

CONFRONTING COMPLEX MULTIDIMENSIONAL SECURITY CHALLENGES IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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In June 2017, the Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force (TTDF) successfully conducted the exercise 'Tradewinds', with 1,200 participants from 20 countries from across the Western Hemisphere (McDonald, 2017). The activity, whose design was substantially shaped by inputs from the TTDF, was the largest such event held in the Caribbean and highlighted the capabilities of the TTDF and its leadership role in regional security for the East Caribbean States. Yet, in recent years, the island has also earned the dubious distinction of being the largest contributor in the hemisphere, on a per capita basis, of recruits to fight for the terrorist group ISIS in Iraq and Syria, and has one of the highest homicide rates in the Caribbean (at 34 murders per 100,000 residents in 2016), as well as serious problems with urban street gangs, firearms, narcotrafficking and corruption.



upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/a/a1/Coat_of_arms_of_Trinidad_and_Tobago.svg/2000px-Coat_of_arms_of_Trinidad_and_Tobago.svg.png

Trinidad and Tobago is a relatively small nation of 1.35 million people (*Government of Trinidad and Tobago, 2017*), separated from the U.S. mainland by the Caribbean Sea; yet, from the perspective of the United States and the security of the Western Hemisphere, the island is strategic in multiple ways. As the southernmost island in the Lesser Antilles chain, Trinidad and Tobago is a key starting point for smugglers moving drugs and other contraband via small boats. The southern location of the country also puts it out of the path of most tropical storms, combined with its relatively good infrastructure to make it a logical location for staging humanitarian relief operations for the Eastern Caribbean.

In addition, it further sits atop considerable oil reserves, and near the base of Venezuela's Orinoco river, a key location in the movement of that nation's own, far greater, oil resources out of the country. Finally, it is a strategic van-

tage point from which maritime and other forces can secure the boundary between the Atlantic and the southern Caribbean against both those moving contraband, as well as against hostile actors in time of war.

Indeed, during World War II, the port of Chamaraguas was a staging area for convoys of allied ships moving from the U.S. to Europe, while the surrounding waters were frequented by German U-boats looking for allied shipping targets (*Kelshall, 1988*).

Yet, despite its importance, Trinidad and Tobago is a country about which most in the United States and the rest of the region have little knowledge. The purpose of this work is thus to provide an orientation regarding the security challenges facing the country, and the work of its government to confront them, with a focus on the Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force (TTDF), and the Trinidad and Tobago

Police Service (TTPS). This work concludes with recommendations for U.S. policymakers regarding how to engage more effectively with the country, in support of its security, that of the Caribbean, and the region more broadly.

Trinidad and Tobago's Security Challenges

The level of crime and violence in Trinidad and Tobago, and the religious radicalization of a subset of Afro-Trinidadians, is the product of a mutually reinforcing dynamic involving street gangs, guns, and drugs, within a context of a multi-ethnic society with high levels of corruption (*Transparency International, 2017*) and various marginalized populations (*Committee on Young Males and Crime in Trinidad and Tobago, 2013*).

While Trinidad and Tobago has always had a pronounced gang culture and high rates of crime relative to other

parts of the Caribbean, the rapid, petroleum-driven, development of the economy arguably created the basis for the nation's present crisis by fostering endemic corruption and uneven development, in which new wealth coexisted with groups excluded from the new prosperity. Indeed, in August 2017, the country's Prime Minister, Keith Rowley, acknowledged corruption as the principal challenge facing his government (Julien, 2017).

Trinidad and Tobago's high levels of corruption has reinforced the alienation of parts of its youth, who perceive a system rigged against them. That alienated youth, in turn, found in the country's gang culture a vehicle for expressing that alienation, an alternative form of community and family, and a mechanism for economic subsistence. Therefore, the viability of gangs was reinforced by public corruption in which, not only could the gang members commit crimes with relative impunity, but even development programs could be hijacked by gang leaders, turning them into an employment program for their members, rather than a vehicle to combat them.

The ability of the gangs to organize a thriving and multi-dimensional illicit trade was reinforced by the relative openness of the country, and its interconnectedness of Trinidad and Tobago with other parts of the Caribbean and the Americas, in terms of flows of money, goods, and people. Specifically, these features facilitated a substantial trade in contraband goods, human trafficking, marijuana consumption, cocaine transshipment, and the ready availability of firearms (which expanded violence and the power of the gangs).

Foreign Terrorist Fighters

The same cycle of gangs and corruption, in interaction with an Afro-Trinidadian segment practicing the Muslim faith, has been a key factor in the unique political role that Islam has played in the

country's post-independence history, and the relatively large number of Trinidadians departing the country to fight for ISIS in Iraq and Syria. In fact, the principal source of the approximately 175 persons who have left to fight is the radical teachings of a small number of mosques in the country, in interaction with youth gangs which identify themselves as 'Islamic'.

The majority of mosques in Trinidad and Tobago, and particularly those belonging to the mainstream Anjuman Sunnat ul Jammāt Association (ASJA), do not promulgate messages or otherwise motivate their members to join ISIS. Rather, the problem is confined to a subset of mosques with relatively radical teachings, including the mosque in Rio Claro, which has been the source of the greatest number of ISIS recruits, as well as mosques in Carapo and the Enterprise area. In addition, one of the more radical religious leaders has left the Rio Claro mosque with a group of followers to establish a new religious community with even more radical beliefs. They have now reportedly established a new temporary facility for religious services and other activities in Diego Martin.

While the overt religious teachings of even the radical mosques do not necessarily violate the law, the criminal activities of some of the members of their communities have raised concern. A well-known case involved Rajaee Ali, the son of the leader of the Rio Claro mosque, who was tried and convicted (alongside 14 affiliates) in 2015 on murder charges (Achong, 2015).

In understanding the relationship between Islam, gangs, and recruitment to ISIS in Trinidad and Tobago, it is important to recognize that, for disenfranchised youth, Islam and street gangs have similar sources of appeal. However, in the country, they interact in unique ways to generate highly negative effects; both, Islam and street gangs, provide an al-

ternative sense of family and community, including an ethic of defense against those who would persecute its members; both can offer help with immediate economic needs, such as food and shelter, drawing the youth in; and, even though the Islamic faith is not inherently violent or masochistic, in practice, both offer a male-dominated narrative of fighting, empowerment, and purpose that appeals to Trinidadian youths who may feel particularly disempowered.

From the Jamaat al Muslimeen to Islamic and Other Gangs

Another critical link in the relationship between radical Islam and the modern landscape of Islamic gangs in Trinidad and Tobago has been played by the group Jamaat al Muslimeen (JAM), which in 1990 unsuccessfully attempted to overthrow the state (Daily Express, 2012). The leader of the group, Lennox Philip, was a former police officer who converted to Islam and assumed the name Yasin Abu Bakr. He built his movement on the alienation of youth in poor neighborhoods across the country, such as Laventille, leveraging Islam to channel the frustration that many of those dispossessed found with the corruption and other ills of the society around them (Sorias, 2017).

After the failure of the 1990 coup, the JAM metastasized into a broader but more loosely coordinated grouping, including not only followers affiliated with various mosques throughout the country but also an array of self-identified, nominally, Muslim gangs. The government's decision, under duress to pardon the JAM leadership (History, 2003), helped to preserve a continuing role for the JAM old guard in the ever more diverse community of Muslims, from pious believers to criminal gangs. With time and the expansion of criminality in the country, the entire gang landscape expanded. By 2015, the TTPS counted approximately 147 gangs operating in the country, com-

prised of 1,698 members, responsible for approximately 34% of Trinidad and Tobago's homicides.

In the contemporary context, although the principal JAM mosque in St. James has not been associated with the recruitment of foreign fighters for ISIS or other terror related activities, most of the senior leaders in the more problematic mosques have some affiliation with the JAM. Nazim Muhammed (head of the Rio Claro mosque from which the greatest number of foreign fighters have come) and Hassan Ali (head of the Carapo mosque) were both part of the JAM at the time of its attempt to overthrow the government in 1990, and both continue to maintain ties to JAM leader Abu Bakr.

To date, very few of those known to have gone to fight for ISIS are known to have returned (Alexander, 2017), yet very little is known about those who have left. Trinidad and Tobago has a relatively strong anti-terrorism law, passed by parliament in 2005 and strengthened on three separate occasions since 2010, 2011, 2012, and 2014 (Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs, 2015). Nonetheless, taking legal action against foreign fighters under the terrorism act has been challenging because of the difficulty of proving, at the level required to achieve a criminal conviction, that an Islamic citizen traveling from Trinidad and Tobago to an Islamic country, such as Turkey, is necessarily doing so with the intention to fight for ISIS (Ellis, 2017).

Gangs

While the Islam-Gang nexus has contributed significantly to Trinidad's foreign fighter challenge, gangs more

broadly arguably present the most significant challenges for public security in the country, and, in the long term, to governance, stability, and development. The previously mentioned Islamic gangs and the JAM played a key role in the evolution of Trinidad and Tobago's gang culture to the current state.

The nominal affiliation with Islam ini-

One example of Trinidadian leadership in regional security affairs is the Caribbean Battalion, a joint force with significant contributions expected from Trinidad with the purpose of collectively responding to security challenges in the region

tially gave the 'Muslim' gangs a basis for cooperation, thus some advantage over the more disorganized set of non-Islamic groups sharing the same neighborhoods. On the other hand, the opposition to the Muslim gangs forced a loose cooperation between the more diverse collections of non-Islamic groups, who called themselves 'Rasta City', in aim to be differentiated from the Islamic gangs. Left out of this polarization was a third group, which, either because of their distance from the urban centers or because they occupied territory around key transportation nodes (such as ports), involved itself with a broad range of criminal activities including drugs and other contraband, collaborating with both Muslim and

Rasta City gangs.

In those areas of Trinidad and Tobago dominated by them, gangs implicitly challenge government as source of authority over the population. In some cases, they operate in marginalized areas providing employment and social assistance with their leaders, establishing themselves as the caretaker of the community, giving money for poor children to buy food or school books. In the case of Beetam Estate Gardens, for example, the local gang boss reportedly throws a local Carnival (Mardi Gras) party for the neighborhood, so that its residents do not have to leave the neighborhood to celebrate (Ellis, 2017). Gangs also often imposed their own codes of justice on the neighborhood, and have become involved in resolving domestic disputes (such as spousal abuse or helping parents deal with unruly children).

Additionally, those gangs in Trinidad and Tobago derive their revenue from a broad array of sources, with different groups involved in different illicit activities. By contrast to countries of the Northern Triangle of Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras), they are somewhat less involved in extortion of busses, taxis, and other transportation companies (in part because they are less common in Trinidad and Tobago than in the northern triangle), but they are involved in robbery and other petty crimes, contraband trade, drug distribution, and local drug sales.

Because of the gang's physical domination of territory, in a situation relatively unique to Trinidad and Tobago, those are also involved in extorting, and even managing, government-funded development and public works projects in marginalized areas, to include the Unemployment Re-

The Trinidad Regiment is a light infantry force, although its involvement in urban security in dangerous urban terrain such as the slums of Laventille has heightened its interest in acquiring armored vehicles for greater force protection

lief Program (URP) and Community Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Program (CEPEP). In these two specific cases, the gangs effectively turned these programs into a source of funds for themselves, and a source of employment for their own followers by organizing their own small businesses to win contracts under the program, and obliging outside companies to employ their members and others in the community whom they designated (News, 2005). Ironically, thus, such government programs contributed to the gangs' revenues and hold over the community (Parkinson, 2014).

Guns

Like drugs, guns compound the damage caused by gangs and criminality in Trinidad and Tobago. Currently, an estimated 3/4 of the homicides in the country involve the use of a firearm (Daily Express, 2014). 691 illegal arms of all types were seized by police in 2016 already inside its borders, and 765 in 2015, due in part to a financial incentive program that the police has for such seizures.

The flow of guns into Trinidad is also enabled, in part, by the nation's relatively openness to flows of people and goods. Other guns are believed to enter through the country's main commercial ports, Port of Spain and Port Point Lisas, concealed in commercial cargo. Yet very few guns have been seized as they enter, with most confiscated by police once they have already reached the streets.

Immigrants

While Trinidad and Tobago has long been a country of immigrants, in recent years, its security environment has been impacted by the arrival of both Venezuelans and Chinese, who have become victims and intermediaries, to some degree, in its criminal landscape.

While immigrants have long come to

Trinidad and Tobago to work and conduct commerce, as the political and economic situation in your countries has deteriorated, they are believed to be migrating in larger numbers. Trinidadian officials and analysts consulted for this study noted ever greater number of immigrants in urban areas surrounding Port of Spain, but particularly to the south in areas, such as Cedros (site of the principal ferry crossing from the Venezuelan town of Pedernales), and further to the north in San Fernando (Dowlat, 2016).

The immigrants in the country are also believed to be conducting more illicit transactions to sustain themselves, from prostitution, to selling guns, to working without a permit (Kong Soo, 2016). The Trinidad and Tobago government does not have an effective system for monitoring those activities; because they may enter the country with a tourist visa, which authorizes them to stay for up to 90 days. There is neither effective monitoring regarding whether those immigrants return home on time, nor whether they illegally work while staying in the country.

In addition to this fact, Trinidad's Chinese community has expanded significantly, due in part to Chinese brought into the country on work visas during the late 2000s to complete construction projects won by their companies in the country. As Trinidad and Tobago's Chinese community has expanded in parallel with the growth of crime in the country, there has been a growing number of criminal acts against Chinese (Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, 2017). Even the Chinese embassy has been touched by such crime (Dhatai, 2017), with the kidnapping of the driver of the Chinese ambassador in July 2017.

Beyond such crime against the community itself, Trinidad and Tobago security experts are concerned about the potential for laundering substantial sums of money through Chinese restaurants

and shops, which generally operate on a cash basis, as well as the gambling machines installed in their establishments, and the informal gambling conducted in upper-story private rooms of some of those commercial facilities.

In confronting such crimes, Trinidad and Tobago authorities have been impaired by their relative lack of access to the Chinese community, which origins in immigration come from Guangdong province during the 19th to the early 20th centuries (Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, 2017), and is relatively well organized to take care of itself, with vehicles for loans and other mutual assistance (Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, 2017). Yet its members are notoriously reluctant to report crimes, cooperate with Trinidad authorities as witnesses, or otherwise involve the Trinidad government in its affairs.

The Government Response

In addition to the analysis of the security challenges facing Trinidad and Tobago, it is important to focus on the work of the nation's government, and the principal relevant organizations to confront them. Doing so facilitates an understanding of where the gaps are, as well as where security partners (such as the United States) can most effectively engage with them to help confront those problems.

As a complement to such efforts, Trinidad and Tobago has also become the first nation in the Caribbean to work with the U.S. Defense Institution Reform

Initiative (DIRI) to strengthen its national military planning and budgeting processes. While the process has caused some discomfort among the senior officials involved, it has helped the nation's leadership lengthen its timeframe for security planning.

Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force

The Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force (TTDF) is considered to be one of the most professional and capable military forces in the Caribbean. But because of that capability and professionalism, it is often looked to by the defense forces of its smaller neighbors to assume a significant share of the burden for broader regional security activities, particularly humanitarian assistance and disaster response.

One example of Trinidadian leadership in regional security affairs is the Caribbean Battalion, a joint force with significant contributions expected from Trinidad with the purpose of collectively responding to security challenges in the region. In the summer of 2017, the TTDF was the driving force in orienting the design of the previously mentioned Tradewinds exercise, conducted in partnership with the U.S., to exercise the Caribbean Battalion (U.S. Southern Command, 2017).

Given that the Caribbean is not a region at war, the budget of the TTDF has come under significant pressure, even while the government has sought to leverage it for an ever-greater role in a law enforcement and internal security role, both through interdiction of narcotics and other criminal flows, and the fight against violence and insecurity.

Although the operational activities of the TTDF in

recent years have concentrated on the fight against organized crime and insecurity, the orientation of the institution remains heavily influenced by its most significant engagement since independence, when it played the decisive role in putting down an attempt by the JAM to overthrow the government (Ransome, 2005). Although there is little evidence that the JAM has either the capability or intention to again seek the overthrow of the state, military officers worry that, if it does, the TTDF will not have adequate size, mobility, or firepower to put down such a challenge, especially if the JAM makes a more geographically dispersed assault, against strategically wiser targets.

In the realization of, and preparations for its security activities, Great Britain, Canada, and the U.S. have been the key security partners for the TTDF. As part of the broader U.S. engagement, the Delaware National Guard has played a particularly important role as the country's U.S. State Partner. Trinidad and Tobago has also been one of the few nations in the Caribbean to send its officers to the U.S. Army War College for senior military studies.

Despite such close ties to the U.S. and western militaries, Trinidad and Tobago has also maintained a strong relationship with the PRC, including regularly sending its officers to China for courses, purchasing military equipment from the PRC, including a long-range patrol vessel and negotiations for military trucks, and seeking the donation of needed military capabilities from mobile field kitchens to a military hospital.

The Trinidad Regiment

The ground component of the Trinidad and Tobago Defense Force, the Trinidad Regiment, is a relatively capable force, comprised of two infantry battalions, an engineer battalion, and a support services battalion. The Trinidad Regiment is a light infantry force, although its in-

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involvement in urban security in dangerous urban terrain such as the slums of Laventille has heightened its interest in acquiring armored vehicles for greater force protection, as well as other vehicles to more independently escort police. Indeed, the Trinidad Regiment reportedly sought to acquire 20 tactical trucks from the PRC, but the deal was never consummated.

The principal joint operations of the TTDF in support of internal security to date include deployment with the police as the 'Interagency Task Force' to conduct joint patrols in the nation's highest crime neighborhoods (such as the slums of Laventille, Beetham Gardens, and other parts of the greater Port of Spain area). As part of the inter-agency concept, police and military have lived together in mobile police posts deployed in the neighborhood, built out of metal shipping containers with beds, air conditioning and other facilities.

While the joint deployment concept has been applied in the greater Port of Spain area, it has not yet been extended to other parts of the country where violence has expanded, such as the Enterprise area, to the south.

In general, the training of both the TTDF and police in the British tradition has facilitated a level of coordination between the two. TTDF training in British doctrine, for example, has included work with concepts worked out by the Brit-

ish during their own use of coordinated military and police forces during their campaign in Northern Ireland, such as the conduct of integrated police-military cordon and search operations.

In order to compliment such doctrine and work more effectively with the police in the conduct of internal security operations, the TTDF has also sought to train officers conducting such activities in basic police procedures. To this end, on at least one occasion, the TTDF sought to establish a compressed version of the program from the police academy for its officers attempted to establish training programs for those soldiers, representing a compressed version of the skills taught at the police academy. There have been some tensions between soldiers and their police counterparts at the grass roots level due to differences in institutional cultures and work practices of the two organizations, to include some resentment among soldiers over the significant income that uniformed police officers receive from overtime pay, which may almost triple their base salary, while working hours similar to the soldiers, who do not receive such benefits.

While the TTDF has worked with its police counterparts without major tensions, military officers worry about the long term negative impact of extended deployments in law enforcement missions, on the preparedness of the military to perform other activities, as well

as the corruption of members of the military from extended contact with populations areas in which significant amounts of criminal activities are occurring.

On some occasions, when police manpower has been inadequate, elements of the TTDF have conducted security operations on their own, in areas such as shopping malls. These activities, known as 'confidence patrols', comply with the law regarding the supervision of the military by the police, even though police officers may not be physically present. Nonetheless, in doing so, TTDF members worry that they may not be prepared, either in their training or in the legal framework, for a significant violent encounter. Because of such concerns, the TTDF generally prefers to make such activities the exception rather than the rule.

In addition to specific issues such as confidence patrols, TTDF members are also concerned about the organization's broader lack of formal law enforcement authorities under the constitution, being restricted to conduct only 'citizen arrests' under police supervision. In the context of the high level of corruption perceived to exist within the Trinidad police, there is a sense within the military that, with arrest authorities, the organization could advance quickly to round up criminal actors and clean-up dangerous areas in ways that the police, to date, has been reluctant to do. Yet while the TTDF has actively sought such authorities, particularly from the prior government, such authorities have not been granted.

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