

Islamist Extremism and Jihadism in Latin America: A Longstanding and Underestimated Phenomenon



By Giovanni Giacalone

Report n. 27, April 2022

Islamist Extremism and Jihadism in Latin America: A Longstanding and Underestimated Phenomenon

About the author:

Giovanni Giacalone: senior analyst for the *Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies/Catholic University of Milan*, for the UK-based think-tank *Islamic Theology of Counter-Terrorism*. Team coordinator for the “Latin America Group” of the *International Institute for the Study of Security*.

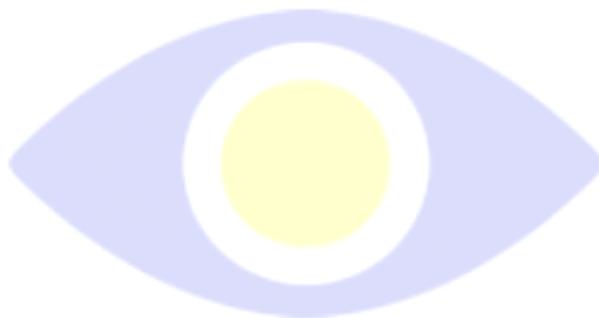
Cover image credit:

A Lebanese soldier standing beside posters of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and the then-ruler of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, in Beirut, Lebanon. Picture taken by Sharif Karim of *Reuters*, 1 December 2006.

Contents Page

Page

Introduction	4
Key Zone of Islamist Activity One: Hezbollah at the Triple Frontier	7
Key Zone of Islamist Activity Two: Salafi-Jihadists in Trinidad and Tobago	9
Key Zone of Islamist Activity Three: The Tablighi Jamaat and Turkish Islamists in Peru	11
Conclusion	14



European
Eye on
Radicalization

Introduction

Islamist extremism has been present in Latin America for around four decades, with a growing level of activity that is facilitated by a series of factors, such as widespread corruption, Islamist-friendly governments like the ones belonging to the “Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas” (ALBA) group,¹ the possibility of exploiting illicit trafficking networks, especially for drugs and money laundering, and the lack of proper counter-terror laws.

It is interesting that to date, despite its longstanding presence in Latin America and the freedom to move and operate they have there, Islamist organizations have only perpetrated three major terror attacks, all against Jewish targets, all in Argentina, and all perpetrated by Iran’s Lebanese proxy Hezbollah. This could mean that Islamists prefer to use the Latin American Continent as a hub for logistics and revenue-generating activities, as it will be discussed in the report, rather than to conduct attacks.

The first major attack, on 17 March 1992, involved a truck filled with explosives crashing into the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, killing twenty-nine people and wounding over 240. The attack was claimed by the “Islamic Jihad Organization”, a deniable Hezbollah unit.² On 18 July 1994, a Hezbollah suicide bomber drove a car-bomb against the Jewish Community Center building, the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA), in Buenos Aires, killing eighty-five and injuring over 300. The following day, a suicide bombing on Alas Chiricanas Flight 901 killed twenty-one people in Panama, twelve of them Jews; the case has never been solved formally, but both U.S. and Panamanian authorities consider it a terrorist attack and suspect Hezbollah to be behind it.³

The pioneering Islamist organization in Latin America is without a doubt Hezbollah, which has been present and operational since the early 1980s. The Lebanese “Party of God” relied on a vast networking operation, implemented by Iran after the 1979 revolution, as explained by Joseph Humire Joseph Humire, executive director of the Center for a Secure Free Society, a national security think tank in Washington DC:

“Since the 1979 revolution, Iran develops intelligence operations through its diplomatic network or cultural centers in countries such as Argentina, Brazil, Peru, and Uruguay. ... On the surface, they teach Islamic culture and offer scholarships to study in Iranian universities. But inside, they use an intelligence system connected

¹ ALBA is led by the radical Left autocracies of the Western Hemisphere—Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua—and includes some of the smaller island nations, which are generally democratic: Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines. It is telling that, in addition to Haiti, the observer states of ALBA are Iran and Syria.

² Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God*, (Georgetown University Press, 2013), p. 100.

³ “Panama says new evidence shows 1994 plane crash ‘terrorist’ incident”, *BBC News*, May 22nd 2018; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-44207991>

to the embassies to understand how Arab communities or gang work. That's how they train leaders who use religion as an alibi to move forward with the network.”⁴

Humire also emphasized the fact that most Latin American legislation does not recognize Islamic terrorist groups, which becomes a weakness in a globalized world that fights to eradicate them.⁵

Hezbollah has also been widely involved in drug trafficking and money-laundering activities, especially from its base in the Triple Frontier—the intersection point where the borders of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet. In 2007, U.S. authorities launched “Operation Cassandra”, leading to the arrest of fifteen Hezbollah-linked individuals accused of laundering millions of euros in South American drug money to Europe and Lebanon.⁶

However, Hezbollah is not the only terrorist organization that found a safe haven in Latin America. Starting in the 1990s, several other groups such as the Egyptian Islamic Group (*Gamaa al-Islamiyya*), Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), Al-Qaeda, and more recently the Islamic State (ISIS) have all found footholds in Latin America.⁷

Information retrieved from the diary of top Al-Qaeda operative Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the operational planner of the 9/11 attacks, revealed that he and Usama bin Laden visited a mosque in the city of Foz do Iguazo, on the Brazilian side of the Triple Frontier, in December 1995.⁸

The Muslim Brotherhood is active in most Latin American countries, especially in Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, and Peru. The Islamic Resistance Movement (HAMAS), the Palestinian branch of the Brotherhood, is likewise known to be widely present in South America and focused on gaining support from various governments for their cause against Israel. For example, HAMAS had a warm relationship with Hugo Chavez, the ruler of Venezuela from 2002 until his death in 2013.⁹ When, in May 2021, the Organization of American States (OAS), an international coalition of thirty-five countries in the Western Hemisphere, designated HAMAS as a terrorist organization, Argentina, Bolivia, Mexico, and Venezuela objected to the decision.¹⁰

ISIS has found a conspicuous number of sympathizers in Latin America, especially in Trinidad and Tobago where, between 2013 and 2016, around 240 nationals joined ISIS in Syria and

⁴ Lorena Baires, “Latin America must prepare to counter Islamic terrorism”, *Dialogo Digital Military Magazine*, March 9th 2019; <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/latin-america-must-prepare-to-counter-islamic-terrorism/#.Yjw30ufMLIV>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Moran Levanoni, “No Boundaries – The Syrian-Lebanese Drug Economy”, *Moshe Dayan Center/Tel Aviv University*, December 22nd 2021; <https://dayan.org/content/no-boundaries-syrian-lebanese-drug-economy>

⁷ Curtis C. Connell, *Understanding Islam and Its Impact on Latin America*, (Air University press, 2005), p.25.

⁸ Henry Orrego, “Bin Laden Trail Grows Cold On South America’s Triple Frontier”, *Arab News*, May 5th 2003; <https://www.arabnews.com/node/231366>. Also see: Maria Zuppello, *Il Jihad ai Tropici*, (Paesi Edizioni, 2019), p.18.

⁹ Jeffrey T. Fowler, “Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and Hamas all Active in South America”, *American Military University*, October 21st 2016; <https://amuedge.com/al-qaeda-hezbollah-and-hamas-all-active-in-south-america/>

¹⁰ “35-country pan-American group designates Hamas a terrorist organization”, *Times of Israel*, May 20th 2021; <https://www.timesofisrael.com/35-country-pan-american-group-designates-hamas-a-terrorist-organization/>

Iraq,¹¹ a striking number in a country with a total population of 1.3 million.¹² As will be examined in chapter two, Trinidad and Tobago has a long history of Islamist extremism that relates to the Black Power movement and the growth of militant Salafi ideology on the island. Further south, in July 2016, Brazilian authorities [arrested](#) twelve individuals, from ten different Brazilian states, belonging to a poorly organized group supporting ISIS. The cell was planning terrorist attacks during the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro the following month.

There is growing concern in Brazil about the spread of Salafism among the population of the favelas. This phenomenon has been detected in Peru, though as it will be explained in chapter three this has provided an opening not for ISIS, but for [the “participationist” Islamists](#) like the Brotherhood and Tablighi Jamaat. This aspect is not accidental given that extremist and jihadist ideology easily break through where institutions are absent and be exacerbated by a high poverty rate.



¹¹ Simon Cottee, “The Calypso Caliphate: How Trinidad Became a Recruiting Ground for ISIS”. *International Affairs*, 2019.

¹² Frances Robles, “Trying to Stanch Trinidad’s Flow of Young Recruits to ISIS”, *The New York Times*, February 21st 2017; <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/21/world/americas/trying-to-stanch-trinidads-flow-of-young-recruits-to-isis.html>

Key Zone of Islamist Activity One: Hezbollah at the Triple Frontier

The Triple Frontier, also known as “Triple Frontera”, is a tri-border intersection between Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay at the junction of the Iguazu and Parana rivers. The population in this area is mainly concentrated in the three border cities: Puerto Iguazu (Argentina), Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), and Foz do Iguazu (Brazil). The zone is notoriously popular for tourism and commerce. Its economy thrived thanks to economic liberalization and cheap energy.

However, as trade and tourism began to slow down in the 1980s, the tri-border area became a safe haven for criminal and terrorist organizations dedicated to illegal trafficking—in drugs, weapons, even humans—to the point that the area earned the nickname “the United Nations of Crime”.¹³

It is in the 1980s that Hezbollah settled in the Triple Frontier, converting it not only into a major hub for all sorts of illegal activities that boosted the organization’s revenues, but also into a base for terrorist attacks. As a matter of fact, the 1992 attack against the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires and the AMIA attack in 1994 were both planned in the Triple Border and traced to Hezbollah elements, as Argentinian intelligence services discovered.¹⁴

As exposed to the Committee on Homeland Security of the House of Representatives by Ilan Berman, Vice-President of the American Foreign Policy Council: “Hezbollah’s presence in the region stretches back to the 1980s, when operatives—taking advantage of weak regional governance and with support from Iran—began to expand the organization’s already-substantial international drug-trafficking and smuggling activities from Lebanon’s Beka’a Valley to the ‘Tri-Border Region’.”¹⁵

In the 1980s, as part of its effort to entrench itself, Hezbollah took advantage of South America’s drug trafficking business—an activity that the terrorist organization already knew very well due to its control over the drugs trade back home in the Beka’a Valley. Hezbollah reached far beyond the Triple Frontier, cutting deals with Colombian narcotraffickers who

¹³ “Good neighbours: Smuggling across South America’s Triple Frontier”, *Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime*, November 18th 2014; <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/smuggling-across-south-americas-triple-frontier/>. See also: Ieva Jusionyte, *Savage Frontier: Making News and Security on the Argentine Border*, (University of California Press, 2015) p.102.

¹⁴ Kleck, N. (2011). Hezbollah Operations in the Tri-Border Area of South America (Master’s thesis, Duquesne University). See also: “Argentine Prosecutors Link Tri-Border Hizballah Leaders to AMIA Attack,” *ABC Color*, May 28th 2003, <http://archivo.abc.com.py/2003-05-28/articulos/50080/gobierno-argentino-implementafuertes-medidas-contr>

¹⁵ “Hezbollah in Latin America: Implications for U.S. Homeland Security”, Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, July 7th 2011, <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112hhrg72255/html/CHRG-112hhrg72255.htm>. See also: David Klein, “Hezbollah in League with Latin American Drug Gangs”, *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project*, July 21st 2021; <https://www.occrp.org/en/daily/14878-report-hezbollah-in-league-with-latin-american-drug-gangs>

were dominating the scene at the time.¹⁶ The revenues from the drug business vastly contributed to Hezbollah's terror-related worldwide activities. This is a problem that still persists today, since the "Party of God" is now widespread in the Continent. In Venezuela, the group contributed to turning the country into a hub for the convergence of transnational organized crime and international terrorism, and it can now count on official institutional support thanks to the strong links maintained by Chavez's successor as Venezuelan ruler, Nicolas Maduro, and Iran.¹⁷ Additionally, in Mexico, Hezbollah members managed to cut deals with Los Zetas drug cartel.¹⁸

There has been some regional pushback. In July 2019, Argentina designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization,¹⁹ and Paraguay followed the same step two months later.²⁰ However, the Lebanese "Party of God" remains active in most of Latin America.

Al-Qaeda's presence in South America is nebulous, certainly by comparison with what the Iranians have been able to do through Hezbollah. It is perhaps not coincidental that Al-Qaeda began its operations in Latin America in the exact zone where Hezbollah was strongest, in the Triple Frontier, during the exact time period—the mid-1990s—when Al-Qaeda and Iran were deepening their relations.²¹ As previously mentioned, Usama bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed allegedly visited Foz Do Iguazu in December 1995, and the latter is said to have remained in Brazil visiting Al-Qaeda sympathizers.²² By later in the 1990s, Al-Qaeda had a more robust presence, albeit, again, incomparably weaker than Hezbollah's. For example, in January 1999, El Said Hassan Ali Mohamed Mukhlis, an Egyptian then-living in Ciudad del Este who was linked to the Egyptian Islamic Group and to Al-Qaeda, was arrested in Uruguay while on his way to Europe to meet with members of an Al-Qaeda terrorist cell.²³

¹⁶ Matthew Levitt, "Hizbullah narco-terrorism: a growing cross-border threat", *HIS Defense, Risk and Security Consulting*, September 2012, p. 37.

¹⁷ For an in-depth analysis of the relations between Hezbollah and the Venezuelan government, read Joseph M. Humire's "The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: how Iran-backed Networks prop up the Venezuelan regime", *The Atlantic Council*, October 2020; <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-maduro-hezbollah-nexus-how-iran-backed-networks-prop-up-the-venezuelan-regime/>

¹⁸ Florencia Montaruli, "Ex-Mayor's Meth Bust Reveals Hezbollah's Power in Mexico", *Iranwire*, October 18th 2021; <https://iranwire.com/en/features/70580>. See also: Daniel Valencia, "The Evolving Dynamics of Terrorism: The Terrorist-Criminal Nexus of Hezbollah and The Los Zetas Drug Cartel", *Capstone*, Fall 2014.

¹⁹ "Argentina designates Hezbollah as terrorist organisation", *BBC*, July 18th 2019; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-49030561>

²⁰ "Paraguay has designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization", *Meir Amit Center*, September 1st 2019; <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/guay-designated-hezbollah-terrorist-organization-joining-argentina-gives-paraguays-government-better-tools-deal-hezbollahs-activities-especially-tri-border-area-ser/>

²¹ "The 9/11 Commission Report", 2004, p. 61, <https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>

²² Anthony Faiola, "U.S. terrorist search reaches Paraguay", *The Washington Post*, October 13th 2001; <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2001/10/13/us-terrorist-search-reaches-paraguay/f69d9ed5-bee6-4b55-af81-cbdd43025371/>

²³ A. F. Trevisi, "Assessing the terrorist threat in the Tri-Border area of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina", *International Institute for Counter Terrorism-Herzliya*, October 2013, pp. 25-26.

Key Zone of Islamist Activity Two: Salafi-Jihadists in Trinidad and Tobago

One jihadist hotspot in Latin America that could surprise many is the dual-island Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago. Despite its small territorial area of about 2,000 square miles, and small population of about 1.3 million (5% of which are Muslims), the country contributed approximately 240 foreign fighters to ISIS.²⁴ The population of T&T is ethnically diverse, as it reflects a history of immigration and conquests: the two predominant groups are those of African and Indian heritage, both around 35% of the population.²⁵ Barry M. Rubin, in his book *Guide to Islamist Movements*, explains how in the early 1970s Michael de Freitas, by then calling himself “Michael X”, brought the Black Power movement to the island, strongly contributing to the creation of an Afro-Trinidadian Islamism that would later embrace Salafism.²⁶

Approximately twenty years later, in July 1990, a native Islamist group named *Jamaat al-Muslimeen*, founded by local convert Lennox Phillip, styling himself “Yasin Abu Bakr”, attempted to overthrow the government and caused the death of twenty-four people. However, the attempted coup did not succeed due to the lack of support from the military and the people.²⁷

Was Abu Bakr planning to establish a sharia-based State? Not really, considering that on national television he had called for a temporary government and new elections in ninety days. As a matter of fact, the so-called “coup” seemed more like a payback against a government that had been considered by the local Islamist leader as the persecutor of the *Jamaat*.

As explained by Simon Cottee, who closely studied Islamist extremism in T&T, three major incidents, all between 1985 and 1990, led to the attempted government overthrow. The first one was the murder of *Jamaat* member Abdul Kareem, while being taken by agents to a police station in the St. James neighborhood of Port of Spain; the homicide remained unpunished and this caused serious tensions between the police and the Islamists. The second incident occurred when the police raided Abu Bakr’s compound and attempted to arrest him without success as the leader surrounded himself with women and children, forcing the police to turn back. The third and most significant episode occurred when the police raided Abu Bakr’s compound once again, seizing weapons and ammunition and arresting thirty-four *Jamaat* members. According to the T&T government, the Islamist organization was expanding its headquarters without

²⁴ Simon Cottee, *Black Flags of the Caribbean: How Trinidad Became an ISIS Hotspot*, (I.B. Tauris, 2021), p.35. See also: Astrid Prange, “Islamic State and the mosques of Trinidad”, *DW*, March 25th 2017; <https://www.dw.com/en/islamic-state-and-the-mosques-of-trinidad/a-38121529>

²⁵ Central Intelligence Agency, *World Fact Book*, latest update March 8th 2022; <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/trinidad-and-tobago/>

²⁶ Barry M. Rubin, *Guide to Islamist movements*, (M.E. Sharpe, 2009)

²⁷ Kathleen M. Collihan and Constantine P. Danopoulos, “Coup d’Etat Attempt in Trinidad: Its Causes and Failure”, *Armed Forces and Society*, Spring 1993.

permission from the authorities. Abu Bakr and his followers accused the government of persecuting the *Jamaat* with the objective of physically destroying it.²⁸

Viewed in retrospect, the “*Jamaat* coup” appears more like a struggle related to territorial control, as Abu Bakr attempted to create a no-go zone under his authority that clashed with the sovereignty of the state, specifically the local police, whom he publicly accused of corruption.²⁹

At bottom, the dynamics involved in the “*Jamaat* coup” look more like the phenomenon of a gangland turf war, rather than a classic instance of Islamist revolutionary activity. This is hardly surprising, considering that T&T is saturated with gangs: over 100 of them, according to a SAGE 2018 report.³⁰ Among the mainstream ones that are currently active, there is an Islamic gang known as “The Muslims”, who are at war with the rival “Rasta City”.³¹

Despite the drama of the 1990 events, they remain generally obscure, known only to locals and specialists. What really caught the attention of the international media is how ISIS managed to take root in Trinidad over the last decade. Yet the two phenomena are linked—quite directly. According to Cottee’s study, 70% of the fighters who left the island for Syria and Iraq were from the southern city of Rio Claro. Many of them lived on or near the Boos Settlement, a Muslim community led by Islamist preacher Nazim Mohammed: a veteran of the 1990 attempted coup. Even though Mohammed has always denied any association with ISIS, authorities on the Island consider him at the center of the local jihadist network. Fifteen members of his family, including his daughter and son-in-law, joined ISIS.³² Among the foreign fighters that went through his facility before travelling to the “Islamic State” was [Shane Crawford](#), who took on the kunya “Abu Saad al-Trinidadadi”. Crawford was featured prominently in ISIS propaganda, releasing an “interview” under the title “Break the Cross” for ISIS’s English-language magazine, *Dabiq*, in 2016. Crawford was killed the following year in a U.S. drone strike.³³

While it is very unlikely that Trinidad and Tobago will become a target for future jihadist attacks, the high number of volunteers for jihad and the widespread Salafi ideology makes the island a very fertile ground for indoctrination and recruitment. It is therefore possible that jihadist organizations will try to draft volunteers from T&T for future terror attacks, possibly in the United States or against American (or British or Israeli) targets.

²⁸ Cottee, pp. 24-25.

²⁹ “The Man Who Tried to Overthrow the Trinidad Government: interview with Abu Bakr”, Vice News; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NhJDsjuOweE>

³⁰ Ericka Adams, Patrice Morris, Edward Maguire, “The Impact of Gangs on Community Life in Trinidad”, SAGE 2018.

³¹ Shaliza Hassanali, “Rasta City, Muslims take over”, *Trinidad & Tobago Guardian*, July 5th 2015; <https://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.366486.346026c34d>

³² Cottee, pp. 47-49.

³³ *Ibid.* p.7

Key Zone of Islamist Activity Three:

The Tablighi Jamaat and Turkish Islamists in Peru

Iquitos is a city of approximately 375,000 people in north-eastern Peru. Accessible only by river and air, Iquitos has strategic importance due to its location in the Great Plains of the Amazon Basin, fed by the Amazon, Itaya, and Nanay Rivers, which makes it a main fluvial gateway to the nearby Brazilian and Colombian borders. Iquitos is also part of the so-called “Amazonian Trapezoid”, the tri-border area where Brazil, Colombia, and Peru meet. *InsightCrime* has indicated that this tri-border zone is a key territory for drug production and trafficking, as well as for smuggling activities. This is due not only to its specific location, a point of convergence between two of the principal cocaine-producing countries, Colombia and Peru, and the region’s biggest consumer market, Brazil, which is also a major drug trans-shipment point, but also because of the lack of border control. *InsightCrime* emphasizes how the area is isolated jungle terrain, which has attracted the presence of coca cultivation.³⁴

Additionally, a U.S. State Department [report](#) on Peru in 2021 warned against the human trafficking activity in the region:

“In the Loreto region, criminal groups facilitate transportation of foreign tourists by boat to remote locations where traffickers exploit women and children in sex trafficking in venues on the Amazon River. Traffickers exploit Peruvian and foreign adults and children in forced labor in the country, principally in illegal and legal gold mining and related activities, logging, agriculture, brick-making, unregistered factories, counterfeit operations, organized street begging, and domestic service”.

Due to the specific complexity of this far-off and isolated area, the fervent activity of a small group of *Tablighi Jamaat* missionaries could not go unnoticed, as exposed by Brazil-based Italian investigative journalist Maria Zuppello in her book *Il Jihad ai Tropici* (“Jihad in the Tropics”), where she drew attention to the constant presence of Saudi, Palestinian, and Malaysian *Tabligh* preachers and the ferment involving their two mosques, the Nur ul-Islam in Iquitos and a smaller one, Al-Ansar, in San Jose de Lupuna: a few shacks in the middle of the jungle less than five miles west of Iquitos. Both centers have a Facebook page where they depict their missionary activity, which clearly aims to convert the local native population, as emerged in a [video](#) published on YouTube in December 2021, where three *Tabligh* activists are making locals, many of whom women and minors, repeat the *Shahada* (the Muslim declaration of faith).

Zuppello exposed the link between the Islamic Center of Iquitos and the Islamic missionary group Islamic Education and Research Academy (IERA).³⁵ Such a connection is confirmed by

³⁴ Daniela Castro, “90% of Brazilian Town Lives off Drug Trafficking: Authorities”, *Insightcrime*, September 19th 2013; <https://insightcrime.org/news/brief/90-of-brazilian-town-lives-off-drug-trafficking-authorities/>

³⁵ Zuppello, p.160.

the group itself on its [Facebook page](#) where, in a post dated 8 June 2021, it states that the project for the mosque in Lupuna was implemented thanks to an agreement with IERA.

Founded in Britain in 2008 by Anthony Green, also known as “Abdul Rahim”, [IERA](#) came under the lens of Sharia Watch UK and the Charity Commission for its [antisemitic and homophobic views](#). Green is known for a series of controversial statements, such as the one where he claimed that beating women will “bring them goodness”, that adultery is punishable by “slow and painful death”, and he also appeared in a video filmed at Hyde Park Speakers’ Corner demanding the removal of a Jewish man from his sight.³⁶

In 2005, Green was prevented from boarding a flight with a stopover in Brisbane because he appeared on the Australian government’s alert list due to his extremist views such as “Muslims and Westerners cannot live peacefully together” and “dying while fighting jihad is one of the surest ways to paradise and Allah’s good pleasure”.³⁷

Going back to the Islamic Center of Iquitos’ Facebook page, it is interesting to notice how, in the same post where the agreement with IERA is cited, there is also a reference to the recommendations provided by one “Sheikh Ahmad of the Magdalena mosque”, who “helped the Iquitos group achieve various objectives”.

The sheikh referenced is none other than Sheikh Ahmed Osman Ali Kassem, imam of the Magdalena del Mar Mosque in Lima, the capital of Peru. In February 2021, the group’s Facebook page, *Comunidad Islamica de Peru* (CIP), advertised the Imam Hatip High School Scholarship Program sponsored by the Turkish Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs), which, during the rule of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has become a major tool for the spread of Muslim Brotherhood ideology.³⁸

In February 2020, CIP shared [a post](#) to promote the demonstration organized by the Palestinian Federation of Peru and the Peruvian Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian People, outside the U.S. Embassy, against the upcoming Abraham Accords that made peace between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain.

Earlier, in May 2019, the CIP Facebook page had shared a series of [photographs](#) during the Ramadan preparations, with a background banner showing the Turkish and the Peruvian flags and the writing “*IHH İnsani Yardim Vakfi, Ramzan 2019*”. The “IHH Humanitarian Relief Foundation” is a notorious Turkish NGO that has been designated as a terrorist organization by Israel since 2012 and has been investigated by European prosecutors as a key logistical

³⁶ Daniel Sugarman, “Commission criticised over inquiry into antisemitic charity”, *The Jewish Chronicle*, December 5th 2016; <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/charity-commission-criticised-over-inquiry-into-charity-accused-of-antisemitism-1.148058>

³⁷ Hamish Robertson, “Australian bans Muslim public speaker”, *ABC Australia*, August 11th 2005; <https://www.abc.net.au/worldtoday/content/2005/s1435557.htm>

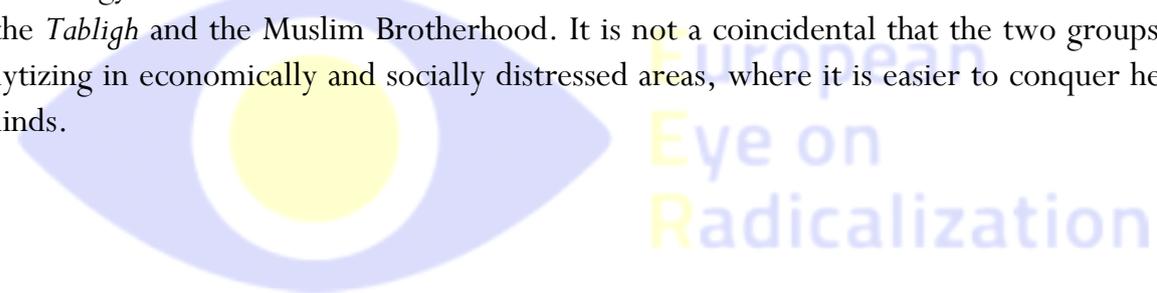
³⁸ Sigrid Herrmann-Marschall, “Why Europe Should Worry About the Converging Interests of the Turkish Diyanet and ECFR”, *European Eye on Radicalization*, December 15th 2021, <https://eeradicalization.com/why-europe-should-worry-about-the-converging-interests-of-the-turkish-diyamet-and-ecfr/>

supporter of Al Qaeda.³⁹ IHH also made international headlines in 2010 for sending a three-ship flotilla to break the blockade against HAMAS in Gaza and was accused in 2012 of shipping arms to Syria through its contacts with the Muslim Brotherhood.⁴⁰

In March 2016, Russia's Ambassador to the United Nations, Vitaly Churkin, sent a letter to the U.N. Security Council warning that three Turkish NGOs had sent weapons and supplies to jihadists in Syria on behalf of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization (MIT). Among those named by Russia was IHH.⁴¹ This should be caveated by noting that Russia, and Churkin specifically, have repeatedly used the U.N. platform to spread lies and disinformation against rival states, most recently in the build-up to, and aftermath of, the invasion of Ukraine.⁴²

In June 2018, once again for Ramadan, CIP released more [pictures](#), this time with the banner "TIKA, Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency/Republic of Turkey Prime Ministry", and [boxes](#) of donations. Turkey is apparently very generous to the Islamic Community of Peru during Ramadan.

It seems quite clear that both groups, the Tablighi Jamaat active in the Amazon forest and the Turkish Islamists operating in Lima, are not only connected, but they are pursuing the same precise strategy, the so-called "Islamization from below", which has characterized the history of both the *Tabligh* and the Muslim Brotherhood. It is not a coincidental that the two groups are proselytizing in economically and socially distressed areas, where it is easier to conquer hearts and minds.



³⁹ Ahmet Yayla, "IHH: The Nonprofit Face of Jihadism. An In-Depth Review", *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism- Herzliya*, May 16th 2019; <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/2397/IHH#gsc.tab=0>

⁴⁰ Sheera Frenkel, "Brotherhood 'buying influence with arms'", *The Times*, September 14th 2012; <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/brotherhood-buying-influence-with-arms-lt9nc0qkh3>

⁴¹ "Russia claims Turkish NGOs are 'main supplier' of extremists in Syria", *DW*, April 1st 2016; <https://www.dw.com/en/russia-claims-turkish-ngos-are-main-supplier-of-extremists-in-syria/a-19159685>

⁴² Juris Pupcenoks and Graig Klein, "Using lies and disinformation, Putin and his team have been building the case for a Ukraine invasion for 14 years", *The Conversation*, April 5th 2022, <https://theconversation.com/using-lies-and-disinformation-putin-and-his-team-have-been-building-the-case-for-a-ukraine-invasion-for-14-years-179335>

Conclusion

Three different types of Islamist extremist activism in Latin America have been discussed in this report.

Hezbollah is clearly the pioneer in the Continent, with a longstanding presence that dates back to the early 1980s, in concurrence with the Khomeinist revolution that captured Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran then used Hezbollah to infiltrate Latin America, focusing on the Triple Frontier and exploiting its peculiar geographic factors, and its favorable economic and trade conditions. Hezbollah also managed to expand to other Latin American countries where it remains present and active. Among the countries that have strong relations with the organization are Bolivia and Venezuela, both members of the ALBA group.

Peru emerged as an epicenter for Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood proselytizing activity. Turkish Islamists are openly operating alongside state institutional channels like the Diyanet and in coordination with the controversial IHH, a state-supported NGO that has appeared on the radar of European, Israeli, and Russian intelligence because of its links to terrorists. The real surprise in this picture is the presence of the *Tablighi Jamaat* in the remote northern Amazon region of Loreto. The two Islamic centers were built a few miles away from each other, with the help of the UK-based IERA, which came under investigation in Britain for its antisemitic and homophobic views, and whose leader was banned from Australia for the same reasons.

As to ISIS, Trinidad and Tobago came out as the big hub for the group, from where approximately 240 foreign fighters left to join the jihad in Syria and Iraq. This phenomenon can be linked to the island's particular Islamist heritage. Brazil also witnessed some pro-ISIS activity in 2016 when "Operation Hashtag" netted twelve individuals connected to the terrorist group, albeit they were poorly organized in their planning for attacks during the Summer Olympics.

There is a debate about whether ISIS activity in Trinidad and Brazil is really ISIS, or whether it is the spontaneous initiative of pro-ISIS individuals without direct links to the organization that created a caliphate with Raqqa as its "capital". Although some attacks in Europe, such as that at the Bataclan and in Brussels in 2015 and 2016, respectively, were orchestrated by teams under the direct command and control of ISIS, other terror attacks perpetrated in Europe have been carried out by ISIS sympathizers who self-activate and then claim their actions are on behalf of ISIS. The director of the Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues and Managing Emergencies/Catholic University of Milan, Marco Lombardi, has said that ISIS can be interpreted as a "franchising of terrorism", where everyone is welcome.

In general, it is possible to speculate that Islamist and jihadist activity in Latin America will increase in the medium-long term. The Continent will mainly be used as a hub for illegal activity, political/institutional infiltration, and proselytism. However, it is possible jihadists will attempt attacks against "soft" targets, as in the 1990s in Argentina, especially in countries where security measures are weaker.