INTRODUCTION
From the moment of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the new Islamic Republic of Iran has been obsessed with the Americas and the US. America is referred to as the “great Satan” and denounced by Iranian clerics and congregations on a weekly basis at Friday prayers. Based on past US support of the government of the Iranian shah, the guardians of the Islamic Revolution consider America their greatest foe and the root of all domestic political opposition to the regime.

In broad terms, Iranian strategic thinking largely consists of attempts to attack America and its regional allies, and to confound US regional strategy, so that the Iran of the government of the Iranian shah, the American continent.

Iran has extended its reach and influence, it has sought to do so in the Americas, to ally with like-minded anti-American regimes, to participate in fundraising through international criminality, and to commit or to attempt acts of assassination, terrorism, and subversion. Iranian operatives, most of them operating through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and IRGC-affiliated Iranian proxy organizations, have cress-crossed the Americas. They have left a bloody trail in their wake.

This report will describe their campaign of criminality and killing, which it will term, in relation to the Iranian Middle Eastern regional project, which is known and widely discussed by officials and policymakers, a new force which is potent and real — the Iranian American regional project. This project is a serious force. And it is a threat to the peace, prosperity, and political independence of the Americas.

First, it is worth discussing the extensive links between the Iranian state, the IRGC which bodyguards the state, and the networks of criminals, killers, and drug traffickers whose crimes are increasingly considered front-rank national security threats in all countries in the American continent.

What began as a means of raising revenue quickly became a means of extending IRGC and Hezbollah influence

NARCOS
The IRGC and affiliated organizations are at the heart of the global drug trade. What began as a means of raising revenue quickly became a means of extending IRGC and Hezbollah influence, cementing power relationships, and furthering the political and social destabilization that drug addiction brings to societies.

In the Americas, Hezbollah’s growing prominence in the transcontinental drug trade was tracked by an American Drug Enforcement Administration project called Cassandra. It painted a bleak picture of a vast and growing operation.

Josh Meyer reported for Politico how the operation worked through, “cocaine shipments, some from Latin America to West Africa and on to Europe and the Middle East, and others through Venezuela and Mexico to the United States.”

He described a “river of dirty cash as it was laundered by, among other tactics, buying American used cars and shipping them to Africa.”

The US Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of New York linked Hezbollah to drug trafficking because of political pressure, in the view of a Politico investigation of the Cassandra project.

But even incomplete, the investigation demonstrated close and powerful ties between the IRGC-led Hezbollah drug operations and numerous American regional

CASSANDRA
Project Cassandra was minimized in importance, according to Politico reporting, because the administration of former US President Barack Obama did not wish a drug enforcement investigation to interfere with broader American efforts to conciliate Iran and to mount a deal on the country’s nuclear weapons, which was finally concluded in 2015 as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

Jack Kelly, the leader of the Hezbollah program at the DEA, said Hezbollah, engaged in the drug trade, was “a paramilitary organization with strategic importance in the Middle East, and we watched them become an international criminal conglomerate generating billions of dollars for the world’s most dangerous activities, including chemical and nuclear weapons programs and armies that believe America is their sworn enemy.”

Kelly felt his team was unable to fully prosecute a campaign against Hezbollah drug trafficking because of political pressure, in the view of a Politico investigation of the Cassandra project.
players, including the state of Venezuela (from which much Hezbollah cocaine is trafficked into the US) and President Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

DEA officials and those of other American departments noted a network engaged in smuggling weapons, including chemical weapons, drugs, and other illicit products, across the Americas and stretching into the Middle East, eastern Europe, and West Africa, all of it featuring Hezbollah and its Iranian and Lebanese state points of contact.

Hezbollah is, in the view of Kelly and his team, at the center of a criminal network taking in illegal funds from drug, weapons trafficking, and criminal violence, which combines with money laundering schemes across the world.

In addition, Hezbollah operatives in the US still serve the Iranian American regional project. They continued through this time to operate as terrorist foot soldiers, “scouting” potential US targets for attack” contemporaneously. The terrorism was not an annex of the criminal scheme; it was and remains at the heart of Hezbollah’s operations in the Americas, which is paid for by the proceeds of criminality. This fusing of criminality and terrorism violence is the hallmark of the Iranian American regional project. Another aspect of the same project is one of more overt political and military subversion — the supporting of revisionist regimes and tyrants across the Americas.

**AIDING DICTATORS**

Iran’s policy, supported and led by the IRGC, is one of backing tyrants and criminal regimes throughout the world. In doing so, it can cultivate allies internationally, building out political and criminal networks, and simultaneously continue its campaign against the post-World War II political settlement and the US-led world order.

One example of this is seen in the analysis of Tamara Wittes of the Brookings Institution.

“Tehran sent oil tankers to Venezuela as part of a long-term project to promote greater energy cooperation and to help alleviate fuel shortages amid the country’s political and economic crisis.8

In addition, Iran’s policy is to promote greater energy cooperation and to help alleviate fuel shortages amid the country’s political and economic crisis.

One example of this is seen in the analysis of Tamara Wittes of the Brookings Institution.

“Tehran has been a revisionist state, and a state sponsor of terrorism, since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. ... (since the 2011 Arab revolutions Iran has) use[d] cash, militias, and other tools to advance its interests and expand its influence.”9 Iranian revisionism works in tandem with other revisionist powers, most notably Russia, including in the American continent.

In practice, it means Russia and Iran participate in the joint support of dictatorial governments in the region, and the building of shared networks of political intimidation and violence, and criminal activity. These networks are linked to governments and are also independent of them, operating to spread Iranian and Russian violence and influence independent of states.

**VENEZUELAN BACKGROUND**

Iranian support for the Venezuelan regime has never faltered. Venezuela’s current government supports wider Iranian objectives, including the hosting of IRGC-linked terrorist organizations on the American continent, and the general subverting of the interests and wishes of the US in South America by the hosting of terrorist and criminal factions in Venezuelan territory.

Despite the independence of the Venezuelan state, the Iranian Venezuelan relationship has remained strong this century. According to a paper for the Center for Strategic International Studies by Moises Naiman, Antonio De La Cruz, and Claudia Fernandez, this “relationship intensified ... when Chavez became president. Between 2001 and 2013, there were dozens of diplomatic visits between the Chavez and the Khatami and Ahmadinejad administrations (in Iran).”

“The two countries signed an estimated 300 agreements of varying importance and value, ranging from working on low-income housing developments, to cement plants and car factories. They even established a joint development fund and opened a development bank under the structure of the Export Development Bank of Iran. By 2012, Iran’s investments and loans in Venezuela were valued at $15 billion.”

These were just the licit developments.

**SUPPORTING VENEZUELA ECONOMICALLY**

Writing for the Middle East Institute, Eric Lob said, “On June 11, 2022, Iran’s ... President Ebrahim Raisi ... met with his Venezuelan counterpart, Nicolas Maduro ... to sign a 20-year bilateral cooperation road map in the fields of energy, defense, agriculture, engineering, tourism, and culture.”

This widespread cooperation extended to security and military cooperation. It speaks of an Iranian effort to undergird the Venezuelan economy and to assist the leaders of Venezuela as they attempt not only to stay in power despite all domestic opposition, but also to assist Venezuela in its revisionist international posture, aimed mostly at countering the diplomatic project of the US in South America and around the world.

The Iranian Venezuelan relationship is an anti-American partnership by default and an attempt to ensure the survival of Iran’s and Venezuela’s brands of tyranny into this century regardless of all opposition.

“At the signing ceremony, and as is common during meetings between Iranian
and Venezuelan officials, Raisi stated that the agenda laid out in this document was intended to counter and resist US sanctions, pressure, and imperialism,” Lob added.

This has long-term analogues and involves the fostering of long-term projects linking Iran and Venezuela. “To promote greater energy cooperation as part of the bilateral agreement and to help Venezuela alleviate fuel shortages amidst political and economic crisis, Tehran delivered a second oil tanker, built by the Sadra Company, to Caracas. It also signed a contract with Caracas the previous month worth 110 million euros ($120 million) to repair and restart Venezuela’s smallest oil refinery, called El Palito.18

The economic ties between Venezuela and Iran are militarized in their own way. Cash and commodities used to prop up the Venezuelan government, to defend the value of its currency, to supplement its own exports, and to develop its capital stock are all knowingly used to secure the future of the Venezuelan regime and to assist in its military defence.

The regime of Venezuela’s survival is linked to both its economic success or failure, and the ability of the regime to maintain a monopoly on violence and to defeat any other claimants to political legitimacy. Cash sent to Venezuela will likely be used for political repression and violence. This is why other countries have repeatedly in the 21st century sanctioned Venezuela, refused to give the regime a monetary lifeline, and refrained from striking commercial deals with the Venezuelan state. This is the logic of international sanctions, as exemplified by the British government’s justification for sanctions. (“This sanctions regime is aimed at encouraging the government of Venezuela to respect democratic principles, to comply with international human rights law, and to respect human rights.”)22

Iran has no such qualms. Its economic investment in Venezuela is explicitly political and geostrategic. It is in Venezuela in concert with the Venezuelan regime. Iran and its IRGC forces and their proxies aid Venezuela because they wish for the regime to survive and to continue the revisionist mission—one that pariah petrostates whose leaders aspire to “create an axis of unity and a new world order against the United States,” Lob said.23

This alliance is vital and has survived the transfer of power in Venezuela between Chavez and Maduro after the former’s death. It has survived serious threats to the survival of the Venezuelan regime and to its economy. As this report will continue, it is glued together by not only economic shared self-interest, but also by military ties, in a joint continuum of violence, and violent struggle against the US-led world order.

SUPPORTING VENEZUELA MILITARILY

Much of Iran’s military ties to Venezuela are unconfirmed. The two countries are allies, but they are also unfree. They have no compunction in hiding details of military operations from their publics and the world. As with all unfree states, an element of theater and pretence also reigns. It is impossible, fully, to know both numbers and names. But foreign observers nonetheless have established a floor for how much military aid and assistance Iran has given Venezuela, in terms of training, military advisers, and even more difficult to measure, through the IRGC-dominated proxy networks of gangsters and criminals which serves Iran’s broadest geopolitical interests.

Iranian advisers have been supporting Venezuela’s armed forces for most of this century. In a speech in 2009, a former New York district prosecutor, Robert M. Morgenthau, who was privy to many American investigations of sanctions-busting, proliferation, and weapons trafficking across the Americas, said: “In April 2008, Venezuela and Iran entered into a memorandum of understanding pledging full military support Venezuela.

It has been reported that since 2006 Iranian military advisers have been embedded with Venezuelan troops. Asymmetric warfare, time and again, is the backbone of the IRGC forces. It is a group of non-state actors, members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard, Hezbollah, and Hamas, has replaced US Army field manuals as the standard Venezuelan military doctrine.24

Morgenthau described Iranian and Venezuelan cooperation as a process by which “two of the world’s most dangerous regimes, the self-descracion of unity, will be acting together in our backyard on the development of nuclear and missile technology. And it seems that for terrorist groups they have found the perfect operating ground for training and planning and financing their activities through narco-trafficking.”25

In the years since, this cooperation has remained and deepened. And it has also stood the test of increasing political violence and instability within the Venezuelan regime. IRGC forces aided Venezuelan regime forces in their defeating of protests and threats to regime security in the post-2019 period when the regime of Venezuela faced growing threats to its survival.

In the years since, in addition to safeguarding the regime against its domestic rivals, Iran has supplemented its military ties, in a joint continuum of violence, and violent struggle against the US-led world order.

Venezuelan commodities with military convoys of tankers.26 And, in the course of the Russian war on Ukraine, Iran’s supply of drones and weapons has allegedly involved Venezuelan territory and Venezuelan operatives.

This has included recent “resumption of weekly airline flights between the two capitals in July (the route had been suspended since 2015, presumably due to foreign pressure), ... (which) significant evidence suggests ... could also be used to transport drone material and other military hardware,” according to analysis by Farzin Nadimi of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.27

This is a story of close cooperation on shared geopolitical objectives. Iran and Venezuela are not always as one. But they are as one in international and regional policy. Their aims are the survival of the tyranny in Venezuela, the busting of sanctions against both countries, the continued propagation of weapons-, drugs-, and commodity smuggling networks, the laundering of money, the suborning of the world economy, and the challenging of the US-led world order.

This alignment is decades old. It is the archetypical hard case of the Iranian American regional project. But it is not alone — and nor is the involvement in Hezbollah and its networks, which extend far further than its involvement in Venezuela.

ARGENTINA

On March 17, 1992, the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, was attacked in a suicide bombing. Twenty-nine civilians were killed, and another 242 innocents were injured. It was a traumatic event and seemed like an attack not only on the embassy of a state, but on the Jewish community of Argentina, too — a conclusion drawn by Argentinian and Israeli authorities in separate investigations.

Less than three years later, in 1995, a truck filled with explosives detonated outside the Argentine Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA) building. This was an even greater act of violence, claiming the lives of 85 civilians and injuring more than 300 others.28 Investigations are still ongoing and agencies and legal authorities differ in their attribution of blame. The US, Argentina, and Israel have all indicated that the terrorist attacks were carried out by Hezbollah and its local affiliates. A 2022 Mossad report, interpreted by The New York Times, suggested greater Hezbollah autonomy in the carrying out of these attacks.

This must not divert readers unduly. The Hezbollah networks are within the generalised IRGC umbrella. All Hezbollah operations, including its demands of supporters that, “each of us is a combat soldier when the call of jihad demands it and each of us undertakes his task in the battle
in accordance with his lawful assignment within the framework of action under the guardianship of the leader jurisprudent, exist within Iranian policy and are accounted for by the broader Iranian project. Nonetheless, it is worth examining the trends in Hezbollah activity, which is a substratum within a broader and proliferating Iranian strategy of worldwide terrorism and disruption in keeping with its broader revisionist objectives.

In relation to the bombings, The New York Times claimed they “were carried out by Hezbollah in revenge for Israeli operations against the Shiite militia in Lebanon,” including the Feb. 16, 1992, Israeli killing of Hezbollah’s then-leader, Sheik Abbas Musaawy, and that, “Hezbollah had used secret infrastructure constructed over years in Buenos Aires and other South American locations to plan attacks.”

Further reporting on the bombings indicated the pattern of smuggling of weaponry and material across the American region.

The investigation, “found that the explosives used in both attacks were smuggled into Argentina by Hezbollah operatives in shampoo bottles and chocolate boxes on commercial flights from several European countries.” Later, before the attack, “they were then stashed in a Buenos Aires park.”

Other elements of this report indicated the widespread use of front companies in the Iranian and Hezbollah terrorist networks. “Chemicals used to make the bombs were acquired by a trading company used as a cover for Hezbollah’s South America operations.”

The sophistication of these networks evidence something else — that for decades, since the Islamic Revolution and the formal announcement of Hezbollah in 1985, the IRGC and Hezbollah have had international ambitions and have fed these ambitions globally, leading to the use of international violence against diverse communities in countries throughout the Americas.

TARGETING JEWS
The attacks in Argentina were pointedly carried out against not only an Israeli state target but the country’s Jewish community more broadly. It is a theme across South America. Where IRGC and Hezbollah networks cannot attack the US, Israel, or their surrogates, they pick from among the peaceful and civilian population.

Just as Hezbollah introduced suicide terrorism with bombs in the 1980s, so too have the IRGC and Hezbollah pioneered and continued to practise the terrorism of striking civilian targets — targets from individual confessional communities rather than from a nation or political project — as a surrogate for attacks on military installations or forces.

It is a longstanding trend: Mohsen Rabbani, the “chief architect of Iran’s Latin American missionary network,” according to the campaign group United Against Nuclear Iran, is also a participant in Hezbollah’s terrorist campaign against Israel and Jews throughout South America.

According to Matthew Levitt, the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute, Rabbani operated with official cover. He said: “Rabbani was named cultural attaché at the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires—a move meant to provide him diplomatic immunity prior to the AMIA attack.”

During his term in Argentina, Rabbani “led intelligence efforts for the operation.” He assembled a network of operatives for this process. “He had been using local Shiite scouts to assess Jewish and American targets in Buenos Aires since 1983. Prosecutors later stated that his surveillance reports would prove to be ‘a determining factor in the making of the decision to carry out the AMIA attack.’”

This broader scouting of Jewish targets would be a feature of Iranian and Hezbollah operations across the continent. Levitt added: “Mohammed Amadar, a Lebanese citizen, (who was later arrested for planning terrorist attacks in November 2014) arrived in Peru in November 2013. Amid paraphernalia for carrying out attacks of terrorism and bomb-making equipment, “by the time of his arrest, intelligence indicated Amadar’s targets included places associated with Israelis and Jews in Peru, including areas popular with Israeli backpackers, the Israeli embassy in Lima, and Jewish community institutions.”

Attacks on one religious minority across South America are threats to civic peace in those countries beyond the threats to the Jewish community. They indicate that Hezbollah and IRGC operations are conducted on sectarian grounds and for reasons of stirring sectarian violence. This is a profound threat not only to national security in those countries but also to civil peace and the survival of the social fabric.

So too is another IRGC and Hezbollah tactic, that one that is broadly practiced in the course of its Iranian American regional project, political assassinations.

ASSASSINATION PLOTS
In its regularly updated report, Outlaw Regime, the Iran Action Group at the US State Department said: “Since the Iranian regime came to power in 1979, Iran has conducted terrorist plots, assassinations, and attacks in
This is a story of close cooperation on shared geopolitical objectives. Iran and Venezuela are not always as one. But they are as one in international and regional policy.

THE UNITED STATES
Iran's campaign of attempted murder in the US is significant and longstanding. Those cases which have been unsealed by legal authorities include the attempted murder of the former national security adviser, John Bolton, by agents of the Iranian regime; and repeated attempts to murder Iranian dissident and women's rights activist, Masih Alinejad. In Alinejad's case, one of the alleged assassins, Ebrahim Mehdizadeh, was first arrested in 2022 in New York for a slate of violations, including having a rifle outside the home of Alinejad. A previous attempt, in 2021, to kidnap Alinejad was also broken up by US authorities. This plot also had a Venezuelan element. In a report, Reuters said: “The Iranian operatives had researched how they might spirit the journalist out of New York on a high-speed boat headed for Caracas.”

In addition to this campaign against individual journalists, a wider Iranian and Hezbollah campaign against members of the US national security state is also ongoing. Threats have been made against former officials such as Bolton, ex-President Donald Trump's secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, and a former administration aide, Brian Hook. This is a threat to the fabric of the US political system. That aides and political figures are not safe in America itself not only threatens US national security, but it is also a serious intervention in the US own political processes.

Incumbent US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan described the situation as being part of, “a disturbing pattern of Iranian government-sponsored efforts to kill, torture, and intimidate into silence activists for government-sponsored efforts to kill, torture, and intimidate into silence activists for speaking out for the fundamental rights and freedoms of Iranians around the world.” This is an understatement. It proves the extent of the Iranian American regional project. It is a project intent on punishing critics even in the US itself, just as it extends to亞mericas. Above all, it is a campaign aimed at defeating the US within its own region. It is a constant campaign of subversion which no American administration ought to consider it reasonable to downplay or ignore.

As Iran seeks to consolidate the growth of its Middle Eastern regional campaigns of proxy warfare, arms shipments, and the growth of a narco-state in the parts of Syria still held by the regime of President Bashar Assad — underwritten recently with intentionally focussed diplomacy — it has accompanied all of this with campaigns in the Americas. Campaigns to kidnap and intimidate opponents. Campaigns to undermine social fabric with criminal violence, and criminal violence stands to affect US citizens, and residents in person.

American politicians and the US public broadly accept that Iranian revisionism is a threat to global peace. What they may remain unaware of is the extent to which Iranian-influenced operations, drug trafficking, and criminal violence stands to affect the US itself and American cities, citizens, and residents in person.

If American leaders wish to keep their citizens and society safe, they will acknowledge this threat more openly than they are apt to do. And they will look squarely — more directly than any have done this decade — at the risks of continuing to tolerate the growth and survival of the Iranian American regional project.

Washington-based Freedom House has assessed that Iran's campaign of assassinations of exiles and critics are one of the hallmarks of its campaign of transnational repression aimed at defeating dissent wherever it appears. Iran's goal is to make criticism of its regime and its policy impossible — or at the very least dangerous — anywhere in the world, and this pointedly includes the Americas. “Since the revolution in 1979, the Iranian regime has frequently conducted deadly attacks on exiles,” Freedom House said. A 2021 report, titled “No Safe Haven,” for the Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, said: “From the first overseas assassination in December 1979, senior officials within the Islamic Republic of Iran have demonstrated a commitment to seeking and eliminating sources of opposition to clerical rule, wherever they may be found overseas.” The IHHRDC said it had a database that revealed, “62 cases in which killed opponents of the regime were murdered in circumstances where the involvement of the Iranian government was either explicit or strongly suspected.” Examples are numerous, including in the US. One of them is the case of Jamshid Sharmahd, who was eventually kidnapped by Iran in the UAE. He had previously been the target of an attempted assassination in California.

These assassinations and attempts are intended to accomplish two goals. The first is to remove or cripple the ability of certain individuals to campaign against the Iranian regime, either through their death or injury. The second, more significant objective, is that of the so-called assassin’s veto. By demonstrating the will to kill, the IRGC, Hezbollah, and Iranian intelligence vastly increases the costs, even for foreigners, of speaking out against the regime. It means that political activity and undermine social fabric with criminal violence, and criminal violence stands to affect US citizens, and residents in person. American politicians and the US public broadly accept that Iranian revisionism is a threat to global peace. What they may remain unaware of is the extent to which Iranian-influenced operations, drug trafficking, and criminal violence stands to affect the US itself and American cities, citizens, and residents in person. If American leaders wish to keep their citizens and society safe, they will acknowledge this threat more openly than they are apt to do. And they will look squarely — more directly than any have done this decade — at the risks of continuing to tolerate the growth and survival of the Iranian American regional project.
outsourcing kamikaze drone production to Venezuela. “
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