

The Hizballah Threat in Africa

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Brief Analysis

On December 25, 2003, Union Transport Africaines (UTA) Flight 141 bound for Beirut crashed on take-off from Cotonou, Benin, in West Africa. According to accounts in the Arab press, a "foreign relations official of the African branch of the Lebanese Hizballah party and two of his aides" were among those killed. The Hizballah officials were reportedly carrying \$2 million in contributions, raised from wealthy Lebanese nationals living in Africa, to the organization's headquarters in Beirut. In fact, Hizballah maintains a worldwide network engaged in financial, logistical, and operational terrorist activities, often in close cooperation with Iranian intelligence services. Hizballah operatives in Africa raise and launder significant sums of money, recruit local operatives, collect preoperational intelligence, and support the organization's terrorist activities against Israeli, U.S., and other Western interests.

Terrorist Financing

According to U.S. and Israeli intelligence officials, Africa represents a particularly attractive arena for Hizballah efforts to raise, launder, and transfer funds because of the large Shi'i and Lebanese expatriate communities that reside on the continent and because of the ineffectiveness of local law enforcement.

Expatriate donations. Arab media reports regarding the \$2 million that Hizballah lost in last week's plane 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." The fact that Hizballah immediately sent an envoy to Benin "to console the sons of the Lebanese community" indicates the value Hizballah places on these expatriate communities. Indeed, an Israeli intelligence report focusing on Hizballah fundraising operations in the Ivory Coast, Senegal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), and South Africa estimated that the organization raises "hundreds of thousands of U.S. dollars yearly" on the continent. 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 Hizballah's financing schemes.

As the Israeli estimate suggests, the transfer of \$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 \$1.7 million to Lebanon. At the time, the local community claimed the smuggling operation was merely an attempt to evade Senegalese law, not to finance Hizballah. Israeli intelligence, however, ranks Senegal

as the "secondary center for Hizballah's fundraising activity in Africa," after the Ivory Coast.

Mafia-style shakedowns. Organized gangs of Hizballah supporters have attacked the commercial properties of local Shi'i and Lebanese expatriates who resisted solicitations to support Hizballah. In the past, these tactics seemed limited to the tri-border region of South America, where Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet. Now, however, Hizballah activists from South America (e.g., Karim Diab and Abbas Abdallah, both of whom reportedly relocated to Angola) may have imported such tactics to Africa.

Illicit diamonds. Hizballah is also believed to raise significant funds by dealing in so-called "conflict diamonds" in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Congo, a practice al-Qaeda has reportedly copied using the model and contacts established by Hizballah. In Senate testimony on the links between conflict diamonds and terrorism, former U.S. ambassador to Sierra Leone Joseph Melrose Jr. and former Sierra Leonean ambassador to the United States John Leigh both confirmed that diamonds mined in Sierra Leone finance the activities of terrorist groups such as Hizballah and al-Qaeda. According to David Crane, prosecutor for the Special Court in Sierra Leone, "Diamonds fuel the war on terrorism. Charles Taylor is harboring terrorists from the Middle East, including al-Qaeda and Hizballah, and has been for years." Moreover, a July 2000 Belgian intelligence report identified specific Lebanese diamond traders and companies tied to Hizballah, including Imad Abdul Reda Bakri, Ali Ahmad Ahmad, Afrostars Diamonds BVBA, Triple Diamonds NV, and Ezzideen Diamonds BVBA. According to the report, "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' organizations such as Amal and Hizballah." Belgian intelligence reports also tie the Congolese diamond trade to the financing of various terrorist groups, including Hizballah.

Recruitment

According to a recent Israeli intelligence report, "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 Hizballah operatives or Iranian intelligence agents. For example, in late 2002, Ugandan officials arrested Shafi Ibrahim, a leader of a cell of Ugandan Shi'is working for Iran and possibly Hizballah. Ibrahim's partner was Sharif Wadoulo, another Ugandan Shi'i wanted by authorities there but believed to have fled to an unnamed Gulf country. Under questioning, Ibrahim confirmed that he and a group of African students first traveled 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 Amaniyyeh area of north Tehran. Together with new Lebanese Hizballah trainees, they were taught to use small arms, produce explosive devices, collect preoperational 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." Like Hizballah networks in Southeast Asia, which have similarly strong ties to Iranian intelligence, Ibrahim and Wadoulo were also told "to recruit other Ugandan civilians for similar assignments."

Terrorist Operations

Israeli intelligence officials recently warned of a Hizballah plot to kidnap Israeli businessmen and diplomats in Africa. The warning included both general threat information related to Hizballah activity in the Horn of Africa (especially 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 Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah to "work day and night to abduct more and more Israelis" if a negotiated prisoner swap was not concluded (to date, German mediators have failed to secure a prisoner swap between Israel and Hizballah despite their best efforts). Commenting on the

kidnapping threat, Israeli officials told local media that they considered the Horn of Africa "particularly sensitive" to Hizballah activity, adding, "For Hizballah, 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."

Wakeup 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, the Bush administration designated the Horn of Africa as a front line in the war on terror and created the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa (based in Djibouti) to disrupt al-Qaeda activity in the region. Yet, little attention has been paid to the African activities of groups other than al-Qaeda, least of all Hizballah.

The revelation that Hizballah maintains an "African branch" proactively engaged in financial, logistical, and operational activity across the continent should serve as a long overdue wakeup call for intelligence services involved in the war on terror. In light of the Ugandan cell's assignment to collect preoperational intelligence on U.S. and Western interests, it would be prudent for Western intelligence services to uproot Hizballah's African networks before they make use of such intelligence. Indeed, with over 1,800 U.S. forces stationed in the Horn of Africa, force-protection planners must keep in mind Hizballah's track record of devastating suicide truck bombings targeting U.S. forces in Beirut (in 1983) and Saudi Arabia (in 1996).

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