

Press Releases: Briefing On U.S. Efforts to Counter Hizballah

Special Briefing
Nathan A. Sales

Ambassador-at-Large and Coordinator for Counterterrorism

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MS NAUERT: Hi, everybody. How are you today? Hope you all had a very nice long weekend. I've discovered something incredible about working for the Federal Government. The last time I had Columbus Day off, I think I was in junior high school, so way to go working for the Federal Government.

A couple things I want to start off with today. First, I'd like to welcome a group of students we have in the back of the room. They are visiting from Tampa, Florida. They're with St. John's Episcopal School. So welcome to Washington and welcome to the State Department, and I look forward to chatting with you a little bit after the briefing today. So the reporters know the drill. That always means behave when we have students in the room.

Okay.

QUESTION: (Laughter.) I thought we were supposed to behave all the time.

MS NAUERT: And we have some other guests here as well, and I would like to welcome the director of the National Counterterrorism Center. Nick Rasmussen is here. Like me, he is from Wisconsin, my mother's maiden name, his name as well. So welcome, sir. It's nice to have you here.

Director Rasmussen leads the U.S. Government's efforts to analyze, understand, and respond to foreign terrorist threats here in the United States and around the world. Director Rasmussen was sworn in as the director of the NCTC in 2014 and today will provide some additional background on Hizballah's worldwide terror activities.

I'm also going to welcome and introduce you to our new ambassador, Nathan Sales. He is the State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism. He's right over here to my right. He joined the department in August. Ambassador Sales develops and implements counterterrorism strategies and policies, and leads the department in a whole-of-government effort to counter terrorism abroad, and today he will outline U.S. efforts to counter Hizballah's worldwide terror activities.

We'll start with Director Rasmussen – the podium is yours, sir – and then when we wrap up they'll take a few of your questions. I'll just do a little moderation, and then I'll take your general questions after that.

MR RASMUSSEN: Great. Thank you for that introduction, Heather. And as Heather suggested, my role today is to provide you with some background on the activity we've seen from Hizballah both globally but also here in the homeland. And I'm doing that in order to provide some context about the group's operations worldwide.

And this background that I'll be discussing with you points to three recurring themes: first, Hizballah's use of terrorism across the globe, which has persisted for several decades; second, the group's continued effort to advance terrorism acts worldwide; and third, the fact that the organization is, in fact, focused on U.S. interests, including here in the homeland. And that is part of the reason why we are here today.

Lebanese Hizballah has repeatedly demonstrated for the world its true character. It is an organization that relies on terrorism as well as other forms of violence and coercion to achieve its goals. And this takes place in spite of the group's attempts to portray itself as a legitimate political party. Prior to September 11th, I think everybody knows Hizballah was responsible for the terrorism-related deaths of more U.S. citizens than any other foreign terrorist organization.

Now, for many Americans, their introduction to the threat posed by this group came after Hizballah's attack on the U.S. embassy in Beirut in April of 1983. That horrific attack killed 63 and wounded an additional 120 individuals, and it was followed by an even more deadly attack on our Marine barracks in

October of 1983 which killed 241 Americans and wounded an additional 128 Americans.

So Hizballah's penchant for violence has not changed over the last three decades. We've seen time and time again with its international terrorism unit, the External Security Organization, also known as the IJO, the Islamic Jihad Organization, and Unit 910, 9-1-0. But its deployment of operatives to nearly every corner of the globe continues to engage in terrorism-related activity.

In 2012 the group carried out a bomb attack in Bulgaria that killed five Israeli tourists and one Bulgarian national, and a number of Hizballah operatives have been caught laying the groundwork for attacks in places like Azerbaijan, in Egypt, in Thailand, in Cyprus, and in Peru. And there are other instances of Hizballah-related arrests and disruptions around the world that are at this point unpublicized and remain classified.

But all of this together shows us that the group seeks to develop and maintain a global capability to carry out acts of terror. I can assure you that the conversation today would be much different had some of these disrupted plots actually succeeded. Casualty counts would be higher and many innocent lives would have been forever altered. The group is also known to focus on areas populated by tourists, almost guaranteeing that with their attacks innocent victims – innocent civilians will be victims.

Now, with respect to the homeland here in the United States, let me say this. While much of our work in the government since 9/11 has focused on al-Qaida and more recently on ISIS, in the 20 years since Hizballah's designation as a foreign terrorist organization, we have never taken our focus off of Hizballah and on the threat it represents to the homeland.

And while I'm not here today to speak publicly about any specific or credible or imminent threat to the homeland, we in the Intelligence Community do, in fact, see continued activity on behalf of Hizballah here inside the homeland. And as you would expect, as the American people would expect, we are watching very closely for additional signs of that activity here in the homeland.

In June, as I'm sure most of you are aware, according to published criminal complaints, two individuals conducting activities on behalf of Hizballah were arrested here inside the United States, and those arrests serve as a stark reminder of Hizballah's global attack infrastructure as well as the group's aspirations potentially to carry out attacks here in the homeland.

It's our assessment that Hizballah is determined to give itself a potential homeland option as a critical component of its terrorism playbook, and that is something that those of us in the counterterrorism community take very, very seriously. With all of the focus on ISIS and al-Qaida, I can assure you that those of us who have focused on terrorism for the entire period since 9/11 have never taken our eye off of the Hizballah threat. We have and will continue to monitor closely Hizballah activity around the world and work aggressively to disrupt any instances of Hizballah operating within our borders.

I'd also like to point out that Hizballah has not limited its use of terrorism to venues outside of Lebanon. The group, though it claims to be defenders of Lebanon, has repeatedly turned its weapons on the people of Lebanon or otherwise coerced them to advance Hizballah's goals. There are countless examples of that that I could point to, to include those being investigated by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon, but I'll just take a quick moment to highlight a few of the most egregious acts.

In 2016, Hizballah detonated a bomb outside the BLOM Bank in Beirut. Going back to 2012, the group killed the head of Lebanon's Internal Security Forces Intelligence Branch. In 2008, Hizballah took over parts of Beirut killing at least 84 Lebanese citizens and wounding at least another 199 after the Lebanese Government attempted to exercise greater oversight into the group's communications infrastructure. And of course, in 2005 it was Hizballah operatives who assassinated former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in a massive car bombing in downtown Beirut.

In addition to all this terrorism-related activity around the globe, Hizballah continues to devote significant resources to expanding its conventional arsenal in Lebanon, including the procurement of advanced rocket and missile capabilities and even indigenous weapons production facilities.

This has resulted in a broadening of the threat to the Eastern Mediterranean and the Arabian Peninsula regions, and it's in violation of the 1989 Taif Agreement as well as UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 and 1701, both of which call for the disarmament of all Lebanese militias. This build-up, weapons build-up by Hizballah, has perpetuated conflict and violence across the Middle East as their operatives deploy to places like Iraq and to Yemen, where they provide weapons, tactics, and direction to Shia militant and terrorist groups. As you well know, the group has also deployed thousands of its fighters to Syria, where it has sustained approximately 2,000 casualties fighting on behalf of the Syrian regime.

So as part of our continued effort to counter the threat of Hizballah, we are going to continue to work aggressively with our foreign, U.S., state, and local partners to share information that we have that would allow us to detect and disrupt the threat that the group poses to the U.S. and our interests around the world. Now, this information sharing and intelligence cooperation will remain a critical component of our response to what Hizballah is doing around the globe.

And to close, I will just say that the Intelligence Community remains focused on doing whatever we can to disrupt the work of foreign terrorist organizations around the globe and most certainly here in the homeland, and the work I've talked about today to counter Hizballah is a very big part of that effort. And in that regard, our work against – our work related to Hizballah is every bit as much of a priority as our work against al-Qaida and ISIS. That aggressive intelligence and law enforcement work goes on around the globe and around the country every day.

I will stop there and turn things over to Ambassador Sales.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Good afternoon, everyone. This past weekend marked the 20th anniversary of the United States designating Hizballah as a foreign terrorist organization. With backing from its patron, the Iranian regime, Hizballah remains one of the world's most dangerous terrorist organizations. It continues to commit terrorist attacks and to engage in other destabilizing activities across the globe.

The threat Hizballah poses to this country was underscored in June when the FBI arrested two alleged operatives, one in New York and one in Michigan. These men allegedly were operating on behalf of Hizballah's international terrorist unit. Hizballah has a truly global reach. In the past several years, we've seen the group conduct a successful attack in Bulgaria. We've seen it undertake two separate plots in Cyprus. We've seen it develop large caches of weapons in Kuwait and Nigeria, and we've seen it send terrorist operatives to Peru and Thailand. These examples can leave no doubt about Hizballah's true nature and intentions. It continues to build its worldwide terrorist infrastructure to lay the groundwork for future attacks.

Countering Hizballah is a top priority for the Trump administration. Today, I am announcing rewards for two senior Hizballah leaders under the State Department's Rewards for Justice Program. First, the Department is offering a reward of up to \$7 million for information that leads to the location, arrest, or conviction in any country of Talal Hamiyah. Hamiyah has been linked to several terrorist attacks, hijackings, and kidnappings targeting U.S. citizens. Hamiyah leads Hizballah's international terrorist unit, the so called "External Security Organization," which is responsible for planning and conducting terrorist attacks outside of Lebanon. These attacks have targeted primarily Americans and Israelis.

We're also offering a reward of up to \$5 million for information that leads to the location, arrest, or conviction in any country of Fuad Shukr. Shukr is a senior military commander of Hizballah's forces in Lebanon. He's also a member of the Jihad Council, Hizballah's highest military body. Shukr plays a key role in Hizballah's military operations in Syria, and he helped plan and launch the 1983 attack on the U.S. Marine Corps barracks in Beirut that killed 241 of our Marines.

Let me be clear. These are the first Hizballah-related rewards under the Rewards for Justice Program in a decade. Today's announcement is just one part of our effort to counter Hizballah's terrorist activities. Until Hizballah stops using terrorism and violence to achieve its goals, the United States and our allies will aggressively target its terrorism infrastructure and financial support networks.

Let me describe some of our other efforts to combat Hizballah. The FTO designation has been a key tool in disrupting the group's associated networks. Since its designation in 1997, we've prosecuted approximately 21 cases against Hizballah members in the United States. The U.S. Government has also designated more than 100 people and entities associated with Hizballah around the world under a range of authorities. These include financial facilitators, the perpetrators of a 2012 attack in Bulgaria, and senior leaders of the organization. They also include Shukr and Hamiyah, who were

designated in 2015 and 2012, respectively. Today's rewards are another step to increase the pressure on them and their organization.

The United States is not the only country to understand Hizballah's true nature. In recent years, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League have designated Hizballah as a terrorist organization, joining the United States, the EU, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

While much progress has been made, more work remains to be done. Hizballah is not subject to UN sanctions, nor is it sanctioned regionally or at the national level in South America, Africa, or Southeast Asia – all areas where the group is active. Additionally, some countries have chosen to designate only Hizballah's military wing, leaving its so-called political wing untouched. But that is a false distinction. Make no mistake – Hizballah has no political wing. It is a single organization, a terrorist organization, and it is rotten to its core. These gaps are not merely symbolic; they limit other governments' ability to freeze Hizballah assets, to shut down its front companies, to eliminate its fundraising and recruiting capabilities, and to prosecute Hizballah-associated networks.

The United States will need allies in this fight. For countries that have already sanctioned Hizballah, we applaud them for taking this important step, and we urge them to further disrupt the group's activities. As for countries that have yet to do so, we invite them to step up and help us confront this common threat. In particular, we urge our partners to join the U.S.-Europol Law Enforcement Coordination Group. The LECG provides a platform for strong collaboration among more than 25 countries that are confronted by this threat.

Before I conclude, it's important to recall that Hizballah hasn't developed its military and terrorist capabilities on its own. It has become the global threat it is today for one reason: Tehran's deep and abiding assistance. The Iranian regime has built and bankrolled Hizballah to foment instability throughout the region and across the world. This has all come at the expense of the Iranian people, whose resources are being diverted to support Hizballah's bloody cause, and at the expense of Lebanon, which has suffered grievously from Iran and Hizballah's deadly partnership. The people of Iran and the people of Lebanon deserve better than this.

Today's Rewards for Justice announcement is another important step in our ongoing campaign to counter Hizballah's wide-ranging terrorist activities. Working with our partners, we will confront Hizballah across the globe. We will deny it the resources it needs to carry out its deadly attacks, and we will bring its leaders and operatives to justice.

Thank you.

MS NAUERT: Thank you. A couple minutes to take some questions. Elise, let's start with you – from CNN.

QUESTION: Thank you. This is for either one of you. I guess, Ambassador, it might be for you. What about the Government of Lebanon? You say that there is

no political wing or political organization; this is all a terrorism organization. Well, as you know, there are members of Hizballah that are cabinet ministers in the Lebanese Government. And so what does that mean for your relationship with Lebanon? I mean, that would, in effect, make them a state sponsor of terrorism? I mean, what are your discussions with the Lebanese Government about that?

And then to what extent is this new focus on Hizballah an extension of the President's Iran review and an effort to kind of crack down on Iranian proxies? Because, I mean, if I'm looking at your list right here, on the last year there are really only in the United States two cases of U.S.-based terrorism – possible terrorism – activity that was thwarted, which is far less than any other groups in the last year.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Well, thank you for the questions. Maybe I could take a stab at that before turning the mike over to Director Rasmussen. Thanks for the question. As I said, the position of the United States is clear. Hizballah is a terrorist organization, from A to Z, and we don't recognize a false distinction between its terroristic ambitions and its – a political role for it. We've been very clear in our public messaging that the Government of Lebanon, likewise, needs to recognize Hizballah as a terrorist organization. And we look to them to be a reliable partner on that front.

QUESTION: I mean, is that – I mean, respectfully though, but is that really realistic? I mean, given the political – and Director Rasmussen has worked in the region for a long time too. You know very well that this is part of the fabric of Lebanese society and these are long-held political struggles within the country. So what do you do if Lebanon does – I mean, that's just not going to – I don't – personally, I don't envision that ever happening. So I'm just kind of – where do you go from there? Because that's a non-starter, for sure.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Well, I guess I respectfully reject the premise of your question. I don't think that terrorism is part of the fabric of any society.

QUESTION: No. I'm saying members of Hizballah, which is also, as you know, a social organization – I mean, it's – I understand what you're saying about the terrorism components, but the people – not all the people of Lebanon but many of the people, a large section of the population, feel differently.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Well, as I said, our position has been consistent throughout the years, that money given to a terrorist organization, even for purportedly non-terroristic purposes, ends up assisting the group's terroristic activities. If you give money to the so-called peaceful side of an organization, money is fungible, right. And so that frees up resources that can then be used for malign activities that have nothing to do with charitable work or other purposes that we might regard as legitimate. And so it's important for us to maintain that distinction as false, right. The distinction between political and terroristic is false.

MR RASMUSSEN: Can I just jump in on one, the latter half of your question, Elise. Because the phrase "only two" –

QUESTION: No, I –

MR RASMUSSEN: Let me just –

QUESTION: You know what I'm saying.

MR RASMUSSEN: No, I know what you're saying. But from our perspective, the idea that we would have information uncovered in the course of legitimate law enforcement investigations that indicate that there are Hizballah-linked individuals here in the United States operating for terrorism-related purposes – that's unacceptable, and we are going to pursue whatever means we have at our disposal to make sure that that activity is identified, disrupted, and stopped. That would be true if the group were the Shining Path in Peru. That would be true if the group were ISIS or al-Qaida, and we are working aggressively against those targets as well.

QUESTION: I guess the question was just then – and I'll pass it over.

MS NAUERT: Elise, we're going to move on (inaudible).

QUESTION: But I guess the question was just that – what is the kind of recent decision to focus on Hizballah as –

MR RASMUSSEN: Well, from a law enforcement and intelligence perspective, it's not a timing question. When those issues present themselves, we go after them aggressively with all the tools at our disposal. The specifics of when to make a more public effort to highlight Hizballah's global activities around the world, I think Ambassador Sales has explained why we're doing that at this particular time.

MS NAUERT: We're going to move on. Matt Lee from AP.

QUESTION: I'll be – thanks. I'll be extremely brief. One, why – you mentioned it very briefly in your opening comments, but why aren't the missile to – rocket attacks into Israel at all part of this? Is it – was it – would it be too long a list to put in this? Or I just don't know. Are you making a distinction between this kind of operational activity and then firing rockets into Israel?

MR RASMUSSEN: No. I wouldn't argue that we're making a distinction between the character of the military activity that's being brought against Israeli interests in the north of Israel. I can't speak to why we didn't include it on that. I think we worked – the purpose of this graphic was to show you, in essence, the reach of the organization around the globe.

QUESTION: Okay. And then secondly, related to Elise's question, but more directly, the military, the Lebanon – the Lebanese Armed Forces – the Israeli defense minister said this morning that Hizballah controls the LAF, runs it. The United States provides a significant amount of cash and equipment to the Lebanese army. One, do you agree with the Israeli defense minister that Hizballah controls the Lebanese Armed Forces? And second, if you do, or even if you don't, if the Israelis feel that, why do you continue to support them with millions and millions of dollars of stuff? Thanks.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Well, we've – we have partnered closely with the Lebanese Armed Forces because they have been an effective partner in defending the borders of Lebanon against terrorist threats externally, including ISIS and al-Qaida and other terrorist elements. We're aware of the report that you referenced today about possible – the report from Israel. We have been very clear with the Lebanese Government that it's important for all of our partners to condemn terrorism in all its forms, and we will continue to work with the Lebanese Government to ensure that that vision of a world that is free from terrorism for all potential victims is realized.

QUESTION: It sounds like you're making a distinction between the Lebanese army and the Lebanese Government.

AMBASSADOR SALES: No. I don't mean to draw that distinction.

QUESTION: Oh. So –

MS NAUERT: All right.

QUESTION: – you're going to continue to give the Lebanese Armed Forces money and equipment? Is that correct?

AMBASSADOR SALES: We are aware of the report. We're looking into it.

MS NAUERT: Rich Edson, Fox.

QUESTION: Thanks. Hi, guys. Have you noticed a difference in Hizballah's behavior since the 2015 signing of the JCPOA, and if so, how? Has their behavior changed?

MR RASMUSSEN: I guess I could handle that from just kind of a narrowly intelligence perspective. The answer is basically no. The trajectory that we have seen Hizballah on has continued pretty much unabated throughout the duration of the conflict in Syria. And I mention that because that's where – Hizballah's involvement on the ground in Syria has been a significant factor in supporting the regime. At the same time, absent the Syria conflict, we were already dealing with a Hizballah that had the kind of global ambition to create a terrorist capability that I would argue predated the Syria conflict. And so we've seen kind of both strands moving together forward without much change in the period since the JCPOA.

MS NAUERT: Thank you, everybody. Director Rasmussen, thank you. Ambassador Sales, thanks a lot.

AMBASSADOR SALES: Thank you.

MS NAUERT: We'll see you soon.

AMBASSADOR SALES: See you soon.

MS NAUERT: Thank you.

QUESTION: Thank you.

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