

# Decoding Intent in Irregular Warfare: Lessons from Venezuela, Iran, and the Strategic Use of Ambiguity

## Description

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Irregular warfare rarely begins with declarations or formal campaigns, but that does not mean it lacks strategy. This article offers a practical framework for identifying intent in such conflicts and uses Venezuela under Nicolás Maduro and its growing alliance with Iran as a case study—highlighting how forced migration, criminal proxies, and foreign alliances serve as tools of statecraft behind a veil of ambiguity.

## The Analytical Triad

The nature of warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has changed. Open confrontations have been replaced by unconventional pressure and blurred authority. State actors increasingly rely on proxies, criminal networks, disinformation, and technological asymmetries to weaken adversaries—undermining political stability, social cohesion, and institutional trust—without triggering conventional responses. The result is a battle space defined less by geography and more by narrative, influence, and legitimacy.

In this context, intent has become a central—but often overlooked—signal in irregular warfare. Unlike conventional conflict, where capabilities and declarations often precede action, irregular warfare demands that analysts and policymakers infer intent from patterns, alignments, and behaviors that rarely announce themselves clearly. But when viewed over time, these acts form a coherent strategy.

This article argues that intent in irregular warfare can be identified through an analytical triad: repeated behaviors, alignment with strategic outcomes, and the systematic use of irregular means. It draws from operational practice and doctrinal sources, including the Pentagon's Irregular Warfare [Annex](#) and the work of [David Kilcullen](#). This framework is then applied to Venezuela and its alignment with Iran, whose shared use of proxies, criminal networks, and information warfare illustrates how states

weaponize ambiguity to advance their agendas without triggering traditional conflict thresholds.

These elements are not incidental—they are deliberate. They explicitly state what is often left implied: ambiguity is not the absence of intent; it is the tactic used to mask it. Recognizing this pattern allows threats that once seemed diffuse or deniable to be understood—and challenged—for what they are.

### **Defining Intent in Irregular Warfare**

Intent, in this context, does not depend on a formal declaration. It can be assessed through three interlocking elements: repeated behaviors, strategic alignment, and the systematic use of irregular means. These components form a triad—a grounded framework that reflects how intent emerges in irregular warfare.

Surrounding this triad is a fourth element: the calculated use of ambiguity. While not itself a form of intent, ambiguity is the tactic that obscures intent. It allows irregular campaigns to unfold beneath the threshold of retaliation, using deniability and dispersion to mask coherence. In that sense, ambiguity is the operational veil cast over the triad—not a pillar of intent, but its camouflage.

This analytical structure enables a disciplined assessment of irregular campaigns in environments where clarity is deliberately denied. It is not revealed through a manifesto or a speech, but through the accumulation of action. A single proxy deployment, or a criminal alliance, or an act of cyber disruption may not carry meaning on its own. But when these acts repeat, when they reliably serve the same set of strategic interests, and when they rely on irregular mechanisms, intent becomes visible.

First, repeated behaviors signal persistence. An isolated event may be opportunistic or accidental; a series of them—especially when varied in form but consistent in effect—suggests design. This is a foundational element in military intelligence analysis, and its relevance in the gray zones of irregular warfare is even more acute.

Second, strategic alignment refers to the coherence between a regime's actions and its long-term political objectives. If a state consistently benefits—politically, economically, or geopolitically—from ambiguous and deniable acts, those acts should be considered part of a strategy, not aberrations.

Third, systematic use of irregular means marks the method of execution. Modern irregular warfare is characterized by its reliance on indirect, unconventional methods, such as criminal proxies, cyber tools, clandestine financial networks, or the exploitation of humanitarian crises. It allows the state to blur lines of attribution and legitimacy.

Taken together, these three indicators form a framework for assessing intent in an environment where the traditional tools of attribution fall short. Interpreting intent in irregular warfare, however, is not without danger. The same ambiguity that masks strategy also opens space for distortion. Analysts may highlight incidents that support a preferred narrative while ignoring others that complicate it.

Of course, identifying intent in ambiguous environments is risky. Analysts may read too much into isolated acts or build patterns where none exist. The answer is discipline: focus on repetition, check the alignment, and stay grounded in what can be observed. Do not chase shadows—but do not ignore what those shadows suggest.

### **The Case of Venezuela**

The Maduro [regime](#) in Venezuela provides a revealing test case. It is not strategically sophisticated in the traditional sense. It has mismanaged the economy, overseen the collapse of its petroleum industry, and gutted its own institutions. But irregular warfare does not demand high-capacity governance. It rewards adaptation, deniability, and the exploitation of systemic decay.

The regime has learned to turn collapse into leverage—outsourcing control, weaponizing migration, and forging opaque alliances that serve its survival. This is not grand strategy. This is improvised statecraft in the gray zone, and it works.

Three elements are salient: forced migration, proxy criminality, and foreign alignment.

Taken together, these three behaviors reveal a campaign that is irregular in method, coherent in objective, and deliberate in design. Intent is not found in any one act, but in the consistency with which the Maduro regime blends collapse with control. The ambiguity surrounding each element is part of the architecture—not a symptom of disorder, but a tool of statecraft. Its activities over the past decade cannot be understood as the chaotic flailing of a failing state. They reflect a coherent strategy of regime preservation, asymmetric advantage, and external disruption.

The most visible feature of this strategy is the forced migration of over [7.7 million](#) Venezuelans. What began as a humanitarian exodus has evolved into a tool of geopolitical disruption. The regime, by negligence or design, facilitated this movement without regard for regional consequences.

[Neighboring states](#) have been strained, borders destabilized, and political tensions inflamed. The Maduro government, meanwhile, remains insulated—shielded in part by the chaos it has helped unleash.

This mass displacement is not a singular act. It is part of a repeated behavior: a tolerance for, or orchestration of, structural collapse that serves a larger purpose. That purpose includes destabilizing adversaries, extracting remittances, and creating bargaining leverage with international actors.

In 2023, Venezuelan migrants sent over [\\$5 billion](#) in remittances back home—about 6%—of the country’s GDP—often routed through regime-linked financial intermediaries that siphon off revenue for the government. These informal channels—complemented by fixed exchange—rate mechanisms and service fees imposed by parallel currency markets—mean the Maduro regime benefits directly, turning the outward migration of Venezuelans into a recurrent source of foreign currency. It aligns consistently with the regime’s interest in weakening regional consensus and disrupting US-led initiatives.

The second key component is the strategic deployment—or at least strategic tolerance—of criminal networks. The Tren de Aragua (TdA), a violent transnational gang rooted in Venezuela’s prison system, now operates across South America and has established a presence inside the United States. Its growth does not seem to have been meaningfully opposed by the Maduro regime.

Evidence suggests a permissive environment—an absence of significant crackdown—even as prisons like [Tocorón](#) fell under gang control before being retaken with limited transparency. The group not only generates revenue but also serves as an informal arm of state influence—[sanctioned](#) by the U.S. Treasury in July 2024 for its transnational criminal activity.

It’s important to note, however, there is debate about the level of cooperation. A National Intelligence Council assessment found no high-level coordination between TdA and the Maduro government—though it acknowledged [tolerance](#) of the gang’s activities within Venezuela.

Its presence is no longer speculative. On June 27, US Attorney General Pam Bondi announced the arrest of over [2,700](#) Tren de Aragua members in the United States since January. Both she, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and President Donald Trump have publicly warned of the threat the gang poses to American communities—underscoring that what began as a Venezuelan prison gang has evolved into a transnational security challenge with direct implications for US homeland defense.

The regime’s tolerance of the group resembles historical patterns—states using irregular forces to harass enemies while denying responsibility. Venezuela takes part in international diplomacy as a sovereign actor while enabling criminal chaos. This contrast is deliberate. It’s the strategy.

The third dimension involves external partnerships, especially with Iran. Venezuela has hosted Iranian military personnel, deepened intelligence ties, and reportedly engaged in drone training and technology

transfers. These developments do not exist in a vacuum. They reflect repeated behaviors, serve clear strategic goals, and rely on irregular means—covert transfers, disinformation, and institutional camouflage.

Recent imagery and leaked purchase orders suggest Venezuela [produces](#) approximately 50 ANSU-100 drones per year, with sub-kits for the stealthier ANSU-200 still in development. These systems, based on Iranian designs, were showcased during a 2022 military parade by Maduro. Their existence signals a maturing capacity for indigenous drone production with external support—demonstrating both technological diffusion and intent.

Additionally, Iran has supplied Venezuela with fast boats capable of carrying anti-ship missiles. These have been paired with Iranian-origin loitering munitions in recent Venezuelan saturation-strike exercises, consistent with IRGC-affiliated visions of building “Houthis of the Caribbean”—small, missile-armed craft designed to deny US or allied naval access to the southern Atlantic.

This pattern—forced migration, criminal proxy use, foreign alignment—is not ideological improvisation. None of these elements alone prove intent. But taken together—repeated actions, clear benefits, and use of irregular means—they show a pattern. What is visible is not improvisation. It is practiced behavior.

### **A Pattern Missed: Iran’s Intent and the Price of Delay**

Iran’s strategic use of [proxy forces](#)—Hezbollah, Hamas, the Houthis—has been acknowledged for years. US and allied intelligence services understood the connections, tracked the weapons flows, and observed the coordination. What was lacking was not awareness, but response. The error was in treating each group as a localized or compartmentalized threat, rather than recognizing the shared logic behind them.

Iran was executing a regional irregular warfare campaign—slowly, methodically, and with plausible deniability. But recognition without response is not a challenge. By failing to confront the strategy behind the proxies, the West allowed ambiguity to become an advantage.

Identifying and acting on the pattern earlier—considering repeated behaviors, strategic alignment, and the use of irregular means—could have shifted policy from containment to disruption. We could have interdicted smuggling routes, pressured proxy infrastructure, and incentivized host governments to reject Iranian entrenchment.

Stronger deterrence, earlier information campaigns, and more coordinated multilateral efforts might have limited Iran's ability to escalate with impunity. Instead, the absence of strategic challenge contributed to crises like the [June 2025](#) strikes on Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and arguably set the conditions for the [October 7th](#) Hamas massacre in Israel.

Whether October 7th was a tactical surprise is less relevant than the fact that it should not have been a strategic one. The [indicators](#)—stockpiled weapons, renewed coordination, rising incitement—were all present. What remained unacknowledged was the intent: to shock, to provoke, and to reset the regional narrative in Iran's favor.

Clarifying intent in irregular warfare is not an academic exercise; it is a tool of prevention. It shifts policy from reaction to anticipation. US doctrine explicitly warns that adversaries "will continue to use irregular warfare as a component of their strategy to challenge the United States and its interests" (Irregular Warfare [Annex](#), p. 2), and that "actors may not overtly reveal their intent, instead relying on proxy forces, disinformation, and deniability" ([JP 3-24](#), p. I-6). The challenge lies in treating those warnings as operational guidance—not just theory.

### **Strategic Implications**

If ambiguity is the tactic, intent is the signal. Recognizing this changes how irregular threats should be analyzed and countered.

Too often, irregular acts are viewed as symptoms of internal dysfunction. A migration wave is treated as a refugee crisis. TdA's emergence is seen as a law enforcement problem. A drone program is labeled a curiosity. What this misses is the possibility that these events, together, form a pattern of strategic behavior.

US and allied responses have frequently faltered in this space. Ambiguity is mistaken for disorder, and tactical incidents are treated as unrelated. This results in a reactive posture, one that struggles to connect the dots and almost never challenges the architecture behind the behavior.

By contrast, analyzing intent through repeated behavior, strategic alignment, and irregular means offers a way to see the architecture. It allows policymakers to shift from responding to symptoms to challenging the logic of the campaign itself.

The Pentagon's defense strategy urges a whole-of-government approach to addressing irregular threats. It emphasizes persistent engagement, partner enablement, and narrative competition. But what it does not fully develop is how to assess intent under conditions of ambiguity. This is where

analytic rigor is most needed.

David Kilcullen's writings, including *Counterinsurgency* and *Out of the Mountains*, argue that irregular warfare is about manipulating systems rather than holding ground. Actors exploit urban density, network effects, and institutional gaps. But beneath this disruption lies intent—the desire to undermine, outlast, and disorient the adversary.

When a regime like Venezuela repeatedly uses irregular methods that align with strategic goals, we should no longer consider it merely dysfunctional. We should understand it as executing an irregular campaign.

### **From Doctrine to Practice**

Identifying intent is not a speculative exercise. This grounding is in the same logic that drives [pattern-of-life](#) analysis in counterterrorism, or [target selection](#) in covert action. The challenge in irregular warfare is that the "targets" are not always people or sites—they are behaviors, alliances, and narratives. And the goal is not elimination but neutralization: denying the adversary the ability to advance through ambiguity.

This requires a different kind of intelligence collection, one that privileges open-source material, migratory flows, financial forensics, and social media dynamics. It also demands policy tools that are calibrated to address indirect threats—legal, economic, and informational—as much as kinetic ones.

With Venezuela, the US and its allies should treat repeated behaviors as indicators of strategy, not noise. The Tren de Aragua is not just a gang; it is a proxy actor. Mass migration is not just a humanitarian outcome; it is a strategic weapon. Iran-Venezuela military cooperation is not just symbolic—it is a strategic marker.

Iranian agents have entered Latin America on [direct flights](#) from Tehran to Caracas, where they are reportedly issued [Venezuelan passports](#)—allowing them to move freely across the region without drawing suspicion. As early as 2008–09, a former Venezuelan immigration official under then-Vice President Tarek El Aissami estimated that some 10,000 Middle Easterners per year were receiving such documents. Intelligence sources suggest this practice has expanded in recent years.

Iranian-linked terror finance and logistics operations have also spread beyond the well-known [Tri-Border Area](#) (Brazil–Argentina–Paraguay) to include locations such as the Chilean port of Iquique, Margarita Island in Venezuela, and Colón, Panama.

The implications extend beyond Venezuela and Latin America. The triad proposed here can assess other ambiguous threats, from Russian private military companies in Africa to Chinese influence operations in Southeast Asia. What matters is not whether these actors fit our existing categories, but whether their behavior reveals intent.

## **Conclusion**

Venezuela is not drifting—it is maneuvering. What appears to be disorder may in fact be deliberate control. The regime survives not by restoring the state, but by exploiting its collapse, turning ambiguity into advantage.

This is irregular warfare. Venezuela thrives in the space between categories—bending humanitarianism, exploiting legality, and masking aggression. The regime persists not because it is unseen, but because its intent goes unrecognized.

Policymakers must learn to read the signals. Intent reveals itself through repetition, coherence, and irregularity. Once understood, the mask falls away. Ambiguity is the tactic. Intent is the message. Venezuela and Iran are speaking it. It is time we listen.

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