

Book Reviews

Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God

By Matthew Levitt
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REVIEWED BY THOMAS F. LYNCH III

I welcomed with great anticipation my copy of Matthew Levitt's *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*. Levitt is also the author of a 2006 book, *Hamas: Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad*. My anticipation for *Hezbollah* was driven in part by Levitt's noteworthy background in the subject of terrorist groups, with his work as a researcher and scholar at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and as a practitioner at the U.S. Department of State, Department of the Treasury and the FBI. Its timing was stimulating, for the book arrived in the midst of controversy and concern regarding Hezbollah's deepening role in the Syrian civil war. My anticipation also was fueled by the chance to read Levitt's work as a detailed refresher to my own late 2008 monograph published by the Combating Terrorism Center at the United States Military Academy titled, *Sunni and Shi'a Terrorism: Differences that Matter*. As its title implied, that monograph took a comparative, 25 year look at the

terrorist activities of groups inspired by radical Sunni Islam and those inspired by radical Shi'a Islam in non-combat zones around the world. Lebanese Hezbollah was a feature Shi'a player in this comparative analysis. Levitt's work promised a much deeper dive into the world of radical Shi'a terrorist groups.

With very minor exceptions, Levitt's work lives up to expectations. It is lucidly written with a compelling narrative, strong on detail regarding specific terrorist events and activities attributable to Hezbollah and its affiliate groups, and features a trove of unique and interesting sources – including many non-American sources. Levitt effectively sketches the wide panoply of international activities undertaken by Hezbollah's terrorist network over the past 30. He also leaves the reader no doubt that Hezbollah's global terrorist activities link directly to Iran, with especially compelling evidence of the consequences of this in the Levant – in Lebanon, in Syria, and against Israel in particular. While his portrait of Hezbollah's terrorism threats in the majority of the world, vice its fundraising and money laundering ones there, do not appear yet to meet the standards for declaring it the kind of international threat against non-Israeli targets he seems to suggest, Levitt's book achieves its self-described aspiration to “kick start” a debate on the full range of Hezbollah's worldwide terrorist activities.

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From his opening paragraphs, Levitt writes *Hezbollah* with an aim to more fully expose its worldwide clandestine activities. Before getting to a brief recitation of Hezbollah's founding in Lebanon and its role in providing social services for previously disenfranchised and oppressed Lebanese Shi'a there, he chronicles the foiled 2009 terrorism adventures of two Lebanese nationals in Azerbaijan against Israeli and Western targets noting how these two were sponsored by Iran. He then introduces readers to the greatest coordinator of regional and global Shi'a terrorist activities in history, the late Imad Mugnyiah, who guided the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO) for almost 30 years. Mugnyiah died from a targeted explosion in Damascus, Syria in early 2008. While other authors including Augustus Richard Norton of Boston University, Ahmad Nizar Hamzah of American University in Kuwait and Eitan Azani of Israel's Herzliya Center have written on the complex relationships between Hezbollah's domestic socio-political role in Lebanon and its martial ones in the Levant and beyond, Levitt's purpose is more limited and clear. He asks the question, "Is Lebanese Hezbollah a terrorist organization?" He answers strongly in the affirmative.

Levitt provides a comprehensive narrative of successful and failed Hezbollah and IJO terrorist plots spanning three decades. His first three chapters focus on Hezbollah's violence-led ascendance in Lebanon in the 1980s emphasizing how its activities there targeted westerners in order to advance Lebanese Shi'a and Iranian aims in the Levant and across the Gulf. He then provides an extended and very useful recounting of Hezbollah's role in carefully choreographed terror activities in Europe – and especially in France. Levitt's documentation of failed attacks in France, Italy and

Germany makes valuable contributions to a record that is otherwise hard to glean from open source terrorism data, for these often don't capture failed plots. Levitt also does a good job of profiling the logistical and financial activities of Lebanese Hezbollah and IJO operations across Europe in the 1980s-90s demonstrating an organizational reach that is not well understood. The value of Levitt's work in this area is unquestionable making it a highly useful reference.

Yet one might take issue with a bit of Levitt's narrative here – a thread which continues later in the book. While clearly peppering his descriptions of Hezbollah and IJO European terrorism operatives as from these groups, Levitt isn't quite as diligent in clearly labeling the many terrorists and assassins during this dark period of terrorism in Europe, who were directly linked to the Iranian government, its embassies and consulates, and the Iranian intelligence agents who choreographed them. As one example, Levitt chose to use a questionable March 1989 *Times of London* report commenting on two 1987 assassination attempts on Iranian monarchist exiles in London to claim that even though the assassination suspects were London-based Iranian expatriates they were, "...believed to be tied to Hezbollah extremists in south Beirut." To my knowledge, this claim was speculative then and remains unproven to this day.

My own research for *Sunni and Shi'a Terrorism* clearly established that the assassination campaign against Shah of Iran era expats in Western Europe and North America that ran from 1980-92 was an Iranian operation inspired and staged through Iranian embassies and consulates and rarely involved Lebanese Hezbollah agents in other than limited ways. So too was most of the 1984-88 terror

campaign in France which in large measure aimed to end French support for Saddam Hussein's Iraq in its ongoing war against Iran – an effort which complemented Hezbollah bombings of French assets and kidnappings of French nationals in Lebanon — and succeeded brilliantly.

Levitt's narrative of Hezbollah terror activities in Argentina (February and May 1994), Khobar Towers (June 1996), and Iraq (2003-10) is compelling and most helpful in drawing together the clearly established interconnection of Hezbollah and IJO terrorist activities with Iranian agents worldwide. The Iraq section develops themes regarding Hezbollah training and assistance to Iranian Quds-Force sponsored Iraqi Shi'a militia that provide insight into how much of this and more now must be ongoing between Shi'a elements in Syria's civil war.

Levitt's recounting of Shi'a terrorist support and plotting activities in Southeast Asia (1990s), North America (1990s-2000s) and East Africa (1990s-2000s) makes interesting reading and illuminates the nature of far-flung financing and logistical support pursued by Hezbollah through Lebanese expatriates and sympathizers. His combination of these activities in a single volume is a most useful contribution. In these pages Levitt draws upon unique official sources from places like the Philippines, New Zealand, Singapore and Canada providing another most helpful record. Yet while this record is important, it strikes me as far short of making the case that Hezbollah is a dramatic much less looming terrorism threat in any of these areas – a conclusion that Levitt seems keen to have us draw. In North America for example, the only clear-cut case of a Shi'a terrorist attack was that planned against the Saudi Arabian Ambassador

to the United States and uncovered in the summer of 2011. Levitt himself acknowledges that this produced a legal indictment against the leader of the Iranian paramilitary Quds Force, General Qassem Soliemani, and not against any Hezbollah or IJO operative. In this vein, scrutiny of the detail Levitt offers actually suggests that agents in these locations are mainly in the business of fundraising, money laundering and logistical support for Hezbollah brethren in the Levant. One can only wonder how much greater a finance and logistical presence was maintained by groups like the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Basque Separatists in similar locations without there being a credible threat of operational terrorism in these locations.

I found much to like in Levitt's final chapter where he helpfully links together the radical Shi'a terrorist strikes of 2010-12 in Burgas, Bulgaria against Israeli tourists and New Delhi, India against the Israeli Embassy with the failed attack planned for Bangkok, Thailand against unspecified Israeli targets. He does well in demonstrating that these far-from-random acts came from a high level decision in Tehran to exact revenge for a supposed Israeli-managed assassination campaign against Iranian nuclear scientists. This assessment tracks well a diverse array of other unclassified intelligence assessments I have seen. Thus Levitt's conclusions about Iranian sponsorship are spot-on even if poorly understood in the Western World.

Less compelling however is Levitt's conclusion that a reorganized and rejuvenated IJO served as a critical component in these attacks – attacks that had far more to do with Iranian national interests in vengeance than with Hezbollah interests. Levitt's documentation for this conclusion cites conversations with

unnamed Israeli intelligence officials in late 2012. Yet other sources – including regional sources like those I read regularly from India and Thailand and uncited in *Hezbollah* -- more directly implicate actors with unambiguous ties to Iran and Iranian agencies like the paramilitary agency (IRGC-Quds Force) or Iranian intelligence (MOIS). While one can understand the perspective that Israeli officials would have regarding the links between IJO and Iranian agents — fearing the worst — it would seem prudent to credit Hezbollah and IJO only with those activities which can be clearly placed at their doorstep.

The questions that arise in those instances of Israeli sole-sourcing notwithstanding, Levitt's work is commendable for its variety and detail in references. He utilizes a most helpful array of declassified or partially declassified assessments from the CIA, FBI and Department of the Treasury of Shi'a terrorism as practiced by Hezbollah and Iranian agencies. He updates the record of radical Shi'a terrorist groups in a compelling and readable historical narrative, astutely noting the senior partner to junior partner relations between Iran's security and intelligence services and the leadership of Hezbollah's military wing. In doing so Levitt generates a narrative of that Iranian state senior partner as one with global reach and a global aim to strike-out using terrorism against Israeli interests and against those that would threaten the Mullah-led regime. And while the junior, non-state Hezbollah partner most surely remains committed to operational terrorism in the Levant in reprisal for Israeli actions globally, apart from a widely networked fundraising and propaganda agent, its direct role in terrorism operations beyond the Levant remains historically

anomalous. Is that Hezbollah role now something much more?

Inspired by this commendable book, let the debate begin! [PRISM](#)