

## Terrorism expert calls for ban on Hezbollah in Europe

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PRAGUE -- Alexander Ritzmann, senior fellow at the European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels, is leading a campaign to have Hezbollah declared a terrorist organization in Europe. A specialist on the radicalization of Muslims in Germany and Europe, as well as on Hezbollah and Hamas, he is a former member of the Berlin State Parliament and a senior member of the Free Democratic Party in Germany.

Ritzmann previously served as the ranking member of his party on homeland security and intelligence committees and was its spokesman for homeland security. RFE/RL correspondent Jeremy Bransten interviewed Ritzmann at RFE/RL headquarters in Prague.

RFE/RL: You have led an effort in recent years to get Hezbollah listed as a terrorist organization in Europe. Why is Hezbollah of such concern?

Alexander Ritzmann: Hezbollah has proven in the past that they are able to commit terrorist acts. They have assassinated [Iranian] opposition politicians, for example in the famous Berlin Mykonos [restaurant] assassinations [in 1992], and they did that as a tool of the Iranian regime. So Iran organized and called for the assassinations; Hezbollah members actually pulled the trigger. We had a similar situation in Argentina, with the bombing in Buenos Aires [of a Jewish cultural center.] An Iran-guided mission was carried out by Hezbollah operatives. That's all been proven in a court of law. There have been other accusations that Hezbollah has been involved in bombings and assassinations in Europe within the last 20 years.

RFE/RL: But lately, they've kept a lower profile in Europe. What's the reason? Does it mean Hezbollah's capabilities have been degraded?

Ritzmann: Hezbollah, in the last years, has been focusing on fund-raising in Europe. But it has the capability and the general motivation to strike. The problem is that it's their decision. The German and European security agencies are not in control of this network. If Iran wants to make a statement using Hezbollah, as they've done in the past many times, they will do it and we will have to face the consequences. And I'm saying we cannot sit here, knowing what's going on, and hope they don't do anything. We have to do whatever's possible within the legal framework we have.

RFE/RL: How many supporters does Hezbollah have in Europe?

Ritzmann: In Germany, security officials say there are 900 known followers, meaning members, who say they officially support Hezbollah. On Shi'ite holy days and other celebrations, there are thousands of followers gathering and celebrating. So, as usual, you have different types of followers. You have a core of activists and then you have people who sympathize with the group. And the core of activists seems to be around 900 in Germany. And we have comparable sizes of supporters in other European countries.

### European Appeasement

RFE/RL: What would be the effect of designating Hezbollah a terrorist organization and how would you describe European policy toward the organization to date?

Ritzmann: For some reason, the Europeans have largely ignored Hezbollah's presence over the last 20 years, have appeased it, have been 'nice' so to say. I think it's time to ban Hezbollah in Europe, meaning that their financial assets would be frozen and it would be illegal to transfer money from Europe to Hezbollah in Lebanon. And that would be the immediate effect, so that we no longer support an organization that wants to destroy the state of Israel, that wants to fight the United States and other Western forces if necessary, and wants to establish an Iran-like Islamist state in Lebanon. We don't support [these goals], so we have to act.

RFE/RL: Your own country, Germany, as well as other European states such as France, Italy, Sweden, or Spain have resisted calls to ban Hezbollah, even though some of these same countries ban other groups that are arguably less threatening, such as Hizb Ut-Tahrir, which does not advocate violence. Why?

Ritzmann: Hezbollah is a complex organization. They have a very strong political wing, they have a social wing, and they have their terrorist wing. Some people try to separate that. They say: 'OK, there's a terrorist wing. We don't like that. But

we have to accept that they're also a political party.' So the question is: is Hezbollah a jihadist terrorist movement that plays politics or is it a political party that sometimes commits terrorist acts? And from what I have learned in the last years, it is definitely a jihadist terrorist movement that plays politics because it's in their interest.

They have a large social network. They operate schools, they operate hospitals, they operate banks. In southern Lebanon they have replaced the Lebanese state. So they get a lot of support. It's easy to become a Hezbollah member if you get free health care, free schooling, a well-paying job, if you subscribe to their ideology. And that's how it works. So some people say they're not just a terrorist organization, which is right.

But I'm saying they commit terrorist acts and have a long history of that, so we have to judge them by their actions. The other point is that people are afraid of retaliation by Hezbollah. So if we disturb their safe haven here, if we go after them in a court of law, Hezbollah might fight back. They might target UNIFIL soldiers in Lebanon -- Spanish, French, German, Italian soldiers or as they've also done in the past, they might even attack in Europe -- commit assassinations, as they've done, or even undertake bombings. So there are various reasons and it's a complex picture.

#### Extremist Broadcasts

RFE/RL: One way Hezbollah reaches its supporters in Europe is through its Arabic-language satellite TV program, Al-Manar. Due in part to your efforts, European satellite operators recently dropped Al-Manar from their programs. Can you describe the station's broadcasts?

Ritzmann: It's a very smart program. You have music clips, you have regular news, and you have incitement, hate against Jews, Israel, Christians, everybody who is disagreeing with Hezbollah's perspective. [German media] have had interviews with youth in Europe, in Berlin, in Germany, who said 'We hate Jews, we hate Israel, we hate the United States.' And the journalists asked why? And they replied: 'We watch Al-Manar and we see what they are doing to us Muslims.' So Al-Manar is a tool to radicalize Muslims. It does other things as well, but it's a problem.

The situation is that the European Union has a directive that prohibits the broadcast of incitement [to violence] and hate speech. So European satellites dropped Al-Manar, stopped broadcasting them. But there are still two satellites that do, NileSat and Arabsat, run by Egypt and Saudi Arabia. So we need a diplomatic initiative to talk to those two countries and tell them it's not in our interest that they broadcast Al-Manar into Europe because we don't want our Muslims to become more radicalized.

RFE/RL: Isn't it odd that two majority Sunni states in the Middle East, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are helping a militant Shi'ite station broadcast internationally?

Ritzmann: There is some odd cooperation. It seems the Shi'ites are very pragmatic. They are the minority within the Muslim faith. They cooperate with the Sunnis on various fronts. And in this specific case, Sunni states allow the broadcast of Shi'ite hate TV. That's how it is and we have to address that.

RFE/RL: Aside from your calls for a diplomatic initiative, you have also worked to deprive Al-Manar of some lucrative corporate sponsorship. Is it true that major Western corporations were advertising on Al-Manar without being aware of the program content?

Ritzmann: It took the Coalition Against Terrorist Media to make the European Union aware that Al-Manar is broadcasting incitement, hate, and all those other things into European living rooms. There were individuals doing something [to bring this to light] and that's when things changed. Individuals traveling throughout Europe, talking to governments, talking to parliaments, talking to companies like Coca-Cola, like Procter and Gamble and all the big car manufacturers that had ads on Al-Manar. We went to these companies and said: 'Do you know what you're supporting?' And they said no, what's the problem? There was a road show where we showed them five minutes of Al-Manar broadcasting. And they all turned white and said OK, we're going to drop our ads. And so Al-Manar lost some \$2 million of advertising revenue, thanks to this campaign.

RFE/RL: What about the argument that Western governments, if they want to root out terrorism at home, should address its underlying causes such as poverty, lack of job opportunities, and perhaps racism, instead of just focusing on enforcement?

Ritzmann: Those factors you just talked about are all part of the mix that make terrorists. But we have to realize that the vast majority of European Islamist terrorists come from a middle class background, with some sort of higher education -- many of them with a university education. And they come from normal family backgrounds. They have prospects in life but they decide to join the jihadi ideology, they decide to buy into the idea that Islam is under attack from the West, that it's the duty of every Muslim to attack the West wherever they can and kill civilians or soldiers -- whomever is accessible. It's a decision to join that ideology. Ninety-nine percent of Muslims, in the same circumstances, in the same living conditions, don't become terrorists. And as I said, most jihadis in Europe, like the 7/7 bombers in London who blew up

the subway trains, had a middle class background. They had jobs, they went to university. It was not that they were left behind and became very angry. They bought into the Al-Qaeda ideology, and we have other incidents as well. Sometimes there's a connection to socio-economic causes. But most of the time there isn't. It's a mix of individual circumstances. And at the end of the day it's an individual decision to join them.

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