



Transcript

How Powerful is Hezbollah? Local, Regional and Global Implications

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Ian Black:

Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for coming to this Chatham House meeting on 'How Powerful Is Hezbollah? Local, Regional and Global Implications'. I'm Ian Black, I work for *The Guardian* newspaper. I write about the Middle East. This is an on-the-record event.

I will now introduce the speakers. From my immediate right, Dr Matthew Levitt, who is the director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at the Washington Institute, and the author of the book which is going to be at the centre of our discussions today: *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God*. Then we have in the middle Professor Michael Kerr, director of the Middle East & Mediterranean Studies Programme and the Centre for the Study of Divided Societies at King's College London. At the far right we have Lord Michael Williams – no relation to his political positions on any subject, I'm sure – distinguished visiting fellow and acting head of the Asia Programme here at Chatham House.

We're going to have a few words from each of the speakers for six to eight minutes, followed by questions and answers. I think I will ask Dr Levitt to begin on this topic and speak for six to eight minutes. Thank you very much.

Matthew Levitt:

It's a pleasure. Thank you all for coming today. Thank you to Chatham House – it's a real honour to be sitting up here with each of you. You do me a great honour by participating in this event. Thanks to Hurst very much for buying the rights to this Georgetown book and publishing it here in the UK.

The topic for today isn't exactly the topic of the book, but I'll tell you a little bit about the book just to set the stage. Hezbollah is lots of things. I state at the very beginning of the book that this book is not intended to replace but complement the vast literature that's already out there on Hezbollah. There is one man here who has a very good book, also published by Hurst, that you should definitely read – I have and I learned a lot.

But the problem with the literature that's been out there is that it is almost solely focused on Hezbollah's activities in Lebanon – which are critical. Hezbollah is a Lebanese entity. Its identity is Lebanese. It is a political party, it is a social welfare movement, it is a standing militia. Anybody who tells you, at either end of the two spectrums, that Hezbollah is only that and is not involved in militancy, political violence or terrorism around the world, it isn't involved in criminal activities in Europe and North America, it isn't involved in

arms procurement or other things, is just patently wrong. And anybody who tells you that they are only a terrorist group or a proxy for Iran is no less wrong.

What you have therefore, and have had for years, in the open literature is a gap. If you looked at the literature you could learn a lot about Hezbollah in Lebanon – accurate stuff, good stuff – and you still didn't have a full, holistic picture of the organization. That's what I tried to fill here. I state this openly in the book: this is not to say that all those things in Lebanon are not true or unimportant. To the contrary, they are very much true and very important. But they are not enough to have a holistic view of Hezbollah.

As I did a literature review after a conference in Washington where a bunch of people from Lebanon stood up and said: Hezbollah has never done an act of militancy abroad ever, and I know that you Americans and Israelis think there's a bogeyman, some terrorist out there named Imad Mughniyah, but we don't think he exists. Well, he did exist. He was assassinated in February 2008. The man who did in fact lead Hezbollah's terrorist wing and whose existence was denied in death was then afterwards embraced in life. That someone could stand up in a conference like this and say that led me to believe, well, what's out there? We did this literature review and we realized there is almost nothing out there on Hezbollah's activities abroad. For people like me, who have had the opportunity and privilege to work on subjects like these in and out of government, there's a need in open-source quite clearly to have a discussion about these things.

So I just started doing interviews around the world. What we end up having is this book, which has Israeli information in it, to be sure, and American and British information in it, to be sure, but also Kuwaiti and Jordanian and Egyptian and Turkish and Chilean and Singaporean and Filipino and Romanian, and a whole lot more. It turns out there are a lot of different countries who have had investigations related to Hezbollah, and understanding these in a serious way without blowing them out of proportion, without screaming 'Fire!' in the cinema, was what we were out to do. The majority of the book is historical. The first chapter and last chapter get to issues today and I think we're going to be talking more about the issues today as we move forward. So I'll just spend the last couple minutes talking about today.

In February 2008 when Mughniyah – who did live – was then killed, Hassan Nasrallah at his funeral – by video-teleconference, for fear he'd be next – said: 'Israel, you want open war? Let it be open war.' There is actually some

interesting evidence now that neither Iran nor Hezbollah fully believed that the Israelis were behind the Mughniyah assassination at the time that he made this threat, though they are clearly quite convinced that the Israelis were behind it now. Nonetheless, you didn't have to wait very long before the first Hezbollah operations targeting senior Israeli officials – some current, some former – took place. The first in Baku, Azerbaijan, targeting the Israeli ambassador there, and then other operations in Africa, a couple in southern Europe, Turkey, Cyprus. That plotline continues today, including two plots within Israel proper. For, as Nasrallah once told a Kuwaiti journalist, to avenge Mughniyah's death that has to be someone of stature.

Meanwhile, since early 2010 Hezbollah has also begun targeting Israeli tourists around the world having nothing to do with Lebanon, nothing to do with Mughniyah at all, and doing it because Iran has asked them to – to put pressure on Israel, to exact revenge, exact a cost on Israel for the actions Iran perceives Israel is doing to undermine Iran's nuclear programme, and perhaps try to deter them from doing further such actions in the future. Nasrallah actually gave an interview to a Kuwaiti newspaper – it was at a very critical time, just before the Burgas (Bulgaria) bombings and just after Hussam Yacoub, a dual Lebanese-Swedish citizen – the second dual Lebanese-Swedish citizen to be arrested abroad in six months (Atris Hussein had been arrested six months earlier in Thailand). Since, both of them, one in Cyprus and one in Thailand, have been convicted and are serving jail terms. There are other cases going on around the world, including Nigeria and others.

After Hussam Yacoub was arrested but before it was made public that he was arrested – so we in the open-source world didn't know about this – and a week and a half before Burgas, Bulgaria, Nasrallah gave an interview to a Kuwaiti journalist who was either very brave or very stupid. He said to Nasrallah: 'so, Nasrallah, I guess you just don't really care about Mughniyah, do you, because you haven't avenged his death.' Nasrallah said very patiently: 'no, we care very much, and all in good time.' So he continued and said: 'well, then I guess you're just not very good because you haven't succeeded in avenging his death.' Nasrallah very patiently says: 'no, we are quite good, thank you, but it also has to be the will of God, and when those two intersect then it will happen.' Which Nasrallah wouldn't like me saying so, but it's almost Talmudic in its logic. Then he volunteers, without a question: 'by the way, if we wanted to hit an Israeli tourist here or there sometime, we can do that. That's not for Mughniyah.'

I saw it at the time, others saw it at the time, and assumed it was bravado. But it wasn't. Already, Hussam Yacoub had been arrested in Cyprus for just this. This was messaging that there were other things going on.

Today we have an overlay of a completely different phenomenon in Syria – also, not only but very much at the behest of Iran – which has presented the greatest challenge, I think, that Hezbollah has ever faced. Again, Hezbollah is not only, as the US intelligence community puts it, in a strategic relationship with Iran, with Iran as the primary partner. They are also deeply Lebanese. They do care about Lebanon and their stature and their place in Lebanon, and what's going on in Syria – far more than attacking Israelis abroad or the Special Tribunal for Lebanon in The Hague or exposures of narcotics activities through the actions targeting the Lebanese-Canadian Bank – what's happening in Syria is challenging their identity as a resistance organization resisting Israel. The Israelis are not in Syria. It's challenging their contention that they're Lebanese and Lebanese first, because what they are doing in Syria is bringing what was a rebellion and became civil war – and was turned into a sectarian blood fest that is not respecting international borders – across the border into Lebanon, and is by no definition in Lebanon's interest. If you're Lebanese, whatever confession or whatever religion, your greatest fear is renewed civil war. Hezbollah's breaking with the government's policy of disassociation is not in any stretch of the imagination in Lebanon's interest.

I'll just conclude with this. Not everything Hezbollah does is because Iran tells it to. Hezbollah has its own interests and has done some attacks abroad out of its own interests. Hezbollah also is not Al-Qaeda in the least and should never be compared to it, and not just because one is Shia and one is Sunni. Al-Qaeda is nihilistic, and if they wanted to get you today and they could tomorrow, they would. Hezbollah is deeply rational. Violence is a legitimate tool – no less, no more than politics or others. They are not looking to do violence per se. If achieving their goals through violence, preferably with reasonable deniability but through violence, is the best way to achieve a goal they won't shy from doing it. But it's not like they're looking to engage in violence all the time. It's a very different type of entity. You can't put all acts of terrorism in the same bucket.

But there is a constant of Hezbollah's relationship with Iran. The relationship is constant even as it has shifted over time, as all relationships do. Today, Hezbollah's relationship with Iran is clearly, I think, as you see in Syria, paramount – even above and beyond its concern over its stature in Lebanon. My conclusion is this: the evidence for this being a relationship and a theme that goes on going, goes back 30 years – 30 years actually last week – to the

bombing of the US Marine barracks and the French military, of the Multinational Force in Beirut. It wasn't the first time Hezbollah targeted Western interests in Lebanon, they had already blown up the US embassy. It wasn't the last time: a few months later they blew up the US embassy annex. Shortly after that they moved from attacking Western interests in Lebanon to attacking Western interests in Kuwait, to attacking Western interests and Israeli interests both in Europe, South America and more. Those first forays were all at Iran's behest.

Among the many pieces of declassified intelligence in the book is this: we know for a fact that three and a half weeks before the Marine barracks bombing, 30 years ago last week, US intelligence intercepted a telephone call between Iran's ministry of intelligence and security in Tehran and Iran's ambassador in Damascus. The Iranian ambassador was told to reach out to Mr [Ibrahim] Moussawi, who at the time was the head of Islamic Amal, the largest of the Shiite militias that were then at that time being brought under what was originally an umbrella of Hezbollah, the Party of God, and fairly quickly became the hierarchically structured organization we know today – and later played quite a role of his own in Hezbollah – and to task Moussawi with 'carrying out a spectacular action against the US Marines'. Hezbollah had no Lebanese or personal interest in Kuwait, in targeting Western interests in Kuwait or the Kuwaiti emir himself – they almost blew him up but they targeted the wrong car in the convoy. It was because Kuwait was supporting Iraq in the Iran–Iraq war. 15 bombings in 1985 and 1986 in Paris – again, nothing to do with Lebanon or for that matter even Israel. It was because France was supporting Iraq with weapons during the Iran–Iraq war. That relationship matters, though it's not the only one that matters.

Hezbollah cares about Lebanon and it is Lebanese, and that's what makes it so difficult to understand. It needs the kind of analysis that we are trying to provide for you today, in Michael's book and my own book, because it is a complicated organization. The world is not like *Homeland*, for those of you who watch it. The real world is complicated and shades of grey. Hezbollah has overt and covert activities. The overt activities, there's lots of literature. My hope is, as I conclude in the book, that with this we will begin to have a discussion about its covert and overt activities both, which affect one another.

Ian Black:

Thank you, Matthew. Now Michael Kerr is going to talk. I think you're going to focus a little more on the internal dynamics in Lebanon?

Michael Kerr:

Thank you, it's very nice to be with you. Thank you to Chatham House for inviting me. Thank you, Matthew, for the book plug. My book on Lebanon is also published by Hurst. I'm going to make a few points about Hezbollah's present local, domestic and regional predicaments.

Looking back to 2006, Hezbollah famously won over the Arab street by withstanding the might of the Israeli army. The West and anti-Iranian Arab regimes in the Middle East had all wanted to see Hezbollah crushed. When I visited south Lebanon shortly after that conflict, I was amazed to see posters being sold on billboards of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Gamal Abdel Nasser on the same page. Hezbollah had become the most influential party in Lebanon. Rising from the ashes of Lebanon's civil war to the dizzy heights of pan-Arab populism was really no mean feat, and we shouldn't forget that, for a Shia Islamist party – albeit with Syrian sponsorship and consistent spiritual, financial, military and political backing from Iran.

Seven summers later, after this surprising 2006 victory/survival, Hezbollah seems to have completely lost the ephemeral Arab street, which is more concerned with its own revolts, having forgotten the Arab–Israeli conflict for a moment. It has lost the influence of the Syrian master that nurtured it after the civil war and brought it from militia to kingmaker in Lebanese domestic politics. And it appears to have been sidetracked or somewhat lost its *raison d'être* in freeing Arab lands from Israeli control. It is presently fighting, uncomfortably, on two fronts in Lebanon. Internally, it is providing much-needed support for the Lebanese army against what Hassan Nasrallah describes as Takfiri extremists and radicals. Externally, it is fighting against the Free Syrian Army and Sunni Islamist groups in Syria, in order to maintain key strategic routes to Beirut and Lebanon – and more than that, in the outskirts of Damascus, it would seem.

But Lebanon must be particularly concerned about its southern border. A couple of interesting things I noticed in August was that when Israel was hit by a couple of rockets, it then retaliated by bombing the pro-Syrian Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine general command in Lebanon, and not Hezbollah. Hezbollah did not receive the blame. Subsequently, a Hezbollah stronghold in southern Beirut is car-bombed and 27 people are killed, and equally notably Hassan Nasrallah does not blame the Israelis but the Takfiris. So I'm saying it probably suits Israel for Hezbollah to be tied up doing what the Lebanese and Syrian armies are incapable of doing on their own: dealing with Sunni Islamist factions that threaten Hezbollah's dominance in Lebanon and its allies in Syria. I suppose the Israelis might say they're content to see

them cancelling each other out. Moreover, opening a third Hezbollah front in southern Lebanon would weaken the Assad regime at a time that it is engaging in an internationally-led chemical weapons decommissioning process. It would certainly risk pushing Lebanon over the brink into civil war. Of course, the Israelis would be blamed. Keeping Lebanon's southern border quiet might well have been part of the recent US–Russian deal over Syria, but that's my own speculation.

However, the whole conflict represents considerable challenges and deep problems for Hezbollah and its future in Lebanon. There are divisions within the party over its engagement in Syria. They have suffered considerable losses – it's impossible to tell exactly how many but there have been many funerals, and some of high-ranking people. Grassroots support for its engagement in Syria is lukewarm at best. Its leadership will of course argue that it is defending Lebanon's borders, but in doing so has broken Lebanon's old National Pact by directly involving the state in an intra-Arab conflict, in Syria's civil war. The more it becomes involved – and there surely will be more significant battles in Syria within which Hezbollah is a key actor – the more it becomes embroiled, the more obvious it is that Hezbollah is acting in Iran's interests and putting Iranian foreign policy goals ahead of Lebanon's security and sovereignty. This clearly risks civil war in Lebanon, a war that Hezbollah would ultimately be blamed for by Lebanon's non-Shia communities. Yet it has very little choice, as Iran – with the collapse or weakening of the Assad regime – is the only constant supporter that Hezbollah has in the region or internationally.

Having said all that, the détente between the US and Russia over Syria seems to me to be a big plus for Hezbollah, as is the decommissioning process which will somewhat reduce – but not entirely – Israeli fears that these weapons will fall into the hands of Islamist radicals. So much so that Nasrallah has recently taken to chastising the Saudis for their negative reaction to the proposed Geneva II process in November this year and their unwillingness to countenance any form of political solution to the Syrian crisis – a political solution which Hezbollah desperately wants and desperately needs.

So in the short term, thinking about what the future holds for Hezbollah – and in conclusion – its main priority will be, I think, to avoid opening up a third front with Israel, while it will continue to support the Lebanese army in regulating or keeping a lid on the domestic factions that are challenging it and opportunists who might try to provoke an Israeli response against Hezbollah at a moment of great tension. It will continue to support the Syrian regime in

containing the Free Syrian Army and clearing out the Islamist factions from Lebanon's border areas, whilst probably continuing to blame these internal and external threats on Saudi-sponsored Salafists rather than the Israelis.

In the longer term – and it's difficult to predict – fearing a military response from Israel, Iran would be very reluctant to openly put troops on the ground in Syria if a political solution in Geneva fails and the tables begin to turn. Thus, in the absence of a positive outcome to Geneva II, I think Hezbollah will certainly become deeper and deeper and more embroiled in the Syrian civil war. Finally, I think it's going to be very difficult for Hezbollah to rebuild its Lebanese credentials on the Arab street and in Lebanon, as the Sunni–Shia split in Lebanon has intensified and it is very close to the bone. But a political solution would help Nasrallah, and of course Hezbollah has reinvented itself a number of times in the past. Yet it has not faced internal and external existential threats of this magnitude since 2006, and that is without even factoring Israel into the equation. Thank you.

Ian Black:

Michael, thank you very much. Now the next and final Michael. I should say, it doesn't say on the programme as it should – Michael Williams was the UN secretary general's special representative in Lebanon for two or three years.

Lord Williams:

Three years. Thank you, Ian. Let me say at the outset and congratulate Matthew on his book. It makes a real contribution certainly to the study of Hezbollah but also to our knowledge of the way it works externally and the way it deploys violence and terrorism.

My background and my comments derive, as Ian said at the outset, from my experience as a UN official in dealing with Hezbollah over several years. This started in 2006 after the war between Israel and Hezbollah and the adoption of Resolution 1701. I was then director for the Middle East and Asia in the Department of Political Affairs in New York. One of the files that Kofi Annan gave me to handle was the issue which had sparked the war, the casus belli, namely the attack on an Israeli patrol and the abduction of two Israeli soldiers. My involvement grew from 2008 to 2011, when I was the secretary general's personal representative and also the senior political official of the UN in Lebanon, which was a very fascinating experience. I dealt with Hezbollah, both with the public wing of the organization and also, if you like, the darker

side, the security side. I should say at the outset this was with the full knowledge of the state of Israel, because how else would you resolve the issue of the fate of those soldiers? Indeed, one of the sort of privileges of my post was I could cross the blue line between Lebanon and Israel. You could have lunch in Beirut and dinner in Tel Aviv. As one Israeli general said to me, I know where the food was better.

Matthew's book looks at the external activities of Hezbollah – the terrorism, the violence that it has deployed. But as I think he himself has acknowledged, one has to understand the roots of Hezbollah. Its politics – Michael has addressed some of that. This is the political voice of the Shia community, or the vast majority of Shia in Lebanon. The only other party really is Amal, the party of the speaker, Nabih Berri, now in his late seventies – and I think a party, after his passing away, which will decline. Hezbollah will become stronger politically rather than less. Its heartland we know – it's the Dahiya suburbs, south Beirut; southern Lebanon, particularly south of the Litani river; and the Bekaa Valley. In these areas it is very strong. Correspondingly, the Lebanese state is virtually absent.

We had hoped, those of us involved in the 1701 resolution in 2006, that the resolution in itself would go some way to trying to build anew, as it were, the Lebanese state. For the first time in decades, I think 30 years, the Lebanese army was deployed in the south. We envisaged that other parts of the state apparatus would also move south but that did not happen. Hospitals, orphanages, centres for the disabled – all these things are run by Hezbollah. They're not run by the Lebanese state. Indeed, I served in Lebanon with three Lebanese prime ministers. The first was Fouad Siniora, then there was Saad Hariri, and most recently Najib Mikati. I could not get those first two prime ministers ever to visit southern Lebanon. They never did. We're not talking about Australia here, this is a tiny country. You can go for coffee mid-morning down in Naqoura and come back for a late lunch in Beirut. They would not go. With Najib Mikati I did manage to get him to go, but that was interesting. He came to Naqoura, which is the headquarters of UNIFIL (United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon) right close to the blue line, and met with UN soldiers and commanders there, but did not meet with local personalities. All of them would say: we can meet with Hezbollah but only in Beirut. The state, which is weak nationally but especially in the south, has left this vacuum which Hezbollah has very ably filled.

Another point I'd like to make is the Christian population in Lebanon. There's a bloc of Christians in Lebanon, supporters of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) of General Michel Aoun, which is in political alliance with Hezbollah. In

fact, many of their seats in parliament are because of Hezbollah support. Often with some of these people, with Aoun himself, I would sort of challenge him on this: 'why are you linked up with Hezbollah? You know the terrorism and the rest of it.' He said – and in a way it's an echo of what's happening in Syria – he said: 'it's our fear of where the Christians will be in the Middle East.' He pointedly would often refer to Iraq after the US–UK invasion of 2003 and how at least 50 per cent of Iraqi Christians, whose community of course goes back centuries, have left the country. He said: 'we will not have that fate happen here, and in that regard our alliance with Hezbollah is very critical.'

A few words about the relationship, if one can call it that, between Israel and Hezbollah. One of the remarkable things is that 1701 has held and it's held well. It's now well over seven years since that war. There's a crude form of deterrence which applies. Hezbollah officials talk about this privately. In one remarkable speech, I think in 2010, Nasrallah addressed it. He said: 'we all know the dangers of another war. If that happens, the Israelis will attack Hariri Airport in Beirut, we will attack Ben Gurion Airport. Then the Israelis will attack our two power stations' – which are very old, from the 1950s I think – 'and then we will attack theirs.' There was a sense of mischief and humour even in some of his speeches. He said: 'you know, dear viewers and listeners, Israel has far greater infrastructure than we have. It will be a long time before we run out targets.'

But behind this, we are talking about a cessation of hostilities which has held. What we could not achieve was a formal ceasefire. But [Ehud] Olmert, the former prime minister, once said to me: 'you know, Ambassador, for the first time in 30 years, we have quiet on our northern border.' There have been incidents, some of which Hezbollah may have known of, but none of those incidents, as far as I recall, have resulted in Israeli fatalities. Some injuries, and there was at least one case I know where Hezbollah killed a Palestinian who was going to be involved in an incident. So they police that cessation of hostilities. But the shame is, of course, we've not been able to build from that onto a formal ceasefire or to expand the capacity of the Lebanese state. Without that, Hezbollah will exist, I'm afraid, for a very long time and is likely to continue to engage in the sort of activities very well documented by Matthew's book.