



## The internationalisation of Hezbollah in Latin America through its active participation in the narcotics trade

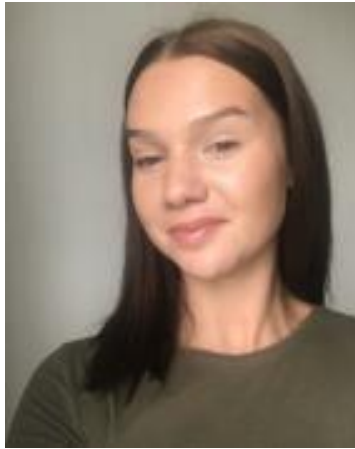


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After two years of preparatory classes (Hypokhâgne - Khâgne), **Anaïs Fauré** went on to do a Bachelor's degree and a Master's degree in international relations at the Institut des Hautes Etudes de l'Amérique latine. Passionate about geopolitics and specialised in Latin America, she chose to do her end-of-studies internship at the French Defence Mission in Buenos Aires. Anaïs Fauré is writing her thesis on the influence of the attack against the Israeli embassy in Argentina in 1992 on Iranian-Argentine bilateral relations and wishes to specialise in international strategy analysis.

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# INTRODUCTION

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If today the action of Hezbollah in Europe, Africa and Asia is no longer to be proven, the movement seems to have invested a region initially very distant both ideologically and geographically, Latin America. In order to understand the process of "internationalisation" of Hezbollah on this continent, it is necessary to redefine the context, the Lebanese national and international framework in which the group emerged.

Founded in 1982 and officially revealed in 1985, Hezbollah (Party of God) is a Shiite armed resistance group and a real political party in Lebanon that functions today as a paramilitary group. If for the United States and Israel it is a terrorist movement, Paulo Botta proposes to define it as "an armed political group whose main ideology is essentially religious and which has resorted to terrorist acts to achieve its objectives"<sup>1</sup>. The movement progressively developed following the invasion of Lebanon by Israel during the 1982 civil war, and benefited from the support of several Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Its armed activities are supervised by the "Central Council of Jihad" and Hezbollah is very regularly considered as a Shiite jihadist group. Hezbollah is a movement that claims to be a Khomeinist movement and has historical links with Iran, which supports the Shiite group financially and with weapons. Iran is Tehran's main terrorist agent and provides Hezbollah with nearly 10 million dollars a month<sup>2</sup>.

Since the 1990s, but especially since 2006 and the withdrawal of Israel from Lebanon, Hezbollah has sought to increase its influence and importance within the Lebanese national political arena, but also on an international scale. Thus, its members have sought to diversify their activities, as well as the opportunities to finance their actions. According to Paulo Botta, it is in this context that we must analyse the internationalisation of the Shiite group and its progressive implantation in Latin America<sup>3</sup>. This article will deal with the analysis of Hezbollah's implantation strategy in Latin America, its objectives, but also the security and geopolitical stakes of its presence with regard to its active participation in organised crime in the region. It will therefore be a question of analysing the action of the Lebanese Hezbollah and not the emerging "Latin American Hezbollah". In fact, for several years, a small group of left-wing activists has emerged in Latin America and claims to be a "Hezbollah group" of a link with the Lebanese Hezbollah that is still unfounded to this day.

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<sup>1</sup> Paulo Botta, "La doble cara de Hezbollah en América Latina", CEMOC, June 2010

<sup>2</sup> Ely Karmon, "Amérique Latine, défi de l'Iran aux États-Unis dans leur arrière cour", *Outre-Terre*, 2011/2 (n° 28), p. 531-555

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*



The ideologies, modes of action and political, economic and social objectives of the two groups are quite distinct. The ideologies, modes of action and political, economic and social objectives of the two groups are quite distinct and we will therefore focus on the action of the Lebanese Hezbollah.

## The Lebanese diaspora in Latin America : a major supporter of Hezbollah's action in the region

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As mentioned in the introduction, the civil war in Lebanon, the end of which was marked by the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the national territory, was an inflection point in the development and ambitions of Hezbollah, particularly in terms of politics. By seeking to become a leading party in the Lebanese political landscape, it has sought to increase its legitimacy by seeking other sources of funding than its main creditors and thus export its actions beyond the regional sphere.

Also, at a time of increasing tensions between Israel, the United States and Iran, Hezbollah was accused (and still is today) of being a relay for Iran in Latin America and of seeking to establish itself in countries that had developed resentment against the North American power in order to organise terrorist actions.

Nevertheless, before understanding and analysing the Shiite group's internationalisation strategy and its degree of participation in the Latin American drug trafficking network, it is essential to understand that Hezbollah, in its quest for legitimacy and new funding, has been able to benefit from the support of the Lebanese diaspora in the region.

Indeed, Latin America has experienced several waves of Lebanese but also Syrian migration in the course of history due to the progressive deterioration of the security context in Lebanon : in the 1970s Argentina experienced the largest wave of Lebanese migration following the civil war. A significant part of the population settled in the area of the Triple Frontier between Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay.

If the majority of the nationals were dedicated to a legal commercial activity, the Lebanese and Arab diaspora contributed to the group's expansion through financial support. Indeed, Hezbollah very quickly sought to establish links with Shiite immigrants and more generally with the Lebanese diaspora, in the image of its internationalisation strategy in Africa. By presenting itself as an actor of the integration of Lebanese immigrants and by investing in the local life of the populations recently arrived in Latin America, Hezbollah benefited in exchange from the support of the diaspora by practising *zakat*, i.e. a system of "spontaneous



donations" to Lebanese families. The sums collected were then directly to the movement in the Middle East via agencies such as Western Union.

Beyond the financial support that allows Hezbollah to increase its legitimacy and contribute to the financing of its terrorist activities in the Middle East, part of the Lebanese diaspora supports the organisation by integrating drug trafficking networks and favours Hezbollah's activity in the region. Generally, these are individuals of Lebanese nationality who have also obtained the nationality of the host country. In 2017, Ali Issa Chamas, a Paraguayan of Lebanese origin, was sentenced to three years in prison for drug trafficking for Hezbollah by the Miami court of justice. He had been arrested in 2016 in Ciudad del Este (Paraguay) while trying to ship a load of thirty-nine kilos of cocaine to Turkey. According to DEA agents, Ali Issa Chamas confessed to being a "global facilitator of Lebanese drug traffickers" <sup>4</sup>and that several individuals in his family were active members of Hezbollah.

Very often used by Hezbollah and the trafficking cartels, certain Lebanese immigrants become key players in the Shiite action and contribute to the major expansion of their activities, such as the Barakat clan in the Triple Frontier<sup>5</sup> zone. The Barakat clan, originating from the Lebanese diaspora, is a major creditor of Hezbollah's activity and an important partner of the drug traffickers in the region. It is also accused of contributing to the financing of Hezbollah in the United Kingdom by sending to London, via money laundering channels, the profits generated from illegal activity in the Triple Frontier area among others.

In Colombia, some members of the Lebanese diaspora contribute to the expansion of Hezbollah by participating in drug trafficking and money laundering by directly integrating the local cartels, notably the criminal organisation Joumaa, part of whose profits are paid directly to Hezbollah<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, Hezbollah has relied on the Lebanese diaspora to develop its activities in the region. However, some countries have experienced larger waves of migration and have become strategic anchor points for Hezbollah, starting with the Triple Frontier area.

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*



## The Triple Frontier : the cradle of Hezbollah's action in Latin America

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The 1980s marked the beginning of suspicions of the presence of a Hezbollah network in Latin America, and more precisely in the Triple Frontier zone between Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. Hezbollah is accused of preparing and planning its terrorist acts (as it was accused during the 1992 and 1994 attacks in Buenos Aires as the armed wing of Iran), but also of contributing to a large extent to the perpetuation of the network of illicit trafficking of all kinds established for many years in this area.

Indeed, although it is known that drug trafficking is now a structuring element of the political and economic frameworks of Latin American countries, certain areas have largely favoured the establishment of extra-regional groups, starting with the Triple Frontier zone.

Indeed, known as a territory marked by the proliferation of actors linked to organised crime, this area, devoid of state control, has been the preferred territory for the establishment of Hezbollah and is now considered a safe haven for the latter's illicit activities.

The choice to invest in this region results from a double observation : on the one hand, the historical presence of a large part of the Lebanese and Syrian diaspora, perceived as a potential support. On the other hand, the strategic interest of the area, both political and economic: faced with the permeability of the borders, a failure of governance in the face of internal security forces (ISF) and governments gangrenous with corruption, Hezbollah has seen the opportunity to contribute to the illegal circuit of trafficking of all kinds without having to fear any economic control. Moreover, Argentina and Brazil allow direct access to the sea thanks to the presence of numerous ports, accentuating the strategic character of the Triple Border, which has become an unavoidable point of passage for the transfer of large cargoes and the drug trade to Europe and the Middle East<sup>7</sup>. It therefore plays a specific role in the chain of production and export of products and profits from trafficking, allowing them to be sent to the most profitable regions for the continuity of the activity and the maintenance of the parallel economy.

Hezbollah maintains privileged links with the cartels of the area by actively participating in drug trafficking, notably with the Brazilian cartels *Primer Comando de la Capital* (PCC)

<sup>7</sup>Gustavo Sierra, "Hezbollah en la Triple Frontera: cocaína para la revolución," *InfoBae*, 11 January 2019, <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-docs/2019/01/11/hezbollah-en-la-triple-frontera-cocaina-para-la-revolucion/>



and *Comando Vermelho (CV)*<sup>8</sup>. Profits from drug trafficking are reportedly sent directly to the Middle East to support the group's regional operations.

Also, Hezbollah maintains close links with the cartels by actively participating in the money laundering circuit.

According to the DEA, out of ten drug trafficking cases linked to money laundering, at least two of them involve Lebanese immigrants with an almost systematic affiliation to Hezbollah<sup>9</sup>. Hezbollah also uses casinos to launder its money, such as the one in Puerto Iguazu, Argentina, in the border area with neighbouring Brazil.

In fact, the Triple Frontier zone would allow mutual enrichment between Hezbollah members and the region's drug cartels: by actively participating in the drug trafficking circuit, the Shiite group directly enriches its activities in the Middle East through money transfer and laundering. Moreover, some of the profits generated by illegal activities in the Middle East are reinjected directly into Latin America and contribute to the development of the activities of local cartels. As an indication, Hezbollah's activities in the Triple Frontier zone alone would bring in more than 10 million dollars per year.

If this area was the privileged zone for the establishment of the Shiite group on Latin American soil, the latter - in its search for legitimacy and its quest for diversification of financing in the face of the complex geopolitical context of the war in Lebanon - has developed throughout Latin America, thus leading to a true internationalisation.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*





## A global presence : Hezbollah's participation in the regional drug trafficking circuit

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Beyond the Triple Frontier, and in order to finance its activities in the Middle East but also in Latin America, Hezbollah has thus progressively penetrated the drug trafficking, money laundering, cigarette trafficking and human trafficking networks of many Latin American countries<sup>10</sup>.

The near inactivity of terrorist groups in the region has been widely exploited by Hezbollah in its internationalisation strategy. Indeed, like the strategy developed in the Triple Frontier zone, the movement has relied on the weaknesses of the political systems and modes of governance of the countries of the region to integrate the circuits of organised crime and develop infrastructures for the financing of its terrorist activities.

According to the US State Department, although Hezbollah's activity is widespread in almost all Latin American countries, the cartels in Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico and Chile are considered its main partners in the area.

The rapprochement with Venezuela reflects the quest for legitimacy sought by Hezbollah and must be integrated into a more global context of ideological confrontation of Hezbollah with the United States. Indeed, very often considered as the armed arm of Iran, an enemy of the United States and accused of numerous terrorist acts on Latin American soil, Hezbollah has therefore sought support from countries sharing the same anti-American sentiment.

The arrival in power of Hugo Chavez was seen as a gateway for the Shiite group to enter the country, taking advantage of the government's sympathy for Iran's ideologies and benefiting from the direct support of certain members of the government to "settle in peacefully in the country"<sup>11</sup>. Indeed, under H. Chavez, the deputy minister in charge of urban security, Dr. Tarek el Ayssami, was suspected of being in direct relation with Hezbollah and of favouring its activity on the national territory<sup>12</sup>. Off the coast of Venezuela, Margarita Island, a free zone marked by the presence of many expatriate Lebanese Shiites, is said to have been taken over by Hezbollah and used as a transit zone as well as for the production of false documents ; Hezbollah is considered to be one of the leading organisations in the production of false passports, visas and counterfeit money. "To date, only counterfeit dollars have been uncovered, but there are indications that the movement's printing plants are manufacturing euro-denominated notes."

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<sup>10</sup> Annex 1

<sup>11</sup> Alain Rodier, "Hezbollah's Drug Trafficking in Latin America", *CF2R*, April 2019, <https://cf2r.org/actualite/les-trafics-de-drogue-du-hezbollah-en-amerique-latine/>

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*





There is also evidence that Hezbollah has an operational centre for planning its terrorist activities and that it hosts paramilitary training camps for its members. Also, Hezbollah is said to have an operational centre for planning its terrorist <sup>13</sup>activities and to host paramilitary training camps for members of the Shia organisation.

In addition, several links have been established between Venezuela and Hezbollah: While in 2013, the US State Department highlighted the existence of close links between the Lebanese group and the Venezuelan cartel Los Soles, the state-owned company *Gonviasa* is said to have facilitated the transfer of arms to Damascus and Tehran.

Today, beyond its participation in organised crime, Hezbollah displays a very strong ideological support for the Venezuelan government, always in opposition to the United States. Indeed, the group does not hesitate to communicate on the political situation of the country and show its support for Nicolas Maduro, even though the United States and many Latin American and European countries condemned him, recognising the interim presidency of Juan Guaido<sup>14</sup>.

Furthermore, close links have been found between Hezbollah and Colombian cocaine trafficking cartels. As the main supplier in the region, Colombia is thus a major strategic anchor for integrating the regional drug trafficking network. According to the Colombian intelligence services, Hezbollah is established there through an apparently legal company, the ESO (External Security Organization) which, in reality, is a branch of Unit 910, the armed wing of Hezbollah for foreign action, and notably accused of having perpetrated the attacks in Burgas (Bulgaria) in 2012 and linked to the attacks in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994. In October 2008, thirty-six people suspected of links to Hezbollah and involvement in organised crime and money laundering were arrested in Colombia<sup>15</sup>.

In reality, Hezbollah's strategy of implantation responds to a logic of permanent enrichment by exploiting the specificities of each of the cartels ; while Colombia allows active participation in drug trafficking because of the abundance of cocaine production, Mexico would be a gateway to the North American market, while Venezuela and the countries further south would allow money laundering and the export of products to Europe or Africa. In each of these countries, Hezbollah has established itself in "grey area".

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>14</sup> "Lebanese Hezbollah Condemns US 'Interference' in Venezuela," *AA.com*, January 25, 2019, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/politics/lebanese-hezbollah-condemns-US-interference-in-venezuela/1374653>

<sup>15</sup> Op.cit <https://cf2r.org/actualite/les-trafics-de-drogue-du-hezbollah-en-amerique-latine/>



These are areas without political and economic control, marked by poverty and major state weakness, notably the Maicao area in Colombia and Iquique in Chile<sup>16</sup>. According to the authorities, Iquique, located in the north of Chilean territory, hosts many front companies used to channel illegal funds for Hezbollah.

As for the links maintained with the Mexican cartels, in particular the Sinaloa cartel or Las Zetas, participation in drug trafficking to the United States would be an opportunity to introduce activists directly onto American soil and to develop 'sleeper cells', which would be mobilised in the event of a major conflict between the United States and Iran, in order to carry out terrorist operations on American soil. In exchange, the Mexican cartels would receive weapons and training from Hezbollah members.

It should also be noted that cooperation with the Sinaloa cartel would allow it to send cocaine directly to the Middle East market via West Africa.

Thus, Hezbollah would have developed a significant network in Latin America. For example, drug trafficking would serve Hezbollah's interests in the Middle East according to the following scheme: cocaine produced in Colombia would then transit through Peru and then Bolivia (Santa Cruz de la Sierra area), to reach the Triple Frontier area. It would first pass through Paraguay, then Brazil and then Argentina, whose ports (Rosario and Buenos Aires) would allow the transit of the merchandise concealed in soya containers to Europe or Central Africa, to finally be transported to the Middle East market, the profits of which would go directly to the local branches of Hezbollah<sup>17</sup>. In addition to illicit trafficking, money laundering is a significant source of financing for the organisation and seems to be supported by sectors that are fully integrated into the legal economic system, notably the banking sector.

According to the United States, Hezbollah is supported by the *Lebanese Canadian Bank* (LCB), which is at the heart of a complex money laundering and drug trafficking circuit benefiting both Hezbollah and Latin American cartels<sup>18</sup>.

In 2011, the DEA accused the LCB of being a hub for international money laundering. According to the

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>17</sup> Op.cit, <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-docs/2019/01/11/hezbollah-en-la-triple-frontera-cocaina-para-la-revolucion/>

<sup>18</sup> Quentin Girard, "Le Hezbollah et les cartels de la drogue travailleraient main dans la main", *Libération*, 16 December 2011, <https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2011/12/16/le-hezbollah-et-les-cartels-de-la-droque-travailleraient-main-dans-la-main-782188/>



In the United States, more than 200 LCB accounts are said to belong directly to members or close associates of the Shiite organisation and to contribute to the enrichment of the movement.

More broadly, in order to bring to Lebanon all the money collected throughout the world, Hezbollah would use the services of Western Union, some of whose agencies established in Lebanon would be infiltrated by members of the movement and would allow the development of financial circuits diverting the traditional channels (particularly via Africa or South-East Asia) in order to escape the supervision of international authorities<sup>19</sup>.

Faced with the proliferation of illicit trafficking networks and the growing involvement of Hezbollah in the actions of local cartels, most countries, supported by the United States, have strengthened their internal security policies. Indeed, condemned as a terrorist organisation, Hezbollah has been the object of a hardening of anti-terrorist policies in many Latin American countries.

### A hardening of the anti-terrorist policies of Latin American governments in the service of North American policy?

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In order to understand the tightening of internal security policies in several Latin American countries, it is important to place these policies in the complex international context in which they emerged. Indeed, in the 1990s, following the attacks in Argentina, many countries became aware of the presence of Hezbollah cells in the region, which was very quickly assimilated as a threat to the security of the region but also to the United States. These events had an awareness-raising effect on Latin American governments, which began to establish real links between Hezbollah and illicit trafficking networks of all kinds, particularly in the Triple Frontier area. Very quickly, the United States took up this issue related to homeland security. It should be remembered that these events occurred in an international context marked by permanent tensions between Iran and the United States. For the latter, participating in the regional anti-terrorist strategy was also an opportunity to show Iran its presence and influence on the Latin American continent; as early as the 1990s, terrorism as a threat to security in Latin America appeared in the strategic documents drawn up by the American State Department.

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<sup>19</sup> Annex 1



Nevertheless, the attacks of 11 September 2001 marked a major turning point in the anti-terrorist policy of both the United States and many Latin American countries.

While for Washington the fight against terrorism and the *Rogue States* (of which Iran was a part) became the priority of national security doctrine, many Latin American countries aligned themselves with the United States by strengthening their national security doctrines in turn. In 2001, the ISPs of the three Triple Frontier countries significantly increased surveillance missions in the area with the establishment of the G3+1 Command, which was composed of Argentine, Brazilian, Paraguayan and US ISPs. Thus, the paradigm shift linked to the 2001 attacks and the strengthening of cooperation in the fight against drug trafficking and terrorism allowed Washington to establish itself permanently in the region and serve its strategic interests. In the name of the security of the 'Western Hemisphere', the US State Department has 'conducted the reorganisation of the security of this area as if it were its own territory' in collaboration with the security forces of the three countries concerned.

Moreover, with the shift to the right in Latin America and the elections of Jair Bolsonaro and Mario Abdo, cooperation between the three South American countries and the United States in the fight against terrorism in the Tri-border area has been revived.

In addition, over the past three years, US federal agencies have put heavy pressure on Hezbollah's activities in Latin America, "generating a serious economic and financial crisis for the organisation"<sup>20</sup>. This situation was exacerbated in 2019 when the US and many Western countries designated the pro-Iranian organisation as a global terrorist in many countries, even beyond Latin America.

This was followed by the recognition of this status by many Latin American countries including Argentina, Paraguay and Colombia in 2019 and, more recently, the condemnation by Honduras in January 2020 and Guatemala at the end of 2020. Legally, this designation places Hezbollah "and any group or organisation that supports, represents or assists it in the category of global terrorism"<sup>21</sup> involving the application of local and/or US laws.

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<sup>20</sup> George Chaya, "Guatemala ratificó la designación de Hezbollah como organización terrorista global", *InfoBae*, 12 December 2020, <https://www.infobae.com/america/america-latina/2020/12/12/guatemala-ratifico-la-designacion-de-hezbollah-como-organizacion-terrorista-global/>

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid*



## CONCLUSION

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If today the link between Hezbollah and Latin American drug trafficking networks is no longer in question, the internationalisation of the movement on the continent has responded to several strategic logics that must be inserted in the international context of systematic tensions between the United States and Iran.

According to the elements presented in this article, there is a synergy between organised crime in Latin America and the Lebanese Shiite group. In fact, although "the members of both have distinct interests and objectives, both have long maintained a relationship that is similar to a "marriage" in which both mutually benefit from the opportunities that each has in this relationship".<sup>22</sup> Following the attacks of 2001, this synergy was the object of a tightening of internal security policies, marked by the intervention of the United States, contributing to the strengthening of the anti-terrorist policy of Latin American countries with certain strategic and geopolitical objectives. While it is clear that the successive Lebanese migrations and the long-lasting establishment of the diaspora in the area has been a support for the development of Hezbollah's activities, it is essential not to indulge in a permanent assimilation of the Lebanese community in Latin America to Hezbollah.

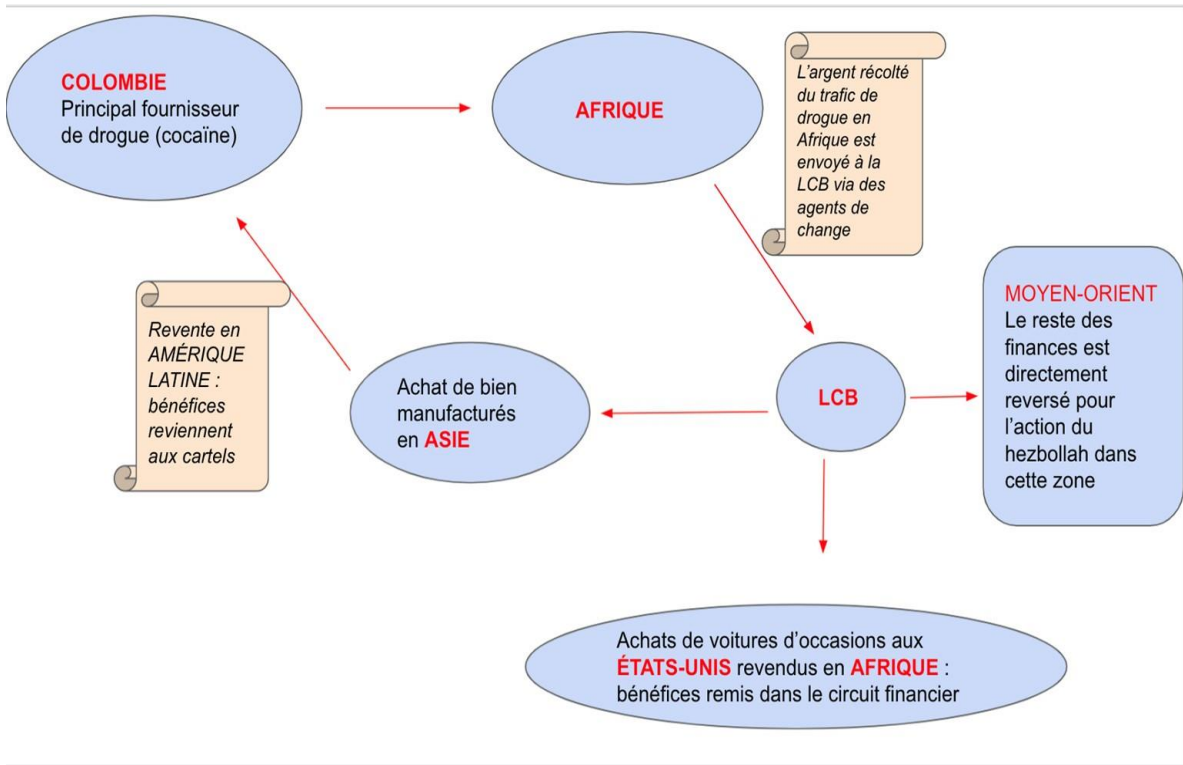
Beyond the latter, other actors of international terrorism have been detected in Latin America, including Al Qaeda cells in the 1990s. In 2007, around seven groups linked to Islamist terrorism were identified in the Triple Frontier area and also contribute to the development of drug trafficking.

Nevertheless, Hezbollah's influence in the region must be qualified. Indeed, while it is clear that it contributes greatly to the enrichment of drug cartels and money laundering circuits, it would seem that the objective sought by Hezbollah by establishing itself in Latin America would be rather to contribute to the financing of its activities in the Middle East thanks to weak local control allowing the development and proliferation of illicit activities more than terrorism.

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<sup>22</sup>Alexandra Dumitrascu, "El radicalismo islámico en America Latina. De Hezbolá Al Daesh", *Instituto español de estudios Estratégicos*, 2016

**APPENDIX 1: Example of a financial circuit**



*Source: Anaïs Fauré*