

Hezbollah Ready to Do Whatever Iran Asks in Support of 'Shadow War with the West'

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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.

Stewart Bell interviews the director of the Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence regarding Hezbollah's international activities and alliance with Iran.

On Oct 23, 1983, Hezbollah introduced itself to the world with twin bombings that killed 241 American and 58 French peacekeepers in Beirut. Thirty years later, Hezbollah has thousands of fighters in Syria propping up the Assad regime, tens of thousands of rockets aimed at Israel and a global network of terrorist operatives. In his new book, *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>), former U.S. counterterrorism official Matthew Levitt examines how Hezbollah's operatives around the world raise money, buy equipment and commit terror. Before lecturing in Toronto on Thursday night, he spoke to *National Post* reporter Stewart Bell. His comments have been edited for length and clarity.

Your book focuses on Hezbollah's international operations. Why?

The book is intended to fill the gap in the literature about one of the key aspects of Hezbollah. We all have multiple identities. Hezbollah certainly does too. One critical part of that identity was simply absent from the discussion.

How active is Hezbollah around the world?

It certainly is the case that, now, Hezbollah is more involved in things abroad than they have been since the late 1980s.

What are Hezbollah's goals overseas?

The first is to avenge [assassinated Hezbollah military commander Imad] Mugniyah's death, targeting current or former senior Israeli officials. And the second, starting in early 2010 at the tasking of Iran, to assassinate Israeli tourists around the world as part of Iran's shadow war with the West. And now, on top of that of course, everything they're doing in Syria.

What did you learn about Hezbollah's transnational network?

There are a variety of interesting themes that come out of this. One is -- not always by any stretch of the imagination, but much, much more frequently than I thought -- some type of nexus back to North America, either to the United States or to Canada. Time and time again.

What is Hezbollah's relationship with Iran?

Iran helped create Hezbollah out of a motley crew of Shi'ite militant groups and brought them under this umbrella of Hezbollah, the Party of God...And while that relationship has varied and shifted over time, it has always been intimate. It's based on a shared ideology and theology...and now the U.S. intelligence community assesses that the Hezbollah relationship is a strategic partnership with Iran as the primary partner.

Hezbollah is being blamed for the July 2012 bombing in Bulgaria that targeted Israeli tourists, as well as a number of other failed plots. Why are they doing this?

Without meaning to be simplistic, because it's not simplistic, but at its core fundamentals the reason Hezbollah is willing to target Israeli tourists around the world, the reason they're doing these things is because Iran asked them to.

You write about Hezbollah's vast organized crime network. If Hezbollah is financed by Iran, why does it need to smuggle drugs?

Twice Iran has had to suddenly, with no prior notice, cut back Hezbollah's financing, in at least one of those instances by as much as 30-40%. This hurts. It did signal to Hezbollah that they needed to diversify their financial portfolio beyond the estimated -- and it fluctuates -- \$200 million that they get from Iran.

What are the consequences of Hezbollah's decision to fight on Assad's side in Syria?

I really think this is a critical turning point for Hezbollah, in terms of the challenge it presents them at home. Hezbollah spends a lot of time saying that it is a resistance organization. It's not terrorist. It's not even freedom fighters. It's resistance, which is an honorable term in their lexicon. But who are they resisting now? They're not resisting Israelis or Zionists or Jews. They're resisting fellow Muslims.

The RCMP says Hezbollah uses Canada mostly as a base for fundraising and procurement. Do you agree?

That's very true and it's not just Canada, it's North America in general, though they've focused a little bit more on procurement here than in the United States. I think North America is seen -- and not only by Hezbollah -- primarily as a cash cow.

Has Hezbollah also looked at targets in Canada?

Hezbollah has done surveillance in North America, both in Canada and the United States.

One of the suspects wanted for last year's bus bombing in Bulgaria is a Lebanese-Canadian, Hassan Hajj Hassan. Is Hezbollah deliberately recruiting Western passport holders?

They're very, very good and focused on recruiting people who are dual nationals, foreign nationals, foreign passport holders, people who have Western complexions, can pass as Westerners, people who have language skills...It's obvious why they're looking for these things: ease of movement and less visa restrictions and things like that, and sometimes it's for operations, in Bulgaria, for example. ❖

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