

Hezbollah: Narco-Islamism

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Articles & Testimony

Earlier this month, the United Kingdom announced that it is reopening dialogue with the political wing of Hezbollah. Unlike the United States, the United Kingdom has only banned Hezbollah's terrorist (External Security Organization) and military wings. The ban on the terrorist wing came in 2000, while the ban on the military wing only came in June 2008 in response to Hezbollah's "providing active support to militants in Iraq who are responsible for attacks both on coalition forces and on Iraqi civilians, including providing training in the use of deadly roadside bombs," for plots to kidnap British security workers in Iraq, and for its support for terrorist activity in the Palestinian Territories.

Meanwhile, the European Union has not yet designated any part of Hezbollah -- military, political or otherwise -- although it did label Imad Mughniyeh, the late Hezbollah chief of external operations, and several other Hezbollah members involved in specific acts of terrorism.

But despite the differences between U.S. and European perceptions of and policies toward Hezbollah, there is one critical area where all parties' mutual interests converge, namely law enforcement. Regardless of divergent political considerations or definitions of terrorism, combating crime and enforcing sovereign laws are straightforward issues. More than any other Islamist group, Hezbollah has a long record of engaging in criminal activity to support its activities. The United States and its European counterparts have a particularly strong shared interest in combating the group's increasing role in illicit drug trafficking.

Just this past week Admiral James G. Stavridis, the Commander of U.S. Southern Command who has now been nominated to head NATO troops as Supreme Allied Commander Europe, testified before the House Armed Services Committee about the threat to the United States from the nexus between illicit drug trafficking -- "including routes, profits, and corruptive influence" -- and "Islamic radical terrorism." While Hezbollah is involved in a wide variety of criminal activity, ranging from cigarette smuggling to selling counterfeit products, the connection between drugs and terror is particularly strong. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), 19 of the 43 U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist Organizations are definitely linked to the global drug trade, and up to 60 percent of terror organizations are suspected of having some ties with the illegal narcotics trade.

Hezbollah is no exception to this statistic, and in recent years has augmented its role in the production and trafficking of narcotics. Hezbollah has utilized the vast Lebanese Shi'a expatriate population, mainly located in South America and Africa, to its advantage. According to Michael Braun, former assistant administrator and chief of operations at the DEA, "Both Hamas and Hezbollah are active in this [Tri-Border] region [see map at right], where it is possible to make a profit of \$1 million from the sale of fourteen or fifteen kilos of drugs, an amount that could be transported in a single suitcase."

For example, Admiral Stavridis's testified that in August 2008, the U.S. Southern Command and the DEA, in coordination with host nations, targeted a Hezbollah drug trafficking ring in the Tri-Border region of Argentina,

Brazil and Paraguay. In August 2008, the United States, in cooperation with Colombian investigators, identified and dismantled an international cocaine smuggling and money laundering ring based out of Colombia. This operation, which was made up of a Colombian drug cartel and Lebanese members of Hezbollah, used portions of its profits -- allegedly hundreds of millions of dollars per year -- to finance Hezbollah.

Such revelations should not surprise. Back in December 2006 the U.S. Treasury listed Sobhi Fayad as a Specially Designated Terrorist. Why? Because, Treasury informed, "Fayad has been a senior TBA [Tri-Border Area] Hezbollah official who served as a liaison between the Iranian embassy and the Hezbollah community in the TBA. He has also been a professional Hezbollah operative who has traveled to Lebanon and Iran to meet with Hezbollah leaders. Fayad received military training in Lebanon and Iran and was involved in illicit activities involving drugs and counterfeit U.S. dollars."

Africa is additionally becoming an area of concern regarding terrorist groups engaged in drug trafficking. According to Admiral Stavridis, drug traffickers have expanded their presence in West Africa as a "springboard to Europe." Hezbollah has long maintained a strong presence in Africa, and has utilized Africa as a strategic point to from which to raise and transfer funds and to engage in criminal enterprises, such as diamond smuggling.

The nexus between drug trafficking and terrorist activities -- specifically those of Hezbollah -- represent an immediate law enforcement challenge for the United States and its European allies. While the Europeans may not view Hezbollah as a terrorist organization, they are certainly eager to prevent Hezbollah from running criminal enterprises within their borders. Countries are particularly determined to prevent the importation of illegal narcotics across their borders, whether by organized criminal networks, terrorists groups, or the hybrid narco-terrorist networks that DEA officials describe as "meaner and uglier than anything law enforcement or militaries have ever faced."

So while there is no common understanding between the United States and the United Kingdom on whether or how to engage Hezbollah or even how to classify Hezbollah and its various component parts, there is no "gray area" as to whether drug trafficking is illegal. The United Kingdom and other European nations are no less eager than the United States to combat the flow of drugs into their countries and to prevent Hezbollah from operating criminal enterprises within their territory.

The British decision to openly engage Hezbollah politically is misinformed, to be sure. But do not be surprised if the Brits talk to Hezbollah "political" leaders on the one hand while arresting some of their cohorts involved in illicit narcotics on the other. Officials may openly describe these actions as targeting criminals, not Hezbollah, but the effect will be much the same.

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