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A twisted game

The US pushes Europe to designate the Lebanese Hizbollah as a terrorist organisation. But this only serves to pressure Iran

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Amid the accelerating escalation between the United States and Iran, there are renewed calls to increase pressure on Iranian allies like the Lebanese Hizbollah. On 25 February 2019, the UK designated the Shiite movement in its entirety as a terrorist organisation, expanding a 2013 EU listing directed against its 'military wing'. Now, some pundits urge Germany to take the lead for the EU to follow the British example, and to also ban Hizbollah-linked civic associations on its own territory.

As they rightly point out Hizbollah itself, and not least party leader Hassan Nasrallah, denies and ridicules the notion that there are separate military and political 'wings' within the group. In private, even European diplomats concede that the idea is mere fiction, albeit a useful one, since Hizbollah is a legitimate political party in Lebanon with representation in parliament and government, and remains a central player in the country's politics.

Useful as this fictional distinction may be, it's not clear that abandoning it would have any actual consequences. European diplomats may find themselves in awkward, even comical situations: for instance, having to hide behind the backs of Russian or Chinese colleagues at official receptions to avoid compromising handshakes with Hizbollah-appointed ministers.

Cooperation with legitimate state institutions, on the other hand, is unlikely to be affected. Even the United States, who have listed all of Hizbollah as a 'Foreign Terrorist Organization' since 1995, continue their support for the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) despite persistent accusations from Israel and from US think tanks that the army cooperates with the movement.

When it comes to real involvement – such as facilitating the formation of Lebanese governments, a game in which the French in particular excel – there will always be go-betweens, such as the eternal speaker of parliament and Hizbollah ally (but not member), Nabih Berri. And since the party and its allies wield a solid (democratically elected) majority in the current Lebanese parliament, excluding them from government is not even an option. As far as Lebanese politics is concerned, an expanded EU designation won't cause more than a shrug.

German law is already sufficient

In Germany itself, the existing partial designation appears sufficient to suppress nefarious activities, such as recruitment or fundraising for Hizbollah, under § 129b of the penal code (membership in or support for a foreign terrorist organisation). That same law also bans public display of Hizbollah flags and symbols, which inevitably refer to the 'military wing' along with the rest of the organisation; in practice, the German police routinely confiscates such paraphernalia. In 2015, a ruling by the Federal Administrative High Court also confirmed that the existing legislation is sufficient to ban civic associations set up to collect money for Hizbollah-affiliated Lebanese NGOs.

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To be sure, there have been recorded activities by Hizbollah in Europe that call for vigilance, in particular in the sphere of money laundering. There have also been preparations for potential terrorist attacks that were attributed to Hizbollah, in addition to the 2012 suicide attack in Bulgaria that killed five Israeli tourists and prompted the designation of the party's 'military wing' by the EU one year later. Yet, the existing legal instruments appear entirely sufficient to deal with these threats and expanding the existing designation will not make a difference in practical terms.

By the same token, a ban against civic associations suspected of ideological affinity and informal links with the party is unlikely to yield results in terms of improved security. Unlike the case of the Islamic State, there's little evidence that Shiite mosques and other structures of the Lebanese expat community in Germany work as incubators for terrorist radicalisation that translates into young men travelling to Lebanon to join the organisation, or planning terrorist attacks in Europe. Monitoring such organisations might be a good idea to stay on the safe side, driving

them underground on the other hand will not make it any easier to pick up warning signals.

Compiling sufficient evidence to make sure that such bans will actually hold up in court would also require labour-intensive investigations that are liable to sap resources, which the security institutions sorely need to combat more imminent threats, such as jihadist or right-wing terrorism. Finally, turning up the heat on the social infrastructure of Lebanese Shiite immigrants and German citizens of Lebanese origin over alleged Hizbollah sympathies would only serve to amplify the alienation of an already vulnerable community, and feed into anti-Semitic tropes whereby in Germany, freedom of expression stops where criticism of Israel starts.

The real motif: pressure on Iran

The real purpose of such discussions appears to be to push EU countries to fall in line with Washington's approach of 'maximum pressure' on Iran. To this end, casting European governments as meek hair-splitters who are soft on terrorists is a smart strategy; but for Europe to follow Washington's confrontational approach would be the exact opposite of smart.

There are many aspects of Iran's foreign policy that are deeply troublesome and need to change. The approach of the Trump White House – from unilaterally walking away from the nuclear deal to military posturing in the Persian Gulf – is not the way to get there. Europe has rightly refused to go down that road, and should not let itself be distracted by discussions over rhetorical exercises, such as terrorism designations that have no bearing on reality.

Too much is at stake: Washington has no viable endgame for the dangerous cycle of escalation it's pushing against Iran, and way too many crackpot propagandists for regime change are milling around a volatile commander-in-chief. That's where the real danger is, and Europeans are spot on to finally push back against it.



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