



BRAZIL

Quick Facts

Population: 207,353,391 (July 2017 est.)
Area: 8,515,770 sq km
Ethnic Groups: White 47.7%, mulatto (mixed white and black) 43.1%, black 7.6%, Asian 1.1%, indigenous 0.4% (2010 est.)
Religions: Roman Catholic 64.6%, other Catholic 0.4%, Protestant 22.2%, other Christian 0.7%, Spiritist 2.2%, other 1.4%, none 8%, unspecified 0.4% (2010 est.).
Government Type: Federal presidential republic
GDP (official exchange rate): \$2.081 trillion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated March 2018)

INTRODUCTION

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. 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.

Considered an important logistical center and recognized "safe haven" by extremist groups, Brazil enacted its first piece of national antiterrorism legislation in March 2016, providing the government with legal authority to surveil, apprehend, and arrest members of Islamist terrorist organizations. Just four months after the creation of the anti-terror law, 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. These arrests stopped what would have been the worst Islamic terrorist attack in Latin America in the last twenty years. In May of 2017, the Brazilian Federal Court convicted eight Brazilians of terrorist activity, constituting that country's first sentence of its kind.

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.

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 upon entering the country. 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 Ahmad-Nia was implicated in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina, which preceded the larger attack on AMIA a couple of years later.

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. Hezbollah's decision to establish its presence in the TBA, and in Foz do Iguacu in particular, turned out to be a lucrative one, allowing the group to reportedly funnel 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. Hezbollah, however, is not the only Islamist terrorist group operating in Foz do Iguacu; Egypt's al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (Islamic Group) and al-Jihad (Islamic Jihad), as well as the Palestinian Hamas movement, have all established themselves to some degree in the area.

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 Iguacu in 1995 to attend meetings at the local mosque there. 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 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 the story, the Internet café controlled an online communications arm of al-Qaeda called the Jihad Media Battalion.

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 Iguacu. Coincidentally, a Colombian citizen of Lebanese descent, Samuel Salman El Reda, had residence in Foz do Iguacu, 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.

A more recent terrorist plot was foiled in the summer of 2016, 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. These arrests were the first high-profile use of Brazil's new anti-terrorism law, passed earlier in 2016. Former 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.

However, the true test of the new law came fourteen months after its ratification, when the Brazilian judiciary began carrying out trials against the 12 arrested Brazilians. According to the indictment presented by the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office, the defendants had demonstrated an explicit intention to commit terrorist attacks at the Rio Summer Olympics. On May 4, 2017, Federal Judge Marcos Josegrei da Silva sentenced eight of them for promoting an Islamist terrorist organization. Leonid El Kadre de Melo was the leader of the ISIS affiliate in Brazil, earning him the longest sentence: 15 years, ten months, and five days in prison. The other members of the ISIS cell received sentences ranging between five years and six months and 6 years, 11 months. In June 2017, Josegrei da Silva upheld charges of terrorism against five more operatives that formed the ISIS cell.

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. High levels of public and private corruption and organized crime compound this challenge. These factors 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. 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. Reportedly, the proceeds from these illicit activities went to Hezbollah, which contacted a well-known Brazilian criminal gang known as the "First Capital Command" to establish an arms-for-drugs pipeline in Brazil. 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 young Brazilians 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." Intelligence officials believe Abu-Khalid Al-Amriki, an American ISIS fighter who died in Syria, recruited al-Brazili. Al-Brazili's virtual profile provides Portuguese content on social media in support of ISIS. The account uses the hashtags: #EstadoIslâmico (Islamic State) and #CalifadoPT (Caliphate PT—in this case, PT refers to the Portuguese language, not to Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers Party)).

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." 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*. 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. For the period that the Olympics took place, more than 110 intelligence agencies from around the world were installed in Rio de Janeiro. They augmented the 85,000 security personnel employed by the Brazilian government as force protection for the Games. 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. Intelligence analysts have determined that pro-Iranian Shiite groups, such as the Islamic Jihad and Lebanese Hezbollah, which normally work separately from orthodox Sunni groups, have been collaborating and cooperating with their Sunni rivals within Brazil. This Sunni-Shiite collaboration is embodied in the work of Khaled Taki el-Dyn, formerly from the Al Murabitun Mosque in Guarulhos, Sao Paulo. Taki el-Dyn 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 Iguaco in the mid-1990s. Although Taki el-Dyn is believed to be an al-Qaeda sympathizer, he has maintained a long-standing relationship with, and even received support from, Mohsen Rabbani, the Iranian Shiite cleric labeled the mastermind of the AMIA attack.

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. 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.

Two key events in 2016 and 2017 highlighted growing acceptance of Islamist radicalism in Brazilian Muslim communities. In January 2016, Saudi Sheikh Muhammad al-Arifi visited Brazil for ten days, during which he met behind closed doors with local leaders and Brazilian converts. Al-Arifi is known for his inflammatory speeches, which contain jihadist propaganda in favor of Sunni (ISIS) combatants against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, and which are often cited by other radical groups. In July 2017, the Shiite community in Brazil also received a visit from another spokesman of extremism. Ayatollah Mohsen Araki participated in a summit in São Paulo attended by several high-profile members of Mohsen Rabbani's Iran-backed network in Latin America.

The tacit acceptance of these radical leaders by Muslim communities could be due in part to the influence that local leaders and organizers have over vulnerable populations, such as refugees. According to Brazilian authorities, between 2010 and 2017 over four thousand Syrian citizens applied for refugee status in Brazil. The latest migratory wave has attracted growing numbers of Muslim refugees to local mosques in search of support. The mosques receiving the largest numbers of refugees are located primarily in the São Paulo area, where el-Dyn (mentioned above to have connections to Mohsen Rabbani and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad) serves as one of the main organizers of refugee reception. As local mosques continue to operate under leaders with ties to radical elements, vulnerable populations such as refugees and other disenfranchised groups face increased risk of radicalization, presenting extremist groups with the opportunity to expand their reach across Brazil.

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."

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.

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. 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 115 active mosques and 94 cultural centers and Islamic associations in the country, and it is estimated that there are over 100,000 Muslim converts living in Brazil. Moreover, Islam is increasingly noticeable in Brazilian society, not only through the presence of mosques, but also Islamic libraries, newspapers, and 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.

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 Shiite communities, which remain somewhat insular, located in Sao Paulo, Curitiba and Foz do Iguacu. 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 actors described in the previous section are all too aware of these conditions, and have 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 dos 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.

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. 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 (January 2011 – August 2016). Under the control of the PT for over a decade, the state expanded massive welfare programs and crowded out private enterprise. 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 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. 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. 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 administration was to begin talks with Germany, the European Union, and the United Nations to consider accepting Syrian refugees. As of November 2017, Brazil had agreed to accept 9,151 Syrian refugees with humanitarian visas, and had already granted 2,696 Syrians full asylum. Following calls from various sectors of society for the Brazilian government to welcome additional Syrian refugees, Rousseff responded. Eugenio Aragao, the former justice minister, said the country could welcome "up to 100,000 Syrians, in groups of 20,000 per year," before leaving his post in May. 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.

Suspending the Syrian refugee issue symbolizes 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 revamped Brazil's foreign policy priorities. His new strategy aimed to strengthen Brazil's relationships with 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 developing nations. This shift resulted in Brazil withdrawing its vote in support of a UNESCO resolution that described Israel as an "occupying power." 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 opened in early 2016 in Brasilia.

Brazil's future is uncertain, as acting President Michel Temer is also facing potential corruption charges. The Attorney General has twice attempted to obtain authorization from the National Congress to prosecute him. Both requests have been denied. 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

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