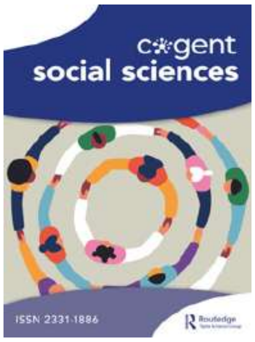

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The denying threat to national security and defense: Hezbollah's presence in Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This article critically examines Hezbollah's presence in Colombia and evaluates whether it constitutes a strategic threat to the nation's security and defense. Through qualitative documentary analysis, the study explores the convergence of international terrorism and transnational organized crime and its impact on Colombia's internal conflict. It focuses on Hezbollah's involvement in drug trafficking, money laundering, and arms smuggling, highlighting the group's integration into local criminal networks and its potential to destabilize regional security. Drawing on open-source intelligence, official documents, and peer-reviewed literature, the research reveals that Colombian defense policies have largely failed to recognize Hezbollah as a significant threat. This institutional blind spot endangers both national and regional stability, especially given Hezbollah's ties to Venezuelan political actors and Colombian insurgent groups. The central research question asks to what extent Hezbollah's presence has influenced Colombia's national security and defense policy since 2001, and how the state has acknowledged—or neglected—this influence. The study hypothesizes that Hezbollah's role has been consistently underestimated due to a narrow view of terrorism as an external threat. As a result, Colombia's security strategies have remained inward-focused and insufficient to address the hybrid, transnational nature of contemporary non-state actors.

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1. Introduction

Hezbollah, originally centered on its opposition to Israel, might initially seem to pose a distant concern for Colombia. However, this perception began to shift in the 1980s, when the organization strategically expanded its global presence, deploying operatives across key regions. In Latin America, this expansion began in Argentina and rapidly extended to the Tri-Border Area – where Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina meet – as well as to Venezuela, Panama, Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Bolivia. This broader regional footprint enabled Hezbollah to establish a vital operational base for hybrid warfare activities aimed at the United States, primarily through recruitment and collaboration with transnational criminal networks as a source of financial support (Levitt, 2013; Noriega & Cárdenas, 2022).

In recent decades, radical Islamist terrorist organizations have significantly expanded their global reach. Notable among them are Al-Qaeda, Daesh, Boko Haram, and Hezbollah, all of which utilize decentralized, multifaceted operational strategies to pursue their objectives (Jordan, 2014). Before the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, terrorism and transnational organized crime were typically seen as separate security threats (Perri & Terrance, 2009; Shelley, 2002). However, under the modern paradigm of hybrid warfare, these phenomena have increasingly converged. Contemporary terrorist organizations not only conduct conventional and asymmetric attacks but also engage in illicit trafficking, operate transnationally, and deliberately target civilian populations. Hezbollah, along with Daesh and Al-Qaeda, embodies this integrated operational model (Hoffman, 2014; Realuyo, 2014).

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This article has been corrected with minor changes. These changes do not impact the academic content of the article.

Founded in 1982 as a Shi'a militia responding to Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon, Hezbollah has evolved into a complex political and military actor. As of 2023, the group held parliamentary representation in Lebanon and was estimated to command a force of around 100,000 members, including a considerable number of non-combatant affiliates. The renewed conflict with Israel, which intensified after 8 October 2023, introduced uncertainty regarding its current manpower, following reports of the deaths of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and other senior figures. Nonetheless, the group maintains strong recruitment capabilities (Al-Alkhira, 2024; Costanza, 2012; Jalkh, 2023; Santiago, 2017). Iran, Hezbollah's founding sponsor, continues to support it as a proxy force to disseminate Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary ideology within the Lebanese Shi'a community (Costanza, 2012).

Over the past thirty years, Iran has been instrumental in transforming Hezbollah into a global actor by providing an estimated $100 million annually in financial aid and facilitating its integration into transnational criminal circuits (Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, 2005). In Latin America, Hezbollah has established strategic alliances with local criminal networks, enabling it to fund its operations through drug trafficking, money laundering, counterfeiting, arms smuggling, and paramilitary training (American Enterprise Institute, 2017; Ellis, 2024; Odin, 2019; Santiago, 2017).

The Lebanese Civil War (1975–1990) led to significant waves of emigration to South America, which Iran and Hezbollah leveraged to deploy operatives and cultivate support within diaspora communities (Ellis, 2024; Gato & Windrem, 2011; Levitt, 2016). Initially focused on religious outreach and recruitment, Hezbollah's operations in the region evolved by the 1990s into active terrorist and criminal enterprises capable of executing major attacks and generating substantial illicit revenue ().

Today, Hezbollah functions as a sophisticated transnational organization, capable of training operatives, coordinating attacks, amassing funds, and forging alliances with both state and non-state actors throughout Latin America (Santiago, 2017). According to multiple sources, including Ellis (2024), the group has carried out numerous attacks in the region since the 1990s. In 2021, Hezbollah reportedly targeted Israeli and U.S. nationals in Colombia, prompting Brazil to initiate 'Operação Trapiche' in 2024 to dismantle its recruitment networks. The organization has also shifted toward more covert tactics, including the use of contracted assassins for targeted killings (Ellis, 2024).

Beyond the security-based frameworks, it is essential to consider the broader geopolitical discourse that conditions how terrorist threats are recognized or ignored. Al-Kassimi (2021) emphasizes that post-9/11 legal imaginaries, shaped by neo-Orientalist logics, have constructed the Arab and Muslim subject as an inherent threat to Western secular rationality. These discourses, embedded in international law through the revitalization of jus gentium, enable a form of defensive imperialism and cultural essentialism. In this context, Hezbollah is not only a hybrid actor but also a product of a broader narrative structure that either magnifies or conceals threats based on their geopolitical origin. This symbolic power influences which threats are prioritized and which are normalized or dismissed, as in the Colombian case.

This study builds upon post-9/11 counterterrorism frameworks and the expanding theory of hybrid warfare. Since that pivotal moment, the academic and strategic discourse has increasingly treated terrorism and organized crime as interrelated phenomena (Al-Kassimi, 2021; Perri & Terrance, 2009; Shelley, 2002). Modern terrorist groups have broadened their operations to include a variety of criminal enterprises aimed at strengthening logistical capacity and extending geopolitical influence. Hezbollah exemplifies this hybrid threat: executing military operations, financing itself through criminal activity, and projecting power across borders (Hoffman, 2014; Melamed Visbal et al., 2024; Realuyo, 2014).

Accordingly, this research seeks to assess the scope of Hezbollah's presence in Colombia and critically evaluate whether the threat it poses to national security and defense has been adequately acknowledged by the Colombian state.

2. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative documentary research design to explore Hezbollah's presence in Colombia. Given the clandestine and sensitive nature of the topic, documentary analysis was chosen as the primary methodological tool. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as a 'systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents in which data are examined and interpreted to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge'. This method enables a thorough examination of pre-existing sources – such as government reports, scholarly publications, and investigative journalism – which is particularly valuable when direct fieldwork or interviews are impractical or pose security risks, as is the case with militant networks. The research follows an interpretivist paradigm, emphasizing qualitative, context-sensitive analysis of social phenomena, such as Hezbollah's operational footprint and strategic relevance in Colombia.

2.1. Data sources and selection

The dataset comprised a diverse collection of documents, including official government records, intelligence reports, legislative debates, journalistic investigations, academic literature, and think-tank analyses. This broad source base allowed for robust data triangulation, as discussed later.

To ensure methodological rigor, inclusion criteria were clearly defined. Documents were selected through purposive sampling based on the following:

Topical relevance: Sources had to address Hezbollah's presence, operations, or networks in Colombia, or more broadly in Latin America with direct relevance to Colombia.

Credibility: Only authoritative documents – originating from government agencies, peer-reviewed journals, or internationally recognized media – were included.

Temporal scope: Materials spanning from the early 2000s to 2024 were reviewed to capture both historical context and current developments.

Documents that did not meet these criteria – such as speculative or unverified accounts – were excluded to maintain analytical integrity. The data collection process was iterative: initial sources were identified through keyword searches in academic databases and news archives using terms like 'Hezbollah Colombia' and 'Hezbollah Latin America'. Snowball sampling was then applied, tracing references from key documents to uncover additional materials. The process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, meaning no new themes or insights were emerging. This approach aligns with grounded theory principles, particularly Bowen's (2009, p. 30) notion of 'sampling on the basis of concepts that have proven theoretical relevance to the evolving analysis'. All documents were catalogued to ensure a transparent audit trail.

2.2. Analytical procedure: inductive–deductive thematic analysis

The data were analyzed through a structured inductive–deductive process, incorporating grounded theory methods, thematic analysis, and qualitative content analysis. The process involved multiple rounds of reading to refine emerging insights. Bowen (2009) outlines this method as progressing through three phases: 'skimming', 'reading', and 'interpretation', which guided the document review cycles.

Initial coding followed grounded theory techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). During the open coding phase, relevant content was identified and assigned conceptual labels based on its relevance to the research questions. As Bowen (2009) notes, this represents the 'first-pass document review' in which meaningful information is extracted and flagged for deeper analysis. The researcher maintained both objectivity and sensitivity, ensuring that nuanced insights were not overlooked.

In the axial coding phase, related codes were grouped into broader categories to reveal thematic patterns. This thematic analysis allowed for the emergence of key concepts through both inductive reasoning – allowing themes to surface organically from the data – and deductive reasoning, comparing those themes with established literature on terrorism and transnational threats. While theoretical frameworks were not used during the initial coding, they were reintroduced later to validate and interpret findings.

2.3. Content analysis framework

To enhance the organization of the coding process, Bardin's (2011) qualitative content analysis framework was applied in three stages:

Pre-analysis: Documents were sorted and subjected to an initial 'floating reading' to gain contextual familiarity. Preliminary ideas and tentative codes were recorded without drawing early conclusions.

Exploration of the material: Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), line-by-line coding was performed. Codes were refined into coherent categories as recurring patterns emerged.

This stage led to the identification of key thematic clusters such as 'criminal activities', 'local support structures', and 'institutional blind spots'.

Interpretation and synthesis: Themes were linked to the central research question. Relationships between categories were explored to draw meaningful conclusions regarding Hezbollah's strategic positioning in Colombia. This final phase yielded a coherent analytical narrative grounded in empirical data.

Throughout all stages, the analysis remained reflexive and iterative. Early documents were revisited in light of emerging themes to ensure consistency and analytical depth. This practice is consistent with grounded theory's emphasis on concurrent data collection and analysis. The process was considered complete once no new themes emerged, indicating that conceptual saturation had been reached.

2.4. Ensuring validity and triangulation

To reinforce the study's credibility and validity, several strategies of qualitative rigor were employed. The analytical procedure was transparent and systematic, with all interpretations traceable to primary data. Peer review was incorporated to reduce potential researcher bias.

Triangulation played a central role in validating findings:

Source triangulation: Various document types (e.g., academic, governmental, journalistic) were compared to verify recurring patterns.

Methodological triangulation: Different qualitative techniques – including grounded theory, content analysis, and thematic analysis – were used in parallel to explore the data from multiple angles.

Findings were considered robust when supported by multiple independent sources. Inconsistencies were not disregarded but analyzed further to enhance interpretive accuracy. Additional criteria such as credibility, dependability, and confirmability were addressed through rigorous documentation, systematic coding, and expert debriefing.

3. Hezbollah's presence in Colombia and its criminal activities

3.1. Hezbollah in Latin America

In 1983, Iran began constructing an intelligence network in South America by deploying Shi'a cleric Mohsen Rabbani to Buenos Aires, Argentina. Although officially appointed as a cultural attaché at the Iranian Embassy, Rabbani played a key role in establishing an Iranian intelligence outpost. He actively promoted the ideology of the Islamic Revolution and recruited local sympathizers. Iran strategically utilized its diplomatic missions and cultural envoys to broaden its regional influence (American Enterprise Institute, 2017; Nisman, Argentine Attorney General Alberto, 2013; Santiago, 2017).

Simultaneously, Hezbollah and Iranian authorities exploited the social and logistical infrastructure of Lebanese Shi'a diaspora communities across Latin America. Particular focus was placed on the Tri-Border Area – where Brazil, Argentina, and Paraguay converge – as well as major urban centers in Brazil (Curitiba, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo), and countries such as Colombia, Chile, Mexico, and Venezuela. Smaller yet active communities in Ecuador, Guyana, El Salvador, and Panama also supported the effort. Iranian operatives, including clerics and emissaries, often obtained legal residency, allowing them to move freely across borders. Religious and cultural institutions – mosques, schools, and community centers – served as platforms to propagate ideological narratives and to recruit supporters (American Enterprise Institute, 2017; Watson, 2017).

Concurrently, Iran expanded its diplomatic engagement throughout the region, cultivating influence not only in anti-U.S. aligned nations but also in ideologically neutral states. By increasing its embassy presence and integrating into local business networks – especially through the Lebanese and Muslim diasporas – Iran pursued long-term strategic objectives across the Western Hemisphere (Karmon, 2010; Watson, 2017).

The Tri-Border Area, particularly the cities of Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil), and Puerto Iguazú (Argentina), quickly became a focal point for Hezbollah. The area's large Muslim population, limited state oversight, and widespread illicit activity created an ideal environment for the group's expansion (Kleck, 2011; Lieutenant Colonel Philip K. Abbott, 2004; Miryekta, 2010; Santiago, 2017; Shorr, 2015).

Hezbollah exploited these conditions to establish a resilient criminal network, partially decoupling its financial dependency from Iran. It engaged in a wide range of illicit enterprises, including drug trafficking, money laundering, counterfeiting, arms smuggling, document forgery, and piracy. These activities generated substantial revenue and enabled the execution of terrorist attacks against Israeli and U.S. targets in the region. While other groups such as Hamas and Al-Qaeda have also taken advantage of regional vulnerabilities, their operations fall outside the scope of this analysis (Ellis, 2024; Lieutenant Colonel Philip K. Abbott, 2004; Santiago, 2017).

In drug trafficking, Hezbollah formed partnerships with powerful cartels, facilitating narcotics flows to North America and Europe. The group implemented complex money laundering mechanisms to legitimize these proceeds and ideologically justified its involvement as asymmetrical warfare aimed at weakening its enemies through addiction. Hezbollah also became a significant regional arms supplier, distributing rifles (e.g., M-16s, AR-15s), grenades, and rocket launchers to allied groups and criminal actors (Committee on Financial Services, Task Force to Investigate Terrorism Financing, 2016; Deriú, 2024; Odin, 2019; Perri & Terrance, 2009).

This operational infrastructure empowered Hezbollah to execute major terrorist attacks across Latin America. In Argentina – home to the region's largest Jewish population – Hezbollah was responsible for the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing and the 1994 AMIA Jewish community center attack. In Panama, the group conducted a suicide bombing on a commercial flight between Colón and Panama City. The cell behind these attacks reportedly transited through Lebanon and Colombia before establishing operations in the Tri-Border Area. In 2014, Peruvian authorities arrested Hezbollah operative Mohamed Ghaleb Hamdar. More recently, Chile launched an investigation into the Barakat clan, a Lebanese family believed to be financing Hezbollah via cross-border commerce along the Chile–Peru–Bolivia corridor. Hezbollah's External Security Organization (Unit 910) coordinated these extraterritorial actions and recruited Lebanese families across Latin America and the Caribbean (Ellis, 2024; Farah, 2012; Monblatt, 2004; Pachico, 2014; Shorr, 2015; Terror Control, 2014).

The Tri-Border Area also facilitated Hezbollah's alliances with other transnational criminal groups, including the Hong Kong mafia, the Lebanese mafia, the FARC, and Al-Qaeda. These connections extended Hezbollah's influence into Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico, Guatemala, Panama, and Costa Rica. For instance, Ecuadorian authorities dismantled a Hezbollah-affiliated drug ring operating out of the restaurant 'El Turco' in Quito in 2005. Hezbollah operatives also established logistical footholds in Chile's Iquique Free Trade Zone (1994–1995) and Uruguay's Chuy Free Zone (Emerson, 2007; Farah, 2012; Miryekta, 2010; Santiago, 2017).

The scope and complexity of these activities eventually drew the attention of U.S. and regional intelligence services. Yet, Hezbollah's operations not only persisted but expanded further into Central America. Under Hugo Chávez, Venezuela provided training facilities and logistical support, solidifying Hezbollah's strategic regional presence (Costanza, 2012; Farah, 2012).

Estimates suggest that Hezbollah derives approximately $20 million annually from illicit operations in the Tri-Border Area. These funds are funneled through regional financial systems, particularly in Venezuela and Ecuador. Iran Shipping Lines, a state-owned enterprise under international sanctions, remained active in Latin America, supporting logistical operations. According to a U.S. Naval War College study, Hezbollah earned about $10 million annually from Latin American ventures, with Mohammad and Adnan Yousef Abdallah identified as key operatives (American Enterprise Institute, 2017; Levitt, 2013; Santiago, 2017; Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence of the Committee on Homeland Security, 2011; Taylor, 2004).

A comparative analysis of country-level responses reveals divergent approaches. Argentina's lack of legal resolution following the AMIA attack has fostered a culture of impunity. Conversely, Brazil initiated 'Operação Trapiche' in 2024 to dismantle Hezbollah's recruitment and financing structures. Peru's 2014 arrest of a Hezbollah operative highlights the group's transnational nature and underscores the need for coordinated intelligence responses across South America (Ellis, 2024; Levitt, 2016; Pachico, 2014; Realuyo, 2014).

3.2. Venezuela-Hezbollah connections

In 1995, a report from the U.S. Library of Congress Federal Research Division confirmed that Hezbollah had established operational cells in Colombia and Venezuela, expanding its activity beyond the Tri-Border Area. These cells focused on fundraising, recruitment, and logistical coordination, often operating under the protection of Iranian diplomats using official embassy cover. Under Hugo Chávez and other populist anti-U.S. regimes, Venezuela emerged as a key partner in Iran and Hezbollah's hybrid warfare strategy. Over time, the country transformed into Hezbollah's main regional hub, surpassing even the Tri-Border Area in strategic importance (Costanza, 2012; Deriú, 2024; Noriega & Cárdenas, 2022; Santiago, 2017).

Following Chávez's election in 1998, Venezuela became a stronghold for Hezbollah's political, economic, and logistical operations. Operating with virtual impunity, Hezbollah cells raised funds, conducted political activities, and benefited from the regime's involvement in narcotics trafficking, especially toward European markets (American Enterprise Institute, 2017; Deriú, 2024; Melamed Visbal et al., 2024).

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, with Venezuelan backing, built strategic alliances with revolutionary governments in Latin America. His 2006 visit to Venezuela marked the start of close cooperation with Chávez, followed by tours in 2007 to Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bolivia, and a second trip to Venezuela. In 2009, Ahmadinejad hosted a summit with leaders including Daniel Ortega (Nicaragua), Evo Morales (Bolivia), and Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil). These ties, underpinned by substantial aid and investment, helped consolidate an anti-U.S. axis centered around Venezuela, Bolivia, and Nicaragua (Gleis & Berti, 2012; Karmon, 2009).

Venezuela also functioned as an air corridor linking Caracas with Damascus and Tehran – a route preserved under Nicolás Maduro. This connection benefited all parties: Venezuela, Iran, and Hezbollah. Inside Venezuela, Hezbollah developed compartmentalized family-based clans embedded within illicit economies, political patronage networks, and state bureaucracy. These networks were sustained by robust Syrian and Lebanese diaspora communities with transnational links into Colombia (Humire, 2020; Miryekta, 2010).

Several events illustrate the depth of this alliance. In 2006, an Indian media report quoted a Hezbollah leader as saying that Chávez was more committed to their cause than any Arab leader (DEA, 2016). In 2010, Chávez hosted officials from Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, reportedly expanding Hezbollah's operational footprint in Venezuela. His government openly supported Hezbollah's regional entrenchment during the 2000s (Gleis & Berti, 2012).

Humire (2020) argues that the perception of Hezbollah as a distant or irrelevant threat has undermined regional counterterrorism strategies. Additionally, Latin America has remained a low priority in U.S. counterterrorism efforts, which largely focus on the Middle East and North Africa. Hezbollah and the Maduro regime exploited this strategic gap to position Venezuela as a central nexus for transnational organized crime and terrorism (Humire, 2020).

Hezbollah now operates like a global criminal cartel, with dedicated divisions for social services, international relations, political representation, and media – each connected to its illicit financing structures. Admiral James Stavridis (2017), former NATO Supreme Allied Commander, classified Hezbollah as a 'hybrid threat', blending terrorism, corruption, and narcotrafficking in a unified operational model. This fusion of Islamist militancy and organized crime has enabled Hezbollah to build expansive, resilient networks across regions (Humire, 2020).

In 2017, CNN reported on Hezbollah's Venezuelan operations, citing exiled Venezuelan officials who exposed systematic passport issuance to terrorist operatives, including Hezbollah members (American Enterprise Institute, 2017). These connections are reciprocal: in As-Suwayda, Syria, a city informally known as 'Little Venezuela', more than 300,000 Venezuelans – many with dual citizenship – coexist with Russian troops, IRGC personnel, and Hezbollah militants who exert control over pro-Assad forces (Escher, 1995; Humire, 2020).

Hezbollah has maintained a continuous presence in Venezuela since the 1980s, gradually embedding itself into regional organized crime networks. The strong ties between Hezbollah and the Venezuelan state, including government protection and residency for operatives, pose a serious threat to neighboring countries – especially Colombia, which shares a 2,219-kilometer border with Venezuela. The following section examines Hezbollah's direct operations within Colombian territory.

3.3. Hezbollah in Colombia

As detailed in previous sections, Colombia has not been immune to Hezbollah's expanding regional influence. Evidence indicates that Lebanese–Venezuelan–Colombian clans have actively supported the group's logistical and financial operations. Venezuela serves as a key staging ground, enabling Hezbollah's integration into Colombia through alliances with local insurgent groups such as the FARC and the ELN (Humire, 2020; Melamed Visbal et al., 2024).

Mohsen Rabbani, dispatched to Argentina in 1983, played a pivotal role in indoctrinating Shi'a Muslim communities across Chile, Uruguay, and Colombia. In Colombia, he developed connections with key Hezbollah affiliates, including Farouk Abdul Omairi and Salman Al-Reda. Al-Reda, a dual Lebanese–Colombian national, maintained residences in Colombia, Buenos Aires, and the Tri-Border Area. In 1987, he joined Rabbani's at-Tauhid Mosque in Argentina (Levitt, 2016).

Hezbollah-linked families such as the Al-Reda (or El-Reda) clan have been especially active in Colombia. In 1987, José Salman El Reda and his uncle Musa El Reda founded a Hezbollah cell in Maicao, a city with a robust informal and illicit economy. Their main objective was fundraising. In 1992, Argentine authorities uncovered a counterfeit dollar distribution network linked to José El Reda. The so-called 'superdollars' were traced back to Iran and distributed by Hezbollah agents (Nisman, Argentine Attorney General Alberto, 2013). In 1997, Hezbollah propaganda was broadcast via a local radio station in Maicao, further confirming the group's presence (Santiago, 2017).

In 2001, Colombian authorities arrested Lebanese businessman Mohammed Ali Farhad for leading a $650 million cigarette smuggling and money-laundering network operating between Ipiales, Colombia, and Ecuadorian ports. The investigation revealed Hezbollah's financial involvement, naming Eric and Alexander Mansur as key operatives (Karmon, 2009).

In 2006, a group calling itself 'Hezbollah Latin America' emerged in Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, and Mexico. Its central faction, 'Hezbollah Venezuela', led by Teodoro Rafael Darnott, claimed ties with the Wayuu Indigenous group and issued a declaration titled The Jihad in America Will Begin in 2007 (Karmon, 2009).

In 2008, a U.S.–Colombian joint operation dismantled a major Hezbollah-linked cocaine and money laundering network led by financier Cherky Mahmoud Harb. The network moved drugs and funds between Panama and Hong Kong, with a portion of profits funneled to Hezbollah (Karmon, 2009; Kraul & Rotella, 2008; Shorr, 2015).

In 2009, DEA sources reported a meeting in Syria between Hezbollah operatives, Venezuelan Interior Minister Tareck El Aissami, and Hugo Carvajal Barrios, head of Venezuela's military counterintelligence. The meeting coordinated an arms-for-cocaine trade with the FARC. In 2014, a Lebanese cargo plane delivered AK-103 rifles and grenade launchers to Venezuela as partial payment for FARC-supplied cocaine (Humire, 2020; Melamed Visbal et al., 2024).

In 2010, drug trafficker Walid Makled was captured in Cúcuta, Colombia. Upon extradition, he testified to the existence of direct connections between Hezbollah, the FARC, and narcotrafficking rings (Melamed Visbal et al., 2024; United States House of Representatives Hearing before the Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation, and Trade, 2013).

The U.S. Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) later sanctioned Ayman Joumaa for trafficking cocaine and laundering hundreds of millions of dollars. Joumaa collaborated with Hezbollah and the Mexican cartel Los Zetas to move Colombian cocaine through Central America and Mexico into the U.S. (Shorr, 2015). In 2011, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted Joumaa's network for laundering up to $200 million monthly, using Hezbollah-linked couriers (Becker, 2011; Humire, 2020).

In 2012, OFAC also sanctioned Hezbollah operatives Ali Mohamad Saleh and Kassem Mohamad Saleh for terrorism financing, smuggling cash across the Colombia–Venezuela border. After being targeted by sanctions, they relocated to Maracaibo and continued operations under Maduro-aligned Lebanese networks (Humire, 2020).

Hezbollah's Colombian network remains closely linked to the Tri-Border Area, where groups such as Al-Fatah, Russian mafias, and Chinese Tongs co-operate. Roughly half of Colombia's illegal arms enter via Brazil and transit through this zone (Cragin & Hoffman, 2003).

In 2009, a former Syrian officer arrested in Honduras was linked to Hezbollah arms sales to the FARC. One of the FARC's key safe zones was located north of Foz do Iguaçu and was owned by Lebanese businessman Ahmad Mohamad, arrested in Brazil in 2002 (Kleck, 2011; Pinheiro, 2003).

Hezbollah and the FARC share ideological and operational ties dating back to Cold War Marxist doctrines. Their collaboration centers on narcotics-for-arms exchanges, facilitated by over 100 clandestine airstrips in the Tri-Border Area. Hezbollah has also received training in abduction techniques from the FARC (Miryekta, 2010; Pinheiro, 2003).

During Colombia's peace talks, Hezbollah's ties with the FARC reportedly deepened, with Iran operating freely in FARC-controlled regions (Santiago, 2017).

In September 2021, Colombia's Defense Minister confirmed Hezbollah's attempted assassinations targeting Israeli and U.S. nationals on Colombian soil (Ellis, 2024). According to Humire (2020), this reflects Hezbollah's evolving shift toward precision attacks.

Since at least 2016, authorities have monitored Hezbollah-linked financing via charcoal exports to evade narcotics detection (Ortega, 2022). In 2024, Mahdy Akil Helbawi was arrested for laundering money through the charcoal trade (DW, 2024).

In 2025, Colombian investigators linked Hezbollah financiers to a cattle export ring used to traffic cocaine to Europe (Pardo, 2025). Maicao, a town in La Guajira, has emerged as Hezbollah's main operational base in Colombia (Appendix A).

3.4. Hezbollah in Maicao

Maicao, located in Colombia's La Guajira department, has become a strategic gateway for Hezbollah's activities in the country, owing to its long-standing Lebanese immigrant presence and its proximity to the Venezuelan border. The city hosts the Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Mosque – the largest mosque in Colombia – which has played a significant role in both the ideological dissemination and logistical concealment of Hezbollah operatives within the local social fabric. Through a network of religious, commercial, and cultural institutions, Hezbollah has established channels for recruitment and financial facilitation.

One of the most emblematic figures associated with Hezbollah's presence in Maicao is Teodoro Darnott, leader of 'Hezbollah Venezuela' and founder of the Movimiento Guaicaipuro para la Liberación Nacional. Darnott's radicalization took root in Maicao under the mentorship of Shi'a clerics such as Musa Rada, where he received religious instruction in Colombian Islamic centers. Inspired by a combination of Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Shi'ism and Latin American liberation theology, Darnott developed a hybrid ideological narrative blending Indigenous resistance with militant political Islam. This discourse resonated strongly with members of the Wayuu Indigenous community. Darnott would go on to forge ties with FARC commanders in Norte de Santander and was appointed regional leader of Hizbul Islam in Latin America by Iranian operative Mohamed Saleh, based in Argentina (Karmon, 2009).

Beyond Darnott, several Lebanese–Venezuelan clans – including the Rada, Saleh, and Nassereddine families – have operated in Maicao as financial facilitators for Hezbollah. In 2017, Abdala Rada Ramel was deported for his role in Hezbollah-linked narcotrafficking networks. Similarly, Amer Mohamed Akil Rada – implicated in the 1990s Buenos Aires bombings – ran a series of front companies in Maicao exporting charcoal and textiles, which were used both to launder money and as covers for cocaine shipments (Humire, 2020).

These operations have reportedly benefited from local political protection. For example, former Maicao mayor Mohamad Jaafar Dasuki Hajj was accused of providing material support to Hezbollah (Semana, 2020; Las Dos Orillas, 2020). Concurrently, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Ali Mohamad Saleh as a global terrorist, further validating the existence of a sophisticated transnational Hezbollah-linked network operating through Maicao.

Taken together, these findings position Maicao not merely as a logistical base, but as a complex ecosystem where religious ideology, transnational organized crime, and local political complicity intersect to advance Hezbollah's strategic objectives. Maicao thus stands as a paradigmatic example of how violent extremism and illicit networks can embed and thrive in regions characterized by porous borders, weak institutional oversight, and entrenched socio-political vulnerabilities.

3.5. Original findings and contribution to the state-of-the-art

This study contributes uniquely to the existing body of literature by providing the first comprehensive, country-specific analysis of Hezbollah's operational structure and strategic integration within Colombia. Unlike broader regional studies that treat Latin America as a single geopolitical bloc, this research dissects Hezbollah's activities at a granular level, mapping its relationships with Colombian insurgent groups, its financing mechanisms through illicit trade, and its consolidation in critical border zones such as Maicao.

The article also brings forward original connections between Hezbollah and the Colombian conflict context that are underexplored in prior academic literature. For instance, the identification of ideological convergence and operational training between Hezbollah and FARC actors, including narcotics-for-arms exchanges and shared clandestine infrastructure, represents a novel contribution. Additionally, the paper highlights how Colombian authorities have increasingly documented Hezbollah's involvement in strategic sectors (charcoal trade, livestock export, and narcotics logistics) yet still fall short of fully integrating this threat into national security discourse – an oversight not emphasized in most international terrorism studies.

This national case study challenges prevailing regional narratives by framing Hezbollah not merely as a foreign ideological actor, but as a hybrid, embedded network with localized influence and community-level recruitment capacity.

4. Hezbollah as a strategic threat: theoretical analysis

Beyond its historical and operational dimensions, Hezbollah's transnational expansion must be examined through the lens of hybrid threat theory and the crime-terror convergence paradigm. As articulated by Picarelli and Shelley (2007), organizations such as Hezbollah operate in a liminal space that bridges ideological extremism and criminal entrepreneurship. These groups engage in multi-domain warfare, strategically blurring the lines between political violence and organized crime. This analytical framework allows for a reinterpretation of Hezbollah's role in Colombia – not merely as a terrorist actor, but as a systemic agent embedded within local and regional criminal economies. Hoffman (2014) further conceptualizes this dynamic as a 'networked insurgency', in which ideological narratives serve to legitimize and conceal logistical operations deeply tied to global trafficking networks. When applied to the Colombian context, this dual-function model reveals a significant blind spot in the country's national security doctrine.

Building on the historical and operational foundations previously outlined, this section provides the theoretical basis supporting the central hypothesis of the study: that Hezbollah constitutes a strategic threat to Colombia's national security. The following analytical categories present key findings from the academic literature that reinforce this premise.

4.1. Structural penetration into Latin American organized crime networks

Hezbollah's sustained operational presence in Latin America is rooted in its adaptability to the transnational organized crime ecosystem. The organization's ability to integrate into regions characterized by weak governance enables it to conceal its operations while participating in illicit economies. Its technical and logistical proficiency facilitates involvement in drug trafficking, money laundering, and contraband activities with minimal visibility. Shelley (2002) argues that the intersection between terrorism and organized crime is not incidental but strategic – a symbiotic relationship in which terrorist organizations exploit the routes, financial channels, and protection mechanisms of transnational crime to sustain operations and advance geopolitical objectives. This argument is substantiated by numerous studies, including those from the Council on Foreign Relations and RAND Corporation, which reference more than 30 sources documenting Hezbollah's collaboration with Latin American cartels, especially via the Tri-Border Area.

4.2. Tactical alliances with local insurgencies such as FARC and ELN

A robust body of literature has traced tactical linkages between Hezbollah and Colombian insurgent movements, particularly the FARC, since the early 2000s. Levitt (2013) offers a detailed examination of how Hezbollah has exchanged operational expertise – particularly in kidnapping, arms smuggling, and financing – with Colombian armed groups. These collaborations have reinforced Hezbollah's capacity for asymmetric warfare in Colombia. Importantly, these are not isolated alliances; rather, they reflect a deliberate strategy of hybrid warfare that integrates terrorism, insurgency, and organized crime to erode state sovereignty. A report from the U.S. Naval War College – cited in over 40 academic works – specifically identifies the Hezbollah–narcotrafficking nexus in Colombia as a major destabilizing force in the region (Taylor, 2004).

4.3. Institutional vulnerability due to omission in security policy

One of the most critical findings of this analysis is the persistent omission of Hezbollah from Colombia's national security and defense frameworks. This institutional oversight is not unique to this study; it has been echoed in various comparative assessments of regional security policy. Cragin and Hoffman (2003) contend that a disconnect between international threat recognition and national policy response creates an enabling environment for transnational terrorism. The absence of formal acknowledgment has hindered the development of intelligence protocols, international cooperation mechanisms, and legal frameworks to address Hezbollah's activities. This omission strengthens the argument that Colombia's strategic risk assessments have failed to incorporate Hezbollah as a legitimate security concern.

4.4. Geostrategic risk from the consolidation of the Venezuela–Hezbollah axis

The consolidation of Hezbollah's presence in Venezuela, with direct backing from the Nicolás Maduro regime, poses an immediate geostrategic threat to Colombia. According to Humire (2020), Venezuela has become Hezbollah's principal logistical, financial, and political platform in the Western Hemisphere. From this base, the organization projects its operations into Colombian territory through a network of family clans, illicit trade routes, and transnational commercial infrastructures. This scenario has been thoroughly explored in more than 30 academic publications on terrorism and organized crime, all of which identify the Caracas–Maicao–Panama corridor as critical to Hezbollah's regional sustainability. Failing to address this border corridor as a central axis for terrorist expansion significantly heightens the strategic threat to Colombia's national sovereignty and regional stability.

To fully grasp the extent of the threat posed by Hezbollah's consolidation in the Western Hemisphere, it is crucial to contextualize the group's operational history and militant behavior in other geopolitical theaters – particularly Syria and Lebanon, where its pattern of violence has been extensively documented.

Beyond its strategic operations in Latin America, Hezbollah has been deeply implicated in some of the most brutal episodes of the Syrian civil war. Since 2013, the group has acted as a frontline paramilitary force in support of Bashar al-Assad's regime, engaging in sieges, executions, and sectarian-driven campaigns that targeted civilian populations. Notably, Hezbollah was a key participant in the Battle of Qusayr in 2013, where it reportedly committed war crimes, including the execution of captured fighters and indiscriminate shelling of residential areas (Levitt, 2024; Phillips, 2020). These actions demonstrate that Hezbollah's militancy extends far beyond resistance rhetoric – it manifests in direct participation in atrocities.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah's growing militarization has also sparked internal repression and political violence. The group has been linked to the 2008 clashes in Beirut, where its armed takeover of the capital resulted in dozens of deaths and signaled a shift from political actor to militant enforcer (Cammett, 2014). Additionally, it has been accused of assassinations of political opponents, including the widely investigated case of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (Special Tribunal for Lebanon, 2020). These episodes underscore Hezbollah's evolution into a bona fide militant organization whose actions increasingly mirror those of transnational armed groups more than traditional political parties.

4.5. Hezbollah as a threat to Colombia's security and defense

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a pivotal turning point in global efforts to combat terrorism and transnational crime. In response, organizations such as Hezbollah were formally designated as terrorist groups by the United States and the European Union.(United States Department of State, 2017). Notably, however, despite extensive documentation of Hezbollah's presence and criminal activities in Colombia, the group was not officially designated as a terrorist organization by the Colombian government until 2020, under the administration of President Iván Duque (CNN en Español, 2020).

This article examines Colombia's national security and defense policies from 2001 to the present, evaluating their treatment of Hezbollah and the broader implications for the country's strategic posture. It confirms that, while Hezbollah's activities are internationally recognized as transnational threats, the group has been addressed only peripherally within Colombia's internal policy frameworks.

During the administration of President Andrés Pastrana Arango (1998–2002), the government's primary security focus was the peace process with domestic armed groups, notably the FARC, through the so-called 'Caguán Peace Talks'. As part of this process, 47,000 square kilometers of territory were demilitarized to facilitate negotiations. However, the FARC continued its illicit activities during the talks and was subsequently designated as a terrorist organization by the United States. The peace negotiations ultimately failed to advance beyond initial agenda items. Concurrently, Colombia engaged with the United States to develop 'Plan Colombia', a comprehensive initiative to combat drug trafficking that culminated in military operations to reclaim the demilitarized zone. Although these measures significantly enhanced Colombia's military and counternarcotics capacities (Ejército Nacional, 2021; Posso, 2009; Suárez & Económicos, 2020), there is no evidence that Hezbollah was identified as a threat – either as a terrorist organization or as a transnational criminal entity – within Pastrana's security doctrine.

Between 2002 and 2010, under President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, Colombia adopted the 'Democratic Security and Defense Policy', which explicitly recognized transnational terrorism as a principal threat. The strategy emphasized links between domestic insurgent groups and international criminal networks, advocating for enhanced international cooperation in areas such as drug trafficking, money laundering, and intelligence sharing (Presidencia de la República, 2003). Despite references to arms shipments originating in the Middle East, the policy did not specifically identify Hezbollah or any Islamist extremist groups as part of the national threat matrix.

Under the administration of President Juan Manuel Santos (2010–2018), the focus shifted toward peacebuilding efforts, resulting in the demobilization of large segments of the FARC. The 'Comprehensive Policy for Security and Defense for Prosperity' aimed to dismantle domestic armed groups and address organized crime. While the policy acknowledged the transnational nature of certain security threats and emphasized regional cooperation, its primary focus remained on actors such as the FARC, the ELN, and criminal bands (BACRIM). Despite Hezbollah's longstanding presence in Colombia, neither it nor other Islamist terrorist groups were explicitly included in the policy framework (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2011).

During President Iván Duque Márquez's administration (2018–2022), Hezbollah was formally designated a terrorist organization in 2020. Nevertheless, the government's 'Policy for Defense and Security for Legality, Entrepreneurship, and Equity' did not include specific provisions to address Hezbollah's threat. Although the policy recognized transnational crime and terrorism, its emphasis remained on domestic actors, particularly residual FARC factions and organized criminal networks. While it called for international cooperation and intelligence integration, these measures were not explicitly linked to combating Middle Eastern terrorist organizations (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2019; CNN en Español, 2020).

The current administration of President Gustavo Petro (2022–2026) has prioritized the 'Total Peace' strategy, which centers on negotiating with armed groups and addressing the root causes of violence. The 'Policy for Security, Defense, and Citizen Coexistence' focuses on internal threats, including organized crime and environmental offenses, but does not identify Hezbollah or other Islamist extremist groups as part of Colombia's security threat landscape. This inward-facing approach further illustrates the enduring gap in Colombia's capacity to respond to transnational terrorism (Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2023).

In conclusion, a review of Colombia's national security and defense policies from 2001 to the present reveals a consistent pattern of omission regarding Hezbollah and other Islamist extremist organizations. Although Hezbollah was officially designated a terrorist group in 2020, the absence of corresponding policy measures underscores a broader institutional reluctance – or failure – to integrate this threat into Colombia's strategic security architecture.

5. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that Hezbollah's presence in Colombia is not only well-documented but has also been systematically overlooked in the country's national security and defense frameworks. Through a comprehensive review of the group's criminal and ideological activities—ranging from money laundering and drug trafficking to radicalization and arms smuggling—the research confirms that Hezbollah has embedded itself within local and transnational criminal ecosystems.

While successive Colombian administrations have acknowledged transnational threats in abstract terms, Hezbollah has remained conspicuously absent from formal threat assessments and strategic responses. This omission reflects a broader institutional blind spot that undermines the state's ability to respond to hybrid threats effectively.

The theoretical framework applied—especially hybrid threat theory and crime-terror convergence—proves critical in understanding the multidimensional nature of Hezbollah's operations in Colombia. The group cannot be addressed solely as a foreign terrorist actor but must be recognized as a strategic threat that leverages local vulnerabilities for global aims.

The article further identifies a persistent imbalance between symbolic actions, such as the 2020 terrorist designation, and the absence of operational measures to detect, disrupt, and dismantle Hezbollah-linked networks within Colombian territory.

This institutional failure is not merely operational but also discursive. As Al-Kassimi (2021) explains, neo-Orientalist imaginaries—revived after 9/11 and reinforced through international legal discourses—have constructed the Arab-Muslim subject as a symbol of ideological threat to Western modernity. These imaginaries condition the ways in which states recognize or ignore terrorism threats. In Colombia's case, this global epistemic framing may explain the persistent underestimation of Hezbollah, whose embeddedness in transnational criminal economies remains misclassified as external or irrelevant. A reorientation of Colombia's security doctrine thus requires confronting not only operational gaps but also inherited discursive frameworks.

To strengthen national resilience, the state must move beyond recognition and adopt a proactive, multi-level strategy that incorporates intelligence, legal reform, international cooperation, and community engagement. Failure to do so may allow Hezbollah and similar organizations to continue exploiting institutional gaps, deepening their influence across Colombia and the broader region.

5.1. Policy recommendations: institutional and legislative measures to address Hezbollah's presence in Colombia

The findings of this study underscore the urgent need for the Colombian state to transition from symbolic recognition to a proactive, institutionalized strategy for confronting Hezbollah's presence. While designating the group as a terrorist organization in 2020 was a necessary step, it remains insufficient without substantive legal, operational, and diplomatic measures. The following policy recommendations outline concrete actions that align with international best practices for counterterrorism and transnational organized crime:

5.1.1. Creation of a specialized interagency counterterrorism unit

The National Intelligence Directorate (Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia, DNI) should establish a Hybrid Threat Task Force dedicated to actors engaged simultaneously in terrorism and organized crime. This unit should:

- Operate under the direct supervision of the National Security Council (Consejo de Seguridad Nacional).
- Integrate personnel from the National Police, Fiscalía General de la Nación, DIJIN, and military intelligence.
- Be equipped with independent financial and technological resources to support HUMINT, SIGINT, and threat monitoring.
- Prioritize Hezbollah-linked operations in border departments such as La Guajira, Norte de Santander, and Arauca.

5.1.2. Development of a National Watchlist of Foreign Terror Affiliates

Colombia should establish a national terrorism watchlist, modeled after the U.S. Treasury's Specially Designated Nationals (SDN) list. This tool should:

- Be managed by the Financial Information and Analysis Unit (Unidad de Información y Análisis Financiero, UIAF).
- Enable preventive asset freezes and enhanced scrutiny of suspicious financial activities.
- Require mandatory reporting by financial institutions, customs agencies, and notaries on transactions involving designated entities.

5.1.3. Strengthening legal frameworks against terrorism financing

Colombia's current legal tools are inadequate for combating indirect support to terrorist entities. Necessary reforms should:

- Amend Law 1121 of 2006 and Law 1908 of 2018 to criminalize material support—including donations, infrastructure provision, and fraudulent invoicing.
- Integrate FATF Recommendations 5, 6, and 8, particularly those concerning NGOs and shell corporations exploited by Hezbollah.
- Extend Colombian jurisdiction to terrorism financing cases involving foreign actors, even when attacks occur outside national territory.

5.1.4. International intelligence and legal cooperation

Colombia should expand and formalize bilateral agreements to enhance intelligence sharing and joint operations. This includes:

- Signing a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty (MLAT) with the United States focused specifically on Hezbollah and Iranian proxies.
- Participating in the Tri-Border Area Working Group (Argentina–Brazil–Paraguay) and hosting annual regional counterterrorism summits.
- Working with INTERPOL to issue Red Notices against Hezbollah operatives known to be operating in Maicao, Bogotá, and other regions.

5.1.5. Inclusion of Hezbollah in the National Security Strategy (ENS)

Colombia's National Security Strategy must be revised to explicitly identify Hezbollah as a hybrid threat. This recognition would:

- Secure long-term budget allocations for counterterrorism operations and counter-infiltration efforts.
- Justify expanding Colombia's cyberintelligence capacity to monitor encrypted communications and illicit financial transfers.
- Align Colombia's national security priorities with those of NATO and the OAS in the fight against terrorism in the Western Hemisphere.

5.1.6. Community engagement and counter-radicalization programs

Beyond institutional reforms, Colombia must invest in community-based resilience and counter-radicalization efforts, particularly in high-risk zones. These initiatives should:

- Train local educators, religious leaders, and community stakeholders in early detection of radicalization patterns.
- Provide socio-economic alternatives for vulnerable youth, especially within migrant and indigenous communities.
- Collaborate with legitimate Islamic organizations to distinguish peaceful religious expression from extremist political ideologies.

Implementing these policy measures would enable Colombia to transition from passive recognition to active deterrence of Hezbollah's presence. An integrated response—combining institutional, legal, intelligence, and community-based strategies—would not only strengthen national security but also position Colombia as a leader in countering complex, transnational threats across Latin America.

6. Limitations and future research directions

Despite the valuable insights presented in this study, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research is based primarily on qualitative methods and documentary analysis, which inherently rely on secondary sources. This approach limits access to classified or sensitive information that is often unavailable due to national security restrictions. As a result, the verification of specific operational ties between Hezbollah and local actors in Colombia is constrained by the lack of publicly accessible empirical data.

Second, although this work incorporates a broad range of international reports and academic literature, much of the documentation originates from foreign institutions. This may introduce geopolitical biases in the interpretation of Hezbollah's activities and influence in the region. The limited volume of Colombian academic production on this subject further restricts the availability of localized perspectives and contextual understanding.

Third, the institutional omission of Hezbollah from Colombia's national security strategies has hindered the availability of official data and limited public policy discussion. This gap makes it difficult to assess state-level responses to the threat and constrains the development of targeted analytical frameworks within the Colombian context.

In light of these limitations, several future research directions are proposed:

- Field-based ethnographic studies: Conducting qualitative fieldwork in critical areas such as Maicao and the Colombia–Venezuela border region could provide firsthand insight into the social and economic embedding of Hezbollah-linked networks and their interactions with local communities.
- Comparative regional analyses: Evaluating the approaches adopted by other Latin American countries—such as Brazil, Argentina, and Peru—in responding to Hezbollah's presence may help identify transferable policy models and institutional strategies applicable to the Colombian setting.
- Quantitative assessment of illicit financial flows: Empirical studies aimed at measuring Hezbollah's financial operations in Colombia are urgently needed. Areas such as informal commerce, charcoal smuggling, and money laundering represent promising avenues for financial forensics research.
- Radicalization and recruitment mechanisms: Investigating the ideological indoctrination and recruitment strategies employed by Hezbollah—particularly among vulnerable populations such as migrant and Indigenous communities—could inform the development of preventive and counter-radicalization policies.
- Public policy and legal framework analysis: A systematic review of Colombia's legislative and policy evolution regarding transnational terrorism could support the formulation of more comprehensive legal instruments and security protocols that formally recognize Hezbollah as a national threat.

By addressing these gaps, future research can provide more granular and actionable knowledge to inform public policy, improve institutional responses, and strengthen Colombia's capacity to counteract hybrid and transnational threats posed by actors such as Hezbollah.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, JA-AP upon reasonable request.

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Appendix A

Appendix A – Summary of Key Operations and Timelines

Year	Location	Event/Operation	Actors Involved	Type of Activity
1987	Maicao (Colombia)	Founding of Hezbollah cell by José and Musa El Reda	El Reda family	Recruitment, fundraising
1992	Argentina–Colombia	Discovery of "superdollar" counterfeiting network linked to Iran and Hezbollah	José El Reda, Iranian operatives	Financial/logistical network
1997	Maicao	Hezbollah propaganda aired on local radio station	Local Hezbollah cell	Ideological dissemination
2001	Ipiales–Ecuador	Arrest of Mohammed Ali Farhad for cigarette smuggling and laundering	Farhad, Hezbollah, Mansur brothers	Narcotrafficking, laundering
2006	Latin America	Emergence of "Hezbollah Latin America" and "Hezbollah Venezuela"	Teodoro Darnott	Recruitment, ideology
2008	Colombia–Panama	U.S.–Colombia operation dismantles Hezbollah-linked trafficking and laundering network	Cherky Mahmoud Harb	Drug trafficking, financing
2009	Syria/Venezuela	Arms-for-cocaine deal arranged between Hezbollah and FARC	El Aissami, Carvajal, Hezbollah, FARC	Weapons trade, insurgent support
2010	Cúcuta (Colombia)	Arrest of Walid Makled confirms Hezbollah–FARC–narco nexus	Walid Makled	Drug logistics, state protection
2011	U.S./Mexico	OFAC sanctions Ayman Joumaa for laundering via Los Zetas	Joumaa, Hezbollah, Los Zetas	Transnational laundering
2014	Colombia–Venezuela	Aircraft delivers weapons to Venezuela in exchange for FARC cocaine	Hezbollah, FARC, Venezuelan officials	Arms smuggling
2021	Colombia	Attempted assassinations of U.S. and Israeli nationals foiled	Hezbollah Unit 910	Targeted terrorist operations
2024	Colombia	Arrest of Mahdy Akil Helbawi for laundering through charcoal trade	Helbawi, Colombian prosecutors	Narco-financing infrastructure
2025	Colombia–Europe	Hezbollah-linked cattle exports used to conceal cocaine shipments	Hezbollah financiers in Colombia	Export-based laundering