

# Israel vs. Hezbollah, Spy vs. Spy

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

Jan 19, 2015

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

---

## **New airstrikes are only the latest chapter in the ongoing intelligence war between Israel and Hezbollah, and financial information gained in U.S. undercover operations may be playing a role as well.**

**S**unday, Israeli airstrikes targeted a convoy of Hezbollah vehicles, killing several senior operatives, reportedly including Jihad Mughniyeh, the son of late Hezbollah terrorist leader Imad Mughniyeh. Whether Jihad was the intended target or not is already a matter of debate, but the collection of the kind of timely and actionable intelligence that identified the convoy offers a glimpse into the spy-vs-spy war being fought between Israel and Hezbollah every day.

The airstrikes overshadowed another recently revealed chapter in this intelligence war. Hezbollah -- the group that declared "divine victory" over Israel in the July 2006 war -- now admits that enemy spies have penetrated the inner core of the group's decision making circles. Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah himself addressed it in a recent interview, conceding that "infiltrations are part of the war between us and Israel and part of the battle's losses, and we must expect things of this kind." Indeed, this is just the latest chapter in a spy-vs-spy saga straight out of an espionage paperback.

On Jan. 5, Hezbollah's deputy chief Naim Qassem lauded the ability of a group as "big and sophisticated" as Hezbollah "to stand with the same steadfastness despite some major infiltrations." Media outlets identified the latest accused spy as Mohammad Shorbah, but as Qassem implied, this was not the first such "major infiltration," nor is it likely to be the last.

But Israel doesn't always come out on top in this intelligence war. Hezbollah is no slouch when it comes to espionage and counter-intelligence, the result of training its operatives receive from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security, and Hezbollah has enjoyed its share of successes against Israeli and Western security agencies. In late 2000, a retired Israeli colonel named Elhanan Tannenbaum established a shady business relationship with Qais Obeid, a Palestinian criminal with ties to Hezbollah. Tannenbaum was lured first to Brussels, then the United Arab

Emirates, where he was kidnapped and smuggled to Lebanon.

"I inform you gladly," Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah announced at a Beirut conference, that Hezbollah now held an Israeli Army officer with ties to Israeli security agencies who was captured "in a new qualitative achievement and in a complicated security operation." Tannenbaum's kidnapping was an intelligence bonanza for Hezbollah. After three years, Tannenbaum and the bodies of three soldiers were exchanged for 435 prisoners in Israeli jails.

In fact, Hezbollah's intelligence prowess dates back much earlier, and has targeted not only Israeli but also American intelligence services. In the mid-1990s, U.S. authorities investigating a local Hezbollah cell in New York quietly flew to South America on a lead. As soon as they landed they were paged by the New York field office. Photographs of the agents disembarking had just arrived on the office's fax machine in New York. More recently, in June of 2011, Nasrallah claimed that Hezbollah had identified at least two CIA spies within the group's ranks. "No one underestimates [Hezbollah's] capabilities," said one U.S. official at the time.

Nevertheless, the litany of failed Hezbollah operations over the past few years suggests Hezbollah's covert operational prowess has diminished. Public slip-ups included plots in Azerbaijan, India, Thailand and Egypt. Hezbollah agents were picked up by local authorities in Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Nigeria and Thailand and are now convicted felons serving jail time. More Hezbollah plots were thwarted this past year in Thailand and Peru -- to cite just some of the recently foiled Hezbollah operations. Hezbollah's only success was the 2012 bombing of a tour bus in Burgas, Bulgaria.

But Hezbollah's botched operations pale in comparison to the single greatest intelligence failure in Hezbollah's history: The assassination of Imad Mughniyeh. The head of Hezbollah's terrorist wing, Mughniyeh was killed by a bomb that exploded as he got into his car in Damascus in February 2008. Though they later determined the Israelis were responsible for the bombing, both Hezbollah and Iranian officials were initially unsure who to blame. Suspicion even fell on their mercurial allies, the Syrians, according to U.S. diplomatic reporting. Syrian security agencies, meanwhile, were blaming each other for the failure to protect such a high-value target from an assassination plot in their capital.

Even once Hezbollah settled on Israel as the likely culprit, the group remained unsure who exactly carried out the operation and, perhaps more importantly, how they found him. But Hezbollah counter-intelligence officials came up with a theory: maybe someone followed the money. In the course of an FBI undercover investigation, Hezbollah operatives told undercover agents and confidential sources about a Hezbollah campaign to steal money around the world that would make its way first to Iran and then to Mughniyeh's terrorist slush fund in Lebanon. Maybe, Hezbollah speculated, someone followed the money trail straight to Mughniyeh. Similar speculation is sure to follow Sunday's airstrikes and the loss of key personnel, including Jihad Mughniyeh.

Fast forward almost seven years. Mohammad Shorbah was reportedly a high-ranking official within Hezbollah, making him a unique, high-value Israeli asset. Hezbollah has insinuated that Shorbah was the informant who informed Israel of several of Hezbollah's recently foiled plots, though in his interview, Nasrallah assured viewers that, "the issue has been greatly exaggerated." However highly placed Shorbah may have been within Hezbollah's covert apparatus, it is highly unlikely that these and other plots were thwarted by any one intelligence stream. Indeed, Shorbah was caught long before Sunday's airstrikes.

Mughniyeh Sr. was killed in 2008, and Mughniyeh Jr. in 2015; Shorbah was arrested in 2014. Individual battles are won and lost, but the spy-vs-spy intelligence war between Hezbollah and Israel continues. Both sides see themselves as battling for survival, which means the espionage war is likely to continue at full force. In the words of espionage novelist John Le Carre, "Survival...is an infinite capacity for suspicion" -- and there's no shortage of suspicion between Israel and Hezbollah.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute, and author of [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God](#)

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god>. ❖

National Post

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



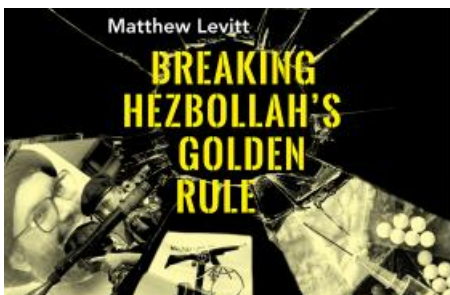
BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022

◆  
Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

### [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

## TOPICS

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

## REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)

Lebanon (/policy-analysis/lebanon)