

# THE LATIN AMERICAN VORTEX

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The scourge of terrorism has touched Central and South America (collectively, Latin America) for much longer than it has been a truly worldwide danger. The nature and reach of that threat in the Western Hemisphere, however, is changing profoundly. “Traditional” terrorism of the Marxist-Leninist variety has been in retreat of late, concentrated within fewer and fewer countries south of the United States. But Islamist terrorism is slowly expanding its presence and activities in a region that has historically been alien to it.

The terrorist threat emanating from Latin America today is two-fold. The first variety is local or regional in nature, and largely Marxist in ideology. The second sort, however, is imported, and Islamist. The two groups remain separate in terms of doctrine and methods—there were and are no suicide terrorists among the self-described Marxist-Leninist insurgents in Colombia or Peru, for example. Yet these forces undeniably share similar aims, most directly the defeat of American influence and power in the Western Hemisphere. And, away from the attention of the United States, these groups are steadily gravitating toward a threatening symbiosis of operational methods, weapons and funding sources.

## **Turmoil south of the border**

The political and security situation in Central America, as in most of South



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America, has changed significantly over the last decade, and not for the better. The civil wars that convulsed the region during the 1980s (and South America before that) brought about a general weakening of local institutions of governance. Combined with slow economic growth, this trend has made regional governments incapable of dealing with real or potential security threats, or of effectively cooperating with the United States.

In El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Guatemala, the military budgets for intelligence, troop strength, and indeed the social and political status of the military itself have been in sharp decline for more than a decade. The police in these countries are in equally bad shape, outgunned by the enormous gangs active throughout the region and reviled by local populations. In a reflection of these factors, all Central American countries—most directly El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, along with Mexico—have effectively lost or voluntarily ceded control over their national borders.

As a result, just about anyone with enough money can enter these countries and continue on toward the United States, often with “valid” documents. Panama is one such environment, with passports routinely sold to Far Eastern illegal immigrants. But Chinese immigrants are not the only ones taking advantage of these loopholes; high-level al-Qaeda operative Adnan El Shukrijumah was spotted in Tegucigalpa, Honduras in July 2004, having crossed the border illegally from Nicaragua after a stay in Panama.<sup>1</sup> Abu Musab al-Zarkawi, al-Qaeda’s pointman in Iraq, is likewise rumored to have been interested in a visa to Honduras as the first step toward infiltrating operatives into the United States via Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

Complicating the problem, international criminal gangs have estab-

lished effective cross-border networks dealing in drugs, weapons and, most important, human beings. As a result, an individual or small group entering Panama could enlist gang assistance to make their way to the Mexican-U.S. border, from where local smugglers—*coyotes* or *polleros*—would take them to an American city of their choice.

In South America, the situation is somewhat different, but no less disturbing. Until very recently, the Colombian government did not control most of its national territory, and oversight of its common borders with Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela is still very weak. Aside from Chile, most of the Southern Cone countries—Uruguay, Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia, as well as Peru and Ecuador—have bankrupt, discredited and wildly unpopular security forces, preventing effective border control, internal security and intelligence operations. Bolivia and Paraguay are, for all practical purposes, nearly-failed states, so weak that the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia (FARC) have been able to “advise”—read control and manipulate—the Paraguayan leftist terrorists of *Patria Libre* (Free Fatherland). In addition, the judiciaries in countries such as Peru, Argentina, and Chile are thoroughly politicized, and obsessed with pursuing the leaders of former, conservative, military regimes—so much so that they handle leftist terrorists, past and present, with leniency.

Add to this the growing anti-Americanism now spreading throughout the region, and it becomes clear that the general political, cultural and social environment in most of Latin America is simply not conducive to either an effective defense against terrorism, or to better cooperation, let alone coordination, with the United States.

Nowhere is this breakdown of effective governance more vis-

ible than in the so-called “Tri-Border Region” at the intersection of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil. The “Tri-Border Region” constitutes the most extensive lawless area in the Western Hemisphere, where international criminal gangs, insurgents, and terrorists (Islamist or otherwise) meet and cooperate—at least temporarily. It is a magnet for every illegal, extra-legal and criminal group in the world, including Korean and Chinese criminal groups, American criminals, locals, and Middle Eastern elements—the latter strengthened by the presence of some 10,000 to 21,000 ethnic Arabs in the area.

The fitfully functional Mercosur—the free trade area encompassing Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil, and Argentina established in March 1991—has done little to control these illegal activities. To the contrary, the elimination of (most) tariffs among member states has only encouraged an expansion of criminality, making the “Tri-Border Region” an economic and criminal free-for-all. Not surprisingly, the result is a security nightmare for regional governments, and for the U.S.

This, in a nutshell, is the post-9/11 strategic environment confronting the United States in Latin America. Local governments are either (self-)disarmed on counterterrorism matters, too weak to pursue them, or too tempted by populism for any hemispheric counterterrorism policy to be effective. As a result, three distinct but increasingly related challenges to U.S. security have emerged:

- The general lawlessness described above, which is spreading throughout the region and, potentially, to the United States from Latin America;
- Indigenous terrorism and;

- Islamist penetration of the region, and the activities of radical Islamist groups there.

### **Marxists on the march**

Since the early 1960s, wave after wave of communist insurgencies have washed up on the shores of Latin America. Most, but certainly not all, have been pro-Cuban—a function of Fidel Castro’s expansionist Revolution. The cessation of Soviet financial and political patronage with the end of the Cold War sounded the death knell for many of these movements, including those in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador. Yet some have managed to survive the collapse of the former Soviet bloc, sustained by their ideological and financial independence from Moscow and Havana.

In Peru, the fanatical Communist Party, better known as *Sendero Luminoso* (SL, or “Shining Path”), ravaged the country and claimed some 30,000 fatalities in the 1980s and early 1990s, until brought to heel by the authoritarian regime of Alberto Fujimori. During this period, SL’s activities were almost entirely funded by cocaine trafficking in the Upper Huallaga and Apurimac Valley regions. Today, remnants of SL are reorganizing, capitalizing on the political weakness of Fujimori’s successor, Alejandro Toledo.

A far more significant threat comes from Colombia’s FARC. Founded in 1964 as the armed wing of the pro-Moscow Communist Party in Bogota, the FARC became independent and grew exponentially after 1990, owing to a succession of weak and irresponsible governments in Bogota and growing demand for cocaine and heroin in the United States. To a much lesser extent, so did Colombia’s pro-Cuban National Liberation Army (*Ejercito de Liberacion Nacional*, or ELN). Over the years, drug trafficking, along with kidnap-

ping for ransom and racketeering, have become so lucrative to the FARC that its annual budget is now estimated at some \$500 million a year—more than enough to arm, feed, and maintain its force of some 15,000 combatants.

This wealth has allowed the FARC to become a serious threat to the stability of the region as a whole. With the tacit tolerance (and possibly the direct support) of the virulently anti-American regime of President Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, the FARC has been able to establish chains of operatives and logistics in Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador, and is trying to do the same in Brazil and Peru. In short, it has become a truly transnational terrorist entity. Furthermore, the FARC's influence has led to the reappearance of similar, albeit smaller, groups in other countries—including *Patria Libre* in Paraguay, which was involved in the kidnapping and murder of the daughter of former president Raul Cubas.

Of greater concern are the FARC's extra-continental connections. While the organization's ties to drug trafficking networks in the United States and Europe are well known, its ties to the Russian and Ukrainian mafias, and to criminal networks that sell arms to al-Qaeda and associated groups, are less understood. Yet the fact that FARC-linked Colombian drug traffickers managed in 2000 to acquire a Russian submarine for use as a transportation vehicle to Mexico provides an inkling of the potential danger such ties present to American security.

One such alliance in particular deserves mention. Members of the Irish Republican Army have been arrested in Colombia, where they are accused of training the FARC in urban terrorism. Indeed, some of the latter's methods of urban warfare—in such places as Bogota, Medellin, and Cali—

are quite clearly patterned after Northern Ireland's long-running insurgency.

## Islamist inroads

For an outsider, the very notion of an Islamist threat in Latin America may seem odd. After all, the mostly-Catholic region has no apparent historic or cultural ties to the Islamic world, and contains virtually no Muslim population of any significance.

With the end of the Cold War, however, Latin America's links with the rest of the world have changed profoundly. The relaxation of border controls, increased immigration, diminished interest from the United States, and the weakness of internal institutions have altered the political climates of Argentina, Chile, Brazil, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, many of which are areas of important historical Arab settlement—a development that has made these locales increasingly receptive to Islamist infiltration.

The hub of Islamist activity in Latin America today is located in the “Tri-Border Region,” and Lebanon's Hezbollah is the dominant player. The majority of the group's Latin American activities, like those of the Palestinian Hamas organization, are related to fundraising and money laundering—a business enterprise so successful that experts estimate it generates revenue of “over \$10 million annually.”<sup>3</sup> But with the assistance of its historic power broker, Iran, Hezbollah has steadily expanded its activities throughout the entire region, with dramatic results. The March 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, and the July 1994 bombing of the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association in the same city have both been attributed to Hezbollah and its military chief, Imad Mughniyeh. Indeed, more than any other factor, it was the involvement of Mughniyeh—and through him, of Iran—in

the Buenos Aires bombings that has focused international attention on the Argentine government's inability to deal with terrorism.

Nevertheless, the "Tri-Border Region" does not represent the only Islamist threat to U.S. security emanating from Latin America. From Peru to Mexico, Islamist groups are increasing their attempts to penetrate the United States, with Mexico's lawless northern border the main target of opportunity. Such a focus is understandable; weakness, corruption and disarray within the national security and intelligence establishments of the Central American states make the region an attractive one for radical elements attempting to infiltrate the U.S. The presence of high-level operatives from al-Qaeda and Hezbollah in the region suggests that Latin America continues to be seen at least in part as a convenient back door into the United States, as well as a facile way of demonstrating the universal reach of their *jihād* to practitioners.

### **The Chavez factor**

As yet, there is no direct proof that the Chavez regime in Caracas is openly and directly involved in supporting terrorism in the Americas, but the circumstantial evidence is mounting. Chavez' close ties to Fidel Castro's Cuba are themselves disturbing, considering Havana's history of support for terrorist groups throughout the Americas and beyond. Nor is it a secret that the FARC and ELN have operated openly in Venezuela, in the border areas with Colombia and, on the political level, in Caracas itself. Moreover, Chavez personally and publicly supports the largest and most dangerous Indian socialist group in Bolivia, Evo Morales' *Movimiento al Socialismo* (MAS), which is now actively trying to expand into Peru and Ecuador. MAS is a significant political party in Bolivia, and is openly supportive of drug production and trafficking, anti-

American and anti-democratic in ideology, and inclined to use violence when political arguments do not succeed.

In short, Venezuelan oil money is fostering an atmosphere in which all kinds of "progressive" groups, reminiscent of the 1970s and 1980s, find a friendly reception. Another important but still unacknowledged problem is that the Chavez regime in Venezuela is increasingly linked—politically, financially, and ideologically—to a number of destabilizing groups in South America: some terrorist (FARC), some left-wing revolutionary, and some a combination of the two.

Furthermore, in line with his almost reflexive anti-Americanism, Chavez is also increasingly pro-Iranian, going as far as to support Tehran's "right" to nuclear weapons. While this may simply be heated rhetoric intended for domestic and regional consumption, it clearly makes any coordinated attempt to control Iranian activities in South America, especially in conjunction with the United States, more difficult.

So far, however, Washington has by and large remained silent in the face of Chavez' provocations, including his rhetorical, political, and financial support provided to Fidel Castro's Cuba, and Venezuela's quiet backing of a new threat to stability in the region—the rise of militant, violent, and anti-democratic Indian-based groups in the Andean region and Mexico, such as Bolivia's Pachacuti Indigenous Movement and the Chiapas, Mexico-based *Ejercito Zapatista Liberacion Nacional* (EZLN).<sup>4</sup>

### **Malignant neglect**

It is not lost on these forces that the United States has, for all intents and purposes, neglected Latin America for more than a decade. Indeed, when officials in Washington have turned their attention to the region, the focus has by and large been Colombia, whose

popular president, Alvaro Uribe, continues to grapple with the rising power of the FARC. But Colombia aside, the U.S. has kept silent or reacted belatedly, if at all, to security threats emanating from south of the border, and especially to the persistent troublemaking of the Chavez government.

Regional institutions, meanwhile, are not up to the task. The Organization of American States (OAS) has proven ineffective in establishing a functioning system of antiterrorism cooperation, and military-to-military relations between OAS member states lately have lost much of their previous luster.

Neither have local governments resolutely confronted the threat. The advent of democracy, or at least electoral politics, in much of the region sadly has failed to engender a greater awareness of—or better effectiveness in—combating terrorism. Rather, in many countries, such as Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Venezuela and Ecuador, Leftist regimes which fear the military, are anti-American to various degrees, and tend to tolerate security threats from the radical fringes, have risen to power. These tendencies have generated a permissive environment for terrorists, whether they be Marxist or Islamist.


At the same time, the security threat emanating from Latin America is particularly threatening as a result of the nexus between international criminal organizations, drug trafficking, terrorist activities and weak governments. Today, a Middle Eastern terrorist cell from, say, Hezbollah or Hamas could freely travel to the “Tri-Border Region” or southern Peru, establish a phony “business” and acquire valid passports allowing travel to Mexico, where well-established smuggling networks would allow infiltration into the United States.

How serious is this threat? The U.S.-Mexico border area, especially the Arizona sector, is becoming more

violent, and more OTM (“other than Mexican”) illegal immigrants are being arrested each year. Indeed,

In 2004, the Border Patrol apprehended 1.15 million illegal aliens along the 1,940-mile U.S.-Mexico border trying to sneak into this country between the nation’s land ports of entry, more than 3,100 a day—a 24-percent increase from the year before. The agents also confiscated 1.4 million pounds of illegal narcotics with an estimated street value of \$1.62 billion.<sup>5</sup>

That Chinese, Lebanese, Iranian, Pakistani, and various non-Latin American foreigners are being arrested in growing numbers along the U.S.-Mexican border indicates just how efficient and extensive Latin American smuggling organizations have become.

Yet, primarily because Latin American governments have become dependent upon remittances from their (mostly illegal) immigrant citizens in the United States,<sup>6</sup> local counterterrorism efforts are lackluster at best. And, in the absence of serious engagement on hemispheric security on the part of Washington, the chances of a coordinated approach to counterterrorism remain slim indeed, while the terrorist threat from south of the U.S. border is bound to increase. 

1. Aaron Mannes, *Profiles in Terror. The Guide to Middle East Terrorist Organizations* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 167.
2. Adam Zagorin et al., “Watch the Border,” *Time*, March 21, 2005.
3. Mannes, 180.
4. For a detailed examination of this new trend, see Michael Radu, “Andean Storm Troopers,” [FrontPageMagazine.com](http://FrontPageMagazine.com), February 9, 2005.
5. Jerry Seper, “Assaults on Border Agents Increase,” *Washington Times*, January 28, 2005.
6. Richard Lapper, “Latin American Migrants Send Home \$45.8bn,” *Financial Times* (London), March 22, 2005.