

# What Is Hezbollah Doing in Europe?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

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## The group remains as strong as ever on the continent.

**T**wo years ago this month, Hezbollah operatives murdered six people -- five tourists and their bus driver -- and wounded many more in a bus bombing at the airport in Burgas, Bulgaria. The incident brought global attention to the extent of the group's operations in Europe, far afield of its traditional home base of Lebanon, where it was founded with a mission to fight Israel. But today, despite a European Union ban on the group's military wing, Hezbollah is just as strong on the continent as it was two years ago.

Hezbollah's European networks are so strong, in fact, that just this month it was revealed that Hezbollah procurement agents bought parts and technologies in Europe for the surveillance drones the group deploys in Syria and Israel. And U.S. lawmakers are worried. On Tuesday, the House unanimously passed a bill that, if enacted into law, would allow the U.S. to take the unprecedented step of sanctioning European banks found to be doing business with the group.

Nor was the Burgas plot Hezbollah's only operational venture in Europe at the time. Indeed, a similar Hezbollah plot targeting Israeli tourists en route to a Bulgarian ski resort had been foiled just six months earlier. To be sure, Hezbollah had been active in Europe for decades, but evidence uncovered in the weeks leading up to the Burgas bombing indicated Hezbollah's financial, logistical, criminal, and even operational activities in Europe were on the upswing, and those activities have not diminished. How did it get to the point that the U.S. would consider sanctioning banks in Europe to combat a movement spawned in Lebanon? Last year, Bulgarian investigators lifted the veil on Hezbollah's growing operational efforts in Europe when they found the group responsible for the Burgas bombing, which killed not only Israeli tourists but a Bulgarian bus driver.

Hezbollah has long operated abroad at the behest of its sponsor and strategic partner, Iran. But the group had not carried out a terrorist operation on European soil in many years, making the Burgas attack a watershed event for European counterterrorism officials. A new twist in the case came just last week, when Bulgarian authorities revealed that one of the bombers was a dual Lebanese-French citizen. In other words, Hezbollah dispatched a

European operative to carry out an attack on European soil in which a European citizen (among others) was killed.

Hezbollah does not suddenly have Europe in the crosshairs, as it did for a period of time in the 1980s. Then, Hezbollah carried out operations in Europe primarily at the behest of Iran, for example carrying out bombings in Paris to pressure France into ending arms sales to Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. Other Hezbollah plots were aimed at securing the release of jailed comrades serving time for previous plots in Europe, such as plots in Germany aimed at freeing jailed TWA 847 hijacker Mohammad Hamadi. Today, Hezbollah operatives primarily take advantage of Europe's open societies and borders and use Europe as a preferred venue for support activities like arms procurement, logistics and fundraising.

But its decision to target Israeli civilians on European soil -- even if Europeans themselves were not the intended targets -- took things to another level. When otherwise "local" terrorist groups operate abroad, in this case in Europe, the networks they develop for logistics and fundraising can just as easily be leveraged to support terrorist operations as well.

Hezbollah has sent operatives to the continent on a regular basis -- to places like Cyprus, France, and the Netherlands -- in some cases to collect intelligence and prepare for possible operations. In other cases, Hezbollah has recruited new operatives and held operational meetings across Europe, from Denmark to Poland. What European authorities discovered two years ago is emblematic of the group's continuing reach.

For example, on July 7, 2012, just days before the Burgas bombing, Cypriot authorities raided the hotel room of Hossam Taleb Yaacoub, a 24-year-old Lebanese-Swedish dual national. Yaacoub -- a European citizen traveling on a European passport -- later testified to being a paid and "active member of Hezbollah" sent to Cyprus to conduct surveillance. He claimed he did not know what his reconnaissance was for, but knew "something weird was going on" and speculated it was "probably to bring down a plane, but I don't know, I just make assumptions." Later, he put it to police differently: "It was just collecting information about the Jews, and that is what my organization is doing everywhere in the world," he said, according to the Cypriot police transcript of his deposition. In the course of the investigation, police determined that before sending Yaacoub on his mission to Cyprus, Hezbollah first used him as a courier -- a role facilitated by his European passport -- dispatching him to deliver packages to operatives in places like Amsterdam and Lyon, France. Yaacoub was convicted in March 2013 on multiple charges, including participation in a criminal organization and in the preparation of a criminal act, and sentenced to four years in prison.

By that time, the U.S. had already taken an interest in Hezbollah's European operations. From 2007 to 2009, the FBI conducted a series of major investigations into the extent of Hezbollah activities in the Philadelphia area, which ultimately took them far and wide, from Venezuela to Slovakia and beyond. The subjects of the FBI investigation were leveraging Hezbollah's global illicit networks -- including some in Europe -- to procure weapons, raise funds, and launder money for the group's activities back in Lebanon. In one case, Hezbollah operative Hassan Karaki was indicted for directing a broad criminal conspiracy to sell counterfeit and stolen currency -- including counterfeit American \$100 bills and European €200 notes as well as stolen Swedish Krona -- to an undercover FBI informant posing as a member of the Philadelphia criminal underworld. In a parallel plot the FBI says was overseen by Hezbollah politician Hassan Hodroj, Hezbollah sought to procure a long list of sophisticated weapons in a black market scheme involving Hezbollah operatives across the globe, including Europe.

In another case in 2006, an undercover FBI officer posed as someone who could sell stolen goods on behalf of a group of suspected Lebanese criminals. Members of the group bought what they believed to be stolen property from the undercover agent and unloaded the merchandise through Hezbollah black market networks around the world, including European destinations in Slovakia and Belgium. Danni Tarraf, a German-Lebanese procurement agent for Hezbollah with homes in Lebanon and Slovakia and significant business interests in China and Lebanon, was

charged with providing the money for these purchases. Tarraf wasted little time before asking whether the undercover agent could supply guided missiles and 10,000 "commando" machine guns from the United States. Law enforcement officers concluded that Tarraf's Slovakian import-export company, Power Express, essentially "operated as a subsidiary of Hezbollah's technical procurement wing." Tarraf was arrested on terrorism and other charges in November 2009 and quickly confessed in full, admitting to being a Hezbollah member, receiving military training from the group, and "working with others to acquire massive quantities of weapons for the benefit of Hezbollah."

The EU banned Hezbollah's military wing last summer -- an action allowing for the seizure of its finances in Europe but one which does not preclude contact with the group's members nor ban the travel of Hezbollah officials in Europe. In the period since, there have been small successes. For example, four months after the EU issued the ban, two Lebanese passengers at a Brussels airport were caught with nearly 770,000 euros in their possession. At least some of this cash was suspected to be intended for Hezbollah's coffers, Europol reported. A few months later, Germany raided the offices of the Orphan Children Project Lebanon in Essen, accusing the group of serving as a Hezbollah fundraising front organization. These exceptional cases, however, prove the rule: Europe has not actually used the legal authority of the Hezbollah ban to go after the group in a meaningful way. And in the absence of such action, Hezbollah will only further entrench itself in Europe.

So it was no surprise that earlier this month the U.S. Treasury Department revealed that Hezbollah continues to procure weapons and technologies from Europe, among other places. Treasury blacklisted a Lebanese consumer electronics business, Stars Group Holding, along with its owners, subsidiaries, and "certain managers and individuals who support their illicit activities." Together, they functioned as a "key Hezbollah procurement network" which purchased technology around the world -- including in Europe -- to develop the drones Hezbollah deploys over Israel and Syria both.

In a nod toward allies in Europe and beyond, Treasury Undersecretary David Cohen said this latest case underscored that "it is critical that countries throughout the world work together to combat this dangerous organization and sever it from sources of revenue and support." Hopefully, these cases will serve as a wake-up call and facilitate such cooperation.

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