

Hizbullah's African Activities Remain Undisrupted

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Articles & Testimony

Union Transport Africaines (UTA) Flight 141 bound for Beirut crashed on take-off from Cotonou in Benin, West Africa on 25 December 2003. According to accounts in the Arab press, a "foreign relations official of the African branch of the Lebanese Hizbullah party and two of his aides" were among those killed.¹ Arab press reports also claim the Hizbullah officials were carrying US\$2 million in contributions, raised from wealthy Lebanese nationals living in Africa, to the organisation's headquarters in Beirut. Indeed, Hizbullah maintains a worldwide network engaged in financial, logistical, and operational terrorist activities, often in close co-operation with Iranian intelligence services. Hizbullah operatives in Africa raise and launder significant sums of money; recruit local operatives; collect pre-operational intelligence and support the organisation's terrorist activities.

Terrorist financing

According to US and Israeli intelligence officials, Africa represents a particularly attractive arena for Hizbullah's efforts to raise, launder, and transfer funds because of the large Shi'a and Lebanese expatriate communities that reside on the continent and because of the ineffectiveness of local law enforcement agencies.² Funds are raised by a variety of methods:

Expatriate donations: Arab media reports regarding the US\$2 million that Hizbullah lost in the aircraft crash noted that "this amount represented the regular contributions the party receives from wealthy Lebanese nationals in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Benin, and other African states".³ The fact that Hizbullah immediately sent an envoy to Benin "to console the sons of the Lebanese community" indicates the value that the group places on these expatriate communities.⁴ Indeed, an Israeli intelligence report focusing on Hizbullah fundraising operations in the Ivory Coast, Senegal, the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) and South Africa estimated that the organisation raises "hundreds of thousands of US dollars yearly" on the continent.⁵ As is the case among all terrorist groups that raise funds under the cover of charitable giving, some donors are defrauded unwittingly into funding terrorism while others are willing participants in Hizbullah's financing schemes.

As the Israeli estimate suggests, the transfer of US\$2 million at once and by human courier - is remarkable in its audacity. The last known transfer of this size occurred in 1998, when Lebanese expatriates in Senegal attempted to smuggle approximately US\$1.7 million to Lebanon.⁶ At the time, the local community claimed the smuggling operation was merely an attempt to evade Senegalese law, not to finance Hizbullah. Israeli intelligence, however,

ranks Senegal as the "secondary centre for Hizbullah's fundraising activity in Africa" after the Ivory Coast.⁷

Mafia-style shakedown: organised gangs of Hizbullah supporters have attacked the commercial properties of local Shi'a and Lebanese expatriates who resisted solicitations to support Hizbullah.⁸ In the past, these tactics seemed limited to the tri-border region of South America, where the Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet.⁹ Now, however, Hizbullah activists from South America may have imported such tactics to Africa.

Illicit diamonds: Hizbullah is also believed to raise significant funds by dealing in so-called 'conflict diamonds' in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Congo, a practice that al-Qaeda has reportedly copied using the model and contacts established by Hizbullah. In his US Senate testimony on the links between conflict diamonds and terrorism the former US ambassador to Sierra Leone, Joseph Melrose Jr, and the former Sierra Leonean ambassador to the US, John Leigh, confirmed that diamonds mined in Sierra Leone finance the activities of terrorist groups such as Hizbullah and al-Qaeda.¹⁰ According to David Crane, prosecutor for the Special Court in Sierra Leone: "Diamonds fuel the war on terrorism. Charles Taylor is harbouring terrorists from the Middle East, including al-Qaeda and Hizbullah, and has been for years."¹¹ Moreover, a July 2000 Belgian intelligence report stated that "there are indications that certain persons, the 'Lebanese connection' mentioned in the diamond smuggling file, also put in an appearance in files on money laundering, the drugs trade and the financing of Lebanese terrorist organisations such as Amal and Hizbullah".¹² Belgian intelligence reports also tie the Congolese diamond trade to the financing of various terrorist groups including Hizbullah.¹³

Front companies: According to US intelligence officials, "Hizbullah maintains several front companies in sub-Saharan Africa".¹⁴ These officials say that many Hizbullah activists in the tri-border region relocated to Africa and other locations as a result of the increased attention drawn to Hizbullah activity after the group's role in the 1992 and 1994 truck bombings in Argentina. In an effort "not to have all their eggs in one basket", one analyst adds, some Hizbullah operatives have "moved on" from locations in South America and Europe and set up shop in Africa, Asia and less conspicuous parts of South America.¹⁵

Recruitment

A recent Israeli intelligence report states: "In recent years, many foreign students, including [students] from Uganda and other African countries, are sent to study theology in Iranian universities" as a means of recruiting and training them as Hizbullah operatives or Iranian intelligence agents.¹⁶

For example, in late 2002, Ugandan officials arrested Shafi Ibrahim, a leader of a cell of Ugandan Shi'as working for Iran and possibly Hizbullah. Ibrahim's partner was Sharif Wadoulo, another Ugandan Shi'a wanted by authorities in his homeland but believed to have fled to an unnamed Gulf country. Under questioning, Ibrahim confirmed that he and a group of African students first travelled to Iran in 1996 on scholarships to study theology at Razavi University in Mashhad. Ibrahim and Wadoulo then underwent intelligence and sabotage training in 2001 at two facilities in the Amaniyeh area of north Tehran. Together with new Lebanese Hizbullah trainees, they were taught to use small arms; produce explosive devices; collect pre-operational intelligence; plan escape routes; and withstand interrogation techniques. The students were given fictitious covers, money, and means of communication, then "instructed to collect intelligence on Americans and Westerners present in Uganda and other countries". In common with Hizbullah networks in Southeast Asia, ¹⁷ which have similarly strong ties to Iranian intelligence, Ibrahim and Wadoulo were also told "to recruit other Ugandan civilians for similar assignments".¹⁸

Terrorist operations

Israeli intelligence officials recently warned of a Hizbullah plot to kidnap Israeli businessmen and diplomats in Africa.¹⁹ The warning included both general threat information related to Hizbullah activity in the Horn of Africa (especially in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, and Tanzania) as well as detailed intelligence identifying at least one

specific diplomat as a target. According to Israeli officials, the warnings came from a number of sources and were given extra attention in light of threats by Hizbullah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah to "work day and night to abduct more and more Israelis" if a negotiated prisoner swap was not concluded (at the time of going to press, German mediators had secured a prisoner swap between Israel and Hizbullah).

Commenting on the kidnapping threat, Israeli officials told local media that they considered the Horn of Africa "particularly sensitive" to Hizbullah activity, adding: "For Hizbullah, Africa constitutes a very comfortable base of operations. On the one hand, there is a strong base for extremist Islamic groups there and on the other hand, the local security forces and intelligence agencies are very lenient." Describing Hizbullah's financial support activity in the Ivory Coast, one US official cautioned that even such support networks are "always a bit operational".²⁰

Wake-up call

Western and African law enforcement and intelligence agencies are proactively engaged in countering the threat that al-Qaeda poses in Africa. To combat that threat, Washington designated the Horn of Africa as a front line in the war on terror and, in concert with coalition partners, created the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (CJTF-HOA) to disrupt terrorist activity in the region. The US also deployed the Task Force 150 Naval Battle Group to patrol shipping lanes in the Red Sea. Both the CJTF-HOA and Task Force 150 are based in Djibouti .

However, little attention has been paid to the African activities of groups other than al-Qaeda, least of all Hizbullah, despite the CJTF-HOA's stated mission to "detect, disrupt and defeat transnational terrorist groups operating in the region - denying safe havens, external support and material assistance for terrorist activity".²¹

The revelation that Hizbullah maintains an 'African branch' proactively engaged in financial, logistical, and operational activity across the continent should serve as a long overdue wake-up call for intelligence services involved in the war on terror. In light of the Ugandan cell's assignment to collect pre-operational intelligence on US and Western interests, it would be prudent for Western intelligence services to uproot Hizbullah's African networks before they make use of such intelligence.

Indeed, with thousands of soldiers from the US, France, Germany, Spain, Italy and Britain stationed in the Horn of Africa on both land and sea, force-protection planners must keep in mind Hizbullah's track record of devastating suicide truck bombings targeting US forces in Beirut (in 1983) and in Saudi Arabia (in 1996).

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END NOTES

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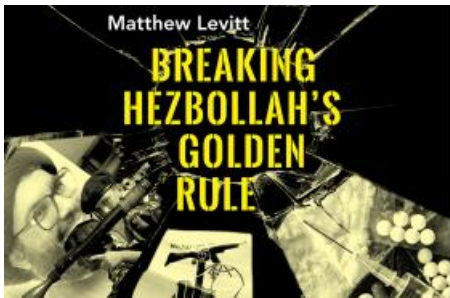
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