

Egypt and the Gulf Crisis: Holding the Line against Iraq

by [Barry Rubin \(/experts/barry-rubin\)](/experts/barry-rubin)

Oct 23, 1990

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Barry Rubin \(/experts/barry-rubin\)](/experts/barry-rubin)

Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



Brief Analysis

The assassination of a major Egyptian political figure, reportedly by Iraqi-backed terrorists, raises questions about Egypt's stability as well as its staying power in opposing Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. One of the main pillars of the anti-Iraq coalition, Egypt is beset by mounting political and economic difficulties. If it were to become a primary terrorist target, its strong stance on the Gulf crisis might be harder to sustain. This danger is increased by the fact that this first attack has passed with virtually no international reaction. Still, despite the serious problems it confronts, the regime of President Hosni Mubarak should be able to cope with them, preserving Egypt's stability and its support for U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Anti-Iraq Sentiments

Mubarak's government and the main opposition party, the Wafd, have steadfastly supported the United States in the Gulf crisis. The Islamic fundamentalists -- including the largest group, the Moslem Brotherhood -- and small leftist parties have been more critical. Yet popular anti-Iraq sentiment runs high. Some of the almost one million Egyptian guest workers in Iraq were forced into Iraq's army during the Iran-Iraq war (and Iran still refuses to release many of those taken prisoner claiming that they were mercenaries). The antagonistic attitude of Egyptians can also be traced back to last year when demobilized Iraqi soldiers began murdering Egyptian workers there, for holding jobs that these returning men wanted. At the same time, the economically strapped Iraqi regime suspended the Egyptian laborers' remittances. The Egyptian government and press -- citing the need to maintain good inter-Arab relations -- hushed up these cases of harassment and murder. Almost unnoticed in the West, Iraq has singled out Egyptians for persecution during the current crisis. About 350,000 Egyptian workers have already left Iraq. Interior Minister Mohammad Abd al-Halim Musa reported in early October that the bodies of 995 Egyptian males between the ages of 19 and 44 had arrived from Iraq since the beginning of 1990. According to medical reports, the victims died of fractured skulls and bullet wounds. Earlier, causes of death had been listed as heart attacks and other natural causes. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait made the Egyptian media willing to talk about -- even highlight -- such atrocities.

The Assassination of Mahgoub

Next, Egypt was targeted by Iraqi-backed terrorism to punish Cairo and intimidate it from continued opposition to

Saddam Hussein's ambitions. Egyptian security services arrested Iraqis, Palestinians, and other Arabs trying to infiltrate Egypt with firearms and explosives. Al-Ahram reported in early October the arrest of four Palestinians belonging to Abu Nidal's terrorist group, whose remnants moved to Baghdad after Libya found it had no present use for their services. But the worst was to come. On October 12, Egypt's Parliament Speaker Rif at al-Mahgoub and three of his bodyguards were murdered in a daring attack by four well-trained assailants outside the Semiramis Hotel. The killers all escaped. The authorities announced on October 19, however, the arrest of other people implicated in the attack and blamed Abu Nidal's forces, from the al-Fatah Revolutionary Council now headquartered in Baghdad. Given the timing, previous infiltration, and apparent foreign origin of those responsible (one hostage said they spoke a non-Egyptian Arabic dialect), a Baghdad connection seems likely. The crime raises the question of how the United States, Arab countries, and other allies would react if there was proof of Iraqi responsibility for terror attacks. Another such incident could be a provocation for war. The 64-year-old Mahgoub had been speaker of the People's Assembly since 1984. He was a crafty politician, whose post gave him considerable political leverage. Since parliament was the only national institution in which the legal opposition participated, Mahgoub was often brought into confrontation with the regime's Islamic and other critics. According to Egypt's constitution, if the presidential post becomes vacant for any reason, the speaker takes command until a new president is elected.

Political Opposition

Mahgoub's death also came in the midst of a heated parliamentary election campaign. Two opposition parties -- the largest, the conservative Wafd party, and the tiny Liberal party -- have decided to boycott the November 29 voting. They are complaining about the Mubarak regime's refusal to accept judicial management of the polling. The second largest opposition party, the Labor party -- which, despite its name, is dominated by the Moslem Brotherhood -- may decide to join them. Complaints, many of them justified, about rigged elections in Egypt are nothing new. Indeed, the November elections are being held because of court decisions against the rules governing the last balloting. The Egyptian system is one in which the governing National Democratic Party of Mubarak always wins but allocates some seats for its critics. In exchange for being allowed to operate political, journalistic, and business enterprises, the regime's opponents agree to abide by certain rules, including their refraining from violence.

The Moslem Brotherhood has greatly moderated its behavior, if not always its rhetoric, and has been criticized as being "coopted" by more radical fundamentalist groups. But the Brotherhood is still under the older generation's leadership. These men view the violent fringe groups as competitors, and rather heretical on Islamic doctrine. Having suffered long and harsh imprisonment in the regime's jails during the 1950s and 1960s, the Brotherhood's leaders have a great respect for the regime's capacity to repress them if they seek its overthrow. The Brotherhood's voice has also been softened by the fact that the group's closest international connections are with anti-Iraq Saudi Arabia. Thus, it has stressed opposition to a U.S. presence in the Gulf rather than support for Iraq.

The Mubarak government also remains angry at the PLO for rejecting its counsel for moderation and progress on the peace process, as well as for Yasser Arafat's support for Iraq. The official Egyptian press and the PLO have been carrying out a public feud of charges and counter-charges since last spring. A particularly emotional point with Egyptians was the PLO opposition to the return of Arab League headquarters to Cairo and the PLO's failure to condemn a terrorist attack on an Israeli tourist bus on Egyptian soil last year. The most worrying longterm challenge to Mubarak's rule is Egypt's poor economic situation. The World Bank has estimated that the crisis has cost Egypt 5 percent of its Gross National Product, about \$4.5 billion. To help Egypt cope with this additional burden, the United States will forgive Egypt's \$7 billion military debt. In addition, promised foreign assistance so far from Gulf states, Europe and Japan totals \$2.5 billion. Given the vital role that Egypt will likely play in any future security arrangements in the Gulf, more aid will probably be forthcoming.

In short, while Egypt is suffering severe economic problems -- worsened by the return of workers from the Gulf and

the loss of their remittances -- and a fair measure of political discontent, the Mubarak regime is stable. It continues to be committed to an Iraqi retreat from Kuwait, alliance with the United States, peace with Israel, and a self-image as the leading Arab power.

Barry Rubin is the senior fellow at The Washington Institute. Among his most recent publications are the Institute study *Inside the PLO: Officials, Notable, Revolutionaries* (Policy Focus #12, 1989), *Islamic Fundamentalism in Egyptian Politics* (St. Martin's Press, 1990) and the forthcoming *Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of the PLO*. ❖

Policy #23

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Targeting the Islamic State: Jihadist Military Threats and the U.S. Response](#)

February 16, 2022, starting at 12:00 p.m. EST (1700 GMT)



Ido Levy,

Craig Whiteside

[\(/policy-analysis/targeting-islamic-state-jihadist-military-threats-and-us-response\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Challenges to Taliban Rule and Potential Impacts for the Region

Feb 9, 2022



Mohamed Mokhtar Qandil

(/policy-analysis/challenges-taliban-rule-and-potential-impacts-region)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Egypt (/policy-analysis/egypt)

Iraq (/policy-analysis/iraq)