

Hezbollah's Corruption Crisis Runs Deep

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Articles & Testimony

The group's involvement in human trafficking and other criminal activities is far more extensive than Nasrallah cares to admit, going beyond anything his anti-corruption committee is likely to address.

The following text was originally published in Arabic *on the Alhurra website*

<https://www.alhurra.com/a/%D8%A3%D8%B2%D9%85%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%85%D9%8A%D9%82%D8%A9/448348.html>

In the run-up to the recent Lebanese elections, Hezbollah officials and candidates rarely spoke about the party's military deployment in Syria. Instead, they focused on two main issues: the economy and corruption. What Hezbollah wants to avoid discussing most of all is how its fight in Syria to support Assad's regime relates to the eroding economy and growing corruption it is suffering inside Lebanon.

In general, the state of extraordinary dissatisfaction within Hezbollah's traditional Shia political base is the result of the party's deep slide in the Syria war and the growing number of its dead there. For some of Hezbollah's old supporters, the doctrine of "resistance" was specifically related to Israel, not to defending President Assad and his war against mostly Sunni Syrian civilians. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections, signs were posted on the highway in the Beqa area, Hezbollah's main stronghold, opposing the party's candidates and bearing slogans such as "We are keen to resist, but our loyalty is to Baalbek Hermel."

There has been a state of irony and suspicion within Hezbollah's ranks over the heavy price the organization is paying to support the Assad regime. Many Hezbollah fighters see they are paying the whole price, while the Iranians are reaping the benefits. As a result, a large number of veterans are leaving the party, making room for a new and different group of younger fighters. The new fighters join the party in order to get a salary, not to fulfill a sense of

conviction, which makes the Syria war an economic rather than ideological issue for this new generation of Hezbollah soldiers.

Accordingly, Hezbollah is also suffering from a crisis of confidence based on the realization that the group has become implicated in corruption. Hezbollah is recruiting its fighters from the poorest areas in Beirut's Dahiya neighborhood and the Beqa region along the Syria-Lebanon border, and to a lesser extent from southern Lebanon. But at a time when Hezbollah is recruiting the poor, its wealthy supporters are profiting from the war.

Last April, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that a former Hezbollah fighter had criticized group leader Hassan Nasrallah in an open letter for his failure to tackle corruption within the organization. In the past, one would never hear this kind of public criticism of the party, but the letter received support in social media. Nasrallah realized that Hezbollah had a serious problem and made campaigning against corruption and supporting economic development the centerpiece of the group's electoral platform.

Describing how the issue had affected Lebanon's public sector, Nasrallah stated that fighting corruption is "a major national battle." On May 25, in a speech marking the anniversary of Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon, he announced that the party leadership had studied the "corruption file" and appointed Hassan Fadlallah, a Hezbollah member of parliament and head of an anti-corruption committee, to follow up on the matter under the supervision of Nasrallah himself.

But even if the party proves it is capable of eliminating much of the political corruption that has resulted from the war economy that Hezbollah contributed to creating, it will be unable to address some of the most pervasive and alarming corruption activities carried out by influential individuals within the group. Most of these powerful and corrupt figures are involved in the criminal network that provides financial support to Hezbollah, especially the part that funds the group's terrorism and military activities, which is referred to by US law enforcement as the Business Affairs Component." The BAC was first detected in early 2016 through a joint operation involving the Drug Enforcement Administration, Customs and Border Protection, Treasury Department, Europol, Eurojust, and French, German, Italian, and Belgian authorities. The investigation involved seven countries and resulted in the arrest of a number of Hezbollah members and collaborators on charges of drug trafficking, money laundering, and possession of weapons for use in Syria.

Alongside these activities, some prominent figures in Hezbollah are involved in horrific criminal enterprises, including trafficking in sex and human beings. Consider, for example, Ali Hussein Zeaiter, a Hezbollah official responsible for procurement and criminal financing. In 2014, the U.S. Treasury Department designated him a terrorist for using his companies to acquire unmanned aerial vehicle components operated by Hezbollah over Syrian territory and against Israel. The following year, the Treasury listed additional companies run by Zeaiter in China and Lebanon for their procurement of UAV components for Hezbollah. A few months later, in 2016, Lebanese authorities uncovered a large prostitution network, mainly employing Syrian women. Hezbollah claimed to have played a role in uncovering the human trafficking and sex network, but press reports linked the prostitution network to Zeaiter, whom the Treasury Department described as the group's procurement agent.

More recently, in May 2018, the Treasury designated Mohammad Ibrahim Bazzi as a terrorist and described him as a "Hezbollah financier" with close ties to former corrupt Gambian dictator Yahya Jammeh and a drug dealer linked to Hezbollah, Ayman Joumma. The Treasury revealed that Bazzi "is a major donor to Hezbollah" and has given the party "financial aid over many years by providing the millions of dollars he has earned from his commercial activities." Bazzi's financing of terrorism is mainly accomplished through close ties with two activists in the commercial branch of Hezbollah, Adham Tabaja and Ali Yousef Sharara.

Bazzi appears to support Hezbollah through human trafficking as well. A month after classifying him for supporting

Hezbollah's terrorist activities, the Treasury released a report on human rights abuses by corrupt foreign political dignitaries and their financial facilitators. The report highlighted the role of Bazzi, mentioning his close association with Yahya Jammeh. Among Jammeh's numerous human rights violations listed in the report, the charge of human trafficking was mentioned. In fact, in its own special report on human trafficking, the State Department describes Gambia as "a source and destination country for women and children subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking." The report adds that "women, girls, and to a lesser extent boys are vulnerable to sex trafficking, forced labor in street markets, and domestic servitude" once they are caught up in this network. The "Lebanon connection" to the world of sex trafficking in Gambia involving close associates of Jammeh has been reported for a long time. According to the State Department, this includes the smuggling of people not only from Lebanon to Gambia, but also in the opposite direction. The report noted that "Gambian women are subjected to forced labor and sex trafficking in the Middle East, including Lebanon and Kuwait."

The role of Bazzi in some of these trafficking activities in partnership with Jammeh was reportedly cited in the original version of the Treasury Department's press release when his designation as a terrorist was announced, but was eventually deleted. According to a report in Alhurra, a Treasury official revealed "Bazzi's involvement in the process of using the Syrian girls who are collected from refugee camps and trading them for money to help Hezbollah."

Indeed, Bazzi's role in human trafficking was discovered as part of the Drug Enforcement Administration's investigation into Hezbollah's money-laundering and drug trafficking operations, called Project Cassandra. In early 2014, a White House meeting on this issue was held before Jammeh's visit to Washington that August. Fearing that the meeting on human trafficking in Gambia would lead to a discussion about Hezbollah and Bazzi's role in these activities, agents from the Project Cassandra Project Task Force were excluded from the discussions.

Hezbollah is open about the corruption crisis facing all Lebanese parties, including Hezbollah itself. But the group closes its ranks and hides its dirty laundry when it comes to senior officials such as Zeaiter and Bazzi, who represent a rot at the core of the party's narrow leadership circle. Hezbollah's corruption extends beyond financial mismanagement and allows the powerful party barons to earn money from the war economy in Syria while recruiting foot soldiers from among the poor. For a group that calls itself "the party of God," the likes of Zeaiter and Bazzi represent shameful problems. The corruption of Hezbollah is spreading far deeper than Nasrallah cares to admit, and it is more complex than anything else the group's anti-corruption committee is likely to address.

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