



THE
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Matthew Levitt

BREAKING HEZBOLLAH'S GOLDEN RULE

Episode 5: Hezbollah Attack Plots in Cyprus and Bulgaria

Script

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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.

I've been following Lebanese Hezbollah for almost three decades, in and out of government. 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. The group goes to great lengths to conceal its illicit and violent pursuits.

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.

You might have picked up on a name I've mentioned in almost all episodes so far - Imad Mughniyeh, one of Hezbollah's longtime terrorist masterminds. We can trace Mughniyeh's time with Hezbollah all the way back to the U.S. embassy bombing in 1983. Since then, Mughniyeh was involved in nearly every major attack we've discussed—from the Marine barracks bombing, to the hijacking of TWA 847, to the AMIA bombing in Buenos Aires.

Clip: A top Hezbollah militant alleged to be behind a series of attacks on US, Israeli, and Jewish targets has been assassinated. An Iranian government-owned television station said Imad Mughniyeh was killed by a car bomb in Syria.

Levitt:

On February 12, 2008, Mughniyeh was killed in a joint CIA-Mossad operation near Damascus. A bomb was placed in his car's spare tire. Fearing he could be targeted next, Hezbollah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah spoke at Mughniyeh's funeral via video conference. He warned Israel to expect attacks on Israeli interests abroad, saying: "Zionists, if you want this kind of open war, then let the entire world listen. Let it be an open war."

Hezbollah was desperate to avenge Mughniyeh's death and carry out a massive retaliatory attack. The problem was, they weren't very successful. Operations in Azerbaijan, Egypt, Greece, Turkey, and West Africa were all foiled.

A botched Hezbollah attack in Turkey in September 2009 was the last straw. Iran was facing increased pressure from Western powers over its nuclear program, but its proxy couldn't even pull off a basic operation anymore.

Frustrated Iranian officials determined that two big changes had to happen:

First, Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization had to revamp its operational capabilities. After 9/11, Hezbollah leaders had scaled back the group's international terrorist operations and invested significantly in the group's militia. But now, when Hezbollah wanted to both avenge Mughniyeh's death and play their part in Iran's shadow war with the West, the group lacked the resources and capabilities it needed to execute a successful operation abroad.

Second, Iran decided Hezbollah could no longer be trusted with high-level, hardened targets like embassies and diplomats. These targets would be passed to a new special external operations unit within the IRGC Quds Force, Unit 400. Meanwhile, Iran tasked Hezbollah with hitting softer targets: Israeli tourists and civilians traveling abroad.

After his death, Mughniyeh had been replaced by Talal Hamiyeh and Mustapha Badreddine, Mughniyeh's brother-in-law and one of the 'Kuwait 17' prisoners we discussed in Episode 2. Per Iran's instructions, Hamiyeh and Badreddine took on new recruits and overhauled Hezbollah's terrorist infrastructure.

At first, results were shaky. According to a U.S. law enforcement official, in one plot, Hezbollah paid criminal gang members \$150,000 each to target a Jewish school in Azerbaijan—that plot also failed. Not long after, U.S. officials discovered a massive Hezbollah ammonium-nitrate collection and distribution operation in Bangkok. Thai police arrested Hussein Atris—a Lebanese national who also carried a Swedish passport—at Bangkok's international airport as he attempted to flee the country.

Clip: Hussein's arrest in January 2012 came soon after Israeli intelligence operatives warned the Thai authorities of a possible terror threat from suspects with Swedish passports. Just weeks later, a botched bombing attempt on Israeli diplomats in Bangkok by a number of Iranians was also foiled.

Levitt:

Six months later, in July 2012, a Swedish-Lebanese dual citizen named Hossam Yaacoub arrived in Cyprus. Hezbollah wasn't taking any chances this time—Yaacoub had been meticulously groomed.

Hezbollah recruited Yaacoub in 2007, and he spent years training in everything from operational security in Turkey to surveillance in Beirut to military and firearms training in Hezbollah camps.

Yaacoub first flew to Cyprus in 2009 as a tourist, where he slowly began to build his cover story as a Lebanese businessman looking to import Cypriot goods to Lebanon. Hezbollah next sent Yaacoub to Europe, to deliver and retrieve items for Hezbollah operatives in Lyon, France, and Amsterdam, in The Netherlands.

Carter Burwell:

Hezbollah was active right in the heart of the EU, right inside Amsterdam and right inside of Lyon, France, according to Yaacoub himself. And his identity as a dual cit gave Hezbollah access to the inside of the EU, and that was very concerning for everyone.

Levitt:

Carter Burwell is the former Counselor to the Secretary of the Treasury for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence. During Cyprus' investigation of Yaacoub, Carter was an Assistant U.S. Attorney in the National Security and International Crimes Unit at the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Yaacoub passed his tests. His training complete, Yaacoub became a salaried Hezbollah operative, earning \$600 a month and returned to Cyprus a couple of more times in December 2011 and January 2012.

But when Hezbollah sent Yaacoub on his fourth trip to the island in July 2012, local authorities were waiting for him.

Clip: Hassan Teleb Yaacoub admitted to being an active member of Hezbollah and was instructed by the Lebanese militant group to record the arrival times of passenger flights from Israel to Cyprus. Yaacoub confessed to also working as a courier for Hezbollah in Turkey, France, and the Netherlands.

Levitt:

As they prepared their case against Yaacoub, Cypriot prosecutors reached out to Dr. Magnus Norell, who served as an expert witness at Yaacoub's trial. Magnus is a senior policy advisor at the European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels and an Adjunct Scholar here at the Washington Institute. From 1997 to 2000, he helped to create a back channel between Hezbollah and Israel to facilitate the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon.

Magnus Norell:

The training, the shooting, the how to check license plates, and arrival of flights--that's the easy part. The difficult part is to get as deep, as best grounded a cover story as possible

The best cover stories are the stories that could be true, and this was such a case, I would say.

Levitt:

Cypriot police arrested Yaacoub at his hotel room shortly after he returned from a surveillance mission at the Larnaca airport. While he was watching Israeli tourists as they arrived on the island and boarded their tourist busses, counterterrorism officers were watching him. Investigators were eager to figure out who Yaacoub was and what his group was planning in Cyprus. One of those interested officials was Carter Burwell.

Burwell:

Our terrorism laws allow us to bring prosecutions against foreigners who are engaged in acts of terrorism overseas, as long as they are connected to a designated foreign terrorist organization like Hezbollah.

And once an individual is involved in a law enforcement process in a foreign country, that foreign country is particularly going to want to engage directly with their U.S. equivalent.

Levitt:

Carter and his team were sent to Cyprus to assist with the investigation. Number one on Carter's agenda was getting a look at the notes from Yaacoub's several rounds of interviews with Cypriot authorities.

Burwell:

We went down to meet with the Cypriot prosecutor, I think I had two FBI agents with me at the time, but we could see that the Cypriot prosecutor had a distrust for law-enforcement officials. And during that meeting, I noticed that the Cypriot prosecutor smoked cigarettes, every five minutes he was lighting up another cigarette.

But as we were talking and smoke was all through the room, I decided that probably the best way to establish a relationship with the Cypriot prosecutor was to try to bum a cigarette from him.

He really was thrilled I think.

Levitt:

Sometimes it's all about making that personal connection. In this case, Carter's bummed cigarette opened the door to share information critical to the FBI and the Department of Justice.

Burwell:

The Cypriot prosecutor excused the FBI agents from the room, we talked more about the interview notes, and at the end of that exchange he decided you know what, I'm going to give you a copy of the notes. And he went back to his computer, printed up all maybe 30 or 40 pages of the interview notes, handed it to me, I think we shared one more cigarette, and then he excused us.

Levitt:

These interview notes proved to be a treasure trove of information.

Starting with his arrest, Yaacoub kept changing his story. First, he insisted he was just in Cyprus on business. Several hours later, Yaacoub admitted to police that he, quote: "did not tell the whole truth." He described his handler as an operative named Rami, a 38-year-old Lebanese man, 5 foot 11, muscular, with a fair complexion, green eyes, and blond hair. Yaacoub said that Rami had taught him how to wear a disguise and conduct surveillance, but never explicitly mentioned Hezbollah.

The story was compelling, but Rami didn't exist. A few days later, Yaacoub again opened the interview with a bombshell, admitting, quote: "I am an active member of the Hezbollah organization for approximately four years now. I was recruited by a Lebanese called Reda in 2007."

Burwell:

Yaacoub's statements varied, certainly, throughout the course of his interrogation, and I think there are a couple things you can take away from his statements. First and foremost, his statements have indications of training....He was intelligent enough to know that if he initially denied any involvement at all, played dumb, played stupid, that that bought time for his co-conspirators, that any statements that he made quickly would have been followed up quickly by the Cypriot law enforcement, and by delaying any real substantive engagement, he was allowing any of his co-conspirators to go move any of the evidence that he might have secured inside one of these apartments or one of these warehouses.

Levitt:

This wasn't the first time a Hezbollah operative employed "R2I" or 'Resistance to Interrogation' techniques. A couple years earlier, in March 2007, coalition forces captured Hezbollah commander Ali Musa Daqduq in Iraq. Daqduq was there to train Iraqi militants alongside the IRGC Quds Force. When Daqduq was captured, he pretended to be deaf and mute for over a month. Like Yaacoub, by the time he confessed, he had stalled long enough that his co-conspirators could escape. Despite a standing U.S. extradition request, the Iraqi government later released Daqduq. Today, Daqduq is believed to be heading up a Hezbollah operational network on the Syrian side of the Golan Heights, along the Israeli border.

When he did talk, Yaacoub painted a frightening picture. Following his handler's instructions, on his December 2011 trip to Cyprus, Yaacoub located internet cafes, purchased several SIM cards, and searched for restaurants serving kosher food—meaning he was hunting for Jews. His handler also wanted detailed information about the Golden Arches hotel and other spots in Limassol, which Yaacoub provided. During his final trip in July 2012, Yaacoub tracked an incoming flight from Israel and used a code to take down the license plate numbers of the corresponding buses. When asked about the purpose of his activities, Yaacoub ultimately conceded that he was involved in something fishy, telling police that “something weird [was] going on” and speculated that it was, quote: “probably to bring down a plane.” It wasn't, but he was at least getting closer to the truth.

Magnus Norell, the expert witness for the trial, explained why Hezbollah likely chose Cyprus as its target:

Norell:

First of all, it's close. Cyprus is not very far from Lebanon at all if you look at security overall—airport security, harbor security—it's not that good all the time. So it's—I think it was Cyprus, especially, it was viewed as an easy picking, if you'd like. It's pretty easy to travel there. It's close.

And it is in Europe, so if you do something there, it will have an effect on Europe as a whole. By hitting the peripheral of the European Union, you're also gonna hit the European Union.

And that's of course part of why they do this. You know, they want to have an impact. They want to scare people. They want to show that you go on vacation somewhere to have a good time to be in the sun, to eat well and all that and we might come and blow something up. That was part of the message and why they pick countries like that.

Levitt:

One of the most concerning details to emerge was Yaacoub's surveillance of a specific parking lot behind a hospital and near a Larnaca police station. Hezbollah wanted Yaacoub to take pictures and to draw a map of the area during his debriefing back in Lebanon. His handlers instructed Yaacoub to pay attention to security cameras, payment requirements, security guards, and whether the exits were manned by attendants or were machine operated.

We know from previous Hezbollah attacks that parking lots and garages often play key roles in Hezbollah attack plots. In Buenos Aires, Hezbollah operatives parked their explosives-filled van in a parking lot a couple of blocks from the AMIA building the night before the bombing. This way, suicide driver Ibrahim Berro had less of a chance of being caught before he reached his target.

So, Yaacoub's surveillance of a parking lot, combined with his tracking of Jewish restaurants, tourist hotels, and Israeli flights and tour buses, suggests that authorities thwarted a potentially devastating attack.

Carter Burwell again:

Burwell:

One of the best pieces of information from Yaacoub's statements was his statement, I think towards the end of one of his interviews, where he sought to characterize Hezbollah, sought to minimize Hezbollah's activities, and ironically he actually demonstrated what is the most concerning thing about Hezbollah. Where he said that he wasn't engaged in any terrorist activities, instead he was just collecting information about the Jews, and that's what my organization, that's what Hezbollah, does all over the world. And I think that encapsulates what is the most concerning thing about Hezbollah, is that it is active all over the world.

Levitt:

That was an exact quote from Yaacoub: “It was just collecting information about the Jews, and this is what my organization is doing everywhere in the world.” It's not like Yaacoub was trying to incriminate himself. In his mind, it was all just a big misunderstanding. It wasn't terrorism, they were just targeting Jews. Everywhere.

The statement was shocking at face value, but even more so when another Hezbollah cell targeted an Israeli tour bus just 11 days after Yaacoub's arrest, this time in the seashore town of Burgas, Bulgaria.

Clip: The bomb tore apart its victims and ripped the roof from the bus. The Israeli tourists had just arrived to the Bulgarian resort by the Black Sea. No group immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, but Israeli officials were quick to blame Iran.

Levitt:

On July 18, 2012, at the height of the summer tourist season, a group of Israelis landed at the Sarafovo Airport in Burgas, Bulgaria. They boarded buses for the thirty-mile drive south to a Black Sea beachfront resort. None of the travelers paid

much attention when a Caucasian man in Bermuda shorts, a T-shirt, and a baseball cap joined the crowd in the terminal and walked with them to the buses. The man approached and placed his backpack bomb in the bus's luggage compartment.

Clip: "I sat two benches from the back of the bus. There was a large explosion, very strong. All the windows broke, and the glass hit us. My grandchild told me, 'Let's jump out of the window!' He and my daughter jumped out. As I was about to jump out, I saw smoke starting to fill up the place. It was becoming impossible to get out. I knew if I stayed inside it would blow up, so I also jumped."

Levitt:

The explosion killed 5 Israelis and the Bulgarian bus driver and wounded 32 others. After years of failures, Hezbollah successfully carried out a terrorist attack abroad.

And yet, it didn't go quite as planned. Mohammad Hassan El-Husseini, the Hezbollah operative and French-Lebanese dual citizen who died in the attack, was not supposed to be a suicide bomber. At some point right after he placed his backpack bomb in the bus luggage compartment, the operation went sideways. The bomb exploded while Hussein was still standing there, and he died in his own bombing.

237 miles away, in the country's capital, Sofia, Nickolay Mladenov was immediately notified.

Nickolay Mladenov:

I was Bulgaria's foreign minister at that point, and it happened on the Day of Bulgarian Diplomacy, so there was a reception in the Foreign Ministry. And just as I was about to speak, one of my advisors came up to me and said, 'Something happened in Burgas, you need to come down to the office immediately.'

Levitt:

Nickolay Mladenov is the former UN special coordinator for the Middle East peace process. In addition to his time as minister for foreign affairs, Nickolay also served as Bulgaria's minister of defense. Today, he is the Segal Distinguished Visiting Fellow at the Washington Institute and director of the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy in Abu Dhabi.

Back in Burgas, one thing was clear: The American driver's license first responders found on what was left of Hussein's body was a fake, and not a very good one. The Michigan license listed a Louisiana address, and Hussein's picture shows him wearing a clearly fake wig. Local authorities quickly identified Hussein on the airport's security footage, complete with the same horrible wig from his license photo, making him look like a character straight off the set of a goofy *Saturday Night Live* routine.

Hezbollah did not claim responsibility for the bombing, but the evidence was compelling—including DNA, travel documents, and even tracing a printer used to produce some of these documents back to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Nor was this a rogue operation. One official close to the investigation explained, quote: "Nobody pushes the button in Burgas without Nasrallah's approval." That's Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's Secretary-General.

Nickolay explains the calculus behind Hezbollah's decision to attack in Bulgaria.

Mladenov:

I think that basically they were looking for targets of opportunity in Cyprus, Greece, and Bulgaria. And, obviously there were a lot of Israeli tourists coming in, still are, coming into Bulgaria.

They were looking for targets of opportunity. They picked, probably, a few, and as the network started to unravel in Cyprus, someone decided not to lose the opportunity and the investment that had been made, and pulled the trigger on the Burgas attack.

Levitt:

Israeli authorities were clearly aware that Hezbollah was plotting a series of attacks. They had warned Cypriot authorities, who arrested Hossam Yaacoub before he could carry out an attack. And Israeli security officials were scheduled to arrive in Bulgaria for similar consultations when the Burgas bombing happened.

Mladenov:

What we did know was that the Cypriots had started to unravel a plot in Cyprus and that involved threats related to Cyprus, Greece, and Bulgaria, and that our services were working. Literally in the days before the attack in Burgas with the Israeli security services to discuss various aspects of airport security and beef up measures. But this was literally, probably within a very, very small window of days if not hours before the attack happened.

Clip: Bulgaria's government now says that besides the bomber, two others were involved. They had genuine passports from Australia and Canada, and Bulgaria says the duo were linked to the Lebanese group Hezbollah.

Levitt:

Six months into the investigation, Bulgarian authorities determined that Hussein's co-conspirators were dual Canadian-Lebanese citizen Hassan al-Hajj Hassan and dual Australian-Lebanese citizen Meliad Farah.

French officials helped identify Mohammad Hussein using DNA tests of his remains. In Bulgaria, he used the alias Jacques Felipe Martin, which appeared on his fake U.S. driver's license. Hussein's travel details are still murky, but border authorities in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary and Turkey were able to map out his accomplice's travel in great detail.

Hassan el-Hajj, the Canadian, used the alias Ralph William Rico. He was identified by a taxi driver and staff at the hotel he stayed at in the coastal town of Nesebar, half an hour up the coast from Burgas. He flew to Turkey, and from there to Romania, where he stayed overnight. The next day, he hired a taxi to drive him almost two hours south to the Bulgarian border.

Farah Meliad, the Australian, had several fake IDs, but primarily used the alias Brian Jeremiah Jamison. He flew to Hungary, took a train to Romania, and then a taxi to the Curtici border crossing where he entered Bulgaria.

Mladenov:

Too many traces had been left, too many crumbs had been left along the road. You know, their boarding passes, their passports, their hotel details, you know, all of this was quite quickly uncovered, so their movements were quite easy to trace.

In my mind, it always showed that it was a bit of a rushed job. And that's why I always thought of it as something that had been prepared for a long time but then at the end implemented in a very rushed manner.

Levitt:

In fact, the Hezbollah operatives made a series of tactical mistakes that highlight their poor operational security. First, there's the goofy wig and the Louisiana address on Hussein's fake Michigan driver's license.

Then, one of the other operatives slipped out of his hotel in Varna, a beach town two hours north of Burgas, without paying his bill. Smart operatives are not stingy operatives, and this one risked being reported to the police just to save a couple hundred dollars. As it happened, the hotel in question didn't have a great record of paying taxes, so it chose not to report the incident to authorities.

And while the bomb went off with devastating effect, killing and wounding multiple victims and taking the attacker, Mohammad Hussein, with them, authorities determined the plot was not intended to be a suicide bombing. Forensic analysis by Europol agents determined the bomb was remotely detonated, leading them to believe he got into a scuffle with some of the Israeli tourists.

Nickolay explains:

Mladenov:

What my understanding is that the person who carried the bomb may have been under the impression that he was there only to place the bomb on the bus and step back and then someone else who had the control device would explode it. Obviously, something happened at that point. Possibly the tourists, Israelis, became suspicious of this person—who was clearly not part of their group—loitering around with them or around the baggage compartment of their bus. And then the other person who had the control device decided to not lose the opportunity and exploded it.

Levitt:

Finally, one of the surviving operatives—likely spooked by having just blown up his accomplice—fled the scene and threw his ID card out the window as he drove to the border. Authorities found the ID, which helped them quickly zero in on Hezbollah as the organization behind the attack.

In the attack, Hezbollah used a now well-established Hezbollah modus operandi. The group employed an ammonium-nitrate bomb, -- they made the bomb using chemicals extracted from disposable ice packs. According to a Bulgarian newspaper, a Hezbollah operative from the group's Islamic Jihad terrorist wing imported 40 boxes of first aid kits to Bulgaria about seven months before the bombing. Each kit contained about 160 grams of ammonium nitrate in its ice packs. When combined, that was enough ammonium nitrate to blow up a bus.

Here's Magnus Norell, again, the expert witness in Yaacoub's trial:

Norell:

I think it's important that one should bear in mind here, we're not dealing with any organization here. We're dealing with a, you know, solidly-based terrorist organization that knows how to do this. They know every sort of every step in the way to build a structure that can hold, that can sustain, that is strong enough to bear setbacks.

Levitt:

Right after the Burgas bombing, Hezbollah operatives back in Lebanon briefly kidnapped a Bulgarian citizen in an effort to pressure the Bulgarian government not to publicly blame Hezbollah for the attack. That gambit failed, and the hostage was quietly released, but not without some tense moments for Bulgarian officials.

A more significant setback Hezbollah encountered was that the Burgas and Cyprus cases finally pushed the European Union to seriously discuss banning Hezbollah. Ultimately, in July 2013, the EU banned just the group's terrorist wing.

Now, with a bus full of civilians killed and injured in a European Member state using the same modus operandi as the case in Cyprus, investigators and prosecutors back in Cyprus, including U.S. prosecutor Carter Burwell, were under increased pressure to bring Yaacoub to justice.

Burwell:

After the Burgas bombing in Bulgaria, you had an attack in Europe by Hezbollah. That made sense for the United States government to support the prosecution of Yaacoub in Cyprus as a way to demonstrate to Europe and the EU that Hezbollah was actively planning and engaged in terrorist activity inside the EU, in another European country like Cyprus.

Clip: Hossam Teleb Yaacoub, the man arrested in Cyprus last summer on charges of conspiring to kill Israelis, has admitted in court that he is a member of Hezbollah.

When Yaacoub was arrested on July 7th, a red notebook was found in his possession containing the license plates of Israeli tour buses.

Levitt:

Yaacoub's trial began in February 2013. But the Cypriot court could not charge him with providing material support to a terrorist organization. Magnus Norell explains why:

Norell:

At the trial at the beginning of 2013, Hezbollah was still not viewed as a terrorist organization by most countries in the European Union., there was this ridiculous division here about the military and the political parts of it, which is, I think, they're still laughing about that in Beirut. But, at the time, that was reality.

Levitt:

So instead, prosecutors charged Yaacoub with participating in an organized crime group and preparing a criminal act. He was convicted in March 2013.

In their 80-page decision, the judges rejected Yaacoub's claim that he collected information for Hezbollah but did not know what it would be used for. There could be no "innocent explanation" of Yaacoub's actions, the court determined, adding that he "should have logically known" his surveillance was linked to a criminal act.

The three-judge panel declared: "It has been proven that Hezbollah is an organization that operates under complete secrecy. There is no doubt that this group has multiple members and proceeds with various activities, including military training of its members. Therefore, the court rules that Hezbollah acts as a criminal organization."

Norell:

He was sort of caught red-handed with a lot of information on flights from Israel, buses from the airport to the hotels, which hotels, which restaurants, and all stuff like that. So, it was, you know, a pretty clear picture.

So, it was both that attack and Burgas and the would-be attack in Cyprus was part of the same strategic war, if you like, that Hezbollah was conducting at the time.

Levitt:

Carter agreed with Magnus' assessment and expressed his concern about Hezbollah's long-term goals.

Burwell:

I think on its face, the Yaacoub case was very modest. On its face, he didn't hurt anyone, there was no bomb that went off, unlike Burgas, there was no attack. All Yaacoub was doing was taking photographs, looking for warehouses, trying to check out the local zoo. But actually, if you look at what Yaacoub was engaged in, and if you look at his statements, it's actually more terrifying. It's more concerning that Hezbollah is investing in operatives throughout the world.

The concern is what else is the organization doing? Where are the other Yaacoub's?

Levitt:

Yaacoub was sentenced to four years in prison. But after serving two years and five months of his criminal sentence, Yaacoub was granted early release from prison and deported to Sweden. It's believed he went from there to Lebanon.

A few months after his conviction, the European Union designated Hezbollah's military wing and froze its assets. Here is Nickolay Mladenov, Bulgaria's former minister of foreign affairs, again:

Mladenov:

Both the attack in Burgas and what was discovered in Cyprus consolidated the rest of the countries in the EU who were sitting on the fence on the issue of Hezbollah, to actually make a decision.

Levitt:

But Hezbollah wasn't done in Cyprus.

In fact, around the same time Yaacoub was making his periodic trips, another Hezbollah operative named Talal Khalil rented a storage space in southern Cyprus. He used the unit to store ammonium nitrate ice packs from 2010 to 2012.

When Yaacoub was arrested in July, Hezbollah decided to change locations and selected a single-family home in southern Cyprus as their safe house. Back in 2010, Hezbollah had used a French-Lebanese professor who taught in Lyon, France to purchase the house for 350,000 Euro—well above asking price. After Yaacoub's arrest, Hezbollah transferred the ice packs to the basement of their new safe house and replaced Khalil with a new operative—a Lebanese-Canadian dual national named Hussein Bassam Abdallah.

Even though Yaacoub's trial was front-page news, Abdallah traveled to Cyprus about 10 times between 2012 and 2015 to check on the explosive material.

Then, in May 2015, Cypriot police received a tip that led them to Abdallah. Once they began surveillance, authorities discovered that Abdallah was trying to rent a large van and a private storage facility. He made several strange requests, such as insisting the unit be sufficiently isolated.

When police executed a search warrant at the Hezbollah safe house, they found 447 large cardboard boxes containing over 65,000 ice packs. That comes to a total of 8.2 tons of ammonium nitrate—enough for several attacks.

Like Yaacoub, Abdallah confidently told police a well-rehearsed cover story at first. But eventually, he admitted to being a member of Hezbollah's terrorist wing. He said Hezbollah hired him to quote "safeguard" the group's ammonium nitrate in Cyprus. Abdallah also admitted that Hezbollah was planning to launch several attacks targeting Jews and Israelis in Cyprus, but he denied knowing any details. Israeli officials believe Hezbollah was planning to export the ammonium nitrate elsewhere in Europe for future attacks. Abdallah pled guilty and was sentenced to six years in prison.

Meanwhile, a 2019 trial in the U.S. later revealed that Yaacoub's real handler was a Hezbollah operative, who went by the name Fadi Kassab. He traveled to Cyprus under the name Alexander Bouji, but Yaacoub knew him by a third name, Sami Helo. Aside from his roles in the Yaacoub and U.S. cases, Cypriot authorities reported that Fadi Kassab was also involved in a 2012 Hezbollah case in Thailand.

Norell:

It's interesting in the sense that if you're someone, that you are good enough to handle several people as being their handler, you really are a very important, you're a key person in the Islamic Jihad Organization. Otherwise, you would never ever reach that kind of level.

Levitt:

We'll discuss Hezbollah operative Fadi Kassab and his role in the U.S. cases in more detail in another episode.

But for now, it's important to note that the Cyprus cases and the Burgas bombing mark important shifts in Hezbollah's strategy and modus operandi.

One trend you may have picked up on is Hezbollah's use of dual nationals. Hossam Yaacoub was a Lebanese-Swedish dual national, and he renewed his Swedish passport for the express purpose of using it during his Hezbollah operations. Later in Cyprus, Lebanese-Canadian dual citizen Hussein Bassam Abdallah traveled on his Canadian passport and employed the help of a Lebanese-French professor to purchase a safehouse. Meanwhile in Bulgaria, Hezbollah operatives with Australian, Canadian and French citizenship blew up a bus of tourists.

It's not just easier to travel on Western passports—it also provides an element of cover for operational activities. That also explains why operatives typically take roundabout routes to get to their intended destinations, as they did in the Burgas case. And it explains why Hezbollah was looking to recruit operatives with legitimate foreign passports, foreign language skills, and experience traveling.

Here's Nickolay, again:

Mladenov:

I don't think it was surprising, because, for these people to move, you know, they need the passports to be able to do it and to do it in a way they would be unnoticed. So certainly, there would be less suspicion if they would travel on an Australian or a Canadian or French passport.

Levitt:

Meanwhile, the Burgas bombing saw the realization of Iran's new strategy, employed in its shadow war with the West. The IRGC Qods Force and Unit 400 would target diplomats, embassies, and foreign companies, and its Hezbollah proxy would target Israeli civilians.

As we conclude Episode 5, it's striking to look back and take stock of how much Hezbollah's targets have changed since Episode 1. At first, Hezbollah targeted Western interests in Lebanon against the backdrop of Lebanon's destabilizing civil war and Iran's desire to export its revolution. But soon, Hezbollah took this fight abroad, carrying out operations that had nothing to do with Lebanon. Some sought to punish Western countries for supporting Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war, others targeted Israeli interests, and then others still sought to pressure governments to release arrested operatives. But when Hezbollah targets a tour bus full of families with children on vacation a continent away, there's nothing military or strategic about it—it's just terrorism.

Magnus Norell expressed his concern, too:

Norell:

I remember when I was in Lebanon, on many occasions ago, I did meet Hezbollah people in there and other places. When they talked about Israel as an enemy, they very often used Jews interconnectedly with Israel. For them it was not really different. It's the same kind of, you know, that's the enemy. It doesn't matter if they were Jews living in Israel or anywhere else. They're all enemies.

Levitt:

The bus bombing in Burgas, Bulgaria seemed to be the push the EU needed to designate Hezbollah, even if it only designated the group's military wing. But this wasn't the end of Hezbollah in Europe. In fact, authorities would soon uncover a massive Hezbollah drug trafficking and money laundering enterprise that stretched across seven countries. In our next episode, we'll follow the money, and speak with some of the individuals who exposed this network.

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. Dubbing for this episode provided by Washington Institute research intern Lauren von Thaden.

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), 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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