

British Policies Gradually Align With Washington's

Yesterday, the British Home Secretary Sajid Javid declared that the UK was planning to ban the political branch of Hezbollah, Lebanon's Shia socio-political movement. Claiming that UK authorities were no longer able to distinguish between Hezbollah's political and military wings, the Home Secretary decided to outlaw membership or support to this group, which has for long been accused of terrorism across the world and backed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. This banning was accompanied by a ban on West African militant and Islamist groups like Ansar Al Islam and Jamaat Nusrat al Islam Wal Muslimin.

Whilst Sajid Javid said that Hezbollah was "continuing in its attempts to destabilise the fragile situation in the Middle East", Jeremy Hunt, Britain's Foreign Secretary declared that the ban was sending a clear signal showing that Britain does not "turn a blind eye to Hezbollah's terrorist activities". Parts of Hezbollah were already proscribed in the UK whilst its military wing got banned in 2008, following the 2006 Lebanon war and the attempt by the Lebanese government to curb down Hezbollah's power in 2008.

From the 29th February onwards, anyone being a member of Hezbollah or drumming support for the organisation in the UK will be handed a sentence of up to 10 years. Even wearing or carrying something provoking "reasonable suspicion" that the carrier is a Hezbollah member could be punishable by a six-months prison sentence.

This move shows that the UK is getting closer to the US, with which it recently reached a deal preserving trading arrangements, in terms of counter-terrorism. In October 2018, President Trump pushed forward the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Amendments Act (HIFPAA) and in November the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on four people coordinating Hezbollah's activities in Iraq. Taking part in backing the Assad regime in Syria, it is believed that 2,000 fighters from the organisation have died in the conflict.

In Lebanon, the news was met with calm as Foreign Minister Gibran Bassil said that Britain's move "will not have direct negative consequences on Lebanon because we are already use to this situation with other countries". Also present during this Press Conference in Lebanon, Federica Mogherini (the EU's top diplomat) said that Britain's domestic decision did not affect the EU's position on Hezbollah.

Following a 2012 terrorist attack on a bus of Israeli tourists in Bulgaria, the EU decided to ban

Hezbollah's military wing in July 2013 but has persisted in seeing its political wing as an acceptable speaker and important actor in Lebanon. Only the Netherlands and a few MEPs and local MPs in EU countries seem to support the idea of banning Hezbollah outright. Israel has for long called upon Brussels to do so, in vain. It is unlikely that Britain's move will change this, especially as the country readies itself to leave the EU.

Hezbollah's financial power in Europe is unknown, however a lot of investigations have shown that the group is involved in money laundering and trafficking on the continent as well as in Latin America. Numbers advanced by Interpol show that Hezbollah is thought to have laundered EUR 1 million per week in 2015 and to have spent EUR 26 million in cash on luxury watches in 2014 to launder money. In early 2016, European authorities seized cash, luxury goods and properties from the network and arrested Mohamad Nourredine, a French-Lebanese businessman. Mr. Nouredine was sentenced to 7 years in prison last year in Paris due to money laundering and ties to Hezbollah. Outlawing Hezbollah throughout Europe would allow authorities to close bank accounts and track down businesses laundering money on behalf of Hezbollah, put its members on no-flight lists, and enable law-enforcement to take appropriate measures against the group.

Yet, it is unlikely that any judicial and financial sanctions will put Hezbollah down on its knees as the organisation is hybrid enough to find alternative avenues for financing and money laundering, in Latin America for instance where it allegedly has a strong presence in Venezuela. Also, the organisation remain an inevitable actor in Lebanon. Hezbollah is a strong actor in Lebanese politics and economics as 13 MPs out of 128 are from the party and 3 Ministries, including the important Ministry of Health, are controlled by party members.

Sources:

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