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[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Public Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Public Affairs: Office of Press Relations](#) » [Press Releases](#) » [Press Releases: 2012](#) » [Press Releases: August 2012](#) » [Briefing On the Designation of Hezbollah for Supporting the Syrian Regime](#)

Briefing On the Designation of Hezbollah for Supporting the Syrian Regime

Special Briefing

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Via Teleconference

Washington, DC

August 10, 2012

MR. SULLIVAN: Hello, everyone. This is John Sullivan. I'm the spokesman over at the Treasury Department. Today we're going to discuss the designation of Hezbollah for their support to the Assad regime in Syria. On the line today I have Under Secretary for Terrorism and Financial Intelligence David Cohen from the Treasury Department as well as Ambassador Daniel Benjamin, the Coordinator for Counterterrorism at the Department of State.

This call will be on the record and there is no embargo for the information on this call. With that, I will turn it over to Under Secretary Cohen to begin, then we'll move to Ambassador Benjamin, and then we will open it up for a question-and-answer session.

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: Thanks, John. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us on the call today.

Today the Treasury Department designated the terrorist group Hezbollah for providing support to the Government of Syria.

This action highlights Hezbollah's activities within Syria as well as its integral role in the continued violence being carried out by the Assad regime against the Syrian population.

While today's actions are focused on Hezbollah's continuing support of the Syrian regime, it is certainly not the first time that Treasury or the United States has publicly exposed the violent acts of this terrorist organization. Hezbollah has been designated as a Global Terrorist by the United States since 1995 for a long history of terrorist attacks against American citizens and officials, including the bombing of the U.S. Embassy and Marine barracks in Lebanon during the 1980s.

Before al-Qaida's attack on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, Hezbollah was responsible for killing more Americans in terrorist attacks than any other terrorist group. Hezbollah started out carrying out bombings and kidnappings in Lebanon but quickly expanded its violent campaign on to a global stage, carrying out and supporting terrorist attacks in South America, Southeast Asia, Europe, and various countries in the Middle East. More recently we have seen the group's plotting disrupted in Azerbaijan, Egypt, Thailand, and Cyprus.

Hezbollah and its leader Hassan Nasrallah have for years painted their organization as a social and political party as well as a resistance movement; however, their activities and statements clearly paint a different picture. Hezbollah has consistently used terrorist operations to attack civilians. Hezbollah's members have engaged in criminal behavior, including profiting from the narcotics money-laundering scheme of the Lebanese Canadian Bank, which we exposed last year.

And now Hezbollah is actively providing support to the Assad regime as it carries out its bloody campaign against the Syrian people. As the wave of revolt has spread across the Middle East, Hezbollah leadership has publicly supported some protests where it suited their needs, and in other cases, such as in Syria, it has actively supported the violent crackdown being carried out by the Syrian dictatorship.

For years the Assad regime provided safe haven to Hezbollah training camps and routed weapons and money, in many cases, from Iran to Hezbollah operatives in Lebanon. Hezbollah is now repaying its debt to Assad by providing training, advice, and extensive logistical support to the Government of Syria.

Since the start of the unrest in Syria in early 2011, Hezbollah has directly trained Syrian Government personnel inside Syria and has facilitated the training of Syrian forces by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Qods Force. Hezbollah has also played a substantial role in efforts to expel Syrian opposition forces from areas within Syria.

We have previously taken a number of actions that have exposed Iran's involvement in the Assad regime's violent crackdown on the Syrian people, including by designating the IRGC Qods Force and its commander, Ghasem Soleimani, as well as Iran's law enforcement forces and its Ministry of Intelligence and Security.

As the Assad regime continues to crack under international pressure and the continued success of the Syrian opposition, the Treasury Department and the entire U.S. Government will continue to work to expose the activities of Hezbollah and Iran and whoever else is responsible for assisting the Syrian regime in its campaign of violence against the Syrian population.

With that, I'll turn it over to my colleague, Ambassador Daniel Benjamin from the State Department.

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: Thank you very much, David. Let me just pick up where David left off and talk a bit more about Hezbollah today. We are increasingly concerned about Hezbollah's activities on a number of fronts, including their stepped-up terrorist campaign around the world, their members and supporters' growing involvement in large-scale international criminal activity, and their critical and ongoing support for the Assad regime.

At a time when the international community is rallying in opposition to the Assad regime, Hezbollah remains one of the embattled regime's few close partners. As this designation highlights, and as David Cohen has outlined, Hezbollah and their Iranian allies have been providing a range of critical support for the Assad regime, including training, advice, and logistical assistance as the regime continues its brutal crackdown against the Syrian people.

These continuing close ties in this time of crisis reflect the longstanding and deep relationship between Hezbollah and

Syria. Hezbollah's actions in Syria underscore its fears of a Syria without the Assad regime and the impact that this would have on the group's capabilities and its strength over the long term.

As the designation notes, Hezbollah's support has been coordinated with Iran's IRGC Qods force. This is no surprise, given the close partnership between Hezbollah and Tehran, a relationship that was developed over several decades. Hezbollah and the Iranian leadership share a worldview and a strategic vision, and are seeking to exploit the current unrest in the region to their advantage. This approach has at times increased sectarian tensions and conflict throughout the region and it has served as a further destabilizing force in this time of great change.

Hezbollah's activities in recent months have hardly been limited to Syria, however. And like Iran, Hezbollah has also engaged in a stepped-up terrorist campaign around the world. Earlier this year, Hezbollah was preparing to attack what we believe were Israeli tourists in Thailand, according to press reports. We assess that Hezbollah remains interested in attacks in Thailand, as it has a history of returning to locations where its previously attempted operations failed or were thwarted. The Hezbollah operative detained in Thailand, who was carrying a Swedish passport when arrested by Thai officials, reportedly provided officials the address of a warehouse located outside the city where Thai police seized several thousand kilograms of explosives and bomb-making material.

Hezbollah may also have been plotting attacks in other European countries. In January 2012, Bulgarian security services investigated an alleged Hezbollah plot to attack Israeli or Jewish interests in Bulgaria, according to press reports. Press reports on the arrest of a Hezbollah member in Cyprus in July 2012 suggest the group was preparing other attacks in Southern Europe. In Bulgaria, as you all know, a bus carrying Israeli tourists was attacked, killing five Israelis and the Bulgarian bus driver. And we are working to assess the facts and with our partners to discover who was responsible. And although the investigation continues, and we are not in a position to make a statement about responsibility, the attack does resemble Hezbollah's plotting earlier this year.

Hezbollah maintains a presence in Europe, and its recent activities demonstrate that it is not constrained by concerns about collateral damage or political fallout that could result from conducting operations there. Our assessment is that Hezbollah and Iran will both continue to maintain a heightened level of terrorist activity in operations in the near future, and we assess that Hezbollah could attack in Europe or elsewhere at any time with little or no warning.

Hezbollah believes that there have been sustained Israeli and Western campaigns against the group and its primary backers, Iran and Syria, over the past several years. And this perception is likely – is unlikely to change, excuse me. Both remain determined to exact revenge against Israel and to respond forcefully to the Western-led pressure against Iran and Syria. This suggests that more acts of terrorism by both Hezbollah and Iran are likely, and that they will continue to pose a serious threat for the foreseeable future.

Hezbollah members and supporters have also been increasingly involved in criminal activity. The USG has uncovered a massive Hezbollah-related scheme to launder the proceeds of narcotic trafficking and other crimes through Lebanese financial institutions, as Under Secretary Cohen mentioned. And on December 15th of last year, the U.S. attorney filed a civil complaint seeking the forfeiture of over \$480 million from several entities, including the Lebanese-Canadian bank, for their role in facilitating this scheme.

Let me just conclude by saying that we have been regularly speaking to our partners about Hezbollah in recent months, outlining for them the range of illicit and destabilizing activities that the group is involved in and encouraging them to take a broad series of steps to counter this threat.

Hezbollah's actions in Syria which we are highlighting today are particularly egregious, extending and prolonging this deadly conflict and bringing further instability to this fragile part of the world. And we would urge other governments to follow the U.S. designation here today with similar action of their own, sending a strong message to Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran that the international community condemns their unacceptable behavior.

I should note that there will be another Administration action – I believe it's already on the State Department website – later today, but we're going to focus here on the Hezbollah designation, and I encourage you to contact State Public Affairs about that one.

And with that, why don't we turn it over for question-and-answer?

MR. SULLIVAN: Yes, just to echo what Ambassador Benjamin just said, we'll open it up for questions right now. The operator will give you instructions on how to do that. But please, again, this press call is about the designation of Hezbollah today for providing support to the Assad regime in Syria. Please limit your questions to that.

OPERATOR: If you would like to ask a question, please press *1. Be sure to un-mute your phone and record your name clearly when prompted. To withdraw your request, you may press *2. Once again, to ask a question, you may press *1 on your touchtone phone.

Our first question comes from Josh Rogin of *Foreign Policy*.

QUESTION: Thank you, gentlemen, for doing the call, and thank you for your service. I'd like to ask you: Since Hezbollah was already designated, and now we're designating them for an additional reason, does that bring any additional punitive consequences to the group? Does it actually increase the pressure on them in any practical ways? If so, what are those ways?

And Ambassador Benjamin, you mentioned that you're hoping other countries will follow suit. Do you have any indication that any of these countries, especially the EU, will follow suit and designate Hezbollah? Do we have any reason to believe that's going to happen? Thank you.

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: Hi, Josh. I'll take that one. It's Dan Benjamin again. It's always hard to predict if there's going to be any near-term enforcement action on our own part, but I think that we have a responsibility – there's been a lot of discussion about Hezbollah involvement in Syria. Here we have the U.S. Government going on the record and describing it, and I think that that is very important in its own right.

Additionally, we feel that there needs to be a broader discussion in the international community about the activities of this group. It has portrayed itself, as David Cohen said, as a political party, as a resistance group, so on and so forth. It certainly doesn't look to us like it's sympathizing with the people of Syria. We have many partners in the international community who share the revulsion about what is going on in Syria. We believe that if they are presented with this information – and we will, of course, be following up diplomatically – that they may want to take additional measures.

And over the long term, that will limit the amount of space that Hezbollah has to operate. It will put the group in a more difficult situation, and, I think, will make them think long and hard before they continue this campaign in which the Syrian people are being brutalized. So we do see very concrete benefits coming from this designation. Whether they will be in the

area of financial sanctions or not remains to be seen, but in terms of casting a bright light on what the group is doing, I think that's vitally important.

QUESTION: Okay. So there's no actual additional punitive measures?

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: So, well – David.

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: Yeah. Josh, as I think you know, when we designate under any of our IEEPA authorities, including the executive order that we're acting under today, the legal effect is that it freezes the assets of the party being designated and prohibits any U.S. person from transacting with the designee.

QUESTION: But they're already frozen, right?

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: Josh, let me finish. The – Hezbollah has previously been designated. It is already a legal obligation for any U.S. person to freeze their assets and to refrain from any transactions with Hezbollah. But the purpose of our designations, whether it's the Hezbollah action today or any of our other designations under our authorities, is not solely focused on the immediate financial impact, but as Ambassador Benjamin just expressed, to expose the activity of the party that is being designated for the conduct that has led to the designation.

And so the designation of Hezbollah today and the information that underlies that designation that is part of our release today serves the very, very important purpose of making clear to parties around the world – both domestically and internationally – the true nature of Hezbollah's activities. So that is the purpose of today's action.

QUESTION: Okay. Thank you.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from Hisham Melhem of Al Arabiya.

MR. SULLIVAN: Go ahead, Hisham. Are you on the line?

QUESTION: Can you hear me?

MR. SULLIVAN: Yeah.

QUESTION: Okay.

OPERATOR: Go ahead and ask your question.

QUESTION: Okay. You said that Hezbollah also has played a substantial role in efforts to expel senior opposition forces from areas within Syria. Are you saying essentially that Hezbollah is in the field fighting with the Syrian Government forces against Syrian opposition forces on Syrian soil?

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: I think what we're saying is what we put forth in the paper itself, that Hezbollah is actively working to expel those forces. It is providing operational support to the Syrian Government in Syria.

QUESTION: Do you know whether there were Hezbollah casualties? We've seen from reports in Lebanon that there are suspicions that there were Hezbollah casualties fell in Syria. Can you substantiate that?

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: I think we've seen those reports as well, but I don't have anything to add to that.

QUESTION: Okay. Thanks.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from Emile Baroody of Al Mayadeen TV.

QUESTION: Yes. Thank you for doing this call. A very quick question. Is the U.S. Government considering similar sanctions on organizations or countries, encouraging also violence in Syria by providing weapons to other parties in Syria against U.S. policy on avoiding militarization of the Syrian conflict?

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: Well, we do not comment, as a rule, on any future designation actions we may be contemplating. But I will say that we – the action that we're taking today is based on an executive order that permits us to impose sanctions on the Government of Syria and those supporting the Government of Syria. The executive order has been used today with respect to Hezbollah support to the Government of Syria in its violent crackdown. We've used it in the past, as I noted, to impose sanctions on a variety of Iranian entities and officials who have been supporting the Syrian Government's crackdown. And we have – we will continue to look for appropriate targets under this executive order who are supporting the Government of Syria.

QUESTION: Thank you very much.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from Eli Lake of *Newsweek*.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks so much for doing this. So it's really kind of three questions, but they're quick. Can you provide any more detail on the kind of support – I know it's sort of asked before – that Hezbollah is providing to Syria? And also, how do you avoid the problem of some European counterterrorism types say, which is that Hezbollah is so important in the Lebanese Government right now, so how do you target Hezbollah without ruining any U.S. diplomatic relations with Lebanon?

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: So I'll take the first part of that and Ambassador Benjamin can take the second part. The – and the first part of it's pretty easy, because I really can't give you any greater detail than what we've put forward in the press release and in my statement this afternoon about the activities of Hezbollah in Syria. But as we note, it is a range of activity, including logistical support, operational support, to the Syrian Government in its violent crackdown.

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: Yeah. And as for the second part, our view is that the repression of the Assad regime is intolerable, that we believe that there is a very high priority in exposing the support that Hezbollah has given to that group. I think that there will be other commentators who might say that Hezbollah is in an embarrassed position in Lebanon because of this activity, and we have never shied away, I think, from telling the truth about Hezbollah and we weren't going to now.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from Rick Gladstone of *New York Times*.

QUESTION: Hi, I also have two questions folded into one, which I'll address to both of you. Thanks very much. How long have you known about what you say is Hezbollah's logistical and operational support for the Assad regime and its repression? And why are you – why is it – why are you releasing this information now if you've known about it for a while? I guess my first question is how long have you known about it?

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: Well, I think those are actually the same question. Look, we take action when we have sufficient evidence to support the action that we're taking. And as we note, Hezbollah has been providing this support to

the Syrian Government really from the outset of the uprising, but I think it's fair to say that the extent and degree of Hezbollah's support has increased over time as the Syrian Government has also increased its violence against the Syrian people over time. But we are acting today because we have the facts and the – to support the action.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from Rachelle Younglai at Reuters.

QUESTION: Hi. Do you know whether Hezbollah still has any assets under U.S. jurisdiction? And if so, can you quantify them anyway?

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: I can't comment on whether there are any Hezbollah assets under U.S. jurisdiction. As noted before, to the extent that they are here, they should have already been frozen, and anyone who has Hezbollah assets in their possession is required to report those to OFAC. But beyond that, I can't comment.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from Brad Klapper of AP.

QUESTION: Yes, Dan, you said you hope that other countries would follow suit after looking at the information that you've laid out here. But you don't really provide too much evidence; you just kind of lay out claims that we've heard before. The fact that they're – you say they're assisting or abetting or facilitating training, these aren't new. Where is the evidence for this?

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: Well, first of all, what goes on in the discussions between governments may very well go beyond what is provided here to the public. That's the first thing. The second thing is that the United States is standing by these charges. This is not a matter of idle speculation or press reports. This is based on a great deal of information gathering that we have done and we've synthesized and we've put it together in an authoritative document, and we believe that it will be taken seriously by many around the world.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from Margaret Brennan of CBS News.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks for doing this. A follow-up on that. In terms of the description "facilitated training and directly training Syrian forces," what does that actually mean? Are you seeing camps? Are you seeing, like, a regional concentration? Are you seeing a direct delivery of folks across the border? Can you give us some idea of what you're actually seeing in terms of active engagement by Hezbollah in Syria?

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: Go ahead, Dan.

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: Well, I was just going to say, look, we're obviously very sensitive here to issues of sources and methods and we're not going to divulge anything that shouldn't be divulged.

I think it's safe to say that Hezbollah is playing a critical role in advising the Syrian Government and training its personnel in how to prosecute a counter insurgency. And so at this point, we're just not going to have any more details on that to provide. But suffice it to say that we are satisfied by our assessment that the group is playing an absolutely integral role in helping the Assad regime try to put down this popular movement for a better day in Syria. And we find it reprehensible and think it ought to be discussed and showcased in public.

QUESTION: That sounds interchangeable with how Iran's role has been described to us in the past, in terms of advising on cleanup tactics, that sort of thing.

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: Well, as we said at the outset, they share a world view and they're both helping in critical ways, and they often coordinate their activities together as well. So I don't think it actually should come as any surprise that we find Iran and Hezbollah doing a lot of the same things. I will say that I think that Hezbollah has an awful lot of experience in this kind of activity that surpasses what the Iranians have, and therefore the Iranians find them to be a very, very useful proxy force.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from Adam Entous of *Wall Street Journal*.

QUESTION: Yeah. Thank you very much. A question for both of you, maybe. Did Assad specifically ask Hezbollah to get involved? Is there any intelligence on that or whether the Iranians asked Hezbollah to jump in more so? We know that Hezbollah has had operational links with Syria for a long time, so how is actually this different from the involvement in the past? And is there any evidence to suggest that Hezbollah, in providing this assistance, is expecting anything in return? There's been a lot of concern about Syrian WMD. I was hoping you guys could address those.

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: Well, I think your question sort of highlights what the answer is going to be. We can't, obviously, talk about intelligence that may speak to whether Assad asked for Hezbollah to come in or not. But it is – it's certainly true that there is a longstanding relationship between the Assad regime and Hezbollah. Hezbollah has benefitted greatly from its access to Syria for training camps and the like over the years, and as well as it being an important conduit for its support from Iran.

So the fact that you have Hezbollah providing the type of support that it's providing now to the Syrian Government alongside the Qods Force and the law enforcement forces from Iran and the MOIS as well is no surprise really, given the combined interests that those entities have in trying to prop up the Assad regime. But who asked whom to jump in to the fight there against the people of Syria is something that I can't comment on directly.

QUESTION: As for the pursuit of maybe WMD – and maybe you can address the issue – I mean, our reporting from the region is more that Hezbollah has been sort of holding back; they have a lot more capabilities that they could be providing and they seem to not be providing that. Maybe that's a reflection of their domestic Lebanese ambitions, that they don't want to get too entangled in neighboring Syria. Is that what you're seeing here? I think the surprise of many is that Hezbollah is not doing more.

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: Doing more in the sense of providing WMD?

QUESTION: No. Sorry. Providing --

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: I'm not sure what your question --

QUESTION: Providing support to the Syrian Government. I mean, Hezbollah has – could do – could be much more involved than they have been.

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: I'm not sure we would necessarily agree with that assessment. They are deeply involved. And if you watch Hassan Nasrallah's speeches of late, I don't think that they're being coy about their support for Syria. And anything on the relationship between Hezbollah and Syria regarding WMD would be either speculative or entirely irresponsible, so I don't think we should go there.

OPERATOR: Our next question is from Karen DeYoung of *Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Hi. I pressed this a long time ago and wanted to ask what everybody else has asked, which is can't you be more specific about this? Has it increased recently, or have you just gotten the specifics recently? Are people being trained in Lebanon or in Syria? Anything else you can tell us in terms of details?

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: So I think as you know, we've been asked this question. I think we have put out as much detail as we are able to put out with respect to Hezbollah's activity in Syria. But I would urge you to look carefully at what's in the material that we release today. I think it answers some of the questions you have there about where this activity is occurring and what the nature of the activity is.

QUESTION: Okay.

MR. SULLIVAN: We have time for one more question.

OPERATOR: Thank you. Our final question comes from Claudia Rosett of Forbes.com.

QUESTION: Thank you so much for this. I have two quick questions. One is: Who is underwriting the stepped up training that you're describing. I mean, on the nitty-gritty level, who is paying for the coffee breaks and the lodging, et cetera? Is that Syria? Iran? Something else? And second, you mentioned that your assessment is Hezbollah could strike at any time in Europe or elsewhere. Does elsewhere include the continental United States? Thank you.

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: Why don't I take the first and Ambassador Benjamin can take the second. Hezbollah has, for years, been supported financially to a lavish extent by the Iranians, and I think our assessment is the Iranians continue to provide substantial financial support to Hezbollah. That being said, I think it's also the case that Hezbollah supplements its income through other activities including, as I noted, involvement in your garden variety criminal activity, including narcotics trafficking. And we, in the action we took about a year and a half ago now against the Lebanese Canadian Bank, noted the linkage between Hezbollah and the activity – the money-laundering activity that was central to that action.

So Hezbollah receives funding, and as I noted, from Iran to a very great extent but also is an organization that has demonstrated a willingness to engage in criminal activity to add to its coffers.

QUESTION: In other words, this is not coming out of Asma al-Assad's pocket-money. This is being bankrolled by the Iranians, by Hezbollah itself. This is a gift to the regime of Assad.

UNDER SECRETARY COHEN: So I don't – I can't comment, like, specifically on the – this camp or that camp that Hezbollah has in Syria today on precisely where the money is coming from for those activities. But broadly speaking, Hezbollah's financial support comes from Iran and from their own criminal activity.

AMBASSADOR BENJAMIN: And if I can just quickly answer the question about the geographical areas of Hezbollah operational activity, we have not detected any operational activity of the group in the United States. It's certainly been the subject of law enforcement actions in the past for primarily fundraising and illicit activities relating to that, but we do not have any information on any operational targeting or anything like that in the U.S. But that said, it's a very ambitious group with global reach. So why don't I just leave it at that, and thank you for your time.

MR. SULLIVAN: All right, everyone. Thank you for your time today. That concludes our call.

PRN: 2012/1292

 [Back to Top](#)

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