Hezbollah linked to Bulgaria attack

SOFIA
Finding could force E.U. to reassess relationship with Lebanese group

BY NICHOLAS RUIBISH AND MATTHEW BRUNWASSER
The Bulgarian government said Tuesday that two of the people behind a deadly bombing attack that targeted an Israeli tourist bus six months ago were believed to be members of the military wing of the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah.

The announcement could force the European Union to reconsider whether to designate the group as a terrorist organization and crack down on its extensive fund-raising operations across the continent. That could have far-reaching implications for Europe’s security because Hezbollah is an influential force in Middle East politics, considers Israel an enemy and has extensive ties with Iran.

Bulgarian’s interior minister, Tsvetan Tsvetanov, said at a news conference that the investigation into the bombing in Burgas on July 15 had found that a man with an Australian passport and his wife with a Canadian passport were two of the three conspirators involved in the attack, which killed five Israeli tourists and a Bulgarian bus driver.

Bulgarian investigators had “a well-founded assumption that they belonged to the military formation of Hezbollah,” Mr. Tsvetanov said.

Bulgarian officials have found themselves under pressure from both Iran and the United States, which consider Hezbollah a terrorist organization, to blame for the attack. But Bulgarian investigators have also been facing pressure from European allies like Germany and France, which regard Hezbollah as a legitimate political organization, to temper any finding on the terrorism issue.

The United States welcomed the findings.

“We call on our European partners as well as other members of the international community to take positive action to uncover Hezbollah’s infrastructure and disrupt the group’s financing schemes and operational networks in order to prevent future attacks,” John D. Brennan, President Barack Obama’s chief counterterrorism adviser and his nominee to run the Central Intelligence Agency, said in a statement on Tuesday. “But Catherine Ashton, the European Union’s High representative for foreign policy, responded with caution.

“These implications of the investigation need to be assessed seriously as they relate to a terrorist attack on an E.U. soil, which resulted in the killing and injury of innocent civilians,” she said in a statement.

An E.U. official, speaking on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, said that the question of listing Hezbollah as a terrorist organization would have to be a unanimous decision by all 27 member states.

Mr. Tsvetanov spoke after briefings by top government officials and secretly travelled to Paris, said an EU official.

“We have followed their entire activities in Australia and Canada so we have information about financing and their membership in a military wing of Hezbollah,” Mr. Tsvetanov said.

Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov, who is also the leader of the Bulgarian Socialists, pledged that his government would not be deterred from taking any action that would be needed to combat the threat.

In a separate development, Bulgaria’s chief prosecutor, Sotir Zoo, announced that Hezbollah’s chief security officer, Mustafa Shami, had been arrested in the Bulgarian capital.

Hezbollah has denied responsibility for the bombing. Amir Hadi, a retired general in the Lebanese Army who is close to Hezbollah, said the group lacked “enough evidence.”

“It is not a campaign,” said Philip Blenkinsop, a senior editor of Italian television station Al Jazeera, which has been covering Hezbollah’s activities in the region.

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Bulgarians are increasingly aware of the consequences of their own actions, with the result that the country may be facing a “new era” of terrorism.

“Has Hezbollah maintained a new profile for its fund-raising and other activities, and Europe does not crack down on them. In Germany alone, 8 people have been identified as being associated with the organization, as of 2011.”

Jodi Rudoren contributed reporting from Jerusalem,urance, Palestinian, Arab, and Eric Schmitt from Washington.