

Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) Analysis



IRGC-QF Malfeasant Activity Outside of the CENTCOM AOR

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What Is ViTTa?

NSI's Virtual Think Tank (ViTTa) provides rapid response to critical information needs by pulsing a global network of subject matter experts (SMEs) to generate a wide range of expert insight. In support of US Central Command (J3), ViTTa was used to address four questions regarding geopolitical stability in Iran. ViTTa reports are designed to provide highly customizable and compelling analyses, reports, and briefings that consider varied perspectives across disciplines, challenge assumptions, provide actionable insights, and highlight areas of convergence and divergence.

Question of Focus

[R2 Q3] Given recent events, what are the trends in Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) malfeasant activity outside of the CENTCOM AOR?

Subject Matter Expert Contributors

Mr. Behnam Ben Taleblu (Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies), **Mr. Christopher Bidwell, JD** (Senior Fellow for Nonproliferation Law and Policy, Federation of American Scientists), **Dr. Michael Connell** (Principal Research Scientist, Center for Naval Analyses), **Mr. Michael Eisenstadt** (Kahn Fellow and Director of Military and Security Studies Program, Washington Institute for Near East Policy), **Mr. Joseph Humire** (Executive Director, Center for a Secure Free Society), **Dr. Kenneth Katzman**¹ (Specialist, Middle East Affairs, Congressional Research Service), **Mr. Alireza Nader** (Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies), **Dr. Emmanuele Ottolenghi** (Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies), **Dr. Sanam Vakil** (Deputy Director and Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House), and **anonymous expert**

IRGC-QF Malfeasant Activity Outside of the CENTCOM AOR

Experts interviewed state that they could find no evidence of recent changes in IRGC-QF activity outside of the CENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR). However, there are micro-trends that are of note, particularly for analysts focused on high risk, low probability events. Before we disentangle these trends, it is critical to place this study within the context of recent events, especially concerning the state of the Iranian economy.

The economic situation has become so untenable for average Iranians that Mr. Christopher Bidwell, JD (Senior Fellow for Nonproliferation Law and Policy, Federation of American Scientists) likens it to the environment in 2013 that drove Iran to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiating table. One Iran expert, who prefers not to be identified publicly, likens the overall dissatisfaction with the regime to levels higher than that which the population experienced in 1978. Nevertheless, none of the experts interviewed believe that either

¹ Katzman was interviewed for this project in his personal capacity. His comments do not reflect the views of the Congressional Research Service or the Library of Congress.

the Iranian economy or government is on the verge of collapse, just that Iran's economy is as close to collapse as it has ever been.²

No Discernable Change in IRGC-QF Activity

Despite economic conditions that are putting immense pressure on the regime, there are several reasons for the belief held by many experts that the IRGC-QF may be purposefully keeping a low profile abroad right now. While the interviews conducted for this study were held prior to the killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, Iran's leading nuclear weapons scientist, the motives fueling the IRGC's low profile abroad remain the same.

Awaiting political change. Like the Iranian regime, the IRGC-QF may be in a "holding pattern" pending the change in US administrations and the upcoming presidential elections in Iran, according to Mr. Alireza Nader (Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies). Dr. Sanam Vakil (Deputy Director and Senior Research Fellow, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House) adds that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei reportedly has asked those involved in making and implementing foreign policy to "tone it down, to lower the temperature, not to give any pretext for anything that could be construed as crossing an American red line that would result in open military conflict." With revenue down, funds to support long-term operations against a better-funded adversary are not available for the IRGC nor any other security force (Bidwell).

Continuing regular operations. The IRGC-QF is almost certainly experiencing financial constraints due to economic sanctions, but it is much less affected by it than other institutions, according to an anonymous expert. The IRGC-QF is likely shielded from the brunt of the sanctions imposed by Khamenei, whose ideology and leadership style requires a strong military. Furthermore, the IRGC has his unmitigated support. Thus, there is no evidence of diminished IRGC activity inside or outside of the CENTCOM AOR.

The IRGC will continue to remain very active across the globe as it works to obtain the supplies, technology, cash, and other items the Iranian economy needs, according to Dr. Kenneth Katzman (Specialist, Middle East Affairs, Congressional Research Service). Katzman notes that the IRGC "works with everyone and is everywhere" as it attempts to move needed materials without being discovered or intercepted. "This is a lot of what the Quds Force does. It has nothing to do with actual combat on a battlefield, but it is all very integral to Iran's global strategy," Katzman states.

However, the death of MG Qasem Soleimani was a particular blow to the IRGC's procurement and sanctions evasion efforts, according to Bidwell and Dr. Michael Connell (Principal Research Scientist, Center for Naval Analyses). "Soleimani was charismatic, visionary, and most importantly, well connected with the senior leadership levels in Iran. [MG Esmail] Ghaani is none of those. The current reality is that Iran has less money coming in the door to support Quds Force operations. Furthermore, Ghaani does not have the charisma and connections to get more money," Bidwell states. As a result, he expects that the effectiveness of Quds Force procurement operations may recede.

Focusing on the Middle East. Bidwell suggests that the lack of visible activity outside of the CENTCOM AOR suggests that Iran remains focused on its neighbors and what is going on in its near abroad. Vakil agrees that

² The factors driving the immense pressure on the Iranian regime are outlined in responses to Question 1 (internal stability dynamics) and Question 3 (effect of Abraham Accords on Iran).

Iranian priorities right now are geared toward the homeland given the state of the economy, the Azerbaijan-Armenian conflict, the change in US administration, and the upcoming Iranian presidential elections.

Tracking IRGC-QF activity is very hard. Finally, the experts interviewed caution that there may be significant changes that cannot be observed from open-source material. This may be a question that is unanswerable with certainty from even the most observant experts.

Micro-trends of Note

The counterpoint to the main conclusion that the IRGC-QF has not discernably altered its behavior in recent months is supported by micro-trends outside of the CENTCOM AOR that may bear watching. In fact, Vakil argues that learning to do more with fewer resources may be shaping the IRGC-QF into an increasingly powerful and effective organization. Furthermore, she discounts analyses that suggest that the IRGC-QF is not active in the world right now. Dr. Emmanuele Ottolenghi (Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies), who specializes in IRGC-QF and Hezbollah activity in Latin America, agrees with Vakil's assessment. He notes that while there has not been observable major growth in IRGC activities abroad, we "have also not seen a retreat despite all of Iran's setbacks." In fact, Nader contends that IRGC activities now may be a way to hedge against Iran's uncertainty regarding changes in the US approach to the region. Continuing to conduct limited attacks (e.g., cyber, bombings, assassinations, kidnapping of dissidents) against soft targets in Europe and elsewhere gives Iran the leverage it needs before engaging in further negotiations with the West. When asked how Iran intends to use these malfeasant activities as leverage, Taleblu points out that:

"Greater sanctions pain correlates strongly with greater Iranian nuclear capacity (despite sanctions trying to impede and offset that capacity). This is because domestically, in Iran, escalation or sustained foreign pressure is treated as something that must be responded to so as to not invite more pressure...no response is a green light for more pressure. This exact line of thinking... is what is driving the hardline debate in parliament for an overt response to the killing of nuclear scientist Fakhrizadeh."

Some of the micro-trends that the experts identify are described below.

Increasing ties to Venezuela. Ottolenghi and the anonymous expert both note that the only significant change in IRGC behavior over the last several months is increasing ties between Iran and Venezuela. However, Humire points out that the most significant uptick in the Iran-Venezuela relationship occurred in December 2019 with the naming of Ambassador Hojatollah Soltani in Caracas, who "is a known quantity in Latin America for blending Iran's foreign ministry with IRGC-QF activities." There are reports that Iran is very active in Venezuela, supporting the Maduro administration and Venezuela's ailing oil & gas sector, while Iran has reportedly benefited from payments in gold (Ottolenghi). This relationship is discussed further in the section below: A Look at Latin America.

More powerful, more aggressive, more creative. While the IRGC-QF likely has fewer resources available, several experts note that its leadership is creative enough to continue with their activities and, if anything, is becoming more effective by learning to do more with less (Taleblu, Vakil, anonymous expert). Katzman and Behnam Ben Taleblu (Senior Fellow, Foundation for Defense of Democracies) both note that the IRGC-QF has become more involved with Iran's non-security related foreign activities—like support for cultural and religious institutions. In so doing, the IRGC has added a security component that can await opportunities as they arise to strike against

US interests abroad. This may be important if the domestic situation in Iran approaches a point at which regime survival is endangered. In this situation, the IRGC-QF may behave more aggressively, conducting assassinations, kidnapping, and bombings, according to Nader and Taleblu. Experts already note an uptick in threats against regime dissidents abroad, with at least two experts noting personal threats against themselves or their institutions. Finally, Katzman notes that since the failure of the JCPOA, hardliners in Iran—backed by the IRGC—have been ascendant, giving the IRGC more power politically.

Retribution. Lest anyone forget, the desire for retribution for the Soleimani (and now Fakhrizadeh) killing, as well as for sanctions, is undiminished (Nader, Taleblu). In fact, the desire for payback is perhaps more widespread now than it ever has been, Taleblu notes. He adds, “We may therefore see an expanded target set. This may increase activities abroad in areas where we do not see inherent linkages to security concerns outside of the AOR.” Taleblu suggests that there may be increasing support for radical communities—even if they are not Shi’a—and increased support for lone wolf activity if it comes at a cost for the US.

Looking for support wherever they can find it. Connell suggests that the US maximum pressure campaign is forcing Iran to look for support wherever it can be found.³ That means that Iran is finding common cause with other countries that are also opposed to US influence. “Venezuela tops the list,” Connell notes. Others point to sub-Saharan Africa, particularly where there are Shi’a communities as in Nigeria and Senegal, as areas where Iran may seek to export its revolution (Connell, Nader, Eisenstadt). Nader also notes significant Iranian activity in Canada with IRGC and Ministry of Intelligence (MOIS) personnel living and working openly there. Furthermore, Ottolenghi notes that the South Caucasus will remain a priority for Iran, especially as the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict brings instability close to Iran’s northern border. He adds that Iran’s interest in the South Caucasus is in line with its historic imperial designs on its near abroad. Despite their recent communist past, Central Asian states (including Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan) retain majority Muslim populations. Iran could expand its influence there through mosques, clerics, and ties to “family owned oppressive regimes.” Mr. Michael Eisenstadt (Kahn Fellow and Director of Military and Security Studies Program, Washington Institute for Near East Policy) notes that the bottom line is that Iran will always want to reach out to groups that are sympathetic to the Iranian worldview—whether that is Shi’a expatriate communities or those who are opposed to US influence. It is “in Iran’s DNA” to seek out potential alliances, he says. Taleblu adds that the priority for Iran to reach out to a group is first and foremost that it has an anti-status quo world view. Islam and Shi’a quickly follow, which explains Iran’s support for al Qaeda and its presence in Venezuela.

Looking Ahead

Experts consulted for this study suggest that IRGC-QF activity outside the CENTCOM AOR is not likely to change dramatically in the near-term. However, that does not rule out continued efforts to attack US interests abroad in ways that are intended to avoid escalating tension above the threshold of armed conflict. Experts interviewed suggested two tactics to watch for: information warfare and surprise.

Information warfare. Connell notes that the easiest malfeasant activity for Iran to conduct directly against US interests is information warfare: “This is where they can get some dividends for cheap.” Recent trends suggest

³ Taleblu disagrees with this assertion. He argues that Iran’s intent is to look for offsets to end the US maximum pressure campaign. In support of this argument, he notes there are no new hotspots of IRGC-QF activity listed in this report; they all predate May 2018.

that Iran has been much more aggressive in the information realm and is perhaps a bit more effective than it has been in the past (Connell). Iranians are adept at using social media to amplify information that supports their regime and hurts their adversaries. Connell notes that Iran has always engaged in information operations, but what is new is that they are now leveraging cyber tools—in particular, social media platforms—to disseminate information. However, other US adversaries have also extended their information operations during the same period, so this is not unique to Iran. Nevertheless, Iran’s activity is notable because it is not expensive and is something they can do with very little risk of blowback.

Surprise. Eisenstadt cautions that making predictions about Iran is always difficult. While they have a careful and calculated decision-making process by and large, “every once in a while, they surprise us” (e.g., Khobar Towers bombing, drone attack against Israel in February 2018, attack on Saudi Aramco). These events were unlikely to be rogue activities, and analysts seem unable to parse out why they occurred. This is an area that likely deserves further study.

A Look at Latin America

Iran’s presence in Latin America is not accidental, opportunistic, or transactional; Iran has a strategic plan for the region, which represents perhaps the largest and most successful foreign investment Iran has made outside of the Middle East (Humire).⁴

In 2005, Iran became an observing member of the Bolivarian Alliance of the Americas (ALBA). “They touted it as a kind of politico-economic alliance, but in reality, it’s a political power project to be able to establish networks and create codependency among illicit networks of the member nations” (Humire). However, the transformation of Latin America into a strategically critical element of Iran’s foreign policy can be traced to the 2007 UN arms embargo that brought the IRGC-QF to the region, which had previously been the domain of the MOIS. The embargo forced the IRGC-QF to rapidly develop a robust procurement network in Latin America for access to minerals, metals, materials, and technology in support of Iran’s growing weapons programs. By 2009, working through ALBA nations, the IRGC-QF had built an extensive, mostly covert network across Latin America that included front companies, shadow banking, and dual-use state-owned enterprises. During this time (2005-2009), Iran also nearly doubled the number of its embassies in Latin America from six to eleven. By 2010, the ALBA relationship had matured into a network with mutual dependencies in trade, military cooperation, and illicit activities. Humire notes that while ALBA is an alliance of small countries, together, they created enough momentum to sway the region to the left politically and to make criminal networks more powerful.

In 2013, the “Soleimani shift” in the region transitioned intelligence collection from MOIS activities to IRGC-QF activities, focusing on developing illicit networks and working with drug cartels. Humire notes that Hezbollah already had a prior existing relationship with many Latin American drug cartels, but in years past, this was relatively autonomous criminal activity for Hezbollah. The “Soleimani shift” in the region saw the Quds Force getting more involved in this criminal activity in support of Hezbollah. Combined with the signing of the JCPOA in 2015, the Soleimani shift led to a spike in IRGC-QF activities in Latin America as it sought to legitimize its

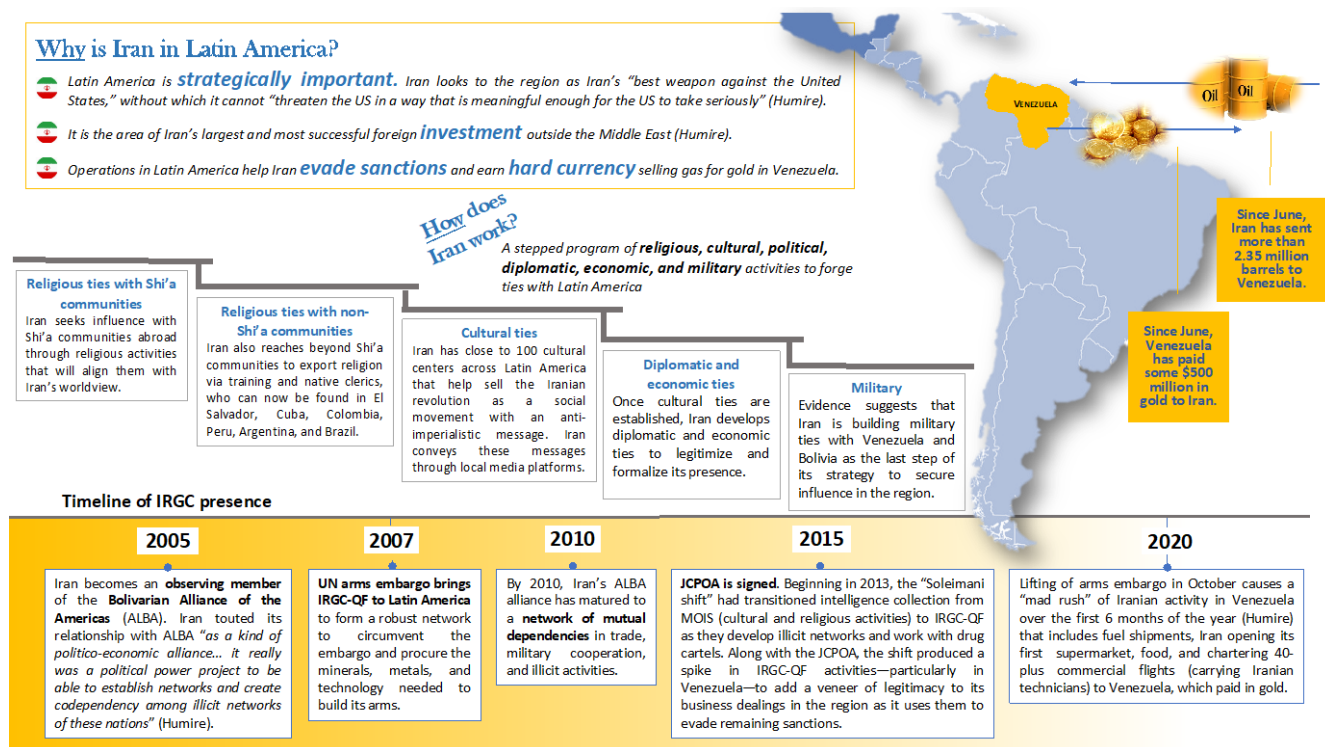
⁴ Please refer to Humire’s 2014 book, entitled *Iran’s Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, for a complete analysis and history of Iran’s strategic intent for Latin America (<https://www.securefreesociety.org/research/irans-strategic-penetration-of-latin-america/>).

presence—particularly in Venezuela and Bolivia⁵—so that when the arms embargo was lifted in October 2020, Iran could evade other sanctions through seemingly legitimate trade.

This has brought us to the current day, where the ending of the UN arms embargo in October 2020 has caused a “mad rush” of Iranian activity in Venezuela, according to Humire. This was evidenced over the last six months as Iran sent upwards of 2.35 million barrels of fuel, opened its first supermarket, sent food, and chartered 40-plus commercial flights (carrying Iranian technicians) to Venezuela. In return for these services, Venezuela has reportedly sent approximately \$500 million worth of gold back to Iran.

Why Latin America?

Although Iran is active in Latin America in order to evade sanctions and provide an economic outlet for Iran’s worsening economic crisis, its main objective may not be economic, according to Humire. Iran plays off the sentiment that the United States has abandoned Latin America, particularly during the 21st century (Humire), to try to employ geography to minimize its disadvantage in defense capabilities vis a vis the United States. “Iran looks at Latin America as its best weapon against the United States. And if it loses that weapon, it does not have the ability to really threaten the US in a way that is meaningful enough for the US to take seriously,” Humire notes.



How Does Iran Implement Its Strategic Plan for the Region?

Iran uses a stepped program of religious, cultural, political, diplomatic, economic, and potential military activities to forge greater ties between Iran and Latin America. These are briefly discussed below.

⁵ Bolivia is included here because while IRGC-QF activity in Bolivia is not as evident as in Venezuela, the Iranian foreign ministry has been increasingly active in Bolivia over the last five years—and especially since the Movement for Socialism party (MAS) has come back to power. Humire indicates that this knowledge may shed light on where QF activity may expand in the future.

Religious Ties

Iran has long invested in exporting the revolution through religious activities, primarily within Shi'a expatriate communities across Latin America (Ottolenghi, Humire). The goal is to infiltrate existing intuitions and networks to ensure that a significant part of these communities is aligned with the Iranian narrative (Ottolenghi). However, Iran's goal is not simply to provide religious services to existing Shi'a communities but to export religion to the masses. Iran has developed a system to train and support native clerics, who can now be found in Mexico, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, Cuba, Guyana, Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, and Brazil (Ottolenghi, Humire).

Cultural Connection

Iran connects with Latin Americans in ways that are not typical in other parts of the world, according to Humire. Exporting the revolution through existing Shi'a Islam networks can only reach so many Latin Americans. Instead, Iran's approach focuses on creating cultural and political ties with left-leaning communities. It has close to 100 cultural centers across Latin America. Humire notes that Iranians "sell the revolution not as an Islamic uprising of Shi'a; they sell it as a social movement that was built in Iran because of the exploitation of their natural resources by a foreign government. So, they built the revolution as a social movement to protect their natural resources from foreign powers." That message resonates in Latin American states because that is their struggle too. Iran is particularly effective in selling its anti-imperialistic messaging because it studies and understands Latin American states—in some cases, better than the US government does, Humire argues.

In addition to working directly with community groups, Iran has invested in media platforms, including teleSUR in Venezuela, and news platforms in Argentina, Bolivia, and El Salvador (Ottolenghi, Humire). HispanTV also broadcasts throughout Latin America. These platforms allow Iran to send strong messages to a large population that are not necessarily related to the finer points of Islamic Shi'a ideology.

Political Support

Ottolenghi notes that one effect of Iran's campaign to exert its influence over Shi'a communities in Latin America is the increase in Shi'a Latin American candidates for local office. He points to the upcoming Brazilian election in December 2020, which has a lineup of "Hezbollah proxies" running across different political parties. Ottolenghi predicts that this will happen more frequently across the continent. Humire adds that many in the Shi'a expatriate community have become very wealthy and influential business people, which Iran sees and wants to exploit as nodes of influence.

Diplomatic and Economic Ties

When the cultural ties become significant enough, Iran looks at developing the diplomatic and economic domain (Humire). That is when it starts to legitimize and formalize its presence—often through opening embassies. However, while the decline of US presence in Latin America and the waning of the Monroe doctrine make Latin America appealing to Iran, elites in Latin America still predominantly favor the US despite their political differences (Ottolenghi).

Military Ties

Once Iran has entrenched itself diplomatically with a host nation government, it begins developing in the military domain, according to Humire. Iran currently has a defense attaché in Venezuela, Brazil, and Ecuador. While the IRGC-QF has had covert activity in Venezuela since at least 2006, this activity is increasing as the IRGC-QF intensifies its presence in Venezuela. On November 6, 2020, President Nicolás Maduro announced the creation

of a new Scientific-Military Commission within the Venezuelan Armed Forces, stating that this will be carried out with military advisors from Iran, as well as Russia and China. Previous Iran-Venezuela defense cooperation included military industrial exchange on UAVs, jet aircraft engines, ammunition manufacturing, and helicopter parts.
