

No Charity

Germany's crackdown on a Hezbollah-affiliated group shows that it may finally be wising up about the Lebanese paramilitary organization.

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On April 8, German police officers raided the offices of the innocuously named Lebanon Orphan Children Project (Waisenkindprojekt Libanon e.V.) across six states in the Federal Republic. They seized cash and files from its properties, and froze two bank accounts totaling \$143,000. But this group wasn't a humanitarian organization -- the German government had come to accept that it was a Hezbollah front, and shut it down effective immediately.

The Lebanon Orphan Children Project was created in 1997, and funneled donations to the al-Shahid ("The Martyr") Association in Lebanon. Al-Shahid was "disguised as a humanitarian organization" and "promotes violence and terrorism in the Middle East using donations collected in Germany and elsewhere," according to a 2009 report by German security expert Alexander Ritzmann.

The al-Shahid Association, Ritzmann wrote, provides financial support to the families of fallen Hezbollah members. In other words, German donations were being used to support the families of suicide bombers who targeted Israelis, to support Hezbollah combatants in Syria, and to generate more recruits.

Five years later, Germany's Interior Ministry accepted Ritzmann's reasoning. "The name of this organization masks its real purpose," Emily Haber, state secretary at the Interior Ministry, said on Tuesday. "The group is not a humanitarian organization."

Germany has lagged behind much of Europe in designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization -- but it may be catching up. While the Netherlands outlawed the Lebanese paramilitary organization in 2004 and Britain designated the group's military wing as a terrorist organization in 2008, Berlin has been recalcitrant in clamping down on the Lebanese group. Until this week, Germany's main challenge to Hezbollah came when the state government in Lower Saxony -- where the Orphan Children Project website is registered -- revoked the tax subsidy it received as a non-profit organization in 2010.

With Berlin treating Hezbollah with kid gloves, the group's members flocked to Germany. Last year, a spokesman for Lower Saxony's intelligence agency told me that there were 130 active Hezbollah members in the state. Germany's federal domestic agency said there are 950 members spread across the Federal Republic, including 250 in Berlin.

Germany's unofficial policy of soft-pedaling Hezbollah's terrorism stretches back as far as the early 1990s. In 1992, a joint Iran-Hezbollah operation assassinated three members and one supporter of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan, a political dissident organization opposed to the Iranian regime, in the West Berlin restaurant Mykonos. According to the German indictment in the case, two Hezbollah operatives and two Iranian intelligence officers carried out the plot.

Following the Mykonos attack, Germany's principal aim was to prevent further acts of terrorism on its soil. German security experts have long suggested that an unspoken agreement was reached between then Chancellor Helmut Kohl's administration and the Lebanese paramilitary organization: Germany would accept Hezbollah's activities -- including fundraising -- on its soil, in exchange for Hezbollah's promise to not carry out attacks.

The unwritten quid pro quo largely endured -- until this week.

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While Germany has not banned Hezbollah entirely, it issued an opening salvo in the crackdown on the organization. And this crackdown appears to be gaining steam across the continent.

The European Union put Hezbollah's military wing on its terrorism list last July because the Lebanese militia carried out a bombing attack on an Israeli tour bus in Burgas, Bulgaria, which killed five Israelis

and their Bulgarian bus driver.

Israel submitted a thick legal dossier to Germany, which listed Hezbollah's terrorism and criminal activities in Germany, prior to the EU ban. According to German commentators, the dossier played a critical role in persuading German policymakers to support the EU ban on Hezbollah's armed wing.

The Orphan Project meets the criteria of the 2013 EU terror listing. All of this helps to explain why the Interior Ministry used the opportunity, as it said, to establish a "watertight case" against Hezbollah and so insulate the German government against legal challenge on the issue.

However, few of the 600-plus deputies in the Bundestag, Germany's parliament, have demonstrated a desire to completely evict Hezbollah from German territory. The most prominent advocate of a full ban is Deputy Philipp Missfelder, a foreign-policy spokesman for Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party. He has some support among his center-right colleagues: Thomas Feist, a CDU deputy from Leipzig, wrote last year, "We should no longer allow

Hezbollah to take advantage of an [non-profit] association-friendly legal climate in Germany and Europe to collect money to conduct terrorist activities -- also in Europe."

Germany's center-left parties, however, have tended to show sympathy for Hezbollah. In 2004, the Friedrich Ebert Foundation -- the in-house think tank of the Social Democrats, which currently serve in Merkel's coalition -- organized and funded a conference with Hezbollah in Beirut. The conference was titled, "The Islamic World and Europe: From Dialogue Towards Understanding," and featured speakers from Hezbollah and Hamas.

The Social Democrats aren't merely an outlier among the German left.

Jürgen Trittin, the former head of the opposition Green Party who also currently serves as a deputy for the party in the Bundestag, sought enhanced political relations with Hezbollah after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. He did so, he said, because Hezbollah played a "very positive" role in Lebanese politics. Meanwhile, a deputy and foreign-policy spokesman for the Left Party, which is currently the most powerful opposition party in the Bundestag, marched in a 2006 pro-Hezbollah rally in Berlin to chants of: "We are all Hezbollah."

Merkel's conservative party has bucked this leftist trend, attempting to align Germany closer to Europe's growing anti-Hezbollah consensus. Interior Minister Thomas de Maiziere, a member of Merkel's party, even cited the "special relationship" between Germany and Israel as a justification for the ban on the Hezbollah-affiliated fundraising charity. As he put it: "Organizations which directly or indirectly work against Israel's right to exist from German soil cannot rely on the guaranteed right to freely organize."