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# 1 Introduction

On 30 September 2025, the UN Security Council (UNSC) approved by Resolution 2793 the launch of the thirteenth peace operation in Haiti: the Gang Suppression Force (GSF), which as the name indicates, is mainly aimed at conducting – in cooperation with the Haitian police and armed forces – targeted operations using coercive force to neutralize, isolate and deter the criminal gangs that currently *de facto* control over 85% of the capital Port-au-Prince and the departments in the country's center, terrorize the civilian population through serious human rights abuses, are linked to transnational organized crime, and threaten the very existence of the Haitian state and its monopoly on legitimate violence (UNODC 2025). Thus, the GSF is the response by the UN to deal with the ongoing crisis in Haiti, which is not about a conventional war but an irregular and asymmetric conflict between weak and dysfunctional state security forces against logistically well-organized and better-equipped criminal gangs.

UN engagement in Haiti in the form of multinational peace operations began more than three decades ago and, so far, it shows a poor track record in managing and solving Haiti's deep political, economic and social crisis, as the country has repeatedly relapsed into cycles of instability and violence, to the point that it is currently on the brink of state collapse since 2021. The launch of the GSF is an auspicious occasion for critically revisiting the debate on "the futility of force" (Cockayne 2014) by UN peace operations in dealing with unconventional armed non-state actors for broader stabilization purposes through an in-depth examination of the case of Haiti. Therefore, the research subject of this study only encompasses those missions deployed by the Security Council under Chapter VII of the UN Charter that are authorized to use force to help local security forces to counter identified peace and security threats, and restore and secure state political authority and territorial integrity. Currently, the UN has just 11 peacekeeping missions on the ground, of which only three are of this type: the UN Stabilization Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (since 2010), the UN Mission in South Sudan (since 2011) and the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (since 2014) – and most lately, the newly launched (but not yet fully deployed and operational) GSF in Haiti. Although the debates on the use and futility of coercive force from the international relations and peace and conflict research are not new but have

been central and recurrent in broader discussions about the purposes, practices and identity of UN peacekeeping since around three decades, this newest launched mission provides an occasion to rekindle this critical discussion, so this booklet aims at summarily revisiting this debate and its critical issues by performing an up-to-date analysis of a very topical case, such as Haiti.

Haiti is an extreme but highly illustrative case for reexamining these paradoxes. Haiti is an island state located in the Caribbean Sea, with a land area of 27,750 km<sup>2</sup> (similar in size to the German federal state of Brandenburg) and an estimated population of 11.9 million, of whom nearly 3 million people live in the metropolitan area of Port-au-Prince. With 59% of the population living below the poverty line – of which 38% are in extreme poverty (on less than USD 1.25 per day) – and a life expectancy of about 61 years, Haiti has been regarded for decades as the poorest country in the Americas, one of the nations in the lowest 15% globally on the Human Development Index and one of the world's top-10 failed states, due to the government's inability to perform basic functions such as delivering public services, ensuring domestic order and monopolizing legitimate violence, meager political governance, generalized mismanagement and endemic corruption, absence of the rule of law and low socio-economic development (The World Bank 2025, Fragile States Index 2024, UNDP 2023). Haiti has been selected as a case study not only because of the acute state collapse caused by gang activities – which has been making headlines in the international media in recent years, but also since the country is highly illustrative of the paradoxes surrounding the futility and effectiveness of the use of force by peace operations, especially when considering that the country has hosted the largest number of missions throughout the entire history of UN peacekeeping (see section 4). Haiti is therefore an extreme case of a long-standing and chronic failed state with a structural inability to fulfill its basic functions and monopolizing coercive violence, and where consecutive and resource-intensive international interventions have been incapable through various means of completely breaking down the criminal gangs and rendering the state both stable and functional.

This study bears academic and practical relevance for critically reviewing the rationale and performance of UN peace operations concerning the use of coercive force in Haiti. On the one hand, a temporary gap of nearly a decade exists in the academic discussion on the performance of UN missions in Haiti: While the UN Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) received considerable attention among the circles of scholars and practitioners in the 2010s, the most recent developments over the 2020s, including the launching of the Multinational Security Support Mission in Haiti (MSS), have been

very poorly addressed through theory-driven scholarly contributions. On the other hand, a critical assessment of the strengths and shortcomings of the two above-mentioned peace operations in using force to counter Haitian gangs and foster state stabilization will serve, from a practical standpoint, to outline a series of policy recommendations for the newly launched GSF and future engagement by the international community in Haiti. The analysis provided in this study is underpinned by a critical examination and documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include UN resolutions and reports, while secondary sources comprise books, journal articles, working papers, reports from non-government organizations and think tanks, and carefully selected news articles.

The remainder of this booklet is structured in four sections. Section two provides a theoretical review on the genesis of use of force practices by stabilization missions and outlines five critical elements surrounding them: the ambiguity of their mandates, the tension with the principle of impartiality by peace operations, the disposal of required operative and tactical capabilities, the negative unintended consequences of using force, and its ultimate purpose as a means to building political and societal peace. In the third section, the framework under which these missions operate in the selected case study is contextualized, offering a brief socio-political overview of Haiti and a characterization of the genesis and evolution process of Haitian criminal gangs. The fourth section examines in detail the performance of the two missions (MINUSTAH and the MSS) previously authorized by the UNSC under Chapter VII powers to deploy coercive force for stabilization purposes in order to counter the gangs and uphold the authority of the Haitian state, based on the five critical elements outlined above. Finally, a comprehensive assessment of these experiences is provided, for later drawing up a batch of recommendations for the future work of the GSF and fostering the sustainability of the state, overall reconstruction and societal peace in Haiti.