



Diamonds for Blood. How terrorism funds itself

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West Africa, a region not usually uppermost in the minds of American foreign policymakers, is nonetheless responsible for two of our most intractable post-9/11 intelligence puzzles.

In these two very similar cases, Arab operatives in West African countries allegedly seek to exploit local smuggling operations to buy precious and tightly controlled natural commodities. The CIA investigates, but the veracity of the stories remains uncertain, and, consequently, the subject of protracted, acrimonious debate within the intelligence community.

Of these stories, one--Iraq's purported attempts to acquire uranium from Niger--is well known. The other--al Qaeda's purchase of conflict diamonds in Sierra Leone and Liberia--is not. Thus it makes a well-deserving subject for a new book, namely *Blood From Stones* by veteran investigative journalist and former *Washington Post* West Africa bureau chief Douglas Farah.

Farah first posited the connection between black market gems and radical Islam in the fall of 2001. *Blood From Stones* carefully lays out the evidence that senior al Qaeda operatives traveled to West Africa in the late 1990s and again in the

summer of 2001 to buy diamonds from Sierra Leonean rebels, with the connivance of then-president Charles Taylor of Liberia.

Taylor, a thuggish kleptocrat under U.N. sanctions, was desperate for cash to fund proxy wars against his neighbors, while al Qaeda in turn was eager to launder tens of millions of dollars into commodities like diamonds, gold, tanzanite, and emeralds. "All are essentially parallel currencies," Farah explains, "easy to transport, smuggle, and convert."

Farah builds his case largely from field intelligence he gathered personally. His story certainly doesn't lack for color. In spare, deadpan prose, the book surveys a bizarre and often grotesque raft of characters, such as a hairdresser-turned-warlord known as "General Mosquito" (the legendarily effective killer is said to suck the life out of his enemies); a rebel army of orphaned child soldiers, notorious for hacking limbs off noncombatants; and a former bodyguard to Muammar Qaddafi, veteran of Hezbollah, and all-around soldier of fortune, who insists he is actually a used car salesman. By the end of this tour through the West African bush, the reader will be forgiven for finding, by contrast, the evil of al Qaeda's Islamic fundamentalism reassuring in its familiarity.

Sensational though Farah's charges are--he was evacuated from West Africa with his family in 2001 after U.S. and foreign governments

discovered threats of "retribution" for his reporting--*Blood From Stones* raises as many questions as it answers. Farah calls the West African diamond trade "some of al Qaeda's most vital financial operations," but it remains unclear to what extent this emphasis on commodities is really commensurate with their importance in Osama bin Laden's budget. Both the 9/11 Commission and an independent task force recently organized by the Council on Foreign Relations, for example, concluded that the overwhelming bulk of al Qaeda's money comes from fundraising in the Gulf.

In fairness, Farah expands his analysis of terrorist financing well beyond Africa's diamond fields, diligently detailing al Qaeda's reliance on Islamic charities and underground financial networks like *hawala*, a trust-based system for transferring funds in the Muslim world. But as the book's title implies, the intellectual and emotional crux of this project lies in exposing the interstices between commodity trafficking and terrorism.

Although Farah's diamond thesis has thankfully not been politicized to the same degree as uranium smuggling in Niger, it has polarized the intelligence community all the same. The CIA has furiously denounced the argument ("a pile of horse--t," according to one Agency spokesman who spoke to Farah), while European intelligence agencies, the U.N. Special Court in Sierra Leone, and independent

sleuthing by NGOs have unearthed further evidence to support it.

But regardless of whether an al Qaeda-diamond nexus is ever conclusively proved, *Blood From Stones* is still valuable for its broader revelations about where our intelligence capabilities are disturbingly lacking.

As Farah points out, "The CIA had lost more assets in West Africa than almost anywhere else in the world after the Cold War. Many stations around the continent, which had been used primarily as recruiting grounds for Soviet bloc agents, were closed or cut to the bone."

Yet the 9/11 Commission found that West Africa is among the half-dozen places where, "if you were a terrorist leader today . . . you [would] locate your base." So it is clear that the conventional wisdom concerning the region's strategic irrelevance is both anachronistic and dangerous. There are hopeful signs that the United States is beginning to redress

its West Africa blind spot. Earlier this year, the Pentagon dispatched Special Forces and Marines to Mauritania, Mali, Niger, and Chad to train local militaries in counterterrorism. Of particular concern to the American military are the ungoverned wastelands that stretch across the southern rim of the Sahara, which radical Islamist networks are believed to be using as a safe haven.

Much of the war on terrorism will require venturing deep into these collapsed corners of the Muslim world, far from where America's spies, soldiers, and diplomats are accustomed to working.

As our national security establishment adapts to confront the considerable challenge posed by such places, we can be grateful to intrepid explorers like Douglas Farah who have already made the journey--and have returned to tell us about it.

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