

TROJAN HORSE REFUGEES PART II • CYBER SECURITY • VENEZUELA THREAT

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CLOSING DISTANCE



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Cover Photo: *Israel Defense Forces*

FROM THE EDITOR:

Active Threat Response Best Practices by Garret Machine

Ten years ago I returned from Israel and started teaching combat classes from lessons learned. As it turns out, I was delivering the most effective tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) for dealing with active shooter type incidents. Acts of violence became even more rampant along with the correlated proliferation of social media. Social media is credited with creating a culture of one-upmanship, devaluation of human life and numbness to violence. Since my return I have gotten into law enforcement and been exposed to many training classes and courses I took both voluntarily and as assigned. Most of those trainings dealt with the complexities of and best practices for handling active shooter or other immediate life threats. Strangely there was no standardization of TTP or best practices among any of the authorities having jurisdiction, locally or statewide. Whereas many private organizations and agencies had their own version of how to react, the great state of Florida officially standardized the solo officer response protocol; it was almost exactly in line with what I had regarded, from years ago and a continent away, as the most sophisticated approach. Draw your own conclusions, but law enforcement or civilian response will circle back to this approach.

Garret Machine
Editor, *The Counter Terrorist*



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THE VENEZUELA THREAT

By Orlando "Andy" Wilson





Venezuela is proving to be a safe haven for both narcos and terrorists alike

For many people, the situation in Venezuela is just another political arguing point that has recently been in the news due to President's Trump recognition of the country's political opposition leader Juan Guaidó as interim president as a result of the failing communist government of Nicolás Maduro.

What most people do not understand, and what is not being mentioned in the media, is that Venezuela is very much a "Narco" state. As well as being a country that is rich in oil and other natural resources, it is also a hub for drugs being trafficked from South America in the U.S. and Europe via the Caribbean.

Courtesy Photo, U.S. Navy, Drugs in the Caribbean Sea

Many parts of the country are controlled by narco traffickers who work hand in hand with the Venezuelan police and national guard to facilitate the secure transportation of narcotics to and from airstrips or from the airstrips to fast boats on the Caribbean coast.

In addition to the narco gangs, Venezuela also has a long-established terrorist connection with groups such as Hezbollah, which has a presence in the country. In 2016 Abu Wa'el Dhiab, one of six people released from the U.S. military detention in Guantanamo Bay, resettled in Uruguay and consequently turned up in Caracas, the Venezuelan capital. It's still not clear how he got there.

Hezbollah is known to have a presence in other parts of South America, especially in the tri-border area where Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil converge. In 2018 a Hezbollah "treasurer," Assad Ahmad Barakat, was arrested for laundering \$10 million USD through various casinos in the Iguazu Falls area of the Brazilian state of Paraná. The group's presence in South America is ingrained in the cocaine and money laundering business.

For the innocent people reading, let me explain something that should be clear after reading the above few paragraphs. Drug traffickers, organized crime groups, and terrorists all work together, whether trafficking drugs and arms, laundering money, kidnapping, or committing extortion or assassinations. They are a combined threat with extremely efficient

communications, intelligence, logistics, and operational networks.

At this time, Venezuela is proving to be a safe haven for both narcos and terrorists alike, so if you think what you are seeing in the new reports is just more political charades, then I hope this article will open your eyes to the real situation and how it can destabilize the entire region.

THE MAIN NARCO CARTELS OPERATING IN VENEZUELA

Below I have listed the main named cartels operating in Venezuela, but you must remember that, just as in Mexico and other such places, many local gangs and organized crime groups operate with these cartels when mutually profitable but also run their own operations. Even if the heads of the large narco trafficking groups are eliminated or arrested, the operations will continue as the actual ground operations are being conducted by numerous semi-independent trafficking and organized crime groups. You are not dealing with a static business structure but rather a fluid and ever-evolving network.

- **Cartel de Los Soles:** This organization is run by high-ranking Venezuelan military officers and top politicians—Diosdado Cabello (head of the cartel and president of the official Bolivarian party - PSUV), Néstor Reverol (minister of internal affairs and justice), and Padrino López (minister of defense)—all of whom are close to presidente Maduro. This cartel was established

over two decades ago by providing security to the Colombians and Mexican cartels; in 2005, they took over the business, and now not even a kilo of pure Colombian cocaine gets to Venezuela without their knowledge. The Venezuelan Army, Navy, Air Force, and National Guard are all involved.

- **ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional):** The Colombian guerrilla group is the main drug supplier; they control most of the Venezuelan and Colombian border and are causing chaos in Táchira and Zulia States. Since 2018, the ELN has also gotten involved in the gold business in Bolívar State, which borders Brazil. Since the Colombian guerrilla group the FARC has officially disbanded, the ELN has taken over; they can be classed as the "new kids on the block" and are operating with the Venezuelan government's blessing and assistance.

- **Hezbollah:** With many years of operating in Venezuela, this terrorist organization has major links to the Venezuelan government and its allies and business associates. Their operations in Venezuela include drug trafficking, arms dealing, terrorist training, money laundering, and involvement in gold mining operations. Hezbollah facilitators and operators are spread across Venezuela, but their headquarters are on Margarita island in the South Caribbean. Tareck El Aissami, who has a reputation for being a "strong man" of the Venezuelan communist government and is a former government official, is responsible for the Hezbollah in Venezuela.

President Nicolás Maduro appointed El Aissami as Vice-President in 2017, which also made him head of Venezuela's intelligence agency (SEBIN). El Aissami has faced allegations of corruption, money laundering, drug trafficking, human rights violations, and being linked to terrorist organizations in the U.S. and elsewhere. El Aissami is currently under sanctions from Canada, the European Union, Switzerland, and the United States. It's reported that members of El Aissami's family, including his father and mother, relocated to the United States in 2016.

• **Pranes:** This domestic organized crime group is controlled by and recruited from those in the Venezuelan prison system. The members of Pranes are very well-armed, and its main business is extortion, murder, kidnapping, and

provision of security and services to some of the cartels. It is connected to and protected by the government because it does a lot of dirty work for them and the narcos.

• **Venezuelan police, military, and national security services:** The state police, national police, and military services are involved in facilitating the drug business. The CICPC (Investigation Police) and SEBIN (National Bolivarian Intelligence Service) are the ones “baby-sitting” narcos, terrorists, and criminals within Venezuela, and they are also active sellers of drugs for the domestic drugs market.

TRAFFICKING ROUTES

The traffickers bringing drugs and weapons in and out of Venezuela use both land, air, and sea routes. Due to the corruption within the police and military, the traffickers

can easily get through any border checkpoints or road blocks they may encounter within the country. Large government-sanctioned shipments are moved in military or police vehicles.

Small planes use isolated or rural airstrips to bring shipments into Venezuela and north into the Caribbean. In addition to using disused government airstrips, traffickers cut and resurface their own strips in areas that are convenient for their operation. In areas completely under their control, hard surfaced roads are used as airstrips. During these landing operations, the roads are closed to traffic by the local police and military.

• **Falcón State:** From villages such as Tucacas, Chichiriviche, La Vela, and Puerto Cumarebo, narcos are deploying speed boats to transport drugs into Aruba, Curaçao, and the Dominican Republic. Because the local farmers have abandoned their lands, the narcos and their associates are buying or simply just using the abandoned farm land to cut airstrips and facilitate their operations. The U.S. is well aware of the large amount of narco flights that take off from Venezuela during the night. It is reported and believable that law enforcement agencies in the Islands of Aruba and Curaçao, which are very close to Venezuela, are infiltrated and corrupted by the Venezuelan narcos. It should be noted that the embarkation points for narco boats from Tucacas and La Vela de Coro are right next to national guard and coast guard posts.



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Maracaibo Police, The Photographer [CC0]

- **Zulia State:** Next to Colombia, Zulia State is the most violent state in Venezuela and is a hub location for narco flights heading for such places as Honduras, Panamá, and Dominican Republic. The Mexican drug cartels are established and operating from the state's main city, Maracaibo.

- **Apure State:** This is one the poorest states within Venezuela; it borders Colombia. Apure State is dominated by the Venezuelan FBL and Colombian ELN guerrillas that organize and facilitate the narco trafficking. It's reported the state has over 100 operational narco airstrips at any given time.

- **Sucre State:** Local fisherman have found that the drug business and now piracy are a profitable way of making easy money. Villages such as San Juan de Gandoles, Güiria, and Carupano are under the domain of Venezuelan organized crime (Pranes) and the Cartel de Los

Soles. In San Juan de las Galdonas, it's reported by local sources that approximately 400 narcos are in possession of heavy weapons. In addition to airstrips in the area, drugs are brought in from the Colombian border by military trucks to be transported by fast boats into the Caribbean. The state has a strategic location because it is close to Trinidad and Tobago and only a few days by boat from Puerto Rico. Recently it has turned into a war zone as local gangs fight for control and also branch out into maritime piracy. The corruption in Sucre State also spreads into Trinidad and Tobago; everyone eats from the narcos table...

The regular Venezuelan citizens living in the rural and narco-controlled areas are at the mercy of the criminals and corrupt police. It is very much a case of "Plata o Plomo" or in English "Silver or Lead." They have no choice but

to look the other way, do as they are told, and help the narcos if requested if they want to ensure their safety and that of their families.

In addition to the active threats I have spoken about so far, I will also mention two more potential threats:

- **Maritime Piracy:** In the waters between Venezuela and Trinidad and Tobago there have been numerous hijackings and kidnappings of local fishermen. In April 2018, 15 Guyanese fishermen were killed when their boats were attacked off Suriname. With the collapse and corruption of law enforcement within Venezuela and the ineffectiveness of the law enforcement agencies in the other Southern Caribbean Islands, Guyana and Suriname, the pirates can roam free. If we are being honest about things, as long as they are only attacking local fishermen, no one really cares strategically, but it's

only a matter of time, if you ask me, before they attack or hijack a yacht or other more valuable vessels than local fishing boats.

• **Terrorism:** As I stated earlier, Hezbollah has an established presence in Venezuela, and there have been reports of ISIS members in the country. Trinidad and Tobago also have an issue with Islamic extremism, and many of their citizens have fought with ISIS in Syria, so we can safely say there is a potential Islamic extremist threat in the Southern Caribbean. Combine the presence of potential terrorists with the availability of military-grade weapons on the black market and covert transportation routes into the U.S. and Europe, and I think, you will see there is a big

problem waiting to happen. The terrorists would not need to go too far to find some very soft targets in the Southern Caribbean, such as the oil platforms around Trinidad and Tobago or, even better, one of the many unprotected cruise ships ferrying tourists from tropical island to tropical island. I am sure you get the picture, so it's pointless for me to mention all the unprotected tourist resorts and hotels dotted across the island where tourists are lounging around swimming pools waiting to be kidnapped.

Venezuela is a failed state, but can things be put back in order? Well, anything can be fixed if people want it to be fixed. The issue with Venezuela is that so many people are making money from those situations

not being fixed, including the supposed political opposition. In Miami it's common knowledge that a lot of very wealthy Venezuelans are buying properties and business, but where is their money coming from? How many of the supposed political opposition are still doing business with the Venezuelan government, and how much of their dirty money is being laundered in Miami's new luxury condo construction.

Even though in 2018 the U.S. government claimed it was clamping down on dirty cash being used for property deals in Miami and other such places, the reality is that the money keeps flowing, and in Miami you don't even have to mention "lead" for people just to take your money with a smile... •

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