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Israel on high alert for Iranian warships' Suez transit. Kharg brings missiles

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Iranian Kharg with missiles for Hizballah

Cairo's approval Friday, Feb. 18 for two Iranian warships to transit the Suez Canal on their way to the Mediterranean has brought Israel and Iran closer than ever before to a naval collision at sea. **DEBKAfile** reports: Israel has learned that the Iranian cruiser *Kharg* is carrying long-range missiles for Hizballah which it plans to unload at a Syrian port or Beirut harbor.

US State Department spokesman P.J. Crowley said he was "highly skeptical" of the Syrian claim that the two ships' visit was for training. "If the ships move through the canal, we will evaluate what they actually do. It's not really about the ships. It's about what the ships are carrying, what's their destination, what's the cargo on board, where's it going, to whom and for what benefit," Crowley told a news conference.

He was responding to questions in the wake of **DEBKAfile's** disclosure that the *Karg* was carrying missiles for Hizballah and indicating that the US and all other UN members were authorized by UN sanctions against Iran to board and search Iranian ships suspected of carrying illegal weapons.

The war ships' passage through Suez has been delayed as Cairo and Tehran spar over an Egyptian navy inspection of the vessels' cargoes.

In Israel, government and military officials were urgently casting about for a way to prevent those missiles reaching the Lebanese terrorists. Heavy US and Israeli pressure failed to dissuade Egypt's military rulers from letting the Iranian flotilla through Suez. So now the waterway has been opened wide for Iran to consign heavy weapons deliveries to Syria and Lebanon - in the first instance, and eventually to try and break Israel's naval blockade on the Gaza Strip and bring Hamas the heavy munitions that were impossible to transport through smuggling tunnels.

On February 16, **DEBKAfile** reported:

Twenty-four hours after Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak said the Egyptian upheaval had no military connotations for Israel, Tehran applied for the Iranian frigate *Alvand* and cruiser *Kharg* to transit the Suez Canal on their way to Syria Wednesday night, Feb. 16. Their passage was termed "a provocation" by Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman. In Beirut, Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah said he was looking forward to Israel going to war on Lebanon because then his men would capture Galilee.

Israel was closely monitoring the Iranian flotilla, whose visit to the Saudi Red Sea port of Jeddah on Feb. 6, preparatory to transiting Suez, was first revealed exclusively by **DEBKA-Net-Weekly**481 on February 10.

Up until now, Saudi Arabia, in close conjunction with Egypt and its President Hosni Mubarak, led the Sunni Arab thrust to contain Iranian expansion – especially in the Persian Gulf. However, the opening of a Saudi port to war ships of the Islamic Republic of Iran for the first time in the history of their relations points to a fundamental shift in Middle East trends in consequence of the Egyptian uprising. It was also the first time Cairo has permitted Iranian warships to transit Suez from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, although Israeli traffic in the opposite direction had been allowed.

Iran made no secret of its plans to expand its naval and military presence beyond the Persian

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