

# VENEZUELA'S TOXIC RELATIONS WITH IRAN AND HEZBOLLAH: AN AVENUE OF VIOLENCE, CRIME, CORRUPTION AND TERRORISM

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## ABSTRACT

Venezuela's relations with Iran date back into the sixties when both were founding members of the OPEC. Iran's influence in Latin America has become quite large since the Iranian revolution. Iran sees Latin America as a strategic priority for its global positioning. The Lebanese immigration towards South America has begun a while ago. But there's a period, during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) when a large number of Lebanese immigrants came to the continent. Back then, according to some *experts*, Hezbollah and Iran took advantage of this mass migration and infiltrated their agents and recruiters among the Muslim migrants. Hezbollah is probably the most organized terrorist organization in the World in respect to its illegal financing activities. The group funds its regular operations through all sorts of crimes. Hezbollah has a tight relationship with Iran. Ever since Iran has established its covert operations in Venezuela, Hezbollah has come along, as its proxy. Venezuela is submerged in crime and corruption. The Venezuelan government has been infiltrated by transnational organized crime for more than a decade. The convergence of corruption, crime, violence and terrorism in Venezuela was enabled by a set of conditions and circumstances that basically got entrenched after Chávez was inaugurated as president in 1999. From that time onwards, Venezuela became a source of political, financial and logistical support for Hezbollah within Latin America. Their relationship impacts the neighboring countries, particularly Brazil.

**KEYWORDS:** Venezuela. Hezbollah. Iran. Violence. Crime. Corruption. Terrorism. Organized Crime. Convergence. Brazil.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In 2007, the current president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro, was still fairly unknown to the general public when he met the leader of Hezbollah<sup>1</sup>, Hassan Nasrallah<sup>2</sup>, in a hotel in Damascus/Syria. At the meeting was also present Rafael Isea, Venezuela's former vice-minister of Finance and a fourth person, a translator. (BLASCO, 2015). They apparently had a long talk. What exactly happened in that room and the conversation's details remain undisclosed, but it was later reported that the talk was about the arrangements between Hezbollah and the Venezuelan government in a way that Hezbollah would have a stronger grip within Venezuela so it could better structure its Colombian cocaine trafficking operations from Venezuela, as well as the trafficking of arms to Lebanon, and also Hezbollah's access to Venezuelan passports in order to ease the travels of its operatives in and out of the country. (BLASCO, 2015; NAGEL, 2015; HUMIRE, 2015; CHAYA, 2017). The next day, Isea and Maduro would take a private flight to Tehran to join Hugo Chávez and meet Iran's president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad<sup>3</sup> for furthering their diplomatic mission in the region. (BLASCO, 2015; NAGEL, 2015).

That inauspicious encounter in Damascus and the strategic meeting in Tehran were simply the consolidation of a relationship between Hezbollah/Iran and Venezuelan government that lasts to this day. That relationship has enabled an avenue of crime, corruption, violence and terrorism that troubles the country and not only threatens its political viability but also the stability of its neighbors.

The first objective of this article is to address the interconnections of the above-mentioned relationship with its

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1 Hezbollah is a Lebanon-based Shiite Islamic political entity that was founded in 1982 following the Israeli's invasion of south Lebanon. Its rise is also connected to two other local and regional factors: the oppression of Shia population in Lebanon and the Iranian Revolution (Hezbollah was inspired by Iran's revolution and the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini). Hezbollah considers itself a group aimed at opposing the Western influence in the Middle East as well as resisting against the Israeli state. (CAMETT, 2011; REALUYO, 2014; JOHNSON, 2014). See also footnote 4.

2 Hassan Nasrallah has been the leader of Hezbollah since 1992.

3 Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was the president of Iran from 2005 through 2013. He and Hugo Chávez became very close. Their intimate relationship spurred the ties between Venezuela and Iran to a level never seen before between a Latin America country and Iran. (FARAH, 2011; CONSTANZA, 2012).

criminal/terrorist by-products. Secondly, the essay seeks to identify the most pressing implications/consequences for Venezuela and Brazil derived from the criminal enterprises conducted by the triad Venezuela-Iran-Hezbollah within the continent. In the conclusion, I indicate the most pressing threats for the region, primarily for the countries that border Venezuela, particularly Brazil.

Hezbollah<sup>4</sup> is probably the most organized terrorist organization in the World in respect to its illegal financing activities. (FARAH, 2011; REALUYO, 2014). Back in 2010, the US administration has described Hezbollah as the most technically skilled and proficient terrorist group in the world. (CFR, 2014). The group funds its regular operations through all sorts of criminal activities such as drugs and arms trafficking, diamonds and precious stones smuggling, counterfeit goods trading, among other criminal enterprises. Hezbollah relies on an extensive web of global facilitators in different continents to make its criminal activities feasible. (FARAH, 2011; CAMETT, 2011; REALUYO, 2014, LEVITT, 2016b).

In the past, the bulk of its financing was state sponsored, by both Iran and Syria. In its beginning, Hezbollah was trained and equipped by Iran's Revolutionary Guards, from which it also received its funding. Ever since the group came into existence, it has had close ties with Iran and also Syria<sup>5</sup>. Hezbollah relies mainly in three sources of funding<sup>6</sup>:

4 The European Union-EU considers Hezbollah military wing a terrorist organization since 2013. (EU, 2017). The United Kingdom also considers Hezbollah's military wing a terrorist organization. (CEP, 2017). The United States of America – USA considers Hezbollah's both Political and Military wing to be a terrorist organization since 1997. (FTO, 2017). The following countries also consider both Hezbollah's wings to be terrorist organizations: Israel, Canada, The Netherlands, France, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates. Recently, in 2016, the Arab League also designated Hezbollah a terrorist group, but the following countries have protested or rejected the League's designation: Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria and Tunisia. (CEP, 2017).

5 Hezbollah, Iran and Syria have a historical alliance. Iran provides continuous material support, as well as training, logistics and financing to its regional partners, including Syria and Hezbollah. In 2006, Iran and Syria armed Hezbollah in its war against Israel. The Assad regime in Syria plays a vital role for Hezbollah. It often serves as a corridor for Iranian material assistance and also a training ground for Hezbollah's operatives. Hezbollah also sees Syria as its rearguard in its conflict with Israel. Nowadays, the Assad regime has relied constantly on its allies Iran and Hezbollah for support. (SULLIVAN, 2014).

6 There is another source of funding for Hezbollah, which is the tax-like collection that the group levies on local businesses in the areas it controls, notably in the Beqaa Valley and the Southern portion of Lebanon. (RUDNER, 2010). Nonetheless, this does not appear to be a core source of funding for the

Iran, private donations<sup>7</sup> and criminal enterprises. (RUDNER, 2010; ASAL *et al.* 2012; CONSTANZA, 2012; LEUPRECHT *et al.* 2015). Hezbollah has for a long time been favored by Iranian largesse. Iran is a notorious sponsor of Hezbollah. Although Iran has been a regular and reliable source of funding since the group emerged, its financing towards Hezbollah has fluctuated throughout the years. The administrations of both president Rafsanjani (1989-1997) and president Khatami (1997-2005) allegedly slashed funding for Hezbollah by nearly 70%. (HAMZEH, 2004; ARENA, 2006). Over the years, as the geopolitical scenario was subjected to changes, Iran became debilitated by the impact of several international sanctions<sup>8</sup>, drop in the price of oil, and other considerations; thus, its funding towards Hezbollah has apparently further diminished<sup>9</sup>. (FARAH, 2011; NEUMANN, 2011; CAMETT, 2011; REALUYO, 2014; LEVITT, 2016b).

The Lebanese migration to South America has begun a while ago. But there's a specific period that's worth considering; *i.e.* the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) when a large number of Lebanese immigrants flocked to South America. (NEUMANN, 2011; LEVITT, 2015). Back then, according to some experts, Hezbollah and Iran

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group.

- 7 Hezbollah also generates income through the solicitation of private donations and the deviation of revenue from business, charities and religious circles built up to serve as "fronts" to covertly collect and transfer money to bank accounts under its control. (CONSTANZA, 2012).
- 8 Iran has been sanctioned for more than three decades by the US. The first US sanctions were intended to make Iran stop supporting acts of terrorism and to limit Iran's strategic power in the Middle East. Eventually, since mid 2000, US sanctions were aimed at ensuring that Iran's nuclear program was intended for civilian purposes only. From 2010, onwards the international community joint forces with the US, through the UN – United Nations, and also began sanctioning Iran's nuclear program. However, in January 2016, the IAEA – International Atomic Energy Agency has confirmed that Iran had complied with the stipulated nuclear dismantlement commitments. Afterwards, most of US and UN sanctions were lifted. Nonetheless, UN Security Council resolution 2231 still restricts Iran's conventional arms programs for a further five years, plus a restriction on Iran's missile program for eight more years. Entities particularly linked to Iran's ballistic missile program, like the IRGC – Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and its Quds Force are still under sanctions. (IRANWATCH, 2018; KATZMAN, 2018). In spite of that, the US has recently reimposed sanctions on Iran that it lifted two years ago. The US has withdrawn from the multilateral deal on May 8th, 2018. Two sets of sanctions are reinstated and they restrict: Iran's purchase of US currency, the trade in gold and precious metals, the sale to Iran of auto parts, commercial aircraft and its parts, the purchase of oil and petrochemicals from Iran. However, the European countries signatories of the multilateral deal are reported to be drawing up a package of economic measures to try to save the deal. (CFR, 2018).
- 9 Despite the fact that Iranian funding for Hezbollah has certainly decreased; some authors say that Iran's financing is still the group's main source of income. (BROWN, 2013; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016; AEI, 2017).

took advantage of this mass migration and infiltrated their agents and recruiters among the Muslim migrants on the continent<sup>10</sup>. Years later, in the early nineties, their efforts in setting up terrorist cells in South America became a reality and they were able to carry a few very deadly terrorist attacks in Argentina. (NISMAN, 2006; HUDSON, 2010; NEUMANN, 2011; CONSTANZA, 2012; LEVITT, 2015).

The earliest and strongest foothold of Hezbollah's network within South America lies in a region known as "Tri-Border Area" - TBA, which is a land border shared by Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina. Hezbollah decided to structure its criminal activities in this area because of TBA's shameful reputation for lawlessness, as well as the presence of an already large Muslim community. This corner of the continent emerged as an unruly region by mid seventies when Paraguay created a free trade zone in the town of *Ciudad del Este*. This town became a mecca for cheap electronic goods, a market that attracted hundreds of thousands of Brazilian and Argentinian customers. (HUDSON, 2010; CONSTANZA, 2012; REALUYO, 2014; KESHAWARZ, 2015; JIANG, 2015; LASMAR, 2015). Soon, the Lebanese diaspora took advantage of it and established a myriad of small shops dedicated to selling electronic goods, both genuine goods and also counterfeited ones. Hezbollah operatives and sympathizers followed suit, and quickly engaged in drugs and arms trafficking, counterfeiting and money laundering to fund their endeavors in Lebanon. (NISMAN, 2006; HUDSON, 2010; CONSTANZA, 2012; REALUYO, 2014; KESHAWARZ, 2015; JIANG, 2015; LEVITT, 2016a; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016; AEI, 2017).

Nevertheless, the TBA is not the only place within South America with a large Muslim population and Hezbollah's presence. In the northern portion of the continent, there are two particular areas with similar characteristics; the Colombian town of *Maicao*, located in *La Guajira* province, which lies in the border between Colombia and Venezuela and *Isla Margarita/Venezuela*, just north of Caracas. In *Maicao*, where there is a prominent Muslim community, Hezbollah has

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10 The amount of Muslims living in the Tri-Border Area is estimated to be around 20.000 to 30.000. (HUDSON, 2010; JIANG, 2015). They live mainly in *Ciudad del Este*/Paraguay and Foz do Iguaçu/Brazil. Most of them live in Foz do Iguaçu. An estimate of 90% of them are of Lebanese descent, the others are of Palestinian and Syrian descent, mostly. (HUDSON, 2010). The majority of the Muslims are Shia. (TREVISI, 2013).

a fairly strong presence and its operatives and sympathizers move freely<sup>11</sup>. (ICT, 2008; PICKELL, 2010; NEUMANN, 2011; CONSTANZA, 2012; FARAH, 2015; LEVITT, 2016b). Not very far from there, *Isla Margarita* is another region with a large Muslim population. Some scholars say that the TBA was surpassed by *Isla Margarita* as Hezbollah's center of operations and safe haven within Latin America<sup>12</sup>. (NORIEGA, 2011; NORIEGA; CÁRDENAS, 2011).

Iran's influence in the Western Hemisphere, particularly in Latin America has become gradually more significant since the Iranian Revolution<sup>13</sup>. Iran sees Latin America as a strategic priority for its global positioning<sup>14</sup>. (JOHNSON, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015). Broadly speaking, Iran's strategy to insert itself in Latin America has four layers, as some experts say. (HUMIRE, 2015). It begins with cultural exchange upon a specific country, which later evolves into a formal diplomatic relation that enables economic cooperation. Then it comes the fourth layer, which is the one that works in the underground. Once the diplomatic mission is functional and the bilateral economic cooperation has begun, Iran is able to secure the necessary cover to send in its operatives, create front companies and establish backdoor channels with the host government<sup>15</sup>. (HUMIRE, 2015). Iran's covert insertion in South

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11 In Maicao, there is an Arab community of around 8.000 people; mostly Arab traders that supposedly pay Hezbollah taxation on revenue. This taxation derives both from extortion and spontaneous support. These payments are made through Venezuelan and Panamanian banking systems. (ICT, 2008; PICKELL, 2010).

12 Isla Margarita is a free trade zone that lies northeast of Caracas, and is home for a large community of Arabs, mainly Lebanese and Iranian. There is a Venezuelan-Arab Friendship Association that apparently supports Hamas and Hezbollah cells, which are active on the island generating funds for their groups through drug and arms trafficking, money laundering and the like. (ROBINSON, 2003).

13 I will not deepen into the details of Iran's geopolitical objectives in the Western Hemisphere because this is not the purpose of this article.

14 Despite of the fact that the current Iranian president Hassan Rouhani has lessen the Iranian focus on Latin America, Iran has been considerably interested in the continent for a few reasons, among them, but not limited to: up to the year 2016 Iran had sought to circumvent UN/USA sanctions (In Latin America the sanctions were apparently not well enforced), nations like Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, Ecuador and Bolivia serve as political allies against the UN and the USA (specially because their leftist governments share a common antagonism towards the USA). (JOHNSON, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015). Once present in Latin American nations, Iran is able to execute its covert actions and spread its theocratic ideology especially among the local Shia Muslims. (JOHNSON, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015).

15 Some authors claim that the Islamic Republic's agents seek to reach notable individuals within the countries' Muslim population and local leadership. So they become able to capitalize on their

America is facilitated because of the rampant corruption throughout the continent and the predominance of weak institutions within its countries. Some authors claim that Iran has currently been successful in moving through nearly every layer of most ALBA<sup>16</sup> countries<sup>17</sup>. (HUMIRE, 2015).

## **2. VENEZUELA'S CONTROVERSIAL ALLIANCE WITH IRAN**

Venezuela's relations with Iran are longstanding and date back into the sixties when both were founding members of the OPEC. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution, in 1979, Iran moved towards approaching Latin American countries in an effort to increase its trade with the region<sup>18</sup>. Venezuela was one of the first countries in which Iran established some sort of trading agreement. (JOHNSON, 2014; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016).

Later, in 2001 and 2003 president Chávez visited Iran and signed a deal which prompted a joint venture to produce tractors in Venezuela. Soon there was also an opening of a car assembly plant to manufacture Iranian cars in the country<sup>19</sup> (FARHI, 2009;

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political connections and wealth. (BERMAN; HUMIRE, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015). Therefore, Iran supposedly boosts the capability of its intelligence operatives to blend in with the local societies. After that, it apparently does not take long to its agents to infiltrate local institutions, penetrate government agencies, co-opt public servants and businessmen and move in the direction Iran wants to. (BERMAN; HUMIRE, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015).

16 ALBA – Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra America. (Bolivarian Alliance for the People's of Our America). It is an intergovernmental organization based on the integration of its members under Bolivarian ideology. It was founded by Cuba and Venezuela in 2004, and there are currently more than 10 Latin American countries as members. (ALBA, 2017). To learn more check: <https://albainfo.org/what-is-the-alba/>

17 Some authors say that after Hassan Rouhani has become the president in 2013, Iran has made a strategic move towards targeting not only ALBA countries, but also and specially the US friendly ones, in order to weaken US influence in the region. (BERMAN, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015).

18 We should also notice that Iran's trade with Latin America is still miniscule and does not even reach most of its countries. Latin America represents only about 2% of Iran's total trade with the world. (JOHNSON, 2014). From Latin American perspective, the largest traders with Iran in the region are Brazil and Argentina. However, their exports to Iran represent less than 1% of their exports globally. (SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016).

19 Iran and Venezuela have signed a variety of agreements in agriculture, petrochemicals, oil exploration, automobile production, housing, banking and others. (JOHNSON, 2014; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016).

JOHNSON, 2014; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016). However, the year 2005 proved to be a turning point in the Iran/Venezuela relations when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was inaugurated as the new Iranian president. Ahmadinejad and Hugo Chávez soon became very close and their relationship enabled Iran to strengthen its bilateral ties with Venezuela and also to move more vigorously towards other Latin American countries with the diplomatic assistance of Venezuela, which played a key role in furthering Iran's relations with other leftist governments in the region, aiming to gradually reduce the US influence in the continent<sup>20</sup>. (FARHI, 2009; FARAH, 2011; NORIEGA; CÁRDENAS, 2011; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016).

Iran's very capable intelligence service has allegedly long embedded into Venezuela's security services and thus, ever since it has been able to collect and manage information, as well as advise its Venezuelan counterparts. (JOHNSON, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015). Ever since Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999, there has been some evidence that the Bolivarian Republic has been impregnated with Middle Eastern mafia, which has embedded in various levels of its government institutions. A considerable number of individuals of Lebanese and Syrian descent currently hold high-level posts in the Venezuelan government. (JOHNSON, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015; BLASCO, 2015). Some authors claim that many of these individuals have close connections to Iran and Hezbollah. (JOHNSON, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015; BLASCO, 2015).

Following the embedding of Iranian intelligence officers into Venezuelan security apparatus, Iran and Venezuela were able to move to the next step, which has brought concern to neighboring countries: the Iran/Venezuela military relation. Some unclassified US Department of Defense Reports for the US congress have stated that Iran has already deployed its elite forces, the "Qods forces" (Special forces unit of the Iran Revolutionary Guards - IRGC), to Venezuela to assist and

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20 It is important to say that regardless Iran's objectives in Latin America, Iran's core foreign policy spotlight remains its immediate region, in which Iran perceives more threats to its survival. For this reason, Iran's efforts and its level of involvement in countries like Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Afghanistan are infinitely larger and more consistent in comparison to its involvement in Latin America. (SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016).

train its military. (NORIEGA; CÁRDENAS, 2011; FARAH, 2011; LOVELACE, 2012; BERMAN, 2014; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016). Iran's capability in asymmetrical warfare (one of Iran's Revolutionary Guards' competences) has been taught to Venezuelan military since the year 2006, when Chávez personally invited Iran's IRGC personnel to come, train and advise Venezuelan military. Later, Chávez sought to publish and distribute the Iranian asymmetric warfare doctrine throughout Venezuelan armed forces<sup>21</sup>. (BERMAN; HUMIRE, 2014). Additionally, other important aspect of their military relationship is the establishment of military industrial joint ventures between the two countries. Through several military agreements, Iran has created some major military projects with Venezuela, including the development of drone technology and the production of missile related items in the region of Maracay, which is home for Venezuela's military industry, known as CAVIM (*Compañía Anónima Venezolana de Industrias Militares*). This state owned Venezuelan weapons company owns many industrial plants in the area and three of its Venezuela/Iran joint military projects<sup>22</sup> are said to be in direct violation of US and International sanctions on Iran<sup>23</sup>. (HUMIRE, 2015).

Meanwhile, the Iranians well know that Latin America has an abundance of strategic minerals and metals that are very useful for their military programs, especially thorium and uranium<sup>24</sup>. Iran has been active in purchasing these minerals throughout Latin America's

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21 The massive introduction of asymmetric warfare doctrine in the Venezuelan Military was officially done by Hugo Chávez in 2006. He believed that he had to prepare for an eventual overseas military attack. He was inspired to change Venezuelan military doctrine after acknowledging the effectiveness of the Iraqi insurgents and the Afghan Taliban. (BERMAN; HUMIRE, 2014).

22 Some say that even though the Qods forces presence in Venezuela and the establishment of military industrial joint ventures are confirmed, it could not be proved that Iran's military presence in Venezuela has been increasing lately. General Fraser, former SOUTHCOM commander allegedly said that the ties between the two countries are everything but a military alliance. (LOVELACE, 2012; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016).

23 Although most of the US and UN sanctions were lifted in 2016, UN Security Council resolution 2231 still restricts Iran's conventional arms programs for a further five years. (IRANWATCH, 2018; KATZMAN, 2018). For more information see footnote number 8.

24 Thorium is used in electronics manufacturing and it is probably going to be a future substitute for uranium as nuclear fuel in nuclear reactors. (HUMIRE, 2015).

black market in the past several years. Many countries in the continent have large uranium deposits barely explored. Latin American investors have apparently not yet envisioned it as a profitable market. (BERMAN, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015). Nevertheless, Iran has been surveying and beginning to explore uranium deposits in Venezuela through several front companies and mining concessions granted by former president Chávez. Up to the year 2016 this actions were in direct violation of United Nations resolutions 1696/2006 and 1737/2006<sup>25</sup>. (HUMIRE, 2015; NORIEGA; CÁRDENAS, 2011; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016; BERMAN; NORIEGA, 2017). The uranium exploration is located mainly in the area known as the “Roraima basin” along the border with Guyana and Brazil, where huge underground uranium deposits can be found. That is what probably explains the large presence of Iranians in the area, as well as the government’s area designation as a no-fly zone. The whole uranium exploration by Iranians in that area is shrouded in secrecy. (BERMAN, 2014; BERMAN; NORIEGA, 2017).

Last, but definitely not least, what probably make the Iran/Venezuela relation still most controversial are the Iranian ties with its surrogate Hezbollah<sup>26</sup> and their impact in Venezuela. The group receives a large funding from Iran every year. That funding together with the income from criminal enterprises help the group to subvert and recruit people, as well as to conduct criminal activities and corrupt Venezuelan officials. (FLEISCHMAN, 2013; JOHNSON, 2014; BERMAN, 2014; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015). Some reports indicate that the group has established five training camps for asymmetrical warfare in Venezuela with the consent of the government, and the financial/military aid of Iran. (FLEISCHMAN, 2013; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015). The Iranian regime and its proxy Hezbollah have been particularly astute in the use of asymmetrical warfare throughout their operational theaters

25 For many years United Nations resolutions forbade countries to collaborate with the Iranian nuclear program. The UN Security Council adopted seven resolutions as part of international efforts to address Iran’s nuclear program. (ACA, 2017). For further reading, check: <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Security-Council-Resolutions-on-Iran>. Nevertheless, these sanctions were lifted in the year 2016. For more information see footnote number 8.

26 Iran and Hezbollah have been active in criminal/terrorist activities in Latin America for at least three decades. Both Iran and Hezbollah are reported to have been directly linked to two massive bombings against Jewish targets in Argentina, in the early nineties. (NISMAN, 2006).

and Venezuela is no exception. They have been successful in their covert infiltration of operatives who have been spreading ideology, expanding presence, recruiting and structuring criminal operations with the aim of strengthening their leverage within the country and the region. (BERMAN, 2014; HUMIRE, 2015; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015).

Years ago Venezuela made Iran/Hezbollah covert access to Latin America easier by using its state-run airline CONVIASA whose weekly direct flights - Venezuela/Iran/Venezuela – were operational from 2007 through 2010. These flights were closely supervised and controlled and the seats were accessible only to people approved by either Iranian or Venezuelan governments. The flights would often take off nearly empty and throughout the years the airline was just cumulating losses, what possibly indicates that the flights were mostly used to transport covert operatives, illegal items and strategic material<sup>27</sup>. (NORIEGA, 2011; BERMAN; HUMIRE, 2014; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015; BLASCO, 2015). Consequently, back then; through that obscure flight route; Iranian and Hezbollah operatives could come freely to Venezuela, which served as a gateway to the whole continent. However, now that the enigmatic flight route has for unclear reasons become inoperable, they had to find other means to enter the continent. In spite of that, once an operative touches the ground in Latin America he is able to cross the international borders easily undetected as border controls are notoriously poorly managed and the extensive continent's land borders also make them very porous. (BERMAN; HUMIRE, 2014; JOHNSON, 2014; BRANDON; GRAY, 2015).

This unprecedented access to nearly everywhere within the continent, facilitated by Venezuela's complicity, grants Iran countless opportunities to conduct covert operations in the region and also to connect to transnational criminal organizations that already operate in the continent. Consequently, it presents a security risk for the whole of Latin America.

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<sup>27</sup> A former Iran's Revolutionary Guard member and CIA spy allegedly said that these flights were instrumental for the Iranian and Hezbollah terror network. They enabled the safe travel of spies, terrorists, weapons experts, senior Iranian Intelligence operatives, as well as members of Hezbollah and Hamas. (BARNES, 2010).

### **3. VENEZUELA'S NEBULOUS RELATIONS WITH HEZBOLLAH**

Whenever speaking about the relations between Hezbollah and Venezuela, it is impossible to dissociate it from Iran, once it has all truly begun when Chávez strengthened his country's ties with the Islamic Republic in its quest to build an "anti-imperialist" and anti-American bloc of nations. Both countries have in common this anti-American sentiment; moreover, Hezbollah as an Iran surrogate shares many of Iran's priorities and principles, not to mention the group's sizeable funding from it. Iran's adversaries are Hezbollah's adversaries. Iran provides extensive material assistance to Hezbollah, not only funding but also training and logistics. Hence, ever since Iran has established its covert operations in Venezuela, Hezbollah has come along. They have worked in a few criminal projects together with corrupted Venezuelan government officials. (PICKELL, 2010; NORIEGA, 2011; NORIEGA; CÁRDENAS, 2011; BERMAN; HUMIRE, 2014). Some sources within the Venezuelan administration say that there are two Islamist entities involved in terrorism related activities entrenched in Venezuelan territory: the Hezbollah and its sympathizers, and the Iranian Qods Force (Iran's Revolutionary Guards elite force). They collaborate with one another on a regular basis. These sources claim that they have also been growing in terms of strength, and their tentacles might reach far into Latin America<sup>28</sup>.

In spite of having its armed activities focused primarily in the Middle East, Hezbollah has been involved in terrorist activities all around the Globe. As mentioned before in this article, Hezbollah has come to South America for material support, and it relies on the continent mainly for financing and recruiting, activities that constitute part of the terrorism cycle<sup>29</sup>. Also, as observed before, Hezbollah has long ago embedded within South American society through the vast Lebanese and Syrian local diaspora<sup>30</sup>. There is no lack

28 Interview with respondent A in June/ 2017. Name withheld for confidentiality reasons.

29 The terrorism activity cycle is considered to be all the interconnected activities that ultimately lead to the terrorist attack, which include, but are not restricted to: proselytizing, radicalization, propaganda, recruiting, funding, training, logistics, resource administration, surveillance, attacking, evasion, escape and media exploitation. (LASMAR, 2015).

30 Like it was mentioned before in this article, the areas of Maicao/Colombia, Isla Margarita/Venezuela

of evidence demonstrating some level of support for Hezbollah within those communities<sup>31</sup>. There were quite a few police investigations in the past 20 years (carried out by police forces of Colombia, Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina) whose focus were primarily drug trafficking, arms smuggling and money laundering that regularly came across Hezbollah's operatives and/or facilitators and their support network, who happened to have been deeply involved in those crimes under investigation. (ROBINSON, 2003; NISMAN, 2006; FARAH, 2011; NORIEGA; CÁRDENAS, 2011; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016; LEVITT, 2016b).

The history of Hezbollah in Venezuela is better understood if we begin with the name of Ghazi Atef Salameh Nassereddine. He was born in Lebanon and became a Venezuelan citizen in 2001. Nassereddine is a diplomat and also the head of the Caracas Shia Islamic Center. As a diplomat he has served in the Venezuelan diplomatic mission in Syria and later in Lebanon. Taking advantage of his diplomatic status he was able to develop ties with Hezbollah's leadership first in Lebanon and then in Syria. (TREASURY, 2008; CONSTANZA, 2012; FARAH, 2016a). He was accused by the US Department of Treasury to be a Hezbollah financial support provider. (TREASURY, 2008; TREASURY, 2016). He was also involved in facilitating Hezbollah's operatives' travels to Caracas aimed at establishing fund raising operations (He is accused of granting authentic Venezuelan passports for Lebanese and Syrian citizens irregularly). Besides, some experts say that he has personally helped in funneling the raised funds directly into Hezbollah's bank accounts (TREASURY, 2008; CONSTANZA, 2012; FARAH, 2016a). Together with two of his brothers, he later made viable a network that raised and laundered money, proselytized, recruited, trained and expanded Hezbollah's influence in Venezuela and in other parts of

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and TBA are notorious for their large Lebanese and Syrian communities. Not only these places, but in Brazil alone there are estimates of a 10 million Lebanese population that comprises the migrants and their second and third generations. (SENADO, 2010).

31 In Venezuela this is evidenced by the emergence of a group called: "Hezbollah Venezuela", which is far from being as strong as its Lebanese brother, but it shares its same ideological views. There are some authors who say that Chávez "Bolivarian revolution" ideology, together with his resistance to neoliberalism and capitalism, his anti-American platform, and opposition to US allies are some principles shared with Iran, Hezbollah and radical Islam. These authors basically claim that the concept of social justice is central to both Iranian and Bolivarian ideology. (PICKELL, 2010; FARAH, 2011). I'm not going to describe these ideological views because it is not the scope of this article.

Latin America. His younger brother Oday Nassereddine has helped him to establish training facilities in Margarita Island, while Abdalah Nassereddine has run the fund raising activities and the money-laundering scheme. Ghazi Nassereddine became probably the most prominent Hezbollah supporter in Venezuela, primarily because of his strategic diplomatic posting, and his friendship with the former Venezuelan Vice-President who was then Minister of Interior and Justice, Tareck El Aissami. (NORIEGA, 2011; FARAH, 2011).

Other key actor in the beginning of Venezuela/Hezbollah relationship was Fawzi Kan'an. (CONSTANZA, 2012; FARAH, 2016a). Fawzi Kan'an is a Lebanese-Venezuelan businessman who received training in Iran together with other Hezbollah's operatives. Kan'an owned travel agencies in Venezuela. In the beginning of Hezbollah's operations in the country, he has helped the group to move money to the Middle East. He has also aided Hezbollah in facilitating the travel of its operatives to Venezuela. (TREASURY, 2008; CONSTANZA, 2012; FARAH, 2016a).

Venezuelan former vice president, Tareck el Aissami<sup>32</sup>, was the Minister of Interior from 2007 through 2012. In that position he was the head of the Venezuelan passport agency (ONIDEX – Venezuelan Identification and Immigration Directorate). When he was in that position, he was responsible for allegedly issuing 10.000 Venezuelan passports to Islamist extremists from Syria, Lebanon, Iran and other Middle Eastern countries, including members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and Hezbollah. (HUMIRE, 2015; OTTOLENGHI; HANNAH, 2017; AEI, 2017). Tareck el Aissami is said to have been Iran's man in Mérida and has helped Hezbollah to channel funds to the Middle East. He has also enabled the coming of Hezbollah operatives to Latin America, through Venezuela<sup>33</sup>. During

32 Tareck el Aissami is a Venezuelan of Syrian origin. Aissami's father (Zaidan El Amin El Aissami-Carlos Al Aissami) was the president of Venezuela's Ba'ath Party and an ardent supporter of Islamic jihad. He had solid ties with the leaders of "Iraqi Resistance". Just before the US intervention in Iraq, Aissami's father praised Osama Bin Laden in a press conference. He used to say that he considered himself to be a 'Taliban'. (FERRAND, 2009; PICKEL, 2010; BARDUCCI, 2011a; RODIL, 2017).

33 A few authors claim that Tareck el Aissami has been a fierce critic of Israel and he is known for defending passionately the Palestinian cause. Some say his speeches are incredibly similar to those of the radical Islamists such as Hassan Nasrallah. Quite a few of his public speeches are carried in Venezuelan official media, even the more passionate ones defending ardently the Palestinian cause and berating Israel. The use of official media for these purposes might reveal that the Venezuelan government tacitly endorses

his tenure as the Minister of Interior he has systematically facilitated the immigration procedures for Islamist<sup>34</sup> radical militants from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Jordan into Venezuela. Intelligence reports later admitted having information that a hundred and seventy three individuals received this benefit and they were most likely affiliated with Lebanese Hezbollah. (HUMIRE, 2015).

Being the vice president he was able to use the immense state-power within his reach to conduct all kinds of criminal and terrorist activities in partnership with other Venezuelan government officials. Under the auspices of the government, Venezuelan officials have been using formal diplomatic, politic and economic channels to corrupt people, to negotiate with criminal organizations, to manage their criminal enterprises and to move illicit Iranian funds and Hezbollah operatives throughout the region. Whoever opposes or denounces Venezuelan government criminal enterprises is subject to harsh penalties or death. Violence abounds. (BRANDON; GRAY, 2015; HUMIRE, 2015; AEI, 2017).

#### **4. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE COUNTRY: VIOLENCE, CRIME, CORRUPTION AND TERRORISM FINANCING**

The current situation in Venezuela is often inadvisedly interpreted as a primarily political or economic crisis. In fact, what lies underneath the ongoing crisis is a criminal enterprise conducted by government leaders and officials that systematically loot the state and impair its governance. (ELLIS, 2017). In turn, the crisis in Venezuela and its possible future breakdown also create an even more fertile environment for the further advance of transnational organized crime, violence, corruption and terrorism. On top of that, some corrupted Venezuelan leaders have apparently embraced terrorism by supporting Hezbollah's operations inside the country. (NORIEGA, 2013; FARAH, 20116b).

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these passionate speeches. (FERRAND, 2009; PICKEL, 2010; MARTIN, 2017). Hugo Chávez throughout his tenures as Venezuela's president also gave innumerable speeches praising Hezbollah and the Palestinian cause and condemning Israel and its actions in the Middle East. (PERDUE, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> For the purpose of this article, Islamist is someone that uses Islam politically, as a political ideology that seeks to derive legitimacy from Islam. (But not a form of Muslim faith or an expression of Muslim piety). (CAGAPTAY, 2010).

Venezuela is submerged in crime and corruption. The Venezuelan government has been infiltrated by transnational organized crime for more than a decade. (FARAH, 2016a; AEI, 2017; ELLIS, 2017). Several members of its government have been directly or indirectly involved in drug trafficking, money laundering, terrorism financing, international corruption and support for guerrilla movements. In a lot of cases, the government officials engaged in these crimes are the very ones responsible for repressing or policing these criminal activities. Venezuela is already informally labeled a narco-state by some authors. However this denomination focus only in one facet of a larger criminal enterprise. (NAGEL, 2015; FARAH, 2016a; AEI, 2017; ELLIS, 2017). For this reason, many authors argue that the country has become a full criminal state. The connections between Venezuela and Hezbollah-Iran possibly enhance the fragility of the Venezuelan state enabling criminal enterprises to thrive, and consequently it creates instability not only in Venezuela but also in its bordering regions of Brazil and Colombia.

*Venezuela has moved perilously closed to being a “criminalized state”, that is, a state where the senior leadership is aware of, involved and act on behalf of the state with transnational organized crime, where transnational organized crime is used as an instrument of statecraft, and where levers of state power are incorporated into the operational structure of one or more transnational organized crime groups. The Maduro administration is the central component of a multi-state ongoing criminal enterprise carried out in concert with Iran. (FARAH, 2015, p 02).*

Even before the “Bolivarian Revolution<sup>35</sup>”, as Hugo Chávez defined his movement, democracy was far from perfect in the country. Venezuela had gone through turbulent years late in the eighties and through the nineties. Its electoral system was rigid, exclusive and corrupt. (FARAH, 2015; AEI, 2017). When Chávez was inaugurated president in 1999, instead of coming up with the necessary reforms, Chávez devised a plan that completely corrupted the already battered

35 “Bolivarian Revolution” is a term coined by Hugo Chávez. This “revolution” which is a leftist political process was initially led by him. The name comes after Simón Bolívar, a 19th century Venezuelan revolutionary leader. He conducted the independence campaigns of most northern South American countries from Spanish rule. The “Bolivarian Revolution” is ultimately aimed to build an inter-American alliance to achieve Bolivarianism, nationalism and state-led economy. (GANDY, 2006; DURAND, 2011; ECURED, 2017).

electoral system, institutionalized rampant corruption, criminalized non-violent dissent and partnered with transnational terrorist and criminal organizations<sup>36</sup>. (FARAH, 2015; AEI, 2017). Once in power, Chávez centralized the government under the presidency and heavily politicized the judiciary and the military. Moreover, he did not care to amend the immoral legacy left by his predecessors: dismantled transparency, poor accountability and the already damaged separation of powers. Hence, he expanded his authority and control through military force and simultaneously advanced the systematic looting of the state. (NORIEGA, 2011; FARAH, 2015; AEI, 2017; ELLIS, 2017).

A case in point is Venezuela's state-run oil giant, PDVSA (Petróleos de Venezuela S.A.) that was turned by crooked officials into an efficient instrument for corruption. Its opaque balance sheets have covered more than 11 billion US dollars that went missing from 2004 through 2014, according to the Comptroller's Commission of the opposition-controlled National Assembly in 2016. (ULMER, 2016). Through PDVSA, Chávez and some officials within his administration were able to create a useful network for money laundering, illicit enrichment, political corruption, and a host of other criminal activities. The company is perhaps one of the best existing mechanisms to the country's crooked officials to make viable Venezuela's international criminal network<sup>37</sup>. (ENRIQUEZ, 2015; FARAH, 2016a; ELLIS, 2017).

As a consequence, Venezuelan government cronies consolidated the spread of corruption and criminality throughout the administration. Hugo Chávez's death in 2013 did not inhibit corruption within the government; on the contrary, the corrupt system has remained strong under the current president Nicolás Maduro<sup>38</sup>. (NAGEL, 2015; AEI, 2017).

36 Hugo Chávez was very sympathetic towards the now extinct FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia) and other Colombian guerrilla movements; as well as Iran and Hezbollah, as mentioned before. Consequently, the US government has imposed several sanctions on Venezuelan individuals and companies for supporting FARC, Iran and Hezbollah. (ROBINSON, 2003; FARAH, 2016a; SULLIVAN; BEITEL, 2016).

37 Venezuela's international criminal network was initially made possible through the devious partnerships/agreements of PDVSA with the ALBA countries, and also with Iran. (ENRIQUEZ, 2015; FARAH, 2016; AEI, 2017). I'll not go into the details of these partnerships because it is not the scope of this article.

38 Venezuela sadly ranks 169 out of 180 on the Transparency International "Corruption Perceptions Index". (TRANSPARENCY, 2017).

In January 2017, president Nicolás Maduro has announced former minister Tareck el Aissami the country's vice president<sup>39</sup>. (LOPEZ, 2017). El Aissami is a familiar name in the world of counterterrorism/counternarcotics intelligence. Some authors assert that he plays an important part in the Venezuelan-state drug trafficking network, and has also strong ties with Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. (OTTOLENGHI; HANNAH, 2017; AEI, 2017; RABASA *et al.* 2017; ELLIS, 2017).

Venezuela is a natural passageway and a common route for the Colombian-cocaine criminal enterprises to export their product to Europe and the USA. This route has been intensely used since 2005 when Chávez has decided to increase his support to former FARC and other Colombian guerrillas<sup>40</sup>. (IISS, 2011; FARAH, 2016b; CAMERO, 2017; RABASA *et al.* 2017). As for Tareck el Aissami, besides his ties with terrorists, according to the US Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control – OFAC, he has for a long time also been involved in the cocaine business in both Venezuela and overseas. OFAC affirms that he was closely linked to the drug trafficker Walid Makled, a Syrian born, Venezuelan citizen who was one of the world's top drug kingpins. (OFAC, 2017). Makled allegedly used to ship 10 tons of cocaine per month to the USA. He was arrested in Colombia and while in prison he has allegedly said that he used to routinely pay bribes to several high-ranking civilian and military officials within the Venezuelan government. He also supposedly said that Hezbollah not only operated in Venezuelan soil, but the group also took part in the cocaine business export. Makled also confessed to have paid large bribes to Tareck El Aissami to ease his drug shipments through Venezuela. (BARDUCCI, 2011b; US ATTORNEY, 2010; NEUMANN, 2011; INSIGHT CRIME; 2016; RODIL, 2017). According to the US Treasury Department, El Aissami also coordinates shipments from his country towards Mexico and beyond; he protects drug traffickers within Venezuela, and he also owns drug parcels that are regularly shipped out of Venezuela, among other criminal acts. (OFAC, 2017).

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39 Tareck el Aissami was Vice President until June/2018. Now he is the Minister of Industry and National Production.

40 The close relations between Hugo Chávez and former FARC have been described in depth in the book edited by the IISS named: 'The FARC files: Venezuela, Ecuador and the secret archive of 'Raul Reyes' (IISS, 2011). I will not descend into details about this matter because it is not the scope of this essay.

In February 2017, the US Treasury Department designated Tareck El Aissami as a narcotics trafficker. (OFAC, 2017).

Over the years El Aissami was able to build up a sophisticated operation in which he created a pipeline for criminal/terrorist activities in Venezuela. This operation was grounded on a network of businesses and front companies that have been successful in bringing militant Islamists into Venezuela and neighboring countries, as well as in funneling illicit funds and drugs to the USA, Europe and the Middle East. (HUMIRE, 2015; OTTOLENGHI; HANNAH, 2017; AEI, 2017; ELLIS, 2017; OFAC, 2017). His multi-layered financial network encompasses nearly 40 front companies that own two dozen properties and tons of cash and other assets sitting in more than 30 bank accounts scattered throughout Venezuela, Panamá, St. Lucia, Curacao, USA and Lebanon. (HUMIRE, 2015; OFAC, 2017).

One more high-ranking Venezuelan official involved in international drug trafficking is Diosdado Cabello. He used to be the former president of the National Assembly and a former state governor. Up to 2015 he was the country's second most powerful man<sup>41</sup>. He was a long time Chávez confidant. Diosdado Cabello's involvement in international drug trafficking emerged in 2012, when a Venezuelan supreme justice magistrate named Eladio Aponte defected the regime, fled the country and later testified Cabello's link to Makled drug trafficking organization<sup>42</sup>. (NAGEL, 2015; AEI, 2017).

Another threatening component of Venezuela's criminal operations is its support for terrorism. Some authors claim that there is convincing evidence that some Venezuelan officials not only support terrorism by laundering terrorists' dirty money, but also some government employees act in direct assistance to terrorists by providing them material support to get to Latin America and move around the continent. (NORIEGA, 2013; FARAH, 2015; FARAH, 2016b; INSIGHT CRIME, 2016; AEI, 2017). In that matter, aside from being a drug trafficker and money launderer, El Aissami is considered also to

<sup>41</sup> He was the president of the National Assembly until 2015, when the majority passed to the opposition; consequently, he fell from his position. (AEI, 2017).

<sup>42</sup> There's an extensive list of Venezuelan high-ranking officials involved in drug trafficking and an array of other crimes, but for the purpose of this article and its page limit I will neither unveil their names, nor describe their criminal networks and *modus operandi*.

be the architect and one of the main pillars in a scheme to aid Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations to expand operational networks within Latin America. (OFAC, 2017). Some experts and practitioners say that in recent times, Hezbollah has been participating regularly in the lucrative drug smuggling operations handled in Venezuela and destined to the European and US markets with the direct aid and provision from the regime's drug trafficker officials<sup>43</sup>. (BRAUN, 2012; NORIEGA, 2013; FARAH, 2016b; TAYLOR, 2016; AEI, 2017).

The convergence of corruption, crime, violence and terrorism in Venezuela was enabled by a set of conditions and circumstances that basically surfaced after Chávez was inaugurated as president in 1999. From that time onwards, Venezuela became a crucial source of political, financial and logistical support for Hezbollah in South America. Not only does Hezbollah operate cells that conduct traditional funding and political activities undisturbed by Venezuelan government, but also the group is becoming ever more involved in international drug trafficking. Finally, Hezbollah's operatives and facilitators have developed a solid ability to deliver financial and logistical support for various organized crime groups across the region<sup>44</sup>. (NORIEGA, 2013; FARAH, 2015; TAYLOR, 2016; RABASA *et al.* 2017).

## **5. CONSEQUENCES FOR BRAZIL: THE THREATS POSED**

As I have mentioned before in this article, the Lebanese, the Syrian and the Iranians have been migrating to South America for quite some time. In the beginning, they have settled mostly in the TBA, Maicao/Colombia and in Isla Margarita/Venezuela. Slowly they were able to spread out all around the continent. Alongside their migration movements, Hezbollah progressively came along.

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43 Michael Braun, former DEA (Drug Enforcement Administration) chief of operations gives detailed information on how Hezbollah's cocaine smuggling enterprises work within South America in his testimony before the US congress titled "Iran, Hezbollah and the threat to the Homeland". (BRAUN, 2012). Available at: <https://homeland.house.gov/files/Testimony-Braun.pdf>

44 The reason behind this derives basically from five elements: first, the existence of clan and family based networks of Lebanese run criminal businesses that are proficient in money laundering; second, access to politically influential individuals and groups that share ideological or economic interests; third, support from Iran (especially financial aid through Iranian sponsored institutions); fourth, epidemic corruption in all levels in Venezuelan government and also to some extent in the neighboring region; fifth, permeable regional borders with a constant historic flow of illicit trade. (AEI, 2017)

Hezbollah's presence in the continent is a well known fact. In Brazil it is not different. The Lebanese Shia communities are concentrated in Foz do Iguaçu/Brazil, Curitiba/Brazil and São Paulo/Brazil, and there are also Shia communities all around the country. There is enough evidence towards the strong connections between Hezbollah and some Lebanese Shia in places like the TBA and the Brazilian cities of Curitiba and São Paulo<sup>45</sup>. (NISMAN, 2006; HUDSON, 2010; CONSTANZA, 2012; LASMAR, 2015).

The active or coerced support of the Lebanese Shia diaspora in the Americas, Europe, Africa and the Middle East has helped Hezbollah build a network of facilitators that allowed it to expand its criminal activities on a global scale. Once Hezbollah and the Qods Force operatives realized they could move freely in Venezuela, they were able to slowly get across the continents' porous borders looking for partners in their illegal businesses. (BRAUN, 2012; CONSTANZA, 2012; REALUYO, 2014; LEVITT, 2016b; RABASA *et al.* 2017).

Brazil, Guyana and Venezuela are the largest producers and exporters of alluvial diamonds in South America<sup>46</sup>. In order to be able to trade diamonds, the countries have to comply and abide to the regulations created and enforced by KPCS<sup>47</sup> (Kimberley Process Certification Scheme) which is responsible for promoting the trade of legally mined diamonds all over the World. The diamonds traded legally are issued a certificate, by KPCS. (PAC, 2006b; PAC, 2006c). Venezuela has operated outside the Kimberley System certification since 2006<sup>48</sup>. From that time on, it has not issued one single Kimberley certificate. Its current diamond production is unknown although, according to several sources, it is estimated to

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<sup>45</sup> It is important to note that, when I mention the connections of Hezbollah and the Lebanese Shia diaspora, I do not mean they are all Hezbollah collaborators or facilitators. On the contrary, only a very small percentage of them actually take part in Hezbollah's criminal or terror activities.

<sup>46</sup> One of the sites with the greatest occurrence of alluvial diamond mining in the continent lies in the border intersection areas between Brazil, Guyana and Venezuela, where large diamond deposits are located and mining activity is concentrated. (PAC, 2005; PAC, 2006b).

<sup>47</sup> The KPCS (Kimberley Process Certification Scheme) was created in the year 2000, with support from the UN, and it is responsible for promoting/regulating/controlling/enforcing the trade of legal diamonds Worldwide. (PAC, 2006c).

<sup>48</sup> Venezuela has unilaterally abandoned the Kimberley System certification in 2006. (PAC, 2006c).

be in excess of 300,000 carats<sup>49</sup>. As a result of Venezuela abandoning the Kimberley certification in 2006 and repeatedly ignoring the organization's appeals to inspect their mining and trade, the country was banned from certification in 2013 and has since been added to the list of nations that cannot trade diamonds. (PAC, 2006c). As a consequence, the criminal organizations that already exploited this market both in Brazil, Venezuela, as well as in Guyana have structured their businesses in order to be able to export Venezuelan illegal diamonds<sup>50</sup>. (PAC, 2005; PAC, 2006a; PAC, 2006b). Therefore, at the bordering areas of Venezuela and Brazil, there is an intense flow of blood diamonds<sup>51</sup>. (PAC, 2006b; PAC, 2006c). Since Hezbollah has already got a vast knowledge of the diamond business<sup>52</sup> (FARAH, 2004), some sources have suggested that part of the production of Venezuelan diamonds has already entered Hezbollah's financing network, and, similar to weapons and drugs, would be periodically sent to the Middle East to be sold in Lebanon or the United Arab Emirates. Their base of operations in this illicit trade is said to be the town of Boa Vista/RR/Brazil, which has a strong tradition in diamond trade. These sources claim that the coming of Hezbollah into this business in the Brazilian side of the border has allegedly been facilitated by its networks in both TBA and Venezuela. As a consequence, part of the illegal diamond trade in Venezuela may possibly being used for terrorist funding and Brazil may have become a place from where Hezbollah can also trade in blood diamonds<sup>53</sup>.

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49 As of 2006, it became difficult to estimate the country's production, as it was entirely illegal. What is known is that the diamond mining activity in Venezuelan territory, near the borders of Brazil and Guyana continued to grow. (PAC, 2006c).

50 The smuggling of diamonds in the area bordering Brazil/Venezuela and Guyana is a complex operation. I will not go into details because it is not the scope of this article.

51 The KPCS came up with the moniker 'blood diamonds' aiming to tackle their trade because they were mined in African countries undergoing conflict. Over the years the concept of 'blood diamonds' expanded and now encompasses all diamonds mined and traded illegally and therefore criminally. (PAC, 2005; PAC, 2006c).

52 Terrorist organizations have been using 'conflict diamonds' to finance their activities for a long time. For decades, groups such as Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah have benefitted from the illegal trade in diamonds originating from Western Africa. Nonetheless, Al-Qaeda and Hezbollah developed expertise and ingenuity when assembling their smuggling structure which, initially, was greatly facilitated because many of these diamond-producing African countries have little or no control over their territory and have governments that are highly susceptible to corruption. (FARAH, 2004).

53 Interview with respondents A and B, in June/ 2017. Names withheld for confidentiality reasons.

Besides, Brazil is home to millions of people of Lebanese descent. As I have mentioned before, the more reliable figure estimates the Lebanese population to be around 10 million. (SENADO, 2010). Hezbollah has been able to create a network of support among a few of them, especially, but not only, among the Shia Muslims, whose number in Brazil is currently unknown<sup>54</sup>. In order to get community support, Hezbollah's basic *modus operandi* is: first of all, it seeks to inspire loyalty within the Shia communities by managing their religious needs and educational structures; secondly, Hezbollah works on its funding asking for donations, and uses the communities' business connections to its own profit and to facilitate its later interaction with the organized crime. (HUDSON, 2010; CONSTANZA, 2012; TAYLOR, 2016; OTTOLENGHI, 2017).

Let me take for example the familiar tri-border area in South America, also known as 'TBA', as I have mentioned before, where Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay meet. This area was once dubbed the "United Nations of Crime", a counterfeiting hot spot. Hezbollah found in TBA a largely under regulated free trade zone suitable for exploitation. As I have previously pointed out, this area has hosted a large Muslim community for decades. Hezbollah's operatives were aware of that fact, and it did not take long before they began to plant agents and recruit sympathizers among the Arab and Muslim migrants. (NISMAN, 2006; HUDSON, 2010; CONSTANZA, 2012; LASMAR, 2015; LEVITT, 2016b). That recruitment resulted in the establishment of Hezbollah cells as well as nebulous networks of individuals of Lebanese descent, mostly Shia that eventually provided some sort of support for Hezbollah, either financial or logistical. (NISMAN, 2006; LEVITT, 2016b). Along the eighties the TBA saw the Muslim community growing fast. Meantime its need for educational, cultural and religious institutions also grew. At that point, a prominent leader of the local Muslim community, Mohammad Youssef Abdallah, built one of these institutions, the mosque 'Profeta Maomé'. He was one of the first Hezbollah

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<sup>54</sup> There is no reliable figure of actual Hezbollah's supporters and facilitators in Brazil. There are the ones who support Hezbollah's 'resistance' cause, both overtly and covertly; apart from that, there are the ones that are involved as facilitators in Hezbollah's criminal activities. It is difficult to make an assessment of the number of Hezbollah's criminal enterprises' facilitators, since they operate covertly throughout the region. (Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Venezuela and Colombia, mainly).

members to move to TBA, according to the Argentine Intelligence. A few years later, the Argentinian Federal Police found evidence of the first Hezbollah network in the area. (NISMAN, 2006). A little after the year 2000, some experts would estimate the numbers of Hezbollah members living in the TBA to be a few hundred, plus a much larger number of supporters and sympathizers. (LEVITT, 2016b). Assad Ahmad Barakat, who used to be Hezbollah's secretary general Hassan Nasrallah's personal agent in the region, directed a Hezbollah network in the TBA. He was said to be a criminal supporter of Hezbollah and also closely tied to the group. (NISMAN, 2006). Police dubbed his criminal ring as the 'Barakat Network'. The ring's headquarters was a popular shopping mall in *Ciudad Del Este* called '*Galeria Pagé*'. His crimes included counterfeiting, extortion, and money laundering, among others<sup>55</sup>. (NISMAN, 2006). He used front companies together with diverse and complex ways to remit money to Lebanon. Both Barakat<sup>56</sup> and the above-mentioned Youssef Abdallah were considered by the Argentinian Police and the US Treasury to be key terrorist financiers in South America. (NISMAN, 2006; TREASURY, 2006). Eventually, the Brazilian Federal Police arrested Barakat in the year 2002, on tax evasion charges. Afterwards, he was extradited to Paraguay as requested by Paraguayan Attorney General<sup>57</sup>. He then served six years of jail time. (STF, 2002). Barakat came to Brazil after he left prison in Paraguay in the year 2008. Recently, at the end of August 2018, Paraguayan authorities issued a warrant for Barakat's arrest. He is accused of identity theft in Paraguay (He was being

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55 Barakat's main criminal activities apparently were counterfeiting and extortion. He had a solid experience in distributing and selling counterfeit US dollars. Also, some experts say he was well known for shaking down local shopkeepers in order to raise money for Hezbollah. His tactics for fundraising through donations were usually harsh. He used to threaten local shopkeepers by saying that their families in Lebanon would be put in a 'Hezbollah black list' in case they did not pay their share in donation through him. (TREASURY, 2004; LEVITT, 2016).

56 According to Paraguayan investigators, Barakat was allegedly more than a financier; he had direct and frequent contact with Hassan Nasrallah. He used to make trips to Lebanon and Iran; moreover, he was very close to Iranian diplomats in the region. The investigator allegedly further said that Barakat was "the most feared and undisputed Hezbollah leader in the region." (PERELMAN, 2003).

57 Ahmad Barakat was extradited on the charges of 'tax evasion', in spite of the fact that the Paraguayan prosecutors had requested his extradition based not only in tax evasion, but also on other crimes, which were terrorism and Hezbollah financing related. Brazilian Supreme Court nonetheless did not recognize the terrorism crimes, first of all because Brazil does not categorize Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Also, terrorism was not a typified crime in Brazil at that time. His extradition process registered under the number: 'Ext 853/STF' include a collection of documents that explain the circumstances under which the arrest warrant was issued against Ahmad Barakat. (STF, 2002).

investigated for his illicit acquisition of a Paraguayan passport last April). (OTTOLENGHI, 2018). Soon afterwards, Interpol issued a red notice against him. In the meantime Brazilian Federal Police located him in Brazil and began following him closely while waiting Brazilian Supreme Court's authorization for his arrest, which came very soon on September 19th, 2018. Two days later Brazilian Federal Police arrested Assad Ahmad Barakat in Foz do Iguaçu/Brazil. (PF, 2018)<sup>58</sup>.

Another case in point has surfaced after the collection of initial information by the police in the wake of the AMIA bombing of 1994<sup>59</sup>. Soon after the bombing, Argentinian intelligence directed its focus to Mohammad Youssef Abdallah and Farouk Abdul Omairi<sup>60</sup>, among others. These two names stood out since they were believed to be some of the main activists who provided direct support for the bombing. (NISMAN, 2006; LEVITT, 2016b). According to the case investigators, Youssef Abdallah was one of the first Hezbollah members in the TBA, but not only that, the investigators said he was also a key Hezbollah member in the TBA and he oversaw the group's clandestine operations in the region. (NISMAN, 2006). The investigators were keen in following the evidence that eventually led them to connect Abdul Omairi to the Iranian diplomat Moshen Rabbani. (NISMAN, 2006). The body of the evidence was initially a series of traced telephone calls between the diplomat and the travel agency owned by both Abdul Omairi and Youssef Abdallah in the TBA called '*Piloto Turismo*'. They later found that '*Piloto Turismo*' was not just a business that provided cover for an array of criminal activities, but also a front company opened with the help of Hezbollah's money to serve its

58 It is worth noticing that soon after his arrest warrant was issued in Paraguay, Assad Barakat has applied for refuge in Brazil under the allegation that he was being ideologically persecuted in Paraguay. Nevertheless, knowing his spurious intentions, Brazilian Federal Police together with Brazilian Attorney General's Office have requested his immediate arrest, for his refuge application was only a deceptive measure undertaken to obstruct Brazilian justice and thus to avoid extradition. (MPF, 2018). Moreover, nearly 20 years ago, by the time Barakat was taken into custody in Brazil in 2002 also for extradition (to serve prison time in Paraguay), he has tried to use the same artifice, unsuccessfully. (MPF, 2018).

59 The 'AMIA bombing' was a terrorist attack on AMIA (Argentine Israelite Mutual Association). It happened in Buenos Aires and 85 people were killed plus hundreds wounded. Argentinians prosecutors accused Iran government of taking part directing the bombing and Hezbollah was accused of executing it. (NISMAN; BURGOS, 2013). This is a complex case and I will not go deep into its details because of the article's page limit constraints.

60 The three of them: Youssef Abdallah, Ahmad Barakat, and Farouk Omairi were listed together in the same document as terrorists by the US Treasury Department. (TREASURY, 2006).

terrorist ambitions in the region. (NISMAN, 2006). Youssef Abdallah has logged many travels to Lebanon. His role in Hezbollah included personally taking the money raised in TBA directly to the group's leaders in Lebanon. Sometimes, as the US Treasury has disclosed, the money has flowed in the opposite direction, when Hezbollah would give Abdallah funds to support the group's network in TBA. (TREASURY, 2006). Years later, in 2006, Abdul Omairi and his two sons were finally arrested by the Brazilian Federal Police<sup>61</sup> on charges of using the travel agency to falsify documents and launder drug money. They were also charged with trafficking drugs between South America, Europe and the Middle East<sup>62</sup>. (TRF4, 2007).

Moreover, there is a controversial topic that has been quite frequent in the Brazilian media channels nowadays, which is the debate of a possible association between Hezbollah and PCC<sup>63</sup> (*Primeiro Comando da Capital*). According to some specialists, it did not take long before Hezbollah started working together with PCC. Their association allegedly started in 2006. (GURNEY, 2014; LEALI, 2014; PALMER, 2016). These authors claim that around the year 2006, Lebanese drug traffickers linked with Hezbollah's

61 In the course of Federal Police's Operation 'Camelo', Omairi and one of his sons (Kaled Omairi) were arrested for providing travel support for drug mules transporting cocaine to Jordan. Omairi was also indicted for having illegally obtained his Brazilian citizenship. He and both of his sons (Kaled Omairi and Ahmad Omairi) were considered guilty of the charges on laundering drug money and were convicted with 11 years and 8 months jail time. However, his younger son, Ahmad Omairi has managed to escape the police raid. He is still at large. The Brazilian criminal lawsuit number 2006.70.02.002541-9 in which they are prosecuted and convicted is very comprehensive and provides details of every step of their criminal enterprise. Nevertheless, it should be noted that neither were guilty/convicted of association with Hezbollah on two reasons: first, as I have mentioned before, Brazil does not consider Hezbollah a terrorist entity; second, at the time of the trial (2007) there was no legislation in Brazil that criminalized terrorism, or terrorism financing. (TRF4, 2007).

62 Some Lebanese citizens connected to international criminal and drug trafficking organizations roam free within South America's drug trafficking and money laundering syndicates. Some of them have close ties with the top tiers of regional drug trafficking groups. They frequently work together in moving cocaine throughout the world. (STATE, 2011; BRAUN, 2012). South American Lebanese ties to Hezbollah vary. Some traffickers belong to families linked with the group, while others just give money to the group because they believe in its ideology, some others are already deeply involved in the drug business and feel sympathetic to Hezbollah, and finally, there are the ones that do not care for the cause or for Hezbollah, but they see Hezbollah as an interesting partner that bolster them in increasing their profit capabilities in the drug trafficking business. (BRAUN, 2012; LEVITT, 2016b).

63 PCC – *Primeiro Comando da Capital* is the largest criminal enterprise in drug trafficking within Brazil. It has 26.000 members and it is present in all the 27 Brazilian states. Its tentacles reach several countries of South America, and through its facilitators PCC has been able to get as far as North America, Africa, the Middle East and Europe. (RIBEIRO; CORREA, 2017).

facilitators operating in TBA have assisted PCC to obtain weapons through international arms smuggling channels. In retribution, PCC would have apparently protected inmates of Lebanese origin detained in the Brazilian prison system<sup>64</sup>. (GURNEY, 2014; LEALI, 2014; PALMER, 2016; LEVITT, 2016b). Some experts further state that the Lebanese weapons traffickers based in TBA have been selling arms and explosives to PCC ever since. Part of the profits of these arms trading would allegedly be remitted to Lebanon as means of financing Hezbollah's operations<sup>65</sup>. (UMAÑA, 2012; GURNEY, 2014; LEVITT, 2016b). Nonetheless, there is still not enough evidence to endorse a direct connection between Hezbollah and PCC; in spite of the existence of a few good examples in the literature connecting PCC with Lebanese criminals.

Nowadays, PCC is a strong drug trafficking organization in Roraima. According to some sources, PCC has allegedly been making its moves with Hezbollah's facilitators to articulate cocaine shipments through Brazilian and Venezuelan territory, in exchange for weapons. There are some claims that Hezbollah's facilitator's networks (a network that had allegedly been already well established in Boa Vista with the blood diamond smuggling scheme) are now outsourcing trusted sympathizers to enable the Venezuelan drug shipment structure, together with ex-FARC guerrillas<sup>66</sup>. These sources say that Venezuelan criminals and ex-FARC guerrillas play on the longstanding relationship between Venezuela and former FARC that was developed and strengthened by Hugo Chávez in the past.

Additionally, as the current political and economic situation in Venezuela deteriorates, there has been a flow of refugees coming over the border into Brazil. From the year 2014 up to September 2018 the Brazilian Federal Police in Roraima state had already processed more than 65.000 Venezuelan refugees.<sup>67</sup> (ACNUR, 2018). The

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<sup>64</sup> PCC is not only the largest drug trafficking organization in Brazil, but also the largest prison gang within the country. (RIBEIRO; CORREA, 2017).

<sup>65</sup> In 2006 some evidence of Hezbollah's ties with criminal organizations in TBA was uncovered. The US Treasury Department identified nine individuals, mainly drug traffickers and arms dealers, and they were accused of providing financial and logistic support to Hezbollah. (US TREASURY, 2006).

<sup>66</sup> Interview with respondents A and B, in June/ 2017. Names withheld for confidentiality reasons.

<sup>67</sup> Venezuelan citizens have been so deprived of food and goods that in one weekend alone in June/2016, around 150.000 people allegedly crossed the land border into Brazil (Roraima) to buy goods and

undisturbed presence of Hezbollah operators and the Qods force in Venezuela makes it a possibility, according to some interviewed sources, that these operatives might have been infiltrated into Brazil, under false names and counterfeit documents, disguised as refugees with a formal legal status of immigrants<sup>68</sup>. Nevertheless, it seems a bit early to acknowledge this alleged infiltration. This is still a hypothesis since there is not enough evidence to suggest its actual occurrence.

Another case in point is the recent finding (February, 2017), by Paraguayan police forces of 25 tons of Venezuelan currency hidden in cloth bags in a weapons dealer's home in the town of Salto de Guairá/PY, which lies at the border with Brazil. Nearly all the money came in 100 bolivar bank notes that have been worthless thanks to the hyperinflation. The odd fact is that, according to some experts, these bills are made of the same quality paper manufactured by the supplier to the US Bureau of Engraving and Printing and are consequently a preferred choice for counterfeiting US currency. If made into 100 USD, these worthless bolivars bank notes would become nearly 2 billion USD<sup>69</sup>. (INSIGHT CRIME, 2017; OTTOLENGHI; HANNAH, 2017).

The initial investigation findings led to the fact that these 25 tons of currency would be destined to the TBA, to the hands of selected counterfeiters<sup>70</sup>. Some authors claim that intelligence officers have discovered that Hezbollah's operatives within the TBA had been looking for bolivars bank notes months before this seizure. (OTTOLENGHI; HANNAH, 2017). This seizure has happened just days before President Maduro would order the final withdrawal of the 100 bills from circulation. The Paraguayan police has allegedly said this situation indicates that the money was probably destined for counterfeiting as the

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stock up on food. (ELLIS, 2017).

68 Interview with respondent A, in June/ 2017. Name withheld for confidentiality reasons.

69 USD – United States Dollars.

70 The Fund For Peace and Transnational Threats' report about the TBA says that there is enough evidence about the connection between terrorist groups and organized crime involving Venezuelans and TBA criminal syndicates specialized in counterfeiting and identity fraud. (UMAÑA, 2012). Hezbollah's facilitators in TBA are well known for their expertise in counterfeiting. (CONSTANZA, 2012). The close cooperation between Hezbollah's TBA cells with their counterparts in Isla Margarita go back to the nineties when they orchestrated the escape of their operatives after bombing their targets in Argentina in 1992 and 1994. (CONSTANZA, 2012). These facts lead us to think about a hypothetical connection between Hezbollah's counterfeiters and the destination of the seized bolivars.

paper the money is printed is of high value for forgers, as mentioned above, because it is supposedly a fine raw material for printing USD<sup>71</sup>. (INSIGHT CRIME, 2017; OTTOLENGHI; HANNAH, 2017).

One of the hypotheses that have been ventilated by some experts is that turning useless bolivars bills into strong USD is a profitable scheme that would possibly be beneficial for Iran, Hezbollah and Venezuela. (OTTOLENGHI; HANNAH, 2017). Taking into consideration that Venezuela is nowadays on the brink of an economic collapse and it is running out of foreign currency reserves, if these tons of worthless currency were turned into USD by Hezbollah's counterfeit specialists, the terrorist group would receive a substantial commission and would increase leverage with Venezuelan government in reciprocity. Iran, on its turn, as a promoter of Venezuela-Hezbollah relations, could possibly help injecting these counterfeit dollars into the global economy. Hence, all of them would clearly profit from this game plan. (OTTOLENGHI; HANNAH, 2017). However, that is a hypothetical situation. Apparently, there is still no strong evidence to confirm such theory.

Additionally, there is one crucial point, despite having approved in 2016 an antiterrorism legislation<sup>72</sup>; Brazil does not consider Hezbollah to be a terrorist organization<sup>73</sup>. Even though Brazilian political authorities do not recognize Hezbollah as a terrorist group, the country's security forces do. The problem in this case is that, in my view, the security forces lack a full government support to conduct their anti-terror investigations in situations involving Hezbollah. This fact might be hindering a better coordination among agencies towards addressing Hezbollah; thus, possibly harming the effectiveness of the country's security forces against Hezbollah's terrorist actions<sup>74</sup> within Brazilian borders.

71 Apparently this is just the tip of the iceberg. According to local journalists and newspapers, in the months following this specific seizure, several more tons of 100 bolivar bills were seized in seven Brazilian states. Until now, the largest of all confiscations supposedly happened in March/2017 in a *favela* in Rio de Janeiro. Preliminary police investigations allegedly claim that all this money confiscated was connected to TBA criminal organizations that used land routes through Brazil and other South American countries to ensure the shipments of bolivars would arrive at the pre-designated spots within the country. (GLOBO, 2017).

72 Law 13.260/16. Brazilian Antiterrorism Law.

73 According to the Decrees 8522/2015 and 8799/2016, Brazilian government only recognizes Taliban, Al Qaeda and the Islamic State as terrorist organizations. (BRASIL, 2015; BRASIL, 2016).

74 As mentioned before, for the purposes of this paper, I consider 'terrorist actions' in a broad sense,

Finally, in my opinion, there are still other possible threats posed to Brazil that derive from the association of Venezuela, Hezbollah and Iran; some of them are: tax evasion, money laundering, capital flight, corruption, terrorism financing, radicalization and recruitment. However, this article has no ambition to cover all the threats, but rather to point what, in my view, are the more pressing ones that currently impact our public and national security more directly, and therefore require more immediate state responses.

## **6. CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The crisis in Venezuela and its apparently ongoing collapse is a fertile terrain for transnational organized crime, violence, corruption and terrorism. The country's economic agony and the disintegration of its law enforcement have fueled unseen levels of lawlessness, civil unrest and violence. For these reasons a growing wave of refugees are flocking into Colombia and Brazil. These facts have a clear impact both on the collapsing Venezuela and also on the neighboring countries, and ultimately on the stability of the region.

Upon analyzing the current situation, Venezuela's problems will probably get worse before they get better. The country will continue its downhill path in the near future, as a result of its recent political and economical moves. Venezuela is on the brink of becoming a failed state, besides the fact that some authors and experts already consider it to be a narco-state. Its current administration seems committed to aid Hezbollah and assist Iran's interests in Latin America. This is something that brings an additional concern and apprehension for the region. If Venezuela becomes a *de facto* failed state, we can expect terrorism and transnational organized crime to soar, since both threats are already present in the country and have been thriving under the auspices of its government. Other cases around the Globe prove that once a state fails, it quickly becomes a no man's land, a safe-haven for terrorism and criminal organizations with devastating consequences for its adjacent region, which always bear the brunt of a neighbor's collapse. For these reasons, Brazil

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which include: proselytizing, radicalization, propaganda, recruiting, financing, training, logistics, resource administration, surveillance, attacking, evasion and escape, among others.

should neither ignore nor downplay Venezuela's current and future economic and political developments.

The bolivars seizure, the increasing strength of Venezuelan crime/terrorism pipeline, the alleged alliance between Lebanese criminals and PCC, Hezbollah's facilitators operating all sorts of crimes in TBA, the ever more sophisticated Hezbollah and Venezuelan money laundering schemes, the country's steadfast turn into a full dictatorship: all these facts should be a warning sign of potential future dreadful consequences of paying insufficient attention to the rolling crisis in Venezuela. Its imperative that South American countries, primarily the ones that border Venezuela, develop a coherent and concerted strategy to address both the convergence of the mentioned threats as well as the country's political/economic crisis, before it is too late. Venezuela's neighboring countries should be prepared to get involved with humanitarian aid and economic support. Besides, the countries in the Western Hemisphere should continue to pressure Maduro's government. The United States' unilateral sanctions could backfire though, as they might feed even more into Maduro's distorted narrative of an 'imperialist economic war' against Venezuela.

Venezuela's democracy has caved in. The majority of Venezuelans see their current governors as illegitimate. The economic collapse erodes their legitimacy. People protest on the streets. Government repression is harsh. Recent developments in Venezuelan political scenario have already indicated that if President Maduro burns out entirely, former vice president El Aissami would be ready to take over with an allegedly full support from Hezbollah. In some Venezuelan political circles, notably within the current administration, El Aissami is considered to be the 'leader of choice' for the regime's survival, since president Maduro's rule faces strong public opposition and it appears to be on the edge of downfall. If that scenario unfolds, we could probably expect to be facing a threat that can possibly go even beyond the ones outlined in this article, whose consequences would most likely spur reactions still unknown.

An alarming possibility is that the level of violence could get even higher and the country could enter a prolonged civil war. In this case, an apparently 'local problem' could become a larger international

issue of massive proportions like the ones we see in Syria, Zimbabwe, Libya, Somalia, Afghanistan and other parts of the World today.

Concerning Hezbollah, differing perceptions between United States and Latin American countries have ended up in dissimilar approaches towards addressing Hezbollah's activities in Latin America. The United States considers Hezbollah a terrorist organization with an unmistakable presence in nearly every continent. The United States has the advantage of collecting information Worldwide and thus it has the capability of analyzing Hezbollah's network and structure much more comprehensively. This far-reaching assessment allows the United States to see the 'bigger picture', and therefore it can compare and differentiate Hezbollah's operations concerning fund raising and other terrorist activities in a variety of 'operational theaters' around the Globe. Consequently, the US broader view on Hezbollah influences US attitudes towards addressing the group in Latin America.

On the other hand, no Latin American country formally recognizes Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Besides, there is a widespread view among the continent's political authorities that there is no real terrorist threat in the region. These facts prevent Latin American political establishment not only to view Hezbollah as a terrorist threat, but it also inhibits the improvement of the countries' security apparatus and institutions (law enforcement agencies and military forces alike) to be structured and designed to face terrorism threats. Therefore, since the security apparatus lack solid political support nearly everywhere within Latin America, law enforcement agencies and military forces might probably remain rather impaired for the task of effective and comprehensive counterterrorism actions that include fighting the various stages of the terrorism cycle, *e.g.*: radicalization, proselytizing, recruiting, financing, logistics, resources administration, training, criminal businesses, among others.

For the above-mentioned reasons, Hezbollah's *modus operandi* in Latin America has been difficult to detect and identify, hence, to counter. Hezbollah has been tailored to function in places with deficient security institutions and also where its operatives can cross international borders freely and quickly. Without a large-scale and comprehensive regional effort to uncover and counter its operational

capabilities within Latin America, both Hezbollah and Iran's covert influence in the continent will continue to grow. That may prompt the emergence of future safe havens for Hezbollah in countries other than Venezuela.

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## **AS RELAÇÕES TÓXICAS DA VENEZUELA COM O IRÃ E O HEZBOLLAH: UM CAMINHO DE VIOLÊNCIA, CRIME, CORRUPÇÃO E TERRORISMO**

### **RESUMO**

As relações da Venezuela com o Irã datam dos anos 1960, quando ambos foram membros fundadores da OPEP. A influência do Irã na América Latina se tornou maior após a Revolução Iraniana. O Irã vê a América Latina como uma prioridade estratégica para o seu posicionamento global. A imigração libanesa para a América do Sul começou há tempos; porém, há um período, durante a guerra civil libanesa (1975-1990), em que um número expressivo de imigrantes libaneses chegaram no continente americano. Àquela época, de acordo com alguns *experts*, o Hezbollah e o Irã se aproveitaram desse movimento migratório massivo e infiltraram seus agentes e recrutadores entre os imigrantes muçulmanos. O Hezbollah é provavelmente o grupo terrorista mais organizado do Mundo, no que tange à sua estrutura criminosa de financiamento. O grupo financia suas operações terroristas por meio dos mais diversos crimes. O Hezbollah tem uma relação estreita com o Irã. Desde que o Irã estabeleceu suas operações encobertas na Venezuela, o Hezbollah o seguiu como seu mandatário. A Venezuela está submersa em crime e corrupção. O governo venezuelano foi infiltrado pelo crime organizado transnacional há mais de uma década. A convergência entre corrupção, crime, violência e terrorismo se tornou possível graças à uma série de circunstâncias que basicamente emergiram quando Hugo Chávez foi empossado como presidente em 1999. Daquele momento em diante, a Venezuela se tornou uma fonte de apoio político, financeiro e logístico para o Hezbollah na América Latina. Esse relacionamento entre eles traz impacto aos países vizinhos, particularmente ao Brasil.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Venezuela. Hezbollah. Irã. Violência. Crime. Corrupção. Terrorismo. Crime Organizado. Convergência. Brasil.

## **LAS RELACIONES TÓXICAS DE VENEZUELA CON IRÁN Y HEZBOLLAH: UN CAMINO DE VIOLENCIA, CRIMEN, CORRUPCIÓN Y TERRORISMO**

### **RESUMEN**

Las relaciones de Venezuela con Irán datan de los años sesenta cuando ambos eran miembros fundadores de la OPEP. La influencia de Irán en América Latina se ha vuelto bastante grande desde la revolución iraní. Irán ve a América Latina como una prioridad estratégica para su posicionamiento global. La inmigración libanesa hacia Sudamérica ha comenzado hace un tiempo. Pero hay un período, durante la guerra civil libanesa (1975-1990) cuando un gran número de inmigrantes libaneses llegaron al continente. En aquel entonces, según algunos expertos, Hezbollah e Irán aprovecharon esta migración masiva e infiltraron a sus agentes y reclutadores entre los migrantes musulmanes. Hezbollah es probablemente la organización terrorista más organizada en el mundo con respecto a sus actividades de financiación ilegal. El grupo financia sus operaciones regulares a través de todo tipo de crímenes. Hezbollah tiene una relación estrecha con Irán. Desde que Irán estableció sus operaciones encubiertas en Venezuela, Hezbollah se ha presentado como su representante. Venezuela está sumergida en el crimen y la corrupción. El gobierno venezolano ha sido infiltrado por el crimen organizado transnacional por más de una década. La convergencia de la corrupción, el crimen, la violencia y el terrorismo en Venezuela fue posible gracias a un conjunto de condiciones y circunstancias que básicamente se afianzaron luego de la inauguración de Chávez como presidente en 1999. A partir de ese momento, Venezuela se convirtió en una fuente de apoyo político, financiero y logístico para Hezbollah dentro de América Latina. Su relación afecta a los países vecinos, particularmente a Brasil.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Venezuela. Hezbollah. Corrí. Violencia. Crimen. Corrupción. Terrorismo. Crimen organizado. Convergencia. Brasil.

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