

Terrorism in Latin America (Part One): The Infiltration of Islamic Extremists

Issue Brief No. 206

By David Grantham

March 2017

The threat from Islamic extremists in Latin America remains an overlooked aspect of U.S. national security strategy. And the threat is worsening – not “waning” as the Obama administration claimed about Iran in 2013.¹ The Trump administration should shift U.S. priorities in Latin America to strategies that preemptively disrupt the financial networks of Islamists, aid allied governments with legal and law enforcement support, and increase intelligence-gathering capabilities in the region.



Dallas Headquarters:
14180 Dallas Parkway, Suite 350
Dallas, TX 75254
972.386.6272

www.ncpa.org



The Process Began Decades Ago. Islamic extremists have used Latin America as a base of political and financial support since the immediate years preceding the formation of Israel in May 1948:

- A handful of Arab officials and Arab-Palestinian sympathizers began fundraising efforts and circulated anti-Israeli literature throughout parts of Latin America not long after the first Arab-Israeli war (1948-1949).
- As networks developed and diplomacy turned to violent activism, more militant groups moved in; for instance, in the 1960s, the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) used established networks to build their own base of support among guerrilla factions, local anti-Semitic organizations and Arab civic groups in Argentina.
- Furthermore, the PLO and others also collaborated with rebels in Nicaragua in the 1970s and with the Cuban government in the 1973 Arab-Israeli conflict.²

Aided by these local networks, Iran began settling its agents in Latin America in the early 1980s and operatives from Hezbollah — a militant Islamist group based in Lebanon and proxy force of Iran — soon followed.

Latin America Is Important for Relationships and Money. Today, international Islamists, especially Iran and Hezbollah, employ much more sophisticated fundraising and recruitment operations that reach far and wide. Former U.S. ambassador to the Organization of American States Roger Noriega told Congress in March 2012 that Iran now has 80 Hezbollah Islamist operatives in at least 12 Latin American nations — including Brazil, Venezuela, Argentina and Chile.³ In fact, the U.S. Treasury Department froze the assets of Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami in February 2017 for his collaboration with drug organizations and terrorist groups such as Hezbollah.⁴

Separately, author and senior Pentagon consultant Edward Luttwak describes the lawless triborder region of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, 800 miles north of Buenos Aires, as the most important base for Hezbollah outside of its headquarters in Lebanon.⁵ [See the figure.] The \$6 billion-a-year illicit economy in this Hezbollah stronghold has allowed a variety of terrorist organizations to earn an estimated \$10 million to \$20 million a year from arms trafficking, counterfeiting and drug distribution, among other illegal activities.⁶

The Infiltration of Islamic Extremists

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia has invested millions to construct mosques and cultural centers in South America and Central America that expand the reach of its rigid version of Islam, known as Wahhabism. Its highest profile accomplishment came when then-Argentine president Saul Menem, the son of Syrian Muslim immigrants, donated 8 acres of coveted land in high-priced Buenos Aires in 1995 for the construction of a \$30 million, Saudi-funded mosque. The largest mosque of its kind in Latin America, it was dedicated in 2000.

The international spread of Saudi dogma, which the State Department's first special representative to Muslim communities worldwide, Farah Pandith, called "insidious," has laid the foundation for likeminded radicals to thrive in other areas of Latin America.⁷ The most notorious was Adnan el Skukrijumah, an Al Qaeda operative and Saudi citizen who appeared on the FBI's Most Wanted List. He was raised for a time in Guyana, where his father allegedly operated a Saudi-funded mosque.

The Muslim Brotherhood — a transnational Sunni Islamist movement — has now also carved out a beachhead in Guyana, according to author and former Air Force Special Agent P. David Gaubatz. Terrorism expert Douglas Farah explained the Brotherhood's ability to piggyback on the work of likeminded extremists, writing in 2007 that although the Sunni-Shia divide remains deep, "the differences on the ground appear to be overcome by tactical alliances, particularly in the movement of money and the procurement of services such as false identity papers."

Farah says the international Muslim Brotherhood acts as the bridge for these traditionally irreconcilable divisions in Latin America, partly due to its significant number of corporate registries and extensive offshore banking. After September 11th, the U.S. Treasury Department closed down two of these financial institutions in Nassau, Bahamas, for funneling money and weapons to Al Qaeda. Those Brotherhood-affiliated banks were also known for funding and holding millions in reserve for Hamas — the paramilitary, fundamentalist Palestinian political party and U.S.-designated terrorist organization in control of Gaza.⁹

The threats to U.S. security in the Greater Caribbean region are even more alarming in Trinidad and Tobago. The small island nation off the coast of Venezuela, once the target of an overthrow by Islamic militants, has also become a breeding ground for ISIS — 70 of the 100 Latin Americans known to have joined ISIS originated from the small country.¹⁰ Suriname is another country of concern in the Greater Caribbean region.

Triborder Area



Source: www.outsidethebeltway.com/iran-hezbollah-and-latin-america/

Terrorist Attacks in Latin America. The presence of extremists in Latin America is often overlooked because there have been few attacks. But the capabilities of those willing to conduct terrorist attacks, rather than the frequency of attacks, should be the primary concern for U.S. officials. Several western intelligence services and Argentina concluded that Hezbollah, supported by Iran, was responsible for the two deadliest terror attacks in the country's history:

- On March 17, 1992, a car bomb detonated outside the Israeli embassy in Argentina's capital, killing 28 people and injuring 220. Just over three-fourths cost the patient \$10 or less.
- The embassy attack was the deadliest in Argentine history until the 1994 bombing against the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA), which leveled a seven-story building, killing 85 people and injuring hundreds — the worst mass murder of Jews in the Diaspora since the Holocaust.¹¹
- Then, Iran's well-oiled machine in Latin America came into play, as authors Tom Diaz and Barbara Newman explain, when operatives connected to the 1992 bombing escaped months after the attack to a Hezbollah outpost off the coast of Venezuela called Isla Margarita.

Tellingly, the truck used in the 1992 bombing was purchased in, and the explosives used in the 1994 AMIA attack were smuggled through, the Triborder region.¹²

The whole truth regarding these terrorist acts has yet to be revealed. In what Latin American expert Joseph Humire called the “most important political assassination in Latin America of the 21st century,” on January 18, 2015, Alberto Nisman, the Argentine prosecutor handling the stagnant AMIA investigation, was found murdered the day before he was to present evidence to the Argentine Congress that showed then-president Cristina Kirchner and other Argentine officials had conspired with the Iranian government to cover-up Iran’s involvement in the AMIA attack.¹³

Nisman’s murder confirmed what the Spanish government concluded in a December 2016 report: that local governments in Latin America are ill-equipped to handle terrorism.¹⁴ For the United States, the proximity of Islamists to North America and the inability of allies to combat them poses a significant danger.

Threats versus Capabilities. Most experts agree that the capabilities of groups like the Islamic State and Al Qaeda do not match their outsized ambitions. Experts cannot agree about Iran. The Islamic Republic has the capability and infrastructure to strike the United States from Latin America, but experts disagree over whether it would take that risk.

Experts consistently discuss the likelihood of a *preemptive or first strike attack* on the United States, though, which creates too high a standard. Instead, the argument should focus on the prospect of *retaliatory attack*.

Keep in mind that Iran’s threats against the United States often refer to retaliation. In a May 2011 speech in Bolivia, for instance, then-Iranian Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi promised a crushing response to any U.S. offensive against his country.¹⁵ More recently, a commander in Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, said in response to a tweet from President Trump that “if we see the smallest misstep from the enemies, our roaring missiles will fall on their heads.”¹⁶ This is not just talk either:

- Recall that Iran responded to the Israel Defense Force’s killing of Hezbollah Secretary-General Abbas al-Musawi in Lebanon on February 16, 1992, by orchestrating the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina one month later.¹⁷
- Further, in 2010, when the Stuxnet virus shut down Iran’s nuclear site by damaging critical centrifuges, the Islamic Republic responded with cyberattacks that damaged hundreds of computers at oil-giant Aramco in Saudi Arabia and took down online banking sites of U.S. financial institutions.¹⁸

The Stuxnet attack, in particular, has several implications. Though cyber-operation harmed critical infrastructure, the Iranian government chose not to respond proportionally against the United States. However, Iran has an expressed interest in and has the capability to attack the U.S. grid. A future attack against Iran’s infrastructure could very well result in a corresponding attack against America’s electrical grid, launched from somewhere only miles to the south.

Freedom of Movement Heightens the Threat. Islamic extremism thrives where there is illicit finance and relative ease of movement across national and international borders. The mobility of terrorists throughout Latin America poses a serious problem. Consider:

- Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami has been linked to the illegal issuance of passports to people in the Middle East, including Hezbollah members.¹⁹
- Carmen Carrión Vela was arrested in November 2015 for material support to terrorism in the person of her husband and Hezbollah operative Muhammad Ghaleb Hamdar, who was previously arrested in Peru in October 2014 for planning a terrorist attack. Vela, a dual-citizen of Peru and the United States, twice traveled to the United States before Hamdar was arrested in Lima.²⁰
- Adnan el Skukrijumah, the Al Qaeda operative with a Guyanese passport, frequently crossed back and forth over the U.S.-Mexico border to meet Islamists in Texas, according to Judicial Watch.²¹
- Extremists in Trinidad and Tobago have the privilege of visa-free travel throughout the Caribbean islands, which makes it fairly easy to travel to the Bahamas, and from there make a “short jump” to South Florida.²²

Conclusion. The growth of extremist activity in Latin America is a major security threat. The prospects of retaliation from Iran, in particular, should not discourage action against Iran where necessary but should heighten awareness regarding the high probability of revenge attacks. Iran’s influence in Latin America and extremists, in general, demand new national security strategies in the region. Such an approach could begin with U.S. support to allied governments that improves their intelligence capabilities, and with targeted financial interdiction strategies.

David Grantham is a senior fellow with the National Center for Policy Analysis.

The Infiltration of Islamic Extremists

Notes

1. U.S. Representative Jeff Duncan (R-S.C.), “Unclassified Summary of Policy Recommendations, Annex, Iran in the Western Hemisphere,” press release, June 27, 2013.
2. JoAnn Fagot Aviel, “The Enemy of My Enemy: The Arab-Israeli Conflict in Nicaragua,” in Damian Fernandez, ed., *Central America and the Middle East: The Internationalization of the Crises* (Miami: Florida International University, 1990), pages 31-41; David Grantham, “Cuba’s Cold War Foreign Policy in the Middle East,” *History Compass: Latin America & Caribbean*, Vol. 13, Issue 9, 2015, pages 445-453; Raanan Rein, *Argentina, Israel, and the Jews* (College Park, Md.: University of Maryland, 2006), pages 10-30; Delegacion de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas, *Anti-Jewish Activities of the Arabs in Argentine* (Buenos Aires: DAIA, 1958), pages 10-20.
3. Testimony of Ambassador Roger Noriega, “Iran’s Influence and Activity in Latin America,” U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, February 16, 2012.
4. Nicholas Casey and Ana Vanessa Herrero, “How a Politician Accused of Drug Trafficking Became Venezuela’s Vice President,” *New York Times*, February 16, 2017.
5. Pablo Gato and Robert Windrem, “Hezbollah Builds a Western Base,” NBC News, May 9, 2007.
6. John Cassara and Avi Jorisch, *On the Trail of Terror Finance: What Law Enforcement And Intelligence Officers Need to Know* (Washington D.C.: Red Cell Publishing, 2010), page 70; Arthur Brice, “Iran, Hezbollah mine Latin America for revenue, recruits, analysts say,” CNN, June 3, 2013.
7. Scott Shane, “Saudis and Extremism: ‘Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters,’” *New York Times*, August 25, 2016.
8. P. David Gaubatz and Paul Sperry, *Muslim Mafia: Inside the Secret Underworld That’s Conspiring to Islamize America* (Los Angeles: WND Books, 2009), pages 93-94; Skukrijumah was killed in December 2014 by Pakistani authorities.
9. Douglas Farah, “The Growing Terrorism Challenges From Latin America,” International Assessment and Strategy Center, February 18, 2007.
10. Frances Robles, “Trying to Stanch Trinidad’s Flow of Young Recruits to ISIS,” *New York Times*, February 24, 2017.
11. Anshel Pfeffer, “Argentine Prosecutor’s Death: The Latest Act in the Iran-Israel Saga,” Haaretz, January 20, 2015.
12. Tom Diaz and Barbara Newman, *Lightning Out of Lebanon: Hezbollah Terrorists on American Soil* (New York: Presidio Press, 2005), pages 124-127.
13. Joseph Humire, “After Nisman: How the Death of a Prosecutor Revealed Iran’s Growing Influence in the Americas,” Center for a Secure Free Society, June 21, 2016.
14. Alexandra Dumitrascu, “El radicalismo islámico en América Latina. De Hezbolá al Daesh,” Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, December 9, 2016.
15. Testimony of Ambassador Roger Noriega, “Iran’s Influence and Activity in Latin America,” U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee, February 16, 2012.
16. Will Worley, “Iran threatens to fire ‘roaring missile’ at ‘enemies’ after Donald Trump Twitter Spat,” *U.K. Independent*, February 4, 2017.
17. Ami Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services and the Struggle Against Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), page 173.
18. Ted Koppel, *Lights Out: A Cyberattack, A Nation Unprepared, Surviving the Aftermath*, (New York City: Penguin Random House, 2015), page 58.
19. Nicholas Casey, “Venezuela Blocks CNN en Español Over Report on Passport Fraud,” CNN, February 16, 2017; Roger F. Noriega and José R. Cárdenas, “The Mounting Hezbollah Threat in Latin America,” American Enterprise Institute, Latin American Outlook No. 3, October 2011.
20. Joseph Humire, “After Nisman: How the Death of a prosecutor revealed Iran’s growing influence in the Americas,” Center for a Secure Free Society, page 49.
21. “Al Qaeda Terrorist Wanted by FBI Crossed Back and Forth Into U.S. From Mexico,” Judicial Watch, December 8, 2014.
22. Frances Robles, “Trying to Stanch Trinidad’s Flow of Young Recruits to ISIS.”