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The Iran/Hezbollah Strategic and Terrorist Threat to Africa

Dr. Ely Karmon (International Institute for Counter Terrorism; Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy, and Strategy, IDC, Herzliya)



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About the Author:

Dr. Ely Karmon is a Senior Research Scholar at the Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya, Israel, and a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute for Policy and Strategy at IDC. He lectures on Terrorism and Guerrilla in Modern Times at The Interdisciplinary Center, Herzliya, at the IDF Military College, and at the National Security Seminar of the Galilee College.

He holds a B.A. in English and French Culture from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, a Licence in International Relations from the Institut d'Etudes Politiques and a Licence in Bantu languages from the Ecole de Langues Orientales, in Paris. He earned his Ph.D. in political science from Haifa University.

Dr. Karmon serves as an advisor to the Israeli Ministry of Defense, is a member of The Atlantic Forum of Israel, and is involved in NATO workshops on terrorism and on the Mediterranean Dialogue. He is a member of the International Permanent Observatory (IPO) on Security Measures During Majors Events at the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), Turin, Italy. Served as advisor of the Anti-Semitism Monitoring Forum of the Israeli Government Secretariat.

Dr. Karmon's fields of research include international terrorism, WMD terrorism, political violence and extremism, and the strategic influence of terrorism and subversion in the Middle East and worldwide. He has written extensively on international terrorism, and has participated in numerous international conferences. His book *Coalitions between Terrorist Organizations: Revolutionaries, Nationalists, and Islamists* was released in May 2005 by Brill Academic Publishers (Leiden and Boston).

Contact email: ekarmon@idc.ac.il

Abstract:

This paper summarizes the information concerning the Iranian, and Hezbollah, presence and activities in Africa and attempts to evaluate the importance of Africa in the overall Iranian strategy to advance its “global power” ambitions, to balance the pressure of the international community on its nuclear project and prepare the ground for subversive and terrorist responses in case of crippling sanctions or a military strike at its nuclear facilities.

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Background

Since President Ahmadinejad’s inauguration in 2005, Iran’s foreign policy focus has shifted from Africa to Latin America in order, as he put it, to “counter lasso” the U.S..ⁱ This change accelerated after Ahmadinejad’s 2007 visits to Venezuela, Nicaragua, Ecuador and Bolivia and the International Conference on Latin America held in Tehran in February 2007, where Iran’s Foreign Minister, Mehdi Mostafavi, announced the opening of embassies in Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, and Uruguay and a representative office in Bolivia. This strategy seemed to be driven by the opportunity President Chavez gave Iran to build an anti-American axis with Venezuela and its “Bolivarian” allies in the backyard of the United States..ⁱⁱ

However, Iran did not abandon its “great power” ambition to enhance its presence and influence in Africa, in the backyard of Western Europe, possibly to balance the growing European pressure on its nuclear program.

According to an analysis by *The Economist*, while Iran has exploited anti-American sentiment in Latin American countries such as Bolivia, Nicaragua and Venezuela, “in Africa it has concentrated on strengthening Muslim allegiances with offers of oil and aid.” In 2009, some 20 ministerial or grander visits to Africa by Iran’s diplomats, generals and president led to the signing of “a bewildering array of commercial, diplomatic and defence deals.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Addressing a group of Iranian ambassadors to African countries in December 2011, Deputy Foreign Minister for Arab and African Affairs Hossein Amir-Abdollahian underlined that Iran attaches major significance to the expansion of ties with all African nations “in the strategic continent and in Muslim states in particular.” He emphasized that the promotion of ties with African states is a major priority for Iran's President Ahmadinejad, who has agreed to provide African nations with essential resources to facilitate their development and progress. Amir-Abdollahian called on the Iranian ambassadors to speed up the implementation of ongoing Iranian cultural, economic and commercial projects based in Africa. Earlier in June, in a meeting with former Malian President Alpha Oumar Konare, President Ahmadinejad expressed Tehran's readiness to launch a joint fund with Africa.^{iv}

In January 2012 Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi underlined that bolstering ties with African countries is a top priority of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy on the background of the pressures imposed by the West to undermine Iran's progress.^v

The reasons behind Iran's activity on the African continent are to be found in attempts by the international community to isolate it. Iran has moved to find access to African markets to which it can export oil and other goods, and from which it can import strategic resources.^{vi}

The diplomatic support of African states in the United Nations (UN) has also been a strong motivation for Iran to keep African Governments close. Tehran's efforts to boost ties and cooperation with Africa have recently led to its acceptance as an observing member of the African Union (AU), where it has shown an active presence in the AU summit meetings.^{vii}

The importance of Africa in Iran's strategic thinking was displayed by its hosting of a two-day Iran-Africa summit in Tehran on September 14-15, 2010, which brought heads of state, diplomats, business leaders and cultural representatives from over 40 African nations to Iran to discuss a range of issues.^{viii}

This is how Ja'far Qannadbashi, an Iranian expert, has presented Iran's "clear strategy in Africa":

"A considerable collection of the continent have accepted Iran as their strategic ally. Iran has achieved a special place which is coveted by many of the industrial countries. The 21st century belongs to Africa due to the needs of the industrial world to merge the African economy with the global economy to use its raw material and emerging markets. Iran is

well equipped with industrial and engineering capabilities of which Africa is in urgent need. In the political arena, the US' unilateralism, domination of capitalism after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and collapse of the bipolar order, have made African countries weary of the West's inexhaustible efforts to re-colonize the continent. Africans are politically in need of collaboration with independent powers capable of stabilizing their position in the power hierarchy. Iran can be this reliable power through which the independence of Africa is preserved.^{xix}

The threat of new sanctions against Iranian oil exports has forced Iran to diversify its oil exports to include growing economies in Africa, which also helps other forms of economic, diplomatic and security cooperation with the continent. Nigeria for instance, by gaining access to Iranian oil would be able to export its own oil to other markets.^x

Like in Latin America, Iran has promised to build energy infrastructure in several African countries: to refurbish refineries, to assist in the construction of power plants and even to share its civil nuclear technology.

In the commercial field, Iran has shown interest in purchasing cocoa from Ghana. One relatively successful project has been the establishment of an Iranian car manufacturing business in Senegal for production of local cabs. The export of cars to Senegal and Sudan helps sustain the cost for Iran's own internal automobile industry.^{xi}

The stressing of cultural proximity to the Islamic population of certain regions of Africa have allowed Iran to position itself as an alternative to what it refers to as the neo-colonial mindsets and imperialist intentions of the West. "I said Iran is near us, is getting nearer by each day. I am not referring to bilateral relations, important though these are. I am referring to the ineluctable fate that binds Iran to the rest of the world, including us,

especially us. She is Third World, which we are. She is anti-imperialist, which we are,” claimed an op-ed in Zimbabwe's most popular daily newspaper.^{xii}

Finally, Iran is determined to counter the diplomatic and economic activities of its arch-enemy Israel, which has a history of strong diplomatic, economic and security relations with sub-Saharan Africa, and compete with Egypt, an important regional rival with a long tradition of relations with Africa.^{xiii}

Uranium trade and nuclear ambitions

The "dark side" of Iran's Africa policy is its attempts to extract uranium from African nations.

During a visit to Teheran in March 2011, Zimbabwe's Foreign Minister, Simbarashe Mumbengegwi, said his country is willing to cooperate with Iran on uranium mining. "Zimbabwe has rich uranium reserves," he said, "but is faced with a shortage of funds and does not possess the technical knowledge and equipment needed for extracting rich uranium ore [...] If we can work together on uranium mining, it will improve the economic situation of both *countries*." *In April 2011, the Sunday Telegraph reported that Iran had struck a secret deal with Zimbabwe to mine its uranium reserves in return for supplying oil.*

Iran has also tried to establish a strategic relationship with Niger, one of Africa's most important uranium producers, but these attempts failed when former President Mamadou Tanja was removed from power during a coup in 2010.^{xiv}

In 2005, Tanzania stopped a ship that was found to be carrying uranium from the Democratic Republic of Congo to Iran. In 2009 the UN reported that Iran had struck a deal with Somali rebels in which it would deliver certain weapons to these rebels in return for access to uranium reserves in Somali areas under the rebels' control.

In December 2011, Iran announced that it will open an embassy in the uranium-rich Namibia, thus strengthening the already existing bilateral ties. Namibian Foreign Minister Utoni Nujoma declared that "Iran's resistance in acquiring peaceful nuclear technology despite all pressures was praiseworthy... and [the two countries] must find ways to make plans on expansion of bilateral ties operational."^{xv}

Iranian efforts to expand its strategic presence and influence in East Africa

Eritrean President Isaias Afewerki visited Tehran in December 2008, and Ahmadinejad went to Djibouti in February 2009, where he signed five cooperation agreements with his Djiboutian counterpart.

According to the Eritrean opposition media, *Asmarino*, Eritrea has granted Iran total control of the Red Sea port of Assab, where Iranian submarines "deployed troops, weapons and long-range missiles... under the pretext of defending the local oil refinery."

^{xvi} Other media outlets have stated that Eritrea was hosting military bases for the Iranian Revolutionary Guards. Radio France Internationale (RFI) remarked that "Iran has not chosen the port of Assab randomly; in case of a conflict with the West over the nuclear question, Tehran would be in a position to carry out a "maritime jihad."^{xvii}

Iran is engaged lately in high level contacts with the leaders of Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and the Comoro Islands while contacts with Ethiopia have been occurring at a lower level.

Kenya's government stated that is looking forward for Iranian investments. According to a statement issued by the Iranian Red Crescent Society (RC), Iran's third polyclinic in Kenya will be opened in Mombasa in the near future. Iran has already set up two polyclinics in the capital city of Nairobi.^{xviii}

It seems though Iran is also interested to advance the Shiite religious presence in Kenya. The Kenyan Shia cleric, Morteza Morteza, said that "the number of Shia Muslims has sharply increased, and a lot of Kenyans became familiar with this honorable school of thought."

The Iranian Speaker of the Parliament, Ali Larijani, met in Tehran with former Tanzanian president, Ali Hassan Mwinyi, and with the Speaker of the Tanzanian House of Representative, Pandu Ameir Kificho, who attended the Fifth International Conference on the Palestinian Intifada. On that occasion, Larijani maintained that the development of relations with Africa was one of Iran's priorities.^{xix}

"Sudan - the pivot of Iran-Africa relations"

"Sudan is the pivot of Iran-Africa relations," and "expanding ties with African nations is high on Iran's foreign policy agenda," said Iranian Defense Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar in Khartoum during a four-day official visit in March 2008. He explained that "religious and cultural affinities between the two countries and a common understanding of major regional and global issues significantly contribute to the expansion of Iran-

Sudan relations.” The Sudanese counterpart, Gen. Abdelrahim Mohamed Hussein called Najjar’s visit to Sudan a “turning point” in Iran-Sudan defense ties.^{xx}

Sudan has strengthened its relationship with the Islamic Republic since 1989, when Brigadier Omar al-Bashir took power in Sudan in an Islamist coup. Iran sent weapons and oil supplies and some 2000 Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) advisors to train Bashir’s army shortly after the revolution. Four years later Iran provided Sudan valuable military support in armored cars, heavy artillery, and radar equipment.^{xxi} In fact, the entire organization and doctrine of the Sudanese Popular Defense Force (PDF) is based on the concept of popular mobilization of the IRGC.^{xxii}

Sudan and Iran are subjected to U.S. economic sanctions as states sponsors of terrorism and the International Criminal Court issued an arrest warrant for President Bashir for war crimes in Darfur. Even Russia and China backed away from overtly cooperating with Sudan’s military as a result of the Darfur crisis. However, Ayatollah Khatami explicitly condemned the International Criminal Court saying that the warrant was issued because Sudan “has stood up to the extravagance of colonial powers” and has sought to implement Sharia law, “actions that Iran supports.”

This pushed Sudan and Iran in recent years to increase their bilateral economic, military, and nuclear cooperation. In March 2008, the two countries signed a mutual defense agreement, “providing for consolidated defense ties and joint efforts to strengthen peace and security in the Horn of Africa,” including training for Sudanese army and intelligence officers in Iran. Iran is engaged in several development projects in Sudan, including a \$30 million water treatment project and a \$130 million electrical production project.^{xxiii}

In 2006, Ayatollah Khamanei told Sudan President Omar Al-Bashir that “the Islamic Republic is ready to transfer this experience and the technology and knowledge of its [nuclear] scientists” to other friendly countries. In return, Bashir called Iran’s enrichment of uranium a great victory for the Islamic world and supported Iran’s right to its peaceful nuclear program.^{xxiv} In December 2009, Sudanese FM Deng stated that, “our fundamental stance is to back Iran's nuclear issue and we always stand by Iran.”^{xxv}

During his September 2011 visit to Sudan, Ahmadinejad said that Iran and Sudan were standing together as “defenders of Islam” in the face of “pressure from the colonialists, who want to impose things that affect our people negatively.” Omar al-Bashir, for his part, stated that his “country, that owns rich natural resources, has opened all ways of cooperation to Iran so that the two countries can benefit from these resources in the interest of their nations and the entire Islamic *Ummah* through partnership and joint cooperation.” Sanam Vakil, an expert on Iran at the Johns Hopkins University, thinks Iran has been successful in strengthening ties with Sudan because the two countries have an ideological link: “standing up against the West and imperialism.”^{xxvi}

According to Amir Ziadzadeh, an Iranian African affairs expert, Ahmadinejad’s last visit to Sudan is possibly related to the recent developments in Egypt and Libya and “the separation of southern Sudan” and has an important political and strategic dimension in the framework of the two countries’ cooperation “against the mutual enemies, i.e. the US and Israel.”^{xxvii}

Thus Sudan has become central to Iranian foreign relations in the Horn of Africa.

Major regional blunder: Iranian Arms Shipment to Nigeria

In late October 2010, Nigerian officials seized in Lagos' Apapa Port thirteen shipping containers of weapons, including artillery rockets, rifle rounds and arms. The seizure came after a twin car bombing on October 1, 2010 (Nigeria's Independence Day) in Abuja, which killed at least twelve people and sparked new concerns, as Nigeria presidential elections were set to be held in April 2011.^{xxviii}

The investigation proved that the shipment originated in the Iranian port Bandar Abbas and its final destination was Gambia. The Iranian authorities confirmed that the consignment originated in Iran. Nigeria reported the seizure to the United Nations Security Council.

Several men were put on trial in Nigeria in connection with the seizure of the cargo: Azim Aghajani, an alleged Iranian Revolutionary Guard member, and three Nigerian suspects.

A few weeks after the seizure of the weapons' cargo, Nigeria's drug enforcement agency captured in Lagos 30 kilograms of high-quality heroin worth nearly \$10 million inside a shipment of auto parts sent from Iran and with Europe as its final destination.^{xxix}

Gambia-Iran Relations

Iran and Gambia enjoyed a good diplomatic and economic relationship, a mutual understanding in foreign policy base on "shared feeling of oppression from the West: Iran under sanctions for its nuclear program and Gambia accused of human rights abuses." In November 2009 Ahmadinejad visited Gambia to strengthen ties.

In November 2010, in reaction to the weapons shipment, the Gambian government cut diplomatic ties with Iran and asked the Iranian diplomats to leave the country within 48 hours. "All Government of Gambia projects and programs, that were being implemented in cooperation with the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran have been cancelled," the Gambian Foreign Ministry stated.^{xxx}

Iran admitted that it had shipped the thirteen containers to Gambia as part of a confidential agreement signed three years before, and that the goods seized were the third of such shipments. Gambian President Jammeh refused to take responsibility for the cache of weapons.

Senegal's Reaction

According to African expert J.Peter Pham, Senegal's President Abdou Diouf shut down the Iranian embassy in Dakar in 1984, accusing its diplomats of spreading Shia religious propaganda and covertly financing Senegalese media and other organizations. The diplomatic mission was allowed to reopen in the 1990s and "relations between Dakar and Tehran warmed considerably since Abdoulaye Wade became president in 2000."^{xxxix}

The Economist has noted that Senegal, though poor and quite small in population, carries diplomatic weight in Francophone Africa and at the UN, so "Iran has been bombarding it with goodwill" by building the Khodro car factory, promising to build tractors, an oil refinery and a chemical plant, and provide cheap oil. Senegal's President Abdoulaye Wade "has gratefully accepted this bounty."^{xxxix} He paid four official visits to Iran – in 2003, 2006, 2008, and 2009. Several Iranian leaders visited Dakar during the same period, including President Ahmadinejad who has been a regular visitor since 2006.

Under Wade, permission was given for an Iranian cleric to build a Shi'a seminary, or hawza, in Senegal, where Senegalese youth are educated by mullahs trained in Iranian institutions. These institutions converted a small, but not insignificant, number of Senegalese Muslims to Shiism.^{xxxiii}

Wade has supported “Iran’s commitment to struggle against the proliferation of nuclear weapons” (!) and expressed confidence in “the assurance by his Iranian counterpart to not exploit uranium for anything other than peaceful and civilian uses.”^{xxxiv}

Michael Rubin of the American Enterprise Institute even claimed in a 2008 article that Senegal was “quietly turning into West Africa’s Venezuela.”^{xxxv}

Most of Gambia’s small territory is located within the borders of Senegal. For its part, Senegal has been combating an insurgency in its southern region of Casamance led by the separatist Movement of Democratic Forces of Casamance (MDFC), a source of tensions between Gambia and Senegal.

Senegal was extremely worried about the Iranian arms shipment, fearing that given the Gambian President's alleged relation with MDFC, the weapons could have ended up in the rebels’ hands. These fears were confirmed when the Senegalese found evidence that the MFDC were in possession of sophisticated Iranian weapons. Therefore, after a failed Turkish mediation, and in spite of the excellent relations of President Wade with Ahmadinejad, Senegal decided to definitely cut its diplomatic ties with Iran.^{xxxvi}

Iranian sponsorship of subversion and terrorism in Africa

Morocco and Iran have had a difficult relationship since the Iranian revolution in 1979 and normalized relations only in the late 1990s. Sunni scholars in Morocco have denounced what they say is an effort to convert people to Shia Islam. Morocco severed diplomatic relations with Iran accusing its diplomatic mission of seeking to spread Shia Islam in the predominantly Sunni Muslim kingdom, threatening “the religious unity of the country.” As Mohamed VI, Morocco's king, is the country's official religious leader, “any attempt to convert Sunni Muslims has been equated to an attack on the monarchy,” the Moroccan foreign ministry said.^{xxxvii}

According to Israeli intelligence, "many foreign students, including [Shi'a students] from Uganda and other African countries, are sent to study theology in Iranian universities" as a means of recruiting and training them as Hezbollah operatives or Iranian intelligence agents.^{xxxviii}

In 2002, Shafi Ibrahim, a leader of a cell of Ugandan Shi'as working for Iran and possibly Hezbollah, was arrested by Ugandan Police. Sharif Wadoulo, another Ugandan Shi'a member of the same cell, fled to a Gulf country. Ibrahim and a group of African students traveled to Iran in 1996 on scholarships to study theology at Razavi University in Mashhad. Alongside Lebanese Hezbollah trainees, Ibrahim and Wadoulo underwent training in 2001 at two facilities in the Amaniye area of north Tehran. They were taught to use small arms, produce explosive devices, collect pre-operational intelligence, plan escape routes, and withstand interrogation techniques. The students were given fictitious covers, money, and means of communication, then "instructed to collect intelligence on Americans and Westerners present in Uganda and other countries."^{xxxix}

In October 2003 Israeli intelligence thwarted an Iranian plot to kidnap Israeli businessmen and political leaders in Africa. Iranian intelligence targeted Israelis in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia and Tanzania. In February 2004, an Iranian diplomat was taken into custody by Nigerian police for spying on the Israeli embassy, the Nigerian Petroleum Corp towers, the British Council, and the Defense Ministry and Army headquarters in the capital of Abuja.^{xi}

The 2,000 members of the IRGC and the Quds Forces, which helped train Sudanese security forces at the beginning of the 1990s, also trained foreign Islamist fighters, as Khartoum permitted Tehran to use Sudan as a secure transit point and meeting site for Iranian based radical groups. According to the U.S. indictment of Osama bin-Laden, the Al-Qaeda leaders met with an Iranian religious official in Khartoum as part of an effort to arrange a tripartite agreement between Iran, Al-Qaeda and Sudan's ruling National Islamic Front (NIF) for putting aside ideological differences and work against the U.S., Israel and other Western countries.^{xii}

After the expulsion of Al-Qaeda elements from Sudan in 1996, this cooperation appears to have been ceased.

Sudan's role in the Iranian efforts to deliver weapons to Hamas

Reports that Israel may have carried out an air attack on an Iranian weapons convoy in the Sudanese desert in January 2009 have drawn attention to an Iranian arms smuggling network to deliver weapons to Hamas in Gaza, in which Sudan is believed to be playing a key role. The weapons are transported with trucks across Sudan into the Sinai Peninsula,

from where they are smuggled by Bedouins to Gaza through an underground tunnel network.^{xlii}

Actually it was reported that since January 2009 Israel had conducted three military strikes against smugglers transporting Iranian weapons shipments destined for Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip, at the height of the fighting during the Israeli *Cast Lead* operation against Hamas terrorism in Gaza.^{xliii} According to *SudanTribune.com*, 39 people riding in 17 trucks were reportedly killed. Israel did not confirm or deny reports about the air attack.

The opposition Sudanese newspaper *Rai al-Shaab* claimed that, as part of a secret clause in the 2008 defense pact between Iran and Sudan, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) is operating a secret weapons factory in Sudan to funnel weapons to Iran-sponsored terrorist organizations in Africa and the Middle East, including supplying the "Houthis [in Yemen], Somalis, and ... Hamas in the Gaza Strip with missiles." Soon after it was published, Sudanese authorities shut down the entire newspaper and its deputy editor was arrested on charges of "terrorism, espionage and destabilizing the constitutional system."^{xliv}

Hezbollah activity in Africa

Hezbollah operates mainly in West Africa, where it has been operational since the early 1980s. Like in Latin America, most of Hezbollah's infrastructure is based on local Lebanese Shia communities.

Lebanese, mostly Shiite immigrants, first arrived in West Africa around the turn of the century. They came to dominate, produce and retail trade within a few decades and

gained control of the lucrative diamonds market discovered in eastern Sierra Leone in 1930. “Lebanese merchants play a major role in the region's economy today, particularly in the Ivory Coast (home to over 100,000 Lebanese), Senegal (roughly 20,000), and Sierra Leone (roughly 6,000 today; about 30,000 prior to the outbreak of civil war in 1991), and have developed strong ties with governing elites in all three countries.” Thus Hezbollah has found a natural constituency among the local Lebanese Shiite, in competition with the Shiite Lebanese Amal movement.^{xlv}

Hezbollah collects donations from businesses, recruits new members and launders money, operates front companies, and is also deeply involved in the "blood diamond" trade. In the diamond trade, Hezbollah operates in Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo.^{xlvi}

One example, which testifies of the successful money rising by Hezbollah in the region, is the accident of a flight from Cotonou, Benin, in West Africa to Beirut, which crashed on takeoff on December 25, 2003. On board were senior Hezbollah members, carrying \$2 million in contributions to the organization from across the region.^{xlvii} This amount represented the regular contributions the party receives from wealthy Lebanese nationals in Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Benin, and other African states.^{xlviii}

According to U.S. intelligence officials Hezbollah “maintains several front companies in sub-Saharan Africa” which are assumed to include import-export companies. The same sources informed that many Hezbollah activists in the South America’s tri-border region relocated to Africa as a result of the investigations on Hezbollah activity after the group's involvement in the 1992 and 1994 truck bombings in Buenos Aires, Argentina.^{xlix}

In May 2009, the U.S. Department of the Treasury designated Kassim Tajideen and Abd Al Menhem Qubaysi, "two Africa-based supporters of the Hizballah terrorist organization, under E.O. 13224, by freezing any assets the designees have under U.S. jurisdiction and prohibiting U.S. persons from engaging in any transactions with them." Kassim Tajideen, who operates a network of businesses in Lebanon and Africa, has contributed tens of millions of dollars to Hizballah and has sent funds to Hizballah through his brother, a Hizballah commander in Lebanon. Tajideen and his brothers run cover companies for Hezbollah in Africa.¹

Abd Al Menhem Qubaysi is the personal representative of Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah in Cote d'Ivoire, communicates with Hezbollah leaders and has hosted senior Hizballah officials traveling to Cote d'Ivoire to raise money for the organization. Qubaysi also helped establish an official Hizballah foundation in Cote d'Ivoire which has been used to recruit new members for Hizballah's military ranks in Lebanon.^{li}

In August 2009 Qubaysi, who was monitored by the Ivory Coast's security service for his recruitment activity for Hezbollah, was expelled from the country but he returned there in 2010 possibly after pressures from the Lebanese ambassador.

According to former DEA operations chief Michael Braun, Hezbollah is moving tons of cocaine into West Africa, onward to North Africa, and eventually into European markets. According to David Asher, an expert on global illicit financial networks, over the last five years, large sums of cash, often escorted by Hezbollah security guards, have been shipped from Africa to Lebanon.^{lii}

“Nigerian Hezbollah”?

Contrary to the shadowy and controversial Hezbollah Venezuela, the “Nigerian Hezbollah”, actually called the Islamic Movement of Nigeria (IMN), is a much more representative and active organization.^{liii}

The IMN is most identified with its leader, Sheikh Ibrahim Zakzaky, who began his political career as a Sunni fundamentalist student leader influenced by the works of Sayyid Qutb, Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood radical ideologue whose ideas lay the basis for Al-Qaeda’s ideology. Zakzaky’s aggressive Islamism led to his incarceration during the rule of military dictator Sani Abacha, earning him cult status among a section of the Muslim poor and oppressed.

In the mid-1980s he decided to pass to Shiism and his movement has grown rapidly since he was embraced by Iran. Zakzaky’s opportunistic association with the Iranian regime was rewarded with substantial funds and training, both religious and military. His movement is operating in Nigeria’s northern Muslim states Kano, Kaduna, and Zaria. Zakzaky fights not only for the implementation of the Sharia law, already imposed in some Nigerian states, but demands that Nigeria abandons secularism and becomes an Islamic state modeled on Iran. According to expatriate former senior Iranian diplomat Adel Assadinia (who personally met Zakzaky in the mid-1980s, while he was serving on the Iranian Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee), IMN is poised to strike Western interests on Iran’s behalf.^{liv}

According to Assadinia, Zakzaky was given money to create an organized and radical Islamic force in Nigeria as “Iran’s objectives are to establish a local power base to exert

influence over the national government and to act against Western interests.” A report of the Nigerian Security Organization noted that the training received by Zakzaky in Iran included “planning and executing student unrest” with a view to overthrowing the Nigerian government.^{lv}

IMN’s popularity is growing among the impoverished Nigerian Muslims and it is challenging the country’s traditional Muslim leaders. In January 2009, Zakzaky’s followers plunged the northern city of Zaria into turmoil after attacking the motorcade of a revered religious and cultural leader, Emir of Zazzau Alhaji Shehu Idris, on his way to a meeting on security in the city of Kaduna, at which the IMN was to be one of the subjects under discussion.^{lvi}

The IMN’s main centers of operation are the northern universities: Ahmadu Bello University in Zaria, Bayero University in Kano and the Usmanu Dan Fodio University. Although the IMN commands the following of impoverished Nigerian Muslims, its leadership is exclusively comprised of graduates from these universities.^{lvii}

Zakzaky’s views are radical and deliberately inflammatory.^{lviii} He claims Al-Qaeda and Osama bin-Laden do not exist and terrorist attacks in the West are the work of Western intelligence services, Tony Blair was responsible for the 7/7 bomb attacks in London and the U.S. and Israel are the only terrorist states in the world.^{lix}

He alleged that Nigeria’s secular leaders engaged in ritual sacrifices of unborn children ripped from their mothers’ wombs, asking his followers to fight them. The IMN has also been implicated in the decapitation of Christians for allegedly offending Islam. Despite

Zakzaky's plea for Muslim unity, Sunnis have been targeted during the IMN's highly confrontational demonstrations.^{lx}

But Jews are the chief targets for attack, as Zakzaky portrays them as "dastardly infidels", imploring Allah to "hasten their destruction in the world" and calling for Israel to be "wiped off the world map," exactly like his Iranian masters. Zakzaky frequently draws inspiration from Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and the deceased Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin, whose portraits are carried at the front of every IMN march and demonstration, as can be seen in many pictures and videos of the movement on the Internet.^{lxi}

Zakzaky spoke at the London Al-Quds Day in October 2010, an annual demonstration held at the end of Ramadan in support of the resistance movements against Israel, organized by the Islamic Human Rights Commission (IHRC), a Hezbollah and Iran supporting organization. The movement's website also reported on an event it hosted with Islamic scholar Sheikh Yusuf Ali, who said that the "utmost aim" of Jews is to "own the whole world and bring it under their control" and "enslave everyone."^{lxii}

In February-March 2012 Sheikh Zakzaky made a six weeks trip to the Iranian religious city of Qom where he was proud to meet Sheikh Jafar Ul-Hadi and Ayatollah Haeri Shirazi.^{lxiii} Ayatollah Shirazi is one of the most radical Mahdist Iranian leaders who in a shocking appearance on Iran's state television stated that instead of arresting and suppressing the opposition protesters after the elections of 2009, it would be better to kill them. "The more of them are killed, the more beneficial. If the armed forces kill some of them, it is to our benefit." he said. He insisted that killing the opposition protesters "is

sanctioned by obedience to Allah and the prophet and is handed down to the Supreme Leader.”^{lxiv}

Interestingly, Zakzaky claimed lately that “the current wave of attacks in the name of Boko Haram is a deliberate agenda to suppress Islamic resurgence in Nigeria, with special focus on the Islamic Movement in Nigeria.” According to him “a highly profile security report has clearly indicated the fear and apprehension of the so-called super powers on the current agitation for Islamic revival in Nigeria, that the country will eventually become Islamic, and in particular Shi’a Islam.”^{lxv}

Conclusion

Iranian and Hezbollah presence and activity in Africa, like the one in Latin America, goes beyond the legitimate political, economic, social and cultural levels and creeps into the dangerous area of terrorism and subversion, threatening not only outside actors and interests but the very stability of the host countries.

The diplomatic and political crisis resulting from Iran's involvement in the clandestine and illegal shipment of weapons to three West African states, Nigeria, Senegal and Gambia, are a clear example of this potential threat and should be taken in consideration by other African states where Iran is active.

Iran's political and economic assets in Africa strengthen the Tehran regime, permits it to circumvent UN sanctions and diminishes the possibility of UN-backed international diplomatic and economic pressure to convince it to renounce its nuclear project. Thus, indirectly at least, it enhances the threat of Iran's nuclear hegemonic projection in the Middle East and beyond.

The Iranian and Hezbollah involvement in the January - February 2012 terrorist attacks in Azerbaijan and Georgia, Thailand and India, is a bad omen for the future. In the event of Iran's vital interests – such as the survival of its nuclear project – being threatened by the international community, by the US alone or by Israel, Africa could be a preferred ground for retaliation, directly or with Hezbollah's support. The Islamic Movement of Nigeria, for the moment a violent movement but not yet terrorist, could be also tempted to imitate Boko Haram, its Sunni nemesis, and enter the field of terrorist activity in the service of Iran.

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