

Israel Navy commander: Hizballah arms ship carried hundreds of tons of hardware

DEBKAFfile Special Report

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The Antigua-flagged arms ship *Francop* commandeered by the Israeli Navy early Wednesday, Nov. 4, near Cyprus, carried 300 containers, in 40 of which hundreds of tons of Iranian arms for Hizballah were hidden, said Israeli Navy commander Brig.-Gen Ronnie Ben-Yehuda in a news briefing Wednesday, Nov 3. Most of it was ammo, grenades, 122-km Katyusha rockets, mortar shells and anti-tank missiles, enough to keep Hizballah fighting for a month or more.

DEBKAFfile's military sources report the first arms ship set out from Kish Island or Bandar Abbas in the third week of October and was detected by US satellites over the weekend while heading out of the Straits of Hormuz and into the Gulf of Oman. The USS Anzio guided missile cruiser of the US Navy's Task Force 151 shadowed the weapons ship as it sailed into the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea. This task force leads the operations against piracy and Iranian arms smuggling under the command of Rear Adm. Scott Sanders.

Israeli military intelligence, navy and air force were kept informed of the Francop's movements, including the projected times of its passage through the Suez Canal and arrival in the Mediterranean. Tehran and Hizballah knew the ship had been spotted and expected it to be seized, although they did not know by whom.

The Egyptian Navy kept close to the arms ship as it passed through the canal to the Mediterranean.

The ship docked at Damietta, Egypt, where the arms freight was offloaded to the Francop, which then acquired an escort of US Sixth Fleet and Israeli Navy warships..

No action was taken then because the American and Israeli commanders of their joint Juniper Cobra ballistic exercise agreed to hold off seizing the ship until a few hours after the two-week war game ended Tuesday, Nov. 3. Washington was reluctant to embark on direct military action against an Iranian target so long as nuclear negotiations are still in progress for fear of provoking a fresh crisis with Tehran. This delay allowed the Francop to reach Beirut, but Hizballah held off unloading the shipment because it was under surveillance. The Francop then headed to the northern Lebanese port of Tripoli where it docked until Oct. 30 when it set out for the Syrian port of Tartous. The Syrians were also wary of laying hands on the cargo under the eyes of the US Sixth Fleet and so the Francop set sail again this time toward Cyprus. Before reaching its next port of call, the ship was intercepted by Israeli commandoes who boarded early Wednesday 100 miles out to sea and directed it to the Israeli naval base at Ashdod for further examination.

DEBKAFfile's military sources add: Iran is finding it increasingly difficult to smuggle arms to Hizballah because of US-Israeli intelligence and naval cooperation. Tehran is now sending out smaller shipments - this one masked by several dozen containers or civilian merchandize - hoping to draw less attention to its deliveries and incur smaller losses if they are impounded. But this latest consignment, Brig. Ben-Yehuda disclosed, was more than ten times the 50 tons of weaponry carried by the Palestinian arms ship Karin-A which Israeli forces intercepted in 2002.

Prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu said the Francop consignment was destined for attacks on Israeli cities, while defense minister Ehud Barak named Hizballah as the consignment's end-user.

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