

Israel: Commandos seize huge Iranian arms shipment

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Navy commander: Hizballah arms ship carried hundreds of tons of hardware

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JERUSALEM — Open crates from a cargo ship seized Wednesday by Israel revealed dark green missiles inside. Containers from the vessel bore writing in English that said "I.R. Iranian Shipping Lines Group."

Israel alleged that the shipment of hundreds of tons of rockets, missiles, mortars, grenades and anti-tank weapons — the largest it ever seized — was headed for Hezbollah guerrillas in Lebanon.

Israel stopped the ship, named the Francop, off the coast of Cyprus and towed it to the port of Ashdod. It carried orange, red, white and blue containers piled three deep on its deck.

Rows of crates from the vessel were displayed on the dock, and inside were rockets, hand grenades, mortars and ammunition. At least 3,000 missiles were on board, the Israeli military said.

The seizure spotlighted the dangerous tensions between Israel and Iran. Israel considers Iran a strategic threat because of its nuclear program and long-range missile development, dismissing Iranian denials that it is building nuclear weapons.

Among the weaponry displayed were Katyusha rockets. One of the long skinny missiles sat atop a pile of storage boxes the military had labeled in Hebrew "rocket 122 mm." The 122 mm Katyusha was the main weapon used against Israel by Hezbollah in a monthlong war in 2006. During that war, about 1,200 people were killed in Lebanon, most of them civilians, and about 160 people were killed in Israel.

Some of the weapons were hidden in the Francop's containers behind stacked bags of polyethylene labeled in English "NPC National Petrochemical Company," and the flame logo used by both the company and the Iranian Petroleum Ministry.

Israel said the huge weapons shipment backed up its long-standing contention that Iran is supplying large quantities of arms to Hezbollah and Hamas.

The Francop's containers were carefully unloaded on army forklifts to avoid accidental detonation. Some of the containers had the initials "I.R.I.S.L." printed on one side and the fuller title, "I.R. (Islamic Republic of) Iran Shipping Lines Group" on the other. Explosives experts and dog-sniffing units examined the haul.

The Israeli military said cargo certificates showed the ship departed an Iranian port for Syria, from where the weapons would be transferred to Hezbollah in Lebanon. The military did not show the documents, and Syria denied the vessel was carrying weapons.

Iran has never acknowledged giving weapons to Hezbollah. Proof of large-scale Iranian weapons shipments to its proxy forces on Israel's borders could reinforce the views of Israelis who favor their military making a pre-emptive strike against Iran's nuclear facilities.

The seizure may also complicate relations with Egypt, where Israel says the weapons were loaded.

Wednesday's dramatic operation allowed Israel to showcase its claims of weapons smuggling by Iran and Syria, which both nations have long denied. It also provided Israel with a chance to highlight what it considers Iranian mischief amid Western allegations that Tehran is developing nuclear weapons.

The seizure came a day after Israeli officials said Hamas tested an Iranian rocket that can hit metropolitan Tel Aviv — bringing to the fore Israeli fears that both Hezbollah and Hamas are rearming for more confrontations following the 2006 Lebanon war and last winter's Gaza war.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu drew clear conclusions.

"Whoever still needed indisputable proof that Iran continues to send weapons to terror organizations got it today in a clear and unequivocal manner. Iran sends these weapons to terror organizations in order to hit Israeli cities and kill civilians," he said in a statement. "The time has come for the international community to put real pressure on Iran for it to halt this despicable activity and back Israel when it defends itself against terrorists and their patrons."

In Tehran, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem dismissed Israeli allegations the ship carried arms.

"Unfortunately, some official pirates in the seas, sometimes in the name of the navy, sometimes in the name of inspection, obstruct trade movement between Syria and Iran," al-Moallem said a joint news conference with his Iranian counterpart.

"This ship does not carry Iranian weapons to Syria and does not contain military material to manufacture weapons in Syria. This ship carries imported goods from Syria to Iran," al-Moallem added. His comments in Arabic were carried by Hezbollah's Al-Manar TV station and other Lebanese stations.

It was unclear why al-Moallem said the ship was headed in the opposite direction of that stated by Israel. Syrian officials were not immediately available for comment in Damascus. Iran, Lebanon and Hezbollah had no comment.

The 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war ended with a U.N.-brokered cease-fire that prohibited Iran from rearming the Islamic militants. Israel claims that Hezbollah has since been restocked with upward of 40,000 rockets but has been unable to prove it.

"We have seen the press reports and remain extremely concerned about Hezbollah's efforts to re-arm in direct violation of various U.N. Security Council resolutions," said State Department spokesman Noel Clay. "Hezbollah continues to pose a significant threat to peace and security in Lebanon and the region."

Rear Adm. Roni Ben-Yehuda, the deputy Israeli navy commander, said hundreds of tons of weapons were found on the ship, but the weapons were only "a drop in the ocean" of arms being sent to Hezbollah.

Israel has conducted daring naval operations before, but never seized anything close to this in scope.

In May 2001 off its coast, Israel captured the vessel Santorini, packed with explosives that Israel said were being sent from Hezbollah to Palestinian militant groups.

In January 2002, Israeli forces stormed the Karine A freighter on the Red Sea, and confiscated what the military said was 50 tons of missiles, mortars, rifles and ammunition headed for Palestinian militants in the Gaza Strip.

Ben-Yehuda said the Francop carried 10 times as many weapons as the Karine A.

Forces from other countries, including the U.S. last month, have stopped ships suspected of carrying arms. Sudan suspects Israel was behind air raids earlier this year on convoys smuggling weapons from Sudan to Egypt en route to Hamas-ruled Gaza.

Most recently, reports surfaced that Israel had a role in the boarding last summer of a Russian ship that was said to be carrying anti-aircraft missiles for Iran, but no evidence has surfaced to back them up.

Acting on intelligence reports, the Israeli military said Wednesday that one of its naval units patrolling the area caught up with the Francop and boarded it peacefully, in coordination with NATO, Ben-Yehuda said.

Deputy Defense Minister Matan Vilnai said the crew, led by a Polish captain, was not aware of the Francop's contents and cooperated fully.

Israel said the ship arrived in Beirut from Iran Oct. 28 and left the next day with a declared destination of Turkey. Instead, Israel said, it sailed to Damietta, Egypt, where the weapons were loaded. Its next destination was supposed to be Latakia in Syria, via Cyprus, Israel said.

The vessel, sailing under an Antiguan flag, was operated by United Feeder Services, a Cyprus-based shipping company. An employee of the company's chartering department in Cyprus who would not identify himself confirmed the ship's destination but insisted the company did not know what was in the containers or where the cargo originated.

An Egyptian government official who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the case with the media could not confirm or deny whether the ship passed through Egypt and said it was impossible to search every vessel that enters its ports.

The Lebanon-Israel border has remained largely quiet since the 2006 war, but tensions have remained high because of Israeli fears Hezbollah has acquired new long-range missiles.

Claire Spencer, head of the Middle East and North Africa program at Chatham House, said Iranian support for Hezbollah is well known.

"It's assumed that the normal supply routes are through Syria," she said. "There are probably practical reasons, but it's a risk given that they are sailing through waters that are closely monitored."

http://www.nydailynews.com/news/world/2009/11/05/2009-11-05_israel_commandos_seize_huge_iranian_arms_shipment_.html

Israel Navy Intercepts Iranian Weapons en route to Hezbollah, 4 Nov 2009
{youtube}wXDCDPPeN_Q{/youtube}

Israel nabs Iran arms ship
By AMY TEIBEL

Last Updated: 4:46 AM, November 5, 2009
Posted: 3:34 AM, November 5, 2009

JERUSALEM -- Israeli commandos seized a ship yesterday that defense officials said was carrying hundreds of tons of weapons from Iran bound for Lebanon's Hezbollah guerrillas -- the largest arms shipment Israel has ever commandeered.

The Israeli military said an Iranian document was found on board, showing that the arms shipment originated from Iran, although the paper was not shown to reporters. Rear Adm. Roni Ben-Yehuda, the deputy Israeli navy commander, said that despite its size, the shipment of weapons was "a drop in the ocean" of arms being shipped to Hezbollah.

"It's a cargo certificate that shows that it was from a port in Iran," military spokeswoman Lt. Col. Avital Leibovich said. "All the cargo certificates are stamped at the ports of origin, and this one was stamped at an Iranian port."

The Israelis boarded the ship, named Francop, before dawn in the waters near Cyprus.

Containers had Iranian shipping codes in English -- "IRISL" on one side and "I.R. Iranian Shipping Lines Group" on the other. Some of the hundreds of crates lined up on the dock were open, revealing dark-green missiles with English-language designations.

But hours after the seizure, Israel had not provided proof that the arms were meant for the Lebanese guerrillas.

Israeli military officials said the ship's journey started in Iran, and it arrived a week ago in Beirut. The next stop was Damietta, Egypt, where the weapons were loaded, they said. Ben-Yehuda said the ship was headed for Latakia, Syria.

In Tehran, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem dismissed Israeli allegations the ship carried arms.

"Unfortunately, some official pirates in the seas, sometimes in the name of the navy, sometimes in the name of inspection, obstruct trade movement between Syria and Iran," al-Moallem said a joint news conference with his Iranian counterpart.

"This ship does not carry Iranian weapons to Syria and does not contain military material to manufacture weapons in Syria. This ship carries imported goods from Syria to Iran."

NEW YORK POST

http://www.nypost.com/p/news/international/israel_nabs_iran_arms_ship_r4P3naGpmksZXIvFo6MxaP

Captured Iranian arms ship tip of the iceberg of vast weapons sealift to Hizballah
DEBKAFfile Exclusive Report

November 4, 2009, 11:03 PM (GMT+02:00)

DEBKAFile's military and intelligence sources report that a mammoth arms train has been running to Hizballah for months via Egypt. They identify the ship which offloaded the arms shipment at the Egyptian port of Damietta, where it was picked up by the Francop as the Iranian Visea, which is now on its way from the British port of Felixtowe to Hamburg, Germany. An international operation is afoot to apprehend the Iranian ship as of Wednesday, Nov. 4, when Israeli naval forces commandeered the Francop with hundreds of tons of Iranian arms bound for the Lebanese Hizballah near Cyprus. The arms were unloaded at the Israeli naval base at Ashdod port.

The Visea was formerly called Iran Zanian. She is owned by the IRISL corporation, Iran's national shippers.

The estimated 500 of tons of weapons aboard were concealed inside sacks of polyethylene and loaded aboard the Visea either at Bandar Abbas or Bandar Imam Khomeini in Iran. It sailed on Oct. 14, docking at Dubai's Jabel Ali on Oct. 18, after which it wound its way through the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, reaching Damietta port Monday, Oct. 26. Our sources stress that the containers and their hidden arms freight stood on Egyptian docks for seven days until Nov. 1, when the German ship Francop collected it for delivery at Beirut.

The Francop is known as a "feeder ship," which circulates between regular ports of call beginning at Damietta, thence to Limassol in Cyprus and from there to Beirut, Lebanon, Port Latakia, Syria, and back. Neither the owners nor the crew knew about the concealed arms cargo, which was not recorded in the ship's documents carried from the port of departure. These documents were left behind by the Iranian Visea.

DEBKAFile's counter-terrorism sources report pressing questions arise about Egypt's security procedures in the Suez Canal and its Mediterranean ports, when Iran has managed for months to run a seahift of arms from Iran to Syria and Hizballah, under the noses of Egyptian security and intelligence authorities.

These sources ask what would have happened if one of the Iranian arms ships plying their waters with hundreds of tons of missiles, rockets, shells and explosives aboard were to blow up in the middle of the Suez Canal. This vital waterway would have been blocked for many weeks, triggering a fresh international financial crisis.

As recently as October, when the German freighter Hansa India was discovered carrying Iranian arms and ammunition destined for Lebanon, the Berlin government ordered it to sail straight to Malta, after a tip-off from Israeli intelligence. There, the containers were unloaded and found to contain the Iranian arms.

To disguise its vast traffic of illicit arms to Lebanon, Iran has taken to using commercial "feeder" vessels which are frequently seen on regular tours around the Mediterranean ports and arouse little attention. By this route, Hizballah has received thousands of tons of arms and ammunition in the last few months.

<http://www.debka.com/headline.php?hid=6358>

 Israel Navy commander: Hizballah arms ship carried hundreds of tons of hardware
 DEBKAFile Special Report
 November 4, 2009, 11:02 PM (GMT+02:00)

The Antigua-flagged arms ship Francop commandeered by the Israeli Navy early Wednesday, Nov. 4, near Cyprus, carried 300 containers, in 40 of which hundreds of tons of Iranian arms for Hizballah were hidden, said Israeli Navy commander Brig.-Gen Ronnie Ben-Yehuda in a news briefing Wednesday, Nov 3. Most of it was ammo, grenades, 122-km Katyusha rockets, mortar shells and anti-tank missiles, enough to keep Hizballah fighting for a month or more.

DEBKAFile's military sources report the first arms ship set out from Kish Island or Bandar Abbas in the third week of October and was detected by US satellites over the weekend while heading out of the Straits of Hormuz and into the Gulf of Oman. The USS Anzio guided missile cruiser of the US Navy's Task Force 151 shadowed the weapons ship as it sailed into the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. This task force leads the operations against piracy and Iranian arms smuggling under the command of Rear Adm. Scott Sanders.

Israeli military intelligence, navy and air force were kept informed of the Francop's movements, including the projected times of its passage through the Suez Canal and arrival in the Mediterranean. Tehran and Hizballah knew the ship had been spotted and expected it to be seized, although they did not know by whom.

The Egyptian Navy kept close to the arms ship as it passed through the canal to the Mediterranean.

The ship docked at Damietta, Egypt, where the arms freight was offloaded to the Francop, which then acquired an escort of US Sixth Fleet and Israeli Navy warships..

No action was taken then because the American and Israeli commanders of their joint Juniper Cobra ballistic exercise agreed to hold off seizing the ship until a few hours after the two-week war game ended Tuesday, Nov. 3. Washington was reluctant to embark on direct military action against an Iranian target so long as nuclear negotiations are still in progress for fear of provoking a fresh crisis with Tehran. This delay allowed the Francop to reach Beirut, but Hizballah held off unloading the shipment because it was under surveillance. The Francop then headed to the northern Lebanese port of Tripoli where it docked until Oct. 30 when it set out for the Syrian port of Tartous. The Syrians were also wary of laying hands on the cargo under the eyes of the US Sixth Fleet and so the Francop set sail again this time toward Cyprus. Before reaching its next port of call, the ship was intercepted by Israeli commandoes who boarded early Wednesday 100 miles out to sea and directed it to the Israeli naval base at Ashdod for further examination.

DEBKAFfile's military sources add: Iran is finding it increasingly difficult to smuggle arms to Hizballah because of US-Israeli intelligence and naval cooperation. Tehran is now sending out smaller shipments - this one masked by several dozen containers or civilian merchandize - hoping to draw less attention to its deliveries and incur smaller losses if they are impounded. But this latest consignment, Brig. Ben-Yehuda disclosed, was more than ten times the 50 tons of weaponry carried by the Palestinian arms ship Karin-A which Israeli forces intercepted in 2002.

Prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu said the Francop consignment was destined for attacks on Israeli cities, while defense minister Ehud Barak named Hizballah as the consignment's end-user.

<http://www.debka.com/headline.php?hid=6357>