



THE  
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## Episode 6: Operation Cedar

### Hezbollah Narco-Money Laundering

Script

Matthew Levitt

Fromer-Wexler Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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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.

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.

In our last episode, we dug deep into Hezbollah plots in Cyprus and Bulgaria, two of which occurred within days of each other in the summer of 2012. But Hezbollah did not stop there. The group continued to stockpile ammonium-nitrate in Cyprus until police raided the Hezbollah safehouse in 2015.

In fact, Hezbollah remained very active across Europe, from a 2012 bombing thwarted in Greece, to the 2013 arrest and deportation of a Hezbollah operative in Denmark who arrived on a commercial ship for purposes still unknown. Four months after the EU banned Hezbollah's terrorist wing, in late 2013, two Lebanese passengers were caught at a Brussels airport with nearly 770,000 euros in their possession. At least some of this cash was suspected to be intended for Hezbollah, according to the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, better known as Europol.

Hezbollah gets the majority of its funding and weapons from Iran. But the group also runs parallel independent fundraising and arms procurement efforts to complement its state sponsorship. We talked about two of those efforts in Episode 4 — Operation Smokescreen in Charlotte, North Carolina, and Operation Phone Flash in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

It might seem totally counterintuitive for Hezbollah to operate criminal fundraising and procurement networks when the group already has Iran as a state sponsor. According to a 2018 State Department assessment, Iran provides Hezbollah at least \$700 million a year. Engaging in criminal activities exposes Hezbollah operatives to additional law enforcement scrutiny. Given the tremendous support the group receives from Iran, why risk it?

The answer is: out of necessity, and to diversify their income portfolio.

In mid-January 2009, gas prices plummeted. At the same time, increased international sanctions, rampant corruption, and soaring inflation severely undermined the Iranian economy. And after it blatantly stole the presidential election that June, the Iranian regime was preoccupied with its violent suppression of the so-called "Green Revolution" protests.

*Clip: There was chaos and bloodshed in the streets of Iran's capital as protesters defied Friday's orders from Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khomeini and marched into clashes with waiting security forces.*

#### **Levitt:**

Iran was facing depleted resources and domestic unrest that challenged the very nature of the regime, so Iranian leadership had to focus its attention inward. According to Israeli intelligence, Tehran slashed its annual budget for Hezbollah by as much as 40% in early 2009, forcing Hezbollah to implement severe austerity measures. The group cut spending, shut programs, closed offices, and slashed its fighters' pay. Out of necessity, Hezbollah operatives were instructed to develop additional revenue streams to complement Iran's traditional generosity. This led to a significant expansion of the group's international criminal activities.

In fact, Hezbollah was already involved in criminal activities in cooperation with Colombian drug cartels. U.S. law enforcement first stumbled on one of these Hezbollah criminal networks that was based out of Colombia in 2004.

In a joint takedown by U.S. and Colombian authorities dubbed "Operation Titan," an undercover agent for the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, or DEA, forged a relationship with Chekry Harb, a Hezbollah figure who ran a cocaine smuggling and money laundering operation. At one point, Harb—who went by the nickname "Taliban"—bragged to the undercover agent that he could get 950 kilos of drugs into Lebanon within hours. That prompted the agent to casually suggest he must have Hezbollah connections, if he could operate so freely. Harb just smiled and nodded. His network reportedly paid Hezbollah 12% of its narco-income. Colombian and U.S. agents ultimately arrested more than 130 suspects and seized \$23 million.

At the time, John Fernandez was assistant special agent in charge of the DEA's Special Operations Division, which included the Counter-Narcoterrorism Operations Center. In this capacity, he oversaw interagency support to field investigations concerning Hezbollah's global criminal support network.

**John Fernandez:**

Following Operation Titan, once DEA knew to look for this connection between Hezbollah and the Colombian drug trafficking networks, several investigations stemmed from that.

Now DEA knew to look for that connection. They started looking for the ties, looking for, who from the Colombian cartels are interacting with known members or people working in that area.

**Levitt:**

Operation Titan opened the eyes of law enforcement agencies around the world. Hezbollah was more than a terrorist organization. It had also developed into a worldwide criminal enterprise. Following leads from Operation Titan, investigators set their sights on one person in particular: Ayman Joumaa.

*Clip: A murderous cartel that sends tons of cocaine to the U.S. each year. A Middle East terrorist group that's killed more Americans than any other except al-Qaeda. Now, US officials establish a connection between them. This man. A new indictment alleges Ayman Joumaa has coordinated the smuggling of at least 90 tons of cocaine to the U.S. and laundered hundreds of millions of dollars for drug gangs in Latin America.*

**Levitt:**

In January 2011, the U.S. designated Hezbollah narcotics kingpin Ayman Joumaa. A DEA investigation revealed that Joumaa oversaw a network that sold multi-ton shipments of cocaine from South America and laundered the proceeds in Europe and the Middle East. Treasury would later state that Joumaa's criminal network, "is a sophisticated multi-national money laundering ring, which launders the proceeds of drug trafficking for the benefit of criminals and the terrorist group Hezbollah."

In a 2017 statement in front of the House of Representatives, DEA Special Agent in Charge Derek Maltz explained that Joumaa's scheme "exposed very innovative ways terrorist groups like Hezbollah could identify alternate sources of income to fund their operations." But Joumaa's designation allowed law enforcement to start pulling at the threads of Hezbollah's global money laundering network.

*Clip: Cocaine was shipped from South America to Africa; sold in Africa, Europe, and the Middle East; the cash was then brought to Beirut and placed in money exchange houses; then, through the Lebanese Canadian Bank, the money was sent to buy used cars from companies in the U.S.; the cars were sent to Africa for resale; much of those profits, according to officials, went to Hezbollah.*

**Levitt:**

That thread led officials around the world—from Panama and Colombia in South America, to the battlefields of Iraq, and to the heart of Europe. It led them to characters like Oussama Salhab, a Hezbollah operative who sold used cars in West Africa and directed his traffickers based in Benin, Ghana, and Togo to transport tens of millions of dollars to Beirut.

Here's John Fernandez again:

**Fernandez:**

One of the things that's important to understand is the truly global nature of this what we call the Hezbollah criminal support network. We've seen them operate on six of the seven continents. And, for example, within Europe itself, we've had operations and investigations that targeted this criminal support network in Belgium, the Czech Republic, Lithuania, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy through their drug trafficking and their money laundering activities, arms trafficking, and even with their threats of violence, etc.

**Levitt:**

But most significantly, it led investigators to the Lebanese Canadian Bank, designated by the Treasury Department as a primary money-laundering concern in February 2011. As it turns out, Joumaa had been laundering hundreds of millions of dollars per month through the bank's accounts and through the accounts of a Lebanese Canadian Bank subsidiary in The Gambia, Prime Bank, which was partly owned by a prominent Hezbollah supporter. One key person involved in this scheme was Hezbollah's Tehran-based envoy, Abdallah Safieddine. Remember his name, we'll come back to him later.

David Cohen, the Under Secretary of the Treasury at the time, commented on this designation in 2016:

*Clip: I mean as you know, that was an action taken against a bank that was centrally involved in an enormous international drug-money laundering scheme. Running money through the United States, involving used cars being sold into Africa. It was a very complex scheme. And, you know, it was affecting the U.S. financial system. It was sending wires into the U.S. that were the proceeds of narcotics trade.*

**Levitt:**

We'll talk more about the Lebanese Canadian Bank, and the ways in which Hezbollah's criminal activities undermine the Lebanese financial system, in the season finale. What's important to know now is that these DEA investigations forced individuals and organizations out of the shadows and into the spotlight.

Each designation pointed investigators to new leads. Soon, investigators got an insider look at a massive Hezbollah illicit financial network established for the specific purpose of financing the group's terrorist and militant activities.

In fact, many of these investigations fell under DEA's "Project Casassandra," which began in 2008 to target Hezbollah's global criminal support network. Investigators believed the group was amassing as much as \$1 billion a year from its drug and weapons trafficking and money laundering activities.

**Fernandez:**

The agent who named the project that was encompassing all of these field investigations named it Cassandra because according to Greek mythology the mythical figure of Cassandra was punished by being able to see the truth about pending or imminent dangers on the horizon. But nobody would believe her. And it was kind of a tongue and cheek little jab at the interagency disagreement over the assessment of the extent to which Hezbollah was involved in criminal activity, such as drug trafficking, money laundering, etc. Whereas DEA was taking a position that was pretty extensive and well-coordinated and in a global nature.

**Levitt:**

Before long, DEA investigations began exposing Hezbollah criminal enterprises tied to South American drug cartels. In coordinated U.S.-French law enforcement actions in October 2015, authorities arrested Joseph Asmar in Paris and Iman Kobeissi in Atlanta. Kobeissi came to the United States for cosmetic surgery, but while in town she met with an undercover DEA agent posing as a narcotics trafficker. Kobeissi told the undercover agent that her Hezbollah associates were eager to purchase cocaine, weapons, and ammunition.

Meanwhile in Paris, Joseph Asmar discussed potential narcotics deals with another undercover DEA agent and suggested he could use his connections with Hezbollah to provide security for narcotics shipments.

In the DEA recordings of their conversations, the two discussed their money laundering network and the services they provided to drug traffickers, terrorist organizations, and other criminal groups in Lebanon, Iran, France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Benin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, Cyprus, and cities across the United States.

The arrests of Kobeissi in Atlanta and Asmar in Paris were just one of many successful operations run under Project Cassandra. Another, which DEA ran in cooperation with several US law enforcement agencies as well as Europol and authorities in France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium, was Operation Cedar. The investigation spanned seven countries and led to the arrest of ‘top leaders’ of a Hezbollah ‘European cell’ on charges of drug trafficking, money laundering, and procuring weapons for Hezbollah’s use in Syria.

**Fernandez:**

The way we would categorize and prioritize cases and enforcement actions, throughout DEA: you have an investigation which has the final title, they’ll fall under an operation, and then that operation gets a name, like Operation Cedar, for example.

And then several operations would fall under the project.

Operation Cedar is one of the many operations – I believe there were up to about 20 of them, 20 operations – under Project Cassandra.

So, Project Cassandra was the overall umbrella of all cases targeting Hezbollah’s global criminal support network.

**Levitt:**

The DEA Paris office played a central role running Operation Cedar together with several of the agency’s other offices and agents at its Counter-Narco Terrorism Operations Center. The DEA worked very closely with its European counterparts on this case, including French police officer Quentin Mugg.

At the time, Quentin Mugg was a police captain in a unit focused on organized crime and money laundering.

**Quentin Mugg:**

I never really intended to follow any kind of Hezbollah activity in Europe. What I intended to do, me and my team at the time, was simply to build some money laundering cases in relation with organized crime. And in that process, we were working on the number of different suspects, some of them being Lebanese, and it’s by association with the DEA that these new elements of possible connection to Hezbollah, etc, appear.

**Levitt:**

That’s one of the reasons Operation Cedar is so interesting. It didn’t start out as a terrorist investigation. This global network was being investigated for its criminal activities, and only later was the Hezbollah connection revealed.

**Mugg:**

Well initially it starts because we had some contacts with DEA attaché Paris, and in January 2015 he came to me with two informations. The first one was related to what we call a money pick-up, meaning that they had information about an individual who was not identified, who according to their information was about to collect large amount of money in Paris. That was the first thing. And so, basically, I just had a phone number and that information.

And then a little bit later, we had another information coming from the same US source which said okay, we’re working on drug trafficking cases and money laundering activities. We know that there’s going to be a meeting in Paris.

So they didn’t really have much information around that, but what they had again was a phone number and, and we just had some geolocation on his phone, that was not enough so we missed that arrest, which in the end turned out to be pretty good thing because that person, nicknamed Samir, turns out to be the main cash courier of the number one suspect in the Cedar case. So what happened is that the money pick up took place, the guy left, and then later on he gave a phone call to give information about how much money had been collected, etc. and how it looked like, and the number he called was actually the old number from the other case that had been passed along. So in the end, we were pretty happy not to have arrested anyone, and that’s how we started the Cedar case.

**Levitt:**

The owner of the phone number the courier called turned out to be a man named Hassan Trabulsi, a car trader based in Dusseldorf, Germany. According to some reports, Trabulsi also happens to be a nephew of Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah.

Trabulsi served as the central money courier for a transnational money laundering ring. At the top of the network was Mohammad Ammar, a powerful Hezbollah financier operating out of Medellin, Colombia. He was a familiar figure to John Fernandez and his team at the DEA.

**Fernandez:**

He was also one of the key links between the Colombians and the network in Europe.

**Levitt:**

With the help of another Hezbollah operative, Hassan Mansour, Ammar reportedly laundered a quarter of a million Australian dollars provided to him by a DEA confidential informant in 2014. Thinking he was laundering money for Colombian traffickers, Ammar moved the money through Emirati banks and into bank accounts the DEA had set up in Miami. Ammar later admitted to a DEA informant that he worked with a Medellin-based cartel.

Hassan Trabulsi was Ammar's main money launderer on the ground in Europe.

**Fernandez:**

Hassan Trabulsi. He was the one that oversaw a lot of the money laundering through the car businesses. And I believe it was he who had the photo of himself in one of the email intercepts doing a money transaction and smiling at the camera in one of the car lots in West Africa. And he was also one of the key money launderers through those businesses.

**Levitt:**

Trabulsi also worked with Lebanon-based Hezbollah operative and money launderer Mohamad Nouredine. Essentially, the network would sell cocaine, take the dirty money, use it to buy new, legal commodities like jewelry or cars, sell those new commodities, and send a portion of the profits to Hezbollah.

One of Nouredine's contacts was Abbas Nasser, who worked out of Nigeria. Quentin Mugg explained how this criminal enterprise worked.

**Mugg:**

So Mohamad Nouredine has his office within the stock exchange in Beirut, he is making phone calls, he was given access to cash by Abbas Nasser with Nigeria, who tells him OK there is money here, and there is money there, and you need to collect that money, to transfer it there and there.

So in this specific instance, he would collect 1 million from a cocaine trade in, let's say Belgium, he would use money exchange houses or other covers or companies to pay in Colombia an equivalent amount of money in Colombian pesos, and then with the €1 million in cash he has, he is going to buy luxury cars, watches, whatever other commodity, put them on a boat, export it when it comes to the cars to West Africa, sell the cars, get the money, get profits out of it, and bring that all back to Lebanon.

**Levitt:**

Still, not all network members were loyal partners. As it turns out, Trabulsi used his job as the money courier to line his own pockets.

**Mugg:**

In October he was about to be removed from the organization because he was stealing money from the money that was collected. So basically, he was taking 5000 euros on every money collection, and so we intercepted a conversation, where he said 'Do you realize that if he's taking just 5000 euros from each money collection, that means he's been taking a huge amount of monies because we have at least three or four money pick-ups a week?' So, you know, the average pick up is 200,000 euros and goes up to 1 million, it quickly adds up to pretty big sums of money.

**Levitt:**

The conversation about Trabulsi was between Nouredine and a man named Ali Zbeeb. Zbeeb was a watch trader in Germany, who was recruited into the money laundering ring.

Benedikt Strunz, an investigative journalist in Germany, spoke with Zbeeb about his role in this money laundering scheme.

**Benedikt Strunz:**

Zbeeb met a certain Hassan Trabulsi in Germany, and Hassan Trabulsi is a cousin of Mohamad Nouredine, and Mohamad Nouredine, as you know, was certainly one of the main figures, one of the main actors, main players in the Cedar network. And Mr. Zbeeb told me that when he met Mr. Trabulsi, he was kind of really impressed by him because he seemed very successful, he was a car trader for high end cars, he was driving expensive cars, and so on.

**Levitt:**

Eventually, Trabulsi suggested that his criminal network buy Zbeeb's watches with their drug money so that they could then resell them and send the now-laundered profits to Lebanon.

**Strunz:**

And Ali Zbeeb agreed on that, and that means, in fact, that he changed his business cycle at a certain point in time and from now on, watches in Germany were in fact bought with cocaine profits, and that means Mr. Zbeeb became, to my opinion, a key figure in this money laundering operation, right, because he was able to change illicit proceeds into legitimate goods.

**Levitt:**

Benedikt managed to get a several hours-long interview with Zbeeb the day before his trial. The meeting was held in a Paris hotel.

**Strunz:**

We did the reservation for conversation room, meeting room, and then we waited for one hour, two hour, three hour, I don't know how many cigarettes I smoked during that time, but then after a while he came and he was dressed like with sneakers and very, very relaxed.

He wanted to tell us his whole life, and he wanted to present himself as a decent businessman who just got into something very bad.

But basically, when we asked him tougher questions, it was very obvious that he avoided to give us answers. For example, if we asked him about his Hezbollah relationship, the answers got shorter and shorter. So, when we asked him about Hezbollah, he was basically saying, 'Hezbollah is a secret organization, you can't say something for sure about Hezbollah, you don't know about their goals, you don't know about their members,' and so on. But what was interesting is that when he got interviewed by the DEA and by French authorities, he was a bit more open about it. And during these interrogations, he said something like, 'I kept on working for the Cedar network because I was afraid,' and then the investigators ask him, 'Why have you been afraid?' and he said, you know, 'My brother down in Lebanon told me that the Cedar members were protected by Hezbollah.'

**Levitt:**

Quentin noted that some of the individuals went out of their way to highlight their connections to Hezbollah, basically to give them street cred.

**Mugg:**

And that's probably where the political and ideological aspect comes in play. Because they were... when Hezbollah was really brought into the conversation, it was obviously used as a means to impress people with whom they were working, the drug traffickers, and also to kind of infer that they were protected and they had the capacity to operate freely in their country. That is something that was brought into the conversation to kind of make a statement of power.

**Levitt:**

In January 2016, police arrested Nouredine and 14 of his associates in concurrent raids in France, Italy, Belgium, and Germany. That same month, the Treasury Department designated Nouredine for engaging in money laundering, bulk cash shipment, black market currency exchange, and other illicit financial services for Hezbollah members. He did this by leveraging "an extensive network across Asia, Europe, and the Middle East."

Treasury reported that Nouredine "worked directly with Hezbollah's financial apparatus to transfer funds via his Lebanon-based company Trade Point International SARL and maintained direct ties to Hezbollah commercial and terrorist elements in both Lebanon and Iraq."

Two and a half years later, a Paris court found Nouredine guilty of drug trafficking, money laundering, and engaging in a criminal conspiracy to finance Hezbollah.

A few days after the arrests, on February 1st, 2016, the DEA held a press conference and released a statement entitled "DEA and European Authorities Uncover Massive Hezbollah Drug and Money Laundering Scheme."

Agents provided an overview of the arrests and cited Hezbollah's direct involvement in the criminal network. In fact, the DEA explained that Hezbollah has a specific, dedicated office with the sole purpose of overseeing the group's drug smuggling and money laundering operations.

**Fernandez:**

In the early 1990s, Hezbollah leadership and Iran tasked Imad Mughniyeh – a well-known terrorist of Hezbollah terrorist organization who had a lot of influence – tasked him with establishing the... Hezbollah's criminal support network. And this was a network to supplement their lost revenue stream by tapping into Lebanese criminal networks that were found around the world. And, although Mughniyeh himself was assassinated years later, this network continued under Abdullah Safieddine, the Hezbollah's ambassador to Iran, and Adham Tabaja, one of his associates.

**Levitt:**

Abdullah Safieddine. That's the name I told you to remember earlier. He was a key figure in the Lebanese Canadian Bank money laundering scheme and was deeply involved in Hezbollah illicit financial activities in West Africa. After Mughniyeh's death, Safieddine and Adham Tabaja took over a Hezbollah illicit financing operation dedicated to raising funds specifically for Hezbollah's terrorist and militant activities.

And as it turns out, the trafficking network was moving more than just cash.

**Mugg:**

So basically, what happened is that in the course of the investigations, the U.S. served some search warrants to some addresses and some information popped up about containers of weapons, in particular AK-47, ammunition for tanks, communications devices, things like that, that were sent to Iraq and that we believed was probably paid, at least in part, with the proceeds of these activities that we were seeing in Europe.

**Levitt:**

John Fernandez and the DEA were clearer still about this weapons procurement angle.

**Fernandez:**

One of the things that was revealed during the Operation Cedar investigation was that Hezbollah network in Europe was also involved in using cocaine proceeds to purchase weapons, which would then be supplied to Hezbollah forces fighting in Syria in support of the Assad regime.

**Levitt:**

You might recall similar efforts by Hezbollah to acquire weapons in Episode 4. Just a few years prior, Dani Tarraf attempted to buy Stinger missiles and 10,000 Colt M4 machine guns in Philadelphia for Hezbollah from a man who turned out to be an undercover FBI agent.

But why risk the exposure of weapons procurement when you enjoy the generous state sponsorship of Iran?

One reason is that Hezbollah is constantly in the market for sensitive technologies –according to the U.S. Treasury Department, Hezbollah-affiliated networks specifically “seek to procure sensitive or controlled goods” in the West. Another reason Hezbollah carries out its own procurement efforts may be a demand among Hezbollah's fighters for original Western-manufactured weapons rather than the Chinese or other knock-offs often provided by Iran. And then there are special circumstances, like the Syrian war, when the demand for weapons and ammunition is so immediate that procurement efforts are dramatically increased, both independently and through Iran.

Operation Cedar helped law enforcement agencies in several European countries see Hezbollah for the criminal and terrorist organization it is. Reflecting back on this case, Europol's 2018 terrorism report pointed to a major criminal money-laundering case in Europe in which “a share of the profits [were used] to finance terrorism-related activities of the Lebanese Hezbollah's military wing.”

Following the convictions of Nouredine, Zbeeb and others in a Paris court, Benedikt Strunz continued his investigation, traveling to Lebanon to flesh out the full story. One of his visits was to the small town of Chtoura in the Beqaa Valley where a Hezbollah money exchange business is located.

**Strunz:**

I think we had a very good picture, but not the complete picture, because for quite a while, we didn't know how the money was channeled back from Beirut to Latin America, and then we saw this missing link, and the missing link was Chams Exchange. And when I got aware of this, I was like are you kidding? I mean, Chams Exchange is such a notorious money laundering company. Chams Exchange played a very vital role in the so-called Joumaa network and for that reason, I want to go to Chtoura, to Chams Exchange, and see this company with my own eyes.

And one very interesting thing is that the city of Chtaura is close to the Syrian border, and the Beqaa valley is under complete control of Hezbollah. And I think that might be one reason why Chams Exchange is still operating, right, until today. Chams is not a small company. I mean, it's a huge building and the city of Chtaura is very, very small. And we were always looking around for small shops or something like that, and then after a while, our driver said "That is Chams Exchange!" and we were like, "The complete building?!" and he said, "Yes, the complete building!"

**Levitt:**

Chams Exchange is a money exchange house that was used by Ayman Joumaa, the Hezbollah-affiliated narcotics kingpin we mentioned earlier. The U.S. Treasury designated Chams Exchange in 2019, assessing that it launders millions of dollars of drug money monthly and facilitates funds transfers for Hezbollah. Payments are laundered to and from Australia, Brazil, Colombia, France, Italy, Lebanon, the Netherlands, Spain, the United States, and Venezuela.

So Benedikt had connected the dots: Hezbollah used Chams Exchange to funnel some of its profits from Beirut to Latin America, where its drug cartel clients were located. But he had one more perspective he wanted to get.

**Strunz:**

Yeah, I mean, the funny thing is that we obviously want to contact Hezbollah. And we did so and we talked to a press officer and she invited us to have a cup of tea together and we talked a little bit, and after a while she was saying like, "Look guys, I really don't think that Hezbollah will give you a statement on this issue."

**Levitt:**

But soon Benedikt was pointed toward a Beirut journalist, known as Mr. Zahran, who frequently answers questions when Hezbollah does not want to officially take an interview.

**Strunz:**

And then we met Mr. Zahran, and it was funny because we met in his office and he was there with his bodyguard and his bodyguard was really like, packed with muscles, and he was carrying a gun all the time, and yeah, it was a bit scary. And then we talked with Mr. Zahran about how Hezbollah is financed and so on, and it was nice talking, and then after a while I started to ask him some tough questions. Basically, I was asking him "what makes you so sure that the members of the Cedar network, who were already in prison in Paris at that time, were not Hezbollah members?" And after a while, when I kept on asking these questions, he got really angry. And then he said, "Look, if they were Hezbollah members, Hezbollah would already have kidnapped you and your colleague to free them as they have done several times before." And then he started to laugh in a very, very scary way. Do you know the "Thriller" song from Michael Jackson? And in the end of this song, there's a scary laughing, yeah? It was a little bit like that, and we were, my colleague and me, were like okay, thank you for the interview, Mr. Zahran.

**Levitt:**

They may have laughed, but that was no joke. Hezbollah has a demonstrated track record of kidnapping certain individuals to free Hezbollah operatives detained in foreign countries—especially those awaiting extradition to the United States. Last episode, we discussed how shortly after the Burgas, Bulgaria bombing, Hezbollah briefly kidnapped a Bulgarian citizen in an effort to pressure the Bulgarian government not to publicly blame Hezbollah for the attack.

As John Fernandez explains, this was no isolated event.

**Fernandez:**

One of the things that you have to understand is that some of the things that Hezbollah as an organization fears more than anything is a capture and extradition of one of their members or criminal members of their support network being extradited to the United States.

And we've seen an MO of theirs, a pattern, that has been repeated over and over again, where they will go to such great lengths to prevent that from happening. One example is the arrest on DEA charges, drug trafficking charges, of Ali Koleilat in Brussels in Belgium. And while he was pending extradition, he worked with his network back in Lebanon and he was plotting to assassinate the Belgian prosecutor and kidnap the Belgian defense attaché in Lebanon. And he was, we sent over a plane there in the middle of the night, the DEA New Jersey office. And the agents got him out and he was taken to the U.S.

**Levitt:**

Another example, where Hezbollah succeeded in their demand, was in the Czech Republic, after the arrest of a Hezbollah-affiliated arms dealer, Ali Fayad, in 2014.



**Fernandez:**

He used his connections with Hezbollah back in Lebanon to have five Czech military intelligence officers, I believe they were, kidnapped and he successfully leveraged that to get himself and one of the associates released. And they were flown out and back to Lebanon. The Czech government was getting pressure, not only from the kidnappings, but also from the Russian government as well. And, you know, we always said that we don't hold it against the Czech government. They have been phenomenal partners in this war on narcoterrorism and they've always been great allies to the DEA and the U.S. and they were just between a rock and a hard place.

But it just goes to show you that they will go to extreme lengths to prevent extraditions to the United States.

**Levitt:**

Hezbollah's worst-case-scenario was having operatives arrested in the United States. But that doesn't mean they avoided the country. In Episode 4, we tracked two fundraising and weapons procurement networks in Charlotte and Philadelphia. In our next episode, we will uncover the stories of two Hezbollah Islamic Jihad agents who lived in the United States as Hezbollah sleeper agents, conducting surveillance in the U.S. and abroad, and relaying their information back to their Hezbollah handlers in Lebanon.

**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.

This podcast 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](http://WASHINGTONINSTITUTE.ORG), where you can explore our map and timeline of [Hezbollah Worldwide activities](#) and access the extended show notes with all the sources for this episode.

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