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Cairo Bombing Exposes the Muslim Brotherhood's Jihadist Tilt

by [Eric Trager](#)

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Brief Analysis

This weekend's embassy attack demonstrates that Brotherhood-aligned militants are becoming a more formidable threat, so Washington should designate them accordingly.

Hasm, an Egyptian militant group aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), has claimed responsibility for the September 30 bombing at the embassy of Myanmar in Cairo. While no one was injured, the attack indicates that MB-aligned groups are acting on their past threats to strike foreign interests and improving their terrorist capabilities.

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.

For example, Qaaf, the media outlet that frequently publicizes attacks by such groups, often pays tribute to MB historical figures. In an August social media post, it referenced the MB's motto when it implored readers, "Have you forgotten that jihad is our way, and death for Allah's sake is our highest aspiration?" Moreover, when security forces killed a militant in July, Hasm and the MB's political party both claimed him as one of their own. Hasm similarly mourned former MB General Guide Muhammad Mahdi Akef as a "mujahid" (holy warrior) when he died in September after four years in prison.

For their part, various MB figures and media outlets have been encouraging attacks against foreign and Egyptian civilians for years. In January 2015, an Istanbul-based, MB-aligned television network aired a communique ordering foreign nationals, foreign companies, diplomats, and tourists to leave Egypt or face "revolutionary retribution." Shortly thereafter, an MB organ issued a report titled "The Jurisprudence of Popular Resistance to the Coup," which endorsed violence against Christians and a wide range of government "collaborators."

Meanwhile, MB-aligned militant groups have become more capable over time. As scholar Mokhtar Awad noted in a July 2017 *Small Arms Survey* report, the first wave of militants to emerge after Morsi's ouster had no training and were armed with Molotov cocktails and small handguns. By mid-2016, however, the rise of Hasm and Liwa al-Thawra signaled a shift toward well-trained groups with effective command-and-control systems and professionalized communications. And while they have largely targeted high-ranking Egyptian security officials and police installations, these groups have also heeded increasing calls within the MB to attack civilians: Hasm attempted to assassinate former Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa last year, and Liwa al-Thawra has published a hit list that includes a prominent businessman, a journalist, a judge, and a Coptic lawyer.

In a statement issued after Saturday's attack, Hasm called it "a warning message to the embassy of the slaughterers who kill women and children in Arakan," referring to the ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar. The group also released photographs on Twitter showing that it had cased the embassy prior to the bombing, implying that it was capable of executing a much more destructive attack. In the same vein, it released a map highlighting the many other nearby diplomatic facilities in Cairo's upscale Zamalek neighborhood, including the embassies of China, India, Greece, and the Vatican. Doing so touted the group's ability to penetrate a supposedly well-protected neighborhood and signaled that other countries' diplomats are as vulnerable as Myanmar's.

Ominously, the increased capabilities and expanded target sets of MB-aligned militant groups suggest that the gap between them and Salafi-jihadist terrorists is narrowing. Indeed, al-Qaeda seems intent on coopting these Egyptian groups: al-Qaeda-aligned media outlets have promoted Hasm statements since late 2016, and the international organization recently issued a statement mourning Akef in an apparent bid to win over more MB members. If such overtures succeed, Hasm and similar groups might seek al-Qaeda's expertise and become even more threatening.

Until now, Washington's counterterrorism concerns in Egypt have centered on Islamic State affiliates, particularly in the Sinai Peninsula. Yet Hasm's embassy attack demonstrates that MB-aligned groups are becoming a more formidable threat, in both ability and intent. The recent rhetoric and operations of such groups are compounding Egypt's security challenges in the Nile Valley, where Islamic State affiliates have been increasingly active. The Trump administration should therefore respond by formally designating Hasm and Liwa al-Thawra as Foreign Terrorist Organizations, enabling the U.S. government to dedicate more intelligence resources to targeting them.

Eric Trager is the Esther K. Wagner Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [Arab Fall: How the Muslim Brotherhood Won and Lost Egypt in 891 Days](#). ❖



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