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## Europe's stance on Hezbollah hardens

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**The attitude towards Hezbollah in Europe is changing markedly.**

In part, this is a response to the growing body of evidence from investigations in Bulgaria and Cyprus that indicate Hezbollah's role in carrying out or planning attacks.

But equally it reflects a growing frustration with the Lebanese Shia grouping following its decision to intervene in Syria's civil war on the side of President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

There are growing concerns in Western European diplomatic circles that Hezbollah is playing with fire and that Syria's bloodshed could easily spill over into Lebanon. Indeed, there are early signs that this is already happening.

The British government is pushing its European partners to designate the military wing of Hezbollah as a terrorist entity. This comes in the wake of the organisation's role in an attack on Israeli tourists in Bulgaria and the recent conviction of a Hezbollah operative in Cyprus.

The Foreign Office minister in London, Alistair Burt, said that this was "the appropriate course of action, especially after we have confirmed that the military wing has been carrying out terrorist acts for a long time.

"We have proof of this," he went on, pointing to the bomb attack on an Israeli tourist bus in Burgas airport in Bulgaria in July of last year, and the more recent conviction of a Hezbollah member in Cyprus for planning to carry out what he called "terrorist acts."

Hezbollah denies involvement in the Burgas bombing.

### **French shift**

Up to now, only Britain and the Netherlands have placed the military wing of Hezbollah on their national terrorism blacklists. Germany now seems more willing to designate Hezbollah's military arm, and this has given some impetus to the British move.

The French position has also shifted. Hezbollah's growing role in the Syrian fighting has changed the calculus in Paris.

France has up to now been cautious, fearing what pressure upon Hezbollah might do to stability in Lebanon, where the French, among others, have a significant number of peacekeeping troops.

Quite apart from the continuing debate within the European Union about lifting the ban on arms sales to rebels in Syria, the fate of peacekeepers (Unifil in southern Lebanon and the UNDOF disengagement monitors on the Golan Heights) is also a growing concern as tensions grow in these crucial border regions.

The British move to list Hezbollah's military wing comes as the image of the Lebanese organisation - long hailed in the region as one of the principal resistance forces against Israel - is coming under strain.

Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war has raised concerns about its motives in Lebanon and beyond. Its troops have had a significant impact on the fighting.

US Secretary of State John Kerry noted only recently that there were thousands of Hezbollah fighters in Syria.

Hezbollah seems to have thrown in its hand with President Assad, confirming the views of many of its critics that it is playing out a wider game plan inspired by Tehran.

The Iran-Syria-Hezbollah axis is under clear pressure now. The risks for all parties are great.

Hezbollah, for one, risks sacrificing the reputation it has built up in Lebanon to help prop up the failing Alawite regime in Syria.

