

Islamic Revolutionary Guards and the Problem of Drug Trafficking in Iran

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September 2021

The origins of the IRGC

Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, shortly after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, established the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), also known as the *Sepah-e-Pasdaran* (*Pasdaran / Guards, Sepah /the Corps*¹). During the Shah's era, 'the revolutionary children'² of Khomeini were the poor and marginalized thugs with a desire for violence. According to Article 150 of Iran's Constitution, the IRGC is responsible for "protecting the theocratic order and Islamic laws and morals"³.

The corps are particularly influential in executing Iran's foreign and security policy. According to Sazegara, for properly fulfilling its strategic objectives, the IRGC has a country-wide infrastructure of branches and military facilities, established its networks for intelligence gathering, namely the Unit of Reservation of Information⁴. It exists in parallel with the Ministry of Intelligence and is highly influential. Like the ministry, their intelligence units operate both internally and externally. The corps is also responsible for the Shahab intermediate-range ballistic missile program and controls Iran's nuclear weapons program.

¹ S. Zahir, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 47

² S. Ghasseminejad, *How Iran's mafia-like Revolutionary Guard rules the country's black market*, Business Insider, 10 December 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-irans-mafia-like-revolutionary-guard-rules>

³ N. B. Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic*, Santa Monica, CA, The Rand Corporation, 1987, p. 74.

⁴ M. Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*, Forward, 16 March 2007, <https://forward.com/opinion/10320/what-was-once-a-revolutionary-guard-is-now-just-a/>

One of the strategic objectives of Sepah is the export of the Islamic revolution, and the Quds Force is in charge of this. This elite unit uses terrorist and subversive methods to fight Iran's enemies. They provide operational support to revolutionary and anti-American groups and infiltrate Shiite and other Muslim populations to create civil and political infrastructure to support Iran's plans. These proxy groups are used to disguise Iran's cross-border terrorist activity. The primary⁵ ally of Quds Force is Lebanese Hezbollah, created with the support of the IRGC.

The IRGC is also present in the country's legislative branch through its retired officers. They occupy a substantial number of seats in the Iranian parliament (The *Majles*)⁶. They persistently expand their political profile and suppress political opposition, thereby acting as the power brokers in Iran's political decision-making processes. The revolutionary guards 'actively prevent steps towards democratic reforms' and clamp down on public protests⁷. They gained absolute control over the media (radio and television networks) by granting political and bureaucratic positions to prominent media figures.

Iran's Black Economy and Smuggling

Control over the country's military-industrial and financial complex allowed the IRGC to create its business empire. They own legal businesses, register as foreign companies, and are involved in illegal smuggling. Business activities of the Guards include over one hundred corporations from various industrial sectors, including security, energy, construction, and communications. Limitless power allows them to use their military capacities to arrest or intimidate economic rivals and establish monopolies. According to a report in 2010, the IRGC controlled between a third and two-thirds of the country's economy⁸. Some reports suggest that they used force to take control of large economic projects. Limited information is available about their role in foreign firms owned by individuals in the UAE and Oman.

The corps is also the major player in Iran's shadow economy, which is an unobservable source of wealth that is nevertheless important for understanding the Guard's abilities and behavior. The IMF's study suggests that the value of an underground economy for developing countries is an amount equivalent to between 35 and 44 percent of their stated

⁵ S. Hughes, 'The Dirty Secret No One Talks About, Tehran's Heroin Drug Trade / its Narco -War Against America', The Jerusalem Post, 10 March 2015, <http://www.jpost.com/Blogs/The-Iran-Threat/The-Dirty-Secret-No-One-Talks-About-Tehrans-Heroin-Drug-Trade-its-Narco-War-Against-America-3935>

⁶ H. Forozan, 'The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The evolution and roles of the Revolutionary Guards', London and New York: 8 Routledge, 2016, p. 1

⁷ M. Khalaji, 'Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, Inc', The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policy no. 1273, 2007, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-revolutionary-guards-corps-inc>.

⁸ J. Borger & R. Tait, 'The Financial Power of the Revolutionary Guards', The Guardian, 15 February 2010, www.guardian.com/world/2010/feb/15/financial-power-revolutionary-guard.

GDP⁹. Estimated measurements of the size of Iran's illicit activity reach 36% of Iran's GDP or the value of \$100-140 billion¹⁰. How much of this amount goes to the IRGC, is unknown. However, it can be stated with confidence that the Guards receive sufficiently enough benefits from illicit trade.

Smuggling activities of the IRGC are based on its control of the country's customs system and exclusive access to some terminals at Iranian ports and airports. They actively use criminal gangs for the import and export of illicit goods. Like the American Mafia, the Guards have built up varied routes to smuggle goods and are said to be in control of a string of 'jetties' (unauthorized docks) on the southern Iranian island of Qeshm, situated in the strategic Strait of Hormuz at the mouth of the Gulf Coast¹¹.

Since the creation of the Islamic Republic, Iran has always relied on smuggling, which secured the procurement of strategically important goods and products necessary for domestic industry and infrastructure development of the country. Oil smuggling is key in this area and has allowed the state to generate large revenues during the stringent sanctions against Iran. For example, in 2013, 90% of export smuggling in Iran involved oil-related products, and in 2014, petroleum products worth \$7 billion were illegally exported from the country¹². Annually about 20 million liters of fuel are smuggled out of the country¹³. The Guards are also major arms smugglers, transferring weapons to Iranian proxy groups such as Hezbollah. Overall, smuggling is facilitated by the widespread corruption in the country, which has significantly worsened since the resumption of sanctions by the Trump administration.

The IRGC's involvement in the shadow economy allows the Guards to expand their financial, political, and operational capabilities inside and outside Iran. The IRGC, one of the most equipped militarized groups of our time, has the will and ability to create a worldwide illicit network.

The build-up of Iran's Drug Business

Iran's black economy has also grown significantly due to the imposed international sanctions. One of the major areas of Iran's shadow economy is drug trafficking (heroin, opium, and methamphetamine) and the distribution of narcotics both in and out of the county. Iran lies on the world's busiest drug smuggling corridors - Balkan and Southern Routes, which are recognized as "superhighways" for Afghani opium. Afghanistan

⁹ S. Ghasseminejad, *'How Iran's mafia-like Revolutionary Guard rules the country's black market'*

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ F. Wehrey et. al, *'The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps'*, Rand Cooperation, Report, 2009, p.64

¹² A. Soderholm, *'Under The Shadow: Illicit Economies in Iran'*, Geneva: The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2020, p.30.

¹³ Ibid

accounts for about 82% of world opium production and the vast majority of world heroin production¹⁴.

Table 1: Seizures of Opiates in 2017

Country	Heroin and Morphine Seizures (kg) (share of global total in %)	Opium Seizures (kg) (share of global total in %)	Total Opiates (kg)
Afghanistan	65,585 (35%)	7,031 (1%)	72,616
Iran	38,858 (20%)	630,551 (91%)	669,409
Pakistan	31,789 (17%)	39,995 (6%)	71,784

Source: IranWire

The illicit drug trade in Iran has affected the lives of countless people, exacerbated by punitive and harsh policies that have left the most vulnerable parts of society unnoticed¹⁵. Nowadays Iran is recognized as the country with the second-highest level of opiate addiction in the world. According to various estimates, the number of "drug addicts" in the country reaches 3-4 million adults, which is the third-highest rate (2.26%) in the world after the U.S. and Afghanistan. Moreover, tens of thousands of Iranians die because of poppy addiction per year¹⁶.

The Iranian government heavily invests in the fight against smuggling across the country's eastern border and the Guards play a crucial role in this war. Many members of the organization have been killed in battles with drug traffickers, particularly in the southeastern provinces of Sistan and Baluchistan¹⁷. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards play a significant role in Iran's war on drug smugglers, and they proudly highlight it to strengthen its domestic and international legitimacy.

Along with efforts to fight drug trafficking, they also use the strategic and tactical potential of the international drug trade to achieve their goals. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) report states that around 40% of drugs seized in Iran remain in the country¹⁸. It is no secret that the corps has been involved in the drug trade for decades and has made millions of dollars from it. The regime has two major benefits from drug production and distribution. First, by fighting and executing drug criminals that may

¹⁴ D. Farahani, 'Drugs in Iran: A New IranWire Series', IranWire, 23 March 2020, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/6840>

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ S. Kronenfeld and Y. Gurzansky, 'The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade', Military and Strategic Affairs, vol. 5, no. 2, 2013, pp. 109

¹⁷ F. Wehrey et. al, 'The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps', Rand Cooperation, Report, 2009, p.65

¹⁸ A. Nima, 'The IRGC's lucrative drug trade', Iran News Wire, 6 May 2019, <https://irannewswire.org/the-irgcs-lucrative-drug-trade/>

infringe on their business, they create an atmosphere of fear, which then spreads to the general population and strengthens the regime's control¹⁹.

Second, participation in drug smuggling provides the regime with cash. Due to the strict international sanctions imposed on Iran, the smuggling business has become an important factor in the country's economy, as it allows Tehran to gain huge profits. The regime controls border crossings and "taxes" illegal smuggling operations. Cash received from such "operations" opens up certain avenues for the IRGC to finance terrorism, war-mongering, and other malicious acts²⁰. Moreover, these operations ensure Guards' strong ties with global criminal organizations. These ties help to support and enhance the ability of the Guards and particularly the Quds Force to fight their enemies through "forging documents, smuggling goods across borders, money laundering, supporting black banking, and so on".²¹

The value of Iran's illegal drug sales is around \$3 billion per year and the Quds Force takes a significant part of this money to finance its military operations²². They are controlling the main routes in and out of the country, dealing with drug traffickers not only in Afghanistan but also in South and Central America through Hezbollah. In fact, this is the main source of financing for their operations. Over the years, many former IRGC members have repeatedly argued that the corps dealt with massive amounts of drugs and that billions of dollars received through their global distribution networks were redirected to the needs of Quds Force and to finance its terrorist activities around the world.

Iran's Drug Business and Afghanistan-Taliban connection

Iran is one of the most influential actors in Afghanistan, whose involvement contributes to the deterioration of the country's security and political instability. Milani notes that the IRGC-QF 'has contributed to Afghanistan's fragile status and growing opium cultivation and trade by assisting Taliban groups fighting in western and southern Afghan provinces, where most of narcotics are cultivated and produced'²³.

The Guards' involvement in the international drug trade is reflected both directly and through proxies. An example of their direct involvement is primarily the Afghan heroin industry. Iran is an important link in the complex transnational drug supply chain in Southwest Asia. It is a "stronghold" for drug trafficking from the so-called Golden

¹⁹ A. Taghati, 'The IRGC Drug Trade', National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) – Foreign Affairs Committee, 8 May 2019, <https://www.ncr-iran.org/en/blog/the-irgc-drug-trade/>

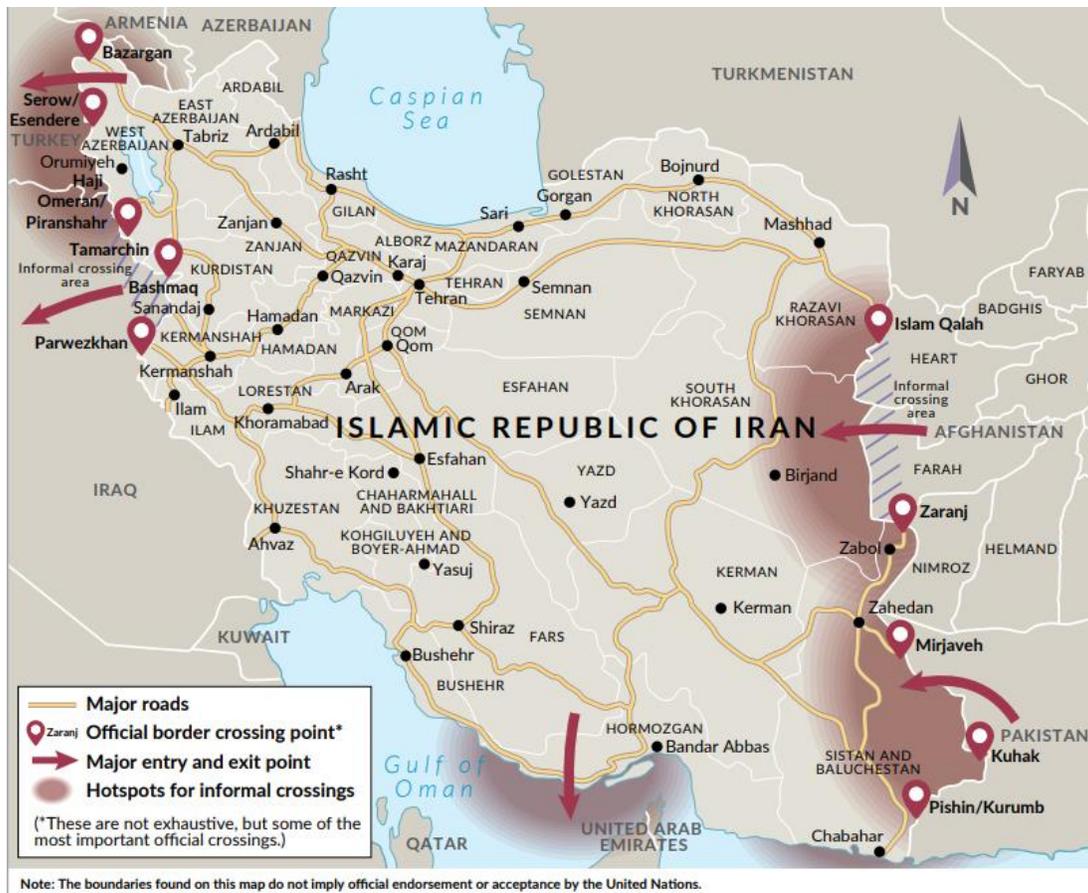
²⁰ Ibid

²¹ J. A. Piazza, 'The Opium Trade and Patterns of Terrorism in the Provinces of Afghanistan: An Empirical Analysis', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24, no. 2, 2012, p.217

²² S. Ghasseminejad, 'How Iran's mafia-like Revolutionary Guard rules the country's black market'

²³ A. Majidyar, 'Iran's Double Game in Drug War', Middle East Institute, 28 February 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/io/iran-s-double-game-drug-war>

Crescent (heroin production or transshipment zone), which is based in Afghanistan²⁴. The Golden Crescent has not only replaced the Golden Triangle of Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos as the main source of illicit drugs but has also become the leading heroin-producing region in the world. Iran's strategic location makes it the starting point of the world's major heroin trade routes, which transport the drug to Russia, Western Europe, and the United States. UNODC estimates that about 140 tons of heroin – 87% of the Afghani heroin trade²⁵ - is transported through Iran annually, as smugglers consider it the main "trafficking hub"²⁶.



Source: The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime

In addition, they stated that in the short-term perspective, the so-called Balkan route, which is supplying Western and Central Europe with opiates from Afghanistan through Iran, Turkey, and Southeast Europe, will remain the most crucial trafficking channel²⁷.

²⁴ J. Calabrese, 'Iran's War on Drugs: Holding the Line?', Policy Brief, no. 3, The Middle East Institute, Washington DC, 2007, http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/JC_PB.pdf

²⁵ UNODC, UNODC, 'World Drug Report 2010', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, 2010, pp. 54-55, http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf.

²⁶ G. Nada, 'Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics', The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, 26 June 2012, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2012/jun/26/iran-both-fights-and-facilitates-narcotics>.

²⁷ UNODC, 'World Drug Report 2016', United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Vienna, 2016, http://www.unodc.org/doc/60_wdr2016/WORLD_DRUG_REPORT_2016_web.pdf.

Besides, Iran is an important part of the Southern Route, which spans the Gulf states, Africa, South Asia, and North America²⁸. The importance of the Southern Route for opiate trafficking has significantly grown in recent years. The third route is known as the Northern Route, leading to the neighboring states of Central Asia, Russia, and the Commonwealth of Independent States. Its integral part is the Caucasus Passage, which provides easy access to drug markets in Europe and Russia²⁹.

These geostrategic conditions make the IRGC and Quds Force major players in the Afghan drug industry and confirm their involvement in drug smuggling to the Western markets. The Guards' close contacts with leading figures in the Afghan drug business and transnational crime organizations have long been no secret and were mutually beneficial. In brief, Iran's authorities facilitated the smuggling of drugs on its territory; as a trade-off, Afghan drug traffickers delivered weapons to the Taliban and other anti-American forces that fought NATO troops in Afghanistan³⁰. Since at least 2006, Iran has arranged frequent shipments of small arms and associated ammunition, rocket-propelled grenades, and probably man-portable defense systems to the Taliban³¹.

In addition to cooperating with criminal organizations, the Guards own infrastructure for the production and distribution of drugs in Iran itself. It is known that at the international level, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards operate by the Quds Forces, while internally the Basiji Corps assist them³². Their members bring huge quantities of raw opium from Afghanistan to Iran, which is processed into heroin and other opiates in local laboratories. Then through an extensive smuggling network, they transport drugs to clients in the West and total control over transport and logistics centers significantly facilitates the process.

One of the proofs of the IRGC's involvement in these activities can be considered the report of the U.S. Embassy in Azerbaijan, in which high-ranking Azerbaijani government officials say that the IRGC is a major player in the country's heroin market³³. An investigation by the Azerbaijani intelligence revealed that the production of these drugs is carried out in the labs of Tabriz and other Iranian cities. Members of the Guards are directly involved in the transportation of heroin from Afghanistan to Azerbaijan, across the southern borders in the Astara district. Interestingly, skirmishes between border guards occur in this area frequently and large consignments of drugs are detained almost every day. Besides, after the 2020 war in Nagorno-Karabakh, the military discovered tunnels leading from the border areas of the Fuzuli-Jabrail districts to Iran, which were

²⁸ Ibid

²⁹ J. Warrick, 'In Iran, Drug Trafficking Soars as Sanctions Take Bigger Bite', The Washington Post, 1 November 2012, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/in-iran-drug-trafficking-soars-as-sanctions-take-bigger-bite/2012/10/31/12ff0930-1d81-11e2-b647-bb1668e64058_story.html?utm_term=.f91aff20693.

³⁰ G. Nada, 'Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics'.

³¹ Ibid.

³² J. Calabrese, 'Iran's War on Drugs: Holding the Line?'

³³ "Tehran-Baku Tensions Heat Up," Aftenposten, October 15, 2009, <http://www.aftenposten.no/spesial/wikileaksdokumenter/article3999424.ece>.

most likely used for drug smuggling. Azerbaijani authorities consider this activity of Tehran as an attempt to destabilize the secular regime in the country³⁴.

The testimonies of former IRGC officers show that involvement in the drug trade is widespread among various units of the corps. This is doubly reprehensible because it is part of a broader scheme to support terrorism. This was confirmed by the identification of several high-ranking officers of the IRGC-QF, directly involved in the Iran-Afghanistan crime-terror nexus. In 2012, the US Department of the Treasury (USDT) designated then-Quds Force General Gholamreza, who was in charge of a region in Iran that bordered Afghanistan, as a Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker under the provisions of the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act)³⁵. He was accused of allowing afghan traffickers to transport heroin/opiates through Iran in exchange for transferring weapons to the Taliban on behalf of the Quds Force³⁶.

They also charged him with smuggling chemicals that are used in drug production laboratories inside Iran. According to Warrick, Iran has become a leading producer of highly pure methamphetamine, a highly addictive synthetic stimulant that is broadly targeted at overseas markets³⁷. Manufacturers, i.e., the IRGC-QF, particularly work with professional chemists in pharmaceutical-grade laboratories³⁸. Considering that such a massive and professional production cannot be conducted without the knowledge of the security authorities, accusations of the USDT are not groundless.

Narco-Terrorism Network of Iran

Drug business strengthens Iran's 'Narco-Power' by providing a wide range of opportunities in its war against the West. It allows Iran to effectively target public and private spheres in enemy countries. . Nowadays, Iran's narco-terrorism network spans from Afghanistan to Latin America and has a global reach. The overseas parts of the routes are protected by Quds Force and its proxies, such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Houthis of Yemen, and the Iraqi group Kata'ib Hezbollah³⁹.

Hezbollah's connection to Iran is more organic than an equal partnership, and there have been several occasions throughout the group's history where Tehran either directly influenced its decisions or blatantly gave it specific orders. The Revolutionary Regime had the greatest influence on the Lebanese Shiites due to mutual religious and cultural affinity, and shared political interests. In addition to all this, Iran's direct involvement

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury, '*Treasury Designates Iranian Quds Force General Overseeing Afghan Heroin Trafficking Through Iran*', 3 July 2012, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1444.aspx>

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ J. Warrick, '*In Iran, Drug Trafficking Soars as Sanctions Take Bigger Bite*',

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ R. Spencer, '*The most dangerous anti-American force isn't ISIS, it's Iran*', New York Post, 30 July 2016, <http://nypost.com/2016/07/30/the-most-dangerous-anti-american-force-isnt-isis-its-iran/>.

through various foundations and institutions such as the IRGC, Iranian diplomats, and intelligence officers (predecessors of Quds Force) in Syria and Lebanon have cemented relations and consolidated Hezbollah's establishment and development. The efforts of the IRGC stand out particularly as it included various forms of assistance and especially recruitment, military training, and augmenting warfighting capabilities vital to the survival and the success of Hezbollah. The creation of Hezbollah was Iran's first and most successful extra-territorial engagement.

Nowadays, Quds Force maintains close links with Hezbollah due to the organization's operational capabilities and power. Hezbollah is the executioner of various terrorist and organized criminal activities, such as money laundering, document forgery, and acquisition of weapons and raw materials for the Iranian nuclear program⁴⁰. Hezbollah has long been involved in drug trafficking and is highly experienced in this. Its involvement spans everything from growing the raw materials, through producing the drugs, to smuggling and distributing them. Over the years, Hezbollah has expanded its involvement in the international drug trade and became active throughout the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and South America⁴¹.

The founder of Hezbollah's criminal activities was Imad Fayeze Mughniyeh, who was number two in the organization and led its External Security Organization (ESO)⁴². Currently, his "sacred" work is continued by the secretary general's cousin and Hezbollah's envoy to Iran, Abdallah Safieddine, who shares this portfolio with the famous Adham Hussein Tabaja. Tabaja runs a media propaganda unit and has set up many investment mechanisms vital to laundering Hezbollah's illicit proceeds⁴³. The most notable of these is Al-Inmaa Engineering and Contracting, based in Lebanon and Iraq, whose financial manager, Jihad Muhammad Qansu holds a Venezuelan passport. Tabaja and Safieddine are linked to a vast transnational criminal network that includes an array of businesses in Latin America — namely in textiles, electronics, construction, and energy, used to launder Hezbollah's illicit funds.

Hezbollah-Syria connection

Faced with financial problems due to tough US sanctions and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, Hezbollah and the IRGC are increasingly relying on criminal enterprises and drug trafficking to finance their military operations. Over the past year, European law enforcement officials have increasingly linked Hezbollah to major drug seizures, ranging from the Syrian-Jordanian border to urban centers in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab

⁴⁰ S. Kronenfeld & Y. Gurzansky, 'The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade', p. 112

⁴¹ Ibid

⁴² J. M. Humire, 'The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime', The Atlantic Council, Washington DC: The Atlantic Council, 2020, p.4

⁴³ Ibid

Emirates, as well as central and southern Europe⁴⁴. In many cases, it is counterfeit Captagon⁴⁵, a synthetic drug, that Hezbollah has been producing for decades, which is a major source of income. Captagon is a stimulant, known as fenethylamine, and was used to treat depression and other psychological disorders until the 1980s, but then it was banned due to its addictive nature. Hezbollah began to mass-produce fake Captagon at factories in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, after the defeat from Israel in 2006, when Iran supplied them with the necessary pharmaceutical equipment. Since the beginning of the Syrian War in 2012, Hezbollah has been actively involved in it and moved its production facilities there as it was possible to work there without the intervention of international law enforcement agencies.

It is suggested that this process involved various actors, including Syrian business leaders close to the government or Assad personally, as well as with organized crime families. Intelligence officials concluded that amphetamines were exported from Latakia, a coastal city in Syria with dedicated Iranian port facilities. This confirms that Hezbollah is behind the coordination and all logistics, with the support of the IRGC of Iran.

IRGC involvement in Latin America

As part of a far-reaching foreign policy, Iran set up lucrative relations with South American governments that share similar anti-US views and have natural resources vital for the development of Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs. Iran has economic links to Venezuela and other countries, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Cuba. Besides, the IRGC-QF has trained Venezuelan security, intelligence, and law enforcement bodies.

Much of Iran's activity in this region is carried out by proxies, such as Hezbollah and its affiliated bodies that provide it with high levels of operational capabilities while maintaining distance and the ability to deny its involvement. This region represents an arena where they actively engage with international drug traders and are involved in cocaine trafficking and money laundering. The connection between Hezbollah and Mexican drug cartels has provided the IRGC-QF with an effective operational and logistical platform for conducting subversive activity on US territory.

In the past, the Quds Force also tried to directly collaborate with them. The FBI investigation revealed that Quds operatives attempted to recruit the Mexican drug cartel Los Zetas to carry out terrorist attacks against the United States, assassinate the Israeli and Saudi Arabian ambassadors, and establish transportation routes to North America

⁴⁴ J. Warrick & S. Mekhennet, 'Hezbollah operatives seen behind spike in drug trafficking, analysts say', The Washington Post, 4 August 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/hezbollah-operatives-seen-behind-spike-in-drug-trafficking-analysts-say/2020/08/03/fa286b1a-d36a-11ea-8c55-61e7fa5e82ab_story.html

⁴⁵ Ibid

for Afghani heroin⁴⁶. As a result, the commander of the Quds Force, General Qasem Soleimani⁴⁷ was placed on the U.S. list of terrorists.

IRGC-Hezbollah-Venezuela Triangle

Special attention in this region should be paid to Iran's relations with Venezuela, which have significantly deepened over the past decade. To enlist Iran's support, the dictatorial regime of Hugo Chavez promoted a "letting do, letting go"⁴⁸ policy that virtually turned Venezuela into Hezbollah's foothold to expand its footprint in the Americas. Moreover, Iran's possible transfer of its missile systems to Venezuela could pose a serious regional threat. Recently, reporters uncovered a secret petrochemical center and gunpowder plant, which is controlled by the IRGC and is thought to play a key role in the Iranian nuclear program, has been located in the Venezuelan city of Morón for more than a decade.

According to Humire, the presence of Hezbollah in Venezuela is explained with the existence of large and influential Arab and Lebanese communities in the country⁴⁹. Many members of the Lebanese community have made significant contributions to Venezuelan society and Hezbollah has used this to their advantage. They have created an "army"⁵⁰ of logistics professionals within the diaspora - entrepreneurs, lawyers, accountants, and others - that help raise, hide, move, and launder illegal funds for Hezbollah, some of which are used to advance its terrorist operations around the world.

Hezbollah's support network functions through 'compartmentalized, familial clan structures' that are embedded in the Maduro regime's political and economic system. Hezbollah has received help and support from at least nine specific families from the Lebanese community⁵¹. Chief among them are the three "clans" known as the Rada clan, the Saleh clan, and the Nasr ad-Din clan⁵². These clans are equally part of Hezbollah's trans-regional threat network, which creates a logistics base in Venezuela that allows criminal groups like the FARC and ELN to expand their operations. The U.S. Department of Treasury designated two of the three clans as global terrorists because of their relations with Hezbollah. Unlike the Nasr ad-Din clan, members of the Rada clan and Saleh clan are not formally a part of the Maduro regime; however, they each control aspects of the

⁴⁶ A. Thomson & J. P. Rathbone, 'Claim of Iran drug cartel link confounds US', Financial Times, 14 October 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/201>.

⁴⁷ U.S. Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Sanctions Five Individuals Tied to Iranian Plot to Assassinate the Saudi Arabian Ambassador to the United States,' October 11, 2011, <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/tg1320.asp>

⁴⁸ X. Herrera, 'Pirates of the Caribbean: The Dangerous Relationship Between Venezuela, Iran and Hezbollah', IranWire, 9 December 2020, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/8268>

⁴⁹ J. M. Humire, 'The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime', p.5

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ X. Herrera, 'Pirates of the Caribbean: The Dangerous Relationship Between Venezuela, Iran and Hezbollah'

⁵² Ibid

illicit economies of drugs, weapons, smuggling, and money laundering between Venezuela, Lebanon, and Syria⁵³.

Collaboration with Hezbollah has helped the Maduro regime “turn Venezuela into the country of transnational organized crime and international terrorism”⁵⁴ in the Western Hemisphere, increasing logistical and financial benefits for both. Therefore, Hezbollah is highly interested in keeping him in power. Moreover, lucrative deals with the regime to evade sanctions, and the freedom of action to carry out illegal activities both inside and outside Venezuela suit them very much. The actions of Iran and Hezbollah to support the Maduro regime actually repeat the strategy of supporting Bashar al-Assad in Syria⁵⁵. Whereas in Syria the goal has been to protect the land bridge across the Levant, known as the Shiite Crescent, in Venezuela, it is to preserve the logistics capabilities between Caracas, Damascus, and Tehran.

Recognizing the danger posed by Iran and Hezbollah's presence in Venezuela is strategically important. Nowadays, Hezbollah not only helps the regime to retain power but has also become a part of its government. This development could have serious implications for the entire South American continent, from the weapons supply to the Colombian FARC to money laundering and drug trafficking across borders. In October 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice designated Hezbollah as one of the five largest transnational criminal organizations⁵⁶.

Policy Recommendations

1. Iran should strengthen the rule of law and reinforce the fight against corruption. While the involvement of corrupt officials and government agencies in drug trade is rarely investigated, non-state actors have met with harsh reactions, as evidenced by the large number of executions carried out for drug-related crimes since 1979.
2. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards completely control the process of combating drug trafficking. Nowadays, Iran is one of the leading countries in the number of seized drugs (opium, morphine, heroin). However, instead of being destroyed, the seized drugs are resold by the IRGC officials. Therefore, the Iranian government should limit its power and hold the Guards accountable for their activities. Limitation and accountability will have a positive impact on the fight against drug trafficking. Moreover, Iran should start a real implementation of the terms of the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances, which it joined back in 1988.

⁵³ J. M. Humire, p.9

⁵⁴ X. Herrera, ‘*Pirates of the Caribbean: The Dangerous Relationship Between Venezuela, Iran and Hezbollah*’

⁵⁵ J. M. Humire, p.10

⁵⁶ U.S. Department of the Justice, ‘*Attorney General Sessions Announces New Measures to Fight Transnational Organized Crime*,’ October 15, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/attorney-general-sessions-announces>.

3. The recent interview with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif confirmed that the IRGC and the Quds Force were against the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) from the outset and tried to undermine its implementation in every possible way⁵⁷. The more Iran is under tough sanctions, the more the IRGC's power in the country is strengthened. In such circumstances, the United States should return to the JCPOA and start a gradual easing of sanctions against Iran. At the same time, this agreement should be expanded to include Iran's commitments to end the financing of international terrorism. Such a development will eventually have an indirect, but effective impact on the problem of drug trafficking in the country, since the capabilities of the IRGC and related groups will be significantly limited.

4. Western countries should intensify information campaigns on the role of the IRGC in the black economy among Iranians who are not fully aware of their activities. A social media messaging campaign can be highly effective as opioid addiction is a serious and delicate problem in society. With the emergence of the youth resistance movement, Iranian society is increasingly expressing its discontent with the ease with which drugs spread throughout the country and that prominent traders are not being arrested. Moreover, the population also complains that the black economy has made possible a lack of accountability for funds that could be used to reduce poverty or create jobs. Therefore, exposing the involvement of the IRGC in drug trafficking to the international community may deprive the Iranian regime of legitimacy and cause international public pressure against cooperation with them. Internally it can damage the regime's religious and moral authority and even undermine its credibility among the conservative circles that have traditionally been its main pillar.

5. Countries should impose targeted sanctions against Iranian officials, instead of tightening the existing ones against the whole country. The international community is obligated to punish every individual and organization involved in the international trade of illicit products and money laundering. Consequently, disclosure of the IRGC's involvement in such activity would allow accusing this organization of violating international law. It would legally oblige members of the international community to impose sanctions against the IRGC that would restrict its activities (detention of its members, confiscation of its assets, extradition of wanted individuals, seizure of ships and aircraft, restriction of movement, etc.). In this regard, the Trump administration's 2019 announcement of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organization is a positive step in that direction⁵⁸.

6. Illicit financing is the link between organized crime and international terrorism. Financial intelligence units (FIUs) are the nerve center of a government's ability to collect, analyze, and report on suspicious activity related to money laundering, corruption, terror finance, and other financial crimes. They exposed and shut down the illegal financial

⁵⁷ P. Wintour, 'Iran foreign minister criticises power of Qassem Suleimani in leaked interview', the Guardian, 25 April 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/25/iran-foreign-minister-criticises-power-of-qassem-suleimani-in-leaked-interview>

⁵⁸ E. Wong & E. Schmitt, 'Trump Designates Iran's Revolutionary Guards a Foreign Terrorist Group', The New York Times, 8 April 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-revolutionary-guard-corps.html>

networks of Hezbollah and its supporters around the world. Due to the absence of adequate legislation in Latin American countries, the FIU has created special mechanisms for countering the financing of terrorism at the regional level, which is a good example of international cooperation in this field. Therefore, this cooperation should be extended to other regions and particularly to the Persian Gulf and the Middle East, where the IRGC and its proxies successfully bypass international sanctions and launder money⁵⁹.

It is clear that the Revolutionary Guards are involved in the international drug trade, both directly and through proxies, allowing the organization to bypass international sanctions. However, since the beginning, the main goals of Iran went far beyond the notion of creating additional sources of income to circumvent international sanctions. The profits from this business help the IRGC gain "operational and logistical capabilities"⁶⁰ that allows the organization to conduct sophisticated subversive operations in enemy territory. Moreover, they consider this activity as a "war by other means"⁶¹ which is one of the main engines of the global "drug jihad"⁶². Consequently, in the absence of appropriate attention and response, it can have serious strategic ramifications for the enemies of Iran⁶³.

⁵⁹ J. M. Humire, p.14

⁶⁰ A. Alfoneh, '*How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran's Economy?*', Middle Eastern Outlook, no. 3, 22 October 2007, <https://www.aei.org/publication/how-intertwined-are-the-revolutionary-guards-in-irans-economy/>.

⁶¹ A. Ansari, '*Blame it on the changing of the Guards*', The Times, 30 March 2007, p. 21

⁶² Ibid

⁶³ S. Kronenfeld & Y. Gurzansky, '*The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade*', p. 116

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