

Why Europe isn't blacklisting Hezbollah

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Hezbollah supporters demonstrate in Berlin in July 2006 against the Israeli attacks on Lebanon. Hezbollah is reported to have over 900 members in Germany alone. (AFP photo)

An unidentified man blew himself up in July 2012 on a bus packed with Israeli tourists in the Bulgarian Black Sea Resort of Burgas, killing six people. Soon after the explosion in Bulgaria, politicians in Israel and the United States accused the Iranian Revolutionary Guards of orchestrating the attack and of using Hezbollah operatives to execute it.

But most European Union states have not put Hezbollah's military wing on its terror organizations list. Both the US and Israel, which long ago labeled Hezbollah a terrorist group, have increased pressure on the European governments to ban the Lebanese Party of God. Placing Hezbollah on the terror organizations list would lead to blocking the party's accounts and seizing its assets in all EU countries, cutting a large amount of its funding. But not many EU countries are willing to do that right away.

The only European states that have labeled Hezbollah a terrorist organization are the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. The rest of Europe, however, demands proof that Hezbollah is still a terrorist threat, the same way it asked for proof to blacklist Hamas. The EU submitted to pressure and blacklisted the Palestinian organization in 2003, but its politicians never complied with the ban. Hezbollah, however, is another matter.

"Listing is about proof of involvement and chain of responsibility, but it is also a political tool with sanctioning capabilities," Magnus Ranstorp, a Swedish scholar and author of "Hezbollah in Lebanon," told NOW. "I think there is careful monitoring of cases in Bulgaria and elsewhere by EU member states before judgment is made. It is more useful not to list it as it closes down options in terms of dialogue with Hezbollah," he added.

Some European countries, especially France and Britain, were targets of Hezbollah operations, along with the United States, in the 1980s. In October 1983 the French contingent of the multinational peacekeeping force in Lebanon was bombed the same day as the US Marine barracks. The French Embassy in Kuwait was bombed in December 1983. In April 1985, a bomb in a restaurant near a US base in Madrid killed 18 Spanish citizens. Hezbollah

was also blamed for a series of 13 attacks in France in 1986 targeting shopping centers and railroad stations, killing 13, and the March 1989 attempt to assassinate British novelist Salman Rushdie. But European leaders think those days might be over.

Many politicians already stated that only absolute proof that the man who blew himself up in Burgas was really a Hezbollah operative would sway them. After the attack, Bulgarian investigators insisted that they found no evidence of any Hezbollah involvement.

However, Ranstorp argued that Hezbollah's military operations are complex and difficult to isolate. "They function and operate as an extended arm of the Iranian intelligence," he noted. "I think Hezbollah's maneuverability has been restricted since 2005 and 2006 as the leadership is afraid of Israeli strikes. In political terms Hezbollah is more vulnerable than ever, [facing] criticism since it supports [Syrian President Bashar] Assad and is involved against the Syrian opposition." With Hezbollah cornered politically in Lebanon, Israel has the perfect opportunity to push it to be labeled as a terrorist organization around the world.

Some linked the Burgas attack to the arrest in Cyprus two weeks earlier of a young Lebanese man with a Swedish passport who was said to be a Hezbollah operative. The Cypriot Minister of Justice Loucas Louca stated that the detained 24-year-old displayed similar behavior to the Burgas bomber. Louca also said he belonged to an organization that is not on a European Union list of known terrorist groups, but refused to directly name the organization. The Lebanese-Swedish man was arrested after a tip-off from foreign intelligence services, among them Israel's Mossad.

A similar scenario happened in January in Bangkok, where Lebanese-Swedish Hussein Atris was arrested for allegedly planning terror attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets. There was not solid proof, only allegations that Atris was a Hezbollah operative, which the party denied.

The last attack where Hezbollah's involvement was proven was the one against the Israeli Embassy in Argentina in 1992. All recent terrorist attacks in Europe, such as the London subway bombing and the Madrid train bombings, were claimed by al-Qaeda or its affiliates. Several bombings targeting Israelis around the world have also been claimed by al-Qaeda or affiliated organizations, and never by Hezbollah.

What the European law enforcement agencies might have a problem with is the involvement of networks close to Hezbollah in organized crime across the continent.

In one of the most prominent recent cases, the German media reported that Hezbollah members were raising funds by smuggling cocaine. Two Lebanese men were arrested with over 8 million euros at the Frankfurt airport in 2008, and another two from the same network were detained in October 2009 in Speyer. The men, who had family members connected to Hezbollah leaders, had been moving millions of euros earned from the cocaine trade from Frankfurt to Beirut.

In another prominent case, Lebanese Bashar Wehbe was arrested in 2011 in the Maldives for attempting to buy weapons in Hezbollah's name from two undercover US Drug Enforcement Agency operatives. The agents recorded him as saying that the weapons he was planning to purchase were destined to reach Hezbollah. Wehbe came as a bonus in the investigation into an Iranian drug dealer who resided in Romania and smuggled drugs from Afghanistan to Western Europe and the United States.

Although Ranstorp said the EU could find proof to list Hezbollah as a terror organization if it wanted to, the bloc is not interested in labeling it so for political reasons. Unlike the United States, in the EU's case, "listing narrows the political options which may make Lebanon an arena where [the EU] can exert its influence over developments," he said.