

Why Europe Should Ban Hezbollah

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Recent cases, including the July 2012 bus bombing in Burgas, Bulgaria, have forced reluctant European leaders to seriously debate the issue of banning Hezbollah.

According to Bulgarian investigators, Hezbollah was responsible for the July 2012 bus bombing that left five Israelis and a Bulgarian dead at Burgas airport. Two of the Hezbollah operatives were Western citizens -- a Canadian and an Australian -- who returned to Lebanon via Romania and Poland; a third died in the attack. Meanwhile, a confessed Swedish Hezbollah operative is now on trial in Cyprus. According to his statements to police, he surveilled Israeli tourists arriving on the island. At one point he speculated his role was in support of a plot to "bring down a plane." Later, he insisted "it was just collecting information about the Jews, and this is what my organization is doing everywhere in the world." Prior to being dispatched to Cyprus, Hezbollah used this operative as a courier sending and retrieving packages to or from Hezbollah operatives in places like Turkey, the Netherlands, and France.

These cases, among others, have forced reluctant European leaders to seriously debate the issue of banning Hezbollah. To be sure, Hezbollah has firmly reinstated itself in the business of European terrorism in a manner not witnessed since the 1980s, when it carried out attacks from Copenhagen to Paris. In addition to the Burgas and Cyprus plots, Hezbollah has conducted surveillance and planned operations in Greece and other European countries. The reemergence of such activity is cause for immediate concern among European law enforcement and intelligence agencies. But that is not all.

Hezbollah is also deeply involved in a wide array of criminal activities on the continent. Its role in drug trafficking and money laundering is on the rise, as documented in recent cases against the Lebanese Canadian Bank, Lebanese drug kingpin Ayman Joumaa, and others. According to Interpol, authorities have "dismantled cocaine-trafficking rings that used their proceeds to finance [Hezbollah] activities...while drugs destined for European markets are

increasingly being channeled through West African countries." The group also uses Europe as a base for fundraising and weapons procurement. Consider German national Dani Tarraf, who sought M4 rifles, missiles, and other weapons for Hezbollah, with the intention of shipping them to Latakia, Syria, via his company in Slovakia. He was very clear about why he wanted guided and shoulder-fired missiles: to "take down an F-16." According to the FBI, Tarraf's company, Power Express, essentially "operated as a subsidiary of Hezbollah's technical procurement wing." Other recent U.S. cases highlighted the extent to which Hezbollah is involved in counterfeiting European and other currencies, including Euros, Swedish Kroner, and more.

But the EU should also ban Hezbollah for its proactive efforts to undermine regional stability in the Middle East. Hezbollah is helping Iran ferry weapons to Houthi rebels in Yemen; it supports Shia militant groups tied to Iran throughout the Gulf region; and in Syria, U.S. officials concluded, Hezbollah fighters are now "part of Assad's killing machine."

Finally, Hezbollah plays a terribly destabilizing role at home in Lebanon. In July 2006, Hezbollah drew Israel and Lebanon into a war neither country wanted. In 2008, it took over parts of Beirut by force, leading to the deaths of several fellow countrymen. Its activities in Syria have drawn that sectarian conflict across the border into Lebanon. And Hezbollah members have been indicted for the assassination of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri by the UN's Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

In short, an EU designation is critical, not only to send Hezbollah a clear message that it can no longer muddy the waters between politics and terrorism, but also because it would empower EU member states to open terrorism-specific investigations into the group's activities -- something many cannot or will not do today despite the resumption of attacks in Europe. The EU must show Hezbollah that there are consequences for its illicit conduct. Inaction or half-measures would only embolden the group to continue operating there as if it were business as usual.

Matthew Levitt is director of The Washington Institute's Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence and author of the forthcoming book Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God. ❖

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