

## Captured Iranian arms ship tip of the iceberg of vast weapons sealift to Hizballah

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DEBKAF'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 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.

DEBKAF'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 sealift 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.

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