

ORION FORUM

# Examining the Crime-Terror Convergence in Venezuela

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*Editor's Note: This policy brief is Part IV of an Orion Policy Institute (OPI) Transnational Crime Project (OPI-TCP) series and culminating report examining Venezuela's transnational criminal networks, their regional security implications, and the evolving U.S. policy response.*

## Introduction

Venezuela, ranked [seventh](#) globally for the highest homicide rate, is characterized by violence brought on by cartels, gangs, and other transnational criminal organizations. Unstable governance, [hypertrophic economic growth](#), illicit markets, and weak institutions have created an environment where violent organizations like Tren de Aragua and Tren del Llano can flourish. These criminal enterprises sustain their activities through kidnapping, human trafficking, drug production and dissemination, extortion, targeted assassinations, and blatant violence. Beyond typical organized crime strategies, cartels and gangs employ terrorist tactics to subdue local populations and compete with rivals in the region. The definition of true terrorism is often disputed throughout academic and analytical spaces, but it concerns [non-state actors](#) and their use of violence against civilian and state targets, typically to coerce a population or achieve a political goal.

[Tren de Aragua](#), a lethal organization that derived its beginnings as a prison gang, has been linked to [brutal assassinations](#) of members of local communities and have posted violent dismembering videos in order to frighten the public and erode their trust in local law enforcement. A separate but allied group of Tren de Aragua, Tren del Llano developed out of [labor lobbying](#) and have quickly risen within Venezuela as a violent criminal enterprise. While Tren del Llano has funded itself through the drug trade and human trafficking, they have

conducted violent operations against Venezuelan police stations and have had violent confrontations with the [Bolivarian National Guard of Venezuela](#) (GNB) in the wake of state troop deployment. These clashes with armed forces are not without complexities, as the Venezuelan armed forces and senior officials have been linked to the illicit crime and drug trade in Venezuela. These individuals are grouped under the label of the Cartel de los Soles, or Cartel of the Suns, which is largely dependent on the [shadow operations](#) of the Venezuelan armed forces. Cartel de los Soles as a centralized operation has largely been contested, with many experts in the region noting that it is merely a [label for corrupted officials](#) that support drug trafficking networks and benefit from their efforts. Despite the unknown status of Cartel de los Soles, it is evident that the lines of state and non-state actors blur significantly across the crime syndicates in Venezuela, particularly as their strategies to sustain and grow have shifted. While Venezuelan gangs and cartels are often distinguished through the “organized crime” category, their use of terrorist tactics as a strategy is largely underexplored.

## The Crime-Terror Convergence

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Terrorism is a tool that is utilized by criminal groups at various threat levels. Following the Cold-War, the global conflict and threat environment shifted state and non-state aspirations, and thus operations. Terrorist groups and criminal groups alike have notably diversified their strategies to maintain relevance and sustain operations. On one hand, terrorist groups have diversified their income through increasing engagement with criminal activities due to a decrease in state sponsorship, while organized crime groups and gangs have [employed terrorist strategies](#) to focus on and achieve their political goals. The use of terrorism is a form of [costly signalling](#) as non-state insurgent and criminal groups alike will not often have the same degree of resources nor weapon and military capabilities like the state. Arguably, the most distinct difference between a traditional terrorist group and a cartel or criminal gang, is the [political relationship](#) with the state.

Often, terrorist organizations utilize their tactics to develop insurgency against the state, control territory, and disseminate ideologies as they seek [social solidarity](#). The [goals](#) of traditional terrorist groups can vary, but often are categorized by their want of regime,

territorial, and policy change or maintenance of social control and the status quo. Criminal enterprises, however, seek to pursue their operations within the state or what the state allows, expressing their tactics through a [war of constraint](#). These groups must therefore balance their ambitions with the strength and potential reaction of the state. Interestingly, Tren de Aragua, Tren del Llano, and Cartel de los Soles seem to share traditional terrorist group goals. In the case of Tren de Aragua, its beginnings as a prison operation and its expansion across the [Western Hemisphere](#) have been in efforts to capitalize on the Venezuelan and global illicit markets. It has entrenched itself in local communities and developed strong international criminal networks in countries like Chile, Colombia, and Peru to secure territorial and financial prowess. Tren de Llano, made its stance regarding the state clear a year before Nicolás Maduro's capture and demanded that he "[respect the will of the people](#)". Tren de Llano's view of the regime is indicative of perhaps an unwillingness to work within the bounds of the state, as its opinions and operations appear more similar to that of a group that seeks a regime change. Separately, the shadow operational activity of individuals that identify with Cartel de los Soles presents another unique element to the crime-terror convergence. Furthermore, they operate in a manner that is indicative of a want to maintain the status quo, given their position of power and the benefits they reap from engaging in criminality. Each of these organizations must also consider its use of violence in relation to the public and the state, further muddying a clear distinction between criminal networks and terrorist organizations.

Tren del Llano, like Tren de Aragua, has developed a strong drug and extortion network but it has found itself in direct and constant [conflict](#) with the Venezuelan state, particularly during Nicolás Maduro's regime. The GNB and Venezuelan military have been deployed and conducted multiple [operations](#) in territories like Guatopo National Park and [Altagracia de Orituco](#), in attempts to mitigate criminal activity. While Tren del Llano has been linked to [extortion](#) and kidnapping, its use of violence against civilians remains underreported. The violence carried out by this organization has primarily been against [state](#) law enforcement and military members. Given this current pattern, Tren del Llano is not indiscriminate with their violence as they must ensure that they maintain the general support of the local community that encapsulates them- this grants further operational security and limits local reports made

to law enforcement or government officials about their activities and location. The strategic action taken by Venezuela demonstrates the fragile environment in which Tren del Llano operates as it attempts to achieve their political and economic goals. Tren del Llano's efforts against state forces but consideration of targeting civilians parallels the operational environment of terrorist groups, highlighting the nexus of crime and terrorism. During this politically fraught time in Venezuela, it is apparent that a war of constraint is no longer the operational strategy of both criminal groups and the state and instead, insurgency and a play for political power is on the horizon. This is where the convergence of crime and terrorism thrives- shifting political and economic aspirations and the distribution of violence against the civilian population and the state.

## Incubators of Hybrid Criminal Formation

Venezuela's long history of regime changes, institutional corruption, and economic hardships contribute to the storm of criminality. In countries like Venezuela where elements of governance are absent, criminal groups capitalize on the demand for such governance, utilizing intimidation and fear to secure localized power. For example, Tren de Aragua created [Somos El Barrio JK](#), which now provides public services and imposes the gang's will upon local schools in San Vicente. Beyond competition for governance and power, the criminal efforts to sustain and gain power manifests itself in smaller incubators like prisons and unions. As Orion Policy Institute previously reported, Tren de Aragua began in [Tocorón state prison](#). Clandestine criminal organizations like gangs and terrorist groups face organizational and recruitment [dilemmas](#). Criminal and terrorist enterprises must screen potential new members to sustain and grow their organizations, while ensuring the safety and security of current operatives. Groups like Tren de Aragua function with the knowledge that their efforts can be thwarted by state operations, thus, typical member recruitment for these organizations is limited. Prisons provide a solution to this dilemma by incubating and fast-tracking the recruitment process and serving as training hubs for potential members. These members, once released, have an established community to turn to following their prison sentence. Other forms of isolated networks, such as union or labor movements, breed connection.

In the case of Tren del Llano, members who were a part of the [Chavista labor movements](#) and the Bolivarian Workers Union utilized their fostered relationships to grow into the megagang that it is known as today. Tren del Llano members, who are connected under a shared ideological space, can easily recruit members given their shared experiences. Similarly, the members of Cartel de los Soles are connected through their positions within the state, which facilitates a recruitment environment where individuals can screen potential new members in relative safety. Radicalized groups, whether categorized as gangs, cartels, or terrorist groups, experience organizational and recruitment dilemmas that can be mitigated by small, localized spaces. The reliance on such strategies to pursue clandestine recruitment punctuates the convergence of crime and terror. Intimate communities like prisons and union movements, foster interpersonal relationships that, when paired with political grievances, cultivate unique criminal formations as seen in Venezuela.

## **Policy Considerations for the Crime-Terror Convergence**

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Given the evolving threat landscape, the parallels between criminal organizations and terrorist [groups](#) seem to intersect more frequently today. To maintain their influence, these groups use terror tactics to incite fear, gain membership, and secure territorial control. Similarly, terrorist groups have broadened their income strategies by engaging with the illicit drug trade, human trafficking, and money laundering. These enterprises operate in a gray zone— one where criminal and terrorist methods converge, thus requiring a different analytical, scholarly, and political approach to understanding the evolution of their operations. Criminal groups like Tren de Aragua and Tren del Llano leverage terror and violence to garner public political support as well as target extensions of the Venezuelan state. Individuals of the Cartel de los Soles utilize their position to screen potential recruits and connect with drug trafficking networks to gain a mutually beneficial relationship. Terrorist groups and organized criminal groups alike face security dilemmas which forces them to operate clandestinely and recruit through small, pre-existing networks. In countries like Venezuela, criminal gangs have become embedded in politics, population, and economy. Because of the clear variations amongst organized criminal enterprises, each case and group should be examined through the [“armed politics”](#) approach. Despite an organization’s technical designation, the context for their operations, recruitment

strategies, and structure must be considered to effectively counter criminal activities. The relationship between armed groups and the state will always vary and thus, cannot be applied uniformly.

In 2025, the United States designated both [Tren de Aragua](#) and [Cartel de los Soles](#) as terrorist organizations, while Tren del Llano did not receive such designation. Following Maduro's capture earlier this year, it is uncertain how these organizations will adapt in the wake of a potential transition to democracy. Tren del Llano, whose identity has been partially shaped by its opposition to the Maduro government, may decrease its operations. In contrast, Tren de Aragua's embedment in the community, its use of the larger illicit drug market, and prison recruitment suggests group sustainability. For Cartel de los Soles, individuals may experience more scrutiny under a democratic regime, but the current transitional period poses risks of continued corruption. The convergence of crime and terror poses distinct challenges in the policy and operational space. If academics, analysts, and policymakers rely too heavily on the differentiation between criminal groups and terrorist groups, counterintelligence efforts, research, and policy are likely to fall short. A nuanced approach to understanding the operations and evolutions of these organizations is essential to address Venezuela's shifting threat landscape.

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