



Islamic Republic of Iran Army soldiers marching in front of highest-ranking commanders of Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran during Sacred Defence Week parade, Sept. 22, 2011. (Image courtesy: Reza Dehshiri**)

Iranian Influence in Latin America

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"This article was influenced by the *Vulnerability Assessment Methodology Workbook* from the Asymmetric Warfare Group and the book *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, edited by Joseph Humire and Alan Berman."

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When U.S. Army leaders and planners face ill-structured problems in ambiguous and complex operational environments they use a process called Army Design Methodology (ADM). According to *Army Techniques Publication 5-0.1: Army Design Methodology*:

“Army design methodology is a methodology for applying critical and creative thinking to understand, visualize, and describe unfamiliar problems and approaches to solving them (ADP 5-0). By first framing an operational environment and associated problems, ADM enables commanders and staffs to think about the situation in-depth. (Department of the Army, 2015, p. 1-3)”

This article uses ADM to frame the operational environment in Latin America, specifically the Tri-Border Area (TBA), as it relates to Iranian influence.

Framing the Operational Environment

The analysis of the operational environment will focus on the TBA where Iran's reach is the most significant. This region consists of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil.

Political Variables

The TBA, with its open borders and connecting infrastructure, has become a hot bed of illicit trading (Neumann & Page, 2018). *BBC News* reports, "The area attracts tourists from all over the world, who travel to see the waterfalls and luxuriant tropical forest. But it also



The Tri-Border Area (TBA). On the left is Paraguay. On the right is Brazil. And on the bottom is Argentina. Photo taken Jan 6, 2011. (Original image: Phillip Capper*. Image modified with flags and country names by the NCO Journal)

has a reputation as a centre for large-scale smuggling and drug-trafficking" ("Hezbollah treasurer Barakat arrested," 2018, para. 6). It must also be noted that Hezbollah, according to journalist Ian Talley at *The Wall Street Journal*, is an "Iran-backed Lebanese militia designated as a terror group by the U.S." (Talley, 2018, para. 1). Matthew Levitt (former U.S. Treasury Department official and a Hezbollah expert) in his interview with the *The Washington Institute* says Iran and Hezbollah's actions have been on the U.S.'s radar since 1994 with the bombing of a major Jewish community center in Argentina called the Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) (Levitt, 2016). And on October 15, 2018, the U.S. Justice Department designated Hezbollah as a top transnational criminal organization ("Attorney General Sessions," 2018).

Paraguay

Systemic corruption and limited rule of law in Paraguay enable drug cartels to hold unconstrained power. Paraguay is often described as a tax haven, which is defined by the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* as having "No or only nominal taxes; Lack of effective exchange of information; Lack of transparency in the operation of the legislative, legal or administrative provisions" (Glossary of Tax Terms, n.d., para. 27). Being a tax haven makes Paraguay very lucrative for drug cartels laundering money (Ottolenghi, 2019). According to the *Counter Extremism Project*, Hezbollah fundraises about 200 million dollars a year throughout the TBA and transfers/launders it through Paraguay because of their soft tax laws. ("Paraguay," n.d.)

Brazil

Also located in the TBA, and like Paraguay, the Brazilian government struggles against Hezbollah's influence. In *Business Insider*, Brazilian investigative journalist Leonardo Coutinho briefed the *House Committee on Foreign Affairs* and said, "Official investigations carried

out by Argentine, American, and Brazilian authorities have revealed how Brazil figures into the intricate network set up to export Iran's Islamic revolution to the West" (Lopez, 2015, para. 8).

The New York Times reports that in May of 2013, slain Argentine prosecutor Alberto Nisman released an indictment "outlining how Iran had penetrated not just Argentina, but also Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Guyana, Paraguay, Trinidad and Tobago, and Suriname, and how it used mosques, social service organizations and its own embassies to radicalize and recruit terrorists" (Dubowitz & Dershowitz, 2017, para. 12).

Argentina

Like the other two countries in the TBA, Argentina's political, judicial, and economic systems foster vulnerabilities to terrorism financing through institutionalized corruption, tax evasion, and money laundering. According to *The New York Times*, even Argentina's former president, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, was involved in shady dealings during her two presidential terms and is currently standing trial for accepting bribes from construction firms in exchange for lucrative government contracts (Londoño & Politi, 2019; Misculin, 2019).

To further illustrate the political climate in Argentina, the *Center for Security Policy* states:

“Iran has been sending financial aid overtly to Muslim organizations in order to influence Argentine society. Yussef Khalil, a person of interest in the murder of Alberto Nisman, declared that Mohsen Rabbani, the mastermind behind the 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires, has been sending money to Argentina in order to continue spreading Iranian Shia Islam — as well as the Islamic revolutionary ideology. ("Latin America's Role in Arming Iran," 2015, para. 9)”

Military Variables

Recently, the security forces of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay have begun conducting cooperative and individual efforts to counter illicit activities by organized crime and terrorist groups in the TBA. For example, the Financial Action Group of Latin America (GAFILAT) includes the three TBA nations as well as all Latin American countries in an effort to counter terrorist financing and money laundering ("Financial Action Task Force of Latin America," n.d.).

With the 2018 arrest of Hezbollah's financier, Assad Ahmad Barakat, all three countries of the TBA have

shown that they are now working together to clean up this region. Paraguayan prosecutors ordered Barakat's arrest, Argentina's Financial Intelligence Unit froze the assets of 14 Lebanese individuals linked to Hezbollah, and Brazilian police performed the arrest of Barakat (Ottolenghi, 2018; "Hezbollah Treasurer," 2018).

Economic Variables

Edward Luttwak of the Pentagon's National Security Study Group states the TBA is Hezbollah's most important base outside of Lebanon ("Hezbollah," 2018). Ilan Berman, senior vice president of the *American Foreign Policy Council* in D.C., and a consultant for the *Central Intelligence Agency*, writes, "Latin America has long functioned as a support theater for Iran and its proxies, with money generated through gray and black market activities sent back to benefit the Iranian regime or its affiliated groups" (Berman, 2014, p. 4).

In 2018, the president of the Brazilian Institute for Ethics in Competition (a business and ethics watchdog organization), Edson Vismona, estimated the TBA generates about \$43 billion a year through legal and illegal means, with much of that going to criminal and terrorist organizations (Quiroga, 2018). Of concern is that it's not just Hezbollah reaping profits and utilizing the money-laundering tactics. Al Qaeda, Hamas, the Islamic State, and other criminal and terrorist organizations also have cells in the TBA (Brancoli, 2019).

Social Variables

It is currently estimated that around 90 percent of Arabs in the TBA are of Lebanese descent. It is believed that the Arab population grew in the TBA in two waves. First in the 1950s following the Arab-Israeli War, and then in the 1980s during the Lebanese Civil War (Neumann & Page, 2018, p. 56).

Author and global security expert Joseph Humire explains "At the tactical level, Iran uses its cultural penetration to gain access to prominent individuals within the Islamic and indigenous communities throughout the region" (Humire, 2014, p. 96).

Culture and cultural centers are a logical entry level from a grassroots, unconventional warfare, and subversion perspective. The networks built in cultural centers can establish front companies, intelligence networks, and election support (Humire, 2014).



A Hezbollah flag flying over an abandoned artillery piece on the grounds of the former SLA prison Jan. 2, 2007. (Image courtesy: Paul Keller*. This image has not been altered)

Information Variables

There is no better method to penetrate culture and society than the control and manipulation of information (Department of the Army, 2018). Iran has significantly invested in public outreach throughout the TBA and has launched both Spanish and English language television channels.

HispanTV is an Iranian news outlet that launched its website in 2010 and its TV signal in 2011. Its mission is to "Work under the strong commitment as a means of communication to promote the rapprochement between the peoples of Iran, the Hispano-American and those of the Middle East, considering also the need to create greater closeness among all the peoples of Latin America" ("We," n.d., para. 3).

According to the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a global leader in fighting hate rhetoric and hate crimes, "Increasing its influence in Latin America has been a strong feature of the Iranian government's foreign policy in the last decade, and *HispanTV* serves as a platform to spread Tehran's conspiracy theories, Holocaust denial and anti-Semitism" ("Iran's HispanTV," 2013, para. 5). ADL's article goes on to document several anti-semitic publications that *HispanTV* published and states that *YouTube* disabled *HispanTV*'s live stream feature due to the anti-semitic material it was broadcasting in 2013.

PressTV is another Iranian-sponsored TV news outlet. *PressTV* delivers the Iranian message under the guise of diversity and unity to an English speaking audience. It is easy to recognize that the cultures of Iran and Latin America are quite different, but “the seeds of this unlikely cross-cultural relationship had long ago been planted when Fidel Castro and Muammar Qaddafi set up *Al Mathada*, a joint propaganda apparatus designed to coordinate anti-American messaging throughout both hemispheres” (Perdue, 2014, p. 13).

Current State of the Operational Environment

There is a growing Muslim population, not only in the TBA, but throughout all of Latin America. The *U.S. Department of State's 2015 International Religious Freedom Report* estimates almost three million Muslims residing in Latin America and the Caribbean in 2015. That's a 23 percent increase over a five-year period (Mora, 2016). This means that the Muslim population will continue to grow in the future and the Latin American culture will be influenced by the Middle East.

“Iran’s penetration into Latin America is of strategic importance to the Islamic Republic as it attempts to build diplomatic allies, launder sanctioned money, and position its Revolutionary Guards and terrorist proxies to attack western targets” (Hirst, 2014, p. 21).

Desired End State of the Operational Environment

The desired end state is one in which the United States is allowed to participate. A cooperative security partnership of strong regional democracies to ensure safety and stability throughout the region is essential to



Brazilian army special operators line up to showcase some of their equipment and capabilities during a demonstration for U.S. Army staff delegates in Goiania, Brazil, July 25, 2017. (U.S. Army photo by Lt. Col. Carol McClelland, U.S. Army South)

foster the conditions necessary for economic growth. To address the primary challenges of poverty and inequality, government effectiveness, corruption, crime, and terrorism the United States should help form a joint task force in which multiple departments from each country are used. This will require a “seamless integration of multiple elements of national power - diplomacy, information, economics, finance, intelligence, law enforcement, and military” (Mattis, 2018, p. 4).

Framing the Problem

“The problem frame identifies those issues preventing the command from achieving its desired end state” (Department of the Army, 2015, p. 4-4).

The problem in Latin America is best framed by former commander of U.S. Southern Command, Adm. Kurt W. Tidd, in his 2017 *Posture Statement* before the 115th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee:

“The illicit flows of goods and people, and the violence and corruption these flows fuel at home and abroad, are visible manifestations of complex, adaptive, networked threats. Transregional and transnational threat networks are now the principal threat to regional security and stability. These networks operate unconstrained by legal and geographic boundaries, unimpeded by morality, and fueled by enormous profits. (Tidd, 2017, p. 5)”

To achieve friendly force objectives, it is important for planners to identify critical adversarial capabilities.

Fund the Effort

Both Iran and its proxies (Hezbollah), are using the TBA to launder money, purchase support, control infrastructure, and bypass international sanctions and law.

Maintain a Permissive Environment

Corruption has been the key for criminals to maintain a permissive environment by keeping policymakers paid and in power. It provides criminals and terrorists freedom of maneuver.

Build and Maintain Relationships

Iran has invested heavily in diplomacy and information operations from a top-down approach. Hezbollah has deep roots in the Lebanese community within the TBA and throughout the region.

Framing the Solution

This section uses an operational approach to describe, in broad terms, actions the United

States government should take to transform current conditions to the desired end state of a partnership that will decrease corruption and illegal activities in the TBA.

Diplomatic

Recently, all three countries of the TBA have elected leaders who put crime and corruption as a priority (Otto-lenghi & Stein, 2018). The goal then is for the new administrations and the U.S. to work together to keep pressure on Hezbollah and their illegal activities in the TBA in order to dry up one of their major global fundraising hubs. This will show the region that the U.S. is working with the countries in order to ensure long-term stability in the region.

Information

One approach would be to bring back the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). This solution is backed on a global scale by James Clapper, former Director of National Intelligence, in order to combat information and misinformation by our adversaries (Muñoz, 2017). If the USIA could operate in Latin America, they would gain the ability to counter Iran's messaging, especially through their TV stations. This could be done covertly or overtly through media outlets. This solution might allow the U.S. the ability to counter anti-American messaging at a grassroots level.

Military

Security cooperation must continue to improve. The approach, however, must include a messaging campaign that places collaboration as the priority and removes any doubt of forced presence.

Economic

Instead of countering alternative alliances to the North American Free Trade Agreement or Free Trade Area of the Americas, alliances such as Mercosur, ALBA, and the Pacific Alliance should be validated. According to the *Council on Foreign Relations*, "Mercosur economies have recently signaled a willingness to open to other markets" (Felter, Renwick, & Chatzky, 2019, para. 3). This could be the opening the U.S. needs to not just unify the TBA economically, but Latin America as a whole.

Conclusion

It is heavily documented that Iran has infiltrated South America, especially throughout the TBA. The U.S. is taking steps to combat narcoterrorism throughout the region, but it is imperative that Paraguay, Argentina, and Brazil work together to establish a long-term solution to their corruption and crime problems. ■

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