

EU Considering Labeling Hezbollah's Military Wing A Terrorist Organization

By RAF CASERT and JUERGEN BAETZ 05/22/13 01:41 PM ET EDT 

BRUSSELS — The European Union is reassessing whether to declare the Lebanese party Hezbollah's military wing a terrorist organization, a move it has long shied from despite pressure from the U.S., officials said Wednesday.

The move is bolstered by Germany's change of heart on the issue after long resisting calls to list Hezbollah as a terrorist organization for fear it could destabilize Lebanon and the greater region around it.

Any change in EU policy on Hezbollah would need unanimity among the 27 EU member nations and has so far been impossible to achieve.

Still, Germany was confident change was imminent. "I expect that the necessary consultations within the EU can now be rapidly brought to a conclusion," German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle said in Amman on the sidelines of an international meeting on Syria.

Adding the military wing to the EU's terror list would impose sanctions such as travel bans and asset freezes on the group's members and severely hamper its operations in the EU.

During an EU summit in Brussels, British officials said London had launched a bid for the change, fueled by indications the organization was responsible for a terrorist bombing in Bulgaria that killed five Israeli tourists and one Bulgarian last year. Bulgaria has accused Hezbollah of the attack, a charge the Shiite group denies.

French President Francois Hollande said the impetus for change had to come from member state Bulgaria. "When there will be a request that will come from Bulgaria, we will study it," he said.

Hezbollah's links to the Syrian regime of President Bashar Assad have also increasingly raised concern. The EU is strongly opposed to the

Syrian leader and is considering next week whether to end an arms embargo to boost the opposition.

Hezbollah's growing role in the Syrian conflict was highlighted recently when 31 of its elite fighters were killed and 70 others were wounded in the battle for the Syrian town of Qusair near the border with Lebanon.

"The sense of urgency comes from Syria," Sylke Tempel of the German Council on Foreign Relations think tank in Berlin said.

She said the presence of Hezbollah fighters in Syria – and their apparent successful performance in combat – had led Western governments to ponder "what if Assad is going to win" and "what if Hezbollah is a factor in making Assad win or at least not lose."

The U.S. has had Hezbollah on its terror list since October 1997.

Germany said Wednesday that its position had changed due to new and clearer information about the Lebanese militant Shiite organization's activities and analysis provided by Cypriot authorities.

In March, a Cyprus criminal court found a Hezbollah member guilty of helping to plan attacks on Israelis on the Mediterranean Island.

"The German position is based on an increasingly clearly emerging set of facts and also on the progress by the Cypriot authorities in uncovering terrorist activities in Cyprus," Westerwelle said.

Germany said a move on Hezbollah also received a fresh boost after the attack in Burgas, in Bulgaria.

"Here you have the case of terrorist acts on European soil," Tempel said. "Put one and one together and you have an idea why there is interest in declaring at least the military wing of Hezbollah a terrorist organization."

Any EU change in policy would be discussed officially within the next two weeks.

One problem, however, might result from the overlap of people involved in both Hezbollah's activities as a legitimate Lebanese political party and the group's armed wing, a diplomat from a major EU country said in Brussels.

Some countries would therefore prefer to sanction specific individuals instead of the entire military wing, said the diplomat, who demanded anonymity because he was speaking before the official announcement.

Action on Hezbollah is further complicated by its pivotal role in Lebanese politics, where the Iranian-backed group has dominated the government since 2011.

In March, Prime Minister Najib Mikati resigned over a political deadlock between the two main political camps – the Western-backed March 14 coalition and the pro-Syrian March 8 movement led by Hezbollah. Mikati's departure plunged Lebanon into uncertainty amid heightened sectarian clashes.

Even without an official EU listing of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, international aid organizations, trying to raise funds for Syrian refugees in Lebanon have complained that European donors are reluctant to provide the money that would help the government in Beirut because of the Shiite group's dominance.

France, a key EU player on foreign affairs, and several other EU nations have United Nations peacekeepers in southern Lebanon, where the Shia group enjoys wide support. German troops patrol off southern Lebanon's coast to enforce a weapons embargo.

Associated Press writers Frank Jordans in Berlin, Jamey Keaten in Paris, Paisley Dodds in London and Barbara Surk in Beirut and contributed to this story.