

Manufacturing the Drones Above Gaza

Photographers Daniel Tepper and Vittoria Mentasti joined forces to investigate the manufacture and use of drones by Israel - and beyond

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"Talking to people in Gaza, you realise how much the drones are burrowed into their daily lives," says Daniel Tepper, an American photographer who has been researching and documenting the production and militarisation of drones in Israel since the 2014 conflict in Gaza.

In Arabic, unmanned aircrafts are referred to as 'zenana', local slang for the buzzing of a mosquito; in English 'drones' take their name from the male honeybee, and the monotonous hum it makes in flight. The Israeli military pioneered the use of drones in combat, employing the technology during the 1982 Lebanon War, and since then people in Gaza have become accustomed to the insidious noise of drones, sounding so close "they could reside beside us", as Dr. Atef Abu Saif writes in his first-hand account of the 2014 conflict, *The Drone Eats With Me*.

"It's like it wants to join us for the evening and has pulled up an invisible chair," he adds.

Despite this familiarity, what's most scary about the drones is the fact it's always unclear why they're out - if they're doing surveillance, if they're armed, or if they're about to strike. During the summer of 2014 the people of Gaza lived under constant surveillance, so much so you couldn't distinguish a star or a satellite from a drone at night, says Vittoria Mentasti, an Italian photographer who experienced the conflict while reporting on it. According to Hamushim, a human rights group based in Gaza, drone warfare was responsible for almost a third of the 1543 civilian casualties in the 2014 war.

"The use of drones ensures a state of fear that perpetuates war," says Mentasti, who has been working with Tepper to document drones and their use in Gaza. "All people in Gaza now suffer from the traumatic experience of war and the lack of any illusion of safety makes it impossible to heal from trauma."



An employee of the Israeli aerospace manufacturer, Aeronautics Defense Systems, carries an Orbiter 2 UAV after a flight demonstration for foreign buyers in southern Israel, near the border with Gaza. ©

Keen to find out more, Mentasti and Tepper joined forces in 2015 to photograph Israeli weapons conventions, and through this work gained access to the factories that manufacture drones. Israeli companies are a top global exporter of UAVs [Unmanned Aerial Vehicles], accounting for over 60% of all international sales since 1985. The industry reportedly made \$4.62 billion between 2005 to 2012, mostly from foreign sales.

Mentasti and Tepper found that, paradoxically, the fully-automated drones are put together piece-by-piece by hand by skilled technicians.

“It’s like putting together a model aeroplane,” says Tepper, who adds that the factories they work in are there to sell as much as they are to produce, with the drones displayed next to promotional videos.

Visiting the factories, Tepper and Mentasti also found that many of the people and businesses associated with manufacturing UAVs believes they are humanitarian weapons, as they help reduce military and civilian casualties.

“They certainly believe they’re doing the right thing,” says Tepper.

In 2016, the duo decided to travel to Gaza and photograph the survivors of Israeli drone strikes. Travelling from Italy, Tepper came across a small infrared camera in an Apple store in Torino, made by a manufacturer that sells similar cameras for use on UAVs. He and Mentasti decided to use this camera on the project, to give an idea of what UAV operators see from their bases while remotely manning the machines.

“With infrared images, people on the ground look like insects, like little white spots running along the ground,” he says. “We don’t really feel anything from that. It’s graphic and removed like a video game. There’s no emotional pull when you see that kind of imagery.”

“We always envisioned this project to be multifaceted,” he adds. “Whatever situation we found ourselves in, we thought about what best way to express what we wanted to say.”

And what they wanted to say encompasses much more than Israel and its use of drones alone, he adds.

“It was about looking at the technology, and saying that what’s happening in Gaza is what’s happening when nations like the US, France, the UK, all these first-world nations, are using their drones all over the world.”



Ground control stations, used to pilot large drones, built inside of camouflaged shipping containers at Israel Aeronautic Industries’ main facility, near Ben Gurion Airport, Israel. Israel Aeronautic Industries (IAI) was founded in 1953 and the state-owned company is the largest aerospace and defense manufacturer in Israel. IAI has produced fighter jets, missiles, and spacecraft for domestic and

international clients and is the largest manufacturer of UAV systems in Israel. This hangar is used as a showroom, exhibiting the many UAVs and related systems produced by the company. © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



The Orbiter mini UAV inside the Aeronautics Defense Systems factory in Yavne, Israel. This highly autonomous UAV can locate and track moving targets while piloting itself along a patrol route without any minimal human control. The Orbiter is flown by military forces in over 30 countries including Mexico, Ireland, and Poland. The company displayed a new version of the Orbiter at the Paris Air show that includes 2.2kg warhead – turning the system into a loitering munition – essentially a kamikaze drone. These types of drones can remain above a target longer than any cruise missile and are also recoverable if the strike is aborted. The drone’s warhead is designed to detonate above a target showering an area 50 meters in diameter with shrapnel. © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



Inside a hangar at Israeli Aerospace Industries (IAI) main facility, near Ben Gurion Airport, Israel. Founded in 1953, the state-owned company is the largest aerospace and defence manufacturer in the country. IAI has produced fighter jets, missiles, and spacecraft for domestic and international clients and is the largest manufacturer of UAV systems in Israel. This hangar is used as a showroom, exhibiting the many UAVs and related systems produced by the company. The small vehicle on the right is a scale-model of the Naval Rotary Unmanned Air Vehicle – a helicopter drone used for naval ISR missions. © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



Yavne, Israel – A flight simulator inside the Tactical Robotic factory © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



Gaza City – A warhead from an Israeli missile that failed to detonate and was recovered by a Palestinian explosive ordinance disposal unit after the 2014 war, also known as Operation Protective Edge. The warhead is encased by a fragmentation jacket composed of thousands of tiny, metal cubes. It is most likely from a LAHAT missile, which is manufactured by Israeli Aerospace Industries (IAI) and can be fired from tanks, ships, helicopters, and UAVs © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



Al-Faraheen, Gaza © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



© Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



Ibrahim al-Remahi shows where he was injured in a drone strike that killed three of his children and wounded other members of his family during the 2014 war, in Wadi as-Salqa, Gaza Strip. “I evacuated my house with my family and I went with my sons to pray. We finished and suddenly the drone missile targeted us directly – the type of missile that has the small metal cubes. I received one cube on my neck and beside my liver here. And then there is my son who got killed directly in front of my eyes and

the other he got injured with his nerves and he started to bleed a lot. After the missile targeted us I look around to see what's happened. I realised that my first son got killed and the other is still bleeding and suddenly I realised that also I'm bleeding. So I start to put my hand on the parts that bleed and after that there was another rocket that hit my two daughters. The other missile targeted us and killed the sisters completely. After that I just saw myself in the ambulance and I spent more than 20 days in the hospital. I had a surgery in my stomach because of the shrapnel. I didn't see my family that got buried because I woke up after 20 days." Ibrahim al-Remahi. © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



Inside the home of Helmi Abu Toha, which was targeted by multiple airstrikes during the 2014 war, in Gaza City. Before the airstrikes, Abu-Toha's neighbour received a call from an Israeli agent telling him to warn the Abu-Toha family to evacuate their house immediately. Hearing his neighbour's shouting, Abu-Toha began moving his family out of their home when the building was hit with a small munition that exploded on the roof. This tactic, first employed by the Israeli Air Force and later adopted by the United States, is known as a 'roof knocking'. It is used to warn those inside a targeted building to evacuate before the next strike, which is usually much more destructive. The warning shot is probably fired by a drone in most cases. Abu-Toha and his family managed to escape before the building was hit again. A bomb penetrated through four floors and ended up in the basement without exploding. The Israeli Air Force sometimes drops inert, concrete filled bombs in an effort to reduce collateral damage. Abu-Toha's building sustained significant damage and a small food market the family ran out of the first floor was destroyed. They do not know why the building was targeted. "It's so amazing in any moment this house could be targeted again. Any way, any clashes, when they break the ceasefire for sure I will evacuate my house because I will not feel safe anymore in this house...I just would like to know why they targeted our house. What's the goal for targeting my house?" Helmi Abu Toha. © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



© Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



Shuja'iyya, Gaza – Eslam Shamali stands amid the rubble of her destroyed home. Eslam's brother was a Hamas commander who died during the 2014 war, houses owned by their family were destroyed by the Israeli military during heavy fighting in their neighbourhood. © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper



Wadi al-Salqa, Gaza Strip. Shrapnel-damaged walls at the site of a drone strike that killed a fifteen year old boy in 2012. © Vittoria Mentasti and Daniel Tepper

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