

Prized Fighter:

How Nicolas Sarkozy Could Help Destroy Hezbollah

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Articles & Testimony

The United States and Europe have long disagreed on how to categorize Hezbollah. While the U.S. government designated Hezbollah as a terrorist organization a decade ago, the European Union has not. Doing so would require the consensus of all 27 member states, and several countries have been opposed, including Spain, Belgium, and, in particular, France. The French have cited a number of reasons for their resistance, including Hezbollah's role as a political party in Lebanon and the fear of upsetting Lebanon's tenuous domestic political balance. In the words of a former French foreign minister, "Hezbollah has a parliamentary and political dimension in Lebanon. They have members of parliament who are participating in parliamentary life. Political life in Lebanon is difficult and fragile."

But pressure has been building for the EU to add Hezbollah to its terrorist list. Senior Bush administration officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, have raised the issue with the EU and key member states, and the House of Representatives passed a resolution in March 2005 urging the EU to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist group. Several days prior, the EU Parliament passed a non-binding resolution noting that "clear evidence exists of terrorist activities by Hizbollah. The [EU] should take all necessary steps to curtail them." Now, the election of Nicolas Sarkozy as France's new president may represent the best chance yet for Europe to reconsider its position.

Sarkozy appears to see Hezbollah in a different light than his predecessor, Jacques Chirac. In a September 2006 closed-door session with Jewish leaders in the United States, for example, Sarkozy reportedly referred to Hezbollah as a "terrorist organization"--a sentiment unlikely to be stated by Chirac. During last summer's war between Hezbollah and Israel, Sarkozy defended Israel's right to defend itself against an organization he described as the "one aggressor" in the conflict. He also stated that France should have committed troops to Lebanon more quickly during the war.

During the presidential campaign, Sarkozy also expressed concern about Iran's close ties to Hezbollah, saying that "there are more than suspicions about the links between Hezbollah and Iran," and he emphasized that he would support aggressive sanctions against Tehran should he win. His new prime minister, Francois Fillon, also criticized Socialist candidate Segolene Royal during the campaign for meeting with a Hezbollah representative and failing to condemn his criticism of the United States and Israel. "Accepting to speak with a member of Hezbollah, which advocates the destruction of Israel, was already a mistake," Fillon said. "Letting him insult France's allies--whether they are the United States or Israel--without reacting, is another serious mistake."

More broadly, Sarkozy's record to date also indicates a willingness to take aggressive and at times controversial counterterrorism positions. In 2005, while serving as France's interior minister, Sarkozy successfully pushed through tough new counterterrorism laws, increasing the government's access to private sector information, imposing longer prison sentences for those convicted of terrorism offenses, and extending the length of time suspects can be held without charge. That same year, Sarkozy also deported twelve Islamic extremist imams from the country, insisting that France has to "act against radical preachers." Finally, Sarkozy ran for president on a pro-U.S. platform and might be more responsive to U.S. prodding on this issue than Chirac was.

Designating Hezbollah as a terrorist organization is important because, while Hezbollah has not conducted terrorist attacks in Europe for many years, it is still active in the region, using Europe primarily as a fund-raising and recruiting ground. An annual German intelligence assessment estimates that 900 Lebanese Hezbollah members live in that country alone. Hezbollah has also used Europe as a launching pad from which to infiltrate operatives into Israel to conduct surveillance and carry out attacks.

A ban would significantly constrain Hezbollah's European activities, especially its ability to raise funds there. Once designated, all EU member states would be required to freeze any Hezbollah-controlled assets within their jurisdiction. Hezbollah related financial transactions would be prohibited as well. It's no surprise, then, that Hezbollah itself fears such an EU designation. According to Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, this action would "destroy" the organization as "[t]he sources of our funding will dry up and the sources of moral, political and material support will be destroyed."

Even with French support, however, a European designation of Hezbollah is by no means guaranteed. A complicating factor is the presence of European military forces in Southern Lebanon as part of the U.N. Interim Force in Lebanon, which is charged with monitoring the cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah in the wake of last summer's war. France, Spain, Belgium, and other European nations which have deployed troops might be concerned that a designation could destabilize the country further, putting their own military forces at increased risk.

Since other EU member states have followed France's lead on the issue of Hezbollah's status to this point, however, it's possible they may continue to do so after a French reversal. Despite the uncertainty, therefore, given the stakes and the potential opportunity, the United States should engage the new French president on this issue as soon as possible. Sarkozy is uniquely positioned to make Nasrallah's fear a reality.

Matthew Levitt directs the [Stein Program in Terrorism, Intelligence, and Policy](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11>) at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and is a former deputy assistant secretary of the Treasury for intelligence and analysis. Michael Jacobson is a senior fellow in the [Stein Program](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11>) and a former senior advisor in Treasury's Office of Terrorism and Financial Intelligence.

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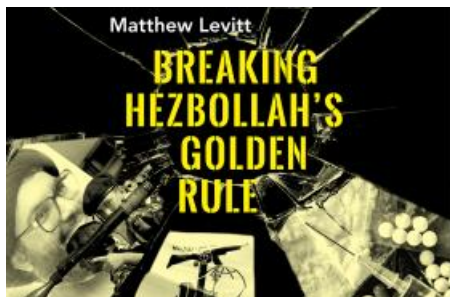
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