ORION FORUM

Tren de Aragua – Background and Transnational Challenge

MARCH 17, 2026

Editor's Note: This policy brief is Part III 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

The rapid expansion of Tren de Aragua (TdA) from a Venezuelan prison gang into a destabilized, decentralized transnational criminal organization (TCO) represents one of the most significant security developments in the Western Hemisphere in recent years. Unlike state-embedded systems, which Orion Policy Institute previously analyzed, TdA thrives in states with weak institutional capacity, making them particularly difficult to combat. Current U.S. policy frameworks lack the nuanced detailed necessary for combatting this threat because of the lack of coordination between affected countries, especially the Venezuelan government, along with the rapid evolution and expansion of TdA. Understanding TdA's origins and organizational evolution is essential to explaining why conventional policy responses often fall short and demonstrate how the precise moment to pursue a TCO like TdA can be fleeting.

Origins

To understand the current threat TdA poses, examining a brief history of the organization can provide a useful context. TdA originated in Venezuela's Aragua state located to the West/Southwest of Caracas. TdA roughly translates to "the train of Aragua" and began its origins in the infamous Aragua Penitentiary Prison, colloquially called Tocorón. Tocorón became the clearest example of Venezuela's *pranato system*, dating back to the early 2010s. In this system, prison gangs were granted de facto authority in exchange for limiting large-

scale violence perpetuated directly against the state.

This system, established during the reign of Hugo Chavez, emerged in response to a series of confrontations between Venezuelan state forces and criminal gangs that had taken control of various Venezuelan prisons, exposing the state's inability to assert control over its correctional system. Weeks-long sieges produced scores of deaths as the Chavez government proved unable and unwilling to deal with the organized criminal element which had, in effect, taken over this prison system. The pranato system was born from this loss of state control. Prison gang leaders were allowed significant autonomy, controlling internal discipline, economic activity, and inmate movement in exchange for preventing large-scale violence.

Within Tocorón, this autonomy expanded beyond informal control. TdA established their own "taxation" structure as their influence grew from the prison and into the greater community. Meanwhile, businesses inside the prison were open to the public as bars and restaurants fed TdA's criminal syndicate. Drug distribution ironically emerged from within the prison so that locals voluntarily entered Tocorón for illicit transactions with TdA. The freedom of movement allotted to gang leaders in Tocorón facilitated their various crimes such as extortion, kidnapping, and drug-dealing. Inmates were sometimes transferred strategically, allowing for expanded recruitment and consolidation of loyal members. What began as a containment strategy evolved into the perfect environment for organization crime.

Tren de Aragua emerged from this environment. The combination of surrendering state authority, pervasive institutional corruption, and overconfidence by the government in being able to delay gang confrontation allowed the organization to establish formal command structures, revenue streams, and vast recruitment pipelines largely insulated from external law enforcement pressure. TdA used access to incoming inmates as part of a massive recruiting tool, encouraged further by the unprecedented autonomy provided to it by the state.

Maduro inherited the pranato legacy from Chavez and rather than dismantle the system he left them largely intact. As the Venezuelan state retreated, Tocorón and similar facilities continued to operate as permissive environments, allowing groups like TdA to fill the institutional void left behind as the state ceded authority to organized crime. Other local gangs were absorbed or forced into agreements with TdA as Tocorón became the criminal nexus from which TdA

expanded regionally and then internationally.

As incompetent economic management caused spiraling hyperinflation, economic prospects for all Venezuelans, including members of TdA, weakened. Millions of Venezuelans fled both the economic collapse as well as state persecution, creating both humanitarian vulnerabilities and enforcement gaps that organizations like TdA were positioned to exploit. Rather than encouraging group member migration in a coordinated maneuver, TdA leveraged migrant flows as cover, recruitment pools, and logistical pathways, embedding operatives within diaspora communities while simultaneously preying on vulnerable populations to further their organizational goals.

Expansion, Evolution, and Brutality

One of the most lucrative and pervasive trades that TdA practices is human trafficking. Recruitment for TdA begins at local beauty pageants, where TdA leverages social media to prey on vulnerable young women called “multadas,” often barely of legal age. Once these girls are groomed and promised a better life by their TdA handlers, events follow an all too familiar pattern of offering the girls transit out of Venezuela for a promising job offer only to burden them with an outrageous debt which they must pay back while in sexual slavery. This consists of not only traditional prostitution, but also digital sexual exploitation by offering pornographic encounters with the trafficked women on social media apps such as WhatsApp or Snapchat. Punishments for refusing to obey TdA’s authority are meted out publicly. Rubi Ferrer, a sex worker in Lima, Peru, was executed on video, alleged by TdA, to send a chilling and public message. This gratuitous violence is typical of how TdA operates; allowing no misunderstandings of their brutality.

Additionally, once the economic collapse of Venezuela was in full swing, TdA capitalized on the internal pressure to seek a better life. With similar brutal enforcement, TdA took over many critical migration routes across South America and especially across the porous, 1,300 mile Colombian-Venezuelan border. Desperate migrants are regularly threatened with violence and their families extorted to guarantee the safe passage of their loved ones across the reported 42 illegal crossing points. Disappearances are regular and violence so rampant that a 2024 human rights report to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

detailed 123 claimed massacres in Colombia of which non-state actors like TdA were responsible for 93%. Bodies which are discovered show telltale signs of TdA violence, including torture and dismemberment, that are meant to strike fear into rival groups the National Liberation Army (ELN) of Colombia.

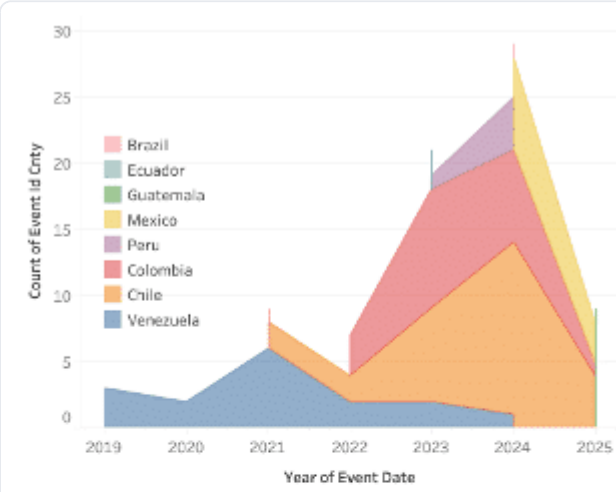
TdA's leadership structure was a traditionally hierarchical one, which can be described as "centralized leadership structure with a clear command system extending across multiple countries," which all reported back to Hector Rusthenford 'Niño' Guerrero Flores aka "Niño Guerrero," who continues to operate as the head of TdA.This would not always remain the case as TdA adeptly adapted to shifting opportunities presented by international expansion.

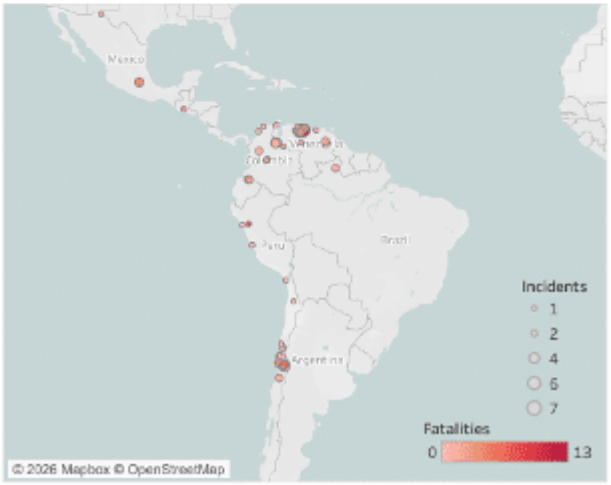
In September 2023, the Maduro government made a point to raid the Tocorón prison as a demonstration of his commitment to rooting out corruption and criminality across Venezuela. While a raid did take place, TdA leadership was tipped off and able to clear out much of their operation prior to the show of force. Although the loss of a logistics and profit hub undoubtedly hurt TdA on a regional level, its transnational networks remained operational, lessening the impact of the raid. A closer look at this raid suggests more of a symbolic gesture. Authorities were able to regain control of the facility while at the same time, TdA's leadership used the raid as an avenue towards expansion.

Reporting has persistently raised questions about the nature of the relationship between TdA and Venezuelan authorities. There are assumptions surrounding coordination between TdA and the Maduro government, which supports the argument that the Tocorón prison raid represented a change in official policy outside of mere security theatrics. The fact that no member of the TdA leadership was captured in the September 2023 Tocorón raid as well as TdA's retention of much of their guns, drugs, and weapons were seized point to at minimum, penetration of TdA within Venezuelan government to know the raid was coming. For example, TdA has been accused by the Chilean government as recently as 2024 of assassinating a Venezuelan dissident, Ronald Ojeda, an operation that reportedly involved impersonation of Chilean police officers. The Chilean government further accused Venezuela's minister of the Interior, Diosdado Cabello, of personally ordering Ojeda's murder. The potential murky relationship between the Venezuelan government and non-state actor forces like TdA isn't

unique. Chavismo governments have enjoyed their arms-length association with so-called “colectivos,” or roving paramilitary gangs of left-wing socialist sympathizers who intimidate those working against “the people” of Venezuela. While the extent of direct state involvement with TdA remains contested, it is worth raising the question of whether or not Venezuela would utilize similar sets of asymmetric tools against their international foes as they do their domestic.

While older reporting described TdA as hierarchical, its operational model is considerably more flexible. The fluidity with which TdA propagates, by operating on a franchise tax (or “*causa*”) based system, permits it to be the perfect vessel to exploit Venezuela’s refugee crisis. Using this semi-autonomous causa system to their advantage, local TdA cells retain operational independence while a large portion of their profits are passed up the chain in exchange for brand recognition, coordination, or access to broader networks. This allows for rapid geographic spread with limited centralized oversight. As Venezuelan migration expanded across Latin America, TdA affiliates established footholds within migrant corridors, adapting to the local environment and maintaining only loose financial and reputational ties to core leadership. This structural flexibility explains how TdA has diversified, rapidly increasing its international footprint to allow its hands in drug, human, and weapon smuggling, as well as human trafficking, extortion, kidnapping, and murder. Unlike state-embedded illicit systems that depend on political protection within national institutions, TdA’s resilience derives from mobility and fragmentation rather than institutional posture or support.





Country	Event Type	Actor2	Incidents	Fatalities
Venezuela	Battles	ELN: National Liberation Army	2	0
		FARC Dissident - 10th Front: Re..	1	2
		FARC Dissident: Revolutionary ..	1	2
		Unidentified Armed Group (Ven..	1	1
		Unidentified Gang and/or Colec..	1	1
	Violence ag..	Civilians (Venezuela)	10	6
Colombia	Battles	Puros Hermanos Sicarios Gang	1	1
		Unidentified Armed Group (Col..	1	0
	Violence against civilians	Civilians (Colombia)	12	14
		Civilians (India)	1	0
		Civilians (Paraguay)	1	1
		Civilians (Venezuela)	4	2
Chile	Battles	El Tren de Aragua Gang	2	2
		Los Orientales Gang	1	5
	Violence against civilians	Civilians (Chile)	13	10
		Civilians (Colombia)	1	2
		Civilians (Haiti)	1	1
		Civilians (International)	3	0
		Civilians (Venezuela)	7	3
Ecuador	Violence ag..	Civilians (Ecuador)	2	2
Guatemala	Battles	Unidentified Gang (Honduras)	1	3
Mexico	Battles	Unidentified Gang (Mexico)	1	2
	Violence against civilians	Civilians (Colombia)	1	1
		Civilians (Mexico)	2	2
		Civilians (Venezuela)	2	3
Brazil	Battles	Unidentified Gang (Brazil)	1	1
	Violence ag..	Civilians (Venezuela)	1	1
Peru	Explosions/..	Civilians (Peru)	1	0
	Violence against civi..	Civilians (Peru)	2	9
		Civilians (Venezuela)	2	2
Grand Total			80	79

Policy Options: Inadequate Solutions

Tren de Aragua's structure presents a fundamentally different policy challenge than state-embedded illicit systems. TdA's role as a semi-autonomous, transnational criminal organization (TCO) that receives tacit patronage and protection from the Venezuelan government makes it extremely challenging to deal with from a U.S. policy perspective. Because TdA does not rely on formal control of national institutions, tools designed to pressure governments have limited direct impact on its operational mode. Instead, TdA thrives on mobility, fragmentation, and the ability to exploit weak coordination between jurisdictions.

Additionally, TdA diversifies its criminal activity, avoiding the traditional counternarcotic approaches. This diversification, specifically into human trafficking, is a more difficult criminal element to track because of the reluctance of victims to come forward combined with the mass

refugee crisis perpetuated by Maduro of which there are an estimated 7.8 million migrant refugees from which TdA can exploit. Even under traditional threats of American soft power, the durability of TCOs is remarkable to behold. With the current administration's pivot towards a preference to quicker, hard power solutions in the Americas, the ability to coordinate a multi-country response to TdA remains distant. The most common instruments for disrupting TCOs like TdA are targeting assets and cooperative, international criminal investigations. These approaches are not without their own sets of limitations.

Asset seizure can disrupt individual cells but rarely dismantle the broader network due to dispersed, varying revenue streams and the use of informal transfer systems and cryptocurrency. Arresting mid-level operators may temporarily degrade local capacity, but a decentralized franchise-style organizational structure enables rapid regeneration elsewhere. However, efforts to prosecute TdA leaders are extremely cumbersome provided the lack of cooperation from Venezuela itself. There exists a black hole of information from country-of-origin databases due to the lack of interagency partnership between the US and Venezuela. In this way, "officers have no way to verify identities beyond relying on self-reported information" which makes immigration enforcement virtually impossible. This is exacerbated by the fact that the Venezuelan refugees among whom TdA is hiding are dispersed across Latin America. Enforcement pressure often results in geographic displacement rather than organizational dismemberment.

Notwithstanding, the more significant constraint is not bilateral relations alone, but the multinational nature of TdA. Because affiliates operate across Colombia, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Brazil, Mexico, and increasingly the United States, investigations require synchronized regional frameworks rather than fragmented bilateral arrangements.

Yet there is widespread interest in combatting TdA across Latin and South America. The extreme violence orchestrated by TdA, accompanied by widespread abuse of migrants via human trafficking, has elevated awareness of the problem to many law enforcement organizations across Latin America. This, combined with the unprecedented military operation to capture President Nicholas Maduro, has provided US policymakers with a precise window with which they can specifically address TdA. Willingness to cooperate internationally is not

unlimited in duration. The emerging multilateral consensus to deal with TdA notwithstanding, there may not be a better opportunity to negotiate bilaterally with Venezuela given the arrest of Maduro. The iron glows white and calls for action lest it cool with the winds of political change.

**image credit:* DW via Reuters

**Suat Cubukcu, Senior Fellow at Orion Policy Institute, assisted this author in compiling this table and corresponding graphics of Tren de Aragua (TdA) associated violent incidents. This data was compiled from the ACLED database on TdA violent incidents across Latin America from 2018 to 2025.*

Orion Policy Institute (OPI) is an independent, non-profit, tax-exempt think tank focusing on a broad range of issues at the local, national, and global levels. OPI does not take institutional policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions represented herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of OPI.