

Egypt militant group Hasm adopts terror tactics

Ahmed Megahid

Cairo

Egypt announced the death of three members of militant Islamist group Hasm following a shoot-out in a southern Cairo cemetery in early October. However, few security analysts said the operation was cause for celebration, given the shadowy Islamist group's ability to resume its attacks.

"Despite active work on the part of security agencies, this group has managed to persevere," said Nabil Naeem, a former militant leader who subsequently renounced violence. "Hasm organises itself in clusters, which is why security agencies find it difficult to get hold of its members."

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Khaled Okasha, a retired brigadier-general and Egyptian security expert

The October 2 operation against Hasm was soon after the militant group, which is believed to be tied to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, claimed responsibility for an explosion at Myanmar's embassy in Cairo, saying it was in retaliation for that country's crackdown on Rohingya Muslims.

"This bombing serves as a warning to the embassy of murderers, killers of women and children in the Muslim Rakhine State and in solidarity with the sons of this weakened Muslim population," a Hasm statement said.

Hasm had focused on domestic targets, specifically attacks on Egyptian security officers and public figures deemed to have collaborated in what Hasm and the Muslim Brotherhood portray as a coup against former President Muhammad Morsi. However, security analysts worry that Hasm could be updating its modus operandi.

The group posted photographs showing that it had studied the area around the embassy before the bombing, implying it could have carried out a more powerful attack. It also released a map of other diplomatic facilities near the Myanmar embassy, including the embassies of China, India, Greece and the Vatican, perhaps indicating it could attack other foreign diplomatic targets in the future.

"[We have used] utmost caution to ensure that there were no civilian casualties or innocent people [hurt] during the operation or else you would have seen a burning hell you could not have stopped," the Hasm statement said.

In a yearly review of its activities published in late September, Hasm claimed to have killed 27 policemen and wounded 56 others from July 2016-July 2017. While Egyptian security forces have sought to target and eliminate the shadowy militant group, their priority remains the Islamic State (ISIS), a strategy Hasm has exploited.



On highest alert. A special police officer stands on a police car in southern Cairo.

(Reuters)

"These conditions make it easy for Hasm to operate, even without being at the centre of security agencies' attention at a time these agencies have other more dangerous groups to fight or threats to address," said Saad al-Zunt, head of the Political and Strategic Studies Centre, an Egyptian think-tank.

"Hasm recruits people with no criminal or terrorist records. This helps to keep them off the radar of security agencies both before and after carrying out their operations."

In addition to targeting soldiers and police officers, Hasm has also gone after senior public figures. In August 2016, former Mufti Ali Gomaa, a staunch backer of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi,

narrowly escaped a Hasm assassination attempt when two men on a motorcycle fired at him as he entered a mosque. One month later, Egyptian Assistant Prosecutor-General Zakaria Abdel Aziz was unharmed in an attack in which a car bomb exploded as his motorcade passed.

Cairo was thought to have struck a major blow against Hasm following the arrest of Magdi Shalash, a senior Hasm member, in September 2016. Shalash reportedly provided Egyptians security with intelligence about the group's operations, leading to several arrests.

In October 2016, Egyptian security officers claimed another blow against the group when senior Mus-

lim Brotherhood figure Mohamed Kamal, believed to be Hasm's main financier, was killed.

Hasm appears to have weathered the storm, however, demonstrating an ability to endure and adapt while the sources of Hasm's funding puzzle security forces.

Khaled Okasha, a retired brigadier-general and Egyptian security expert, said Hasm planned and carried out attacks from furnished flats they rented only hours earlier.

"They succeeded in deceiving policemen on many occasions," Okasha said, "but this should not in any way make us lose confidence in the police. Hasm will die like all other militant groups. Terrorists can never defeat a state."

Catalonia the next target of the Muslim Brotherhood

Ahmad Abou Douh

Barcelona

The Muslim Brotherhood is slowly building up its presence in Catalonia, Spain, part of a long-term strategy to plant roots in an Islamic community with Salafi traditions.

Police said they have paid attention to an increase in activities by Islamic groups in the area following an influx of money from mostly foreign sources. The added scrutiny comes in the wake of terrorist attacks in Barcelona and the seaside resort of Cambrils in August that left 16 people dead, with eight attackers also being killed.

A high-ranking police official in Catalonia's anti-terrorism unit said: "The Muslim community (in Catalonia was) long under the influence of Salafists but lately the Muslim Brothers have started getting the upper hand."

The official, who insisted on anonymity, said: "We have noted that many international associations and organisations were sending funds to entities belonging to the Brotherhood network. One of these is the Islamic Relief Organisation, which has recently increased its fund-raising activities."

He also said other parties were providing financial support to the Muslim Brothers in Barcelona but refused to name the parties.

The heightened concern about Muslim Brotherhood came as residents of Catalonia on October 1 overwhelmingly voted "yes" on the question of independence from Spain. Spanish National Police,

in support of federal government claims the referendum violated the constitution, tried to stop the vote but 2.2 million people – 42% of those eligible – turned out.

A diplomatic source in Madrid said: "The International Muslim Brotherhood is quietly transferring many of its assets, especially those in France, to Catalonia following the enormous pressure placed by the French government on the Brotherhood leadership and the Qatari government to reduce its financial support of the Brotherhood's activities in the marginalised quarters of Paris."

The French government warned the Qatari Embassy in Paris against investing in the poor of the Muslim community for ideological purposes, the source added.

To persuade Catalan youth to join their organisation, the Muslim Brotherhood relies on an ideological approach that sometimes is met with controversy in Spanish society. For example, many senior Brotherhood TV figures have called for "recapturing Andalusia from the Spanish invaders."

"When the Muslim Brothers speak of liberating Andalusia, we have to pause for a while because this is very bothersome discourse," said Lourdes Vidal, chief officer for the Arab and Mediterranean world at the European Institute of the Mediterranean. "It is a message intended for people with insufficient background knowledge because, for sane people, it is just plain heresy and madness."

"Our problem with the Muslim Brothers is not their use of violence since they don't do that in Europe... Their real danger lies in their constant effort to create an ideological and religious environ-

ment which would endorse such extremist ideas."

There are about 500,000 Muslims in Catalonia but many in the community are suspicious of them and the Muslim Brotherhood seems intent on capitalising on the situation. In Catalonia, the Muslim community has been denied a permit to build a mosque. Sometimes, local governing bodies under pressure have given permits for prayer venues in cramped and inconvenient locales. These places are often in marginalised industrial zones in the periphery of Barcelona. In these Muslim ghettos, it can be easy for extremists to thrive.

The senior police official said: "The main base for the Muslim Brothers in Catalonia is the Islamic Cultural Centre in Clot, Barcelona. We know that the centre director, Salem Ben Amara, and the mosque imam are members of the Muslim Brotherhood."

"From this centre, the Muslim Brothers are trying to extend their control to other centres and mosques thanks to generous funds from the Islamic Relief Organisation and from Muslim Appeal... We are very aware of the true nature of the Brotherhood and of their obscurantist views."

Requests for interviews with Ben Amara and with Sheikh Mahmud, the name the mosque imam goes by, were declined.

The Islamic Cultural Centre in Barcelona mounted a public relations campaign to invite researchers, experts and social activists to hear the views of Sheikh Mahmud and other Brotherhood figures and disseminate them. Unlike Salafists, the Muslim Brothers often focus on attracting female activists since Salafis

often clash with them.

Ibrahim, a 45-year-old construction worker, said: "The centre hosts many lectures and conferences, some of which are given by famous Islamic scholars," referring to Egyptian Omar Abdelkafi and Saudi Saleh al-Maghamsi.

The Muslim Brothers have been trying to gain legitimacy in Catalonia by organising forums and discussion circles between Muslim, Christian and Jewish religious figures under the guise of "inter-faith dialogue."

Police sources cited the case of youth groups raising money from Islamic associations and using the

funds to help poor Muslim families pay their children's school expenses. Our source said: "We know that they belong to the Brotherhood but there is nothing we can do about it."

Vidal pointed out that the Muslim Brothers usually use the venue of providing social services for their own narrow political gains. She said she was shocked by the Brotherhood's insistence on setting up Islamic schools by taking advantage of a loophole in the Spanish educational system allowing children from poor families to abandon school at an early age.

Most of the 2.5 million Muslim families in Spain are classified as poor. Many Muslim children, teens and young adults work in construction or as mechanics or delivery boys.

The Muslim Brothers want to have Islamic schools in Spain but Lourdes and other activists said they feared these schools would encourage and lead to the isolation of Muslims in the country and push them towards extremism.

Among the backers of Salafist groups in Catalonia is the Kuwait-based Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage. It finances the construction of schools and mosques and sets up charities. Another backer is the Muslim World League based in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, which finances Salafist groups in Barcelona and pays for the expenses of extremist speakers such as Maghamsi.

Government reports revealed that years of lenient policies towards the actions of such institutions have turned Catalonia into a transit point for jihadists in and out of Europe.

Ahmad Abou Douh is an Egyptian writer.

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