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Islamist Cyber Networks in Spanish- Speaking Latin America

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Executive Summary

Despite significant concern among policy, law enforcement and intelligence communities in the United States (U.S.) over the possible spread of radical Islamist thought throughout the world as part of a global *jihad* movement, there has been little investigation into the growing cyber networks in Latin America that promote strong anti-Semitic and anti-U.S. messages. This paper offers an overview of that network, focusing on the structure of Shi'ite websites that promote not only religious conversion but are also supportive of Iran—a designated State-sponsor of terrorism—,its nuclear program, Hezbollah and the “Bolivarian revolution” led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and his allies in Bolivia, Ecuador and Nicaragua. There is also a smaller group of Sunni Muslim websites, mostly tied to the legacy organizations of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Many of the Shi'ite websites are linked to each other consistently portray Israel as a Nazi State, and the United States as an imperialist war monger. The Palestinian issue is frequently juxtaposed with the anti-imperialist struggle that those states supporting Chávez' Bolivarian revolution claim to wage against the United States.

Some of the Islamist websites claim thousands of new converts, but such claims are difficult to verify. Most of the websites visited touted the conversion of one or two individuals as significant victories and signs of progress, implying that there are few, if any, mass conversions.

While conducting this research, no websites directly claiming to be linked to Hezbollah were found, although there are numerous sites hosted by that group that were active until around 2006. Several of the inactive links are supportive of Hezbollah as a political party. No websites linked to al Qaeda were found. Yet a substantial Internet network remains operational. Much of the outreach for Shi'ite Muslims, closely tied to Iran, is sponsored on numerous websites across the region, including El Salvador, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico and Bolivia. Numerous Facebook forums for discussion are also hosted around Latin America. These links must be viewed in the context of the rapidly expanding diplomatic, intelligence, political and economic ties of Iran in recent years with the self-proclaimed Bolivarian states.

Given the sparse literature available and the rich vein of un-mined information on the sites cited as well as others that one could find with additional research, the cyber network of Islamist groups remains one of the least understood or studied facets of their presence in Latin America and the Caribbean. It merits significantly more investigation.

Introduction

Since the September 11, 2001 (9-11) attacks on the United States, there has been significant concern among policy, law enforcement and intelligence communities in the U.S. over the possible spread of radical Islamic thought throughout the world, as part of a global *jihād* movement. One of the least explored areas is the growing cyber networks in Latin America that promote strong anti-Semitic and anti-U.S. messages, while supporting designated terrorist entities.

This paper offers an overview of the contours of that network, primarily focusing on the structure of Shi'ite websites that promote not only religious conversion but are also strongly sympathetic to Iran, its nuclear program, Hezbollah and the Bolivarian revolution led by Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez. These websites, which often have link to each other, portray Israel as a Nazi State and the United States as war mongering and imperialist. Similarly, the Palestinian issue is frequently juxtaposed with the anti-imperialist struggle that the states that support the Bolivarian revolution that President Chávez claims to wage against the United States.

The Scope of the Problem

There is little reliable data on the number of Muslims in Latin America. According to an Islamic database there are some 200,000 Muslim in the Caribbean, and an additional 360,000 in South America, making up less than 3 percent of the total population.¹ However, few dispute the fact that Islam is growing in Latin America. This is in part because the same groups that are promoting the religion and reaching out to Latinos in the United States are also operating in Latin America. It should be noted that not all the Latin American immigrants from Greater Lebanon, known throughout Latin America as “*turcos*,” are Muslim. There was a large-scale Christian migration to Latin America as well, particularly at the turn of the 20th century. However, many of these groups retain strong family ties to Lebanon and the Middle East. They are not included in this paper, except to note that some of the Christian families support the Islamist causes in their places of origin out of national and ethnic pride. While Islamist websites claim thousands of new converts, such claims are difficult to verify.

Most of the websites visited touted the conversion of one or two individuals as significant victories and signs of progress, implying that there are few, if any, mass conversions. Some of the more interesting sites reporting large numbers of converts are several years old and have not been updated in several years. Yet, some reported unexpected and significant inroads among the Wayúu indigenous communities in the Guajira Peninsula that borders both Colombia and

¹ These figures were arrived at by totaling the number of Muslims in each country from the figures from the Islamic Population website. The country with the largest Muslim population is Brazil, with about 170,000 members, followed by Venezuela with some 85,000 and Argentina with 50,000. The figures are accessible here: www.islamicpopulation.com/americarticle.html.

Venezuela.² This also would seem to indicate that the initial proclaimed success did not carry forward, or else the sites were taken from public viewing.³

In the past, some Muslim entities have had significant ties to Latin American in the past. The Muslim Brotherhood (*Al Ikwan al Musulman*),⁴ for example, controlled a large Islamist banking structure in the Bahamas and an offshore business structure based in Panama. Lasting over two decades, this activity indicates that radical Islamist groups were more familiar with operating in Latin America than is often understood.

Many of the banking structures were shut down in the immediate aftermath of the 9-11 attacks. U. S Treasury Department stated that one of the Bahamas institutions, Bank al Taqwa, was a shell bank, with no real physical installations. It pointed out that the bank was used to funnel money to al Qaeda, even after the 9-11 attacks on U.S. soil. The bank also allegedly facilitated secure communications among al Qaeda cells and the transportation of weapons. The key leaders

² For example, “Autonomía Islámica Wayyu (Wayuu Islamic Autonomy) <http://autonomiaislamicawayuu.blogspot.com/> has not been updated since May 2009 and has few posting in the years prior to the most recent postings.

³ For example, a forum called *Teocracia Latinoamericana*, (Latin American Theocracy) http://www.foroswebgratis.com/foro-teocracia_islamica_latinoamericana-140170.htm was shut down early this year by the host, but had not been updated since 2009.

⁴ The Brotherhood, formed in 1928, espouses the creation of theocratic states ruled by Sharia law and the reestablishment of the Muslim Caliphate, or empire. Many of the radical Sunni terrorists and theologians of today passed through Muslim Brotherhood structures in their radicalization process, including Osama bin Laden and Khalid Sheik Mohammed. Most Brotherhood statements today call for a political takeover of the West that is not explicitly violent. However, Hamas, a designated terrorist organization, identifies itself in its constitution, as the armed branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. The motto of the Brotherhood, in use today, is: Allah is our objective; the Koran is our constitution; the Prophet is our leader; *jihad* is our way; death for the sake of Allah is our highest aspiration. The Brotherhood is unique in that it is the only transnational Islamist organization that bridges the Sunni-Shi'ite divide. While primarily Sunni, its leaders have maintained close relations with Iran, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Iranian revolution. For a more complete look at the Brotherhood see: Douglas Farah, “The Challenge of Failed States, the Muslim Brotherhood and Radical Islam,” International Assessment and Strategy Center, adaptation of presentation to the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), July 11, 2007, accessed at http://www.strategycenter.net/research/pubID.168/pub_detail.asp.

of the bank, Yousef Nada, Ghalib Himmat and Idriss Nasreddin, were designated as terrorist financiers by the U.S. government and the United Nations.⁵

In addition to working with al Qaeda, the banks were also the primary financial institution for Hamas, even after the organization had been declared a terrorist group by the United States. At one point the bank reportedly held more than US\$60 million in Hamas funds.⁶

The Islamic Websites

While conducting this research, no websites directly claiming to be linked to Hezbollah were found, although there are numerous sites hosted by that group that were active until around 2006. Several remain with inactive links. Others, identified by an Israeli study of Hezbollah's use of the Internet, have simply disappeared. Many were hosted in the United States, and it is likely they were shut down at the request of the U.S. government.⁷

No websites linked to al Qaeda were found. In addition to the Shi'ite sites, there is a smaller group of Sunni websites, largely tied to the Muslim Brotherhood and its legacy organizations that are active in the United States, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. These sites, too, are linked to each other. The sites are designed to attract Spanish-speaking Hispanic visitors from the United

⁵ U.S. Treasury Department Statement on Terrorist Designations, Aug. 12, 2002.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ One of the few studies of Hezbollah's use of the Internet was "Terrorism and Internet: Hezbollah's widespread use of the Internet as a means to distribute anti-Israel, anti-Jewish, and anti-American incitement as part of the war for hearts and minds," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, Center for Special Studies, December 3, 2006, accessed at: http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/english/eng_n/html/hezbollah_int_e.htm. At that time it listed numerous Hezbollah sites hosted in Venezuela and elsewhere. None of them are currently active and only one, *Hezbollah Partido Politico* (Hezbollah Political Party, <http://hezbollahpartidoislamico.blogspot.es/>) is available and has not been updated since 2006. Others cited include: <http://groups.msn.com/Hezbollahelsalvador>; <http://groups.msn.com/autonomiaislamicawayuu>; <http://bloggy.com.ar/caracas>; <http://groups.msn.com/justiciadinavenezuela>; and http://es.groups.yahoo.com/group/Hezbollah_latino.

States, carrying content in both Spanish and English. These sites offer links to a common Spanish-language literature, primarily on Sunni doctrine and the benefits of conversion to Islam, referred to a “reversion,” as is common in Muslim literature.

A substantial Internet network of Muslim websites remains operational. Much of the outreach for Shi’ite Muslims, closely tied to Iran, is sponsored on numerous websites across the region, including El Salvador, Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, Mexico and Bolivia. Numerous Facebook forums for discussion are also hosted throughout Latin America.

As will be described below, these websites are often linked to the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini and offer descriptions of the struggle for Islamist revolution in Latin America to the historic battle of Karbala.⁸ They also compare Israel to a Nazi state and extol the virtues of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

These links must be viewed in the context of the rapidly expanding diplomatic, intelligence, political and economic ties of Iran in recent years with the self-proclaimed Bolivarian states led by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, and including Evo Morales in Bolivia, Rafael Correa in Ecuador and Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua.⁹

⁸ The battle of Karbala, fought October 10, 680, is viewed in Shi’ite theology as seminal event in which Mohammed’s grandson, Hussain ibn Ali, his infant son and a small group of followers were killed by a large military detachment of the Umayyad caliphate, which Ali had refused to recognize.

⁹ For details of this rapid expansion in ties see: Douglas Farah Testimony Before the House Committee on Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, July 7, 2011, accessed at: <http://homeland.house.gov/sites/homeland.house.gov/files/Testimony%20Farah.pdf>.

It should also be noted that Venezuela and Bolivia broke diplomatic ties with Israel in 2009, alleging Israel was a “criminal state,”¹⁰ an accusation both Chávez and Morales have repeated, as well as using the language equating Israel to Nazis. This language is frequently repeated on the Shi’ia websites that often contain drawing such as the one below to emphasize this point.¹¹



This network, which appears to be somewhat mobile in that some sites are no longer available but similar sites open up under new addresses, offers the possibility of significant amounts of communication among like-minded people and groups across the continent. For example the Shi’ite site that operated in Bolivia in 2009 (<http://usuarios.multimania.es/shiabolivia/>) is no longer accessible, but there is now a more militant and aggressive site, *Islam en Bolivia* (Islam in Bolivia) <http://www.islam.org.bo/>, that is available.

¹⁰ “Chávez expulsa embajador de Israel,” El País, July 1, 2009, accessed at: http://www.elpais.com/articulo/internacional/Chavez/expulsa/embajador/Israel/elpepuint/20090107elpepuint_3/Tes.

¹¹ The drawing accompanies a long anti-Israeli article called “*Israel, La Vergüenza de Occidente*” (Israel: Shame of the West), at one of the main aggregator sites: http://www.revistaislamica.org/revista17/israel_la_verguenza.html.

This latter site offers the only effort found to proselytize in one of the major indigenous languages, although a previously available site for the Wayúu community contained posts in that language. The Bolivian site offers a new translation into the Aymara language of the tract “*Qué es el Islam?* (What is Islam?) and states that is “an important contribution to the Plurinational State of Bolivia and for the spread of Islam in all the languages of humanity.”¹²

It has not been possible to determine how many people view these sites or participate in the Facebook forums. But, channels of outreach and communication appear to be multiple and unchecked. One element that could have been a key to this communications strategy would have been the promised Iranian-financed satellite TV station that was to be installed in the coca-growing region of Chapare in Bolivia. Although announced in 2009¹³ there are few indications the multi-million dollar project is underway. However it is interesting to note that Bolivia’s state TV now regularly airs Iranian movies and soap operas and a Muslim cleric offered prayers at a Bolivian state event in March 2009.¹⁴

It is worth noting that there are numerous interviews with Shi’ite Muslim clerics in the regional media. The interviews are almost always couched in respectful terms that do not probe into Iran’s less than transparent activities in the region, Iran’s nuclear program or the activities of Hezbollah.

¹² Site accessed September 5, 2011: <http://www.islam.org.bo/>.

¹³ The project was to be part of the \$1.1 billion in Iranian aid promised to Bolivia over 5 years, most of which has not materialized. See: “Morales: Bolivia to Launch TV Station with Iranian Backing,” FARS News Agency, January 5, 2009, accessed at: <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8710161271>.

¹⁴ Kelsey Price, “Iranian Activity in Bolivia,” Southern Pulse, August 18, 2009, accessed at: http://samuellogan.blogspot.com/2009/08/iranian-activity-in-bolivia_18.html.

One notable exception was the interview with a visiting Imam in El Salvador by *El Faro*, a noted investigative journalism website in San Salvador, which offered some interesting insights. The interview was with Sheik Suhail Assad, an Argentine-born Shi'ia who lives in Qom, Iran. He said he was visiting 13 Muslims in El Salvador to feed them spiritually and organize cultural and inter-faith events. Asked about Islam's image as a violent religion in the wake of 9/11, he responded that no religion is responsible for all the actions of those that claim it, adding that "one has to give to al Qaeda what is due al Qaeda and to Islam what is of Islam." He denied Hezbollah or Iran had anything to do with the 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires or that Hezbollah was a terrorist organization.

Asked about Iran's hostility to the United States, he responded that

*The declared enemy of the Islamic world is Israel--not the United States as a government, much less its people. The enemy is U. S. foreign policy. Israel will be a friend when it returns what it stole; there are 5 million Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. The United States, if it changes its policies toward the Islamic world, would be our friend.*¹⁵

In contrast, there appears to be only a few significant Sunni sites, primarily one hosted in Argentina, *Islam América*.¹⁶ This site is linked to the World Association of Muslim Youth (WAMY), and other groups tied to the Muslim Brotherhood. It also links to the *Agencia Islámica de Noticias* (Islamic News Agency, <http://www.ain.com.ar/index.php>.)

¹⁵ Carlos Dada, "Hay que darles a Al Qaeda lo que es de Al Qaeda, y al Islam lo que es del Islam," *El Faro*, August 27, 2007, accessed at: http://archivo.elfaro.net/secciones/Noticias/20070827/noticias10_20070827.asp.

¹⁶ Accessed September 5, 2011: <http://www.islamamerica.org.ar>.

Unlike many of the Shi'ia sites, the Sunni website mentioned about lists Sunni mosques in Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Curacao, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Dominican Republic. It had, however, no links to further sites in any of these listings.

Most sites also couch their anti-U.S. sentiments in terms of U.S. support for Israel. However, some take a more direct approach, with archives of President George W. Bush in various devil costumes and portraying President Barack Obama's administration as a continuation of the same bloodthirsty policy and the U. S. as an oppressor. An example is given below in the artwork from one those sites.¹⁷



¹⁷ Accessed September 5, 2011: <http://www.almusawwir.org/2011/08/who-is-obama/>.

A Look at Selected Websites

It is instructive to look at some of the most important sites, because of the links they provide and the aggregation of information on Islam in general. This is an overview rather than a detailed analysis of each site. What is striking about some of them, given the level of sophistication and updating of the site, is that the most active ones are found in countries with miniscule Muslim populations, indicating possible funding and resources from outside the immediate country where they are hosted.

Two of the most important sites – *Red Islam* and *Revista Biblioteca Islámica* are hosted in El Salvador, where Islamic websites claim an active Muslim population of approximately 60 people.¹⁸ Another is in Bolivia, where estimates of the Muslim population range from a few dozen to a few hundred. The translation of a Muslim primer into a native language also seems to indicate resources beyond the scope of that particular community.

Among the most diverse in its listings is *Red Islam* (Islam Network), hosted in El Salvador. According to its ambitious mission statement the website is,

A project of the Shi'ia Muslims in El Salvador. It was conceived as a channel for Islamic information with multimedia content. Our goal is to become an effective and attractive means of communication, using videos, audio, news, exhibits and more, in Spanish for the use of Spanish speakers. Among our objectives are: To spread Shi'ia Islam; aggregate multimedia Islamic content; edit programs with

¹⁸ “La comunidad musulmana de El Salvador,” Web Islam, May 9, 2008, accessed September 15, 2011 at: <http://www.webislam.com/?idn=12256>.

*Shi'ia Muslim content; and present news that is relevant to the Muslim world in general.*¹⁹

In addition, the site offers a selection of Spanish language movies, documentaries and books on Islam, Iran and Iranian leaders. It is also among the most visually attractive sites, in keeping with its mission statement of broadening the horizons of traditional Islamic websites.

Closely linked to this site, and also based in El Salvador, is “*Revista Biblioteca Islámica,*” (Islamic Library Magazine), which is run by the *Asociación Cultural Islámica Shiita de El Salvador* (Shi'ia Islamic Cultural Association of El Salvador), which offers a series of links similar to *Red Islam*, as well as a history of Islam and an outline of the basic tenets of the faith.²⁰

As noted earlier *Islam en Bolivia* offers some of the most frequent updating, largely with articles claiming Israeli atrocities against Palestinians, news of Iranian leaders and statements and articles against the United States, Great Britain and other Western countries, centered on their support for Israel. It includes images such as the one seen below.²¹

¹⁹ <http://www.redislam.com/sobre.html>.

²⁰ Accessed September 5, 2011 at: <http://www.revistaislamica.org/revista27/ponencia.html>

²¹ <http://www.redislam.com/sobre.html>.



Recent posting included the headlines: “Israeli Terrorism: Air attacks kill 14 Palestinians and cause serious damage to infrastructure in Palestinian territories;” “Egyptians Demand Breaking Relations with Israel;” “Western Hypocrisy: Growing Rejection in Great Britain for the harsh punishments for harsh sentences for those who protested using social networks,” accompanied by a picture of riot police holding down a protestor.²² In addition there are numerous links to sites in Iran and other Shi’ia sites in Latin America.

Another website that is linked to many of those examined, but whose hosting is not explicit on the webpage, is *Seminario Islámico* (Islamic Seminary). This site hosts an “anti-terrorism” section claiming the Mossad was responsible for the 9-11 attacks and undated photographs of what they claim are Israeli nuclear reactors.

In addition to a large dose of conspiracy theories, the site is largely devoted to praising Iran and the Iranian revolution. Unlike other sites visited, it officially hosts a section where one can request religious opinions on any issue. While the website has a banner urging “Peace Now in

²² Accessed September 5, 2011 at: <http://www.islam.org.bo/index.php?limitstart=20#>.

Libya,” indicating there has been some updating, there are no new postings since October 2010.²³

In contrast, the Mexican site *Islam Hoy* (Islam Today) offers little more than a collage of pictures of different Iranian cultural events, and has not been updated since May 2010. It seems especially designed to avoid the aggressive and confrontational tone of many of the other sites.²⁴

The Colombian site *Islam Colombia* in Buenaventura offers a wide array of Iran-inspired content, including the audio biography of Ayatollah Khomeini, a history of Islam in the region and a wealth of translated literature. Unlike some of the other sites, it has no overtly anti-Semitic messages on the opening page, but it does offer numerous links to Iranian sites and some site in Farsi. The site also offers numerous links to other Islamic communities in Colombia. It is interesting to note that the link to the Islamic community page in Cali is in English, and the only other functional link was to a rudimentary page for a mosque in Bogotá.²⁵

²³ Accessed September 6, 2022 at: <http://semanarioislamico.blogspot.com/>.

²⁴ Accessed September 6, 2011 at: <http://iranhoy.wordpress.com/2010/05/>.

²⁵ Accessed September 6, 2011 at: <http://www.islamcolombia.org/>.

Conclusions

There is a broad-based multi-nation network of Shi'ia Islamist websites across Spanish-speaking Latin America. There are far fewer Sunni sites and those that exist provide primarily links to the Muslim Brotherhood websites outside the region rather than focusing on the region itself.

Each of the Shi'ia sites has numerous internal links to other sites, often to the same literature, audio and general overall message of glorifying the Iranian revolution, urging support for the Palestinian cause against Israel and calling for conversion to Shi'ia Islam. This indicates a coordinated communications strategy behind most of these websites, even those that do explicitly present an anti-Israel message. At the same time, the more sophisticated ones, such as those in Colombia and El Salvador, attempt to put Islam and conversion to the faith within a local and national historical context and are designed, in a significant measure, to attract a local and national readership rather than those from outside the region.

This network, consisting of dozens of sites with a broad range of tones and sophistication, allow for significant communications among like-minded people and a way for virtual communities to meet, share and find common ground. It is not possible to see the correspondence among the various groups, but almost every website has a way to contact the group, meaning such communication would be easy and relatively secure. It also seems that the amount of websites in many countries like El Salvador and Bolivia, are significantly disproportionate to the actual Muslim populations in those countries.

While those sites directly claiming to represent Hezbollah have been taken down (and none for al Qaeda were found), there is a significant emphasis on supporting Iran and its leadership, the veneration of Ayatollah Khomeini and a strong anti-Israeli component that seeks to justify Iran's nuclear aspirations and its place as a world leader.

Given the sparse existing literature and the rich vein of un-mined information on the sites cited as well as others, the cyber network of Islamist groups remains one of the least understood or studied facets of their presence in the region. It merits significantly more investigation.

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About the Author

Douglas Farah is IASC's Senior Fellow, Financial Investigations and Transparency. Farah specializes in research, writing and training on transnational criminal organizations and armed groups and their effects on states and corruption; terrorism, terror finance and proliferation; and, illicit financial flows, with a particular focus on the Western Hemisphere, Africa and globalized networks. A veteran investigator with more than 25 years experience, Farah is a consultant on these and related issues to numerous U.S. and European government departments, agencies, combatant commands, as well as the United Nations Criminal Investigative Unit, Bosnia. He also applies his expertise on subjects such as the Muslim Brotherhood, drug trafficking, and investigative journalism with leading academic centers in the U.S. and abroad, and with NGO's including the World Bank, Wilson Center, National Endowment for Democracy, U.S. Peace Institute, Coalition for International Justice, Consortium for the Study of Intelligence, NEFA, Global Witness, and CSIS, where he is an Adjunct Fellow.

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