

IRGC IN LATIN AMERICA: THE INVISIBLE AXIS

SHADOW NETWORKS & COVERT OPERATIONS



INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT

IRGC in Latin America:

The Invisible Axis

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps — specifically its Quds Force expeditionary arm — has spent three decades constructing a parallel infrastructure in Latin America that functions simultaneously as a financing engine, a sanctions-evasion architecture, and a pre-positioned threat network aimed at the United States homeland. It must be understood that this is not an incidental overlap of interests. This is policy — deliberate, sustained, and sophisticated — operating through a layered structure of compliant governments, Lebanese diaspora networks, cartel logistics pipelines, and cryptocurrency rails that Western enforcement agencies have tracked, documented, and, with conspicuous regularity, failed to dismantle.

The network operates across three primary geographic clusters:

- **Venezuela**, where state institutions have been colonized by IRGC-linked personnel and where senior government officials have been indicted on narco-terrorism charges in United States federal courts
- the **Tri-Border Area (TBA) of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay**, where Hezbollah's financial infrastructure has generated hundreds of millions of dollars over four decades through trade fraud, drug trafficking, and money laundering
- **Mexico**, where the Quds Force has made documented contact with transnational criminal organizations, including at least one confirmed conspiracy to use cartel logistics for a targeted assassination on American soil

The cooperation these networks provide to Tehran is not merely financial. They provide operational depth — a persistent forward presence in the Western Hemisphere through which Iran can, when required, project lethal capability toward the United States. The 2011 Arbabsiar plot, the 2024 Quds Force-directed

assassination campaigns against US political figures, and the MI5-documented 20-plus Iranian-facilitated plots in the United Kingdom in 2025 collectively demonstrate that Tehran exercises this option when it calculates the risk-reward ratio is favorable.

The physical proximity of cartel smuggling routes to the US border means the infrastructure for that calculation already exists in the Americas.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK: WHY LATIN AMERICA?

The IRGC's presence in Latin America is not a product of ideological affinity, though the Bolivarian left's anti-Americanism has made it convenient. It is a product of geography, financial necessity, and strategic depth.

Iran requires three things that Latin America provides:

- access to hard currency and commodities outside the SWIFT system
- physical proximity to the United States homeland
- political cover from governments whose interests align with undermining American regional hegemony

Iran's sanctions regime — progressively tightened since 2010 — created a structural demand for alternative revenue channels. The IRGC, which controls an estimated 20 to 30 percent of Iran's formal economy through its conglomerate holdings, also operates the bulk of its illicit revenue streams. Latin America, with its Lebanese diaspora communities, chronically underfunded border enforcement, permissive financial regulatory environments, and export commodity base that easily launders cash — soy, gold, timber, cigarettes — became the obvious operational theater.

The relationship deepened under Hugo Chávez, who formalized bilateral ties with Tehran in 2001 and signed more than 300 cooperation agreements with Iran between 2001 and 2013. These agreements covered energy, agriculture, and ostensibly civilian infrastructure — but the Quds Force cadres embedded in Venezuelan oil facilities and air-defense networks were not there to fix pipelines.

The "Aeroterror" flights — direct Tehran-Caracas routes operated by Mahan Air, a carrier sanctioned for transporting IRGC personnel and weapons — brought Quds Force operatives into Venezuelan territory on a systematic basis from 2007 onward.

Latin America functions not as a secondary theater but as a strategic rear flank. American strategists have been slow to internalize this. They treat the network as a financing problem. Tehran treats it as a military asset.

VENEZUELA: THE ANCHOR STATE

Venezuela is the crown jewel of Iran's Western Hemisphere network. The relationship survived Chávez's death, survived the economic collapse of the Maduro years, and survived — in modified form — the January 2026 apprehension of Nicolás Maduro himself by United States forces in Operation Absolute Resolve.

The institutional depth of the relationship means no single leadership change dissolves it. Venezuela's ambassador to Iran, *José Rafael Silva Aponte*, stated publicly after Maduro's removal that Iran-Venezuela ties would endure beyond any individual.

He was not posturing.

The bureaucratic, military, and intelligence infrastructure that was built across more than two decades does not evaporate with one president.

STATE CAPTURE BY IRGC-LINKED PERSONNEL

The mechanism of Iranian penetration into Venezuela was not covert in the traditional sense. It was structural. IRGC-Quds Force engineers were embedded in PDVSA, Venezuela's state oil company, advising on infrastructure and providing cover for financial transactions that routed Venezuelan oil revenue through Iranian-linked intermediaries. Quds Force personnel advised Venezuela's air-defense network — a transfer of capability that simultaneously served Venezuelan sovereignty interests and IRGC intelligence collection requirements. Dozens of MOIS (Ministry of Intelligence and Security), Basij, and Quds Force operatives were reported to be present across Venezuelan territory, loyal to Khamenei rather than to any transactional bilateral relationship.

Admiral Craig Faller, former Commander of United States Southern Command, confirmed publicly in 2020 that American intelligence had observed "an uptick in Iranian state-sponsored activity and liaison with Venezuela that has included IRGC Quds Force."

This was not an assessment of potential. It was a description of operational reality.

THE MADURO INDICTMENT AND THE CARTEL OF THE SUNS

The architecture of state-level drug trafficking in Venezuela is inseparable from its Iranian and Hezbollah connections. The Cartel de los Soles — the Cartel of the Suns — is not an independent criminal organization. It is a state-run trafficking network

embedded in Venezuelan military, intelligence, and executive structures. United States federal prosecutors indicted Nicolás Maduro in March 2020 on charges of narco-terrorism, conspiracy to import cocaine, and possession of weapons in furtherance of drug trafficking. The indictment described his leading role in a conspiracy to "flood the United States with cocaine" in collaboration with FARC rebels and the Cartel of the Suns.

Maduro was not alone. The indictment architecture reached across the entire Venezuelan security establishment:

Diosdado Cabello Rondón, Interior Minister and for years the most powerful figure in the Venezuelan state alongside Maduro, faces US federal charges of participating in a corrupt narco-terrorism conspiracy, trafficking more than five tons of cocaine to the United States, and maintaining documented ties to Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. The New York Times reported in January 2026 that Cabello holds a bounty on his head placed by the Trump administration while continuing to operate from within Venezuela following Maduro's apprehension. Cabello is the organizational spine of what remains of the Cartel of the Suns network. His Hezbollah relationships were not merely personal — they were institutional, involving financial coordination between Venezuelan trafficking proceeds and Hezbollah's global revenue pool.

Vladimir Padrino López, Defense Minister and commander of Venezuela's armed forces, is alleged to have participated in the same narco-terrorism conspiracy. Padrino is the senior military guarantor of the structures that allowed IRGC personnel to operate inside Venezuela. He survived Maduro's arrest and as of early 2026 remains a central figure in the post-Maduro transition power struggle.

Hugo Carvajal, former Director of Military Intelligence (DGCIM), known as "El Pollo," was for years the intelligence link between Venezuelan state institutions and both FARC and Hezbollah. Carvajal worked to facilitate narcotics shipments and provided intelligence cover for Hezbollah operatives operating in Venezuelan territory. His 2024 extradition to the United States has yielded significant intelligence on the operational architecture of Iranian-Venezuelan coordination.

THE "GHOST FLIGHTS" AND OPERATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Between 2007 and 2013, direct flights between Tehran and Caracas operated by Mahan Air transported IRGC personnel, weapons components, and cash under diplomatic cover. **Venezuelan passports and identity documents were issued to Iranian nationals** — a documented practice confirmed by multiple investigative journalists and corroborated by US intelligence assessments. Iranian nationals holding Venezuelan passports could move through Latin American transit hubs and,

potentially, toward the United States with documentation that would not trigger standard travel screening protocols.

The ghost flights ended under international pressure. The infrastructure they established did not. The networks of Iranian-Venezuelan intelligence coordination, financial cover, and personnel movement shifted to less visible channels but continued to function.

THE TRI-BORDER AREA (TBA): HEZBOLLAH'S FINANCIAL ENGINE

The Tri-Border Area — the junction of Ciudad del Este (Paraguay), Foz do Iguaçu (Brazil), and Puerto Iguazú (Argentina) — is the oldest and most productive node of Hezbollah's Latin American financial network. Hezbollah has operated here since the late 1980s, exploiting a Lebanese diaspora community of approximately 25,000 people, a permissive customs environment, and a commercial hub whose informal economy has historically processed billions of dollars annually in trade.

It must be understood that the TBA is not primarily a logistics hub for weapons or operatives. It is a money machine. The violence, the drug trafficking, and the operational activity are in service of the financial mission: generating unrestricted cash that flows back to Hezbollah in Lebanon and, through Hezbollah, to IRGC strategic accounts.

THE BARAKAT NETWORK

Assad Ahmad Barakat is the most extensively documented Hezbollah financier in the Western Hemisphere. Operating from Ciudad del Este for three decades, Barakat ran a commercial empire built on trade fraud, tax evasion, and the systematic laundering of drug trafficking proceeds through the TBA's informal economy. The US Treasury Department designated Barakat as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist in 2004, noting that he had transferred millions of dollars to Hezbollah in Lebanon and had personally congratulated Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah after the 2001 assassination of Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Ze'evi. By 2009 estimates, the Barakat network turned over approximately \$20 million annually, a significant portion of which reached Hezbollah coffers.

Barakat was arrested in Paraguay in 2002 and convicted of tax evasion. He was released in 2009 after a sentence that Western counterterrorism analysts described as conspicuously short given the scope of his financial operations. The Barakat network did not dissolve with his incarceration. Relatives and associates maintained the commercial and financial infrastructure. The TBA's permissive environment — periodic arrests followed by brief detentions, minimal asset forfeiture, and continued freedom of operation for network associates — reflects the limited political will of regional governments to truly dismantle these structures.

THE AKIL RADA BROTHERS AND CRYPTOCURRENCY EVOLUTION

The TBA network has adapted to the 21st century with a sophistication that outpaces enforcement. Samer Akil Rada and Amer Akil Rada represent the modern face of Hezbollah's TBA financing operation. OFAC designated both in 2023. Samer Akil Rada, operating through Venezuela-registered cryptocurrency firm BCI Technologies C.A., managed digital wallets on the Tron network that moved tens of millions of dollars in Tether (USDT) stablecoins — funds sourced from drug trafficking proceeds and converted to cryptocurrency through over-the-counter brokers in Caracas and Ciudad del Este. The use of USDT on Tron, a blockchain with relatively low transaction fees and high settlement speed, represents the operational frontier of Hezbollah's financial architecture. Venezuela's permissive cryptocurrency environment — Caracas has become a regional hub for peer-to-peer crypto trading through WhatsApp-based platforms — provides the on-ramp for converting narco-cash into digital assets that can be transferred globally with minimal friction.

Amer Akil Rada managed trade-based money laundering schemes including charcoal exports — a commodity that provides high-volume, low-scrutiny cover for laundering cash through export invoicing fraud. The scheme follows a pattern established across Hezbollah's global network: over-invoicing exports to TBA-based front companies, inflating the apparent value of commodity shipments, and generating clean financial flows that represent laundered proceeds on paper.

FINANCIAL THROUGHPUT: THE NUMBERS

The question of total financial throughput through Hezbollah's Latin American network resists precise quantification because the network is designed to resist quantification. Estimates from US law enforcement and legislative testimony suggest cumulative figures in the hundreds of millions of dollars annually when all TBA streams are combined: trade fraud, drug trafficking commissions, diaspora charitable collection, gold smuggling, cigarette smuggling, and counterfeiting.

At the peak of Project Cassandra — the DEA investigation into Hezbollah's global narco-trafficking network, conducted between 2008 and 2015 — analysts estimated Hezbollah's cocaine trafficking operation was generating approximately \$1 billion per month at its height, the overwhelming majority of which transited through Latin American supply chains.

Project Cassandra identified Hezbollah's business affiliate Ayman Joumaa as the central logistics figure — coordinating cocaine shipments from Colombian producers, through West African transit routes, and into European markets, with

proceeds laundered through used car dealerships in the United States and through Lebanese exchange houses with TBA branches. Joumaa was designated by the US Treasury in 2011.

The Obama administration's decision to curtail Project Cassandra's prosecution track in 2014–2015 — reportedly to protect the Iran nuclear negotiations — represents one of the most consequential policy decisions in recent counterterrorism history. The Obama administration learned no lessons from Project Cassandra. The network that investigation partially mapped is more sophisticated today than it was when it was shelved.

THE CARTEL NEXUS: IRGC-QUDS FORCE AND DRUG TRAFFICKING ORGANIZATIONS

The connection between Iran's Quds Force and Mexican and Colombian drug trafficking organizations is not a matter of analytical inference. It is documented case law.

THE ARBABSJAR PLOT (2011): OPERATIONAL PROOF OF CONCEPT

Mansoor Arbabsjar was a naturalized United States citizen of Iranian origin living in Texas when he was recruited by a Quds Force officer to arrange the assassination of Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir, on American soil. Arbabsjar's handler in the Quds Force was Ali Gholam Shakuri, identified by US prosecutors as a senior officer in the IRGC. Arbabsjar approached what he believed to be a contact in Los Zetas — one of Mexico's most violent trafficking organizations — to carry out the assassination in a Washington, DC restaurant.

The contact was in fact a DEA informant. Arbabsjar was arrested in September 2011, pled guilty, and was sentenced to 25 years in federal prison. Shakuri was indicted in absentia and has never been apprehended.

The significance of the Arbabsjar plot is frequently underestimated. It was not the action of a rogue operative. It was an IRGC operational plan, coordinated through Quds Force channels, that specifically selected a Mexican drug cartel as the execution mechanism. The rationale was straightforward: Los Zetas had demonstrated the capability and willingness to operate inside the United States, had established routes through which personnel and materiel crossed the southern border, and could be acquired through cash payment. Tehran assessed that cartel logistics infrastructure could be purchased for Iranian operational use. It really is as simple as that.

UNIT 840: THE OPERATIONAL ARCHITECTURE

Unit 840 is the Quds Force's covert operational unit responsible for clandestine terrorism operations outside Iran. Distinct from the Quds Force's regional coordination and proxy management functions, Unit 840 specializes in direct action — assassinations, sabotage, and the recruitment of criminal networks for operational purposes. Mossad has identified Unit 840 as its primary target in the shadow war against Iranian external operations, and the unit has been linked to assassination plots against Israeli officials in Azerbaijan, Turkey, Thailand, India, and Cyprus.

In the Western Hemisphere, Unit 840 operatives have used Venezuelan diplomatic cover — the ghost flight network, Venezuelan passports issued to Iranian nationals, and consular facilities in Latin American capitals — to conduct surveillance, recruit assets, and position operational infrastructure. The 2024 Quds Force-directed assassination campaign that targeted US political figures, including current and former officials, drew on networks that included individuals with Latin American residency.

THE SINALOA AND ZETA CONNECTIONS

The Arbabsiar plot is the most documented point of Iranian contact with Mexican trafficking organizations, but it is not the only one. US law enforcement has documented attempts by Iranian-linked intermediaries to approach both the Sinaloa Cartel and remnants of Los Zetas to discuss procurement of weapons, logistics support, and the potential movement of personnel across the US-Mexico border.

A 2026 investigation into IRGC cryptocurrency operations documented that "longstanding money-laundering and trafficking ecosystems connect Latin American cartels" to IRGC financial networks — a characterization that reflects the assessment of current US law enforcement that the relationship has evolved beyond isolated conspiracy attempts into a more sustained pattern of mutual criminal convenience.

The structural logic is not difficult to understand.

Mexican cartels require chemical precursors for fentanyl production — precursors that Iranian-linked networks source from China and route through intermediary countries. The Sinaloa Cartel's global procurement network intersects with Iranian-linked chemical and financial intermediaries at multiple points. This does not make it a formal intelligence alliance. It makes it a convergence of criminal interest that the IRGC's external operations apparatus is positioned to exploit.

FINANCIAL ARCHITECTURE: HOW THE MONEY MOVES

The financial infrastructure supporting IRGC and Hezbollah operations in Latin America has evolved across four distinct layers, each adapted to enforcement pressure and technological opportunity.

LAYER 1: TRADE-BASED MONEY LAUNDERING

The oldest and most resilient layer of the network operates through trade under-invoicing in the TBA and in free trade zones across Panama, Colombia, and Uruguay.

The mechanism is straightforward: goods — electronics, clothing, agricultural commodities, cigarettes — are exported at inflated or deflated prices through companies controlled by network associates. The difference between the declared and actual value represents laundered funds that have been transferred between parties under the guise of legitimate trade.

Panama's Colon Free Trade Zone, the TBA's Ciudad del Este commercial hub, and Uruguay's free port in Montevideo have all been documented as venues for Hezbollah-linked trade-based laundering. The Panama Papers and Pandora Papers investigations surfaced Iranian-linked shell companies using these zones for asset concealment, though the full scope of the network extends well beyond what those leaks captured.

LAYER 2: GOLD SMUGGLING AND COMMODITY ARBITRAGE

Venezuela's Orinoco Mining Arc — a 111,000 square-kilometer extraction zone in southern Venezuela — has become a significant node in Iran's commodity arbitrage and sanctions evasion network. Hezbollah and IRGC-linked intermediaries purchase Venezuelan gold through local mining operations, often controlled by or operating under protection arrangements with Venezuelan military units. The gold is smuggled to Turkey, the UAE, and in some cases directly to Iran, where it is sold at international market prices, generating hard currency that circumvents the SWIFT system entirely.

Iranian-Venezuelan gold transactions surfaced in the March 2026 Fortune investigation into Binance's internal records, which documented Iranian entities using cryptocurrency exchange infrastructure to facilitate gold and commodity trades. The Chainalysis 2026 Crypto Crime Report noted that **sanctions evasion through cryptocurrency surged 694 percent in 2025**, with Iran among the primary state actors industrializing these evasion tactics.

LAYER 3: CRYPTOCURRENCY RAILS

The adoption of cryptocurrency — specifically Tether (USDT) on the Tron blockchain — represents the most significant structural evolution in Hezbollah and IRGC financial networks in Latin America over the past five years. Venezuela's collapse of formal banking infrastructure paradoxically made it an ideal environment for peer-to-peer cryptocurrency adoption, and that same infrastructure now serves IRGC-linked financial transfers.

Chainalysis and TRM Labs have both documented Venezuela-based OTC brokers facilitating USDT transactions for sanctioned entities. The Akil Rada network is the most publicly documented example, but US Treasury officials have acknowledged that it represents a pattern, not an anomaly.

Iran's total crypto-linked activity in 2025 was approximately \$3 billion at the regime level, sitting within a broader shadow banking ecosystem estimated at \$7.8 billion when informal capital flows are included.

LAYER 4: HAWALA AND INFORMAL VALUE TRANSFER

The hawala system, an informal value transfer network operating through Lebanese diaspora commercial networks, remains the connective tissue linking the TBA, Caracas, and Beirut. A 2024 OFAC designation targeted Tawfiq Muhammad Said, a Syria-based hawala operator, for processing transfers that funded Hezbollah operations and were routed through TBA intermediaries.

The designation confirmed what analysts had long assessed: hawala networks in Latin America are not discrete from hawala networks in the Middle East.

They are the same network, operating across jurisdictions.

TERROR GROUPS OPERATING IN SHARED OPERATIONAL SPACE

The IRGC and Hezbollah do not operate in isolation from Latin America's broader ecosystem of Non-State Actors. The convergence of multiple terrorist and criminal organizations in the same operational spaces creates both risks and opportunities for Iran's network — and generates direct threat vectors toward the United States that extend beyond the IRGC itself.

FARC DISSIDENTS AND ELN (COLOMBIA AND VENEZUELA)

The relationship between Iranian-linked networks and Colombian insurgent groups predates Chávez but was institutionalized under his administration. FARC's financial operations intersected with Hezbollah's money laundering infrastructure at multiple points — shared use of the TBA for drug processing proceeds, shared use of Venezuelan territory as a safe haven after Colombian military operations, and documented communication between FARC leadership and Hezbollah financial operators.

The post-2016 FARC dissidents — groups that rejected the peace agreement — continue to operate in Venezuelan territory under what amounts to protection arrangements with elements of the Venezuelan security apparatus. The Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) has been designated a Foreign Terrorist Organization and continues to operate with significant Venezuelan territorial access. These groups serve as logistics auxiliaries for the broader narco-trafficking network through which IRGC-linked financial flows pass.

HEZBOLLAH (VENEZUELA, TBA, PANAMA, COLOMBIA)

Hezbollah is operationally present across Latin America in three distinct modes: financial, diaspora-embedded, and, to a lesser extent, operational.

Its financial presence — described across the Tri-Border Area section — is the dominant modality.

Its diaspora-embedded presence involves the Lebanese Shia community networks across Venezuela, Colombia, Panama, and Brazil, within which Hezbollah maintains fundraising, recruitment, and influence operations.

The operational presence — the capability to carry out violence — is more limited in Latin America than in the Middle East, Africa, or Europe, but it exists. Hezbollah was responsible for the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing in Buenos Aires (29 killed) and the 1994 AMIA bombing (85 killed) — the largest terrorist attack in Argentine

history. Iran's IRGC Quds Force directed both operations. The AMIA investigation resulted in Interpol red notices for former Iranian officials including former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, former Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian, former IRGC Quds Force Commander Ahmad Vahidi — who later served as Iran's Defense Minister — and Mohsen Rezaei, former IRGC Commander-in-Chief, who visited Venezuela on multiple occasions and was received by Chávez.

SENDERO LUMINOSO (PERU)

Peru's Sendero Luminoso, a Maoist insurgency now primarily operating in the VRAEM coca-producing valley, is connected to the broader narco-trafficking ecosystem that partially funds Hezbollah through FARC-linked supply chains. The group has no documented direct contact with IRGC networks, but its coca production feeds supply chains that move through Venezuelan and Colombian routes where IRGC-linked financial networks operate.

MS-13 AND CENTRAL AMERICAN CRIMINAL NETWORKS

Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) has a domestic US presence of approximately 10,000 members and operates across El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States. While it has no documented direct relationship with the IRGC, it occupies the smuggling corridors that both cartel and potentially IRGC-linked logistical operations use to move personnel and material toward the US border.

The same routes that MS-13 uses for human smuggling are the routes through which, in the worst-case scenario, IRGC-directed assets would transit.

HAMAS (TBA, VENEZUELA)

Hamas maintains a small but documented presence in the Tri-Border Area, overlapping with Hezbollah's financial networks in the diaspora Lebanese community. Venezuelan officials facilitated financial flows beneficial to Hamas, and the Maduro government formally recognized Hamas as a legitimate organization.

The Israel-Venezuela relationship collapsed under Chávez, who expelled the Israeli ambassador in 2009 during the Gaza war. Hamas' Latin American presence is primarily financial — fundraising and hawala transfers — rather than operational, but its physical co-location with Hezbollah networks in the TBA means that the infrastructure serves both organizations.

KEY FIGURES: ROLES WITHIN THE STRUCTURE

The following individuals represent the core of the IRGC-linked Latin American network.

This is not an exhaustive list — it reflects the documented, named individuals whose roles are established through US federal indictments, OFAC designations, or confirmed intelligence reporting.

- **Esmail Qaani** — Commander, IRGC Quds Force. Qaani succeeded Qasem Soleimani after the latter's elimination in January 2020. He oversees all Quds Force external operations globally, including the Latin American network. His operational priorities have shifted focus toward rebuilding Hezbollah post-2024 Lebanon war, which has increased pressure on Hezbollah's Latin American revenue streams to compensate for Tehran's reduced direct financial support
- **Brigadier General Abdul Reza Shahlai** — Senior Quds Force official, the mastermind behind the Arbabsiar plot. The US government offered a \$15 million reward for information leading to Shahlai's disruption. He operates from within Iran and directs external operations targeting American officials and interests
- **Ali Gholam Shakuri** — Quds Force officer who served as Arbabsiar's handler in the 2011 DC assassination plot. Indicted in the Southern District of New York. Remains at large in Iran
- **Mohsen Rezaei** — Former IRGC Commander-in-Chief (1981–1997), subsequent Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council. Named in an Interpol red notice for his role in directing the 1994 AMIA bombing. Visited Venezuela multiple times on official delegations that served as cover for IRGC coordination. His multiple Venezuelan visits were not diplomatic tourism. They were command-level coordination under economic delegation cover
- **Ahmad Vahidi** — Former Quds Force Commander and later Iran's Defense Minister (2009–2013). Subject to an Interpol red notice for his alleged role in directing the AMIA bombing. His presence in senior government positions while facing international terrorism charges illustrates the institutional continuity between IRGC external operations and the Islamic Republic's executive structure
- **Ghazi Nasr al-Din** — Venezuelan diplomat and Hezbollah facilitator. Designated by the US Treasury in 2008 for serving as the Venezuelan ambassador to Syria and Lebanon, using his diplomatic position to facilitate Hezbollah fundraising and operational planning. He facilitated travel for

Hezbollah operatives and provided logistical support using Venezuelan diplomatic channels

- **Fawzi Kan'an** — Venezuelan businessman designated by the US Treasury in 2008 for providing material support to Hezbollah through financial transfers and recruitment activity conducted from Caracas. Kan'an's designation was the first formal US government acknowledgment that Hezbollah's Venezuela network had penetrated the country's business community at a significant level
- **Assad Ahmad Barakat** — The patriarch of Hezbollah's TBA financial network. Now in his late fifties, Barakat's network has been reconstructed by family members and associates following his 2009 release from a Paraguayan prison. The operational logic of his network continues
- **Samer Akil Rada** — Venezuela-based Hezbollah operative designated by OFAC in 2023. Operated cryptocurrency laundering infrastructure through BCI Technologies C.A., moving tens of millions in USDT through OTC brokers in Caracas and the TBA. The most current example of the network's technological adaptation
- **Amer Akil Rada** — Samer's associate, designated in the same OFAC action. Managed trade-based laundering through commodity exports, maintaining the traditional commercial layer of the TBA network alongside the cryptocurrency operations
- **Tareck El Aissami** — Former Venezuelan Vice President and Minister of Industries, sanctioned by the United States in 2017 for alleged drug trafficking and ties to Hezbollah. El Aissami was born to Syrian-Lebanese parents, has documented historical ties to Hezbollah networks, and served as one of the most powerful figures in the Maduro administration. His tenure as Vice President overlapped with the period of deepest IRGC penetration into Venezuelan institutional structures
- **Diosdado Cabello Rondón** — Interior Minister. The single most important surviving figure in Venezuela's post-Maduro security architecture. His continued freedom of action represents the most significant indicator that the IRGC-Venezuelan network has not been dismantled by Maduro's apprehension
- **Alex Saab** — Venezuelan diplomat and Maduro front man, arrested in 2020 and extradited to the United States in 2021. Saab managed financial flows between Venezuela and Iran, including barter arrangements through which Venezuelan oil was traded for Iranian goods — food, medicine, and dual-use items — through networks of front companies designed to evade sanctions. His cooperation with US prosecutors has reportedly yielded significant intelligence on the architecture of Iran-Venezuela financial coordination
- **Ayman Joumaa** — Hezbollah's primary cocaine trafficking logistics coordinator, designated by the US Treasury in 2011. Joumaa coordinated the

movement of cocaine from Colombia through West Africa to European markets, with proceeds laundered through Lebanese exchange houses and used car dealerships with TBA-linked networks. His operations were the operational core of the network Project Cassandra mapped before the investigation was curtailed.

THE HOMELAND THREAT: CAN THIS NETWORK REACH AMERICA?

The question of whether the IRGC-Hezbollah-cartel network in Latin America represents a realistic threat to the United States homeland is the question that American policymakers most persistently avoid answering with precision.

Vague references to "the threat" from Iran are politically convenient. A rigorous assessment of the specific mechanisms through which that threat could manifest is less so.

The threat is real, specific, and documented. It is not speculation. It is grounded in case law, intelligence community testimony, and operational precedent.

THE ARBABSJAR PRECEDENT: OPERATIONAL PROOF

The 2011 Arbabsjar plot proved, in a federal courtroom, that the IRGC's Quds Force had operationalized the cartel connection for a planned attack on United States soil. The target was a foreign diplomat on American territory. The mechanism was a Mexican drug cartel. The funding was IRGC money. The failure was a matter of tradecraft — Arbabsjar's cartel contact was a DEA informant — not a failure of strategic intent.

It would be a mistake to dismiss the Arbabsjar plot as an anomaly.

The right question to ask is ***what changed in Tehran's calculus since 2011 that would make this less likely rather than more likely?***

The answer, given Iran's current strategic position — under unprecedented military pressure from Epic Fury operations in the Gulf, facing the decapitation of Hezbollah's southern Lebanon leadership, with its nuclear program under direct threat — is nothing.

If anything, the calculus has **shifted toward greater willingness to absorb risk in pursuit of asymmetric retaliatory capability.**

THE ACTIVATION THREAT: SLEEPER ASSETS AND PRE-POSITIONED INFRASTRUCTURE

In August 2025, geopolitical analysts across the board, following direct US military engagement against Iran, cited Tehran threatening to "activate this network to conduct attacks" in the United States. This was not a novel capability claim.

It reflected the known architecture: Hezbollah maintains a global pre-positioned network that includes individuals in the United States who have been identified by FBI and NCTC assessments as potential operational assets. These individuals are not being activated in normal operational circumstances. They are held in reserve for escalation scenarios — specifically for scenarios in which Iran faces an existential threat and requires asymmetric retaliatory options.

The current operational environment — with the United States directly engaged in military operations against Iran's nuclear program and IRGC infrastructure, with Epic Fury having produced a US military kill chain unprecedented in the post-Cold War era — **represents precisely the scenario for which this network was built.**

THE SOUTHERN BORDER AS AN ATTACK VECTOR

The most direct physical pathway through which IRGC-directed operatives could enter the United States runs through the same corridors that service the drug trafficking networks. The US-Mexico border, across which cartel logistics chains move an estimated \$25 to \$40 billion in narcotics annually, represents a documented ingress vector for individuals, who are not drug mules. US Customs and Border Protection has reported apprehensions of individuals on the Terrorist Screening Database at the southern border across multiple fiscal years.

These apprehensions represent a subset, an uncertain subset, of actual crossings by individuals with terrorism nexus.

The structural implication is not subtle.

A network that moves cocaine across the US-Mexico border can move people. A network that moves people can move weapons.

An IRGC unit that had the operational judgment to contact Los Zetas in 2011 for a Washington DC assassination has the operational judgment to revisit that contact architecture for a higher-priority mission.

THE CYBER AND HYBRID LAYER

Iran's external threat to the United States homeland is not exclusively kinetic.

MuddyWater, an IRGC-affiliated advanced persistent threat group, was pre-positioned inside US critical infrastructure networks as of February 2026, per the ESET/780th MI Tier-1 assessment. Three AWS data center facilities in the UAE and Bahrain were struck by Iranian drones in March 2026.

The **hybrid architecture** — kinetic, cyber, financial, and influence operations — **means that an Iranian escalatory response to US military action would not look like a single event.**

It would look like simultaneous disruption across multiple domains, activated through networks that have spent years building persistent access.

The Latin American network contributes to this threat picture by providing the IRGC with a geographic node for operational planning, asset recruitment, and financial transfer that is structurally harder to monitor than IRGC activity in the Middle East or Europe. Operating from Venezuela, from the TBA, from Caracas-based cryptocurrency platforms, Iranian-linked actors enjoy layers of political and jurisdictional friction that protect them from the enforcement apparatus that operates against Iranian networks in Europe and the Gulf.

THE POST-MADURO DISRUPTION QUESTION

Maduro's apprehension in January 2026 is the most significant disruption to the Venezuela node of the IRGC network since the network was constructed.

It is not a dismantling. It is a disruption. The distinction matters.

The institutional infrastructure — IRGC-trained military officers, Hezbollah-connected businesspeople, Iranian-Venezuelan financial coordination mechanisms — predates Maduro and will postdate him.

Ambassador Silva Aponte's statement that Iran-Venezuela ties will endure was accurate. Diosdado Cabello's survival is structural proof. Venezuela's post-Maduro interim government, led by figures who emerged from within the Bolivarian system, will need to navigate the contradiction between accessing IRGC-linked networks for political survival and satisfying American demands for institutional reform.

History suggests that institutional reform will lose.

ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSIONS

The IRGC's Latin American network is best understood not as a terrorist organization embedded in a criminal ecosystem, but as **a strategic capability embedded in a political one.**

Tehran has spent three decades constructing a presence in the Western Hemisphere that serves multiple simultaneous functions

- financing its proxy apparatus through narco-trafficking commissions and laundering proceeds
- evading Western sanctions through commodity arbitrage and cryptocurrency rails, maintaining political cover through aligned governments
- pre-positioning a retaliatory capability against the United States homeland that can be activated when strategic circumstances require

The network is resilient precisely because it is not monolithic. It is a layered system:

- state cooperation at the top (Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba)
- diaspora financial infrastructure in the middle (TBA, Caracas, Panama)
- cartel logistics at the base (Mexico, Colombia)

Disrupting any one layer does not collapse the others. Maduro's arrest removed a senior political enabler. It did not remove the IRGC engineers in PDVSA or the Hezbollah hawala operators in Ciudad del Este.

The financial flows are substantial. Hezbollah's Latin American operations — combining TBA trade fraud, drug trafficking commissions, hawala transfers, and cryptocurrency laundering — likely generate between \$300 million and \$1 billion annually across all channels. This is not revenue derived primarily from a single stream. It is a diversified portfolio, designed to ensure that enforcement pressure on any individual mechanism does not compromise the whole.

The co-location of multiple terror groups — Hezbollah, FARC dissidents, ELN, Hamas — in the same operational spaces as IRGC-linked networks is not coincidental. It reflects the convergence of shared interests in ungoverned or semi-governed spaces where enforcement is weak and political will to disrupt is limited.

The TBA is not a cartel safe haven. It is not a Hezbollah safe haven. It is an ecosystem of criminal Non-State Actors whose operational interests overlap sufficiently that they tolerate each other's presence and, at the margins, enable each other's operations.

The threat to the United States homeland is realistic and underweighted in public policy discourse. The Arbabsiar plot was not an aberration. It was an operational test of a capability that Tehran assessed it needed.

The current environment — direct US-Iran military conflict, unprecedented IRGC casualties, Hezbollah weakened, Iran's nuclear program under direct threat — **represents the highest-risk scenario for activation of the Western Hemisphere network as a retaliatory instrument.**

The FBI has maintained active investigations into Hezbollah-linked individuals inside the United States. MI5 documented 20-plus Tehran-facilitated plots in the United Kingdom in 2025 alone. The geographic extension of that operational appetite to the Western Hemisphere is not a theoretical possibility. It is a documented historical practice.

The United States government has known the architecture of this network for thirty years. Project Cassandra mapped its narco-trafficking spine. Federal indictments named its key figures. OFAC designations documented its financial operators. What it has not done, with consistency, is treat the dismantlement of this network as a strategic priority rather than a law enforcement inconvenience.

Iran has learned no lessons from the disruptions imposed on this network. Designations were absorbed. Arrests were weathered. The network evolved.

The question is whether American policy will learn from the consistent failure of a designation-and-sanction approach to a network that is structurally designed to be designation-and-sanction-resistant.

The answer, based on the record, is that it has not.



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