

Hezbollah Terrorists May Be Out of a Safe Haven

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If the group's standing in Lebanon continues to implode, the country might cease to be the comfortable home for Hezbollah fugitives it has been for decades.

Twenty-one years ago this week, just a few minutes short of 11 p.m. on September 17, 1992, Hezbollah and Iranian operatives opened fire with some 30 gunshots at a Berlin restaurant, brutally ending what had been a quiet dinner. A German court would later determine that Abdolrahman Banihashemi and Abbas Rhayel carried out the assassination plot at Iran's behest, killing three members of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, the largest Iranian-Kurdish opposition to the regime in Tehran. The two gunslingers were assisted by other Hezbollah members, including Kazem Darabi, "the boss of Hezbollah in Berlin." Darabi and Rhayel were given life sentences, but were released in a 2007 prisoner exchange. Youseff Amin, another co-conspirator, and Mohammad Atris, a document forger who assisted the attackers, were given terms of eleven years and about five years, respectively. Banihashemi, on the other hand, fled the country and made his way back to Iran where he was rewarded with a Mercedes 230 and profitable businesses for his role in the successful operation. Unfortunately, his case is more the rule than the exception.

Truth be told, cases in which Hezbollah operatives have been captured and imprisoned for their crimes are far and few between. Recently, law enforcement and intelligence successes have yielded a series of Hezbollah arrests (Hezbollah operatives are now standing trial in Nigeria and Thailand) and one conviction (Hussam Yacoub was sentenced to 4 years in prison by a Cypriot court). But even discounting the many Hezbollah operatives never even to be indicted for their crimes, there is a disturbing number of wanted Hezbollah fugitives -- like Banihashem -- who continue to evade justice.

More often than not, wanted Hezbollah operatives evade capture by fleeing to Iran or just staying in Lebanon. That appears to be the case now with Hassan El Hajj Hassan and Meliad Farah, the two surviving members of the terrorist squad that perpetrated a deadly attack on Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, in July 2012 and who were both

recently added to the list of the FBI's most wanted terrorists. Both reportedly escaped back to Lebanon after the bus bombing in Bulgaria last summer and are allegedly hiding in Southern Lebanon. Bulgarian authorities recently announced their plans to try these fugitives next year, in absentia if necessary.

If recent history is any indicator, finding and arresting the Burgas bombers so they can stand trial in person will prove difficult. Four Hezbollah members believed to be hiding in Lebanon are wanted by the U.N.'s Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), where they have been indicted on charges of carrying out the assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. The most prominent of the four wanted individuals, Mustafa Badreddine, has apparently not allowed his status as an international fugitive to hinder his activities. Following the 2008 assassination of Imad Mughniyah -- himself wanted by Interpol before his demise -- Baddreddine was promoted to the top militant commander in Hezbollah. In this capacity, the U.S. Treasury revealed, he is believed to be providing support to Hezbollah's "terrorist activities in the Middle East and around the world." The STL plans to try the four defendants, whether or not they are in the country.

In 2009 Argentina issued an arrest warrant for Lebanese-Colombian dual-national Samuel El-Reda. Described by Argentinean authorities as "the coordinator of [Hezbollah] sleeper cells" in Buenos Aires and the Tri-Border Area in South America in the period leading up to the 1994 bombing of the AMIA Jewish community center, El-Reda is also believed to be evading capture by hiding in Lebanon.

Ahmed al-Mughassil and Hussein Mohamed al-Nasser are wanted for the 1996 bombing of the Khobar Towers military complex in Saudi Arabia that killed 19 US Air Force personnel, wounded 372 other Americans as well as killing an unknown number of Saudi citizens who were unfortunate to be in the vicinity of the complex. Al-Mughassil and al-Nasser are believed to be in Iran.

There are some rare exceptions, however, including one in which the FBI penetrated a Hezbollah criminal enterprise with nodes in North America and Europe that was raising (dirty) money and procuring weapons for the group's operatives in Lebanon. A sophisticated FBI dragnet -- a story right out of Hollywood -- led to the arrest of several senior operatives who ventured out of Lebanon. Others, including one Hezbollah operative nicknamed "Mr. Lebanon" for his refusal to venture beyond Lebanon's borders, within which he knows he is safe from capture or arrest, remain fugitives. This investigation led to the November 2009 arrest of Dani Tarraf, a German-Lebanese arms procurement agent for Hezbollah who maintained homes in Lebanon and Slovakia and had significant business interests in China and Lebanon. A few months later, in June 2010, another Hezbollah operative tied to this case, Moussa Ali Hamdan, was taken into custody by Paraguayan officials in Asuncion. Hamdan escaped arrest by fleeing the United States for Lebanon, but calculated he could travel to the Paraguayan side of South America's Tri-Border area without risking arrest, given Hezbollah's strong presence in the area. But in February 2011 Hamdan was extradited to the US and made his first court appearance; in July 2013, he received an eleven-year sentence.

Mohammad Ali Hamadi is still wanted by U.S. authorities for his role in one of Hezbollah's earliest terrorist acts. In June, 1985, Hamadi and another Hezbollah operative hijacked TWA Flight 847. For fifteen days the story dominated headlines as the plane crisscrossed the Middle East, making Hezbollah a household name. Hamadi is believed to be the one who shot U.S. Navy diver Robert Stetham in the head and tossed his body onto the tarmac. That November, Hamadi was indicted by the U.S. government for his role in the hijacking and Stethem's murder. In 1987, German authorities arrested Hamadi at Frankfurt airport and found liquid explosives in his luggage. He was imprisoned in Germany until 2005, when he was released on parole and returned to Lebanon.

Today, Hezbollah is in deep trouble. The self-described "resistance" organization pledged to Israel's destruction is tied down in a brutal sectarian war in Syria where it is "resisting" fellow Muslims, including fellow Lebanese citizens. Hezbollah's role in the Syrian war has cost it tremendous grassroots and political support at home, where the sectarian fighting is bleeding across the border and risking renewed civil war. But Hezbollah is also suffering from a

series of arrests and prosecutions that are peeling away the organization's "resistance" facade and exposing the group as the terrorist network and criminal enterprise that it is. And if Hezbollah's standing in Lebanon continues to implode, perhaps in time the country might not be the comfortable and guaranteed safe-haven for Hezbollah fugitives it has been for decades.

Matthew Levitt directs The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and is 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>). ❖

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