

Filling the Vacuum: New Players in the Geopolitical Backyard of the United States?

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“As it stands today, I believe the Hezbollah/Iranian presence in Latin America constitutes a clear threat to the security of the U.S. homeland. They have the motivation, and they have been steadily increasing their capacity to act.”

Ambassador Roger F. Noriega, 2011²

Abstract

At the end of the Cold War, the attention of the United States was drawn away from its own neighbouring region, Latin America. Events in the Balkans and the Middle East, besides others, and the fall of the Soviet Union left the region unattended, leaving a vacuum there. Latin American states slowly found their way back to democracy, although after a short period most of them tried a different route than before: the populations of several countries elected left-wing governments one after the other. The phenomenon known as *Pink Tide* changed the political landscape of the region not just domestically but also with regards to foreign relations: governments started to look for allies other than the US and other countries in the Western World. In parallel to these changes, China started to reach out for resources, and Russia rebooted its strategic views about its own global role — thus some of the new connections. Additionally, however, in the shadow of these large-scale steps, smaller steps by a distant regional power were also taken: Iran, and its proxy, the Hezbollah, as well as Lebanon, also set foot in Latin America. The paper aims to focus on these actors, with special regard to Iran and its growing influence in certain areas of the region.

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² Noriega, R. F. (2011): Written Testimony of Ambassador Roger F. Noriega Visiting Fellow, American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research Before a Hearing of the Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence Committee on Homeland Security U.S. House of Representatives. U.S. Government. Available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg72255/html/CHRG-112hhrg72255.htm> [Accessed: February 1, 2020]

Keywords: Latin America, Iran, Hezbollah, terrorism, Venezuela, Bolivia, tri-border area, TBA, drug trafficking, money laundering

Introduction

To portray countries external to the region with the greatest influence within the Latin-American and Caribbean region (LAC), that is, powers from outside the Western Hemisphere, one has to consider primarily Russia and China as important geopolitical stakeholders. As many as five or six countries have considerable Russian influence, either financial, military or political. These countries are mostly led by leftist governments, such as Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Bolivia³, Argentina,⁴ and to some extent Peru.⁵ In an even greater number of states, China holds significant influence. These countries range from the smallest islands in the Caribbean to the largest ones of South America. Their relations to China are dominated by investment in areas such as the infrastructure and energy sectors, the mining industry, or by the massive loans given by Beijing, and to a lesser but emerging extent by military cooperation. The spheres of influence of Russia and China often overlap, at other times they compete, as is the case in Argentina — over the country's plans to build nuclear power plants. Most importantly, they both challenge the influence of the United States.

On a significantly lower level, with a very different portfolio of interests, and in many ways with characteristics different from those of the Chinese and the Russians, there is another form of influence that is present in the LAC region. This presence is, however, far less visible and channelled largely in informal (at times illegal) ways. It originates from the Middle East and Iran, and is driven by the ideology behind Hezbollah, the “Party of God”, the Shia Islamist political party and militant group based in Lebanon. This influence is not present on the state level — rather, it is centred in certain remote areas. In order to understand the dynamics of the emergence of this presence, we need to look back on the history of migration to the region.

³ Bolivia had a leftist government from January 22, 2006 until November 10, 2019 when a coup d'état removed President Evo Morales from power.

⁴ Argentina has been governed by leftist presidents since May 25, 2003, with the exception of Mauricio Macri's term (December 10, 2015 - December 10, 2019).

⁵ Though Peru is considered a “traditionally right-wing country”, Lima has a significant military cooperation with Russia.

The first wave of Lebanese migrants arrived in Latin America in the nineteenth century. They were mostly non-skilled and semi-skilled workers moving to Argentina, Venezuela and Brazil (Taber, 2010: 6-8). These people were followed by a second wave – smaller in number – in the second half of the twentieth century, due to the deteriorating security situation in the Middle East (approximately 40 percent of Lebanon’s population fled the country in the Lebanese Civil War between 1975 and 1989) and the favourable tax environment of the Tri-border Area (usually abbreviated as TBA, it is the border zone of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay)⁶ in the 1960s and 1970s (Folch, 2012). A significantly smaller group of people were also attracted to the region by the weak law and customs enforcement that contributed to the growth of a shadow economy, in smuggling, drug trafficking and money laundering. The appearance, and later on the concentration, of criminal elements in the TBA made the region an attractive location as a site of illicit activities and as a safe haven for the likes of Hezbollah and the operatives of the post-1979 Iranian regime. The area served as fertile ground for the clerics to spread their extremist version Islamist ideology. Throughout the 1980s, Iran and its proxy, Hezbollah, created a network of “friendly” mosques and cultural centres⁷ in order to spread the word: to influence the believers and, even more, to recruit new disciples (O’Grady, 2015). The spread of influence was in certain cases facilitated by corrupt officials and regimes that sought to secure power and/or financial resources by working with actors sharing an interest in countering US influence in the region.

A New Theatre of Operations

Illicit activities in the TBA could flourish almost without any interference or major obstacle.⁸ Terrorist cells had the time and space besides the will and the means to plan targeted attacks in a region where terrorist attacks have usually been associated with (left-wing) guerrilla organisations fighting against state control, under authoritarian regimes. The first significant

⁶ The TBA is concentrated around three major cities: the Argentine city of Puerto Iguazú, Foz do Iguazú in Brazil and the Paraguayan Ciudad del Este.

⁷ As of today, the bigger and more influential cultural centres are located in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Venezuela.

⁸ Besides the TBA, there seems to be another emerging "New TBA" at the borderlands of Chile (Arica and Iquique), Peru (Tacna and Puno) and Bolivia (from El Alto to La Paz). In this area, Hezbollah-related elements can capitalize on Chile’s ports, Peru’s rich history of drug industry and terrorist groups and Iran’s strong presence in Bolivia. (Witker, 2014: 39)

incident was the terrorist attack that took place on March 17, 1992 when a pick-up truck full of explosives, driven by a suicide bomber, crashed into the building of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, then exploded. The embassy, a Catholic church, and a nearby school building were destroyed. The detonation killed 29 people (including four Israelis) and injured 242. The Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO)⁹ – a Shia terrorist group that has been associated with Iran and Hezbollah – claimed responsibility. The attack occurred a month after the Israeli assassination of Sayed Abbas al-Musawi, the Secretary General of Hezbollah, in February 1992. Most likely, this served as the motive behind the bombing in Buenos Aires. The investigation – supported by the U.S. National Security Agency and Israeli counterparts – concluded that the attack was planned in the TBA with the help of Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniyah (Nash, 1992).

Two years later, on July 18, 1994, a Renault packed with 275 kilograms of ammonium-nitrate fertilizer crashed into the building of the Argentinian Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA), the busy Jewish centre in Buenos Aires. Unlike in the previous case, the detonation took place inside the seven-story building, which collapsed after the explosion, killing 85 people and wounding 151. After concluding the investigation, Argentinian prosecutors officially raised charges against former Iranian President Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and several other high ranking officials, including the former Iranian intelligence minister Ali Fallahian, former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati, two former commanders of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), two former Iranian diplomats, and a former security chief of Hezbollah. Chief prosecutor Alberto Nisman's indictment stated that the decision for the attack was made in Iran, while the attack itself was carried out by Hezbollah, and the motive was Argentina's denial of Iran's interest in assistance with nuclear technology. As in the previous case, both Iran and Hezbollah refused the allegations (Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 2006).

Ansar Allah did,¹⁰ however, claim responsibility for the attack. The Hezbollah-linked terrorist organisation also took responsibility for the attack that happened the day after the strike on AMIA. The regional airline Alas Chiricanas Flight 00901 of July 19, 1994 was en route from Colón to Panama City when it exploded in the air after taking off, killing all 21

⁹ Other name variations used for the group include Harakat al-Jihad al-Islami, Islamic Jihad / Jihad al-Islami.

¹⁰ Also, Ansarullah, i.e., the "Helpers/Supporters of God".

people on board, including 12 Jews. The investigating Panamanian authorities considered the bombing an act of terrorism. After the list of passengers was revealed, only one body was not claimed by relatives, believed to be the corpse of Ali Hawa Jamal, of Middle Eastern origin and with suspected links to Lebanon-based Ansar Allah (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994). Officially, the case remained unresolved. In 2018, Juan Carlos Varela, the President of Panama referred to the emergence of “recent evidence” and reopened the files.

Exactly two decades later, Lebanese Mohammed Amadar was arrested by Peruvian police after a search at the suspected Hezbollah operative’s house in Lima, based on a Mossad alter about a possible planned attack. Authorities found TNT, detonators and flammable substances in Amadar’s residence, and later on information was gathered that he was collecting intelligence on possible future targets linked to the Jewish community (Winer, 2014).

Since this failed attempt, no major attacks have taken place, nor has evidence of further plots surfaced. However, as mentioned at the beginning of the paper, terrorist activities in Latin America involve a great variety of illegal financial activities as well. Strategically, these may mean a more to the organisations involved than carrying out an actual terrorist attack.

Illicit financing

In the lifecycle of many of the Latin American terrorist groups, there has been a major shift from what was original ideologically motivated struggle to the illicit economic activities they are involved in today, several decades later. For example FARC,¹¹ the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army was a Marxist-Leninist guerrilla movement at its foundation in 1964, and their activities were predominantly driven by their stance against the government. There was much emphasis on the ideological indoctrination of FARC members. However, with time this has changed, and FARC became involved in the drugs trade (from cultivation to trafficking), thus securing a steady flow of financing.

This shows some similarities with the case of Hezbollah and Hezbollah-related Lebanese organisations. As mentioned above, certain Islamist extremists took advantage of

¹¹ Stands for Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—Ejército del Pueblo.

the weak (local) authorities and governments of particular regions, using remote areas such as the TBA for training and as a safe haven. As the environment proved favourable and the demand for certain activities was high, Hezbollah-linked organizations began to take their share of the drug business and money laundering, even as this has been consistently denied by different high-ranking sources from Hezbollah, as well as religious leaders referring to the Holy Koran that makes drugs both religiously and morally unacceptable to deal with (Francis, 2018).

The findings of the Project Cassandra investigation into Hezbollah's economic activities worldwide, launched in 2008 by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration with the help of 30 U.S. and foreign agencies, show a revenue of 1 billion USD from narcotics and arms trafficking, money laundering and other illegal activities accruing to the group on a yearly basis. Besides Project Cassandra, Operation Titan, a joint US-Colombian investigation, and Operation Perseus, focusing on the Venezuelan connections, were launched as well, both with the aim to detect the networks of drug trafficking and the channels of money laundering in Latin America and beyond. The latter investigation reached out as far as Benin, where it found tens of thousands of used cars originating from the USA. The method was the following: drugs mostly from Colombia, Bolivia and Peru were smuggled and sold in Mexico and in the USA (usually with the help of Mexican drug cartels), and, subsequently, the income was invested in the mass purchase of used cars, which were then shipped to Benin, mostly to Lebanese car dealers who then turned the money into legal income by selling the cars to not just Beninese buyers but throughout West Africa. The "already-clean" money would then be transferred to Lebanon and used to finance future activities (Meyer, 2017).

Traces found during these investigations led to figures as high as late Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, whose sudden death was thought by some to be the end Iranian influence in the country (Bunker-Sullivan, 2016: 177-198). This presumption proved to be wrong, and the Trump administration blacklisted Venezuelan strongman Tareck El Aissami, the former vice president of Lebanese origin, who serves as Minister of Industries and National Production at the time of writing. In spite of thousands of documents uncovered, information from undercover agents, and international cooperation leading to considerable evidence, the Obama administration prioritized the nuclear deal with Iran and halted Project

Cassandra as well as other investigations, eventually. The task force agents were not given the permission to go after any suspected Lebanese, Iranian or Venezuelan nationals involved in Hezbollah's dealings. It was only after the Trump administration entered office in January 2018, when cases were reopened, under a different U.S. foreign policy approach to Iran and a changed geopolitical situation (Francis, 2018).

Diplomatic Ties

Although it is close to impossible to prove that official diplomatic relations between Iran and any specific country in Latin America ever covered or touched upon Hezbollah-related issues, the mere presence and interest of Iran in the region is worth the attention.

The rise to power of leftist governments during the 'Pink Tide' served as a favourable environment for a Muslim country like Iran, against a backdrop of strong anti-Washington sentiment in countries such as Venezuela, Bolivia and Brazil. The latter conveniently justified welcoming the frequent visits of Iranian leaders to Latin America along with reciprocal visits to the Western Asian country. Six new embassies were opened, dozens of agreements were signed. Iran became an observer in ALBA¹², Venezuelan leader Hugo Chávez's Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (the only country besides Syria from outside the region). Trade with Brazil quadrupled from 2 billion USD in just five years, between 2002-2007 (Madden, 2008). Full diplomatic relations with Bolivia were only established in 2007, but cooperation set off with great speed: Iran pledged to invest over 1 billion USD in return for visa-free entry for its citizens to Bolivia. Military partnership also flourished, with May 31, 2011 serving as probably the most visible proof, when the Iranian Minister of Defence, Brigadier General Ahmad Vahidi paid an official visit to Santa Cruz, Bolivia, for the opening ceremony of the ALBA Military Academy, a move that greatly endangered Bolivia's relationship with the government of Cristina Fernández de Kirchner of Argentina¹³ (Vogel, 2019: 105-106).

¹² ALBA stands for Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América - Tratado de Comercio de los Pueblos.

¹³ Since Brig. Gen. Vahidi was the commander of the Quds Force, the special unit of Iran's Revolutionary Guard at the time of the AIMA attack, and Interpol issued a red notice against him in 2007, it was considered a "grave incident" that Argentina chose to invite him. In order to recover from the diplomatic fiasco, the hosts told Vahidi to leave immediately, although they did not arrest him. (Yapp, 2011)

In conclusion

The goal of this brief article was to draw attention to several relatively new and important developments in Latin America, and to highlight key events and major trends in connection with Iran, a new player in the region, and, last but not least, to raise questions about this.

These questions include the issue of what can be done to minimize territorial “blind spots” such as the TBA in order to reduce their destabilizing impact? If there is a growing number of countries that are sanctioned by the West – such as Iran, Venezuela and Russia – and this situation (besides other factors) seems to unite them, how will the US and other actors respond to this? Is there a way to counter religious extremism in the region?

The first steps might have already been taken: in December 2018, a dozen countries of the LAC region gathered in Washington DC at the Hemispheric Ministerial Conference on the Fight against Terrorism,¹⁴ followed by a second event in July 2019 in Buenos Aires,¹⁵ and the last one so far in January 2020, in Bogota.¹⁶ The number of regional participants increased to sixteen. All of these countries expressed concern about the Hezbollah-related networks’ activities, and, in one of the greatest results of the initiative, Argentina designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in July 2019, followed by Paraguay a month later, while Colombia, Honduras, and Guatemala made the same decision in January 2020. Something, thereby, seems to have started.

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¹⁴ Argentina, The Bahamas, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Honduras, Jamaica, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Trinidad and Tobago attended the conference, while Brazil and Mexico participated in observer roles. (DOS, 2018)

¹⁵ Participants included Argentina, Bahamas, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Panama, Paraguay, Peru and the United States of America; additionally, Mexico, Uruguay and the Organization of America States – Inter-American Committee against Terrorism (CICTE) attended the Conference as observers. (Joint Communiqué, 2019)

¹⁶ The following states participated: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Panamá, Paraguay, Perú, Saint Lucia and the United States of America; with Israel, México, Uruguay, Venezuela, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee, The Inter-American Committee on Terrorism (OAS), INTERPOL, and AMERIPOL as observers. (Itamaraty, 2020)

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