

Episode 8: Hezbollah Assassinations Unit 121

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.

This season, we've talked about Hezbollah's wide-ranging global activities: attack plots in Asia, finance and logistics in the Gulf and Africa, surveillance and procurement operations in the United States, and even the group's digital footprint.

Now, for our final episode of Season 2, we travel back to where it all began, Lebanon. Hezbollah maintains a unit dedicated entirely to carrying out assassinations there. Even as it carries out plots abroad, the group uses this specialized team to eliminate its rivals at home.

As we discussed last season, Hezbollah's leaders insist that everything they do, they do for the Lebanese people. The group has created a successful model of social-welfare governance in Lebanon by providing various social services, like education, healthcare, financial institutions, and even their version of the boy scouts. These services help Hezbollah build support at home in Lebanon, thus allowing the group to subvert the Lebanese political system to serve its own interests. Hezbollah buys support when it can, but when that's not enough, it turns to murder to eliminate opponents and intimidate people into submission.

In the movies, a terrorist group's elite assassination squad would have a cool name like the "Wolfpack" or something like that. But this is not Hollywood, and Hezbollah's assassination team is just known as Unit 121.

Joby Warrick:

This assassinations team, this Unit 121, was known to be controlled by Hezbollah's top leadership, according to the officials we spoke with.

That was Joby Warrick, the investigative journalist from the *Washington Post* who we heard from earlier this season. He is also the author of several highly acclaimed books, the most recent called *Red Line: The Unraveling of Syria and America's Race to Destroy the Most Dangerous Arsenal in the World*.

Warrick:

By 2005, the time of the Hariri assassination in Beirut, it had already been active for several years under different names. Our sources describe Unit 121 as "highly secretive." It consisted of dozens of operatives and was totally disconnected from the rest of Hezbollah. It took its orders directly from the top, from Hassan Nasrallah.

Levitt:

The existence of Unit 121 was revealed in 2020 after the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, or STL, ended its eleven-year investigation into the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Hariri was killed by a suicide truck bomb in Beirut on February 14, 2005. The attack killed twenty-two people and wounded over 200. Intercepted communications confirmed the existence of the assassination unit that had been behind a series of deadly car bombings targeting a long list of Lebanese military and political leaders over the course of at least a decade.

Warrick:

What we learned in our reporting was that there was evidence tying all these various assassination attempts to one another and then linking them either to Hezbollah militants backed by Iran, or to other operatives inside Iran itself. And this evidence was being amassed and pieced together by intelligence officials in at least four different countries sharing tips and leads and trying to build a comprehensive picture.

Levitt:

Little is known about the secretive Unit 121. But as a result of the STL investigation, we know about one senior commander, Salim Ayyash.

David Schenker:

We know that Salim Ayyash, a senior commander in this unit, was singled out in the ruling of the International Tribunal on Hariri as being responsible for Hariri's murder. There were a couple other folks who were later identified in the appeal, but he was convicted in the initial trial.

Levitt:

David Schenker is the former Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs at the U.S. Department of State.

Schenker:

The State Department in 2021, actually issued a Rewards For Justice memorandum, you know, a \$10 million reward for the rendering of the arrest of Salim Ayyash. But this is a key tool of Hezbollah's power, its ability to go out and take care of its opponents, to assassinate its opponents.

Levitt:

In the months leading up to the attack, members of Unit 121 followed Hariri around Lebanon, including his trips to the airport, mosques, dinners, and even to a meeting with Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah.

The purpose of this extensive surveillance was to obtain information on Hariri's movements, his security detail, and his level of protection at any given time. This would help them determine the best method, time, and location to kill him. For example, Hariri's convoy was equipped with electronic jammers that would have blocked the remote detonation of any explosive. So, the unit decided to use a suicide bomber driving a truck loaded with explosives to ensure that the bomb would go off. When the time came, despite the layers of security surrounding Hariri, Hezbollah's Unit 121 assassins were still able to successfully carry out their plot in broad daylight in the middle of downtown Beirut.

Monika Borgmann:

Hariri had all protection he needed, blinded cars, bodyguards, etc., etc., and it didn't help him to survive.

That was Monika Borgmann, a German-Lebanese journalist and documentary filmmaker, and widow of Lokman Slim, a Lebanese intellectual and political activist assassinated by Unit 121. We'll hear more from her later in the episode.

Four individuals were charged for their roles in Hariri's assassination. Two of the suspects appear to have been lowlevel Hezbollah musclemen, while the others–Salim Ayyash and Mustafa Baddredine–were senior members of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization. Ayyash was a U.S. passport holder who headed the cell that carried out the assassination. Meanwhile, Badreddine was a senior Hezbollah official who eventually replaced his cousin and brotherin-law, Imad Mughniyeh, as the head of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization. For many years he was Mughniyeh's most trusted associate, and is believed to have participated in some of Hezbollah's most spectacular operations, like the Beirut and Kuwait bombings we talked about in Season 1. Together with Salim Ayyash, Badreddine coordinated the surveillance of Hariri and monitored the physical preparation of the attack.

Following Rafik Hariri's murder, mass protests erupted in downtown Beirut that ultimately forced the Syrian military to withdraw from Lebanon after twenty-nine years. Lebanese journalist and activist Samir Kassir helped organize those protests, and Hezbollah took notice. Kassir soon received messages telling him to leave the country, and one ominously read, "one day you'll be found dead on [the] pavement." Not long after those threats began, Kassir was killed.

Clip: It was the 2nd of June 2005, a Thursday. Samir Kassir walked toward his car parked on the street nearby. He sat in the driver's seat, and moments later, as he started the engine of the silver Alfa Romeo, explosives attached to the car detonated. Samir Kassir was killed instantly.

Rafik Hariri's son, Saad, spoke out at the time saying, quote: "the blood-stained hands that assassinated Rafik Hariri are the same ones that assassinated Samir Kassir," pointing a finger at Hezbollah for killing both Kassir and his father.

At this time, Kassir's editor and publisher, Gebran Tueni, feared he was going to be next, given his outspoken opposition to the Syrian regime. So, Tueni left Lebanon and stayed in Paris for a while until he returned on December 11, 2005 to attend a government ceremony. He was killed in a car bomb one day later. The blast, triggered by remote control, shattered windows more than 100 yards away. A series of leaked Syrian documents later revealed Hezbollah's involvement in Tueni's assassination. One document, in particular, stated: "With the help of the members of the intelligence department of Lebanon's Hezbollah, Mission 213, which was assigned to them on December 10, has been successfully accomplished with excellent results." Mission 213? Apparently Unit 121's codename for Tueni's murder.

But this was just the beginning.

Between 2005 and 2013, Hezbollah was responsible for the deaths of nearly a dozen more Lebanese officials. This includes parliamentarians, law enforcement officers, and military figures who challenged Hezbollah's position within Lebanon's political system.

David Schenker again.

Schenker:

Whether these are politicians or whether they are law enforcement personalities, when they get too close to the bone or become too much of a threat, Hezbollah will just take them out of the scene. Hezbollah traditionally has shown a higher regard for bullets than ballots. They take matters into their own hands.

Levitt:

During the Syrian occupation of the country from 1976 to 2005, Hezbollah had been a compelling force in the Lebanese government, whether or not they actually had a majority of seats in parliament. But things began to change in 2005, when the anti-Hezbollah bloc formed a slim government majority.

Schenker:

The anti-Hezbollah, or nominally anti-Hezbollah, parliamentary majority in Lebanon–very critical of Hezbollah, very critical of Syria–they had a slim majority in the parliament. And Hezbollah starts a campaign of assassination. They look to pick off anti-Hezbollah politicians, decreasing the majority, and it gets very close to effectively ending the anti-Hezbollah, or nominally anti-Hezbollah, majority in parliament. They killed three, four folks and that could have been, had it kept going, one or two more people, would have really tipped the balance in parliament.

Levitt:

Many of these targets were part of the so-called March 14 coalition, which was formed after Hariri's assassination in opposition to the Syrian occupation. This coalition was on one side, while Hezbollah, Amal, and their Christian Maronite allies were on the other. By September 2007, the seventh anti-Syrian politician was killed, reducing the anti-Hezbollah bloc to sixty-eight seats, only three more than the necessary majority of sixty-five seats it needed to win votes.

During this volatile time period, Unit 121 was busy.

Clip: Amidst a presidential vacuum and a fear of uncertainty, the Lebanese capital Beirut woke up to a new shock. A boobytrapped car exploded, killing Francois al-Hajj, the Lebanese Army's second in command.

Levitt:

On December 12, 2007, Lebanese Major-General Francois al-Hajj was killed by Hezbollah Unit 121 along with four others in a car bombing. He was poised to play a major role in the new Lebanese government. Additionally in 2007, the Lebanese government uncovered that Hezbollah had developed a fiber optic cable and telecommunication network stretching over 200 miles. The cable network had transmitters and backup generators, so communications could continue even if part of the network was damaged. This extensive infrastructure helped Hezbollah stay off the radar of law enforcement monitoring Hezbollah communication on public lines, ensuring that Hezbollah leaders and operatives could stay in contact with each other.

In May 2008, a Hezbollah surveillance camera was discovered at the Beirut International Airport and taken down. A former leading member of the March 14 coalition claimed that Hezbollah placed the camera there to quote: "monitor the arrival of Lebanese or foreign leaders" and to "kidnap and assassinate [people] on the airport road." On May 6, 2008, the western-backed Lebanese government issued orders outlawing Hezbollah's private telecommunications network and dismissed the Beirut Airport security chief on the grounds of allowing Hezbollah to install the camera.

Needless to say, Hezbollah was not happy about this. Hezbollah Deputy Secretary General Naim Qassem even gave a warning during a television interview that "those taking aim at [Hezbollah's] telecommunications network [were] targeting [their] weapons."

Schenker:

In response to this, two, three months after this initiative started, Hezbollah took over, by force, Beirut.

Clip: Anti-government protesters bring the Lebanese capital Beirut to a standstill. Explosions and gunfire ring out across the city, as opposition supporters hold a one-day general strike calling for higher pay. But the protests have become a show of force by Hezbollah against the government's moves to break up the group's communications infrastructure.

Schenker:

They had all their troops come in on the back of, you know, flatbed trucks and opened fire on Hariri's house. It was a remarkable development. Then, of course, Hezbollah, eventually they made their point, and eventually stepped down and turned over their positions to the Lebanese Armed Forces, which had basically abandoned Beirut to let Hezbollah come in.

Levitt:

Fearing Hezbollah would target them next, a group of fourteen politicians holed up in a hotel, effectively under siege.

Schenker:

So realizing, you know, they had killed before this, it looked like it was, you know, whittling down this majority. And so recognizing this, members of the so-called March 14 coalition checked into the Phoenicia Intercontinental Hotel. Actually, at that point, I think it was 2007, 2008, I actually went to the Phoenicia to visit a member of parliament who was my friend. And I had to go through like two metal detectors to get in. And he was in this suite in the Intercon and you know, he said to me, he said, you know, this looks great, but it's really like Abu Ghraib, you know, we're all here in prison.

Levitt:

The politicians survived and eventually left the hotel. After taking over downtown Beirut in 2008, Hezbollah seemed to take a break from its assassination campaign for a few years. That is, until 2012.

Clip: The opposition in Lebanon have called for a big turnout at the funeral of the murdered intelligence official, Wissam al-Hassan. He's due to be interned at a mosque in Beirut's Martyrs' Square. The general was killed, along with seven other people in a massive car bomb explosion on Friday.

Levitt:

Wissam al-Hassan was the head of Lebanese internal intelligence, a brigadier general in the Lebanese Internal Security Forces, and Hariri's security chief. Just before his murder, Hassan was investigating a former Lebanese minister who allegedly collaborated with Syrian officials to plot bombings in Lebanon. An unnamed security official told the *Washington Post* that Unit 121 was responsible for Hassan's murder.

And just over a year later, Unit 121 struck again.

Clip: The blast shattered Beirut's downtown, an area known for its five-star hotels and expensive shops, just as the working day was getting underway. The target of the bomb was Mohammed Chatah, a former finance minister and one-time Lebanese Ambassador to the United States. Chatah had been an outspoken critic of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed militia which uses Lebanon as its base, and also its ally, President Bashar al-Assad in neighboring war-torn Syria.

Levitt:

On December 27, 2013, a car bomb exploded in downtown Beirut as Chatah's convoy passed by – the same modus operandi used by Unit 121 to kill Hariri eight years earlier. The explosion killed Chatah, his bodyguard, and four others in his convoy, and wounded seventy-one more. He was on his way to meet then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri, the son of the late Rafik Hariri. Just one hour before his death, Chatah posted the following on Twitter, quote: "Hezbollah is pressing to be granted similar powers in security and foreign policy matters that Syria exercised in Lebanon for 15 years."

David Schenker knew Chatah personally.

Schenker:

You know, I spent time with Mohamad Chatah and his wife on the roof of their home in Beirut. You know, just, impressive, really just lovely people who paid the ultimate price for being nationalist Lebanese.

Levitt:

Chatah was widely regarded as one of the brains behind the March 14 opposition coalition, and their point person with Western governments. But Hezbollah also targeted members of its own Shi'a community who opposed the group.

Here's David Schenker again, talking about the role Chattah played in Lebanese political society.

Schenker:

Also a key figure for the anti-Hezbollah, anti-Syrian trend in Lebanon. Probably the smartest Sunni politician in the country, and to remove him from the scene was really, I think, decimating for the March 14 opposition.

Political and military figures aside, Hezbollah isn't above targeting civilians who get in its way either. One of the more well-known examples of Hezbollah targeting Lebanese civilians was Lokman Slim. You might remember him from Season 1's discussion of Hezbollah's efforts to undermine stability in Lebanon.

Clip: Lokman Slim was found dead in his car just sixty kilometers south of Beirut. He was shot in the head. The political commentator and secular activist was known for his fierce opposition to Hezbollah.

Levitt:

On February 4, 2021, Lokman Slim was assassinated. Just minutes after Lokman's death was confirmed, Jawad Nasrallah, son of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, tweeted, and I quote: "The loss of some people is in fact an unplanned gain #notsorry."

According to the U.S. government, Unit 121 operatives killed Lokman. In a letter to senior U.S. officials, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee called Lokman Slim's murder and other similar actions taken by Hezbollah as "attempts to derail basic state functions for their" –meaning Hezbollah's– "own political benefit." But why did Hezbollah feel so threatened by him? As a filmmaker and activist, Lokman Slim launched projects aimed at documenting Lebanon's violent history and paving the way for what he hoped would be a more peaceful future. Along the way, he began to speak out against what he described as Hezbollah's intimidation tactics and attempts to monopolize Lebanese politics.

Monika Borgmann again, widow of the late Lokman Slim.

Borgmann:

Lokman wanted really to see a better Middle East than we are seeing now. He became one of the vehement critics of Hezbollah. And, I mean for Lokman, it was not possible to build up an independent Lebanon when the state has not the full control. I mean, because for him, it was clear that the Lebanese state has not the full control, as long as there is a militia which is controlling, which was maybe at that time, you could say it was a state in the state. But over the years Hezbollah became much more than a state within a state overseeing us, Hezbollah really took control of the state and established parallel structures.

Levitt:

Lokman Slim openly accused Hezbollah of imposing its view of eternal war against Israel and the United States on Lebanon's Shiites and criticized the group for sending fighters to Syria. Foreign diplomats sought out Lokman for his views on developments in the Shiite community. They provided funding for some of Lokman's initiatives, and even arranged high-level meetings for him in Western capitals.

David Schenker again.

Schenker:

Lokman Slim, actually a dear friend of mine who I had known for fifteen, twenty years, was the most prominent critic, Shiite critic, but critic writ large of Hezbollah in Lebanon. This guy lived in the belly of the beast. He lived in the heart of Dahieh, and had this position, didn't hide it, was a prominent critic, a public critic, TV, radio, writer.

Levitt:

The Dahieh is a neighborhood in southern Beirut controlled by Hezbollah. I met Lokman myself several times when he visited Washington. He was a man who cared deeply for Lebanon and who, despite the risks, sought to undermine Hezbollah's efforts to involve Lebanon in a never-ending cycle of violence. Hezbollah took notice of Lokman's access to foreign diplomats and his status as a vocal opponent of Hezbollah. Hassan Nasrallah, himself, described Lokman as, quote: "Shiite of the embassies," referring to his contacts with Western diplomats. But Lokman also received much more explicit threats to his personal safety.

Borgmann:

Lokman refused to discuss threats for, really, many years. Whenever he was asked by a journalist if he feels threatened, if he is afraid, he wouldn't answer these questions, he would make some jokes.

Levitt:

In December 2019, threatening flyers were posted on the wall and entrances to Lokman's home, and a group of people gathered in his family's garden chanting threats and slurs.

Borgmann:

What changed in December 2019, first of all, these leaflets which were posted on the walls, they were not only threatening or insulting him, they were also insulting his father, and he felt that it's a threat against the whole house and the family, and therefore, it was the first time that he went public. He wrote an open letter saying if anything is happening to him, to me, to his family, to the house, here he really is making Nabih Berri from the Amal movement and Hassan Nasrallah from Hezbollah, responsible.

Levitt:

In response to these threats, the U.S. government tried to help.

Schenker:

He had gotten a number of death threats through the years by Hezbollah. At one point, he told me that the U.S. Embassy brought him in for duty to warn that he had a significant, credible death threat from Hezbollah and was offered citizenship in the United States. And he said, hell no, I'm not leaving. I'm fighting for my country.

Levitt:

Duty to warn means the U.S. had specific intelligence about a concrete threat to Lokman's life. Still, Lokman continued his non-profit work for Shiites in Lebanon while simultaneously continuing to criticize Hezbollah. In January 2021, during a TV interview, Lokman suggested that the hazardous chemicals that blew up the Beirut port were brought to Lebanon for the Syrian government, and Hezbollah was involved.

He was killed one month later.

Borgmann:

He was invited to the house of a friend he hadn't seen for a long time, and so he left at noon. He left Beirut. And he arrived there at around 1:30, stayed there until around 8:30, and then drove back, or tried to drive back. And, what I know that, I mean, he went to Niha. Niha is in the UNIFIL region. It's very close to the French contingent. And to go to the house of this friend, you have to take a very tiny road which leads to the house. And he was kidnaped at this road. And then he was droven in a Jeep, or at least three cars drove to a region near to Beirut, called Andusia, outside of the UNIFIL region, and there he was assassinated.

Levitt:

UNIFIL stands for United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, and serves as a UN peacekeeping mission in the country. UNIFIL was established in 1978, and its mandate was renewed once more just days before this recording. In theory, Lokman should have been safe there.

Schenker:

Monika Borgmann, his wife, called me that night at three in the morning to say that Lokman had gone missing. I don't think anyone was surprised. But I think Hezbollah had just gotten fed up with Lokman, who most recently had been on TV talking about his theory about how Hezbollah had siphoned off tons of this ammonium nitrate in Beirut's port to provide it to the Assad regime to fuel the barrel bombs that were murdering Syrian civilians. He was a real thorn in their side, and it's a real, a real loss for Lebanon, and I think for the world.

The subsequent investigation into Lokman's murder has been described by Human Rights Watch as a failure, highlighting the gross negligence and procedural violations of the supposed investigators. After more than two years, the Lebanese government has not ordered a single indictment or arrest for Lokman's murder.

Borgmann:

My confidence that an investigation might be possible and successful in Lebanon was very, very small.

Levitt:

But Lokman's assassination is not the only unsolved murder in Lebanon. No suspects have been prosecuted for any of the country's high-profile assassinations in decades.

Borgmann:

I mean, there has been a whole series of political assassinations we have documented since the beginning of the independence of Lebanon. We have documented almost 200 political investigations, and almost nothing was really-nobody was almost brought to justice, with some exceptions.

Levitt:

One reason for the lack of accountability is Hezbollah isn't just preventing justice–it is actively obstructing it. In Season 1, we discussed Hezbollah's tactics to interfere in the Special Tribunal for Lebanon's investigation into Rafik Hariri's assassination. Hezbollah stole computers belonging to investigators, harassed interviewers, and surveilled STL headquarters.

In Lebanon, Hezbollah followed tribunal investigators on the ground and openly intimidated them. The group also collected information on tribunal officials entering and leaving the country using airport surveillance, creating an environment in which the investigators did not feel safe. But, perhaps most disturbingly, the group also assassinated individuals they saw as getting too close to the truth. And they used their infamous Unit 121 to get the job done.

Clip: This was the third attempt at Major Wissam Eid's life. The powerful explosion left him no way to escape this time. And Major Eid also had a very important role in revealing crucial evidence in the assassination of the late prime minister, Rafik Hariri.

Levitt:

On January 25, 2008, Lebanese Internal Security Forces Captain Wissam Eid, one of Lebanon's top terrorism investigators, was killed when a car bomb exploded on an overpass as Eid drove past it. Eid's bodyguard and two civilians were also killed in the explosion. Eid specialized in tracking cell phones used to detonate explosive devices, but he was killed while investigating the murder of Rafik Hariri for the STL. Hezbollah paid careful attention to Eid's investigation. According to a *New York Times Magazine* investigation, it was Eid who broke open the case early on by examining cell phone records and linking phone networks to senior members of Hezbollah, including Mustafa Baddredine.

But this was not the first time Hezbollah targeted Eid's team. In 2006, a roadside bomb exploded near a two-car motorcade carrying Eid's commander and entourage. His commander survived, but the blast killed four of his bodyguards. Then, Eid himself began receiving death threats. He continued his work, tracking one phone to the next, making new connections. That's when Eid began meeting with UN investigators to discuss his findings. The day after his second meeting with the UN, Eid was killed.

After the STL indictment of Salim Ayyash and the other defendants in the Hariri bombing case was released in 2011, Hassan Nasrallah challenged the Lebanese government in a speech broadcast on Iranian state-owned news network Press TV.

Clip: Would this government, would it have been able to go ahead and arrest these people, arrest these Hezbollah members? Would it have been able to do so? It wouldn't have been able to do so. And I believe in thirty days or sixty days or one year or thirty years, three hundred years, even after three hundred years pass, you cannot arrest or take anyone in.

Levitt:

Hezbollah operatives Hussein Khalil, Hassan Nasrallah's political advisor, and Wafiq Safa, the head of Hezbollah's security apparatus, were later implicated in Wissam Eid's murder.

Hezbollah controls its position in Lebanon by creating a climate of fear. The group intimidates activists, the media, and politicians, and silences its critics. This flies directly in the face of Hezbollah's claim that it protects the Lebanese people. In fact, in pursuing its own malign agenda, the group actively threatens and murders fellow Lebanese citizens. And those who try to get in Hezbollah's way–people like Lokman Slim, Mohamad Chattah, or Wissam Eid–risk paying the ultimate price.

OUTRO:

As always, 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.

The audio clips used in this episode are from Link TV, Al Jazeera, CBS, Euro News, and France 24.

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 <u>washingtoninstitute.org</u> and explore our map and timeline of <u>Hezbollah Worldwide activities</u>.

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