



Hezbollah's African Venture: Realities and Limitations

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In the past decade, Hezbollah has focused its attention in the region mostly on Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The organization is, nonetheless, extending its activity to the African continent, with news reports and private sources underlining its support to the Polisario Front in Morocco and the Islamic Movement in Nigeria (IMN). At present, Hezbollah's African endeavor appears to be limited in scope, with vastly different drivers from one country to the other.

Last May, Morocco's foreign affairs minister Nasser Bourita asserted¹ in an interview with *Jeune Afrique* that his country had broken off relations with Iran over Hezbollah's alleged support to the Polisario Front,² a liberation movement contesting Moroccan control over the Western Sahara. The official explained that Hezbollah had provided military support to the organization via Algeria and that among the Hezbollah officials involved in the case were Haidar Sobhi Habib; Haj Abou Wael Zalzali,³ who is responsible for Palestinian affairs in the militant group; and Ali Moussa Dakdouk, who had trained in Iran⁴ and was involved in the organization's Iraqi operation.⁵ Through its media arm, Al-Manar, Hezbollah rebuffed Moroccan claims, quoting the party's Media Relations Office and saying that it was "regrettable that Morocco resorts, under pressure by the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia, to false accusations."⁶

(1) Hezbollah Supports Polisario: Bourita Unveils Its Names and Attacks Algeria," *Vajuu.com*, May 14, 2018, <https://vaaju.com/maroc/le-hezbollah-soutient-le-polisario-bourita-devoile-ses-noms-et-sattaque-a-lalgerie/>.

(2) "Polisario Front: Political and Military Organization, North Africa," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, updated Nov. 17, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Polisario-Front>.

(3) Mohammed Darwish, "Hezbollah Receives Leading Delegation from PLO Factions in Lebanon," *Donia Al Watan*, Nov. 23, 2014, <https://www.alwatanvoice.com/arabic/news/2014/11/23/622976.html>.

(4) Hamza Mustafa, "Iraq Releases Moussa Dokdouq Months after He Was Acquitted of Killing Five US Soldiers," *Aawsat.com*, Nov. 17, 2012, <http://archive.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&issueno=12408&article=704708#.W3TQZuhKh8Z>.

(5) Elizabeth O'Bagy and Stephen Wicken, "Fact Sheet: Ali Mussa Daqduq," May 14, 2012, <http://www.understandingwar.org/reference/fact-sheet-ali-mussa-daqduq>.

(6) Al-Manar. <https://english.manartv.com.lb/tag/morocco>

Morocco's tumultuous relations with Iran date back to 2009. In March of that year, the Kingdom decided⁷ to break off diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic following the statement of an Iranian official about the situation in Bahrain, which dubbed that country "the fourteenth province of Iran." Morocco had also accused⁸ Iran of interfering in its internal affairs by attempting to change the core foundation of the Moroccan identity, and undermine the Maliki school of Sunni, which had been adopted by the Kingdom. The relationship resumed in 2014 when Iranian officials expressed regret at the breakdown of diplomatic relations between the two countries, and on October 13, 2016, Moroccan ambassador Hami Hassan was appointed to Tehran. However, in 2017, Moroccan authorities arrested Hezbollah financier Kassem Mohamed Tajeddine, who was accused by the United States of money laundering and of belonging to a terrorist organization. Kassem Tajeddine,⁹ aged 63, is a Belgian-Lebanese financier, and his three brothers, Ahmed, Husseyn, and Ali, have since 2011 operated logging concessions in the Democratic Republic of Congo through the company Trans-M, and have also owned another company, Congo Futur, specializing in cutting forest wood, all of which have been subjected to sanctions by the United States as front companies for Hezbollah. Tajeddine was also involved¹⁰ in building up Hezbollah's real estate assets in Lebanon. In recent years, Tajeddine had risen as a front for Hezbollah's illicit financing operations. "Hezbollah is actively working on developing licit business activities that allows it to have more financial autonomy and provides it with a steady revenue stream," said a source close to Hezbollah who spoke to the author on condition of anonymity.¹¹ The source also added that the organization was involved in construction, various dealerships, transportation, commodities trading, and other business in Lebanon and Africa. Thus, Tajeddine was an instrumental element in the organization's financial-engineering model, and his arrest was a significant blow to the militant group. Moroccan news agencies attributed¹² Hezbollah's support to the Polisario Front movement as an act of revenge for Tajeddine's arrest.

Last month,¹³ a source close to Hezbollah commanders reported to the author that Hezbollah was providing ideological and religious training to a limited number of Nigerian Shiites. Nigeria is home to the Islamic Movement in Nigeria,¹⁴ a jihadist organization with strong support among the 5 million Shia Muslims that emerged in the 1980s. The movement was founded by Ibrahim Zakzaky, who hailed from the town

(7) Mustafa Sehim, "Iran, Hezbollah, Algeria, Polisario, Morocco Face the "Band of Four,"" May 9, 2018, <http://www.maroc-hebdo.press.ma/iran-hezbollah-algerie-polisario-maroc-face-a-bande-quatre/>.

(8) El Houssaine Naaim, "Morocco to Name New Ambassador to Iran, Resume Diplomatic Relations," *Morocco World News*, Dec. 22, 2014, <https://www.morocccoworldnews.com/2014/12/147751/morocco-to-name-new-ambassador-to-iran-resume-diplomatic-relations/>.

(9) Hoda Saliby, "The Bottom of the Freeze on Relations between Morocco and Iran," *Courrier International*, May 3, 2018, <https://www.courrierinternational.com/article/les-dessous-du-gel-des-relations-entre-le-maroc-et-liran>.

(10) "Who Is Qasim Taj Eddin?" Janoubia.com, Mar. 28, 2017, <http://janoubia.com/2017/03/28/%D9%85%D9%86-%D9%87%D9%88-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%85-%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%9F/>.

(11) Interview with a source close to Hezbollah in July, 2018.

(12) Sehim, "Iran, Hezbollah, Algeria, Polisario, Morocco."

(13) Interview with a source close to Hezbollah commanders in July, 2018.

(14) Official Website of the Islamic Movement in Nigeria, <https://www.islamicmovement.org/index.php?limitstart=52>, accessed Aug. 15, 2018.

of Zaria¹⁵ and who was influenced by the works of Sayyed Qutb,¹⁶ one of the main thinkers of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, who was considered one of the main contributors to Al-Qaeda's ideology and later became an admirer of the Iranian revolution. The IMF has gained in popularity the backdrop¹⁷ of escalating Sunni-Shiite tensions and clashes with the Nigerian State in 2015, which resulted in the killing of over 300 Shiites in Zaria, according to a Bloomberg report.¹⁸ At the time, the army had accused the Shiite group of attempting to kill Nigeria's army chief-of-staff, a charge the movement denies.

"The Shiite Nigerians receive first a religious training, before a military one that is provided in two camps in the Lebanese Bekaa."¹⁹ In 2013, a CNN report²⁰ highlighted as well that IMN was providing Hezbollah-style military training to hundreds of Nigerians in camps throughout northern Nigeria. A Nigerian diplomatic source who spoke to the author on condition of anonymity confirmed they had "received similar reports."²¹

The IMN appears to have also endorsed Hezbollah's successful model in terms of working on strong propaganda and outreach programs. The Bloomberg report had noted last year that the IMN propaganda was very similar to that of Hezbollah, with the organization beginning broadcasting its own Internet-based Hausa radio station, Shuhada, and with plans to start a new TV channel; it already has a newspaper, *al-Mizan*. In addition, the organization, according to Bloomberg, boasts more than 300 schools, Islamic centers, guards and a "martyrs' foundation" funded mainly by member donations. This network bears a striking resemblance to Hezbollah's welfare systems and media operations model, which have allowed that organization to expand its reach internally and regionally and promote its agenda.

Hezbollah's positioning in both Morocco and Nigeria appears limited in scope for now. After, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Hezbollah's expansion in Africa appears to be motivated by Iran's belief in the organization's strong abilities to train, build up, and equip forces loyal to Tehran that could be used as a pressure point when needed or fall within the Islamic Republic's larger foreign policy strategy. In both Nigeria and Morocco, Hezbollah seems to be implementing Iran's successful strategy of supporting legitimate movements that find themselves marginalized in their home countries. Yet an escalation of Hezbollah activity in Nigeria could be a more efficient foreign policy tool than an escalation in Morocco in its ability to thwart Israeli and Western ambitions in the region. The country's unique geographic position, its resources, and its political, economic, and social situation make it the better choice to extend operations across Africa.

(15) Conor Gaffey, "Who Is Sheikh Zakzaky, Nigeria's Most Powerful Shiite Muslim?" *Newsweek*, Dec. 16, 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/who-sheikh-zakzaky-nigerias-most-powerful-shiite-muslim-405297>.

(16) Jacob Zenn, "The Islamic Movement and Iranian Intelligence Activities in Nigeria," *CTC Sentinel*, 6, no. 10 (Oct. 2013), <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-islamic-movement-and-iranian-intelligence-activities-in-nigeria/>.

(17) "Saudi [Arabia], Iran Stoke Sunni-Shia Tensions in Nigeria: Experts," *News24*, Nov. 5, 2016, <https://www.news24.com/Africa/News/saudi-iran-stoke-sunni-shia-tensions-in-nigeria-experts-20161105>.

(18) Donna Abu-Nasr, "As Trump Makes Threats, Iran Makes Friends," *Bloomberg.com*, Mar. 8, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/features/2017-03-08/as-trump-makes-threats-iran-makes-friends>.

(19) Interview with a source close to Hezbollah in July, 2018.

(20) Dawit Giorgis, "Nigeria's Hezbollah Problem," *Global Public Square* blogs, CNN, June 14, 2013, <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/14/nigerias-hezbollah-problem/>.

(21) Phone interview with a Nigerian diplomat in June, 2018.