

A Hezbollah Threat in Thailand?

January 19, 2012 | 1213 GMT



Stratfor

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On Jan. 12, Thai authorities arrested a man they say was a member of the Lebanon-based Shiite militant group Hezbollah who was plotting an attack in Bangkok. In uncovering the plot, Thai police cite cooperation with the United States and Israel going back to December 2011. Bangkok is indeed a target-rich environment with a history of terrorist attacks, but today Hezbollah and other militant and criminal groups rely on the city as a business hub more than anything else. If Hezbollah or some other transnational militant group were to carry out an attack in the city, it would have to be for a compelling reason that outweighed the costs.

The suspect was identified as Hussein Atris, who was born in Lebanon but acquired Swedish citizenship and a passport after marrying a Swedish woman in 1996. Atris was arrested on immigration charges as he was trying to board a plane at Suvarnabhumi airport, Bangkok's main international airport. Police said another suspect is still at large and possibly already out of the country. Atris's arrest on Jan. 12 was followed by a statement the next day from the U.S. Embassy warning U.S. citizens in Bangkok of the potential foreign terrorist threat in the country and encouraging them to avoid tourist areas. Other countries, including the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and Israel, issued similar warnings. Thai police have responded by increasing security in tourist areas like Bangkok's Khao San Road and the island of Phuket.

Then, on Jan. 16, some 200 Thai police officers searched a three-story commercial building in a town along the coast 32 kilometers (about 20 miles) southwest of Bangkok. Information on the location and contents of the building was said to have been provided by Atris after two days in custody. On the second floor of the building, officers found 4,380 kilograms (about 10,000 pounds) of urea-based fertilizer and 38 liters (about 10 gallons) of liquid ammonium nitrate -- enough materials to construct several truck bombs comparable to the one detonated at the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad in 2008. Urea fertilizer can be used to manufacture the improvised explosive mixture urea nitrate, which was the main charge used in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing. The compound is also frequently used in improvised explosive devices in Iraq and to some extent in Afghanistan. On the ground floor of the same building, police found reams of printing paper and 400 electric table fans in cardboard boxes.

The following day, a Bangkok court charged Atris with illegal possession of explosive materials. As in many other countries, a permit is required for handling such large amounts of fertilizer in Thailand.

Since Atris' arrest and the police raid, a flurry of statements from Thai authorities have given contradictory accounts of what happened. Gen. Yuthasak Sasiprapha, Thailand's defense minister, seemed comfortable connecting the U.S. and Israeli warnings to the arrest and seizure, stating that Atris and other conspirators were linked to Hezbollah and had chosen Bangkok as part of a plan to retaliate against Israel. The general speculated that the Israeli Embassy, synagogues, tour companies and kosher restaurants could be targeted.

The defense minister's speculations are logical. In 2010, Thailand received 120,000 Jewish tourists, and Bangkok itself has a large Jewish community, complete with a Chabad house (a Jewish cultural center and one of the targets in the 2008 Mumbai attacks). According to its website, the Israeli Embassy is located in a commercial office building with (from what we can tell from photographs) relatively little perimeter security. Hundreds of thousands of Americans also visit Thailand each year. At the same time, [the United States and Israel are engaged in a covert war](#) with Iran that has most recently seen the [assassination of an Iranian scientist](#) allegedly involved in the country's nuclear program. Since Hezbollah has been considered a proxy of Iran, the United States and Israel have long anticipated reprisal attacks from Iran via Hezbollah against U.S. or Israeli targets around the world.

While there are certainly plenty of U.S., Jewish and Israeli targets in Thailand in general and Bangkok in particular, other officials have given different accounts of the alleged plot that add more nuance. According to National Police Chief Prieuwan Damapong, Atris insisted that the materials seized were not intended for attacks in Thailand but were going to be transported to a yet-to-be-named third country (a Stratfor source has cited the Philippines as a logical destination). He also allegedly told authorities that, although he was a member of Hezbollah, he was not a member of the group's militant arm. A Hezbollah official in Beirut, Ghaleb Abu Zainab, told the Lebanese Broadcasting Corp. that Atris was not a Hezbollah member, while Stratfor sources have told us that he was. Our sources also have confirmed Atris' reported confession to police that he was on the business side of things -- likely involved in procurement and logistics -- rather than the militant side, which involves such things as bombmaking or operational planning. As a Swedish passport holder, Atris would have much more access to business connections, so it makes sense that Hezbollah would want to compartmentalize his skills.

Most other official statements since Gen. Sasiprapha's have focused on softening the threat and mitigating the damage done to Thailand's tourism industry. Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra has called on the United States to revoke its warning, saying it will damage the country if it is prolonged. Hence, it is not surprising that tidbits released from Atris' purported interrogation have moved the spotlight away from the domestic threat and focused more on targets abroad.

The historical record shows ample precedent for attacks by foreign extremists in Bangkok. In

1972, members of Black September took over the Israeli Embassy in Bangkok and held diplomats hostage there for 18 hours. In 1988, Hezbollah gunmen hijacked Kuwait Airways Flight 422, which was departing Bangkok for Kuwait City, in an effort to coerce the Kuwaiti government to release the "al-Dawa 17," a group of Shiite militants being held in Kuwait. And in 1994, a truck laden with explosives was en route to attack either the U.S. or Israeli Embassy (the investigation did not yield conclusive results) when a traffic accident disrupted the plot. Bangkok has long been on the map for terrorist operational planners.

During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, Hezbollah and other groups conducted dozens of attacks targeting Jews, Israel and Israel's allies around the world. However, over the past decade, Hezbollah has become a more serious political party in Lebanon, and while its international network is still in place, its activities are increasingly focusing on illicit business ventures rather than terrorist attacks. The shell corporations and drug-smuggling networks that for years provided the means to fund ideological terrorist operations have, in many ways, themselves become the end. Hezbollah members who have grown rich off the international network are more interested in spending the cash from the network and building up political patronage at home than in provoking powerful enemies abroad. For example, Bangkok is a hub for acquiring counterfeit documents, which are a lucrative commodity around the world and part of Hezbollah's criminal enterprise. Conducting an attack in Bangkok would likely disrupt a node in the network and ultimately affect the group's bottom line.

Thus, Hezbollah's profile and set of interests support Atris' reported claims that the bombmaking materials that police found were being moved out of the country and were not intended for use in Bangkok or other tourist locations in Thailand.

Other details from the case support this scenario. The fertilizer was to be hidden in the 400 table fan boxes found in the same building, a move conducive to smuggling the fertilizer, not constructing explosive devices. The sheer amount of fertilizer (nearly 5 tons) is a wholesale amount. The largest vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs) in recent history have contained about a ton of fertilizer. The device used in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing consisted of about 1,300 pounds of urea nitrate. Constructing and delivering bombs larger than that tends to create technical and logistical hitches. It is much more likely that such a large amount of fertilizer would be meant for multiple smaller or medium-sized devices.

While urea-based fertilizer and ammonium nitrate are key ingredients for the main charge of a VBIED, many more materials are required to make it a viable device, including nitric acid, which must be mixed with urea-based fertilizer to make urea nitrate. (Urea nitrate is highly corrosive and has typically been mixed and held in plastic industrial chemical drums. While cardboard boxes would be fine for holding the urea-based fertilizer, they certainly would not be heavy-duty enough to contain the urea nitrate mixture.) In the Bangkok case, there has been no mention of other important bombmaking components such as fuses, timing mechanisms or detonating charges or of a competent bombmaker to put it all together.

In other words, while some of the materials to make a bomb were present in the commercial

building that police raided, there was no viable device there. Nor has there been any mention of weapons such as rifles, handguns or grenades, which are often (although certainly not always) involved in terrorist attacks. Some media sources alleged that Atris was plotting a "Mumbai-like" attack, which would have required a stash of automatic rifles, ordnance, communication devices and other tactical tools that have yet to surface.

Just as Bangkok is an attractive business hub in Southeast Asia for legitimate businessmen, it is also an attractive hub for illicit businessmen. In 2008, Thai police arrested Russian arms smuggler Viktor Bout after agents from the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, posing as members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia guerrilla group trying to negotiate a deal to buy weapons, incriminated Bout during a meeting in Bangkok. It appears that Atris' role in this case would have been an administrative one similar to Bout's: sourcing the fertilizer, finding a place to stockpile it and concealing it in innocent-looking fan boxes. This would not make him any less guilty of assisting a militant group, but it would deflate the theory that Hezbollah was plotting to use this material in an immediate attack in Bangkok.

This is not to say that Hezbollah or some other militant group will not conduct an attack in Bangkok in the future. But it would take a lot to convince group leaders that the financial pain of an attack in the city would be worth the ideological gain. And the recent alleged plot should remind investigators and policymakers to remember the financial bottom line as well as the ideological bottom line when assessing future terrorist threats.

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