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Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area of South America

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Hezbollah, Lebanon's Iran-sponsored Shi'i Muslim terrorist organization, has established global networks in at least 40 countries. Its growing presence in South America is increasingly troublesome to U.S. policymakers, yet there are few experts on Hezbollah and fewer still on Hezbollah Latino America. Hezbollah's operatives have infiltrated the Western Hemisphere from Canada to Argentina, and its activity is increasing, particularly in the lawless Tri-Border Area (TBA) of Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. This research was conducted to expose the actions and objectives of Hezbollah in the TBA. The majority of US officials and operators believe that Hezbollah's terrorist wing is separate from its political wing, but these are misconceptions from people who "mirror-image" the American experience when assessing Hezbollah. Unfamiliarity with the organization makes these assessors vulnerable to its propaganda, which is a severe problem that permeates the US government and its operatives. People who think Hezbollah is or could be compartmentalized or disunited are not familiar with the organization and perceive Hezbollah through the lens of the organization's extensive propaganda effort. Hezbollah has a large operational network in the TBA, which generates funds for the party, but its primary mission is to plan attacks and lie dormant, awaiting instructions to execute operations against Western targets. The following is a look at Hezbollah's *modus operandi*, an analysis of how operational its networks in the Tri-Border Area are, as well as some possible solutions to this threat. First, is an examination of how Hezbollah traditionally operates to establish the context.

Modus Operandi

Hezbollah is a centrally run terrorist organization with a grand strategy. All of its deception, propaganda, and political warfare operations are different tactics used to achieve Hezbollah's political objectives. It is a terrorist organization that repeatedly uses atrocities to further its agenda. Hezbollah's most infamous terrorist attacks are the Beirut bombings of the Marine Barracks and U.S. Embassy in 1983, the kidnapping of U.S. citizens in Lebanon to trade in the Iran-Contra Affair, the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992, the Argentine Jewish Center bombing in 1994, and the Khobar Towers bombing in 1998. They have conducted many smaller operations, kidnappings, firing rockets blindly into civilian centers, hijackings, and assassinations as well as a plethora of criminal endeavors. Since the early 1990s, Hezbollah has been very concerned with public and international opinion. It has developed a well-oiled propaganda machine which has successfully blurred its image to the outside world. Because Hezbollah conducts propaganda and political warfare so well, using a two-pronged approach of coercion and persuasion, it has solidified much support in Lebanon, and is now vying for global opinion. These misconceptions, however, have severe implications. The world is divided on what the nature of Hezbollah is, which prevents efforts to counter it. Hezbollah must be understood as an organization before attempting to determine what exactly it is doing in the TBA.

Hezbollah has many deception operations aimed at creating a distorted image that confuses onlookers. As a pragmatic terrorist organization, Hezbollah is conscious that many of its actions are condemnable to the international community, if exposed. Hezbollah alleges, however, that it is always the victim. They are just the defender of the Lebanese and Shi'i Muslims. To facilitate support from many opposing factions, Hezbollah co-opts others by addressing the basic human needs of the impoverished or war-torn Lebanese. "Hezbollah has created an impressive social base by setting up an array of public services, including schools, mosques, clinics, hospitals, community centers, and public assistance facilities... This 'kinder, gentler' side of Hezbollah has been used to bolster the party's membership and to increase popular support."¹ These programs were originally created to consolidate support amongst Lebanese Shi'i, but since have become pluralistic. "Hezbollah boasts that, although its social welfare system was first instigated to cater to the needs of its Shiite brethren, it is also available to the poor of other religious sects."² Now Hezbollah drags these programs all over its media outlets, Al Manar satellite TV³, Al Nur radio, and multiple websites. These stories are then disseminated by other Arab news sources and their message reaches an exponentially larger audience. Deceiving the world and distancing itself from its attacks, Hezbollah has garnished much support in the international arena as well as some in the United States. When they cannot openly persuade people, they blatantly lie. To achieve its objectives, "the organization employed deceptive practices, applying in the name of proxies not publically linked to Hezbollah."⁴ By using fronts, "some donors are defrauded unwittingly into funding terrorism while others are willing participants in Hezbollah's financing schemes."⁵ Hezbollah is creating sympathetic networks by distorting the world's perception. Nasrallah has uses a "double-faced policy... to blur the identity of the organization as a terrorist organization and to emphasize the identity of the organization as a political party inside Lebanon and social party inside Lebanon."⁶ Hezbollah is so efficient at distorting its identity that even though they practically wrote the book on modern terrorism, only five countries- the United States, Israel, Australia, Holland, and Canada- have labeled them a terrorist organization.

To forward its agenda, Hezbollah strives to down play its atrocities to favorably influence public opinion and policymakers. Hezbollah does not even officially claim responsibility for its most infamous attacks, except, presumably, to its sponsor, Iran.⁷ Instead, Hezbollah blames its terrorism on a fictional front called Islamic Jihad⁸ that only exists after an attack.

Islamic Jihad threatened, terrorized (sic), and claimed responsibility for a chain of horrendous attacks. Yet it had no distinct public figures, no one particular leader or

¹ Avi Jorisch, *Beacon of Hatred: Inside Hizballah's Al-Manar Television* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004), 11.

² Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah, Born with a Vengeance* (New York Columbia University Press, 1997), 148.

³ Al Manar is run and funded by Hezbollah; it is their official news station and openly acknowledges its mission is disseminating propaganda.

⁴ Matthew Levitt, "Shutting Hizballah's 'Construction Jihad,'" Policy Watch/Peace Watch (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 20 February 2007).

⁵ Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God," Op-Eds & Artivles. (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute For Near East Policy, February 2005).

⁶ Franck C. Urbancic, "Hezbollah's Global Reach," Hearing of the House Committee on International Relations – Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation, September 2006.

⁷ To include but not limited to: the Beirut Marine Barracks and Embassy Bombings of 1983, the Argentinean bombings of Israeli Embassy in 1992 and the AMIA Jewish center in 1994, the Saudi Arabian Khobar Towers bombing in 1996, etc. Iran is renowned for distributing funds amongst its terrorist proxies based on the effectiveness of their attacks.

⁸ Not to be confused with Palestinian Islamic Jihad or Egyptian Islamic Jihad.

chieftain to arrest, no offices, and worse still no specific address against which counter-attacks or retaliations could be launched. Its name was deliberately contrived to by the [Iran's Revolutionary] Guards and their recruits to cast confusion... Lebanon's entity was more of a phantom than a fully fledged organisation (sic). It existed only when it was committing an atrocity against its targets: rather like a phony company which rents office space for a month and then vanishes.⁹

This fictional entity disassociates Hezbollah from its crimes, so they can reap the political benefit from the impact of its attacks, but they cannot be dragged in front of the world and condemned.

Their flag, however, provides clarity. "If we look at the flag of the organization, we can see the global aspiration of the organization."¹⁰ The flag has a fist coming out of the word "Allah," holding an AK-47 assault rifle, higher than the globe, next to it. The words are in green, which symbolizes the green gardens of Paradise which martyrs enter, a common theme in militant Shi'i culture. The words roughly translate to: "the Party of God cannot fail." For all of Hezbollah's deception, its flag, and thus its agenda, has not been moderated at all. Global domination through violent Shi'ism is its highest objective.

Hezbollah may try to camouflage its agenda in the media, but its officials often reiterate it publicly. Conducting operations and waging jihad are the obligatory duties for every Hezbollah member, regardless of position. Everything else Hezbollah does, is to streamline its ability to operate. Policies are coordinated, though its means are very diverse. "The organization's senior members have clarified more than once that Hezbollah and all of its branches are a single organic unit whose policy and activity are decided by its leadership."¹¹ In a speech on Al-Manar, Nasrallah said, "the Hezbollah leadership... the organization's leadership is the resistance's leadership and it is the one to consider all the information, the resistance's interest and its operational policy. The brothers in the field are the ones who carry out the policy."¹² Hezbollah is always operational and to assume the organization is compartmentalized, like U.S. institutions, is to project the American concept of specialized occupations on others who do not have that luxury. Hezbollah's executive is the Shura Council, with seven Lebanese members and two Iranians.¹³ Decisions are made with the terrorist and military branches sitting alongside the social and political branches. Iran, being the sponsor has the final say, and the biggest decisions go up to the Iranian President, who cannot act outside the will of their Supreme Leader.¹⁴ The organization usually conceals the depth of Iranian involvement, but not its alliance.

One of the highest virtues for all of Hezbollah's members is self-sufficiency. Hezbollah launches young, bright operatives into many foreign countries with no money and no assistance. They are expected to establish a network as well as funds to ship back to Lebanon, conduct surveillance, and map out and practice operations which can be launched shortly after the decision is made or accepted. These operations are not contingencies, but the primary means of

⁹ Hala Jaber, *Hezbollah: Born with a Vengeance*, p 113

¹⁰ Eitan Azani, "Hezbollah's Global Reach."

¹¹ Azani, "Hezbollah's Global Reach."

¹² Hassan Nasrallah, Al-Majla 24/03/02.

¹³ Azani, "Hezbollah's Global Reach."

¹⁴ Technically, that makes Iran's Supreme Leader Hezbollah's top authority, though he is not often called upon.

increasing Hezbollah's political capital through international cells. The rough standard of what an international Hezbollah cell consists of:

A local Hezbollah network usually includes the following components: *Dawa* and recruitment entity, based on religious clerics, Islamic centers, Internet sites, and the broadcasts of Almanar Television; a financing department whose capabilities based on the ability to raise money legally and illegally by using organized crime; and an operational team, dealing with smuggling activists and means of warfare and the assembling of intelligence concerning potential targets.¹⁵

Mohammed Hammoud, Hezbollah's Charlotte Cell's founder and leader was given his mission in Lebanon. "Get inside the United States, exploit its vast wealth and comfortable complacency, and help create a hidden network ready to spring into action when ordered."¹⁶ This is the standard infiltrator; Hammoud was just 21 years old when he set foot in the U.S. To assume that Hezbollah's foreign cells are strictly concerned with lucrative business enterprises would be a denial of its history and *modus operandi*. While many U.S. officials are unfortunately dismissive of the threat, Hezbollah operatives have been arrested for conducting surveillance on U.S. Embassies in Asuncion, Cyprus, Russia, and Spain, as well as surveying U.S. targets in Singapore and Germany. "Hezbollah has the capacity to strike against American interests anywhere at any time of its choosing," according to a senior FBI official who monitored the terrorist group's U.S. operations for years.¹⁷ Every Hezbollah cell exists for the purpose of conducting operations. These cells are multifaceted with the goal of compelling international actors to act in Hezbollah and Iran's interest. The effects of these complex, pre-planned operations need to lie dormant so they can strike at the most effective time to magnify the results.

Hezbollah's international cells have to create an underlying infrastructure to launch these attacks on short notice. The timing is crucial, and if Hezbollah strikes at a critical moment, then even the global dialogue can change, much less influence the countries that were attacked. Covert cells grant Hezbollah the ability to concisely launch its terrorist attacks. "Hezbollah is a terror movement that maintains extensive infrastructural, operational, and logistic presence and activity in the international arena. This infrastructure grants it the ability to shorten the time between accepting a decision concerning an activity and its actual performance."¹⁸ Preparation takes years and costs money and lives to full effect. Timing is essential, giving Hezbollah and Iran's threats credibility, which is capable of influencing even the most powerful governments. "If you know the history of Hezbollah, you know that it has an established modus operandi...It creates an infrastructure, as it did in Argentina, to support its terrorist attacks. Then it brings in the specialists."¹⁹ These cells are making money while they wait to strike. Generating income is important for Hezbollah's foreign cells, but it is a second-tier priority.

To demonstrate the Hezbollah's emphasis on terrorism and not finance, here is a case that took place in the TBA. TBA is crucial to Hezbollah's income.²⁰ "The tri-border is especially important to Hezbollah, where the group raises close to \$10,000,000 a year."²¹ One Hezbollah

¹⁵ Eitan Azani, *Hezbollah: The Story of the party of God* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 204.

¹⁶ Tom Diaz and Barbara Newman, *Lightning Out of Lebanon* (New York: Presidio Press, 2005), 13.

¹⁷ Diaz, *Lightning out of Lebanon*, 69.

¹⁸ Azani, *Hezbollah: The Story of the Party of God*, 202.

¹⁹ Diaz, *Lightning out of Lebanon*, 188.

²⁰ To provide a frame of reference, Iran pays Hezbollah a reported \$100 million, but a suspected \$200 million, annually.

²¹ Matthew Levitt, "Financing Terror Through Criminal Enterprise," (Herzilya: ICT, 25 May, 2005), testimony.

operative in the TBA, Sobhi Mahmoud Fayad, sent \$50 million to Hezbollah alone.²² Fayad made a fortune for Hezbollah, yet his lucratively did not excuse him from his operational responsibilities. Fayad was arrested for performing surveillance on the U.S. Embassy in Asunción. This shows Hezbollah casually risking an operative, who made quite a significant amount of money for the organization, in operational planning.²³ Jihad is a duty of Hezbollah's operatives and according Nasrallah, no one is excused, including its parliamentary representatives. "Hezbollah cells are frequently involved in fundraising activities, even if they are primarily operational cells."²⁴ Hezbollah's cells are versatile, though people in those cells may have diversified roles. "[T]he idea that they are coming over here simply to make contacts with a mosque in order to get a few thousand dollars, I think, has been counterproductive to the FBI and intelligence."²⁵ Improperly assessing the Hezbollah's intent clouds the knowledge of its severity. It is a mistake that is easily avoided if one just sees its history or tactics.

Concealed operatives grant Hezbollah the ability to properly launch its attacks. In 1999, "a police raid in Paraguay reportedly disrupted plans by Hezbollah and Al Qaeda to make simultaneous bomb attacks on Jewish targets in Buenos Aires, Ciudad del Este, and Ottawa."²⁶ This multi-pronged operation, coordinated between two terror groups in three countries shows how the amorphous Hezbollah network is not just in Paraguay for money, or anywhere else for that matter. This is a counter-value strategy where Hezbollah has leverage over U.S. assets abroad. Once Hezbollah is established, the situation becomes much more precarious for U.S. interests.

Operations in the TBA

Hezbollah has taken advantage of the lawless region of the Tri-Border Area. The lack of rule of law makes the TBA a haven for criminal syndicates and nefarious factions from every continent come and function without restraint. Hezbollah too, exploits the lack of vigilant or concerned law enforcement which permits free trade and fairly free movement across the borders of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina. At this point, Hezbollah's fundraising capabilities in the TBA are legendary. Most of these funds are acquired through criminal enterprises. The conditions for fundraising in such a chaotic environment allow Hezbollah to exploit the profits of criminal industries without fear of retribution. "This ideal brew of lucrative corner, lawlessness, and a network of possible recruits has made Ciudad del Este and the tri-border region a breeding ground for Islamist terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas."²⁷ Hezbollah takes advantage of the anarchic environment, establishing and co-opting many businesses in the area. "These enterprises include, among others, mafia-style shakedowns of local Arab communities, sophisticated import-export scams involving traders from India and Hong Kong, and small-scale Arab businesses that engage in a few thousand dollars worth of business but transfer tens of

²² Levitt, "Hezbollah, Financing Terror Through Criminal Enterprise."

²³ Fayad would have better served Hezbollah if he kept generating funds. Allowing his sub-standard surveillance skills to risk his financial empire was folly, different operatives would be more effective if they stuck to their specialties; but this is a very American perspective.

²⁴ Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah, A Case Study of Global Reach," Special Events (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 08 September 2003).

²⁵ Congressman Dana Rohrabacher, "Hezbollah's Global Reach."

²⁶ Diaz, *Lightning Out of Lebanon*, 204.

²⁷ Pablo Gato Robert Windrem, "Hezbollah builds a Western base: From inside South America's Tri-border area, Iran-linked militia targets U.S." (Americas, MSNBC. 09 May 2007).

thousands of dollars around the globe.”²⁸ Facilitating these criminal enterprises is low-cost bribery. The traditional corruption of South American authorities and officials is unrestrained in the TBA. “Several free-trade Latin American Areas with large Middle Eastern populations allow Islamic terrorist groups, organized crime mafias, and corrupt officials to thrive in a mutually beneficial, symbiotic relationship.”²⁹ South American officials and law enforcement are extremely corrupt at the best of times and the accepted lawlessness of the TBA gives them additional cover. To assist in covering up the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish center in Argentina, Iran “reportedly included the bribing of the then Argentinean President Carlos Menem with a payment of \$10 million dollars to keep Iran’s involvement quiet.”³⁰ When the highest levels of government are susceptible to bribery, those concealed are free to turn profit any way possible.

Part of Hezbollah’s reason for such intense participation in criminal enterprises is not just opportunistic, but to “guarantee the groups’ future independence through diversified funding no matter what happens to Iran. That is, Hezbollah likely wants to ensure that even in the event that Iran were to ever strike a ‘grand bargain’ with the West...the group would continue to be able to exist and function on its own.”³¹ Hezbollah is trying to secure its future and it currently cannot without an external sponsor. It will be rejected in environments with a rule of law and a monopoly of force and go broke. So, Hezbollah engages in illegal and highly unethical activities that are also very profitable in chaotic and dangerous regions like the TBA or West Africa to secure its interests in the event Iran and the West come to terms.

The TBA has become a lucrative location and a safe place for Hezbollah to operate, and now it is being used as a launching pad to acquire South American passports and infiltrate other countries and continents in South and Central America, as well as also to infiltrate the United States. In addition to criminal endeavors, Hezbollah also creates alliances with nefarious organizations. This is not only for illegal trade, but also to disperse its operatives through these networks to establish new cells and exchange ideas and tactics. With the increase of Iranian involvement in South America, Hezbollah has acquired many new partners and is effectively infiltrating the Western Hemisphere. The TBA is far from the only Hezbollah activity in South or Central America, but it should be viewed as a nexus and staging area. There, Hezbollah conducts business, sends operatives out, and pulls partners in. The TBA is where Hezbollah works with the Hong Kong Mafia, Lebanese Mafai,³² the FARC, and Al Qaeda. Hezbollah’s South American networks are expanding and integrating in Venezuela, Columbia, Mexico, Guatemala, Panama, and Costa Rica.³³ These networks are functioning, as Hezbollah smuggles its terrorists into the United States taking the Mexican drug routes.³⁴ Hezbollah’s growing reach has created additional access to new lucrative criminal endeavors and organizations. This provides additional funding which leads to the expansion of cells into new areas which perpetuate the terrorist organization and its ability to strike and terrorize.

²⁸ Levitt, “Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God.”

²⁹ Federal Research Division, Library of Congress. *Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America* (Washington, DC: Library of Congress. July 2003), 4.

³⁰ Levitt “Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party God.”

³¹ Ibid.

³² It is hard to discern the Lebanese Mafia from Hezbollah in South America. If they are not synonymous, then they work in close tandem in the TBA.

³³ Federal Research Division, *Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area*.

³⁴ Sara A. Carter, “Exclusive: Hezbollah uses Mexican drug routes into U.S.,” Washington Times, 27 March, 2009.

Hezbollah's infiltration of the TBA has led to its entrenchment in the drug industries of South America. They use drugs not only for funding, but also as a weapon. Hezbollah has used the drug trade in the Middle East to create traitors in Israel as well as deteriorate its forces. Islamists benefit from drugs in a couple of ways. First, profit margins are huge in the illegal drug trade and second, people that use drugs are infidels. Destroying infidels in any fashion is commendable. "God turn all infidels into corpses," adding, 'whether it is by opium or by shooting, this is our common goal.'"³⁵ As soon as one takes drugs, he is an infidel. So rather than constricting the movement and drug sources, Islamists streamline the drug trade in a conveniently self-serving fashion that puts a lot of money at their disposal.

The drug industry in the TBA has fostered an alliance between Hezbollah and the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia,³⁶ commonly known as the FARC. To capitalize on the drug trade as well as irritate Western security forces, Hezbollah has found common cause with this communist, narco-political organization. "The official intelligence sources say the FARC was in talks with the Iranian-backed terrorist group Hezbollah."³⁷ Marxist influence unites the two groups which now work on more pragmatic goals. During the Cold War the Soviets flooded the Arab world as well as South America with Marxist propaganda. Its effects last to the present and Hezbollah is able to connect ideologically on some levels with the popular Leftist movements in South America. Hezbollah divides the world into the "oppressors" and the "oppressed," and the FARC is a popular Marxist movement, which divides the world the oppressed and oppressors through the guise of class warfare. Hezbollah's lexicon is "borrowed from Marxism and the Qur'an...infused with a sense of moral dualism and millennialism in its division of mankind into good and evil forces."³⁸ The United States is viewed as the oppressor to both the FARC and Hezbollah, as they work together exchanging guns and drugs. The logical connection between the FARC and Hezbollah would be Hezbollah sending drugs north to the FARC, in exchange for arms. The illegal arms trade is flourishing in the TBA assisted by over 100 illegal airstrips.³⁹ Iran has streamlined this new alliance, building "a large beef processing and refrigeration facility in the heart of the FARC's demilitarize zone."⁴⁰ Iran has no business building infrastructure for the FARC, other than to streamline the alliance of their proxy. The coupling of these two brutal organizations provides a sharing of operational knowledge, making the "hybrid narco-terrorist networks that DEA officials describe as 'meaner and uglier than anything law enforcement or militaries have ever faced.'"⁴¹ Both organizations run from Argentina to Mexico, and into the United States.

Since working with communists, who are doctrinally atheistic, in South America is not an ideological impediment for Hezbollah, neither is working with Muslims from different sects, even if both factions are actively fighting each other in places like Iraq. For all the insurgent-on-insurgent bloodshed and rhetoric in the chaotic areas of the Middle East, in South America, the nuances of Islamic organizations are subdued and much less relevant. Hezbollah and Al Qaeda have worked together at least twice between 1992 and 1994, but lately relations have been quite

³⁵ Matthew Levitt and Michael Jacobson, "Drug Wars," Op-Eds & Articles, (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 27 January 2009).

³⁶ Translates to: "The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia"

³⁷ Caracas, Gringo, "FARC-Hezbollah and Hugo Chavez," 23 March, 2009.

<http://caracasgringo.wordpress.com/2009/09/23/farc-hezbollah-and-hugo-chavez/>. [Accessed October 2009].

³⁸ Saad-Ghorayeb, Amal, *Hizballah: Politics and Religion* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 17.

³⁹ Mark S. Steinitz, "Middle East Terrorist Activity in Latin America" (Washington, DC: CSIS. 2003.) 8.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 12.

⁴¹ Levitt Jacobson, "Drug Wars."

strained. In Iraq, Al Quds Force⁴² and Hezbollah has been trying to crush the Sunni, Al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgency; the fighting has been brutal, often targeting markets and mosques, peaking in 2007. History and rhetoric do not pose problems for Islamists in South America. There, Islamist groups are assisting each other. “Further collaboration between Hizballah and Al Qaeda is possible in an area such as the tri-border where Shia-Sunni divisions seem less pronounced, perhaps because such differences are at times muted in an overwhelmingly Catholic region. Argentine intelligence has filmed meetings and monitored communications between Shia and Sunni extremists.”⁴³ Hezbollah and Al Qaeda are not only conducting business, they are training together again, like they did in Libya in the early 1990s. “Organized paramilitary training goes on in the jungles and on remote plantations owned by sympathetic Arabs.”⁴⁴ The training is operational and it seems that mid to lower level Hezbollah operatives have no issue working with Sunni Islamists. It is not like either groups issues ID cards; when the violent side of the ideology dominates the Islamic side, then it is easy for these terrorists to blend across amorphous networks.⁴⁵

Hezbollah’s presence and capabilities in the TBA are strong and getting stronger. The organization is now protecting its operations and members with counterintelligence, while infiltrating more operatives into the region. Recently, FBI agents went to the TBA on a covert mission, only informing a select few officials of the host country with little time before arriving. Hezbollah faxed the FBI New York office pictures of their agents de-boarding their plane, just minutes after it happened. “The implicit message was clear: We know you’re here. We’re watching. It was a classic example of Hezbollah’s superb counterintelligence, another reason why American officials consider the group so dangerous.”⁴⁶ Hezbollah is firmly entrenched in the region. Hezbollah has been funneling operatives to the TBA for over a decade. “Hizballah was bolstering its presence in several regions, including South America. Additionally, the group is believed to have moved entire families from Lebanon to South America to serve as ‘ sleeper cells’ for future activity.”⁴⁷ For what activity are these families being relocated? “Hezbollah has assets around the world, and it can mobilize them on a moment’s notice.”⁴⁸ Though the U.S. is largely unaware or unconcerned, it is actually a late stage in the game to address the degree in which Hezbollah is operational in the TBA.

Solutions

Hezbollah may be very efficient in the TBA, but recent joint operations of the U.S. with Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, military and paramilitary law enforcement agencies, have thwarted several jihadi plots. Most of the details are classified. “The pattern of these foiled plots suggests that TBA-based Hizballah and/or Al Qaeda operatives will again attempt to carry out simultaneous terrorist attacks against two or more U.S. embassies or consulates in South America.”⁴⁹ The pressure needs to be kept on Hezbollah in order to impede its growing South American networks. First, crime needs to be cracked down on. Hezbollah’s operatives in the

⁴² Al Quds Force is a special unit in Iran’s military that specializes in making terrorist proxies.

⁴³ Steinitz, “Middle East Terrorist Activity,” 15.

⁴⁴ Diaz, *Lightning Out of Lebanon*, 110.

⁴⁵ Allegedly, Hezbollah has been worried recently about not being violent enough, and that violence-drawn Arab fighters will be more keen to join action-oriented groups like Al Qaeda.

⁴⁶ Diaz, *Lightning Out of Lebanon*, 94.

⁴⁷ Daniel Pipes, “Terror Alliance Has U.S. Worried,” Washington Post, June 30, 2002.

⁴⁸ Urbancic, Hezbollah’s Global Reach,” 23.

⁴⁹ Federal Research Division, *Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area*, 2.

TBA are in every criminal enterprise they can vest themselves, from human and drug trafficking, to pirating multimedia on a massive scale. “Counterterrorism is not about defeating terrorism; it is about constricting the operating environment –making it harder for them to do what they want to do at every level...It is about making it more difficult for terrorists to conduct their operational, logistical, and financial activities.”⁵⁰ Targeting Hezbollah’s finances is essential, as “money is a terrorist group’s oxygen, attacking terrorist financing is an essential element to combating terrorism.”⁵¹ Neutralizing Hezbollah’s criminal enterprises have the potential to severely cripple the organization, while creating solidarity amongst participating law enforcement entities and granting the U.S. more time to persuade the world that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization and to treat it accordingly. While the international community is disunited on Hezbollah’s terrorist status, it has outlawed the majority of Hezbollah’s financial ventures and can be mobilized to crack down on the drugs and human trafficking, and software piracy, as well as smaller frauds. Exposing Hezbollah’s links to Al Qaeda and the FARC will generate more international support and further tarnish the organization. Hezbollah’s alliance with a sworn enemy or God-less Marxists contradicts its ideology and these hypocrisies should be exposed and exploited.

When trying to foster support from allies, the U.S. must frame the Hezbollah in the way it shows how it effects our allies’ interests. “So while there is no common understanding between the United States and the United Kingdom on whether or how to engage Hezbollah or even how to classify Hezbollah and its various component parts, there is no ‘gray area’ as to whether drug trafficking is illegal.”⁵² This is the quick path to invigorating our South American allies in the fight against Hezbollah. Brazilians do not have the same view of Islamist terrorism as the United States, because they have never been its victim; but their country is torn apart by drugs. Brazil would be more active in neutralizing Hezbollah’s operatives if the U.S. exposed and assisted in taking out their drug networks. We should utilize the assets of our allies who are capable of doing things we are not. Brazil, like most South American countries, has elite, paramilitary anti-drug units. These paramilitary units are known for being exclusive and lacking corruption since their mission is so severe. Since we have money and good intelligence, we could constantly tip off these units that are extremely ruthless when dealing with narcotics networks. If the U.S. monitors Hezbollah’s drug trafficking, it can pay or assist in paying for these paramilitary operations and assist them in executing their mission more efficiently. Here, we should ironically imitate Iran’s approach, by giving funds and arms on a performance-based scale; creating competition amongst these ideologically committed elite unites. This would provide a mutual enemy and strengthen solidarity between our two governments, as well as crippling a severe threat to U.S. interests. Most South and Central American countries have these paramilitary units – Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico – and their governments unleash them daily to wage their wars against drugs and all the ills that come with them. Simply assisting with intelligence against Hezbollah’s drug networks would allow these energetic, paramilitary squads to accomplish their mission and take the fight to our adversary while distancing ourselves from our actual involvement.

Since Hezbollah is established in the TBA and is using it for a launching pad, the TBA should be where U.S. counterintelligence (CI) operations aimed at Hezbollah should start. The

⁵⁰Levitt, “Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God.”

⁵¹Urbanic, “Hezbollah’s Global Reach.”

⁵² Matthew Levitt, “Hezbollah: Narco-Islamism,” Op-Eds & Articles. (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 22 March 2009).

TBA should be used as the staging point for Western security agencies to monitor its operatives as they move out across South and Central America. That way, if a cell is discovered in say Bolivia, the U.S. could say the Bolivians uncovered them, disassociating itself from its moles and CI operations based in the region. Isle Margarita is also a congested traffic point for Hezbollah operatives entering or exiting the TBA, and is also another excellent site established long term CI operations. “Isle Margarita as one of the several strongholds of the Hezbollah infrastructure in Latin America...Hezbollah operatives fleeing scrutiny in the Tri-Border Region after the Argentine bombings passed through Margarita Island, where via the Hezbollah network they obtained visas to enter a variety of countries.”⁵³ Since the Island is a staging point, operatives there will be more complacent there than when in neutral or enemy territory. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinajad is planning on meeting Brazil’s president. The U.S. ought to pressure Brazil to not meet or establish relations with Iran’s president. But if the Brazilians are determined, we could try to create a joint operation. The Brazilian security forces currently work with us often, sharing intelligence and running operations. Together, we could allow Iran to establish some networks in Brazil and monitor all of the operatives they import from a position of concealed vigilance. If targets are selected in Brazil, Brazilian forces will neutralize them, masking our CI efforts. If the operatives are targeted in external locations, then the government in those locations could be tipped off and neither Iran nor Hezbollah would know where the source of intelligence came from. If this is done correctly, whether the CI operations are based in the TBA, Brazilian markets, or Isle Margarita, there is the potential for Iran and Hezbollah to ‘clean house,’ and gut its own organization in paranoia. Pablo Escobar killed his loyal lieutenants and drove away his fierce death squads into an alliance with his enemies because of a successful, paranoia-inducing CI operation. The same strategy can be used on Hezbollah in the TBA, or even South America, though the tactics will have to suit the individual situations in each location.

The U.S. should endeavor to drive a wedge between the South American countries that Iran is or has tried to court. There is no ideological, religious, ethnic, or linguistic connection between Iran and South America. Iran should be exposed for trying to start trouble in a region it is not vested in. The U.S. should emphasize the similarities and stress that the U.S. is not going anywhere and Iran’s interests in the Western Hemisphere are temporary.⁵⁴ We should also emphasize Iran’s willingness to sacrifice its allies, like they did by instigating the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah war in Lebanon. The U.S. should expose CITGO’s money trail, putting all funds in Hugo Chavez’ coffers. CITGO must be banned in America because it is proactively funding our enemies; this can be done by exposing the money trail and using the pretext for shutting down businesses and charities that fund terrorist groups. Venezuela is assisting Iran and Hezbollah in South America, and a properly executed public relations policy could cripple the Venezuelan economy and foster unrest there as well as in Iran, as well as reduce Hezbollah’s financial and political support. It would be simply consist of informing the public without risk to any American lives.

Hezbollah is a brutal terrorist organization and it is flourishing in the Tri-Border Area. It is not only a severe threat to U.S. interests in the Western Hemisphere, it is also Iran’s insurance policy for retaliation, or threat of retaliation, at least until Iran’s nuclear weapon is developed.

⁵³ Diaz, *Lightning Out of Lebanon*, 14.

⁵⁴ Congressman Brad Sherman, “Iran in South America,” Hearing of the Subcommittee on Terrorism— Subcommittee on the Middle East— Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, 27 October 2009.

Hezbollah must be taken seriously. It has to be seen as a multi-faceted, organization that adheres to the fatalistic culture of militant Shi'ism with a comprehensive strategy. Hezbollah needs to be rolled back wherever it is discovered, if not for national interests, then for transcending ethical ones. They are a narco-terrorist organization that engages in human trafficking for money on the side, it is an organization that needs to be isolated and neutralized, wherever it is found. The logic of engaging Hezbollah for ethical reasons, like its atrocious business practices of human and drug trafficking, can draw in allies who would otherwise not assist, to join us in the fight against Hezbollah's terrorism. Let us not forget, that Hezbollah's financial endeavors are to assist its terrorist operations. To view Hezbollah's cells as compartmentalized, is delusional optimism. To sum up, "security services should avoid looking for cells that are strictly engaged in fundraising, logistical support, or terrorist operations... Hezbollah cells are always a bit operational."⁵⁵ By Hezbollah's own decrees, no one is free of his jihadist responsibility, regardless of his position or location. Look at its flag once more. There is no fist holding money or conducting public diplomacy for a better tomorrow.

Research

This is a little examined topic with no academic experts. There are a couple of scholars who are Hezbollah experts, but none specialize in Hezbollah's actions in South America. That being said, sources covering Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area (hereafter TBA) are scarce and usually vague. As a result of limited secondary sources at my disposal I was required to conduct extensive research, including a broad range of interviews. I interviewed: Dr. Dan Fisk, former Senior Director of the Western Hemisphere on the National Security Council; Dr. John Tsagronis, former Senior Director of the Implementation on the National Security Council; L.D., a Lebanese-American Professor who strongly sympathizes with Hezbollah; K.N., an American covert operator for the Department of Defense who just returned from the TBA; and, Dr. Efraim Inbar, an Israeli professor and Director of the Besa Center for Strategic Studies. I also attended a Congressional Session, watched one documentary and read more than 2,000 pages of books and articles. Since no one focuses solely on this topic, research usually consisted of wading through readings for a snippet here or there. The officials and people I interviewed knew almost nothing, except K.N. who could not tell me much since it is nearly all classified. L.L. was trying to assess me and I believe she wants more information on me. She aggressively insisted she receive a copy of this paper, which she will most assuredly not be getting. A couple of my sources have a comprehensive understanding of Hezbollah as an organization and then address its actions in South America. Specifically, I am referring to Dr. Matthew C. Levitt and Dr. Eitan Azani. I hope this research provides insight and clarity of a covert organization and its actions in poorly scrutinized region.

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⁵⁵ Levitt "Hezbollah, A Case Study of Global Reach."

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