

Egypt's Campaign against Iran Sends Washington a Signal

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock), [Mohammad Yaghi \(/experts/mohammad-yaghi\)](/experts/mohammad-yaghi)

Apr 17, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.

[Mohammad Yaghi \(/experts/mohammad-yaghi\)](/experts/mohammad-yaghi)

Mohammad Yaghi is a research fellow and program manager at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, specializing in social and Islamic movements and the Gulf states.



Brief Analysis

In the last week, Egypt has moved against Iran and its allies in the Arab world. Cairo arrested a Hizballah cell that was preparing terrorist operations on Egyptian soil, organized a campaign against Hamas weapons and money smugglers in the Sinai Peninsula, and stepped up efforts to displace Qatar -- an Iranian sympathizer -- as a mediator on Sudan, Lebanon, and other inter-Arab issues. It remains to be seen whether this policy shift will become a sustained part of a grand strategy to restore Egypt's leadership among Arab states or, instead, a more-defensive approach designed to parry previous humiliations from Iran's allies. It is apparent, however, that Cairo is sending a signal to Washington that the "nuclear file" is not the only -- or even the most urgent -- aspect of the Iranian threat.

Hizballah's Egyptian Cell

On April 8, the Egyptian chief prosecutor announced the arrest of forty-nine members and supporters of Hizballah, mostly Lebanese, Palestinian, Egyptian, and Sudanese. The prosecutor accused the detainees of "preparing to commit crimes against Egypt," including "observing the movement of ships in the Suez Canal, and the tourist villages in the northern and southern Sinai Peninsula, in order to attack them." The accusations also involved "spreading Shiite ideas in Egypt and inciting the Egyptians against their government," as well as "providing Hamas in Gaza with arms and money." According to the Egyptian media, Hizballah secretary-general Hassan Nasrallah personally ordered Muhammad Qabalan, chief of the group's intelligence unit, to execute this mission. Nasrallah also reportedly asked his deputy Naim Qassem to follow up.

According to the prosecutor's declaration, some of the suspects have connections with Hamas and two are linked to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, while Egypt's security forces are still searching for ten other Lebanese suspects in Sinai. In a televised speech on April 10, Nasrallah denied the accusations of plotting terror attacks against Egypt, but admitted that alleged cell leader Sami Shihab (whose true name is Muhammad Yousef Ahmad Mansour) is indeed a member of Hizballah and that he was ordered "to provide the Palestinian resistance in Gaza with logistical services including moving military equipment and personnel to Gaza." Yet the credibility of this qualified admission is highly suspect, especially since Hamas spokesman Muhammad Nazzal has denied any link with this operation.

The Larger International Picture

Six months ago Egyptian security forces reportedly arrested Hani Sami Shihab, the head of what now is known as Hizballah's Cell in Egypt, but refrained from announcing the news -- ostensibly to collect more information and to capture the cell's remaining members. But the timing of Egypt's latest, very public, moves against Hizballah is highly significant for other reasons. It clearly reflects that Cairo is taking sides in an increasingly polarized pan-Arab debate on Iranian influence in the region.

In late March, Morocco dramatically broke diplomatic relations with Iran, openly accusing it of supporting Shiite, Hizballah, and other subversive elements in the kingdom (including, according to several less public accounts, the anti-Moroccan Polisario guerrilla movement seeking independence for the Western Sahara). Bahrain vehemently protested against a statement by one Iranian official that suggested it was Iran's fourteenth province. Then, after the Doha Arab Summit two weeks ago, Egypt's semiofficial media voiced deep dismay about the refusal of this gathering to condemn Iranian meddling in Arab affairs. Jordan launched a further crackdown on Hamas, Hizballah, and other alleged agents of Iranian influence. From the perspective of these governments, Hizballah, far from being just a Lebanese movement, represents a clear and present danger that serves Iran's ambitions "from the Atlantic to the Gulf." And in Lebanon itself, with Hizballah projecting confidence about gains in the upcoming June 7 parliamentary election, the anti-Hizballah press has quickly seized on the Egyptian story to try and discredit the movement as a destructive Iranian proxy.

Especially striking in this case is Cairo's outspoken challenge not just to Hizballah, but also to its Iranian patrons. Egyptian foreign minister Abu al-Ghait has repeatedly pointed his finger at Iran, using strident language that charges the non-Arab country with the illegitimate desire, among other things, of attempting to exploit Hizballah to become "the queen of the whole Arab region." Iran's foreign minister Manouchehr Motakki has responded by calling Egypt's charges "fabricated."

Such sharp exchanges reflect genuine anxiety among the Egyptian elite, observed by one of the authors during a visit to Cairo last week, not only about Iran's own activities, but also in regard to the new U.S. willingness to engage Tehran. At a recent State Department briefing for a select group of friendly Arab states, including Egypt, the U.S. message reportedly emphasized that its efforts to engage Iran now would improve the prospects of confronting Iran later, if necessary. The Arab diplomats apparently did not find this message entirely reassuring, with some asking pointedly about more immediate Iranian threats. Egypt's new revelations about the Hizballah plot on its own territory present the most vivid case in point.

Putting the Muslim Brotherhood on Notice

Another key aspect to the timing of Egypt's new push concerns internal security, as a kind of follow-up to the Mubarak government's largely successful moves to thwart an opposition general strike slated for April 6. Egypt carefully monitors coordination among Hizballah, Hamas, and the Muslim Brotherhood, a group that has built its popularity in part by siding with Hamas and Hizballah in their conflict with Israel and by opposing the Egyptian government's preferred leaders: Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority's president, and Fouad Siniora, Lebanon's prime minister. The Brotherhood also organizes most of the demonstrations and protests in Egypt supporting Hamas and Hizballah.

By accusing two members of the Muslim Brotherhood of being part of the Hizballah plot, the Egyptian government wants to embarrass the Brotherhood, warning it that Egypt will not tolerate its political support for either Hizballah or Hamas. At the same time, to preempt rumors of Israeli or other foreign assistance in foiling this conspiracy, Abu al-Ghait issued a statement on April 15 insisting that Egypt relied exclusively on its own intelligence sources to roll up the plotters. The Brotherhood quickly understood at least part of this message, declaring that "any military

activities from Egypt must be coordinated with the government and they have no relation with the accused two men." A member of parliament affiliated with the Brotherhood went so far as to proclaim Egypt's national security "a red line that cannot be crossed." Moreover, the Brotherhood refrained from sending its lawyers to represent the accused men after an initial public position defending them.

Looking Ahead: Using Hizballah to Pressure Hamas?

Thus far, Egypt has not explicitly accused Hamas of working closely with the Hizballah cell and has leaked no details about the Palestinians involved. But this is probably not the last word on the subject. Egypt may be deliberately postponing the discussion of this issue until after April 26, when Fatah and Hamas are due to resume unity talks. If Hamas maintains its intransigence toward Cairo's suggested compromises, Egypt may play the "Hizballah card," reveal information about the Hamas connection, and use that to press the group. Until Hamas shows greater flexibility, Egypt may also seal its border with Gaza more tightly and take more steps to destroy the smuggling tunnels. If this too fails to budge Hamas, a full-fledged rupture of relations with Egypt might become a real possibility.

Implications for U.S. Policy

This latest, and particularly severe, Egyptian falling-out with Iran and its allies in the Arab "resistance," along with other signs of acute Arab concerns, offer the United States an opportunity to both support friends and contain adversaries in the region. The United States should move quickly to provide strong public support and tangible assistance to Egypt and other Arab governments in their efforts to counter Iran's increasingly brazen subversion. Such a stance is not incompatible with Washington's search for a way to engage Iran. On the contrary, the essence of smart statecraft lies precisely in the ability to talk while simultaneously protecting one's interests and preserving one's principles.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. Mohammad Yaghi is a Lafer international fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Palestinian politics. ❖

Policy #1507

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

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

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Egypt \(/policy-analysis/egypt\)](#)

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)

[Lebanon \(/policy-analysis/lebanon\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)