

Fighting crime or fueling xenophobia? Trump's crackdown on the Tren de Aragua

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In its second term, the Trump administration has intensified its offensive against the Tren de Aragua (TdA), a criminal megagang designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) on February 20, 2025. The move is justified by the group's involvement in crimes such as drug trafficking, human smuggling, extortion, and its connections to Nicolás Maduro's regime and the Cartel of the Suns. Based on these links, the administration has implemented financial sanctions, mass arrests, and deportations. But is this an effective security policy, or does it risk criminalizing the Venezuelan diaspora?

The Tren de Aragua: A real threat

There is no denying the danger posed by the TdA. Its international expansion and collaboration with criminal and terrorist networks make it a hemispheric security risk. Combating it is a necessity, yet the White House's approach appears more focused on sending a political message to Miraflores than on effectively dismantling the organization.

The implications of terrorist designation

Labeling the TdA as an FTO grants the U.S. new legal tools to combat the group, including:

- Sanctions and asset freezes for members and financial collaborators.
- Facilitating arrests and deportations of individuals linked to the group.
- Stricter legal proceedings, making support for the organization punishable by up to 20 years in prison.

The U.S. government has activated intelligence mechanisms to identify alleged members of the Tren de Aragua, analyzing immigration records, criminal backgrounds, distinctive tattoos, and cooperating with security agencies in Colombia, Peru, and Chile.

Mass deportations and the alien enemies act

On March 15, 2025, the Trump administration invoked the Alien Enemies Act, a law allowing the expulsion of foreign nationals without trial if deemed a threat to national security. Since then, mass deportations of Venezuelan migrants have been carried out on the premise of their

alleged ties to the Tren de Aragua. However, this policy has sparked concerns and raised critical issues:

1. Impunity for real criminals – Given the lack of cooperation from the Maduro regime, which harbors these criminals, top leaders of the organization may evade justice while migrants with no criminal records are deported.
2. Stigmatization and xenophobia – The perception that “every deported Venezuelan is a criminal” hampers the integration of legitimate refugees.
3. Potential human rights violations – Deportees may face arbitrary detention, violence, or persecution in their home country without due process protections.

The political calculus and its consequences

More than a national security strategy, this policy appears designed to reinforce Trump’s image as a hardline leader on immigration. However, the consequences could be counterproductive:

- Displacement of the problem – Instead of eradicating the organization, mass deportations may scatter its operations to new jurisdictions.
- Legitimization of the Maduro regime – By condemning xenophobia and the criminalization of Venezuelan migrants, the regime may present itself as a human rights defender, distracting from its own abuses—including the ongoing use of state terrorism to instill fear and maintain control.
- Domestic security risks – Without a clear dismantling strategy, operational cells could remain active within the U.S., creating long-term threats.

Effective alternatives

To dismantle the TdA without resorting to punitive populism, the U.S. should:

1. Arrest and prosecute key leaders and members instead of conducting indiscriminate deportations.
2. Ensure transparency and protection – Share concrete evidence with allied governments about deported individuals to prevent abuses, while safeguarding their identities and protecting their families from potential retaliation.
3. Distinguish between criminals and refugees, avoiding rhetoric that fuels xenophobia.
4. Strengthen cooperation with Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, and Chile to dismantle the network internationally.
5. Implement targeted sanctions against the Maduro regime instead of allowing it to capitalize on anti-immigrant narratives.

Conclusion

The fight against the Tren de Aragua must not turn into an indiscriminate crackdown on Venezuelan migrants. U.S. security demands strategies rooted in intelligence, cooperation, and precise action against actual terrorist actors. The Trump administration still has time to adjust its course before this policy turns into a misstep with serious political and humanitarian repercussions.