



Episode 6: Sleeper Cells and Surveillance in the U.S.

Script

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Russell Rosenthal:

Saab was known to obviously be living in the United States and what he was doing was surveilling high level targets all over the U.S., primarily New York. Any landmark you can think of he basically was taking photographs of, making diagrams of and looking at them from a perspective of target assessment, if and when Hezbollah ever chose to make an attack in the U.S.

INTRO:

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 went online to uncover Hezbollah's digital and cyber activity, its online recruitment tactics, and even its own video games. Today, we'll shift back to the group's offline, or real world, operations, this time in the United States.

You may recall the cases of Ali Kourani and Samir el-Debek from Season 1 of this podcast. FBI agents arrested these two Hezbollah sleeper agents who carried out surveillance operations in the United States and, in el-Debek's case, operational activities as far afield as Panama and Thailand.

Kourani was based in New York and worked as a sleeper agent for the Islamic Jihad Organization, or IJO, for eight years, from 2008 to 2016, though he'd been involved with Hezbollah since his teens. Hezbollah sought to take full advantage of Kourani's family connections in Canada and his U.S. residency.

After immigrating to the U.S., Kourani applied for naturalization and then a passport, which allowed him to begin taking international trips as instructed by his Hezbollah handlers. On May 3rd, 2009, Kourani traveled to Guangzhou, China, to quote: "develop relationships that the IJO could rely on to obtain ammonium nitrate to be used as an explosive precursor chemical."

Yet again, we see Hezbollah's modus operandi of procuring ammonium nitrate to make bombs. Keep that in mind. We'll circle back to this shortly.

Authorities eventually arrested Kourani on June 1st, 2017 in New York City, and in 2019, he was convicted of providing material support to Hezbollah and sentenced to forty years in prison. But Kourani wasn't the only Hezbollah operative arrested that day in 2017.

Clip: Thirty-seven-year-old Samir el-Debek is said to have been on Hezbollah's payroll for the better part of ten years. The FBI describes el-Debek as an expert in bomb-making, saying he had a high degree of technical sophistication when it comes to explosives, receiving training in the use of rocket-propelled grenade launchers.

Levitt:

Like Kourani, Samir el-Debek became a naturalized U.S. citizen and was recruited by the IJO in late 2007 or early 2008. He also attended religious and military training camps in Lebanon, and learned how to build, you guessed it, ammonium nitrate bombs. El-Debek has yet to stand trial.

Hezbollah sought to recruit operatives in the U.S. who could function as long-term "sleeper agents." These agents conducted surveillance and created ready-to-go operational plans that IJO operatives could conduct on short notice on Iran or Hezbollah's directive, all while living "normal lives." And Kourani and el-Debek were not the only ones.

Rosenthal:

Hezbollah being Iranian backed and somewhat controlled, they're basically always preparing for a time in the future should they deem an attack would be beneficial to them. Right, it's all about risk management and the cost-benefit analysis should they want to conduct an attack in the United States. And they're very long-term and forward-thinking. So they send over sleeper cells to just put infrastructure in place, and each individual is tasked with very limited taskings, and they do not know what other operatives are necessarily doing, should the organization at some point decide that they would like to conduct an attack here, or anywhere else for that matter.

Levitt:

That's Russell—or Rusty—Rosenthal, a retired FBI special agent and former legal attaché at the U.S. embassy in Israel.

Hezbollah recruiters look for key skill sets and characteristics when recruiting potential sleeper agents.

Rosenthal:

Especially for the United States, what they love to find is anybody that might have dual citizenship, can speak English, has some way that they can explain being in the United States and going back and forth to Lebanon, where they can reconnect with their handlers back there.

Obviously, they have to also have the requisite skill set, which they're trained in before they ever deploy overseas, which is military types training. They train in firearms, they train in explosives, intelligence, target surveillance, and other skill sets along those lines.

Levitt:

Even Kourani himself told FBI agents that he thought the IJO recruited him because of his education and residency in the U.S., which helped qualify him as a "sleeper" candidate.

Clip: In June, as I'm sure most of you are aware, according to published criminal complaints, two individuals conducting activities on behalf of Hezbollah were arrested here inside the United States, and those arrests serve as a stark reminder of Hezbollah's global attack infrastructure as well as the group's aspirations potentially to carry out attacks here in the homeland. It's our assessment that Hezbollah is determined to give itself a potential homeland option as a critical component of its terrorism playbook.

Levitt:

That was the then-director of U.S. National Counterterrorism Center, Nicholas Rasmussen speaking at a press conference a few months after Kourani and el-Debek's arrests. The arrests of Kourani and el-Debek were big news, but

the very public exposure of two Hezbollah agents in the U.S. did not dissuade Hezbollah from running still other agents in the country.

Clip: Accused terrorist is under arrest tonight, accused of scouting locations here in Boston. Prosecutors say the New Jersey man was part of the militant group, Hezbollah, and the Justice Department says he took these pictures that show the Prudential Center and Fenway Park. Forty-two-year old Alexei Saab of Morristown, New Jersey, is now facing several terror-related charges.

Levitt:

In July 2019, U.S. officials arrested IJO member and naturalized U.S. citizen Alexei Saab on nine criminal charges. Saab joined Hezbollah in 1996 after being recruited by a fellow student at a university in Lebanon. Saab was originally tasked with observing Israeli and Lebanese military troop movements and positions in southern Lebanon, and attended his first Hezbollah military training course in 1999. After that training, he was formally recruited into the IJO in 2000. Conveniently, he also moved to the U.S. that same year.

In 2003, Saab's Hezbollah handlers instructed him to begin collecting pre-operational surveillance on potential targets in the United States.

Here's Rusty again.

Rosenthal:

Saab was known to obviously be living in the United States and what he was doing was surveilling high level targets all over the U.S., primarily New York. Any landmark you can think of he basically was taking photographs of, making diagrams of and looking at them from a perspective of target assessment, if and when Hezbollah ever chose to make an attack in the U.S. He had diagrams and photographs of the Empire State Building, the New York Stock Exchange, Rockefeller Center, 26 Federal Plaza, which is where the FBI is located in New York. He also is known to have done the same thing at Washington, D.C., Boston, and I think even other cities.

Levitt:

And these are only a handful of the locations and structures Saab surveyed. He even took photographs of Fenway Park, home of my beloved Boston Red Sox.

Rosenthal:

He was doing this surveillance that he was conducting from an aspect of target assessment. So he was looking at where the most damage could be inflicted if a terror attack were to be committed against any of these targets. So where the most casualties might be, where the most structural damage could be, you know, to any given structure. So, it was very significant that he was looking at any of the different places from that perspective.

Levitt:

In other words, Saab looked for structural choke points like doors, narrow passageways, and high-traffic areas to ensure that attacks carried out based on his intelligence would result in the highest number of casualties. Saab was aware that the IJO would use the information he gave them to calculate the size of a bomb needed to target a particular structure and the ideal location in which to place explosive devices to maximize damage.

In between his surveillance operations in the U.S., Saab periodically traveled back to Lebanon, where he received still more Hezbollah training. He learned advanced surveillance skills, became proficient in the use of various firearms, and trained to produce explosives.

While in Lebanon, Saab also attempted to murder a man his handler said had spied for Israel. Saab and his "field mentor"—or trainer for operations—drove fifteen minutes outside of Beirut and parked behind a white van in the middle of a field. Saab's field mentor then instructed him to reach underneath his seat, and he pulled out a plastic bag that contained a firearm and silencer. Saab was told to exit the car and shoot the man seated in the van – twice in the stomach, and once in the head.

Saab pointed the gun at the man in the van and pulled the trigger twice, but the gun never fired. Saab and his field mentor then fled the scene. Perhaps it was a test, or maybe the gun just jammed. Either way, when asked by his handler to murder a man suspected of spying on Hezbollah, Saab pulled the trigger. Twice.

In April 2005, Saab flew back to the United States, with a stopover in Turkey, after one of his trips back to Lebanon. At the Istanbul Airport, security officials detected explosive residue on Saab's clothing or luggage, and interviewed him before allowing him to board his flight to New York. They let him go, but U.S. law enforcement officers interviewed him again upon his arrival at JFK Airport in New York. Saab denied knowing why his luggage had tested positive for the presence of explosives, and authorities released him. U.S. officials would later conclude that Saab had recently completed a round of Hezbollah training in explosives production before these flights.

At trial, prosecutors described the secret methods Saab used to communicate with his handlers. He would receive an email that looked like spam but really contained an encoded message, a keyword, or mention of his father, signaling that the email had come from his Hezbollah handler. Saab could also reach his handler by dialing a dedicated number and entering a unique PIN code, which would communicate that he was about to return to Lebanon or was already back on Lebanese soil.

Saab met with the FBI eleven times for consensual interviews before he was eventually arrested on July 12th, 2019. He was charged with nine different criminal counts which, combined, carried a maximum prison sentence of 105 years. But, he was sentenced in May 2023 to just twelve years. He was convicted of receiving military-type training from Hezbollah, marriage fraud, and making false statements to authorities. The jury acquitted him of the most serious charge: providing material support to a terrorist organization.

There is really no doubt that Saab provided such support to Hezbollah, but finding him guilty of such a charge is a factor of rules of evidence. In this case, prosecutors stipulated in a pre-trial motion that Saab's relationship with Hezbollah had more or less ended by 2005. Apparently, the jury felt uncomfortable convicting Saab of crimes he carried out on behalf of a terrorist group in the 1990s and early aughts, when even the government stipulated that he more or less broke with the group about fifteen years earlier.

The Saab case is not the only one of its kind in the Western Hemisphere that's posed a challenge for prosecutors seeking to convict Hezbollah operatives caught by law enforcement.

Clip: He was arrested on October 28, 2014, accused of terrorism for belonging to the Islamic terrorist organization Hezbollah. This is Muhammad Ghaleb Hamdar of Lebanese origin who, at the time of his capture, traces of explosive materials were found on his hands. In addition to supplies for the manufacture of these at his home and photographs of the interior of the Jorge Chávez International Airport.

Levitt:

Last season we discussed the case of Muhammad Hamdar, who was arrested in Peru and charged with document forgery—for the multiple fake IDs he carried to facilitate his operational travel—and with carrying out surveillance and plotting attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets in the country. Authorities also found other photographs of popular tourist destinations and the Israeli embassy in Lima in Hamdar's home, in addition to discovering explosive material in his trash can. Hamdar later admitted to being a member of Hezbollah's ESO –External Security Organization– another name for the IJO.

He was sentenced for use of false documents, but tried and acquitted of terrorism charges twice: once in 2017 and again in 2023. After his first acquittal, which was largely based on the court's decision to disregard his confession, the Peruvian government appealed the decision, overturned the acquittal, and sent the case back to be retried, saying the confession should not have been thrown out. Earlier this year, the court ignored the instruction to include Hamdar's confession, ruled it inadmissible, and acquitted him again.

Cards on the table: I served as an expert witness in this trial in Lima, Peru, as I did in the Kourani and Saab cases in the Southern District of New York. Of course, I am not a fact witness in such cases. I did not observe the defendants engaging in the crimes of which they are charged. I'm just the guy brought in to provide context about Hezbollah and its modus operandi, background on key events and people that come up in the course of the trial, that sort of thing.

According to the American and Peruvian governments, Hamdar's role as a Hezbollah agent is a matter of fact. The U.S. Treasury Department noted in Hamdar's October 2016 designation that he admitted undertaking "all of his activities in Peru at ESO's direction." Proving his guilt as a matter of law, however, has proven challenging.

Now, some cases tied to Hezbollah operatives in the United States, like Saab, Kourani, and el-Debek, get heaps of media attention. Others fly under the radar. Many don't even get charged with terrorism-specific crimes. Some don't even mention the word "Hezbollah." That was the case in Houston, Texas, where a Hezbollah operative named Robert Assaf quietly collected ice packs. You know, the kind that Hezbollah uses to make ammonium nitrate bombs.

You'll recall that Hezbollah sent Ali Kourani to China for the purpose of, how did the Department of Justice put it? To quote: "develop relationships that the IJO could rely on to obtain ammonium nitrate to be used as an explosive precursor chemical."

Well, Robert Assaf did much the same, just here in the United States. As far as the public record is concerned, Robert Assaf's case amounted to little more than basic fraud. And yet, this run-of-the-mill fraud case was filed under seal. Now, we know why. Because it was sealed, I was completely unaware of it for a while. And then suddenly, in June 2020, the files were unsealed and started showing up in searches of court documents.

As I read through the case, I noticed something. Underneath the fraud was a charge of lying to the FBI, and the lie was about collecting ice packs for Hezbollah. So I got a little suspicious. Was this case unsealed by mistake? Sometimes cases like these are sealed because a defendant has agreed to cooperate, and sealing the case can shield this from the public and protect the fact that the individual is talking to the FBI.

So just to make sure I wasn't undermining an ongoing investigation or putting a cooperator's life at risk, I reached out to one of the prosecutors involved in the case. They confirmed that a judge had, in fact, unsealed the case and that it was now a matter of public record. In other words, I was free to dig into it and make the information public.

Though not widely known, the overwhelming majority of Hezbollah-related cases prosecuted in the United States do not involve terrorism charges, and often don't even mention Hezbollah by name. According to a study published by the George Washington University's Program on Extremism, among U.S. federal criminal cases from 1997 to 2020 that are publicly-known to have a "concrete link to Hezbollah," less than fifteen percent of individuals were charged with providing material support to the group.

This makes these Hezbollah-affiliated cases harder to uncover, and requires diligent investigation on the part of researchers to see what the group is really up to in the United States. And the other eight-five percent of Hezbollah-linked individuals in that study? They were charged with non-terrorism related offenses, carrying much lighter sentences.

Seamus Hughes:

So when you look at Hezbollah cases in the federal court districts, it's not gonna be the traditional kind of "material support to terrorism" cases. Now, there are of course, there are, those in the dockets, but a lot of these cases are what we call "non-terrorism charges for terrorism cases." So that would be cigarette smuggling in North Carolina, ice packs in Texas, false statements in California, and they generally aren't explicitly Hezbollah cases.

Levitt:

That's Seamus Hughes, a senior research faculty member at the National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center, at the University of Nebraska.

Hughes:

And the way you kind of figure out if they are, is you really dive into it. It's never gonna be in the first document that's filed, alright. It's never gonna be in the third document that's filed. It's gonna be in the hundredth document that's filed, on the tenth page, on a footnote –that type of thing.

Levitt:

Seamus prowls through PACER, an electronic public access service for U.S. federal court documents, searching for national security and other newsworthy cases buried in this, supposedly public access, but actually extremely non-user-friendly database of U.S. court cases. Seamus is the best of the best at this digital court file dumpster diving.

Washingtonian Magazine dubbed him, quote: “the PACER whisperer.”

Hughes:

The real reason I got into this, in general, was I was doing an investigation into terrorism in the U.S., and I could not rely just on Department of Justice's press releases to tell me what's going on. You know, sometimes it'd hide the ball. Maybe a guy plead out, maybe they didn't get a sentence they liked, maybe they just didn't want to talk about the story, so I had to go through the ninety-four different federal districts, and go through every single case until I found it, and damned if I didn't find hundreds of cases that never saw light of day.

And the reason why this is all important is, if you want to get a sense of how big, or how small, the threat of Hezbollah is in America, you can't just rely on arrests related to terrorism cases. You really have to dive into it. And the story of Hezbollah in many ways in the U.S. is a story of fundraising and resources here. So using fraud, waste, and abuse in order to fund operations overseas, and a good number of plots that never see the light of day for a variety of different, kind of, geopolitical and policy decisions.

Levitt:

Seamus points out what exactly it is that makes Assaf's case –which may seem simple at first glance– in fact quite complex.

Hughes:

Robert Assaf's case is interesting to me because it's so mundane in nature until you dive into it. You have an individual who's charged with false statements as it relates to buying a bunch of ice packs, right? And that is a random charge that you see a lot in terrorism cases. And so, what's interesting about this case is how it kind of flew under the radar. And what you see in the court records is this guy was directed by a foreign terrorist organization in order to do this. There was a plot involved in this scenario and it never hit the nightly news.

Hezbollah's always creative in the way they do terrorist attacks. And I think this one's a great example of that. You have an individual who's collected ice packs in order to extract the ammonium nitrate and build a bomb from that.

Levitt:

This is the tactic I told you to keep in mind earlier. We talked about it last season, and it already came up again this season. It's become a common, even preferred, modus operandi for the group as a means of clandestinely collecting material to build bombs. I mean, who's going to bat an eye when someone buys ice packs, right?

Around the 2010s, after IJO operative Kourani's trip to China to develop networks for obtaining ammonium nitrate apparently failed, Hezbollah began ramping up its efforts to build up its chemical stockpiles worldwide.

Clip: Since 2012, Hizballah has established caches of ammonium nitrate throughout Europe by transporting first aid kits whose cold packs contain the substance. Today, I can reveal that such caches have been moved through Belgium, to France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland. I can also reveal that significant ammonium nitrate caches have been discovered or destroyed in France, Greece, and Italy. We have reason to believe that this activity is still underway. As of 2018, ammonium nitrate caches were still suspected throughout Europe, possibly in Greece, Italy, and Spain.

Levitt:

That was Ambassador Nathan Sales, the former State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism speaking in 2020 about Hezbollah's activities in Europe. When Ambassador Sales revealed that Hezbollah operatives were collecting and moving large quantities of ice packs across Europe, it created quite a stir.

So far, we've been lucky, and Hezbollah has only executed one successful bombing operation using explosive material culled from ice packs. In December 2011, a Lebanese-Bulgarian dual national and IJO operative imported forty boxes of first aid kits to Bulgaria. Another Hezbollah operative later used the ammonium nitrate from the first aid kits in the bus bombing of July 2012 in Burgas. We covered that case in great detail in episode 5 of Season 1.

It was that same year, in 2012, that authorities in Thailand arrested Hussein Attris, the Lebanese-Swedish dual national and Hezbollah operative who was also stockpiling ice packs. Sometimes, even Iran itself sends shipments of ammonium nitrate to Hezbollah to prepare for attacks. According to German newspaper *Die Welt*, the IRGC Quds Force, Iran's paramilitary wing tasked with external operations, sent three shipments of ammonium nitrate to Hezbollah in Lebanon totaling around 630 tons between 2013 and 2014.

Fast forward to 2015, and Robert Assaf is in Houston, Texas stockpiling ice packs for the production of Hezbollah bombs. Assaf was able to amass over 300 pounds of ammonium nitrate, which he extracted from several hundred cold packs that he bought from local pharmacies in Texas.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, another Hezbollah operative was also stockpiling ammonium nitrate, this time in London. Authorities there seized three metric tons of the chemical, which a local Hezbollah operative collected and stored in three businesses and one home in northwest London. Following the bust, British authorities arrested a man in his 40s on suspicion of plotting a terrorist attack, but later released him without charges. Another parallel to the case in Texas: authorities in Britain also kept news of this operation under wraps until the newspaper *The Telegraph* released a report about the incident in June 2019.

Perhaps not so coincidentally, Hezbollah ordered Assaf to destroy his ammonium nitrate stockpile in Houston in August 2015, just before MI5 and British police busted Hezbollah's illicit activity in London.

Authorities in the U.S. charged Assaf with one count of making a false statement or representation to a federal agent. He pled guilty to the count in April 2017, and was sentenced in June 2020 to three months imprisonment, followed by one year of supervised release. The judge involved in Assaf's case sealed the hearing until his sentencing due to quote: "substantial likelihood of imminent danger" to Assaf, his wife, and their family members living overseas. In other words, they feared his family in Lebanon could face retaliation if Hezbollah suspected Assaf cooperated with U.S. authorities in any way.

And why might they think that? Because he was never charged with terrorism, despite evidence that he was stockpiling bomb-making materials. And, he was sentenced to just three months in jail. But really, it's not uncommon for terror suspects, in the U.S. at least, to avoid terror-related charges. Here's Seamus again.

Hughes:

They don't include terrorism charges in a lot of these Hezbollah cases primarily because prosecutors like to win. It is an open-and-shut case to say, "I went to a guy's house. I did a search warrant. I found an illegal gun. I can arrest him for illegal gun." You don't have to explain the inner workings of Hezbollah to a grand jury. You don't have to dive into seven or eight days of ideology and narrative and propaganda that inspired them to do so. You can just say, "I found that gun at that house on that date." And that's an open-and-shut case.

Levitt:

Now, you may be asking yourself, why would Hezbollah instruct an operative to work in a place like Texas? New York City, I understand. We saw Ali Kourani and Alexei Saab operating there. D.C., it's a big target. But, Houston, Texas?

Well, it was actually a strategic decision.

Robert Clifford:

The FBI was well aware of Hezbollah cells in the major cities: New York, Houston, Detroit, Los Angeles, Boston. But Hezbollah made a conscious decision, because of that federal oversight in these larger areas and because members were starting to be arrested, there was indications that they were aware that their cells had been penetrated. Hezbollah started placing operatives in areas such as Portland, Oregon; Louisville, Kentucky; and these operatives were to blend into the community and establish, essentially, sleeper cells to be activated, to conduct whatever activities Hezbollah may want of them.

Levitt:

That was former FBI special agent Bob Clifford who we heard from last season. He led the four-year investigation that uncovered a Hezbollah sleeper cell in Charlotte, North Carolina.

As it happens, Hezbollah has a bit of a history in Texas. Going all the way back to 1994, the FBI indicated that an Iraqi-born Shia cleric based in Texas positioned himself in a leadership role of Hezbollah in the United States.

Additionally, between 1999 and 2002, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency, or DEA, arrested over 370 individuals located in twelve cities across the United States – including Houston – in an operation targeting methamphetamine production. Investigators determined that a significant portion of the profits from these drug rings were sent to individuals and bank accounts across the Middle East with possible ties to terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and Hamas.

More recently, Paraguayan authorities arrested a Lebanese-Paraguayan dual national in 2016 at an airport in Ciudad del Este for intent to ship cocaine to associates in Houston, Texas and Turkey. The man admitted that some of his relatives were Hezbollah members and that his family clan in South America's Tri-Border Area were allied with Hezbollah.

Despite the negative publicity from cases like Alexei Saab and Robert Assaf, Hezbollah operatives continue to raise funds, procure goods, and collect operational intelligence for Hezbollah. There is more to discuss here, so watch this space.

In our next episode, we'll take a look at Hezbollah funding schemes in the Gulf, where the group's regional activities have also included high-profile airplane hijackings, kidnappings, and coordinated bombing attacks.

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 for Earshot Strategies, and written by myself, Lauren von Thaden, Camille Jablonski, and Delaney Soliday, research assistants at the Washington Institute. Dubbing for this episode was provided by Kyle Robertson.

The audio clips used in this episode are from WXYZ-TV Detroit, the U.S Department of State, CBS Boston, 24 Horas, and the American Jewish Committee.

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://www.washingtoninstitute.org) and explore our map and timeline of [Hezbollah Worldwide activities](#).

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