



The Mounting Hezbollah Threat in Latin America

By Roger F. Noriega and José R. Cárdenas

Over the last several years Hezbollah and its patrons in Iran have greatly expanded their operations in Latin America to the detriment of inter-American security and US strategic interests. Today, Hezbollah is using the Western Hemisphere as a staging ground, fundraising center, and operational base to wage asymmetric warfare against the United States. Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and other anti-American governments in the region have facilitated this expansion by rolling out the welcome mats for Hezbollah and Iran. US policymakers must increase their attention to this problem, expand their assets in the region, and develop a comprehensive strategy to combat this threat in a sustained and meaningful way.

Hezbollah's presence in Latin America dates to the mid-1980s, when it began sending operatives into the notoriously lawless region known as the tri-border area (TBA)—where the borders of Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay meet—to use it as a principal safe haven for fundraising, money laundering, recruitment, training, plotting, and other terrorist-related activities.¹ Their activity also includes drug and arms trafficking, counterfeiting, forging travel documents, and pirating software and music. Their resulting proselytizing has led to the creation of numerous Hezbollah cells, with an estimated 460 operatives in the TBA by mid-2000.²

It is impossible to quantify the level of criminal activity taking place in the TBA, but some estimate that Islamic extremist groups there and in other suspect areas in Latin America remit \$300 to \$500 million per year in illicit profits to radical Islamic groups in the Middle East.³ US authorities have been well aware of the wanton criminality occurring in the TBA through the years and have cited some individuals and entities for providing

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financing to terrorist groups and achieved some extraditions, but the overall effort to combat the menace has been hampered by uneven levels of cooperation from the governments of Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay.

It is not appropriate, though, to see this as simply a law enforcement issue, as if the illicit business activities and fundraising were ends in themselves. In fact, the nature of the threat has changed considerably. Hezbollah is a preeminent

Key points in this Outlook:

- To ward off its international isolation and undermine US influence in the region, Iran, with its Hezbollah proxy in tow, has made a major diplomatic and economic push into the Western Hemisphere.
- Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and other radical anti-American populists have made common cause with Iran and Hezbollah in waging asymmetric warfare against the United States.
- Hezbollah's criminality in the region has multiplied as it has established deeper relations with transnational criminal organizations.
- Evidence indicates Hezbollah is sharing its terrorist experiences and techniques with Mexican drug cartels along the US border.

The Changing Nature of Hezbollah's Presence in Latin America

- In 2007, one member of the network plotting a terrorist attack at New York's JFK International Airport met with radical Iranian cleric and Western Hemisphere point man Mohsen Rabbani in Iran; he was subsequently arrested in Trinidad en route to Venezuela, where he planned to board a flight to Tehran.⁴
- In a September 2009 speech, then-District Attorney of New York Robert Morgenthau identified Hugo Chávez's two principal interlocutors with Hezbollah: Venezuelan Interior Minister Tarik El Aissami, who was suspected of having issued passports to Hezbollah operatives, and Venezuelan Ghazi Nassereddine, who has been sanctioned by the United States as a terrorist financier of Hezbollah.⁵
- In 2010, a sensitive source confirmed that two Iranian Hezbollah operatives were conducting terror training on Venezuela's Margarita Island for people brought there from other countries in the region.
- In July 2010, Mexican authorities arrested Jameel Nasr in Tijuana, Mexico, for attempting to set up a Hezbollah network in Mexico and throughout the region.⁶
- On August 22, 2010, Hugo Chávez hosted a terror summit of senior leaders of Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in Caracas.⁷
- In April 2011, Venezuelan drug kingpin Walid Makled confirmed in an interview that Hezbollah operates cocaine labs in Venezuela with the protection of the country's government.⁸
- In August 2011, the Italian newspaper *Corriere Della Sera* reported that Hezbollah had established a cell in Cuba to expand its terrorist activity and possibly facilitate an attack on Jewish targets in the Western Hemisphere.⁹

international terrorist organization dedicated to waging Islamic jihad against its enemies, which include the United States and its allies, and the threat it poses should be dealt with accordingly by all law-abiding nations.

The Hezbollah Modus Operandi

Building cells abroad in the service of Hezbollah's mission involves substantial time and investment. The group

sends only its most committed and intrepid operatives into new regions with no support. They must establish a network from scratch among which they can raise money to send back to the leadership in Lebanon, familiarize themselves with the territory and potential targets, and begin planning operations. Invariably, their missions involve infiltrating or establishing mosques or "Islamic centers" to help Hezbollah to spread its influence, legitimize its cause, and promote jihad on a global scale.

Each Hezbollah cell is a complex organization with multiple components: a *dawa* (proselytizing) and recruitment component, utilizing religious clerics, Islamic centers, Internet sites, and local media broadcasting; a fundraising component that oversees illicit and legitimate business activity and relationships; and an operational component, which covers logistics, planning, surveillance, and execution of missions.

Ultimately, every Hezbollah cell exists for the sole purpose of executing operations, with time and place decided on by the supreme leadership.¹⁰ The express purpose of building infrastructure in countries abroad is to minimize the time between deciding to pursue an operation and executing it.

Game Change: Ahmadinejad Meets Chávez

Hezbollah clearly acts as a proxy for Iran—specifically, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps Qods Force—globally and in Latin America. Thus, Hezbollah's escalating presence in the Western Hemisphere can be understood only in the context of its patron Iran's pursuit of its strategic objectives. In the face of international sanctions for its pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability, Iran has invested heavily in a global strategy to break its diplomatic isolation, develop new sources of strategic materials, and undermine US influence wherever opportunities exist.

To these ends, Iran has made the Western Hemisphere a priority, expanding its number of embassies in the region from six in 2005 to ten in 2010.¹¹ The real game-changer, however, has been the alliance developed between Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuela's Hugo Chávez.

Hugo Chávez's track record of anti-Americanism and support for terrorist groups such as the Revolutionary

Armed Forces of Colombia is well-established, but his making common cause with a radical Islamic theocracy in waging asymmetric warfare (unconventional and irregular methods used by a weaker opponent against a stronger opponent) against the United States truly speaks to the depths of his fanaticism. He has allowed Iran to mine uranium in Venezuela and has worked assiduously to undermine economic sanctions against the Iranian regime (for which Venezuela has, in turn, been sanctioned).¹² In recent years, moreover, Venezuela's Margarita Island has eclipsed the infamous TBA as the principal safe haven and center of Hezbollah operations in the Americas.

But Chávez has not stopped there. He has served as the principal interlocutor on Iran's behalf with other like-minded heads of state in the region, primarily Rafael Correa (Ecuador) and Evo Morales (Bolivia), both members of the Chávez-sponsored Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) and both of whom have established dubious networks with criminal transnational groups.¹³ According to recent congressional testimony by investigative journalist Doug Farah, this has led to "the merging of the Bolivarian Revolution's criminal-terrorist pipeline activities and those of the criminal-terrorist pipeline of radical extremist groups (Hezbollah in particular) supported by the Iranian regime."¹⁴ Such ties are invaluable to groups like Hezbollah, as they afford them protection, safe havens in which to operate, and even diplomatic status and immunity—with no other commonality of purpose than to inflict damage on the United States.

Hezbollah Networks

Our research from open sources, subject-matter experts, and sensitive sources within various governments has identified at least two parallel yet collaborative terrorist networks growing at an alarming rate in Latin America. One is operated by Hezbollah and aided by its collaborators, and the other is managed by the Qods Force of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. These networks encompass more than eighty operatives in at least twelve countries throughout the region (with the greatest areas of focus being Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina, and Chile).

The Nassereddine Network

Ghazi Nassereddine, a native of Lebanon who became a Venezuelan citizen about ten years ago and is now Venezuela's second-ranking diplomat in Syria, is the most prominent Hezbollah supporter in Venezuela, because of his diplomatic role and his close relationship to Chávez confidante Tarik El Aissami. Along with at least two of his brothers, Nassereddine manages a network to expand Hezbollah's influence in Venezuela and throughout Latin America. Using his diplomatic status, Nassereddine has built and consolidated relationships with Hezbollah officials, first in Lebanon and now in Syria.

Nassereddine's brother Abdallah, a former member of the Venezuelan legislature, uses his position as the former vice president of the Federation of Arab and American Entities in Latin America and the president of its local chapter in Venezuela to maintain ties with Islamic communities throughout the region.¹⁵ He currently resides on Margarita Island, where he runs various money-laundering operations and manages much of the business dealings of Hezbollah in Latin America.

Younger brother Oday is responsible for establishing paramilitary training centers on Margarita Island. He currently resides in Barquisimeto, Venezuela, 170 miles southwest of Caracas, where he is actively recruiting Venezuelans through local *circulos bolivarianos* (neighborhood watch committees made up of the most radical Chávez followers) and sending them to Iran for follow-on training.

The Rabbani Network

Hojjat al-Eslam Mohsen Rabbani, who was the cultural attaché at the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Buenos Aires, Argentina, oversees a parallel Hezbollah recruitment network.¹⁶ Rabbani is currently the international affairs advisor to the Al-Mostafa Al-Alam Cultural Institute in Qom, which is tasked with propagation of Shia Islam outside Iran.¹⁷ Rabbani, referred to by the important Brazilian magazine *Veja* as "the Terrorist Professor,"¹⁸ is a die-hard defender of the Iranian revolution and the mastermind behind the two notorious terrorist attacks against Jewish

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targets in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994 that killed 144 people.¹⁹

At the time, Rabbani was credentialed as a cultural attaché at the Iranian embassy in the Argentine capital, which he used as a staging ground for extremist propaganda, recruitment, and training that culminated in the attacks in the 1990s. In fact, he continues to exploit that network of Argentine converts today to expand Iran's and Hezbollah's reach by leveraging them in identifying and recruiting operatives throughout the region for radicalization and terrorist training in Venezuela and Iran (specifically, the city of Qom).

At least two mosques in Buenos Aires—Al Imam and At-Tauhid—are run by Rabbani disciples. Sheik Abdallah Madani runs the Al Imam mosque, which also serves as the headquarters for the Islamic-Argentine Association, one of the most prominent Islamic cultural centers in Latin America.

Some of Rabbani's disciples have taken what they have learned from their mentor in Argentina and replicated it elsewhere in the region. Sheik Karim Abdul Paz, an Argentine convert to Shiite Islam, studied under Rabbani in Qom for five years and succeeded him at the At-Tauhid mosque in Buenos Aires in 1993.²⁰ Abdul Paz is now the imam of a cultural center in Santiago, Chile, the Centro Chileno Islamico de Cultura de Puerto Montt. His wife, Masoumeh As'ad Paz, is the head of the Argentine Muslim Women's League, the editor of *Moazzen*, and director of the activities of the Argentine Islamic Aid and Relief Committee and the Argentine Islamic Cultural Institute.²¹

Another Argentine convert to radical Islam and Rabbani disciple now in Chile is Sheik Suhail Assad, currently a professor at the University of Santiago who lectures at universities throughout the region and appears frequently on television. Most recently, he was in El Salvador establishing relationships with the Muslim community.²²

But the real prize for the Rabbani network—and Hezbollah in general—is Brazil, home to some 1 million Muslims. Rabbani has a brother living there, Mohammad Baquer Rabbani Razavi, the founding father of the Iranian Association in Brazil, whom he visits and coordinates with systematically.²³ Another of his principal collaborators is Sheik Khaled Taki Eldyn, a Sunni radical from the Sao Paulo Guarulhos mosque.

Taki Eldyn, who is active in ecumenical activities with the Shia mosques, also serves as the secretary general of the Council of the Leaders of the Societies and Islamic Affairs of Brazil.²⁴ A sensitive source linked that mosque to a TBA network designated by the US Treasury

Department as one that provides major financial and logistical support to Hezbollah.²⁵ As far back as 1995, Taki Eldyn hosted al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheik Mohammed in the TBA region. According to sources in Brazilian intelligence cited by the Brazilian magazine *Veja*, at least twenty operatives from Hezbollah, al Qaeda, and the Islamic Jihad are using Brazil as a hub for terrorist activity.²⁶

Despite being the subject of an Interpol Red Notice, Rabbani reportedly still operates in the region, traveling under

false papers and connecting with his former disciples. Rabbani was in Venezuela as recently as March and in Brazil as recently as September 2010, where he and his brother continue their recruitment efforts.

Mexico and the US Border

The immediate US national security concern related to Hezbollah activity in Latin America is Mexico, where the terrorist group has ready access to the US border. Principal Hezbollah activities there include human smuggling and narcotics trafficking. According to recent congressional testimony, "repeated apprehensions by Mexican authorities of human smuggling networks connected to Hezbollah over the past half-decade indicate that this troubling pattern of activity continues unabated."²⁷ Hezbollah's capacity to move operatives across the US border was noted in a 2007 Homeland Security Committee staff report on threats along the border: "Members of Hezbollah, the Lebanon-based terrorist organization, have already entered to the United States across our Southwest border."²⁸

In a notable case, Salim Boughader Mucharrافیlle was sentenced to sixty years in prison in 2008 after being arrested in 2002 by Mexican authorities on charges of organized crime and immigrant smuggling. Mucharrافیlle, a Mexican of Lebanese descent who owned a small restaurant in Tijuana, Mexico, just south of San Diego, smuggled 200 people, reportedly including Hezbollah

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supporters, into the United States.²⁹ A second case involved Mahmoud Youssef Kourani, who pled guilty in 2005 in the United States to providing material support to Hezbollah. Kourani had bribed a Mexican official in Beirut for a visa to travel to Mexico. From there, he crossed the US border and made his way to Dearborn, Michigan, where there is a sizable Lebanese expatriate community, and began raising funds for Hezbollah in Lebanon. Kourani's brother is Hezbollah's chief of military operations in southern Lebanon.³⁰

While there certainly have been no reported cases of Hezbollah smuggling operatives across the border to carry out terrorist attacks in the United States, it is neither "sensationalist" nor "alarmist" to be concerned about it and respond with appropriate policy measures.³¹

Hezbollah's other focus is making common cause with drug trafficking networks in Mexico (and elsewhere in the Americas). For example, in March 2009, current and former US officials told the *Washington Times* that ties between Hezbollah and Mexican drug cartels have been strengthening over the past few years. According to Michael Braun, a former high-ranking Drug Enforcement Administration official, Hezbollah relies on "the same criminal weapons smugglers, document traffickers and transportation experts as the drug cartels."³²

According to an internal September 2010 Tucson (Arizona) Police Department memo leaked by an Internet hacker group, law enforcement authorities there are concerned about links between Mexican drug trafficking organizations (DTOs) and Hezbollah.³³ Specifically, they note Hezbollah's long-established expertise in the use of small improvised explosive devices and car bombs and the dire implications for border security if such expertise and technology was transferred to Mexican DTOs.

According to the memo, "Recent events involving the use of VBIEDs [vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices] make a significant change in tactics employed by DTOs and conjure images expected to be seen in the Middle East. While no connection has been made, Hezbollah's extensive use of VBIEDs raises strong suspicion concerning a possible relation to Mexican DTOs."

Another disturbing development signaling a growing relationship between Hezbollah and Mexican drug cartels is the increasingly sophisticated narco-tunnels being found along the US-Mexico border. According to investigative journalist Doug Farah, these tunnels

resemble the types used by Hezbollah in Lebanon, raising the concern that Hezbollah is providing drug traffickers the technology to construct such smuggling channels.³⁴

Farah also notes that "numerous former intelligence and law enforcement officials have publicly discussed the appearance in recent years of arrested gang members entering the United States with Farsi tattoos and other goods that could indicate a Hezbollah influence."

Some US policymakers are keenly aware of the threat. Last year, Rep.

Sue Myrick (R-NC), a member of the House Intelligence Committee, wrote a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano calling for more intelligence gathering on Hezbollah activities on the US border and requesting that she "form a Homeland Security task force to engage U.S. and Mexican law enforcement and border patrol officials about Hezbollah's presence, activities, and connections to gangs and rug cartels."³⁵

Frankly, it would be more surprising if there was no cooperation between Hezbollah and Mexican cartels, given the obvious benefits to both criminal groups. The cartels are able to access Hezbollah's smuggling and explosives expertise and links with drug trafficking networks in the Middle East and South Asia. Hezbollah is able to establish a presence in a lawless environment with ready access to the US border at the same time it promotes harmful activity to undermine the US social fabric.

Conclusion

Research demonstrates that Hezbollah—via its patrons Iran and Venezuela—has engaged the United States in an offensive strategy of asymmetric warfare designed to expand its influence in an area of strategic importance to the United States, to the detriment of US interests. Neither Hezbollah, Iran, nor Venezuela has made any secret of their strategy and objectives.

Primarily because Hezbollah now enjoys "official" support from some governments in Latin America—including Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua—combined with the unwillingness of other governments to recognize its threat, we can expect to see the Hezbollah presence in Latin America become more active and deadly in the coming years. Hugo Chávez's illness may complicate Venezuela's risky support for Hezbollah (Ahmadinejad was forced to cancel another visit to Venezuela in September 2011 because of Chávez's declining

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health), but unfortunately its terror network has metastasized in the Americas. Our research indicates, moreover, that the most tempting target for Hezbollah in the region is Brazil, one of the world's ten largest economies with a population of 1 million Muslims.

In developing effective policy responses, we must understand the threat we are confronting. Hezbollah is not just one more criminal entity operating in the Americas. As Doug Farah states, "The nature of the threat to the United States then is not merely the drugs in the criminal pipelines and multiple transnational criminal activities that directly affect us every day. It is the establishment of political and financial influence and military presence by Hezbollah, a terrorist organization that enjoys the state sponsorship of Iran and, to a lesser degree, Syria, in concert with states that are hospitable to its movements and that are replicating its model, particularly south of the border."³⁶

That model relies on someone else to do your dirty work. In this case, the so-called ALBA countries, united by nothing more than anti-Americanism, are using a designated terrorist organization to service their destructive agendas. That this provides them a direct channel to the US border should concern all US policymakers.

US and other government authorities have identified and sanctioned some of the leaders of these networks, and US law enforcement agencies—led by the Drug Enforcement Administration—have made great efforts to assess and confront this threat by building cases against foreign officials and sanctioning commercial entities that provide support to this criminal terror organization. However, this dangerous network requires a whole-government strategy, beginning with an interagency review to understand and assess the transnational, multifaceted nature of the problem; educate friendly governments; and implement effective measures unilaterally and with willing partners to disrupt and dismantle their operations.

The stakes are clear. In a May 2011 visit to Bolivia, Iranian Defense Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi proclaimed that in the event of any military confrontation between Iran and the United States, "The strong Iran is ready for enemy-crushing and tough response in case of any illogical and violent behavior by the U.S."³⁷ There is every reason to believe that such a response would utilize every weapon in Iran's arsenal, including Hezbollah. But we do not have to wait until an outbreak of military hostilities between the United States and Iran to confront Hezbollah's continuing efforts to consolidate its presence

and expand its influence in the Western Hemisphere. The United States and responsible governments in Latin America need to act now, precisely so that we do not have to respond later.

Notes

1. Rex Hudson, *Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America* (Washington, DC: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 2003), www.loc.gov/frd/pdf-files/TerrOrgCrime_TBA.pdf (accessed September 27, 2011). The area has proven inviting not only to Hezbollah but other Islamic extremist groups, including the Islamic Resistance Movement (Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiyya-Hamas), Islamic Jihad, al-Gama's al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group), and al Qaeda, in addition to a number of transnational criminal organizations.

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. US Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York, "Imam from Trinidad Convicted of Conspiracy to Launch Terrorist Attack at JFK Airport," news release, May 26, 2011, www.justice.gov/usao/nye/pr/2011/2011may26b.html (accessed September 29, 2011). Venezuela hosts a regular flight between Caracas, Tehran, and Damascus with secret passenger lists and cargo manifests. According to Brazil's *Veja* magazine, Brazilian intelligence officials label the flights "AeroTerror." See Rodrigo Rangel, "'Professor' Terrorista," April 18, 2011, www.itamaraty.gov.br/sala-de-imprensa/selecao-diaria-de-noticias/midias-nacionais/brasil/veja/2011/04/18/2011cprofessor201d-terrorista (accessed September 30, 2011).

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8. Casto Ocando, "Había una nominata como de 1 millón de dólares' para los altos mandos en Venezuela," *Univision*, March 31, 2011, <http://noticias.univision.com/aqui-y-ahora/article/2011-03-31/entrevista-exclusiva-walid-makled-aqui-ahora-denuncia-narco-corrupcion-chavez> (accessed September 27, 2011).

9. Olimpio Guido, "L' Hezbollah sbarca a Cuba 'Prepara nuove azioni,'" *Corriere Della Sera*, August 31, 2011, http://archivistorico.corriere.it/2011/agosto/31/Hezbollah_sbarca_Cuba_Prepara_nuove_co_9_110831020.shtml (accessed September 27, 2011); Menachem Gantz, "Report: Hezbollah Opens Base in Cuba," *Ynetnews*, September 1, 2011, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4116628,00.html (accessed September 27, 2011).

10. To emphasize the point that fundraising is not the end-all for Hezbollah operatives in Latin America, one analyst cites the case of Sobhi Mahmoud Fayad, who was arrested by Paraguayan authorities in 2001 after he was caught surveilling the US embassy in Asunción. It turns out Fayad was also a prolific fundraiser for Hezbollah, sending on some \$50 million amassed in the region. That Hezbollah would sacrifice such a fundraising asset on a risky endeavor demonstrates the centrality of operational planning over any other objective in Hezbollah leaders' mind-set. See Cyrus Miryetta, "Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area of South America," *Small Wars Journal*, September 10, 2010, www.smallwarsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/533-miryetta.pdf (accessed September 27, 2011).

11. Douglas M. Fraser, "Posture Statement," Testimony before the 112th Congress, House Armed Services Committee, March 30, 2011, www.armedservices.house.gov/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=fcc6b631-6b51-4bdb-b0a0-6b97ea36cb58 (accessed September 29, 2011).

12. Keith Johnson, "U.S. Cuts Off Firms Over Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, May 25, 2011.

13. José R. Cárdenas, "The Chávez Model Threatens Ecuador," *AEI Latin American Outlook* (March 2011), www.aei.org/outlook/101037; Douglas Farah, *Into the Abyss: Bolivia under Evo Morales and the MAS* (Alexandria, VA: International Assessment and Strategy Center, 2009), www.strategycenter.net/docLib/20090618_IASCIIntoTheAbyss061709.pdf (accessed September 27, 2011).

14. Douglas Farah, "Hezbollah in Latin America: Implications for U.S. Security," Testimony before the House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, July 7, 2011, www.homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Testimony%20Farah.pdf (accessed September 27, 2011).

15. This organization was founded in Argentina in 1972 to unite Muslims, namely the Syrian and Lebanese communities, in Latin America and has spread rapidly throughout Latin America, with offices in Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Cuba, Venezuela, Guadalupe Island, Antigua, and Uruguay. It is overtly anti-Israel; supportive of anti-American regimes in the Middle East and Latin America; and used as a platform for Hezbollah to raise money, recruit supporters, and solicit illegal visas.

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