

Debating the Hezbollah Problem

by [Matthew Levitt](#)

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Articles & Testimony

Many officials fear that a full ban on the group could jeopardize British relations with Beirut and undermine Lebanon's stability, but the facts show otherwise.

London has a Hezbollah problem, which will be the subject of a [backbench business committee debate](#) in the British Parliament this week. Such debate is long overdue, and the problem runs far deeper than just debate over the periodic [display](#) of Hezbollah flags at anti-Israel protests. Hezbollah actively thumbs its nose at the UK model—adopted by the European Union in 2013—of designating just certain parts of Hezbollah but not the group overall. The evidence? Hezbollah continues to engage in terrorist and criminal activities—within the UK and the EU more broadly—despite the partial ban.

The UK first designated Hezbollah's terrorist wing as a terrorist entity in [2001](#), and added the military wing in [2008](#) after Hezbollah targeted British soldiers in Iraq. The UK pressed the EU to designate Hezbollah's terrorist and military wings as terrorist entities, but opposed banning the group overall. The EU effectively adopted the UK model, adding only these wings to the EU's terrorism list under [Common Position \(CP\) 931](#) in July 2013.

But the problem with the UK model is two-fold: first, it is based on a fiction which Hezbollah itself rejects; and second, this half-measure has not stopped Hezbollah from operating on British soil or undermining British interests abroad.

The UK model is based on the premise that Hezbollah has distinct military, terrorist, and political wings. This, however, is a political distinction of convenience which Hezbollah's own leaders reject. In 2000, Hezbollah deputy

secretary-general Naim Qassem [explained](#) that "Hezbollah's secretary-general is the head of the Shura Council and also the head of the Jihad Council, and this means that we have one leadership, with one administration." Speaking in 2012, Qassem [added](#): "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."

It should therefore not surprise that the U.S. intelligence community [assesses](#) that Hezbollah is "a multifaceted, disciplined organization that combines political, social, paramilitary, and terrorist elements" and that its decisions "to resort to arms or terrorist tactics [are] carefully calibrated." Dutch intelligence came to a similar conclusion, [determining](#) that "Hezbollah's political and terrorist wings are controlled by one coordinating council."

Protestors waving Hezbollah flags on the streets of London [argue](#) they are only demonstrating support for Hezbollah's political wing, not its terrorist wing, though the group's militants and politicians all fly the same flag [featuring](#) a machine gun front and center. But Hezbollah engages in far worse behaviors than that in the UK, underscoring the ineffectiveness of banning just part of a group engaged in widespread terrorist and criminal activities.

Some of these activities touch British interests more than others, such as the case of Hussein Bassam Abdallah, who [pled guilty](#) to stockpiling precursor chemical explosives in a Hezbollah plot in Cyprus. As part of his operational cover, Hezbollah provided Abdallah a forged British identity card which he used to rent a storage facility. Authorities worry Cyprus was not the only target of that plot, but rather a "[point of export](#)" from which to funnel explosives elsewhere for a series of attacks in Europe.

The British government has long [acknowledged](#) "a small, overt Hezbollah presence in the UK" with "extensive links" to Hezbollah's Foreign Relations Department (FRD), which London has traditionally regarded as distinct from the group's terrorist wing. Alongside its clandestine foreign operatives, Hezbollah also maintains a more public international presence through the FRD, which has representatives around the world and is currently led by [Ali Damush](#), who was designated a foreign terrorist by the U.S. State Department in January 2017.

The U.S. government has [determined](#) that the FRD "engages in covert terrorist operations around the world on behalf of Hezbollah, including recruiting terrorist operatives and gathering intelligence." Tellingly, despite its operational responsibilities—which have [increased dramatically](#) over the past several years—the FRD does not report to Hezbollah's Jihad Council, as its terrorist wing does, but to Hezbollah's Political Council, further undermining the myth of distinct terrorist and political wings within the group.

Then there are the expressly criminal activities Hezbollah operatives engage in to raise funds and provide logistical support to the group—some of which occurred within the UK. In October 2015, U.S. and French authorities arrested two [Hezbollah associates](#), one in Atlanta, Georgia and another in Paris. The two were caught laundering drug proceeds and seeking to purchase cocaine and weapons 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. One of these Hezbollah associates was located in the UK and laundered 30,000 British Pounds for a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) undercover agent posing as a narcotics trafficker. The UK-based Hezbollah associate also discussed distribution of cocaine shipments with the undercover agent, and requested to purchase kilogram quantities of cocaine. (Hezbollah [denies](#) accusations of drug trafficking, but just this month French authorities [referred](#) 15 Hezbollah members to criminal court on drug dealing and money laundering charges).

Clearly, the partial UK ban of Hezbollah has not deterred the group from engaging in criminal conduct on British soil. And it certainly has not deterred the group from engaging in activities contrary to UK interests, from engaging

in criminal and terrorist activities in [Europe](#), to dispatching some [7,000 fighters](#) to prop up the Assad regime in Syria, to [smuggling](#) missile components into Yemen (some of which it then assembled and [fired](#) at Saudi Arabia on behalf of Yemeni Houthi rebels).

Without question, there is more than enough evidence to warrant an overall terrorist designation of Hezbollah, but the debate this week will likely also ask if doing so would make good policy. Would it? There are several arguments against taking such action.

For years, British and other European officials maintained that banning Hezbollah in its entirety would undermine domestic stability in Lebanon. But Lebanon is an extremely resilient country and its many moderates deserve international support in their efforts to marginalize extremist militants like Hezbollah. Moreover, Hezbollah's role in the 2005 [murder](#) of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri, its [takeover](#) of downtown Beirut by force of arms in 2008, and its involvement in the [Syrian war](#) all suggest that Hezbollah is far from a stabilizing factor within Lebanon.

European officials also worry that designating Hezbollah writ large might prompt Hezbollah to attack European interests, or lead the group to target UN peacekeeping troops in Lebanon. In fact, not only is Hezbollah already engaged in plots in Europe, it dispatches dual Lebanese-European citizens (from [Sweden](#), [France](#), etc.) to carry them out. And yet, recent actions against Hezbollah by the United States, the Arab League, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the Organization for the Islamic Conference have not led to increased Hezbollah plots against the countries involved. As for UN peacekeepers, the U.S. State Department has [documented](#) at least two instances where Hezbollah has already targeted European peacekeepers in Lebanon. Those lines have been crossed, the question now is what—if anything—will be done about it?

Perhaps the greatest sticking point has been the concern that banning Hezbollah would preclude contact with Hezbollah politicians and, by extension, the government of Lebanon. But the U.S. has been able to communicate its interests to both the government of Lebanon and even Hezbollah with no problems, despite designating all of Hezbollah as a terrorist group. In fact, the EU's [Common Position 931](#) designation authority only authorizes asset freezing—it neither precludes 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 Quartet restrictions, not the EU's CP931 ban of Hamas).

Banning only part of Hezbollah has not worked. Hezbollah called the UK and EU's bluff and has continued engaging in terrorist and criminal activities notwithstanding the ban of parts of the group. The question now is whether or not Her Majesty's Government intends to allow Hezbollah to continue to operate as easily as it does on UK soil and in direct opposition to UK interests abroad.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. His past publications include the book [Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God](#). ❖

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