

# Strange Bedfellows

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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## Is the turbulent Middle East bringing Sunni and Shiite jihadists together or driving them to war?

**F**ifteen years ago this month, al Qaeda operatives executed two devastating, simultaneous car bomb attacks targeting the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. The attacks in East Africa killed 223 people, injured more than 4,000, and brought international infamy to al Qaeda -- among other repercussions, they earned Osama bin Laden a place on the FBI's Most Wanted list.

U.S. embassies are still targets for violent extremists today -- as shown by the recent closure of 19 U.S. diplomatic outposts across the Middle East in response to intercepted communications from al Qaeda leaders -- but the nature of the terrorist threat has evolved over time. The relationship between al Qaeda Central and its regional franchises has changed dramatically, and the relationship between Sunni and Shiite terrorists is changing as well. These radicals have historically put aside their rivalries to focus on common enemies when their interests aligned -- witness Iran and Hezbollah's relationship with the Sunni Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, a terrorist organization active in the Gaza Strip. But such partnerships have become more complicated as the two groups find themselves in open battle for control of Syria.

While Iran and Hezbollah played crucial roles training and preparing al Qaeda to hit American embassies in East Africa in 1998, such collaboration appears unlikely today. Back then, the enemy of their enemy was their friend -- but today, the two Shiite powers are at the epicenter of a Sunni-Shiite war that threatens to spill over from Syria to Lebanon and Iraq, and well beyond.

This fact has once again been driven home by the Aug. 15 car bomb explosion in Beirut's Hezbollah-controlled southern suburbs, which killed at least 18 people. The most likely culprit for the attack is Sunni jihadists angered by the Shiite paramilitary group's support of the Syrian regime.

The East Africa embassy bombings were eventually determined to be solely the work of bin Laden, but there is no

doubt that the jihadist network benefited from years of collaboration with Iran. Early in the investigation, the FBI was already examining Iranian links to the attacks: An Aug. 13, 1998, report by the Times of London noted that the FBI was focusing on the movement of Kazem Tabatabai, the Iranian ambassador in Nairobi, and Ahmad Dargahi, the Iranian cultural attaché in Nairobi, who had left their posts two weeks before the attacks -- a pattern seen in 1992 and 1994, in the period leading up to the bombing of the Israeli embassy and AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, respectively.

There were good reasons law enforcement and intelligence officials worried about a possible Shiite extremist connection to this clearly Sunni extremist attack. To begin with, the suicide truck bombs that hit the East African embassies were similar to previous Hezbollah attacks. And as the 9/11 Commission made clear, already in the early 1990s "Bin Laden reportedly showed particular interest in learning how to use truck bombs," notably like the one used in the 1983 U.S. Marine Barracks bombing in Lebanon. According to intelligence declassified for the 9/11 Commission Report, al Qaeda operatives, including top operatives involved in the Kenya cell's plotting of the embassy bombings, developed the tactical expertise to execute this kind of attack while attending Hezbollah terrorist training camps in Lebanon sometime in 1993.

Hezbollah's outreach to Sunni extremists in Africa and beyond, in fact, hearkens back even further. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, Hezbollah operatives began appearing in areas where Sunni Islamist groups were operating. For example, a 1987 CIA report documented Hezbollah's propaganda ties to Egyptian extremists. "Although logistical ties probably are extremely limited and are likely to remain so," the CIA noted, "for Hezbollah and its Iranian patron close public ties and apparent cooperation with radical Sunni groups constitute a valuable propaganda success underscoring their commitment to Islamic unity."

These ties would expand in a few short years, as al Qaeda and Iran joined forces to combat their common American enemy. According to the 1998 federal indictment in U.S. v. Usama bin Laden et al., the case against bin Laden in response to the East Africa embassy bombings, al Qaeda forged an alliance with the Iranian government as early as 1992, which was negotiated and agreed upon in Khartoum, Sudan. The relationship forged between the two entities in the mid-1990s led al Qaeda emissaries to travel to Iran for training in explosives, according to the 9/11 Commission Report. Author Lawrence Wright reported in his book *The Looming Tower* that Imad Mughniyeh, the head of Hezbollah's international terrorist branch and also believed to be a commissioned officer in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, also agreed to train al Qaeda members in exchange for weapons. Al Qaeda and its affiliated Egyptian Islamic Jihad sent members to Lebanon at various times between 1992 and 1996 to receive training from Hezbollah, according to the federal indictment.

In the end, neither Iran nor Hezbollah was behind the East Africa embassy bombings -- that infamy falls to al Qaeda alone. But both played critical roles in the years leading up to the bombings by providing the precise training al Qaeda operatives would need to successfully carry them out. With these links severed today, both al Qaeda and Iran-linked terrorists will likely be on their own as they plan future attacks against the United States.

This marks the end of a long alliance between both sets of extremist groups, which extended well into the 2000s. A few months after the end of the July 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah, the United Nations revealed Somalia's radical Islamic Courts Union (ICU) dispatched some 720 experienced militants to Lebanon to fight alongside Hezbollah against the Israeli military. "One of the criteria of the selection process," the U.N. monitoring mission in Somalia reported, "was individuals' combat experience, which might include experience in Afghanistan." Only roughly 80 members of the Somali militant force returned to Mogadishu after the fighting ended, according to the U.N. report.

In early September 2006, the United Nations reported, some 25 additional Somali fighters returned home -- accompanied by five Hezbollah members. The U.N. report did not say what business the five Hezbollah members

had in Somalia, though it did note elsewhere that Hezbollah "has provided military training to ICU and has made arrangements with other States on behalf of ICU for the latter to receive arms." Among the Somali fighters who had not returned home, the report added, "a number" extended their stays in Lebanon to attend advanced military training courses provided by Hezbollah.

The Syrian war raging today has wrecked these decades-old relationships. Sunni fighters are once again flocking to a foreign battlefield -- but now they are going to fight against Hezbollah militants, not to be trained by them. Hezbollah soldiers have reportedly clashed with militants fighting for Jabhat al-Nusra, an al Qaeda affiliate, across the country - notably in the cities of Qusayr, Homs, and Aleppo.

The Syrian war's repercussions on the al Qaeda network in Iran -- which has been operating for years, with the apparent acquiescence of Tehran -- is so far unclear. According to the U.S. Treasury Department, the al Qaeda network agreed to refrain from conducting any operations on Iranian soil and keep the Iranian government informed of its activities -- and in return, Tehran allows the jihadists freedom of operation and mobility throughout the country. But Syria may throw a wrench in this arrangement: The Treasury Department also noted that the network's leader, Muhsin al-Fadhli, is "leveraging his extensive network of Kuwaiti jihadist donors to send money to Syria," and that the group was also sending fighters to support al Qaeda-affiliated networks in Syria. Such activity would presumably remove Fadhli from Iran's good graces -- but hard facts on the evolution of al Qaeda activities in Iran are still hard to come by.

The collapse of these strategic partnerships has been accompanied by an upsurge in sectarian vitriol targeting the Shiite parties. In late May, one of the world's most influential Sunni clerics, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, called for jihad in Syria against President Bashar al-Assad's government and its supporters, Iran and Hezbollah, "who are more infidel than Jews and Christians." A wave of statements harnessing sectarian animosity to justify support for a Syrian jihad soon followed: Saudi Arabia's grand mufti denounced Hezbollah as the "party of Satan," Saudi cleric Saud al-Shuraim declared from the pulpit of Mecca's Grand Mosque that believers had a duty to support Syrian rebels "by all means," a group of Yemeni Sunni clerics released a fatwa calling for the "defense of the oppressed" in Syria, and then Egyptian President Mohamed Morsy denounced both the Assad regime and Hezbollah at a rally in Cairo, waving the flag of the Syrian opposition.

The longer the Syrian war persists, the deeper the sectarian divide will grow -- not only between average Sunni and Shiite faithful, but even between the violent extremists within each sect. That could change, of course: The groups could once again strike a temporary alliance in order to combat a graver threat. But for now, the Syrian war has ensured that terrorists who used to pool their resources to attack the United States will now be forced to carry out their deadly work all on their own.

*Matthew Levitt directs The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and is author of [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god). ❖*

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