



**GLOBAL
INITIATIVE**
AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL
ORGANIZED CRIME

BROKERS AND PATRONS

UNSTITCHING GANGS FROM
HAITI'S POLITICAL FABRIC

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SUMMARY

In 2025, gangs continued to expand their influence in Haiti, both through territorial control and by consolidating their role as political brokers. This latter dimension remains largely absent from national and international crisis response strategies. By failing to account for the political economy of violence, particularly the importance of addressing politico-criminal relationships, current policies risk perpetuating rather than loosening the links between armed groups and the political system, especially if the 2026 elections proceed without a more comprehensive response adapted to the complexity of the crisis.

Haiti's gangs are neither insurgents nor revolutionaries; they are embedded within circuits of political and economic power. The crisis is sustained by illicit financial flows, arms and drug trafficking, and patronage networks that protect and instrumentalize armed groups. Arrests and targeted operations may weaken certain groups, but as long as the structures that sustain criminal governance remain intact, the system will reconstitute itself. Haiti requires a strategy to combat organized crime that integrates public security, justice and community reconstruction. Any approach focused exclusively on force will fail if it does not address the political and economic foundations that allow violence to persist.

Key points

- In Haiti, gang leaders function as criminal intermediaries deeply embedded in the country's political and economic systems. These criminal groups act as brokers, regulating territories, economic activity and political influence. They derive their authority not only from violence, but also from their role as mediators between the state, resources and the communities they control. Despite notable ruptures, they represent a continuation of long-standing politico-criminal relations in Haiti.
- National and international strategies have failed to account for this violent political intermediation. These strategies are often based on the assumption that gangs operate in isolation. This denial results in strategic paralysis, with policies failing to match the operational environment. In practice, all sectors – political, economic and humanitarian – interact with armed actors through informal arrangements.
- The crisis in Haiti is driven by a complex political economy of violence, not just territorial confrontation. Gangs consolidate their power through extortion systems, participation in the illicit trafficking of firearms, drugs and protected species, and their capacity to impose systems of criminal

governance. In 2025, the expansion of Port-au-Prince gangs into provincial areas through franchised criminal cells marked a shift towards network-based criminal structures rather than purely hyper-territorial gangs.

- The new phase of political transition that began with the end of the Transitional Presidential Council (TPC)'s mandate on 7 February 2026 risks becoming a battleground for violent confrontation among competing political actors, particularly if a fragile electoral timetable is rushed forward. Without measures to dismantle the networks intertwining political competition and criminal governance, electoral processes risk reinforcing rather than transforming the system they are intended to renew.
- A long-term crisis resolution strategy must integrate justice, economic policy, security and political reform. The central question is not whether to negotiate with criminal groups, but how to articulate justice, demobilization and reintegration in a way that prevents the reproduction of violence.
- To be effective, the Gang Suppression Force (GSF) must be paired with judicial tools capable of targeting gang support networks, particularly financial ones, and not only armed actors. This includes pursuing criminal leaders as well as their political and financial sponsors. Only by addressing the broader ecosystem of collusion can Haiti move away from a political order that is shaped by entrenched politico-criminal relationships.

Recommendations

Strategic reframing

- Recognize and confront the system of politico-criminal relationships as a structural feature of the crisis. National and international strategies must acknowledge that Haitian criminal groups act as intermediaries embedded within the political and economic order. Approaches that treat gangs as insurgent actors, for example, should be revised accordingly and replaced with analytical frameworks centred on the political economy of criminal violence.

Disrupt the political economy of violence

- Prioritize dismantling financial and economic facilitation networks. Strategies should focus on the extortion systems, trafficking revenues and money laundering circuits that sustain armed groups. This includes carrying out financial investigations and asset recovery, strengthening customs controls and following appropriate judicial procedures.
- Adopt a network-disruption approach. The expansion of franchised criminal cells in provincial areas requires moving beyond operations limited to specific territories and towards strategies that target command structures, logistical nodes and interregional criminal alliances.
- Integrate anti-corruption measures into security responses. Efforts to counter organized crime must explicitly address political patronage and the corrupt structures that protect or instrumentalize armed groups, in order to prevent cycles of impunity and obstruction of justice.

Justice, accountability and sequencing of stabilization measures

- Discussions on disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) and community violence reduction (CVR) have recently resurfaced in policy debates on Haiti. However, these discussions remain characterized by conceptual ambiguity and limited institutional memory. No consolidated review has been conducted of initiatives implemented in Haiti over the past two decades under DDR, CVR, pacification, mediation or reintegration frameworks. Without conceptual clarity and

empirical grounding, calls for DDR or CVR risk becoming politically instrumentalized, poorly sequenced, or disconnected from the current political economy of violence. What is needed is a clear and forward-looking strategic roadmap that defines principles, sequencing options and policy pathways.

- Address the political dimensions of gang power. Judicial frameworks should be designed to prosecute not only gang leaders, but also the political and economic actors who sponsor, protect or mobilize armed groups, recognizing the dual criminal and political nature of violent clientelism.
- Strengthen national anti-corruption and judicial institutions. The authority, independence and resources of the anti-corruption unit and specialized judicial units must be reinforced, with sustained international assistance provided to national authorities to support this.
- Strategies should focus on how to articulate criminal justice, demobilization and reintegration. This may include criminal prosecution for serious crimes, transitional justice mechanisms enabling negotiated surrender, conditional amnesties where no serious violations have been committed, and structured DDR and rehabilitation programmes.

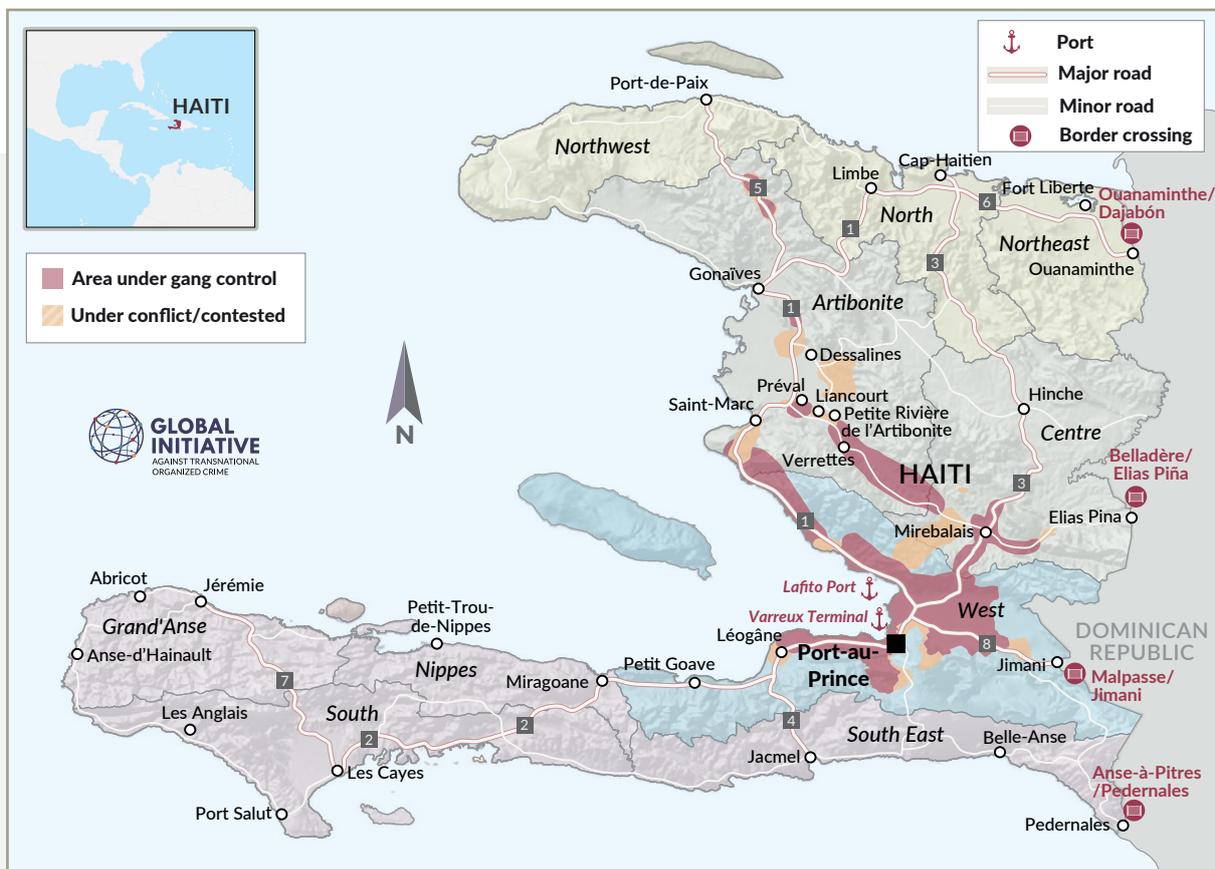


FIGURE 1 Areas under gang control in Haiti, January 2025.



INTRODUCTION

The crisis in Haiti, where gangs have taken control of large swathes of the country since the assassination of President Jovenel Moïse in July 2021, intensified significantly in 2025. Criminal groups not only gained control of 90% of the capital, but also established a durable presence across the Centre and Artibonite departments, and advanced toward the Dominican border and the northern regions.¹

The Viv Ansanm coalition, the union of gangs that formed in late 2023, now controls a fragmented corridor stretching several hundred kilometres from the capital into the country's interior.² Metropolitan gangs provide weapons, manpower and financing to local franchises. Haiti's ecosystem of violence can no longer be understood through the binary equation of 'gangs versus police.' It has morphed into a tripartite configuration in which gangs, armed vigilante brigades and state forces compete.³

THE VIOLENCE IN NUMBERS

According to the Human Rights Division of the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti, 5 915 people were killed in 2025 (compared to 5 601 in 2024).⁴

Homicides were reported in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area (71%), the Artibonite department (24%), and the Centre department (5%).⁵

The national homicide rate for 2025 was 49.8 per 100 000 people. Port-au-Prince's homicide rate reached nearly 140 per 100 000 people, ranking it among the most violent cities in the world.⁶

In 2025, armed violence displaced more than 1.4 million people, nearly three times the number recorded in early 2024.⁷

Coherent national or international strategies to tackle the consequent fragmentation of communities are sorely lacking. Efforts by the government and the Haitian National Police (HNP), including with the support of the private military company Vectus Global and the use of drones to strike criminal groups, have failed to unlock the gangs' stranglehold. The Multinational Security Support (MSS) mission, a UN-authorized intervention led by Kenyan police, was rehatted as a new outfit, the GSF, in October 2025.⁸ This force, composed of up to 5 500 military personnel and 50 civilians, is to begin deployment in Haiti in April 2026.⁹

Politically, the situation has evolved markedly. The TPC, established in April 2024 to steer the country towards restored security and the organization of elections, saw its mandate expire on 7 February 2026. Following weeks of intense political contestation and unsuccessful efforts to remove Prime Minister Alix Didier Fils-Aimé, the members of the TPC ultimately relented. Prime Minister Fils-Aimé now stands alone at the helm of the executive, bearing primary responsibility for the organization of the elections scheduled for August 2026.¹⁰

During 2025, and particularly in the months leading up to 7 February, Haitian criminal groups increasingly sought to convert their territorial control and local governance functions into political capital.¹¹ However, despite rhetoric to the contrary, the objective of major gangs is not to replace the state outright, but to position themselves as indispensable patrons and brokers capable of controlling the flow of resources between state institutions, international actors, economic stakeholders, and the populations and territories they effectively control.¹²

Haitian gangs are currently neither insurgents nor revolutionaries. They are embedded in the very networks through which power is exerted in Haiti.¹³ By erroneously treating gangs as external actors, the strategies for 2026 are therefore stymied by a critical blind spot. Bridging this gap requires recognizing the nature of Haiti's political-criminal crisis and designing interventions that dismantle the alliances that sustain it: the funds gangs receive, the financial circuits they exploit, the weapons and drugs they traffic, and the patronage networks that protect or use them. Without addressing corruption structures, for example, law enforcement remains a revolving door – arrests or eliminations may occur, but the system that enables criminal governance endures.

A structured response should allow for hybrid justice mechanisms tailored to the Haitian context.¹⁴ These may include criminal prosecution for serious offences, but also transitional justice pathways enabling negotiated surrender, conditional amnesties in cases where no grave crimes were committed, and differentiated DDR and rehabilitation programmes designed to ensure that thousands of young Haitians do not evolve into long-term combatants.¹⁵

Haiti urgently needs a comprehensive anti-organized crime strategy to sequence security, justice and accountability. Any strategy that focuses solely on operational force will fail if it does not confront the ecosystem that enables criminal governance to endure. Without addressing the networks that link political competition, criminal control and coercive leverage, elections risk reinforcing the very system they are intended to renew. Electoral integrity cannot rest solely on the mechanics of polling; it depends on whether the underlying structures of power, and the violent brokers who animate them, are – at least partly – put aside.

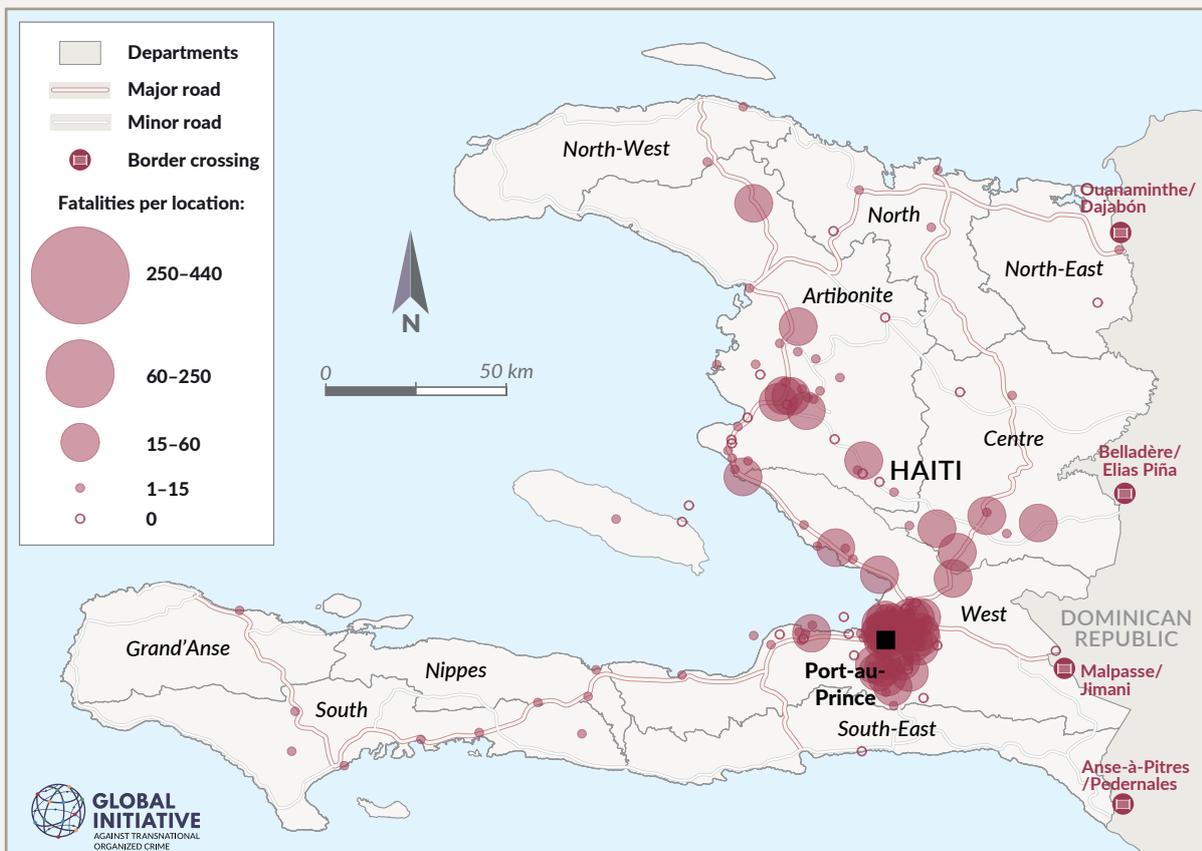
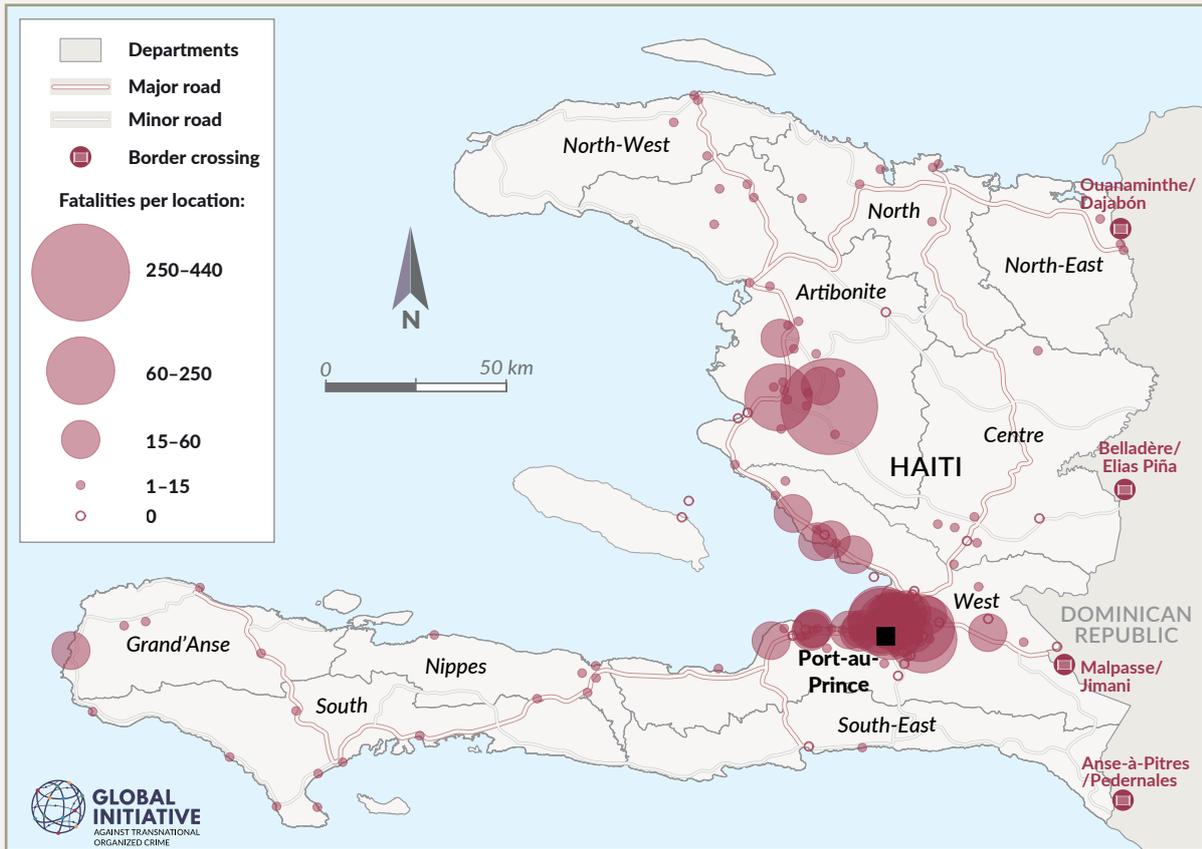


FIGURE 2 Fatalities in violent incidents in Haiti in 2024 (above) and 2025 (below).

SOURCE: Based on ACLED data.

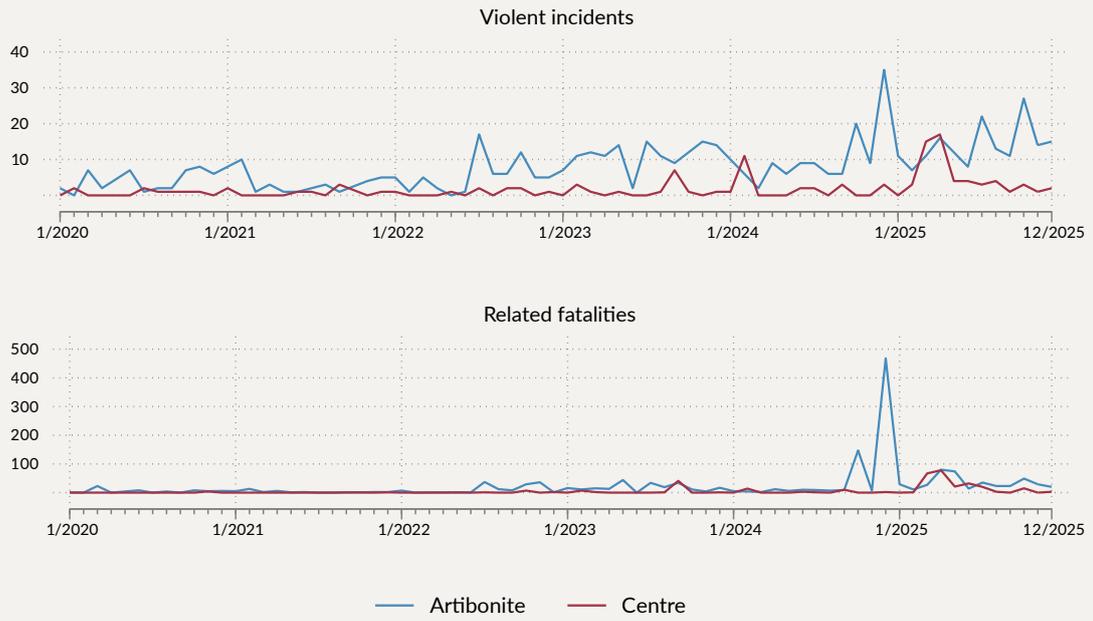


FIGURE 3 Violent incidents and related fatalities in the Artibonite and Centre regions, 2020–2025.

SOURCE: Based on ACLED data.



THE RISE OF GANG ‘FRANCHISES’ AND VIGILANTE BRIGADES

One of the biggest developments in Haiti’s security landscape in 2025 was the extension and consolidation of a criminal ‘franchise’ model. This centred on Port-au-Prince gangs creating or co-opting satellite cells beyond their initial areas of operation. It allowed gangs to replicate their governance systems – extortion, population control, and illicit trafficking networks for drugs and firearms – without relying on geographically contiguous territorial control.

Similar to the modus operandi of some Mexican criminal organizations – such as the Jalisco New Generation Cartel¹⁶ – Haitian groups are therefore extending their influence by creating, or absorbing, satellite criminal cells far beyond their original strongholds. Canaan is looking to expand outward from the commune of Montrouis, in Artibonite; 5 Segond is active not only in and around Village-de-Dieu, in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area, but also in Kenscoff, Furcy and Cabaret; and 400 Mawozo has established cells in Mirebalais and Lascahobas, in the Centre department.

The proliferation of these ‘franchised’ networks means violence radiates outward through networked nodes. This dynamic is accelerating the decentralization of the conflict, blurring frontlines and overwhelming state forces and vigilante brigades, which are already operating beyond capacity. It also provides gangs with forward operating positions that provide tactical advantage while requiring limited upfront investment.

The deterioration of security conditions in the Artibonite and Centre departments reflects this phenomenon. Between September and December 2025, groups originating in these two departments – such as the Gran Grif gang – deepened their collaboration with Port-au-Prince gangs that are expanding in the provinces, notably 400 Mawozo, Canaan and 5 Segond. This cooperation resembles an emerging sub-coalition; an offshoot of the Viv Ansanm coalition that seeks to control the Central Plateau and extend its reach toward the towns of Saint-Marc, Gonaïves and Lascahobas. In parallel, attacks in the northern Artibonite, particularly around Gros Morne, have been carried out by the Kokorat San Ras gang.¹⁷ All these offensives have been accompanied by widespread forced displacement and systematic destruction of infrastructure, including at least three police stations.¹⁸

The adaptive capacity of Haitian criminal groups in the face of security operations has also become increasingly apparent. For example, following the killing of its leader in a clash with the police on 20 July 2025,¹⁹ the Kokorat San Ras gang rapidly reorganized under new leadership, maintaining – and

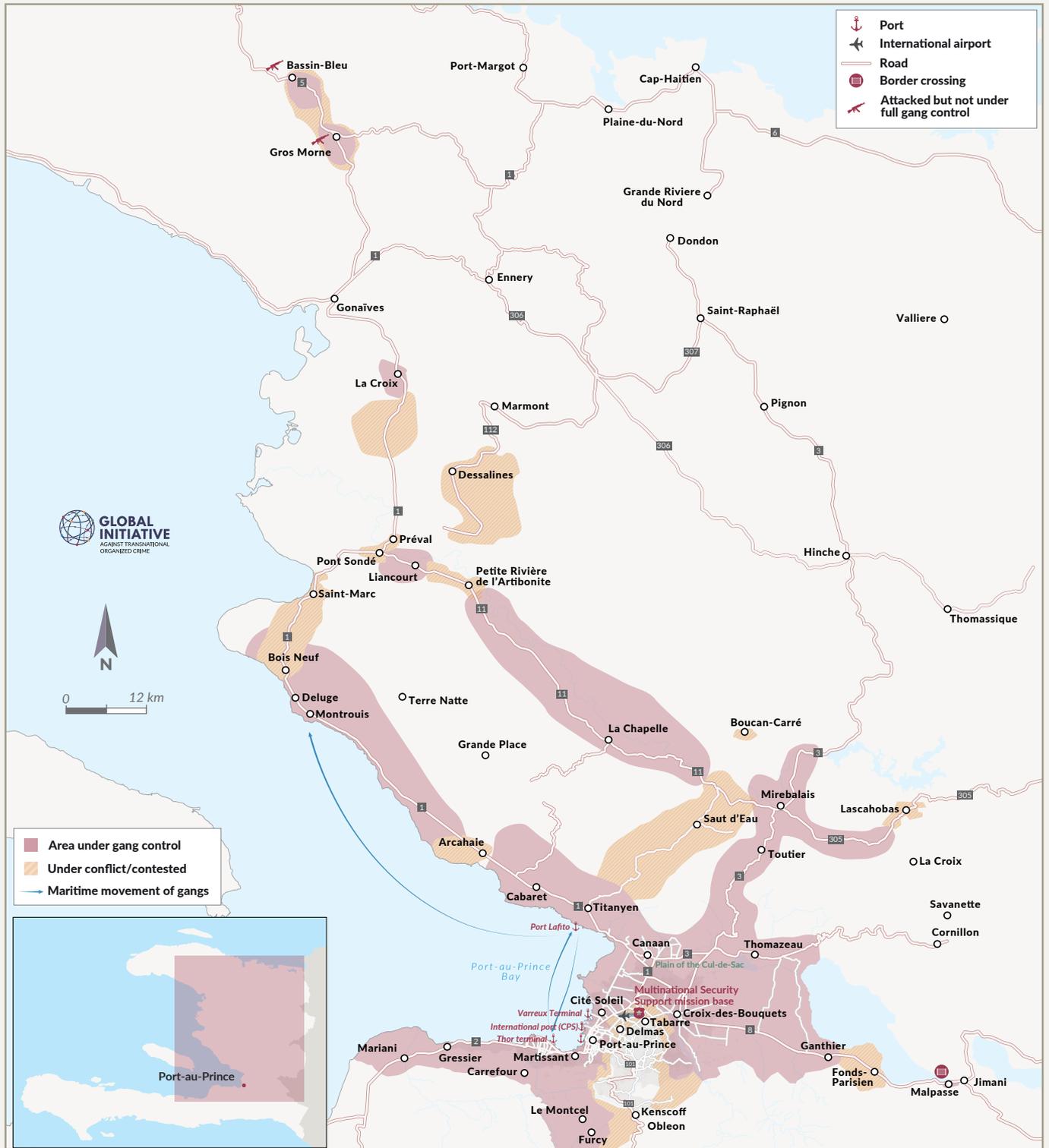


FIGURE 4 Gang presence in the Artibonite and Port-au-Prince metropolitan area, December 2025.

in some areas strengthening – its operational tempo across the Artibonite.²⁰ Since August 2025, fighters from the Ti Bwa Dom cell, affiliated with Kokorat San Ras, have attacked the communes of Bassin Bleu and Gros Morne, attempting to seize control of the road corridor between Port-de-Paix and Gonaïves.²¹ Control of this corridor facilitates extortion, and is also key for illicit firearms and allegedly cocaine trafficking in the north of the country.²²

In September 2025, another Kokorat San Ras cell launched an assault more than 45 kilometres south, in L'Estère, a commune near Gonaïves.²³ The attackers destroyed rice fields and looted harvests, further exacerbating the region's humanitarian crisis.²⁴ Witnesses reported that the assailants also burned the homes of members of local self-defence groups, indicating a strategy of selective reprisals. This illustrates the ability of Kokorat San Ras to operate simultaneously north and south of Gonaïves, undeterred by the loss of its former leader. It also illustrates that leadership neutralization rarely dismantles gang structures.

Simultaneously, a tactical shift became apparent along the Arcadins Coast, on the RN1, between the communes of Cabaret and Montrouis, driven by the Canaan and 5 Segond gangs. After failed ground assaults on the commune of Arcahaie in August and September, Canaan's fighters pivoted to maritime operations, circumventing the resistance of local brigades and the HNP by landing fighters by boat directly in Montrouis, a commune north of Arcahaie.²⁵ On 17 October, Canaan seized control of Montrouis and installed a new affiliated commander before resuming attacks north and south of the commune.²⁶

Vigilante influence proliferates

Vigilante brigades confront gangs alongside police forces in several areas, notably in Tabarre, Pernier and the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area, but also operate autonomously. This evolution reflects a concerning dynamic of direct confrontation between armed civilians and criminal groups, particularly in the Artibonite and Centre departments.²⁷

While these forms of cooperation – or de facto delegation of certain functions from public security forces to armed civilian groups – raise significant questions regarding the future role of the brigades and the risks associated with their growing influence, it nonetheless remains the case that, without their support, Port-au-Prince and large parts of the Central Plateau would, in all likelihood, have fallen under the total control of gangs in 2025.

In addition to their security role, top brigade leaders have built strong political profiles, for example by channelling, and at times orchestrating, public demonstrations. Since August 2025, multiple forms of protest have re-emerged across Haiti, expressing both security-related grievances and political discontent directed at local and national authorities.²⁸ More recently, the UN has also been the focus of discontent.

In the Artibonite, demonstrations organized by local communities and vigilante brigades to demand government support against gangs regularly block cities, the RN1 and other critical routes connecting Port-au-Prince to the North.²⁹ In the South, between 17–19 November, demonstrations took place in support of Jean Ernest Muscadin, the commissioner for the department of Nippes. Thousands of protesters who gathered in Nippes and South department deplored the publication of a report by the United Nations Integrated Office in Haiti documenting extrajudicial executions attributed to Muscadin, whose armed brigade has operated in the South for more than two years.³⁰

This wave of mobilizations underscored the ability of brigade leaders to orchestrate large-scale protests. It is part of the rising political and territorial influence of vigilante groups, which has also been seen in the Artibonite and Centre departments. Brigade leaders – some of whom simultaneously serve as local political authorities, like the mayors in Kenscoff and Arcahaie – embody the political entanglement between vigilante structures, strongmen politics and political brokerage mechanisms.

Gangs have also sought to engineer protests, albeit rather less deftly than brigades. In July 2025, 'Vlad', the leader of a local 5 Segond cell in the commune of Cabaret, forced residents to march to condemn government drone strikes and express support for Johnson 'Izo' André, the leader of 5 Segond.³¹ This forced mobilization came despite Cabaret being located a considerable distance from 5 Segond's main base across the bay of Port-au-Prince (and an absence of drone strikes in the area). Two months later, on 11 September, at least 42 civilians were killed over several days by 5 Segond in Labodrie, a fishing village in Cabaret commune. This reportedly came in retaliation for Vlad's killing by the police; locals were accused of collaborating with security forces.³² The episode illustrates how civilians coerced and controlled by gangs subsequently become targets of violent retribution.

Another worrying trend is permeability between gangs and vigilante groups. In October 2025, Ti Kenken, a leading figure in the Jean Denis brigade coalition (originating from Petite Rivière de l'Artibonite), reportedly defected to join his long-standing enemy, the Gran Grif gang.³³ Ti Kenken's shift is one of the only examples of a self-defence commander joining a criminal coalition. Yet, this is particularly worrying because of potential other changes of allegiance, as well as because brigades are indispensable partners for the police in defending the country and holding terrain.

These changes in allegiance may also be linked to long-standing local conflicts, particularly land disputes. Armed violence and criminal networks in Haiti remain deeply rooted in historical social fault lines. Since the 1950s, land conflicts in the Artibonite, for example, have combined territorial rivalries, political vendettas and competition over resources. The persistence of these disputes is exacerbated by the absence of a functional cadastre system and widespread illegal land appropriation (less than 5% of land is recorded in the public land registers).³⁴



Residents of the commune of Cabaret march to condemn government drone strikes and to express support for Johnson 'Izo' André, leader of 5 Segond, July 2025. *Photo supplied*

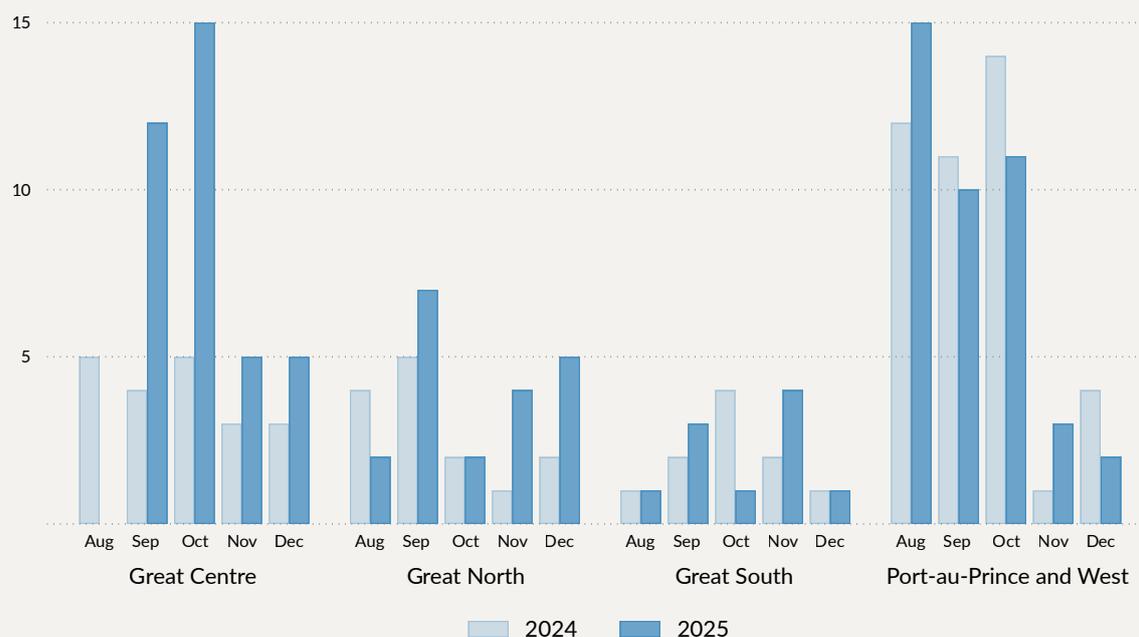


FIGURE 5 Civilian incidents, by region, including riots or protests, August–December 2024 and 2025.

SOURCE: Based on ACLED data.

Such blurriness tends to promote the consolidation of predatory local ‘bosses’ and to turn small-scale disputes into violent confrontations. These intertwined land, political and social disputes drive current violence in the provinces and help explain why the dynamics in the Artibonite or in the South, for example, may differ from those in Port-au-Prince. Violence is not solely gang-driven; it emerges from a dense landscape of historical tension – long-standing land conflicts, competition between political networks, diaspora and absentee landowner financing of vigilante structures, and rural struggles over licit and illicit markets and trade routes. To an extent, gangs capitalize on these fault lines, sparking inter-communal clashes and fuelling cycles of revenge.

Gangs recast themselves as stabilizers

With the TPC’s mandate ending on 7 February 2026 – and ahead of elections scheduled for August – Haitian criminal groups have worked to convert their territorial control and local governance capacities into political capital. A central component of this strategy involves discourse and practices aimed at presenting themselves as forces of stabilization or even pacification. After seizing Montrouis, for example, the leader of the Canaan gang portrayed himself as a stabilizing presence, encouraging residents to resume daily life under his protection.

In August 2025, gang leader Jimmy Chérizier issued a call for ‘peace’ and for the return of residents to Solino, Nazon and Delmas 30 – neighbourhoods at the heart of Port-au-Prince that had been devastated and emptied by his men in November 2024.³⁵ As the spokesperson of Viv Ansanm, he had already declared in January 2025 that this coalition of gangs would henceforth be a political party.³⁶ Chérizier framed his call for return as a contribution to ‘rebuilding the country’. He urged communities

to 'build a bridge' for dialogue and 'forget the past', so that they could work together to confront the current government.³⁷ This initiative came just two weeks after the United States government announced a US\$5 million reward for information leading to his arrest.³⁸

Beyond this call for peace, gang leaders aim to show that they can influence the security and political landscape. This was illustrated in the days preceding 18 November 2025, a significant date marking the commemoration of the 1803 Battle of Vertières, a decisive battle of the Haitian Revolution. Acting as spokesperson for Viv Ansanm, Chérizier released a video ordering a complete shutdown of Port-au-Prince to facilitate a gang offensive.³⁹ Although no attack ultimately occurred, the city nonetheless fell silent as fearful residents stayed indoors. The episode highlights the political and performative power of gang leadership: public statements alone generate behavioural change. Rooted in fear, these reactions reveal the gangs' ability to shape public agenda and send a signal about their political and social weight to Haitian authorities and the international community ahead of the GSF deployment and upcoming elections.

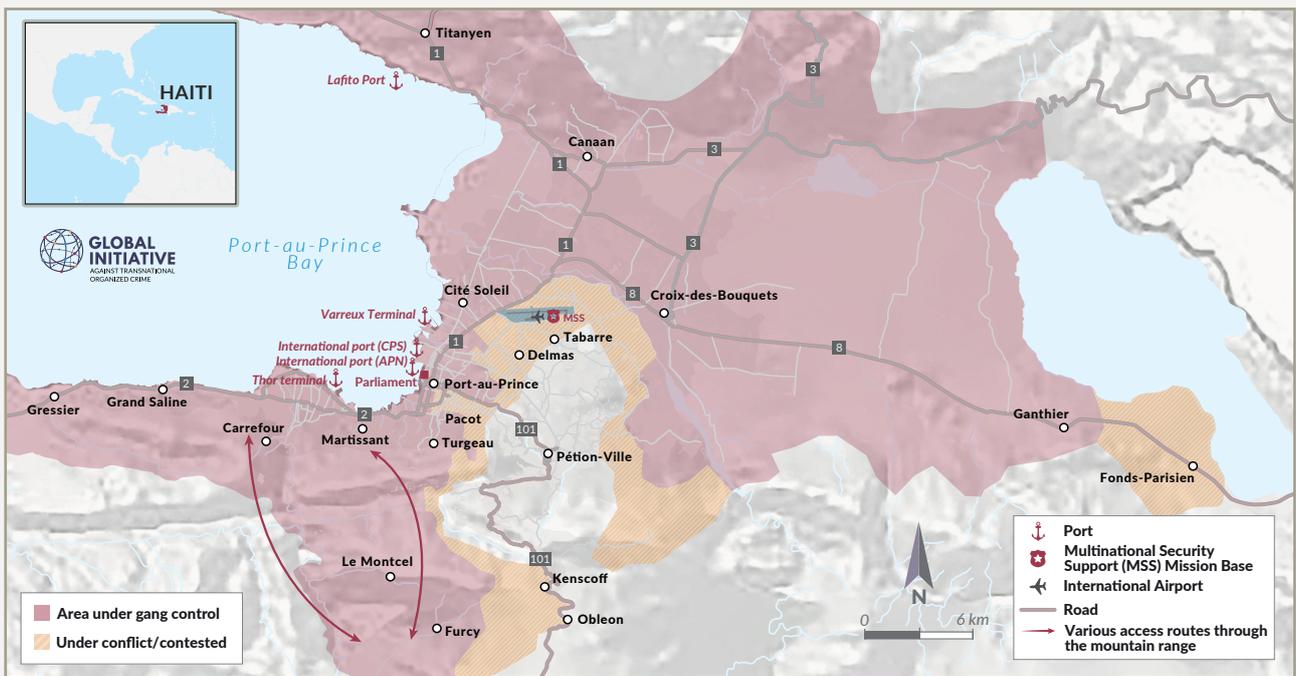


FIGURE 6 Areas under gang control in the Port-au-Prince metropolitan area, January 2025.



THE CENTRALITY OF POLITICAL BROKERAGE

Although Chérizier has repeatedly called for the TPC and the government to be toppled, it is questionable whether Haitian gangs seek to overthrow the state.⁴⁰ In practice, far from behaving like insurgents, criminal groups in Haiti are geared towards making themselves indispensable to the country's functioning. Since the creation of Viv Ansanm, between August 2023 and February 2024, they have possessed the material capacity to collectively seize Port-au-Prince, but they have not done so. Instead, they extract rents and impose protection and order without launching the revolution that Chérizier has been mentioning for years.

Gang leaders have consolidated their power within the system, as brokers: intermediaries who shape flows of power and resources between state institutions, economic actors, humanitarian agencies and populations under their control. This brokerage system is not new in Haiti.⁴¹ Political power in the country operates through layered networks of intermediaries and operators – some violent, others not – who control access, distribute favours and enable political action.⁴²

A broker accumulates power not necessarily by holding office but by becoming indispensable to all actors in the system. The more central the brokers become, the harder they are to circumvent. In this architecture, gangs are embedded nodes within Haiti's political economy. The use of violence by gangs ensures, among other aspects, that other actors are forced to go through them for the system to function. This is how extortion works: in exchange for protection rackets, gangs allow ports to operate or goods to be transported, for example.⁴³ If the other parties do not comply, they expose themselves to violence (blockades of port terminals, for example) until the terms of the exchange are back in place.

The purpose here is not to transform the system, but to occupy the most profitable and central position possible within it. This logic mirrors long-standing patterns in Haitian history wherein violent non-state actors served as extensions of political authority and elite power.⁴⁴ Like armed patrons before them, gang leaders want to control security, territorial passage, future electoral mobilization and humanitarian corridors.



A roadblock set up by gangs in the Solino neighbourhood of Port-au-Prince, October 2025. Such violent blockades have allowed gangs to position themselves as central brokers in Haiti's political landscape.

© Clarens Siffroy/AFP via Getty Images

What differentiates contemporary gang leaders from earlier community brokers is not necessarily the function they perform but the scale of authority, coercion and resources they command. They can shut down ports or national highways, obstruct or allow humanitarian access, or paralyze commercial corridors within hours. Unlike past structures, they now do so from a position of dominance rather than subordination, becoming simultaneously patrons and brokers.

In early 2026, as Haiti enters a very tense political and pre-electoral period, gangs are accelerating efforts to transform territorial dominance and social governance into political leverage. By calling on displaced people to return to their neighbourhoods, for example, they aim at positioning themselves as vote providers for future political parties and decision-makers eager to win a constituency.

The politics of denial

Unlike insurgent groups or revolutionary guerrillas, Haitian gangs are deeply embedded in the political system. As such, most political or economic actors currently rely on a certain level of interaction, accommodation or coordination with gangs, although there has been very limited public acknowledgement of this. In a rare instance, US Ambassador Dennis Hankins in October 2024 stated that there was 'limited contact from time to time'⁴⁵ between the embassy and gangs to coordinate security in the area.⁴⁶ Moreover, negotiations with the authorities or foreign countries over hostage releases, international or national humanitarian access to gang-controlled areas, and the transit of goods and persons require contact with gang leaders or their representatives. This does not mean that there is an official system of negotiations or dialogue with criminal groups, but that contacts exist out of necessity, because *Viv Ansanm* is part of everyday life.

However, security policies are all too often crafted as if Haitian criminal actors were living in a separate world. Denying the extent of gangs' political and social embeddedness creates a policy blind spot, limiting the ability of national authorities and international partners to design adequate security and political interventions.

Durable solutions require understanding the Haitian crisis, and the gangs, as a political phenomenon, not in the sense of ideological insurgency, but as a system of violent brokerage that perpetuates violence. The path forward calls for dismantling the political–criminal alliances (protection, money pipelines, weapons trafficking networks and patronage structures) that sustain them. Without addressing these collusive architectures, security and law enforcement become a revolving door. Arrests or the elimination of gang leaders may occur, but the structure remains intact.

This is all the more important given that brokerage in Haiti is not exclusive to armed groups.⁴⁷ The political economy of violence functions through a wide spectrum of intermediaries: political actors, business operators, local notables, mayors, vigilante or *baz* (neighbourhood-based organizations) leaders, and informal dealmakers who govern access to resources, markets, votes and territory, often bridging licit and illicit spheres.⁴⁸

These non-violent brokers serve as connectors between gangs and political or economic stakeholders, for example. The investigation of these mechanisms is at the centre of the mandate of the United Nations Security Council Panel of Experts.⁴⁹ It is likewise on the basis of this recognition, or at least the accusation of political-criminal collusion, that administrative sanctions, including asset freezes and visa revocations, are imposed by the United States, Canada, France, the European Union and the Dominican Republic.

However, these sanctions, whose effectiveness remains debatable, are not accompanied by the disclosure of the information that justified their implementation, and even less frequently result in legal proceedings capable of elucidating the mechanisms of collusion at work or allowing those sanctioned, or accused, to defend themselves against the measures imposed. This situation also precludes any analysis, grounded in evidence accessible to the general public, of how political-criminal collusion actually operates in Haiti.

Few judicial cases shed light on the mechanisms linking politics, business and violent actors. One of them is that of Magalie Habitant, former Director General of the National Solid Waste Management Service. She was arrested on 9 January 2025 in Port-au-Prince and remains in custody.⁵⁰ She is accused of working with high-profile gang leaders – including Chérizier, Izo, Renel ‘Ti Lapli’ Destina and Claudy ‘Chen Mechan’ Célestin.⁵¹ Investigators suggest possible logistical and financial support to the Viv Ansanm coalition, including involvement in ransom facilitation and ammunition purchases, at times through intermediaries such as, allegedly, the former deputy of Petite Rivière (Artibonite), Prophane Victor.⁵² The Central Directorate of the Judicial Police also noted that public funds intended for social assistance may have been diverted to armed groups, allegedly with the complicity of Elionor Devallon, director of Haiti’s social assistance fund.⁵³

While concerns have been raised regarding the integrity of the investigative process, and with no news of a possible trial to date,⁵⁴ Victor has also been cited for alleged involvement in the consolidation and support of armed groups. During his 2016 electoral campaign, he reportedly armed and mobilized young men in Petite Rivière who later formed the Gran Grif gang. Over subsequent years, he is accused to have expanded his support to multiple armed groups through weapons provision, financing and facilitation of criminal activities.⁵⁵ On 25 September 2024, the United States Department of the Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control sanctioned Victor for ‘forming, supporting, and arming gangs and their members that have committed serious human rights abuse in Haiti.’⁵⁶ The Security Council Sanctions Committee simultaneously sanctioned him for weapons trafficking, support to armed groups, diversion of public funds, and the use of violence for political and financial purposes.⁵⁷ Victor was arrested on 13 January 2025 in Port-au-Prince and remains in custody.⁵⁸

The arrests of Habitant and Victor represent rare instances in which high-level political operators or senior political figures allegedly linked to gang networks have been detained by Haitian authorities. While these individuals are still presumed innocent, the information shared about their cases provides insight into the mechanisms that tie state institutions and organized crime in Haiti. They highlight what interviewees constantly comment on in Haiti: how access to public resources may be leveraged to facilitate criminal activity, including the arming and financing of gangs. While the United States imposes administrative sanctions and accuses leading political figures of colluding with gangs, including TPC members, without providing evidence or initiating legal proceedings, a transparent judicial process against Habitant and Victor could set a precedent for accountability; conversely, a stalled or inconclusive process risks deepening perceptions of impunity and political manoeuvring.



SECURITY RESPONSE LAGS

One of the main obstacles to progress in Haiti has been the lack of a coordinated effort in the area of public security. On the domestic front, the appointment in August 2025 of Vladimir Paraison as the HNP's director general reorganized the security response. Coordinating the task is a difficult one, given a proliferation of stakeholders. Players range from the HNP, to Haiti's military, a separate police task force created by Prime Minister Fils-Aimé, the MSS/GSF, and the Vectus Global private military company.⁵⁹ Since Paraison was appointed, joint deployments and sustained operations are more frequent, operational communication has improved and the chain of command is more legible. This has been particularly true since late December 2025, with unprecedented operations carried out by the government in Port-au-Prince, especially in the Bel-Air area. For the first time in years, law enforcement agencies are making progress.

The question remains whether security gains will be episodic, geographically narrow and weakly consolidated. There is an established pattern whereby public forces advance and gangs withdraw, only for the public forces to withdraw and deploy elsewhere, enabling the gangs to return. An arson attack on 22 November against the Sacré-Cœur school in downtown Port-au-Prince illustrates this pattern: a zone temporarily reclaimed by the state was quickly reconquered.⁶⁰

An over-reliance on armed drones

Since March 2025, the government has turned to explosive drones as its key instrument of military action. Between 1 March and 20 September 2025, UN reporting attributed at least 547 deaths to drone operations, including those of 527 alleged gang members and 20 civilians, and 489 injuries, of which 28 were civilians.⁶¹ The tactical effect of drone operations on criminal groups has been significant, forcing leaders to move constantly, and limiting their capacity to conduct attacks in broad daylight.

However, despite this onslaught, no major gang leaders have been neutralized or arrested. Instead, drone pressure has produced adaptation. Gang leaders have reportedly fortified buildings, dug underground shelters and surrounded themselves with civilians to deter strikes.⁶² The latter did not stop the authorities. A drone strike on 23 September 2025, in the area of Simon Pelé, in Port-au-Prince, killed 15 civilians, including eight children. This marked the first recorded case of drone fire in a dense residential area.⁶³

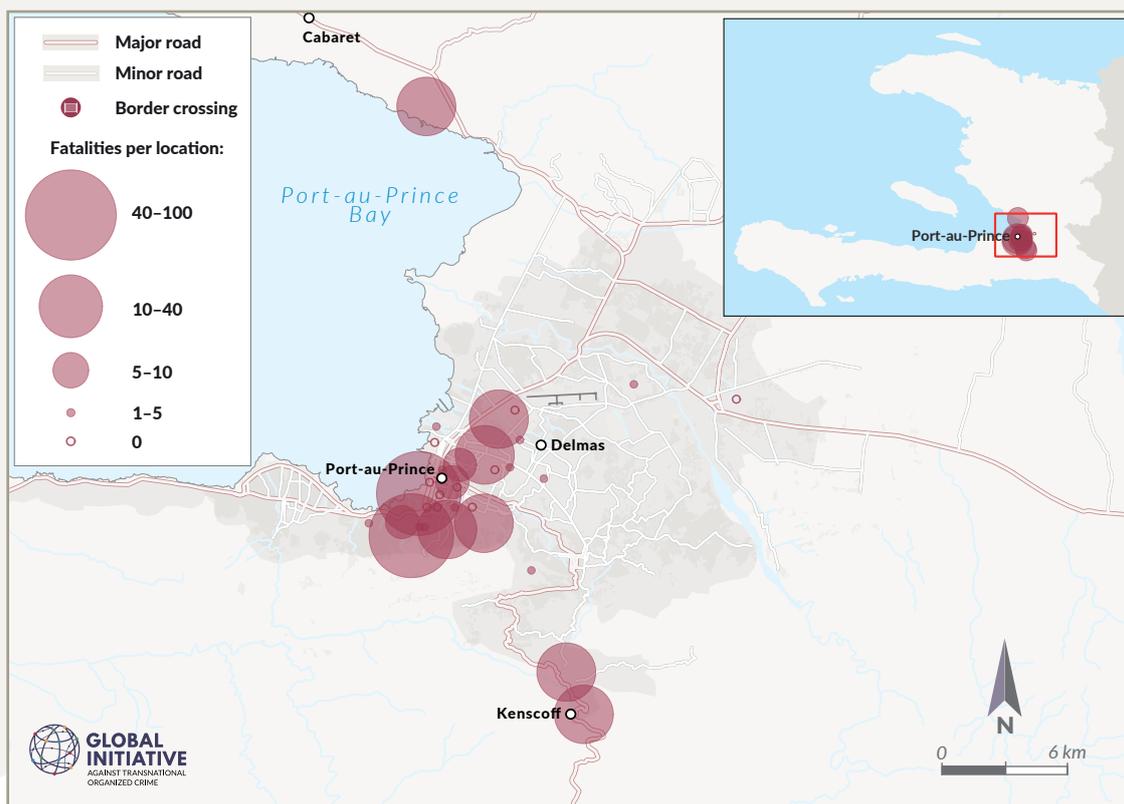


FIGURE 7 Fatalities in air/drone strikes, 2025.

SOURCE: Based on ACLED data.

Since gangs are using civilians as human shields, the latter risk becoming part of gangs' warfare strategy – used simultaneously as camouflage and as defensive infrastructure. This makes security operations both deadly and tactically complex. This pattern has been observed in Bel-Air: since the beginning of 2026, at least 50 civilians have reportedly been killed, and 5 800 individuals have been displaced as a result of security operations.⁶⁴ According to interviews conducted in Port-au-Prince, ground police forces are going door to door, with direct support of explosive drone strikes.⁶⁵ The protection of civilian lives in neighbourhoods where residents are often constrained by gang leaders to remain, and where avenues for safe exit are virtually non-existent, does not appear to be consistently prioritized. The resulting dynamics resemble destructive urban warfare; while producing short-term territorial gains, they are unlikely to offer a long-term solution.

A coherent CONOPS is required

At the international level, UN Security Council Resolution 2793 on 30 September 2025 authorized the transition of the MSS into the GSF.⁶⁶ Equipped with a Chapter VII mandate, the GSF came into being on 2 October. The new force, whose first deployments are promised for April 2026 (approximately 1 500 troops), has, unlike the MSS, a military profile and a particularly offensive mandate. While at the time of writing the list of countries providing troops is not yet known, the GSF will require a clear and robust concept of operations (CONOPS) capable of translating the mandate into sustainable enforcement. The CONOPS – and not the Chapter VII mandate alone – will determine whether the GSF can deliver structured security recovery.

Members of a vigilante brigade in Port-au-Prince. Haiti's security response continues to be hampered by the absence of a coordinated public-security strategy.

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Additionally, the evolution of armed actors in Haiti heightens the need for a reformed intelligence architecture. The current system remains fragmented, event-led and limited in its capacity to generate knowledge of power dynamics in different territories. Intelligence collection must become systematic, secured and shielded from manipulation. Without a structure capable of producing shared threat assessments and up-to-date territorial mapping, operations will continue to disperse rather than dismantle criminal gangs.

The need for deeper analysis also extends to the involvement of private military companies, which currently provide operational support. Yet, reliance on private military companies must be governed through a formal regulatory framework defining mandate boundaries, civilian protection obligations, incident review procedures and coordination with national and GSF forces.

Moreover, operational limits generate major constraints. With gangs expanding in the Artibonite and Centre departments – and consolidating control over key access routes – the state can hardly project force beyond the perimeter of the capital. To date, the GSF does not have a nationwide strategy.

A sustainable solution requires embedding justice tools within the security strategy and sequencing accountability and DDR to prevent cyclical regeneration of violence. If gang power is political as well as criminal, accountability frameworks must treat both dimensions. This means building justice tools capable of prosecuting gang leaders and the political and economic actors who sponsor, protect or contract them.

Strengthening the authority and funding of the anti-corruption unit and the specialized judicial units must be a priority for national authorities and international partners.⁶⁷ These specialized units were created in April 2025 to address high-profile cases on large-scale corruption and financial crime, mass atrocities and sexual and gender-based violence.⁶⁸ By concentrating technical expertise, investigative capacity and enhanced security provisions within a single institutional structure, these special units can help mitigate the vulnerabilities of Haiti's ordinary courts, including fragmentation, political interference and limited protection for magistrates and witnesses.

For national stakeholders, these mechanisms offer a pathway to address impunity and restore public trust in the justice system. For international partners, they provide an entry point for assistance. Consolidating these units would amount to a strategic intervention, curbing criminal capture of state institutions and underpinning broader political and security stabilization efforts. However, these judicial structures currently lack the funding needed to begin operations.

Discussion on justice responses also means exploring transitional justice models⁶⁹ that combine prosecution for mass violence and corruption with demobilization, mediation, reconciliation and reintegration pathways for rank-and-file members, especially children and minors forcibly recruited into armed structures.⁷⁰ Haiti needs a model that separates leadership from the thousands of young combatants who require education, psychosocial support and alternative livelihoods.

Understood this way, the debate shifts. Instead of bluntly asking whether to negotiate with gangs, the question becomes how to sequence justice, demobilization, accountability and reintegration so that the system stops reproducing violence.⁷¹

Elections without pre-requisites: a high-risk trajectory

Political competition in Haiti entered a period of heightened tension in January 2026, marked by attempts by members of the TPC to remove the government of Prime Minister Fils-Aimé.⁷² With direct support from the United States – through diplomatic engagement, administrative sanctions and ultimately the deployment of naval assets in Port-au-Prince bay – the prime minister was able to retain his position, and the 7 February transition, which had been widely feared to turn violent, ultimately unfolded peacefully.⁷³ The political phase now underway, characterized by a government exercising full executive authority, nonetheless remains marked by significant uncertainty.

The Provisional Electoral Council has announced an electoral calendar: first-round legislative and presidential elections are scheduled for 30 August 2026,⁷⁴ followed by municipal and second-round presidential and legislative elections on 6 December 2026, with the newly elected authorities intended to assume office on 20 January 2027.⁷⁵

Yet, as of February 2026, the calendar amounts more to political signalling than a functional road-map. Of approximately 6 million eligible voters, more than half reside in the West and Artibonite departments, which are currently epicentres of violence.⁷⁶ Authorities have considered relocating voting to Pétion-Ville to accommodate Port-au-Prince's internally displaced voters. However, this approach overlooks two structural realities: restricted mobility through gang-controlled corridors and widespread loss or destruction of identity documents. In several neighbourhoods, individuals intentionally discard IDs because birthplace now signals presumed allegiance to specific armed groups, increasing personal risk.

While the organization of elections in Haiti constitutes an indispensable condition for the restoration of peace and stability, electoral processes conducted in an environment of limited transparency would create significant space for influence and control by political-criminal networks, including those supported by violent groups, gangs or brigades.

Within a system structured by brokerage, electoral credibility depends less on the mechanics of voting than on the influence behind it. Without dismantling politico-criminal networks, elections risk producing continuity under democratic packaging: new dates, new ballots, but the same intermediaries controlling access to votes, resources, extortion and criminal groups. Most major political actors

are not yet gearing up fully for electoral competition, but for succession management: who will control ministries and administrations, who will negotiate with foreign partners, who will command the security apparatus and ultimately who will control the state.

As noted above, administrative sanctions, based on alleged links to gangs without the public provision of evidence, and which are used as a means of exerting pressure on local political actors, do not help to shed light on criminal processes, let alone strengthen the Haitian judicial system, which cannot use these sanctions to open investigations.

The dismantling of political-criminal networks has therefore not yet begun. With a new transition phase already underway, beginning on 8 February 2026 and continuing until the first elections in August, the credibility of the ballots will inevitably depend on progress in transparency and the fight against impunity. Without confronting the infrastructure, the ballot box simply re-legitimizes the same power structure in electoral form. The question is no longer about sequencing peace before elections or elections before peace. It is about whether political power continues to be allocated through coercive brokerage, or whether disarticulating these networks becomes the first true act of democratic transition.



CONCLUSION

Haiti enters 2026 with a security and political landscape in which criminal groups, vigilante brigades and state institutions coexist and fight each other within an increasingly fragmented order. The expansion of gang governance beyond Port-au-Prince, the consolidation of franchised satellite cells in Artibonite and the Centre, and the political activation of brigades have reshaped the dynamics of conflict and sovereignty. To counter Viv Ansanm's claims to legitimacy, national and international responses remain constrained by a persistent policy blind spot: strategies continue to treat gangs as external adversaries rather than as actors operating within the same networks that structure political and economic life.

The embedded political influence of the gangs is derived not only from coercion, but their ability to mediate access to territory, markets and electoral constituencies. A durable approach requires confronting the political, financial and institutional alliances that sustain criminal governance. This entails uprooting armed group resilience – their revenue streams, weapon supplies and patronage networks.

The deployment of the GSF offers an opportunity to recalibrate the international security response, but only if its doctrine integrates political economy analysis, financial disruption tools and protection of civilians into operational planning. A force-centric approach that does not address the economic infrastructure and human aspects of criminal governance will inevitably fall short. The integration, regulation and restraint of brigades must also form part of a national security plan, otherwise any short-term alliance risks reproducing the same trajectory that once allowed criminal groups to consolidate power.

Lastly, civil society must be placed at the centre rather than at the periphery of major decision-making on stabilizing the country. Local organizations – human rights platforms, peace committees, women's networks, collectives of displaced persons, local journalists and faith associations – provide legitimate gateways to communities and early warning capacity that the state and international actors cannot replicate. Their vision is essential for shaping DDR pathways, identifying vulnerable youth, monitoring abuses and rebuilding social trust. No transition will endure if civil society is consulted symbolically but excluded from decision-making and funding.



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