

A fugitive in Brazil, a mystery in Lebanon

ERIK SCHECHTER, THE JERUSALEM POST

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This was not the way Rana Qoleilat thought things would end. In mid-March, police arrested the 39-year-old Lebanese bank executive at her hotel room in Sao Paolo, Brazil. Rather than going gracefully to jail, Qoleilat offered local officers a \$200,000 bribe to release her; three days later, she attempted suicide by cutting her wrists with a tiny blade from an eyeliner sharpener.

Qoleilat once lived the high life back in Lebanon. According to the US News and World Report, she jetted around in her own private plane, had servants and a personal hairdresser and lived in a three-story penthouse - all while claiming to make only \$1,000 a month. She even bought a \$10 million villa from the son-in-law of Lebanese president Emile Lahoud.

But those care-free days came to an end three years ago when al-Madina Bank, the institution for which Qoleilat worked, came up \$1.2 billion short. The resulting scandal landed her in jail for embezzlement, but she only spent a few months there, making bail and then fleeing the country just two months before the assassination of former prime minister Rafik Hariri, a key opponent of the Syrians.

To say that the fugitive banker is politically connected is an understatement. Qoleilat moved money for Syrian intelligence officials and Hizbullah, and during the Syrian occupation, the Lebanese government squelched reporting on the al-Madina case. Even now, there's reluctance to open that Pandora's Box, though some of the stolen funds may have financed the Hariri murder.

The bank scandal

Before the 1975-1990 civil war, Lebanon was the financial capital of the Middle East, but warring sectarian militias (as well as Syrian, Palestinian and Israeli forces) wrecked the banking industry, along with much of the economy. Now, after years of reconstruction, the country's banking sector is among the largest in the world, with more than 70 private banks holding deposits in excess of \$39 billion.

The al-Madina Bank opened in 1982, in the midst of the war, and was bought two years later by a pair of wealthy Druse brothers from the town of Baakline. In the early 1990s, Rana Qoleilat came to work as a clerk for Adnan and Ibrahim Abu Ayash, and after 12 years at the bank, she made executive. Billions of dollars in Russian mafia, Iraqi regime and Saudi charity money washed through the trio's hands.

Who would notice if a few million here or there went missing? However, a run on the bank in early 2003 revealed that \$1.2 billion was gone. The Central Bank of Lebanon first froze the accounts of Qoleilat and the Abu Ayash brothers, then mysteriously backed away. The government even intimidated journalists covering the story.

"Al-Madina was one of the rackets that flourished in Lebanon helping Syrian intelligence officers and officials and their Lebanese allies enrich themselves," explains a Beirut-based reporter.

John Walzer agrees.

"When you see the size of the embezzlement, the people [allegedly] involved, and then the inaction [on the part of the government], you have to surmise that they don't want anyone want to look into it," says the former FBI agent and lead investigator for Fortress Global Investigations, who examined the case.

In July 2004, the Central Bank of Lebanon appointed an administrator to run al-Madina, but the authorities are still not releasing bank details to the public. Still, Fortress Global Investigations knows of money transfers to General Rustom Ghazali, who was the Syrian intelligence chief in Lebanon, to then-Syrian defense minister Mustapha Tlass and to Hizbullah.

"We have some access, we know there were transfers," says Walzer, "but there is no evidence as to what happened with the money."

Connecting the dots

In February of last year, prime minister Rafik Hariri and at least 20 others were killed in Beirut when a 500-kilogram bomb detonated beneath their motorcade. At first an unknown al-Qaida affiliate claimed credit for the attack, but the Lebanese had their suspicions. Hariri had, after all, infuriated the Syrians by not agreeing to extend the presidential term of their local ally, Emile Lahoud.

Under pressure from the UN Security Council, the Syrians began withdrawing from Beirut in September 2004, but they were none too happy about it. In fact, Syrian president Bashar al-Assad had reportedly threatened "to break Lebanon over [Hariri's] head."

After the bombing, people started to wonder if some of the missing al-Madina Bank money might have financed the premier's killers.

The UN's Mehlis Report on the assassination did not rule out the possibility that the murder might have been partly economic in motive.

"The likely motive was political," reads the report. "However... it very much seems that fraud, corruption and money-laundering could also have been motives for individuals to participate in the operation."

The Syrians had managed to have Lahoud's term extended before pulling out completely in April 2005, but, says the Beirut source, they feared that Hariri would win re-election as prime minister and upset the applecart: "If Hariri had triumphed in the elections..., it would threaten the enormously lucrative corruption rackets in Lebanon run by the Syrians and their Lebanese allies."

Rana Qoleilat was supposed to be in jail on fraud charges, but curiously, two months before the Hariri assassination, she was let out on bail. The one person who knew which generals and politicians had their palms greased with al-Madina Bank funds then fled the country, spending a few months in Cairo before going on to Brazil, where there is a large Lebanese community.

The extradition

Interpol issued an arrest warrant for Qoleilat, and Brazilian police arrested her in March at her Sao Paulo apartment. The fugitive banker tried and failed to bribe officers, and then three days later, cut her wrists with a tiny razor in a bid to call attention to her fears of being extradited back to Lebanon. Her lawyer Victor Mauad said his client believes her life is in danger.

Some have noted in the Lebanese press that Brasilia and Beirut have no extradition treaty, and Qoleilat may face prison time in the South American country for trying to bribe a police officer. But these objections seem like excuses for politicians who would rather not deal with the consequences of bringing her back home.

"The Lebanese government has to do something about her with everyone looking on," says Walzer, "but at this point, no investigative authority has had access to her."

Source: Jerusalem Post