Iran blasted as 'leading sponsor' of terrorism in new U.S. report

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The [Trump](http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics-government/donald-trump-PEBSL000163-topic.html) administration Wednesday continued its sharp criticism of Iran, labeling Tehran the world's top government sponsor of terrorism.

In a new report, the State Department said terrorist attacks and deaths from terrorism declined worldwide last year. The Islamic State militant group remained the most active "nonstate" perpetrator, the report said, despite having suffered a significant loss of territory.

The document, formally titled Country Reports on Terrorism 2016, is issued annually under congressional mandate.

A section on state sponsors of terrorism highlights Iran, its arming of the Hezbollah organization in Lebanon and anti-Israel groups like Hamas, plus its support for Syrian President [Bashar Assad](http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics-government/government/heads-of-state/bashar-assad-PEPLT007504-topic.html), whom the U.S. accuses of committing numerous atrocities against his citizenry.

"Iran is the leading state sponsor of terrorism," Justin Siberell, the State Department's acting coordinator for counterterrorism, said in a briefing for reporters.

Iran has been on the list since 1984.

The report noted that Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps served as the government's "primary mechanism for cultivating and supporting terrorists abroad."

It is used to "implement foreign policy goals, provide cover for intelligence operations and create instability in the Middle East," the report said.

On Tuesday, the administration hit Iran with a new batch of economic sanctions, targeting 18 individuals and entities accused of supporting or working in Tehran's ballistic missile program.

That came a day after the administration -- reluctantly -- certified that Iran was obeying the terms of a landmark deal limiting its nuclear weapons capabilities.

The deal with Iran was brokered by the Obama administration in 2015 along with the four other permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany.

When he campaigned for the presidency, Trump threatened to "rip up" the agreement, which he claimed was a terrible deal. So far, though, Trump has stuck with the accord, while at the same time adding new punishment for unrelated issues.

Hezbollah also made an appearance in the report in discussion about Venezuela, which came under heaviest criticism among Western Hemisphere countries.

"For the 11th consecutive year, the Department of State determined ... that Venezuela was not cooperating fully with U.S. counterterrorism efforts," the report said, noting the leftist Caracas government had provided safe haven for Hezbollah "supporters and sympathizers," along with other militants like Colombian guerrillas and Basque separatists.

Successive U.S. administrations have called on Venezuelan President [Nicolas Maduro](http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics-government/government/nicolas-maduro-PEPLT0009018-topic.html) to return the country to democracy after he attempted to shut down parliament and embarked on a campaign to rewrite the constitution in what his critics see as a bald power grab.

Trump said this week he was considering new economic sanctions to pressure Maduro's government as well. Previously Maduro's vice president was sanctioned and accused by U.S. officials of being a drug trafficker with ties to Hezbollah.

The State Department report, citing statistics compiled by the University of Maryland, said the total number of terrorist attacks in 2016 decreased by 9% from 11,774 in 2015 to 11,072. Deaths from terror attacks fell 13% in the same year, from 28,328 to 25,621. [Sixteen](http://www.latimes.com/topic/lifestyle-leisure/dining-drinking/chicago-restaurants/sixteen-PLENT000318-topic.html) of the dead were American citizens.