

# GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP ON SMALL ARMS Blog post



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## Maritime Arms Seizures Point to Iran

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US, Australian, and French naval forces operating in the northern Indian Ocean have seized thousands of small arms and light weapons in 2016. Whilst initial reports indicated the first two seizures were heading for Somalia, the types of weapons recovered suggest that the vessels almost certainly originated from Iran, and were likely destined for Yemen. [More recent US Navy statements](#) support this analysis.

On 27 February 2016, sailors from the Royal Australian Navy ship HMAS Darwin (FFG 04) boarded a fishing vessel to conduct a flag verification visit. They proceeded to [uncover an arsenal](#) of weapons, including nearly 2,000 AK type self-loading rifles, 100 RPG-7 type shoulder-fired recoilless weapons, 49 PKM type general-purpose machine guns, and 20 60 mm mortar tubes. On 20 March 2016, sailors from the French Navy ship FS Provence (D652) boarded another unflagged fishing vessel, and [seized several hundred](#) AK type self-loading rifles, as well as general-purpose machine guns, 64 SVD type designated marksman rifles, and nine unspecified anti-tank guided weapons.

In both cases, initial reports from the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) indicated that the vessels were destined for Somalia, and that the weapons were seized [under UN sanctions](#) authorizing the interdiction on the high seas of illicit arms and munitions destined for Somalia. In both cases, the vessels were determined to be stateless. The crew was of 'various nationalities'.

In both seizures, the recovered weapons strongly suggest that the vessels were likely to have originated in Iran—both ships were [transporting North Korean-made Type 73](#) general-purpose machine guns (GPMG), an uncommon weapon, produced only by DPRK. Iran is the only known importer of this machine gun.

Armament Research Services (ARES) has been [tracking the proliferation of the Type 73](#), and has documented their use in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. In Syria, the weapon has been seen in the hands of the Syrian Arab Army and pro-Assad Shi'a militias, whilst in Iraq it has been observed in service with various Iraqi Shi'a militias, including those associated with the Badr Brigade, a group which receives substantial support—both material and financial—from Iran and which has operated under the [direct command](#) of Iranian forces in Iraq. Other Iraqi groups have also acquired limited numbers of the Type 73, including the al-Imam Ali Brigade and the Christian Babylon Brigades.

The Type 73 GPMG has also made its way to Iranian-supported Houthi forces in Yemen. Recent videos from 14 and 27 March aired by the Houthi-operated Al-Masirah channel show the Type 73 in the hands of Houthi fighters in governorates of Taiz and Al Jawf.

The common denominator linking the presence of these weapons in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen is likely to be Iran. Sometime in the late 1970s or early 1980s, Iran received the only known exports of the Type 73 GPMG from North Korea. Iran made use of these weapons during the Iran-Iraq War and has continued to employ the Type 73 in a reserve role with the paramilitary Basij forces. In recent years, several of the weapons have been [spotted](#) in videos of Basij military exercises.

On 28 March 2016, sailors from the USS Sirocco boarded a third stateless dhow, this time seizing some 1,500 AK type self-loading rifles, 200 RPG-7 type shoulder-fired recoilless weapons, and 21 DShKM type heavy machine guns. As with the earlier seizures, this shipment contained visually distinctive items that point to Iran, including Iranian-style RPG-7 type launchers. These weapons feature a distinctive olive green heat shield and pistol grip, and often incorporate yellow factory markings and a round supporting grip that are unique to Iranian and Sudanese production.

Other seizures of Iranian-made weapons aboard fishing vessels off the coast of Oman have also been reported. In September last year, CMF forces from an unspecified Gulf nation seized a number of [Iranian-made anti-tank guided weapons](#) and other materiel aboard an unflagged vessel. The US Navy later indicated that the dhow may have been bound for Somalia.

The inconspicuous fishing dhow has long been considered a key tool in smuggling operations operated by Iran's Revolutionary Guards in the Persian Gulf. The lack of registry and modern navigation aids is commonplace amongst small fishing vessels in the Indian Ocean, and the swarms of similar craft give cover to pirates and drug smugglers, as well as the illicit transfer of arms and munitions.

It is possible that the weapons in question may have been headed to Somalia for local or secondary sale, but it's more likely that they were destined for Yemen, either directly or via Somalia as an intermediate port. In previous cases, illicit Iranian arms were shipped through neutral ports and hidden amongst the clutter of maritime traffic. Regardless of their destination, it is highly likely that these illicit shipments originated in Iran.

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*The Global Partnership on Small Arms was a platform where stakeholders engaged in reducing or preventing illicit arms trafficking were able to interact; exchange information, experience, and knowledge; and give feedback to further their shared goals.*

*The Global Partnership was intended to build on the mutually reinforcing implementation of existing international instruments dealing with countering illicit arms trafficking (for example, the UN Programme of Action on small arms and light weapons), promoting the regulation of the legal trade through the Arms Trade Treaty, and advancing gender equality through the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.*