

The EU's designation of Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist group is a critical step toward preventing its illicit activities in Europe.

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Last month the EU added Hezbollah's military wing to its 'blacklist' of terrorist organisations. [Matthew Levitt](#) gives an overview of the developments that have led to the EU's decision, and assesses its likely impact on Hezbollah's operations. He argues that in addition to giving EU member states the legal basis to investigate Hezbollah's actions, the decision also sends a clear message that any illicit activities being carried out in Europe will no longer be tolerated.



After months of often-acrimonious deliberations, senior European officials gathered on July 22 for a ministerial meeting in Brussels and announced that Hezbollah's military wing would be added to the EU's list of banned terrorist groups. This decision is especially important in the wake of Hezbollah's resumed terrorist operations in Europe after years of financial and logistical support activities on the continent. If history is any guide, failure to respond in a meaningful way would almost certainly have invited further attacks. Designating even just the military wing of Hezbollah as a terrorist group was therefore an important step in the right direction.

Origins of the debate/process

For years, European countries avoided any discussion of designating Hezbollah. Some cited the fact that it had not carried out terrorist attacks on the continent since the 1980s, while others highlighted the group's social welfare activities and its status as Lebanon's dominant political party. However, the long-awaited results of Bulgaria's investigation into the July 2012 [bus bombing](#) in Burgas, which ultimately deemed Hezbollah culpable, spurred a spirited European debate about proscribing Hezbollah. But the designation was never about just one case. Far more evidence of Hezbollah's recent terrorist activities exists. In late March, for example, a Cypriot court convicted Hossam Taleb Yaacoub — a Swedish Lebanese citizen arrested just days before the Burgas bombing — on charges of [planning attacks](#) against Israeli tourists. These two cases alone presented a more compelling argument for an EU designation than ever before.

According to some observers, the Bulgaria and Cyprus cases suggest that Hezbollah has returned to the continent after decades of operational hiatus. But Hezbollah never left Europe. For more than thirty years, the group's networks have continuously used the EU as a base to recruit members, raise funds, procure weapons, conduct surveillance, and, when feasible, carry out operations. Evidence of such activities from previous cases — in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, France, and elsewhere — was admissible under the rules of the working group which deals with the EU's terrorism black list (CP 931), as was the information contained in Britain's previous unilateral proscription of Hezbollah's military wing.

Likely impact

There is, in fact, no distinction to be made between the various wings of Hezbollah, as Hezbollah officials have themselves reiterated in the days since the EU ban. Nevertheless, the EU action is far from a superficial gesture that should be dismissed; it will have a significant impact on several fronts going forward.

First, it will enable EU governments to initiate preemptive intelligence investigations into activities that can be tied in any way to Hezbollah's military wing. Germany and a handful of other European countries have already conducted such investigations, but the designation will spur many others to do so. This alone is a tremendous change that

should make Europe a far less attractive place for Hezbollah operatives. Moreover, this decision marks a change in how various members of the international community can proceed in its work against Hezbollah. As early as the day following the designation, Israeli diplomatic officials announced that Israel would commit to providing intelligence materials about this organisation to the EU. This swift announcement indicates the increased willingness of various actors to engage in greater collaborative efforts on an international scale that extends beyond the borders of EU member states.

Second, the ban is a strong means of communicating to Hezbollah that its current activities are beyond the pale, and that continuing them will exact a high cost. Previously, the group had been permitted to mix its political and social welfare activities with its terrorist and criminal activities, giving it an effective way to raise and launder money along with a measure of immunity for its militant activities. This recent designation makes clear to Hezbollah that international terrorism, organised crime, and militia operations will endanger its legitimacy as a political and social actor.

Despite these two concrete positive effects, there remains a question regarding the ultimate impact of a decision that addresses the elusive military wing alone. While there is indeed no separation within Hezbollah that indicates two formal wings, political expediency necessitated this distinction in order to ensure the aforementioned positive outcomes of designating even a portion of Hezbollah. In effect, the initiation of preemptive investigations and the importance of messaging as a deterrent override this uncertainty. Hezbollah can no longer assume that its illicit operations will be overlooked because of its involvement in political processes and other actions that are deemed legitimate. Engaging in politics and social action should not, and no longer will, amount to being able to engage in terrorism, militancy, and crime with impunity.

As for the financial angle, seizing significant amounts of Hezbollah funds is unlikely because the group's accounts are presumably registered under its nonmilitary names. But the ban will probably still curtail Hezbollah fundraising. Some of the group's members may be barred from traveling to Europe as governments become bolder in opening new investigations, and Hezbollah leaders may curtail certain activities on the continent as they assess the ban's full impact. In effect, now that the military wing has been designated there will not only be a chilling effect, but also, by virtue of increasing numbers of cases, a constricting effect on Hezbollah's ability to raise funds and engage in logistical support for its activities out of Europe.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, Hezbollah has resumed operational terrorist activity in Europe in a manner not witnessed since the 1980s. In addition to Burgas and Cyprus, it has conducted surveillance, planning, and related activities in Greece and other countries, engaged in a wide array of organised crime across the continent, and increased its military involvement in places where European interests are at stake, such as Syria.

This operational uptick is cause for great concern among European law enforcement and intelligence agencies. As the U.S. State Department's coordinator for counterterrorism noted last year, "Hezbollah and Iran will both continue to maintain a heightened level of terrorist activity in operations in the near future, and we assess that Hezbollah could attack in Europe or elsewhere at any time with little or no warning." For these reasons, the EU designation is critical, in terms of both sending Hezbollah a message and giving EU member states the legal basis and motivation to investigate.

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