

# Iran and Venezuela: Axis of Anti-Americanism

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## Introduction

Venezuela and Iran have maintained steady diplomatic relations since the late Hugo Chávez came to power in 1999. Iran, an Islamic theocracy, and Venezuela, a far-left socialist regime, have close political, economic, and security ties, despite their obvious religious and political differences. Both countries have adopted the ideological narrative that the U.S. threatens their national identity, resources, security, general well-being, and, in the case of Iran, the Islamic faith. They defend each other's interests on the international stage and they have deepened their engagement in various sectors, including in the economy, internal security, defense, intelligence, and nuclear sectors.

This resource, "Iran and Venezuela: Axis of Anti-Americanism," examines the relationship, providing historical background on bilateral diplomatic relations, starting with Chávez's first trip to Tehran as head of state in 2000. It also identifies several features of Venezuela's economic and political system that render it vulnerable to Iranian influence and exploitation. It examines the roles of Iran-sponsored Hezbollah and the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) in Venezuela. The final section explores the differences in approach taken by the past three U.S. administrations to this developing alliance and concludes with a list of recommendations for U.S. policymakers.

## Overview of Diplomatic History

Formal diplomatic relations between Iran and Venezuela were [established](#) in 1947. Both countries were also founding members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960. Venezuela and Iran both experienced turbulent years in the 1980s. At the start of the decade, Iran entered a war with Iraq which lasted until 1988. In 1983, Venezuela suffered a prolonged debt crisis following the rapid devaluation of the Venezuelan currency against the U.S. dollar. Close cooperation only took place from 1999 after Venezuela's socialist revolution brought Hugo Chávez to power.

Much like the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran that ousted the Shah, Venezuela's revolution had an anti-American ideological underpinning that immediately soured relations with the U.S. This shared antipathy towards the U.S. remains an important, but far from the only, factor shaping the Venezuelan-Iranian partnership today. When the socialist revolution unfolded in Venezuela, Iranian "reformist" President Mohammad Khatami was pursuing a more non-confrontational approach to the West, like his predecessor Akbar Rafsanjani, compared to the hardline policies of Ayatollah Khamenei, who was president of Iran during the Iran-Iraq War.

## Relations under Khatami and Chávez

Seeking to oppose the U.S., Chávez brought Venezuela closer to Iran. He first traveled to Iran as head of state in 2000, and Khatami reciprocated in the same year. This was the first time an Iranian president had traveled to Venezuela. In May 2001, Chávez again traveled to Tehran and expressed his interest in cooperating on oil production cuts, prompting Iran's leaders to begin to see value in a partnership. During his time in office, President Khatami traveled to Venezuela three times and presided over the signing of a bilateral free trade agreement and launching joint initiatives in the tractor, cement, and automobile industries. During a state visit in 2005, following the signing of 22 agreements in energy and infrastructure cooperation, Chávez [awarded](#) Khatami the "Collar of the Order of the Liberator" and [issued](#) support for Iran's pursuit of a nuclear program.

## The Ahmadinejad-Chávez Partnership

In 2005, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became President of Iran leading to closer ideological ties between Venezuela and Iran. President Ahmadinejad [stated](#): “We want to create a bipolar world... Despite the will of the world arrogance [the U.S.], we will stand by the oppressed and deprived nations of the world.” This statement heralded an increasingly confrontational approach to the West, with the developing world serving as a platform for the Iranian regime’s anti-American rhetoric and policy. This messaging was well-received in parts of the Western Hemisphere, especially in Venezuela. Meanwhile, Ahmadinejad expanded Iran’s [proxy war](#) and destabilizing activities across the Middle East in an effort to undermine the U.S.-led regional security architecture and evict the U.S. military from the region.



President Hugo Chávez

A close personal bond also developed between Ahmadinejad and Chávez, both anti-American ideologues. Their friendship was evident in frequent state visits. Between 2005 and 2007, each leader [made](#) three visits to the other country. In July 2006, Chávez met Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in Tehran, and President Ahmadinejad [awarded](#) him Iran’s highest state honor, “the Higher Medal of the Islamic Republic of Iran.” Given Chávez’s support for Iran’s nuclear program at the U.N. earlier in the year, this was not unexpected. On this visit, Chávez [accused](#) then-President George W. Bush of having a “relationship with the devil.”

Later in the year, Chávez welcomed Ahmadinejad to Venezuela and emphasized the revolutionary nature of their respective countries’ regimes. He [said](#), “Two revolutions are shaking hands: the Persian people, warriors of the Middle East...and the sons of Simón Bolívar, the warriors of the Caribbean, the free peoples.” Framing their respective revolutions this way, Chávez and Ahmadinejad sought to appeal to the desire to resist perceived U.S. domination and oppression. Chávez visited Tehran again in July 2007, meeting with his foreign minister and future president of Venezuela, Nicolás Maduro. Maduro was on the back leg of a trip to Lebanon, where he had [met Hassan Nasrallah](#), the leader of the U.S.-designated terrorist organization [Hezbollah](#). The summit offered the occasion for Chávez to [declare](#) that Iran and Venezuela constituted an “axis of unity” opposed to the U.S., and established closer ties between Venezuela and Iranian proxies like Hezbollah.

In March 2013, President Chávez died from cancer and was succeeded by his vice president, Nicolás Maduro. That month, Ahmadinejad [declared](#) he had “no doubt that he [Chávez] would be resurrected and return alongside Jesus Christ and Mahdi [the Hidden Imam] to establish peace and justice in the world.” These remarks were considered [heretical](#) by officials, clergy, and ordinary people in Iran, indicating Iran’s majority Shia population did not share the same enthusiasm for the Venezuelan socialist dictator. This situation highlighted the balancing act required for an Islamic theocracy to express sympathy for a socialist regime while maintaining its internal religious integrity. However, despite Iran’s status as an international pariah and its religious and political differences with Venezuela, the relationship has remained intact. A shared animosity towards the U.S. remains the defining characteristic of the partnership to this day.

## The Transition to Rouhani and Maduro



President Nicolás Maduro

In April 2013, Ahmadinejad traveled to Caracas to congratulate Maduro on his elevation to the presidency. While there, he stated that Iran’s relations with Venezuela “[symbolize](#)” its relations with Latin America, intending to build on and extend its steady relations with Venezuela to the rest of Latin America. But the subsequent [Hassan Rouhani](#) administration, taking power in August 2013, failed to realize his predecessor’s vision. Unlike Ahmadinejad, President Rouhani sought to improve relations with the West and reduce Tehran’s international isolation. He, therefore, deprioritized relations

with Venezuela, traveling to Venezuela only once during his eight years in office. Maduro [did not visit](#) Tehran for five years before June 2022, when he and the [Ebrahim Raisi](#) Administration [signed](#) a 20-year cooperation agreement.

Despite the slowdown in high-level diplomacy during the Rouhani era, cooperation based on shared interests continued. For example, as oil prices plummeted and damaged national finances, Rouhani [proposed](#) colluding with Venezuela at OPEC to “thwart world powers’ strategies...and to stabilize prices at a reasonable level in 2015.” The following year, Maduro visited Tehran for the second time to [reaffirm](#) their countries’ mutual alliance against the U.S.

In 2018, following the Trump Administration’s withdrawal of the U.S. from the Iran [nuclear deal](#), formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran increased its support for the Maduro regime, which had been facing a domestic political crisis and heightened U.S. pressure. Iran [began shipping](#) gasoline to the embattled regime—an arrangement that has accelerated since President Raisi took office.

There were also [reports](#) Iran was considering shipping missiles to Venezuela. In October 2020, then-U.S. Special Representative for Iran and Venezuela Elliot Abrams [said](#), “the transfer of long-range missiles from Iran to Venezuela is not acceptable to the United States and will not be tolerated or permitted.” The missiles were never shipped. However, in July 2021, a few days before Rouhani left office, Iranian warships were [identified](#) carrying attack craft, believed to be headed toward Venezuela for delivery. The warships eventually [changed course](#) toward the Russian city of St. Petersburg, after U.S. officials threatened Venezuela with sanctions should it allow the warships to dock.

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## The Raisi Administration and Maduro

In June 2022, President Maduro traveled to Tehran, where he and Raisi signed a 20-year cooperation agreement. This seeks to [boost trade and improve ties](#) in the energy, science, technology, and tourism sectors, though more detailed information has not been made available. While hailed as a dramatic geopolitical move by both countries, the agreement belies tensions in the relationship.

Since Russia's ground invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, reduction in Russian oil on global markets due to Western sanctions has led to an increase in the price of oil, which the Biden Administration has sought to alleviate by easing sanctions against Venezuelan oil exports. In March 2022, the Biden Administration reportedly [mulled](#) allowing Venezuela to resume some oil exports. In October 2022, Maduro [released](#) seven U.S. prisoners and resumed talks with the opposition to placate the U.S. The U.S., in turn, [eased some sanctions](#) against Venezuela, allowing Chevron to export Venezuelan oil. The U.S. also withdrew recognition of Juan Guaidó as interim president of Venezuela after the opposition-controlled legislature [voted](#) to dissolve the interim government, and the U.S. [released](#) two Venezuelan prisoners who were being held in the U.S.

In February 2023, Iran's international isolation grew due to its [acceleration](#) of uranium enrichment to near weapons-grade, its [provision](#) of one-way attack drones to Russia for use on the battlefield in European Union (EU)-candidate country Ukraine, and its brutal [crackdown](#) against peaceful Woman, Life, Freedom protesters. Because of this isolation, Iran's partnerships with authoritarian regimes like Venezuela appear increasingly important. In January 2023, President Raisi [warned](#) Maduro against normalizing relations with the U.S., a step Maduro said his country was "ready" to take. The following month, Raisi sent [Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian](#) to Venezuela to shore up ties. Amir-Abdollahian [issued statements](#) about "defending their national interests against external pressures," but no significant agreements were reached.

In June 2023, Raisi made his first trip to Venezuela, which was also his first trip to Latin America since assuming the presidency. In Venezuela, President Maduro [awarded](#) him the "National Medal of Honor." After meeting and calling the U.S. their "common enemy," the two leaders signed cooperation agreements. [Reports](#) indicated that the deals would provide scholarships for educational exchanges and Iran's importation of Venezuelan cattle. The two leaders also [expressed](#) optimism about increasing annual bilateral trade volumes to \$20 billion despite international sanctions against their countries. As part of the effort to expand trade, Raisi called for activating new shipping lines between the two countries. The two leaders also agreed to initiate joint projects in the oil and petrochemical industries, aiming to build on the projects announced after their June 2022 meeting.

Despite this developing economic cooperation, the U.S. continued to smooth relations with Maduro, looking to boost global oil supplies to keep prices low. In mid-October 2023, the Biden Administration [reached](#) a deal with Maduro to lift additional sanctions on companies working in Venezuela's energy sector in exchange for his guarantee to hold free and fair elections.

## Exploitable Conditions

Iran cultivates influence in Venezuela on an anti-American and anti-Israel ideological platform and exploits Venezuela's political and economic vulnerabilities, namely a deeply corrupt leadership that creates repeated legitimacy crises. Iran also curries Venezuela's favor by supporting it on the

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international stage against U.S. pressure to reform. The corruption further allows organized crime and narcotics trafficking to thrive, which has provided Iran and its proxy Hezbollah additional avenues of influence. Corruption and mismanagement have driven Venezuela's oil infrastructure into a [dilapidated state](#), which has given Iran the opportunity to engage in oil diplomacy.

The first vulnerability that Iran exploits is the Venezuelan's leadership's left-wing ideology, which shares a core feature with the belief system imposed by Iran's ruling clerics. Both condemn and promote hostility towards the U.S. and blame it for domestic challenges. Venezuela also has been highly critical of Israel. Hugo Chávez, in particular, was known for his [outspoken criticism](#) of Israel and his support for the Palestinians. While Palestinian terrorist groups have threatened and attacked Israel, Chávez has sought to help their cause on the international stage. Anti-American and anti-Israeli sentiment in Venezuela has created openings for Iranian cultural engagement and diplomacy.

The second vulnerability is the prevalence of corruption among Venezuela's political elite. This feature of Venezuela and Iran's political systems has contributed to popular discontent in both countries. In Venezuela, it culminated in a political legitimacy crisis, which came to a head in 2019 with the [Venezuelan presidential crisis](#). The U.S. government-supported opposition leader, Juan Guaidó, claimed power and attempted to set up a parallel government, challenging the legitimacy of Maduro's administration. Although the crisis has since subsided, the Venezuelan regime's diminishing popular legitimacy remains a vulnerability. It forces Venezuela to rely on other authoritarian regimes such as Iran, which similarly lack popular domestic support. In fact, international support and economic ties help both Iran and Venezuela sustain their control despite domestic opposition. Venezuela and Iran have formed a political alliance and strive to attract other states into it, particularly authoritarian regimes dissatisfied with U.S. global leadership.

Thirdly, organized crime driven by top political officials like Venezuela's former Oil Minister, Tareck El Aissami, attracts Iran and its terrorist proxy Hezbollah. El Aissami, [sanctioned](#) by the U.S. Department of the Treasury in 2017 for aiding the drug trade, and then [indicted](#) by the U.S. Department of Justice in 2019, has been [described](#) as critical to the partnership between the "ayatollahs of Iran and the Maduro regime." Throughout his political career, El Aissami has also worked with Hezbollah to recruit and facilitate travel for the terrorist group when he was interior minister. In his former capacity as vice president, El Aissami was in charge of [internal security](#) and commanded the "colectivos," a leftist youth militia modeled on the IRGC's [Basij](#).

Given that the political and military elites are deeply involved in the drug trade, Venezuela can be reasonably classified as a narco-state. Venezuelan elites permit criminal enterprises, including terrorist groups like Hezbollah, to sell narcotics, and receive kickbacks in return. Since Chávez's rule, Venezuela has attracted terrorist groups that use proceeds from narcotics trafficking to fund terror operations worldwide. In 2019, the U.S. Department of Justice [indicted](#) President Maduro on charges of narcoterrorism, further underscoring that Maduro's government is a narco-state, a condition that is ripe for Iranian exploitation.

Additionally, Venezuela provides an avenue to smuggle Special Interest Aliens, or non-U.S. persons who pose potential national security threats to the U.S. [According](#) to Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, the former commander of the U.S. Southern Command, "Venezuela has long provided a permissive environment for

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narco-terrorist groups and Lebanese Hezbollah supporters, and is a transit country for the smuggling of illicit drugs and Special Interest Aliens (SIA).” SIAs can use their citizenship in Venezuela to gain access to other Latin American countries or even the U.S.



Left to right: former Venezuelan Oil Minister Tareck El Aissami and Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji

Finally, the dilapidated condition of Venezuela’s refineries and oil infrastructure—the result of years of corruption and mismanagement—contribute to a perception that Venezuela is a failed petrostate, albeit with the world’s largest known oil reserves. Its inability to produce enough gasoline for its population has created a need for imports and foreign technical expertise, both of which Iran has willingly supplied. While profiting economically from its sales to Venezuela, Iran is also propping up the Maduro regime.

Venezuela has paid Iran in gold, which is more difficult for authorities to trace and less vulnerable to sanctions than wire transfers or other financial exchanges. Iranian media [first reported in 2012](#) that this sanctions evasion technique would be introduced because of the difficulty of making dollar payments to Iranian banks. In the late 2010s, reports revealed that Iran was exploiting the Venezuelan-Turkish gold trade. According to a [2019 BBC report](#), Venezuelan gold shipped to Turkey—whose president, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, is a Maduro ally—for refining was diverted to Iran in violation of U.S. sanctions, instead of being shipped back to Venezuela.

While the gold could have been transferred to Iran for the purchase of gasoline, which Iran began shipping to Venezuela almost a year later, the reports did not clarify the reasons for the alleged transfers, nor did they identify the actors involved. When Iran began shipping gasoline in 2020, then-Special Representative for Iran Brian Hook [raised doubts](#) that Iran’s assistance to Venezuela was limited to the energy sector. Subsequently, Venezuela has begun swapping its heavy crude oil for much-needed gasoline. Venezuela also has uranium and thorium mines—natural resources that could be used to aid Iran’s nuclear weapons program.

## Ideological Affinity

The ideologies in Venezuela and Iran since the Bolivarian and Islamic Revolutions, respectively, aspire to build consensus in their regions against the U.S. Both states have at times shunned nationalism, appealing instead to a broader coalition of states in their regions. Venezuela's brand of pan-Latin anti-Americanism resembles Iran's appeal to pan-Islamism, a call for unity among all Islamic nations. While Venezuela has cynically claimed the mantle of South American leadership against U.S. capitalism, Iranian clerics frame their struggle in terms of Muslim oppression. They both demonize Western influences, including secular democracy and capitalism, as a threat to their faith, and have weaponized the Palestinian nationalist movement to exact costs on Israel and stoke violence in an effort to convince the world that the Israeli state is illegitimate.

The rhetoric of external threats, victimization, and oppression at the hands of the West bolsters both revolutionary states' legitimacy in the view of some audiences and helps distract from domestic challenges. Accordingly, U.S. policies like economic sanctions, rather than the regimes' endemic corruption and mismanagement, are said to be blamed for their citizens' poverty and resource shortages. This narrative appeals to regime insiders and sections of the populaces alike, even though the latter bear the brunt of their government's destructive policies.

Alex Saab is a notable example of a Venezuelan regime official that uses anti-Americanism to distract from his involvement in crime and corruption. Saab is a Colombian businessman-turned-Venezuelan diplomat and in June 2020 [was detained](#) in Cape Verde on a U.S. arrest warrant for money laundering. In October 2021, the U.S. [charged](#) him with siphoning millions of dollars from aid programs intended to help people in Venezuela. As he was at the time of his arrest Maduro's Special Envoy to Iran, and had in that capacity [secured](#) Iran's promise to provide medical supplies, fuel, and technical expertise to help repair Venezuela's oil facilities, he claims that the U.S. targeted him as a means of depriving the Venezuelan people of basic necessities. Saab's lawyers have framed the indictment as a politically-motivated attack on humanitarianism.

The ideological anti-Americanism behind Saab's diversion tactics is buttressed by Iran's humanitarian activities in Venezuela. In 2020, amid the Covid-19 pandemic, Iran [shipped](#) testing kits and other supplies to Venezuela, and it sent tankers to supply much-needed fuel. Iran's gas provisions led Venezuelan youth to [raise](#) the Islamic Republic of Iran flag as a gesture of gratitude to their benefactor, underscoring the shipment's propaganda value.

However, Saab's potential involvement in these humanitarian activities did not deter the U.S. from indicting him. Because aid programs and religious and educational institutions are difficult to sanction given their perceived humanitarian value, policymakers must keep a close eye on them, as they can be used for money laundering, illicit financing, propaganda, and operational cover.

## Iran's Soft-Power Infrastructure

The main feature that unites Venezuela and Iran and minimizes their obvious religious and political differences is their deep-seated ideological hostility toward the U.S. Iran-linked cultural, religious, and educational institutions in Venezuela provide a forum to propagate this anti-Americanism and an anti-Israeli worldview and to cultivate trust and loyalty, which lays the groundwork for future economic,

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political, and military cooperation. This network injects pro-Iranian messaging into Venezuelan society, which tends to be framed in terms of anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, and anti-capitalism, valorizing resistance figures like Simón Bolívar, Che Guevara, and more recently, the late IRGC Quds Force Commander [Qassem Soleimani](#), a terrorist leader responsible for the death of [over 600 U.S. servicemen and women in Iraq](#). Iran's Al-Mustafa University has pioneered soft-power projection in Venezuela, flanked by Hispan TV, the regime's chief propaganda outlet in Latin America.

In 2004, the Iranian [Al-Mustafa University established](#) the Centro de Intercambio Cultural Iran Latino America (CICIL) in Caracas. An Iranian cleric, Mohsen Rabbani, who was involved in the 1994 bombing of a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, [runs](#) CICIL's parent organization, the Qom-based Islam Oriente. The U.S. Department of the Treasury [sanctioned](#) Al-Mustafa in December 2020 for its role in recruiting fighters for the war in [Syria](#). The sanctions came one month after the university opened a center at the Universidad Bolivariana de Venezuela in Caracas dedicated to Qassem Soleimani, whom it [called](#) "the hero and martyr of the anti-imperialist struggle." Many left-wing groups in Venezuela and throughout Latin America view the former Quds Force commander as the Middle East equivalent of Che Guevara, epitomizing resistance to U.S. hegemony.

Additionally, the Iranian-linked Samuel Robinson Institute (SRI) formed in October 2020, has [hosted](#) events featuring Venezuelan socialist leaders and their Iranian allies. Iran's former Foreign Minister, [Mohammad Zarif](#), spoke at the institute's inaugural event, reflecting on the two countries' cooperation in the oil sector and the history of their political ties. He heavily [criticized](#) the U.S. for "terrorizing" Venezuelan people in his [lecture](#) titled, "US/Western terror tactics in attempts to halt the course of history toward a post-Western world." The SRI [website](#) features stories about the Shia Muslim faith, Iranian goodwill, and Iran's positive role in Iraq and Syria.

Al-Mustafa University and SRI are tools to promote trust in and loyalty to Tehran. [According](#) to Joseph Humire, an expert on Hezbollah's Latin America operations, Iran (and Hezbollah) use these and other cultural institutions to identify and form bonds between its operatives and certain wealthy and politically well-connected individuals in Venezuela.

Iran's growing media coverage in Latin America is also essential to its diplomatic campaign. In 2019, then commander of U.S. Southern Command Admiral Craig S. Faller [stated](#) before Congress, "Iran has deepened its anti-U.S. Spanish language media coverage and has exported its state support for terrorism into our hemisphere." By spreading anti-American and anti-Israeli messaging via its media network, Hispan TV, the [Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting](#) potentially generates interest in criminal activities and terrorist groups like Hezbollah.

## Diplomatic Ties

Iran and Venezuela share interests on the basis of their corrupt, authoritarian natures. This section points out the international forums in which this political alliance plays out, such as the U.N., the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA).

During significant political crises at home, the Iranian and Venezuelan regimes frequently resort to violent suppression. The leaders of these authoritarian regimes in turn coordinate their rhetoric to fend off international censure due to their dismal human rights records and lack of basic political freedoms.

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For example, in 2009, Chávez [congratulated](#) Ahmadinejad on his [disputed reelection victory](#), claiming it was a “triumph all the way.” Meanwhile, the Iranian system [arrested, detained, tortured, and killed](#) Iranians peacefully demonstrating their political rights. Hassan Rouhani did the same for Maduro after the contested 2019 presidential election, [denouncing](#) U.S. “hegemony” for trying to topple his regime. More recently, amid the September 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom movement in Iran, [reports](#) emerged that Venezuela has offered asylum to Iranian regime officials in case of a regime overthrow.

In addition to relieving pressure on the international stage, Venezuela has sought to protect Iran from condemnation at the U.N. over its nuclear program. For example, in 2006, it [joined](#) Cuba and Syria in a vote at the U.N.’s International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) against Iran’s referral to the U.N. Security Council for its nuclear program. Again in 2009, Venezuela [voted](#) against a U.N. resolution rebuking Iran for its secretive construction of the Fordow nuclear facility.

Within NAM, a group of nation-states that claim not to align with any significant power bloc, Venezuela and Iran launch rhetorical attacks against the U.S. and seek political support from the developing world. In September 2006, at the NAM Summit in Cuba, Chávez [claimed](#) he would defend Iran from invasion. Notwithstanding their membership in NAM, both countries engage in extensive collaboration with other authoritarian regimes, namely Russia and China. Furthermore, Iran holds [full-member status](#) in the China-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Iran’s relations with Venezuela have led to [closer relations](#) with other left-wing governments. Chávez helped Iran to [open communication](#) channels with Ecuador, Bolivia, and Nicaragua and [backed](#) Iran’s successful bid to become an honorary member of ALBA, an intergovernmental organization founded by Venezuela and Cuba in 2004 to encourage political and economic cooperation among leftist governments—often contrary to U.S. interests.

Therefore, Iran’s main diplomatic objective behind its relations with Venezuela is to gain political support on the international stage in order to bolster its legitimacy, provide cover for its nuclear escalation, and build anti-American coalitions with other Latin American countries.

## Economic Ties

During Ahmadinejad’s first year in office, Venezuelan-Iranian trade [ballooned](#) from nearly \$1 million to over \$50 million. Bilateral trade slowed during the Rouhani presidency but has shown signs of recovery thus far under President Raisi. According to the June 2022 cooperative agreement, the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line (IRISL) [launched](#) a direct commercial shipping line to Venezuela. A barter system has developed to neutralize sanctions, with Iran providing gasoline, condensate, and technical support in exchange for gold, fuel oil, and Venezuelan heavy crude. Iran and Venezuela cooperate in a range of sectors, including energy, shipping, banking, automotive, and agriculture. Such cooperation tends to be geared towards evading Western sanctions, which have impaired both countries’ ability to sell oil on the global market, their procurement activities, and their access to financial services.

## The Energy Sector

In addition to serving diplomatic objectives, Iran’s petrochemical shipments to Venezuela and its involvement in the Venezuelan energy sector also have a more direct profit motive. In 2007, the two

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countries [agreed](#) to a four-year \$700 million project to build a methanol facility in Venezuela after launching a similar project in Iran. The Venezuela project would help Iran get closer to the Latin American market, while the one off the coast of Iran would help Venezuela get closer to Asian markets.

Since 2007, Iran has depended on Venezuela to help it meet its fuel demand. For instance, in 2011, as U.S. sanctions were squeezing Iran's oil export revenues and depriving it of fuel imports, Venezuela [agreed](#) to ship it gasoline and other petrochemical products, despite the risk of damaging its relations with the U.S. The Obama Administration responded by imposing retaliatory sanctions on Venezuela's state-owned oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela (PDVSA), but the measures [did not impede](#) Venezuelan oil exports to the U.S. These sanctions, considered among the least severe options available to Washington, prevented PDVSA from accessing U.S. government contracts and export financing. At the time, the U.S. was the destination for approximately [60 percent](#) of Venezuela's total oil exports.

Since May 2020, amid widespread blackouts and gas shortages, Venezuela has relied on Iran for gasoline imports. Due to the weakness of Venezuela's national currency and the impact of Western sanctions on its banking sector, the country uses its natural resources, namely gold and heavy crude, to make payments to Iran. In 2020, reports emerged of a gas-for-gold barter agreement whereby Iranian gasoline was exchanged for Venezuelan gold. The [first gasoline shipments](#) from Iran to Venezuela began in May 2020, with five Iranian tankers [delivering](#) approximately 1.5 million barrels of gasoline worth \$45 million. During the same period, Venezuela began receiving catalysts from Iran needed to refine gasoline at its Cardon oil refinery, which had stopped distilling earlier that year. Before these initial shipments, Bloomberg [reported](#) that the total value of the gold loaded onto planes bound for cash-strapped Tehran was \$500 million, or nine tons, leaving Venezuela's reserves with a mere \$6.3 billion in hard currency. It remains unclear where the \$500 million payment went, considering that the delivered gasoline was worth only \$45 million.

In 2021, the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) [agreed](#) to supply PDVSA with gas condensate in exchange for oil. This arrangement has helped Venezuela preserve its currency reserves and allowed it to dilute its oil for sale to China. The blended product is more desirable to refineries worldwide compared to Venezuela's typically very heavy crude. Venezuela has also [received](#) refinery parts and technical assistance in exchange for its heavy crude. Additionally, given the surplus of jet fuel at the time due to Covid-19 restrictions, Venezuela [bartered jet fuel](#) in exchange for Iranian gasoline.

Iranian gas condensate and crude oil deliveries to Venezuela accelerated the following year. In 2022, Iran exported just under 20 million barrels of oil to Venezuela, [according](#) to UANI ship-tracking data. While there were multiple companies involved in shipping gas condensate and crude oil to Venezuela, the National Iranian Tanker Company (NITC) played a significant role by delivering the bulk of Iranian products and facilitating the import of Venezuelan oil back to Iran. Iran has [imported](#) approximately the same volume of fuel oil from Venezuela as it has exported gas condensate and crude oil to Venezuela. UANI has documented [75 vessels](#) transporting both Iranian and Venezuelan oil and oil products.

In December 2022, an Iranian tanker arrived in Venezuela carrying about two million barrels of ultra-light crude oil, [according](#) to UANI ship-tracking data and analysis. That same month, [reports](#) emerged that Iran was smuggling gold it received from Venezuela to Hezbollah, its proxy in Lebanon. Thus, the gold payments help Venezuela circumvent sanctions and contribute to Iran's sanctions evasion schemes

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to fund terrorism. According to a [Lloyds Marine alert](#), the IRGC's Quds Force worked with Hezbollah to facilitate the transfer of Venezuelan gold via the IRGC-linked civilian airliner [Mahan Air](#). In February 2023, Israeli intelligence [confirmed](#) that proceeds from the gold were in fact transferred to Hezbollah.

Pending the successful implementation of announced agreements, Iran will provide parts, equipment, and technical assistance for projects to repair Venezuela's key refineries, including the PDVSA's El Palito refinery and its Amuay and Cardon facilities on the Paraguana peninsula. PDVSA and the National Iranian Oil Refining and Distribution Company (NIORDC) [signed](#) a \$117 million agreement in May 2022 to repair and restart the El Palito refinery, which at the time was operating at half its production capacity. In 2020, Iranian technicians—some from the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya construction conglomerate—[arrived](#) in Venezuela to install refinery components. The agreement to revamp El Palito accelerated the influx of Iranian technicians into Venezuela, displacing local oil technicians and spurring protests.

PDVSA and NIORDC were expected to sign another agreement valued at just under \$500 million in February 2023 to repair the Venezuela's largest refinery complex, at Paraguana, which at the time was operating at 25 percent of its production capacity of almost one million barrels per day. Under the agreement, Iran would procure and install refinery parts and inspect the facilities. Four hundred Iranian technicians were [expected](#) to arrive in Venezuela to work on this project. However, it remains unclear whether the deal was finalized or the Paraguana refinery complex repairs have begun. Additionally, Venezuela's export infrastructure—the pipelines carrying oil from its interior to its seaports—needs repairs and maintenance, though it is unclear whether Iran will do this work.



National Iranian Tanker Company Vessel

In mid-2022, Venezuela started to buy Iranian-made oil tankers to replenish its depleted fleet. By September, the IRGC-affiliated Marine Industrial Company (SADRA) had delivered three of the tankers, [according](#) to Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Contracts for two additional SADRA-made Aframax tankers, each valued at \$33 million, were under [negotiation](#) in early 2023. These contracts would be part of an existing agreement dating back to the Chávez era, which has reportedly been affected by payment delays and certification difficulties, further exacerbated by U.S. sanctions.

## Other Sectors

Economic ties are not limited to the energy sector. Ahmadinejad and Chávez signed more than [300 agreements](#). They [agreed](#) to work together on low-income housing developments, cement plants, automobile factories in Venezuela, and a joint development bank. The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) [documented](#) the poor track record of these planned projects. For instance, one of the cement factories announced in 2005 did not start production until 2012. Chávez announced [Venirauto](#), a joint venture between Venezuela and Iranian automobile manufacturers, Iran Khodro and Saipa Group, in 2006, promising to produce over 25,000 cars per year. However, it [produced](#) fewer than 2,000 cars in 2014.

The joint development bank, Banco Internacional de Desarrollo, is a subsidiary of Iran's Export Development Bank (EDBI), located in Venezuela. The U.S. government [sanctioned](#) both the development bank and EDBI in 2008 for their links to Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL), which is involved in Iran's weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program and is responsible for the planning, logistics, and funding of Iran's regular military and the IRGC. Iran hoped to access the U.S. financial system through its bank in Venezuela, either directly or through [correspondents](#) that have access to U.S. banks. The Supreme Leader [allegedly](#) transferred \$4 billion to his son [Mojtaba Khamenei's](#) Venezuelan bank account in 2023. If true, the transfer could show how Iran views Venezuela as a safe haven for cash.

While not all plans for Iranian investment in Venezuela and joint business endeavors have materialized, Iran has successfully executed numerous enterprises in the country, serving both ideological and profit motives. Iran's economic endeavors in the Western Hemisphere have been tied to weapons transfers and sanctions evasion. In 2009, Turkish authorities [seized](#) explosive materials, labeled as tractor supplies, destined for a Venezuelan lab on board a vessel from Iran. The use of seemingly benign businesses to cover up the shipment of illicit materials raises concern about factories in Venezuela set up and run by Iran, particularly those hidden in rural areas that are ideal for weapons manufacturing.

Furthermore, links exist between Megasis, an Iranian supermarket in Venezuela, and the IRGC. The supermarket works with Maduro's CLAP food program, which the U.S. has [sanctioned](#) for money laundering. Megasis is a subsidiary of Ekta, which is owned by MODAFL and dominated by current and former IRGC officials. Ekta is [headed by Issa Rezaie](#), an executive in several IRGC-owned companies. According to U.S. intelligence, Iranian businesses [require](#) permission from IRGC officials before they can operate abroad. Foreign business executives are, therefore, often chosen from the ranks of retired IRGC officials.

Finally, Iran has [increased](#) automobile exports to Venezuela and agreed to facilitate automobile manufacturing in Venezuela in accordance with the June 2022 cooperation agreement. Saipa, Iran's second largest car manufacturer after Iran Khodro, will build new models in the Latin American country. According to Iranian media reports, Saipa will [establish](#) a joint production line with [Venirauto](#). However, since it was founded in 2006 in partnership with Saipa and Iran Khodro, Venirauto has been largely [unsuccessful](#) at producing automobiles in Venezuela. In the agricultural sector, Iran is [expected](#) to grow crops on one million hectares of Venezuelan land to help cope with food insecurity and [water shortages](#) in Iran.

## Military and Security Ties

Iran supports the Maduro regime's domestic and national security interests. Domestically, the vice president of Venezuela commands a militia trained and equipped by top Iranian military officials. More recently, Quds Force and Hezbollah operatives have taken over [training](#) courses, which tend to have a heavy ideological element, for Maduro's internal security apparatus. The resumption of a flight linking Tehran and Caracas expands logistics capabilities. These flights were previously [used](#) to channel personnel, arms, and explosives into Venezuela. Additional risks have emerged, including Iran's ability to ship drone technology and other advanced weaponry via these flights. Additionally, there is a precedent for intelligence and nuclear cooperation.

## Internal Security

In April 2009, Iran's Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad-Najjar, and Commander of the Basij Mohammad Reza Naqdi, traveled to Caracas to meet President Chávez and Foreign Minister Nicolás Maduro. This meeting was [aimed](#) at standing up civilian militias in Venezuela similar to the Basij, a violent volunteer youth paramilitary group under the command of the IRGC that carried out brutal attacks against peaceful protesters in Iran following the 2009 disputed election.

Naqdi was present at the meeting to advise Venezuela's Defense Ministry and Interior Ministry on how to train similar militias in Venezuela. The "colectivos," as the now-infamous Venezuelan leftist militias are known, today [exhibit](#) advanced clandestine communication capabilities and infiltration techniques. The "colectivos" have transformed into a leftist paramilitary force that the Maduro regime uses to suppress dissent, infiltrate the opposition, and maintain order, especially after elections. They also [implement](#) social welfare activities, geared toward shoring up the pro-Maduro constituency, much like the Basij and Hezbollah.

In recent years, the IRGC's Quds Force and its proxy Hezbollah have [trained](#) elements in Maduro's domestic security services. Quds Force operatives, often based out of the Iranian embassy and religious institutions, assisted Venezuela's National Guard in suppressing an opposition movement in 2019. The Quds Force has recruited Venezuelan youth through intense indoctrination and urban combat training. One propaganda video used features Mohsen Rabbani, the mastermind of the 1994 bombing of a Jewish cultural center in Argentina, [communicating in Spanish](#).

The Quds Force has also supported Venezuela's cyber defenses. After meeting Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in June 2022, Maduro praised former Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani, saying he had [helped](#) defend against alleged U.S. cyberattacks on the Venezuelan power grid in 2019.

## Logistics Capabilities

In the past, Venezuela has supported Iranian logistics operations to supply the Assad regime in Syria. In 2008, Agence France-Presse reported that Venezuelan airline Conviasa [transported](#) electronics and engine components from Iran's chief solid-propellant missile manufacturer, Shahid Bagheri Industrial Group (SBIG), to Assad in contravention of U.N. Security Council Resolution 1737. In exchange, IRGC personnel were dispatched to Venezuela to train the Chávez police and repressive secret service agencies. It was not until February 2020 that the U.S. finally [designated](#) Conviasa.

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Venezuelan-Iranian military cooperation is partly dependent on logistics capabilities. Those capabilities have improved through deepening economic ties. In particular, the tourism sector provides a pretense, according to the June 2022 cooperative agreement between the two countries, to reopen the “air bridge” from Tehran to Caracas. After having suspended them for years, Conviasa now provides weekly flights between Tehran and Caracas. Conviasa came to the attention of U.S. national security officials early in the Obama Administration for its ties to military, intelligence, and terrorist logistics operations. However, the flights continued through 2015, when they were abruptly [closed down](#).

U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) agents [dubbed](#) the commercial flights “Aeroterror,” watching as they ferried drugs and cash to the Middle East and returned, often via Damascus, with Iranian spies, Quds Force operatives, weapons technicians, Hezbollah and Hamas fighters, and arms and explosives. Hezbollah [received](#) \$1 billion per year through its involvement in narcotics over this period of time, while personnel and weapons were transferred into Venezuela.



Mahan Air Airplane

Iran’s [misuse of civilian airliners](#)—particularly the IRGC-linked and U.S.-designated Mahan Air—to conduct logistics operations supporting its proxies in the Middle East and brutal dictators, President Assad of Syria and President Putin of Russia, is well documented. Mahan Air is currently working with Conviasa, its analog in Venezuela. Conviasa now owns a cargo airline named Emtrasur, which began [operating](#) a Mahan Air Boeing 747 out of El Libertador Air Base in January 2022.

The plane made headlines in June 2022 when Argentina grounded it and [found](#) former IRGC members on board, including the pilot, Gholamreza Ghasemi Abbassi, a former IRGC Aerospace Force general, an [architect](#) of Iran’s misuse of civilian airliners to arm proxies, and now the managing director of another IRGC-linked airline, Qeshm Fars. A Mahan Air flight log was found on board the cargo plane, showing stops in Moscow, Tehran, and Caracas, raising fears the plane could have been involved in transporting war materiel to Putin.

At the time, Iran International also [reported](#) that an Argentinian lawmaker believed some Iranians on board the Venezuelan plane planned to carry out “attacks on human targets.” Later, reports surfaced that the plane had [transited](#) through Paraguay, prior to arriving in Argentina, for the purpose of loading 80 tons of cigarettes purchased from a Hezbollah-linked company.

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As previously noted, Iran's Mahan Air has also been involved in gold shipments. In late February 2023, Israeli intelligence confirmed [reports](#) from a few months prior that the smuggling of Venezuelan gold was linked to terror financing and [unveiled](#) key actors in the Mahan Air operations. An IRGC's Quds Force unit managed by an Iranian businessman named Badr Ad-Din Naimi Musawi, was responsible for acquiring the Venezuelan gold, selling it at a profit in Iran, and then using the proceeds to fund Iran's proxy Hezbollah. Hezbollah operatives were also implicated in the funding scheme.

## Military Assets

Iran and Venezuela have a long history of military cooperation, resulting in the transfer of weapons systems and production capabilities from Iran to Venezuela. Iran today has one of the world's most advanced [drone programs](#) and an improving [ballistic missile program](#), despite years of international sanctions and export controls meant to prevent it from obtaining military supplies and dual-use technology. Iran has shipped drones, missiles, and other weapons to Venezuela.

In the Chávez era, Iran began assisting Venezuela in the production of drones, ostensibly for defensive purposes only. Iran began [transferring](#) drone technology to Venezuela as early as 2001 when Khatami was in power in Iran. In 2012, Chávez [confirmed](#) that his country Venezuela was producing drones in Venezuela with assistance from Iran, Russia, and China. By 2013, the Venezuelan air force had over a dozen Iranian-made Mohajer-2 surveillance drones that they were [reportedly](#) using to monitor drug traffickers, patrol the border, and protect oil fields. Venezuelan state-run weapons manufacturer, Compañía Anónima Venezolana de Industrias Militares (CAVIM), produced some of these, and later [fitted them with bombs](#).

While the early drone shipments were not armed, Iran began transferring more advanced attack drones as the military partnership between Iran and Venezuela deepened. Only one month after the U.N. arms embargo against Iran [expired](#) in October 2020, Iranian media [reported](#) that Iran had begun shipping the Mohajer-6—which has an air-to-ground strike capability—to Venezuela. In February 2022, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz alleged that Iran [provided](#) Venezuela with precision-guided missiles for the Mohajer-6.

Venezuela-Iran military cooperation does not only involve the transfer of drones and technical expertise to Venezuela. In 2006, reports emerged that Venezuela was [considering](#) selling U.S.-made F-16 fighter jets to Iran in retaliation for an American arms embargo against Venezuela. In 2008, the U.S. Department of State [levied sanctions](#) against CAVIM, pursuant to the Iran, North Korea, and Syria Nonproliferation Act, for allegedly transferring technology to Iran that could be used to develop weapons systems. In 2010, after a deal between Russia and Iran for Russia's S-300 air defense missile system fell through because of U.N. sanctions, Venezuela [offered](#) to transfer the S-300 system to Iran. However, Iran did not act on the offer.

Iran and Venezuela's arms industries have cooperated since at least 2009 when the two countries [reportedly](#) agreed to a secretive military program, the details of which remain hidden, involving CAVIM and MODAFL. The CAVIM-MODAFL collaboration has, over the years, come to resemble a joint military-industrial complex that allegedly [taps funds](#) from PDVSA's transactions with China for opaque military projects. Additionally, CAVIM used the PDVSA and the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Line (IRISL) to [shield](#) its involvement in "military transfers." The former commander of CAVIM, General Aref Richany

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Jiménez, served concurrently as the director of PDVSA's external relations department. CAVIM is based in Maracay, Venezuela, where Iran has [worked](#) on drone technologies and missile-related items. Experts [believe](#) that drone facilities may be dual-purposed. A large explosion at one of them in 2011 suggests that offensive capabilities were being produced there.

Finally, Iran is capable of providing Venezuela with weapons besides drones. Most alarmingly, Iran and Venezuela have engaged in discussions regarding Iranian missiles. In 2010, the German newspaper Die Welt [reported](#) on an agreement between President Chávez and President Ahmadinejad in which Venezuela would allow Iran to construct a medium-range missile base on Venezuelan soil. The agreement, which the two regimes kept secret, would allow for the establishment of a jointly operated missile base and the joint development of surface-to-surface missiles. The Die Welt report said IRGC officials would operate the base alongside Venezuelan missile experts.

In 2020, ten years after the Die Welt report, Colombian President Iván Duque [accused Venezuela](#), which had previously threatened to invade Colombia, of purchasing medium- and long-range missiles from Iran. These alleged sales were all the more concerning given that the U.N. arms embargo against Iran was set to expire in months. The accusations seemed to be confirmed months later, but the plans under consideration were never carried through, likely because of U.S. threats of retaliation. In late October 2020, a senior Trump Administration official [said](#) the missiles would be destroyed if they arrived in Venezuela. Later reports [indicated](#) that the U.S. was considering deploying the Coast Guard to interdict the shipment, expected to take place aboard a commercial vessel rather than a warship.

The expiration of the U.N. arms embargo against Iran in [October 2020](#) and the expiration of the U.N. missile embargo in [October 2023](#) will improve Iran's procurement activities and its ability to transfer unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), including attack drones, to authoritarian regimes like Venezuela, Russia, and China.

In 2021, Iran dispatched warships carrying arms intended for Caracas, though the types of arms were unclear. One of the ships was [believed](#) to be carrying fast-attack craft, a mainstay of the IRGC's asymmetric naval threat. Biden Administration officials claimed victory for its diplomatic efforts to prevent the transfer, [saying](#) they believed public and private pressure against Venezuela, Cuba, and other South American countries resulted in the Iranian warships' course change. The administration reportedly used the threat of sanctions to deter the Latin American countries from receiving the vessels. An interdiction of these shipments would have likely required the U.S. Navy, given that Iran was transporting the weapons via warships rather than commercial vessels.

## Intelligence Cooperation

Venezuelan-Iranian intelligence cooperation has been coordinated at the highest levels of government. In 2012, President Ahmadinejad and top IRGC officials [met](#) with Venezuelan military and security officials, with the goal of setting up a joint intelligence program. A Pro Publica report cited "western intelligence officials" as saying that, at this secret meeting, Venezuelan security officials [agreed](#) to provide arms, travel documents, bank accounts, and support the necessary movement of operatives and equipment from Iran to Venezuela towards these ends. The Western official said the intelligence apparatus would obscure the IRGC's role in criminal activities.

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Iran has also sought to improve its intelligence-collection capabilities based out of Venezuela. In 2020, the Venezuelan opposition warned that Tehran might be [assisting](#) Maduro in setting up a listening post in northern Venezuela for intercepting aerial and maritime communications. They alleged that the increasingly frequent oil shipments could be used to conceal the necessary technology. Iran's access to valuable signals intelligence vis-à-vis the U.S. would improve its visibility into U.S. operations designed to prevent Iran's movement of sensitive material, weapons, and personnel.

## The Nuclear Program

In 2008, the U.S. Department of State [sanctioned](#) CAVIM, alleging that it had provided Tehran with sensitive technology that could be used to develop nuclear weapons. In 2009, Chávez [admitted](#) that Iran was helping Venezuela to explore for uranium and develop nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes. This admission sparked concerns that Iran sought uranium from Venezuela for its enrichment program. Venezuela is also rich in [thorium](#), which can be used in nuclear weapons production. In 2010, former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs Roger Noriega [wrote](#) in Foreign Policy magazine that Venezuela was helping Iran circumvent international sanctions and violating U.N. Security Council Resolutions meant to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

## Iran's Sponsorship of Terrorism

The Iranian spies, Quds Force operatives, and pro-Iranian terrorist groups that Maduro permits in Venezuela pose an asymmetric threat to U.S. interests, especially in escalated tensions between the U.S. and Iran. Iran's interest in keeping Maduro in power is tied to his willingness to allow such groups to act with impunity and establish operational capabilities in his country. Terrorist groups continue to be Tehran's most effective means of projecting power abroad and one of its few means of doing so in the Western Hemisphere.

## Hezbollah

Venezuela's role in state-sanctioned drug trafficking and its ties to Hezbollah are often neglected given Hezbollah's [concentration](#) near the borders of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, known as the Tri-Border Area (TBA). However, Venezuela's permissive environment has enabled Hezbollah to set up a base to conduct its regional operations. Venezuela is a critical [transshipment hub](#) for cocaine en-route to the U.S. from other Latin American countries such as Colombia.

Hezbollah is politically well-connected in Venezuela, [allowing](#) it to conduct illicit trade in narcotics, charcoal, textiles, beef, cigarettes, liquors, and electronics. Hezbollah [uses these industries](#) to launder money. Hezbollah's "Business Affairs Component," a division identified within the group's external operations unit and [named](#) by the DEA, takes the lead on illicit economic activities. These activities enrich the group and relieve the need for Iranian largess. Therefore, through its proxy, Iran is connected to the Latin American drug trade.

Hezbollah and the Maduro regime have well-established political ties. Hezbollah sympathizers have always occupied high-ranking offices in the Venezuelan government, which allows them to protect Hezbollah's interests in illicit activities like the drug trade. Moreover, the Secretary-General of Hezbollah, [Hassan Nasrallah](#), and President Maduro are political allies, with a relationship extending back to Maduro's travels to the Middle East as foreign minister in the Chávez Administration. According

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to a 2019 [letter](#) from Nasrallah to Maduro, Hezbollah was prepared to offer the regime military and security support in gratitude for his predecessor Chávez's history of funding the terrorist organization's activities. While Hezbollah's brand of radical Shiite Islam, which is based on loyalty to the Supreme Leader of Iran, may be less appealing in Venezuela than plain anti-Americanism. Still, the sizeable Lebanese and Syrian diaspora community serves as a recruitment pool for prospective political operatives, intelligence assets, illicit actors, and donors.

In the mid-1970s, many Lebanese citizens fleeing the Lebanese Civil War emigrated to Venezuela. This population has served as a pool for Hezbollah's recruitment and infiltration. Today, [more than one million Lebanese](#) people live in Venezuela, and more than 10 million reside in South America.

Hezbollah has [operated](#) cells in Venezuela since the 1990s, according to a 2003 U.S. Department of State report, thus predating Chavez's rise to power in 1998. The U.S. Special Operations Command [issued a finding in 1990](#) that Hezbollah began recruiting in Latin America as early as the mid-1980s. These government agency reports across administrations credibly show that Hezbollah has a long history of ideological influence in the Western Hemisphere. That influence laid the groundwork for an operational presence, manifested in high-profile terror attacks. In the 1990s, Hezbollah carried out two deadly suicide bombings against Jewish targets in Argentina. The Israeli embassy and a Jewish cultural center in Buenos Aires were [attacked](#) in 1992 and 1994, respectively. IRGC operatives and intelligence officials supported the operations.

Prior to 2007, Hezbollah was implicated in the "Aeroterror" drugs-for-arms scheme operated out of Venezuela. According to an exposé in Politico magazine, the Obama Administration [sought to derail a DEA task force](#) formed in 2008 when it discovered that Hezbollah was funding terrorism in the Middle East through drug smuggling operations based out of Latin America.

The U.S. administration [did not compel](#) the extradition of two major players in the "Aeroterror" operation: Walid Makled, a Syrian-born Venezuelan businessman; and Hugo Carvajal, a retired Venezuelan general and former chief of intelligence. On one hand, Makled was arrested in 2010 in Colombia, a U.S. ally, for allegedly shipping 10 tons of cocaine a month to the U.S., but was extradited to Venezuela instead of the U.S. On the other hand, DEA agent John Kelly [described](#) Carvajal as the "main man between Venezuela, Iran, Quds Force, and Hezbollah, and cocaine trafficking." He was arrested in Aruba and was not extradited. The Obama Administration did not use U.S. leverage to compel these extraditions, which may have appeased Tehran while depriving the U.S. of valuable intelligence on Hezbollah's networks.

Hezbollah has expanded its presence in Venezuela by working with Venezuelan diplomats in the Middle East and government officials to obtain passports and facilitate travel. In 2008, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [designated Ghazi Nassereddine](#), a high-ranking Venezuelan diplomat first in Syria and then in Lebanon, for facilitating Hezbollah members' travel to and from Caracas, and his role as the president of a Caracas-based Shia Islamic center used to solicit funds for the terrorist organization. The Nassereddine clan is today [believed](#) to be based on Margarita Island, a known Hezbollah safe haven off of Venezuela's northeastern coast. The island includes training camps and is central to drug trafficking operations.

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In 2017, CNN reported on an intelligence document showing that Venezuela's former Interior Minister, Tareck El Aissami, [ordered](#) the issuance of 173 Venezuelan passports out of the Venezuelan embassy in Iraq, including to Hezbollah members. Some of these passports were presumably offered to Iranian operatives as part of the "Aeroterror" scheme. A day prior to the CNN report, the U.S. Department of the Treasury sanctioned El Aissami for, among other things, [receiving payment](#) from Venezuelan, Colombian, and Mexican drug lords to use the Venezuelan airbases, ports, and highways over which he had control to transport drugs through Venezuela.

In testimony before the U.S. House Homeland Security Committee in April 2018, illicit finance expert Emmanuele Ottolenghi [listed](#) a dozen operatives and facilitators involved in "terror plots, terror finance schemes, weapons and technology procurement, trade-based money laundering, and drug-trafficking on behalf of Hezbollah [who] were a dual national of Lebanon and another country," underscoring the importance of travel documents. In some cases, the operatives permitted into Venezuela established cells in other countries in the Western Hemisphere, many of which do not require a visa for travel by people holding Venezuelan passports. The U.S. requires a visa but it is believed that, with Venezuelan travel documents, terrorists have [set up cells](#) in the United States, including in North Carolina. A total of 26 European Union countries [do not require a visa](#) for Venezuelan passport carriers.

Aissami did not only play a role in facilitating travel when he was interior minister; leaked intelligence obtained by the New York Times in 2019 shows that he and his father, a Syrian immigrant, played an active role in [recruiting](#) Hezbollah members to expand spying and drug trafficking networks in Latin America. The recruits were sent to training camps in Venezuela, [set up by El Aissami](#) to prepare for asymmetric war against the U.S. The leaked documents suggest that El Aissami facilitated business between his brother and a notorious Venezuelan drug lord, the previously-mentioned Walid Makled. El Aissami's own business operations—managing a financial network of up to 40 front companies in Latin America—[allows](#) him to direct funding to the Middle East in support of Hezbollah and Hamas and bring militant Islamists to Venezuela.

Having served in multiple positions in the Maduro regime, including formerly as Oil Minister, El Aissami, who is of Lebanese descent, was one of Maduro's most powerful and trusted confidants. However, El Aissami [resigned](#) his office as oil minister in March 2023 amid a corruption probe into PDVSA.

[According](#) to national security expert Joseph Humire, "in Venezuela, Hezbollah's support network operates through compartmentalized, familial clan structures that embed into the Maduro regime-controlled illicit economy and the regime's political apparatus and bureaucracy." In 2020, Humire identified three of these clans—the Saleh clan, the Nassereddine clan, and the Rada clan—which he argued operate at the nexus between organized crime and terror.

The Saleh clan is believed to be led by a Shia businessman and Hezbollah operative, [Ali Mohamad Saleh](#). In the past, Ali Saleh [controlled](#) trade in drugs, weapons, contraband, bulk-cash smuggling, and money laundering in Maicao, Colombia, close to the border with Venezuela. Cartels under the control of the Maduro family continue to benefit from these cross-border networks that Saleh managed. However, local shopkeepers have reported that Ali Saleh and his brother [moved](#) their operations to Maracaibo, Venezuela, after the U.S. Department of the Treasury [designated](#) them as terror financiers in 2012.

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Ghazi Nassereddine, though not part of Hezbollah’s chain of command, acts as a “fixer” to arrange meetings between Hezbollah officials and members of the Maduro government. The Lebanese-born diplomat served effectively for Maduro, given his ability to bridge cultural and language barriers.

## The IRGC



IRGC Insignia

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps ([IRGC](#)) is a [U.S.-designated](#) terrorist organization that cultivates proxies and partners worldwide via its extraterritorial special operations branch, the Quds Force. The IRGC’s [malign and destabilizing activities](#) have never been restricted to the Middle East. It has growing operational capabilities in every region of the world, including in the Western Hemisphere.

In 2010, the Pentagon reported to the U.S. Congress that the Quds Force was [increasing](#) its presence in Latin America, particularly in Venezuela. A former CIA employee confirmed this report, stating that IRGC personnel, including Quds Force operatives, [were transported to Venezuela](#) via the “Aeroterror” flights and took positions in Venezuela’s security services.

In 2019, then Iranian Foreign Minister Mohamad Zarif, often hailed in the West as a moderate figure, proposed the [provision](#) of an IRGC detachment to

preserve Maduro’s domestic security. In 2020, then-commander of the U.S. Southern Command, Rear Admiral Craig Faller, [pointed out](#) that his office had “seen an uptick in Iranian state-sponsored activity and liaison with Venezuela that has included Quds Force.”

The Quds Force aims to establish intelligence and asymmetric capabilities to conduct attacks against its enemies. In July 2021, the U.S. Department of Justice unsealed an indictment against Iranian intelligence operatives who had attempted to kidnap Iranian-American activist and journalist Masih Alinejad, revealing that they were [planning to take her to Venezuela](#) aboard speedboats for onward deployment to Iran.

## U.S. Policy Toward Venezuelan-Iranian Ties

Venezuela is one of the few Latin American countries where U.S. economic inducements like development aid and trade have not repelled Iran’s malign influence or led to significant political reforms. Most countries in Latin America prefer close economic relations with the U.S. rather than U.S. adversaries like Iran. Iran’s penetration into Latin America, especially Venezuela, challenges U.S. interests in the region. Venezuela’s economic and political system and its leftist ideology give Iran an inroad into the Western Hemisphere.

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The Obama Administration generally disregarded Venezuelan-Iranian ties, partly because it focused more on its diplomatic outreach to Tehran. For instance, the Obama Administration [derailed](#) the DEA’s “Project Cassandra,” whose focus was to crack down on the cocaine sales from which Hezbollah and its affiliated networks in the Western Hemisphere were profiting. While Hezbollah operatives streamed into Latin America on the “Aeroterror” flights, the U.N. [assessed](#) that Venezuelan cocaine exports—often destined for the U.S.—skyrocketed from 50 to 250 tons. The administration’s siloed approach to the Iranian nuclear file neglected the Islamic Republic’s threats to U.S. interests, including in the Western Hemisphere. That is not to mention the regime’s brutality towards its people and ballistic missile and drone development programs.

The Trump Administration prioritized the Iranian threat. The administration’s “maximum pressure” campaign sought to root out Iran’s nefarious activities in Venezuela. On several occasions in 2020, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [targeted](#) Iran for providing technicians and technical equipment via the U.S.-designated Mahan Air to support what it referred to as Maduro’s illegitimate and corrupt regime’s efforts to revive Venezuela’s energy sector. Earlier that year, a separate round of sanctions [revealed](#) that some of the technical equipment was sourced from China. The Treasury Department also [designated](#) Iranian captains for delivering gasoline to the Maduro regime.



United States vs. Islamic Republic Flag

Also in 2020, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) [seized](#) roughly 1.16 million barrels of Iranian gasoline from four foreign-flagged vessels near the Strait of Hormuz en-route to Venezuela. The U.S. threatened the ship owners and operators with sanctions, after which they surrendered the cargo. The seizure exacerbated Maduro’s gasoline crisis and curtailed IRGC revenues. In late 2021, a U.S. district court ruled in favor of the DOJ, [agreeing with the complaint](#) filed in July 2020 before the seizure, that the proceeds from the oil sales would have gone to the IRGC. The DOJ [announced](#) that the \$26 million from the sale of the fuel would be directed to the U.S. Victims of State-Sponsored Terrorism Fund.

The Trump Administration took an interagency approach to Iranian penetration in Latin America, emphasizing legal action and economic measures. For example, in 2019, the Treasury Department [designated Salman Raouf Salman](#), a senior member of Hezbollah’s Islamic Jihad Organization, also known as the External Security Organization (ESO), an elite unit responsible for planning, coordinating, and executing terrorist attacks. The sanctions emphasized his role in coordinating sleeper cells in the Tri-Border region. Soon after, the State Department [issued a reward](#) of up to \$7 million for information on

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Salman, noting that he was the point man for operations in the Western Hemisphere, including the 1994 AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires, Argentina. The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) [added](#) President Maduro's then-Minister of Industries and National Production, Tareck El Aissami, to its Most Wanted List that year. He had already been [designated](#) by the Treasury Department for facilitating the drug trade in 2017 and was [indicted](#) by the DOJ in 2019.

The U.S. State Department also took the lead on extending the U.N. arms embargo against Iran that was set to expire in October 2020. It implemented a diplomatic offensive at the U.N. before the U.N. Security Council vote. It took unilateral action in anticipation that China and Russia would oppose reinstatement. President Trump signed a new Executive Order, "Blocking Property of Certain Persons with Respect to the Conventional Arms Activities of Iran." The State Department then [imposed sanctions](#) against various entities in Iran, including MODAFL, and Nicolás Maduro, for having engaged in the transfer of arms or related material to or from Iran.

In 2020, the DOJ, working with the DEA, indicted members of a sprawling criminal network managed by the Maduro regime. The DOJ [indicted](#) Nicolás Maduro and other high-ranking government officials for, among other things, their extensive involvement in narcoterrorism, and it [indicted](#) Adel El Zabayar, a former Venezuelan parliamentarian and member of the infamous Cartel de los Soles ("Cartel of the Suns"), for "recruit[ing] terrorists from Hezbollah and Hamas to help to plan and organize attacks against United States interests." The DOJ revealed that the conspiracy had broader ambitions than recruiting and training operatives. Only a few months after El Zabayar returned from his supposed recruitment mission in the Middle East, he [received a plane full of weapons](#), including rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) launchers, AK-103s, and sniper rifles, at Simón Bolívar International Airport in Maiquetía, Venezuela.

In May 2022, the U.S. Department of the Treasury [levied sanctions](#) against an oil smuggling network generating proceeds for the Quds Force and Hezbollah, targeting an individual who had facilitated payments from PDVSA to Iran. The Biden Administration, however, has not since then levied sanctions against Iran for its ongoing and intensifying support for Maduro. In November 2022, the department again [targeted](#) the Quds Force and Hezbollah's oil revenues but did not mention sales to Venezuela.

## U.S. Policy Recommendations

The following U.S. policy recommendations should be considered in order to elevate pressure against the world's leading [state-sponsor of terrorism](#), Iran, and its partner in Latin America, Venezuela. These measures would hinder the two U.S. adversaries' economic cooperation, particularly in the energy sector. It is also essential to identify the illicit financing schemes used by Iran-backed terrorist organizations in Venezuela and prevent the proliferation of weapons to Maduro and Iranian proxies in Venezuela. The U.S. government must consider all elements of national power to counter these two countries, focusing on legal actions and economic measures in particular.

- **Pressure maritime service providers facilitating the illicit trade of oil and oil products between Iran and Venezuela.** Since U.S. sanctions against Venezuela's oil sector were imposed, Venezuela has exported more than 360 million barrels of oil, [according](#) to Reuters. Given the increased tempo of petroleum shipments between Iran and Venezuela, the U.S. Department of the Treasury and the DOJ [should increase pressure](#) on maritime service providers complicit in

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these sanctions evasion activities. Insurers, owners, operators, ports, and other maritime service providers are each [targeted](#) by Iran's deceptive practices, including document falsification, ship-to-ship (STS) transfers on the high seas to obscure the oil's origins, changes of the vessel's name and its identifying features, the use of front entities to obscure ownership, and switching off AIS transponders in contravention of internationally-accepted shipping practices. Alerting these service providers—which make the Venezuelan-Iranian oil trade possible—to these deceptive practices and threatening them with sanctions will cut down on the shipments.

- **Expand financial intelligence capabilities.** Illicit actors engage in economic activities designed to deceive U.S. authorities and circumvent sanctions. To counter and deter sanctions evasion, U.S. authorities must focus on the proliferation of front companies and bank accounts engaged in transactions on behalf of corrupt politicians in the Maduro regime, criminal syndicates, terrorist organizations operating in Venezuela, and the IRGC. For example, the U.S. financial system's safeguards against transactions through intermediary banks outside Venezuelan and Iran might be strengthened through a broader sanctions regime and public-awareness campaign that raises the profile of prominent illicit actors. Criminal money laundering operations, such as trade-based money laundering, that drug traffickers like Hezbollah use to conceal the origin of their proceeds and lower the risk of detection should be exposed. Given Hezbollah's interests in various industries, trade-based money laundering [techniques](#) like over- and under-invoicing and misstating the value of items to move money across continents are important to examine. The group's acquisition of valuable financial assets in real estate and other industries also warrants attention.
- **Prevent the proliferation of Iranian weapons to Venezuela and its terrorist proxies in Venezuela.** The installation of ballistic missiles, drone production and/or launch facilities, and the transfer of unmanned aerial combat vehicles (UACVs) to Venezuela would compensate for Iran's lack of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), setting up a potent deterrent against any U.S. military option. Without a credible military option, the U.S. cannot deter Iran from making strides in its nuclear program, for which near weapons-grade enriched uranium has been produced, and the time needed to produce a nuclear weapon has been dramatically shortened. Therefore, U.S. national security agencies must prevent Iran from exporting these munitions to its partner in Latin America. Consistent with the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. should consider the proliferation of such systems in the Western Hemisphere as a direct threat to peace and security and, therefore, unacceptable. The first resort to prevent these shipments would be diplomatic; in particular, the U.S. must lead a diplomatic push to invoke the "snapback" provisions contained in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, which would reinstate the U.N. arms embargo against Iran. The U.S. might also consider bolstering its intelligence and interdiction capabilities and persuading allies to deny Conviasa and Mahan Air overflight privileges.

## Conclusion

Iran has a longstanding policy of exporting its revolution, especially in vulnerable regions of the world. Iran makes a concerted effort to use radical ideology to promote loyalty from terrorist groups, hoping that loyalty translates into a willingness to do its bidding in the event of a conflict with the U.S. However, Tehran does not only look to build partnerships with terrorist groups. Its relationships with Venezuela,

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Russia, and China, are based on the shared vision of a new world order in which the U.S. is no longer the dominant power. Towards that end, Iran and Venezuela help each other resist U.S. efforts to induce a behavior change. While there are notable differences between Iran and Venezuela—Iran is an Islamic theocracy, and Venezuela is a majority-Christian socialist regime—their similarities and shared interests are stronger. They are dictatorships that regularly deploy violence as a response to persistent, and in the case of Iran, intensifying political legitimacy crises at home. They are both inherently and deeply corrupt, heavily sanctioned by the West, and depend on one another economically. Most pertinently, they share a convenient anti-American hostility and are focused on undermining U.S. influence in their respective regions.