

A Counter-Terrorism Analysis of WikiLeaks* – Brazil and the Tri-Border Area

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Introduction

The Tri-Border Area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay has seen a growth in terrorist activity in recent years. The presence of several organizations including Hizbollah, Hamas, al-Qaeda, and al-Jihad has been suspected among the 20-30,000 Muslims in the region. Due to the ease of obtaining resident visas and the lack of a strong law enforcement initiative, the region has become a center for financing terror through the drug trade and as a way station for terrorists who are training and waiting to perform operations.

Favorable conditions for terrorism exist, yet due to a lack of motivation, economic dependence on the region, and an absence of counter-terrorism legislation, very little is being done to combat the problem. Of particular concern are the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.

While the presence of Arab-Muslims in the region is not new, the recent immigration of a more fundamentalist element from Lebanon is cause for some concern and outreach and engagement is being encouraged by the moderate Muslim communities within Brazil and the facilitated by the US government.

The international community has come to a consensus that certain legal structures are needed to properly combat international terrorism, and Brazil's resistance to make these reforms casts doubt that they are taking the terrorist threat seriously.

** **Disclaimer:** Although we do not condone the actions of WikiLeaks, its staff and its sources, the information is now in the public domain and therefore it is important for a research institute to analyze the contents of the materials.*



Overview: The Tri-Border Area

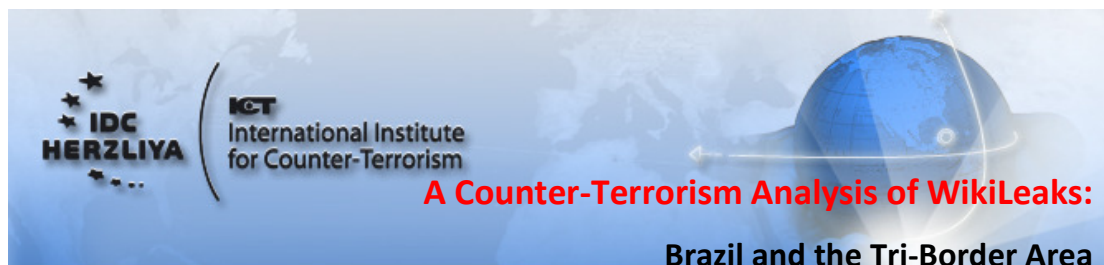
The Tri-Border Area (TBA) is made up of the Brazilian, Paraguayan, and Argentine borders. This region is defined by its easily passable borders, making the TBA an ideal region for organized crime. The three major cities in the area are the Brazilian city of Foz do Iguacu, Paraguayan city of Ciudad del Este, and Argentine city Puerto Iguazu. The TBA first began to develop in the early 1970s when the Common Market of the South (Mercosur) was signed between select South American countries to promote regional trade, creating a free-trade zone in Ciudad del Este and exploiting the energy and tourist potential of Iguassu Falls. Ciudad del Este is the main city of commerce in the TBA. All types of organized crime take place in the city including the sale of counterfeit products, trafficking of drugs, weapons, and humans, and terrorism financing. The amount of criminal activity has caused Ciudad del Este to be ranked third, behind Hong Kong and Miami, in volume of cash transactions, and in 2001 the annual turnover made the city's economy larger than that of the rest of Paraguay¹.

The Muslim population in the TBA ranges from 20,000 to 30,000, comprising mostly of Lebanese and located mainly in Foz do Iguacu and Ciudad del Este². Islamic extremist groups have been reported to have an interest in the area since the 1990s³. It is believed that terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, al Qaeda, and Al-Jihad have a presence in

¹ Rex Hudson, "Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America" *A Report Prepared by the Federal Research division. Library of Congress under and Interagency Agreement with the Director of Central Intelligence Crime and Narcotics*, July 2003.

² Larry Rohter, "South America Region Under Watch for Signs of Terrorists" *New York Times*, December 15, 2002, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/12/15/world/south-america-region-under-watch-for-signs-of-terrorists.html?src=pm>.

³ Rex Hudson, Op. Cit.



the region⁴. The bombings in Buenos Aires of the Israeli Embassy in 1992, and a Jewish Community Center in 1994 have been linked to operatives of Hezbollah and Al-Jihad⁵. In 1995 it is reported by *Veja* (a leading Brazilian newsweekly) that Osama bin Laden visited Foz do Iguacu. This suspicion caused Argentina to believe that Iran was no longer the only worry in relation to Islamic extremism in the TBA. Argentina's SIDE (Secretariat for State Intelligence) had been investigating groups that were allegedly operating under orders from Osama bin Laden and through surveillance proved these suspicions to be true. The SIDE also uncovered a plot between al-Qaeda and Hezbollah operatives to stage simultaneous attacks on Jewish targets in various locations throughout the Americas in 1999, marking a new phenomenon of opposing Islamic extremist groups working together⁶. In 2000, a plot to attack the U.S. and Israeli embassies in Asuncion, Paraguay, led to the arrest of Salah Abdul Karim Yassin who is a suspected Hamas explosives expert.

Paraguay has been the most forthcoming with information regarding terrorist activity in the TBA. In 2001 Paraguay's Vice Interior Minister Mario Sapriza affirmed that the TBA was a way station for terrorist operatives in which terrorist groups plan, gather supplies, train, and live for a period of time before proceeding with attacks in other countries⁷. This has become possible because of an effect of the Mercosur agreement. Resident visas have become very easy to obtain, and document forgery combined with the difficulty of monitoring the thousands that cross the borders each day give the terrorists the ability to move easily within the TBA and later to travel abroad, widening their targeting options.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Mario Daniel Montoya, "Israel Takes Special Interest in Triple Border Area" *Jane's Intelligence Review*, 13, No. 12, December 2001, 13-14.

⁶ Rex Hudson, Op. Cit.

⁷ Ibid.



Terrorists also take advantage of the many fundraising opportunities the TBA offers. Hezbollah and the Lebanese Mafia use the TBA to smuggle Colombian cocaine. In 2003, after the arrest of Bassam Naboulsi suspected Lebanese Mafia ringleader, an operation moving between 400 and 1,000 kilos of Colombian cocaine per month was uncovered⁸. Aside from drug trafficking, money laundering is also rampant in the TBA and exploited by terrorist cells. One group in particular that is thought to be affiliated with Hezbollah and led by Assad Ahmad Barakat, uses a shop in Ciudad del Este to launder money, concealed as familial remittances, to the Middle East⁹. A raid conducted on the shop in 2001 revealed financial statements totaling US\$250,000 in monthly transfers to the Middle East, as well as materials for suicide bombing training, 60 hours of video that show military marches and attacks around the world, and descriptions of several attacks in Israel¹⁰.

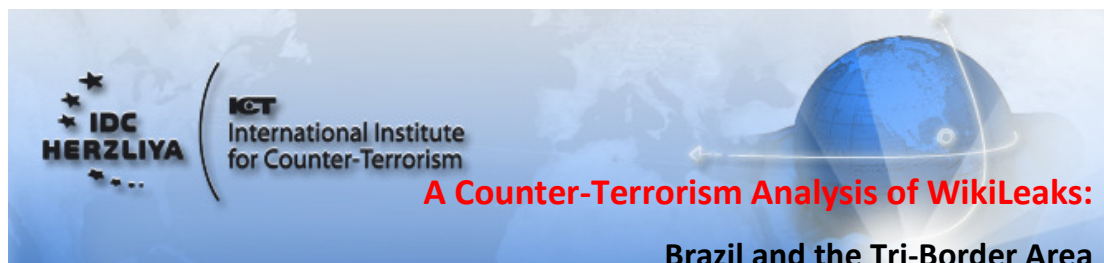
The TBA governments have been involved in efforts to stop the use of the TBA by criminal and terrorist groups. In 1996, Brazil, Paraguay and Argentina established the 'Tripartite Command of the Tri-Border,' which led to a security agreement in 1998 to better fight cross border crime¹¹. However, the institutional problems of corruption, a lack of funding and motivation, poor training, and inadequate penal codes have hindered the various security organizations operating in the TBA. Political and economic instability have made Paraguay reluctant to create changes since they rely heavily on the informal economy in Ciudad del Este. Much of the terrorist activity takes place in Ciudad del Este and while operating in

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Anthony Faiola, "U.S. Terrorist Search Reaches Paraguay; Black Market Border Hub Called Key Finance Center for Middle East Extremists," *Washington Post*, October 13, 2001.

¹¹ Eric Green, "U.S. 'Pleased' by Creation of South American Intelligence Center," *America.gov*, August 24, 2006.



Paraguay, many terrorists live in Brazil, where they are able to escape justice, because Brazil has neither a definition of terrorism nor do they designate any groups as terrorist organizations, making extradition very difficult¹². Brazil in particular continues to deny that terrorism financing occurs in the area, as evidenced by the WikiLeaks cables. Despite this view, in 2001, a decree was issued “blocking all funds being sent from Brazil to Osama bin Laden or companies, associations, or people linked to him.”¹³ On the other hand, anti-terrorism legislation was introduced in 2007 to better address terrorism in the TBA, but Brazil came under extreme political pressure from the public and was unable to introduce the legislation that would bring stronger definition to terrorism and terrorist related activities.

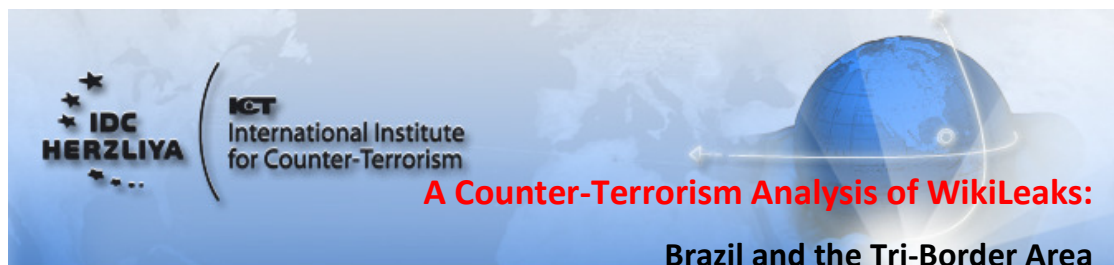
The Threat

The cables leaked from the US embassy in London, show that US counter-terrorism officials are highly concerned with the threat faced by, and potentially exported from, the UK.¹⁴ According to US officials, Britain currently faces a multi-faceted threat from Islamic terrorism – specifically, a commitment to global jihad among homegrown terrorists elements.

¹² Thomas Muirhead “Terrorism’s Triple-Border Sanctuary: Islamist World Terror from Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay,” *Global Politician*, August 15, 2005, <http://www.globalpolitician.com/21088-latin-america-terrorism>.

¹³ Rex Hudson, Op. Cit.

¹⁴ London US Embassy. (2008, 04 24). *Reports that Britain is importing Pakistani Imams*.



The message does not appear to have been lost on the British Government. In a 2008 cable, Home Secretary Jacqui Smith argues that the government repeatedly tries to convince the British public of the importance this threat poses to the UK¹⁵.

Mrs. Smith argues that the number of young people who may be susceptible to extremism and terrorism is growing, as is the likelihood that they will turn that aggression against the UK. According to US officials, the British government had determined several indicators that make people susceptible to this type of radicalization. These indicators have been derived from highly classified analysis carried out by the British government on individuals detained for initiating or supporting terrorist acts in the UK. The findings of the report indicate that for immigrants from the Middle-East and North Africa, immigration itself, plays a strong role in radicalization. Moreover, the report argues that immigrants that suffered personal disappointments or traumas such as loss of job, divorce or death of a close family member are more likely to become radicalized.¹⁶

Moreover, those individuals who hold a British passport are able to travel more freely abroad, thus increasing their access to targets in Western countries as well as reducing scrutiny when traveling to their home states. This was a contributing factor in several instances which are listed in the 2008 Counter-Terrorism Report on the UK. The two following cases exemplify the risks associated with homegrown terrorism.

In December 2009, British born Muslim, Rangzieb Ahmed was convicted by the Manchester Crown Court of being a member of Al-Qaeda and of being the leader of

¹⁵ London US Embassy. (2008, 06 06). *Home Secretary Sells the Counter-Terrorism Bill*.

¹⁶ London US Embassy. (2008, 06 06). *Home Secretary Sells the Counter-Terrorism Bill*.



a terrorist organization in the Britain. The court convicted Rangzieb to life in prison and he is expected to serve a minimum of ten years. An associate of Rangzieb, also a British Born Muslim - Habib Ahmed, was also found guilty of being member of Al-Qaeda. Nonetheless, the court found Rangzieb of being the leader of a three-man terrorist cell that was planning an attack overseas. The conviction marked the first of its kind in the United Kingdom since the introduction of the Terrorism Act of 2000 and inciting and planning terrorism became an offence. The prosecution presented evidence that Rangzieb was in close contact with high ranking Al-Qaeda members. The conviction was the result of a three-year international investigation conducted by Scotland Yard and Interpol¹⁷.

Another example of home-grown terrorism is the conviction in 2009 of Bilal Abdulla. Abdulla, is a British-Iraqi doctor who had been a physician in Scotland for several years. The Scottish police convicted him on several charges of murder and conspiring to cause explosions. In 2009 Abdulla was found guilty of the June 30, 2007 car bomb attack at Glasgow International Airport and the car bomb attacks in London on June 29, 2007. The Woolwich Crown Court sentenced Abdulla to life in prison and he is expected to serve at least 32 years before being eligible for parole.¹⁸

The second main concern voiced by the US in the leaked cables is the presence of radical foreign members of Islamic organizations in the UK who fall under "asylum status". Unfortunately, the WikiLeaks cables do not specify which organizations are being singled out for greater scrutiny, but they do refer to the following case mentioned by US officials in the 2008 Country Report on Terrorism.

¹⁷ London US Embassy . (2008, 12 22). *United Kingdom: 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism*

¹⁸ *ibid*



The case that exemplifies this concern, involves a Jordanian radical cleric and terror suspect Abu Qatada whom is accused of being Osama Bin Laden’s “right-hand man in the UK” and an Al-Qaeda recruiter in Europe. Abu Qatada’s role in supporting Al-Qaeda cannot be overstated, he was a major terrorism financier, and his sermons were found in 9/11 terrorist Mohammed Atta’s apartment in Hamburg¹⁹.

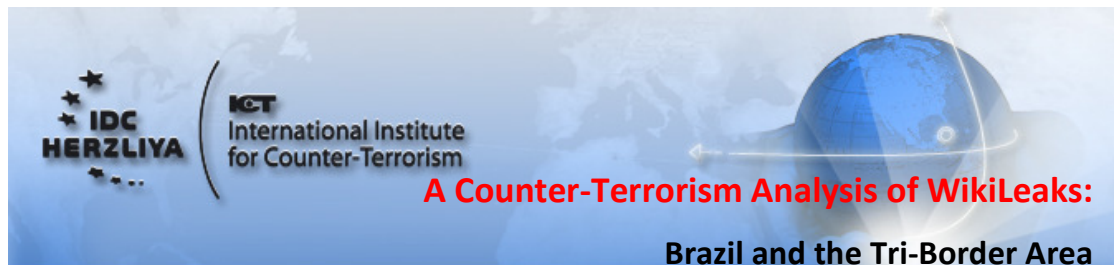
In 2008, Abu Qatada had been released from prison to serve his sentence in house arrest after successfully contending his deportation to Jordan. Abu Qatada was sentenced in absentia by a Jordanian court to life in prison for planning several terror attacks on tourists traveling to Petra. Nevertheless in 2008, according to US officials “Qatada was re-arrested after the UK’s special immigration appeals commission revoked his bail due to concern that he was a flight risk and that he might potentially breach his bail conditions”.²⁰

The Threat

The presence of terrorism in Brazil and the TBA present a threat to more than those countries directly involved. The awarding of the 2016 Olympic Games to Brazil and the geographic advantages of the TBA pose a threat to nations worldwide. The Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro provide a great target for terrorists in Brazil and the TBA. With the many favelas (slums) around Rio de Janeiro and the increased amount of high profile people, tourists and human traffic, tracking suspicious persons or known suspected terrorists will become increasingly difficult. The lack of legal institutions defining terrorism and terrorist activity will also hinder the Brazilian law enforcement from acting upon intelligence, or

¹⁹ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/1939057/Profile-Abu-Qatada-An-al-Qaeda-lynchpin.html>

²⁰ London US Embassy . (2008, 12 22). United Kingdom: 2008 Country Reports on Terrorism



preemptively investigating and prosecuting members of the terrorist groups that are known to be operating currently in Brazil and the TBA. The geographic location also makes Brazil and the TBA an ideal base for terrorist groups. Paraguay's inhospitable and scantily populated Chaco region and many areas of the Brazilian rainforest offer an abundance of hidden sanctuaries. The Mercusor treaty has also created porous borders between its member countries, and the ease with which a foreigner can gain resident status has made it easier to move between countries outside of South America. This has opened up more targeting options to terrorist organizations to targets throughout South America and North America as well.

Findings from WikiLeaks

The WikiLeaks cables regarding Brazil discuss the encouragement by the U.S. of the development of counter terrorism strategies in Brazil, the criminalization of terrorist activities, and the unique Muslim community concentrated in Sao Paulo. A major concern of the U.S. and Brazil is the presence of individuals with links to terrorism in Sao Paulo and other areas of southern Brazil. An additional threat of terrorist activity comes from the Tri-Border area located on the shared border of Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. The U.S. is concerned that favorable conditions exist in this area that could be exploited by terrorists. Brazil's history with military regimes and political repression make this a difficult issue for the government to tackle. However, Brazil has been very successful in integrating a moderate Muslim community although; there are growing concerns over a new wave of more fundamentalist Muslims emigrating from Lebanon.



The U.S. has been encouraging the Brazilian Government to strengthen its counter terrorism strategies. Its main concerns are over the presence of individuals with links to terrorism in Sao Paulo and southern Brazil, and the Tri-Border area between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. There are several suspected Sunni extremists and individuals with links to Hezbollah operating in Sao Paulo and other areas of southern Brazil. These individuals may be able to lend logistical support to terrorist organizations, by means of financing, safe haven, or false travel documents. The Federal Police, and to some extent the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (ABIN) monitor these individuals, and in 2007 arrested a suspected Sunni extremist for failure to declare funds upon entering the country. Another concern is the Tri-Border area between Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay. This area is characterized by lax border control, smuggling, drug trafficking, easy access to false documents and weapons, movement of pirated goods, and uncontrolled cash flows. The U.S. is concerned that terrorists could exploit these conditions, although there is little evidence to suggest that terrorist groups have an operational presence in the area. However, the main concerns of the Brazilian government regarding this region are the criminal activities; drug and arms trafficking, smuggling of pirated and counterfeit goods, money laundering, and terrorist financing.

An additional concern to the U.S. is that Brazil's current laws that deal with terrorism are ambiguous and out dated. In 2004 the Brazilian government believed it needed legislation to update its legal definition of terrorism, which currently does not regard terrorist activity, terrorism financing, or support of terrorism a crime. The government then began to investigate weaknesses in its existing legislation and drafting a bill to remedy those weak



points. In 2007 the bill came under extreme scrutiny by the public and was seen as a move by the government to criminalize social movements. The difficulty of the Brazilian government to come to a consensus comes from its recent military era history. During this time there was a lot of political repression, and many in the government do not want to criminalize actions, such as politically motivated violence, or groups that it sympathizes with, such as the Landless Movement. Also, the lack of terrorism carried out by Islamic extremist in Brazil, makes the threat of international terrorism a remote idea to the Brazilian government and the public at large.

The Muslim population is comprised largely Sunni who emigrated from Lebanon decades ago. They are concentrated in Sao Paulo and are mostly moderate and integrated into Brazilian society. There has been a more recent wave of Shiite immigrants also from Lebanon who have a more fundamentalist outlook and often look to Hezbollah for leadership. There is growing concern over this new group among the moderate Muslim community because of its lack of integration into the larger Muslim community as well as Brazilian society. The moderate Muslim community wishes to encourage engagement between the fundamentalists, the moderates, and Brazilian society to discourage the type of “closed atmosphere” that promotes extremist recruitment. The U.S. government also wishes to develop relations between U.S. Muslim community leaders and the Muslim communities in Brazil. They hope that by fostering a connection they will “bolster mainstream Islam in Brazil, highlight the importance of freedom of religion in America, the diversity of Islam in America, and debunk the myths that exist about Islam in America.” Additionally it would further the Sao Paulo Muslim community’s effort to spread its “interfaith relations... with other Muslim communities around the World.”



From the discussions in these documents there seem to be few inside the Brazilian government interested in terrorism issues, and even less who see the need for new legislation criminalizing terrorist activities. While Brazilian security and law enforcement agencies have recognized the threat of terrorist activity in the Tri-Border Area and Sao Paulo, their ability to adapt the current legal tools to successfully countering terrorism in the area is another deterrent to the Brazilian government to implement changes and creates a lack of “evidence” the Brazilian government uses to argue against the need for change. The U.S. government receives intelligence on counter terrorism in Brazil from the Brazilian government itself, and therefore sees the Brazilian call for “evidence” in two ways. First as a lack of communication between the government and its intelligence agency, and second as the Brazilian government not considering the intelligence provided as evidence of terrorist activity because it does not fit their legal tools or because “it does not meet a presumed higher threshold of what constitutes terrorist-related activity.” Considering the government’s disbelief that terrorism is a problem within the country and the lack of support from the Brazilian public for a strong stance against terrorism it is not surprising the government does not see a need to include costly and unpopular counter terrorism policies in its agenda. The international community however, has come to a consensus that certain legal structures are needed to properly combat international terrorism, and Brazil’s resistance to make these reforms casts doubt that they are taking the terrorist threat seriously.

The WikiLeaks cables analyzed in this paper do not reveal the full extent of British CT efforts. Nevertheless, some interesting facts and opinions emerge. According to the cables, the British and the US governments see domestic radicalization as the



primary trigger of terrorism. Two important examples have been brought forward in the Department of State's 2008 country report. Both examples address radical Muslim individuals who aided terrorists and perpetrated attacks on British soil. Additionally, the US government is concerned about the presence of foreign terrorists living in the United Kingdom under the shield of asylum seekers. There is a danger to both the UK and the US that these individuals are able to recruit and radicalize British citizens as well as travel internationally with all the advantages and protections provided with a UK passport. The response to this threat has been the CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy. The *Prevent* aspect of this strategy has been revised, as of 2011, in an attempt to increase its effectiveness and efficiency through greater accountability, increased data collection, specific targeting of at risk individuals, and by making greater use of the internet. The US and the UK are working closely to find approaches that are specifically honed to the local communities with the US having direct involvement on the part of the embassy in both public and governmental arenas. Cables reveal that cooperation and efforts by

American authorities are strong and pro-active. Nonetheless, US officials remark that by 2008 the British had not transposed the strategy into clear policy for all levels of the bureaucracy and the express their desire to see significant changes put into effect.