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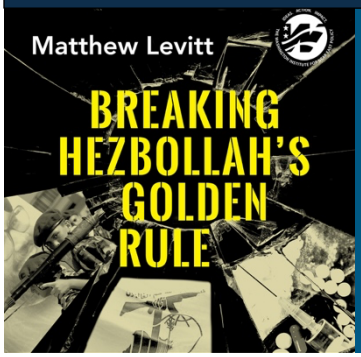

Episode 1: Wild, Wild West Beirut

Script

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Matthew Levitt:
Hi, I'm Matthew Levitt, and this is 'Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule,' a podcast that shines a bright spotlight on the criminal, militant, and terrorist activities of Lebanese Hezbollah.

Hezbollah is an organization that engages in everything from overt social and political activities in Lebanon to covert militant, criminal, and terrorist activities around the world. The group goes to great lengths to conceal its illicit and violent pursuits.

But I've been following Lebanese Hezbollah for almost three decades, in and out of government. I spent 9 years researching a book on Hezbollah, entitled: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God.

One Hezbollah operative was taught by his commander that the golden rule of the group's terrorist unit is this, quote: The less you know, the better.

In this podcast we set out to break this rule.

Let's start out at the beginning and consider just what American counterterrorism agents knew about Hezbollah in the early 1980s.

Fred Burton:
Well on my first day of the job, I walk into a very small three person office with three wooden desks and your old rotary dial phones on the desk, surrounded by stacks of burn bags and classified information, which I had never seen by the way because this was Day 1 on the job, and sitting on my desk was Beirut 1 and Beirut 2, these huge accordion file folders, and stuck in between them was a file folder labeled Bill Buckley's kidnapping.

And I'm ruffling through the first U.S. embassy Beirut bombing looking at it from a chronological perspective, and lo and behold I come across a piece of evidence that I pick up out of the file folder, and I look at it and it's a piece of an ear that was attributed to one of the suicide bombers. And I remember holding it up, thinking that I really had gone down the rabbit hole here and not knowing what I had got myself into, and kinda wishing at that moment in time I had kinda walked out of the door and gone back to my police car. And in retrospect I probably should have you know, predicated upon all the chaos that followed.

Levitt:
Fred Burton is a former police officer, special agent, and New York Times best-selling author. Today, he serves as the Executive Director of the Ontic Center for Protective Intelligence. But in the 1980's, Fred was just starting out as a Special Agent in the Counterterrorism Division of the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service. His assignment: locate American hostages kidnapped by Hezbollah.

Burton:
Looking back on this, I really wish we had done more—but I don't know what more we could have done.

Clip: Lebanon war report
Beirut's image as the playboy's playground has vanished among the smoking ruins and rubble to which large areas of the city has been reduced…

Lebanon's politicians are as divided as the fighters on the streets and have proved themselves incapable of any concerted action to stop the country's slide to chaos.

Levitt:
By the early 1980's, Lebanon was several years into its bloody civil war. Its precarious government structure built on sectarian balancing had collapsed, with civilians and politicians from all sides taking up arms. Then in 1982, Israel invaded and began its occupation of southern Lebanon. This created a situation ripe for external manipulation. And Iranian diplomats and agents soon began to fashion a group called Hezbollah from a motley crew of Shi'a militias and groups.

Magnus Ranstorp is the Research Director at the Centre for Asymmetric Threat Studies at the Swedish Defense University. He literally wrote the book on Hezbollah's early years.

I asked Magnus to give us some insight into the Lebanese Shia community in the period leading up to the country's civil war:

Magnus Ranstorp:
So the Shia were really relegated to the lowest status. At the same time, they had the highest birth rate of any community. So, when Lebanon was created in the 1920s, it made up around almost 17 percent but by the 1980s, it was almost 30 percent. You can see they were socially marginalized, but their population was rising massively.

You know, the Shia presence in Lebanon had really been sort of ignored. They were politically, economically, and socially marginalized until 1959 when Musa al-Sadr, an Iranian cleric, who had family roots in south Lebanon, he established himself in Lebanon. And he began raising, sort of, the awareness of the community, and he tried to raise the profile of the Shia, the downtrodden Shia movement, to the authorities to recognize them. And, therefore, he created what would then later become known as Amal.

Levitt:
Amal was a Shia militia founded by al-Sadr in 1974. After the Israeli invasion in 1982, Iran encouraged sympathetic Shia activists to infiltrate Amal. But as these activists rose through the ranks, tensions grew between the moderate Amal leadership and the militant Islamist members of the organization. Soon the two sides reached a breaking point, and Shia activist Husayn al-Musawi left and created his own group for these radicals—Islamic Amal.

In Magnus' book, "Hizb'Allah in Lebanon," he highlights three major events that really triggered Lebanese Shia activism prior to Israel's invasion in 1982: The first was the disappearance of the prominent Shia figure Imam Musa al-Sadr in 1978. The second was the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon that same year. And the third was the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Ranstorp:
In August 1978, this figure Musa al-Sadr, the head of the Shia community in Lebanon, he went on an official visit to Libya and he disappeared. And the Lebanese Shia community were traumatized. And they spoke that he went into occultation, and it also, more importantly, created a vacuum in the leadership in the Shia community that was filled quickly by other personalities, and one of them was Mohamed Hussein Fadlallah, who later became the spiritual guide or leader of Hezbollah.

While Al-Sadr was advocating acceptance of the system, Fadlallah he was sort of advocating more of Islam, nationalism, and anti-imperialism. And what happened with Musa al-Sadr's disappearance was that Fadlallah became the undisputed leader of Shia militants in Lebanon.

Of course, the other event, was in 1978, Israel invaded South Lebanon in operation Detani, and this galvanized the Shia community, particularly in the Bekaa Valley where later a leader of Hezbollah, Abbas al-Musawi, one of the creators, he was starting to preach military mobilization.

Then, of course, you also have the Iranian Revolution. And you know, for many, the creation of Hezbollah was a Hezbollah creation in the sense that there were Lebanese Shia that created it, but they went to Iran. And together, they really created the movement of the group that became Hezbollah.

Levitt:
In its early years, Hezbollah functioned as a network of radical Shia paramilitary groups that agreed on major strategic goals such as the establishment of an Islamic republic in Lebanon but often differed on tactical or operational matters.

These militant networks were typically organized around specific family clans, such as the Musawi and Hamadi families. In 1985, Hezbollah identified the organization's ideological platform, writing:

We view the Iranian regime as the vanguard and new nucleus of the leading Islamic State in the world. We abide by the orders of one single wise and just leadership, represented by '*waliyat el faqih*' and personified by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Still, most Shia in Lebanon had yet to subscribe to Ayatollah Khomeini's theological innovation of '*waliyat el faqih*'–which translates as 'guardianship of the jurist' and effectively means seeing the Supreme Leader of Iran as the leader of Shi'a worldwide whose orders are to be followed.

And while Iran and Hezbollah were already avowed enemies of Israel, many in southern Lebanon were more concerned about the PLO than Israel.

After Jordan expelled the Palestine Liberation Organization in 1971, the PLO relocated to southern Lebanon. Here, Palestinian militants created a state-within-a-state, treated local Shia poorly, and put the local population at risk by using the area as a launching pad for attacks targeting Israel.

So, when Israeli forces invaded southern Lebanon in 1978 to push out the PLO, many Shiites celebrated. But public opinion turned against the Israelis as a result of heavy Israeli shelling and subsequent widespread displacement of Lebanese civilians. Soon, armed Shia groups like Hezbollah began to coalesce into organized militant groups employing guerilla tactics against the Israeli forces.

> *Clip: Israeli offensive report*
> *It's in response to these hit-and-run attacks that Israel has declared its so-called 'Iron First' policy. The result is a cycle of hatred, inflamed by Islamic fundamentalists, preaching the message from Khomeini's Iran.*

Levitt:
There is some controversy surrounding exactly when Hezbollah emerged as an actual group. Some say it was founded in 1985, when the group issued an Open Letter publicly announcing its existence.

But since declassified evidence points to several Shia militant groups coalescing into Hezbollah–a then covert but very real organization–as early as 1982. I asked Magnus to walk us through Hezbollah's founding years:

Ranstorp:
Hezbollah's emergence in the 1980s was a result of merging of two militant networks in different regions. So on one hand, you had Sheik Subhi al-Tufayli, the leader of the Dawa in Lebanon, the party, and then you have Abbas al-Musawi, who was a distinguished student of the Iraqi Ayatollah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr.

This militancy did not start until 1978 when Tufayli returned from Iran and Musawi returned from Iraq. In the late 1970s, Tufayli had joined a small committee tasked with forging links to various Shia factions, and this operated under Iranian supervision. So, you had Tufayli and Masawi, #2 in Amal's leadership, and you also had the Iranian ambassador to Syria.

Levitt:
So, both Tufayli and Musawi had support from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, or the IRGC. From their safe haven in the Beka Valley, the two men translated Iranian revolutionary texts from Persian to Arabic for dissemination in Lebanon.

But when was Hezbollah actually created?

Ranstorp:
So in essence, Hezbollah was to be established in 1982. They sent a committee of nine clerics to Tehran to seek advice, permission to unite this into one movement.

Khomeini, he gave his blessing to this, so then they set up a structure called Shura Lubnan, the Council of Lebanon.

This sort of Council of Lebanon was made up of five people–there were three Lebanese and there were two Iranians. You really had Tufayli, representing al-Dawa; Abasa Musawi, representing the Association of Muslim Ulema in the Bekaa; you had a representative from Ilia, Muhammad Irag; and you had also Iran's ambassador to Syria, Ali Akbar Mohtashamipur; and you had the Pastor and Commander of the IRGC Quds Force in Lebanon, Ahmed Kanani. So, the creation is very exact when Hezbollah was formed.

Levitt:
So despite the fact that Hezbollah was founded in 1982, the group's existence was not made public until 1985. This, the fact that a variety of militant groups were operating in Lebanon at the time, and the fact that Hezbollah operated under several cover names made it very difficult for investigators like Fred Burton to connect the dots and pin down Iranian involvement.

Burton:
Well now I think with the benefit of hindsight, clearly Iran was calling the shots and utilizing Hezbollah as a tool of foreign policy, in my assessment, to carry out a range of different asymmetrical kinds of attacks, from embassy bombings to kidnappings to hijackings.

But I'm here to tell you, as I worked this problem and was assigned to the Hostage Location Task Force, which was housed inside the CIA at the time, we would sit around and argue or contemplate or "guess" the degree of Iranian control.

Levitt:
Over the course of the early 1980s, the CIA began to put the pieces together. Declassified CIA documents make clear that intelligence officials around the world understood very early on that Hezbollah used several cover names for its operations–the most important and popular one being Islamic Jihad Organization, but there was also the Council of Lebanon, Islamic Amal, the Husayni Suicide Commandos, Hizb al-Dawa, the Muslim Students' Union, and Jundallah.

In the CIA's April 1985 edition of its internal, classified publication *Terrorism Review*, analysts confirmed that Hezbollah "usually takes credit for its actions in the name of Islamic Jihad." Officials clearly understood even then that the IJO was not a separate entity from Hezbollah—it was the group's terrorist arm.

But what about the Iran connection? This is also covered in since-declassified CIA material. In December 1983, the CIA's *Terrorism Review* determined that Islamic Jihad was "likely a cover used by Iran for its terrorist operations." Less than two years later, the CIA obtained a memo from the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that definitively linked Iran and Islamic Jihad.

But this intel was only seen by a handful of eyes within the Intelligence Community. For others, getting their hands on any intelligence at all was nearly impossible.

Burton:
We had this organization that was known as the Islamic Jihad Organization, that we had very little visibility into, and we believed that they had a degree of Iranian control, but we were lacking a fair amount of specificity, at least into the reports that were reflected in our file, and then as we drilled into the Islamic Jihad Organization, we suspected that Hezbollah was an operational wing of this organization in some capacity, but I must say it was clear as mud.

We lacked that Human Intelligence to specifically tell us anything, and I attribute that a lot to the April 1983 attack on the US Embassy in Beirut, where the entire CIA station was wiped out as a result of that, that literally took the eyes and ears of US intelligence out of Lebanon.

Clip: Sirens, commotion

Clip: Embassy bombing report
Lebanese police say they have arrested six men they believe were involved in the car bomb explosion at the American embassy today. One police source says all are Muslim fundamentalists and connected to a group in Beirut which follows the teachings of Ayatollah Khomeini the Iranian political and religious leader.

Levitt:
Around 1pm on April 18, 1983, a Chevrolet pickup truck sped through the gates of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, hitting the building and setting off 2,000 pounds of explosives. The attack killed 63 people, making it the deadliest attack on a

U.S. diplomatic mission at the time. Among those killed were 8 members of the CIA who had convened for a top-level meeting with Robert Ames, the CIA's top Middle East analyst who was visiting Beirut.

Burton:
Oh yes, I mean we had a very senior CIA official that had chosen to visit for a meeting that day, and his name was Bob Ames.

Trust me, we thought long and hard about this: you know, was this something that had been compromised, did we have insider threats, did we have some degree of operational security failure, which led everybody to this, or was it just sheer random luck on the part of Hezbollah when they chose to blow up the Embassy that day?

Levitt:
Soon after the bombing, Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attack in a telephone call to a Beirut news office. But few in the US government, let alone the American public, knew what Islamic Jihad was, or were aware of its intimate ties to Iran.

At the beginning, many people viewed the April 1983 U.S. Embassy bombing as an outlier event, and Beirut was experiencing a period of relative calm by the fall 1983. The Embassy attack was considered an isolated incident and that year Marines were free to roam the city and be in public without fear of being ambushed. Beirut was under a cease-fire, and hopes were high for Syrian reconciliation talks. It was the quiet before the storm.

> *Clip: Marine looking bomber in the eye*
> *Then I heard the rev of an engine behind me, and I saw this truck, he was inside the compound. He was so close in fact, that I could look directly at the driver's face. He and I looked at each other, and he put that smile. I saw the truck come to a stop dead center of that lobby. Dead silence in the lobby.*
>
> *Then the next thing that I saw was a bright orange flash in what was the roof at 40 feet high was now on the ground beside me all cracked. I remember looking over my shoulder, and there was one marine back here. Moaning, "Help me. Help me God help me. Somebody please help me." It was a black marine in the rubble I couldn't get to. He didn't make it.*

Levitt:
That was Sgt. Steven Russel who was front and center at 6:22 am, when a massive truck bomb drove into the U.S. Marine compound in southern Beirut. And just minutes later, a second suicide bomber targeted the French military barracks just two miles away. In total, the attacks killed 241Americans, 59 Frenchmen, and 6 civilians. Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility for the attacks—that's the same name that was used to claim the bombing of the U.S. Embassy 6 months earlier.

Magnus Ranstorp again.

Ranstorp:
It was very clear that the Iranian MOIS and even the Revolutionary Guards, working through Hezbollah, were thinking of doing a very spectacular attack on the 23rd of October 1983. And of course, that was a cataclysmic event, that a mini-9/11 in the Middle East, but also in relation to one of the hardest blows against the United States. You know, having been involved of course, you've had attacks before but nothing on this scale.

Levitt:
Obviously, this was an absolutely catastrophic blow to the United States and France. This begs the question: How did Hezbollah, in its infancy, carry off such massive attacks?

Ranstorp:
Iran's role in galvanizing and coordinating, both ideologically but more importantly operationally, was absolutely crucial. Hezbollah then, together with Iran, started to surgically go after its main enemies. It began with the US Marine barracks bombing and the attacks against the French paratrooper headquarters, the US embassy in Beirut.

Levitt:
But bombings were not the only weapon of terror wielded by Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad. The CIA wrote an analytical report on the subject entitled "Wild, Wild West Beirut," noting that "turf battles, terrorism, rampant street crime, and the lack of central authority made the city extremely dangerous for both local residents and foreigners."

Between 1982 and 1992, more than 100 foreign hostages were kidnapped in Lebanon. Most hostages were ultimately released, some after several years. Others died in Hezbollah dungeons.

Part of Fred Burton's job with the Diplomatic Security Service was to find Bill Buckley. Bill was the new CIA station chief in Beirut, sent there after Bob Ames and the whole station were blown up in the 1983 embassy bombing. But, only a few months after he arrived in Beirut, Bill was on his way to work when he was cornered by Hezbollah operatives and kidnapped. This had a devastating and deeply personal impact on the US intelligence community, especially the CIA.

Burton:
We have the man that goes into Lebanon to stand up the US intelligence efforts after the April 1983 bombing, is actually kidnapped and held hostage and we literally have no idea where he is.

The hostage location task force, which I was a member of, was stood up primarily to locate Bill Buckley, with–an obvious hope that we could rescue him, but we just simply lacked any granular tactical intelligence at any point in time, to be able to carry that out. And, you know, quite frankly, I look back on that time period as one of just failure on not only my part, but on the part of many of us. And it wasn't through the lack of trying. Meaning, we just lacked the human assets, the technical assets to try to find Bill. You know, for that we suffered, and so did Bill.

Levitt:
Fred was on the team that debriefed another Hezbollah hostage, Father Lawrence Martin Jenco. Jenco was able to answer long-held questions about Bill Buckley and his condition.

Burton:
Surprisingly, when Father Jenko came out, we were actually expecting Bill Buckley to come out.

And after they got medically evaluated and dental care and so forth and were able to talk to a psychiatrist to see how bad they had suffered, the hostage debriefing team would take over. And Father Jenko told us that Bill was dead. And it really kind of sucked the air out of the room. We kind of looked at each other with a sense of failure and that's the biggest thing that I thought at that moment in time, because we had no idea that Bill was dead. Bill was always kept separate from all the other hostages. I think it was just part of the torture that he endured, but also it enabled the Iranians and Hezbollah and anybody else who wanted to come and debrief him at that moment in time to keep him separate from the others. But Father Jenko said, you know, Bill had been sick. They had been begging the guards to bring in medical care because Bill had been hallucinating and kind of crying out in the middle of the night. And he was clearly delirious and probably suffering from a high degree of fever, perhaps pneumonia. And Father Jenko remembered Bill being dragged down the stairs and his head hitting the stairs as he was being dragged down. And…excuse me… [Matt: Of course]…I knew we had failed.

Levitt:
On October 4th, 1985, Islamic Jihad reported that it had executed Bill Buckley. But he most likely died from a heart attack, as a result of his deteriorating condition while imprisoned and tortured. Today, he is represented by the 51st star on the CIA Memorial Wall.

Burton:
You know, of course, Washington didn't want to believe it. I remember going off to our secure voice phone that we had set up there and calling back, and talking to the NSC, and telling them that Bill was dead. And I remember Washington saying "Well, you know, are you sure?" and I said "Ya, we're pretty sure…"

Levitt:
The tradition of kidnapping in Lebanon runs deep. Hezbollah was just one of several groups selling and trading hostages for profit. By 1984, Lebanon had the highest number of international terrorist incidents in the world, and from 1982 to 1988, about 40% of international kidnappings worldwide took place in Lebanon.

The longest-held hostage was Associated Press journalist Terry Anderson. He was imprisoned for over six and a half years—that's 2,455 days in Hezbollah captivity.

> *Clip: Terry Anderson interview*
> *"In the first few months and couple of years, the guards were pretty brutal, there was a lot of beating, there was even some torture—I wasn't physically tortured, but others were."*

Levitt:
Many in the public questioned what Hezbollah hoped to gain from these kidnappings. Here's Magnus again.

Ranstorp:
First of all, you know, Hezbollah's militancy and Hezbollah's targeting of the west was very much closely wrapped up with Iranian and Syria foreign policy objectives. There was also a strong element of vengeance for what they saw.

Because Iran was in a war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988, so a lot of the sort of foreign policy objectives was to get Westerners out of the region or to get them out of Lebanon, but also more specifically as bargaining chips to trade for political favors, or for mostly usually arms, or for economic concessions, etc.

Levitt:
And it was clear Hezbollah preferred to target Westerners.

Burton:
Well, from a practical standpoint, it was quite simple. They had control of the geography. They had the means and opportunity. They could be utilized by Iran as their boots on the ground so to speak to drive America out of Lebanon. And they knew how to hit us. They were very good at what they did, basically killing people. We lacked any ability to be able to get in front of these kinds of threats, and they were very capable of kidnapping hostages, hijacking airplanes. And I think Iran in many ways was brilliant from a foreign policy perspective, strategy wise, because, in many ways, it was so murky and clouded during that period of time and we lacked the intelligence to be able to have that smoking gun to say Iran is directly responsible to the point that Hezbollah was literally getting away with murder. And I remember one day, we had a meeting at the CIA after Bill's death, and someone said "whoever was responsible for this was brilliant because you could kill Americans as long as you did it overseas, and you spread it out." I think in many ways that was the nature of terrorism during those days.

Levitt:
Years later, in DC Federal Court, declassified intelligence would reveal that Hezbollah carried out the Marine barracks bombing with Syrian and Iranian oversight. According to the testimony of former U.S. military officials, an intercepted message sent from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security in Tehran instructed the Iranian ambassador in Damascus to contact Hussein al-Musawi and to direct him to "take spectacular action against the United States Marines."

Soon, Hezbollah would expand its efforts to target Western interests beyond Lebanon's borders, again at Iran's behest, starting in the Gulf and in Europe. In our next episode, we will explore Hezbollah's early operations beyond Lebanon's borders, focusing on key plots in Kuwait and in Germany.

OUTRO:
Thanks for listening to 'Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule,' brought to you by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and hosted by me, Matthew Levitt.

It is produced by Anouk Millet from Earshot Strategies, and written by myself and Lauren Fredericks, a research assistant at the Washington Institute.

To learn more about Hezbollah's criminal, militant and terrorist activities, check out my book, *The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God.*

You can also visit the Washington Institute's website at WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG and explore our map and timeline of Hezbollah Worldwide activities.

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