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Israeli and NATO Navies Ramp Up Ties

by Yaakov Lappin

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: While most naval fleets spend the bulk of their time conducting international missions, the Israeli Navy is on operational duty against enemies every day. There is much NATO fleets can learn from the Israeli Navy and vice versa. With that in mind, Israel is now being invited to take part in NATO naval drills and is developing warm maritime partnerships with NATO countries.

On a Friday night in mid-November at a Greek naval base, dozens of officers and sailors from several countries gathered around a large dinner table aboard an Israeli Navy missile ship. They listened intently as Israeli Navy personnel welcomed the Sabbath and explained the significance of the meal in Jewish culture. "It was something very special that we did," said Lt. Col. Yaniv Lavi, commander of the Israeli Navy's 32nd Squadron.

The dinner was held in the midst of a two-week NATO exercise hosted by the Greek Hellenic Navy. "We invited representatives from all of the other ships. They all arrived – commanders and sailors alike, including admirals and commodores, and chiefs of regional task forces. They were very interested in Jewish culture," Lavi recalled.

The scene is symbolic of a growing partnership between the Israeli Navy and NATO fleets. For the first time, the Israelis were invited by the Hellenic Navy to take part in a NATO drill, and Greece was not taking no for an answer. "It was a compliment to us – they intensively asked us to take part," Lavi said.

On November 13, three Israeli Navy missile ships – the INS Eilat, the INS Herev ("sword"), and the INS Tarshish (named after the precious biblical stone worn by the ancient Jewish Temple high priests) – set out from Israel to Greece.

During the first week, crews from Israel, the US, the UK, Greece, Italy, Romania, and Bulgaria, as well as international observers, held briefings and planning meetings on shore. In the second week, they went into action, practicing a range of scenarios they might encounter. These included sea-based counter-terrorism operations, strikes, dealing with enemy swarm boats laden with explosives, aerial threats, and practicing how to rescue stranded vessels and provide medical attention to the injured. A helicopter on board the INS Eilat – the largest type of Israeli missile ship, the Sa'ar 5-class – took part in a search and rescue drill with the NATO forces.

Lavi said the learning process was mutual. “We learned from the others, and we passed on our knowledge. We are improving all of the time,” he said.

NATO fleets’ interest in the Israeli Navy is growing due to several special characteristics, according to Lavi. “We have the highest number of hours that we spend on operational missions, on a regular basis,” he said. As soon as Israeli Navy vessels head out of their bases for security missions, they are in close proximity to heavily armed enemies.

The Israeli Navy also plays a crucial role in the IDF’s ongoing campaign to monitor and disrupt the trafficking of destructive weaponry to the Hezbollah and Hamas terror groups. “We operate all of the time in our combat sectors. This is unique,” Lavi said.

Other fleets spend most of their time at sea conducting international missions, based on objectives like monitoring and rescuing refugees, fighting international terrorism, and dealing with smuggling. The Israeli Navy, by contrast, is on operational duty against Israel’s enemies on a daily basis, off the coasts of Gaza, Lebanon, and beyond.

Ultimately, Lavi said, the Israeli Navy would like to become an active participant in NATO. “The world needs an international force that can act anywhere against threats that influence us all,” he said. “In our small area of the Mediterranean, we know how to reply to threats and to receive help. This cooperation builds confidence and ties with other countries. It is very important for regional stability.”

Lt. Col. Assaf Boneh, head of the Israeli Navy’s International Cooperation Planning Branch, described the Jewish state’s growing bilateral naval ties with countries like Greece, Cyprus, Italy, and France.

“The French arrive in Israel a lot,” he said. “They have kind of turned Haifa into their home port. They are looking for a secure, stable port where they can rest and train with a modern fleet. Their visits are also beneficial to us. There

has been a very significant rise in their visits. Sometimes, the French Navy is here more than the American Navy, which is our biggest partner.”

As a result, increasingly complex and highly planned Israeli-French naval exercises have taken place.

Due to its relatively small size and heavy workload, the Israeli Navy has less time than the NATO fleets to take part in drills, but it is increasing its hosting of international exercises. More and more foreign fleets are expressing the wish to take part in Israeli-hosted naval drills – more than the navy can support, Boneh said.

“The navy is the most international military organization by nature. We have important visits by NATO chiefs and we maintain a permanent representative at NATO’s [UK-based] Northwood headquarters,” he added.

Boneh pointed out another key difference between NATO navies and the Israeli Navy. “We head out for days or weeks,” he said. “They head out for months, up to half a year. Obviously, when they dock here in Israel, they receive supplies, refueling, and rest for their personnel. But they’re also in search of NATO-standard ports, and someone to train with, so they do not get rusty out at sea. They’re looking for someone who can speak NATO’s language, and who knows how to train with them on relevant issues.”

Israel has reaped many benefits from this growing maritime partnership, he said. A friendly partner like Greece, for example, 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,” Boneh said. “The Greeks have technical knowledge on maintenance and we are happy to learn from them. We expect our cooperation with others to only increase.”

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