



Iran's Hidden War Machine in Venezuela: A Threat to National Security

Introduction

Iran and Venezuela have cultivated a steadily deepening strategic partnership, forged under the shared pressure of international sanctions and driven by mutual anti-U.S. ideologies. What once may have appeared as symbolic diplomatic alignment has evolved into a robust operational alliance encompassing economic survival strategies, military cooperation, and political coordination. Open-source intelligence (OSINT) now reveals that this relationship actively supports sanctions evasion, arms transfers, illicit transport corridors, and the creation of influence networks throughout the Western Hemisphere.

This report serves as the foundational mapping effort in a broader investigation into Iran–Venezuela cooperation. It examines the structure and channels of interaction between Tehran and Caracas—spanning oil-for-gold deals, covert flights, financial front companies, and joint projects—and identifies initial vectors of interest regarding potential penetration of U.S. economic and political systems. By systematically analyzing official agreements, logistical movements, transport corridors, and elite-level ties, this assessment lays the groundwork for a targeted operational proposal to investigate possible influence operations or economic infiltrations into U.S. territory.

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Executive Summary

The Iran–Venezuela alliance has matured into a robust, multi-domain threat network that directly undermines U.S. national security. Once perceived as a symbolic ideological alignment, the partnership now functions as an operational axis of sanctions evasion, covert logistics, military-industrial exchange, proxy deployment, and narrative warfare—all strategically embedded within the Western Hemisphere. Venezuela serves as Iran’s **geographic and institutional gateway** into Latin America, offering a permissive state infrastructure for Tehran to project power, generate illicit revenue, and conduct influence operations with minimal risk of interdiction. This alliance not only **circumvents U.S. policy tools** but actively exploits gaps in American enforcement systems and soft-power defenses, including through **coordinated Spanish-language media campaigns** using outlets like TeleSUR, HispanTV, and Telegram to amplify anti-U.S. narratives and erode support for sanctions policy.

Key U.S. Vulnerabilities

- **Financial Sanctions Evasion**

Iran and Venezuela bypass the U.S.-led financial system through joint banking ventures and cryptocurrency platforms. Venezuela’s military-managed crypto infrastructure enables covert transactions that support bilateral trade and obscure illicit flows, while U.S. correspondent banks have been exploited to launder regime funds.

- **Illicit Maritime Trade & Shadow Fleet**

A coordinated tanker fleet uses AIS spoofing, forged documentation, and ship-to-ship transfers to disguise the origin of sanctioned oil. Recent operations rebranded Venezuelan crude as Brazilian exports to China, displacing U.S. oil and weakening sanctions enforcement mechanisms.

- **Air Logistics Corridor**

The Tehran–Caracas air bridge, operated by sanctioned airlines, moves dual-use cargo and personnel under the cover of civilian aviation. Aircraft transfers and irregular cargo patterns mirror Iran’s military logistics tactics in the Middle East and now support similar operations in Latin America.

- **Military-Industrial & Proxy Expansion**

Iran has embedded drone manufacturing within Venezuela’s El Libertador Air Base, producing Shahed UAVs under IRGC supervision. Hezbollah-linked operatives exploit Venezuelan passport fraud to embed proxies across the hemisphere, some with potential access to U.S. territory.

- **Coordinated Influence Campaigns**

Iran and Venezuela co-produce Spanish-language propaganda aimed at U.S. Hispanic communities. Using platforms like TeleSUR, HispanTV, and Telegram, these campaigns spread anti-U.S. narratives, polarize public opinion, and legitimize resistance to Western sanctions. Venezuela also functions as an operational platform for Iran’s broader messaging strategy, which includes low-visibility influence efforts through U.S.-based academic institutions and nonprofits—such as webinars that frame sanctions as imperialist and promote Tehran-Caracas alignment. Joint campaigns have also portrayed figures like Alex Saab as victims of U.S. imperialism, reinforcing a shared narrative of resistance against Western dominance.

- **Operational Staging Ground**

Venezuela has been used as a safe harbor for operations targeting U.S. interests. This includes plots to abduct U.S.-based dissidents and narcotics corridors operated with Hezbollah facilitation, reinforcing Iran’s transnational threat posture near U.S. borders.

Historical Overview

Iran and Venezuela's relationship traces back to their alignment as founding members of OPEC in 1960. However, the alliance gained operational depth in the early 2000s during the concurrent presidencies of Iranian Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) and Venezuelan Hugo Chávez (1999–2013).¹ Under their leadership, bilateral cooperation expanded beyond oil policy into military coordination, infrastructure projects, and high-level diplomatic exchanges.

The relationship has persisted under Nicolás Maduro and Iranian leaders such as Ebrahim Raisi, evolving into a strategic partnership aimed at circumventing U.S. sanctions and projecting anti-U.S. influence in Latin America. For Iran, the partnership offsets geographic constraints by giving it a foothold in the Western Hemisphere. For Venezuela, Iranian support provides economic lifelines and political reinforcement amid Western sanctions and exclusion from the dominant international financial system.

In 2024, Iran and Venezuela jointly backed the Group of 77's Ministerial Declaration, which issued a direct challenge to the legitimacy of U.S.-imposed unilateral sanctions. The declaration—endorsed by over 130 member states—explicitly called for the immediate lifting of coercive economic measures targeting developing countries, including both Iran and Venezuela. By framing sanctions as violations of international law and impediments to sovereign development, the G77 positioned itself as a multilateral shield against Western economic pressure. For Tehran and Caracas, this alignment offers more than rhetorical support; it is an attempt to institutionalize their anti-sanctions agenda within a global diplomatic bloc, signaling an escalation in efforts to normalize resistance to U.S. economic statecraft through collective south-south platforms.²

Banking and Financial Ties

Under Chávez, Venezuela and Iran established a bi-national economic fund and bank, expanding Iran's financial footprint in Latin America and embedding elements of its global

¹ <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/iran-and-venezuela-a-strategic-partnership/>

² <https://www.g77.org/doc/Declaration2024.htm>

illicit procurement network. Through joint ventures, loans, and investments, Iran accessed approximately \$16 billion via Venezuela's financial system. This activity was underpinned by around 270 bilateral agreements connected to more than 60 projects and over 80 Iranian firms operating in-country. A portion of these funds supported joint military initiatives, some of which drew international scrutiny for potential ties to Iran's strategic weapons programs.

The Maduro regime has increasingly leveraged cryptocurrencies as a strategic instrument to bypass U.S. sanctions and maintain international trade flows—like particularly with allied states like Iran and Turkey. Venezuela's domestic crypto infrastructure has expanded under state oversight, including the establishment of **military-managed mining operations**. While its state-backed Petro cryptocurrency—purportedly backed by oil reserves—has seen limited adoption, it reflects a broader state intent to operationalize sovereign digital currencies as alternatives to the U.S.-dominated financial system.

Venezuelan entities have reportedly used Bitcoin to settle cross-border payments for imports, enabling transactions that circumvent traditional financial intermediaries subject to U.S. oversight. Regime-linked financial platforms have also been instructed to accept cryptocurrencies for official transactions, embedding digital assets into the machinery of state commerce. This pivot presents an asymmetric challenge to U.S. financial security: the pseudonymous and decentralized nature of cryptocurrencies allows the Maduro regime to obscure transaction origins, bypass due diligence requirements, and build semi-covert trade corridors. As these tools become entrenched, they may also serve as shared infrastructure for partner regimes such as Iran to conduct parallel financial operations. Venezuela's crypto strategy—though still limited in scope—contributes to a wider trend of sanctioned states developing alternative financial channels that weaken the efficacy of U.S. sanctions enforcement and erode the dominance of dollar-based global transaction systems.³

Money Laundering

Alex Saab and Álvaro Pulido, Colombian nationals tied to the Maduro regime, were indicted in Florida for laundering over \$350 million from a Venezuelan state contract. Between 2011 and 2015, they bribed Venezuelan officials and used false import documents to exploit its

³ <https://runrun.es/rr-es-plus/430245/maduro-recurre-a-las-criptomonedas-para-mitigar-sanciones-de-ee-uu/>

government-controlled exchange rate, securing U.S. dollars at favorable rates. According to a Florida district court case, these funds were funneled through U.S. banks—like a Citibank branch in Miami—and moved to offshore accounts including in Panama.⁴

The operation relied on U.S. correspondent banks and involved meetings on American soil, showing how Venezuelan actors used U.S. financial channels to hide illicit state funds. Saab’s network spanned Venezuela, the U.S., and other jurisdictions, taking advantage of U.S. institutions to bypass oversight. This case reveals a key vulnerability: American banks are at risk of being used by foreign regimes to launder money and potentially support sanctioned partners like Iran. It highlights the need for stronger oversight of high-risk international transactions.⁵

Oil & Maritime Trade

President Nicolás Maduro sustained the alliance with Iran as Venezuela faced increasing international isolation. Over the past 5–10 years, U.S. “maximum pressure” sanctions on both regimes accelerated their alignment. In 2020, Iran’s role escalated significantly, delivering emergency fuel shipments and technical support to help Maduro navigate critical shortages and maintain internal stability.⁶

High-level engagements—most notably Maduro’s 2022 visit to Tehran to meet then-President Ebrahim Raisi—resulted in a 20-year cooperation agreement spanning oil, petrochemicals, defense, agriculture, and other sectors. The deal includes provisions for Iran to assist in restoring Venezuela’s degraded oil refinery infrastructure.⁷ As payment for the fuel, Caracas reportedly transferred **9 tons of gold bullion**—valued at approximately \$500 million—to Tehran. This gold-for-gas exchange served as a critical lifeline for Venezuela’s

⁴ <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/press-release/file/1187306/dl>

⁵ <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/two-colombian-businessmen-charged-money-laundering-connection-venezuela-bribery-scheme>

⁶ <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/fourth-iranian-tanker-docks-at-venezuelan-port-us-slams-distraction-idUSKBN234306/>

⁷ <https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-venezuela-sign-20-year-cooperation-plan-state-tv-2022-06-11/>

collapsing refinery network while providing Iran with hard assets outside the U.S.-controlled dollar system.⁸

Venezuela's refinery collapse—rooted in years of mismanagement and underinvestment—was sharply accelerated by U.S. sanctions in 2019. Trump's first administration's measures targeted state-owned PDVSA, severing access to foreign investment, critical parts, software, and equipment, further degrading the country's energy infrastructure.⁹ The partnership allowed Venezuela to circumvent sanctions and restore parts of its refining capacity, helping stabilize Maduro's regime by decreasing fuel shortages and expanding Iran's influence in the region.

Despite Iranian support, the Cardón refinery—part of the Paraguaná Refining Complex in northwestern Venezuela and one of the largest in the world—continues to experience recurring operational failures. Although Iran assisted with restarting key units, the intervention failed to address the refinery's structural degradation. Within two months, a critical failure in the reformer unit triggered a complete halt in gasoline production. As of 2025, sustained instability at Cardón has compelled PDVSA to increase reliance on smaller facilities like El Palito to mitigate output deficits. Capacity remains well below design thresholds due to equipment decay, sanctions-related constraints, and systemic mismanagement, undermining the long-term impact of external technical assistance.^{10 11}

In February 2025, former President Trump revoked a U.S. Treasury license that had allowed Chevron to extract and export oil from Venezuela—operations accounting for roughly 25% of the country's output and serving as a key revenue stream for Maduro's regime amid ongoing sanctions.

Chevron had been permitted to operate under a limited 2022 license issued by the Biden administration, intended to stabilize global oil markets following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and to incentivize political concessions from Caracas. The license authorized Chevron to

⁸ <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/iran-and-venezuela-a-strategic-partnership/>

⁹ <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R44841>

¹⁰ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/fabulous-five-how-foreign-actors-prop-maduro-regime-venezuela>

¹¹ <https://energynews.oedigital.com/oil-refineries/2025/04/08/venezuela-restarts-el-palitos-fluid-catalytic-cracked-to-offset-the-largest-refineries-problems>

resume joint ventures with PDVSA under strict conditions, including that revenues be directed toward debt repayment rather than directly enriching the regime.

Trump justified the revocation by citing the Maduro government's failure to meet electoral commitments ahead of the 2024 presidential vote and its lack of cooperation in repatriating Venezuelan nationals.¹²

Shadow Fleet

In September 2021, the first 2.1-million-barrel shipment of Iranian condensate arrived in Venezuela under the bilateral pact. The Iranian tanker employed deceptive tactics—broadcasting a false location via its AIS transponder—to mask its route. This mirrors both regimes' reliance on a "shadow fleet" of reflagged or dark vessels to avoid detection. The imported condensate enables PDVSA to dilute heavy crude and increase volumes of exportable blends.¹³

The shadow tanker fleet—operating largely outside international oversight—is primarily controlled by state-linked actors in Russia, Iran, and Venezuela. These regimes have acquired hundreds of aging vessels through secondhand sales brokered by opaque front companies, often registered in low-transparency jurisdictions such as the UAE. This structure allows sanctioned entities to expand maritime logistics while concealing vessel ownership, operational control, and cargo origin. According to CI Live, acquisitions are typically funneled through obscure intermediaries that act as legal buffers, complicating interdiction efforts and limiting accountability within the global maritime system.¹⁴

Ship-to-ship (STS) transfers between Iranian and Venezuelan-linked vessels have been a key tactic to mask the origin of sanctioned oil, often taking place in international waters off Malaysia and near the Caribbean. The frequency and visibility of these operations have fluctuated in response to U.S. enforcement pressure. Following the U.S. Department of Justice's 2020 seizure of four Iranian fuel shipments en route to Venezuela, STS activity

¹² <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/27/nx-s1-5311377/venezuela-oil-trump-chevron>

¹³ <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/iranian-condensate-cargo-begins-discharging-venezuela-sources-2021-09-27/>

¹⁴ <https://cilive.com/commodities/shipping/news-and-insight/111124-factbox-global-shadow-tanker-fleet-moves-growing-volumes-of-sanctioned-oil>

adapted but did not cease—highlighting the regimes’ continued reliance on covert maritime tactics to sustain their oil trade,¹⁵ both regimes have increasingly adopted evasive tactics including AIS spoofing, oil blending, and falsified documentation. Rather than abandoning STS transfers, they now use them selectively—integrated into layered deception strategies—to segment trades and bypass transshipment chokepoints. These adaptations reflect a continuously evolving logistics playbook designed to evade detection, sustain vital oil revenues, and reinforce regime stability and strategic reach.

Recent Example

Between July 2024 and March 2025, traders orchestrated a sophisticated rebranding scheme in which over \$1.2 billion worth of Venezuelan Merey crude was disguised as Brazilian “bitumen blend” and shipped directly to China. By tampering with the AIS signals of tankers and forging certificates of origin, shippers made it appear as though vessels were departing from Brazilian ports, when in reality they were loading in Venezuela. A prime example is the Liberia-flagged tanker Karina, renamed Katelyn, which spoofed its location while in Venezuela and discharged 1.8 million barrels of Merey crude at China’s Yangpu port in April 2025. The forged paperwork labeled the crude as Brazilian, exploiting the fact that Brazil’s state oil company Petrobras does not export bitumen blends. This bypassed not only the usual maritime scrutiny but also eliminated the need for time-consuming and costly ship-to-ship transfers in Malaysia—a common method also used by Venezuela to obscure crude’s origin. In addition to shortening voyages by about four days, the tactic enabled traders to secure bank financing under the guise of non-sanctioned cargo, easing capital constraints and allowing greater operational agility.

The operation’s scale and sophistication present a direct challenge to U.S. foreign policy. It undermines sanctions meant to cut off revenue to the Maduro regime, which has responded by ramping up exports to China—jumping from 351,000 barrels per day in 2024 to 463,000 in early 2025. These shipments fund domestic repression and international disinformation campaigns, including influence operations against the US and Africa. At the same time, the rebranded oil displaces U.S. crude in Asian markets by offering a cheaper, unregulated alternative. This not only erodes U.S. energy market share but also gives a competitive

¹⁵ <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/largest-us-seizure-iranian-fuel-four-tankers>

advantage to shadow fleet operators who avoid compliance costs. The normalization of AIS spoofing and document forgery further weakens maritime transparency, rendering sanctions enforcement more reactive and less effective. The use of Brazil's identity in these forged cargoes also risks diplomatic strain.¹⁶

For the United States, the operations of the shadow fleet undermine the efficacy of sanctions imposed on Iran and Venezuela, allowing these countries to continue generating substantial oil revenues that can fund activities counter to U.S. interests. Moreover, the influx of discounted oil from these shadow operations can distort global oil markets, potentially impacting U.S. energy producers and market stability.¹⁷

Recent U.S. Treasury Press Release

The May 13, 2025 U.S. Treasury press release reveals that Iran's Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS), through its commercial arm Sepehr Energy, uses a complex shadow fleet to covertly export oil—relying on ship-to-ship transfers, AIS spoofing, and front companies in Hong Kong, the Seychelles, and China. Vessels like the BALU and ROC, flagged under Cameroon and Panama, facilitate these disguised shipments to Chinese teapot refineries, often rebranded as Malaysian crude. The operation generates billions annually, directly funding Iran's ballistic missile development, UAV programs, and terror proxies like Hezbollah. Treasury's action sanctioned these networks under Executive Order 13224 and warned that any parties facilitating such transactions risk secondary sanctions, emphasizing that the shadow fleet is not a workaround but a central component of Iran's statecraft to bypass U.S. pressure and finance destabilizing activities.¹⁸

Air Corridor

The Iran–Venezuela air corridor functions as a strategic logistics and influence channel, enabling both regimes to bypass international sanctions under the guise of civil aviation. Its foundation was laid by **Mahan Air**, a private Iranian airline sanctioned by the U.S. and EU for

¹⁶<https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/traders-rebrand-venezuelan-oil-china-brazilian-sources-tanker-trackers-say-2025-05-12/>

¹⁷<https://cilive.com/commodities/shipping/news-and-insight/111124-factbox-global-shadow-tanker-fleet-moves-growing-volumes-of-sanctioned-oil>

¹⁸ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0139>

its ties to the IRGC. During Venezuela's 2020 fuel crisis, Mahan Air initiated sustained flights into Caracas, transporting technicians, refinery components, and unspecified cargo. These operations were not only critical to restoring Venezuela's refinery capacity but are also suspected of facilitating the transport of **nine tons of Venezuelan gold** used as payment for Iranian fuel deliveries—demonstrating the corridor's dual function as a sanctions-evasion mechanism and state-level barter system.

Following this initial phase, Venezuela's national carrier **Conviasa**, also under U.S. sanctions, institutionalized the route. Conviasa began operating direct passenger flights between Caracas and Tehran in 2022, which appeared to pause intermittently before resuming in December 2024. These flights utilize long-range Airbus A340-600 aircraft, capable of significant cargo loads beyond civilian requirements. Although branded as commercial passenger service, Conviasa's operations—along with those of its cargo subsidiary **Emtrasur**—have mirrored the logistical patterns of Mahan Air. In 2021, Mahan Air transferred a Boeing 747-300M to Conviasa/Emtrasur, which was then used for Tehran–Caracas cargo operations. This handover effectively embedded Iranian aviation assets within Venezuela's fleet and helped establish a persistent, sanctioned cargo corridor.

This model reflects a broader Iranian strategy of aviation misuse observed in other regions. Iran has a well-documented history of using civilian airlines to transport military equipment, dual-use goods, and IRGC personnel, especially to theaters like Syria and Lebanon. The tactics used—such as the repurposing of aircraft via shell airline networks, strategic aircraft transfers to evade ownership tracking, and deployment of wide-body aircraft for covert logistics—are now appearing in Latin America through the Tehran–Caracas corridor. The 2022 detention of the Emtrasur-operated aircraft in Argentina confirmed this dynamic; the crew included a former IRGC Aerospace commander, and investigations pointed to training missions and fleet integration. These developments mirror practices used by Iran's Qeshm Fars Air and Pouya Air, suggesting the corridor is not an anomaly, but part of Iran's global model for covert military logistics.

Further concern arises from reports that Conviasa flights into Tehran routinely avoid standard civilian procedures. Eyewitnesses have observed Conviasa aircraft parked at cargo ramps rather than passenger terminals, with unmanifested pallets being discreetly offloaded—

characteristic of operations involving sensitive or undeclared cargo. The repeated use of this method aligns with Iranian aviation deception techniques, such as obfuscating cargo contents and masking the identities of onboard personnel. This layered opacity, in combination with the strategic convergence between Caracas and Tehran, elevates the risk that the corridor is being exploited for the covert transfer of sanctioned goods, advanced military components, or operatives under civilian cover. The resumption of direct flights in late 2024 further signals that the corridor remains a valuable tool in both regimes' sanctions-evasion and regional influence strategies, posing an ongoing challenge to U.S. enforcement and regional stability.

Security and Strategic Collaborations

Weapons Procurement and Development

Iranian firms, including Qods Aviation—a known IRGC front—established a drone assembly line at El Libertador Air Base in Maracay, Venezuela.¹⁹ As of 2025, El Libertador Air Base is manufacturing advanced drone models like the Shahed-131—the same type deployed by Russia in Ukraine. Venezuelan military personnel are operating these systems under Iranian supervision. Iran is also positioning itself to export drones to additional Latin American countries, expanding its defense footprint in the region.²⁰

Intelligence Collaboration and Hezbollah

In 2008, U.S. Treasury officials reported that the Venezuelan government was “employing and providing safe harbor” to Hezbollah operatives—acting as proxies for Iran. One key figure, Lebanese-Venezuelan diplomat **Ghazi Nasr al-Din**, served as a Venezuelan envoy in the Middle East and allegedly leveraged his diplomatic post to raise funds for Hezbollah and facilitate the movement of supporters into Venezuela.²¹ Nasr al-Din was designated by the U.S. for terrorism in 2015 and remains an FBI-wanted individual.²² Through operatives like Ghazi Nasr al-Din, Iranian influence agents have secured Venezuelan passports and official

¹⁹ <https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/iran-and-venezuela-a-strategic-partnership/>

²⁰ <https://www.latintimes.com/iran-increases-military-presence-venezuela-drone-factory-maduro-claims-new-term-office-despite-571806>

²¹ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/hp1036>

²² <http://web.archive.org/web/20250417151835/https://www.fbi.gov/contact-us/field-offices/miami/news/press-releases/fbi-adds-lebanese-man-to-seeking-information-terrorism-list>

documentation, enabling covert entry into North America under Venezuelan identities. Some of these individuals have held positions within the Maduro government or operated front businesses tied to narco trafficking and money laundering networks supporting Hezbollah.

Activity Within U.S. Borders

Venezuela as a Staging Ground

Multiple incidents indicate that Iran has leveraged Venezuela as a staging ground for operations targeting the U.S. In 2021, the FBI charged four Iranian intelligence operatives with plotting to abduct a U.S.-based Iranian dissident. The plan involved forcibly transporting the target via maritime routes to Venezuela, highlighting the regime's use of Venezuelan territory as a safe transit point for hostile actions against U.S. persons.^{23 24}

Influence Operations

Venezuela may also function as an unofficial hub for Iran's anti-U.S. propaganda efforts. Iran's state-run HispanTV, a Spanish-language outlet, frequently mirrors the messaging of Venezuela's TeleSUR—amplifying narratives hostile to U.S. interests across Latin America.

In the U.S., Iranian and Venezuelan propaganda has the potential to reach Spanish-speaking communities, particularly through online platforms distributing Venezuelan or Iranian state-backed content.²⁵ During U.S. election cycles, hostile actors have exploited Spanish-language social media groups to push divisive narratives. While Russia remains the dominant actor in this space, both Iran and Venezuela possess the ideological drive and expanding technical capabilities to conduct targeted influence operations—aimed at eroding U.S. foreign policy consensus, undermining sanctions, and sowing domestic distrust.²⁶

Academic Webinar

In June 2020, the Council on Hemispheric Affairs (COHA) co-sponsored a webinar titled *“Venezuela–Iran: A Natural Alliance in the Face of Illegal Sanctions”* alongside activist groups

²³<https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-kidnapping-conspiracy-charges-against-iranian>

²⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-57830677>

²⁵ <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russia-and-iran-latin-america-same-outlook-similar-playbooks>

²⁶ <https://www.wsj.com/politics/national-security/election-interference-russia-iran-minority-voters-1e560737>

CodePink and the Alliance for Global Justice. The event featured speakers including COHA Senior Research Fellow Dan Kovalic and University of Tehran professor Foad Izadi, and advanced messaging that framed U.S. sanctions as imperial overreach while legitimizing strategic ties between Tehran and Caracas. COHA—a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit known for its anti-interventionist stance—has served as a soft power platform for disseminating narratives aligned with Iranian and Venezuelan interests. Such events, while couched in academic language, function as low-visibility influence channels targeting U.S. and Latin American audiences.²⁷

Coordinated Narratives

Between 2020 and 2022, Iran and Venezuela ran a coordinated influence campaign to secure the release of Alex Saab, casting him as a diplomat unlawfully targeted by the U.S. According to a Recorded Future cybersecurity report, the operation leveraged platforms like Twitter, Telegram, state-run media, and proxy organizations to disseminate disinformation. The campaign framed Saab’s detention as illegal while pushing anti-U.S. narratives and reinforcing joint strategic messaging between Tehran and Caracas.²⁸

The narratives advanced by state-affiliated media in Iran and Venezuela reveal a deliberate alignment in strategic messaging aimed at undermining U.S. global influence. Both stress the imminent decline of Western—particularly American—hegemony, framing it as historically inevitable due to the rise of alternative power centers like China, Russia, and **Iran**. Within this framework, Iran is cast as the vanguard of resistance, rejecting Western-imposed terms, while Venezuela promotes a rebalanced world order led by the Global South. Maduro, in a Telesur interview, explicitly declared the end of Western dominance and affirmed the ascent of long-marginalized nations. The messaging portrays U.S. policy as imperialist and untrustworthy, with sanctions framed as tools of oppression. This thematic convergence indicates a

²⁷ <https://coha.org/coha-webinar-venezuela-iran-a-natural-alliance-in-the-face-of-illegal-sanctions/>

²⁸ <https://www.recordedfuture.com/blog/iran-and-venezuela-the-alex-saab-trans-regional-influence-campaign>

coordinated effort to construct a multipolar narrative ecosystem—one that legitimizes their regimes, garners regional backing, and undermines the moral authority of the U.S.^{29 30}

Drug Trafficking and Cartel of the Suns

Iran, through its proxy Hezbollah, has embedded itself within Venezuela’s illicit narcotics ecosystem, using the country as a key transit node for drug trafficking operations targeting the United States. This activity is closely linked to the “**Cartel of the Suns**,” a network composed of **senior Venezuelan military officials** who facilitate the movement of narcotics in exchange for financial and political gain. Hezbollah’s collaboration with this network enables the transit of large-scale cocaine shipments—primarily originating from Colombia—through Venezuelan territory, utilizing military-controlled ports and clandestine airstrips. From there, the narcotics flow through established trafficking corridors in Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico before entering the U.S. illicit market. Proceeds from these operations are laundered through international financial channels and ultimately directed back to Hezbollah, reinforcing its operational capabilities in the Middle East and enhancing Iran’s strategic reach.³¹

Key Figures

Alex Saab

Colombian businessman Alex Saab served as the key **financial intermediary** between Caracas and Tehran, facilitating fuel and food deals to help the Maduro regime evade U.S. sanctions. In June 2020, Saab was arrested in Cape Verde by U.S. authorities while en route to Iran. Maduro had designated him a “diplomat” and issued a diplomatic passport in an attempt to shield him from apprehension.³² Saab was released by the US in 2023 in prisoner swap with

²⁹ <https://www.telesurtv.net/presidente-maduro-predice-el-declive-de-la-hegemonia-occidental/>

³⁰ <https://www.hispantv.com/noticias/opinion/611638/iran-fuerza-poderosa-desafia-hegemonia-estadounidense>

³¹ <https://insightcrime.org/venezuela-organized-crime-news/cartel-de-los-soles-profile/>

³² <https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/who-is-maduro-ally-alex-saab-who-was-granted-clemency-prisoner-swap-2023-12-20/>

Venezuela's government.³³ Nicolás Maduro appointed Alex Saab as Minister of Industry and National Production announcing via Telegram on October 18, 2024.

Tareck El Aissami

A Venezuelan politician of Syrian-Lebanese descent, El Aissami has been a central figure in facilitating Iranian influence operations. As former Vice President and Petroleum Minister (until 2023), he oversaw numerous deals with Tehran and is alleged to maintain ties with Hezbollah. The U.S. Treasury designated him a narcotics “kingpin” and linked him to a passport fraud scheme involving the sale of Venezuelan documents to individuals connected to Hezbollah and other extremist groups, potentially enabling entry into North America under false identities. El Aissami is widely seen as **Iran's closest ally in Caracas**, managing petroleum exports via Iranian channels and reportedly brokering gold-for-food exchanges through Turkish intermediaries on Iran's behalf.³⁴

In April 2024, El Aissami was arrested by Venezuelan authorities as part of a sweeping anti-corruption crackdown focused on irregularities within state oil company PDVSA. He had vanished from public view for over a year prior to his detention, fueling speculation about internal power struggles. Authorities accuse him of orchestrating unauthorized oil sales that bypassed the central bank, resulting in billions of dollars in lost revenue. His arrest marks a decisive move by Maduro to neutralize internal rivals while consolidating control over Venezuela's illicit petroleum networks.³⁵ Iran has remained silent on El Aissami's arrest, likely to avoid scrutiny of its regional operations.

Ghazi Nasr al-Din

Nasr al Din is a Venezuela-based Hezbollah facilitator who exploited his diplomatic postings in Syria and Lebanon, along with his leadership of a Shi'a Islamic Center in Caracas, to advance Hezbollah's financial and operational objectives. While stationed at the Venezuelan embassy in Damascus, he helped arrange meetings between senior Venezuelan officials and Hezbollah

³³<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/who-is-maduro-ally-alex-saab-who-was-granted-clemency-prisoner-swap-2023-12-20/>

³⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-38986809>

³⁵<https://apnews.com/article/venezuela-corruption-arrests-maduro-elaisami-eea92e199050fc414c3625e07bae6184>

operatives. In 2009, he allegedly brokered a meeting between Hezbollah, then-Interior Minister Tareck El Aissami, and Venezuelan military counterintelligence chief Hugo Carvajal, which later enabled a cocaine-for-weapons scheme involving FARC and Hezbollah. He coordinated fundraising, provided donors with account information for direct transfers, and arranged travel for operatives between Venezuela, Lebanon, and Iran—including organizing Hezbollah training courses in Iran—positioning Venezuela as a key node in Iran’s proxy logistics network in the Western Hemisphere. His brother, Oday Nasr al Din, also played a role in Iran-Hezbollah activities in Venezuela, including alleged involvement in passport issuance schemes for operatives. Ghazi Nasr al Din has been linked to the Venezuelan think tank Global AZ, a platform reportedly used to project pro-Iranian narratives in Latin America; however, his current affiliation with the entity remains unconfirmed.³⁶

Fawzi Kan’an

A Venezuela-based Hezbollah operative, Kan’an serves as a key financial facilitator and logistical enabler for the group’s international operations. He has channeled funds raised in Venezuela to Hezbollah officials in Lebanon and used his company, Biblos Travel Agency, as a cover to courier money abroad. Kan'an has met directly with senior Hezbollah leadership to discuss operational matters—including kidnappings and potential terrorist attacks—and has traveled to Iran alongside other Hezbollah members for training, underscoring his embedded role in the Iran-backed proxy network operating within the Western Hemisphere.³⁷

U.S. Impact: Threat Map from the Iran–Venezuela Alliance

The strategic alliance between Iran and Venezuela has matured into a multidomain threat network actively degrading U.S. power projection across economic, information, and territorial domains. Below is a synthesized threat map segmented into macro-level impact categories:

1. Financial Impact: Sanctions Evasion and Erosion of Dollar Dominance

³⁶<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-maduro-hezbollah-nexus-how-iran-backed-networks-prop-up-the-venezuelan-regime/>

³⁷ <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/hp1036>

- **Bi-national Banking & Cryptocurrency Infrastructure:** Iran and Venezuela’s joint financial institutions, paired with Venezuela’s military-managed crypto platforms, have established semi-covert payment ecosystems. These bypass SWIFT, obscure transaction chains, and enable barter (e.g., gold-for-oil) and pseudonymous crypto-settled trades—eroding the enforceability of U.S. sanctions and weakening the primacy of the U.S. dollar.
- **Exploitation of U.S. Financial Channels:** Illicit actors such as Alex Saab exploited U.S. correspondent banking systems to launder regime funds, revealing systemic vulnerabilities in financial oversight. These activities illustrate how sanctioned regimes leverage American infrastructure against itself when insufficiently monitored.

2. Maritime Trade Deception: Disruptive Energy Market Manipulation

- **Shadow Fleet & Maritime Spoofing:** A coordinated fleet of reflagged tankers conducts covert ship-to-ship (STS) transfers, AIS spoofing, and cargo falsification—allowing sanctioned oil to reach markets like China under fake provenance (e.g., “Brazilian bitumen blend”). These tactics displace U.S. crude in global markets, normalize deception, and disrupt maritime transparency norms.
- **Third-Country Facilitation:** Operations are routed through permissive jurisdictions (e.g., Panama, UAE, Hong Kong), using opaque ownership structures to shield state-aligned trade and banking activities from enforcement. This global buffer system exposes weaknesses in international compliance frameworks and enables operational agility for both regimes.

3. Air Logistics Corridor: Dual-Use Supply Chain & Personnel Transfers

- **Tehran–Caracas Air Bridge:** Sanctioned carriers like Conviasa and Mahan Air have institutionalized a dual-use air corridor, camouflaged as civilian travel but functionally optimized for logistics. Aircraft transfers, irregular cargo manifests, and terminal avoidance patterns suggest a sustained IRGC-modeled supply chain—capable of transporting sensitive cargo or personnel under diplomatic or commercial cover.

- **Embedded Aviation Assets:** Iran’s transfer of wide-body aircraft to Venezuelan cargo fleets mirrors tactics used to resupply Syrian and Lebanese theaters—indicating the corridor’s integration into broader Iranian military logistics doctrine.

4. Proxy Infiltration & Operational Security Threats

- **Passport Fraud & Identity Laundering:** Venezuelan complicity in issuing documentation to Hezbollah-linked operatives (e.g., Ghazi Nasr al-Din, Fawzi Kan’an) has enabled covert Iranian proxies to embed within Latin America—and potentially access U.S. territory—under false identities. These vectors represent direct infiltration risk to U.S. homeland security.
- **Drone Manufacturing & Military Export Hub:** The establishment of an IRGC-supervised Shahed drone line at Venezuela’s El Libertador Air Base represents Iran’s first known military-industrial export node in the Western Hemisphere. With operational Venezuelan units and export potential to other regional regimes, this foothold expands Iranian asymmetric warfare capabilities into U.S. proximity.
- **Terror-Linked Narcotrafficking Corridors:** Hezbollah, shielded by Venezuela’s military and intelligence infrastructure, has integrated into narcotrafficking networks such as the Cartel of the Suns. These flows fund Iran’s global terror apparatus while contributing to domestic drug crises in the U.S.

5. Influence & Cognitive Operations: Strategic Narrative Convergence

- **Coordinated Spanish-Language Propaganda:** Iran and Venezuela co-amplify disinformation targeting U.S. Spanish-speaking communities, using platforms like TeleSUR, HispanTV, and Telegram to distribute synchronized messaging. Campaigns exploit polarization, delegitimize U.S. sanctions, and undermine consensus around foreign policy toward authoritarian regimes.
- **Domestic Soft Power Entrenchment:** Iran and Venezuela have co-opted D.C.-based nonprofits and academic figures to legitimize their narratives within U.S. intellectual

discourse. These influence nodes operate under the radar, shaping public opinion through ostensibly neutral platforms such as webinars, think tank reports, and pseudo-academic events.

6. Venezuela as an Operational Staging Ground

- **Territorial Safe Haven for Hostile Acts:** Iran has used Venezuela as a launchpad for hostile actions against U.S.-based dissidents, including maritime kidnapping plots. The permissive operating environment provides a risk-tolerant base of operations for Tehran's asymmetric activities across the hemisphere.
- **Embedded Hezbollah Operatives & Military-Intelligence Integration:** Venezuelan soil is now a confirmed logistical hub for Hezbollah facilitators—embedding military officers, facilitating travel networks, and co-opting state entities. These conditions replicate Iranian operational patterns seen in Iraq and Lebanon, but now within striking distance of U.S. borders.

Urgent Need to Investigate Mechanisms of Influence

Investigating Mechanisms of Penetration and Influence

Understanding the full scope of Iranian influence in Venezuela requires mapping the operational mechanisms through which the Iran-Venezuela alliance may penetrate and influence U.S. territory, both directly and indirectly. The aim is to transition from relationship-mapping to actionable threat identification, leveraging open-source intelligence (OSINT), corporate registries, shipping databases, and cyber monitoring tools to trace malign networks that are either already embedded in or actively targeting the U.S. and its partners.

Core Investigative Pillars

1. Shell Company & Financial Network Mapping

- Conduct in-depth forensic analysis of front and shell companies connected to sanctioned individuals (e.g., Alex Saab, Tareck El Aissami) and their proxies operating in the U.S., Caribbean, and offshore jurisdictions.

- Cross-reference incorporation records, trade databases, and leaked financial data (e.g., Panama Papers, FinCEN Files) to identify U.S.-registered or U.S.-linked business entities being used for laundering, procurement, or lobbying.
- Investigate cryptocurrency wallets and platforms (particularly those with weak KYC) known to be tied to the Maduro regime or Hezbollah-linked facilitators.

2. Profile Expansion: Alex Saab & Strategic Facilitators

- Compile a comprehensive behavioral and operational profile of Alex Saab and his network post-2023 prisoner swap, focusing on his reappointment and access to state resources.
Identify associates and business affiliates now operating under new aliases or through layered shell structures in U.S.-adjacent jurisdictions (Panama, Mexico, Florida).
- Expand this profiling model to other designated facilitators such as Ghazi Nasr al-Din and Fawzi Kan'an to anticipate proxy operations.

3. Shadow Shipping & Port Monitoring

- Track real-time AIS spoofing incidents linked to Iran–Venezuela oil trades rerouted through U.S. maritime corridors, including potential transshipments in the Caribbean Basin or Gulf of Mexico.
- Monitor U.S. Gulf Coast refineries and import terminals for signs of falsely labeled crude (e.g., Brazilian bitumen blend) linked to these shadow fleet operations.
- Map the registry and ownership histories of tankers flagged under suspect jurisdictions (e.g., Panama, Cameroon) and tied to previously sanctioned shipments.

4. Dual-Use Aviation & Air Cargo Monitoring

- Investigate Conviasa and Emtrasur air operations for continued patterns of undeclared cargo into Latin America, with a focus on secondary movements into Central America and Miami.
- Assess airport landing records, flight plans, and cargo manifests where accessible—especially for Tehran–Caracas corridors utilizing Airbus A340s.
- Scrutinize the reuse or re-registration of aircraft originally transferred from Mahan Air, especially if connected to Venezuela's military logistics.

5. Influence and Soft Power Channels

- Analyze Spanish-language media content across Florida, Texas, and California to detect Iran–Venezuela aligned narratives targeting diaspora and minority communities.
- Monitor Telegram and other encrypted platforms for disinformation linked to Saab or Hezbollah-linked campaigns, especially for the upcoming U.S. midterm election cycle.
- Map diaspora and academic institutions receiving indirect funding or ideological programming from Bolivarian or Iranian state-linked entities.