

Hezbollah's disquieting presence in South America

Mon, 2020-01-06 00:03

LONDON: With the elimination on Jan. 3 of Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian general who oversaw the Islamic Republic's web of regional proxy armies, attention is bound to turn sooner or later to Hezbollah, the Lebanese armed group whose cloak-and-dagger operations have been detected in places as far apart as South America and Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

Entrenched deeply over the years in South America, Hezbollah is arguably the only Shiite militia belonging to the Soleimani network that has the twin advantages of ability and proximity to consider retaliating against the Trump administration for the targeted killing of the Quds Force commander with a direct attack on the US.

As recently as September, authorities in New York apprehended Alexei Saab, aka Ali Hassan Saab, an alleged Hezbollah operative who "conducted surveillance of possible target locations in order to help the foreign terrorist organization prepare for potential future attacks against the United States."

Unlike China and Russia, the US is an avowed enemy of Hezbollah, having long designated the entire group, including its political wing, as a foreign terrorist organization.



In recent months, the State Department and Washington's intelligence community have concluded that there is enough evidence to support claims linking Hezbollah to criminal activities, including drug trafficking, in South America and Europe.

Much has been written about Hezbollah's presence in the "triple frontier"

area along the Paraguay-Argentina-Brazil border in South America. Since the Al-Qaeda attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Americans have warned of potential terrorist cells forming in this under-policed corner of the continent.

Hezbollah has been able to find a footing in the tri-border area by piggybacking on the Lebanese diaspora presence. The ancestors of South Americans of Lebanese descent began arriving in the area before 1930 and were mostly Christian.

The fact that, today, more than 5 million Lebanese migrants and their descendants live in just two countries (Brazil and Argentina) has proved a distinct advantage for Hezbollah, which tries to cultivate intelligence assets from across the religious spectrum.

Hezbollah has developed local contacts to facilitate as well as conceal its drug-trafficking, money-laundering and terrorist-financing operations. Since 2009, a number of Lebanese nationals have been sanctioned by the US Treasury for their connection to organized crime, involving drug trafficking and money laundering in particular.

Just last month, the US Department of Justice sentenced Lebanon-born Ali Kourani, a naturalized US citizen, to 40 years in prison for his "illicit work" as an operative for "the Islamic Jihad Organization," the "external attack-planning component" of Hezbollah.

Maximilian Brenner, of the Berlin-based Security Institute, sees a mixed picture emerging from recent developments. "In the US, significant progress has been made in terms of harnessing crime-fighting ops to curb Hezbollah," Brenner said.

"However, the international community is divided on the issue, with diverging interests preventing organized action to tackle Hezbollah also in the criminal – not solely in the international terrorism – context."



Jonathan Cardozo, of the Paris-based Media Research Inc., says there is obvious overlap between terrorism and illicit drug trade, but the motives are not necessarily the same.

“Americans will find it very difficult, if not impossible, to combine the war against terrorism with the war against the drug trade, especially considering the differences in agency infrastructure, personnel and local assets,” he said.

“Slow-moving bureaucracies are not equipped to fight guerrilla-style tactics of lawless – and ruthless – criminal and terrorist outfits. While terrorists and criminals certainly collaborate in many instances, it is incredibly difficult to pinpoint any grand strategy at play in Latin America between the two elements.”

What is for certain, though, is that the rationale behind Hezbollah’s “South America strategy” is closely linked to its origin as revolutionary Iran’s

most successful export.

Even as Hezbollah's domestic position was fortified by election successes and sectarian polarization, its aggressive anti-Western rhetoric and targeting of US and Israeli interests placed it firmly in the crosshairs of the two countries. On the other hand, distant South America, with its leftist political parties and regimes, was a study in friendliness.

Sympathetic South American governments granted Hezbollah a high degree of operational freedom. For instance, Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, the socialist politician who served as Brazil's president between 2003 and 2010, invested a lot of diplomatic capital in trying to forge a rapprochement with Hamas and Hezbollah as well as the two groups' main backer, Iran.

Da Silva's initiative was part of a larger strategy of increasing Brazil's outreach to, and strengthening bilateral relations with, Russia and Iran and their Middle Eastern allies, while effectively ignoring Washington's concerns regarding the presence of Hezbollah cells in his country.

According to Ghanem Nuseibeh, founder of strategy and management consultancy company Cornerstone Global Associates, Hezbollah has been active in Latin America for decades now.



The monument at the meeting point of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. (AFP)

"The organization has been operating at the grass-roots level as well as attempting to infiltrate senior levels of government," he said, pointing to the 2015 arrest of Dino Bouterse, the son of Suriname's president, for inviting Hezbollah agents to establish a base in his home country in exchange for \$2 million that was ultimately not paid.

Under the current conservative government of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil has made a U-turn with regard to its Iran policy. As an inevitable corollary, the country now has little tolerance for Hezbollah's activities in the region. Argentinian foreign policy too has swung in the same direction as Brazil.

An upshot of the rightward shift in the region's political mood was the arrest in September 2018 by Brazilian authorities of Assad Ahmad Barakat, a man the Americans have long considered a key financier for Hezbollah.

In contrast with the hardening stances of Brazil and Argentina, the government of Venezuelan socialist President Nicolas Maduro views Hezbollah as a natural ally as part of a policy first adopted by his predecessor, Hugo Chavez, who deepened ties with Iran when he came to power in 1999.

Against this mixed background, security analysts say subterfuge and criminality remain the key elements of Hezbollah's South America strategy. They say it will not be easy to cut Hezbollah down to size and deny it the ability to influence governments – or to carry out terror attacks if it wants to avenge the killing of Soleimani.

There are possibly drug traffickers active in South America who are sympathetic to Hezbollah's cause, the analysts say, adding that the fact that a group in control of 12 seats in the Beirut parliament is involved in drug trafficking and fundraising halfway across the world is deeply worrisome, even without their terrorist connotations.

Nuseibeh asserts that "it is likely Latin America will be an even more important frontier for Hezbollah in the coming days as it is a region in which the group has invested so many resources."

Clearly, in the absence of a firm and coherent response to Hezbollah's activities in South America, the organization, fired with a zeal to avenge the death of Soleimani, could pose a serious security threat to the region and beyond in the days to come.



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Yemen minister warns Houthis against turning country into theater of US-Iran war

[Egypt rules Coptic inheritance governed by Christian law](#)

Author:

AFP

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Sun, 2020-01-05 20:03

CAIRO: An Egyptian court has ruled that Coptic citizens should be governed by Christian inheritance norms, including gender equality, a lawyer told AFP on Sunday.

"Until now, Islamic law (which provides that men should inherit twice as much as women) was applied to Coptic citizens, even though Orthodox rules guarantee equality between men and women," said lawyer Hoda Nasrallah, who brought a test case.

Nasrallah said she was forced to go to court to ensure her father's estate was "fairly shared" between her and her two brothers. The court decision was based on article three of Egypt's 2014 constitution, which said Christian inheritance rules govern Christian citizens. Previous rulings by the Coptic Orthodox church guarantee gender equality in inheritance matters. Coptic Christians, the largest non-Muslim religious minority in the Middle East, make up about 10-15 percent of Egypt's predominantly Sunni Muslim population of 100 million. Up until now, a law dating from the 1940s has continued to apply Islamic inheritance law to Coptic citizens.



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Erdogan: Turkish military units have started deploying to Libya

Sun, 2020-01-05 21:55

ANKARA: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Sunday said Turkish soldiers had begun deploying to Libya after parliament approved such a move last week.

"Our soldiers' duty there is coordination. They will develop the operation center there. Our soldiers are gradually going right now," he told CNN Turk broadcaster during an interview.

The Turkish parliament passed a bill allowing the government to send troops to Libya aimed at shoring up the UN-recognized government in Tripoli.

The Tripoli government has come under sustained attack since military strongman general Khalifa Haftar launched his offensive in April.

Haftar is backed by Turkey's regional rivals, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, while the UN-backed government has the support of Ankara and its ally Qatar.

Erdogan said Turkey's objective was "not to fight," but "to support the legitimate government and avoid a humanitarian tragedy."

Turkey's move comes after the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord made a formal request for military support.

Meanwhile, the US Embassy in Libya on Sunday strongly condemned the military escalation in Tripoli in recent days, which reportedly killed and injured many people.

"This deterioration in security underscores the dangers of toxic foreign interference in Libya, such as the arrival of Syrian fighters supported by Turkey as well as the deployment of Russian mercenaries," the embassy said in a statement via Twitter.

It all said that all Libyan parties have a "responsibility to end this dangerous involvement of foreign forces, which is contributing to civilian casualties and damaging civilian infrastructure to the detriment of all Libyans."

The embassy also said it "stands ready to support all Libyan efforts to end the violence, curtail the interference of foreign forces, and reestablish a UN-facilitated political dialogue, which is the only path to lasting peace and prosperity."

Libya and Turkey signed security and maritime agreements in November last year, angering Mediterranean countries including Greece and Cyprus who also seek to exploit energy resources in the region.



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Death toll from airstrike in Libya's Tripoli climbs to 30 Saudi Arabia condemns Turkey's military interference in Libya

[US targeting 52 Iranian sites if Tehran attacks Americans: Trump](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-01-05 02:18

WASHINGTON: President Donald Trump warned Saturday that the US is targeting 52 sites in Iran and will hit them "very fast and very hard" if the Islamic republic attacks American personnel or assets.

In a tweet defending Friday's drone strike assassination of a top Iranian general in Iraq, Trump said 52 represents the number of Americans held hostage at the US embassy in Tehran for more than a year starting in late 1979.

Trump said some of these sites are “at a very high level & important to Iran & the Iranian culture, and those targets, and Iran itself, WILL BE HIT VERY FAST AND VERY HARD. The USA wants no more threats!”



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Reaper drone launched from Qatar fired missile that killed Soleimani Missiles hit Green Zone, Baghdad and Iraq base housing US troops

[Erdogan under fire over troops for Libya](#)

Author:

Sun, 2020-01-05 01:03

JEDDAH: Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan faced growing international opposition on Saturday to his plans to send troops to fight in Libya.

Members of the Libyan Parliament in Benghazi accused Ankara of “a return to colonialism,” and the African Union said it was deeply concerned about “interference” in Libya.

Turkish politicians last week approved a law authorizing a military deployment in Libya to shore up the UN-backed government in Tripoli, which has been under sustained attack since April from the rival administration in the east.

At an emergency meeting of the Libyan Parliament in the eastern city of Benghazi, members accused the Tripoli government of "high treason" because of the maritime and military deals it signed with Ankara in November, clearing the way for a Turkish military intervention.

FASTFACT

Members of Libya's Parliament in Benghazi accused Ankara of 'a return to colonialism.'

Parliament spokesman Abdallah Bleheq said MPs voted unanimously to scrap the accords, and to sever ties with Ankara.

In Addis Ababa, African Union chief Moussa Faki Mahamat said he was "deeply concerned at the deterioration of the situation in Libya and the continuing suffering of the Libyan people."

"The various threats of political and military interference in the internal affairs of the country increase the risk of a confrontation, whose motives have nothing to do with the fundamental interests of the Libyan people and their aspirations for freedom, peace, democracy and development," Faki said.

He urged the international community to join forces with Africa in seeking a peaceful resolution of the crisis, which he warned had "dangerous consequences" for the continent as a whole.



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Turkish intervention risks Syria scenario for Libya, say experts
Libya's Haftar makes 'call to arms' over possible Turkey intervention