

Hezbollah: The Noose Tightens

by Hugh Fitzgerald



The heartening recent story of the U.K.'s decision to ban the terror group Hezbollah in its entirety, and to freeze all of its financial assets, is [here](#).

The UK government announced on January 17 that it would add the entirety of Hezbollah – Iran's Shi'a proxy based in Lebanon – to its list of terrorist groups that are subject to asset freezing, drawing a line under its earlier position that sanctions against Hezbollah should apply only to its "military wing" and not its so-called "political wing."

The claim that there is some meaningful kind of separation between the "political wing" and the "military wing" of Hezbollah has been repeatedly shown to be false. In its operations, Hezbollah itself makes no such distinction. As Hezbollah's deputy secretary general, Naim Qassem, Nasrallah's second-in-command, has said:

"We don't have a military wing and a political one; we don't

have Hezbollah on one hand and the resistance party on the other... Every element of Hezbollah, from commanders to members as well as our various capabilities, is in the service of the resistance, and we have nothing but the resistance as a priority."

Many Hezbollah officials function in both military and political roles. The Shura Council, Hezbollah's highest decision-making body, is made up of representatives of the organization's military, political, and social institutions.

Members of the "political" wing of Hezbollah show up at military parades. Military men are involved in deciding how funds should be raised and spent, including for non-terrorist purposes such as propaganda. Those who serve as propagandists, fundraisers, and political figures (as members, for example, of the Lebanese parliament) within Hezbollah also help decide on targets for terrorism. These people share the same goals as those who plant bombs, build terror tunnels, lob missiles at Israeli civilians, kidnap and kill Israeli soldiers. On the financial level, Hezbollah's social and political institution are used to raise and funnel money that fund the organization's military activities – that is, its terrorist attacks. Money raised by fundraisers in the "political wing" of the terrorist group of course goes to pay for weapons used by those in the so-called "military wing." Those Hezbollah members who defend the group's activities do so in furtherance of its terrorist activities, and in their aims are indistinguishable from those who fire the guns and plant the explosives..

On the organizational level, many seemingly innocuous social and political institutions in fact serve as conduits for terrorist activity. An example of this is the Foreign Relations Department (FRD), which is officially responsible for maintaining relations between Hezbollah and the Lebanese-Shiite Diaspora. The FRD plays a crucial role in supporting

and promoting Hezbollah's terror activities abroad through recruitment, funding, and dissemination of propaganda.

The American government long ago understood, as Secretary Pompeo noted after hearing of the U.K.'s decision, that "there is no distinction between Hezbollah's political arm and its military arm." In 1995, it declared a ban on all of Hezbollah. The United Kingdom was the first government to attempt to make a distinction between Hezbollah's political and military wings, declaring only the latter a terrorist group in July 2008. So the U.K.'s declaration that such a distinction makes no sense is particularly significant.

It is disturbing that when, on July 22, 2013, the European Union agreed to blacklist Hezbollah's military wing, it did so not because of the many terrorist attacks by the group against Israel, but over concerns about its growing role in the Syrian conflict. This is one more example of how unsympathetic toward Israel many European states have proven to be.

Had Jeremy Corbyn won the U.K. election, there is little doubt that not only would his government not have banned the "political" wing of Hezbollah, but that it would likely have removed the ban on the "military" wing as well. Corbyn, after all, has attended services honoring Arab terrorists at a cemetery in Lebanon; he has described members of Hamas and Hezbollah as his "friends." Thankfully, that most pro-Israel member of Boris Johnson's cabinet, Sajid Javid – a Muslim in name only who spent his honeymoon in Israel – is now Chancellor of the Exchequer and was in a position to push for the Hezbollah ban, which will include an important financial component – that is, seizing Hezbollah assets in the U.K.

The U.S. and Israel were the first to ban Hezbollah without distinguishing between its so-called separate wings. They have been followed by the members of the Arab League, the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, Argentina, Paraguay, the

Netherlands, Australia, Venezuela (the Guaido government), Honduras, and, as of January 17, the U.K. Germany, France, and the E.U. , on the other hand, continue to maintain the fiction of separate political and military wings, and ban only the former. That means that Hezbollah is still allowed, through its so-called “political wing,” to raise money within the E.U. that will certainly be used to pay for terrorist activities.

A statement from the UK Treasury said that the new designation “aligns with the decision made last year by the Chancellor – when Home Secretary – to proscribe the entire organization.”

Last February, Sajid Javid – who was then Home Secretary and is now Chancellor of the Exchequer in Boris Johnson’s recently-elected Conservative government – announced that Hezbollah in its entirety would be designated as a terror entity.

“Hezbollah is continuing in its attempts to destabilize the fragile situation in the Middle East – and we are no longer able to distinguish between their already banned military wing and the political party,” Javid said at the time. “Because of this, I have taken the decision to proscribe the group in its entirety.”...

Arthur Stark, chairman, and Malcolm Hoenlein, executive vice chairman and CEO, of the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations, said, “We applaud the decision of the government of the United Kingdom to designate the political arm of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization.”...

“This important action by the UK follows the Bundestag’s recent overwhelming vote in favor of banning Hezbollah within Germany,” Stark and Hoenlein added. “We strongly encourage other countries to act against Hezbollah.”

The vote in the Bundestag was a non-binding resolution, and

Merkel's government has made clear that it has no intention of banning Hezbollah's "political wing." There are more than 1,000 Hezbollah operatives in Germany at this moment spreading propaganda, and raising funds; Merkel insists that they be left alone. But perhaps now that the U.K. has taken such a strong step, it will put more pressure on the government to accept the Bundestag's proposal.

The U.K. is a very important source of funds and recruitment for Hezbollah, and this total ban on its activities will hit the terrorist group very hard. And if the British example is emulated by Germany, a bigger player, and economy, on the world stage, that will also damage Hezbollah efforts at recruitment and funding.

Meanwhile, the collapse of Iran's economy has led to severe cuts in Iranian support for Hezbollah. Iran's catastrophic situation is clear: its oil revenues have declined by 90% in the last two years; the rial has decreased in value by two-thirds in the last year; the inflation rate is 42%. Iran cannot afford the subsidies that it used to give to Hezbollah. So the terrorist group has had to rely on the contributions of rich Shi'a in the West, on what Hezbollah members involved in the cocaine and heroin trade from South America to Europe can bring in, and even – a clear sign of its desperation – made use of those donation cans placed in Shi'a-owned stores for small contributions. Reports have emerged from Lebanon about Hezbollah fighters complaining that their salaries have been slashed and they cannot feed their families ; some have quit in desperation. Morale is very low in and cannot improve unless Iran can once again help fund the group, which now seems impossible. The Iranian protesters, after all, are enraged at the amounts their government has already used in foreign adventurism. Among their chants: "No to Lebanon" and "No to Palestine" express that fury.

Hezbollah's proudest recent achievement has been the digging of very deep terror tunnels from Lebanon far into Israel.

Millions of dollars were spent on this undertaking. But every single one of those tunnels has been blown up by the Israelis. Worse still for Hezbollah, the Israelis have started to build a network of underground seismic and acoustic sensors all along the border with Lebanon that will allow Israel to detect tunnel building by its fighters just as it begins..

Hezbollah's military wing has now been banned nearly universally; and more countries are joining the U.S. in banning both wings – the military and the political – of the group as indistinguishable; the U.K. is the latest, and the most important, state so far to have followed America's lead.

In the streets of Lebanon, protesters who for months have been denouncing the government and the corrupt political elite, have not spared Hezbollah, which they rightly regard as helping to prop up the current government. Hezbollah has lost its former sheen as the leader of the so-called "resistance" (to Israel), and is now seen as one more corrupt group that wants to hold onto power through its members and sympathizers in the Lebanese cabinet.

For Hezbollah, nothing is going right. Not with the terror tunnels that have been blown up, not with the money from Iran that has dried up, not with the loyalty of those of its fighters who now want out,, not with the vanishing support from those Lebanese who have had quite enough of Hezbollah.

The noose tightens. And it's a long drop.