

Analysis: Fighting Iran on the high seas

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Seized arms evidence of Iran's investment of Israel's borders

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Nov. 5, 2009
Yaakov Katz , THE JERUSALEM POST

The naval commandos came out of complete darkness when they made their final approach towards the Francop cargo vessel near Cyprus, some 100 nautical miles from Israel late Tuesday night.

The elite soldiers climbed aboard the ship, encountering zero resistance as they conducted a brief search of the cargo, discovering just a sample of the hundreds of tons of weaponry it was carrying, and then commandeered it for the sail back to Ashdod.

The route that the ship took is a demonstration of the complicated international battle that Israel is waging to win the war against weapons smuggling in the Mediterranean.

The arms cache began its journey aboard an Iranian cargo ship some 10 days ago when it left the Bandar Abbas Port in Iran just near the Straits of Hormuz. The dozens of containers carrying the weaponry were unloaded at the Egyptian port of Damietta next to Suez Canal, were loaded onto the German-owned Francop vessel and on Tuesday afternoon began making its way towards its final destination - Syria.

The war against the illegal weapons trafficking in the Middle East picked up speed following the 9/11 attacks against the United States. Israel cooperates with a number of countries to track ships sailing in the Mediterranean Sea, including the United States, Egypt, the European Union and NATO.

NATO, after 9/11, established a special taskforce, which Israel is a part of - called Active Endeavor based in Naples - whose mission is to uncover illegal sea trafficking in the Middle East.

The best-known arms smuggling ship was the Karine A which was intercepted by the Israel Navy in January 2002 as it made its way from Iran to the Gaza Strip loaded with 50 tons of rockets, missiles and weapons.

In December 2003 and January 2004, Iran sent planes full of weaponry to Lebanon disguised as humanitarian shipments following an earthquake.

The cooperation between the different countries gained additional momentum following Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip earlier this year. In January, for example, Cyprus stopped the Monchegorsk ship that was chartered by the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) and was carrying artillery shells, tank shells and raw materials to make rockets on its way to Syria.

Just last month, the Hansa India ship, which left Iran flying a German flag, was caught carrying eight containers filled with bullets and industrial equipment that could be used to manufacture weapons. These containers were also intended for Syria.

While these seizures are impressive, they are likely only the tip of the iceberg.

Take Hizbullah for example: The Israeli defense establishment has said that Hizbullah has over 30,000 rockets. The Francop was carrying some 3,000. This is just 10 percent, meaning that as many as 10 other ships have already succeeded in making it from Iran to its proxy in Lebanon.

The IDF recognizes this statistic and has, as a result, increased the number of ships it boards in the Mediterranean to several hundred just this past year. UNIFIL has also boarded hundreds of ships near Lebanon and the US Navy has boarded dozens.

One reason that Iran uses the sea track is because of the sheer size of the cargo: the amount of weaponry on the Francop, for example, would have required 20 planes to carry.

In addition, a plane leaves a high intelligence signature, since anyone can check when a plane takes off and lands. A

ship is far more discreet.

The significance of this arms shipment though was not in the quality of the weapons - Hizbullah has had Katyushas, mortar shells and grenades for decades - but in the massive quantity - some 500 tons.

The assessment in the IDF is that if and when Iran or Syria will decide to supply Hizbullah with balance-altering weaponry, it will be done by ground or by plane, which will minimize the risk of it being captured.

The seizure may also deal Iran a severe economic blow. Under UN Security Council Resolution 1803, countries are asked to board and inspect IRISL ships. Now foreign shipping companies are likely to be far more cautious before agreeing to carrying IRISL containers. This will also increase the premium the Iranian company needs to pay.

Lastly, the seizure also helps Israel on with its public diplomacy efforts. It happened the same day the UN convened to discuss the Goldstone Report and just a day after Military Intelligence revealed that Hamas had test-fired a rocket that could reach Tel Aviv.

This article can also be read at <http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1256799095872&pagename=JPArticle%2FShowFull>

 Analysis: Seized arms evidence of Iran's investment of Israel's borders
 Nov. 5, 2009

JONATHAN SPYER , THE JERUSALEM POST

The seizure by Israeli forces of an Iranian-commissioned arms smuggling ship on its way to Syria and/or Hizbullah in Lebanon offers a further glimpse into the daily, silent war under way between Israel and the Iranian-led regional bloc.

It is evidence of Iran's ongoing strategy of arming its Islamist clients to Israel's north and south.

The strength of these forces on the ground constitutes an important asset for the Iranian regime. Iranian aid and weaponry is not doled out for its recipients to use at will. Iran's investment is likely to be called in at a moment of the Iranian regime's choosing - most likely in the event of a strike on Iranian nuclear facilities.

Iran makes use of all its regional assets and allies in its effort to supply arms to Hamas and Hizbullah. These two organizations play a vital role in Iran's strategy for regional hegemony.

They currently maintain the two "hot" fronts in the Israeli-Arab conflict (which might today more accurately be referred to as the "Israel-Islamist" conflict). So maintaining the smooth flow of supplies is a strategic priority of the first order for Teheran.

In January, an Israeli bombing of an arms convoy in Sudan laid bare an arms trail leading from Iran to Sudan, across Egypt, across Sinai, and finishing in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip.

The Sudan-Sinai-Gaza part of the trail was created and administered by Hizbullah men, acting on behalf of their Iranian patron. In April, an unidentified warship sank an Iranian vessel carrying arms to the Gaza Strip, as it sought to dock in Sudan.

This latest seizure of the arms ship bound for Syria lays bare a similar collective effort by Iran's allies to supply the parallel northern front - apparently along a similar route. The latest indications are that the ship docked first in Yemen, then in Sudan, before making its way to the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal.

But the destination of the arms ship - either a Syrian or a Lebanese port, according to sources - points to one of the essential differences in the two fronts maintained by Iran against Israel.

Hamas in Gaza is boxed in and lacks strategic depth. Egypt to its south is aligned with the pro-western bloc in the region, and as such is a partner (sometimes even an energetic partner) in Israeli efforts to stem the flow of weaponry to Gaza.

Syria, however, is a card-carrying member of the pro-Iranian regional bloc. The porousness of Lebanon's eastern border with Syria is a vital asset for Hizbullah. And the Shi'ite Islamist movement has complete freedom of operation on Lebanese soil.

UN Resolution 1701 tasks UN forces in Lebanon with preventing the Syrian supply of arms across the border to Hizbullah. But no serious effort has been made to implement this clause.

Journalists working in Lebanon are aware that the crossings at the eastern border are off limits, and few attempt to report events there. Even UN investigators themselves concur that since August 2006, a steady supply of Iranian and Syrian arms has been making its way across Lebanon's eastern border to the Hizbullah forces in the south of the country.

It may be assumed that this was the intended final destination for the arms found Tuesday night on the ship bearing the Antiguan flag.

The events of the last 18 months in Lebanon have indicated that Hizbullah is the de facto ruler of that country - in the simple sense of being the force that can impose its will on matters it considers vital without consulting with other elements.

Six months after the much-vaunted election victory of the pro-western March 14 movement, Lebanon still has no government in sight. In the meantime, the parallel pro-Iranian Hizbullah state pursues its policies unhindered.

If the ship turns out to have been bound for a Lebanese port - this will offer the latest indication of just how free Hizbullah's hand in Lebanon now is.

The apprehending of the arms ship represents a propaganda coup for Israel, which may help it draw attention to the reality of an ongoing Iranian effort to amass powerful proxy military forces to Israel's south and north.

However, it is unlikely to put a major dent in Iranian efforts to rearm Hizbullah. The evidence suggests that the process of replenishing the large-scale destruction suffered by Hizbullah in 2006 has been mostly trouble-free and has largely been completed. Hizbullah is thought by Israel to now possess around 80,000 rockets and missiles directed at the Jewish state.

The frenetic armament efforts undertaken by Iran and its clients do not mean that conflict is necessarily imminent. The Iranians were displeased at Hizbullah's provocation that led to the war of 2006. The war destroyed costly resources and undid intensive Iranian efforts.

Rather, weaponry is making its way to south Lebanon and Gaza, via Syria, Sinai and the Mediterranean, to place the Israeli population within the range of Iranian-directed short and medium range missiles. The implicit threat is that these assets would be activated should Israel (or anyone else) dare to move against the Iranian nuclear program.

Israelis may take justified pride in its navy's significant achievement in stopping the arms ship bound for Syria. But the result of the larger contest of which the ship was a part, however, still lies ahead.

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IDF commandos uncover hundreds of tons of Iranian weapons on ship
Nov. 5, 2009

Yaakov Katz and Tovah Lazzarof , THE JERUSALEM POST

Hundreds of tons of weaponry, the largest arms seizure in Israel's history, were intercepted overnight Tuesday in a daring raid by Israeli naval commandos aboard a cargo ship sailing 100 nautical miles west of Israel.

The arms shipment was 10 times the size of the cache found on the Palestinian arms ship Karine A in 2002.

The cache was hidden inside shipping containers belonging to the Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL) which departed from the Badar Abbas Port in Iran some 10 days ago, were unloaded in the Egyptian port of Damietta and then loaded onto the Francop, a German vessel flying an Antiguan flag.

The operation had been in planning for several days and was dubbed "Four Species," for the recent Succot holiday.

Two Israel Navy missile ships approached the Francop late Tuesday night as it passed Israel some 100 miles off the coast. One of the ships raised the captain, of Polish origin, on the radio and asked for permission to board. Once he gave permission, the second ship, carrying several teams of commandos, closed in.

The soldiers boarded without encountering resistance and were given the cargo certificates, which indicated that some of the hundreds of containers on board had originated in Iran and were on their way to the Lattakia Port in Syria, where Israel believes they would have been unloaded and then transferred to Hizbullah.

The total shipment was estimated to weigh over 500 tons and included thousands of rockets and shells of various types, including 122 mm. Russian-made Katyushas, which have a range of some 30 kilometers.

Upon receiving permission from relevant authorities, including the political establishment, the ship was commandeered and brought it to Israel. The Foreign Ministry had a representative in a special command center that was set up, who contacted the countries involved with the ship - Germany and Antigua.

The ship's crew were unaware of the weapons on board, as the armaments were disguised as humanitarian aid. Some of the other containers contained toilets, milk powder and piles of sacks - each weighing 25 kilograms - filled with polyethylene and made by the Amir Kabir National Petrochemical Company based in Teheran.

The transfer of such a large amounts of weapons was "part of Iran's effort to create a balance of terror with Israel," said Brig.- Gen. Rani Ben-Yehuda, deputy commander of the Israel Navy.

"What we discovered is likely just the tip of the iceberg," Ben-Yehuda said, adding that it was "10 times the amount caught on the Karine A," a reference to the Palestinian arms ship that was carrying 50 tons of weaponry and was intercepted in 2002 in the Red Sea, on its way to the Gaza Strip.

"This is the third time this year that Iran has disregarded international law and United Nations Security Council resolutions that forbid it to transfer weaponry," Ben-Yehuda said.

The navy, he said, regularly conducted operations hundreds of miles from Israel's shores to inspect ships suspected of carrying illegal weapons from Iran to terror proxies like Hizbullah and Hamas.

Ben-Yehuda said that there was regular intelligence indicating that Iran was continuing to support terror groups with large amounts of weapons intended for use against Israel. Furthermore, it was likely that additional shipments from Iran would be shipped, he said.

Ben-Yehuda called the shipment "very advanced weaponry."

He added that even though the Iranian containers were loaded at port of Damietta in Egypt, the Egyptians were totally unaware of the ship's contents.

Hilary Leila Krieger and Greer Fay Cashman contributed to this report.

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Shipped from Iran, but arms came from all over the world

Nov. 5, 2009

Yaakov Katz , THE JERUSALEM POST

One crate had "Parts of Bulldozer" written on its side. When it was opened though, the Navy did not see a track or a blade but a five-meter long 122 mm. Katyusha rocket.

The weaponry that was discovered aboard the Francop cargo vessel on its way from Iran to Syria and then to Hizbullah was of a wide variety and mix, including fragmentation grenades, artillery and tank shells, Kalashnikov bullets, and mortars.

The crates with the weapons came with writing in different languages, including Chinese, Russian, Spanish and of course English. An initial review of the cache appeared to indicate, senior IDF officers said, that the weaponry originated possibly in different countries before it was purchased by Iran.

By Wednesday afternoon, representatives from Military Intelligence's Technological Division had assembled at the Ashdod Port to begin sifting through the weaponry together with soldiers from the Engineering Corps elite unit Yahalom - who are experts in handling explosives - to try and determine the exact origin and make.

The officers also raised the possibility that the weaponry was mostly manufactured in Iran but came in boxes with different languages since Iran also sells armaments to other countries.

The 122 mm. Katyusha rockets appeared to have been manufactured in Russia since they were covered in Russian writing. Some of the Kalashnikov bullets likely came from China. Others were in boxes from the "Ministry of Sepah," which is the main body in charge of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards.

The weaponry was hidden inside containers behind piles of sacks - each weighing 25 kilograms - filled with polyethylene and made by the Amir Kabir National Petrochemical Company based in Teheran. The sacks even had a phone number written on them.

IDF sources said that they were not ruling out the possibility that some of the mortar shells were manufactured in Israel and painted to make them look new. Israel's Soltam Company sold thousands of mortar shells to Iran during the regime of the Shah in the 1970s and some of them are believed to have been already transferred to Hizbullah in the past.

The Spanish crates were carrying 106 mm. shells and each had the words "2 Disparos" written on them, meaning two shots, for the number of rockets inside.

The 107 mm. rockets were in crates claiming that they were manufactured in 2007. There were even instruction manuals inside in English explaining how to handle the rocket, carry it and even place it inside a launcher.

Other weapons on the ship included F1 fragmentation grenades, 20 per box. Several countries, including Iran, are known to manufacture the grenade.

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PM: Ship proves Iran's support for terror organizations

Nov. 4, 2009

JPost.com Staff , THE JERUSALEM POST

A day after the IDF operation in which an Iranian arms shipment headed for Syria and allegedly intended for Hizbullah was captured some 100 nautical miles west of Israel, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu addressed the international community concerning Iran's material support for terrorist organizations.

"The time has come for the international community to apply real pressure on Iran to cease these criminal operations and give backing to Israel when it defends itself against the terrorists and their sponsors," he said in a statement Wednesday evening.

Regarding those who may doubt Iran's continual support for terrorist organizations, the prime minister said, "Whoever still needed decisive proof that Iran continues to send weapons to terrorist organizations, received it today in a very clear and unequivocal way."

President Shimon Peres said that the capture of the Iranian weapons shipment was an important achievement for the IDF and the State of Israel.

"The ship, probably hailing from Iran, was destined to reach Syria and Hizbullah. All sides involved deny [any connection] but the world is aware of the gap between what Syria and Iran say and how they actually act," Peres added.

Defense Minister Ehud Barak commended IDF Chief of General Staff Lt.-Gen. Gabi Ashkenazi and Navy Commander Vice-Admiral Eliezer Marom for the operation.

"This is another success in the incessant battle against the smuggling of arms and the military buildup by terrorist organizations who threaten Israel's security," he said.

The defense minister was speaking during a Yitzhak Rabin memorial service held by the 'Mahane' organization at Jerusalem's Mount Herzl cemetery.

There will be other such smuggling attempts in the future, he said, and Israel will have to "make every effort to thwart them."

Three Iranian weapons shipments were recently intercepted at sea. According to Channel 10, Wednesday's naval operation "will neither help nor hinder," but may deter Iran from delivering large amounts of weapons by sea because of the huge losses incurred by seized shipments.

Opposition leader Tzipi Livni also hailed the Navy's seizure.

"We all today praise the Navy and IDF over the seizure of the ship - it's not a controversial matter. There are issues over which there are no coalition and opposition," she said at a convention in the Knesset regarding the drought levy. "We are all partners in the people of Israel's war on terror - whether it's Hamas, Hizbullah or other supporters [of terror]. Well

done."

Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem on Wednesday afternoon denied that the cargo ship was carrying weapons from Iran, and implicitly called the Israeli naval forces "pirates."

"Unfortunately there are official pirates disrupting the movement of goods between Iran and Syria," he told reporters on a visit to Teheran. "I stress, the ship was not carrying Iranian arms bound for Syria, nor was it carrying material for manufacturing weapons in Syria. It was carrying [commercial] goods from Syria to Iran."

Lebanese MP Michel Aoun, who in 2006 became aligned with Hizbullah, remarked later on Wednesday that Lebanon would get its arms from China if not from Iran, adding that such weapons would be better suited to the "liberation of Palestine" than to the internal Lebanese conflict.

Also commenting on the issue was a US State Department official, who said that the US was concerned over "Hizbullah's efforts to rearm in direct violation of various UN Security Council resolutions," adding that the terrorist organization remained "a significant threat to peace and security in Lebanon and the region."

Hilary Leila Krieger contributed to this report.

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