

Congress of the United States

Washington, DC 20515

December 10, 2021

The Honorable Antony Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Blinken,

We write to express our profound concerns regarding the resumption of negotiations toward a return to the failed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, or “Iran Deal”), and particularly want to highlight the disastrous consequences that an emboldened, validated, and wealthier regime in Iran will have for our hemisphere.

Iran, a U.S.-designated state sponsor of terrorism, has strong ties to pariah states in the Western Hemisphere, including the Maduro regime in Venezuela and the regime in Cuba, another U.S.-designated terrorist state. Iran has provided petroleum, financial, and military support to the Maduro dictatorship, and the Maduro regime has provided gold from reserves belonging to the Venezuelan people. In speaking to the Atlantic Council in August 2020, Admiral Craig Faller, the commander of the Armed Forces Southern Command, said that “The center of gravity of the [Maduro] regime’s illicit activities are Cuba, Russia, increasingly Iran and, to a lesser degree, China.” To the *Wall Street Journal* in December 2020, he said that there was a growing Iranian influence” in Venezuela, and noted the “alarming and concerning” presence of military personnel from the Quds Force of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. He concluded, “We’re real concerned about what Iran is up to, not just globally, but here in this hemisphere.”

In addition to propping up pariah states, Iran and its proxy, the U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization Hezbollah, have been active in committing acts of terrorism in the Western Hemisphere. Iran was implicated in the 1994 bombing of the Argentine Israelite Mutual Association (AMIA) Jewish Community Center, Argentina’s most deadly terrorist attack which killed 80 and injured 300 people. In 2006, Argentinian prosecutors formally condemned Iran for ordering the attack, and indicted seven Iranian nationals, including many high-level Iranian regime operatives. A joint investigation in 2005 by the FBI and Argentina into the AMIA attack found that the suicide bomber was a Hezbollah operative. According to the Atlantic Council’s October 2020 report, “The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime,” Hezbollah is also credited with the 1992 bombing of the Israeli embassy in Argentina, and is suspected of downing the Alas Chiricanas Flight 00901 in Panama on the same day as the AMIA bombing. In fact, Hezbollah has maintained footholds in various countries within Latin America since the 1980s. The U.S. Treasury Department in 2019 sanctioned Colombian-born Salman Raouf Salman for his role as a top Hezbollah operative who smuggled explosives from Lebanon in coordination with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

(FARC), another foreign terrorist organization, and who has also been linked to assisting with the 1994 AMIA bombing.

According to reports, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), another terrorist organization, and Hezbollah have collaborated for decades. For example, in an “After Action” report provided by the Center for a Secure Free Society (SFS) based on a policy forum event in March 2021 entitled, "Hezbollah and Its Criminal Operations: Threat Convergence and How to Combat It," organized by the Colombian organization Instituto de Ciencia Política Hernán Echavarría Olózaga with support from the Israeli Embassy in Bogota and the Colombian Foreign Ministry, SFS provided a comprehensive assessment of Iran and Hezbollah’s influence in the region. The report found that the Tri-Border Area of Paraguay, Brazil, and Argentina, as well as Venezuela, are the major logistical and financial hubs for Hezbollah in Latin America, and that the strategic relationship with Iran factors into Hezbollah’s ongoing and persistent presence in the Western Hemisphere. The report further indicates that a prominent Lebanese-Venezuelan family, the Nassereddine family, has facilitated Hezbollah’s relationship with the Maduro regime. A recent DOJ indictment of Ghazi Nassereddine, who is sanctioned by OFAC and listed as a Person of Interest by the FBI, bolsters that claim. Nassereddine has been implicated in a cocaine-for-weapons scheme between the terrorist organizations of the FARC, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Maduro dictatorship. And just last year, the U.S. Department of Justice indicted Syrian-Venezuelan dual national Adel El Zebayar for allegedly working with Hezbollah in 2014 in an illicit narcotics-weapons trade scheme to bring arms from Lebanon to Venezuela for the FARC.

The inter-agency Project Cassandra, initiated in 2008 and led by the Drug Enforcement Agency with support from U.S. Special Operations Command, Colombia, and other countries, exposed the extent of Hezbollah’s criminal and terrorist activities, and its links to the FARC and the regime in Venezuela. For these reasons, the U.S. Department of Justice named Hezbollah as among the top five transnational crime organizations in 2018. In fact, as the Atlantic Council article highlighted, “Of the more than two thousand individuals and entities around the world designated by the US government as foreign narcotics kingpins, almost two hundred are affiliated with or connected to Hezbollah.”

In connection to Iran’s connection to Cuba, another U.S.-designated state sponsor of terrorism, the Italian publication *Corriere della Sera* first reported in “Hezbollah Heads to Cuba” (August 31, 2011) that Hezbollah had established its western hemisphere hub in Cuba, where it could forge fake travel documents and work freely. Subsequent reports have described ever-growing ties between the terrorist organization and Cuba, including “official” delegation visits and warm expressions of support. Notably, Aleida Guevara, a once roving international spokesperson for the Castro dictatorship, was sent to Lebanon to pose next to Hezbollah missiles aimed at Israel. These points highlight the dangerous narcoterrorist, transnational criminal organization that Hezbollah has become, and the immense danger it poses to U.S. national security interests.

Perhaps most alarmingly, Iran’s dangerous activities in the Western Hemisphere have not been kept outside U.S. borders. In 2012, Iranian national and Texas resident Manssor Arbabsiar pleaded guilty in U.S. federal court to conspiring with the Iranian regime to assassinate the Saudi Ambassador to the United States in Washington, D.C. In January 2020, an FBI investigation found that two Iranian nationals, Ahmadreza Mohammadi-Doostdar and Majid Ghorbani, were spying on Iranian-Americans in the United States and relaying that information to the Iranian

regime. Both men pleaded guilty for their crimes in U.S. courts. And earlier this year, U.S. authorities uncovered an attempt to kidnap and possibly kill journalist Masih Alinejad from her home in New York City, resulting in indictments of four Iranian nationals working with Iranian intelligence. According to the indictment, Iranian agents had considered abducting Ms. Alinejad to Venezuela where they would have a supportive base to hold her. That Iran's audacious actions during the Obama and Biden Administrations have extended to U.S. soil are yet another alarming indication of its malevolence and its increasingly unchecked ambition to extend its reach well beyond the Middle East.

An emboldened, strengthened, and unchecked Iran further strengthened by weakened sanctions and unearned diplomacy will grow even more dangerous. For these reasons, and within all applicable rules and regulations, we write to ensure that you consider the implications for our hemisphere should you continue to seek greater engagement and concessions to the terrorist state of Iran.

Thank you for your attention to this matter of utmost importance.

Sincerely,



Mario Diaz-Balart
Member of Congress



Carlos A. Gimenez
Member of Congress



María Elvira Salazar
Member of Congress