

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved
OMB No. 0704-0188

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1. REPORT DATE (DD-MM-YYYY) 04/28/2017	2. REPORT TYPE Master's Thesis	3. DATES COVERED (From - To) SEP 2016 - APR 2017
--	--	--

4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Rising Threat of Islamist Terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Implications for United States Interests and Domestic Security	5a. CONTRACT NUMBER N/A
	5b. GRANT NUMBER N/A
	5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER N/A

6. AUTHOR(S) Pinales, Eduardo, J., Major, USMC	5d. PROJECT NUMBER N/A
	5e. TASK NUMBER N/A
	5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER N/A

7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) USMC Command and Staff College Marine Corps University 2076 South Street Quantico, VA 22134-5068	8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER N/A
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9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)	10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)
	11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) N/A

12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Approved for public release, distribution unlimited.

13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES

14. ABSTRACT
This master thesis addresses the rising threat of Islamist terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean, drawing attention to the associated security and economic impacts to United States interests in the region and domestically. It is organized in four sections: a section that discusses the historical context of terrorism issues in Latin America and the Caribbean; the Islamist terrorism problem in the region; the impact on United States security and economy; and concludes with the articulation of solutions and recommendations.

15. SUBJECT TERMS
Latin America; Caribbean; Islamist Terrorism

16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT	b. ABSTRACT	c. THIS PAGE			USMC Command and Staff College
Unclass	Unclass	Unclass	UU	42	19b. TELEPHONE NUMBER (Include area code) (703) 784-3330 (Admin Office)

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Command and Staff College
Marine Corps University
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MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

TITLE:

The Rising Threat of Islamist Terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Implications for United States Interests and Domestic Security

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

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Executive Summary

Title: The Rising Threat of Islamist Terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean: Implications for United States Interests and Domestic Security

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Thesis: The United States needs to recognize the growing Islamist terrorism threat in Latin America and the Caribbean as a regional security concern to prevent instability in the Western Hemisphere and protect the American people. To accomplish this goal, the United States should support countries in the region in identifying and combating Islamist terrorism, developing a plan to counter the influence of state sponsors of terrorism in the region, improving regional socio-economic conditions, and sustaining and improving security cooperation initiatives.

Discussion: Conditions in the region provide key benefits to terrorists looking to do harm to US citizens or American interests in the region. These conditions include established insurgency and guerrilla groups, transnational criminal organizations, state sponsorship of insurgency groups, and fragile states. These same factors, which have fueled indigenous insurgent and terrorist activity in Latin America and the Caribbean over the years, could enable the growth of Islamist terrorism in the region. Therefore, these factors should be included in the analysis of future terrorism trends and during counterterrorism planning. Although government reports have documented Hizballah's activities in Latin America for several decades, Islamist terrorism in the region is not exclusively linked to Hizballah, nor is it a threat of the past. There are other Islamist groups present in the region that seek to grow their influence and relevance to benefit from the potential advantages of operating in the region. The US government has counterterrorism initiatives in the region; however, a renewed understanding of the threat and synchronization of efforts across all US government agencies can improve those efforts.

Conclusion: Recent congressional and US Department of State reports concluded that the terrorism threat originating in countries in Latin America is low in comparison with other regions of the world. The research presented in this paper suggests that this assessment is accurate. Nonetheless, the rising threat of Islamist terrorism in the region cannot be ignored. This threat must be addressed to prevent further development in the short-term and its elimination in the long-term.

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Preface

This paper explores the security challenges currently present within the Latin American and Caribbean region focusing on the link between terrorism, transnational criminal networks, and the opportunity that this presents to Islamist terrorist groups potentially looking for safe havens in close geographical proximity to the United States. My goal is to raise awareness on this topic, discuss its impact to US domestic security and American interests in the region, current US government counterterrorism initiatives, and provide additional recommendations for improvement.

I would like to acknowledge the guidance and assistance I received from my research advisor, Dr. Francis Marlo, who mentored me throughout the process. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance I received from the librarians at the Gray Research Center, and the Leadership Communication Skills Center faculty. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my family for their support and understanding.

Master of Military Studies Requirements for the Degree

APPENDIX D

REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE		FORM APPROVED - - - OMB NO. 0704-0188	
PUBLIC REPORTING BURDEN FOR THIS COLLECTION OF INFORMATION IS ESTIMATED TO AVERAGE 1 HOUR PER RESPONSE, INCLUDING THE TIME FOR REVIEWING INSTRUCTIONS, SEARCHING EXISTING DATA SOURCES, GATHERING AND MAINTAINING THE DATA NEEDED, AND COMPLETING AND REVIEWING THE COLLECTION OF INFORMATION. SEND COMMENTS REGARDING THIS BURDEN ESTIMATE OR ANY OTHER ASPECT OF THIS COLLECTION OF INFORMATION, INCLUDING SUGGESTIONS FOR REDUCING THIS BURDEN, TO WASHINGTON HEADQUARTERS SERVICES, DIRECTORATE FOR INFORMATION OPERATIONS AND REPORTS, 1215 JEFFERSON DAVIS HIGHWAY, SUITE 1204, ARLINGTON, VA 22202-4302, AND TO THE OFFICE OF MANAGEMENT AND BUDGET, PAPERWORK REDUCTION PROJECT (0704-0188) WASHINGTON, DC 20503			
1. AGENCY USE ONLY (<i>LEAVE BLANK</i>)	2. REPORT DATE	3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED <i>STUDENT RESEARCH PAPER</i>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <i>THE RISING THREAT OF ISLAMIST TERRORISM IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN: IMPLICATIONS FOR UNITED STATES INTERESTS AND DOMESTIC SECURITY</i>		5. FUNDING NUMBERS <i>N/A</i>	
6. AUTHOR(S) <i>Major Eduardo J. Pinales, United States Marine Corps</i>			
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <i>USMC COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE 2076 SOUTH STREET, MCCDC, QUANTICO, VA 22134-5068</i>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER <i>NONE</i>	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <i>SAME AS #7.</i>		10. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER: <i>NONE</i>	
11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES <i>NONE</i>			
12A. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <i>NO RESTRICTIONS</i>		12B. DISTRIBUTION CODE <i>N/A</i>	
ABSTRACT (<i>MAXIMUM 200 WORDS</i>) This master thesis addresses the rising threat of Islamist terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean, drawing attention to the associated security and economic impacts to United States interests in the region and domestically. It is organized in four sections: a section that discusses the historical context of terrorism issues in Latin America and the Caribbean; the Islamist terrorism problem in the region; the impact on United States security and economy; and concludes with the articulation of solutions and recommendations.			
14. SUBJECT TERMS (KEY WORDS ON WHICH TO PERFORM SEARCH) <i>Islamist Terrorism, Latin America, Caribbean, Terrorists</i>		15. NUMBER OF PAGES:	
		16. PRICE CODE: <i>N/A</i>	
17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT <i>UNCLASSIFIED</i>	18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE: <i>UNCLASSIFIED</i>	19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT <i>UNCLASSIFIED</i>	20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION

Foreign terrorist fighters traveling to and from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria into other regions of the world pose a security threat to Western nations. While reports of transnational Islamist terrorist travel to and from Europe and South Asia are well known, there are also less known reports of people traveling to and from Latin America and the Caribbean to fight with the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL).¹ The “porous borders, limited law enforcement capability, and established smuggling routes,” in Latin America and the Caribbean make this region appealing to foreign Islamist terrorist fighters looking for a safe haven or a base of operations from which to launch or support an attack against American interests in the region, on US soil, or elsewhere in the world.² Relatively recent past history shows that this combination of factors is not only possible to exploit, but it has happened, as in the case of the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina, the 1994 bombing of the Argentina Israelite Mutual Association community center in Buenos Aires, the 1996 plot to blow up the US Embassy in Paraguay, and the 2007 plot to bomb John F. Kennedy (JFK) Airport terminals and fuel lines in New York by Islamist terrorists.³ Islamist terrorists operating in or with links to the region reportedly planned these attacks. The incidents in Argentina and the plot to blow up the US Embassy in Paraguay were attributed to Hizballah cells operating from the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina, while the plot to blow up the JFK Airport was attributed to Islamic converts of US, Guyanese and Trinidadian nationality.⁴ These conditions and events highlight the presence of Islamic fundamentalists operating in Latin America and the Caribbean, and demonstrate the potential to endanger the US domestic security and US interest in the region.

The conditions stated in the preceding paragraphs affect American interests in the region and US domestic security; therefore, the United States needs to recognize the growing Islamist terrorism threat in Latin America and the Caribbean as a regional security concern to prevent instability in the Western Hemisphere and protect the American people. To accomplish this goal, the United States should support countries in the region in identifying and combating Islamist terrorism, developing a plan to counter the influence of state sponsors of terrorism in the region, improving regional socio-economic conditions, and sustaining and improving security cooperation initiatives.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF TERRORISM ISSUES IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Several factors have enabled terrorism activity in the region over the years. Chief among those factors are established insurgency and guerrilla groups, transnational criminal organizations, state sponsorship of insurgency groups, and fragile states. Although the focus of this paper is the rising Islamist terrorism threat in Latin America and the Caribbean, it is important to discuss the aforementioned factors as they are still relevant, continue to pose a threat to the security and stability of the region, and in the case of insurgent groups, these groups can potentially collaborate with and enhance the capabilities of Islamist terrorists in the area.

Insurgency and Guerrilla Groups

Traditionally, terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean has been linked to insurgency and guerrilla groups that seek to conduct operations and extend their ideology mainly, although not exclusively, in their country of origin. This includes groups founded in the 1960s such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia - FARC) and the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional -

ELN) in Colombia, and Peru's Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso, SL). The US Department of State identified these three groups as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs) in 1997.⁵ In fact, the *2015 US Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism* states that "the primary terrorist threat in the Western Hemisphere come from the FARC and the ELN which continue to commit the majority of the attacks in the region."⁶ However, there are several other terrorist organizations with influence in Latin America and the Caribbean, and the latest US government terrorism reports have noted the presence and growing influence of Islamist terrorist groups in the region.⁷

Transnational Criminal Organizations

Transnational criminal organizations are a serious threat to US security, both abroad and domestically, and regional stability. Some researchers believe that "a distinct feature of the terrorist threat emanating from [Latin America and] the Caribbean is its connection to organized crime."⁸ Transnational criminal organizations take advantage of favorable conditions for their illicit affairs throughout the region such as established smuggling routes for drugs and weapons, and human trafficking.⁹ The *2015 US Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism* states that "transnational criminal organizations continued to pose a more significant threat to the region than terrorism, and most countries made efforts to investigate possible connections with terrorist organizations."¹⁰ It is the possible connections with terrorist organizations that should be cause for concern to the region, but most importantly to the US domestic security. In July, 2016, Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, the current Commander of the United States Southern Command (USSOUTHCOM), spoke at the Atlantic Council about the command's strategy for Latin America.¹¹ The Admiral stated that the strategy "centers around maintaining our competitive advantage in the defense and security sectors, countering transnational threat networks, and rapid

response to crises.”¹² Admiral Tidd also spoke about the involvement of criminal networks in the “transportation of known terrorists, recruiting fighters for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and laundering and transporting dirty money.”¹³

The 2002 congressional report, *A Global Overview of Narcotics-funded Terrorist and other Extremist Groups*, “examined the connections between extremist groups and narcotics trafficking” in a number of countries, including the following in “Latin America: Tri-border Region (Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay), Colombia, and Peru.”¹⁴ The report determined that the relationship between insurgent groups and drug-trafficking organizations is mutually beneficial, as these groups take advantage of exchanges of complementary assets, such as the exchange of drugs for weapons, and security in exchange for financial aid.¹⁵ Furthermore, corrupt government officials who facilitate access to border areas and certain protections afforded by nation states, substantially enhance the capabilities of transnational criminal organizations with access to immense amounts of money.¹⁶

State Sponsorship of Insurgency Groups

The Latin American insurgency groups discussed thus far have a long-standing relationship with nation-states that have arguably facilitated their survival.¹⁷ In a speech to the US House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, on February 4, 2014, Douglas Farah of the International Assessment and Strategy Center (IASC), stated that “the state support of Colombia's neighbors Venezuela and Ecuador over much of the past decade has given the FARC a significant rearguard area for rest, relaxation, resupply and financial activities.”¹⁸ In March, 2008, a Colombian raid on a FARC camp in Ecuador obtained evidence of Venezuela’s support to the FARC.¹⁹ The documents recovered contained information that highlighted the relationship between the group and the then Venezuelan President, Hugo Chávez,

“a relationship that endures in the [current] government of President Nicolas Maduro.”²⁰

Additionally, the *2015 US Department of State Country Reports on Terrorism* states that “border areas with Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador reportedly are used for incursions into Colombia, and Venezuelan and Ecuadorian territory reportedly used for safe haven.”²¹ Nation-state support that facilitates the activities of insurgent groups that are designated as FTOs is a cause for concern, as it complicates counterterrorism efforts. This relationship could also be an appealing feature of Latin America and Caribbean illicit activities for Islamist terrorist groups looking to expand their operations in the region.

Fragile States

As it is the case in other parts of the world, fragile states may contribute as a factor that makes Latin America and the Caribbean conducive to the spread of terrorism.²² The region has a significant number of nation-states that are ranked between “High Alert” and “Elevated Warning,” as detailed in the 2016 Fragile States Index produced by the Fund for Peace organization.²³ Fragile states pose a threat to the security and stability of their country, but also can drastically affect security and stability in countries located in close geographic proximity, the region, and the world.²⁴ A comparison of the Fragile States Indexes for 2015 and 2016 revealed that while some Latin American and Caribbean countries maintained their rankings, most countries in the region showed worsening trends.²⁵

Of interest to this paper are the fragile state rankings of Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina (Tri-Border Area countries with decades of reported links with Islamist terrorist groups); Venezuela and Ecuador (which were briefly discussed as states sponsoring insurgency groups); Colombia and Bolivia; Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica (Caribbean nations that have reported links with Islamist terrorism); and Haiti, which is ranked as 10th on the 2016 Fragile States

Index, the highest ranked country in the Western Hemisphere.²⁶ Of these countries only Colombia, Trinidad and Tobago, and Jamaica showed a slight improvement from 2015 to 2016, with the other countries displaying worsening trends.²⁷ As an example, Venezuela’s indicators of risks placed it in the “High Warning” category in 2016, which is up from the “Warning” category in 2015.²⁸ Venezuela was ranked 75th in the 2015 Fragile States Index; it ranked 63rd in the 2016 index.²⁹ In fact, per the Fund for Peace Country Data and Trends report, Venezuela has shown worsening trends since 2013.³⁰

The same factors that have fueled indigenous insurgent and terrorist activity in Latin America and the Caribbean over the years could enable the growth of Islamist terrorism in the region. Therefore, these factors should be included in the analysis of future terrorism trends and during counterterrorism planning.

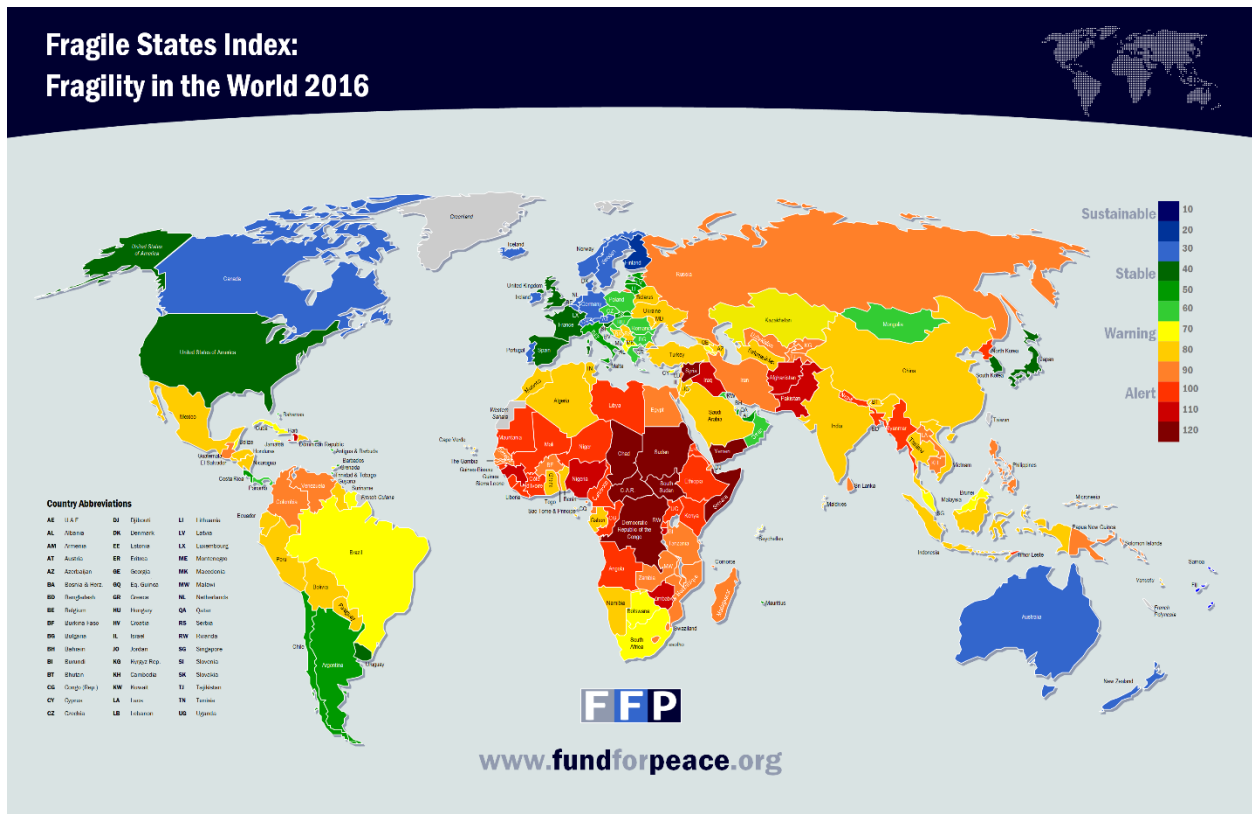


Figure 1: Fragile States Index 2016 Map
Source: <http://fsi.fundforpeace.org/map/2016heatmap.png> (accessed March 22, 2017)

THE ISLAMIST TERRORISM PROBLEM IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Conditions in Latin America and the Caribbean provide key benefits to terrorists looking to do harm to the US or its interest in the region. The geopolitical conditions in the region, the “US border with Mexico, [and] the porous borders of the Caribbean may potentially provide a strategic haven for terrorist, given the links among drugs, arms, and money laundering.”³¹

US government officials have warned about the threat of Islamist terrorism in Latin America and the Caribbean for over two decades.³² Government reports also detailed known locations of Islamic extremist support networks in the region. These locations include places in Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay, the TBA, and Venezuela.³³ The 2002 congressional report, *A Global Overview of Narcotics-funded Terrorist and other Extremist Groups*, illustrates this point as follows:

As early as 1995, Ambassador Philip Wilcox, former State Department Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism, testified before the International Relations Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives that Hizballah activities in the Triborder Region involved narcotics, smuggling, and terrorism. He further asserted that Hizballah also had cells in Colombia and Venezuela, was engaging in fund-raising and recruitment, and was receiving guidance and logistical support from Iranian intelligence officers assigned to Iranian embassies in the region.³⁴

Furthermore, a profile of Hizballah included in the same 2002 congressional report states that the group has a strategic relationship with the FARC; has direct business activities in the region such as construction, foodstuff and clothing manufacturing, training facilities in Isla Margarita [Venezuela]; and a strong presence in the TBA.³⁵ The activities of Hizballah in Latin America and the Caribbean with links to drug trafficking, in addition to help funding its terrorist agenda in the region and elsewhere in the world, may also satisfy its strategic goal. The group’s original “fatwa,” published in the mid-1980s stated the following:

We are making these drugs for Satan – America and the Jews. If we cannot kill them with guns, so we will kill them with drugs.³⁶

Although government reports have documented Hizballah’s activities in Latin America for several decades, Islamist terrorism in the region is not exclusively linked to Hizballah, nor is it a threat of the past. There are other Islamist groups present in the region that seek to grow their influence and relevance to benefit from the potential advantages of operating in the region. Groups such as “ Hamas and Egypt’s Al Gamaa al Islamiya are getting between \$300 million and \$500 million a year from the criminal networks that are spreading across Latin America, particularly the tri-border region and Margarita Island off Venezuela.”³⁷ The TBA is an ideal area of operations for criminal networks and terrorist groups. Not only is it a remote jungle region, but its geographic connection to three countries presents challenges for governments to enforce their laws. To further complicate matters, “Paraguayan and Brazilian officials are less convinced that the tri-border region has any links to terrorism, although no one disputes the criminal activities for which it is notorious.”³⁸ The TBA has seen migration from the Middle East since the 1980s; Lebanese and Syrian immigrants make up the preponderance among the 20,000 Arabs in the TBA.³⁹ Arguably only a small fraction of that population supports radical Islamist groups.



Figure 2: Tri-border Area Map. Source: Sam Pepple/Sample Cartography. Supplementary Data Provided by LeadDog Consulting. Found in “Trouble on the Triple Frontier: The Lawless Border Where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay Meet.” <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/map-reexport-trade-triple-frontier> (accessed March 22, 2017)

Warnings about the possible terrorist threat originating in Latin America and the

Caribbean have increased in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 (9/11). Recent congressional and US Department of State reports conclude that the terrorism threat originating in countries in Latin America is low in comparison with other regions of the world.⁴⁰ At the same time, these reports continue to highlight US concerns of the presence of Islamist terrorism groups in the area, while characterizing their activities mainly as related to financial and ideological support, “including the issue of individuals from the region leaving to fight with the Islamic State.”⁴¹ The number of individuals leaving Latin America and the Caribbean to fight with ISIL per the most recent estimates was greater than 100. The number on these estimates is more than two times the number reported in previous years’ estimates.⁴² This statistic is a concerning trend as returning fighters will constitute a cadre of not only ideologically motivated individuals, but also a ready source of battle experienced radicals with newly acquired skills to carry out attacks in the region. Most of these travelers are nationals of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Trinidad and Tobago is the location of several radical Islamic organizations in the Caribbean and home to a growing Islamic population. These organizations include: Jamaat al-Muslimeen (JAM) (composed primarily of Afro-Trinidadian Muslim converts to Sunni Islam), Waajihat-ul-Islamiyyah (Islamic Front), Jamaat al-Murabiteen (Almoravids, after the African Muslim dynasty that ruled Morocco and Spain in the 11th and 12th Century), and the related Jamaat al-Islami al-Karibi (Caribbean Islamic Group).⁴³ Trinidadians characterized the JAM as a criminal organization instead of a political or religiously-motivated one.⁴⁴ This characterization, which is not unique to Trinidad and Tobago, as other countries in the region have also labeled terrorist organizations as criminal organizations and vice versa, could be a problem for future counterterrorism efforts in the region as resources may not be allocated to fight the intended

terrorist groups. As its population witnesses a rise of radical Islam in the country, Trinidad and Tobago nationals have been involved in recent overseas terror plots and attacks.⁴⁵ Notorious among these is the 2007 plot to bomb John F. Kennedy (JFK) Airport terminals and fuel lines in New York. The leader of the Shiite Muslim community in Trinidad and Tobago, Imam Kareem Ibrahim, was arrested in Trinidad in June 2007, extradited to the US, and later sentenced to life in prison for his role in the plot.⁴⁶ An article published by *The Jerusalem Post* in May 2016 noted the increased number of Trinidad and Tobago citizens that had traveled to Syria to join ISIL; the article also stated that ISIL sees Trinidadians as susceptible to radical inclinations.⁴⁷

While Trinidad and Tobago has recent reported cases of Islamic terrorist activity, another Caribbean nation with citizens recently linked to Islamist terrorism is Jamaica. One of the four people involved in the July 7, 2005 London bombings was a 19-year old Jamaican-born man who had converted to Islam.⁴⁸ In 2003, another convert to Islam, Jamaican-born Sheik Abdullah el-Faisal, who became a Muslim cleric and preached in England, was jailed, and later deported to Jamaica for “urging his followers to kill non-believers, Americans, Hindus and Jews.”⁴⁹ Abdullah el-Faisal was deported to Jamaica in 2007 and continues to live there. Although, he is permitted to worship in Jamaica, he is not allowed to preach at any of the twelve mosques of the Islamic Council of Jamaica.⁵⁰ Despite the restriction, Abdullah el-Faisal remains active by utilizing other communication methods such as social media to spread his message. These two examples show how radicalized persons from the region can travel to countries outside the region, blend in with the population, and subsequently attack those countries. At the same time, an English-speaking, radicalized cleric could influence the actions of a regional audience or recruit others in support of fundamentalist agendas to the detriment of Western nations.

Current conditions in Venezuela could provide a major opportunity to radical groups looking to expand their activities in the region. The country's fragile state status, which showed a worsening trend over the last three years, and its history of supporting insurgencies, are attractive features for potential Islamic terrorists. In May 2015, "for the tenth consecutive year the US Department of State determined that Venezuela is not cooperating fully with US antiterrorism efforts."⁵¹ Among areas in which Venezuela is not fully cooperating with the US antiterrorism efforts, the US Department of State cited that a subsidiary of the Development and Export Bank of Iran, an institution designated under the US Treasury Department Executive Order (EO) 13382 for its support to weapons of mass destruction proliferation activities, continued to operate in Venezuela.⁵² In addition, as previously discussed, "there were credible reports that Venezuela maintained a permissive environment that allowed for support of activities that benefited known terrorist groups. Individuals linked to the FARC, National Liberation Army, and Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) were present in Venezuela, as well as Hezbollah supporters and sympathizers."⁵³ Another development in Venezuela with regional as well as global consequences is the reported, although not confirmed, sales of Venezuelan passports to citizens of Iraq and other Middle East countries by the Venezuelan Embassy in Iraq.⁵⁴ If the report is confirmed, these passports could facilitate travel to over 130 countries where Venezuelan passports are valid (travel to the US requires an additional visa), while providing the holders an avenue to avoid watch lists with their new names and circumvent established security procedures.⁵⁵

Ease of legal travel in the Caribbean by citizens of most Caribbean nations can further facilitate freedom of movement of potential members of radical Islamist groups or radicalized individuals within and outside the region. Over sixty percent (19 of 31) of Caribbean countries

are part of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), a regional inter-governmental institution founded in 1973 to promote economic integration and cooperation between its members.⁵⁶ CARICOM has fifteen Member States (fourteen Caribbean nations and Belize, a country located in Central America) and five Associate Members.⁵⁷ CARICOM adopted a passport issued by its fifteen member states, the CARICOM Common Passport, which facilitates intra-region and international travel.⁵⁸ In May 2015, five CARICOM members (Saint Lucia, Dominica, Grenada, St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago) signed a visa waiver agreement with the European Union that would allow its citizens visa-free travel for any kind of purposes during short-stay travel.⁵⁹ Furthermore, citizens of the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) countries (Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, Grenada, St. Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and St. Vincent and the Grenadines) can travel between member countries simply by possessing a driver's license, national identification card, voter registration card or social security card.⁶⁰

The ease of travel combined with the increase “in migration to the Caribbean of Arab Muslims from Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, mainly due to the increasingly cozy relationship between those countries and Venezuela” and the active recruiting effort of ISIL elevates the significant threat to the region.⁶¹ The examples from Trinidad and Tobago citizens traveling to the Middle East to fight with ISIL show that at least a few individuals in the region have been susceptible to the ideology of Islamist fundamentalist groups.⁶² This dynamic is further complicated and becomes more dangerous with the influence of nation-state sponsors of terrorism.

Iranian Influence in the Region

The presence of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Iran) in Latin America and the Caribbean could contribute to the growth of radical Islamist groups in the region. Although US State

Department and Congressional Reports, published in 2015 and 2016 respectively, state that Iran's influence in the region is declining, the recent state visits to countries in Latin America and the Caribbean by high ranking Iranian government officials, suggest that there is renewed interest to expand its influence in the region.⁶³ It is conceivable that with the passing of former Venezuelan president, Hugo Chávez, and the end of former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran's dealings in the region declined after almost a decade of improved economic and diplomatic relationship with "countries that view the US as an ideological opponent, specifically, the Bolivarian Alliance (Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América-ALBA) countries of Venezuela, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Bolivia."⁶⁴ However, just last year, Iranian Foreign Minister, Javad Zarif, conducted a diplomatic tour of Latin American and Caribbean "countries known for hostility towards the US, including Cuba, Venezuela, and a host of other countries believed to be providing shelter to Iranian terrorist proxies such as Hizballah."⁶⁵

These visits aimed to expand Iran's diplomatic missions and footprint in the region with the future opening of additional embassies and cultural centers. Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R., Fla.), was quoted in an article published in *The Washington Free Beacon*, in August 2016, on her comments about Iran's increasing footprint in the region: "Tehran's classic playbook is to use cultural centers, new embassies or consulates, or cooperative agreements on various areas to act as façades aimed at expanding Iran's radical extremist network."⁶⁶

The characterization of the presence and influence of Iran in the region has ranged from low and waning to growing. Speaking about Iran's influence in the region, Admiral Tidd summarized this opposing view by saying: "Some say that these so-called external actors don't

pose a significant challenge to U.S. interests in Latin America, at least in the near term. Others worry that we're ceding ground in a global game of influence and leadership."⁶⁷

A growing Islamic population in the region can also be an appealing factor for terrorist groups looking to expand their sphere of influence, and for a continued Iranian presence in Latin American and the Caribbean.

Projected Islamic Population Growth

Senior government officials have expressed concern about the growing number of Muslims in the region. In 2003, former USSOUTHCOM commander, General James T. Hill stated that "the fastest-growing religion in Latin America today is Islam."⁶⁸ Hill further stated: "we think there are between 3 million and 6 million people of Middle Eastern descent in Latin America. There are radical Islamic groups associated with that population that are using it to create lots of money for their organizations."⁶⁹ Another government report states that "approximately 6 million people of Muslim descent live in Latin America."⁷⁰ More recently, in its 2015 International Religious Freedom Report, the Department of States estimated that there are approximately 3 million Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean.⁷¹ This estimate indicates close to a 25 percent increase from the numbers it reported in 2010.⁷² However, a 2015 Pew Research Center report estimated that there are 840,000 Muslims in the region; per the report, this number is projected to grow to 940,000 by 2050.⁷³

The difference in the estimates does not necessarily mean that one is accurate while the other is inaccurate; it demonstrates the complexity of the assessments. The following excerpt from the religious demography assessment of Brazil on the 2015 International Religious Freedom Report published by the Department of States illustrates this point: "Assessments of the number of Muslims vary. Per the 2010 census, there are approximately 35,200 Muslims, while

the Federation of Muslim Associations of Brazil states the number at approximately 1.5 million. Other observers estimate the number of Muslims to be between 400,000 and 500,000. There are significant numbers of Muslims in Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba, and Foz do Iguazu [TBA], as well as in smaller cities in the states of Parana and Rio Grande do Sul”⁷⁴ Despite the difference in the numbers reported, an analysis of the sources indicates that the Muslim population in the region is growing.

Religious affiliation alone is not an indication of support to terrorism. Policy makers and government leaders must be able to balance the perceived connections between religious affiliation and Islamist terrorism, while at the same time respecting religious freedom and not discriminating against people based on their religious belief. The concern for the potential growth of Islamist terrorism in the region goes beyond religious affiliation, and rather centers in the combination of the factors described in previous sections of this paper, which when combined with other geopolitical and socio-economic conditions, make the region appealing to Islamist terrorists. These factors include people converted to Islam who are susceptible to radicalization, as is the case in Trinidad and Tobago, “where during the last three decades many of the Afro-Caribbean population have converted to Islam, and some have been involved in terror attacks;”⁷⁵ the willingness of groups such as ISIL to recruit in the region; the presence of radicalized local Muslim clerics with access to mass communication means to disseminate their message; and the regional intentions of state sponsors of terrorism.

IMPACT ON UNITED STATES SECURITY AND ECONOMY

The rising Islamist terrorism threat in the region can impact the security of the United States and its citizens domestically, as well as American economic interests and citizens in the region. The Department of State Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs states that “the United

States is linked to the countries of the Western Hemisphere by geographic proximity, shared values, and vast cultural, commercial, and demographic ties. We have a compelling national security interest in the success of stable, secure, prosperous, democratic societies throughout the Americas – and in effective partnerships with them in support of our highest global priorities.”⁷⁶ As mentioned before, the United States needs to recognize as a regional concern the security risks related to the growing Islamist terrorism threat in Latin America and the Caribbean to prevent instability in the Western Hemisphere and protect the American people.

Several events over the last twenty years have demonstrated the dangers that Islamist terrorism based in the region presents to American security both domestically and abroad. Congressional reports mention that “extremist cells tied to Hizballah, Islamic Jihad, and al Qaeda are operating in Argentina, Ecuador, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela, and pose a potential threat to U.S. businesses, military personnel, and civilians throughout the region.”⁷⁷ In 1996, the arrest of Marwan ‘Adnan al-Qadi (“Marwan al-Safadi”), a man who was linked to a Hizballah-affiliated group in the TBA, revealed the details of a plot to bomb the US Embassy in Paraguay.⁷⁸ In 2007, four Islamic converts of US, Guyanese, and Trinidadian nationality plotted to blow up JFK Airport terminals and fuel lines.⁷⁹ More recently, the increased number of individuals traveling from the region to the Middle East to fight alongside ISIL represents a serious concern for regional security, as individuals returning from conflict areas are expected to acquire additional skills with weapons and explosives and operational experience.

In March 2015, during a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, General John Kelly, then the Commander of USSOUTHCOM, now the Secretary of Homeland Security, warned that Middle Eastern individuals linked to ISIL could enter the US southern border with the help of

smugglers from the region.⁸⁰ During the hearing, Senator McCain read a statement from General Kelly detailing the concern: “in addition to thousands of Central Americans fleeing poverty and violence, foreign nationals from countries like Somalia, Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Pakistan are using the region’s human smuggling networks to enter the US. While many are merely seeking economic opportunity, or fleeing war, a small subset could potentially be seeking to do us harm. Last year ISIS adherents posted discussions on social media calling for the infiltration of the US southern border.”⁸¹ Following this statement, Senator McCain asked General Kelly for his opinion on the seriousness of the threat, to which the General responded: “extremely serious.”⁸² The type of illegal immigrant mentioned above is what federal agencies categorized as Special Interest Aliens (SIAs), “higher-risk immigrants from some 35 countries of interest in the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia where terrorist organizations operate.”⁸³ According to General Kelly, the security problem is intensified due to the limited resources available in the region, such as the lack of institutions like the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), and capable law enforcement and military organizations.⁸⁴ The infiltration of the US southern border should continue to be a concern, however, “a resurgence of illicit smuggling routes in the Caribbean corridor has raised concerns about the future of U.S. maritime interdiction efforts;” and it is further complicated, as previously discussed, by the ease of travel among citizens of Caribbean nations.⁸⁵

The rising Islamist terrorism threat in the region in addition to its impact on security also affects the economy. The economic relationship between the United States and the region is one of the fastest-growing trade partnership relationships, and wholesale of US goods in the region are larger than those in the European Union.⁸⁶ Per the Office of the United States Trade Representative, “the United States has free trade agreements in force with 20 countries;” more

than 50 percent of those free trade agreements are with countries in the region.⁸⁷ Additionally, the “US energy sector is heavily reliant on the Latin American/Caribbean region,” with more than half of its crude oil and petroleum imports coming from the Western Hemisphere.⁸⁸ Due to this economic connection, an instable security environment in the region would directly affect US economic interests.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As mentioned before, the same factors that have fueled insurgent and terrorist activity in Latin America and the Caribbean over the years could enable the growth of Islamist terrorism in the region. Therefore, these factors should be included in the analysis of future terrorism trends and during counterterrorism planning. Counterterrorism efforts in some countries in the region are hindered by “corruption, weak government institutions, insufficient interagency cooperation, weak or non-existent legislation, and a lack of resources.”⁸⁹ Although the research presented in this paper suggests that the growing Islamist terrorism in the region is not yet significant, and a recent congressional report described terrorism in the region as low when compared with other regions of the world, the United States should prioritize trying to reduce the growth rate of the problem and subsequently eliminate it.⁹⁰ Failure to do so can result in a more significant security problem in the future, which would require a greater commitment of resources to mitigate or eliminate. While Latin America has not been the focal point for US global counterterrorism efforts since 9/11, the US government has instituted several initiatives to address terrorism problems in the region.⁹¹ This paper will highlight some of those initiatives and recommend additional items for consideration.

1. Support Countries in the Region in Identifying and Combating Islamist Terrorism

Current US led assistance programs to counter terrorism in the region include: “programs administered by the Department of State, [such as] an Anti-Terrorism Assistant (ATA) program, an Export Control and Related Border Security (EXBS) program, and a Conventional Weapons Destruction (CWD) program, and measures to combat money laundering and terrorist financing via multilateral regional Financial Action Task Forces; the programs are funded through the Nonproliferation, Anti-terrorism, Demining, and Related Programs (NADR) foreign aid funding account.”⁹² Other initiatives not necessarily dedicated to counterterrorism, but complementary to the effort, include the Mérida Initiative for Mexico, the Central America Regional Security Initiative, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, and US government port security programs administered by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).⁹³ In November 2016, Representative Robert Pittenger (R., N.C.), the chairman of the congressional taskforce on terrorism and unconventional warfare, and other American officials met with representatives from ten nations in Argentina during the Regional Parliamentary Intelligence and Security Forum to discuss joint efforts to prevent terrorist financing in Latin America.⁹⁴ In addition to the initiatives mentioned above, the US should recognize and prioritize as a regional concern the security risks related to the growing Islamist terrorism threat in Latin America and the Caribbean to prevent instability in the Western Hemisphere and protect the American people. Countries in the region generally label terrorist organizations as criminal organizations and vice versa, which could lead to the allocation of resources to the wrong areas, constraint formal US assistance programs to combating terrorism, and hinder counterterrorism efforts. Therefore, the US should continue working with regional entities such as the Organization of American States, to help

with educational programs to develop clear understanding of the difference between criminal networks and terrorist organizations in terms of ideology, purpose, and recruitment strategies.

2. Counter the Influence of State Sponsors of Terrorism in the Region

The research suggests that the two main state sponsors of terrorism in the region are Iran and Venezuela. However, only one of those countries, Iran, is officially designated as a state sponsor of terrorism by the US Department of State. Iran was designated a state sponsor of terrorism in 1984, and as such is subject to several sanctions including “restrictions on U.S. foreign assistance; a ban on defense exports and sales; certain controls over exports of dual use items; and miscellaneous financial and other restrictions.”⁹⁵ Venezuela is included on the list of countries not fully cooperating with US antiterrorism efforts “pursuant to section 40A of the Arms Exports Control Act,” and has been for ten consecutive years.⁹⁶ Although sanctions are levied to countries included on the list of countries not fully cooperating with US antiterrorism efforts, given that Venezuela has “maintained a permissive environment that allowed for support of activities that benefited known terrorist groups,” Venezuela should be added to the list of state sponsors of terrorism.⁹⁷ Furthermore, if the issue of Venezuelan passports being sold to persons from countries in the Middle East is confirmed, Venezuela should be added to the list of countries designated as SIAs to prevent individuals, potentially from countries already designated as SIAs, from circumventing established procedures at US border entry points. Designation to the state sponsors of terrorism list and sanctions are important tools to counter the influence of these countries, but it is also important to counter their negative propaganda. The founding of regional organizations over the last decade that do not include US membership such as the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and ALBA can present potential roadblocks “toward integration that again emphasized a movement away from active US

involvement” in the region.⁹⁸ Therefore, another recommendation is to increase the US government’s participation and influence in regional organizations to ensure American representation on regional security matters.

3. Improve Regional Socio-Economic Conditions

The 2015 Global Terrorism Index explored the question of why individuals become foreign fighters for violent extremist groups.⁹⁹ The report stated that “one of the most pressing issues, particularly in Western countries, is understanding why individuals become violent extremists,” and went on to say that “this is an important question with limited good quality data to inform evidence-based research. Access to violent extremists for qualitative studies is limited and individuals who have joined terrorist groups have done so for vastly different reasons based on their own socio-economic, political and ideological world views.”¹⁰⁰ Despite the limited evidence-based research available, it is common to associate radicalization causes to exposure to “gang violence, broken homes, poor educational opportunities, [and] a lack of a sense of self belonging.”¹⁰¹ A study conducted by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) in 2010 on the motivations for foreign fighters joining Al-Qaeda concluded that 40 percent was due to identity seeking, 30 percent due to revenge seeking, 25 percent due to status seeking, and 5 percent due to thrill seeking.¹⁰² The fact that there are many different causes of radicalization makes it more difficult to develop solutions. However, the US should support regional efforts to determine the factors that are causing radicalization of small numbers of individuals in countries in the region and assist in the development of plans to address the problem.¹⁰³ Initiatives to reduce crime, government corruption, and unemployment can go a long way in discouraging individuals from becoming disenchanting. The 9/11 Commission Report offered several recommendations for preventing the continued growth of Islamist terrorism, to include a “comprehensive U.S. strategy

to counter terrorism should include economic policies that encourage development, more open societies, and opportunities for people to improve the lives of their families and to enhance prospects for their children's future."¹⁰⁴

4. Sustain and Improve Security Cooperation Initiatives

Effective partnerships with countries in the region not only support a defense in depth strategy to border security, but also support US economic interests. Military or diplomatic efforts conducted in isolation cannot address the regional Islamist terrorism threat. Security cooperation initiatives should be conducted with an interagency approach and should focus on improving those risky areas of the region that are likely appealing to foreign terrorists looking for safe havens or bases of operation in the region by securing porous borders, improving law enforcement capacity, and eliminating established smuggling routes. The US has security cooperation initiatives in place that addressed those areas. Different US government departments lead these initiatives. Agencies such as DHS, the Department of Defense (DoD), and the Department of State Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, have security cooperation programs in the region. The United States Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) has recognized the challenge that the increased activity in the Caribbean Sea presents to US national security, and is “working with regional partners to build domain awareness and develop capabilities to counter illicit tracking and smuggling.”¹⁰⁵ The relationship with the Government of the Bahamas, “though they are limited in their security capacity,” is critical in this initiative to keep the “third [US] border” safe.¹⁰⁶ USSOUTHCOM’s initiative to “expand multinational information sharing (MNIS) programs such as Participating Nations Network (PNN) and Combined Enterprise Regional Information Exchange System (CENTRIXS) to facilitate information sharing” will improve collaboration and threat awareness.¹⁰⁷ Port security programs administered by DHS

contribute to security by building partner nation capacity. At the same time, the Caribbean Basin Security Initiative, a program sponsored by the Department of State Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, “brings members of CARICOM and the Dominican Republic together to collaborate on regional security with the US as a partner.”¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, these initiatives seem to be isolated and to lack unity of effort. The US government should conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the different security cooperation initiatives currently in place with the aim to develop a regional approach that unify and synchronize the efforts of all the US government agencies in the region for a more efficient execution.

CONCLUSION

As terrorists’ safe havens become more restricted due to effective counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, Islamist terrorists will be forced to look for alternate destinations. The fact that Islamist terrorist groups already have established footholds in Latin America and the Caribbean, coupled with conditions that are conducive for exploitation, make the region a suitable destination for terrorists looking for new safe havens. Recent congressional and US Department of State reports concluded that the terrorism threat originating in countries in Latin America is low in comparison with other regions of the world. The research presented in this paper suggests that these assessments are accurate. Nonetheless, the rising threat of Islamist terrorism in the region cannot be ignored. The growing trend of Islamist terrorism in the region combined with mutually beneficial partnerships with regional FTOs, transnational criminal organizations, and state sponsors of terrorism continue to pose a threat to the security and stability of the area. This threat must be addressed to prevent further development in the short-term and its elimination in the long-term. This problem is still manageable. Now is the time to face this issue head on. If resources are not appropriately

dedicated to address this issue and counterterrorism efforts are not effectively synchronized, the negative implications for the stability and security of the region, regional American interests, and domestic security will be significant.

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