

# EL TIEMPO

## Designating Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist organization is a legal tool

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January 21, 2020

Joseph Humire, one of the foremost experts on Hezbollah and Iran in Latin America, doesn't have any doubt: designating Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist organization isn't just a political show—it's a legal tool.

A tool for governments to effectively combat Hezbollah; one that gives them clear and powerful resources to arrest members, freeze their assets, restrict their freedom of movement, and to make it harder to plot and carry out terrorist attacks.

Humire, the executive director of the Center for a Secure Free Society (SFS), told EL TIEMPO that Colombia's designation, announced by President Duque at the Third Hemispheric Ministerial Counterterrorism Conference, is especially important because the country was one of the first in the region to have a Hezbollah presence.

### **Q: What is the history of Hezbollah's presence in Colombia?**

A: Colombia is one of the countries in Latin America that has had a presence of Hezbollah for some time. The first wave came through Lebanese migration to the Caribbean coast of Colombia, where large Lebanese communities have formed and have been infiltrated by Hezbollah. Ground zero for this infiltration started in Maicao, on the border with Venezuela. There is clear evidence backing up this point.

### **Q: Does this necessarily imply a link to terrorist activity?**

A: We have to remember the attack on the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA)* in Buenos Aires in 1994. Colombia is connected to this attack through the planning and logistics of the operation. Operatives moved in and out of South America to plan and carry out the attack and the explosives used to blow up the building came from the Middle East, passing through Colombia to get to the Tri-Border Area.

**Q: Although this has never been published, correct?**

A: You are right, it hasn't. But Argentine intelligence officials that investigated the AMIA case, long before the case was given to special prosecutor Alberto Nisman, confirmed this. It's in the 1,500-page classified report from Argentine intelligence that I have read and studied.

**Q: Is there more that connects Colombia to this attack that killed 85 people?**

A: The operative that prepared the logistics for the attack, the communications, and the movement of the explosives is a native Colombian, his name is Samuel Salman el Reda el Reda, who was born in San Andrés. His birth name is Salman Raouf Salman. All of this is public information, identified by the late Alberto Nisman.

**Q: Where is he now?**

A: He [Salman] is still up to the same activities. This past July, the US Treasury Department designated him as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist and Argentine authorities responsible for the AMIA case got an Interpol red notice on him.

**Q: Does this mean he is very active?**

A: Since the AMIA bombing, el Reda has done nothing but climb up the ranks [of Hezbollah]. There are some that believe he could be the number two or three-guy in Unit 910, Hezbollah's elite, clandestine operations unit in charge of planning international attacks. It is the same unit that works closely with the Qods Force of Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps.

**Q: The Qods Force is in charge of Iranian "military activity" outside of Iran...**

A: Exactly. But quickly returning to this man [Salman el Reda], let us be clear: a Colombian born in San Andrés is a senior member of Hezbollah. And he does not only operate in Latin America. He is also suspected of having helped organize plots or attacks in Thailand, Bulgaria, and Cyprus. El Reda has been operating globally, but his infamy comes from the "success" he had in the AMIA attack [in Argentina].

The Argentine intelligence report also says el Reda has strong connections with the "Colombian guerrilla forces," although it does not specify further.

The section dedicated to him in the report is very extensive. We have to remember that Mohsen Rabbani, the Iranian diplomat supposedly involved in the preparation of the attack, who was mentioned by Nisman as the "mastermind" of the attack, and who is also wanted by Interpol, traveled very often to Colombia when he was in South America it was el Reda who arranged his trips and contacts [in Colombia].

**Q: How can Colombia's designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization affect its tense situation with Venezuela? Especially when it is known that Hezbollah is installed in Venezuela...**

A: Today, if you designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, by extension you are dealing with the subject of Hezbollah's presence in Venezuela, since they are linked. Especially with Colombia, where there is movement of people across the border between the two countries, although it is hard to know who is associated with Hezbollah since they change their identity and use fake names.

What is certain though, is Maicao is used as an entry and exit point and that there are Venezuelans [that move in and out of Maicao] who are directly linked to Hezbollah.

**Q: Are there concrete examples?**

A: Yes. For example, Ghazi Nasr al Din, a former Venezuelan diplomat under Maduro, who served in the Venezuelan Embassy in Syria, has Lebanese origins and now resides in Venezuela. He had to leave the government in 2012, due to U.S. sanctions for his ties to Hezbollah. And it is known that he often travels from Venezuela to Colombia, mostly by Maicao, operating from mosques and Islamic centers.

Further, we know that in Colombia there is a strong presence of militant Lebanese that support and/or are sympathetic to Hezbollah. What's the most difficult is proving with certainty who is an actual member or operator of the organization. The bottom line is that when Hezbollah has supporters in Colombia's Lebanese community, spaces are opened up for true Hezbollah operators to enter without anyone detecting them.

**Q: How can the designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization help?**

A: For example, if you have a [Lebanese] community where most of its members are good people, you can't start investigating all of its members just because a minority may be helping Hezbollah. But if Hezbollah is [legally] designated as a foreign terrorist organization, one can warn the community that any contact with Hezbollah can be considered a crime and weed out the bad apples. Without a designation, it is more complicated.

**Q: So, the "terrorist" designation isn't just for political reasons ...**

A: Not at all. You can't criminalize the preparation of a terrorist act without criminalizing being a member of a terrorist group.

Hezbollah's entry, and its continual presence in Latin America is so advanced that it has managed to separate its networks. Their illicit drug trafficking network is separate from their terrorist network, from those responsible for planning an attack. That means if you think a Hezbollah operative may be planning an attack, you won't be able to convict him if he didn't commit another crime. Why? If there isn't a clear definition criminalizing membership in a terrorist group, officials will have to wait until the operative committed another crime, such as

falsifies documents, or is involved in money laundering or drug trafficking in order to convict him. This has already happened in the Tri-Border Area, Panama, and in Peru

But in order to combat terrorism, we must anticipate the terrorist acts before they take place and neutralize the threat. Terrorism works differently from organized crime [where you investigate after the crime has taken place], and thus, cannot be treated the same.

Designating Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist organization is the most effective legal counterterrorism tool. And if Latin America does this, they are also taking measures to protect their citizens from having to experience a tragic terrorist attack stemming from a conflict that is not theirs but exported from the Middle East by Hezbollah throughout the world.