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# Road to Proscription: The EU and Hezbollah since the Arab Spring

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**Road to Proscription: The EU and Hezbollah  
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## About the Author

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## **Abstract**

The European Union (EU) has traditionally taken a rather nuanced view of the activities of Hezbollah. Despite historic links to violent activity, Europe always remained reluctant to place the Lebanese militant group on its list of terrorist organisations. Internal divergences among member states, as well as the strategic-realist goals of the EU in both Lebanon and the Middle East more generally meant that such a listing never materialised. This remained the case even in the initial turmoil following the Arab uprisings, when Hezbollah's relatively moderating objectives were viewed as a force for stability.

However, the EU shifted policy in July 2013 by listing the military wing of Hezbollah as a terrorist entity. This paper will investigate the reasons behind this decision, as well as the likely implications and effectiveness of the new policy. Two principal catalysts were behind the decision. The first was a Hezbollah-linked bombing in Bulgaria which provided the focal point around which a consensus of the EU member states could emerge in the Council. Secondly, the escalation both of the Syrian conflict and Hezbollah's role in it provided a more political and strategic impetus for the decision. This paper maintains that although a change in policy was somewhat necessary, it is questionable whether the artificial separation of Hezbollah's political and military wings and the symbolic proscription of the latter is the most propitious choice to achieve European objectives.

## Introduction: Dealing in definitions

Notwithstanding the Manichean dynamic of some post-September 2001 discourse, defining what separates a terrorist from a freedom fighter remains a contentious issue. This is even more so the case in Lebanon, where diverse colonial legacies, sharp confessional dividing lines and a volatile regional setting lend an undercurrent of subjectivity to any attempt at pigeon-holing. Hezbollah is to many a wholly legitimate and representative component of Lebanese social and political life. To others, especially in the West, it is a terrorist organisation.

The European Union (EU) has historically taken a more nuanced view of the activities of the “party-cum-militia”.<sup>1</sup> Despite evidence of terrorist-like activity across the globe since its emergence in the 1980s, the EU steadfastly refused to ostracise the group, fearing instability and the alienation of a socially indispensable actor in Lebanon. Even following the onset of the Arab spring and the Syrian conflict over two years ago, which has shifted European strategic interests and resulted in a revamped policy in the region, Brussels held fast to this position.

However, the bloc recently took a major step away from this stance by labelling the *military wing* of Hezbollah a terrorist entity on 22 July 2013.<sup>2</sup> This will allow for sanctions and financial strangulation, at least regarding the European activity of Hezbollah’s armed faction. Diplomats have maintained that such a specific listing leaves the door open for substantive dialogue with the political wing of Hezbollah; yet such a move nevertheless marks a symbolic break from previous policy.

This paper will thus tackle two questions. First, which considerations have guided the post-Arab spring European approach towards Hezbollah, culminating in the recent blacklisting of its military wing? Second, what are the repercussions of the proscription, and will it amount to a more effective policy than the previous, more benign, approach?

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<sup>1</sup> This is the stock phrase used by *The Economist* when it refers to Hezbollah. The hybrid nature of the term is telling.

<sup>2</sup> See Council of the European Union, “Joint Council and Commission declaration on the specific restrictive measures to combat terrorism”, press release, Brussels, 25 July 2013.

It is argued that two main catalysts were behind the EU's decision of blacklisting the military wing of Hezbollah. The first, and most important, was the alleged implication of Hezbollah in a terrorist attack in Burgas, Bulgaria, in August 2012. The second was the continuing role of Hezbollah in the escalating conflict in Syria, where fighters of the movement have flouted the official disassociation policy of Lebanon. However, as regards the effectiveness of the policy, it is difficult to envisage how the artificial distinction between political and military wings – and the blacklisting of the latter – will lead to any tangible outcomes on the ground.

In order to examine these issues, this paper will be divided into several sections. An initial scene-setter will outline the activities and shifting objectives of Hezbollah since the Arab spring and the eruption of violence in Syria, which most analysts say have made the party more vulnerable.<sup>3</sup> This will allow for a more informed investigation of EU policy towards what is a complex organisation.

The next section will provide an overview of the precise reasons why the EU has decided to label Hezbollah's military arm a terrorist organisation. It will examine the EU's concept of what constitutes a terrorist entity, institutional procedures for blacklisting, the conflicting policies of various member states towards Hezbollah, and the EU's overarching geopolitical and strategic objectives in Lebanon and the Levant. Finally, an appraisal will be offered as to the ramifications of the decision, as well as an analysis of the likely effectiveness of such a policy compared with the previous EU position of non-confrontation and dialogue.

### **Hezbollah since the Arab spring: hedging its bets**

Despite the fact that Lebanon is *not* an Arab spring state, the events since early 2011 have nevertheless had a profound impact on its fragile socio-political situation. Hezbollah, as a member of government and a key component of a growing region-wide sectarian divide, has also seen its position threatened and has been forced to reassess its standing in a rapidly changing environment.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example P. Salem, "Can Hezbollah Weather the Arab Spring?", *Project Syndicate*, 19 June 2012.

*Pragmatism and politics in an on-edge Lebanon*

The behaviour of the organisation *within* Lebanon since the outset of the Arab spring has been characterised by two notable trends: relative moderation and pragmatic national politics.<sup>4</sup> This is most visible in the reluctance of Hezbollah to become overtly involved in the slide towards sectarian violence in various areas in Lebanon, particularly in and around the hotbed of Tripoli.<sup>5</sup> Rather, Hezbollah has preferred to batten down the national hatches and work towards maximising gains in the political system without resorting to overt violence to achieve its goals as seen on occasion in the past.<sup>6</sup> This can be viewed as a continuation of the trend – visible since the 1990s – of “Lebanonisation”, or the “progressive transformation of Hezbollah from a group that initially sought to establish an Islamic Republic in Lebanon to a political party actively participating in Lebanese social life”.<sup>7</sup> Whether the pragmatism is guided by a lasting desire for democratic progress or an ephemeral attempt to maintain relevance and clout, it has nevertheless contributed – up to this point – to the current situation of uneasy stability in Lebanon.

However, if Hezbollah no longer professes a desire to install an Islamic Republic in Lebanon as in the past and now plays an active role in the power-sharing system, it does still essentially operate a “state within a state”.<sup>8</sup> As a Shi’i religious symbol and through its work as a development actor<sup>9</sup> it stands above and beside Lebanese state institutions, while its considerable military capabilities – reinforced since the 2006 war with Israel<sup>10</sup> – and its influence over the General Security Directorate (GSD)<sup>11</sup> give

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<sup>4</sup> Interview with M. Young, opinion editor of *The Daily Star Lebanon*, 22 April 2013.

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of the history of sectarian tensions in the Tripoli area, see N. Kalawoun, “Tripoli in Lebanon: an Islamist Fortress or a Source of Terror?”, in G. Joffé (ed.), *Islamist Radicalisation in Europe & The Middle East*, London, I.B. Taurus, 2012, pp. 181-199.

<sup>6</sup> Most notably in 2008, when Hezbollah took over downtown Beirut by force and brought about the fall of the Western-supported Siniora government.

<sup>7</sup> T. Atrissi, “Political Islam in Lebanon” in M. Emerson & R. Youngs (eds.), *Political Islam and European Foreign Policy: Perspectives from Muslim Democrats of the Mediterranean*, Brussels, Centre for European Policy Studies, 2007, p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> H.A. Hussain, “Hezbollah: A State within a State”, *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*, vol. 8, The Hudson Institute, May 2009.

<sup>9</sup> See M. Harb, “Hezbollah and post-war reconstruction in Lebanon”, in G. Clarke & M. Jennings (eds.), *Development, civil society and faith-based organizations: bridging the sacred and the secular*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 214-239.

<sup>10</sup> F. Lutz, “La FINUL et le maintien de la paix au Liban”, *Groupe de Recherche et d’Information sur la Paix et la Sécurité*, 10 April 2013, p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> The GSD is a Lebanese intelligence and security body, also responsible for the surveillance of foreigners in the state. See J. Barnes-Dacey, “Lebanon: Containing Spillover from Syria”, Policy Brief, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 2012, p. 2.

it the necessary clout to fear neither the police force nor the army. It thus seems that Hezbollah is *entrenching*, through latent force and manoeuvring,<sup>12</sup> rather than *legitimising* its support in Lebanon since the Arab spring.

### *No more hiding in a shifting regional chess game*

Such clout is fading in its neighbourhood. If Lebanese politics is “a kind of board game played by its neighbours”,<sup>13</sup> Hezbollah’s regional status has plummeted from brave knight to lowly pawn. Although it found itself on ‘the right side of history’ in vocally supporting the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya (as well as the failed efforts of its fellow Shi’i in Bahrain), Hezbollah’s continuing support for the Assad regime has led to a decline in popularity on the Arab street.<sup>14</sup> Arab public opinion has shifted from resistance-driven foreign policy to democratic reform and civil liberties;<sup>15</sup> in backing the heavy-handed Assad regime and turning its weapons on fellow Arabs for the first time, Hezbollah has had to answer many questions regarding consistency and hypocrisy.

Based on a mixture of pragmatic (supply lines and geostrategic security) and ideological (resistance to Israel<sup>16</sup> and Iranian prodding<sup>17</sup>) considerations, the party’s support for Assad’s regime in Damascus has dramatically shifted up a gear in recent months. The secretive backing of the earlier days of the Syrian conflict has been replaced by considerable vocal and material support – most notably in the battle of Qusair of July 2013. This leaves the ‘Party of God’ on a clear side of the emerging Sunni-Shi’i divide which has taken shape in the Middle East since the Arab spring,<sup>18</sup> with the Gulf states facing off against the Iranian-Syrian-Hezbollah axis. Faced with the blunt dichotomous choice between radicalisation and moderation,<sup>19</sup> Hezbollah appears to have chosen to double-down on similarly threatened allies Iran and Syria.

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<sup>12</sup> Political pressure by Hezbollah was largely the cause of the March 2013 resignation of Lebanese President Najib Mikati, see B. Y. Saab, “Why Lebanon’s Najib Mikati Resigned”, *Foreign Affairs*, 25 March 2013.

<sup>13</sup> L. Wright, “Lebanon’s Tragic Hero”, *New Yorker*, 13 January 2011.

<sup>14</sup> A. Al-Toraifi, “The Future of Hezbollah”, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 27 February 2013.

<sup>15</sup> Salem, “Can Hezbollah Weather the Arab Spring?”, *op.cit.*

<sup>16</sup> “Julian Assange Interview with Hezbollah Leader Hassan Nasrallah”, *YouTube*, 19 April 2012.

<sup>17</sup> A. Norton, “The Role of Hezbollah in Domestic Lebanese Politics”, *The International Spectator*, vol. 42, no. 4, December 2007, p. 475.

<sup>18</sup> See G. Abdo, “The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi’a-Sunni Divide”, *Analysis Paper*, no. 29, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, April 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Toraifi, *op.cit.*



## Explaining the policy of the EU

### *The European concept of terrorism and institutional procedures*

What is a terrorist act for Brussels? As with a general definition of terrorism,<sup>20</sup> this is a disputed concept. Notwithstanding a certain amount of European cooperation in the antiterrorist area since September 2001 – notably the EU Counter-Terrorism Strategy of 2005<sup>21</sup> – different EU member states have different strategies for both defining and combatting terrorism and commonly acceptable definitions have been difficult to come by at the European level.<sup>22</sup> Under Common Position 2001/931/CFSP terrorist acts as defined by the EU are “intentional acts which, given their nature or context, may seriously damage a country or international organisation and which are defined as an offence under national law”.<sup>23</sup> Acts including murder, kidnapping, attacks on infrastructure and hijacking, if they are carried out with the goal of “intimidation”, are listed as examples.<sup>24</sup>

Analysing Hezbollah’s activities in light of these criteria could *a priori* lead to the conclusion that the group has engaged in what Europe would classify as terrorist activity. The most recent and most pertinent incident was the bombing of a bus of Israeli tourists in Burgas, Bulgaria, in August 2012. This has been closely linked (although not definitively) to Hezbollah, and was one of the major factors behind several EU member states’ push for a listing (see below). Elsewhere in Europe, a court case in Cyprus in which a Swedish-Lebanese man was found guilty in March 2013 of belonging to a “criminal organisation” – Hezbollah – provides a firmer legal footing for pursuing the group;<sup>25</sup> even if the nature of the crime is not as ostentatious as in Bulgaria.

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<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive overview of the nuances inherent in defining terrorist organisations, see B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> Council of the European Union, “A Secure Europe in a Better World: European Security Strategy”, Brussels, 12 December 2003.

<sup>22</sup> R. Youngs, *Europe and the Middle East: In the Shadow of September 11*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 2006, p. 100.

<sup>23</sup> Council of the European Union, “Council Common Position of 27 December 2001 on the application of specific measures to combat terrorism (2001/931/CFSP)”, *Official Journal of the European Union*, L344/93, 28 December 2001.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> See N. Kulish, “Hezbollah Courier Found Guilty in Plot to Attack Israeli Tourists in Cyprus”, *New York Times*, 21 March 2013.

However, the decision to place an individual or group on the EU's list of terrorist entities is a Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) decision. The criteria for defining a terrorist act are ultimately only guidelines; there is no automatic triggering mechanism and unanimity of all 28 EU member states in the Council is required in order to move ahead.<sup>26</sup> Reaching such a consensus has proven to be difficult for two main reasons. Firstly, an institutionally crowded Council structure – reflecting the fact that operational counter-terrorism policy has remained at the member state level – makes authoritative decisions hard to come by.<sup>27</sup> Secondly, the very sovereign and sensitive nature of counter-terrorist policy, as well as the often nuanced nature of putative terrorist organisations, means that listing issues are invariably debated over a political rather than purely institutional backdrop.

#### *Member state preferences: the Burgas catalyst*

This is most definitely the case regarding the question of Hezbollah. In the past, and up until recent months, the sheer diversity of views and approaches in European capitals meant that achieving a consensus to take action was impossible. The entire spectrum of opinion, from hard-line to more conciliatory, was represented in the Council.

The French, "*de grands amis du Liban*",<sup>28</sup> have always been conscious of their historical and cultural legacy in the Levant and reluctant to ostracise an important component of Lebanese society.<sup>29</sup> The Quai d'Orsay felt that this could contribute to political and military instability in Lebanon and the region, especially in the context of possible Syrian spillover violence. This reticence was echoed by a host of EU countries: Belgium, the Nordics<sup>30</sup> and states wary of the safety of peacekeeping troops in southern Lebanon – Ireland and Austria.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> K. Eling, "The EU, Terrorism and Effective Multilateralism", in D. Spence (ed.), *The European Union and Terrorism*, London, John Harper, 2007, p. 109.

<sup>27</sup> J. Argomaniz & W. Rees, "The EU and counter-terrorism", in S. Biscop & R. G. Whitman (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of European Security*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 233.

<sup>28</sup> L. Fabius, French Minister of Foreign Affairs, "La France, puissance d'influence : quelle politique internationale ?", speech, Paris, 27 March 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with an official, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lebanon desk, Paris, 17 April 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with two officials, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Lebanon and Syria desk, The Hague, 20 February 2013.

<sup>31</sup> J. Kanter & J. Rudoren, "European Union Adds Military Wing of Hezbollah to List of Terrorist Organizations", *New York Times*, 22 July 2013.

At the other end of the spectrum, the Netherlands has always made it clear that it felt Hezbollah should be designated as a terrorist organisation at the European level. Its foreign ministry has classified the organisation – both political and military wings – as a terrorist entity since 2004.<sup>32</sup> Whether driven by political considerations (close links to Israel<sup>33</sup>), strategic leanings (“the most Atlanticist of continental countries”<sup>34</sup>) or its strong commitment to the rule of law,<sup>35</sup> the Dutch have persistently been drivers within the Council of efforts to blacklist Hezbollah completely; even though the Netherlands has been “a bit on [its] own” on this issue.<sup>36</sup>

Between these two positions came that of the United Kingdom; London has blacklisted the military wing of Hezbollah since 2008.<sup>37</sup> Taking a similar track to that with Sinn Féin and the IRA in Northern Ireland, and prompted by considerations relating to the Iraq war,<sup>38</sup> the UK’s strategy is based on the objective of pushing Hezbollah away from transnational military activity while encouraging its political wing to continue the process of ‘Lebanonisation’ and co-optation into the political system.<sup>39</sup> It has pushed the position more and more forcefully at EU level since the onset of the Arab spring, although initially with little success; many countries regarded such a political-military distinction as artificial, an issue which will be discussed below.

The first significant game-changer as regards the recent shift in policy was the Burgas incident. Representing the first time that Hezbollah has been linked to serious violent activity on European soil, it proved to be a particularly significant catalyst for many member states. Former Bulgarian foreign minister Nickolay Mladenov used some

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<sup>32</sup> “Annual Report 2004”, General intelligence and security service, The Hague, June 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Hezbollah mouthpiece *Al-Manar* accused former foreign minister Uri Rosenthal of being guided by his close personal links to “the Zionist entity”, see “La Hollande traque le Hezbollah”, *Al-Manar*, 6 October 2012.

<sup>34</sup> H. Kundnani, “Why Europe needs the Netherlands”, *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 6 March 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Interview, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *op.cit.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> “Proscribed terrorist organisations”, Home Office, 23 November 2012.

<sup>38</sup> Hezbollah’s putative involvement in training, financing and supporting terrorist and Shia insurgent groups in Iraq was a particular cause of concern for the UK, heavily implicated in state-building efforts in the country.

<sup>39</sup> UK House of Commons, Commons Debates, 2 July 2008.

choice words in strongly advocating a terrorist listing in February 2013,<sup>40</sup> while Guido Westerwelle was also reported to have been influenced by the fall-out from the attack.<sup>41</sup> As for Paris and its staunch anti-listing stance, a source in the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs nevertheless admitted that a clear implication of Hezbollah in the official report on Burgas would mean that the French policy would have to change somewhat.<sup>42</sup>

However, recent months have also demonstrated that France is particularly keen to bring about progress in Syria, even to the point of considering military force. If Burgas was the publicised catalyst behind the French shift, Hezbollah's increasingly open and ferocious involvement on the side of the Assad regime was a more political and strategic reasoning.<sup>43</sup> High Representative Ashton also admitted that the decision was "of course partly a political signal",<sup>44</sup> while the timing of the British proposal – not long after the decisive battle of Qusayr and not long before Prime Minister Cameron pushed for military action in Syria – further could be seen to corroborate this. At a time when various EU member states are ramping up pressure on the Assad regime, sending a unified message to key ally Hezbollah was at least a secondary goal.

With the "Big Three" of the UK, France and Germany backing the designation, internal dynamics within the Council thus took over and countries such as Ireland and Austria – both neutral states with peacekeepers in the region – dropped their opposition in order to make the decision possible.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, a secondary objective behind the decision of the member states appears to have been to demonstrate European solidarity and the ability to take concerted foreign policy action in a sensitive area. European foreign policy-making is often based on "inter-relational" and "identity" objectives as much as concrete external concerns;<sup>46</sup> the fact that Italy – despite reservations – was said to have gone along with the decision in order

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<sup>40</sup> When asked, on entering the Foreign Affairs Council meeting in Brussels, whether Hezbollah should be added to the EU's terrorist list, Mladenov replied "I think the answer is quite obvious". See L. Norman & N. Bendavid, "Bulgaria Seeks EU Action on Hezbollah", *The Wall Street Journal*, 18 February 2013.

<sup>41</sup> A. Croft, "Germany backs call to put Hezbollah armed wing on EU terror list", *Reuters*, 22 May 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Interview, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *op.cit.*

<sup>43</sup> "France backs move to list Hezbollah as terror group", *France 24*, 23 May 2013.

<sup>44</sup> L. Norman, "EU to Put Hezbollah Military Wing on Terror List", *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 July 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Kanter & Rudoren, *op.cit.*

<sup>46</sup> S. Keukeleire & T. Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming.

to maintain unity in the EU's foreign policy<sup>47</sup> is an example of this. If the decision is primarily a *symbolic* statement of intent towards Hezbollah, the taking of the decision was also a symbolic statement of European unity.

*EU objectives in Lebanon: protecting the egg*

"For Hezbollah, you might ask, given the situation in Lebanon, which is a highly fragile, highly fragmented country, is listing it going to help you achieve what you want?"<sup>48</sup>  
- Gilles de Kerchove, EU Counter-Terrorism Coordinator

Cushy statements about democracy, dialogue and trade links aside, stability remains the overriding objective of the EU in Lebanon.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, the EU has been very careful throughout recent years not to upset the delicate sectarian balance that constitutes the Lebanese social and political fabric. An EU official likened the structures and institutions of the Lebanese state to a shell, with the various confessions and communities fighting for supremacy within.<sup>50</sup> Unable or unwilling to substantially influence the complex political realities in Lebanon,<sup>51</sup> the European strategy aims at keeping the egg-shell intact in order to give the zygotes within the freedom to work through a process of democratic and political reform – padding out the empty space. This overall objective has not been hugely altered by an Arab spring which has surrounded Lebanon by a sea of turmoil but has not directly threatened its already democratic state structure.

Policy towards Hezbollah has reflected this careful overall approach to the fragile situation. As a democratically elected actor in the Lebanese albumen, Hezbollah is an essential element of the nation's social and political make-up and to any sustainable power-sharing agreement.<sup>52</sup> Thus the EU has made an effort to recognise *all* political actors in Lebanon – most recently by supporting the Lebanese National

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<sup>47</sup> Kanter & Rudoren, *op.cit.*

<sup>48</sup> A. Rettmann, "EU official: Hezbollah unlikely to get on terrorism blacklist", *EU Observer*, 28 January 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with an EU official, *op.cit.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> P. Seeberg, "The EU as a realist actor in normative clothes: EU democracy promotion in Lebanon and the European Neighbourhood Policy", *Democratization*, vol. 16, no. 1, February 2009, p. 87.

<sup>52</sup> R.H. Santini, R. Mauriello & L. Trombetta, "Taking the lead: EU mediation role assessed by Iran and Lebanon", in S. Lucarelli & L. Fioramenti (eds.), *External Perceptions of the European Union as a Global Actor*, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 65.

Dialogue initiative<sup>53</sup> – and promote Lebanese solutions to Lebanese problems; solutions that include rather than ostracise Hezbollah.

Furthermore, regarding the escalation of sectarian tensions in Lebanon and spillover from the Syrian conflict, the EU had until recently recognised the relatively moderating influence of Hezbollah.<sup>54</sup> The party was, and perhaps remains, determined to avoid antagonising factional battles on a large scale within Lebanon, even when faced with increasingly violent provocation.<sup>55</sup> Indeed, the EU recognised that a more potent threat to internal Lebanese stability could come from increasingly active but increasingly disparate Sunni groups calling for more aggressive Sunni-Salafi stances within the country.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, as regards the neighbouring Syrian conflict, the EU recognised that although Hezbollah was playing an active role in helping Syrian regime forces, the tone and earnestness of the backing was more low-key than might have been expected; Hezbollah was not interested in attracting the conflict across the border.

However, recent months have witnessed the tension in Lebanon reach new levels. The increasingly open support of Hezbollah for Assad's regime has made a mockery of the Baabda declaration of Lebanese disassociation from the Syrian conflict.<sup>57</sup> Sectarian violence and bombings have prompted references to the 'Iraqisation' of Lebanon.<sup>58</sup> There are also signs that the sheer volume of refugees pouring into the country is reaching a tipping point.<sup>59</sup> Whether or not Hezbollah still represents a force for stability amidst the chaos is a matter of debate. Aside from spurious and denied links to two devastating August 2013 car-bombings in Tripoli,<sup>60</sup> the party has not been responsible for unleashing its arsenal within Lebanon nor dragging the country into another war with Israel. However, the psychological and divisive impact of its gung-

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<sup>53</sup> The National Dialogue brings together representatives of all political groups to discuss various issues of national importance, notably the question of arms trafficking and illegal weapons arsenals in the country.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with an EU official, *op.cit.*

<sup>55</sup> This has come in the form of highly-charged threats from fundamentalist groups in both Lebanon and Syria, as well as more recently in the form of a lethal car bomb in Hezbollah's stronghold of Southern Beirut on 15 August 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Barnes-Dacey, *op.cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> For the text of the declaration, see United Nations General Assembly Security Council, report, A/66/849-S/2012/477, 21 June 2012.

<sup>58</sup> J. Aziz, "Blast in Beirut Sparks Fears of 'Iraqization' of Lebanon", *Al-Monitor*, 15 August 2013.

<sup>59</sup> "Syria Regional Refugee Response: Lebanon", *UNHCR*.

<sup>60</sup> "Al Qaeda blames Hezbollah for Lebanon bombings", *Reuters*, 24 August 2013.

ho support for Assad's regime, as well as the rhetorical impact of Secretary-General Nasrallah's increasingly fiery oratory,<sup>61</sup> cannot be understated.

In this context the EU's previous, softly-softly approach towards Hezbollah, based on a fear of re-radicalisation and the unknown and unwelcome outcomes which that would involve, appeared increasingly obsolete.<sup>62</sup> In the face of endogenous tensions within Lebanon which Hezbollah's military actions are doing little to assuage, as well as exogenous catalysts such as the Burgas incident and member state pressures, the EU's blacklisting decision is theoretically comprehensible. Maintaining dialogue with the political wing will still *a priori* allow for the overall long-term goal in Lebanon – the fleshing out of the democratic egg – to be pursued while shorter-term objectives of Lebanese stability are tackled by attempting to corner Hezbollah's illegal and counterproductive military apparatus.

The fragile egg-shell of Lebanon does not just have to contend with internal issues; it is surrounded by trampling feet which threaten to shatter it at any moment. Hezbollah plays a pivotal role in most of these sources of regional tension due to its links to Syria and Iran, resistance to Israel and growing rivalry with the Gulf States. It thus risks being a particularly destabilising force if it attracts – willingly or unwillingly – the undue attention of powerful regional actors. As a result, the decision to take the stand of listing its military wing is directly related to EU policy in the region.

#### *Solving Syria: Hezbollah in too deep*

The spillover dangers of the Syrian crisis for Hezbollah and Lebanon from an 'outside-in perspective' have already been noted but it is also important to analyse how Hezbollah fits into the more general picture of the EU's stance towards the conflict. Like the US, Europe's position is based on a clear choice of side – the rebels – but not backed up with any comprehensive military or on-the-ground aid to help them advance. This cautious, humanitarian and sanctions-based approach remains the priority, especially since the mooted military strikes involving the UK and France in August were sidelined following a messy US-Russia brokered deal to rid Syria of its chemical weapons.

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<sup>61</sup> "Nasrallah: we cannot side with the beheaders in Syria", *Al-Akhbar*, 25 May 2013.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with an EU official, *op.cit.*

A desire to avoid further inflaming political-sectarian tensions – both within Syria and at the regional level – as well as a growing preoccupation with the development of Sunni terrorist groups<sup>63</sup> meant that the EU downplayed somewhat the role of Hezbollah in Syria until recently. It was feared that initiatives to put pressure on Hezbollah with a terrorist listing and sanctions would lead to a doubling-down by the party on its support for Assad's regime and a more overt presence of Hezbollah fighters within Syria.<sup>64</sup> This would prolong the violence, widen divisions, and provoke the further ire of the Gulf States which have already displayed impatience with Lebanon's failure to fully respect its policy of disassociation.<sup>65</sup>

However, recent months have seen Hezbollah raise the level of its military involvement in Syria *regardless* of any European soft-handling. Qusayr, heightened rhetoric and the sheer volume of Hezbollah "martyrs" returning from the Syrian battlefield demonstrate this beyond doubt.<sup>66</sup> Hezbollah's escalated involvement, which has mirrored the escalation of the conflict more generally, has prolonged the battle, contributed somewhat to regionalising the conflict, and raised the spectre of full-scale regional war. In this sense the terrorist listing of its military wing – although not likely to alter the balance of power in the Syrian war in any way – can be seen as a symbolic rebuke by Brussels – the "political signal" to which Ashton referred.<sup>67</sup>

Strategically, the decision also accompanies an overall hardening of the European stance towards the conflict. The recent French and British hints at a military intervention to dissuade the use of chemical weapons, as well as stronger EU statements of condemnation of Assad's regime,<sup>68</sup> are the latest signals of a heightened European resolve to reach a solution to the crisis. Targeting Hezbollah, as a vital but vulnerable element of support for the Syrian regime, is thus part of a holistic – if sometimes fragmented – European approach which has seen further

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<sup>63</sup> Notably the group Jabhat al-Nusra, see M. Peel, "Syrian jihadists pledge fealty to al-Qaeda", *Financial Times*, 10 April 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with an EU official, *op.cit.*

<sup>65</sup> "GCC 'worried' Lebanon not abiding by dissociation policy", *The Daily Star*, 5 March 2013.

<sup>66</sup> M. Fitzgerald, "We are not fighting a new enemy in Syria", *The Irish Times*, 22 July 2013.

<sup>67</sup> Norman, "EU to Put Hezbollah Military Wing on Terror List", *op.cit.*

<sup>68</sup> "Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the informal meeting of EU Foreign Ministers, Vilnius, 7 September 2013", Press release, A 447/13, 7 September 2013.



sanctions imposed on 31 May 2013<sup>69</sup> as well as earnest efforts to improve the humanitarian situation.<sup>70</sup> "To oust Assad, pressure Hezbollah";<sup>71</sup> this headline in the New York Times succinctly sums up the objective, although Europe has chosen to "pressure" via a terrorist listing rather than via other avenues such as negotiations with Iran.

### *Iran and the Gulf: Europe taking sides in the regional Cold War?*

The dust thrown up by the Arab uprisings, which is still swirling rather than settling in most areas, has plunged the entire region into a period of shifting geopolitical dynamics. Of the various trends that have been used to describe the current context,<sup>72</sup> one has received considerable attention: the growing Sunni-Shi'i schism across the Middle East. Although local and traditional affiliations often trump any over-arching ideological or strategic perspective,<sup>73</sup> the growth in sectarian violence within states from Egypt to Lebanon, and increasingly bloodily in Iraq, is cause for concern. Whether as a symptom or a cause, sectarianism is also increasingly the dominant divider in the Syrian conflict.<sup>74</sup>

Geopolitically, this schism roughly corresponds to the 'regional Cold War' pitting Iran, as the bastion of Shi'i Islam in the region, against Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies. The struggle for regional supremacy between the two camps has moved up a notch following the escalation of violence in Syria, with the conflict now being seen as a proxy battle between Tehran and the Gulf. Further widening the circles of foreign meddling in Syria, the conflict is now also increasingly tinged with a 'US versus Russia' flavour. As for Europe, although it has taken a clear stance in supporting the rebels in Syria, it wants to avoid any escalation of this sectarian divide into a large-scale regional war which would plunge the Middle East into chaos; what French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius referred to as an "apocalyptic" scenario.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> "Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the European Union on the alignment of certain third countries with Council Decision 2013/255/CFSP concerning restrictive measures against Syria", Press release, 11533/1/13 REV 1, 24 June 2013.

<sup>70</sup> European Commission, European Commission, "Statement by Kristalina Georgieva on latest figure of refugees fleeing from the Syrian crisis", Memo/13/761, 3 September 2013.

<sup>71</sup> J. Stevenson, "To Oust Assad, Pressure Hezbollah", *The New York Times*, 18 July 2013.

<sup>72</sup> R. Youngs, "Living with the Middle East's old-new security paradigm", *FRIDE*, policy brief, no. 152, March 2013.

<sup>73</sup> Abdo, *op.cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> M. Peel, "Battlelines drawn", *Financial Times*, 1 August 2013.

<sup>75</sup> Fabius, *op.cit.*

Hezbollah is a trump card in this regional divide. A veritable “cat’s paw”<sup>76</sup> of Iran in Lebanon since its inception, the fiercely Shi’i party is a key ideological and geopolitical component of the regional power play. The previously benign position of the EU regarding the group took this into consideration: with the Assad regime on the ropes and Iran crippled by economic sanctions, attacking Hezbollah could have been the straw that broke the camel’s back, provoking a backlash of the Shi’i allies to go on the offensive and safeguard their regional status. The Saudis, “the worst people alive”,<sup>77</sup> according to one Hezbollah commander, are also reported to be funding militant groups within Lebanon so that they can contribute to the fight next door.<sup>78</sup> Siding too closely with the Gulf states would be doing on a regional level what the EU has attempted to avoid in Lebanon – overtly declaring sides in a risky and nuanced conflict.

The recent decision to blacklist Hezbollah’s military wing appears somewhat surprising in this respect. However, as with the Syrian issue, the listing is in keeping with the recent escalation of regional tensions and shifts in the balance of power. Culminating in the recent global divisions concerning a possible US-led strike on Syria, the battlelines have been becoming steadily more clearly drawn. By taking the symbolic step of a terrorist listing while keeping lines of communication open with Hezbollah’s political wing, Europe is attempting to satisfy its regional ‘allies’, pressure its regional ‘enemies’, while ultimately not doing so in such a way that tensions will be irrevocably inflamed. Similarly to its tightrope act regarding the Israeli-Palestinian issue – where both sides often view the EU as leaning towards the other – it remains to be seen whether this objective can be achieved.

#### *The Middle East Peace Process: back on the radar*

The Israeli-Palestinian dispute is an issue which permeates everything in the Middle East. This is especially true for the question of Hezbollah. The party was born of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the very presence of the Jewish state “provides a reason for its existence as a political bloc and a militia”.<sup>79</sup> However, the

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<sup>76</sup> A. Norton, “The Role of Hezbollah in Domestic Lebanese Politics”, *The International Spectator*, vol. 42, no. 4, December 2007, p. 475.

<sup>77</sup> M. Prothero, “Paintballing with Hezbollah”, *Vice Magazine*, March 2012.

<sup>78</sup> Interview with S. Roborgh, Strategic Policy Analyst, *The Hague Centre for Strategic Studies (HCSS)*, 20 February 2013.

<sup>79</sup> Abdo, *op.cit.*, p. 37.

Israeli-Palestinian issue was pushed aside and relatively neglected during and immediately after the Arab spring.<sup>80</sup> For Arab states, national aspirations, socio-economic concerns and the newly invigorated Shi'i-Sunni divide took precedence over the ongoing stalemate in the Holy Land. For the EU and traditional leader America, responding to the security and policy implications of the revolutions was the priority.

Hezbollah had also calmed somewhat its rhetoric towards Israel. At a time when there was no indication that either Israel or Hezbollah was "spoiling for a fight",<sup>81</sup> Europe was thus reluctant to antagonise the situation with a provocative terrorist listing. Indeed, not doing so allowed Europe to cultivate an image as a more neutral broker, especially in contrast to the US with whom it arguably plays a 'good cop-bad cop' role-play in the region. Further, the repercussions of the strategically compromising decision which led to the blacklisting of the democratically elected Hamas in 2005 were still being acutely felt.<sup>82</sup> Not only did this decision "erode the EU's credibility" in the region,<sup>83</sup> but it also achieved the opposite objectives of pressuring more cooperation on the part of Hamas and weakening its appeal.<sup>84</sup> Avoiding a similar situation with Hezbollah – which would potentially impact the course of any future peace talks – was, and of course remains, of paramount importance.

However, the timing of the recent terrorist listing has coincided almost exactly with the launching of a high-profile but secretive round of talks between Israeli and Palestinian negotiators. While it is unclear how much the imminent talks influenced the EU listing, a recent spate of lobbying by US and Israeli figures cannot be ignored.<sup>85</sup> Further, Europe's relatively benign position regarding Hezbollah has historically been a stumbling block when it comes to gaining the trust of the Israelis in negotiations, Israel having "deep-seated reservations" with regards to the EU's

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<sup>80</sup> A. Echagüe & B. Mikail, "The Middle East Conundrum", in G. Grevi & D. Keohane (eds.), *Challenges for European Foreign Policy in 2013: Renewing the EU's Role in the World*, Madrid, FRIDE, 2013, p. 66.

<sup>81</sup> J. Muir, "What next for Hezbollah, Israel, Syria and Iran?", *BBC News*, 15 February 2013.

<sup>82</sup> Interview with an EU official, *op.cit.* The official recognised that the Hamas listing was a sore topic for many within the EU.

<sup>83</sup> B. Khader, Professor at the Catholic University of Louvain, speech, conference, *Palestine, the EU and the Middle East Peace Process*, College of Europe, Bruges, 4 April 2013.

<sup>84</sup> P. Müller, *EU Foreign Policymaking and the Middle East Conflict: The Europeanization of National Foreign Policy*, London, Routledge, 2012, p. 58.

<sup>85</sup> Notably Israeli President Shimon Peres' speech before the European Parliament on 12 March 2013.

involvement in any security issues in the region.<sup>86</sup> Such a move by Brussels could be seen partly as an attempt to preserve a foothold in US and Israeli circles, particularly following a recent EU directive which caused anger in Tel Aviv by excluding certain Israeli settlements from future international agreements between with Europe.<sup>87</sup>

Regarding fears of a Hamas repeat, the EU has taken the middle, 'soft', route of listing only Hezbollah's military wing – allowing the democratically legitimate political wing to continue operating freely. The other fear, that difficult decisions such as terrorist listings are easier to go ahead with than to later reverse,<sup>88</sup> has been assuaged by the fact that the listing will be "reappraised" after a six-month period.<sup>89</sup> Although this is standard procedure, it does allow for the decision to be reassessed in light of any possible developments in the region.

## Evaluation of the European strategy

### *Softly softly no joy*

Europe's historic strategy towards Hezbollah had many things to commend it. Active engagement with the group constituted a "commendable exception" to the pre-Arab spring trend of ignoring political Islamists,<sup>90</sup> while a reluctance to cede to post-Arab spring US and Israeli pressure demonstrated that the EU recognised the moderating force of Hezbollah in a region defined by chaos. Within Lebanon, recognising Hezbollah's irredeemable tenancy in the "House of many mansions"<sup>91</sup> respected the complex consociational dynamics which constitute the country. Further, its active support for initiatives attempting to integrate Hezbollah – and its

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<sup>86</sup> C. Musu, *European Union Policy Towards the Arab-Israeli Peace Process: the Quicksands of Politics*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 74.

<sup>87</sup> "Guidelines on the eligibility of Israeli entities and their activities in the territories occupied by Israel since June 1967 for grants, prizes and financial instruments funded by the EU from 2014 onwards", *Official Journal of the European Union*, 2013/C 205/05, 19 July 2013.

<sup>88</sup> M. Gallagher, deputy Head of Division, Middle East Peace Process, Israel and the Occupied Palestinian territory at the EEAS, speech, conference, *Palestine, the EU and the Middle East Peace Process*, College of Europe, Bruges, 4 April 2013.

<sup>89</sup> "Remarks by EU High Representative Catherine Ashton following the Foreign Affairs Council", *op.cit.*

<sup>90</sup> F. Burgat, "Europe and the Arab World: The dilemma of recognising counterparts", *International Politics*, vol. 46, no. 5, 2009, p. 630.

<sup>91</sup> K. Salibi, *A House of Many Mansions*, London, I.B. Taurus, 2003.

military forces – into a national framework<sup>92</sup> demonstrated an understanding that coercive action alone will never resolve the question of violence emanating from the region.<sup>93</sup>

But commendable strategies are not synonymous with effective strategies. As regards the long-term and broad objective of the development of a stable and democratic Lebanese society, such has been the lack of impact of EU (and US) policies that some scholars have suggested that they have been “counter-productive”.<sup>94</sup> EU policy – lacking conditionality and any “targeted dialogue activities”<sup>95</sup> – did nothing to prevent Hezbollah maintaining and even increasing in recent years its considerable military capabilities, which undermine the authority of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF).<sup>96</sup> This military clout – along with its value as a religious symbol and social actor – means that Hezbollah more than ever operates a ‘state within a state’. The EU, viewed as a benign but ultimately not *influential* actor by Lebanese elites,<sup>97</sup> has been unable to induce any other outcome and has thus viewed Hezbollah within the prism of a “pragmatic, realist agenda”<sup>98</sup> towards Lebanon.

However, even the fundamental objective of stability is now threatened by the progressive involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict. Efforts by the EU to avoid a radicalisation of the party by prioritising a non-confrontational strategy was indeed welcome according to local sources,<sup>99</sup> although the initial reluctance of Hezbollah to overtly join the battle stemmed more from pragmatic considerations than from external prompting. Like much in the region, the uneasy stability came about irrespective – rather than because – of EU calls for calm. The more recent escalation

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<sup>92</sup> Along with the previously mentioned National Dialogue, the EU also backed the National Defence Strategy, which aimed to tackle the issue of Hezbollah’s arms head-on. This National Defence Strategy failed.

<sup>93</sup> Musu, *European Union Policy Towards the Arab-Israeli Peace Process*, *op.cit.*, p. 166.

<sup>94</sup> N. Tocci, “The Impact of Western Policies towards Hamas and Hezbollah: What Went Wrong?”, in M. Emerson and R. Youngs (eds.), *Political Islam and European Foreign Policy: Perspectives from Muslim Democrats of the Mediterranean*, Brussels, Centre for European Policy Studies, 2007, p. 139.

<sup>95</sup> Interview with an EU official, *op.cit.*

<sup>96</sup> Lutz, “La FINUL”, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>97</sup> Santini & Trombella, *op.cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>98</sup> Seeberg, *op.cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>99</sup> Interview with M. Young, *op.cit.*

of Hezbollah fighting has flown in the face of European efforts to the contrary<sup>100</sup> and progressive spillover from Syria – as demonstrated most recently by the bombings in Tripoli on 23 August 2013 – meant that a rethinking of EU policy towards the group was indeed necessary.

### *Consequences of listing*

Whether or not the listing of Hezbollah's military wing as a terrorist organisation is the appropriate response is another matter. Concrete ramifications will take time to become evident, while any immaterial or symbolic results of the listing will be difficult to gauge. *A priori*, the sanctions, travel bans and asset freezes which are now levelled on Hezbollah military figures will make it "more difficult for Hezbollah to raise funds in Europe for its activities", according to MEP Charles Tannock.<sup>101</sup> Politically, the aim is to make the party think twice about its unconditional backing of President Assad, while also serving as one element of an overall EU strategy to work against the Syrian regime.

However, it is difficult to see how the listing is going to achieve significant progress on either count – material or political. As regards disrupting its European activities, Hezbollah undertakes very little military fundraising within the EU in any case.<sup>102</sup> Most of its military funding and capabilities come from Iran, often via Syria,<sup>103</sup> while the party also controls much of the illegal arms trade within Lebanon.<sup>104</sup> Travel bans and asset freezes are similarly unlikely to dent the confidence or the wallet of Hezbollah cadres. As Jamal Ghosn, managing editor of Lebanese daily Al-Akhbar put it, "it's not like any of them are going to visit Marbella this summer".<sup>105</sup>

Politically, the symbolic nature of the listing is also unlikely to cause a major shift in Hezbollah's current trajectory. Indeed, the EU's faffing around with definitions was

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<sup>100</sup> For example, a European ambassador reportedly met with a high-ranking Hezbollah official in March 2013 and threatened a tightening of EU pressure unless the party toned down its Syrian involvement. See J. Aziz, "Hezbollah Sees Nothing New From Obama Visit", *Al-Monitor*, 3 April 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Quoted in "EU adds Hezbollah's military wing to its terrorist list", *Euractiv*, 22 July 2013.

<sup>102</sup> J. Barnes-Dacey, "EU blacklists Hezbollah: symbolism without impact", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, 22 July 2013.

<sup>103</sup> A.H. Cordesman, "Iran's Support of the Hezbollah in Lebanon", *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 2006.

<sup>104</sup> Interview with F. Lutz, researcher on small arms and arms transfers, *Groupe de Recherche et d'Information sur la Paix et la Sécurité*, Brussels, 11 April 2013.

<sup>105</sup> "EU blacklists Hezbollah's armed wing", *Al Jazeera*, 23 July 2013.

already described as “largely irrelevant” to the situation in Beirut even before the listing.<sup>106</sup> For Hezbollah, the US, Syria and patron Iran are the important players;<sup>107</sup> indeed, Nasrallah dismissed the prospect of a European sanctioning before it was even decided upon.<sup>108</sup> Further, as a political strategy sanctions alone are insufficient in tackling the issue of violence emanating from the region,<sup>109</sup> and the apparent lack of any reinforced diplomatic efforts to reach a solution – a reflection of the current impasse in Syria – is worrying.

While the listing is unlikely to cause a significant deterioration of events on the ground in Lebanon, it will undoubtedly have a knock-on effect on perceptions of Europe in the region. The Lebanese government as a whole was against the move,<sup>110</sup> while a prominent Hezbollah analyst, Amal Saad-Ghorayeb, suggested that the decision “will anger the Shia community”.<sup>111</sup> Hezbollah itself characterised the decision as “written by American hands with Zionist ink”,<sup>112</sup> while the indirect signal that the listing sends to Iran puts Europe ever more clearly on one side of an emerging regional divide, as discussed earlier. In a complicated region where the EU is struggling to shape a coherent and inclusive strategy after years of double standards and cozying up to Arab dictators, this is dangerous. All the more so at a time when engagement with the new, seemingly more moderate administration in Tehran, could go a long way towards encouraging cooperation on Syria and Lebanon.<sup>113</sup>

### *Acting with distinction?*

Reinforcing the sentiment that the EU decision was more symbolic than substantive is the fact that the distinction between military and political wings is not easily made. The EU defines Hezbollah’s military wing as comprising of the group’s Jihad Council and External Security Organisation.<sup>114</sup> However, academic studies and statements by Hezbollah figures – including Deputy Secretary-General Sheik Naim Qassem – have shown that the centralised nature of the command structure of the Party of God

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<sup>106</sup> Interview with M. Young, *op.cit.*

<sup>107</sup> Atrissi, *op.cit.*, p. 86.

<sup>108</sup> “Nasrallah: we cannot side with the beheaders”, *op.cit.*

<sup>109</sup> Tocci, *op.cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>110</sup> Norman, “EU to Put Hezbollah Military Wing on Terror List”, *op.cit.*

<sup>111</sup> N. Samaha, “Hezbollah: The EU’s new ‘terrorists’”, *Al Jazeera*, 23 July 2013.

<sup>112</sup> “Hezbollah Slams Aggressive EU Decision”, *Al Manar*, 23 July 2013.

<sup>113</sup> Echagüe & Mikail, *op.cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>114</sup> M. Khalifeh, “EU Envoy: We Must Differentiate Between Hezbollah, Military Wing”, *Al-Monitor*, 26 July 2013.

means that no such distinction is coherent.<sup>115</sup> Even member states recognise this: not long before the EU's decision, a French foreign ministry official dismissed such a separation as "artificial";<sup>116</sup> the Dutch labelled it "rather naïve";<sup>117</sup> while the Irish Minister for Defence categorically stated that "Hezbollah has just one wing".<sup>118</sup>

The hybrid distinction thus reflects the EU's desire to reach a compromise decision which reprimands without overly-antagonising Hezbollah. It also allows Europe to continue dialogue and aid flows to the Lebanese government, of which Hezbollah is a major part; a full boycotting would have necessitated cutting all forms of communication with the group. However, aside from removing from the substance of the policy by making any concrete effects unlikely – one analyst branded the decision a "fudge"<sup>119</sup> – the military distinction also adds an extra layer of complexity to the affair. Seeking to distinguish between Hezbollah's wholly legitimate social activities and its now illegal military activities in Europe is not an easy task.

### **Conclusion: Keep talking**

As of early October 2013, the situation in both Syria and Lebanon has reached new levels of tension. Although the hastily brokered deal by the US and Russia to rid Syria of chemical weapons has averted foreign intervention for now, the death toll in Syria has well exceeded 100,000 and President Assad has issued warnings about a coming regional war.<sup>120</sup> In Lebanon the suffocating influx of refugees, heightened sectarian tensions and political paralysis have left the country, oft-described as 'on-edge', teetering on the brink.

Amidst this chaos, why has the EU decided to proscribe the military wing of Hezbollah? And will this amount to an effective policy shift?

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<sup>115</sup> Qassem quoted in M. Levitt, "On a Military Wing and a Prayer", *Foreign Policy*, 12 February 2013. See also S. Simon & J. Stevenson, "The Hezbollah Problem", *Democracy Journal*, no. 17, Summer 2010.

<sup>116</sup> Interview, French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *op.cit.*

<sup>117</sup> Interview, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *op.cit.*

<sup>118</sup> N. Fleming-Farrell, "Irish minister: Hezbollah has just one wing", *The Daily Star Lebanon*, 11 March 2013.

<sup>119</sup> J. Barnes-Dacey quoted in Norman, "EU to Put Hezbollah Military Wing on Terror List", *op.cit.*

<sup>120</sup> G. Malbrunot, "La mise en garde d'Assad à la France", *Le Figaro*, 2 September 2013.



Against the backdrop of the Burgas bombing, the decision of the 28 EU member states to blacklist the military wing of an increasingly belligerent Hezbollah is politically understandable. But it could also be unhelpful. Hezbollah is fighting, or believes that it is fighting, an existential battle. The fall of the Assad regime and the ascendance of the diverse Sunni factions which currently constitute the Syrian rebel opposition would push the party into an extremely tight corner. While acknowledging the legitimate and indispensable nature of Hezbollah as a political actor is commendable, targeting the party's militia at a time when it feels that these weapons are its only guarantor of survival seems hasty. Although it has attempted to preserve some leeway by avoiding a full listing, the decision leaves the EU on a clear side of the emerging regional divide.

It will also almost definitely be materially ineffectual. The political-military distinction, and thus the substance of the decision as a whole, is artificial. Lebanese poet and philosopher Kahlil Gibran said that "you cannot separate the just from the unjust and the good from the wicked; for they stand together before the face of the sun just as the black and the white thread are woven together".<sup>121</sup> With Hezbollah, there is no 'good' and 'bad' side; it is a homogenous if protean organisation which should be treated as a single bloc.

Adel Al-Toraifi, editor-in-chief of Asharq Al-Awsat, wrote presciently in February 2013 that Hezbollah was at a crossroads; between fighting a regional war to regain its moral and military presence, or following a road towards peace and a moderate but sustainable existence in Lebanon.<sup>122</sup> The EU cannot, for the sake of the entire region, assume that the former path has been irrevocably chosen. If it has decided to proscribe Hezbollah's military action, it should now keep talking with the party in order to reassure it that there is more than one way out of the current and post-Assad quagmire. Efforts to coerce must *support* diplomacy rather than *replace* it;<sup>123</sup> for the EU and Hezbollah, the stick of this military listing must also be accompanied by serious diplomatic efforts at communication.

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<sup>121</sup> K. Gibran, *The Prophet*, London, Wordsworth Editions, 1996.

<sup>122</sup> Al-Toraifi, *op.cit.*

<sup>123</sup> A. de Waal & B. Conley-Zilkic, "What Sir William Would Do in Syria", *International Herald Tribune*, 4 September 2013.

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