

TRANSNATIONAL TERRORISM IN LATIN AMERICA

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Summary

Following the horrific attacks of September 11, 2001, in the United States, the international community woke up to what many political scientists and historians called “multipolar chaos.” Two decades later, strategic and security challenges have not been limited and have risen dangerously to global alert levels. With geopolitics once again as a battleground, the horizon of terrorism has expanded or increased in traditionally safe areas, such as Latin America.

Keywords: *International terrorism, Geopolitics, Southern Hemisphere, Latin America.*

Introduction

Without a shadow of a doubt, the world changed on a sunny morning on September 11, 2001. With less than 45 minutes of difference, two commercial aircrafts crashed into the north and south towers of the *World Trade Center* in New York City, the financial heart of the United States. In addition, two other planes would crash that day. One was against the headquarters of American military power, the Pentagon, while the other would not achieve its objective of impacting the US Congress, after the heroic intervention of its passengers who paid with their lives for stopping such an attack. Faced with those facts, the former president of the United States, George W. Bush, warned that war against America had been declared. However, reality indicated that global terrorism, focused on a foreign enemy such as Osama Bin Laden’s Al Qaeda network, had already been present in Latin America for a long time.

The last two decades changed the global geopolitical and geostrategic landscape. From a kind of regional threat and/or terrorism, it has gone to the rise of global attacks, most likely due to globalization and a world that -in less than a decade- is interconnected through the *World Wide Web*. The “New World Order” advocated by leaders such as George W. Bush and political scientists such as Francis Fukuyama is a fact, but with a variant opposed to their initial theses. That would be, there was no rise of liberal democracies, nor an increase in world security. Some examples are the cases of terrorism (from Al Qaeda to the so-called Islamic State), wars in the heart of Europe (the former Yugoslavia or the invasion of Ukraine by Russia), and the terrible COVID-19 pandemic. Logically, Latin America was not going to be an exception.

The First Attacks in the Region

The year 1992, which celebrated the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in America and began with the fall of the Soviet Socialist Bloc, was one of the most convulsive years in recent history, rapidly moving from optimism of global peace to the deepest disappointment. The Balkan War or Yugoslav Implosion, the crisis in the Horn of Africa (mainly in Somalia and Ethiopia), together with the beginning of the long Algerian Civil War, the fall of Kabul into chaos after the mujahideen victory against the Marxist government of Mohammad Najibullah, and many “low intensity” conflicts completely surprised the world chancelleries.

In the case of Latin America, the violence came through terrorist acts of extreme brutality, the most serious case being the attack on the Israeli Embassy in Argentina, which occurred on March 17, 1992. This act, committed by a suicide driver of a van loaded with TNT, destroyed the headquarters of the Israeli embassy and consulate, located in the city of Buenos Aires. Although Argentina had suffered attacks of parapolice terrorism in the moments before the coup d'état in 1976 that gave rise to the so-called “National Reorganization Process,” that country had never felt the actions of international terrorism, particularly the Fundamentalist

Group Hezbollah (in Arabic, the “Party of God”), a militant organization of international scope that maintains parliamentary representation in its country of origin, Lebanon.

According to the Government of the country, “the massacre constituted the first international terrorist attack perpetrated against Argentina.”¹ Two years later, the country would again suffer an even more brutal attack with the bombing of the Israeli-Argentine Mutual Association (AMIA), which occurred on July 18, 1994, this time killing 85 people and wounding 300 others. As singer-songwriter León Gieco named it: “All the dead of the AMIA and those of the Israeli Embassy. The secret power of weapons. The justice that looks and does not see. Everything is hidden in memory. Refuge from life and history.” Likewise, there was talk of the penetration of international terrorists into the southern cone through the so-called “Triple Frontier,” an area where the territorial limits of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil converge.

Hezbollah in Latin America

In the end, Argentine authorities would conclude that “the decision to carry out the AMIA attack was taken, and the attack was orchestrated, by the highest officials of the Islamic Republic of Iran at the time, and that these officials instructed Lebanese Hezbollah... to carry out the attack.”²

According to a study conducted for the U.S. Special Operations Command, Hezbollah clerics “began placing operatives and recruiting sympathizers among Arab and Muslim immigrants around the tri-border area during the height of the Lebanese Civil War in the mid-1980s.”³ The result was the

1 Ministry of Culture, “17 de marzo de 1992: 30 años del atentado terrorista contra la Embajada de Israel”, *Government of Argentina* (17 March 2022), <https://www.argentina.gob.ar/noticias/17-de-marzo-de-1992-30-anos-del-atentado-terrorista-contra-la-embajada-de-israel>

2 Matthew Levitt, “Iranian and Hezbollah Operations in South America. Then and Now”, *National Defense University Press* (PRISM 5 No. 4: April 2016), 118-133 https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/06/Documents/prism/prism_5-4/Iranian%20and%20Hezbollah.pdf

3 Daniel Blinder, “El uso político del atentado a la AMIA: Irán y Hezbollah”. *Magazine Intellector* (ISSN 1807-1260-[CENEGRI], 7(14): June 2011), 1-28.

establishment of more formal Hezbollah cells in the region, composed of people of Lebanese descent, particularly Shia Muslims, who provided some financial support to Hezbollah.

All these factors were exploited by radical Shiite cleric Mohsen Rabbani, an Iranian who lived in Argentina for 11 years. Rabbani, the main architect of the AMIA plot, was sent specifically from Iran for the express purpose of running the state-controlled al-Tawhid Mosque in the Floresta neighborhood, but he also served as a representative of Iran's Ministry of Agriculture, which ensured that Argentine beef exported to Iran complied with halal-seal dietary decrees.

Investigators from the Argentine Intelligence Secretariat (SIDE) later concluded that Rabbani was “the driving force behind these efforts [to establish an Iranian intelligence network in Argentina] From the moment of his arrival in the country in 1983, Mr. Rabbani began to lay the foundations that allowed for the further implementation and further development of the [Iranian] spy network.”⁴ Four months before the AMIA attack, Rabbani was suddenly named diplomat of the Islamic Republic of Iran, with full official status, which included diplomatic credentials and immunity. As for the Hezbollah operatives deployed to carry out the attack, Argentine law enforcement and intelligence officials would later determine that they left the country about two hours before the building exploded.

Following the AMIA attack, early Argentine intelligence reports reported that “the main activists suspected”⁵ of being members of an Islamist terrorist organization included Mohammad Youssef Abdallah, Farouk Abdul Omairi, and Samuel Salman el-Reda, among others. As the investigation into the AMIA bombing progressed, it increasingly focused on these three Hezbollah operatives. The result of these activities was that Hezbollah built networks (formal and informal) of support in the tri-border area, a relatively simple

4 Isaac Caro, “Presencia de movimientos chiítas en América Latina: Su relación con los atentados de Buenos Aires (1992, 1994) y con el eje Caracas-Teherán”. *Latin American Research Review* (2011), 177-193, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41261375>

5 *Ibid*

process thanks to the abundant Lebanese and Shia origin population settled in that area. Hidden in plain sight, Hezbollah militants found themselves in an ideal operating environment to raise funds, provide logistical support and engage in operational activities in the region. This included, according to a protected witness, the formation of sleeper or “inactive” cells operating under strict safety guidelines, so that members of one cell were unaware of the acts of members of another. To avoid attracting attention, they allegedly settled and worked among friends or relatives in Ciudad del Este, where they used businesses, schools, and mosques.

Hezbollah would later link the AMIA bombing to the capture of a Hezbollah militant Mustafa Dirani by Israeli commands. However, in May 1993 (a year before Dirani’s capture by operatives sent from Jaffa) and then in November 1993, Rabbani visited car dealerships to ask about buying a Renault Trafic pickup truck, according to Argentine intelligence. No purchase was made at the time, though authorities became suspicious when they realized that Rabbani told each car salesman a different story explaining his interest in the purchase. Later, in a television interview after the AMIA bombing, Rabbani would deny having been informed about the purchase of a pickup truck, insisting that he was looking for a sedan all the time despite detailed testimonies from several sellers at multiple dealerships.

The day after the AMIA bombing, the terrorists attacked again, this time in Panama. On July 19, 1994, an Embraer twin-engine aircraft operated by Atlas Airlines exploded shortly after takeoff from Colón bound for Panama City. Of the 21 people on board (including passengers and crew) who lost their lives instantly, 12 passengers were Jewish, including four Israelis and three Americans. After the terrible attack on the AMIA and given the small size of the Jewish community in Panama, the tragedy strongly shook the Jewish community in that country. The community’s fears were quickly confirmed when Panama’s president-elect announced that the accident “was not a human error, but a terrorist act.”⁶

6 Philip K. Abbott, Terrorist Threat in the Tri-Border Area: Myth or Reality? *Military Review* (October 2004), 51-55, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/abbott.pdf>

That same year, not long after these attacks, Uruguayan police thwarted a Hezbollah-led arms smuggling operation with linkages to the tri-border area. The following August, Paraguayan police arrested three members of a Hezbollah “sleeper cell” with possible links to the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy. Imad Mughniyeh himself (Hezbollah’s top military commander) was reported to have hatched a plot in the mid-1990s to buy a large amount of beef from Paraguayan cold storage companies and poison the meat before shipping it for resale in Israel. Paraguayan police reportedly intercepted the shipment and prevented it from leaving the country.

The operational links between criminal activities such as drug trafficking and terrorism cases became evident shortly thereafter, such as the arrest in 1996 of Marwan Kadi (also known as Marwan Safadi), who was captured by US agents while he was under surveillance as part of an operation that prevented a plot to bomb the US embassy in Asunción, Paraguay. Convicted in a Canadian court of smuggling cocaine from Brazil, Kadi arrived in the tri-border area after escaping from a prison in Ottawa, possibly with the help of Hezbollah elements. He obtained a U.S. passport under an alias and returned to the tri-border area, where Brazilian police arrested him for cocaine possession. Inexplicably, he again escaped from prison and fled across the border into Paraguay. While under surveillance, police arrested him at his apartment in Ciudad del Este, where they found explosives, firearms, forged Canadian and American passports, along with a large amount of cash. However, after he was deported to the United States, prosecutors could only charge him with fraud by using false passports. He was subsequently deported to Canada to serve the remainder of his sentence.

Just months after mass surveillance of Hezbollah began in the region in early 2000, photos of local Lebanese businessmen appeared next to Iranian and Hezbollah al-Muqawama (“resistance”) flags at a training camp allegedly located in the surroundings of *Foz do Iguaçu*, Brazil. Argentine intelligence believes Hezbollah operated a military and ideological training camp in the tri-border area. According to a former Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI)

agent who focused on Hezbollah in South America, Hezbollah operatives were also reportedly involved in military training in Panama and Venezuela. Assad Ahmad Barakat, the militant group's top adviser in Latin America, was reported to have planned attacks on Jewish targets in Canada, Argentina, and Ciudad del Este.

On December 22, 1999, Argentine intelligence arrested alleged members of Hamas and Hezbollah, along with an Iranian intelligence agent. However, they were later released. In 2000, an FBI delegation traveled to Argentina to help with the effort to investigate the AMIA bombing and coordinate with local authorities to deal with Hezbollah's presence in the region. Briefed extensively by Argentine intelligence both in Buenos Aires and in the tri-border area, the FBI agent who led the delegation left convinced that local intelligence services had the evidence about Hezbollah and its role in the AMIA bombing. Even so, Hezbollah's activity in the region would continue to thrive to this day, in some cases with the support of important political leaders such as former Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami.

Militant and Terrorist Activities in the Tri-Border

After quoting in previous lines the almighty and almost omnipresent presence of Hezbollah in Latin America, the following question would be asked: Are there more militant groups or organizations in that area of such porous edges, such as the so-called "Triple Frontier"? Undoubtedly, previous experiences point to a resounding "yes". Connections between the region's Muslim groups and terrorism only increased after 2001, following the September 11 attacks in the United States. In a report that same year, the U.S. State Department singled out the Tri-Border as a financial sanctuary for Hezbollah and the Palestinian militant group Hamas. They claimed the presence of these groups precisely because a large Muslim community lived there, confusing the practice of Islam with the presence of terrorism. The report asserted that, by maintaining ties to their home countries, these groups served as channels for money laundering. Communications between the Brazilian government and the U.S. State Department typically

described the Tri-Border Area as an “ungoverned” area and a “zone of non-sovereignty,” so it would require immediate action to contain threats, according to research by Thomaz Costa and Gastón Schulmeister.⁷

Additionally, the location and detention of numerous operatives in the region also showed the existence of terrorist groups in the Tri-Border Zone. Some were charged with financing terrorism, inciting terrorism, or planning attacks. Lebanese Argentine citizen Khalid el Din, for example, was arrested on terrorism charges after being identified as a collaborator in the 1994 AMIA bombing. In 1996, Paraguayan authorities established that explosives expert Marwan al Safadi lived in the Tri-Border Area and was eventually captured by Brazilian authorities. Another key figure, Mohamed Ali Abou Ibrahim Soliman (accused by Egypt of involvement in the 1997 terrorist attack in Luxor against Western tourists) was arrested by Brazil’s Federal Police in 1999. Other examples of key actors located in the triple border include the late head of Hezbollah’s military branch, Imad Mugniyah (1962 - 2008), who was directly linked to the establishment and development of terrorist cells in Ciudad del Este and Encarnación.

The area has also been called “the United Nations of crime, a safe shelter for terrorists,” and Mecca for counterfeiting activities. Although border regions are often referred to as “lawless,” the Tri-Border –for good reason– gained notoriety for its large amount of illegal activity.⁸ This was largely due to its isolated jungle areas, but also to its urban centers that facilitate communications, transport, and banking services. Although the Tri-Border was a hotbed of illegal activity for decades, it made headlines again in April 2019 when then-U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo raised the issue of combating transnational crime and terrorist financing in the area during a

7 Thomaz G. Costa and Gastón H. Schulmeister, “The puzzle of the Iguazu tri-border area: Many questions and few answers regarding organized crime and terrorism links”, *Global Crime* (Taylor & Francis Journals, vol. 8, Iss. 1: 17 February of 2007) 26–39, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17440570601121845>

8 Gregory Shapiro, Terror Reigns Supreme and the Cycle of Violence Is Seemingly Endless in the Triple Frontier, *NYLS Journal of Human Rights* (Vol. 19, Iss. 3, Article 11: 2003), 895, https://digitalcommons.nyls.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1557&context=journal_of_human_rights

meeting on counterterrorism in Buenos Aires.⁹ Argentina State Department International Narcotics Control Strategy Report described the Tri-Border as “the center of a multibillion-dollar trade in illicit goods, including marijuana cultivation, Andean cocaine trafficking, and arms smuggling that facilitates significant money laundering in Paraguay.”¹⁰

Despite increasingly prolific legislation, as well as joint meetings and interventions between Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and the United States, the tri-border is an empty space or rather “liberated” from state control. Criminal organizations take advantage of the state’s lack of presence to increase their authority. Therefore, it is considered a free zone for crime and terrorism, including planning, and raising resources for this purpose and others that could serve militant groups such as Hezbollah.¹¹ Undoubtedly, this area is a laboratory where States and organizations (civilian and military) do not stop learning, treating, combating, and studying the chameleonic phenomenon of terrorism (or a part of it). In that sense, there cannot be complete standardization in the treatment of this phenomenon, since each State responds differently depending on the situation, place, time, and people involved.

Conclusions

The so-called Triple Frontier is certainly one of the most volatile, violent, and dangerous areas on the planet. Traditionally, it has been an area of synergy between migrants from the extinct Ottoman Empire (in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and the Indian subcontinent. Since 1988, the area fell into an irrational spiral of violence, drug trafficking, and human trafficking, together with the presence of cells of militant

9 Oxford Analytica, “US will increase Paraguay money-laundering pressures”, *Emerald Expert Briefings*, (Oxan-db: 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1108/OXAN-DB243981>

10 Robert Muggah y Gustavo Macedo Diniz, “Securing the border”, *Strategic Paper*, (n.º 5: 2013), 1–29.

11 William Costanza, Hezbollah and its mission in Latin America, *Studies in conflict & terrorism*, (Vol. 35, Iss. 3: February 22, 2012), 193–210. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/254335250_Hezbollah_and_Its_Mission_in_Latin_America.

groups, mainly from the Middle East, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, the Palestinian group Hamas or the now extinct Gam'ah Egyptian Islamiyya. Unfortunately, the participation of governments considered “rebel states” (mainly the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela and -previously- the Military Junta of Panama presided over by Manuel Antonio Noriega), involved in the lucrative drug trafficking business, does not help to stabilize the area.

In a globalized and hyperconnected world, “small problems” or “low-intensity conflicts” in geographically volatile areas can lead to dire results, especially today during a global financial crisis and an open war between Russia and Ukraine, following a pandemic that has officially left seven million dead worldwide. If borders as porous as those of the Donbas in Eastern Europe gave rise to a border conflict whose effects are felt to this day, the different nations of Latin America should be concerned about the impact and development of the existing threats in the Triple Frontier.

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