

Israeli-Greek Naval, Air Force and Defence Industry Cooperation

Introduction

The bilateral Israeli-Greek military and defence industry cooperation was not created in a vacuum, but is a by-product of the steadily deteriorating Israeli-Turkish relations which include two important events: the famous World Economic Forum incident in Davos on January 29th, 2009 and the Mavi Marmara incident on May 31st, 2010.¹ At the time of the incident, Prime Minister Erdogan said to President Shimon Peres: “Mr Peres, you are older than me and your voice comes out in a very loud tone. And the loudness of your voice has to do with a guilty conscience. My voice, however, will not come out in the same tone. When it comes to killing, you know well how to kill.”² The Davos incident was further aggravated by the Mavi Marmara incident, which left ten Turkish citizens dead after clashing with Israeli commandos as the latter boarded the ship which was trying to break the Gaza blockade.³ Moreover, the military component of Israeli-Turkish relations, which used to be the backbone of the relations, is still missing and is unlikely to reappear in the near future. For this reason, Israel began looking for a like-minded partner in the eastern Mediterranean as early as 2011. By 2021, the bilateral relations were expanded into a fully-grown military cooperation that continues to flourish and also includes the defence industry cooperation that reached its zenith in April 2021.

From Naval Multinational Cooperation to Bilateral Cooperation

It is important to stress that the United States has encouraged Israeli-Greek naval cooperation since the inauguration of the ‘Noble Dina’ naval exercise in 2011. ‘Noble Dina’ was the first trilateral naval exercise led by the United States, Israel and Greece and took place in 2012. It was reported in April 2012 that Israel, Greece, and the US conducted joint air and naval exercises,

in part to stimulate defending the sea-borne gas drilling installations around the eastern Mediterranean. The exercises were also intended to simulate air-to-air combat and anti-submarine warfare and were overseen by the US Sixth Fleet.⁴ Since then, the joint exercise has occurred annually. The ‘Noble Dina’ 2019 submarine hunting exercise, involving naval forces from Israel, Greece, and the US, was concluded in the Mediterranean in late April 2019. Lt. Col Eitan Paz, Commander of the 34 Squadron of the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) Navy’s Missile Frigate Flotilla, said that: “Such exercises are inherently difficult owing to the aspect of the common language between the participating forces, which in our case necessitated a two-month long preparatory process. The seamen studied NATO’s international Multinational Maritime Tactical Procedures (MTP) language for joint exercises and practiced the exercise scenarios on simulators. For the seamen of the 3rd Flotilla, it was a special experience, going abroad with their vessels, docking at a foreign port, and spending a shore leave with their counterparts from the Hellenic Navy and the US Navy. The experience is intended to enhance the cooperation between the participating forces.”⁵

IDF Navy sources said that the international exercises enhance the bonds with their allies. Eventually, the Israelis became involved and extended assistance at the common language level, the willingness to help and solid foundations for doing things together in the future. As far as the military aspect is concerned, it will be easier to face a real joint event after having participated in joint training exercises.⁶ In the recent ‘Noble Dina’ naval exercise in March 2021, in addition to Greece, France and Cyprus joined for the first time.⁷ The Navy led a large-scale exercise in which it implemented capabilities in underwater warfare, search and rescue, convoy escort and surface combat. These exercises are of paramount importance in strengthening

the Navy’s connection with foreign fleets which share common interests.⁸

Greece and Israel conducted a joint naval exercise for the first time ever on July 18th, 2012; two years after Israeli-Turkish relations broke down. The bilateral exercise symbolises the coming together of the two countries. Israeli Navy ships conducted five exercises in the Marmara Sea. The exercises included firing missiles at the rocky islet of Karavia west of Milos.⁹ On November 13th, 2017, three Israeli missile ships and a naval helicopter participated in the Hellenic Navy’s autumn ‘war games.’ The main aim was to provide training on how to deal with modern maritime threats while conducting evacuations of civilian populations. During the drill, the naval forces carried out advanced training in search and rescue and the prevention of maritime terrorist attacks as well as in advanced maritime medical evacuations.¹⁰ Israel has reaped many benefits from the growing maritime partnership. A friendly partner like Greece owns similar vessels to Israel’s – such as German-made air independent propulsion submarines which can travel great distances without needing to resurface. Maintaining such submarines is complex and requires a lot of knowledge. The Greeks have technical knowledge on maintenance and Israelis are happy to learn from them¹¹ in order to be self-sustainable in the future.

In December 2020, a joint naval exercise was held between Greece, Bulgaria, and Israel. The latter displayed its capability to land a helicopter on ships at sea and transfer injured personnel to hospitals on shore. If there is an urgent need for medical evacuation of naval personnel operating in the eastern Mediterranean, then in the words of Antonio Mourinha, a senior officer in the naval command of NATO: “We do not have time to go to Turkey” with an Israeli casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) capability serving to extend the network.¹²

In other words, Israel, with its well-organised Navy and well-developed inland medical infrastructure, replaces Turkey as a major site for CASEVAC and becomes a major pillar of non-NATO allies.

This is an indication of the enhanced military cooperation between Israel and Greece in the naval sector and we can expect further naval exercises between the two countries. This is also an indication of trust and a learning curve for the Israeli commanding officers and sailors.

From Air Forces Multinational Cooperation to Bilateral Cooperation

It needs to be emphasised that, like in the aforementioned trilateral naval exercise, the first 'Blue Flag' multinational air force exercise in Israel, including Greece, Italy, and the US, took place in November 2013. Israel was looking forward to hosting more air forces in the next 'Blue Flag' that, as a biannual event, was scheduled for 2015.¹³ Following the 2015 and 2017 'Blue Flag' exercises, the big novelty in the 2019 exercise was the first-ever participation of the IAF F-35 together with the air forces of Germany, Greece, Italy, and the US. The cooperation enables high-quality international training, mutual learning, and the study of flight techniques, providing an opportunity to strengthen relations between the participating countries¹⁴ and enhancing the trust and understanding of the parties involved.

The first-ever Israeli Air Force and Hellenic Air Force (HAF) joint exercise in Israel took place in December 2016. Colonel Amnon, Commander of the Ramat David Air Force Base (AFB), noted that: "The Greek deployment was of historical significance because the AFB usually does not host foreign fighter division deployments. This was a trailblazing event. The last time foreign fighter aircrafts were hosted in the AFB was in 1956. The Greeks are our long-time partners, and the current exercise is a step forward in our cooperation. The fact that this was a relatively small deployment (a total of three squadrons) allowed us to create an intimate training exercise and develop tighter relationships." Major

Dimitrios Gritzaliotis, Commander of the Greek deployment, commented: "I hope to profit from this cooperation in a way that both sides see the scenarios they train for daily and from a different point of view. We expect to continue the cooperation between the two air forces and in the near future host the Israeli aircrews as they did us."¹⁵ That is exactly what happened. In June 2018, the IAF together with the HAF conducted a joint exercise over Greek skies. Long-distance flights and dozens of aircrafts in unknown territory were trained with air-to-air refuelling exercises and mutual acquaintance of flight crews.¹⁶ In a statement, the Israeli Defence Forces noted that "40 Israeli fighter planes from the 105 Flight Squadron as well as tanker planes, which never landed during two missions, participated in the exercise."¹⁷ The exercise was part of a series planned for 2018 to improve the operational readiness of the Israeli armed forces.

In November 2018, the IAF F-16I fighter jet squadrons returned from a combined training in Greece alongside the HAF. At the same time, service members from the Hellenic Attack Helicopter Division trained in the IAF's Ramon Air Force Base alongside the IAF's Helicopter Division.

This was one of the largest fighter jet exercises held by the IAF overseas in 2018. The HAF is an advanced force with excellent weapon systems, pilots, and surface-to-air missile (SAM) batteries. The IAF want to learn how the HAF handles advanced threats. The Greeks fly differently than Israelis do, and it is reasonable that they learn from each other – why and how we fly the way we do.¹⁸ Many aircrew members say that flying in international territory is a significant experience. To reinforce this point, Lt. Col A., said that: "Taking off in an unfamiliar area with an unfamiliar view is a powerful, meaningful experience for a young pilot. This is not even related to the exercise itself – the unique mountainous topography in Greece allows us to perform a high-quality exercise which is different to what we see in Israel."¹⁹ The flight envelope was new to the Israeli pilots, and they had to communicate over the radio with foreign partners. Admittedly, they all

spoke English but not everyone actually commanded that language, and the main thing – they all had to fly together. There are certainly similarities between the Greeks and the Israelis. Pilots are pilots but there are differences nevertheless and it is interesting and important to listen and to learn. For the Israeli pilots, it was definitely a giant leap in professionalism.²⁰ English language proficiency for pilots is not just a must but it is imperative during real combat. As a result, the learning curve and the interoperability of the fighter jets are essentials for a successful air force operation.

An additional advantage in the joint exercise is that Greece, as a member of NATO, operates according to NATO combat doctrines. These doctrines differ from the ones used by the IAF, and this, in turn, provides an opening for mutual learning and the exchange of opinions.

There is no doubt that the naval and air forces exercises have greatly impacted the way that the countries see each other. Strengthening their fraternity vis-à-vis defence industry cooperation is discussed below. The so-called third leg of cooperation underscores how quickly the cooperation proceeded and what was accomplished in the last 12 months.

Defence Industry Cooperation

From Treating Greece as a Customer or a Partner to Cooperation

In addition to the naval and air forces cooperation, the Israeli defence industry sees Greece as an excellent customer for Israeli defence systems. On May 6th, 2020, the Director General of the Israeli Defence Ministry, Major General Uzi Adam (retired), and the Director General for Defence Investments and Armament of the Hellenic Ministry of Defence, Lieutenant General Theodoros Lagios (retired), signed an agreement for leasing two Israeli Heron UAVs to Greece for border defence. As part of the agreement, the Heron system in its maritime configuration was leased to Greece for a period of three years with the option to purchase the system in 2023.²¹ It

is important to stress that the leased UAV with the maritime configuration include sensors and communications designed to monitor the extensive water borders of Greece that remain of prime security for the country.

Israel has reportedly agreed to upgrade the Greek AH-64 Apache helicopter. The contract is valued at \$34 million and includes 19 helicopters. Elbit Systems of Israel will provide a new Modernised Target Acquisition Designation Sight/Pilot Night Vision Sensor System (M-TADS/PNVIS) and an integrated Helmet and Display Sighting System (IHADSS) to be equipped on the helicopter. The helicopter will also be equipped with Rafael-built Spike NLOS fire-and-forget anti-tank guided missiles.²²

Finally, Israel signed a major defence deal with Greece worth \$1.65 billion on April 18th, 2021. The deal was signed by Brigadier General Yair Kulas (retired), Head of the International Defence Cooperation Directorate of the Ministry of Defence, and Nikos Panagiotopoulos, Defence Minister, while Elbit Systems was represented by its President and CEO, Bezahel Machlis, and Yoram Shmueli, General Manager of Elbit Systems' Aerospace Division. Through the Israeli company Elbit Systems, the Israeli Ministry of Defence will set up an International Flight Training Centre for the Hellenic Air Force based on the model of the Israel Air Force Flying School.

Under the agreement, Elbit Systems will supply new M-346 training aircraft and will maintain the entire training fleet comprising dozens of M-346 and T-6 training aircraft for a period of about 20 years. In addition, the company will provide its latest advanced Embedded Virtual Avionics (EVA) on-board the training aircraft and deliver networked flight simulators and an array of Ground-Based Training Stations. The contract also includes command and control systems to facilitate the effective management of the flight training.²³

The recent deal between the two countries is a major breakthrough for the Israeli defence establishment and the defence industry. It highlights the rapid development

of the military cooperation between the two states and underlines the importance that Greece attaches to Israel, in general, and Elbit Systems in particular. It also emphasises the importance that the top military leadership in the two countries attach to the long-term project that turns Greece from a pure customer to a real long-term partner.

Greek ONEX Neorion Shipyards and Israeli Shipyards have signed a cooperation agreement for the construction of next-generation corvettes which will meet Greece's needs for future naval warfare in the eastern Mediterranean. The agreement was signed during the visit by Kyriakos Mitsotakis, Greek Prime Minister, to Israel on June 16th, 2020.²⁴ Naval News reported that the Themistocles vessel will be partially built by Israel Shipyards, while it will be sharing the relevant know-how with and be partially built by ONEX Shipyards. The design of the Greek vessel is basically the same design of Israel's Saar S-72 corvette but with modifications according to the needs of the Hellenic Navy.²⁵

In the next milestone between the two countries, the Greek Parliament ratified an agreement with Israel on July 7th, 2020, for the procurement of defence equipment and services. Nikos Panagiotopoulos, Greece Defence Minister, said: "We gave assurances to intensify contacts on the production of defence material with Israeli firms that are interested in synergies and cooperation, even on co-production in Greece, with Greek defence companies. I expect to see a significant amount of movement as of next month, with specific proposals being put on the table."²⁶

Finally, the Israeli consortium of the SK Group and Plasan acquired 79 percent of the Greek Hellenic Vehicle Industry (ELVO) company while the Greek State retained 21 percent in ELVO.²⁷ There will be three new categories of vehicles that the new ELVO will build; namely, military vehicles, another special type of vehicles, and civilian vehicles. However, other products may include portable armature, added vehicle shielding systems and electro-optical equipment. A main goal for the Israeli

companies is to get their products to have a European and NATO "passport", so that they can be exported more successfully to the international market²⁸ and bought internally by the Greek Army.

Conclusion

The last decade in Israeli-Greek military and defence industry cooperation has shown the strength and the depth of the bilateral relations. The two sides have much to learn about each other's experience of operations in the eastern Mediterranean while Greece shared its knowledge with Israel on how to operate German-built submarines. The decade since 2011 has clearly underlined the notion that Greece replaced Turkey as Israel's partner in multinational and bilateral air and naval forces and in the naval forces of Israel, Greece, and the US Navy. It can, therefore, be expected that multinational and bilateral cooperation between like-minded nations such as Israel and Greece will intensify in the coming years as the participants not only learn from each other's tactics and strategy, but also gain insight into the strengths and weaknesses of pilots and sailors in an unfamiliar air and sea space operation. In addition, since Greece, as a member of NATO, operates according to NATO combat doctrines, it opens the door for the IAF and the Navy for an in-depth learning of the Alliance doctrines and for sharing IAF and Navy lessons with their Greek counterparts.

Whether or not one day in the future Israel will be invited to join NATO is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it can be said that Israel is already militarily aligned with the Alliance; however, politically Israel has some way to go.

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Endnotes

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Layout: Medienbüro Meyer