



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
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Report

Bulgaria's Hezbollah Moment

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As I write these lines, European Union (EU) foreign ministers are convening in Brussels. The regular Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) chaired by Cathy Ashton, the Union's external relations supremo, is to discuss, amongst other things, how to deal with Hezbollah. On 5 February, Bulgarian authorities declared they had "grounded suspicions" of the Iranian-backed organisation's – or more specifically its military wing – involvement in the bomb attack that killed five Israeli tourists and the Bulgarian driver of their bus as they were about to leave the airport at the Black Sea resort town of Burgas on 18 July 2012.¹ Bulgaria calls for measures against Hezbollah, stressing the fact it is the first time it has been linked to an attack on European soil. However, due to brief his opposite numbers in Brussels, Foreign Minister Nickolay Mladenov has neither spoken clearly in favour of blacklisting the organisation as a terrorist group² nor dismissed the option. Rather, he called for "a political debate on what measures should be taken collectively by Europe to prevent similar terrorist attacks in the future."³ In a similar vein, the 5 February statement, produced after a session of the Consultative Council on National Security, called for reinforced cooperation with Lebanon for the tracing of the individuals linked to the bomb attack;⁴ and it should be noted that Najib Mikati, the Middle Eastern country's prime minister, visited Sofia as recently as last November.⁵

Clearly, Bulgarian authorities have tried to strike a balancing act: pointing a finger at the Shi'ite movement but ensuring that the government in Lebanon (which it supports) is not alienated, responding to the demands of Israel and the United States but also showing commitment to a unified EU stance in favour of keeping Lebanon stable in the face of a fierce civil war next-door in Syria.

But to get a better handle of Bulgaria's predicament, one should delve deeper into the context, at both domestic and EU levels. The bomb attack and its political aftershocks highlight Bulgaria's growing ties with the Middle East. The Hezbollah saga illustrates the

¹Significantly, the driver Mustafa Kyosov was a member of the Bulgarian Muslim (Pomak) community. The failure of government representatives to show up at his funeral, suggestive of lingering suspicions of complicity, was heavily criticised by various civic groups who called for solidarity with the family of the victim. See Dimitar Bechev, "Bulgaria, terror and aftershock," *openDemocracy*, 20 July 2012

²Beyond symbolism, experts argue that such a decision might disrupt financial flows to Hezbollah.

³Младенов: ЕС няма да обсъжда днес добавянето на Хизбула в терористичния списък. (Mladenov: EU not to discuss today adding Hezbollah to the terror list) *Dnevnik.bg*, 18 February 2013.

http://www.dnevnik.bg/evropa/novini_ot_es/2013/02/18/2005285_mladenov_es_niama_da_obsujda_dnes_dobavianeto_na/. The minister denied news reports suggesting that he was pushing for the blacklisting option. "Bulgaria urges harder stance on Hezbollah," *EurActiv*, 19 February 2013; "Bulgarian FM to EU colleagues: Sanction Hezbollah," *The Times of Israel*, 18 February 2013.

⁴Speaking to the National Radio on 12 February, Mladenov also underscored that relations with Iran remained friendly and refused to draw a link between the Burgas attack and Tehran.

⁵Lebanese authorities pledged to cooperate fully with the inquiry into the bombing.

burning dilemmas at the heart of Europe's policy: the perennial tension between high principles and hard-nosed interests, coupled with the conundrum of how one should go about radical movements in the Middle East and North Africa i.e. through engagement driven by the hope of steering them into moderation or through sanctions, diplomatic sticks and pressure.

Bulgaria: Back to the Middle East

When the Arab Awakening erupted in Tunisia and spilled over into Egypt and Libya, the Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs unveiled the Sofia Platform, a high-profile policy forum bringing together Arab reformers and decision-makers and pundits from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) to exchange experiences and "lessons learned" regarding democratisation.⁶ Soon, Foreign Minister Mladenov was also hosting a meeting of the Syrian opposition near Sofia (28 May 2012)⁷ and traveling to Lebanon and Iraq alongside his Swedish and Polish counterparts, Carl Bildt and Radek Sikorski (21-24 June). The three-way shuttle was mandated by Lady Ashton but was very much an initiative of Mladenov, who had spent large chunks of his career residing in the Arab world and Afghanistan.⁸ In the Maghreb, the minister was personally involved in the establishment of the Tunisian School of Politics, a cross-party organisation housed in the Bulgarian Embassy in Tunis and supported by the Bulgarian School of Politics, a similar umbrella structure.⁹

To be sure, the amount of attention and energy spent on the Middle East has not been uncontroversial. Domestic critics point out that a small, impoverished Bulgaria has little capacity or resources to deliver long-term results. To them, priorities should be set elsewhere like the Western Balkans (the former Yugoslav republics plus Albania), Turkey and the ex-Soviet region.¹⁰ After the Burgas attack, there were loud voices accusing the foreign department of having turned the country into a terrorist target by sticking its neck out on high-risk issues such as the war in Syria.¹¹ Bulgaria's growingly warm relations with Israel was also a matter of contention from the joint sessions of the two

⁶Bulgarian MFA convened the Sofia Platform for the first time in May 2011. For details, visit www.sofiaplatform.org. More on the history of the relationship in: Dimitar Bechev, "Distant Neighbours: the Mediterranean Policies of the Countries in South East Europe," and Isabel Schäfer and Jean-Robert Henry, *Mediterranean Policies from Above and Below*, Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2009, pp. 171-86.

⁷"Bulgaria hosts united meeting on Syria," *Bulgarian National Radio*, 29 May 2012. www.bnr.bg.

⁸In December 2012, the trio toured the Southern Caucasus too. Susi Dennison, "Does Size Matter? Small States and EU Foreign Policy," *EUObserver*, 11 February 2013.

⁹See <http://www.cemi-tunis.org/> and <http://www.schoolofpolitics.org/>.

¹⁰Personal conversations with foreign policy experts and observers.

¹¹By way of illustration, "GERB (Bulgaria's ruling party) turned Bulgaria into a target of Islamic terrorism," a headline dated 23 July 2012 in the newspaper published by Ataka ("Attack"), a far-right populist and xenophobe party. <http://www.vestnikataka.bg>.

cabinets, to the reports of Israeli airforce training in Bulgaria's aerospace,¹² to deepening economic ties and the influx of tourists.¹³ Middle Eastern watchers and the Arab diaspora in Sofia were dismayed when the government chose to abstain in the General Assembly vote on granting Palestine observer status in the United Nations.¹⁴ And inevitably, conspiracy theorists hastily laid the blame on Israel itself, the United States and even the Free Syrian Army for engineering the attack in order to implicate Hezbollah and even provoke military action against its ally, Iran.¹⁵

Yet questions remain: Can Bulgaria stay friends with everyone in the Middle East? Is it not risking being caught in the cross-fire, with collateral damage in battles fought far away from its shores? Equidistance seems to be a difficult, though certainly not impossible, act to pull off.

After the Attack

Once the bomb went off in Burgas on 18 July, Israel's hawkish Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, was quick to lay the blame at Hezbollah's door. Allegations were obviously based on intelligence sources and referred to several thwarted attempts in preceding months. Zooming in on Hezbollah was a way to expose its patron, Iran, whose nuclear programme poses a direct challenge to Israel. In contrast, Bulgarian authorities played for time delaying definitive. From the very start, their preference was to share burden with other states and international bodies including Israel, the United States, Europol and the law enforcement agencies of other EU member countries. The government was reluctant to make any conclusive statements though it appears that it was able to track down the suicide bomber responsible for the assault as well as his abettors early on, doubtless with the help of partner agencies in Europe and beyond.

Teaming up with others was an understandable choice but it was nonetheless vulnerable to criticism. The governing Citizens for European Development of Bulgaria (GERB, "coat of arms") was elected on a law-and-order ticket back in July 2009, with Prime Minister Boyko Borisov having built his popularity as a straight-talking head of the Bulgarian police in 2001-2005. Burgas was as much a blow for Bulgaria and Israel as it was for the government; its detractors readily pointed at the inadequate security measures at the airport and the inability of the law-enforcement apparatus to carry out the investigation

¹²Experts speak of a Balkan alliance involving Greece, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Romania and other countries from South East Europe.

<http://www.israeldefense.com/?CategoryID=472&ArticleID=508>.

¹³National statistics registered 138,951 visits in 2011. The attack in Burgas led to a 25% slump compared to July 2011.

http://www.dnevnik.bg/biznes/turizam/2012/08/27/1895560_turistite_ot_izrael_sa_na_maleli_s_25_prez_juli/.

¹⁴"Israel thanks Bulgaria for abstaining on Palestinian UN vote," *Novinite*, 30 November 2012, http://www.novinite.com/view_news.php?id=145622.

¹⁵Alarmingly, such comments were aired on Bulgarian National Radio too, 9 February 2013.

on its own. Though such accusations were probably far-fetched given the international span of the terrorist network behind the deadly blast, it is clear that Borisov and his deputy, Tzvetan Tzvetanov, the omnipotent minister of interior, were under pressure to produce a culprit in order to preserve credibility in the eyes of its constituents. Characteristically, the key message heard after the 5 February announcement was that Bulgaria was no "soft target" for terrorists.¹⁶

It is clear that the authorities could not defer making a public announcement ad infinitum. But why choose this particular moment? Insiders comment that no fresh evidence has been discovered beyond what has been known for a long time to justify a public declaration. Pundits sniffed targeted lobbying by Israel and the United States. Mladenov was fresh from a one-day trip to Jerusalem (17 January) in which, after meeting Netanyahu and President Shimon Peres, he reportedly declared that "a blow against Israel is like a blow against Bulgaria".¹⁷ Tzvetanov had spent nearly three weeks in the United States in November and Borisov was one of the first world leaders to have a one-to-one with newly re-elected Barack Obama on 3 December.¹⁸ Beyond doubt, there had been consultation with fellow EU member states as well though the prevailing narrative was there was no European masterplan as to what to do once Hezbollah was named, however indirectly and subject to qualifications (e.g. distinguishing between the movement and its military wing).

Enter the EU

At present, the ball is squarely in the EU's court. But as on other issues, member states are divided on Hezbollah. The movement has been proscribed in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom but other members, notably France, have been reluctant to follow suit. Thomas Donilon, national security advisor to Obama, urged Europeans, via a *New York Times* op-ed, to take a tougher stand on Hezbollah following Bulgaria's announcement.¹⁹ But from the looks of it, the FAC on 18 February has not resulted in a joint position by the 27 EU member states. Ministers will take their time as they are not under immense pressure to make a conclusive decision. Ashton indicated that she and her colleagues would be looking very carefully at the issue but has nevertheless made no commitment to the course of action. Still, it might prove difficult to kick the issue down the road for too long.

¹⁶As it had been portrayed by multiple foreign observers, including Stratfor, <http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/persistent-threat-soft-targets>.

¹⁷http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/Flash.aspx/260039#.USNNnh1M_N.

¹⁸Страната, която извика „пожар“ (The country that called "fire"), *Capital Weekly*, 8 February.

http://www.capital.bg/politika_i_ikonomika/bulgaria/2013/02/08/1999530_stranata_koi_ato_izvika_pojar/?sp=1#storystart.

¹⁹"Hezbollah Unmasked," *New York Times*, 17 February 2013.

Meanwhile in Lebanon, Nabih Berri, speaker of parliament, has played down Bulgaria's accusations linking them to the buildup to the general elections in the Balkan country on 7 July. Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's leader, has declined to comment on the Sofia declaration, noting instead that Netanyahu attributed the attack to the movement immediately after it occurred.²⁰ The toned-down rhetoric emanating from Beirut is surely appreciated at least in some EU capitals. As my colleague, Julien Barnes-Dacey, has argued, Hezbollah has been threading cautiously, not pushing too far in consolidating its grip over Lebanon, and limiting its support for the regime in Damascus.²¹ Caution is advised by those who are concerned that a tough approach would empower the hardliners inside the Shi'ite faction.

Conclusion

The decision of Bulgarian authorities to speak up about the available evidence relative to the Burgas attack has thus far failed to stir up a diplomatic storm. Temporising has emerged as the dominant strategy for both the government in Sofia and the EU. A critical variable to keep an eye on is, unsurprisingly, the conflict in Syria. If the deadlock between the al-Assad regime and the FSA lingers on, the EU, and arguably the US as well, will have all the incentives to thread cautiously with respect to Hezbollah. One thing is clear though: the issue will not simply go away; it is firmly on the EU's agenda and has implications on Europe's relations with both Israel and the United States.

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²⁰Daily Star, 16 February 2013.

²¹"Bulgaria points finger at Hezbollah," *ECFR blog*, 5 February 2013.
http://ecfr.eu/blog/entry/bulgaria_points_finger_at_hezbollah.