

Breaking Hezbollah's 'Golden Rule': An Inside Look at the Modus Operandi of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization

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Abstract

In September 2019, the U.S. Department of Justice announced the arrest of Alexei (Ali) Saab, a naturalized American citizen from Lebanon, on charges of marriage fraud and material support to the designated terrorist group Hezbollah. Saab reportedly served as an operative of Hezbollah's external terrorist operations wing, the Islamic Jihad Organization (also known as the External Security Organization or Unit 910). In this role, he carried out surveillance of potential target locations in several American cities to "prepare for potential future attacks against the United States." [1] Saab's case came on the heels of two others in the United States, including the conviction of Ali Kourani for engaging in similar preoperational surveillance for Hezbollah and an apparent plea-bargain for Samer el-Debek who was dispatched on Hezbollah missions abroad. Just a few years earlier, in 2012 and 2015, two Hezbollah operatives had been arrested in Cyprus. One was arrested for carrying out surveillance of Israeli tourists and other targets in Larnaca and Limassol, while the other was stockpiling ammonium nitrate for the production of explosives. Law enforcement officials learned much about Hezbollah's covert operations from these cases, including details being made public for the first time in this article. Taken together, these cases - along with those involving operatives in Thailand and Peru - illustrate Hezbollah's external operations modus operandi, senior handlers, communications techniques, travel patterns, terrorist training, and offer even limited information about the pay scale for Hezbollah operatives. Publicly disclosing such information breaks the "golden rule" of Hezbollah's Unit 910, as expressed to Kourani by his Hezbollah handler: "The less you know about the unit, the better." [2]

Keywords: Hezbollah, terrorism, modus operandi, surveillance, training

Introduction

Hezbollah [also spelled Hizballah] has not carried out a successful international terrorist attack since it blew up a bus of Israeli tourists arriving at the airport in Burgas, Bulgaria, in July 2012—but not for lack of trying. Law enforcement and intelligence authorities have successfully thwarted a long list of Hezbollah plots and operational preparations around the world since then, including cases in Bolivia,[3] Canada,[4] Cyprus, Nigeria, Peru, Thailand, the United Kingdom,[5] and the United States.[6]

In fact, Hezbollah has run at least two distinct operational trend lines in the years since the February 2008 assassination of the group's longtime terrorist mastermind, Imad Mughniyeh, in Damascus. One set of plots relates to Hezbollah's stated desire to avenge Mughniyeh's death, while the other set of missions began slightly later, as part of Iran's shadow war with the West in the lead-up to the 2015 Iran Deal. The latter class of missions began in January 2010, when Iran created a new unit within the Qods Force—the external operations arm of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corp (IRGC)—to carry out attacks against countries perceived as undermining Iran's nuclear program. Complementary to the creation of this unit, Iranian officials tasked Hezbollah with carrying out attacks targeting Israeli soft targets—primarily tourists—in an effort to pressure Israel not to target people and places tied to Iran's nuclear program.[7]

Together, these two incipient events led Hezbollah to spot promising recruits for the group's terrorist operatives units (the Islamic Jihad Organization (ISO), or External Security Organization (ESO), also known as Unit 910) from within its armed militia (effectively a sub-state army), the Islamic Resistance, and from the group's other militant, political, social and youth branches. Once spotted—either for their existing skillsets, demonstrating particular promise, or having foreign passports and/or dual-nationalities—these recruits received training in the dark arts of espionage, countersurveillance, operational security, weapons training, and more.[8]

In hindsight, it is clear that Hezbollah realized that its international terrorist operations capabilities had withered on the vine in the post-9/11 era, a time when the group wanted to avoid being included in the “war on terror” and so cut back on foreign operations while maintaining international logistics, procurement and financing networks. Thus, in the 2008-2010 time period, Hezbollah began to reinvest the time and resources necessary to instill in its new recruits a knowledge of sophisticated tradecraft.

In the years that followed, a string of Hezbollah operatives would be arrested. In some cases, the suspects were ultimately released without charges (and likely deported), such as the 2015 case of a man in his 40s who was caught stockpiling thousands of disposable ice packs containing ammonium nitrate, a key bomb-making component, in the U.K.[9] In others, they would be detained until trial and tried. In Nigeria, some were convicted and others not.[10] In Peru, one was convicted on false-document charges and is being retried on terrorism charges.[11] In Cyprus and the United States, several operatives were charged and convicted for their Hezbollah operational activities. The cases of Samer el-Debek and Ali Saab, both in the Southern District of New York, are still pending trial.[12] Among those plots that law enforcement have intercepted, the cases in the United States and Cyprus provide the most information. Taken together, material made public in these cases opens a window into Hezbollah’s external operations modus operandi, its senior handlers, communication techniques, travel patterns, terrorist training, and even pay scale. Publicly disclosing such information breaks the “golden rule” of Hezbollah’s Unit 910, as expressed to Kourani by his Hezbollah handler: “The less you know about the unit, the better.”[13]

Hezbollah in Cyprus: “It Was Just Collecting Information About the Jews”

Hezbollah has a long history of engaging in operational activity in Cyprus,[14] but a pair of interrelated arrests of Hezbollah operatives there in July 2012 (just two weeks before the successful Hezbollah bus bombing in Burgas, Bulgaria) and May 2015 began to pull back the curtains on Hezbollah’s covert operations modus operandi.

Hossam Yaacoub

On July 7, 2012, Cypriot police arrested a 24-year-old Swedish-Lebanese dual citizen, Hossam Yaacoub, on suspicion of being a Hezbollah operative engaged in preoperational surveillance of Israeli tourists arriving in Cyprus, not long after he returned to his Limassol hotel room after a surveillance mission at the Larnaca airport.[15]

When questioned by police, Yaacoub initially denied ties to terrorist activity, and then spun a tall tale about his recruitment and mission over the course of a series of depositions.[16] Ultimately, Yaacoub conceded he was a paid and “active member of Hezbollah” sent to Cyprus to conduct surveillance.[17] Just four hours after insisting to police he was in Cyprus on business, Yaacoub admitted, “I did not tell the whole truth.”[18] In his original, fabricated story, Yaacoub claimed to have been randomly approached and recruited by someone named Rami, who he assumed was associated with Hezbollah, despite the fact that, according to Yaacoub, this affiliation was never explicitly stated.[19] Yaacoub claimed that “Rami” tasked him with collecting information on Israeli flights arriving at Larnaca airport, gave him basic information on going incognito with a basic disguise (hat and glasses) and avoiding airport surveillance cameras, which was partially true.[20] In a following deposition, Yaacoub confessed that “the story I told you in a previous deposition about a guy called Rami, as you can guess, did not happen.”[21]

What did happen, Yaacoub would ultimately explain, is that he was recruited in 2007 by someone going by the name Reda. Reda sent Yaacoub for multiple training sessions, used him as a courier to meet Hezbollah operatives in Europe, and dispatched him to Cyprus several times for operational purposes.[22] After several rounds of training (see below), in 2009, Hezbollah sent Yaacoub on his first trip to Cyprus, via Dubai.[23] Hezbollah paid for Yaacoub’s weeklong vacation in Ayai Napa, laying the groundwork for a cover story. Indeed, Yaacoub said that he was specifically sent to Cyprus in 2009 “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.”[24] Next, Hezbollah dispatched

Yaacoub to Lyon, France, to pick up a bag from one person and deliver it to another.[25] Soon after, he was sent to retrieve a cellphone, two subscriber identification module (SIM) cards, and a third unknown object wrapped in newspapers from someone in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, and to bring those back to his Hezbollah handler in Lebanon.[26]

Yaacoub returned to Cyprus at Hezbollah's behest in December 2011 and again in January 2012, where he continued to build his cover story while simultaneously undertaking operational activities as well. For example, he was told to look into renting a warehouse.[27] Yaacoub claimed he did not know the precise reason for this task, but speculated that "perhaps they [Hezbollah] would commit a criminal act or store firearms or explosives." [28] On this conjecture, he was either well-informed or prescient.

Yaacoub was also tasked with carrying out preoperational surveillance of specific targets during his December 2011 Cyprus trip.[29] His handler told Yaacoub to collect detailed information about a parking lot behind the Limassol Old Hospital and near the police and traffic departments. Hezbollah wanted Yaacoub to take pictures and be prepared to draw a schematic of the area during his debriefing in Lebanon. Hezbollah handlers asked Yaacoub to pay attention to security cameras, to take notice if payment was required on entry and if parking attendants held on to the car keys, and to look for security guards. Yaacoub was to locate Internet cafes in Limassol and Nicosia, to mark these on a map, and to purchase three SIM cards for mobile phones from different vendors on different days. Hezbollah also requested Yaacoub identify safe places to meet in public, which he did, selecting a zoo in Limassol and an area outside a castle in Larnaca. Hezbollah told Yaacoub "to spot Israeli restaurants in Limassol, where Jews eat 'kosher,'" but Yaacoub said that an Internet search indicated there were none.[30] Later, in January 2012, Yaacoub was instructed to inspect the Golden Arches hotel in Limassol, collect brochures, and explore the area around the hotel (he did survey the area, but the hotel was undergoing renovation and closed).[31]

While insisting he was unaware of the ultimate purpose of his reconnaissance, Yaacoub admitted being aware that "something weird [was] going on" and speculated it was "probably to bring down a plane, but I don't know, I just make assumptions." [32] Despite his feigned ignorance, Yaacoub understood that his activities were intended to help Hezbollah engage in activities in Cyprus. "I did all these things after receiving clear instructions from Hezbollah, so to have Cyprus as a basis [sic] and be able to serve the organization." [33]

In his final deposition with police, Yaacoub was somewhat more forthcoming, conceding he was carrying out targeting surveillance but insisting this did not constitute terrorist activity. His calculus, while flawed, was revealing of the Hezbollah mindset: "It was just collecting information about the Jews, and that is what my organization is doing everywhere in the world." [34]

In March 2013, a panel of judges on a Cypriot criminal court rejected Yaacoub's defense that he collected information for Hezbollah but had no idea for what purpose. There could be no "innocent explanation" for his actions, the judges ruled.[35] "There is no doubt these are serious crimes which could have potentially endangered Israeli citizens and targets in the republic," they stated.[36] Yaacoub was convicted of participation in a criminal organization, participation and acceptance in committing a crime, and money laundering—Hezbollah's terror wing was only later designated as a terrorist group by the European Union in July 2013—and sentenced to four years in prison.[37] After serving two years and five months of his criminal sentence, Yaacoub was granted early release from prison and escorted to Sweden.[38] He is believed to have subsequently returned to Lebanon, but his release was not the end of the Cyprus saga.

Even as the EU debated designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, ultimately settling on banning only the group's terrorist and military wings, the group's Cyprus operation continued unabated.[39] According to Cypriot police, once Hossam Yaacoub was arrested, Hezbollah decided to move the ammonium nitrate ice packs it was stockpiling in Cyprus.[40] Subsequent investigation would reveal that parallel to Yaacoub's surveillance missions in Cyprus, a Hezbollah operative named Talal Khalil rented a storage space in which ammonium nitrate ice packs were stored from 2010 to 2012.[41] According to Cypriot authorities, in 2010 Hezbollah used a French-Lebanese professor, Jalal Jomaah, who was teaching in Lyon, France, at the time, as a cutout to purchase a single-family home in Larnaca in 2010 for 350,000 Euros (well above the normal asking price for

that neighborhood, according to investigators).[42] Then, after Yaacoub's arrest, the ice packs were transferred to the basement of this house for storage, even as the EU debated designating Hezbollah as a terrorist group. With Yaacoub arrested, and Hezbollah likely on edge, the group decided to pull Khalil out of Cyprus and periodically send in a different operative—Hussein Bassam Abdallah—to visit Cyprus for a few days at a time and check on the ammonium nitrate cache. Khalil and Jomaah remain fugitives, believed to be in Lebanon, wanted on outstanding arrest warrants.[43]

Hussein Bassam Abdallah

According to Cypriot police, Abdallah, a 26-year-old dual Lebanese-Canadian national, traveled to Cyprus about 10 times to check on the explosive material, staying for 10-20 days at a time, over a three year period from 2012 to 2015.[44] Despite the arrest and conviction of Yaacoub, Cypriot authorities were unaware he was part of a larger Hezbollah plot that continued unabated even in the face of the unwanted attention of Yaacoub's trial.[45]

Then, in May 2015, Cypriot police received intelligence indicating that a large quantity of ammonium nitrate, a chemical precursor for production of explosives, was being stored in the basement of a house in Larnaca.[46] Police initiated surveillance of the property, revealing that the house was occupied by Abdallah.[47] Abdallah had rented a seven-seater Nissan Qashqai SUV, but surveillance determined he was making plans to rent a larger minivan and a warehouse.[48] When inquiring about the warehouse, Abdallah made suspicious inquiries, wanting a private storage space that was also sufficiently isolated.[49] Concerned he was preparing to move a large quantity of explosive precursor material from the home, police executed an arrest warrant for Abdallah and a search warrant for his home, where they found a basement stacked with boxes containing 65,573 ice packs, yielding 8.2 tons of ammonium nitrate.[50]

Police also found cash, cellular phones, documents, and a photocopy of a doctored British passport featuring Abdallah's photograph and a fictitious name.[51] As a dual Lebanese-Canadian national, Abdallah traveled on his Canadian passport, but according to prosecutors, he planned to use the photocopied fake passport to rent a vehicle and storage space.[52] Hezbollah paid Abdallah well for his services as guardian of the explosive chemicals. Police seized 9,400 euros when they arrested him, which he conceded was his latest payment from Hezbollah.[53]

Like Yaacoub, Abdallah confidently told police a well-rehearsed cover story over the course of his initial interviews. He readily provided his personal and family background and calmly explained that he came to Cyprus as a tourist with the intention of finding a house to rent for his mother and sister, who he said wanted to move there.[54] Like Yaacoub before him, Abdallah referred to a fictitious man named "Rami," who he claimed generously offered the keys to his own unoccupied house, telling Abdallah that if there were any items in the house he did not need, he could move them into storage.[55] Abdallah claimed he simply planned to move the 447 large cardboard boxes he found in the basement to a storage facility, not thinking the ice packs were in way suspicious, and insisted the police must have made a mistake arresting him.[56]

After 18 days, however, as time passed and investigators collected more evidence (from their own investigative work, through European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation-EUROPOL, and other friendly services), Abdallah began cooperating. He confessed to being a member of Hezbollah's terrorist wing, adding that he underwent military training and was recruited by his Hezbollah handler in Lebanon for the express purpose of traveling to Cyprus every couple of months to "safeguard" the ammonium nitrate cache.[57] His orders for this last trip to Cyprus were to move the explosive material from the safehouse to a warehouse storage facility.[58]

Abdallah admitted that Hezbollah planned to mount attacks in Cyprus targeting Israeli or Jewish interests, but said he had no knowledge of the ultimate targeting or timing of the attack.[59] A singular bombing, however, may not have been the full scope of the operation—the quantity of explosives Hezbollah stockpiled would have facilitated many attacks. According to information Israeli officials say they received from Cyprus, Hezbollah was using Cyprus as a "point of export" from which to funnel explosives elsewhere for a series of attacks in

Europe targeting Israeli and Jewish sites, including synagogues and other Western targets.[60]

It remains unclear who Abdallah's Hezbollah handler was, but testimony in another Hezbollah trial in a U.S. federal court would later reveal that Yaacoub's handler was probably Fadi Kassab (true name believed to be Majed Abdullah).[61] According to Cypriot police, Kassab was also involved in another Hezbollah case in Thailand in 2012 and traveled to Cyprus under the name Alexander Bouji (Yaacoub knew him by a third name, Sami Helo).[62] Cypriot authorities determined that Fadi helped initiate the Cyprus plot by arranging for the importation of 33,200 first aid kits to Cyprus, each containing two ice packs.[63] Kassab then removed the 66,400 ice packs and sold the remaining first-aid kits to a multinational corporation as gifts for its clients.[64]

Abdallah ultimately plead guilty to participating in, and providing support to, a terrorist organization; money laundering; and possessing explosive substances.[65] He was sentenced to six years in prison. Fadi Kassab remains a fugitive, believed to be in Lebanon, wanted on an outstanding arrest warrant.[66]

U.S. Arrests: "I am a member of 910, also known as Islamic Jihad or the Black Ops of Hezbollah"

The June 2017 arrests of Hezbollah terrorist operatives Ali Kourani and Samer el-Debek marked the first time the Department of Justice openly described arrested Hezbollah operatives as members of the group's Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO) terrorist wing. In fact, the operational activities of these operatives so concerned U.S. authorities that the director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center warned in October 2017 that the U.S. intelligence community had updated its assessment of the possibility of Hezbollah attacking the U.S. homeland. "It's our assessment that Hezbollah is determined to give itself a potential homeland option as a critical component of its terrorism playbook," former Director Nicholas Rasmussen said.[67] Since then, Kourani has been tried in federal court and convicted on all counts (el-Debek has to stand trial, though it appears he pleaded guilty pursuant to a cooperation agreement with the government).[68] Even more recently, in September 2019, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) arrested another Hezbollah IJO operative, Alexei Saab (Saab has yet to stand trial).

Both Kourani and el-Debek were recruited around January 2008, just a month before the assassination of IJO commander and longtime wanted Hezbollah terrorist Imad Mughniyeh in what was later revealed to be a joint U.S.-Israeli operation.[69] But Hezbollah was engaged in operational planning even before Mughniyeh was killed, as evidenced by the fact that Saab was recruited several years earlier, in 1996, when he first served as a spotter observing and reporting on Israeli and South Lebanon Army movements in south Lebanon but only attended his first Hezbollah training three years later.[70] Kourani's family is well-known in Hezbollah circles—indeed, he would brag to FBI agents that his family was like the "Bin Ladens of Lebanon" and note that one of his brothers was the "face of Hezbollah" in the village of Yatar, Lebanon—so he was able to get into a Hezbollah training program in 2000 as a 16-year-old boy.[71] Only later, in 2008, after becoming a U.S. resident, would he be recruited into the IJO. El-Debek said he was recruited into Hezbollah in late 2007 or early 2008, likely because of the fact that he held a U.S. passport, and he attended his first training session that same year.[72] The timing of recruitment is significant because it demonstrates that Hezbollah had begun to rebuild its international terrorist networks even before Mughniyeh's death. Kourani and el-Debek were then in the right place at the right time. In a eulogy broadcast at Mughniyeh's funeral, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah issued a not-so-veiled threat that attacks abroad would follow, saying, "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." [73] As Kourani would later tell the FBI, Hezbollah was "desperate because they were looking to exact revenge for [Mughniyeh's] death." [74]

Ali Kourani

One of the FBI agents who met with Kourani recalled that the then-suspect "sat back in his chair, squared his shoulders and stated, 'I am a member of 910, also known as Islamic Jihad or the Black Ops of Hezbollah. The

unit is Iranian-controlled.” He explained that although the unit reports directly to Hezbollah’s Secretary General, Hassan Nasrallah, Iran oversees its operations as well.[75]

Like Yaacoub in Cyprus, Kourani’s handler was also Fadi Kassab, whom federal prosecutors argued is actually named Majed Abdullah. Kourani believed “Fadi” was a European-Lebanese dual-national, possibly a British citizen.[76] He described Kassab to the FBI as the person “responsible for IJO operatives in both the United States and Canada.” According to Kourani’s statements to FBI agents, even as Kassab was running Kourani as an agent in New York, the Lebanon-based handler played hands-on roles in the Hezbollah attack in Bulgaria in 2012.[77] Kourani confirmed for the FBI that Kassab was also Hossam Yaacoub’s handler for Hezbollah’s Cyprus plot.[78]

At Kassab’s instruction, Kourani carried out a variety of pre-operational intelligence-gathering missions in New York City, including conducting surveillance of FBI and U.S. Secret Service offices, as well as a U.S. Army armory. Kourani described himself as a Hezbollah sleeper agent, and carried out other operational activities in New York, such as identifying Israelis in New York who could be targeted by Hezbollah and finding people from whom he could procure arms that Hezbollah could stockpile in the area. Kourani told the FBI he believed his IJO handler tasked him with identifying Israelis currently or formerly affiliated with the Israeli army “to facilitate, among other things, the assassination of IDF personnel in retaliation for the 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyeh.”[79]

Kassab also tasked Kourani with collecting detailed information about New York’s JFK and Toronto’s Pearson International airports. Prosecutors used Kourani’s travel documentation to show that he traveled through JFK 19 times and through Pearson seven times. Based on these surveillance runs, Kourani reported back to Hezbollah details regarding airport security procedures, the uniforms worn by security officials, and locations of cameras, security checkpoints, and other security barriers. At trial, prosecutors concluded that Hezbollah wanted this information because the group was “thinking about how to get terrorists, and weapons, and contraband through airports, from Lebanon into Canada, from Lebanon into the United States.”[80]

Hezbollah came up with other ways to take advantage of Kourani’s presence in the United States. For example, he was asked to procure surveillance equipment, including drones, night-vision goggles, and high-powered cameras for Hezbollah, but never did. He was also told to try to obtain employment at the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) to facilitate Hezbollah’s procurement of fraudulent identification documents for use in operations. Kourani demurred from applying for a clerical job at the DMV—which Kassab believed would be useful in procuring drivers’ licenses and license plates for operatives—but he did apply for a job at the New York Police Department.[81]

Hezbollah also saw the benefit of deploying a U.S.-based operative elsewhere around the world with his legitimate U.S. passport. Fadi pressed upon Kourani the importance of obtaining U.S. citizenship and getting an American passport, and just a week after becoming a naturalized citizen in April 2009, Kourani obtained a passport. Although he claimed on his passport application that he had no immediate travel plans, he immediately applied for a visa to China, which he received eight days later. Three days after the receipt of his visa, he flew to Guangzhou, China.[82]

Kourani, who trafficked in counterfeit clothing, originally stated he went to China for a medical device trade show, but he understandably could not explain why someone who sold counterfeit goods would attend such a trade show.[83] Kourani told FBI investigators that he had a Chinese contact in the counterfeit clothing business named Frank, but he did not know Frank’s last name. He claimed he traveled to China with Frank’s son, but he did not know the son’s first name.[84] In fact, Kourani went to visit the Guangzhou-based medical device company that produced the ammonium nitrate ice packs Hezbollah uses to make explosives. According to the Department of Justice, “the purpose of the trip was to develop relationships that the IJO could rely on to obtain ammonium nitrate to be used as an explosive precursor chemical.” Substantiating this theory, the DOJ added, authorities had previously seized bomb-making precursor chemicals manufactured by a Guangzhou company in Thailand in 2012 and again in Cyprus in May 2015.[85]

Samer el-Debek

El-Debek appears to have been a Hezbollah supporter well before the group recruited him as a paid IJO operative in late 2007 or early 2008. In July 2006, for example, he sent an email from his work email to his personal email account expressing support for Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah.[86] Once recruited, however, el-Debek became a salaried operative, receiving compensation for his support of Hezbollah through about 2015, according to U.S. investigators.[87]

Over the course of eight months, FBI agents interviewed el-Debek five times in person and several more times over the phone.[88] They discovered that beginning in 2008, and on several other occasions through 2014, el-Debek received Hezbollah military and religious training in Lebanon, from basic military and surveillance and countersurveillance techniques, to advanced bomb-making techniques, with a focus on ammonium-nitrate explosives, which Hezbollah referred to as “Samad.”[89] His explosives training focused on methods to create maximum damage and casualties, target people and buildings, and collect dual-use chemicals available at hardware stores to build explosive devices.[90] El-Debek was specifically trained, U.S. officials noted, in technically sophisticated techniques of the kind Hezbollah operatives utilized to construct the ammonium-nitrate bomb used in the 2011 Burgas, Bulgaria bus bombing. That bombing, officials added, was carried out by el-Debek’s relative, Mohamad Hussein. In a meeting with FBI agents, el-Debek identified a photograph of Hussein, noting that he and Hussein were both members of Hezbollah’s IJO.[91]

Hezbollah dispatched el-Debek on his first mission three years before the Burgas bombing, in May 2009, shortly after his first explosives training. Hezbollah had set up a safe house in Bangkok, Thailand, where a group of Hezbollah operatives were storing chemical explosive precursors for the manufacture of improvised explosive devices. According to the criminal complaint issued against el-Debek, he was sent to clean up the explosive materials abandoned by other operatives who believed they were under surveillance. Using his American passport, so as to avoid applying for a Thai visa, el-Debek traveled from Lebanon to Kuala Lumpur and on to Bangkok.[92]

Hezbollah must have had reason to suspect they would need to send el-Debek to Thailand at some point, because as early as April 2008—soon after he first joined the IJO—he reached out to women in Thailand asking if they would be his guide or expressing interest in getting to know them better.[93] When it came time to travel, el-Debek would leverage these relationships as part of his cover story. During his two-day layover in Malaysia, el-Debek met his IJO handler, who instructed him to use sex tourism as cover. Once in Thailand, he could hire an escort and use her to draw out any surveillance authorities may have set up at the safe house.[94]

In Bangkok, el-Debek followed these instructions, hiring a female escort, to whom he gave the key to the safe house, watching for any sign of surveillance as she entered the house. Seeing nothing suspicious, he entered the premises and found around 50 boxes of material that he believed to be ammonium nitrate sealed in plastic. He filled his car with boxes, poured the remaining chemicals down the drain, and left. Two days later, apparently convinced the safe house was not under surveillance, el-Debek was instructed to return the explosive precursor materials, pay the rent, and leave as he came, traveling through Malaysia. He then contacted his brothers by email, first from Bangkok and then Kuala Lumpur, telling them in one email, “I m ok . . . I finish the deal here . . . suppose to arrive Sunday . . . don’t u guys worry [sic].”[95]

El-Debek next attended language school to learn Spanish before being deployed to Panama twice, each time for about a month, first in February 2010 and a year later in February 2011. On his first trip, el-Debek traveled via Colombia and was tasked with acquainting himself with the lay of the land—learning to drive, developing a cover story as a businessman looking for local business opportunities—and casing and identifying security procedures at the Panama Canal and the Israeli embassy. He was also told to locate the U.S. embassy and continue his Spanish lessons while in Panama. El-Debek located hardware stores where he could buy materials used to build explosives, such as acetone and battery acid.[96]

He returned to Panama a year later, traveling through the United States, but not before emailing Panama tour operators from Lebanon asking about tours at or near the Panama Canal. The canal, el-Debek’s handlers told

him, would be his primary focus on this trip.[97]

Per the specific instructions Hezbollah gave him, el-Debek took many photographs of the canal with the purpose of identifying areas of weakness, construction, security, and the proximity between the shore and ships transiting the canal. Hezbollah also asked el-Debek to take pictures of the Israeli embassy, but he decided not to do so because he assessed this to be a secondary tasking and was afraid of getting caught. His IJO handlers also asked for photographs of the American embassy, and for information about periods of heavy traffic in and out of the embassy, vehicular traffic patterns in front of the embassy, and locations of houses and apartments near the embassy. El-Debek claimed to the FBI that he neither took pictures of the U.S. embassy nor visited it, but he did tell his IJO handlers that it appeared people waiting for U.S. visa appointments were able to enter the embassy and wait inside. On his return to Lebanon, el-Debek met with his handler and the handler's superior and provided them with detailed photographs, maps, notes, and the camera he used in Panama.[98]

El-Debek appears to have pleaded guilty to several terrorism-related offenses pursuant to a cooperation agreement with the U.S. government. The indictment of Alexei Saab includes significant information from a cooperating witness (CW-1), who while unnamed, appears from his description to be el-Debek.[99]

Alexei Saab

Over five months, from March to July 2019, FBI agents conducted a series of interviews with Alexei Saab—also known as Ali Hassan Saab, Alex Saab, or Rachid—during which Saab appears to have provided significant details about his recruitment, training, and operational activities on behalf of Hezbollah.[100]

Saab joined Hezbollah as a young man barely out of his teens, and his first missions for the group were confined to Lebanon. In the mid to late-1990s, prior to the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000, a young Saab was assigned to observe Israeli Defense Forces and Southern Lebanese Army soldiers in the border areas around Yaroun and report on their movements, including patrol schedules, formations, checkpoint security procedures, and the types of vehicles the soldiers drove.[101]

From 1996 to 2000, Saab met his first Hezbollah handler at least 15 times. This handler gave Saab his assignments in Lebanon and received Saab's written reports on surveillance in the Yaroun area. Around 1999, Hezbollah sent Saab to attend a basic military training course focused on the use of small arms (M-16, AK-47, pistol) and grenades.[102]

By 2000, Hezbollah spotters appear to have seen potential in Saab, recruiting him into the IJO and training him in Hezbollah external operations. Only then did Saab get more advanced training in sophisticated IJO trade-craft, weapons and military tactics, and bomb-making. Around the time of his recruitment, Saab's handler also introduced him to three additional handlers. These three would become Saab's interlocutors now that he had joined the IJO. Later that same year, Saab lawfully entered the United States.

After moving to the United States in November 2000, Saab returned to Lebanon some ten times over the years and received additional terrorist training during at least some of these trips. For example, in 2004 and 2005, Saab was instructed in triggering mechanisms, explosive substances, detonators, and circuit assembly during a specialized explosives training that lasted several days over a three-week period.[103]

In 2011, the United Nations (UN) Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) indicted several Hezbollah operatives for reportedly carrying out the February 2005 bombing that killed former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and several others in downtown Beirut.[104] As it happens, part of Saab's explosives training took place shortly after the Hariri assassination, and Saab's Hezbollah trainers presented him and other trainees with photographs of the bombing scene. They had the trainees analyze the photographs to determine the epicenter of the blast and the type of explosive and triggering mechanism employed.[105]

During this training, Saab learned which shapes of explosive charges are most effective against various targets, including specific Israeli targets. Saab built a "sticky bomb" with C4 explosives, which he detonated in the mountains outside Beirut near a Hezbollah safe house. Other parts of the explosives training course were held

in an underground workshop. On his return to the United States in April 2005, right after he completed his explosives training, Saab traveled via Turkey, where authorities detected explosive residue on his luggage or clothing. Saab was allowed to fly on to JFK Airport in New York, where he was interviewed upon arrival and denied knowing why his luggage tested positive for explosive residue.[106]

Meanwhile, around 2003, Saab's handlers instructed him to conduct preoperational surveillance of "hot spots" in New York City and to prepare intelligence reports on his findings for the IJO. Saab conducted surveillance of dozens of locations in New York and elsewhere, later explaining to the FBI that his Hezbollah training was so effective that he would habitually collect intelligence as a matter of course as he went about his business. He would casually stop to take pictures that he said looked touristic in nature, with the dual purpose of identifying structural weaknesses and "soft spots" to determine how an attack might cause maximum damage should the IJO later decide to bomb that location. For example, Saab's surveillance photographs of New York City bridges focused on structural details—such as the main joints, towers, and cables—with an eye toward placing explosives for the purpose of disabling the bridge.[107]

At some point in 2003, Saab traveled to Lebanon and was taken to a Hezbollah safe house to meet his IJO handlers. Over a two day period, per their instructions, Saab drafted a detailed report on potential targets in New York City, with an annotated map and summaries of specific locations, including federal, state and local government buildings, United Nations headquarters, the Statue of Liberty, the New York Stock Exchange, the Empire State Building, New York's three international airports, and New York tunnels and bridges. Saab's handlers debriefed him on this information, and he provided them photographs of the locations included in his report.[108]

Saab conducted additional preoperational surveillance in other U.S. cities, including of landmarks and monuments in Washington, D.C., and tourist sites and buildings in Boston, such as Fenway Park and Quincy Market. [109] In January 2005, Saab traveled from Lebanon to Istanbul, Turkey, at Hezbollah's expense, for the purpose of collecting intelligence about the city. Saab flew from there to Damascus, where he met his handlers in the lobby of the Al-Safir hotel before driving back to Lebanon with them.[110] Sometime that year, Saab, who had been living in the United States since November 2000, filed an application for naturalization (lying, when he affirmed that he had never been "a member of or in any way associated with . . . a terrorist organization),[111] and he became an American citizen in August 2008.[112] He received his American citizenship in August 2008.[113]

Trends in Hezbollah IJO Modus Operandi

As members of a group engaged in international terrorist activities, it should not surprise that Hezbollah IJO operatives carry out preoperational surveillance, collect information about cities where they operate, prepare target packages for prospective operations, or collect and stockpile explosive materials. Recent cases involving these malevolent activities offer insight into Hezbollah modus operandi, specifically those related to documents and travel, operational handlers, legends and cover stories, training and pay scales, operational security, and communication, which may prove useful to law enforcement in detecting and intercepting potential future plots.

Dual Nationals

Historically, a classic modus operandi of Hezbollah is recruiting, training, and dispatching dual nationals to carry out missions outside of Lebanon. Having operatives who can travel on their legitimate, non-Lebanese passports provides excellent cover, and usually means the operatives also have experience living and/or traveling abroad, and likely speak foreign languages.

Hezbollah operatives have explicitly spoken to the organization's nuanced understanding of customs and immigration. For example, Kourani stated that he was directed by his handler to obtain not only a passport but also a passport card, which can be used to enter the United States by land from Canada or Mexico.[114] The

handler explained that in the event Kourani's U.S. passport was seized, Kourani could use his Lebanese passport to fly to either Mexico or Canada and then use the passport card to cross the land border back into the United States.[115]

El-Debek told FBI investigators he believed he was recruited to the IJO because he held a U.S. passport. He also said that on his mission to Thailand, he was instructed to travel from Lebanon to Malaysia on his Lebanese passport and then from Malaysia to Thailand on his U.S. passport. This flight pattern and document use would allow him to avoid obtaining a visa to enter Thailand.[116] In a similar vein, Yaacoub traveled internationally on Hezbollah business using his Swedish (rather than Lebanese) passport.[117] As noted below in Figure 1, dual-nationals from a variety of countries—including Australia, Canada, Colombia, France, Philippines, Sweden, and the United States—are represented among Hezbollah IJO operatives.

Hezbollah's military and political leadership engaged in a joint effort to identify Hezbollah members who were to be tasked with acquiring citizenship in foreign countries, according to the U.S. Treasury Department. In July 2019, Treasury designated Hezbollah parliamentarian and Shura Council member Muhammad Hasan Ra'd for using his political position to act on behalf of Hezbollah and Iran. According to the Treasury Department, Ra'd and Hezbollah security chief Wafiq Safa "maintained a list of a hundred Hezbollah members who were to acquire foreign citizenship in order to carry out long-term missions in Arab and Western countries." [118]

False Documents

Hezbollah also has a long history of producing counterfeit documents and procuring legitimate passports to be doctored into fraudulent documents for Hezbollah operatives. The FBI noted this trend in a November 1994 report:

In an ongoing effort to bring more members into the United States, Hizballah also alters or steals travel documents, passports and visas. In one such operation, Hizballah members presented photo-substituted passports and fraudulent visa applications at a U.S. Embassy. Eighteen individuals obtained passports in this manner.[119]

A few years later, in 2001, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) issued a report on "Expanding Links between Alien Smugglers and Extremists: Threats to the United States." The report warned that various terrorist groups, including Hezbollah, "are tapping into global alien smuggling networks to abet their movements around the world, including to the United States." The report underscored that Hezbollah relies on these networks for travel documents. It claimed that "[t]hey solicit help from document vendors who cater to illegal migrants to receive genuine—though fraudulently obtained—passports, visas and other identification documents from corrupt officials." [120]

More recently, in Cyprus, Bulgaria, and Peru, among other places, Hezbollah operatives used a combination of legitimate, non-Lebanese passports and other fraudulent identification papers (see Figure 1). The Bulgaria bombers carried fake U.S. driver's licenses from Michigan; Bassam Abdullah in Cyprus had a copy of a false British passport; and Mohammed Hamdar in Peru carried a fake Peruvian national identity card and a fake passport from Sierra Leone.[121]

At one point, Kourani's Hezbollah handler even asked him to get a job at a Department of Motor Vehicles office "in order to facilitate efforts by the IJO to obtain fraudulent identification documents for use in operations." FBI agents recounted that Kourani told them in an interview that "the IJO is interested in these kinds of identifying documents because they would utilize those in connection with attacks, as they did in the Burgas bus bombing in 2012." [122] Kourani feared that applying to the DMV job would draw too much attention to himself (as an overqualified applicant with an MBA), but the instruction underscores the priority Hezbollah assigns to the need to procure high-quality false documents.[123]

Operational Handlers

Once recruited, Hezbollah IJO operatives are typically assigned one or more operational handlers who over-

see their training, give them their operational taskings, maintain communication with them while they travel abroad, sometimes travel to meet them outside of Lebanon, and debrief them on their return to Lebanon. El-Debek, for example, met his handler in Malaysia on his way to Thailand to carry out a mission for Hezbollah.[124] In recent years, the names of two key Hezbollah IJO handlers have come to light: Salman Raouf Salman (aka Salman el-Reda) and Majed Abdullah (aka Fadi Kassab).

Figure 1: Hezbollah’s use of dual-nationals and fake documents

	Dual Nationality*	Fake Documents	Year of Arrest**	Plot Location	Type of Activity
Hussein Bassam Abdallah		British passport	2015	Larnaca	Explosives storage
Hussein Atris	Swedish		2012	Bangkok	Explosives storage
Youssef Ayad	Filipino		2014	Bangkok	Preparations for terrorist attack
Samer El-Debek	American		2017	Bangkok, Panama City	Explosives disposal, pre-operational surveillance
Meliad Farah (aka Hussein Hussein)	Australian	Michigan driver’s license (Brian Jeremiah Jameson)	2012**	Burgas	Terrorist attack
Mohammed Hamdar		Liberian passport and driver’s license, Sierra Leonean passport and driver’s license	2014	Lima	Pre-operational surveillance
Hassan Khalil Hizran	Swedish		2015	Israel	Pre-operational surveillance
Mohammad Hassan al-Husseini	French	Michigan driver’s license (Jacque Felipe Martin)	2012**	Burgas	Terrorist attack
Hassan el-Hajj Hassan	Canadian	Michigan driver’s license (Ralph William Rico), U.S. Social Security card (Ralph William Rico)	2012**	Burgas	Terrorist attack
Ali Kourani	American		2017	Guangzhou, Toronto, New York	Explosives procurement, pre-operational surveillance
Samuel Salman El-Reda	Colombian		1994 - present**	Buenos Aires, Panama, Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Southeast Asia	Preparations for terrorist attack, operational travel, handler
Alexei Saab	American		2019	New York, Boston, Washington D.C.	Pre-operational surveillance
Hossam Yaacoub	Swedish		2012	Limassol, Larnaca	Pre-operational surveillance

* All operatives also hold Lebanese citizenship. **Not arrested. Year refers to known activity.

El-Reda, a dual Lebanese-Colombian citizen, oversaw the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish Community Center in Buenos Aires, Argentina, coordinating between the Hezbollah sleeper cells in Buenos Aires and the Tri-Border Area of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay.[125] For these actions, he is the subject of an Interpol Red Notice arrest warrant.[126] When designated as a terrorist by the U.S. Treasury in July 2019, the U.S. government identified el-Reda as a senior IJO member who “directs Hezbollah’s foreign operations from Lebanon.”[127] The State Department identified el-Reda as “a leader in Hezbollah’s External Security Organization

(ESO)[who] has also been involved in plots worldwide” and published a Rewards for Justice notice, offering up to \$7 million for information leading to el-Reda.[128]

El-Reda fled South America after the AMIA bombing and rose through the ranks of Hezbollah’s IJO. In the years that followed, the Treasury Department reports, his work for the IJO focused in particular “on Southeast Asia and South America in the 1990s, including a flurry of operational missions in 1997 with three visits to Panama, two to Colombia, and one to Brazil.”[129] More recently, Mohammed Hamdar, who was arrested by Peruvian police in October 2014 for planning a terrorist operation in Peru, identified el-Reda his Hezbollah IJO handler.[130]

Meanwhile, according to Kourani, Fadi Kassab held the IJO handler portfolio for IJO operatives in the United States and Canada (he added that Kassab’s role in the Bulgaria bombing may have been a result of the fact that one of the operatives was a dual Canadian-Lebanese national).[131] Until the May 2019 trial of Kourani, Fadi Kassab was only known by that name and a couple other aliases he used in the Cyprus operations (Sami Helo and Alexander Bouji). But in interviews with FBI agents, Kourani identified Kassab as his handler and, when shown a picture of Kassab, stated that he knew this person as Majed Abdullah. Kourani then backtracked, alleging he was not sure if this was this was the person he knew as Fadi, his handler. Nonetheless, whenever Fadi came up during the interview, Kourani pointed or motioned toward the photograph of Majed Abdullah.[132]

According to Kourani, Fadi Kassab is a dual citizen of Lebanon and a European country, possibly England,[133] and it was Kassab who served as the handler for the operatives in the Cyprus[134] and Bulgaria cases as well. [135] According to Kourani, when he had asked Kassab about the Burgas, Bulgaria bombing, Kassab told him that the less he knew about the bombing, the better.[136] At one point, in a sign of his confidence in Kourani, Kassab suggestion that Kourani return to Lebanon to become an IJO handler and mentor himself.[137]

Cover Stories

For some IJO operatives, posing as a tourist has proven to be the cover story of choice, while others developed carefully crafted legends—typically mixing fact and fiction, grounding their cover stories at least in part on their true, and therefore confirmable identities. Recent cases suggest that posing as a tourist might suffice for a Hezbollah operative when simply carrying out surveillance in a place where tourists are typically found. But for more substantial assignments abroad, Hezbollah might invest in a more robust cover story.

Consider the cases of Muhammad Hamdar and Alexei Saab, who carried out surveillance operations in Lima, Peru, and in New York City, respectively. Peruvian authorities found photographs of popular tourist spots when they searched Hamdar’s apartment, along with surveillance photographs.[138] As for Saab, his training specifically included lessons in “tradecraft in conducting surveillance and in taking videos and photographs for the IJO without drawing the attention of law enforcement authorities.”[139]

When el-Debek traveled to Thailand, his cover story was sex tourism, which enabled him to use his escort to try and draw out surveillance of the Hezbollah safe house before entering himself.[140] El-Debek was next sent to Panama, where he took Spanish lessons and operated under the cover story that he was a businessman visiting to identify potential business opportunities.[141]

Ali Kourani was able to operate in New York City under his true identity, but when dispatched on an IJO mission to Guangzhou, China, Kourani also posed as a businessman. At one point, Kourani maintained his travel to China was to attend the Canton Fair, an import/export trade show, for the purpose of “looking at textiles, clothing, shoes, medical equipment, and medical devices.”[142] In another telling, he traveled to the Canton Fair with the son of a contact in the counterfeit clothing business, but he only knew his contact’s first name, Frank, and did not know the name of his traveling companion at all.[143] In fact, prosecutors established that the true purpose of this trip was “to develop relationships which the IJO could rely on to obtain ammonium nitrate to be used as an explosive precursor chemical.”[144]

But the most sophisticated cover story among these recent cases was the one developed and deployed over time in the case of Hossam Yaacoub. In his deposition with Cypriot police, Yaacoub explained that his handler sent

him 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.” To further his cover, Yaacoub traveled to Cyprus via Dubai, and spent a week vacationing in Ayia Napa at Hezbollah’s expense. For Hezbollah, the benefit was that when Yaacoub next returned to Cyprus he could say that the idea for importing merchandise from Cyprus came to him while on vacation there a couple of years earlier. When he did return to Cyprus, in December 2011 and January 2012, Yaacoub was told “to create a cover story” as a merchant interested in importing to Lebanon juices from a specific local company in Cyprus. While there, he also collected information about renting a warehouse in Cyprus. “I did all these things after receiving clear instructions from Hezbollah, so to have Cyprus as a basis [sic] and be able to serve the organization,” he said.[145]

Training and Pay Scale

When interviewed by authorities, Hezbollah operatives spoke of a mix of weapons, surveillance, interrogation, explosive, and ideological training, conducted in both group and one-on-one settings. However, there does not seem to be any standard curriculum for all recruits beyond basic training. For example, among Kourani, el-Debek, Saab, and Yaacoub, only el-Debek received a crash course in ideology.[146] During 2013 or 2014, he attended a six-day ideological camp, with sessions on religious rules and topics including martyrdom ideology. And only Kourani and Yaacoub described being instructed in the art of denial and resistance to interrogations; Yaacoub purportedly engaged in a two-hour-long training with a representative of Hezbollah’s intelligence unit in 2000.[147]

The extensiveness and frequency of training also differed, according to these Hezbollah operatives’ statements, and included: a 45-day “Hezbollah 101” boot camp (Kourani), two-day-two-night military training (Kourani), six-day religious training (el-Debek), four surveillance and counter surveillance trainings over four years (el-Debek), a several-day training over a three-week period (Saab), and 6-7 training sessions, each lasting 3-5 days, at several different camps outside Beirut (Yaacoub), in addition to individual instruction with handlers. [148]

Figure 2: Hezbollah Training

	Number/timing of trainings	Length of trainings	Surveillance	Resistance to Interrogation	Religious	Military	Weapons Used
Samer El-Debek	Military training on “several occasions” from 2008 to 2014; surveillance and counter-surveillance training at least 4x from 2009 to 2013; religious training in 2013 or 2014; Spanish language training in late 2010	Religious training (6 days)		X			AK-47, M-16, and MP assault rifles, Russian PKS automatic rifle, 9 mm pistol, RPG 7, explosives
Ali Kourani	“Boot camp” in 2000; military training in July 2011; surveillance and resistance to interrogation training around 2008	“Boot camp” (45 days); 2011 military training (2 days, nights)			X		AK-47, MP5 submachine gun, PKS machine gun, Glock, rocket launchers
Alexei Saab	“Extensive Hizballah training” between 1996 and 2005; first military training in 1999; explosives training in 2004 and 2005; surveillance training between 2003 and 2005	Explosives training (several days over 3 weeks)		X	X		AK-47 and M1-16 rifle, pistol, grenades, explosives
Hossam Yaacoub	2-3 months with Wahid; 5-7 months with Yousef; 2008 courier training in Antalya, Turkey; military training 6-7x	Military trainings (3-5 days each)			X		FN Browning, Glock, AK-47, MP5, PK, RPG7, C4 explosives

Note: Reflects only those trainings explicitly referenced in indictments, interrogations, and/or court testimony. Bassem Abdallah is not listed due to lack of publicly available information.

Nonetheless, military tactical training is clearly considered essential: “[T]he organization wants its members to know how to handle firearms,” Yaacoub explained, adding that “it does not mean that they will participate in any military operation.”[149] Hezbollah operatives have reported using AK-47s, M-16s, M-5 assault rifles,

PKS automatic rifles, 9mm pistols, and RPF-7s, among other firearms.[150] In addition, el-Debek described receiving specialized training in explosives assembly, achieving what the FBI assessed as “extensive training as a bomb-maker” and “a high degree of technical sophistication in this area.”[151] In interrogations after his arrest, el-Debek discussed learning to produce and handle explosive materials; build landmines; remotely detonate devices; and target people and buildings. On the last day of his training, he purportedly detonated five or six bombs. Likewise, during a three-week explosives training in 2004 and 2005, Alexei Saab was taught about triggering mechanisms, explosive substances, detonators, and circuit assembly, assembling a sticky bomb that was tested near a Hezbollah safe house in the mountains outside Beirut.[152] Saab and other trainees were also shown photos of the bombing that killed Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri and were asked to identify the center of the blast, and the size, type, and triggering mechanism of the explosive used.[153]

Pay scales varied among Hezbollah operatives as well, at least from the few cases in which limited payment data was available. According to the FBI, Kourani maintains that the IJO “offered to pay him a salary to reimburse him for travel and also to pay off some of his debts,” but Kourani says he never accepted money from the IJO. [154] Samer el-Debek, on the other hand, started receiving a regular Hezbollah salary shortly after first being recruited to the group. From 2007 to 2015, el-Debek was employed by Hezbollah, eventually being paid over \$1,000 per month, plus medical expenses.[155] Yaacoub became a salaried Hezbollah operative in 2010, starting once he completed basic training, but only earned \$600 a month.[156] One cannot draw any significant conclusions about Hezbollah operatives’ pay scale from such limited data, but it is provided here nonetheless to get this information into the public domain.

Operational Security

Although there appears to be no consistency in the timeline, order, or length of Hezbollah external operations training, the value placed on secrecy and anonymity is a constant. Kourani, Saab, and Yaacoub were all picked up for their military trainings in vehicles with blacked-out windows and/or driven blindfolded to undisclosed locations. In 2008, after his initial recruitment into the IJO, Kourani was driven, while wearing a blacked-out motorcycle helmet, to a meeting with his handler.[157] In a sign of extreme precaution, even the elevator buttons in the building where the meeting took place were described as “being scrambled on or out of sequence and so he did not know where in the building they went to.”[158] In July 2011, when he attended a military training camp in the vicinity of Birkat Jabrur, Lebanon, Kourani was picked up with five or six other operatives by an unknown driver in a van and asked to wear a black, balaclava-style mask.[159] Similarly, Alexei Saab was picked up at a predetermined Beirut location by “a white van with blacked-out windows” with “rows of seats separated by curtains.”[160] The pickup procedure for Yaacoub appears to have been slightly more nuanced, albeit still surreptitious. His trainer, Aiman, provided Yaacoub with the answer to a coded question to give to his driver, and new passwords were given to Yaacoub by his trainers for each pickup.[161]

This extreme obsession with secrecy extended from pickup into the classroom. At an auditorium-style interrogation training Kourani attended, the 20 to 25 other operatives all donned masks, and during Saab’s trainings between 2000 and 2005, operatives were put in a classroom partitioned by cubicles and advised not to talk or share personal information.[162] They were asked to use fictitious names (Saab used the pseudonym Rashid). [163] During Yaacoub’s trainings, trainees and instructors wore hoods, slept in individual tents, and were forbidden from seeing each other.[164]

The seriousness with which the secrecy order was taken is evident in interrogations Cypriot authorities conducted with Yaacoub, during which he spoke of recognition by voice. For example, Yaacoub said he assumed one of his fellow trainees was American because of his accent; he also recognized a fellow trainee while on a mission in the Netherlands not from his name or appearance, but “by his voice.”[165] Indeed, Yaacoub told authorities that “everything is done in complete secrecy within the organization,” while Kourani told the FBI that the organization’s “golden rule” was that “the less you know the better it is.”[166]

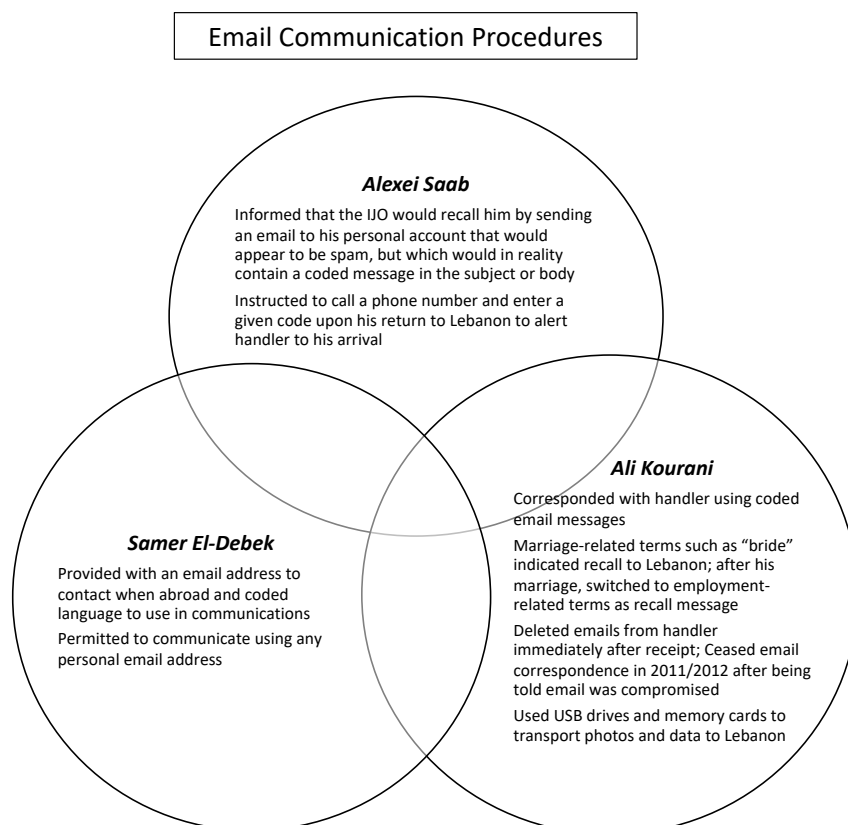
Operational security took on even greater importance after the late-2014 arrest of Mohamad Shawarba, a senior Hezbollah operative accused of spying for Israel. Hezbollah believed Shawarba provided information that enabled Israel to disrupt several terrorist operations abroad, according to Kourani.[167]

Communication

Perhaps the greatest level of detail concerning communication between operatives and handlers comes from Kourani. In Kourani’s telling, his standard operating procedures differed domestically and internationally. While outside of Lebanon, Kourani corresponded with his handler, Fadi, via email. Fadi used two email addresses, as did Kourani (on Gmail and Hotmail), including one address in the name of a childhood friend. [168] In discussing operations, the two used marriage-related terms; for example, the word “bride” was a cue that Kourani should return to Lebanon. After he was married, they adjusted their code accordingly; Fadi used references to jobs or employment prospects as a recall message. Kourani deleted all emails from Fadi immediately after their receipt.

Rather than email photographs, Kourani was instructed to use digital storage media, such as universal serial bus (USB) drives and memory cards, to transport photos and other data back to Lebanon (in September 2015, he was found in possession of one such cell phone card, hidden beneath a sticker on his passport, when traveling through customs at John F. Kennedy International Airport).[169] He ceased using email altogether in 2011 or 2012, after being told that communications had been compromised. To reach Fadi once inside Lebanon, Kourani followed a multi-step procedure. He was instructed to call a telephone number associated with a pager and use a predetermined code.[170] His handler would then contact Kourani to set up a meeting by calling one of Kourani’s relatives, either his father or brother.[171]

The instructions given to other operatives mirror Kourani’s. Hezbollah gave el-Debek an email to contact when he was abroad and coded language to use in his communications (he was permitted to use an email address of his choosing).[172] Saab was told that the recall message would be an email to his personal account that would appear as spam, but that would contain a coded signal in the email’s subject or body. He too was told to call a particular phone number and use a numeric code when in Lebanon to alert his handler to his return; after receiving the code, the handler would contact Saab on his personal cell phone or at his family’s home.



Only Yaacoub's instructions differed slightly; his primary means of communication with higher-ups was text. [173] If a meeting was required, Yaacoub would receive a text about the weather, indicating that he should go to the Finikoudes promenade in Lanarca at 6:00 p.m. If no one showed up, he was to return the following day at 2:00 p.m., and then the next day at 10:30 a.m.[174]

Conclusion

Hezbollah is a multifaceted organization, engaged in a wide range of activities from overt social and political activities to covert militant, criminal and terrorist activities. While Hezbollah has a vested interest in publicizing the former, which it does through the television, radio, online and social media platforms it operates, the group goes to great lengths to conceal its militant and criminal activities. Fadi Kassab made this clear when he taught Ali Kourani, one of the Hezbollah operatives he was running at the time, the "golden rule" of Hezbollah's Unit 910: "The less you know about the unit, the better." [175] Indeed, such compartmentalization is a cornerstone of Hezbollah's operational security training.

This article's aim was to shed some light on what Ali Kourani described as "the Black Ops of Hezbollah," the Islamic Jihad Organization or Unit 910 (aka External Security Organization), [176] specifically laying out what recent cases have revealed about how Hezbollah operatives are trained and paid, how they communicate, travel, create cover stories, and conduct surveillance, and how they are run by their handlers.

After a close analysis of Hezbollah modus operandi, the strategic takeaway is nuanced: Hezbollah is a highly-skilled, operationally capable and dangerous adversary. But it is not 10 feet tall; its handlers and operatives make mistakes, and in at least the recent cases explored here international intelligence and law enforcement agencies have been able to take advantage of these mistakes and peel back much of the group's operational mystique and secrecy.

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Notes

[1] "New Jersey Man Indicted for Terrorist Activities on Behalf of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization," Office of Public Affairs, Department of Justice, September 19, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/new-jersey-man-indicted-terrorist-activities-be-half-hizballah-s-islamic-jihad-organization>.

[2] Court transcript at 282 (May 8, 2019), United States v. Ali Kourani (S.D.N.Y. 2017).

[3] "2017 Country Reports on Terrorism," U.S. Department of State, September 2018, 195, 298.

[4] Court testimony at 352 (May 8, 2019), United States v. Ali Kourani (S.D.N.Y. 2017).

[5] Ben Riley, "Iran-Linked Terrorists Caught Stockpiling Explosives in North-West London," The Telegraph, June 9, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/06/09/iran-linked-terrorists-caught-stockpiling-explosives-north-west/>.

[6] "New Jersey Man Indicted for Terrorist Activities on Behalf of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization," Office of Public Affairs, Department of Justice, September 19, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/new-jersey-man-indicted-terrorist-activities-be-half-hizballah-s-islamic-jihad-organization>; "Ali Kourani Convicted in Manhattan Federal Court for Covert Terrorist Activities on Behalf of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization," Office of Public Affairs, Department of Justice, May 17, 2019, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/ali-kourani-convicted-manhattan-federal-court-covert-terrorist-activities-behalf-hizballah-s>; "Bronx Man And

Michigan Man Arrested For Terrorist Activities On Behalf Of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization," Office of Public Affairs, Department of Justice, June 8, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/bronx-man-and-michigan-man-arrested-terrorist-activities-behalf-hizballah-s-islamic>.

[7] Matthew Levitt, *Hizballah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West*, Policy Focus 123, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hizballah-and-the-qods-force-in-irans-shadow-war-with-the-west>.

[8] Matthew Levitt, *Hizballah and the Qods Force in Iran's Shadow War with the West*, Policy Focus 123, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 2013, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hizballah-and-the-qods-force-in-irans-shadow-war-with-the-west>.

[9] Ben Riley, "Iran-Linked Terrorists Caught Stockpiling Explosives in North-West London," The Telegraph, June 9, 2019, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2019/06/09/iran-linked-terrorists-caught-stockpiling-explosives-north-west/>.

[10] "Hezbollah Arms Dealer Sentenced to Life in Nigeria, Two others Freed," Reuters, November 29, 2013, <https://www.haaretz.com/nigeria-hezbollah-operative-sentenced-to-life-1.5295804>.

[11] "Peru: Extremism and Counterextremism," Counter Extremism Project, <https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/peru>.

[12] Material used here from these two cases comes from indictment documents. This means FBI and other law enforcement authorities concluded the material is accurate and reliable but the defendants are innocent until proven guilty. As discussed below, it appears el-Debek has pleaded guilty and is cooperating with authorities.

[13] US v Ali Kourani, Southern District of New York, Court testimony at 282, May 8, 2019.

[14] Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 130, 246.

[15] 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, Criminal Number Σ/860/12, File Page 35, 79, 85, 110, 134, 187, by interviewing police officer Sergeant Michael Costas, Cypriot Police. Depositions taken on July 7, 2012, July 11, 2012, July 11-12, 2012, July 14, 2012, July 16, 2012, and July 22, 2012.

[16] Hossam Taleb Yaacoub Deposition, 7/11/2012, 79.

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