

Don't Forget, or Deny, Hezbollah's Brutal Crimes

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The anniversary of two deadly attacks is a sobering reminder that the group continues to engage in terrorist plots and criminal fundraising around the world while unabashedly denying the mountains of evidence against it.

For the victims of Hezbollah terrorism, this week is a painful one. While the world was focused on horrifying attacks in France, Germany and across the Middle East, a grim anniversary on July 18th went little noticed.

In 1994, Hezbollah carried out the suicide truck bombing of the AMIA Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, killing 85 and wounding 300 people. Eighteen years later, the group struck again, this time blowing up a busload of Israeli tourists at the airport in Burgas, Bulgaria, killing seven and wounding 32 others. Despite overwhelming evidence, Hezbollah has denied responsibility for these (and many other) attacks. It is a common tactic employed by the group: engage in acts of terrorism and militancy, and then deny involvement no matter what the evidence hoping people will eventually believe you. But few do.

It took many years, but Argentinean investigators ultimately released a series of reports documenting Iran and Hezbollah's roles in the AMIA bombing in excruciating detail. And in the wake of the Burgas bombing, the EU designated the military and terrorist wings of Hezbollah as terrorist entities. This week, the Bulgarian government announced the public indictment (in absentia) of two of the accused Hezbollah attackers, Meliad Farah, an Australian, and Hassan El Hajj Hassan, a Canadian, both of Lebanese origin and now believed to be in Lebanon.

We've seen this pattern before. In 2009, Hezbollah was under pressure from the international community, via accusations of terrorism worldwide and political assassinations in Lebanon. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah denounced the international initiatives, insinuating that these accusations were Israeli machinations. Nasrallah claimed that Israelis were "working to make the whole international community against Hezbollah...to present Hezbollah as a terrorist group according to the international community and all world states."

Now, as then, Hezbollah denies, in the face of all evidence, responsibility for crimes we know it has committed around the world. Consider a few examples:

Despite growing suspicion of Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah denied the accusations in early 2011, assuring that it had no "military role in Arab countries." Yet over time, Hezbollah increasingly struggled to conceal its on-the-ground support of the Assad regime. Most funerals for those killed in the fighting were quiet affairs, as Hezbollah tried to keep a lid on the extent of its activities in Syria, but news began to leak. In August 2012, two funerals were held for Hezbollah military commanders. According to Hezbollah newspapers, each had "died while performing his jihadi duty" in Syria. U.S. officials informed the UN Security Council in October 2012, "the truth is plain to see: Nasrallah's fighters are now part of Assad's killing machine." Two months later, a UN report confirmed Hezbollah members were in Syria fighting on behalf of the Assad government.

In February 2016, the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) implicated Hezbollah in a multi-million-dollar drug trafficking and money laundering network that spanned four continents. According to the DEA report, Hezbollah had relationships with South American drug cartels in a cocaine-smuggling network to Europe and the U.S. The proceeds funded a money laundering scheme known as the Black Market Peso Exchange and provided Hezbollah with "a revenue and weapons stream."

The investigation's implication of Hezbollah was met with the usual dismissal. "The criminal regimes are falsely accusing Hezbollah of corruption and money laundering in order to destabilize the party," Nasrallah said in May.

Beyond Syria and transnational crime, Hezbollah continues to engage in -- and deny any connection to -- terrorist plots around the globe. Peruvian counterterrorism police arrested Mohammed Amadar, a Hezbollah operative, in late 2014. When Amadar was arrested, police found traces of TNT, detonators, and chemicals used to manufacture explosives in and around his Lima home. Intelligence indicated Amadar's targets included places associated with Israelis and Jews in Peru. Hezbollah-linked Al-Manar news derided the case as "another Mossad manoeuvre against Hezbollah," saying that Amadar's confession was coerced.

In June 2015, Cypriot officials indicted Hussein Bassam Abdallah, a dual Lebanese-Canadian citizen. Abdallah pled guilty to all eight charges against him -- including participation in a terrorist group (read: Hezbollah), possessing explosives (8.2 tons of ammonium nitrate), and conspiracy to commit a crime. It was the second time in three years that a Cypriot court had sentenced a Hezbollah operative to prison for plotting an attack in Cyprus. Once again, Hezbollah denied involvement.

Meanwhile, Hezbollah's support for terrorist groups in the Gulf region also continues unabated. In January, Bahraini authorities detained six members of a Hezbollah-linked terror cell blamed for the July 2015 explosion outside of a girls' school in Sitra that killed two people. In February, the Yemeni government asserted evidence of "Hezbollah fighting alongside [Houthis] in attacks on Saudi Arabia's border." It should therefore not surprise that the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization for committing hostile acts within GCC member states' borders. The Arab League and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation followed suit within weeks.

Hezbollah's response? To deny the accusations and accuse the Saudis in turn of trying to "silence" Hezbollah because of its refusal to "be silent on the crimes the Saudis are committing in Yemen and elsewhere."

Contrary to its denials, Hezbollah continues to engage in illicit activities around the world. This week, as we mark the anniversary of two of Hezbollah's most spectacular attacks on opposite sides of the globe -- from Bulgaria to Argentina -- it is high time to call spade a spade: Hezbollah is a social and political movement in Lebanon, but engages in terrorist, military, criminal activities there, and around the world. Its legitimate activities in Lebanon should not be a free pass for its illegitimate conduct.

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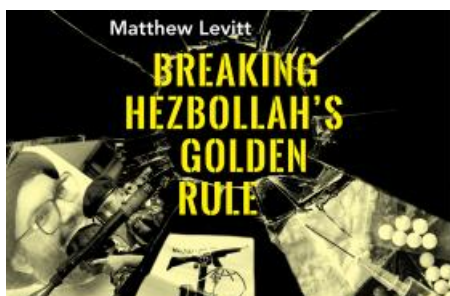
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