



Jennifer Teale

Graduated from the IMSISS international security, strategy and intelligence studies Masters programme from the University of Glasgow in 2021. She interned at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy in Vienna in 2020. She has worked for independent news agency Accent in Tbilisi, Georgia and she started with the IDSF in 2023. Her background is in teaching and psychology, with a bachelor's degree in French from the Universities of Strasbourg and Stirling and postgraduate psychology from the University of Glasgow.

- This is a product of the Israel's Defense and Security Forum's Research Department
- Published: February 25, 2024
- For more research products, please enter our website: idsf.org.il
- Contact us: or@idsf.org.il

The Iran-Brazil Border: How Tehran and Hezbollah Infiltrate South America

Jennifer Teale

For years, Latin American countries and Israel have had ups and downs in their relationship. In light of the October 7 massacre and the ensuing war between Israel and the Iranian-led axis of Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthis, we examined the massive Iranian effort to create a sphere of influence in the Latin world, and the apparent correlation between Iran and Hezbollah presence in South American countries and their attitude toward Israel. From Argentina's sharp turn in favor to Israel to Brazil's increasing hostility, recalling ambassadors and enabling vast Iranian covert activity in their territory, South American countries are home not only to significant political turbulence, but also of vast Hezbollah narco-terrorism networks, Iranian-operated media outlets that stream propaganda in Spanish, and terrorist cells waiting to be activated.

Relationships between Israel and various countries in Latin America have known ups and downs, and have taken turns over the past 75 years. In the aftermaths of the October 7 massacre and the ensuing war between Israel and Hamas, as well as the Iranian-led proxies Hezbollah and the Houthis, these dynamics have resurfaced, also **underscoring the massive Iranian efforts to create spheres of influence in South America.**

Such was the case with Bolivia. In response to Bolivia's announcement to sever ties with Israel, Israel's foreign ministry said that the Bolivian government decided to "surrender to terrorism and to the Ayatollah's regime in Iran" and "is aligning itself with the Hamas terrorist organization." **These dynamics also reached The Hague as South American countries joined to or initiated legal cases against Israel.** Bolivia has since presented a request to the Prosecutor of the International Criminal Court (ICC) to "investigate the situation in Palestine" on November 17. In January, Chile also referred Israel to the ICC to examine events in the war against Hamas. Colombia has also declared its backing for South Africa's legal action against Israel before the International Court of Justice since the start of the year.

Brazil has also taken a critical attitude towards Israel, as Hezbollah networks plotting to attack Jewish targets were exposed. Brazil has also expressed its support for the ICJ case filed by South Africa. In February, Nicaragua filed to join South Africa in its genocide case against Israel. The court said in a statement that Nicaragua considers Israel's conduct in its war against Hamas to be in "violation of its obligations under the Genocide Convention." President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva's decision was made within hours of meeting Palestinian Ambassador Ibrahim Alzeben in Brasília on January 12. Brazil's Foreign Ministry said in a statement that considering "the flagrant violations of international humanitarian law," Lula expressed support for South Africa's case. His

statement reiterated its defense of a two-state solution within mutually agreed and internationally recognized borders. In 2010, during his first tenure as president, Lula officially recognized Palestine's statehood.

Meanwhile, on February 6, recently appointed Argentinian President Javier Milei instead visited Israel on his first official overseas trip as President and reiterated his pledge to **move Argentina's embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.** Under Milei, the Argentinian government has taken 180 degrees turn in its attitude to the conflict and has shown extremely favorable positions toward Israel. Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz thanked President Milei for his support for Israel against Hamas and for recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital. "You are a person of values who is committed only to the truth," Israel Katz told President Milei, "and it is no wonder that you chose to come to Israel right away to support us in the just struggle for the defense of the Jewish people against the murderers of Hamas." As South America's second-largest economy, President Milei's foreign policy challenges the impression that Israel is isolated in the region.

The decision by the governments of Colombia and Chile to recall their ambassadors on October 31 also appears to be a clearly coordinated action. The following day, on November 1, Israel called on Colombia and Chile to "explicitly condemn the Hamas terrorist organization, for the slaughter and abduction of Israelis." "Israel expects Colombia and Chile to support the right of a democratic country to protect its citizens, and to call for the immediate release of all the abductees, and not align themselves with Venezuela and Iran in support of Hamas terrorism," Israel's Foreign Ministry said. The diplomatic moves by these four South American countries come as other Latin American leaders have ramped up their criticism of Israel's military activity.

A Complicated Road

Latin American countries have always had varying relations with Israel. Along the spectrum one may find Venezuela on the one end, who openly forms a link in the Iran-North Korea-Russia-China axis, vocal against Israel on the world stage, and refuses to hold diplomatic relations with it; and countries such as Guatemala on the other end, which was the only Latin American country to vote against a UN resolution that called for a "humanitarian truce" on October 26, together with Israel, the United States, Austria and others. **In Honduras' case, while the previous government made a historic rapprochement with Israel** and declared the moving of its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, **the recent change of government has also dramatically shifted its attitude toward Israel.** At the UNSC on December 12, 2023, Member States adopted a resolution demanding an "immediate humanitarian ceasefire", the immediate and unconditional

release of all hostages and well as "ensuring humanitarian access". Those voting against included the US, Israel, Guatemala and Paraguay. On February 12, 2024, Venezuela condemned Israel's military advance towards Rafah. Caracas has demanded Tel Aviv respect international law "as a guarantee of global peace". It reiterated its call on the international community to take decisive decisions to prevent Israel from continuing its "catastrophic" policy.

Not all Latin American countries have strongly condemned the terrorist attack against Israel. In the coming months, as Israel seeks to create the conditions for the security of its people in the face of mass murder, its actions may raise concerns. In that context, some Latin American leaders are likely to adopt a contentious rhetoric of moral neutrality.



Hezbollah militants fly the organization's flag. Over the past few decades, Hezbollah has significantly expanded narcoterrorism as a massive source of income, notably in cooperation with local drug cartels such as Medellín and cartels in Brazil and in Mexico

Credit: Shutterstock.com

Strong Iran and Hezbollah presence

Iranian presence is omnipresent in Latin American countries. Iran's President Raisi recently visited Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua in defiance of the US and in violation of sanctions. Brazil's President Lula, on his part, allowed Iranian warships to dock in ports in Rio de Janeiro in 2023. He did so just after returning from a trip to Washington to meet with President Biden, where the US threatened further sanctions, which President Lula simply ignored. The Iranian signal is that they are going to ignore US sanctions and pressure, even whilst though Brazil has since signed more bilateral agreements with the US on the promotion of workers right internationally. President Lula is essentially telling the world that America will no longer dictate what he does.

After the October 7 attacks, the Cuban Foreign Ministry called Israel an occupying power and refused to condemn the Hamas terrorists. Cuba indeed has

been providing intelligence to Hamas for decades and holding high-level meetings with their leaders and their Iranian sponsors. Cuban President Miguel Diaz-Canel visited Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah in Tehran in December and reinforced their alliance to "take a common and effective position on important international issues such as the Palestinian issue." **In Chile, with its strong and radicalized Palestinian diaspora, Iranian agents and Hezbollah networks have infiltrated government, media, and academia, in addition to running illicit financial networks in recent years.** Iran, and groups such as the Quds Force's Unit 840, continue to take advantage of money laundering for terrorist purposes designed and funded by the Iranian regime. The susceptibility and use of migrant transient routes by nefarious terrorist actors moving personnel and materials throughout the region is of grave concern and an increased focus on these corridors must take center stage.

In Bolivia's case, its historic hostility toward Israel plays along a long-standing relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran. Tehran's "infiltration" of Latin America was reignited with a security deal they signed with Bolivia on July 20, 2023. For Iran, the deal seemingly only has advantages: it further breaks the narrative of its diplomatic isolation whilst simultaneously validating its strategy of forging "south-south" links as well as its "Look East" policy. Bolivia will now protect Iranian assets, giving Iran the liberty to plan and operate in the country. Israeli operatives, on the other hand, will now be restricted in their ability to confront and counter Hezbollah operatives in Bolivia. Bolivia, therefore, is acting as a haven for Iranian operatives against Israel and therefore poses a serious risk to Israeli nationals in the country, and its Jewish community.

Argentina's relationship with Iran remains complicated by unresolved grief over Tehran's responsibility for the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires and the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center there. The perpetrators of the attacks together killed over 100 civilians. Israeli intelligence revealed that Iran's Qods Force and Hezbollah operatives were behind the attack, including Imad Mornieh, former Hezbollah senior official who was assassinated in 2008 in Damascus, possibly by Israel; and Ahmad Vahidi, who recently served as the Iranian Defense Minister and is accused of masterminding the attack. An Argentine prosecutor later traced the attacks to Iran's partnership with its militant proxy, Hezbollah, in Lebanon. Yet the accused perpetrators still walk free in Iran, leaving justice denied to those who lost loved ones in these attacks.

These bombings have cast a permanent shadow over Argentine-Iranian relations, although former president Cristina Kirchner was accused by the then-prosecutor Nisman of covering up Iranian involvement and avoiding to act directly to arrest Iranian wanted officials. Nisman was later found dead in his apartment. Yet geopolitics seems to drive Argentina's rationality in engaging Iran. **It**

has maintained diplomatic ties and avoided joining US pressure against Tehran. Bilateral trade in agriculture and other commodities with Iran exceeds \$500 million annually.

However, ever since Argentina has seen a dramatic shift in its approach to the Israel-Gaza conflict and to Israel in general with the rise to power of President Javier Milei's government in December 2023. On February 12, Israel freed two Israeli-Argentine hostages held by Hamas in Rafah in a ferocious rescue operation. Argentina has strongly condemned Hamas but as yet have not designated the group as a terrorist organization. President Milei has expressed extremely pro-Israel views and a fondness of the Jewish people in general; expressed his wish to convert to Judaism and announced plans to move the Argentinian embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem during his February 2024 visit, a move only taken thus far by Guatemala, Honduras, Kosovo, Papua New Guinea, and the United States in 2017.

President Milei's trip may be as an attempt to establish an alliance with both the United States and Israel, even though Argentina has limited influence on the world stage. As South America's second-largest economy, Milei's foreign policy challenges the impression that Israel is increasingly isolated in the region." During the Israel visit, however, the lower house of the Argentine Congress gave Milei his first legislative defeat. The next day, whilst still in Israel, a 250% public transport price rise was announced in Argentina. In a country with a large Jewish community of some 200,000, but nonetheless a majority Catholic population, Milei's gestures toward Israel and the Jewish world are interpreted by some as creating a sense of disconnection and confusion at a time of economic turmoil.



Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi during his visit to Brazil, where he met Brazilian President Lula de Silva (August 24, 2023) | Source: @Tasnimnews_Fa on X

Hezbollah, a Narco Terrorist Organization

Hezbollah is not designated as a terrorist organization in most Latin American countries— only Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and Paraguay consider Hezbollah as such. Without this designation, local authorities' ability to monitor or prosecute Hezbollah and its local operatives is severely limited. **Hezbollah enjoys open support from authoritarian regimes aligned with Tehran**, such as that of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro – which appears to largely be Iran's forward operating base in Latin America. Co-ordinated Hezbollah and Iranian fronts commingled with pro-Palestinian radical activism – a popular cause with radical leftists in Latin America. This potentially gives Hezbollah easier access to political leaders and more of a viable cover for their activities.

Finally, because of its decades-long involvement with organized crime, Hezbollah has extensive connections with local crime syndicates in Latin America. These connections provide access to weapons, explosives, counterfeiting, and most critically, corrupt public officials in key positions at migrations, customs, and ports of entry to allow for ease of movement.

Elsewhere in Latin America, Hezbollah's networks remain undisturbed. One key center is the Tri-Border Area of Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, where Hezbollah financiers and supporters have historically been involved in money laundering. This area, with its porous borders, is an ideal hiding place for criminals and terrorists, giving them easy movement of resources; a sympathetic population of the 30,000-strong local Lebanese expatriate community, and access to these three Latin American countries with U.S. and Israeli diplomatic presences and large Jewish communities (including Argentina and Brazil). In Brazil, the sympathetic government of President Luis Ignacio Lula da Silva has allowed Hezbollah and Iranian fronts to expand with little risk of scrutiny from local authorities.

This policy has enabled Hezbollah to thrive in the country. Sure enough, it has taken a tangible turn as well. On November 8, **Brazilian Federal Police uncovered a plot by alleged Hezbollah operatives to attack Jewish targets.** Brazil is home to Latin America's second-largest Jewish community, after Argentina, and the arrests further raises fears about the region's vulnerability to terrorism.

This border area between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay is considered a center of criminal activity and is home to a dense network of terror financing, according to a study by Spain's University of Navarra (UNAV). This was also confirmed by Nazarian who said that it is the most dangerous area in terms of narco-trafficking and terrorism in Latin America where "Hezbollah and other Iranian agents have been exploiting using drug funds to support terrorism." Hezbollah works closely with other cartels including the Medellin cartel and cartels in Brazil and Mexico. No evidence of a direct connection yet exists

between these networks that launder money for crime and the criminal networks that bring fentanyl through Mexico into the United States, but given that Hezbollah has developed this money laundering infrastructure worldwide for decades now, a connection may well emerge.

Likewise, Hezbollah's network in Columbia remains active. Only weeks before Hamas launched its Oct. 7 surprise attack on Israel, the U.S. Treasury had sanctioned Amer Akil Rada, a member of the Hezbollah cell that carried out the 1994 Buenos Aires bombing. Sanctions extended to Amer's brother, Samer Akil Rada, and his son, Mehdi Akil Helbawy. The Akils are Colombian-Lebanese dual nationals, and Samer and Mehdi resided in Colombia until shortly before the U.S. Treasury's sanctions were published when they moved to Venezuela.

Sources say a significant part of Hezbollah's \$1 billion USD annual budget originates in narcoterrorism, including Captagon deliveries around the Arab world as well as smuggling of drugs from South America. A mutual project to the CIA and the Mossad called "**Project Cassandra**" revealed the extensive ties that Hezbollah keeps with drug cartel networks around Latin America in order to smuggle drugs to the United States and Europe, filling its pockets with cash.

Given the danger and threat this border area brings to the stability of the region, the three countries of the Triple-Border have taken measures that have allowed them to put pressure on narco-terrorist groups which have resulted in important captures of Hezbollah members. According to the UNAV study, the 2018 arrest in Brazil of Assad Ahmad Barakat, an important financial Hezbollah operator and one of Hezbollah's main operatives in the area, was made possible through the collaborative work of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. Authorities later arrested Hamdar in Peru but since Peru does not consider Hezbollah to be a terrorist organization, Hamdar was only prosecuted and convicted on immigration fraud. A proper counterterrorism investigation was never conducted, despite a U.S. Department of Treasury 2016 report identifying Hamdar as a Hezbollah agent.

The Iranian connection: Satellite-broadcasted disinformation in Spanish

Radical mobilization in favor of the Palestinian cause across the region is fomented by Iran-backed disinformation. **Iran undertakes large-scale psychological warfare using social networks, satellites, and Spanish-language media in South America**, which "promote Iranian interests to attack the West and Latin America," Jorge Serrano, a member of the team of advisors to the Peruvian Congressional Intelligence Commission, told *Diálogo* in September 2022. "VEVAK [Iran's National Ministry of Intelligence and Security] is behind this," he said.

Among the terrorist groups supporting Iran in the

region, Unit 840 of the Quds Force, one of the five branches of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), calls for attention. Unit 840 is a secret division of the IRGC led by the Quds Force, the executing arm of all acts of international terrorism designed and financed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Its main propaganda tool is the Hezbollah-affiliated television station, *Al-Manar*, from which it broadcasts the terrorist group's activities, as well as promoting the group's ideology and Iranian Islamic revolution values.

The unit is responsible for planning and establishing the terrorist infrastructure outside of Iran and does so through the use of local criminals to execute terrorist acts globally and kill adversaries abroad. The regime similarly strengthens its attacks against overseas unidentified officials in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. Since 2020, Iran has moved from categorizing and tracking targets for possible attack in the event of escalating pressures between the West and Iran, to launching plans, including the attempted assassination of Israeli businessmen in Colombia.

Aside from the Al-Manar television station, there is the *Tertulias en Cuarentena* channel on YouTube, created by two Spanish members of the Internationalist Anti-Imperialist Front (FAI). The objective behind the content broadcasted is to penetrate Latin American screens, through interviews conducted by other Iran-influenced media such as *Hispan TV*, *TeleSur*, *RT*, and *Al Mayadeen*, and to create political content that supports the ideologies of countries such as Venezuela and Cuba.

Another case is the digital platform *Resumen Latinoamérica (RL)*. This web page created in Argentina seeks to be "the other face of the news of America and the Third World." But the objective of the content is to **misinform**. Its narrative frequently attacks those who consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization, and just like *Tertulias en Cuarentena*, it uses Iranian media such as *Al Mayadeen*, *Hispan TV*, and *Al Manar* as sources, and often even regurgitates information originally broadcast by *Tertulias en Cuarentena*. All of the terrorist group's media outlets target Lebanese as well as international audiences, broadcasting in different languages, including Spanish as a fundamental element for the strengthening of its psychological warfare and information manipulation in the South America region.

An American-Iranian Cold War

The US-Iran Cold War left many Iranian policymakers with a siege mentality where Iranian policymakers feel constantly under threat. One solution has been to **invest heavily in a national narrative and broadcast that to the world—to portray Iran as a religious beacon, an anti-imperialist stalwart, and perpetual underdog vis-à-vis the United States.** Internationally, the IRIB (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting) operates 30 radio stations and 9 television networks. The scale of their foreign

broadcasting significantly increased following the US invasion of Iraq. *Hispan TV*, a Spanish-language station launched in 2011, focuses on Latin America. Despite growing economic turbulence and the mounting effects of US sanctions, the IRIB maintains an annual budget of approximately \$750 million.

The region serves as a major propaganda beacon for Iran, Hezbollah, and pro-Iranian organizations by using this 21st-century technology to leverage a shared narrative with Latin America's revolutionary left. This allows Iran to overcome its inflexibilities and lack of capacity to perpetrate terrorist acts at the international level as with the additional help of Venezuela, Cuba and the *Sao Paulo Forum in Latin America* in particular, it infiltrates the whole region.

Former cultural attaché to the Iranian Embassy in Buenos Aires, Mohsen Rabbani, has promoted pro-Iranian communication channels in Argentina and Chile since the 1990s. The **Rabbani Network** grew over 30 years, moving to YouTube, websites, and social networks and analysis shows. Rabbani has an international arrest warrant from Interpol against him for his involvement in the 1994 bombing of the Israelite Mutual Association in Argentina. The AnnurTV platform, with news in Spanish about Islam and the Middle East, is within the Rabbani network. This AnnurTV platform belongs to the Argentine Islamic Organization. Mohsen Rabbani's close supporters and advocates are actively involved in the official Iranian channel, *Hispan TV*.

Leveraging Hate Toward America for the Iranian Quest to Annihilate Israel

Iran's proxy Hezbollah may well join the current Israel-Hamas war. Given their vast sphere of influence over Latin America, with large-scale disinformation campaign and media terrorism, their narcoterrorism networks to finance their malign activities, and in-depth ties with some governments that hold coalescing interests with them, these relations are noteworthy when examining the larger picture around Latin American countries' actions toward Israel. **Recalling their ambassadors, condemning Israel or inciting against its war against Hamas following the deadliest massacre in Israeli history is characteristic to some Latin American countries who also happen to hold extensive ties with the Iranian regime and its proxy Hezbollah,** or prone to be exposed to its disinformation efforts. The Iranian challenge will have to be taken into account when considering the Latin American front in the global war on terrorism, as Israel represents only the frontline of defense against a worldwide Iranian attempt to take on the West.



Iranian-affiliated media channels in Spanish, HispanTV, Resumen Latinoamérica and Tertulias en Cuarentena echo anti-Imperialist propaganda and disinformation