

# **The Geopolitical Tale of a Lebanese Hizballah Family**

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## **The Geopolitical Tale of a Lebanese Hizballah Family**

On June 6, 2020, French authorities confiscated a Falcon 7X jet belonging to the Congolese president in Bordeaux. A firm named Commisimpex had filed a lawsuit, ostensibly to reclaim a debt owed by the Republic of the Congo (RoC), and the seized plane was held as a possible means of asset recovery.<sup>1</sup> But the RoC had its own claims against the firm. Commisimpex had been dissolved in Brazzaville and the nation's government had assigned a group of lawyers as the liquidators of the company. Moreover, the RoC had issued a judgment against Commisimpex since the firm owes over a billion dollars in back taxes. So the plane now sits in Bordeaux, awaiting arbitration.

On the surface, this seems a fairly straightforward commercial episode that might make the news, but not the headlines. And yet, like a Dan Brown novel, the further one digs into that incident, the more one begins to realize this is far from a simple business dispute. Indeed, the deeper one goes, the more it looks like a ripple caused by powerful geopolitical forces at work deep within the water.

First, the facts: The claim to the plane as an asset comes from a Lebanese businessman, Mohsen Hejeij, who is affiliated with the Lebanese Middle East Africa Bank (MEAB), based in Beirut, Lebanon. Hejeij has an extensive history of operating in Africa, in the Gabon and Equatorial Guinea as well as other parts of sub-Saharan western Africa. His presence in the RoC began under the reign of Pascal Lissouba, and thus his business network in the nation is grounded in the elites of the Lissouba era, and not the current Denis Nguesso-Sassou era. This alone has created some tension between Hejeij and the Congolese government.

### **The Rise of Hizballah and Amal families**

Mohsen Hejeij is part of the large and influential Hejeij family, which comes from Lebanon's Shiite community, the Mutwali. His family hails specifically from the town of Deir Antar (Diryantar), which is situated about 10 miles equidistant from the Israeli border to the south, the Israeli border to the east and the Mediterranean Sea to the West, and about 18 miles from Tyre. The town lies in

<sup>1</sup> "The unwanted ping that could cost Sassou Nguesso his presidential jet," Africa Intelligence, June 6, 2020, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa\\_business/2020/06/11/the-unwanted-ping-that-could-cost-sassou-nguesso-his-presidential-jet,109236566-ar1?utm\\_source=PDF&utm\\_medium=PDFART&utm\\_content=3594157&utm\\_campaign=109600752](https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa_business/2020/06/11/the-unwanted-ping-that-could-cost-sassou-nguesso-his-presidential-jet,109236566-ar1?utm_source=PDF&utm_medium=PDFART&utm_content=3594157&utm_campaign=109600752)

the heart of the southern Lebanese Shiite enclave known as Jebel Amal in the Bint Jbeil district, from which some of the most important Shiite scholars came to help the Iranian Safavid dynasty convert Iran into a Shiite empire a half millennium ago. A thousand years ago, Jebel Amal could have reasonably been seen as the intellectual heart of Shiism, but it has fallen far from its zenith in the intervening centuries. The area is now largely impoverished, having suffered centuries of underrepresentation and ultimately come to be viewed with great suspicion by the Ottoman overlords. The Shiite community entered the period of Lebanese independence as a distant, dismissed and derided fourth community, far behind the Christians, Sunni Muslims and Druze. A small elite had arisen that made its peace with the reigning powers, but its efforts were largely focused on maintaining its position among fellow Shiites by enriching itself through its status in Beirut. The Hejeij were as far from that elite as any group could be.

Beyond the small number of elites who had made their peace with the powers in Beirut, the local towns in Jebel Amal also had their own branches of powerful Shiite clans – a structure based on tribes reaching back hundreds of years, and anchored to the roughly 30 Shiite tribes descended from the original 50–70. These clans armed themselves in the late 1970s as part of the overall Shiite Awakening led by Imam Musa al-Sadr. However, they always guarded their autonomy from the powerful new sectarian forces al-Sadr had created – Amal in the 1970s and then Hizballah, which was created by Iran in the early 1980s after al-Sadr’s disappearance in Libya in 1978. The clans in Deir Antar came from the most established pedigree – the Hamadiyah clan – of hundreds of years ago through the Chamas subclan. It is beyond the focus of this article, but the headiness of those days at the edge of the Lebanese civil war, combining both the anxiety of being caught in the intensifying Israeli–PLO crossfire and the growing sense of empowerment as the Shiite community emerged from its cowed submissiveness, are captured brilliantly in Fouad Ajami’s most beautiful book, *The Vanished Imam*. Suffice it to say that in a time of new dynamics or great change, industrious actors can find paths out of their station. And the Hejeij did.

The Hejeij family did not descend from respected clan ancestry. As the Arabs would say, they had neither Nassib nor Asal (lineage nor pedigree), and thus their rise to fame had to buck the traditional route to predominance through the extended influences and implied power of belonging to these clans. But the age gifted them the chance. The 1970s and 1980s were a time of great change in the Shiite community. Old traditional structures were increasingly under stress. The Sunni-dominated PLO had established its own mini-state – Fatah land – in

southern Lebanon, including atop the Shiite Jebel Amal. Along the way, it was increasingly both destroying the ancient Shiite community of Jebel Amal and ironically attracting Shiite youth who felt, or outright were, alienated from traditional and ossified Shiite structures. The romance of the PLO's resistance and globetrotting, although it was by and large no more than a cover for Sunni domination through the language of Arab nationalism, provided the promise of the sort of drama and adventure that animated hope of breaking out of the stasis gripping Shiite youth. Some youth found their fortunes through the PLO – at least in the mid-1970s – but others left and began to seek adventures in the land of opportunity: sub-Saharan Africa. And yet a select few more began to notice the rise of a charismatic cleric, Imam Musa al-Sadr, who was to eventually form the Amal movement and trigger the Shiite Awakening years before Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Tehran.

By the early 1980s, these three paths out of the ossified Shiite structure began to converge. Musa al-Sadr had been removed from the scene by the Libyan regime, and great events consumed Tehran that would propel the Shiite world onto a global stage. While the ossified older elites and ancient clans bristled with suspicion at the new actors, the youth who sought drama, the youth who fled to Africa to seek fortune, and the youth who joined the small but growing ranks of the Shiite militias under al-Sadr suddenly looked far east to Qom and Tehran as a new guiding light. With one eye gazing toward Africa and the other fixed on the great change gripping Lebanon in the 1980s, new revolutionary structures began emerging among the Shiite. Money from Shiites in Africa combined with these new structures. After the Islamic Revolution in Iran and its alliance with the PLO, some of those young, radical Shiites who had drifted into PLO ranks drifted into newly emerging Shiite revolutionary ranks. Among them was Emad Mughniyeh, a graduate of the PLO's Force 17 who returned to the Shiite fold to forge the new "Party of God": Hizballah.

It was against this backdrop that families like the Hejeij, with ambition but no means or pedigree, could make their move. If the Hejeij family were to make its way out of its limited conditions in an impoverished part of the country, then it would have to look toward Africa for wealth and consider making its pact with another powerful structure, essentially a nontraditional "new" clan, for power and protection. If Amal and Hizballah did not exist, the Hejeij family would have invented them as their ladder and protector. The old Shiite clans, the ones descended from their "Mayflower," the Hamadiyah clan centuries earlier, were in their arrogance unable to discern this new reality emerging, and too late to tap

into it. They were thus surpassed, and only 20 years later, in a much-weakened form, joined the new Shiite reality under the condition of paying homage to the new powers – Hizballah and Amal – and the new elite they knighted, such as the Hejeij.

Indeed, the Hejeij family knows who its patron is, who bestowed its meteoric rise, and it is thus active on the web in its support for Hizballah. Some of its members, such as Talal, Nassir and Mahmoud Hejeij, can often be found posting pro-Hizballah tweets, including in support of the late Kassem Soleimani, and advertising its meetings with Hizballah officials and attendance at Hizballah events. While we in the West might wonder why they tip their hand so, we must remember that their stature is entirely dependent within Lebanon at this point on being understood as an extension of the reigning Hizballah power. So, they must flaunt their connection as loudly and widely as possible for validation.



*Mahmoud Hejeij (left) with a senior Hizballah commander at a Hizballah rally.*

The Hejeij family was not alone. Other families aligned with Hizballah included the vast Tajideen family network. Several such families of undistinguished pedigree – even by Lebanese Shiite standards – rose to wealth and stature in the 1980s and 1990s because their exiled members in Africa tied their fortunes to the two new forces in Lebanese politics, the Amal movement and the Hizballah group. It started with the war trade in diamonds in places like Cote d’Ivoire, but adept navigation among the lattices of corruption gripping several African nations allowed these families to expand beyond that soon enough.

Indeed, the Hejeij family is perhaps one of the most perfect examples of the Hizballah-Amal Shiite family making its money far away in the tropics of west Africa while looking back to its homeland, and the upheaval and changes gripping the Shiite community, to navigate into the corridors of influence and power.

These families are collectively reshaping Lebanon, not only in the south and Bekaa Valley – traditional Shiite strongholds – but in other areas of Lebanon too. They are asserting themselves as the new masters not only of their sect, but of their nation.

And they cross red lines of unspoken sectarian understandings as they do so. The Tajideen family used its wealth already a decade ago to try to impinge on traditionally Druze lands in the Shouf mountains. In a 2011 Book, *Warriors for God*, Matthew Levitt noted how the Tajideen empire of building companies and poultry traders – enriched massively by gaining huge contracts to rebuild south Lebanon following the 2006 war (which Hizballah had started and from which its client families were guaranteed to profit) – aimed much higher. Rebuilding the south after the war was not the only aim; the families sought to use the reconstruction process to fill the gap between Jezzine and the Bekaa Valley with new Shiite communities connected by a new highway. The Shiites were on the move and expanding their realm at the cost of others. Druze towns like Srayreh were in the way, and were thus targeted for intrusion and eventual takeover by these new Hizballah-knighted aristocrats.<sup>2</sup> The pro-Hizballah Shiites were using the destruction Hizballah wrought, the power it wielded and the money brought in from global networks to change not only the internal constitution of elite Shiite society and rank, but the delicate face and geographic divisions of Lebanon beyond. It was a profoundly destabilizing move that passed, and passes, only as long as Hizballah has the terrorizing power to keep the lid on the inevitable reaction.

But the Tajideen family reached high – too high, too fast and with too much swagger. The law caught up with them quickly and they were prosecuted in Western courts. Kassim Tajideen was pegged as suspicious early and tracked as a

<sup>2</sup> ElSaraali Masoud, “The Tajideen Brothers: From the Mountains of South Lebanon to ‘Tajco’ and Its Many Branches,” Janoubia, July 23, 2020.

Hizballah financier as he managed to maintain his vast international network, even with major American firms such as Tyson Foods. In 2015, the U.S. Department of Justice moved to recover funds from ongoing trade amounting to \$1.2 million through a front company, International Cross Trade, from which funds were diverted to Hizballah.<sup>3</sup> The U.S. finally caught up with Kassim Tajideen himself in 2017, and he was indicted in the U.S. District Court in the District of Columbia as a Hizballah fundraiser, having passed “tens of millions” of dollars to the organization. He soon found himself in a federal penitentiary. And yet, the Tajideen empire survives. It remains active and undeterred to this day. For example, as this article is being written, the clan – this time led by Kassim Tajideen’s brother Ali – is making a play for large lumber concerns in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. These networks fall back on their families to carry on whenever a single member is exposed and apprehended. To defeat financiers like the Tajideen, one must take on a family structure.

The Hejeij family makes fewer such mistakes. Indeed, while its network seems to operate on behalf of Hizballah, it employs with great skill all the tools of ambiguity, manipulation and maneuver. It thus serves as a sort of window for us into the foundation of power and the moorings of Hizballah in the Shiite Lebanese universe, and the way that this newly acquired stature has been leveraged into the corridors of power in the West.

The Hejeij family seems led by Mohsen Hejeij’s brother, Kassem Hejeij. He is the mayor of the town from which the Hejeij come, Deir Antar. Until recently, Kassem also headed the Middle East Africa Bank (MEAB), and the two brothers even shared the office in the top floor of the MEAB headquarters office building in Corniche el-Mazraa in Beirut. It is a tight family altogether, with the two owning adjacent palatial mansions in their hometown of Deir Antar.

As they rose to power, though, as part of the Hizballah financial system, the Hejeij had to overcome a logistical problem: international banking. The danger of winding up on the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) sanctions list of terror financiers is a strong deterrent to banks that contemplate lending money or issuing letters of credit – an essential component of maintaining an international business presence – to people or companies who may not yet have been proven engaged in criminal activities, but over whom hangs a thick cloud of suspicion. The skittishness with which any reputable bank would approach

<sup>3</sup> Elsaraali Masoud, “Kassim Tajideen Undeterred: Continues to Profit off the United States,” Janoubia, July 30, 2020.



such actors poses, therefore, quite an obstacle for potentially nefarious financiers and businessmen with terror connections trying to move monies without attention, circumvent structures of control and, most importantly, get letters of credit, make payments and lend money. The answer: create your own bank backed by a government and operating ostensibly – indeed mostly – aboveboard as cover for the subterranean financial world serviced below-board. Hizballah was backed by the Lebanese government and by Iran, which owned it through Hizballah, so the Hejeij managed to establish their own bank – the MEAB – in 1991. The effort to establish the bank, of course, was made much easier by sympathetic associates at the top of the Lebanese state banking and treasury worlds, such as the Amal leader’s protégé Ali Hassan Khalil, the Minister of Finance after 2014, and other Berri protégé Yusuf Fenianos, the Christian Minister of Transportation, who controlled ports and points of entry into Lebanon. These guardian angels had state power at their disposal to clean the MEAB books and records, and other enterprises as well, of possible sanctionable activity.

The MEAB, founded by the Hejeij brothers, is the epicenter of Hizballah financing. It is through this bank that Hizballah can without detection (or so they thought) receive funds internationally, make investments and finance activities in Lebanon – especially construction and real estate. A number of its clients have been sanctioned as well for financing the Shiite militias in Iraq associated with the late Kassem Soleimani and the Iranian IRGC. In other words, the MEAB is not about only the Hejeij business empire in Africa, but also activities by an assortment of others associated with the Iranian terror structure in Iraq.

The MEAB’s structure of correspondent banks is impressive and unnerving: Banca UBAE SPA in [Italy](#), a Libyan-controlled bank in Rome associated with [Iranian](#) activity; Fransabank in [Paris](#), singled out by the U.S. along with 11 other banks that cooperate with Hizballah; the Banco BPM Spa in Italy, associated with the Iranians; and the CBW bank, the only correspondent bank for USD. CBW is mostly a fintech bank with minimum due diligence located in Weir, Kansas, and annual sales of \$2.5 million.<sup>4</sup>

Through this bank, Hejeij could provide support for operational units. As the U.S. Treasury Department stated in its official press release, Kassem Hejeij and his clients – Adham Tabaja of Inmaa Group, which has a monopoly on

<sup>4</sup> “Hezbollah Financiers – Hejeij Clan,” Global Fight against Terrorism Funding, May 27, 2020, <https://www.gfatf.org/archives/hezbollah-financiers-hejeij/>

engineering and construction in the Dahieh section of Beirut; Husayn Ali Faour and his Car Care Company, which provides vehicular operational support for Hizballah; and “other so called legitimate businesses ... fund, equip and organize their subversive activities” in Lebanon for Hizballah.<sup>5</sup>

Kassem Hejeij is deeply involved with the African operations of Hizballah. He has reportedly met with senior figures from Hizballah’s elite Unit 910, active in the West Africa region.<sup>6</sup> According to various reports, Hejeij’s meetings with senior 910 officials, including Talal Hamiyah, the commander of Unit 910 and the man many consider Imad Moughnia’s successor, usually took place in locations considered to be safe, such as Libreville (Gabon) and Malabo (Equatorial Guinea).<sup>7</sup>

## The United States Notices

But the U.S. government has begun to catch up with the Hejeij. In 2014, a close business associate of Kassem Hejeij and client of the MEAB, Kamal Amhaz and Stars Group Holding, was placed on the OFAC terror list. In 2015 and 2016, more clients of the Hejeij brothers and the MEAB – Ali Youssef Charara and Spectrum Investment Group Holding SAL as well as Global Cleaners SARL – were placed on the OFAC list. Soon after, Kassem Hejeij himself was the target of investigations and on his way to the list as well.

In short, by late 2015, the United States was closing in on the MEAB from all directions, including via placing its clients below and its owners above Kassem Hejeij on the OFAC list. It is thus quite surprising that the MEAB itself was not placed on the list.

Feeling the heat of the U.S. OFAC designation, Kassem Hejeij moved quickly to divest his stockholdings in the empire of Hejeij clan companies, including the MEAB (although he remains the mayor of Deir Antar). But the ownership did not travel far from his hands. He turned over 99% of the controlling interests in the MEAB to his son, Ali. An OFAC amended complaint, *Hejeij vs. Gacki*, filed on

<sup>5</sup> “Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Front Companies and Facilitators in Lebanon and Iraq,” U.S. Department of the Treasury [press release], June 10, 2015, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl0069.aspx>

<sup>6</sup> “Update: Hejeij Clan – Logistic And Financial Services To Hezbollah,” Global Fight against Terrorism Funding, September 10, 2020, <https://www.gfatf.org/archives/logistic-financial-hezbollah/>

<sup>7</sup> “Hezbollah Financiers” (see note 4).

November 10, 2019, even noted, “The management change was merely a change on paper designed to circumvent sanctions.”<sup>8</sup>

Kassem Hejeij also turned over the reins of his two real estate companies (4266 and 703 Real Estate Companies SAL) to his wife, infant son Amir, minor son Kassim, infant daughter Rina, two adult daughters Fatme and Sara, former wife Rima Wehbe and the Hejeij Group Holding SAL.<sup>9</sup> The Hejeij Group Holding SAL, in turn, was handed off to his former wife Nasmal Hejeij and two adult daughters Sara and Fatme.<sup>10</sup> And the W.A.F. Commercial and Investment Company SAL was divested to his brother Hassan Mohammed Ali Hejeij; the Hejeij Group Holding; his nephew Wissam, son of Hassan Mohammed; adult son Ali; and adult daughter Fatme.<sup>11</sup> Kassim’s brother, Hassan Hejeij, who is also a cofounder of the MEAB, is married to Nada Kalot, an overt and strong supporter of Hizballah.

These divestments do not mean much. For example, in 2016, a year after the OFAC designation forced Kassim to start divesting, a major development construction project in Beirut still listed him as the primary point of contact for all matters.<sup>12</sup> And in a revealing article written in 2017 by Peter Ferrara, Kassim was quoted as bragging to a U.S. government source that “after all, turning over the bank to Ali [Kassim’s son] changes nothing because me and my son are one and he is following my orders.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, he even boasted, “I have the Americans in my pocket and I can buy Washington.”<sup>14</sup> And as noted, the U.S. government believes that the divestment of the MEAB was merely a shell game.

Kassem Hejeij’s game of musical chairs exposes both how these networks operate and our limits in legally nailing them. We in the West, especially in the

<sup>8</sup> See Kassem Hejeij’s amended complaint for declaratory and injunctive relief at Court Listener, November 11, 2019, <https://courtlister.com/recap/gov.uscourts.dcd.208749/gov.uscourts.dcd.208749.6.0.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> The 4266 Real Estate Company is registered at the Register of Commerce in Baabda under no. 2052611, dated March 1, 2018, and the 730 Real Estate Company is registered at the Register of Commerce in Baabda under no. 2052589, dated February 28, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Hejeij Group Holding SAL is registered at the Register of Commerce in Beirut under no. 1900816, dated November 30, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> W.A.F. Commercial and Investment Co, SAL is registered at the Register of Commerce in Beirut under no. 611184, dated January 28, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> CODE Consultants and Designers, “About Code: Recent Projects: Projects in Lebanon,” retrieved July 17, 2020, from <http://code-lb.com/default.asp?menuID=21>

<sup>13</sup> Peter Ferrara, “Power without Responsibility — Kassem Hejeij And Hezbollah’s Illicit Financial Network,” Daily Caller, July 13, 2017, <https://dailycaller.com/2017/07/13/power-without-responsibility-kassem-hejeij-and-hezbollahs-illicit-financial-network/>

<sup>14</sup> Ferrara, “Power without Responsibility.”

United States, emerged in rebellion to the European idea that the status of our birth dictates our future. We regard it as a given that sons, daughters, brothers and even spouses cannot be held to account for the crimes of an individual, and an individual can be held to account only for his own actions. This conviction is also inherent to the nature of the United States, probably originating in our Christian cultural origins, where redemption and forgiveness are cherished cultural values. So, too, should families be forgiven their errant member. So deep is this value that it is explicitly enshrined in our Constitution.

But in the Middle East, families are the most basic units of survival. Culturally and practically, in Middle Eastern Islam, all institutions are generally anchored to persons and their stature at that moment – and are extensions of that person rather than entities of their own under which a leader is viewed as the trustee of that institution. Even Mohammed’s successor, Abu Bakr, faced a civil war among the loyal tribes not because they wanted to take over, but because the institution of the caliphate, which he had just inherited, held no inherent legitimacy until he had personally negotiated and acquired his personal allegiance from those tribes. In those lands, families and, to a lesser extent, tribes hold an outsized importance since they are the only inherently benign forms of safety for an individual.

Moreover, a person severed from his family is fair game for anything, even elimination. Muhammed himself had to flee Mecca to Medina since his uncle was no longer able to provide him family protection. That made Mohammed fair game for murder by those he irritated. Simply, in Middle Eastern practice and culture, a person without a family is a person without a structure, without a foundation, without allies and, most importantly, without protection. A person severed from his family is a man marked for the unimaginable.

And vice versa: a family is judged by the activities, honor and behavior of every one of its members. If a family is genuinely dishonored, shamed or threatened by the behavior or activities of one of its members (including by the danger of revenge), then the family is obligated to protect itself and make very clear that this family member is expunged from the family, even killing the offender themselves if necessary, and the offensive activity he undertook is aggressively rejected by the family.

The result is that when we are dealing with political or subterranean structures of terror and terror funding, we incarcerate ourselves within the conventions of our culture to judge and track these networks. This is highly problematic. Unless a family has made very clear that it has severed itself from that family member

and his actions, that it has withdrawn familial protection and taken action to cauterize the family unit as a collective from him, it is to be assumed that the family is complicit. True, not only is this far from politically correct for any ideological flavor in the West, but it genuinely grates against every fiber of our being in terms of our cultural values. And yet, one simply cannot understand how Middle Eastern family-based terror networks operate unless we measure them against that culture's rudimentary need for familial survival and protection.

This is not the first time we have seen this. In the heyday of the Oslo peace process, the Palestine Development and Investment Company (PADICO) ran into corruption allegations leveled at its owner, a member of the powerful Nablus-based al-Masri family, but the structure of controlling ownership was just rearranged among other al-Masri members. Every Middle Eastern knew nothing was truly changed by this game of familial musical chairs. It meant, thus, only one thing: the West and Israel were either too naïve to understand or too weak to do anything about it. The idea that the al-Masri clan had reformed or that corruption in PADICO had been addressed was dismissed out of hand. Indeed, it was an inconceivability.

If this adept, or actually really brazen, use of shell games is not understood, then one cannot appreciate how Hizballah's terror networks operate around the world. And it is precisely our values – namely, our decency – that drive our aversion to violate them to analyze how these networks operate and respond to them. Hizballah seizes on this aversion to get away with murder – figuratively and, sadly, literally.

So it is clear, by Kassem Hejeij's own admission, that his spider web of family ownership networks in fact allows him to continue freely running the affairs of them all. And his family never forgets who it is: a new elite raised to influence and wealth by its role in the new constellation of power shaped by Amal and Hizballah. To disown its members who traffic with Hizballah is to surrender its position and wealth – to commit familial collective suicide.

## **The Hejeijs in Washington**

But what about his odd, but grandiose, boast that “he has the Americans in [his] pocket and [he] can buy Washington”? Moreover, when someone is put on the OFAC list, he can hardly defend himself alone in the U.S. To hire legal representation, payments must be made, but once a person is on the OFAC list,

his ability to move money internationally is gone. Kassem Hejeij needed a structure in Washington, if for no other reason than to pay lawyers to represent him and help resolve his case. In other words, on the face of it, Kassem Hejeij should be shut down in Washington, and yet he claimed to own it until at least 2017.

OFAC regulations prohibit all transactions by U.S. persons or those within (or transiting) the United States that involve any property or interests in property of designated or otherwise blocked persons. The prohibitions include the making of any contribution or provision of funds, goods or services by, to or for the benefit of any blocked person or the receipt of any contribution or provision of funds, goods or services from any such person.

Moreover, the OFAC writ was expanded, not only through Executive Order 13224 covering secondary sanctions, but in a series of acts in the last half decade, including in the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Act of 2015, as amended by the Hizballah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act of 2018. Under these amendments, the OFAC can prohibit or impose strict conditions on the opening or maintaining in the United States of a correspondent account or a payable-through account by a foreign financial institution that knowingly facilitates a significant transaction for a terrorist group like Hizballah, or a person acting on behalf of or at the direction of, or owned or controlled by, a specially designated global terrorist (SDGT) such as Hizballah. The OFAC closely coordinated this action with the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). The DEA's work with the OFAC is part of the DEA's broader effort under its Project Cassandra to target Hizballah's global criminal support network, which operates as a logistics, procurement and financing arm for Hizballah.

So how does Kassem Hejeij pursue his interests in Washington, especially hiring lawyers and lobbyists?

The answer to this riddle may also explain why the MEAB itself was never placed on the OFAC list in 2015 even though U.S. investigators were closing in on it from all directions.

Indeed, Kassem Hejeij's boast might have some merit. A retired U.S. Treasury official claimed that in January 2015, when U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met with Iran's foreign minister, Mohammed Zarif, in the framework of the nuclear talks that resulted in the JCPOA, Zarif raised the issue of the EMAB and asked that the U.S. government find a way to keep the bank off the OFAC list. After

this meeting, then-deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman met the same month with Iran’s deputy foreign minister, Abbas Araqchi, on January 18, 2015. We do not know exactly what they discussed, but we do know that soon thereafter it became clear that the U.S. would not include the MEAB on the OFAC sanctions list (although it was also clear that Kassem Hejeij called the shots at the bank), and that Patton Boggs and Alvarez and Marsal were hired by the other Hejeij, Mohsen, to help keep the MEAB off the OFAC list and to find a mechanism to show their books to the U.S. Treasury and Lebanese central bank in a way that could avoid its being necessarily sanctioned. Kassem Hejeij himself, however, was put on the OFAC list a few months later,<sup>15</sup> begging the question as to why the MEAB that he clearly controlled and through which he operated was not.

Which brings us to the other Hejeij, the one trying to confiscate the airplane, Mohsen Hejeij, who thus far remains off the OFAC list. As noted, Kassem Hejeij, who is on the OFAC list, cannot move a penny into the United States to pay a single lobbyist or lawyer. And yet, as Peter Ferrara noted in 2017:

Hejeij boasts, in fact, that he never has to worry about business, because of go-betweens connecting him with US lawyers and lobbyists willing to represent Treasury sanctioned individuals. When pressed by the source, Hejeij revealed that he has DC-based lobby firm BGR Group, and Squire Patton Boggs, a prominent Washington law firm, [at his fingertips](#). Being blacklisted from Washington has not stopped Kassem from buying the city, evidently.<sup>16</sup>

But how? The answer: Mohsen Hejeij is not on the OFAC list, although he maintains a large office as well in MEAB offices in Beirut. But Mohsen has a structure in and visits Washington. To understand how Kassem Hejeij can carry weight, even in DC, one must examine the Hejeij Washington structure.

Kassem Hejeij, as Peter Ferrara noted in his article citing U.S. investigators, remains in control of the MEAB. As such, leaving the MEAB off the OFAC list is a tremendous and bizarre loophole in anti-terror funding controls. It is so conspicuous as to raise suspicions that it was another unreported part of the JOCPOA “understandings.” This must not necessarily be taken as fact, but at least considered possible.

<sup>15</sup> “Treasury Sanctions Hizballah” (see note 5).

<sup>16</sup> Ferrara, “Power without Responsibility” (see note 13).

Two firms in Africa from which Kassem Hejeij has *not* divested, even in a shell game, expose for us how he continues to control Commisimpex and the MEAB: the two key assets are in Equatorial Guinea (SEGUIBAT SA SA)<sup>17</sup> and in Gabon (SOCOFI SA). Indeed, Kassem Hejeij is still listed as a chairman and shareholder of SEGUIBAT SA. Nonetheless, there is evidence that the MEAB has substantial ongoing business transactions with both SEGUIBAT SA<sup>18</sup> and SOCOFI SA. For example, the MEAB has leased a Bombardier Challenger 605 jet<sup>19</sup> from Avcon Jet Malta LTD to transport Kassem Hejeij family members, SEGUIBAT SA and SOCOFI SA personnel and other MEAB executives.<sup>20</sup>

In short, Kassem Hejeij and the two firms he controls overtly, SEGUIBAT SA and SOCOFI SA, appear to maintain unfettered access to the MEAB's financial structures and enter into agreements, access funds and use its assets, such as the firm's own private jet. Indeed, from published reports it appears that through these firms, Kassem employs a critical figure – a Lebanese-Gabonese citizen named Hicham Hazzime – to run drug networks and underworld activities in Europe, which allows him to purchase drones, night-vision equipment and other critical technologies for Hizballah and Iran, and then send them to Gabon. From there they are sent to Lebanon, Iran or Africa for Hizballah operations.<sup>21</sup>

At the same time, Commisimpex and the MEAB continue to have ongoing interactions, with the latter providing funding for Commisimpex' s lawyers in Washington, D.C. Further, it uses the arbitration case as cover for Mohsen's lobbying activities on behalf of Kassem. Moreover, in response to RoC attempts to seize its assets in Brazzaville, Commisimpex has used funds from the MEAB to retain lawyers in Paris and seize RoC assets for failure to pay its "debt" to Commisimpex, namely the value of the assets in Brazzaville, which amounts to over \$1 billion.

Kassem Hejeij's network in Washington is thus in fact quite complex.

In 2009, the MEAB and Kassem Hejeij retained Patton Boggs, and in 2012 they added BGR Group to address growing U.S. concerns over the MEAB's

<sup>17</sup> SEGUIBAT is an anagram for Société Equatoguinean de Batiment, the company registered at the Equatorial Guinean Register of Commerce under no. 100 Folio 542 SEME L.

<sup>18</sup> Architectural drawings identify SEGUIBAT SA as the builder for the MEAB's Tyre office in Lebanon (see <https://corcionetinucci.it/en/project/direzionale/meab-bank-agency/>). Also, a 2012 bill of lading identifies the MEAB as consignee on behalf of SEGUIBAT SA (see "Supply Chain Intelligence about MEAB S.A. Beirut Lebanon," Panjiva, <https://panjiva.com/MEAB-S-A-Beirut-Lebanon/5484461#>)

<sup>19</sup> Registered # 9H-KAS, CN: 5856.

<sup>20</sup> See search results for "9H-KAS," JetPhotos, <https://jetphotos.com/registration/9H-KAS>

<sup>21</sup> "Update: Hejeij Clan" (see note 6).



relationship with Hizballah.<sup>22</sup> In or around 2014, Kassem Hejeij's brother Mohsen Hejeij arranged for Christine Hassan Jaber<sup>23</sup> of Dearborn, Michigan, to begin working in the offices above the Mazraa branch of the MEAB in Beirut.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Megan R. Wilson, "Lebanese Bank Accused of Terrorist Ties Hires Patton Boggs," The Hill, July 8, 2013, <https://thehill.com/business-a-lobbying/309639-lebanese-bank-accused-of-terrorist-ties-hires-patton-boggs>

<sup>23</sup> Ms. Jaber (born January 31/February 1, 1979) is a former employee of Schulman & Associates PC, a Detroit defense firm whose clients include an Ohio woman who in 2011 pled guilty of a scheme to fund Hizballah. See the plea agreement at Court Listener, May 23, 2011, <https://www.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.ohnd.166566/gov.uscourts.ohnd.166566.75.0.pdf>; and U.S. Attorney's Office, "Ohio Man Sentenced to 75 Months in Prison for Scheme to Send Money to Hizballah," May 21, 2012, FBI website archives, <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/cleveland/press-releases/2012/ohio-man-sentenced-to-75-months-in-prison-for-scheme-to-send-money-to-hizballah>

<sup>24</sup> See the MEAB branch and ATM locator, <https://www.meabank.com/network/branches-atms>



*Mohsen Hejeij and Christine Jaber in the MEAB offices in Lebanon*

Since 2014, Ms. Jaber has been photographed with Mohsen Hejeij and MEAB lawyers Waddah El Chaer and Nicolas Najjar of the El Chaer Law Firm on multiple occasions in Washington, D.C.; London; and Lebanon.<sup>25</sup> When outside of the MEAB office in Beirut, Ms. Jaber supports the legal and lobbying team for Mohsen Hejeij’s construction company Commisimpex, which is involved in a

<sup>25</sup> Derek Parks, “2019 Global Leadership Awards” [digital photo album], Flickr, <https://flic.kr/s/aHsmHSGg3R>

long-running additional commercial arbitration dispute in Congo.<sup>26</sup> In 2014, Mohsen Hejeij, via the El Chaer Law Firm, hired Prime Policy Group to bolster his influence in Washington, with the assistance of Jaber.<sup>27</sup> In October 2019, Jaber appeared with him at an event at International Student House in Washington, D.C.,<sup>28</sup> after which Ms. Jaber was credited with having made a donation in an amount between \$1,000 and \$5,000<sup>29</sup> – a contribution in all likelihood made by Mohsen Hejeij for which Ms. Jaber served as a mere conduit.

Ms. Jaber also appears to provide logistical support to Mohsen Hejeij and the MEAB by virtue of her residence at 10008 Essex Street in Dearborn (“Essex St.”). Jaber is the registered lessee and Essex St. is the registered address for several luxury Lincoln cars and SUVs.<sup>30</sup> Public records show that Mohsen Hejeij and Waddah El Chaer<sup>31</sup> are both associated with the Essex St. address.<sup>32</sup> According to some published reports, the Essex St. house is used to launder drug money as well as provide money-laundering services for other Lebanese-owned businesses, in return for which Hizballah skims 4% of the revenue, and the Hejeij clan 2%.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> The litigation involved efforts by Mohsen Hejeij’s Congolese construction venture (Commisimpex) to collect on an arbitration award stemming from a decades-long dispute with the Republic of Congo – Brazzaville. See the complaint at Court Listener, September 2, 2011, <https://www.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.dcd.154174.1.0.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://soprweb.senate.gov/index.cfm?event=getFilingDetails&filingID=08F374C5-6881-4CB7-BC99-C68C2A91285A&filingTypeID=1> and

<https://projects.propublica.org/represent/lobbying/r/300937076>

<sup>28</sup> See the photo “John Tanner, Lisa Cotter Colangelo, Janet Pitt, Esther Coopersmith, Mohsen Hojeij, Christine Jaber,” Washington Life Magazine, November 16, 2019, <https://washingtonlife.smugmug.com/2019-PHOTOS/International-Student-House-Awards-Dinner-Vithaya-Phongsavan/i-qHPknXM/A>

<sup>29</sup> See “Our 2019 Supporters,” International Student House, <https://www.ishdc.org/our-2019-supporters/>

<sup>30</sup> A view of the house is available at Google Maps by searching “10008 Essex St Dearborn Michigan,” <https://goo.gl/maps/NrQyVVEGQwbguAYv5>

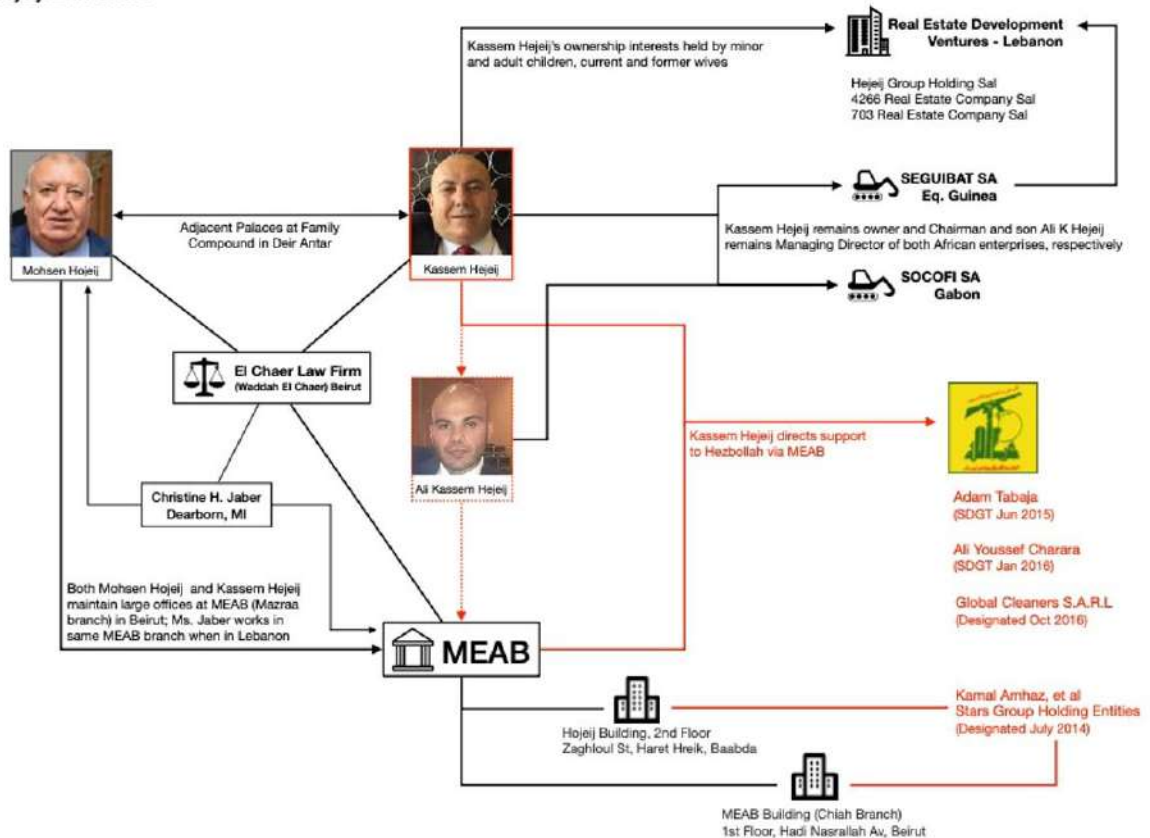
<sup>31</sup> Basic information about the firm is available on its website at

<http://www.elchaerlawfirm.com/#!lawyers/cp5d>; a list of recent news involving the firm is found at <http://www.elchaerlawfirm.com/news--publications>; and its Twitter account is viewable at <http://twitter.com/waddahelchaer?lang=en>

<sup>32</sup> The Essex St address is also associated with Liliane Cheyrtelli, who maintains extensive social media connections to South America and the Hejeij family in Lebanon. See <https://www.facebook.com/liliane.ch.31>

<sup>33</sup> “Update – Hejeij Clan” (see note 6).

**Exhibit A**  
**Hejeij Link Chart**



In August 2015, less than two months after the OFAC’s designation of Kassem Hejeij in June 2015,<sup>34</sup> the El Chaer Law Firm’s website announced it had been “appointed as a legal representative of a Beta group bank to execute legal due diligence and supply legal advice on diverse legal issues and corporate governance matters”<sup>35</sup> – almost certainly referring to the MEAB. In September 2015, the El Chaer Law Firm announced that its “notification to the U.S. Department of Treasury’s Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has been approved for legal representation in order to provide legal advice and sound counsel on delisting an international businessman placed on the Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List (SDN) as per the OFAC regulations”<sup>36</sup> – almost certainly referring to Kassem Hejeij.

As of September 2015, Mohsen Hejeij, the MEAB and Kassem Hejeij were all clients of the El Chaer Law Firm, at which point each party had the means and

<sup>34</sup> “Treasury Sanctions Hizballah” (see note 5).

<sup>35</sup> El Chaer Law Firm news (see note 31).

<sup>36</sup> El Chaer Law Firm news (see note 31).

mechanisms to pursue a legal and influence strategy under the guidance of Mohsen Hejeij.

Again, Kassem has no legal means to spend money in the United States, and thus is stripped of the means to retain a lawyer to represent his interests. To circumvent this, it appears as if Mohsen has engaged in clever obfuscations to avoid U.S. sanctions enforcement by acting on behalf of his brother, Kassem, in the U.S. and paying lawyers to represent him under the cover of ostensibly unrelated parallel work on the Commisimpex portfolio and its claims on Congo.

Mohsen Hejeij, using money from the MEAB, is lobbying in Washington on behalf of Commisimpex in the arbitration case in Paris over the ultimate dispensation of the seized RoC plane in Bordeaux. To fight this, Mohsen has hired law firms and lobbyists there as well.

In this case, Mohsen Hejeij has hired the same lawyers who are handling the legal case of Commisimpex – the African-based effort to lobby for his brother and delist him from the OFAC, which effectively obscures the use of that money and lawyer to act not only on behalf of Commisimpex, but of Kassem in support of his attempts to get off the OFAC list and keep the MEAB from getting placed on the OFAC list. And yet, even the “legitimate” cover is questionable. Kassem is using the MEAB to finance legal representation for the Commisimpex cases against the Congo, but at the same time using the same structure’s seamlessness on behalf of his brother’s case. To note, the entire Commisimpex world is clearly still under the control of Kassem, so Commisimpex may well be in violation of OFAC regulations by acting at the behest of Kassem and engaging in these activities in Washington, D.C.

Taken together, the Hejeijs’ capability in Washington, D.C., directed and coordinated from Mohsen Hejeij’s office in the brothers’ shared space above the MEAB Mazraa branch, provides Kassem Hejeij with access to Washington, D.C., ongoing support from Ms. Jaber in Dearborn and the means to further circumvent OFAC sanctions.

That would make Mohsen Hejeij, the MEAB and Commisimpex, and the whole cluster of activity of lawyers and lobbyists surrounding the Commisimpex issue, the confiscated plane, and this and other arbitration issues a seamless mishmash that includes activity in Washington, D.C. itself that is intended to circumvent and likely violates OFAC regulations.

## Back to Bordeaux and the seized plane

And indeed, it is likely that Commisimpex itself is a key asset-funneling structure for Hizballah and Hizballah-controlled entities. In a recent case in Paris, Commisimpex was able to seize bank accounts belonging to the RoC of approximately €6 million, but it is unknown where the seized money actually went. Observers in Paris stated that technically the money should have been transferred to Brazzaville, to the Commisimpex court-appointed liquidators, but it appears the money went instead to the MEAB in Beirut.

And this brings us back to the confiscated RoC airplane in France. If the money from these previous settlements in the West never wound up in Commisimpex coffers, and is instead diverted directly to structures that funnel money to Hizballah and Iran, then it should be assumed that the funds from this asset are also part of Hizballah's and Iran's effort to circumvent sanctions and fund themselves in their cash-strapped environment.

Indeed, the history of circumstances of the arbitration case surrounding the confiscated airplane, and Commisimpex itself, raise eyebrows. In August 2020, Nabih Berri took a personal interest in the case of the airplane in Bordeaux and intervened to negotiate some sort of settlement between Hejeij and Congo. In a June 2020 *Africa Intelligence Online* article, Berri appears to have personally introduced the Congolese delegation to Mohsen Hejeij and his nephew Ali Hejeij, who sits on the board of directors at Commisimpex.<sup>37</sup> While the mediation effort failed, Berri's personal interest in this case of the confiscated airplane is unusual, indeed striking. As the *Africa Intelligence Online* article notes:

Despite the financial crisis which has plagued the country for months, and the explosion that rocked the port of Beirut on August 4, Lebanon's parliament speaker and leader of the Shiite Amal movement, Nabih Berri, found time to mediate between the Congolese president's office and the Lebanese CEO of Commisimpex, Mohsen Hejeij ... Berri is a leading figure in the Lebanese Shiite community, and has long been close to Lebanese entrepreneurs operating in Arica, who contribute to his party,

<sup>37</sup> "Commisimpex: Godfather to Lebanon's Shiites Fails to Reconcile Hejeij and Sassou," *Africa Intelligence*, August 19, 2020, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa\\_business/2020/08/19/commisimpex-godfather-to-lebanon-s-shiites-fails-to-reconcile-hojeij-and-sassou\\_109600752-ar1](https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa_business/2020/08/19/commisimpex-godfather-to-lebanon-s-shiites-fails-to-reconcile-hojeij-and-sassou_109600752-ar1)

Amal. When asked by Hejeij, himself a Shiite, Berri agreed to act as an intermediary between the businessman and Brazzaville.<sup>38</sup>

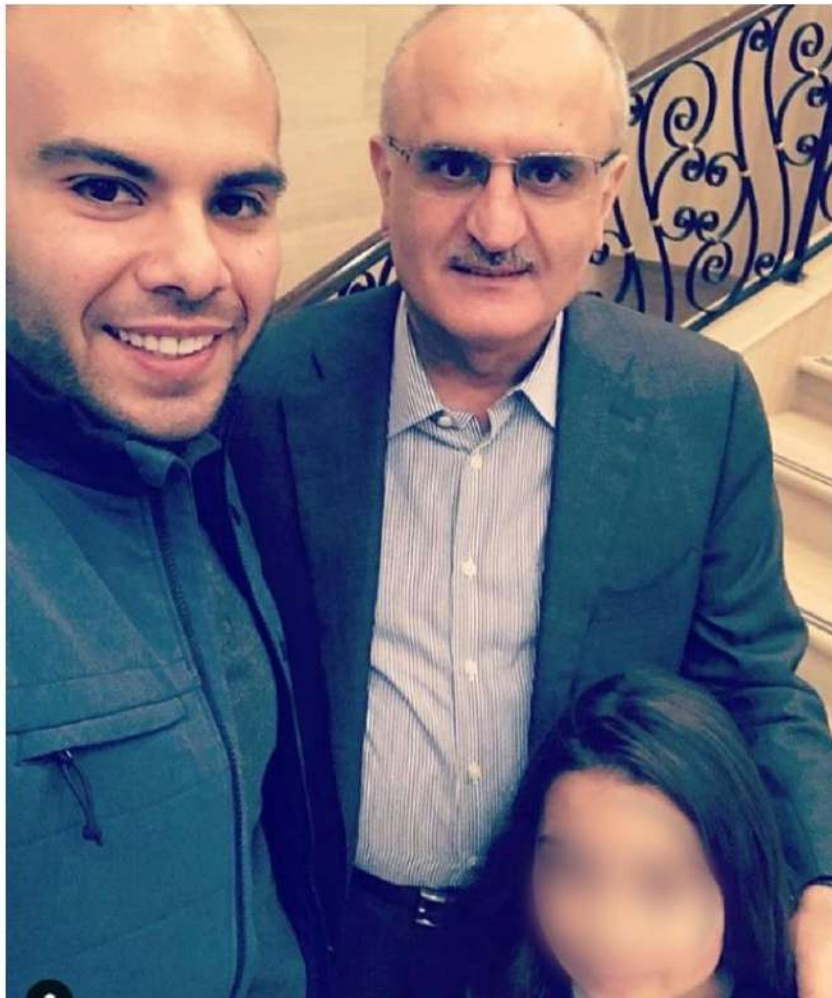
It is worth noting that the Yves Derains Law Firm legally represents the arbitration between Commisimpex and the Republic of the Congo. This firm was hired at the behest of the Commisimpex/Hejeij side. It specializes in helping companies that face arbitration in French courts. The specific lawyer, who is an Iranian, assigned to this case by the Derains firm, Hamid Gharavi, specializes in representing all sorts of Iranian firms with terror connections who are sanctioned or are running afoul of sanctioned activities.<sup>39</sup> This is an interesting choice and suggests an Iranian interest in this case as well.

Mohsen Hejeij's legal claims against the Congo shine light on their associations with Amal and Hizballah leadership and their illicit financial networks, and Nabih Berri. In this context, it is worth noting that the latest round of U.S. sanctions placed on Lebanese officials, announced the first week of September 2020, included Yusuf Fenianos and Ali Hassan Khalil; the former used to be Minister of Transportation (which controls port entries), and the latter was Minister of Finance. The sanctions highlight U.S. government determination to close in on the Hizballah funding structures at the highest levels connected to Nabih Berri and the Amal movement.<sup>40</sup> The close connections between the Hejeij clan and Berri both highlight this and expose the real nature of the clan's business underworld.

<sup>38</sup> The quote is from: "Commisimpex: Godfather to Lebanon's Shiites Fails to Reconcile Hejeij and Sassou," Africa Intelligence, August 19, 2020, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa\\_business/2020/08/19/commisimpex-godfather-to-lebanon-s-shiites-fails-to-reconcile-ajeij-and-sassou,109600752-ar1](https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa_business/2020/08/19/commisimpex-godfather-to-lebanon-s-shiites-fails-to-reconcile-ajeij-and-sassou,109600752-ar1). See also, "The unwanted ping that could cost Sassou Nguesso his presidential jet," Africa Intelligence, June 6, 2020, [https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa\\_business/2020/06/11/the-unwanted-ping-that-could-cost-sassou-nguesso-his-presidential-jet,109236566-ar1?utm\\_source=PDF&utm\\_medium=PDFART&utm\\_content=3594157&utm\\_campaign=109600752](https://www.africaintelligence.com/central-and-west-africa_business/2020/06/11/the-unwanted-ping-that-could-cost-sassou-nguesso-his-presidential-jet,109236566-ar1?utm_source=PDF&utm_medium=PDFART&utm_content=3594157&utm_campaign=109600752) and

<sup>39</sup> "Yves Derains: Founding Partner," Derains & Gharavi International, <http://www.derainsgharavi.com/lawyers/yves-derains/>; and "Hamid Gharavi: Founding Partner," Derains & Gharavi International, <http://www.derainsgharavi.com/lawyers/hamid-gharavi/>

<sup>40</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Hizballah's Enablers in Lebanon" [press release], September 8, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm1116>



 hichamleroi  
Ain et Tini



 Liked by fatimahazimeh and

MARCH 19, 2017

*A 2017 photo of Ali Hejeij (left), current chairman of the MEAB, with OFAC-sanctioned Ali Hassan Khalil, posted by Hicham Hazime, the Gabonese-Lebanese businessman implicated in drug and underworld traffic on behalf of Hizballah.*

The Hejeij clan, like the Tajideen clan, is a creation bootstrapped up from insignificant origins by Hizballah, Amal (working at Hizballah's behest) and Iran to become the new – and entirely beholden – elite of the Shiite community in Lebanon, which in turn controls Lebanon through Hizballah and Amal. Its members are loyal to Hizballah and Iran because they would be nothing were it not for Hizballah and Iran. In other words, they are all-in with Hizballah; their survival as families depends on it.

Lebanon's Shiite community in Lebanon is increasingly under fire internally for its support via structures like the Hejeij and Tajideen clans, under the protection of Amal and Hizballah, to funnel money to and advance Iran's hegemonic



activities in the area. In recent demonstrations following the horrific explosion and destruction of the Beirut port, the entire population of Lebanon – including moderate Shiites who refuse Iran’s influence in Lebanon – turned against Hizballah and Amal leadership and accused them of corruption and mismanagement of the country. The Lebanese population is clearly losing patience, and the United States is clearly closing in, but to do so, it will have to crack the case of the Hejeij clan and the MEAB, which has thus far eluded scrutiny and sanction ... possibly because of an understanding between the Iranian and American governments under the JCPOA.



*The Hejeij family, led by Kassem Hejeij's son Ali, at a cookout in honor of Amal founder Imam Musa al-Sadr in the Hejeij hometown of Deir Antar.*

## Why Should We Care?

The saga of the Hejeijs is perhaps an interesting tale, but our investigative services are clearly tracking and trying to tackle it. So, why does this matter from a strategic point of view? And, yes, this episode also shows how the system of life and influence in Washington is indeed a swamp pushing policy into distorted forms by money and foreign lobbyists, a few (although it is to be noted strongly that most merely are self-interested but aboveboard and honest) with nefarious backstories. But the current administration seems mostly determined to ignore the culture of Washington, and thus many of these lobbyists and their money are in a largely unsuccessful search for access to this unorthodox White House. Moreover, these are tactical funding structures, which are primarily the concern of law enforcement officials, not necessarily statesmen. Finally, since the Hejeijs and their MEAB are a critical part of the overall conflict between Iran and the West, would it not stand to reason that these networks will ultimately disappear once the West dispatches with the core problem, Iran.

Sadly, no.

To understand the threat these networks pose over the long term – indeed, beyond the longevity of Iran's Islamic Revolution – one must widen the aperture and examine the history and context of such a network as the powerful Hejeij one.

In the last two decades, numerous fascinating and well-researched studies have examined how the initial Imperial German clandestine networks of influence and subversion in Russia and the Near East acquired a strategic life of their own in World War I and onward. They branched out into a rainbow of toxic movements, societies and leaders that haunt us to this very day in their modern forms. Often changing masters, they played a role in the Russian Revolution, the Palestinian national movement both before and after World War II, Iranian revolutionary movements – both nationalist and religious – and even in South America.

What is interesting about these networks is that while they may have a life of their own, they do not seem to have a sustaining purpose of their own – they need to have a state-based patron to give them the power and resources to

acquire and maintain genuine significance. Part of this is because they used state-based intervention to begin with to establish themselves above their lowly status (such as the Hejeij or Tajideen families), or secondary status, and thus they can hardly survive as the top of the elite without continued intervention. For example, the al-Husseini family was far, far from the top of Palestinian Arab leadership at the beginning of the last century. But Haj Amin al-Husseini was bootstrapped up by the British in the early 1920s precisely because he was seen as weak and thus beholden to the British – a big mistake since he almost immediately turned to Britain’s archnemesis, the Germans, to seek support. At the same time, much like the new Hizballah families did a half century later in Lebanon under Hizballah’s power, Haj Amin al-Husseini used his perch, his cause and his movement to purge Palestinian Arab society of traditional leadership that could stand in his way or serve as an agent of British influence. When the Germans were finally defeated in 1945, the network survived even Haj Amin al-Husseini’s demise because it devolved to Soviet control – as did other regional networks that the Nazis had run. Every upheaval for this nouveau noblesse of elites was another opportunity to further dominate the societies within which they had earlier been diminished. As such, treating these networks merely as criminal gangs shows a shallow understanding of their vulnerability – which drives them to seek new patrons – but also an underestimation of their danger and strategic use by those new patrons.

In other words, these networks are powerful assets, which ominously are also transferrable, that seek new patrons as old ones go down. They are much like the proverbial cannons on ship: dangerous when aimed, but even more dangerous when cut loose.

But how could such a sectarian-based network survive the collapse of its patron? Unfortunately, we have in the past often made the mistake of assuming sectarian divides are insurmountable not once, but many times before. We failed to see how the Muslim Brotherhood networks set up in the Middle East in the 1910s–1930s with the encouragement of the Germans could become assets for the hyper-secular communist world in the 1950s–1980s. But one need look no further than the person of Arafat to understand this. He was at first Sunni Islamist, then the archetype of a third-world pro-Soviet revolutionary, and then the Shiite Iranian regime’s first and best friend from the Iranian Islamic revolution’s birth – being, in fact, the first international visitor to Tehran. It never jolted our preconception, even when Arafat – the symbol of Sunni Arab nationalism, the nemesis of Lebanese Shiites and the man who asked Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi

to “disappear” Imam Musa al-Sadr in 1979 – was welcomed to Tehran after the revolution in 1979, after which major assets of the PLO, led by Emad Mughniyeh himself, passed to Iranian control and use.

Later, we also assumed in the 1980s and 1990s that the Sunni-Shiite divide was so unbridgeable that we need not worry about one side using the other’s assets against us. We could not imagine how Shiite Iran could employ Sunni tribal structures against us in Iraq. We could not understand how Baathist Alawite Syria could employ proto-ISIS Sunni Islamists in Nahr al-Barid and under al-Zarqawi’s control against us in the mid-2000s. For three decades, from 1979 until the early 2000s, our preconception blocked our imagination, and we failed to fathom how Iran could use Sunni networks of terror and influence against the greater enemy. It never occurred to us that al-Qaeda-like Sunni politics became the lingua Franca, or umbrella amalgam structure, within which every power, especially Alawite Baathist Syria and Shiite revolutionary Iran, laid some piece of claim. We never realized that the Sunni tribal structure of subversion we ourselves had helped set up in the ill-fated Hussein Kamal defection to overthrow Saddam Hussein in the mid-1990s became a critical structure Baathist Syria and Shiite Iran used to destabilize Iraq and terrorize the Iraqi Shiite into seeking protection from Iran.

In short, we never saw these networks as strategic assets with a considerable degree of transferability among nefarious actors.

Such underworld networks in the Middle East have staying power and easily survive the demise of their masters, but only if they are inherited by rising powers and repurposed into their networks. Orphaned, they wither, and they know it, so they are willing and eager to be adopted. Our assumption that they die with their patrons, and thus can be safely ignored to wither on their own, has been a repeated mistake as well.

## **Conclusion**

As such, the biggest danger these networks pose is not actually their financing structures. Terrorism is a huge problem, and government must work diligently to track and sever these financial structures of terror funding. But it is equally important to understand how these networks are used, and how they carry and acquire a strategic significance that can be used not only by terror networks, but as commodities for great powers in their own strategic games.

Consider the Iran-China agreement in these terms. We know that Iran was willing to barter access to critical strategic assets to China for cash – so desperate is it – but one should assume that far more than a few islands are on the table. The networks set up by Iran in Africa must be seen in this regard – not just as a criminal network or terror funders, but as a strategic arm of Iran that can be inherited or shared with Iran’s strategic partners.

We look at China as essentially a regional power, and in terms of classic power projection, it is. We see its actions in Venezuela and Bolivia, in Africa and Asia, and in the Middle East as a form of strategic mercantilism. *Strategic* in this context means they are seeking to create structures of economic dependency on China – quite overtly, in broad daylight – that can translate into influence. This is not to be dismissed, but what is more generally missed is how China can use its most critical “deus ex machina” role of salvation to motivate the most desperate and dangerous regimes to turn over their inherent strategic assets for employment in its geostrategic aims. The Hejeij clan, unless uprooted, may well be one of those assets. Indeed, we already see that Iran, in its recent strategic deal with China, has apparently allowed China to establish an intelligence hub in its territory.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, to think that these subterranean criminal Shiite networks with strategic capabilities would simply disappear with the collapse of Iran is Pollyannaish. They will seek new masters, and China and Erdogan are eagerly awaiting them. Further, confidence that a Sunni power like Erdogan’s Turkey or a secular Communist power like China would not employ them stands against bitter lessons derived from studying the historical record of such networks.

Let us return to Mohsen Hejeij and his airplane. It is no accident that his efforts to recover assets to which it is unclear that he is even entitled rise in parallel to the increasing despair Tehran feels to find new sources of revenue to make up for the stranglehold it now finds itself in due to ever-tightening U.S. sanctions. It is clear that Mohsen Hejeij has no assets of his own to track planes, nor the vast resources to take on whole countries as part of an effort to shake down African leaders for money on the highest level. These are not pittance shaken down from local Shiite businesses across sub-Saharan Africa, but real, big money that can be confiscated only from national coffers. Hejeij is clearly receiving information from states and is under pressure to raid his own network – even if

<sup>41</sup> Simon Watkins, “China Looks to Build Espionage Hub in Iran under 25-Year Deal ,” September 7, 2020, <https://oilprice.com/Geopolitics/Middle-East/China-Looks-To-Build-Espionage-Hub-In-Iran-Under-25-Year-Deal.html>

it burns his foundation and bridges to that part of the world – to cough up as much money as possible, as quickly as possible, to help fund Hizballah, impoverished Iran and the increasingly desperate Iranian minion-led government of Lebanon.

One can easily imagine how the geopolitical overlay might play out, especially with the strategic agreements between Beijing and Tehran. On one side, Hejeij escalates his lawfare efforts (with the assistance of organizations like the Soros networks, who have their own reasons to besiege several African leaders) to confiscate Congolese national property for ostensible debts owed. In Hejeij's case, vis-à-vis the Congo, this amounts to billions of dollars.

This amount is real money, and far beyond the capacity of the Congolese government to repay. But the constant barrage of lawfare originating in Europe has soured the Congolese president to the Europeans, who are afraid to lend to or touch leaders with legal baggage, lest they get entangled. Moreover, Hejeij not only has a presence, but works with networks in those capitals to build their presence and influence. Strong lobbying efforts against the ostensibly out-of-bounds corruption of the Congolese government stymies international investment and leads Western governments to keep such African leaders at arm's distance. In despair, these leaders have only one direction to turn to survive: China, which is more than happy to assume debts in exchange for longer-term debts and fealty. Iran gets its money, and China gets its dependent client.

These terror networks, thus, are no longer just criminal problems. They are strategic assets and commodities with flexible talents used by adversarial powers for strategic objectives. And they are playing an increasingly important role in great power rivalries worldwide, not only in the Middle East.