

Europe's Hezbollah Problem (Part 2)

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Brief Analysis

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How is Europe dealing with the resurgence of Iranian state-sponsored and Hezbollah terrorist activity?

On February 8, 2013, Matthew Levitt, Daniel Benjamin, and Karen Betts addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Dr. Levitt's remarks; the other speakers' observations were published as [PolicyWatch 2037 \(/node/5418\)](/node/5418).

Although the February 2008 assassination of Hezbollah operations chief Imad Mughniyah spurred an uptick in the group's terrorist operations against Israeli interests, Iran's decision to aggressively target Western interests beginning in early 2010 was even more impactful. Tehran's shadow war with the West led to a string of plots and attacks against U.S., British, Saudi, and Israeli interests worldwide, conducted by operatives from Hezbollah and the Qods Force branch of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps ([read a recent Institute report on the reasons behind this shadow war \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hizballah-and-the-gods-force-in-irans-shadow-war-with-the-west\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/hizballah-and-the-gods-force-in-irans-shadow-war-with-the-west)). A number of these plots unfolded on European soil, yet EU officials remained hesitant to officially designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Last week, however, an extensive Bulgarian investigation concluded that the group was responsible for the July 2012 Burgas bus bombing. The new finding marks an important first step toward an EU designation of Hezbollah, and more evidence of the group's activity in Europe is still emerging. Just a week before the Burgas attack, authorities in Cyprus arrested a suspected Hezbollah operative -- this one a European citizen -- on charges of conducting surveillance for a similar operation against Israeli tourists boarding airport buses. That trial is due to conclude in the next couple weeks and will likely reveal a good deal more information on the group. The investigators have already contended that the

accused was a Hezbollah courier who delivered packages to operatives around the world before he was sent to Cyprus to conduct surveillance. At least some of those deliveries were reportedly to European operatives, including in France and the Netherlands.

Regardless of that case's outcome, the reasons for Europe to designate Hezbollah are well established:

1. Terrorism at home. 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.

2. Criminal activity. 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, readily obtaining vast amounts of money through charity-like methods while using front companies to secure arms for its militants. In one case, German Lebanese dual national Dani Tarraf attempted to procure M4 rifles, antiaircraft/antitank 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."

In addition, recent U.S. cases have revealed the extent to which Hezbollah is involved in counterfeiting European and other currencies, including euros. For example, one Hezbollah operative explained to an FBI source that the group operates high-quality printing presses eighteen to twenty hours per day to produce counterfeit U.S. dollars and Kuwaiti, Saudi, and European money. The operative also bragged that he belonged to what he called "terrorism Hezbollah," which he said was active "all over the world." Other operatives have told the FBI that the group ran a longstanding worldwide robbery campaign to fund terrorist operations; in one heist, Hezbollah supporters reportedly stole \$2 million from a bank in Sweden.

3. Undermining regional security. The EU has immediate interests in Middle Eastern stability, and few actors are as proactively involved in undermining regional security as Hezbollah. In August 2012, the U.S. Treasury Department once again blacklisted the group for providing "training, advice, and extensive logistical support" to the Syrian regime's increasingly ruthless efforts against the opposition. A month later, the department sanctioned Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah and two key leaders, Mustafa Badr al-Din and Talal Hamiyah, for the same reason. As U.S. officials told the UN Security Council in October, "The truth is plain to see: Nasrallah's fighters are now part of Assad's killing machine."

4. Destabilizing Lebanon. Although several European countries are concerned that designating Hezbollah could spur instability in Lebanon, the fact is that the group itself has already done more to destabilize the country than anyone else. 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 implicated in the assassinations of Internal Security Forces investigations chief Wissam al-Hassan and former prime minister Rafiq Hariri, with the latter resulting in indictments by the UN's Special Tribunal for Lebanon.

The fact that Nasrallah is personally directing Hezbollah's activities in Syria also underscores the need to avoid

making false distinctions between Hezbollah's political and military "wings." Although it may seem pragmatic for the EU to designate the group's military and terrorist organs while sparing its political wing, such an approach would severely limit Europe's ability to prevent operatives from traveling and fundraising throughout the continent. Selective designation could also have the unintended consequence of lending the group undeserved legitimacy. Some European countries have even proposed designating only specific Hezbollah operatives, but that approach would be even more ineffectual ([read more on the "wings" issue \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/on-a-military-wing-and-a-prayer\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/on-a-military-wing-and-a-prayer)).

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 Bulgarian announcement was just the first shoe to fall; next comes the Cyprus verdict. The EU must show Hezbollah that there are consequences for executing terrorist operations, raising funds, procuring arms, and recruiting operatives on European soil. Inaction or half-measures would only embolden the group to continue operating there as if it were business as usual.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Guive Rosen. ❖

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