

TERRORISM IN PANAMA – ECHOES OF 30-YEAR-OLD AIRLINER BOMBING CONTINUE

In modern times there have been just two reported terrorism incidents affecting Panama. The first was in January 1970, when a young man attempted to hijack a DC.3 airliner on an internal flight and have it fly to Cuba. Bad weather forced the aircraft to land at the airport of the city of David, where passengers persuaded the would-be hijacker to give himself up (he was nevertheless shot by the security forces). This was during what now might be seen as the heyday of such hijackings.¹



However, the second incident was far more serious, with the deaths of 21 people, when a Bandeirante regional airliner of *Alas Chiricanas* on Flight AC901, an internal flight from Enrique A Jiménez airport in Colón to Panama City, was lost. The small airliner had departed Colón on 18 July, carrying 18 passengers, 12 of whom were Jewish businessmen said to be returning from the Colón Free Zone, and three crew. It blew up a few moments after take-off, crashing some 6 km from the city.ⁱ A subsequent investigation, involving the FBI, determined that the cause was a bomb planted by a female suicide bomber, who was named as Ali Hawa Jamal. It was reported that the suspected bomber had used the connection at least eight times in a week, allegedly with a false passport.

The incident occurred the day after the bombing of the Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association in Buenos Aires² when 85 people had been killed.ⁱⁱ Following the airliner bombing, a group calling itself Ansar Allah (identified as an alias for Hizbollah) claimed

¹ Between 1961 and 1973, some 85 aircraft were hijacked and told to fly to Cuba, although the first involving flight to Cuba is said to have taken place in 1961 (which led to a new law in the US on aircraft piracy). The first recorded hijack took place, in Peru, as long ago as 1931 but, until the 1960s, such events were rare.

² The Israeli Embassy in Buenos Aires had suffered a bomb attack in March 1992.

responsibility for both attacks in a statement issued from Lebanon. In 2003, the judicial authorities in Argentina said that they wanted to collaborate in the investigation in Panama, given the apparent link between the two attacks. The FBI reported that an unidentified "Middle Eastern" man had used a stolen credit card to rent a car from a rental company in Panama City, and a second car the following day, also charged to the stolen card. Both vehicles were later found abandoned near Tocumen airport, the destination of the flight from Colón.ⁱⁱⁱ Other reports suggested that as many as eight other people could have been involved in organising the bombing, providing logistical support, financing or crucial information to carry out the attack. Some years later, it was claimed that a second, unnamed man of Lebanese origin may also have been connected to the attack, and may have also died in the bombing.

In 2019, the investigation in Panama was reopened, this came after President Verela was told by the Israeli prime minister in November 2017 that Mossad had determined that Hizbollah had been behind the attack (Verela visited Israel in 2018, during which the matter was discussed). In June 2022, a judge in Argentina had issued INTERPOL Notices naming four Lebanese citizens, who probably resided in Brazil and Paraguay, for their alleged participation in the bombing in July 1994, and in 2023 the same four suspects were named in the Panamanian case, including a Ali Zaki Hage, who is now the subject of an extradition request to Venezuela.³

In 2020, the FBI issued a wanted notice for Ali Hage Zaki Jalil, naming him as a person who could have information about attacks in which citizens of Panama, Israel, the US and Colombia were killed. The FBI had arrested two Hizbollah operatives in New York who were accused of carrying out surveillance of US Government agencies, airports in New York and Toronto, as well as US and Israeli interests, and the Panama Canal.^{iv}

In fact, Ali Hage Zaki Jalil had been detained in Panama in October 1994, several months after the airliner bombing. In his apartment police found three submachine guns and records of some \$500,000 in banking transactions. The weapons case was eventually reportedly closed as an "administrative matter". At the time, he presented himself as being a businessman, living in an exclusive area of Colón, and had established a

³ The four named in 2023 were Mohmoud Moutan Mohammad, Mahamad Tha Moutan, Gilberto Tomás Yangüez, and Ali Zaki Hage Jalil.

company called Skydive Panama in June 1994 (other air-related companies were said to have been set up, the last in 2018). Aside from his interest in skydiving, he was also said to have owned several bars and nightclubs in the Colón area, and had been married to a Russian citizen.

In December 2023, the US Department of Justice charged a Colombian-Lebanese citizen and alleged member of Hizbollah, 58-year-old Samuel Salman El Reda⁴ with alleged involvement in July 1994 bombing Buenos Aires. It was reported that in 2011 he had visited Panama to monitor the Canal, and the US and Israeli embassies there, and that, on or about January 2012, he had directed another agent to travel back to Panama to conduct additional preoperational surveillance. This, of course, raised fears of further attacks.⁵

In 2024, following a series of technical analyses carried out by specialists from the FBI, a new theory was that put forward – that a radio transmitter carried by the suspected bomber could have been activated remotely.

Also in 2024, in September, it was reported that Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hizbollah, and said to be one of those responsible for the bombing of the *Alas Chiricanas* airliner, had been killed in an Israeli air attack in Beirut.^v

In October 2024, the US State Department announced a \$5 million reward for information about the airliner bombing, this having involved the deaths of three US citizens. It was also stated that the US Office of the Director of National Intelligence had assessed that Hizbollah was responsible for the bombing of the flight.^{vi}

⁴ Aka Salman Raouf Salman, Sulayman Rammal, Salman Ramal and simply "Hajj".

⁵ <https://www.prensa.com/mundo/estados-unidos-acusa-a-un-miembro-de-hezbollah-con-nexos-con-panama-y-con-el-atentando-de-la-amia-en-buenos-aires/>
<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/justice-department-announces-terrorism-charges-against-high-ranking-hezbollah-member-who>



This brings us to 2025, with reports that a suspect in the airliner bomber, Ali Zaki Jalil, was in Venezuela and that Panama would be seeking his extradition.^{vii} It was reported that the suspect had been arrested, on the strength of an INTERPOL Red Notice raised by Panama, the arrest being said to have been confirmed by the *Oficina Central Nacional de Interpol* in Panama.^{viii} He was said to have been arrested on 6 November on Margarita Island, in the state of Nueva Esparta.^{ix}



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- ⁱ <https://www.prensa.com/judiciales/fiscalia-analiza-si-bomba-de-alas-se-activo-desde-tierra>
<https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/fiscalia-de-homicidio-dice-que-continua-la-investigacion-del-caso-alas-DE8006984>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.prensa.com/judiciales/fiscalia-pide-prorroga-para-investigar-atentado-contravion-de-alas-chiricanas-en-el-que-murieron-21-personas>
- ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.prensa.com/judiciales/fiscalia-analiza-si-bomba-de-alas-se-activo-desde-tierra>
- ^{iv} <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/trends-in-iranian-external-assassination-surveillance-and-abduction-plots>
- ^v <https://newsroompanama.com/2024/09/29/hezbollah-terrorist-leader-hassan-nasrallah-was-killed-saturday-and-was-behind-the-air-attack-in-panama-on-alas-chiricanas>
- ^{vi} https://www.defensemirror.com/news/38029/U_S_Offers_5M_Reward_for_Information_on_1994_Panama_Plane_Bombing_Linked_to_Hezbollah
<https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-offers-5m-reward-for-info-on-1994-panama-plane-bombing-blamed-on-hezbollah>
- ^{vii} <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/panama-adelanta-la-extradicion-de-sospechoso-del-atentado-contrael-vuelo-de-alas-chiricanas-KB17430192>
- ^{viii} <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/todo-lo-que-debes-saber-sobre-el-atentado-de-alas-chiricanas-en-1994-y-la-conexion-con-hezbola-NM17399589>
- ^{ix} <https://albertonews.com/principales/interpol-panama-confirma-la-captura-de-ali-zaki-hage-jalil-en-venezuela-esta-requerido-por-atentado-controun-avion-en-1994/>