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# Hezbollah's Networks in Latin America

## Potential Implications for U.S. Policy and Research

**H**ezbollah, a Lebanese Shia Islamist organization founded in 1982, functions as a layered entity—combining elements of a political party, social movement, and militant group—with strong ties to Iran and a history of armed conflict with Israel. Although Iran remains Hezbollah's largest patron, the group has expanded, diversifying its network and revenue streams across Europe, Asia, and Latin America since the 1990s (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2018).

Despite the potential risks posed by the group's operations, verifiable analysis of the organization's Latin American activities has waned (Sánchez-Azuara, 2024). The decline in scrutiny is particularly concerning given Hezbollah's weakened position in Syria and the tapering conflict in the Middle East, which could embolden Hezbollah affiliates in Latin America, where oversight is less stringent. Celina B. Realuyo, former director of the U.S. State Department's Counterterrorism Finance Program, suggests that the reduced unclassified focus on Hezbollah in Latin America may be a consequence of shifting U.S. priorities; resources are being diverted to address challenges posed by China and Russia at the expense of combating



international terrorism in such theaters as Latin America (Realuyo, 2023).

There is evidence that Hezbollah has actively sought to develop operational capabilities both within the United States and in Latin America. In the United States, this is exemplified by the 2017 arrests of alleged Islamic Jihad organization operatives who had surveilled potential targets in New York City on behalf of Hezbollah (Office of Public Affairs, U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). The group's operational presence in Latin America was most recently demonstrated in November 2023, when Brazilian authorities disrupted a suspected Hezbollah cell planning attacks against Jewish targets (Grattan, 2023). Although robust U.S. homeland security measures may better contain such threats domestically, Hezbollah's illicit activities in Latin America—where security infrastructure may be less developed—pose a distinct risk to U.S. interests throughout the region.

Geopolitical realities exacerbate these concerns. The deaths of Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah and his presumed successor Hashem Safieddine in Israeli airstrikes, combined with growing direct U.S. support of Israel, could prompt the organization to leverage its global networks more aggressively (Jackson, 2024; Jones et al., 2024). This leadership transition period may be particularly volatile for Hezbollah's international operations, including its sleeper cell capabilities in the United States and Latin America.

Volatile dynamics and the relative lack of analysis in this area underscore the pressing need for continued research into and monitoring of Hezbollah's Latin American operations. Therefore, this paper seeks to address the following question: How has Hezbollah's presence in

Latin America evolved in the past decade, and what are its potential implications for U.S. national security and regional stability?

## Methods in Brief

A structured analysis of open-source materials informs this assessment of Hezbollah's operational footprint and strategic activities in Latin America. The research collates and cross-references data from peer-reviewed academic publications, U.S. congressional hearing transcripts, reports from think tanks, investigative journalism, declassified government reports, and press releases to construct a granular map of the organization's regional network at the unclassified level. This paper is not an attempt at a comprehensive systematic review, which would be challenging given the often opaque nature of terrorist activities and limitations in publicly available data; rather, it is a targeted analysis of credible open sources to identify patterns and trends in Hezbollah's Latin American operations.

The analysis prioritizes three objectives: (1) pinpointing critical logistic hubs, (2) cataloging illicit activities by country, and (3) evaluating potential ramifications for U.S. national security. Although this approach cannot capture the scope of Hezbollah-affiliated activities, it provides valuable insights into how the organization's presence in Latin America is characterized and discussed in open sources, complementing any classified assessment that may exist. This analysis serves distinct purposes, such as informing public discourse, supporting legal proceedings, and laying the groundwork for international cooperation. The analysis identifies specific information gaps and proposed research directives for the U.S. Intelligence

Community—particularly for agencies focused on transnational threats—while distinguishing between homeland security concerns (such as those of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS]) and broader national security implications (such as those of the U.S. Department of Defense [DoD] and others).

## Hezbollah's Network in Latin America

Hezbollah's presence in the Americas is primarily motivated by fundraising for its global and Levant-based activities,<sup>1</sup> although the organization has also demonstrated a capacity for targeting Israeli and U.S. interests in the region.

### Fundraising for Levant-Based Activities

One key driver of Hezbollah's Latin American presence has been the diversification of the group's finances. Networks affiliated with the organization's fundraising operations in the region have evolved in scope and sophistication over the past three decades. Analysis by regional experts posits that U.S. sanctions on Iran may have catalyzed such revenue diversification (Fanusie and Entz, 2017, p. 2). Several countries in the region—including Argentina, Colombia, Honduras, and Paraguay—have formally designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, reflecting growing regional concern about its activities (Vianna de Azevedo, 2024, p. 11).

To generate revenue that ultimately benefits Hezbollah, networks within the Lebanese diaspora—from active sympathizers to individuals with loose or indirect connec-

tions to the organization—have established connections to the region's criminal underworld (Levitt, 2016). These funding mechanisms reportedly encompass drug trafficking, arms trafficking, human trafficking, illegal mining, identity theft, and money laundering schemes (Hesterman, 2005, pp. 34–45). Although Iran's patronage accounts for roughly 70–80 percent of the organization's finances, criminal activities in Latin America by individuals connected to Hezbollah serve as a notable supplement, affecting the region in several ways (Fanusie and Entz, 2017, pp. 11–16; Johnston et al., 2023, pp. 224–230; Marinides, 2021, pp. 8–16):

1. *Drug and contraband smuggling*: Evidence from law enforcement operations demonstrates the involvement of Hezbollah-linked individuals and sympathizers in drug trafficking. Notable cases include the 2008 arrest of Chekri Harb in Colombia for operating a black cocaine smuggling network that paid Hezbollah a 12-percent tax and the 2006 Operation Camel, which uncovered similar trafficking operations with apparent connections to Hezbollah's fundraising activities (Vianna de Azevedo, 2024, pp. 31–32). These same networks allegedly traffic weapons, dominate the illicit cigarette trade, and engage in digital piracy (Cengiz and Pardo-Herrera, 2023; Marinides, 2021, p. 13; Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, 2011). Although U.S. officials have reported detections of individuals on terrorism watchlists at the U.S. southern border, evidence directly linking these crossings to Hezbollah operations remains limited (U.S. Customs and Border Protection, undated).

2. *Natural resource exploitation*: Iran and affiliated networks have demonstrated interest in Venezuela's gold reserves as a means of sanction evasion. In 2020, Iran shipped gasoline to Venezuela in exchange for gold; U.S. officials successfully deterred some shipments through sanction threats against the former (Katzman, 2022, p. 49). Although direct Hezbollah involvement in Venezuelan gold mining remains difficult to verify conclusively, the established gold-trade relationship between Iran and Venezuela—combined with Hezbollah's documented presence in Venezuela and its role as an Iranian proxy—suggests that there are potential opportunities for the organization to benefit from these arrangements. However, claims of specific operational details—including logistics of gold transportation—require additional corroboration.
3. *Identity theft*: According to expert testimony before Congress, individuals and networks connected with Hezbollah participate in large-scale document fraud operations—producing falsified passports, driver's licenses, birth certificates, and national identification cards—that potentially enable undetected cross-border travel for operatives (Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence, 2023; Subcommittee on Oversight and Management Efficiency, 2013).
4. *Financial crimes*: There are documented cases of sophisticated money laundering operations, including Ayman Joumaa's network, which laundered hundreds of millions of dollars through used car sales and cocaine trafficking, and Assad Ahmad Barakat's casino-based money laundering opera-

tion in Argentina (Vianna de Azevedo, 2024, p. 43). Although these individuals maintained connections to Hezbollah, the precise nature of their involvement and extent to which they receive organizational direction remains unclear.

Despite the efforts that DHS, the Department of State, Drug Enforcement Agency, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Department of the Treasury have taken to subdue these networks, many reportedly persist with the support of Lebanese diaspora communities in the region (Gunes, 2024). The complexity of these networks—which are characterized by loose affiliations, varying degrees of organizational connection, and the frequent use of intermediaries—complicates efforts to fully map and disrupt their operations. Additionally, a lack of updated and publicly available information on these networks makes it difficult to draw robust conclusions about their activities and operational capacity. The distinction between direct Hezbollah operations and activities by affiliated networks or sympathizers remains crucial for addressing the complex nature of transnational criminal activities with links to terrorist organizations, also known as the *terror-crime nexus*.

## Targeting Israeli State, Jewish Community, and U.S. Interests

Hezbollah maintains networks in Latin America that combine both fundraising operations and the targeting of Israeli state facilities, Jewish community institutions, and U.S. interests. Although significant uncertainty exists regarding its existing operational capacity, a pattern of disrupted violent plots reveals that the group has a persistent intent to develop such capabilities in the region.

Such plots occurred as recently as November 2023, when authorities arrested three individuals with suspected Hezbollah links who were planning attacks on Jewish targets (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Israel, 2023). These arrests, which transpired just one month after the October 7, 2023, attack in Israel, raised concerns about the limited intelligence and law enforcement resources dedicated to countering Hezbollah networks in Latin America (Realuyo, 2023). Other experts made similar claims years earlier (Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere and Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, 2015).

Hezbollah's violent plots in Latin America began decades earlier with a devastating attack on the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in 1992. The bombing, which resulted in more than 20 fatalities, marked the group's entry into the region and demonstrated its capacity for high-casualty operations thousands of miles from Lebanon (Rey and Debre, 2024). Just two years later, Hezbollah orchestrated another attack in Buenos Aires, targeting the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish community center. The bombing killed 85 people and injured more than 200, making it one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in the Americas before those of September 11, 2001, and the most devastating in Argentina's history (Rey and Debre, 2024). That same year, the organization gained notoriety with the bombing of a commercial airliner in Panama, which killed all passengers aboard—many of whom were Jewish (Ottolenghi, 2023a). These early attacks showcased Hezbollah's commitment to conducting deadly operations in the region.

Despite Hezbollah's shift away from mass-casualty terrorist attacks like those of the 1980s and 1990s, the organization continues to demonstrate an interest in potential

targets throughout the region. However, surveillance activities alone may not indicate immediate intent to conduct attacks. For instance, in 2014, a Hezbollah operative was arrested for scouting targets in Peru, suggesting the organization was attempting to maintain operational capabilities that could be activated if needed (Humire, 2023). Two years later, in Bolivia, authorities seized several tons of explosives from a Hezbollah-affiliated warehouse (Humire, 2023). The organization has also shown interest in U.S. targets. In Panama, Hezbollah operative Samer El Debek was tasked with surveilling both U.S. and Israeli embassies, studying security procedures at the Panama Canal, and identifying sources for explosive precursors (Pop and Silber, 2020). Such operations mirror similar Hezbollah external security operations conducted globally during this period, including plots in Azerbaijan, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, and West Africa (Levitt, 2013, p. 2). Altogether, these activities demonstrate the scope, scale, and boldness of Hezbollah's operations in Latin America.

Despite the prominence of these attempted operations, there appears to be a gap in publicly available assessments and policy focus on the organization's activities in the region. This gap is evidenced by the following factors:

1. *Limited public congressional attention:* The last focused public U.S. congressional hearing on Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere occurred in March 2015 (Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere and Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa, 2015). Subsequent hearings have only touched on Hezbollah tangentially (Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence, 2023; Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, 2024).

2. *Outdated government reports:* The most recent unclassified comprehensive analysis specifically addressing terrorist threats in Latin America, including Hezbollah, was published by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) in 2016 (Sullivan and Beittel, 2016). Although this report includes a discussion of Hezbollah-affiliated activities, it is not focused solely on the group and is now out-of-date. No more recent CRS or other government reports have provided an in-depth analysis of Hezbollah's presence and operations in the region.
3. *Limited scope of recent academic studies:* Literature on Hezbollah's Latin American operations is sparse and narrowly focused. A 2023 RAND study examined the group's financing strategies as part of a broader analysis of violent non-state actors (Johnston et al., 2023, pp. 224–230). However, comprehensive studies on the group's full range of interconnected activities and evolving presence in the region are lacking.
4. *Insufficient regional cooperation:* Despite such initiatives as the 3+1 Group (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and the United States) to strengthen security in the region, there have been few publicly reported joint operations or intelligence-sharing efforts specifically targeting the group's networks (Nielsen, 2019; Realuyo, 2023; Sullivan and Beittel, 2016).

Experts have long warned about the potential for Hezbollah's posture to shift from fundraising and logistics to operational capabilities targeting U.S. interests, particularly in response to perceived U.S. or Israeli actions against Iran (Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, 2011). Although more-recent analyses from think tanks

and regional security experts have echoed these concerns (Ottolenghi, 2023b; Realuyo, 2023; Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, 2024), there is limited credible evidence to substantiate claims of an imminent shift in the organization's regional strategy. Despite its demonstrated capacity for violence, Hezbollah's existing operational patterns suggest a continued focus on maintaining its fundraising and logistical networks rather than expanding its attack capabilities in Latin America. However, given the group's historical willingness to conduct attacks in the region and its deep ties to Iran, this calculus could change rapidly in response to regional or global developments. Although escalating tensions with Israel may compel Hezbollah's core organization to concentrate its resources on its immediate sphere of influence, there remains significant uncertainty about how Hezbollah affiliates might leverage their established networks in the Western Hemisphere. Evidence—such as El Debek's specialized surveillance mission in Panama (Pop and Silber, 2020)—suggests that significant operational changes would require careful planning and dedicated resources rather than a simple conversion of existing Hezbollah-affiliated networks. Collectively, uncertainty surrounding Hezbollah's strategic priorities and operational capacity in the region demands further analysis.

## Countries and Key Operational Hubs

Hezbollah-linked operations have been publicly documented in at least 12 of the 20 mainland Latin American countries (see Table 1). Recently reported activity (post-2021) has occurred primarily in countries that have

TABLE 1  
Hezbollah's Illicit Activities and Operations Across Latin America

Country	Year of Terrorist Organization Designation	Events	Year of Event	Documented Response Status
Argentina	2019	Israeli embassy bombing in Buenos Aires; 29 killed, more than 200 wounded	1992	U.S. terrorism charges and sanctions; Interpol Red Notices; ongoing investigation
		Jewish AMIA center bombing; 85 killed	1994	U.S. terrorism charges and sanctions; Interpol Red Notices; ongoing investigation
Panama	X	Airliner bombing (all killed, Jewish passengers)	1994	Unresolved airliner case
		Joumaa launders up to \$200 million per month	Pre-2011	OFAC SDNT designation against Joumaa network
		Samer El Debek scouts Israeli and U.S. targets	2017	U.S. conviction of El Debek
Peru	X	Mohammed Ghaleb Hamdar arrested for scouting	2014	Hamdar convicted
		Majid Azizi, linked to Iran's Quds force, plans to kill Israeli	2024	Azizi arrest warrant issued
Colombia	2020	Chekri Harb (alias "Taliban") linked to the Medellín cartel in cocaine smuggling and money laundering	2007	Harb arrested
		Joumaa launders up to \$200 million per month	Pre-2011	OFAC SDNT designation
Venezuela	X	Diplomat Nasr al-Din and businessman Fawzi Kan'an designated as Hezbollah supporters	2008	U.S. Treasury sanctions in effect
		Tareck Zaidan El Aissami engages in narcotics trafficking	2020	OFAC SDNT designation
		Former lawmaker Adel El Zabayar involved in narcoterrorism	2020	DOJ indictments issued
		CONVIASA transports operatives and illegal items	2020	CONVIASA sanctioned by the United States
Brazil	X	Federal police uncover Hezbollah plot to attack Jewish synagogues and Israeli embassy	November 2023	Active federal police investigation
		Brazilian prison gang First Capital Command obtains weapons from Hezbollah	2006–unknown	Brazilian executive order establishes first intelligence task force to combat criminal organizations
Curacao	X	17 arrested for involvement in drug ring	2009	Local prosecutions



Table 1—Continued

Country	Year of Terrorist Organization Designation	Events	Year of Event	Documented Response Status
Bolivia	X	Police allegedly thwarts La Paz plot, seizing explosives from a Hezbollah-affiliated warehouse	2016	Case closed after seizure; no prosecutions
Mexico	X	Hezbollah affiliates found entering the United States	2006 and 2024	Arrested; ongoing investigation
		Authorities dismantle Hezbollah smuggling ring	2010	Dismantled smuggling network
Honduras	2020	Undetermined activities		
Guatemala	2020	Undetermined activities		
Chile	X	Barakat presence in Iquique	2024	Possible Hezbollah activity flagged at port

SOURCES: Features information from “17 Arrested on Curacao for Involvement in Hezbollah-Linked Drug Ring,” 2009; Ainsley, 2024; Berg, 2022; Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, 2020; “Colombia Says Smashes Drug Ring with Hezbollah Ties,” 2008; Coutinho, 2019; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994; Grattan, 2023; Gurney, 2014; Homeland Defense & Security Information Analysis Center, 2024; Humire, 2023; Khoury, 2010; Office of Public Affairs, “Peru Arrests 2, Including Quds Force Operative, for Alleged Plot to Attack Israeli,” 2024; Sales, 2019; Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 2024; U.S. Department of Justice, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2019; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2009; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2015; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2019a; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2019b; U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2009; U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 2020.

NOTE: *Documented response status* includes only verifiable institutional actions, such as law enforcement investigations, prosecutions, sanctions, or official designations. *Sources* include government documents, court records, and official statements. An absence of documented response should not be interpreted as evidence of inactivity. *X* denotes no designation. *Year* refers to the date of these activities, or, if undetermined, the most recent years that Hezbollah was reported as active in the country. Duplicate entries reflect transnational network involvement.

CONVIASA = Consorcio Venezolano de Industria Aeronáutica y Servicios Aéreos; DOJ = U.S. Department of Justice; OFAC = Office of Foreign Assets Control; SDNT = Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker.

not designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Latin American countries that have made the designation—Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Paraguay—have generally reported a decrease in recent activity (“Colombia Profile,” 2024). Colombia, perhaps because of its complex landscape of criminal organizations, is the sole exception.

### Operational Hubs: The Tri-Border Area and Venezuela

Despite limited data on Hezbollah’s Latin American operations, reports consistently point to the Tri-Border Area and Venezuela as operating hubs since the early 1980s; there has been a shift toward the latter after the election of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in 2013 (Green

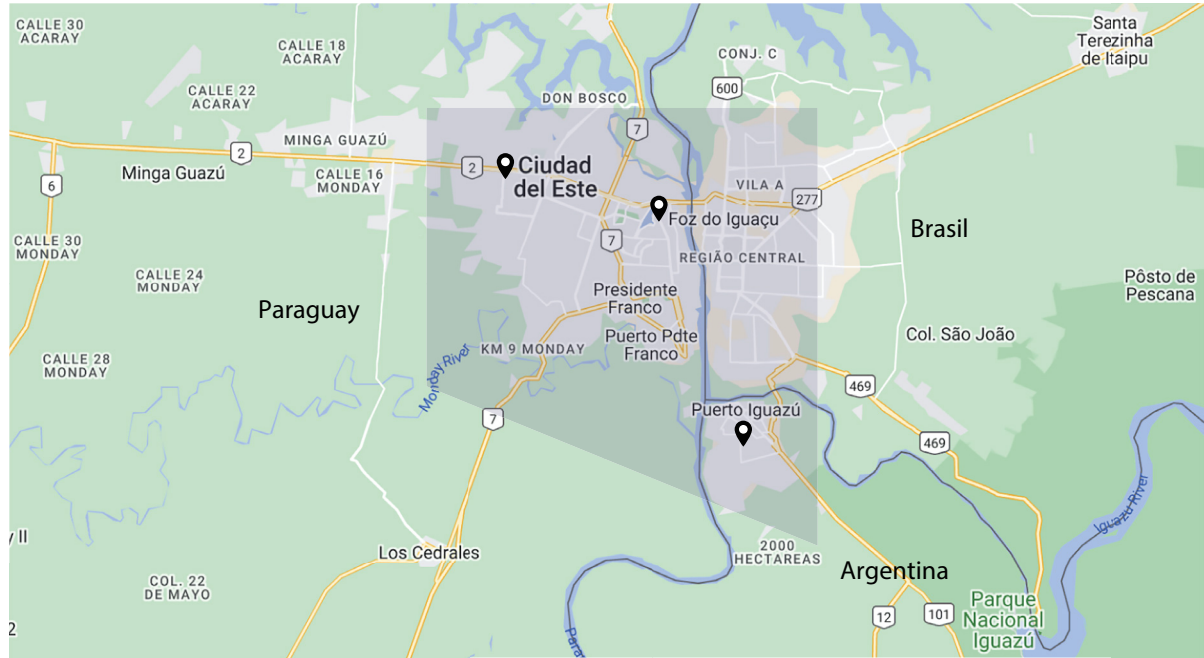


et al., 2023; Ottolenghi and Rosenberg, 2023). Each location offers unique advantages: The Tri-Border Area’s semi-lawless environment and Venezuela’s free trade zones and close political ties with Iran facilitate the group’s operations (Marinides, 2021, p. 3). Although various media and think tank reports have suggested specific revenue figures for Hezbollah’s operations in these regions, the actual scope of these activities remains unclear because of limited verifiable data in unclassified sources.

### The Tri-Border Area

Located at the nexus of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, the Tri-Border Area has long been identified as a hub for Hezbollah-linked activities (Financial Crimes and Enforcement Network, 2024, p. 5). The area, which hosts a substantial Lebanese-Muslim population, is home to individuals who sympathize with and facilitate the organization’s operations (Hudson, 2003). Also characterized by complex

FIGURE 1  
Map of the Tri-Border Area



SOURCE: Google Maps.  
NOTE: Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil), and Puerto Iguazú (Argentina).

border control challenges and limited law enforcement resources, the Tri-Border Area enables drug trafficking, money laundering, document fraud, and contraband smuggling. It has also served as a staging area for some of the bloodiest attacks in the region, including the 1992 and 1994 Buenos Aires bombings (Sales, 2019). For a map of the Tri-Border Area, see Figure 1.

Given the limited availability of verifiable public sources since the early 2000s, it remains unclear whether the Tri-Border Area continues to serve as one of Hezbollah's primary operational hubs in Latin America. Although collaborative efforts among the 3+1 Group—Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and the United States—may have disrupted the organization's presence in the region (Sales, 2019), these measures could have also displaced activities to other areas in Latin America. The lack of recent, detailed unclassified reporting makes it difficult to assess the state of Hezbollah-linked operations in the Tri-Border Area in public discourse and analysis, though controlling broader illicit activities in the region remains challenging (Financial Crimes and Enforcement Network, 2024, p. 5).

## Venezuela

The Chávez and Maduro regimes have established Venezuela as an operational hub for Hezbollah. Building on longstanding connections with Iran, the Venezuelan government has created an environment that allows Hezbollah to maintain active cells engaging in drug trafficking, money laundering, and illicit smuggling (Clarke, 2019; Young, 2024). This permissive atmosphere extends deep into Venezuela's political sphere, in which Hezbollah collaborates extensively with government officials on intelligence infrastructure, securing arms, identification documents, bank

accounts, and pipelines for moving operatives and equipment (Humire, 2020). The variety of ways that this threat is characterized in public discussion is evident in unclassified documentation: Although the State Department's 2018 and 2019 Country Reports on Terrorism briefly noted the presence of Hezbollah sympathizers in Venezuela, the 2021 and 2022 reports contained no references to Hezbollah activities (U.S. Department of State, undated-a, undated-b, undated-c, undated-d, 2019).

Evidence of these state-level connections emerged clearly when Venezuelan politicians were found issuing passports to Hezbollah operatives (U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 2020). The U.S. Department of the Treasury has identified key figures in this network, including Venezuelan businessman Fawzi Kan'an and diplomat Ghazi Nasr al-Din—who facilitate ideological training, militia preparation, and illicit arms and narcotics trafficking networks (Humire, 2020; U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 2020). The 2020 indictment of former Venezuelan lawmaker Adel El Zabayar—who was charged with coordinating cocaine and weapon trafficking between Maduro's government and Hezbollah—further demonstrates these state-level connections (U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, 2020).

Iran's strategic partnership with Venezuela has strengthened Hezbollah's regional position significantly. In June 2022, Iran and Venezuela formalized a 20-year cooperation agreement, in which Maduro explicitly aligned his country with Iran's Axis of Resistance ("Maduro: We Are All Part of Axis of Resistance," 2022). The alliance manifests in practical support through various channels: State-run airlines, such as CONVIASA, reportedly transport operatives and illegal items while Iranian oil tankers

deliver fuel to Venezuela, demonstrating the intertwined nature of these relationships (Berg, 2022; Zerpa, Bartenstein, and Millard, 2020).

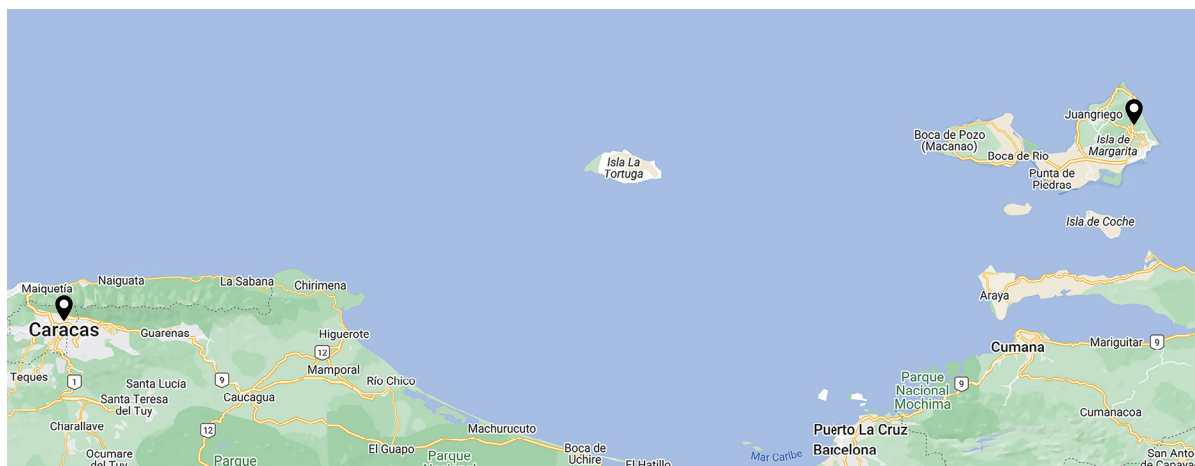
The Iran-Venezuela axis has provided Hezbollah with substantial resources, diplomatic protection, and operational flexibility. The organization leverages Venezuela's sizable Lebanese community to move its operatives discretely throughout the country; at the same time, embedded agents within Maduro's security apparatus and intelligence networks facilitate money laundering operations (Young, 2024). U.S. law enforcement's ability to counter these activities remains limited by diplomatic tensions, while Venezuela's opaque judicial system and refusal to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization compound the challenges. Of particular concern is Isla de Margarita,

northeast of Caracas, which has emerged as a hub for paramilitary training that could potentially support violent operations in the Western Hemisphere (Humire, 2020). For a map of Isla de Margarita, see Figure 2.

## Iranian Soft Power in Latin America

Just as Hezbollah's activities in Latin America have received limited attention in recent years, the role of its primary sponsor, Iran, in the region has been similarly understudied. Iran has developed a comprehensive approach to expanding its influence in Latin America, employing a combination of overt and covert strategies. These efforts not only advance Iran's geopolitical interests but also potentially support Hezbollah's operations in the region,

FIGURE 2  
Map of Isla de Margarita, Venezuela



SOURCE: Google Maps.

highlighting the intricate relationship between Iranian state activities and Hezbollah's presence.

Iran's soft power strategy in Latin America encompasses cultural diplomacy, media operations, and educational initiatives. The 2023 Spanish translation and distribution of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's memoir, *Cell No. 14* (Khamenei, 2021), exemplifies this effort. The campaign, overseen by graduates of Iran's Al-Mustafa International University, is viewed by such entities as the Peruvian Congressional Intelligence Commission as part of a broader strategy to propagate radical Islam and potentially establish terrorist cells throughout Latin America (Pelcastre, 2023). Complementing these efforts, Iran promotes educational scholarships and established cultural centers across Latin American countries, from Cuba and Venezuela to Peru and Argentina.

Iran's media strategy is further amplified by HispanTV, which is an Iranian Spanish-language news channel launched in 2011. HispanTV serves as Iran's primary voice for Hispanic audiences, targeting Latin American citizens of Iranian descent and Muslim minorities in Spanish-speaking countries (Castaño, 2024). The channel focuses on furthering Iranian interests by transmitting theocracy's cultural values, promoting its stance on international events, and supporting political change in Latin America (Dvorakova, 2020). HispanTV's content often critiques the United States, its allies, and capitalist economics, following a strategy similar to other state-owned news channels, such as Russia's RT (Ottolenghi and Rosenberg, 2023).

Although Iran's overt activities are well-documented, its covert operations in the region, potentially involving Hezbollah as a proxy, remain largely opaque. The limited available information suggests that Iranian diplomatic

missions in Latin America may operate beyond their conventional roles. Intelligence sources and officials have suggested that these embassies may function as hubs for covert activities and ideological dissemination, potentially facilitating the radicalization of Latin Americans (Montaruli, 2021). However, the full extent and nature of these alleged clandestine operations remains unclear.

The two notable exceptions for which more concrete evidence exists are the CONVIASA smuggling operation and gold mining activities in Venezuela. Reports indicate that CONVIASA, Venezuela's state-owned airline, has been implicated in facilitating covert access for both Iranian operatives and Hezbollah members, allegedly transporting personnel and illicit items (Watson, 2019). Additionally, illegal gold mining operations in Venezuela's Orinoco Mining Arc, reportedly involving both Iranian and Hezbollah operatives, have been identified as a significant source of funding for these groups (Subcommittee on Counterterrorism, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence, 2023; Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere, Transnational Crime, Civilian Security, Democracy, Human Rights, and Global Women's Issues, 2019).

These overt and covert initiatives serve as key components of Iran's power projection in the region, cultivating an environment potentially sympathetic to Hezbollah (Pelcastre, 2023). The interplay between Iran's state-level activities and Hezbollah's operations underscores the complexity of the geopolitical landscape and the challenges in distinguishing between state and nonstate actor activities in the region.

The limited information available on Iran's clandestine operations and its use of Hezbollah as a proxy in Latin America highlights a significant information gap.

This gap not only complicates efforts to understand the full scope of Hezbollah's activities but also raises questions about the extent to which Iran's soft power initiatives may be facilitating or masking more-nefarious operations. Further research is needed to clarify the relationship between Iran's overt diplomatic and cultural efforts and any potential covert activities, as well as Hezbollah's role within this framework.

## Conclusion and Potential Implications

The United States faces a critical knowledge gap in understanding Hezbollah's Latin American networks at a potentially pivotal moment. The October 2023 Hamas attacks on Israel and Israel's subsequent military response have dramatically altered regional dynamics. Recent covert actions by Israel against Hezbollah leadership, including strikes that caused civilian casualties, may prompt the organization to pursue more-aggressive tactics. Given the intense operational pressure that Hezbollah faces in Lebanon and Syria, the organization might view its Latin American networks as providing strategic depth for retaliation, potentially seeing the region as a theater in which it can retaliate while minimizing the risk of direct escalation in the Levant. Although Hezbollah has shown relative restraint thus far, sustained degradation of its capabilities in Lebanon could prompt strategic adaptation, including the leveraging of its Latin American infrastructure in new ways. Given Hezbollah's history of attacking Jewish and Israeli targets in Latin America—most notably the 1994 AMIA bombing in Argentina—this possibility warrants particular attention. At the same time, increased pressure

on the organization could result in a defensive posture focused on preserving rather than expanding its Latin American operations.

Although classified channels undoubtedly maintain ongoing assessments of these threats, robust unclassified analysis serves several crucial functions: It enables public discourse and informed debate, supports law enforcement actions and legal proceedings, facilitates diplomatic engagement with regional partners, and helps counter potential disinformation campaigns. Enhanced public understanding through unclassified assessments can also build support for counterterrorism initiatives and foster international cooperation. The scarcity of such unclassified congressional attention, government reports, academic studies, and regional cooperation has led to a severely outdated public understanding of Hezbollah's operations and influence in Latin America. This information gap has concrete consequences: Law enforcement agencies struggle to build cases because of dated evidence, financial institutions lack the typologies needed to detect evolving money laundering schemes, and regional partners operate with obsolete U.S. threat assessments that fail to capture new operational patterns. Moreover, this lack of up-to-date public information has historically led to two opposing tendencies to either sensationalize Hezbollah's presence, leading to alarmist rhetoric, or underestimate the potential threats posed by the group. Both extremes can result in misguided policy decisions that either misdirect resources or leave critical vulnerabilities unaddressed. Understanding how Hezbollah might adapt its Latin American networks in response to strategic pressure is especially crucial, given both significant geopolitical changes in Latin America and military exchanges along the Israeli-Lebanese border.

In assessing Hezbollah's presence in Latin America within the context of U.S. counterterrorism efforts, U.S. policymakers face challenges reminiscent of those identified by American historian Roberta Wohlstetter—distinguishing critical intelligence from background noise and avoiding the pitfall of projecting U.S. perspectives onto adversaries' decisionmaking processes (Baxter et al., 2018). Although it is crucial to address genuine security concerns, it is equally important to base public assessments and policy decisions on rigorous, evidence-based analysis. This is particularly vital because it has direct implications for U.S. homeland security: Hezbollah's Latin American networks could exploit cross-border vulnerabilities, manipulate existing trafficking routes into U.S. cities, and potentially leverage criminal networks for intelligence-collection or operational support within the United States.

Recent strategic guidance, including DHS's 2024–2030 *Innovation, Research & Development Strategic Plan* (2024) and its *Homeland Threat Assessment 2025* (Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2024), emphasizes the increasing complexity of transnational threats and the need for enhanced detection and information-sharing capabilities (Science and Technology Directorate, 2024; Office of Intelligence and Analysis, 2024). Building on these frameworks, DHS and DoD could consider three key actions to address the evolving threat landscape:

1. DHS and DoD could jointly establish an interagency working group on transnational threats in the Americas (complementing any existing classified proceedings) to
  - provide centralized oversight of cross-agency counterterrorism efforts in Latin America

- receive and publicly report on declassified assessments of regional security dynamics
  - advance bipartisan legislative initiatives to address identified security gaps
  - coordinate with the relevant executive agencies to ensure the implementation of counter-network strategies.
2. DHS's Office of Intelligence and Analysis, in coordination with DoD's Defense Intelligence Agency, could strengthen its unclassified coordination and information-sharing by further
    - building public-private partnerships with financial institutions
    - developing open-source intelligence frameworks
    - creating awareness programs for state and local law enforcement
    - establishing transparent information-sharing protocols with regional partners
    - engaging academic institutions and legitimate diaspora communities
    - coordinating with chambers of commerce on suspicious business activities.
  3. DHS's Office of Intelligence and Analysis could lead a comprehensive, unclassified assessment to bridge the public knowledge gap by leveraging open-source intelligence, academic research, law enforcement information, and declassified materials when possible. This effort could be coordinated through interagency partnerships while collaborating with international partners and research organizations to develop up-to-date analyses of Hezbollah's presence in the region. That assessment should include:



- updated analysis of Hezbollah’s financing methods and revenue streams
- evaluation of the group’s recruitment strategies and alliances with local criminal organizations
- assessment of Hezbollah’s influence over local and regional politics
- analysis of the interplay between Iran’s soft power initiatives and Hezbollah’s operations
- assessment of Hezbollah-affiliated capabilities and manpower in Latin America
- analysis of cross-border security vulnerabilities that could be exploited by Hezbollah-linked individuals, including an examination of existing detection and prevention capabilities.

Implementing these measures will enable a more accurate public understanding of Hezbollah’s Latin American presence at a critical juncture in the organization’s history. By institutionalizing regular unclassified assessment and oversight mechanisms, the United States can move beyond the historic pattern of either public exaggeration or public dismissal of the organization’s capabilities. This approach recognizes that modern nonstate actors operate as adaptive networks spanning multiple regions and require flexible, coordinated public responses that can evolve as rapidly as the dynamics themselves. Most importantly, this approach would position the United States to anticipate and counter potential strategic shifts in Hezbollah’s operations in the public domain before they materialize into direct challenges to U.S. national security interests or regional stability.

## Note

<sup>1</sup> The Levant refers to the Eastern Mediterranean region encompassing Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Israel, and the Palestinian authorities. Hezbollah, based in Lebanon, maintains significant influence throughout this region.

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## About This Paper

Although U.S. policymakers face a variety of complex challenges in addressing transnational terrorism, an underappreciated challenge is Hezbollah's evolving presence in Latin America. Academic literature and government reports almost universally indicate that Hezbollah's activities in the region pose potential threats to U.S. national security. However, there is a significant knowledge gap in existing assessments. The author of this paper offers an initial exploration of Hezbollah's operational footprint in Latin America, focusing on illicit funding mechanisms, violent operations, and key operational hubs—particularly in the Tri-Border Area and Venezuela. The analysis situates these activities within the broader context of Iran's regional diplomatic, economic, and cultural activities, which partially facilitate conditions amenable to Hezbollah's operations.

The author draws from a variety of open-source materials and reviews publicly available information. Although this paper does not include an independent verification or assessment of the status of Hezbollah's Latin American network, and sensitive intelligence remains outside its scope, the author provides a foundation for understanding how this issue is characterized and discussed in open sources. By analyzing the group's operational strategies and historical precedents, this initial framing identifies actionable considerations for U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) leadership while raising awareness of the organization's presence among

a broader community of stakeholders. These findings are significant for both DHS and DoD, given the former's counterterrorism mandate in Latin America and the latter's strategic interests in the region. Hezbollah's evolving presence warrants careful consideration from defense planners to effectively address potential challenges to U.S. interests and regional stability.

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