

The **Karine-A** Affair: A Strategic Watershed in the Middle East?

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Brief Analysis

The Palestinian defense budget spending—relative to national income—is higher than that of any Arab country or Iran. This calculation is based on official data that exclude an important part of a state's defense budget—namely, procurement of weapons. The Oslo agreements prohibit the Palestinian Authority (PA) from procuring arms, yet they have been smuggled into the territories for years. It is not known how much the Palestinians actually invest in illegal weapons procurement, and there is no way to know how many weapons have been smuggled successfully. There is, though, strong reason to believe that it has been a major PA activity.

Three Ships

The Israeli capture of the *Karine-A* on January 3, 2002—a ship carrying fifty or more tons of arms—is the most recent incident in the long history of smuggling arms into the territories. In May 2001, the *Santorini*—carrying a large load of weapons—was apprehended by Israel after having completed many trips. An even less known ship, the *Calypso*, was apprehended during an attempt to smuggle arms in January 2001. These three incidents share four key elements:

All three attempts were linked to Hizballah or Iran in a very significant way.

In each incident, members of Fatah facilitated the endeavor. The three attempts involved Palestinian naval police, the Palestinian coast guard, and members of Fatah.

All the attempts implicated Egypt in some way. The weapons were supposed to be dropped in or right outside Egyptian waters in sealed barrels or floating devices. In some cases, weapons washed ashore onto Egyptian territory.

All three ships set sail while there was heavy U.S. involvement in brokering peace initiatives. The *Calypso* embarked between January 27 and 29, 2001, soon after the Taba negotiations ended. The *Santorini* left Lebanon on May 4, 2001, the same day Senator George Mitchell submitted the Mitchell Report to the Israeli and Palestinian governments. The *Karine-A* set sail during the time Gen. Anthony Zinni was heading to the region in an effort to deescalate the situation.

In light of these facts, the U.S. government cannot ignore the disappointing reality that while the United States is trying in good faith to pursue a ceasefire and peace, Yasir Arafat and the PA are involved in shipping arms.

Military Options for the PA

The intifada is based on three elements: popular resistance, guerrilla warfare, and terrorism. Popular resistance cannot be sustained indefinitely, as people eventually get weary. The use of guerilla warfare tactics—for example, the shooting and bombing of Israeli soldiers and settlers in the West Bank and Gaza Strip—is insufficient to achieve real victory. Terrorism may frighten and demoralize the Israeli public and creates a deep sense of insecurity, but it is economically damaging to the Palestinians. To be sure, according to Khalil Shikaki, director of the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah, many Palestinians consider the intifada to be a success rather than a

failure, as long as Israelis suffer. In short, it is not clear whether continuing the intifada as it has been conducted to date is possible or desirable.

One route that the Palestinians seem interested in pursuing is attacking Israeli cities from PA territory. For this purpose, they have made determined efforts to invest in long-range military capability, especially artillery, rockets, and mortars. It is easy to exaggerate the actual importance of these weapons. Since the first Palestinian use of mortars, rockets, and artillery against Israel in January 30, 2001, there have been more than 500 artillery attacks, with only one Israeli casualty. From 1985 to 2000, 4,000 katyushas were launched into Kiryat Shmona, yet only seven Israelis were killed. Though they are not militarily effective, katyushas are symbolic in the Israeli psyche of an insecure northern border—a threat that goes back twenty-five years. In other words, Palestinian use of mortars, rockets, and artillery could be quite effective politically.

Palestinians are faced with the problem of stopping Israeli incursions into Palestinian cities. Despite the large sum invested in Palestinian security, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) easily penetrate Palestinian cities. Since the first Israeli incursion into Area A at the outset of the intifada, there have been almost weekly incursions of Israeli soldiers into Palestinian cities. Following the assassination of Tourism Minister Rehavam Zeevi in mid-October 2001, the IDF entered six Palestinian cities, sustaining no casualties. Recently, Israel went into Tulkarem and encountered little Palestinian resistance. A major problem for the Palestinians is that they cannot stop Israeli use of tanks. For this reason, the Palestinians are likely to focus on acquiring an antitank capability, which could affect the IDF's ability to enter cities at will.

Sharon's repeated threats of finishing off Arafat and the PA have made Palestinians increasingly nervous of a "doomsday" scenario. Their response could be to seek a deterrent capability that would cause Israel to think long and hard before undertaking an assault on the PA as an institution. Procuring anti-aircraft weapons and nonconventional weapons are probable choices. While anti-aircraft weapons were not found on the Karine-A, they were discovered on the Santorini. Palestinians already have SA-7s and Strella missiles. It would not be technically difficult to shoot down a civilian airliner with several hundred people on board. The threat of an airplane being shot down from the ground is just as dangerous as that of a terrorist boarding a plane, and it is a threat shared by Israel and the United States.

There is also an indication that Palestinians may be interested in acquiring and using nonconventional weapons. False allegations have been made by Arafat and others that the Israelis use nonconventional weapons against the Palestinian public -- "black gas," "poisonous candy," and poisonous chemicals. These charges provide justification for Palestinians to acquire and use chemical weapons against Israelis. If the PA is considering the use of these weapons, Iran may be a perfect partner.

Collapse of a Paradigm

The Karine-A signifies the collapse of an Israeli paradigm with regard to the military capability of a future Palestinian state. In the past, Israel envisioned there would be no Arab military west of the Jordan River, and that the Palestinians would have no military alliances with Arab or other states. This is the de-militarized state that Israel proposed at Camp David and Taba. The Karine-A event breaks this paradigm, insofar as it has shown that the Palestinians have clearly been procuring weapons, and that they have military ties with other Middle Eastern governments. From these facts, Israel may need to reconsider the stance it will take in future negotiations on issues like open borders, verification, and penalties for violations.

The PA has fallen victim to the international security dilemma—that is, the more military capabilities one acquires in an effort to increase security, the less secure one becomes. Palestinian attempts to acquire strategic weapon capabilities to alter the military balance with Israel are self-defeating, making the Palestinians less secure,

economically damaged, and diplomatically ostracized. These potential developments cannot be dismissed in light of the record of past decisions made by Arafat and the PA.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Jacqueline Kaufman.

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