

# Hizballah Poised to Strike in Southeast Asia

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Brief Analysis

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## New discoveries regarding Hizballah bombmaking in Thailand are no surprise given the group's long history of terrorist operations in Southeast Asia.

Last week, Thai police arrested Atris Hussein, a suspected Hizballah operative, at the Bangkok airport, while another suspect escaped. Elsewhere in the capital, authorities seized a large cache of chemical explosives composed of ammonium nitrate and urea fertilizer, leading the United States and Israel to issue emergency alerts warning their citizens in the country of a possible imminent terrorist attack. According to local authorities, initial intelligence indicated an attack would occur over the weekend in Thailand, yet they now believe some or all of the explosives were intended to be shipped out of the country. The U.S. embassy in Bangkok, meanwhile, continues to warn U.S. citizens of a "real and credible" threat of a terrorist attack in the capital.

Although the news may read like a made-for-Hollywood plotline, the fact that Hizballah is active in Southeast Asia should come as no surprise. Indeed, the case strongly parallels several previous Hizballah plots in Thailand and elsewhere in the region. Hussein is not the first Hizballah operative to be arrested at a Southeast Asian airport, nor is he the first to be tied to weapons caches and terrorist operations in Thailand. Hizballah operations in the country date back to at least April 1988, when group members hijacked a Kuwaiti airliner departing from Bangkok. And the discovery of chemical explosives is reminiscent of the group's use of a bomb built with the same chemicals in a 1994 plot targeting the Israeli embassy in Bangkok.

## April 1988: Hijacking Flight 422

On April 5, 1988, Hizballah members seized Kuwait Airways Flight 422, which was carrying 112 passengers from Bangkok to Kuwait. Forcing the plane to land in Mashhad, Iran, the hijackers sought the release of seventeen imprisoned Shiite terrorists, including Iraqi al-Dawa and Lebanese Hizballah operatives jailed for their roles in the near-simultaneous December 1983 bombings of the American and French embassies and several other sites in Kuwait. Over the course of the fifteen-day hijacking, Hizballah gunmen killed two passengers before ultimately releasing the rest.

Assessing whether Hizballah could have been behind the 1990 assassination of three Saudi diplomats in Bangkok, the CIA noted that the hijacking of Flight 422 underscored Hizballah's ability to operate there. "It is possible," an agency assessment read, "that the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO), a Hizballah element headed by Imad Mughniyah, carried out these assassinations. Mughniyah has close ties to Tehran, and the IJO demonstrated its operational capability in Thailand by orchestrating the hijacking of flight KU422 from Bangkok in 1988."

## **March 1994: Targeting the Israeli Embassy**

**O**n March 11, 1994, a Hizballah suicide bomber came within about 240 meters of driving a van laden with explosives into the Israeli embassy in Bangkok. As he exited an underground parking garage, however, he crashed into a motorcycle taxi, panicked, and fled the scene. When police inspected the van, they found a water tank filled with approximately 1,000 kilograms of fertilizer, two oil containers, a battery, C4 explosives, and two manual switches beneath the driver's seat, wired to set off the massive bomb.

Upon removing the explosives from the water tank, police also discovered a dead body. The owner of the van recognized the murdered man as one of her drivers and confessed that she had agreed to rent the vehicle to a person who preferred not to provide the required documentation so long as one of her employees drove. The unfortunate employee had been strangled and stuffed into the explosive-filled drum; had the bomb gone off as planned, no evidence of his death would have survived the blast. Four months later, a Hizballah suicide operative drove a similar truck bomb into the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Yet the group's involvement in the Bangkok embassy plot was not discovered until five years later.

## **November 1999: Hizballah Operative Arrested at the Airport**

**W**hen Pandu Yudhawinata stepped off Philippines Airlines Flight 126 from Zamboanga City to Manila in November 1999, customs officials with drug-sniffing dogs honed in on his luggage and arrested him for narcotics possession. In fact, the Indonesian suspect was already well known to counterterrorism officials. Within weeks of his arrest, the Philippines Intelligence Directorate informed the chief of national police that Pandu was the subject of a "covert operation" by the directorate and its "Israeli counterparts." Israeli counterterrorism officials confirmed that a joint operation had led to a number of cell members across Thailand who, when brought in for questioning in October 1999, provided key information that uncovered previously unknown details about Pandu, his terrorist network, and Hizballah's role in the failed 1994 plot to bomb the Israeli embassy in Bangkok.

Pandu, investigators discovered, was the one who rented the van for that plot under a false identity, coordinated with senior Hizballah commanders in Lebanon, and oversaw the network's passport and other procurement efforts in the region. Moreover, according to an Israeli intelligence report, the interrogation of the Thai cell members revealed that Hizballah was planning other attacks targeting Israeli and U.S. interests in both Southeast Asia and Europe.

A full inspection of Pandu's checked luggage also revealed documents with the names and telephone numbers of various Hizballah and Iranian intelligence operatives, as well as five Philippine passports in the names of different people, a photocopy of a sixth passport, and personal data for five more persons. Eventually, investigators found that one of Pandu's areas of specialization was procuring false passports for Hizballah operatives, and he had traveled to the Philippines at least twice in the weeks leading up to his arrest for this express purpose. The urgency of these visits was operational: according to local authorities, the passports were intended to be used by Hizballah "for an impending terrorist attack at [a] still undetermined country in the Middle East." Shortly after making that discovery, they found that Pandu also maintained Hizballah arms caches in both Bangkok and Manila

## **Hizballah in Southeast Asia**

Between trips to Iran and Lebanon for additional training, Pandu spent the bulk of his time from the botched

1994 bombing until his 1999 arrest carrying out smaller missions for Hizballah. According to Philippine investigators, these missions involved "procurement of armaments in Indonesia and passports in other parts of Southeast Asia and the conduct of casings on terrorist targets and recruitment of members." Although he was living in Malaysia at the time, Pandu was also involved in storing weapons in both Thailand and the Philippines, "presumably in preparation for future missions," Philippine authorities concluded.

In 1996, Hizballah sent one of the operatives involved in the 1994 Bangkok bomb plot back to Thailand and other countries in the region in order to prepare "the Five Contingency Attacks." This opaque phrasing -- perhaps describing attacks to be executed only under some specific contingency -- fits an established Hizballah modus operandi of casing targets and preparing off-the-shelf operations that are ready to go if and when an order is given to act.

Indeed, intelligence reports indicate that Hizballah operatives were active in the region throughout the 1990s, including Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and even Burma. According to Philippine authorities, the group's potential targets included U.S. and Israeli embassies, Israeli companies, synagogues, Jewish communities, tourist sites frequented by Americans and Israelis, offices of Israel's El-Al Airlines, and American and Israeli military and merchant vessels traveling through the Singapore Strait and the Strait of Malacca.

Hizballah activity in the region continued into the new millennium, though mirroring the group's post-September 11 trend of focusing more on logistics than operations in order to stay out of the crosshairs of the global war on terrorism. Even during this period, Hizballah engaged in some operational activity, especially infiltrations into Israel by operatives from Europe and, in one case, Southeast Asia. And the operational hiatus ended in full with the February 2008 assassination of Mughniyah, who had continued to serve as the group's external operations commander.

Therefore, it should come as no surprise today that Hizballah has the capacity to carry out attacks and engage in logistical support activities in Thailand and elsewhere in the region. Should the need arise, the group is ready to either set contingency operations in motion or procure and move explosives or other materials. With the anniversary of Mughniyah's assassination just weeks away, U.S. and Israeli authorities are on high alert for the kinds of plots reportedly foiled in places as far afield as Thailand, Bulgaria, and Turkey. Hizballah first demonstrated its ability to operate in Thailand more than two decades ago and has maintained it ever since. What remains to be seen is whether last week's arrest, like Pandu's in 1999, will help authorities uncover the local Hizballah cell that Atris Hussein and his escaped accomplice were almost certainly overseeing.

*Matthew Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. This article draws on research conducted for his forthcoming book Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's "Party of God" (Georgetown University Press).* ❖

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