

Open letter calling for EU to ban Hezbollah a 'first step,' MEP says

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An open letter from European MPs calling for the European Union to designate Hezbollah a terrorist group is a "first step" in a broader process, one of the letter's initiators said.

Sixty members of the European Parliament signed the letter to EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini.

"For us, this is certainly only a first step. The letter underlines that there is a growing recognition in Europe that Hezbollah and their Iranian masters pose a serious threat," MEP Lars Adaktusson said.

The letter outlined the threat the writers said is represented by Hezbollah, including its role as an "accomplice" to Syrian President Bashar Assad's alleged crimes, as well as in international drug smuggling and money laundering.

The European Union designated Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist group in 2013 following an attack on an Israeli tour bus in Bulgaria in July 2012.

"We believe that making a distinction between Hezbollah's 'military' and 'political' wings is illogical as it is a notion Hezbollah's senior leadership themselves consistently and publicly reject," the letter said.

"Moreover, removing the distinction would put the EU more in line with international consensus as the United States, the Netherlands, Canada, Israel, the Gulf Cooperation Council and the Arab League all have proscribed Hezbollah in its entirety."

The letter was signed by 60 members from across the European Parliament political divide. Adaktusson, a representative of Sweden's Christian Democrats, hailed the letter's cross-party support.

"I believe it was extremely important that the letter was from the beginning a cross-party effort, showing that this is not just the concern of one particular political group but is seen across the political families in Europe as a serious challenge," he said. "Political ac-



Feeling threatened. Members of the European Parliament take part in a voting session at the European Parliament in Strasbourg in eastern France, last October. (AFP)

tion is always much more likely in the EU if one can count on support from all relevant stakeholders."

MEP Anders Vistisen, a representative of the Danish People's Party, who also co-wrote the letter, said it was past time that the European Union recognised the danger posed by Hezbollah.

"I find it outrageous that the EU still has not denounced Hezbollah in its entirety as a terrorist organisation. Hezbollah's growing arsenal and entanglement in regional conflicts severely destabilise certain countries and the wider Middle East," he said.

The letter warned that Hezbollah had amassed at least 150,000 rockets in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1701.

"I believe that it is high time to acknowledge that Islamist-inspired terrorism is not only a threat to the Middle East but is also the top threat to Europe's security," Vistisen said.

Adaktusson said the letter's signatories were awaiting a response from Mogherini.

"It's too early to gauge the letter's impact. We are expecting High Representative Mogherini to respond to

our initiative and start a serious discussion in the EU about the dangers Hezbollah poses not just to regional security but to safety of Europe," he said.

"I will certainly continue my efforts to protect European citizens from this threat and to show a united Western front against terrorism, no matter where it comes from."

It is traditional for the EU high representative to respond to open letters of this kind, although not obligatory. If Mogherini does not respond to the call to ban Hezbollah, it is likely that an MEP would table an on-the-record question on the issue.

Given the increasing threat represented by Hezbollah, particularly in Europe, many observers clamoured

for a change in the European Union's policy towards the group.

"As the letter spells out, there are close to 950 Hezbollah members alone in Germany and German police have raided the homes of Iranian spies preparing potential terror attacks on Israeli and Jewish sites," Adaktusson said. "So the dangerous Iran-Hezbollah nexus is no longer 'just' a problem for the peoples of the Middle East but for us in Europe as well."

Vistisen said he would continue campaigning against Hezbollah. "I will follow the cross-party initiative by sustaining pressure during committee meetings and bilateral meetings with relevant stakeholders," he said.

Sixty members of the European Parliament signed the letter to EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini.

Viewpoint

Mona Alami

Incoherent views hamper clear US policy on Hezbollah

In recent visits to Lebanon, US State Department officials have reiterated support for Lebanese political and military institutions, despite Washington's wider escalation in its conflict with Iran. Appointments at the State Department could, nonetheless, account for a bolder American stance on Iran's Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah.

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's visit contained a double message for Lebanon. While stressing that Washington remained committed to supporting the Lebanese Army and internal security forces, Tillerson warned that "Hezbollah is not just a concern for the United States. The people of Lebanon should also be concerned about how Hezbollah's actions and its growing arsenal bring unwanted and unhelpful scrutiny on Lebanon."

The Trump administration has been escalating its tone on Iran and its regional proxies. In February, the US Treasury Department targeted six people and seven businesses in Lebanon, Iraq and West Africa, with sanctions believed to be the first in a series of actions targeting Hezbollah's licit and illicit financial networks.

The US administration's targeting of Hezbollah is focused on its financing arm. "There were reports that Iran was financing its proxies in Syria via Lebanese banks that operate in Iraq and Syria. There will be more pressure to curb such activity. In addition, geographical driven sanctions targeting Hezbollah areas are also under discussion," former Syrian diplomat Bassam Barabandi said.

His opinion is shared by Ahmad Majidyar, a fellow at the Middle East Institute think-tank in Washington, who noted that "there is a lot of focus on isolating Hezbollah in Lebanon."

The newsletter Syrian Digest stated that legislation was introduced by two Republican members of the US Congress requiring a presidential determination on Hezbollah that could designate it as a foreign narcotics trafficker or a transnational criminal organisation.

The US war on Hezbollah has been limited, however, by the White House's incoherent Middle East policy. Hussein Ibish, a senior resident scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, said Trump's policy is based on several key principles,

including keeping the United States out of avoidable conflicts and restricting the use of force to instances when it is necessary. When force is deemed necessary, Trump has resolved to use overwhelming power.

"This means that, in fact, Trump's Middle East policy looks surprisingly similar to that of former President Barack Obama," Ibish said.

Obama's critics said his disengagement in the Middle East led to a resurgence of al-Qaeda in Iraq along with the Islamic State (ISIS) and that his conciliatory foreign policy, specifically on Syria and foreign militias fighting in Syria – such as Hezbollah – allowed for the return of Russian influence in the region and created a power vacuum that benefited Iran.

Obscuring the issue is the division of power within the US system and even within the executive branch of the White House, the State Department and the Department of Defence. "This is complicating the emergence of a coherent foreign policy, especially for the Trump administration," said Ibish.

Another challenge, Majidyar said, is the two schools of thought

that prevail in Washington: One recommends tougher sanctions on Beirut and another does not want to see Lebanon fail.

"[Acting Assistant Secretary of State] David Satterfield was known for adopting more lenient positions on Lebanon. He intervened personally during the November crisis triggered by the resignation of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri as he is primarily concerned with Lebanon's stability," said Barabandi.

New appointments at the State Department could translate into a more aggressive policy on Iran and Hezbollah. David Schenker, a fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy who is widely believed to be Trump's nominee to replace Satterfield as assistant secretary of state, takes a harder line on Hezbollah.

Barabandi pointed out that most appointees in key State Department positions responsible for the Levant file are known for their more hawkish positions on Iran and, consequently, on Hezbollah.

Whether or not their views translate into policies hinges on the multiple power centres in Washington and the Trump administration agreeing on a unified vision.

Two schools of thought prevail in Washington: One recommends tougher sanctions on Beirut and another does not want to see Lebanon fail.