

New Palestinian and Egyptian Designations Highlight Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood

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Brief Analysis

The State Department is upping the pressure on Tehran and the Brotherhood's violent progeny in Gaza and Egypt.

Speaking at the annual conference of the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, State Department Counterterrorism Coordinator Nathan Sales [announced on January 31](#)

(<https://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/rm/277794.htm>) that Washington has placed new terrorist designations on Palestinian and Egyptian entities. Accused of destabilizing activities such as undermining the peace process, targeting high-level Egyptian officials, and smuggling weapons into the Gaza Strip, the designees include one individual, Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh, and three groups: Harakat al-Sabirin (Gaza), Liwa al-Thawra (Egypt), and Harakat Sawad Misr, known by the acronym Hasm (Egypt). The designations touch on two issues of particular interest to the Trump administration: Iranian sponsorship of terrorism and Muslim Brotherhood-inspired violence.

IRANIAN PROXIES

In a [press release \(<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/01/277792.htm>\)](https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2018/01/277792.htm) describing the designations, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson emphasized that both Hamas and al-Sabirin are "sponsored and directed by Iran" and continue to attempt attacks at its behest. For example, the release notes that "Palestinian Authority security forces arrested five [al-Sabirin] operatives who were working under Iranian orders and received funding in Gaza to carry out their attacks."

Likewise, Haniyeh led efforts to improve ties with Iran during his tenure as Hamas leader in Gaza. Although relations with Tehran deteriorated when the group refused to back the Assad regime in Syria, they quickly recovered under Haniyeh's tenure, particularly after he sent a Hamas delegation to Iran last year. Earlier this month, IDF chief of staff Gadi Eisenkot stated that Iran's annual funding for Hamas and other Gaza militant groups has increased to

\$100 million. Along with Haniyeh's outreach to Iran, the State Department also highlighted his "close links" with the Hamas military wing and his reported involvement "in terrorist attacks against Israeli citizens." (Such charges are the reason why his designation was handled by the State Department rather than the Treasury Department, which primarily targets terrorist financiers and logisticians; that said, Haniyeh was also subject to Treasury financial restrictions for some time before today's announcement.)

For its part, al-Sabirin reportedly receives (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-to-expect-from-the-state-departments-annual-counterterrorism-report>) \$10 million per year from Tehran. The group was founded by former Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Hisham Salem, who has been the target of several assassination attempts, including by Palestinian Salafi-jihadist groups. Salem is a Shia Muslim, and al-Sabirin is openly pro-Iranian (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/replacing-hamas-irans-new-proxy-militia-in-gaza>), organizing rallies on the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and holding seminars on Shia ideology. The group's flag is a close variation of Hezbollah's, and it has taken pro-Iranian positions on issues unrelated to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Salem has a long terrorist pedigree, having been arrested by Israeli, PA, and Hamas authorities over the years.

Iran's support for al-Sabirin reportedly includes funding for philanthropic projects aimed at building grassroots support for the group, following the Hezbollah model in quite literal terms. For example, school supplies distributed by al-Sabirin in Gaza have featured pictures of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, according to Israeli media reports from 2015. Yet little has been written on the group in any depth.

BROTHERHOOD-INSPIRED VIOLENCE

Hasm emerged in July 2016 after taking responsibility for the deadly attack on Egyptian police officer Mahmoud Abdul Hamid. Since then, it has carried out numerous other domestic attacks, targeting government and security personnel in particular. Most recently, it took responsibility for the September 2017 bombing of Myanmar's embassy in Cairo.

One month after Hasm emerged, Liwa al-Thawra announced its formation on social media. Like Hasm, its attacks have predominantly targeted Egyptian security and government personnel, including the assassination of high-ranking army officer Maj. Adel Ragaa in October 2016.

Hasm and Liwa al-Thawra's direct connection to the Muslim Brotherhood may be up for debate, but both are considered to be aligned with and inspired by the organization. According to Egypt expert Eric Trager (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/cairo-bombing-exposes-the-muslim-brotherhoods-jihadist-tilt>), "Ever since MB leader Mohamed Morsi was ousted from the presidency in 2013, low-profile militant groups have proliferated in Egypt. Although these groups cannot be linked definitively to the MB's notoriously rigid chain of command, which the government decapitated during the severe crackdown that followed Morsi's overthrow, they openly espouse the MB's ideology and narrative."

Tellingly, Hasm and Liwa al-Thawra's actions and rhetoric strongly resemble (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-muslim-brotherhoods-fatal-mistake>) those of late Brotherhood hardliner Mohamed Kamal, and "the social media pages that publicize their attacks often promote Brotherhood slogans and historical figures." In one instance, Hasm and the Brotherhood both claimed a July 2017 attack on security forces as their own. More broadly, MB members have likely joined well-trained militant groups such as Hasm and Liwa al-Thawra, all the while calling for attacks against foreign and Egyptian civilians.

Although the State Department's new designations are framed as an effort to deny these entities the resources to plan and carry out terrorist activities, none of them likely hold property subject to U.S. jurisdiction. The actions are therefore more symbolic in nature, aimed at shoring up key regional allies who share Washington's concerns about

Iranian terror sponsorship and Brotherhood-inspired violence.

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute. ♦

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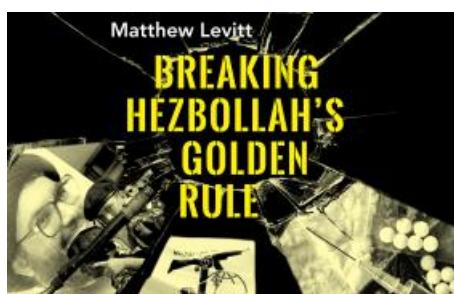
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