



A Theoretical Analysis of the Capability of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Its Surrogates to Conduct Covert or Terrorist Operations in the Western Hemisphere.

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A Theoretical Analysis of the Capability of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and
Its Surrogates to Conduct Covert or Terrorist Operations in the Western Hemisphere.

William F. Prince

A Thesis in the Field of International Relations
For the Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

Harvard University

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Abstract

The Islamic Republic of Iran is one of only three state sponsors of terrorism as designated by the U.S. Department of State. The basic goal of this project has been to determine what capability the Islamic Republic has to conduct covert or terrorist operations in the Western Hemisphere. Relevant background to this research puzzle essentially begins with the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent taking of U.S. diplomats hostage. The Islamic Republic, through its subordinate Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) or its closely allied proxy, Hezbollah, has successfully conducted two deadly terrorist operations in the Western Hemisphere, which together killed 108 people and injured almost 400. The Islamic Republic had planned to conduct at least two more. Yet civilian and military leaders in the U.S. government, as well as academics and journalists, have arrived at very different conclusions regarding an Iranian threat capability to the Western Hemisphere. I have distilled these various conclusions into three major “schools’ or ‘views’ discussed at length in Chapter I.

In conducting research for this paper, I reviewed over 390 references. I developed a theoretical model for assessing covert action capability. As a result of this research, I believe the Islamic Republic has developed a viable threat capability in the Western Hemisphere as one part of its asymmetric warfare strategy. I have concluded that at least as of early 2018, the Islamic Republic is reluctant to antagonize the U.S. or other Western Hemisphere nations for fear of jeopardizing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA/Nuclear Deal), although it may well employ Hezbollah operatives which provide the Islamic Republic with some ‘plausible deniability.’ While the Islamic

Republic may not have the intention to employ this capability, intentions can change very quickly, requiring additional intelligence resources and continued vigilance on the part of the U.S. and Western Hemisphere nations.

Author's Biographical Sketch

Colonel (Retired) William F. (Bill) Prince received his commission in the Infantry from the United States Military Academy, West Point, NY. He served in Vietnam with both Ranger and Special Forces units. In 1978, he resigned his Regular Army commission to accept a position with the Central Intelligence Agency. He served as an Operations Officer in the Middle East, Africa and Central America. Col. Prince is a recipient of one of the CIA's highest awards for valor, "...for extraordinary heroism...in the face of hostile armed opposition..." Since his retirement from CIA he has continued to serve overseas engaged in contract work for various U.S. government agencies. His experience in hostile areas includes: El Salvador, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Colombia, Pakistan and Iraq. He retired from the Army Reserve in 2001 with 31 years combined Active and Reserve service. In 2008, he was recalled to Active Duty and assigned to the U.S. Special Operations Command at MacDill AFB, Tampa, FL.

While Col. Prince did not "work" Iran during his career in intelligence and special operations, he did serve operationally in some 13 countries in the Middle East as well as eight countries in Latin America over a course of approximately 40 years. His time in the Middle East includes 11 deployments between Iraq and Afghanistan since 9-11. In this thesis he has tried to leverage something of a 'comparative advantage' over other scholars who have no direct experience in either the Middle East or Latin America. In addition, he reads and speaks Spanish and has been able to exploit several appropriate Spanish language articles.

This thesis is unclassified and the author has been careful not to incorporate any classified information. That said, for over 40 years, Col. Prince maintained a Top Secret, Special Compartmented Information (SCI) clearance and produced or reviewed thousands of classified intelligence reports. He believes he can effectively analyze information for validity and sources for reliability. This thesis relies heavily upon the yearly “Posture Statements” by the commander of the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) which has responsibility for Latin America. (Col. Prince performed several active duty tours with SOUTHCOM and Special Operations Command South, SOCSOUTH.)

Dedication

With great gratitude I dedicate this thesis to Flicka, my lovely bride of now 37 years. She has watched me walk out the door and into harm's way many more times than I can count. She has been in harm's way as well during our tour in El Salvador, having been showered with glass, courtesy of an insurgent placed bomb on the utility pole adjacent to our front gate. And later she spent the better part of a week living in an interior closet with our then very young children as the Salvadoran guerrilla's 'Final Offensive' raged up and down the street in front of our house. She has been a blessing to me, to our children, to her parents and to so many others. She is the second-best thing that ever happened to me, and she knows what that means.

Acknowledgments

First, I wish to acknowledge the help and inspiration I received from my Thesis Director, Prof. Payam Mohseni, the Director of the Iran Project at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at the Harvard Kennedy School. It was through taking his class, “The Politics and Ideology of Post-Revolutionary Iran” which first sparked my passion for this subject. Having him first as professor, then as Thesis Director, was a genuine privilege. In addition, I received excellent guidance and support from his colleague Mohammad Sagha, the Iran Project Coordinator at the Belfer Center.

I owe a debt of gratitude to Col. (Ret.) Bill Duesbury, a friend and colleague of almost 40 years. He is a tireless researcher on subjects relating to the U.S. military and international affairs. He graciously agreed to forward articles appropriate to my thesis as he came across them.

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Explanation of Transliterations and Terms

The following lists important terms used in the thesis. Transliterations from a foreign language frequently vary. I have attempted to standardize terms used in the paper to mirror the transliterations found in most of the secondary source material. If useful, I have included below their spelling in Persian (Farsi), common abbreviations, and finally any alternative spellings. Quotations will always retain alternative spellings as used in the original document.

The Islamic Republic of Iran: *Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*, standardized in the thesis as ‘The Islamic Republic,’ or more generically, simply ‘Iran.’

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps: *Sepah-e Pasadaran-e Enqelab-e Eslami*, which literally translates as Corps of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution. Frequently referred to as the ‘Revolutionary Guards’ or as the *Pasadaran*. References also refer to it as the ‘Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.’ Occasionally, and incorrectly, referred to as the ‘Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps.’ Abbreviated IRGC.

The Quds Force: *Sepah-e Qods*. Alternative references or spellings include ‘Qods Force’ and *Niru-ye Qods*, ‘Jerusalem Corps.’ Abbreviated QF.

Hezbollah – The Party of God, an alternative spelling, frequently used in U.S. government documents, is ‘Hizballah.’ Other spellings include: ‘Hizbullah,’ ‘Hizbollah,’ ‘Hezbollah,’ ‘Hisbollah’ and ‘Hizb Allah.’

Shia - The Party (or Followers) of Ali. *Shiyan e Aysha*. Alternate spellings include ‘Shite,’ ‘Shiite,’ ‘Shi’a,’ and ‘Shi’ah.’ Shias make up approximately 15% of the world’s Muslims.

The Government of the Jurist: *Vilayat-e Faqih* or *Vilayat-i Faqih* – Also referred to as the ‘Rule of the Jurisprudent.’ Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s vision for governing Iran under a clerical Supreme Leader.

The Ministry of Intelligence of the Islamic Republic of Iran: *Vezarat-e Ettela'at Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran*, is Iran’s primary intelligence agency. Western publications normally refer to this organization as the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).

Chapter I

Introduction - Framing the Puzzle:

Does a Threat Exit and How Can So Many Experts Disagree?

“We will export our revolution throughout the world. As our revolution is Islamic, the struggle will continue until the call of ‘There is no God but God...’ echoes around the globe.”¹

The leadership of the Islamic Republic of Iran (henceforth, the ‘Islamic Republic’ when referring to the government) bears considerable animosity towards the United States. The Islamic Republic is one of only three countries in the world that the U.S. Department of State has designated as a ‘state sponsor of terrorism.’ As recently as July 2017, the State Department emphasized that the Islamic Republic continued its worldwide sponsorship of terrorism.² As I detail in Chapter IV below, the Islamic Republic, through its subordinate Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), or through its closely allied proxy, Hezbollah, has successfully conducted two deadly terrorist operations in the Western Hemisphere, which together killed 108 people and injured almost 400; and had planned to conduct at least two more. Former IRGC commander Major General Yahya Safavi paints a stark difference; Iran represents ‘good’

¹ From the IRGC’s biweekly journal *Payam-e Enqelab* (Message of the Revolution) as found in Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 102.

² “Country Reports on Terrorism 2016.” U.S. Department of State. 19 Jul. 2017.

(*jebeh-e Hagh*) and the United States ‘evil’ (*jebeh Batel*).³ Further, the Islamic Republic’s constitution calls for the continuation of the revolution at home *and abroad*. (italics added).⁴

Central for the Islamic Republic has been the adoption of an asymmetrical warfare strategy. The Defense Department defines asymmetrical warfare as “...the application of dissimilar strategies, tactics, capabilities, and methods to circumvent or negate an opponent’s strengths while exploiting his weaknesses.”⁵ Despite a general agreement on the Islamic Republic’s asymmetrical warfare strategy, civilian and military leaders in the U.S. government (U.S.G.), as well as academics and journalists, have arrived at very different conclusions regarding an Iranian threat capability to the Western Hemisphere. I have distilled their different conclusions into the following three major ‘schools’ or ‘views’:

View #1: The Islamic Republic does not now have, nor did it ever have, an objective of establishing a capability of attacking the U.S. or its interests via the Western Hemisphere. Rather, the Islamic Republic wished only to ally with other ‘progressive’ governments in the region, specifically Venezuela, to block U.S. ‘hegemonism.’

View #2: The Islamic Republic’s interest in establishing an asymmetrical warfare capability in the Western Hemisphere has waned since 2013, but it retains the capability

³ “The Next President Should Implement the Supreme Leader’s Orders.” Fars News Agency, 11 Apr. 2013, as quoted in Saeid Golkar’s article, “Iran’s Revolutionary Guard: Its Views of the United States.”

⁴ From the Preamble to the Islamic Republic’s Constitution, section entitled “The Form of Government in Islam.” Translation provided by the Islamic Republic’s embassy in London. Published by the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs of Georgetown University.

⁵ U.S. Department of Defense, “Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms” (Joint Publication JP 1-02). As of Dec. 2017.

to leverage allies, proxies, or networks to conduct terrorist attacks against the U.S., or its interests. The situation requires continued vigilance on the part of the U.S.

View #3: The Islamic Republic has systematically developed a covert action capability to conduct terrorist attacks against the U.S. or its interests via the Western Hemisphere. This capability remains a viable and dangerous option as part of its asymmetric warfare strategy.

It is the thesis of this study that the Islamic Republic had available, as of early 2018, an infrastructure in the Western Hemisphere to support future covert or terrorist operations should it decide to do so (essentially view #2). In producing this thesis, I developed a theoretical model for assessing a covert action capability. Chapter II defines covert action and explains the theoretical model. I hope this theoretical model will help future scholars assess covert action capability in other situations. Regarding the Islamic Republic's capabilities, I conducted an inductive analysis of the research data followed by deductive reasoning to answer the following research question: In building its capacity to wage asymmetrical warfare against the U.S., what factors impact the capability of the Islamic Republic to direct terrorist or covert operations in the Western Hemisphere?

I have identified four key factors shaping the Islamic Republic's capabilities in the Western Hemisphere. I identify these four as key, because the capability would not exist minus any one of these four.

1) The Quds Force. Retired senior CIA Iran analyst Norman Roule describes the Quds Force as 'a unique entity in the world' with its mission to conduct

external covert and terrorist operations.⁶ In my opinion, it consists of well-qualified and highly motivated personnel, ably led by Major General Qassem Suleimani. Chapter III provides additional detail on the Quds Force.

2) The Lebanese Diaspora. During my tours in Latin America, I have come in contact with an extraordinary number of Lebanese. I have even heard that there are more ethnic Lebanese living in Latin America than there are living in Lebanon. Many within the Lebanese Diaspora have become very successful businessmen and entrepreneurs with strong networks based on ethnic and family ties.

3) Hezbollah. As further detailed in Chapter III, I believe Hezbollah serves as a proxy for the Islamic Republic. Hezbollah leverages religious and cultural ties with the Lebanese Diaspora in the Western Hemisphere.

4) Anti-U.S. Sentiment. Likely since the ending of the Spanish colonial period, there has existed significant anti-U.S. sentiment in Latin America. During the period since the Iranian Revolution in 1979, several countries have displayed national policies hostile to the U.S.; Cuba throughout the period, Nicaragua during the Sandinista regime and more recently, Venezuela. Chapter IV describes the alliance between Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadijad and Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez

By using the answers to the above noted research question, I have formulated policy recommendations for U.S.G. action (Chapter VI). In my view, the research points to an existing and viable Iranian threat capability in the Western Hemisphere, with a requirement to remain vigilant to the possibility of a decision on the part of Iran's leaders

⁶ Norman Roule, "Friction Ahead: Tehran Faces Enemies Foreign & Domestic in 2018." *The Cipher Brief*. 28 Dec. 2017.

to exercise that capability. I also hope that the bibliography, which identifies over 390 sources, will assist other scholars interested in exploring this topic.

Relations between nations are rarely static and U.S. – Iran relations are clearly no exception. During the drafting of this thesis, hardly a day has passed without the publication of news items concerning relations between the two countries. A major difficulty in producing this thesis has been to ascertain when to stop the information gathering. Thus, it was with some trepidation that I had arbitrarily selected mid-October 2017 as the ‘cut-off-date’ for the inclusion of new information. On 13 October 2017, President Donald Trump announced significant changes in U.S. policy toward Iran. Chapter V will provide a very brief overview of these changes. That said, I continued to closely follow events relative to my thesis into January 2018. Four more very significant events occurred, which I will briefly cover in Chapter VI. I recognize how quickly situations can change. I hope this thesis will have enduring significance, but ask the reader’s forbearance if events soon compromise my assessment and/or policy recommendations. Time will tell.

As noted above, it was the “puzzle” that first captured my interest in this subject. How is it that Iran watchers, at least some of whom are very familiar with that nation’s activities in the Western Hemisphere, could come to dramatically different views regarding threat capabilities and intentions?

Support for View #1: Probably not surprisingly, I found a great deal of support for View #1 from official Iranian sources. Those sources maintain that the U.S.G. has exaggerated any threat from Iran, purposely provoking ‘Iranophobia.’⁷ Secretary of

⁷ “Inefficiency of US Non-Nuclear Sanctions against Iran.” Expediency Council, Center for Strategic Research. 09 Jul. 2017.

State Rex Tillerson earns special opprobrium for ‘demonizing’ Iran due to his unbounded Iranophobia.⁸ Iran’s former ambassador to Mexico stated that Iran has no influence along the U.S. southern border; an area he maintains is actually controlled by the drug cartels. He charged that U.S. Congressional concern is actually only ‘propaganda hype’ resulting from pressure imposed by the ‘Zionist lobby.’⁹ Indeed, during a March 2012 visit to Mexico and Honduras, then Vice-President Joe Biden essentially affirmed View #1. He stated, “People talk about Hezbollah. They talk about Iranian support for weapons and the rest. I guarantee you, Iran will not be able to pose a hemispheric threat to the United States. We have the full capacity to make sure that does not happen.”¹⁰

Support for View #2: I found very interesting a 2009 article entitled “Alliance Problematic for the U.S., But Not Threatening” published by an official Iranian website, which seems to support View #2. In this article, Prof. David Myers from Pennsylvania State University allowed as how Iran has embedded its officers in Venezuelan military units since 2006, and has influenced the Venezuelan military to adopt asymmetrical warfare as its official doctrine. He concluded that in his view, the relationship is only potentially problematic for the U.S. rather than threatening. He opined, however, that it bears watching.¹¹ In 2008, the Woodrow Wilson Center for Scholars published an article

⁸ Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, “The Trouble with Tillerson: Unbounded Iranophobia.” *Iranian Diplomacy*. 20 Apr. 2017. Dr. Afrasiabi is a former research scholar at Harvard. He had been arrested by Harvard University police in 1996 for extortion, but was later cleared of all charges.

⁹ Mohammad Rouhifefat, “The Main Goal Is to Depict Iran as Threat to US.” *Iranian Diplomacy*. 02 Jan. 2013.

¹⁰ Joe Biden, “Biden: Iran Will Not Threaten U.S. Security Through Latin America.” *CNN en Espanol*. 07 Mar. 2012.

¹¹ Danielle Kurtzleben, “Alliance Problematic for the U.S., But Not Threatening.” *Iran Review*. 11 Aug. 2009.

entitled, “Iran in Latin America: Threat or ‘Axis of Annoyance’?” I found the following to provide an interesting view:

As this report demonstrates, the growing and multi-layered relationship between Iran and numerous Latin American countries since Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005 is driven by a combination of factors. These include...economic self-interest, shared anti-U.S. and anti-imperialist ideology, and the desire (on Iran’s part) to play a larger role on the world stage, assert foreign policy independence, and diversify international partners beyond the United States.¹²

Another scholarly article written in 2012, and entitled “Iran’s Influence in the Americas” by the Center for Strategic & International Studies, provided an additional nuanced view. The author, Stephen Johnson, had served as Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Western Hemisphere Affairs. In his article, he admitted that there was, what he described as, strong circumstantial evidence of Hezbollah operations in the Western Hemisphere, but that Hezbollah’s links to Iran have weakened. He further allowed as how Hezbollah could serve as what he termed a fifth column in the Americas. I will explore this theory in more detail in subsequent chapters. Regarding cultural activities, Johnson noted Iranian outreach to relatively small Muslim populations. He opined that this outreach was simply Iran’s way of highlighting its role as a world power.¹³ Could there be, however, a more sinister motive? Drawing on my 40 years of experience in intelligence and special operations, I believe there is. Cultural outreach to minority communities in any environment provides an ideal venue for spotting, assessing, developing and recruiting agents, operatives and support personnel.

¹² Cynthia J. Arnson, Haleh Esfandiari and Adam Stubits, eds. “Iran in Latin America: Threat or ‘Axis of Annoyance’?” *Woodrow Wilson Center Reports on the Americas* No. 23. July 2008.

¹³ Stephen Johnson, “Iran’s Influence in the Americas.” *Center for Strategic & International Studies*. Feb. 2012.

Support for View #3: At the other end of the spectrum, my research came across the 2014 book, *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America*, which presents a clearly alarmist view. Editor Joseph M. Humire is the executive director of The Center for a Secure Free Society, a global think tank headquartered in Washington, D.C. Co-editor Ilan Berman is vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council, also based in Washington. Their book, which I will cite in upcoming chapters, details extensive Iranian skullduggery in the region. It received a very positive review by former CIA Director R. James Woolsey.¹⁴

In my view, Dr. Cynthia J. Arnson, Director, Latin American Program at The Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, perhaps best identified the problem during her 16 February 2012 testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing *Iran's Influence and Activity in Latin America*. She testified on the difficulty of evaluating the Islamic Republic's activities in the Western Hemisphere due to a lack of transparency both on the part of Iran and its regional allies.¹⁵

In writing this thesis, I further explored this dichotomy by placing special emphasis on assessing reliability and validity. Unfortunately, a great deal of the information from secondary sources is rather inflammatory in nature. Said another way, it appears that more moderating, nuanced articles do not get quite the exposure allotted to their more alarming counterparts. In evaluating the three contending views, I tried to strike a balance with my research. As evidenced above, I explored official Iranian

¹⁴ Joseph M. Humire and Ilan Berman, eds., *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America* (London: Lexington Books, 2014), Back cover.

¹⁵ Cynthia J. Arnson, "Iran's Influence and Activity in Latin America." Testimony Before the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere, Peace Corps, and Global Narcotics Affairs, 16 Feb. 2012.

websites, particularly *Iranian Diplomacy* and *Iran Review*. I further explored peer reviewed, scholarly journals which provided important data. Articles published by think tanks such as the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, as well as the Brookings Institution, provided useful information. This paper has also relied heavily on data from three official U.S. Government sources:

1) Expert testimony before U.S. Congressional committees. In researching this paper, I found that the U.S. House of Representatives has held regular hearings on the Iranian/IRGC/Hezbollah threat to the Western Hemisphere. These hearings contain testimony from expert witnesses, as well as comments from members of Congress. Of interest, there appears to be bipartisan concern for Iranian and Hezbollah activities south of the U.S. border.

2) The yearly *Posture Statements* provided by the Commander of the U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM). SOUTHCOM has responsibility for monitoring threat issues in Latin America. Each year in February/March, the four-star general or admiral in charge of SOUTHCOM provides the U.S. Congress with an official *Posture Statement* reviewing the command's regional assessment and priorities. A review of these *Posture Statements* for each year from 2011 to 2017 notes Iranian activities in the region, and provides arguably the best overview of the commander's assessment of the threat. These *Posture Statements* are unclassified, but the SOUTHCOM commander has access to 'all-source' intelligence. It is reasonable to assume that while the *Posture Statements* do not contain classified information, they also do not violate the analysis derived from classified intelligence reporting. Additionally, by reviewing the *Posture Statements*, this paper will note changes in perspective during the previous seven years.

3) Studies done by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) of the Library of Congress. The CRS provides tailored studies on topics of interest to members of the U.S. Congress and other policy makers. In particular, approximately every three months, Dr. Kenneth Katzman produces a CRS study entitled *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*. Each of these studies contains a section on Iranian activities in the Western Hemisphere. As with the SOUTHCOM commander's *Posture Statements*, Dr. Katzman has access to all-source intelligence. While his products are unclassified, it is doubtful that these reports would substantially contradict classified material.

In summary, there appears to be several foundational concepts upon which to begin building an understanding of the situation. First, there exists animosity between the U.S. and the Islamic Republic. Second, to overcome a disparity in combat power, the Islamic Republic has adopted an asymmetrical warfare strategy. Third, there exist at least four factors (noted above) which are available in Latin America to support this strategy. So, how to resolve "the puzzle" of how subject matter experts have arrived at such divergent views? Developing a theoretical model for analysis seemed the next logical step.

Chapter II

Background to the Puzzle

This chapter provides foundational information upon which the remainder of the thesis rests. First, we will construct a theoretical model for assessing the Islamic Republic's capability to conduct covert or terrorist operations in the Western Hemisphere. Next, we will assess the situation, both from Tehran's perspective and from Washington's. Finally, in this chapter, we will define Tehran's objectives.

Constructing a Theoretical Model

While this thesis, as shown by the title, discusses covert action as well as terrorist operations, the two are not always linked. As I will cover in more detail below, a covert operation, by definition, seeks to conceal the identity of the sponsor. In contrast, the sponsors of terrorist acts may or may not seek to conceal their identities. In fact, some groups will publically and loudly claim responsibility for terrorist acts even when they were not really involved.

In the case of the Islamic Republic, however, I believe combining the two is legitimate since that country's leadership has, since coming to power in 1979, traditionally sought to hide its sponsorship of terrorist acts. Thus, in the remainder of this paper, I will normally use the term 'covert action' regarding Iranian capabilities, but with the capability to conduct terrorist acts understood to be a part of Iran's covert action capability. I assume that a reader of this thesis is likely to have a firm understanding of

what constitutes terrorist acts. But for clarity, the U.S. Defense Department defines a terrorist act as, “The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political.”¹⁶

What constitutes covert operations may not be so well understood. Thus, I will provide additional focus on that aspect. According to the Department of Defense, a covert operation is designed to conceal the identity of the sponsor, or at least provide ‘plausible deniability.’ I will highlight the concept of plausible deniability as we deal with the Islamic Republic’s effective use of its proxy, Hezbollah.

The term ‘covert’ is often confused with the term ‘clandestine,’ although the two have very different objectives. Whereas covert operations seek to conceal the identity of the sponsor, clandestine operations seek to conceal the operations themselves.¹⁷ I offer two examples from the world of computer hacking which I hope will help clarify the terms. The intelligence service of Nation A may hack into Nation B’s computer system to gain access to classified information. Ideally, Nation A would prefer if Nation B never realized they had been hacked and their protected information compromised (a clandestine operation). In contrast, hackers inserting ‘ransomware’ onto computers are not trying to hide the act. Their action is all too obvious and worrisome for the individual from whom they are demanding payment. However, the hackers definitely wish to hide their identities from individuals and law enforcement agencies (thus a covert operation).

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, “Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms” (Joint Publication JP 1-02). As of Sep. 2017.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, “Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms” (Joint Publication JP 1-02). As of July 2017.

And while not as familiar as terrorist acts, covert action is a much used capability. Indeed, an article published by the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center, entitled "Covert Action," described "Covert Action as one of many foreign policy tools used by policy makers to advance national interests." The authors, Eric Rosenbach and Aki J. Peritz, emphasize that the U.S. government has made extensive and at times successful use of covert action. The interested reader will find included in their article, examples and parameters of covert action.¹⁸ A Cato Institute *Policy Analysis* entitled, "The Pitfalls of U.S. Covert Operations," consisted largely of a review of what that author, David Isenberg, described as CIA failures. (While Mr. Isenberg writes on a wide variety of foreign policy and defense issues, I found his views on covert action to be rather naïve and simplistic.) That article did, however, provide a convenient, informal description of covert action which I believe bears emphasizing. Covert action provides an intermediate option between the use of overt military force and diplomacy. Isenberg noted how attractive this option can be to policy makers not wishing to be criticized as either warlike or cowardly.¹⁹ Having been in the intelligence and special operations arena for 40 years, I agree.

Also helpful to me in devising my theoretical model was "Principles of Covert Action" by retired CIA case officer James Periard, who was the author of the CIA's doctrine manual for covert action. He makes several important points. Periard emphasizes that the development of a covert action program should focus first on specifically defining the objective and will likely require patience; with many such

¹⁸ Eric Rosenbach and Aki J. Peritz, "Covert Action." The Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School of Government. July 2009.

¹⁹ David Isenberg, "The Pitfalls of U.S. Covert Operations." *Cato Institute Policy Analysis*. 07 Apr. 1989.

programs requiring five to seven years to achieve fruition.²⁰ Another helpful reference was Kristen N. Wood's thesis for the Naval Postgraduate School, *Covert Action: A Systems Approach*. She explored the following eight 'Internal System Components' of a covert operation; Decision Maker Risk Attitude, Objectives, Operational Constraints, Type of Action/Tools Used, Target Characteristics, Event, Deniability, and Effectiveness.²¹

While my literature review found these and several other articles dealing with the theory of covert action to provide useful ideas, none presented a theoretical model for analysis. Thus, I devised the following 'phases,' which I applied to the thesis topic, and by which I have organized the remaining sections/chapters in this thesis paper. I hope that the phases contained in this model will serve future scholars should they decided to analyze other covert operations. The phases are:

Phase I: Assessing the Situation (section two below in this chapter)

Phase II: Defining the Objective (section three below in this chapter)

Phase III: Creating a Covert Action Capability (Chapter III)

Phase IV: Employing the Covert Action Capability (Chapter IV)

Phase V: Assessing the Operational Flexibility of the Capability (Chapter V)

Phase VI: Assessing Effectiveness and Policy Recommendations (Chapter VI)

The objectives of using this theoretical model have been 1) to provide a basic foundation for understanding the Islamic Republic's security drivers, 2) to weigh the

²⁰ James S. Periard, "Principles of Covert Action." *The Cipher Brief*. 08 Mar. 2017.

²¹ Kristen N. Wood, "Covert Action: A Systems Approach." *Naval Postgraduate School*. Dec. 2014.

evidence regarding those capabilities, 3) to articulate the implications of the evidence, and 4) to formulate recommendations for U.S.G. action. As I noted earlier, much of the literature sounds a rather alarmist tone. That is not to say that the more alarmist literature is without merit. It does mean that I have tried to evaluate the alarmist literature especially carefully.

Again, drawing on my 40 years of experience in intelligence and special operations, I have relied on a four part system for evaluating over 390 sources. First, what is the source's background? Is he or she an academic or a journalist? Second, what sub-sources does the author cite, if any? A review of the literature indicates that there is present what the intelligence community refers to as 'circular reporting.' In other words, it seems to me that a significant number of sources are relying on the same sub-sources or incidents. Third, do these sources or sub-sources have, or did they have, direct access to the information? Do they have an 'ax to grind' which might prejudice their views; for example, information obtained from a defector. Fourth, I have attempted to separate fact from opinion, conjecture and speculation. I have used two key criteria for measuring success: 1) finding a variety of credible sources who support key findings and 2) presenting testable hypotheses such that other scholars can review and expand upon this research.

Now, armed with our six-phase theoretical model, we move to applying Iranian actions to that model, beginning with the situation as viewed from Tehran and Washington.

Assessing the Situation – Tehran’s View and Washington’s View

As listed earlier in this chapter, the first phase in our theoretical model for assessing a covert action capability is “Assessing the Situation.” Most of the following chapter will deal with the situation as Tehran sees it. I assume the reader of this paper will be more familiar with the situation as Washington sees it, explored in a shorter section following the view from Tehran.

Drivers Impacting the Quest for Security in Post-Revolutionary Iran

Arriving at a concise, overarching worldview for the Islamic Republic is an important first step in the first phase of our model. Iran’s history, geography, religion and ideology shape its strategic culture; its worldview and decision-making patterns. And public opinion is of little importance.²² Within Iranian politics, various factions energetically debate foreign, domestic and economic policies.²³ In its dealings with other nations, the advancing of the Iranian Republic’s foreign policy objectives is more important than religion. Iran uses several strategies to include terrorism, proxies, and diplomacy to achieve its foreign policy objectives.²⁴

²² J. Matthew McInnis, “The Future of Iran’s Security Policy: Inside Tehran’s Strategic Thinking.” *American Enterprise Institute*. May 2017.

²³ Payam Mohseni, “Fractionalism, Privatization, and the Political Economy of Regime Transformation.” In Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Fardi, eds., *Power and Change in Iran: Politics of Contention and Conciliation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 41, 65.

²⁴ Soner Cagaptay, James F. Jeffrey, and Mehdi Khalaji, “Iran Won’t Give Up on Its Revolution.” *The New York Times*. 26 Apr. 2015. This article presents the thoughts of three well-qualified Iran watchers; Washington Institute’s senior fellow Soner Cagaptay, former U.S. ambassador to Iraq, Turkey and Albania, James F. Jeffrey, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei biographer Mehdi Khalaji.

A central element of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy since the Revolution has been hostility toward the U.S. government. This hostility stems from U.S.G. support for the 1953 coup which overthrew the government of Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq and reinstalled Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.²⁵ As current Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei stated in July 2014, "Reconciliation between Iran and America is possible, but it is not possible between the Islamic Republic and America."²⁶ Indeed, at least one scholar blames the 'caustic' and 'rampant anti-American sentiment' among 'Arab nations' (sic) on the overthrow of Mossadeq.²⁷ This view seems to me to be a bit of a stretch. Many factors may well contribute to anti-American sentiment in the Middle East, among those is U.S.G. support for the creation of the State of Israel.²⁸ But whatever the cause, hostility toward the West in general, and the U.S. government in particular, is clear. Visitors to Tehran's Mehrabad Airport have noted the yellow neon sign in the domestic terminal which reads, in English, "In future Islam will destroy Satanic sovereignty of the West."²⁹

What interests us most, however, is how this hostility impacts the Islamic Republic's efforts in the Western Hemisphere. If we assume, as some scholars do, that a sense of victimhood and paranoia shape Iranian foreign policy, then it seems logical that

²⁵ Ervand Abrahamian, *The Coup: 1953, The CIA, and the Roots of Modern U.S. – Iranian Relations* (New York: The New Press, 2013), 1-2. Prof. Abrahamian has written extensively on Iran.

²⁶ William J. Burns, et al., "Contain, Enforce, and Engage: An Integrated U.S. Strategy to Address Iran's Nuclear and Regional Challenges." *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. 26 Oct. 2017.

²⁷ Jaechun Kim, "The First American Secret War: Assessing the Origins and Consequences of Operation AJAX in Iran." *The International Area Studies Review*. 01 Mar. 2006.

²⁸ Bernard Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans* (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 2004), See especially Chapter 33, "The Roots of Muslim Rage," 319-331. Also of interest is Chapter 4, "Iran in History," 43-52.

²⁹ Elaine Sciolino, *Persian Mirrors: the Elusive Face of Iran* (New York: The Free Press, 2000), 14.

the Islamic Republic would attempt to create a provocative capability in Latin America to counter any U.S.G. desires for governmental change in Iran.³⁰

As noted in Chapter I (Introduction), I have distilled the opinions of Iran watchers into three primary ‘schools’ or ‘views.’ As support for views 2 and 3, I have gathered compelling evidence that the Islamic Republic has formulated a strategic decision to build an asymmetrical warfare capability. I found Mohsen M. Milani’s comments in *Foreign Affairs* magazine particularly relevant. “To deter any possible military actions by the United States and its allies, Iran is improving its retaliatory capabilities by developing the means to pursue *asymmetric, low-intensity warfare* (italics added), both inside and outside the country...” This strategy includes solidifying ties with such countries as Bolivia, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Venezuela which share the Islamic Republic’s animosity toward the U.S.³¹ In addition to pursuing allies among Latin American nations, the Islamic Republic has focused efforts on empowering proxies as part of its objective of improving its asymmetric warfare capabilities. Allies and proxies provide the Islamic Republic with deniability. There remains concern on the part of some U.S. officials that the Islamic Republic would conduct terrorist attacks inside the U.S. through its surrogates or proxies, (support for view #3).³²

In subsequent chapters, especially Chapter III, I will explore the use of proxy forces and asymmetrical fighting doctrine in more detail.

³⁰ Farideh Farhi and Saideh Lotfian, “Iran’s Post-Revolution Foreign Policy Puzzle.” *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan and Russia*. (Oxford: The Oxford University Press, 2012), 122.

³¹ Mohsen M. Milani, “Tehran’s Take: Understanding Iran’s U.S. Policy.” *Foreign Affairs*. 01 Jul. 2009.

³² (Name redacted.) “Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies.” *Congressional Research Service*. 06 Feb. 2017. I have relied heavily on publications by the Congressional Research Service.

Drivers Impacting Washington's policy objectives regarding Post-Revolutionary Iran

I was involved in intelligence operations in the Middle East in the late 1970s. Based on my personal experience, I maintain that the 1979 Revolution was a serious setback for U.S. objectives in that entire region. Pivotal was the occupation of the U.S. Embassy and the taking of the U.S. diplomats hostage; actions in direct contravention of well-established international norms.³³ There remains a good deal of debate regarding who or what caused the release of the hostages. Whatever actually transpired, many Americans believe, as do many U.S. political leaders, that Ronald Reagan's landslide victory in the 1980 presidential election appeared to signal to the Iranian leadership, and indeed to most of the rest of the world, a tougher, more activist attitude toward foreign policy. The fact that the Iranian leadership released the U.S. hostages on Inauguration Day indicates, in this view, the value of a 'get tough' policy toward Iran. Since the Revolution, various U.S. administrations have made no secret that they desire and would commit resources to regime change which has certainly reinforced Iran's antagonism toward the U.S.G.³⁴ According to a June 2017 report, the Trump administration's NSC

³³ I had numerous discussions with foreign counterparts during that hostage crisis. Of interest, it seemed to me that much of the U.S. media was laudatory toward the administration of President Jimmy Carter for showing 'restraint' and 'patience.' Without exception, my Middle Eastern counterparts were not favorably impressed by the administration's 'restraint' nor by its 'patience.' Rather, they looked upon the administration's actions, or lack thereof, as 'weakness.' The hostage crisis, and failed rescue attempt in April 1980, seemed to me to be particularly damaging, coming so soon after our humiliating departure from Saigon. (I accept that I might be rather sensitive in conflating these events, having served as a Ranger and Special Forces officer in Vietnam and having several friends who participated in the Iran rescue attempt.)

³⁴ Seymore Hersh, "Preparing the Battlefield – the Bush Administration Steps Up its Secret Moves against Iran." *The New Yorker*. 07 Jul. 2008.

senior director for intelligence, Ezra Cohen-Watnick favors using CIA assets to force government change.³⁵

Ambassador John W. Limbert, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iran, in his book, *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling with the Ghosts of History*, provided sage advice. “Remember that power is respected, weakness despised.” Ambassador Limbert has personal experience with Iranians. He was one of 52 diplomats taken hostage in 1979, spending nine months of his captivity in solitary confinement.³⁶

I trust the above provides an adequate if not exhaustive view from both Tehran and Washington. We can now focus more specifically on Iranian foreign policy objectives.

Defining Tehran’s Objectives

Phase II in our theoretical model for assessing a covert action capability calls for defining the Islamic Republic’s objectives. Any analysis of Tehran’s objectives must first ask the question, is the Islamic Republic a ‘nation’ or a ‘cause’? Further, any understanding of Iranian national security decision making, indeed any understanding of Iranian geopolitics in general, must begin with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his concept of *Vilayat-i Faqih*, (The Government of the Jurist). A detailed discussion of this intricate concept is far beyond the scope of this thesis. Suffice it to say that Khomeini envisaged that the new government of Iran would espouse a totalist, all-embracing

³⁵ Matthew Rosenberg and Adam Goldman, “C.I.A. Names the ‘Dark Prince’ to Run Iran Operations, Signaling a Tougher Stance.” *The New York Times*. 02 Jun. 2017.

³⁶ John W. Limbert, *Negotiating with Iran: Wrestling with the Ghosts of History* (Washington: United States Institute for Peace, 2009), 21.

ideology, not simply a religion, and that a ‘Supreme Leader’ would guide the Iranian nation, invested with far reaching, but not absolute power.³⁷

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei assumed the position of supreme leader in 1989 upon Khomeini’s death, and has continued to adhere to the latter’s vision. Indeed, as recently as 11 March 2017, IRGC commander Major General Mohammad Ali Ja’fari expressed the vision for the Islamic Republic which included the worldwide rule of Islam. Several days later on 15 March, he declared that the IRGC and senior revolutionary clerics remain committed to shaping the Islamic world.³⁸

Iran’s foreign and defense policies are frequently contradictory. Iranian leaders appear to continually be trying to balance ideology with national interest.³⁹ Henry Kissinger opined that Iran must decide whether it is a nation or a cause.⁴⁰ The following provides a succinct introduction to the mechanics of the Islamic Republic’s consensual decision-making:

The supreme leader of Iran, like the president of the United States, is the commander in chief of all military and security forces. Decisions to use conventional force, shift major foreign policies or direct the actions of the Islamic Republic’s paramilitary and *covert organizations* (italics added) are made and executed through direct and indirect channels under the supreme leader’s guidance.

³⁷ Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), xiv, 113.

³⁸ Ali Ja’fari, “IRGC Commanders: Our Main Aim is Global Islamic Rule.” *The Middle East Media Research Institute* from Tasnimnews.com (Iran). 19 Jun. 2017.

³⁹ Kenneth Katzman, “Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies.” *The Congressional Research Service*. 06 Apr. 2017.

⁴⁰ Reza Akhlaghi, “A Candid Discussion with Karim Sadjadpour.” *Foreign Policy Association*. 06 May 2013.

The supreme leader does not have dictatorial power. Decision making includes the Supreme Council for National Security (SCNS), the Armed Forces General Staff (AFGS), and the Expediency Council. While there may be spirited and vocal debate among governmental leaders on certain topics, after it is all said and done, it is the supreme leader's guidance which carries the day.⁴¹

Tehran's foreign policy objectives, reviewed in this chapter and alluded to previously, dictate the establishment of an asymmetrical warfare capability. The leaders of the Islamic Republic have, since the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, done an effective job in designing and creating a covert action capability for supporting terrorist operations as an integral part of an overall asymmetrical warfare strategy.

In my view, there appears, in summary, to be very logical reasons for the Islamic Republic to adopt asymmetrical warfare as a national strategy given the drivers impacting its quest for security. Further, it is logical that they would desire to exploit U.S. vulnerabilities; to include the capability of hitting the U.S. in its 'backyard.' I certainly would, if I were in their position. Thus, we move on to Phase III of our model, to explore just how the Islamic Republic has gone about creating this capability.

⁴¹ McInnis, "The Future of Iran's Security Policy: Inside Tehran's Strategic Thinking."

Chapter III

Creating a Covert Action Capability

Phase III in our theoretical model is *Creating a Covert Action Capability*. The Islamic Republic's capability rests upon a strong three-pillared structure; the IRGC, its subordinate Quds Force, and its proxy, Hezbollah. This chapter provides pertinent background; followed by an overview of each of these three organizations. Iranian websites, particularly *Iran Review.Org* and *Iranian Diplomacy* provided interesting data. And as noted in the introduction, I have relied heavily on hearings and testimony before U.S. Congressional committees, as well as the yearly *Posture Statements* provided to the U.S. Congress by the four-star general or admiral commanding U.S. Southern Command. The final section provides testimony in chronological order which the interested reader may find useful in assessing possible changes in the operational environment.

Determining the Building Blocks.

In January 1984, the U.S. Department of State designated the Islamic Republic of Iran as a state sponsor of terrorism.⁴² As noted in Chapter I, the U.S. State Department described Iran's sponsorship of worldwide terrorism in 2016 as undiminished. During the early relationship between the Iranian government and the IRGC, the Guards served as the enforcers for the clerics. The IRGC reports directly to the country's supreme

⁴² "State Sponsors of Terrorism." U.S. Department of State. As of 19 Aug. 2017.

leader, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, with responsibility for internal security and for supporting like-minded revolutionary organizations throughout the world. The lead-in quote for this paper, (“We will export our revolution throughout the world”), came from the IRGC’s official magazine, *Payam-e Enqelab*.

Within the IRGC, the Quds Force (QF) has the mission of undertaking covert operations outside of Iran.⁴³ The U.S. Treasury Department designated the QF as a terrorist entity in 2007.⁴⁴ And as we will explore in more detail below, the IRGC and the QF work closely with Hezbollah (Hizballah), which the U.S. Department of State designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization on 08 October 1997.⁴⁵ In December 2012, President Barack Obama signed the *Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act*. This bill called attention to congressional concern for Iran’s growing and hostile activities in the region.⁴⁶ On 13 October 2017, President Donald Trump went a step further, issuing an executive order requiring the Treasury Department to officially designate the IRGC as a terrorist entity. He did not, however, take an even more aggressive action, requiring the State Department to list the IRGC as a Foreign Terrorist Organization.⁴⁷ Many Iran watchers, including myself, expected (or feared) that he would. At any rate, the U.S. government has now condemned the Islamic Republic of Iran, the IRGC, the Quds Force, and Hezbollah for their terrorist activities.

⁴³ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*, 61, 146.

⁴⁴ Emanuele Ottolenghi, “Time to Designate Iran’s Revolutionary Guards as Terror Group.” *The Hill*. 20 Oct. 2015.

⁴⁵ “Foreign Terrorist Organizations.” U.S. Department of State. As of 18 Aug. 2017.

⁴⁶ “Countering Iran in the Western Hemisphere Act.” U.S. Congress. House of Representatives. 28 Dec. 2012.

⁴⁷ Meira Svirsky, “US Slaps Crippling Sanctions on Iran.” *Clarion Project*. 15 Oct. 2017.

The previous chapter discussed Tehran's views. In addition, a particularly interesting 2008 article appeared on an Iranian website entitled "The Secret Behind Expansion of Iran's Ties with Latin America." This article supports View #1, highlighting the coming to power of the 'anti-imperialist' governments of Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, and Nicaragua which, per the article, join Iran in combating the 'hegemonic' policies of the United States, and together campaign against 'imperialism' and 'oppression' while seeking 'justice' and 'independence.'⁴⁸ Another Iranian website, *Iran Review*, published a 2009 article entitled, "Alliance Problematic for the U.S., But Not Threatening," cited earlier in Chapter I. In that article, Prof. David Myers allowed as how the Iran – Venezuela relationship bears watching, but does not serve as a major national security threat.⁴⁹ In contrast, and supporting View #3, Guatemalan professor, Dr. Pedro Alvarez, writing in *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, cautions that Venezuela is only the tip of the iceberg with regard to supporting radical Islamic terrorist groups in Latin America.⁵⁰ So, the question remains, what potential threat do any or all of the organizations pose in the Western Hemisphere, and what part do 'anti-imperialist' governments, especially Venezuela, play?

⁴⁸ Hossein Sobhaninia, "The Secret Behind Expansion of Iran's Ties with Latin America." *Iran Review*. 09 Sep. 2008.

⁴⁹ Kurtzleben, "Alliance Problematic for the U.S., But Not Threatening." David Myers is Professor of Political Science at Pennsylvania State University.

⁵⁰ Pedro Alvarez, "Dispatches – Islamist Inroads in the Americas." *The Journal of International Security Affairs*. Fall/Winter 2014. Dr. Alvarez is the director of the Political Science and International Relations Department of the Universidad Francisco Marroquin in Guatemala.

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps: The Enforcers and (Still?) the Exporters of the Revolution

Within six weeks of coming to power in 1979, then Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini supported the establishment of a military force, loyal to him and to the Revolution, which would serve as a counterweight to the unreliable Iranian military.⁵¹ Indeed, the preamble to the Islamic Republic's constitution tasks the IRGC with the ideological mission of 'Jihad in God's way' to extend the sovereignty of God's law *throughout the world* (italics added). Many would find such a function completely understandable. One need only harken back to Adolf Hitler relying first on the *Sturmabteilung* (SA), and later the *Schutzstaffel* (SS), as a counterweight to the German military in his quest to establish a 1000 year Reich, and impose National Socialism on the rest of the world.

A June 2013 *Council of Foreign Relations* article noted that since its establishment, the IRGC has expanded both in size and influence.⁵² It is much more than a military organization. It incorporates security and intelligence functions with extensive economic and industrial interests.⁵³ With the arrival of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Revolutionary Guards have played an increasingly important role in maintaining internal order.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 22.

⁵² Greg Bruno, Jayshree Bajoria and Jonathan Masters, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards." *Council on Foreign Relations*. 14 June 2013.

⁵³ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 5.

⁵⁴ Mohsen M. Milani, "Tehran's Take: Understanding Iran's U.S. Policy."

In a very laudatory article on the IRGC, entitled “The Revolutionary Guards and Explaining Revolutionary Discourse,” carried on the *Iranian Diplomacy* website, Dr. Sayad Abadi discussed the requirement for the IRGC to defend the identity of the Islamic Republic. He describes the IRGC as the strongest cultural institution in Iran, composed of educated, intelligent, and tireless revolutionaries. Dr. Abadi discussed the critical importance within the IRGC of preserving the ‘jihadi spirit.’ He argued that it was this ‘jihadist spirit’ which was so effective in countering the sanctions imposed on Iran, and how effective the IRGC had been in the fields of development and construction.⁵⁵

The IRGC has its own army, navy and air force units. In addition, it controls all Iranian missile forces and the Basij paramilitary militia.⁵⁶ Currently, regular IRGC forces number in the hundreds of thousands, with Basij militia forces numbering in the millions.⁵⁷ An article entitled “Paramilitarization of the Economy: The Case of Iran’s Basij Militia,” published in the *Armed Forces and Society* journal, estimates three million regular members, but not the 15 million claimed by Iran.⁵⁸ Of note, the IRGC’s budget for FY 2011-2012 was almost four times larger than that of the Iranian military forces.⁵⁹

According to a Rand study published in 2010, the IRGC has used the government’s emphasis on security to increase its political and economic power.⁶⁰ On

⁵⁵ Sajad Abadi, “The Revolutionary Guards and Explaining Revolutionary Discourse.” *Iranian Diplomacy*. 01 Sep. 2017. Dr. Abadi is visiting professor at the University of Saint Joseph of Lebanon.

⁵⁶ Alireza Nader, “The Revolutionary Guards.” *The Iran Primer*. Updated as of Aug. 2015.

⁵⁷ Payam Mohseni, “Trump’s Dangerous Shift on Iran.” *Foreign Affairs*. 15 Oct. 2017.

⁵⁸ Saeid Golkar, “Paramilitarization of the Economy: The Case of Iran’s Basij Militia.” *Armed Forces and Society Journal*. 09 Apr. 2012.

⁵⁹ Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kouros Rahimkhani, “The Office of the Supreme Leader: Epicenter of a Theocracy.” *Power and Change in Iran: Politics of Contention and Conciliation*. Ed. Daniel Brumberg and Farideh Farhi (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 148.

16 February 2017, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing entitled *Iran on Notice*. Committee member Congressman Thomas A. Garrett (R-VA) described the IRGC as the fulcrum of power in Iran. Later in the hearing, former senior CIA officer Scott Modell testified that the Iranian regime depends for its existence on the IRGC and that 25 to 50 percent of the economy is under the control of the IRGC.⁶¹

The foundation of the IRGC's economic empire dates back to the end of the Iran-Iraq War, in 1988, when then President Hassan Rafsanjani tasked the IRGC to use revolutionary ideals for the reconstruction of the country's economy through the Construction Base of the Seal of the Prophets (*Gharargah Sazandegi-ye Khatam-al-Anbiya* also known as *Khatam-al-Anbiya* or *Ghorb*.) In addition, the IRGC, through assignment of former Guard officers, indirectly controls two extraordinarily powerful economic conglomerates, the Foundation of the Oppressed of the Earth (*Bonyad-e Mostazafan*), and the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans' Affairs (*Bonyad-e Shahid va Omur-e-Janbazan*). One study estimated the IRGC controls between 25 and 40 percent of the Iranian GDP.⁶² A 2010 article stated that Ghorb owns 812 subsidiaries, although the author does not cite a source for that figure.⁶³ Brookings Institution analyst Suzanne Maloney provided an interesting supposition. She argues that sanctions actually

⁶⁰ David E. Thaler, et al., "Mullahs, Guards and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics." *Rand National Defense Research Institute*, 2010.

⁶¹ Scott Model, "Iran on Notice." Testimony to the House of Representatives, Foreign Relations Committee. 16 Feb. 2017.

⁶² Emanuele Ottolenghi, *The Pasdaran: Inside Iran's Islamic revolutionary Guard Corps* (Washington: Foundation for Defense of Democracies), 43. Ottolenghi cites a study by Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzales, in *The Militarization of Post-Khomeini Iran: Praetorianism 2.0*.

⁶³ Massimo Calabresi, "New Iran Sanctions Target Iran Revolutionary Guards." *Time Magazine*. 10 Jun. 2010.

supported the increase in both the IRGC's involvement in the domestic economy and its political influence.⁶⁴

A *Council on Foreign Relations* article identified the IRGC as key in facilitating the import of alcohol for sale on the black market.⁶⁵ Mohammad Amin, a researcher at the Foundation of Studies for the Middle East in Paris, maintains that Iran will continue to be an economic failure due to the control Supreme Leader Khamenei, and the IRGC maintain over what he (Amin) describes as at least half of Iran's GDP. Unfortunately, Amin does not cite the source of these statistics.⁶⁶ An article published in the *Journal of Democracy and Security* argues that the Islamic Republic increasingly resembles a military regime, or a 'Praetorianism' state.⁶⁷

Perhaps indicative of the problems for U.S. policy makers is the March 2017 announcement by Boeing that it would sell 30 B737 aircraft to Aseman Airlines for approximately \$3 billion. The CEO of Aseman, which is Iran's third largest airline, is Hossein Alaei, who joined the IRGC in 1979, and rose to become chairman of the IRGC's Joint Chiefs of Staff.⁶⁸ As of the drafting of this paper, (early 2018) there was media speculation that President Trump would order the Treasury Department to deny

⁶⁴ Suzanne Maloney, "Major Beneficiaries of the Iran Deal: the IRGC and Hezbollah." *Brookings Institution*. 17 Sep. 2015. The article is a reprint of Dr. Maloney's testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa.

⁶⁵ Bruno, "Iran's Revolutionary Guards." 14 June 2013.

⁶⁶ Mohammad Amin, "Iran: Rouhani's Re-Election Is Not the Key to the Country's Economic Recovery." *The Gatestone Institute*. 25 May 2017.

⁶⁷ Youhanna Najdi & Mohd Azhari Bin Abdul Larim, "The Role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the Future of Democracy in Iran: Will Oil Income Influence the Process?" *Journal of Democracy and Security*. 02 Mar. 2012.

⁶⁸ Emanuele Ottolenghi and Saeed Ghasseminejad, "CEO of Iranian Airline to Buy Boeing Jets Has Ties to IRGC." *Real Clear Defense*. 24 Apr. 2017.

export licenses to Boeing which would invalidate the purchase agreement.⁶⁹ Whatever the outcome of the Boeing deal, the IRGC seems to be faring rather well financially. One report claims that the IRGC's budget would increase by 24% in 2017, although that author does not cite a reference for that statistic.

Multiple reports indicate animosity between current President Hassan Rouhani and the IRGC. One Iran watcher speculated on the IRGC splintering, citing their reluctance to shoot demonstrators in 2009.⁷⁰ In support of this theory, in an article on Rouhani's reelection, retired senior Israeli intelligence officer, Col. Ephraim Kam argues that Rouhani intends to limit IRGC control of much of the economy. Kam warned of increased friction between Rouhani and the IRGC.⁷¹ I found it interesting, when on 20 August 2017, the Iranian Parliament approved Rouhani's nominee for Defense Minister, Army Brigadier General Amir Hatami, the first minister of defense in 20 years not closely associated with the IRGC. On the surface, the decision appears to be a slight on the IRGC, but Hatami likely has neither the power nor the inclination to confront the IRGC.⁷²

In view of the above, and a great deal of other research, it appears to me that the IRGC retains a very strong position within the Islamic Republic. It also appears that the

⁶⁹ Adam Kredo, "Trump Admin Expected to Kill Landmark Boeing Plane Sales to Iran." *Washington Free Beacon*. 23 Oct. 2017.

⁷⁰ Reuel Marc Gerecht, "In Iran's Election, Americans Should Root for the 'Hard-Liner'." *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 May 2017. Gerecht is a former CIA Iranian-Targets officer.

⁷¹ Ephraim Kam, "The Significance of Hassan Rouhani's Reelection as President of Iran." *Iran Matters*, The Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School of Government. 06 Jun. 2017. Col. Kam is the Deputy Director of the Israeli Institute for National Security Studies. He received his PhD from Harvard University. His focus includes Iranian strategy.

⁷² Benham Ben Taleblu, "Why Iran's New Defense Minister Doesn't Change Much." *U.S. News and World Report*. 25 Aug. 2017.

IRGC remains totally loyal to the current supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. The question becomes, will a possibly ailing Khamenei or his successor retain that support and loyalty? Multiple sources speculate that Khamenei suffers from prostate cancer, which may have spread. I believe that the IRGC would move quickly, perhaps even taking effective control of the government, should there be indications of political instability, or a power vacuum upon Khamenei's departure.

The Establishment of the Quds Force

Another pivotal development for the IRGC was the 1990 establishment of the Quds Force, now numbering between 10,000 and 15,000 personnel, which has the responsibility for extra-territorial operations to include terrorist operations.⁷³ The commander of the Quds Force since circa late 1997 is Maj. Gen. Qassem Suleimani (Qasem Soleimani). I found the exhaustive article on Suleimani done by former CIA officer Dexter Filkins for *The New Yorker*, to be particularly helpful, and recommend that anyone interested in understanding Iranian paramilitary operations in general, or this increasingly important and high-profile individual in particular, read it. Filkins calls Suleimani the most powerful operative in the Middle East today. Filkins also highlights the close personal and professional relationship between Suleimani and Hezbollah leader, Hassan Nasrallah. Filkins argues that the Quds Force has leveraged the Lebanese diaspora to create networks of assets capable of supporting QF missions.⁷⁴ The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage and

⁷³ "Qods Force/Sepah-e Qods/Qods Corps/Jerusalem Corps." *Global Security.org*, 22 Aug. 2016.

⁷⁴ Dexter Filkins, "The Shadow Commander: Qassem Suleimani is the Iranian Operative who has been Reshaping the Middle East." *The New Yorker*. 30 Sep. 2013.

Commemoration Center, in a 2007 review, listed the Quds Force's main areas of operations to be Lebanon, among Palestinians, and Iraq. I found particularly interesting, however, a follow on comment that "*Iran continues setting up sleeper cells throughout the world which will be activated when Iran feels the time has come, independently and in collaboration with Hezbollah* (italics added)"⁷⁵

According to the April 2010 Department of Defense publication, *Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran*,

The IRGC-QF stations operatives in foreign embassies, charities, and religious/cultural institutions to foster relationships with people, often building on existing socio-economic ties with the well-established Shia Diaspora. At the same time, IRGC-QF engages in paramilitary operations to support extremists and destabilize unfriendly regimes. IRGC and IRGC-QF have been involved in or behind some of the deadliest terrorist attacks of the past 2 decades...⁷⁶

Further, I have encountered a great deal of compelling evidence of the link between the IRGC and the Quds Force, and drug trafficking in the Middle East and Latin America, to be explored below. Quds Force support for terrorist organizations and operations resulted in the U.S. Treasury Department designating the Quds Force as a 'terrorist supporter' in 2007 for aiding the Taliban and other terrorist organizations, as noted above.⁷⁷ Even former President Barack Obama has stated, "We have no illusions about

⁷⁵ "Using the Quds Force of the Revolutionary Guards as the Main Tool to Export the Revolution Beyond the Borders of Iran." *The Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center*. 02 Apr. 2007.

⁷⁶ U.S. Department of Defense, *Unclassified Report on Military Power of Iran*. April 2010.

⁷⁷ Alma Keshavarz, "Iran and Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Areas of Latin America: A Look at the 'Old TBA' and the 'New TBA.'" *Small Wars Journal*. 12 Nov. 2015.

the Iranian government or the significance of the Revolutionary Guard and the Quds Force. Iran supports terrorist organizations like Hezbollah.”⁷⁸

Linkage with Hezbollah: Who Does What – and for Whom?

Virtually all the literature I have reviewed for this thesis notes a linkage between the IRGC, the Quds Force and Hezbollah, normally referring to the latter as an Iranian ‘proxy’ or ‘surrogate,’ or occasionally as its ‘partner.’ Former CIA and NSA Director, General Michael V. Hayden, in his book, *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror*, referred to Hezbollah as Tehran’s Lebanese proxy.⁷⁹ A look at the founding of Hezbollah supports this nexus. Senior Iranian cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Montazeri was an early IRGC architect. Montazeri had spent considerable time in Lebanon before the Iranian Revolution working with the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Lebanese Shia groups. Another senior Iranian official, Ali Akbar Mohtashami, served as Iranian ambassador to Syria, where he worked to bring together Shia militants and low-level clergy to form the Hezbollah organization.⁸⁰ Though a Lebanese organization, Hezbollah swore allegiance to Iranian Supreme Leader

⁷⁸ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal.” The White House, Office of the Press Secretary. 05 Aug. 2015.

⁷⁹ Michael V. Hayden, *Playing to the Edge: American Intelligence in the Age of Terror* (New York: Penguin Press, 2016), 292.

⁸⁰ Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*, 113-114.

Ayatollah Khomeini in its founding manifesto.⁸¹ With Iran's backing, Hezbollah may well be more strategically effective than either al Qaeda or ISIL.⁸²

Thus, describing Hezbollah as an IRGC proxy, surrogate or partner seems appropriate. There are, however, those who reject such a relationship, essentially supporting View #1. University of California-Irvine professor, Lara Deeb, argues that Iran did not create Hezbollah, nor does it direct its activities. She even goes so far as to question Hezbollah's involvement in terrorist attacks.⁸³ I find Prof. Deeb's objectivity questionable. She has publically and vociferously displayed pro-Hezbollah sympathies, while roundly condemning Israel.⁸⁴ Still, the operational relationship between the IRGC, Quds Force, and Hezbollah remains part of the puzzle, the boundaries of which, all three parties will likely try to keep blurred. At the very least, Hezbollah provides Iran with 'plausible deniability,' one of the key aspects, as noted in Chapter II above, of covert action, and in my view, a very valuable commodity in today's international relations.

While the IRGC, the Quds Force, and Hezbollah intentionally obfuscate their interaction, the preponderance of evidence indicates close cooperation, thus the remainder of this paper will refer to this association as 'a nexus' and Hezbollah as Iran's 'proxy.' There remains, however, significant disagreement over what this nexus does in the Western Hemisphere. Supporting View #1, a 03 January 2011 Congressional

⁸¹ Jonathan Masters and Zachary Laub, "CFR Backgrounders Hezbollah." *Council on Foreign Relations*. 03 Jan. 2014.

⁸² Paula Doyle, "Four Policy Actions Needed to Strengthen US and Coalition Efforts Against al-Qaeda, ISIL, and Hizballah." *Georgetown Security Studies Review*. Feb. 2017.

⁸³ Lara Deeb, "Hizballah: A Primer." *Middle East Research and Information Project*. 31 Jul. 2006.

⁸⁴ Michael Duke, "Hezbollah Advocate Challenged at Rice." *The Jewish Herald-Voice (Houston)*. 17 Apr. 2008.

Research Service report, *Hezbollah: Background and Issues for Congress*, questions the existence of operational cells active in Latin America. The study warned, however, of Hezbollah supporters/sympathizers in Latin America fund raising for the organization, and their involvement in arms and drug trafficking, as well as the smuggling of contraband.⁸⁵

I found an article entitled “Hizballah and Its Mission in Latin America,” published in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, to be extraordinarily helpful. This article argues that Hezbollah operatives and sympathizers in Latin America need not conduct terrorist operations themselves. Instead, they can provide support for highly trained terrorists who arrive in-country to conduct the attack and depart immediately afterwards. Thus it is somewhat disingenuous to state that there are no covert Hezbollah terrorist cells operational in Latin America. Hezbollah sympathizers resident in-country need only provide logistical support.⁸⁶

Indeed, Hezbollah does not limit its activities to Latin America. An article published in the *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*, provided an in-depth academic study of two Hezbollah fundraising operations in the U.S.; the Charlotte Network and the Dearborn Network, both of which operated in the late 1990s. These two groups raised funds for Hezbollah through credit card fraud, internet pornography, cigarette smuggling, and marriage and immigration fraud. They used funds to procure dual use technology to support Hezbollah operations.⁸⁷ And in July of 2007, the U.S.

⁸⁵ Casey L. Addis and Christopher M. Blanchard, “Hezbollah: Background and Issues for Congress.” *Congressional Research Service*. 03 Jan. 2011.

⁸⁶ William Costanza, “Hizballah and Its Mission in Latin America.” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*. 22 Feb. 2012.

Treasury Department targeted the Goodwill Charitable Organization in Dearborn, Michigan, charging that it was a Hezbollah front organization with the mission of fund raising.⁸⁸ Testimony I will highlight later in this chapter raises the concern that such individuals and networks could transition quickly into operational, or more likely, support cells. I have had experience over several decades with clandestine logistics networks. In my experience, it is just about as easy to smuggle explosives as it is drugs.

U.S. Congressional Testimony by subject matter experts – a changing operational environment?

The following section provides the interested reader additional insight based on official testimony to U.S. Congressional committees by various subject matter experts. I have positioned the sub-paragraphs in chronological order, allowing the reader to see how at least some of the testimony has changed over the past approximately six years.

In his 30 March 2011 *Posture Statement* before the 112th Congress, House Armed Services Committee, SOUTHCOM commander General Douglas M. Fraser noted that Iran had nearly doubled the number of its embassies in Latin America over the past ten years. I found that statement particularly interesting, as I have served in, or worked out of, dozens of embassies over my 40 year career. It is my view that these Iranian embassies can provide a solid platform for covert action, and can protect Iranian operatives, if caught, by claiming diplomatic immunity. Gen. Fraser also cited expanded

⁸⁷ Christian Leuprecht, et. al., “Hezbollah’s Global Tentacles: A Relational Approach to Convergence with Transnational Organized Crime.” *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*. 23 Nov. 2015.

⁸⁸ “Twin Treasury Actions Take Aim at Hizballah’s Support Network.” Press Center. U.S. Department of the Treasury. 24 Jul. 2007.

ties between Iran, Venezuela and Bolivia. In a section entitled “Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs),” Gen. Fraser said that Hezbollah members continued recruiting supporters and raising funds. He summed up by saying that SOUTHCOM remains watchful (View #2).⁸⁹

On 07 July 2011, the House Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence conducted a hearing entitled *Hezbollah in Latin America – Implications for U.S. Homeland Security*. This hearing provided an interesting divergence of views. For example, Roger Noriega, former U.S. Ambassador to the Organization of American States, and former Assistant Secretary of State for Western Hemisphere Affairs, supported View #3 in his opening comments; arguing that Hezbollah, with Iran’s and Venezuela’s backing, has increased its activities in Latin America. He described Hezbollah as a deadly and determined enemy. In contrast, Prof. Melani Cammett, then Director of Middle East Studies at Brown University, advocated View #1, citing a lack of evidence that Hezbollah is a threat to the U.S. militarily. She offered that Israel remains Hezbollah’s primary focus.⁹⁰

On 01 August 2013, Mr. Michael A. Braun submitted a ‘Statement for the Record’ to the House Foreign Affairs Committee entitled, “Examining the State Department’s Report on Iranian Presence in the Western Hemisphere 19 Years after AMIA Attack.” (Chapter IV below contains details of this attack.) Braun had served as the Chief of Operations for the Drug Enforcement Agency, and as DEA’s acting Chief of

⁸⁹ Douglas M. Fraser, Posture Statement of Gen. Douglas M. Fraser, U.S. Air Force, before the 112th Congress, House Armed Services Committee. March 30, 2011.

⁹⁰ “Hezbollah in Latin America – Implications for U.S. Homeland Security.” Hearing before the House Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. 07 Jul. 2011.

Intelligence. He took serious exception to a June 27, 2012 *Department of State Report on Iranian Influence in Latin America and the Caribbean*, which concluded that Iran's influence was waning. The DOS report stated that there are no known Hezbollah cells operating in the Western Hemisphere. Braun, in support of View #3, stated that the DOS report was completely incorrect. He criticized the State Department analysts for failing to meet with, or receive input from either the DEA or the FBI. I found very troubling Braun's comment that this report was classified, but that he had seen excerpts from it. Having held a Top Secret, Special Compartmented Information (SCI) clearance for several decades, I look askance when a currently uncleared individual claims access to classified information. However, I find this testimony credible, primarily because it tracks with other data. If Braun is correct, that the State Department did not obtain input from either the DEA or the FBI, then in my view, the State Department analysts were negligent. My experience in Latin America has convinced me that both the DEA and the FBI have much to offer in understanding the situation on the ground.⁹¹

SOUTHCOM Commander General John F. Kelly's 26 February 2014 *Posture Statement* before the 113th Congress, House Armed Services Committee included under the heading of "External Actors: Iran and Islamic Extremist Groups," that Hezbollah continues to view Latin America as a potential attack venue (View #3). Additionally, he noted Iranian sponsorship of Hezbollah. Of particular concern for me was Gen. Kelly's warning that SOUTHCOM had insufficient intelligence assets to provide a clear understanding of possible Iranian supported terrorist networks in Latin America.⁹²

⁹¹ Michael A. Braun, "Examining the State Department's Report on Iranian Presence in the Western Hemisphere 19 Years After AMIA Attack." Statement for the Record to the House Foreign Affairs Committee. 01 Aug. 2013.

In his 12 March 2015 *Posture Statement* before the 113th Congress, House Armed Services Committee, Gen. Kelly again noted Hezbollah's involvement in money laundering and drug trafficking. In a section entitled "Iranian Influence and Islamic Extremist Organizations," Gen. Kelly expressed concern that Iran had established more than 80 cultural centers; odd, on the surface, given the relatively small Muslim population in Latin America.⁹³ As I noted above, cultural centers provide an attractive venue for spotting, assessing, and recruiting local operatives. Also, as we will review in Chapter IV below, the alleged architect of the bombings in Buenos Aires, Mohsen Rabbani, was a Cultural Attaché at the Iranian embassy.

I found particularly pertinent a written statement accompanying Gen. Kelly's 2015 *Posture Statement*, by SOUTHCOM Deputy Commander Lieutenant General Kenneth E. Tovo. In support of View #2, he noted a lack of evidence that terrorist groups were involved with criminal networks. He cautioned, however, that terrorists could use those same smuggling routes to enter the U.S. carrying weapons of mass destruction. For fear of belaboring the point, I have some rather extensive experience with clandestine logistics networks, and believe LTG Tovo to be absolutely correct. Tovo also cited DEA information that 22 of 59 groups identified by the Department of State as Foreign Terrorist Organizations were involved in drug trafficking.⁹⁴

On 18 March 2015, the House Foreign Affairs Committee conducted a joint hearing entitled *Iran and Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere*. In written testimony,

⁹² John F. Kelly, Posture Statement of Gen. John F. Kelly, U.S. Marine Corps, before the 113th Congress, House Armed Services Committee. 26 Feb. 2014.

⁹³ John F. Kelly, Posture Statement of Gen. John F. Kelly, U.S. Marine Corps, before the 114th Congress, House Armed Services Committee. 12 Mar. 2015.

⁹⁴ Kenneth E. Tovo, Written Statement of LTG. Kenneth E. Tovo, U.S. Army, before the 114th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee. 25 Mar. 2015.

submitted for the record, William Ross Newland III, former CIA station chief in Havana and Buenos Aires, stated that Iranian activities in Latin America have waned (View #2). Of interest to me is that Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad left office and Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez died in 2013. In Chapter IV, we will return to the potential importance of these two almost concurrent events.⁹⁵

In late 2015, Congress unanimously passed, and President Obama signed into law, the *Hizballah International Financing and Prevention Act of 2015*. The legislation requires action against Hezbollah's global financial and logistical capabilities.⁹⁶ As part of her testimony to the House Foreign Affairs Committee on 16 February 2017, Katherine Bauer of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, noted a July 2016 Treasury Department assessment of Hezbollah's financial situation, which the report described as the poorest in decades, due to outside pressure. In contrast, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, denied the impact of outside pressure. He further claimed that Iran was the sole source of funds for Hezbollah.⁹⁷

In his 10 March 2016 *Posture Statement* before the 114th Congress, House Armed Services Committee, newly assigned SOUTHCOM commander Admiral Kurt W. Tidd supported View #2, noting that while Iran's activities in the region seem to have waned, he remains concerned. He commented on Hezbollah's illicit activities including money-laundering. Of special interest to me in drafting this thesis, he stated specifically that

⁹⁵ "Iran and Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere." Hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs. 18 Mar. 2015.

⁹⁶ United States Congress. 114th, 1st Session. House of Representatives. H.R. 2297 – Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015. 18 Dec. 2015.

⁹⁷ Katherine Bauer, "Iran on Notice." Testimony to the House of Representatives. Foreign Relations Committee. 16 Feb. 2017.

Hezbollah maintains an infrastructure such that it could support or conduct terrorist attacks.⁹⁸

In Adm. Tidd's most recent *Posture Statement* (2017), he expressed concern that terrorists could use smuggling routes to attack the U.S. with weapons of mass destruction. He cautioned that Iran might become more active in Latin America with the easing of sanctions. He stated that SOUTHCOM faced significant resource constraints in countering threat networks.⁹⁹

In perhaps a good summary of the above testimony, American Enterprise Institute's J. Mathew McInnis (cited above) added what appear to me to be several germane points supporting View #2, which were contained in his statement to the Senate's Foreign Relations Committee on 29 November 2016. He argues that Iran could very well use proxies to give itself plausible deniability, and thus diffuse retaliatory actions. He suggested that IRGC's focused operations in the Middle East have limited Iran's ability to create new networks. McInnis warned, however, that if these conflicts subside, the U.S. should anticipate the possibility that Iran would begin using their proxies on a global, not just a regional level.¹⁰⁰

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, I believe the Islamic Republic has established an asymmetrical warfare capability in the Western Hemisphere, based on what I term a strong three-pillared structure; the IRGC, the Quds Force, and Hezbollah.

⁹⁸ Kurt W. Tidd, Posture Statement of Adm. Kurt W. Tidd, U.S. Navy, before the 114th Congress, House Armed Services Committee. 10 Mar. 2016.

⁹⁹ Kurt W. Tidd, Posture Statement of Adm. Kurt W. Tidd, U.S. Navy, before the 115th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee. 06 Apr. 2017.

¹⁰⁰ J. Mathew McInnis, "Iranian Deterrence Strategy and Use of Proxies." Statement before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. 29 Nov. 2016.

If we assume, as I believe we should, that the Islamic Republic has a covert action capability with which to support terrorist operations, the next phase of our model should detail where and how they have employed this capability.

Chapter IV

Employing a Covert Action Capability

The theoretical model next calls for a review of how and where the Islamic Republic has employed its covert action capability. In the first part of this chapter, I will list and briefly describe the terrorist attacks either perpetrated or planned, leading off with the two attacks in Buenos Aires, which killed 108 people and injured almost 400 more. The following section provides an assessment of drug trafficking and money laundering operations supporting the covert action capability. Finally, in the third section of this chapter, I will describe in some detail the advances made during the tenures of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez.

Terrorist Attacks Perpetrated or Planned

This section provides an overview, in chronological order, of the major terrorist acts that “the nexus” either conducted or planned in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁰¹

However, before reviewing the terrorist acts, I believe it is worthwhile to recount the activities of two pivotal individuals, Iranian operative Mohsen Rabbani, and Palestinian terrorist Imad Mugnyah. Rabbani arrived in Argentina in 1983. According to

Abolghasem Mesbahi, an Iranian intelligence officer who would later defect, the two met

¹⁰¹ See Kenneth Katzman, “Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies.” (Table 1. Major Iran or Iran-Related Terrorism Attacks or Plots.) *Congressional Research Service*. 06 Apr. 2017 for a thorough listing. Also see “Hezbollah” *Anti-Defamation League*. Updated 06 Feb. 2013, which contains a list of 16 incidents of “...Hezbollah – related activity in the U.S. including Americans who have been indicted or convicted in the U.S. on terrorism charges relating to Hezbollah...”

prior to Rabbani's departure for Argentina. During the meeting, Rabbani said he was going to Argentina to establish a support mechanism for exporting the Islamic revolution. He served first as a representative of the Iranian Ministry of Agriculture, (supposedly) tasked with ensuring the quality of Argentine meat exported to Iran.¹⁰² He became heavily involved in the at-Tauhid mosque in Buenos Aires, eventually assuming leadership of the mosque. During later testimony, three of his students at the mosque said that he had urged them to both export the revolution and support Hezbollah.¹⁰³ As of May 2017, there was still an international arrest warrant issued by the Argentine judicial authorities, and a 'Red Notice' from INTERPOL, which forced Rabbani to return to Iran.¹⁰⁴

A study published in the *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* entitled "Al-Qods Force: Iran's Weapon of Choice to Export Terrorism," provides a critically important review on the Quds Force. I recommend this study to interested readers. In a section entitled 'South America,' the authors cite several references to the activities of Imad Mugnyah, whose efforts included orchestrating the attack on the U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut, which killed 241 marines. Also, according to the article's sources, he was involved in the kidnapping of the CIA's Beirut Chief of Station, William

¹⁰² Matthew Levitt, "Exporting Terror in America's Backyard: Is the United States Downplaying the Threat from Iranian Agents in Latin America?" *Foreign Policy*. 13 Jun. 2013.

¹⁰³ Matthew Levitt, "Iranian and Hezbollah Operations in South America: Then and Now." *PRISM 5, No. 4, National Defense University*. 16 Dec. 2015.

¹⁰⁴ Emanuele Ottolenghi, "Emerging External Influences in the Western Hemisphere." Congressional Testimony for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*. 10 May 2017.

Buckley. Citing another source, the article states that Iran's Intelligence Minister, Ali Fallahian, tasked Mugnyah to conduct the terrorist attacks in Buenos Aires.¹⁰⁵

The 1992 bombing of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires.

On 17 March 1992, a Ford F-100 panel van filled with explosives, drove onto the sidewalk in front of the Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires, and exploded, killing 23 people and injuring 242. According to an Israel Security Agency report, Hezbollah claimed credit for the attack. It was in retaliation for Israel's 16 February 1992 killing of their secretary general, Abbas al-Musawi, one month prior.¹⁰⁶ Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization released surveillance video to support their claim. The Argentine government released a telephone intercept linking Mohsen Rabbani with a Lebanese Shia leader having close ties to Hezbollah.¹⁰⁷

The 1994 bombing of the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

On 18 July 1994, a suicide bomber detonated a car bomb, a Renault van carrying 300-400 kgs. of explosives, next to the *Asociacion Mutual Israelita Argentina* (AMIA) Jewish center, destroying the building, killing 85 people, and injuring 150 more. According to the Iranian intelligence defector, Abolghasem Mesbahi, mentioned above, the AMIA building was selected at a meeting of the Committee for Special Operations within Iran's Supreme National Security Council in Mashhad, Iran on 14 August 1993.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Wigginton, et. al., "Al-Qods Force: Iran's Weapon of Choice to Export Terrorism." *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism*. 22 Nov. 2015.

¹⁰⁶ Israel Security Agency, "Terrorist Attack Against the Embassy of Israel in Buenos Aires, Argentina (1992)."

¹⁰⁷ Levitt, "Iranian and Hezbollah Operations in South America: Then and Now."

Present at the meeting, according to the defector, were Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Minister of Intelligence Ali Fallahian, Foreign Minister Ali Velayati, Ahmad Asghari (a suspected IRGC official assigned to the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires), and Mohsen Rabbani. Shortly after this meeting, Rabbani became a cultural attaché at the Iranian embassy in Buenos Aires, an appointment which would provide diplomatic immunity.¹⁰⁸

As of July 2017, five INTERPOL “Red Notices” remain in effect calling for the arrest and extradition of the following Iranian suspects in the bombing: (then) IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai, (then) Minister of Intelligence Ali Fallahian, (then) Minister of Defense Ahmad Vahidi, (then) Third Secretary at the Iranian Embassy in Argentina Ahmad Asghari, and the previously mentioned Mohsen Rabbani.¹⁰⁹

The 2006/2007 plot to bomb JFK International Airport

According to FBI reporting, beginning in 2006, Russell Defreitas, a naturalized U.S. citizen from Guyana, conceived of a plot to commit a terrorist attack at John F. Kennedy International Airport, by exploding fuel tanks and the fuel pipeline under the airport. Defreitas had been employed as a cargo handler at the airport. During 2006 and 2007, Defreitas made multiple trips to Guyana and Trinidad, where he recruited Abdel Nur and Abdul Kadir, the latter, who according to the FBI, was a trained engineer having contacts with militant groups in Iran and Venezuela. Kadir further provided advice on explosive materials as well as a bank account through which the conspirators could

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Toby Dershowitz and Gardner Lange, “Iran Continues to Protect AMIA Bombing Suspects.” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Long War Journal*. 18 Jul. 2017.

finance the terrorist attack. Kadir, a former member of the Guyanese parliament, admitted that he regularly passed sensitive information to Iranian authorities, citing fatwas issues by Iranian religious leaders.¹¹⁰

A fourth conspirator was Kareem Ibrahim, an Imam and leader of the Shia Muslim community in Trinidad & Tobago. Defreitas presented Ibrahim with video surveillance and satellite imagery of the planned targets. Ibrahim advised the plotters to present the plot to ‘revolutionary leaders’ in Iran. The plotters then sent Abdul Kadir to meet with these revolutionary leaders, to include Mohsen Rabbani, the former cultural attaché in Buenos Aires who, as noted above, allegedly had a key role in the AMIA Jewish cultural center bombing. At Ibrahim’s sentencing, then U.S. Attorney (later U.S. Attorney General) Loretta Lynch stated that Ibrahim had hoped to commit a terrorist attack that would rival 9/11.

Agents from the FBI’s Joint Terrorist Task Force (JTTF) arrested Defreitas in New York. Local authorities arrested Abdul Kadir, Abdel Nur and Kareem Ibrahim in Trinidad in June 2007, and extradited them to the U.S. for trial. Defreitas, Abdul Kadir and Kareem Ibrahim all received life in prison. Abdel Nur received a 15 year sentence.¹¹¹

The 2011 assassination plot against the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C.

On 29 September 2011, U.S. law enforcement officers arrested Mansour Arbabsiar, a naturalized U.S. citizen of Iranian decent, for plotting an assassination

¹¹⁰ “Russell Defreitas Sentenced to Life in Prison for Conspiring to Commit Terrorist Attack at JFK Airport.” Federal Bureau of Investigation. 17 Feb. 2011.

¹¹¹ “Kareem Ibrahim Sentenced to Life in Prison for Conspiring to Commit Terrorist Attack at JFK Airport.” Federal Bureau of Investigation. 13 Jan. 2012.

attempt on the Saudi ambassador to the United States, Adel al-Jubeir, to be carried out by planting a bomb in a popular Washington D.C. restaurant frequented by many members of the U.S. Congress, as well as by al-Jubeir. According to court documents, Arbabsiar conspired with a senior Quds Force external operations officer (who is also his cousin) Abdul Reza Shahlai, and his deputy Ghola Shakuri. Arbabsiar had agreed to pay \$1.5 million to an individual he thought was a member of the Mexican Los Zetas drug cartel. This individual was a DEA informant posing as a member of the drug cartel. Arbabsiar pleaded guilty in New York City federal court on 30 May 2013, and received a sentence of 25 years in prison.¹¹² In early 2012, the *Unclassified Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, supplied under the authority of then Director of National Intelligence James R. Clapper, stated:

The 2011 plot to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States shows that some Iranian officials-probably including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei-have changed their calculus and are now more willing to conduct an attack in the United States in response to real or perceived US actions that threaten the regime.¹¹³

In October 2011, the official Iranian website, *Iran Review*, had published an article entitled “Ten Reasons to Question Allegations of Iranian Terror Plot.” The author, Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, stated that no credible expert on Iran can possibly have faith in the U.S. government account. He posited the existence of a ‘false flag’ operation, and that the incident was hyped by the U.S. government to shift focus from the anti-Wall Street protests.¹¹⁴ I found none of Dr. Afrasiabi’s ten reasons particularly compelling.

¹¹² Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards*, 195-197.

¹¹³ James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, “Unclassified Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence.” 31 Jan. 2012.

Presumably, Dr. Afrasiabi does not consider the Director of National Intelligence to be a credible expert on Iran. Notably, *Iran Review* published this article prior to Mr. Arbabsiar pleading guilty in 2013. Indeed, an article in *Foreign Policy* noted that evidence of Iranian involvement included phone transcripts and wire transfers. It concluded that seldom has Iran's hand in a terrorist plot been so clearly revealed.¹¹⁵

The 2011 cyber attacks against U.S. financial institutions

On 24 March 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs released a notice entitled, *Seven Iranians Working for Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Affiliated Entities Charged for Conducting Coordinated Campaign of Cyber Attacks Against U.S. Financial Sector*. According to the statement, the cyber attacks that the group perpetrated against 46 victims, primarily in the U.S. financial sector, between late 2011 and mid-2013, blocked hundreds of thousands of customers from accessing their accounts. Further, it forced the companies to spend tens of millions of dollars in order to stay online through the attacks. Additionally, one of the defendants, Hamid Firoozi obtained unauthorized access to the control system of a New York dam.¹¹⁶

The 2015 attempted bombing of the Israeli embassy in Montevideo, Uruguay

Although the incident did not receive widespread news coverage, on 08 January 2015, Uruguayan police found and detonated a small explosive device outside the building housing the Israeli embassy. In December 2014, the Uruguayan government had

¹¹⁴ Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Ten Reasons to Question US Allegations of Iranian Terror Plot." *Iran Review*. 15 Oct. 2011.

¹¹⁵ Martin Indyk, "The Iranian Connection." *Foreign Policy*. 12 Oct. 2011.

¹¹⁶ "Seven Iranians Working for Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Affiliated Entities Charged for Conducting Coordinated Campaign of Cyber Attacks Against U.S. Financial Sector." Department of Justice. 24 Mar. 2016.

filed a formal protest against Iranian diplomat Ahmed Sabatgold, for allegedly spying on and plotting an attack on the Israeli embassy. During the subsequent investigation, the Iranian embassy advised that Sabatgold would not be available for questioning, having already departed Montevideo, according to them, three days prior to the attack. Sabatgold had previously been assigned to the Iranian embassy in Caracas, where he had served as the official translator for President Ahmadinejad's visit in 2013.¹¹⁷

The 2017 arrest of two Hezbollah operatives for terrorist activities in the U.S.

On 08 June 2017, the Department of Justice's Office of Public Affairs announced the arrest of two naturalized U.S. citizens, charged with being Hezbollah operatives. Allegedly, Hezbollah ordered Samer el Debek, 37, of Dearborn, MI, to travel to Panama to locate the U.S. and Israeli embassies, and assess Panama Canal vulnerabilities. Ali Kourani, 32, of the Bronx, NY, allegedly surveilled military and law enforcement targets in New York City, as well as other potential targets in the U.S. Both had received training in Lebanon. According to the DOJ announcement, both operated under the direction of the Islamic Jihad Organization, also known as the External Security Organization, and '910,' which the DOJ described as the Hezbollah department responsible for the planning and coordination of intelligence and terrorist activities outside of Lebanon.¹¹⁸

Drug Trafficking and Money Laundering: Funding the Capability or Making a Profit?

¹¹⁷ JKC de Courcy, "Questions Swirl Over Incident Involving Iranian Diplomat in Uruguay." *Courcy's Intelligence*. 07 Feb. 2015.

¹¹⁸ Department of Justice, "Two Men Arrested for Terrorist Activities on Behalf of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization." 08 Jun. 2017.

A late 2012 report prepared by the Library of Congress's Federal Research Division, in coordination with the Combating Terrorism Technical Support Office's Irregular Warfare Support Program, specifically cited cooperation between the Quds Force and Lebanese Hezbollah in Latin America, with support from the indigenous Shia population. The report noted Iranian interest in establishing a capability to wage asymmetrical warfare against the United States.¹¹⁹ The essay, "The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade," describes "the link between the (IRGC) and the international drug trade as one development within the growing terrorism-crime spectrum." It continues:

These ties create operational and logistical platforms that support and enhance the ability of the Revolutionary Guards and specifically the al-Quds Force to pose a threat to their enemies' territories and populations by forging documents, smuggling goods across borders, laundering money, supporting black banking and so on.¹²⁰

An example of the terrorist - drug trafficking linkage is the case of Ayman Joumaa, a Colombian/Lebanese national. On 27 June 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department issued a press release entitled, "Treasury Targets Major Money Laundering Network Linked to Drug Trafficker Ayman Joumaa and a Key Hizballah Supporter in South America." Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, David S. Cohen, described the Joumaa network as a sophisticated multi-national money laundering ring, benefiting drug traffickers and Hezbollah.¹²¹ According to charges the Treasury

¹¹⁹ "Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security: A Profile." *Federal Research Division, Library of Congress*. Dec. 2012.

¹²⁰ Sami Kronenfield and Yoel Gurzansky, "The Revolutionary Guards' International Drug Trade." *American Center for Democracy*. 01 Nov. 2013.

¹²¹ "Treasury Targets Major Money Laundering Network Linked to Drug Trafficker Ayman Joumaa and a Key Hizballah Supporter in South America." U.S. Department of the Treasury. 27 Jun. 2012.

Department brought against the Lebanese Canadian Bank (LCB), Joumaa used the LCB to launder *hundreds of millions of dollars monthly* (italics added). The Treasury Department statement maintained that this operation exposed Hezbollah’s direct involvement in international drug trafficking and money laundering.¹²²

In his 06 March 2012 *Posture Statement* before the 112th Congress, House Armed Services Committee, under a section entitled “Threat to U.S. National Security,” SOUTHCOM commander Gen. Fraser expressed particular concern over transnational criminal organizations controlling smuggling routes into the United States. He allowed as how other groups could leverage these potential access points. He expressed concern over evidence of international terrorist groups benefiting from illicit trafficking and money laundering, particularly Hezbollah raising money through drug trafficking, as well as counterfeit and pirated goods. Especially significant, Gen. Fraser stated that SOUTHCOM had not yet seen evidence that international terrorist groups meant to leverage these smuggling routes, but he advised that SOUTHCOM remained watchful.¹²³

In his 19 March 2013 *Posture Statement* before the 113th Congress, House Armed Services Committee, SOUTHCOM commander Gen. Kelly, under a section entitled the “Crime/Terror Nexus,” testified that Hezbollah is involved in drug and other illegal trafficking, with the support of Shias in Latin America.¹²⁴

¹²² “Treasury Identifies Lebanese Canadian Bank Sai as a ‘Primary Money Laundering Concern’.” U.S. Department of the Treasury. 10 Feb. 2011.

¹²³ Douglas M. Fraser, *Posture Statement of Gen. Douglas M. Fraser, U.S. Air Force, before the 112th Congress, House Armed Services Committee.* 06 March 2012.

¹²⁴ John F. Kelly, *Posture Statement of Gen. John F. Kelly, U.S. Marine Corps, before the 113th Congress, House Armed Services Committee.* 19 March 2013.

On 01 February 2016, a Drug Enforcement Administration Public Affairs Office news release announced – “DEA and European Authorities Uncover Massive Hizballah Drug and Money Laundering Scheme.” The authorities had developed leads from the Lebanese Canadian Bank investigation referred to above. The news release highlighted the dangerous global nexus between drug trafficking and terrorism, and that DEA’s partnership with international counterparts is important for strengthening U.S. border security.¹²⁵

The Hezbollah-drug trafficking relationship appeared to continue. In October 2016, a joint operation between DEA and the South Florida Money-Laundering Strike Force charged three men, suspected of having ties to Hezbollah, with laundering money for the Colombian drug cartel by illegally moving \$500,000 into Miami banks through a series of complicated financial transactions. One of the three, Mohammad Ahmad Ammar, was in custody in Miami. He boasted to an undercover agent that his family was well-connected with Hezbollah. A second suspect, Ghassan Diab, was in custody in Paris and a third, Hassan Mohsen Monsour was at large, possibly in Lebanon or Nigeria.¹²⁶

During his 08 June 2017 testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, Dr. David Asher stated, “Over the last decade, Lebanese Hizballah has morphed from being a terrorist organization and political-military (pol-mil) resistance movement to becoming a transnational criminal terrorist resistance organization fueled by a large and global illicit financial and business apparatus.” He stated that organized criminal activity

¹²⁵ “DEA and European Authorities Uncover Massive Hizballah Drug and Money Laundering Scheme.” Drug Enforcement Agency Public Affairs Office. 01 Feb. 2016.

¹²⁶ David Ovalle, “State: Hezbollah-linked group laundered drug money through Miami banks.” *Miami Herald*. 11 Oct. 2016.

provides a larger amount of support for Hezbollah than does Iran.¹²⁷ In contrast (as noted above), and perhaps admitting to more than he should, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah defiantly stated that U.S. congressional passage of the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act of December 2015 had no impact on Hezbollah's finances. He stated, "We are open about the fact that Hezbollah's budget, its income, its expenses, everything its eats and drinks, its weapons and rockets, come from the Islamic Republic of Iran."¹²⁸

The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) is a multinational and multilateral organization, headquartered in Paris, which sets and enforces anti-money laundering and counterterrorist financing (AML/CFT) standards. The FATF has repeatedly blacklisted only two countries; Iran and North Korea. Given what is, in my opinion, some rather stiff competition, I find it noteworthy that The Basel Institute on Governance ranks Iran's AML and CFT protections as the *worst in the world* (italics added). In June 2017, the FATF suspended countermeasures against Iran, based on Iranian promises to address deficiencies and criminalize terrorist financing. Of note, however, Iran created an exemption for Hezbollah.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ David Asher, "Attacking Hezbollah's Financial Network: Policy Options." Congressional Testimony before the U.S. House of Representative's Foreign Affairs Committee. 08 Jun. 2017. Dr. Asher has extensive experience in terrorist financing. He led the investigation of the Lebanese Canadian Bank.

¹²⁸ David Daoud and Yaya J. Fanusie, "Hezbollah Fundraising Underscores its Financial Crisis." *The Cipher Brief*. 24 Apr. 2017. Quotation from "Screengrab" from Al Arabiya English. 25 Jun. 2016.

¹²⁹ Toby Dershowitz, "FATF Leadership and Iranian Accountability." *Foundation for Defense of Democracies Policy Brief*. 16 June 2017.

Ahmadinejad and Chavez: Will the Dynamic Duo's Legacy Persist?

Adding to my understanding of the Islamic Republic's strategic outlook, the 2012 book, *The War of All the People: The Nexus of Latin American Radicalism and Middle Eastern Terrorism*, states specifically that Iran and Venezuela have adopted the doctrine of asymmetrical warfare against the United States. In evaluating the nexus between Venezuela and Iran, author Jon B. Perdue argues that it is ideology not religion that motivates these two nations in their anti-U.S. activities.¹³⁰

While Iranian interest in Latin America goes back at least to Mohsen Rabbani's efforts beginning in 1983, that interest increased dramatically with the election of hard-line president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. Ahmadinejad found in Venezuela's president, Hugo Chavez, an eager '*compadre*.' In my view, there is a direct link between Ahmadinejad's radical, revolutionary worldview, and Chavez's so-called '21st Century Socialism.'¹³¹ Chavez had been elected in 1999, and systematically acquired increased power, such that by the time of Ahmadinejad's election in 2005, Chavez was a virtual dictator. The two shared a fundamental hostility toward the U.S. In a 2010 joint press conference, reported in *Iran Review*, Chavez lauded the strategic alliance between Venezuela and Iran, necessary, in his mind, to hasten 'the collapse of imperialism.' For his part, Ahmadinejad emphasized the importance of Iran and Venezuela resisting the 'bullying powers' and 'colonizers' and their 'tyrannical world order.' He advocated the two countries work to establish a new world order based on justice and humanity.¹³²

¹³⁰ Jon B. Perdue, *The War of All the People* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012), 1, 59.

¹³¹ Ilan Berman, "Threat to the Homeland: Iran's Extending Influence in the Western Hemisphere." Testimony given to House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security. 09 Jul. 2013.

In addition, Venezuela offered Iran a mechanism to circumvent economic and military sanctions imposed by the U.S. and other nations. Further, Chavez opened the door for increased contact with other nations in Latin America, especially Bolivia and Ecuador. Chavez saw himself as leading a broad anti-U.S. alliance, which he dubbed the *Bolivarians*. During his tenure as president, Ahmadinejad made eight trips to Latin America; the majority to Venezuela, but also to Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Nicaragua and Cuba.¹³³ However, President Obama, during the 2012 presidential campaign, downplayed the impact. He told a Miami television station on 11 July 2012, “We’re always concerned about Iran engaging in destabilizing activity around the globe, but overall my sense is that what Mr. Chavez has done over the last several years has not had a serious national security impact on us.”¹³⁴

In contrast, on 02 February 2012, the House Committee on Foreign Affairs conducted a hearing entitled *Iran’s Agenda in the Western Hemisphere*. During this hearing, committee chair Ileana Ros-Lehtinen expressed concern over Iranian alliances with Chavez, Nicaraguan president Daniel Ortega, Cuban president Raul Castro, and Ecuadoran president Rafael Correa. She continued that these alliances can provide Iran either through the IRGC, the Quds Force, or Hezbollah, the capability to conduct attacks against the United States.¹³⁵ An October 2012 Brookings Institution article, in my view, supports this concern. The article was almost entirely focused on the recent reelection of

¹³² “Iran, Venezuela Pact Fights Imperialism: Joint Press Conference of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Venezuelan Leader Hugo Chavez.” *Iran Review*. 23 Oct. 2010.

¹³³ (Names redacted), “Latin America: Terrorism Issues.” *Congressional Research Service*. 15 Dec. 2016.

¹³⁴ Barack Obama, “Interview with TV Station WJAN.” *CNN Political Unit*. 11 Jul. 2012.

¹³⁵ “Ahmadinejad’s Tour of Tyrants and Iran’s Agenda in the Western Hemisphere.” Hearing before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. 02 Feb. 2012.

Hugo Chavez, and the state of the Venezuelan economy at that time. Surprising to me was a rather nonchalant statement noting that the presence in the country of IRGC and Hezbollah operatives was ‘public knowledge.’ The article continued that Iran plays an influential role in the government by providing technical assistance in state security, intelligence and energy matters.¹³⁶

The dynamics may have changed in 2013. In congressional testimony referenced above, the partnership is now in a state of ‘profound flux’ with the death of Chavez in April 2013, and Ahmadinejad’s tenure as president ending in June 2013.¹³⁷ During the 18 March 2015 House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing referred to above, Mr. Michael Shifter, President of the Inter-American Dialogue, advised that Latin America is currently not a very hospitable environment for Iranian activities, and that its influence has declined. Mr. Shifter offered that President Hassan Rouhani does not seem to share Ahmadinejad’s enthusiasm for improving ties to Latin America.¹³⁸ Since becoming president in 2012, Rouhani has made just one, brief visit to Venezuela and Cuba in September 2016, in route to address the UN General Assembly in New York.¹³⁹ However, in late August 2016, just prior to President Rouhani’s visit, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Bolivia and

¹³⁶ Diana Villiers Negroponte, “Chavez’s Last Hurrah!” *Brookings Institution*. 09 Oct. 2012.

¹³⁷ Berman, “Threat to the Homeland: Iran’s Extending Influence in the Western Hemisphere.”

¹³⁸ “Iran and Hezbollah in the Western Hemisphere.” Hearing before the House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs. 18 Mar. 2015.

¹³⁹ Kenneth Katzman, “Iran’s Foreign and Defense Policies.” *Congressional Research Service*. 06 Apr. 2017.

Venezuela, which China's Xinhua News Agency described as Latin America's 'progressive governments.'¹⁴⁰

In his 2013 *Posture Statement*, SOUTHCOM commander Gen. Kelly further advised that, while he shared Congress's concerns over Iran's attempts to increase influence in the region, he described Iran's outreach as only marginally successful. He concluded that SOUTHCOM takes Iranian activities very seriously and that SOUTHCOM remains vigilant. He cautioned however, that SOUTHCOM may not have a complete picture of Iranian and Hezbollah efforts in Latin America, due to limited intelligence capabilities.¹⁴¹

Impacting Iran's ability to leverage access to Venezuela has been the political and economic situation in the latter country. Since the death of Chavez in 2013, his handpicked successor and current president, Nicolas Maduro, has attempted to continue his socialist policies. Patrick Duddy served as U.S. Ambassador to Venezuela during both the Bush 43 and Obama administrations. In a 03 May 2017 interview, he noted that Venezuela was once the richest (country) in Latin America (and) is now 'a basket case.' He condemned the Chavez and Maduro administrations for the effective collapse of Venezuelan political institutions. He also noted the February 2017 U.S. Treasury Department's sanctioning, under the Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC), of Venezuelan Vice President Tareck el Aissami for his connections to international drug trafficking.¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ "Spotlight: Emerging Iran Looks to Latin America for Cooperation." Xinhua News Agency. 29 Aug. 2016.

¹⁴¹ John F. Kelly, Posture Statement of Gen. John F. Kelly, U.S. Marine Corps, before the 113th Congress, House Armed Services Committee. 19 March 2013.

El Aissami's designation under the Kingpin Act included 13 U.S. companies he used in his fraudulent activities.¹⁴³ The Treasury Department froze his assets for his collaboration with drug and terrorist organizations, including Hezbollah. El Aissami is the son of Lebanese and Syrian immigrants. His assets in the U.S. amounted to tens of millions of dollars.¹⁴⁴ Colonel Vladimir Rengifo, the former director of the Venezuelan Office of Identification, Immigration and Foreigners, claimed that el Aissami headed an operation that illegally provided over 10,000 legitimate Venezuelan passports to Syrians, Iranians and others from the Middle East. The Venezuelan Consulate in Damascus issued the great majority of these passports, and occasionally issued Venezuelan visas. Rengifo stated that each time he raised this issue with then Interior Minister el Aissami, the latter would order him to 'let his cousins in.' (dejara pasar a sus 'primos').¹⁴⁵

In conducting research for this thesis, I was impressed by the large number of terrorist or covert operations planned or perpetrated by the Islamic Republic in the Western Hemisphere. I trust the interested reader will be impressed as well. The above descriptions of these activities, albeit brief, demonstrate the establishment of a covert action capability. However, a successfully established capability cannot rest on past achievements; *it must remain viable*. Situations change, requiring operational flexibility, or the ability to adapt to those changing circumstances. We will next explore the impact of two very significant changes in U.S. – Iranian relations.

¹⁴² Patrick Duddy, "Venezuela: From Richest Country in Latin America to 'Basket Case'." *The Cipher Brief*. 03 May 2017.

¹⁴³ Ottolenghi, "Emerging External Influences in the Western Hemisphere."

¹⁴⁴ Nicholas Casey and Ana Vanessa Herrero, "How a Politician Accused of Drug Trafficking Became Venezuela's Vice President." *The New York Times*. 16 Feb. 2017.

¹⁴⁵ Antonio Delgado, "Regimen Chavista Otorgo Ilegalmente 10,000 Pasaportes Venezolanos a Sirios, Iranies." *El Nuevo Herald*. 16 Apr. 2017.

Chapter V

Assessing the Operational Flexibility of the Capability

Any assessment of a covert action capability must include an exploration of ‘Operational Flexibility.’ Situations change, frequently very quickly. An effective covert action program must be able to adapt to a changing environment. Two recent events have had a major impact on relations between the U.S. and Iran. The first section will briefly explore the impact of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (‘the Nuclear Deal’). The second section will provide an overview, also brief, of the impact of the 2016 election of President Donald Trump.

The JCPOA Windfall: Guns or Butter?

In the research for this paper, I found myself agreeing with the critics of the JCPOA who maintain that the Obama administration, desperate for at least one successful ‘foreign policy legacy,’ dealt with Iran in a very conciliatory manner, to avoid jeopardizing the nuclear deal. As author Jay Solomon argues in his comprehensive book on the JCPOA, President Obama displayed an obsessive commitment to improving relations with Iran from the very beginning of his administration.¹⁴⁶ Former Israeli senior intelligence officer Colonel Ephraim Kam argues that while the Obama administration understood the threat posed by Iran, they hoped the JCPOA would result in a diminishing

¹⁴⁶ Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars* (New York: Random House, 2016), 8.

of that threat. Kam further argues that this notion was unrealistic.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, an article entitled “Barack Obama and His Diplomatic Legacy: From an Iranian Viewpoint,” carried in *Iranian Diplomacy*, had complimented President Obama for taking a more ‘nuanced’ approach to Iran than had his predecessors.¹⁴⁸ In contrast, John Hannah, former National Security Advisor to Vice President Dick Cheney, took a different view in an article for *Foreign Policy*. He stated that Obama refused to take action against Iran’s threatening actions; that he was ‘paralyzed,’ fearing that any action would jeopardize the JCPOA.¹⁴⁹ CRS analyst Kenneth Katzman posits a more balanced view. He maintains that sanctions relief has allowed Iran’s economy to grow, but has also enabled Iran to potentially expand its weapons program, as well as its regional influence.¹⁵⁰

Prior to the JCPOA, Iran’s economy had faced serious difficulties, possibly being on the brink of collapse. In exchange for Iranian promises, the U.S. and its P5+1 partners released approximately \$100 billion in escrowed oil revenue which reportedly amounted to a quarter of Iran’s entire GDP; an enormous windfall. Equally important was Iran’s reintegration into global markets. However, sanctions relief may not have been of much benefit to the average Iranian.¹⁵¹ This situation begs the question, whence goeth the money? For starters, on the eve of the JCPOA signing, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei

¹⁴⁷ Ephraim Kam, “A Possible Trump Administration’s Iran Policy: Constraints and Options.” *Iran Matters*, The Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School. 20 Jan. 2017. See footnote #71 for additional information on Col. Kam.

¹⁴⁸ Kaveh Afrasiabi, “Barack Obama and His Diplomatic Legacy: From an Iranian Viewpoint.” *Iranian Diplomacy*. 19 Jan. 2017.

¹⁴⁹ John Hannah, “Why Trump’s Iran Sanctions Waiver Should Worry the Mullahs.” *Foreign Policy*. 18 May 2017.

¹⁵⁰ Kenneth Katzman, “Iran Sanctions.” *Congressional Research Service*. 14 Apr. 2017.

¹⁵¹ Ilan Berman, “Nuclear Deal Fallout: The Global Threat of Iran.” Statement before the House Foreign Affairs Committee. 24 May 2017.

announced a 30% increase in the nation's defense budget to 5% of GDP.¹⁵² U.S. Special Operations Vice Commander, Lieutenant General Thomas Trask stated in late May 2017 that Iran will spend increased defense dollars on a network of proxies and unconventional warfare designed to provide a buffer for the regime.¹⁵³ Somewhat in contrast, the Director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, Lieutenant General Vincent R. Stewart, provided testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee on 23 May 2017, in which he stated that the Iranian government will use sanctions relief to increase domestic social and economic expenditures.¹⁵⁴

Supporting this view is Brookings analyst Suzanne Maloney in her testimony before the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, previously cited in Chapter III. She argues that President Rouhani will use money from the sanctions relief to focus on Iran's domestic economy. I found her rationale very interesting. She maintains that Rouhani's focus results from fears that a lack of improvement in the domestic economy could threaten regime survival.¹⁵⁵

The pre-JCPOA sanctions also appear to have had a negative impact on the IRGC. Statements by supreme leader Khamenei's Chief of Staff Asghar Mir-Hejazi, former IRGC commander Yahya Rahim Safavi, and Supreme Council for National Security Chairman Ali Shamkhani, all noted that the sanctions hit the Quds Force especially

¹⁵² Abbas Qaidaari, "More Planes, More Missiles, More Warships: Iran Increases its Military Budget by a Third." *Al-Monitor*. 13 July 2015.

¹⁵³ Thomas Trask. Vice-Commander, US Special Operations Command, "Eyes on Iran." *Foreign Policy Situation Report*. 01 Jun. 2017.

¹⁵⁴ Vincent R. Stewart, Director, Defense Intelligence Agency, "Worldwide Threat Assessment." Statement for the Record to the U.S. Senate Armed Service Committee. 23 May 2017.

¹⁵⁵ Suzanne Maloney, "Major Beneficiaries of the Iran Deal: the IRGC and Hezbollah."

hard.¹⁵⁶ On 13 August 2017, Iranian Parliamentarians, some shouting ‘Death to America,’ approved budget increases of approximately \$800 million for Iran’s military, with \$260 million for the ballistic missile program and \$300 million for the Quds Force.¹⁵⁷

The pre-JCPOA sanctions also appear to have had a major impact on Hezbollah operations in the Western Hemisphere. Iran’s influence in the region may have waned over the past 15 years due to sanctions and Hezbollah may have had to turn to organized criminal activity to generate revenue to keep the movement alive. Reporting indicates that Hezbollah has smuggled hundreds of tons of cocaine through Latin America. The question then becomes, will Hezbollah’s Iranian funding increase with the sanctions lifted?¹⁵⁸ Iran may not want to engage directly in activities that could undermine the Nuclear Deal, but would rely on deniable activities conducted by proxies, such as Hezbollah.¹⁵⁹

Impact of the Trump Administration: New Sheriff in Town?

Throughout the 2016 election, then candidate Trump signaled his intention to take a stronger posture with respect to Iran than did the previous Obama administration.

The following explores the impact of President Trump’s election, and whether Iran will

¹⁵⁶ Scott Modell, “Regional Implications of a Nuclear Agreement with Iran.” Statement before the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. 12 Jun. 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas Erdbrink, “Iranian Parliament, Facing U.S. Sanctions, Votes to Raise Military Spending.” *The New York Times*. 13 Aug. 2017.

¹⁵⁸ Michael A. Braun, Statement for the Record for the Joint Hearing Before the Task Force to Investigate Terrorism Financing. 08 Jun. 2016.

¹⁵⁹ Matthew Levitt, “Hezbollah’s Growing Threat against U.S. National Security Interests in the Middle East.” Testimony submitted to the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa. 22 Mar. 2016.

react to the Trump administration with covert or terrorist operations. Certainly, during the 2016 campaign, Donald Trump was vocal in his condemnation of the Obama administration's Iran policy, and especially of the JCPOA. In the cabinet selections of General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense and Lieutenant General Michael Flynn for National Security Adviser, President Trump signaled taking a tougher line towards Iran. An article published by *Iranian Diplomacy* decried President Trump's selection of LTG Flynn for National Security Adviser. The article described Flynn as an 'Islamophobic, far-right, maniac.' The article also noted that the choice of Gen. James Mattis for Secretary of State would result in a sharp increase in 'Iranophobic' policies under Trump.¹⁶⁰

It did not take long for the Iranian government to antagonize the new administration. On 30 January 2017, just days after the Trump inauguration, Iran conducted a test launch of a ballistic missile.¹⁶¹ In a 03 February 2017 tweet he sent out at 3:28 AM, President Trump said "Iran is playing with fire – they don't appreciate how 'kind' President Obama was to them. Not me!"¹⁶² Indeed, one of the more notable actions taken by LTG Flynn during his brief tenure was to 'put Iran on notice.'¹⁶³ Not to be outdone in the rhetoric battle, speaking on Iranian television, on 07 February 2017, Minister of Defense Hossein Dehghan stated, "Today the main threat is from the arrogant regime, America, along with the Zionists and so on. When we consider how to fight such a threat, we need to find factors that will give us the upper hand in battle. There will be a

¹⁶⁰ Kaveh L. Afrasiabi, "Trump's Iranophobic Picks Open a Path towards Confrontation." *Iran Diplomacy*. 03 Dec. 2016.

¹⁶¹ David E. Sanger, "Iran Launches a Missile Testing Trump's Vows of Strict Enforcement." *The New York Times*. 30 Jan. 2017.

¹⁶² Donald J. Trump, Twitter.com. 03 Feb. 2017.

¹⁶³ Raz Zimmt, "Iranian Conduct in the Early Days of the Trump Administration." *Crethi Plethi*. 06 Mar. 2017.

situation of *asymmetric warfare* (italics added).” “In addition, we need to have sufficient power to surprise the enemy. In other words, we need to hit the enemy where it hurts the most.”¹⁶⁴

As noted above, on 16 February 2017, the House Foreign Affairs Committee held a hearing entitled *Iran on Notice*. Chairman Edward Royce (R-CA) called the hearing to order, then immediately expressed the concern that the U.S. government needed options to deal with *an emboldened Iran* (italics added). Minutes later, Chairman Royce condemned the IRGC as Iran’s terror arm. He further advocated attacking Iran’s proxy, Hezbollah. Interestingly, there appears to be bipartisan cooperation on Iran. The ranking Democrat on the committee, Eliot L. Engel (D-NY), agreed on the reality of an Iranian threat that the U.S. government must take seriously.¹⁶⁵

Early in its tenure, the Trump administration initiated a thorough Iran-policy review. The administration applied dozens of new sanctions connected to Iranian missile and terrorism activities, and the Quds Force. In addition, the administration sanctioned Sohrad Suleimani, who oversees the infamous Evin Prison. He is the brother of Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani.¹⁶⁶ Indeed, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed more sanctions on Iran during the first six months of the Trump administration than it did in the previous four years of the Obama administration.¹⁶⁷ And as noted above, there appears to be bipartisan support for the new administration’s actions. Arizona State

¹⁶⁴ Hossein Dehghan, “Iranian Defense Minister: We Need to Surprise the Enemy, America, and Hit it Where It Hurts the Most.” *The Middle East Media Research Institute*. 07 Feb. 2017.

¹⁶⁵ “Iran on Notice,” US Congress. House of Representatives. Foreign Relations Committee. 16 Feb. 2017.

¹⁶⁶ Mark Dubowitz, “Trump Tries a ‘Waive-and-Slap’ Approach to Tehran.” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*. 17 May 2017.

¹⁶⁷ Emanuele Ottolenghi, “The Iranian Express.” *The Weekly Standard*. 31 Jul. 2017.

University law professor Orde Kittre, writing in *The Hill*, advised that the Republican chairs and Democratic ranking members of both the House and Senate Foreign Relations committees believed that the U.S. should stand firm against Iran's non-nuclear activities and its global terror network.¹⁶⁸ Indicative of this bipartisan support, in mid-June 2017, the U.S. Senate passed Senate Bill S.722, the *Countering Iran's Destabilizing Activities Act of 2017*, by a 98-2 vote. The bill requires the U.S.G. to designate the IRGC as a terrorist organization, enforce arms embargos, and impede Iran's ballistic missile development. The bill also requires the imposition of human rights sanctions, an area I will explore in the next chapter. The bill specifically mentions deterring Iran's *asymmetric warfare capabilities* (italics added).¹⁶⁹ A bill with provisions applied to Iran, the *Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act*, passed the U.S. House of Representatives by a vote of 419-3.¹⁷⁰

Support for the Trump administration's actions is far from universal. Paul Pillar, former National Intelligence Officer for Near East and South Asia at CIA, expressed concern that President Trump's 20 May 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia exacerbated already high Gulf tensions.¹⁷¹ Former CIA senior analyst Steven Ward echoed Pillar's concerns. In an article entitled, "Arab NATO Plan Could Backfire, Driving Tehran Toward Moscow, Beijing," Ward warned that an Arab NATO's targeting of Tehran could

¹⁶⁸ Orde Kittre, "Trump's Steps on Iran Show Cooperation with Congress is Possible." *The Hill*. 19 May 2017.

¹⁶⁹ Behnam Ben Taleblu, "Senate Bill Addresses Flaws in Iran Nuclear Deal." *Foundation for Defense of Democracies Policy Brief*. 19 Jun. 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Tyler Stapleton, "Congress Moves to Reassert Itself in Iran Policy Oversight." *Foundation for Defense of Democracies Policy Brief*. 27 Jul. 2017.

¹⁷¹ Paul Pillar, "ISIS Attack in Tehran Stokes Cross-Gulf Tensions, Weakens Iran's Reformers." *The Cipher Brief*. 09 Jun. 2017.

aggravate regional instability, and provoke Iranian countermeasures.¹⁷² Yet another former CIA officer, Reuel Marc Gerecht, commenting on the difficulty facing the pro-business Trump administration's decision on whether to approve the \$17 billion Boeing deal (noted above), warned that "President Trump's Iran policy will become just a rhetorically harsher, more intellectually confused version of President Obama's Iran policy."¹⁷³

In mid-June 2017, *Foreign Policy* published an article which detailed disagreement within the administration. According to the article, the senior director for intelligence at the National Security Council, Ezra Cohen-Watnick, and the NSC's senior Middle East advisor Derek Harvey, want to broaden U.S. military actions in Syria to confront Iran and its proxy forces. The article continues that Defense Secretary James Mattis and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Joseph Dunford disagreed.¹⁷⁴

Clearly, any objective observer would agree that the signing of the JCPOA and the election of President Donald Trump have had a major impact on U.S. – Iranian relations. The JCPOA has been an almost daily feature in the news media. For his part, Donald Trump has left no doubt as to how differently he views U.S.-Iran relations than did his predecessor. In the first section of the next chapter, I will offer my assessment of Tehran's covert action and terrorist capabilities as of early 2018. Following that, I will provide recommendations for U.S. government actions.

¹⁷² Steven Ward, "Arab NATO Plan Could Backfire, Driving Tehran Toward Moscow, Beijing." *The Cipher Brief*. 01 Jun. 2017.

¹⁷³ Reuel Marc Gerecht, "'Principled Realism': Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Trump." *The Weekly Standard*. 02 Jun. 2017.

¹⁷⁴ Kate Brannen, Dan De Luce and Paul McLeary, "White House Officials Push for Widening War in Syria Over Pentagon Objections." *Foreign Policy*. 16 Jun. 2017.

Chapter VI

Conclusion: Assessing Effectiveness and Policy Recommendations

As noted in the Introduction (Chapter I), relations between nations are rarely static, and U.S. – Iran relations are clearly no exception. During the time I have been drafting this thesis, hardly a day has passed without the publication of news items concerning relations between the two countries. My final chapter consists of an introduction, an assessment of capability and finally what I hope are straight forward, specific recommendations for the U.S. government. As a foundation for recommendations, I have divided possible U.S.G. strategy options into three very broad policy ‘categories’ or ‘approaches,’ to be dealt with in more detail below.

Approach #1 - Aggressive – focused on regime change.

Approach #2 - Engaged – focused on modifying what various U.S.G. officials have described as the Iranian Republic’s ‘malign’ activities.

Approach #3 - Accommodating – focused on improving relations between the two countries.

Introduction

A major difficulty in producing this thesis has been to ascertain when to stop the information gathering. Thus, it was with some trepidation that I initially selected mid - October 2017 as the ‘cut-off-date’ for the inclusion of new information; a cut-off-date which includes President Trump’s 13 October Iran policy announcements. That said, I

continued to closely follow events relative to my thesis into January 2018. Four very significant events occurred after my tentative cut-off-date. First was the 15 December publication of an article in *Politico* on the Obama administration's blocking of Justice Department efforts, under Project Cassandra, against Hezbollah drug trafficking.¹⁷⁵ Second was the 18 December publication of the Trump administration's National Security Strategy.¹⁷⁶ The last days of 2017 saw an outbreak of demonstrations in multiple Iranian cities. Finally, on 11 January, the DOJ announced the formation of the Hezbollah Financing and Narcoterrorism Team (HFNT).¹⁷⁷

I certainly recognize how quickly situations can change. These four events are clear examples. I hope this thesis will have enduring significance, but I ask the reader's forbearance if events soon compromise my assessment and/or policy recommendations. With this understanding as preface, it is time to move to the final phase of our model, which requires analyzing the threat that the Iran/IRGC/Hezbollah nexus poses to the Western Hemisphere. In a section following that, I will offer policy recommendations.

An Analysis of the Threat

After evaluating information from over 390 sources, I believe that Iran has the *capability* to conduct covert or terrorist operations in the Western Hemisphere, to include in the U.S., and that maintaining this capability is a significant aspect of their asymmetrical warfare strategy. Research provides less evidence that Iran, as of late

¹⁷⁵ Josh Meyer, "The Secret Backstory of How Obama Let Hezbollah Off the Hook." *Politico*. 15 Dec. 2017.

¹⁷⁶ Office of the President, "National Security Strategy of the United States of America." 18 Dec. 2017.

¹⁷⁷ "Attorney General Sessions Announces Hezbollah Financing and Narcoterrorism Team." Department of Justice. 11 Jan. 2018.

2017/early 2018, has the *intention* to conduct such terrorist operations. Therein lies the problem. Capability takes time to establish, and Iran appears to have put significant resources into establishing this capability. Intention, on the other hand, can change very quickly.

In my view, an analysis of the threat should remain a critical and ongoing mission for U.S. policy makers and intelligence analysts. As noted above, what makes this such an interesting puzzle is the wide divergence in threat assessment among policy makers, political leaders, senior military officers, area experts, academics, and journalists.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee on 09 February 2016, DNI Clapper said that “Iran continues to be the foremost state sponsor of terrorism and exerts its influence in regional crises in the Mideast, through the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Qods Force, its terrorist partner Lebanese Hezbollah, and proxy groups.” He added that, “Iran and Hezbollah remain a *continuing terrorist threat* (italics added) to U.S. interests and partners worldwide.”¹⁷⁸ Interestingly, Gen. Clapper describes Hezbollah as Iran’s “partner” and seems to differentiate it from proxy groups. The majority of my sources refer to Hezbollah as Iran’s proxy. I do not believe Gen. Clapper’s change in terminology indicates any change in assessment. Further, the State Department’s *Country Reports of Terrorism 2016*, published in July of 2017, describes Iran’s worldwide sponsoring of terrorism as undiminished.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, “Statement for the Record on the Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community for the Senate Armed Service Committee.” 09 Feb. 2016.

¹⁷⁹ “Country Reports on Terrorism 2016.” *U.S. Department of State*. 19 Jul 2017.

The two bombings in Buenos Aires, plotting to blow up fuel storage tanks at JFK Airport, and the attempted assassination plot in Washington D.C., provide evidence that Iran is willing to carry out deadly terrorist attacks in the Western Hemisphere. Additionally, there is a great deal of evidence that Hezbollah has morphed into a sophisticated criminal enterprise, and has developed ties with other criminal organizations, which also maintain sophisticated smuggling networks into the U.S. It is reasonable to assume that these smuggling networks could move individuals, weapons and explosives, as well as drugs.

Presenting a somewhat contrasting view is the 13 August 2015 *Foreign Policy* magazine article by Daniel Benjamin entitled, “Is Iran about to Unleash a Wave of Terrorism against the United States?” Mr. Benjamin previously served as Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the U.S. State Department from 2009 to 2012, and wrote the article in response to concerns from political leaders and journalists that Iran would use the windfall from the nuclear agreement to increase funding for terrorism. Benjamin allowed as how Iran is the world’s foremost state sponsor of terrorism. He argued, however, that U.S. ability to identify terrorist perpetrators has served to deter Iran from carrying out attacks directly against the United States. He continued that “Iran’s terrorist attacks have always been smaller and carefully calibrated so that its enemies would not use these attacks as justification for military reprisal or retributive war.” To my disappointment, he only briefly acknowledged and described as ‘strange,’ the plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador by placing a bomb in a popular D.C. restaurant, and the plotters’ full intention to cause massive civilian casualties. He described that plot as ‘one

of the strangest in terrorism history.’¹⁸⁰ Benjamin’s confidence in U.S. government counter-terrorist capabilities, while flattering to this former intelligence officer, are, in my opinion, naïve. Small groups, or indeed individuals, can slip through the best defenses, and can do dramatic harm.

A very interesting assessment of Iranian/Hezbollah capabilities and intentions in the Western Hemisphere comes from a 2010 STRATFOR publication, “Hezbollah, Radical but Rational.” While somewhat dated, their analysis warrants a rather lengthy quote.

For several years now, every time there has been talk of a possible attack on Iran there has been a corresponding threat by Iran that it will use its proxy groups in response to such an attack. Iran has also been busy pushing intelligence reports to anybody who will listen (including STRATFOR) that it will activate its militant proxy groups if attacked and, to back up that threat, will periodically send IRGC-QF, MOIS or Hezbollah operatives out to conduct not-so-subtle surveillance of potential targets. (They clearly want to be seen undertaking such activity.)

Space precludes an analysis of this view point, but we cannot rule out the possibility that the Islamic Republic might hype or exaggerate its capabilities as a deterrent to U.S. action.¹⁸¹

Policy Recommendations

If we assume that the Islamic Republic has created the capability to conduct covert or terrorist operations in the Western Hemisphere, and as noted above, I believe we should, then the question becomes, what the U.S. government should do about it? I

¹⁸⁰ Daniel Benjamin, “Is Iran About to Unleash a Wave of Terrorism Against the United States?” *Foreign Policy*. 13 Aug. 2015.

¹⁸¹ Scott Stewart, “Hezbollah, Radical but Rational.” *STRATFOR*. 12 Aug. 2010.

have divided U.S.G. strategy options into three very broad policy ‘categories’ or ‘approaches.’

Approach #1 - Aggressive – focused on regime change.

Approach #2 - Engaged – focused on curtailing what various U.S.G. officials have described as the Iranian Republics ‘malign’ activities.

Approach #3 - Accommodating – focused on improving relations between the two countries.

Defining an overall U.S.G. policy toward Iran is far beyond the scope of this thesis. However, I believe it is worthwhile to evaluate policy recommendations within these three categories as they apply to covert action capabilities in the Western Hemisphere. In my view, the Trump administration’s attitude falls somewhere between Approach #1 and Approach #2. The Obama administration’s attitude, especially during negotiations for the JCPOA, fell between Approach #2 and Approach #3.

In evaluating Approach #1, I believe it is reasonable to expect that Iran would retaliate to a more aggressive U.S.G. approach, especially if the Iranian leadership sees regime change as the focus of U.S.G. efforts. We could see a strengthening of the hard-liners’ position within Iran and also witness world opinion shifting more in support of the regime thus isolating the U.S. Indeed, a more aggressive approach could actually strengthen internal public support for the IRGC; the opposite of what the U.S.G. seeks.¹⁸² Specifically in the Western Hemisphere, the Islamic Republic could undertake or sponsor lethal operations against Israeli targets as happened in Buenos Aires, or possibly against Sunni majority Gulf state targets, as exemplified by the plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington, D.C. As noted earlier in Chapter V, then Defense Minister

¹⁸² Payam Mohseni and Sahar Nowrouzadeh, “Trump’s Dangerous Shift on Iran.”

Hossein Dehghan stated on 07 February 2017, that Iran will engage in ‘asymmetric warfare’ to hit the enemy where it hurts the most.¹⁸³ Given the situation as of early 2018, I find taking an aggressive approach ill-advised, especially any adoption of regime change as U.S.G. policy

For the sake of brevity, let us deal with Approach #3, Accommodation, next. The Obama administration held out hope that the JCPOA would usher in a new era in improved relations between the two countries. I believe it is safe to say that has not happened. In my research, I have found very little support for continuing to ‘extend a hand’ to Iran as President Obama initially intended, in hopes that Iran will ‘unclench (its) fist.’ As current Supreme Leader Khamenei stated in July 2014 (noted above), “Reconciliation between Iran and America is possible, but it is not possible between the Islamic Republic and America.”

Thus, I believe we are left with Approach #2, Engagement. On 26 October 2017, the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace published a very comprehensive, integrated strategy for the U.S. government’s dealings with the Islamic Republic, entitled *Contain, Enforce, and Engage: An Integrated U.S. Strategy to Address Iran’s Nuclear and Regional Challenges*. Key input to this paper came from former senior members of the Obama administration. It details an overall U.S.G. strategy, however, I found it to be a sober-minded assessment with parts very applicable to the threat posed in the Western Hemisphere. The sections on ‘JCPOA Implementation’ and ‘Structural Nuclear Issues’ have little relevance to my thesis. The sections on ‘Coercion’ and ‘Engagement’ do. Particularly pertinent, the ‘Coercion’ section calls for exposing and embarrassing Iranian

¹⁸³ Hossein Dehghan, “Iranian Defense Minister: We Need to Surprise the Enemy, America, and Hit it Where It Hurts the Most.”

asymmetrical activities not only in the Middle East, but around the world. Regarding ‘Engagement,’ the U.S.G. should look for opportunities to provide meaningful and credible incentives, for example by offering the possibility of limited, direct U.S. corporate involvement in Iran, all contingent on a moderation in Iranian government behavior. Especially important should be the establishment of channels for direct and indirect communication with Iranian officials and an emphasis on the need for de-confliction capabilities.¹⁸⁴

Worrisome to me, however, have been several recent SOUTHCOM *Posture Statements*, in which those commanders expressed concern that they did not have the intelligence resources to fully evaluate the threat in the Western Hemisphere. As part of her testimony noted in Chapter I above, Dr. Arnson made a perceptive comment, “There is every reason to be watchful and vigilant, and treat allegations about Iran’s military and intelligence activities in the region with the utmost seriousness”...“the secrecy and lack of transparency that characterize the behavior of the Iranian regime...heighten the level of concern.”¹⁸⁵ Thus, those charged with monitoring Iranian activities must remain vigilant, likely avoiding either extreme; complacency or unwarranted concern. The U.S.G. should apply additional resources to understand the threat, and then undermine the capabilities of the two key action agents of the threat, the IRGC and Hezbollah.

I have organized the remainder of the chapter into four sub-sections: 1) general recommendations, 2) recommendations concerning the IRGC, 3) recommendations concerning Hezbollah, and 4) final thoughts.

¹⁸⁴ William J. Burns, et al., “Contain, Enforce, and Engage: An Integrated U.S. Strategy to Address Iran’s Nuclear and Regional Challenges.”

¹⁸⁵ Cynthia J. Arnson, “Iran’s Influence and Activity in Latin America.”

1) General Recommendations. Assign additional intelligence gathering resources, particularly human intelligence (HUMINT) resources to areas where Iranian assets and/or Hezbollah operatives are active. As noted above, SOUTHCOM commanders, in their yearly *Posture Statements*, have decried their lack of resources. Based upon my 40 years of personal experience in special operations and intelligence gathering, there is no substitute for HUMINT reporting. Only HUMINT operations can infiltrate hostile networks. Recruited agents, who have penetrated such networks, are in the best position to provide critical, time-sensitive and predictive intelligence.

As both the 2009 and late 2017 demonstrations indicate, there are significant levels of disapproval of the Iranian government from within the civilian population. Writing in *Foreign Policy*, John Hannah argues that “The Islamic Revolution is ideologically, politically, and morally bankrupt in the eyes of vast numbers of its own people. It survives now largely on the basis of fear, oppression, targeted patronage, and inertia.” Hannah noted President Trump’s emphasis on the Iranian people during his address to the U.N. General Assembly on 19 September 2017, highlighting specific ways that the regime has failed the Iranian people.¹⁸⁶ If Hannah is even partially correct about levels of dissatisfaction among the population, and I believe he is, then efforts to reach out to the Iranian people may pressure the government to modify its interest in external, hostile, activities. Certainly the demonstrations in multiple cities by perhaps tens of thousands of Iranian citizens in the last days of 2017, lend credence to the existence of significant dissatisfaction. The government’s focus on external military actions, vice

¹⁸⁶ John Hannah, “A U.S. President Is Finally Speaking Up for the People of Iran.” *Foreign Policy*. 25 Sep. 2017.

internal economic issues, has been a key frustration expressed by many of the demonstrators.

Numerous entities, including the U.S. Department of State and the U.N. Special Rapporteur, have criticized the Islamic Republic's human rights record.¹⁸⁷ The arrest and detention, reportedly by the IRGC, of at least 30 dual nationals over the past two years offers indications that Tehran intends that at least some of these individuals would serve as useful bargaining chips, or as a revenue source. Indeed, there are some indications that the human rights situation in Iran has grown worse since the signing of the JCPOA.¹⁸⁸ The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom described the Islamic Republic's violations of religious freedom as 'egregious.' Religious minorities, including Baha'is and Christian converts, remain attractive targets.¹⁸⁹ The regime punishes dissidents, be they women rights activists, or journalists. The leadership's views on homosexuality have been a source of outrage. One need only recall then president Ahmadinejad's comments at Columbia University in 2007 that they do not have homosexuals in Iran.

The Iranian government places heavy restrictions on its citizens' access to media. Freedom House's Freedom of Press Ranking for 2017 rates Iran as 'Not Free,' and ranks it 190th out of 198 countries. The Small Media Foundation, a United Kingdom based media monitor, cited an Iranian news item in which Saeed Reza Ameli, a member of the Islamic Republic's Supreme Council of Cyberspace, stated that 76% of Iranians use

¹⁸⁷ Kenneth Katzman, "Iran: Politics, Human Rights, and U.S. Policy." *Congressional Research Service*. 01 Nov. 2017.

¹⁸⁸ Bozorgmehr Sharafedin, "Exclusive: Iran's Revolutionary Guards Arrest More Dual Nationals." *Reuters*. 09 Nov. 2017.

¹⁸⁹ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. "Iran Chapter – 2017 Annual Report." 24 Sep. 2017.

internet circumvention tools. Mr. Ameli called for an increase in religious material on the internet. The Small Media report also noted the dominating presence of the IRGC in the Iranian telecommunications industry.¹⁹⁰

The U.S. Government sponsors Radio Farda, a subordinate entity of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Radio Farda, which is based in Prague, broadcasts Persian language programs. According to the Radio Farda fact sheet, the Farda website has averaged 12.5 million visits *per month* (italics added) in 2017, despite an official government ban. Part of the station's charter is to expose corruption and human rights violations in Iran.¹⁹¹ The station should redouble its efforts.

2) IRGC Recommendations. I remain convinced that the IRGC occupies what military personnel term 'the center of gravity.' Its political, economic, and military power is of overriding importance for keeping the supreme leader and the current ruling elites in power. The IRGC, especially through its subordinate Quds Force, is the primary action agent through which the Islamic Republic could engage in covert and/or terrorist actions in the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, any undermining of their power at home could lessen their enthusiasm for adventures in America's backyard. The public dissatisfaction noted above extends to the IRGC. Indeed, Rouhani used attacks on the IRGC to bolster his 2016 campaign for re-election. Thus, I recommend maintaining sustained pressure, specifically on the IRGC, through economic sanctions and broadcasts on Radio Farda. The station could focus especially on IRGC excesses and human rights abuses, and as mentioned in Chapter III, its black-market activities. The strategy

¹⁹⁰ Small Media.org. "Iranian Internet Infrastructure and Policy Report." Mar. 2017.

¹⁹¹ *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Radio Farda Fact Sheet*. 22 Sep. 2017.

proposed in the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace article, referred to above, calls for undermining the IRGC's domestic and international economic roles.¹⁹² I concur.

3) Hezbollah Recommendations. Hezbollah presents a particularly virulent threat in the Western Hemisphere given that it combines terrorist capabilities with established drug-trafficking and money-laundering networks. Increasing pressure on Hezbollah would thus benefit the U.S. and other Western Hemisphere countries in all three of these critical areas. Space does not permit a detailed review of the Justice Department's Project Cassandra. Suffice it to say that Josh Meyer, in his exhaustive *Politico* article on the program, makes a strong case that the Obama administration thwarted a concerted effort against Hezbollah drug trafficking in order to encourage Iranian acceptance of the JCPOA. The U.S. government should provide resources to reactivate Project Cassandra, or a similar program, to aggressively and relentlessly promote sanctions on entities and individuals in the Western Hemisphere which have an affiliation with Hezbollah, and apply diplomatic pressure on Latin American nations to declare Hezbollah a terrorist entity.¹⁹³

The joining of Iran-sponsored radical Islam with organized crime is a serious threat to U.S. national security. Measures could include targeting local financial institutions, which facilitate terror finance, by freezing their assets. Another effective measure would be to blacklist corrupt foreign officials, and restrict their access to the U.S. by denying visas and freezing assets. Section 311 of the Patriot Act could be an effective tool against local financial institutions used by Hezbollah to launder money.

¹⁹² William J. Burns, et al., "Contain, Enforce, and Engage: An Integrated U.S. Strategy to Address Iran's Nuclear and Regional Challenges."

¹⁹³ Josh Meyer, "The Secret Backstory of How Obama Let Hezbollah Off the Hook."

The Financial Action Task Force, mentioned in Chapter IV above, can make a contribution. Unfortunately, as of the drafting of this thesis, no Latin American country has listed Hezbollah as a terror organization.¹⁹⁴

On 18 December 2015, President Obama signed into law the *Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act (HIFPA)*, referred to in Chapter III. This bill opened the door for the designation of Hezbollah as a foreign narcotics trafficker under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act and/or as a Transnational Criminal Organization under Executive Order 13581. The Obama administration did not fully leverage the HIFPA provisions.¹⁹⁵ The Trump administration should fully employ the provisions of this legislation to prosecute Hezbollah networks and individuals. Such action would, in my view, attack two national security issues, terrorism and drug trafficking.

4) Final thoughts. On 18 December 2017, the Trump administration published the “National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” I had drafted this thesis prior to reading this document. But I must admit to a sense of satisfaction when under “Pillar I” of the strategy, the administration specifically gave priority to deterring and disrupting terrorist groups including ‘Iran-backed groups such as Lebanese Hizballah’ and to dismantling transnational criminal organizations.¹⁹⁶ I also admit to an additional sense of satisfaction when I read of the 11 January 2018 DOJ announcement regarding the decision to form the Hezbollah Financing and Narcoterrorism Team. According to

¹⁹⁴ Emanuele Ottolenghi, “Hezbollah in Latin America is a Threat the US Cannot Ignore.” *The Hill*. 11 Jun. 2017.

¹⁹⁵ Tyler Stapleton, “Congress and the Administration Need to Reinvigorate HIFPA.” *Foundation for Defense of Democracies Policy Brief*. 19 Jul. 2017.

¹⁹⁶ Office of the President. “National Security Strategy of the United States of America.” 18 Dec. 2017.

the DOJ announcement, the team combines prosecutors experienced in both drug trafficking and terrorism. As a first priority, this team will assess cases stemming from Project Cassandra.¹⁹⁷

Military theorists frequently credit Prussian General Carl von Clausewitz with promoting the concept of ‘the fog of war’ to describe operational ambiguities during conflicts. Iran has, and will continue to keep their capabilities and intentions as ‘foggy’ as possible. While it appears that Iran may not currently have the intention to use the Western Hemisphere to attack the U.S. or its interests, it is normally prudent to err to the side of cautious concern. As the old U.S. Army saying goes, ‘Few commanders have ever won battles by underestimating their opponents.’

¹⁹⁷ “Attorney General Sessions Announces Hezbollah Financing and Narcoterrorism Team.” Department of Justice. 11 Jan. 2018.

Appendix

Definition of Terms

Asymmetrical Warfare - In military operations the application of dissimilar strategies, tactics, capabilities, and methods to circumvent or negate an opponent's strengths while exploiting his weaknesses.

Basij - An Iranian paramilitary militia numbering in the millions. A subordinate unit to the IRGC.

Clandestine Operation – An operation designed to conceal the operation itself.

Covert Operation - One designed to conceal the identity of the sponsor or at least provide 'plausible deniability.'

Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) - An official U.S. State Department designation designed to identify organizations with a proven history of conducting terrorist actions.

Hezbollah - Lebanese Shia political and military organization dedicated to the destruction of the State of Israel. Alternate spelling Hizballah. Most observers describe it as an IRGC proxy.

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) - The so-called 'Nuclear Deal' signed on 14 July 2015 by the Iranian government and the U.S., the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Russia, China and the European Union which the Obama administration hoped would preclude Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

Quds Force - The unit subordinate to the IRGC with the mission of undertaking covert and/or terrorist operations outside of Iran.

Supreme Leader - Senior cleric in the Iranian government. Retains ultimate but not absolute political power. As of early 2018, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Terrorist Entity - An official U.S. Treasury designation designed to thwart financial support for the designee.

Terrorist Act - The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political.

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