

Chapter 2: State Sponsors of Terrorism

This report provides a snapshot of events during 2019 relevant to countries designated as State Sponsors of Terrorism. It does not constitute a new announcement regarding such designations.

To designate a country as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, the Secretary of State must determine that the government of such country has repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism. Once a country is designated, it remains a State Sponsor of Terrorism until the designation is rescinded in accordance with statutory criteria. A wide range of sanctions is imposed as a result of a State Sponsor of Terrorism designation, including:

- A ban on arms-related exports and sales;
- Controls over exports of dual-use items, requiring 30-day Congressional notification for goods or services that could significantly enhance the terrorist-list country's military capability or ability to support terrorism;
- Prohibitions on economic assistance; and
- Imposition of miscellaneous financial and other restrictions.

DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF KOREA

On November 20, 2017, the Secretary of State designated the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) as a State Sponsor of Terrorism. The Secretary determined that the DPRK government repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism, as the DPRK was implicated in assassinations on foreign soil.

The DPRK was previously designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1988 primarily because of its involvement in the bombing of a Korean Airlines passenger flight in 1987. The DPRK's designation was rescinded in 2008 after a thorough review found the DPRK met the statutory requirements for rescission. In 2017, the Secretary of State determined the DPRK had repeatedly provided support for acts of international terrorism since its State Sponsor of Terrorism designation was rescinded in 2008. The DPRK has also failed to take action to address historical support for acts of international terrorism. Four Japanese Red Army members wanted by the Japanese government for participating in a 1970 Japan Airlines hijacking continue to shelter in the DPRK. The Japanese government also continues to seek a full accounting of the fate of a number of Japanese nationals believed to have been abducted by DPRK state entities in the 1970s and 1980s; only five such abductees have been repatriated to Japan since 2002.

IRAN

Designated as a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1984, Iran continued its terrorist-related activity in 2019, including support for Hizballah, Palestinian terrorist groups in Gaza, and various terrorist groups in Syria, Iraq, and throughout the Middle East. Iran used the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF) to provide support to terrorist organizations, provide cover for associated covert operations, and create instability in the region. Iran has acknowledged the involvement of the IRGC-QF in the Iraq and Syria conflicts, and the IRGC-QF is Iran's primary

mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorists abroad. In April 2019, the Secretary of State designated the IRGC, including the Qods Force, as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). Iran also used regional proxy forces to provide deniability, in an attempt to shield it from accountability for its aggressive policies.

In 2019, Iran supported various Iraqi Shia terrorist groups, including Kata'ib Hizballah (KH), Harakat al-Nujaba, and Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq. During the same period, KH was responsible for a series of rocket attacks against American interests in Iraq, which culminated in the death of an American citizen following a 30 plus rocket barrage in December 2019. On December 31, Iran-backed Shia militia groups, including KH, participated in an attack on U.S. Embassy Baghdad, which resulted in significant damage to embassy property. There were no embassy casualties and security personnel used less-than-lethal countermeasures to repulse intruders. It also bolstered the Assad regime in Syria and Shia terrorist groups operating there, including Hizballah. Iran views the Assad regime in Syria as a crucial ally and Syria and Iraq as vital routes through which to supply weapons to Hizballah, Iran's primary terrorist proxy group. Through financial or residency enticements, Iran has facilitated and coerced primarily Shia fighters from Afghanistan and Pakistan to participate in the Assad regime's brutal crackdown in Syria. Iran-supported Shia militias in Iraq have also committed serious human rights abuses against primarily Sunni civilians. Iranian forces have directly backed militia operations in Syria with armored vehicles, artillery, and drones.

Since the end of the 2006 Israeli-Hizballah conflict, Iran has supplied Hizballah with thousands of rockets, missiles, and small arms in direct violation of UNSCR 1701. Israeli security officials and politicians expressed concerns that Iran was supplying Hizballah with advanced weapons systems and technologies, as well as assisting the group in creating infrastructure that would permit it to indigenously produce rockets and missiles to threaten Israel from Lebanon and Syria. Iran has provided hundreds of millions of dollars in support of Hizballah and trained thousands of its fighters at camps in Iran. Hizballah fighters have been used extensively in Syria to support the Assad regime. In Bahrain, Iran has continued to provide weapons, support, and training to local Shia militant groups, including the al-Ashtar Brigades. In Yemen, Iran has provided weapons, support, and training to the Houthi militants, who have engaged in terrorist attacks against regional targets.

In 2019, Iran provided support to Hamas and other designated Palestinian terrorist groups, including Palestine Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command. These Palestinian terrorist groups were behind numerous deadly attacks originating in Gaza and the West Bank, including attacks against Israeli civilians in the Sinai Peninsula.

The Iranian government maintains a robust offensive cyber program and has sponsored cyber attacks against foreign government and private sector entities.

Iran remained unwilling to bring to justice senior al-Qa'ida (AQ) members residing in the country and has refused to publicly identify members in its custody. Iran has allowed AQ facilitators to operate a core facilitation pipeline through Iran since at least 2009, enabling AQ to move funds and fighters to South Asia and Syria.

As in past years, the Iranian government continued supporting terrorist plots to attack Iranian dissidents in several countries in continental Europe. In recent years, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Albania have all either arrested or expelled Iranian government officials implicated in various terrorist plots in their respective territories. Denmark similarly recalled its ambassador from Tehran after learning of an Iran-backed plot to assassinate an Iranian dissident in its country.

SUDAN

The Secretary of State designated Sudan as a State Sponsor of Terrorism in 1993 for supporting international terrorist groups, including the Abu Nidal Organization, Palestine Islamic Jihad, Hamas, and Hizballah. In September 2019, Sudan officially formed the civilian-led transitional government (CLTG) after 30 years under the regime of former President Omar al-Bashir. The CLTG has asserted that it no longer supports the aforementioned or any other terrorist organization. Sudan has taken steps to work with the United States on counterterrorism. Throughout 2019, despite political turmoil that led to the ouster of the former president and the formation in September of the CLTG, the Sudanese government continued to pursue counterterrorism operations alongside regional partners, including operations to counter threats to U.S. interests and personnel in Sudan.

Despite the absence of high-profile terrorist attacks, ISIS facilitation networks appear to be active within Sudan. The newly appointed Minister of Religious Affairs and Endowments under the CLTG denied the existence of an official ISIS entity in Sudan but acknowledged that there were “extremists” linked to ISIS in the country. The Minister of Religious Affairs and Endowments also emphasized that his ministry would work on combating extremism, fighting terrorism and renewing school curricula to promote tolerance. The media reported in November 2019 that the CLTG was prepared to return between 16 and 20 terrorists from ISIS and other groups to their countries of origin. The arrested persons belonged to different nationalities, including six Egyptians, one Tunisian, and six individuals from Chad and Nigeria.

As part of the government’s counterterrorism strategy, Sudanese forces patrol the Sudanese-Libyan border as well as the Sudanese-Chadian border to interdict the flow of suspected terrorists transiting through the region, and to prevent arms smuggling and other illicit activities. Sudan’s expansive size, and the government’s outdated technology and limited visa restrictions, presented challenges for border security. The CLTG has asked for assistance from the U.S. government as well as the international community to upgrade its technical and physical capabilities to secure its borders.

Regarding AML/CFT, Sudan remains a member of the Middle East and North Africa Financial Action Task Force (MENAFATF), a Financial Action Task Force-style regional body. The Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and MENAFATF have both determined that Sudan’s AML/CFT regime adequately addresses AML/CFT. Additionally, Sudan’s Financial Information Unit is a member of the Egmont Group and works regularly with other members of the group on AML/CFT issues.

While new, the CLTG continues to develop a national strategy for countering terrorist radicalization and recruitment. Sudan's existing strategy combines government and civil society resources and uses a social, economic, and religious approach toward strengthening Sudan's population against internal or external "extremist" influences. Sudan's de-radicalization programs run concurrently with the national strategy. De-radicalization programs in Sudan focused on reintegrating and rehabilitating returned FTFs and those espousing terrorist ideologies. Sudan repatriated a small number of women and children who are or had been affiliated with FTFs, mostly the spouses and children of ISIS members killed in Libya, and enrolled them in Sudanese rehabilitation programs.

SYRIA

Designated in 1979 as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, Syria continued its political and military support to various terrorist groups. The regime continued to provide weapons and political support to Hizballah and continued to allow Iran to rearm and finance the terrorist organization. The Assad regime's relationship with Hizballah and Iran grew stronger in 2019 as the regime became more reliant on external actors to fight opponents and secure areas. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) remains present and active in the country with the permission of President Bashar al-Assad. Assad remained a staunch defender of Iran's policies, while Iran exhibited equally energetic support for the Syrian regime. Syrian government speeches and press releases often included statements supporting terrorist groups, particularly Hizballah and vice versa.

Over the past two decades, the Assad regime's permissive attitude towards AQ and other terrorist groups' FTF facilitation efforts during the Iraq conflict fed the growth of AQ, ISIS, and affiliated terrorist networks inside Syria. The Syrian government's awareness and encouragement for many years of terrorists' transit through Syria to Iraq for the purpose of fighting U.S. forces before 2012 is well documented. Those very networks were among the terrorist elements that brutalized the Syrian and Iraqi populations in 2019. Additionally, Shia militia groups in Iraq, some of which are U.S.-designated FTOs aligned with Iran, continued to travel to Syria to fight on behalf of the Assad regime. Marxist groups, including affiliates of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), also operated on Syrian soil and represent Turkey's primary counterterrorism concern in Syria. ISIS cells remained active in parts of Syria and launched attacks on civilians and U.S. partner forces. In October, U.S. forces completed an operation that resulted in the death of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi. ISIS members in Syria continued to plot or inspire external terrorist operations.

As part of a broader strategy during the year, the regime portrayed Syria itself as a victim of terrorism, characterizing all internal armed opposition as "terrorists."