Germany bans Hezbollah, raids mosques

A police officer walks out of Al-Irschad Mosque during a raid in Berlin, as dozens of police and special forces stormed mosques and associations linked to Hezbollah in Bremen, Berlin, Dortmund, and Muenster early Thursday. – AFP – Odd Andersen

---

Germany on Thursday completely banned Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement from carrying out activities on its soil, as police raided mosques and venues linked to the group.

Like the European Union, Germany had until now only outlawed Hezbollah's military wing while tolerating its political wing.

But in a shift immediately welcomed by the United States and Israel, the German interior ministry said it now considered the entire movement a "Shiite terrorist organization".

"Hezbollah is a terrorist organization deemed responsible for numerous attacks and kidnappings worldwide," Interior Minister Horst Seehofer told Germany's Bild daily.

The interior minister "has banned the operation of the group" in Germany with immediate effect, his spokesman tweeted.

"Even in times of crisis the rule of law is upheld," he wrote.

Raids were taking place in several places across the country, he added.

Dozens of police and special forces stormed mosques and associations linked to Hezbollah in Bremen, Berlin, Dortmund, and Muenster in the early hours of the morning, German media reported.

The Al-Irshad mosque in Berlin was sealed off with at least 16 police vans parked

outside, an AFP photographer saw. Masked police officers were seen walking in and out of the mosque.

Police raid Al-Irschad Mosque in Berlin as dozens of police and special forces stormed mosques and associations linked to Hezbollah in Bremen, Berlin, Dortmund and Muenster early Thursday. – AFP – Odd Andersen

---

Although Hezbollah has no official presence in Germany, security forces estimate it has roughly a thousand members in the country.

They are thought to use Germany as a safe haven to make plans, recruit sympathizers and raise funds, including through criminal activities.

The group's "criminal activities and plannings for attacks are also taking place on German soil," Seehofer told Bild.

He also recalled that Hezbollah has openly called for "the violent destruction" of the Israeli state.

"It's part of our historic responsibility that we use all means under the rule of law to act against this," he said, in a nod to Germany's responsibility for the Holocaust during World War II.

– 'Significant step' –

The United States and Israel have long designated Hezbollah as a terrorist group and urged allies to follow suit.

US ambassador to Germany, Richard Grenell welcomed Berlin's change in stance and called on "all European Union member states to take similar action".

In Jerusalem, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz praised what he called "a significant step in the global fight against terrorism." He too urged the European Union "to do the same."

Britain outlawed Hezbollah's political wing last year, making membership of the Shiite movement or inviting support for it a crime.

The decision followed outrage over the display of the Hezbollah flag, which features a Kalashnikov assault rifle, at pro-Palestinian demonstrations in London.

The mood began shifting in Germany too with parliament passing a resolution last December that urged the government to ban the group from operating in Germany altogether.

The interior ministry's prohibition order means the group's supporters are no longer allowed to display Hezbollah symbols or hold gatherings, and that funds can be frozen.

Hezbollah sympathizers had in recent years waved their flag at the anti-Israel al-Quds rally that is controversially held in Berlin each year.

Hezbollah, which backs Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in the country's civil war, is seen by Israel as an Iranian proxy, seeking to extend the Islamic republic's military reach to the Jewish state's northern border.

Interior Minister Horst Seehofer banned all activities of Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement in Germany, with police raiding on mosques and other places in Berlin and other cities. – AFP – Odd Andersen

---

Israeli warplanes have carried out hundreds of airstrikes in Syria over the past few years against what Israel says are Iranian and Hezbollah targets.

Hezbollah was established in 1982 during Lebanon's civil war.

It is now a major political party in the country, where it holds a majority in parliament along with its allies.

Israel and Hezbollah also fought a 2006 war.

Source:
https://www.afp.com/en/news/3954/germany-bans-hezbollah-raids-mosques-doc-1qw87a1

[Disclaimer]