



## Episode 2: Hezbollah Goes Global

Script

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### **Matthew Levitt:**

Hi, I'm Matthew Levitt, and this is 'Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule,' a podcast that shines a bright spotlight on the criminal, militant, and terrorist activities of Lebanese Hezbollah.

Hezbollah is an organization that engages in everything from overt social and political activities in Lebanon to covert militant, criminal, and terrorist activities around the world.

One Hezbollah operative was taught by his commander that the golden rule of the group's terrorist unit is this, quote: The less you know, the better.

In this podcast we set out to break this rule.

In our last episode, we traced Hezbollah back to its origins, to a network of radical Shia paramilitary groups mobilized by the Lebanese civil war, galvanized by the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and funded by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the IRGC. In its first few years, Hezbollah kidnapped dozens of hostages and targeted Western diplomatic and military installations, to a devastating effect.

But it did not take long for Hezbollah to strike outside of Lebanon. In fact, it started almost immediately.

In December 1983, Beirut was still reeling from the bombing of the French and U.S. Marine barracks that October. It would be another year and half before Hezbollah would formally announce itself to the world in its Open Letter. But this supposedly nationalist group was already plotting attacks far from Lebanon's borders.

*Clip: The six blasts shattered Kuwait's capital city, erupting within minutes of each other. The targets were plain: any building housing American or French personnel. The onslaught started when a booby-trapped truck crashed into the American embassy compound, minutes later, a series of explosions went off throughout the city. Four people were killed and a further 50 were treated for injuries, mainly cuts from flying glass.*

### **Levitt:**

To better understand why Hezbollah started carrying out attacks beyond Lebanon's borders, I turned to Nader Uskowi. As a young journalist in Iran, Nader interviewed Ayatollah Khomeini, who would become the country's first Supreme Leader, in Paris just before the Iranian revolution. Nader worked as a journalist until 1982, when he emigrated from Iran to the United States.

There, he continued to write about regional developments and began advising U.S. policymakers, eventually serving as a senior political advisor in Afghanistan for the U.S. Department of Defense, before working at the Pentagon. Nader's book, *Temperature Rising*, explores the role of the IRGC Quds Force in Iran and across the Middle East.

### **Nader Uskowi:**

Within a matter of two hours, they attack six different places: the US Embassy in Kuwait, the French Embassy in Kuwait City, the Kuwait International Airport, the Kuwait National Petroleum companies, oil rig, the state-owned power station,

even a US subsidiary or companies Raytheon building in Kuwait City, and the number 7 target was the post office that the police defused before going off.

**Levitt:**

It was quickly apparent that the Iraqi Dawa Party, led by Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, was responsible for the 6 bombings throughout Kuwait City. If Muhandis' name sounds familiar, it's because he later rose to prominence as a Shia militia leader targeting U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq, and he was killed in a January 2020 U.S. airstrike alongside Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani.

In 1996, the CIA published a then-classified report on the growing danger of Dawa Party branches in the Persian Gulf. According to the report, Hezbollah "has close links to some Dawa factions. Many Hezbollah leaders were once Dawa Party members, and some Hezbollah members joined Dawa members in conducting the 1983 bombings in Kuwait."

**Uskowi:**

Because of the complexity of the Kuwait City bombings, having seven different operations within two hours in the city itself, Iranians decided to send Hezbollah operatives to help Muhandis with the operations. The two prominent persons were sent was Mustafa Badreddine, which was Mughniyeh's brother-in-law and cousin...and then along from with Mustafa Badreddine, they sent Hussein Yousef Musawi.

Badreddine was sent in under an alias of Elias Saab, which is a Christian Lebanese name.... And as young as Hezbollah was at the time, only a year old, it had started using sophisticated techniques to cover their operatives in the Middle East.

**Levitt:**

Within days of the attacks, Kuwaiti officials identified the perpetrators after catching a lucky break: they found the thumb of the suicide bomber who drove a truck packed with explosives into the U.S. embassy. It was the only part of his body left intact.

The cell's Hezbollah operatives included Mustafa Badreddine, the brother-in-law and cousin of Hezbollah's operational leader, Imad Mughniyeh. The two men reportedly planned and then watched the bombing of the U.S. marine barracks from a rooftop before Mughniyeh fled to Iran. The second Hezbollah operative, Hussein Yousef al-Musawi, was the cousin of Hezbollah leader Husayn al-Musawi.

So Badreddine and al-Musawi were sent to Kuwait by Iran to help plan and execute the Kuwait bombings together with Dawa Party operatives. But why would Hezbollah agree to dispatch operatives to Kuwait, so far from Lebanon's borders?

**Uskowi:**

For a Shia militant in Beirut the best thing would be to be organized, to be armed, to be funded, to be led, by newly-formed IRGC that had a state behind it to help them to start the revolution not only just in Lebanon, but also in the whole Middle East....and that was the thinking behind Hezbollah. The revolution was not about Lebanon, the revolution was about the whole Middle East and with the help of Iran, they could hit targets not only in Lebanon but also across the region.

**Levitt:**

As the CIA would later assess in a 1986 report, the attacks in Kuwait stemmed at least in part from Iran's perception "that it has a religious duty to export its Islamic revolution and to wage, by whatever means, a constant struggle against the perceived oppressor states."

Hezbollah shared Iran's ideological convictions, and it helped carry out these operations in Kuwait at the behest of its patrons in Tehran. It did so to demonstrate it was a capable and loyal proxy force, and to help export Iran's Shia Islamist revolution to other parts of the Middle East.

But the larger context for these attacks was the devastating Iran-Iraq war that started in September 1980 when Iraq launched a full-scale invasion of Iran.

*Clip: Not since the '73 MidEast war has there been such a threat to stability in that volatile region as now. Iran and Iraq today dangerously escalated months of sniping along their 720-mile border, unleashing massive air, sea, and artillery attacks.*

**Levitt:**

Iran hoped attacks by its proxies against U.S. and French interests in Kuwait would dissuade these countries from supporting Iraq during the war.

But over the course of nearly 8 years, a sizable part of the international community, including Western powers, did support Iraq.

**Uskowi:**

The Iranians wanted to take revenge in the form of attacks by its proxies on all those that they considered to be siding with Iraq in its war with Iran, again notably US and France. There was also a secondary motivation, there was a number of Shia prisoners in prisons throughout the Middle East and Europe.

**Levitt:**

Ultimately, after the six bombings in Kuwait, 25 suspects were charged and 17 convicted terrorists were jailed, including Mughniyeh's cousin, Badreddine. The jailed group would become known as the "Kuwait 17," or the "Dawa 17." And Hezbollah would spend the next decade trying to get them back.

**Uskowi:**

Well, the very first Hezbollah-led operations after the Kuwait bombings was actually hijacking of Kuwait Airlines.

*Clip: airplane*

**Levitt:**

In 1984, almost exactly one year after the Kuwait bombings, four Hezbollah operatives hijacked Kuwait Airways Flight 221, diverted it to Tehran, and demanded the release of the Kuwait 17.

**Uskowi:**

Yes, there were 162 passengers taken hostage, including three Americans. One employee of the US Agency for International Development, USAID. He was shot dead after the plane landed in Tehran. Minutes after the shooting was heard, the main door was open and the half body of one of the passengers was thrown out on the tarmac. The body was shot twice more.

**Levitt:**

A standoff between the hijackers and Iranian authorities lasted 6 days, until Iranian police disguised as a cleaning crew seized control of the plane and freed the remaining hostages. But U.S. officials believe the rescue was a farce, engineered by Iran to give the hijackers a way out.

Reflecting on the fake rescue operation, a U.S. official later commented: "You do not invite cleaners aboard an airplane after you have planted explosives, promised to blow up the plane, and read your last will and testament. That is patently absurd."

Later, investigators said they believed that the Hezbollah hijackers were working together with leading members of the Iranian regime. In the end, the hijackers escaped, and the Kuwait 17 remained in prison.

So Hezbollah escalated.

On the morning of May 25th, 1985, a car filled with explosives rammed into the Kuwaiti emir's royal motorcade. The attack killed two bodyguards and a pedestrian and injured the emir. The car's driver was believed to be a Dawa Party member. And within a few hours, an anonymous tipster in Beirut claimed that Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad had orchestrated the attack. He demanded the release of the Kuwait 17 and issued a warning, saying: "We hope the Emir has received our message: we ask one more time for the release of those held or all the thrones of the Gulf will be shaken."

**Uskowi:**

Hezbollah and Iran wanted to tell the Emir of Kuwait that they cannot continue supporting Saddam in his war with Iran, the way he was openly supporting, as a matter of fact, more than any other GCC countries.

They thought that by killing the Emir of Kuwait, they can shaken the whole Gulf and it's going to be another Iranian revolution-type in Kuwait and in other areas of the Gulf. But that didn't happen.

**Levitt:**

Kuwait did not erupt into revolution, and the government did not free the Kuwait 17. So Imad Mughniyeh turned his attention to Europe.

*Clip: It all began almost a full day ago, this hijacking of the TWA flight that was scheduled to go from Athens to Rome. There were then 153 people on board, including the 2 hijackers. The plane was hijacked first to Beirut, then to Algiers, back to Beirut, and now, reportedly, again back to Algiers.*

*All of the hostages being held by 2 heavily armed members of the Islamic Jihad Terrorist Group.*

**Levitt:**

The hijackers of TWA Flight 847 in June 1985 were Hezbollah operatives Mohammed Ali Hammadi and Hasan Izz al-Din. The mastermind behind the plot was none other than Imad Mughniyeh.

*Clip: Shortly after takeoff, the two hijackers produced their weapons and forced the pilot to head for Beirut. This was the radio conversation between the flight deck and Beirut tower as the airliner approached the airport:*

*“He has pulled a hand grenade pin and he is ready to blow up the aircraft if he has to. We must, I repeat, we must land at Beirut. We must land at Beirut. No alternatives.”*

**Levitt:**

The hijackers demanded freedom for the Kuwait 17, as well as 700 Shia militants held prisoner in Israeli jails.

*Clip: A passenger, identified as an American, is shot and killed by the hijackers and thrown out of the plane. Several passengers with Jewish-sounding names are apparently taken off, their whereabouts are unknown”*

**Levitt:**

After more than 2 weeks of flying back and forth across the Mediterranean between Algiers and Beirut, the remaining 39 hostages were freed and sent to Damascus. Investigators later found Mughniyeh’s fingerprints on the plane’s toilet walls; After all, he had a personal interest in securing the release of his brother-in-law, Mustafa Baddredine.

**Uskowi:**

This is three years prior to the end of Iran-Iraq war, so that still looms large in their mind, but also, they really wanted to have the 17 prisoners in Kuwait, the Kuwait 17, freed and they showed that they are not going to limit their operations to Middle East. They’re going to expand it into Europe if need be to get their goals.

**Levitt:**

And that they did. Hezbollah’s Islamic Jihad Organization claimed responsibility for its first terrorist attack in Europe in November 1983, one month before the Kuwait City bombings. Bombs exploded at a train station and aboard the express train from Paris to Marseilles.

A year later, almost to the day, Swiss police arrested a Hezbollah operative at the Zurich airport with several pounds of explosives in a cloth belt around his waist as he was boarding a flight to Rome. Following up on this arrest, Italian authorities soon arrested a cell of Hezbollah operatives plotting to attack the U.S. embassy in Rome.

Then, in July 1985, Hezbollah planted bombs in Copenhagen at the office of Northwest Orient Airlines and at Scandinavia’s oldest synagogue, injuring 22 people. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the bombings in an anonymous call.

But 1985 proved to be a pivotal year. In its annual report, the State Department declared 1985, quote, a “banner year” for terrorism. It noted that terrorists’ focus on civilian targets and international transportation “gave pause to international travelers worldwide who feared the increasingly indiscriminate nature of international terrorism.” In 1985, international terrorist incidents rose by 30 percent over the previous year. And attacks by Middle Eastern terrorists accounted for nearly 60 percent of all attacks that year.

Dr. Hans-Jakob Schindler is the Senior Director at the Counter-Extremism Project. He’s a former German security official, who served at the German embassy in Tehran from 2005-2011 and later as a member and coordinator of the Islamic State-Al-Qaeda-Taliban monitoring team at the UN Security Council. Hans has followed Hezbollah closely for years, in and out of government.

**Hans-Jakob Schindler:**

Iran, at that point, was very eager to operate in Europe, for really two main reasons as far as I can tell. Number 1- Europe

hosted a lot of the opposition figures from the former regime, but also from opposition organizations that were still active in Iran...Furthermore, if you are talking about the 80s, and then shortly after the revolution, you know the Iran-Iraq war started, which did not go particularly well for Iran...so Iran really wanted to punish those countries that were supporting Iraq against it in the war. And of course, you know, Germany and France were very high on the list.

**Levitt:**

Hezbollah operatives bombed 15 targets in Paris in less than a year, between December 1985 and September 1986. Fear gripped Paris as bomb after bomb exploded and the investigation saw little progress.

That is, until one of the TWA 847 hijackers walked into the Frankfurt international airport.

**Hans-Georg Engelke:**

On the 13th of January in 1987 one of the Hezbollah hijackers of flight TWA 847 from Athens to Rome, Mohammad Ali Hammadi, was arrested upon entering Germany at Frankfurt Main Airport because three wine bottles containing the explosive methyl nitrate were in his possession.

**Levitt:**

This is Hans-Georg Engelke. He is the State Secretary at the German Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building and Community, and previously served as the head of the Counterterrorism Department for Germany's federal domestic intelligence agency.

**Engelke:**

We didn't think that these explosives were meant to be used in Germany, that's true. We thought that Germany as having the big Frankfurt airport hub and being centrally located as being used as a place for transfer of explosives for preparation of terrorist attacks maybe, and also for retreat of persons but not really as being the potential place where such attacks should be carried out.

**Levitt:**

So Mohammad Hammadi, one of the TWA 847 hijackers, attempted to smuggle explosives into Germany. He was also carrying an address book. Flipping through it, investigators found the name of a Tunisian, Fouad Ali Salah, who turned out to be the man behind the Paris bombings. Hammadi was reportedly en route to France to resupply Salah's group with more explosives.

The Hammadi clan had long been close to Hezbollah core leadership, and Hammadi's brothers soon set out on a kidnaping spree to try and secure his freedom. A July 1987 CIA report tied Hezbollah's success in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley to Shi'a clans there, in particular, the Musawi, Tufayli, and Hammadi clans. Here is Hans-Jakob Schindler again:

**Schindler:**

These families really put in their money with the Iranian side, got organized, got training, and used their local influence to set up the first Hezbollah structure. So for really the first generation, if you want to call it that, of Hezbollah operatives, family names really mattered significantly. If you belonged to one of the clans that you mentioned...you had automatically a very high level not only reputation but position within Hezbollah.

**Levitt:**

The year after Hammadi was arrested in Frankfurt, a Hezbollah operative named Bassem Makki sought and received a residency permit in Germany to study at the Institute of Technology in Darmstadt, south of Frankfurt. But his studies were just a cover for his true mission: casing American, Israeli and Jewish targets in Germany.

Over the next two years, Makki exchanged letters and packages with his Hezbollah handler in Lebanon. In his letters, Makki appeared to be interested in German cars, but investigators determined that "BMW" referred to Israeli or Jewish targets and "Mercedes" referred to American targets. When Makki was arrested in June 1989, police found codebooks and bomb-making instructions in his possession.

Convicted and sentenced to two years in a German prison before being deported, Makki later turned up in South America and then the United States. He ultimately pled guilty to various charges in cases in New York and Miami and served several months in a U.S. prison before being deported—again.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah activities in Europe persisted even as the Iran-Iraq war ended in a stalemate in August 1988.

*Clip: Today was day one of the long-awaited ceasefire in the Persian Gulf war. Iraq has charged Iran with one ceasefire violation. But for all practical purposes the truce seems to be holding.*

**Levitt:**

Despite its involvement in a costly war, Iran spent between 50 and 150 million dollars financing terrorist organizations in the Middle East between 1983 and 1988. And while it did not win the war, Iran did succeed in establishing a reliable proxy network to carry out its dirty work, including assassinating Iranian dissidents abroad.

The most daring and public of these assassinations carried out by Hezbollah operatives was the assassination of Dr. Sadegh Sharafkandi, secretary-general of an Iranian Kurdish opposition group, and three of his colleagues, at the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin on September 17th, 1992.

The operation's logistics chief, Kazem Darabi, was a Hezbollah member. In a statement to German prosecutors after his arrest, one of the operatives made clear that Darabi was, quote: "the boss of Hezbollah in Berlin."

Here you had Hezbollah operatives carrying out a terrorist attack in Europe that had nothing to do with Lebanon or with Israel. They were simply acting at Iran's behest to further Iranian interests.

Here's Hans-Jakob Schindler again:

**Schindler:**

First of all, this was a purely proxy operation. So the targets were Iranian-Kurdish dissidents. Now Hezbollah has a lot of interests, but Iranian-Kurdish dissidents are really not having influence on its ability to operate.

**Levitt:**

Indeed, a CIA report—published in 1988, the year the Iran-Iraq war ended—stressed that Iran probably preferred using non-Iranian proxy groups to carry out its attacks because it provided, 1) access to strategic targets, and 2) deniability needed to prevent retaliation.

**Schindler:**

Secondly, this attack was hard to beat as far as the brutality is concerned. I mean these three dudes just walked into the restaurant, without even facemasks, just walked in, and just gunned those guys down, and casually left the restaurant, thinking that that was okay. Because of the brutality, because of the brazenness with which this attack was concerned, something clicked on the German government. And, you know, really the reaction was this is the last straw, enough is enough.

**Levitt:**

The police investigation quickly revealed Iran's involvement in the attack. Just 5 days after the shooting, police found a bag containing the weapons and silencers the assassins ditched as they fled the scene.

**Schindler:**

Now then there is a court case that's coming along. And the German government side decides that this is not just a murder trial. This is also a very important political message that we send... And so, they set out, pulled out all the stops: intelligence, investigations within the police. They even used information from a very high ranking Iranian intelligence service officer who had defected to the German side...and risk that his identity gets disclosed and come to the conclusion that pretty much everyone with a big name in Iran was part of the decision making and part of the planning stage of this particular attack, from President Rafsanjani, to the Minister of Information/Intelligence of Iran...and last, of course, ultimately, the final decision was made by the then Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

**Levitt:**

A Berlin court ruled in 1997 that the attack was carried out by a Hezbollah cell on the orders of the Iranian government. Four people were convicted for their roles in the attack. Speaking after the ruling, U.S. State Department Counterterrorism Coordinator, Ambassador Philip Wilcox noted that the Mykonos attack was carried out at Iran's behest and described Iran as "a flagrant violator of international norms."

*Clip: That was dramatically shown in the verdict in the Mykonos cafe trial early this month in Berlin. That verdict convicted Iranian agents in the murders of four Iranian dissidents. What I think was lost in the publicity about that incident was that this was only the tip of the iceberg.*

**Levitt:**

Two Hezbollah gunmen, Darabi and Abbas Rhyael, were sentenced to life in prison in Germany.

**Schindler:**

At a very high price! There was a communications channel between German and Iranian security forces that was very very very useful many times, believe me, but obviously it was clear after he embarrassed the Supreme Leader of Iran in, essentially, in a German courtroom and public, call him a murderer, that's not going to bode well for that channel, so little surprise, that channel was cut by the Iranians.

**Levitt:**

Nonetheless, Hezbollah activities continued unabated in Europe.

In October 2008, the German Federal Ministry of the Interior banned Hezbollah's satellite television news channel, al-Manar, from operating in the country.

*Clip: Al-Manar, the media outlet widely thought to have close ties with the militant organization Hezbollah, is facing a social media crackdown. Al-Manar was classified as a terrorist organization by the United States in 2004 and has also been banned by a number of European countries.*

**Levitt:**

At this time, Hans-Georg Engelke was serving as the head of the Counterterrorism Department for Germany's federal domestic intelligence agency.

**Engelke:**

Why did we do that? We don't want propaganda of any terrorist organization, of whatever origin, faith or ideological background, to do propaganda in Germany, to reach people to incite trouble.

And, particularly, we were appalled by al-Manar disseminating calls for martyrdom through suicide bombings.

And given the special responsibility we feel towards the state of Israel, we found it absolutely irritating that there is this TV station showing propaganda, being used for sending messages and inciting people to hate within Germany. So that was our main motivation to ban al-Manar.

**Levitt:**

Despite arrests and prosecutions of Hezbollah operatives in Germany, the banning of Hezbollah's al-Manar TV, and the public naming and shaming that came with this kind of bad publicity, Hezbollah continued to actively raise funds in Germany.

**Engelke:**

In 2014, we banned another organization, the so-called Waisenkinder-projek in Lebanon, the Lebanon's Orphans project, which was founded in Germany in 1997 by a long-serving chair of the organization who was responsible for transactions with the al-Shaheed Foundation in Lebanon.

**Levitt:**

The al-Shaheed, or Martyrs, Foundation in Lebanon is a core part of Hezbollah's financial support network. According to the U.S Treasury Department, the Martyrs Foundation in Lebanon is staffed by Hezbollah officials and, in addition to fundraising, senior Martyrs Foundation officials have been directly involved in Hezbollah operations targeting Israel.

**Engelke:**

Each region had a number of sponsorship representatives and by and large they managed to raise more than 3 millions of euro in this way.

It describes itself as a charitable organization of the Islamic Resistance and helps orphans and relatives of Hezbollah fighters killed in combat, including those killed fighting Israeli forces. We think that as a social welfare organization, the foundation is an integral part of Hezbollah. Its ties to Hezbollah are especially apparent on the foundation's website and that's why we think it doesn't matter what kind of work you do if you support a terrorist organization by that and that was the reason why we banned this organization as well.

**Levitt:**

Hans-Jakob Schindler, the former German security official, elaborated on this dynamic:

**Schindler:**

What is clear, and its been again made clear when Germany banned all of Hezbollah's activities in Germany, in April 2020, is that now, Germany primarily is seen as a place where you prepare attacks outside Germany and where you pump your expat community, your criminal networks, for as much money as you possibly can including through the setup of particular charities.

**Levitt:**

According to German officials, Hezbollah continued to use Germany as a logistics and transport hub in Europe:

**Engelke:**

Investigations in Germany showed that in the years 2012-2016, a type of cold packs filled with ammonium nitrate had been stored in the premises of a haulage company in southern Germany. We assumed that in this case, the storage on behalf of Hezbollah was for the same purpose as other findings that we had before; That is, to work with explosives and to send them abroad.

**Levitt:**

And as law enforcement adapted to address the threat, so too did Hezbollah's tactics:

**Engelke:**

The External Relations Unit of Hezbollah regularly, to our assessment, sent functionaries and what are known as those travelling sheikhs, to us and to other countries in Europe to support those associations sympathetic to Hezbollah. For example, in 2018 and 19 we found a high level functionary in the organization who, in the past, had also accompanied the deputy chair of the executive council of Hezbollah to events, made several visits to associations sympathetic to Hezbollah in Germany, such as a mosque in Berlin and another mosque in Bremen.

**Levitt:**

Meanwhile, even as Hezbollah engaged in a wide range of illicit activities far from Lebanon's borders in Europe and the Middle East, the group had already begun to build a network of operatives on the other side of the world. Only in hindsight, looking back at Hezbollah bombings in Buenos Aires in 1992 and 1994, would authorities in South America appreciate how deeply Hezbollah networks entrenched themselves in the Western Hemisphere starting as early as the 1980s.

We'll pick up here in our next episode and take a close look at Hezbollah in South America.

**OUTRO:**

Thanks for listening to 'Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule,' brought to you by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and hosted by me, Matthew Levitt.

This podcast is produced by Anouk Millet from Earshot Strategies, and written by myself and Lauren Fredericks, a research assistant at the Washington Institute.

To learn more about Hezbollah's criminal, militant and terrorist activities, check out my book, *The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*.

You can also visit the Washington Institute's website at [WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG](http://WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG) and explore our map and timeline of [Hezbollah Worldwide activities](#).

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