

“The Benefits” of the Israeli Occupation: Gaza is a Weapons Testing Ground for Military Contractors

Israeli drone conference features weapons used to kill Gaza’s children

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The Hermes 900 was among the drones used to bomb Gaza this summer. (Tal Inbar)

Less than one month after killing more than 2,100 Palestinians in Gaza, including more than 500 children, Israel is hosting its annual drone conference.

Organized in partnership with the US embassy in Tel Aviv, “Israel Unmanned Systems 2014” offers Israeli military firms an opportunity to flaunt the performance of their products, many of which were tested on Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip this summer.

Palestine has long served as a laboratory for Israel’s ballooning “homeland security” industry to test and perfect weapons of domination and control, with disenfranchised and stateless Palestinians serving as their lab rats.

Speaking to the German magazine Der Spiegel last month, Avner Benzaken, head of the Israeli army’s “technology and logistics” division — a unit “comprised largely of academics who also happen to be officers” — explained the benefits of this occupation.

“If I develop a product and want to test it in the field, I only have to go five or ten kilometers from my base and I can look and see what is happening with the equipment,” said Benzaken. “I get feedback, so it makes the development process faster and much more efficient.”

Easy access to a captive population to experiment on allows Israeli weapons manufacturers to market their products as “combat-proven,” a coveted label that gives Israel a competitive edge in the international arms trade. Israel’s suppression technology is then exported to regimes that are similarly invested in subjugating the poor and marginalized.

This dystopian arrangement has paved the way for Israel, a country the size of New Jersey, to rank among the globe’s top five largest arms exporters and to become the world’s number one exporter of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones.

“Combat-proven”

One of the sponsors of this year’s drone conference is G-NIUS. Formed as a joint venture between two of Israel’s largest arms companies — Elbit Systems and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) — G-NIUS develops unmanned ground vehicles for the Israeli army.

Thanks to the Gaza assault, G-NIUS can now add “combat-proven” to the resumé of its unmanned Armored Personnel Carrier (APC), which was deployed operationally in Gaza this summer, marking the first time a remote controlled and unmanned APC has ever “participated in combat,” according to Israel Defense.

Those attending the drone conference were scheduled to visit G-NIUS on Monday, 15 September to get a first-hand look at the machines used to assist in Gaza’s destruction.

They were also scheduled to visit Israel’s largest developer of military technology, Elbit Systems, which benefited enormously from the summertime offensive.

Elbit’s stock jumped to its highest level since 2010 during the Gaza slaughter, a phenomenon Bloomberg Businessweek attributed to investor speculation that the Haifa-based company would see increasing demand for its products from governments impressed by its blood-soaked performance.

One product likely to use the Gaza bloodshed as a selling point is Elbit’s Hermes 900, which was deployed operationally for the first time during Operation Protective Edge.

The Hermes 900 is a larger and more advanced version of the Hermes 450, an aerial attack and surveillance drone that was used by the Israeli army to deliberately target civilians in Gaza during Israel’s 2008-2009 onslaught, according to Human Rights Watch.

Elbit drones were also used to kill civilians in Israel’s war on Lebanon in 2006, including Red Cross workers, ambulance drivers and dozens of people fleeing their homes for refuge from relentless Israeli bombardment.

Even before it helped Israeli soldiers reduce Gaza to rubble, the Hermes 900 was winning lucrative contracts.

In July, the Swiss government purchased the Hermes 900 system for \$280 million. And earlier this year, the Brazilian government purchased a fleet of Hermes drones, including the Hermes 900, to help crush the massive protests that erupted across Brazil against the World Cup.

After participating in Israel’s 51-days of terror on Gaza this summer, the Hermes 900 can join its predecessors in the “combat-proven” camp, which is sure to boost demand.

Also likely to profit from its role in turning Gaza into a graveyard is Elbit’s Skylark mini-UAV, a hand-launched surveillance drone. Though it has been used in Gaza in the past, Operation Protective Edge was the first time the Skylark was deployed in large numbers to assist the invading ground forces.

Roy Riftin, a general and chief artillery officer in the Israeli army, told Defense News that the Skylark was instrumental in “serving up targets of opportunity” for Israeli gunners.

Weapons testing

Drone makers weren’t the only ones to profit from the Gaza massacre.

Mired by debt prior to the Gaza onslaught, Israel Military Industries (IMI) was on life support.

The company's slump was so severe, the Israeli government planned to privatize it by 2016 and was offering \$370,000 severance packages to any employee willing to retire early.

But now things are looking up for IMI.

During Israel's military assault on Gaza, IMI employees worked nonstop to ensure an endless flow of 5.56 mm bullets and Kalanit and Hatzav tank shells to Israeli forces, reported Haaretz.

The Kalanit and Hatzav tank shells detonate in midair, blanketing the people and structures below with deadly bomblets. The Kalanit, an Israeli army favorite, is so popular that it was awarded Israel's esteemed "Defense Prize" in 2011. Though they have been used in the past, Operation Protective Edge marked the first time the Kalanit and Hatzav shells were deployed on a colossal scale.

IMI also tested several new weapons during the Gaza slaughter, including its MPR-500 multipurpose rigid bomb, a 500-pound precision-guided explosive so powerful it can penetrate a meter of reinforced concrete. After deploying the MPR-500 the first time in an operational capacity against the structures and bodies of the people of Gaza this summer, demand for the bomb skyrocketed, with 5.6 billion shekels (\$1.5 billion) worth in back orders in early August.

Getting in on the action

Meanwhile, foreign military contractors are aiming to cash in on the next slaughter.

Doron Shalev, business development manager at BAE Systems Rokar, a subsidiary of the Anglo-American firm BAE Systems that specializes in developing GPS navigation for artillery, is already angling for new business opportunities from the Israeli war machine in the aftermath of the Gaza slaughter.

Writing in *Israel Defense*, Shalev notes that Israel's use of indiscriminate artillery, most heavily in the Shujaiya and Rafah areas of Gaza, provoked the ire of the Obama administration. To avoid a similar "controversy" in a future attack on Lebanon, Shalev suggests Israel invest in the type of navigation systems that he happens to sell, understanding full well that Israel is itching to attack Hizballah.

"During the last operation, artillery fire was admittedly employed on a relatively large scale, but it is important to bear in mind that it was employed under relatively favorable conditions," argues Shalev. "It is important to understand that the next conflict will be different and that the Gaza Strip theater is not in any way similar to Lebanon. For this reason, we must ensure that the right lessons are being drawn and that the artillery layout is being prepared effectively for the next challenge rather than for the previous challenge."

Lockheed Martin, the world's largest "defense" contractor, is also looking to get in on the action, having just formed a subsidiary inside Israel. "The move is part of a wider push by Lockheed Martin to seek overseas defense contracts amid a slowdown in US military spending," reported *The Wall Street Journal*.

Meanwhile, the besieged and devastated Gaza Strip remains buried under four million tons of rubble as the death merchants responsible parade around Israel's annual drone festival bragging about their successes in an effort to export their products.

War is a racket indeed.

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