

Hezbollah Is Not a Threat to America

‘Trumped’ up charges to get at Iran won’t work

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*Featured image: Hezbollah’s supporters at Liberation Day, Bint Jbeil, Lebanon, 25 May 2014.
(Source: Shutterstock/Gabirelle Pedrini)*

*Western-backed militants are in retreat, **Bashar al-Assad** remains president, Hezbollah has stretched its wings regionally, Israeli power is in [decline](#), and Iran is on the rise. Not a pretty result for Washington’s multi-billion dollar investment in the Syrian conflict, especially if it was intended to change the map of the region to favor U.S. interests.*

The Trump administration is therefore moving to hit its regional adversaries on alternative, non-military fronts—mainly, employing the sanctions tool that can cripple economies, besiege communities, and stir up public discontent.

The first step was to decertify the nuclear agreement struck between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1), which would open up a pathway to further U.S. sanctions against Iran.

The second step is to resuscitate the Hezbollah “threat” and isolate the organization using legal maneuvers and financial sanctions—what one pro-U.S. Lebanese Central Bank official calls “the new tools of imperialism.”

The U.S. listed Hezbollah as a [“terrorist organization”](#) 20 years ago this month. Most other states, as well as the United Nations Security Council, have not.

Two weeks ago, at a State Department briefing on the Hezbollah “threat,” National Counterterrorism Center **Director Nicholas J. Rasmussen** tried to [paint a picture](#) of an organization that was directing “terrorism acts worldwide” and posing a threat “to U.S. interests” including “here in the homeland.”

“Prior to September 11,” Rasmussen claimed, “I think everybody knows Hezbollah was responsible for the terrorism-related deaths of more U.S. citizens than any other foreign terrorist organization.”

This was news indeed.

A check with a State Department spokesperson confirmed that the “deaths of more U.S. citizens than any other foreign terrorist organization” claim was in reference to the following

incidents:

“Hezbollah is responsible for multiple large scale terrorist attacks, including the 1983 suicide truck bombings of the U.S. Embassy and U.S. Marine barracks in Beirut; the 1984 attack on the U.S. Embassy annex in Beirut; and the 1985 hijacking of TWA flight 847, during which U.S. Navy diver **Robert Stethem** was murdered,” explained the spokesperson in an email.

The 1983 attack on the Beirut barracks took the lives of 241 Americans. The 1983 U.S. embassy bombing killed 17 Americans, and the 1984 attack on the relocated embassy facilities killed two Americans.

Hezbollah has officially and consistently denied involvement in these suicide bombings and was not even *established* as an organization until 1985. Some write off this important discrepancy by arguing that the bombings would have been conducted by one of Hezbollah’s “precursor organizations,” albeit without providing evidence to prove the point. The U.S. secretary of defense at the time of the bombings, **Caspar Weinberger**, told PBS [almost two decades later](#), in 2001:

“We still do not have the actual knowledge of who did the bombing of the Marine barracks at the Beirut Airport... and we certainly didn’t then.”

What was the U.S. reaction to the Beirut bombings in 1982? Did it retaliate against this phantom Hezbollah or its “precursor” organizations? No. In what was the heaviest shore bombardment by a U.S. naval vessel since the Korean war, the Americans retreating from Lebanon launched 300 missiles inland, killing hundreds of Druze and Shia non-combatants. In their book *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America’s War Against Terrorism*, **David C. Martin** and **John Walcott** write about the incident:

In a nine-hour period, the U.S.S. New Jersey fired 288 16-inch rounds, each one weighing as much as a Volkswagen Beetle. In those nine-hours, the ship consumed 40 percent of the 16-inch ammunition available in the entire European theater...in one burst of wretched excess.

It wasn’t until 2003 that Hezbollah was officially fingered in the embassy bombing. In a 30-page decision that resulted from a lawsuit filed by the victims’ families, U.S. District **Judge Royce C. Lamberth** said Hezbollah [carried out the attack](#) at the behest of Iran and its Ministry of Information and Security. This was based in part with an alleged Hezbollah bomber who said he was directed “to go forward with attacks” in Lebanon at that time. Critics have called this a “show trial,” comparing it to the 2016 U.S. trial that [blamed Iran for the September 11 terrorist attacks](#), despite the fact that 15 Saudis (and no Iranians) were among the hijackers and the U.S. [intelligence community has identified links](#) between Saudi officials and some of the perpetrators.

Meanwhile, the Beirut barracks bombing targeted servicemen from the U.S. and France. This was in the context of Israel’s invasion and occupation of Lebanon in 1982. The Israeli military at the time had been heavily armed and outfitted by the United States. The victims were not non-combatants—they were military forces belonging to governments that were perceived by Lebanese as aiding the aggression against sovereign Lebanon.

Whatever the case and whomever the perpetrator, you don't get to call such an action "terrorism." It's an irrational American narrative that time and time again confounds the Middle East: If the U.S. kills you, you are collateral damage. But if you shoot back, you are a terrorist.

Not Hezbollah

"It's not really Hezbollah's modus operandi," mused former UK **Ambassador Frances Guy** about the massive car bomb that killed former Lebanese **Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri** along Beirut's seafront. We were discussing likely perpetrators during my visit to Beirut in 2010, and Guy told me that the Lebanese resistance group doesn't really "do" high-octane car bombings in public spaces.

Nonetheless, four Hezbollah operatives [stand accused](#) of assassinating Hariri by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), a highly politicized UN investigative body that shifted its focus from one western political adversary to another, until finally settling on Hezbollah.

A revealing [Wikileaks](#) cable from 2008 shows the STL's chief investigator begging the U.S. ambassador to Lebanon to provide the names of "leads" to pursue in Syria. "You are the key player," he implores **Ambassador Michele Sison**, adding that the U.S. has "a big investment in the Tribunal."

In a rare candid moment during an off-the-record meeting in 2011, another senior British official dropped this bombshell:

"The [UN] Tribunal is useful for us to keep the Iranians in line. We don't have too many tools left to do that."

Shortly after my meeting with Ambassador Guy in 2010, she was raked over the coals for a [blog she posted](#) on the passing of Grand **Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah**—a Lebanese Shia cleric the U.S. has consistently, and many believe incorrectly, called "Hezbollah's spiritual leader." She wrote:

When you visited him you could be sure of a real debate, a respectful argument and you knew you would leave his presence feeling a better person...The world needs more men like him willing to reach out across faiths, acknowledging the reality of the modern world and daring to confront old constraints. May he rest in peace.

Israelis were incensed by Guy's admiration for the Hezbollah-supporting cleric, and her blog post was scrubbed. But the UK nevertheless sent an official to pay condolences at Fadlallah's Hassanein mosque, followed by a procession of ambassadors from France, Belgium, Poland, and Denmark. The French and Spanish ambassadors and the UN secretary general sent condolences to Hezbollah too.

[Foreign Policy](#) magazine published a piece upon Fadlallah's death, subtitled: "How the United States got Lebanon's leading Shiite cleric dead wrong—and missed a chance to change the Middle East forever." That cryptic sentence refers, of course, to the monumentally misguided off-the-books assassination attempt against Ayatollah Fadlallah

organized by CIA **Director William Casey** in the aftermath of the barracks and embassy bombings—despite the fact that the U.S., per Weinberger’s claims, had no clue who did not.

According to an [interview](#) Casey gave to the *Washington Post*’s Bob Woodward, the CIA chief arranged for Saudi funding for the covert operation using Lebanese militias to do the dirty work. Fadlallah escaped death, but 80 others died in the southern Beirut suburb that day, including the brother of a young Imad Mughniyeh, who went on to become a leader of Hezbollah’s security operations.

He had been only nine years old in July 1972, when the Israelis set off Beirut’s first car bomb near the southern suburb where he lived, [killing Palestinian poet Ghassan Kanafani](#) and others.

Mughniyeh, you may recall, was himself killed in a car bomb in Damascus in February 2008. In the immediate aftermath of that assassination, U.S. Director of National Intelligence **Mike McConnell** [seemed to misdirect reporters](#):

“There’s some evidence that it may have been internal Hezbollah. It may have been Syria. We don’t know yet, and we’re trying to sort that out.”

No, it wasn’t Hezbollah and it wasn’t Syria. Seven years later, a series of orchestrated leaks to [Newsweek](#) and the [Washington Post](#) revealed that the Mughniyeh car bombing came courtesy of a joint operation by the CIA and Mossad.

No Threat to Americans

“Hezbollah is not plotting against us,” former U.S. **Secretary of State John Kerry** told a small group of anti-government Syrians on the sidelines of the UN’s General Assembly plenary session a year ago.

Kerry’s comments were caught on an audio tape acquired by the [New York Times](#). Asked why the U.S. fights extremist Sunni groups and not Shia ones, he [replied](#):

The reason for [airstrikes against the Sunni Extremists] is because they have basically declared war on us, and are plotting against us, and Hezbollah is not plotting against us— Hezbollah is exclusively focused on Israel, who they’re not attacking now, and on Syria, where they are attacking in support of Assad.

Now, a mere year later, Rasmussen wants us to believe:

“We in the Intelligence Community do, in fact, see continued activity on behalf of Hezbollah here inside the homeland.”

So which is it? Is Hezbollah targeting Americans or not? The evidence of this is [extremely slim](#) and is peppered with more use of qualifying terms—“allegedly,” “reportedly,” “assessments,” “linkages”—than any objective journalist can comfortably swallow. So too are U.S. reports of Hezbollah’s “international terrorist activities.”

American investigative reporter **Gareth Porter** has done deep dives on various allegations

of Hezbollah-linked “terrorism” in [Argentina](#), [Bulgaria](#), [Washington, DC](#), [India](#), [Saudi Arabia](#) and other places. The State Department lists many of these incidents as evidence of the “global threat” Hezbollah poses, but always, upon further scrutiny, the accusations ring hollow.

If there was compelling evidence of the Lebanese resistance group’s involvement in all these attacks, then why have so few nations clamored onto the Hezbollah-is-a-terrorist-organization bandwagon? Until the conflict in Syria kicked off, it was restricted to a smattering of western states and Israel. But relentless [U.S. pressure](#), and the seismic battle currently underway in the Middle East between pro-U.S. states and pro-Iran states vying for hegemony, have produced a smattering few recent additions.

In early 2016, the six-member [Gulf Cooperation Council](#) (GCC) designated Hezbollah a terrorist group, followed a few days later by the 21-member [Arab League](#), with Lebanon and Iraq voting against the measure.

Both organizations are heavily dominated by the immensely wealthy and sectarian (read: anti-Shia) Saudis, financial patrons to many Sunni leaders in the region, and a country entrenched in existential proxy battles in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Bahrain (against Hezbollah ally and U.S. foe, Iran).

What stands out, instead, is the European Union’s fuzzy position on Hezbollah. Despite U.S. insistence that the group in its entirety is a terrorist organization, the EU lists only Hezbollah’s “military wing” as such—and that designation was made only in 2013, when the Syrian conflict exploded and nations started taking hard sides in the Middle East. The “military wing” caveat is a critical distinction that reveals there are more layers to this onion than we see in State Department sound bites.

For Lebanon, Hezbollah is more than just the first Arab force to militarily expel the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) from its territory permanently. In Lebanon, Hezbollah is a political party too, with members of parliament and seats in the cabinet. The group runs a remarkable array of social services across the country, from subsidized schools, hospitals and clinics, to agricultural centers and environmental programs.

Obama’s Deputy National Security Advisor for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism **John Brennan** introduced a more nuanced image of the group to a Washington think tank audience in 2009:

Hezbollah started out as purely a terrorist organization in the early ’80s and has evolved significantly over time. And now it has members of parliament, in the cabinet; there are lawyers, doctors, others who are part of the Hezbollah organization ... And so, quite frankly, I’m pleased to see that a lot of Hezbollah individuals are in fact renouncing that type of terrorism and violence and are trying to participate in the political process in a very legitimate fashion.

Furthermore, Hezbollah’s appeal is not limited to Lebanon’s Shia community. Since 2006, Hezbollah has been in a political alliance with the country’s largest Christian-based political party, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), whose leader, **General Michel Aoun**, is currently president of Lebanon.

Aoun’s close association with Hezbollah is an irritant to Washington, and so the Trump

administration is pushing to tighten the sanctions noose on Lebanon, too. In September, the U.S. House of Representatives [voted](#) to strengthen the 2015 [Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act](#). Congressmen claim the new measures won't harm regular Lebanese civilians, but there is a dangerous trend underway to punish anyone who supports Hezbollah's civic, social, and religious initiatives.

This concern by the Lebanese is fully justified if you listen to State Department Coordinator for Counterterrorism **Nathan A. Sales**, who insists:

Money given to a terrorist organization, even for purportedly non-terroristic purposes, ends up assisting the group's terroristic activities. If you give money to the so-called peaceful side of an organization, money is fungible. And so that frees up resources that can then be used for malign activities that have nothing to do with charitable work or other purposes that we might regard as legitimate. And so it's important for us to maintain that distinction as false. The distinction between political and terroristic is false.

The Lebanese resistance was formed in reaction to Israel's illegal invasion and occupation of Lebanon. As Kerry says, that's where Hezbollah's real fight is—with Israel.

Washington should leave it to the two to duke it out. This is not America's fight. Hezbollah has saved Lebanon—and much of the Levant—not once, but twice, from bloody aggressions. In fact, maybe I'll take them out to lunch in Beirut and pay the bill. I daresay that could be regarded as a financial contribution to Hezbollah, and that would make me a "terrorist," too.

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