

ORION FORUM

Venezuela's Hybrid Criminal Networks and U.S. Regional Strategy

FEBRUARY 4, 2026

Editor's Note: This policy brief is Part I 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.

For years, U.S. policy toward Venezuela has fluctuated between sanctions, diplomacy, and public opposition of the actions of the Venezuelan government, treating the country primarily as a governance failure or a humanitarian crisis. Recent U.S. actions in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific, combined with language of the [2025 National Security Strategy \(NSS\)](#), point to an intentional shift: Venezuela is increasingly understood not as a failing state with, until recently, an illegitimate president, but as a hub for transnational criminal networks that pose a direct threat to U.S. national security and security more broadly.

This policy reframing matters and should not be ignored. It changes not only how Washington interprets Venezuela, but also which policy tools it considers necessary. [The NSS](#) explicitly advances the Western Hemisphere as a forefront of U.S. national security, identifying transnational criminal organizations and narco-terrorists as strategic threats rather than mere law enforcement challenges. That framing has been reinforced by operational developments, including Operation Southern Spear, which I have analyzed in detail in prior [Orion Policy Institute reports](#). Rather than restating those operations in detail here, this piece focuses on what they signal. That is, a strategic reclassification of Venezuelan-linked criminal activity as a national security concern for the United States.

"We want a [Western] hemisphere whose governments cooperate with us against narco-terrorists, cartels, and other transnational criminal organizations" - 2025 U.S. National Security Strategy

This series argues that Venezuela’s criminal landscape is best understood not as a single illicit system, but as a dual-model hybrid threat, combining state-embedded criminal organizations and decentralized transnational violence, requiring differentiated U.S. policy tools rather than a single strategic approach.

From Engagement to Confrontation: How Venezuela Became a Security Concern

The relationship between the U.S. and Venezuela dates back to when both countries were colonies of [European powers](#), with the U.S. playing a role in helping Venezuela achieve independence from Spain in the 18th and 19th centuries. For much of the twentieth century, U.S.-Venezuelan relations were shaped by energy interests and [commercial exchange](#), particularly in [the oil sector](#). Over time, however, our relationship with Venezuela has deteriorated as Venezuela experienced regressions in democratic practices, institutional erosion, and deepening corruption under [Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro](#). By the mid 2010’s, U.S. policy centered on sanctions and diplomatic isolation aimed at pressuring political reform, including legislation such as the [Venezuela Defense of Human Rights and Society Act of 2014](#).

While well-intentioned, this approach failed to produce lasting change. Instead, Venezuela’s crisis deepened, [governance grew more corrupt](#), the [humanitarian crisis grew exponentially](#), and [illicit economies](#) expanded, fueling [mass migration](#) and regional instability. By the mid-2020s, U.S. perceptions began to shift, noting that Venezuela was no longer viewed not only as an authoritative regime resisting reform, but as a permissive, and even enabling environment for transnational criminal networks with direct spillover effects across Latin America.

This evolution resulted in a dramatic [U.S. response](#) towards the [end of 2025](#) and in early 2026. As recent reporting notes, current U.S. actions fit within a longer historical pattern of hemispheric intervention, using a “[Big Stick](#)” approach to combat regional insecurity that threatens U.S. interests. This [historical trajectory](#) helps explain why Venezuela now occupies a central place in U.S. strategic thinking [among the largest proven reserves](#)

Two Models of Venezuelan Transnational Crime

There are two networks commonly treated as interchangeable: ***Tren de Aragua*** and ***Cartel de los Soles***. They are not interchangeable.

The first model consists of state-embedded illicit networks, often grouped under the label [Cartel de los Soles](#), which will be discussed in greater detail in part II of this Orion Policy Institute series. In Venezuela, state-embedded criminal networks are one of the [most significant threats](#) to security. These networks are embedded within the political, military, and economic institutions and derive power from access rather than from territorial control. Their core activities include [drug trafficking](#), [gold smuggling](#), and [sanctions evasion](#), which have been documented extensively and align with patterns OPI reports [previously analyzed](#) in its coverage of Venezuelan illicit economies and foreign partnerships.

Tren de Aragua (TdA), which will be discussed in great detail in Part III of this Orion Policy series, is a decentralized criminal network that has evolved from a Venezuelan prison gang into an organization operating across South America. [TdA tactics](#) include extortion, kidnapping, human trafficking, migrant smuggling, contraband, illegal mining, drug trafficking, cybercrime, and theft to sustain their operations.

Together, these two models explain Venezuela's resilience as a criminal hub.

This framework provides the foundation for the remainder of this OPI-TCP series. Part II will examine state-embedded illicit networks operating under *the Cartel de los Soles umbrella*, including their foreign enablers, sanctions-evasion mechanisms, and role in sustaining regime power.

Part III will focus on *Tren de Aragua's* evolution into a decentralized transnational criminal organization, tracing its expansion across Latin America and the distinct security challenges it poses to regional partners. Subsequent pieces will address operational disruption, illicit economies, and the convergence of crime and terrorism, before culminating with a final report that includes policy recommendations.

Why This Matters for U.S. Strategy

This analysis examines what the U.S. actions reveal about how U.S. policymakers now conceptualize Venezuelan-linked criminal threats.

The [2025 NSS](#) recognizes that hybrid threats blur the lines between crime, governance, and security. Venezuela is the perfect example of this challenge.

Prior to the capture of Maduro, U.S. maritime operations associated with Operation Southern Spear reflected a strategy of managed pressure allowing the U.S. to impose costs, demonstrate reach, and shape adversary behavior without necessarily triggering an immediate regime collapse. As previous Orion analyses have shown, the strategic impact of such operations depends less on individual strikes than on sustained pressure against economic lifelines, including oil logistics, tanker movements, and sanction-evasion networks. Yet, the January 3, 2026 military operation that resulted in the [capture of Nicolas Maduro](#) represented a clear offensive shift in policy, not simply a continuation of managed pressure. That operation, which involved the use of direct military force against senior leadership targets, has been described by analysts as an unprecedented intervention in South America and marked a pivotal escalation in how Washington is prepared to use force against perceived hybrid threats in ways that align with the broader threat reflected in the 2025 NSS.

This marked a transition from a strategy focused on degrading criminal capacity to one willing to impose political and leadership-level costs, blurring the line between counter-network operations and regime-targeting intervention.

Instead of depending solely on the cumulative effects of interdiction and economic disruption, this offensive action signaled a willingness to use direct force against leadership targets, exposing the limits of a purely defensive or pressure-based approach. The strategic ambition behind [such a move](#) reflects a broader interpretation of the NSS's mandate to defend U.S. interests against networks that combine criminality with elements of political power and regional influence, while also raising complex questions about sovereignty, legality, and the result of direct military engagement.

What does this mean for responding to threats like Cartel de los Soles and Tren de Aragua? The implication is straightforward. Tools designed to pressure state-embedded illicit networks will not meaningfully disrupt decentralized groups like TdA, and vice versa. Treating these actors as a single problem risks applying the right tools to the wrong targets, producing visible activity without a lasting impact.

The policy challenge, therefore, is not whether to act, but how. Targeting decentralized criminal networks with tools designed for state-embedded actors risks over-militarization

without durable disruption. Conversely, treating state-embedded criminal organizations as a conventional law-enforcement problem risks allowing illicit regimes to adapt, entrench, and externalize instability. The choices Washington makes in Venezuela will shape not only regional security outcomes, but future U.S. responses to hybrid criminal threats elsewhere.

Setting the Stage

Venezuela is not an anomaly; it is a warning. It illustrates how transnational crime evolves when state institutions criminalize, politicize, or fragment, and how those dynamics spill across borders.

This policy brief introduces a broader OPI-TCP examination of Venezuela's hybrid criminal ecosystem, the regional consequences of its expansion, and the strategic choices now confronting U.S. policymakers. Subsequent analyses will examine how these networks are financed, how they operate across borders, and where current policy tools fall short.

The question is no longer whether Venezuela poses a security challenge. It is whether the United States can translate its strategic diagnosis into a coherent, differentiated response before hybrid criminal networks further entrench themselves across the region.

**image credit: VOA.*

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.