

# Disrupting Tehran's Export of Technology and Weapons

by [Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Apr 30, 2009

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Matthew Levitt \(/experts/matthew-levitt\)](/experts/matthew-levitt)

Matthew Levitt is the Fromer-Wexler Fellow and director of the Reinhard Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

**E**arlier this year, Cyprus impounded the Iranian-chartered freighter Monchegorsk, a vessel laden with war materiel bound for Syria (and perhaps beyond). This episode highlights the shortcomings of current UN and European Union sanctions on Iran, and underscores the need for a more systematic approach for dealing with Tehran's efforts to transfer technology and arms to radical allies in the Middle East and elsewhere, even as Washington seeks to engage Iran.

### The Monchegorsk and its Cargo

In January, the U.S. Navy stopped Monchegorsk while it was transiting the Red Sea en route to Syria, on the basis of intelligence that the freighter was carrying Iranian arms exports in violation of UN Security Council Resolution 1747. According to UN documents, the Monchegorsk, a Russian-owned, Cypriot-flagged vessel, was chartered by Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines (IRISL). In September 2008, the Treasury Department designated IRISL for its proliferation activities, stating that "Not only does IRISL facilitate the transport of cargo for UN designated proliferators, it also falsifies documents and uses deceptive schemes to shroud its involvement in illicit commerce."

A U.S. Navy boarding party confirmed the arms embargo suspicions and ordered the ship to Cyprus. There, according to the Wall Street Journal, the Cypriot authorities found components for mortars and thousands of cases of powder, propellant, and shell casings for 125mm and 130mm guns. The cargo was then unloaded and impounded by Cypriot authorities.

U.S. and Cypriot authorities acted upon the legal guidelines set forth by a series of EU and UN resolutions pertaining to Iran. In February and April 2007, the EU imposed a number of sanctions on Iran in order to implement UN Security Council decisions, including a ban on Iranian transfers of military materiel, arms, and missile technology. Similarly, Resolution 1747, adopted in March 2007, prohibited the transfer of "any arms or related materiel" by Iran, and urged UN member states not to facilitate such efforts. In addition, Resolution 1803, passed in March 2008, calls upon all states, "in accordance with their national legal authorities and legislation and consistent with international law," to inspect IRISL cargoes to and from Iran transiting their airports and seaports, "provided there are reasonable grounds to believe that the aircraft or vessel is transporting [prohibited] goods."

Not a New Problem

Problems relating to interdicting destabilizing technology and arms transfers on the high seas, or those proscribed by UN resolutions, are not new. In October 1991, the North Korean freighter Mupo, carrying Scud missiles and related equipment to Syria, returned to North Korea after Egypt denied it transit through the Suez Canal amid concerns that Israel might try to interdict the shipment. The cargo was subsequently delivered to Iran in March 1992 by North Korean freighters Dae Hung Ho and Dae Hung Dan, which were shadowed by U.S. Navy vessels during the transit. (The navy was unable to stop the transfers because they were not illegal under international law.) The shipments are believed to have subsequently been flown to Syria.

In August 1993, the Chinese freighter Yinhe, which was believed to be carrying chemical warfare agent precursors bound for Iran, was forced to dock in Saudi Arabia, but was found not to be carrying any banned items. And in December 2002, a North Korean freighter carrying Scud missiles believed to be for Iraq was stopped and inspected by Spanish warships, but was set free when it turned out that the Scuds were intended for Yemen.

These episodes demonstrate the need to ensure that efforts to interdict destabilizing or proscribed shipments are backed up by reliable intelligence and appropriate legal authorities, and highlight the risks of acting without one or the other.

#### Iran Arming U.S. Foes

A number of similar incidents in recent years have involved Iranian efforts to transport military materiel and arms by sea, land, and air to allies and surrogates. During the second Palestinian intifada, Iran helped facilitate arms shipments to Gaza through Hizballah and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine to Gaza (by means of floating waterproof containers) by using two civilian vessels, the Santorini, seized by Israel in May 2001, and the Calypso 2. In December 2001, Iran attempted to deliver fifty tons of weapons to the Palestinian Authority aboard the Karine A, whose shipment was seized by the Israeli Navy in the Red Sea.

During the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war, Israeli intelligence claimed that Iran was resupplying the Shiite movement via Turkey. Such claims gained credibility in May 2007, when a train derailed by PKK terrorists in southeastern Turkey was found to be carrying undeclared Iranian rockets and small arms destined for Syria -- probably for transshipment to Hizballah.

More recently, Iran has emerged as a major arms supplier for Hamas in Gaza, as well as for anti-American governments in South America. In January and February 2009, the Israeli Air Force bombed two vehicle convoys reportedly carrying Iranian arms destined for Hamas fighters in Gaza. (There are also reports that the Israeli Navy sunk an Iranian ship carrying arms for Hamas off the coast of Sudan at this time.) Also in January 2009, Turkish customs officials in the port of Mersin discovered a shipment with equipment capable of producing explosives. The shipment, which originated in Iran, had entered Turkey by truck and was destined for Venezuela.

These recent episodes underscore Iran's growing emergence as a supplier of military materiel, equipment, and arms for radical Islamist and anti-American allies and surrogates in the Middle East and beyond. For that reason, it is increasingly important to establish a comprehensive regime to constrain Iran's ability to transfer military materiel and arms to its allies and surrogates by sea, land, and air, especially if Iran were to market its nuclear technology abroad.

#### Enhancing Leverage over Tehran

These past incidents indicate that intelligence must be timely and reliable to avoid embarrassing incidents that undermine U.S. credibility. They also highlight the gaps in the available policy tools to deal with Iranian arms transfers to its allies and surrogates. To close these gaps, the United States should work with its allies and the international community to:

- encourage the UN sanctions committee to issue a Security Council communique to the UN General Assembly, emphasizing the obligation of all member states, including Iran and Syria, to fully abide by the UN ban on arms transfers;
- work with the EU to expand its current policy banning the sale or transfer to Iran of "all arms and related material, as well as the provision of related assistance, investment and services" to include a ban on the purchase or transfer from Iran of the same;
- work with UN and EU member states to adopt legislation pertaining to Iranian arms and technology transfers, to enable them to fulfill their UN and EU obligations. Encourage regional organizations in South America and South and East Asia to adopt similar resolutions;
- work with the EU and Turkey (the de facto eastern gateway to Europe) to develop an enhanced customs and border security regime to prevent Iranian arms and technology transfers through Turkey;
- engage the private sector to draw attention to the risk of doing business with IRISL, its subsidiaries, and other banned entities. As the U.S. Treasury noted when it designated IRISL: "Countries and firms, including customers, business partners, and maritime insurers doing business with IRISL, may be unwittingly helping the shipping line facilitate Iran's proliferation activities." Indeed, given Iran's history of deceptive financial and trade activity, extra scrutiny should be given to any ship that has recently paid a call to an Iranian port;
- encourage countries to require ports and/or authorities to collect detailed, accurate, and complete data regarding all cargo being shipped to or through their countries (especially from risk-prone jurisdictions like Iran), to conduct rigorous risk assessments, and to proceed with actual inspections as necessary;
- encourage implementation of the World Customs Organization's (WCO) draft Framework of Standards to Secure and Facilitate Global Trade. The WCO represents 174 Customs administrations across the globe (including Iran) that collectively process approximately 98 percent of world trade. Under the proposed framework, a risk management approach would be implemented for all cargo to identify high-risk shipments at the earliest possible time. Participating members would benefit from enhanced security and efficiency, and could benefit from lower insurance premiums.

#### Policy Implications

Recent events show that even as the Obama administration seeks to engage Tehran, the Islamic Republic has continued to work to undermine U.S. interests and to support anti-American elements around the world, as demonstrated by its ongoing efforts to resupply Hamas, support Hizballah's efforts to destabilize Egypt, and assist Iraqi insurgents. For this reason, the United States needs to better constrain Tehran's ability to arm allies and surrogates hostile to U.S. interests. Doing so would enhance Washington's leverage in possible negotiations with Tehran, contain Iran should such diplomatic efforts fail, and prevent Iran from contributing to the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East and beyond.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=11). ❖

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