

The Seizure of Gaza-Bound Arms (Part II):

Military Implications

Jan 8, 2002



Brief Analysis

Alongside the diplomatic efforts to reach a ceasefire with Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) has been involved—since the beginning of the second intifada—in the indigenous production of weapons and ammunition and in repeated attempts to smuggle arms on a massive scale into the territories under its control. To thwart these efforts and to degrade the PA's fighting capabilities, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) have destroyed dozens of warehouses and weapons-producing factories and have sealed all land, sea, and air passages leading into the PA.

But the January 3 capture by the Israeli Navy of a ship—the *Karine-A*—transporting fifty or more tons of arms indicates that senior members of the PA who, according to Israel, planned, financed, and carried out the smuggling operation are still committed to the objective of overcoming Israeli interference and transferring into the PA enough weapons and ammunition to prolong—perhaps even escalate—the conflict with Israel. In doing so, the PA receives help from several terrorist organizations as well as, seemingly, the governments that sponsor them. Moreover, the types and the quantities of the weapons captured aboard the *Karine-A*, as well as the timing of the ship's voyage, indicate that Palestinian armament efforts are designed not exclusively for defensive purposes, but rather for changing the military balance between the PA and Israel.

Palestinian Weapons Smuggling

Attempts to smuggle illegal weapons into the West Bank and Gaza Strip began soon after the PA's establishment in 1994, but these attempts were limited mainly to small quantities of light arms and ammunition. Since the outbreak of the second intifada in September 2000, the intensity of the fighting has grown, and with it the need for a constant inflow of weapons of higher quality and lethality. These weapons have been smuggled into the Gaza Strip through a system of secret, underground tunnels which connect Egypt to Rafah in the southern part of the Gaza Strip. Despite the IDF's efforts to locate and destroy those tunnels, many are still very active.

Israel has also thwarted several Palestinian efforts to smuggle weapons through the Dead Sea and the Jordan River Valley. But the main inlet of weapons into the Gaza Strip has been via the Mediterranean Sea. On January 29, 2001, the IDF found two sealed barrels on a beach near Ashkelon containing weapons with indication that a smuggler's ship from Lebanon had discharged them into the sea off the coast of Gaza. It is believed that dozens of other barrels from the same shipment, allegedly sent by Hizballah to the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) in Gaza, reached their destination that night.

On May 7, 2001, the Israeli navy captured a fishing boat off the coast of Haifa with a large quantity of arms and ammunition bound for the PA. The arsenal contained 107-mm rockets, mortars, rocket-propelled grenades, shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missiles, and anti-tank missiles—all prohibited by the Oslo agreements—and had apparently been dispatched to the PA by Ahmed Jibril's Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, which is headquartered in Damascus with bases in Lebanon.

Now, this latest capture has revealed another weapons source: Iran. Although it is not yet clear whether the shipment of weapons to the Palestinians was sanctioned by the Iranian authorities, Israeli intelligence claims that the weapons were loaded in Iran by both Iranian nationals and Hizballah operatives.

Strategic Escalation?

Due to their tactical inferiority vis-a-vis the IDF, the Palestinians are interested in developing military capabilities that could offset the Israeli advantage and deter the IDF from carrying out uninterrupted attacks against the PA using tanks and aircraft. The cargo of the Karine-A included weapons that have never before been in the PA's possession. For instance, the shipment included a large number of anti-tank missiles, including modern, Iranian-manufactured missiles carrying Tandem-Charge warheads capable of penetrating heavy armor. Israeli tank units, which have become accustomed to entering Palestinian cities with impunity, would be subjected to real danger if such weapons were to be activated.

More unsettling are the 122-mm katyusha rockets found on board which have a range of 12 miles. They could, if launched from the West Bank, hit any location in Israel between Hadera in the north and Ashkelon in the south, including strategic targets such as critical road junctions, oil and gas farms, power stations, and, most importantly, Israel's air and sea ports. Yasir Arafat's acknowledgment that Hamas and PIJ suicide attacks against Israeli civilians have both run their course and threatened to cast him in the same light as the international terrorists currently being pursued by the United States, offers a glimpse into the Palestinian leader's possible motivation, if he is indeed behind this arms shipment. These arms would increase his ability to pressure Israel: by acquiring long-range artillery, the Palestinians could threaten the Israeli home front and achieve a demoralizing and deterring effect on the Israeli public, similar to the "walking bombs" of Hamas and PIJ.

Implications for Indigenous Arms Production

The downside of the Israeli success in intercepting arms transfers and denying the PA the possibility of importing weapons is that it will likely increase pressure inside the PA to invest more resources in the domestic production of weapons and ammunition. Local arms production could provide the Palestinians with sufficient ammunition to prolong their guerrilla operations.

The Palestinians lack the industrial infrastructure needed to manufacture advanced weapons, but they have demonstrated their ability to produce light arms and ammunition, such as grenades, primitive anti-tank weapons, and artillery weapons. In May 2001, for example, the Israeli security services uncovered a network of Palestinian operatives in Gaza who were involved in the manufacturing of thousands of mortar shells of various calibers. Members of the network included senior ranking officers of the Palestinian police and the Preventive Security Service in Gaza, headed by Muhammad Dahlan.

Hamas has also been involved in plans to produce homemade katyusha rockets. On January 2, the Israeli General Security Service arrested a Hamas operative en route to Saudi Arabia, apparently on a mission to receive funding and technical assistance for establishing rocket production plants in Gaza and the West Bank. Should such efforts continue to fail, some Palestinians have suggested that the PA consider developing chemical and perhaps biological weapons, which could be smuggled and concealed more easily than conventional weapons and could act as deterrents against any future Israeli attack intended to destroy the PA.

Israel's Response to the PA's Armament

In the short run, Israel will tighten its blockade along the Gaza coast and pressure the United States to recognize as sponsors of terrorism the countries involved in arming the PA. It may also change its attitude toward the 1,000-man Palestinian Coast Guard (Shurta Bahariyya), an elite unit established in 1995 (as part of the Cairo Agreement) to prevent the smuggling of goods and weapons into the PA. The fact that the captain of the Karine-A, Omar Akkawi, is a

Coast Guard colonel indicates that this group has become the main facilitator of weapons smuggling into the PA—a reality that may force Israel to equate the Coast Guard with the Tanzim and Force 17, both officially recognized by Israel as terror organizations.

In the longer run, the strategic threat represented by long-range weapons introduced into the hands of the Palestinians adds a new dimension to the debate about the feasibility of a demilitarized Palestinian state as part of a final-status agreement with Israel. When peace negotiations resume, Israel is likely to condition any further concessions to the PA on the collection and surrender of all weapons prohibited by the Oslo agreements, and will be less flexible in granting the Palestinians control over border passages with Jordan and Egypt, as well as air and sea ports.

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