

How Europe Courted Israel's Arms Industry on Eve of Gaza Attack

By [David Cronin](#)

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Haneen was 10-months-old; Omar 11 months; Ibrahim one year. For the offence of being reared in Gaza, these infants were killed with the aid of Israel's "precision-guided" missiles.

A few days before their deaths, the European Commission sponsored the "second international homeland security conference" in Tel Aviv. More of a bazaar than a talking shop, the event featured exhibits by Israel's top weapons companies. Shimon Peres, the state's president, gave the closing address, using this august occasion to boast of how, as a youthful arms dealer, he was "part of founding Israel's defence industries". Peres said he was "delighted to see the innovative technological developments which are leading the world in homeland security" and expressed pride in heading "a nation with creativity and wisdom, courage and chutzpah".

As far as I can see, the EU's involvement in this exhibition went unnoticed by the media. That is deeply disturbing. It suggests that the Commission can endorse firms which profit from dropping bombs on Palestinian babies without anyone batting an eyelid.

The officials who rubber-stamped the EU's participation in the Tel Aviv fair cannot claim it was unrelated to the latest offensive against Gaza. Both provided an opportunity for the arms industry to advertise its wares: in one case in a conference centre; in the other case on the "battlefield". DefenseNews, a popular magazine among weapons traders, has reported that Rafael, the Israeli state-owned weapons company, has "initiated emergency, round-the-clock operations" to meet rising demand to supply Iron Dome, a missiles "interceptor" system that is a recent addition to Israel's arsenal.

Nor is this an isolated case. EU institutions are regularly represented in fairs where Israeli weapons manufacturers can show off their latest "innovative technological developments", to quote Peres. In September, for example, the European Defence Agency lent its support to the ILA - an air show near Berlin - at which the aforementioned Rafael had a stall. In June, numerous Israeli firms took part in Eurosatory, an arms fair in Paris; so did delegations from the EU and NATO.

Rubbing shoulders with war profiteers is not in itself reprehensible. But awarding subsidies to the same profiteers amounts to acquiescence in the human rights abuses on which their bottom line depends. At present, Israel is taking part in some 800 EU-sponsored scientific research projects, with a total value of 4.3 billion euros. Israel is eyeing an even bigger share of Horizon 2020, the Union's next pot of research money.

It is interesting that the Tel Aviv fair earlier this month focused on how surveillance equipment can be used for major sporting events like the Olympics. When London hosted the games during the summer, the EU financed the trial of a new security system in Heathrow airport. Elbit, a maker of drones that have been heavily used over Gaza's skies in recent days, was one of the "partners" in this trial.

There is a sordid irony behind how the EU is turning to Israel for advice on how to make our airports safer. In 2001, Israel destroyed Gaza's only airport. It had been constructed with 9.5 million euros worth of EU aid. Yet Chris Patten, the Union's external relations commissioner at time, refused to sue Israel for this damage. He tried to justify his inaction by contending that once cheques were handed over to the Palestinian Authority, the EU no longer owned them.

Around this time last year, the Commission published a list of 82 EU-funded facilities that had been destroyed by Israel. Officials estimated that the loss incurred to the Union as a result was almost 30 million euros. Still, the Brussels bureaucracy would not take legal action in order to hold Israel accountable; when Israel last conducted a major offensive against Gaza in 2008 and 2009, the EU released emergency funds to repair harm inflicted by Israel, with the help of American and European weapons and components. More than likely, this pattern will soon be repeated.

Why is the EU so eager to court Israel's war machine? One clue can be found in the "action plan" for a "competitive security industry" that Antonio Tajani, the EU's enterprise commissioner, published in July. It noted that the "global security market" was worth 100 billion euros per year in 2011 - a tenfold increase on its value in 2001.

Brussels officials know that Israel is the world's sixth largest exporter of "security" goods. Cooperating with Israel is necessary, they say, in order to develop Europe's own "security" industry. By sucking up to Benjamin Netanyahu's government, they can help win lucrative contracts for European firms. Italy's Finmeccanica, for example, grabbed a \$1 billion deal to supply training jets to Israel earlier this year.

And when Europe lacks weapons it calls on Israel. Frontex, the EU's border agency, has been toying with the idea of buying Israeli drones to monitor asylum-seekers. Denmark is reported to have bought Israeli bombs as its own stockpile became depleted while taking part in NATO's war against Libya.

Next month the EU will be formally awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in Oslo. We will be told of the Union's commitment to human rights and other "values". The spectacle will surely be nauseating. The EU's unerring support for Israel proves that the "values" that are truly cherished can be quantified in monetary terms. Why else would the Union court those who stand to gain from putting Haneen, Omar and Ibrahim in tiny graves?

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