

If You Don't Understand Our Commitment to Iran, You Don't Understand Hezbollah

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

Lee Smith interviews Washington Institute fellow Matthew Levitt on Hezbollah's internal workings and international reach.

Six years ago Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyeh was assassinated when the headrest in his car was detonated in Damascus. While Israeli intelligence neither denies nor confirms its involvement, the Mossad is generally believed to have been responsible for his death. And yet there is no shortage of Western as well as Arab intelligence services that wanted Mughniyeh dead -- including the CIA, whose station chief William Buckley Hezbollah abducted, tortured and killed in 1985. Moreover, Mughniyeh was responsible for the April 1983 bombing of the American embassy in Beirut that killed 17 Americans, and the Marines barracks bombing in October of that year that killed 244 American marines, sailors, soldiers and airmen. As founder and director of Hezbollah's terrorism apparatus, Mughniyeh left a long wake of blood across the world. And even six years after his death, Mughniyeh's legacy of terror lives on, as Hezbollah has recently plotted operations on several continents, including Europe, Asia and Africa.

To get a better sense of Hezbollah's capabilities and goals, I spoke with Matthew Levitt, a former Treasury Department official and now the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and Director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Levitt, who spoke on Hezbollah in a panel sponsored earlier this week by the Israel Project, is the author of the recently published *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>), the most thorough account of the organization's campaign of international terrorism.

Why focus on Hezbollah's activities abroad rather than in Lebanon, where it serves as an eastern Mediterranean outpost of the Islamic Republic of Iran?

There's a gaping hole in our knowledge of Hezbollah's criminal and terror activities around the world. Lots of people think it is a terror group that did lots of bad things a long time ago, like the Beirut bombings of the US embassy and

the Marine Barracks; or its bombings of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires 1992 and then the bombing of the Jewish community Center there in 1994; Bangkok bombing in 1994, attempted assassination on the emir of Kuwait in May 1985. People believe these were sporadic things, efforts by rogue individuals, or past events and now Hezbollah is primarily a Lebanese political party.

I started the book because there was nothing on this and there was a need for it. There was no serious conversation on this issue, and I wanted to spark debate. Some of the scholars who work on Hezbollah have not focused on this issue, and they are going to need to take close look at it. It's not meant to be a polemic, I just went out finding what evidence there was -- it took nine years on and off to finish.

But it was a fun project to research. I did interviews with people who came through Washington, where I live and work, but I did a lot of travel for it around the world. Of course there's a lot from American sources, and Canadians, Aussies, Israelis, the Brits, the French and Western Europeans. But I also have tremendous information from the Chileans, Jordanians, Romanians. I was warned that the evidence I was looking for was not only not Google-able, but it was also, as many insisted, not doable. Frankly, I was surprised at how much I was able to uncover.

What surprised you most in your research?

The extent of Hezbollah's reach was surprising to me, but the biggest surprise was the extent of Hezbollah's activities Southeast Asia. I knew about the 1994 the failed attempt to bomb the Israeli embassy in Bangkok, but I learned there are two different southeast Asian networks engaged in logistics and operations in the region (Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Australia) that also aimed to infiltrate operatives into Israel to carry out surveillance and/or operations. One Malaysian operative made his way into Israel undetected twice within one year. I was able to put the story together not just from the Aussies, Americans and Israelis, but also the Filipinos and Singaporeans as well. Most telling was the joint operation, code named "Co-plan Pink Poppy" that followed the disruption of the 1994 Bangkok plot and involved multiple intelligence agencies from around the world. Together, they exposed an alarmingly entrenched and well-developed Hezbollah network across the region.

There is also the extent of Hezbollah's involvement with organized crime, including counterfeit currency and document fraud, fencing stolen items from cellphones to automobiles, and transporting and laundering the proceeds of narcotics And of course its ongoing and ever-present ideological and operational links to Iran.

And yet some Hezbollah experts continue to play down the outfit's relationship to Iran.

The idea of exporting the revolution has never gone away -- for Hezbollah this is part of its reason for being. They believe that if you don't appreciate our commitment to wilayet al-faqih [ed., the theological concept of guardianship of the jurist that undergirds the clerical regime and Hezbollah] then you don't understand us. As one Hezbollah parliamentarian explained, if the Iranians told him to divorce his wife he would.

Or we can ask, why is Hezbollah targeting Israeli tourists, for instance, in Cyprus and Bulgaria, where it killed 5 Israelis in the summer of 2012? It has little to do with Lebanon -- a large part of it is because Iran said so. I don't think Hezbollah is losing sleep over the prospects of the Iranians making a grand bargain with the White House that would throw Hezbollah under the bus.

Richard Armitage famously called Hezbollah the A-team of international terrorism. Where do you rate them in relation to al Qaeda?

I never liked the term "A-team" because it trivialized it. Al Qaeda and its affiliates are capable and dangerous. However, Hezbollah has far better operational security and counterintelligence capabilities. Because of its relationship with Iran, because it can access things like Iranian diplomatic switchboards for secure communications as it apparently did in Argentina, it has capabilities that others don't. Al Qaeda is more nihilistic, while Hezbollah has

several goals -- primarily exporting the Islamic revolution.

What's changed for Hezbollah since the death of Mughniyeh? What about his ostensible replacement, his cousin Mustafa Badreddine, now on trial in The Hague in absentia for the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri?

Badreddine does not have the same street cred as Mughniyeh, but he is considered extremely dangerous. According to a Hezbollah member interrogated by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service, Badreddine is "more dangerous" than Mughniyeh, who was "his teacher in terrorism." Remember, Badreddine not only reportedly planned and executed the Marine Barracks bombing together with Mughniyeh, but was then jailed by Kuwaiti authorities for his role in a series of bombings there as well.

Hezbollah's greatest challenge today comes not from Israel to the south but from Syrian rebels -- both moderates and extremists alike. Hezbollah's status as the standard-bearer of the "resistance" has been severely undermined, both at home and abroad. Lebanon's Party of God is no longer a pure "Islamic resistance" fighting Israel but a sectarian militia and Iranian proxy doing the bidding of Bashar al-Assad and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. It's not Israel that is bombing Hezbollah strongholds in Beirut's southern suburbs or the Beqa Valley, but Sunni rebel groups.

Hezbollah is not down and out, but you don't have to be a cartographer to see that the road to Jerusalem does not go through Damascus. With their patron in Damascus on the ropes, Hezbollah has gone all in, and taken serious losses in a short period of time. This has huge ramifications for their standing in Lebanon. As this conflict becomes more sectarian, will the Shia in Lebanon forgive Hezbollah and support it by default because of the sectarian nature of the war? Or how will Hezbollah come out of it? ❖

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