

IGNORING THE WARNING LIGHTS ON HEZBOLLAH

THE CASE FOR A EUROPEAN BAN ON HEZBOLLAH

BY DR. MATTHEW LEVITT



by Dr. Matthew Levitt

Twenty-nine years ago, on October 23, 1983, Hezbollah blew up the U.S. Marines and French army barracks in Beirut, both compounds under the aegis of the Multinational Force sent to Lebanon as peacekeepers to oversee the evacuation of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) from Beirut. The barracks bombings left 241 Americans and 58 French dead, and came just six months after Hezbollah bombed the U.S. embassy, killing 63, including 17 Americans. Less than a year later, Hezbollah bombed the U.S. embassy annex in Beirut, killing 24.

Back then, the international community had little understanding of the growing threat of Iranian-inspired terrorism and did little to counter it. Today, the international community is painfully aware of Hezbollah's long history of terrorism, including its recent attempts to carry out attacks in Cyprus and Thailand, among other places, and its successful bombing in Burgas, Bulgaria. And yet, in Europe and elsewhere, still precious little is done to address the threat.

FBI forensic investigators determined that the Marine barracks bomb—composed of at least 18,000 pounds of explosives—was the single-largest non-nuclear explosion on earth since the Second World War. The bomb demolished the four-story barracks building, leaving behind a crater at least thirteen-feet deep and thirty-feet wide.

At the French Multinational Force building, on the same morning as the strike on the U.S. compound, the deaths of fifty-eight French paratroopers marked the highest toll the French military had endured since the Algerian war ended in 1962. The eight-story building where the paratroopers lived was literally upended by the blast. An investigation into the bombings would later reveal that the techniques used were identical to those employed six months earlier in the U.S. embassy bombing. The IJO, a cover name for Hezbollah, claimed responsibility for the attacks in calls to the press. Moreover, Hezbollah praised the bombings in its 1985 manifesto, describing the April 1983 American embassy bombing and the attacks on the Multinational Force barracks as “punishments.”

Terrorist mastermind Imad Mugniyah reportedly coordinated the 1983 Marine Barracks bombing plot together with his cousin and brother-in-law, Mustapha Badreddine. According to journalist Hala Jaber, the two Hezbollah operatives watched their plot unfold through binoculars from the rooftop of a nearby building. The operatives involved in the attack had monitored the U.S. Marine barracks for months, noting delivery times and routes, the Marines' late wake-up on Sunday mornings, and even the color of the delivery trucks. Delivered to Beirut a few days before the attack, the vehicle used in the U.S. barracks attack was fitted with explosives, likely at or near the shared Hezbollah-IRGC headquarters in the Beqa Valley.

A 1983 Department of Defense report on the October bombing revealed that U.S. forces in Lebanon were aware of the threat. The Multinational Force's intelligence support issued more than a hundred reports warning of terrorist bombing attacks between May and November 1983. From August 1983 to October 23, 1983, the MNF was inundated

with warnings. But while there was a lot of noise, the U.S. investigation concluded, the reports held no specific intelligence that could have successfully been acted upon to thwart the attack.

Two decades after the Marine barracks bombing, a civil suit brought against Iran by the family members of the soldiers killed and wounded in the attack proved beyond a reasonable doubt that the bombings were carried out with Syrian and Iranian oversight. According to the testimony of former U.S. military officials, two days after the bombing—on October 25, 1983—the chief of naval intelligence notified Adm. James Lyons, then deputy chief of naval operations, of an intercepted message from September 26, 1983, just a few weeks before the Barracks bombing. Sent from MOIS in Tehran to the Iranian Ambassador in Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi, the message instructed Mohtashemi to contact Husayn al-Musawi, the leader of Islamic Amal (a key precursor to Hezbollah) and to direct him to “take spectacular action against the United States Marines” and the multinational coalition in Lebanon. U.S. signals intelligence had caught Iranian officials instructing a Hezbollah leader to carry out an attack targeting U.S. Marines in Lebanon, but the information was not processed in time to prevent the attack.

Imad Mughniyeh was killed in a Damascus bombing in February 2008, but his partner-in-crime, Mustapha Badreddine, has taken over as chief of Hezbollah’s military and terrorist wing. Under his leadership, the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran has become a “strategic partnership,” according to senior US officials. Hezbollah is not only actively involved in the Assad’s regime’s brutal attacks on Syrian civilians, which threatens to spill over the border into Lebanon, it is also engaged in operational activity around the world, including recent terrorist plots foiled in Asia, Africa, and Europe. The increased terror activity led White House Counterterrorism advisor John Brennan to publicly chastise his European counterparts in a public speech in Dublin last week. “Failure to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization makes it harder to defend our countries and protect our citizens,” Brennan said, adding that absent a designation European law enforcement agencies are often unable to charge Hezbollah suspects with terrorism charges.

The warning lights are flashing today, much as they did back in 1983. But, unlike then, the immediate threat Hezbollah presents to international security is clear for all to see. And yet, the question persists: will the international community act—say, by designating Hezbollah a terrorist group in Europe—or sit idly by pretending the warning signs were never there.

Matthew Levitt directs the Counterterrorism Program at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and is the author of Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon’s Party of God (forthcoming 2013)

Related Reading

Hezbollah’s activity as a terrorist group is often thought to be limited to its war against Israel. This is a great mistake. From its killing of 58 French peace-keepers in 1983 to the current day, Hezbollah has repeatedly sought out, killed and been implicated in the killing of numerous European targets.

Read more of this HJS publication from September 2012 at www.henryjacksonsociety.org in our ‘Publications’ section.

First published in 2012 by The Henry Jackson Society

The Henry Jackson Society

© The Henry Jackson Society, 2012

All rights reserved

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and are not necessarily indicative of those of The Henry Jackson Society

