



Episode 4: Blood Diamonds, Picassos, and Illicit Financing in Africa

Script

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Matthew Levitt:

Picture this: Two of Hezbollah's most seasoned money launderers and illicit financiers are talking on the phone...unaware that law enforcement officers in at least two countries are listening in.

At one end of the call is Iman Kobeissi. She would soon be arrested by the FBI in Atlanta, Georgia. At the other end is Joseph Asmar. He is about to be arrested by French police in Paris. We mentioned these characters last season, so the names may sound familiar.

Kobeissi and Asmar talk through many countries through which they can smuggle goods and launder money. This includes the United States and several European and Middle Eastern countries. So far, no surprises.

And then...they start listing countries in Africa, including Benin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, and Nigeria, to name just a few.

Yeah, Africa.

Here's Nathan Sales, speaking at a Washington Institute event I chaired back when Nathan served as the State Department's Counterterrorism Coordinator:

Clip: In recent years, Hezbollah operatives have been caught preparing attacks as far afield as Azerbaijan, Bolivia, Cyprus, Egypt, Peru, and Thailand. Hezbollah weapons caches have been discovered in the Gulf, in Europe, in Asia, and in Africa.

Levitt:

That's right, Hezbollah stores weapons in Africa.

INTRO:

Hi, I'm Matthew Levitt, and this is 'Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule,' a podcast that shines a bright spotlight on the criminal, militant, and terrorist activities of Lebanese Hezbollah. Hezbollah is an organization that engages in everything from overt social and political activities in Lebanon to covert militant, criminal, and terrorist activities around the world.

One Hezbollah operative was taught by his commander that the golden rule of the group's terrorist unit is this, quote: "The less you know, the better."

In this podcast, we set out to break this rule.

To better understand the context in which Hezbollah was able, over time, to establish a base of support in Africa, we first need to look at the history of the Lebanese diaspora there.

During the 19th century, under the Ottoman Empire, Lebanese citizens began immigrating to Africa in numbers. Some Lebanese entrepreneurs sought to prevent their sons from being conscripted into the Ottoman army, while others left for economic reasons as financial pressures mounted in Lebanon. But the Lebanese *Shi'a* community began immigrating to the region in around 1903. This was largely in response to population pressure and poor agriculture in southern Lebanon.

In the 1970s, another wave of Lebanese migrants arrived in Africa, almost all of whom were Muslim. And a majority of whom the CIA assessed were quote: “members of the Shi’a sects that are in practice, or at least potentially, influenced by Iran.”

In the early 1980s, as Hezbollah gained ground and members at the expense of Amal back home in Lebanon, a similar trend occurred in Africa. Amal was until then, the most prominent Shia political and militant movement in Lebanon. But soon after, we saw copious defections from Amal to Hezbollah. CIA analysts reported that Hezbollah now offered, quote: “not only the virtue of ideological simplicity and authenticity, but the rewards of *hard cash*.”

While Hezbollah enjoyed the benefits of generous funding from Iran, Amal relied on Lebanese donations...even during the hard-hit economic times of the 1980s.

Since then, Hezbollah continued to expand its support networks in Africa. This growing presence was the result of an initiative reportedly spearheaded by former commander of the Islamic Jihad Organization, Imad Mughniyeh. He developed support networks within Lebanese Shi’a diaspora communities. The continent overall became a particularly rich source of financial and logistical support for Hezbollah.

A DW News documentary on Hezbollah noted how the group’s reach has spread far from where it began in Lebanon, including to Africa.

Clip: So Hezbollah is receiving support from donations but also from the business activities – informal, let’s say, illegal also sometimes, business activities that are, that are conducted in order to fund the organization.

Joseph Palazzo:

So Africa is an interesting place.

Levitt:

Here’s Joe Palazzo, federal prosecutor with the Department of Justice, explaining why some of the more recent Hezbollah cases here in the United States include touchpoints in Africa.

Palazzo:

It's a dynamic, growing economy and it is one of the last places, or one of the last few places that really has an extensive, large cash economy. Kinshasa is one of the largest cities in the world, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where not only is cash king, but the U.S. dollar seems to be king.

There is a great need to avoid anti-money laundering detections that are in place in most Western banks and so if you are able to do a large volume of business, you know, we're talking tens of millions of dollars in monthly or weekly transactions, if you could do that in a place that values cash and not only cash, but U.S. dollars, there is a great opportunity there for nefarious actors to get their money into a banking system and then get that money from a banking system into the Western banking system or to the U.S. banking system. That's something we've observed in places like Africa.

Levitt:

But let’s step back a bit and look at the early years of Hezbollah’s activities in Africa.

Considering Hezbollah's commitment to terrorism and the lax security environment present on the African continent, a 1988 U.S. intelligence report warned, quote: "We believe that Hizballah will increasingly turn to Africa as a site for terrorist operations."

And they were right.

One of Hezbollah's earliest operations in Africa was the hijacking of Air Afrique Flight 56 on July 24, 1987. The flight plan called for stops in Bangui in the Central African Republic, and then on to Rome, before ultimately arriving in Paris.

Hezbollah operative Hussein Ali Mohammed Hariri traveled to Bangui from Beirut. Among the items in his carry-on was a pistol and an explosive belt containing TNT.

Hariri started off his journey in Beirut, where he boarded a plane with his weapons hidden in a box of pastries.

From there, he flew to Nigeria, where he transferred the weapons into a sports bag, which was carried aboard the plane by a local accomplice who worked at the airport. From there he flew to Bangui, where he paid a small bribe to a local customs official to bypass security and flew to Rome.

Hariri calmly sat through the first few legs of his journey from Beirut to Rome. But shortly after the Air Afrique flight took off from Rome en route to Paris, Hariri brandished his weapon, strapped the explosives around his waist, and took control of the plane.

He demanded that the flight reroute to Geneva to refuel, before heading to Beirut... all while threatening to shoot the passengers or blow up the plane.

Hariri likely intended to replicate Abbas Ali Hammadi and Imad Mughniyeh's hijacking of TWA flight 847 two years prior.

Like in the TWA case, the Air Afrique hijacking was not random. Hezbollah tried to secure the *release* of Abbas Ali Hammadi and his brother, Mohammad Hammadi – both Hezbollah operatives. They had been arrested within weeks of one another at Frankfurt Airport in Germany a few months before the hijacking, in January 1987...on various charges such as attempting to smuggle explosives, murder, and hostage taking.

The flight landed in Geneva as planned, and airport personnel began refueling the plane *as slowly as possible* to buy time. Hariri grew angry over the delay, shot a French businessman, and sent crewmembers to collect passengers' passports.

The turning point came when an announcement over the intercom indicated Hariri's plans to reroute the plane to Lebanon. A crewmember on the flight overpowered Hariri...and passengers flung a side door open and slid down the emergency chutes to the tarmac. The crewmember sustained a serious gunshot wound to the stomach, but survived.

A Swiss court later sentenced Hariri to life in prison after he admitted to conducting the attack on Hezbollah's orders. Despite two attempted jailbreaks, Swiss authorities deported Hariri to Lebanon after serving just 17 years of his *life* sentence.

Another early Hezbollah operation tied to Africa was the 1989 attempted assassination of author Salman Rushdie. Just one month after Iran's Supreme Leader issued a religious edict, or fatwa, calling for followers to attack him.

Clip: His name is Salman Rushdie and he was marked for death 20 months ago by the Ayatollah Khomeini, who declared Rushdie's novel "The Satanic Verses" an affront to Islam.

Levitt:

A Lebanese-Guinean citizen and Hezbollah member prepared an explosive “book bomb” to assassinate Rushdie. But the bomb detonated prematurely inside the Paddington Hotel in London. The bomber was killed but luckily, no one else was injured.

The operative was a Lebanese citizen born in Guinea who joined a local Hezbollah cell as a teenager. Prior to the attempted attack, he obtained a French passport in Cote d’Ivoire from an official who was later arrested by French authorities for selling 50 authentic, blank passports to other Shi’a extremists.

Hezbollah activity continued unabated in the region for years... but with some setbacks.

Clip: We were told that during the takeoff of the plane from Cotonou, it crashed, and 60 people were wounded, and an unknown number of passengers were killed. We don't know what is going on. Nobody is supplying us with the correct information. Rumors are that the plane exploded during takeoff. My brother, uncle, and other relatives were on the plane.

Levitt:

On December 25, 2003, a passenger plane on its way from the West African nation of Benin to Beirut crashed into the sea after takeoff, killing at least 141 people on board, mostly Lebanese.

Right after takeoff, the plane clipped a building, exploded, and crashed off the Atlantic coast. Press reports claimed that a foreign relations official of Hezbollah’s Africa branch and two of his aides were among those killed in the crash.

Hezbollah officials were reportedly transporting 2 million dollars to Hezbollah’s headquarters in Beirut. This money was part of the “regular” contributions the party collected – sometimes willingly, other times through intimidation – from wealthy Lebanese nationals in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Benin, and other African states.

However, an investigation into the crash revealed suspicious handling of the flight from the outset. There were no records made of the boarding and loading of the passengers or baggage, like you would see on regular flights, and the plane was weighed down by around *three tons* of unreported baggage. By some accounts, the three tons of unregistered weight may have included as much as 6 to 10 million dollars in cash. Investigators concluded that the plane crashed because of this unaccounted-for baggage.

The day after the crash, Hezbollah sent an envoy to Benin to collect the bodies of the deceased, escort survivors back to Lebanon, and console members of the Lebanese diaspora impacted by the crash – a clear demonstration of the value Hezbollah places on these expatriate communities.

Hezbollah’s operational and illicit financial networks in Africa run deep – it’s the result of a concerted effort to develop and build such networks in Africa over time. In July 1992, the CIA reported that “Hezbollah’s efforts to expand its international support infrastructure have enhanced the group’s ability” to carry out attacks in “non-traditional venues” such as Eastern Europe, Latin America and – you got it – Africa.

Hezbollah has launched a plethora of operations there – kidnapping plots from East to West Africa, surveillance of Israeli tourists in South Africa, weapons smuggling and attack plots in Nigeria. To name just a few.

Over time, Hezbollah financiers and supporters in Africa have built a lucrative network of operatives and sympathizers willing to use their businesses as front companies to raise and launder funds, smuggle goods, evade sanctions, and generate creative financing streams that link Africa to Lebanon.

So let’s take a look at a few of these cases in more detail.

In May 2009, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Kassim Tajideen as an important financial contributor to Hezbollah. He operated a network of businesses and Hezbollah front companies in both Lebanon and Africa.

Palazzo:

Kassim Tajideen came to the attention of law enforcement in the West, in Belgium, where he was based.

Levitt:

Joe Palazzo again, the federal prosecutor with the Department of Justice.

Palazzo:

So during our investigation we discovered that Kassim Tajideen actually, although of Lebanese extract, had three citizenships. He had a citizenship in Lebanon, which was expected, Belgium, which was also somewhat expected as he had resided there for some years, but also in Sierra Leone. And in fact we discovered that he had passports and the ability to travel with those three citizenships. This presented some complications for the investigation. We were able to see that by having sort of 'triple citizenship,' if you will, Mr. Tajideen was able to identify with different communities, was able to gain access to different industry conferences and most likely local financing and sort of local credibility, you know, in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa with these three different passports.

Levitt:

A recurring theme in recent investigations is that Hezbollah financiers in Africa typically also have Belgian, or sometimes French, citizenship.

Palazzo:

By 2009, Kassim Tajideen had fled Belgium and moved his commodities operation to Africa and was designated under the Executive Order 13224 as a financial supporter of Hezbollah.

Levitt:

Kassim Tajideen contributed tens of *millions* of dollars to Hezbollah and funneled money to the group through his brother, Ali – a former Hezbollah commander in Lebanon.

In fact, Kassim had already been under investigation six years earlier in Belgium. In May 2003, Belgian police raided the offices of a Lebanese export company owned by Tajideen in Antwerp. The company exported food to Africa in exchange for diamonds. Belgian officials arrested Kassim and his wife and froze the company's bank accounts on charges of large-scale tax fraud, money laundering, and trade in diamonds of *questionable* origin.

The couple was convicted of money laundering and forgery, and fined 150,000 euros. They were eventually released on bail and the terrorism-related charges were dropped.

Palazzo:

So Mr. Tajideen essentially built a global commodities business where he and his extensive web of companies trade names, were able to source goods outside of markets and then bring them to market. When he moved to Africa after being arrested and prosecuted in Belgium, he set up shop in the western part of Africa, you know, using his Sierra Leone citizenship and connections. He was able to build a tremendous business, bringing in manufactured goods, manufactured food commodities, retail goods, household products. There were lots of things that there was a great need for in Africa. Africa is a wonderful place, but it is a growing population that has been hungry for Western goods for years. And by utilizing his knowledge of markets in, in Europe from his Belgian days, he was able to source things that Africans desperately needed for, for daily life.

Levitt:

Not long after Treasury designated Kassim in 2009, yet *another* aviation tragedy struck the Lebanese African community.

Clip: The seas have been rough off the coast of Lebanon where an Ethiopian Airlines plane went down in stormy weather.

Levitt:

On January 25, 2010, moments after taking off from Beirut International Airport, Ethiopian Airlines Flight 409, en route to Addis Ababa, crashed into the Mediterranean, killing all 90 passengers on board.

Once again, among the many innocents killed, one name stood out for his ties to Hezbollah. This time it was Kassim Tajideen's brother and business partner, Hassan. He was flying back to Africa with four employees of a food import company he owned.

Speaking at Hassan's funeral, one of his cousins highlighted that Hassan, quote: "had been living in Africa for over 30 years. He was a very successful businessman with ties to Hezbollah – a movement he strongly supported."

The extent of that support became clear later that year, when the Treasury Department designated two *more* Tajideen brothers – Ali and Husayn – as Hezbollah financiers.

Ali, in particular, along with his brother Kassim, ran a multinational network that generated millions of dollars for Hezbollah, according to the U.S. Treasury. Their businesses were located as far afield as The Gambia, Sierra Leone, the DRC, Angola, the British Virgin Islands, and Lebanon.

Joe Palazzo again.

Palazzo:

So one of the things that became evident to us during our investigation of Mr. Tajideen's business activity was that although it was a sprawling business across almost a dozen countries in Africa and Lebanon, that Mr. Tajideen himself was very hands-on in certain aspects of the business. He personally traveled throughout Africa, between Africa and Lebanon in order to procure business. And then we eventually learned that he even, at times, would travel to Asia and to Western Europe in fact, despite the sanctions. He would represent himself and the businesses at different industry events, different commodities industry conferences, or he would send surrogates on his behalf that would put potential customers and vendors directly in touch with Mr. Tajideen.

Levitt:

Ali also provided huge cash payments to Hezbollah, in amounts as large as 1 million dollars. And while he was a major donor to the group, he was no mere fundraiser...he was also a former Hezbollah commander in Lebanon.

Husayn Tajideen, on the other hand, was a primary Hezbollah financier and prominent Hezbollah supporter in The Gambia.

That's where in 2011, the Treasury Department exposed *another* Hezbollah money laundering scheme. In this case, drug proceeds were used to purchase used cars in the United States that were then shipped to West Africa.

These transactions were facilitated through Lebanese Canadian Bank—a case we discussed in season 1. What we didn't mention before is that one of LCB's subsidiaries was Prime Bank Limited, a private commercial bank in The Gambia. LCB owned 51 percent of Prime Bank, with the remainder owned by local and Lebanese partners, including someone described by the Treasury Department as "a Lebanese individual known to be a supporter of Hezbollah."

Although designated and subject to financial sanctions, Kassim Tajideen roamed free for nearly a decade until March 2017 – when the United States charged him with fraud, conspiracy, money laundering, and violating U.S. counterterrorism sanctions regulations.

That month, while en route from Guinea to Beirut, Kassim was arrested in Morocco.

John Fernandez – former assistant special agent in charge of the Drug Enforcement Administration’s Special Operations Division – explains what happened next.

Clip: Following Tajideen’s arrest, and actually during the arrest, when he was arrested in Morocco, while he was pending extradition, we knew that every time we’ve had an arrest in this network in whatever country it is, almost without fail there will be enormous pressure of some type and sometimes the threat of violence on that host country government that is holding them pending extradition to the U.S.

Levitt:

In the past, Iran and Hezbollah put pressure on governments like Belgium and the Czech Republic when authorities in those countries arrested people tied to Hezbollah pending a U.S. extradition request.

For example, in 2014, Hezbollah operatives plotted to assassinate Belgian prosecutors and looked into kidnapping a Belgian defense attache in Beirut. This followed the arrest of Ali Koleilat when he landed in Brussels on a flight from West Africa. Hezbollah was trying to intimidate Belgium and prevent Koleilat’s extradition to the United States. They failed.

And it was the case a few months later when Czech authorities arrested Ali Fayad in Prague. In that case, Hezbollah operatives likely related to Fayad kidnapped five Czech citizens in Lebanon. Fayad was later released in a prisoner exchange for the five kidnapped Czechs.

So U.S. authorities had every reason to fear Hezbollah and Iran would try to seek Tajideen’s release as well.

Clip: So we knew as soon as he was arrested in Morocco, with the amount of money he generated for them, we knew there was going to be political pressure and maybe something else. And sure enough there was; there was enormous political pressure from Iranian-tied elements and LH-related elements on the Moroccan government, including reports of extensive bribe offers, etc. And to the credit of the Moroccan government’s great courage in this, because they were risking a lot, they did the right thing and they not only extradited him, but expedited it in the interest of justice. And as you know, Iran actually severed diplomatic ties – not solely because of that – but as we understand, it was in part due to that snubbing. But we’re, you know, forever grateful to the Moroccans for that.

Levitt:

Thanks to the Moroccans, Tajideen was successfully extradited to the United States, despite the threats from Iran and Hezbollah. In 2018, he was tried and sentenced to five years in prison for his role in a money laundering conspiracy aimed at evading U.S. sanctions, and ordered to forfeit 50 million dollars.

But only two years later...

Clip: Kassim Tajideen is back home. The Lebanese businessman charged by a U.S. court for financing the Iranian-backed Lebanese group Hezbollah was released from prison on compassionate grounds. Tajideen landed in Beirut after completing three years of his five-year sentence.

Levitt:

He was granted an early compassionate release due to health conditions and concerns he could contract COVID in prison.

Although back in Lebanon, Kassim Tajideen has maintained close ties to a number of Hezbollah financiers – including Mohammad Bazzi.

Clip: Mohammad Ibrahim Bazzi provided Hezbollah with millions of dollars from his transcontinental business holdings. He leveraged his political relationships to build a vast petroleum, mining, milling, and energy services empire that again spanned Europe, the Middle East, and Africa – all to Hezbollah’s benefit.

Levitt:

Bazzi, a dual Lebanese-Belgian citizen and Specially Designated Global Terrorist, was a key Hezbollah financier who provided *millions* of dollars to the group over the years. This was generated from his business activities in Belgium, Lebanon, Iraq and throughout West Africa. He has his pick of passports when traveling – he holds Lebanese, Belgian, British, Sierra Leonean *and* Gambian passports. That obviously helps him avoid scrutiny when crossing international borders.

In 2005, Bazzi was even appointed honorary consul in Lebanon by the government of Gambia.

Honorary consuls are part-time volunteer diplomats, representing the interests of the countries that appoint them, often in ceremonial ways. They receive some of the same perks and protections as traditional diplomats, including the ability to move diplomatic “pouches” across borders without inspection.

Former senior DEA official Jack Kelley explains:

Clip: Part of the tools that they're using to achieve these strategic-level objectives is through getting these honorary consular positions specifically so that they can have diplomatic immunity.

Levitt:

As you can imagine, these positions are very attractive to terrorist organizations like Hezbollah.

Clip: Nine honorary consuls have been linked to terrorist groups by law enforcement and governments, most were tied to Hezbollah.

Hezbollah financiers and facilitators use honorary consul positions to enhance their prestige and their freedom of movement.

Levitt:

As an honorary consul, Bazzi established close ties to the president of The Gambia, Yahya Jammeh. In October 2007, President Jammeh appointed Bazzi Consul General to Lebanon and they engaged in joint ventures together. They owned a petroleum company together, for example. He even assigned Bazzi a full-time paramilitary guard and escort.

According to The Gambia's *Freedom Newspaper*, Bazzi invited Hezbollah militants to The Gambia “on a regular basis” in the name of investment. The militants handled Bazzi's business activities and other official errands.

However, Gambian officials revoked Bazzi's honorary consul status in 2017, after they accused him of paying bribes to then-President Jammeh and contributing to what officials call the country's “near ruin.” And by the next year, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Bazzi for serving as a key Hezbollah financier.

But that didn't really deter Bazzi. Instead, he started relying on his son, Wael. He conducted business through him, and used him to register new businesses and bid on Gambian government contracts. Wael formed a petroleum company to maintain his father's access to the oil industry. But then, Wael, himself, was designated by the Treasury in 2019.

Mohammad Bazzi was officially charged in the United States with money laundering conspiracy in January 2023. A month later, he was arrested by Romanian law enforcement in Bucharest and extradited to the United States to face charges.

Bazzi was only one of many Hezbollah financiers who abuse honorary consul status in Africa.

Ali Saade and Ibrahim Taher are both close associates of Bazzi and key Hezbollah financiers involved in numerous illicit financial schemes in the region.

Clip: The US Treasury has imposed sanctions on a number of Hezbollah sponsors in Guinea. The ministry confirmed that it continues to uncover businessmen funding Hezbollah's destabilizing activities. Meanwhile, media sources revealed that the sanctions extended to the two Lebanese businessmen Ali Saade and Ibrahim Taher for their support.

Levitt:

Designated by Treasury for supporting Hezbollah, Ali Saade – born in Guinea – is a prominent businessman in the African nation. He is also a Lebanese citizen and, guess what, holds a French passport. Another surprise, he was appointed honorary consul status by Guinea. Ali Saade's business? He uses fishing boats for narcotics trafficking, among other things.

The State Department's Rewards for Justice program offered a 10 million dollar reward for information leading to the disruption of Hezbollah financing mechanisms like those run by Ali Saade.

According to the State Department, Saade, quote: "initiates money transfers from Guinea to Hizballah, transferring funds through Hizballah representatives in Guinea and Lebanon."

Hezbollah's illicit financial activities in Africa are highly intertwined – Tajideen, Bazzi, Saade and others all have ties to one another.

Clip: Saade helped provide Tajideen with access to corrupt members of the former Guinean administration at the highest levels and the rest of the Guinean government.

Levitt:

When the Treasury Department designated Ali Saade, it also sanctioned *another* Hezbollah financier operating in Guinea – Ibrahim Taher – for financing Hezbollah.

Clip: Ibrahim Taher is one of the most prominent financial supporters of Hezbollah in Guinea.

Levitt:

Taher has reportedly gone to significant lengths to cover his illicit activities. For example, when Taher and an associate wanted to send U.S. dollars collected at one of their commercial facilities abroad, they bribed Guinean customs officials to allow their currency to pass in luggage. Taher has also used his status as an honorary consul of Lebanon to Cote d'Ivoire to travel in and out of Guinea with minimal scrutiny.

In another instance, in 2020, Saade and Taher flew from Guinea to Lebanon on a special flight with a "large amount" of money. The group claimed that the money was relief aid for the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon, which allowed the flight to pass without question. But really, COVID-19 relief aid had previously been used as a cover for transferring funds from Guinea to Lebanon for Hezbollah's use.

According to court records, prosecutors in Guinea opened an investigation into the flight, but it closed its inquiry without filing charges. Both Saade and Taher have denied any wrongdoing.

As you can see, Hezbollah uses a variety of tactics to raise funds from Lebanese communities in Africa. This includes leveraging the businesses of willing donors and, at the other end of the spectrum, using threats and even outright violence to compel members of the diaspora Lebanese communities to cough up money for the group.

And for those expatriates who dare resist Hezbollah's request for money, it usually ends with attacks on their commercial properties by organized groups of thugs.

Once or twice a year, Hezbollah officials in Beirut reportedly inform Lebanese businesses across West Africa just how much their contributions should be. That's based on each businesses' expected earnings, of course.

Then at least once a year, senior Hezbollah operatives travel through the region to collect these...let's call them mandatory 'donations'...to support Hezbollah.

In 2000, a European Union official even pointed out how only a small portion of the Lebanese community in Africa is sympathetic to Hezbollah's cause, but many people contribute regardless just to keep Hezbollah off their backs and their properties safe.

These mafia-style tactics are reminiscent of a Hezbollah operative you might remember from last season – Assad Barakat in South America, who convinced local store owners to pay him by threatening their family members back in Lebanon.

But not all Hezbollah financiers utilize such violent methods. Some get more creative – like Nazem Ahmad, a Lebanese-Belgian dual citizen who generated funds through the blood diamond trade and used a Beirut art gallery as a laundering front.

Hezbollah has a long history of involvement in the blood diamond trade. Diamonds are an excellent way to smuggle and launder money – they're very liquid, can't be sniffed out by dogs, don't set off metal detectors, and are easy to conceal. Same goes for artwork. Which may be why Nazem Ahmad chose to stash and transport his money in this particular way, rather than through traditional money laundering schemes.

According to U.S. law enforcement, Ahmad has “longstanding ties” to the blood diamond trade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or DRC, and formerly ran businesses in Belgium. In order to hide his ill-gotten gains, he hid his money in high-value art – a pre-emptive attempt to mitigate the effects of U.S. sanctions. His extensive art collection is worth tens of millions of dollars and includes works by Pablo Picasso and Andy Warhol. He then decided to open an art gallery in Beirut as a front to launder money.

Nazem's business ties to Africa stretched across multiple continents and resulted in a complex web of illicit actors colluding to financially benefit Hezbollah. He maintained close ties to both Kassim Tajideen *and* Mohammad Bazzi.

In December 2019, the US Treasury Department designated Ahmad as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist, noting that “Hezbollah utilizes Ahmad and his companies to launder substantial amounts of money bound for the terrorist group.”

According to Treasury, Ahmad *personally* provided funds to Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah as well. That's how connected he was.

Following his designation, Ahmad needed a way to continue laundering money without raising alarms. Like Tajideen...he turned to his family.

Ahmad's son handled his father's businesses in South Africa and owns one of the companies that laundered the blood diamonds. And his daughter acted as an art broker. But that didn't last long.

Clip: I'm pleased to announce today that OFAC has sanctioned a global network that has engaged in sophisticated forms of money laundering and attempted sanctions evasion to benefit Hezbollah and a key financier, Nazem Said Ahmad, who OFAC sanctioned in 2019 as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist. Our sanctions target today a total of 52 individuals and entities spanning Lebanon, the United Arab Emirates, South Africa, Hong Kong, Angola, Côte d'Ivoire, and other countries.

Levitt:

Earlier this year, on April 18, 2023, Ahmad was indicted alongside 51 other individuals and businesses spread across nine countries. Their criminal activities included facilitating “the payment, shipment, and delivery of cash, diamonds, precious gems, art, and luxury goods”– activity which benefited both Ahmad and Hezbollah.

This network transacted 160 *million* dollars worth of artwork and diamond-grading services through the U.S. financial system, helped Ahmad evade sanctions, and allowed him to maintain his opulent lifestyle.

The United Kingdom also sanctioned Ahmad on the same day in April 2023 and froze all of his assets. The UK arrested one of Ahmad’s colleagues at the request of the United States, but Ahmad and the remaining defendants are still at large at the time of this recording.

Clip: Today I am here to highlight a standing \$10 million reward offer for information leading to the disruption of financial mechanisms of Hezbollah. Specific to this offer, we are seeking information on the financial network of Nazem Ahmad, a prominent Hezbollah money launderer, financier, diamond dealer, and art collector.

Levitt:

With several notable exceptions, Hezbollah has increasingly looked to Africa as a finance and logistics hub, not only as a place where the group can carry out terrorist operations.

That’s because Africa presents Hezbollah financial and logistical opportunities few other areas can offer. Hezbollah operatives cornered the market on certain goods, established monopolies affecting critical industries like food production and groceries, and established close ties with corrupt officials.

It should therefore not be a surprise that in December 2022, the Law Enforcement Coordination Group, or LECG, held a meeting focused *specifically* on Hezbollah’s activities....*in Africa*. The LECG was established by the United States and Europol in 2014 as a global forum to improve international coordination to counter Hezbollah’s terrorist and other illicit activities. Governments from around the world participate in this group – it’s a big deal that Hezbollah activities in Africa warranted a dedicated meeting of the group.

It’s pretty clear that Hezbollah goes to great lengths to evade authorities around the world, but what is less known is the extent of the group’s digital footprint, which knows no boundaries.

In our next episode, we’ll dive into Hezbollah’s online activities – from its cyberattacks to its disinformation campaigns to its first-person shooter games – and uncover how the group uses the *internet* as a weapon.

OUTRO:

Thanks for listening to ‘Breaking Hezbollah’s Golden Rule,’ brought to you by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and hosted by me, Matthew Levitt.

This podcast is produced by Anouk Millet for Earshot Strategies, and written by myself, Lauren von Thaden, Camille Jablonski, and Delaney Soliday, research assistants at the Washington Institute. Dubbing for this episode was provided by Abdullah O Hayek.

The audio clips used in this episode are from DW, 60 Minutes, Associated Press, Al Jazeera, the U.S. Department of State, ProPublica, Sawt Beirut International, Voice of America, and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

To learn more about Hezbollah’s criminal, militant and terrorist activities, check out my book, “The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God.”

You can also visit the Washington Institute’s website at [washingtoninstitute.org](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org) and explore our map and timeline of Hezbollah worldwide activities.

If you liked what you've heard, leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts and subscribe so you don't miss any future episodes.

Correction: Iman Kobeissi was arrested in a DEA sting operation, not during the course of an FBI investigation. Please see here for the [2015 DOJ press release](#).