

American Foreign Policy Council

BRAZIL

QUICK FACTS

Population: 201,009,622

Area: 8,514,877 sq km

Ethnic Groups: White 53.7%, Mulatto (mixed white and black) 38.5%, Black 6.2%, Other (includes Japanese, Arab, Amerindian) 0.9%, Unspecified 0.7%

Religions: Roman Catholic (nominal) 73.6%, Protestant 15.4%, Spiritualist 1.3%, Bantu/Voodoo 0.3%, other 1.8%, unspecified 0.2%, none 7.4%

Government Type: Federal Republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$2.396 trillion



The Federative Republic of Brazil is Latin America's largest country, both in geographical size and in terms of population, and subsequently has the second 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 Islamic entrepreneurs who have assimilated into Brazilian culture. Unfortunately, a radical element is forming within this larger Muslim population, fueled by ties to Islamist terrorist networks from the Middle East. Iran is a major propagator of these terror networks within Brazil, using its veteran intelligence operatives and proxy groups, such as Hezbollah, to proselytize and radicalize Brazilian youth.

This problem is compounded by the lack of a legal framework for antiterrorism on the part of the Brazilian state, and a growing Palestinian lobby that is trying to sway Brazil into its political orbit. Moreover, Brazil continues to be the largest

trade partner for Iran in the hemisphere, which informs the country's passive attitude toward the growing Islamist movement within its borders.

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 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.²

According to the 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 years later.³

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 Iguaçú (state of Paraná). Historically, Foz do Iguaçú, 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 Iran's terror proxy Hezbollah, which has had a presence in the TBA since the group's founding in the mid-1980s. Hezbollah's decision to establish its presence in the TBA, and Foz do Iguaçú 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.⁴ Hezbollah, however, is not the only Islamist terrorist group operating in Foz

do Iguaço. 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.⁵

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 Iguaço in 1995 to attend meetings at the local mosque there.⁶ KSM returned to this mosque three years later in 1998 to connect with other radical elements throughout Brazil. Recently, reports re-surfaced 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.⁷

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, where one of the mobile phones used by the suspects was purchased in Foz do Iguaço. Coincidentally, a Colombian citizen of Lebanese descent, Samuel Salman El Reda, had residence in Foz do Iguaço, and was accused of coordinating the logistics of the attacks from Brazil. He later fled to Lebanon to escape detention for the AMIA attack.⁸

The mastermind of the AMIA attack was an Iranian intelligence operative, Mohsen Rabbani, who was cited by Argentine prosecutor Nisman as being the Iranian regime's point person in Latin America for establishing this network of Islamic radicals. Having escaped to Iran following the AMIA bombing, Rabbani now has an Interpol red notice barring his travel to the region. Nevertheless, it has been reported that he has traveled to Brazil at least twice in the last five years. In 2008, Rabbani was being monitored by the *Agência Brasileira de Inteligência* (ABIN), which tracked him all the way south in Curitiba, capital of the Paraná state in the southern part of Brazil, approximately seven hours from the TBA.⁹ Mohsen Rabbani's younger brother—Mohammad Baquer Razavi Rabbani—resided in Curitiba. Here, the younger Rabbani was gradually recruiting and converting Brazilians to radical Islam through the *Al Imam Ali Ibn Abi Taleb Mosque* in Curitiba. The older Rabbani would finance his efforts through the *Instituto Brasileiro de Estudos Islamicos* (Brazilian Institute on Islamic Studies) also based in Curitiba.¹⁰

In 2010, Mohsen Rabbani returned to Brasil with a false Venezuelan passport, using the alias Ali Tayvidianareial, but by the time Interpol alerted the Brazilian Federal Police of his presence Rabbani had already left. Documents released by *Veja* indicate that ABIN (Brazilian Intelligence) knew of

Rabbani's presence in the country but aborted their surveillance for reasons unknown. Nevertheless, Mohammad Baquer Rabbani had his visa cancelled in 2011, shortly after Mohsen Rabbani's hasty exit from the country.

Even though the Rabbanis no longer reside in Brazil, their efforts succeeded in recruiting and training a new generation of Brazilian Muslim converts, who now continue to proselytize and export the Islamic revolution. Chief among them is a young Brazilian from Sao Paulo, Rodrigo Jallou, who was trained at a *madrassa* in Qom, Iran for several years, achieving the status of a *Hojat al-Islam* (meaning "authority on Islam") from the Islamic Republic. Jallou has created his own following in Brazil, and leads the *Mesquita do Bras* (Bras Mosque), located in the urban, primarily immigrant neighborhood of Bras in Sao Paulo. He also recently inaugurated the *Centro Cultural Imam Ali* (A.S.) in Sao Paulo. Jallou maintains his affiliations with the Rabbanis, and receives financial support from the *Fundação Selo dos Profetas* (Seal of the Prophets Foundation) in Curitiba, which is tied to the *Fundación Cultural Oriente* (Eastern Culture Foundation) based in Qom, Iran and led by Mohsen Rabbani. Jallou is one of several thousand Muslim converts in Brazil that are spreading the tenets of radical Islam and propagating Islamist ideals.¹¹

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 significant shift is best 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 Iguaçó 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 and his brother Mohammad Baquer.

This Sunni-Shi'ite nexus is even more pronounced when dissecting the money-laundering network of Assad Ahmad Barakat, 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.¹² 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 Solicitor General Camanho Alexandre de Assis, the head of the public ministry of thirteen states and the Federal District of Brazil, has described it, “Without anyone noticing, a generation of Islamic extremists is emerging in Brazil.”¹³

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 conversions to Catholicism.¹⁴

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 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.¹⁵ 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 10,000 Muslim converts living in Brazil.¹⁶ Moreover, Islam is increasingly noticeable in Brazilian society not only through the presence of mosques, but also Islamic libraries, newspapers, schools, and even architecture and cuisine. The second largest food chain in Brazil is *Habib's*, a Middle Eastern restaurant with more than 300 outlets across the country.¹⁷ Another thriving business in Brazil is

the textile industry, which is dominated by merchants of Syrian-Lebanese origin (although mainly of Christian faith). 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, now dedicates a half-hour show each week to talk about a variety of Muslim issues.¹⁸

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. There are smaller and more reclusive Shi'ite communities that remain somewhat insular within Sao Paulo, Curitiba and Foz do Iguaço. The Sunnis, however, have been able to accumulate wealth, which has allowed them to organize in order to 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 the Islamic lobby is active in Brasilia.

This kind of political action is worrisome, because as Islam is accepted in Brazilian society, so too will its radical element. Brazil already has a major problem with drug trafficking/consumption and 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 above 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 Islamic revolution.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

There has been at least a rhetorical shift in recent years in Brazil's official posture toward the Islamic Republic of Iran, but this is not emblematic of the country's attitude towards other Islamic nations. This is because the current President, Dilma Rousseff, has largely maintained the foreign policy paradigm of her predecessor, Luiz Inácio "Lula" de Silva, known as the "South-South" strategy.

This broader foreign policy paradigm was part of Lula's vision to align African and Islamic countries to Brazil, and his successor, Dilma Rousseff, has

continued the pursuit of a multi-polar world.¹⁹ The common denominator in both administrations is Marcos Aurelio Garcia, the most senior foreign policy advisor to both presidents, who co-founded, along with Fidel Castro of Cuba, the infamous *Foro de Sao Paulo*, a coalition of leftist parties and revolutionary movements throughout Latin America. A self-described communist, Marcos Aurelio is known to be a major player in “Bolivarian” circles throughout the region.²⁰

Within Brazil, Aurelio is closely aligned with the Communist Party of Brazil (PCdoB) and the ruling *Partido de Trabalhadores* (Workers Party), and their respective think tanks (the Mauricio Grabois Foundation and the Perseu Abramo Foundation). This has allowed Marcos Aurelio to start a grassroots movement within Brazil that is sympathetic to Bolivarian leaders, such as the late Hugo Chavez, and by extension the regional Islamist movements that they support.²¹ It is this alignment between Islamism and the state, fueled by Marcos Aurelio, the PCdoB and the PT, that has given the Islamic lobby the ability to influence Brazilian politics.

Symbolic 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. In an attempt to help Iran avoid further UN Security Council sanctions, Lula attempted to negotiate an agreement between Iran and the P5+1 countries (the U.S., UK, France, China, Russia and Germany) in April 2010, 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.²² While this activism shocked some in the U.S. foreign policy community, in reality Brazil’s political ties to the Middle East and North Africa had been building over time.

Lula’s first official visit to the region was in December 2003, to Egypt, where Lula also had side meetings with Nabil Sha’ath, the Foreign Minister of the Palestinian Authority. A year later, Brazil opened an official mission in Ramallah. Later, in 2005, Brasilia hosted the first annual meeting of the *América del Sur-Paises Arabes* (ASPA), a coalition between South American and Arab states. Lula took this opportunity to solidify his relationship with the Palestinian Authority, and offered to be a mediator in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Two years later, Brazil participated in the IBAS dialogue forum in Annapolis, and at least tried to play a moderator role, but was reduced to observer status by the United States. Nevertheless, these high-level meetings opened the door for an array of bilateral agreements between the PA and Brazil, which went largely unnoticed amid Brazil’s diplomatic relations with

Israel and the United States.²³ (The close relationship between certain political factions in Brazil and Islamic elements within the country and abroad (namely the Federation of Islamic Associations), has led the latter to begin thinking broadly about how to make use of upcoming international events, such as Brazil's hosting of the FIFA World Cup in 2014, to propagate Islam within the country.²⁴)

Brazil's historically sympathetic attitude toward the Middle East also inspired the Islamic Republic of Iran to establish closer relations with Brazil, particularly during Lula's tenure. Dilma, on the contrary, has made it a point to keep a healthy distance from the Iranian regime, repeatedly rebuffing former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's requests to make an official state visit to Brazil during his time in office.²⁵ This has prompted some officials in the Islamic Republic to complain that Rousseff was "destroying years of good relations" between the two countries.²⁶

Cooler diplomatic ties between Tehran and Brasilia, however, are mitigated by the fact that trade relations between the two countries remain robust. Beginning with Lula's tenure (2003-2011) and continuing through the current Rousseff government, Brazil has graduated to become the largest trade partner of Iran in the Western Hemisphere. Comparatively robust trade during the 1990s (estimated at approximately \$1.4 billion for the period between 1990 to 1993) tapered off later that decade. Trade began to rise again in 2002, eventually reaching the same levels as the early 1990s as Brazil became a major exporter of foodstuffs and livestock to the Islamic Republic. Trade spiked in 2009, to more than \$2.4 billion, and today accounts for 3.5 percent of total Iranian imports, largely in agricultural products.²⁷ Brazil's exports to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have risen in parallel with its trade with Iran. However, most of this trade is reportedly destined for transshipment to Iran, so in reality the Brazil-Iran trade relationship could be even larger than official statistics show.²⁸

To some degree, the presence and activities of Islamists in Brazil is a function of the fact that Brazil does not have a legal framework for antiterrorism or counterterrorism operations.²⁹ Some Brazilian officials believe that this was the legal loophole that allowed Mohsen Rabbani to escape extradition during his 2010 visit to Brazil. There have been attempts to introduce antiterrorism legislation in the parliament in recent years; however, these bills often get voted down by the ruling PT political party. This has left Brazil an attractive bastion for radical Islamists, who are utilizing the country as a logistical base for regional operations. It also presents an inviting environment for the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has succeeded in establishing an informal stronghold there.

ENDNOTES

- [1] The Brazilian Census of 2010 gives the number of 32,307 Muslims in Brazil, while religious authorities speak of one to two million Muslims. Based on the scope of Islamic activities in Brazil, the number of 1 million seems a more plausible estimate.
- [2] 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>.
- [3] Alberto Nisman released a special follow-on 500-page report on May 29, 2013 that discussed Iran's clandestine intelligence structure in Latin America. As of this writing, this report—issued by the Public Ministry in Argentina—is not available to the general public.
- [4] 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.
- [5] *Ibid.*, 20.
- [6] *Ibid.*, 25.
- [7] Leonardo Coutinho, "A Rede do Terror Finca Bases no Brasil," *VEJA* (Brazil), April 6, 2011.
- [8] Burgos & Nisman, *Office of Criminal Investigations: AMIA CASE*, 64.
- [9] Rodrigo Rangel, "Professor Terrorista," *VEJA* (Brazil), April 20, 2011.
- [10] Author's interviews with Brazilian intelligence officials, 2011.
- [11] This paragraph is taken from a chapter written by Leonardo Coutinho in Joseph Humire and Ilan Berman, eds., *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, forthcoming 2013).
- [12] Cyrus Miryekta, "Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area of South America," *Small Wars Journal*, September 10, 2010, http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/call/docs/11-15/ch_11.asp.
- [13] Robin Yapp, "Brazil Latest Base for Islamic Extremists," *Telegraph* (London), April 3, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/world-news/southamerica/brazil/8424929/Brazil-latest-base-for-Islamic-extremists.html>.
- [14] Cristina Maria de Castro, *The Construction of Muslim Identities in Contemporary Brazil* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013).
- [15] *Ibid.*, 17.
- [16] 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=jDk1ZP->

pNivg%3D&tabid=89.

[17] Robert Plummer, "Giving Brazil a taste of Arabia," *BBC*, December 11, 2005, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4468070.stm>.

[18] Brazzil, "Press Release: Let's hear it for Brazil's Globo," May 3, 2003, <http://brazzil.com/2003/html/articles/may03/p105may03.htm>.

[19] Jaime Darenblum, "How Argentina and Brazil help Iran," *Weekly Standard*, November 1, 2012, http://www.weeklystandard.com/blogs/how-argentina-and-brazil-help-iran_659920.html.

[20] Luis Fleischman, "Brazil and the Bolivarian Revolution," Center for Security Policy, May 20, 2013, <http://www.centerforsecuritypolicy.org/2013/05/20/brazil-and-the-bolivarian-revolution/>.

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Jackson Diehl, "Has Brazil's Lula Become Iran's Useful Idiot?" *Washington Post*, May 6, 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/postpartisan/2010/05/has_brazils_lula_become_irans.html.

[23] Cecilia Baeza, *América Latina y la cuestión palestina* (1947-2012) (Universidad de Brasilia, 2012), http://alojoptico.us.es/Araucaria/nro28/monogr28_4.pdf.

[24] "Islam in 2014 FIFA World Cup," OnIslam, n.d., <http://www.onislam.net/english/news/americas/463048-islam-in-brazil-world-cup.html>.

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[26] Eduardo J. Gómez, "Why Iran-Brazil friendship has Gone Cold," *CNN*, April 5, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/05/opinion/gomez-iran-brazil-chill>.

[27] Stephen Johnson, *Iran's Influence in the Americas* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic & International Studies, March 2012).

[28] *Ibid.*, 69.

[29] U.S. Consulate Sao Paulo, "Brazil: Pragmatism, Uncertainty Temper Theory at Left Conclave," WikiLeaks cable 09SAOPAULO372, dated June 30, 2009, <http://cables.mrkva.eu/cable.php?id=214615>.