

‘Suicide Drones’ and the Spoils of War: Israeli Arms Manufacturers Look to Cash in on the War in Gaza

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Image: An advertisement at the “Israel Unmanned Systems 2014” conference. (Photo: Dan Cohen)

Three weeks after Israel’s latest assault on the Gaza Strip concluded, Israeli military and political leaders attended a conference next to Ben Gurion Airport to sell the successes of what Israel dubbed Operation Protective Edge, which killed more than [2,200](#) Palestinians including 521 children. The annual conference, named “Israel Unmanned Systems 2014,” took place in business-as-usual atmosphere — even with a complimentary beer keg. But the fare was anything but humdrum. Among the offerings were suicide drones, “loitering munitions” that need to explode; a 16-year-old showing off high-tech robots designed by fellow high schoolers and future drone makers; and “premature” weapons, armaments that have not been fully tested before they are used on a live Palestinian population. Such is Israel the military power.

The conference showcased the latest drone technology and previewed the industry’s prospects to a few hundred international buyers, vendors, and military figures. Inside a private conference room, political and industry leaders gave presentations — speaking in military euphemisms that avoided any uncomfortable references to the humanitarian catastrophe resulting from the 51-day bombing campaign.

Elad Aharonson, General Manager of the Israeli weapons company Elbit Systems’ Unmanned Systems Division, praised the “relative advantage” Israel enjoys due to the “intimate ties” between the “developers and users” of the military industry. “In some cases, we must admit these are the same people and that is a great advantage,” Aharonson said.

Suicide Drones

Lieutenant Colonel Itzhar Jona, who heads Israel Aerospace Industries, spoke about “loitering munitions” — what he called a “politically correct” name for Suicide Drones. They are a hybrid of drone and missile technology that have “autonomous and partially autonomous” elements, and are “launched like a missile, fly like an UAV [unmanned aerial vehicle],” and once they identify a target, revert to “attack like a missile.” Jona called the Suicide Drone a “UAV that thinks and decides for itself,” then added, “If you [the operator] aren’t totally clear on the logic, it can even surprise you.”

Jona praised the advantage of the Suicide Drone because the operator “doesn’t have to bring it home or deal with all sorts of dilemmas.” The Suicide Drone will quickly find a target

using its internal logic, which Jona explained in this way: “It carries a warhead that eventually needs to explode. There needs to be a target at the end that will want to explode. Or it won’t want to and we will help it explode.”

Still Undergoing Test Flights

Within 48 hours of the first airstrikes of Operation Protective Edge last July, the military began operating the Hermes 900, nicknamed the “star” of Israel’s arsenal of drones. Made by the Israeli weapons giant Elbit Systems, the drone was “[still undergoing test flights](#)” when it was first deployed. The assault presented an opportunity to expedite the testing process by launching strikes on Gaza’s captive population — which allows Israel weapons makers to market their products as “combat proven.” This places the Israeli brand squarely at the top of the arms industry.

This phenomenon is nothing new. Colonel Erez Karabiti, who heads the Israeli Air Force’s UAV division, admitted implementation of premature weapons systems has been the norm for at least 15 years — what he referred to as the “pre-standard era.” Though he praised the benefits of Israel’s use of premature weapons because it “brings results”, he suggested that in the future, the Israeli arms industry should adhere to testing standards in order to ensure reliability, effectiveness and, “obviously to sell” the weapons.

Another aspect of Operation Protective Edge was the widespread use of Sky Rider mini-drones by ground forces — part of a program that Israeli troops pushed for and was first implemented in the Second Lebanon War in 2006. “Every brigade — even the reserves — got at least two air vehicles and flew them nonstop; at the same time,” the Israeli military’s chief artillery officer, Brigadier General Roy Riftin [told](#) a reporter.

Battlefield-Proven

Rami Shmueli, CEO of RT Technologies, which makes Aerostat surveillance balloons, informed me that in addition to 13 systems flying around the Gaza Strip, the company has a subsidiary at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. Additionally, the US army purchased surveillance systems from RT for use in Afghanistan. Shmueli explained that the United States is “the most promising market in the world.”

Drew Marks, from ESC BAZ, which makes unmanned surveillance systems, said that the Israeli company sells to governments and militaries in Europe, Asia and Africa. He continued, “We sell to other markets — friends in Asia. I can’t tell you where exactly but I can tell you Asian countries — southeast Asian countries. People can maybe understand where it is.”

Marks boasted that a video that showed Palestinian fighters emerging from the sea to attack an Israeli military base, which was recently [revealed](#) to be only partial, “was taken by this system right here.” He added, “We call it battlefield-proven!”

Drone Youth

In front of the trade show was a team of Israeli high school students who were being groomed as part of the next generation of drone engineers and electricians. They operated

remote-controlled robots designed to launch large yoga balls into a basket at a given height and distance. Their team was called FIRST Israel, part of an international competition that has been featured on National Geographic's television channel.

There I met Omer Golan-Kaplan, 16, who told me, "I'm sure at least half of the people who participate in the project will go to make electronic devices [in the military]." As for herself, Golan-Kaplan was torn between spending her military service in a unit working with electronics, or being "a tank teacher or a shooting teacher." "I really want to get to know the cool stuff." She added, "I'm still young to know what I want to do with my life."

Nothing illustrated the complete militarization of the Israeli society so much as the interaction with Crosslab Networks (XLN). XLN is a project of the Reut Institute, an Israeli national security and socioeconomic policy think tank that has [called on the Israeli government to](#) "sabotage" and "attack" that global Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement or what it described as an international Delegitimization Network. Under the leadership of former Reut Institute CEO Roy Keidar, XLN creates centers for 3D printing and other advanced technologies which are becoming an integral part of Israel's ability to quickly design and build weapons. Keidar admitted that children as young as 14 were instrumental in building a mini-copter that could navigate the network of tunnels that Palestinian resistance groups had constructed.

"You wouldn't believe who is leading who. I've got 14-year-olds working on sensors and writing codes so fast," Keidar said. "That's the future!"

Footage shot by Dan Cohen and Lia Tarachansky with thanks to Ronnie Barkan for translation.

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