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Hezbollah in Latin America: A Potential Grey Zone Player in Great Power Competition

By Demetrios Marinides



**WILLIAM J. PERRY CENTER
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National Defense University

Photo title: The militant group Hezbollah, declared a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the U.S. Department of State, has a surreptitious presence in parts of Latin America.

Photo credit: Voice of America

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Introduction

Since its formation in the 1980s, the Lebanese group Hezbollah has served as the archetype of a hybrid terrorist organization. The group functions as a terrorist organization, a militia, a social welfare organization, and a political party depending on the theater and context in which it is being discussed. It is inextricably linked to the Islamic Republic of Iran, and more specifically, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and serves as a proxy in a variety of conflicts and other operations. Hezbollah – literally meaning Party of God – has been active in Latin America for almost its entire existence, adding transnational crime to its résumé. Aside from conducting two terrorist bombings in Buenos Aires, Argentina in the 1990s, the group has largely used its presence in Latin America to raise funds and infiltrate members into the Western Hemisphere. Its operations in the region are not dissimilar from other Transnational Criminal Organizations (TCOs).

In recent years, however, Hezbollah's presence has become more explicit, and it has gained a warm welcome from Nicolás Maduro's regime in Venezuela. Hezbollah's staying power in Latin America, and complex bridging of different tiers of grey zone conflict, is a troubling example of what is possible in the region for nefarious nonstate actors and has implications for how Great Power Competition (GPC) is playing out in America's neighborhood. Hezbollah is uniquely positioned to play a key role among anti-western powers vying for a foothold in Latin America and looking to disrupt the United States within its own sphere of influence at every opportunity.

This paper will explore how Hezbollah has evolved within Latin America and how its base of support there could hypothetically serve as an advance party for other anti-western powers in a more kinetic stage of GPC. In considering this possibility, this paper will focus on the roles of Iran and Russia as said anti-American powers due to their existing use of grey zone measures in countering the United States worldwide.

Several aspects of Hezbollah's activities will be used to explore its potential role within the grey zone of GPC: the group's deep-rooted criminal ties with other TCOs, its proliferation throughout the region, connections to armed substate or rebel groups, and its relationship with the Maduro government. Iran's efforts in the region are interspersed throughout the narrative, due to its close ties, overlapping structure, and history with Hezbollah. By looking at these layers of Hezbollah's activities and how they connect with each other, we can better understand how illiberal regimes like Russia could leverage such an organization as an aspect of GPC. If tensions ramped up, Hezbollah could be called upon to bring its



Photo title: Hezbollah has long had ties to Venezuela. In this photo, former Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah are shown side-by-side on a banner at a rally in Lebanon in 2006.

Photo credit: Dialogo Magazine.

networks and capabilities to bear against the United States and its partners as part of a broader conflict beyond the organization's current mandate. This will be explored by describing the manner in which Russia – which already uses a varied and effective mix of grey zone and hybrid warfare to execute aspects of its foreign policy – could make use of Hezbollah's presence in the Western Hemisphere.

Grey zone tactics require a blurring of lines between state and substate actors. Hezbollah's hybrid nature and robust capabilities make it a built-in proxy for such a conflict. In preparing for possible acceleration of GPC worldwide, the United States must recognize the way in which its adversaries can use unconventional means to counter or even harm it in a variety of theaters. An awareness of the potential role of a uniquely successful group like Hezbollah is important to assessing risk and planning for regional contingencies.

Historical Context: Formation, Elements, and Methods

In examining Hezbollah's potential, which spans multiple capabilities and types of operations, it is worth briefly looking at the history of the group in Latin America. While several periods of migration from Lebanon have led to significant numbers of refugees and emigres resettling in Latin America, Hezbollah's roots are traced to the late 1960s and 1970s, when foreign merchants flocked to the Tri-Border Area (TBA) connecting Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay due to generous tax laws in the region and the

free flow of cross-border trade. Many of these merchants were Shia Muslims from Syria and Lebanon.¹ Previous waves of Lebanese immigrants to Latin America had consisted mainly of Christians, but starting in 1975 at the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war, these waves included more Muslims. While fewer of those fleeing the Lebanese civil war went to Latin America compared to previous periods, these smaller numbers still consisted of tens of thousands of immigrants between 1975 and 1982.² By the time Hezbollah formed in the 1980s, the combination of this multi-generational diaspora and several free trade zones in Latin America – in addition to the TBA – provided fertile ground for infiltration.³

In the late 1970s and early 80s, the precursors to Hezbollah began to coalesce in Lebanon, with the group officially forming in the summer of 1982.⁴ Although the elements preexisted the Iranian revolution, its formal establishment was inspired by the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hezbollah declared loyalty to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, from the outset.⁵ In early 1985, Hezbollah held a press conference where it issued an “open letter” (essentially a manifesto) describing the group’s structure, ideology, and goals. It confirmed its ties to Iran and declared itself as part of the “vanguard”



Photo title: The tri-border area is reportedly a frequent location for Hezbollah logistics and fund-raising activities.

Photo credit: Google Maps

¹ Christine Folch, “Trouble on the Triple Frontier: The Lawless Border Where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay Meet,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 6, 2012. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/argentina/2012-09-06/trouble-triple-frontier>

² Paul Tabar, “Lebanon: A Country of Emigration and Immigration,” *Center for Migration and Refugee Studies, The American University in Cairo* (2010): 3, 7, 20.

³ William Costanza, “Hizballah and Its Mission in Latin America,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 35, No. 3 (February 2012): 194-5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2012.648155>; Tabar, *Center for Migration and Refugee Studies*: 3, 7, 20.

⁴ Eitan Azani, “The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No. 11 (August 2013): 903. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.832113>

⁵ *Ibid.*, 903.

of jihad in the Iranian mold.⁶ Hezbollah was built to function in three planes. First was *da'wa* (missionary work), which encompassed social welfare and religious education.⁷ Its second pillar was *jihad* (holy war) and included its terrorist elements (Islamic Jihad) and its paramilitary wing (Islamic Resistance). Both its terrorist elements and the militia mainly fought against the Israeli Defense Forces and attacked western targets in Lebanon and other parts of the Middle East starting in 1983.⁸ Its third function was that of a political party in Lebanon, which came to fruition in 1992, with the supreme leader's approval. In parliamentary elections that year the group's political bloc, Loyalty to the Resistance, won eight seats.⁹

From the start, Hezbollah worked seamlessly with Iranian elements in Latin America, where the Islamic Republic already had a robust intelligence network.¹⁰ Initially, this cooperation manifested itself through multiple high profile terrorist attacks in Argentina. In 1992, a Hezbollah operative drove a car bomb into the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, killing 23 people and wounding hundreds. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack, which was ostensibly conducted as revenge for the death of one of their leaders and his son in an Israeli airstrike one month prior, although there was speculation at the time that Iran had been planning an attack in response to Argentina's suspension of shipments of nuclear material to Iran.¹¹ Less than two years later, a suicide car bomb drove into the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina* (AMIA), a Jewish center in Buenos Aires, killing 85 and wounding 150. Iranian and Hezbollah complicity in the attack was determined relatively quickly by prosecutors, but the case would become shrouded in scandal, confusion, and internecine political drama within Argentina for years to come.¹²

Regardless, a distinct *modus operandi* was demonstrated by both Iranian and Hezbollah operatives in the region in carrying out these two attacks. Local actors set the stage for the bombings, arranging the logistics and associated details, while remaining compartmented from the attackers themselves.¹³ These elements were led by Mohsen Rabbani, an Iranian cleric who led a mosque in Buenos Aires and began serving as cultural attaché in the Iranian embassy shortly before the AMIA bombing, gaining him diplomatic immunity.¹⁴ Those who would actually carry out the attacks entered the country a short time beforehand, only 17 days prior in the case of the AMIA attack.¹⁵ This method is significant in understanding how the expansion of Hezbollah's financial and criminal network impacts the group's ability to arrange for a variety of operations. Setting up clandestine cells of foreigners to conduct planning,

⁶ Ibid., 901.

⁷ Ibid., 904.

⁸ Ibid., 906

⁹ Ibid., 909-10.

¹⁰ Matthew Levitt, "Iranian and Hezbollah Operations in South America: Then and Now," *PRISM: The Journal of Complex Operations*, 5, No. 4 (April 2016): 119.

¹¹ Levitt, *PRISM*, 5, No. 4: 120-1.

¹² Ibid., 120-1, 123-5.

¹³ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No. 3: 202

¹⁴ Levitt, *PRISM*, 5, No. 4: 120-3.

¹⁵ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No. 3: 202.

reconnaissance, and gather intelligence is a risky endeavor. This risk is significantly reduced through resident members with local passports who speak the local language conducting these preliminary phases of an operation. They also remain compartmentalized from the attack elements, making it more difficult for investigators to put the pieces together. This is a capability that could be leveraged by more powerful actors with devastating effect, while providing plausible deniability.



Photo title: Rescue workers sift through the wreckage of the Israeli-Argentine Community Center (in Spanish, la Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina or AMIA) in Buenos Aires after it was attacked by a Hezbollah car bomb on July 18, 1994.

Photo credit: Voice of America

Post-1994: Strategic Shift and Eventual Role in Venezuela

Hezbollah's strategic shift away from terrorist attacks in Latin America demonstrates an interesting pivot that has facilitated the organization's network expansion. Hezbollah has fortified its deep entrenchment and gained unprecedented influence in the region without resorting to large-scale violence. This shift, whether rooted in pragmatism or not, puts the group in a position to have a stake in geopolitical matters – especially as an indispensable proxy for Iran – and foreshadows a vital role for Hezbollah in any future conflict that sees Latin America dragged into the fray of GPC.

Since 1994 there has not been another successful terrorist attack conducted by Hezbollah or Iran in Latin America. This may not be for lack of trying, as some reporting in the early 2000s indicated plans by both Hezbollah and rival Sunni terrorist group Al-Qaeda to attack several U.S. and Israeli targets.¹⁶ The U.S. State Department has also reported alleged plots by Hezbollah operatives against targets in Panama,¹⁷ and another operative was arrested in 1999 for surveilling the U.S. embassy in Paraguay.¹⁸ Whether or not these attacks were planned in earnest, their failure might have actually aided the long game for Hezbollah and its partners. Many countries in Latin America lack the same type of anti-terrorism and counterterrorism laws that other western countries have on the books.¹⁹ Even then, weak enforcement, corruption, and complex financial schemes have allowed Hezbollah to operate with near impunity in some areas.²⁰ High profile terrorist attacks only increase the likelihood that stronger laws will be enacted, as they were in Argentina, although it took several years.²¹ Even then, it was not until 2019 that Argentina designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, the first Latin American country to do so, with Paraguay quickly following suit.²² Ultimately, operating in the shadowy world of organized crime and prioritizing fundraising in Latin America benefits Hezbollah's bottom line and provides the financial support necessary to carry out its core missions and operations in higher priority theaters such as Syria, Yemen, and its home base in Lebanon. Additionally, by avoiding headline-grabbing attacks, Hezbollah has been able to quietly infiltrate criminal networks, armed substate groups, and regional governments, providing them with a measure of power that makes them a formidable organization. Their alarming rise to prominence in Latin America over just a few decades is most aptly demonstrated by their presence in Venezuela.

In seeking to understand the concerning and problematic relationship between Venezuela's government and Hezbollah, this paper will examine where the relationship is today before looking back at how it got to this point. This will demonstrate the alacrity with which the terrorist group has crossed

¹⁶ Hudson, Rex. "Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America." *Library of Congress, Federal Research Division*. July 2003 (Revised December 2010): 23.

¹⁷ United States Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism 2018 (October 2019): 285. <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Country-Reports-on-Terrorism-2018-FINAL.pdf>

¹⁸ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 197.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 205.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 198.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 203.

²² Eric Halliday, "Iran and Hezbollah's Presence Around the World," *Lawfare*, January 8, 2020. <https://www.lawfareblog.com/iran-and-hezbollahs-presence-around-world>

from its opaque and secretive presence into a prominent role in the energy and security sectors of the Maduro administration. While this presence is not publicly declared, it has become an open secret, and it is the first time that high-ranking officials within a Latin American country have been linked so directly with Hezbollah. The main example of this is Tareck El Aissami. El Aissami, who was indicted by a U.S. federal court for drug trafficking in March 2019, is the former Vice President and current Minister of Petroleum for Venezuela and served in numerous other cabinet posts in the past.²³ He is of Lebanese Syrian descent, and according to multiple sources, he is a Maduro confidant who has served as a key liaison between the Venezuelan government and Hezbollah.²⁴

Much of what is known about El Aissami's activities has come from a dossier created on him by Venezuela's own intelligence services and provided to The New York Times. What is perhaps most disturbing is that beyond corruption and money laundering, El Aissami has also allegedly coordinated the infiltration of fighters from the Islamic Resistance branch of Hezbollah into Venezuela as part of a plan



Photo title: Former Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami, of Lebanese-Syrian descent, is wanted in the U.S. for drug trafficking. He is alleged to be a go-between for the Venezuelan government and Hezbollah.

Photo credit: Voice of America

²³ Nicholas Casey, "Secret Venezuela Files Warn About Maduro Confidant," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/02/world/americas/venezuela-maduro-hezbollah-drugs.html>; Joseph Humire, "The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime," *Atlantic Council, Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center* (October 2020): 7-9.

²⁴ Emili Blasco, "Tareck el Aissami se consolida como el cerebro de los negocios sucios del régimen de Maduro," *ABC Internacional*, May 7, 2018. https://www.abc.es/internacional/abci-tareck-aissami-consolida-como-cerebro-negocios-sucios-regimen-maduro-201805070904_noticia.html

to provide them training there.²⁵ The presence of paramilitary members of Hezbollah in Latin America is a significant change in how the group has been able to operate in the region. Although it is difficult to confirm, it has been alleged that Hezbollah and Iranian-linked militants have training grounds on Margarita Island, off the coast of Venezuela, which had already been a safe haven for other illicit activities by Hezbollah.²⁶ Additionally, it has been reported in Spanish-language press that Hezbollah has a training camp on mainland Venezuela at Yaritagua.²⁷ While it is unclear who is training whom and for what purpose, one possibility is that Hezbollah militants may conduct joint training with elements of Venezuelan *colectivos*, substate armed groups that operate on behalf of the Maduro regime.²⁸ It would be unwise to have Hezbollah militants training openly with the Venezuelan armed forces, but cooperation on the substate level between *colectivos* and Hezbollah paramilitary forces would provide deniability while still serving the interests of President Maduro and his associates, especially in a situation where his grip on power seems to be slipping.

Hezbollah's local operatives work based on clan/family systems to conduct their criminal enterprises. El Aissami himself is linked to the Nassereddine clan, one of several that operate from various locations throughout Venezuela.²⁹ Another member of the clan, Ghazi Nassereddine, previously served as Chargés d'Affaires in the Venezuelan embassy in Syria, a role which he allegedly used to arrange meetings between Venezuelan officials and senior members of Hezbollah.³⁰ He and other members of this clan have been involved in cocaine-for-arms deals with the Colombian revolutionary group *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), other smuggling operations, and money laundering.³¹ These efforts demonstrate another aspect of the previously mentioned *modus operandi* of Hezbollah and its contacts in Latin America; they are not full members of Hezbollah but serve primarily as "fixers" for its operations in the region. This clan-based financial structure is similar to that used by Hezbollah in its operations in Africa.³² In the past, this approach provided compartmentalization and insulation for Hezbollah from the distinct financial and other criminal enterprises that fill its coffers. But these fixers were businessmen and other local contacts, not government ministers. The presence of members of the

²⁵ Casey, *The New York Times*, 2019.

²⁶ Penny Watson, "Hezbollah's Presence and Iran's Influence in Venezuela Coming into Focus," *Radio Farda*, February 12, 2019. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/would-a-new-venezuelan-government-kick-out-hezbollah-/29765060.html>; Moises Rendon and Arianna Kohan, "Identifying and Responding to Criminal Threats from Venezuela," *Center for Strategic and International Studies, CSIS Briefs*, July 22, 2019. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/identifying-and-responding-criminal-threats-venezuela>

²⁷ Emili Blasco, "Qué hace Hezbolá en Venezuela," *El Medio*, May 19, 2015. <http://elmed.io/que-hace-hezbola-en-venezuela/>; Gustavo Sierra, "Hezbollah en la Triple Frontera: los predicadores que llegan en el vuelo de 'Aeroterror'," *Infobae*, January 10, 2019. <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-docs/2019/01/10/hezbollah-en-la-triple-frontera-los-predicadores-que-llegan-en-el-vuelo-de-aeroterror/>

²⁸ "Hezbollah's Backing of Maduro May Shine Light on Links with Venezuela," *Insight Crime*, January 29, 2019. <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/does-hezbollah-backing-maduro-confirm-venezuela-terrorist-links/>; John Herbst and Jason Marczak, "Russia's Intervention in Venezuela: What's at Stake?" *Atlantic Council, Eurasia Center and Adrienne Arsht Latin America Center* (September 2019): 11.

²⁹ Humire, *Atlantic Council*: 8-9.

³⁰ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 200.

³¹ Humire, *Atlantic Council*: 8.

³² Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 195.

Nassereddine clan in such prominent positions in the Venezuelan state underscores the noticeable shift in Hezbollah's status in Latin America. It also provides deniability to the Maduro regime and ostensibly to other governments should their dealings with Venezuela result in contact with elements of Hezbollah or its master, the Quds Force of the IRGC.³³ This deniability is starting to crack however, and the Venezuelan foreign minister met with Hezbollah representatives during a trip to Lebanon in April 2019, an alarming admission of the Venezuelan government's willingness to work with such organizations.³⁴ This type of connection is already exploited by Iran in the form of a gold-for-gas deal with Venezuela,³⁵ and could readily be leveraged by other illiberal governments such as Russia, as will be explored later on. Before doing so, the status Hezbollah enjoys in Venezuela today will be traced back from its earlier shift away from overt terrorist acts to the deliberate expansion of its criminal enterprises throughout Latin America, where its transactional relationships have found it connected to everyone from Mexican cartels to Chinese and Russian organized crime, and formidable insurgent and rebel groups.

Expanding the network: The Path from the TBA to Venezuelan Power Brokers

Hezbollah and Iran's efforts to use Latin America to raise funds and expand their network have taken many forms. Transnational crime has been complemented by military assistance to regional partners, opening of cultural centers, and active recruitment in mosques throughout the region. The ability to create influence at these various levels gives Iran and Hezbollah an ascendancy and entrenchment in Latin America that is unprecedented. This type of pervasive presence is ideal for operating effectively in grey zone conflicts, and its potential role in GPC should not be underestimated. A scenario that involves increased altercations between great powers in Latin America, even as a secondary theater in a widespread conflict, would undoubtedly include a role for Hezbollah. The following examples show the expansion and consolidation of Hezbollah's positions across Latin America since the attacks in the 90s, and demonstrate how quickly and effectively the group has become part of the security landscape in the region.

Due to the lack of strong antiterrorism laws in most South American countries, it can be difficult to determine precise information about the scope and nature of Hezbollah's illicit activities throughout the continent. Except in some high-profile operations, much of the information that has been determined is through cases related to financial crimes. Even so, it demonstrates the reach, adaptability, and deep entrenchment of Hezbollah. Through these law enforcement methods, Hezbollah's fundraising in Paraguay alone was estimated to be over USD \$10 million per year by 2004, according to a Naval War College report at the time.³⁶ These numbers have since been dwarfed by examples such as a 2011

³³ Magdalena Defort and William Preston McClaughlin, "Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America: Consequences for U.S. Foreign Policy and National Security," *Small Wars Journal*, January 20, 2020. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/irans-strategic-penetration-latin-america-consequences-us-foreign-policy-and-national>

³⁴ Andrea Rosa, "Venezuelan FM visits anti-U.S. allies in Mideast," *Associated Press*, April 3, 2019. <https://apnews.com/article/feed0131f24e4ddb9893925715bb96ee>

³⁵ Humire, *Atlantic Council*: 12.

³⁶ Paul D. Taylor (ed.), "Latin American Security Challenges: A Collaborative Inquiry from North and South," *Naval War College, Newport Papers*, No. 21 (2004): 24.

international cocaine smuggling and money laundering scheme that reportedly netted as much as USD \$200 million *per month* in profits.³⁷ Through numerous other law enforcement actions, authorities have gained an idea of the amounts of money flowing from various Hezbollah-linked operatives in Latin America, with multiple examples of individual operatives netting annual returns of several million dollars each.

The TBA has served as the main node for this type of activity over the years, with operations based in three large cities: Puerto Iguazú, Foz do Iguazu, and Ciudad del Este in Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay. One operative, Sobhi Mahmoud Fayad – whose activities included counterfeiting and drug trafficking – is believed to have sent more than USD \$50 million to Hezbollah between 1995 and 2013.³⁸

One of the most effective Hezbollah fundraisers was Fayad's superior, Assad Barakat. Barakat served as both Hezbollah's premier money launderer in Latin America and its military leader in the TBA.³⁹ His brother was reportedly a high-ranking leader for Hezbollah in Lebanon.⁴⁰ Barakat was linked to the AMIA attack by Argentinian prosecutors for providing material support for the bombing.⁴¹ Evidence seized by a Paraguayan Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) team during a raid in 2001 provided evidence not only financial transfers to Hezbollah, but also evidence linking Barakat to attacks in Israel.⁴² Barakat was arrested in Brazil in 2002 for tax evasion and extradited to Paraguay.⁴³ He served a six-year sentence and was subsequently arrested again in 2018 in Brazil for passport fraud and extradited to Paraguay in 2020.⁴⁴ He was convicted, stripped of his Paraguayan citizenship, and expelled to Brazil in April 2021.⁴⁵ His expulsion to Brazil occurred via the *Puente de la Amistad* (Bridge of Friendship) between Ciudad del Este and Foz do Iguazu,⁴⁶ putting him right back into the heart of the TBA.

In another example, Hezbollah operative Moussa Hamdan, who was arrested by Interpol in 2010, raised funds through the sale of counterfeit money and forged passports and used the money to attempt the purchase of 1,200 American-made rifles. The seller was an FBI informant, leading to Hamdan's arrest.⁴⁷ These operatives have historically demonstrated versatility and variety in their fundraising

³⁷ Halliday, *Lawfare*.

³⁸ Matthew Levitt, "South of the Border, a Threat from Hezbollah," *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, No. 24 (Spring/Summer 2013): 71.

³⁹ Hudson, *Library of Congress*: 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 72; Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Hezbollah Operative Assad Ahmad Barakat Extradited to Paraguay," *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, July 22, 2020. <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2020/07/22/hezbollah-operative-extradited-to-paraguay/>

⁴¹ Hudson, *Library of Congress*: 13.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁴⁴ Ottolenghi, *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*.

⁴⁵ Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Paraguay's Endemic Corruption Will Not End Without U.S. Intervention," *The National Interest*, April 18, 2021. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/paraguay%E2%80%99s-endemic-corruption-will-not-end-without-us-intervention-182856>

⁴⁶ "Condenan y expulsan de Paraguay al jefe regional del Hezbolá, Assaad [sic] Ahmad Barakat," *La Nación*, April 8, 2021. <https://www.lanacion.com.py/judiciales/2021/04/08/condenan-y-expulsan-de-paraguay-al-jefe-regional-del-hezbolaa-ahmad-barakat/>

⁴⁷ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 197-8.

schemes, which include counterfeiting, narcotics trafficking, arms smuggling, film and software piracy, racketeering, extortion, and document forgery services. Some aspects of these operations have included collaboration with Chinese organized crime groups in the TBA.⁴⁸ This is not surprising due to the long-term presence of the Chinese mafia in the TBA, and Hezbollah's seeming willingness to work with all types of TCOs.⁴⁹

Hezbollah in Brazil

Away from the TBA, one of Brazil's largest cities, São Paulo, has also seen significant Hezbollah activity among a Shia diaspora of approximately 20,000 people.⁵⁰ The Brazilian government's view of terrorism is that it is an external threat, mainly targeting the United States and Israel. Brazil has not designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization and terrorist financing is not a crime there, similar to other countries in Latin America. Any prosecution of Hezbollah associates or members would be coincident with their breaking of other laws governing a variety of criminal activity.⁵¹ Brazilian newspaper *O*



Photo title: São Paulo, the fifth largest city in the world, with more than 21 million inhabitants, is reportedly a location for frequent Hezbollah activity in Brazil.

Photo credit: Creative Commons and Wikipedia

⁴⁸ Hudson, *Library of Congress*: 43.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 40-45.

⁵⁰ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 199.

⁵¹ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 203.

Globo has linked Hezbollah to Brazil's largest organized crime syndicate.⁵² It has also been reported that Mohsen Rabbani's brother, Mohammad Baquer Rabbani Razavi, has recruited Brazilian converts to Islam who have then undergone terrorist training in Qom, Iran and returned to set up networks in their home country.⁵³

Similar operations have been found throughout Latin America. Other free trade areas offer similar opportunities to those of the TBA. Assad Barakat has also been implicated in money laundering operations in Chile's Iquique Free Trade Zone (ZOFRI). According to Chilean authorities investigating these activities, Barakat set up several businesses as fronts for laundering money in the early 2000s, in addition to similar setups he had previously established in the TBA.⁵⁴ Chile forms just one portion of what some have dubbed the "New TBA" between Chile, Bolivia, and Peru, which covers a larger geographic area than the original TBA.⁵⁵ Hezbollah has exploited this area after the old TBA garnered significant attention by international law enforcement, and demonstrated its adaptability by shifting operations accordingly and expanding its relationships with narco-trafficking syndicates to capitalize on opportunities in the new TBA.⁵⁶

A key feature of the new TBA compared with the old TBA is that it is coastal. Both ZOFRI and another free trade area in Arica sit on the Chilean coast. Iranian vessels have been known to dock at Chilean seaports, although they are reflagged due to sanctions.⁵⁷ Peru is the number one producer of cocaine in the world, and Bolivia is number three, providing for a robust drug trade originating in the new TBA.⁵⁸ The availability of ports, access to free trade zones, porous borders, geographic remoteness, and high cocaine production, all combine to provide an ideal environment for TCOs, including Hezbollah.

Iran has sought to enable Hezbollah's operations in the countries of the new TBA through various soft-power means. One example was the opening of a military training facility with the assistance of Iran near Santa Cruz, Bolivia. It ostensibly served as a regional military school for member states of the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA),⁵⁹ an alliance spearheaded by Venezuela under Hugo Chávez.⁶⁰ Iran has observer status in the alliance, and maintains a steady military presence in Bolivia.⁶¹ Although the interim government repurposed the school after former Bolivian president Evo Morales

⁵² Alma Keshavarz, "Iran and Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Areas of Latin America: A Look at the "Old TBA" and the "New TBA", *Small Wars Journal*, November 12, 2015. <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/iran-and-hezbollah-in-the-tri-border-areas-of-latin-america-a-look-at-the-%E2%80%9Cold-tba%E2%80%9D-and-the>

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 198-9.

⁵⁵ Keshavarz, *Small Wars Journal*.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Elodie Brun, "Iran's Place in Venezuelan Foreign Policy," *Iran in Latin America: Threat or 'Axis of Annoyance'?*, Woodrow Wilson Center Reports on the Americas, No. 23 (2009): 37.

⁶¹ Keshavarz, *Small Wars Journal*.

resigned, Iran reportedly still enjoys cordial relationships with the political left in that country.⁶²

Another example of soft-power efforts by Iran centers around the establishment of mosques and cultural centers, an effort led by Mohsen Rabbani. In Chile, the number of Muslims is relatively low, but many of them are converts. The first mosque in Chile was constructed in 1995 but more have been built throughout the country since then, in addition to an Islamic cultural center in the capital, Santiago.⁶³ Thirty-six Shia cultural centers linked to Rabbani's network have been established throughout Latin America, in addition to an Iranian outreach center that was run by Rabbani himself, the *Fundación Cultural Oriente*.⁶⁴ While simply converting to Islam does not of course result in becoming an extremist or a Hezbollah operative, the increased efforts to expand Shia Islam through Iranian-funded endeavors signal a vast network and cannot be discounted as an indication of Hezbollah's presence in areas that lend themselves to drug trafficking and other illicit activities. These efforts have driven recruitment and helped Hezbollah and Iran embed operatives within the local culture.⁶⁵ Recruiting local converts expands family networks, provides citizenships obtained through marriages, and further entrenches Hezbollah into the fabric of Latin America. Additionally, Iran has opened embassies in several Latin American countries relatively recently, to include Bolivia and Chile.⁶⁶ Investigation of the AMIA bombing found that Rabbani and other operatives had worked out of Iran's embassies in Buenos Aires and Brasilia.⁶⁷

Hezbollah has also been active in Colombia, but law enforcement and military capability, coupled with close cooperation with the United States, has enabled more impactful results in combatting the threat of TCOs and therefore the terrorist networks that are party to their operations. Hezbollah's activities related to Colombian drug trafficking were highlighted through an extensive investigation called Operation Titan, made public in 2008.⁶⁸ The two-year joint effort between Colombian authorities and the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) dismantled a widespread drug trafficking operation that impacted several other countries, including not just those in South and Central America, but also Mexico, the U.S., and parts of Europe, West Africa, and the Middle East. One of the suspects arrested was a Lebanese criminal named Chekrey Harb. Harb's criminal organization laundered hundreds of millions of dollars per year and its primary customer was Hezbollah.⁶⁹ Another Lebanese-Colombian drug kingpin associated with the drug ring as a result of the operation was Ayman Joumaa, who was also

⁶² Stephen Johnson, "Iran Is Working Hard to Revive Anti-U.S. Operations in Latin America", *Foreign Policy*, June 1, 2020. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/01/iran-venezuela-alliances-latin-america/>

⁶³ Keshavarz, *Small Wars Journal*.

⁶⁴ Levitt, *PRISM*, 5, No. 4: 125.

⁶⁵ Keshavarz, *Small Wars Journal*.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*.

⁶⁷ Levitt, *PRISM*, 5, No. 4: 122.

⁶⁸ Chris Kraul and Sebastian Rotella, "Drug probe finds Hezbollah link," *Los Angeles Times*, October 22, 2008. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2008-oct-22-fg-cocainering22-story.html>

⁶⁹ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 200.

indicted by a U.S. grand jury for working with Mexico's Zetas cartel to traffic cocaine.⁷⁰ Part of Operation Titan's success was the exposure of a clear-cut case of Hezbollah's connection to narco-trafficking, smuggling, and money laundering.⁷¹ Additionally, it confirmed ties between a major Medellín cartel (*La Oficina de Envigado*), the FARC, and Hezbollah.⁷² Although the DEA has linked multiple other Islamic terrorist groups to the drug trade, it has noted Hezbollah's "high level of sophistication; its hierarchical, compartmentalized structure; its combination of widespread political, military, criminal, and social activities", and its success in carrying out terrorist attacks.⁷³

Venezuela-Hezbollah Nexus

Venezuela stands out compared to the other examples due to Hezbollah's shift from the dark underbelly of Latin American organized crime/terror connections, into the halls of power in Caracas. Hezbollah's prominence in Venezuela could serve as the exact counterexample to the robust cooperation between Colombian authorities and U.S. agencies. In terms of GPC, the Venezuela-Hezbollah connection opens up the continent to the group's extensive network without requiring the cooperation of other governments in the region. It provides a key foothold, differentiated by those such as the TBA due to the semi-official approval of the government, highlighting the importance of the group's rise to prominence under the Chávez and Maduro regimes.

After the rise to power of Hugo Chávez in the late 1990s, Venezuela established itself as one of the main anti-U.S. voices in Latin America, establishing ALBA.⁷⁴ Iran's closer relationships with Venezuela under the Chávez regime began in 2001, based mostly on trade. But starting with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, the relationship shifted into more ideological ground, based primarily in countering the United States.⁷⁵ It was during this time period that members of the Nassereddine clan gained prominent roles in the Chávez government, including Ghazi's aforementioned role as a senior diplomat. Reports indicated that in the early 2000s the government began issuing Venezuelan passports to individuals from Middle Eastern countries, with a later iteration of such a scheme tied to El Aissami while he was vice president.⁷⁶ It is also alleged that Venezuela has provided false identity documents to the cleric Rabbani, allowing him to travel freely between Iran and Latin America despite an Interpol "red notice" for his arrest.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ John Fernandez, "The DEA's Targeting of Hezbollah's Global Criminal Support Network," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, January 10, 2020 (rapporteur's summary of remarks by Mr. Fernandez on January 9, 2020, prepared by Samantha Stern). <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/deas-targeting-hezbollahs-global-criminal-support-network>; Humire, *Atlantic Council*: 6.

⁷¹ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 200.

⁷² Humire, *Atlantic Council*: 6.

⁷³ Fernandez, *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*.

⁷⁴ Brun, *Iran in Latin America*: 37.

⁷⁵ Kavon Hakimzadeh, "Iran and Venezuela: The 'Axis of Annoyance'," *Military Review*, 89, No. 3 (May/June 2009): 79.

⁷⁶ Humire, *Atlantic Council*: 8, 11; Scott Zamost, Drew Griffin, Kay Guerrero, and Rafael Romo, "Venezuela may have given passports to people with ties to terrorism," *CNN*, February 14, 2017. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/08/world/venezuela-passports-investigation/index.html>

⁷⁷ Keshavarz, *Small Wars Journal*.

Many of the trade agreements between Iran and Venezuela during the Chávez era centered on energy, with Iran providing funds to build platforms for oil exploration, and Venezuela providing refined petroleum products due to Iran's difficulty producing gasoline.⁷⁸ This type of relationship continued into the Maduro regime, but the continued nationalization of oil companies in Venezuela has led to rampant corruption and mismanagement, and Venezuela cannot refine its heavy crude oil. Facing fuel shortages, Venezuela turned to Iran for help, to include providing fuel, leading to the aforementioned gold-for-gas deal. The Iranian entities involved in the deal all had connections to the IRGC and were therefore subject to U.S. sanctions. The effort to conduct the scheme using gold as payment was an effort to circumvent these sanctions and El Aissami played a key role in his capacity as Minister of Petroleum. The deal demonstrated the role that Hezbollah-linked clan members play in facilitating the relationship between the two nations.⁷⁹ Hezbollah has been able to capitalize on Iran's warm relations with Venezuela, vaulting it from the criminal underworld into positions of power. Although Iran spends hundreds of millions of dollars to fund Hezbollah,⁸⁰ the activities its proxy has undertaken in Latin America and elsewhere bolster this revenue stream (or possibly surpass it) and are no doubt particularly helpful in light of Iranian economic troubles.⁸¹

The high level of influence demonstrated in Venezuela, along with the discoveries made in Operation Titan, provided a clearer picture into how Hezbollah operates in Latin America. The aforementioned DEA description of Hezbollah encapsulates the singularity of the organization. It has achieved what other large terrorist groups could not, entrenching itself within the complex web of TCOs and substate actors in a region far removed from its founding territory and spiritual heartland. It has done so with alarming success and in a relatively short span of time. The lack of terrorism-related laws mean that going after Hezbollah is often based on financial crime and fraud. This makes it difficult to deal lasting blows to the organization. Assad Barakat's case is a prime example of this challenge. Hezbollah is the premier hybrid terrorist organization, brimming with experience in a variety of theaters and types of operations. It is battle-hardened and adaptable, making its advances in the region all the more troubling.⁸² The methods, connections, and capabilities pieced together by various means have notable implications for how effective Hezbollah has been. In a hypothetical scenario where powerful adversaries in a multilateral world seek to cause instability in the Western Hemisphere, Hezbollah is capable of playing a vital role on behalf of those authoritarian regimes that would not hesitate to capitalize on the group's deeply rooted presence.

That being said, in looking at the potential role of a group like Hezbollah in GPC, one must examine the multi-tiered capabilities that a more sophisticated world power such as Russia can bring to bear in leveraging such an organization.

⁷⁸ Hakimzadeh, *Military Review*, 89, No.3: 81.

⁷⁹ Humire, *Atlantic Council*: 12.

⁸⁰ Costanza, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 36, No.3: 194.

⁸¹ "Iran Economic Outlook," *Focus Economics*, November 3, 2020. <https://www.focus-economics.com/countries/iran>

⁸² Frank G. Hoffman, "Examining Complex Forms of Conflict: Gray Zone and Hybrid Challenges," *PRISM: The Journal of Complex Operations*, 7, No. 4 (November 2018): 40.

Russia: Grey Zone Connoisseurs

The opportunity to project power into Latin America in response to perceived U.S. aggression in Russia's sphere of influence is a key tenet of Moscow's activities and policies in the region.⁸³ Plausible deniability is a condition that is consistently relied upon in a variety of the measures that President Putin's government uses worldwide. Whether it is "little green men" fighting alongside Russian-backed separatists in the Donetsk Basin in Ukraine, Wagner contractors in Syria, Central African Republic, and Venezuela, or active measures conducted via social media, Russia relies on this thin veneer of separation to make it difficult to pin down Moscow's involvement. In Syria, Russia has sought to put some distance between its support for Bashar al-Assad's regime and Hezbollah/Iranian operations in the conflict. But this may be to avoid a confrontation with Israel, which has been conducting air strikes against Iranian and Hezbollah targets in Syria.⁸⁴ That being said, Russia still has channels through which to engage with Hezbollah and doing so vis-à-vis Venezuela would likely incur less risk due to its geographic and geopolitical distance from the Syrian conflict.



Photo title: An SA-24 Man-Portable Air-Defense System (MANPADS) missile, like those sold from Russia to Venezuela.
Photo credit: Vitaly Kuzmin and Creative Commons.

⁸³ Herbst and Marczak, *Atlantic Council*: 3.

⁸⁴ Gawdat Bahgat, "Russia and the Middle East: Opportunities and Challenges," in *Russia's Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme P. Herd (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021): 76-7.

Russia has proven to be one of Venezuela's most consistent allies. This relationship began in earnest during the Chávez era.⁸⁵ In recent years the partnership has found Russia shoring up the Maduro regime when it seemed on the verge of collapse by sending the aforementioned contractors in addition to Russian troops and military hardware.⁸⁶ In terms of arms, Venezuela has bought a significant amount of aircraft and weaponry from Russia since 1999, including formidable S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems and SA-24 Iгла-S Man Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS).⁸⁷ It has been reported that the number of MANPADS purchased by Venezuela is around five thousand, cause for significant concern.⁸⁸ If even a small number of these weapons found their way into the hands of Hezbollah operatives, they would present a serious threat wherever they are deployed. The exclusive direct-flight corridor set up between Tehran and Caracas in 2019,⁸⁹ in addition to robust smuggling networks, means relatively easy transport of those systems to places like Syria and Iraq. With the current high-level placement of known Hezbollah fixers and sympathizers within the Maduro regime, this is not unthinkable. This is an example of a scenario that would not have been as readily considered prior to this era of Hezbollah-Iran-Venezuela connections. While Russia is likely also interested in keeping those weapons out of Hezbollah's arsenal in the current climate, a downturn in world events and some type of escalation in terms of Moscow's contretemps with the United States or European countries could see a change in Putin's calculus. The flexibility of authoritarian regimes across the grey zone provides opportunities to ratchet up operations while still avoiding a head-on confrontation with its adversaries.

Military sales are not the only way Russia has provided support for Maduro's hold on power. It has also played a significant role in economic investment, primarily in the energy sector. Russia's investment and material support for the Venezuelan state-run oil and natural gas company, *Petroleos de Venezuela* (PDVSA) has been significant. In addition to providing help in the energy sector, Russia has assisted Venezuela in avoiding sanctions through the establishment of a Venezuelan cryptocurrency, the *petro*, which was first sold by a small Russian bank.⁹⁰ Cryptocurrency not only helps avoid sanctions by enabling illicit financial activity by the Venezuelan state and its partners but is also concerning for its role in black market finance. With Hezbollah-linked persons holding ministerial ranks in the government, this is a feasible method for moving funds among the Hezbollah-IRGC-TCO networks and is an example of how Russia's assistance to Venezuela on such matters has grey zone applications and implications beyond sanctions avoidance by the governments themselves.

⁸⁵ Herbst and Marczak, *Atlantic Council*: 3.

⁸⁶ Kejal Vyas and Ryan Dube, "U.S. Chides Russia for Military Aid to Venezuela," *Wall Street Journal*, March 25, 2019. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-chides-russia-for-military-aid-to-venezuela-11553553299>

⁸⁷ Alison Brown, "An Enduring Relationship – From Russia, With Love," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, September 24, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post/enduring-relationship-russia-love>

⁸⁸ Girish Gupta, "Exclusive: Venezuela holds 5,000 Russian surface-to-air MANPADS missiles," *Reuters*, May 22, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-venezuela-arms-manpads/exclusive-venezuela-holds-stock-of-5000-russian-surface-to-air-manpads-missiles-idUSKBN18I0E9>

⁸⁹ "Iran's Mahan Air launches direct flights to Venezuela," *Reuters*, April 8, 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/iran-venezuela-airlines/irans-mahan-air-launches-direct-flights-to-venezuela-idUSL8N21Q11T>

⁹⁰ Herbst and Marczak, *Atlantic Council*: 5-7.

The Russian mafia could also play a connective role between state entities and groups such as Hezbollah if required. Russian speaking TCOs have been active in Latin America since the late 1990s where they sought connections with local TCOs in the TBA for drug trafficking purposes. While accusations have been leveled that they were in league with Al Qaeda at some point, these are unsubstantiated.⁹¹ That being said, the Russian TCOs are still reported as being active in Latin America.⁹² The type of grey zone measures that Russia has employed in recent years provide a context within which organized crime can play a role as a conduit. Extensive contacts between Russian organized crime and local cartels mean that at least passing contact with Hezbollah operatives has occurred considering their extensive criminal activities throughout the region over the last several decades. The links between Vladimir Putin's government and Russian-speaking organized crime are well documented, and allegedly include collaboration with military and intelligence units, as well as government ministers.⁹³ In a situation where Russia feels the need to up the ante, Russian organized crime would just be another tool in the toolkit. While this would be drastic step, it would be a mistake to discount any possibility, as Putin has consistently found new ways for Russia to operate within the grey zone, and no measure seems to be off limits.

Russia, therefore, is able to cover a spectrum of grey zone measures in pursuing its interests, or at least undermining those of the United States and others. Official Russian military units present in the region would serve in a limited capacity to protect Russian property, whether that is vessels belonging to Russian oil companies, or military equipment and facilities where Russia has openly conducted training and security cooperation. Russian contractors such as Wagner mercenaries can play a more varied role and serve as a link between official Russian military units and substate groups, or perhaps play a role in seizing assets and infrastructure on behalf of the Venezuelan state under the auspices of securing them, operating similarly to the *colectivos*. Additionally, they can conduct training alongside Hezbollah's paramilitary operatives who have supposedly had a presence in Venezuela on Margarita Island and Yaritagua. It would not be the first time Islamic Resistance fighters have been exposed to the tactics of Russian special forces, as both have seen significant combat in Syria.⁹⁴ The Venezuelan government would serve as the main go-between for the Kremlin and Hezbollah, so no official contact has to be made with the terrorist organization, thus maintaining plausible deniability for sabotage, terrorism, smuggling, or money laundering conducted by Hezbollah operatives in support of Russian aims. The Russian mafia represents a fourth tier to this capability, and could be leveraged to carry out dirty work of its own on behalf of the Kremlin, including enabling Hezbollah and other armed groups by providing weapons and other resources. All this could be done without any official contact between

⁹¹ Hudson, *Library of Congress*: 46.

⁹² Ivan Ulises Klyszcz, "Russia's Central American Engagements," *Foreign Policy Research Institute, Russia Foreign Policy Papers* (October 2019): 4.

⁹³ Sebastian Rotella, "Gangsters of the Mediterranean," *The Atlantic*, November 10, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/11/russian-mob-mallorca-spain/545504/>; Mark Galeotti, "European security concerns bring Russian mafia back onto agenda," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, July 25, 2016. https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_security_concerns_russian_mafia_back_on_agenda7083/

⁹⁴ Hoffman, *PRISM*, 7, No. 4: 40.

Russian authorities and Hezbollah itself. This vignette demonstrates the versatility of grey zone operations, and how a state like Russia can wield power efficiently. It can do so while making it very difficult to pinpoint the connections and provide a smoking gun of collaboration, enabling an escalation of a proxy conflict with minimal expenditure of blood and treasure.

Conclusion

Hezbollah's emergence as an effective, multi-faceted hybrid terrorist organization is an anomaly. Other terrorist groups have fallen and risen, never gaining the robust international influence, and staying power, of the Party of God. The formula of *da'wa*, *jihad*, and politics, in addition to its robust criminal enterprises, have kept Hezbollah well-funded, battle-tested,⁹⁵ and influential over several decades. Its network in Latin America has not only grown, but has become interwoven within the fabric of society in many places where it operates. The examples provided in this paper barely scratch the surface of the extent of Hezbollah's operations.

Challenges in prosecuting and dismantling the group have shown its resilience and staying power, and absent tougher counterterrorism efforts by countries in the region, Hezbollah will continue to flourish. High-level influence in Venezuela has certainly served to demonstrate Hezbollah's potential as a geopolitical player, and demonstrated that its close ties with Iran have enabled the Islamic Republic's efforts in Latin America, and vice versa. The relationship has evolved from that of patron-client into a more symbiotic effort to export the Islamic revolution and undermine the United States of America.⁹⁶ As unconventional warfare and grey zone tactics have become more prevalent in challenging the U.S. as a unipolar hegemon, Iran and Hezbollah are well-positioned to play a significant role as Great Power Competition reemerges. As different parts of the world become distinct theaters within this global contest, intermediate conflicts will likely take place within the grey zone, where violence and clashes will occur through interactions short of conventional warfare.

Hezbollah's deep roots, diversified operations, and more recently, its presence within the halls of power in Venezuela mean a role for the group is inevitable. Russia's own inroads into Latin America are aimed at projecting power against the U.S., and Moscow has proven adept at using the entire spectrum of grey zone measures to carry out its foreign policy globally. The confluence of Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah's efforts in Latin America over several decades finds them aligned in purpose, a reality Russia would have the ability and willingness to leverage to great effect. This would come at the expense of the rule of law and cause significant damage to the global rules-based order. As tensions rise, so does the potential for Great Power Competition to manifest itself in the form of low-intensity conflict. The United States and the rest of the global rules-based order must consider the type of challenge presented by Hezbollah in Latin America and be prepared to find new ways to counter such a unique and dangerous organization.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Defort and McLaughlin, *Small Wars Journal*.



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