



Center for a Secure Free Society Global Dispatch



Turning the Tables: How Brazil Defeated an ISIS Threat

by Leonardo Coutinho

For several decades, Brazil has been criticized for serving as a haven for Islamist extremists in South America. Foz da Iguaçu, a southwestern Brazilian city within the Tri-Border Area, at the crossroads of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil, was used as a logistical base to carry out the 1994 terrorist attack on the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina* (AMIA) in Buenos Aires.¹ Brazil's historic lack of legislation for effectively combatting terrorism, further incentivized a larger presence of Islamist militants in the country leading to several sanctions by the U.S. Treasury since 2004.²

On March 16, 2016, the legal conditions changed when the Brazilian Parliament passed its first antiterrorism law, despite opposition from left-leaning political and social movements. Those opposed to the law believed it “unnecessary,” viewing it unlikely that terror groups at home or abroad would “import” the threat of terrorism to a country that's never suffered such an attack. Recent events proved its opponents wrong merely four months after the new law went into effect. On July 21, 2016, Brazilian federal police arrested twelve ISIS sympathizers for plotting a terrorist attack at the Rio Summer Olympics. One year later, on May 4, 2017, Brazilian courts upheld the charges against those arrested, convicting eight of them of terrorist crimes. One more was sentenced a month later, sending to prison a total of nine Jihadists in what is the first Islamist terror conviction in Latin America's history.

This Dispatch describes the environment and circumstances that led to the first antiterrorism law in Brazil, detailing Brazil's evolution from a country poorly informed of the Islamist terror threat to the first country to successfully try and convict Islamist extremists in Latin America for terrorist activity.

South America's Terror Base

Brazil has never suffered an attack from an Islamist terror group. Brazilians, therefore, have never conceived of the global jihadist movement as an imminent national security threat, while political leaders in Brazil felt little public pressure to directly confront or even acknowledge the issue. Nonetheless, Brazil is known within the counterterrorism community as a prominent haven for members of Islamist terror

groups, especially those conducting financial or intelligence support to terrorist operations.

In the 1980s, high-level Hezbollah operatives, sponsored by the Islamic Republic of Iran, made Brazil an important logistical hub for the AMIA attack. Argentine special prosecutor Alberto Nisman revealed that when the Iranian mastermind of the AMIA attack, Mohsen Rabbani, arrived in Argentina in 1983,³ Tehran deployed Shi'ite cleric Taleb Hussein al-Khazraji to Brazil.⁴ Al-Khazraji created Centro Islâmico no Brasil (Arresala) and was imam of the Prophet Mohammed Mosque now known as the Brás Mosque in an immigrant neighborhood of São Paulo.⁵

Brazil is known within the counterterrorism community as a prominent haven in Latin America for members of Islamist terror groups.

In tandem with Rabbani in Argentina, Al-Khazraji helped spread much more than the Islamic faith throughout the region from his post in Brazil. According to the AMIA investigation, both clerics worked as undercover Iranian intelligence agents, collecting information and recruiting supporters in South America on behalf of the Islamic Republic. Operating under the cover of *halal* (Islamic dietary law) beef inspectors, both Iranian clerics received guidance and instruction from Iranian embassies in Buenos Aires and Brasilia, respectively.

“The strategic alliance between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah is very tight in the ‘Tri-border Area.’ Moreover, it exceeded those boundaries reaching other Brazilian cities such as São Paulo and Curitiba. A report from the Brazilian Federal Police states that radicalized Lebanese Shias, members of the terrorist organization Hezbollah, and Sunnis related to Hamas, the Islamic Jihad and Gamat AllIslamiyah, were detected particularly in the Brazilian States of São Paulo, Paraná and the Federal District.”⁶

(...)

Ahmad-Nia, Civil Attaché of the Iranian Embassy in Brasília between 1991 and 1993, would have worked as an Intelligence agent (VEVAK). About him, Mesbahi⁷ also stated that during operative actions this person was “in situ”, from where he directed and solved potential logistic problems. It is striking that he entered Argentina on March 16, 1992 and left on March 18, 1992, that is, the previous and the following day of the Israeli Embassy bombing in Buenos Aires.⁸

According to Nisman, São Paulo, Brazil’s largest city, is an important hub for Hezbollah in South America.⁹ This includes members of the Barakat clan¹⁰ in Foz do Iguaçu and Sheik Bilal Mohsen Wehbe,¹¹ the religious leader of the Brás Mosque in São Paulo, all sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control for suspected links to Hezbollah. According to the Treasury Department, Wehbe is recognized as one of the leaders of the Shiite militia in Brazil.¹² Another important Hezbollah operative is Farouk Abdul Hay Omairi, arrested with his son, Kaled Omairi, for cocaine trafficking in 2007. Both son and father had already been targeted by U.S. authorities, identified a year earlier as important members of Hezbollah’s financial apparatus in the TBA.¹³ At the time, however, Brazil had no anti-terror legal framework, thus, Farouk and Kaled Omairi were charged with drug trafficking and sentenced to eleven years and eight months in prison.

Brazil’s role as a terrorist haven extends beyond Hezbollah, as evidenced by the 2009 arrest of an Al-Qaeda operative secretly living in São Paulo.¹⁴ A Lebanese native, Khaled Hussein Ali had been identified by the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) as a high-



Farouk Omairi is one of Hezbollah’s top operators in the TBA, arrested and convicted for drug trafficking in Brazil.

ranking member of the communications team for Al-Qaeda’s Jihad Media Battalion (JMB). Using this information, the Brazilian Federal Police found and arrested Ali. Unfortunately, without the appropriate anti-terrorism legal infrastructure in place, he could not

be tried for his terrorist activity. Ali was instead charged and convicted for the crime of racism, a legal offense under Brazilian law, despite having been responsible for the translation of Al-Qaeda’s propaganda material and one of the group’s principal broadcasters of its radical messaging in the region.¹⁵

Cases like Khaled Hussein Ali (Al-Qaeda) and Farouk Abdul Hay Omairi (Hezbollah) illustrate how Islamist terror organizations have historically taken advantage of Brazil’s lack of antiterrorism laws to operate in a state of legal grace. Even

when the suspects were caught and arrested, the legal infrastructure in Brazil made it difficult for the judiciary to effectively punish terror activity. Because of this, those involved with extremist terror groups in Brazil had to be tried for other types of crimes, such as the cases of Khaled Hussein Ali (al-Qaeda) for racism and Farouk Abdul Hay Omairi (Hezbollah) for drug trafficking. Under former Brazilian President Luis Inácio Lula de Silva, the social and legal aspects of this environment became especially complicated.



Khaled Hussein Ali, operative for Al-Qaeda in Brazil, convicted of racism

A Legal Vacuum

Under Lula de Silva’s administration, talk of implementing effective antiterrorism legislation halted. The government believed such legislation would push Brazil into the middle of a conflict in which it had no part and would place the country into the spotlight of global terrorism. In 2006, the administration organized an event in Brasília called *Why (not) Designate Terrorism in Brazil?* The event underscored the government’s opposition to passage of anti-terror legislation in the country.

During the event, then Secretary of Legislative Affairs for the Ministry of Justice, Pedro Abramovay, declared that Brazil would not “criminalize legitimate social movements,”¹⁶ adding that Brazil does not treat “members fighting for legitimate social causes as terrorists.”¹⁷

Though this statement referred exclusively to local movements like the Landless Workers' Movement or MST,¹⁸ the Brazilian government did not recognize foreign groups like Hezbollah or Hamas as terror groups, making the punishment of their members for fundraising and planning in support of terrorist operations all but impossible. The Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*—PT) in Brazil not only refused to draft anti-terror legislation, but actively blocked other anti-terror legislative proposals from passing the legislative process in Brazil.¹⁹

Brazil's anti-terror legal vacuum is perhaps most exemplified by the failure to detain and apprehend Iranian cleric Mohsen Rabbani when he was in Brazil in 2010,²⁰ despite the Interpol Red Notice issued for his role in the 1994 AMIA bombing. This failure allowed various other well-known terrorists to visit and travel throughout Brazil with ease.

In January 2016, Saudi Sheik Muhammad al-Arifi was in Brazil²¹ visiting the Pari Mosque in São Paulo. Known for his radical sermons, in which he defends the killing of infidels, Al-Arifi also visited a prayer house in a *favela* (Brazilian shanty town), promising to fund the expansion of *musallas*²², which are small prayer houses (not led by a sheik) used to spread Islam. This should have raised a red flag for Brazilian authorities, as young people living in *favelas*, with little access to education or economic mobility, are often targeted for radicalization by extremists. Though the Brazilian Federal Police kept a close watch on him, Al-Arifi left Brazil without incident. This is just one example of the freedom of movement that well-known Islamists and other terrorists enjoyed in a Brazil free of anti-terror legal consequences, and the risks such unfettered access and mobility posed for Brazilian society.

Like fish in the ocean, Islamist terror groups have found a niche in a growing Muslim community within Brazil. Brazil is a country of 208 million inhabitants, 87 percent of whom are Christian, but there is a small but growing Muslim community. While only 35,000 Brazilians self-declare as Muslim according to the 2010 Brazilian census, the Brazilian Islamic Federation estimates 1.5 million Muslims are currently residing in Brazil.²³ Most Muslims in Brazil are of Lebanese or Syrian descent and live in São Paulo and Parana state, with the largest Muslim community in Iguassu Falls (Foz de Iguaçu), near the Tri-Border Area.

There are approximately 115 mosques



Saudi Sheikh Muhammad al-Arifi (in white) visits Brazil in 2016. He is barred from entry in several countries.

and 94 Islamic centers operating in Brazil. In 2002, there were only 59 centers and in 1983, there were merely 33.²⁴ This represents a significant growth of Islam in Brazil that has been a focus of Islamist elements from around the world. Moreover, from 2001 to 2011, the number of Brazilians converting to Islam increased 25 percent.²⁵ While the clear majority of Brazilian Muslims are, no doubt, peaceful citizens, the spread of radical Islamist ideology has also led to the development of such groups as the "Defenders of Sharia," to which the plotters of Operation Hashtag (the name used by federal authorities to designate the operation neutralizing the Rio Olympics attempted plot) were affiliated. For decades, jihadists exploited the lack of an adequate legal landscape in Brazil to recruit, train, plan, and fundraise in support of global terrorist operations moving under the guise of established mosques and Islamic centers. This changed in 2016.

A New Antiterrorism Law

Brazil's long history of civil and political strife, with military governments identifying radical groups as "terrorists," has made the term a lightning rod of controversy in the country. In 1970, for example, former president Dilma Rousseff was arrested for allegedly participating in the underground guerrilla movement Revolutionary Armed Vanguard Palmares (VAR Palmares), labelled a terrorist group by the military junta at the time. Many of Brazil's left-wing activists have similar backgrounds during the period of military dictatorship and resent the designation. Moreover, activist and civil rights organizations feared that anti-terror legislation could be used

against them.

The word “terrorism” appears twice in the text of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Brazil, enacted in 1988. The first reference appears in Article 4, where it is explicitly rejected as one of the foundations of Brazilian foreign policy.²⁶ The other reference lends a more criminal dimension to the word because it is listed among other crimes that are unpardonable, such as torture and drug-trafficking.²⁷ Though the country’s most important legal text recognized terrorism as a real, criminal act to be combatted, Brazil’s ambivalence toward terrorist activity lasted for almost three decades. The country was a signatory of major international laws and pacts against terrorism, but at the same time it avoided creating any domestic law that established an explicit definition of what constituted terrorist activity.

After the 9/11 attacks in the United States, a conversation began in Brazil regarding terrorism and the need to protect the country from similar threats. Just two months later, Brazilian authorities drafted a law that anticipated the country’s foray into anti-terror legislation, enabling the state to assume responsibility in the event of a terrorist attack involving Brazilian aircraft.²⁸ Over the next five years, the Brazilian government produced a series of enabling acts and decrees regarding international treaties on security and countering terrorism and terror financing. However, the previous administration still avoided establishing the country’s own anti-terror legal framework, arguing that criminalizing terror organizations would only push Brazil into a worldwide confrontation in which it did not want to participate.

In 2013, when a new law regarding criminal organizations was passed, Brazil took its first steps toward criminalizing terrorist groups.²⁹ The law considered criminally culpable those that carried out attacks, but also those involved in planning them both within Brazil and abroad. The law, however, still fell short of explicitly addressing terrorism and proved insufficient for tackling the more complex elements of the issue.

Many in the Brazilian national security community saw this attempt as a palliative measure aimed at appeasing those who pushed for a better defined anti-terror law. The Brazilian Parliament received a series of proposals for the definition of terrorism as a criminal act and the establishment of appropriate punishments for those who committed it, but every measure

negotiated in the Parliament failed³⁰ due to lack of interest from the PT administration and its allies. Evidently, the PT and its allies did not wish to see the enactment of a stronger anti-terror law in the country.

In 2015, however, in the lead up to the Summer Olympics, the Rousseff government began a review of its anti-terrorism policy. That June, President Rousseff directed the Parliament to define the concept of terrorism and all crimes associated with it, including terror financing.³¹ The message included a signed letter from Justice Minister José Eduardo Cardozo and Finance Minister Joaquim Levy, whose ministries would implement security and financial measures in compliance with any new law.³²

It is debatable whether the change in attitude between two consecutive PT administrations (Lula’s and Dilma’s) reflected a newfound understanding of the threat that global terrorism posed for Brazil. Most likely, the attitude change came out of fear of being listed by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) as uncooperative in combatting terrorism. Despite the PT’s objections³³ to establishing effective anti-terror legislation before the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, then President Dilma Rousseff signed Law No. 13.260 to regulate section XLIII of article 5 of the Constitution, establishing a new anti-terror law, which went into effect on March 16, 2016.³⁴

Operation Hashtag



The ISIS affiliate in Brazil discusses executing an attack at the Río Olympics. It’s an “opportunity to enter paradise,” they say.

Brazil did not have to wait long to put its new anti-terror law to the test. In late 2015, the government had acquired evidence that ISIS was recruiting Brazilian citizens.³⁵ According to documents from the intelligence communities

of various countries, ISIS recruiters had added Brazil to their “routes,” primarily looking to enlist young “lone wolves.” Only two months after the new anti-terror law was passed, the FBI sent information detailing a group of Brazilians that were promoting the Islamic State on the internet. According to the FBI, the Brazilian suspects under investigation presented a potential risk to Brazil during the upcoming Summer Olympic Games, which were set to start a few months later. This sentiment is echoed in the transcription sent to Brazil:

“The FBI would like to provide your service with information regarding Brazil-based individuals who use their social media accounts to express support for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). The FBI assesses these individuals may pose a threat to national security and the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.”³⁶

Just 14 months after the introduction of its first anti-terror law, Brazil saw its first terrorist conviction sentencing eight Brazilians for promoting an ISIS affiliate.

Following this lead, the Brazilian Federal Police opened an investigation into suspicious activity by tracking social media networks (Twitter and Facebook) and closed-group communications through the Telegram app. The investigation uncovered an active ISIS affiliate in Brazil³⁷ made up of twelve Brazilians, who were arrested exactly two weeks prior to the start of the Rio Olympics.³⁸

Unaccustomed to cases of this kind, Brazilian society and much of the media did not understand the magnitude of the allegations against the suspects, and the operation received strong public criticism. With no prior history of Islamist terrorism on Brazilian soil and a new anti-terror law in place for just four months, the idea that Brazil could be at such risk seemed implausible, especially after the Olympic Games passed without incident. The investigation and the subsequent arrests, however, underscored the real terror threat posed to Brazil.

In the following months, Brazilian Federal Police carried out a series of other operations, arresting and seizing the computers and cellphones of more than 20 other suspects involved with the ISIS cell in Brazil. Among the arrested was Matheus Barbosa da Silva. Analysis of Barbosa’s electronic equipment, seized by the Federal Police, revealed the then 17-year-old had operated under the pseudonym Ismail Abdul Jabbaar al-Brazili, and was an active ISIS recruiter wanted by Brazilian police.³⁹

Al-Brazili (Barbosa da Silva) converted to Islam in 2013 when he was living in Roswell, Georgia. After his conversion, he frequented the local mosque, Roswell Community Masjid.⁴⁰ Under another pseudonym, Mahmod Silva, he created a YouTube channel where he began posting content in support of his “idol,” Osama bin Laden.⁴¹ The FBI used his videos to track down Barbosa da Silva and his family, who were living illegally in the United States, and were deported back to Brazil in 2015.

In several intercepted conversations, Al-Brazili revealed that he remained in contact with ISIS extremists in the United States and was awaiting further instruction from them regarding future attacks to be carried out in Brazil.⁴² Among the targets identified by Al-Brazili’s cell were Jewish entities in the country.⁴³ His case was separated from Operation Hashtag so he could be tried in a local court due to his status as a minor.

Making History

Just 14 months after the introduction of Brazil’s first anti-terror law, the country saw its first terrorist conviction.⁴⁴ On May 4, 2017, Federal Judge Marcos Josegrei da Silva sentenced eight Brazilians for promoting an Islamist terrorist organization.⁴⁵ According to the sentencing, Leonid El Kadre de Melo was the leader of the ISIS affiliate in Brazil, earning him the longest sentence: 15 years, ten months, and five days in prison. His status amongst the others investigated was proven in messages intercepted by the Federal Police, in which he gave orders to the other members of the cell. His sentence was also influenced by the fact that Brazilian law requires that recidivism, or the tendency of criminals to reoffend, be considered when deciding upon a sentence. El Kadre had already been convicted



The first convicts of Islamist terrorism in Brazil and Latin America. They were part of the ISIS affiliate that planned an attack on the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro. Their leader is highlighted in red.

of homicide in 2005, when he was sentenced to thirteen years in jail after stoning an accomplice to death to keep all the money they had robbed together.⁴⁶ As a result, his sentence was ten years longer than any of the others' sentences.

Unlike the July 2016 police arrests that received criticism from the Brazilian press, Judge Josegrei da Silva's ruling on El Kadre's case received public praise. The country's first conviction of terrorism, and the region's first sentencing of Islamist-inspired terrorists, validated the movement that had advocated for the drafting of effective anti-terror legislation and solidified Brazil's role in the fight against global terror.

Regardless of Brazil's considerable distance from the conflicts in the Middle East and having never been attacked by Islamist terrorists, Judge Josegrei de Silva ruling identified ISIS as an extra-regional actor and highlighted the global following the group developed in Brazil by using the internet to recruit members and coordinate attacks all over the world.

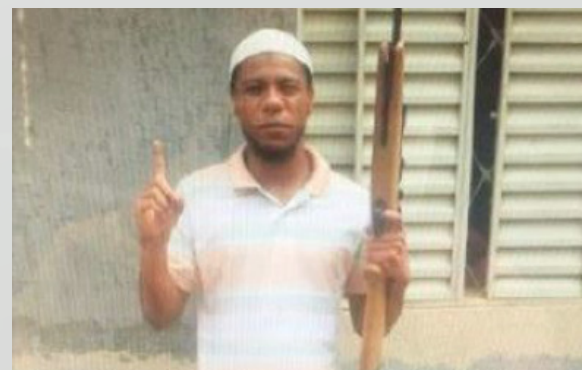
"The matter is extremely serious because it does not matter geographically whether [a member] comes from the Middle East or from any other caliphate that the terrorist organization claims to have established. Any individual, in any part of the world, can align with terrorist goals, promote the group, promise loyalty (bayat) to the caliphate, and start to act alone or to organize the formation of a cell to carry out terrorist activities."⁴⁷

In July 2017, Federal Judge Alaôr Piacini added Isac Pinheiro dos Santos to the list of those convicted of terrorism, sentencing him to six years and nine months in prison.⁴⁸ In his ruling, Judge

Piacini lists out Santos's criminal history. Prior to his radicalization, Santos had already been convicted for robbery, illegal possession of a weapon, and attempted murder. In his ruling, Judge Piacini argued that the defense used by many of the suspects—that they were victims of religious radicalization—did not apply in this case, because while the Brazilian Constitution guarantees religious freedom, that freedom

does not protect criminal activity like that uncovered in the investigation.⁴⁹ Judge Piacini's ruling further underscored the tactics used by radical Islamist movements who use religious freedom as a disguise for financing, organizing, and executing criminal force against civil society.

In June 2017, Federal Judge Marcos Josegrei da Silva upheld charges of terrorism against five more operatives that formed part of the ISIS affiliate in Brazil.⁵⁰ According to the indictment



Isac dos Santos, Brazilian extremist from ISIS

presented by the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, the defendants had demonstrated explicit intention to commit terrorist attacks at the Rio Summer Olympics. Federal prosecutor Rafael Brum Miron pointed out that it is characteristic of ISIS to encourage individual or "lone wolf" attacks.

Federal prosecutor Miron spotlighted three defendants—Ahmad Al Khatib, Antônio Andrade dos Santos Júnior, and Vitor Barbosa Magalhães—who were not convicted of terrorism



Brazilian extremists around ISIS flag: Extremists Antonio Andrade and Vitor Barbosa escaped terrorist convictions because their trials predated the new anti-terror law

because they had been tried before the new anti-terror law took effect. In the indictment sent to the Supreme Court, the prosecutor reaffirmed that the Federal Police had found “hard evidence” of the defendants’ support and promotion of the Islamic State. Andrade and Magalhães travelled to Egypt with financial help from Al Khatib to “study” the Islamic religion in Alexandria. According to files found on the defendant’s cellphones and computers, Al Khatib sent instructions to Andrade on how to pledge loyalty to ISIS. In statements to the Federal Police, Andrade admitted to being a follower of ISIS, but said he had abandoned the group over disagreements on certain issues. Magalhães expressed interest in migrating to Syria where he could join the ranks of ISIS. It is apparent that the defendants destroyed all compromising evidence weeks before Operation Hashtag began.

The Brazilian Example

Brazil carried out the first criminal trial—and the first conviction—of Islamist terrorists in Latin America, setting an important legal precedent for the region. A conviction of Islamist terrorists after less than a year in prison is an extraordinary feat for a country with hardly any experience dealing with Islamist terrorist activity. Even Argentina, the victim of multiple terror attacks on the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 and the AMIA in 1994, has yet to bring the perpetrators to justice some 23 years later.

Operation Hashtag was labeled

“excessive” by its critics, but the Federal Police, the public prosecutor’s office, and the judiciary refused to give in to public opinion and pressure. Coupled with hard evidence recovered during the operation, the Federal Police’s uncompromising investigation resulted in an unprecedented development in the region’s counter-terror history. Following the first arrests, the investigation continued forward, completing four more phases that included 15 convictions and 20 defendants and prevented at least one major terror attack during the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics.

In his ruling, Judge Marcos Josegredi da Silva defended the operation to its detractors, likening the activity of the defendants to that of pedophiles on the internet. Just as those who spread images of children performing sexual acts are pedophiles whether they engage in said acts themselves, actors who spread propaganda, recruit members or otherwise abet terrorist groups are engaging in terrorist activities, whether or not they personally commit the acts they encourage.

Furthermore, the multitude and geographical scope of terrorist acts committed in the name of ISIS, like the 2013 Boston marathon bombing and a series of attacks in



El Kadre: leader of the ISIS affiliate in Brazil, during the trial that led to a sentence of more than 15 years in prison

Paris in 2015 and London in June 2017, prove that lives are endangered, and lost, when authorities choose not to act preemptively. Both the Boston bombers and the terrorists who detonated bombs and drove cars into pedestrians on the streets of London and Paris were known by the security and law enforcement

services of their respective cities and countries. Countless lives could have been saved had the appropriate authorities acted proactively instead of reactively.

Brazil decided to act proactively instead of waiting to see whether the ISIS affiliate it had discovered imbedded on its soil would carry out an attack during the Rio Olympics. As a result, the federal police, public prosecutor's office, and judiciary ensured that it would not.

We may never know if the ISIS affiliate in Brazil was even capable of realizing its plan to "kill infidels," but one thing *is* certain: *no one* was killed during the Rio Olympic Games. Even if the simplest, smallest of terror attacks was prevented by Operation Hashtag, the fact remains that lives were saved. This, in of itself, marks a counterterrorism success in Brazil and deters ISIS advances in South America.

Implications for U.S. National Security

If not for the heroic action of Brazil's counterterrorism officials and their global counterparts, the 2016 Rio Summer Olympics could have been a nightmare for Brazil. Often chastised for corruption and inefficiency, in this instance, the Brazilian judicial process proved robust as federal judges successfully convicted the first case of Islamist terrorism in Latin America's history. The implications are profound.

This historic legal precedent in Brazil requires careful study in order to properly designate and criminalize membership in foreign terrorist organizations throughout Latin America.

For decades, foreign terrorist organizations from the Middle East have operated in Latin America in a state of legal laxity. The ensuing vacuum enabled the second largest Islamist terrorist attack in the Western

Hemisphere in 1994, when a van full of explosives crashed into the AMIA Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, killing 85 civilians and injuring hundreds more. The attack, credited to Lebanese Hezbollah, awoke the region to the jihadist threat from abroad. Nonetheless, the anti-terror laws in Latin America remained outdated and did not provide officials the proper legal framework to pursue judicial actions against Islamist terrorists—before they act.

The importance of Brazil's 2016 anti-terror law proves that provided with the proper legal authorities, regional counterterrorism officials can prevent atrocities such as the AMIA attack, by pursuing the terrorist networks preparing these plots. This historic legal precedent in Brazil requires careful study and emulation throughout Latin America in order to properly designate and criminalize membership in foreign terrorist organizations.

The Islamist threat in Latin America remains active, and there are current legal cases throughout the region attempting to prosecute members of Islamist organizations. Notably, Peru's Supreme Court is reviewing an ongoing case of a Lebanese national suspected of membership in Hezbollah. An initial ruling by a Peruvian federal court, handed out in April 2017, resulted in a non-guilty verdict of the accused due to Peru's inability to criminalize membership in Hezbollah, a Lebanese group categorized as a terrorist organization by over 30 countries around the world.

This Peruvian case, like many others, could benefit from Brazil's actions and lessons learned. The United States should capitalize on this momentum and assist other Latin American countries to properly understand the legal mechanisms that led to this counterterrorism success in Brazil. Moreover, this example is a powerful anecdote in helping to defeat the ISIS narrative of global jihad. While Brazil continues tackling the rise of Islamist extremism within its borders, Operation Hashtag underscores the serious consequences for Brazilians operating within an extremist environment. Counterterrorism experts have argued that defeating ISIS is less about killing jihadists and more about delegitimizing their message and organization. In this sense, Brazil just handed ISIS its first loss in Latin America.

Notes

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Leonardo Coutinho (Brazil)

Leonardo Coutinho is a Brazilian journalist currently serving as foreign correspondent in Washington, D.C. for VEJA magazine. He has published several articles about corruption, drug trafficking, and transnational organized crime, as well as revelations about the nuclear connections between Iran, Venezuela and Argentina. Coutinho was also the first to publish official documents that provided evidence that Iranian cleric Mohsen Rabbani-named by the Argentine Judiciary as one of the architects of the 1994 AMIA attack--had secretly visited Brazil. In 2016, his reporting revealed the identities of the members of ISIS's terror affiliate in Brazil as part of "Operation Hashtag." A six-time winner of the Journalist Award from Grupo Abril, Mr. Coutinho has contributed to the book "Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America," by Lexington Books and testified before both the U.S Congress and Brazilian Parliament.

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Edited by Fernando Menéndez
Translated by Kylie Skorupa, Martha O'Brien, and Rachel Echeto

TEL: +1 (202) 909-1108
EMAIL: info@securefreesociety.org
WEBSITE: securefreesociety.org
TWITTER: Follow us @securefreesoc
FACEBOOK: Like us /securefreesociety

1440 G St NW #8198
Washington, DC 20005

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