

Lacking Transparency: Israeli Drones and Australian Defence

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Global Research, September 05, 2017

Featured image: Marise Payne (Source: Financial Review)

“Give us the chance to compete, to see our capabilities, to compare, to see the benefit we can bring with our [drone] system.” – Shaul Shahar, Israel Aerospace Industries Vice-President, March 2, 2017

A certain part of you should go on vacation when a drone company, certainly one dedicated to killing, gets less custom to do what it does best. The only problem in this case is that the winning party will also be a manufacturer of killer drones. Where there is unscrupulous demand, a willing if soiled supplier is always happy to step in.

The Australian Defence Force was already making its intentions clear earlier this year when the murderous Reaper drone made a visit to Australian soil. This spine tingling presence of a weapon responsible for the deaths of thousands caused a minor titter in local circles.

In recent years, the ADF has pondered whether to get into the grim business of robotic killing, despite its abysmal failings on the legal front. Defence Minister Marise Payne is fairly indifferent to such concerns:

“There will always be, in a remotely piloted aircraft, a human involved and that is the threshold for this capability for us.”[1]

Precisely the problem: behind the machine is a human; and behind that human is a vulnerable commander executing government policy.

The ADF, in other words, is falling for that old canard that such technologies are good, clean and strictly sanitised through a line of command. Malcolm Davis of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute throws the book of “strict rules of engagement” back at the critics. As long as the nod is given to protocols of use, there is nothing to sweat over. “We’ve worked with the US and other countries using drones, we understand about command and control.”[2]

Davis also laments Australia’s limp into a brave new world of lethal technologies.

“I’m amazed to be honest, that we haven’t got drones or more correctly, unmanned aerial vehicles by now. I mean, Australia has fallen well behind in this regard.”[3]

Where are the options in an emerging smorgasbord of killing? General Atomics from the US

offers its prize MQ-9 Reaper, and Israeli Aerospace Industries (IAI) boasts the Heron TP. The vigorous rumour whirling in the wings of drone central is not the whether the Heron discharges its job well, but whether the Reaper has an inter-operable dimension with the weapons systems of allies. To that end the usual plaudits are cast the way of the Israeli model, while the eye on the prize is already set.

The fuming Israeli representative, Shaul Shahar, was beside himself. His ultimate fear: that the decision is already cooked for the American rivals. In protest, he explained to the ABC that prospective Australian drone pilots had been training on the Heron-1 system, a “successful” one at that. Furthermore, Shahar claims that Australians were already using it in Afghanistan – for 3 years, no less. (Such a nugget of information, implicating Australian pilots in incidents where whole families become the bloody collateral of a target mission.)

Shahar smells discrimination and foul play, that awful sense of being strung along.

“With all the risk analysis, all competitive analysis, they need to do here and they didn’t done [sic] it because no one has approached us, no one has offered to put our data of the system on the table.”[4]

Minister Payne complied with cabinet protocol: avoid the grievance, keep the options open and claim that nothing was off the boardroom table. A similar option is done in appointing academic staff to faculties: you know who you want, but you want to keep up appearances by getting appropriate external candidates. To that end, the playbook of deflection ensures that no one option is ignored in favour of another, even if a decision has been made months in advance.

“Defence,” goes such weasel speak from a statement from the minister, “is considering a range of options for the future of the future Australian Defence Force armed remotely piloted aircraft system.”

Naturally, Payne makes the mandatory addition, the qualifier that suggests keen objectivity, gentle and deft consideration:

“As the evaluation process is ongoing it is not appropriate to comment.” Woe to the Israeli contractor.

The notable disdain for transparency shown by the ADF is far from unusual in the Australian defence industry. The ADF, for one, can hardly be accused of being overly patriotic when it comes to local industries, showing a drug-addicted preference for US products.

This was made clear in 2015 when Australian drone manufacturers – this time in the surveillance context – found it impossible to net contracts from the ministry of defence. The Australian forces showed greater and ultimately definitive interest in dealing with the American company AeroVironment.

This time, the pattern is set to repeat itself. Few are better in the business of drone-directed killings than the Israelis, but the Reaper has clout, a grotesque resume to back it, and the brutish swagger of made in the USA.

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Notes

[1] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-07/drones-in-spotlight-as-defence-weighs-future-options/8333080>

[2] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-03-07/drones-in-spotlight-as-defence-weighs-future-options/8333080>

[3] <http://www.abc.net.au/radio/hobart/programs/am/australias-military-poised-to-buy-reaper-drones-from-us/8866046>

[4] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-09-02/reaper-drone-defence-accused-lack-transparency-israeli-company/8866036>

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