

# The Seizure of Gaza-Bound Arms (Part I): Political Implications

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## Brief Analysis

Israeli naval commandos seized the Gaza-bound freighter *Karine-A* in the Red Sea last Thursday, exposing a cargo hold containing fifty tons of munitions. The seizure took place in international waters some 300 miles off of Israel's southern coast, between Sudan and Saudi Arabia. The ship's captain, Omar Akkawi, later participated in an interview with Reuters and several television networks invited by Israeli authorities to the prison where Akkawi was being held; in the interview, he named Adel Awadallah of the Palestinian Authority (PA) as head of the operation. Akkawi also identified himself as both a long-time member of Yasir Arafat's Fatah and a naval advisor to the PA's Ministry of Transport; the PA subsequently confirmed the latter fact. In front of the reporters, Akkawi disclosed his instructions to first collect arms at a specified point off of Iran's coast and then sail through the Red Sea and Suez Canal to the Mediterranean. He also confirmed that one of the men who helped load the arms onto his ship was a member of the Iranian-backed Hizballah, and that one of his own crew members had been trained by the group.

At an appearance before the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee yesterday, Defense Minister Binyamin Ben-Eliezer stated that all of the weaponry on the freighter is Iranian, and that the PA purchased the freighter in October 2001. Akkawi said that Awadallah, whom Israel identifies as a weapons purchaser for the PA, bought the *Karine-A* in Lebanon for the mission and that the ship was loaded with weapons at the Qeys Islands, located just off of Iran's southern coast. Akkawi also made reference to his superior, Fathi "Bahariyya" (an Arabic nickname for "the navy"); Israeli authorities believe Bahariyya is Fathi Ghazem, deputy commander of the PA Naval Police. Israel also charges that the group worked with Fuad Shubaki, a PA finance official.

Akkawi apparently last spoke with Awadallah a week before the ship was seized. Although this would have been shortly after Arafat's December 16 speech calling on Palestinian groups to cease anti-Israeli violence, Awadallah did not tell Akkawi to cancel the mission. When the story broke, several PA officials denied that the Authority had any connection to the ship or its cargo. Yet, after the Akkawi interview, Arafat emerged from a meeting with European diplomats with the announcement that he had ordered an internal investigation of the incident.

## Implications for Israel

Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon expressed no doubt about Arafat's own personal involvement, partly due to the

size of the shipment and its cost. He reserved some of his toughest language yet for Arafat, describing him as "a bitter enemy." Sharon also called on the Israeli cabinet to reevaluate the government's ties to the PA in light of the incident. Sharon aides announced today that they would release documents later this week establishing Arafat's direct responsibility for the smuggling.

A PA-sanctioned shipment would indeed violate the Oslo accords that the PA signed with Israel. Moreover, the cornerstone of any final-status arrangement between the two parties is a demilitarized Palestinian state with no military links to other countries. This premise is likely to be reassessed in light of the Karine-A incident.

In addition, the shipment—if PA-sanctioned—would undermine the PA's post-September 11 condemnations of terrorism, as well as Arafat's December 16 speech. As Israel's Ha'aretz opined in an editorial yesterday, "The Palestinians' dangerous weapons adventure strengthens those who argue that Arafat's statements from three weeks ago—when he called for an end of armed struggle against Israel and even stretched out his hand in a gesture of peace—was nothing more than a ruse designed to cover up preparations for a fierce conflict. If Arafat wants to acquire the trust of Israel through his declarations, his task will now be a lot tougher." Even Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's advisor, Osama El-Baz, has reportedly asserted, "If it is proven that the Palestinians really were involved or knew about [the ship], it would be a difficult blow for Palestinian interests, especially at a time when calls for peace were once again being heard in the region."

#### Implications for the United States

The Karine-A affair has complicated U.S.-backed efforts to acquire an Israeli-Palestinian truce. Washington has been rather mute on the entire incident; apart from praising Israel for intercepting the freighter, it took the State Department almost five days to state, as it did today, that it finds the Israeli allegations to be "credible." This has led to speculation that official U.S. silence may stem from fears of a tougher stance somehow upsetting the mission of Gen. Anthony Zinni to bring about a formal truce. Zinni's four-day visit to the region last week was overshadowed by the incident, but upon his departure, he expressed hope that security cooperation was getting back on track. Zinni also chaired a trilateral security-cooperation meeting during his visit, and he will be returning to the region on January 19.

Before Zinni's trip, U.S. officials expressed hope that there would be sufficient reduction in violence to warrant a beginning of the Tenet work plan to combat terrorism, which actually includes several provisions of the Mitchell Plan (including the lifting of West Bank roadblocks); each plan is designed to build confidence between Israelis and Palestinians. CIA director George Tenet originally put the plan forward at a U.S.-backed summit in Sharm el-Sheikh in October 2000, and then again during his visit to the region in June 2001. During yesterday's Knesset appearance, Ben-Eliezer noted that the level of violence is at its lowest since the beginning of the al-Aqsa intifada in September 2000; there have been absolutely no attacks over the last two days. Some in Israel have pointed to this quiet period as evidence that Arafat is capable of stopping violence against Israel if he so chooses. At the same time, Ben-Eliezer said that the PA has arrested only ten of the thirty-three alleged terrorists on the list that Zinni presented to them recently.

Confiscation of illegal weaponry belonging to Palestinian renegade factions has been one of the most ignored subjects of the Oslo process, with efforts largely confined to the episodic gathering of a few pistols. The latest incident, however, could allow the United States and others to throw fresh focus on this issue. Other issues have come into play as well. For example, some wonder if the muted U.S. reaction is born of a desire to avoid confrontation with Tehran at a time when Washington is considering an attack against Iraq as part of the war on terrorism.

#### Implications for Iran

Notwithstanding official Iranian denial of involvement in the incident, the Karine-A affair raises the prospect of strong links between Iran and the PA—not just between Tehran and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), which U.S. officials see as simply an arm of Iranian intelligence. Iran has never supplied arms to the PA in the past, and this incident would therefore indicate a turning point. On December 14, former Iranian president Hashemi Rafsanjani called on his country to use nuclear weapons—which it is currently developing with the aid of Russia—to wipe out Israel. Moreover, Iran remains listed in the State Department's "Patterns of Global Terrorism" report as the primary supporter of terrorism today.

#### Implications for Hizballah

Akkawi's reference to Hizballah's logistical support for the weapons shipment is the latest piece of evidence that the group seeks to support Palestinian terrorism now that Israel is out of southern Lebanon. Hizballah has been training Palestinians who are engaged in violence, and its satellite station Al-Manar has been exhorting Palestinians to engage in suicide attacks against Israel. In the wake of the arms seizure, Israel has called on the European Union to add Hizballah to its terrorism list, just as it added Hamas and PIJ in the wake of December's burst of suicide bombings against Israel.

David Makovsky is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute.

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