

Maritime-related Terrorism: Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, What Next from the International Jihadist Network?

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I would like to thank the RSIS for inviting me to speak this afternoon. What I say will fall into three sections. First, I will summarise the maritime-related activities of transnational terrorists in recent years. Second, I will give reasons why they have been relatively unsuccessful in their operations. Third, I will look ahead and suggest what might happen in future.

In the past decade, the maritime-related plans and operations of Muslim militants against ships and their cargo have been far less numerous than strikes on land-based targets by these terrorist groups. They have also been overshadowed by aircraft hijackings and other terrorist attacks using civilian planes laden with fuel as weapons. The most spectacular of these was the 9/11 plot in which al-Qaeda operatives seized four civilian jet airliners in the United States and crashed three of them into landmark buildings in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, killing nearly 3,000 people from 80 nations. As a result, much is now known about the activities on land and in the air of al-Qaeda, its affiliates and emulators in the violent jihadist network. Less is known about their maritime-related activities.

Yet the list of foiled, failed and successful attempts in maritime-related terrorism over the last decade is significant. Nonetheless, there remains a tendency to overlook or downplay what has happened, and thus ignore the possibility of further trouble. It is clear that terrorists can see the potential of using the maritime trading system, and its land links through the cargo container supply chain, to conceal weapons or agents for attack purposes or to provide funding or support for their operations. The terrorist network associated with al-Qaeda understands the vital role of sea transport and has exploited it for years.

(East Africa)

For example, an al-Qaeda-controlled cargo ship delivered the explosives that its operatives used to bomb two US embassies in East Africa in August 1998, killing 224 people and injuring more than 5,000. US investigators say they have evidence that al-Qaeda was buying ships at least as early as 1994.

(Yemen)

In September 2004, two al-Qaeda operatives were sentenced to death and four others jailed in Yemen for the suicide attack in October 2000 on the American destroyer Cole. They used a small boat packed with explosives to ram and seriously damage one of the US navy's most sophisticated warships. An earlier attempt to attack another American destroyer, The Sullivans, in Yemen had failed when the over-laden attack boat sank. It was salvaged and used in the operation to strike the Cole. The blast, which left a

gaping hole in the side of the destroyer, killed 17 American sailors and wounded 40. It took more than 14 months and cost around US\$250 million to repair the ship.

In October 2002, two years after the Cole was hit, the French-registered oil tanker, Limburg, carrying crude oil off the coast of Yemen, was crippled and set ablaze in another terrorist attack using an explosive-laden small boat. Al-Qaeda claimed responsibility.

(Iraq)

In April 2004, suicide terrorists in several small boats packed with explosives tried to attack laden tankers and pumping and storage facilities in the main oil export terminal in southern Iraq. The attack boats either blew up or were blown up before they reached their targets. But they came perilously close and it took several days to restore normal output from the terminal. The assault was ordered by Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, then head of al-Qaeda in Iraq. He was killed in June 2006 but the movement is under new leadership and fights on.

(Jordan)

The terrorist group led by Zarqawi, who was born in Jordan, claimed responsibility for the Katyusha rocket attack in August 2005 that narrowly missed two US warships in the Jordanian Red Sea port of Aqaba. Three rockets were fired at the two docked vessels, the amphibious assault ship Kearsarge and the landing ship Ashland. The Katyushas missed the ships, but a Jordanian soldier was killed and a taxi driver wounded when they exploded.

(Turkey)

Also in August 2005, authorities in Turkey arrested Louai Sakka, a senior al-Qaeda operative and longtime associate of Zarqawi in Iraq. Sakka was picked up and interrogated after a one-ton bomb he was making in a rented harbour-side apartment in the resort town of Antalya, in southern Turkey, went off prematurely. He had intended to put the bomb into final shape on his 27-foot motorized yacht, the Tufan, which was moored in a marina close to the apartment. Sakka planned to ram the explosive-laden yacht into a cruise ship carrying Israelis - and, he believed, US soldiers on rest and recreation - as it approached Antalya to disembark passengers. Sakka said later that he was prepared to attack NATO warships in the area if he was unable to locate Israeli passenger vessels.

(Strait of Gibraltar)

Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri, captured in late 2002, gave CIA investigators information that reinforced concerns about plans for terrorist attacks against shipping. He was al-Qaeda's head of operations in and around the Arabian peninsula and its de facto naval chief. Al-Nashiri is the alleged mastermind of the attack on the USS Cole and the tanker Limburg. He has also been linked to the bombings of the two US embassies in east Africa in 1998.

In addition, al-Nashiri confessed to planning attacks on shipping in the Strait of Gibraltar. Early in 2002, he sent a team of several Saudis to Morocco to prepare for bomb-laden speedboat attacks on US and British warships as they passed through the strait between the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. The Saudis had been trained in Afghanistan. The Moroccan intelligence service, working with Western intelligence agencies, foiled the scheme.

(Persian Gulf)

Evidently drawing on information from interrogation of al-Nashiri and other captured al-Qaeda operatives, President George Bush said in October 2005 that America and its partners in the war on terror had disrupted at least 10 serious al-Qaeda terrorist plots since 9/11. Two of these attempts were directed against shipping.

The White House noted that in the first, in late 2002 and 2003, the US and a partner nation disrupted a plan by al-Qaeda operatives to attack ships in the Arabian Gulf. This may be a reference to an abortive attempt to bomb the US Navy's Fifth Fleet headquarters in Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, a plan linked to al-Nashiri who was captured in the United Arab Emirates in November 2002. Or it may be a reference to another audacious plot Al-Nashiri was working on at the time of his arrest. He was arranging funding to crash a small aircraft into the bridge of a Western navy vessel when it was docked in the UAE's Port Rashid.

(Strait of Hormuz)

The White House said that in the second plot in 2002, the US and partners disrupted a plan to attack vessels transiting the Strait of Hormuz, a vital shipping channel both for tankers carrying oil exports from the Gulf to Asia, Europe and America, and for US and allied warships patrolling the area and supporting military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Al-Nashiri's procurement arm in the United Arab Emirates, through a series of front companies, had bought a general cargo vessel and several small fast attack boats. The aim was to fit a special lifting rig on deck to lower the boats, packed with shaped explosive charges, into the water when they were close to the Hormuz strait, which is about 40 miles wide. The waterway consists of 2-mile wide channels for separate inbound and outbound tanker traffic, with a 2-mile wide buffer zone between them. Once in position within striking distance of a passing US warship, the small craft manned by suicide crew were to be launched from the mother ship in a combined attack from different directions on the chosen target. The freighter itself was to be loaded with explosives and blown up in the shipping lanes as close as possible to the transiting US naval target. The plot was reportedly intended to coincide with the attacks on the US in September 2001. But al-Nashiri, fearing that the operation's coordinators were under surveillance, called it off.

(Philippines)

Maritime terrorism has not been confined to the Middle East, Africa and the Mediterranean. In Southeast Asia, al-Qaeda's affiliates, including the Abu Sayaff Group, the ASG, and Jemaah Islamiyah, the JI, have attacked shipping or planned to do so.

Philippine officials say that the ASG - working with the Rajah Solaiman Movement, made up of converts to Islam from among the Christian majority in the Philippines - was responsible for placing the bomb that sank a passenger ferry, the MV Superferry 14, in Manila Bay in February 2004, leaving 116 people either dead in the fire or drowned or still missing, presumed dead. In terms of loss of life, this is the worst maritime terrorist attack in recent years. In August 2005, another bomb on a ferry, MV Dona Ramona, docked in the southern Philippines, injured at least 30 people. Security officials said the incendiary device was the work of Abu Sayaff terrorists.

(Singapore)

The Singapore government has said that when it started its crackdown in December 2001 on the JI – the Southeast Asian terrorist network with links to both al-Qaeda and Abu Sayyaf militants - it discovered that the group had made preliminary plans for suicide attacks on US warships visiting Singapore. The JI also intended to carry out multiple truck bomb attacks against Western and Israeli diplomatic and other targets in Singapore, including naval bases used by the American military. It had started buying the ammonium nitrate to be used in the explosives.

The plans to attack US warships with explosive-laden small boats manned by foreign suicide bombers were started in the mid-1990s and were fairly well developed, although never activated. They included a detailed targeting map for a seaborne attack using a small craft against US naval vessels traveling eastwards from Singapore's Sembawang Wharf, in the northern part of the island state opposite Malaysia, via Tekong Island. The markings on the map identified a strategic "kill" zone where the channel was narrowest and where the target ship would have had no room to take evasive action to avoid colliding with the suicide boat. The plan took advantage of local geography to hide the attack boat from radar and visual detection until the very last minute. The route and patrol schedule of Singapore's Police Coast Guard in the area had also been monitored.

In early 2001, the plans were revived when two unidentified Middle-Easterners approached Faiz bin Abu Bakar Bafana, the Malaysian JI leader, for information on US military vessels in Singapore. Faiz then instructed members of the JI in Singapore to survey Sembawang Wharf and Changi Naval Base, both of which were being used by visiting American warships. They video-recorded what they observed and a copy of the video was later given to the Middle-Easterners in Kuala Lumpur.

(Malaysia & Indonesia)

The planning for the attack on the USS Cole in Yemen in October 2000 began in Malaysia. One of the key suspects – Walid Bin 'Attash, best known as Khallad – worked with al-Qaeda maritime commander al-Nasheri on the Cole attack. Khallad, a Yemeni born and raised in Saudi Arabia, was plotting another attack on a US naval vessel visiting

a Malaysian port in 2000. Less than year later, Malaysian intelligence foiled a plan to attack a second US warship. Meanwhile in Indonesia, al-Qaeda intended to attack a US naval vessel in Surabaya, a major Indonesian naval port and the country's second largest city. Planning for this attack by was being handled by Omar al-Faruq, one of al-Qaeda's leading liason operatives in Southeast Asia. It was disrupted by al-Faruq's arrest in June 2002 in Indonesia.

(Japan)

Japan, along with Singapore, Australia and South Korea, is among the countries that have been singled out for attack by Al-Qaeda for supporting the US-led military coalition in Iraq. In May 2004, Japanese police arrested five foreigners – three from Bangladesh, one from India and the other from Mali – who had been in contact with Lionel Dumont, a 33-year old French national of Algerian descent with ties to al-Qaeda. Dumont was arrested in Germany in December 2003 and extradited to France in May 2004. He had been involved in criminal activity in France in the 1990s while belonging to a radical Islamist group known as the Roubaix gang.

Dumont tried to establish an Al-Qaeda cell when he worked as a used-car exporter in Japan in 2002 and 2003. He sent substantial amounts of money to one of the arrested Bangladeshis who had an office near the US navy base in Yokosuka on the outskirts of Tokyo. The office was being used to gather information on the base - the largest American naval facility outside the US - in preparation for a terrorist operation.

(United States)

These are examples terrorist attacks on naval and commercial vessels or plans to attack them and the bases from which they operated. However, al-Qaeda has also shown interest in cargo containers on ships to ferry agents, weapons and terrorist-related material around the world. Shortly before his capture in Pakistan in March 2003, al-Qaeda's head of global operations, Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, through two trusted lieutenants, offered to invest about 200,000 US dollars in an export firm in exchange for access to the containers used by the firm to ship garments to Port Newark in the New York-New Jersey harbour complex. He wanted to use the containers to smuggle explosives into the US for various al-Qaeda attacks.

Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, described by the US intelligence community as one of al-Qaeda's most capable senior operatives, is the alleged mastermind of the 9/11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. His interest in ships and their cargo containers, and the fact that he was prepared to invest an unusually large amount of al-Qaeda's money in a company that regularly moved textiles into the maritime heart of the US financial capital and sold them to leading retail outlets, must be regarded as an ominous warning sign.

(Italy)

The fear that terrorists could exploit the container transport system was confirmed barely a month after the al-Qaeda hijackers crashed civilian airliners into the World Trade Centre twin towers and the Pentagon. In October 2001, authorities in the southern

Italian port of Gioia Tauro discovered an unusually well-equipped and neatly dressed stowaway locked inside a shipping container. It was furnished as a makeshift home with a bed, water, and supplies for a long journey. Italian police named the stowaway as Rizik Amid Farid and said he was born in Egypt but carried a Canadian passport.

Unlike most stowaways, Farid was smartly dressed, clean-shaven and rested as he emerged. He was found to be carrying two mobile phones, a satellite phone, a laptop computer, several cameras, batteries and, ominously given recent events in the US, airport security passes and an airline mechanic's certificate valid for four major American airports. Gioia Tauro is a leading trans-shipment hub for cargo in the Mediterranean. The container had been loaded in Port Said, Egypt. Had the occupant not been trying to widen ventilation holes when workers in Gioia Tauro were nearby, the box may well have passed unhindered to its final destination in Canada via Rotterdam. After he was discovered, Farid was investigated by Italian prosecutors who suspected that he was an al-Qaeda operative. He was charged with illegal entry into Italy and detained. But a court released him on bail and he disappeared before further information about him and the purpose of his unorthodox means of travel could be gathered.

(Israel)

More recently, on 14 March 2004, two Palestinian suicide bombers gained access to the Israeli seaport of Ashdod, near Tel Aviv, by concealing themselves in a 40-foot container. They hid in a secret compartment behind a false wall at the back of the container which was loaded with marble and ceramic tiles. An electronic scan and a physical inspection of the box, both inside and out, by Israeli officials failed to detect the bombers. In blowing themselves up, they killed 10 port workers and injured 18. This was the first attack in a closely guarded Israeli port, which was considered one of the most secure in the world. It shows how cargo containers can be used to hide people on military or terrorist operations.

In July 2002, Israeli security officials in Ashdod had seized a shipment of guns and other weapons intended for Palestinian militants. Two months earlier, a container - supposedly filled with a donation of toys sent to the Gaza Strip by an Islamic charity - had been opened by officials in Ashdod and found to be packed instead with hundreds of pounds of guns, ammunition, telescopic lenses and night-vision equipment.

In summary, if one looks at the plans and operations of the first generation of al-Qaeda leaders like Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, Abd al-Rahim al-Nashiri and others, it is clear that by 2001 and 2002 they were conducting trial runs for opening a maritime-related front in global terrorism. They could see that:

- 1) the vast commercial shipping and cargo container business around the world was open to infiltration and abuse;
- 2) naval ships are iconic targets; and
- 3) busy ports, too, are tempting because they are key nodes through which so much of world trade is shipped.

Why then have terrorists not succeeded, at least so far, in causing greater damage to naval operations and to international shipping and the cargo container supply chain that carry the bulk of world trade?

First, violent jihadists have lacked modern and lethal anti-shipping weapons. Their most effective weapons so far have been small boats packed with explosives and manned by suicide bombers. But this is changing as more and better weapons fall into the hands of terrorists.

Second, many of the trans-national terrorist network's most capable and ruthless planners have been killed or captured. They include Khalid Shaykh Muhammad, al Nashiri, Khallad and eleven others whom US President George Bush said in September had been transferred to Guantanamo Bay detention centre in Cuba for trial before military tribunals. There have been dozens of terrorism-related prosecutions in many countries.

Third, there has also been a worldwide crackdown on the sources of terrorist finance, their communications and means of moving money around. Visa and border controls have been tightened. In addition, counter-terrorist cooperation and intelligence sharing between nations and among law enforcement agencies have been enhanced in recent years, although there is still much room for improvement.

Fourth, it will take time not just to replace dead or captured planners but also to put any major maritime-related operation into effect. Remember that Khalid Shaykh Muhammad started to think about how to strike New York and Washington with hijacked planes in 1995, six years before the plot was actually carried out. According to the 9/11 Commission Report, al-Qaeda's chief, Osama bin Laden, summoned Khalid Shaykh Muhammad to Kandahar in southwestern Afghanistan in March or April 1999 to tell him that al-Qaeda supported the "planes operation". This was nearly two and a half years before the strikes took place.

Fifth, the shipping business, like the aviation industry, is now better protected by a range of measures to prevent terrorist attacks. So, too, are the US Navy and other naval forces around the world that have learned protective lessons since the attack on the USS Cole in October 2000.

The international community, spurred by the US, has tightened controls over the movement of containerised cargo at sea and on land. But given the scale of maritime trade and the huge volume of commerce moving through the global supply chain in cargo containers, the task is far from complete. Indeed, assuring total security from terrorism in a trading system designed to maximise efficiency and minimise costs is probably impossible, even if a new generation of so-called smart and secure containers become affordable and universally used, and all containers shipped on international trade routes by sea are scanned at their departing and arriving terminals.

Accurate and timely intelligence of any terrorist threat will remain the key to success. Those looking for signs of terrorist activity on ships or among the many millions

of containers moving around the world by sea carrying legitimate cargo are checking for the proverbial needle in the haystack. And they are under pressure to do so without unnecessarily slowing global trade or increasing its cost.

A sixth reason why terrorists have not succeeded, at least so far, in causing greater damage to shipping may lie in the breakdown of centralized control. In the past few years, al-Qaeda has franchised its ideology around the world following the loss of Afghanistan as a base and training area. Holed up - possibly in the porous border zone between Afghanistan and Pakistan – al-Qaeda’s leaders have watched as affiliates and emulators, often in home-grown and largely autonomous cells, have taken root and launched their own terrorist activity in Asia, Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, Australia, Canada and the US.

So far, this wave of second generation al-Qaeda inspired terrorism has been directed against mainly land-based and air targets, including laden jet airliners, crowded commuter rail systems; US embassies and consulates; landmark buildings; places frequented by tourists; expatriate housing communities; and oil production, refining and storage facilities. Using remotely detonated explosions or suicide bombers to attack targets that are part of everyday urban and industrial life may be easier, cheaper and quicker to organize than striking from the sea. These attacks on ‘soft’ targets are planned and carried out in secret by just a few people using relatively small amounts of explosives that can be bought and put together without great difficulty. Such attacks are hard to detect and stop. Yet they are effective in causing fear and conveying a political message.

The US intelligence community has concluded that violent Sunni jihadists, although only a very small percentage of the world’s 1.3 billion Muslims, are increasing in both number and geographic dispersion, partly because Iraq has become a focal point of resentment against America. It says that apart from al-Qaeda, other affiliated Sunni extremist organizations, such as JI, Ansar al-Sunnah, and several North African groups, unless countered, are likely to expand their reach and become capable of multiple and/or mass casualty attacks outside their traditional areas of operation.

WMD Terrorism

The US intelligence community has also cautioned that jihadist groups will continue to seek chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear (CBRN) capabilities. Mustafa Setmariam Nasar, often referred to by the nom de guerre Abu Musab al-Suri, has urged clandestine terrorist cells to use weapons of mass destruction or radiological bombs if they can get them. So has the new head of al-Qaeda in Iraq. Al-Suri is the Syrian-born strategist for decentralized global jihad who was arrested in Pakistan in October 2005 and then handed to US intelligence agents. Some analysts argue that the risk of terrorists being able to acquire or build a nuclear explosive device is overstated. Others say that the fissile material needed to build a bomb is available, or could become available and that there are terrorists groups that have already demonstrated the technical abilities and organizational reach to make an improvised nuclear device.

However, most experts believe that a radiological or 'dirty' bomb (which uses conventional explosives to disperse radioactive material) is well within the technical capabilities of at least some terrorist groups and that they could get all the components without much difficulty. Such a device would probably be designed as weapon of mass disruption - to cause panic, chaos and prolonged economic dislocation in a metropolis or port-city. The majority view among international officials and specialists is that some form of CBRN attack is highly likely in the next decade. The nightmare scenario, in which terrorists would move from a position of relative technological weakness to approximate symmetry of power with their perceived enemies in the US, Israel and elsewhere, is certainly no longer unthinkable.

(Sunni-Shiite Extremists: Competition or Common Front?)

There may be another looming threat as well: the prospect of intensified international terrorism on an increasingly wide range of fronts - on land, in the air and at sea - as Sunni and Shiite radicals compete, and perhaps in some cases cooperate, to spread political violence. In Iraq, al-Qaeda in the second half of 2006 sought to mend its virulently anti-Shiite reputation by distinguishing between those supporting the US-backed government and those who were neutral or actively resisting it.

However, continuing rivalry between Sunni and Shiite extremists is likely to predominate as the historic feud between the two main branches of Islam intensifies. In September 2006, as the Shiite militia Hezbollah in Lebanon trumpeted its claimed victory over Israel to the applause of the Arab populace in the Middle East, al-Qaeda warned that it would be making Israel and the Gulf Arab states its next targets in a campaign it said would seal the West's economic doom in the world's top oil exporting region. The implication of this call to arms is that Sunni radicals intend to compete with their Shiite counterparts for control of the Palestine-Israel-Lebanon heartland and the Gulf region.

(Sunni Arab Reaction to Iran's Rise)

However, the rise of Shiites in Iraq and Lebanon, backed by the Shia theocracy in Iran, is challenging traditional Sunni Arab authority in the Middle East, creating new ferment and instability. This is exacerbating the historic mistrust between predominantly Shiite and Persian Iran and many of its Sunni Arab-ruled neighbours in the Persian Gulf region, the source of nearly three quarters of Asia's oil imports. These regimes want to defend the primacy of Sunni-Arab Islam in the region, which they see as an integral part of their own self-defence. This may incline them to cooperate, either openly or covertly, with the US and Israel against Iran.

(Hezbollah's Global Reach)

So far, al-Qaeda and other Sunni extremists have shown most interest in maritime-related terrorism. They have been exclusively involved in nearly all the plans and operations I have outlined. But the Shiite Hezbollah and other arms of the Iranian-sponsored terrorist movement have also carried out maritime-related strikes against Israel, as well as bombings against Israeli and US targets abroad.

In the aftermath of the fighting with Israel last July and August, Hezbollah, backed by Iran, may be planning to mount terrorist attacks abroad against Israeli and US targets, since Hezbollah and its foreign patrons publicly identified America as Israel's key ally in the fighting. Hezbollah's global network is spread over more than 40 countries and five continents. In contrast to al-Qaeda and the now highly decentralized Sunni extremist network, Hezbollah is centrally directed from Lebanon, working in tandem with Iran. Its budget is estimated at about \$US100 million a year. A big part comes from Teheran.

(New Prototype)

Hezbollah has emerged as a new prototype for a guerrilla or terrorist organization – one with foreign state patrons (Iran and Syria), an international support network, a satellite television and media outreach program reaching an estimated 10 to 15 million viewers daily around the world, and ready access to money and increasingly sophisticated arms. Its original ideological and military leadership is still intact and has not been affected to anywhere near the same degree as al-Qaeda by the killing and capture of key operatives. Formed by Iran's powerful clerical army in 1982 to counter Israel, Hezbollah remains committed to the Iranian theocracy's vision of a Shiite dominated caliphate in the region, and of confrontation with the West, especially America.

Before 9/11, Hezbollah was responsible for more American deaths than any other non-state actor. In 2002, then US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage suggested that Hezbollah, not the al-Qaeda-inspired Sunni extremist movement, might be the premier terrorist threat to international peace and security. "Hezbollah may be the 'A team' of terrorists," he said. "Maybe al-Qaeda is actually the 'B team.'" This may well be true today and his assessment reportedly reflects a long-standing consensus in the US intelligence community: Hezbollah is a terrorist group with global reach and extensive asymmetric capabilities, due largely to its strategic partnership with Iran.

(Trigger Points)

The Lebanese Hezbollah has not carried out any major bombings outside its immediate region in the last ten years. In 1992 and again in 1994, with active Iranian support, the group attacked Jewish and Israeli targets in Argentina. In 1994, Hezbollah tried but failed to bomb the Israeli embassy in Thailand. In 1996, the Saudi wing of Hezbollah, which like its Lebanese affiliate had close ties to the Iranian regime, detonated a truck bomb in the Khobar Towers residential complex in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, that housed US Air Force personnel. Nineteen Americans were killed and 372 wounded.

Hezbollah is likely to re-launch terrorist operations abroad if:

- 1) the US, supported by Israel, assembles an effective coalition of countries opposed to Iran's nuclear ambitions, or failing that attacks Iranian nuclear facilities;
- 2) the fragile truce in Lebanon breaks down and hostilities resume between Hezbollah and Israel;

or

- 3) tensions between the US and Iran in Iraq escalate into armed conflict by miscalculation or deliberate act.

(Hezbollah's Strikes from the Sea)

Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the military wing of Fatah claimed responsibility for the container attack in the Israeli port of Ashdod in March 2004. They are all Sunni Arab militant groups. But the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iran have become increasingly involved in the Palestinian struggle against Israel in recent years, providing arms and other assistance to fighters of Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad and other units. Israeli forces have intercepted at least three major shipments of these weapons by sea in the last five years.

(Abu Hassan)

In the most recent, in May 2003, naval commandos boarded an Egyptian fishing boat, the Abu Hassan. Of the eight people aboard, at least one was a Hezbollah operative. Hidden in the vessel were fuses for Katyusha rockets, electronic bomb-making components, materials used to make explosive vests for suicide bombers and Hezbollah compact discs containing instructions.

(Karine A)

The biggest arms haul was taken from a 4,000-tonne freighter, the Karine A, in January 2002. When boarded off the Israeli Red Sea port of Eilat, it was found to be carrying 50 tons of rockets, mines, anti-tank missiles, guns and C-4 plastic explosives for Palestinian fighters. The freighter was tracked from the Jordanian port of Aqaba to an Iranian island in the Persian Gulf where its military cargo was loaded. Further investigation revealed that the arms were purchased through Iran's so-called "Export Committee of the Islamic Revolution" for \$US15 million. Payment was made through Lebanon via Hezbollah agents. Senior US intelligence officers in Iraq now say that the Iranian government, with Hezbollah's assistance, is spending millions of dollars to train, arm and equip Shiite extremist groups in Iraq, and that Iranian C-4 captured in Baghdad in 2006 is identical to the C-4 taken by the Israelis from the Karine A in 2002.

(Santorini)

A year earlier, in May 2001, Israeli naval forces intercepted the Santorini, a 65-foot wooden boat laden with a large shipment of munitions that included SA-7 Strela man-portable anti-aircraft missiles. The shipment smuggled from Libya was arranged by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine – General Command for delivery to Palestinian Authority representatives. Israel has thwarted many other more recent attempts to smuggle explosives, weapons and terrorists by sea into Gaza.

(Singapore)

While Hezbollah is based in Lebanon, it casts an increasingly long shadow across the Middle East and into other parts of the world. For example, in 1998, several operatives from the Iranian-backed network were planning to attack US naval vessels and Israeli commercial ships in Singapore or as they approached, using small boats packed

with explosives. Singapore's Internal Security Department disclosed Hezbollah's activities in June 2002. The minister for home affairs said that Hezbollah had no linkages to the JI and that the Hezbollah members had been expelled. They had tried to recruit Singaporeans and establish a cell here similar to those elsewhere in Asia, Australia and in North and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa.

(Hezbollah: Iran's Arm's Length Strike Force)

These cells, front organisations and support groups have been involved in fund raising, recruitment, and intelligence gathering as well as criminal activity and money laundering. They have also been preparing for terrorist attacks should Hezbollah and its main patron, Iran, decide to launch them. Hezbollah gives Iran an international capability for retaliation against US interests on several fronts and on several continents. Just last week, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned that Iran would hit back at US and allied interests worldwide if attacked.

(Hezbollah's Lethal Arsenal)

The military wing of the Shiite Hezbollah movement in Lebanon is sometimes described as a militia. But the fighting with Israel last year revealed it to be one of the best equipped guerrilla forces in the world. Hezbollah is a militia trained like an army and equipped like a state, an Israeli soldier who had just returned from combat against the group in southern Lebanon in August 2006, told the New York Times. With some 3,500 fighters, an infantry brigade size force, Hezbollah's military wing proved to be very well organized, equipped and armed.

Its weapons included some that have rarely, if ever, been seen before in the hands of non-state actors:

...advanced anti-tank missiles and rocket-propelled grenades such as the Russian-designed RPG-29 which proved to be effective against Israeli tanks and armoured vehicles. The RPG-29, which Russia had sold to Syria, has a tandem warhead. The first explosion is designed to blow away the target's protective armour while the second penetrates it;

...the Ababil unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), a pilotless aircraft with a self-guidance system that is capable of carrying an 88-pound warhead for up to 150 miles. Iran builds the Ababil and supplied it to Hezbollah. Three were launched against Israel but were shot down. One carried an explosive charge.

The UAVs and the armour-piercing missiles are potentially new weapons in the hands of terrorists for use against ships.

(C-802 Anti-Ship Missile)

Among Hezbollah's arsenal of modern arms was a weapon not normally associated with even the fanciest guerrilla group. On 14 July, two days after Hezbollah triggered the conflict by capturing and killing some soldiers inside Israel, it fired two C-802 radar-guided cruise missiles. One seriously damaged an Israeli corvette about 16 kilometres off the coast. The ship was helping to enforce Israel's blockade of Lebanon. Four sailors were killed. The second C-802 narrowly missed another Israeli corvette.

Instead, it hit a Cambodian-registered freighter, sinking the vessel and killing 11 Egyptian crewmen.

Neither Israel nor the US knew that Hezbollah fighters had such sophisticated weapons as the C-802 in their arsenal. As a result, the Israeli vessel did not have its missile-defence system on. Even if it had, the system would probably have been unable to protect it from the sea-skimming missile traveling at just under the speed of sound.

The C-802 is rated by experts as among the most lethal anti-ship missiles in the world. It has a range of around 120 kilometres and a warhead packed with 165 kilograms of high explosives. How did Hezbollah get such an advanced weapon? From Iran - by sea, air or overland through Syria, another Hezbollah ally. Iran bought at least 75 of the missiles from China in the mid-1990s. It reportedly received help from China and North Korea to extend their range and improve their accuracy. With its own product line, Teheran clearly felt it had enough of the C-802s to send some to Hezbollah in Lebanon and provide the training needed to operate them successfully.

(Conclusion)

To conclude, arms smuggling is rife in the Middle East and the region is awash with weapons, reflecting its many conflicts. In September 2006, after the first RPG-29 was discovered in Iraq following Hezbollah's use of the weapon against Israel in southern Lebanon, the commander of US forces in the Middle East at the time, General John Abizaid, warned that it might be a hint of things to come.

Western officials and military commanders are concerned at the spread of increasingly sophisticated conventional weapons to non-state actors, including long-range anti-ship missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles and closer-range armour-piercing missiles and rocket-propelled grenades - all capable of causing serious damage to ships, both big and small. This proliferation is the result of transfers by Iran, Syria and other governments to militia, guerrilla and insurgent groups they support, particularly in the Middle East.

For those who regard Hezbollah as an international terrorist organization armed by Iran and Syria, the transfer of high-tech anti-ship cruise missiles, shorter-range armour-piercing weapons and UAVs is an alarming development. Hezbollah has gone one-up by showing al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups it can use these weapons in combat. As a result, navies and commercial shipping face a significantly higher level of threat, especially if there is a resurgence in fighting between Hezbollah and Israel or a major conflict with Iran over Iraq or the Iranian nuclear program.

The use of the C-802 by Hezbollah shows the increasingly dangerous nexus between technology and terrorism. It also shows that there has been a quantum leap in the weaponry available for maritime-related terrorist attacks.