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Will Morocco Extradite a Hezbollah Financier to the United States?

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Brief Analysis

Last week's arrest highlighted the kingdom's role as a key counterterrorism partner, and following through on the U.S. extradition request could deliver a significant blow to Hezbollah's reputation and finances.

On March 21, a Moroccan security official confirmed that the kingdom plans to deport Lebanese businessman Kassim Tajideen to the United States, presumably based on his financial ties to Hezbollah and related designations by the U.S. Treasury Department. He was arrested last week in Morocco while on his way from Guinea to Beirut. His lawyer, Chibli Mallat, told the authors that "there is indeed an extradition request from the U.S. Department of Justice," though he denied allegations that Tajideen is connected to terrorist activities. "For the past seven years," he added, "Mr. Tajideen and his U.S. counsel have communicated openly with the U.S. government and remained extremely cooperative with [Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control], including through regular updates and engagement in the delisting proceeding."

Neither Moroccan nor American officials have confirmed that the arrest came at the request of the United States, but such cooperation would be in keeping with Morocco's emergence as a key counterterrorism partner in recent years. In 2004, Washington formally labeled Morocco as a "major non-NATO ally," and since 2008 they have annually held a joint military exercise called African Lion, which brings together more than 900 Moroccans and 1,200 Americans for training in counterterrorism and other areas. In addition, the Moroccan air force has participated in the U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State, and American officials have publicly credited Moroccan security measures for disrupting terrorist activities by al-Qaeda-affiliated groups in the kingdom. Although the two countries do not share an extradition treaty, a Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty has been in force since 1993, providing for bilateral cooperation in criminal matters.

TARGETING THE TAJIDEENS

When the Treasury Department designated Tajideen in 2009, it referred to him as "an important financial contributor" to Hezbollah. His company "Tajco" was designated as well; Treasury accused him of using "proceeds from this business to provide millions of dollars in financial support" to Hezbollah.

In 2010, Treasury also designated Tajideen's brothers and business partners, Ali and Hussein, on similar charges. The department noted that Ali is a former Hezbollah commander and has provided cash to the group in tranches as large as \$1 million. He is also a major player in Jihad al-Binaa, a Lebanon-based construction company formed and operated by Hezbollah and separately designated by Treasury in 2007. His other brother Hussein is a primary Hezbollah fundraiser and prominent supporter in The Gambia; he was later expelled from that country in 2015 for these alleged ties.

Companies owned or operated by the Tajideen brothers include Tajco, Kairaba Supermarket, Congo Futur, Ovlas Trading, Golfrate Holdings, and Grupo Arosfran. These firms are active in The Gambia, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Angola, and the British Virgin Islands.

POTENTIAL HEZBOLLAH REACTIONS

Hezbollah has not said anything about Tajideen's arrest thus far and will probably refrain from any official reaction, since openly defending or helping him would be considered proof of their association. Yet the group might use other tools to pressure authorities involved in his potential extradition, such as indirectly organizing protests in front of the Moroccan or U.S. embassies in Lebanon. The mayor of Tajideen's hometown, Hanaway, has already given an ultimatum of forty-eight hours for his release, threatening demonstrations. Although protestors would have difficulty penetrating the U.S. embassy's formidable security measures, the Moroccan embassy is more exposed, so demonstrations organized there could be more threatening.

Hezbollah could take other steps as well, as shown following previous actions against its associates and interests. For instance, after the United States signed the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act (HIFPA) into law in December 2015, banks in Lebanon and elsewhere closed hundreds of accounts affiliated with the group. Six months later, an explosion targeted Blom Bank in Beirut. Although Hezbollah did not claim responsibility for the attack, Lebanon's Interior Ministry and security bodies indicated that the incident was spurred by the Central Bank's efforts to comply with U.S. sanctions on the group.

Earlier in 2015, five Czech nationals were kidnapped in the Hezbollah-controlled Beqa Valley area of Lebanon. The driver who vanished with the Czechs turned out to be the brother of Ali Fayyad, a Lebanese national who had been arrested in Prague the previous year and faced extradition to the United States on charges of attempting to sell arms and cocaine to undercover U.S. agents pretending to be Colombian terrorists. Accordingly, many observers began to view the kidnapping as an effort to secure Fayyad's release. Although Hezbollah claimed no responsibility publicly, the Czech government changed its position immediately after the kidnapping and refused to extradite Fayyad to

America. In February 2016, he was sent back to Lebanon; the same day, the kidnapped Czechs were released.

Similarly, the group may decide to retaliate for Tajideen's arrest in one way or another, without claiming responsibility or displaying any association with him or his companies. Tajideen is no less significant to Hezbollah than Fayyad -- his arrest could complicate the group's finances at a time when it is undergoing serious financial problems and budgetary shifts. In addition to the revenues he secured for Hezbollah, his company Tajco has been involved in a number of residential projects located in strategic areas of Lebanon. Through these projects, Hezbollah hopes to link the south to Beirut via the coastal Sunni towns, the south to Beqa via Sunni and Christian towns in West Beqa, and finally the Beqa to the coast via Druze areas in the Chouf district. The residences in question are usually occupied by Shiite families who are willing to move from the south, Beqa, and Dahiya because the new apartments being offered are cheaper.

At the same time, locals in the towns where these residences are located have accused Hezbollah of using the projects to enforce its military presence and recruit poor, unemployed Sunni and Christian men into the Saraya al-Muqawama (Resistance Brigades), a non-Shiite militia created by Hezbollah for internal security operations and clashes. Last August, Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk dubbed this sub-militia "the occupation brigades," arguing that its "50,000-strong army" was intended for "domestic missions."

MOROCCO'S CALCULUS

Tajideen's ties to Hezbollah and, by implication, Iran may give Morocco sufficient incentive to comply with the extradition request. The kingdom's relations with Tehran and its proxies have fluctuated between hostility and tepid normalization since 1979. In 1981, Iran cut ties with Rabat in delayed response to the fact that King Hassan II had granted asylum to the ousted shah. Tensions eased in the mid-1990s, and the countries established economic and diplomatic relations. In 2009, however, Rabat severed diplomatic ties with Tehran, accusing it of seeking to convert Moroccans to Shiism and decrying an Iranian official's remarks to the effect that Bahrain, a fellow Sunni monarchy, was a "province of Iran." Leaked diplomatic cables later suggested that Morocco's move came at the request of Saudi Arabia, which at the time had joined with other Gulf Cooperation Council countries to pledge \$5 billion in assistance to Rabat. Whatever the motivation, Moroccan-Iranian relations were not officially restored until December 2016, reportedly on the condition that Tehran refrain from proselytizing within the kingdom.

Although it is still unclear whether Tajideen's extradition will actually be carried out, Lebanese sources indicate that his arrest has already created tension and fear among many Shiite businessmen. When HIFPA was signed in 2015, the resultant wave of account closures caused panic among Hezbollah-linked businesses and other entities, some of whom cut their financial ties with the group. Although this fear subsided a few months later when banks were no longer asked to close accounts, Tajideen's arrest has reawakened it. These sentiments are particularly heightened at a time when the new U.S. administration has issued confrontational rhetoric against Iran and Hezbollah. Taken together, such developments have left many Shiite business figures worried that anyone could be apprehended at any airport if they are linked to Hezbollah.

It is these concerns among the business community that aggravate Hezbollah the most. If wealthy Shiite figures become reluctant to support the group, its already fragile support base will become all the more tenuous. Securing Tajideen's extradition would therefore be a significant illustration of Washington's credibility and seriousness when it comes to curbing Hezbollah and its Iranian patron. It would also signal America's intention to continue pursuing terrorism suspects in cooperation with allies in the region.

Hanin Ghaddar, a veteran Lebanese journalist and researcher, is the inaugural Friedmann Visiting Fellow at The Washington Institute. Sarah Feuer is a Soref Fellow at the Institute. ❖



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