



Episode 1: Risky Business in South America

Script

Matthew Levitt

Former-Wexler Fellow, Washington Institute for Near East Policy

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Matthew Levitt:

Hi, I'm Matthew Levitt, and this is Season 2 of '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.

Welcome back to the podcast where we uncover all things Hezbollah.

Last season, we explored the group's origin story, its narco-money laundering tactics, and its operational activity in the Middle East, South America, Europe, and the United States.

This season, we'll expose Hezbollah's activities on new continents and dive deeper into the group's modus operandi.

We'll dig into Hezbollah plots from Baku, Azerbaijan, to Bangkok, Thailand, we'll expose Hezbollah surveillance and procurement operations in the United States, and we'll examine Hezbollah's digital presence and cyber activities, its assassination squad in Lebanon, and much more.

First, let's head back down to South America.

As you may recall from Season 1, on the afternoon of March 17th, 1992, a Ford F-100 panel van filled with explosives blew up in front of the Israeli embassy in Buenos Aires. And again, in the summer of 1994.

Clip: A bomb has exploded at the AMIA just like they did with the Embassy of Israel. I'm standing in front of the building, which is about to collapse. I'm in front of the AMIA. They are taking out bloodied children, women, kids. The building has been destroyed; they are calling out for ambulances. There are shredded people, mutilated people, rubble all over the place. Tragedy has struck Buenos Aires.

Levitt:

Hezbollah operative Ibrahim Berro detonated an ammonium nitrate car bomb in front of the AMIA Jewish community center. Combined, the explosions killed over 114 people and injured nearly 400 more.

Following the two Buenos Aires attacks, Hezbollah continued to operate in South America without scrutiny for over twenty years. Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization – the group's external operations wing – benefited from an extensive financial and logistical support network with significant ties to the region's drug cartels. In fact, of the more

than 2,000 individuals and entities around the world designated by the U.S. Department of Treasury as foreign narcotics kingpins, almost one in ten has proven ties to Hezbollah.

Hezbollah is not involved in narcotics production in South America per se, but is able to leverage its extensive network of front companies for a wide range of illicit enterprises which include, but are by no means limited to, narcotics trafficking.

Which is why we need to better understand Hezbollah's skillful use of front companies, in particular.

Aurora Ortega:

There's particular value for Hezbollah's operatives to use commercial cover in businesses. The commercial cover can easily obfuscate their operational plans and intentions, and their operational financial activities.

Levitt:

That's Aurora Ortega, a U.S. government professional, and the author of the report *Hezbollah in Colombia: Past and Present Modus Operandi and the Need for Greater Security*.

Ortega:

They're also able to leverage non-Hezbollah individuals and use commercial tradecraft that can further blur the lines and lead to misdirection, sometimes gross misdirection, that can result in deadly consequences.

Levitt:

The benefit of using front companies is that they appear legitimate and are therefore able to obscure the other, more nefarious, activities taking place behind closed doors.

Armando Cortez is the former head of the AMIA investigation with Alberto Nisman, the prosecutor who was killed the night before he was scheduled to deliver damning testimony before the Argentine parliament about his investigations into the Buenos Aires attacks.

Armando Cortez:

The cover companies serves as the purpose of having a dual use.

Levitt:

Today, Armando is the director of the antiterrorist unit within the Argentinian Attorney General's Office.

Cortez:

The dual use is you establish a legal company, with legal purposes, with legal employees, but you use its structure, its relationships, its contacts, to fundraise money for terrorist purposes.

Levitt:

In order to conceal its involvement in the narcotics trade, Hezbollah operatives established charcoal companies to smuggle cocaine into Lebanon.

They used a technique popularized by Colombian drug cartels to evade detection by drug-sniffing dogs and chemical tests called black cocaine.

Adding charcoal and other chemicals to powdered cocaine turns it into "black bricks," making the drugs appear to be blocks of charcoal. Once the disguised cocaine is delivered, experts transform it back to powder before it hits the streets.

In one instance, in October 2020, Paraguayan police confiscated a hefty amount of black cocaine.

Clip: Paraguay police have seized a record 2.3 tons of cocaine, hidden in charcoal. That's around 500 million dollars worth in market value. The police said on Tuesday that the drug was found at a port, hidden in six charcoal containers that were headed to Israel.

Levitt:

One of the major players in Hezbollah's illicit charcoal trade is reportedly Amer Mohamed Akil Rada, a Hezbollah operative with dual Lebanese-Venezuelan citizenship who has been active in the region for decades.

Ortega:

So some of the companies that Hezbollah uses as commercial cover are actually run by its operatives, part of its Islamic Jihad Organization.

In January 2015, Amer Akil established the Lebanon-based charcoal company Tucan Trading S.A.R.L. Just a few months later, in March 2015, Amer's son, Mahdy Akil Helbawi, established the Colombia-based charcoal company Zanga S.A.S.

Levitt:

Since their inception, these companies have delivered over fifty shipments of "charcoal" throughout the Middle East – including to Lebanon, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates.

At least four of the shipments were unloaded at Port Everglades in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. It's still unknown whether the U.S. was the final destination for these shipments or if it was just a transit point.

It is also interesting to note that Zanga – the charcoal company of Amer Akil's son, Mahdy – has used three unique addresses on its official shipping documents. In 2016, the company used an address in Cartagena, Colombia. In 2017, they began using an address in Medellin. And for the four shipments to the United States – and only for these four shipments – Zanga used its officially registered address in Barranquilla. These are the kinds of suspicious shenanigans that point to illegal activities.

In April 2018, online newspaper *Infobae* released a report publicly exposing Amer's name for the first time. The report claimed that 80% of the revenues produced by Hezbollah's commercial companies, including Amer and Mahdy's charcoal companies, are sent to Lebanon to finance Hezbollah operations. The remainder is reinvested in Hezbollah commercial operations in South America.

Aurora Ortega again.

Ortega:

It is difficult to know for sure the precise nature of Amer and Mahdy's charcoal business. While Amer and Mahdy may well have used their charcoal companies to illegally smuggle cocaine as a means to generate revenue, this should not be an automatic conclusion. They may have adopted this drug smuggling tradecraft to obfuscate shipments of more dangerous materials, such as explosives or explosive precursors.

Levitt:

In the past, Hezbollah has used drug smuggling techniques and networks to smuggle explosives. Hezbollah's charcoal trade could also be used to smuggle U.S. currency into Lebanon, given the country's current economic crisis.

Amer and his son Mahdy are not the only members of their family involved in Hezbollah's narcotics enterprise.

Part of Hezbollah's modus operandi is to use family members to evade detection and circumvent sanctions. The tighter the network, the more difficult it is to penetrate.

In the summer of 2013, Amer's brother – Samer Akil Rada, a Hezbollah logistics operative in Colombia – was implicated in trafficking nearly 500 kilos of cocaine concealed in, get this... buckets of pineapple. Counter-narcotics agents used drug-sniffing dogs to uncover the cocaine, which was reportedly valued at \$15 million.

And Amer and Mahdy's charcoal front companies are not alone.

Ortega:

Official records reveal similarities and overlap between Hassan Mansour, Amer Akil Rada, and Mahdy Akil Helbawi's business operations in Colombia and Lebanon.

Levitt:

Hassan Mansour is a dual Canadian-Lebanese citizen who was arrested in 2016 as part of Operation Cedar and indicted in both the United States and France on drug money laundering charges.

In our last season, we highlighted Operation Cedar, which was an investigation that spanned seven countries and involved the DEA, Europol, and several other European authorities. It led to the arrest of top leaders of a Hezbollah European cell and the criminal facilitators they were working with.

Mansour established his own Lebanese-based company, Zoom Zoom Motors S.A.R.L. around 2014. Although it's officially described as a general trade and import-export company for motor vehicles, Zoom Zoom received charcoal shipments in 2014 and 2015 from at least two Colombian companies – including one that had the same physical address as Mahdy's charcoal company, Zanga.

Ortega:

In 2015, Mansour revealed to undercover law enforcement officers that he used his trade as a cover to ship cocaine disguised as charcoal. He also admitted that he had a business importing wood charcoal to Lebanon from Colombia.

Levitt:

He had the necessary connections to ensure the containers were not searched.

Ortega:

Mansour is well connected to the Shia leaders in Lebanon by virtue of his wife, Zeinab Assad Fawaz, whose grandfather is Lebanon's speaker of parliament, Nabih Berri.

Levitt:

However, to successfully run fake businesses, it's important to look the part.

Ortega:

Hezbollah has a very long history of producing counterfeit documents and procuring legitimate passports that are doctored to be fraudulent. Their use of fake IDs gives the operatives freer access to move around to countries they wouldn't otherwise have access to.

Levitt:

Amer Akil Rada holds false Venezuelan and Colombian citizenship, the former was acquired as a result of cooperation between Iran and the Venezuelan regime.

In spring 2021, a Colombian newspaper revealed that Hezbollah members "legally" reside in Colombia and possess authentic citizenship.

Within the Colombian registrar's offices, a network of people had amassed a massive amount of documents to fraudulently grant individuals Colombian citizenship certificates.

In addition to facilitating widespread illicit fundraising schemes, Hezbollah establishes front companies and false identities to prepare for operational activities. This was the case in both attacks in Buenos Aires - the 1992 attack on the Israeli embassy and the 1994 attack on the AMIA Jewish Community Center.

Amer Akil himself was an operative in South America in the early 1990s and helped facilitate these attacks. He is thought to have provided the detonators used in the AMIA bombing.

Here's Armando Cortez again, the former head of the AMIA investigation.

Cortez:

With the establishment of a commercial net that serves not only for economic resources for its members, but also as a fundraising source for Hezbollah due their owner links to the organization. So with sometimes the net are able to provide logistical support to Hezbollah operatives, for instance, they provide good quality documents, or false documents. They provide safe houses. They provide routes to enter and exit the countries, of course, without being detected by the authorities. They provide shelter. They provide religious assistance. And also, they camoflate [sic] weapons and explosives within the imports of Middle East goods.

Levitt:

Last season we briefly mentioned Hezbollah's use of front companies in South America.

Christian Vianna De Azevedo:

After the bombings in 1992, authorities in the Tri-Border Area begin to see logistical support for the bombings that came from Tri-Border Area, for both the Brazilian side and also the Paraguayan side.

Levitt:

That was Christian Vianna De Azevedo, the former Special Agent with the Brazilian Federal Police.

Azavedo:

They had a lot of front businesses, they were connected transnationally, and that became clear – that the crime and terror nexus on the Hezbollah side was the way that Hezbollah operated in South America.

Levitt:

One of these front businesses was Piloto Turismo, a travel agency co-owned by Hezbollah operative Farouk Omairi.

This front company served many purposes: procuring false documentation, facilitating travel for operatives, and money laundering. Omairi was a key figure procuring false Brazilian and Paraguayan documents for Hezbollah operatives.

The U.S. Treasury Department even described Omairi as “a principal member of the Hezbollah community in the Tri-Border Area” who “served as a coordinator for Hezbollah members in the region.”

But this is just the tip of the front company iceberg. Hezbollah’s support networks in this region are extensive, and every investigation seems to uncover more illicit activity.

In the fall of 2022, Israel’s intelligence agency, Mossad, released two previously classified reports. They detail the roles Iranian and Hezbollah operatives played in the Buenos Aires attacks. According to the reports, operatives began developing the bombings’ logistics as early as 1988 – at least 4 years before the actual attacks took place. The reports also reveal previously unknown front companies that Hezbollah established to successfully carry out these attacks.

One was called El Fortin. It was created in Colombia in early 1992 by Hussein Karaki, the Latin American commander of Hezbollah’s terrorist wing – the IJO. El Fortin was used to purchase and move explosive material across different countries in Latin America.

Another company, Sandobad Commercial Company, was used to launder counterfeit dollars for Hezbollah in the Tri-Border Area. Following the AMIA attack, the company ceased to exist.

Cortez:

What we have seen is that the cover companies, or the front companies, they are only a small part of a bigger intelligence structure.

Levitt:

Armando Cortez again.

Cortez:

That includes centralized decisions for the executions of the actions. That includes the use of cultural centers as intelligence gathering and sharing points. That includes the development of the system of sales that we all know. That includes the use of mosque as sources of recruitment and secure transmission of information. That includes safe houses in the local logistics. That includes false documentation. And well, this is like the modus operandi of Hezbollah in many countries, and that had happened in Argentina.

Levitt:

Operatives in Argentina acquired false documentation to establish such extensive support networks.

In Season 1 we mentioned Samuel el-Reda. He was one of the architects behind the Buenos Aires bombings. Today, he is believed to be in Lebanon, where he is a senior operator within Hezbollah’s Islamic Jihad Organization.

El-Reda and Amer Akil Rada have worked together, including in the two Buenos Aires attacks and subsequent plots in Argentina.

One report even suggests the two men picked up the vehicle for the AMIA bombing together, wearing hats and sunglasses to hide their faces like they were starring in a bad buddy cop movie.

El-Reda used his false Colombian citizenship to appear to work as a businessman in the La Guajira area of Colombia and to travel around the world to countries such as Argentina, Panama, Venezuela, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, Italy, France, Puerto Rico and even to the United States.

What we have come to learn, however, is that El-Reda was not a Lebanese citizen born in Colombia. In fact, he is a Lebanese citizen who traveled to Colombia in 1986 and bribed registrar officials for citizenship.

Ortega:

He didn't just use his citizenship to travel out of the country. He also established companies. And with these companies, he was able to hide in plain sight. He was able to use the guise of being a businessman to operate within the country and carry out transactions and travel "legitimately," quote, to other countries.

Levitt:

Samuel's brother, Jose el-Reda, also acquired his Colombian citizenship by bribing the right people.

In 1987, Jose and his uncle, Musa el-Reda, formed a cell in Maicao, Colombia, which is known for its free trade zone. Jose's main task for the cell was to fundraise and circulate counterfeit dollars. Jose operated in South America with seemingly little trouble, until November 1992, when he ran into a problem in Rosario, Argentina.

Cortez:

He tried to exchange some fake dollars in a local bank, like \$5,000 dollars, they are fake dollars. Then they arrest him, they search his hotel room. In his hotel room, they found another \$30,000 dollars, also false dollars. They are very, very of a good quality, false dollars. According to the secret service, so the U.S. Secret Service, they were from a family "Supernotes," which was at that time some fake dollars that were made by the Republic of Iran. Then Iran gave the dollars to Hezbollah, and Hezbollah distribute.

Levitt:

A judge set Jose's bail at \$20,000, which his brother Samuel el-Reda paid in full.

The fact that Samuel had this amount of money readily available shows the scale of influence and funding Hezbollah is able to offer its high-level operatives even as far away as South America.

A couple of years later, in July 1994, Akil Rada fled to Brazil using his false Colombian passport – just two days before the AMIA bombing.

Since then, he has not returned to Argentina and disappeared from public life, but maintained contact with el-Reda and other IJO operatives.

After the Buenos Aires bombings, Hezbollah operatives began opening up similar front companies in other parts of South America in places like Margarita Island, Venezuela; Curitiba, Brazil; and Iquique, Chile.

Cortez:

Iquique is a free port, and then in Maicao, there is a big or a huge community of Muslim, Shia Muslim, community. It's logical that they built front companies to do the same things as they do in other places.

Levitt:

Hezbollah operatives have long preferred operating in free trade zones due to the lack of customs oversight. This makes it much easier to facilitate both legitimate cross-border trade and also illicit trade-based money laundering. The group also prefers to operate within Lebanese diaspora and Shia communities where they can hide in plain sight.

In 1994 and 1995, in the wake of the Buenos Aires bombings, authorities in the Tri Border area began looking hard at Hezbollah activities there.

According to Chilean law enforcement officials, Hezbollah operatives began visiting Chile to, quote: "establish a new operational center of the development of their activities."

On February 27, 2006, a leaked U.S. diplomatic cable suggested that radical fundamentalists associated with Hezbollah were increasing their presence and activity in Iquique and Santiago, Chile.

One Hezbollah operative with a strong presence in Iquique was Assad Barakat.

Barakat is a prominent member of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization who served as the personal representative of Hassan Nasrallah – Hezbollah's Secretary General – in the Tri-Border Area.

He established the front company Casa Apollo, an electronics wholesale store in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay. In reality, Casa Apollo was channeling money to Hezbollah's Martyrs Foundation.

When Paraguayan authorities raided Casa Apollo, in September 2001, they found something surprising.

Cortez:

It was a letter addressed to Ahmed Assad Barakat. The letter was signed by Hassan Nasrallah, and Hassan Nasrallah wrote in that letter – I can read it, I have the letter here, the translation is: "I am grateful for your contributions and permanent support in taking care of the sons of those who fulfilled their compromise with God, becoming martyrs by sacrificing their own blood. Your support shows the true fidelity of Lebanese people, which have all the martyrs and jihad values."

So we...this...there is.....a reasonable suspicion that the money raised in the fundraising of Barakat strictly goes to the protection program of the Martyrs' Sons.

Levitt:

Barakat narrowly avoided capture by Paraguayan authorities, but that didn't stop him from expanding his network's operations into other parts of South America. A Chilean investigation revealed that in 2001, Barakat had opened additional front companies in Iquique.

Cortez:

Barakat opened two companies. One of them was named Saleh Trading Company. The other one was Import Export Barakat Limited Company. They used to launder money that came from Ciudad del Este.

Levitt:

Barakat invested over \$70,000 in these Chilean-based front companies, and is suspected of establishing at least eight more.

And then there's the group's activities in Venezuela.

Clip: The allegations have been around for years...that Venezuela's leftist government is harboring ties to the Lebanese armed group, Hezbollah.

Levitt:

While Venezuela's Margarita Island is home to a number of Hezbollah front companies, including real-estate properties, commercial centers, American textiles stores, and even a casino – all used to secretly launder money – a less-known hotspot is Curitiba, Brazil.

Cortez:

In Curitiba, they have Farouk Omairi's partner, which is called Hussein Gharib. Hussein Gharib has, like, a travel agency. And also they raise, they fundraise money for Hezbollah. So Brazil for us is now like a transit country and they raise money in the same way that they raise in Argentina.

Levitt:

In addition to this travel agency in Curitiba, Hussein Gharib was a partner in the Sandobad Commercial Company, the front company in São Paulo that helped facilitate the Buenos Aires bombings.

Gharib was arrested at the Beirut airport in 1993 with \$120,000 in counterfeit currency. He was on his way back to Brazil.

Hezbollah operational and commercial activity continued throughout the 1990s in this region. Following the Buenos Aires attacks, there was suspicion another was coming.

I mean, at that point, no one had been caught and their logistical infrastructure was still intact. In 1998, a Hezbollah cell reportedly looked into procuring trucks for car bomb attacks on a Jewish school in the Palermo neighborhood of Buenos Aires, as well as a hospital affiliated with the Jewish community.

Argentinian police successfully disrupted these plots early on, but the operatives reportedly escaped to Lebanon.

And Hezbollah's operational and commercial exploits in the region continue today.

Operational surveillance activities have been detected in places like Peru and Panama, and Argentina is still not out of trouble.

Cortez:

Nowadays, Argentina, it's a low risk country for attacks, not for fundraising. They are still in the Tri-Border Area fundraising for terrorist organizations.

Levitt:

As late as 2017, Colombian immigration deported Hezbollah financier Abdala Rada Ramel, a Venezuelan-Lebanese dual national, back to Lebanon on suspicion of running a drug trafficking and contraband smuggling ring.

Ramel is a prominent member of the Rada clan, known to have close ties to none other than Amer Akil Rada and Samuel el-Reda. The investigation that followed revealed Ramel was responsible for all Hezbollah operations in Panama.

And remember Amer Akil's brother, Samer Akil Rada, the man implicated in the seizure of cocaine in buckets of pineapple?

Today, he is a budding entrepreneur in the region. Following a stint running a pizzeria in Barranquilla, Colombia, Samer now reportedly owns and operates various cryptocurrency companies in Venezuela, raising concerns about potential Hezbollah fundraising through virtual currencies.

Such concerns were deepened in June 2023, when Israel's National Bureau for Counter Terror Financing announced the seizure of about \$1.7 million in cryptocurrency from Iran and Hezbollah.

Clearly, Hezbollah's criminal and illicit activities extend far beyond South America.

In our next episode, we'll travel to the other side of the world, Thailand, where we'll uncover a massive bomb plot planned to take place just weeks before the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires.

The Bangkok bombing was not thwarted by authorities, however, it was derailed when the suicide truck driver got into a fender-bender on the way to his target and fled the scene.

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 for Earshot Strategies, and written by myself, Lauren von Thaden, and Camille Jablonski, research assistants at the Washington Institute.

The audio clips used in this episode are from Foundation for Defense of Democracies, Arirang News, and The Newsmakers. Dubbing for this episode was provided by Jonah Shrock.

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](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org) and explore our map and timeline of [Hezbollah Worldwide activities](#).

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