

# FARC–Hezbollah: The success of Venezuela–Iran proxy groups and their convergence in the Americas

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## Abstract

*Persistence and adaptation are the main characteristics that have allowed FARC and Hezbollah to become perhaps the most successful proxy groups in recent years. Both Iran and Venezuela have sponsored the military, political and criminal actions of these alleged insurgent organisations. The main objective of this research was to identify and conceptualise the mitotic evolution of FARC and Hezbollah from purely armed organisms into consolidated political organisations in Colombia and Lebanon, and how this evolution has presented a criminal convergence in Venezuela based on drug trafficking and money laundering. This article is based on a comparative case-study of published research papers, documents, and official statements of FARC and Hezbollah, by applying a rational perspective that allows their performance to be deduced. The research results showed a constant mutation of these hybrid threats. Thus, not only was the political and military success of these organisations established but also the strategic support of a criminal dimension which converged in Venezuela, where the FARC drug trafficking and Hezbollah money laundering were amalgamated. Consequently, the investigation exposes the possible consequences of the FARC-Hezbollah criminal convergence in the Americas and its destabilising effects in the next decade.*

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## Keywords:

Cocaine traffic, money laundering, TOC, mitosis, revolution, destabilisation

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## Introduction

Ignoring the current success of FARC and Hezbollah as organisations would be simply disastrous in matters of international security and defence. These organisations, which have been underestimated by governments, have found in a protracted people's war, the necessary strategy to survive and, in transnational organised crime (TOC), the unlimited resources to persevere, as well as strategic supporters in the Venezuela and Iran regimes to consolidate their goals. From an academic perspective, it would be incorrect to limit the classification of these complex organisations to the simple categories of terrorist groups, insurgent guerrillas, transnational criminal organisations (TCOs) or proxy groups. They are hybrid threats in constant mutation and adaptation. In this article, not only will the success of FARC and Hezbollah as proxy groups of Venezuela and Iran be studied, but also their criminal convergence as they consolidate themselves as fundamental actors for the destabilisation of the Americas. This article will explore two arguments: first, the FARC-Hezbollah mitosis from complex terrorist organisations to the twin births of political parties and semi-clandestine terrorist wings, and second, the FARC-Hezbollah criminal convergence in Venezuela and the complex multinational network that they have been weaving. These arguments will lead to a consideration of the role of these two proxy groups in the destabilisation of America in the coming decade (2020-2030). Despite all the early victories to militarily defeat these terrorist groups in the last few decades, democratic security has not been achieved. A descriptive comparison method between Hezbollah and FARC was used in this article to explain the evolution of these two proxy organisations. The data was analysed from open sources, scientific and academic literature, policy documents and official statements. Initially, this information was organised in biological terms to understand these organisations as living organisms in processes of mutation and reproduction. Subsequently, all available judicial information is put into a context that exposes the criminal convergence between Hezbollah and FARC in Venezuela and the growth that this phenomenon has experienced in the last few decades. The lack of a long-term strategy on the part of democratic countries, as opposed to the long-term vision of these proxy groups and their sponsors, has generated the growth and sophistication of these groups in an exponential way. Now, while most democratic governments are reactive to the different threats, it can be anticipated that for the Americas, the strategy of terrorist proxy groups over the next decade will be characterised by low-intensity conflicts and the proliferation of mafias with subversive names and the gradual imposition of pseudo socialist governments that will transform quickly into authoritarian regimes.

### **Hezbollah mitosis: from a terrorist group to a political party (1982-2020)**

It is true that during the birth of Hezbollah, the main characteristic was large-scale terrorist action against Israel and the United States. However, it is also true that this organisation had a very particular political nature from its inception. Its very name, "God's Party", refers to its condition as a political actor. The mitosis of Hezbollah had its origin in the 1982 Israeli occupation which aimed to prevent the Palestinian militants operating from southern Lebanon. As a consequence, the Shiite leaders split according to the lines they considered they must follow (Levitt, 2013, pp. 11-14). Those who called for a military response and the creation of an Iranian-style Islamic state broke with the Amal movement, until then the leader of the Shiites, and formed Al Amal al Islamiya. With the support of Iran, they extended their influence from the Bekaa Valley to the southern suburbs of Beirut (DeVore, 2012, pp. 91-92).

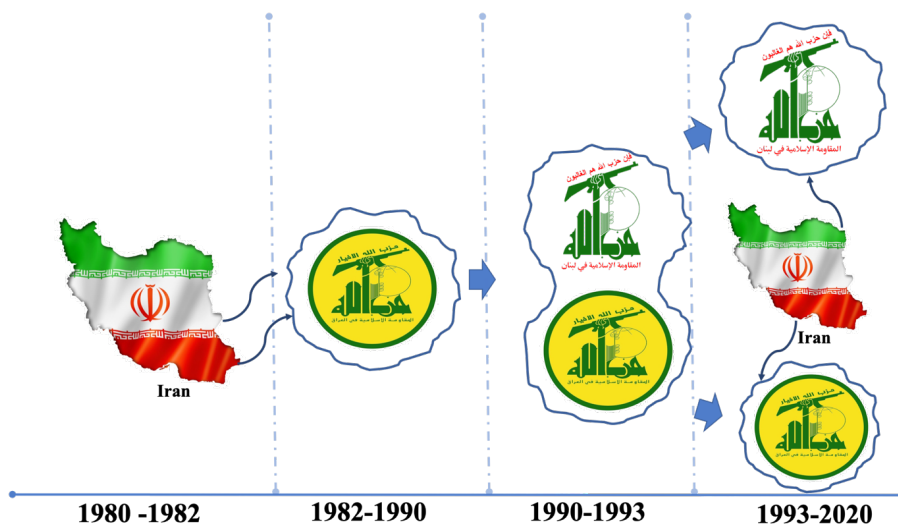
Hezbollah issued its political manifesto in 1985. The organisation pledged allegiance to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and called for the establishment of

an Islamic regime, demanding the expulsion of the United States, France and Israel from Lebanese territory, as well as the annihilation of the State of Israel ([Avon, Khatchadourian and Todd, 2012a, pp. 105–115](#)). However, in 1990, Hezbollah took advantage of the Ta'if peace agreement to revise its political narrative into an atypical and dangerous model of playing politics without laying down arms. This has generated ambiguity at the regional and global level, since many states do not know whether Hezbollah is a terrorist organisation, an insurgency, a political party or TCO ([AJC, pp. 7–8, 23–24](#)).

Hezbollah's decision to participate in the 1992 national elections marked the completion of a mitosis that would result in the creation of two cells while maintaining their original DNA that is, their goals and solid loyalty to Iran. The militia cell focused on planning and executing attacks of international relevance such as March 17, 1992, when a car bomb with 300 kilos of explosives led by a Hezbollah terrorist hit the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, Argentina. It caused 29 fatalities and wounded 242. Two years later, on July 18, 1994, again in Buenos Aires, this time against the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA), an attack left 85 people dead and more than 300 injured. The van was driven by Ibrahim Hussein Berro Mohsen, whose family still lives in the Bekaa Valley, the heart of Hezbollah. On June 25, 1996, Ahmed al- Mughassil, Hezbollah's military chief, was responsible for an attack on the Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia, the location of housing for the United States military. In total, 19 United States Air Force soldiers were killed and 498 other people of different nationalities were injured ([Levitt, 2020](#)).

Simultaneously, the political cell grew, increasing its local participation in Lebanese politics, as defenders of an "Islamic system" of clerical government, and through unyielding criticism of the errors and corruption of local governments in Lebanon. With clear support from Iran in 1992, Hezbollah won eight seats in the 128-seat parliament. By 2005, its political participation had grown and Hezbollah won fourteen seats ([Norton, 2014, pp. 89–122](#)). In July 2006, Hezbollah carried out a military campaign against Israel where precision ground-to-ground rockets, anti-tank mines, surface-to-air missiles, Russian Anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) and Iranian Anti-ship missiles were successfully deployed against the Israeli Army, achieving a ceasefire after 34 days ([Gabrielsen, 2014, pp. 257, 274–277](#)). Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah profited from this ambiguous victory by positioning himself regionally as the punisher of the Zionist state, thus achieving not only the admiration of the Shiites but even many Sunnis ([Arkin, 2007, p.191, 242](#)). This action demonstrated Hezbollah's new armed capacity as semi-regular militia.

In 2008, Hezbollah took advantage of a political opportunity and changed the balance. Lebanese Prime Minister, Fouad Siniora, decided to shut down Hezbollah's private telecommunications network due to continued propaganda attacks against the government, a decision which sparked clashes between Hezbollah fighters and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) ([Worth and Bakri, 2008](#)). After two weeks of fighting, Qatar negotiated the Doha Agreement, which called for a government of national unity and gave the Hezbollah-led opposition veto power within the Lebanese government. This essentially gave Hezbollah the ability to completely halt the government if it strayed from Hezbollah's agenda.



**Figure 1.** Hezbollah's mitosis process has been simpler and more continuous due to the fact that an absolute loyalty to Iran is rooted in its DNA and its philosophy has not changed dramatically.

In the 2009 elections, Hezbollah and its allies were defeated by the US-backed “March 14” alliance (Rubenstein, 2009). But its radical goals have not changed. On November 30, 2009, Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyid Hassan Nasrallah read in a televised conference a long document intended to highlight the group's political vision, along with its hopes, aspirations and concerns. The speech was considered an update of the 1985 manifesto, and dealt with the following issues, which summarise both its ideology and its objectives:

- Hezbollah's position against Israel, the United States, and the International Community
- Hezbollah's position regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Palestinian question, as a point of impossibility. They will never recognise the Israeli state.
- Hezbollah's close relationship with Iran, as a model of freedom and independence.
- Their desire to maintain a good relationship between Syria and Lebanon.
- Hezbollah's role in providing security in Lebanon, as a resistance movement that can fill the army's shortcomings in the face of an Israeli invasion. It stressed that it is a formula that leads to success, as happened in 2006. But it will be an incomplete task until the occupied areas of the Shebaa Farms, Kfar Shouba Hills, and the north of the city of Al Ghajar are liberated (Avon, Khatchadourian and Todd, 2012b, pp. 130–138).

At the beginning of the 2010s, the consolidation of Hezbollah's political power began, to such an extent that it imposed on the Iranian government's political-religious will over the Lebanese government's secular will. In January 2011, the Lebanese government practically collapsed with the resignation of 11 ministers of the Shiite movement Hezbollah and its allies (BBC News, 2011), due to a lack of agreement between rival blocs in the international trial in The Hague regarding the murder of former Prime Minister, Rafic Hariri, which occurred in 2005<sup>1</sup>. These resignations led to the collapse of the government led by Hariri's son, Saad Hariri. In 2011, Najib Mikati, backed by Hezbollah, was named the new prime minister. Hezbollah directly received two ministries as part of the government. Most of the remaining ministers were from allied factions of Hezbollah.

1. Recently judged at the UN as an action by Hezbollah (Collard, 2020).

force with an organisation and hierarchy typical of a paramilitary force. This Iranian-financed and trained force officially supported the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria on May 25, 2013, when Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah publicly recognised it. In 2016, it was estimated that the Hezbollah combat forces in Syria numbered between 5,000 and 8,000 fighters, and in that year more than 1,600 Hezbollah fighters died in Damascus, Homs and Aleppo. In May 2016, Mustafa Badreddine, Hezbollah's military chief in Syria, was assassinated in Damascus (Pollak, 2016, pp. 4–5, 12). In 2018, Lebanon held parliamentary elections for the first time since 2009. Hezbollah's parliamentary representation held steady at 13 seats, but Hezbollah and its allies won a total of 70 of the 128 seats in parliament. On the other hand, the Future Movement, a pro-Sunni coalition, only won 21 seats, although its leader, Saad Hariri, kept his role as prime minister. Nasrallah called the results *a political and moral victory* for Hezbollah that would guarantee the protection of the “resistance” (BBC News, 2018; Nilsson, 2020, p. 1600).

By the end of 2018, Hezbollah's mitosis had not only ended, but also the two twin cells were defined, healthy and strong. Hezbollah has established itself as a strong political party capable of controlling the central government from the parliament, being not only part but also the protagonist of the Lebanon establishment. Hezbollah has been able to take advantage of its political base, transforming its electorate into a constantly mobilising social movement. In 2019, Hezbollah achieved a victory with the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri in October after days of mobilisation and protests. Hezbollah has become a major political party in the last decade and has been active in all parliamentary and municipal elections in Lebanon. Hezbollah is not only a political party, it has the political power to unite or destabilise Lebanon (Ali Kooshki, Shirkhani and Kiani, 2020, pp. 38–39). At the same time, the militia cell has not only grown but has reached a level of maturity and sophistication that today has approximately 45,000 combatants, many of them in reserve. Its elite unit, the Radwan Force, has approx. 2,500 fighters (Pollak, 2016, pp. 4–10). The missiles, rockets and mortars of this cell are estimated to be up to 150,000, divided as follows: tens of thousands are short range (up to 40 kilometres), thousands are mid-range (up to 75 kilometres) and hundreds are long range (200–700 kilometres). During the civil war in Syria, Hezbollah combatants were trained on and operated various Russian made tanks. Additionally, they have been trained in various APCs, including types owned by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). Further, Hezbollah owns mounted mobile units who use Jeeps, ATVs and motorbikes. Such is their level of growth and adaptation that in recent years, Hezbollah expanded its use of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) alongside an upgrade of their capabilities. To date, Hezbollah owns hundreds of such UAVs from drones through intelligence gathering photography through to attack aircraft (either “suicide” aircraft or grenade launchers). As a consequence, the systematic weakening of the armed forces and the degradation of the state security and defence policy of the Lebanese state are evident, while Hezbollah has been taking advantage of these deficiencies to gain political and military space through arms (Vuković, Matika and Barić, 2016, pp. 125–126). Hezbollah has created complex money laundering networks that disturbed multiple banks in Lebanon. The drawbacks of Hezbollah's influence was exposed from December 2019 with the destruction of the entire Lebanese banking system, the destruction of the port of Beirut (Badran and Ottolenghi, 2020) and the collapse of the health system during the current COVID-19 pandemic.

## **FARC mitosis: from communist insurgents to a new political party (1964–2020)**

Considering that the revolutionary armed forces of Colombia (FARC, after the initials in Spanish) was born 20 years before Hezbollah, its mitosis has been longer. At first, its structure as an insurgent guerrilla force in the mountains of Colombia had the

main purpose of seeking the seizure of power and the imposition of a communist government based on Marxist-Leninist ideology, something similar to what had been achieved in Cuba. However, during those first years, the guerrillas did not manage to establish a winning strategy and fought for the survival and growth of the organisation itself, as established in its first six conferences.

These conferences track the growth of the organisation into a terrorist force. The first conference was held in 1965 in the south of the country and in it, the group, which at that time was made up of several dispersed guerrilla detachments, was renamed south block (in Spanish: bloque sur) because it had a presence in various departments of the southern region of Colombia (Cauca-Huila-Valle del Cauca). At that assembly, the guerrillas began to establish their military actions and internal organisation and began to structure FARC as a group (Leech, 2011). Since its creation, FARC has held ten conferences from 1966 to 2016 in which it has drawn its political and military guidelines. These conferences demarcated such issues as the composition of the governing bodies, the creation of fronts and blocs, the sources of financing (kidnapping, extortion, drug trafficking, illegal mining), relations with party politicians and, at the end, the infiltration of the Colombian establishment through the Clandestine Communist Party (PC3), revolutionary trials to justify assassinations of members of the organisation or political enemies, relations with governments of other countries (USSR, Cuba, Ecuador, Venezuela, Nicaragua) and other strategic guides that allow its survival as an organisation (Spencer, 2016, pp. 22–44).

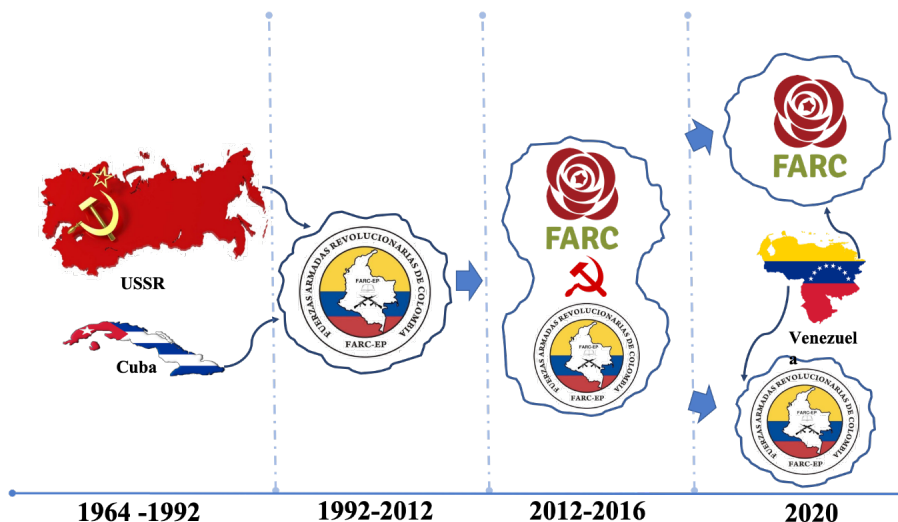


Figure 2. The FARC mitosis process has been more delayed and difficult, taking into account that the fall of the USSR in 1992 was a severe knock-back, although FARC recovered and found an excellent sponsor in Venezuela.

In 1982, FARC began a dialogue with the government of Colombian President Belisario Betancourt, making it possible to sign the well-intentioned but ill-fated Uribe agreement, and through an amnesty law, to free the captured FARC commanders from jail. In August of 1984, a cease-fire agreement was signed, which was broken several times by FARC and maintained despite criticism by the Colombian government. In May of 1985, the Unión Patriótica (UP) political party was formed as part of a peace proposal, becoming the political arm of FARC and of other communist insurgent groups, including the guerrilla group, the National Liberation Army (ELN), the movement M-19 and the self-titled Popular Liberation Army (EPL). In November 1985, the M-19 in alliance with the drug trafficker Pablo Escobar attacked Colombia's Supreme Court in Bogota, assassinated 11 magistrates, 20 judicial employees, 13 soldiers and policemen and more than 20 civilians. They also set fire to all the buildings containing the judicial files against the Medellin cartel (Treaster, 1985). At the same time, FARC began its alliance with the cartels of Medellin and Cali, finding in drug trafficking an inexhaustible



source of money necessary to achieve their objectives. In fact, in 1984, Lewis Tamb, US Ambassador, coined the word “narco-guerrilla” to describe the alliance between the FARC and drug trafficking (International Crisis Group, 2009, p. 21).

The creation of the Patriotic Union party (UP) was an important achievement for FARC, considering that in the elections on March of 1986, five of its candidates were elected as senators, nine as congressmen, twenty as regional deputies and 353 as municipal councilors; the congressmen included two FARC commanders<sup>2</sup>. The political success achieved by the UP coincided with the beginning of an escalation of terrorist events. In June 1987, a convoy of soldiers was attacked in Caquetá, leaving 27 soldiers dead and 49 wounded. In August 1987, FARC attacked the municipality of Acevedo in Huila, killing three policemen and three civilians. By the end of the year, there were more than 130 attacks on isolated towns. In September 1987, President Virgilio Barco (1986-1990) officially ended the ceasefire, and the peace talks due to the criminal conduct and perfidy of FARC (Aguilera, 2016). Ivan Marquez and Braulio Herrera fled from Bogota and returned as FARC commanders. In April 1990, the M-19 group completely laid down its weapons and was granted impunity. In 1991, FARC, EPL, and ELN began new peace talks (Caracas and Tlaxcala) again, this time with President Cesar Gaviria (1990-1994), but the dialogues were ended in 1992 due to the kidnapping and murder of a Colombian former minister (Harding, 1992, p. 1). In this same period, FARC took advantage of the dialogues to double their number of military fronts and expand their actions in regions north of Colombia and on the border with Venezuela.

2. Carlos Enrique Cardona Henao, aka: Braulio Herrera, and Luciano Marin Arango, aka: Ivan Marquez.

### The flow and ebb of violence

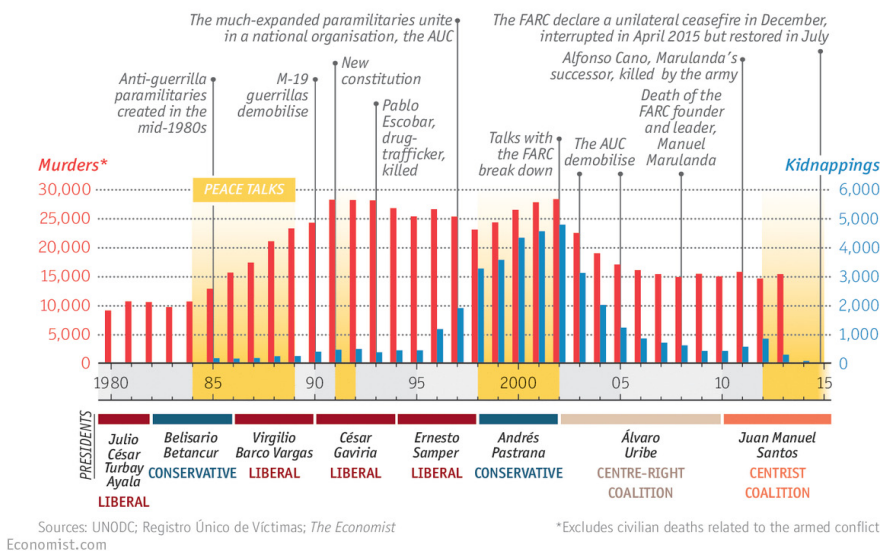


Figure 3. The flow and ebb of violence: 1980-2015 statistics of murders and kidnappings of FARC. The failed attempts at peace by Colombian governments are highlighted in yellow. Source: *The Economist in the Colombia: the promise of peace* (*The Economist*, 2015)

At this point, the first attempt of the FARC cell division begins, in order to create a political alternative that would allow it to take political power in Colombia, in something they called the combination of all forms of struggle. Unfortunately, for FARC's strategic plans, it coincided with the fall of the Soviet Union, weakening its communist political discourse and leaving its political cell project without a credible ideology. However, FARC's ability to adapt would, with the death of Pablo Escobar in 1993, find the perfect opportunity to take over drug trafficking and become the largest cocaine cartel in the world (Neumann, 2011), thus finding an inexhaustible source of income that would allow it to acquire unprecedented military capacity. By 1998, it managed to subdue the Colombian government of President Andres Pastrana, who handed it a 64,000-square-kilometre demilitarised zone (DMZ) to enable peace negotiations (1998-2002) (Rabasa

and Chalk, 2001, pp. 40–43; Moyar, Pagan and Griego, 2014, pp. 12–22). The DMZ was in the heart of the cocoa fields. But instead of making peace, FARC used this time very strategically to reorganise, acquire new weapons and increase its military strength, its international influence, and its cocaine exports. Its international influence allowed its political representatives to position themselves and gain the support of Nicaraguan President, Daniel Ortega, and more consequentially, Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez (1999–2013), who would become their new ideological mentor and official sponsor.

The 21st Century Socialism established in Venezuela and sponsored by all the members of the São Paulo Forum would be the renewed narrative superimposed on the basis of Marxism-Leninism to create a new political platform for FARC (Neumann, 2011). However, the lack of synchrony with the military cell led the military leaders to decide that it was time to change their model of guerrilla warfare to a war of movements with the aim of taking power by armed means. They thought that the balance of forces was adequate to defeat the state and they failed. From 2003 to 2011, FARC suffered its greatest military defeats. As a result, more than 25,000 fighters surrendered their weapons, while the historical leaders were neutralised by the Colombian Army (Priest, 2013). Nevertheless, the support of Chavez provided the necessary space in Venezuela to establish a new strategic rear-guard, where its military leaders found refuge and the political leaders again began to strengthen their transnational political cell.

However, despite so many errors and failures, FARC has always known how to maintain its resilience, based on the fact that its principal objective has always been singular and they repeat it until all members at all levels internalise it: “the seizure of power by any means”. It does not matter if that means is military, criminal or political. This has allowed it not only to survive but to continue in a constant transformation. From 2013 to 2016, FARC decided to re-establish dialogues in Cuba with the support of the governments of Venezuela and Norway and took the initiative from the beginning (The Economist, 2016). They used the support of these governments to establish a firm political base. They sought the support of other countries and gained international legitimacy. They took advantage of the vanity of President Juan Manuel Santos, who was distracted by the allure of winning the Nobel Peace Prize, and imposed its will. Smartly, FARC negotiators, Ivan Marques and Seuxis Pausias Hernández, a/k/a: Jesús Santrich, resurrected the armed organisation and managed to establish a series of mechanisms and organisations to protect their new political project. They achieved full immunity from all crimes, including drug trafficking, managed to get five permanent seats in the Senate and five seats in Congress without the need for votes. They managed to get the government to finance their political party with approximately US\$ 1.2 million, and the new party retains the FARC acronym as it transforms into the Common Alternative Revolutionary Force (Spanish: Fuerza Alternativa Revolucionaria del Común) as the political successor of the armed cell called the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), and they managed to win 2 municipal mayorships in the 2018 elections (Reuters, 2017; Gill, 2019).

In 2019, the same FARC leaders who negotiated in Cuba (Ivan Marques and Jesus Santrich) were discovered by the DEA and the Colombian Prosecutor’s Office negotiating cocaine trafficking with Mexican cartels. All the organisations that were established to protect the dialogues quickly managed to get them released from prison and they fled to Venezuela, where they re-established the armed cell. They currently have several well-armed sub-groups in the most critical areas of Colombia where they dispute the control of cocaine traffic with other criminal organisations. During the period 2019 and 2020, the armed cell dedicated itself to establishing military bases in Venezuela along the Colombian-Venezuelan border supported by the Venezuelan Army, thus projecting the rapid growth of this cell known as FARC dissidences, who continue to maintain their structural



DNA. Although it is true that they do not today compare to the capacity reached in the 2000s, FARC dissidents are smaller groups led and made up of the most experienced insurgents, with highly sophisticated weapons and, most importantly, for the first time in history, with the direct support of a regular military force, the Venezuelan army (U.S. Department of Justice, 2020).

## **Transnational organised crime (TOC): a dark dimension where FARC and Hezbollah converge**

The political and military mitosis of FARC and Hezbollah has a third vital dimension that has allowed the continuity of these organisations' criminal financial support; and it was in this realm that the successful conditions were created for the convergence of FARC and Hezbollah. The persistence of the political and armed cells of FARC and Hezbollah is due to the diffuse criminal network that generates large amounts of money in the name of the revolution. This large flow of money allows the purchase of weapons, the payment of bribes and corruption of government agents in any country. For several years, these criminal terrorist support schemes operated clandestinely and secretly, but for the past fifteen years, they have begun to intervene in lawful businesses in order to launder all the dirty money. In this sense, Venezuela has become a key platform for this purpose.

The coincidence between the power of the President of Venezuela, Chávez, and the President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, from 2005, gave a new impetus to the relationship between Venezuela and Iran and would lay the necessary foundations for the strengthening of both FARC and Hezbollah (Neumann, 2011). The two presidents already knew each other and agreed on the definition of what should be the foreign policy of developing countries. Furthermore, Iran and Venezuela believe that they embody revolutionary projects to launch radical change at the international level. The dialectic of the revolution was conspicuously evident in the speeches of the two leaders (Perdue, 2014, pp. 17–18). In September 2006, Chávez welcomed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, saying: *Two revolutions are shaking hands: the Persian people, warrior of the Middle East (...), and the sons of Simón Bolívar, the warriors of the Caribbean, of the free peoples.* Chavez described his Iranian counterpart as a *distinguished leader of a heroic people and leader of a revolution, sister of the Venezuelan revolution.* Simultaneously, Chavez began to openly support FARC and allowed its settlement on the border with the protection of the Venezuelan army, as denounced by Colombian President Alvaro Uribe with intelligence reports and satellite photos in March 2008 to the international community. In parallel, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad met with Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in Syria in July 2007 and subsequently increased the delivery of heavy weapons that included medium-range Zelzal-2 missiles capable of hitting any target in Israel (Berman and Humire, 2014).

The convergence between FARC and Hezbollah criminal cells was neither political nor revolutionary but drug traffic related. In 2004, the Drug Enforcement Administration – Special Operations Division (DEA-SOD), together with the Colombian police, developed the “Titan Operation”, which allowed the dismantling of a drug trafficking and money laundering network that convicted more than 130 people (Hernández, 2013, p. 48; Realuyo, 2014, pp. 122–123). In 2008, the capture of the entire network would be achieved in simultaneous operations in Colombia, Panama and the US and the seizure of \$23 million. This was only the tip of the iceberg, since connections were identified in Hong Kong, Central America, Africa and Canada, and most worryingly, the direct connection to several Lebanese criminals associated with a global organised crime network and where Hezbollah was shown to be directly responsible for this convergence. Due to

the complexity of the evidence found, DEA-SOD developed the “Cassandra project” in 2008, which sought to identify the nodal points and the different global connections that this organisation had (Levitt, 2018, p. 6).

The Cassandra project allowed Ayman Saied Joumaa, a Colombian-Lebanese citizen, to be identified as the leader of a global money-laundering network in the service of Hezbollah in a powerful way. According to the DEA, Joumaa was born in Lebanon and nationalised in Colombia, and by 2011, was “washing” more than US \$200 million a month on four continents with the complicity of Hezbollah. Joumaa would have taken the place left by Chekri Mahmoud Harb, who was captured in Bogotá in October 2008 and extradited in early 2009 to the United States. However, the most important thing was to comprehend that Ayman Saied Joumaa had his main businesses in Maicao (Colombia), a city on the northern border with Venezuela (Rabasa *et al.*, 2017, pp. 113–115).

Recently, criminal connections centre upon two key figures in Venezuela. The first was Tareck El Aissami of Iraqi-Lebanese descent. In 2005, this Venezuelan politician was elected deputy to the National Assembly by the official United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV), of which he also became vice president. Subsequently, in 2008, he was appointed Minister of the Interior. Between 2012 and 2017, he was governor of the Aragua state. In 2018, he re-entered the cabinet of the government of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro as executive vice president. He is currently Minister of Petroleum, Economic Vice President and Minister of Industries and National Production. In 2017, the US Treasury Department included him in the OFAC list (Perdue, 2014, p.18; Rabasa *et al.*, 2017, p. 39; U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2017). In March 2019, he was accused in a New York court of violating the law as a foreign drug lord, according to the federal prosecutor of Manhattan. *He has used his position of power to get involved in international drug trafficking* said Ángel Meléndez, special agent of the Department of Homeland Security. Also, in 2019, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) included El Aissami on the most wanted list because of his activities related to drug trafficking (U.S. ICE, 2019). Venezuelan colonel, Vladimir Medrano Rengifo, former director general of the office of identification, migration and foreigners in Venezuela, established that at least 800 people arrived in Venezuela monthly – between May 2008 and October 2009 – from Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, many of them members of Hezbollah, to whom Minister Tareck El Aissami ordered Venezuelan passports to be issued. One of those favoured with this passport delivery was Akram Saied Joumaa, brother of Ayman Saied Joumaa and who is part of this criminal transactional network. (The American Enterprise Institute, 2017, p. 22).

In 2008, the United States Treasury Department stated that *it is extremely worrying to see that the Government of Venezuela employs and provides refuge for Hezbollah facilitators and fundraisers*. But Tareck El Aissami, apparently, is not only implicated in terrorism and the issuance of diplomatic passports for terrorists. He also might have facilitated shipments of narcotics from Venezuela. The transnational criminal organisation headed by El Aissami is one of the main providers of the drug network that Hezbollah operates in Europe. According to the US Treasury Department, El Aissami exercised control over planes taking off from a Venezuelan air base, in addition to controlling the routes of the drugs that left through Venezuelan ports.

The second fundamental key figure in this convergence process is Ghazi Nasr Al-Din, born in Lebanon, who arrived in Venezuela at the age of 11. Since the early 2000s, he was associated with Venezuela’s foreign affairs ministries. His career as a Venezuelan diplomat was developed mainly in Syria and Lebanon. In 2008, the Treasury Department singled out Ghazi Nasr al-Din as a Hezbollah supporter established in Venezuela

who used his status as a high-ranking diplomat of the South American country to provide financial support to the terrorist group (Karmon, 2009, p. 21). Adam J. Szubin, director of the Office of Foreign Assets Control of the Treasury (OFAC) claimed that Nasr Al-Din served as a diplomatic officer at the Venezuelan embassy in Syria and was later appointed as director of Political Affairs at the Embassy of Venezuela in Lebanon. OFAC mentioned that Nasr Al-Din provided bank information to Hezbollah donors so that the money went directly to this terrorist group, and that he also facilitated a trip to Caracas of members of this organisation. Although he is much more discreet than Tareck El Aissami, the ability of Ghazi Nasr Al-Din to create a series of connections between licit and illicit businesses in Isla Margarita (Venezuela) Maicao (Colombia) and Colon (Panama) has been highlighted, to mix drug money laundering, smuggling, arms sales with import and export companies and even donations to the pro-Lebanese cause (Levitt, 2016, p. 130; Santiago, 2017, pp. 22–44), replicating, in this way, the success of what happened on the triple border (Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay). All this would be evident on March 26, 2020, when the US Attorney General William Barr placed an indictment on Maduro, whom he described as a *corrupt and violent narco-terrorism conspiracy between the Venezuelan “Cartel of the Suns” (Cártel de los Soles) and FARC.*

The indictment explains these criminal connections in detail. It is established that in 2005, the former President of Venezuela Chávez agreed with the current President Nicolas Maduro and with other members of the Venezuelan National Assembly to withdraw from their positions, the Venezuelan magistrates who did not protect the activities of FARC in the neighbouring country (Colombia). Then in the following year, 2006, Maduro was appointed by Chávez as Minister of Foreign Relations. And soon after, the authorities of the United States point out, the current Venezuelan president would have received a payment of \$5 million dollars, as a result of the sale of drugs, through a third party that was part of the money laundering scheme that is part of the narco-terrorist conspiracy. Then, in 2008, Chávez, who was at that time the president of Venezuela and one of the leaders of the “Cartel of the Suns”, agreed with Luciano Marín Arango, alias Iván Márquez, to use funds from the Venezuelan state oil company (PDVSA) to support FARC’s terrorist and drug trafficking efforts (U.S. Attorney, 2020, pp. 10–11).

According to the US Attorney, FARC dispatched processed cocaine from Venezuela to the United States through transportation points in the Caribbean and Central America. By 2004, the US State Department estimated that 250 or more tons of cocaine transited Venezuela each year. Likewise, it is mentioned that maritime cargos was sent north from the Venezuelan coast using speedboats, fishing boats and cargo ships. The air shipments were dispatched from clandestine airstrips in the state of Apure (Venezuela). Alcalá (former commander of REDI Guyana 2010-2013) (U.S. Attorney, 2020, p. 8). The indictment indicates that to achieve the safe passage of the cocaine shipments that were transiting Venezuela, FARC paid bribes that benefited the current president of Venezuela Nicolás Maduro, current president of the National Constituent Assembly Diosdado Cabello Rondón, Retired General Hugo Carvajal (former national director of Venezuelan intelligence 2004-2011 and deputy of the national assembly 2016-2019) and retired General Clíver Antonio. Although it is true that cocaine trafficking is the central crime, this organisation has diversified its criminal portfolio and includes illegal mining of gold and coltan, piracy of goods and movies, trafficking of marijuana, trafficking of heroin, human trafficking, and also timber trafficking. The global scope of this symbiosis between FARC, Hezbollah and the Venezuelan narco-government is sophisticated and clearly goes beyond any ideology. The ultimate goal is the accumulation of power and money.

## Conclusion and Consequences

The changes that have occurred in the past decades, both in the Middle East and in the Americas, have generated multiple variations in the political relations between state and non-state actors. It is clear that Iran and Venezuela do not plan to engage in regional wars due to their weakness as states and their fragile economies, but it is also true that these two countries are immersed in a permanent volatile and unstable regional environment. Within this context, Iran and Venezuela have known how to take advantage of Hezbollah and FARC as proxy groups that have been catalysts of violence, instability and regional ambiguity. However, with the passage of time, these two non-state actors have grown and evolved as their own organisations, following their own agenda that has allowed them to influence their countries in Lebanon and Colombia, but also at a regional and even international level. This article has established three significant conclusions and a possible course of action that can be carried out by the studied actors as a consequence of the current dynamics.

Firstly, Hezbollah, analysed from a biological perspective, has been an organisation that has had a constant and rapid evolution. It was initially born as a unicellular terrorist cell generated, protected and financed by Iran with theoretical bases of high religious-political content. The initial methodology was pure and decentralised suicide terrorism against U.S. American, French and Israel assets. This methodology allowed Hezbollah to achieve its first early victories in the 80s. The first Hezbollah manifesto of 1985 can be taken as the starting point of its political mitosis, and the 1989 Ta'if peace agreement would be the catalyst that would allow Hezbollah to also mutate into a successful political party by the early 1990s. The ambiguity generated since the Ta'if agreement by the non-disarmament of Hezbollah has created an environment of volatility and political uncertainty in Lebanon, where the political agenda of the Shiite minority has always been imposed over other political groups. This ambiguity has favoured it not only at the local level, but also at the international level where many countries do not know how to define Hezbollah. Meanwhile, the biological growth of the two cells, both the armed cell and the political cell, during the last twenty years has been constant and successful. On the one hand, the armed cell went from being a simple terrorist group to a paramilitary force capable of confronting the Israeli army on the southern border of Lebanon and operating jointly with Syrian, Iranian and Russian forces within the Syrian conflict. On the other hand, the political cell has dominated the Lebanese political establishment. Today, it manages the health sector and the banking sector. Unfortunately, for Lebanese society, the consequences of the success of Hezbollah became evident with the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and the explosion of the port of Beirut in August 2020 by highlighting the total collapse of hospitals, the poor handling of the pandemic and the monetary devaluation of more than 80%.

Secondly, the evolution of FARC in contrast to Hezbollah has been a long, troubled and diffuse process with similar success to that of the Shiite group. FARC was born at the height of the cold war between the USA and the former USSR to replicate the success of the Cuban revolution in Colombia and impose a communist government. To achieve this objective, FARC was born as a clearly insurgent armed cell and carried out limited armed attacks that increased from low to medium intensity in the 70s and 80s. In 1985, after a long peace process, it succeeded in creating a distinctly left-wing political party called Patriotic Union, but a series of attacks against military bases and the immersion in the drug trafficking business caused this initial political mitosis to collapse. The fall of the Soviet Union and the worldwide collapse of communism represented another additional disappointment to the political aspirations of FARC. However, after Pablo Escobar's death, FARC took over the entire cocaine production chain and intelligently mutated itself as the

main narco-terrorist cartel in South America. By the end of the 90s, its armed capacity forced the Colombian government to establish peace talks (1998-2002) in a demilitarised zone of more than 64,000-square-kilometres where crime, drug trafficking and terrorism were the main characteristics. The desire to take power through arms during these years caused FARC to suffer a series of strategic defeats by the Colombian Army between 2002 and 2011, through a policy of democratic security based on the frontal fight against cocaine production, which suffocated illicit finances and generated social discredit. Parallel to the weakening of narco-terrorism, the Venezuela regime presented itself as the new FARC sponsor. In August of 2019, from Venezuela FARC (arm cell) declared itself in rebellion to continue its revolutionary fight against the Colombian government and retained control of the multimillion-dollar drug trafficking business. By 2020, FARC had established two cells: a political cell with permanent representation in Congress and an armed cell that maintains control of drug trafficking with the complicity of the Venezuelan regime. Like Hezbollah, the international community does not know how to deal with it, since it carries the same name. FARC has intelligently created ambiguity and is a legitimate political party today, a TCO, and it is also now a Venezuelan paramilitary group.

Thirdly, the convergence between FARC and Hezbollah has three key functional elements. The first is the place where this connection has been consolidated. Venezuela is a country with one of the largest oil reserves in the world, with wide access to the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean and a long porous border of more than 2000 kilometres with Colombia. Although it is true that the Lebanese settlement was initially centred on the triple border region (Brazil-Argentina-Paraguay), and that it was from this site that the devastating 1992 and 1994 attacks against Israeli targets on Argentine soil were planned, it is also true that in this place, the criminal convergence between FARC and Hezbollah began in the late 90s. Furthermore, in the last two decades, the Venezuelan government has strengthened and empowered this connection. The second key factor was the accession to power of Venezuelan President, Hugo Chavez (1999-2013), and Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). They would find, both in the revolutionary narrative of a socialism and in the anti-imperialist narrative, a common foreign affairs agenda and in oil, their economic strength as permanent members of the Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). It is this revolutionary narrative that allows the comfortable existence of FARC and Hezbollah as proxy groups to fight against justifiable causes from the point of view of these two governments. The third functional element and the most important is drug trafficking, since this has become the source of the greatest funding for these two groups both to acquire weapons and keep their armed cells active, and to finance their political causes and buy hearts and minds in the elections of each country. The success of this convergence is seen in the sum of the strengths of each organisation. On one hand, the dark and criminal dimension of FARC is that it has specialised in the production of cocaine and heroin for more than three decades from Colombia. On the other hand, the dark and criminal dimension of Hezbollah has specialised in money laundering in its global capacity to move money through international banks and is unique and extremely complex. In addition, these two groups have innovated criminal logistics by creating new routes and means of transportation to move cocaine through Africa to Europe, Asia and even Australia. Today, this criminal enterprise has exceeded the control capacity of its own organisations (FARC-Hezbollah) and even of its government sponsors (Venezuela-Iran). This criminal convergence continues to grow and seeks the destruction of legitimacy in countries like Lebanon and Colombia to establish criminal regimes where they can grow and prosper.

In this complex context, one of the phenomena that has become more visible and empowered is the transnational nature of criminal networks that commit crimes with the complicity of governments such as Venezuela and Iran. Today, TOC is a global dimension



that has caused the destruction of the democratic establishment in Venezuela and Lebanon. It has also absorbed and changed the DNA of FARC and Hezbollah. The ideology and the revolutionary narrative of FARC and Hezbollah cells are the collateral support for hiding and justifying all criminal business. In this way, FARC and Hezbollah have succeeded in penetrating the legitimate establishments of Venezuela, Lebanon and, now, Colombia. Furthermore, they have engineered a mitosis resulting in political and armed cells. It is clear that Venezuela is leading the Bolivarian Revolution for the Americas, and this country is the epitome of a criminal state. This type of political and criminal entanglement is difficult to overcome because a criminal state can take advantage of public resources for its illicit operations, while preserving national sovereignty and all the benefits that come with borders and international law. The Bolivarian Alliance, led by Venezuela, takes advantage of facilitators, financiers and diplomatic officers to assist the covert movement of people, money and material, while sharing operational areas, intelligence and tactics. The connections between politics and crime become more diffuse, complex and decentralised. Venezuela and the FARC-Hezbollah connection are using the Revolution narrative to disrupt other countries in the Americas. This is basically a socialist narrative that exacerbates class hatred and also hate speech between races and genders creating widespread civil disobedience. This civil disobedience is infiltrated by violent actors in the streets and agitators on social networks, to create an atmosphere of anarchy and instability. Organised crime and conventional government in Venezuela and Lebanon are indistinguishable; and its ability to influence and destabilise the Americas was evident in the protests in Chile, Ecuador and Colombia at the end of 2019. Activists and instigators, linked to Venezuela and FARC, deliberately tried to destabilise these countries. Unlike the cold war, no economic or political model needs to be established, just a narrative for the seizure of power. What might be established is a pattern of criminal regimes capable of managing dirty economies to take over the Americas in a volatile and complex global political environment.

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