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# IRANIAN INFLUENCE IN **VENEZUELA**



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## Iran - Venezuela: A Strategic Alliance

Iran has become a strategic and indispensable ally of the Venezuelan regime, providing cooperation in several key areas, particularly energy and defense. Many of these cooperation mechanisms continue to this day under Rodríguez's interim regime.

In return, Venezuela has become a critical component of Iran's axis of influence, serving as a key outpost for the propagation and financing of terrorist and illicit activities linked to Islamist extremist groups in Latin America. These activities include money laundering, sanctions-evading oil trade, and gold smuggling.



Both regimes have actively cooperated in sanctions-evasion schemes designed to undermine Western pressure. This collaboration aligns with Iran's broader strategy known as the "resistance economy," which seeks to bypass international sanctions through alternative financial and trade networks.

Iran's presence in Venezuela represents a significant geopolitical risk to hemispheric security, with direct implications for U.S. national interests.



# Two Decades of Strategic Cooperation<sup>1, 2, 3, 8, 9, 15</sup>

In the past **20 years**, more than **300 agreements** have been signed between Venezuela and Iran, primarily in energy, defense, and technology.

## 2005

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad becomes President of Iran, and the deepening of relations with Venezuela under Hugo Chávez begins.

## 2007

A USD \$2 billion joint fund was established to support bilateral projects, including support for “anti-imperialist” countries. Iran is also accepted as an observer member of ALBA (A regional alliance founded by Cuba and Venezuela to counter U.S. influence).

## 2012-2013

Relations were recalibrated following the death of Hugo Chavez and Ahmadinejad’s departure.

## 2014

High-Level Joint Commission meets again in Caracas, relaunching bilateral cooperation, particularly in defense.

## 2022

A Strategic Cooperation Framework is established in energy, petrochemicals, defense, and economic cooperation.

## 2023

Iranian President Raisi visits Venezuela; 25 agreements signed, with emphasis on petrochemicals and mining.

## 2024

Strategic agreements signed in agriculture, science, and energy, marking over 300 agreements signed in the last 20 years.



10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 24, 26

## Energy Cooperation

Iran has played a key role in Venezuela's oil production recovery and expansion in the years leading up to 2026, a service that Venezuela has compensated largely in illegal gold.

- Iran has supplied necessary technology and materials for the reactivation of refineries, diluents for heavy crude processing, and gasoline shipments to meet Venezuela's domestic demand.
- The Venezuelan regime has historically paid in illicit gold to Iran via air bridges through Mahan Air and Conviasa flights, both in direct routes and with international connections. This scheme is known as "gold for oil."
- Between September and December 2025 alone, Conviasa operated six roundtrip flights between Caracas and Tehran, four of which included an air bridge via Moscow.

### GOLD FOR OIL EXCHANGES

- **2.35 million barrels** of gasoline sent by Iran to Venezuela in 2020.
- **9 tons of gold** sent by Venezuela to Iran in 2020 – a USD \$500M value.
- **17 Mahan Air flights** in 2019 carrying spare parts and Iranian technical staff for refinery training.
- **5 tankers** transported gasoline from Iran to Venezuela in 2019.



## Defense Cooperation<sup>1, 10, 11, 16, 22</sup>

Iran is among the top arms suppliers to Venezuela. The increasing deployment of Iranian military equipment and personnel, as well as the capacity-building of the Venezuelan armed forces, has posed a major concern for U.S. interests and the region.

- **Weapon transfers:** Missiles, defense systems, radars, and naval vessels.
- **Drones:** Venezuela is the only country in the region with an Iranian drone program.
- **Military training:** Islamic Revolutionary Guard units have trained Venezuelan armed forces.



Venezuela received from Iran at least four Peykaap-III class boats in 2023, each of which can carry up to two anti-ship Kowsar missiles



# Iranian Drone Program<sup>4, 6, 7, 16, 17, 18</sup>

Venezuela is the only country in the Western Hemisphere to host an Iranian drone program, operating at least three models in both surveillance and combat roles. It is also the only country in the hemisphere equipped with Iranian combat drones, representing an important adversarial military threat in the region.

## The Iran-Venezuela drone program

Venezuelan drones are modeled after Iranian designs, with few modifications such as model names and features, including different landing gear in some cases.

### Surveillance drones:

- ANSU-100 (VE) | Mohajer-2 (IR)
- ANSU-200 (VE) | Shahed-171/161 (IR)

### Combat Drones:

- Zamora V-1 (VE) | Shahed-131/136 (IR)
- Unveiled in May 2024, completed in 2025.
- First Kamikaze drone in Venezuela, with single-use precision strike capability (no publicly demonstrated operational use to date).

### Development & Assembly:

- Possible manufacturing of Venezuelan drones within the country using Iranian technology.
- Alternatively, the regime may be assembling drones with imported Iranian parts, replicating existing models.
- Evidence suggests both approaches may be used in parallel.



ANSU-100 (VE) | MOHAJER-2 (IR)



ZAMORA V-1 (VE) | SHAHED-131/136 (IR)



ANSU-200 (VE) | SHAHED-171/161 (IR)

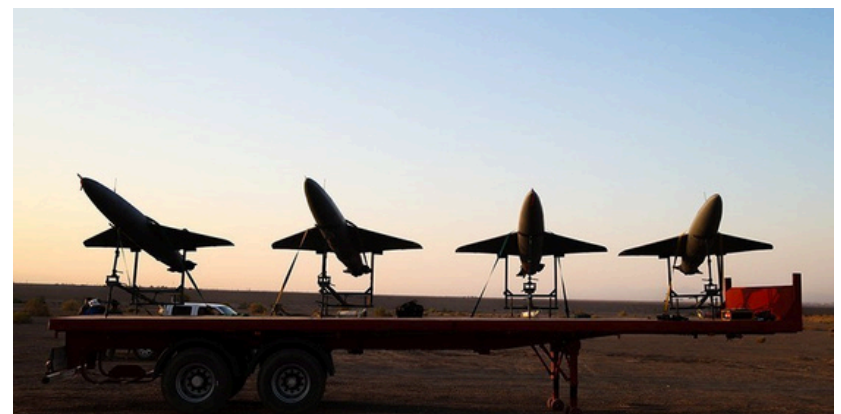


## Cooperation Timeline

**2009:** CAVIM BEGINS PRODUCTION WITH SECRET IRANIAN EQUIPMENT.

\*CAVIM (Venezuela's Military Industries Company)

**2007:** FIRST IRAN-VENEZUELA AGREEMENT FOR UAV DRONE PRODUCTION.



**2010:** U.S. SATELLITE IMAGERY CONFIRMS A FACTORY IN MARACAY.

**2012:** CHÁVEZ REVEALS THE ARPÍA DRONE.



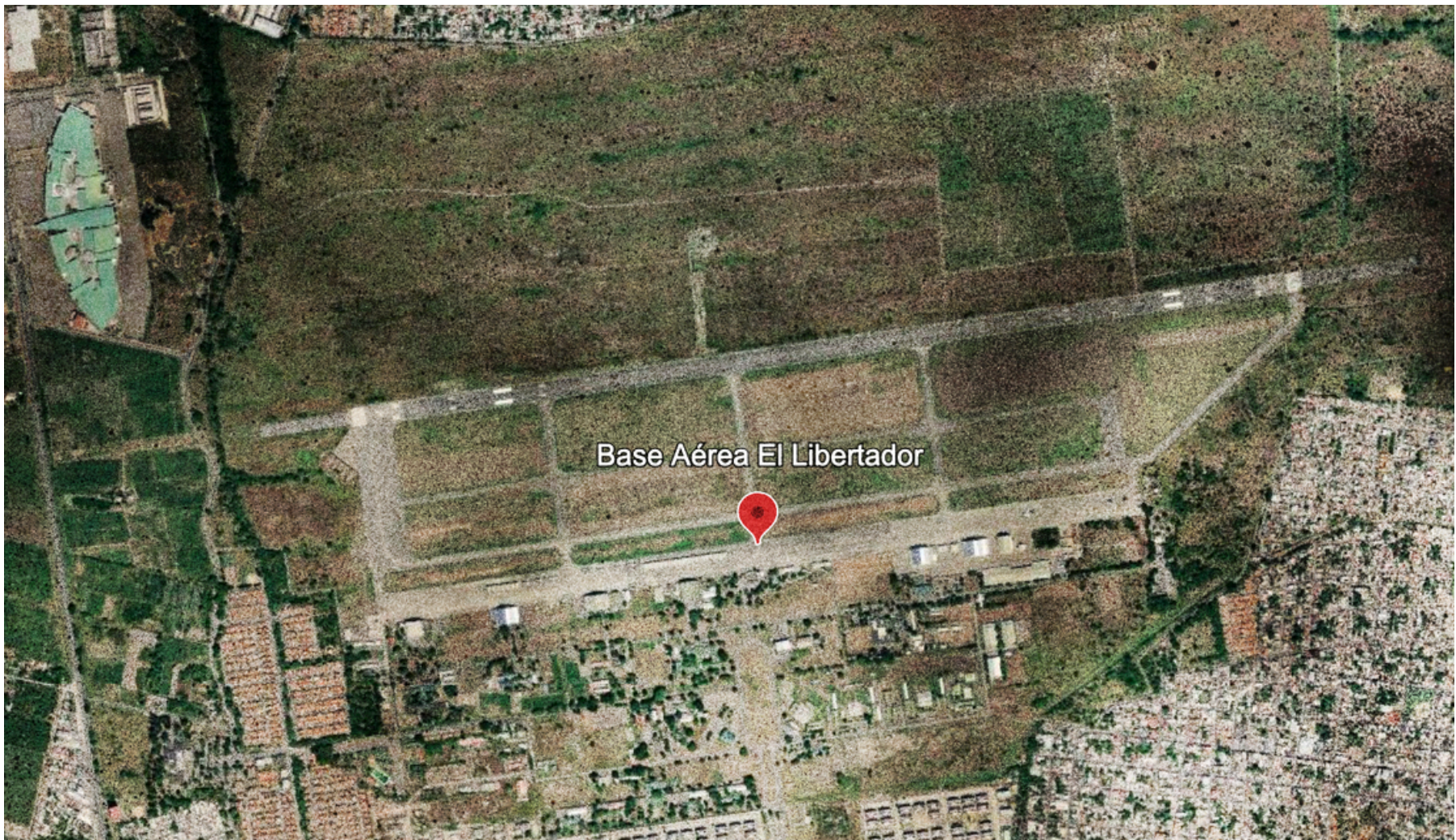
**2021:** DOCUMENTS REVEAL THE VENEZUELAN REGIME HAS AT LEAST 10 RECONNAISSANCE DRONES.

**2024:** ZAMORA V-1 EXHIBITED.





## Presence of the Islamic Guard<sup>16, 19, 20</sup> at El Libertador Air Base (BAEL)



The El Libertador Air Base has served as the main hub for Iranian military presence in Venezuela. The site hosts the drone program, serves as the base of flight operations, and has also served as a hub for Islamic Revolutionary Guard officers who have conducted capacity-building for the Venezuelan armed forces.

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard, through the Quds Force, has trained Venezuelan forces in drone operations and flight coordination. Additionally, Venezuelan officers have been sent to Iran for training.
- Mahan Air and Fars Air Qeshm flights have been coordinated for arms transfers.
- An estimated 12–17 flights landed at BAEL in 2021, delivering over 2,015 air defense units.



## Support for Terrorist Groups <sup>5, 9, 21, 27, 28, 29</sup>

- **Hezbollah networks:** Hezbollah operates complex logistics and financing networks in at least three Venezuelan states, facilitating money laundering and terrorist financing.
- **Gold Financing:** Venezuelan gold is smuggled to Iran aboard Mahan Air and Conviasa flights, with proceeds partly funding the IRGC and Hezbollah.
- **Passport Issuance:** Former Vice President Tareck El Aissami oversaw the issuance of over 10,000 passports to Syrian and Iranian citizens, including individuals linked to Hezbollah.

### State-enabled Operations

- **State cooperation:** U.S. and regional intelligence point to direct cooperation between Venezuelan officials and Hezbollah operatives, including in money laundering operations.
- **Iranian funding of Hezbollah:** According to the U.S. State Department's 2020 terrorism report, Iran provides Hezbollah with approximately 70% of its annual budget.
- **Sanctions evasion scheme:** Per a U.S. government report obtained by ABC, a money laundering structure designed by the Venezuelan regime used binational funds, public enterprises, and false industrial projects to help Tehran evade sanctions — moving approximately \$7.8 billion to the Iranian state via Venezuela.





# Conviasa's Tehran Connection<sup>26</sup>

## CONVIASA AIRCRAFT MAINTENANCE IN TEHRAN

- May 2025: A Conviasa aircraft (YV3554) remained for 12 days at Imam Khomeini Airport (IKA) in Tehran for alleged maintenance.
- Ramón Velásquez Araguayán, then Venezuelan Transport Minister, tweeted, along with Conviasa's official X account, that the maintenance took place in Venezuela. However, images show Arabic inscriptions and a setting consistent with IranAir hangars.
- IranAir is sanctioned by the United States' Office of Foreign Assets Control.



## FROM IRAN TO U.S. AIR BASES

- Conviasa Airbus A340 (YV3554) has been used to transport migrants on deportation flights from the United States.
- From April 2025 through the end of the year, it landed at least six times at Soto Cano U.S. Air Base in Honduras to pick up deported migrants.
- The aircraft was also part of the four-plane fleet that transported Maduro to Russia for the May 2025 celebrations.



## Conclusions

Iran's presence in Venezuela has posed a serious threat to the United States for decades, driven by deepening military cooperation, illicit activities, and an ideological alignment rooted in anti-Western and anti-American sentiment. This shared framework has strengthened ties between Iran, Venezuela, and other adversarial states. U.S. capacity to counter this dynamic had been limited, in part due to persistent sanctions evasion schemes.

This strategic alliance has enabled a large-scale global sanctions evasion architecture. Venezuela has served as a key node in the Iran–China–Russia axis in the Western Hemisphere. Through opaque mechanisms, the Maduro regime received strategic and economic support while acting as a money-laundering hub.

Few areas exist where both regimes have not cooperated. From issuing passports to terrorist and criminal networks, shipping oil and gold, training armed forces, operating drone programs, and establishing bilateral financial channels, the evidence is clear: Iran and Venezuela have built a deeply integrated partnership.

The period following the U.S. military operation in Venezuela in January 2026, as well as the military operation in Iran, marks a noticeable departure from what had been the Iran–Russia–China–Venezuela axis. Traditional areas of cooperation, such as defense and energy, are expected to have slowed or halted. However, the Venezuelan regime, now led by Delcy Rodríguez, remains deeply aligned with anti-Western ideology consistent with that of the Islamic Republic and its partners. Cells of terrorist and criminal groups remain, and the sponsors of those groups continue to hold positions of power. The threat is not eliminated, but rather less visible and subdued.



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