

Closing the Gaps on Hezbollah's Global Operations

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The group's large-scale criminal enterprises make it particularly vulnerable to measures such as Congress's recently introduced Hezbollah International Financing Act of 2014.

Twenty-nine years ago this week, a traumatic yet formative event occurred that prompted a major change in U.S. policy on terrorism. On June 14, 1985, two Hezbollah hijackers took over TWA Flight 847 just after it took off from Athens en route to Rome. Over the course of 17 days, a short flight turned into a terrifying 8,500 mile journey around the Mediterranean that led to the murder of U.S. Navy diver Robert Stethem.

The flight bounced back and forth between Algiers and Beirut, where the two original hijackers, Mohammed Ali Hamadi and Hassan Izz al-Din, were joined by other armed militants including the famed Hezbollah terrorist Imad Mughniyeh. The passengers were moved to safe houses around Beirut, further increasing the severity of the Lebanon hostage crisis that was already underway in Lebanon. Ultimately, 39 hostages were freed on June 29 and sent to Damascus. That November, the hijackers were indicted by an American court on 15 different counts, though this would not deter them from further activity. Izz al-Din was later linked to the 1988 hijacking of Kuwait Air Flight 422 from Bangkok, and Hamadi was arrested in West Germany in 1987 after attempting to carry liquid explosives onto a plane departing from Frankfurt.

Hezbollah's hijacking of TWA 847 was not the first time it targeted U.S. interests abroad. Over 18 months from 1983 to 1984, the group carried out a series of bombings targeting the U.S. embassy and U.S. Marines stationed in Beirut as peacekeepers. Indeed, the October 1983 Marine Barracks bombing would serve as an inspiration for Osama bin Laden. Now, following the Beirut bombings and in the aftermath of the TWA 847 hijacking, the U.S. was prompted to create its first interagency institution to aggressively pursue and thwart terrorism.

In 1986, the CIA Counterterrorism Center (CTC) was born, bringing together intelligence analysts and operations officers together for the first time. Hezbollah's capabilities increased over time, expanding well outside of the Levant. Assassinations and large scale bombings occurred around the world, not just in the Lebanon and the Middle East,

but Europe, Asia and Latin America as well. Less than two years ago, Hezbollah demonstrated its international capabilities in a bus-bombing in Bulgaria -- the first successful attack after a long series of failed plots that spanned the globe. Today though, Hezbollah's attention has circled back to the Levant as it has come to the defense of the Bashar Assad regime in Syria. Sporadic international plots continue -- most recently, two Hezbollah members were arrested in Thailand in April for plotting to carry out an attack -- but Hezbollah's involvement in Syria is so intensive that it is taking up a majority of the organization's resources and time.

Today, with Hezbollah active around the world and especially in Syria, understanding Hezbollah and contending with its activities is critically necessary. And yet, The Washington Post reports that the intelligence community still has about 50 "counterterrorism gaps" or "blind spots" -- several of which concern Hezbollah. But there is some good news.

Since 9/11, one of our most successful counterterrorism tools has been cracking down on illicit finance with targeted sanctions. Hezbollah is especially vulnerable to financial sanctions as it engages in a wide range of illicit activity that supplements the funding it receives from its longtime patron and strategic partner, Iran. These activities -- which include counterfeit currencies, money laundering, and narcotics trafficking, as well as a host of other criminal activities such as selling counterfeit Viagra, stolen PlayStations, and even watered-down baby formula -- expose Hezbollah to law enforcement scrutiny and present opportunities to expose the group for the criminal enterprise it has become.

While the U.S. Treasury Department already targets Hezbollah's abuses of the U.S. financial system, the Hezbollah International Financing Act of 2014 introduced in the House in April and the Senate in May would place one of the world's most capable terrorist organizations under further scrutiny. In addition to targeting Hezbollah's diverse financial network, the act also requires the government to report on Hezbollah's global logistics networks, its drug smuggling activities, and its transnational organized criminal enterprises. Much of this reporting would be made available to the public, injecting information into the public domain and allowing policymakers to be in a better position to craft policy. By requiring such reporting, Congress seeks to close some of the existing intelligence gaps regarding Hezbollah and empower the United States to work still more closely with allies around the world to counter one of the world's most formidable terrorist organizations. Given Hezbollah's destabilizing role in current events, such an effort is very timely indeed.

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) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god>) (2013). ❖

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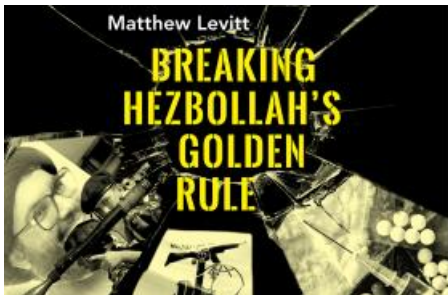
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