

# Hizballah and Iran in the Age of Engagement

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## Brief Analysis

In early March, the British government reestablished contact with Hizballah, reversing a ban that had been in effect since 2005. The move comes less than a year after Britain decided to actually tighten the ban on Hizballah and outlaw its military wing. The decision not only highlights the lack of a coordinated EU policy regarding the Shiite movement, but also complicates EU and U.S. efforts to formulate a coherent and unified policy toward Lebanon and Iran.

## Background

Britain's new policy position toward Hizballah, which will certainly be mimicked by EU members that do not already have dealings with the Lebanese movement, was justified by Foreign Office Minister Bill Rammell, who stated that "We have reconsidered the position . . . in light of more positive developments in Lebanon." One of the "positive developments" was the establishment of the new Lebanese unity government last July, which reinstated Hizballah ministers and ensured that it would hold an effective veto over government decisions.

Although the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office clarified that it was only exploring contacts with Hizballah's political, not military, wing, the organization itself makes no such distinction. Hizballah welcomed Britain's policy shift, with the organization's spokesman Ibrahim al-Moussawi stating, "This policy revision is a step in the right direction and we shall see how it translates in practical terms."

## Lebanon, Hizballah, and the EU

Differences between the United States and the EU are easily visible in the conduct of certain European countries, such as France and Italy, with Hizballah and Lebanon. Traditionally, countries like France have pursued their own foreign policy toward Lebanon without necessarily coordinating with the rest of the EU. Both France and Italy have provided soldiers to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), but are sensitive to initiatives that could endanger their troops. At present, there is a "gentlemen's agreement" between UNIFIL and Hizballah's militia south of the Litani River, whereby UNIFIL does not aggressively look for weapons inside villages and towns, and Hizballah refrains from carrying or displaying weapons openly. This arrangement is in direct conflict with UN Security Council Resolution 1701, which states that no forces other than UNIFIL and the Lebanese Armed Forces can have weapons in the area. In addition, Hizballah has not only replenished its stocks since its 2006 war with Israel, it has also rebuilt

defensive positions throughout the south.

Although it has not conducted terrorist attacks in Europe for many years, Hizballah is still active there, mainly engaged in financial, logistical, and recruiting operations, as well as political activities aimed at legitimizing the movement in the eyes of the Western audience. A recently released German intelligence assessment estimated that 900 Hizballah members (an increase of 100 from previous reports) live in Germany alone. Hizballah has also used Europe as a launching pad to send operatives into Israel to conduct surveillance and attacks.

#### EU's Hopes for Obama

EU policy toward Hizballah has been the topic of debate for some time. The U.S. decision to designate Hizballah as a terrorist organization was never affirmed by the EU, nor was it adopted by any major EU country. On the contrary, a common denominator of EU policy toward Hizballah (and its relations with Lebanon) has been to prefer engagement to confrontation, using the rationale that engagement offers a chance to influence the movement's policy and conduct. Not only has this approach failed to achieve any real results, the organization has actually rearmed and strengthened its position in Lebanon during talks with the EU.

The EU is optimistic about the Obama administration's new policy of engagement in the Middle East. Brussels hopes that Washington will be more inclined to listen to the EU when it comes to devising new policy initiatives toward the Middle East, presumably involving less pressure and more engagement with troublesome regimes such as Tehran.

#### EU's Iran Policy

To complicate matters, Britain's policy shift comes amid ongoing tensions between Iran -- Hizballah's main backer -- and the West on a number of issues, primarily Iran's nuclear program. As for relations with Iran, the so-called EU troika (UK, France, and Germany) has continued to press the Islamic Republic to change its nuclear policy with a combination of economic incentives and sanctions. (It should be noted that past EU sanctions on Iran were in response to proliferation and that the European body has been unwilling to impose sanctions on Iran for supporting terrorism and terrorist organizations.)

After several years of pursuing this policy of inducement, however, the EU cannot point to any breakthroughs with Iran on the nuclear front. Furthermore, the British change of policy to "explore" contacts with Hizballah is clearly intended to prepare for Hizballah's possible electoral victory in June. If Hizballah wins, or gets enough votes to be Lebanon's new kingmaker, Britain (and likely the EU) hopes to be in a privileged position with the government in Beirut. Since Iran and Syria are aware of the lack of U.S.-EU policy coordination toward Hizballah, any disagreements on Hizballah and Lebanon will certainly be exploited by Tehran and Damascus.

#### Conclusion

The U.S. administration's commitment to new Middle East initiatives and the EU's eagerness to cooperate with Washington could pave the way for real change in the region. But for that to happen, it is paramount that Brussels and Washington be on the same page. At present, U.S. and EU policies toward Hizballah are not in sync, making any new initiative from the West for post-election Lebanon difficult to implement and unlikely to succeed. Moreover, Britain's public decision to reestablish relations with Hizballah despite its repeated violations of European and international law could seriously undermine joint U.S.-EU initiatives toward Hizballah and Lebanon in the future. As such, coordination should be a key priority for both the EU and the United States.

Britain's recent move on Hizballah could also be interpreted by European and U.S. allies in the Middle East as an attempt to curry favor with Iran. To remove that doubt and ensure effective U.S.-EU initiatives toward Iran, the Obama administration must publicly convey its goal: to alter Iran's present drive toward achieving nuclear weapons capability, preferably through forceful sanctions and real incentives. The EU will have to look inward and decide how

far it is prepared to go in pursuit of such policies.

Magnus Norell, a Fulbright scholar, is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, where his research focuses on the 2006 conflict between Israel and Hizballah. ❖

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