

# Hezbollah, a Worldwide Criminal Organization

by Omer Dostri

In recent decades, Hezbollah has established itself not only as one of the world's leading terrorist groups and Lebanon's effective master, but also as a prominent transnational crime syndicate. Hezbollah's criminal activities range from drug trafficking in cocaine and heroin, to cigarette smuggling, document and identity card forgery, and money laundering through Iran's and Lebanon's banking systems.



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These criminal enterprises fill its coffers, facilitate its domination of Lebanon's political system, and underpin the buildup of the organization's global terrorist and intelligence infrastructure. This is so much the case that, in October 2018, U.S. attorney general Jeff Sessions designated Hezbollah as one of the world's leading transnational criminal organizations alongside four Latin American drug cartels.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> News release, Office of Public Affairs, U.S. Justice Dept., [Oct. 15, 2018](#).

## A Complex Criminal Web

Hezbollah's international criminal activity dates back to the 1980s when the newly-established organization began laundering money for drug cartels through Lebanese immigrants in Latin America. Since then, it has become one of the world's largest drug suppliers and money laundering organizations, working in close cooperation with a string of Latin American paramilitary and criminal organizations, including Colombia's Medellin cartel, La Oficina de Envigado, North Valley cartel, and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (People's Army, FARC),<sup>2</sup> as well as Brazil's First Command of the Capital (PCC)<sup>3</sup> and the Mexican Los Zetas.<sup>4</sup>

The terrorist group establishes, operates, and maintains cells and networks of activists, logistical warehouses where stolen and counterfeit goods are stored, and supply chains around the world, particularly in Africa and Latin America. Hezbollah operatives are also deployed throughout the United States and Europe where they distribute the organization's criminal goods and services—primarily by trafficking drugs, counterfeiting consumer products, and

**Hezbollah works in cooperation with a string of Latin American paramilitary and criminal organizations.**

laundering money.<sup>5</sup>

Hezbollah's criminal network operates relatively independently from the organization's political and military wings, which are closely aligned with Tehran. The network is strategically managed and led by a chain of senior officials but maintains an intricate system of buffers to avoid linking the organization to criminal activity. At times, operatives carry out criminal activities on direct orders from Hezbollah officials; at other times, they share their activities with these officials without necessarily seeking direct orders.<sup>6</sup> This allows Hezbollah to maintain ambiguity, deniability, and obscurity regarding its activities as a transnational criminal organization.

This criminal network is managed by the business unit of the Organization for External Security (Unit 910), Hezbollah's external operations mechanism. Founded by Imad Mughniyeh, head of Hezbollah's military wing until his assassination in 2008, Unit 910 is headed by Talal Hamia, one of the organization's most seasoned military commanders who served as Mughniyeh's deputy. Hamia's father-in-law was implicated in the 1994 attack on the Jewish community building in Buenos Aires in which eighty-five people were murdered, and Washington has offered a \$7 million reward for information leading to his arrest. The business unit is currently managed

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<sup>2</sup> "Terrorist Groups in Latin America: The Changing Landscape," testimony, U.S. House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade, Washington, D.C., [Feb. 4, 2014](#), pp. 21-2; "State Sponsors of Terrorism: An Examination of Iran's Global Terrorism Network," testimony, U.S. House Homeland Security Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence, D.C., [Apr. 17, 2018](#), p. 8; *Los Angeles Times*, [Oct. 22, 2008](#).

<sup>3</sup> *InSight Crime* (Washington, D.C.), [Nov. 10, 2014](#).

<sup>4</sup> *ABC News*, [Dec. 14, 2011](#).

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Levitt, "Hezbollah's Criminal Networks," in Hilary Matfess and Michael Miklaucic, eds., *Beyond Convergence: World without Order* (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 2016), pp. 155-79.

<sup>6</sup> John Fernandez, "[The DEA's Targeting of Hezbollah's Global Criminal Support Network](#)," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., [Jan 10, 2020](#).

by Abdullah Safi ad-Din, a cousin of Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah and former liaison officer to Iran.<sup>7</sup>

One prominent member of the unit is Adham Hussein Tabaja, owner of one of the largest and most successful real estate companies in Lebanon, who uses his legitimate-seeming business activities to funnel funds to Hezbollah and to help the organization circumvent U.S. and European sanctions.<sup>8</sup> Identified by U.S. officials as one of Hezbollah's top five financiers, in October 2015, Tabaja was designated by the U.S. Treasury Department as having direct ties with senior Hezbollah officials—including military wing commanders—and holding assets in Lebanon on behalf of the terrorist organization.<sup>9</sup> Another prominent Hezbollah financier is Hassan Dehghan Ebrahimi, an Iranian citizen and owner of the Maher trading company. A Beirut-based member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force, Ebrahimi funneled millions of dollars to Hezbollah through his company, which serves as a conduit for money laundering and goods smuggling for the organization.<sup>10</sup> A string of other businessmen



*In 2021, the U.S. State Department offered a \$10 million reward for information on Hezbollah financier Mohammad Ibrahim Bazzi.*

play a similar role as Ebrahimi,<sup>11</sup> including Muhammad Ibrahim Bazzi, owner and chairman of large energy companies in Belgium, Gambia, and Lebanon with close relations to international drug barons; Ali Youssef Charara, chairman and CEO of the Lebanese telecommunications company Spectrum, which provides communication services to Hezbollah; Ali Tajideen, a businessman and international arms dealer; and Muhammad Jafar Qasir, a senior Hezbollah operative responsible for the organization's logistics and procurement. These individuals and others like them form the intricate network of financiers and operatives that enables Hezbollah's transnational criminal activity.

<sup>7</sup> *The Wall Street Journal*, [May 17, 2018](#); *Ynet News* (Tel Aviv), [Feb. 6, 2016](#).

<sup>8</sup> "Treasury Sanctions Hezbollah Front Companies and Facilitators in Lebanon and Iraq," U.S. Treasury Dept., Washington, D.C., [June 10, 2015](#).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Associated Press, [Feb. 25, 2023](#); Reuters, [Jan. 7, 2016](#); "Treasury Targets Hezbollah Financial Network," U.S. Treasury Dept., Washington, D.C., [Dec. 9, 2010](#); "Treasury Targets Hezbollah Financial Network's Abuse of the Business Sector," U.S. Treasury Dept., [May 19, 2022](#).

<sup>11</sup> "Sanctions Evasion and Money Laundering Charges Unsealed against Specially Designated Global Terrorist Mohammad Bazzi and Talal Chahine," U.S. Attorney's Office, Eastern District of New York, Feb. 24, 2023; "Treasury Sanctions Hezbollah Financier and His Company," U.S. Treasury Dept., Washington, D.C., Jan. 7, 2016; "Treasury Targets Hezbollah Financial Network," U.S. Treasury Dept., [Dec. 9, 2010](#); *Ya Libnan* (Beirut), June 18, 2022.

## The Iranian-Hezbollah Partnership

Hezbollah operatives carry out robberies around the world and send the proceeds to Iran from where they are subsequently transferred to the organization's Lebanese bank accounts. Profits from drug deals of Latin American cartels in Europe and the United States are also sent to Hezbollah, which deducts a commission before laundering the rest of the money and returning it to the drug cartels. According to the U.S Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), this laundering activity is done through the purchase and sale of luxury cars, as well as by other means. In some cases, the money is hidden in the cars themselves when they are transported to locations around the world.<sup>12</sup>

Since Hezbollah's budget is not open to public scrutiny, it is difficult to ascertain the share of the organization's criminal profits in its overall budget. According to Israeli security sources, about 90 percent of Hezbollah's annual budget (an estimated \$700 million) comes from Iran. Brian Hook, U.S special envoy for Iran in 2018-20, estimated that Tehran provides 70 percent of the organization's budget while Lebanese anti-Hezbollah sources set the figure at 70-80 percent. This means that at least 10-30 percent of Hezbollah's budget emanates from its criminal activities. The figure could be

**Hezbollah's criminal activities seem to have been related to reducing its financial dependence on Tehran.**

higher if one counts the money laundered via Iranian banks that none of the estimates appears to have considered.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the vicissitudes in Hezbollah's criminal activities over the past decades seem to have been related to the desire to reduce its financial dependence on Tehran, which, in turn, was forced to cut funding to its Lebanese proxy because of the debilitating effects of international sanctions and its decade-long intervention in the Syrian civil war. As a result, Hezbollah will likely increase its transnational criminal activities in the foreseeable future not only because of Tehran's worsening economic predicament and the growing domestic resistance to the mullahs' regime, but also because of Lebanon's spiraling economic crisis and the reported worsening of Hezbollah's financial standing (e.g., reflected in reports of slashed salaries within the group).<sup>14</sup> These factors will combine to increase its collaboration with Latin American drug cartels, an alliance already driven by the drop in oil prices and reduced Iranian support.

## Hezbollah's Long Reach

Hezbollah is deeply involved in trans-

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<sup>12</sup> U.S. Attorney's Office Eastern District of New York, Oct. 9, 2015; Emanuele Ottolenghi, "The Laundromat: Hezbollah's Money-Laundering and Drug-Trafficking Networks in Latin America," Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Mideast Security and Policy Studies, no. 194, [July 2021](#); CNN, [Feb. 1, 2016](#).

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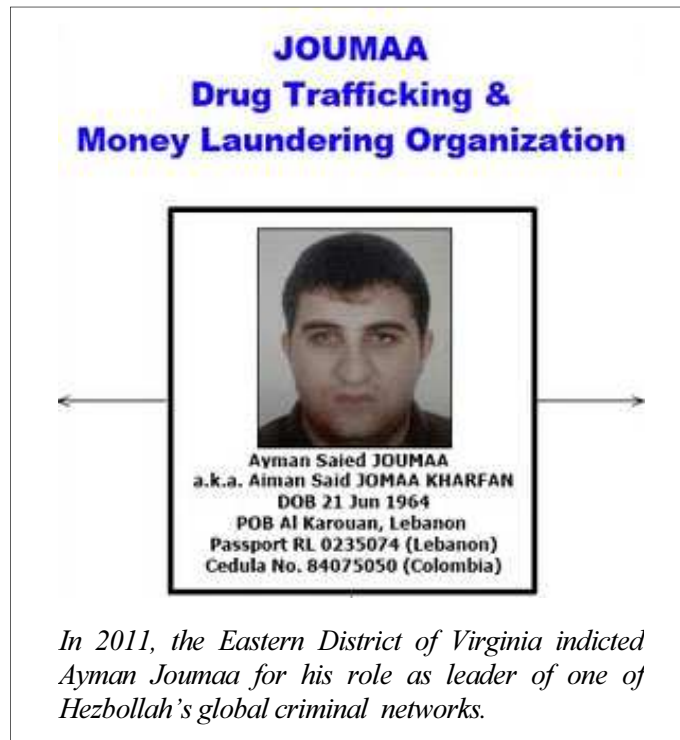
<sup>13</sup> *The Times of Israel* (Jerusalem), [June 2, 2019](#); *al-Arabiya* (Dubai), [Apr. 22, 2019](#); "Officials in Lebanese, Gazan Terror Organizations Confirm: [Iran Funds Our Activity](#)," Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI), Washington, D.C., [Aug. 11, 2016](#).

<sup>14</sup> "[Setting the Record Straight on Hezbollah](#): Full Report," American Jewish Committee, New York, and the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism, Herzliya, 2019, p. 26; Hanin Ghaddar, "[U.S. Sanctions Are Hurting Hezbollah](#)," The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., [Mar. 6, 2019](#).



national organized crime activities with tentacles spreading from the Americas, to Africa, to Europe. In 1997, for example, the Canadian Security Intelligence Service informed a Canadian court of the existence of a Hezbollah “infrastructure” in the country comprising individuals who “receive and follow orders from the Hezbollah leadership in Lebanon.” A former senior Canadian intelligence official estimated the organization’s covert network at 50-100 operatives “directly involved in Hezbollah activities in Canada.” The intelligence service also revealed that the organization had a procurement network in Canada linked to cigarette smuggling from the United States.<sup>15</sup>

In July 2000, the U.S. authorities broke up a North Carolina-based smuggling ring that was suspected of raising money for Hezbollah. Court documents indicate that the group had “allocated several thousand dollars in cash for Hezbollah, derived from the proceeds of smuggling illegal cigarettes” and had collected donations from local Hezbollah members and supporters through fundraising activities.<sup>16</sup> Four years later, nineteen members of the Farhat/Berro family in Dearborn, Michigan, were indicted in a widespread conspiracy to defraud banks and credit card issuers. At least one defendant admitted that the fraud scheme was conducted on behalf of Hezbollah and that the proceeds were transmitted to the terrorist group. Court filings from the U.S. Justice Department also reveal that one of the defendants had “extensive contacts” with the



*In 2011, the Eastern District of Virginia indicted Ayman Joumaa for his role as leader of one of Hezbollah’s global criminal networks.*

Iranian government as well as Hezbollah.<sup>17</sup>

In 2011, the United States designated Ali Muhammad Saleh, a Hezbollah operative, as a narcotics kingpin and, in 2012, as a global terrorist. A former Hezbollah fighter, Saleh, served as a money launderer for a criminal organization while acting as “a key facilitator for Hezbollah who directed and coordinated Hezbollah activity in Colombia.” He maintained contacts with suspected Hezbollah operatives in various locations around the world, including Venezuela, Germany, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. Also in 2011, the Eastern District of Virginia indicted Ayman Joumaa for his role as leader of one

<sup>15</sup> Levitt, “[Hezbollah’s Criminal Networks](#),” p. 163.

<sup>16</sup> CNN, [July 21, 2000](#).

<sup>17</sup> Anyssia S. Kokinos et al, “Hezbollah’s Operations and Networks in the United States: Two decades in review,” The Program on Extremism at The George Washington University, Washington D.C., [June 2022](#), pp. 18-9.

of Hezbollah's global networks used to sustain its financial needs. A Lebanese-Colombian dual national, Joumaa operated a global network of companies in Latin America, West Africa, and Lebanon accused of laundering money for Mexican and Colombian cartels at a rate of some \$200 million per month in drug proceeds.<sup>18</sup>

On October 8, 2015, Hezbollah operative Iman Kobeissi was arrested in Atlanta, Georgia, after telling a DEA undercover agent with whom she was in contact that an acquaintance of hers in the terrorist organization was interested in purchasing cocaine, weapons, and ammunition. On the same day—as part of a joint international operation—Joseph Asmar was arrested in Paris, having told an undercover agent that he could use his connections with Hezbollah to provide security for drug smuggling. The two told the undercover agents that they provided money laundering services to drug smugglers, terrorist organizations, and criminal organizations in at least ten countries, thus underscoring the wide scope of Hezbollah's transnational criminal activities. They also told the agents that they could organize a plane with a large load of cocaine in Latin America that would land safely in Africa as a stopover for the transfer of the drugs and their distribution in Europe and the United States.<sup>19</sup>

A year later, in September 2016, the DEA filed a lawsuit against three Hezbollah operatives on charges of money laundering

**The son of a Los Angeles-based Hezbollah operative was implicated in transferring \$500 million of drug money to a Miami bank.**

and drug trafficking in collaboration with Colombian drug cartels. One of them, Muhammad Amar, son of a Los Angeles-based Hezbollah operative, was implicated in the

transfer of \$500 million of drug money from Australia and Europe to an American bank in Miami for laundering purposes. In the past, Amar had laundered money through Holland, Spain, Britain, Australia and Africa. Another activist, Hassan Mohsen Mansour, a Lebanese citizen, was charged with laundering hundreds of millions of dollars in drug trafficking funds around the world. Mansour was a major money launderer and drug trafficker for Hezbollah. The third indicted person was Ghassan Diab, a senior Hezbollah operative with access to many international bank accounts.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, in August 2019, a federal court in Washington sentenced Qassem Tajeddine, a Lebanese citizen and Hezbollah operative, to five years in prison and a fine of \$50 million. Arrested in March 2017 in Morocco and extradited to the United States, Tajeddine was believed to have provided Hezbollah with \$1 million in cash funding. Back in 2003, he and his wife were arrested in Belgium and accused of transferring tens of millions of Euros to Hezbollah through his brother, who was a commander in the terrorist organization.<sup>21</sup>

In January 2016, Ali Khalife, a Lebanese citizen, was arrested in the Colombian capital of Bogota on charges of involvement in the cocaine trade and money laundering for

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<sup>18</sup> Levitt, "[Hezbollah's Criminal Networks](#)," pp. 164-5, 169-70.

<sup>19</sup> "[Two Hezbollah Associates Arrested](#) on Charges of Conspiring to Launder Narcotics Proceeds and International Arms Trafficking," U.S. Justice Dept., Washington, D.C., Oct. 9, 2015.

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<sup>20</sup> *Business Insider*, [Oct. 14, 2016](#).

<sup>21</sup> Nada Atallah Maucourant, "How did the network of Tajeddine companies circumvent US sanctions against Hezbollah?" *L'Orient Le Jour* (Beirut), [Nov. 24, 2021](#).

Hezbollah while, in September 2018, Assad Ahmad Barakat, a Lebanese-born Hezbollah operative who had lived in Latin America for years, was arrested in Brazil after Paraguay issued an arrest warrant against him. Apart from the suspicion of identity theft in Paraguay, the Brazilian authorities revealed that Barakat was accused in Argentina of laundering \$10 million through a casino in the city of Puerto Iguazú, near the Argentinian-Brazilian border.<sup>22</sup>

Across the Atlantic, in February 2016, France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium—with U.S. support—conducted a large-scale international operation against Hezbollah’s criminal activities in Europe, arresting fifteen Hezbollah operatives and others associated with the organization on drug trafficking and money laundering charges. In a string of raids across the continent, the law enforcement agencies seized some €500,000 in cash, seventy watches worth an estimated \$9 million, weapons, and properties valued at millions of dollars.<sup>23</sup>

Apart from the desire to boost its financial standing and self-sufficiency, it can be assumed that Hezbollah views its



*Photo: Frode Bjorshol  
Hezbollah weapons, Mleeta, Lebanon, October 2013. Hezbollah purchases light weapons, ammunition, assault and sniper rifles, and machine guns through its transnational criminal activities.*

transnational criminal activities as a way to weaken its enemies by spreading drug addiction in Western societies. In its perception, a drug-afflicted society is a weak society that can be exploited for the establishment of terrorist networks and the recruitment of operatives; can be attacked from within if necessary; and can be more effectively defended against in the event of inter-state conflict. Furthermore, law enforcement and intelligence agencies that dedicate most of their time and resources to fighting criminal activity may be less attentive to stymying terrorist activities.<sup>24</sup>

Against this backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the U.S. Treasury Department described Hezbollah’s transnational criminal activities as inextricably linked to the

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<sup>22</sup> David Asher, “Attacking Hezbollah’s Financial Network: Policy Options,” Congressional testimony, House Foreign Affairs Committee, Washington, D.C., [June 8, 2017](#); Voice of America, [Sept. 22, 2018](#).

<sup>23</sup> “DEA and European Authorities Uncover Massive Hizballah Drug and Money Laundering Scheme,” U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), Arlington, Va., Feb. 1, 2016.

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<sup>24</sup> “[Framework to Counter Drug Trafficking and Other Illicit Threat Networks](#),” U.S. Department of Defense, Washington, D.C., May 2019.

organization's global terrorist network.<sup>25</sup> Thus, for example, alongside the steady buildup of its massive rocket and missile arsenal by Tehran, Hezbollah has striven to independently purchase light weapons and ammunition, including assault rifles, sniper rifles, and machine guns, through its transnational criminal activities. Over time, the organization has also begun to acquire dual-use technologies that could be useful for terrorist activities, such as computer software, laser rangefinders, night vision devices, and more.<sup>26</sup> According to former DEA deputy director Jack Riley, the criminal proceeds seized during the agency's years-long operation against Hezbollah's drug trafficking to the United States, codenamed Project Cassandra, were designed to serve the organization's worldwide terrorist activities and military intervention in the Syrian civil war.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, many of the funds used for Hezbollah's weapons acquisitions were laundered by the U.S.-indicted trio, Amar, Mansour, and Diab.<sup>28</sup>

Further evidence of the connection between Hezbollah's criminal and terrorist activities was provided by the arrest of Iman Kobeissi, who planned to purchase weapons, not only for Hezbollah but also for Tehran. According to the U.S. Justice Department,

**Hezbollah's drug trafficking served its terrorist activities and military intervention in the Syrian civil war.**

Kobeissi told a DEA undercover agent that she had Iranian clients who were interested in purchasing heavy weapons. Among other things, she presented the agent with a

list of demands from her clients in Iran and Hezbollah, which included assault rifles, grenades, pistols, and sniper rifles. On another occasion, Kobeissi discussed the possibility of illegally supplying Tehran with fighter jet parts so as to circumvent the international sanctions against Iran.<sup>29</sup>

Similarly, the Treasury Department has identified Ali Zeaiter and brothers Kamel and Issam Amhaz as responsible for a major Hezbollah procurement network through a Lebanon-based electronics company that purchased, among other things, technology for the organization's drones program. Other operatives implicated in the illegal procurement of sensitive technology for Hezbollah's drone program were Fadi Hussein Serhan and Adel Muhammad Cherri while the Lebanese businessman Abdul Nur Shalan was designated by the Treasury Department as a key member of Hezbollah's weapons procurement network with close ties to the organization's leadership.<sup>30</sup>

Small wonder that U.S. administrations sought to combat Hezbollah's terrorism by curbing its criminal activities. In January 2018, for example, the Justice Department

<sup>25</sup> ["2022 National Terrorist Financing Risk Assessment,"](#) U.S. Treasury Dept., Washington, D.C., Feb. 2022; U.S. Treasury Dept., [Oct. 7, 2014.](#)

<sup>26</sup> Matthew Levitt, ["Hezbollah's Procurement Channels: Leveraging Criminal Networks and Partnering with Iran,"](#) *CTC Sentinel* (West Point), Mar. 21, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> ["Hizballah Drug and Money Laundering Scheme,"](#) DEA., [Feb. 1, 2016.](#)

<sup>28</sup> *Business Insider*, [Oct. 14, 2016.](#)

<sup>29</sup> ["Two Hezbollah Associates Arrested,"](#) U.S. Justice Dept., Oct. 9, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> "Treasury Sanctions Procurement Agents of Hizballah Front Company Based in Lebanon with Subsidiaries in the UAE And China," U.S. Treasury Dept., Washington, D.C., [July 10, 2014;](#) U.S. Treasury Dept., [July 21, 2015;](#) "Treasury Sanctions Hizballah Procurement Agents and Their Companies," U.S. Treasury Dept., [Nov. 5, 2015.](#)



created the Hezbollah Financing and Narcoterrorism Team that targeted the organization's criminal activities and, in October 2018, established a special task force to combat Hezbollah and other transnational organized crime organizations.<sup>31</sup> That same month, the U.S. Congress passed the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act of 2018 that sought to sever its sources of funding. Strengthening and expanding the economic and financial sanctions imposed on the terrorist organization three years earlier, the new legislation targeted foreign governments, businesses, and individuals that provided financial support to Hezbollah or assisted its activities (e.g., recruiting operatives, laundering money, collecting donations), enabling international law enforcement agencies, such as Interpol and Europol, to disrupt Hezbollah's global financial network. The amendment also required the U.S. administration to provide information on Hezbollah's illegal activities to the House of Representatives.<sup>32</sup>

## Conclusion

The significance of Hezbollah's transnational criminal activities cannot be overstated. While the lion's share of the organization's funding still comes from Tehran, its steadily growing criminal network boosts its maneuverability vis-à-vis its patron and its political leverage in the Lebanese political

scene. It is regrettable, therefore, that the EU and some U.S. administrations have turned a blind eye to Hezbollah's criminal activities—the Obama administration even obstructed Project Cassandra in its eagerness to lure Tehran into a nuclear deal<sup>33</sup>—at a time when the organization is working hand-in-hand with Iran against Western interests and allies in the Middle East, first and foremost Israel. This state of affairs is particularly galling for Jerusalem given the transformation of Iran and its Hezbollah proxy into the foremost threat to its national security, and potentially—to its very existence.

Hence, while sustaining its decade-long effort to prevent Tehran from arming Hezbollah,<sup>34</sup> Israel should intensify its fight against the organization's criminal network. It can do so, among other things by providing quality intelligence to police and law enforcement agencies around the world and initiating worldwide covert operations, especially in Latin America.

No less importantly, the EU should drop the artificial distinction between Hezbollah's "political" and "military" wings—which the organization itself rejects. Washington, too, must ramp up designating and sanctioning activists, associates, companies, and groups related to Hezbollah and Iran. Without undercutting Hezbollah's crime syndicate, the fight against its global terrorist activities is doomed to failure.

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<sup>31</sup> "Attorney General Sessions Announces Hezbollah Financing and Narcoterrorism Team," U.S. Treasury Dept., Washington, D.C., Jan. 11, 2018; Eric Halliday, "Transnational Organized Crime and National Security," *Lawfare Blog* (Washington, D.C.), [Apr. 29, 2019](#).

<sup>32</sup> "Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act of 2018," S.1595, U.S. Congress, Washington, D.C., [Oct. 2018](#).

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<sup>33</sup> Josh Meyer, "The secret backstory of [how Obama let Hezbollah off the hook](#)," *Politico*, [2018](#).

<sup>34</sup> Jonathan Schanzer, "The Quiet War between Israel and Iran," *Middle East Quarterly*, [Winter 2023](#).