

Ideas That Shape (ITS)

South America and Islamist Militants

Possible Repercussions of Terrorist Alignments in the Wake of Hugo Chavez's Death

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South American and Islamist Militants

The 'Tri-Border Region' – comprised of the convergence point between the Brazilian, Paraguayan and Argentine borders – has long been a significant concern for regional security authorities. The weak military presence, coupled with insufficient border control - and the impenetrable jungle thicket - provide excellent conditions for regional drug trafficking gangs to operate freely and with little concern for government intervention. Ciudad del Este, Paraguay, and Foz do Iguacu, Brazil, are *the region's principal money-laundering centers* creating the largest focal points for illegal financing. (Hudson, Rex. Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area [TBA] of South America, 2010, Page 2, Paragraph 2)

The Lebanese military organization, Hezbollah, has been suspected of utilizing the Tri-border Region (TBR) since the late 1980's as a base of operations, a transshipment point of personnel and materiel, and training grounds for new and current troops. Hezbollah's relationship with Iran as their militant proxy group has allowed them to take advantage of the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's personal relationship with former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. This relationship has allowed them to acquire new regions in which to operate. It has also yielded direct aid from a South American government and possible new business connections with Venezuela's proxy group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). (Pickell, Sam. Radical Islam's Western Foothold: Hugo Chavez and Hezbollah, 2010)

This article will argue that the relationship between Hezbollah and Venezuela destabilizes regional political cooperation. The destabilization factors include: a breakdown in interstate diplomatic relations; military interventions from regional and external forces; and lastly, violence between terrorist groups as funding methods overlap between FARC and Hezbollah. This will be examined through an analysis of the political and military connections between Venezuela and Hezbollah.

Outline

South America experienced an influx of Lebanese immigrants during the civil war in Lebanon from 1979 to 1990. This mass migration created the initial surge of personnel to organize and mobilize Hezbollah cells within South America. New recruits were acquired through the radicalization of displaced Lebanese citizens residing in South America, through mosques and community groups. Operating out of the TBR, Hezbollah affiliates executed *the bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992 [and] the Argentine Jewish Center bombing in 1994*. (Miryetka, Cyrus. Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area of South America, 2011, Paragraph 2)

Despite their hostility towards the American government and Jewish Population in South America, Hezbollah's presence in the region was relatively minimal in comparison to larger groups in the regions such as the National Liberation Army (ELN) and FARC.

Both Colombian-based groups boasted much larger numbers and more frequent attacks. Concern regarding Hezbollah's activity and strength in the region escalated as President Chavez and President Ahmadinejad consolidated their personal and diplomatic relationship. (Berman, Ilan. Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere, 2011)

Iran has openly supported Hezbollah as their militant proxy group to suppress Israeli and U.S. influence in the Middle East. Increased cooperation between President Chavez and President Ahmadinejad has resulted in an increased level of financing for Hezbollah. As stated by Syrian drug lord Walid Makled, funding is acquired through drug trafficking and cocaine sales in the South American region. Revenue is then immediately transferred to Hezbollah leadership in Lebanon. (Farrah, Douglas. *The Growing Terrorism Challenge in Latin America*, 2007)

The support comes from free and uninterrupted land used for *training camps, recruiting bases and networks of mutual assistance in Venezuela*. Conviasa, Venezuela's national airline, has regular flights between Caracas, Damascus and Tehran. These flights reportedly left Caracas devoid of passengers but with cargo loads of cocaine and money. On the return flights the Conviasa planes would arrive with suspected Hezbollah militants. (Neumann, Vanessa. *The New Nexus of Narcoterrorism: Hezbollah and Venezuela*, 2011, Paragraph 3) (Department of Homeland Security. *Hezbollah in Latin America - Implications for U.S. Homeland Security*, 2008, Page 9, Paragraph 3)

This provides the necessary transshipment methods to *ferry operatives, recruits, and cargo in and out of the region*. Most recently, Margarita Island in Venezuela has surpassed the TBR as *a principal safe haven and center of Hezbollah operations in the Americas*. (Department of Homeland Security. *Hezbollah in Latin America - Implications for U.S. Homeland Security*, 2008, Page 7, Paragraph 6)

Farah states that Iran's relationships in Latin America stretch beyond Venezuela, but towards the Venezuelan-allied Bolivarian governments of Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Bolivia – all of which are key members to Chavez' interstate political group - the Bolivian Alliance for the Americas (ALBA).

The networks that these countries' leaders share with President Ahmadinejad have forgone institutional legitimacy in favour of personal relationships. Nonetheless, despite the numerous personal visits that President Ahmadinejad has made to Presidents Ortega, Correa and Morales, their affiliation with Iran still hinges on the relationship held by President Chavez and President Ahmadinejad. (Farah, Douglas. *Iran in Latin America: An Overview*, 2009)

Destabilizing Factors

The interstate relations during the Chavez era were characterized by his personal relationships with foreign state leaders. Chavez' ALBA group was mostly centered on himself and relied on the Venezuelan leader's vision to maintain and continue its progression towards its goals of a Bolivarian supremacy. These leaders shared idealistic Bolivarian and anti-American views that rallied around the vision, personality, and charismatic leadership of Hugo Chavez. By revolving the bilateral relationships that Venezuela held with both Iran and the ALBA members around one individual, the nature of interstate relations changes drastically with the new Venezuelan leader Nicolas Maduro. (Farah, Douglas. *Iran in Latin America: An Overview*, 2009)

There is no guarantee that President Maduro will command the same respect and authority that President Chavez boasted to forge the relations he created - while promoting both his socialist and anti-American ideals – the ideals that netted him the allegiance of his allies in Latin America, the Caribbean and the Middle East. Lastly, aligning these nations along explicitly socialist, anti-American ideals causes further tensions within the South American political spectrum. By labelling these countries as

part of the *Bolivarian Revolution*, President Chavez has intrinsically labeled any country unaffiliated with the group as *non-Bolivarian*. (Farah, Douglas. *Iran in Latin America: An Overview*, 2009)

The division of ideals establishes an in-group/out-group scenario for South American countries and creates latent notions of political discord between both groups. This becomes a point of concern for Colombia, which stands in the out-group of non-Bolivarian countries, but is sandwiched between the two in-group Bolivarian countries, Venezuela and Ecuador. The Colombian government has been the target of Venezuelan and Ecuadorian hostility since their recent incursion of Ecuadorian territory in pursuit of FARC forces. In-group Bolivia has recently taken out-group Chile to the International Court to reclaim access to the Pacific Ocean – the result of a war that took place over a century ago. (Pickell, Sam. *Radical Islam's Western Foothold: Hugo Chavez and Hezbollah*, 2010)

Hezbollah's increased activity presents another form of regional destabilization that may cause more immediate problems than diplomatic deterioration. The attacks that Hezbollah carried out on American and Jewish targets were still on Argentine soil and constitute an attack on the Argentine state. The harbouring and aiding of active terrorist groups within the region may elicit the mobilization of state troops, and ultimately an interstate conflict. The possibility of military incursion comes from two sources in this context. (Miryetka, Cyrus. *Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area of South America*, 2011)

Firstly, there is the military intervention on behalf of the victimized nation who has suffered an attack on its territory. An attack on a nation such as the attacks in Argentina – whether targeting an American asset or not – remains an attack on the nation and creates a necessity for retaliatory efforts to eliminate terrorist threats. The fluid nature of terrorist threats creates logistical problems with traditional military confrontations. Lake argues that Realist tactics to conflict are no longer applicable when the principal threat posed to a state is of a terrorist nature. (Pickell, Sam. *Radical Islam's Western Foothold: Hugo Chavez and Hezbollah*, 2010)

In Lake's definition, he explicitly asserts that direct conflict between two states constitutes a breakdown in the diplomatic process. In this instance, one or both states find direct conflict to yield higher benefits than complacency to the other party. A terrorist threat eliminates both the concept of a direct party to bargain with as well as an equally direct party to confront if said bargaining tactics deteriorate. This model of fluid terrorist belligerents departs from the traditionally state-centered model of interstate conflict.

Lake's analysis outlines the principal reason that Hezbollah has not been flushed out of the TBR – which is the tendency for terrorist groups to operate out of logistically impermeable locations and the fluid, unidentifiable nature of their troops. Once a terrorist organization is linked to a state's national government it provides an identifiably belligerent party as a target for attack in the absence of the terrorist group's immediate military presence.

The most obvious example available of this phenomenon are the events following the September 11, 2001 attacks that resulted in the United States' invasion of Afghanistan in search of the Al Qaeda terrorists and the subsequent Global War on Terror (GWOT). Continued attacks from the Hezbollah cell in the TBR, as well as their connection to the Venezuelan government, may fulfill the necessary conditions for interstate conflict. (Lake, David A. *Rational Extremism: Understanding Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century*, 2003)

Secondly, Hezbollah's presence in South America creates a significant security threat for the United States, which may result in either a direct or indirect intervention on behalf of the U.S. forces to eliminate targets within the specified regions. The Colombian military incursion into Ecuador that resulted in the death of FARC leader Raul Reyes was strongly backed by the U.S. forces and constituted a blatant disregard for Ecuadorian sovereignty. (Chertoff, Michael. *Confronting Threats to the Homeland: The Next Generation*, 2008)

Though the countries comprising the TBR do not fulfill the quality of a failed state that Menkhaus claims, they are necessary for clandestine operations. More sovereignty-breaching operations may take place in the future if opportunities to eliminate Hezbollah leaders arise. Both of these instances may destabilize the South American region through interrupted diplomatic relations or possible interstate violence leading to regional warfare. (Menkhaus, Kenneth J. *Somalia and Somaliland: Terrorism, Political Islam, and State Collapse*, 2005)

FARC and Hezbollah

The inevitable competition between FARC and Hezbollah proves to be one of the most under researched outcomes within the context of these two proxy parties. Um states that the causes of inter-group terrorist violence are normally entrenched in one of four major reasons:

1. Criminally motivated violence
2. Sectarian violence
3. Expressive violence
4. Politically motivated violence

Um's analysis on Colombia shows that most inter-group violence between FARC and the ELN has *targeted perceived supporters and sympathizers of opposing militant groups*. This would indicate that their struggles with one another have been less about maintaining supremacy regarding political goals and more centralized around territorial spats and resources. This, I predict, will be the major point of contention between FARC and Hezbollah if the situation arises.

Both groups maintain divergent political and ideological views but utilize the same revenue-generating practices of drug trafficking and money laundering. FARC's practice of maintaining political prisoners such as Clara Rojas and Ingrid Betancourt were done in an effort to gain political clout as a primary goal and obtaining ransom funds as a secondary goal. (Um, Eric van. *Why Militant Groups Fight Each Other: The Role of Support, Political Objectives and Revenge*, 2012, page 21, paragraph 1)

Hezbollah cells in South America have not been mobilized for political gain but almost exclusively for the economic development of the party. Thus, the kidnapping practices used by FARC would seem unnecessary and impractical for these cells. Therefore, a conflict along territorial lines in the cocaine trafficking market - would be the most plausible cause of violence between both groups - who have increasing numbers with limited resources. (Um, Eric van. *Why Militant Groups Fight Each Other: The Role of Support, Political Objectives and Revenge*, 2012)

There also exists the possibility that FARC may tolerate the presence of Hezbollah, within their immediate vicinity and allow for a mutually exclusive relationship, not unlike their relationship with

the ELN. This would result in three major terrorist groups operating in and around Colombia that provide extensive quantities of illicit drugs to the region while simultaneously defending their territories, compounds, and business interests.

Cooperation between these two groups already extends beyond the confines of South America. Much of the narcotics and capital generated by FARC are exported to their extensive European markets – most notably in Spain. Traditional shipping routes for contraband have been noted to travel through West African countries due to weak regional counter-narcotics measures and Venezuela’s geographical proximity. (Department of Homeland Security. Hezbollah in Latin America - Implications for U.S. Homeland Security, 2008)

Hezbollah currently maintains a monopoly on the control of illegal shipping routes in West Africa. This is mostly due to the long history Hezbollah has spent establishing their presence in the region, and the level of support they have from the Lebanese population in West Africa. Cooperation between both groups allows for more fluid and more profitable illicit activities by providing secure and efficient routes to European markets. (Department of Homeland Security. Hezbollah in Latin America - Implications for U.S. Homeland Security, 2008)

The Venezuelan Conviasa Airline routes through the region provide the necessary mode of transport in completing the shipping networks to illicit European markets. By aligning themselves with Hezbollah and the Venezuelan government, FARC has now secured an expanded European market with more stable shipping routes and revenue streams. Consequently, partnering with FARC and Venezuela has allowed Hezbollah to both create a launch pad, with which to infiltrate the United States, and augment their own revenue-generating means within South America. It is important to note that these new revenue streams are not restricted to narco-trafficking. (Department of Homeland Security. Hezbollah in Latin America - Implications for U.S. Homeland Security, 2008)

In recent years, increased cocaine eradication efforts from the Colombian government have caused FARC to pursue new methods of financing. The depletion of cocaine revenue has caused FARC to turn to illegal gold mining in Colombia. In fact, reports show that a large percentage of FARC’s revenue has now been replaced by illegal gold mining – and there is speculation that it is now their primary source of revenue.

This poses new dangers in the war against terrorism in South America. Unlike narcotics, gold is a legal commodity which can be transported and sold on open markets, unobstructed by most concerns of seizures or imprisonment. This allows for a more consequence-free form of financing with very abundant profit margins due to the surge in global demand for gold. (Mcdermott, Jeremy. Gold overtakes drugs as source of Colombia rebel funds, 2012)

Efforts to crackdown on illegal gold mining have been made by the Colombian government. Despite the government’s efforts, the number of artisan gold miners and unregistered gold mines makes the effort almost as difficult as combatting the level of narcotics. The abundant number of illegitimate gold mines also allows for FARC to function freely by taking control of these artisan mining operations. Many tactics are used to accomplish this via extortion or threats, and on some occasions, by operating their own mines. (Romero, Simon, In Colombia, New Gold Rush Fuels Old Conflict, 2011)

This new form of revenue extraction allows for Hezbollah, in their new partnership with FARC, to reap the same benefits of more lucrative and secure financing through illegal gold mining. With both groups collaborating in this new revenue-producing effort, it may cause the same amount of destabilization that coca-producing farmers have proven to generate in the past. (The Economist, Gold and Guerillas, 2012)

Conclusion

This analysis has considered the destabilizing factors that joint ventures between Hezbollah and Venezuela may have on the immediate South American region. The central role that former President Chavez played in the relationship between Venezuela and Iran - as well as the relationships amongst the Bolivarian countries in Latin America - have set the precedent for unstable political negotiations in the future. Consequently, his support and aid for the Lebanese terrorist group Hezbollah has been the catalyst for these destabilizing factors.

Now the question is: will there be any changes from the recent election result in Iran - the exit of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the ushering in of the new Iranian President-elect, Hassan Rouhani? On all counts, President-elect Rouhani describes himself as a moderate candidate who wishes to do away with the extremist tendencies of prior regimes and engage in warmer relations with the West. These encouraging claims are to be taken with a grain of salt, though, as President-elect Rouhani still remains loyal to Ayatollah Khomeini and his political agenda.

Despite President-elect Rouhani's wishes to do away with the policies of his more radical predecessors and compatriots, he faces large hurdles with the Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) and the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who ultimately determines the nation's final decisions. As a result, warmer relations with the West may not be as feasible an idea as many are purporting it to be. (Sadjapour, Karim. Realistic Expectations for Iran's New President, 2013)

The ultimate concern is whether the diplomatic landscape between Venezuela and Iran will move forward. The strength of the bilateral relationship between both countries relied on the shared vision between Presidents Chavez and Ahmadinejad. With the regime change in both countries, there arises a possibility of a complete diplomatic breakdown if the respective new leaders – both of which are described to be more moderate than their predecessors – do not share the same relationship that Chavez and Ahmadinejad shared. Consequently, this may cause either further destabilization of the South American region due to an inability to control the Hezbollah cells in the TBR, or a depletion of their operations due to a deprivation of funds and state support.

The death of Hugo Chavez suggests that his personal relationships with foreign leaders will no longer be a reliable asset to the Venezuelan government. As a result, the union between ALBA nations and the government of Iran, or ALBA nations with other South American countries may degrade due to the neglect of legitimate official channels in favour of personal relationships. Increased attacks on South American targets from Hezbollah operations may cause a military backlash that either breaches state sovereignty through clandestine offensive measures or, more worrisome, produces an outright interstate conflict against the Venezuelan state for aiding the terrorist group.

Lastly, the presence of both Hezbollah and FARC within the same regional territory coupled with their similar drug-centered revenue streams may cause one of two outcomes: either the immediate

confrontation of both groups in an effort to muscle one another out of the drug market; or the cooperative implementation of territorial boundaries that would indicate their individual territories and bases of operations.

These outcomes are not mutually exclusive and the conditions provided may allow for more than one destabilization factor to be realized. The reality is that this now rests squarely on President Maduro's shoulders. Despite his recent troubles with his contentious election, he must be prepared to either maintain the same quality of relationships former President Chavez had while in office or prepare himself for the possible hurdles left to his government in the wake of President Chavez' passing.

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