# TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR INTERNATIONAL SECURITY: NON-STATE ARMED GROUPS AND UNDER-GOVERNED SPACES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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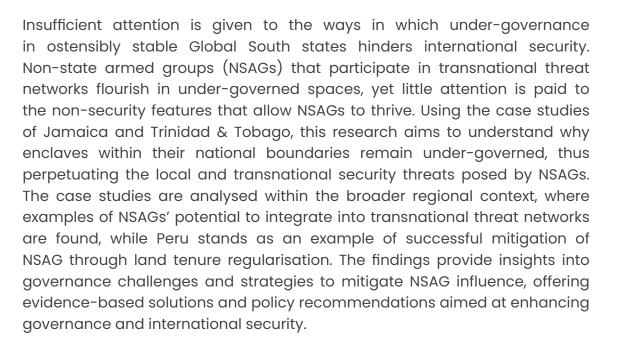
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## Abstract

Insufficient attention is given to the ways in which under-governance in ostensibly stable Global South states hinders international security. Non-state armed groups (NSAGs) that participate in transnational threat networks flourish in under-governed spaces, yet little attention is paid to the non-security features that allow NSAGs to thrive. Using the case studies of Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, this research aims to understand why enclaves within their national boundaries remain under-governed, thus perpetuating the local and transnational security threats posed by NSAGs. The case studies are analysed within the broader regional context, where examples of NSAGs' potential to integrate into transnational threat networks are found, while Peru stands as an example of successful mitigation of NSAG through land tenure regularisation. The findings provide insights into governance challenges and strategies to mitigate NSAG influence, offering evidence-based solutions and policy recommendations aimed at enhancing governance and international security.

## Keywords

# Evidence for decision-making

1. Criminal gangs, terrorist groups, and militant insurgent groups exploit under-governed spaces in Global South countries, contributing to high violence rates, drug trafficking, and international terrorism.

2. Effective legibility, territorial control, and land tenure regularisation reduce the potential for the formation of NSAGs and their influence in under-governed spaces, thereby enhancing national and international security.

3. Political expediency is the primary reason that governments fail to address the proliferation of under-governed spaces.

4. There is a high probability that NSAGs flourishing in under-governed spaces collaborate or become co-opted by transnational illicit networks, posing a danger to both national and international security.

5. Improved land use regulations can diminish NSAG influence by integrating informal settlements into formal governance, thus reducing safe havens for armed groups.

# Introduction

The proliferation of threat networks throughout the Global South became the central security concern for the liberal international order upon the Soviet Union's dissolution, particularly after Al-Qaeda successfully prosecuted the 9/11 attack on the United States (Abrahamsen & Sandor, 2018). Owing to their relative underdevelopment, Global South states were simultaneously viewed as passive actors in international security affairs and vulnerable to penetration by such networks. Consequently, developed countries adopted a strategy of coordinating security assistance and development aid to fortify weaker states against transnational threats. However, with the re-emergence of Great Power competition in the twenty-first century, major international players refocused on the threat of conventional war. Southern states have since become more active as intervenors when security threats arise in weaker countries, notably increasing participation, for example, in United Nations peacekeeping missions (Abrahamsen & Sandor, 2018). However, insufficient attention is given to the ways in which even ostensibly stable Global South states undermine international security by neglecting to secure their own territorial integrity, thereby allowing non-state armed groups (NSAGs) to flourish and participate in transnational threat networks.

## Advancing technology empowers NSAGs—criminal gangs, insurgencies, terrorists, and hybrids—to unite, expand capabilities, and deepen their threat to global peace.

Advancing technology enables NSAGs, such as criminal gangs, insurgencies, terrorist cells, and hybrid organisations, to continue to converge, augment their capabilities, and extend their reach, further exacerbating their collective threat to global peace (Realuyo, 2016; United Nations, 2023b). Developing countries' security forces, such as those in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, often struggle to keep pace with NSAGs' evolving capabilities and strategies, even with continued security assistance agreements with Northern partners such as the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative. While enhancing security forces' capacity to confront transnational NSAGs remains critical, less attention is paid to the non-security features that allow NSAGs to thrive, participate in international threat networks, and undermine democracy.

Research has shown that NSAGs thrive in developing countries with under-governed spaces, which can be co-opted as safe havens for their unlawful operations (Blake, 2022; Frank, 2022; Frank & Bartels, 2022).

Under-governed spaces are regions where the state's control is tenuous. These areas are often insulated from central authority, with local solidarities that challenge state power. Moreover, these areas are characterised by a sparsity of legitimate and enforced institutions, as well as being relatively inaccessible and largely illegible to the state. Historically, such regions have provided safe havens for resistance movements, criminal activities, and NSAGs, exploiting the absence of effective state oversight (Frank, 2022).

This article examines why such spaces persist even in smaller, stable democratic countries with manageable land areas. With a focus on Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, it explores how irregular land regulation undermines democratic control and enables NSAGs to exploit power vacuums and export operations abroad. We argue that these countries fail to consistently enforce the legal frameworks and institutions necessary for democratic control of territory, leaving certain spaces vulnerable to NSAG co-optation. These findings are placed in the context of the Americas, drawing lessons from Peru on how policies like land tenure regularisation can disrupt NSAG safe havens. It concludes with evidence-based solutions and policy recommendations to strengthen Global South governance and international security.

This perspective supports the New Agenda for Peace's promotion of peacebuilding strategies that enhance legal frameworks, economic development, institution-building, and inter-state cooperation (United Nations, 2023a). The UN's Policy Brief 9 highlights Global South states' vulnerability to destabilisation by transnational criminal and terrorist groups due to socio-political instabilities and institutional weaknesses. This article aligns with the Common Agenda's call for comprehensive national strategies to strengthen state institutions, uphold the rule of law, and promote social cohesion. It also contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by addressing violence, conflict, and weapon proliferation, emphasising the need for developing states to strengthen governance and institutional capacities.

## Methods

This article employs a comparative case study of Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago to examine under-governed spaces and their implications on international security. The research draws on documentary analysis of academic literature, official and media reports, and government documents to examine each country's historical context, governance structures, and NSAG activities, and identify key themes in governance and security.

A main limitation while conducting the study was the sparsity of information available on NSAG spaces in Trinidad & Tobago, making interviews with local experts crucial, as knowledge on this topic is nascent and only now being created. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four stakeholders—security officials, analysts, and social scientists, who provided informed consent. The interviews gathered expert insights on governance and security dynamics and captured key themes. This allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of each case study's historical context, governance structures, and NSAG activities.

A cross-case comparison was conducted to highlight similarities and differences between the cases. First, an in-depth case analysis of governance challenges and illicit transnational activities in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago was carried out, while the case of Peru served as an example of successfully mitigating NSAG threats through improved territorial governance. Each case was analysed independently to identify unique and common factors influencing governance and security. Finally, patterns were identified through comparative analysis, which yielded broader conclusions about under-governed spaces in the Global South.

## NSAG presence in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago

Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago are among several Latin American and Caribbean countries facing internal security threats from NSAGs concentrated in under-governed spaces (See Appendix 1 for a definition of key terms). Despite their relatively small size compared to other countries in the region, NSAGs originating in these nations have played an outsized role in undermining regional and global security. Trinidad & Tobago has sent the most foreign fighters per capita to the Islamic State (IS), contributing to Middle East destabilisation (Causwell, 2018; Cottee, 2021). Meanwhile, Jamaica has the world's second-highest murder rate, driven by criminal gangs that have long played a role in drug trafficking between the Americas and Europe, and collaborate with gangs overrunning Haiti (CAPRI, 2020). NSAGs in both countries contribute to persistently high rates of internal violence, threatening lives, security, democracy, and the rule of law.

The nature of the armed groups varies between the two nations: violent gangs predominate in Jamaica (CAPRI, 2024), while Trinidad & Tobago faces threats from both radical Muslim groups and violent gangs (Rampersad, 2023). Despite posing ongoing domestic and international threats, neither country has made substantive strides in eradicating these armed groups.

## Jamaica: How informal communities spawn transnational organised violent groups

The proliferation of informal settlements around Kingston from the 1930s led to public health crises, labour conflicts, and a breakdown in public order, which accelerated the push for Jamaican self-governance. Post-1962 independence, politicians sought to structure communities through social housing projects aimed at alleviating poverty and solidifying political control, thus creating the first 'garrisons' (Patterson, 2019). However, even informal settlements eventually became 'garrisonised' as they grew dependent on political patronage to prevent eviction. Local enforcers, or 'dons', fostered community loyalty to political parties through jobs, goods, services, and violence, while politicians facilitated these 'area leaders' in establishing organised criminal networks (Mogenson, 2005; Moser & Holland, 1997). This reciprocal relationship between local enforcers and political parties transformed communities into isolated gang strongholds, turning them into incubators for NSAGs. These garrisonised communities are now central to Jamaica's organised violence, which accounts directly and indirectly for 90% of the country's murder rate—one of the highest globally (CAPRI, 2024).

Jamaica's under-governed spaces not only serve as safe havens for domestic organised violent groups but also have implications for international security. Jamaican gangs have established networks abroad, particularly in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom, primarily through connections with diaspora members (CAPRI, 2020). These networks fuel the illegal firearms market (Miller, 2023) and export criminal tactics. Conflicts originating in Jamaica often find their echoes in U.S., Canadian, and UK cities, where gang-related violence among expatriate communities mirrors and sometimes escalates the hostilities found on the island (CAPRI, 2019). Moreover, Jamaican NSAGs are involved in regional illicit trade, notably with Haitian NSAGs and Central American drug traffickers (CAPRI, 2020).

The evolution of organised NSAGs in Jamaica is intertwined with the country's under-governed urban informal settlements and social housing communities, aligning with the concepts of "urbanisation without industrialisation" or "urbanisation without growth" (Davis, 2004). Rural inhabitants in developing countries were pushed by declining agricultural sectors into urban areas in the 20th century, rather than pulled by job-creating industrialisation. This led to 'over-urbanisation', marked by the rise of 'slums' or 'shanty towns' characterised by squalor and informal land tenure. Such insecure land tenure binds residents in a 'quasi-feudal' relationship with politicians, as they watch the surrounding city develop while their communities remain

unintegrated into mainstream governance. The research identified the continued dependence of politicians on these marginalised communities for electoral support as the main hindrance to their integration (CAPRI, 2024). The cross-border criminal activity from these under-governed spaces underscores the urgent need to transform irregular settlements from gang safe havens into secure, governed spaces.

## Trinidad & Tobago: Where the State absents itself, violent groups flourish

Trinidad & Tobago's radical Islamist network originates from a community of over 4,000 Afro-descendant converts, representing approximately 0.25% of the country's population. Militants from this network have been involved in international terrorism, with the twin-island nation having sent the most foreign fighters per capita to the Islamic State (IS) rebel group—the conservative estimate is 100-150 (Cottee, 2021; Causwell, 2018). Currently, the network presents one of the greatest challenges in terms of the radicalisation of local populations in the Caribbean.

**Under-governance led to domestic destabilisation in the short term and provided for the incubation of an extremist network participating in international terrorism in the long run.**

In the 1980s, a group of Afro-descendant converts to Sunni Islam founded Jamaat al-Muslimeen (JAM) as a haven for marginalised Afro-Trinidadians (Causwell, 2018). In 1983, the group established a compound in the country's capital—Mucarapo, Port of Spain—with a mosque, school, and housing, without governmental approval and on land to which they had no legal rights. This compound rapidly became a recruitment and radicalisation hub. Government seizure of the land led to the only Islamist coup attempt in Western Hemisphere history. Though the coup failed, JAM members were granted amnesty and regained control of the compound. However, the group eventually splintered. (Adams & Pawinski, 2022; Cottee, 2021).

One splinter faction established a new compound in rural Boos Village in Rio Claro, a somewhat remote village that became a hub for militant Islamism (R. Lynch, personal communication, June 10, 2024). During the 2010s, the Boos settlement housed 70% of the country's IS migrants before traveling to Syria. The settlement's isolation provided a buffer from state security, enabling the cultivation of a homogeneous community of Islamist radicals.

The ideological homogeneity, not unlike that of informal communities in Jamaica, further insulated the space from state penetration (M. Pawinski, personal communication, May 31, 2024). Evidence suggests that state authorities were aware of the radicalising activities ongoing at Boos, yet they made no effort to disrupt the settlement. As long as they appeared focused on participating in global jihad by joining IS in Syria, state authorities did not perceive the extremists as a domestic threat (Cottee, 2021).

Many of the migrants found their way to Boos via a satellite mosque in Chaguanas from the Enterprise district. Enterprise is characterised by a prevalence of public housing and gang violence (A. Santaram, personal communication, May 14, 2024). Like Jamaica's garrison communities, the social dynamics of public housing have made policing difficult and thus have been conducive to gangs' flourishing. Other research has laid out that powerful criminal gangs in Port of Spain were consolidated through political patronage and policies from the 1960s (Pawelz, 2020). Biographical evidence indicates that many fighters were initially involved in gang activities before becoming militant Islamists (Adams & Pawinski, 2022; Cottee, 2021). Currently, Enterprise houses the gang 'Unruly ISIS', indicating an ongoing threat of violent Islamism and potential recruitment for global jihadist movements (M. Pawinski, personal communication, May 31, 2024).

Despite social housing communities like Enterprise incubating criminal gangs and Islamic extremism, the government has not sought to disrupt them. This is likely due to political patronage, the same reason for their creation. Trinidad & Tobago's political parties are generally divided racially, with the Afro-Trinidadian People's National Movement (PNM) and the Indo-Trinidadian United National Congress (UNC) competing for influence. Social housing, ostensibly for low-income families, has been used to introduce Afro-Trinidadian voters into predominantly Indo-Trinidadian districts to break the party's local monopoly, a practice called 'house padding' (Lara, 2010; I. Rampersad, personal communication, May 24, 2024). These insular spaces are hard to govern, making them ideal for gang activity and jihadist recruitment. Maintaining public housing in Enterprise is a political choice: the ruling PNM retains its voter base, while the UNC risks accusations of political cleansing if it takes action to dismantle projects housing opposition voters.

Trinidad & Tobago's extremist network was able to take root and spread through under-governed spaces, the maintenance of which can only be explained by political expediency. The global consequences of Trinidadian nationals recruited as foreign fighters for IS underscore the international impact of radical extremism from relatively small but under-monitored

regions. Allowing for, or directly facilitating, the construction of irregular settlements supported the rise of the JAM, the subsequent compound at Boos Village, and the recruiting grounds in social housing communities such as Enterprise. Under-governance led to domestic destabilisation in the short term and provided for the incubation of an extremist network participating in international terrorism in the long run.

## NSAG dynamics in Latin America and the Caribbean

Informal and social housing communities in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago exemplify under-governed spaces, with insular social dynamics that make them relatively illegible and impermeable to state penetration. Physical isolation further hinders state security access for passive monitoring. Despite being two of the smallest countries in the Latin American-Caribbean region, Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago's experiences with NSAGs represent broader regional trends. The Americas, an ostensibly peaceful region with no recent inter-state wars, faces several cross-border challenges with organised crime, insurgency, and terrorism (R. Lynch, personal communication, June 10, 2024). Under-governed spaces across the region provide entry points for transnational threat networks.

Hezbollah's presence in the Americas illustrates the region's vulnerability to penetration by external threat networks, facilitated by local NSAGs. Hezbollah is a Shiite Muslim political party and militant group based in Lebanon. The Iran-backed group is driven by its opposition to Israel and its resistance to Western influence in the Middle East (Robinson, 2024). In the tri-border region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, Hezbollah has exploited under-governance by engaging corrupt officials and manipulating civilian authorities to conduct illegal activities such as arms trafficking, drug trafficking, and money laundering. The proceeds from these activities are often remitted to support their operations in Lebanon and the broader Middle East (Miller, 2023; Realuyo, 2014). Hezbollah's presence has also been noted in Colombia, Venezuela, Argentina, Chile, and Mexico, with smaller communities in Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, and Panama. The group's operations in the region highlight the potential for NSAGs to integrate into transnational threat networks and underscore global security challenges arising from under-governed spaces.

# Lessons from Peru

Peru stands out in the region for successfully overcoming its most significant NSAG challenge during a period of internal conflict. Sendero Luminoso launched its 'people's war' against the state in 1980 in Ayacucho, later expanding across the country. Many campesinos lacked land titles, making them vulnerable to exploitation, and enhancing the appeal of the insurgency's promise to protect and redistribute land. Over time, Sendero Luminoso established control over significant portions of the Peruvian countryside, created parallel administrative structures, and expanded to informal slums in cities like Lima. Initial efforts to counter Sendero Luminoso either failed or backfired until the government adopted a combined strategy involving civilian self-defence militias, targeted intelligence, and a national land tenure regularisation programme (CAPRI, 2024).

The land tenure programme was arguably key to success, as regularising land rights undermined the insurgency's support base (de Soto, 2014). The Special Land Titling Project (PETT) covered about 90% of the country's informal housing. By 2004, the government had registered 1.2 million households and issued 920,000 titles (Mitchell, 2005). The initiative was funded by USAID in the pilot phase, and then by the World Bank and other donors (Endo, 2004). By formalising land ownership, insurgents were isolated from their support bases and the government curtailed vital resources, safe havens, and potential recruits for the insurgency (Albertus, 2020; CAPRI, 2024). The reduction of the insurgency's influence pre-empted a decline in violence, restoring order and stability to Peru.

Lessons from Peru are useful to counter NSAG activities in other areas, as these groups often exploit the lack of formal land rights to build control and support (Shiffman, 2020). Formalising land ownership weakened the insurgents' base and restored state control. Regularising irregular settlements in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago could similarly weaken NSAG influence by integrating those spaces into mainstream governance. While context-specific strategies are needed, the overarching problem is similar: the states' capacity to carry out such interventions—Peru in the 1990s and Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago in the 2020s—are comparable, and there are no formidable historical differences that would prevent such an initiative from having similar outcomes. The successful intervention in Peru demonstrates the potential of land titling for improving governance, mitigating NSAG influence, and enhancing security globally.

# Conclusions and recommendations

Under-governed spaces, often stemming from land tenure irregularities, negatively impact citizen security, transnational stability, and democracy. Secure land tenure supports democratic governance and is highlighted under multiple SDGs, yet progress remains limited in the Global South (Lomborg, 2023). Moreover, the relationship between private land ownership and democratic governance is frequently overlooked in development efforts in the Global South.

**Throughout the twentieth century, many Global South countries neglected key social infrastructure, leading to under-governed spaces where NSAGs thrived, worsening domestic and international security.**

In democracies, the state decentralises territorial governance and enforces rules that facilitate private land ownership (Mann, 1984). This decentralisation creates a mutually beneficial relationship: landowners depend on the state for property rights enforcement and services, while the state relies on landowners for economic contributions and civil responsibilities. Thus, land tenure in democracies extends beyond property rights allocation, acting as social infrastructure analogous to feudal fiefdoms. It encourages local stewardship of land, political engagement, and a network of mutual responsibilities and benefits, motivating citizens to actively participate in community and national governance. Peru exemplifies this dynamic, where aligned interests between landowners and the state led to stabilised governance.

Throughout the twentieth century, many countries in the Global South variably adopted the decision-making procedures of democratic governance, such as electoral processes, but often neglected much of the social infrastructure that undergirds an effective democracy. The result is incomplete territorial governance, and thus the proliferation of under-governed spaces that serve as fertile ground for NSAGs to emerge and operate, exacerbating security challenges both domestically and internationally. This phenomenon, as seen in Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, and in the broader Latin American region, underlines the interconnectedness of under-governance with broader socio-political, economic, and security dynamics. Peru's land tenure initiative offers a blueprint for mitigating NSAG influence, demonstrating that institutional strengthening, enhancing legal frameworks, and increasing state presence are viable strategies for disrupting the environments that foster NSAGs (Azubuike et al., 2023).

This article contributes to a deeper understanding of how under-governance in the Global South links to international security concerns throughout the world. By adapting successful governance strategies from contexts like Peru and applying them judiciously in Caribbean settings, there is a substantial opportunity to improve security and democratic integrity, thus addressing a critical aspect of the global challenge posed by transnational criminal and terrorist groups.

Based on the case studies of Jamaica and Trinidad & Tobago, the following policy recommendations can be made to mitigate the national and transnational security threat that under-governance foments:

1. Pursue land tenure regularisation, which is key to aligning citizens' interests with the states. It provides a basis for improved economic development through reinforcing property rights and integrates these areas into the national polity, economy, and judicial system, leading to improved governance. Where such initiatives are often thwarted by state bureaucracy and vested political interests, these should be identified upfront as elements of global cooperation to be addressed.

2. Strengthen national governance structures as a corollary and subsequent set of ongoing activities to enhance the robustness and efficacy of local institutions, which is vital to sustaining state presence and authority. This involves coordinating improvements in law enforcement capabilities and public service delivery in under-governed spaces in the context of enhanced land use management policies and practices, thus reducing the appeal and influence of NSAGs.

3. Enhance international cooperation specifically targeted to the above reforms, including financial and technical support, and sharing intelligence and relevant best practices. Coordination efforts should focus on tackling the transnational activities of NSAGs, such as arms and drug trafficking, and participation in international terrorist networks.

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# Appendix 1

## Definition of key terms

**Governance** refers to the state's capacity to manage and coordinate social relations within its claimed territory (Fukuyama, 2013). Effective governance across a state's territory hinges on the reach and functionality of its institutions, the accessibility of its regions, and the legibility of these areas to the governing authorities (Fukuyama, 2013).

**Effective institutions,** such as currency and legal systems, shape behaviours within their domain, enforcing rules that facilitate orderly interactions and conflict resolution. By establishing and enforcing clear rules and frameworks that individuals and entities must follow, these rules create predictable environments, encourage cooperation, provide mechanisms for resolving disputes, guide actions and decisions, and promote order and stability within society (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012).

The **accessibility of a space,** understood as a parcel of territory within a nation-state's borders, uninhabited or peopled, is a prerequisite for governance and is facilitated by a robust institutional infrastructure. Strong infrastructural networks allow the state to project its authority from central to peripheral regions, ensuring uniform governance coverage (Soifer & Vom Hau, 2008). Effective governance involves the state's ability to respond swiftly to threats and maintain order through visible state presence, such as police forces (Mann, 1984).

**Legibility** refers to the state's ability to identify and monitor citizens, property, and economic activities. High legibility enables effective policy implementation and administration, from taxation to public health initiatives.

**Under-governed spaces** are characterised by ineffective control, limited state presence, and vulnerability to non-state actor dominance. These spaces often feature weak, ignored, or non-existent institutions, unable to enforce rules or moderate conflict effectively. The ineffectiveness may be due to partial institutional coverage or discrepancies in how laws are applied to different actors, such as state versus non-state entities (Grissom, 2022). Under-governed spaces often suffer from inadequate infrastructure, limiting state presence, and weak responsiveness, allowing non-state actors to fill the power vacuum (Frank & Bartels, 2022). Moreover, they are characterised by a lack of data and visibility, making it difficult for the state to assert control or implement policies effectively (Scott, 1998).