

The Islamist threat in Latin America and the Caribbean: What do we really know?

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There *is* an Islamist threat in the hemisphere. But the way it has dominated the thinking of many people close to this administration—often with spurious facts and thinly stretched allegations—risks alienating our partners in the hemisphere and making it more difficult to secure the sort of cooperation we need to keep U.S. citizens safe.

Individuals from Caribbean countries have left to join the ISIS jihad in Syria and Iraq, raising the real risk that they will return as rogue terrorists, much like those that have been behind a number of attacks on civilians in Europe. There were the 1992 and 1994 alleged Hezbollah-Iran linked bombings in Argentina against the Israeli embassy and the Israeli Mutual Aid Society (AMIA) that killed 85 people. There was the recent arrest and now sentencing of the Hezbollah member Mohammed Hamdas in Peru for quite likely scoping out the country for potential targets. And there is the troubling series of allegations that the recently promoted Venezuelan Vice President Tareck El Aissami had and may maintain ties with Hezbollah.



But more on that later because it deserves a section of its own. First, there are the disproven or inflated claims that risk driving U.S. policy.

There are a number of fantastical claims that have been promoted—and largely discredited—by some of the individuals queuing up to get an appointment in the administration of Donald J. Trump. If this were just a case of partisan rumor mongering to discredit an administration (which, by the way, happens on both sides of the ideological divide) that would be one thing. But given the Islamophobic tendencies of the higher ups, including Michael Flynn and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) director Mike Pompeo, these allegations—both unfounded and true—risk seriously skewing U.S. policy toward the region and—by militarizing our policy—alienating regional allies and pragmatic partners in ways that will make U.S. citizens less secure.

Any Latin Americanist who has worked in government knows how this works. You want to get the attention of higher ups because the region rarely makes it to the top of the priority pile of the principals. So you learn and play to their interests and concerns. In the case of Flynn (who wrote in his book, *The Field of Fight*, that Cuba and Venezuela were allied with radical Islamists—though with no evidence), Pompeo and President Trump we know what those are: the Islamic threat. So you play to that, even exaggerating it to get the attention of your superiors to get some face time with the principals. That doesn't make you cynical or evil; it makes you a good bureaucrat.

But in a context of heightened alarmism about the threat of radical Islam and the promise to wipe it off the face of the earth, being a good bureaucrat may mean dangerously distorting our policy and undermining our positive relations in the hemisphere.

A foundation of conspiracy and fear

Before the Trump administration and Flynn there was already a pattern of “Islamism-alarmism” in the hemisphere. Much of those more [extreme claims](#) have been disproven by credible sources. Among those discredited allegations have been: the existence of Iranian controlled uranium mines on the banks of the Orinoco River in Venezuela; an operating Hezbollah training camp in Venezuela's Isla Margarita; active Hezbollah training camps in the Tri-Border area of Paraguay, Brazil and Argentina; and the placement of surface to air missiles in the Paraguaná peninsula in Venezuela. None of them is true.

The latter charge, sold by José Cárdenas and Roger Noriega, could have easily been disproven with a mere glance at Google maps. Similarly, another member of the Drumpf transition team in Treasury who had a pro-embargo blog, CapitolHillCubans.org, regularly made assertions of Iranian-Cuban collaboration. While less fevered than those made by Cárdenas and Noriega, Mauricio Claver-Carone “reported” breathlessly on each visit by an Iranian official to Cuba and the alleged agreements they established. Unfortunately his reporting was short on actual intelligence and long on speculation. In these cases it was the whiff of sinister collusion rather than specific examples of terrorist collaboration.

Concerns over Iranian and indirect Hezbollah influence in the region fanned by the likes of Cárdenas, Noriega and Claver-Carone sparked a bipartisan bill, the Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act, signed into law by President Obama in January 2013. The measure called for a comprehensive U.S. response to Iranian incursions and a study based on threat assessments by intelligence and law enforcement agencies. The provision has helped ensure a comprehensive scrub and report of Iran and Hezbollah’s activities in the region.

Despite the pessimistic language in the bill (such as claims that key infrastructure was being targeted by terrorists in Latin America) and the intentions of congresspeople who pushed for the bill, the report and its later updates have failed to produce the smoking gun of Islamist influence in the region that many had hoped for. Worse, the comprehensive report pulled information and staff time from embassies across the region and agencies across the government creating a huge distraction from more relevant, immediate security threats in the region.

While the report and subsequent briefings have demonstrated that there does not exist an Iranian or Hezbollah dagger aimed at the soft-underbelly of the United States, the Iran-o-phobic congresspeople have refused to accept the conclusions. For example, despite his lack of access to actual intelligence information Rep. Jeff Duncan, R-S.C., criticized the State Department’s report saying “This administration refuses to see Iran’s presence—so near U.S. borders—as a threat to U.S. security.” Unfortunately, he didn’t provide any evidence for his claims that the administration should see it any other way.

The State Department hasn’t been alone in questioning the urgency and realism of Iranian and Hezbollah threats to U.S. security in the region. A 2012 report by the independent think tank Center for International and Security Studies (CSIS) poked holes in many of the allegations. As the report acknowledges, “Within the hemisphere, Iran has sought links with a broad range of countries, from democratic, free market states to a handful of authoritarian, anti-U.S. regimes.” At a bilateral-economic relations level most of those have focused on establishing Iranian manufacturing facilities in things such as “tractor factories, dairy facilities, and cement plants, plus hydrocarbon and mineral exploration” that the report says are often unprofitable for Iran but serve to promote the country’s status as a globally engaged player. In Venezuela—the focal point of a number of future Drumpf officials’ alarmism—the report concludes that many of even those benign projects have come to nothing as a result of bureaucratic wrangling. Concerning the allegations of Iran-Venezuelan collaboration on uranium mining, CSIS recognized that Venezuela “does not seem to have as much uranium as Iran, nor the capability to process and concentrate it,” leading to the unanswered question in the Noriega/Cárdenas reports: what is the rationale for their alleged (and disproven) joint uranium venture?

In conclusion the report states, “Iran’s activities in the Western Hemisphere raise a number of warning flags, although some may be distractions,” and earlier it says perhaps quite presciently, “Overestimating a potential Iranian threat could lead to reactions more damaging than anything Iran could do by degrading U.S. relations with neighboring governments and publics.”

Another [extensive report](#) by the investigative reporting non-governmental organization (NGO) [ProPublica](#) revealed that there were indeed efforts to share information and intelligence collaboration between the governments of former President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela and former president of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The report, though, gives the impression that the U.S. government is on top of it. For example, in one case it points out that “the U.S. Treasury Department designated a Venezuelan diplomat and a Venezuelan businessman as terrorists for allegedly raising funds for Hezbollah, discussing terrorist operations with Hezbollah operatives, and aiding travel of militants

from Venezuela to training sessions in Iran.”

Recent south-of-the-border fear mongering

As could be expected from aspiring, ambitious bureaucrats, the drum beat to draw attention to the region from Trumpistas has already begun. In December *Foreign Policy's Shadow Government* section published a piece by Emanuele Ottolenghi and John Hannah titled, “[To Combat Illegal Immigration, Drumpf Should Target Latin America's Hezbollah-Narco Nexus](#).” The only way the article could have been a more craven call for attention from those in charge of government appointments would have been if the opening sentence had said “Look at us. We have managed to link all of this administration’s concerns. We await your nomination.” (Keep an eye out for Ottolenghi and Hannah’s likely next piece “The Radical Islam-Bad Hombres-Nordstrom Nexus.”)

The problem with the article was that, while it drew from disparate but credible sources, the data points didn’t add up to a massive seething Hezbollah or Iranian conspiracy south of the U.S. border. The links it provided were to a series of [individual cases](#) of [drug seizures](#) and the revelation of a [money laundering link](#) between Hezbollah and Mexican and Colombia drug traffickers. And while the money laundering link is true and has been reported on, the article goes on to draw another series of thinly supported allegations. Those primarily revolve around the Paraguayan government’s possible collusion with the Lebanese government whose president allegedly has ties to Hezbollah. Following? Curiously, despite the article’s Trumpist title the authors never make any connection at all to illegal immigration. Perhaps in a second iteration Ottolenghi and Hannah will explore Hezbollah’s links to the 3 to 5 million “illegals” that voted in the presidential elections and that cost Drumpf the popular vote. Now that would get some attention.

The same is true of an article that appeared this week in *National Review* on-line by J.P. Carroll with the title, “[The Looming Islamist Threat... in Latin America](#).” Unfortunately, the evidence offered doesn’t meet the piece’s alarmist title. The scare tactics are based on three claims, one that the Tri-Border area between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay has become a training and financial hub for Hezbollah. Unfortunately the only evidence provided is a statement by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the [Jerusalem Post](#) that they are collaborating with the Paraguayan government. (That should be a *good* thing shouldn’t it?) Carroll also conveniently points out that that area is a major global hub for illicit sale of tobacco, but doesn’t directly link Hezbollah in any plot to wipe out infidel Christians from lung cancer or emphysema.

The idea that the Tri-Border area is a hotbed of terrorism training and camps has been around for decades and consistently debunked. Numerous State Department, CIA and embassy investigations have scoured the area so much that it must be one of the most studied areas by the U.S. intelligence community in the Western Hemisphere. In fact, in their piece Ottolenghi and Hannah link to a [Wikileaks page containing a State cable](#) summarizing a 2007 inter-agency conference in Asunción, Paraguay, that concluded “Hizbollah [sic] has a small direct, non-operational presence on the ground but most Lebanese in the TBA [Tri-Border area] are Hizbollah sympathizers, if not financial supporters.” To put it bluntly, Lebanese communities—as has been reported repeatedly—in the Tri-border area are likely raising money for Hezbollah for its activities elsewhere, but the region is not an operating base for terrorist attacks in the Americas. (Not surprisingly, though the authors of “[To Combat Illegal Immigration, Drumpf Should Target Latin America's Hezbollah-Narco Nexus](#)” link to a document with that conclusion, they don’t mention that point their article.)

The second main basis of Carroll’s fear mongering—which is also mentioned in the Ottolenghi and Hannah piece—is the well-known case of Iranian Quds forces attempting to [recruit Mexican narcotics hitmen](#) to assassinate the then-Saudi Ambassador to the U.S. Adel al-Jubeir in Washington, DC. The plot led to U.S. Justice Department [charges against two Iranian officials](#). So, yes, this one is true and substantiated. There are only two problems with it. First, the Mexican drug groups were never involved. Quds force representatives only met with the U.S. undercover agent, meaning that in this much-cited example of collaboration between Iran and Mexican narco-traffickers were never actually involved as partners. The second problem is that Iran’s plan wasn’t of the same scale or type being peddled by the authors of these two articles. It wasn’t a massive attack against U.S. citizens or

infrastructure; it was a targeted assassination attempt. Oh yeah, and it had nothing to do with illegal immigration.

The last charge made by Carroll is more legitimate and that is the potential Hezbollah ties of the current Venezuelan vice president, Tareck El Aissami. And I turn to that now.

What me worried? Yes

None of this is to say that radical Islamist contacts and activities, including those of Hezbollah and Iran, don't exist in the region. Whether the 2008 designation by the U.S. Treasury Department of Venezuelan diplomat and Venezuelan businessman as terrorists for allegedly raising funds for Hezbollah and discussing terrorist operations with Hezbollah operatives or the tragic AMIA bombing in Argentina, Hezbollah and Iran are engaged in the hemisphere. At the same time, there is credible evidence that Venezuela's recently appointed vice president [El Aissami](#), son of a Lebanese mother and a Syrian father, was active in Hezbollah in his youth and has maintained his ties to terrorist groups both while he was in the Interior Ministry and now in the vice presidency. Sources have confirmed his youthful ties to Hezbollah and raised serious concerns about the nexus between narcotics trafficking and Hezbollah while he was in Interior Ministry. (And, given what we know about the Venezuelan Interior Ministry and its involvement in narcotics trafficking and criminal activities, that the 42-year-old hardline chavista rose so quickly through the ranks and through the Interior Ministry to be a heartbeat away from the presidency should alone be cause for concern.)

The question is how Iran or Hezbollah will exercise this influence. Because, as the case of the Saudi Ambassador Adel al-Jubeir indicates, a massive terrorist attack in the U.S. or on U.S. interests launched by Iran from the Americas would bring a swift and painful response to the theocratic government. That's not to say there are no interests or that they are benign; but a realistic assessment of the risk of a terrorist attack led and linked to a government should be in order.

Which brings me to a perhaps the more legitimate terrorist risk from the region that these scholars have ignored—quite likely because it doesn't play into the narrative of the people's attention they so desperately seek. That is the possibility of a returning ISIS fighter staging a rogue attack. According to two sources, the United States is carefully tracking a troubling number of citizens from the region—primarily the Caribbean—that have left to join ISIS. The fear is that they could come back and launch self-guided attacks on U.S. soil or against U.S. interests in their home countries. Besides the fact that it is how the most recent terrorist attacks have occurred in Europe and—very loosely—in the U.S., it also has more logic than the idea that Iran would launch an attack given all it would risk.

But addressing that concern requires cooperation with governments in the region tracking their citizens' travels—to ISIS territories, back and to the United States—and sharing that information with U.S. intelligence services. And this includes working even with countries like Cuba to remain up to date—something that is anathema to many of those salivating at getting a chance to work in this administration.

At the same time, the fact that many look at the region and see only a terrorist threat, shows a troubling lack of interest in the main concerns of most Latin Americans. Across the region, citizens are worried about [climate change](#), [economic growth](#), and [crime](#), often much more than the [threat of terrorism](#). If the Trump administration wants to build the sorts of alliances with governments in the region required to detect and thwart an attack, this demands leading with the issues that are of primary concern to Latin Americans. As real as the threat may be, ignoring the demands and fears of citizens south of the border and letting radical Islam dominate our discussions with the hemisphere will only make the U.S. less safe.

Will there be a terrorist attack on U.S. soil by a terrorist who slipped

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through Latin America and even the Mexico border. It's possible; it may even be likely. But rather than leading with a series of alarmist, unsubstantiated charges that will only distort our policy and turn off our allies, a future team in the administration should measure the demands and interests of partners in the south and look for ways to build off those to address legitimate concerns of Islamism in the region. Doing so will not only consolidate cooperation in the region it will also further—in the long term—improve U.S. security from radical Islam, from any source from any region.

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