



Photo by: Reuters

Vienna agrees to label Hezbollah as terror group

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Austrian diplomat: Political dialogue will continue; United Kingdom: Blacklisting is 'fully justified.'

LONDON/BERLIN – The Austrian Foreign Ministry announced ahead of a Thursday meeting in Brussels that the central European country will not oppose blacklisting Hezbollah's military wing.

Reinhold Lopatka, a state secretary in the Foreign Ministry, told the Kurier newspaper that "Austria will not prevent an agreement" on labeling Hezbollah a terrorist organization.

The EU's 28 members require unanimity to pass a measure listing an organization as a terrorist group. Over the last year, Austria's position on the subject of Hezbollah's blacklisting has moved from opposition to undecided to support.

However, the Austrian diplomat noted that the terror designation will not bar talks with politicians from Hezbollah.

"Political dialogue with Hezbollah, which is represented in the Lebanese government and parliament, remains in place," said Lopatka, because, he added, that is the consensus of the EU.

Labeling the Hezbollah militia as a terror organization is a "political signal of ostracism," he said.

Lopatka is slated to represent Austrian Foreign Minister Michael Spindelegger at a gathering of EU foreign ministers on Monday. At the meeting, the foreign ministers are expected to issue a decision on whether the EU will formally sanction Hezbollah.

The EU will hold meetings this week ahead of the meeting in an effort to marshal a consensus on including Hezbollah's military wing on its terror list.

There is cautious optimism among EU and Israeli diplomats that Europe will sanction the Lebanese organization.

A diplomat from a country in favor of a ban against Hezbollah said a "consensus is clearly building" because "the evidence that it [Hezbollah] committed terrorism on EU soil is strong," AFP reported on Tuesday.

The diplomat appeared to be referencing the evidence linking Hezbollah to a terrorist attack on an Israeli tour bus in Burgas, Bulgaria, that killed five Israelis and their Bulgarian bus driver in July 2012.

The EU's ambassadors were slated to meet in Brussels on Thursday to hammer out the required consensus.

For some European politicians, however, a partial ban falls dramatically short of the necessary action to rope in the European activities of the Shi'ite group.

Michael McCann, a Labor MP in the UK, told The Jerusalem Post on Tuesday, "Hezbollah should be proscribed, full stop."

"The simple truth of the matter is that Hezbollah is Iran's proxy and issued to exert its sphere of influence over Lebanon and the wider region in whatever way possible. But don't take my word for it, the deputy leader of Hezbollah, Sheikh Naim Qassem, said in 2007 that all of Hezbollah's policies including firing missiles into Israel would not have taken place without the consent of Iran," he said.

“It’s a scandal that the UK has only proscribed part of Hezbollah, giving the impression that a distinction can be drawn between Hezbollah’s terrorists and those that purport to be politicians. And it’s even worse that the EU haven’t proscribed Hezbollah at all,” McCann continued.

“Let’s hope these issues can be remedied, but if they are not, it will be an extraordinary indictment of Western democracies – that while they will be tough on any terrorist who breaches their borders, they will apply a weaker standard to Hezbollah and the Middle East,” he said.

Charles Tannock, a British member of the European Parliament for the Conservative Party, told the Post on Tuesday, “I fully support efforts to blacklist Hezbollah’s military wing, but this will only partially solve the problem given that the military and civilian wings are so closely entwined.

If you allow the civilian wing to continue raising money, there is no guarantee that this will be ring-fenced and not reach the military wing. The USA bans both the civilian and military wings.”

He added that the issue is even more pressing given the ongoing Syrian conflict.

“There are also reports that money is being raised now in EU territory and being sent to Hezbollah in Lebanon and possibly Syria... where Hezbollah has over 1,000 fighters alongside Assad.”

Tannock said before Austria’s recent comments that it – along with the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Ireland – has “has been holding out against EU designation because of concerns about the safety of their UN troop contributions in the Golan Heights and southern Lebanon.”

He said that France is ready to lend its support for the measure.

“France, which had previously opposed designation through fears of destabilizing Lebanon [where Hezbollah is part of the government], is now fully behind this measure, following the revelations of Hezbollah’s involvement in the terrorist attack in Bulgaria against Israeli tourists, and attempts to carry out an action in Cyprus, which was thwarted,” he said.

A Cypriot court convicted Hezbollah member Hossam Taleb Yaacoub in March for plotting to kill Israelis and Jews on the island. Yaacoub, a dual Lebanese-Swedish citizen, used Europe for his meetings with Hezbollah. The court sentenced him to four years in prison.

Yaacoub told the Cypriot authorities that he was collecting “information about the Jews. And that is what my organization does everywhere in the world.”

Malta is widely believed to be resisting labeling Hezbollah a terrorist organization.

The British Foreign Office told the Post that the evidence that Hezbollah’s “military wing is a terrorist organization and committed terrorism on EU soil is compelling. That’s why we and a large number of member states believe that their formal listing as a terrorist organization is fully justified.”

A representative for the British Foreign Office said it is working closely with EU countries on the issue in hopes of reaching a robust, collective EU position.

Hezbollah’s attacks on European soil date back to the 1980s, spanning deadly bombings in a number of Western and Central European countries.

Canada, the United States, Bahrain and Israel recognize Hezbollah’s entire structure as a terrorist entity.