

Hezbollah's Criminal Networks: Useful Idiots, Henchmen, and Organized Criminal Facilitators

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Oct 25, 2016

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Articles & Testimony

Hezbollah's broad web of shady 'facilitators' provide an attractive means of quickly moving and laundering massive amounts of illicit money, but they also reveal the supposed 'resistance' group as the criminal enterprise it has become.

The following is an excerpt from Dr. Levitt's contribution to the new book [Beyond Convergence: World Without Order \(http://cco.ndu.edu/BCWWO/Article/980812/7-hezbollahs-criminal-networks-useful-idiots-henchmen-and-organized-criminal-fa/\)](http://cco.ndu.edu/BCWWO/Article/980812/7-hezbollahs-criminal-networks-useful-idiots-henchmen-and-organized-criminal-fa/), a publication of National Defense University's Center for Complex Operations. To read the full chapter, download the PDF.

Today, Hezbollah criminal enterprises -- some formal, some informal -- span the globe from drug-running and organized crime in the Balkans, to procuring false passports in Southwest Asia, to trafficking in stolen goods and trade-based money laundering in South America, and operating corporate front organizations and extorting financial support in Africa. U.S. officials believe "a substantial portion" of revenue raised by Middle Eastern terrorist groups in general comes from the \$20 to \$30 million brought in annually by the illicit scam industry in the United States alone. Little, if any, of this is believed to be directed in any top-down form of command and control by Hezbollah leaders. But often, if one follows the loose threads of a Hezbollah-linked criminal investigation, connections emerge with at least one person with formal, often high-level Hezbollah connections, including people with Hezbollah military training or people serving somewhere in the diaspora as the local representative of senior Hezbollah officials like Secretary-General Nasrallah. Occasionally, a case will reveal the involvement of a senior Hezbollah leadership figure as well. In 2009, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency revealed a series of Hezbollah criminal schemes in the United States which ranged from stolen laptops, passports, and gaming

consoles to selling stolen and counterfeit currency, procuring weapons, and a wide range of other types of material support, pointing to the wide range and scale of Hezbollah's criminal activities. In those cases, senior Hezbollah officials from both the organization's public and covert branches played hands-on roles in the planning and execution of many of the criminal schemes. According to U.S. investigators, following the loose threads in several recent cases led straight back to a Hezbollah representative in Iran, Abdallah Safieddine. That should not surprise, given that a United Nations criminal investigator found that Safieddine -- a cousin and close associate of Nasrallah himself -- is "considered one of the Hezbollah's top moneymen." His brother, Sayyed Hashem Safieddine, is a senior Hezbollah official sometimes mentioned as a possible successor to Nasrallah.

Recently, Hezbollah's criminal activity has turned away from the petty crime of sympathizers. Today, Hezbollah seeks to leverage the services of organized criminal networks to facilitate its own entry into large-scale organized criminal enterprise. From narcotics to international used car sales, and from money laundering to procurement front companies, U.S. law enforcement now sees multiple cases where the Hezbollah-affiliated criminal operators are themselves acting as "super-facilitators" for a tremendously wide range of crimes and clients.

Consider again the case of Ayman Joumaa and the Lebanese Canadian Bank (LCB). In January 2011, Joumaa was designated a drug kingpin for "laundering as much as \$200 million per month" through LCB and other channels tied to Hezbollah. The following month, the U.S. Treasury designated LCB a primary money laundering or terror financing concern under Section 311 of the USA PATRIOT Act, effectively shutting down the bank. But several months later, in December 2011, the Southern District of New York unsealed a \$483 million civil forfeiture action against LCB, which read like a cross between a criminal indictment and a suspense thriller. Since then, investigators around the world have followed the threads of the LCB case from the United States to Europe, Australia, Africa, and South America, arresting not only garden-variety drug traffickers and money launderers but key "super-facilitators" with ties to senior Hezbollah figures as well. For example, one of the senior Hezbollah officials implicated in the LCB case: Abdallah Safieddine.

Investigators have pursued so many Hezbollah-related cases that the group can no longer pretend to ignore them, and the press has taken notice. "The U.S. government is intensifying efforts to stop the flow of money to the terror group Hezbollah as officials work more closely with their European counterparts to stymie the organization's international network," the Wall Street Journal reported in December 2015. Citing the case of an American suspected money launderer in Colombia with ties to Hezbollah, and cases of suspects arrested in Lithuania, France, and the United States, the Journal cited U.S. officials describing how "Hezbollah uses a variety of means to make, move, and hide cash," aided by "super-facilitators -- moneymen who help various criminal enterprises disguise the sources of their funding."

The challenge Hezbollah poses has become global in nature. In this brief review we have discussed criminal operations in five continents; North and South America, Africa, Europe, and Asia. They include terrorist operations in Cyprus, the Philippines, and along the Lebanese-Israeli border; money laundering in the TBA, North Carolina, Belgium, Sierra Leone, and plenty more; trafficking of drugs and other contraband in Canada, Colombia, Germany, and Africa, to name a few; and waging war in Syria on behalf of the brutal Assad regime. The lesson to be learned here is that the Hezbollah threat has evolved and is no longer limited in scope to politics in the Middle East or their mission to wipe Israel from existence. It is a threat that must be recognized everywhere it is manifest, and challenged on a global scale. Hezbollah can no longer be seen as an Iranian proxy and terrorist organization alone; it is now a powerful military force, a globally lethal terrorist organization, and a complex criminal and money laundering network. To effectively thwart Hezbollah's anti-American and anti-Western operations will require a much more accurate understanding of how Hezbollah has evolved over the three decades since its establishment.

As the White House strategy to combat transnational organized crime warns, illicit networks of all kinds -- drug

traffickers, weapons dealers, terrorist groups, and more -- share key "convergence points" -- in particular people, places, or organizations that launder their money. In the case of Hezbollah, super-facilitators -- some with ties to the group, some just criminal middlemen -- are attractive convergence points for their ability to quickly and efficiently move and launder massive illicit money flows. But they are also Hezbollah's Achilles' heel, exposing a group presenting itself as a noble "resistance" for the criminal enterprise it has become. This presents Hezbollah both with a grassroots legitimacy problem at home and exposes the group to law enforcement scrutiny around the world...

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