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## Hezbollah in Lebanon, Syria, and Beyond

Remarks by Amb. Frederic C. Hof on the occasion of the release of  
*Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* by Matthew Levitt

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First of all it's a great honor for me to be invited to say a few words in connection with the release of this very important new book. I had an advance copy to glance at over the past several days, and I must say that it is a fascinating story written with strikingly vivid prose. It's a book whose intellectual foundations will satisfy specialists, and whose story-telling skills will appeal to a more general readership. So Matt, congratulations on a wonderful achievement that took many years of hard research and writing to bring about.

Matt Levitt's book is the first of its kind to focus specifically on Hezbollah's worldwide clandestine activities, which are largely criminal and terroristic in nature. One of the real services rendered by this work is the spike it drives into the notion that there is somehow a distinction between Hezbollah's military and political wings, a concept clung to by various academicians, politicians, and commentators in spite of categorical denials by senior Hezbollah leaders. It is true that the organization provides social services to its constituents. It is true that Hezbollah acts, in areas where it dominates, as a state within a jurisdiction - Lebanon - that itself is barely a state, if at all. Yet Matt Levitt accurately and eloquently described the truth of the matter as follows: "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."

My own interest in Hezbollah, over the past 30 years, has focused largely on its role in Lebanon and the immediate neighborhood. In April 1983 it blew up the American Embassy in Beirut, killing and injuring a great many Lebanese embassy employees who I had gotten to know well during a tour of duty at the embassy that had ended a year earlier. Several American officials were also killed. In October of the same year Hezbollah attacked the US Marine Corps compound adjacent to Beirut's airport, killing 241 American servicemen. A simultaneous attack targeted French peacekeepers, also with deadly results. At the time the US Secretary of Defense, Casper Weinberger, created a commission of inquiry headed by retired Admiral Robert Long to investigate the airport bombing and develop a body of recommendations. As an Army major I served on that commission. Subsequently Hezbollah engaged in a campaign of murder and hostage taking aimed at Americans and other westerners in Lebanon. A friend of mine, Marine Colonel Rich Higgins (then serving as a United Nations observer in Lebanon), was one of those seized. Back in 2006 I mentioned at a

public gathering that I am one of a very few people who knows the precise manner of Rich Higgins' death, and that if I were to describe it everyone in the room would be sickened. Shortly thereafter a person I knew who had developed close contacts with senior Hezbollah leaders tried to persuade me, based on what he was being told, that the person responsible for many of the outrages committed in the 1980s - Imad Mugniyah - was not a person well-known to the party's current leadership, including Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah. That effort ended abruptly in February 2008, when the killing of Mugniyah in Syria produced his canonization as a martyr by his close colleague Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah. No one should have any doubt about the murderous quality of this organization's leadership cadre. Indeed, I now work for a part of the Atlantic Council named in honor of the most prominent of Hezbollah's victims: the late Rafik Hariri.

That leadership cadre has, in my view, one central mission: to safeguard, normally within Lebanon but now on Syrian territory as well, the clerical regime in Iran. This is the primary purpose of Hezbollah's missiles and rockets: to deter an Israeli attack on Iran and to retaliate against Israel should such an attack take place. As I have noted previously, Hassan Nasrallah is not in my view an Iranian stooge or employee. He is a true believer. Although he will certainly yield to the desires of Iran's Supreme Leader, as I suspect he did when he deployed thousands of fighters to Syria in an effort to save Assad family rule, he is, I think, someone highly regarded by the powers that be in Iran; someone whose views are accorded respect and weight. In the end, though, he has hijacked Lebanon and a significant portion of one of Lebanon's key communities for purposes that are not Lebanese. By placing a major part of his militia at the disposal of the Assad regime Nasrallah has rejected the disassociation policy of the government of which his party is a key member and, as such, has all but seceded from the Lebanese state, such as it is. Hezbollah is now assisting the Assad regime in consolidating an area west of a line running from Jordan to Turkey: one incorporating key cities and Mediterranean Sea frontage; one contiguous in part with the Hezbollah-dominated Biqa Valley. Although we are not likely to see a formal redrawing of boundaries, we may be witnessing a de facto state emerging 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.

Obviously Syria is now completely dominating the headlines in this country. Our purpose today, however, is to mark the publication of a marvelous new book on Hezbollah. I'll conclude, however, by noting that Iran's decision to deploy Hezbollah fighters to Syria carries with it great risk. Hezbollah's Lebanon-based deterrent and retaliatory capability represent an important strategic asset for Iran. Saving the compliant Assad regime, at least in a useful portion of Syria, is of vital importance to Tehran. Yet in committing Hezbollah to a fight that has, because of the Assad regime's tactics, become disturbingly sectarian in nature, Iran has risked undermining the modicum of Lebanese stability required to secure that strategic asset in the south of Lebanon. This is why it is critical for Iran and Hezbollah to win outright in Syria, at least in a part of the country that counts. This is why they are determined to win a military victory, regardless of whether or not the US administration believes a military victory is to be had in Syria. This is why Iran - at least for as long as the nuclear issue and the potential of an Israeli attack remain outstanding - has no interest in facilitating the political transition objectives of the June 2012 Geneva agreement. So as we celebrate today the publication of a very significant book detailing the scope and implications of Hezbollah's global reach, let us also remember that Iran and its Lebanese militia are "all-in" trying to bind the people of Syria to Iran's strategic objectives in Lebanon and in the region. From the point of view of the Supreme Leader and his colleagues, keeping in business the organization whose international depredations have been so skillfully chronicled and described by Matt Levitt is an objective of supreme importance.

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