Many officials fear 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 (https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBD-2018-0015), in the British Parliament this week. Such debate is long overdue, and the problem runs far deeper than just debate over the periodic display (https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/police-told-anti-balfour-marchers-display-the-hezbollah-flag-and-we-will-arrest-you-1.447433) 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.


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 (https://books.google.com/books?id=UgoxCgAAQBAJ&pg=PA14&lpg=PA14&dq=%22Hezbollah%27s+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%22&source=bl&ots=HA6B-rY72k&sig=4jYzHyC9ITx4CoTmDZTX6tmCgw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjUl52jxOTYAhVJdt8KHbTHA-4Q6AEIMDAB#v=onepage&q=%22Hezbollah%27s+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%22&f=false) 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 (https://books.google.com/books?id=UgoxCgAAQBAJ&pg=PA14&lpg=PA14&dq=%22Hezbollah%27s+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%22&source=bl&ots=HA6B-rY72k&sig=4jYzHyC9ITx4CoTmDZTX6tmCgw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjUl52jxOTYAhVJdt8KHbTHA-4Q6AEIMDAB#v=onepage&q=%22Hezbollah%27s+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%22&f=false) that “Hezbollah’s political and terrorist wings are controlled by one general—head of the Shura Council and Jihad Council—which means we have one leadership, with one administration.”

It should therefore not surprise that the U.S. intelligence community assesses (https://archive.org/stream/AnnualThreatAssessmentOfTheIntelligenceCommunityForTheSenateSelect/20090212_testimony_djvu.txt), 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 (https://fas.org/irp/world/netherlands/aivd2004-eng.pdf), that “Hezbollah’s political and terrorist wings are controlled by one coordinating council.”

Protestors waving Hezbollah flags on the streets of London argue (http://media.breitbart.com/media/2017/06/Image-uploaded-from-ios-6-1.jpg), 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 (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flag_of_Hezbollah) 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 (https://apnews.com/53676149475102f2), 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 (https://www.haaretz.com/planned-hezbollah-attacks-against-israeli-targets-in-europe-foiled-1.5367617), from which to funnel explosives elsewhere for a series of attacks in Europe. The British government has long acknowledged (http://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBD-2018-0015), that “Hezbollah’s political and terrorist wings are controlled by one coordinating council.”

By its admitted political objectives, 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.
Then there are the expressly Lebanese Hezbollah operatives engaging 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 (https://www.justice.gov/soa/edn/army/two-hezbollah-associates-arrested-charges-conspiring-launder-narcotics-proceeds-and) 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’s denial (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-hezbollah-usa-drugs/hezbollah-denies-4-x-accusations-of-drug-trafficking-idUSKB1IF21AVI) of accusations of drug trafficking, but just this month French authorities referred (https://www.sawiat.com/english/home/article/1131781/france-refers-15-%E2%80%98hezbollah%E2%80%99-members-criminal-court-drug-money-laundering) 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 Eurozone (https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/inside-hezbollah-european-plots) to dispatching some 7,000 fighters (https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2016/272238.htm) to prop up the Assad regime in Syria, to smuggling (http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/06/middleeast/saudi-foreign-minister-interview/index.html) missile components into Yemen (of some of which it then assembled and fired (http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/06/middleeast/saudi-foreign-minister-interview/index.html), 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.


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 (https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=4&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwii0Jh9vs_TAhWVwZKoHd8ADv0QFggjAA&bvm=bv.85566439,d.eWg) to prop up the Assad regime in Syria, to smuggling (https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1131781/france-refers-15-%E2%80%98hezbollah%E2%80%99-members-criminal-court-drug-money-laundering) 15 Hezbollah members to criminal court on drug dealing and money laundering charges).

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 851 (http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=LEGISSUM%3A183200) 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.

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