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EU blacklisting may force Hezbollah to choose



When the Prosecutor's office in the Cypriot seaside resort of Limassol received the case of Swedish-Lebanese Hezbollah

operative Hossam Yakoub, arrested by the police while surveying Israeli tourist flights, hang-outs, restaurants, and hotels, they called a Swedish terrorism expert to analyze the evidence. The expert who testified in court at the end of February was Magnus Norell, a Swedish scholar, adjunct fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and a Senior Policy Advisor for the European Foundation for Democracy (EFD), based in Brussels.

Previously, Norell was a senior analyst and project leader at the Swedish Defense Research Agency in Stockholm. According to his resume, between 1997 and 2000, he created a back channel between Hezbollah and Israel to facilitate the Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon. Prior to joining the Swedish Defense Research Agency, Norell served as an analyst for the Swedish Secret Service and Swedish Military Intelligence.

He recently talked to NOW about Yakoub's trial in Cyprus, and what it means for the law enforcement agencies in Europe, Hezbollah's activities in Europe, and the efforts to label the Lebanese Shiite militant group as a terrorist organization in the European Union.

NOW: The government in Cyprus handled Hossam Yakoub's case with a lot of discretion: small court in a town with scarce media coverage, no security whatsoever. Why do you think they did that?

Magnus Norell: One explanation for that is they are consciously downplaying the whole thing. Everybody knows that the stakes are pretty high, because this will be a factor in the European discussion on whether to designate [Hezbollah] as a terrorist organization or not. I think this is a very compelling case. I think the Cypriots, more than most people, are very well aware of this and they are downplaying this for precisely that reason. You don't want to highlight it too much because it is sensitive enough as it is.

NOW: What was your impression of Hossam Yakoub at the trial in Cyprus?

Norell: It is difficult to speak about a man who I saw just once and I have never spoken to. But from the evidence I saw... He arrived in Sweden when he was 6 months old, he lived a number of years in Sweden. He moved back to Lebanon, as his mother I think lives in Lebanon. He has spent more time in Lebanon than in Sweden. Being careful about generalizing too much, he is a very young man and he was very explicit in court about why and how he got involved with Hezbollah. From what I've seen or heard he is in a sense the typical young man who would get caught up in this. I think his story is probably not unique. There are many

people like him. The fact that he carries a Swedish passport is an advantage for the organization.

NOW: Why Sweden? There is a strong Hezbollah supporting community in Sweden. It was obvious in 2009, when they protested together with the Swedish opposition against the Gaza offensive.

Norell: It's a good question. We got a couple of cases just last year of people getting arrested for various crimes, both involved with Hezbollah. I think, in one way, it may be a coincidence. And it just came at the wrong time. But I also think that the fact that they carry Swedish passports is a factor here. It's a very advantageous passport to have: no one will suspect you of anything, you can travel everywhere. It's good value. That is recent, that they are trying to recruit people with Swedish passports. And, of course, we have a considerable Lebanese minority in Sweden, as well. There is a community from which to recruit. Hezbollah was more active in Sweden the 1990s I think, but there are still a number of sympathizers, not only in Sweden, but primarily in Sweden. It's the passport, it's the fact that it's a neutral country, you can travel anywhere. It all makes Sweden an interesting case.

NOW: Does this influence Sweden's position in the European Union regarding listing Hezbollah as a terrorist organization?

Norell: It's a hard question to answer. I have been talking to people in the government about that. I think fear is part of it. You won't hear people say that in public, of course, but I think fear is part of it. You don't want to have great problems, unnecessary problems. Also, in Sweden, you can be part of any organization you like, and as long as you don't do anything no one is going to touch you. Hamas is a terrorist organization in the EU, but we do have Hamas members living in Sweden without any problem, as long as they don't do anything.

NOW: But even if a member commits a crime, the authorities in the EU countries don't look for the connection with any of these groups like the United States authorities do...

Norell: That's a very good point. If you don't look, you will not find. If I don't ask the question, I don't have to be afraid of the answer. Which is pretty hypocritical. As you may know, Europol [the European Union's law enforcement agency that handles criminal intelligence] designated Hezbollah as a terrorist entity in their database, which is kind of interesting, because most governments didn't. Only The Netherlands blacklisted the group. And the UK blacklisted the military wing, but they don't even believe that themselves. It's done for political reasons.

NOW: Why the hesitation?

Norell: The argument that you will hear in Europe is that Hezbollah is also a political party, it's also a social movement, they do charity, health care, schools etc. And if we designate them as a terrorist organization it will be very difficult to deal with all this. I think that's the fig leaf that you hide behind. The real reason is that you don't want to risk getting any conflict there and you will make it difficult for the Lebanese government and the Lebanese polity to deal with it. But I think the opposite is true. If you did that, it would force Hezbollah to choose: are you a political party or not? If you are a political party, you don't really need a militia. It would be an advantage to Lebanon. Maybe Lebanon is not that important for the EU and they will choose the easy way out. Maybe they will designate what they call 'military wing', which will not make any difference whatsoever. It will be a punch in the air.