

More on Gilbert Chagoury's Ties to Hezbollah

As we first reported [LATimes](#).

Nigerian billionaire Gilbert Chagoury, one of Africa's richest men, has built a reputation as a giant of global philanthropy.

His name is on a gallery at the Louvre and a medical school in Lebanon, and he has received awards for his generosity to the Catholic Church and St. Jude's Children's Hospital. He owns a seven-bedroom hilltop mansion in Beverly Hills, and he has a high-level network of friends from Washington to Lebanon to the Vatican, where he serves as an ambassador for the tiny island nation of St. Lucia. His website shows him shaking hands and laughing with Pope Francis.

"I never imagined what the future would hold for me," Chagoury once said of his boyhood in Nigeria. "But I knew there was a vision for my life that was greater than I could imagine.... I consider it a duty to give back."

Since the 1990s, Chagoury has also cultivated a friendship with the Clinton family – in part by writing large checks, including a contribution of at least \$1 million to the Clinton Foundation.

By the time Hillary Clinton became secretary of State, the relationship was strong enough for Bill Clinton's closest aide to push for Chagoury to get access to top diplomats, and the agency began exploring a deal, still under consideration, to build a consulate on Chagoury family land in Lagos, Nigeria.

But even as those talks were underway, bureaucrats in other arms of the State Department were examining accusations

that Chagoury had unsavory affiliations, stemming from his activities and friendships in Lebanon. After a review, Chagoury was refused a visa to enter the U.S. last year.

Chagoury is a prominent example of the nexus between Hillary Clinton's State Department and the family's Clinton Foundation, which has come under renewed scrutiny during her presidential run. The organization, founded as a way for the Clintons to tap their vast network for charitable works, has tackled some of the steepest challenges in the developing world, including rebuilding Haiti and fighting AIDS in Africa. It has also come under fire for its willingness to accept money from foreign governments with interest in swaying U.S. policy during Clinton's time as secretary of State, and the controversial histories of some donors.

Part of a dictator's inner circle

Chagoury was born in 1946 in Lagos to Lebanese parents, and as a child attended school in Lebanon. He sold shoes and cars in Nigeria, according to a biography on his website, before marrying the daughter of a prominent Nigerian businessman.

During the rule of Gen. Sani Abacha, who seized power in Nigeria in 1993, Chagoury prospered, receiving development deals and oil franchises.

In the 1990s, Chagoury portrayed himself as an Abacha insider as he tried to influence American policy to be more friendly to the regime. Soon after President Clinton named Donald E. McHenry a special envoy to Nigeria in 1995, Gilbert and brother Ronald Chagoury visited McHenry in his office at Georgetown University in Washington. The U.S. was pushing for the return of democratic rule in Nigeria; Abacha, meanwhile, was eager to have his country taken off a U.S. list of nations that enabled drug trafficking,

McHenry said.

“Their effort was to try and influence anyone who they thought could influence the U.S. government,” McHenry said, adding that the approach was heavy-handed. “They tried every key on the piano.”

Abacha turned out to be “one of the most notorious kleptocrats in memory,” stealing billions in public funds, acting Assistant Atty. Gen. Mythili Raman later [lauded](#) the \$1-billion Eko Atlantic as an example to the world of how to fight climate change.

“I especially thank my friends Gilbert and Ron Chagoury for making it happen,” he said.

By last summer, U.S. diplomats had selected a 9.9-acre property at Eko Atlantic as the preferred site for a new Lagos consulate, State Department documents obtained by the Los Angeles Times show. Two months ago, James Entwistle, then the U.S. ambassador to Nigeria, wrote to Washington, asking permission to sign a 99-year lease.

No deal has been signed, State Department spokeswoman Elizabeth Trudeau said. She did not answer questions about whether the Clintons recommended Eko Atlantic. She said at a recent briefing that she was unaware of whether Hillary Clinton knew the site was under consideration; it was on a list of possibilities submitted by a real estate firm in 2012, Trudeau said in response to questions from The Times. A spokesman for Clinton’s campaign noted that the State Department has said the process has been managed by “career real estate professionals.”

Chagoury declined requests for an interview. A friend and spokesman, Mark Corallo, said Chagoury was a generous and “peace-loving” man unfairly scrutinized because of his association with the Clintons. He said Chagoury last saw

Hillary Clinton at a 2006 dinner. The Clinton Foundation and a spokesman for Bill Clinton did not respond to requests for comment.

Chagoury also has given to Republicans: He and his brother, along with Eko Atlantic, are listed as sponsors for a 2014 art exhibit at the George W. Bush Presidential Center.

Suspicious emerge in the U.S.

In spite of his network of powerful friends, Chagoury has aroused the suspicions of U.S. security officials. In 2010, he was pulled off a private jet in Teterboro, N.J., and questioned for four hours because he was on the Department of Homeland Security's no-fly list. He was subsequently removed from the list and categorized as a "selectee," meaning he can fly but receives extra scrutiny, Homeland Security documents show. The agency later wrote to Chagoury to apologize "for any inconvenience or unpleasantness."

That letter did not explain why Chagoury was on the no-fly list, but another Homeland Security document shows agents citing unspecified suspicions of links to terrorism, which can include financing extremist organizations; Chagoury later told reporters that agents asked him what bank he used in Nigeria.

Chagoury believes it was unfair for government officials to disclose the episode and to "suggest that he was a potential threat," Corallo said. He said that Chagoury's lawyers resolved the issue and that he never asked anyone else for help.

Chagoury told ABC News and the Center for Public Integrity at the time that he was miffed because his travel problems made him miss seeing the Lakers in the playoffs. "I just love the Lakers," he said.

His visa troubles stem at least in part from his

involvement in the tangled politics of Lebanon. Chagoury has contributed to charitable projects there, advocated on behalf of the country's Christians and formed political alliances, including with Michel Aoun, a Lebanese Christian politician who served as army commander and prime minister during the country's civil war.

For a decade, Aoun's party has been part of a political coalition with Hezbollah, the Shiite Muslim group backed by Iran that has seats in Lebanon's parliament. Hezbollah is classified as a terrorist organization by the U.S., which holds the group responsible for the 1983 bombing of the U.S. embassy in Beirut and a Marine barracks blast that year that killed 241 American servicemen. Drug Enforcement Administration investigations have also found that Hezbollah is in league with Latin American cartels to launder hundreds of millions of dollars in drug profits.

Chagoury was "known to have funded" Aoun, a Lebanese government minister told then-Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman in 2007, according to [wrote his friends](#) in the department. "We need Gilbert Chagoury to speak to the substance guy re Lebanon. As you know he's key guy there and to us and is loved in Lebanon. Very imp." Huma Abedin, a longtime aide and confidante to Clinton and now vice chairwoman of her presidential campaign, suggested Feltman.

When Band's email was made public this month, Donald Trump pounced, calling the Chagoury episode "illegal" and a "pay-to-play" scheme.

But no meeting ever happened, according to both Feltman and Chagoury's spokesman. Chagoury wanted only to pass along insights on Lebanese politics, Corallo said, adding that "nothing ever came of it" and that Chagoury never talked to anyone at the State Department. Band declined to comment for this story.

A Clinton campaign spokesman said Judicial Watch, the conservative organization that sued to make the emails public, "has been attacking the Clintons since the 1990s."

"No matter how this group tries to mischaracterize these documents, the fact remains that Hillary Clinton never took action as secretary of State because of donations to the Clinton Foundation," spokesman Josh Schwerin said.

This month, the foundation announced that it would stop accepting donations from foreigners and corporations should Clinton win the presidency.

Denied a visa

After Clinton left the State Department, Chagoury again found himself under suspicion by U.S. security officials. A 2013 FBI intelligence report, citing unverified raw information from a source, claimed Chagoury had sent funds to Aoun, who transferred money to Hezbollah. The source said Aoun was "facilitating fundraising for Hezbollah." The U.S. put Chagoury in its database used to screen travelers for possible links to terrorism, interagency memos show.

The ties between Chagoury and Aoun ended years ago in a dispute over oil franchises, said Michel de Chadarev, an official with Aoun's party. Chagoury now backs an Aoun rival for the presidency. De Chadarev said Aoun "categorically denied" any arrangement where he shared money with Hezbollah or passed funds from Chagoury: "No, no, no. Of course not. It is not in his principles to act as transporter to anyone."

Last summer, when Chagoury planned a trip to Los Angeles, he applied at the U.S. embassy in Paris for a visitor's visa and was refused, according to interviews and government documents. Based on the FBI report and other allegations from intelligence and law enforcement sources, the State Department denied the application. It cited

terrorism-related grounds, a broad category that can apply to anyone believed to have assisted a terrorist group in any way, including providing money.

Chagoury has denied ties to Hezbollah. Two years ago, he helped pay for a conference in Washington on the persecution of Christians in the Middle East; some attendees supported Hezbollah, but the director of the group that organized the conference said that didn't mean Chagoury or other conference organizers were among them. "Hezbollah is part of the political reality of the country," Andrew Doran told the National Review.

Corallo did not answer questions about the visa denial, but said Chagoury "has been a friend and supporter of America all his life" and that "any allegation that Mr. Chagoury is involved in any way with providing material support to any terrorist organization, of any stripe, is false, outrageous and defamatory." He said Chagoury has no business interests in Lebanon.

The visa decision process is opaque and provides little recourse for those who are denied entry. Typically, the person is told of the grounds for refusal, but not the details. The secretary of State can grant a waiver, but that is often difficult when the evidence used to block entry is terrorism-related.

For the last three decades, Corallo said, Chagoury spent at least a few months each year in Beverly Hills, where he owns an 18,000-square-foot estate, once the home of actor Danny Thomas, with commanding views of West Los Angeles and the ocean.

A year ago, after his visa application was denied, Chagoury's mansion was put on the market, with an asking price of \$135 million. It's still for sale.