

# Europe's Hezbollah Problem (Part 1)

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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, Daniel Benjamin, Karen Betts, and Matthew Levitt addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Mr. Benjamin is the State Department's former ambassador-at-large and coordinator for counterterrorism. Ms. Betts is a political counselor and representative for the Joint Intelligence Committee at the British embassy in Washington. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks; [read Dr. Levitt's observations \(/node/5417\)](/node/5417).*

### DANIEL BENJAMIN

**T**here is a common perception that the U.S. antiterrorism campaign deals exclusively with al-Qaeda. In reality, the recent resurgence of Iranian state-sponsored terrorism and global Hezbollah activities has become a prominent issue on the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

Last year, authorities foiled a Hezbollah plot targeting Israeli tourists in Thailand. Further investigation led them to a warehouse filled with thousands of kilograms of explosives and bombmaking materials, proving that the group was focused not on isolated attacks, but on preparing for a terrorism campaign. Additional activities have been reported in Azerbaijan and Kenya, among other places.

The group has also been implicated in a July 2012 bombing at Bulgaria's Burgas Airport that killed several Israelis and a Bulgarian. Last week, after completing an extremely thorough investigation, the country's Interior Ministry attributed responsibility to Hezbollah. This finding took a great deal of political courage -- the Bulgarian government knew there were risks associated with such a declaration, but it chose to place greater priority on its duty to combat terrorism.

One driving force behind Hezbollah's increased activity -- which has risen to a level unmatched since the 1990s --

may be a desire to show the potential consequences if the West continues to confront Iran over its nuclear program. The group likely also hopes to avenge the deaths of longtime operations chief Imad Mughniyah and several Iranian nuclear scientists. Hezbollah already believes itself to be in a conflict with the West, and it now wants to demonstrate how much worse the situation could become if tensions continue to build.

The United States has long called on Europe to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist organization. Such a move would have significant implications beyond its symbolic value: it would criminalize fundraising and logistical operations and help delegitimize the group as a political actor. Even Hezbollah's leaders have publicly acknowledged the damage a designation would do to the organization. Hopefully, the Bulgarian statement will be a turning point in the long-stalled debates regarding Hezbollah's presence in Europe. The fact of a terrorist attack on European soil will make the matter difficult for EU policymakers to ignore.

Europe's opposition to a designation has been partly attributed to fears of retribution (e.g., the UN Interim Force in Lebanon has been targeted in the past). Even more important, European policymakers have confirmed their interest in maintaining influence in Lebanon, and they frequently point to the country's stability as a major concern. This is not a trivial fear given Lebanon's history, especially the enormous toll in human lives exacted during the civil war.

Despite these legitimate concerns, however, European reasoning on this issue may be faulty. Western pressure on Hezbollah in recent years has not stoked instability in Lebanon -- for example, witness the group's relatively muted reaction to the news that its operatives were being indicted for the murder of former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. Furthermore, Hezbollah itself is a significant contributor to domestic turbulence, as seen in the Hariri assassination, the toppling of the government through armed action, and the apparent killing of Lebanon's intelligence chief just last year.

Going forward, Europe needs to ask whether Hezbollah has any interest in actively destabilizing Lebanon. Despite its violent actions at home, the group seems keen to protect what is left of its image as a champion of Lebanese interests and a national force that promotes a strong Lebanon. It is therefore unlikely to take steps that gravely threaten that goal. Although designating Hezbollah could conceivably spark a reprisal against UNIFIL troops, the probability of a new civil war is very low.

Finally, the story of Hezbollah's terrorist activities in Europe does not end in Bulgaria. In Cyprus, for example, a trial is underway involving a suspect apprehended in July 2012 who confessed to surveilling Israeli tourists as potential targets. A thorough prosecution and conviction would do much to fulfill the requirement of some European states for evidence against Hezbollah that can withstand judicial scrutiny. Such evidence would be difficult for policymakers to ignore.

Whatever the case, Europe will be deliberating intensively on the designation issue in the near future. A number of countries have stated that they would shift their policy if Bulgaria publicly attributed the Burgas bombing to Hezbollah operatives -- time will tell if this is still the case.

## **KAREN BETTS**

**H**ezbollah is a regional problem and, most likely, a growing problem globally. The Bulgarian investigation revealed that the group is also a European problem. Bulgaria's interior minister accused two members of Hezbollah's military wing of being involved in the appalling attack in July that killed five Israelis and a Bulgarian bus driver while injuring thirty other people. The United Kingdom believes the right response is for the EU to designate Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist organization. The UK has no doubts about Hezbollah's involvement in terrorism -- it designated the group's External Security Organization in 2001, then extended the designation in 2008 to include Hezbollah's entire military wing.

An EU designation would not destabilize Lebanon, nor would it affect the legitimate role that Hezbollah's political

wing plays in Lebanon's politics. Rather, a designation carried out via the EU's terrorist asset freezing program would have a number of positive effects: in addition to sending a clear message that the EU will not tolerate acts of terror on European soil, it would reduce support for Hezbollah's activities, put pressure on the group to move away from violence as a means of achieving its objectives, and limit its ability to raise and move funds, making the group less agile in terms of operating in Europe. A designation would have symbolic effects as well, damaging Hezbollah's profile and reducing its legitimacy.

The UK makes a distinction between Hezbollah's military and political wings based on its experience in dealing with terrorism, most notably in Northern Ireland. The UK's view is that even in the best of circumstances, terrorist problems can be resolved only by long and persistent pressure (e.g., defensive security, policing, intelligence-led operations, financial pressure, sanctions) together with political measures. It is important to leave space for the political talks necessary to achieve a sustainable solution; the UK hopes that Hezbollah will one day seek to achieve its aims solely through politics. The UK recognizes that Hezbollah is an influential political force in Lebanon and enjoys strong support from the Lebanese Shiite community. The group is part of Lebanon's government and could one day be a force for stability in the country.

Finally, the UK has been impressed by the Bulgarian government's painstaking investigation into the Burgas attack and believes that sufficient evidence has been revealed for the EU to designate Hezbollah's military wing. The UK also recognizes that the EU has a different legislative basis for sanctions than the United States, and that EU sanctions could be challenged in court.

*This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Jonathan Prohov and Melissa Trebil. ❖*

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