The Caribbean: A New Frontier for Radical Islam?

The foiled attack against JFK Airport’s fuel system in early June has increased concerns about the growing presence of radical Islamic groups in the southeastern Caribbean. Despite indications of terrorist activity in the Western Hemisphere – mainly the attacks in Buenos Aires against the Israeli embassy in 1992 and the AMIA building in 1994, harbingers of 9/11 – official and public focus on the matter has been sporadic and devoid of a comprehensive strategy.

Three of the four men charged with conspiring to blow up JFK Airport’s fuel system come from Guyana and one from Trinidad, each a convert to Islam – Russell Defreitas, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Guyana and former JFK Airport employee; Abdul Kadir, a former Guyanese legislator; Abdel Nur, also from Guyana; and Kareem Ibrahim, a Shiite Imam in Trinidad. U.S. authorities, who began surveillance in January 2006, say that had the plot been carried out, it would have resulted in unfathomable destruction and hundreds of deaths.

Defreitas, the plot’s alleged mastermind, purportedly solicited the financial backing of Jamaat al Muslimeen, a Trinidadian radical Sunni Islamic group that launched an unsuccessful coup against the local government in 1990. More than 100 Jamaat al Muslimeen members stormed the National Parliament in Port of Spain, setting off violence in Trinidad’s capital city, resulting in 24 deaths.

Counterterrorism police in Trinidad also are investigating possible ties that Kareem Ibrahim has to Shiite organizations in southern Iraq and Iran. The incident has attracted the attention of security officials throughout the Western Hemisphere. Porous borders, political instability, weak government institutions, and endemic corruption and poverty provide ample opportunities for radical Islamic organizations to recruit new members.

Transnational Crime and Marginalized Populations

A distinct feature of the terrorist threat emanating from the Caribbean region is its connection to organized crime. Well-established networks of narcotics and weapons trafficking, kidnapping for ransom, money laundering and extortion provide channels through which terrorist groups can operate with impunity. The lack of antiterrorist and anti-laundering legislation in the region hampers local efforts to stem the potential fundraising and human smuggling activities of international terrorist organizations, such as Hezbollah and al-Qaeda.

Corruption and a lack of resources also limit the effectiveness of governments to monitor and prosecute perpetrators of illegal activities. Jamaat al Muslimeen’s leader, Imam Yasin Abu Bakr, for example, is a former Trinidadian police officer whose access to power, from corrupt elements of the police to the upper tiers of political parties, has insulated him from conviction for numerous crimes in Trinidad. Abu Bakr received a presidential pardon for his role in the 1990 coup attempt, was tried and acquitted for conspiracy to murder in 2006, and the most recent trial for charges including sedition, promoting a terrorist act and inciting others to breach the peace.
was postponed in June 2007 to allow intense prejudicial media reports against him to subside. The danger posed by a potential alliance between domestic terrorist networks and international organizations is illustrated by the 2001 arrests in Colombia of three members of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA), who were in Bogota to train FARC militants on the use of IRA bomb tactics.

Porous borders have allowed the southeastern Caribbean region to become a safe-haven for high-profile criminals on the run. In 2003, Suriname Defense Minister Ronald Assen admitted that Ali Imron, the Indonesian sentenced to life in prison for his role in the October 2002 Bali bombing that killed 202 people, spent a year living in the Surinamese city of Mungo, where he taught at a Muslim school. Local Trinidadian papers reported that Adnan El Shukrijumah, a Saudi native sought by the FBI in connection with al-Qaeda plots to attack the U.S., had ties to Darul Uloom, a local Islamic institute, and that he had also been reportedly spotted in Panama in April 2001 and in Honduras in 2004.

Recent numbers indicate an increase in migration to the Caribbean of Arab Muslims from Lebanon, Syria and Palestine, mainly due to the increasingly cozy relationship between the governments of these countries and Venezuela. Although Caribbean societies remain mostly a harmonious mosaic of ethnicities and faiths, the JFK plotters, late converts to Islam, demonstrate the susceptibility of some local Muslims to the messages of international radical Islamic organizations.

Conversions have been increasing as Islam is seen as an outlet for social empowerment. In Trinidad, Jamaat al Muslimeen, as well as its offshoots Wajihatul Islamiyyah, Jamaat al-Murabiteen and Jamaat al-Islami al-Karibi, borrow heavily from the discourse of militant Black ethno-nationalist movements, including the most radical fringes of the Nation of Islam. Most followers of these groups are Afro-Caribbean, although a high percentage of Muslim natives are of South Asian descent.

The Caribbean can also serve as a base for recruitment and operations of militant Islamic groups because of its proximity to the U.S. The five-acre compound of Jamaat al-Muslimeen, in the capital city Port-of-Spain, was raided by Trindadian authorities in July 2007, who reportedly discovered and confiscated a small supply of weapons and grenades. In addition to Abu Bakr’s close relationship with Libya’s Muammar Qadhafi in the 1980s and 90s, the Jamaat allegedly received funds through Libya’s World Islamic Call Society (WICS) to finance the construction of its compound. The CARICOM community, a political forum established to foster the coordination of economic and foreign policies of Caribbean states, has taken steps to improve security conditions in the region. Before hosting the 2007 Cricket World Cup Tournament Caribbean governments promoted closer collaboration between their military, police, customs, immigration and intelligence agencies.

New security arrangements and procedures to ensure safety for the Tournament’s participants and audience were implemented. An advanced passenger information system and maritime and airspace cooperation agreements facilitated the capture of several individuals on international watch lists attempting to enter the region. In July, CARICOM heads of state met in Barbados and signed two treatises on permanent security cooperation efforts that build upon the measures enacted at the Cricket World Cup. While these coordination efforts are a step in the right direction, a lack of resources still limits their effectiveness and maintainability.
Terrorist Attacks in Argentina and the US and their Impact on Inter-American Security

U.S. and regional attention to the growing threat of Islamic fundamentalism in Latin America surfaced two decades ago after the terrorist attacks in Buenos Aires, first against the Israeli Embassy in 1992, followed by the AMIA Jewish Community Center bombing in 1994. The concern only intensified in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. Those responsible for the attacks in Buenos Aires, Hezbollah militants acting under orders from Iran, came from the Triborder Area (TBA) where Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay meet. The activity that goes on in this region has been closely monitored for some time amid reports of arms smuggling and terrorist training.

In recent years, international terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas and the Egyptian Islamyya al Gama’at (IG) have generated revenue by funneling money through clandestine channels, particularly in the Caribbean free trade zones and in the TBA. The US State Department, in its annual Global Report on Terrorism, released in April 2007, expressed concern that Hezbollah and Hamas were raising funds in the TBA by participating in illicit activities and soliciting donations from extremists in the sizeable Muslim communities in the region and elsewhere in Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay.¹

Iran’s Growing Activity in Latin America

Venezuela President Hugo Chávez has aggressively pursued relations with Iran and Cuba, countries on the U.S. list of state-sponsors of terrorism, since the early 1980s. Chávez has become an icon in the Arab world, frequently referring to his Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, as his “brother,” while expressing unconditional support for Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Venezuela has become the largest consumer of weapons in the region, spending $4.3 billion from 2005 to 2007, and also has plans to open Latin America’s first Kalashnikov factory to produce the Russian-designed rifles in the city of Maracay.² Chávez visited his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, in early July, to discuss bilateral cooperation and the sale of five Project 636 Kilo-class diesel submarines to Venezuela. The country is also currently discussing a joint venture with Iran to build a remotely piloted patrol aircraft.

He has also sought to bring the Caribbean into his sphere of influence through the creation of Petrocaribe, guaranteeing subsidized oil to the countries of CARICOM. This has resulted in increased economic, political and tourist exchanges.

Abdul Kadir, a former member of Guyana’s Parliament and one of the men charged with plotting to attack JFK Airport, was arrested in Trinidad on a plane bound for Caracas. He had arrived in Trinidad from Guyana, and, according to Kadir’s wife and daughter, was there to pick up an Iranian visa so he could attend an Islamic conference in Tehran. Kadir and his co-conspirator, Ibrahim, fostered a relationship while studying Islamic theology together in Iran.

Iran has been active in the region for decades, but President Ahmadinejad has pursued an aggressive foreign policy aimed at building alliances with Latin American and Caribbean nations since taking office in August 2005. With embassies in Cuba, Venezuela, Mexico, Brazil and Argentina, plans to reopen embassies or strengthen its diplomatic presence in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Uruguay, and the founding of a new embassy in Bolivia, Iran is expanding its stronghold on the continent.

In January 2007, Chávez and Ahmadinejad announced the creation of a $2 billion fund to finance projects to “thwart U.S. domination.” Iran and Venezuela are currently pursuing joint ventures in the oil sector to facilitate entry into new markets, both in Latin America and in the Gulf region. In early July, the leaders launched construction of a joint petrochemical plant in Iran, which will cost at least $700 million over four years and relate to increased travel of Iranian and Venezuelan nationals between continents.

Hezbollah, a proxy of Iran, seems to be the primary Islamist force in Latin America, with a widespread network reaching Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico and Venezuela. Its fundraising, counterfeiting, passport fraud, and drug trafficking activities could be potentially facilitated by Iran Air’s launch, several months ago, of a weekly, commercial flight linking Tehran and Caracas, via Damascus. The U.S. State Department has expressed concern regarding the ease with which Venezuelan citizenship and other travel documents can be obtained, making Venezuela a potentially attractive way-station for terrorists.

Conclusions
Nations of the Western Hemisphere need to urgently develop a coordinated effective response to the growing threat of radical Islamist cells in the Americas. A substantial increase in foreign assistance, trade agreements, regional cooperation and diplomacy are urgently warranted.

The recent plot against JFK highlights the potential dangers posed by the presence of Islamic fundamentalism in the Americas. Terrorists cannot operate in a vacuum. Therefore, it behooves every state to create a political, legislative and socio-cultural environment that precludes any expression of support for movements that incite hatred and violence and that represent a clear and present danger to all who value democracy, freedom and the rule of law.

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