

American Foreign Policy Council

BRAZIL

QUICK FACTS

Population: 205,823,665 (estimated 2016)

Area: 8,514,877 sq km

Ethnic Groups: white 47.7%, mulatto (mixed white and black) 43.1%, black 7.6%, Asian 1.1%, indigenous 0.4%

Religions: Roman Catholic 64.6%, other Catholic 0.4%, Protestant 22.2% (includes Adventist 6.5%, Assembly of God 2.0%, Christian Congregation of Brazil 1.2%, Universal Kingdom of God 1.0%, other Protestant 11.5%), other Christian 0.7%, Spiritist 2.2%, other 1.4%, none 8%, unspecified 0.4%

Government Type: Federal Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$1.77 trillion (estimated 2015)

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (January 2017)

OVERVIEW

The Federative Republic of Brazil is Latin America's largest country, both in geographical size and in terms of population, and subsequently has the largest Islamic population in the region, hovering at around one million.¹ A growing portion of this population is made up of converts to Islam, as da'wah (Islamic proselytization activities) is in full effect in most major cities within Brazil.

With antecedents going back 500 years to the founding of the state of Brazil, Islam is generally accepted within society, and there are many successful Muslim entrepreneurs who have assimilated into Brazilian culture. Unfortunately, however, a radical element is forming within the larger Muslim population, fueled by ties to Islamist terrorist networks from the Middle East. Iran and Hezbollah have historically been major

propagators of these networks in Brazil. However, recent years have seen a rise in followers and sympathizers of the Islamic State terrorist group within the country.

In March 2016, Brazil enacted its first piece of national antiterrorism legislation, one that provides the government legal authority to surveil, apprehend, and arrest members of Islamist terrorist organizations. Four months later, the Brazilian Federal Police foiled a major terrorist plot by ISIS affiliate Ansar al-Khilafah targeting the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.² These arrests stopped what would have been the worst Islamic terrorist attack in Latin America in the last twenty years.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

Since the mid-1980s, an Islamist movement has been steadily growing within Brazil. This movement consists of radical clergymen, terrorists, influence peddlers and money laundering “fixers” who use the country as a logistics hub for many of their regional operations, which stretch from the Southern Cone to the Andes. The most prominent of these operations was the 1994 bombing of the *Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina* (AMIA) Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which in part was supported by radical Islamist elements in Brazil and the Triple Frontier, or Tri-Border Area (TBA) where Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil meet.³

According to the late Argentine prosecutor of the AMIA case, Alberto Nisman, Iran’s intelligence apparatus first engaged Brazil in 1984 by sending operative Mohammad Tabataei Einaki to its capital, Brasilia. Some years later, Einaki was expelled for his involvement in political activities incompatible with the role he had declared to perform. Nevertheless, Iranian intelligence continued to operate through the early 1990s from the Embassy of the Islamic Republic in Brasilia via a Civil Attaché, Jaffar Saadat Ahmad-Nia. To local authorities, Jaffar Saadat was known as a “fixer” for regional logistical problems. This would come to light when he was implicated in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina, which preceded the larger attack on AMIA a couple of years later.⁴

Part of the reason Iranian intelligence targeted Brazil as an area of support for regional operations is because of the heavy Islamic presence in the southern city of Foz do Iguacu (state of Paraná). Historically, Foz do Iguacu, which is within the TBA, has one of the largest Lebanese enclaves in Latin America, and is in close proximity, across the Parana River, to the largest free trade zone in South America—Ciudad del Este, Paraguay. Combined, these conditions provide a permissive environment for recruitment, proselytizing, fundraising and other terrorist operations by a variety of Islamist terrorist groups.

Most notable is Iranian terror proxy Hezbollah, which has had a presence in the TBA since the mid-1980s, at the height of the Lebanese civil war.⁵ Hezbollah's decision to establish its presence in the TBA, and Foz do Iguaçó in particular, turned out to be a lucrative one, reportedly funneling between \$15 million and \$150 million annually to Lebanon through a variety of illicit activities, including drugs and arms trafficking as well as counterfeit and contraband operations.⁶ Hezbollah, however, is not the only Islamist terrorist group operating in Foz do Iguaçó. The presence of Egypt's *Al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Group) and *Al-Jihad* (Islamic Jihad), as well as Hamas, has also been noted.⁷

Al-Qaeda likewise has an interest and presence in the TBA. Both Osama bin Laden and 9/11 mastermind Khaled Sheikh Mohammed (KSM) reportedly visited Foz do Iguaçó in 1995 to attend meetings at the local mosque there.⁸ KSM returned to this mosque three years later in 1998 to connect with other radical elements throughout Brazil. The Islamist presence in Brazil originated in the TBA but began to spread north into major cities, such as Sao Paulo, in the 21st century. In 2011, reports resurfaced of al-Qaeda cells on the move in western Brazil, when a Lebanese man, Khaled Hussein Ali, was discovered to be running an Internet Café in Sao Paulo, Brazil's largest city. According to *Veja*, the prominent newsweekly that ran this story, the Internet café controlled an online communications arm of al-Qaeda called Jihad Media Battalion.⁹

These terrorist groups have planned several operations over the years, most of which have been foiled by authorities. Yet some have succeeded, such as the infamous AMIA attack, in which one of the mobile phones used by the suspects was purchased in Foz do Iguaçó. Coincidentally, a Colombian citizen of Lebanese descent, Samuel Salman El Reda, had residence in Foz do Iguaçó, and was accused of coordinating the logistics of the attacks from Brazil. He later fled to Lebanon to escape detention for his role in the AMIA attack.¹⁰

A more recent terrorist plot was foiled this past summer, when 12 Brazilian Islamists were arrested on suspicion of being linked to ISIS and planning terrorist attacks during the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro.¹¹ These arrests, heralded as a success, are the first high-profile use of Brazil's new anti-terrorism law passed earlier in 2016.¹² Brazilian Justice Minister Alexandre de Moraes hailed the new law as an important tool that empowered Brazilian authorities to coordinate effectively across nine Brazilian states to neutralize the terrorist plot against the Olympic games.¹³

Appropriate anti-terrorism laws are a strong step in addressing the counterterrorism challenge in Brazil. The country's porous borders, weak institutions, and recent influx of Syrian refugees, however, present additional challenges. Due to these conditions, over the years Brazil has become a hub for Islamism in South America. This challenge is compounded by high levels of public and private corruption and organized

crime, which have catalyzed a growing crime-terror nexus that facilitates increased arms, drugs, and human trafficking, along with new avenues for terror finance and immigration fraud.

The most notable example of the criminal-terrorist convergence in Brazil is the infamous Barakat brothers, who lead a Lebanese clan prevalent in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) and prominent within Hezbollah. Assad Ahmad Barakat has been identified by the U.S. Treasury Department as one of Hezbollah's most prominent members, raising some \$50 million for the terrorist organization from the TBA.¹⁴ In 2004, he was arrested and extradited to Paraguay for tax evasion. A decade later, in 2014, Brazilian police arrested Assad's brother, Hamze Ahmad Barakat, and convicted him of embezzling money from fellow Lebanese immigrants, and creating false documents to create companies to cover for trafficking in arms and drugs.¹⁵ Reportedly, the proceeds from these illicit activities went to Hezbollah, which contacted a well-known Brazilian criminal gang "First Capital Command" to establish an arms-for-drugs pipeline in Brazil.¹⁶ Today, the Barakat brothers have been released from prison and are back on the streets of Brazil.

Hezbollah remains the most active foreign terrorist organization in South America. However, recent years have seen an uptick in Islamic State followers and sympathizers within Brazil's borders. The use of social media and modern pop culture provides increased avenues for Islamists to attract Brazilian youth. For instance, the following of Saudi extremist Muhammad Al Arifi, who is banned from 30 countries in Europe, has grown exponentially over the years to include some Brazilian youth appearing in ISIS propaganda videos. According to Brazilian intelligence, the most active Brazilian Islamist propagandist on the web is Ismail Abdul-Jabbar al-Brazili, aka "the Brazilian." Believed to have been recruited by Abu-Khalid Al-Amriki, an American ISIS fighter who died in Syria, al-Brazili's virtual profile is responsible for providing Portuguese content on social media in support of ISIS using the hashtags: #EstadoIslâmico (Islamic State) and #CalifadoPT (Caliphate PT).¹⁷

The increase in Islamist social media in Brazil led to the creation of an encrypted channel on the messaging app Telegram called *Ansar al-Khilafah*, which officially pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2016. One message on this channel read: "If the French police cannot stop attacks on its territory, training given to the Brazilian police will not do anything."¹⁸ *Ansar al-Khilafah* was created in response to a call from an ISIS-linked Telegram account named Online Dawah Operations, which requested its supporters with Spanish or Portuguese skills to contact a local Brazilian militant and join its ranks. This call to action sparked an internal discussion within Brazilian intelligence on handling ISIS recruitment in Brazil, resulting in a report on the phenomenon entitled "Islamic State: Reflections for Brazil."¹⁹ The findings of the report led to more aggressive surveillance by Brazilian authorities and subsequently more arrests of Islamists in Brazil prior to the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. In July 2016, authorities uncovered a terrorist plot targeting the Olympic Games through potential small arms

attacks at various locations, emulating the 2015 Paris attacks carried out by ISIS.²⁰ For the period that the Olympics took place, more than 110 intelligence agencies from around the world were installed in Rio de Janeiro to augment the 85,000 security personnel employed by the Brazilian government as force protection for the Games.²¹ Empowered by recently enacted antiterrorism legislation, Brazilian authorities thwarted what could have been the worst Islamist terrorist attack in its history.

Argentine intelligence has been monitoring Brazil since the Buenos Aires bombings in the 1990s, and has determined that pro-Iranian Shi'ite groups, such as the Islamic Jihad and Lebanese Hezbollah, which normally work separately from orthodox Sunni groups, have been collaborating and cooperating within Brazil. This Sunni-Shi'ite collaboration is embodied in the work of Khaled Taki Eldyn, formerly from the Al Murabitun Mosque in Guarulhos, Sao Paulo. Taki Eldyn is a Sunni of Egyptian origin who was the Director of Islamic Affairs of the Brazilian Muslim Associations Federation. He is believed to be a member of the Egyptian Islamic Jihad, and to have coordinated the visit of Bin Laden and KSM to Foz do Iquação in the mid-1990s. Although Taki Eldyn is believed to be an al-Qaeda sympathizer, he has maintained a longstanding relationship with, and even received support from, Mohsen Rabbani, the Iranian Shi'ite cleric labeled the mastermind of the AMIA attack.²²

This Sunni-Shi'ite nexus is even more pronounced when dissecting the money-laundering network of the Barakat brothers, who laundered millions of dollars for both Osama bin Laden of al-Qaeda and Imad Mughniyah of Hezbollah through a construction company with offices in Ciudad del Este and Beirut.²³ There are unconfirmed reports that Barakat organized a "terrorist summit" in 2002 in the TBA, with high-level officials from al-Qaeda and Hezbollah in attendance to discuss cooperation in casing U.S. and Israeli targets throughout the Western Hemisphere.

Since the mid-1980s, this Islamist mobilization has intruded into Brazilian society through an array of mosques, Islamic cultural centers and commercial endeavors. Its stealthy presence provides its members with the ability to move freely within Brazil, and to continue their attempts to unify and radicalize other Muslim populations throughout the country. As one prominent former Brazilian official, has described it: "Without anyone noticing, a generation of Islamic extremists is emerging in Brazil."²⁴

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Islam in Brazil has been present since the founding of the country over 500 years ago, and was first practiced by African slaves who led the largest urban slave revolt in Latin America. This uprising in Bahia, known as the Malé Revolt of 1835, involved 300 African slaves who stormed the streets of Salvador, Bahia and confronted soldiers and Brazilian authorities. Although the revolt was short-lived (spanning just a few hours),

its implications would impact Islamic propagation in Brazil in future years, when authorities began to monitor the *malé* people and made efforts to force them to convert to Catholicism.²⁵

The Islamic community, however, was not erased and the *da'wah* in Brazil continued into the late 19th century, when an *imam*, born in Baghdad and educated in Damascus, arrived in Rio de Janeiro. This *imam*, Al-Baghdadi al-Dimachqi, would connect with small Islamic communities in Salvador, Bahia and later was invited to Recife to continue his proselytization work. There are conflicting reports as to when the first mosque in Brazil was built, but around the same time Al-Baghdadi al-Dimachqi moved to Recife, the Brazilian government passed a resolution to allow for temples other than Catholic churches to be built. More than a century later, Brazil's first contemporary mosque, the so-called *Mesquita Brasil* (Brazil Mosque) was built on Avenida Do Estado in Sao Paulo.²⁶ It remains one of Brazil's largest mosques, but as Sao Paulo continued to grow, it became more difficult for congregants to attend. Thus, smaller mosques were built in surrounding neighborhoods.

Today, there are over 100 active mosques, cultural centers and Islamic associations in the country, and it is estimated that there are close to 100,000 Muslim converts living in Brazil.²⁷ Moreover, Islam is increasingly noticeable in Brazilian society, not only through the presence of mosques, but also Islamic libraries, newspapers, schools. But it wasn't until a *telenovela* (soap opera) called "The Clone" was launched in 2001 that Islam hit the Brazilian mainstream. This soap opera centered around showing the difference between Islam and the Western world and was such a success that *Globo*, the most prominent TV channel in Brazil, dedicated a half-hour weekly show to talk about a variety of Muslim issues.²⁸

Islam has experienced comparatively rapid growth in recent years in Brazil, relative to other countries in Latin America, even though Muslims still make up a small percentage of the overall population.

The majority of the Muslim community in Brazil is Sunni, and most have assimilated into Brazilian society.²⁹ There are smaller and more reclusive Shi'ite communities, which remain somewhat insular, located in Sao Paulo, Curitiba and Foz do Iguaçó. The Sunnis, however, have been able to accumulate wealth, which has allowed them to organize and represent their political interests in Brasilia. For instance, in the first half of 2013, legislation was proposed in the Brazilian parliament to create a "national day of Islam" as a federal holiday in Brazil. Although the legislative proposal failed, it highlights that an Islamic lobby of sorts is active in Brasilia.

Brazil already has a major problem with drug trafficking/consumption and organized crime, and the addition of Islamist terror networks to this mix would dramatically complicate the country's security environment. Unfortunately, the radical Islamist movement described in the previous section is all too aware of these conditions, and

has begun outreach to disenfranchised communities within Brazil in order to proselytize and radicalize them. The goal is not to assimilate into Brazilian society and culture, but rather to assimilate Brazil into the global *jihadist* movement.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

Under President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva of the Workers' Party (*Partido de Trabalhadores*, PT), Brazil engaged in a new foreign policy paradigm known as the "South-South Strategy." This paradigm was part of Lula's vision to align African and Middle Eastern nations to Brazil, and his successor, Dilma Rousseff, largely continued his pursuit of a multi-polar world.³⁰

Emblematic of Brazil's growing support for Islamic nations in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) was Lula's controversial intervention in the Iranian nuclear dispute in May 2010. To help Iran avoid further UN Security Council sanctions, in April 2010 Lula attempted to negotiate an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 countries (the U.S., UK, France, China, Russia and Germany) to swap low-enriched uranium for higher-enriched uranium. The deal, however, eventually broke down, and the UN Security Council adopted another resolution calling on Iran to suspend all enrichment activity that could be used to support their nuclear program.³¹ While this activism shocked some in the U.S. foreign policy community, Brazil's political ties to the Middle East and North Africa had grown stronger under Lula's tenure.

Dilma Rousseff built on Lula's foreign policy paradigm while prioritizing social spending during her term as president. Under the control of the PT for over a decade, the state expanded massive welfare programs and crowded out private enterprise. The concurrent Lula and Rousseff governments imposed burdensome regulations on businesses that made it nearly impossible to create companies or fire under-performing employees. The result was Brazil's private sector struggled, while the state rewarded crooked businessmen and created a culture of corruption within the government.

This reached a boiling point in 2014, when the largest corruption scandal in Brazil's history erupted after known money launderer (and the son of Lebanese immigrants), Alberto Youssef, implicated the state-run energy giant Petrobras in a massive public corruption scheme. Upwards of \$5 billion was believed to have changed hands between corrupt public and private actors as kickbacks and bribes. In 2015, this scandal implicated top politicians in Brazil including the former president Lula da Silva. Throughout the year, massive public protests spread throughout Brazil calling for Rousseff's impeachment or resignation. By December, the Brazilian Parliament answered the protestors' call to action by filing for the impeachment of President Rousseff.³² On August 31, 2016, the Brazilian Senate voted by a 61-20 margin to remove Rousseff from office, finding her guilty of breaking budgetary laws.³³ Acting President Michel Temer, who took office after Rousseff's impeachment, appears committed to establishing fiscal discipline but is also realigning Brazil's foreign policy priorities.

One of the last governmental initiatives of the Rousseff regime was to begin talks with Germany, the European Union, and the United Nations to consider taking in additional Syrian refugees. As of March 2016, Brazil had agreed to accept 8,474 Syrian refugees with humanitarian visas, and had already granted 2,250 Syrians full asylum. Following calls from various sectors of society for the Brazilian government to welcome additional Syrian refugees, Rousseff responded. Shortly before leaving his post in May, Eugenio Aragao, the former justice minister, said the country could welcome “up to 100,000 Syrians, in groups of 20,000 per year.” Following the suspension—and later impeachment—of Rousseff as Brazil’s president, the new Temer government has decided to abandon discussions of taking in more Syrian refugees, citing security concerns.

The decision to abandon talks over Syrian refugees is symbolic of a wider pivot in foreign policy being taken by the interim President Temer and his foreign minister, Jose Serra. In his first act as minister, Serra set out a list of policy directives recalibrating Brazil’s foreign policy priorities. Chief among them is an emphasis to strengthen Brazil’s relationships with its traditional economic and trade partners: Europe, the U.S., and Japan. This was a significant shift from the previous governments’ engagement with Middle Eastern and Islamic countries. In practical terms, this shift resulted in Brazil withdrawing its vote in support of a UNESCO resolution describing Israel as an “occupying power.”³⁴ While marginal in its effect, the decision to realign foreign relations closer to Israel broke Brazil’s longstanding supportive attitude toward the Palestinian Authority. Under Rousseff, Brazil had become home to the first Palestinian Authority embassy in the Western Hemisphere, which was inaugurated in early 2016 in Brasilia.³⁵

Brazil’s future is uncertain, as acting President Michel Temer is also facing potential corruption charges. Elections in 2018 will define the leadership of the country and renew Brazil’s foreign policy priorities. The critical issue of Syrian refugees and large public corruption scandals have highlighted the importance of paying attention to the rise of Islamism in Brazil, a phenomenon still largely misunderstood in Brazil, Latin America, and the world writ large.

ENDNOTES

[1] The Brazilian Census of 2010 puts the number of Muslims in Brazil at 35,207, while religious authorities speak of far higher numbers: between one and two million. Based on the scope of Islamic activities in Brazil, the number of one million seems a more plausible estimate.

[2] Julia Cortchian, “Brazilian Police Arrest 10 Suspected of Plotting Olympics Terror Attack” *TIME* magazine, July 21, 2016, <http://time.com/4417762/rio-olympics-brazil-terror-plot/>

[3] Marcelo Martinez Burgos and Alberto Nisman, Office of Criminal Investigations: AMIA CASE; Investigations Unit of the Office of the Attorney General (Argentina), October 25, 2006, <http://www.peaceandtolerance.org/docs/nismanindict.pdf>

[4] Alberto Nisman released a special follow-on 502-page report on May 29, 2013 that discussed Iran's clandestine intelligence structure in Latin America. An English translation of this report can be found at www.albertonisman.org (<http://albertonisman.org/nisman-report-dictamina-on-sleeper-cells-full-text/>)

[5] Rex Hudson, Terrorist and Organized Crime Groups in the Tri-Border Area (TBA) of South America (Congressional Research Service, July 2003 (revised December 2010)), http://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/pdf-files/TerrOrgCrime_TBA.pdf.

[6] *Ibid.*, 5.

[7] *Ibid.*, 20.

[8] *Ibidem*, 25.

[9] Leonardo Coutinho, "A Rede do Terror Finca Bases no Brasil," VEJA (Brazil), April 6, 2011.

[10] Burgos & Nisman, Office of Criminal Investigations: AMIA CASE, 64 .

[11] Holly Yan, Julia Jones, and Shasta Darlington, "Brazilian police arrest 12 suspected of planning terrorist acts during Olympics," CNN World, July 25, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/07/21/americas/brazil-olympics-terror-arrests/index.html>

[12] "Brazil: New Anti-Terrorism Law Enacted," Global Legal Monitor, Library of Congress, Apr. 15, 2016; <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/brazil-new-anti-terrorism-law-enacted/>

[13] For more information on the ISIS terrorist plot in Brazil, please see the Situation Report (SITREP) from the Center for a Secure Free Society (SFS) published on August 2016.

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[15] Simon Romero, "Businessman Linked by U.S. to Hezbollah Is Arrested in Brazil in a Fraud Scheme," The New York Times, May 20, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/21/world/americas/man-linked-by-us-to-hezbollah-is-arrested-in-brazil.html>

[16] "Hezbollah has ties to Brazil's largest criminal gang; group also found active in Peru," Fox News World, November 11, 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/world/2014/11/11/hezbollah-has-ties-to-brazil-largest-criminal-gang-group-also-found-active-in.html>

[17] Jack Moore, "ISIS Calls for Recruitment of Portuguese 'Brothers' Ahead of Rio Olympics," Newsweek, June 21, 2016, <http://www.newsweek.com/isis-calls-recruitment-portuguese-brothers-ahead-rio-olympics-472649>

[18] Christine Williams, “Jihadists pledge loyalty to Islamic State in first public declaration in South America,” Jihad Watch, July 19, 2016, <https://www.jihadwatch.org/2016/07/jihadists-pledge-loyalty-to-islamic-state-in-first-public-declaration-in-south-america-weeks-before-olympics>

[19] This report is in the author’s possession. For more information please see the SFS SITREP from August 2016.

[20] “Ten People Arrested on Suspicion of Terrorism,” Global Legal Monitor, Library of Congress, July 26, 2016; <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/brazil-ten-people-arrested-on-suspicion-of-terrorism/>

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[26] *Ibid.*, 17.

[27] Paulo G. Pinto, *Muslim Identities in Brazil: Shared Traditions and Cultural Creativity in the Making of Islamic Communities* (Florida International University Applied Research Center, April 2010), <http://strategicculture.fiu.edu/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=jDk1ZPpNivg%3D&tabid=89>.

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[33] CNN, Catherine E. Shoichet and Euan McKirdy. “Brazil’s Senate ousts Rousseff in impeachment vote”. CNN. Retrieved 31 August 2016. <http://www.cnn.com/2016/08/31/americas/brazil-rousseff-impeachment-vote/index.html>

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