

# Derailing the Tren de Aragua

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Tren de Aragua is a state-sponsored criminal organization born of the policies of the Venezuelan government, which blend the state with criminal networks.

The TdA's goal is to establish territorial control and impose a criminal economy that connects illicit networks to penitentiaries in or near those neighborhoods.

The new Trump Administration should work with Latin American partners to dismantle the TdA throughout the Western Hemisphere.

**S**hocking videos surfaced in late August of gun-wielding Venezuelan migrants storming an apartment building in the suburban city of Aurora, Colorado.<sup>1</sup> One of the migrants, a 20-year-old, confessed that he is part of a Venezuelan gang called Tren de Aragua (TdA, or “Train from Aragua”).<sup>2</sup> The Aurora police department is now beefing up its budget to confront the increased crime spilling over from the sanctuary city next door in Denver.<sup>3</sup>

Aurora was just the beginning. In the past 11 months, there have been increasing reports of TdA activity in no fewer than 30 major cities across America. At least 100 federal investigations involving the TdA are underway, catching most of the U.S. law enforcement community by surprise.<sup>4</sup> Shooting two New York City police officers, building sex trafficking rings in Louisiana, and murdering the Georgia nursing student Laken Riley and 12-year-old Jocelyn Nungaray in

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Houston are just some of the high-profile violent crimes carried out by the TdA. Moreover, given that the Venezuelan government does not cooperate or provide any data on suspected criminals coming from their country into the United States, some law enforcement officers have dubbed the TdA as “ghost criminals” with little to identify them other than confessions and/or tattoos.<sup>5</sup>

The Tren de Aragua has been around for more than a decade, first as a Venezuelan prison gang, then as a transnational criminal organization (TCO) spreading throughout Latin America, and now as a major street gang terrorizing cities in at least 20 states throughout America—and growing.<sup>6</sup> Many comparisons have been drawn between the TdA and the transnational Salvadoran gang, La Mara Salvatrucha 13 (MS-13). The TdA, however, is expanding much more quickly, likely due to its unique origin and state sponsorship in Venezuela. Unlike MS-13, which was born in Los Angeles in the 1980s, the TdA is foreign-born and was virtually nonexistent in America until 2021, distinct from other major TCOs such as MS-13 or the Mexican cartels. The TdA’s rapid expansion in the United States is a direct consequence of the Biden–Harris Administration’s failed immigration policies and lack of border enforcement.

## Weak Border Security and Failed Immigration Policies

Venezuela is the fastest growing nationality arriving in America since 2021. During the Biden–Harris Administration, almost *1 million* Venezuelans have arrived on the U.S. southern and northern borders.<sup>7</sup> This is about 10 percent of the overall encounters nationwide in the past four years. Prior to 2021, the numbers of Venezuelan nationals encountered on U.S. borders were in the thousands. This jumped to tens of thousands in fiscal year (FY) 2021, then hundreds of thousands in FY 2022, and it is now hovering between 300,000 to 350,000 encounters for FY 2024<sup>8</sup>—a growth of *520 percent* in four years. Add to this the Venezuelans that arrived in America through a humanitarian parole program or Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and other “immigration fudges,”<sup>9</sup> and it is easily another one-half million Venezuelans resettled in the United States since 2021.<sup>10</sup>

In under four years, more than 1.5 million Venezuelans have entered the United States illegally or through misguided immigration policies. Tren de Aragua followed them. Much like in South America, the TdA preys first on Venezuelan migrant communities, then expands to other vulnerable populations.<sup>11</sup> The difficulty of distinguishing criminal aliens from other Venezuelan migrants is a real conundrum for U.S. law enforcement. With

CHART 1

## Venezuelans Fastest Growing Nationality Arriving in U.S. Since 2021

	Total Encounters (2021–2024)	% Growth (2021–2024)
Mexico	2,901,821	-1.0%
Guatemala	946,172	-27.2%
Honduras	896,525	-55.0%
Venezuela	888,429	520.8%
Cuba	681,812	453.7%

**SOURCE:** U.S. Customs and Border Protection, “Nationwide Encounters,” <https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/nationwide-encounters> (accessed November 19, 2024).

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no cooperation from the Venezuelan government the U.S. must assume that TdA members or facilitators are mixed into Venezuelan migrant networks inside the country. By accelerating the migration process via the Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Venezuela (CHNV) parole program, the Biden–Harris Administration made it much more difficult to adequately vet Venezuelan migrants entering the United States.

**The Failed CHNV Program.** The CHNV parole program, announced in January 2023, was set up to provide an “orderly pathway” for up to 30,000 nationals per month from those countries to discourage travel to the U.S. southern border.<sup>12</sup> One year later, the effect of the parole program was disorder and chaos. The parole program was immediately flooded with more than 1.5 million applications in the first few months, enough to fill four years of parole slots, prompting a lottery system to select half of the monthly parolees.<sup>13</sup> The result is a range of fraud schemes tied to the CHNV parole program,<sup>14</sup> which was temporarily halted by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and restarted in August with a new vetting process focused on the migrant sponsors—but with no additional vetting of the migrants themselves.<sup>15</sup> Then the Biden–Harris Administration decided not to extend the CHNV parole program into FY 2025,<sup>16</sup> likely because they finally realized it was a failed policy.

Given the lack of cooperation and the adversarial nature of the Venezuelan regime, the fundamental flaw of the Biden–Harris Administration’s CHNV parole program is that it *accelerated* the vetting process instead of slowing it down. The U.S. is not prepared for the increased flow of

Venezuelan migrants, enabling the TdA to circumvent detection by U.S. law enforcement and border authorities. Now that the TdA is already present in America, to fix this, a proper understanding of the TdA is necessary to detect their motives, tactics, and overall strategy of organized crime.

## Emptying Prisons

Throughout Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, he has claimed that Venezuela—among other countries—are sending their criminals to the United States.<sup>17</sup> He repeated the claim in his most recent September debate with Vice President Kamala Harris, unleashing an array of “fact checkers” stating that the claim is false.<sup>18</sup> The “fact checkers” are incorrect.

The concern of Venezuelan criminals coming to the United States first emerged in September 2022 when 13 GOP Congressman wrote a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas about a leaked DHS intelligence report that instructed Border Patrol agents to be on the lookout for Venezuelan inmates mixed with migrant caravans traveling to the U.S. southern border.<sup>19</sup> The DHS intelligence report coincides with various instances of inmates being released from Venezuelan prisons in recent years under dubious circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

**Prisoners’ “Path to Liberty.”** Within the past five years, the Venezuelan government has been releasing inmates under early parole programs to decongest overcrowded prisons and focus on rehabilitation rather than punishment of criminals. The *Pasos de Libertad* (Path to Liberty) program, started in 2019, has released upwards of 2,000 Venezuelan inmates,<sup>21</sup> many of whom are unaccounted for.<sup>22</sup> The following year, the *Regimen de Confianza Tutelada* (“Trusteeship Regime”) program released another 1,500 inmates between 2020 to 2021.<sup>23</sup> The architect of these prisoner early release programs is Maria Iris Varela, the former minister of penitentiary services in Venezuela, a hardened Chavista loyalist known as *Comandante Fosforito* (“Commander Firecracker”) for her temper.

**Iris Varela.** In 2011, Iris Varela was named the first minister of prisons in Venezuela, despite not having any experience in criminal justice, and she remained in that position for nine years. Her tenure coincides with the TdA’s growth and expansion in Venezuela from one prison in the Aragua state in 2013 to dozens of prisons in no fewer than 13 states throughout the country by 2017.<sup>24</sup> Varela is sanctioned by the United States,<sup>25</sup> Canada, Panama, Colombia, and has been denied entry into Argentina for her documented ties to organized crime.<sup>26</sup> This includes alleged ties to a criminal boss called Teofilo Rodriguez, also known as *El Conejo*, who led the Tren de

Pacifico based at the San Antonio prison on Margarita Island in the Nueva Esparta state of Venezuela. Tren de Pacifico is a mega-gang that predates the TdA but is part of the same criminal network that flourished after Hugo Chávez rose to power in Venezuela in the early 2000s.

**The Murky Origin of Tren de Aragua.** At the turn of the century, at least five prison gangs emerged called *trenes* (trains) in Venezuela, spread over different geographic regions. The *trenes* connect criminal networks from inside the prisons, which are called *carros* (cars), to the illicit economy outside the prison.<sup>27</sup> In Venezuela the *trenes* are considered mega-gangs, or *megabandas*, because of the array of illicit activities in which they are involved, from extortion, kidnapping, robbery, and prostitution to human and drug trafficking, and more. The older *trenes*, such as Tren de Llano or Tren de Pacifico, which began in 2008, have largely been dismantled in recent years by Venezuelan security forces, while other *trenes* like Tren de Norte in western Venezuela or Tren de Guayana in eastern Venezuela have been taken over by the TdA.

The TdA's origin is more mysterious than the other *trenes*. Some attribute its origin to a labor union of construction workers that worked on a train in the Aragua state of Venezuela.<sup>28</sup> Yet others discount this version and say that the origin came after a major confrontation between Venezuelan security forces and gang leaders at the Rodeo prison outside Caracas. In May 2011, a 26-year-old gang leader named Yorvis Valentín López Cortez, alias *Oriente*, withstood at least 4,000 Venezuelan security forces with tanks and helicopters for weeks.<sup>29</sup> After 27 days and dozens of deaths, the Venezuelan government finally secured the Rodeo prison but not before *Oriente* escaped in what some allege was a backdoor deal between the gang and then–Interior Minister Tareck El Aissami, an important and powerful figure in the Venezuelan government who is of Syrian–Lebanese descent.<sup>30</sup>

The 2011 Rodeo prison riots catalyzed the creation of the new Ministry of Penitentiary Services, under the control of Iris Varela, who used the incident as a pretext to transfer gang leaders to the Penitentiary Center of Aragua, referred to as the Tocatorón prison, where the TdA was born. Known as the *Casa Grande* (“Big House”), the Tocatorón prison is where the TdA emerged under the leadership of three prison gang leaders, known as *pranes*. The *pran* stands for *Preso Rematado Asesino Nato*, meaning a “natural-born killer prisoner,” which started the usage of the term *pranato* in 2004 as representative of an informal prison system in Venezuela. The *pranato* in Venezuela expanded significantly during Tareck El Aissami's tenure as interior minister (2008–2011) and was institutionalized in 2011 by Penitentiary Services Minister Iris Varela.<sup>31</sup>

**Prisons as Power Centers.** The Venezuelan government has promoted the *pranato* culture from the beginning, turning the penitentiary system into major convergence points for illicit activities. Today, Venezuelan prisons act as power centers for Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro’s geopolitical objectives, imposing social control over the people and training Venezuelan inmates how to penetrate migrant communities in surrounding neighborhoods and abroad.

The handing over of the Tocorón prison in Aragua to the *pranato* system is the origin of the TdA. Venezuelan experts estimate that 2014 is when the TdA was formed inside the Tocorón prison, and 2017 is when they started expanding throughout South America.<sup>32</sup> The conditions, however, for the TdA to flourish were set up by Tareck El Aissami, who became the governor of Aragua from 2012 to 2017, and Penitentiary Services Minister Iris Varela. Together they created a permissive environment for gangs inside the Tocorón prison and throughout the penitentiary system in Venezuela.

When 11,000 Venezuelan soldiers stormed the Tocorón prison last September, shutting it down, they found swimming pools, casinos, nightclubs, a zoo, and a professional baseball field.<sup>33</sup> The Venezuelan government claimed they arrested 88 TdA members during the raid, and, according to their interior minister, “completely dismantled the so-called Tren de Aragua.”<sup>34</sup> They also said they transferred 1,600 Tocorón inmates to other prison facilities in Venezuela.<sup>35</sup>

According to the Observatory of Prisons—a Venezuelan nongovernmental organization (NGO) set up in 2002 because Venezuela’s government prison data is unreliable—there are at least 3,000 inmates in the Tocorón prison, meaning that at least 1,400 inmates are unaccounted for.<sup>36</sup> Among those unaccounted for was the main TdA leader and *pran* of the Tocorón prison Hector Rusthenford Guerrero Flores, also known as *Nino Guerrero*, whose current whereabouts are unknown. Regional intelligence authorities suspect that some TdA members who escaped the Tocorón prison raid are now in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

Tren de Aragua represents a criminal system that was honed and perfected inside Venezuelan prison walls, and then exported throughout the Western Hemisphere. As the TdA gained notoriety, other Venezuelan criminals began adopting the TdA name as a brand or franchise to increase their influence. For the Maduro regime, the TdA is a perfect proxy and tool of asymmetric warfare to destabilize democratic countries while maintaining a high degree of plausible deniability.



## State Sponsorship from Venezuela's Maduro Regime

In October 2022, the Biden–Harris Administration released the nephews of Venezuela's first lady, Celia Flores, the wife of President Nicolás Maduro, from a federal prison in New York in a controversial prisoner swap for seven Americans jailed in Venezuela, including five CITGO oil executives.<sup>38</sup> Franqui Flores and Efrain Antonio Campo Flores, known as the “narco-nephews,” were arrested in 2015 in Haiti by the Drug Enforcement Administration, later convicted in 2017, for attempting to transport 800 kilos of cocaine into the United States.<sup>39</sup> According to the Office of the Southern District of New York, which prosecuted the case, the text and WhatsApp messages recovered during the investigation revealed a connection between the “narco-nephews” and Tren de Aragua.

In the seized communications, the Flores nephews discussed the murder of a TdA leader, whose dismembered body was shown in graphic photos exchanged in their chats.<sup>40</sup> The conversations suggested that the TdA functions as enforcers or hitmen (*sicarios*) for the interests of the Maduro regime. This tracks with analysis of the criminalized nature of the Venezuelan state, which maintains power and control by blurring the lines between the state and transnational organized crime.<sup>41</sup> The “Pax Mafioso” in Venezuela provides the TdA with political cover to operate with selective impunity in Venezuela, allowing its leaders to focus on expanding its influence in the Western Hemisphere.

**The TdA in Chile.** One of the countries with the heaviest TdA presence is Chile.<sup>42</sup> Beyond being a criminal gang that smuggles and extorts Venezuelan migrant communities, the TdA in Chile built a reputation as cop-killers after repeatedly confronting Chilean police officers on the streets of Santiago.<sup>43</sup> In April 2023, Daniel Palma was a Chilean carabinero conducting a routine vehicle check in Santiago when he was shot dead at point blank range by a TdA member whose 9mm pistol was later discovered to be tied to multiple other homicides.<sup>44</sup> The heightened violence of the TdA has served the Venezuelan government; the TdA is acting as an unofficial enforcement arm to attack targets abroad that are deemed enemies of the Chavista regime. A recently leaked intelligence report produced by U.S. border authorities suggests that the Maduro regime is working with the TdA in a covert operation to “deploy to the United States to conduct operations on selected targets.”<sup>45</sup> The concern is warranted given a high-profile murder of a Venezuelan military officer in Chile earlier this year.

**A Complex Targeted Assassination in Chile.** On February 21, 2024, in Santiago de Chile, four individuals arrived at the apartment of Ronald

Ojeda, a former Venezuelan Army lieutenant who fled his home country due to threats from the Maduro regime. The individuals, who posed as Chilean police officers with tactical gear, forcibly entered Ojeda's apartment in the middle of the night, tied him up, and threw him in the trunk of a car.<sup>46</sup> Ojeda's remains were recovered nine days later in a camp in Maipú, a commune located southeast of Santiago. Two of the suspects in the Ojeda kidnapping and killing are Venezuelan nationals Maickel Villegas Rodriguez and Walter Rodriguez Pérez, who are believed to be TdA members with ties to the Maduro regime. According to the Chilean prosecutor, Walter Rodriguez Pérez worked closely with Tareck El Aissami as part of his security detail when El Aissami was governor of the Aragua state.<sup>47</sup>

The methodical, sophisticated, and targeted nature of the Ojeda assassination in Chile extends beyond known TdA foreign capabilities. The TdA can carry out targeted killings on their own, and they have done so in the past, but acquiring authentic Chilean police equipment, including helmets and bulletproof vests, employing countersurveillance techniques, and using technical countermeasures are well beyond the capabilities of a street gang. Additionally, Walter Rodriguez Pérez worked on El Aissami's security detail in Aragua, making it very likely he was trained by Venezuela's Military Counterintelligence Directorate (DGCIM), known for its brutal repression of the Venezuelan military. These details highly suggest that the targeted assassination of Lieutenant Ronald Ojeda in Chile was a joint DGCIM/TdA operation.<sup>48</sup>

Only one of the five suspects in the Ojeda killing has been captured.<sup>49</sup> Chilean authorities believe that the other suspects escaped to Venezuela. The individual captured, Maickel Villegas Rodriguez, was arrested in Costa Rica in July 2024 after an INTERPOL red notice alerted local officials of his profile.<sup>50</sup> Villegas Rodriguez was sent to a maximum-security prison in Costa Rica awaiting extradition to Chile to stand trial for the murder of Venezuelan Lieutenant Ronald Ojeda. He was caught on a migrant bus traveling from Panama after crossing the Darien Gap, seemingly following the route to the U.S. southern border.

**TdA's Modus Operandi.** Chile is an important case study for studying the TdA's modus operandi and the impact of their presence in intensifying crime and violence. Prior to the TdA's presence, Chile was a relatively safe country with an annual homicide rate hovering between two to three murders per 100,000 inhabitants before 2017. As of 2023, the homicide rate in Chile has almost tripled to 6.3 murders per 100,000 inhabitants—down from 6.7 the year prior.<sup>51</sup> Kidnapping has also risen 135 percent in the past 10 years, with one-quarter of kidnappings involving a foreign perpetrator,



and 75 percent of perpetrators being Venezuelan.<sup>52</sup> Kidnapping-for-ransom in Chile has grown from an annual average of six to eight cases in 2020 to 48 cases in 2023.<sup>53</sup> Sex trafficking, smuggling contraband, extortion, and several other crimes are also on the rise, prompting the Chilean Congress to pass specific legislation to tackle transnational organized crime.

The U.S. can draw important lessons from the Chilean experience combatting the TdA—especially to not underestimate the mega-gang. First detected in 2021, Chilean police started seeing TdA presence after increased violence and sex trafficking in Tarapacá, along the Chile–Bolivia border.<sup>54</sup> Three years earlier, however, in January 2018, one of the *tres papas* (“three bosses”) and founders of the TdA arrived in Chile as a Venezuelan migrant seeking asylum. Larry Amaury Álvarez Nuñez, also known as Larry Changa, was spotted by other Venezuelan migrants in Santiago running a restaurant about four blocks from *La Moneda*, the presidential palace.<sup>55</sup> Larry Changa fled Chile in 2022 and was arrested in Colombia in July 2024.

## What Are Tren de Aragua’s Goals in America?

The goal of the TdA, whether in Chile or the United States, is to establish territorial control to impose a criminal economy that connects illicit networks from urban and suburban areas to penitentiaries in or near those neighborhoods. The TdA does this by increasing crime and violence to insert its members in a territory, then using intimidation to capture political and business elites. In Venezuela, the TdA created NGOs in towns near the main prisons they controlled as mechanisms to accomplish this—allowing the TdA to embed itself in the community, corrupt local elites, and establish a hybrid criminal governance model, merging illicit economies with social welfare programs.

The criminal governance model in Venezuela is called “peace zones.” A Maduro-regime initiative launched in 2013 to “reduce crime and violence,” these peace zones serve as safe havens for organized crime.<sup>56</sup> In theory, the Venezuelan state retreats from the “peace zone” so that local gangs manage security and maintain order in that neighborhood—the same flawed logic used in the *pranato* system of the Venezuelan prisons.

**Tren de Aragua’s NGOs.** For the TdA, the main “peace zone” in Venezuela is San Vicente, a neighborhood in Maracay the capital of the Aragua state. It rests no more than 20 miles from the Tocarón prison where the TdA was based. In 2017, the *Fundación Somos El Barrio JK* (“We Are the Neighborhood Foundation”) was officially registered as a charitable organization in Venezuela, although some experts believe its operations date

back to 2015.<sup>57</sup> The NGO was established to provide a front for the TdA to further its political and social influence in the San Vicente neighborhood, positioning itself as both a protector and an authority. The role of the NGO is not to manage illicit activities but rather to legitimize those activities and integrate the TdA into the social fabric of the communities it sets out to control—while using intensified crime and violence to intimidate the community and impose an alternative governance model.

In Aurora, Colorado, the preconditions for this hybrid criminal governance model are starting to be set. After repeated denials by the city’s politicians and some officials, the owner of the apartment complexes that reportedly were taken over by the TdA spoke out saying they were attacked, extorted, and beaten by the Venezuelan gang members.<sup>58</sup> This behavior matches TdA intimidation tactics used in South America to take over a territory in what many Venezuelans have come to know as *invasiones*, a criminal practice of confiscating private property and land through squatting and/or violent assaults.<sup>59</sup>

U.S. local law enforcement and intelligence authorities should not underestimate the TdA and must understand that once an uptick in crime and violence in a local neighborhood is detected and attributed to Venezuelan migrants, the presence of the TdA is probably already established. Crime and violence are just a first step for the TdA to begin moving toward its overarching goal, in America or elsewhere, to install the hybrid criminal governance model that enabled its rapid rise to the top ranks of transnational organized crime.

**Targeted Assassinations.** This concern is heightened for legal Venezuelan migrants in the U.S. who fled persecution by the Maduro regime. The stronger the TdA grows, the riskier it is for Venezuelan and other migrant communities in America. Targeted assassinations like that of Lieutenant Ronald Ojeda in Chile can become a real risk for Venezuelan and other migrants in America that are deemed enemies of the Maduro regime and its allies. The TdA can also be outsourced for other complex targeting and assassination operations against dissidents and targets of other totalitarian regimes, namely Cuba and Iran, both of which have close ties to the Venezuelan government.

In the United States, the TdA has a documented presence in no fewer than 20 states: Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, New Jersey, Nevada, North Carolina, Tennessee, Utah, Virginia, and Wisconsin. Florida, Illinois, New York, and Texas, in particular, have seen a significant TdA presence that warrants additional scrutiny.

**Florida.** The sunshine state is home to the largest contingent of Venezuelan migrants, making it a natural target for the TdA, particularly in South Florida. Among an array of TdA-related crimes earlier this year, the murder of a retired Venezuelan police officer in January 2024 in Doral alerted local authorities as to how TdA members can lure, abduct, and murder specific individuals working through a network of local prostitution.<sup>60</sup> Specific law enforcement efforts in Broward County and Miami-Dade County have started targeting TdA activity, particularly unconfirmed reports that the TdA is financing NGOs in South Florida.<sup>61</sup>

**Illinois.** The Cook County Sheriff's Office was one of the first local police stations in Illinois to confirm the presence of the TdA in its jurisdiction in October 2023. Garry McCarthy, police chief for suburban Willow Spring and former superintendent for Chicago, made a chilling prediction during an interview with Telemundo Chicago: “[T]he established gangs [in Chicago] and this new gang [the TdA] are probably going to go to war at some point, and that is when violence will erupt.”<sup>62</sup> Signs that this impending turf war on the south side of Chicago started to surface in September when several ex-gangbangers claimed that the TdA is taking over their territory and that this will prompt a war of “blacks against migrants,” as expressed by a former enforcer for the Gangster Disciples, a traditional street gang in Chicago.<sup>63</sup>

**New York.** The rise of retail theft prompted the New York City Police Department (NYPD) to detect TdA presence in 2023, which included theft of cell phones and luxury watches through drive-by assaults on motorcycles and scooters.<sup>64</sup> This crime spree includes at least 517 arrests in New York City this year and 41 members of the TdA registered in the NYPD's gang database,<sup>65</sup> but authorities believe the presence to be much larger, particularly after gun-toting squatters were suspected to be part of the TdA.<sup>66</sup> The NYPD suggests that the TdA is spreading throughout the city through WhatsApp messaging groups tied to migrant shelters and food (and other) delivery services.<sup>67</sup>

**Texas.** Since 2021, state and federal authorities in Texas have documented TdA involvement in various criminal activities, namely in human smuggling and drug trafficking. Governor Greg Abbot (R) revealed that more than 3,000 undocumented Venezuelan immigrants have been arrested in Texas for crimes linked to the TdA, while Texas Department of Public Safety (DPS) Director Steve McCraw identified El Paso as “ground zero” for TdA operations, citing the shutdown of a 121-year-old Gateway Hotel as an example of the Venezuelan mega-gang's influence.<sup>68</sup> Meanwhile, DPS has arrested other TdA members in San Antonio, Dallas, and Houston. In October, the San Antonio Police Department arrested more than a dozen TdA members in a

raid of several apartment complexes as part of a recently launched “Operation Aurora” named after the incident in Colorado earlier in the year.<sup>69</sup>

The TdA is unique among criminal organizations because it has an ideology associated with it. It is part of the recent growth of prison-based gangs throughout Latin America, such as the *Primeiro Comando da Capital* from Brazil, but because it is tied to the Venezuelan government, the TdA has some socialist underpinnings. This explains why assaults on apartment complexes and squatting in abandoned buildings are particularly attractive for TdA members: It represents their “invasion” ideology of capturing private property to impose social control.

## Recommendations

After pressure from the U.S. Congress, the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned Tren de Aragua as a transnational criminal organization<sup>70</sup> in July, while the State Department announced a \$12 million reward for information leading to the arrest and/or conviction of three TdA leaders.<sup>71</sup> These policies are a good start, but resources need to be directed toward state-level law enforcement, such as the Texas DPS, which recently raised the TdA to a Tier-1 gang status and launched a strike team to identify and arrest TdA members,<sup>72</sup> then established a joint task force in which state and federal authorities partner with South American law enforcement agencies who have the most experience in dealing with the TdA.<sup>73</sup> Fundamentally, however, any strategy for dismantling the TdA will need to begin with ending the failed open border policies of the Biden-Harris Administration.

The actions taken in Texas are a good start to dismantle the TdA within American cities. Deporting Venezuelan migrants arrested for violent crimes is a priority and a challenge, given the Maduro regime does not accept deportation flights. However, it must be understood that keeping specific TdA leaders in U.S. prisons runs a high risk of these leaders applying the know-how of creating a hybrid criminal governance model, learned in Venezuela’s prisons, to the U.S. penitentiary system, making the TdA stronger in America. Intelligence gathering in U.S. correctional facilities must also become a priority, and prison intelligence systems need to be enhanced and integrated so that information is shared across several states that have TdA presence.

The incoming Trump Administration will make tackling transnational organized crime and immigration security a top priority. During the campaign, President Trump announced Operation Aurora, an initiative to take

the Texas-led law enforcement effort to the federal level. Complementing state-led efforts with a more robust federal strategy that involves foreign partners and a whole-of-government approach would be effective at dismantling the TdA structure from within the U.S. while stopping additional TdA members, associates, and facilitators from arriving in the United States.

It is believed that the main TdA leaders have not yet arrived in America, meaning time is of the essence to take preventive measures. The following specific policy recommendations are intended to stop the increase of TdA members and facilitators arriving in the United States and helping partner nations in Latin America dismantle the TdA within their countries to eradicate this violent Venezuelan TCO from the Western Hemisphere.

**The Department of State should establish a Counter-Transnational Organized Crime (CTOC) cooperation agreement with Mercosur,** a multilateral trade bloc that has created a Tren de Aragua Task Force with some South American member states. The new task force, established by Uruguay, plans to present a comprehensive report on the TdA to include recommended countermeasures at the next Mercosur annual meeting. U.S.–Mercosur cooperation on the TdA should focus on identifying diplomatic agreements with third-country partners that could serve as source destinations for TdA members and facilitators that are deported from the United States. A parallel effort should be started by the State Department with the Department Against Transnational Organized Crime at the Organization of American States (OAS).

- **The Department of Defense should create a Combined Joint Interagency Task Force focused on transnational criminal organizations that are threatening American sovereignty—**encompassing Tren de Aragua as a top priority—and working in tandem with partner nations’ military and law enforcement entities throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. U.S. Special Operations Forces created a similar joint task force called Operation Inherent Resolve that trained, advised, and assisted local partners in the Middle East to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.<sup>74</sup> A similar effort managed out of Special Operations Command–South should be developed to defeat the TdA in the SOUTHCOM Area of Operation.
- **The Department of Justice should designate Tren de Aragua as a top priority for its Organized Crime Drug Enforcement Task Forces (OCDETF) to bring together a broad coalition** of federal, state, and local prosecutors, law enforcement agencies, and

subject-matter experts and partner them with Latin American law enforcement entities that are working on TdA cases. The OCDETF took a similar action on MS-13 in 2017 that resulted in several subsequent arrests and convictions, offering a severe blow to the Salvadoran gang's activities and leadership in the United States.

- **The Department of Homeland Security should designate Venezuela as a country of special interest** to slow the vetting process of Venezuelan migrants and enhance U.S. and partner nation capabilities at identifying TdA members. Normally, the Special Interest Alien (SIA) designator is applied to migrants that come from a country with a high density of terrorist organizations operating on its territory; however, given the lack of cooperation from the Venezuelan government and the ties between the government and the TdA, placing the SIA designator on Venezuelan migrants is warranted and needed to protect the migrants and Americans from this transnational gang.
- **The White House should direct the U.S. Council on Transnational Organized Crime<sup>75</sup> to coordinate the results of the recommendations listed to combat Tren de Aragua** into a comprehensive report to be presented to the President no more than 120 days after implementation. Prior to this, the Director of National Intelligence should assess the intelligence community's posture and capabilities regarding intelligence collection on the TdA to steer U.S. intelligence efforts.

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## Endnotes

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