

Viewing cable 06DUBLIN1020, EMERGING CONSTRAINTS ON U.S. MILITARY TRANSITS AT

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TAGS: [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [EAIR](#) [PTER](#) [EI](#)
SUBJECT: EMERGING CONSTRAINTS ON U.S. MILITARY TRANSITS AT SHANNON

REF: A. DUBLIN 891

[B](#). DUBLIN 709

[C](#). USDAO DUBLIN EI U-0011-06

Classified By: Ambassador James C. Kenny; Reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

[1](#). (C) This is an action request. Please see para 10.

[2](#). (C) Summary: Although supportive of continued U.S. military transits at Shannon Airport, the Irish Government has informally begun to place constraints on U.S. operations at the facility, mainly in response to public sensitivities over U.S. actions in the Middle East. Shannon remains a key transit point for U.S. troops and materiel bound for theaters in the global war on terror, while yielding diplomatic benefits for the Irish Government and significant revenues for the airport and regional economy. Segments of the Irish public, however, see the airport as a symbol of Irish

complicity in perceived U.S. wrongdoing in the Gulf/Middle East and in regard to extraordinary renditions, a view that underpinned a recent jury decision to acquit the "Shannon Five" protesters who damaged a U.S. naval aircraft. The Irish Government has repeatedly defended U.S. interests in the face of public criticism, but has recently introduced more cumbersome notification requirements for equipment-related transits in the wake of the Lebanon conflict. These requirements, which entail a more expansive interpretation of munitions of war, are designed to give the Irish Government more latitude to decide on allowable transits, according to a senior Department of Foreign Affairs official. We suspect that the Government aims with these new constraints to dampen public criticism ahead of the 2007 general elections, and we would appreciate Department guidance on a USG response, including on any next steps regarding the Shannon Five. End summary.

Shannon: Significant Benefits and Sensitivities

¶3. (SBU) U.S. military access to Shannon Airport in western Ireland is among the most tangible benefits of traditionally strong U.S.-Irish relations. For the United States, geography makes Shannon a key transit point for military flights and military contract flights carrying personnel and materiel to Iraq and the Middle East/Gulf theater in the global war on terror, as well as to Europe and Africa. In 2005, roughly 340,000 U.S. troops passed through Shannon on nearly 2,500 contract carrier flights; about 450 equipment-related/distinguished-visitor transit military flights and thousands of airspace overflights also took place. Approximately 220,000 troops have transited to date this year. For Ireland, U.S. military transits not only demonstrate bilateral cooperation in support of U.S. objectives in the Gulf/Middle East, but also generate significant revenue for Shannon Airport and the regional economy. In 2005, the airport turned a euro 2.9 million profit after earning roughly euro 10.3 million from services for transit flights, including landing, parking, catering, and fuel. The economic gains for the Shannon area are less easily calculated, but would include, at a minimum, payments for hotels, food/beverages, transportation, and cultural activities that come with 8-10 overnight stops per year for roughly 200 soldiers each time. (Revenues may fall in 2006, as World Airways, a DOD-contract carrier, has begun to transfer operations from Shannon to its Leipzig hub for internal logistical reasons.)

¶4. (SBU) For segments of the Irish public, however, the visibility of U.S. troops at Shannon has made the airport a symbol of Irish complicity in perceived U.S. wrongdoing in the Gulf/Middle East. This popular sentiment was manifest in the July 25 jury decision to acquit the "Shannon Five," a group of anti-war protesters who damaged a U.S. naval aircraft at the airport in 2003 in the belief that they would prevent loss of life in Iraq (ref A). Members of the Shannon

Five have subsequently called for a mass demonstration in Dublin on September 23 (capitalizing on publicity for the September 21-24 Ryder Cup tournament and the return of university students) as part of a campaign to "demilitarize" the airport. Although it is by no means clear that any protest will reach "mass" proportions, participation in the planned protest will likely draw from a vocal anti-war lobby that has demonstrated against U.S. use of Shannon from the start of the Iraq War up through the recent Lebanon conflict.

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In late 2005/early 2006, EU-wide debate on extraordinary renditions similarly galvanized this lobby, and the Irish public generally, to question U.S. military access to the airport.

The Irish Government and Shannon

¶5. (C) The Irish Government consistently has acted to ensure continued U.S. military transits at Shannon in the face of public criticism. Since the Shannon Five decision, for example, Irish authorities have upgraded airport security, doubling the number of police and military personnel patrolling the facility and introducing rigorous checks at the parking lot and perimeter fence. (The upgrade is also partly a response to possible Islamic extremist threats.) Moreover, despite a general Government reluctance to challenge independent court decisions, Defense Minister Willie O'Dea and governing Fianna Fail party politicians have publicly questioned the legal merits of the Shannon Five jury decision. These public statements track with representations to the Irish Parliament by Government ministers over recent years and months in defense of U.S. practices at Shannon, including by Foreign Minister Dermot Ahern, who cited U.S. assurances on renditions this past year to rebuff calls for random aircraft checks. In parliamentary debate this spring, Minister of State for Europe, Noel Treacy, dismissed renewed calls for random inspections following the transit of a U.S. military prisoner that occurred without prior notification to the Irish Government (ref B).

¶6. (C) Notwithstanding its general support for U.S. interests, the Irish Government has more recently begun to place limits on certain forms of U.S. transits at Shannon. On August 15, the Irish Department of Transport informally advised Post by e-mail that all military equipment, including HMMWVs and trucks, were to be considered "munitions of war," requiring prior notification to the Transport Department and exemption waivers for transshipment. In addition to diplomatic clearance requests for state aircraft, we have heretofore provided notification for troop transits (with accompanying weapons), hazmat, and actual weapons/munitions, but not non-lethal military articles. The Transport Department notice followed upon the Department of Foreign

Affairs (DFA) oral but definitive decision during the Lebanon conflict to forbid U.S. military transits carrying munitions to Israel, a policy that DFA did not convey to Post before informing the media. Indications of this trend to constrain U.S. operations at Shannon first arose in the context of the extraordinary renditions issue. In late 2005, for instance, the DFA informally denied a DHS deportation transit through Shannon of convicted foreign nationals from the United States out of apparent concern that the public would misread the transit as a rendition.

¶7. (C) In an August 30 meeting with the DCM and emboff, DFA Political Director Rory Montgomery said that the Department of Transport's more encompassing approach to munitions of war and notification requirements reflected the Irish Government's interest in knowing the full scope of military materiel transiting Ireland. He recalled that the February shipment through Shannon of U.S. Apache helicopters to/from Israel, which the U.S. contract carrier had not listed as munitions of war, elicited parliamentary criticism and highlighted the need for clarity about the nature of materiel in transit (ref C). More expansive notification requirements that would apply to all countries would "make it easier" for the Irish Government to decide on allowable shipments, while remaining predisposed to respond quickly and positively to U.S. transit requests, said Montgomery. He added that the DFA would recommend that the Department of Transport consult with Post in the process of clarifying and publishing guidance on munitions of war. The DCM noted Post's intention to confer with the Transport Department, and he emphasized that broader notification requirements would make it more cumbersome to process materiel shipments, with the possibility that U.S. military planners would consider alternatives to Shannon as a transit hub.

Comment and Action Request

¶8. (C) Comment: Irish sensitivities generally about foreign military usage of the airport often make any inadvertent

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breaches of Ireland's restrictive rules on foreign military transits more visible and problematic. A neutral country, Ireland has no military attache system, no SOFA for U.S. activities, and strict rules regarding weapons transits and the wearing of foreign military uniforms. Occasional and inadvertent breaches of weapons and uniform policies, like "failure" to notify transiting prisoners (ref B) and military equipment, are met with public and press scrutiny, but also with Government understanding. Any incident, however, that becomes the cause for a public debate about the U.S. use of Shannon will likely add pressure on the Government. Embassy has sought to manage the policy issues, notification requirements, and the coordination of transiting flights,

overflights, refuelings, crew rest overnights, and equipment failure overnights with existing DAO and civilian Embassy resources on the ground. With the help of extra TDY support to the DAO office and a TDY EUCOM presence at Shannon airport (which is three-and-a-half hours from Dublin), we have managed the occasional problems adequately and well.

¶9. (C) More comment: We intend to engage other ranking DFA, Transport, and Irish Defense Department officials, upon their return from the August holiday period, on the reasons for new constraints at Shannon, particularly the novel interpretation of munitions of war and its application to other countries (Russian transits to Venezuela, for instance). The Irish public's overwhelming opposition to Israeli military actions in Lebanon has exacerbated the governing Fianna Fail party's sensitivity to public criticism ahead of Ireland's May 2007 general elections. The major opposition party, Fine Gael, supports continued U.S. military use of Shannon, but the Labour Party and the Green Party, Fine Gael's opposition partners, favor a review, if not reversal, of Irish policy on U.S. transits. Against this political backdrop, U.S. missteps at Shannon could easily become campaign grist, a Fianna Fail concern that mid-level DFA officials have cited in informal discussions with Post. Compliance with the new rules (entailing notification for almost any U.S. military equipment transiting), if feasible from the U.S. logistical perspective, will require a higher order of coordination among TRANSCOM, Air Mobility Command, TACC, and the contract carriers.

¶10. (C) Action request: We would appreciate input from the Department and other USG agencies for our planned follow-on discussions with Irish officials on Shannon. Embassy will diplomatically pursue the most workable arrangements possible with Irish officials, but we would appreciate Washington's judgment as to whether the process of notification of almost everything of a military nature (including by contract carriers) through Shannon is becoming too difficult to make the airport a preferred transit stop. Guidance is also requested regarding the Shannon Five decision, an outcome that DFA Political Director Montgomery described as "bizarre" and presumably not precedential. Our understanding is that the case, as a criminal matter, has run its course, as there is no possibility to appeal a jury decision under Irish law. There may be an option to pursue the case as a civil matter, and Post would need authorization and funding to contact local attorneys about this possibility. Another option would be to present an itemized bill for aircraft damages to the Irish Government, either to seek compensation outright or, at least, to convey USG dissatisfaction with the Shannon Five verdict.

KENNY