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Abstract

This article examines a thwarted Hezbollah terror plot targeting Jewish sites in Brazil, orchestrated by two Brazilian nationals of Middle Eastern descent, facilitated by Hezbollah's shift in strategy from using trained agents to employing local recruits via intermediaries. The narrative unfolds with the arrest of a Lebanese drug trafficker in the Tri-Border Area, revealing Hezbollah's deep-rooted connections within the local Lebanese diaspora, exploited for both drug trafficking and terror financing. The involvement of local businessmen and the recruitment of Brazilian nationals underscore Hezbollah's adaptation and the complexities of its operational tactics, contrasting with its traditional reliance on its External Security Organization. The investigation highlights Hezbollah's leveraging of diaspora communities for establishing illicit finance networks, a strategic maneuver unveiled by the DEA's decade-long investigation into Hezbollah's criminal activities. The article delves into the backgrounds of the plot's orchestrators, their ties to the diaspora, and their recruitment methods, painting a detailed picture of Hezbollah's operational evolution and its implications for global security. The foiled plot serves as a stark reminder of the persistent threat posed by Hezbollah's international network and the challenges of countering its multifaceted operations.

Keywords: Hezbollah; Brazil; Terror plot; Lebanese diaspora; Illicit finance networks

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On November 8, Brazilian authorities foiled¹ a Hezbollah terror plot against Jewish targets in Brazil, including two synagogues in the country's capital, Brasilia. Tipped off by Israel's Mossad², Brazil's Federal Police (PF) initially detained several Brazilian nationals, alleged Hezbollah-hired agents³. Eventually, the PF identified two Brazilian nationals of Middle Eastern descent as the plot ringleaders: Mohamed Khir (or Kheder) Abdulmajid⁴, who is Syrian, and Haissam Houssim Diab⁵, who is Lebanese. Abdulmajid

1 <https://oglobo.globo.com/blogs/bela-megale/post/2023/11/pf-prende-terroristas-ligados-ao-hezbollah-e-que-planejavam-ataques-no-brasil.ghtml>

2 https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/mossad-confirms-taking-part-in-operation-to-thwart-hezbollah-attack-in-brazil/

3 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/nov/08/brazil-hezbollah-terror-plot>

4 <https://www.em.com.br/nacional/2023/11/6654302-bh-dono-de-tabacaria-e-suspeito-de-aliciar-brasileiros-para-grupo-terrorista.html>

5 <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2023/11/23/operacion-trapiche-en-brasil-hezbollah-apues->

and Diab, according to the PF, lured at least six Brazilians to Beirut, where they offered⁶ them large sums of money to hit Jewish targets⁷ in Brasilia, including two synagogues.

How did it come to be that Hezbollah relied on two intermediaries – both apparently petty businessmen in Brazil’s expatriate Shi’a communities – to recruit Brazilian nationals for the grim task of murdering Jews? Why lean on local businessmen and foreign mercenaries when in all past instances of terror plots Hezbollah hatched in the region, it always relied on its own well-trained External Security Organization (ESO) agents for the job of planning and carrying out the attacks? And who exactly are Mohamed Abdulmajid and Haissam Diab?

In recent times, Iran has been known to occasionally contract mercenaries. In 2021, for example, Iran hired⁸ three Azerbaijani nationals to assassinate Iranian dissident Masih Alinejad in New York. That same year, an Iranian Quds Force operative recruited⁹ two Colombian criminals to assemble members of the Colombian underworld to target Israeli and U.S. businessmen and diplomats in Bogotá. For Hezbollah, however, this is a first.

To answer these questions, initially, we need to turn to the past, and more precisely to the arrest of Akram Abed Ali Kachmar, a minor Lebanese drug trafficker in the Tri-Border Area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, or TBA. Sometime in the early evening hours on April 8, 2017, a unit of SENAD, Paraguay’s anti-narcotics police, stormed his apartment in Ciudad Del Este, Paraguay. Paraguay’s authorities had evidence¹⁰ of Kachmar’s business ties to Ali Issa Chamas, another Lebanese national arrested¹¹ the previous year while he was trying to ship 39 kilograms of cocaine to Turkey. The Chamas’ arrest gave investigators a window into local drug trafficking networks run by Lebanese nationals and some leads into their ties to Hezbollah. Chamas’ connections, for example, included a Brazilian drug baron, Lebanese associates in Paraguay, and buyers in the United States, Europe, and Lebanon. Authorities pursued them one by one. In February 2017, they arrested¹² Munir Öztürk and Eray Uç, two Turkish nationals of Lebanese descent who were part of Chamas’ network. Their confiscated passports, provided to this author by a Paraguayan intelligence source, showed multiple trips to Iran, Turkey, and Northern Cyprus, a hub of Iranian activities¹³. Uç’s brother, Garip, whom

ta-por-el-contrabando-de-cigarrillos-electronicos-para-financiar-el-terrorismo/

6 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12801491/Brazilian-musician-Michael-Messias-Hezbollah-offer-killings.html>

7 <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/brazilian-hezbollah-suspect-cased-out-synagogues-brasilia-documents-show-2023-12-06/>

8 <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/iran-targeting-masih-alinejad-dissidents-60-minutes/>

9 <https://www.investigativeproject.org/9018/colombia-uncovers-another-iranian-foreign>

10 <https://www.instagram.com/p/COgKSAmP2F/>

11 <https://www.lanacion.com.py/2016/08/19/cocaina-aeropuerto-guarani-minga-guazu/>

12 <https://www.adndigital.com.py/supuestos-narcos-turcos-fueron-capturados-por-la-senad/>

13 <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2023/12/10/iran-using-northern-cyprus-as-terrorist-staging-ground/>

the PF detained in Brazil in June 2023, was a chemical engineer working for the PCC¹⁴, one of Brazil's organized crime syndicates.

It was now Kachmar's turn to fall into the SENAD's dragnet. Why this minor anti-narcotics operation would have anything to do with a major Hezbollah terror plot six years later becomes immediately apparent from police reports and evidence gathered at the arrest scene, which this author obtained from a Paraguayan intelligence source. Alongside Kachmar, sitting in his living room, there were three other Lebanese nationals. One of them was Haissam Diab, the guy later implicated in the Brasilia terror plot. Corporate records obtained from the Sayari Analytics platform show that Diab owns a small sandwich shop in São Paulo¹⁵ and used to run a small electronics store in Brasilia¹⁶ – hardly the stuff that pays the hundreds of thousands of dollars¹⁷ he and Abdulmajid allegedly promised their recruits. But his connection to Kachmar, alongside other indicia we will discuss later, suggests that Diab could be a player in Hezbollah's Business Affairs Component. And if that were the case, Hezbollah would rely on someone they already trust to run risky business for their benefit in keeping with past practices. Hezbollah leveraged its local networks in the TBA to support its two terror attacks against Israel's embassy and the AMIA Jewish Cultural Center in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994. This is not new.

In a decade-long investigation¹⁸ that the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, or DEA, conducted against drug trafficking and money laundering networks whose revenues went to fund Hezbollah, DEA realized that the terror group's facilitators were not just run-of-the-mill white-collar criminals for hire but had some closer, more intimate ties to the mothership. The DEA also understood that this was by design: Hezbollah leaders relied on members of the Shi'a Lebanese diaspora to establish illicit finance networks for funding purposes. In the process of doing so, a loose structure emerged, which DEA called the Business Affairs Component (BAC) of Hezbollah's ESO.

Shortly after law enforcement agencies successfully rounded up suspects in a large anti-narcotics operation in Europe tied to Hezbollah drug trafficking and money laundering, the DEA revealed¹⁹ the existence of the BAC. According to the DEA, the BAC founder was the late Imad Mughniyeh²⁰, Hezbollah's arch-terrorist and the mastermind of Hezbollah's deadliest terror attacks, including the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marines barracks and French paratroopers in Beirut, the 1992 bombing of Israel's embassy and

14 <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2023/06/29/detuvieron-en-brasil-a-garip-uc-un-narcotraficante-vinculado-a-la-red-de-hezbollah-en-sudamerica/>

15 <https://www.consultasocio.com/q/sa/haissam-houssim-diab>

16 <https://casadosdados.com.br/solucao/cnpj/casa-bo-comercio-de-eleto-eletronicos-ltda-00480663000150>

17 <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12801491/Brazilian-musician-Michael-Messias-Hezbollah-offer-killings.html>

18 <https://www.politico.com/interactives/2017/obama-hezbollah-drug-trafficking-investigation/>

19 <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2016/02/01/dea-and-european-authorities-uncover-massive-hizballah-drug-and-money>

20 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/who-was-imad-mughniyeh>

the 1994 bombing of the AMIA building, the Jewish cultural center, both in Buenos Aires. Mughniyeh died in a car bomb in Damascus in 2008, and while his brother-in-law, Mustafa Badreddine, took control of the ESO, Abdallah Safieddine²¹ – Hezbollah’s ambassador to Tehran – and Adham Tabaja²², a Hezbollah member acting as a sort of CEO, ran the BAC. The DEA did not dwell upon the BAC’s command structure, membership recruitment, the way it functions, or much else, except that it was²³ “involved in international criminal activities such as drug trafficking and drug proceed money laundering.” Hezbollah is a hierarchy of councils, units, branches, departments, and bureaus. The ESO itself is under the Jihad Council of Hezbollah, and it is highly compartmentalized. The BAC, by contrast, is less a department and more like a joint venture of talented freelancers, opportunists, and ideologues working as contractors for Hezbollah.

Soon after the February 2016 press release, a DEA-authored affidavit in support of an arrest warrant against three Lebanese drug traffickers²⁴ offered further clues about the BAC’s nature. “To meet its financial needs,” it explains, “Hezbollah maintains a wide network of non-member supporters or associates engaged in raising capital.” The DEA described them as “culturally aligned compatriots” who are “more concerned with generating cash than religious or political doctrine” and who “readily remit portions of their profits back” to Hezbollah. To say that they are more concerned with generating cash does not mean they are not devout to their faith and flag. But they are not the flock’s most pious.

Diab fits the bill. His presence in the TBA was no mere family visit, and Ciudad Del Este, the Paraguayan side of the TBA, where Diab was when the SENAD detained him, is a hotbed of illicit financial activities, many of which are tied to Hezbollah’s terror finance networks.

In recent years, drug trafficking, a key revenue source for the terror group, has become prevalent in the area due to changes in cocaine’s trade routes²⁵ and the steady penetration of Paraguay²⁶ by regional crime syndicates²⁷. Diab’s friend Kachmar was part of a broader network of drug traffickers that Paraguayan authorities repeatedly targeted

21 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg1057>

22 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jl0069>

23 <https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2016/02/01/dea-and-european-authorities-uncover-massive-hizballah-drug-and-money>

24 <https://www.moneylaundering.com/news/colombia-based-hezbollah-associate-knew-anti-money-laundering-protocols/>

25 <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/02/26/cocaine-routes-paraguay-transit-country/>

26 <https://insightcrime.org/news/evolving-crime-persistent-corruption-paraguay/>

27 <https://urbanviolence.org/brazils-primeiro-comando-da-capital-takes-flight/>

with multiple arrests and investigations. All²⁸ had²⁹ suspected links³⁰ to Hezbollah, and they had a global distribution network for their merchandise that included Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. Diab could very well have been one of the network members, and some clues to a possible active role in the BAC emerge from his phone, seized during the April 8, 2017, raid and likely gathering virtual dust on a Paraguayan government server since then.

When the SENAD agents entered Kachmar's apartment, they had no grounds to charge Kachmar's friends and arrest them. Still, they briefly detained them, questioned them, seized their electronics, and imaged them before returning the phones and tablets to their legitimate owners. That includes Diab's mobile phone, which, considering his later involvement in the Brasilia terror plot, is potentially a treasure trove of information. Yet even as the plot investigation unfolded, Brazilian authorities were initially unaware of Diab's past run-ins with the law, his connection to Hezbollah, or his close links to Abdulmajid.

That Diab did not remain on the radar of local law enforcement agencies in Latin America raises important questions about their cooperation, information sharing, and awareness of Hezbollah's presence and its modus operandi, which in turn highlights the reluctance of most countries in the region to treat Hezbollah as a terrorist group – only five out of 33 countries in the Latin America and Caribbeans region have designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization so far, and Brazil is not one of them. Though Paraguayan anti-narcotics detained Diab – a Brazilian national – they did not notify their Brazilian counterparts, nor did they seek their assistance. Had they done so, they might have learned more about Diab, or they could have shared information about him, which the Brazilians could later rely on when his name emerged in connection to the Brasilia terror plot. Because Brazil does not consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization and its law enforcement agencies did not know of Diab's close relationship with a network of Lebanese drug traffickers, they did not track Diab and his broader network of contacts in Brazil and abroad. And, as his phone contents suggest, there were good reasons for that.

First, there is his connection to a prominent, Brazil-based Iraqi Shi'a cleric – a potential link to Hezbollah's FRD – and his friendship, possibly partnership, with Lebanese drug traffickers. Diab also has³¹ multiple³² social media³³ accounts³⁴ – which, his phone contents

28 <https://www.investigativeproject.org/case/808/us-v-chamas>

29 <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2018/01/11/buscan-a-dos-trafficantes-de-droga-turcos-vinculados-al-grupo-terrorista-hezbollah-que-escaparon-de-prision-en-paraguay/>

30 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/02/14/paraguay-is-a-fiscal-paradise-for-terrorists/>

31 <https://www.facebook.com/haissam.diab.395>

32 <https://www.facebook.com/people/Haissam-Diab/pfbid021yzZ8R433byXqqKhkgUsJkUjngZ2tJB6p9Tp4uQibbw9S-6WjBMgL4Ca79Ufs1bUqI/>

33 <https://www.facebook.com/haissamdiab.diab.1>

34 <https://www.facebook.com/haissam.diab.3>

show, he mainly used for messaging purposes to keep in touch with a vast network of contacts in Algeria, Argentina, Brazil, Germany, Lebanon, Morocco, Paraguay, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Venezuela.

But the most striking contact to emerge from his phone is someone named Abou Najib. It's a nickname, Arabic for "father of Najib," and while it tells us that a person is a family man with offspring, it reveals nothing more of their identity. Yet, once searched on the TrueCaller.com database of worldwide phone numbers, the cell phone comes up as "Hassan Chams Exchange." It might be a coincidence, but Haissam Diab is from Chtaura, in the Beqaa Valley. You would not know much about this quaint mountain village close to the Syrian border were it not for the fact that Chtaura is the location of several money exchange businesses, including one named Chams Exchange. The U.S. Treasury sanctioned it in 2019³⁵, because, according to the Treasury, the currency exchange business "moves money to and from Australia, Colombia, Italy, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Spain, Venezuela, France, Brazil, and the United States as part of his narcotics money laundering activities." Corporate records from Lebanon's Ministry of Justice also show another exchange, located in the same building as Chams Exchange, as belonging to Diab's uncle. Diab also has another contact in his phone, linked to another exchange house in Chtaura³⁶. Based on these connections, Diab, like other TBA-based Lebanese, could very well be a money transmitter for Hezbollah, helping move drug money from his traffickers' contacts to the exchange houses there that for years now have supported Hezbollah's drug money laundering efforts.

This may be the biggest red flag from Diab's phone, but there are other notable clues. Another contact is Sobhi Fayad, a TBA-based Hezbollah financier whom the Treasury sanctioned in 2006. Diab's phone contacts also include Munir Öztürk's wife, Akram Kachmar, members of the Chams clan in Lebanon, alongside many Diab's, both in Lebanon and Brazil.

The evidence reviewed so far suggests that Diab could plausibly be a member of the BAC. He is clearly sympathetic to Hezbollah – one of his Facebook accounts displays a photo of the late ESO commander, Mustafa Badreddine³⁷, the brother-in-law of Imad Mughniyah, as wallpaper. He has connections to the criminal underworld – drug traffickers and all – and possibly to a money launderer sanctioned by the U.S. Treasury for being a significant conduit of Hezbollah's drug money. There is plenty of devotional Shi'a material populating his phone memory – and then there are numerous ladies whom Haissam, when not busy talking to his contacts, assiduously engaged with on the dating app, Tinder. They are not the flock's most pious, but they are still committed to the cause.

What about Abdulmajid? Both Diab and Abdulmajid are part of the large Shi'a

35 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm650>

36 <https://lb.kompass.com/c/ghassan-ali-chams-co-for-exchange/lb025232/>

37 <https://www.facebook.com/hshdhd.behrb/>

Lebanese Diaspora community, which in the past century left Lebanon and settled first in West Africa and, later, in Latin America. These communities quickly became part of the patronage network for Amal³⁸, the Shi'a political movement and paramilitary organization founded by Imam Musa Sadr and currently led by Lebanon's parliament Speaker, Nabih Berri. But starting in the early 1980's, first in competition and then jointly with Amal, Hezbollah assiduously cultivated ties with these diaspora communities, through dedicated units such as its Foreign Relations Department³⁹ (FRD), which act as a liaison between Iran and Shia communities⁴⁰ worldwide. This is the most visible element of Hezbollah's overseas activity. It manifests itself through the total control of Shi'a communal institutions, much in the way Hezbollah does⁴¹ with Shi'as in Lebanon. Like in Lebanon, across Diaspora Shi'a communities, Hezbollah clerics lead mosques; teachers from Hezbollah's Al Mahdi schools run educational institutions; scout instructors from Hezbollah's al Mahdi scouts' movement head local chapters⁴², and other loyalists take charge of charitable associations. These efforts ensure enduring loyalty among diaspora members, help radicalize youth, and guarantee steady support for Hezbollah's worldview despite generational change. The FRD is not just a recruitment conduit. It is also a funding channel, as evidenced by the 2009 U.S. Treasury designation of Sheikh Abd Al Menhem Qubaysi⁴³ in the Ivory Coast, the role played by his successor, Sheikh Ghaleb Khojok, as a significant contributor to Hezbollah's sanctioned financial institution⁴⁴, Al Qard al Hassan, and that of the once Brazil-based Sheikh Bilal Mohsen Wehbe, who, according to the U.S. Treasury⁴⁵, "has been involved in transferring funds collected in Brazil to Hizballah in Lebanon."

The FRD has a strong presence in Brazil, given that the Lebanese Shi'a diaspora there is likely the largest in the entire region. The FRD cleric formerly responsible for Latin America, Sheikh Wehbe, resided in São Paulo, and worked at the local Mesquita do Bras, until November 2018 (the U.S. Treasury outed him and sanctioned him⁴⁶ in 2010).

Family remains a large driver of immigration for these communities. People who ventured out first later brought over spouses; as they became successful, they paved the way for other relatives to join and then relied on kinship to expand business ties and trade with relatives who settled elsewhere. Many Lebanese Shi'a businessmen who sought and found fortune abroad not only have been drawn to Hezbollah through communal institutions but also maintain familial ties with Hezbollah – through a sibling in the clerical

38 https://ict.org.il/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Ottolenghi-Match-Made-in-Heaven_2022_10_06_0801.pdf

39 <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollahs-diplomats-go-operational>

40 <https://www.ict.org.il/images/Iranian%20Threat%20Network.pdf>

41 <https://www.thenationalnews.com/opinion/comment/from-latin-america-to-west-africa-hezbollah-s-complex-web-of-connections-is-fuelling-its-terrorist-activity-1.904231>

42 <https://iranwire.com/en/features/70326/>

43 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg149>

44 <https://thedispatch.com/article/time-to-target-hezbollahs-illicit/>

45 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg997>

46 <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/tg997>

hierarchy, an uncle in the Hezbollah-run Al Mahdi scouts or its namesake schools, a cousin in the ranks of Hezbollah's military cohorts, a spouse who hails from a Hezbollah family. The family ties, spread across the world throughout the vast expanse of the Lebanese diaspora, cement the bounds of loyalty and provide the global infrastructure of Hezbollah's financial networks. Hezbollah recruits among these cohorts to join the BAC. These individuals take charge of money movements and illicit activities in close coordination with the FRD, recruit other family members, and rely on family ties to keep a tight ship.

The family connection is likely the reason a young Abdulmajid made it to Brazil sometime around 2008. Although he is Syrian, and Haissam Diab is Lebanese, they are relatives. Brazilian immigration and Lebanese voters' records show that Abdulmajid's mother, Nehad Diab, is a Lebanese Shi'a, from the village of Hazerta, near Zahle, in the Beqaa Valley. It is a stone's throw away from Chtaura, whence Haissam hails. They are from the same clan, if not the same family. There are many other Diab's in Brazil, including in Brasilia, São Paulo, and Foz do Iguaçu, the city on Brazil's side of the TBA. And they are mostly Abdulmajid's family relatives from his mother's side – some with past problems with the law, including contraband.⁴⁷ Facebook photos from Abdulmajid's account confirm the close family connection. He spent considerable time in the TBA in late 2008-early 2009, visiting Diab-named relatives and, apparently, briefly working at a shop in Ciudad Del Este.

Along with family comes the ideological zeal that may have made Abdulmajid a candidate for a Hezbollah operation.

His social media reveals⁴⁸ a young, enthusiastic supporter of both Hezbollah and Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad. In 2021, as Syria held presidential elections, Abdulmajid posted a photo of himself voting at the Syrian embassy in Brasilia and even of his ballot, showing he voted for Assad. In 2016, he posted pictures of himself in Syrian army fatigues, standing on a tank and an armored personnel carrier, presumably at a Syrian army base. In 2013, photos on his brother's Facebook page⁴⁹ showed the siblings attending an anti-American and pro-Assad demonstration in front of the U.S. embassy in Brasilia. Of course, none of this proves anything more than political devotion. But Abdulmajid is not just a Syrian-born Brazilian with a strong allegiance to his homeland, its dictator, and his murderous allies. In 2018, he accompanied⁵⁰ Sheikh Mohammed Sadeq Maadel, aka Moaddel Ebrahimi, a prominent Iraqi cleric⁵¹ who works at São Paulo's main Shi'a mosque, to an official visit at the Syrian embassy – an indication that Abdulmajid may work closely with the local Shi'a religious networks tied to Iran and Hezbollah. The Sheikh is friends with Haissam Diab on social media as well.

47 <https://www.jusbrasil.com.br/processos/226261147/processo-n-49410-5120174013400-do-trf-1>

48 <https://www.facebook.com/mohamed.brazil.14>

49 <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=553692848000842&set=pb.100000803942387.-2207520000&type=3>

50 <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10214920024747467&set=pb.1633432299.-2207520000>

51 <https://www.facebook.com/muaddelm>

Sheikh Ebrahimi is not just a cleric. After serving many years at Brazil's oldest Shi'a mosque in Curitiba, he moved to São Paulo, where he worked closely with Sheikh Wehbe, the Brazil-based FRD representative for Latin America. Among his many friends on social media, one finds numerous Diabs, including Haissam and Hicham Hussein Diab. Hicham is Haissam's younger brother (his contact details appear on Haissam's phone). He lives in Brasilia. Little transpires of him in public sources, aside from a Facebook friendship with the late Samer Abou Hamdan, another Lebanese former convict who was gunned down⁵² in São Paulo in November 2017, and a few family photos, including with older brother Haissam⁵³. However, one thing stands out. Hicham serves on the board of directors of a Shi'a religious center, the Centro Cultural Beneficente Islamico en Brasilia⁵⁴ (CCBIB), alongside two other Lebanese nationals, Ismail Ali and Ali Abou Hamdan (another contact on Haissam's phone). They are not part of our story, but the center's president, Sayid Marco Tenorio, might be.

Tenorio is a Brazilian Communist militant and political activist, a convert to Shi'a Islam, and a vocal supporter of Iran⁵⁵, the Polisario Front⁵⁶, and Hamas⁵⁷. He lobbies for Hamas through the Palestine-Brazil Institute, or IBRASPAL⁵⁸, a Brazilian NGO headed by Dr. Ahmad Shehade⁵⁹, brother of the slain founder of Hamas' Izzadin el Qassam Brigades, Salah Shehade⁶⁰, and, until early October 2023, through Brazil's Congress, thanks to his former job as an advisor to a member from Brazil's Communist Party. But after October 7, even his boss found Tenorio's glorification of Hamas too hard to stomach and fired him⁶¹. Using his now revoked access to Brazil's Congress, he once facilitated a meeting⁶² between Sheikh Wehbe⁶³ – the Hezbollah FRD representative in Latin America as mentioned earlier– and members of the Brazilian Congress. He also visited Iran, where he met Iran's president⁶⁴, Ebrahim Raisi; met the leader of the Polisario Front⁶⁵; accompanied⁶⁶ an Iranian parliamentary delegation to the TBA; worked⁶⁷ for the Brazil-

52 <https://www.metroworldnews.com.br/foco/2017/11/18/comerciante-libanes-e-morto-tiros-na-zona-sul-de-sao-paulo.html>

53 <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=331237670606763&set=pb.100011615985212.-2207520000&type=3>

54 <https://cnpj.biz/33859753000106>

55 <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2021/01/25/iran-commemorates-death-of-gassem-soleimani/>

56 <https://noticiaspia.com/sahara-occidental-lucha-anticolonial-invisible/>

57 https://english.palinfo.com/opinion_articles/hamas-and-the-legitimate-right-of-defense/

58 <https://www.facebook.com/lbraspal/>

59 <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230318-panama-detains-head-of-brazil-palestine-institute/>

60 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salah_Shehade

61 <https://revistaoeste.com/brasil/sayid-tenorio-ira-hezbollah/>

62 <https://revistaoeste.com/brasil/sayid-tenorio-ira-hezbollah/>

63 <https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/noticia/2023/11/11/o-que-se-sabe-sobre-acoes-do-hezbollah-na-america-do-sul.ghtml>

64 https://www.instagram.com/p/CwWJJDcM9_P/?img_index=1

65 https://www.instagram.com/p/CxOfHpBpRcl/?img_index=1

66 <https://portaldatransparencia.gov.br/viagens/43618966>

67 <https://casadosdados.com.br/solucao/cnpj/instituto-de-amizade-brasil-ira-iabi-52481866000165>

Iran parliamentary friendship; and publicly commemorated⁶⁸ the slain commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards' Qods Forces, Qassem Soleimani, at an Iranian cultural center in Sao Paulo. Tenorio is close to the Iranian regime, has unfettered access to its stalwarts, and runs its ideological sounding board in Brasilia alongside three members of the local Lebanese Shi'a community, including the brother of a now suspected Hezbollah terrorist. It might be a benign coincidence, but this is the kind of space where Iran's worldview and Hezbollah activities come together to exchange notes.

Sheikh Ebrahimi visits CCBIB regularly – the community there is too small to have a resident cleric. Given his connection to the center, the two suspects, and the Iranian regime – the Iranian ambassador regularly visits the center, too – it is plausible to assume that he serves there as an itinerant cleric. But there may be more. With Wehbe gone, the post of FRD representative in Brazil has apparently remained vacant, with Wehbe running the Latin America operation for Hezbollah remotely from Lebanon. It is possible that Sheikh Ebrahimi, who worked with Wehbe, is part of Hezbollah's clerical nomenclature and maybe the new FRD person in Brazil. If so, his connections to both Haissam Diab and Mohamed Abdulmajid would not just be that of a pastoral guide to his spiritual flock but possibly more – that of a handler.

There is no proof of Abdulmajid's attendance at the CCBIB. Still, at least one CCBIB board member, Ismail Ali, posted a social media picture of himself⁶⁹ at the Lebanese restaurant in Brasilia, which Abdulmajid used to own. The small group of Shi'a Lebanese in the capital, many of whom appear to be family relations, all seem to know one another. Besides, there is ample evidence of Abdulmajid's religious devotion. In the last year, he began posting videos of sermons by Shi'a clerics. And since October 7, until his previous post on November 9, his social media activity focused obsessively on Hamas, first glorifying the October 7 massacres and then reposting pro-Hamas propaganda as Israel launched its military response. Finally, according to media reports⁷⁰, Abdulmajid was involved in contraband, in addition to reportedly playing an active role in moving money to Hezbollah through two tobacco stores⁷¹ in Belo Horizonte, formally owned by his wife.

This snapshot is not the whole story, for sure. But it makes Abdulmajid a poster child for Hezbollah's operations in the diaspora: despite growing up in relative affluence in a Western democracy, this young man is wedded to a violent revolutionary cause and weaponizes his radical ideas through illicit business activities, family networks, and clerical support from the religious infrastructure Hezbollah and Iran created in the diaspora, eventually becoming a recruiter, probably thanks to a mixture of his devotion to the cause, his proven talents, and his local connections.

68 https://www.instagram.com/p/CYgcG-yumJQ/?img_index=1

69 <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=984747534932804&set=pb.100001926991828.-2207520000&type=3>

70 <https://g1.globo.com/fantastico/noticia/2023/11/12/exclusivo-fantastico-descobre-a-identidade-do-principal-investigado-na-operacao-que-apura-o-recrutamento-de-brasileiros-pelo-grupo-extremista-hezbollah.ghtml>

71 <https://bhaz.com.br/noticias/bh/dono-de-tabacaria-em-bh-suspeito-liderar-grupo-extremista/>

The PF investigation will no doubt uncover more elements as it moves along. But what emerges, at least tentatively, is a familiar landscape. What we find, all in the same space, is this. Iranian-sponsored cultural centers run by Lebanese Shi'a close to Hezbollah and zealous converts; Hezbollah clerics; and members of close-knit Shi'a Lebanese family and business networks engaged in illicit commercial and financial activities, which Hezbollah leverages for fundraising and, when the time comes, for operational tasks too.

Relying on local supporters is not unheard of – in fact, the overseas financial networks Hezbollah leverages for its revenue streams can provide and have in the past provided, logistical support to terror attacks. Operatives need explosives and warehouses to store them; money, local safehouses, safe passage with counterfeit documents; and much more, which friendly, sympathetic locals will offer. There is a history of this division of labor in Latin America, after all. This is not the first time Hezbollah has taken its war against Israel there – in fact, it has a long record of both successful and failed plots – including the already mentioned murderous attacks it carried out in Argentina. This time, however, is different. And that may be the reason why Hezbollah, this time, chose to recruit mercenaries instead of sending its own agents to murder its victims.

The reason for this change of tactics may have to do with the ongoing Gaza war. After October 7, Hezbollah announced that if Israel launched a ground operation inside Gaza, it would open a second front in Israel's north. Despite failing to make true of its threats, Hezbollah has deployed its elite forces along the Lebanon-Israel border. It is currently engaged in a low-intensity conflict with Israel that could quickly escalate. Rallying around the resistance flag without necessarily triggering a full-fledged conflict is a difficult balancing act, which a terrorist attack could upset, giving Israel a reason to launch a full-scale attack against Hezbollah. But task random Brazilians with blowing up Jews in Brasilia, and there is plausible deniability. With antisemitic incidents on the rise globally, a successful attack could have been disguised as a hate crime plotted by local extremists rather than one orchestrated by Hezbollah. That, too, might explain why, instead of following the script of previous overseas terror operations, Hezbollah tasked Abdulmajid and Diab – both living in Brazil for more than a decade and with no previously known ties to Hezbollah – as intermediaries to recruit willing assassins.

Be that as it may, the many characters we've mentioned all offered clues to connections to Hezbollah – one of sympathy and support at the very least, which may include familial and business ties and closeness to Hezbollah's religious nomenclature overseas.

The plot was foiled, fortunately. But the Hezbollah networks in the region are still intact, and Iran's cultural emissaries and Hezbollah's FRD clerics are still in place. There is no shortage of guns for hire south of the Rio Grande. And the region, by and large, still refuses to acknowledge that Hezbollah is a terror organization bent not only on fundraising but also on murdering innocents. This story should be a cautionary tale. Here's to hoping it is not a dry run.

