

INVESTIGATION

Narcos and terrorism, Iran and Latin America's dangerous friendship

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Iran is very interested in Latin America, the area just a few miles from the 'Great Satan', the United States of America. In June 2023, President Ebrahim Raisi toured three Latin American nations, including one located only 90 miles from the US border. The main

objective of the trip was to strengthen Iran's strategic and economic ties in the Western Hemisphere by openly challenging the United States.

During the visit, which included stops in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba, the Iranian president praised these countries “for their resistance to US pressure and for sharing values contrary to the international order” based on democratic principles. During the trip, Raisi emphasised the evolution of Latin America, formerly considered ‘America’s Backyard’, towards a recovery of independence by each country. He emphasised a growing ‘harmony’ between Iranians and the Latin American people since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, citing a common spirit and ideals. However, Iranian efforts to penetrate the region are not limited to diplomatic relations.

According to a study conducted by the *International Institute for Counterterrorism* (ICT), Iran receives support from terrorist organisations and pro-Iranian groups to expand its ideological influence in Latin America. Hezbollah is deeply involved in fundraising, propaganda, and smuggling operations, while other organisations such as Al-Tajammu play a significant role in expanding Iranian influence through the Internet and social media.

Hezbollah's media influence is evident in its powerful international media apparatus, as reported by the Spanish think tank *International Observatory on Terrorism Studies* (OIET). Through its television station al-Manar and other platforms such as HispanTV and al-Mayadeen, Hezbollah promotes its ideology and the values of the Iranian Islamic revolution, reaching an international audience, including Latin American audiences.

Iran uses 'large-scale psychological warfare' through social networks, satellites, and Spanish-language media to promote Iranian interests and attack the West and Latin America. Jorge Serrano, a member of Iran's advisory team to the Peruvian Congress' Intelligence Commission, emphasised the key role of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence (VEVAK) behind these activities.

With respect to Iranian ambitions in Latin America, already discussed in an article on this website in 2018, *Narcos and Jihad, the lies about extremism in Brazil*, links between Iran, its proxies Hezbollah and Hamas, and destabilising activities in Central and South America are currently highlighted. In particular, Hezbollah's involvement in illegal activities, such as drug trafficking, and links with criminal organisations such as the Primeiro Comando da Capital in Brazil, the largest criminal organisation in the country, with around 11.000 members, present mainly in the São Paulo and Triple Frontera areas: the border area between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, long identified as a

nerve centre for a wide range of criminal activities, from drug and arms trafficking, to smuggling of goods, intellectual property theft, document forgery, and money laundering.

The area is recognised as a major hub for money laundering to support the activities of organised crime and terrorist networks, with significant financial and regional security implications, generating a turnover of approximately USD 43 billion annually.

Illegal activities have been documented for over 40 years. And terrorist organisations like Hezbollah have found in the Triple Frontera the right environment where, thanks to alliances with criminal organisations, they can count on access to financial resources to subsidise attacks; on independence from state sponsorship; on the possibility of building economic power by compensating for the lack of public support; access to specific expertise (money laundering, counterfeiting of documents; facilitation of cross-border movements, i.e. use of human trafficking routes); and contact with a wide range of potential recruits already belonging to the world of crime.

Since its creation in the 1980s, Hezbollah has received significant support from Iran, both economically and militarily. In addition to this support, the group has financed its activities through various illegal activities on a global scale. In Latin America, several investigations have revealed strong links between Hezbollah and drug trafficking organisations, including the Colombian FARC and the Mexican cartels Los Zetas and Sinaloa. These ties facilitated the exchange of weapons between Hezbollah and the Mexican cartels, as well as the teaching of tunnelling techniques similar to those used between Lebanon and Israel.

Hezbollah has been involved in several illicit activities, including cigarette smuggling, drug trafficking, and the illegal trade in diamonds from West Africa, particularly Sierra Leone. In the case of cigarette smuggling, the US counter-terrorism operation Smokescreen unveiled a business that earned between \$1.5 and \$2.5 million, which was invested in military equipment and other needs of the group. Over the years, it has also emerged that **despite Hezbollah's criminal activities, in 2017 the Obama Administration** allegedly obstructed investigations into the group's international drug-trafficking network in order to preserve the Iranian nuclear deal.

The investigation known as the Cassandra Project and conducted by the *Drug Enforcement Administration* (DEA) revealed a vast cocaine trafficking network run by Hezbollah, but DEA requests for arrest warrants were allegedly obstructed or delayed so as not to jeopardise the Iran agreements. Through various telephone wiretaps, covert

operations and informants, and with the help of 30 other US and foreign intelligence agencies, the DEA allegedly uncovered a vast cocaine trafficking network operated by Hezbollah from South America to Europe and the Middle East, as well as other routes from Venezuela and Mexico to the United States.

However, the Obama Administration, after the Iran Nuclear Deal of 17 January 2016, obstructed the continuation of investigations and actions against Hezbollah so as not to jeopardise relations with Iran. Project Cassandra's efforts were gradually delegitimised, with DEA agents encountering resistance and delays in requests for clearances for investigations, prosecutions and arrests. This has prevented the blocking of Lebanese terrorist activities, demonstrating a deliberate restriction of investigative actions against Hezbollah by the Obama Administration. According to DEA investigations, Hezbollah procured synthetic drugs from the Mexican drug cartels to sell initially mainly in the Middle East – where, once it learned the chemical processes, it set up numerous laboratories for the production of amphetamines - in order to finance its operations and economy, also finding in the Assad regime a partner and ally in the trafficking and production of narcotics.

In particular, of psychostimulant tablets of phenethylamine, a compound derived from the molecular doubling of methamphetamine and caffeine, **known as Captagon**, Biocaptagon, and Fitton, but also as 'Captain Courage', Abu Hilalain (Father of Two Crescents, ed.) for the two letters C (Captagon's initial) engraved on the pills, 'cocaine of the poor' and 'the drug of jihad', because of its widespread use by fighters in Syria, including ISIS. Syria, write analysts Carmit Valensi and Orna Mizrahi of the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), **has become a narco-state** for which drug revenues are among the main sources of income: in 2022, drug exports from Syria were worth around \$25-30 billion; in contrast, annual revenues from legal exports are around \$800 million (the production of a pill costs a maximum of 3 cents.)

In some cases, the drugs are transported through Syria and in other cases through Lebanese ports and airports. According to the Centre for Operational Research and Analysis (COAR), a consultancy firm based in Cyprus, in 2020, authorities in several countries seized Syrian drugs with a street value of no less than \$3.4 billion.

Hezbollah has patiently built a global network of illicit financial activities and terrorist plots, repeatedly striking targets in the West and beyond, in collaboration with the Iranian state. The particular concern for Latin America is motivated by the fact that many countries in the region do not consider Hezbollah a terrorist organisation, thus limiting the action of local authorities. The open support of local authoritarian regimes aligned with Tehran, such as Nicolas Maduro's Venezuela, has turned this area

into a forward operating base for Iran.

Hezbollah and Iranian fronts mix with radical pro-Palestinian activism, gaining access to political leaders and cover for their activities. Hezbollah's long association with organised crime provides extensive links with local criminal syndicates, facilitating access to weapons, explosives and corrupt public officials. Yet, designating the Party of God a terrorist organisation, without distinction between 'political wing' and 'military wing', is still a struggle.