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How Trump Is Going After Hezbollah in America's Backyard

by [Matthew Levitt](#)

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Articles & Testimony

U.S. officials are taking action against the pro-Iranian militant group using new clues from old investigations in Latin America.

The Trump administration is pushing back aggressively against what the intelligence community often refers to as the "[Iran Threat Network](#)" or ITN, and as part of that campaign it is especially keen to focus on the activities of Hezbollah, the pro-Iranian Lebanese militia, in Latin America. Now, new revelations about a Hezbollah cold case from 1994 underscore the importance of rolling back the group's footprint in the region.

On July 19, 1994, the day after Hezbollah operatives blew up the [AMIA Jewish community center](#) in Buenos Aires, the group sent a suicide bomber to take down a flight on [Alas Chiricanas Airlines](#), a Panamanian commuter airliner carrying mostly Jewish passengers, including several Americans. The case languished for years, but the FBI appears to have recently collected new information which, together with evidence gleaned from other current investigations, is likely to serve as the basis for a variety of actions aimed at Hezbollah, the lynchpin of the ITN and Iran's most powerful proxy group.

But Hezbollah's more recent moves in Latin America are very much a matter of interest for investigators, too. In October, a joint [FBI-NYPD investigation](#) led to the arrest of two individuals who were allegedly acting on behalf of Hezbollah's terrorist wing, the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO). At the direction of their Hezbollah handlers, one person allegedly "conducted missions in Panama to locate the U.S. and Israeli Embassies and to assess the vulnerabilities of the Panama Canal and ships in the Canal," according to a Justice Department press release. The other allegedly "conducted surveillance of potential targets in America, including military and law enforcement

facilities in New York City." In the wake of these arrests, the director of the National Counterterrorism Center **warned**: "It's our assessment that Hezbollah is determined to give itself a potential homeland option as a critical component of its terrorism playbook, and that is something that those of us in the counterterrorism community take very, very seriously." These cases, one official **added**, are "likely the tip of the iceberg."

The administration's counter-Hezbollah campaign is an interagency effort that includes leveraging diplomatic, intelligence, financial and law enforcement tools to expose and disrupt the logistics, fundraising and operational activities of Iran, the Qods Force and the long list of Iranian proxies from Lebanese Hezbollah to other Shia militias in Iraq and elsewhere. But in the words of Ambassador Nathan Sale, the State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, "Countering Hezbollah is a **top priority** for the Trump administration." Since it took office, the Trump administration has taken a series of actions against Hezbollah in particular -- including **indictments**, **extraditions**, public **statements** and **rewards** for information on wanted Hezbollah terrorist leaders -- and officials are signaling that more actions are expected, especially in Latin America. **Congress** has passed a series of bills aimed at Hezbollah as well. The goal, according to an administration official quoted by Politico, is to "expose them for their behavior." The thinking goes: Hezbollah cannot claim to be a legitimate actor even as it engages in a laundry list of illicit activities that undermine stability at home in Lebanon, across the Middle East region and around the world.

To support this policy, the administration has issued a broad RFI -- a request for information -- requiring departments and agencies to scour their files and collect new information that could be used to identify targets and help direct and inform the implementation of forthcoming actions. Though it is unclear if it is a result of that RFI, it appears new information is coming in, as evidenced most recently by a little-noticed FBI "**Seeking Information**" bulletin issued by the Bureau's Miami Field Office.

The subject of the bulletin -- the bomber Ali Hawa Jamal -- died in the Alas Chiricanas attack. In the wake of the crash, families of the passengers and crew claimed all but one of the bodies. That body, which was badly disfigured in ways consistent with a suicide bombing, has now "**possibly been identified** as Ali Hawa Jamal," according to the FBI bulletin. But the request for information is very timely indeed, as authorities are actively looking for his still-living accomplices. What's new, it appears, is knowledge of this Hezbollah bomber's true name. Until now, authorities only knew the name that appears on the fake ID he used to purchase his ticket for the doomed flight, Jamal Lya. Now, with the knowledge of his true identity, authorities are asking for information that could lead them to the presumably local Latin American support network that helped him carry out his plot. "It is suspected," the **FBI bulletin** concludes, "that additional parties may have assisted Jamal in the bombing."

Flight 00901, a twin-engine Embraer commuter plane operated by Alas Chiricanas Airlines, exploded shortly after take-off from Colon on its way to Panama City. Of the 21 passengers and crew, most were businessmen working in the Colon Free Trade Zone; all were killed instantly. Amazingly, given the tiny size of the Jewish community in Panama (about 8,000 people), 12 of the 18 passengers were Jewish, including four Israelis and three Americans. Coming on the heels of the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires, the local Jewish community was especially on edge. One community leader noted at the time, "we all knew someone on the flight, or were related to someone on the flight." Their fears were quickly confirmed when Panama's president-elect announced that the crash "was not an accident but a **planted bomb** inside the plane." Investigators would determine that the bomber carried out preoperational surveillance leading up to his actual attack, including **flying** this commuter plane route several times, presumably to test security and select the optimal seat selection to maximize the impact of his explosive device.

Within days, Hezbollah had claimed responsibility for both the AMIA bombing and the Panama airline bombing in a leaflet distributed in the Lebanese port city of Sidon. The claim of responsibility was issued under the name Ansar Allah, or "Partisans of God." "Ansar Allah was one of the many fictitious names that Hezbollah used to claim

responsibility for its attacks," [Argentinean authorities](#) explained. And yet, despite the claim of responsibility and other circumstantial evidence pointing to Hezbollah, authorities were not yet sure.

The State Department's annual [report on international terrorism for 1994](#) notes that Hezbollah was the leading suspect behind the AMIA attack, and adds that together with the downing of Flight 00901 "these attacks raised concerns about the reported presence of members of Hezbollah in Latin America, especially in the triborder area where Brazilian, Argentine, and Paraguayan territories meet." According to a November 1994 [FBI report](#), both the AMIA bombing and the Panama airline downing -- as well as two other bombings in London on July 26 and 27 (both near Israeli targets) -- were all "highly suspected of being perpetrated by Hezbollah." Testifying before Congress a year later, the State Department's [Coordinator for Counterterrorism noted](#) Ansar Allah's claim of responsibility, adding that "evidence gathered so far suggests it may also have been a Hezbollah suicide bombing." Investigators following the evidence of the AMIA and Flight 00901 attacks stumbled on other Hezbollah plots in the region around the same time. That same year, police in Uruguay busted a Hezbollah-run weapons smuggling operation with ties to the triborder area, a well-known epicenter of criminal activity with a [significant Hezbollah presence](#). The following August, Paraguayan police arrested three members of a Hezbollah "[sleeper cell](#)" with possible links to the 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires.

By 1996, however, evidence pointed more definitively to Hezbollah's role in the Alas Chiricanas bombing. In May 1996, the three border countries launched a "[Tripartite Command of the Tri-Border](#)" to coordinate their law enforcement and intelligence agencies to combat organized crime and terrorist activities in the area. The next month -- just days before Lebanese Hezbollah operatives helped local Saudi Hezbollah and Iranian operatives blow up the [Khobar Towers](#) military housing complex in Saudi Arabia -- the FBI issued a [bulletin](#) seeking information about the Flight 09001 bombing, which it described as an "oversees homicide," and about the bomber who had been "tentatively identified" as Jamal Lya, the name that appeared on the flight manifest. The bulletin appears to have been issued in response to a request from local authorities in the region, likely at the behest of this new Tripartite Command. "Authorities are seeking information that may pertain to possible suspect(s) and the crime aboard this flight," the bulletin explained.

The FBI identified Jamal Lya as the man "suspected of carrying the bomb aboard the aircraft," and described him as "a Middle Eastern male, 25 to 28 years old, approximately 5'9" and weighing 160 pounds." The bulletin described his appearance and the clothes he wore the day of the attack, adding that he spoke neither Spanish nor English, but possibly spoke Arabic. Authorities were not sure, however, because -- in what may have been a display of operational security -- "in order to communicate instructions to people he used hand signals or wrote notes."

The 1996 bulletin concluded by subtly linking the attack to Hezbollah without specifically naming the group (likely a nod to the [political sensitivities](#) of local countries to any suggestion that groups like Hezbollah raise funds or are active within their borders). The downing of Flight 00901 occurred just one day after "a Muslim fundamentalist group" allegedly blew up the AMIA building in Buenos Aires, the bulletin concludes. "This group is also suspected of involvement in the Flight 00901 bombing."

The new, updated bulletin, posted on the FBI Miami Field Office's website the week of October 30, 2017, now includes the bomber's true name -- Ali Hawa Jamal. It repeats much of the information from the 1996 version, but adds some new facts. Beyond his name, we now also know Jamal "was known to have traveled to Lebanon, Venezuela, Colombia, and Panama" -- all places with established [Hezbollah networks](#). The 2017 bulletin also ends with a cryptic reference to Hezbollah, but now adds: "It is suspected that additional parties may have assisted Jamal in the bombing." It is information about those "additional parties" and their activities in places like Venezuela, Colombia and Panama that authorities are surely now running down.

The renewed focus on Hezbollah's presence and operations in Latin America is long overdue. Hezbollah's last

attempted international terrorism plot was in Peru, where a Lebanese Hezbollah operative, [Mohammed Amadar](#), arrived in November 2013 and married a woman of dual Peruvian-American citizenship two weeks later. The U.S. connection got the attention of the FBI's Miami Field Office. Shortly thereafter, Amadar moved to Brazil, living in Sao Paulo until he returned to Lima in July 2014. Peru's anti-terror unit questioned him upon his arrival at the airport, put Amadar under surveillance, and arrested him for planning attacks on Jewish and Israeli targets that October.

Hezbollah today is deeply invested in operations in South America. One of the most prominent operatives behind the AMIA bombing has now risen up the ranks of the organization and is personally overseeing Hezbollah operations in the region. According to Israeli investigators, [Salman al-Reda](#) (whose true name is reportedly Salman Raouf Salman) was the on-the-ground coordinator of the AMIA bombing. A dual Lebanese-Colombian citizen who lived at various times in Colombia, in Buenos Aires and in the Tri-Border area, Reda fled the region after the bombing before being indicted by Argentine authorities for his role in the attack. It remains unclear if Reda also played a role in the bombing of Flight 00901.

But in the years that followed, Reda served as an active member of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization. He was especially active in Southeast Asia and South America in the 1990s, including a flurry of [operational missions](#) in 1997 with three visits to Panama, two to Colombia and one to Brazil. Following Mohammad Amadar's arrest in Peru, he reportedly identified Reda as the Hezbollah operative who served as his handler; he said he'd met with him on three different occasions in Turkey to plan the Peru operation.

With Reda still at large and presumably driving Hezbollah operations in the region, U.S. authorities have good reason to be concerned about the group's activities in the Western Hemisphere. That was surely underscored by the arrests of the [Hezbollah operatives in Michigan and New York](#) who stand accused of casing targets in New York and Panama. These cases highlight the determination of the U.S. intelligence community, articulated by the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, that the trajectory of Hezbollah's international terrorist activities has [not changed](#) since the Iran nuclear deal was reached in 2015. In other words, we have no reason to believe that Hezbollah won't launch fresh attacks in America's backyard -- especially as tensions rise between the U.S. and Iran.

The Trump administration is clearly eager to counter Iran and sees Hezbollah as a key proxy for Tehran, involved in many of what officials have called the Iranian regime's "[malign activities](#)." The administration's public campaign against Hezbollah seeks to accomplish two things. First, to disrupt the group's ongoing fundraising, logistics and operations. And second, to highlight the disconnect between the group's terrorist and criminal activities and its "attempts to [portray itself](#) as a legitimate political party," according to the director of the National Counterterrorism Center, Nicholas Rasmussen.

Rasmussen made clear what we should expect moving forward: "We have and will continue to monitor closely Hezbollah activity around the world and work aggressively to disrupt any instances of Hezbollah operating within our borders." The close monitoring is ongoing. Authorities have already uncovered new information about the group's role in the bombing of Alas Chiricanas Airlines Flight 09001, and are sure to expose more recent Hezbollah activities as well. Next up: Expect some aggressive disruption.

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