



Hizb Allah Resurrected: The Party of God's Return to Tradecraft

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During the past few years, Lebanese Hizb Allah's global operations increased markedly, but until recently its efforts yielded few successes. In July 2012, however, Hizb Allah operatives bombed a busload of Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, killing five Israelis and a Bulgarian bus driver.[1] Yet what may prove no less significant than this operational success was another plot foiled in Cyprus just two weeks earlier. The Cyprus plot provided the clearest window yet on the rejuvenation of Hizb Allah's tradecraft and the capabilities of the group's international terrorist wing, the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO).

This article traces Hizb Allah's recent spike in operational activity since 2008, highlighting the group's efforts to rejuvenate the capabilities of its IJO. Many of these details derive from the author's extensive conversations with Israeli security officials in Tel Aviv, which were then vetted and confirmed in conversations with American and European security, intelligence and military officials.

The article also provides a detailed case study of Hossam Yaacoub—the convicted Hizb Allah operative now serving time in a Cypriot prison for his role in a plot targeting Israeli tourists—to show how Hizb Allah has resurrected its terrorist capabilities. Drawn from the police depositions of interviews with Yaacoub after his arrest, the case provides unique insights into how Hizb Allah recruits and trains new operatives.

The article finds that while Hizb Allah's decision to stay out of the crosshairs of the war on terrorism after 9/11 caused its global terrorist capabilities to decline, the group has since rebuilt its IJO networks.

Operation Radwan Reveals Degraded Skills

In February 2008, a Damascus car bomb killed Hizb Allah's military chief, Imad Mughniyyeh. At his funeral, Hizb Allah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah promised to retaliate with an "open war" against Israel. The Israelis took the warning seriously, but Nasrallah may not have realized how ill-prepared Hizb Allah was to follow through on the threat.

Israeli officials quickly took preventive action—from issuing specific travel warnings to covert disruptive measures—against what they deemed the most likely scenarios. Israeli officials did not have to wait long for Hizb Allah to act. Yet when the IJO—then under the command of Mughniyyeh’s brother-in-law, Mustafa Badreddine, and Talal Hamiyeh—first set out to avenge Mughniyyeh’s death, Operation Radwan (named for Mughniyyeh, who was also known as Hajj Radwan) experienced a series of setbacks.[2]

Even as it decided to operate in countries with comparatively lax security rather than vigilant Western states, Hizb Allah’s efforts to exact revenge for Mughniyyeh’s death failed repeatedly. In places such as Azerbaijan, Egypt, and Turkey—and even with significant support from Qods Force[3] agents—Hizb Allah suffered a series of failures, starting with the May 2008 fiasco in Baku, when a number of actions, including the planned bombing of the U.S. and Israeli embassies, were disrupted.[4] The event led to the quiet release of Qods Force personnel, but the public prosecution of two Hizb Allah operatives.[5] Operations were soon foiled in Egypt and Turkey too, as well as attempts to kidnap Israelis in Europe and Africa.[6]

Nevertheless, however committed Hizb Allah was to carrying out such attacks, the IJO was not up to the task. Hizb Allah’s leaders had actively pared down the IJO’s global network of operatives following the 9/11 attacks in an effort to stay out of the crosshairs of the war on terrorism. Moreover, the “strategic partnership” it had shared with Iran for the past decade appears to have focused on funding, training, and arming Hizb Allah’s increasingly effective standing militia, not on its cadre of international terrorists. Therefore, Hizb Allah not only lacked the resources and capabilities to execute a successful operation abroad, but it could also not rely on Mughniyyeh to plan and direct operations.[7]

New Tasking from Tehran: Target Israeli Tourists

A foiled attack in Turkey in September 2009 was a watershed event for Hizb Allah’s operational planners and their Iranian sponsors.[8] Despite the increased logistical support Qods Force operatives provided for that plot, Hizb Allah operatives still failed to execute the attack successfully.[9] Israeli officials claimed that Hizb Allah and the Qods Force blamed each other for the two years of failed operations, culminating in the botched attack in Turkey and then another failed plot in Jordan in January 2010.[10] Meanwhile, by late 2009 Israeli officials contended that Iran’s interest in Hizb Allah’s operational prowess focused less on local issues like avenging Mughniyyeh’s death and more on the much larger concern of combating threats to its nascent nuclear program.[11] Malfunctioning components ruined Iranian centrifuges,[12] Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers defected,[13] and then a bomb killed Iranian physics professor Masoud Ali Mohammadi outside his Tehran home in January 2010.[14]

According to Israeli intelligence officials, Iranian leaders reached two conclusions after Mohammadi’s death: 1) Hizb Allah’s IJO had to revitalize its operational capabilities, not only to avenge Mughniyyeh’s death, but also to play a role in Iran’s “shadow war” with the West; and 2) the IRGC would no longer rely solely on Hizb Allah to carry out terrorist attacks abroad.[15] These officials claimed it would now deploy Qods Force operatives to do so on their own, not just as logisticians supporting Hizb Allah hit men.[16] Even more than the loss of its scientists, Tehran sought to address its damaged prestige—the image of an Iran so weak that it could not even protect

its own scientists at home.[17] For its part, Israeli officials contended that the Qods Force instructed Hizb Allah to prepare a campaign of terrorist attacks targeting Israeli tourists worldwide.[18]

Under Nasrallah's instructions, Badreddine and Hamiyeh "undertook a massive operational reevaluation in January 2010, which led to big changes within the IJO over a period of a little over six months," in the words of one Israeli official.[19] During this period, IJO operations were put on hold and major personnel changes made.[20] New operatives were recruited from the elite of Hizb Allah's military wing for intelligence and operational training, while existing IJO operatives were moved into new positions.[21] At the same time, the IJO invested in the development of capabilities and tradecraft that had withered since the 2001 decision to rein in operations.[22]

Fits and Starts

Meanwhile, Hizb Allah operatives were busy planning operations to fulfill their end of Iran's "shadow war" with the West: targeting Israeli tourists abroad.[23] Although it was still struggling to rebuild its foreign operations capabilities, Hizb Allah continued to dispatch insufficiently prepared operatives abroad in the hopes that one might succeed. Yet the increase in plots did not yield results. According to a U.S. law enforcement official, in one plot Hizb Allah paid criminal gang members \$150,000 each to target a Jewish school in Baku.[24] Then, around the same time that authorities foiled a January 2012 plot targeting Israeli vacationers in Bulgaria—just weeks ahead of the anniversary of Mughniyyeh's assassination—authorities disrupted another Hizb Allah plot in Greece.[25] Yet it was halfway across the world, in Bangkok, where Israeli and local authorities broke up a far more ambitious—but no less desperate—Hizb Allah bid to target Israeli tourists.

On January 12, 2012, acting on a tip from Israeli intelligence, Thai police arrested Hussein Atris—a Lebanese national who also carried a Swedish passport—at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport as he attempted to flee the country.[26] Another suspect, whose police composite portrait strongly resembled Naim Haris, a Hizb Allah recruiting agent whose photo Israeli officials had publicized a year earlier, escaped.[27] Within days, police issued an arrest warrant for Atris' roommate, a Lebanese man who went by the name James Sammy Paolo.[28]

Questioned over the weekend of January 12, Atris led police to a three-story building on the outskirts of Bangkok where he and his housemate had stockpiled approximately 8,800 pounds of chemicals used to make explosives.[29] The materials were already distilled into crystal form, a step in building bombs.[30] Information on international shipping forms found at the scene indicated that at least some of the explosives—which were stored in bags marked as cat litter—were intended to be shipped abroad. Israeli intelligence officials surmised that Hizb Allah had been using Thailand as an explosives hub—Atris had rented the space a year earlier—and decided to task its on-hand logistical operatives, who were apparently not trained in the art of surveillance, to target Israeli tourists. The conclusion should not have been a surprise: U.S. officials had already determined that Hizb Allah was known to use Bangkok as a logistics and transportation hub, describing the city as "a center for a [Hizb Allah] cocaine and money-laundering network." [31]

Six months after its failed attempt to target Israeli skiers in Bulgaria,[32] Hizb Allah bombed the Israeli tour bus in Burgas. While successful, some elements of the Burgas plot highlighted operational shortcomings, such as the fake Michigan driver's license used by the bomber that featured a Baton Rouge, Louisiana, address.[33] Other aspects of the plot, however, demonstrated

improved tradecraft. Hizb Allah dispatched two operatives to see the bomber through his mission, both of whom traveled on legitimate foreign passports (one Canadian, the other Australian).[34] They traveled to Bulgaria through Poland, then returned through Romania and Turkey.[35] Yet little more has been made public by Bulgarian authorities, and despite their conclusion that Hizb Allah executed the attack, the investigation remains open with investigators pursuing leads on at least three continents.

The Cyprus Case Study: A Window into Hizb Allah Recruitment and Training

In contrast to the aforementioned plots, a treasure trove of information has poured out of the trial in Cyprus of Hossam Yaacoub, the Lebanese-Swedish dual citizen and self-confessed Hizb Allah operative arrested just days before the Burgas bombing.[36] All of the subsequent details on this case are derived from Yaacoub's police interviews and depositions from the official English translation, which are in the author's possession.

Arrested in his Limassol hotel room on the morning of July 7, 2012, just a few hours after returning from a surveillance operation at Larnaca airport, Yaacoub was first interviewed by Cypriot police over a five hour period starting within an hour of his arrest. At first, Yaacoub provided only basic background information about himself and insisted he was nothing more than a Lebanese businessman looking to import Cypriot goods into Lebanon. He had been to Cyprus three times, he explained, first as a tourist about three years earlier, then for business in December 2011 and now again in July 2012. Yaacoub stuck to his cover story throughout his first two police interviews on July 7 and July 11, 2012.

Several hours passed after the second interview, and as soon as Cypriot police began their third interview of Yaacoub later that same night the story began to change. "With regard to the previous deposition I gave to the police," Yaacoub said. "I did not tell the whole truth." Four deposition pages later, Yaacoub had changed his story, claiming to have been approached in Lebanon by a man named Rami in June 2012. He described clandestine meetings with Rami, always conducted during outdoor walks on which he was not allowed to bring his cell phone. Rami tasked Yaacoub with checking on the arrival of Israeli flights at Larnaca airport. Whatever favors he asked, Yaacoub recalled Rami saying, would "be done for the sake of the religion and the 'end.'" Yaacoub detailed Rami's instructions to set up e-mail accounts through which he could contact Rami, to change his appearance and avoid cameras at the airport, and to collect leaflets from specific Cypriot hotels. Yaacoub said he took the \$500 that Rami offered, traveled to Cyprus, wore a hat and glasses and avoided security cameras when he went to the airport to observe the arriving Israeli flights, and went to an internet cafe to create the new e-mail accounts per Rami's instructions.

Yaacoub described Rami as a 38-year-old Lebanese man, muscular and 5'11" tall, with a fair complexion, green eyes and blond hair. "I could recognize him from a picture," Yaacoub noted, adding, "I don't know if Rami belongs to Hizb Allah, he never mentioned such a word, but I suspected that he belongs to this organization." Yaacoub concluded by saying "everything I said in my deposition is the truth." It was not the truth, however. "Rami" never existed. Only later would Yaacoub admit that "the story I told you in a previous deposition about a guy called Rami, as you can guess, did not happen."

The next interview took place a couple of days later and ran for two and a half hours in the middle of the night. By the time the interview ended at 3:15 AM, police had a much fuller picture of Yaacoub's recruitment by Hizb Allah and the nature of his mission in Cyprus and his previous operations elsewhere in Europe. Again, Yaacoub opened the interview with a bombshell: "I am an active member of Hizb Allah organization [sic] for approximately four years now. I was recruited by a Lebanese called Reda in 2007."

For a full week after his arrest, Yaacoub kept Cypriot police at bay first by sticking to his well-established cover story as a Lebanese merchant and then by conceding that he was asked to collect information on Israeli flights but making up a fake story about his recruitment. In fact, Hizb Allah has a long history of teaching its operatives basic but effective resistance-to-interrogation techniques. In March 2007, the same year Hizb Allah recruited Yaacoub, a seasoned Hizb Allah operative was captured by British forces in Iraq. In that case, Ali Musa Daqduq al-Musawi pretended to be deaf and mute for several weeks before speaking and admitting to being a senior Hizb Allah operative.[37] From a counterintelligence perspective, misleading one's interrogators for a period of time enables other operatives to escape. The reason Yaacoub ultimately revealed the truth after a week of deceptive statements likely parallels al-Musawi's experience in Iraq: presented with hard evidence undermining his cover stories, and having bought time for accomplices to cover their tracks, there was no longer a need to mislead.

How Hizb Allah spotted Yaacoub is unknown, although their interest in his European citizenship and import business was clear. Reda apparently called Yaacoub on the telephone suddenly, inviting Yaacoub for a meeting in his office at a Hizb Allah bureau responsible for "student issues." It was there, not at a Hizb Allah military or terrorist facility, that Yaacoub was told he was needed "for the secret mission of Hizb Allah." Yaacoub was flattered: "I accepted because I considered that he needed me for something great and I was for them the chosen one."

Reda immediately arranged for Yaacoub to meet his first Hizb Allah trainer, Wahid, later that same day outside a Beirut storefront. Yaacoub worked with Wahid for two to three months before going to Sweden to visit his father. Yaacoub explained that "when I say 'work' I mean that Wahid explained to me roughly the secret operation, in which I would participate. He always pointed out that nobody should know anything, neither my family nor my friends." Wahid trained Yaacoub for another couple of months after he returned from Sweden, all of which was theoretical discussion focused on "explaining to me that my secret mission would be surveillance and undercover activities on behalf of Hizb Allah." Then Wahid handed Yaacoub off to his next trainer.

A man named Yousef trained Yaacoub for another five to seven months, focusing on operational security concepts. Yousef taught Yaacoub "how to handle my personal life and my activities, so that people won't get information about me and so that I can work undercover and persuasively without giving rise to suspicions...he taught me how to create stories undercover."

Later, Mahdi took over the training regimen which included Yaacoub's first test-run. In 2008, Yaacoub was given a large, thin envelope to deliver to someone in Antalya, Turkey, with specific instructions about the day, time and place where the delivery was to be made. The meeting point was outside a Turkish department store, and the recipient recognized Yaacoub based on the specific hat and clothes Yaacoub wore, per his instructions. Once they exchanged the pre-arranged code

words, the handoff was made. Yaacoub stayed in Turkey a couple of more days, at Hizb Allah's expense, before returning to Lebanon. "I don't know what its contents was [sic] and I had not entitlement to ask, because everything is done in complete secrecy within the organization," he explained.

Having passed this test, Yaacoub was finally ready for military training and was assigned yet another instructor named Abu Ali who he first met at a secret meeting arranged by Mahdi. Abu Ali organized Yaacoub's military training over the next few years, which involved six to seven different training sessions each lasting for three to five days at a Hizb Allah military camp. Yaacoub would get picked up at different spots in Beirut each time, and was driven in closed vans so he and fellow trainees could not see where they were going. Once there, Yaacoub added, it was clear from the topography that they were in southern Lebanon.

Each military training group consisted of 10-13 trainees, all of whom wore hoods—as did the instructors—to hide their identities from one another. They each slept in their own tent and trained at another site. Yaacoub described being trained in the use of multiple firearms, from handguns to shoulder-fired missiles, including the FN Browning, Glock, AK-47, M-16, MP-5, PK-5, and RPG-7. He also trained in the use of C4 explosives. Over the same period of time while under the overall responsibility of Abu Ali, Yaacoub attended training sessions in Beirut basements focused on teaching surveillance techniques, how to work safely undercover, how to create a cover story, and resistance-to-interrogation techniques such as how to defeat a polygraph test.

In 2009, Yaacoub explained, Abu Ali sent him on a mission to Cyprus "to create a cover story for people to get to know me, to keep coming with a justifiable purpose and without giving rise to suspicions." He traveled to Cyprus via Dubai to strengthen his cover, and spent a week vacationing in Ayia Napa at Hizb Allah's expense. When he returned to Cyprus two years later, he would be able to say that the idea for importing merchandise from Cyprus came to him while on vacation there in 2009.

Each time he returned from a mission, including this one, Yaacoub was debriefed by a Hizb Allah security official who wanted to know where Yaacoub went, who he met, what the climate was like, how people live in the given location, and the state of the economy. On his return from his 2009 Cyprus vacation, Yaacoub was assigned to a new instructor, Aiman, who sent him on his next mission to Lyon, France, at Hizb Allah's expense. His assignment: to receive a bag from one person and deliver it to someone else, all using the same tradecraft (identification signs and codewords) he employed on his last courier mission in Turkey. Shortly thereafter, Aiman sent Yaacoub to Amsterdam, where he retrieved a cell phone, two SIM cards, and an unknown object wrapped in newspapers, and he brought them back to Aiman in Lebanon.

Then, in December 2011 and again in January 2012, Aiman sent Yaacoub back to Cyprus "to create a cover story" as a merchant interested in importing to Lebanon juices from a specific local company in Cyprus. He was also tasked with collecting information about renting a warehouse in Cyprus. "I did all these things after receiving clear instructions from Hizb Allah, so to have Cyprus as a basis [sic] and be able to serve the organization," he said. Yaacoub maintained he did not know why Hizb Allah wanted this base of operations, but speculated "perhaps they would commit a criminal act or store firearms and explosives."

For all of his European travels on behalf of Hizb Allah, Yaacoub used his Swedish passport, which he had renewed for this purpose. Once his basic training was complete, Yaacoub became a salaried Hizb Allah operative, earning \$600 a month since 2010.

Yaacoub's next interview with Cypriot police occurred on July 16, 2012, in the late evening. His first words were: "My operational name, that is my nickname within Hizb Allah, is Wael." Yaacoub offered more details about Hizb Allah's operational security protocols, such as the need to answer a coded question each time he was picked up in Beirut for military training out of town. Aiman provided the updated passwords each time, and then different passwords would be provided by each instructor.

Yaacoub now admitted that his December 2011 visit to Cyprus actually involved several separate missions. First, Aiman tasked Yaacoub with gathering details on a parking lot behind the Limassol Old Hospital and near the police and traffic departments. Aiman wanted Yaacoub to take pictures and be able to draw a schematic of the area on his return. Yaacoub was to specifically look for security cameras, if payment was required on entry, if car keys were left with a parking attendant, if there was a security guard, among other observations. Yaacoub was also told to find internet cafes in Limassol and Nicosia, which he marked on a map for Aiman, and to purchase three SIM cards for mobile phones from different vendors on different days, which he did. He also found good meeting places, such as at a zoo in Limassol and outside a castle in Larnaca. In the event a meeting was necessary, Yaacoub would receive a text message. A text about the weather meant to go to the Finikoudes promenade in Larnaca that day at 6 PM. If no one showed up, Yaacoub was to return the following day at 2:00 PM, and then again the next day at 10:30 AM. Aiman also wanted Yaacoub "to spot Israeli restaurants in Limassol, where Jews eat 'kosher,'" but an internet search indicated there were none. Later, in January 2012, Yaacoub was instructed to check out the Golden Arches hotel in Limassol, collect brochures and reconnoiter the area (he did survey the area, but the hotel was being renovated).

"Hizb Allah knows Cyprus very well," Yaacoub told police, adding he thought his taskings were intended to update the group's files "and create a database." He insisted that he was not part of any plot "to hit any target in Cyprus with firearms or explosives," adding that he would have had the right to refuse the mission if asked to execute such an act.

Five days passed before Yaacoub's final police interview, which took place midday on July 22, 2012. Yaacoub conceded he was "aware of the ideology and the objectives of [the] Hizb Allah organization," adding this was limited to protecting Lebanese territory "with all legal means," which he noted included "armed struggle, military operations, and the political way." He opposed terrorism, he stressed, saying it was different from war. Yaacoub expressed support for "the armed struggle for the liberation of Lebanon from Israel," but was "not in favor of the terrorist attacks against innocent people."

Then, he added: "I don't believe that the missions I executed in Cyprus were connected with the preparation of a terrorist attack in Cyprus. It was just collecting information about the Jews, and this is what my organization is doing everywhere in the world."

On March 21, 2013, a Cypriot criminal court convicted Yaacoub of helping to plan attacks against Israeli tourists on the island last July. In their 80-page decision, the judges rejected Yaacoub's defense that he collected information for Hizb Allah but did not know for what it would be used. There could be no "innocent explanation" of Yaacoub's actions, the court determined, adding that he "should have logically known" his surveillance was linked to a criminal act.[38]

Reason for Concern

Taken together, the Bulgarian and Cypriot cases present compelling evidence of Hizb Allah's return to traditional tradecraft. As the Yaacoub case makes clear, several years before the Qods Force instructed Hizb Allah to rejuvenate its IJO terrorist wing in January 2010, the group had already been recruiting operatives with foreign passports, and providing new recruits with military training and surveillance skills. Yaacoub was recruited in 2007, while Mughniyyeh was still alive. Indeed, while Mughniyyeh's assassination prompted the group to resume international operations in a way they had not since before 9/11, Hizb Allah never stopped identifying and recruiting new operatives for a variety of different types of missions at home and around the world.

There is no question, however, that the operational failures that followed Mughniyyeh's assassination demonstrated that the group's foreign operational capabilities had weakened over time. When Mughniyyeh was killed, and later when Iran wanted Hizb Allah to play a role in its "shadow war" with the West, Hizb Allah was not yet fully prepared to do so. Yet the Bulgaria and Cyprus cases suggest that this may no longer be the case. Yaacoub was no anomaly, as the Burgas attacks made clear. Like Yaacoub and the Burgas operatives, some of those new recruits are Western citizens. During one of his training sessions, Yaacoub heard another trainee speaking fluent Arabic with some English words mixed in. According to Yaacoub, the trainee spoke with a distinctly American accent.[39]

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[2] Personal interview, Israeli counterterrorism official, Tel Aviv, Israel, March 17, 2008.

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[4] Sebastian Rotella, "Azerbaijan Seen as New Front in Mideast Conflict," Los Angeles Times, May 30, 2009; Lada Yevgrashina, "Lebanese Militants Jailed in Baku Over Israel Plot," Reuters, October 5, 2009.

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[15] Personal interviews, Israeli intelligence officials, Tel Aviv, Israel, September 13, 2012.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.; Rotella, "Before Deadly Bulgaria Bombing, Tracks of a Resurgent Iran-Hezbollah Threat."

[19] Personal interviews, Israeli intelligence officials, Tel Aviv, Israel, September 13, 2012.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.; Rotella, "Before Deadly Bulgaria Bombing, Tracks of a Resurgent Iran-Hezbollah Threat."

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[29] James Hookway, "Thai Police Seize Materials, Charge Terror-Plot Suspect," Wall Street Journal, January 17, 2012; Rotella, "Before Deadly Bulgaria Bombing, Tracks of a Resur-gent Iran-Hezbollah Threat."

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[33] See cover photo at Matthew Levitt, "Hizballah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2013.

[34] Matthew Brunwasser and Nicholas Kulish, "Multinational Search in Bulgaria Blast," New York Times, February 6, 2013.

[35] Ibid.

[36] All references to Hossam Yaacoub's interviews and depositions came from the official English translation of his police depositions. These were taken in Arabic, translated into Greek, and then into English by a certified translator. For details, see Depositions of Hossam Taleb Yaacoub (some spelled Yaakoub), Criminal Number Σ /860/12, File Page 35, 79, 85, 110, 134, 187, by interviewing police officer Sergeant Michael Costas. Depositions taken on July 7, 2012, July 11, 2012, July 11-12, 2012, July 14, 2012, July 16, 2012, and July 22, 2012.

[37] "Press Briefing with Brig. Gen. Kevin Bergner, Spokesman, Multi-National Force-Iraq," Multinational Force-Iraq, July 2, 2007; U.S. Military Commission Charge Sheet for Ali Musa Daduq al Musawi, ISN #311933, January 3, 2012; Mark Urban, Task Force Black: The Explosive True Story of the Secret Special Forces War in Iraq (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2010), pp. 224-225.

[38] Menelaos Hadjicostis, "Cyprus Court Convicts Hezbollah Member," Associated Press, March 21, 2013.

[39] Depositions of Hossam Taleb Yaacoub (some spelled Yaakoub), Criminal Number Σ /860/12, File Page 187, by interviewing police officer Sergeant Michael Costas. Depositions taken on July 22, 2012.