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## From Failed State to Tourist Haven

BY MATTHEW KAMINSKI

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Palomino, Colombia — The world usually looks good from a thatched beach hut on the Caribbean. But this spot not far from the Venezuelan border offers a unique perspective.

Less than a decade ago, few ventured to the seaside village set against lush tropical forest and the Sierra Nevada mountains. Marxist rebels, paramilitary bands and narco-traffickers had the run of it. This was the bad-news Colombia of guerrilla wars and Pablo Escobar.

Arriving in Palomino these days, visitors see a poster that reads: “Ejército nacional: Su causa es nuestra.” (National Army: Your cause is ours.) Young soldiers patrol the main road. Military helicopters occasionally fly overhead. Yet the town is calm and safe. Its main preoccupation is tending to backpackers from Europe and America.

So many countries in this summer of war can only dream of one day becoming Colombia. It is a nation far from perfect, with plenty of conflicts and problems, but on the mend and coming up. The list of crippled countries with recovery hard to see is heavy on the Middle East: Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya. Afghanistan of course. Closer to Colombia, Venezuela and much of Central America are messes. And Crimea, the old Soviet Riviera with palm trees and beaches, fell off the tourist map after Russia’s springtime military invasion of Ukraine.

Colombia was long the sick man of Latin America. The 19th and 20th centuries were virtually one long undeclared civil war. The current conflict with FARC guerrillas — depleted militarily, unpopular and suing for peace — goes back 50 years. The nation’s best people sought futures elsewhere. Kidnappers, criminals and rebels made the roads too scary to brave at night.

The center in Colombia didn’t just fail to hold; there was never much of a center, with powerful extremists on most sides. That’s even though Colombia’s democratic roots are deeper than almost any of its neighbors’, save for a short period of military rule in the 1950s.

The Colombian security and economic renaissance didn’t come overnight and is incomplete. Many of the reasons for it

are complex and local, but the lessons are universal. Strong and legitimate political leaders, acting with the support of a populace tired of conflict, tamed the criminal and ideological forces of disorder.

The route out for a failed state takes a national consensus, by necessity formed through compromise, about the way ahead. Zero-sum politics, the scourge of authoritarian states as well as some aspiring democracies, is the way back to violence and instability.

Consider the Arabic case. Of the nations thrown into upheaval by the so-called Arab Spring of 2011, only Tunisia avoided the catastrophes of Egypt, Libya and others. Islamist terrorists tried to kill Tunisia's experiment with free politics, assassinating prominent politicians and waging a low-grade war along the Algerian border. Tunisia's mainstream Islamist party, which won the most votes in an election, has fought them. It made political concessions to the secular establishment parties that, at one point last year, agitated for a coup on the Egyptian model. Hard political negotiations produced a strong constitution this year. Free elections, only the second in its history, are due in the fall.

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*If only Iraq, Russia and  
Libya were more like ...  
Columbia.*

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Elsewhere in the region, as extremists clash, the center vanishes. Earlier this summer, I met an Iraqi Shiite cleric and politician, Iyad Jamal al-Din. He represents an alternative to Iraq's purely sectarian politics. He had joined with Sunnis and battled Iran's influence on Baghdad. A "true liberal," the Iraqi exile scholar Kanan Makiya calls him. "With a few thousand like him we could launch an Islamic reformation."

Mr. al-Din's prominent family and religious credentials gave him a platform — and made him a threat to Iraq's peddlers of the politics of victimhood, sectarian hatred and intolerance. Mr. al-Din has survived seven assassination attempts. He served in Parliament after Saddam Hussein's fall. He formed his own party, which failed to win a single seat in the 2010 elections. Mr. al-Din now lives in exile in suburban Washington.

Egypt is riven by a similar partisan dynamic, pitting the secular establishment against the banned Muslim Brotherhood. In Russia — another state with a deficit of democratic hope — Vladimir Putin's Kremlin kills, imprisons and muffles domestic opponents.

Yet history isn't static. There was a time when the idea

of taking a family vacation in Colombia would have sounded more like a punch line.

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*Mr. Kaminski is a member of the Journal's editorial board.*