# Terror Without Borders, Part I: Hezbollah, Inc. and Beyond

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*Featuring Dr. Matt Levitt*
*Hosted by Mark Dubowitz*

**LEVITT:** Hezbollah does have networks around the world. You know those disposable ice packs you give your kid when they twist their ankle in soccer practice, and you break the membrane and shake it up and it gets really cold for 20 minutes? Well, if you don't break that membrane, and in each side, you take that chemical material and combine it with some other stuff that's publicly available, you've got most of what you need to make an ammonium nitrate bomb. And that's been a modus operandi of Hezbollah all around the world. We even have a Hezbollah ammonium nitrate case in Houston, Texas.

**DUBOWITZ:** Welcome back to "The Iran Breakdown." I'm your host Mark Dubowitz. Today we're zeroing in on one of the deadliest weapons in the regime in Iran's arsenal. And no, it's not the nuclear bomb. It's Tehran's global terror network. Hezbollah in Lebanon. Hamas and Palestinian Jihad in Gaza. The Houthis in Yemen. Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria. From the Middle East to Africa, Latin America, and Asia; this isn't chaos, it's strategy. The regime in Iran has built a terror empire that spans the globe, operated by its proxies, funded by the regime, fueled by its goal to dominate the region.

That is why the United States rightly calls the Islamic Republic the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. And these proxies aren't hiding. Hezbollah and Hamas are still striking after taking heavy hits from Israeli intelligence and military operations. The Houthis are launching missiles at international shipping and the U.S. Navy in the Red Sea, trying to strangle global trade. Iran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria attack U.S. troops, triggering U.S. airstrikes in retaliation against both the Houthis and the Shiite militias. Israel is landing real blows. The US is hitting back. But the Islamic Republic keeps pushing. This is the regime's playbook: wage war through proxies, dodge the consequences, and destabilize the world. It's one more reason this regime must fall.

To break it all down, I'm joined by Dr. Matt Levitt of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He's a former senior official at the U.S. Treasury and FBI, one of the world's top experts on Iran's terror network, its financing, and its global reach. Today, we're going to unpack how Iran and Hezbollah operate, the threats they pose, and how the United States, Israel, and our allies can help stop them. So, let's break it down.

Matt, wonderful to see you. Thank you for joining "The Iran Breakdown." And so, Matt, we're going to break it down. We're going to look at the entire proxy network that the regime has been sponsoring for many years. But before we get there, I want to talk a little bit about Matt Levitt, the man, the myth, the legend, your background. How did you get involved in this? How'd you get interested in this? Tell us a bit about your background.

**LEVITT:** First of all, it's a pleasure to be here. I'm really excited you're doing this podcast; it's really important. To make a long story short, I thought I was going to be the next Dennis Ross when I first started out, probably because the first week of my graduate school career was Oslo, and that got a lot of people very, very excited.

**DUBOWITZ:** This was the Oslo peace process of the 1990s.

**LEVITT:** Yeah, 1993.

**DUBOWITZ:** Right.

**LEVITT:** That's how young I am. And as I continued past my Master's into my PhD, I wrote a PhD that was very much a conflict resolution theory based piece, but basically looking at how terrorist attacks undermine a negotiation process, undermine the legitimacy of the leader of one side, the perception of the leader on the other side, the legitimacy of the process overall, all kinds of technical things like that.

Did the PhD eventually; published it as a book eventually. But the conclusion of it to me personally was, there will always be really smart people who will be able to figure out where to draw the boundary line, and how to deal with water rights, and right of return, and those types of things. If you really wanted there to be space within which any type of agreement, in the Israeli-Palestinian context or any other, is possible, you've got to bubble wrap the process from the outset, because you have to anticipate that the extremists, potentially on both sides, are going to try and undermine it.

And that really brought me to terrorism. In the PhD, I looked at terrorist attacks by Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Jewish extremists like the Baruch Goldstein attack in Hebron. And the timing was good because I had done all this PhD field research in Israel, the West Bank, and then Gaza Strip in 1997, really just a few weeks after the Palestinians came into Gaza. I interviewed people that the U.S. government hadn't interviewed yet. I know because I got calls from parts of the U.S. government saying, "Hey, you met with people we haven't met with yet. What'd you think of them?"

And to make a long story short, that led to a job in counterterrorism at the FBI, focused on Middle Eastern terrorist groups, their activities in the United States, and their activities threatening U.S. interests and persons abroad. I left the FBI after 9/11. I led the analytical team for Flight 175, among other things. And I really wanted to write a book on Hamas and how it basically has not only a terrorist and military wing and a political wing, but also a social and welfare wing, but that these are all in service of one another. And that was ultimately published by Yale, “Politics, Charity, and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad.”

And then just as I decided not to go back into government, government came knocking. Part of the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act, the big thing was creation of DHS [Department of Homeland Security], the National Counterterrorism Center. But it also pulled almost all of the law enforcement components, everything but IRS Criminal Investigations, out of Treasury, mostly into the new DHS. And in that space, Treasury created something called Terrorism and Financial Intelligence, which included a bunch of pre-existing components and then also a new Office of Intelligence and Analysis. And I got recruited to be the Deputy Assistant Secretary for Intelligence and Analysis.

Did that for a while, and then went back to the think tank world, back to the Washington Institute. Had my book on Hezbollah. And I direct the counterterrorism program there and teach at Georgetown and take as many opportunities as I can to share a podium with you, mostly to poke fun at you because – and you poke fun at me and it's a lot of fun. And frankly, I'm tolerating the whole Iran conversation just so we can get to that.

(LAUGHTER)

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, we do like to have fun on this podcast, Matt, so we will get to that, even though it is a dark and serious topic. By the way, has anyone read any of your books? Have you got readers? Or-

**LEVITT:** Oh, yeah, my mom. Yeah.

**DUBOWITZ:** Your mom's read all of them.

**LEVITT:** I will tell you this much. I know I'm doing something right because the then-Deputy Secretary General of Hezbollah, the current Secretary General, Naim Qassem, a couple of years ago, I think it was, spent, I think it's like 22 minutes, talking about me on Hezbollah's Al-Manar television. It's a great video clip, and he has, like, pages of notes that I assume some aides prepped him with. And he carefully reads the name, “Matthew Levitt,” checks his notes again, “Matthew Levitt,” and proceeds to tell the audience all the lies I say about Hezbollah and how I'm a shill for the U.S. government.

The other way I know I'm onto something is that, and I'm sure you'll appreciate, every once in a while, I get calls from people in positions to know, who say, "Just be careful not to click on emails with strange things because there are people who are trying to get you to click on those."

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, that makes sense. I imagine you would have watched with some interest all the names in your Hezbollah and Hamas book have been systematically taken out by the Israelis. So, I don't know how many of them are left.

**LEVITT:** I've never thought of my books as targeting lists. And it's kind of funny only because the latest version of the Hezbollah book came out, like, just before everything started in July with the assassinations of Fuad Shukr and Ibrahim Aqil, people who were involved in attacks against the CIA in the 1980s. People in the U.S. Intelligence Community dancing a jig when these people were taken out, and then, of course, pagers and walkie-talkies and whatnot. So, the book has great historical context at this point.

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, I'm glad you reminded our listeners about that because people forget that Hezbollah has killed and maimed many Americans. It's not just Israelis and Middle Easterners. But I want to get to Hezbollah first because I think your book's outstanding. It obviously came out in a very timely fashion. And Hezbollah is perhaps down, but not out. Let's talk a little bit about the Hezbollah that is still standing after Israel launched, I think, attacks that impressed me and surprised me. I don't know if they surprised you. And Israel's capabilities, and what they did to Hezbollah leadership and Hezbollah networks. Who is Hezbollah today, after these Israeli strikes?

**LEVITT:** So, Mark, first of all, anybody who tells you they weren't surprised by what happened since last July is pulling your leg. The only people who weren't surprised were the people who've been developing these capabilities for a long time. And even they, I'm here to tell you, were in some ways surprised by how effective and successful this series of body blows was.

So, before I answer where they are now, I think it's important to understand it's not just a question of taking out key personnel. It's not just a question of destroying a significant amount of their weaponry. It's not just a question of taking out a significant amount of forward deployed weaponry in bunkers and tunnels underground along the Blue Line separating Lebanon and Israel. It's not just a question of literally blowing up huge amounts of cash, U.S. dollars, in gold. It's really also a question of completely ripping apart their command and control.

People have referred to this as an effort to, kind of, cut off the head of the snake. It's not that. This is like open heart surgery. So, you're talking about multiple people at the top level, multiple people at levels 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7. You take out one person and then three days later, the person who was supposed to succeed them. It's had a tremendously disrupting effect for Hezbollah. It's going to take them some time to recoup from that, if they ever do. I don't think that Hezbollah that existed prior to July will exist again, if not for many, many years, and only if we make lots of big mistakes.

**DUBOWITZ:** And Matt, that's interesting, because I just want to stop you there before we go into more detail. There is an argument, and I think it's been mostly used with Hamas, and that is this notion that you can't kill an idea. And I'm sure you've been hearing about this for decades as you worked on counterterrorism. But what you're saying is, you may not be able to kill an idea, but you certainly can demolish the capabilities of a terrorist organization and in doing so, really undermine its effectiveness.

**LEVITT:** Look, the basic calculus for understanding threat is intent and capability, right? I would love to be able to address intent, but if I can sufficiently address capability, I can mitigate the threat significantly. Now, we're going to get to your original question. It's not completely mitigated, there still is a significant threat from Hezbollah. And then if you can mitigate the threat enough, you can create space where there can be changes.

The Washington Institute conducted a poll in the summer before October 7: just over 70 percent of Gazans wanted Hamas disarmed, did not support Hamas targeting Israel, and wanted even the corrupt PA [Palestinian Authority] to come back in. Hamas controlled the Gaza Strip, and yet it wasn't actually winning the battle of ideas and hearts and minds.

The same with Hezbollah. If you look at the Arab Barometer polls that came out, Hezbollah wasn't doing so great. People were very upset with Hezbollah, not only for preventing, until recently, there being an actual Lebanese government, but much more fundamentally for playing a critical role – they don't deserve all the blame, but a critical role in the huge economic crisis that continues to face Lebanon.

So, look now. You have now, it's not the best thing in the world, but you have a ceasefire that Hezbollah had no choice but to agree to. You have a president and a prime minister who are not big fans of Hezbollah. You have a new head of the Lebanese Armed Forces, the LAF, similarly. Small baby steps, to be sure, lots of imperfections, but a far cry from what was before.

All that said, Hezbollah is still a threat because ultimately what the Israelis – and I'd say they're still a threat in terms of international terrorism, they're still a threat in terms of things domestically within Lebanon, and they're still a threat to Israel, mostly in terms of rockets. But the Israelis will still be concerned about cross-border raids, not necessarily of hundreds or thousands of people like we saw on October 7, which was the threat people were concerned about from the North. For many, many years, I've been going up there and Israeli officials saying, "This is the threat we're preparing to counter against a Hezbollah cross-border raid."

But the fact, is Hezbollah has today still thousands upon thousands of rockets. Even if it's accurate that the Israelis destroyed some 80 percent of the most sophisticated rockets and the precision guided munitions, which is a tremendously huge achievement, 20 percent of thousands is still a not small number. And they still have plenty of other smaller, shorter, older, dumber rockets that are important mostly in terms of being able to overwhelm even Israel's four-tier air defense system.

Now, they can't do something like that for weeks and months and months on end like they once could have. But if Hezbollah decided tomorrow to initiate a significant rocket attack on Israel, they could do significant damage. If Hezbollah operatives decided at some point that they wanted to do some type of cross-border raid, maybe like 2006 and grab a couple of people. A few months ago, I wrote a piece on Iran's petrochemical weapons program that mostly are fentanyl-based knockout drugs. The big concern on the part of the Israelis is that was going to be provided to Hezbollah. Hezbollah uses that to knock out people on the border and either grab their bodies or pass them and go and attack someone. That's still a possibility, though much less of a threat than it was because the Israelis are so much better prepared.

But Hezbollah has no shortage of fighters. Not necessarily the most – they've lost some very sophisticated fighters, some very experienced fighters, but they've got plenty of numbers of people and they've got no shortage of small arms. And I think that's the biggest threat actually domestically in Lebanon, which is why you're seeing, I think, the Lebanese government take some good steps, but also trying to be careful in what and how they do. As we just saw Hezbollah kidnap Syrians from inside Syrian territory and then torture and kill them in an effort to try and pressure the post-Assad Syrian government, which is no group of Jeffersonian Democrats, but is anti-Iran, anti-Hezbollah, and is cutting off the land and air bridge that was Syria before for Iranian weapons. You see Hezbollah trying to push back and they could.

Finally, the one part of Hezbollah where I haven't seen any significant name of someone who has been killed in this campaign is their international terrorist network, the Islamic Jihad organization, the external security organization, Unit 910. It's the same thing. They were never huge in numbers. It doesn't mean that they're more capable. But if I were Hezbollah and I've been beaten back so bad, I would be really looking for ways to show that I'm not down and out. And I would be looking to do that internationally in ways that have some measure of kind of reasonable deniability. That is to say, it's less likely the Israelis will start bombing the stuffing out of me again over this.

And then I would also be looking to refill my coffers. They lost a tremendous amount of money. They lost a lot of infrastructure; they can't rebuild. Iran is having a much harder time sending money to them, trying to send money on flights from Iran, which now get inspected, on flights from Iraq, which now get inspected. Now we're seeing flights from Turkey. But 1 million, 2 million at a time, it's hard to rebuild the millions upon millions upon millions they've lost that way. So, I anticipate we're going to see a lot more of their criminal networks in Africa, in South America, leveraging their footprint in the Iraqi economy, for example, to try and fill some of that gap.

**DUBOWITZ:** So Matt, that's what I really want to talk to you about: is Hezbollah, Inc. International, because I think there's been a huge amount of focus, as you allude to, in the past year on Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hezbollah in Israel, Hezbollah in Syria, tend to – a lot of podcasts, a lot of writing, a lot of reports, but Hezbollah International is something that you've focused on for many years. I think you're the leading expert on how Hezbollah operates internationally.

**LEVITT:** Okay.

**DUBOWITZ:** Give our listeners…

**LEVITT:** I think we're done here.

**DUBOWITZ:** We're done. You're the leading expert. Now, let's bring in your mom who's read all your books and probably knows more than you.

(LAUGHTER)

But you've been tracking them internationally and I'm particularly interested in learning more about that, and I'm sure our listeners are as well. Give us a sense of the scope of Hezbollah globally. And how's the organization, how are they organized? Where are they? Talk a little bit about their presence, particularly in Latin America and also in the United States and Canada.

**LEVITT:** How much time do you have?

**DUBOWITZ:** We've got quite a bit of time, and I actually want to spend quite a bit of time on this podcast talking about this, because I think, again, we're going to get to Hamas, we'll get to Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and we're certainly going to get to Iran and its global network. But it's been clear to me for many years that Hezbollah has been operating very successfully, very lucratively, as you alluded to, in places and in jurisdictions where they really represent a significant threat to the United States, to Jewish communities, to Israeli diplomatic missions, and to local populations. Tell us a little bit about that, and where are we with Hezbollah Global Inc?

**LEVITT:** So, look, this is where I spend most of my time when it comes to Hezbollah. The book, “Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God,” really is this and goes kind of mapping around the world. And then following off from that, we built an interactive map of Hezbollah activity around the world, which is open access and free at Washington Institute's website. And now a podcast, *Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule*.

And maybe let's start by, I'll just explain that title. At one point, there was a Hezbollah operative in New York, Ali Kourani, who's since been convicted and is in jail. Cards on the table, I was the government's expert witness in that case. And at one point he asks his handler, who's a more senior Hezbollah international terrorist, "Hey, what was your role in the Burgas Bulgaria bus bombing and in the failed ammonium nitrate explosive stockpiling plots in Cyprus?" And his handler scolds him and says, "Hey, the golden rule of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad is the less you know, the better."

Now, he means operational security. But it's also true that Hezbollah does lots and lots of things that it wants you to know about it. Its political activity, its social welfare activity in Lebanon, its religious activity, its ideological activity, including its very, very anti-Israel stances. But there are things it really doesn't want you to know about. So, this is not just operational security for its operatives. They'd much prefer that people like you and I weren't having this conversation. So, the point of the podcast is to break Hezbollah's golden rule.

Hezbollah's different than, say, your al-Qaeda, than your ISIS, because they want to be able to have capabilities to do all kinds of things, including kill people. But they don't necessarily feel they have to kill people. If there's other ways to do what they want to do it, that's fine too. But they definitely want to have off-the-shelf operational planning in case the leadership decides that this is something they want to do.

The big concern for intelligence and law enforcement in the West, in general, but specifically here in the United States, right now is that the assessment that we've had for many, many years, the fundamental assessment has been Hezbollah doesn't want to carry out attacks in the United States yet. It's never carried out an attack in the United States, it's carried out attacks against Americans in Lebanon and abroad. But it wants to have the capability. And the types of things that would make it consider carrying out these types of attacks, we were told by Ali Kourani, and it came out in his court case, were if the United States was deemed to be directly involved in a war against Iran or taking out senior Iranian leaders, think Qasem Soleimani, or directly involved in a war against Hezbollah or helping Israel, and he specifically said like killing Hassan Nasrallah, which obviously has happened too, that and much more. So, all of the kind of tripwires, they're kind of in the rear-view mirror. Now…

**DUBOWITZ:** Are you surprised? Given that these events have occurred, and Hezbollah has not activated its international cells?

**LEVITT:** So, first of all, you and I don't know what they've activated. I remember right after the Qasem Soleimani assassination, a bunch of people in government at the time said to me, "You see, lots of people thought it would be World War III. Nothing happened." And I remember telling people, "Stuff's going to happen. They're at least going to try and do stuff. Don't think that you kill Qasem Soleimani on Monday and by Thursday, you see what they've done." And in fact, we've seen them trying to kill current and former U.S. government officials and do other things around the world, and they still are trying to do those things to avenge Qasem Soleimani.

**DUBOWITZ:** We've seen Iran do that directly. We've seen Hezbollah do that directly. Are you making a distinction between Iran and Hezbollah in that case?

**LEVITT:** So, in that case, yes. I'm not saying that Hezbollah hasn't been involved, we just haven't seen it directly. Hezbollah was involved in one instance where they had an opportunity to get information from someone who was then an active-duty U.S. military person in Iraq and provided information to Hezbollah on people that were involved in that plot. And that information was clearly provided to Iran. But in these types of international operations, Iran and Hezbollah have often operated together. They've often operated separately. When it comes to Iranian external operations, and we have an interactive map of that on the website now too, the biggest modus operandi, which now Hezbollah is following, is to recruit non-terrorist, non-Iranian, non-Lebanese criminals.

**DUBOWITZ:** We see this just in recent days, right? There's a trial in the Southern District of New York, the murder-for-hire trial targeting Masih Alinejad, the very famous and very outspoken Iranian dissident. I was there just recently, listening to court proceedings, and it was quite chilling and quite harrowing. You've been, I think, involved with that trial as well, correct?

**LEVITT:** I was the expert witness for that trial and didn't have to testify because the defense stipulated to the things I had to say, I guess, rather than have me get up there and do it myself.

**DUBOWITZ:** But that's an example. I guess in that case, was it a Russian mob recruiting Azerbaijanis?

**LEVITT:** Two former Soviet Union Republic gangs of thieves, criminals. At least one of them was Azeri. And then having someone on the ground who, unfortunately for them, the FBI caught and flipped, and he pled guilty and testified against these two guys who were effectively his bosses.

**DUBOWITZ:** But that's the model you're talking about, which is essentially…

**LEVITT:** Yeah.

**DUBOWITZ:** ... Iran and/or Hezbollah recruiting non-Iranian, non-Lebanese.

**LEVITT:** I think in the Lebanese case, so I guess it's almost a couple of years now in Brazil, recruiting local Brazilian criminals, paying for them to have vacations to Lebanon where people could then vet them and sending them back. But they were not necessarily Muslim, not necessarily Shia, not Arab. They were doing it for the money in plots targeting, in that case, Israelis and Jews.

**DUBOWITZ:** We've seen also biker gangs and drug cartels and others involved in these plots.

**LEVITT:** Yeah, especially on the Iran side.

**DUBOWITZ:** On the Iran side.

**LEVITT:** It's just another version of the reasonable deniability, right? Trying to have a little bit more distance. And sometimes it's even a cutout of a cutout. We've seen in Sweden, the Iranians hiring Foxtrot or other criminal networks who then in turn provide an improvised explosive grenade to a 14-year-old kid and say, "Here's a little bit of money, go throw it over that wall," which happens to be the wall of the Israeli embassy. And when law enforcement shows up, what they've got is a 14-year-old who threw something over and they get to trace it back to the criminals and then trace that back to Iran. Which you and I sitting here may sound fairly straightforward, but when you're an investigator, it's not, following that type of, getting that type of information.

In any event, Hezbollah does have networks around the world. Sometimes it's people that they've sent around the world. I don't like the term “sleeper cell,” but Ali Kourani in New York, he used it to describe himself and others. And it wasn't the only case there. Alexei Saab, also in New York, some other cases, and they were doing real surveillance. They were doing surveillance of Secret Service, FBI, and military offices in New York. They were doing surveillance of Israelis in New York. They were doing surveillance of JFK and Pearson International Airports in New York City and in Toronto. They were looking for storage facilities they could rent for small arms or other things, looking into networks where they could procure small arms.

Ali Kourani became a U.S. citizen fraudulently and then got a passport and immediately applies for a visa to China because Hezbollah had him go out there to the largest factory in the world that makes ice packs. You know those disposable ice packs, if your kid twists their ankle in soccer practice and you break the membrane and shake it up and it gets really cold for 20 minutes? Well, if you don't break that membrane in each side and you take that chemical material and combine it with some other stuff that's publicly available, you've got most of what you need to make an ammonium nitrate bomb. And that's been a modus operandi of Hezbollah around the world. We even had a Hezbollah ammonium nitrate case in Houston, Texas. And the State Department has revealed across Europe, and we've had cases in Thailand, really around the world.

And there's no evidence that Ali Kourani succeeded in going there to negotiate a bulk discount purchase, but that's what he went there for, according to investigators. He came up with a cover story that really held no water. “I met a guy; I traveled with his son. We traveled 20 something hours together, but I never met his name.” Whatever, it didn't – at face value, it fell apart.

More frequently, you see Hezbollah engage in criminal fundraising. Every type of fraud you can imagine, money laundering for cartels, some very unsophisticated stuff, some extremely sophisticated stuff, some things by low-level people who don't have a lot of money and others by some really important Hezbollah financiers who are millionaires and provide not only direct funding but provide their networks to Hezbollah.

**DUBOWITZ:** So Matt, this is important to understand. I think for our listeners, many of them will probably appreciate this, but Iran has been giving Hezbollah annually, estimates of 700 million a year, maybe up to a billion dollars a year. But Hezbollah is also a organization that doesn't want to be wholly dependent on Iran. So, it's created these independent streams of self-financing around the world.

**LEVITT:** Yeah.

**DUBOWITZ:** This is what you're referring to.

**LEVITT:** This was always the case. Hezbollah was always one of the groups that was more engaged in criminal activity than most terrorist organizations, but it was largely not kind of at an institutional level, it was just let's have our people, whenever you're out there and you can, sure, do that type of stuff.

I think a big turning point came in 2009 when the Green Revolution was going on domestically within Iran, U.S. and international sanctions were really beginning to bite again, and a sharp drop in the price of oil all came around at the same time and the stars aligned. And you had a situation where, it's not clear how long, but for a period of time, more than days or weeks, but probably not much more than some months, Iran had to cut back its funding for Hezbollah by as much, we're told, as 40 percent.

If you're Hezbollah and you're trying to create a “culture of resistance,” their term, not mine, in Lebanon, you'd much rather be told by Iran, "Look, I'm really sorry, no rockets this month." You don't want to have this huge budget shortfall. And they actually had to shut offices, combine office space, cut back salaries to people. That's a real crisis for Hezbollah.

Now, the funding went back up and then some, but it was a real wake-up moment for Hezbollah, and they realized they needed to diversify their income portfolios. So, they went to all kinds of international crime. And then we saw, just shortly thereafter, just a few years later, now that they had these types of networks, in particular in Europe and Eastern Europe, that were engaged in all of these economic crimes and financial schemes, they then leveraged many of those to reach out to other elements within their criminal networks for arms procurement.

Because at the time, the Iranians were providing Hezbollah with all kinds of cheap knockoff weapons, and for their special forces, Hezbollah wanted the real thing. They wanted M10s, they wanted AR-15s, they had specific things they wanted, and they got those through some of the same networks. Which, by the way, provided openings for the Drug Enforcement Administration and others to go in undercover pretending to be, I don't know, in some cases FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia]. And, "We'll give weapons for drugs, drugs for weapons," and Hezbollah fell into that.

In a few cases, the US has been able to extradite some of these deep-pocket donors, Kassem Tajeddine, Mohammad Bazzi, to the United States. In those two cases, not on material support charges, but because they were designated by the U.S. Treasury Department and then engaged in sanctions evasion and on sanctions evasion charges were brought to the United States. Both of them served some time in jail. Mohammad Bazzi, I think just this week was released on time served, about two years, time served, and a huge fine, I understand. Kassem Tajeddine was released on the context of COVID, officially on humanitarian grounds, but we were able to get an American who was being wrongfully detained in Lebanon released around the same time…

**DUBOWITZ:** So, released and sent back to Lebanon?

**LEVITT:** Yes.

**DUBOWITZ:** In both cases.

**LEVITT:** I don't know if both cases they were sent back to Lebanon, both of them are nationals of several countries, including countries in Africa. So, I don't know if they were sent back to Lebanon or to the countries where they hold citizenship in Africa.

**DUBOWITZ:** But they're not wandering around New York City.

**LEVITT:** No, they're not in the United States…

**DUBOWITZ:** Okay. Just to clarify.

**LEVITT:** Very, very nervous look on your face right now.

**DUBOWITZ:** I had a very nervous look on my face.

(LAUGHTER)

**LEVITT:** I got your back.

**DUBOWITZ:** Thank you. This points to my long-time concern about Hezbollah in the United States. We'll get to Latin America, we'll get to Africa and other places around the world, but there has been a – and you've mentioned this a couple times now, there are networks of Hezbollah cells here. The surveillance you talked about in New York City, Toronto. I remember a case about surveillance in Chicago. There's obviously a…

**LEVITT:** Surveillance, for example, of federal buildings goes back decades. The FBI, at the time, this is a long time ago now, assessed that this was not surveillance for the purpose of carrying out an attack or even primarily off-the-shelf planning, but it was to test new recruits to see if they could not draw attention to themselves.

But two things. One, you then have this off-the-shelf planning whether or not that's just an added benefit or not. And second, these recruits here in the United States were being recruited to do financial schemes, to procure dual-use items like night vision goggles or whatnot. The way you're going to test them is to see if they can do surveillance of a federal building, maybe that's the ultimate test for these guys. But at the end of the day, they had that surveillance.

And we've got a whole bunch of cases now that are out in the open source where Hezbollah operatives carried out surveillance of a very wide range of targets and bridges and buildings and locations where there are Jews, locations where there might be Israelis, locations where it's just non-Jewish or Israeli Americans, so that we know that this is something that they do here in this country. And the concern is, it's not like in the movies where they have to send some highly trained operative to the United States. What they're going to do is rely on people who are here.

People go back home to Lebanon, perfectly law-abiding Lebanese Americans, like anybody whose family comes from another country, right? You go back home for the summer so people can see grandma and grandpa and meet their cousins and know the culture, right? Absolutely nothing wrong with that. But people are able to say, "Oh, I went back for a summer vacation," and maybe dad when he was there, got some training.

Alexei Saab, the other case in New York, who was convicted for getting military training with Hezbollah, a Foreign Terrorist Organization, he was living here. He was, I think, a computer programmer. But he'd go back, and he'd get updated training from them. And he wasn't necessarily doing that while he was here, but he kept going back to get updated training, and that does make us concerned.

So, there's a real focus right now, given world events, on being very on top of, who are these people? And the Bureau, the FBI in particular, is really pretty animated on this.

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, and you said given world events. 2025, seems to me, Matt, I wonder if you agree, it's going to be potentially a big year on the Iran file.

**LEVITT:** There's no way it can't be. Right?

**DUBOWITZ:** And you mentioned that Iran has always thought of Hezbollah as the– sort of, in its back pocket to be used both to deter and then to respond to any potential U.S. or Israeli attack on, for example, Iran's nuclear facilities.

**LEVITT:** Israeli or anybody else's then. And the main way they would do that was through the Iranian missile and rocket program, which is now a fraction of the size. Iran really doesn't have that anymore in terms of Hezbollah rockets. Again, Hezbollah could fire rockets in Israel, but at this point, it's the type of thing that Israel can certainly survive. It's not the same kind of level of deterrent, which suggests, not that that goes away, but that it's going to be, that if you're the Iranians, you want to complement that. If you're the Iranians and Hezbollah, you want to build up your capability to do some other things right now.

We already see the administration taking a much more aggressive stance on the Houthis. On the Iran nuclear file, the president sent a letter, gave a two-month deadline. That makes all the sense in the world because you have a snapback deadline in October, which means for all intents and purposes, US and Europeans are going to be very, very seriously talking about this by July. So here we are, March, the two months makes some sense. No matter how you slice it, on the proxies, on malign regional activity look at – I see recent events in Syria as Iran's Vietnam. They invested so heavily in Syria and so far, they've been kicked out. And then of course, the nuclear file, all these things, I think, come to some type of a head, certainly peak within the first year of the Trump administration.

**DUBOWITZ:** So Matt, what I hear you saying is the Israelis have done a remarkable job of severely degrading Hezbollah's capabilities in Lebanon, Hamas' capabilities in Gaza. Assad has fallen. The Iranians have lost support of a close ally and a land bridge for getting weapons and men and money into Lebanon to replenish and rebuild Hezbollah. And the United States is finally taking it to the Houthis. We'll see if they continue this at the same level of intensity, and most importantly, if they go after the Iranian spy ships and ports and commanders who are supporting the Houthis. Israelis are obviously on the West Bank. The West Bank's always a big concern. I'm sure you're watching it closely.

But if Iran has any capabilities left, it's really one on the nuclear side, the fear that they may actually break out or sneak out to a nuclear weapon. And second, it's this global network that they've established of both Hezbollah and Iranian assets and Iranian affiliates.

Let's shift for a bit from Hezbollah's global footprint to Iran's global footprint. And you said that there's a lot of, sort of, complementarity, between the two, but I'm sure there's also a distinct Iranian network. You want to talk a little bit about that? And you mentioned this project that you've got.

**LEVITT:** There is, but I'm going to allow myself a segue, and that is in between, there is a trend now that we've seen both with Iran and with Hezbollah, both in the operations where they come do things together and separate operations, where they are deploying operatives who are dual nationals and who are not Iranian and are not Lebanese. I'm not talking about the criminal operatives right now. I'm talking about people who developed relationships, Shia militants from different parts of the world who developed relationships in places like Iraq and Syria.

So, we've seen cases with Pakistani Shia, with Afghani Shia, with Iraqi Shia, with Azeri Shia, in different places around the world, from Colombia to the case we were just talking about in New York, to Germany, really around the world. A former Iranian IRGC [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps] official referred to this as Iran's fighters without borders. So, this is another theme that people have been kind of focused on quite carefully.

As you segue beyond Hezbollah operations, beyond these kind of hybrid operations of sending people, whether it's Iran sending them or Hezbollah sending them, but who are neither Hezbollah group members or Iranian Quds Force members, but just Shia militants who follow the same worldview of *wilayat al-faqih* the rule of jurisprudence You then have actual Iranian operations. Now for a period of – let me back up.

Iran has been carrying out external operations, assassinations, abductions, intimidation, surveillance, to support all of that since just a few months after the 1979 revolution. In fact, one of the first cases was in Bethesda, Maryland, not too many miles from where we're sitting right now. One thing that we see in the dataset that we've created, which is represented in this online map at the Washington Institute's website, is that this is something that they've done fairly consistently over time, actually really consistently over time with one exception, and that is a bunch of months right after 9/11. And then they went back to it.

Also, I went into this with a few, like, let's come up with some interesting hypotheses and see if they would work. One of them was, I thought we would see a lot more operations in places in third-world countries and places with relatively lax law enforcement, border security and all that. And we do. We saw things in Africa, we saw things in South America, some of them quite big. But actually, when you bar graph it out, overall, and certainly over the last decade, far and away, the three biggest bars: Europe, North America, Middle East. And by far, the biggest is Europe, which suggests that they're not afraid to go where the targets are. They're not intimidated by first world, highly capable law enforcement and intelligence services.

And if you look at the chronology of these incidents, it also shows that they're not intimidated from doing things not only in places that are sensitive, but at times that are sensitive. So, in negotiations over the JCPOA [Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action], fast-forward to the beginning of the Biden administration, negotiations over a potential JCPOA 2.0, and they're plotting things in France. I can't tell you, by the way, if that's just how stubborn and brave they are, or it's just as likely there's a left hand, right hand within the Iranian bureaucracy. There's a lot of cooperation between their security services.

**DUBOWITZ:** But I want to ask you about this.

**LEVITT:** There's a lot of tension there, too.

**DUBOWITZ:** Yeah. There is, but I want to ask you about the supreme leader's role there, because it would seem to me that if the Iranians are engaged in negotiations on one hand, and on the other hand, the IRGC and the Quds Force and the Ministry of Intelligence are engaged in terror plots in Europe, that the supreme leader would know that.

**LEVITT:** So, it's a big maybe. That is a very logical conclusion. I could also see a situation where the supreme leader doesn't want to know everything and actually wouldn't mind it if negotiations are continuing over here, and the West gets some pressure over there. I can't look deep into his eyes and understand his inner soul. I lack that skill.

But what we do know is that there was enough competition, for example, between these security and intelligence agencies within Iran right after the 2009 revolution where the government said, "Knock heads," meaning Iranian heads. "Sniper, go up on a roof and put a bullet in an Iranian female university student's head," which happened. The MOIS, the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, kind of their CIA, if you will, was a little less comfortable with that. And the IRGC, and in particular their Basij militia said, "You do what you got to do."

That actually, we understand – kind of the IRGC went up a few notches and the MOIS down a few notches. And it's shortly after that that you have the founding of the IRGC Intelligence Organization, the IRGC-IO. Now there's more cooperation but also tension between MOIS and the IRGC's own intelligence organization.

I envision, and I tell people all the time, go back and read the indictment of [Shahram] Poursafi, the guy who's involved in the attempted plot against Ambassador [John] Bolton. You read that, and I come away with this feeling of like there's this – each unit, each agency wants to be the one to do what the big boss man wants. “Not that agency, but my agency, not that office, but my office.” Poursafi is told, "Look, I'm not sure I can do this with deniability.” “Just do it. Just do it," he says.

So, we can't really answer exactly where the soul is, and maybe the supreme leader is absolutely pulling all the strings and knowledgeable about all of it, and it's all very intentional. Having worked in the U.S. government, I can tell you we have left-hand, right-hand things all the time. And it's not the case that senior people are aware of each piece of what's going on.

And we also know that within Iran, there's a little bit of a culture of better to ask forgiveness later than permission now. There's a lot of rewarding people for taking initiative. If you remember, years ago now, when the IRGC Navy grabbed a bunch of British soldiers in the Shatt al-Arab. It's quite clear now, that was not planned. No one gave them the authority to do that. No one told them to. A bunch of people did, it didn't work out so well, made them – didn't look so great. And rumor is it that those guys got promoted.

So, I can't tell you exactly what the decision-making is in all of this, but what I can tell you is what the data shows is that at the end of the day, they are aggressive even in places and in times that are sensitive. Now, if you look at the, what was that? I think the 2018 plot outside of Paris, targeting an MEK [Mojahedin-e-Khalq] rally, where lots of current and former U.S. officials were going to be, and they were going to plant a bomb. Scenes out of a movie where they literally shut down sections of the Autobahn in Germany to arrest this diplomat who gets extradited to Belgium and is tried and is convicted, and the Iranians do what they do, which is arrest a Belgian citizen, saying he's a spy when he wasn't. And of course, "Well, we're happy to negotiate with you, but you got to release our guy," which is what happened.

After that plot, which involved the actual Iranian diplomats and some other Iranian agents, the Iranians seem since then to have backed away from using their own agents. And that's when you really start seeing them deploying criminals who are in it for the money. And the results aren't as guaranteed, but you can kind of throw paint at the wall and see what sticks.

**DUBOWITZ:** But let me ask you this, Matt, because at the end of the day, what you've talked about throughout this podcast are indictments, sometimes convictions, sanctions, designations. And yet the Iranians, the regime, and Hezbollah have really operated with relative impunity in Europe and certainly in Latin America and Africa and around the world. You suggest that there is some level of caution when it comes to operating in the United States. They're here, they're doing what they're doing, but they're careful.

What is the right response? We started the podcast by talking about Israel's amazing capabilities and success against Hezbollah in the Middle East. The Israelis were not indicting, they were not designating, they were not sanctioning. They were killing, they were blowing things up. How many more court cases, how many more expert witnesses, how many more sanctions are we going to level until the West wakes up to a reality that that doesn't seem to be deterring the Islamic Republic of Iran and Hezbollah from conducting these operations around the world, some of which have been deadly, and some of which could be very deadly going forward?

**LEVITT:** Yeah, and some of them, we just got lucky. So, look, you presented it as an either or, right? And I don't think it is. For so many decades now, certainly since 9/11, we're talking about all elements of national power. And this is an area where we don't do that. And I've written and lectured widely on the fact that we are not going to indict and sanction our way out of this problem alone. And without meaning to be too pithy, on the question of Iranian external operations specifically, the reason they keep doing it is because they can and because the cost is really pretty acceptable to them.

**DUBOWITZ:** What do they have to fear in Europe? What are the Europeans going to do about it?

**LEVITT:** Well, I think it's a question of what have they done? And the answer is not very much. It's beginning to change. The Brits, the Germans, the French, the Swedes, because there have been a bunch of plots in Sweden, the Belgians, there's a lot more focus right now on state-level threats. They put this in a Russia, China, Iran basket. The EU's, I think every five years, they come out with their serious organized crime. Unclassified paper came out this week, points at this as well, in terms of the use of these criminals by states. And there is a lot more appetite now for doing more.

My feeling is absolutely, we should be sanctioning. We should be designating. We should also, by the way, be enforcing those. So, it's great to add more entities to our various lists, but we need to act on those enforcement actions. We need to indict, and I think we need to be a little bit more aggressive on who we indict. There have been a large number of people who are quote-unquote “just here raising funds for Hezbollah,” and I think we need to be more aggressive in indicting those types of things.

We need to be much more aggressive with diplomatic efforts. Iranians are very sensitive to visa bans. You know better than most, how many kids of senior Iranians or Hezbollah or Hamas…

**DUBOWITZ:** Of officials, of Islamic Republic officials.

**LEVITT:** Exactly. Are studying in the best universities in this country. How many of their mostly wives and daughters, probably some sons too, but the cases I know are wives and daughters like to shop in New York and shop in Paris. And I don't think putting those types of visa bans in place is a small thing. If it's all we did, it would be nothing. But we should be doing things to make it clear that you can't do this and still live that life that you want.

And then, yes, there is a place for kinetic action here. And I think the first place we have to look is at this: To me, one of the biggest takeaways post-October 7 is the fact that if you sit back and you look at the Hezbollahs, and the Hamases, and the Houthis, probably some other groups that don't start in “h,” around the region, none of them, even Hezbollah, would be anywhere near as capable of doing anything close to what they've been doing were it not for Iranian money, weapons, training, and intelligence. That's the secret sauce.

And our problem is that in over many years where things were relatively quiet in the region, we're like, "Okay, look, things have never been quieter," right? We've had national security advisors write in *Foreign Affairs*, "Look, things have never been quieter." And in fact, what was happening was tremendous amounts of planning for what became, for example, October 7, with huge amounts, and not just planning, but funneling weapons into Gaza Strip, into Lebanon, into Yemen. In the two years leading up to October 7, Iran stopped insisting that weapons going into the West Bank have to go to Hamas or Islamic Jihad. And they just said, "You know what? Actually, let's just flood the West Bank with weapons. Anybody who wants to shoot at Israelis, knock yourself out."

So, I think one of the single most important things we have to focus on, it's going to take intelligence resources, this is not easy, is to disrupt Iran's weapons, and also money, but let's focus first on weapons smuggling operations. Explain to me why Iran should be able to move weapons to all these different places. That means some pretty serious conversations with Oman. That means some pretty serious conversations with the Iraqis. That means some pretty aggressive activities at sea. It may mean some kinetic activities at sea.

**DUBOWITZ:** But I want to focus on the kinetic activities, Matt, because I think you mentioned earlier in the podcast that a number of U.S. officials were high-fiving after the Israelis killed Nasrallah and other senior Hezbollah terrorists who had American blood on their hands, who had been living in Lebanon comfortably for decades. And it took the Israelis to go after them and take them off the battlefield. Why didn't we? These people had 20, 30, whatever million dollars of bounties on their head. They killed and maimed Americans, and yet they were able to live in relative comfort and operate with impunity for years.

Why are we depending on the Israelis to take the killers of Americans off the battlefield? Why are we, for example, and I think it's still going on even in this campaign right now against the Houthis, and it certainly did during the Biden administration, and it has so far during the Trump administration, why are we attacking the Houthis, but allowing the Iranians, the Islamic Republic of Iran, that provides the weapons, the money, the intelligence to the Houthis, off the hook so that they can operate with impunity? Why is our approach to all of this, indictments, trials, designations, sanctions, Red Notices, the tools of diplomatic power and economic power we have, that I agree with you are important, it's not an either or, but why are we not killing the terrorists, the Hezbollah terrorists and Iranian terrorists, the way that we have operated against al-Qaeda and ISIS and other terrorist organizations? Why are we making this distinction?

**LEVITT:** I could tell you, but I'd have to kill you.

(LAUGHTER)

**DUBOWITZ:** I'm not afraid of you, Levitt.

(LAUGHTER)

**LEVITT:** Stop kicking me under the table. Look, one reason is that we've always seen, officials have always seen, ISIS and al-Qaeda differently because, as I said at the beginning, the Iranians and the Hezbollah, they don't kill you every opportunity they have, right? So, there's an inherently different threat. And if you look at the numbers of plots and the number of – there was a much bigger threat, much more immediate threat from the al-Qaedas, the Islamic states, etc.

We have a hard time, I think, wrapping our heads around adversaries that threaten us really badly, but not as consistently, and at the end of the day, the number of dead and wounded aren't as high, aren't as many Americans. I hoped in the post-October 7 era, which, by the way, is, I think most people forget, one of the deadliest attacks for Americans if you list out all the acts of terrorism that we've suffered over the years. I think that's changed.

I do think that also that both the military and the Intelligence Community, they really see the kinetic as the absolute last worst option. And on the Iran side in particular, there has always been, across Democratic and Republican administrations, a wariness of poking the bear because it's not just terrorism, it's regional malign activity, it's not regional malign activity only, it's the nuclear file. And there was a sense that if you were too aggressive in one area, you could push them to do something you didn't want them to do in another. And there were instances both where we should – I think we should have acted and didn't, and where we did.

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, with that in mind.

**LEVITT:** Let me give you an example of each.

**DUBOWITZ:** Yeah, please do.

**LEVITT:** It took a year or so for it to come out, but it turns out that when Hezbollah's arch-terrorist Imad Mughniyeh was killed in February 2008, that was not only an Israeli operation, that was a joint U.S.-Israeli operation with U.S. operatives' boots on the ground. Now, it's also true that we, apparently – the United States vetoed an opportunity to take him out a few days earlier because senior leader, possibly Qasem Soleimani was there too, and they didn't want to rock that boat.

But another example is when we were fighting the war in Iraq and we had Iranian senior IRGC officials and, of course, Hezbollah officials doing things, including targeting Americans, and we actually detained the number three Quds Force officer in Iraq. And we had him for a little while, and then eventually released him. But there was a big debate as to once it became clear that the Iranians were providing EFPs, explosive form penetrators, to punch through our armored vehicles, and the Iranians were engaging in and enabling and pushing others to engage in lethal action against Americans, there was a serious talk about, well, what kind of limited military attack could we do in Iran targeting IRGC or Quds Force to send them a message? And at the end of the day, the decision was none. And I think that the Iranians got that message.

**DUBOWITZ:** They got that message, and they've continued to escalate against us for years. I think the Israeli lesson for me from October 7 is you escalate to de-escalate, right? You actually, in terms of your pacing operations, your military operations, you do more, you escalate beyond what Hezbollah expects you to do. And I don't think Nasrallah expected that the Israeli Air Force…

**LEVITT:** Nasrallah, who was thought of by the Iranians as the Israel whisperer, the guy who had his finger on the pulse of Israel.

**DUBOWITZ:** Right.

**LEVITT:** And he absolutely did not anticipate that the Israelis would develop capabilities to overcome what most Israelis, and clearly Nasrallah himself, saw as a mutually deterrent situation. I will say that you ideally don't want to have to be in a situation where you have to escalate to de-escalate. You want to be dealing with this at pace on a regular basis over time, and then maybe you don't have to do that.

The problem is, if you get to a point where, "oh my God, it turns out Hamas has held onto Gaza for all these years," since 2007 by the way, when they turned their weapons on fellow Palestinians, because the Israelis had already withdrawn in 2005. And through all these years, they've dug all these tunnels, many more kilometers of tunnels than the Israelis anticipated, had all these weapons. Figured out ways to breach the incredibly sophisticated Israeli security fence, which was above ground, which was below ground. If you let your adversaries who are committed to your destruction sit cozy over a long period of time, the expectation that they will moderate and be co-opted by the need to pay teacher salaries is wrong.

Now, there are indications that most Gazans – as I said, we took this poll, most Gazans actually were moving away from the Hamas idea of attacking Israel at all costs. But for the hardcore Hamas guys, that only propelled them to say, "We've got to do something so big to completely change the dynamic. People are losing their commitment to their resistance." So it pains me to say it, but the extremely effective intelligence coup that Hamas pulled over the Israelis and the rest of us, leading the Israelis to believe that Hamas prioritized their governance project in Gaza over attacking Israel, and that there was an element of deterrence there, they were absolutely wrong.

And I think the lesson has to be, you can't simply say, "Well, they're not attacking me today. It's been calm, but they've got a billion and a half rockets pointed at my face. But that's okay because maybe I can deter them, because maybe they don't really mean it." If there's someone who's committed to your destruction, and is spending lots of money, and collecting lots of arms to do things that can only be used to hurt you, you've got to do something about it before they "Octobe[r] 7th" you.

**DUBOWITZ:** Well, that's exactly right, Matt. And that's the lesson, not just for Israelis, it's for Americans. The Israelis seem to have moved beyond that October 6th mindset that you've really described very well with respect to the sort of mutual deterrence that they had, both with Hamas and Hezbollah, this desire not to escalate, not to provoke. But in not doing so and allowing Hezbollah and Hamas to build up these potent military capabilities that were unleashed on October the 7th.

The question for the United States is, are we October 6th? Or are we October 8th? Are we acknowledging now that our enemies, Iran and Hezbollah, have taken their time, have built up these very deadly capabilities of men and weapons, and that they're just waiting to unleash it? And there's a lot of focus on Iran's nuclear program because that is the most, I think, deadly threat, not just to Israel and our allies in the region, but to the United States, because Iran is building intercontinental ballistic missiles that will be nuclear tipped with only one address. That's not for Israel; that's for the United States of America. Are we going to allow the Islamic Republic to get nuclear tipped ICBMs [Intercontinental Ballistic Missile] that could threaten the United States? Or are we going to move preemptively to stop that? I think that's going to be the question in 2025.

But the picture that you've painted, which I think is something that gets too little attention, and grateful for your work on this, is that when you look at the Islamic Republic of Iran and you look at Hezbollah, they have a global network. They have these cells, these relationships with narco-terrorists and with biker gangs, and with people that they're using for plausible deniability, but that they're there and that they're waiting and that they can be operationalized at some point. The question is, are we going to wait until that deadly attack? Or are we going to move against them aggressively beyond just sanctions and indictments and Interpol Red Notices?

**LEVITT:** Yeah, and it's an especially acute question, given that the mood in Washington right now is, not terms I particularly like, but the terms people use, against forever wars, against endless wars, getting out of the Middle East battlefield, not into it. And between those two, I would consider fake polls of doing nothing and doing everything, there's the addressing the real threat and being present.

So, I'm concerned that over multiple administrations, Democratic and Republican both, we have stepped back from the Middle East. We have articulated, by default, messages to our allies that we are not committed, and it's forced them from their perspective to diversify their security relationships. There have been good things that have happened, for example, the Abraham Accords. There have been positive unintended consequences of our adversaries' actions. I think that the Iranian missile drone strikes on Israel last April and then October had the unintended effect of being the single most effective commercial for the fact that Iran is the biggest threat to the region, not Israel, and that there is a need for a shared regional air defense and that it works and people want in on this.

That's good, but I think we, the United States, need to be able to articulate what our commitment to the region is, and why people can and should rely on us for more than four years or less than four years at a time. And again, that's across multiple administrations of different political persuasions. Unfortunately, I think this is something that's been consistent.

**DUBOWITZ:** Matt, I think those are great takeaways. I would add just one final takeaway, which is a consistent theme of *The Iran Breakdown*, and that is that millions of Iranians inside Iran despise the Islamic Republic, despise Ali Khamenei and the IRGC and the Ministry of Intelligence because they know them up close. You've mentioned it throughout this podcast; they've been brutalized by them. And it's been a failure from the United States across multiple administrations, Republican and Democratic, to provide support, maximum support to the Iranian people who want to see the end of the Islamic Republic and a secular Iranian democracy. So consistent theme will be through this podcast, I hope that this administration understands that if you want to peacefully undermine and weaken this regime, support the Iranian people who are prepared to go to the streets to do it.

**LEVITT:** Circle back, just to that case we talked about earlier, that's been going on in New York right now, the people who tried to kill Masih Alinejad, right? Why are they so petrified of a petite, lovely woman, a woman with frizzy hair and typically a flower in her hair? She's not carrying a gun; she doesn't lead a militia. What they're petrified of is that she empowers women and men in Iran to stand up against forced hijab and to send videos so people can document what's actually happening there, that there is significant protest against the regime.

This theocratic totalitarian regime is so afraid that forced hijab is some type of magic Jenga block. And that if people like Masih Alinejad, just by leveraging the free speech that they don't have there, but that she has here, and giving people the confidence to post that type of material, that if that Jenga block is pulled out, the whole regime will begin to fall apart. So, I don't think officials in the West are fully cognizant of that, but it's very clear that the Iranians are.

**DUBOWITZ:** Matt, you know I hate to give you compliments. It's really painful. But that was really beautifully put and that is exactly right.

**LEVITT:** Did you hear your, Mom? Did you hear that?

(LAUGHTER)

**DUBOWITZ:** Beautifully put. No, thank you, and a great note to end on. Matt, thank you so much for joining us and we'd love to have you back to talk about all the other great work that you're doing.

**LEVITT:** We're going to have to get back together because there was way too much agreement here. And one of my favorite things to do is to demonstrate how to disagree without being disagreeable with Mark Dubowitz. In fact, that might be the title of my next podcast.

**DUBOWITZ:** Disagreeable with Mark Dubowitz. Thanks, Matt, we appreciate it.

**LEVITT:** Pleasure to be here.

**DUBOWITZ:** That's it for this episode of *The Iran Breakdown*. Iran's global terror network isn't just a collection of rogue terrorist organizations: It's a carefully orchestrated strategy designed to undermine U.S. interests, threaten Israel, and destabilize the world. Tehran continues to wage war through Hezbollah, through other proxies, evading consequences while fueling conflict from the Middle East to Africa, Latin America and beyond. Big thanks to Dr. Matt Levitt for his expert insights on how Hezbollah operates and how Iran operates terror proxies around the world. We talked about how they're funded and what must be done to stop them. We're going to continue to tracking Iran's terror network and breaking down what policymakers need to know. I'm Mark Dubowitz, and this has been "The Iran Breakdown."