

LATIN AMERICA, THE CARIBBEAN, ISLAMISM AND TERRORISM

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Al-Qaeda's recent claims that they will wage war against the United States' oil supply sources across the world, particularly in Mexico and in Venezuela come as a stark reminder that Islamist terrorism could strike the country's interest via its southern markets.

A threat that was seen as distant and hypothetical since the anti-Israeli attacks of the 1990s in Argentina has been revived.

In truth, the risk of a terrorist attack against western interests in Latin America or in the Caribbean is a real one. Although surveillance is in place, the local environment could today tend towards acts of terrorism, despite certain exceptional circumstances. ¹.

Islam in Latin America and the Caribbean

Estimations of the number of Muslims in the region vary depending on whether we look at distant geographical origins or a current religious reference.

Nevertheless, it is the latter that today is the more concrete interest as it is true that the presence of Islam on American soil is as old, or almost as old as the discovery of the New World, and that it has been subjected to a « *melting pot* » effect in certain aspects, more powerful than north of the Rio Grande.

- **First colonial origins**

About fifty years after the discovery of Hispaniola island by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and the landing of the Portuguese Pedro Alvares Cabral on the Brazilian coast in 1500, colonisers imported a workforce of African slaves. It was aimed at compensating for the demographic collapse of the native populations due to diseases brought over from Europe and the tough nature of the work imposed on them.

¹ For example, the World Cup of Cricket (WCC) organised this year in the West Indies, which starts on 11th March. Friendly matches have been organised since 5th March. Host countries: Jamaica, Tobago, Barbados, St Kitts and St Lucia.

The first Muslims to arrive on American soil in the middle of the 16th century found themselves among the slaves originating from the western coast of Africa.

These slaves were employed by the Spanish in the gold mines of Columbia, Venezuela and Ecuador, or in the silver mines of Mexico and Peru. The Portuguese brought them over in large numbers in the same period in Brazil to develop the sugar cane culture. In the 17th century, the implantation of this same culture in the West Indies was the beginning of a major flow of African slaves to the Caribbean.

No culture remains of these Muslims, who were just a minority in this monstrous treatment of human beings.

As in native cultures or other imported ones, an Iberian acculturation took place, pressed home by the imposition of the Catholic religion, Spanish and Portuguese languages and a powerful local organisation.

- **Later arrivals**

From 1845 and up to the start of the following century, England organised the implantation of nearly 200,000 people from India and what is now Pakistan in the Crown's dependencies (the Caribbean Islands, Guyana and Surinam). Many Muslims came across in this wave.

In addition, after the wars of independence at the start of the 19th century and the slow abolition of slavery, governments in the new American republics wanted to reinforce and "civilise" a population that was under 20 million inhabitants over the whole of Latin America and was essentially made up of Amerindians, blacks and mulattos.

Their effort was applied to "Latin" Europe but their call was heard way beyond that. Attracted by perspectives of liberty and an economic eldorado, several million immigrants entered Latin America between the 1850s and the first world war. Argentina, Brazil, Uruguay and Paraguay absorbed three-quarters of them.²

In this voluntary wave that affected the shores of the South American continent, we found Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslims, and especially many citizens from Middle East countries who were looking to flee the Ottoman regime. Among them, we found Syrians, Lebanese and Palestinians ("*los Turcos*"). Many of them, like their European homologues, went to Brazil and southern countries. Columbia and Venezuela also took people in, but at a lesser proportion.

Latin America witnessed a final significant arrival of Palestinians and Lebanese from the 1950s after the creation of the state of Israel and the troubles that rocked the Middle East in the second half of the last century.

- **Current characteristics of the community**

Muslims in Latin America and the Caribbean today are essentially descendants of immigrants from the Middle East and the Indian sub-continent over the last two centuries.

The number of people professing Islam in this population are approximatively evaluated at 2 million, of which hardly 85,000 are in the Caribbean islands³. They represent globally 0.36% of a population estimated at 550 million inhabitants.

² Between 1880 and 1920, Brazil took in 3 million immigrants, Argentina took in 2.5 million.

³ Figures to be compared to those - also approximative - of Canada (0.6 million) and the USA (5 million).

The history of their arrival is reflected even more in their geographical distribution.

Thus, Brazil and Argentina have the largest Muslim communities in the Iberian zone with 0.7 and 0.6 million people respectively. Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana and Surinam, with Muslim populations of up to 65,000 and 85,000 individuals, come out on top of the former possessions of the British crown.

The 5 most populated countries - Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Columbia and Venezuela - are also those who have the largest number of Muslims.

However, ratios in relation to the global population are similar to the average of the Latin American - Caribbean zone. Alone among them, Argentina carries the distinction of a larger proportion, estimated at 1.5% of the population.

On the other hand, in the "small" countries, in population terms, we find record proportions of Muslims: 6% in Trinidad and Tobago, 10% in Guyana and 20% in Surinam.

Muslim immigrants have been accepted by societies that took them in, and have so far managed to integrate.

Trade has been and continues to be, notably in the southern countries, their preferred sector. Many of their descendents have converted to Christianity, and have gone into political careers.

Nevertheless, since the 1990s, there has been an attempt to organise Muslim communities in the Latin America - Caribbean zones on the basis of a religious and cultural affirmation.

The most developed entity is, it seems the Islamic Organisation for Latin America (IOLA), created in 1992, with headquarters in the Argentinian capital. Among its objectives are the creation of a unique religious contact for Muslim communities with the authorities of various countries as well as the establishment of "fluid" contacts between these communities and the diplomatic representatives of the locally accredited Islamic countries. The IOLA favours a proactive attitude of Latin American Muslims so that they themselves guarantee the defense of their values. The organisation has an office responsible for translating and distribution Islamic study subjects in Spanish. And finally, to this day, we can note the presence of organisms, learning or prayer centres and associations linked to IOLA in 16 countries of Latin America and 5 countries in the Caribbean.

Islam in the general context of the region

Islam is indeed present in Latin America and the Caribbean: it has affected the New World, mixed with different waves of immigration. Today, it is trying to confirm itself and develop beyond its original limits.

Before looking at extremist expressions, it would be a good idea to examine the conditions of development of Islam in the cultural, social, economic and political contexts of the region.

There are many factors and parameters that can help it prosper.

- From a religion point of view, the prospects have become more open over the last half a century. Catholicism has lost its historic pre-eminence as much from a cultural viewpoint for the populations as from the viewpoint of the place of the Church as an institution. Weakened internally by the theology of liberation, it has seen the progression of Protestant churches at its expense, the development of cults and animistic practises among the black populations, and the display of resurgent secular cults in Amerindian communities.

- Alongside that, various components within society are looking to go "back to their roots", a cultural inclination that "arab" immigrants cannot escape from, the most ardent elements of

which do not hesitate to refer to the splendour of Al Andalusia and their conquistador descendents.

- A considerable argument within the mainly poor societies in the region, the image of Islam is largely assimilated into a Third World reality. Moreover, the fact that the precepts of Islam propose a range of rules and secular guides make it appear to be the solution when faced with poverty, failure and exclusion.

- Finally, from a political point of view, the *jihad* launched by the Islamists against American imperialism and its meanings and consequences is not unlike the movement of the Marxist revolutionaries in the 60s and 80s. Thus, the pro-*Hezbollah* movements in Argentina and Venezuela (*see hereafter*) are supported by leftist "revolutionary" movements or even integrated by indigenous organisation members (ethnically from Wayuu to Venezuela).

Nevertheless, there are major obstacles to its development.

- Latin American and Caribbean mentalities, while diverse and reflected in a multitude of cultural expressions, are part of a historic pluri-secular history in relation to which Islam appears exotic enough to be a newcomer. With few exceptions, if not converted, the *Turco* remains culturally a foreigner, notably through religion and the practise of a liturgical language in Arabic.

- Moreover, from the European links and references, the influence of North America has resulted in and reinforced the secularisation of societies in the region, notably in terms of political and social organisation.

- Finally, from an economic viewpoint, Latin America - Caribbean does not constitute a priority investment zone for Middle-Eastern investment, but is however being approached and conquered by Chinese and Indian initiatives.

Globally, we can therefore believe that Islam is still on foreign ground in Latin America and in the Caribbean.

Its possibilities of a slow expansion are however quite real.

This expansion, supported by the worldwide resurgence in Islam is itself spread locally by the globalisation of information and the proselytic effort of its believers, with the backing of consequent communities, can effectively result in the appearance of extremists or favour their participation in a general context wrought with a multitude of tensions.

Manifestations of the Islamist threat

In the turbulent violence linked in any form to "Islamist" terrorism, the neighbours to the south of the United States have set themselves apart over the last decade by an exceptional calm that has not however excluded them from Washington's mistrust after the attacks of 11th September 2001.

It is delicate to accept as fully proven certain "evidence" put forward concerning the existence of Islamist terrorism activities today in the region, even if an understandable amount of caution is required...

- **The "historic" attacks in Buenos Aires in the 90s**

The booby-trapped vehicle attack that destroyed the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires in 1992 caused 29 deaths and more than 240 injuries. The attack was claimed by an organisation, the Islamic *Jihad*, which claimed to be responding to the execution of a Lebanese *Hezbollah* leader a month earlier by the Israeli army. Argentine, American and Israeli enquiries led to the suspicion of support of the Muslim community in the Three

Border zone ⁴, steering by the Iranian embassy and an execution by Pakistanis, without bringing sufficient proof to bring the case to the courts.

Regardless, this attack deserved the full attention of observers as it was perpetrated in a region that until then had not been affected by "arab" terrorism and hit a country that brought together the Jewish and Muslim communities of Latin America. It was manifestly linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the time, this crisis had reached one of its peaks with the failure of the Madrid peace conference at the end of 91 due to the continuing installation of Jewish settlers in the occupied territories, followed in 92 by the UNSC's condemnation of Israeli policy in Palestine.

The explosive-packed vehicle that in July 1994 destroyed the building of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AIMA) killed 85 people and injured many more. Once more, enquiries led to the suspicion of Iranian and *Hezbollah* support but led to nothing. One hypothesis put forward was that of a reply to President Menem's cancellation of a project to sell nuclear equipment to Syria. This time, in fact, the link with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not as clear: in May 1994, the agreement over Palestinian autonomy was signed, followed by the creation of the Palestinian Authority, Israel's military retreat from Gaza and Jericho, and then the arrival at the start of July of Yasser Arafat in Gaza. Nevertheless, once more, it was the Jewish community that was affected and the Israeli interests that were exclusively targeted.

- **After 2001**

Since 1994, no spectacular criminal events have hit the region but historic precedents in Buenos Aires and especially the attacks of 11th September 2001 have led the authorities to keep a more watchful and suspicious eye on the Muslim communities.

At the same time, the reasons for this defiance have taken a new direction. Indeed, immediately after 9/11, "security experts" and other American "intelligence sources" confirmed unequivocally that al-Qaeda had terrorist "bases" in Latin America and in the Caribbean with the intention of preparing attacks against American interests in the zone or on American territory. With the same approach tending to globalise the threat, they did not hesitate to point the figure at Hugo Chávez's relations with Saddam Hussein or Ghadaffi, and in doing so, revive the Cuban threat.

Manifestations of actual Islamist terrorist activities in the region remain imprecise. However, we note that in 2006, while relations between the United States and Iran became ever more tense, more precise indicators were detected, accusing *Hezbollah* and even Tehran.

Probably linked to the resurgence of religious and cultural affirmation previously mentioned,

⁴ Regarding the Three Border zone: the borders of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay meet at the place where the Paraná and the Iguazú meet, some 1000km to the north of Buenos Aires. It is an internationally renowned tourist region (the falls of Iguazú) and above all a commercial zone in which the absence of rigorous border controls facilitate the numerous illegal or criminal trafficking. The 3 towns - Puerto Iguazú in Argentine, Foz de Iguazú in Brésil and Ciudad del Este in Paraguay - constitute an urbanised whole of over 700,000 inhabitants. Ciudad del Este comes behind Hong Kong and Miami as one of the most active tax-free commercial centres in the world. It has a large Muslim colony made up of several thousand people, notably of Lebanese origin, which groups together half of the 25,000 "arabs" in the Three Border zone. Foz de Iguazu dedicates itself to tourism and the exploitation of hydroelectric energy and is also a very cosmopolitan town that plays host to about 12,000 Muslims. In Argentina, with 40,000 inhabitants, Puerto Iguazú is relatively small, with plenty of tourist activities.

the circulation of printed publications showing aggression against the "infidel" have been noticed here and there, notably in communities in the former British colonies.

Among these, Trinidad and Tobago stands out with the existence of at least 3 radical Islamist movements responsible since 2004 for hateful declarations: *Jama'at al Murabiteen*, *Waajihatul Islaamiyyah* and *Jama'at al Muslimeen*. Between July and October 2005, 4 bomb attacks hit the Port of Spain. The devices of limited power, placed in public spaces claimed 2 deaths and several injuries. They were not claimed but, coming after the London attacks of 7th July 2005, they resulted in joint enquiries between local authorities and Scotland Yard regarding probably criminal connections. In November, the leader of *Jama'at al Muslimeen*, Yasin Abu Bakr, was brought to trial for possession of weapons and violent declarations made at his mosque. The last example concerning the implication of Caribbean citizens in Islamist terrorism, in February 2007 in Paris, saw the judgement of Willie Brigitte, a French national from Guadeloupe who had converted to Islam, for his part played in a terrorist plot in Australia.

Several days after the start of the Israeli intervention in the Lebanon in July 2006, the organisation named *Hezbollah America Latina*, in the footsteps of its sister organisation *Hezbollah Venezuela* displayed a warning message to Israel and the United States on its internet site *AutonomiaIslamicaWayuu* urging them to cease their operations in Lebanon and abandon their plans to invade Iran, or face revenge attacks.

A previous publication on the same site announced the start of the *jihad* in America for 2007.

In Argentina, at the same moment, the site of *Hezbollah Argentina* broadcast a message in the same anti-American and anti-Israeli vein, renewing its threats to attack in Latin America as a response to threats to Iran.

In October 2006, the local police in an area of Caracas found two low-grade explosive devices close to the American embassy. The plans seemed essentially to be attention-seeking, notably through the distribution, as the explosions took place, of propaganda documents signed by *Hezbollah Venezuela*⁵. Two days later, the plans were claimed by *Hezbollah America Latina* while the person accused of the plans, a Venezuelan student (José Miguel Rojas Espinoza), who had been arrested by police officers, was granted the title of *moudjahid*.

In December 2006, the Three Border zone was once more accused by the American authorities and particularly by the Treasury department, who condemned the existence of a network made up of 9 shopkeepers of Lebanese origin living in Ciudad del Este or Foz de Iguazú who were collecting funds and recruiting volunteers for *Hezbollah*. The "*Barakat*" network (taken from the name of the first Lebanese trader who travelled to Foz and settled in the 1950s) has allegedly collected "thousands of millions" of dollars since 2004, according to the American authorities who went public on their activities giving names and addresses of their members. They nevertheless specified that the information divulged did not lead to any court action against the private companies mentioned and did not ask any government to make use of it... Unsurprisingly, governments in the three countries concerned believed that this information carried "no new elements that could allow them to confirm the presence of terrorists in the region, nor on the financing of terrorism".

Indeed, this official reaction presumes nothing of the reality of a cooperation between the American services and those of the three south-American countries in the surveillance of the manifestation of activities linked to Islamist terrorism in this region, a cooperation that seems assiduous since the Buenos Aires attacks, and that has strengthened since 2001 in the framework of the "3+1 regional cooperation mechanism".

Finally, among the recent events that have sparked international tensions, in November

⁵ Among others: "The Islamic World, Civilisation of God, combat is my greatest expression of love, the only path to offer you a healthy world free from corruption".

2006, a federal Argentine judge issued an international arrest warrant for the former Iranian president Rafsanjani and 8 of his compatriots for their responsibility in the attack on AIMA in 1994. It is interesting to take note of the virulent reaction of Argentina's Muslim community (*Dear Judge, you have insulted our community... you are taking us for idiots...*) and the organisation of a demonstration march in front of the Israel embassy. The manifestation at which *Hezbollah* banners were brandished was led by Shiite religious leaders.⁶ Several "revolutionary" organisations and political movements took part.

Regional context of the anti-terrorist combat post-2001

9/11 marked a turning point in the cooperation in the fight against terrorism on the American continent. The Organisation of American States (OSA) naturally gave it the framework by obtaining in June 2002 the completion, through its 34 member states, of the Inter-American Convention for the Fight Against Terrorism (ICFAT).

To this day, 23 countries have ratified this convention which is applied by a steering committee integrated within the OSA.

According to its statutes, the CICTE "is the main organisation of the inter-American system responsible for co-ordinating efforts aimed at protecting citizens of member countries against the threats linked to terrorism. In the framework of this organisation, the most highly qualified leaders, specialists and decision-makers collaborate and exchange intelligence in order to strengthen solidarity and security on a hemisphere-wide scale".

The purpose of the convention signed in June 2002 is to "prevent, punish and eliminate terrorism" thanks to a strengthened inter-state cooperation in the numerous domains listed in a series of articles including notably: the fight against financing of terrorism (particularly seizing of funds, actions against money laundering), border control, reconciliation of specialised services, the fight against lax migratory flows and the development of training programs at all levels.

The question of Islamist terrorism and recent regional events

In recent developments at a regional level, two major elements have surfaced and reinforce the attention of the American authorities vis-a-vis current and future manifestations of the existence of and virulence of Islamist terrorism. It consists in the increasing numbers of « left-wing » governments and Tehran's efforts to improve relations with them.

Today, there is a long list of major countries in the zone who, since the last noisy Americas summits (Monterrey in 2004 and then Mar del Plata in 2005) confirmed with the election of "left-wing" Presidents the cooling of relations between the United States and South America or, at least a distance put between them and Washington. This development comes on top of an increasing solidarity, albeit slow and chaotic, between *latinos*, which is currently influencing the official delicate position towards the American administration (condemnation of the war in Iraq, refusal of immunity for American soldiers at the International Tribunal...). The uncontested and vocal leader of this development is of course the Venezuelan Hugo Chávez, whose regional interventionism has a global project, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (BAA) and relies on his country's oil resources. The election of Daniel Ortega in Nicaragua has given him a key ally in Central America while links have been strengthening

⁶ Abdallah Madani, head of the Islamic Argentine Association and of the Argentine Arab House; Mohsen Ali, head of the House for the Spread of Islam in Argentina.

since 2005 with the Caribbean⁷ where his ambitions gain weight with the support of Fidel Castro. While Cuba is still classified as a country that supports terrorism, Venezuela has not only "virtually ceased cooperation in the global fight against terrorism" but has become a "potential entry point for terrorists". Its contacts with states supporting terrorism is worrying, as much as the support expressed by Teodoro Darnot, leader of *Hezbollah Venezuela*, who called for the electorate to vote for Chávez last December.

Moreover, reactions such as those from the Argentinian Muslim community regarding the international arrest warrant for Iranians and the support received from left-wing movements have not gone unnoticed in Washington.

It would seem indeed that the United States fears that several countries carried away by "progressive" political discourse do not do enough when faced with a threat that they understand badly and are harming a situation that is already alarming in the domain of security: drugs trafficking, corruption, institutional and regulatory weaknesses, insufficient effort in combating terrorism.

In this context, the visits of the Iranian President Ahmadinejad in the region at the end of 2006 and the start of 2007 added to Washington's worries. After repeated trips by Mr Chávez to Tehran, the Iranian President, playing up the same tune of oil resources and anti-imperialism as his Venezuelan "brother", reinforced or established fresh links with four major countries. Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia and Nicaragua.

For Washington, the Latin American leaders concerned are playing a dangerous game. Indeed, riskier than anti-Americanism and the promotion of radical options within the OPEP, this coming together on the basis of two radicalisms - shiite religion and social-bolivarian secularism - strangers to each other, is likely to provoke a penetration of Middle East conflicts within the region.

Its stability can only worsen, and the same goes for American interests.

So much so that the call last February to attack oil installations in Mexico and Venezuela supplying the United States, while it comes from al-Qaeda and not Iran, can only strengthen **Washington's impression that Islamist terrorism is now setting itself up on America's doorstep.**

Perspectives

It is prudent not to be optimistic.

Certainly, Islam is having difficulties developing in the Latin American-Caribbean zone. However, the characteristics of its implantation in several countries such as Argentina, Paraguay, Venezuela or in Guyana, Surinam and Trinidad and Tobago are now favourable to the implication of a handful of individuals in actions supporting Islamist terrorism, or even direct action in the zone.

The situation in various countries of Latin America and the Caribbean is not susceptible alone, and for internal reasons, to generate today violent expressions of Islamist terrorism. However, its few manifestations are already creating noises beyond regional borders. Its development and its expression through possible spectacular actions will more than likely be linked to exterior events concerning the Middle East. In this respect, the development of relations with Iran appears to be an element that could increase this sensitivity.

The lack of reliability, experience and means of national security systems leaves most of the

⁷ In 2005, 13 countries in the Caribbean signed, with Venezuela, an oil contract aimed at "reinforcing their independence" in February 2007, Antigua and Barbados, the Dominican Republic, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines have signed to integrate ALBA, joining Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua.

countries in a state of initial vulnerability faced with the possible rise of the threat.

If it should manifest itself, the most important risks appear to weigh on activities reflecting the American presence in the zone due to the amalgam that can be made between the rejection of Washington's foreign policy and the deep-rooted presence of "*gringos*" in the region.

In this respect, activities linked to the various aspects of exploitation of natural energy resources could be priority targets, notably but not exclusively taking into account the internal political situation of several producer countries.

Moreover, certain parts of Latin America-Caribbean which welcome major tourist activities bring together many western clients who could be hit by serious terrorist actions attacking means of transport and other "soft targets".

In the short term, the observation of the events of the last few years leads us to believe that spectacular Islamist terrorist attacks, similar to the attacks in Buenos Aires in the 90s, are unlikely to happen in the Latin America-Caribbean zone without active external participation.