

Hizbullah narco-terrorism

A growing cross-border threat

Hizbullah has significantly expanded and institutionalized its drug trafficking enterprises to the point where the group may soon raise more money through cross-border illicit narcotics activities than all its other funding streams combined. **Matthew Levitt** investigates.

KEY POINTS

- Hizbullah's venture into the global narcotics industry began in the Bekaa Valley in the 1970s. The group used well-established drug smuggling ratlines across the Israel-Lebanon border for operational purposes.
- Historical drug trading routes eventually grew and enabled Hizbullah to access Europe from South America via West Africa across the 10th parallel, known as "Highway 10".
- Hizbullah has significantly expanded and institutionalized its narcotics logistics and money laundering enterprises, to the point where narcotics proceeds are a major funding stream.

On 8 August 2012, eight residents of Nazareth and Ghajar (a small town straddling the "Blue Line" demarcating Israel's northern border with Lebanon) were charged in an Israeli district court in connection with an attempt to smuggle 20 kg of explosives into Israel foiled by Israeli authorities in early-June 2012, *The Jerusalem Post* reported. According to a spokesman for the Israeli Security Agency (Shin Bet), the explosives included enough C-4 to wage "a wave of serious attacks in Israel". Israeli authorities cited in media reports said the explosives crossed the border with the help of a Ghajar resident. The facilitator was known to authorities, both for his ties to narcotics smugglers and Hizbullah. The explosives were then passed along in a series of exchanges between smugglers who Shin Bet believed were smuggling drugs, not explosives.

The US government claims that Hizbullah is heavily involved in drugs trafficking and money laundering schemes, and in December 2011

US prosecutors filed a civil lawsuit in New York targeting US and Lebanese businesses allegedly involved in a Hizbullah-controlled global network laundering millions of dollars in criminal proceeds from the US to West Africa, *The New York Times* reported. Hizbullah issued a statement denying the allegations on 22 December, saying: "US allegations that Hizbullah is funding its activities illegitimately is merely another attempt to tarnish the image of the resistance in Lebanon... after the failure and exposure of US intelligence operations in our country."

Nevertheless, available evidence indicates the group has a long history of using well-established drug smuggling ratlines across the Israel-Lebanon border for operational purposes. In the early-1980s, the group's ties to drug trafficking were more peripheral, leveraging criminal connections and proceeds from the illicit activities of some of its members and supporters in the Bekaa Valley and South America. Over time, Hizbullah leveraged its criminal ties to support operational objectives, including trading drugs for intelligence from Arab-Israeli (and sometimes Jewish-Israeli) criminals and, as the June 2012 case illustrates, moving weapons or explosives through drug smuggling networks.

While Hizbullah leads the governing coalition government in Lebanon and is well known for providing much-needed social welfare support to its constituent communities, it has long complemented these public and legitimate activities with a laundry list of clandestine and criminal pursuits, including acts of terrorism abroad and raising funds through criminal enterprises worldwide. Hizbullah's venture into global narcotics (with an overall market value estimated by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) to be a USD320 billion per year) is not new, but over the past

few years it has significantly expanded and institutionalized its narcotics logistics and money laundering enterprises, to the point where it could soon raise more money from narcotics than all its other funding streams combined, including as much as USD200 million it is believed to receive annually from Iran, according to a December 2011 *New York Times* article.

Across the Security Zone and Blue Line

Lebanon was the Middle East's leading producer of illicit drugs in the 1970s and 1980s, with cultivation taking place mostly in the northern Bekaa Valley, according to UNODC figures. In 1976, when the Syrian military entered Lebanon, senior Syrian officials reportedly recognized the profitability of Bekaa Valley production and, according to Israeli press reports, increased the proportion of cultivated land dedicated to drug production from 10 to 90 per cent in less than a decade. Hizbullah's involvement in Lebanon's drug trade was a consequence of growth in commercial narcotics cultivation in the Bekaa Valley that continued throughout the late 1970s. "The civil war virtually destroyed all other economic fields; however, the production of marijuana became a key import sector in which almost all the ethnic communities and forces involved in Lebanon played a part," a June 1997 *Yedioth Ahronot* report noted.

In 1978, the Israeli military invaded Lebanon in an effort to push Palestinian terrorist groups away from the Israeli border, with forces reaching as far north as the Litani river. "The Israeli [1978] invasion was the best thing that ever happened to the hashish business in Lebanon," a young Lebanese trafficker told Israeli journalist David Oren in the early-1980s. In 1982, Israeli forces invaded once more, this time establishing a "security zone" along Lebanon's southern border with Israel in an attempt to prevent cross-border attacks. According to a 1984 study published in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, based on official and unofficial export data between June 1983 and February 1984, Israel officially exported USD60 million in goods to Lebanon over this period. However, unofficial Lebanese exports to Israel were an estimated USD400 million, including an



Members of the Colombian Narcotics Division during a raid in Guaviare, Colombia, on 25 January 2012. Lebanese Shia involved in narcotics in Lebanon eventually began to work with criminal associates within the Lebanese Shia diaspora in South America. Ultimately, Lebanon became a transit country for cocaine and heroin, “with Lebanese nationals operating in concert with drug traffickers from Colombia and South America,” according to the 2011 international narcotics control strategy released by the US Department of State.

estimated 700 tons of hashish, and half of a ton each of heroin, opium and liquid hashish.

Following the establishment of Hizbullah in the early-1980s – recruiting heavily from key Bekaa Valley tribes and families – it benefited from a religious edict, or fatwa, issued in the mid-1980s providing religious justification for the otherwise impure and illicit activity of drug trafficking. Presumed to have been issued by Iranian religious leaders, the fatwa reportedly read: “We are making drugs for Satan – America and the Jews. If we cannot kill them with guns, so we will kill them with drugs.” According to an FBI report declassified in November 2008, “Hizbullah’s spiritual leader” [the name is redacted in the declassified report] “has stated that narcotics trafficking is morally acceptable

if the drugs are sold to Western infidels as part of the war against the enemies of Islam.”

Over time, Hizbullah-linked Lebanese drug dealers and their criminal associates in Israel moved beyond just making money for the group to using the drug trade for operational purposes. A telling example involves an Israeli-Arab named Qais Obeid (thought to be a Hizbullah agent residing in Lebanon, according to a 2004 article in *The Telegraph*. The son of a well-connected former deputy mayor of Taibeh, Obeid ran a jewelry business that went bankrupt, leading him to pursue other money making ventures. In 1996, Obeid and Ofer Schneitman, a Jewish-Israeli, were arrested on charges of conspiring to sell ammunition to Palestinians in the West Bank, *Haaretz* report-

ed in 2002. As he stumbled from failed business endeavors to debt to criminal activities, Obeid grew closer to Mohammed Biro, a one-time source for Israeli intelligence who later shifted his allegiances to Hizbullah.

Obeid and an Israeli named Elhanan Tannenbaum first met as children and their lives intersected from time to time as the two grew up. Israeli press reports indicate that in the 1990s, Tannenbaum was involved with various illicit activities, some in partnership with Obeid. Both men fell into debt through illicit financial dealings with Palestinian money launderers. In dire need of money, Tannenbaum signed up for extra reserve duty in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), but maintained connections with Obeid and other criminal business partners.



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UN peacekeepers set up a razor wire fence in the Lebanese part of the divided border village of Ghajar, Lebanon, on 10 April 2008. When Israel withdrew its troops from southern Lebanon in May 2000, Ghajar was left in a unique position, straddling the “Blue Line,” the UN-demarcated line dividing Israel and Lebanon, with no fence on the Lebanese side. The open-ended northern side makes it ideal for smuggling and Ghajar has gained a reputation as the main route for drug trafficking.

Tannenbaum’s dichotomous position made him an attractive target for exploitation. His frequent business trips to Lebanon put him in contact with Lebanese drugs dealers, but the closing of the Israeli-Lebanese border in 2000 after Israeli forces withdrew from Lebanon made such interactions difficult to arrange and effectively ended the business opportunity. According to a *Jerusalem Post* report, Obeid proposed the two go into business together by leveraging Obeid’s Arab world contacts and Tannenbaum’s

salesmanship. Tannenbaum believed he could trust Obeid, and with accumulating gambling and business debts, he desperately needed the income this new business partnership promised to produce. He departed Israel for Brussels in October 2000, believing he was meeting with some of Obeid’s business contacts and was reported missing a few days later. Less than two weeks later, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah informed a conference in Beirut that Hizbullah had kidnapped Tannenbaum “in a new quali-

tative achievement and in a complicated security operation,” *The New York Times* reported. A special team set up immediately following the abduction quickly determined that Tannenbaum had been lured to Europe with the promise of a major drug deal, according to an October 2003 *Haaretz* report.

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Perhaps the highest profile case occurred in 2002, when IDF Lieutenant Colonel Omar Heib was accused by Israeli authorities of providing sensitive military information in exchange for drugs and money. Heib had served in the IDF for 20 years and was the highest ranking officer from the Bedouin community. Heib, who lost his right eye in a road side explosion in 1996 while pursuing Hizbullah agents, was often cited as the example of the advancement possibilities for Israeli-Arabs within the Israeli military. In 2002, Israeli military police collected evidence indicating Hizbullah had asked Heib to provide information on Israeli military deployments in the Shaaba area, maps of northern Israel, locations of tank ambushes, and personal details on his superior officer Lieutenant General Gabi

Azhkenzai, the head of Israeli Northern Command. Heib was found guilty on 18 June 2006 of supplying sensitive information to Hizbullah, and sentenced to 15 years in prison.

Narco-trafficking in South America

Hizbullah's expansion into the South American narcotics industry began in the early-1980s but grew significantly in the following decades. "Drug trafficking organizations based in the tri-border area have ties to radical Islamic organizations such as Hizbullah," according to Anthony P Placido, assistant administrator for intelligence in the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). "It is important to note that this is not a newly emerging threat per se," he explained during congressional testimony in March 2010, "but one that has existed at least since the 1980s or early-1990s."

Drawing support from the Lebanese diaspora in South America, Hizbullah's footprint in international drug smuggling expanded from the Bekaa Valley and the Lebanon-Israel border to the southern half of the Western Hemisphere. In particular, Hizbullah supporters and sympathizers entered drug transportation businesses in Columbia, in the tri-border area where the borders of Argentina, Paraguay and Brazil meet, and over time in Venezuela and elsewhere in South America. While Hizbullah's role in drug smuggling and money laundering would grow exponentially over time, Placido revealed during his 2010 congressional testimony that smuggling along the borders of the tri-border area had existed since the late-1980s.

Starting in the 1980s, DEA agents noticed that so-called Lebanese Colombians were increasingly involved in moving drugs and money laundering for drug cartels through the port of Barranquilla near Macao on Colombia's Caribbean coast. Some were involved in the shipping business and sidestepped into drugs through their involvement in other trade-based money laundering schemes that depended on a reliable stream of foreign currency income. Working with the drug cartels provided Hizbullah operatives this revenue stream and opened the door to money laundering and drugs shipments, according to US law enforcement agents interviewed by this author in 2010.

Lebanese Shia involved in narcotics in Lebanon eventually began to work with criminal associates within the Lebanese Shia diaspora in

South America. Ultimately, Lebanon became a transit country for cocaine and heroin, "with Lebanese nationals operating in concert with drug traffickers from Colombia and South America," according to the 2011 *International Narcotics Control Strategy* report released by the US Department of State. Growing evidence, it said, indicates that large scale criminal groups largely control drug trafficking in Lebanon. "Lebanese citizens with links to these organizations are a major presence among international drug trafficking and money laundering organizations in South America, and are tied into the highest levels of Colombian traffickers moving cocaine throughout the world."

In the early-1990s, Philip Wilcox (then Department of State co-ordinator for counterterrorism) told a congressional hearing: "We believe that Hizbullah activities, which include narcotics and smuggling as well as terrorism, are supported in the tri-border area." According to Michael Braun, former assistant administrator and chief of operations at the DEA, "both Hamas and Hizbullah are active

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in this [tri-border] region, where it is possible to make a profit of USD1 million from the sale of 14 or 15 kg of drugs, an amount that could be transported in a single suitcase”.

Hizbullah took advantage of the loosely regulated tri-border area to participate in a wide range of illicit activities and to solicit donations from within the region's sizable Muslim communities. The Department of State outlined global concerns about illicit activity in the region in its 2009 *Country Reports on Terrorism*: "The Argentine, Brazilian, and Paraguayan governments have long been concerned with arms and drugs smuggling, document fraud, money laundering, trafficking in persons, and the manufacture and movement of contraband goods through the TBA [tri-border area]." In its 2011 report, the State Department confirmed that



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"ideological sympathizers in South America and the Caribbean continued to provide financial and ideological support to those and other terrorist groups in the Middle East and South Asia”.

In the 1990s, much of Hizbullah's revenue from criminal enterprises, including narcotics, ran through a network based in the tri-border area headed by Assad Barakat. He was designated by the US Department of the Treasury on 10 June 2004, and described in a press release as "one of the most prominent and influential members of the Hizbullah terrorist organization". Twice in 2001, international authorities raided Barakat's import-export shop at the Galeria Page shopping center in Paraguay. Using his shop has a front for his activities Barakat had conducted counter-intelligence and oversaw counterfeit currency operations, drug running, and more. Assad's brother and business partner, Hamzi Ahmad Barakat, was designated by the US Treasury in December 2006. According to a Treasury press release, Hamzi "is a member of Hizbullah in the TBA suspected of trafficking in narcotics, counterfeit US dollars, arms, and explosives". Meanwhile, it added, Barakat's executive assistant, Sobhi Mahmoud Fayad, "has been a senior TBA Hizbullah official who served as a liaison between



In the US Southern Command 2009 Posture Statement, Admiral James G. Stavridis (pictured) noted that the expanded presence drug trafficking syndicates in West Africa has become their “springboard to Europe.”

the Iranian embassy and the Hizbullah community in the TBA.” A “professional Hizbullah operative who has traveled to Lebanon and Iran to meet with Hizballah leaders,” Fayad complemented explicitly militant activities with a variety of criminal enterprises, including “illicit activities involving drugs”, among other crimes, according to the Treasury.

In 2006, the Brazilian Federal Police-led Operation ‘Camel’ resulted in the arrest of Farouk Omairi – a Lebanese national who had obtained Brazilian citizenship illegally – who was providing travel support to cocaine smugglers, according to Brazilian press coverage. The arrest was preceded by a US Treasury designation in early-December 2006 of Omairi as a Hizbullah agent, along with his business partner Mohammad Abdallah. Aside from procuring false documentation for Hizbullah, Omairi’s role, according to the Treasury, was regional co-ordinator for Hizbullah, and involved in trafficking narcotics between South America, Europe, and the Middle East.

The precise nature of operational ties between criminal activities and terrorism cases have on occasion only become clear after the fact, as was the case following the 1996 arrest of Marwan Kadi (aka Marwan Safadi), who was caught by US agents after conducting surveillance as part of a plot to bomb the US embassy

in Asuncion, Paraguay. Convicted in a Canadian court of smuggling cocaine from Brazil (the precise details of which are unavailable in the open source), Kadi escaped from prison in Canada, possibly with the help of Hizbullah elements. He obtained an American passport under an alias and returned to the tri-border area, where Brazilian police arrested him for cocaine possession. He escaped from custody again and fled across the border to Paraguay. In November 1996, following his surveillance of the US embassy, police raided his apartment in Ciudad del Este, where they found explosives, firearms, counterfeit Canadian and American passports, and a large quantity of cash. According to a 2003 Federal Research Division report, he fled from his apartment to Asunción, where Paraguayan police arrested him. Two days after his capture, he was extradited to the US, where prosecutors were only able to charge him with simple passport fraud. He was later sent to Canada to serve out the remainder of his previous prison sentence.

While Hizbullah is involved in a variety of criminal activities, the connection between drugs and terrorism has grown particularly strong, especially in South America. Drug rings busted in Ecuador in 2005 and in Curacao in 2009 tied explicitly to Hizbullah reveal the extent of the organization’s narco-trafficking through South America.

In June 2005, Ecuadorian police broke up a cocaine-smuggling operation run by members of the Lebanese diaspora community who were involved in Hizbullah fundraising activities, *The Associated Press* reported. From a Middle Eastern restaurant in northern Quito, Rady Zaiter headed a drug ring that brought in USD1 million per shipment of cocaine smuggled to Europe and Asia. An internal police report cited in the media confirmed that the operation was connected with Hizbullah. The report added that the network sent upwards of 70 per cent of its profits to Hizbullah. Zaiter was arrested in Colombia in mid-June, and six others were arrested in Ecuador for involvement in his network, the *BBC* reported. The operation reportedly also recruited airport officials to get their merchandise past airport security checkpoints, according to an *Associated Press* report.

In April 2009, 17 people were arrested in the Dutch Caribbean island of Curacao for their involvement in a “Hizbullah-linked drug

ring”, the *Associated Press* reported. The suspects included locals, as well as individuals from Lebanon, Cuba, Venezuela and Columbia. The Dutch prosecution service said in a statement released following the arrests that the network shipped vast amounts of cocaine from the Caribbean to the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, and Jordan. Others were shipped from Venezuela to West Africa and from there onward to the Netherlands, Lebanon and Spain. Profits were invested in real estate in Columbia, Venezuela, and Lebanon. Prosecutors asserted: “The organization has international contacts with other criminal networks that financially supported Hizbullah in the Middle East. Large sums of money flooded into Lebanon, from where orders were placed for weapons that were to have been delivered from South America.”

The most significant Hizbullah narcotics takedown to date was dubbed Operation ‘Titan’, a two-year investigation of a cocaine smuggling and money laundering operation in Colombia run by a Hizbullah figure named Chekry Harb (who used the alias “Taliban”). According to a *New York Times* investigation, the case began when agents overheard Harb on wiretaps they were running targeting Colombia-based cartel. In June 2007, an undercover DEA agent met Harb in Bogota and learned details about his routes, including one that involved smuggling cocaine overland to Syria via a Jordanian port. At one point, Harb bragged to the undercover agent that he could get 950 kg of drugs into Lebanon within hours, prompting the agent to casually suggest he must have Hizbullah connections in order to operate so freely there.

As the investigation progressed, the undercover agent got close enough to the cartel to serve as one of its money launderers. The agent laundered some USD20 million, enabling the DEA to follow the money and map out much of the cartel’s operations. But before Harb could identify his Hizbullah contacts to the DEA undercover agent, the operation broke down, reportedly due to interagency squabbling, the *New York Times* reported.

Colombian and US agents arrested more than 130 suspects, seized USD23 million, deployed 370 wiretaps, and monitored 700,000 conversations during the investigation. Harb’s network reportedly paid Hizbullah 12 per cent of its narco-income. “The profits from the sales of drugs went to finance Hizbullah,” Gladys



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Sanchez, lead investigator for the special prosecutor's office in Bogota told the *Los Angeles Times* after the October 2008 arrests. According to investigative reporter Douglas Farah, among those reportedly co-operating in this narcotics and money laundering enterprise were members of the Northern Valley Cartel, right-wing paramilitary groups, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Despite the collapse of the intelligence operation, Harb was convicted on drug trafficking and money laundering charges and named in July 2009 by the US Treasury, along with several of his associates, as a specially designated narcotics trafficker.

That such networks are flourishing in the southern half of the Western Hemisphere is of particular concern to American officials because, as former DEA special operations official Michael Braun noted during a Washington Institute forum in July 2008, new hybrid narco-terrorist networks – like those involving Hizbullah in South America and Africa – are “meaner and uglier than anything law enforcement or militaries have ever faced”.

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Smuggling along ‘Highway 10’

A particularly lucrative means of terrorist financing, the African narcotics pipeline has secured the immediate attention of intelligence and law enforcement officials around the world. In late-February 2012, Yury Fedotov, head of the UNODC, informed the UN Security Council: “The West African transit route feeds a European cocaine market which in recent years grew four-fold, reaching an amount almost equal to the US market. We estimate that cocaine traf-

ficking in West and Central Africa generates some USD900 million annually.”

However, the drugs do not originate in Africa. Crossing the Atlantic along a transit route that since the early-1900s took shippers along the 10th parallel, aptly named “Highway 10,” traffickers now move drugs across the narrowest stretch of ocean between South America and West Africa. In February 2011, US director of national intelligence James Clapper told the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence that “drug trafficking continues to be a major problem in Africa”, emphasizing “the emergence of Guinea-Bissau as Africa’s first narco-state” in an effort to “highlight the scope of the problem and what may be in store for other vulnerable states in the region”.

With almost no drug cultivation or production of its own, only the corruption and lawlessness of Guinea-Bissau made it an attractive transit route for traffickers of South American narcotics. Drugs from Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela – and some from elsewhere in Africa – pass through Guinea-Bissau en route to



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southern Europe, according to the US Department of State’s 2010 *International Narcotics Control Strategy* report.

At least some of this activity involves Hizbullah and other terrorist groups. According to a June 2009 Pulitzer Center report citing UN and Interpol agency reports, “cocaine traded through West Africa accounts for a considerable portion of the income of Hizbullah” and other terrorist groups. Hizbullah leverages Lebanese Shia expatriate communities in South America and West Africa “to guarantee an efficient connection between the two continents.” Speaking at the 20th Annual Americas Regional Conference in April 2009, Interpol secretary-general Ronald Noble acknowledged that law enforcement efforts “dismantled cocaine-trafficking rings that used their proceeds to finance the activities of the FARC and Hizbullah, while drugs destined for European markets are increasingly being channeled through West African countries”.

The drug smuggling threat came into focus in spring 2007, when two cocaine shipments from South America – each containing around 630 kg – were seized in Africa, one in Guinea-Bissau and the other in Mauritania, Noble noted in an earlier speech at the West African Police Chiefs Committee meeting in Ghana in October 2007. By April 2010, the problem had become so endemic that the US Treasury

designated Jose Americo Bubo Na Tchuto, Guinea-Bissau’s former navy chief of staff, and its then current air force chief of staff Ibraima Papa Camara, as drug kingpins.

In November 2009, an unmarked Boeing 727-200 commercial jet mysteriously crashed in the northern Mali desert some 10 miles from a makeshift airstrip. Though completely burned out, the aircraft was suspected by authorities to be carrying a massive shipment of drugs, in a plane capable of carrying up to 10 tons of narcotics. In the wake of these episodes, American and British diplomats expressed heightened fears about “the prospect of Al-Qaeda and Hizbullah exploiting the region’s UN-estimated USD1.3bn-a-year drug trade to fund terror,” according to diplomatic cables cited by *The Guardian* in December 2010.

For those investigating the drug trade on the ground, the dangers are real. The journalist Marco Vernaschi recounted being dragged out of a Bissau hotel bar by six drunken Lebanese. “We all know what the foreign journalists look for in this country,” the ringleader said. “And I know your name, Marco, so if I see anything published from you that mentions drug trafficking I will find you, wherever you are.” Despite the threat, Vernaschi wrote in the Winter 2010 edition of the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, arguing that even considering the generous support the group received from Iran, “most of Hizbullah’s support comes from drug trafficking, a major moneymaker endorsed by the mullahs through a particular fatwa.” For a fee, Vernaschi wrote, Hizbullah facilitates drug trafficking for other smuggling networks, including those of the Colombian terrorist group FARC. Once shipments arrive at one of the 90 islands off the coast of mainland Guinea-Bissau, the cocaine is broken down into smaller batches and either sent by fast boat to Morocco or Senegal or trucked in armed four-wheel-drive vehicles across traditional Sahel smuggling routes.

“Mark my words,” warned Michael Braun, the former head of the DEA’s Special Operations division, during a congressional hearing on confronting drug trafficking in West Africa in June 2009, “as we speak here today, operatives from Al-Qaeda, Hizbullah and Hamas – perhaps others – are rubbing shoulders with Latin American and Mexican drug cartels, including the FARC, in West African countries

and other places on the [African] continent.” Braun noted that these groups have developed mutually beneficial relationships of convenience, testifying: “They are frequenting the same seedy bars and sleazy brothels, and they are lodging in the same seamy hotels. And they are ‘talking business.’ They are sharing lessons learned, sharing critically important contacts and operational means and methods.”

In the US Southern Command 2009 Posture Statement, Admiral James G Stavridis noted the expanded presence of these syndicates in West Africa has become their “springboard to Europe.” In January 2010, *Der Spiegel* reported that the previous year, German authorities had arrested two Hizbullah members with ties to Hassan Nasrallah and other senior Hizbullah officials. According to the report, the two had trained in Hizbullah camps, but were not arrested for terrorist or militant activities, rather for cocaine trafficking on behalf of the group. The October 2009 arrests followed a pitched investigation that began in May 2008 when customs agents at Frankfurt airport seized EUR8.7 million in cash and another EUR500,000 during a subsequent investigation at the suspect’s apartment. To their surprise, investigators found traces of cocaine on the bills along with the fingerprint of an infamous Dutch drug kingpin who goes by the alias Carlos.

A dramatic expose of the full scope of both the African drug problem and Hizbullah’s role in it appeared on 26 January 2011, when the US Treasury blacklisted Lebanese narcotics trafficker Ayman Joumma along with an additional nine individuals and 19 businesses allegedly involved in his drug trafficking and money laundering enterprise. According to its press release, Joumma’s organization was truly transnational in nature, with criminal associates and front companies in Colombia, Panama, Lebanon, Benin and the Republic of the Congo. But while his drug ties to South America and his terrorist ties to Lebanon were unsurprising, the African narco-terrorism link – and its direct connection to the US – served as a wake-up. An extensive DEA investigation revealed that Joumma laundered as much as USD200 million per month from cocaine sales in Europe and the Middle East through operations located in Lebanon, West Africa, Panama and Columbia using money exchange houses, bulk cash smuggling, and other schemes, accord-

ing to the Treasury statement. Joumma was charged in November 2011 with conspiring to distribute cocaine and conspiring to commit money laundering. He remains at large.

Another prominent Hizbullah operative involved in laundering drug money through Africa is Oussam Salhab, according to US officials. Court documents citing evidence collected during DEA investigations identify Salhab as “a Hizbullah operative who, among other things, controls a network of money couriers who have transported millions of dollars in cash from West Africa to Lebanon”. His current status is unknown but he is believed to be in Togo. A close associate of Salhab, Maroun Saade – who belongs to the Free Patriotic Movement, a Lebanese Christian group allied with Hizbullah – ran a separate major drug trafficking organization tied to Hizbullah in Africa, according to court documentation. Along with several other defendants, Saade was indicted in February 2011 on narco-terrorism and other charges related to his alleged agreement to sell cocaine to people he believed were affiliated with the Taliban and to transport and distribute Taliban-owned heroin in West Africa.

In another case, Saade bribed officials to close a narcotics investigation into the activities of Imad Zbib, described in US court documents as “a prominent Hizbullah representative in Togo”. According to US officials cited in these documents, Zbib is a close associate of Salhab and has transported loads of two to three metric tons of cocaine from South America to Togo, concealing the hauls in used cars purchased through lots he owns and transporting the drugs to Europe for sale.

Operatives like Ayman Joumma and Oussam Salhab appear to have been in the right place at the right time. As demand for narcotics increased in Europe and the Middle East, South American cartels started looking for new routes to these growing markets. One route went to Europe through West Africa, while another passed through Syria and Lebanon. The Middle East route benefited from Hizbullah’s ties to Iran and Venezuela. According to Lebanon’s drug enforcement chief, Colonel Adel Mashmoushi, one way drugs were sent to Lebanon was on board the weekly Iran Air flight from Venezuela to Damascus and then overland by trucks to Lebanon. Discussing this route, US officials stressed that “such an oper-

ation would be impossible without Hizbullah’s involvement,” the *New York Times* reported in December 2011.

Thanks to its support networks on both sides of the Atlantic, Hizbullah has a natural advantage regarding Latin American drug kingpins looking to transport their product to or through Africa. Long active as cargo aggregators, Lebanese merchants – including those with ties to Hizbullah – are well placed to use their existing logistical machinery to facilitate the movement of other products. From a trafficking perspective, it matters little whether the product being moved is frozen chickens, cigarettes, gasoline, or drugs.

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Conclusion

Over time, the drug trade transformed from a criminal enterprise that some Hizbullah supporters engaged in into an organized fundraising tactic for its operatives. Wherever Hizbullah had operatives or supporters, investigators found some drug connections. For instance, in November 1999, according to Philippine intelligence reports, authorities arrested Pandu Yudhawinata at an airport in Manila when dog units discovered drugs in his checked luggage. Philippine intelligence had been tracking Pandu the previous month, and had intended to follow him to gather further information and intelligence on his cohorts and other activities. His arrest derailed those plans.

In 2006, Imad Hammoud, a Lebanese immigrant from the Detroit area of Michigan, was indicted along with 18 others in a Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) case on charges that Hammoud and his conspirers bought more than 90,000 counterfeit Viagra pills imported from China over a three-month period. “They’re small, they’re high in demand and they’re easily transport-

able,” explained Bob Clifford, a senior FBI agent who led the Iran-Hizbullah unit at the bureau’s headquarters, *Newsweek* reported. Hammoud remains at large.

The entry of terrorist groups like Hizbullah into the narcotics trafficking business is largely a factor of border insecurity. Were it not for their ability to move product across state lines, the narcotics industry might offer more risk than it was worth.

At present, the reverse appears to be true. In June 2010, North Carolina representative Sue Myrick sent a letter to US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) secretary Janet Napolitano urging the DHS “to do more intelligence gathering on Hizbullah’s presence on our border”. Myrick was specifically concerned with Hizbullah’s presence, activities, and connections to gangs and drug cartels. Ties between Hizbullah and drug cartels have grown, especially along the US-Mexico border, and Myrick’s letter quoted Michael Braun as saying: “Hizbullah relies on the same criminal weapons smugglers, document traffickers and transportation experts as the drug cartel... They work together; they rely on the same shadow facilitators. One way or another they are all connected”

This may have been news to the public, but not to the US intelligence community. Years earlier, the CIA published a report (since declassified in April 2012, with the original date of release redacted) on *Expanding Links between Alien Smugglers and Extremist Threats to the United States*. The declassified report noted: “Travelers associated with various terrorist groups – including Hizbullah, Hamas, and the Egyptian Islamic Jihad – are tapping into global alien smuggling networks to abet their movements around the world, including to the United States.”

Those networks now offer Hizbullah, as well as other terrorist groups and drug trafficking organizations, the potential to raise massive amounts of money through narcotics trafficking and money laundering. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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