



BRAZIL

QUICK FACTS

Population: 211,715,973 (July 2020 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% (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% (2010 est.)

Government Type: Federal presidential republic

GDP (official exchange rate): \$2.055 trillion (2017 est.)

Source: CIA World FactBook (Last Updated November 2020)

INTRODUCTION

The Federative Republic of Brazil is Latin America's largest and most populous country. It has the largest Islamic community in the region, which numbers around one million.¹ A growing portion of this population is made up of converts, as *dawa* (Islamic proselytization activities) is in full effect in most major cities.

With antecedents going back some 500 years to Brazil's founding, Islam is accepted within society, and many successful Muslim entrepreneurs have assimilated into Brazilian culture. Unfortunately, however, a radical element is forming within the country's larger Muslim population, fueled by ties to Middle Eastern Islamist terror networks. Iran and Hezbollah have historically propagated these networks in Brazil. Recently, however, there has been a rise in Islamic State (IS) followers and sympathizers within the country.

Considered an important logistical center and recognized "safe haven" by extremist groups, Brazil enacted its first piece of national anti-terrorism legislation in March 2016. The law gave the government legal authority to surveil, apprehend, and arrest members of Islamist terrorist organizations. Just four months after the anti-terror law was passed, the Brazilian Federal Police foiled a major terrorist plot by IS affiliate Ansar al-Khilafah. The attack targeted the 2016 Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in what would have been the worst Islamic terrorist attack in Latin America in the last twenty years.² In May of 2017, the Brazilian Federal Court convicted eight Brazilians of terrorist activity in the country's first legal sentence of its kind.³ On March 8, 2019, newly-elected president Jair Bolsonaro formally approved law 13.810, which makes Brazil compliant with sanctions against people who are investigated or accused of terrorism, as required by the United Nations Security Council. The new bill updates and tightens rules to combat criminals and companies involved in money laundering and terrorist financing, including a provision to block assets of those who are investigated or accused of terrorism. Such an action previously

required a judicial order, but it remains dependent on the approval of the Executive.⁴

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY:

Since the mid-1980s, an Islamist movement has been steadily growing within Brazil. It consists of radical clergymen, terrorists, influence peddlers and money laundering “fixers” who use the country as a logistics hub for other regional operations, which stretch from the Southern Cone to the Andes. 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.”⁵

The most prominent manifestation of this growing regional presence was the 1994 bombing of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, Argentina. That attack was, in part, supported by radical Islamist elements in Brazil and the Triple Frontier, or Tri-Border Area (TBA) where Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil meet.⁶

According to the late Argentine prosecutor of the AMIA case, Alberto Nisman, Iran’s intelligence apparatus sent operative Mohammad Tabataei Einaki to Brazil’s capital, Brasilia, in 1984. 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 continue operating in the country via a civil attaché and a “fixer” for regional logistical problems named Jaffar Saadat Ahmad-Nia during the early 1990s. Ahmad-Nia was implicated in the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Argentina, which preceded the larger attack on AMIA.⁷

Iranian intelligence targeted Brazil as an area of support for regional operations, in part, because of the heavy Islamic presence in the southern city of Foz do Iguaçu. Foz do Iguaçu, which is within the Tri-Border Area (TBA), historically has one of the largest Lebanese enclaves in Latin America, and is in close proximity to the largest free trade zone in South America in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay. Combined, these conditions provide a permissive environment for recruitment, proselytization, 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 height of the Lebanese civil war in the mid-1980s.⁸

Hezbollah, however, is not the only Islamist terrorist group operating in Foz do Iguaçu; Egypt’s *al-Gama’ a al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Group) and *al-Jihad* (Islamic Jihad), as well as Hamas, 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 Iguaçu in 1995 to attend meetings at a local mosque.⁹ KSM returned to this mosque three years later, in 1998, to connect with other radical elements in Brazil. These terrorist groups have planned several operations over the years, most of which have been foiled by authorities. 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 Iguaçu. Coincidentally, a Colombian citizen of Lebanese descent, Samuel Salman El Reda, had a residence in Foz do Iguaçu, 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.¹¹

The Islamist presence 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. The Internet café controlled an online communications arm of al-Qaeda called the Jihad Media Battalion.¹⁰

A more recent terrorist plot was foiled in the summer of 2016, when 12 Brazilian Islamists were arrested on suspicion of connections to ISIS and planning terrorist attacks during the 2016 Summer Olympic Games.¹² These arrests were the first high-profile use of Brazil’s anti-terrorism law, which had been passed earlier in 2016.¹³ Former Brazilian Justice Minister Alexandre de Moraes hailed the law as an important tool that empowered Brazilian authorities to coordinate effectively across nine Brazilian states to neutral-

ize the terrorist plot against the Olympic games.¹⁴

However, the true test of the new law came 14 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, a federal judge sentenced eight of them for promoting an Islamist terrorist organization.¹⁵ Leonid El Kadre de Melo, the leader of the ISIS affiliate in Brazil, was sentenced to nearly 16 years in prison. The other ISIS cell members received sentences ranging from five years and six months to six years, 11 months.¹⁶ In June 2017, the same judge upheld charges of terrorism against five more operatives.¹⁷ In July 2018, the Federal Regional Court of the 4th Region confirmed the sentences. However, the condemnation was not unanimous and, therefore, there is still room for the defendants to appeal the judgment.¹⁸

Appropriate anti-terrorism laws are a big step in addressing the terrorism challenge in Brazil. The country's porous borders, weak institutions, and the recent influx of Syrian and Venezuelan refugees, however, present additional challenges. 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 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.¹⁹ In 2002, he was arrested and extradited to Paraguay for tax evasion, where he was imprisoned until 2008.²⁰ In 2018, he was again arrested in Foz do Iguaçu.²¹ In 2013 Brazilian police arrested Assad's brother, Hamzi Ahmad Barakat, and convicted him of embezzling money from fellow Lebanese immigrants and creating false documents to create companies to obfuscate arms and drug trafficking.²² 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.²³

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)).²⁴

The increase in Islamist social media in Brazil led to the creation of *Ansar al-Khilafah*, an extremist group 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."²⁵ *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 their 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 state surveillance and subsequently more arrests of Islamists in Brazil ahead of the 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.²⁶ More than 110 intelligence agencies from around the world were installed in Rio de Janeiro during the Olympics, augmenting the 85,000 security personnel employed by the Brazilian government.²⁷

Argentine intelligence has been monitoring Brazil since the Buenos Aires bombings in the 1990s. Intelligence analysts have determined that pro-Iranian Shi'ite groups, such as the Islamic Jihad and Lebanese Hezbollah, which generally 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 Bin Laden and KSM's visit to Foz do Iguacu. Although Taki el-Dyn is believed to sympathize with al-Qaeda, he has maintained a long-standing relationship with Mohsen Rabbani, the Iranian Shi'ite cleric and mastermind of the AMIA attack.²⁸

This Sunni-Shiite 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 and Imad Mughniyah of Hezbollah through a construction company with offices in Ciudad del Este and Beirut.²⁹ There are unconfirmed reports that Barakat organized a "terrorist summit" in 2002 in the TBA; high-level officials from al-Qaeda and Hezbollah are believed to have attended the conference to discuss cooperation in casing "U.S. and Israeli targets throughout the Western Hemisphere".³⁰

Two recent events highlight the 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 supporting ISIS combatants and rejecting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime, rhetoric that is often cited by radical groups.³¹ In July 2017, the Shi'a community in Brazil also received a visit from another spokesman of extremism.³² 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 Brazil's Muslim communities could be due in part to the influence held by local leaders and organizers 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.³³ The latest migratory wave has attracted growing numbers of Muslim refugees to local mosques in search of support.³⁴ The mosques receiving the most significant numbers of refugees are located primarily in and around São Paulo, where the aforementioned el-Dyn serves as one of the main organizers of refugee reception.³⁵ 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.

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY:

Islam has been present in Brazil since the country's founding over 500 years ago, first practiced by African slaves who led the largest urban slave revolt in Latin America. Although the revolt was short-lived (spanning just a few hours), its implications would impact future Islamic propagation, specifically when authorities began to monitor the Malé people and made efforts to force them to convert to Catholicism.³⁶

The Islamic community, however, was not erased and the *dawa* 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 allowing 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 established on Avenida do Estado in Sao Paulo.³⁷ 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 over 100,000 Muslim converts are living in Brazil.³⁸ 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 contrasted Islam and the Western world and was such a success that *Globo*, the most prominent TV channel in Brazil, dedicated a half-hour weekly talk show to a variety of Muslim issues.³⁹

Islam has recently experienced comparatively rapid growth 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.⁴⁰ There are smaller and more reclusive Shiite communities located in Sao Paulo, Curitiba and Foz do Iguacu. Sunni society members, however, have been able to accumulate wealth, allowing them to organize and represent their political interests in Brasilia. For example, 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 significant problem with drug trafficking/consumption and organized crime; the addition of Islamist terror networks would dramatically complicate the country's security environment. Unfortunately, radical Islamist actors are all too aware of these conditions and have begun outreach to disenfranchised communities within Brazil 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 Ignácio Lula da Silva of the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers' Party, or PT), Brazil adopted 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. His successor, Dilma Rousseff, largely continued his pursuit of a multi-polar world.⁴¹

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, 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 in April 2010. 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.⁴² While this activism shocked some in the U.S. foreign policy community, Brazil's political ties to the MENA had grown stronger under Lula's tenure. Under the control of the PT for over a decade, the Brazilian government expanded massive welfare programs and crowded out private enterprise. Brazil's private sector struggled, while the state rewarded crooked businesspeople and created a culture of government corruption.

This paradigm 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 is believed to have changed hands in the form of kickbacks and bribes. This scandal implicated top politicians in Brazil, including the former president Lula da Silva. Massive public protests spread throughout Brazil in 2015 as protestors called 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.⁴³ 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.⁴⁴ Michel Temer, who took office after Rousseff's impeachment, was 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 when the latest official figures were released, Brazil had agreed to accept 9,151 Syrian refugees with humanitarian visas and had already granted 2,771 Syrians full asylum. 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.⁴⁵ Following the suspension—and later impeachment—of Rousseff as Brazil's president, Temer's government abandoned discussions of taking in more Syrian refugees, citing security concerns.

Suspending the Syrian refugee issue symbolizes a wider pivot in foreign policy taken by the former President Temer and his foreign minister, Jose Serra. In his first act as a minister, Serra revamped Brazil's foreign policy priorities. His 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, resulting in Brazil withdrawing its vote in support of a UNESCO resolution that described Israel as an "occupying power."⁴⁶ While marginal in its effect, the decision to realign foreign relations closer to Israel broke Brazil's long standing support for the Palestinian Authority. Under Rousseff, Brazil became home to the first Palestinian Authority embassy in the Western Hemisphere, which opened in early 2016 in Brasilia.⁴⁷

The Brazilian government's foreign policy positions further pivoted throughout 2018. Jair Bolsonaro, a retired military officer from the conservative Social Liberal Party (PSL), committed to re-aligning with the US and Israel. While visiting Israel, Bolsonaro announced the opening of a business office in Jerusalem, and reassured his intention to move Brazil's embassy to the disputed city during his term.⁴⁸ The president decided not to visit the Palestinian Territories, a move that further infuriated the Palestinian leadership and Hamas.⁴⁹ The newly-appointed foreign affairs minister, Ernesto Araújo, and Eduardo Bolsonaro, one of the president's sons and a federal deputy of São Paulo, openly speak about the activities of terrorist organizations in Brazil and vow to fight them. This, too, marks a shift in the public discourse on the topic.⁵⁰

The abrupt shift in foreign policy highlights the importance of paying attention to the rise of Islamism in Brazil, and how the country's new policies will affect a complex dynamic. This includes assimilating Syrian refugees and a deep public dissatisfaction with Brazil's traditional way of doing politics, marked by corruption scandals that Bolsonaro has vowed to end.

ENDNOTES

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