

Introduction

Researching Hezbollah's Clandestine Activities

IN MAY 2003 I PARTICIPATED in a conference for current and former US law enforcement and intelligence personnel on Lebanon. Sponsored by the US government and featuring speakers from the United States and Lebanon, each of the conference panels was chaired by a US official. Strikingly, when participants on several panels insinuated that Hezbollah had never engaged in an act of terrorism or that there was no such person as Imad Mughniyeh (Hezbollah's late operations chief)—both concepts being American or Israeli fabrications—the US officials chairing the respective panels said nothing. The issue was put to rest once the session was opened up to questions from the audience, but the experience left me convinced of the need for a serious study focusing on Hezbollah's clandestine activities worldwide to complement the already rich literature on the party's overt activities in Lebanon.

“Due to the secretive nature of [Hezbollah's terrorist wing], it is difficult to gather information on its role and activities,” an Australian government report acknowledges.¹ Hezbollah, to be sure, goes to great lengths to hide its covert and illicit activities, severely complicating the prospect of conducting open source (i.e., unclassified) research on the subject. As a former FBI agent put it, groups like Hezbollah “are well aware of our interest in them and what our intentions are” and therefore “they have become experts in the art of concealing their activities.”² It should therefore not surprise that this book is the product of almost a decade of painstaking research. Collecting publicly available material only underscored the dearth of detailed information available on even such well-known incidents as the 1992 and 1994 bombings in Buenos Aires. As for other incidents, like the failed 1994 attempt to bomb the Israeli embassy in Bangkok, the vast majority of people—among both the general public and professionals in the field—had no idea these events had occurred at all.

So over the course of several years I interviewed officials and collected reports from all over the world. I met with journalists, academics, and current and former government officials—policymakers, intelligence officials, law enforcement officers, analysts, and more—everywhere from Australia to Germany and from Jordan to Singapore. My travels took me from the Los Angeles garment district to the salon of

a Kuwaiti intellectual, and from a Belgian steakhouse to innumerable coffeehouses and government offices. I interviewed former undercover agents in the most unlikely places, and when a face-to-face meeting could not be arranged I conducted interviews over the phone.

The tale of international intrigue that poured forth from these meetings amazed me at first, though over time I grew accustomed to scribbling pages and pages of notes that knew no geographic bounds. In one instance a couple of investigators mapped out a case that involved petty crime and massive fraud, radical ideology and nationalistic fervor, all interwoven with arms procurement, document forgery, counterfeiting, and fundraising schemes. More astounding still were the stops in that one story: from the United States to Argentina, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Germany, Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Paraguay, Slovakia, and Syria.

Most interviews led to several others, over the course of which I methodically bounced ideas off people who came from a wide array of backgrounds, and ultimately I sifted through the vast amounts of raw material to form the contents of this book. A great deal of information I collected did not make the cut. From time to time, interviews are cited directly in the notes. But the greatest value of the interviews was in confirming material from the many reports, investigations, declassified intelligence assessments, and other documents I collected along the way and which are more commonly cited here.

This book benefits from extensive field research, including hundreds of interviews; primary source material, including newly released documents, declassified intelligence, court documents, and official reports; and supplementary material which I worked hard to vet and confirm from press reports and the existing academic and other literature. The documents I collected include declassified reports from the CIA and FBI, the Canadian Integrated Threat Assessment Centre (ITAC), the Israeli Shin Bet and Mossad, and agencies of the governments of Argentina, Chile, Germany, the Philippines, and Singapore, among others. The documents include case files from local law enforcement agencies, congressional testimonies, press releases, government affidavits and reports, and much more.

Because of the sensitivity of the subject matter, and since many of the people I interviewed were current or former government officials, many of these interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis. "Anonymous sourcing is widely recognized as necessary when researching clandestine militant groups," as a colleague put it in the introduction to his own study.³ But the necessary practice makes the vetting of materials and exploitation of as much publicly citable material as possible all the more important. To that end, I used each interview not only as an opportunity to collect new information but also to vet and confirm information I obtained in other interviews or documents. What I write here is based on this research, not any special knowledge of my own. I direct the reader to the notes for further information on the source of information for any given fact or statement. It should be assumed that persons or entities accused of illicit conduct of any kind within the documents I cite dispute those charges. But with the source information provided here, readers can and should draw their own conclusions.

The book is structured along geographic and loosely chronological tracks. It opens with Hezbollah's birth and its first forays into violence targeting Western interests, first at home in Lebanon and then abroad. It then follows the trajectory of Hezbollah's operations abroad, first in Europe and the Middle East, then South America and Southeast Asia. Hezbollah's activities in North America pre-September 11 come next, moving to the Persian Gulf where the group played a role in the bombing of a US military barracks building in Saudi Arabia. The book then takes a look at the Hezbollah unit dedicated to supporting Palestinian militant groups, at Hezbollah's activities in Africa, and at the group's activities in post-Saddam Iraq. A chapter on Hezbollah's activities in North America post-September 11 follows, taking advantage of the significant amount of information gleaned from investigations of Hezbollah in the United States and Canada over the past few years. The book concludes with a look at Hezbollah's role in Iran's shadow war with the West, including plots targeting civilians around the world.

This book is not intended to be the final word on Hezbollah's global reach, nor does it pretend to be a comprehensive study of Hezbollah's worldwide presence and capabilities. This book is, however, the first study of its kind focused specifically on Hezbollah's clandestine activities worldwide. I look forward to the conversation that follows.

Notes

1. US Department of the Treasury, "Hizballah External Security Organisation." Attorney General's Department, Australian Government, May 16, 2009 (document last modified November 8, 2010).
2. Hamilton, "Hezbollah's Global Reach."
3. Tankel, *Storming the World Stage*, 7.