

Review

Reviewed Work(s): Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God by Matthew Levitt

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Source: *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 7, No. 5 (October 2013), pp. 144-146

Published by: Terrorism Research Institute

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26297049>

Accessed: 03-07-2018 14:09 UTC

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Matthew Levitt, *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013.

ISBN: 978-1-62616-013-2. 426 pp. Hardcover, US\$32.95.

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With its enormously unpopular involvement on the side of President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian civil war against the regime's primarily Sunni opposition, the Shi'ite-based Lebanese Hezbollah (some times also transliterated as Hizballah) now finds itself facing the most severe existential crisis since its creation in the early 1980s. Matthew Levitt's "Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God" is a meticulously detailed, comprehensive, and authoritative examination of Hezbollah's origins as an Iranian proxy in Lebanon, its forays into terrorism targeting Western and Israeli interests in Lebanon and abroad (where it also runs extensive criminal and illicit military materiel importing enterprises), and the consolidation of its power among Lebanon's Shi'ite population and the country's political system – all of which are now being threatened by its internally and externally controversial involvement in Syria's civil war.

Mr. Levitt is a former deputy assistant secretary for intelligence and analysis at the U.S. Department of the Treasury who currently serves as a senior fellow and director of a program on counterterrorism at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. To research his book, he accumulated a vast collection of Hezbollah-related newspaper accounts and primary source documents, such as indictments and transcripts of the trials of its members around the world for their illicit activities, which provides the book with in-depth details about how Hezbollah's far-flung terrorist and criminal networks operate.

Hezbollah ("Party of God" in Arabic) has multiple identities, Mr. Levitt writes. It is a social and religious movement representing the country's Shi'ite community (estimated at around 27-30 percent of the total population) and one of the dominant political parties in Lebanon, having won 12 seats in the 128-seat parliament. It is also Lebanon's largest and most powerful para-military force, which was created by Iranian Revolutionary Guards in the early 1980s to serve as its Lebanese Shi'ite proxy, and has since carried out numerous terrorist attacks on behalf of its Iranian patron, which has provided it with hundreds of millions of dollars in funding over the years. Hezbollah is also a proxy of the Syrian regime, and allegedly carried out an assassination in February 2005 on its behalf, killing Rafik Hariri, Lebanon's Sunni Prime Minister, who had vigorously opposed the Syrian government for its involvement in Lebanon.

What is so significant about Hezbollah's current predicament, which Mr. Levitt discusses towards the end of the book, is that over the years the party has branded itself as the primary Islamic resistance to Israeli "aggression" in Lebanon – although with Israeli forces withdrawing

from south Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah has been left, according to Mr. Levitt, with demanding that Israel withdraw from the relatively inconsequential Shebaa Farms, which constitute a tiny uninhabited territory along the common border claimed by Lebanon but occupied by Israel (and which, in any case, is also claimed by Syria).

Although Mr. Levitt's manuscript was completed prior to the recently intensified conflagration between Hezbollah's forces against the Sunni rebels in Syria, which has turned Lebanon's Sunni community against the Shi'ite party (including a series of bombings by Sunni militants against Hezbollah-controlled neighborhoods in Beirut), now the party has lost its brand as the spearhead of Islamic resistance against Israel, with Hezbollah forced (in the most awkward way) to rationalize its new mission of fighting fellow Muslims on behalf of an unpopular Syrian tyrant. Even more consequential for Hezbollah, the families of its soldiers fighting in Syria are likely furious at the party for sacrificing their sons to die unnecessarily in battles against fellow Muslims.

Much of Mr. Levitt's book focuses on Hezbollah's international activities. These consist of criminal and logistical support networks that raise funds for the organization in geographically disparate regions such as the United States (including cigarette smuggling and money laundering enterprises), South America's Tri-Border, Venezuela and Mexico (narcotics trafficking), and Africa (diamond smuggling), with Hezbollah's operatives exploiting Lebanon's diaspora Shi'ite communities in those countries as their safe haven. There are also numerous accounts of the activities of its military procurement agents in the U.S. and Canada – many of whom have been arrested and convicted for such crimes. Mr. Levitt's accounts of these wide-ranging illicit enterprises are riveting.

Hezbollah's most notorious terrorist operation was the October 1983 suicide truck bombing of the U.S. Marine Barracks in Beirut, in which 241 American Servicemen were killed. This was followed by numerous other large-scale terrorist attacks, such as the bombings of Jewish and Israeli targets in Argentina in 1992 and 1994, and its role in the June 1996 bombing by Saudi Hezbollah (its Saudi Arabian counterpart) of the Khobar Towers housing complex in Dhahran, in which 19 U.S. Servicemen were killed, with several hundred others wounded. These terrorist operations are detailed extensively in the book, with new information revealed about the Khobar Towers plot.

Not all of Hezbollah's terrorist operations have succeeded. Mr. Levitt discusses numerous plots against Israeli and Jewish targets in far-away regions such as Azerbaijan, Turkey and Thailand that were thwarted, due either to successful preventative measures or incompetence by the plotters. Such plots have been on the increase in recent years, especially in retaliation for Israel's alleged assassination in February 2008 of Imad Mughniyeh, Hezbollah's long-time terrorist mastermind, with the most recent attack taking place on July 18, 2012 at Sarafovo

Airport in Burgas, Bulgaria, when a bomb allegedly placed by a Hezbollah operative killed several Israeli tourists (while injuring others) who were boarding their resort-bound buses.

Especially intriguing is Mr. Levitt's account of Hezbollah's efforts to recruit Israeli Arabs to spy on its behalf against potential Israeli targets, with some of these individuals recruited during their stays in European countries.

The chapter on Hezbollah's involvement in Iraq provides extensive details about its cooperation with Iranian security forces in training Shi'ite militias in the country, but it lacks any discussion of its response to al Qaida's Iraqi affiliate's escalating attacks against the country's Shi'ite majority, thereby creating a void in Mr. Levitt's coverage of this subject.

Mr. Levitt concludes that "it is high time the international community conducted a thorough and considered discussion of the full range of Hezbollah's 'resistance' activities, and what to do about them. With this book, I hope to kick-start that discussion." (p. 373). This book's meticulous documentation of Hezbollah's terrorist and criminal enterprises makes it required reading for all those concerned about understanding its true nature.

NB: This is a revised version of a review that appeared in 'The Washington Times'.

About the Reviewer: Dr. Joshua Sinai is the Book Reviews Editor of 'Perspectives on Terrorism'.