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Rethinking U.S. Strategy for Intercepting Iranian Arms Transfers

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Brief Analysis

Existing mechanisms for interdicting Iran's arms shipments to its proxies have already been proven insufficient, so any concerted effort to push back against the flow of weapons will require additional measures.

U.S. allies in the Middle East are concerned that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) will embolden Iran's aggressive behavior, particularly in terms of funding and arming militias and terrorist organizations such as Hezbollah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and the Houthis. In recent weeks, the Obama administration has sought to assure these allies that the United States will push back against this behavior. On July 15, at a press conference one day after the JCPOA was signed, President Obama stated, "The issue of the arms embargo and ballistic missiles is of real concern to us -- has been of real concern to us. And it is in the national security interest of the United States to prevent Iran from sending weapons to Hezbollah, for example, or sending weapons to the Houthis in Yemen that accelerate a civil war there." He added that Washington still has "a number of mechanisms under international law that give us authority to interdict arms shipments by Iran."

The mechanisms the president alluded to include various UN Security Council resolutions and sanctions that are still in place at this stage of the JCPOA's implementation. Yet these are the same mechanisms that have been in place for years -- the question is, have they actually helped the United States interdict arms transfers from Iran?

SMUGGLING TACTICS AND SCOPE

Arms have been flowing from Iran to Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Gaza, and beyond for years. These smuggling efforts are mostly executed by Unit 190, a special branch of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Qods Force (IRGC-QF). According to multiple reports, the roughly two dozen personnel who make up Unit 190 use an elaborate system of companies and shipping firms as fronts to conceal the IRGC's fingerprint and bypass international sanctions. One of the unit's main figures is Behnam Shahriyari, the owner of Behnam Shahriyari Trading Company; both are currently designated by the U.S. Treasury Department.

Unit 190 uses a variety of methods to transfer advanced weapons by sea, air, and land. Arms are usually concealed inside containers next to other commonplace products such as construction materials. The containers are then placed on commercial airlines or ships (sometimes under foreign flags) and sent to their recipients as innocuous commodities. In some cases these ships have passed through three or more ports before reaching their final destination. In October 2010, for example, Nigerian authorities found rocket launchers, grenades, and mortars hidden in containers loaded with building materials. Upon further investigation, they discovered that the weapons had been loaded at the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas on the ship MV Everest, which was owned by a French company. The vessel then traveled to India before making its way to Lagos, where the containers were discovered before reaching their final destination (which was believed to be Gambia).

Unit 190 has employed other methods as well, at various points using trains to smuggle weapons to Syria through Turkey, airplanes to move arms from Tehran to other regional capitals, and trucks to carry weapons through the Iraqi desert on their way to Syria and other places. Another method that became more apparent in recent years was to re-export arms manufactured in other countries, with the objective of removing any Iranian fingerprint. In March 2014, Israel intercepted an arms shipment in the Red Sea destined for Gaza; onboard were Syrian M-302 rockets, transferred to Iran from Syria before they were shipped to Sudan. Elsewhere, recent photos coming out of Yemen have shown Houthi fighters using rockets that are very similar in design to those manufactured in Iraq by IRGC-affiliated Shiite militias.

Over the years, the scope of these transfers has proven to be massive, with Iranian weapons and explosives used in great quantity by Hezbollah, Hamas, PIJ, the Syrian regime, the Houthis, and Iraqi militias. They have also been used by various cells plotting to target Israeli and American targets abroad. Most prominently, two suspected IRGC-QF personnel were arrested in Kenya in June 2012 for their involvement in plots to attack Western targets there; they had smuggled more than a hundred kilograms of powerful explosives into the country for that purpose.

HOW MANY TRANSFERS DID THE UNITED STATES INTERDICT?

The recent history of U.S. interdiction efforts does not include many examples of preventing Iranian arms transfers. In January 2009, the USS *San Antonio* intercepted the MV *Monchegorsk*, a Russian-owned cargo ship flying under the flag of Cyprus. After the ship was stopped in the Red Sea, naval personnel boarded the vessel with the captain's permission. Yet the only reason they were permitted to do so was because of a bilateral ship-boarding agreement between the United States and Cyprus. And although U.S. sailors discovered the weapons, they lacked the legal authority to seize them, so Washington had to press Cypriot authorities to bring the ship to one of their ports and inspect the weapons themselves. Investigators found that the ship had been chartered by Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, which is currently designated by the Treasury Department but will be delisted as part of the JCPOA.

Another interdiction occurred in January 2013, when Yemeni authorities intercepted the ship *Jihan 1* in coordination with the U.S. Navy. The vessel, which was on its way to Yemen, contained Katyusha rockets, man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS), and various explosives, all originating from IRGC facilities. The ship's

crew, consisting of Iranians and Yemenis, first insisted that the vessel was Panamanian flagged and carried fuel, but the weapons were quickly discovered. According to Yemeni officials, the crew of the *Jihan 1* was detained and the ship was impounded. The weapons were seized, but the fate of the eight Yemeni crewmen and the vessel itself is not specified in open-source reports on the incident. And in April 2015, the Theodore Roosevelt Carrier Strike Group was sent to the Gulf of Aden to intercept a group of Iranian vessels purportedly carrying weapons for the Houthis.

In the grand scheme of things, however, these interdictions were a drop in the bucket. Tons of weapons carried by commercial airlines and ships were still reaching their destinations in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and Yemen, improving the fighting capabilities of the Assad regime and various militant and terrorist organizations. This fact was readily apparent during the summer 2014 Gaza war, when Hamas fired rockets that were very similar in design to the Syrian M-302. The group also displayed Ababil drones and other weapons that it received from Iran. Similarly, the Assad regime and its Hezbollah allies are still using Iranian weapons to fight rebels in Syria. And given the photographic evidence emerging from Yemen thus far, it is safe to assume that once the dust settles there, ample Houthi usage of Iranian weapons will be discovered.

The truth is that interdictions are subject to numerous legal and logistical limitations, as the MV Monchegorsk case demonstrated, making it very difficult for the United States and other countries to stop arms shipments. U.S. authorities have assisted with other interdictions, mainly by sharing intelligence with countries in the region, but some of these states lack the resources or political will to contribute to the countersmuggling effort.

SYRIA AND HEZBOLLAH

Iran is mainly using the aerial route to Syria, sending arms via commercial airliners such as Yas Air, Iran Air, and Mahan Air. After landing in Damascus, these shipments are transferred to Syrian warehouses or directly to Hezbollah's Unit 108, which is in charge of moving weapons from Syria to Lebanon.

To interdict these transfers, the United States would need to force the airplanes to land (presumably while they are crossing Iraqi territory) or deny them access to Syrian airports. In the past, Washington has urged Iraq to force landings by Iranian planes carrying arms through its airspace, but Baghdad refused, arguing that its hands were tied by Iranian claims that the planes contained only humanitarian aid. Currently, the United States does not have much leverage over the Iraqis in this matter, since Tehran is heavily assisting Baghdad in the fight against the "Islamic State"/ISIS, arguably even more so than Washington.

Alternatively, the United States could attempt to work with other allies such as Israel, feeding them intelligence that would help them intercept Iranian shipments. Yet Israel has no diplomatically viable options for preventing Iranian planes from landing in Damascus. It can only act after the fact, targeting ground convoys transporting the weapons to locations elsewhere in Syria or Lebanon -- a tactic that carries significant risk of escalation. On August 5, when asked if the United States was interdicting Hezbollah rocket shipments from Iran, Secretary of State John Kerry told an interviewer, "We are if we see them. Israel's knocking them out. If Israel sees them, Israel is bombing them." Yet recent history shows that more arms transfers were detected by U.S. intelligence (as when the administration urged Baghdad to intercept Iranian planes), yet these arms still reached their destination in Syria. This demonstrates that interdiction is not an easy task, and that intelligence detection is not enough -- sometimes political will is required.

CONCLUSION

U.S. officials are trying to convince their allies that America will push back against Iranian mischief in the Middle East after the nuclear deal is implemented. A key element of this pushback, according to Secretary Kerry, will be to "double down" on interdicting Iranian arms transfers. The reality on the ground, however, is that existing mechanisms to intercept these weapons are not enough. In recent years, the IRGC-QF and Unit 190 have been very successful in arming Iranian proxies across the region while the same mechanisms were in place. If the U.S.

government wishes to fulfill President Obama and Secretary Kerry's promises of pushback and to show their allies that they share their interest in checking Iranian behavior in the region, better mechanisms will need to be implemented. Moreover, given that most Iranian shipments these days seem to be heading to Syria and Hezbollah, countries in the region will be eyeing the U.S. response to this challenge. If recent history has taught us anything, it is that real pushback will be impossible without limiting Iranian planes' access to Damascus.

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