

Book Launch: Hezbollah's Global Footprint

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Brief Analysis

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On September 3, 2013, Matthew Levitt and Frederic C. Hof addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Dr. Levitt is director of the Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and author of the new book [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hezbollah-the-global-footprint-of-lebanons-party-of-god\)](#). Ambassador Hof, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Council's Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, served most recently as a special advisor on Syria for the State Department. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

MATTHEW LEVITT

Hezbollah has multiple identities: it is simultaneously committed to the decrees of Iranian clerics, the Lebanese state, the Shiite community in Lebanon, and its fellow Shiites abroad. These identities often pull the group in different directions, making it operate in ways that are mutually exclusive. Consider, for example, why it would decide to stand with Iran on the Assad regime's side in Syria despite already facing so much pressure in Lebanon, where four Hezbollah members are under indictment for the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Suddenly, "the resistance" is fighting not Israelis, but Syrians; not Jews, but fellow Muslims.

One of these multiple identities involves targeting Western interests worldwide. This October marks the thirtieth anniversary of Hezbollah's

bombing of a U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut. That attack took place during an eighteen-month period in which the group carried out a series of strikes targeting Western interests in Lebanon, the Middle East, and Europe. Hezbollah later extended its attacks to the Western Hemisphere, including large-scale bombings against the Israeli embassy and the AMIA Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.

Much of what was relevant to the 1983 Beirut bombing remains relevant today. Hezbollah master terrorist Imad Mughniyah and his brother-in-law, Mustafa Badr al-Din, planned that attack, watched from a rooftop as it was carried out, and then fled to Iran. It was there that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps helped them organize and formally found the Islamic Jihad Organization, Hezbollah's covert operations wing, which al-Din has led since Mughniyah was assassinated in 2008.

By 1985, the CIA was filing intelligence report with titles like "Wild, Wild West Beirut," while the State Department was reporting a "spillover" of violence across the region. Seven bombings were conducted in Kuwait in 1983 alone. And when Kuwaiti authorities arrested al-Din and his fellow perpetrators, Hezbollah launched a long series of attacks around the world to secure his release, including an assassination attempt on the Kuwaiti emir in 1985. That same year, the group hijacked TWA Flight 847; one of the hijackers, Muhammad Ali Hamadi, was arrested two years later in the Frankfurt airport ferrying explosives to other operatives in Europe, illustrating the extent to which Hezbollah was operating in the West. In 1989, for example, German intelligence intercepted messages from Bassam Makki to his Hezbollah handlers in Lebanon. Although he was arrested at the time, he resumed operating abroad after his release, first in South America and later in Washington, D.C.

In February 2008, Mughniyah was assassinated in Damascus; both Hezbollah and Iran initially suspected that Syria was behind the move, but group leader Hassan Nasrallah instead called for "open war" against Israel. Thus began the first of several plots seeking to avenge Mughniyah by targeting a major Israeli figure. The first such plot was a failed 2008 attack in Azerbaijan. Similar efforts continue today around the world, in Nigeria, Egypt, Turkey, Georgia, India, Thailand, and elsewhere. Most recently, Hezbollah bombed a bus in Bulgaria in July 2012 and planned similar attacks in Cyprus. As Hossam Taleb Yaacoub, an operative convicted of conducting surveillance in Cyprus, nonchalantly stated during a deposition, "It was just collecting information about the Jews, and this is what my organization does all over the world."

Yet such plots are no longer solely for avenging Mughniyah. They are now conducted at the behest of Iran, as part of its shadow war with the West over the regime's nuclear program. The director of the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center and the director of national intelligence have called the Hezbollah-Iran relationship a "strategic partnership," with "Iran as the senior partner." Indeed, Hezbollah believes deeply in *velayat-e faqih*, the doctrine granting authority to Iran's Supreme Leader. This is crucial to understanding the group, both in a historical context and with regard to its "all-in" Syria policy.

Perhaps most important, Hezbollah has never faced significant consequences for its attacks against Western targets. This has led the group and Tehran to conclude that terrorism is not only effective, but also cost effective. They are still careful to act with plausible deniability in most cases, though, providing just enough cover for their operations so as to make retaliation politically difficult.

Should the United States decide to strike Syria following the recent chemical weapons attacks in Damascus, Hezbollah has multiple response options. If the strike is perceived as limited and merely punitive, the group's response would likely be limited. But if the attack is seen as undermining the Assad regime's stability, Hezbollah would bring its full range of capabilities to bear, including rocket attacks on Israel and further global operations. For now, the West is divided on Syria, and neither Hezbollah nor Iran wants to give it a reason to unite.

FREDERIC HOF

Dr. Levitt's new book is the first of its kind to focus specifically on Hezbollah's worldwide clandestine activities, which are largely criminal and terrorist in nature. It is a fascinating story whose intellectual foundations will satisfy specialists, and whose vivid prose will appeal to a more general readership.

One of the main services rendered by the book is to drive a stake through the notion that one can distinguish between Hezbollah's military and political wings, a concept clung to by various academicians, politicians, and commentators despite categorical denials by the group's own leaders. To be sure, Hezbollah does provide social services to its constituents, often acting as a state within a jurisdiction -- Lebanon -- that itself is barely a state. Yet as the book points out, "Hezbollah should be judged by the totality of its actions. It cannot be forgiven its criminal, terrorist, or militant pursuits simply because at the same time it also engages in political or humanitarian ones. Hezbollah's leaders often insist the group does not maintain support networks around the world, let alone carry out attacks abroad...But as the schemes and plots documented here demonstrate, Hezbollah can and has mobilized operatives for everything from criminal enterprises to terrorist attacks well beyond Lebanon's borders."

In 2006, a person who had developed close contacts with senior Hezbollah officials claimed that Imad Mughniyah was not well known to the group's current leadership, including Nasrallah. Yet this was quickly discredited in February 2008, when Nasrallah canonized Mughniyah as a martyr following his assassination. Indeed, no one should have any doubt about the murderous character of the organization's leadership cadre.

Hezbollah's top officials have one central mission: to safeguard the clerical regime in Iran through the posture they take in Lebanon and now in Syria. For example, the primary purpose of Hezbollah's missiles and rockets is to deter an Israeli attack on Iran and retaliate if such an attack takes place. Nasrallah is not an Iranian stooge or mere employee; he is a true believer. Although he yields to the mandates of Iran's Supreme

Leader -- as he did when he deployed an estimated 5,000 fighters to Syria -- he is also highly regarded by the powers-that-be in Tehran, who accord his views respect and weight. Indeed, Nasrallah has delivered, hijacking Lebanon for purposes that are not Lebanese. By placing a major part of his militia at the Assad regime's disposal, he has rejected the Beirut government's disassociation policy and all but seceded from the Lebanese state.

Currently, Hezbollah is helping the Assad regime consolidate western Syria, incorporating key cities and the Mediterranean coast. This large swath of territory is partly contiguous with the Hezbollah-dominated Beqa Valley in Lebanon. Although a formal redrawing of boundaries is unlikely, a de facto state may emerge from parts of eastern Lebanon and western Syria -- one in which the venal and incompetent Assad family may gradually give way to those who need Syria as a logistical bridge to Lebanon.

Of course, Iran's decision to deploy Hezbollah fighters to Syria carries great risk. Saving the compliant Assad regime, at least in a useful portion of Syria, is of vital importance to Tehran. Yet by committing Hezbollah to a fight that has become disturbingly sectarian in nature, Iran could undermine the modicum of Lebanese stability required to secure that country as a deterrent/retaliatory asset against Israel. Tehran and Hezbollah are therefore determined to win an outright military victory in Syria. As long as the nuclear issue and the specter of an Israeli attack persist, Iran's leaders will have no interest in facilitating the Syrian political transition envisioned in the June 2012 Geneva agreement.

Against this backdrop, the publication of a book detailing the scope and implications of Hezbollah's global reach can help observers understand the group's determined posture in Syria. Iran and its Lebanese militia are fully committed to binding the Syrian people to Tehran's strategic objectives in Lebanon and the region. In the event of a U.S. attack on Syria, Iran would use the group -- whose missiles are perpetually aimed at Israel -- to deter anything more than a punitive strike, just as it has done to avoid U.S. military retaliation in the past. For the Supreme Leader and other Iranian elites, keeping Hezbollah in the business of committing the international depredations so skillfully chronicled by Dr. Levitt is an objective of supreme importance.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Jonathan Prohov. ❖

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