

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Season 2

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

Listen to the new season of a podcast series shining a bright light on the global terrorist and criminal activities that Lebanese Hezbollah would rather keep hidden from view.

Lebanese Hezbollah goes to great lengths to publicize its overt, social, and political activities and to conceal its covert terrorist, militant, and criminal pursuits. In the words of one operative, Hezbollah's "Golden Rule" is this: *The Less You Know, the Better*.

In this podcast, terrorism scholar Matthew Levitt sets out to break this rule by shining a bright spotlight on Hezbollah's global terrorist and criminal activities. Levitt has been following Lebanese Hezbollah for almost three decades in and out of government. He's written books, given expert testimony, and literally mapped Hezbollah's worldwide illicit activities in an online [interactive map and timeline \(/hezbollahinteractivemap\)](/hezbollahinteractivemap).

Listen as Levitt tracks Hezbollah's evolution over the years and its operations across the globe from Thailand to Azerbaijan, West Africa to the Gulf, then on to the U.S. and back to Lebanon. This season will explore new locations, dive deeper into the group's modus operandi, examine Hezbollah's digital footprint, and expose the group's assassination unit – responsible for the murder of Lebanese, politicians, security officials, and intellectuals. Along the way, Levitt will speak with law enforcement officers, intelligence agents, government officials, and world-class experts from around the globe, each of whom has first-person experience confronting Hezbollah and uncovering things the group would much prefer nobody ever heard about.

[Subscribe to Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule on your favorite podcatcher app. \(https://shows.acast.com/breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](https://shows.acast.com/breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

[Listen to Season 1 of Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule. \(/node/17244\)](#)

Season 2 Trailer

Trailer 1

Trailer 2

Preview Season 2 of Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule, a podcast series devoted to shining a bright light on the global terrorist and criminal activities that Lebanese Hezbollah would much prefer to keep quiet. Coming soon to your favorite podcatcher.

Episode 1: Risky Business in South America

Earlier this month, the U.S. Treasury Department designated Hezbollah operative Amer Mohamed Akil Rada for coordinating the activities of various commercial enterprises for Hezbollah, including charcoal exports from Colombia to Lebanon. Rada previously helped case targets for Hezbollah around South America and was a member of the Hezbollah operational squad that carried out the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires. Here's the backstory on Rada, recorded prior to the Treasury designation, and more on Hezbollah's use of front companies to hide its criminal and terrorist activities in the Western Hemisphere.

[Download a transcript of this episode. \(/media/6791\)](#)

Guests

Armando Cortez is Director of the Anti-Terrorist Unit within the Argentinian Attorney General's Office. Cortez served as team leader of the 1994 AMIA Jewish community center bombing investigation.

Aurora Ortega is a U.S. government professional who has served in various positions within the U.S. Departments of Defense and the Treasury. She is a Ph.D. candidate at George Mason University, and the author of the Institute report [Hezbollah in Colombia: Past and Present Modus Operandi and the Need for Greater Security \(/node/17362\)](#).

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Lebanese Hezbollah Interactive Map

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- *Hizbullah Narco-Terrorism: A Growing Cross-Border Threat* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/3195>) by Matthew Levitt
- *Hezbollah Finances: Funding the Party of God* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-finances-funding-party-god>) by Matthew Levitt

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Episode 2: Terror in Bangkok, Then and Now

An innocent looking hit-and-run accident in downtown Bangkok in 1994 uncovered a sophisticated Hezbollah network in Thailand, an attempt to target the Israeli embassy there, and a decomposing body hidden in a vat full of chemical explosives. Two decades later, a new string of Hezbollah and Iranian-directed plots in Thailand cropped up, this time involving operatives hiding explosives in bags marked as “cat litter,” signing up for flower arrangement classes as cover for travel to Bangkok, and bulk buying bottles of nail polish remover for reasons having nothing to do with makeup.

[Download a transcript of this episode. \(/media/6812\)](#)

Guests

Oded Ailam served in the Mossad for over twenty-two years, most recently as Deputy Head of Global Operations. He also served as chief of Mossad’s counterterrorism center.

Sakdawut “Josh” Smanbut is a police colonel and superintendent in the Royal Thai Police’s Special Branch. He was involved in the investigations into Hezbollah operatives plotting attacks in Thailand in 2012 and 2014.

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- [Long Reach of Hezbollah Makes It a Threat Close to Home \(/node/4936\)](#) by Matthew Levitt
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Episode 3: "A Jumble of Overlapping Plots" in Baku

In 2008, Azerbaijani authorities thwarted a Hezbollah plot to target an Israeli Independence Day celebration and kidnap the Israeli ambassador in Baku. Two Hezbollah operatives were arrested, tried, and convicted, but the group was not deterred by this setback. By 2011, Hezbollah and Iran had formulated “a jumble of overlapping plots” that officials discovered to be part of a coordinated campaign to assassinate foreign diplomats in at least seven countries, including in Azerbaijan.

[Download a transcript of this episode. \(/media/6838\)](#)

Guests

Ambassador Arthur Lenk served as Israeli Ambassador to Azerbaijan from 2005-2009, and Israeli Ambassador to South Africa, Lesotho, and Eswatini (formally Swaziland) from 2013-2017. Ambassador Lenk also served as Director of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Department of International Law. He currently serves as Principal at Lenk International Consulting Ltd.

Mahammad Mammadov is a Research Fellow at the Topchubashov Center, an independent think tank in Baku, Azerbaijan. He is an adjunct lecturer at Khazar University. In 2020, he obtained his double MA degree in Russian, Central and East European, and Eurasian Studies from the University of Glasgow and the University of Tartu. Mammadov specializes in foreign policy analysis and international relations theories. His research interests include energy, connectivity, as well as geopolitical and transitional developments in the post-Soviet space with a specific focus on Azerbaijani foreign policy. He is the co-author of [From the Street to the Border: Iran's Growing Paranoia Toward Azerbaijan](https://mei.edu/publications/streets-border-irans-growing-paranoia-toward-azerbaijan) (<https://mei.edu/publications/streets-border-irans-growing-paranoia-toward-azerbaijan>), published by the Middle East Institute in 2023.

Zohar Palti is the Viterbi International Fellow at The Washington Institute. He previously served as head of the Policy & Political-Military Bureau at Israel's Ministry of Defense, where his responsibilities included directing defense and security relationships with foreign countries. Prior to that, he led the Mossad Intelligence Directorate and served as Counterterrorism Chief in the organization. He also served in the IDF for 26 years in the IDF Intelligence Corps at the rank of colonel. He has also held several research positions, including senior research fellow at Harvard's Belfer Center (2016-2017) and visiting military fellow with The Washington Institute (2004). Palti holds a BA and an Executive MA in Middle Eastern studies from Tel Aviv University, with distinction. He is a graduate of the U.S. National Defense University's advanced management program. In March 2022, he was awarded the U.S. Department of Defense Medal for Distinguished Public Service for his major contribution to bolstering U.S.-Israel strategic defense relations.

Joby Warrick has been a reporter at the *Washington Post* since 1996. He has served with the *Post's* investigative and national security teams, and currently writes about the Middle East, terrorism, and weapons proliferation. He is the author of three nonfiction books, including his 2021 book [Red Line: The Unraveling of Syria and America's Race to Destroy the Most Dangerous Arsenal in the World](https://www.amazon.com/Red-Line-Unraveling-Americas-Dangerous/dp/0525564810/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=) (https://www.amazon.com/Red-Line-Unraveling-Americas-Dangerous/dp/0525564810/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=), the 2016 Pulitzer Prize winning [Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS, and The Triple Agent](https://www.amazon.com/Black-Flags-Rise-Joby-Warrick/dp/0804168938) (<https://www.amazon.com/Black-Flags-Rise-Joby-Warrick/dp/0804168938>).

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- *From the Streets to the Border: Iran's Growing Paranoia Toward Azerbaijan (https://mei.edu/publications/streets-border-irans-growing-paranoia-toward-azerbaijan)* by Mahammad Mammadov

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Episode 4: Blood Diamonds, Picassos, and Illicit Financing in Africa

Diamonds are an excellent way to smuggle and launder money - they're very liquid, can't be sniffed out by dogs, don't set off metal detectors, and are easy to conceal. Similarly, illicit funds can be laundered and stored by investing in artwork. These luxury items link Hezbollah headquarters in Beirut to the blood diamond trade in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, art galleries in Côte d'Ivoire, and illicit business activities in South Africa.

Correction: Iman Kobeissi was arrested in a DEA sting operation, not during the course of an FBI investigation. [Please see here for the 2015 DOJ press release \(https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/two-hezbollah-associates-arrested-charges-conspiring-launder-narcotics-proceeds-and\)](https://www.justice.gov/usao-edny/pr/two-hezbollah-associates-arrested-charges-conspiring-launder-narcotics-proceeds-and).

[Download a transcript of this episode. \(/media/6872\)](/media/6872)

Guest

Joseph Palazzo is the Deputy Chief of the Special Financial Investigations Unit within the U.S. Department of Justice's Money Laundering and Asset Recovery Section (MLARS).

Show Notes

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

In 2017, two Hezbollah operatives were arrested on the same day for conducting independent surveillance operations on U.S. targets across the country. A third was arrested in July 2019 for taking pictures of a number of high-profile U.S. landmarks and communicating this information back to Beirut through his Hezbollah handlers. These three cases received a lot of media attention. A fourth didn't, despite one operative's efforts to stockpile bomb-making materials...in Houston, Texas.

[Download a transcript of this episode.](/media/6917) (/media/6917)

Guests

Russell Rosenthal served in the Federal Bureau of Investigation for over twenty-five years, most recently as the unit chief responsible for Asian Operations in the International Operations Division. From 2019 to 2022, he served as the FBI Legal Attaché and senior representative to Israel. Rosenthal was most recently Vice President of Security and Law Enforcement at the Anti-Defamation League. In this role, he led ADL's efforts to enhance partnerships and engagement with federal, state and local law enforcement across the country, and additionally oversaw the security of ADL staff and physical offices.

Seamus Hughes is a senior research faculty member at University of Nebraska Omaha's National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center (NCITE). He is an expert on terrorism, homegrown violent extremism, and countering violent extremism (CVE). Hughes has authored numerous academic reports on extremism in America and published a critically acclaimed book, *Homegrown: ISIS in America* (<https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/homegrown-9781788314855/>). Hughes previously worked at the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), serving as a lead staffer on U.S. government efforts to implement a national terrorism prevention strategy. Prior to NCTC, Hughes served as the Senior Counterterrorism Advisor for the U.S. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee.

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Episode 7: Operations and Illicit Finance in the Gulf

Two Hezbollah financiers based in Qatar secretly raised tens of millions of dollars for Hezbollah through banks and cash couriers. The operatives leveraged family connections and utilized a complex web of bank accounts and real estate projects across several Gulf countries to funnel large sums of money back to Lebanon. Hezbollah has a long history of carrying out attacks in the Gulf, but it also sees the region as a lucrative place for raising illicit funds to finance the group. Gulf states have taken notice, and more recently taken action targeting Hezbollah financing in the region.

[Download a transcript of this episode. \(/media/6959\)](#)

Guests

Ambassador Nathan Sales served as Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the U.S. Department of State from 2017-2021. In this position, he led diplomatic engagements to persuade a dozen key partners in Europe and the Americas to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in its entirety. Concurrently, Ambassador Sales served as acting Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights. Formerly a tenured law professor, Ambassador Sales previously was Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy at the Department of Homeland Security. He also worked on counterterrorism policy in the Justice Department's Office of Legal Policy. Today, Ambassador Sales is the founder and principal of the consulting firm Fillmore Global Strategies, and a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

Marshall Billingslea served as the special presidential envoy for arms control at the U.S. Department of State, holding the rank of ambassador in 2020. In this capacity, he led arms control negotiations and worked with partners and allies in Europe and Asia on the development and deployment of defensive capabilities. Before joining the State Department, Billingslea served as the assistant secretary for terrorist financing at the U.S. Department of the Treasury, where he built international coalitions and led U.S. efforts to counter illicit financial activities around the globe. In 2018, he was selected as president of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF)—the global anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing body—and co-chaired the global Counter-ISIS Finance Group. Today, he is a senior fellow at Hudson Institute, focusing on illicit finance and arms control with the Kleptocracy Initiative.

Douglas London is a retired, decorated, 34-year veteran of the Central Intelligence Agency's Clandestine Service. London has served as Senior Operations Officer, Chief of Station and CIA's Counterterrorism Chief for South and Southwest Asia. He served primarily in the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Africa, with senior management positions for the Near East, Counterterrorism, Counterintelligence, Iran and Cyber operations. He is also a Non-resident fellow at the Middle East Institute, and is author of the book *The Recruiter: Spying and the Lost Art of American Intelligence* (https://www.amazon.com/Recruiter-Spying-Lost-American-Intelligence-ebook/dp/B08RYQZNPT/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=), concerning the CIA's post 9/11 transformation.

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- [Euro News \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdsjVYg85Ig\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdsjVYg85Ig)
- [Euro News \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoWSA-lG7RA\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JoWSA-lG7RA)

- [TRT World \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kjk_5s5bs\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_kjk_5s5bs)

Episode 8: Hezbollah Assassinations Unit 121

Hezbollah buys grassroots support in Lebanon where and when it can, but the group turns to intimidation and even murder when a vocal opponent can't be bought. Hezbollah's elite, highly-secretive Unit 121 is the group's death squad, which carries out assassinations of Lebanese politicians, military and law enforcement officers, and intellectuals who oppose the group's illicit activities. This is no rogue unit—officials say Unit 121 operates under the direct orders of senior Hezbollah leadership.

[Download a transcript of this episode. \(/media/6965\)](#)

Guests

Monika Borgmann is a German-Lebanese award-winning documentary filmmaker and Co-Director of UMAM Documentation and Research, a Lebanon-based nonprofit cultural organization that archives and publicizes documents, books, films, magazines, newspapers, and other material from Lebanese history. Borgmann directed documentary films *Tadmor* (2016) and *Massacre* (2005). She is the widow of Lebanese anti-Hezbollah activist and filmmaker Lokman Slim, who was assassinated in 2021.

Joby Warrick has been a reporter at the *Washington Post* since 1996. He has served with the Post's investigative and national security teams, and currently writes about the Middle East, terrorism, and weapons proliferation. He is the author of three nonfiction books, including his 2021 book *Red Line: The Unraveling of Syria and America's Race to Destroy the Most Dangerous Arsenal in the World* (https://www.amazon.com/Red-Line-Unraveling-Americas-Dangerous-ebook/dp/B083RZTNBF/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=), the 2016 Pulitzer Prize winning *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS, and The Triple Agent* (https://www.amazon.com/Black-Flags-Rise-Joby-Warrick-ebook/dp/B00RRT346E/ref=tmm_kin_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=).

David Schenker is the Taube Senior Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the [Linda and Tony Rubin Program on Arab Politics \(/node/15982\)](#). Confirmed by the Senate on June 5, 2019, he served as Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs through January 2021. From 2006-2019, Schenker was director of the Program on Arab Politics at The Washington Institute. From 2002 to 2006, Schenker served in the Office of the Secretary of Defense as Levant country director, the Pentagon's top policy aide on the Arab nations of the Levant. He is the author of the 2017 Institute study, *Beyond Islamists and Autocrats: Prospects for Political Reform Post Arab Spring* ([/node/2561](#)) and 2013 study *No Good Outcome: How Israel Could be Drawn into the Syrian Conflict* ([/node/4959](#)).

Show Notes

Reference Documents

- *Washington Post*: "Man convicted in 2005 assassination of former Lebanese prime minister was part of a Hezbollah hit squad, officials say" (https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/man-convicted-in-2005-assassination-of-former-lebanese-prime-minister-was-part-of-a-hezbollah-hit-squad-officials-say/2020/08/25/543cbf1a-e6e0-11ea-bc79-834454439a44_story.html)
- Special Tribunal for Lebanon: [Sentencing Judgment for Hassan Habib Merhi and Hussin Hassan Obeissi \(https://www.stl-tsl.org/crs/assets/Uploads/20220616-F0061-S2-PUBLIC-Sentencing-Judgment-EN-Web.pdf\)](#)
- *New York Times*: "Prominent Lebanese Critic of Hezbollah is Killed" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/04/world/middleeast/lokman-slim-killed-hezbollah.html>)
- Human Rights Watch: Lebanon: "Flawed Investigations of Politically-Sensitive Murders" (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/03/lebanon-flawed-investigations-politically-sensitive-murders>)

Lebanese Hezbollah Interactive Map

- [Rafik Hariri Assassinated \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=326\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=326)
- [Salim Ayyash and Four Others Indicted for Hariri Assassination \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1034\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1034)
- [Francois al-Hajj Assassinated \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1426\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1426)
- [Hezbollah Seizes Control of West Beirut \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=399\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=399)
- [New Zealand Designated Hezbollah's Military Wing as a Terrorist Organization \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=453\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=453)

- [Wissam al-Hassan Assassinated \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1425\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1425)
- [Mohamad Chatah Killed in VBIED Attack \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=537\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=537)
- [Hezbollah Critic Lokman Slim Found Shot Dead in Hezbollah-Controlled Southern City \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1431\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=1431)
- [Wissam Eid Assassinated \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=393\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/hezbollahinteractivemap/#id=393)

Relevant Reading

- Chapters 1 and 12 of *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/hezbollah-global-footprint-lebanons-party-god>) by Matthew Levitt
- ["Saad's Sad Goodbye: Hariri Leaves Lebanese Politics" \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saads-sad-goodbye-hariri-leaves-lebanese-politics\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/saads-sad-goodbye-hariri-leaves-lebanese-politics) by David Schenker
- ["The Lebanon Human Rights Report: Punting on Accountability?" \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-human-rights-report-punting-accountability\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/lebanon-human-rights-report-punting-accountability) by David Schenker
- [Middle East Matters, Episode One: "The Murder of Lokman Slim: Justice Delayed in Lebanon" \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-matters-episode-one-murder-lokman-slim-justice-delayed-lebanon\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/middle-east-matters-episode-one-murder-lokman-slim-justice-delayed-lebanon) by Hanin Ghaddar
- ["Trends in Iranian External Assassination, Surveillance, and Abduction Plots" \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/5386\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/5386) by Matthew Levitt

Audio Sources

- [Link TV \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy5NjSm6Eik\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wy5NjSm6Eik)
- [Al Jazeera \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SW8JFfr_E68&t=1s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SW8JFfr_E68&t=1s)
- [CBS \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6OG5bKQfa8&t=42s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6OG5bKQfa8&t=42s)
- [Euro News \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRVvCmw-c7g\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRVvCmw-c7g)
- [Al Jazeera \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJyPPvWkmJ4&t=384s\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WJyPPvWkmJ4&t=384s)
- [France 24 \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWL9Gl5-w1E\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWL9Gl5-w1E)
- [Al Jazeera \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBMi4xPNKfY\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WBMi4xPNKfY)



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