

IRAN AND HEZBOLLAH IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE

Statement before the
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere & Subcommittee on the Middle East
and North Africa

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Chairman Duncan, Chairwoman Ros-Lehtinen, ranking members Sires and Deutch, distinguished members of the Subcommittee:

Thank you for the invitation and opportunity to submit this written testimony about the growing Iranian presence in Brazil, their connections to the terrorist organization Hezbollah in Brazil, and the nexus between Hezbollah and organized crime in my country.

Between 2010 and 2011, I was tasked by VEJA, my employer, to investigate Iran's presence and activities in Brazil. This investigation allowed me to research the AMIA case of Argentina and develop several sources throughout Latin America that informed me of how Iranian agents active during the AMIA attack continue to operate in the region and especially within Brazil.¹

Over the last two decades, Brazil has enjoyed attention mostly as an emerging BRIC country, receiving international plaudits as two successive governments took advantage of the commodity price "supercycle" to maintain a decade and a half of relative prosperity. This economic prosperity has been coupled with savvy foreign policy that allows Brazil to remain out of the spotlight that was focused for much of the last decade on Venezuela and its ideological allies in the region. But it also helped to hide the fact that South America's most populous and geographically vast country was being utilized by terrorist and criminal groups to recruit and organize while raising funds, laundering money, building illicit business enterprise, and planning terrorist attacks on neighboring countries.

While Brazil has never experienced a terrorist act carried out by Islamic extremists on its territory, it has served as a planning and operations hub for the attacks recorded in Argentina against the Israeli Embassy (1992) and the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina*, known as AMIA (1994). These attacks demonstrate how Brazil is used as an operational base, a weapons cache, and a source of revenue generation for the financing of terrorist organizations, most notably Hezbollah. Still, successive parliaments in Brazil have refused to pass anti-terrorism legislation that would set parameters for surveillance, prosecution, and international cooperation, and would better serve to prevent future attacks.

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Brazil as an operational hub for Iran and Islamic Terrorism

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, by both establishing legitimacy and regional support while simultaneously organizing and planning terrorist attacks. Despite the fact that Brazil has never been the target of one of these terrorist attacks, the country plays the role of a safe haven for Islamic extremist groups, as explained below.

In May 2013, the late Dr. Alberto Nisman, special prosecutor of the AMIA bombing, produced a comprehensive dictum that describes in detail the participation of Iranian authorities, Shia clerics and Hezbollah militants in the 1994 Buenos Aires bombing that killed 85 and wounded more than 300 innocent civilians. The 502-page dictum not only describes the operations of the network responsible for this terrorist attack, it also names those who carried it out. Consequently, the document lists twelve people in Brazil with ties to Hezbollah, who reside or resided in Brazil. Seven of these operatives had either direct or indirect participation in the AMIA bombing.²

According to Nisman, Samuel Salman El Reda, a citizen of Lebanon who lived in the Brazilian city of Foz do Iguacu, was sent a command to carry out the attack just prior to the explosion,³ marking him as the point person in Brazil for executing this terrorist operation. According to Dr. Nisman, the central character and architect of the attacks against AMIA, was the Iranian cleric Mohsen Rabbani. According to my investigation, Rabbani, under the guise of visiting Brazilian mosques and with fraudulent identification, had made a number of trips to Brazil in the years following the AMIA attack.

For several years, Mohsen Rabbani was identified by Brazilian intelligence services as the coordinator of a youth recruitment network throughout Latin America to carry out "studies" in Qom, Iran.⁴ Brazilian intelligence sources claim that Rabbani visited Brazil frequently, which means that he used false documents, given that he has a red notice from INTERPOL barring his travel outside of Iran. In September 2010, Brazilian Federal Police organized an operation to arrest him in the country. But the operation failed to capture the cleric.

Sources within Brazilian law enforcement say Rabbani entered Brazil from Venezuela carrying an authentic Venezuelan passport, but using the alias Ali Tayvidiantareial.⁵ Taking advantage of regular flights between Tehran and Caracas, Rabbani was able to travel undetected between Iran and the Western Hemisphere via the Venezuelan state airline Conviasa.⁶

“The Federal Police and ABIN, the country’s secret service agency, have followed Rabbani’s recruitment of Brazilians for courses abroad for the last four years. Rabbani himself, with the help of trusted associates, chooses who will travel. Since 2007, three groups of Brazilians have visited Iran. There are plenty of reasons for such official surveillance. The course has strong religious content, but this is not the main reason for concern. Rather, students of one of Rabbani’s classes have confided that during the trips they visited the facilities of the radical Lebanese group Hezbollah, considered a terror organization by many countries, including the United States. Reports to which Veja had access indicate that professor Rabbani’s courses are a gateway to terrorism. According to these documents, classes are used for preaching radicalism and include training in military camps.”⁷

Dr. Nisman's investigation found that, although Rabbani was the main leader of Iran's cell in Latin America at the time of the attacks, the Brazilian contingent was led by Iraqi Shiite cleric Taleb Hussein al-Khazraji.

Al-Khazraji is the founder of an Islamic center in Brazil, and according to information from INTERPOL in Brazil, was an agent of the Iranian government.⁸ In the 1980s, al-Khazraji was responsible for hosting Rabbani during several visits that the Iranian made to Brazil. On one of these visits (recorded by the photo below), Rabbani participated in a meeting with then Archbishop of São Paulo, Dom Paulo Evaristo Arns.



Mohsen Rabbani and al-Khazraji in São Paulo, during a meeting in the 1980s.

Nisman's investigation also revealed that al-Khazraji used the Shiite Islamic Center of Brazil to recruit Brazilians and bring them closer to Tehran.

"The strategic alliance between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah is very tight in the 'Triborder Area'. Moreover, it exceeded those boundaries reaching other Brazilian cities such as Sao Paulo and Curitiba. A report from the Brazilian Federal Police informs that radicalized Arabic Shias, members of the terrorist organization Hezbollah and Sunnis related to Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and Gamat Al-Islamiyah, were detected particularly in the Brazilian States of Sao Paulo, Parana and the Federal District."

(...)

"According to Interpol Brasilia, the Islamic Association of Brazil that used to operate in Sao Paulo – and that shared its building with "Prophet Mohammed" mosque – was a common meeting place for Hezbollah's members. In the diplomatic arena, the information indicates that Jaffar Saadat Ahmad-Nia, Civil Attaché of the Iranian Embassy in Brasilia between 1991 and 1993, would have worked as an Intelligence agent (VEVAK). About him, Mesbahi also stated that during operative actions this person was "in situ," from where he directed and solved potential logistic problems. It is striking that he entered Argentina on March 16th, 1992 and left on March 18th, 1992, that is, the previous and the following day of the Israeli Embassy bombing in Buenos Aires."⁹

Dr. Nisman was unable to say whether al-Khazraji was directly involved in the AMIA bombing, although he claims to have found phone records showing that the Shiite cleric kept constant contact with Rabbani and his assistants. Both men were in frequent contact with Abdul Kadir, a former politician from Guyana, who was also an engineer and leader of an Islamic community in the Caribbean. Kadir was later convicted in the United States for conspiring¹⁰ to carry out a terrorist attack on New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport.¹¹ Al-Khazraji is also known to have hosted Kadir's son in Brazil, and had traveled to Argentina under Rabbani's protection.

Rabbani's point man in Brazil; however, is the son of Lebanese nationals—**Gamal Oumairi**—who is the vice president of the Islamic Charitable Society of Paraná, a state on the southern coast of the country. As a top disciple of Mohsen Rabbani, Oumairi was selected by the Iranian cleric to be the guide and interpreter of Rabbani's brother, Mohammad Rabbani Baquer Razavi. Mohsen Rabbani's brother lived in Brazil for several years after the AMIA attack, but after his presence was revealed by VEJA in 2011, he left Brazil because he was residing illegally in the country. Since his departure, Oumairi stepped up to serve as the main Iranian agent in country: recruiting, proselytizing, and sending Brazilian youth to Qom, Iran.

One of the points of connection between Rabbani, Kadir, al-Khazraji and Oumairi is **Farouk Abdul Hay Oumairi**, a Lebanese citizen who was designated by the US Department of the Treasury¹² for his links to terrorist groups. Oumairi, lives in the Brazilian city of Foz do Iguaçu.

Oumairi was arrested in 2006 for being the kingpin of a gang of cocaine traffickers, along with his son, Ahmad Farouq Oumairi. The two were accused of leading a drug-delivery network trafficking to Europe and the Middle East.¹³ For years, Brazilian authorities monitored the Oumairi family and other extremists who were operating in the Tri-Border Area, but the lack of anti-terrorism legislation in Brazil prevented their arrest.¹⁴ But, because terrorism financing transactions are generally associated with other illegal activities, such as money laundering, smuggling and drug trafficking,¹⁵ Federal Police focused their efforts on these crimes in order to arrest them.

Mohsen Rabbani and Brazilian "students" (in red highlight) in Qom, Iran



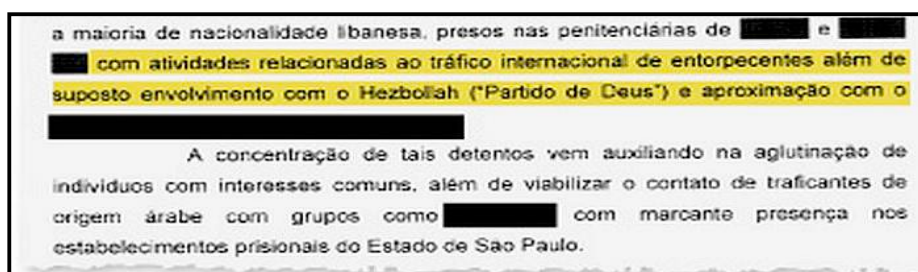
Mohsen Rabbani's man in Brazil, Gamal Oumairi, seen in Qom, Iran (picture above) and in Lebanon in 2013 (picture below).

Brazil's burgeoning crime-terror connection

The arrest of Farouk Omairi and his son Ahmad was the genesis of a criminal-terrorist association in Brazil. The most powerful criminal group in Brazil, the First Capital Command (Portuguese: *Primeiro Comando da Capital, or PCC*),¹⁶ controls drug trafficking in various parts of Brazil and exercises informal control of most Brazilian prisons. The Omairi family was offered protection by members of the PCC while in prison—an agreement that was negotiated with Hezbollah according to an investigation by the Brazilian Federal Police.¹⁷ The partnership has since deepened, and now PCC and Hezbollah work jointly in drugs and arms trafficking. This pairing has been compared to similar partnerships in Mexico¹⁸ with Los Zetas and in Colombia with the FARC.¹⁹

According to a recent report by Brazil's Federal Police, Hezbollah sells weapons to Brazilian criminal organizations, and has also used the PCC's criminal services inside Brazil. Hezbollah has also brokered the sale of C4 explosives that was stolen in Paraguay, and was being sold on the black market at very low prices.²⁰

Translation of an excerpt from the report by Brazilian Federal Police



English Translation: "the majority of Lebanese nationality, trapped in prisons of [redacted] and [redacted] with activities related to international drug trafficking as well as alleged involvement with Hezbollah (" Party of God ") and approximation with [redacted]. The concentration of prisoners has helped the assemblage of individuals with common interests, as well as providing the contact with Arab traffickers and groups such as [redacted] with striking presence in prisons of the State of São Paulo."

Source: O Globo

Conclusion and Recommendations

Separate investigations in Brazil and Argentina have both concluded that, since Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution, the regime in Tehran has been targeting Latin America as part of its strategy to "export the revolution." The spread of Iranian-controlled mosques and Islamic cultural centers in the region is part of a strategy to provide cover for Tehran's international goals, which include recruiting militants as well as pursuing international political support for thwarting sanctions.

Until recently, there was little known evidence suggesting that Hezbollah's actions could pose a threat to Brazil. But authorities have now become aware that these extremists are making use of Brazilian territory to raise funds for their actions²¹ and to plan attacks. Hezbollah's association with Brazilian organized crime, namely the PCC, changes significantly the need for a new approach to monitoring and thwarting the terrorist group's operations in Brazil. The U.S. Congress can help with cooperation in forming and framing anti-terrorism legislation in my country.

Moreover, the U.S. can also help to influence the Brazilian government to cease recognizing Hezbollah as a legitimate political party,²² which protects it from sanctions imposed by the U.S. and the European Union.

The upcoming 2016 Summer Olympics can provide an opportunity for cooperation with Brazil to ensure that such a major sporting event has adequate force protection necessary to prevent or deter any terrorist action on Brazilian soil. Further investigation, either by Brazilian authorities solely or by working jointly with international law enforcement organizations, is necessary to prevent these groups from continuing to use Brazil as safe haven for extremist groups.²³

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