

Arctic Sea ghost ship 'was carrying weapons to Iran'

The Arctic Sea cargo ship that disappeared for almost a month earlier this summer, was carrying weapons to Iran and was being tracked by Mossad, the Israeli security service, according to reports.

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Mystery has surrounded the ship, officially carrying a cargo of timber worth £1.3 million from Finland to Algeria, since its crew first reported a boarding in Swedish waters on July 24 after a raid by 10 armed English-speaking men posing as anti-narcotics police officers.

It was eventually recovered off the coast of west Africa on August 17. Russia has since charged eight men from Estonia, Latvia and Russia with kidnapping and piracy.



The Arctic Sea was officially carrying timber Photo: AP

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Russian officials have said the alleged pirates demanded a \$1.5 million ransom but speculation has grown that the freighter was carrying contraband cargo.

Israeli and Russian security sources have questioned The Kremlin's official explanation, instead arguing that the ship was carrying S-300 missiles, Russia's most advanced anti-aircraft weapon, while undergoing repairs in the Russian port of Kaliningrad, a notorious Baltic smuggling base.

According to reports, Mossad is said to have briefed the Russian government that the shipment had been sold by former military officers linked to the black market, and Russia then dispatched a naval rescue mission. Those who believe Mossad was involved point to a visit to Moscow by Shimon Peres, Israel's president, the day after the Arctic Sea was recovered.

Crew members of the Arctic Sea have since told Russian news reporters that they have been told not to disclose "state secrets" further fuelling the speculation.

A Russian military source told The Sunday Times: "The official version is ridiculous and was given to allow the Kremlin to save face.

"I've spoken to people close to the investigation and they've pretty much confirmed Mossad's involvement. It's laughable to believe all this fuss was over a load of timber. I'm not alone in believing that it was carrying weapons to Iran."

Another theory is that Mossad concocted the alleged hijacking by setting up a criminal gang, who were unlikely to have known anything about a secret cargo, instead blocking the route to Iran by the mounting media interest.

"Once the news of the hijack broke, the game was up for the arms dealers. The Russians had to act," said a former Russian army officer. "That's why I don't rule out Mossad being behind the hijacking. It stopped the shipment and gave the Kremlin a way out so that it can now claim it mounted a brilliant

rescue mission.”

As well as Russia facing potential embarrassment, had the missiles reached Iran, it would have significantly strengthened the Islamic republic's air defences. Israeli defence sources told the newspaper that in the event of an attack on Iran's nuclear installations, S-300 missiles would increase Israeli casualties by 50 per cent.

Earlier this week Mikhail Voitenjo, editor of Russia's online Maritime Bulletin, told The Sunday Telegraph he feared for his life after a warning call from a "cold official voice" thought to be an intelligence agent after he speculated the Arctic Sea was smuggling weapons.

Mr Voitenjo, who has since fled the country, said: "Very important government people got involved in this business.

"I ran away because I was afraid."

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