
Irish minister: Hezbollah has just one wing

By Niamh Fleming-Farrell

BEIRUT: It is not a “valid distinction” to differentiate between Hezbollah’s military and political wings, Alan Shatter, Ireland’s minister for defense, justice and equality, said Sunday. “I don’t believe that distinction is a valid distinction,” Shatter, presently on an official visit to Lebanon, told The Daily Star.

“I think Hezbollah is a single organization,” he continued, adding: “it doesn’t reflect ... the structure of the IRA [Irish Republican Army] where the IRA, or Provisional IRA, was a military wing and Sinn Fein was a political wing.”

The minister was commenting on the emerging European Union debate over whether Hezbollah, suspected perpetrators of a July 18 suicide bombing on a bus carrying Israeli tourists in Bulgaria, should be officially designated a terrorist organization.

Presently, the EU, unlike the United States, does not place Hezbollah on its terror list, although some individual member states do. The Netherlands recognizes Hezbollah as a terrorist group, while the United Kingdom distinguishes between Hezbollah’s political and military wings, proscribing the latter as a terrorist organization.

“Whether Hezbollah would be named a terrorist organization or not from a European perspective is a matter that remains to be considered by European justice ministers,” Shatter said, explaining that Bulgaria’s investigation into the bomb attack is ongoing and that no decisions should be made before its outcomes are known.

Ireland, which currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Council, hosted a meeting of EU justice ministers in January during which Bulgaria briefed attendees on the progress of this investigation, Shatter added.

While condemning the attack, Shatter highlighted that it is “important ... that the Bulgarian authorities complete their investigation, and that we don’t jump to conclusions.”

The minister also emphasized the need for careful reflection ahead of any final decision.

The matter “would have to be weighed up very carefully so the right decisions are made,” he said, noting the particular context in which Hezbollah operates: “It is a group that participates in democratic elections in Lebanon, that has a role in the Lebanese government, that plays a very major role in the politics of Lebanon.”

Shatter is in Lebanon on the first leg of a weeklong trip to the region during which he will be briefed by Lebanese, Israeli and Palestinian officials.

The minister will also visit the Irish-Finnish battalion currently serving with UNIFIL, the United Nations peacekeeping force in south Lebanon.

Commenting on how UNIFIL’s role might change in the context of the escalating crisis next door, especially in relation to securing the Lebanon-Syria border, Shatter said he anticipated no alteration to the force’s current mandate, which pertains to the Lebanon-Israel frontier alone.

“I am not anticipating any change in the mandate. ... I don’t think UNIFIL as presently constituted has a role in securing the border between Syria and Lebanon. ... The border between Lebanon and Syria is a sovereign responsibility of the Lebanese Armed Forces, it’s not a role that I would see as appropriate for UNIFIL to perform,” he said.

The minister did however indicate that Ireland is open to requests from the Lebanese Army for additional military training, particularly if it were to contribute to ongoing stability in the south.

“I think that is something of a positive nature that Ireland would consider providing assistance with if it was sought,” he said, noting that at “some unspecified date in the future” he hoped UNIFIL’s presence would no longer be necessary.

For the time being though, Shatter emphasized that Ireland was “committed to UNIFIL, to [helping maintain] peace in the area for as long as we’re requested to do so.”