

"GRAL. QASEM SOLEIMANI"
EL GENERAL DEL PUEBLO IRANÍ



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Translation: Gen. Qasem Soleimani, the general of the Iranian people.

Venezuela, Iran and Oil



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About the Council for a Secure America

The cornerstones of American national security are: a strong military, a vibrant economy, enduring alliances, and American ingenuity. The Council for Secure America was founded on the premise that American energy independence, in all of its forms, is the underpinning for U.S. security.

For decades, American foreign policy was forced to make concessions to foreign nations who fueled its economy. In 2019, thanks to the innovation of American energy producers, the United States achieved energy independence. This accomplishment made America the leading energy producer in the world, fortifying its national security and buttressing geo-political stability in the Middle East.

Amongst America's many allies, the US-Israel partnership is a strategic, long-lasting and ongoing bilateral alliance. Energy independence has only strengthened it.

CSA educates key audiences on the importance of domestic energy production and technologies to American and Israeli mutual national security interests.

Moreover, American energy statecraft has reshuffled the geopolitical landscape and sowed the seeds of peace in the Middle East, enabling old adversaries to become allies. In 2020, the United States brokered the Abraham Accords—promoting unprecedented normalization and multilateral ties between its closest ally, Israel, and Arab States including the United Arab Emirates, the Kingdom of Bahrain, Sudan, and the Kingdom of Morocco.

CSA champions the ideals of the Abraham Accords and their critical impact on geopolitical security and global trade. CSA is advancing these partnerships and is committed to bringing multi-faceted awareness to complex and evolving challenges.



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Venezuela, Iran and Oil: Key Facts

- Oil exports are the top source of revenue for the Government of Venezuela.
- Hezbollah is embedded in Venezuela, working alongside the political leadership in criminal activities.
- NYT: Iran's presence in Venezuela "included billions of dollars of Iranian investment in Venezuela's oil and energy sector, housing developments and various industrial projects, many with little to no financial return."
- 2022: **Venezuela and Iran signed a 20 year agreement** covering oil, economic cooperation, and defense cooperation. Iran gained new markets for exporting its oil and weapons while Venezuela gained energy and energy expertise, access to Iranian military technology, and support for industrial development.

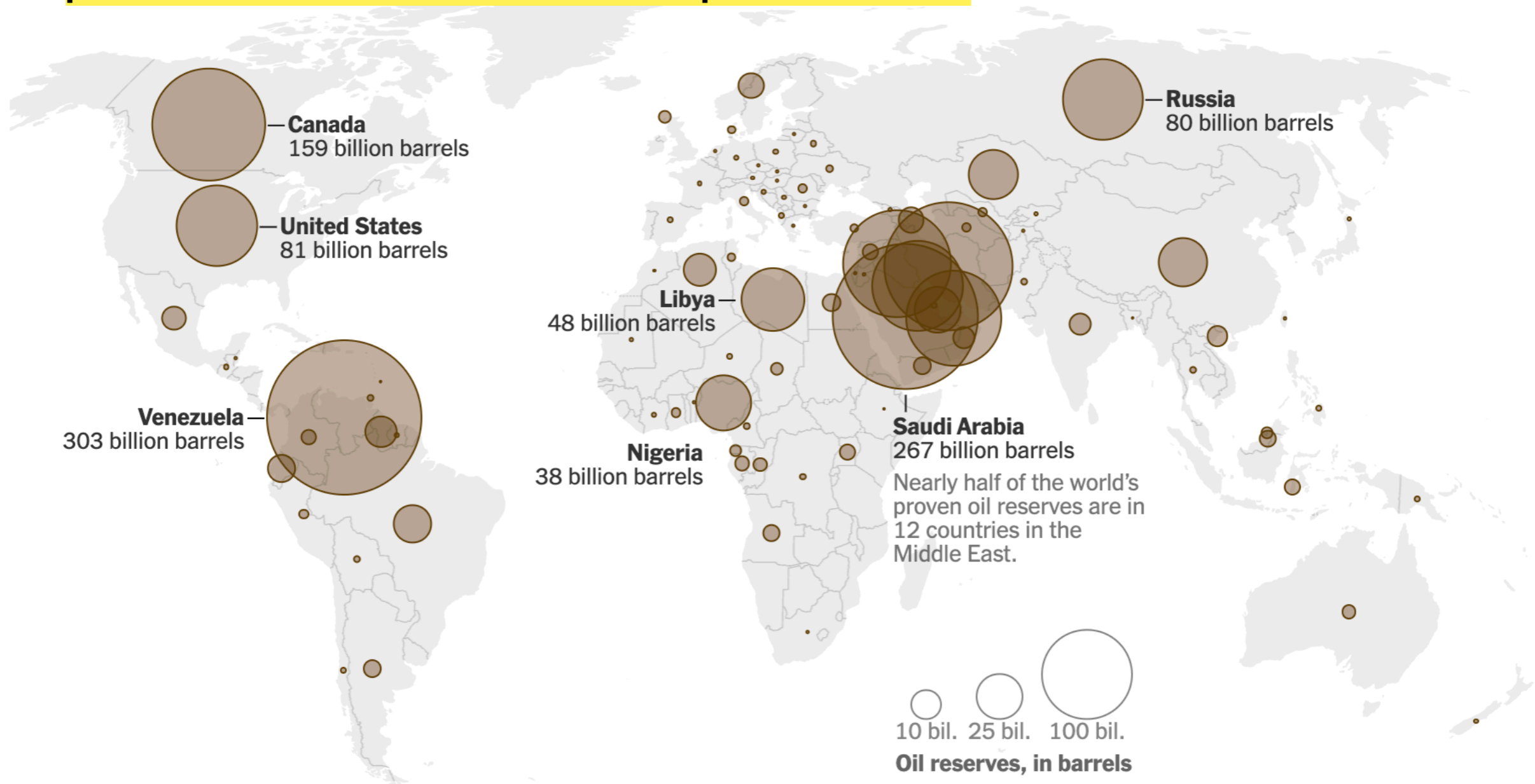
Politico: "In Venezuela, President Hugo Chavez was personally working with then-Iranian president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hezbollah on drug trafficking and other activities aimed at undermining U.S. influence in the region."



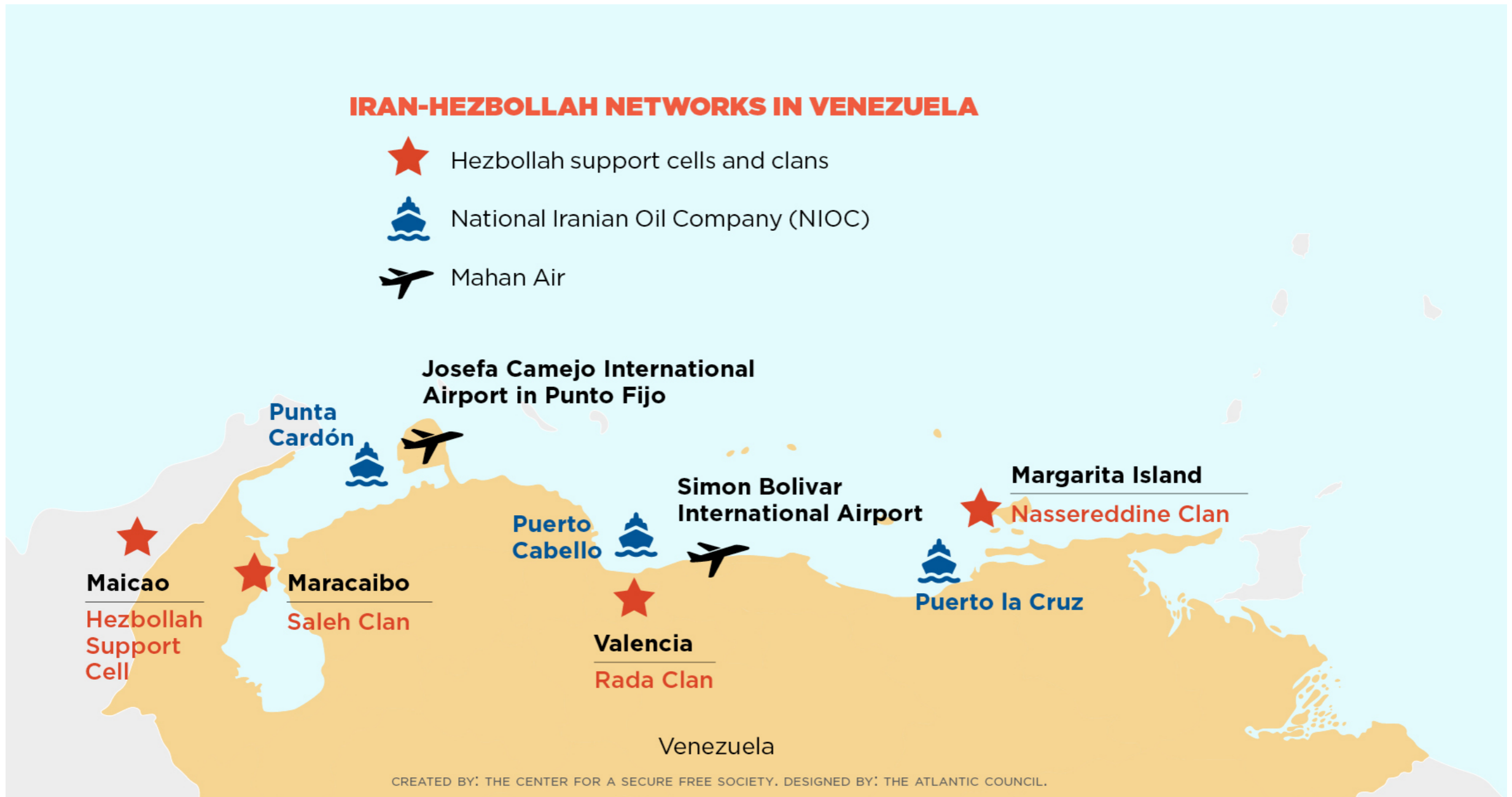
A 2021 image of Iran's President Ahmadinejad (L) with Venezuela's President Chavez (R) in Venezuela.

Venezuela, Iran and Oil: Key Facts

- **Venezuela has the world's largest known reserve of oil with 303 billion barrels, representing about 17% of the world's known reserves, yet Venezuela produces only about 1% of global oil production. Over 80% of Venezuelan oil exports are to China**



Venezuela, Iran and Oil: Key Facts (Image from 2020)



Iran and Hezbollah in Venezuela

- For over 150 years, Lebanese migrants fled to Venezuela. Hezbollah exploited this and established cells in Venezuela going back to the 1990's. Diplomatic relations between Iran and Venezuela go back to 1950 although Iran only opened an embassy in Venezuela in 1972.
- Hezbollah's network operated through "compartmentalized, familial clan structures that embed into the Maduro regime-controlled illicit economy and the regime's political apparatus and bureaucracy." Hezbollah became "a main finance and money launderer for narco-terrorism groups."
- Following the 1998 election of Hugo Chavez as President of Venezuela and then the 9/11 attacks in 2001, Hezbollah and Iran developed alliances with leaders along the "cocaine corridor" from northern part of South America up to Mexico. The goal was to turn these countries against the US. **Hezbollah's crime-terror network in Venezuela facilitated Iran's cooperation with the Chavez and Maduro regimes.**
- The strategy worked in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Venezuela as relations with the US government were diminished and DEA agents were evicted. Iran also was able to deepen its military and financial presence in Venezuela via a military industrial footprint based on military-to-military agreements.
- With the US government's success in fighting drug trafficking in Colombia, Venezuela became the primary pipeline for US-bound cocaine. **Hezbollah and Iran were involved in the drug trafficking and other illicit activities, including training camps in Venezuela they built for Shiite militias.**



Iran and Hezbollah in Venezuela

The US DEA ran an 8-year investigation from 2007 to 2015 into Hezbollah's illicit networks, including cocaine shipments via Venezuela into the US called Project Cassandra. The investigation connected Hezbollah to Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro but was shut down as the Obama administration signed the JCPOA.

- From 2007 to 2011, Venezuela's state airline and Iran's state airline moved military technology and personnel from Iran to Venezuela. The flights carried radioactive materials and parts for missile systems. Only Iranian agents, including members of Hezbollah and the IRGC, were allowed as passengers.
- **Politico: "A commercial jetliner from Venezuela's state-run Conviasa airline flew from Caracas to Tehran via Damascus, Syria, every week with a cargo-hold full of drugs and cash.** They nicknamed it "Aeroterror," they said, because the return flight often carried weapons and was packed with Hezbollah and Iranian operatives whom the Venezuelan government would provide with fake identities and travel documents on their arrival."

In 2018, **the US Department of Justice designated Hezbollah as one of the top five transnational criminal organizations**, alongside major Mexican cartels and the MS-13 gang. This made Hezbollah equal to the major cartels in organized crime and terror.



Iran and Hezbollah in Venezuela

- **Then President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, visited Venezuela several times in order to further develop ties between Iran and Venezuela.** He helped establish a flight from Caracas to Tehran that stopped at a Syrian military base.
- Hezbollah's former Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah also visited Venezuela. In a February 2019 visit, **Nasrallah offered President Maduro support from Hezbollah's members living in South America and acknowledged the funds that Maduro and Chavez had given to Hezbollah.**
- **By 2020, Hezbollah controlled large territories in Venezuela, including leading a drug trafficking organizing in Venezuela's western region and profiting from illegal gold mining in the eastern region.**
- The Venezuelan government offered asylum to the leaders and elite of Iran in the event of a coup. Many Senior Iranian officials have already purchased homes in Venezuela, possibly in case such a coup occurs.



Then Presidents of Iran and Venezuela, Ebrahim Raisi and Nicolas Maduro, together in Venezuela in 2023.

Venezuelan Oil Industry: a Pipeline to Iran

- **Venezuela lacks the infrastructure to process its crude oil. The state-run oil company, PDVSA, is unable to increase oil production due to old infrastructure, intermittent loss of power, and minimal drilling.**
- Venezuela's nationalization of its oil industry, in 1976 and then again in 2007, left major oil companies with billions of dollars of seized operations.
- The main American oil company still operating in Venezuela is Chevron which has operated there for over 100 years with special permission from both the US and Venezuelan governments. Chevron maintained five onshore and offshore production sites in Venezuela, producing around 25% of the country's oil, half of which is exported to the US.

The US placed sanctions on Venezuelan oil. Iran exports refined oil products to Venezuela and supports Venezuela's energy industry including by building and fixing refineries and energy infrastructure in Venezuela in exchange for Venezuelan gold. Iran also provides agricultural products to Venezuela. The gold-for-fuel arrangement between Iran and Venezuela was necessitated by the US sanctions imposed on Iran and the Iranian regime's need to bypass traditional banking.



Venezuelan Oil Industry: a Pipeline to Iran

- **Venezuela relies on naphtha imported from Russia to dilute and export its oil, supporting **Russia's energy industry and undermining sanctions.****
- January 2019: The US Department of Treasury sanctioned the Venezuelan state-owned oil company PDVSA.
- From 2021-2023, Iran delivered 25 million barrels of oil and gasoline to Venezuela, which owes Iran ~\$2 billion for the oil, fuel and other investments in the Venezuelan economy.
- NYT: Iran's Ministry of Oil completed hundreds of millions of dollars worth of contracts to repair Venezuela's largest refineries. Iran also sent equipment and spare parts for Venezuela's refineries that had been near collapse.
- December 31, 2025: The US Department of Treasury sanctioned companies and oil tankers operating in Venezuela's oil sector serving as Venezuela's shadow fleet.



Military Relations Iran-Venezuela

- As far back as 2007, Venezuela purchased Iranian kits to make Mohajer-2 drones in Venezuela by the state-owned company CAVIM which was sanctioned by the US in 2013. State-owned companies in Venezuela such as CAVIM and EANSA received technology and guidance from Iran in order to assemble Iranian drones. **In 2012, President Chavez himself confirmed Venezuela was building drones with Iran.**
- Footage from November 2020 showed President Maduro standing next to a model of Iran's Mohajer-6 drone during a speech in an aircraft hangar. By 2022, the drone was being sold to Venezuela.
- **In July 2025, President Maduro showed off Iranian combat drones in Venezuela. Israel stated publicly that Iran provided Venezuela with precision-guided missiles for use in the drones.**
- Iran built a drone development base at the El Libertador Venezuelan air base in Aragua and trained Venezuelans in the use of drones designed for both reconnaissance and attacks.
- December 30, 2025: The US sanctioned a Venezuelan company for acquiring Iranian drones.



A Mohajer-2 Iranian drone at a Venezuelan air base.

Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez and Nicolas Maduro

- **2005: Venezuelan President Chavez referred to Iran and Venezuelan as “two brothers” that “are and will be together forever.” He later referred to Iran as Venezuela’s “sister.” During the presidencies of Chavez and Ahmadinejad, Venezuela and Iran signed over 100 joint cooperation projects and agreements. Many failed.**
- 2020: the US Department of Justice indicted Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro for his decades-long involvement in drug trafficking and narcoterrorism. Maduro denied the charges.
- Venezuela held presidential elections in 2024 and due to fraud and irregularities, Maduro won another term as President. It is widely believed that he was not the legitimate winner. By January 2025 the US government recognized Maduro’s opponent, now living in exile, as the legitimate President of Venezuela.
- **July 2025: the US government added a Venezuelan cartel to a list of global terrorist groups with President Maduro as its leader.** The next month, the US government began deploying military personnel to the Caribbean Sea and announced a \$50 million reward for information leading to the arrest of President Maduro.



Spotlight: Tarek El Aissami

- Aissami was born in Venezuela, the son of a Lebanese mother and Syrian father, who supported the 1992 coup attempt by Hugo Chavez.
- As a lifetime supporter of Chavez, he rose the ranks - starting as a deputy director of Venezuela's passport agency, then as a member of Parliament in 2005, Vice Minister of Public Security in 2007, and Minister of Interior and Justice in 2008.
- **A meeting in 2009 in Syria between El Aissami and the Venezuelan counterintelligence Chief Hugo Carvahal Barrios with Hezbollah led to a cocaine-for-weapons arrangement that began several years later.**
- He served as Governor of Aragua from 2012-2017, where Iranian military company Qods Aviation operated.



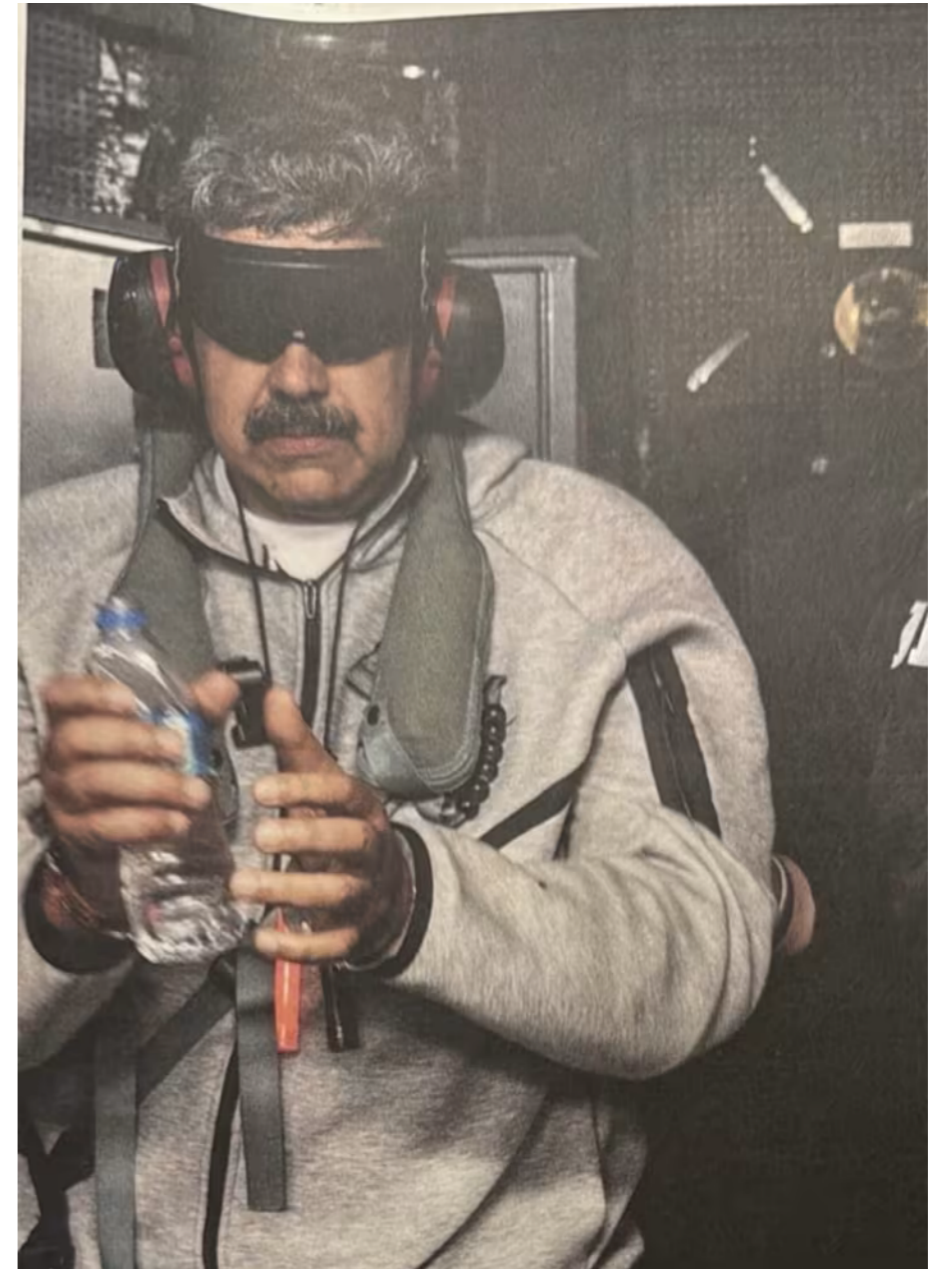
Spotlight: Tarek El Aissami

- **President Nicolas Maduro appointed El Aissami as his Vice President in 2017. The US Treasury Department sanctioned El Aissami as a Narcotics Kingpin, accusing him of involvement in drug trafficking. He was also accused of granting Venezuelan passports to Hezbollah members.**
- He was then appointed Minister of Industries and National Production in 2018 and in 2019, ICE added El Aissami to the list of the 10 most wanted fugitives. In 2020, the US Department of Justice announced charges against El Aissami for narco-terrorism.
- **He concluded his public service as Minister of Petroleum from 2020-2023. In 2020, El Aissami was referred to as “Hezbollah’s main point of contact, bagman, in Venezuela.” That year, President Maduro relied upon Iran to fix oil refineries and provide fuel for the country. As Petroleum Minister at the time, Aissami developed a gold-for-gas deal with Iran. Planes from the Tehran-based airline, Mahan Air, alongside five tankers from the National Iranian Oil Company (both companies are under US sanctions) were used to export 1.5 million barrels of gasoline alongside Iranian personnel and material from China. In exchange, Venezuela sent nine tons of gold bars to Iran, worth nearly a half a billion dollars.**
- ICE investigated El Aissami for years for his involvement in money laundering in Lebanon and drug trafficking. In 2023, he resigned as Venezuelan police officials investigated him for corruption.



The Lead Up to President Maduro's Capture

- September 2025: US military struck a Venezuelan boat in international waters allegedly carrying cartel members, killing 11 people. The US military struck other such vessels killing 6 more people. In response, Venezuela sent two armed F-16 fighter jets over a US Navy ship in the Caribbean.
- October 2025: The US military deployed an aircraft carrier to the region. The US flew several Army Special Operations helicopters near the coast of Venezuela, then flew two B-52 bombers off the Venezuelan coast for several hours and later flew two B-1 bombers near Venezuelan air space.



President Maduro on board the USS Iwo Jima after his capture.

The Lead Up to President Maduro's Capture

- By November 2025, the US had carried out 20 strikes against ships, killing at least 80 people.
- December 2025: The US military seized an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela that was under US sanctions for smuggling Iranian oil. The US then issued two rounds of sanctions on Venezuela's oil industry and President Maduro's family members. A blockade of sanctioned oil tankers was announced as enforcement began. Oil shipped by Chevron to the US was exempted from the blockade.
- In response, President Maduro provided Venezuelan navy escorts for oil tankers departing Venezuela. The US Coast Guard failed to intercept the sanctioned tanker Bella 1 but did intercept the Centuries, a tanker carrying Venezuelan oil. The CIA attacked a port facility on Venezuela's coast via drone used for drug trafficking without any fatalities.



The Lead Up to President Maduro's Capture

- January 2026: Over the course of 5 months, the US military dispatched dozens of ships to the Caribbean Sea, reaching over 15,000 personnel in the region. This was the largest buildup of forces there since the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962. Over 115 people had been killed in 35 boat strikes.
- January 3, 2026: The US military captured President Maduro and transferred him to US custody.
- January 7, 2026: The US military finally succeeded in intercepting the Bella 1 tanker, despite a Russian vessel that had been sent to escort it.



The Bella 1 oil tanker pictured in 2025.

Report Prepared from a Variety of Media, Government, and Expert Sources and Are Hyperlinked Throughout

- Al Arabiya
- Al Jazeera
- Atlantic Council
- AP
- BBC
- Bloomberg News
- Caracas Chronicles
- CBC News (Canada)
- CNN
- Deutsche Welle (DW)
- Fox
- Iran International
- JINSA
- La Tercera
- NYT
- Politico
- Radio Farda
- Reuters
- Task and Purpose
- US Department of Justice
- US Department of State
- US Department of Treasury
- WSJ



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