

U.S. Pushes for U.N. Censure of Iran, Syria on Arms

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The Obama administration is pushing for a formal censure of Iran and Syria at the United Nations over an arms-smuggling case that U.S. officials see as highlighting the risks that Iranian weapons shipments pose to regional stability.

The move at the U.N. could impede the ability of Iranian shipping firms to deliver arms to militant groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Palestinian territories, U.S. and other Western officials said.

Washington has already placed unilateral sanctions on Tehran's largest freight shipping firm, the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, for its alleged role in arms smuggling and procuring equipment for Iran's nuclear and ballistic-missile programs. U.S. and European officials hope a formal U.N. censure will increase scrutiny of the shipping line's global operations, while driving up the cost of business for Iranian shipping firms.

"The fact that Iran is smuggling arms isn't new. What's new is that they got caught in the act," said a European official working on Iran. "We now have the evidence."

The evidence involves an Iranian-chartered cargo ship that was detained in Cyprus after American intelligence suggested it was ferrying arms to Syria. U.S. officials believe the weapons could have been passed on from there to Hezbollah or Hamas.

The Cypriot-flagged ship, called the Monchegorsk, left the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas in January and, according to U.N. documents, was chartered by Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines. Cypriot authorities found dozens of wooden cases on the boat carrying bullet shells, high-explosive gun charges and items related to 125-mm armor-piercing guns. According to the U.N. documents, the Syrian port of Latakia was the port of discharge.

Last month, a U.N. committee ruled that both Iran and Syria violated a Security Council resolution that bans Tehran from both importing and exporting weapons.

U.S. naval vessels stopped and boarded the Monchegorsk in the Red Sea, but let the ship continue through the Suez Canal, due to uncertainties in the Pentagon over Washington's legal right to confiscate the cargo. Cyprus's government subsequently summoned the Monchegorsk to a Cypriot port and asked the U.N. committee that enforces Iran sanctions to rule on further action. The committee ordered last month that the Monchegorsk's cargo be impounded.

IRISL's chairman, Mohammed Hussein Dajmar, in a phone interview on Wednesday, denied that the Monchegorsk was ferrying prohibited items. He said his company didn't own the ship and has never been involved in arms smuggling. He said the ship's owner told IRISL that chemicals and metals were in the cargo. Customs agents -- not IRISL -- are supposed to inspect the ship, he added.

"It was logically not prohibited goods, because we do not ship prohibited goods," Mr. Dajmar said. "We are still not aware about what was on the ship."

The Iranian government responded angrily to the U.N.'s decision, saying Tehran might seek financial compensation for the confiscated cargo. In a March 31 letter to the Security Council, Iran's U.N. ambassador, Mohammad Khazaee, said: "We wish to stress that the consignment of the said ship falls within the framework of normal trade."

Syria has charged that the U.N.'s actions amount to a double standard, because no efforts have been made to prevent American arms from reaching Israel. Damascus has also said the U.N. is seeking to block Syria's right to defend itself against Israeli aggression.

The U.S. actions at the U.N. come as President Barack Obama is more broadly seeking to improve relations with Damascus and Tehran. Syrian officials have suggested the Monchegorsk incident could undermine Syria's rapprochement with Washington.

U.S. diplomats in New York are discussing with the U.N.'s Iran sanctions committee what steps to take. Officials involved in the deliberations said Washington, Japan and the U.K. are hoping the committee will issue a communique to the wider U.N. General Assembly underscoring the need for Iran, Syria and other countries to abide by the arms embargo.

Washington and its allies have been taking an increasingly aggressive stance to counteract arms flows since the end of Israel's 22-day war with Hamas in January. The U.S. and Israel signed a memorandum of understanding that month, focused on systematically countering arms smuggling to the Palestinian organization in the Gaza Strip.

Israel bombed at least three truck convoys in northern Sudan in January in the belief they were transferring Iranian arms to Gaza, according to people familiar with the Israeli operation. Egypt this month arrested nearly 50 members of Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese militia and political party, for allegedly moving weapons through Egyptian soil to Hamas.