



RESEARCH BRIEFING

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IRAN & HIZBOLLAH'S GLOBAL TERRORISM: PATTERNS & METHODS

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Front cover: Bomb attack by Hizbollah in Burgas, Bulgaria 2012
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INTRODUCTION

In June 2019, the *Sunday Telegraph* reported that the UK authorities had foiled the stockpiling of explosives, by Hizbollah, in London in the autumn of 2015. Such claims may come as a shock, but they should not be a surprise when placed in the context of Hizbollah's global activities.

The cell had reportedly stockpiled three tonnes¹ of ammonium nitrate in north west London. While the *Telegraph* referred to this operation as a plot, it also acknowledged that "there was no evidence Britain itself would have been the target". The report emphasised that Hizbollah's alleged activities were at the pre-planning stage, and no target had been selected.

Despite no official confirmation regarding the details of these claims, the implications are clear: Hizbollah remains a security threat.

For over 30 years, from the 1980s to the present, Hizbollah and Iran have been linked to numerous terrorist attacks and plots worldwide, including an historic nexus to the UK. Hizbollah and Iran are also linked to at least 50 incidents relating to the targeting of, and gathering information on, Jewish communities and Israelis abroad.

No information suggests that Hizbollah's reported 2015 operation in the UK considered these types of targets. If accurate, the alleged operation is another example, among a mounting evidence-base, which demonstrates the extent and nature of Hizbollah and Iran's global capabilities. This briefing provides some essential context of their international modus operandi.

The revelation reported in the *Sunday Telegraph*



HIZBOLLAH'S OPERATION IN LONDON, 2015

Ben Riley-Smith, the US editor of the *Telegraph*, published the report on Hizbollah's alleged activities in the UK in 2015.² His Twitter thread also gave additional details on the nature of the plot and security operation.

In the summer or autumn of 2015, a foreign intelligence agency reportedly informed UK authorities that a Hizbollah cell, based in north west London, was in the pre-planning stages

authorities wishing to gain useful intelligence on Hizbollah operations, rather than pursue a criminal prosecution. Neither the name of the suspect nor the addresses of the locations have been disclosed.

If this alleged stockpiling of ingredients for explosives was part of an attack plot, then it was at an early stage, and no target had been chosen. Riley-Smith, moreover, notes that no evidence showed that Britain itself was the target. London may even have been used as a logistics or transit point. Then Prime Minister David Cameron and then Home Secretary Theresa May were personally briefed, but neither then Mayor Boris Johnson nor his successor, Sadiq Khan, were apparently made aware. In fact, MPs were also reportedly not informed, most likely due to the sensitivity of the operation. After the story broke, MPs Joan Ryan³ and Tom Tugendhat⁴ each wrote about the potentially serious nature of these revelations.

Furthermore, as Riley-Smith wrote, the essential context is that, "the London cell was not alone". He correctly noted other Hizbollah and Iranian-linked plots and attacks in Europe and Thailand, as well as the fact that in May 2015, a few months before the London cell was foiled, a Hizbollah operative in Cyprus was discovered with 8.2 tonnes of ammonium nitrate also hidden in ice packs. At that time, Hizbollah was already engaging in a global effort to plan and undertake attacks, mostly targeting Israeli interests or Jewish locations. These details are explored later in this report.

of terrorist activity or weapons stockpiling. This tip-off led to, as the *Telegraph* reported, a months-long covert operation by MI5 and the Metropolitan Police Counter Terrorism Command (SO15). Finally, on 30 September 2015, Met Police officers reportedly raided four locations (three businesses and a residential home) in north west London and found three metric tonnes of ammonium nitrate (in an unmixed state) that was stored in ice packs. A man, aged 40, was arrested under section 5 of the Terrorism Act 2006, pertaining to the preparation for terrorism acts, but he was later released without charge. Riley-Smith suggests this may be due to

Security footage of the alleged Hizbollah operative who perpetrated the 2012 Bulgaria bombing targeting Israelis



THE IRAN-HIZBOLLAH UK FOOTPRINT

British government and security officials rarely comment publicly on Iranian or Hizbollah activities in the UK. In January 2018, Ben Wallace MP, the Minister for Security, told Parliament that the Home Office "department does not collect data on specific numbers of Hezbollah members or supporters in the UK."⁵ Unlike recent incidents in Europe implicating Iran and Hizbollah in terrorist operations,⁶ no public information specifically linked them to similar operations in the UK – until now.

That said, a fairly obscure House of Commons Library document, published in March 2014, discussed the presence of Hizbollah in the UK.⁷ It acknowledged that it operates in Britain in both a semi-overt manner (via Hizbollah's Foreign Relations Department) and a covert manner (via Hizbollah's External Security Organisation, the unit that undertakes attacks abroad). In particular, the document states as follows:

"[Hizbollah's] terrorist wing, the ESO (also known as Islamic Jihad) has been responsible for car bombing, hijacking and kidnapping Western and Israeli/Jewish targets in Israel, Western Europe and South America."

"There is a small, overt Hizbollah presence in the UK with extensive links to Hizbollah's Foreign Relations Department (FRD), which is distinct from the ESO. There is some indication of occasional ESO activity in the UK."

Again, if reports concerning Hizbollah's 2015 operation in London are accurate, then it would surely seem to constitute an example of "ESO activity in the UK" – or, to put it bluntly, it could be an example of Hizbollah gathering bomb-making material in the UK with the possible intention to undertake an attack here or elsewhere.

Furthermore, in May 2019, the *Times* reported on alleged hostile Iranian state activities, involving agents spying on and infiltrating regime opposition groups in Britain.⁸

Remarkably, the report included a rare public confirmation, by an anonymous British security source, of Iranian espionage activities in the UK: "British intelligence services are acutely aware of the espionage threat and hostile state activity from Iranian actors in the UK. MI5 regards Iran as being very active in trying to intimidate and silence dissidents in the UK."

Aftermath of the bomb attack on the headquarters of AMIA in 1994
Copyright: Wikimedia



But this too is not entirely new. The historical record shows earlier instances in which Iran and Hizbollah have engaged in terrorist and criminal operations in (or linked to) the UK. For example:

- **October 2016:** A Colombia-based Hizbollah operative, who had numerous citizenships including British and who may have lived in London, was arrested in the US on drug money laundering charges.⁹
- **October 2015:** US and French law enforcement ran an operation against two Hizbollah associates in Paris conspiring to launder narcotics proceeds and traffic arms globally.¹⁰ This included links with a UK-based Hizbollah associate who laundered £30,000 for an undercover DEA agent.
- **January 2001:** Israeli authorities arrested a British-Lebanese dual national, Jihad (Gerard) Shuman, who entered Israel on a valid British passport and reportedly planned to perpetrate terrorist missions and attacks in Israel.¹¹ Hizbollah ESO recruited him in Lebanon, before dispatching him back to the UK where he received logistical support from Hizbollah's network in London. He then travelled from the UK to Israel in December 2000.
- **July 1994:** Some authorities have discussed whether Hizbollah may have been involved in the double car bombing of the Israeli Embassy and Balfour House, a Jewish community building, in London on 26-27 July 1994. For example, the Argentinian Attorney General's indictment for the 1994 AMIA bombings in Buenos Aires claims that an Iranian intelligence operative, Mohammed Hussein Rahmanian, was reportedly present in the vicinity of the Israeli Embassy in London ten days prior to the attacks.¹² The indictment suggests that Iran and Hizbollah may have played a role in the Israeli Embassy bombing, and the US State Department seems

to concur.¹³ However, the official British position ruled out Hizbollah involvement, and the two convicted for conspiracy to cause explosions, Samar Alami and Jawad Botmeh, were not connected to Hizbollah. According to Professor Christopher Andrew, in his definitive history of MI5, Hizbollah was planning an attack that summer, but it was a different operation: "Suspicion initially fell on Hizbollah, which had already planned one attack on the Israeli embassy, successfully disrupted by the Security Service. Subsequent intelligence, however, indicated that, though Hizbollah had indeed been planning another attack, it had been both surprised and annoyed to be upstaged by a secular Palestinian group which struck first".¹⁴

- **May 1992:** MI5 identified that Mahdi Seyed Sadighi, a London-based operative of the Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), was ordered to collect operational intelligence on Salman Rushdie.¹⁵ Both Sadighi and another operative (operating under a student cover) were expelled from the UK. In the months afterwards, other Iranian intelligence-linked operations targeted Rushdie.
- **August 1989:** Hizbollah operative Mustafa Mahmoud Mazeher was killed when an explosive device in his suitcase accidentally detonated inside the Paddington Hotel in London. He planned to target Salman Rushdie.¹⁶
- **October 1987:** Iranian monarchists living in the UK in exile were shot in the head in their London flat.¹⁷
- **July 1987:** Car bomb detonation in London injured a former Iranian cabinet member and British chairman of the National Movement of the Iranian resistance.¹⁸

IRAN & HIZBOLLAH'S TERRORIST MODUS OPERANDI

Hizbollah and Iran possess international terrorist capabilities. They continue to pose a viable, global terrorist threat to their primary targets: Iranian dissidents living abroad, diaspora Jewish communities and Israeli interests worldwide. Both Iran and Hizbollah operate globally and have a history of engaging in covert terrorist activities (external "special operations") and criminal endeavours. Iran, in fact, utilises terrorism as an instrument of foreign policy to achieve regime objectives, using Iranian state resources and government structures to commit acts of terrorism abroad.¹⁹

Iran's operations are generally organised, handled or perpetrated by operatives from Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Qods Force (or Quds Force). Meanwhile, Hizbollah's External Security Organisation organises Hizbollah operations. In turn, the Qods Force handles most of Iran's external operations, involving sabotage, espionage, assassinations and attacks. In foreign operations, MOIS often provides the Qods Force with logistical support and handles the communications of operations that involve operatives from the Qods Force and Hizbollah.²⁰

Hizbollah has long been assessed as a terrorist organisation with one of the broadest global reaches in the world, and with the capability to attack globally. The 2019 intelligence assessment of the US Office of National Intelligence stated that both Iran and Hizbollah will continue to develop global terrorist capabilities.²¹ A recent assessment by the New York Police Department's Intelligence Division likewise assessed that, "Hizbollah possesses a vibrant global network with cells operating on five continents".²² This includes networks of cells and terrorist infrastructures in Europe, United Kingdom, USA and Canada.

To achieve their aims, Iran and Hizbollah employ a range of modus operandi as part of their information-gathering and attack preparations. Iranian and Hizbollah operatives are known for keeping a "bank of targets" as "on-the-shelf" options ready to be activated when an order is given to attack. In this sense, they seek to establish "command day capabilities" and build a capacity to undertake attacks worldwide.²³

This operational behaviour is encapsulated in the case of Ali Kourani who was convicted in the USA in May 2019. Kourani was a member of Hizbollah's ESO and was recruited and trained to prepare and carry out acts of terrorism in the USA. He undertook a variety of covert activities, including collecting information on security procedures and structures at airports in the USA and Canada.²⁴

In 2018 and early 2019, numerous European authorities arrested, expelled or blamed Iran for engaging in terrorist-related activities in their countries:

- **Netherlands (January 2019):** Dutch intelligence stated that it has "strong indications" that Iran was involved in the assassinations of two Dutch nationals of Iranian descent who were opponents of the regime. The murders took place in November 2017 and December 2015.
- **Albania (December 2018):** Albania expelled two Iranian operatives plotting terrorist attacks against the Israel-Albania World Cup match in 2016.
- **Denmark (September 2018):** Danish authorities foiled an Iranian-intelligence assassination plot directed at an Iranian dissident leader living in the country.

- **France (June 2018):** French and German authorities disrupted a bombing attack that was targeting the gathering of an anti-Iran regime conference in France. The Belgian couple in possession of TATP explosives were arrested in France, while their handler, an Iranian intelligence agent posing as a diplomat in Austria, was arrested in Germany for providing them the explosives.
- **Germany (January 2018):** German special police teams raided homes and offices of 10 suspected Qods Force agents who are accused of collecting information on the Israeli Embassy in Berlin, as well as Jewish community locations, including nurseries.

Indeed, over the last 30 years, Iranian and Hizbollah terrorist activities have demonstrated a variety of modus operandi in preparing for attacks and in collecting information against targets abroad. This includes the following methods of operation, among many others:

- ▶ Undertaking intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) activities on targets
- ▶ Long-term pre-attack planning over the course of several months or years
- ▶ Infiltrating Iranian dissident groups by using cover stories and coercive tactics
- ▶ Using sophisticated and plausible diplomatic, business, education and other covers to disguise operatives' true intentions
- ▶ Assembling "human target packages" for the purposes of neutralising adversaries
- ▶ Employing counter-surveillance tradecraft and sophisticated operational security
- ▶ Recruiting operatives worldwide, especially those with dual nationalities and Western passports

Hossam Taleb Yaakoub being led by police in Cyprus during his trial
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HIZBOLLAH & IRAN TARGET JEWISH COMMUNITIES WORLDWIDE

Hizbollah and Iran have been responsible for numerous anti-Jewish terrorist attacks worldwide. They are linked to some 50 incidents against Jewish communities and Israelis abroad. For years, CST emphasised the nature of this threat in conversations with MPs, civil servants, UK governments and Police. CST also long-pressed for Hizbollah to be fully banned in the UK and, in February 2019,²⁵ welcomed the UK Government's order banning Hizbollah in its entirety.²⁶

Hizbollah's first known anti-Jewish attack in Europe was in July 1985. Hizbollah planted IEDs at the Great Synagogue in Copenhagen (and an American-linked target), injuring 22 and damaging a Jewish old age home. The most catastrophic attack was the July 1994 vehicle-borne suicide bombing at the AMIA Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a sophisticated attack that was ordered by Iranian government leaders, coordinated by Iranian intelligence and executed by Hizbollah.

Iranian and Hizbollah-linked attacks, plotting and planning have continued apace ever since. CST's report 'Case Against Hizbollah' (January 2018) detailed nearly 30 examples of executed, failed and foiled attacks worldwide.²⁷ In 2012 alone, Iran and Hizbollah were linked to incidents in India, Georgia, Thailand, Singapore, Cyprus, Azerbaijan, Bulgaria and Kenya, all of which were directed at either Israeli interests abroad or Jewish communities.²⁸ Dr Matthew Levitt, an expert in terrorism and Hizbollah, explained the reason for the rise in tempo of Iran and Hizbollah operations against Israeli and Jewish targets in 2012 (and in the years after). He showed

that the rise was attributed to a decision within Iran's leadership in 2010 to undertake a campaign of violence based on a three-tiered threat stream: (1) Israeli tourists, (2) Israeli government/state targets and (3) locations or individuals representative of Israel or Jewish communities. According to Levitt, Hizbollah was tasked with targeting Israeli tourists, while a special external operations unit within the Qods Force (Unit 400) was assigned to target Israeli, US, Gulf states' and British interests.

Many of these examples highlight one of the primary features of Hizbollah and Iranian modus operandi: using trained operatives and/or local proxies to undertake hostile reconnaissance against Jewish individuals and community locations worldwide, including in Europe:

- In August 2018, for example, the US government charged two Iranians with allegedly acting on behalf of the Iranian government and conducting hostile surveillance of Israeli and Jewish facilities.²⁹ This reportedly involved undertaking hostile reconnaissance against Jewish religious and cultural centres in Chicago, such as taking photographs of the security around one of the buildings.
- In March 2017, a German court convicted a Pakistani national on charges of spying for Iran's Qods Force after he had collected information on, and taken hundreds of photographs of, Jewish and Israeli possible targets for attacks in Germany and France.³⁰

THE CYPRUS PLOTS, 2012 AND 2015

As the *Sunday Telegraph*³¹ piece noted, a 2015 Hizbollah plot in Cyprus saw a similar method of operation to the case in London. The latter incident involved 26-year-old Hussein Bassam Abdallah, a dual Lebanese-Canadian national. As part of his operational cover, Hizbollah provided Abdallah with a forged British identity card that he used to rent a storage facility. He was convicted in Cyprus after pleading guilty to all criminal charges, including membership of Hizbollah and confessing that the bomb-making material he stockpiled in Larnaca was to be used to attack Israeli or Jewish interests in Cyprus. An international arrest warrant was issued for a Lebanese-French dual national who was living in France and teaching at a French university at the time of the plot; and this individual had reportedly purchased the house in Cyprus in which the ammonium nitrate ice packs were stored.³² Cypriot arrest warrants were also issued for two other Lebanese Hizbollah operatives wanted for their alleged roles in the plot.

The 2015 case, however, was not the only significant Hizbollah-related incident in Cyprus. A few years earlier, on 7 July 2012, Cypriot authorities arrested Hossam Taleb Yaakoub, a 24-year-old Lebanese citizen travelling on a Swedish passport, in Limassol on suspicion of planning a terrorist attack.

CONCLUSION

Evidence of Hizbollah and Iranian international terrorist activity is abundant and clear. Many questions remain about Hizbollah's alleged London operation. If true, who were the perpetrators? How large was the cell? What type of logistical support did they receive in the UK? What targets (if any) were considered? Did they conduct hostile reconnaissance here and, if so, against whom and how? Answers to these questions may not be answered any

Yaakoub had photographs of Israeli targets in his possession, including a notebook that contained registration numbers of tourist buses carrying Israelis and Israeli flights to and from the Island. In fact, he was arrested just eleven days before the suicide bomb attack on a bus in Burgas Airport (18 July) that killed Israeli tourists and the bus driver.

During Yaakoub's trial, in February and March 2013, he admitted to being a member of Hizbollah and conducting hostile reconnaissance of areas frequented by Israeli tourists. During police interviews, Yaakoub admitted that one of his Hizbollah handlers wanted him "to spot Israeli restaurants in Limassol, where Jews eat kosher", and that he "was just collecting information about the Jews, and this is what my organization is doing, everywhere in the world."³³ Yaakoub told the court that he had been a member of Hizbollah since 2007 and had acted as a courier in Europe. The court convicted Yaakoub of helping plan attacks against Israeli tourists in Cyprus. This plot also demonstrated the sophisticated tradecraft Hizbollah employs in training operatives to resist interrogation, create detailed 'legends' for their cover stories and engage in various ISR techniques.³⁴

time soon. Nevertheless, they emphasise a key point: for CST and other Jewish security professionals, Hizbollah's jihadi terrorism has been a concern long before al-Qaeda, ISIS and other Salafi-Jihadis started attacking diaspora Jewish communities. This sober assessment suggests that Iranian and Hizbollah-linked terrorism will remain a serious concern for many years to come.

NOTES

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CST'S MISSION

- To work at all times for the physical protection and defence of British Jews.
- To represent British Jews on issues of racism, antisemitism, extremism, policing and security.
- To promote good relations between British Jews and the rest of British society by working towards the elimination of racism, and antisemitism in particular.
- To facilitate Jewish life by protecting Jews from the dangers of antisemitism, and antisemitic terrorism in particular.
- To help those who are victims of antisemitic hatred, harassment or bias.
- To promote research into racism, antisemitism and extremism; and to use this research for the benefit of both the Jewish community and society in general.
- To speak responsibly at all times, without exaggeration or political favour, on antisemitism and associated issues.

 WEBSITE www.cst.org.uk

 FACEBOOK **Community Security Trust**

 TWITTER **@CST_UK**  YOUTUBE **CSTmedia**

 NATIONAL EMERGENCY NUMBER (24-hour) **0800 032 3263**
LONDON (Head Office) **020 8457 9999**
MANCHESTER (Northern Regional Office) **0161 792 6666**