latter is more biased than other data, so we believe they can give us a general comparative view of the subject. Next, maps were

⁵ We chose to evaluate raw materials since they are the initial step in producing refined cocaine (final product). In usually smaller and more rustic laboratories, cocaine leaves become coca paste. This, in turn, is one of the materials in the final stage of powdered cocaine and other, more popular, drugs, such as crack. They differ in price and popularization; the former more expensive and exclusive and the latter, more inexpensive and popular. Thus, to broaden our data analysis, we opted for evaluating materials despite their final use.

drawn for spatial analysis, so we could assess patterns of trafficking transnationalization in the region and their effects on armed violence.

Map 1 shows the mobilization of drug trafficking networks by their spatial structures. Its first axis shows Amazon networks can more easily reach the Caribbean and North America than South America (FERREIRA, 2018), allowing a second axis polarized by connections the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC) has with Peruvian and Bolivian networks.

This second route, also known as *rota caipira* (inland route), shows a greater ease of spatial circulation within its paths (ROSS, 2004; LE BILLON, 2011). Moreover, Peru⁶ and Bolivia⁷ allow a relative legal status to coca-leaf production, and their dense railway network extends to their borders with Paraguay. The inland route connects traditional coca-leaf production to the Triple Frontier and, from there, to the main subcontinental markets: São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro (ABREU, 2017; MANSO; DIAS, 2018).

Another essential element in Map 1 refers to the organization of the transnational logistic chain as a whole, analyzed by cocaine raw material seizures. Andean coca leaf producers are at the base of the production chain with Colombia as the emblematic example of a logistic production, transport, distribution and trade hub (SALAZAR; GABRIEL, 2010; SALAZAR, 2015). Bolivia and Peru, on the other hand, seize more coca leaf and paste, especially within their legal borders, making them production and transportation nodes. At this stage, turning coca leaves into paste decreases their volume, facilitating aerial or terrestrial transport to further processing. Finally, Paraguay is an important wholesale transit and distribution space towards Brazilian and Argentinian markets which seize substantial amounts of cocaine hydrochloride, i.e., cocaine in its final pure form in border municipalities. Thus, Brazilian metropolitan⁸ and intermediate regions are retail distributors and final consumers, especially the inland municipalities in São Paulo which consume a volume larger than the state's capital (ABREU, 2017).

⁶ Articles 296 and 303 of the 1991 Peruvian penal code describe most of the criminal legislation against illicit drug trafficking. They place no restriction in the cultivation of coca leaves whose consumption and harvest are legal (TNI, 2016). Many initiatives are in place to change this, a form of State control to stop the commercialization of coca leaves to drug trafficking groups.

⁷ In Bolivia, according to Law n° 1008 of 1988, planting coca for personal, medicinal and ritualistic uses is legal. However, its sale, possession, and refinement are illegal; subject to socioeducational measures prescribed in the fifth article of the law (BOLIVIA, 1988).

⁸ UNODOC currently ranks Brazil as the second largest consumer of cocaine in the world.

Map 1 shows the density and morphology of inland route networks moving from East to West. Andean ones follow the local orography from North to South, facilitating the integration of production, circulation, and refinement nodes, but not of distribution and commercialization since the main regional markets are in Brazil and Argentina. Few Andean actors control the circulation to these markets –the most strategic and profitable point of the logistic chain, whereas PCC monopolizes strategic transnational points in the inland route.

Thus, TCO, such as PCC, Comando Vermelho (CV), and Família do Norte (FDN) (LUJALA, 2009) fight for control over strategic points, routes, and markets, main objects of dispute in which wholesale distribution meets retailer dealers at the top of the chain (PFRIMER, SILVA, 2019). The kernel (heat map) in Map 1 shows the homicide rate per 100 thousand people by municipality between 2010 and 2015. Note that most homicides occur in large Northeastern urban centers, in which PCC faces CV. Areas such as the Triple Frontier between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina also show high homicide rates whose armed violence indices are due to organized crime confronting police forces which are increasingly incapable of responding to the expansion of drug trafficking (ATLAS DA VIOLÊNCIA, 2019)⁹.

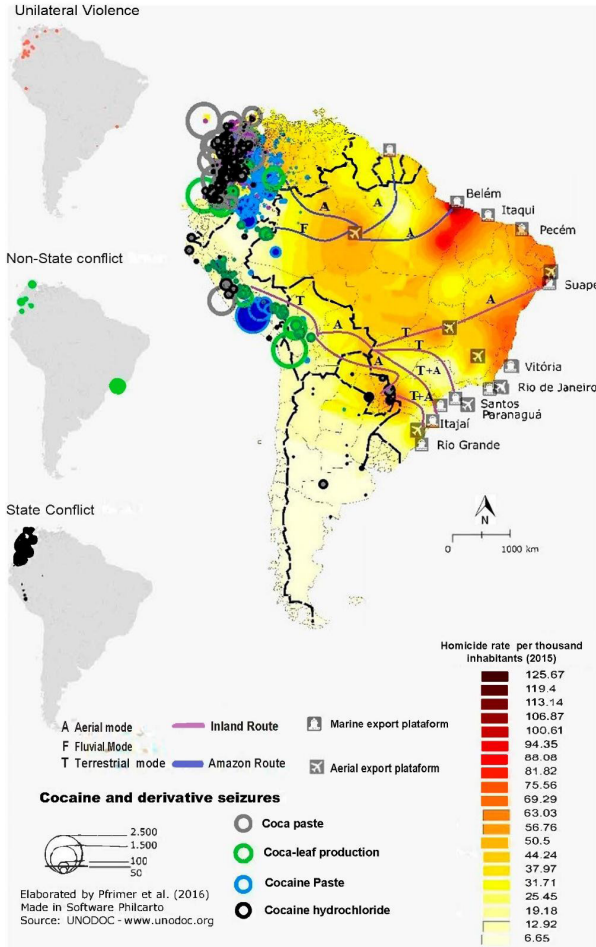
Map 1 also shows distribution and commercialization routes to Brazil. We justify our choice of the highlighted and Amazon routes in Map 1 by Abreu (2017) and Couto (2020), for whom the inland and Amazon routes are the most important of all drug routes. Abreu (2017) claims the inland route shows the most unimpeded drug flow out of all routes, especially in the Southeast, due to its geography: improvised landing strips in sugar cane fields specially designed for planes loaded with cocaine (dense, pulverized, and difficult to control) (ABREU, 2017). Couto (2020) offers similar circumstances for the transnationalization of drug trafficking in the Brazilian Amazon. The limited durability of distribution networks

⁹ Gabriel Feltran (2012; 2018) claims that rivalries of multiple natures and reasons in zones between criminal factions naturally increase homicide rates. The opposite, Feltran's main subject (2012; 2018 – especially in the case of PCC) is also true: in the absence of faction disputes, homicide rates decrease or stabilize. Justus' "The 'São Paulo Mystery': The role of the criminal organization PCC in reducing the homicide in 2000s" (et al., 2018) and Manso and Dias' "A Guerra: a ascensão do PCC e o mundo do crime no Brasil" (War: the rise of PCC and the crime world in Brazil) corroborate Feltran's premise (2012; 2018) – with which we agree – that faction disputes increase homicide rates (as is the case between PCC and FDN in the Northeast). See especially Manso e Dias (2018, p.34 and 35). We recommend the texts above to understand these authors' premises in the discussion of this specific subject.

require constant replacement. The Amazon geography allows traffickers to easily control the flow of drugs in and out of the country (COUTO, 2020). Thus, the natural, economic, and developmental characteristics of the Amazon make it a fragile point to which cocaine from Bolivia, Peru, and Columbia can easily flow (COUTO, 2020).

We should mention that drug traffickers most commonly use the highlighted modal routes (air, rivers, and highways) (ABREU, 2017; COUTO, 2020), though not always. As previously stated, drug trafficking patterns constantly change, destroying old infrastructures and buildings for new ones, giving its organizational process a dynamic character. As Map 1 shows, the inland route favors aerial and terrestrial transport, especially due to its geography, whereas the Amazon route, fluvial and aerial transport.

MAP 1 – IRREGULAR CONFLICTS BY TYPE, ENTRY ROUTE, VIOLENCE AND TRAFFICKING TERRITORY, AND SOUTH AMERICAN MUNICIPALITIES BETWEEN 2010 AND 2015.



Sources: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime; Instituto Igarapé, and Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2016. Elaborated by the author.

We differentiate between homicides in South America involving score settlements and armed confrontations of a certain intensity and temporal continuity. The UCDP characterizes armed conflicts as armed confrontations causing more than 25 deaths a year. The left side of Map 1 shows South American armed conflicts between 2010 and 2016, according

to the authors' dyads. In Brazil, most armed conflicts stem from non-State actors, such as TCO in Rio de Janeiro, whereas in Colombia and Peru, from regular State armed forces facing TCO.

The high number of armed conflicts in both cases relates especially to the militarization against drug trafficking and its arms. Unilateral violence refers to aggression by State actors or by non-State ones against each other. More particularly, they show the Venezuelan regime repression of its civil opposition and the violence the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia employ against the Colombian civil society.

The relation between the cocaine productive chain and transnational violence synthesizes the South American context. The importance of the routes and territories shown in Map 1 to international drug traffickers engender violent disputes. Pfrimer and Sousa (2019) claim commercialization and wholesale distribution spaces show the greatest degree of violence since the former entails the transnationalization of cocaine; the most profitable stage of trafficking, in which few actors participate (PFRIMER; SOUSA, 2019).

Therefore, we can claim that armed violence is more intense in internal borders than in international ones, except for the Triple Frontier. According to the UCDP, despite Brazilian homicide rates, armed conflicts of greater intensity are rare. The next section will describe how the transnationalization of violence follows the political economy of South American cocaine trafficking. We must look more closely at the inward spread of violence to analyze the facts.

THE NATURE AND SPATIALITY OF BRAZILIAN ARMED VIOLENCE:

We showed in the previous section the relation between the logistic chain of South American drug trafficking and armed violence, and the flow of production to the main (though not all) South American entry routes. In this section, we contextualize the spatiality of Brazilian armed violence to understand how the transnational elements from the previous section relate to national ones. We aim to analyze the spatiality of Brazilian armed violence by its internal, international, rural, and urban borders. We also cite *Operação Ágata* as an example of how the Brazilian Armed Forces react to transnational threats which must be suppressed and controlled so as to not contribute to the internal violence resulting from the drug flow,

route disputes, and arms sales within Brazilian borders. For that, we used general data on *Operação Ágata* and a thematic map from *Atlas da Violência* data on homicides between 2009 and 2016.

Map 2 shows the spatial distribution of homicides in Brazil between 2009 and 2016. Though armed violence is a phenomenon mostly limited to large urban centers, it also occurs in intermediate centers, especially in the Amazon pioneer and cattle-raising expanding frontiers in Midwest, North, and Northeast municipalities existing more due to rural rather than urban relations. Municipalities in international borders also show low homicide rates, except for the Triple Frontier with Argentina and Paraguay. Thus, if police have already encountered logistic and operational difficulties in guaranteeing public safety in recent years, intermediate centers face even greater issues, such as precarious work conditions; lack of logistic and intelligence support to military, civil, and federal police; obsolete arms; lack of increase in wages, of career perspectives and, in some cases, of wage payments (or delays); and the logistic difficulty of ensuring law and order (ABREU, 2017).

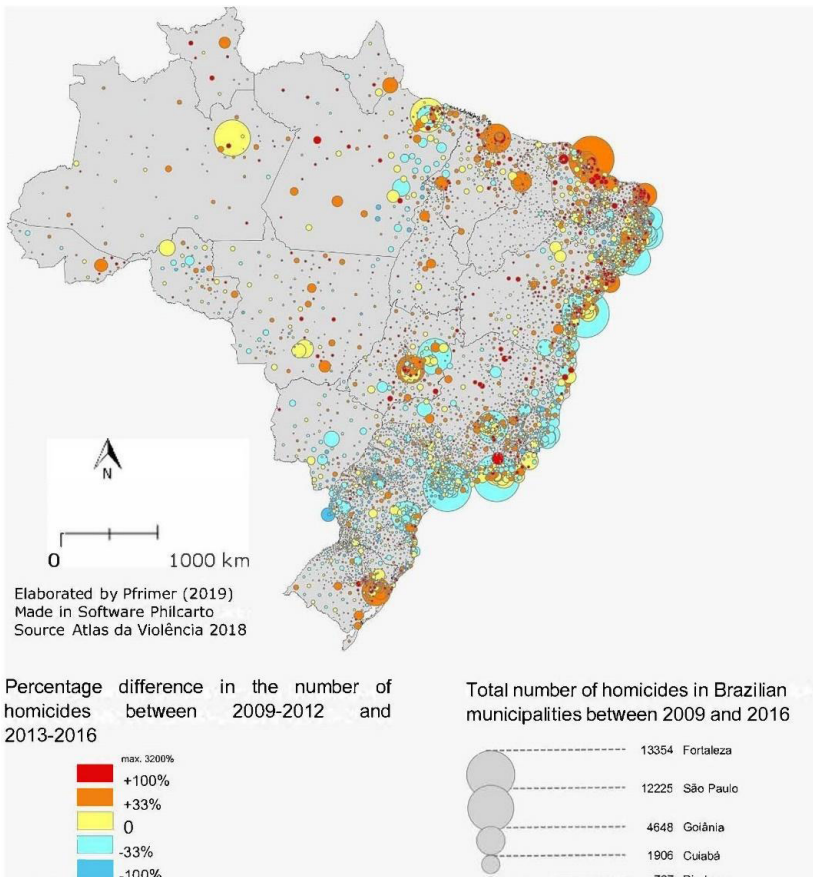
Map 2 also shows the percentage difference between the total number of homicides between 2009 and 2012, and 2013 and 2016; in which homicide rates significantly decreased in the inland municipalities across the Triple Frontier up to the metropolitan area of São Paulo. The increasing control PCC has over the inland route prevents rivalries with other factions, such as CV, pacifying the region. Moreover, local security forces receive better overall financing and training (MANSO, 2012; BIDERMAN ET AL., 2019; JUSTUS ET AL, 2018; RISSO, 2014).

Homicide rates also decreased in the border between the most meridional area of the state of Rio Grande do Sul and the Solimões route, unlike North-Northeastern urban centers, such as São Luís, Teresina, Fortaleza, and Natal. This partly relates to disputes over local markets between factions connected to PCC and CV which control areas of great drug and arms trafficking to neighboring countries; and the weakened response of traditional security forces to such well-armed threats; a reflection of regional disparities in the public investment to security across Brazil (MATOS, 2017).

Though homicide rates have declined in other North-Northeastern urban centers, they have increased in its inland municipalities, especially those belonging to the *Polígono da Maconha* (Marijuana Polygon – municipalities in the state of Pernambuco across the *sertão* – Northeastern

hinterland – and the São Francisco river) (FERREIRA, 2018). Inland cities in the Solimões route also show a substantial increment in homicides. PCC and FDN currently dispute this transit space, slaughtering each other both inside and outside the Amazon prison system (FERREIRA; FRAGMENTO, 2020). Homicide rates have also increased in municipalities within the Amazon pioneer front in the states of Tocantins and Mato Grosso. Finally, cattle producers also engender grave conflicts by grabbing indigenous and *quilombola* (hinterland settlements founded by people of African origin) lands.

MAP 2 - TOTAL NUMBER OF HOMICIDES IN BRAZILIAN MUNICIPALITIES BETWEEN 2009 AND 2016



Sources: Atlas da Violência 2018. Elaborated by the author via the Philcarto software.

We could interpret the spatial dynamics in the map above by looking at its internal borders and urban and rural relations. Internal borders refer to intermediate zones of unconsolidated human occupation whose economy relies on the primary sector or other economic sectors supplying products and materials for more industrialized sectors, such as agribusiness. Whereas international treaties offered the judicial foundation for international borders (FOUCHER, 1991), the socioterritorial dynamic established internal borders (BECKER, 1986; 1996). Internal borders follow the rise of urban networks and, more precisely, the formation of pioneer frontiers. (BEK CER, 1986).

TCO dynamics inevitably affect internal borders since armed violence becomes transnational as it expands across South America, and Brazil is no exception. Thus, in response to this threat, the Brazilian Armed Forces, under the responsibility of the Ministry of Defense, launched *Operação Ágata* in 2011 against TCO transnational threats to promote the effective control of the national territory. It also intends to patrol the extensive Brazilian border areas extending across 16,800 km whose 11 districts, ten countries, and 710 municipalities house six million people (RES DAL, 2016). For Mendes (2016), *Operation Ágata* seeks to contribute to the “increase in inspection and the feeling of safety in borders” (MENDES, 2016, p. 33), though it faces the difficulty of monitoring a territory whose road capillarity allows the entry of drugs into Brazil, favoring the dynamic of TCO. He claims that:

[...] we attest that intelligence efforts cannot limit themselves to monitoring activities in the domestic environment. It is urgent, therefore, to turn our eyes to our strategic surroundings, realizing the evolution of possible threats and correlating the external events with the occurrences verified in our national territory (MENDES, 2016, p. 41).

The threats Mendes (2016) cite justify the Brazilian response against the transnationalization of armed violence taking many forms across the internal spaces of the Brazilian territory. Moreover, such an operation proves that the violent TCO dynamic actively operating within Brazilian and other South American borders constitutes an external

threat to Brazil. Thus, employing the Armed Forces to size and reduce the uncertainties TCO cause will prevent the increase of the violent lethality casually connected with armed violence within Brazilian borders and its spatial scenarios.

The political economy of cocaine trafficking and armed violence are inseparable phenomena from urban networks around agribusiness expansion (the inland and the Solimões routes – the latter connected to pioneer fronts in the Amazon – are examples of this) (MACHADO, 2011). As Mendes (2016) states, the great road capillarity of Brazilian borders facilitates the infrastructure of drug circulation, providing a scenario conducive to the creation of intermediate markets up to the Rio-São Paulo axis and, from there, to Africa and Europe. It fails to surprise us that, currently, the drug market in the state of São Paulo is larger than that of the capital (ABREU, 2017). Agricultural modernization and the formation of internal borders relate to the transnationalization of TCO trafficking and armed violence by their control of flow spaces, constituting a threat to the security not only of Brazil but of South America, as Map 2 shows.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As observed, TCO expanded their activities to Brazilian inland cities, opaque spaces articulating the local with the transnational (HALL, 2013). The breadth of their scope favored their illicit enrichment since the control of trafficking routes and consumer territories are indispensable for expanding and securing their operations. We also note that operations such as *Ágata* (2011) relate to the perception of transnational threats to Brazil, justifying the use of Armed forces to prevent the loss of control of national borders. TCO operation zones increased armed violence in these regions. Our data show this phenomenon correlates to the change in violence spaces, influenced by fluvial and terrestrial drug routes, changing its *loci* from urban areas to internal borders.

PCC's monopoly of the entry flow to the Brazilian Southeast prevents disputes and conflicts, unlike the North and Northeast, suffering the greatest increase in violence; thus, further reinforcing the argument that violent lethality relates to the expansion of retail distribution and drugs routes, and not of production. The networks within the national territory are an important and relevant analytical element of the spatiality

of Brazilian armed violence due to its correlation to drug flow from border countries.

We also observed the lax legislation of South American countries producing materials indispensable for the manufacture of cocaine. How this hegemony organizes itself shows another side of TCO in South America: they enjoy relative peace in border areas due to greater consensus between different factions, but dispute consumer spaces: metropolises and inland cities, profitable areas financing their growth and enabling their expansion.

Finally, we conclude that our maps and the data from the literature show a clear spatial correlation between drug production in South America and its impact on armed violence in Brazil. It remains to be seen how national security forces face the imminent challenge of guaranteeing law and order in a country seriously exposed to these risks and facts.

AMEAÇAS EM REDE À SEGURANÇA NACIONAL: DOS AMBIENTES URBANOS À CIRCULAÇÃO TRANSNACIONAL DE ILÍCITOS

RESUMO

O aumento da produção de cocaína e a hegemonia nas rotas transnacionais fortaleceram as redes narcotraficantes na América do Sul. Essa expansão apresentou desdobramentos na violência armada no Brasil, já que as Organizações Criminosas Transnacionais (OCTs) passam a disputar a hegemonia em corredores de circulação e distribuição da droga não apenas nas regiões metropolitanas, mas especialmente nas cidades interioranas. Dessa forma, o presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar como as novas territorialidades do narcotráfico sul-americano se relacionam com a natureza e espacialidade da violência no Brasil, e levantar qual tipo de ameaça direta isso traz à segurança nacional. Para tanto, coletamos dados quantitativos georreferenciados no Repositório do Projeto de Conflitos da Universidade de Uppsala (UCDP), no Observatório de Homicídio do Instituto Igarapé e no Repositório de Apreensões do Escritório das Nações Unidas sobre Drogas e Crime (UNODC). Por meio do Software Philcarto, construímos as cartografias e desenvolvemos a análise espacial dos dados. Por fim, observamos que a capilarização e hegemonia das territorialidades do narcotráfico impulsionam a violência nas fronteiras internas e cidades interioranas no Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Espacialidade da violência; Organizações Criminosas Transnacionais; Violência armada.

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