

Terrorist Threat in the Tri-Border Area: Myth or Reality?

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LATIN AMERICA's Tri-Border Area (TBA), bounded by Puerto Iguazu, Argentina; Ciudad del Este, Paraguay; and Foz do Iguacu, Brazil, is an ideal breeding ground for terrorist groups. The TBA is a lawless area of illicit activities that generate billions of dollars annually in money laundering, arms and drug trafficking, counterfeiting, document falsification, and piracy. The TBA offers terrorists potential financing; access to illegal weapons and advanced technologies; easy movement and concealment; and a sympathetic population from which to recruit new members and spread global messages. While the TBA is not currently the center of gravity in the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT), it has an important place in the strategy for combating terrorism.

The TBA and Global Terrorism

The TBA, South America's busiest contraband and smuggling center, is home to a large, active Arab and Muslim community consisting of a Shi'a majority, a Sunni minority, and a small population of Christians who emigrated from Lebanon, Syria, Egypt, and the Palestinian territories about 50 years ago. Most of these Arab immigrants are involved in commerce in Ciudad del Este but live in Foz do Iguacu on the Brazilian side of the Iguacu River.

According to international terrorism expert John Price, "The economy of Ciudad del Este is dominated by illegal activity focused on smuggling contraband products, pirating software and music, and money laundering of cocaine production revenue."¹ Even though it has a population of only 300,000, Ciudad del Este has approximately 55 different banks and foreign exchange shops. The United States estimates that \$6 billion a year in illegal funds are laundered there, an amount equivalent to 50 percent of the official gross domestic product of Paraguay. Carlos Altemberger, chief of Paraguay's antiterror-

ist unit, says terrorists partly finance their operations by remitting dollars from Ciudad del Este to the Middle East.²

Ambassador Philip Wilcox, former Department of State (DOS) Coordinator for Counterterrorism, testified before the International Relations Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives that Hezbollah activities in the TBA have involved narcotics, smuggling, and terrorism. Many believe the TBA's Arab and Muslim community contains hardcore terrorist sympathizers with direct ties to Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian, Lebanese Shiite terrorist group; Hamas, the Palestinian fundamentalist group; the Egyptian group Islamic Jihad; and even al-Qaeda.³ However, Arab and Muslim TBA leaders claim their community members are moderates who have lived in harmony with the rest of the population for many years and have rejected extremist views and terrorism. Most of the TBA's 20,000 Arabs and Muslims say it would be impossible for terrorists to hide in their midst and deny remittances sent abroad go to Hezbollah. A minority of Arabs and Muslims, however, make no secret about their sympathy and financial support for Hezbollah, which they say is a legitimate Lebanese political party.

Argentine officials believe Hezbollah is active in the TBA. They attribute the detonation of a car bomb outside Israel's embassy in Buenos Aires on 17 March 1992 to Hezbollah extremists. Officials also maintain that with Iran's assistance, Hezbollah carried out a car-bomb attack on the main building of the Jewish Community Center (AMIA) in Buenos Aires on 18 July 1994 in protest of the Israeli-Jordanian peace agreement that year.⁴

In May 2003, Argentine prosecutors linked Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguacu to the AMIA bombing and issued arrest warrants for two Lebanese citizens in Ciudad del Este. An Iranian intelligence

officer who defected to Germany told Argentine prosecutors that Imad Mugnyiah was the principal suspect in the Buenos Aires bombings.⁵ U.S. officials consider Mugnyiah the mastermind of the 1983 suicide bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, which suggests he has direct ties to Hezbollah and Iran.⁶ Argentine Jews (and many non-Jews) reportedly feel former Argentine President Carlos Saul Menem, of Syrian ancestry, accepted a bribe to conceal Iran's role in the bombings.⁷ Although we cannot confirm the growing radicalization of Islamic communities in the TBA, we must take the possibility into account and closely monitor the situation.

Al-Qaeda is a network of terrorist groups scattered all over the world with a presence in practically every country. Are Osama bin-Laden's operatives also present in the TBA? Local and international media have written about al-Qaeda and other Islamist terrorist groups setting up training camps in the TBA and even having secret summit meetings in the area, although intelligence and law-enforcement officials have not corroborated these reports. The governments of the three TBA countries say terrorism is not a problem in the region and emphasize that they have never detected terrorist activity or cells there.⁸ In December 2002, Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and the United States agreed that "no concrete, detailed tactical information . . . support[s] the theory that there are terrorist sleeper cells or al-Qaeda operatives in the TBA."⁹

Even so, U.S. and regional officials worry that illegal activity and commerce in the area fund terrorist groups, primarily Hezbollah and Hamas. Hezbollah relies extensively on Islamic money through the common Arab community practice of remitting funds to relatives in the Middle East. In addition, with the complicity of corrupt local officials, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) paid Brazilian and Paraguayan organized criminal groups to obtain weapons and equipment in exchange for cocaine.

After 11 September 2001, the TBA attracted so much attention from local law-enforcement groups, intelligence agencies, and the international media that many regional experts believe terrorists moved to



The population in the Tri-Border Area is concentrated in three border cities: Ciudad del Este, Paraguay; Foz do Iguazu, Brazil; and Iguazu, Argentina. The Arab community of immigrants that represents a slice of the urban population in the area, mainly Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguazu, is estimated to be nearly 30,000.

less scrutinized locations in Latin America. This is not to suggest, however, that Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay's counterterrorism efforts have eliminated terrorism in the TBA.

Latin American Links to Global Terrorism

Terrorist groups seek target-rich environments for financial support, safe haven, and recruitment. Six million Muslims inhabit Latin American cities, which are ideal centers for recruiting and hiding terrorists. Ungoverned areas, primarily in the Amazon regions of Suriname, Guyana, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Brazil, present easily exploitable terrain over which to move people and material. Over-populated Latin American cities are home to many disenfranchised groups and marginalized communities capable of supporting terrorist activities or fomenting homegrown terrorism. The Free Trade Zones of Iquique, Chile; Maicao, Colombia; and Colon, Panama, can generate undetected financial and logistical support for terrorist groups. Colombia, Bolivia, and Peru offer cocaine as a lucrative source of income. In addition, Cuba and Venezuela have cooperative agreements with Syria, Libya, and Iran.¹⁰

Terrorist groups are flexible, patient, and use globalization to achieve their objectives. Unless its leaders cooperate with the U.S. National Strategy for Combating Terrorism, Latin America will remain a lucrative target for terrorist funding, recruiting, and safe haven.¹¹

Counterterrorism and Regional Cooperation

The Organization of American States (OAS) fosters international cooperation to counter terrorism. A 1998 Argentine initiative created the Inter-American Committee to Combat Terrorism, and shortly after 11 September 2001, the OAS created the Inter-American Committee Against Terrorism to enhance hemispheric security through improved regional cooperation. The committee established financial intelligence units to collect, analyze, and disseminate information on terrorist offenses and improved border control measures to detect and prevent movement of terrorists and terrorist-related materials.¹² On 28 September 2001, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1373, requiring states under international law to deny financing, support, and safe harbor of terrorists.¹³

Regrettably, a huge gap often exists between a government's good intentions and its ability or political will to act. Most countries in Latin America support international counterterrorism efforts in open fora, but do little to control their porous borders; crack down on illegal arms shipments and illegal immigration; or tighten weak financial controls. Full cooperation between and among nations is quite minimal.

Several Latin American countries do not consider the GWOT their war and do not actively participate in it. Preoccupied with pressing social issues like poverty and unemployment, most Latin American governments are reluctant to support what they perceive as a politically unpopular cause. Only the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua provided troops for Operation Iraqi Freedom's international stabilization force. Some regional political leaders even denounced preemptive U.S. military action against suspected terrorist threats, although many high-ranking military officers privately expressed their support of and willingness to provide troops for Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

Many Latin American governments do not have the legal infrastructure to counter transnational threats or the law-enforcement, intelligence, or military capabilities to assert effective control over their

territories. Economic interdependence among TBA nations further complicates matters. For example, each day, 30,000 people cross the International Friendship Bridge that connects Brazil and Paraguay. Tight security measures and better enforcement of the laws on contraband hurt commerce and anger tourists, consumers, and business people.

Representatives from Mercosur (the Latin American common market) have discussed ways to increase security and facilitate the movement of people and commerce between member countries.¹⁴ In 2002, the Mercosur countries signed an agreement making it easier for their citizens to travel and obtain resident visas. The agreement also permits inspection-free transportation of commercial containers. Such open borders make the region inviting for terrorists and make an already difficult law-enforcement situation worse.

Regional Capabilities to Combat Terrorism

Latin America must use the economic, political, intelligence-gathering, and military elements of national power to cut off terrorism's life-blood—financing and state support. However, most countries in the region cannot afford to control their borders, deny terrorists safe haven in ungoverned territories, eliminate money laundering, or restrict terrorists' abilities to operate.

Resource needs are great, fiscal challenges severe, and available funding insufficient. Latin American militaries and law-enforcement agencies are not suitably organized for or adequately used to confront terrorist networks. The constitutions of many Latin American countries prohibit using military forces for internal security. Memories of the military dictatorships of the 1970s and 1980s have not been forgotten, and the people are afraid such dictatorships might return if the military's role expands. Law-enforcement agencies are not well funded and trained and are notoriously corrupt. Distrust between the military and law-enforcement institutions impedes routine coordination.

U.S. Efforts

U.S. policymakers have not attacked the conditions that attract people to terrorism. The United States and its allies can win spectacular military victories; freeze terrorists' bank accounts and cut off their weapons supplies; and capture or kill terrorist masterminds, but such triumphs are not enough to eliminate an entire generation of brain-washed extremists who have a profound hatred

of the West and a determination to attack it.¹⁵ To get at the source of terrorism, the United States and its allies must ensure their counterterrorism policies and strategies are balanced and clearly articulated.

The National Strategy for Combating Terrorism aims to identify and eliminate terrorist threats before they reach U.S. borders. The document states, "The intent of this strategy is to stop terrorist attacks against the United States, its citizens, its interests, and its allies and, ultimately, to create an international environment inhospitable to terrorists and those who support them."¹⁶ To accomplish these tasks, the United States and its allies must act to—

- Defeat terrorists and their organizations by using all elements of national power: diplomatic, economic, information, law enforcement, military, and intelligence.

- Deny terrorists the sponsorship, support, and sanctuary that enable them to exist, gain strength, train, plan, and execute their attacks, and cut off their access to territory, funds, equipment, training, technology, and unimpeded transit.

- Reduce the underlying conditions that terrorists seek to exploit, such as poverty, deprivation, social disenfranchisement, and unresolved political and regional disputes.

- Defend U.S. sovereignty, territory, and national interests at home and abroad.¹⁷

U.S. counterterrorism strategy toward Latin America has essentially adopted the rollback approach the Reagan Administration used against leftists and communists. The strategy does not adequately address the underlying conditions that terrorists exploit. This preemptive, zero-tolerance strategy calls on regional leaders to adopt U.S. security interests as their own.¹⁸

From a military perspective, the most important responsibility is executing the GWOT Strategic Campaign Plan. Through combatant commanders' theater security cooperation plans, military-to-military contacts foster bilateral and multilateral cooperation to promote U.S. security interests.

The United States has worked with Colombia to protect the latter's strategically important oil fields from FARC sabotage, but the U.S. has no long-term plans to work with Latin American militaries. By and



large, the United States does not consider Latin American militaries to be key players on the world scene, although some participated in the Persian Gulf war, United Nations peacekeeping operations, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. Although the DOS has concluded that Latin America has suffered nearly 40 percent of all terrorist attacks in the Western Hemisphere, Latin America (except for Colombia) remains a low priority in the U.S. counterterrorism strategy.

Future Trends

The world is confronting a new brand of terrorism based on religious-sectarian-nationalist convictions.¹⁹ While terrorist movements have had hundreds or even thousands of members in the past, these new terrorist groups have only a few members.

The new terrorism is more radical, irrational, and difficult to detect. Clear dividing lines once separated terrorists from guerrillas or criminals and homegrown terrorists from state-sponsored terrorists, but these lines have become blurred.²⁰ Terrorist groups like al-Qaeda now likely have access to weapons of mass destruction and use extreme methods, as observed during attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Economically marginalized and disenfranchised groups are made-to-order for terrorists to exploit. The piqueteros (picketers) in Argentina, cocaleros (cocaine dealers) in Bolivia, Movimento Sem Terra (Movement of Those Without Land) in Brazil, and the Pachakutik indigenous peoples in Ecuador, the Bolivarian Circles in Venezuela, and peasants' groups in Paraguay are ethnically and economically op-

pressed groups whose destabilizing power is growing, whose leaders are gaining political prominence, and who could be susceptible to terrorism's appeals.

The TBA's exact role in attracting terrorist groups is not entirely clear, but Ciudad del Este's Arab and Muslim community has raised funds through money laundering, illicit drug and weapons trafficking, smuggling, and piracy, with some of the funds reportedly going to Hezbollah and Hamas to support terrorist acts against Israel. The FARC also reportedly maintains a fundraising presence in the TBA. This extensive terrorist financial network also stretches to Margarita Island, Panama, and the Caribbean.

The TBA's dangerous combination of vast ungoverned areas, poverty, illicit activity, disenfranchised groups, ill-equipped law-enforcement agencies and militaries, and fragile democracies is an open invitation to terrorists and their supporters. Undeterred criminal activity, economic inequality, and the rise of disenfranchised groups with the potential to collaborate with terrorists present a daunting challenge.

Terrorism today is transnational and decentralized. International support of a multidimensional counterterrorism strategy is necessary to defeat it. Colombia's less-than-successful counternarcotics strategy demonstrates that unilateral action does not necessarily eradicate or eliminate drug trafficking. The same is true of terrorism. Unilateral action in Afghanistan has not eliminated the global terrorist threat. Without multilateral, cooperative deterrence, terrorist organizations will simply migrate across porous borders to less scrutinized areas. As long as

terrorism does not directly affect them, nations in the TBA will place economic considerations ahead of security concerns, seek economic prosperity, and remain reluctant to tighten border controls or place new restrictions on commerce and transportation.

The potential for terrorism in the TBA and elsewhere in Latin America is clearly no myth. The TBA and several other tri-border areas in Latin America will emerge as ideal breeding grounds for terrorists and those groups that support them, unless countries in the region make changes in their judicial systems, improve their law-enforcement and military capabilities, take effective anticorruption measures, and cooperate with each other. The potential for Middle East terrorists to operate in the TBA and elsewhere in Latin America warrants closer scrutiny.

The United States can only win the GWOT if it has regional partners ready and willing to take preemptive action and not just wait for the United States to act. Closing down charities that fund terrorism, rounding up suspected terrorists, and denouncing terrorism is in the regional partners' self-interest.²¹ Only effective diplomacy can bring this to pass. According to Ambassador J. Cofer Black, DOS Coordinator for Counterterrorism, "[Diplomacy] is the instrument of power that builds political will and strengthens international cooperation. Through diplomatic exchanges, we promote counterterrorism cooperation with friendly nations, enhance the capabilities of our allies, take the war to the terrorists, and ultimately cut off the resources they depend on to survive."²² **MR**

NOTES

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