



## Drama in the Red Sea: The Capture of the Palestinian Arms Ship *Karine A*, January 3, 2002

By Brigadier General (Ret.) Amos Gilboa

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Display in the port of Eilat of weapons found aboard the *Karine A*

### Summary<sup>1</sup>

#### What the book is about

► At 0400 hours on January 3, 2002, at the height of the Palestinian terrorist campaign led by Yasser Arafat known as the second intifada, an Israeli naval commando (Shayetet 13) seized a Palestinian freighter, the *Karine A*. The ship was carrying 55 tons of high-grade Iranian arms for the Palestinian Authority, ultimately to be delivered to the Gaza Strip. The event took place in the Red Sea, about 350 miles south of the State of Israel. The cargo also included long-range rockets and high explosives that would have upgraded the capabilities of the Palestinian terrorist organizations and seriously escalated the campaign against Israel. The Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps transferred the weapons from Kish Island, off the Iranian coast, to the hold of the *Karine A*.

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<sup>1</sup>Published by the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center and Effi Melzer, Inc. The book was recently issued in Hebrew and the possibility of translating it into English is under examination.

► At the time the event was widely covered by the media. To the American administration, Arafat strenuously denied any knowledge of the ship, and the Palestinian Authority denied, equally strenuously, any link to the affair, claiming it was an Israeli fabrication. Iran as well, despite Israel's unequivocal proof to the contrary, denied any connection to the ship and its cargo. It took Israel a long time to convince the Bush administration that Arafat and Iran were lying, and that Arafat was personally motivating Palestinian terrorism. The affair had far-reaching political consequences: the Bush administration called for Arafat to be replaced by a different Palestinian leader. The *Karine A* was a turning point in the American administration's political strategy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

► This book is the first of its kind to deal with three main aspects of the seizure of the *Karine A*: intelligence, operations and politics.

### **The intelligence aspect**

► How Israeli intelligence, specifically naval intelligence, discovered the Palestinians had bought a ship to smuggle weapons, how they successfully identified it, uncovered the relationship between the Palestinian leadership and Iran and Hezbollah, located the ship and tracked it from Sudan to the Persian Gulf and from there to the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea, en route to smuggle weapons to the Gaza Strip. The book details, for the first time, declassified information about the work of junior and senior intelligence researchers to discover the ship.

► The book gives an exclusive, detailed description of the close working relations between Israeli and American intelligence in tracking the ship, locating it at the critical time and providing vital intelligence. For example, it was American intelligence that gave Israel the original sketches of the ship from the shipyard in Vigo, Spain, where it had been built. The collaboration went far beyond formal agreements between Israel and the United States. The book also describes the courageous personal relations between American and Israeli intelligence agents.

### **The operational aspect**

► The book describes how the leadership made its decisions, at the heart of which were the planning and execution of the operation by Israel's naval commandos; how at the last minute, because of the weather forecast, a daring, very risky decision was made to almost entirely change the original plan: instead of lying in wait for the freighter 50 miles south of the Straits of Tiran (situated between the Red Sea and the bay of Eilat), to go further south to 100

miles, beyond the operational range of the Israeli Air Force's helicopters and fast commando boats, and seize the ship in an area with more favorable weather. The mission was successful thanks to the commanders' creativity, originality and resourcefulness.

► The planning and actual execution of the operation were conducted without the Americans, but the concept of how to take control of a hostile sailing ship had been worked out in collaboration with them many years previously. Its main components were the following: commandos would secretly board the ship from Morena naval-warfare boats while other commandos would use Fast Rope from helicopters to lower themselves onto the deck. Unfortunately, IDF helicopters did not have Fast-Rope capabilities, but the commandos had trained its use in various places around the world. The book describes how in less than two days and with remarkable creativity, the Israeli Air Force had installed Fast Rope capabilities on two Black Hawk helicopters, trained the pilots, and written a combat doctrine outline.

### The political aspect

► The two final chapters of the book deal with the political aspects, especially the political capital Israel made from capturing the *Karine A*. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon told American Secretary of State Colin Powell about the operation and the seizure of the ship immediately after the *Karine A*, under the command of and sailed by the Israeli Navy and flying the Israeli flag, quit the Red Sea, sailed through the Straits of Tiran (where there was an Egyptian guard) and entered the Bay of Eilat on the morning of January 4, 2002. Later that morning General Anthony Zinni, President Bush's envoy to the Middle East, met with Ariel Sharon to discuss stopping the terrorist campaign the Palestinians were waging against Israel. After the meeting Zinni was supposed to go to Ramallah and meet with Arafat. As he was leaving Sharon asked him to tell Arafat "not to worry about the *Karine A*. We have it and it is on its way to Eilat." At noon the head of Israeli naval intelligence told Admiral Porterfield, the head of American naval intelligence, about the capture of the ship.

► To Israel's disappointment, during the first days after the capture of the *Karine A*, the American Department of State refused to accuse Arafat of any involvement, and stuck to the story that there was no proof of a direct connection between the ship and the Palestinian Authority. To convince the Americans the Israelis held a working meeting with them, necessitating the exposure of sensitive intelligence.

► The book describes the initial Israeli efforts to convince the American administration that the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and Arafat were deeply involved in terrorist

activities in general and the attempted smuggling of the weapons aboard the *Karine A* in particular. First, a delegation of senior Israeli intelligence officers met with members of the American administration. The book gives a vivid description about the meeting between Brigadier General Yossi Kuperwasser and CIA Director George Tenet. Tenet had agreed to the meeting "under protest", but listened carefully. The Israeli delegation managed to create a narrow crack in the State Department's negative position. Then IDF Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz went to the United States for a series of meetings with the upper political and security echelons of the Bush administration, officially sent by Ariel Sharon. Wearing his uniform, he met first with Condoleezza Rice, the American national security advisor. The book gives a detailed account of the interesting meeting, which widened the crack significantly. In August 2002 John Bolton, the American Under Secretary of State said the *Karine A* had had critically important influence on Washington, providing dramatic proof of an Iranian threat to world peace. Without the evidence of the *Karine A*, he added, it would have been difficult for the United States to take a tougher stance with Arafat.

### **What the book is based on and its format**

- ▶ The book is based on a comprehensive, internal, classified study conducted by the author (see below) in 2003, focusing on the affair of the *Karine A* with information from the intelligence community (especially naval intelligence) and the general IDF operational staff. The author was privileged to intelligence materials, studies, minutes of deliberations, stenographic reports and original drafts of documents. The author also conducted a long series of personal interviews with many of the people involved, from the most junior intelligence personnel to the most senior intelligence and operational figures. The Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center recently decided to publish the study as a book for the general public, omitting the material that is still classified. The author held another series of interviews, specifically with the commander of the naval commando at the time, the chief of staff and the head of research in IDF military intelligence, as well as a number of Israeli Air Force officers who actively participated in the operation. The author also reviewed some of the transcripts of the interrogations of people aboard the ship who were caught and are today imprisoned in Israel.
- ▶ The book is written as a suspense story. It follows the stages of identifying the ship, tracking it, planning the operation to seize it and the thrilling operation (see the Appendix in the Table of Contents). It also provides portraits of the protagonists. As is only natural, the

protagonists are the senior figures, but throughout the book there is one woman character in the lower echelons of the intelligence community, and thanks to her the *Karine A* was discovered.

## About the author

► Brigadier General (Ret.) Amos Gilboa was born in Israel, has an MA from the Hebrew University in Middle Eastern studies and is an intelligence professional. He headed the Analysis and Production Unit of IDF military intelligence, which provides a continuous flow of intelligence to Israel's military and political leadership, and is responsible for assessing national intelligence. Before that he held a variety of positions within military intelligence , including responsibility for intelligence from Syria, Lebanon and Iraq. He was military attaché in Washington liaising with the American intelligence community; advisor to the Israeli prime minister for Arab affairs and minister of defense. He was also special advisor for methodology in military intelligence. Along with Professor Sergio Della Pergola he headed "Annual Assessment 2004-2005: The Jewish People Between Thriving and Decline," a project of the Jewish People Policy Institute in Jerusalem. With Ephraim Lapid he edited *Israel's Silent Defender, an Inside Look at Sixty Years of Israeli Intelligence*. He also wrote *Mr. Intelligence*, a book about General Aharon Yariv, the legendary head of Israel intelligence during the Six Day War, and *Code Name Dawn*, about Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000.

## Chapter headings

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- **Acknowledgements**
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  - ◆ **Chapter 1** – Middle of August to September 2001: There are many vessels but no specific smuggling ship.
  - ◆ **Chapter 2** – October-November 2001: There is a smuggling ship, but what is its name?
  - ◆ **Chapter 3** – December 4-6, 2001: Intelligence deciphers the ship former name.
  - ◆ **Pictures**

► **Section Two** – December 6-19, 2001: The commando unit and its operatives become involved.

- ◆ **Chapter 4** – December 6-11: Initial ideas for the operation and finding the new name of the ship, the *Karine A*.
- ◆ **Chapter 5** – The Americans enter the picture and begin to think of missions.
- ◆ **Chapter 6** – December 15-16: Could the intelligence be wrong?
- ◆ **Chapter 7** – December 17: The *Karine A* is spotted and identified.
- ◆ **Chapter 8** – Tuesday, December 18: Preparations go into high gear.
- ◆ **Chapter 9** – Wednesday, December 19: The Israeli Navy gets ready to seize the ship in the Mediterranean Sea.
- ◆ **Pictures**

► **Section Three** – December 19-20, 2001: The tension heightens dramatically, but there is no ship.

- ◆ **Chapter 10** – The night of December 19: Mofaz decides to seize the *Karine A* in the Red Sea.
- ◆ **Chapter 11** – Thursday, December 20: The operative craziness begins.
- ◆ **Chapter 12** – Thursday, December 20: The operative craziness continues.
- ◆ **Chapter 13** – Thursday, December 20: The operative craziness ends.
- ◆ **Pictures**

► **Section Four** – December 21-28, 2001: Tense waiting

- ◆ **Chapter 14** – Saturday, December 22: The Israeli Air Force proves itself in al-Hudaydah, Yemen.
- ◆ **Chapter 15** – More intelligence and more planning. The ship is being repaired.
- ◆ **Chapter 16** – December 27-28: The *Karine A* anchored off al-Hudaydah. Is Akawi the captain of the ship?

► **Section Five** – December 29-31, 2001: The *Karine A* disappears

- ◆ **Chapter 17** – December 29-30: The *Karine A* is not anchored off al-Hudaydah. What now?
- ◆ **Chapter 18** – Monday, December 31: No *Karine A*. Have we lost it?

► **Section Six** – January 1-3, 2002: We find and seize the *Karine A*.

- ◆ **Chapter 19** – Tuesday, January 1: The *Karine A* has been located, but a fierce storm is brewing at sea.
- ◆ **Chapter 20** – Wednesday, January 2: The day of the turnabout
- ◆ **Chapter 21** – Thursday, January 3: Before dawn the ship is seized.
- ◆ **Sketches and pictures** – Taking the *Karine A*
- ◆ **Chapter 22** – Are there weapons aboard?
- ◆ **Sketches and pictures**
- ▶ **Section Seven** – Sailing home and political achievement
  - ◆ **Pictures**
  - ◆ **Chapter 23** – Sailing home to Eilat with the *Karine A*.
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  - ◆ **Chapter 24** – Laying the foundation for political gains: the first Israeli delegation to the United States (January 9-10, 2002).
  - ◆ **Chapter 25** – Political capital: IDF Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz visits the United States.
- ▶ **The last word**
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  - ◆ The route taken by the *Karine A* from the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf
  - ◆ Where the weapons were loaded in the Persian Gulf, near the Iranian island of Kish
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  - ◆ The movement of the Israel Navy from the port of Eilat to the northern Red Sea in preparation for intercepting the *Karine A*.
  - ◆ The northward movement of the *Karine A* in the Red Sea, locating its stop for repairs off the coast of al-Hudaydah.
  - ◆ What the consequences would have been if the ship had not been seized: the assumed route of the weapons into the Gaza Strip.
- ▶ **Appendices written by Captain (navy res.) shlomo gueta**
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- ▶ **Maps**