

# Britain seeks European Union action against Lebanon's Hezbollah

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After forcing the lifting of a weapons embargo against Syria and thus enabling the arming of Islamist militants, Britain is now calling for the European Union to designate the Lebanese party Hezbollah's military wing a terrorist organization.

A special EU working group will meet June 4 to discuss the issue. If agreed, the decision would then have to be ratified by foreign ministers at a June 24 meeting.

Designating Hezbollah—Lebanon's most powerful political bloc, backed by both Iran and Syria—a terrorist organization demonstrates the extent to which the conflict in Syria has become a regional war and a de facto war against Iran. It will inevitably lead to a new round of clashes between it and Western backed-Sunni forces in Lebanon. It could embroil the country in another civil war.

Lebanon was the arena in which the regional powers fought in shifting alliances for power and influence in a long and bitter civil war between 1975 and 1990.

Britain's request came as Hezbollah announced May 25 that its forces were fighting alongside the Syrian army, which was advancing against opposition strongholds in Syria, notably the strategic town of Qusair, 15 kilometres from Lebanon. Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah promised that his fighters would deliver "victory" in Qusair, the first time that Hezbollah had made such a commitment of support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime.

It follows Hezbollah's involvement in several cross-border clashes with opposition forces during the two-year-long civil war, and Nasrallah's first public admission, on April 30 during a visit to Tehran, about Hezbollah fighting in Syria.

Facing a military defeat in Qusair and without any significant support amongst the Syrian population,

opposition forces have appealed to their imperialist backers to escalate their intervention. In a statement last Wednesday, the Syrian National Coalition called on the EU to "solidify" its words by action and supply the Free Syrian Army (FSA) with "specialized weaponry to repel fierce attacks" by the regime.

FSA leader and former Syrian general Salem Idris made an appeal on the BBC's World Service to the imperialist powers to intervene. He accused Hezbollah fighters of invading Syria, claiming that it had sent 7,000 fighters to attack Qusair, although the French foreign ministry estimated the number at 3,000-4,000.

Idris warned of a possible "massacre" if the US and its allies did not intervene to assist him, saying, "We will take all measures to hunt [them], even in hell." He added, "I will no longer be bound by any commitments I made if a decision to stop the attacks ... is not taken and implemented."

The pretext for Britain's appeal to the EU was the announcement by the Bulgarian government in February that two of the people responsible for the July 2012 bombing at the Burgas Airport that killed five Israeli tourists and a Bulgarian bus driver "belonged to the military formation of Hezbollah."

Britain also pointed to the prosecution in Cyprus of a Lebanese-Swedish citizen, who had confessed to being a Hezbollah operative carrying out surveillance of Israeli tourists for potential targets.

Initially, Britain's call received a cool response. That has now changed. Reuters cited a diplomatic source in Berlin on May 22 as saying that "in the light of discussions we have had with our partners following the terrorist attack in Burgas, Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle supports listing at least the military wing of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization in the EU."

French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius confirmed at

the “Friends of Syria” meeting in Amman last week that Paris would also support Britain.

Should the EU agree to Britain’s demand, all European companies and governments would cease financial interactions with Hezbollah. It has thus far been able to raise money in Europe. Germany is believed to be its main centre, with some 950 members, according to German intelligence.

It is openly acknowledged that the EU shift is driven by the role played by Hezbollah in the Syrian war, and not by accusations of terrorism. Fabius declared, “Given the decisions that Hezbollah has taken and the fact that it has fought extremely hard against the Syrian population, I confirm that France will propose to place Hezbollah’s military wing on the list of terrorist organizations.”

The decision could call into question the presence of United Nations peacekeeping forces in Lebanon, in which a dozen EU countries are represented. Austria has said it may withdraw its 300-strong force from a UN peacekeeping force on Syria’s Golan Heights, which Israel has occupied illegally since the 1967 war, if Britain sent arms to the rebels fuelling the conflict.

The UN Human Rights Council (UNHCR) in Geneva passed a one-sided resolution last week, clearly aimed at Hezbollah, with 36 in favour, one against, and eight abstentions. Its non-binding text condemned “the intervention of foreign combatants fighting on behalf of the Syrian regime” in Qusair, but said nothing about the foreign combatants fighting against the government. It called for an urgent investigation into alleged abuses in Qusair. While Russia, Syria’s key backer, called the resolution “odious”, it is not a voting member this year.

Following the resolution, the US State Department demanded that Hezbollah withdraw its fighters from Syria immediately, with spokeswoman Jen Psaki calling their presence “extremely dangerous.”

Tensions are already running high in Lebanon, which has long suffered sectarian strife stoked by France, the former colonial power, and the regional powers to further their own interests. Last week saw gun battles between forces allied with the Syrian regime and its opponents on the streets of the port city of Tripoli, a Sunni stronghold that acts as a conduit for arms, supplies and fighters to the rebel forces, killing at least 31 people and wounding 212. It follows more than a

dozen rounds of fighting in Tripoli since the start of the Syrian conflict.

Last weekend, there were attacks on the southern suburbs of Beirut, which are Hezbollah strongholds, leaving at least three wounded. On Monday, rockets fired from Syria killed at least one woman near the eastern Lebanese town of Hermel, another Hezbollah stronghold. More rockets fell the next day, wounding seven people.

Since the start of the Syrian conflict, there have been several rocket and mortar attacks on Lebanon, with the FSA claiming responsibility for attacks on at least two occasions.

In an interview on Monday, Jamal Maarouf, commander of the Saraqeb Martyrs Brigade, a rebel group based in northern Syria, threatened to attack the Lebanese army if it did not stop Hezbollah fighters from crossing into Syria. The Lebanese army is no match for the various militias backed by the Gulf petromonarchies that have sprouted up in Lebanon supporting the Syrian opposition.

The next day there was an armed attack on a Lebanese army checkpoint near Aarsal in the eastern Beka’a Valley, killing three soldiers. The attackers fled towards the Syrian border. Lebanese President Michel Sleiman said the killings were part of a “series of terrorist and criminal acts that seek to provoke strife in the country and [target] soldiers who are working to prevent such strife.”

He urged that “an iron fist be used against anyone targeting the army, security services, civil peace or [anyone] seeking to sow strife.”



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