



Matthew Levitt



## BREAKING HEZBOLLAH'S GOLDEN RULE

## Episode 3: Crime and Terror in South America

Script

Matthew Levitt

Fromer-Wexler Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

February 23, 2022

### **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 followed the expansion of Hezbollah operations into Europe and the Gulf. By the mid-1980s, Hezbollah hijackings and bombings targeting civilians in the Middle East and Europe made the group a household name. But in the Western Hemisphere, Hezbollah seemed like a distant problem. Sure, Hezbollah targeted Americans abroad, but the group was not considered likely to cross the Atlantic.

But over the course of Lebanon's 15-year-civil war, economic drivers, and the conflict itself spurred an exodus of around a million Lebanese men, women, and children. Many of them settled in South America, including in the Tri-Border Area where the borders of Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil meet.

### **Christian Vianna de Azevedo:**

Many of those Lebanese who migrated, they had relatives or friends who lived in South America. Especially in Paraguay, Argentina, Brazil, and Venezuela. So, Hezbollah members and facilitators, they just came along with them.

### **Levitt:**

That was Christian Vianna de Azevedo. Christian has been a Special Agent with the Brazilian Federal Police for the past 20 years. He currently serves as the Under Secretary of Justice and Public Security focused on intelligence and integration in the State of Minas Gerais – Brazil.

Just a quick disclaimer: the opinions expressed by Christian in this episode are his alone and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Brazilian federal government or those of the State of Minas Gerais.

On the Paraguayan side of the Tri-Border Area is the bustling city of Ciudad del Este, described by a local vender there as "the United Nations of crime." In the early 1970s, the Tri Border Area was declared a regional free trade zone, and gangs, militants, and traffickers of all stripes began taking advantage of the flourishing black-market economy.

Hezbollah operatives have long preferred operating in Free Trade Zones in South America—places like the Tri-Border Area, but also: Margarita Island in Venezuela; Iquique in Chile; and Colon in Panama.

The Tri-Border Area is a hub for the sale of stolen and counterfeit goods. When a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* visited the region, he concluded that when it comes to products sold in the Tri-Border, "just about everything that is not biodegradable is fake."

So where better for a group like Hezbollah to raise money through criminal enterprises?

**Azevedo:**

From my perspective and what I have seen so far, those free trade zones are actually zones in which there is a lot of black holes, so to speak. For instance, a lot of informal trade, informal economy thrive. And within the formal economy, it comes a lot of crimes, not only tax evasion but also contraband and drug trafficking, arms trafficking, everything. One of the remarkable areas that they have been thriving for the past 40-50 years is the Tri-Border Area. On the surroundings, you have rivers, you have lakes, you have dense forests, so you have everything that helps them these guys' flow of illicit goods, flow of anything they want.

**Levitt:**

American authorities track Hezbollah's entry to the Western Hemisphere's Southern cone to the mid-1980s—meaning that as Hezbollah was founded and began to grow back in Lebanon, it developed a following not only at home but also within Lebanese expatriate communities in places like Africa and South America.

In the mid-1980s, Hezbollah clerics began planting agents and recruiting sympathizers from among the Arab and Muslim immigrants in the Tri-Border Area. These Hezbollah support networks were focused primarily on raising money through illicit activities like smuggling and soliciting donations from diaspora communities.

**Azevedo:**

And once they have settled in the Tri-Border Area, they have started to link up with other members and pulling up themselves for facilitation.

**Levitt:**

So, Hezbollah built formal and informal support networks in the Tri-Border Area, a process made easy thanks to the region's large Lebanese and Shi'a populations. Hezbollah networks in the area included sleeper cells that operated under strict operational security guidelines so that members of one cell were not aware of the members of another.

Former FBI special agent Bob Clifford was sent to Bolivia on an unrelated counterterrorism mission in 1992. But when Hezbollah operatives carried out attacks in Argentina in the early 1990s, he was in the right place at the right time to jump on those investigations.

**Robert Clifford:**

I became very, very familiar with Hezbollah operations in the Americas and their ability to blend into the community, their ability to compartment various cells, so if one cell gets wrapped up, the operation will not be destroyed.

**Levitt:**

To avoid attracting attention, Hezbollah operatives settled and worked among friends and relatives in the region, where they used businesses, schools, and mosques to help establish their cover.

One of the most popular of these mosques was the al-Tauhid mosque in a Buenos Aires neighborhood. The mosque was headed by Mohsen Rabbani, an Iranian who also served as a representative of the Iranian Ministry of Agriculture. Rabbani quickly cultivated a network of like-minded radicals and didn't even try to keep his extremist views hidden. He was known to send his followers, known as his "antennas," to scout potential Jewish and American targets, and told his congregants "We are all Hezbollah."

This is where a man named Samuel el-Reda was radicalized. A Lebanese citizen born in Colombia, el-Reda—also known as Salman Raouf Salman—eventually settled in Foz do Iguazu, on the Brazilian side of the Friendship Bridge which separates Foz, as it's known, from the Tri-Border Area's commercial center in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay. As Argentinian intelligence officers dug into his past, they found that in the Tri-Border Area, el-Reda was known as quote, an "Arab from the mafia" ... and a Hezbollah member.

**Azevedo:**

He had linkages with Buenos Aires, very strong ones. He had a lot of friends and community members. He was part of Rabbani's closest circle, also his wife was also part. And they were all close to this most radical Shia community in Buenos Aires. So they had strong links. So even though he moved to Foz do Iguazu, he kept on traveling back and forth to and from Buenos Aires quite often.

**Levitt:**

So, Samuel el-Reda became immersed in the Hezbollah networks operating out of the Tri-Border Area and maintained ties to other networks, including operational sleeper cells, across South America. Like others involved in the Tri-Border Area's black-market hub, el-Reda took advantage of the weak security environment and porous borders—in his case to conduct business on behalf of Hezbollah.

**Azevedo:**

He would sometimes cross the border without showing up to border check procedures and everything, because there are a lot of ways to cross these borders in the southern part of Brazil without actually having to go through border security or through customs. And I think that he might have traveled way more back and forth than what is actually registered.

**Levitt:**

On the afternoon on March 17<sup>th</sup>, 1992, a Ford F-100 panel van filled with explosives veered onto the sidewalk in front of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. The van blew up, destroying the front of the embassy and the entire consulate building, killing 29 people and injuring 242 more.

*Clip: Crowd during explosion aftermath*

*Clip: All of a sudden my mom called me, and said "Mabel, I can't believe it but, I heard on the radio that there is, they blew the Israeli embassy." And I said, "what, what are you talking about?" It's impossible."*

Here's former FBI special agent Bob Clifford again:

**Clifford:**

So I knew Hezbollah MO and so when the embassy was attacked, like everyone I was shocked, but I knew that Hezbollah could reach out to this hemisphere and conduct an attack based upon their modus operandi. They have compartmented cells in different areas that can provide intelligence, that can provide targeting, that can provide logistics, for a hit team, either within the area or to come on in and conduct an attack. So, the attack on the embassy in 1992 was visceral to me.

**Levitt:**

We'll hear more from Bob on our next episode.

Following this attack on the Israeli embassy, Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization called into a Beirut news agency, and quote "with all pride," claimed responsibility for the attack.

Hezbollah's secretary-general, Abbas al-Musawi, had been killed in an Israeli airstrike in February, barely a month before the embassy bombing. And Hezbollah declared this attack was retribution for Musawi's death.

If that sounds like a quick turnaround, you'd be right. Hezbollah used the Musawi assassination to justify the embassy bombing to its supporters. But according to Argentinian prosecutor Alberto Nisman, the attack was actually carried out under instruction from Tehran in response to Argentina's suspension of nuclear cooperation with Iran. Hezbollah had already been planning the attack for months before Musawi was killed.

Within weeks of the attack, U.S. intelligence agencies concluded that Hezbollah was behind the Israeli embassy bombing. The CIA wrote that the Hezbollah car-bomb attack "demonstrates Tehran's willingness to permit its surrogates to conduct large-scale attacks on Israeli targets worldwide."

But it was not only Israeli targets that were at risk. The CIA added: "We believe Iran is also supporting Hezbollah's plans to attack U.S. interests."

Meanwhile, the Argentinian investigation into the embassy bombing identified the Islamic Jihad Organization's chief, the already-infamous Hezbollah operative Imad Mughniyeh, as one of the masterminds of the attack. But his man on the ground, overseeing the operatives sent to carry out the attack, was Samuel el-Reda.

Here's Christian again:

**Azevedo:**

After the bombings of 1992, authorities in the Tri-Border Area begin to see logistical support for the bombings that came from Tri-Border Area, for both the Brazilian side and also the Paraguayan side.

**Levitt:**

These support networks took on many forms. One Hezbollah business was Piloto Turismo, a travel agency co-owned by Hezbollah operative Farouk Omairi.

**Vianna de Azevedo:**

And Piloto Turismo was not only a travel agency, it was like also Hawala operation point, it was a point in which they could procure false documentation. They could do a whole lot of business. Even the usual travel business for the perpetrators of the attack, for the criminals. So, travel agencies are very useful for terrorists and for criminals because it can give them cover for a lot of illicit activities. And also it can link them up with travel agencies around the world to facilitate their travels because these groups, their members, they do travel a lot, back and forth, from and out of the continent.

**Levitt:**

A hawala is a way to send money, an informal value transfer system based on trust, that operates outside the traditional banking system. Hawala is commonly used around the world to conduct legitimate transactions, but it is also a method frequently exploited by terrorist groups to discretely transfer funds.

**Azevedo:**

They had a lot of front businesses, they were connected transnationally, and that became clear, that the crime and terror nexus on the Hezbollah side was the way that Hezbollah operated in South America. So, Hezbollah operated in South America not aiming to specifically carry out a future bombing, a future attack, but also to make money, to hide money, to send money back to Lebanon, in order to fund attacks elsewhere or to facilitate attacks elsewhere.

**Levitt:**

So, Piloto Turismo and related businesses played key roles in Hezbollah's worldwide money laundering system.

First, Hezbollah operatives in Lebanon would print counterfeit dollars of varying denominations. Then, they would send the money to the Tri-Border Area, where it was put into circulation and used to purchase traveler's checks. Hezbollah operatives would then cash the checks in Europe while traveling on false Brazilian and Paraguayan passports that were often produced by front companies like Piloto Turismo. And then, finally, operatives would deliver the funds to Hezbollah in Lebanon.

We'll talk more about Hezbollah's money laundering activities in future episodes. The point here is that Hezbollah had the local infrastructure in place to carry out not only widespread illicit fundraising schemes but also operational activities.

By the summer of 1993, the FBI determined that a number of reports indicated that Hezbollah was "planning some sort of spectacular act against Western interests, probably Israeli but perhaps against the United States."

In the Tri-Border Area, Assad Ahmad Barakat served as the personal representative of Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Musawi's successor as Hezbollah secretary-general. According to Argentinian authorities, Barakat was an active member of Hezbollah's terrorist wing, the Islamic Jihad Organization. By the fall of 1993, Barakat's phone records show that he was in touch with Samuel el-Reda, the Lebanese-Colombian Hezbollah operative involved in the 1992 embassy bombing. The men had different specialties, but together they began plotting Hezbollah's next attack.

**Azevedo:**

Oh yes, Salman el-Reda and Barakat are different persons, I think they are different personalities. El-Reda has a more of a violent personality. I think he was even convicted for street fighting or aggression or in these sort of crimes, before moving to the Southern cone. And Barakat is more of a diplomatic political person. Barakat was a key facilitator. He is the guy managing everything, managing the money, communications, and the overall strategic plans. And el-Reda was the guy that was, they had an operational team on the ground in Buenos Aires. He was more of an operational guy, would get intelligence, select and assign operatives to surveillance to do all the groundwork. So, he was operational arm.

**Levitt:**

According to a witness, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah ordered Hezbollah operatives in the Tri-Border Area—including Farouk Omairi, one of Piloto Turismo's co-owners—to give Barakat and members of his network, quote: "everything they needed."

The witness said Omairi and others provided the Barakat network with high-quality forged passports and identity cards, money, maps of Buenos Aires, and information on local Hezbollah sources.

The U.S. Treasury Department described Omairi as “a principal member of the Hezbollah community in the Tri-Border Area” who “served as a coordinator for Hezbollah members in the region.” He was a key figure procuring false Brazilian and Paraguayan documentation for Hezbollah operatives and was also “involved in narco-trafficking operations between South America, Europe, and the Middle East.”

Looking back, it is clear in retrospect that by the summer of 1994 increased communication between Hezbollah operatives across the globe indicated the group was plotting a new operation. Argentinian authorities later traced phone calls from Buenos Aires to New York City.... from New York to a cell phone linked to Piloto Turismo in Brazil ... from Buenos Aires to Ciudad del Este several days later....and then, a flurry of more than 20 calls to different Hezbollah members in Lebanon.

Then, one by one, Iran’s ambassadors to Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile suddenly departed the region, flying back to Iran just as the operational tempo picked up pace. At the same time, Hezbollah operatives snuck into the region.

In early July, a Brazilian citizen walked into Argentinian, Brazilian, and Israeli consulates in Milan, Italy. He warned that a terrorist attack in Argentina, similar to the 1992 Israeli embassy bombing, was imminent. But nobody believed his story. The man claimed he was having an affair with an Iranian spy and sex worker who told him about another attack that was forthcoming. It was just too far-fetched.

But days later, a Hezbollah truck bomb blew up a Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

*Clip: A bomb has exploded at the AMIA, just like they did with the Embassy of Israel. I'm standing in front of the building, which is about to collapse. I'm in front of the AMIA. They are taking out bloodied children, women, kids. The building has been destroyed; they are calling out for ambulances. There are shredded people, mutilated people, rubble all over the place. Tragedy has struck Buenos Aires.*

#### **Levitt:**

At around 9:53am on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1994, Hezbollah operative Ibrahim Berro detonated a huge ammonium nitrate car bomb in front of the Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina, a Jewish community center better known as AMIA. The explosion killed 85 people and injured 150 more.

Just two hours prior, el-Reda made his final pre-operational phone call to his Hezbollah handlers in Lebanon, confirming that the rest of the hit team were on a plane out of Buenos Aires. By the time the flight landed, emergency responders were tending to the wounded and dying victims of the AMIA Jewish community center bombing.

Within 24 hours of the attack, the Islamic Jihad Organization itself claimed responsibility for the operation. Rabbani, the Iranian operative in Buenos Aires, was the main architect of the plot. But investigators determined that el-Reda coordinated the sleeper cells and operatives who flew into the country to carry out the attack, while Barakat and members of his network provided logistical support.

#### **Azevedo:**

They were linked all the way up to the chain of command in Hezbollah back in Lebanon. So, we have realized that they had a structure in place in South America. And that structure was day by day getting stronger, and they were getting deeper, with more people coming to work for them. And these guys were the backbone of Hezbollah in South America.

#### **Levitt:**

But the subsequent Argentinian investigation into the bombing was marred by corruption. Judge Juan Jose Galiano, who led the initial investigation for about a decade, was ultimately convicted and jailed for his role in a cover-up that included concealing evidence and bribing police to lie in the case. It took until 2003 for the Government of Argentina to issue arrest warrants for both Imad Mughniyeh and Assad Barakat. By 2004, an Argentinian team led by special prosecutor Alberto Nisman took over and conducted a full re-investigation of the AMIA bombing, producing more than 113,000 pages of documentation. In the end, Nisman’s team concluded that the decision to carry out the attack was made by, quote “the highest representatives of the Iranian government.”

This is Nisman:

*Clip: We were able to identify the perpetrator of the attack on the AMIA. The suicide driver is the Lebanese Hezbollah militia member Ibrahim Hussein Berro, and I would also add it's proven that it was Hezbollah, the operative group that carried out the attack.*

**Levitt:**

During the investigation, Nisman's team also determined that Piloto Turismo was not just a business that provided convenient cover for illicit conduct. It was opened with start-up funds supplied by Hezbollah, specifically to serve as a Hezbollah front company. And after the AMIA attack, co-owner Farouk Omairi continued to provide logistical support and cover to Hezbollah.

**Azevedo:**

Farouk Omairi has always been in the travel agency business. He has had 3 or 4 different agencies just in that area. So, Piloto Turismo is just the first one. So, investigators had realized that Omairi had placed another agency, and was using the agency for the same purposes as back then, for procuring false documentation, for sending money through parallel channels like hawala overseas, and also for arranging all the traveling for his mules, his drug dealers, that would go through to the Middle East to Europe and other countries.

**Levitt:**

In 2006, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Omairi as a key member of the Barakat network. Assessing Assad Barakat's long list of criminal enterprises, the Treasury Department concluded that Barakat "used every financial crime in the book, including his businesses, to generate funding for Hezbollah."

**Mariano Federici:**

We have no doubt here that we were talking about a big fish that had been connected to the highest commands of Hezbollah for years, and that was particularly interesting to us because of his connection with the money.

**Levitt:**

That was Mariano Federici, who served as the head of Argentina's Financial Intelligence Unit from 2016 to 2020. Today, Mariano serves as a managing director at K2 Integrity in its Washington, D.C. office.

Like so many other Hezbollah supporters, Barakat lived primarily on the Foz do Iguacu side of the Tri-Border Area but crossed the bridge regularly to Ciudad del Este, where he maintained his various businesses. The Treasury Department designated several of Barakat's companies as well, such as Casa Apollo, an electronics wholesale store, which the U.S. government determined served "as a cover for Hezbollah fundraising activities and as a way to transfer information to and from Hezbollah operatives."

**Federici:**

These people were also being investigated in our neighboring countries for, I could mention, I think, the entire penal code of offenses that they were probably involved in. You know, it was counterfeiting, contraband smuggling, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, human trafficking, all types of different offenses, serious offenses, organized crime-related offenses, that these people had been investigated for. And so, our assumption was that they were bringing in proceeds from those crimes into our country to launder the money and be able to wire it out internationally to Lebanon to finance the terrorist organization.

**Levitt:**

But Barakat's heavy-handed tactics demonstrated he was no mere fundraiser. His mafia-style threats to shopkeepers were a case in point; instead of threatening local storeowners themselves, Barakat threatened that if they did not pay him a Hezbollah quota, he would have their family members back in Lebanon put on a Hezbollah blacklist.

And yet, despite all of this illicit activity, and despite the two devastating Hezbollah bombings in Buenos Aires, Hezbollah's activities in South America continued unabated.

**Federici:**

I'm not gonna speak for the Paraguayans or the Brazilians, but certainly in our country, this issue was not a priority, unbelievably so right? Because we suffered two major terrorist attacks, the most important terrorist attacks in the Western Hemisphere prior to 9/11 and, you know, we should have had this issue as the number one national security priority for our country, but unfortunately, that was not the case.

**Levitt:**

It took al-Qaeda's 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 for authorities in South America to start taking Islamist terrorism seriously. The day after the 9/11 attacks, a SWAT team descended on the Galeria Page—a shopping center in Ciudad del Este owned by members of the Barakat network—that was considered by locals to be "the central headquarters for Hezbollah members in the Tri-Border Area."

Police raided Barakat's Casa Apollo electronics shop where they found hundreds of receipts indicating that Barakat had directed some \$50 million to Hezbollah since 1995.

Over the next few years, the Treasury Department issued a series of terrorist designations targeting members of Hezbollah's Barakat network and their companies. This, plus increased attention by local law enforcement to these operatives' criminal enterprises, led Barakat to branch out to other areas in South America, like Iquique, Chile. Authorities there quickly opened up an investigation into what they termed "illicit association for the purpose of committing terrorist attacks."

Christian Vianna de Azevedo again:

**Azevedo:**

And I think all those people re-emerged after the bombings of '94 because for years, they had been, you know, flying under the radar, and suddenly after the designations, they popped up again. And for the law enforcement, for the intelligence in the region, it was like a confirmation that they were really implicated Hezbollah and they were linked all the way up to the chain of command in Hezbollah back in Lebanon. And some of this had been brought up by Nisman and also in his prosecution piece with evidence linking Barakat to the top tier of Hezbollah in Lebanon. And evidence linking also, many of his trips back and forth from Tri-Border Area to Lebanon. So, we have realized that they had a structure in place in South America.

**Levitt:**

Over the next few years, Hezbollah continued to raise funds hand over fist in South America, even as the United States designated Hezbollah financiers and Argentinian prosecutor Alberto Nisman exposed Iran and Hezbollah's roles in the AMIA bombing and in South America more broadly.

Then, in November 2013, a Hezbollah operative named Mohammed Hamdar arrived in Lima, Peru, on counterfeit travel and identity documents. While attempting to learn Spanish and establish a cover business, Hamdar carried out pre-operational surveillance of the Israeli embassy in Lima, popular tourist destinations, and locations associated with the Israeli and Jewish communities in Peru.

*Clip: So, a few weeks ago, we were surprised by an arrest, the likes of which we were not in the slightest bit accustomed to, of a person who is allegedly linked to the terrorist group Hezbollah.*

*Clip: Here you see all the documents, photos, and testimonies relating to the secret history of someone who, according to the police investigation, is Hezbollah's man in Peru.*

**Federici:**

And at the time of his arrest, police raided his home and found traces of explosives, detonators, and other flammable substances, and a search of the garbage outside his home found chemicals used to manufacture explosives.

Hamdar's targets included places associated with Israelis and the Jewish community in Peru, as well as areas that are popular with Israeli backpackers, the Israeli embassy in Lima, and Jewish community institutions.

**Levitt:**

And which Hezbollah terrorist commander did Hamdar identify as his handler? .... Samuel el-Reda.

El-Reda fled South America after the AMIA bombing and rose through the ranks of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization. His involvement in Hezbollah operations focused particularly on Southeast Asia and South America over the next few years, including a flurry of operational missions in 1997 with three visits to Panama, two to Colombia, and one to Brazil.

In 2019, the US State Department issued a \$7 million reward for information leading to el-Reda's arrest, noting that since the AMIA bombing he has directed and supported Hezbollah terrorist activities in the Western Hemisphere, and been personally involved in other Hezbollah terrorist plots worldwide.

Here's then U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, speaking at the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the AMIA bombing:

*Clip: The AMIA bombing was carried out by Hezbollah with the full support of the regime in Tehran. As I announced at the ministerial, the United States government is taking actions against Salman Raouf Salman, a top Hezbollah operative, for his role as the on-the-ground coordinator for that attack. He continues, today, to conduct terrorism on behalf of Hezbollah.*

**Levitt:**

Christian again:

**Azevedo:**

If, after a few years of deploying to South America, they could carry out 2 successful attacks in Argentina... Imagine now, after 30 years after those attacks. Considering that their logistics, their networks, they have increased many times, maybe four or five, six times, they would, yes, have plenty of targets to choose from in all of these countries that they have been embedded. And I think that they would be even more professional and carry out these attacks. That's why, from our opinion, we also have to keep an eye on all their support, facilitation, funding, everything, because those are the leads, if you follow them, will be able to see the bigger picture and maybe preventing where they will attack next.

**Levitt:**

Meanwhile, despite serving six years in prison for tax evasion in Paraguay, Barakat and his network continued to raise funds for Hezbollah. In November 2018, Argentinian authorities froze the assets of 14 members of the Barakat clan—including 11 people from Brazil and 3 from Paraguay—who were caught laundering over \$10 million through a casino in the border city of Puerto Iguazú as part of a Hezbollah financing scheme.

Here's Mariano, former head of Argentina's Financial Intelligence Unit, again:

**Federici:**

When we refer at the FIU to the Barakat case, it was basically information related with people that were crossing the border between Brazil and Argentina on a very frequent basis, I'd say every, every other day: always on the same cars, always together, with differences of, you know, minutes separating them from each other, staying always at the same hotel or sometimes not even spending the night. But essentially, going to the casino that's located on our side, on the Argentine side, and gambling. We started looking at the way they were gambling and found out, you know, they were getting very lucky and taking wins, which is what generated some of the alerts as well because it's unfortunately not very common to get so lucky in the casino business!

**Levitt:**

As Hezbollah's expenses mounted, especially in the context of the group's deployment to Syria in defense of the Assad regime, Hezbollah financial support networks became increasingly forward-leaning in their illicit financing schemes, including those in South America.

**Federici:**

As a result of the greater involvement that Hezbollah had undertaken, particularly in places like Syria, it was in deep need for additional funding. And that it had made calls for additional funding to the different cells it had spread out all over the world. So that, for us, represented a present and prospective threat because if Hezbollah was in need for additional funding, if it has placed demands on its cells for additional funding and we had cells connected to it in our in our country or right next to it, that meant that our financial integrity was, the financial integrity of our system was at risk.

**Levitt:**

While Hezbollah remains very active in South America, authorities in several countries now work together, across borders, targeting Hezbollah activities. In recent years, authorities have thwarted Hezbollah plots in Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Panama. And in 2019, Argentina formally designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization and froze its assets. The designation was the first by any country in Latin America, but was followed in short order by Colombia, Honduras, and Guatemala.

Just days before Argentina's designation, the country's ambassador to the United States, Fernando Oris De Roa, spoke in Washington about AMIA's legacy:

*Clip: The pain will never cease. The wounds cannot be completely healed. But impunity makes it a lot worse.*

**Levitt:**

Much of this progress is thanks to the tireless work of Argentinian Special prosecutor Alberto Nisman and his team, for which Nisman paid the ultimate price.

*Clip: The ministry of security confirmed in the early hours of Monday morning the death of federal prosecutor Alberto Nisman, who was found dead on Sunday night in the bathroom of his 13th floor apartment in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of Puerto Madero by a single gun wound.*



**Levitt:**

Nisman's body was found in the early hours of January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2015. He was set to appear before Argentina's national congress that day to present evidence that then-Argentinian President Cristina Kirchner collaborated with Iran to thwart the AMIA investigation.

Though the scene was staged as a suicide, no gunpowder residue was found on Nisman's hands. In 2017, an official report determined that two people assaulted Nisman, beat him, then shot him dead. Nisman's murder remains unsolved.

I met Alberto Nisman several times over the years and each time he was more animated than the last in his pursuit of Hezbollah. Alberto and I kept in touch over the years as we each conducted research into Hezbollah's global operations.

Soon after Nisman filed his complaint of a cover-up, I wrote the following in an email to some colleagues: "The victims of this horrific attack and their families are still a long way from closure or justice, but the determination of Mr. Nisman — the Eliot Ness of the AMIA conspiracy — should at least give them some measure of hope."

Today, we are left hoping for closure and justice not only for the victims of the Buenos Aires bombings, but also for the man who tried more than anyone else to bring the terrorists behind these attacks to justice.

Hezbollah's illicit activities in the Tri-Border Area are extensive, but not unique. In our next episode, we'll bring the conversation home--and discuss two major FBI investigations into Hezbollah illicit financing and weapons procurement activities--dubbed Operation Smokescreen and Operation Phone Flash--that took place here in the United States.

**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. Dubbing for this episode was provided by Lauren Fredericks and Jonah Shrock.

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](#).

If you liked what you've heard, leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts and subscribe so you don't miss any future episodes.