

Karine-A

The Strategic Implications of Iranian-Palestinian Collusion

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Brief Analysis

Revelations of Iranian-Palestinian collusion to smuggle fifty tons of weapons into the hands of Yasir Arafat's Palestinian Authority (PA) through the offices of Hizballah have profound strategic implications for the Middle East. For the Bush administration, responding appropriately to the Karine-A episode may have unpleasant repercussions for relations with key Arab states. However, failing to deal forthrightly with the shift in the region's tectonic plates represented by the smuggling affair is a self-defeating exercise in delusion.

Background

Since the Islamic revolution in Iran, Iranian opposition to any diplomatic recognition of Israel and hostility toward any negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli conflict has been a cardinal principle of regional politics. Hence, Iran's condemnation of the Egypt-Israel and Jordan-Israel peace treaties, the convening of the October 1991 Madrid peace conference, and the signing of the September 1993 Israel-Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) Declaration of Principles, and all subsequent peace accords. Unlike some armchair critics of Arab-Israeli peacemaking, Iran has a long history of backing up its words with deeds -- especially the hundreds of millions of dollars that Tehran has spent in training, arms, and logistical support for the anti-Israel/anti-peace process organizations such as Hizballah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and, more episodically, Hamas, the main Palestinian Islamist movement.

Withering criticism of the peace process did not always mean that Arafat and the ayatollahs were enemies. Indeed, on February 17, 1979, only sixteen days after Ayatollah Khomeini's return to Iran, Arafat was the first foreign leader to visit Tehran and offer his personal support to the Islamic revolution. At the time, the Palestinian-Iranian entente was based on common antipathy toward Israel. However, that relationship effectively ended with the Iraq-Iran War, when Arafat (and most Arab leaders) sided with Saddam Husayn. Equally disturbing to Iran was Arafat's lack of evident enthusiasm for the creation of an Islamic state in all of Mandatory Palestine, "from the river to the sea." Even Hamas was too tame for Tehran, which then sponsored the creation of a more militant alternative, PIJ, while still providing aid to Hamas. For more than a decade, Iranian-PLO relations have been in a deep freeze, with Arafat even accusing the Iranians of assassination plots against him.

U.S. Policy and the Iranian-Palestinian Nexus

Mutual antagonism between Iran and the Arafat-run PLO has long been a working assumption of U.S. Middle East policy. As Palestinian Islamist organizations grew in popularity and brazenness, it was taken for granted that Arafat would want only to keep at arm's length the patron of his leading political competitors. This mutual antagonism was reflected in U.S. policy throughout the period. The U.S. trade embargo on Iran (1995) and the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (1996) were in no small part prompted by the grave danger to the peace process and its major protagonists -- Israel and the PA -- posed by Iranian-backed terrorism. In all these developments, there was no doubt that Israel and the PA were both viewed as targets of Iranian-backed terrorism. Indeed, both American and Israeli leaders often argued throughout the 1990s that pursuing the peace process was one of the best defenses against the spread of Iranian-supported religious fundamentalism throughout the Arab world.

Implications of the Karine-A

All of these assumptions have been called into question by the interception of the Karine-A by the Israeli navy. To be sure, this collusion does not necessarily mean that the two parties share the maximalist strategic aims long espoused by Iranian leaders -- i.e., the destruction of Israel -- though that is surely possible. What is clear is that their tactical goals are complementary enough for the two parties to set aside any lingering animosities in order to work together. Though they may eventually turn on each other along the lines of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact that made Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia unlikely and short-lived allies more than seventy years ago, the Karine-A affair is evidence that Iran, Hizballah, and the PA have, at the least, joined forces in the current military confrontation against Israel. One should note that the hardly reassuring best-case scenario represented by the Karine-A is that the PA is only using Iranian military assistance in a military campaign to win Palestinian independence in the 1967 borders.

So far, that reality has not forced a full-scale paradigm shift in U.S. strategic thinking about the Middle East. At first, official U.S. reaction ranged between denial and disbelief, with unnamed U.S. intelligence officials offering the New York Times the explanation that the boat was heading to Lebanese shores to re-stock Hizballah. Within days, that pose was dropped when Israeli intelligence provided what U.S. officials accepted as convincing proof that the weapons originated in Iran and were destined for the PA in a scheme organized, funded, and implemented by close associates of Yasir Arafat -- including both a longtime associate who heads covert military spending and also the deputy head of the Palestinian naval force. To complete this witch's brew, Israeli intelligence has suggested that Hizballah operations chief Imad Mughniyah -- the alleged mastermind of the 1983 U.S. Marine barracks bombing in Beirut, recently named to the FBI's list of most wanted foreign terrorists -- was a key middleman for the operation.

Although convinced of the evidence, the administration has so far opted not to address the strategic significance of this Palestinian-Iranian collusion. Instead, senior officials have fixated on the sensationalist but fundamentally irrelevant questions of "what did he know and when did he know it," focusing first on Arafat and secondly on Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In doing so, they are holding these leaders to higher standards of proof than that to which President Bush held Osama bin Ladin with regard to the latter's responsibility for the September 11 terrorist attacks. In macabre fashion, the administration has asked Arafat to "bring to justice" those Palestinian officials responsible for the Karine-A smuggling operation, as though the arms initiative were a mere crime and not a strategic undertaking. Moreover, the president himself twice asked Arafat to "renounce terrorism" -- a request remarkable for its similarity to the request his father made thirteen years ago, just before the United States first opened a dialogue with the PLO.

The administration's reluctance to deal with the strategic implications of an Iranian-PLO entente is not surprising. That is because the Karine-A represents the worst nightmare scenario of the Arab-Israeli peace process, i.e., that well-meaning diplomacy was only a tool to make war possible, not a means to make peace irreversible.

Karine-A and the War on Terror

Even before September 11, it would not have been easy for the Bush administration -- any administration -- to recognize the paradigm shift and respond accordingly. After September 11, it was especially difficult because one of the great diplomatic achievements of the "war on terror" has been the Bush team's success in fighting Arab terrorists in Afghanistan while maintaining peace with Arab states, especially Saudi Arabia and Egypt. One key element has been renewed engagement in the peace process, manifested in the president's unprecedented commitment to the establishment of an independent Palestine, Secretary of State Powell's Louisville speech delineating a "vision" for Middle East peace, and the subsequent dispatch of a new peace envoy, General Anthony Zinni. Dealing with the implications of the Karine-A will, in the short term, threaten the tranquil U.S.-Arab ties that the administration has so assiduously fought to preserve.

But the negative repercussions of maintaining a "business as usual" approach in the face of the strategic enormity of the Karine-A affair vastly outweigh the short-term costs of addressing it in a realistic, straightforward fashion. A focus on "first principles" requires action on four fronts:

Iran. Like the Germans after the 1997 Mykonos verdict, there is a narrow window of opportunity for the administration to press for international action against the Iranian regime. Topping the list should be U.S. efforts to stop Russian and other third-party assistance to Iranian weapons programs, especially weapons of mass destruction (WMD) initiatives. Former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani's publicly declared nuclear threat against Israel last month highlights how much of a danger Iran's WMD ambitions can pose.

Hizballah. The complicity of Hizballah operatives in the Karine-A affair once again puts the lie to Lebanese government claims that Hizballah activities are limited to "resisting the occupation of Lebanese national soil." (Of course, given the UN's certification of Israeli withdrawal from south Lebanon, even that excuse is no longer "legitimate.") A smuggling operation that transited weapons over thousands of kilometers and involved the participation or transiting of numerous countries fits most reasonable definitions of "terrorism of global reach." The appropriate U.S. response should be to impose economic sanctions on Lebanon, linked to Hizballah's disarmament and the arrest of its key military figures. This action would have the beneficial consequence of targeting critical economic interests of Hizballah's other key patron, Syria.

Palestinian Authority. The Karine-A revelations necessitate a sober assessment of whether the terms upon which U.S.-PLO relations were established nine years ago still apply. An honest answer will be "no." Translating that judgment into policy, in the current political environment, will not be easy. But after September 11, President Bush has the standing to take bold steps that neither he nor his predecessor had.

Diplomatically, the United States should issue a declaration suspending relations with the PLO (and the PA) and announcing that it will hold in abeyance any U.S. effort to realize Palestinian aspirations of independent statehood, pending the advent of a Palestinian leadership committed irrevocably to the principle of peaceful resolution of conflict. After all, to assist in the creation of a Palestinian state whose leadership is in collusion with Iran is manifestly inimical to U.S. interests. In that same declaration, the administration should clarify the efforts it is willing to undertake in order to realize Palestinian political aspirations -- within the context of a negotiated settlement with Israel -- once a new leadership has come to power.

Militarily, the U.S. needs to move from the "conflict management" approach, which was appropriate for the post-Camp David/post-intifada period of Israeli-Palestinian confrontation, into a full "alliance-based" footing, in recognition of the threat to a U.S. ally posed by the Iranian-Palestinian collusion.

Economically, Washington should consider a substantial increase in the level of humanitarian support for Palestinians to be channeled via the UN Relief and Works Agency and relevant nongovernmental organizations. Although none of those groups are likely to be free of PLO influence and corruption, it is worth the risk to facilitate

aid to needy Palestinians as the world awaits the development of a new Palestinian leadership.

Key Arab States. For numerous reasons, Iranian-Palestinian collusion cannot be welcome news to Egypt, Jordan, or Saudi Arabia. Although each will publicly criticize U.S. suspension of relations with the current Palestinian leadership, each will also welcome both a renewed U.S. commitment to work for Palestinian statehood when a responsible Palestinian leadership emerges and also firm U.S. steps to fight the creation of an Iranian bridgehead in the West Bank and Gaza. Discreet but high-level communication with Cairo, Amman, and Riyadh in this regard is essential. Militarily, the United States should offer assistance to these countries for the purpose of beefing up defense intelligence and reconnaissance against potential alternative smuggling routes into the PA -- now that Israel has unmasked two routes (via the Mediterranean and the Red Sea) of conventional military smuggling.

These suggestions are just the tip of the strategic iceberg. Each will have its own repercussions in U.S.-Arab, U.S.-Euro, and U.S.-Muslim relations; the U.S.-Israel and Arab-Israel dimensions also need a full assessment. Indeed, as with the Czech arms deal in 1955 and Sadat's expulsion of the Soviet advisors in 1972, it may be some time before the full ramifications of the Karine-A affair are recognized, internalized, and addressed. Painful as that process may be, however, even greater damage would be done to U.S. interests by making believe the Karine-A affair did not occur.

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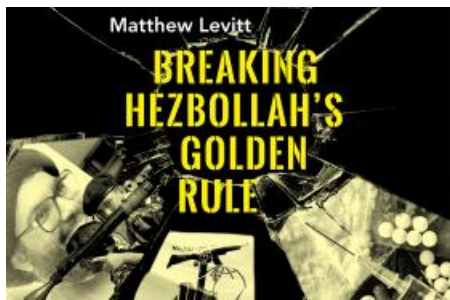
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