

AIR COMMAND AND STAFF COLLEGE

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EXPOSING AND COUNTERING THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY GUARD CORPS

by

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Abstract

This paper will explore the historical interactions between the United States and Iran in chronological order starting with the final years of the Obama Administration and continuing into November 2019 with the Trump Administration. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, commonly referred to simply as the Iran nuclear deal) serves as a central reference point. This paper does not discuss the nature or negotiations of the nuclear deal, but it will attempt to investigate if the U.S. withdrawal from the deal explains any of Iran's actions. The designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a Foreign Terrorist Organization provides a second key date. The available views of both Iran and the United States help to explain and document historical Iranian behavior and responses. The paper concludes with an investigation into Iran's influence within the United States and South America. This information is presented with respect to protecting U.S. interests and the population, as well as to serve as an educational tool to those who may be unfamiliar. The evidence shows that Iran will continue asymmetrical attacks against the United States and will seek to control the narrative that best meets their political goals.

Exposing and Countering the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

The United States has designated Iran as a State Sponsor of Terrorism since 1984.¹ On April 8th, 2019, the Trump Administration designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO).² This paper will document the recent events and conflicts dating back to the final years of the Obama Administration and work forward to the present day. A chronological event timeline will highlight key events to assess the effects of the recently terminated Iran nuclear deal. It will conclude with a look at the domestic threats posed to the U.S. The U.S. population has little awareness of the threats posed by the IRGC domestically, as well as the terror that they support overseas.

This paper does not cover the Iranian nuclear program. It will discuss the reasons cited by the Trump Administration for pulling out of the Iranian nuclear agreement and attempt to identify any Iranian and IRGC actions that have resulted from the cancelled agreement. The IRGC controls the Iranian nuclear program; however, this paper does not focus on that. In order to fully combat the IRGC, a discussion regarding the Iranian nuclear program must include U.S. and foreign government actions and intentions. Conversely, only focusing on the Iranian nuclear program and not mentioning the terrorist activities supported by the IRGC across the world would fail to see the whole picture. Due to the recent worldwide media coverage given to the Iranian nuclear program this paper will document lesser known U.S.-Iranian interactions and terrorist acts supported by the IRGC.

Iran Captures U.S. RQ-170 Drone- 05 December 2011

The United States claims that on December 5th, 2011, a RQ-170 Sentinel drone was accidentally forced to crash land in Iran. It claims that the drone sustained damage in the crash. Iran claims that they hacked into the drone's GPS system, and brought it to a controlled landing

in Iran intact. Iran touted its ability to conduct this type of cyber-attack against an American stealth drone, while the United States attempted to downplay the technology located on the drone. Iran could be using the captured drone to strengthen its relations with China and Russia by allowing those countries to inspect it.³

Iran claims that it reverse engineered the U.S. RQ-170 in 2012. In 2012, IRGC Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh claimed they had successfully reverse engineered the U.S. drone and extracted sensitive information from it. As proof, he offered up information claimed to have been gathered from the Osama Bin Laden raid in Pakistan. On February 10th, 2018, Israel shot down an Iranian drone that resembled the captured U.S. RQ-170 after it crossed its borders. In response, Iran denied that they were supporting the war in Syria with anything other than advice. Iran also denied that the drone entered Israeli airspace, calling Israeli claims “a lie,” and stated that the drone was used to combat ISIS in Syria.⁴ This statement shows a clear contradiction by Iran. They cannot be providing advice only if they are employing a drone in Syria. This incident and the debris found afterwards suggests that Iran did clone the captured U.S. RQ-170 drone.⁵

The first U.S.-Iranian incident listed in this paper highlights the conflicting nature of U.S. and Iranian claims. Iran practices deception and presents claims that represent their own interests, including staged pictures and propaganda. Open source information was used to describe the U.S. side of events. At times, Iran will deny involvement when they feel it serves their political objectives to deflect. Due to the technology possessed by the United States, it becomes increasingly difficult to deny certain actions or attempts to downplay involvement. Both sides will use politics, pictures and accounts to form their own narrative. Two things become increasingly clear during the exchanges: Iran supports terrorist activity through deception and the U.S. is actively involved in countering them.

Adoption of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)- 18 October 2015

The U.S., U.K., Russia, China, France, Germany, the European Union and Iran all claimed the JCPOA as a historic deal which required many years for the Obama Administration to negotiate.⁶ It omitted any reference to Israel. While the U.S. and Iran could have benefitted from the deal had it been continued, Israel had the most to lose. The JCPOA sought to delay Iran from building nuclear weapons, while allowing it to continue peaceful economic development for nuclear power plants.⁷ It was meant to signal good faith on the Iranian government's behalf to commit to peaceful nuclear development rather than pursuing nuclear weapons. In exchange for agreeing to not acquire or build nuclear weapons, the UN and the negotiating parties lifted the sanctions. These sanctions restricted Iran's access to trade, technology, finance, and industry.⁸ As part of the deal, Iran would have to allow inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to inspect its nuclear program.⁹ The deal also allowed for a gradual reduction in sanctions (with Iranian compliance) over the next ten years.¹⁰

Critics argue that many of the provisions of the deal expired after ten years. Had the Obama administration reached the deal early on in his term of office, he would have been able to see the deal through at least eight years, which would have given a larger window to assess Iran's actions. Even proponents criticized the short nature of the deal and believed that ten years was too short to assess whether or not Iran had changed its behavior. The deal was short lived and the U.S. pulled out of it during the Trump administration, which will be discussed later in this paper.

IRGC Seizes Two USN Riverine Boats- 12 January 2016

Two U.S. Navy riverine patrol vessels relocating from Kuwait to Bahrain drifted into Iranian territorial waters off the coast of Farsi Island four days prior to implementation day for

the JCPOA. One of the boats experienced an engine malfunction while awaiting repairs. The IRGC Navy approached the boats and took ten U.S. Navy sailors hostage. After a tense twenty-four hours, Iran released the sailors. Iran claims they were initially held for questioning whether or not they were on an intelligence mission. Iran determined that the incident was indeed an accident and that the crew did not sail into Iranian waters on purpose.¹¹

Ayatollah Khamenei awarded five IRGC commanders Fath (victory) medals for their actions in capturing the ten Americans. Historically, Iran has rarely awarded these medals, and only to war heroes, especially those from the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.¹²

The situation was resolved quickly through diplomacy, possibly because the approaching date for the JCPOA to take effect. In 2007, the UK found itself in a similar situation with fifteen of its sailors and marines captured by the IRGC Navy. The sailors and marines were held in Iranian captivity from 23 March 2007 until 05 April 2007 after a contested dispute over territorial waters.¹³

In 2012, the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) rescued six Iranian mariners who had become stranded with a flooded engine room. The USCG brought them aboard the cutter Monomoy and provided medical care, halal meals and blankets. The Iranian mariners were never taken into custody and were promptly released to the Iranian Coast Guard later on the same day. Iran could have learned from this incident and promptly released the U.S. Navy sailors instead of taking them captive.¹⁴

It is unclear how long the situation could have lasted for the U.S. sailors if not for the JCPOA, which would take effect in four days. It is likely that Iran would have eventually released the sailors in this situation without the JCPOA, to avoid further confrontation with the U.S. over human lives. The Iranian government awarding medals to the IRGC Navy

demonstrates the hostility that the Iranian government officials have towards the United States. Iran released several photos internally meant to serve as propaganda to its residents, but apparently had a different view for the rest of the world. Iran took pictures of the sailors with their hands over their heads and released photos of them in captivity with passports, which could have been used to identify them.¹⁵ These actions violate the Geneva Conventions. In early 2016, Iran reenacted the capture of the sailors in a parade commemorating the 37th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, adding to its internal propaganda against the U.S.¹⁶

USS Mason Targeted by Houthi Missiles -09 and 12 October 2016

Houthi militias in Yemen targeted the USS Mason with missiles two different times over a course of three days. It was operating in the Red Sea, in international waters off the coast of Yemen. The missiles fired at the Mason came from Houthi controlled territory in Yemen. The U.S. Navy concluded that the missiles fired were Chinese built C-802s supplied to the Houthis by Iran. The USS Mason deployed countermeasures and fired two SM-2 missiles in order to protect itself. The USS Mason was not hit or damaged in the attack. The U.S. Navy stated that it fully intends to maintain its mission in international waters off the coast of Yemen and commended the crew of the USS Mason for its efforts.¹⁷ The United Arab Emirates (UAE) leased and operated the former U.S. Navy vessel HSV-2 when it was heavily damaged in a similar attack on October 1st, 2019. Iran denied that it supplied the missiles to the Houthis. They also claimed that they had nothing to do with the attacks on the USS Mason or the HSV-2 Swift. Iran was quick to praise Yemen for firing on the UAE operated HSV-2 Swift, claiming that it fired in self-defense.¹⁸ Iran purposely claimed that it was Yemen who fired the missiles and not the Houthis, likely in an attempt to demonstrate what it believed to be U.S. intrusion into Yemeni territorial waters. Iran also seemed confused about who actually operated the vessel,

possibly signaling that they thought the vessel was still used by the U.S. Navy. IRGC Qods Force deputy commander Esmail Gha'ani stated: "we are waiting for the Americans to divulge the death of half of their ship crew and other secrets about recent military engagements, but until that time we only suffice with mentioning this truth: in the region called Middle East, Iran is everywhere, though it is not anywhere."¹⁹ By this, Iran claims that its support networks can project power without actually sending Iranian military members to carry out operations. The Swift was heavily damaged, but was not cut in half. Since April 2015, the U.S. has intercepted five shipments from Iran to the Houthis that have included coastal defense systems.²⁰

Whitehouse Statement on ending Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran- 08 May 2018

The Trump Administration ended U.S participation in the Obama era Iran nuclear deal. The announcement clearly states the United States does not oppose the Iranian people, but the malign behavior of the Iranian regime. The announcement demands that Iran is not to develop a nuclear weapon, but also makes several other demands including: stopping cyberattacks against U.S. and Israel, ending support for Hamas, Hezbollah, the Taliban and al-Qaeda, ending weapons support for Houthi rebels in Yemen, and ending its public calls for destroying Israel. The announcement publicly accuses the Iranian regime of using money to support terrorism, instead of the Iranian people, by giving specific examples of the Iranian regimes support for Hamas, Hezbollah, and the IRGC-QF.²¹

The Trump Administration states that sanctions on Iranian energy, petrochemical and financial sectors will begin immediately. Additionally, timetables will be given for businesses doing business in Iran to cease involvement or face penalties. From the U.S perspective, the deal rewarded Iran for its support of terrorist activities. The Trump Administration stated that Iran

did not agree with the terms of the original deal and that it would only temporarily delay Iran's development of a nuclear weapon.²²

Reported Blocked Assets Relating to Iran as of Dec 31, 2018

Even after resolving the 1979 hostage crisis in 1981, the U.S. has blocked several properties owned by Iran. Proceedings in the Iran-U.S. Claims Tribunal continue in The Hague as of December 2019.²³ Iran currently owns eleven blocked properties in the United States, spread across California, Illinois, Maryland, New York, Texas and Washington, D.C. The State Department's Office of Foreign Missions manages these properties and the rental proceeds.²⁴ They are authorized to use rental proceeds to maintain the blocked properties.²⁵ These properties are diplomatic and consular real estate properties. The funds blocked from these properties include tenant security deposits and rental proceeds.²⁶ The United States continues blocking six Government of Iran consular accounts.²⁷

Designation of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)- 08 April 2019

On April 8, 2019, President Donald Trump announced that his administration had designated the IRGC as a FTO.²⁸ The U.S. government designated the Qods Force²⁹ at the same time under Section 219 of the Immigration and Nationality Act. Although Iran was a well-known state sponsor of terrorism, for the first time, the United States has designated a part of a foreign government as an FTO.³⁰ The announcement makes clear to those considering doing business with the IRGC that they would be providing funds for terrorism. The designation states that "the IRGC is the Iranian government's primary means of directing and implementing its global terrorist campaign."³¹ The designation sends a clear signal to Tehran to stop supporting terrorism. It also exposes Iran's actions as fundamentally different from other governments.³²

The FTO designation on the IRGC carries several significant consequences. According to the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, Section 303 makes it a crime for persons within the U.S. or persons subject to U.S. jurisdiction to knowingly provide material support or resources to an FTO. Additionally, except as authorized by the U.S. Department of Treasury, the law requires U.S. financial institutions in possession or control of funds in which an FTO or its agent has an interest are required to block such funds and report on them to the Department of Treasury.³³

Counter FTO Argument-09 April 2019

Just one day after the Trump Administration announced it was labeling the IRGC as an FTO, Daniel Benjamin and Jason Blazakis offered a countering perspective. They argue that typically FTOs are non-state actors such as ISIS, FARC or al Qaeda. However, they claim the designation attempts to show that the government is doing something, while in reality not much is accomplished.³⁴ They argue that sanctions and Executive Orders have been working, so the FTO designation serves only as a “figurative nuclear weapon in the diplomatic arsenal.”³⁵ The authors worry that attacks against the U.S. may become more likely and that U.S. credibility will be questioned regarding the designation. The IRGC has responded by designating the U.S. military at large as a terrorist organization.³⁶

Iran avoids confronting the U.S. military conventionally. They prefer asymmetric attacks and terrorism through proxies. The U.S. military suffers no more risk after this designation than they did before. Other countries have followed suit with the U.S. in regards to sanctions and denying Iranian commercial aircraft from entering their country. The designation announces clear political resolve to take on the IRGC as the root of the problem. Enough time has passed to invalidate some of the author’s opinions. Iran has not increased its attacks on U.S. military

personnel, but instead targeted unmanned aircraft or international shipping while being extremely careful to avoid casualties that may provoke stronger U.S. intervention.

M/T Front Altair and M/T Kokuka Courageous Attack- 13 June 2019

U.S. imagery and video clearly show that the IRGC Navy conducted a limpet mine attack on the Japanese flagged tanker M/T Kokuka Courageous. The first limpet mine made a hole in the Courageous. The crew found a second unexploded limpet mine on the hull and evacuated the vessel. After the crew abandoned the vessel, the United States filmed an IRGC Navy Gashti patrol boat and crew removing the second unexploded limpet mine from the hull of the Courageous. The USS Bainbridge rescued the crew of the Courageous. On the same day, the Norwegian flagged tanker Front Altair suffered a similar attack by Iranian limpet mines. Iran captured the crew of the Front Altair and subsequently held them for two days prior to releasing the crew to UAE. Both tankers were reported outside of Iranian waters at the time of the attacks. Iran has denied responsibility for the attacks.³⁷ Previously, on April 14th, 1988, the USS Samuel B. Roberts struck an Iranian mine in the Persian Gulf. The U.S retaliated by sinking the Iranian vessel responsible for laying the mine.³⁸

On June 17th, 2019, the acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan approved a request from U.S. Central Command to send in an additional 1,000 troops for air, ground, and naval threats in the Middle East. In his announcement, Secretary Shanahan also stated that the tanker attacks prove Iran's hostile behavior against U.S. interests and personnel. The statement ended with a declaration that the U.S. does not want a war with Iran, but that it will seek to protect U.S. military personnel and U.S. interests in the region. Shanahan reserved the right to reevaluate and address credible threats and respond as necessary.³⁹

Iran Shoots Down U.S. Navy Drone- 20 June 2019

Three days later, Iran shot down a U.S. Navy MQ-4A drone aircraft near the Strait of Hormuz. The IRGC claims that the drone was spying and violated Iranian airspace. The U.S. counters stating that the drone was over international waters. Iran's actions may be a response to claims that it supported Houthi rebels, and launched a drone attack against Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the Trump Administration announced just a few days prior to the shoot down that he was sending 1,000 more troops to the region in order to protect U.S. interests.⁴⁰ The shoot down comes one week after the U.S. accused Iran of mining multiple tankers in the Gulf of Oman on 13 June 2019. Additionally, Iran fired a missile at a U.S. MQ-9 Reaper drone that was overflying two of the targeted tankers and sending video back to U.S. forces. The missile missed the MQ-9. Iran has denied the attempted attack, likely because of the failure to bring the drone down.⁴¹

In response, U.S. forces prepared to attack with conventional weapons and cyber-attacks. President Trump called off the conventional strikes after learning there would be about 150 casualties at the target sites in Iran. This shows a high level of restraint on behalf of the United States. Whether the cyber-attacks achieved the American political goal of deterring Iran from conducting a similar attack in the future is unknown. Open source reporting mentions that likely U.S. targets for the planned strikes would have been RADAR sites and missile locations.⁴²

Iran has taken responsibility for the MQ-4 drone attack. Iranian leaders boasted to the United States that they do have the ability to shoot down a drone in congested airspace with multiple aircraft. Iran was careful not to target a manned aircraft. However, they did further provoke the U.S. by claiming they could have targeted a U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon aircraft with thirty-five people aboard.⁴³ However, the P-8A cannot fly with thirty-five people aboard. IRGC

Commander Maj. Gen. Hossein Salami stated that “We declare that we do not want war with any country but we are fully ready for war and the today incident was a clear instance of this precise message.”⁴⁴

In contrast to its previous denial of attempting to shoot down a U.S. RQ-9 drone, and denying any involvement in the tanker mining attacks, Iranian officials saw the drone shoot-down as a positive for Iran’s political and military goals. Had the IRGC targeted the P-8A or another manned aircraft, the U.S. would have surely responded differently but in proportion. Iran appears to have taken this into consideration. The possibility that Iran would shoot down a manned aircraft near Iran’s territorial waters poses a great risk to American airmen, especially if Iran perceives that they can claim the aircraft was inside their waters, whether it actually was or not.

U.S. Cyberattack on Iran’s Ability to Target Oil Tankers- 20 June 2019

U.S. Cyber Command targeted a computer network that the IRGC used to attack oil tankers in the Gulf. The attack occurred on the same day that the Trump Administration announced it had called off conventional strikes against Iranian targets in response to Iran shooting down a U.S. Navy drone. According to the *New York Times*, Iran was still attempting to get its systems back online and recover data lost in the cyberattack.⁴⁵ Iran has denied the cyberattack was successful and Iran’s minister of communications technology Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi stated that Americans “try hard but have not carried out a successful attack.”⁴⁶ Iran did not deny that there was a cyberattack, but instead says that their national firewall blocked this particular attack and others. According to the article, Iran increased its own cyberattacks on the United States, targeting government agencies, and oil and gas sites. Iran also attempted to access the U.S. networks via spear-phishing e-mails.⁴⁷

Iran-Related Civil Aviation Industry Advisory 23 July 2019

The U.S. Department of Treasury Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) issued a statement warning the civil aviation industry and its suppliers and partners about Iran's deceptive use of civilian aircraft. The message warned businesses who continue to supply illegally-sourced U.S. parts or technology destined for Iran. Penalties can range from sanctions to criminal charges. The specific aviation related companies listed are:

Mahan Air, Caspian Air, Meraj Air, Pouya Air, Dena Airways, Al-Naser Airlines, Syrian Air, Dart Airlines, Khors Aircompany, Kyrgyz Trans Avia, Qeshm Fars Air, and UM Air—as well as any Iranian individual or entity on OFAC's List of Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons⁴⁸

U.S. and non-U.S persons who continue to do business with these companies or individuals could be charged with supporting Iranian terrorism, human rights abuses, or proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Iran relies on civilian airlines to transport fighters and material to foreign locations. Most recently they have supported Assad's regime in Syria with the use of civilian aircraft.⁴⁹

The Obama administration previously sanctioned Mahan Air under executive order 13224 after it was found to be providing financial, material and technological support to the IRGC and IRGC-QF.⁵⁰ Since 2018, the U.S. has additionally designated ten companies that Mahan Air used as fronts to acquire aircraft parts, sales and agents in countries such as Armenia, Thailand, and Malaysia. In January 2019, Germany denied Mahan Air landing rights in its country stating "it is in Germany's diplomatic interest that there are no flights to Germany by companies that support the military conflict in Syria and contribute to the repression of people in war zones."⁵¹ France denied Mahan Air landing rights in March 2019 and the United States encourages any other countries to do the same.⁵² The release of the statement also has historical

ties to past aviation events in Iran. On February 1st, 1979 Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned to Iran on a chartered Air France Boeing 747 aircraft. He had been living in exile in Paris.⁵³ Mujahideen-e Khalq (MEK) pilots commandeered an Iranian Air Force Boeing 707 on July 29th, 1981 to fly Massoud Rajavi and ousted former Iranian President Bani Sadr to Paris.⁵⁴ After this incident, the Iranian government grounded the Iranian Air Force for months during the Iraq-Iran War. Once flights resumed, a committee of mullahs approved all flights and ensured that the aircraft only had enough fuel for the planned mission.⁵⁵ These historical events highlight the importance that Iran places on civilian as well as military aircraft. It also shows that they are aware of the tactical and strategic effects that aircraft can have on political and military operations.

The advisory further highlights multiple attempts by Iranian citizens, Mahan Air and other foreign companies to provide aviation-related parts to the company in an attempt to circumvent U.S. sanctions. For example, in May 2018, a Turkish front company ordered American-made aviation parts from foreign suppliers. Those parts were shipped to Istanbul and then forwarded to Mahan Air.⁵⁶ Analysts face great challenges keeping up with foreign shell companies in the global market. However, with continued pressure from our allied partners and increased awareness by aircraft parts suppliers prior to shipping, the United States can continue to improve the efforts of the sanctions. Iran and its civilian aviation support companies show the value that the regime places into concealing its use of civilian aircraft for military purposes. The sanctions appear to work and create difficulties on Iran, the IRGC, and its civilian companies to procure spare parts. A possible side effect of the sanctions is that they could impact legitimate civilian uses of the aircraft. Controlling the people who ride on these aircraft presents another problem altogether, but specifically mentioned in the letter is IRGC-QF Commander Qasem

Soleimani who is blocked from travel by a UN travel ban and sanctioned by UN Security Resolution 2231.⁵⁷

Twitter Suspends Official Hamas and Hezbollah Accounts- 02 November 2019

Twitter initially defied pressure from U.S. law makers to suspend the official accounts of Hamas and Hezbollah. Eventually, Twitter did end up suspending the accounts. Twitter officials initially objected because they were allowing legitimate military and political accounts of Hezbollah and Hamas. They also noted that some of the accounts were linked to elected officials of Hezbollah and Hamas. Democrats Max Rose and Josh Gottheimer as well as Republicans Tom Reed and Brian Fitzpatrick led the charge to get Twitter to change their minds. Hamas and Hezbollah have used Twitter to spread hate speech towards Israel and the U.S. They are not the only terrorist organizations to use the platform to push their agenda. In this case, Twitter reversed course and observed that Hamas and Hezbollah were aiding and abetting terrorism and suspended the accounts.⁵⁸

These recent events suggest that Iran is suffering from the renewed Trump Administration sanctions and is increasing its attacks in response. However, the attacks during the Trump Administration do not depart from the pattern of previous attacks or threats that Iran has made in the past. Iran could be acting out due to the U.S. pulling out of the Obama Administration's nuclear deal. Iran's military and economy pales to that of the United States. The Iranian Air Force has suffered neglect for many years. Iran purchased many of its aircraft from the U.S. during the rule of the Shah in the 1970's. The few flying aircraft it does have suffer from maintenance problems and lack of parts due to U.S. sanctions, as well as aging technology. Iran has reverse engineered U.S. made F-5 aircraft, but since 1997 these efforts have only constructed twelve serviceable aircraft.⁵⁹

Iran has exaggerated claims that it has domestically developed a new 4th generation fighter jet. The Iranian government published a picture on August 21st, 2018, that shows President Hassan Rouhani sitting in the jet that Iran claimed to be new. In fact, the jet was an older F-5F previously purchased from the U.S.⁶⁰ That Iran would attempt to fool journalists with a public stunt shows their desperation and the difficult position of its Air Force. It could be a clumsy attempt at deception, or it could be using the opportunity to gather support from other countries such as Russia or China that might be willing to sell or help procure newer aircraft. At any rate, it highlights the fact that Iranian officials know their deficiencies with military power, which forces them to continue supporting its proxy wars and terrorism abroad.

Continued pressure from sanctions can have negative consequences for the cause of freedom in Iran as well. Smuggling operations become more profitable under sanctions. As foreign businesses become more reluctant to conduct business inside or with Iran, it becomes more isolated. This causes Iran to depend more on internal IRGC-ran businesses.⁶¹ The consolidation of power by the IRGC prevents other business from challenging them.⁶² The United States hopes is that Iranian citizens resist their government and do not resent the United States for the sanctions and their dire financial burdens.

Domestic Threats

While these aspects of the continuing conflict garner much attention there are other lesser known events that have occurred inside the U.S. For example, the FBI discovered a large Hezbollah cell in Charlotte, NC.⁶³ Mohammed Hammoud would buy cigarettes in North Carolina where the tax was five cents per pack and then transport them to Michigan where a seventy-five cent tax had reduced sales. By this means, Hammoud raised more than \$7 million dollars, which he sent to Hezbollah.⁶⁴ He is currently serving a thirty year prison sentence.⁶⁵

Two aspects of Hammoud's operation caused great concern. First, he did not enter the U.S. legally from his native Lebanon, but instead flew to Margarita Island, just off the coast of Venezuela. In 1992, he used fake Visas to enter New York where he was caught and released under the condition that he appear before an immigration examiner. Before that could happen he went to North Carolina and applied for asylum, which allowed him to stay legally.⁶⁶

Hammoud practiced assault tactics with AK-47s and played propaganda videos for other local Lebanese Shiites in hopes that they would support Hezbollah as well. According to Bob Clifford, who investigated the Hezbollah cell, the members were ready to conduct an operation in the U.S. if they had received the order.⁶⁷ Additionally, the United States learned from the Canadian Security Intelligence Service that Hammoud had a friend named Said Harb who was buying GPS, laser range finders, digital cameras, night vision devices and stun guns.⁶⁸ He intended to send the equipment to Hezbollah to support terrorist activities. As the investigation unfolded, Harb was buying the equipment at the request of Mohamad Dbouk, a Hezbollah operative, and was previously trained by the IRGC.⁶⁹ Evidence uncovered suggested that Dbouk reported directly to the head of Hezbollah's Special Security Apparatus.⁷⁰ During pretrial confinement, Hammoud showed no remorse and even ordered the murder of the prosecuting attorney and the bombing of Charlotte's federal courthouse.⁷¹

In Detroit, two Lebanese immigrants Talal Khalil Chahine and his wife Elfat El Aouar ran a chain of restaurants called La Shish. In total, there were fourteen restaurants.⁷² They were arrested for tax evasion in the U.S. They had transferred more than 20 million dollars to Lebanese bank accounts.⁷³ Court filings revealed that Chahine and his wife had traveled to Lebanon to attend a fund-raising event, with Chahine as one of the guest speakers. The other guest speaker was Sheikh Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah, considered Hezbollah's spiritual

leader. Chahine prominently sat to the right of Fadlallah at the event, presumably due to the large amounts of money he had raised for Hezbollah.⁷⁴

Lebanese immigrants have also been caught and convicted of selling counterfeit goods such as Nike shoes and Versace jeans.⁷⁵ They have used credit card and insurance fraud to generate revenue for Hezbollah in the United States. In the book *Iran's Revolutionary Guard: The Threat that Grows While America Sleeps*, Steven O'Hern writes that the monetary support and weapons procurement illustrate "the type of support Hezbollah cultivates worldwide, including the within the United States."⁷⁶

Central and South American Influence

Since the 1980s, the IRGC has used Hezbollah to exploit the Lebanese population in countries such as Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina. In 2006, the United States designated Lebanese businessman Muhammad Youssef Abdullah as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT). In 1994 he built a mosque that had previously been blessed by the spiritual leader of Hezbollah Sayyid Muhammad Hussein Fadlallah.⁷⁷ Hezbollah pressures the large population of Lebanese business owners to support its cause, even if they are not members themselves.⁷⁸ One such businessman was Assad Ahmat Bakarar, who in the year 2000 alone, sent Hezbollah over 3.5 million dollars.⁷⁹

Further, Iranian militias train and plan terror attacks on training grounds in South America. Argentine authorities investigating the 1992 Israeli Embassy bombing found that sleeper cells in Buenos Aires had supported the bombing.⁸⁰ On October 10th, 2001, Mexican authorities captured ten Hezbollah operatives in Mexico City who planned to assassinate Mexican President Vincente Fox and attack the Mexican Senate.⁸¹

In October 2008, the U.S. and Columbian authorities arrested over 130 people in a large drug smuggling ring that sent back large profits to Hezbollah. Drugs were trafficked in the U.S., the Middle East and Europe. A key player in the laundering of the drug money was Lebanese immigrant Chekry Harb who was living in Colombia.⁸²

Venezuela gives significant help to Iran as one of three countries who supported Iran in a 2006 UN International Atomic Energy Agency vote. Venezuela, like Iran, blames many of its problems on the United States.⁸³ Iran has been investing in commercial business plants to manufacture bicycles, cars and other goods. Given Iran's attempts to circumvent sanctions, the secretive nature and remote locations of these activities create a great deal of suspicion in the United States.⁸⁴

In March 2007, IranAir, the national airline of Iran, began weekly flights from Tehran to Caracas with an enroute stop in Damascus. These flights allowed passengers from Iran to enter Venezuela without having their passports stamped, or being entered into immigration records.⁸⁵ The U.S. Department of Treasury OFAC designated IranAir as a Specially Designated and Blocked Person (SDN) on November 5th, 2018.⁸⁶

Sleeper Cells

Hezbollah has been present in the U.S. since 1987.⁸⁷ An FBI report from 1994 stated that Hezbollah has been recruiting members from U.S. mosques during Friday prayer meetings.⁸⁸ Hezbollah operatives learned of the investigations into their operations and sought to use U.S. laws in order to avoid capture and convictions.⁸⁹ Additionally, they try to blend into their communities, even denying Islam to support their activities.⁹⁰

Hezbollah operatives carry out reconnaissance missions inside the United States.⁹¹ According to the FBI, Hezbollah agents take videos and photos of government and infrastructure

buildings. They also draw diagrams and conduct reconnaissance from foot or passing cars. They send the videos and diagrams to Lebanon where Hezbollah keeps them for future use. Historically, Hezbollah operatives have conducted similar reconnaissance missions against U.S. diplomatic buildings in Europe, Asia, and South America. These buildings represent potential targets for sleeper cells inside the U.S. to attack on command, or if war would break out between Iran and the U.S. Suicide bombers and terrorists using vehicles could also attack U.S. buildings or public places.⁹²

Countering the Threat

Americans need to understand the threat posed by the IRGC. The IRGC remains as violent as ever, and may even be increasing its attacks in recent years. According to O'Hern, the U.S. has effectively ignored the IRGC's responsibility for supporting terrorism across the world.⁹³ The recent designation of the IRGC as a FTO is a step in the right direction. Many people in the U.S. do not understand Iran, much less the IRGC inner workings. Overall, U.S. politicians have not given the threat posed by Iran the same credibility as that of China today.⁹⁴

U.S. Officials should focus their efforts to counter Hezbollah as a homeland security and criminal problem. A focus on all Hezbollah-related crime should be a priority, however prosecutions of financial crime, counterfeiting and tax evasion have proven easier to get convictions rather than terrorism-related charges.⁹⁵ The FBI and Department of Justice need to get local law enforcement on board and assisting with this problem. Quick arrests can disrupt Hezbollah organizations, but they can also uncover leads to more important Hezbollah decision makers. However, only watching suspected Hezbollah members allows the organization to grow and gives them more opportunities to recruit or attack.⁹⁶

The porous borders of South American countries, and the ability to travel routinely without passports or visas from Iran to Venezuela causes a real security concern for the United States. While rarely discussed during internal politics in the U.S., the IRGC has demonstrated its abilities to operate profitable smuggling and drug-running operations. Securing our borders and assisting our South American allies with their own border security will help stop the drug trade and smuggling. It will also help stop the profits being sent back to Hezbollah and deter terrorist who might wish to sneak into the U.S. The U.S. should also seek free trade agreements with South and Central American countries that do not support the IRGC inside their borders or overseas.⁹⁷ The U.S. should also work closely with South American militaries and intelligence agencies to root out IRGC influence and terrorist activities.

Unfortunately, many Americans remain unaware of the IRGC and its proxy networks. O'Hern references the multiple attacks that al-Qaeda conducted against U.S. targets prior to 2001 to serve as a wake-up call to the threats that the IRGC pose. Many Americans did not know who al-Qaeda was until after September 11, 2001. America may be on a similar path with the IRGC, even though the threat is credible and ever present.⁹⁸

Endnotes

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