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United States Institute of Peace

How to Break Gangs' Grip on Haiti

KEY TAKEAWAYS

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- For Haiti to move beyond its crises, its gang problem must be addressed first.
- The U.S. should lead a coordinated regional effort to choke off the resources sustaining gang power.

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Since the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in 2021, Haiti has spiraled into chaos, with gangs tightening their grip on nearly every aspect of daily life. Once a fragile but functioning state, the country now finds its capital, Port-au-Prince, [almost entirely controlled](#) by gangs — and their influence is spreading. A new [U.N. report](#) warns that the situation is more dire than ever, as armed groups extend their control into new territories, displacing communities and deepening the country's humanitarian crisis. As of January over one million people are [displaced](#), the majority of them children, major roads are impassable, and “5.4 million Haitians — nearly half the population — [do not have enough to eat](#).”



Members of the G9 gang protest over the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, July 26, 2021. (Victor Moriyama/The New York Times)

Meanwhile, Haiti's police force is underfunded and overwhelmed, with limited ability to enforce the law, leaving citizens with nowhere to turn. With little to no faith in the police or judiciary, Haitians have turned to a desperate response. Under the banner of the [Bwa Kale movement](#), citizens have resorted to vigilantism, targeting and executing suspected gang members to reclaim some measure of security.

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The unchecked rise of criminal networks in Haiti is not an isolated crisis — it poses a growing threat to the broader region. Indeed, these gangs are evolving from localized criminal groups to transnational criminal organizations. The same smuggling routes that bring weapons into Haiti facilitate the flow of drugs and illicit goods to the United States and the Caribbean. Metastasizing gang power spills over in the forms of human and arms trafficking and financial crimes that undermine stability across the hemisphere. Left unaddressed, Haiti's gang crisis risks fueling further migration surges, straining regional governments and deepening security challenges for the U.S. and its partners. A proactive strategy is necessary to stabilize Haiti, contain the spread of organized crime and maintain regional security.

While the international response to date has rightly focused on reinforcing Haitian sovereignty — supporting the country’s institutions and policymakers in reclaiming control — more can be done immediately to weaken the gangs that have supplanted the state in western Haiti. The United States, Canada, the European Union and the United Nations have imposed sanctions, but these efforts remain too limited. Sanctions should be expanded alongside stronger action to disrupt illicit financial flows, cut off weapons supplies and pursue extraditions and legal measures against key actors.

These are actions that Haiti’s international allies can take now without waiting for slow-moving diplomatic processes. A more aggressive approach that chokes off the resources sustaining gang power would alleviate immediate suffering and create the conditions necessary for Haiti to rebuild its institutions. The long-term recovery of the Haitian state depends on restoring its authority, but first, the grip of organized crime must be broken.

A Disorganized Puzzle of Sanction Regimes

International actors have recognized the link between violent criminal gangs and private interests as one of the most important causes of the endemic fragility of Haitian institutions. Several [reports](#) and studies have identified how some of Haiti’s political and economic elites have created and financed gangs in order to mobilize — or coerce — in times of political convenience, such as elections or in protests against political rivals. In exchange, gangs receive financial resources and protection from law enforcement.

The U.N. Security Council [established a sanctions regime](#) for Haiti in October 2022, imposing a travel ban, asset freeze and targeted arms embargo against individuals “[e]ngaging in, directly or indirectly, or supporting criminal activities and violence involving armed groups and criminal networks.” Since then, other countries such as the United States, Canada, the Dominican Republic and others like the European Union have imposed their own sets of bilateral sanctions. Today, around 45 Haitian nationals have been sanctioned by one or more countries or international organizations. This includes prominent figures such as former president Michel Martelly; a number of former Haitian congresspeople such as Prophane Victor, Joseph Lambert and Youri Latortue; and renowned businessmen Gilbert Bizio, Reynold Deeb and Sherif Abdallah.

Still, the international sanctions regime on Haiti is a disorganized and uncoordinated set of puzzle pieces that sometimes overlap while leaving huge gaps in other places. For instance, despite a series of damning reports by the U.N. Panel of Experts involving a number of prominent Haitian politicians and businesspeople, the Security Council has only sanctioned seven individuals, most of them renowned gang members such as Jimmy “Barbecue” Cherizier and Vitel’Homme Innocent. Their criminal enterprises have mostly been housed in the black markets and are thus largely unaffected by the sanctions.

Other prominent Haitians have been sanctioned by Canada — which has sanctioned 15 individuals — but not by the U.S. or the European Union, illustrating how the lack of coordination allows criminal actors to continue to operate relatively unimpeded within Haiti by exploiting the gap between these parallel sanction frameworks. Russia and China have not imposed any bilateral sanctions and further blocked the Security Council from acting on the recommendations of the U.N. Panel of Experts and sanctions committee.

Before expanding the reach of the current regime of sanctions, which could further damage Haiti’s struggling economy, international partners should work toward harmonizing their targeted sanctions policies in order to create a united front against these nefarious individuals. Partners should also work with the diaspora and Haitian leaders to inform the public on these efforts, increase awareness of their expected effect and expose sanctioned individuals and their criminal networks.

Beyond sanctions, U.S. and international partners have a different set of more direct instruments to effectively disrupt Haitian gangs. On one hand, the United States’ network of extradition agreements with most regional countries is a mechanism for accountability in the American justice system for Haitian elites guilty of criminal offenses and can have a positive effect on the rule of law in Haiti. On the other hand, stronger security cooperation with neighboring CARICOM members and key countries such as Colombia and Mexico can disrupt weapons and drug trafficking routes that have fueled the rise of gang violence in Haiti.

Fragmented Enforcement and the Gaps Criminal Networks Exploit

Haiti’s security crisis is sustained by the unchecked flow of arms, drugs and human trafficking, facilitated by smuggling networks that stretch across the Caribbean. Criminal [groups exploit](#) weak coastal defenses, porous borders and gaps in enforcement to transport contraband that fuels gang violence and corruption. These networks do not operate in isolation — their reach extends beyond Haiti, contributing to broader regional instability. The U.S. and its allies should take more decisive action to disrupt these supply chains and hold the actors behind them accountable.

Disrupting the networks sustaining Haiti’s gangs requires a coherent, interagency task force that integrates existing U.S. enforcement tools. Efforts to track weapons traffickers, interdict shipments at sea and prosecute key actors remain fragmented across multiple agencies, limiting their effectiveness. A dedicated task force should centralize these efforts, coordinating between U.S. law enforcement agencies, U.S.-led regional security groupings like the U.S. Joint Interagency Task Force-South (JIATF-S) and the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative (CBSI), and the U.N. [Multinational Security Support](#) (MSS) mission. This structure would allow for intelligence-sharing across domains, linking efforts to target arms traffickers on U.S. soil, interdict shipments at sea and dismantle smuggling networks in Haiti.

A significant number of firearms fueling Haiti’s gang violence originate from the United States, with many trafficked through Florida’s ports. A GAO [report](#) found that 73% of traced firearms recovered in the Caribbean between 2018 and 2022 came from the U.S., underscoring how gaps in export oversight allow legally purchased weapons to reach criminal networks. Law enforcement should ensure traffickers cannot exploit the U.S. system with impunity, prioritizing efforts to track, intercept and prosecute those enabling the flow of illegal arms.

JIATF-S plays a key role in counter-narcotics operations in the Caribbean but has not been equipped to focus on arms interdiction. As Canadian naval officer Patrice Deschenes has [argued](#), expanding its mandate to include weapons trafficking would allow for a more comprehensive approach to cutting off the supply chains sustaining Haiti’s gangs. Additional naval and aerial surveillance capacity should be allocated to interdict illicit shipments, with stronger intelligence-sharing between JIATF-S and regional partners.

The CBSI should also be leveraged to facilitate intelligence-sharing between the U.S. and key regional actors, particularly the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas and Jamaica. Integrating MSS operations with interdiction efforts at sea would close gaps between law enforcement and military coordination, ensuring that information about smuggling networks is acted upon in real time.

The MSS mission has shown that international partners are willing to assist but need clarity on their role, the resources required, and how their contributions will provide a net benefit to Haiti and the region. To date, that has been hampered in large part due to [extreme dysfunction](#) in coordination between Haitian and international security stakeholders. A task force that brings together U.S. interdiction and prosecution efforts with broader international coordination would provide the structure needed to align resources, intelligence and enforcement strategies.

This framework would attract additional support, ensuring that naval, intelligence and financial assets are deployed effectively to disrupt trafficking networks and hold key actors accountable. Once established, this task force could then be linked to the MSS, closing critical gaps between enforcement operations and on-the-

ground security efforts in Haiti. Strengthening coordination in this way would improve the effectiveness of MSS operations and Haiti's police, creating the conditions necessary to weaken gang control and restore security.

A more coherent approach to interdiction is long overdue and the infrastructure to act already exists. What's needed is a unified effort to use it effectively.

Conclusion

Haiti's collapse is not inevitable. The resources to disrupt the criminal networks sustaining the country's instability already exist, but enforcement remains disjointed, slow-moving and often reactive. While sanctions have been imposed and international partners have taken steps to provide security assistance, these efforts are too fragmented to dismantle the infrastructure that enables gang rule. The U.S. and its allies should move beyond piecemeal interventions and commit to a sustained strategy that targets the financial, logistical and territorial control of these criminal groups.

A coordinated task force linking U.S. law enforcement, maritime interdiction and international security efforts would create the kind of pressure needed to disrupt arms and drug trafficking while holding key actors accountable. The challenge is not a lack of tools but a failure to use them effectively. Without a more aggressive approach, gangs will continue to tighten their grip, making any effort to restore Haiti's governance an increasingly distant prospect.

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PHOTO: Members of the G9 gang protest over the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse, in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, July 26, 2021. (Victor Moriyama/The New York Times)

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s).