



A fer-de-lance, a highly venomous snake native to South and Central America, is coiled on a branch in the darkness. (Photo by Jean-nature via Wikimedia Commons)

Snakes in the Shadows

Hezbollah's Threat Slithers Past U.S. Security Radar

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In the murky world of modern security threats, some dangers move in plain sight while others slither beneath the surface, exploiting gaps and vulnerabilities. Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Shiite militant organization, represents a “snake in the shadows”—an elusive, nonstate actor that has continually adapted its tactics and fundraising, quietly expanding

its operations across swaths of South America. The moniker of “snake” bestowed on nonstate actors is a nod to James Woolsey’s nomination hearing for CIA director in 1993 and the more in-depth analysis covered David Kilcullen’s *The Dragons and the Snakes*.¹ While U.S. security efforts have focused on visible threats, Hezbollah has steadily infiltrated regions like

Latin America, using areas such as the Tri-Border Area (TBA)—where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet—as potential safe havens for illicit activity and to organize for possible future attacks across the Western Hemisphere.

Hezbollah, emboldened by Iran's backing and skilled in navigating the complexities of international security blind spots, has posed a threat to the national security of the United States for decades. Shortly after the assassination of Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani in 2020, Hezbollah encouraged revenge attacks against the United States.² Regional blind spots are potentially leveraged even further by Russian bases and political alliances, to include Russia, Iran, and China, across South and Central America. Moreover, by leveraging illegal immigration routes and exploiting weakness along the southern U.S. border, Hezbollah threatens to bypass traditional defenses and stage attacks on American soil. With assistance from these state actors and a sophisticated understanding of these vulnerable regions, Hezbollah's activities continue to slither under the radar, posing a serious challenging and evolving threat. Its endeavors are further enhanced by covert activity undertaken by proxies operating in the region. This analysis will dissect the Hezbollah's tactics, possible state actor's role in supporting these efforts, and the critical vulnerabilities that the United States must address to counter this stealthy menace.

Safety in South America

The growing presence of Hezbollah in Latin America, particularly in the haven of the TBA, has been known and documented for decades. This sanctuary is home to organized crime and smuggling activities as well as illicit financial operations that benefit Hezbollah due to the area's weak government institutions, poor counterterrorism policies, porous borders, and corrupt state officials.³ Recently, their illicit reach



(Graphic by Beth Warrington)

The Tri-Border Area

has extended to other South American nations such as Bolivia, Colombia, Paraguay, and Chile, particularly the northern region of Iquique.⁴ Furthermore, websites also house information on cells operating in Argentina, El Salvador, and other Latin American countries.

Deeply embedded in the criminal economy of the TBA, Hezbollah often works alongside drug cartels, smugglers, and counterfeiters to raise funds. While slightly dated, a 2007 joint investigation by Telemundo and NBC News uncovered an extensive Hezbollah-run smuggling operation funneling large sums of money back to the Middle East to finance terrorist training camps, propaganda operations, and future South American bombings.⁵ Furthermore, based on historical smuggling networks along the Colombian-Venezuelan border, Hezbollah has developed a network of active cells involved in extensive illicit trafficking, with the town of Maicao standing out as a key hub for this illegal trade.⁶ One of the notable figures in this operation was Ali Mohamad Saleh, a former Hezbollah fighter with ties to the Colombian crime syndicate *Oficina de Envigado* (The Office of Envigado). Saleh coordinated a steady stream of trafficking activities, including drugs, weapons, contraband, bulk-cash smuggling, and money laundering. The profits from these activities served to

finance Hezbollah's operations. Ayman Saied Joumaa, a notorious drug kingpin of Colombian Lebanese descent and also a native of Maicao, led a sprawling drug trafficking enterprise that created a bridge among Hezbollah, Colombia's Oficina de Envigado, and Mexico's notorious cartel, Los Zetas.⁷ Through these alliances, Hezbollah was able to tap into an international network of organized crime, further strengthening its financial and operational reach. Fundraising efforts using cryptocurrency have also aided in providing the group with additional financial backing using Tron, a "quicker and cheaper" rival to Bitcoin.⁸

Aside from raising capital from illicit activities in the TBA, Hezbollah receives approximately \$700 million annually in financial, logistical, and material support through Iranian state sponsorship.⁹ This assistance could be used to facilitate Hezbollah operatives' movements through Latin America, including establishing sleeper cells or recruiting sympathizers among Shia communities in South America. In April 2024, French weekly magazine *Le Point* reported that a particular Bogota, Colombia, mosque was busy expanding Iranian influence and connecting with groups involved in drug trafficking, money laundering, and other criminal networks.¹⁰

Strategic Partnerships

Iran, Russia, and China have strengthened their influence in Latin America, particularly with Venezuela, potentially providing Hezbollah with strategic alliances that enable disguised support for operations targeting the United States. The 2024 BRICS summit in Kazan, Russia, included primary members such as Russia, Brazil, China, and Iran; key discussion topics included ending the dominance of the U.S. dollar as the world's premier reserve currency, strengthening multilateralism for global development and security, and reforming the UN and its Security Council.¹¹ Interesting enough, respective heads of state or delegates were invited as guests from the following countries: Cuba, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Collaborations such as these can play into the hands of Hezbollah, potentially providing financial aid or logistical support, use of shell companies or criminal networks, cyber and technological support, covert intelligence or additional military-type training, use of denied locations or equipment, and diplomatic assistance through veto power.

Indirect channels through proxy state and nonstate actors. The use of proxy forces by nefarious state actors such as Russia, China, and Iran allow such regimes to provide training, support, or other resources to groups like Hezbollah while still maintaining plausible deniability for those governments' leadership. The decentralized Russian mercenary organization, Wagner Group, is a perfect example of such an entity. After its founder, Yevgeny Prigozhin died in a mysterious plane crash in 2023, the group was rebranded in early 2024 under Moscow's control as the "Africa Corps" and continues to serve in a paramilitary "gray zone" capacity for interests in the Sahel region.¹²

Africa Corps would be the most capable proxy nonstate actor to provide weapons, supplies, covert intelligence, or military training to Hezbollah forces across Latin America. They display an obvious willingness—U.S. intelligence reported in 2023 that Wagner Group personnel were planning to arm Hezbollah in Lebanon with Pantsir-S1 air defense missile/gun systems.¹³ Moreover, aside from overt operations in Ukraine and their rebranded efforts in Africa, Wagner Group mercenaries have been previously reported operating in South American and Caribbean countries. In 2019, a force of four hundred mercenaries was deployed to Caracas, Venezuela, for additional protection of President Nicolás

Maduro and to provide specialized training to elite Venezuelan special operations units.¹⁴ In that same time period, there were accounts of Wagner Group personnel transiting through Havana, which is no surprise given the friendly relationship between Russia and Cuba going back decades.¹⁵ As of April 2023, the group was also in initial discussions with the Haitian government to provide contracted services to counter the plague of local gangs.¹⁶

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(Illustration by *Diálogo Américas*)

It would be unlikely that China would be emboldened to leverage such a kinetic tool for fear of reprisal. It is more plausible that China would remain behind a firewall and provide cyber or technological support or financial aid through a shell company while still maintaining a sphere of influence. Another possibility, albeit unlikely, is China supplying resources to Hezbollah under the guise of humanitarian aid. China is currently committed to providing medical aid and supplies to Hezbollah in southern Lebanon due to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas/Hezbollah.¹⁷ A more plausible scenario might involve China providing financial and logistical support through indirect channels, routing aid via nations with limited Chinese oversight or presence like politically unstable or war-torn regions. These countries could serve as intermediaries, adding layers of complexity to any effort to link the assistance back to China, similar to the intricate shipping and facilitation networks used already by Hezbollah to smuggle Iranian oil to China with the use of front companies in third-country jurisdictions or that sail under flags from unrelated third countries.¹⁸ For instance, this support might take the form of disguised aid such as rebuilding materials or export-import goods

originating from Chinese-controlled hubs like the Chancay Port in Peru—a nation significantly influenced by China.¹⁹

Cyber and technological support. Cyber operations could be used to assist terrorist groups by hacking into secure systems, providing encryption tools, or conducting cyberattacks on behalf of those groups. These attacks could be launched from compromised systems in neutral or enemy countries, masking the true source. China is certainly capable of leveraging its cyber assets; however, similarly to the kinetic approach mentioned already, they are less likely to be as overt due to political and international blowback. Iran and North Korea both possess capable cyber operations and care far less about repercussions. As North Korea's largest economic trading partner, China might deflect or coerce their neighbor into cyber or technology support for Hezbollah instead of being directly involved.²⁰ According to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, North Korea's cyber program is "sophisticated and agile" and will continue their cyber activities, especially in cryptocurrency as well as laundering and cash out of stolen cryptocurrency.²¹

Use of denied locations and equipment. Weapons and materials supplied to Hezbollah may come from

covert sources, meticulously routed to avoid any direct traceability to China or Russia. This deliberate obfuscation ensures that the origins remain concealed, masking any connection to state actors while maintaining their plausible deniability. For instance, they could supply weapons manufactured in third countries or outdated Chinese arms that no longer directly implicate the Chinese government. The TBA serves as the perfect central hub to funnel such weapons and equipment from a pantheon of locations and directly into the hands of Hezbollah operatives.

Hezbollah operatives traveling to the U.S. southern border from the TBA or Venezuela could potentially be sheltered, provisioned, or provided immunity for covert activity by neighboring governments friendly to Iran, such as Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador. In his hearing statement to the House of Representatives Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, Douglas Farah stated,

The relationship between these alliances with Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua with Iran seems paradoxical. It is between groups espousing seemingly irreconcilable world views, the theocratic Shiite Muslim fundamentalism and socialism for the 21st Century. What binds it together is the common aim of asymmetrical military defeat of the United States, according to their own writings.²²

Moreover, this alliance can be magnified with the introduction of Russia's intimate relationships with the same core nations. An example of this is the Nicaraguan military base on the outskirts of Managua reportedly serving as an espionage hub for Russian forces, operating a sophisticated array of satellite dishes and signals intelligence collection equipment.²³ While this base technically falls under the Nicaraguan army's Directorate of Military Intelligence and Counterintelligence, the equipment and the base itself are manned by Russian officers while Nicaraguan soldiers only provide local security. Such a secretive installation could easily provision Hezbollah operatives or possibly provide additional training by Wagner Group mercenaries.

Diplomatic shielding. China and Russia, as permanent members of the UN Security Council, hold veto power, which they could potentially use to block

international sanctions or actions against nations and organizations supporting terrorist groups. This veto power allows them to exert influence indirectly, potentially offering a form of assistance without direct involvement. In 2020, China and Russia threatened to wield their veto power to block a proposal to reimpose an arms embargo on Iran, openly expressing their disapproval.²⁴ This move likely facilitated continued arms supply to groups like Hezbollah, revealing a clear alignment with their strategic interests in the region.

Exploitation of the U.S. Southern Border

Immigration routes across the southern U.S. border have been identified as potential infiltration points for various actors, including organized crime groups. Hezbollah could attempt to infiltrate the United States using the same illegal immigration routes that human traffickers, drug cartels, and smugglers use. In 2004, the CIA's Counterterrorism Center stated in a threat assessment how the U.S.-Mexico border is an inviting target for Hezbollah.²⁵ To echo this concern, FBI Director Christopher Wray made comments in July 2023 regarding how the increase in known or suspected terrorists illegally crossing the U.S. border "represents a massive security threat."²⁶ The goal of these suspected terrorists is to enter the United States undetected with the use of humans smuggling routes, leveraging the chaotic environment at the border.

Hezbollah operatives, with state actor assistance, might use forged documents or false identities to blend in with migrants and refugees. The use of fraudulent Venezuelan documents has been uncovered in multiple instances. Smugglers with established networks may facilitate these operations. Iran's support could extend to providing its operatives with logistical resources such as fake passports and cover identities. In 2012, authorities uncovered an international network involved in selling Venezuelan visas, fake passports, and bogus birth certificates through embassies worldwide, catering to citizens from Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Iran, and Iraq.²⁷ During this operation, Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami enabled the issuance of hundreds of Venezuelan passports to individuals suspected of being affiliated with Hezbollah.²⁸

In January 2021, U.S. policy changes dismantled the "systems of systems" that made up the holistic



A border patrol agent inspects a man-made tunnel near Nogales, Arizona. Such tunnels are used to transport drugs under the U.S. border, and Hezbollah could attempt to infiltrate into the United States using similar tunnels. (Photo by Josh Denmark, U.S. Customs and Border Protection)

border security system, ultimately allowing illegal immigration in the United States to surge from four hundred thousand encounters in 2020 to 1.6 million in 2021, and over two million in 2022 and 2023.²⁹ That is not even considering the approximate 1.7 million “gotaways” who were never apprehended by Border Patrol.³⁰ In the first eleven months of the 2024 fiscal year, the top five nations from which illegal aliens have entered the United States were Guatemala (181,000), Venezuela (133,000), Ecuador (110,000), Honduras (101,000), and Columbia (100,000), totaling over 625,000 and equivalent to the population of Detroit (633,000).³¹ Given the longstanding presence of the Lebanese diaspora in South America, a Spanish-speaking Hezbollah operative holding a Latin American passport could easily blend in with other migrants making their way north.

Key Challenges and Obstacles

Illegal border crossings. The United States faces a major challenge stemming the flow of illegal migrants crossing the southern border in what seems to be a never-ending game of “Whac-A-Mole.” However,

despite the vulnerabilities of the southern U.S. border, intelligence and law enforcement agencies continue to monitor potential Hezbollah operatives. Accordingly, the challenge for Hezbollah is to avoid detection. Hezbollah possess myriad contacts and connections already established across the United States and Canada that most likely would be utilized to move fighters who’ve entered those countries illegally or legally on fake documentation. Hezbollah may also collaborate with smugglers or cartels in northern Mexico, sharing and applying their tunneling expertise acquired from operations along the U.S.-Mexico border and in southern Lebanon. This exchange of knowledge could enhance cross-border smuggling efforts, leveraging the cartel’s experience in covert tunneling as well as local knowledge to support Hezbollah operations.

Tri-Border Area enforcement. Enforcing the law in the TBA is notoriously difficult. However, international efforts to crack down on Hezbollah’s financial networks and smuggling operations have increased pressure in this area, making it more difficult for Hezbollah to operate freely and even foiling terrorism plots over the last few years in Bolivia and Peru.³²

As another example, in 2021, Hezbollah operatives attempted to assassinate U.S. and Israeli nationals in Colombia.³³ Although these plots were thwarted, Hezbollah's network in Latin America remained mostly untouched, preserving its operational infrastructure and regional foothold.

To combat against these snakes, the United States must strengthen its security measures across Latin America. However, bolstering defenses alone won't suffice. The United States needs to adopt a proactive and asymmetric approach to counter Iran and Hezbollah's growing influence in the region through both soft and hard power.³⁴ To this end, Washington should issue strong warnings to its allies and partners throughout the Western Hemisphere, emphasizing the urgent threat posed by these networks. The United States should encourage more governments to officially designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, lead investigations to dismantle Hezbollah's illicit financial networks, and actively disrupt their disinformation campaigns. Additionally, Washington should impose sanctions and penalties on Hezbollah's local facilitators, sending a clear message of deterrence.

The al-Qaida-Hezbollah relationship. The idea of cooperation between al-Qaida and Hezbollah, despite their deep ideological divisions—one being Sunni jihadist and the other a Shiite militant group aligned with Iran—may not be as implausible as it seems. Both organizations see the United States and Israel as common enemies and as significant obstacles to their broader aims of reshaping the Middle East and exerting influence over Muslim populations.³⁵ While past hostilities and doctrinal divides would typically place them at odds, a shared strategic interest in undermining U.S. power could encourage temporary, pragmatic collaboration. History offers multiple examples of rivals joining forces when faced with a mutual enemy, and in this case, the United States represents a major target in both groups' ideological and geopolitical agendas. As early as 2002, Dana Priest and Douglas Farah reported that Hezbollah was beginning to work more closely with al-Qaida, collaborating on logistics and training efforts.³⁶ Such an alliance wouldn't require a full merger or even sustained partnership; rather, it could be limited to the exchange of resources, intelligence, or tactical support, allowing each group to leverage the other's capabilities

while pursuing a mutual goal. Given the increasingly fluid nature of extremist alliances in conflict zones, the possibility of even minimal cooperation between al-Qaida and Hezbollah cannot be ruled out, especially if it serves their immediate objectives.

With a shared arsenal of skills in attack planning, suicide bombers, improvised explosive devices, weapons handling, and tactical coordination, a joint, highly complex assault involving multiple bombers and active shooters from several aligned terrorist groups isn't far-fetched. Combining their expertise could enable these groups to execute a coordinated attack on a scale that's both sophisticated and devastating. Imagine the devastation that could result from a coordinated assault across multiple U.S. cities, where operatives from Hezbollah and al-Qaida deploy suicide bombers alongside a range of weaponry, utilizing social media to broadcast their actions much like the attackers in the 2008 Mumbai attacks.³⁷ Drawing from a historical playbook, these groups could easily adapt successful tactics from previous attacks on smaller targets, such as the 2015 Paris shootings and bombings, the 2018 assault in As-Suwayda, Syria, and the 2024 attack on Crocus City Hall in Moscow.³⁸ The combination of their resources and strategies could lead to a catastrophic event that resonates far beyond its immediate impact.

Conclusion

Hezbollah operates like a stealthy snake weaving through Latin American enclaves, seizing every opportunity, contact, and concealed space to expand its network, channel resources to its base in Lebanon, and maintain its presence as an ongoing threat to the United States. Through carefully cultivated connections and hidden footholds, Hezbollah strengthens its influence, adapting to its surroundings while working quietly yet persistently toward its broader aims. Multiple nation-state partners offer support such as critical resources, political cover, financial assistance, and logistical backing, so Hezbollah's broad ambitions can swiftly move from distant goals to concrete realities. These alliances allow Hezbollah to operate with greater efficiency and security, accelerating its agenda and enhancing its influence both regionally and globally.

It is important to recognize that this is purely hypothetical and speculative, as China's stance on international terrorism has been to ensure domestic stability

through its own counterterrorism capabilities, promote regional stability, and engage in multilateral counterterrorism efforts. According to the United States Institute of Peace, “it is unlikely China will become a major actor in fighting global terrorism and US-China cooperation in counterterrorism activities will remain limited.”³⁹ Similarly, Russia has criminalized terrorism-related activities and taken a comprehensive approach by expanding counterterrorism efforts at the federal, regional, and local levels.

International law enforcement and counterterrorism cooperation are essential to dismantle Hezbollah and prevent future attacks. As a well-resourced and globally connected organization, Hezbollah presents serious security risks worldwide. Only by sharing intelligence, pooling resources, and aligning strategies can countries disrupt Hezbollah’s financial networks, recruitment, and arms trafficking. A united global front is crucial to weaken Hezbollah’s capabilities and secure a safer future for all. ■

Notes

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