



*President Emmanuel Macron talks with a French naval officer in view of the Beirut skyline and the wreckage from the August 2020 explosion.
Photo: REUTERS*



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A Paris Reset on Hezbollah? Implications for French Interests and Lebanese Security

In late September 2020, Hezbollah threw a wrench into French president Emmanuel Macron's efforts to stabilize the Lebanese political system following the tragic August 4 explosion in Beirut. It did so by insisting that the party or its allies remain in control of key ministries as a condition of any future government or program of political reform.¹ Hezbollah seeks to preserve its own interests, but it is also effectively serving as the militant defender of the corruption and cronyism of the current government system. President Macron's response was uncharacteristically blunt for a French politician speaking about Hezbollah. In a public statement, Macron said, "Hezbollah cannot operate at the same time as an army against Israel, a militia unleashed against civilians in Syria and a respectable political party in Lebanon."² Within days, Israel released information about still more



Hezbollah precision-guided-missile production facilities in residential areas of Beirut, underscoring the group's use of Lebanese civilians as human shields protecting the group's military arsenal.³

Macron's new take on Hezbollah reflects a position not often articulated by French leaders: that the group should not be considered a legitimate political party in Lebanon worthy of respect so long as it also engages in acts of terrorism and militancy targeting its neighbors. The natural extension of Macron's statement is that France should support efforts to have the European Union designate Hezbollah in its entirety if the group—which its own leaders insist is a single, unitary organization⁴—continues to engage in terrorist and militant activities.

An EU designation of Hezbollah writ large would further French interests in Lebanon, the Levant more broadly, and even at home. Beyond Hezbollah's political and militant machinations in Lebanon, designating the group would help address its recent activities in France and its recruitment of French citizens as operatives to help carry out terrorist attacks abroad.

Consider, for example, that according to U.S. officials, Hezbollah has been stockpiling caches of ammonium nitrate—used to make explosives for terrorist attacks—in Europe, including in France.⁵ In September 2020, Bulgaria's Specialized Criminal Court convicted two Hezbollah operatives of conducting the July 2012 bus bombing at Burgas's Sarafovo Airport, which killed six and wounded many more.⁶ A third Hezbollah operative, French-Lebanese dual citizen Mohammad Hassan El-Husseini, died carrying out that attack.⁷ Two plots in Cyprus, in 2012 and 2015, also reveal telling touch points to France.⁸ Beyond these plots, a close look at recent Hezbollah illicit financing cases reveals a common French thread, underscoring that France's Hezbollah problem is a factor not just of events in Lebanon but at home as well.

HEZBOLLAH'S HISTORY OF ATTACKING FRENCH INTERESTS

Though the narrative is little known, Hezbollah has a long history of targeting French interests domestically and abroad. By contributing French personnel to the United Nations Multinational Force in Lebanon (MNF), which aimed to end the country's civil war, and by supporting Iraq during its war with Iran, France found itself in Hezbollah's crosshairs by the early 1980s. On August 5, 1983, operatives from Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization—the group's terrorist wing (aka External Security Organization, or ESO)—fired rocket-propelled grenades at the French embassy in Beirut.⁹ The next day, the group targeted the French ambassador's residence. Two months later, on October 23, 1983, Hezbollah suicide bombers struck the barracks of U.S. and French forces in Beirut.¹⁰ Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization claimed responsibility for the attacks, which killed 241 U.S. soldiers, 58 French soldiers, and 6 civilians.

In March 1984, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency reported that French officials expressed concern about pro-Iran militants targeting French interests in Lebanon and throughout the Middle East.¹¹ The CIA believed such concerns were warranted, citing the February 22 killing of a French soldier at a UN MNF position in Beirut. On June 6, 1984, Hezbollah snipers killed one and wounded two French truce observers.¹²

Even as Hezbollah kidnappings focused on Western nationals in Lebanon, including French citizens like Christian Joubert, Hezbollah started to expand its targeting to Europe as well.¹³ In February 1984, Hezbollah operatives participated in the Iran-led assassination of a regime critic and Paris resident, Gholam Ali Oveisi, and his brother on Paris's Rue de Passy.¹⁴ That same month, the CIA reported that Husayn al-Musawi, whose Islamic Amal group was then merging into Hezbollah, was entering into an

agreement with Venezuelan terrorist Carlos the Jackal (aka Ilich Ramirez Sanchez) to cooperate on terrorist operations in Europe, especially those targeting French interests.¹⁵ The CIA reported at the same time that multiple sources indicated pro-Iran groups intended to target U.S. or French interests in Europe.¹⁶

The years 1985–86 saw more French citizens kidnapped in Lebanon and additional attacks targeting French soldiers there, including the September 1986 assassination of French military attaché Christian Gouttière outside the French embassy annex in East Beirut.¹⁷ In June 1985, threat levels were high enough that the CIA warned of an increased likelihood of “attacks against U.S., French, or Kuwaiti interests in the near future,”¹⁸ given Hezbollah’s inability to achieve its goals through acts such as kidnapping Westerners in Lebanon. Then, Hezbollah operative Fouad Ali Salah orchestrated a series of Paris bombings that terrorized the French capital from December 1985 to September 1986.¹⁹ French authorities ultimately arrested Salah and several other members of his cell in March 1987, including Mohammad Mouhajer, a nephew of Hezbollah leader Ibrahim al-Amin.²⁰

The CIA would later assess that “Hizballah has been trying to extend its operations to Western Europe since at least January [1987], when three Hizballah terrorists, including suspected [TWA 847] hijacker Mohammad Ali Hamadi, were arrested trying to smuggle explosives through Frankfurt, West Germany and Milan, Italy.”²¹ This analysis appeared prescient when, in November 1989, Spanish authorities arrested eight men, several of whom were Hezbollah operatives, attempting to smuggle 440 pounds of plastic explosives packed into fruit jars from Lebanon into Spain. According to a French police report, the explosives were headed for France.²²

By the 1990s, this history of Hezbollah terrorist plotting against French interests at home and abroad had scarred French decisionmakers, who largely opted not to cross Hezbollah or Iran and risk terrorist

retaliation. Today, a primary concern French officials articulate about designating Hezbollah in its entirety is that the group could retaliate by striking French forces serving in the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL).²³ In fact, many countries have designated Hezbollah in full, and in no case did the group respond with retaliatory attacks. Moreover, regardless of whether France were to designate Hezbollah in full, the group already targets French soldiers attached to UNIFIL. Indeed, while France has been effectively deterred from taking action against Hezbollah, the group periodically works to undermine French interests in Lebanon. After a Hezbollah arms cache exploded in July 2009 in Khirbet Selim, in southern Lebanon, Hezbollah supporters attacked and injured French peacekeepers sent to investigate the explosion.²⁴ And in July 2011, Hezbollah detonated a roadside bomb near Saida, Lebanon, wounding six French peacekeeping troops.²⁵ Five months later, in December 2011, a bomb left in a trash bin injured five French UNIFIL peacekeepers and two passersby.²⁶ Ultimately, France decided to fold its territorial responsibility for the Blue Line central sector into a mobile quick-reaction force.²⁷

HEZBOLLAH ACTIVITIES IN FRANCE

Hezbollah activities undermine French interests not only in Lebanon but at home as well. In public remarks on September 17, 2020, the U.S. State Department coordinator for counterterrorism, Nathan Sales, revealed that according to U.S. intelligence, “since 2012, Hezbollah has established caches of ammonium nitrate throughout Europe by transporting first aid kits whose cold packs contain the substance.” Such caches, he continued, “have been moved through Belgium, to France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Switzerland,” adding that “significant ammonium nitrate caches have been discovered or destroyed in France, Greece, and Italy.” Sales concluded, “We have reason to believe that this activity is still underway,” allowing the group to conduct attacks on short

notice if instructed to do so by its leadership or that of Iran.²⁸ At the same event, Hans-Georg Engelke, state secretary at the Germany Federal Ministry of the Interior, confirmed that ammonium nitrate was seized in raids in southern Germany in advance of Germany's April 30, 2020, designation of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, adding that further details are sensitive because this was an intelligence operation.²⁹ Sales's comments echoed those of a senior White House counterterrorism official, who said in August 2020 that Hezbollah "is actively plotting and stockpiling weapons for terrorist attacks around the world, including in Europe."³⁰

French officials made no effort to deny that such activities occurred in the years following 2012, demurring only when asked whether the activities continue today. "To our knowledge," a French Foreign Ministry spokesperson said in response to Sales's remarks, "there is nothing tangible to confirm such an allegation in France today."³¹ Tangible or not, Hezbollah clearly remains active in France.

In September 2020, French authorities arrested four former directors of the Iranian-government-funded Centre Zahra France for "participation in or maintenance of a dissolved organization."³² The center had been shut down in October 2018, when French authorities arrested eleven people suspected of supporting Hezbollah and Hamas.³³ Authorities seized weapons at the organization's headquarters and at the homes of several leaders. Zahra France's funds were frozen, along with those of three other groups and four associates.

Europol, in its 2020 European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report, assessed that Hezbollah "is suspected of trafficking diamonds and drugs and of money laundering via the trade in second-hand cars. Capital is sent to Lebanon through the banking systems but also through physical transport of cash via commercial aviation."³⁴

In fact, in December 2019 the U.S. Department of

the Treasury exposed one of the most prolific financial supporters of Hezbollah's Islamic Jihad Organization, Saleh Assi, a dual French-Lebanese citizen with an address on Paris's Avenue Bosquet.³⁵ Assi arranged for funds to be sent to Hezbollah in Lebanon, specifically to operatives involved in financing the group's military and terrorist activities, through bulk cash transfers or laundered through the diamond business of another Hezbollah financier, dual Belgian-Lebanese citizen Nazem Said Ahmad.³⁶

By 2019, Assi was one of the sole remaining sources of financial support for Adham Tabaja, a Hezbollah operative who oversaw a global network of criminal enterprises and businesses fronting for the organization.³⁷ Several years earlier, in June 2015, the Treasury Department had designated Tabaja, detailing his use of business enterprises to benefit Hezbollah.³⁸ Then, in February 2016, U.S. officials revealed that Tabaja had teamed up with senior Hezbollah official Abdullah Safi al-Din to run a network "involved in international criminal activities such as drug trafficking and drug proceed money laundering."³⁹ At least some of the proceeds were "used to purchase weapons for Hezbollah for its activities in Syria."⁴⁰ Members of Tabaja's network were designated or arrested around the world, making his personal and business ties to remaining contacts like Assi all the more important to him and Hezbollah. Assi funneled tens of millions of dollars to Tabaja, the Treasury Department reported. Indeed, he collaborated with a litany of Hezbollah financial supporters and operatives in his illicit financial schemes, including Belgian nationals Nazem Ahmad, Mohammad Bazzi, and Kassem Tajideen.⁴¹

In early 2016, U.S. and European authorities determined that Hezbollah's terrorist wing, the ESO (aka Islamic Jihad Organization), runs a dedicated entity specializing in worldwide drug trafficking and money laundering.⁴² This finding was uncovered through Operation Cedar, a joint endeavor that included several U.S. law enforcement agencies working in concert with Europol, Eurojust, and authorities in France, Germany, Italy, and Belgium.⁴³

The investigation spanned seven countries and led to the arrest of “top leaders” of a Hezbollah “European cell” on charges of drug trafficking, money laundering, and procuring weapons for the group’s use in Syria.⁴⁴ The arrested leaders included Mohamad Nouredine, “a Lebanese money launderer who has worked directly with Hezbollah’s financial apparatus to transfer Hezbollah funds” through his companies while maintaining “direct ties to Hezbollah commercial and terrorist elements in both Lebanon and Iraq.”⁴⁵ The U.S. Treasury Department had already designated Nouredine and his partner, Hamdi Zaher El Dine, as Hezbollah terrorist operatives in January 2016, noting that the group needs such individuals “to launder criminal proceeds for use in terrorism and political destabilization.”⁴⁶

Specifically, on January 24–25, 2016, Nouredine and fourteen others were arrested across Europe in raids, during which authorities seized some half-million euros in cash, US\$9 million worth of watches, a luxury vehicle, and several million dollars’ worth of property.⁴⁷ As part of the scheme, which operated out of France but spanned across Europe, South America, and the Middle East, operatives dropped off cash at hairdressers in Antwerp, Belgium, a large hotel in Paris, a restaurant in nearby Montreuil, and a café in Enschede, Netherlands.⁴⁸ Originally, the plan was to announce the arrests through a joint press release including Europol and several European countries as well as the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, but senior French officials balked because Iranian president Hassan Rouhani was in Paris at the time.⁴⁹

This was no rogue operation but rather a function of Hezbollah’s “financial apparatus,” which “maintained direct ties to Hezbollah commercial and terrorist elements in both Lebanon and Iraq.”⁵⁰ A French court sentenced Nouredine to seven years in prison for “engaging in a criminal conspiracy to financially support Hezbollah, among other charges,” but another Hezbollah operative, Hassan Mansour, evaded prison with his trial pending, instead being put under house arrest. He fled the country,

presumably for Lebanon, and remains a fugitive of the French judicial system.⁵¹

For all of its success, Operation Cedar was not the first case underscoring for U.S. and French authorities the extent of Hezbollah’s money laundering, narco-trafficking, and weapons procurement efforts in Europe, including in France. In October 2015, the United States and France collaborated to arrest a Lebanese-French woman, Iman Kobeissi, in Atlanta and her associate, Joseph Asmar, in Paris on charges of conspiring to launder narcotics proceeds and trafficking in international arms on Hezbollah’s behalf.⁵² Kobeissi was arraigned on charges of conspiracy to launder funds she believed to be drug money, and for arranging for the sale of thousands of firearms, among them military assault rifles, machine guns, and sniper rifles, to criminal groups in Iran and Lebanon, including Hezbollah. Asmar was arrested in Paris the same day and charged with money laundering conspiracy. The investigation into the two Hezbollah associates effectively mapped out the extent of the group’s criminal reach into and across Europe and was based, at least in part, on meetings the two held in Paris with undercover U.S. agents.⁵³

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, “Kobeissi and Asmar explained that they could arrange for planes from South America laden with multi-ton shipments of cocaine to land safely in Africa as a transit point before the drugs were smuggled to the U.S. or Europe.”⁵⁴ In conversations recorded by law enforcement, the two discussed their money laundering network and the transportation and banking services they provided to drug traffickers, terrorist organizations, and other criminal groups in Lebanon, Iran, France, Belgium, Bulgaria, Benin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Nigeria, Cyprus, and cities across the United States.⁵⁵ The investigation caught Kobeissi and Asmar laundering drug proceeds through Europe and seeking to purchase cocaine and weapons there, specifically for “Hezbollah and other independent

criminal groups in Iran.” According to court documents, they also offered to use “Hezbollah connected associates” to provide security for narcotics shipments through Europe.⁵⁶

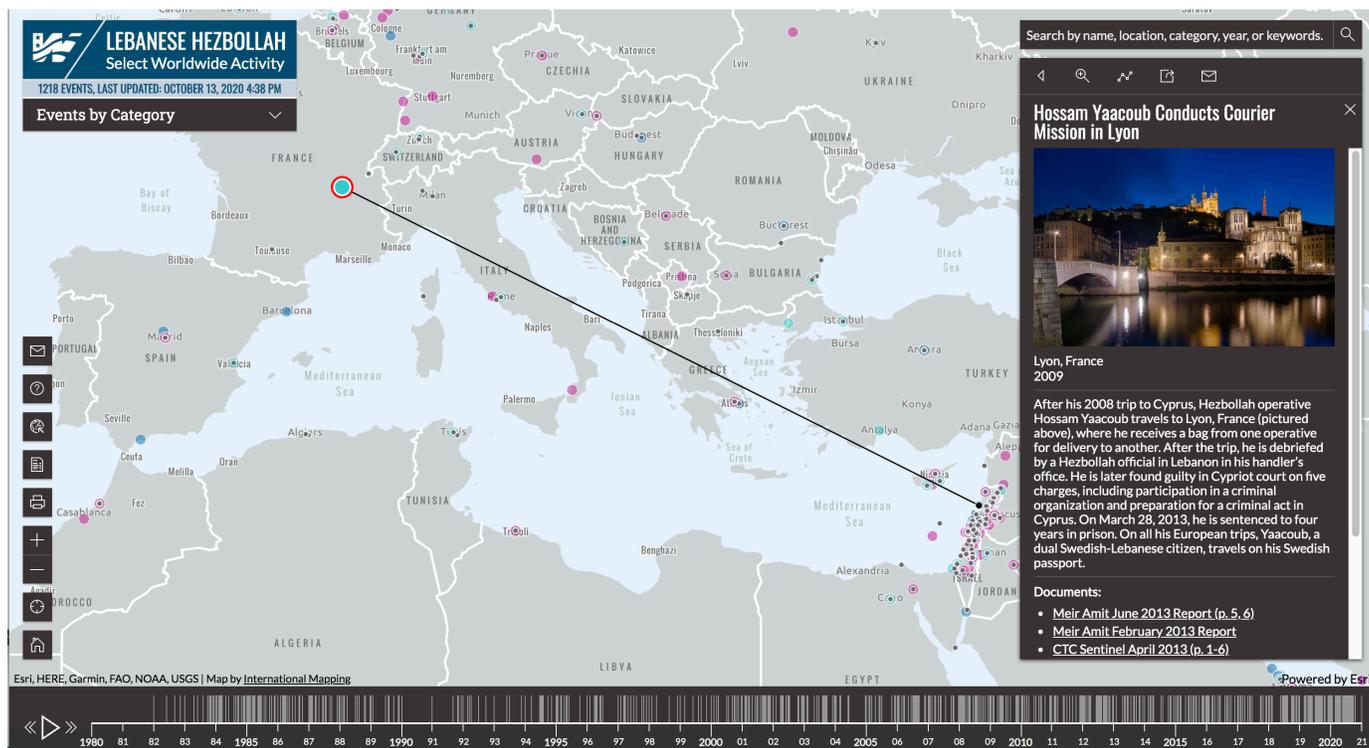
FRENCH NATIONALS' FINGERPRINTS ON WORLDWIDE PLOTS

Over the past several years, Hezbollah has dispatched operatives around the world to conduct surveillance, procure weapons or ammonium nitrate for explosives, or carry out attacks. Beyond the July 2012 bombing in Burgas, Bulgaria,⁵⁷ law enforcement and intelligence authorities have successfully thwarted a long list of Hezbollah plots and operational preparations around the world, including cases in Bolivia, Britain, Canada, Cyprus, Nigeria, Panama, Peru, Thailand, and the United States.⁵⁸ At least four of these plots involved Hezbollah operatives who were French citizens.

Looking specifically at the Cyprus example, on July 7, 2012, Cypriot police arrested a twenty-four-year-old Swedish-Lebanese dual citizen, Hossam Yaacoub, on suspicion of being a Hezbollah operative engaged in preoperational surveillance of Israeli tourists arriving in the island nation. But as part of his operational training, Yaacoub’s Hezbollah handler sent him elsewhere on courier missions for the group. In 2009, Yaacoub was dispatched to Lyon, France, to retrieve a package from one person and deliver it to another, after which he was debriefed by a Hezbollah official in Lebanon.⁵⁹

Just a few days after Yaacoub’s arrest, French Hezbollah operative Mohammad Hassan El-Husseini traveled to Bulgaria on a false French passport under the name Jacque Felipe Martin and blew up a busload of Israeli tourists at the Burgas airport.⁶⁰ Only in September 2020, when two of his fellow Hezbollah operatives were convicted in absentia by a Bulgarian court, did prosecutors reveal that El-Husseini’s father,

Screenshot from the *Lebanese Hezbollah Select Worldwide Activity* interactive map and timeline. Hossam Yaacoub, the Swiss-Lebanese citizen discussed in the entry, was accused of carrying out illegal surveillance in Cyprus.



also a French citizen, “financed the military wing of the organization.”⁶¹

Meanwhile, the Hezbollah plot in Cyprus continued even after Yaacoub’s arrest. Even as Yaacoub carried out surveillance of Israeli tourists, other Hezbollah operatives stockpiled ammonium nitrate ice packs in a safe house basement in Larnaca. In 2010, according to Cypriot authorities, Hezbollah used a French-Lebanese professor, Jalal Jomaah, then teaching in Lyon, as a cutout to purchase the single-family home in 2010 for 350,000 euros (well above the normal asking price for the neighborhood, according to investigators).⁶²

Then, in April 2014, Thai officials arrested two Hezbollah operatives, French-Lebanese dual national Daoud Farhat and Filipino-Lebanese national Yosef Ayad, for plotting an attack targeting Israeli tourists in Bangkok.⁶³

ENCOURAGING FOLLOW-THROUGH ON MACRON’S NEW RHETORIC

The French president, speaking after Hezbollah insisted that the group or its allies retain key ministries such as the Finance Ministry, asserted at a press conference that Hezbollah “must not believe that it is stronger than it is. It must show that it respects all Lebanese. These last days, it clearly demonstrated the opposite.”⁶⁴ Indeed, Hezbollah engages in any number of activities in Lebanon that prioritize its own and Iran’s interests over those of Lebanon, from building missile facilities in urban areas, to undermining the Lebanese financial system, to assassinating Lebanese politicians and law enforcement personnel not to its liking.⁶⁵

One primary reason Hezbollah engages in such brazen activity is that it believes it can get away with it. Indeed, failure to hold Hezbollah accountable for its illicit conduct has not prompted any moderation

in the group’s behavior, but rather has emboldened it to amplify its aggressiveness. That is true in Lebanon, and it is true in France. When Hezbollah engages in boundary-probing behaviors, and those behaviors are neither challenged nor disrupted, the lack of a response serves to normalize such behaviors in Hezbollah’s eyes. Given this reality, passivity does not serve French interests at home, in Lebanon, or in the wider Middle East.

Domestically, French law enforcement has been willing and able to intensify its efforts to counter Hezbollah activities, playing leading roles in joint investigations initiated by U.S. authorities such as Operation Cedar and the Kobeissi and Asmar cases. French authorities likewise engage with Europol and Interpol on Hezbollah issues as part of the Law Enforcement Coordination Group, and run their own investigations into groups like Zahra France.⁶⁶

But French law enforcement, like its sister agencies in other European Union member states that lack their own national-level designations, are constrained by the fact that the EU has designated only Hezbollah’s military wing. This has practical implications for law enforcement agencies’ ability to counter Hezbollah criminal activities. In its 2020 terrorism report, Europol explained that Hezbollah “investigations face the difficulty of demonstrating that the funds collected are channeled to the military wing of the organization.”⁶⁷ Had Hezbollah been designated in full, Hassan Mohsen Mansour—the operative arrested in France but who was released to house arrest and fled the country—likely would have remained in custody on charges of working for a terrorist organization and been unable to flee to Lebanon. One reason French law enforcement authorities have yet to bring charges against French citizens who finance Hezbollah is that money is fungible and they face an uphill battle proving funds raised in or laundered through France go specifically to the group’s militant wing.

When the EU banned the Hezbollah military wing in 2013, France was persuaded not to block the move

because of the group's military involvement in the Syrian war in defense of the Assad regime. This argument, even more than a Hezbollah bombing in one EU member state (Bulgaria) and two interrelated plots in another (Cyprus), influenced the French decision. Since then, investigators found that French Hezbollah operatives were involved in all three of those plots, among others. French citizens sit atop Hezbollah's most important illicit financial schemes, which specifically fund the group's military and terrorist activities. Hezbollah money launderers and narco-traffickers attend meetings in Paris and run their operations through France. This all means French law enforcement needs the country's political elite to take the long-overdue and much-needed action of supporting an EU-wide designation of Hezbollah in its entirety.

Hezbollah leaders themselves are vocal about the group's unitary identity, as opposed to consisting of separate wings. In the words of Hezbollah parliamentarian Mohammad Hassan Raad, "Hezbollah is a military resistance party...there is no separation between politics and resistance."⁶⁸ Perhaps to prove this point, Raad engaged in distinctly extrapolitical activities together with Hezbollah security official Wafiq Safa when the two "maintained a list of a hundred Hezbollah members who were to acquire foreign citizenship."⁶⁹ According to the U.S. Treasury Department, Raad and Safa compiled this list so that these Hezbollah members could then obtain foreign passports.⁷⁰ "With these passports," the department notes, "these individuals would be sent by Hezbollah on long-term missions to Arab and Western countries."⁷¹ In plainer terms still, a Hezbollah politician was deeply involved in a plot to groom future dual-national Hezbollah operatives. Such future operatives might eventually emulate the French-Lebanese man who killed six people in Bulgaria, or the individual who bought a safe house in Cyprus where the group stored ammonium nitrate for explosives, or the one financing Hezbollah military activities from his posh Beirut and Paris residences.

Traditionally, French officials articulate variations of three primary arguments against designating Hezbollah: fear of reprisal attacks, concern France would lose political access in Lebanon and be unable to help stabilize the country, and discomfort with designating a duly elected political party as a terrorist group.⁷² But none of these contentions holds up under close examination.

Fear of reprisal attacks. For French officials, counterterrorism is primarily viewed as a problem posed by Sunni, not Shia, extremism. Given the nature of the terrorist threats to French interests since 9/11, and especially since the rise of the Islamic State, such an assessment makes sense. But whenever talk turns to designating Hezbollah writ large, French officials invariably raise concerns that such action would lead to reprisal attacks targeting French interests. They worry a designation might goad the group into taking still more aggressive action than it has to date, possibly targeting French forces assigned to UNIFIL. In fact, as already noted, many countries have designated Hezbollah, and the group has never responded to any designation with violence. Not once. As for targeting UNIFIL, the group already does this as a means of frustrating the force's ability to inspect Hezbollah military sites—not to exact revenge.

Loss of political influence. French officials have also feared such a designation would bar French diplomats from interacting with Hezbollah officials, with Lebanese-government agencies controlled by Hezbollah, or with the group's allies. They worry designating Hezbollah in its entirety would cost France political leverage in Lebanon and undermine France's ability to help stabilize the country. Such concerns, however, are based on false assumptions. For example, a designation under the EU's Common Position 931 (CP 931) authority would in no way preclude the EU or any member state from engaging fully with all Lebanese parties.⁷³ CP 931 only authorizes asset freezing; it neither blocks contact with the group's members nor bans their travel.

(European officials sometimes confuse this with the prohibition on meeting with Hamas members, which is due to restrictions by the Quartet—the UN secretary-general, the EU, the United States, and Russia—not the EU’s CP 931 ban of Hamas.) In fact, a Hezbollah designation would help stabilize Lebanon, not destabilize it, by signaling to the group that Macron’s statement was not just words to be ignored but a line in the sand. It would signal to Hezbollah’s many opponents in Lebanon that France stood with them. And it would exact a cost from the group without going too far, compelling its members to take to the streets. The international community could then spell out what political and economic reforms would be necessary for the Lebanese government to qualify for the international aid it so desperately needs, giving Lebanese leverage to press for these urgently needed reforms.

Resistance to banning a political party. French officials express discomfort with the idea of designating a group that includes a political party whose members have been elected to parliament and hold positions in the government. This discomfort is understandable. But while Lebanese voters can elect anyone they like, the international community need not legitimize Hezbollah’s politics while the group pursues other actions that violate human rights, target civilians, and undermine regional security. Indeed, France itself, like several other EU countries, has dissolved or banned domestic political parties that engage in violence, promote discrimination, or even propagate ideas supporting such activities. In 1986, the country’s laws were expanded to allow for the dissolution of political parties that “take steps in France to perpetrate acts of terrorism in France or abroad.”⁷⁴ The decision might be harder if a meaningful distinction actually existed between Hezbollah’s military and political wings. But as Hezbollah leaders themselves make clear, this is not the case. In the words of Deputy Secretary-General Naim Qassem, “We don’t have a military wing and a political one; we don’t have Hezbollah on one hand

and the resistance party on the other. Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, [is] in the service of the resistance and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority.”⁷⁵

Because of these traditional concerns, France has long played the ostrich and pretended Hezbollah has both good and bad parts, despite the group’s protestations to the contrary. The French policy has only emboldened the group to be more aggressive in Lebanon, around the region, and in Europe, including in France specifically. Designating Hezbollah is not meant to be a punishment. Instead, it is meant to extract a cost for the group’s violent and criminal activities, with an eye toward disrupting such activities now and potentially deterring similar activities in the future.

President Macron has now laid the ground for a shift in policy, and the time is right to enact his principle that “Hezbollah cannot operate at the same time as an army against Israel, a militia unleashed against civilians in Syria and a respectable political party in Lebanon.” Hezbollah has demonstrated its ability to do these very things, without incurring any costs, for years. Designating Hezbollah as the terrorist and militant organization it represents no panacea, but it would be an important and effective first step toward changing the current dynamic.

Germany, which recently expanded its designation of Hezbollah to include the entire organization, now chairs the rotating presidency of the European Union, and appears to want to use its role to broach an EU-wide designation of the group.⁷⁶ France should support such an effort not only to address the challenges Hezbollah poses to France and French interests, but to give Lebanon leverage to address the challenges the group poses to both the safety and security of Lebanese citizens and to the political reform and economic transparency the country desperately needs. ❖

NOTES

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