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‘Game-changing’ designation

While the decision to brand the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group received local and Arab support the reaction from the US and Europe was less positive

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In the wake of the 25 December decision to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation Foreign Minister Nabil Fahmi said the government had contacted the Cairo-based Arab League and requested it follow suit. On Sunday Arab League Secretary-General Nabil Al-Arabi announced that “the League has informed all member states of the Egyptian government’s decision”.

Foreign Ministry spokesman Badr Abdel-Atti indicated that the decision had won the immediate backing of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). “Just as they were the first to show support for the 30 June Revolution, Saudi Arabia and the UAE were also the first to endorse the government’s decision aimed at proscribing Muslim Brotherhood,” said Abdel-Atti. “We are now in the process of contacting other countries — Bahrain, Kuwait, Iraq, Morocco and Jordan — to secure their official endorsement. We will make it clear that we do not ask them to proscribe Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated political parties working within their borders but we are urging them to officially recognise our designation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as a terrorist organisation.”

“The support of two influential, oil-rich Arab Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE will push other Arab and Muslim countries towards approving the decision. We have high hopes this approval will help drain foreign funding of the Brotherhood in line with Arab and international conventions on the suppression of terrorism and facilitate the extradition of any of its leaders charged with inciting violence in Egypt.”

Abdel-Atti added the Foreign Ministry has contacted the UN and Interpol informing them of the government’s decision. “We are currently collating documents in support of the designation and addressing all the political and legal aspects necessary to make it applicable worldwide.”

The spokesman conceded, however, that the United States and Western European governments remained unconvinced. He said US Secretary of State John Kerry had called Fahmi asking for more information about the government’s designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group.

In Washington State Department spokeswoman Jen Psaki queried Abdel-Atti’s account. In his phone call with Fahmi, she said, Kerry “expressed concern” about the terrorist designation and recent detentions and arrests in Egypt. A Reuters report from Washington cited a US official as saying that the Egyptian government was going “way too far” in its crackdown on the Brotherhood though the Obama administration was not planning to take any action against Cairo in response.

Rightwing US conservative CNS News accused Washington of “double standards” in its designation of Islamist groups as terrorist organizations. The report noted the Muslim Brotherhood had never been listed as a foreign terrorist organization although its Palestinian wing, Hamas, has been a designated such since 1997. “Also, the US has barred entry to the Brotherhood’s spiritual leader, Youssef Al-Qaradawi, and the US Treasury Department in 2008 added the Union of Good, a coalition of charities led by Al-Qaradawi, to a list of organizations sanctioned for links to terrorism.”

The CNSNews.com report continued by lambasting the White House for not designating the Brotherhood a terrorist organization when some of the world's leading terrorists had past ties with the group, including Al-Qaeda leader Ayman Al-Zawahri, 9/11 architect Khaled Sheikh Mohamed and Egyptian cleric Omar Abdel-Rahman, now serving a life sentence in a US prison for his involvement in the 1993 World Trade Centre bombing.

Hafez Abu Seada, chairman of the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights, told private television channel CBC on Saturday that “the timid reaction of America not only offers a new example of the West's double-standards in dealing with terrorism but also reinforces the impression held by many Egyptians that the Obama administration was supportive of Muslim Brotherhood and played a dominant role in helping it reach power after the ousting of Hosni Mubarak.”

According to the CNSNews.com report, “under its ‘We the People’ initiative the White House undertakes to respond formally to any petition which within 30 days attracts 100,000 signatures. The 30-day deadline for a petition calling for the Brotherhood to be designated a foreign terrorist organization was 6 August, and by that date it had received almost 190,000 signatures. More than four months later, the petition has still brought no response from the White House although it now has just under 197,000 signatures.

“The double standards of the West,” charges Abu Seada, “are not just confined to official circles but extend to include civil organizations like the New York-based Human Rights Watch [HRW].”

Abu Seada denounced suggestions by HRW that the Egyptian government's decision to label the Brotherhood a terrorist organization was politically motivated.

“As a leading human rights organization in Egypt and the Arab world which plays a major role in exposing the autocratic practices of Arab regimes HRW's statement was itself politically driven and motivated,” claimed Abu Seada. “I can understand that HRW might reject the government's decision on the grounds that it was not adequately documented but for the HRW to give such a hasty judgement about the decision clearly shows its statement is part of a political agenda.”

HRW, says Abu Seada, like most American media “adopts a politically-driven stand against the government of Egypt, insisting on describing it as autocratic and manipulated by the Egyptian army — a thing which is far from truth”.

“Why have we never heard HRW describing the American government's decision to label Islamist organizations like Hizbullah and Hamas as terrorist as politically driven? Isn't this another glaring example of the double standards of these Western organizations which claim to defend human rights impartially?” said Abu Seada.

According to Abu Seada the government's 25 December fully complies with international conventions on terrorist crimes. “Some might argue that the government's decision was not supported by final judicial rulings but I say the investigations carried out by prosecution

authorities on several Brotherhood terrorist activities in 2013 and beyond are perfectly sufficient to justify the government's designation.”

Shawki Al-Sayed, an independent lawyer, argues “the judicial ruling issued by the Urgent Matters Court on 23 September ordering that the Muslim Brotherhood be dissolved and its assets confiscated lends credibility to the government's decision, especially given the group's attempts to twice appeal the ruling failed”. The Supreme Administrative Court is expected to give a final ruling in February. Most commentators expect it will adopt a recommendation by its Panel of Commissioners that the Brotherhood be dissolved and all its activities banned.

Hossam Eissa, the leftist deputy prime minister, insists the government's decision is in line with Article 86 of the Egyptian Penal Code. Article 86, he explains, is very clear in defining terrorist organizations: they resort to violence with the aim of spreading terror and disrupting public order, the constitution and national unity.

Muslim Brotherhood lawyers claim the designation was made under pressure from secular forces which have directly accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being behind the recent deadly Daqahliya bombing. They contend the decision reflects the government's failure to contain peaceful protests organized by the group's members.

The Brotherhood has repeatedly denied any links to militant attacks against the state and quickly condemned the Daqahliya bombing. It insists its protests have been and always will be peaceful, an assertion unlikely to convince anyone who has had the misfortune to be caught up in the violence that has become a trademark of Brotherhood demonstrations.

Ammar Ali Hassan, an expert on political Islam, views the government's designation as a game-changer.

“Since it was established in 1928 the Brotherhood has faced dissolution and numerous bans but it has never before been labeled as terrorist despite a history of militant activity that began with the assassination of prime minister Ahmed Maher in 1945.”

“The Brotherhood is the mother of all Islamist terrorist organizations, of Jihad, Al-Gamaa Al-Islamiya and Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda. This is what the government should make it clear to the world. It must also make clear how the group has been used by the West to resist the spread of communism, as an alternative to anti-Western nationalist regimes or, as in the Turkish model, to replace a military-backed system with one under Western supervision.”