

## EU ministers ready to blacklist Hezbollah

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EU foreign ministers decide Monday whether to blacklist the military wing of Lebanon's Hezbollah group, with an eye also on the conflict in Syria and the possible resumption of stalled Israel-Palestinian talks.

Hezbollah, which is close to Iran, is Israel's sworn enemy, and its recent intervention in Syria has dismayed Western powers who back rebels battling to oust President Bashar al-Assad.

A decision to place the militia on the European Union list of terrorist groups requires approval by all 28 national ministers and it will take time, if agreed, to proceed to actual sanctions.

The EU seeks to play a leading role in the Middle East peace process and on Friday foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton warmly welcomed news that US Secretary of State John Kerry had got Israel and the Palestinians to resume peace talks.

Foreign ministers were due to review the Middle East situation Monday but the issue may now demand more time given the possible wider impact of a decision on Hezbollah.

"There are still some reservations ... but we are moving towards a decision on listing Hezbollah's military wing," a senior EU official said Friday as Lebanon warned that such a move could potentially destabilize the fragile country.

The official stressed that a decision would be fully justified by Hezbollah's involvement in an attack against Israeli tourists in Bulgaria last year and its activities in Cyprus.

But it would "not impact current EU policy and engagement with Lebanon," the official said, arguing that only the military wing would be targeted and not Hezbollah's political side, which was part of the outgoing Lebanese government.

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Several EU member states have expressed sharp reservations over blacklisting it precisely because of such fears, but EU sources believe the consensus is now to go ahead.

"We would be surprised if some ministers stood in the way of the EU taking robust action on terrorism," another senior EU official said. "They'll need to think quite carefully before blocking consensus."

Asked if Hezbollah's intervention in support of Assad in Syria had changed opinion, the first senior official insisted this was "another issue completely."

The decision was "solely driven" by concerns over terrorist actions in Europe, he added.

EU sources said Syria and Egypt, which Ashton visited recently to press the need to uphold democratic reforms, will both be discussed Monday.

In Syria, Assad appears to be making inroads against the rebels who are torn by bloody infighting and growing extremism, prompting concerns they will lose the war.

At their last meeting in May, ministers led by Britain and France agreed to end the EU arms embargo on Syria so as to allow supplies to the rebels but not before August 1 as Washington and Moscow negotiated for a fresh peace conference in Geneva.

With that prospect receding, Ashton is due to give an overall report on the situation in Syria on Monday.

In what one official said was a heavy agenda, ministers will also review developments in Myanmar as the government presses ahead with reforms, and in Africa -- the Great Lakes region, Somalia and above all Mali, due to hold elections July 28 after French-led military intervention earlier this year forced back Islamist rebels.

There will be a general review of EU human rights policy and efforts and a discussion on water security, a major and increasingly important factor in many conflicts.