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Hezbollah's Operations and Networks in the United States: Two Decades in Reviews

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**HEZBOLLAH'S OPERATIONS AND
NETWORKS IN THE UNITED STATES: TWO
DECADES IN REVIEW**

**ANYSSIA S. KOKINOS, NAKISSA P. JAHANBANI, JON LEWIS,
and DEVORAH MARGOLIN || June 2022**

Program on Extremism
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY



Combating Terrorism Center
AT WEST POINT



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About the Program on Extremism

The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University provides analysis on issues related to violent and nonviolent extremism. The Program spearheads innovative and thoughtful academic inquiry, producing empirical work that strengthens extremism research as a distinct field of study. The Program aims to develop pragmatic policy solutions that resonate with policymakers, civic leaders, and the general public. The views and conclusions contained in this document are those of the authors and should not be interpreted as necessarily representing the official policies, either expressed or implied, of The George Washington University or the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point. The details contained in the court documents are allegations. Defendants are presumed innocent unless and until proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt in a court of law. This material is based upon work supported by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security under Grant Award Number 20STTPC00001-01.

About the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point

The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point educates, advises, and conducts research to equip present and future leaders with the intellectual tools necessary to understand the challenges of terrorism and counterterrorism.

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Executive Summary

- This report aims to provide a comprehensive examination of Hezbollah-affiliated activity in America by examining all publicly-known federal criminal cases from 1997 to 2020 in the United States with a concrete link to Hezbollah. The authors found evidence of 128 individuals that meet these criteria.
- The majority of cases involve small, centralized hubs of Hezbollah operatives, who engage in illegal activities in conjunction with wider criminal enterprises to create an array of networks across America. These relationships of convenience have resulted in Hezbollah operatives collaborating with financially-motivated individuals, criminals, and other non-ideological actors, in furtherance of a broader operational mission. These arrangements, in turn, have allowed Hezbollah to profit financially and deepen its influence in the United States, even as many such cases display minimal direct connective links to the terrorist organization itself.
- Based on analysis of the cases, the authors identified two distinct categories of participation in Hezbollah-affiliated activity in America: individuals who provided *financial* support to Hezbollah (109 individuals), and those who provided *operational* support (19 individuals).
 - 87% of individuals provided financial or material support to Hezbollah as money launderers, bundlers, fraudsters, and goods smugglers, with many raising funds from others to be provided to Hezbollah or directly providing funds to the group themselves. This finding supports existing assessments that Hezbollah's primary aspirations in the United States are to use it as a financial support hub.
 - 13% of individuals in the dataset engaged in operational conduct in support of Hezbollah, including as human smugglers, weapons procurers, pre-operational surveillance, and travelers who sought to join the group. Despite the prominence of Hezbollah's financing activities in the United States, elements within Hezbollah remain intent on developing the capacity and capability to plot attacks on U.S. soil.
- The vast majority (92%) of cases involved network activities between two or more individuals. Larger geographic hubs operated out of Michigan (55 cases), California (19 cases), North Carolina (16 cases), and New York (15 cases). 90% of individuals operating in these four states and 76% of all cases in this dataset were a part of just six networks.
 - Large parts of network activity involved individuals with limited evidence to suggest a direct link to Hezbollah. As discussed above, these individuals actively collaborated with persons with an evidenced connection to the terrorist organization, and in many cases appear to be driven primarily by financial rather than ideological motivations. This in and of itself is a manifestation of Hezbollah's activities in the United States, which sought to use local criminal actors in furtherance of their illegal activities. Further, in several significant instances, network activity often involved friends or family members engaged in organized conspiracies.

- 84% of individuals were convicted and sentenced to an average of 49.6 months in prison. Notably, only 19 of the 128 individuals (14%) were charged with providing material support to Hezbollah, while the others were charged with non-terrorism related offenses. Individuals sentenced on terrorism material support charges received an average sentence length of 85.6 months, almost twice as long as the average sentence for individuals not sentenced on material support charges.
- Hezbollah-affiliated individuals were primarily male (83%) and tended to be older (average age: 37) than members of other designated foreign terrorist organizations in the US, in particular the Islamic State (average age: 28).

Hezbollah and the United States

While groups like the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda have dominated headlines for years, other terrorist organizations such as Lebanese Hezbollah (or simply Hezbollah) have developed a significant support base in the United States.¹ From fundraising rings to weapons procurement and more, Hezbollah's influence spans across the country, even if the group's activities rarely make the front pages. While Hezbollah has not executed a successful terrorist attack in the United States, the group still attempts to develop the operational capacity to do so, and continues to use the United States as a financial and logistical hub to support its activities and operations around the world.²

Founded in 1982, Hezbollah comprises multiple arms, including political and judicial councils, all of which are governed by its Shura Council, a consultation body.³ One of these arms includes the External Security Organization (ESO), otherwise known as the Islamic Jihad Organization (IJO) or Unit 910, a compartmentalized part of Hezbollah.⁴ According to the U.S. government, the IJO is responsible for the “planning, preparation, and execution of intelligence, counterintelligence, and terrorist activities” outside of Lebanon on behalf of Hezbollah.⁵

Hezbollah operates complex networks both inside and outside Lebanon that engage in a wide range of criminal conduct in support of the group, including weapons smuggling, financing, and drug-related activities. Beginning in 1983, Hezbollah perpetrated a series of attacks against U.S. interests both inside and outside of Lebanon, including the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing, the 1984 U.S. embassy annex bombing, and the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985.⁶ The group has found fertile ground for its operations in dozens of countries, including the Tri-Border Area of South America, Canada, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and more.⁷ It has also taken

¹ While several groups use the Hezbollah moniker, including in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Venezuela, this study will analyze the universe of cases related to the nexus of Lebanese Hezbollah.

² Reuters, “Blinken calls Hezbollah 'threat,' U.S. blacklists 7 Lebanese nationals.” May 11, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-blacklists-seven-lebanese-nationals-tied-hezbollah-treasury-website-2021-05-11/>; “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community,” Office of the Director of National Intelligence, April 9, 2021. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>

³ Magnus Ranstorp, “Hizbollah’s Command Leadership: Its Structure, Decision-Making, and Relationship with Iranian Clergy and Institutions,” *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1994, 6(3), p. 303-339.

⁴ “Lebanese Hezbollah,” Congressional Research Service, February 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1363491/download>; Parliament of Australia, “Review of the relisting of Hizballah's External Security Organisation as a terrorist organisation under the Criminal Code Submission 5,” Parliamentary Joint Committee on Intelligence and Security, November 24, 2021. https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Intelligence_and_Security/Hizballah/Government_Response.

⁵ “Criminal Complaint: United States v Ali Kourani,” Department of Justice, May 31, 2017. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/972421/download>

⁶ Gleis, Joshua L., and Benedetta Berti, *Hezbollah and Hamas: A comparative study*, JHU Press, 2012.; “Lebanese Hezbollah,” Congressional Research Service, February 1, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1363491/download>.

⁷ Celina B. Realuyo, “The Terror-Crime Nexus Hezbollah’s Global Facilitators,” *PRISM*, 2014, 5. https://cco.ndu.edu/Portals/96/Documents/prism/prism_5-1/prism_5-1.pdf; “Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces

advantage of permissive environments overseas to stage acts of violence, launching numerous attacks from its hub in the Tri-Border Area between Argentina, Paraguay, and Brazil, including the 1992 Buenos Aires Israeli Embassy bombing and the 1994 Argentine-Israeli Mutual Association (AMIA) bombing.⁸ These attacks and others continue to define the group's tumultuous relationship with the United States almost forty years after the embassy bombing.⁹

While Hezbollah conducts extensive operations around the world, this report specifically examines the group's activities within the United States. The group was officially designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States in 1997 and has long been interested in expanding its influence across America.¹⁰ As Levitt contends: "Hezbollah has long seen North America as a cash cow, where its supporters and operatives have run charities and engaged in a vast array of criminal activities to raise money and procure material for the organization."¹¹

It is this aspect of Hezbollah's operations that make its activities in the United States notable in comparison to other terrorist groups operating domestically today. As this report will show, a small, centralized group of Hezbollah operatives has worked alongside wider criminal enterprises to create a vast array of networks across America. In many of these examples, only a small number of prominent members of the network have an evidenced connection to the terrorist organization, but they are often surrounded by a web of individuals willing to commit criminal activities to support the network's goals.

Together, these Hezbollah-affiliated networks worked as a whole, often committed to a broader operational mission of committing illegal activities to raise money, smuggle goods, or otherwise take advantage of the United States' financial system for profit, with some of the funds then finding their way to Hezbollah through the small cluster of Hezbollah operatives that sat at the center of such networks. This is itself a manifestation of Hezbollah's activities in the United States, which sought to use local criminal actors in furtherance of their illegal activities. However, while the primary activities of Hezbollah-affiliated individuals over the past two decades have been largely

\$102 Million Settlement Of Civil Forfeiture And Money Laundering Claims Against Lebanese Canadian Bank," Department of Justice, June 25, 2013. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-102-million-settlement-civil-forfeiture-and-money>.

⁸ Lieutenant Colonel Philip K. Abbott, "Terrorist Threat in the Tri-Border Area: Myth or Reality?," *Military Review*, 2004.; Sarah Nielsen, "Fighting Terror in the Tri-Border Area," Wilson Center, December 9, 2019. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/fighting-terror-the-tri-border-area>.

⁹ Matthew Levitt, "Beirut to Blue Ridge: Hezbollah Comes to North America," In *The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press), 2013; Emanuele Ottolenghi, "State Sponsors of Terrorism: An Examination of Iran's Global Terrorism Network," Congressional Testimony, House Homeland Security Committee, April 17, 2018. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/HM/HM05/20180417/108155/HHRG-115-HM05-Wstate-OttolenghiE-20180417.pdf>

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State: Bureau of Counterterrorism "Foreign Terrorist Organizations." <https://www.state.gov/foreign-terrorist-organizations/>

¹¹ Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Criminal Networks: Useful Idiots, Henchmen, and Organized Criminal Facilitators," In *Beyond Convergence: World Without Order*, eds. Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, DC: Center for Complex Operations), 2016.

financial in nature, there are deeper implications that threaten U.S. interests domestically and worldwide.

This report explores cases of Hezbollah-affiliated individuals operating in the United States from Hezbollah's designation in 1997 through 2020. In the coming pages, the methodology and data collection efforts are introduced before delving into the statistical profiles of the cases. Next, this report explores Hezbollah's operations, categorizing its activities in the United States. Finally, this paper offers some conclusions and highlights important policy implications.

Methodology and Data

The findings of this report are based on a unique, aggregated dataset maintained by the authors that includes **128 Hezbollah-affiliated individuals operating in the United States from 1997 to 2020.**

Most datasets on Hezbollah in the United States focus solely on cases in which the government charged the defendant with providing material support to Hezbollah, a designated foreign terrorist organization, under 18 U.S. Code § 2339B.¹² However, while material support cases often provide the most overt and clear-cut evidence of Hezbollah activity, this criterion does not capture the full scope of Hezbollah’s activities in the United States. As discussed above, these activities are often made up of large networks containing both individuals with an evidenced connection to Hezbollah, as well as those that worked alongside them. Thus, this dataset expands the inclusion criteria to also include federal cases in which individuals are *linked* to Hezbollah and its activities, and where affiliation with Hezbollah and its activities is detailed in court documents or in significant open-source reporting. By expanding the collection to include the universe of cases where individuals are found to be *linked* to Hezbollah but charged with non-terrorism offenses, this dataset attempts to provide a more complete understanding of Hezbollah’s wide breadth of operations in the United States.

Due to the nature of Hezbollah-affiliated activities, one notable facet of Hezbollah cases in the United States is the prominence of networks in which many co-conspirators exhibited little to no ideological support for the organization. As Levitt notes, within Hezbollah’s global network of operatives, supporters, and sympathizers, many elements of Hezbollah’s criminal enterprise function as “loosely connected nodes,” supporting the group sometimes without necessitating a clear hierarchical linkage to Hezbollah proper.¹³ In several prominent examples in the United States, criminal actors operated in support of Hezbollah, even if only some of the individuals in that network had an evidenced connection to Hezbollah. Both individuals with an evidenced connection to Hezbollah, as well as those that worked alongside them, made up these vast networks of Hezbollah-affiliated activity. In these instances, the entire charged network is included in the dataset.

The corpus of cases included in this dataset stems from federal prosecutions that have identified a clear link to Hezbollah and its activities. While additional relevant prosecutions have likely occurred at the state level — albeit without making a direct, named connection to Hezbollah — no such cases have been publicly identified in previous research or the collection undertaken within

¹² “18 U.S. Code § 2339B - Providing material support or resources to designated foreign terrorist organizations,” Legal Information Institute, Cornell Law School. <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/2339B>.

¹³ Matthew Levitt, “Hezbollah’s Criminal Networks: Useful Idiots, Henchmen, and Organized Criminal Facilitators,” In *Beyond Convergence: World Without Order*, eds. Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, DC: Center for Complex Operations), 2016.

this study, and as such are not within the scope of this study. Additionally, this dataset only includes cases in which the defendant was operating within the United States. External cases in which the defendant engaged in criminal conduct outside of the United States and was subsequently charged in federal court are examined in limited breakout discussions to highlight Hezbollah's international networks and global reach, but exist outside the scope of this present study and are not included in the dataset.

Primary source records such as court documents provide in-depth insights into specific federal cases. Still, it is important to acknowledge that the corpus of cases included in this dataset might not represent the entirety of cases connected to Hezbollah and its activities in the United States. For example, court documents could be sealed or not digitized and therefore inaccessible through PACER, the Public Access to Court Electronic Records service. Thus, although this report may not provide the full nature of Hezbollah's activities in the United States, it does provide an important snapshot of the group's activities. Finally, the time-bound constraint of this report (1997-2020) reflects the designation of Hezbollah as a foreign terrorist organization and captures a significant proportion of major Hezbollah cases, but excludes cases filed prior to the designation, which risks missing earlier instances of Hezbollah-linked mobilization in the United States.

The following sections investigate general trends in Hezbollah-affiliated activities.¹⁴ First, we provide a statistical overview of Hezbollah-affiliated individuals in the United States, including trends in age, gender, geographical areas of operation, and sentencing. Next, we explore the categories of participation in Hezbollah activities, specifically focusing on its financing and operational activities in the United States. Finally, we conclude with a review of key findings and offering potential policy implications.

¹⁴ The dataset comprises 128 individuals, and cases have varying degrees of complete information. The dataset is composed of information from a wide variety of sources, including federal court records for each defendant. The authors also reviewed data made public by the Investigative Project on Terrorism and the Intercept, as well as press releases and documents made public by Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Drug Enforcement Administration, Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The authors conducted open-source research related to the arrest and prosecution of the defendants.

Hezbollah in the U.S.: A Statistical Profile

This section provides a statistical profile of the 128 individuals included in the authors' dataset, including individuals' age, gender, geographic area of operation, and trends in legal sentencing.

Age

Hezbollah-affiliated individuals in the dataset ranged in age from 22 to 68 years old at the time of their arrest. For men, the average age was slightly higher at 42 years old, while the average for women was 40 years old.

The average age of Hezbollah-affiliated individuals in the United States is significantly higher than Islamic State-affiliated individuals in the United States, who are on average 28 years old.¹⁵ Furthermore, a July 2020 RAND report on U.S. persons affiliated with American designated foreign terrorist organizations found that in a dataset of 476 individuals, most individuals, on average, were 30 years old.¹⁶ This discrepancy is likely due to the nature of Hezbollah's activities in the U.S. which are primarily financial.

Gender

This study found that an overwhelming majority of cases in this dataset are male Hezbollah operatives.¹⁷ Of the 128 individuals profiled within this dataset, 108 are men and 20 are women.

While women make up 16% of Hezbollah cases in this dataset, they make up only 10% of cases of Islamic State-affiliated supporters in the United States.¹⁸ There are several reasons why this might be, most likely of which is the relatively greater role of family networks in facilitating pro-Hezbollah activity in the United States compared to pro-Islamic State activity.¹⁹ Several female operatives have filled crucial roles in notable Hezbollah networks in the United States, many of

¹⁵ "GW Extremism Tracker: Terrorism in the United States," Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Jul2020%20Tracker.pdf>.

¹⁶ Williams, Chandler, and Robinson, "Trends in the Draw of Americans to Foreign Terrorist Organizations from 9/11 to Today", RAND, 2018 p. 24.

¹⁷ This finding supports the assessments in other studies on Hezbollah mobilization. See, for example, see: Leuprecht, Christian, Olivier Walther, David B. Skillicorn, and Hillary Ryde-Collins, "Hezbollah's Global Tentacles: A Relational Approach to Convergence with Transnational Crime," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29:5, 2017, p. 902-921.

¹⁸ "GW Extremism Tracker: Terrorism in the United States," Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Jul2020%20Tracker.pdf>.

¹⁹ On the role of women in Hezbollah, see: Bianchi, Kendall. "Letters from home: Hezbollah mothers and the culture of martyrdom." *CTC Sentinel* 11:2, 2018, p. 20-24.; Worrall, James, Simon Mabon, and Gordon Clubb. *Hezbollah: From Islamic Resistance to Government: From Islamic Resistance to Government*. ABC-CLIO, 2015.

which were composed of family members or spouses, highlighting the role of family and relational connections in radicalization processes.²⁰

Mariam Taha Thompson of Rochester, Minnesota, was charged in the only known case of espionage for supplying critical national defense information to a Lebanese national with links to Hezbollah.²¹ Thompson, a Defense Department linguist, born in Lebanon, passed information to a Lebanese national after falling in love with him while serving with a U.S. Special Operations task force in Iraq.²² After a U.S. airstrike killed Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Qassem Soleimani, the contact leveraged his personal relationship with Thompson for information.²³ Starting in early January 2020, she accessed classified documents from the Pentagon's servers with her security clearance.²⁴ Investigators later found a piece of paper listing America's foreign informants in Arabic hidden under her mattress, which Thompson shared over video calls with Hezbollah.²⁵ In March of 2021, four years after Thompson's involvement began, she pleaded guilty to delivering national defense information, including human intelligence and asset identification, to aid a foreign government with the belief that it was being transmitted to Hezbollah.²⁶ She was sentenced to 23 years in prison.²⁷

Geographic Area

Hezbollah-affiliated activity spanned across 11 states. As Figure A highlights, several major hubs of Hezbollah-related activity emerged in Michigan (55), California (19), New York (15), and North Carolina (16).²⁸ A significant factor driving this clustering of cases is the establishment of several large Hezbollah-affiliated criminal networks in these four states. In fact, 91% of individuals

²⁰ Carson, Jennifer Varriale, Patrick A. James, and Tyler A. O'Neal. "The radicalization of the Kanes: family as a primary group influence?." *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 12, no. 1 (2019): 67-89.; Scremin, Nicolò. "Family Matters: A Preliminary Framework for Understanding Family Influence on Islamist Radicalization." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2020): 1-17.

²¹ "Defense Department Linguist Sentenced to 23 Years in Prison for Transmitting Highly Sensitive Classified National Defense Information to Aid a Foreign Government," Department of Justice, June 23, 2021. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/defense-department-linguist-sentenced-23-years-prison-transmitting-highly-sensitive>

²² Ibid.

²³ "Mariam Taha Thompson Indictment," Department of Justice, March 5, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/1380446/download>.

²⁴ "Defense Department Linguist Sentenced to 23 Years in Prison for Transmitting Highly Sensitive Classified National Defense Information to Aid a Foreign Government," Department of Justice, June 23, 2021.

²⁵ "Defense Department Linguist Sentenced to 23 Years in Prison for Transmitting Highly Sensitive Classified National Defense Information to Aid a Foreign Government," New York Times, March 4, 2020.; "Mariam Taha Thompson Indictment," Department of Justice, March 5, 2020.

²⁶ "Pentagon linguist sentenced to 23 years for exposing U.S. sources in Iraq to Hezbollah in rare terrorism espionage case," The Washington Post, June 23, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/legal-issues/pentagon-linguist-sentenced-espionage/2021/06/23/71805bb0-d436-11eb-ae54-515e2f63d37d_story.html.

²⁷ "Pentagon linguist sentenced to 23 years for exposing U.S. sources in Iraq to Hezbollah in rare terrorism espionage case," The Washington Post, June 23, 2021.

²⁸ As discussed in the methodology, these cases are not definitively the full corpus of Hezbollah-related mobilization in the U.S., as only cases which have been publicly reported as having a clear Hezbollah link are included in this report. The location information is predicated on where the offense by the charged individual took place. In instances in which conduct crossed state borders, the coding defaults to where the individual in question was based at the time conduct occurred.

operating in these four states and 76% of all individuals in this dataset were part of just six significant networks. Moreover, 92% of all cases in this dataset were part of networks.²⁹

Figure A. Map of Hezbollah's Activities in the U.S.



Sentencing Trends

As noted in the methodology section, this dataset includes individuals charged with providing material support to Hezbollah (15%) as well as individuals indicted on other charges who had an established affiliation with Hezbollah and its activities made public through legal proceedings, court documents, and open-source reporting (85%).

The vast majority of all individuals in the dataset (107, **84%**), were convicted and sentenced.³⁰ The average sentence length for all Hezbollah-affiliated individuals charged in the United States is **49.6** months. However, those convicted on material support-related charges received an average sentence length of **85.6** months, whereas those convicted on non-terrorism-related charges received an average sentence length of **42.8** months. This can be partially attributed to the numerous financial cases in which the government sought little or no jail time, instead utilizing a

²⁹ This dataset codified networks as groups of two or more individuals.

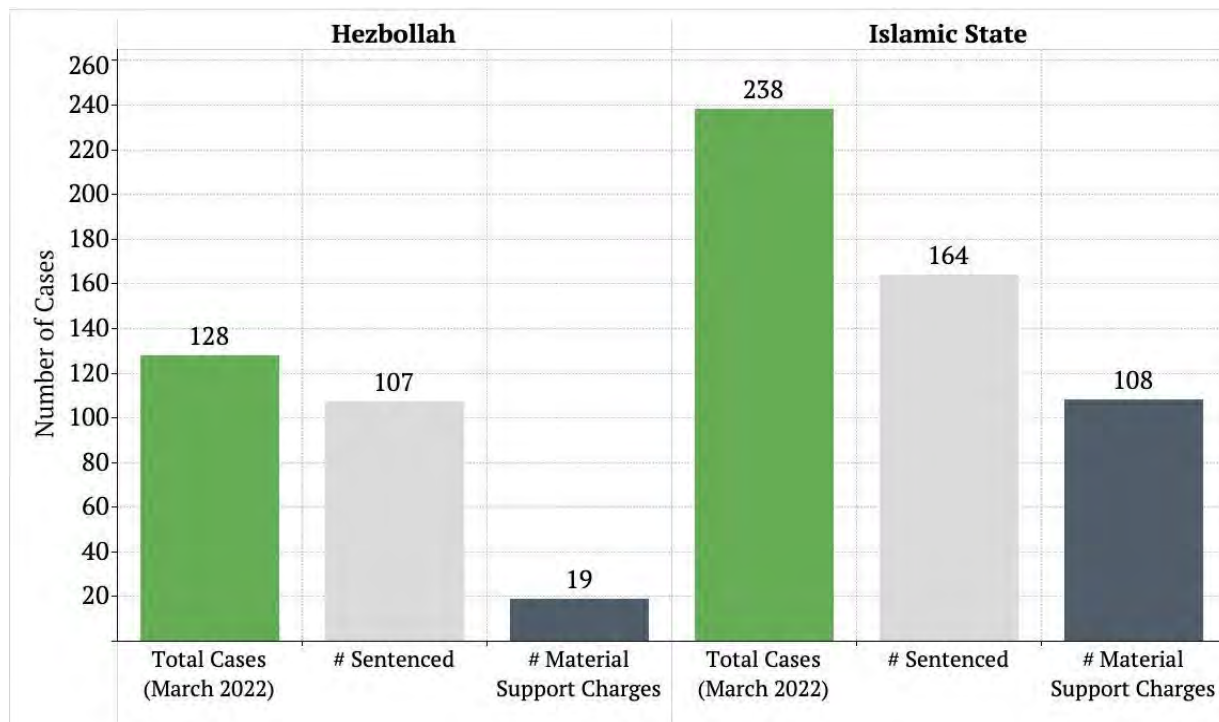
³⁰ Several cases within the dataset do not make public the specific conviction or sentencing information.

combination of probation, restitution, and deportation in the large criminal networks disrupted by domestic law enforcement.³¹

By comparison, the current sentencing trends for individuals charged in the United States related to their support for the Islamic State currently stands at **157** months. This is due to the fact that material support charges have been brought by the Department of Justice against the Islamic State’s American supporters in **70%** of the **238** cases made public to date.³² As noted, terrorism sentencing enhancements for those charged with material support can lead to longer sentences. On the other hand, only 15% of Hezbollah supporters (19 individuals) were charged with providing material support to Hezbollah, with the remaining 85% facing charges such as fraud, money laundering, or firearms charges, which tend to carry less severe sentencing enhancements.

Twenty individuals (16%) in this dataset have not yet been convicted and sentenced, and their criminal cases are still pending. This group includes 14 individuals who were arrested and charged, but for whom conviction and sentencing information is not available.³³

Figure B: Sentencing Trends



³¹ United States Sentencing Commission “§3A1.4 - TERRORISM.” Effective November 1, 1995 (amendment 526). Amended effective November 1, 1996 (amendment 539); November 1, 1997 (amendment 565); November 1, 2002 (amendment 637). <https://guidelines.usc.gov/gl/%C2%A73A1.4>

³² “ISIS in America.” Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, accessed May 13, 2022. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/isis-america>.

³³ Moreover, this includes one individual who has pleaded guilty and whose case remains pending, three individuals who are fugitives/not arrested, one who died overseas, and one who was convicted by trial and is awaiting sentencing.

Categorizing Hezbollah's Activities in the United States

Hezbollah-related activities in the United States vary in several ways. First, in the period examined in this report, there were no cases of individuals arrested for seeking to carry out attacks on U.S. soil.³⁴ However, Hezbollah-affiliated individuals engaged in several other categories of activity in support of the group. These were coded based on open-source information about individuals' primary activities, such as legal sources and open-source reporting.

This report delineates between activities in which individuals provided *financial* support to Hezbollah, and activities in which individuals provided *operational* support. The former category comprises 109 (87%) individuals, while the latter comprises 19 (13%) individuals.

Within both of these two top-level categories exists a subset of classifications that provide further granularity in the assessment of individuals' conduct.

The *financier* category consists of *money launderers/bundlers/fraudsters* and *goods smugglers*, all of whom raised funds for Hezbollah or directly provided or transferred funds to the group.

- *Money Launderers/Bundlers/Fraudsters* make up 29% (35 individuals) of the dataset and include individuals who committed fraud, sent or laundered funds for Hezbollah, often in connection with drug proceeds, tobacco proceeds, or proceeds from the sale of electronics.
- *Goods Smugglers* make up 58% (74 individuals) of the dataset and include those who smuggled or provided non-monetary support of goods to Hezbollah or Hezbollah-linked organizations or individuals. Examples include drugs, electronics, and stolen goods.

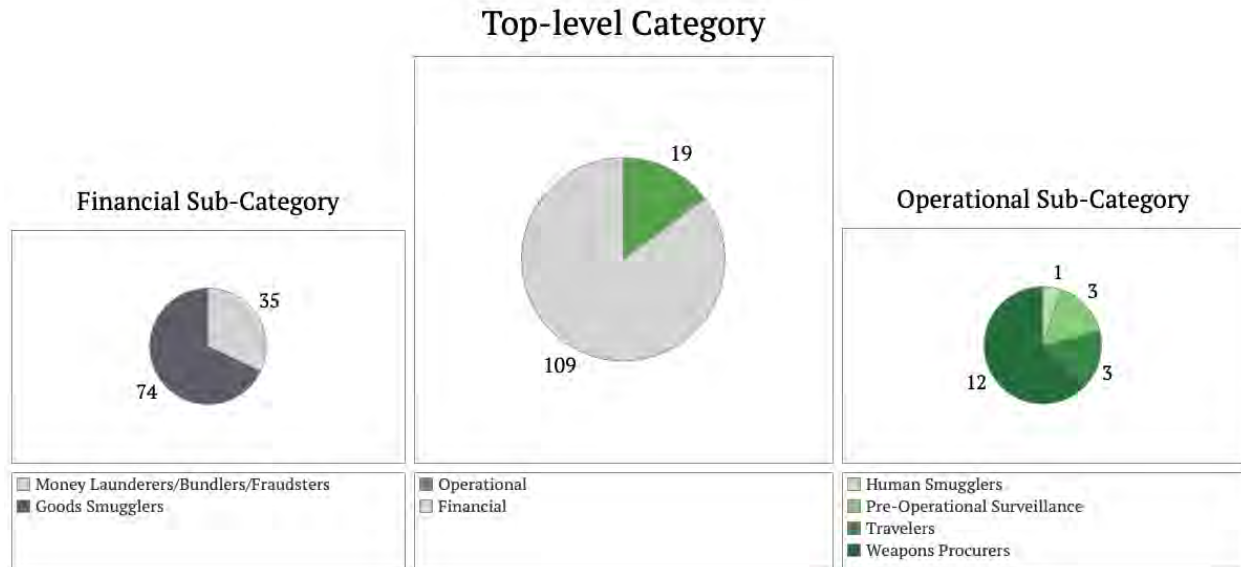
The *operational* category consists of *human smugglers*, *travelers*, *weapons procurers*, and *surveillance operatives*, all of whom carried out activities that furthered the operational goals of the group.

- *Human Smugglers* make up 1% (1 individual) of the dataset and consist of individuals who illegally transported other individuals across state and international borders.
- *Weapons Procurers* make up 8% (12 individuals) of the dataset and include individuals who provided weapons or military equipment for Hezbollah.
- *Travelers* make up 1.5% (3 individuals) of the dataset and refers to individuals who traveled or attempted to travel abroad to join Hezbollah.

³⁴ As the methodology notes, while no individuals in this dataset have been accused of plotting a domestic terror attack, several have engaged in pre-operational surveillance efforts to allow Hezbollah to carry out attacks in the U.S.

- *Pre-Operational Surveillance* makes up 2.5% (3 individuals) of the dataset and refers to individuals who collected operational information like potential targets, target security, and other details for future domestic plots on behalf of Hezbollah.

Figure C. Categories of Activity



The following section explores some of the case studies that make up the two primary categories of participation.

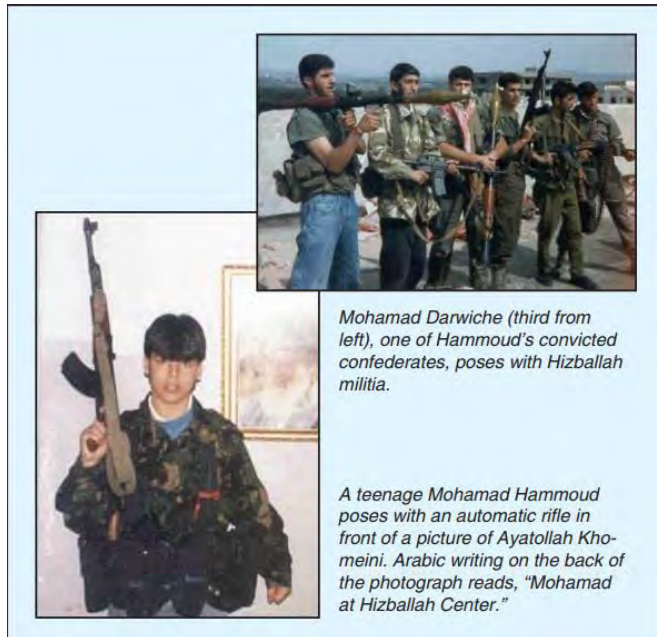
Financier Category Overview

Financiers are by far the most represented category within this dataset, which further supports assessments that Hezbollah's primary aspirations in the United States are financial in nature. This category encompasses a wide range of Hezbollah supporters' activities, whose ultimate goal was to provide financial support to the organization.

A significant number of examples of Hezbollah's financial activities took place through networks. As noted, 92% of all cases in this dataset were part of networks, with large hubs in Michigan, California, New York, and North Carolina. The abundance of financial networks in such cases contributes to the high percentage of financiers observed in this study. For example, the Charlotte-Michigan network led by Mohammad Hammoud and broken up by law enforcement in 2000 was comprised of more than a dozen individuals who ran an interstate cigarette smuggling ring from

North Carolina — where the cigarette tax was only 5 cents per pack — to Michigan — where the cigarette tax was 75 cents per pack — while passing along some of its profits to Hezbollah.³⁵

Figure D. FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin³⁶



However, just because a financial network's illicit activities benefited Hezbollah, does not mean that every individual in the network held strong ideological support for the organization. In fact, available evidence suggests that some members of the criminal networks profiled in this study were content with merely profiting financially through their illegal activities, and were either unaware of or unbothered by the links of other network members to Hezbollah. Nevertheless, many of these networks were led or shaped by individuals with pronounced and established connections to Hezbollah.

Mohammad Hammoud, who functioned as one of the leaders of the Charlotte-Michigan network, had prominent links to Hezbollah's leadership. Born in Bourj al-Barajneh, Lebanon, in 1973, Hammoud "drew the attention of those in the highest ranks of the Hezbollah structure" from an early age.³⁷ While still a teenager, Hammoud attempted to gain visa entry into the United States repeatedly before traveling to Margarita Island in 1992, a well-known hub for Hezbollah activity off the coast of Venezuela. There, Hammoud and two of his cousins acquired fake visas and were able to travel to New York. Hammoud later traveled to North Carolina, where he joined two of his brothers who had already illegally entered the country. Once in North Carolina, Hammoud

³⁵ He was initially arrested in 2000, but resentenced in 2011. See: "Mohamad Youssef Hammoud sentenced to 30 years in terrorism financing case," Department of Homeland Security, January 27, 2011. <https://www.ice.gov/news/releases/mohamad-youssef-hammoud-sentenced-30-years-terrorism-financing-case>; Roberta Belli, Joshua D. Freilich, Steven M. Chermak, and Katharine A. Boyd. "Exploring the crime-terror nexus in the United States: a social network analysis of a Hezbollah network involved in trade diversion." *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8, no. 3 (2015): 263-281.; Leuprecht et al 2017, p. 907-910; Matthew Levitt, "Beirut to Blue Ridge: Hezbollah Comes to North America;" Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Criminal Networks: Useful Idiots, Henchmen, and Organized Criminal Facilitators," In *Beyond Convergence: World Without Order*, eds. Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, DC: Center for Complex Operations), 2016.

³⁶ FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin (December 2007), v.76 no.12. Available via the Homeland Security Digital Library. <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=38614>

³⁷ Tom Diaz and Barbara Newman, *Lightning out of Lebanon: Hezbollah terrorists on American soil*. Presidio Press, 2006.

obtained a job at the local Domino's Pizza and continued to expand his group, which was largely comprised of members of the Lebanese diaspora — including some from his neighborhood of Bourj al-Barajneh — and began engaging in a series of immigration fraud schemes through phony marriages.³⁸

It was largely through these relational connections at the local Domino's Pizza and within a small Lebanese community in Charlotte, North Carolina, that Hammoud's criminal enterprise began to take shape. This motley crew of Hammoud's family, ideologically aligned residents of Charlotte, and a revolving door of financially motivated individuals, such as those employed at Domino's Pizza, began an interstate cigarette smuggling ring that would ultimately net over \$2 million in profits.³⁹ Domestic law enforcement disrupted this operation in 2000 by charging Hammoud and 17 co-defendants before turning their attention to the Michigan-based cigarette smuggling network. In 2003, 11 members of the Dearborn, Michigan, cigarette smuggling network were indicted on Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations (RICO) charges. Elias Akhdar and Hassan Makki served as key nodal connections to both Hammoud in Charlotte as well as to Hezbollah operatives in Lebanon, Canada, and elsewhere.⁴⁰

The following sections will explore some of the sub-classifications that make up the financier category.

Money Launderers, Bundlers, and Fraudsters

Money launderers/Bundlers/Fraudsters include a variety of individuals who laundered funds or engaged in fraud to raise funds for Hezbollah, often in connection with drug proceeds, tobacco proceeds, or proceeds from the sale of electronics. The investigation into the Farhat/Berro family in Dearborn, Michigan, for example, uncovered a widespread conspiracy to defraud banks and credit card issuers, and ultimately led to charges against 19 individuals. Defendants involved in the conspiracy would “bust out” credit cards by processing large transactions at two companies owned by members of the Farhat family and subsequently declare bankruptcy to avoid paying the debts.⁴¹ While early evidence in the investigation suggested a narco-terrorism financing nexus, evidentiary issues and informant reliability derailed this line of inquiry. However, at least one

³⁸ Testimony of Christopher Swecker, Compilation of Hearings on Islamist Radicalization. Hearings before the House of Representatives Committee on Homeland Security, March 21, 2012.

<https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-112hrg76517/html/CHRG-112hrg76517.htm>

³⁹ Matthew Levitt, “Hezbollah’s Criminal Networks: Useful Idiots, Henchmen, and Organized Criminal Facilitators,” In *Beyond Convergence: World Without Order*, eds. Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic (Washington, DC: Center for Complex Operations), 2016.

⁴⁰ “Hassan Moussa Makki et. al Indictment,” Department of Justice, January 23, 2003.

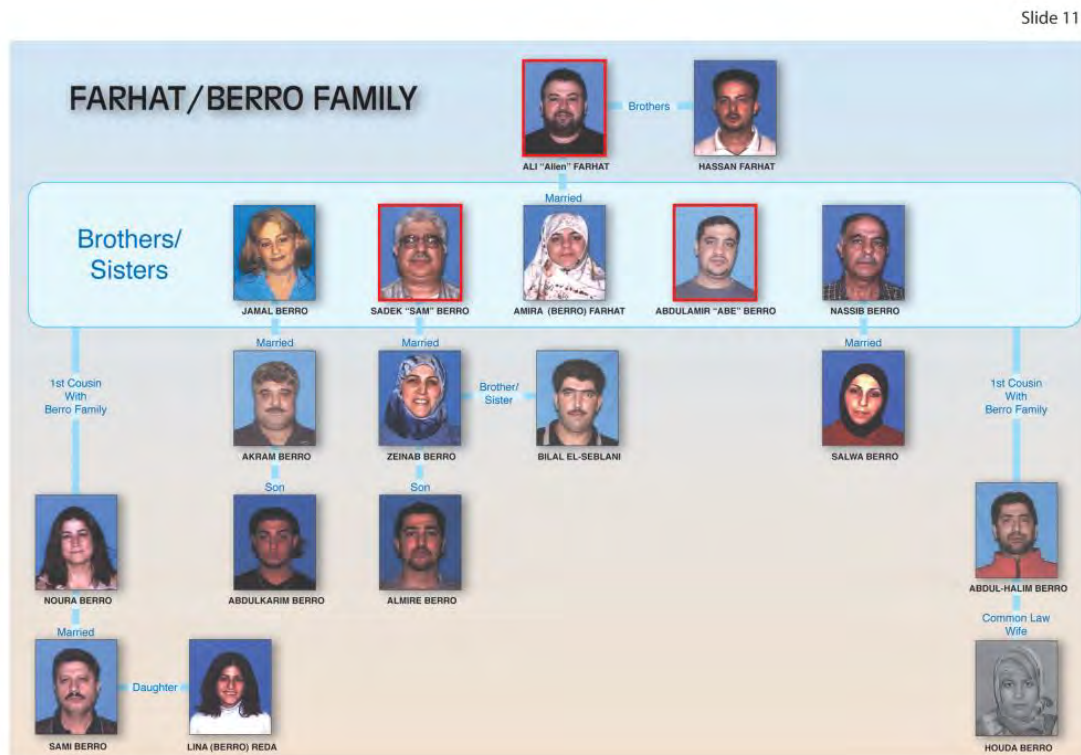
<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Elias%20Akhdar%20et%20al%20Indictment.pdf>

⁴¹ “Samir Berro Government’s Sentencing Memorandum,” Department of Justice, January 26, 2007.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Sami%20Berro%20Government%20Sentencing%20Memorandum.pdf>

defendant made a statement to the FBI that the “scheme functioned for the benefit of the terrorist organization, Hezbollah, and monies from the scheme were transmitted to Hezbollah,”⁴² and DOJ court filings make note of another defendant’s “extensive contacts throughout the world” including “both the Government of Iran and the terrorist organization Hizballah.”⁴³

Figure E. Farhat/Berro Family Network⁴⁴



The Money Launderers, Bundlers, and Fraudsters category also includes *bundlers* - individuals who collected, donated, or otherwise provided funds to support Hezbollah. This category represents a range of monetary-related criminal conduct, and the case of Hor and Amera Akl of Toledo, Ohio, is an informative example of this group. In 2009, the pair met with an FBI

⁴² “Ali Abdul Karim Farhat Government’s Sentencing Memorandum and Motion for Downward Departure,” Department of Justice, December 22, 2006.
<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Ali%20Farhat%20Government%20Sentencing%20Memorandum.pdf>

⁴³ “Ali Abdul Karim Farhat Government’s Sentencing Memorandum and Motion for Downward Departure,” Department of Justice, December 22, 2006.
<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Ali%20Farhat%20Government%20Sentencing%20Memorandum.pdf>

⁴⁴ Ali Abdul-Karim Farhat Government’s Sentencing Memorandum, Exhibit 2” Department of Justice, December 22, 2006.
<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Ali%20Farhat%20Government%20Sentencing%20Memo%20Exhibit%202.pdf>

confidential human source whom they believed to be a fellow supporter of the terrorist organization, and discussed ways to send money to Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon.⁴⁵ After this meeting, the Akls hid cash totaling \$200,000 into car accessories they believed were to be shipped to Lebanon, with the understanding that the money would be used for Hezbollah's operations.⁴⁶ The Akls were arrested in June 2010 in Ohio,⁴⁷ and both pleaded guilty to conspiracy to provide material support to Hezbollah in May 2011.⁴⁸ Amera was sentenced to 40 months in prison in June 2011,⁴⁹ while Hor was sentenced to 75 months in prison in May 2012 due to his role as an "organizer, leader, manager, and supervisor in the criminal activity."⁵⁰

Goods Smugglers

Goods smugglers are individuals who smuggled or provided non-monetary support in furtherance of Hezbollah's criminal enterprise. Cases of goods smuggling observed in this dataset included efforts to smuggle drugs, electronics, and stolen goods. One case involved a transnational smuggling network that stretched from Miami to the Tri-Border Area of the Paraguay-Brazil-Argentina border. According to an indictment filed in the Southern District of Florida in 2010, U.S.-based defendants Ulises Talavera, Khaled Safadi, and Emilo Jacinto Gonzalez-Neira used their respective freight forwarding companies to ship Sony brand electronics to Samer Mehdi, a Paraguayan national operating from the Galeria Page shopping center in Ciudad del Este, Paraguay.⁵¹ Galeria Page, which has been listed as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity since 2006, is "locally considered the central headquarters for Hezbollah members" and is managed and co-owned by Hezbollah operatives.⁵²

⁴⁵ FBI, "Ohio Man Sentenced to 75 Months in Prison for Scheme to Send Money to Hizballah" U.S. Attorney's Office Northern District of Ohio, May 21, 2012. <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/cleveland/press-releases/2012/ohio-man-sentenced-to-75-months-in-prison-for-scheme-to-send-money-to-hizballah>

⁴⁶ "Indictment: United States v Hor I. Akl and Amera A. Akl" Department of Justice, June 7, 2010. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Hor%20Akl%20and%20Amera%20Akl%20Indictment.pdf>

⁴⁷ Carol Cratty, "Feds: Ohio couple conspired to send money to Hezbollah," *CNN*, June 3, 2010. <http://www.cnn.com/2010/CRIME/06/03/ohio.hezbollah.couple/index.html>.

⁴⁸ "Plea Agreement: United States v Hor I. Akl" Department of Justice, May 23, 2011. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Hor%20Akl%20Plea%20Agreement.pdf>; "Plea Agreement: United States v Amera A. Akl" Department of Justice, May 23, 2011. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Amera%20Akl%20Plea%20Agreement.pdf>.

⁴⁹ "Sentencing: United States v Amera A. Akl," Department of Justice, June 22, 2011. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Amera%20Akl%20Minute%20Entry%20Sentencing.pdf>

⁵⁰ "Ohio Man Sentenced to 75 Months in Prison for Scheme to Send Money to Hizballah," FBI Press Release, May 21, 2012.; "Plea Agreement: United States v Hor I. Akl" Department of Justice, May 23, 2011.

⁵¹ Seven Charged with Illegal Export of Electronics to U.S.-Designated Terrorist Entity in Paraguay," Federal Bureau of Investigation, February 19, 2010. <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/miami/press-releases/2010/mm021910.htm>.

⁵² <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-113hhr85689/html/CHRG-113hhr85689.htm>

Operational Category Overview

The *operational* category consists of individuals who provided operational support to Hezbollah. This includes human smugglers, travelers, weapons procurers, and surveillance operatives. The majority of Hezbollah’s activities in the United States have been financial, with operational supporters making up only 13% of the total cases. There are several potential explanations for this relatively small proportion of cases, including the desire by Hezbollah supporters to take advantage of the U.S. financial system, strategic top-down and bottom-up organizational dynamics, and effective domestic law enforcement disruptions that have hampered attempts by Hezbollah and other terrorist organizations from establishing more expansive surveillance and information gathering operations in furtherance of potential overtly violent conduct and plots.⁵³ While smaller in number, these cases offer essential insight into the group’s diverse activities in the United States.

Moreover, there are important points of comparison between Hezbollah-affiliated activity in the United States and the broader universe of American homegrown violent extremist activity. First is the outsized proportion of Hezbollah supporters who took on strictly financial roles. As discussed in greater detail throughout this paper, this can partially be attributed to the large proportion of Hezbollah-affiliated individuals who supported the criminal activity of several major financial networks. This figure, however, stands in stark contrast to other homegrown violent extremist mobilizations in the United States. For example, while financiers make up 87% of the cases in this dataset, a 2018 RAND report on American support for foreign terrorist organizations found that only 18% of the cases profiled involved financing.⁵⁴ Furthermore, research by the Program on Extremism on the financial activities of U.S.-based Islamic State supporters found that most individuals focused on traveling overseas to join the Islamic State, carrying out attacks domestically, or providing other forms of support to the group. The majority of American Islamic State supporters’ financial activity involved self-financing, raising small amounts of money often through very simple tactics.⁵⁵

⁵³ This finding should not be taken as a comprehensive assessment of Hezbollah’s operational capacities or long term strategic goals. The cases analyzed in this report offer a complex array of factors that could explain the stark discrepancies between the portion of cases that are financial vs. operational category, as outlined above. Some might argue that this discrepancy lends evidence of strategic organizational restraint; if Hezbollah were to expand its operational activities and even carry out attacks on U.S. soil, it would likely trigger increased scrutiny on Hezbollah activities as well as a swift and severe response from the U.S. government on a range of networks and operations, to include financial activities. That said, the cases in this dataset—while limited in nature—show that Hezbollah operatives have attempted to develop operational capabilities that could potentially be leveraged to inflict violence on U.S. soil and on its interests abroad. The extent to which senior and mid-level Hezbollah leadership and their U.S.-based members prioritized expanding financial vs. operational activities, as well as the flow of decision making and command and control between the two, are worthy of further study. At present, there are inherent limitations within this report’s methodology regarding its ability to capture the totality of Hezbollah’s mobilization in the United States. As such, definitive conclusions cannot be drawn given the current data available.

⁵⁴ Heather J. Williams, Nathan Chandler, and Eric Robinson, “Trends in the Draw of Americans to Foreign Terrorist Organizations from 9/11 to Today,” RAND, 2018.

https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR2500/RR2545/RAND_RR2545.pdf

⁵⁵ Lorenzo Vidino, Jon Lewis, and Andrew Mines, “Dollars for Daesh: Analyzing the Finances of American ISIS Supporters,” The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, 2020.

<https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Dollars%20for%20Daesh%20final%20report.pdf>

Additionally, while 40% of Islamic State supporters in the United States attempted or successfully traveled to join the terrorist group overseas, only three such cases were observed among Hezbollah supporters.⁵⁶ This finding both aligns with existing assessments that highlight the significance of the physical Caliphate as a draw for American homegrown violent extremists, and supports the interpretation that Hezbollah’s American supporters within this dataset appear largely intent on engaging in criminal conduct within the United States for financial or material benefit to themselves and Hezbollah.

However, despite the focus on Hezbollah’s financial operations, overemphasizing the financial aspects risks misinterpreting the broader strategic picture: elements within Hezbollah remain interested in developing the capacity and intelligence base to plot attacks on U.S. soil.⁵⁷ This dataset includes three Hezbollah-linked cases that involved evidence of a plot to carry out attacks on U.S. soil. While relatively low in number, they are important to examine and contextualize. Comparatively, Program on Extremism data on American Islamic State supporters indicates that 29% of individuals were involved in a domestic plot,⁵⁸ echoed in a 2018 RAND report that found that 28% of violent extremist cases involved a plot, conspiracy, or attempt to conduct a terrorist attack domestically.⁵⁹

The following sections will explore some of the sub-classifications that make up the operational category.

Weapons Procurers

Weapons procurers are individuals who identified and solidified relationships with potential suppliers, as well as arranged for the transport and sale of such weapons. One notable case of weapons procurement came to light following the arrest of Dani Tarraf, a Hezbollah procurement agent, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in November 2009.⁶⁰ Based on a public tip line run by the Philadelphia Joint Terrorism Task Force, officers identified an individual, Mohamed Hamdan.⁶¹

⁵⁶ “GW Extremism Tracker: Terrorism in the United States,” Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Jul2020%20Tracker.pdf>.

⁵⁷ Matthew Levitt, “Breaking Hezbollah’s ‘Golden Rule’: An Inside Look at the Modus Operandi of Hezbollah’s Islamic Jihad Organization,” *Perspectives on Terrorism* 14, no. 4 (2020): 21-42. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/367>.

⁵⁸ “GW Extremism Tracker: Terrorism in the United States,” Program on Extremism at The George Washington University.

⁵⁹ Heather J. Williams, Nathan Chandler, and Eric Robinson, “Trends in the Draw of Americans to Foreign Terrorist Organizations from 9/11 to Today,” RAND, 2018.

⁶⁰ Arrests Made in Case Involving Conspiracy to Procure Weapons, Including Anti-Aircraft Missiles,” Federal Bureau of Investigation, November 23, 2009. <https://archives.fbi.gov/archives/miami/press-releases/2010/mm021910.htm>.

⁶¹ Hamdan’s wife was arrested as part of Operation Smokescreen, a U.S. interagency operation in 2000 which disrupted the Hezbollah cigarette smuggling operation in North Carolina and Michigan.; Matthew Levitt, “Hezbollah Support Networks in the United States,” *Breaking Hezbollah’s Golden Rule Podcast*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 2, 2022. <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/5393>.

The investigation into Hamdan found that he was trafficking stolen goods, and an undercover agent was introduced into the network via a third individual, Sadek Koumaiha.⁶² Shortly after, Sadek's uncle Hassan Koumaiha began purchasing what he believed to be stolen goods from the undercover agent and shipping these goods to locations across the world - including Paraguay, Brazil, Slovakia, Lebanon, Syria, and Iran.⁶³ Sadek informed the undercover agent that the stolen goods purchased were being funded by Dani Tarraf, who believed the undercover agent could supply the necessary firearms and missiles to provide to Hezbollah. In a meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in June 2009, Tarraf requested weapons that could "take down an F-16."⁶⁴ In July and November 2009, Tarraf met with the undercover agent and provided payments of \$20,000 and \$10,000 for shipments of Colt M-4 Carbines, M72 Light Anti-Armor Weapons, and FIM-92 Stinger missiles, to be shipped to the Port of Latakia in Syria.⁶⁵ Following the November meeting, Tarraf was indicted in the Eastern District of Pennsylvania along with three co-conspirators, and charged with numerous offenses, including conspiring to provide material support to Hezbollah.⁶⁶

Human Smugglers

Human smugglers illegally transported other individuals across borders. The only publicly-known case identified by the authors is that of Salim Boughader-Mucharfille, a Lebanese-Mexican national based in Tijuana, Mexico. Boughader-Mucharfille was responsible for smuggling approximately 200 people, including Hezbollah-linked individuals, into the United States via San Diego, California.⁶⁷ In press reports, he admitted to knowing that one of his clients worked for *Al Manar*, Hezbollah's television station, which has been listed on the U.S. Terrorist Exclusion List since 2004.⁶⁸ He was indicted on multiple counts of human smuggling in November 2002 in the Southern District of California.⁶⁹ After pleading guilty to human trafficking in 2003, Boughader-

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ "Dani Nemr Tarraf et al Superseding Indictment," Department of Justice, March 15, 2011. https://www.investigativeproject.org/documents/case_docs/1504.pdf

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Tarraf's exact sentencing information is not publicly available, although the Bureau of Prisons Inmate Locator function indicates Tarraf is due for release in 2027. <https://www.bop.gov/inmateloc/>

⁶⁷ While based in Mexico, Boughader-Mucharfille operated across the Mexico-U.S. border area into San Diego, California. The authors of the report included him in the dataset due to the nature of his U.S. based operations.; Pauline Arrillaga and Olga R. Rodriguez, "Porous Border Is Seen as Terrorist Threat," Los Angeles Times, July 3, 2005. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-jul-03-adna-border3-story.html>.

⁶⁸ Adam Erel, Deputy Spokesman, U.S. Department of State. "Addition of Al-Manar to the Terrorist Exclusion List" December 28, 2004. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2004/40081.htm>

⁶⁹ "Salim Boughader-Mucharrafille," Trial and Terror, The Intercept. <https://trial-and-terror.theintercept.com/people/8097d800-dfe3-4050-80d4-aa1f39f46326>

Mucharfille was sentenced to a year in prison.⁷⁰ Upon his release and return to Mexico, he was rearrested and sentenced to 60 years in prison for his role in human trafficking.⁷¹

Travelers

Travelers are individuals who traveled or attempted to travel abroad to join Hezbollah. As an example, Mohammad Hassan Hamdan, a resident of Dearborn, Michigan, was charged in the Eastern District of Michigan on March 17, 2014, with attempting to provide material support to Hezbollah. Hamdan was arrested at the Detroit Metropolitan Airport on March 16, 2014, while attempting to fly to Lebanon with the ultimate goal of entering Syria to fight in the Syrian civil war on behalf of Hezbollah.⁷² Hamdan was later charged with making false statements to federal agents involving terrorism and pleaded guilty in August 2016.⁷³ He was sentenced in December 2016 to 63 months incarceration and ordered deported to Lebanon upon completion of his sentence.⁷⁴

Pre-Operational Surveillance

Pre-operational surveillance includes individuals who collected operational information like potential targets, target security, and other details for future domestic plots on behalf of Hezbollah. According to a recent study, “Iran and Hezbollah have a history of recruiting operatives globally from within Shi’a diasporas, preferably those who have Western passports.”⁷⁵ For example, Samer El Debek, an IJO member and resident of the Bronx, NY, was allegedly recruited by Hezbollah in 2007 and subsequently received military-style training, including bomb-making.⁷⁶ While based in

⁷⁰ Pauline Arrillaga and Olga R. Rodriguez, “Porous Border Is Seen as Terrorist Threat,” Los Angeles Times, July 3, 2005. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2005-jul-03-adna-border3-story.html>; The San Diego Union Tribune. “60-year prison term for human smuggler” December 31, 2008. <https://www.sandiegouniontribune.com/sdut-60-year-prison-term-human-smuggler-2008dec31-story.html>.

⁷¹ The San Diego Union Tribune. “60-year prison term for human smuggler” December 31, 2008.; UPI “Mexico sentences smuggler to 60 years.” December 29, 2008. https://www.upi.com/Top_News/2008/12/29/Mexico-sentences-smuggler-to-60-years/12931230598496/.

⁷² “Indictment: United States v Mohammad Hassan Hamdan” Department of Justice, April 15, 2014. <https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Mohammad%20Hassan%20Hamdan%20Indictment.pdf>; Robert Snell, “Dearborn man lied about dental visit to join Hezbollah” The Detroit News. August 15, 2016. <https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/wayne-county/2016/08/15/dearborn-man-fix-teeth-terror/88797544/>

⁷³ “Dearborn man pleads guilty to lying about travel to fight for Hezbollah” Department of Justice, August 15, 2016 <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edmi/pr/dearborn-man-pleads-guilty-lying-about-travel-fight-hezbollah>

⁷⁴ “Dearborn Resident Sentenced for Making False Statements to Federal Agents in Relation to a Terrorist Investigation” Department of Justice, December 9, 2016. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-edmi/pr/dearborn-resident-sentenced-making-false-statements-federal-agents-relation-terrorist>

⁷⁵ Ioan Pop and Mitchell D. Silber. “Iran and Hezbollah’s Pre-Operational Modus Operandi in the West.” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 2021: 44(2), p. 15.

⁷⁶ “Bronx Man And Michigan Man Arrested For Terrorist Activities On Behalf Of Hizballah’s Islamic Jihad Organization,” Department of Justice, June 8, 2017. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/bronx-man-and-michigan-man-arrested-terrorist-activities-behalf-hizballah-s-islamic>; “United States of America vs. Samer El Debek

New York, El Debek is alleged to have traveled and obtained information about the U.S. and Israeli embassies in Panama in 2011, including photos and details about security procedures, and also identifying areas of weakness in the Panama Canal.⁷⁷ El Debek provided his IJO handler with maps, notes, and pictures providing information about Canal security.⁷⁸ El Debek was arrested and charged in 2017 in the Southern District of New York with providing material support to Hezbollah, receiving training, funding Hezbollah, and firearms violations.⁷⁹ At the time of writing, El Debek's case has yet to go to trial.

As explored throughout this report, Hezbollah's operations in the United States are indicative of the organization's global reach. While many pro-Hezbollah activities in the United States were focused on embedding networks and strengthening the organization financially, Hezbollah's IJO was also operating in the United States. In a meeting with FBI agents, New York-based IJO operative Ali Kourani described the unit as the "Black Ops of Hezbollah," claiming that IJO was Iranian-controlled.⁸⁰ Kourani, an American and Lebanese dual citizen, received Hezbollah-sponsored weapons training in Lebanon in 2000 when he was approximately 16 years old. He legally entered the United States three years later and was recruited by the IJO in 2008. Kourani obtained U.S. citizenship in 2009 and was subsequently assigned a handler who began providing him with taskings, including a trip to Guangzhou, China, to "develop relationships that the IJO could rely on to obtain ammonium nitrate to be used as an explosive precursor chemical."⁸¹

In addition to his activities in China, Kourani returned to Lebanon for more advanced weapons training and to prepare for future attacks against the United States. During this period, Kourani engaged in covert operations that he understood to be aimed at preparing for potential future Hezbollah attacks in the United States.⁸² This included identifying weapons suppliers in the United States, targeting members of the Israeli Defense Force that the IJO could recruit or target for

- Complaint," Department of Justice, May 31, 2017. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/972446/download>.

⁷⁷ "United States of America vs. Samer El Debek - Complaint," Department of Justice, May 31, 2017.; "Bronx Man And Michigan Man Arrested For Terrorist Activities On Behalf Of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization," Department of Justice, June 8, 2017.

⁷⁸ "United States of America vs. Samer El Debek - Complaint," Department of Justice, May 31, 2017. ; "Bronx Man And Michigan Man Arrested For Terrorist Activities On Behalf Of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization," Department of Justice, June 8, 2017.

⁷⁹ "United States of America vs. Samer El Debek - Complaint," Department of Justice, May 31, 2017. ; "Bronx Man And Michigan Man Arrested For Terrorist Activities On Behalf Of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization," Department of Justice, June 8, 2017.

⁸⁰ "Criminal Complaint: United States v Ali Kourani," Department of Justice, May 31, 2017. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/972421/download>.

⁸¹ "Ali Kourani Complaint," Department of Justice, May 31, 2017, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/press-release/file/972451/download>; "Ali Kourani Government Sentencing Memorandum," Department of Justice, November 26, 2019, <https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.nysd.476782/gov.uscourts.nysd.476782.135.0.pdf>.

⁸² "Hizballah Operative Sentenced to 40 Years in Prison for Covert Terrorist Activities on Behalf of Hizballah's Islamic Jihad Organization," Department of Justice, December 3, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/hizballah-operative-sentenced-40-years-prison-covert-terrorist-activities-behalf-hizballah-s>.

violence, and gathering operational information on security at targets such as airports and military and law enforcement facilities in New York City. In December 2019, Kourani became the first IJO operative to be convicted and sentenced in the United States.

A few years after Kourani and Samer El Debek were arrested, Alexei Saab, a naturalized U.S. citizen and IJO member, was arrested in July 2019 on similar charges. Saab joined Hezbollah in 1996 and began to receive official training in 1999, but it was not until September 2000 that he became a member of the IJO.⁸³ In 2004 and 2005, he received special explosives training, and in 2008 he became a naturalized U.S. citizen.⁸⁴ While living in Morristown, New Jersey, Saab is alleged to have scouted possible targets in New York, including landmarks like the United Nations headquarters, the Statue of Liberty, Rockefeller Center, Times Square, and the Empire State Building.⁸⁵ In addition to gathering general information on each potential attack site, Saab allegedly focused on their “soft spots” in order to ensure maximum destruction.⁸⁶ On May 12, 2022, Saab was convicted of receiving military-type training from the IJO, conspiring to commit marriage fraud, and providing false statements.⁸⁷

Trends in IJO cases—in which individuals are alleged to have engaged in violent plots and conducted surveillance activities against domestic soft and hard targets—suggest that the long-term goals of Hezbollah in the United States extend beyond financing. These IJO cases are a relatively small sample within the dataset, but their continued presence suggests the persistent potential for Hezbollah’s U.S.-based activity to expand beyond financial support and into attack planning operations. Indeed, while the dataset does not include any cases which rise to the level of an active domestic plot, the modus operandi of Hezbollah operatives—IJO members specifically—seems to be intended to provide Hezbollah with the operational capacity to conduct hostile activities against targets of their choosing in the United States. This pattern tracks with global Hezbollah operations more broadly, which seek to capitalize on security gaps and engage in actions against U.S. and Western interests. The cases profiled within, which underscore the effective law enforcement disruption of pre-operational surveillance activities of actors like El Debek and Kourani, show the clear intent by IJO operatives to develop intelligence to allow for kinetic actions against U.S. based targets in the future.

⁸³ “United States v. Alexei Saab Criminal Complaint,” Department of Justice, July 8, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/1203826/download>

⁸⁴ “Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces Indictment Of New Jersey Man For Terrorist Activities On Behalf Of Hizballah’s Islamic Jihad Organization,” Department of Justice, September 19, 2019. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-indictment-new-jersey-man-terrorist-activities-behalf>.

⁸⁵ “United States v. Alexei Saab Criminal Complaint,” Department of Justice, July 8, 2019.

⁸⁶ “United States v. Alexei Saab Criminal Complaint,” Department of Justice, July 8, 2019.

⁸⁷ The jury was unable to reach a verdict on the charge of provision of material support to a terrorist group, and the prosecution has requested a retrial on this count.

The authors also conducted an assessment of 24 cases that were not included in our dataset. These cases involved actors operating on behalf of Hezbollah abroad, but who were charged in the United States. In some instances, the individual was extradited to the United States, while in other cases, the individual remains a fugitive. Although these cases are outside the scope of this study, they underscore the transnational elements of Hezbollah's criminal enterprise.

*For example, Adel El Zabayar, a former member of the Venezuelan National Assembly, was charged in 2020 in the Southern District of New York with participating in a narco-terrorism conspiracy, as well as drug and firearms charges. El Zabayar is accused of conspiring with members of the *Cártel de Los Soles* to recruit and train Hezbollah and Hamas operatives at clandestine training camps in Venezuela for the purpose of carrying out attacks on U.S. soil.⁸⁸ *Cártel de Los Soles* is comprised of high-ranking Venezuelan officials who seek to use Venezuelan institutions to facilitate the importation of cocaine into the United States. Members of *Cártel de Los Soles* reportedly instructed El Zabayar to travel to Syria and Palestine to obtain weapons and recruit members of Hezbollah and Hamas. He allegedly returned from the Middle East with a cargo plane full of weapons, including "rocket-propelled grenade launchers, AK-103s, and sniper rifles."⁸⁹ El Zabayar has not been arrested, and his case remains pending in the Southern District of New York.*

Another example is that of Dino Bouterse, son of the former president of Suriname, Desi Bouterse.⁹⁰ As Suriname's Counterterrorism Head, Bouterse allowed individuals he believed to be Hezbollah members to use his country as a base for attacks against the United States in exchange for millions of dollars.⁹¹ In 2013, Bouterse met with purported Hezbollah operatives and agreed to the covert transport of Hezbollah members from Lebanon to Suriname through Trinidad.⁹² Bouterse also supplied a false Surinamese passport to one of the purported members of Hezbollah, and discussed the procurement of heavy weapons for the group.⁹³ Bouterse was extradited to the United States in August 2013 to face charges in the Southern District of New York, and was sentenced to 195 months in prison in 2015.⁹⁴

⁸⁸ "Former Member Of Venezuelan National Assembly Charged With Narco-Terrorism, Drug Trafficking, And Weapons Offenses," Department of Justice, May 27, 2020. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-member-venezuelan-national-assembly-charged-narco-terrorism-drug-trafficking-and>.

⁸⁹ "Criminal complaint: U.S. v Adel El Zabayar." Department of Justice. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/press-release/file/1279391/download>

⁹⁰ "Dino Bouterse et. al Indictment," Department of Justice, August 20, 2013. https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/usao-sdny/legacy/2015/03/25/Bouterse%2C%20Dino%20S2%20Indictment_0.pdf.

⁹¹ Jonathan Stempel, "Suriname leader's son gets 16 years U.S. prison for Hezbollah aid," Reuters, March 10, 2015. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-suriname-hezbollah/suriname-leaders-son-gets-16-years-u-s-prison-for-hezbollah-aid-idUSKBN0M61UN20150310>

⁹² Jonathan Stempel, "Suriname leader's son gets 16 years U.S. prison for Hezbollah aid," Reuters, March 10, 2015.; "Manhattan U.S. Attorney Announces Charges Against Senior South American Counterterrorism Figure For Attempting To Support Hezbollah," Department of Justice, November 8, 2013. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/manhattan-us-attorney-announces-charges-against-senior-south-american-counterterrorism>; "Dino Bouterse et. al Indictment," Department of Justice, August 20, 2013.

"Dino Bouterse et. al Indictment," Department of Justice, August 20, 2013.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ "Former South American Counter-Terrorism Official Sentenced In Manhattan Federal Court To More Than 16 Years In Prison For Attempting To Support Hezbollah," United States Attorney's Office - Southern District of New York, December 7, 2016

Conclusion and Policy Implications

As addressed by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken in May 2021, “[t]he threat that Hezbollah (Hezbollah) poses to the United States, our allies, and interests in the Middle East and globally, calls for countries around the world to take steps to restrict its activities and disrupt its facilitation networks.”⁹⁵ While groups like the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda have dominated security discussions, Hezbollah has worked quietly behind the scenes to recruit operatives, expand networks, and embed themselves in the United States. As Hezbollah’s U.S. operations have differed from other foreign terrorist organizations, their actions in America are rarely discussed. However, as this report has shown, Hezbollah continues to use the United States as a base of operations, seeking to expand its networks and resources on American soil in order to carry out terrorist operations around the world.

Throughout this report, we reviewed 128 cases of Hezbollah operatives active in the United States between 1997 and 2020. Several trends in our analysis merit reiteration and further study to inform policy outcomes. In particular, networks played a central role in the group’s activities, as detailed throughout this study, with the majority of cases examined (92%) involving networks of two or more individuals, with six large networks making up 76% of all cases in the dataset. Network activity often involved friends or family members engaged in organized conspiracies such as cigarette smuggling and various other fundraising operations to support Hezbollah. Hezbollah also had interstate and transnational linkages, with cases spanning 11 U.S. states and evidencing a global reach. The prevalence of networks within the milieu of Hezbollah-affiliated individuals in the United States is an important consideration when examining potential responses. Further obscuring the clarity of these networks, as this paper has reviewed, is the interconnected nature of Hezbollah’s operational plans with broader criminal enterprises and other illegal activity - which often evidences little overt ideological connection to the terrorist group.

The second key trend is the manifestation of Hezbollah’s activities in the United States, with the vast majority (87%) of the individuals examined participating in pursuits that sought to provide financial support to the group. This stands in stark contrast to other homegrown violent extremist mobilizations in the United States, specifically the Islamic State’s.⁹⁶ As demonstrated by many studies and bolstered by this report, Hezbollah’s activities have often come in the form of funding schemes that establish transnational connections with the intent of developing operations capable of utilizing the United States to support the group financially and materially.

⁹⁵ Reuters, “Blinken calls Hezbollah ‘threat,’ U.S. blacklists 7 Lebanese nationals.” May 11, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-blacklists-seven-lebanese-nationals-tied-hezbollah-treasury-website-2021-05-11/>

⁹⁶ “GW Extremism Tracker: Terrorism in the United States,” Program on Extremism at The George Washington.; Heather J. Williams, Nathan Chandler, and Eric Robinson, “Trends in the Draw of Americans to Foreign Terrorist Organizations from 9/11 to Today,” RAND, 2018.; Lorenzo Vidino, Jon Lewis, and Andrew Mines, “Dollars for Daesh: Analyzing the Finances of American ISIS Supporters,” The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, 2020.

Despite the prominence of Hezbollah’s financing activities in the United States, overemphasizing the financial aspects risks misinterpreting the broader strategic picture: elements within Hezbollah remain interested in developing the capacity and capability to plot attacks on U.S. soil. Recent trends in IJO cases, in which individuals are alleged to have engaged in violent plots and conducted surveillance activities against domestic soft and hard targets, suggest that the long-term goals of Hezbollah in the United States extend further and deeper than financing or smuggling. This aligns with the findings of the April 2021 Annual Intelligence Assessment released by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence’s annual threat assessment, which contended, “Hizballah maintains the capability to target, both directly and indirectly, U.S. interests inside Lebanon, in the region, overseas, and—to a lesser extent—in the United States.”⁹⁷ While these IJO cases are a relatively small sample within the dataset, their continued presence suggests the persistent potential for Hezbollah’s U.S.-based activity to expand beyond financial support and into attack operations.

Taken together, these findings highlight that Hezbollah’s main activities in the United States have typically focused on efforts to expand its influence. However, the report’s findings also emphasize Hezbollah’s global reach, including its use of surveillance operations. As such, it is pivotal that policymakers further develop a strategic understanding of how, if at all, Hezbollah’s operational goals have shifted in recent years - and how they may further evolve in the near future.

⁹⁷ Office of the Director of National Intelligence. “Annual Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community.” April 9, 2021. <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/assessments/ATA-2021-Unclassified-Report.pdf>

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