

## A Dutchman's Vendetta Against Hezbollah



Foreign Minister of the Netherlands Rosenthal addresses the 67th session of the United Nations General Assembly at U.N. headquarters in New York, 28 September 2012. (Photo: Reuters - Mike Segar)

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**Dutch Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal is determined to have Hezbollah designated a terrorist organization by the EU. The motivations behind his insistence on the matter reveal a wider political agenda.**

“I have information that Hezbollah, with Iranian assistance, is interfering in the Syrian civil war, by supporting the regime and loyalist militias,” Dutch Foreign Minister Uri Rosenthal declared at

United Nations headquarters in New York last week on the sidelines of the latest session of the UN General Assembly. He took the opportunity to renew his call for the European Union (EU) to designate Hezbollah a terrorist organization as a prelude to imposing sanctions on its members and supporters.

Rosenthal has for weeks been citing Hezbollah's support for Syrian President Bashar Assad as a reason for the EU to join the US in taking punitive measures against the party, though there has been no tangible evidence that any such support has been military or material – and if the reference is to political support, it should be noted that the UN continues to recognize Assad as legitimate president of the Syrian Arab Republic.

At a meeting of foreign ministers in Cyprus early last month to discuss the EU's response to the Syrian crisis, the Dutch minister reminded his colleagues he had been demanding EU sanctions against Hezbollah to enable its assets in Europe to be frozen for a long time – since before the start of the Syrian crisis.

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Hezbollah is only deemed a terrorist organization by six countries: the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, The Netherlands and Israel. The United Kingdom considers the organization's military wing to be terrorist, but not its political wing. The Netherlands designated Hezbollah a terrorist organization in 2004. The country's General Intelligence and Security Service Annual Report for that year stated that "investigations have shown that ... Hezbollah's political and terrorist wings are controlled by one coordinating council," and The Netherlands therefore "no longer makes a distinction" between the two.

Other than the Dutch and British, all the EU members – even those that agreed to blacklist the Palestinian Hamas movement – have resisted pressure from the US, Israel and Holland to do the same to Hezbollah. Officials from these countries have argued that such a move would aggravate the situation in Lebanon, fuel tensions in the Middle East and conflict with EU foreign policy goals.

However, in his response to Rosenthal's call, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius indicated that steps were already being taken to attempt to criminalize Hezbollah, and that they should run their course before further action was considered.

Fabius replied that "to designate a group as a terrorist organization, you have to have a judicial process under way against this organization, which is not the case at the present time."

It could become the case, however, if investigations in Bulgaria into last June's bombing on the Black Sea coast in which Israelis were killed uphold Israel's claim that Hezbollah and Iran were behind the attack.

Also, the bid to have Hezbollah branded a terrorist organization has clearly been aided by the indictment of four Hezbollah members by the prosecutor of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) looking into the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafik al-Hariri. The STL is, after all, the first international court ever set up to try a terrorist crime.

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Pending the outcome of the Bulgarian probe, or a trial at the STL, Rosenthal has failed to provide any information in support of his claim of Hezbollah intervention in Syria, and there has been no other concrete evidence of it. In his bid to target Hezbollah, the minister seems to be taking advantage of the wave of incitement against the party which intensified after the outbreak of the Syrian crisis, motivated by his personal political convictions.

Rosenthal is a hard-line Zionist, with family links to Israel. In addition to an Israeli wife, he has one sister living in Asqalan and another in Haifa. He is considered one of the most pro-Israeli senior politicians in Europe and among the most hostile to a “unilateral” declaration of Palestinian statehood.

In a letter to the UN dated September 22, Rosenthal stressed that his country opposes the admission of Palestine to the UN as an observer. Observer status gives Palestine the right to be part of the UN, albeit without the right to vote. At present the only state with UN observer status is The Vatican.

In response to last year’s bid to secure UN recognition of a Palestinian state, he had remarked that “the Dutch government doesn’t appreciate Israel-bashing, and Israel-bashing shouldn’t be acceptable to anyone.” And in answer to other EU states’ criticism of Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians, he said: “I believe that we can express our concerns and criticism more effectively by engaging in closer relations with Israel than by keeping Israel at a distance.”

Rosenthal was speaking at the annual Israeli security conference in Herzliya, where he emphasized that it was an agreed policy goal of the current Dutch coalition government that "The Netherlands will continue to strengthen the relationship with Israel."

When he appeared before the Dutch parliament before taking office last year, he declared that his priority as minister would be to bring an end to “Israel-bashing” – prompting Green-Left MP Arjan el-Fassed, who is of Palestinian origin, to remark: “That’s different from saying we will facilitate the peace process and promote human rights. No, his priority is preventing criticism of Israel.”