Haiti on the edge of security: is the violence in the country a narco-terrorism phenomenon?

LENIRA OLIVEIRA

Violence in Haiti can be explained against the backdrop of a state that has been ill-prepared to withstand the lethal combination of growing social pressure from a marginalized population and the weakening of state structures due to a complex pattern of globalization that propped up non-state armed parties and led to the atomization and/or privatization of violence (Feldmanm, 2019, p. 22).

The Haiti internal security situation has deteriorated in the last few years. At least since 2021, with the assassination of former President Jovenel Moïse, the violence has spread and violent gangs have effectively seized control of large parts of the country, contributing to worsening the humanitarian crisis (UNODC, 2023, p. 3).

In this context, the situation in Haiti became even worse at the beginning of 2024, when the Haitian Prime Minister, Ariel Henry, was unable to return to Haiti after paramilitary groups attacked a prison and set more than 4,000 inmates free, as well as almost took control of the international airport in Port-au-Prince (León, 2024). These events raised a lot of public apprehension about the possibility of these Haitian gangs taking power in the country.

In this analysis it will be discussed if the urban violence in Haiti, caused mainly by criminal groups, such as gangs, can be understood as a phenomenon linked to the concept of narco-terrorism, and also what is the best way to deal with the security problem the country is currently facing.

What is narco-terrorism?

The term narco-terrorism was used for the first time in 1983 by a former president of Peru, Fernando Belaúnde, to describe the attacks against the country's anti-narcotics police (Gomis, 2015, p. 2). Since the early 1990s, however, the

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definition of narco-terrorism has expanded, and it is used nowadays to refer to multiple situations.

The term can be used to describe the violence perpetrated by drug traffickers to protect and advance their economic interests, and the resort to drug trafficking and terrorist tactics by state actors. It may also refer to the use of drug trafficking, or directly and indirectly related activities, by terrorist organizations to fund their operations, and cooperation between drug traffickers and terrorist organizations for mutual gains (Ibid., p. 3). This concept is also employed to define the merger of drug trafficking organizations and terrorist organizations to carry out both drug trafficking and terrorist activities.

The concept of narco-terrorism was used broadly by analysts and politicians who tried to establish a connection between terrorist and criminal organizations (Schmid, 2005, p. 4). These two categories have some differences and similarities. Both of them operate secretly and tend to use similar tactics, such as kidnappings, assassination, and extortion, for example (Ibid., p. 5-6). On the other hand, terrorist groups are ideologically or politically oriented and also compete with governments for legitimacy. At the same time, criminal organizations do not share the same objective, being more profit-oriented (Ibid., p. 5-6). Although both of them usually victimize civilians, terrorist acts tend to be less discriminate than the violence used by organized crime groups (Ibid., p. 6).

Considering this discussion, it is possible even to question the use of this concept to describe a relationship between these two categories and, therefore, to define certain groups. Some critics of this term emphasize that its use can also be a way of driving attention away from the real problems, which are normally more structural in society and can even be a result of government corruption (Gomis, 2015, p. 15).

Exploring the origins of violence in Haiti

In Haiti's history, there have been moments of acute violence that can be traced back at least to the long reign of the Duvaliérs (1957-1986), who began the process of arming the population and forming militias (Feldmann, 2019, p.

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22). But the most recent wave of extreme violence in the country is connected to President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's government (2001-2004) that started distributing weapons to youth groups (known as bazes or bases) in exchange for their support (Becker, 2011, p. 137). These weapons were later used by them to commit crimes and dominate neighborhoods, especially after Aristide's departure. At this point, these gangs were fully involved in criminal activity, and they rapidly established control over parts of Port-au-Prince and other cities such as Cap Haïtien, Gonaïves, and Jacmel (Ibid., p. 137).

Even the United Nations' efforts, with the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH), in rebuilding the country policy force using UN forces to patrol the streets, were not able to prevent the commitment of violent crimes and kidnappings in urban zones (Ibid., p. 137-138). One of the main reasons for this problem was, and still is, that the Haitian state was very fragile – but then these criminal gangs were not so strong.

The country's gangs are estimated between 150 and 200 groups, many of which are deeply connected in complex relations of networks with the political and economic elites of Haiti (UNODC, 2023, p. 4). Most of these gangs serve those seeking to advance a political agenda, harm an economic rival, or ensure the protection of an important warehouse or other strategic location (International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 7). Normally, members of the armed groups or gangs are overwhelmingly young men from the poorest sectors of big city areas with few or no social services at all, poorly equipped schools, no clean water, and scarce public policies for health care (Ibid., p. 7).

In addition, several gangs and gang coalitions present and active in Haiti, notably the G9, G-Pep, 400 Mawozo, Baz Galil, Vilaj de Dye, Vitelhomme, and Ti Mkak are usually engaged in predatory behavior in communities under their control contributing to rising levels of extortion, sexual violence, kidnapping and fatal violence (UNODC, 2023, p. 5). These gangs have also employed organized violence to subdue the population and expand their territorial control over the country (UNODC, 2023, p. 30).

The scenario in Haiti is too complex to just jump into the assumption that the urban violence committed by gangs is a clear example of narco-terrorism. These gangs normally provide service for influential figures, including members of the Haitian government, so they do not operate secretly and appear to act in favor of their interests in a corrupt

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environment. For this reason, it is more useful to understand the sources of this violence and how it impacts a society already so fragile due to a combination of crises and natural disasters.

The impacts of urban violence on Haiti's humanitarian crisis and society

Although the urban violence in Haiti is not a recent problem, it is possible to see it getting worse in the last few years alongside the country's political crisis. In July 2021, President Jovenel Moïse was assassinated, but even before this event, armed gangs were already operating throughout the country and controlling over half the capital Port-au-Prince International Crisis Group, 2021, p. 2). In this context, the shortages of basic goods increased, and more than half the Haitian population subsisted on less than US$2 per day. Moreover, at least 15,000 people had been internally displaced, and many found themselves in overcrowded community centers that humanitarian agencies found hard to reach due to the control of criminal groups. Rape and sexual violence were also common in these centers (Ibid., p. 2).

Jimmy Chérizier, the most notorious gang leader in Haiti, also known as "Barbecue", heads the powerful G9, an alliance of several gangs in the capital. The U.S. Treasury Department and the UN have tied Chérizier and his group to several gross human rights violations, including the La Saline massacre in 2018, when at least 71 people were killed (Ibid., p. 8). In addition, Chérizier has made statements seeking to stoke racial and ethnic tensions between Haiti's Black majority and a minority population that traces its origins to the Middle East.

The Haitian population and society are held hostage by the gang's actions, being too afraid to leave their houses and live their daily lives normally (Ibid., p. 9). Gangs also influence negatively the Haitian economy as they threaten critical structures responsible for the supply of gasoline and other petroleum-based products (Ibid., 2021, p. 9-10) while targeting also ports, highways, critical infrastructure (including access to seaports, fuel terminals, airports, and key roads) and local businesses (UNODC, 2023, p. 4). All

these actions have an important role in weakening the country's economy, which is already facing big challenges caused by political instability and natural disasters.

The increase in violence is just one of the problems faced by Haitian society that contributes to deeper social and economic gaps. This phenomenon has broad consequences such as the disruption of education, local economies, and social cohesion, so it is significant to find ways to better address these groups and the problems caused by them.

Strategies for combating the violence in Haitian society

Firstly, it is indispensable to state that combating violence in Haitian society should not consider the security strategies usually employed in narco-terrorism situations, as they normally lead to misguided policies that do not respond appropriately to structural problems (Gomis, 2015). As previously stated, this term drives attention away from the important issues, such as corruption and other kinds of organized crime actions in a society; so just combating gang violence will not solve the problem's roots. For this reason, strategies for combating the violence in Haitian society must consider this situation's roots in a broad political and economic context.

The power vacuum created by the lack of elections has strengthened the gangs' actions, which increasingly emerged and asserted themselves in the country (León, 2024). Therefore, a crucial step to resolving this violence issue is to find a way to restore the state institutions and put an end to the political crisis, otherwise, gangs will continue to strengthen and professionalize (Conflict Watchlist..., 2024). It is also essential to combat the corruption in Haiti, as drug and arms smuggling have been historically facilitated by some government agents.

In addition, as a contingent of international police, led by Kenya, is planned to be sent to stabilize and restore peace in the country (Contreras et al., 2024), it is relevant to consider that only combating the gangs with more violence and repression is not going to solve the problem. So, it is important to fight corruption while building structures of good governance that need to be sustainable over time.

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An additional step to stabilize the country and (re)build a sense of security, is to control firearms availability and drug overflow, as they are used by gangs to commit crimes and to collect illicit revenue (UNODC, 2023, p. 30). This must be an international and regional effort with straight cooperation with UN organizations, such as the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), and the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) that can help Haiti overcome its security problems based on the experiences and strategies of countries in the region (Ibid., p. 32) – a critical perspective on CARICOM's action about Haiti is further explored in this issue in the analysis by Santos (2024).

Closing remarks

The current situation in Haiti shows an increase in urban violence against the population, already weakened by a series of political and economic crises combined with natural disasters in the last years. In this context, gang violence contributes to an ongoing sense of insecurity combined with a glimmer of hope for the future of the people living in the country.

Considering this scenario, it is possible to say that linking the concept of narco-terrorism with Haitian urban violence is not the best way of perceiving the violence concern in the country. Making this connection just simplifies the situation and may drive away the attention of the state personnel involved with these groups, which helps them to pursue their illicit activities that accentuate the insecurity perception in Haiti's society.

It is imperative to take action to build a sustainable government in Haiti that works for the benefit of Haitian society. Considering the violence in the country as an example of narco-terrorism does not seem like a good way to handle the problem, doing this could make the combat of the violence less effective and more harmful for the people. Then, it is necessary for a multi-dimensional response to this problem that considers Haiti in the long-term, which focuses on (re)building the institutions instead of just militarizing the country.

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