



NATO Foundation
Defense College

NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

STRATEGIC TRENDS

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EMERGING CHALLENGES

Why Saudis declare Hezbollah a terrorist organization

The decision taken by the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, Bahrein, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar) to declare Hezbollah a terrorist organization (followed by the Arab League with the exception of Lebanon and Iraq who abstained), does not add anything significant to the debate with regards to the nature of the Shia Lebanese movement. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu praised the move venturing to declare that “many Arab states now understand that Israel is not their enemy” while other politicians hope that Hezbollah will be excluded from future parliamentary elections in Lebanon.

Like Israel, the USA, Canada and Australia consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization while some countries in the European Union make a distinction between the political organization of the Party of God and its military wing. In contrast, Russia has a different position regarding Hezbollah which it does not consider to be a terrorist organization. Since September 2015 Russian military forces have been coordinating and conducting military operations in Syria that have given Assad the opportunity to retake significant parts of the country’s territory from rebel opposition groups, Jabhat al Nusra and ISIS.

The crisis in Syria has overshadowed the contentious debate in Lebanon within the Lebanese society and the Lebanese Parliament about Hezbollah's intentions to maintain a militia that would not be accountable to a central authority. The threat of jihadist groups on the Lebanese border, and the numerous attacks they have conducted as well as the humanitarian crisis resulting from Syrian refugees have prompted, in 2014, the creation of government of national unity to confront the emergency in the country. In the Syrian conflict, Hezbollah has developed a new doctrine, pre-emptive war, to demonstrate its claim that without its military intervention ISIS would have reached Beirut.

Of course Hezbollah's position on this issue is divisive in Lebanon. What seems to emerge from the recent pressure on Hezbollah is the willingness of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, to send a strong message to Iran in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen. This message could become explosive in Lebanon and exacerbate the already precarious sectarian lines which a country that, in recent years, has resisted slipping back into civil war. This is the reason why recent statements released by Saad Hariri – the Sunni leader who is opposed to Hezbollah – minimizing the possible effect of the Arab League decisions on the Lebanese scenario seem to defuse yet another possible escalation.