

## **French-Israeli Security Cooperation in the Twenty-First Century**

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This study analyzes French-Israeli security cooperation in the twenty-first century. The preface presents a brief historical background regarding the strategic relations between the two countries, as well as the defense bodies which take part in the decision-making process concerning arms trade. Subsequently, it highlights some key factors which affect the relatively low defense-related trade between the two countries. The study focuses on three significant areas: drones (UAVs), missiles, and satellites (space), analyzing the extent to which France and Israel cooperate or compete in these areas. The study concludes with assessments and recommendations concerning the potential tightening of defense cooperation between the two countries.

### **Historical Background**

Israel-France relations have known numerous ups and downs. The most severe crisis in their relations occurred in the aftermath of the 1967 War when the arms embargo imposed by French President Charles de Gaulle disrupted the “golden age” of the 1950s. It was only at the beginning of the 1990s, mainly with the backdrop of the Oslo Accords, that the two countries gradually resumed their defense and security cooperation. In 1994 they signed an agreement to maintain a regular high-level strategic dialogue, thus establishing a significant channel of defense cooperation. The outbreak of the Second Intifada in 2000 triggered a significant rupture between the two countries as a result of the one-sided French support for the Palestinians. However, at the end of 2002, the recommendations of a high-level Israeli-French committee have produced a gradual tightening and upgrading of bilateral relations in various areas including strategic cooperation, despite their political divergences.

### **Influential Key Factors**

Despite the gradual improvement in bilateral relations, some major key factors still continue to compromise the defense cooperation between the two countries. This is evident, *inter alia*, in the relatively low defense-related trade between the two countries, which are ranked among the world top exporters of arms. A major negative impact on Israel-France defense cooperation relates

to French special relations with the Arab and Muslim world. In addition, French authorities display political sensitivity regarding public opinion in France as well as in many EU countries, which tend to support the Palestinians in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Consequently it is often hostile to defense cooperation with Israel. The French ambition for self-sufficiency of its defense industry has also played a major role in undermining the defense-related procurement from Israel. Indeed, economic constraints connected with the high cost of R&D projects have obliged the French to abandon the strict preservation of the self-sufficiency principle, channeling it to a preference of industrial defense cooperation with the EU member states. Moreover, the economic global crisis has aggravated the competition between Israeli companies and French companies for defense tenders in countries such as India, Singapore, and Brazil.

Israeli attitudes regarding defense cooperation with France has also played a significant role in determining the relatively low defense-related trade between the two countries. Israeli attitudes are still affected by the historical distrust resulting from the lengthy French arms embargo imposed by de Gaulle and perused by his successors. French–Israeli divergences over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have equally played a major role in their security cooperation. In this context, Israel holds misgivings about what it perceives as French pro-Palestinian and pro-Arab partiality. Furthermore, Israel’s dependence on US military assistance eliminates its defense-related procurement from France to mainly spare parts.

## **Drones**

Despite the weighty factors which weakened Israeli-French defense cooperation, particularly the implementation of arms deals, substantial considerations have led to tight Israeli-French cooperation in the area of drones. France has purchased Israeli drones since the 1990s, as Israeli drones have won a worldwide reputation for their advanced technology. The change in the French perception concerning drones occurred mainly during the Yugoslavian wars, and the need to purchase them has become even more urgent as result of French involvement in asymmetric wars against terrorists in Afghanistan and Mali. Consequently, France reached the conclusion that buying Israeli drones would be less costly and more reliable than self-developed ones. Israeli drones are also attractive due to Israel’s practical field experience with drones in battle, as well as Israel’s willingness to sell the drones with their own technology intact (in contrast to the US, which sells military products “off the shelf” without their technologies). Another significant point relates to the fact that the various drone deals took the form

of cooperation between Israeli companies such as Israel Aeronautic Industries (IAI) or Elbit, and French companies such as EADS, Thales, Sagem and Dassault. Consequently, the Israeli drone deals became even more attractive for France since its defense industry could also benefit from them.

Alongside the pragmatic military considerations, which pushed the French to buy Israeli drones, there are also factors which impede cooperation, such as political pressure to withhold the deals. For instance, the newly-elected Socialist French government decided to suspend the former administration's decision to buy Heron TP drones from Israel, a pending annulment that was made, *inter alia*, due to political considerations.

The drone cooperation might turn into competition if and when France – together with other EU member states – succeeds in creating an advanced drone industry. In fact, in addition to the procurement of Israeli drones, France – together Britain, Germany, Spain, and Italy – has launched R&D projects of a European unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV), though it is yet to show desired results.

Thus, despite Israel's calculated risks of exposing its secret technologies and facing competition, it takes into consideration that the drone deals with France may help finance R&D projects of more advanced generations of drones, and help maintain Israeli supremacy in that area.

## **Missiles**

A different kind of relations between France and Israel has developed in the missile industry. Both countries are struggling to export major products of their respective missile industries due to the immense R&D costs on the one hand, and decreasing defense budgets on the other. Additionally, both Israel and France mainly produce equivalent categories of missiles (surface to surface missiles, air to surface missiles, anti-tank), which strengthens the competition between them.

For example, both Israel and France have stressed the strategic importance of their defense and security relations with India. France won significant tenders relating mainly to big platforms such as the Dassault fighter aircraft Rafale, and the DCNS submarine Scorpion, as well as their subsystems and missiles. Israel won tenders relating mainly to subsystems such as the Rafael anti-tank spike missiles, besting French contenders. Israel and India have also cooperated in the Indo-Israeli Barak Eight surface-to-air missile.

Alongside the competition there is also cooperation in areas where the French lack an adequate response to their strategic needs. For example, France's lack of target missiles led to its use of the Israeli target missile Black Sparrow to test its Aster 30-Block 1 anti-ballistic missile in 2010 and 2011.

## **Space**

The third area relates to Israeli-French cooperation in space. In 1994 the two countries signed a cooperation agreement in space projects. In the following years they cooperated, inter alia, in joint projects such as the satellites Amos (1- 4) and Venus. They also cooperate in the framework of the European Space Agency in projects such as the Galileo. This cooperation became possible despite the impediments presented above, due to the countries' mutual appreciation for the other's advanced space technology and science capabilities. In addition, enormous budgets for space projects favor interstate cooperation. The civil scientific aspect of the activity in space (although the civil and the military capacities are interconnected) has probably neutralized the widespread hostile attitudes within public opinion in France towards military cooperation with Israel.

Israel's geographic location, with hostile states to its east, has obliged it to launch satellites from east to west, which is in the opposite direction to the rotation of Earth. That prevents Israel from using the Earth's slingshot effect for the speed needed to launch satellites into orbit. Israel has succeeded to overcome this disadvantage by developing miniaturizing technologies, and by constructing micro satellites. France, in contrast, has specialized in macro satellites. Both countries compete for military satellite tenders, as well as immensely profitable commercial civil services.

## **Conclusion**

The three areas analyzed in this research represent three kinds of defense relations between Israel and France. The drone relations are characterized by a long history of French procurement of Israeli drones. The Israeli expertise, combined with its experience in operating the drones in battle, a willingness to sell the drone with its technology, and the addition of a local French company to the deal, increased the attractiveness of the Israeli drones. In the area of missiles, defense relations are mainly competitive due to the need to cover the immense expenses in a period of global economic crisis and decreasing defense budgets. Cooperation is negligible and takes place only when the French lack the appropriate missile and/or technology. Finally, in the realm of satellites there is a combination of cooperation and competition

emanating from the mutual respect to the scientific capacity of each one of the states on one hand, and the wish to maximize profits, especially in civil services, on the other.

Despite the impediments, the defense cooperation between the two countries is indispensable in view of the growing shared security concerns and challenges, such as global terrorism, Iran's nuclear threat, the upheaval in the Arab world – particularly in Syria – cyber-attacks and the global economic crisis.

The tightening of the defense cooperation can be expanded to intelligence or armed drones; there are also potential prospects of extending cooperation in the area of active defense systems for tanks, airplanes, and in combatting IED, areas in which Israel enjoys an advantage over France as result of its long experience in asymmetrical wars. Extending mutual cooperation by creating joint ventures in space directed to third parties may benefit both countries; while Israel contributes its expertise in micro satellites, France can offer its expertise in macro satellites, as well as its contacts within the European Union.

Generally speaking, Israel and France have gone a long way since the rupture in their relations following the Six Day War. Currently there are already significant channels of defense cooperation which can be utilized to boost these relations in the benefit of both countries.