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Did Hezbollah Do It?

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Earlier today, on the 18th anniversary of the Hezbollah bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires, a busload of Israeli tourists was bombed in Burgas, Bulgaria, a popular summer vacation destination among Israeli tourists. Early reports indicate several people were killed, and many more injured. Hezbollah is the leading suspect, and for good reason.

A similar plot targeting Israeli tourists in Bulgaria was thwarted in January, just weeks ahead of the fourth anniversary of the assassination of Hezbollah operations chief Imad Mughniyeh, when a suspicious package was spotted on a bus carrying Israeli tourists from Turkey to Bulgaria. Israeli officials requested the Bulgarians provide enhanced security for buses carrying Israeli tourists, which they did. Additional security was reportedly put in place at the country's premier ski resort as well. At the time, however, Israeli officials deemed airport security sufficient. That no longer appears to be the case.

Today's attack also comes just days after the arrest of a suspected Hezbollah operative accused of plotting an attack on Israeli tourists in Cyprus, an attack eerily similar to the one just executed in Bulgaria. On July 7th Cypriot authorities raided the hotel room of a 24 year old Lebanese man traveling on a foreign passport. Reportedly based on Israeli intelligence, Cypriot police tracked the suspect for a day before arresting him on terrorism charges. The suspect had in his possession photographs of Israeli targets, including information on tour buses carrying Israeli tourists and Israeli flights to and from the island nation. Authorities believe the planned target was a tour bus or airplane. According to press reports, the suspect initially denied ties to terrorist activity but later admitted being a Hezbollah operative.

These are just the latest in a long list of Hezbollah terrorist plots attributed to Hezbollah since Mughniyeh's assassination in Damascus, Syria, in February 2008. The past few years have seen Hezbollah plots thwarted across the world, including three plots in Turkey, two in Cyprus, two in Azerbaijan, among others.

None of this comes as much of a surprise. Speaking at Mughniyeh's funeral, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah threatened Israel with an "open war." In an emotional eulogy, Nasrallah warned Israel, "You have crossed the borders. With this murder, its timing, location and method -- Zionists, if you want this kind of open war, let the whole world listen: let this war be open." Nasrallah pledged that "Mughniyeh's blood will lead to the elimination of Israel." Israeli officials quickly took preventive action to contend with what they deemed the three most likely scenarios for a Hezbollah revenge attack: an attack on current or former senior Israeli officials traveling abroad; an attack on an Israeli embassy or other diplomatic mission abroad; or an attack targeting a location affiliated with a Jewish community abroad, like the 1994 AMIA bombing.

Mughniyeh's assassination led to the resurrection of Hezbollah's international operations arm, which Hezbollah leaders actively pared down in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in an effort to keep the group out of the crosshairs of the "global war on terror." The drawdown helps explain why Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization experienced so many failures when it first set out to avenge Mughniyeh's death. Not only was the terrorist mastermind Mughniyeh no longer there to quarterback operations, but the group lacked the resources and capability to carry out a successful operation abroad. In light of the far tighter security environment now in place in the Western world since 9/11, Hezbollah has also generally shied away from trying to carry out attacks in the West, opting instead to operate in places where security is still relatively lax and where the group has cells and supporters (of its own or belonging to its Iranian patron). Thus, attacks in places like Baku, Bangkok, and now Burgas. In Bulgaria, Hezbollah may have relied on Lebanese drug and other criminal organizations that have long provided funds to the group. A 2008 Bulgarian government commission concluded that profits from drug trafficking through the country supports Hezbollah and other militant groups. This was likely on the agenda when then Mossad chief Meir Dagan paid an official visit to Sofia in 2010 to meet with the Bulgarian Prime Minister.

Hezbollah and Iran each have their own reasons for executing terrorist attacks targeting Israeli or other Western targets -- Iran seeks to avenge attacks on its scientists and sanctions targeting its nuclear program, and Hezbollah seeks to avenge Mughniyeh's death. This convergence of interests strengthens their long-standing and intimate relationship, making their combined operational capabilities that much more dangerous. Such was the case back in 1994 as well. At the time, Tehran was furious over Buenos Aires's decision to cease all nuclear cooperation for fear that Iran's nuclear program was not limited to peaceful purposes. Hezbollah, meanwhile, sought to avenge Israel's capture of Hezbollah ally Mustapha Dirani in Southern Lebanon in May, 1994. Sound familiar?

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