

Waging Jihad by Other Means: Iran's Drug Business and its Role within the International Crime-Terror Nexus

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Abstract

Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has been a state sponsor of terrorism worldwide. The production and trade of narcotics has been a key to this enterprise. The respective logistics function as a main infrastructure for Iran's global export of Jihadism and is an early example of the growing crime-terror nexus. On behalf of the country's clerical regime, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), in particular its *Quds* Force (QF), as well as the *Niruyeh Moghavemat Basij* (or *Basiji*) and its international proxies, are running Iran's global drug business. Its focus is on the Middle East and the US, but it is not geographically limited, as it also includes regions such as South and Central Asia and Europe. For some time now, Latin America has also become a launch pad for subversive activities in the US. Illegal drug trade is not managed by stray members of Iran's state apparatus it is a core interest and a central element of its policy. Research shows that the so-called anti-drug campaign promoted by Iran's security agencies is not aimed at eradicating drug trade production and consumption; it is used to ruthlessly eliminate competing actors in the drug business, and sometimes to eliminate political opposition and to suppress ethnic and religious minorities. Whereas the international community has been fixated with delaying the completion of Iran's nuclear programme, the survey argues for a reinforced emphasis on Iran's involvement in illegal drug trade and connected crime.

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Keywords

Iran, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, IRGC, Quds Force, Narcotics, Drug Trade, Drug Production, Terrorism, Narco-Terrorism, Jihadism, Crime, Afghanistan, US, Latin America

1. The role of IRGC

After leading the Islamic Revolution, on 5 May 1979, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini officially established the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, (IRGC) also known as the *Sepah-e-Pasdaran* (*Pasdaran*/¹Guards, *Sepah*/the Corps).² According to Article 150 of Iran's Islamic Constitution, the IRGC is responsible for 'guarding the revolution and its achievements'³. As pointed out by Nikola B. Schahgaldian, then based at the US think tank RAND, the IRGC is responsible for protecting the theocratic order and assisting the ruling mullahs in administering Islamic laws and morals.⁴ The Indian research fellow associated with the Institute for Defense Studies and Analysis (IDSA), M. Mahtab Alam Rizvi, stresses that by ensuring the regime's survival, the IRGC quickly became one of the country's 'leading political and economic actors'⁵ and, until today, remains the primary support of the Tehran's regime⁶ rooted in religious fanaticism. In return, the IRGC and its members received various privileges. Hesam Forozan, a research scholar educated both in the US and UK, emphasises that the patronage system — which often includes whole families, constituencies, and communities related to the IRGC — grants multiple benefits to its members. The Sepah Corporative Foundation⁷ that addresses the socio-economic needs of retired and active servicemen of IRGC,⁸ is a case in point. In a joint article by Forozan and Afshin Shahi, Associate Professor at University of Bradford, the authors argue that state assets, especially those related to income arising from Iran's oil and gas revenues, enable the IRGC machine to indoctrinate and mobilise masses of Iranian population on behalf of the regime.⁹ The IRGC financial patronage also requires loyalty to the regime. Mohsen Sazegara, co-founder of the IRGC, highlights that the political presence of IRGC compensates the absence of popular support for the theocratic order.¹⁰ He further states that, to properly fulfil its manifold objectives, the IRGC

¹ N. B. Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic*, Santa Monica, CA, The Rand Corporation, 1987, p. 64.

² S. Zahir, *The Iranian Military in Revolution and War*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 47.

³ *Iran (Islamic Republic of)'s Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989*, p. 37, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en. See also Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic*, p. 74; R. P. Anderson and J. Ciment, 'Iran: Revolution and Post-Revolution Violence, 1970s-Present', in James Ciment (ed.), *World Terrorism. An Encyclopedia of Political Violence from Ancient Times to the Post-9/11 Era*, Second Edition, London & New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 266.

⁴ Schahgaldian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic*, p. 64.

⁵ M. M. A. Rizvi, 'Evaluating the Political and Economic Role of the IRGC', *Strategic Analysis*, vol. 36, no. 4, 2012, pp. 584-596.

⁶ For a comprehensive summary of the rise of the IRGC, see Schahgaldian, pp. 64-86.

⁷ Besides the Sepah Cooperative Foundation, there are several other religious foundations such as the Foundation of the Oppressed and the Martyr Foundation.

⁸ H. Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran: The evolution and roles of the Revolutionary Guards*, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, p. 76.

⁹ H. Forozan and S. Afshin, 'The Military and the State in Iran: The Economic Rise of the Revolutionary Guards', *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 71, no. 1, 2017, pp. 67-86; Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, p. 77.

¹⁰ M. Sazegara, 'What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia', *Forward*, 16 March 2007, <http://forward.com/opinion/10320/what-was-once-a-revolutionary-guard-is-now-just-a/>.

established a country-wide infrastructure of branches and military facilities, set up its own bureaucracy¹¹ and networks for intelligence gathering, namely the Unit of Reservation of Information.¹² According to Sami Kronenfeld and Yoel Guzansky, former researchers at the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS), Tel Aviv University, the IRGC also dominates the country's police forces and has a presence in the legislative and judicial branches, including key bodies of the administration such as the Supreme National Security Council, Ministry of Defence, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Moreover, the IRGC established absolute control over Iran's media — radio and television networks — by granting some of its members senior political and bureaucratic positions,¹³ as well as more covert positions.¹⁴

According to Forozan, retired IRGC officers occupy a substantial number of seats in the Iranian parliament (*The Majles*).¹⁵ Rizvi argues that they persistently expand their political profile and operate extensive security networks; they suppress political opposition and act as the power brokers in Iran's political decision-making processes.¹⁶ Mehdi Khalaji, a *Qom*-trained Shiite theologian and the Libitzky Family fellow at The Washington Institute, states that the revolutionary guards 'actively prevent steps towards democratic reforms' and that IRGC 'is trained for scenarios of suppressing political or social uprisings in urban settings, especially in Tehran'.¹⁷

Elliot Hen-Tov, then a researcher at the Princeton University's Department of Near Eastern Studies and a Truman National Security Fellow, together with Nathan Gonzalez, an US-based scholar at the Washington D.C. based think tank named Foreign Policy In Focus (initiated by the Institute for Policy Studies), emphasise that the IRGC went beyond their constitutional duty by 'institutionalizing a praetorian political dimension to its power'.¹⁸ To strengthen this argument, Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow

¹¹ Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

¹² The IRGC intelligence, which works also abroad, exists in parallel with and is influential within the Ministry of Intelligence. 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>.

¹³ For example, Ayatollah Al Khamenei appointed many former Revolutionary Guards commanders to top political positions, blurring the line between military and civil authority. Former IRGC senior officers 'hold significant positions throughout the Iranian government: the president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; the secretary of the Supreme Council of National Security, Ali Larijani; the head of state television and radio services, Ezzatollah Zarghami; the secretary of the Expediency Council (charged with interpreting policy when the president and Majlis disagree), Mohsen Rezaei; and the head of the powerful Mostazafan Foundation, Mohammad Farouzandeh; as well as numerous cabinet ministers and a remarkable number of members of parliament (Majlis)'. Khalaji, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, Inc*.

¹⁴ S. Kronenfeld and Y. Guzansky, 'The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade', *Military and Strategic Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2013, pp. 108-109; Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

¹⁵ Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, p. 1.

¹⁶ Rizvi, *Evaluating the Political and Economic Role of the IRGC*.

¹⁷ Khalaji, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, Inc*.

¹⁸ E. Hen-Tov and N. Gonzalez, 'The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0.', *The Washington Quarterly*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, vol. 34, no. 1, 2011, p. 48.

at the US based Atlantic Council, quotes from the *Payam-e Enghelab*¹⁹ (issue published on July 25, 1981), according to which ‘the two main tasks of the Guards’ are defined as ‘guarding the principle of government by the supreme jurist and the principle of jihad’ and sums up that ‘the Guards cannot be robbed of a political dimension or ideological beliefs’.²⁰

The IRGC is particularly influential in areas of foreign policy and national security. Forozan observes that ‘Sepah’s long-established authority in export of the Iranian revolution and procurement of Iran’s military industry has been substantially augmented, strengthening its position as a leading actor in determining Iran’s national defence and regional policies’.²¹ For Saeed Ghasseminejad, an *Iran Fellow* at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies (FDD), the IRGC has full control of Iran’s mighty *military-industrial-financial complex*;²² and this remarkable combination of military power and political influence allowed the IRGC to develop its own business empire.²³ The IRGC’s entrepreneurial activities consist of more than one hundred corporations.²⁴ Alfoneh and Sazegara stress that IRGC controls a wide range of industrial sectors, including security, energy, construction, and communications.²⁵

The complexity of the patronage systems and multi-layered support of the regime forged a close relationship between the IRGC and the clerical elites. Deeply entrenched in Iran’s power structures, the IRGC is not only equipped with sufficient resources, but also acts with total impunity regarding its activities in the informal economy and organised crime, including the trade and production of illegal narcotics. Stephen Hughes highlights the fact that the IRGC is mandated to export the *Islamic Revolution*, including unconventional warfare and special operations in other countries,²⁶ which is a cornerstone of Iran’s engagement in the international crime-terror nexus.

¹⁹ The IRGC is running several publications - the *Payam-e Enghelab* is one of the IRGC periodicals. B. Sinkaya, *The Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations*, New York, Routledge, 2016.

²⁰ A. Alfoneh, ‘The Revolutionary Guards’ Role in Iranian Politics’, *Middle East Quarterly*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2008, <http://www.meforum.org/1979/the-revolutionary-guards-role-in-iranian-politics>.

²¹ Forozan, *The Military in Post-Revolutionary Iran*, p. 1.

²² 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>.

²³ 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/>; S. Golkar, ‘Paramilitarization of the Economy: The Case of Iran’s Basij Militia’, *Armed Forces and Society*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2012, pp. 625-648; T. Duheume, ‘Iran’s big business and IRGC Commanders’, *Al Arabiya*, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2017/02/10/ANALYSIS-Iran-s-big-business>.

²⁴ For example, the Bahman Group assembling Mazda cars in Iran or the National Company of Building and Civil Engineering, are owned by IRGC. Khalaji, *Iran’s Revolutionary Guards Corps, Inc.*

²⁵ Alfoneh, *How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran’s Economy?*; Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

²⁶ 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-393542>.

2. IRGC and the black economy

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.²⁷ Hugh Tomlinson, a political observer from The Times, quotes Sajjad Haghpanah, a former investigator at the IRGC's domestic intelligence division: 'They [IRGC] work with criminal gangs to move it overseas. They have their own ships, aircraft and haulage companies, everything needed for import and export. Their power is limitless.'²⁸ An independent analyst, Tony Duheume,²⁹ adds that Iran's praetorian guards are '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 Coast'.³⁰

In the words of Ghasseminejad, having uncontrolled access to land and sea routes for cross-border transportation, the IRGC smuggles goods in³¹ and out³² of the country bypassing taxes and related duties.³³ Mehdi Khalaji points out that 'one-third of country's import takes place through illegal markets, underground economy, and unauthorized docks'.³⁴ Guardian journalists, Julian Borger and Robert Tait, reported in 2010 that the IRGC is already in control of between a third and two thirds of the country's economy³⁵.³⁶ IRGC monopolises key industries and enjoys multiple privileges, such as for instance the ability to import household goods at a time when other companies have no permission.³⁷ According to Sazegara, companies linked to the IRGC are awarded multi-million dollar contracts without any serious public contenders. Khalaji emphasises that contracts are customarily passed without any open bidding process in violation of the Iranian law.³⁸ This harms Iran's economic

²⁷ Duheume, *Iran's big business and IRGC Commanders*.

²⁸ H. Tomlinson, 'Iran's elite Guard 'runs global crime network pushing heroin to West', *The Times*, 17 November 2011, p. 23; Sajjad Haghpanah quoted in Tomlinson, *Revolutionary Guard 'running Iran drug trade'*.

²⁹ Duheume, *Iran's big business and IRGC Commanders*.

³⁰ According to several reports, the IRGC is operating 60 illegal jetties in the country without government supervision. Frederic Wehrey et. Al, 2009, p. 64.

³¹ Ghasseminejad, *How Iran's mafia-like Revolutionary Guard rules the country's black market*.

³² According to the Customs Administration, the estimated worth of smuggled imported goods into the country is between 20-30 billion dollars. Ghasseminejad, *How Iran's mafia-like Revolutionary Guard rules the country's black market*.

³³ Ghasseminejad.

³⁴ Khalaji, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, Inc.*

³⁵ J. Borger and 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.

³⁶ One year later, Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez (*The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0*), came up with a lesser calculation and estimated that the IRGC share in Iran's economy is about 25-40 per cent. However, we can suspect the IRGC's involvement in the economy to be higher. Especially due to so called *economic privatisation* of public companies which led to a transfer of the ownership (which means without public tenders and below the market price) to the *Guards*. See Khalaji, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, Inc.*

³⁷ Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

³⁸ Khalaji, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, Inc.*

development, as companies with more experience and better qualification are sidelined.³⁹ The latter phenomenon is exacerbated by the fact that the IRGC does not hesitate to use its military capacities to achieve economic gains; economic rivals are arrested or intimidated, and monopolies are established. The case of Cyrus Nasserli is a prominent example. The then vice-chairman of Oriental Oil Kish, one of the largest private oil companies in the country, and a senior nuclear negotiator, was detained by the 'Guards' because he refused to offer equal partnership to the IRGC.⁴⁰ Later, the ownership of his company was granted to the IRGC. Alex Barker from the Financial Times tells us that IRGC launches armed attacks in cases of contractual disputes, as it did with the Romanian-owned (*Grup Servicii Petroliere*) oil rig operating in the Gulf.⁴¹ Sazegara concludes that in such an environment, enterprises out of IRGC control can hardly survive economically.⁴²

Iran's black economy has thrived as well on the wake of the international sanctions. In order to tackle the challenge, the U.S. Department of the Treasury identifies the IRGC

'to be a primary focus of US and international sanctions against Iran because of the central role it plays in all forms of Iran's illicit conduct, including Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programs, its support for terrorism, and its involvement in serious human rights abuses. As Iran's isolation has increased, the IRGC has expanded its reach into critical sectors of Iran's economic infrastructure, particularly to the detriment of the Iranian private sector in order to generate revenue and conduct business in support of Iran's illicit activities'.⁴³

The department blacklisted Iranian commercial entities such as Tidewater Middle East Co. (Tidewater) or Iran Air.⁴⁴

3. IRGC and the build-up of Iran's drug business and other criminal activities

An independent Iranian expert, Dudi Cohen, highlights that IRGC is involved in many illegal activities, such as trafficking of drugs (heroin, opium, and methamphetamine) and alcohol, oil smuggling,

³⁹ Certain sources report that companies belonging to the IRGC are getting awarded with contracts of multi-million dollar volume without any public tenders. This creates severe harm for Iran's economic development, since the companies with the most experience and best qualification are sidelined. In such an environment, enterprises out of the IRGC control can hardly survive economically. Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

⁴⁰ Khalaji, *Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, Inc.*

⁴¹ A. Barker, 'Iranian forces seize Romanian oil rig', *Financial Times*, 22 August 2006, <https://www.ft.com/content/529a366a-321d-11db-ab06-0000779e2340?mhq5j=e2>.

⁴² Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

⁴³ U.S. Department of the Treasury, 'Fact Sheet: Treasury Sanctions Major Iranian Commercial Entities', 23 June 2011, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1217.aspx>.

⁴⁴ In its Fact Sheet 'Treasury Targets Commercial Infrastructure of IRGC, Exposes Continued IRGC Support for Terrorism' it is stated that 'Tidewater is a port operating company owned by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) that has been used by the IRGC for illicit shipments. Iran's national airline carrier, Iran Air, is a commercial airline used by the IRGC and Iran's Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAF) to transport military related equipment.' U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Fact Sheet: Treasury Sanctions Major Iranian Commercial Entities*, 2011.

prostitution, money laundering and forgery.⁴⁵ Duheume (Ibid.) claims that the IRGC is also extensively involved in a large-scale trafficking of weapons.⁴⁶ Kronenfeld and Gurzansky describe the Iranian engagement in the international trade and production of narcotics.⁴⁷ The IRGC is represented internationally by the Quds Force (QF) and domestically it is assisted by the *Basiji*. John Calabrese from the Middle East Institute in Washington notes Iran is an essential link in a complex transnational drug supply chain that is anchored in Southwest Asia.⁴⁸ It functions as a pivot for drug trafficking from the so-called *Golden Crescent* (a production or a trans-shipment zone for drugs encompassing the remote mountain valleys of Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan). At the core of the *Golden Crescent* lies Afghanistan, the world's primary source of heroin. The *Golden Crescent* did not only replace the *Golden Triangle* of Myanmar, Thailand and Laos as a major source of illegal drugs, but has also become the world's leading heroin producing region.

4. Iran's Afghanistan connection

Mohsen Milani, professor and executive director of the Center for Strategic & Diplomatic Studies at the University of South Florida, considers Iran to be one of the most influential actors in Afghanistan.⁴⁹ Frederick W. Kagan from the American Enterprise Institute and former professor of military history at the US Military Academy (West Point) and his colleagues point out that Tehran's involvement in the affairs of Afghanistan contributes to the deterioration of security and political instability which is, however, often ignored by the Western media and think tanks.⁵⁰ Despite this, one can find telling analyses on the issue. According to Ahmad Khalid Majidiyar, director of the Iran Observed Project at the Middle East Institute, 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, a region where most of Afghanistan's narcotics are cultivated and produced.'⁵¹

⁴⁵ D. Cohen, 'Iranian Drug Ring Funding Terror?', *Ynet*, 18 November 2011, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4149990,00.html>. See also Tomlinson, *Revolutionary Guard 'running Iran drug trade'*; Duheume, *Iran's big business and IRGC Commanders*; Kronenfeld and Gurzansky, *The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade*; Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

⁴⁶ Duheume.

⁴⁷ Kronenfeld and Gurzansky, *The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade*.

⁴⁸ 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.

⁴⁹ M. Milani, 'Iran and Afghanistan, Article Series, United States Institute of Peace', *The Iran Primer*, n.n., <http://iran-primer.usip.org/resource/iran-and-afghanistan>.

⁵⁰ F. Kagan et al, 'Iranian Influence in the Levant, Iraq, and Afghanistan', *American Enterprise Institute Report*, 2008, <https://www.aei.org/publication/iranian-influence-in-the-levant-iraq-and-afghanistan/>.

⁵¹ A. Majidiyar, '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>.

Besides trafficking Afghanistan's drugs out of the country, Iran is also involved in the production of various drugs, in close connection with Iran's support for terrorism.

Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence of the U.S. Department of the Treasury, David S. Cohen considers that the '... IRGC-QF involvement in trafficking narcotics, [is] made doubly reprehensible here because it is done as part of a broader scheme to support terrorism'.⁵² This was exposed through the identification of several senior IRGC-QF officers directly involved in the Iran-Afghanistan crime-terror nexus.⁵³ IRGC-QF General Gholamreza Baghbani was blacklisted by the U.S. Department of the Treasury as a Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker pursuant to the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act).⁵⁴ This was the first time the Kingpin Act was used against an Iranian official. According to US authorities,

'General Gholamreza Baghbani is an IRGC-QF officer and the current chief of the IRGC-QF office in Zahedan, located in southeastern Iran near the border with Afghanistan. General Baghbani allowed Afghan narcotics traffickers to smuggle opiates through Iran in return for their assistance. For example, Afghan narcotics traffickers moved weapons to the Taliban on behalf of Baghbani. In return, General Baghbani has helped facilitate the smuggling of heroin precursor chemicals through the Iranian border. He also helped to facilitate shipments of opium into Iran'.⁵⁵

In brief, Iran's authorities facilitated the smuggling of drugs on its territory; as a trade-off, Afghan drug traffickers helped their Iranian counterparts to deliver weapons to the Taliban.⁵⁶ Garrett Nada, a programme specialist on Iran and Middle East who is involved in the 'Iran Primer: Power, Politics and U.S. Policy' project at the United States Institute of Peace stresses that the supply of weapons and military support was part of Iran's initiative to arm the Taliban and other anti-American forces that fight NATO troops in Afghanistan.⁵⁷ The U.S. Treasury Department further highlights Iran's involvement in arming the Afghan Taliban in its 'Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism':

⁵² U.S. Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Designates Iranian Qods Force General Overseeing Afghan Heroin Trafficking Through Iran', 3 July 2012, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/tg1444.aspx>.

⁵³ U.S. Department of the Treasury, 'Treasury Targets Networks Linked To Iran', 6 February 2014, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl2287.aspx>. See also Tomlinson, *Iran's elite Guard 'runs global crime network pushing heroin to West'*.

⁵⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury, *Treasury Designates Iranian Qods Force General Overseeing Afghan Heroin Trafficking Through Iran*.

⁵⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury.

⁵⁶ See also Cohen, *Iranian Drug Ring Funding Terror?*; Majidiyar, *Iran's Double Game in Drug War*; Hughes, *The Dirty Secret No One Talks About, Tehran's Heroin Drug Trade / its Narco-War Against America*; 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>.

⁵⁷ Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

‘The Qods Force is the Iranian regime’s primary instrument for providing lethal support to the Taliban. The Qods Force provides weapons and financial support to the Taliban to support anti-U.S. and anti-Coalition activity in Afghanistan. Since at least 2006, Iran has arranged frequent shipments of small arms and associated ammunition, rocket propelled grenades, mortar rounds, 107 mm rockets, plastic explosives, and probably man-portable defense systems to the Taliban. This support contravenes Chapter VII UN Security Council obligations. UN Security Council resolution 1267 established sanctions against the Taliban and UN Security Council resolutions 1333 and 1735 imposed arms embargoes against the Taliban. Through Qods Force material support to the Taliban, we believe Iran is seeking to inflict casualties on U.S. and NATO forces.’⁵⁸

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC), the so-called *Balkan route*, which is supplying Western and Central Europe with opiates from Afghanistan through Iran, Turkey and Southeast Europe,⁵⁹ will continue to be the most important conduit for heroin trafficking.⁶⁰ Since Tehran controls this route, Garrett considers that ‘Iran is the major trafficking hub for opiates produced in Afghanistan that are smuggled to Europe and beyond’.⁶¹

Furthermore, Iran is also a crucial step on the so-called *Southern Route*, which leads through Pakistan and Iran to the Gulf region, Africa, South Asia and — to a lesser extent — Southeast Asia, Oceania and North America.⁶² Despite the growing significance of the *Southern Route*, the *Balkan Route* remains the world’s most important opiate trafficking route.⁶³ The third route is known as the *Northern Route*, leading from Afghanistan to neighbouring states in Central Asia, including Russia and the Commonwealth of Independent States. While this route does not cross Iran’s territory, one should expect that Tehran will try to influence it through its Afghan proxies. According to Joby Warrick, an American journalist and winner of two Pulitzer Prizes, an alternative to the *Northern Route* is the *Caucasus Passage*, which runs through Iran to the Caucasian states characterised by unstable governments and porous borders, providing easy access to the drug markets of Europe and Russia.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ U.S. Department of the Treasury, ‘Fact Sheet: Designation of Iranian Entities and Individuals for Proliferation Activities and Support for Terrorism’, 25 October 2007, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/hp644.aspx>.

⁵⁹ Calabrese (*Iran’s War on Drugs: Holding the Line?*) considers a subdivision of the *Balkan Route* in three: ‘the Southern Route, which runs through Turkey, Greece, Albania and Italy; the Central Route, which runs through Turkey, Bulgaria, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Italy or Austria; and the Northern Route, which runs from Turkey, Bulgaria and Romania to Austria, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Poland or Germany. Turkey, the anchor point for the Balkan Route, is not only a major staging area and corridor for heroin destined for European markets but is also a critical thoroughfare for precursor chemicals such as acetic anhydride.’

⁶⁰ UNODC, ‘World Drug Report 2016’, *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime*, Vienna, 2016, http://www.unodc.org/doc/wdr2016/WORLD_DRUG_REPORT_2016_web.pdf.

⁶¹ Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

⁶² The Afghan heroin is not smuggled only via the *Balkan Route*. There is also an increasing drug trafficking via *Southern Route* through Pakistan. UNODC, *World Drug Report 2016*, 2016.

⁶³ UNODC, *World Drug Report 2016*.

⁶⁴ 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.

Iran's drug trafficking network has a global reach, spanning from Afghanistan to Latin America. Robert Spencer, director of Jihad Watch, a program of the David Horowitz Freedom Center (US based non-profit organisation and think tank), emphasises that the overseas parts of the routes are protected by Iran's Quds Force and its proxies, such as Lebanon's *Hezbollah*, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Houthis of Yemen, and the Iraqi group Kata'ib *Hezbollah*.⁶⁵ Additionally, quoting former senior IRGC member, Sajjad Haghpanah, Hugh Tomlinson concludes that the IRGC is working with organised crime to smuggle and distribute drugs.⁶⁶ Tomlinson further reports that Iran's allies are entrenching their role in existing routes or opening up new ones into North America.⁶⁷ Garrett states that even in Australia illegal narcotics of Iranian origin have been seized.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, despite Iran's apparent leading role in the international drug business, there are voices trying to downplay, ignore or, surprisingly, deny the existing evidence.

5. Iran's drug business and its role in the growing international crime-terror nexus

Ali Schirasi, author of German-Iranian origin and a human rights activist, describes smuggling of raw opium and morphine into Iran from Afghanistan. Tomlinson emphasises that the drugs are processed in Iranian laboratories.⁶⁹ The IRGC-QF actively expands into new markets and constantly develops new products. As Warrick tells us, Iran is a leading producer of methamphetamine, a highly addictive synthetic stimulant.⁷⁰ According to Warrick,⁷¹ producers of drugs in Iran are able to mass-produce a type of methamphetamine that is exceptionally pure. Such a large-scale and professional production of narcotics is done by professional chemists in pharmaceutical-grade laboratories⁷² and cannot be conducted without the knowledge of the omnipresent authorities and security agents. Despite the fact that methamphetamine (or meth) is increasingly consumed by local drug addicts, the number of Iranian indigenous meth users remains relatively small,⁷³ compared to heroin addicts. The production of meth is therefore likely targeting foreign markets.

Saeed Ghasseminejad claims that the IRGC is also Iran's main producer of weapons⁷⁴ and points out that the illegal narcotics trade and weapons trade are closely linked. Ghasseminejad sees these as the

⁶⁵ 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/>.

⁶⁶ Sajjad Haghpanah quoted in Tomlinson, *Revolutionary Guard 'running Iran drug trade'*.

⁶⁷ Tomlinson, *Revolutionary Guard 'running Iran drug trade'*.

⁶⁸ Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

⁶⁹ Tomlinson, *Iran's elite Guard 'runs global crime network pushing heroin to West'*.

⁷⁰ Warrick, *In Iran, Drug Trafficking Soars as Sanctions Take Bigger Bite*.

⁷¹ Warrick.

⁷² Warrick.

⁷³ Warrick.

⁷⁴ Ghasseminejad, *How Iran's mafia-like Revolutionary Guard rules the country's black market*.

two major pillars of Iran's engagement in the international crime-terror nexus.⁷⁵ For Tomlinson, Iran's involvement in drug and weapon trafficking and organised crime is not a new phenomenon,⁷⁶ but the international community has consistently ignored it. For Kronenfeld and Gurzansky, the IRGC, as a government entity involved in a variety of criminal acts worldwide,⁷⁷ is a major contributor to the global phenomenon of merging terrorism with crime.

6. Iran's narco-terrorism – from Afghanistan to Latin America

According to Tomlinson, Iran's 'drug-business' strengthens its so-called *Narco-Power* and provides Tehran with a broad range of options in its war against the 'Western Hemisphere'.⁷⁸ By launching a 'narco-jihad', Iran effectively targets all spheres of state and society of its perceived enemies. Narco-terrorism in South America has its roots in the 1980s, when the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC) and other terrorist groups began using the drug business to finance their missions. Former Peruvian president Fernando Belaúnde Terry coined the term 'narco-terrorism' and described it as the drug cartels usage of terrorist tactics — 'It has since served as a code name for the tight relationships between terrorist organisations and the global drug industry.'⁷⁹

Iran is now the main actor in the region as well, pushing for the convergence between drug-business and Jihadism in Latin America. Iran's engagement in terrorism in Latin America dates back to the times of the high-profile attacks against Israel's Embassy and Jewish cultural centre in Buenos Aires that took place in the early 1990s.⁸⁰ Parallel to that, Iran built its ideological subversion infrastructure.⁸¹ The establishment of the *Centro de Intercambio Cultural Iraní Latinoamericano* (CICIL) in 2004 was a landmark in this course. CICIL is supported by *Islam Oriente*, an Iranian foundation (based in the Iranian religious centre of *Qom*), and is run by Mohsen Rabbani, an Iranian cleric who was implicated in the 1994 Buenos Aires bombing. This highlights the strong link between Iran's clerics, terrorist networks and organised crime, within a complex crime-terror nexus.

Tehran makes efforts to form alliances with governments in the region to gain a stronger foothold in America's Southern backyard. Thomson and Rathbone refer extensively to Iran diplomatic and economic assistance to Hugo Chavez's Venezuela.⁸² Chavez functioned both as Iran's primarily

⁷⁵ Ghasseminejad.

⁷⁶ Tomlinson, *Iran's elite Guard 'runs global crime network pushing heroin to West'*.

⁷⁷ Kronenfeld and Gurzansky, *The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade*.

⁷⁸ Tomlinson, *Revolutionary Guard 'running Iran drug trade'*.

⁷⁹ Fernando Belaúnde Terry quoted in Kronenfeld and Gurzansky, *The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade*.

⁸⁰ A. Thomson, and J. P. Rathbone, 'Claim of Iran drug cartel link confounds US', *Financial Times*, 14 October 2011, <https://www.ft.com/content/20111014>; BBC, 'Iran charged over Argentina bomb', 25 October 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/>.

⁸¹ The Buenos Aires 1994 terrorist attack was coordinated by the 'Cultural Attaché'. As could be expected from its concept of jihad, Iran's terror activities and ideological propaganda are close instruments.

⁸² Thomson and Rathbone, *Claim of Iran drug cartel link confounds US*.

interlocutor and political bridgehead in the region, but also facilitated several contacts between Iran and other Latin American governments. José R. Cárdenas, an expert in inter-America relations and former acting assistant administrator for Latin America at the U.S. Agency for International Development in the George W. Bush administration, is pointing particularly at the governments of Rafael Correa (Ecuador) and Evo Morales (Bolivia).⁸³ The fact that numerous leading politicians and members of Venezuela's security agents are involved in the drug business, created a solid common ground for cooperation. According to Linette Lopez, senior finance correspondent at UK-based newspaper Business Insider, to reward politicians for facilitating Iran's entrance in South America, Iran flew large amounts of weapons, drugs and cash to Venezuela, through what was nicknamed the 'Aeroterror'.⁸⁴ Roger F. Noriega, former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs and visiting fellow at the US think tank American Enterprise Institute, argues that with the help of the Chavez administration, Tehran created an anti-American failed state in South America to push the flow of drugs and drug-related violence into the US.⁸⁵ According to press sources, ongoing political turbulence in Venezuela is an outcome of Iran's deconstructive influence on the government in Caracas.⁸⁶ To strengthen Teheran's position in Latin America, the country uses its proxies, particularly *Hezbollah*. Emanuele Ottolenghi, senior counselor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, and John Hannah, former deputy national security advisor for the Middle East of Vice President Dick Cheney, claim the Embassy of Venezuela in Syria has been issuing passports to facilitate the entry of Iranian backed Jihadists from the Middle East into Latin America.⁸⁷ Ottolenghi and Hannah say that one of the responsible Venezuelan diplomats, Ghazi Atef Nassereddine, is a 'key Hezbollah operative'.⁸⁸ Noriega reports that Nassereddine, who was sanctioned by the US in 2008, functioned as 'Hezbollah's principal representative to the Venezuelan regime'⁸⁹ and was in close collaboration with President Nicolás Maduro.

Scott Modell, managing director of the Rapidan Group (Global Energy Insight), expert on Iran and former CIA officer, together with David Asher, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American

⁸³ J. R. Cárdenas, 'Why is Iran conspiring with Mexican drug dealers?', *Foreign Policy*, 12 October 2011, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/12/why-is-iran-conspiring->.

⁸⁴ L. Lopez, 'Regular flight from Caracas to Tehran carried more drugs and money than people', *Business Insider UK*, 25 March 2015, <http://uk.businessinsider.com/aeroterror-venezuela-iran-and-latin-america>.

⁸⁵ R. F. Noriega, 'Hezbollah in the streets of Caracas?', *The Counter Jihad Report*, 23 February 2014, <https://counterjihadreport.com/tag/ghazi-atef-nassereddine/>.

⁸⁶ Aljazeera, 'Venezuela: What is happening?', 27 April 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/04/venezuela-happening-170412>.

⁸⁷ E. Ottolenghi and J. Hannah, 'In Venezuela's Toxic Brew, Failed Narco-State Meets Iran-Backed Terrorism', *Foreign Policy*, 23 March 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/03/23/in-venezuelas-toxic-brew-failed-narco-state-meets-iran-backed-terrorism/amp/>.

⁸⁸ Ottolenghi and Hannah, *In Venezuela's Toxic Brew, Failed Narco-State Meets Iran-Backed Terrorism*.

⁸⁹ Noriega, *Hezbollah in the streets of Caracas?*

Security (Washington D.C.), concluded that Iran (through IRGC-QF) and *Hezbollah* have built a multi-layered network across South America that includes official and unofficial Iranian government personnel, *Hezbollah* members, local and regional collaborators, organised crime groups, and official liaison relationships with a limited number of regional police, intelligence services and (para)military organisations.⁹⁰

7. Western business collusion with the Iranian regime

The fact that the Iranian clerical regime functions as the main protagonist for Jihadism and the global crime-terror nexus is often overlooked by western governments. The European decision makers are trying to ignore Iran's support for international terrorism and growing drug-business to fund its terrorist activities. Despite the US sanctions against Iran, the European decision-makers maintain business contacts and even weapons deliveries.

Emanuele Ottolenghi, who is also an expert at the Center on Sanctions and Illicit Finance focused on Iran (Washington, D.C.), gives the example of the Austria's Ministry of Defence approval of the sale of 800 HS50 12.7 mm Steyr-Mannlicher sniper rifles to Iran.⁹¹ Richard Kemp, retired Colonel and former commander of the British Forces in Afghanistan and Chris Driver-Williams, retired Major and former UK Special Forces, argue that these weapons are used by Tehran to arm regional insurgencies.⁹² Vienna based Journalist, Marion Kraske, states in an article published at German online Magazine of *Der Spiegel* that in contrast to Europe,⁹³ the US is increasingly aware of Tehran's growing affiliations with international criminal organisations. The report about the involvement of the IRGC-QF in the attempt to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States shows Iran's deep entrenchment in the crime-terror nexus.⁹⁴ Financial Times journalists Adam Thomson and John Paul Rathbone concluded that this failed murder also displayed the links between the IRGC-QF-*Hezbollah* and Latin American drug cartels, like the Mexican *Los Zetas*.⁹⁵ In spite of sanctions passed on individual members of the IRGC-QF or their proxies, Iran as a state was not sanctioned for its terrorist actions.

⁹⁰ See also S. Modell and D. Asher, 'Pushback: Countering the Iran Action Network', *Center for a New American Security*, Report, 2013, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/pushback-countering-the-iran-action-network>.

⁹¹ Steyr-Mannlicher is an arms manufacturer previously sanctioned by the US. E. Ottolenghi, 'Iran's Deceptive Commercial Practices', *Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies*, BESA Center Perspectives Paper no. 41, 15 April 2008, <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/iran%C2%92s-deceptive-commercial-practices/>.

⁹² R. Kemp and Ch. Driver-Williams, 'Killing Americans and their allies: Iran's Continuing War against the U.S. and the West', *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs*, March 2015, <http://jcpa.org/killing-americans-allies-irans-war/>.

⁹³ Besides the British government which expressed its objections against weapons deals with Iran. M. Kraske, 'Austrian Weapons in Iraq A Smoking Gun from the Alps', *Der Spiegel*, 14 February 2007, <http://www.spiegel.de/international/austrian-weapons-in-iraq-a-smoking-gun>.

⁹⁴ Ch. Savage and S. Shane, 'Iranians Accused of a Plot to Kill Saudis' U.S. Envoy', *New York Times*, 11 October 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/12/us/us-accuses-iranians-of-plotting-to-kill-saudi-envoy.html>.

⁹⁵ Thomson and Rathbone, *Claim of Iran drug cartel link confounds US*. See also Cohen, *Iranian Drug Ring Funding Terror?*

The IRGC protects its illegal overseas activities, including its cooperation with criminal networks. As soon as new sanctions against Iran (or one of its state agencies or proxies) are debated, Duheume observed that Tehran's praetorian guards show their 'notoriety for hitting back'.⁹⁶ To avoid punitive measures, they press the international community by carrying out large-scale military exercises and by testing new homemade weaponry.⁹⁷ By exhibiting its military capabilities and subsequent options for pre-emptive strikes, Tehran threatens its allies in Iran's neighbourhood, aiming at isolating the US. It goes also beyond these public shows of strength and promotes Jihad to put pressure on what it deems are hostile governments.

8. Iran's supposed punishment of the IRGC personnel: a showcase of whitewashing

Iran's involvement in criminal activities is not the feat of individual members of the IRGC-QF. While certain individuals such as General Gholamreza Baghbani or Mohsen Rafighdoost⁹⁸ were identified and sanctioned by the international community, these sanctions never affected the whole IRGC. The most obvious step to respond to reality would be the designations of the whole IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organisation (FTO) by the U.S. Department of State.⁹⁹

Iran's drug business is not an affair of some illegal activities of some guardians, it is a structural state instrument. Iran considers the production and trafficking of drugs as a tool in its 'war against the west', 'infidels' or 'worthless' societies, especially the US. According to Kronenfeld and Gurzansky, Iran's drug business offers an additional 'access to sources of financing that bypasses international sanctions,¹⁰⁰ as well as to sophisticated operational platforms that support its subversive efforts'.¹⁰¹

The Iranian government tries to disguise its deep engagement in the crime terror-nexus and subsequently its involvement in illegal trade and production of drugs by pointing from time to time at some individual IRGC members (retired or active). For instance, Sadeqh Mahsouli, a former senior IRGC officer and commander of the Azerbaijan province in Iran's northwest, faced criticism and

⁹⁶ Duheume, *Iran's big business and IRGC Commanders*.

⁹⁷ For example through tests of homemade missile systems like the long-range Qadir radar system or the Kavosh low altitude radar system, new 'command and control centres', and options for cyber warfare. Duheume, *Iran's big business and IRGC Commanders*.

⁹⁸ Mohsen Rafighdoost head of the IRGC in the 1980s, was running a major criminal network under the name of a logistic company, with hundreds of busses, planes, ships, transporters with networks for money laundering for income of drug money. A. Schirasi, 'Einblicke in einen Winkel des Mafianetzwerkes der Pasdaran', 1 November 2011, Weblog of Ali Schirasi, <http://alischirasi.blogspot.de/2011/11/01/einblicke-in-einen-winkel-des-mafianetzwerkes-der-pasdaran/>.

⁹⁹ For more information regarding the debate and the efforts regarding the designation of IRGC as FTO see M. Dubowitz, and R. Takeyh, 'Labeling Iran's Revolutionary Guard', *Foreign Affairs*, 6 March 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-03-06/labeling-irans>.

¹⁰⁰ The decline in the oil price had severe ramifications for the finances of the IRGC-QF too. Tomlinson, *Iran's elite Guard runs global crime network pushing heroin to West*.

¹⁰¹ Kronenfeld and Gurzansky, *The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade*.

punitive measures by Iran.¹⁰² However, the IRGC members who were punished for their illegal or ‘dubious’ activities were mainly targeted because they used their position for personal enrichment and political power, as was the case of Sadegh Mahsouli.¹⁰³ Bringing these officers to justice was at best a subordinate goal of the Iranian government. Furthermore, most of the punitive measures against senior members of the IRGC are rather symbolic in nature and aiming at individual persons in check. Parliament rejected Sadegh Mahsouli nomination for the powerful position of oil minister, but he was still awarded with the post of Minister of interior, what cannot be normally considered as a ‘punishment’.¹⁰⁴ Official charges against the IRGC members and subsequent punishment in Iran remain rare.

9. The myth of Iran’s struggle against drugs

Amir-Pasha Tabrizian, journalist and contributor to Al-Monitor, an online platform of experts from the Middle East for reporting and analysing, as well as Emanuele Ottolenghi, both observe that the Iranian authorities persistently claim they are battling the trade and consumption of drugs.¹⁰⁵ Based on Tehran’s official rhetoric, various sources¹⁰⁶ stress that Iran’s annual execution of hundreds of people for drugs related offenses proves the administration’s proclaimed hard-line policy against narcotics. Several international observers, including The New York Times (e.g. in a contribution by Thomas Erdbrink, a Tehran Bureau Chief of the NYT) describe the Mullah regime in Iran as the ‘West’s Stalwart Ally in the War on Drugs’¹⁰⁷ and imply that the vast scope of drug abuses in the country has driven Tehran to develop counter-narcotic policies.¹⁰⁸ Roberto Arbitrio, then Technical Cooperation Section Chief (and Head of the Teheran office) of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes (UNODC) stated, according to WikiLeaks, that ‘Iran is a ‘good guy’ on this issue’,¹⁰⁹ having in mind the promotion of border security and counter-narcotics cooperation.¹¹⁰ Observers following this approach often highlight that Iran is one of the leading countries confiscating drugs, mostly opiates.¹¹¹

¹⁰² Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

¹⁰³ BBC, ‘New Iran interior chief approved’, 18 November 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/>.

¹⁰⁴ BBC, *New Iran interior chief approved*.

¹⁰⁵ Amir-Pasha Tabrizian, 8. October 2015; E. Ottolenghi, ‘Iran’s Drug Problem’, *Weekly Standard*, 22 February 2013, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/irans-drug-problem/article/703113>.

¹⁰⁶ Cohen, *Iranian Drug Ring Funding Terror?*; Tomlinson, *Revolutionary Guard ‘running Iran drug trade’*.

¹⁰⁷ T. Erdbrink, ‘The West’s Stalwart Ally in the War on Drugs: Iran (Yes, That Iran)’, *The New York Times*, 11 October 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/12/world/middleeast/iran-fights-drug>.

¹⁰⁸ Regarding official Iranian sources it is estimated that Iran spend already in 2011 around 1 billion US dollars annually on its so-called *war on drugs*. Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

¹⁰⁹ WikiLeaks, ‘UNODC Officials discuss progress in Af-Pak and Iran programs, reiterate dialogue possibilities with Tehran’, 20 March 2009, https://wikileaks.org/plusd/cables/09UNVIEVIENNA117_a.html.

¹¹⁰ WikiLeaks, *UNODC Officials discuss progress in Af-Pak and Iran programs, reiterate dialogue possibilities with Teheran*.

¹¹¹ Kronenfeld and Gurzansky, *The Revolutionary Guards’ International Drug Trade*.

UNODC reports that Iran is ‘accounting for 75 per cent of global opium seizures, 61 per cent of global morphine seizures and 17 per cent of global heroin seizures, the largest aggregated opiate seizures worldwide in 2014.’¹¹² Some others argue that the IRGC plays a significant role in the country’s ‘war on drugs’ and pays a high price, particularly in the form of casualties, among the IRGC members¹¹³ as they wage a ‘war on drugs’ in Iran’s eastern province of Sistan and Baluchestan.¹¹⁴ Roberto Arbitrio states that ‘Iran is the frontline of the war against drugs.’¹¹⁵

Garrett Nada offers an opposite view as he sees these assertions as distortions of the reality on the ground and failures to perceive the inconsistencies in Tehran’s narratives that try to hide the fact that Iran is one of the main suppliers on the global drug market.¹¹⁶ The so-called ‘anti-drug campaign’ by Iranian security agencies is not aimed at eradicating trade, production, and consumption of illegal narcotics, but serves a different set of purposes. As Tomlinson observed, Iran anti-drug campaigns primarily aims to conceal Tehran’s deep entrenchment in drug trafficking and building of an industry of narcotics, supported by the IRGC-QF and its international proxies.¹¹⁷

UNODC, instead of gearing the fight against drug trafficking seems to work more as a public relations office on behalf of the countries that mostly contribute to it. For instance, there is no relevant information on the financing of Iran by UNODC in 2006 or in 2007 in its annual report.¹¹⁸ However, an Amnesty International report on this issue reveals the following:

‘In November 2006, the former head of UNODC said that UNODC would give 22 million US dollars to the Iranian authorities to bolster their efforts to combat drug trafficking. These funds were said to be intended to strengthen Iran’s eastern border against drug traffickers and for intelligence activities by police in that part of the country.’¹¹⁹

It is worth reminding that the IRGC is responsible for operations along the border with Afghanistan.

Another fundamental issue hidden by UNODC is that the campaign aims at eliminate the competition in the drug business and secure a monopoly for the IRGC. Concerning the above mentioned WikiLeaks telegram, the Iranian government and several observers emphasise that the ‘war on drugs’ is

¹¹² UNODC, *World Drug Report 2016*, 2016.

¹¹³ There are claims that between 1979 and 2007 around 3.300 of the IRGC members died in clashes with drug dealers. See Fathi, N., ‘Drug Smugglers Kill 11 Iranians in Elite Corps’, *The New York Times*, 23 July 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/23/world/middleeast/23iran.html>. According to another source, Iran lost some 3.720 soldiers between 1979 and 2012 in fighting drug traffickers. Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

¹¹⁴ Calabrese, *Iran’s War on Drugs: Holding the Line?*

¹¹⁵ Roberto Arbitrio quoted in Calabrese.

¹¹⁶ Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

¹¹⁷ Tomlinson, *Revolutionary Guard ‘running Iran drug trade’*.

¹¹⁸ UNODC, 2007, 2008.

¹¹⁹ Amnesty International, *Iran: Addicted to death: executions for drugs offences in Iran*, London, Amnesty International Ltd, Peter Benenson House, 2011, p. 11

one of the few areas in which Tehran is willing to cooperate with the international community, especially with its closest neighbours.¹²⁰ In a bid to improve its border security, Nada observes that Iran sealed and fortified its eastern borders with Pakistan and Afghanistan.¹²¹

This is a significant step towards strengthening the grip of the authorities over porous, remote frontiers. However, these measures do not aim at undermining the flow of drugs and other illegal goods. Instead, they establish the supremacy of the IRGC-QF in all cross-border related affairs, such as the movement of weapons as well as people, particularly Islamist militants, insurgents, and refugees. Several think tanks and media have been highlighting the use of refugees by the IRGC-QF as a recruiting pool of fighters for Iran's war in Syria.¹²² Some observers, like Joby Warrick, state that Tehran is hardly cooperating with neighbouring countries to track the flow of drugs.¹²³ Joint border controls or exercises of border guards are rather the exception than the norm, a clear indication that Tehran has no serious interest in bilateral or multilateral cooperation to eradicate the smuggling of illegal narcotics and goods in a comprehensive and sustainable manner. Actually, there are severe complaints by neighbouring states such as Azerbaijan about the increasing number of clashes between Iranian drug traders and their border posts. Iranian traffickers infiltrating Azerbaijan are so heavily armed — their weaponry includes tanks — that they have, according to Warrick, 'enough firepower to fight a small war'.¹²⁴ One may wonder about the role of Iranian security in these incidents. Some observers also point out it is no surprise that Iran is still far from implementing the UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drug and Psychotropic Substances,¹²⁵ despite the fact it joined the Convention in 1988.

According to Alfoneh, anti-drug campaigns are used to eliminate those who oppose the regime in Tehran (e.g. democratic, political opposition and armed insurgency movements).¹²⁶ Initially, the *Basiji* were a volunteer militia that supported the regular Iranian troops in the war with Iraq (1980-88). Today, they function mainly as a volunteer paramilitary organisation operating under the larger IRGC umbrella.¹²⁷ As an auxiliary force, it is assigned with several domestic duties, such as internal security,

¹²⁰ WikiLeaks, *UNODC Officials discuss progress in Af-Pak and Iran programs, reiterate dialogue possibilities with Tebran*.

¹²¹ Trough additional watch towers, electronic detection equipment, trenches, and barbed wire fences. Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

¹²² S. E. Rasmussen and Z. Nader, 'Iran covertly recruits Afghan Shias to fight in Syria', *The Guardian*, 30 June 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/30/iran-covertly-recruits-afghan-soldiers-to-fight-in-syria>; and A. Majidivar, 'Iran Recruits and Trains Large Numbers of Afghan and Pakistani Shiites', Middle East Institute, 18 January 2017, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/io/iran-s-recruitment-afghan-pakistani-shiites>.

¹²³ Warrick, *In Iran, Drug Trafficking Soars as Sanctions Take Bigger Bite*.

¹²⁴ Warrick.

¹²⁵ For details see UNODC, https://www.unodc.org/pdf/convention_1988_en.pdf.

¹²⁶ Also known as Basij Resistance Force or the Organization for Mobilization of the Oppressed.

¹²⁷ As one out of five arms of the service. A. Alfoneh, 'The Basij Resistance Force', *The Iran Primer*, 2015, <http://iran-primer.usip.org/resource/basij-resistance-force>.

law enforcement, and moral policing. However, Mohsen Sazegara points out that their most important task appears to be the identification, confrontation and/or eradication of political opposition.¹²⁸ Maintaining branches in virtually every urban area and larger rural settlement, the *Basiji* are one of the government's most significant tools of repression.

Measures against illegal narcotics are seen as a crucial instrument to improve the overall prestige of Iran, creating the image of a cooperative actor in international affairs and improving its reputation as a credible partner in the 'war on drugs'. For example, Tehran reintroduced treatment programmes for drug addicts.¹²⁹ Nevertheless, while the regime subsidised a few NGOs and community-based programmes, it did not spend any remarkable effort to launch its own initiatives.¹³⁰

Concretely, the announced policy shift from punishment to treatment of drug addicts is a sign of them shirking their responsibilities and indicates there is no political will to solve the problem of drug addiction. In reality, the government continues to execute drug traffickers and consumers, which is contradictory to its image-building campaign of aiming at addiction treatment. The fact is that the domestic drug market continues to flourish without facing comprehensive counter-narcotic efforts by the government. Consequently, the drug business run by the IRGC is expanding and exacerbating the existing problem of drug abuse among Iranians. A variety of illegal narcotics are widely available at 'discount prices'. Ulrich Ladurner, foreign correspondent of the German newspaper *Die Zeit* mentions that a dose of heroin is cheaper than a package of cigarettes.¹³¹ This reality on the ground is completely contradictory with the propagated image of a regime supposedly engaged in combating production, distribution and consumption of illegal narcotics. According to Tomlinson, 'cooperative criminals' are spared by Iran's law enforcement agencies. A remarkable case is the one of Reza Yousefnezhad, an alleged Iranian mafia boss, who has been deeply involved in drug trafficking. Despite being the focus of the anti-drug campaign for a long time and while crucial evidence was collected, the case was just dropped due to the interference of the higher-ups.¹³²

To extend its drug business, the IRGC not only collaborates with domestic criminals but also with non-resident ones. Foreigners are allowed to use Iran's territory for trafficking in drugs and weapons as long as they do not fall outside the IRGC's protection. Otherwise, they might face draconic treatment,

¹²⁸ Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

¹²⁹ After the Revolution in 1979, the new fanatic cleric regime stopped all treatment programmes for drug addicts launched by the monarchy. Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

¹³⁰ For example only 150 out of the 850 treatment centers for drug addicts were government run, the rest by NGOs like Rebirth. Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

¹³¹ U. Ladurner, 'Modern sind wir auch, aber nicht ganz', *Zeit Online*, 5 February 2004, <http://www.zeit.de/2004/07/Drogen>. See also Karl Vick, 23 September 2005. Actually, various other reports confirm this situation. According to the *Focus Magazin*, (2001) a shot of heroine was cheaper than a litter of milk. According to Karl Vick (2005) in the Washington Post: 'If he could afford it, Ali Nariman would drink beer, he says. But like most Iranians, he is poor, and so takes his solace in the form of a small gray ball of opium.'

¹³² Tomlinson, *Revolutionary Guard 'running Iran drug trade'*.

including official death penalties imposed by the authorities¹³³ and secret, extra-judicial killings.¹³⁴ The IRGC officially declares these activities as part of the country's counter-narcotics campaigns to reinforce its zero-tolerance image.¹³⁵ However, the use of capital punishment for (alleged) drug-related offences is also a tool of repression and control against those who oppose the regime and ethnic, religious minorities, especially Kurdish, Baluchi, Azerbaijanis (*Kouresunni*).¹³⁶

Drugs that were seized by the IRGC are often resold.¹³⁷ According to Tomlinson, drugs do not get destroyed as claimed by the IRGC to the UN.¹³⁸ The burning of narcotics '...is a small show for the UN. It is big business for us'.¹³⁹

Finally, the fact that the IRGC operates both inside the drug business and as the official enforcer of anti-drug policies,¹⁴⁰ highlights the falseness of Tehran's anti-drug rhetoric. The government's destructive involvement in the drug business not only adds to the growing drug epidemic, accompanied by a dramatic spread of HIV/AIDS,¹⁴¹ but also enhances the frustration and demoralisation of the common Iranian people, resulting in further opposition against the Mullahs. This results in even more restrictive policies to silence critical voices.

¹³³ There are reports about mass executions and that many of these death penalties based on juvenile arrests, torture, and unfair or non-existent trials. S. K. Dehghan, 'Iran executed all adult men in one village for drug offences, official reveals', *The Guardian*, 26 February 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/26/>.

¹³⁴ Tomlinson, *Iran's elite Guard 'runs global crime network pushing heroin to West'*.

¹³⁵ Tomlinson.

¹³⁶ According to the Guardian (2016): 'Iran executed all adult men in one village for drug offences, official reveals' we can read in a title of a London based newspaper early last year referring to the acknowledgement by the authorities of their genocidal policy carried out in Baluchistan, incidentally performed in the name of the 'war on drugs'. Amnesty International, *Iran: Addicted to death: executions for drugs offences in Iran*.

¹³⁷ Tomlinson, *Iran's elite Guard 'runs global crime network pushing heroin to West'*.

¹³⁸ Tomlinson.

¹³⁹ Tomlinson.

¹⁴⁰ Nada, *Iran Both Fights and Facilitates Narcotics*.

¹⁴¹ Nada.

Conclusions

From the beginning, Iran's build-up of an illegal narcotic industry went far beyond the notion of creating additional sources of income to bypass the effects of international sanctions. The substantial profits from this business help the IRGC 'to gain operational and logistical capabilities that will enhance their ability for terror and subversion in enemy territory'.¹⁴² Concretely, the drug business is a core piece in the financial and organisational infrastructure of the IRGC-QF (and their proxies) as it supports their global terrorist activities. For Tehran, drug business is seen as 'war by other means'. Other than its military engagement in Syria, the IRGC is more than a fighting force; it is a business conglomerate and criminal organisation that has virtually limitless power in Iran¹⁴³ and thus became the world's main engine of 'narco-jihad'.

Nowadays, it is imperative that the international efforts include and target the IRGC-QF and enforce sanctions against its overt economic activities. In addition, punitive measures must be carried out against the informal, criminal activities of Iran's security sector agents and their proxies. Iran's illegal economic undertakings will ultimately lead to a serious crisis, not only in Iran but also across the Middle East, Latin America (especially Venezuela) and parts of Central Asia, including Afghanistan.¹⁴⁴ In sum, the country can be accurately described as the motor of the largest and deepest entrenched international crime-terror nexus. The current clerical regime in Tehran is not only the top state-sponsor of terrorism worldwide but also the most criminal and corrupt government in the modern history of Iran. The IRGC, which was initially meant to be a people's movement to protect the achievements of the revolution, turned into a repressive instrument against the people and, in particular, against political opposition and minorities. One can conclude that the IRGC 'is perhaps the most equipped and sophisticated terrorist organisation of our time'.¹⁴⁵

¹⁴² Alfoneh, *How Intertwined Are the Revolutionary Guards in Iran's Economy?*; Kronenfeld and Gurzansky, *The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade*.

¹⁴³ A. Ansari, Blame it on the changing of the Guards, *The Times*, 30 March 2007, p. 21.

¹⁴⁴ Sazegara, *What Was Once a Revolutionary Guard Is Now Just a Mafia*.

¹⁴⁵ Ghasseminejad, *How Iran's mafia-like Revolutionary Guard rules the country's black market*.

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