

## Opinion

Baria Alamuddin



## In the drugs and arms trade, is Iran getting away with murder?

**P**ossibly one of the biggest scandals of the Obama administration was the blocking of active investigations into Hezbollah and Iran's complicity in the deadly global trade in drugs and armaments. Former US Treasury official Katherine Bauer testified that these investigations were "tamped down for fear of rocking the boat with Iran and jeopardising the nuclear deal." In recent days, the US Justice Department has reopened these investigations. This couldn't come a moment too soon.

We all remember former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad cozying up to Venezuela's Hugo Chavez as part of their anti-American axis. It later came to light that this alliance brought forth a vast drug-trafficking operation, which saw Venezuelan cocaine sales skyrocket from 50 to 250 tonnes a year — mostly bound for the US. In and around 2007, Venezuela's state airline was ferrying large quantities of cash and drugs to Tehran each week, returning laden with weapons and Hezbollah operatives.

Venezuela was just one segment of Iran and Hezbollah's strategy for cultivating crime networks in South America, operating via Lebanese and Syrian communities across the continent. US officials recognized that Hezbollah was becoming one of the largest global crime networks, yet this flew in the face of the criminally naive Obama administration orthodox that the Islamic Republic could be sweet-talked into becoming a constructive member of the international community. Barack Obama's CIA Director John Brennan

was an advocate of cultivating Hezbollah's "moderate elements," commending the movement's success in "assimilating" into the Lebanese political system, just as Hezbollah was rolling up its trousers to wade into the blood-soaked Syria conflict. In reality, the 2015 nuclear deal emboldened Tehran, eased the constraints of sanctions, and removed global pressures as European nations trampled each other in the unseemly stampede to tap into Iran's oil economy.

Figures like Lebanese arms dealer Ali Fayad, who the Obama administration missed an opportunity to extradite from the Czech Republic, are today deeply involved in diverting a flood of Russian heavy weapons to Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan and the wider region. Similar routes transported chemical weapons used by Bashar Assad against his people: Just one strand of a dense clandestine network connecting Iran, North Korea and entities like the Pakistani A.Q. Khan network for smuggling nuclear and ballistic materials.

Hezbollah's ambassador to Tehran, Abdallah Safieddine, reputedly oversaw one of the world's largest drug-smuggling operations, laundering around \$200 million per month out of the US from profits of narcotics imports. At one point an "entire Quds Force network" was active in the US, laundering money and trafficking drugs and weapons. Counter-narcotics officials amassed detailed information about this activity, which ran in parallel with plots to assassinate foreign diplomats and terrorist operations

elsewhere. However, Obama hindered investigations (known as Project Cassandra) by his own law enforcement agencies and blocked preventative action; even though US agents discovered that narcotics revenues were being channelled to Iraqi Shiite militants who were then engaged in killing American troops. Nevertheless, during 2016 some Hezbollah personnel were indeed arrested by US police on drugs trafficking charges.

A DEA official who led these investigations commented: "(Hezbollah) were a paramilitary organization with strategic importance in the Middle East, and we watched them become an international criminal conglomerate generating billions of dollars for the world's most dangerous activities, including chemical and nuclear weapons programs and armies that believe America is their sworn enemy."

Hezbollah previously dabbled in arms smuggling and criminal activity, but observers were dumbfounded by this wholesale shift into global organized crime from around 2006. Hezbollah strongholds became awash with foreign currency, with cash reserves of US dollars in Lebanon doubling to \$16 billion in just a few years. This was massively important in helping Hezbollah rearm and rebuild its infrastructure after the 2006 war with Israel. Hezbollah operations in south Beirut during April 2017 against local drug dealers appear designed to ensure a monopoly over the drugs trade. Hezbollah was criticized for behaving like a state within a state by embarking on such actions.

Iran's shared border with Pakistan and Afghanistan is one of the world's busiest drug smuggling corridors (an estimated 140 tonnes a year). The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is well placed to monopolize this cross-border trade. This has had terrible consequences inside Iran, with up to 10 percent of Iranian nationals estimated to be drug addicts — the highest proportion in the world.

With Hezbollah heavily implicated in Syria, Iranian financial transfers to the movement recently soared to an estimated \$800 million, yet this is exceeded by the approximate \$1 billion a year it is reported to receive from narcotics, arms trafficking and organized crime. Data indicates that the IRGC may double its formal budget (around \$8bn) through illicit economic activities. After encroaching on territory formerly

held by Daesh, Iran's new corridor of control through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon to the Mediterranean opens up lucrative and potentially destabilizing pathways into the heart of Europe.

Tehran's proxy militias of Al-Hashd al-Shaabi (the Popular Mobilization Forces) in Iraq act like gangsters in the expanding territories they control, with militants fighting among themselves to monopolize the oil smuggling trade around Basra; reportedly conducting systematic kidnappings of Sunnis and often murdering them after ransoms are paid; and engaging in the full spectrum of organized crime: Extortion, drugs, expropriating property, terrorizing local people, and the theft of historical artefacts. As primary benefactors of laundered funds from Hezbollah's American narcotics network, Al-Hashd factions are said to be investing these funds in activities to perpetuate Tehran's cultural control: Universities, schools, religious institutions and paramilitary training for young people — all calculated to indoctrinate Iraqi Shiites into Iran's theological model of Wilayat al-Faqih.

Iran has reportedly become deeply complicit in arms smuggling throughout Africa. Nigeria, Kenya, Sierra Leone, Senegal and other states are key proliferation hubs, with a broad range of African insurgent and terrorist groups benefiting from Iranian military munificence. Several West African states also became integral parts of Hezbollah's cash-laundering network for billions of dollars of drugs money flooding out of the US. Sudan had been a key ally in facilitating Iranian arms smuggling towards conflicts that claimed countless lives. However, GCC states notched up a remarkable success in drawing Sudan away from Tehran's orbit.

Intelligence officials describe a standard operating procedure of Hezbollah, Quds Force and Iranian diplomats establishing connections through the Lebanese diaspora across Africa and the Americas. Front companies and smuggling routes are then established and evangelical Shiite institutions are set up to cultivate local support and nurture proxy groups. These channels are then exploited for a variety of illicit purposes. Iran's support for the Houthis in Yemen, meanwhile, offers opportunities to expand new routes through Somalia, the Arabian Peninsula and the Indian Ocean.

The US Justice Department's reopening of investigations into Iranian crime networks may have to start from scratch, having lost institutional expertise and on-the-ground sources after Project Cassandra was closed down. We have yet to see whether these investigations are a stepping stone to decisive action against Iran and its proxies, or whether this is more empty rhetoric against both Tehran and the Obama administration.

After the investigation announcement, Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah came out with a vigorous denial of any involvement in drugs, claiming that such activities violated the movement's fundamental principles. I fervently wish this was true, just as I wish that Hezbollah had adhered to its founding principles of being a Lebanese nationalist bastion against Israel — yet a mountain of evidence tells us otherwise.

All this illustrates why Tehran constitutes a greater proliferation threat than Pyongyang. While tiny North Korea is an isolated and encircled failed state in Far East Asia, imperialist oil-rich Iran is expanding out of Central Asia, through the Middle East and towards the shores of Europe. Tehran is furthermore aggressively branching out through Africa, Latin America and South Asia, profiting from organized crime to bankroll its blueprint for paramilitary expansionism. With each successive year that the world turns a blind eye to these activities, Iran becomes stronger, more belligerent, wealthier and wider-reaching.

Even though the Trump administration is willing to revisit evidence of Hezbollah's role in narcotics and arms trafficking, much of the West remains stubbornly in denial that Iran, Hezbollah and Al-Hashd al-Shaabi are pursuing a coherent long-term strategy for aggressively expanding their influence. What will it take for Europe to wake up to the Iranian proliferation threat? Automatic weapons in the hands of Eastern European anti-democracy militias? The streets of Hamburg, Paris and Barcelona awash with heroin? Or a 9/11-style major terrorist atrocity?

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*(The article was published previously by Arab News)*

*(The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the policy or position of this newspaper.)*

## Bapco, Technip to sign Bahrain refinery deal

Manama

**B**apco and Technip consortium will sign Bahrain refinery expansion contract by the end of this month, said Oil Minister Shaikh Mohammed bin Khalifa Al Khalifa yesterday.

Speaking on the sidelines of

the 2nd Middle East Refining Technology Conference, the Minister said: "Expansion works, expected to enhance refining capacity to 400 thousand barrels, will begin in about 48 to 50 months."

When asked about the progress of the Bahrain-

Saudi Oil pipeline works, the minister said: "More than 50% of the replacement and upgrading works of the 70-year old Bahraini-Saudi oil pipeline had been completed."

The pipeline, ready to run by the end of 2018, will be buried underground far away from

residential areas and will be monitored by security agencies.

The minister also revealed that total oil investments in projects under construction during 2018 tops \$6 billion. On oil prices, the minister said he expects oil prices to exceed \$70 per barrel during 2018.

## Dair sewerage works completed

Manama

**D**air Sewerage Network Project, which serves 47 houses and real estates in Block 231 has been completed, said Sanitary Engineering Assistant Undersecretary of the Ministry of Works, Municipalities Affairs and Urban Planning Asma Murad.

The BD221,985 project was awarded to Kingdom's Asphalt.

Dair sewerage network will be connected to the Muharrag Sewage Treatment Plant. The plant was inaugurated in 2014 and constructed in partnership with the private sector.