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Two small countries in Europe



In July last year, a young man wearing shorts and a baseball cap hung around the small airport in Burgas, Bulgaria, watching

closely when the charter planes with Israeli tourists arrived. He later detonated the explosives he was carrying in his backpack, in a bus full of Israeli tourists, killing six.

Two weeks before, the Cypriot police arrested a 24 year-old man with Lebanese and Swedish passports who had been scouting and surveying charter flights carrying Israeli tourists, kosher restaurants, and other hangouts.

Hossam Taleb Yaacoub was sentenced today in Limassol to 4 years in prison for membership in a criminal organization and involvement in criminal activities, after telling the courts that he had been hired by Hezbollah as a courier and for surveillance operations on Israeli tourists. In Bulgaria the February investigation pointed at two Lebanese nationals with Australian and Canadian passports which investigators believe are connected to the Lebanese Party of God.

The United States and Israel, whose governments designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, saw in the two cases the opportunity to push for a decision in the European Union to similarly classify the Lebanese Shiite armed group. Blacklisting would mean that all the charities and businesses that the organization and its pool of supporters operate in EU member countries would be frozen and their funds confiscated. But both Cyprus and Bulgaria, two of the smallest countries in the European block, are not willing to take the responsibility for initiating such a move in Brussels.

The trial of Hezbollah member Hossam Yakoub in Cyprus did not receive much attention at the national level. Nor did it in the EU. According to terrorism expert and Swedish scholar Magnus Norell, this is what the government in Cyprus wanted. The executive in Nicosia has very important economic problems **to solve**, with the country's economy on the brink of collapse. "But disregarding the economic crisis, this is not a surprise. They have been trying to downplay this all along," Norell said. "Political geography is a powerful thing. Hezbollah is close, there are probably other operatives in Cyprus right now. [The Cypriot authorities] will continue to downplay the case. They had to deal with it because it literally fell on their laps and they couldn't just sit and do nothing. But they treated it as any criminal case," he pointed out.

Bulgaria is even under greater pressure to act on the Burgas case. The government in Sofia found, after six months of inquiry, that the bombing had been planned by three people, two of whom had ties to Hezbollah. Bulgaria presented the results of its bomb probe to EU foreign ministers on February 18, asking for a harder stance towards Hezbollah. However, just two days later, the government in Sofia resigned after a mass protest triggered by the economic crisis the country is going through.

Bulgaria's caretaker Prime Minister Marin Raykov told journalists on Wednesday, as he was visiting the NATO headquarters, that his country will present new evidence on last year's bus bombing. "We will continue the investigation. We will continue to work on this very seriously, very actively. We will provide the needed evidence," Raykov told reporters. But he also said that Bulgaria will not initiate any technical procedure to list Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in the EU. "I think that our partners will be able to do this once they reach a certain level of consensus on this issue," he said, adding that some EU member countries were not convinced Bulgaria had enough evidence.

In order to include an organization on the EU's terror list, the designation has to be officially requested of the EU president by a member country or a third party, with sufficient evidence. According to EU legislation, the evidence has to go through a committee of terrorism experts, member countries have to weigh the submitted evidence, then reach a political consensus. No EU country has so far submitted the official request.

Krassimir Yankov, coordinator of the Middle East section of the Bulgarian publication *Dnevnik*, told NOW that the Bulgarian caretaker government can't and doesn't want to make big foreign policy decision in areas outside the EU. "The main goal in the foreign agenda is to be a reliable partner to Brussels I think," Yankov said. "Ensuring that we are working on the Hezbollah case should be read in this context. But I don't believe anything more will happen on this aspect before we have a majority government, which at the earliest can be in June, but can be delayed until fall as well," he pointed out. He also added that at the moment, Bulgaria needs to ensure the smooth transition and secure the EU funds for the 2014-2020 period. "The Hezbollah affair is a European issue and Raykov doesn't want any disagreement on that," he added.

Norell also said that Bulgaria, like Cyprus, treats the Burgas investigation as a sensitive issue. "They're small countries, they will not initiate anything without having a stronger ally in the EU," he said. "It's interesting that Bulgaria did, in fact, point at Hezbollah. But this is as far as they go," Norell pointed out.