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Is Hezbollah a Terrorist Organization?

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Introduction¹

To the Chair of the Committee on Foreign Affairs, Mr. Elmar BROK; to honorable members of the European Union Committee on Foreign Affairs; and to my esteemed colleagues, Good morning, and thank you for your attention to my presentation today.

Is Hezbollah a Terrorist Organization ?

I have been invited here by this esteemed Committee to answer a question that greatly concerns the European Parliament, and which we are here to discuss today: Is Hezbollah a terrorist organization? It is natural that we should be discussing this question, for there is a great deal of evidence that Hezbollah is involved in terrorist activities internationally – including on European soil – and that it has been involved in terrorism and in killing civilians in Lebanon and regionally, in Iraq, Egypt, Bahrain – and especially in Syria.

The answer to this question is: YES. If we examine Hezbollah's organizational behavior throughout its history, in light of parameters that are included in most definitions of terrorism – that is, the actual use, or the threat of using, violence against civilians to achieve political goals – then we clearly see that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization.

Hezbollah is a hierarchical hybrid terrorist organization. It has three wings: a political wing; a social-welfare wing; and a military-terrorist (jihadist) wing. Hezbollah's three wings work in synergy. They are run directly by Hezbollah's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and by Hezbollah's Shura Council (that is, its "board of directors").

In 1992, Muhammad Fneish, a senior member of Hezbollah who during the 1990s represented it in Lebanon's parliament and later in the government, stated that "Our entry into parliament is one form of Resistance, a political form, because naturally we men of the Resistance need political backing, and armed Resistance needs political assistance...Our entry into parliament will promote armed resistance against the occupation."² In June 1996 he stated, "Resistance in all of its forms – military, political and civilian – is legitimate..."³ In

¹ This presentation is based on Eitan Azani, *Hezbollah: The Story of the Party of God; From Revolution to Institutionalization* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Eitan Azani, "Hezbollah's Strategy of 'Walking on the Edge': Between Political Game and Political Violence", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 35(11; 2012):741-759; and Eitan Azani, "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study", *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (forthcoming).

² Interview with Muhammad Fneish, *Al-Loua'a*, 16 September 1992.

³ Interview with Muhammad Fneish, Radio Kol Ha'Am, 18 June 1996.

2002, Fneish again raised this topic, stating: "One cannot separate Hezbollah's military wing from its political wing".⁴

Declaring Hezbollah a terrorist organization can be based on the following facts:

- **Hezbollah's vision and goals:** Hezbollah is founded on the ideology formulated by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini during and since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. According to this ideology, Israel is the "Little Satan". It has no right to exist, and efforts must be made to physically wipe it out. This ideology has been stated again and again over the years, most recently by former Iranian President Ahmadinejad and Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei.
- **The use of violence against civilians in the 1980s:** No one doubts or denies that Hezbollah used extreme violence throughout the 1980s. It kidnapped foreign citizens in and outside Lebanon, hijacked a TWA plane en route from Athens to Rome, and carried out suicide bombings against the US Embassy and the multinational force in Lebanon. Throughout the 1980s, Hezbollah used violence to try and topple the Lebanese regime and chase the multinational force out of Lebanon. For more than 30 years, Hezbollah's terrorist activity has been run by the same leadership, mainly Hassan Nasrallah, Imad Mughniyeh (until 2008), and Mustafa Badr a-Din.
- **The use of violence against civilians in the 1990s:** During the 1990s, Hezbollah perfected its means of operating within Lebanon, which at that time was rehabilitating itself (through the Ta'if Accord). Hezbollah began a campaign to hide that it was continuing to behave like a terrorist organization; it tried hard to "brand" itself as a legitimate Lebanese political party, which is part of the Lebanese political system. To reinforce this image, Hezbollah insisted that its actions against Israel were defensive, and meant to liberate Lebanon from the Israeli occupation. Hezbollah claimed that it fired Katyusha rockets at Israeli towns and cities as retaliation for Israeli aggression. During the 1990s, Hezbollah's purely terrorist nature was reflected in its involvement in terrorist attacks against Israeli and Jewish targets in Argentina. Throughout the 1990s, Hezbollah forced the Lebanese government to declare its support for the Resistance (against Israel). It refused under any circumstances to lay down its arms.

⁴ Muhammad Fneish, *Al-Manar*, 18 January 2002.

- **The use of violence against civilians from 2000 to the present:** When Israel withdrew the Israel Defense Forces to the international border with Lebanon in 2000, Hezbollah still did not lay down its arms. On the contrary. Now that it no longer had a reason to carry out guerilla acts against Israel, Hezbollah set up – with Iranian support – tens of thousands of missiles, and aimed them at Israeli population centers. During the Second Lebanon War (2006), Hezbollah fired some 4,000 missiles at Israel’s civilian population. Since that war, this important component of Hezbollah’s military capability has been repaired, enlarged and improved.
- **The use of violence against civilians abroad:** Hezbollah’s involvement in terrorist activity is a product of organization and orderly planning. It draws on the infrastructure that Hezbollah has established over the years, with Iranian support. Throughout its existence, Hezbollah has built up terrorism infrastructure worldwide. This infrastructure is based partly, but not only, on the Lebanese population. Hezbollah uses infrastructure for crime – especially its involvement in the drug trade, which earns it tens of millions of dollars a year – to gather intelligence, and to commit terrorist attacks against Jewish and Israeli targets all over the world. Since 2008, the fingerprints of Hezbollah and its Iranian allies have been found at the scene of numerous attempted and successful terrorist attacks in places as diverse as Burgas, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Nigeria. The traces of Hezbollah at these and other sites of attack or attempted attack prove that Hezbollah is a terrorist organization that acts against civilians, wherever it sees an opportunity to do so, and whenever it has the operational capability to do so. Hezbollah has not hesitated to defy the sovereignty of countries in South America, Africa and Europe. It has often violated the sovereignty of Muslim countries like Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Iraq. Hezbollah recruits members, gathers intelligence, engages in crime, and establishes logistical infrastructure in these and other countries. I wish to stress that if a country chooses **not** to declare Hezbollah a terrorist organization, this does not guarantee that Hezbollah will suddenly respect that country and see it as “out of bounds”. The only things that determine when and where Hezbollah acts, are its operational capability and the opportunity to use it.
- **The use of violence against civilians in Lebanese politics:** In Lebanon itself, Hezbollah has followed a strategy of “walking on the edge”. In other words, even as it has participated in elections and joined parliament and the government, it has continued

to use violence to reach its political goals. It has used both the threat of violence and actual violence – including political assassination, actual street clashes, and even the takeover of strategic spots and neighborhoods – to gain political power. It is no secret that Hezbollah was blamed for the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, who opposed it and Syria’s presence in Lebanon. The Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) that investigated the assassination handed down four personal indictments against senior members of Hezbollah. One of them was Mustafa Badr a-Din, the head of Hezbollah’s Jihad Council. Moreover, this was not the only murder attributed to Hezbollah. It has been accused of killing its opponents, including government ministers and members of parliament, journalists – even the Lebanese Police investigator who uncovered its involvement in the assassination of al-Hariri.

Hezbollah’s use of terrorism for political ends reached new heights in May 2008. At that time, Hezbollah used its military capability against Lebanese civilians because it did not like a particular decision by the Lebanese government, whose authority Hezbollah was unwilling to respect. In fighting that lasted three weeks, Hezbollah took control of the government’s seats of power in Beirut’s Sunni neighborhoods, killing tens of civilians in the process. It was only the intervention of Arab states that ended the crisis, through the signing of the Doha Agreement – which met most of Hezbollah’s demands.

- **The use of violence against civilians in the Middle East:** During the past decade, Hezbollah has actively fanned the flames of tension everywhere in the Middle East. Its involvement in the killing of the region’s civilians has surely reached its apex during the Syrian civil war, in which thousands of Hezbollah members are fighting in support of the Assad regime, under the command of Mustafa Badr a-Din and Iran’s Al-Quds forces. Hezbollah has also been involved in the killing of civilians in Iraq,, in Yemen where it assisted the Shi’ite Houthis, and in attempts to overthrow the Sunni leadership of Bahrain (which recently declared Hezbollah a terrorist organization). Since 2011, Hezbollah has become increasingly involved in the civil war in Syria – to the extent that its involvement in the fighting has begun to affect the political situation in Lebanon itself.

If all of these facts are true, we must ask: Why **isn’t** Hezbollah listed as a terrorist organization by the United Nations and most of the nations of the world? Why have only a

few countries listed Hezbollah as a terrorist organization? Why has Hezbollah's military-terrorist wing been outlawed by only a few more?

There are many reasons for this, too many to discuss in detail here. In general, they range between two extremes. At one extreme, we can say that declaring Hezbollah a terrorist organization is prevented by the lack of international consensus on a definition of terrorism; the political interests of individual states; a lack of knowledge about Hezbollah's true nature; and a desire "not to get involved". At the other extreme, we can say that Hezbollah has not been declared a terrorist organization because many countries have accepted its presentation of itself as a legitimate Lebanese political party whose armed "Resistance" is only meant to defend Lebanon against Israeli aggression.

Furthermore, I must take issue with those countries that favor outlawing only Hezbollah's military-terrorist wing. As I have tried to explain, such a designation has no basis in reality. Hezbollah does not see itself as a divided organization, with two or more branches that are unconnected and unrelated to one another. On the contrary: On many occasions throughout the group's history, Hezbollah's leaders have stated clearly and unequivocally that Hezbollah is a hierarchical, unified organization that functions under the control of one leadership. That leadership is headed by Hassan Nasrallah and composed of the Shura Council, which in turn is composed of representatives of all three wings of the organization. Hezbollah's participation in Lebanon's parliament has not made it more moderate – any more than Hamas' coming to power in the Gaza Strip has made *it* more moderate; any more than the power wielded by Islamist players in Iran and elsewhere has made *them* more moderate. Rather, Hezbollah uses the power it has amassed to impose its Islamist ideology and, it hopes, Islamic law [shari'a].

In 2000, Na'im Qassem, Nasrallah's deputy and a member of the Shura Council, summarized the nature and role of the Shura Council. He said, "Hezbollah has one leadership and its name is the Decision-Making Shura Council. It runs [Hezbollah's] political, jihadist (i.e. military), cultural and social activities...The leader of Hezbollah is the head of the Shura Council and also the head of the Jihad Council. This means that we have one leadership and one administration".⁵

⁵ *Al-Mustaqbal*, 31 December 2000.

Summary

Hezbollah is a hybrid terrorist organization. It is active in Lebanon, in the Middle East, and throughout the world. It uses violence and terrorism to promote its goals and the interests of its patrons, Iran and Syria. Hezbollah has three wings – civilian, terrorist and political – that act in synchronization and synergy. In this way, Hezbollah can present the outward appearance of a legitimate, pragmatic Lebanese political party, which only uses guerilla tactics against an aggressive occupying army. Yet in reality, Hezbollah’s leaders are also the leaders of its terrorist wing; they engage in acts of terrorism and the killing of civilians – in Lebanon, in the Middle East, and throughout the world. This involvement has reached its peak in the engagement of thousands of Hezbollah fighters, under Iranian command, in the civil war in Syria. The findings of the investigations into the terrorist attack in Burgas, and into the attempted terrorist attacks in Cyprus and Nigeria, prove that Hezbollah is involved in terrorism not as a one-time phenomenon or a random event. They prove that it is Hezbollah’s stable, permanent organizational policy and strategy to use violence internationally to reach its goals. It is supported in this by Iran.

If we do not declare Hezbollah a terrorist organization, or declare only a part of it to be a terrorist organization, we will be playing into Hezbollah’s hands. Countries that prefer not to get involved in making such a declaration, will not necessarily ensure themselves “peace and quiet” by their abstinence. Hezbollah is already active on the European continent and elsewhere, recruiting members, engaging in crime, raising funds, gathering intelligence, laying down logistical infrastructure – and yes, committing or trying to commit terrorist attacks.

To cope effectively with Hezbollah’s activities, the international community must strive to reach broader agreement that Hezbollah is indeed a terrorist organization, which should be declared illegal in as many countries as possible. Thank you very much.