



THE
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Matthew Levitt



**BREAKING
HEZBOLLAH'S
GOLDEN
RULE**

Episode 8: Undermining Stability in Lebanon

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.

This season, we have tracked Hezbollah's activities around the world—from Saudi Arabia to Peru, from Thailand to Germany, from Turkey to the United States. Now, for our final episode of Season 1, we'll return to where we started: Lebanon.

In our first episode, we explored Hezbollah's origin story and the role the group played during Lebanon's brutal 15-year civil war. But even while war raged at home, we saw how quickly Hezbollah leaders turned their attention abroad. While Lebanese civilians suffered as sectarian violence and informal militias tore apart their cities, Hezbollah operatives targeted diplomats and civilians alike in places like Kuwait, France, and Denmark.

Hezbollah's leaders insist that everything they do, they do for the Lebanese people. In the group's 1985 Open Letter, Hezbollah wrote that it was, quote: "in a state of permanent alert, in order to repel aggression and defend [its] religion, [its] existence, [and its] dignity." But in reality, Hezbollah often embraces aggression in a way that threatens Lebanon's existence.

Whether a Hezbollah plot succeeds or fails, we've seen throughout this season that the group has had to face consequences for its actions. After Hezbollah's al-Manar television channel encouraged martyrdom, Germany banned the channel. After Hezbollah militants killed three Israeli soldiers and kidnapped two others in 2006, Lebanon itself was plunged into a war with Israel. And after Hezbollah entered the Syrian conflict to defend Bashar al-Assad, the war spilled over into Lebanon with a string of attacks on Lebanese soil. Syrian rebels, angry at Hezbollah for propping up a dictator, have repeatedly shelled majority-Shia areas in Lebanon, like el-Hermel in the north and el-Dahiyeh in southern Beirut, in retaliation. And in November 2013, an al-Qaeda linked group targeted the Iranian embassy in Beirut, killing 23 and demanding that Iran and Hezbollah withdraw from Syria.

These actions don't happen in a vacuum. Over the past two decades, Hezbollah has woven itself into Lebanon's political, economic, and social fabric. When Hezbollah sends drones into Israel, kidnaps Israelis, trains militants in Iraq, launders money through Lebanese banks, or targets UN forces patrolling its southern border, the group makes decisions that affect the lives and livelihoods of all Lebanese.

Let's start with Hezbollah illicit banking. When we discuss Hezbollah money laundering and narcotics trafficking operations in the U.S., South America, Europe, and West Africa, where do you think the dirty money goes? Back home, to Lebanon.

Over time, Hezbollah has created a successful model of social-welfare governance in Lebanon. By providing social services parallel to, and in many cases in the place of, those provided by the government of Lebanon, Hezbollah has created a shadow economy that benefits its supporters, builds grassroots support, and enables Hezbollah to derive a significant measure of authority within the country.

Danny Glaser:

So there are so many different levels of Hezbollah hypocrisy. One of them is their attempt to control, or exert enormous influence over the government of Lebanon while at the same time standing apart from the government of Lebanon. And it is also fairly clear that they want to control or influence the Lebanese financial system while at the same time standing apart from it because they have to in order for the Lebanese financial system to be linked in with the rest of the world's financial system.

Levitt:

Danny Glaser served as Assistant Secretary for Terrorist Financing and Financial Crimes in the Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence at the U.S. Treasury Department from 2011-2017. Today, he is the head of K2 Integrity's Washington, D.C. office.

As Danny explains, Hezbollah leverages its position of political and militant strength in Lebanon to funnel dirty money into the Lebanese economy and place its deputies in powerful political positions.

Consider, for example, two Hezbollah financial institutions—Bayt al-Mal and the Youssef Company—which functioned as Hezbollah's unofficial treasury. The banks held and invested the group's assets and served as intermediaries between Hezbollah and mainstream banks. Hezbollah's main financial body, Bayt al-Mal served as a bank, creditor, and investment arm for the organization, and it operated under the direct supervision of Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah.

But in 2006, the U.S. designated Bayt al-Mal and the Youssef Company, which forced Hezbollah to move most of its funds elsewhere. Danny Glaser says that actions like these were very frustrating for Hezbollah—which was even more clear when Nasrallah began complaining about the US Treasury Department.

Glaser:

I loved it when Nasrallah would mention the U.S. Treasury Department in his speeches. And it didn't happen until after our campaign against Hezbollah within the Lebanese financial system started, and it was one of the strongest affirmations we received that we were making progress. I don't think Nasrallah spends a lot of time thinking about international finance. These aren't normally matters that he bothers himself with. The fact that we were being mentioned specifically, and by name, the U.S. Treasury Department, in his speeches, whatever else he said in that sentence almost didn't matter. It meant that we were having an impact, that Hezbollah was noticing it and that Hezbollah was bothered by it.

Levitt:

Still, Hezbollah needed to replace Bayt al-Mal and the Youssef Company, and Al-Qard al-Hassan Association was the answer. Al-Qard al-Hassan was founded in Lebanon as a non-profit charity organization in support of the so-called "Lebanese resistance." Today, al-Qard al-Hassan serves as the main financial arm of Hezbollah. Because it has access to the Lebanese banking system, al-Qard al-Hassan provides Hezbollah with a gateway to the international financial system.

Al-Qard al-Hassan has developed strong relationships with Lebanese banks, especially Jammal Trust Bank, to conduct its illicit activities. Hezbollah's deep coordination with Jammal Trust reportedly dates back to at least the mid-2000s. According to the U.S. Treasury, Jammal Trust provided financial services for Hezbollah's Executive Council and al-Qard al-Hassan itself.

By 2019, Hezbollah parliamentarian Amin Sherri was accused of coordinating the group's financial activity with Jammal Trust management. When the U.S. Treasury Department designated Sherri, it condemned his mafia-style tactics and the "extreme steps he was willing to take" in order to further Hezbollah's violent agenda. The U.S. Treasury Department put it this way:

“[Sherri’s] efforts to threaten Lebanese financial institutions on behalf of Hizballah...demonstrate the extreme steps he takes to advocate for Hizballah’s agenda of intimidation and violence, at the cost of a legitimate sector that is the backbone of the Lebanese economy. Sherri’s behavior threatening bank employees and their family members is unacceptable for a Member of Parliament whose office should advance the interests of the Lebanese people.”

But to really understand the extent to which Hezbollah has compromised the Lebanese financial system, we need to take a step back and look at the case of the Lebanese Canadian Bank.

Danny Glaser again:

Glaser:

Well, Lebanese Canadian bank was an important node within a broader global money laundering and money moving system that Hezbollah had established. Hezbollah would move money from all over the world.

But in order to use that money effectively to advance their aims within the Middle East and within Lebanon and Syria, they needed to move that money back to Lebanon so that they can use it.

Lebanese Canadian bank was an important part of how that money would move back to Lebanon, and ultimately be made available to Hezbollah.

Levitt:

Sound familiar? We first mentioned Lebanese Canadian Bank in episode 6, where we talked about its role in facilitating the money laundering activities of an international narcotics trafficking and money laundering network. This network moved illegal drugs from South America to Europe and the Middle East via West Africa and laundered hundreds of millions of dollars monthly through accounts held at Lebanese Canadian Bank.

As you may recall, one of the men in charge of this network was Abdullah Safieddine, Hezbollah’s Tehran-based envoy. Safieddine was a key figure in the Lebanese Canadian Bank money laundering scheme. Among other things, he helped Iranian officials gain access to Lebanese Canadian Bank and key bank managers.

In 2011, Treasury designated Lebanese Canadian Bank under Section 311 of the U.S.A. PATRIOT Act for the bank’s role in money laundering activities. Section 311 allows Treasury to identify a foreign entity as a “primary money laundering concern.” This effectively cuts the entity off from the U.S. financial system.

311 is to banks, what kryptonite is to Superman.

Glaser:

For a bank in Lebanon, that’s an extraordinarily strong measure, partially because Lebanon itself is a dollarized economy, it’s linked to the dollar. So when the bank is cut off from the U.S. financial system like that, it can’t really conduct international business anymore.

Levitt:

Hezbollah’s deep penetration of the Lebanese financial system threatens the legitimacy and stability of the country’s economy. The group’s actions repeatedly prioritize its own interests, and those of its chief sponsor, Iran, over the welfare of Lebanese civilians and Lebanon’s economy.

But jeopardizing the Lebanese economy is not the only way Hezbollah undermines the stability of Lebanon.

Hanin Ghaddar:

They have managed to be part of the Lebanese government. At the beginning, they weren’t. Right. They really didn’t want to be part of the Lebanese government, they just wanted to be a resistance group focused on resistance and focused on military activities. And then they realized gradually that it would be much more beneficial to actually have a leg inside. And that’s why they started to participate in elections. And eventually, they decided to be part of the government.

Levitt:

Hanin Ghaddar is the Friedmann Fellow in the Washington Institute’s Program on Arab Politics, where she focuses on Shia politics throughout the Levant. She’s originally from the South Lebanon city of Al-Ghazieh. She has written for several Lebanese newspapers and was the longtime managing editor of Lebanon’s NOW news website.

Hezbollah currently only has about a dozen members in Lebanon's 128-seat Parliament, but it effectively controls the government through tactical alliances with several government leaders, notably President Michel Aoun.

Ghaddar:

Today, Michel Aoun is the president of Lebanon because they made him the president of Lebanon and in return, he gave them everything. Everything they want. This is how they function. They promote corrupt politicians because they can control them, and they promote a corrupt system because they can use it.

Levitt:

In 2019, the U.S. designated three Hezbollah officials for exploiting Lebanon's political and financial system: Amin al-Sherri, the parliamentarian I mentioned earlier who threatened bank officials, Mohammad Raad, another Hezbollah parliamentarian, and Wafiq Safa, Hezbollah's head of security.

Amin al-Sherri is deeply entrenched in Hezbollah's illicit financial activities, and is a close business partner of Adham Tabaja, who you may remember from episode 6 and Operation Cedar. Tabaja, along with Abdullah Safieddine, oversees an illicit financing entity within Hezbollah dedicated to funding the group's terrorist and militant activities. When the U.S. Treasury Department designated Tabaja, Sherri was directed by none other than Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah to fix any problems that arose as a result of Tabaja's designation.

Mohammad Raad is a Member of Parliament and a member of Hezbollah's Shura Council, Hezbollah's highest decision-making body. In 2017, Raad met with Hezbollah businessmen to ensure the organization's funding mechanisms would remain open despite sanctions.

Together, Raad, the Member of Parliament, and Safa, the Hezbollah security official, have worked to recruit individuals who can operate internationally. The two maintained a list of a hundred Hezbollah members who were tasked with acquiring foreign citizenship. With their foreign passports, these Hezbollah operatives would be sent on long-term missions to Arab and Western countries around the world.

Hezbollah uses its local influence and its members in Lebanon's Parliament to manipulate institutions to benefit the group's financial and security interests. But what are these interests? What does Hezbollah really want from the Lebanese state?

Ghaddar:

The main thing that they need from the Lebanese state is the war and peace decisions. It's basically to be able to start wars and use Lebanon as a channel or a war ground. They need to be able to use Lebanon for their own wars without anyone objecting.

The second thing they need is to be able to use the ports of entry, especially the borders, the port, and the airport.

Levitt:

Access to and control over ports of entry allows Hezbollah to conduct its illicit activities without having to explain itself. In its 2019 designation of Wafiq Safa, the U.S. Treasury noted that Safa exploited Lebanon's ports and border crossings to smuggle in drugs and weapons and give Hezbollah operatives freedom of movement. Hezbollah even routed certain shipments through Safa to avoid scrutiny.

Remember Dani Tarraf from Operation Phone Flash in episode 4? When purchasing weapons from an undercover FBI agent, Tarraf insisted that the weapons be shipped to the port of Latakia in Syria where Hezbollah controlled the port because security and secrecy could be guaranteed.

But there's a reason Hezbollah previously avoided politics. When you enter government, people start holding you accountable.

Clip: A massive explosion has torn through the Lebanese capital, Beirut, killing at least 70 people and injuring more than 3700. It's not yet known what caused the explosion, but Lebanon's prime minister says his country is facing a catastrophe, and Beirut is in mourning.

Levitt:

On August 4th, 2020, a stockpile of ammonium nitrate stored at the Port of Beirut exploded, causing massive damage to the city, and killing more than 200 people.

Two years later, the victims' grieving families are still waiting for answers, accountability, and justice. Despite the lack of answers, many blame Hezbollah for the explosion—after all, Hezbollah controls the ports.

It doesn't help Hezbollah that it acts like it's guilty. The group has obstructed the investigation and launched an aggressive campaign to remove Judge Tarek Bitar, accusing him of bias after he pursued some of Hezbollah's political allies.

Ghaddar:

The judge that was appointed to investigate the port explosion resigned after a lot of pressure and they appointed a new one, Tarek Al-Bitar. Judge Tarek Al-Bitar turned out to be a very good judge, they had no idea, very dedicated and very good as a judge. And he was investigating and started to summon people who are actually Lebanese officials, politicians who knew. And then at one point Wafiq Safa, Hezbollah's internal security chief, went to Judge Tarek Al-Bitar and threatened him publicly that if you don't stop your investigation, we are going to remove you. Remove you in Hezbollah's language it means kill you. That's how they remove people. So, that's when people started questioning Hezbollah.

Levitt:

Even though no one intentionally set off the ammonium nitrate, someone is responsible for storing it there improperly and abandoning it for years. By threatening the judge trying to investigate the case, Hezbollah has made it clear that it doesn't want the case solved. This fact reflects a key reality—it is Hezbollah that benefits from its position in government, not the other way around. Hezbollah picks and chooses what it needs from the state and leaves the rest. And the Lebanese people are left to pick up the pieces.

Thankfully, Hezbollah has not followed through on its threat, and Judge Al-Bitar continues to investigate the Beirut port explosion. But in other cases, these pressure campaigns have turned deadly. Hezbollah has a long track record of silencing its critics—by whatever means necessary. Anyone can be a target—from a local journalist to a former prime minister.

Clip: Rafiq Hariri was killed with 21 others on the 14th of February 2005, when his motorcade was attacked by a suicide bomber in a lorry packed with two tons of military explosive.

Levitt:

On February 14th, 2005, former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri was assassinated, along with 22 others. A massive explosive detonated as his motorcade drove past Beirut's St. George Hotel.

Hariri's assassination shocked Lebanon, and the world as a whole. What followed was later called the "Cedar Revolution." Syria had allied with Hezbollah and occupied Lebanon years after the civil war had ended. Many in Lebanon blamed Syria for Hariri's assassination, and massive protests against the occupation followed. Soon Syria was forced out of Lebanon, and two new political coalitions formed. Each was named for the date of its main rally: the March 14 coalition featured Hariri's party and its allies on one side, while Hezbollah, Amal, and their Christian Maronite allies formed the March 8 coalition on the other.

In 2009, the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, or STL, was set up by the United Nations, to investigate Hariri's death. One of its investigators was a familiar face—Quentin Mugg, the French police officer who would later play a central role in Operation Cedar.

Quentin Mugg:

I happened to be an investigator for that tribunal for a short period of time of six months in 2010, and as I was investigating for the STL, [I] was mainly in charge of the crime scene and trying to attribute phones.

In one specific instance, we had to go and talk with a doctor in a clinic in South Beirut not very far from where the Drakar building was attacked, also in October in 1983. And just in front of that clinic, there was a theme park called Fantasy World.

And when the investigator of the UN arrived there, roughly 100 person, mostly women dressed in traditional ways, came out of that amusement park and stormed the building of the clinic where the interview should have taken place, and within this crowd of women there were also some men disguised as women and armed with firearms, etc. so there has been a little bit of struggle, a few punches, the interpreter was molested, and then in the end, they all went away with some electronic devices that they stole, and etc. So that was really a warning.

Levitt:

So armed men ended up stealing the computers that belonged to the STL investigators, underscoring Hezbollah's deep

concern over what the STL might find. That wasn't the first time Hezbollah tried to influence the investigation. In 2010, Dutch intelligence officials reported that Hezbollah was surveilling the STL's headquarters in The Hague. That same year, Hezbollah operatives used airport surveillance to track STL investigators while they were in Lebanon.

The thing is, Hezbollah has vehemently denied any involvement in the Hariri assassination. But when the group surveils investigators and sends gunmen to threaten officials and steal evidence, Hezbollah makes it pretty clear that it knew that it was not in Hezbollah's interest for the case to go forward.

And it wasn't wrong. In December 2020, the STL sentenced Hezbollah operative Salim Ayyash to five life sentences for the murder of Rafiq Hariri and four other individuals.

Clip: The trial chamber therefore finds Mr. Ayyash guilty beyond reasonable doubt as a co-perpetrator of the intentional homicide of Mr. Rafiq Hariri.

Levitt:

And there was more to come. In March 2022, the STL Appeals Chamber also convicted Hezbollah operatives Hassan Habib Merhi and Hussein Hassan Oneissi for their roles in the Hariri assassination.

This decision, 15 years after Hariri's death, was huge. Hezbollah claims that it is the defender of the state of Lebanon, but this was proof that the group murdered that state's former prime minister. Not to mention the fact that Rafiq Hariri was the de-facto leader of the Sunni community, one of the three largest ethnic groups in Lebanon. How can Hezbollah claim to work on behalf of the Lebanese people when it brutally betrayed at least a third of them?

Former Treasury official Danny Glaser had a similar reaction.

Glaser:

The fact that the UN Special Tribunal has directly linked Hezbollah to the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri is just another demonstration, and I would hope a powerful demonstration, of the impunity that Hezbollah operates with within Lebanon, and the fact that it is not a supporter of Lebanese democracy, that it is not, does not take actions with the best interest of Lebanon at heart. In fact, when its position is threatened, it is prepared to take actions directly against the Lebanese state.

Levitt:

Here's Hanin Ghaddar on how Lebanese people have viewed this verdict:

Ghaddar:

It's a big deal. It's basically accusing Hezbollah of the murder. But, taking it back to Lebanon, on the ground, symbolically it's very important. A lot of people see it as it's a very symbolic win.

So much has happened from inside Lebanon since Hariri was murdered in 2005: the Syrian war, all the Syrians that have been killed, or the Lebanese that have been assassinated, the Beirut port blast where the investigation is still going on and everybody knows today that Hezbollah is somehow responsible because they are the ones who are blocking the investigation of the Beirut port blast. This is, for the Lebanese today, is much more important than that part because they're living it. They're suffering from its repercussions directly today.

Levitt:

It's hard to celebrate justice finally being served when you know that the Hariri assassination was really just the tip of the iceberg. In fact, Hezbollah has a special team dedicated to taking out its enemies. It's called Unit 121, and it's Hezbollah's assassinations team.

The unit is directed by Hezbollah's top leadership. According to current and former security officials, Salim Ayyash was part of Unit 121, and the squad has carried out many assassinations of political and military figures. They include Wissam Eid, a Lebanese officer involved in the investigation of the Hariri murder; Wissam al-Hassan, a Lebanese army brigadier general and Hariri's security chief; François al-Hajj, a Lebanese major general; and Mohamad Chatah, an economist and diplomat.

But Hezbollah isn't above targeting journalists, activists, and other civilians who get in its way. Hanin Ghaddar knows this, first-hand.

Ghaddar:

The way Hezbollah deals with its own community is very different from the way it deals with other communities in Lebanon or, and even to the certain extent, the foreigners who live in Lebanon. So, if you are a westerner, western journalist, and living in Lebanon, they try to be the nicest, the most professional. They treat you as a king or a queen when they grant you an interview, or when you are in their own company.

A Lebanese is a completely different story. There's more threats and they need you to know that they are scary. And then there's a third level, which is the Shia community. This is where everybody knows that they are scary, and they don't need to show you that, they actually make sure that the Shia community does not cross a certain line of criticism.

Levitt:

Last year, it appears that Hezbollah thought one of Hanin's colleagues, Lebanese journalist and activist Lokman Slim, crossed that line.

Clip: Lokman Slim was found dead in his car just 60 km south of Beirut. He was shot in the head. The political commentator and secular activist was known for his fierce opposition to Hezbollah.

Levitt:

Lokman Slim was found dead in his car in southern Lebanon after his assailant shot him in the head four times. There's little doubt that Slim was silenced by Hezbollah. Just minutes after Slim's death was confirmed, Jawad Nasrallah, son of Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah, tweeted, and I quote: "The loss of some people is in fact an unplanned gain #notsorry."

Ghaddar:

Hezbollah murdered Lokman Slim in a way that was very clear that they wanted everyone to know that they killed him. It was very clear, but no one called for justice. The Lebanese state ignored the whole thing.

Levitt:

Hanin has experienced Hezbollah intimidation herself.

Ghaddar:

Personally, I've been through that. As a journalist, I started writing about Hezbollah and then when I started writing op-eds and more in-depth reporting. And I remember the first time I had problems with Hezbollah, and I realized that there is actually a red line, is when I wrote my first piece for *Foreign Policy* about mutaa marriage.

Levitt:

Mutaa marriage, also known as a "temporary marriage," is a practice Hezbollah has used to reward its supporters who fight in Syria. A portion of this practice has morphed into full-fledged sex trade.

Ghaddar:

And I wrote this article and I remember suddenly there was a big backlash. And that was the first time they called someone in my family, and it was the first time I hear that Hezbollah asked about me. And they didn't talk to me directly, they talked to my family: (1) I was younger, (2) I'm a woman. They don't deal with me. You know, they deal with the men in the family.

It was obviously a threat. It was obviously them telling them that you need to be careful; that she needs to be careful. I wasn't careful. I kept going going going, until the campaigns escalated. The threats escalated. The pressure on my family escalated. And then it was a serious security issue, and I thought at one point that I need to leave Lebanon because I don't want to be, I don't want to end up dead like Lokman Slim because that's what they do. They kill the opposition. And I don't want to be dead, so I left Lebanon and I came to Washington. And I was, that was the best decision I've done in my life.

And while I was here, they pressured the military court to sentence me to prison. That was the first time since the 50s that the military court really went after a journalist. And it was obvious that Hezbollah was behind it.

And thank god I wasn't there because otherwise I would be in prison, not here. And if I were there, probably, I'd also be dead like Lokman Slim.

Levitt:

Clearly, Hezbollah is able to operate through a climate of fear where it intimidates activists and silences its critics. This

flies in the face of Hezbollah's claim that it protects Lebanese people. In fact, Hezbollah uses the Lebanese people to protect itself—and its stockpiles of weapons.

In September 2018, the Israeli military released video and photos of three underground facilities built by Hezbollah to improve its precision guided missiles. One of the most disturbing parts of this revelation was the fact that these facilities are located in densely populated, urban neighborhoods in Beirut, totally unbeknownst to the Lebanese government or the local population.

Ambassador Nathan Sales served as the State Department's Counterterrorism Coordinator. We heard from him last episode, but here he expresses his concern about this discovery:

Nathan Sales:

Hezbollah's precision-guided munitions program is a problem for Israel and it's a problem for the United States, but it's also a problem for the people of Lebanon because Hezbollah is effectively using the Lebanese people as human shields. It has deliberately located the facilities it uses to construct precision-guided munitions in civilian neighborhoods and near civilian targets in an attempt to shield them from kinetic response.

Levitt:

Essentially, Hezbollah places its weapons development facilities in densely populated areas to prevent Israel, the U.S., or any other actor from responding.

Hanin explains that even if Israel did respond, it would still work in Hezbollah's favor.

Ghaddar:

Yes, so there has been a lot of evidence and reporting that Hezbollah has been hiding their precision missiles and ammunition facilities within residential areas. And this is not the first time that Hezbollah hides their military bases within residential areas because they know that if Israel attacks them, it will be a lot of casualties. And that is something that they have used many times before during the 2006 war and during the older wars that preceded that. They always count on big numbers of casualties in order to, you know, impact the international community and the public opinion, international public opinion.

Levitt:

So, if Hezbollah hides its weapons in civilian neighborhoods and no one targets them, Hezbollah wins. And if Hezbollah hides its weapons in civilian neighborhoods and Israel strikes and kills dozens of civilians, more people might be motivated to join the resistance, and Hezbollah wins. Either way, the Lebanese people lose.

Ghaddar:

That's why they don't build shelters, right? So, because if they really want to protect citizens, civilians, they would build shelters instead of letting them out in the open and get them killed so they can actually use it in order to impact public opinion.

Levitt:

This isn't the first time Hezbollah has been caught using Lebanese civilians as human shields. In July 2017, Israel released aerial photos of southern villages where Hezbollah built a rocket factory and arms warehouse. One of the structures was located just 100 meters from a pair of mosques.

And the civilians being used don't get much of a choice. Hanin described a personal friend of hers in southern Lebanon who suddenly found that Hezbollah was storing missiles in his backyard.

Ghaddar:

And he didn't like it, although he was back then a supporter of the resistance. And they thought that he would be ok with it. He was ok with it until it came to his backyard. And his own property, and then he was not ok when he realized that they actually hid missiles in his own land. And they didn't even think about telling him or taking his permission.

Levitt:

After the photos and videos of Hezbollah's facilities were released, the group organized a big press conference. The group denied everything, insisting that it didn't have any missiles in Beirut and even giving journalists a tour of the sites.

Clip: We wanted to do this tour to disprove the statement. We came today to confirm that this is a functioning natural and industrial facility that has existed in this area for perhaps dozens of years. And in this case, and in front of the media, we're exposing this false allegation, because we're live on air on all the channels.

Levitt:

Still, by 2019, Nasrallah was bragging about Hezbollah's missile stockpile and threatening to hit Israel.

Clip: Of course we have enough precise missiles. These weapons are enough to confront the Israelis in any coming war.

Levitt:

Throughout southern Lebanon, Hezbollah has turned around 200 Shia villages into part of its so-called "defensive" plan against Israel, planting rocket-launchers among the homes. These complement Hezbollah's network of underground tunnels, bunkers, and command posts that spiderweb throughout the south and previously reached into Israeli territory.

Despite the fact that Hezbollah has built a series of attack tunnels into Israeli territory, the group has consistently refused to allow UN troops access to sites along the southern border. The United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, also known as UNIFIL, has patrolled the Lebanese-Israeli border since 1978. After the 2006 War, UNIFIL also supported the official Lebanese military in the south and helped return displaced peoples.

Clip: For 40 years, UNIFIL has traversed the hills of south Lebanon with one key goal: to maintain peace and security.

Levitt:

But Hezbollah still maintains independent military zones in wide swaths of the country. In a recent report, the UN secretary-general noted that UNIFIL is still denied access to many areas along the Lebanese side of the Blue Line, which is the UN-demarcated de facto border. Hezbollah has even used its environmental NGO, called Green Without Borders, to plant trees to block off certain areas or provide cover for their militant prepping.

In late February 2020, on my last trip abroad before the COVID-19 lockdown, I visited the one Hezbollah tunnel Israeli authorities did not completely destroy. The tunnel was far larger and more sophisticated than I could have imagined. The Israeli military found six Hezbollah attack tunnels dug from Lebanon, under the Blue Line, and into Israeli territory. Hezbollah dug three such tunnels north of the Israeli town of Metula, located at the northern most point of Israeli territory, and another three further south, along a stretch of the border near Lebanon's most southern point.

Running from the Lebanese village of Remiyah, under the border, to the small Israeli communities of Zarit and Shtura, the tunnel I toured was carved out of hard limestone rock. Over the course of several years and at significant financial cost, Hezbollah dug a spiral stone staircase leading 260 feet underground, and then dug a tunnel reaching 250 feet into Israeli territory. The tunnel included electricity, ventilation, a communication system, and storage space.

Clip: There's a secret in this hole those responsible prefer you not to know. We drop a camera down, past tens of meters of hard limestone, to reveal a sophisticated tunnel, complete with ventilation, lights. It's large enough for an NBA player to stand in.

Levitt:

The operational concept was simple: Members of Hezbollah's Radwan special forces would blow up the earthen cap of the tunnel, storm out, and attack one of the Israeli civilian communities just east or west. The Radwan special forces are named for Imad Mughniyeh, who was also known as Hajj Radwan.

Yet again, Hezbollah tunnels create additional hardships for the Lebanese people. Southern towns are policed by illegitimate security forces, illegal weapons are hidden in civilians' backyards, and locals know that they are just one Hezbollah missile away from war.

Ghaddar:

Hezbollah has never really acted in the best interest of the Lebanese people. It has always been acting on the best interest of the Iranian regime, maybe the IRGC. And at the beginning this was not clear because they came with a lot of support to the Shia community in terms of services, and in terms of jobs and charity and programs.

And that was the case until the year 2000.

Levitt:

In 2000, Israel completely withdrew from southern Lebanon. At that point, some people figured Hezbollah would disband and hand over its weapons. After all, the group was supposedly created to push out foreign occupiers, and Israel was finally gone.

Ghaddar:

It was very clear that they were there to liberate Lebanese land, defend Lebanese land, and help the Lebanese or the Shia community with services, jobs, and political empowerment.

And it was very clear that all these were actually tools. Everything that their popular support was built on was tools in order to achieve the end goal, the real agenda, which is power.

Levitt:

Hezbollah wasn't going to give up its weapons. It had the best of both worlds—power and influence, without the pesky accountability that comes with being in government. And even after Hezbollah did enter government in 2005, it refused to disband its militia—which is stronger and has more firepower than Lebanon's official military.

Ambassador Nathan Sales recognizes that Hezbollah carries out devastating attacks abroad, in places like Argentina and Bulgaria, but it's the group's destabilizing activities in Lebanon that take a toll on the Lebanese people it claims to work for.

Sales:

It's not just the overt terrorist attacks that ruins lives. It's the financing mechanisms that Hezbollah uses, such as narcotics trafficking, such as human trafficking, such as the promotion of gambling. The toll that Hezbollah's financial networks cause in terms of human suffering is another crime that that organization is responsible for, separate from and apart from the overt acts of violence that we see in places like Bulgaria.

It is pursuing its own malign agenda, many times to the detriment of the Lebanese people in whose name it purports to act.

Levitt:

I've been in many, many meetings with European officials from countries that haven't designated Hezbollah in its entirety. Perhaps the greatest reservation these leaders have, stems from the concern that blacklisting the group in Europe might further destabilize Lebanon. This is a fair concern, given the history of Lebanon's devastating civil war. But when we spell out Hezbollah's local and international activities over the past 30 years, it is so clear that no party has played a more destabilizing role in Lebanon in recent years than Hezbollah.

Time and again, Hezbollah makes it clear through its own actions that its commitment to Iran and Iranian interests trumps its identity as a Lebanese political movement. From political assassinations at home, to fighting alongside the brutal Assad regime in Syria, to bombing busloads of tourists abroad, Hezbollah is anything but a force for peace and stability.

Limiting our criticism to a mythological 'military wing' hasn't worked. Maybe we should try something different.

I hope you've enjoyed Season 1 of Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule. We're already beginning to plan for Season 2, so please feel free to leave us a review and share your feedback about what you've enjoyed and what you'd like to hear about in future episodes. So far, we're planning on exploring topics such as Hezbollah activities in Africa, its involvement in the Syrian civil war, additional Islamic Jihad Organization activity in the Western Hemisphere, and Hezbollah's role as a regional actor across the Middle East.

OUTRO:

As always, 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, with help from Washington Institute intern Lauren von Thaden. Dubbing for this episode was provided by Calvin Wilder. Special shoutout to Hanin Ghaddar's dog, Dexter—if you listen really closely you might hear him snoring in the background.

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, 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.

If you liked what you've heard, leave us a review wherever you get your podcasts and subscribe so you don't miss Season 2.