



The UK Government's decision to proscribe the military wing of Hezbollah

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This note provides background information on Hezbollah, its aims, and sources of funding, and information on the Order, laid before Parliament by the Home Secretary on 3 July 2008, proposing the proscription of the organisation's entire military wing under the *Terrorism Act 2000*. Before the Order can come into force, it must be approved by Parliament. A motion on the proscription of Hezbollah's military wing is due to be considered on the floor of the House of Commons on Tuesday 15 July and by the House of Lords on Thursday 17 July.

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1 Background

Hezbollah – or the Party of God – is a powerful political and military organisation of Shia Muslims in Lebanon. The group was formed, with financial backing from Iran, in response to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. It has become the most powerful military force in Lebanon, but also has a parliamentary party with MPs, and has held seats in the cabinet. The group’s military wing – the Islamic Resistance – is believed to have between 500 and 600 full-time, highly trained and motivated fighters. Some estimates put the number as high as 1,200, with the ability to call on several thousand less experienced “reserves”. During the 2006 conflict in Lebanon, Hezbollah showed that they are armed with rockets that can reach deep into northern Israel.

The organisation was formed to offer military resistance to the Israeli occupation and it initially proposed an Iranian-style Islamic state, although this was later abandoned in favour of a more inclusive approach. The group calls for the destruction of the state of Israel. It regards the whole of Palestine as occupied Muslim land and argues that Israel has no right to exist. It also demands the release of prisoners from Lebanon who are being held in Israeli jails.

The Israeli withdrawal from southern Lebanon in May 2000 won Hezbollah the respect of many Lebanese. It has built support by providing social services and health care. The group also has an influential television station, al-Manar.

Hezbollah is believed to receive military training, weapons and explosives, as well as diplomatic and financial support from Iran. Syria provides diplomatic, political and logistical support.

The United States and Israel regard Hezbollah as a terrorist group. Its members were involved in kidnapping westerners and in attacks on foreign troops who were based in Lebanon during the civil war. The UK says that the military wing of Hezbollah is a terrorist group, but not the political side of the organisation. UN Security Council resolutions call for armed militia groups like Hezbollah to disarm.

2 The position of the UK Government

The UK Government has long held the view that Hezbollah’s military wing has been involved in conducting and supporting terrorism. In March 2001, the Hezbollah External Security Organisation (ESO), part of the broader military wing of Hezbollah, was added to the list of proscribed organisations under the *Terrorism Act 2000*. Under the Act, the Home Secretary can, by Order, add an organisation to the list of proscribed organisations. Similar Orders dealing with other organisations were laid in 2002, 2005, 2006, 2008 and 2008. All such Orders must be approved by Parliament before they can come into force. A total of 45 international terrorist organisations are proscribed under the Act.

On 2 July 2008, the Government laid before Parliament an Order proscribing the military wing of Hezbollah in its entirety, including the Jihad Council and all units reporting to it including the Hizballah External Security Organisation.¹ If approved by Parliament, it will be a criminal offence to belong to, fundraise and encourage support for the military wing of the organisation.

¹ Home Office press release, “Government to proscribe Hizballah’s military wing”, 2 July 2008

The Explanatory Memorandum to the Order states that:

Hizballah is actively involved in terrorist related activities. These activities include, but are not limited to, the provision of training and logistical and financial support to terrorist groups in Iraq and Palestine. The military wing of Hizballah is involved in supporting Shia insurgent groups in Iraq to carry out attacks, including against Coalition forces. In particular it has carried out training and support for Jaish Al-Mahdi (JAM), including in the use of explosively formed projectiles. The military wing of Hizballah has also provided support for Palestinian terrorist organisations such as the Hamas Izz al-Din al-Qassem Brigades and Palestinian Islamic Jihad.²

During Prime Minister's Questions, on 2 July, Gordon Brown told the House:

To help bring about more general peace in the Middle East, we have been considering what we can do. We have today laid an order before Parliament extending proscription to cover Hezbollah's entire military wing, solely on the grounds of new evidence of its involvement in terrorism in Iraq and the occupied Palestinian territories. Proscription will not affect Hezbollah's legitimate political and social wings, but we continue to call on Hezbollah to end its status as an armed group, to participate in the Lebanese democratic process, and to do so on the same terms as other political parties.³

The Government, however, has emphasised that this will not affect Hezbollah's political, social and humanitarian activities. Introducing the Order, Home Office Minister Tony McNulty said:

Proscription of Hizballah's military wing will not affect the legitimate political, social and humanitarian role Hizballah plays in Lebanon, but it sends out a clear message that we condemn Hizballah's violence and support for terrorism.⁴

Before the Order proscribing Hezbollah's military wing can come into force it must be approved by Parliament. According to a Business Statement by the Leader of the House on 3 July 2008, the House of Commons will consider a motion to approve the Order on Tuesday 15 July. A motion to approve the Order will be considered by the House of Lords on Thursday 17 July.

3 Further reading

The draft Statutory Instrument and Explanatory Memorandum:

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2008/draft/pdf/ukdsi_9780110819525_en.pdf

http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si2008/draft/em/ukdsiem_9780110819525_en.pdf

"Lebanon: the vote for the presidency", Library Standard Note SN/IA/4523, December 2007



snia-04523.pdf (58 KB)

² Explanatory memorandum to the Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) (No.2) Order 2008

³ HC Deb, 2 July 2008, Col 860

⁴ Home Office press release, "Government to proscribe Hizballah's military wing", 2 July 2008

“Lebanon: Hizbollah’s Weapons Turn Inward”, Policy briefing, International Crisis Group, 15 May 2008



ICG Report on
Hizbollah (May 2...

“Hezbollah’s Shadow War”, Greg Bruno, Council on Foreign Relations, 30 May 2008:
http://www.cfr.org/publication/16382/hezbollahs_shadow_war.html

Profile of Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, Council on Foreign Relations, 30 May 2008: <http://www.cfr.org/publication/11132/>