

Cairo Joins the Battle against Tehran

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Articles & Testimony

In June 2009, an Israeli Dolphin-class submarine sailed from the Mediterranean to the Red Sea via Egypt's Suez Canal. Given the 30-year peace between the states, Israeli vessels in the canal -- even submarines -- wouldn't ordinarily make headlines. But the submarines and the Israeli SAAR V-Class warships that passed through Egypt a few weeks later were big news in the region, a stark reminder that as Iranian centrifuges continue to spin, the deadline for Israeli military action is fast approaching. The movement of the sub -- a ship believed to carry nuclear-tipped cruise missiles -- was an unmistakable Israeli warning to Tehran.

These latest naval deployments also suggest that the warning to Iran extends beyond the Israelis. By granting canal access to the warships now, Cairo too is signaling its concern. In fact, lately Egypt's Mubarak regime has been demonstrating an increasingly public identification with the nascent coalition against Iran. For years Egypt was silent as a militant and emboldened Tehran usurped Cairo's traditional regional leadership role. But recent developments -- including unprecedented public strategic cooperation with Israel -- suggest that Cairo has finally joined the campaign against Tehran.

Egypt's awakening should be a welcome development in Washington and is sure to be on the agenda when Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak meets President Obama in the White House on August 17.

Relations between Cairo and Tehran have been tense for decades. In the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Egypt provided asylum to the deposed shah, and when he succumbed to cancer in 1980, he was feted with a state funeral by President Sadat. Tehran severed ties with Cairo in 1979 when it made peace with Israel, and when Sadat -- who signed the treaty -- was assassinated in 1981 by Khalid Islambouli, Iran returned the favor, naming a street after the killer. A giant mural of Islambouli remains on display in Tehran to this day.

In January 2008 a flurry of senior-level contacts between the states -- including a phone call between Mubarak and his Iranian counterpart, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -- seemed to portend a warming of relations. But this effort fizzled quickly.

More recently, during the December 2008-January 2009 Israeli military campaign in Gaza, Cairo refused -- to the chagrin of Tehran -- to open the border and provide relief to the besieged Iranian-backed Palestinian terrorist organization Hamas. This course of action generated significant criticism from Iran's Lebanese client, Hezbollah. In December, the militia's leader, Hassan Nasrallah, gave a televised speech urging civil disobedience in Egypt to open the frontier, an appeal that Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit characterized as a "declaration of war."

Subsequently, an organization affiliated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards put a \$1.5 million bounty on the head of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, which was posted on the website of the Iranian government's Fars news agency.

Then this past April, Cairo announced the arrest of 25 members of a 49-person Hezbollah cell operating on Egyptian territory. According to Egyptian sources, the group was smuggling weapons to Hamas, targeting Israeli tourists in the Sinai, and conducting preoperational planning against shipping in the Suez Canal. Iran's ally Syria, via its state-controlled Al-Watan daily, said the accusations "reflected the political bankruptcy" of Cairo.

Egyptian security sources subsequently leaked that Iran had "connections" to the arrested cell. During an interview with the pan Arab daily Asharq al-Awsat, Aboul Gheit went a step further in clarifying the nature of the problem. "Iran is attempting to reach Egyptian lands and arrive at the shores of the Mediterranean Sea," he said, describing it as "a clear message to the western world, and Israel, and Egypt, and all of the Arabs."

Just months after the Hezbollah arrests were announced, Cairo once again found itself at odds with Tehran and its ally Syria, this time in Lebanon. In the aftermath of the June 7 Lebanese elections -- where the pro-west March 14 coalition upset the odds-on-favorite Hezbollah-led alliance -- Cairo has reportedly made efforts to undermine the nascent Syrian--Saudi Arabian political rapprochement.

Since March 2009, Riyadh and Damascus have been engaged in discussions focused on improving bilateral ties that deteriorated following the 2005 assassination of former Lebanese premier Rafiq Hariri. (Syria remains a leading suspect in the murder of Hariri, a dual Lebanese-Saudi national.) And until recently, the talks appeared to be progressing: in July, Saudi Arabia appointed an ambassador to Syria, a post that had been vacant since early 2008.

This summer, the Riyadh-Damascus discussions focused on post-election politics in Beirut and, in particular, on the composition of the new Lebanese cabinet. At issue was whether Syrian and Iranian-backed Hezbollah and its Lebanese allies would be granted the "blocking third" veto power in the Lebanese Government. As of mid-July, Lebanon's Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri had rejected this concession, as it would effectively constitute the reversal of the June election results. Perhaps predictably, Damascus continued to push for this arrangement as a component of the rapprochement with Riyadh.

A broad range of sources suggest that Cairo has played a critical role in delaying a Saudi-Syrian agreement over Lebanon that would have cemented the bilateral ties, formally returned Damascus to the Arab fold, and reinstated a degree of Syrian control over Beirut. In July, Hezbollah MP Ali Fayyad said Egypt was "clearly annoyed with the energetic Saudi move to reinvigorate relations with Syria." According to Fayyad, Cairo's opposition to the talks resulted in a loss of Saudi enthusiasm for the thaw. The Shiite militia's cable network Al-Manar likewise attributed problems in the talks to "Egyptian coldness." Even Hariri's March 14 Druze ally Walid Jumblatt suggested that Cairo was responsible for the lack of progress in the talks. As Jumblatt lamented to the Lebanese daily *As-Safir* on July 8, "Unfortunately, there are Arab and Western quarters that do not want to establish the Saudi-Syrian dialogue."

Cairo's opposition to the rapprochement appeared to be driven by two factors. First, the Mubarak regime wants Syria to pressure Damascus-based Hamas to join a national unity government with Fatah, a development that would pressure Israel to re-engage in peace negotiations with the Palestinians. Secondly, it appears that Egypt wants to bolster the moderate March 14 coalition against its Iranian-supported adversaries. Indeed, many analysts believe this was Cairo's motivation in waiting to announce the November 2008 arrest of the Hezbollah cell until April 2009 -- just two months before Lebanese elections. Egypt, not coincidentally, announced the arrest of a second Hezbollah cell in mid-July.

Regardless of Cairo's rationale, the apparent challenge to the Saudi-Syrian talks has hurt Damascus and, by extension, Iran. Clearly, Damascus is not pleased with Egypt's position. Syria's Assad Regime canceled plans to participate in the July 15 summit of the Non-Aligned Movement in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, reportedly due to Cairo's "negative stance" on the Riyadh-Damascus rapprochement. In mid-July, Saudi Arabia reportedly shelved plans for a Damascus summit between King Abdullah and President Assad.

But the most obvious manifestation of Egypt's unprecedented stand against Iran has been its overt support for the transit of Israeli warships through the Suez Canal. Although Egyptian officials say that Israel has long had explicit access to the waterway -- About Gheit said it was Israel's "right" under the 1888 Convention of Constantinople -- movement of the ships comes at a particularly sensitive time. Use of the canal facilitates Israeli operational planning against Iran. Transit through the canal saves Israeli vessels the time-consuming trip via the Horn of Africa, providing near immediate access to the Red Sea, bringing Israeli missiles closer to Iranian shores.

While Israeli use of the canal for deploying military assets wasn't unprecedented -- prior to the latest voyage, the *Hanit* reportedly had traveled through the canal three times -- it is highly symbolic of what many see as a burgeoning strategic coordination against Tehran. Within the region, this passage of the vessels generated a lot of criticism toward Cairo. The Iranian-sympathetic London-based daily *Al-Quds al-Arabi*, for example, described this cooperation as an "Egyptian-Israeli alliance to strike Iran"; on July 14, Iran's Press TV website posted a story titled "Egypt, Israel coordinating over anti-Iran act."

Several reports speculated on what armaments the ships might be carrying. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, via *Ikhwanonline.com*, for example, wrote that ships, which departed from "the port of Haifa in occupied Palestine ... were suspected to carry Zionist nuclear warheads." Sheikh Mohammed Yazbek, the personal representative of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, highlighted the changing regional strategic alignments by asking IRNA a rhetorical question: "Why does the peaceful Iranian nuclear program constitute such a threat to Egypt while Egyptian [escort] ships protect Zionist nuclear warheads in the Suez Canal?"

According to the Israeli press, the June movement of the submarine through the canal was a first. But the subsequent movement of the Israeli missile cruisers the *Eilat* and the *Hanit* also carries significant symbolism. The *Eilat* was named after an Israeli destroyer sunk by Egypt in 1967; the *Hanit* was hit off the coast of Lebanon by a Chinese-made, Iranian-provided land-to-sea missile fired by Hezbollah in the summer of 2006. The repair and redeployment of this vessel against Iran is a clear message of Israeli resilience and determination.

Over the past decade, Egypt has seen its influence and traditional leadership role in the region decline, eclipsed by the robust, militant, and interventionist foreign policy of Iran. In the past six months, however, Cairo has adopted a more aggressive military, diplomatic, and public affairs posture vis-a-vis Tehran. Today Egypt's posture stands in sharp contrast to the quietest and relatively inconsequential regional role it has played in recent years. Given the level of criticism the Mubarak regime has been willing to absorb in pursuit of its new tack, countering the Iranian nuclear program and its regionally subversive policies is certainly a priority.

It's unclear whether Cairo will sustain its diplomatic efforts to embarrass and isolate Tehran and its allies and enhance its own strategic cooperation with Israel. But it appears that the Mubarak regime has made the decision to oppose Iranian regional hegemony, and will likely stick with it, at least until negotiations or a military strike resolve the nuclear issue.

For Washington, which appears interested in demonstrating a seriousness of purpose as it tries to entice Tehran to the table, Egypt's revitalized leadership role is a welcome development. A strong Arab coalition led by Egypt would be useful to Washington should it eventually pursue robust sanctions against the Islamic Republic. And while the administration might be less pleased with the transit of Israeli warships via the canal -- as the Red Sea deployments might be seen as facilitating the unilateral Israeli military action the White House is attempting to dissuade -- the emergence of Egypt as a regional counterbalance to Iran improves U.S. leverage for diplomatic engagement with Tehran.

At a minimum, the emergence of Egypt as an opponent to Iran within the Arab system strengthens and potentially emboldens Washington's regional allies in confronting Tehran's destabilizing and anti-American policies. It's a development that the Obama administration did little to promote but one that will ultimately benefit the U.S. in its efforts to constrain Iran.

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