



A Match Made in Heaven: The Hezbollah-Amal Nexus

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Introduction

Over the past decades, Hezbollah has built a well-oiled, multi-billion-dollar illicit finance and drug-trafficking machine in Latin America that launders organized crime's ill-gotten gains through multiple waypoints in the Western Hemisphere, West Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, generating hundreds of millions of annual revenues. Those in charge, back in Beirut, Baghdad, and Tehran, are party stalwarts, who rake the profits to fund Hezbollah's stranglehold on Lebanese society, sustain its mobilization as Iran's regional proxy in multiple theatres of war, and plot terror attacks overseas.

Their lieutenants, however, are a different story: party lines are blurred in the murky waters of illicit finance. There, in the vast universe of trafficking, money laundering, and smuggling, the entrepreneur rises above the ideologue, the militant, and the militia fighter to take the front seat. Party membership matters little, where money is made for the cause. As my colleague, Tony Badran argues, "What matters is Hezbollah's relationship with Shi'a society, both in Lebanon and in the diaspora, where familial ties, business connections, and patronage networks extend to Amal, the other Shi'a party in Lebanon." In the realm of fundraising, Amal and Hezbollah followers have over time become so intertwined that telling them apart has become almost impossible. Especially across the Shi'a diaspora, it is often Amal businessmen who tend to Hezbollah's fundraising needs.

Acknowledging this overlap, rather than proving a formal bond to Hezbollah's party structure, is key to unmasking the terror-finance networks feeding into Hezbollah's global fundraising efforts. Amal too, should be a target for U.S. sanctions. Without its members and their support, Hezbollah's overseas illicit finance operations might not come to fruition so easily.

Amal: The Other Shi'a Party

Before there was Hezbollah, Amal ruled the Shi'a of Lebanon. Musa Sadr, an Iranian-born, charismatic, Lebanese cleric educated in Iran and Iraq, established Amal in 1975. He envisioned it as an armed wing of a larger political project, the Movement of the Deprived, which Sadr created to politically organize, represent, and later defend, the Shi'a of Lebanon. Both Hezbollah and Amal, therefore, are political-military-religious movements created to represent Lebanon's Shi'a, with similar goals: represent the 'deprived' (Amal) or the 'oppressed' (Hezbollah). Unlike Hezbollah's clerical leaders, who pledged allegiance to Iran's Islamic revolution and its theological tenets, Sadr rejected the principle of Velayat-e Faqih, or guardianship of the jurist, the essence of the Islamic revolution according to its founder, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. As practiced by the Islamic Republic of Iran, Velayat e-Faqih requires a

learned Islamic jurist to guide the body politic, ensuring its actions conform with Islam's and God's will. The revolution and its followers, Hezbollah included, are bound by this hierarchical principle. Amal, by contrast, never embraced it, even after its founder and charismatic leader Musa Sadr mysteriously disappeared during a trip to Libya in 1978, possibly murdered by his host, Libya's late dictator Muammar Qadhafi, at the behest of Ayatollah Khomeini's lieutenants.

Despite their doctrinal divergence, Hezbollah emerged from the same social, political, religious awakening of the Shi'a community Sadr helped mobilize. Hezbollah capitalized on that awakening but offered Lebanon's Shi'a an even more militant ideological framework that enjoyed the backing of a nation-state— Iran—and its significant resources. Many of Hezbollah's followers are former Amal party members. Hezbollah became Amal's competitor, and the two parties jockeyed for leadership of the same community while emphasizing similar grievances of dispossession and injustice on behalf of their constituents. At times, disputes, and disagreements between these two Shi'a factions resembled the ideological squabbles between Stalinists and Trotskyites within the Soviet revolution. But mostly, Khomeini and his followers resented Sadr's rising popularity as a potential competitor to Khomeini, along with Sadr's refusal to recognize Khomeini as the highest Shi'a clerical authority and to embrace his religious doctrine.

This, then, was not a split between secular and religious Shi'a: their political pieties do not diverge significantly. At times, the Amal/Hezbollah duopoly over Lebanon's Shi'a cut across the community, often pitting family members and neighbors against one another. But it also overlapped enough that people frequently crossed party lines and allegiances. Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah himself was, early on, a member of Amal and a student of Sadr's followers in Iraq. He later rose through the ranks of Amal, becoming a regional leader, before joining Hezbollah. One of his brothers, Hussein, also an Amal member, never left.

Throughout the early period of Shi'a political mobilization, family, sect, and party loyalties intersected. And the Amal/Hezbollah rivalry, which erupted in open war during the 1988-1990 period, eventually subsided, under an Iranian Syrian brokered peace agreement first and, subsequently, under a division of labor where Amal and Hezbollah increasingly became two sides of the same coin.

Politics ultimately could not break families apart, and, as the two rivals turned into allies, the intricate and intimate links crisscrossing kinship and party allegiance blended the two together. As Lebanese journalist, Wassim Mroue argues, "An implicit division of labor crystalized shortly after the agreement whereby Hezbollah took charge of armed resistance against the Israeli occupation of the south while Amal occupied

public sector posts and government positions allocated for the Shi'a community." Amal's leaders, dressed in suits and ties and holding Western-sounding institutional titles, appear as the face of the state, which Western leaders think can be turned into a bulwark against Hezbollah, if only its institutions are strengthened. In fact, Amal and Hezbollah are in a symbiotic relationship, especially when it comes to business, and the presence of men in suits in the seats of institutional power only serves the purpose of letting Hezbollah in through the back door.

The Match: Hassan Mansour

Canadian Lebanese businessman, Hassan Mohsen Mansour illustrates the Amal-Hezbollah symbiosis. On May 15, 2015, two U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) agents, codenamed "Amber" and "Alex" met Mansour at a Marriott Hotel located on the prestigious Boulevard des Champs Élysées in Paris, France. Mansour thought he was meeting drug money couriers. The undercover agents were there to gather intelligence on an elaborate, Hezbollah-run drug trafficking, money laundering operation, they were investigating. French court records show that during their meeting, Mansour explained how he moved cocaine and laundered money: he had "a wood charcoal import business from Colombia to Lebanon" and "the required connections in country to ensure the containers would not be searched."

Eventually, French authorities arrested Mansour during a January 2016 sweep, nicknamed Operation Cedar – a DEA [joint operation](#) with European law enforcement agencies across seven countries that targeted a large Hezbollah criminal network. (Mansour later escaped.) U.S. authorities also [sanctioned](#) the network's Hezbollah ringleaders. Cedar was the culmination of a decade-long string of DEA-led law enforcement actions that exposed Hezbollah's global criminal enterprise. The picture that emerged was of a worldwide criminal cartel composed of hundreds of business members of the Shi'a Lebanese diaspora. Mansour, DEA claims, was one of them.

[Shortly after his arrest in France, in February 2016, a Florida court indicted Mansour](#), alongside two others, for drug trafficking and money laundering. The affidavit supporting their arrest warrant described him as "a Hezbollah associate, known to be involved in multi-faceted criminal activity, not simply money laundering and drug trafficking," adding that Mansour was "working directly with established members of Hezbollah."

What is a "Hezbollah associate"? How different is an associate from "an established member"? Hezbollah is neither a corporation nor a university, with tenured partners, adjuncts, and associates. It is a terror group ruled by a clerical *nomenklatura* loyal to Iran, a revolutionary theocratic regime. To be sure, it is a

tight ship, with a rigid hierarchical structure, salaried members, contractors, and assets. The affidavit, however, is using the label of “associate” to evoke a more informal relationship, its exact contours ill-defined. That is precisely what characterizes the organic nature of the relationship between Hezbollah and those who run its illicit finance networks. Though contracts and benefits exist between the networks and the terror group, their bonds are not necessarily or always based on formal hierarchy and established procedures such as membership fees.

Mansour’s personal circumstances illustrate the informal and elusive nature of these bonds. Though allegedly involved in “multi-faceted criminal activity” and “working directly with established members of Hezbollah,” Lebanese voters’ records show that he is married to Zeinab Assaad Fawaz – daughter of Silan Nabih Berri and granddaughter of Nabih Berri, the speaker of Lebanon’s Parliament and the historic leader of Amal, the Shi’a party that pre-existed Hezbollah’s establishment shortly after Iran’s Islamic revolution. Silan, one of Berri’s daughters from his first marriage, is married to Assaad Abdul Hamid Fawaz from Tibnine, Nabih Berri’s village of origin (Berri himself was born in Sierra Leone in West Africa to Lebanese expatriates). This is the highest entry point into Amal’s political patronage, not Hezbollah’s.

As Aurora Ortega recently [wrote](#), “While often described as a Hezbollah associate, Mansour himself is likely an Amal member, based on his marriage.” Marriage is an important factor in establishing links to extended families/clan structures and their patronage networks. Given his alleged degree of involvement with Hezbollah’s terror funding, Mansour’s nuptials show how intertwined the two Shi’a Lebanese groups are.

Love is important, but so is business: Mansour’s bond of affection to the Berri family extends to a handful of Lebanese-registered business ventures. Corporate data from Lebanon’s company registry show that Zeinab and her parents hold a stake in two companies, Zoom Zoom Motors S.A.R.L. (where Zeinab and her father each hold a 33% stake) and Zoom Zoom Car Rentals S.A.R.L. (where Zeinab and her mother each hold a 33% stake), alongside Mansour, who owns the remaining 34% in each entity.

To recap: Mansour is an alleged high-profile Hezbollah “associate” who, according to both French and U.S. court records, is deeply enmeshed in criminal activities. He is also allegedly “working directly” with senior Hezbollah members to funnel illicit funds to the terror group. He is married to the heiress of the Amal Party dynasty and is their business partner.

Is he Amal then? Or Hezbollah?

It is, perhaps, the wrong question to ask. And to understand why, we need to turn to Hezbollah's Business Affairs Component, or BAC, a term the DEA introduced, during its decade-long journey of investigating, mapping, disrupting, and prosecuting Hezbollah drug trafficking networks, to describe those in the Shi'a Lebanese diaspora who facilitate Hezbollah's illicit fundraising efforts.

The Business Affairs Component

Part of the problem U.S. agencies face when it comes to investigating, prosecuting, or sanctioning Hezbollah individuals or entities on terrorism or terror finance grounds is the U.S. legal framework. A terrorist designation needs to show that the sanctioned or indicted individual is a Hezbollah member or, failing that, someone providing material support to Hezbollah. What U.S. authorities seem to have missed is that, in the realm of terror finance, they need to look beyond Hezbollah and recognize that the networks supporting what it calls "the Resistance" are first and foremost Shi'a. And that in that world of tightly knit expatriate communities, Amal and Hezbollah are intimately intertwined. Perhaps they should consider sanctioning Amal as well, making it easier for themselves when confronted with suspects like Mansour.

After all, in the decade-long investigation that DEA conducted against drug trafficking and money laundering networks whose revenues went to fund Hezbollah, DEA realized that the facilitators were not just run-of-the-mill white-collar criminals for hire, but had some closer, more intimate ties to the mothership. The DEA also understood that this was by design: Hezbollah leaders relied on members of the Shi'a Lebanese diaspora to establish illicit finance networks for funding purposes. In the process of doing so, a loose structure emerged, which DEA called the Business Affairs Component (BAC) of Hezbollah's External Security Organization (ESO).

Shortly after law enforcement agencies successfully rounded up all the suspects in Operation Cedar, DEA [issued a press release](#), on February 1, 2016, where it revealed the existence of the BAC. According to DEA, the BAC founder was [the late Imad Mughniyeh](#), Hezbollah's arch-terrorist and the mastermind of Hezbollah's deadliest terror attacks, including the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Marines barracks and French paratroopers in Beirut, the 1992 bombing of Israel's embassy and the 1994 bombing of the AMIA building, the Jewish cultural center, both in Buenos Aires. Mughniyeh died in a car bomb in Damascus in 2008 and [Abdallah Safieddine](#) – Hezbollah's ambassador to Tehran – and [Adham Tabaja](#), a Hezbollah member acting as a sort of CEO for the BAC, took over its leadership. DEA did not dwell upon the BAC's command structure, membership recruitment, the way it functions, or much else, except that [it was](#) "involved in international criminal activities such as drug trafficking and drug proceed money laundering." Hezbollah

is a hierarchy of councils, units, branches, departments, and bureaus. The ESO itself is under the Jihad Council of Hezbollah and it is highly compartmentalized. The BAC, by contrast, is less a department and more like a joint venture of freelancers, opportunists, and ideologues.

Soon after the February 2016 press release, the DEA-authored affidavit in support of Mansour's arrest warrant further elaborated on the nature of the BAC. "To meet its financial needs," it explains, "Hezbollah maintains a wide network of non-member supporters or associates engaged in raising capital." Supporters and associates, then, are not members. The near-mythical Mughniyeh may have founded the BAC, but those involved, the affidavit suggests, do not belong to the party.

So, who are they? DEA describes them as "culturally aligned compatriots" who are "more concerned with generating cash than religious or political doctrine" and who "readily remit portions of their profits back" to Hezbollah. What DEA should recognize is that, almost invariably, these businessmen have organic links to Amal and sympathize with Hezbollah's cause. As Nasrallah himself [said](#) of one of his brothers, "Muhammad is basically not interested in politics; even though he is not a member of Hizballah, he approves of it." Muhammad, as it happens, has left Amal. But plenty others in the Lebanese diaspora feel the same way about Hezbollah while remaining within the orbit of Amal's political patronage.

The DEA-drafted affidavit seems to suggest that "culturally aligned compatriots" are motivated by profit rather than ideology. Why remit to Hezbollah, then? And if Hezbollah recruits people more motivated by profit than political doctrine, then why focus on compatriots alone? Unscrupulous people looking to make a fortune by cutting moral corners are equally distributed among all national groups inhabiting our planet. There is no shortage of crooks. Why would party ideologues like Mughniyeh, Safieddine, and Tabaja, insist on compatriots alone then? It certainly helps if the moral compass of those engaged in criminal activities is elastic. But people can commit crimes both for profit *and* for God and Country. They are not mutually exclusive.

What the notion of "culturally aligned compatriots" seems to miss is what drives these relationships: kinship. Culturally aligned compatriots matter because their ties of blood, faith, village of origin, marriage, and clan all cement confidence in what is risky business, regardless of what motivates them.

Those, like Mansour, whom DEA implicated in multiple trafficking and money laundering cases were not always clad in Hezbollah uniforms, wrapped in Hezbollah flags, and carrying a Hezbollah party membership card in their wallet. The U.S. government, not just DEA, frequently classifies them as

“[financiers](#),” “[enablers](#),” “[facilitators](#),” and “[donors](#)” – all near-synonyms for what DEA calls the BAC. Yet these labels sometimes betray a misunderstanding of how these relationships work.

To be sure, these categories are not official Hezbollah designations. Financiers, enablers, facilitators, and donors need not be, strictly speaking, members. They need not be wholly wedded to the cause (but they surely cannot be opposed to it either). They help and profit from it, and their involvement in this enterprise has to do with personal ties. Take Mansour. His “level of participation in BAC affairs is significant” according to the affidavit. Yet, his marriage suggests he is Amal – spouse of a party heiress, no less.

Ascribing involvement with Hezbollah to profit alone overlooks the deep bonds of affection that rule over these uniquely tight-knit, insular communities, where family, clan, village, and faith indissolubly tied them together long before there ever were Shi’a political parties to rule over them. Trust built on ties of blood, faith and heritage is what makes “culturally aligned compatriots” likelier to support the cause, with profit a strong incentive.

Hezbollah does not expect total adherence to its doctrinal worldview from those who help its fundraising efforts. Hezbollah’s leadership fully embrace the principle of *Velayat-e-Faqih*. Iran’s Supreme Leader is their leader. That may not appeal to everyone. Many, however, identify with their cause – the Resistance. Hezbollah, like its paymaster, Iran, claims to fight for the oppressed of the earth, which the Shi’a narrative of Imam Hussein and his martyrdom epitomizes. The Shi’a of Lebanon are oppressed. The Resistance fights for their pride and rights. The Palestinians are oppressed. The Resistance fights for Palestine. The oppressors are Israel, the Jews, the West, and America, first and foremost. The Resistance fights Israel, the Jews, the West, and America. Helping the Resistance, and making money along the way, is not something requiring a high degree of ideological purity, but neither a total indifference to it.

Charcoal, Charcoal on the Wall

Consider [the case of Nasser Abbas Bahmad](#), a suspected high-placed Hezbollah operative who, a few months after Mansour was arrested and his wood-charcoal-cover for cocaine shipment blown, came to what is known as the Tri-Border Area (TBA), where the frontiers of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay meet. Bahmad’s apparent mission: Establish a supply line of multi-ton shipments of cocaine from Latin America to overseas markets to generate funds for Hezbollah. The parallels between Mansour’s disrupted operation shipping cocaine disguised as charcoal from Colombia to Lebanon and Bahmad’s attempt to establish a similar supply chain from Paraguay are revealing.

Shortly after his arrival in the TBA, Bahmad created a company named GTG Global Trading Group S.A., a subsidiary of a namesake company he established in early 2016 in Sydney, Australia. Bahmad's Paraguayan business partner in GTG was Ali Fawaz, a young Lebanese-Paraguayan dual national from Tibnine, the village of origin of Silan Berri's father and of her husband Mansour's father-in-law, Assad Fawaz. His last name is the same – they are likely related.

According to French court records, Mansour relied on the complicity of corrupt port officials to smuggle his product out of Colombia and into Lebanon. That may have been a key reason Bahmad partnered with Fawaz. [According to Agustin Ceruse](#), an Argentinian intelligence analyst, Ali Fawaz's Paraguayan father-in-law had connections in Terport, a small riverine private port that Bahmad intended to use for its shipments – and where in October 2020 Paraguayan police [found](#) more than three tons of cocaine hidden in charcoal. There's more. Lebanese records [list](#) Hassan Mansour as a shareholder in a Beirut-based media company. Among his business partners: relatives of Nasser Bahmad.

In short: Bahmad, a Hezbollah operative, partners up with a young member of the Tibnine branch of the Fawaz clan, in the TBA. Fawaz has no established link to Hezbollah, being more likely from an Amal family. Bahmad's relatives, meanwhile, are in business with Mansour, who is married to Amal royalty. These facts, on their own, do not prove that Hezbollah had chosen Bahmad as its replacement for Mansour, but taken together they make it a plausible scenario, which adds another layer of complexity, given that, as one network is taken down and another one arises, it is hard to keep up with who's Amal and who's Hezbollah.

Two Sides of the Same Coin

Lebanese Shi'a businessmen who sought and found fortune abroad in some cases maintain familial ties with Hezbollah – through a sibling in the clerical hierarchy, an uncle in the Hezbollah-run Al Mahdi scouts or its namesake schools, a cousin in the ranks of Hezbollah's military cohorts, a spouse who hails from a Hezbollah family. Others are tied by family and patronage to Amal, the other Shi'a party in Lebanon, with which Hezbollah exercises a duopoly over representation of the Shia sect in the Lebanese system. Sometimes, links to both groups are found within the same clan or even family. These are the indissoluble bonds that matter, not a membership card. It is hard for Western observers to tell who is, and who isn't Hezbollah, in these intricate networks bound across the globe by marriage, blood, or village of origin. And it is beside the point. Dividing lines of party affiliation, in a world where family, marriage, patronage, village, and business make it all happen, are blurred. Calling these supporters “culturally aligned compatriots” may be a good description of these people's involvement in illicit finance for the benefit of

Hezbollah. But it misses the point. They are part of the Amal network, often, and because of the multilayered symbiosis characterizing the Amal-Hezbollah political alliance, they support Hezbollah's fundraising efforts. To ignore the Amal dimension of the BAC and its operations may serve the purpose of keeping the façade of respectability for Amal and its leader, the affable and avuncular speaker of parliament, the hollow symbol of Lebanon's confessional democracy. But it is still a façade.

A recent Treasury action offers a perfect example of this. The department [announced](#) sanctions against two West Africa-based Lebanese businessmen, Ali Saade and Taher Ibrahim, on March 4, 2022. According to Treasury, the two are prominent Lebanese businessmen "with direct connections to Hezbollah." Treasury accused them of being conduits for money transfers for the benefit of Hezbollah and, in Saade's case, of having used his political influence in Guinea (Saade, like Taher, holds the title of honorary consul) to assist Hezbollah financier Kassim Tajideen. To protest his innocence, Saade [took to the press](#) and acknowledged his connection to Tajideen, following Treasury's announcement, confirming that he had liaised between Tajideen and the then-president of Guinea, Alpha Condé, in 2013, four years after the U.S. [sanctioned](#) Tajideen and identified him as a key Hezbollah financier (Tajideen [was subsequently arrested in Morocco](#), extradited to the U.S. and [convicted](#); Saade seemed to believe, mistakenly, that Tajideen had only been sanctioned in 2017).

By the sound of Treasury's press release, both Taher and Saade fit the DEA's BAC profile of "culturally aligned compatriots" generating revenue for Hezbollah. Yet their political affiliation, if any is to be found, is another story. Publicly available data on Ali Saade, his businesses and his family members offer a composite picture common to many successful Lebanese Shi'a expatriates in West Africa. Religious devotion and business acumen; a vast network of family contacts spanning the globe; and political access both in the country of residence and Lebanon. That access includes Amal – social media postings from a family account show Saade and his two sons paid a friendly visit to Nabih Berri, in 2020 – something not uncommon for successful Lebanese Shi'a's living abroad. The Saade men, both Ali and his sons, who help him run the family business, [are thoroughly westernized](#) and, outwardly at least, fit the Amal profile. Amal then? Or Hezbollah?

Conclusion

Prominent figures in the Shi'a Lebanese community whom DEA and the U.S. Department of Treasury have investigated or sanctioned over the years due to their alleged role in Hezbollah's BAC, appear, like Mansour, to seamlessly move back and forth between the two supposedly distinct worlds of Amal and

Hezbollah. To the outside observer, they may look different. Berri, in his tailored suits and ties, [his U.S. green card](#), his institutional demeanor, is the secular leader of a movement whose youth drinks, smokes, and listens to Western music. Hassan Nasrallah, the firebrand cleric who vows fealty to Iran, galvanizes his followers to dream of martyrdom while living pious lives of Shi'a devotion. Yet, when all is said and done, they sit down and do business together. The two parties [are political allies](#) in Lebanon. Berri [praises](#) the Resistance as a cause Amal shares. And as the cause goes, so do the financial networks that sustain it. Amal and Hezbollah, when it comes to funding the Resistance, are one and the same.