Hizballah in Southeast Asia: A Resurgent Threat

Matthew Levitt

On 12 January 2012, Thai police arrested suspected Hizballah operative Atris Hussein at Suvarnabhumi Airport in Thailand while another suspect escaped. Elsewhere in Bangkok, authorities seized a large cache of chemical explosives composed of ammonium nitrate and urea fertilizer, leading U.S. and Israeli authorities to issue emergency alerts warning their citizens of a possible imminent terrorist attack. On the basis of materials seized at the weapons cache, however, authorities subsequently believed that Hizballah had been running an explosives transshipment center out of Bangkok for at least a year before Hussein’s arrest. Most of the explosives found were likely intended to be shipped out of the country, but when Iran and Hizballah decided to start executing terrorist attacks targeting Israeli tourists, they put this existing logistical network to operational use. Though it reads like a made-for-Hollywood plotline, the fact that Hizballah is active in Southeast Asia should not surprise anyone.

This latest case strongly parallels several previous Hizballah plots attempted throughout the Southeast Asia region. Mr. 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 Thailand date back to the April 1988 hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner that departed from Bangkok. Moreover, the recent discovery of chemical explosives tied to Hizballah in Thailand is reminiscent of the group’s use of an explosive device built with the same chemicals in a plot to bomb the Israeli embassy in Bangkok in 1994. Ultimately, authorities made the connection between that 1994 bomb plot and Hizballah when they arrested a Hizballah operative at a Manila airport in late 1999.

April 1988: Hijacking Kuwait Airways Flight 422

On 5 April 1988, Hizballah members hijacked Kuwait Airways flight 422 (KU422), which was carrying 112 passengers from Bangkok to Kuwait, and forced the plane to land in Mashhad, Iran. The hijackers sought the release of 17 imprisoned Shia terrorists, including Iraqi Dawa and Lebanese Hizballah operatives jailed for their roles in the nearly simultaneous bombings of the American and French embassies, as well as several other sites in Kuwait, on 12 December 1983. Over the course of the 15-day hijacking, the Hizballah gunmen killed two passengers before ultimately releasing the rest of their captives. The Central Intelligence Agency noted that the hijacking of KU422 underscored Hizballah’s ability to operate in Bangkok. In their evaluation of whether Hizballah had been behind the assassination of three Saudi diplomats in Bangkok in 1990, one Central Intelligence Agency assessment claimed, “It is possible 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 in Bangkok

Around 0900 on 11 March 1994, a Hizballah suicide bomber, driving a van loaded with explosives, came within about 240 meters of the Israeli embassy in Bangkok. As he exited an underground parking garage, however, the driver of the van crashed into a motorcycle taxi, panicked, and fled the scene. When police inspected the van, they found a water tank filled with approximately 1000 kilograms of fertilizer, two oil containers, a battery, C4 explosives, and two manual switches located beneath the driver’s seat wired to set off the massive bomb. Only when the Thai police removed the explosives from the water tank did they discover a dead body beneath the fertilizer and explosives. The owner of the rented van recognized the murdered man as one of her drivers and confessed to police that she agreed to rent the van to a person who could not provide the standard documentation required to rent a vehicle as long as one of her employees drove the vehicle. The driver had been strangled and stuffed
into the explosive-filled drum. Had the bomb plot gone off as planned, no evidence of the driver’s death would have survived the blast. Four months later, a Hizballah suicide bomber drove a similar truck bomb into the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (AMIA) Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

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November 1999: Arresting a Hizballah Operative at the Airport

Pandu Yudhawinata stepped off of Philippine Airlines flight PR126 from Zamboanga City, Mindanao, to Manila in November 1999. Within minutes, customs officials with drug-sniffing dogs honed in on Yudhawinata’s luggage and arrested him for drug possession. Within weeks of his arrest, the Philippine Directorate for Intelligence informed the chief of the Philippine National Police that Pandu, no stranger to counterterrorism officials, “was a subject of [a] covert operation by [the] Directorate and Israeli counterparts.” Israeli counterterrorism officials confirmed that a joint operation had led officials to a number of local 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 a failed attempt to bomb the Israeli embassy in Bangkok in 1994. Pandu, investigators discovered, rented the van for the 1994 bombing plot under a false identity, communicated with senior Hizballah commanders from Lebanon, and oversaw the network’s passport and other procurement efforts in the region. In addition, according to an Israeli intelligence report, the interrogation of the suspected Hizballah operatives revealed that the group was planning other attacks targeting Israeli and U.S. interests, not only in Southeast Asia, but in Europe, as well.

A full inspection of Pandu’s checked luggage revealed a variety of documents with the names and telephone numbers of individuals and organizations. These documents included contact information for both Hizballah and Iranian intelligence operatives, as well as five Philippine passports using different names, a photocopy of a sixth Philippine passport, and personal data for five additional individuals. In time, investigators found that one of Pandu’s areas of specialization was procuring false passports for Hizballah operatives. Authorities determined he had traveled to the Philippines at least twice in the weeks leading up to his arrest in November for this express purpose. The urgency, the police discovered, was operational. According to Philippine investigators, Pandu was procuring passports that “were intended to be used by the Lebanon-based international terrorist group known as Hezbollah (Party of God) for an impending terrorist attack at [a] still undetermined country in the Middle East.” Philippine authorities quickly discovered that Pandu also maintained Hizballah arms caches in both Bangkok and Metro Manila.

Conclusion: Hizballah Operations in Southeast Asia

In between trips to Iran and Lebanon for additional training, Pandu spent the bulk of his time after the botched 1994 bombing until his 1999 arrest carrying out smaller missions for Hizballah. According to Philippine investigators, Pandu’s missions involved the “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, he was also involved in storing weapons in Thailand and the Philippines, which Philippine authorities concluded was “presumably in preparation for future missions.”

In 1996, Hizballah sent one of the operatives involved in the 1994 Bangkok bomb plot back to the region, including Thailand, “for the purpose of preparing the ‘Five Contingency Attacks.’” The opaque reference to a plan for five attacks—perhaps only to be executed 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.
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Throughout the 1990s, intelligence reports indicated that Hizballah operatives were active in Thailand, the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and even Myanmar (Burma). According to Philippine intelligence reports, Hizballah 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 or Israeli military or merchant vessels traveling through the Singapore Strait and the Strait of Malacca. Hizballah activity in the region continued into the new millennium but mirrored Hizballah’s global trend post-9/11 of focusing more on logistics than operations in an effort to stay out of the crosshairs of the global war on terrorism. However, even during this period, Hizballah engaged in some operational activity that was particularly focused on infiltrating operatives into Israel from Europe and, in one case, Southeast Asia. This operational hiatus ended with the February 2008 assassination of Hizballah’s commander of external operations, Imad Mughniyah.

Fast forward to 2012. No one should be surprised that Hizballah has the capacity to carry out attacks and engage in logistical support activities in Thailand and throughout Southeast Asia. Furthermore, Hizballah’s operational contingency plans are constantly being updated and are ready to be implemented within a short period of time. Hizballah has also demonstrated that its logistical capabilities, such as procuring or moving explosives or other necessary materials, have been well planned. As for Hizballah’s ability to carry out operations in Southeast Asia, the group first demonstrated this ability 33 years ago and has maintained it ever since. What remains to be seen is whether, as was the case with Pandu in the 1990s, the arrest of Hussein helps authorities uncover the local cell of Hizballah recruits that he and his accomplice, who escaped custody, were almost certainly overseeing. What is already clear is that Hussein’s arrest has not deterred Iran and its proxies from carrying out further operations, since just weeks after Hussein’s arrest, a group of Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force operatives were exposed, and several arrested, when the explosives they were preparing in Bangkok exploded prematurely. 

Dr. Matthew Levitt directs The Washington Institute’s Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence. This article draws on the author’s research for his book Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s ‘Party of God’ (Georgetown University Press, forthcoming 2013).

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