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The Israeli Drones Guarding Fortress Europe

Much of the technology used to monitor migration in the Mediterranean — and to follow the Madleen activist vessel — was battle-tested in Gaza

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A group of activists attend the departure of the Madleen for Gaza with songs and Palestinian flags on June 1, in Catania, Sicily. (Fabrizio Villa/Getty Images)

Six days before the Madleen – a humanitarian vessel carrying 12 peace activists from around the world attempting to break the Israeli siege on Gaza – was intercepted by the Israeli military in international waters off the coast of Gaza, it was sailing 80 nautical miles off the Greek island of Crete. There, at 11:12 p.m. on June 3, a drone buzzed loudly overhead. The crew, which included the Swedish activist Greta Thunberg and the French lawmaker Rima Hassan, was unarmed, and the boat was carrying foodstuffs, medical supplies and baby formula. As the drone whirred above, the crew filmed and posted videos on social media sites, visibly agitated and concerned.

They had good reason to be. A month earlier, the original humanitarian aid boat for this mission – the Conscience – caught fire after it was targeted by a drone attack in international waters off the coast of Malta. Israel neither claimed nor denied responsibility for the attack, and organizers have said they can't confirm with full certainty that Israel was responsible. But the available evidence is quite damning. The day prior to the attack, Israel requested that Malta refuse entry to the ship, and just before the attack, a Lockheed C-130 Hercules, an aircraft used by the Israeli military and capable of deploying drones, was spotted in Valletta and the region where the Conscience was sailing. Rendered unusable, the Conscience was replaced by the Madleen, a British-flagged vessel that was named after Gaza's only woman fisher, Madleen Kulab.

The initial assumption was that the drone that appeared on June 3 was Israeli. And, in a way, it was: Owned and operated by the Hellenic Coast Guard, the drone was Israeli-made. It was part of a group of drones that were originally leased in 2020, and then bought, as part of Greece's broader attempt to surveil and curb migration, aided by the European border patrol Frontex. "There's no question that the tracking and surveillance as the EU and Frontex have been doing for years over the Mediterranean has happened thanks to Israeli drones," says Antony Loewenstein, independent journalist and author of "The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World." "In this instance, that information would have been relayed straight to the Israelis."

As the drone hovered overhead, a sticky web began to unravel itself across the azure waters of the Mediterranean. There are no discernible borders at sea, yet the drone represented an amalgamation of years of brutal repression aimed at migrants and refugees trying to cross the water and the repression of Palestinians. The drone itself is a symbol of the interconnectedness of contemporary surveillance and warfare, and the ways it is used to police and control the most vulnerable among us for the profit of the most powerful.

Andrew Feinstein, author of "Shadow World: Inside the Global Arms Trade," says Greece is "becoming a part of Israel's military homeland security surveillance and misuse of data complex. Which is probably the most dangerous manifestation of militarism in decades and decades." How did we get to this point?

In the early 2000s, Israel Aerospace Industries, a state-owned aerospace and aviation manufacturer second only to Elbit Systems in terms of size and revenue, began developing the Heron drone. "It's known for its endurance capabilities," explains Jack Cinnamon, a researcher and parliamentary liaison at Shadow World Investigations. "The Heron can stay in the air for over 24 hours" – up to 55, in fact – "can carry a heavy payload – it can obviously have missiles attached to it – and they are specialized for maritime purposes, because of their extended endurance time." The drone has a 50-foot wingspan and is equipped with thermal imaging, day/night vision cameras, synthetic aperture radar that allows it to see through adverse weather conditions, and real-time data transmission. It can carry up to 550 pounds of payload, including missiles, which can then be dropped from the air.

It has also been routinely tested on Palestinians and is one of the main drones Israel has used to kill Gazans in what expert scholars and international bodies now largely agree is a genocide. As far back as 2009 and Operation Cast Lead, Human Rights Watch reported on Israel's use of the Heron drone to unlawfully target Palestinians, killing civilians, including children. As Loewenstein told Middle East Eye in 2023, "years of experience in Palestine is a key selling point."

"Looking at Oct. 7, a logical person would see that all the Israeli tech, surveillance and infrastructure around Gaza failed – the Israeli communities were vulnerable, and large numbers of people were killed and kidnapped," Loewenstein says. But during the exceptionally brutal 20 months since, Israeli defense companies have never done better. At the end of 2024, when the Palestinian death toll was at least 45,000, sales of Israel's international arms – for which the European Union is the prime customer – reached $14.8 billion, and Israel Aerospace Industries announced that it had its "best year ever." As of the time of writing, over 56,000 Palestinians in Gaza have been killed by Israel since Oct. 7; one-third of them are under 18.

Israel Aerospace Industries has since produced several iterations of the Heron drone, selling it to governments and regimes all around the world, from Turkey to India. They are sold without missiles, but one of their main selling points is their use in surveillance, making them an advantageous weapon for operations seeking to gather information and data. That, in turn, makes them ideal for states attempting to police their borders – and in the age of "Fortress Europe," Cinnamon notes, that makes them extremely useful to countries like Greece.

Though the Greek populace has historically leaned more pro-Palestinian, its governments, including more left-leaning ones led by parties like Syriza, have not. Greece's relationship with Israel stretches back decades, though it has been pursued in earnest since the mid-2010s. Along with Cyprus, the three countries began a trilateral cooperation, bolstered by similar economic and regional interests. In May 2025, they invited the United States to participate in the next "3+1" framework ministerial meeting. In a joint open letter, they wrote that their collaboration "provided an exemplary platform for promoting regional dialogue, stability and prosperity in the Eastern Mediterranean." As Greece patrols the Mediterranean with drones and violently intercepts migrants at sea or keeps them to die, and Israel continues to pummel Gaza with such severity that the dust from the bombings occasionally wafts over to Cyprus, it is difficult to find sense in the word "stability" – until one looks at the money.

In 2018, Greece, then under the leadership of the Syriza party, signed a memorandum of understanding with Israel to lease seven Heron drones to the tune of $40 million. Two years later, with the center-right New Democracy party in power and platforming a hard-line approach to both migration and Turkey, the memorandum went into effect. A little more than a year later, Greece signed a $1.8 billion arms deal with Israel, which included the purchase of Israel Aerospace Industries' Heron drones and a 22-year public-private partnership with Elbit Systems. In April 2023, Israel and Greece signed another defense export agreement worth $400 million, with Greece acquiring Rafael Advanced Defense Systems' Spike anti-tank guided missiles. The same year, Israel Aerospace Industries acquired Intracom Defense, Greece's leading tech company, further cementing the two countries' long-term strategic partnership.

Feinstein says Greece's willing continuation of its military and economic relationship with Israel poses a moral dilemma and "feels to me you're not just aiding and abetting genocide, you're actually cheerleading a genocide. And I find that both politically and morally repugnant."

Greece is, in large part, moving forward with such defense and surveillance spending because it has for years been heavily patrolling its borders in an attempt to curb migration. Frontex, the European Union border police, operates in Greece under Operation Poseidon. In 2015, as Europe experienced an influx of refugees on a scale not seen since World War II, countries were overwhelmed with people desperately trying to reach safety. Collaboration between local governments and Frontex deepened significantly. The aim was "to implement coordinated operational activities at the external sea borders of the Eastern Mediterranean region," according to the Frontex website. A separate news release on the site says Frontex officers "perform border surveillance, assist in the identification and registration of incoming migrants, as well as debriefing and screening."

Operation Poseidon continues to have several aims, including search and rescue, border control, identification of "people smugglers" and gathering information on "criminal networks." Tens of thousands of people have died braving the perilous journey across the sea into Greece and Italy. Many more have been saved, and even more have managed the journey themselves.

In 2019, as governments across Europe began to respond to growing right-wing sentiment against refugees and migrants, a shift occurred. Frontex and individual EU countries, including Greece, began to increase their spending on unmanned aerial vehicles, scaling back naval operations that are able to respond to SOS calls. Across the Mediterranean, drones began to replace patrol ships. Frontex signed a $1.28 billion deal, along with the European Maritime Safety Agency, for drones that can supply intelligence – and those drones included Israel Aerospace Industries' Heron. "The switch to drones is part of an apparent effort to monitor the Mediterranean without being pulled into rescue missions that deliver migrants to European shores," reported The Guardian in 2019.

Frontex's entire fleet of drones is Israeli-made. In 2024, it purchased more drones from Israel. That year, the hours Frontex flew drones over the Mediterranean more than doubled compared to the previous year, yet in the official tally from the International Organization on Migration, over 2,400 people died. "The policy is essentially to let people drown, and the use of Israeli drones that have been battle-tested in Gaza is part of it," says Loewenstein. He notes that Israeli tech in general, including the kind found in migrant camps on Greek islands, is "a central part of the EU infrastructure."

Heron drones allow Frontex and the Greek government to take aerial photography and determine the location of boats. Thanks to their long-range capabilities, Heron drones are also deployed by Frontex to patrol the Libyan coast, and Europe is increasingly looking to curb migration at the point of boat departure. This is not a new tactic: In March 2016, the EU signed a controversial deal with Turkey, which saw the Turkish government receive $7 billion in exchange for clamping down on so-called irregular migration. New routes popped up, largely through North Africa, and Frontex has turned its attention to putting the onus of policing on departure countries, including Libya and Tunisia.

Human Rights Watch has been documenting the pushing back of migrants and refugees from international waters by the Libyan coastguard, an act illegal under international law. "Our analysis reveals that almost one-third of these interceptions were facilitated by intelligence gathered by the European Union border agency, Frontex, through aerial surveillance," they report. In 2023, Tunisia surpassed Libya as a point of departure from North Africa and has deepened its cooperation with Frontex and European Union countries. A recent $114 million deal between Tunisia and the EU was part of a $1.1 billion memorandum of understanding negotiated by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, former Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte and European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen – who dubbed themselves "Team Europe." It will see Tunisia ramp up its border control, backed in part by racist domestic rhetoric against Black migrants that casts their presence on Tunisian soil as a "Zionist plot" to change the country's demographics. And despite vociferous support of Palestine that stretches back decades, the Tunisian government, propelled by its own antagonistic policy toward migrants, allows Frontex's Israeli-made drones to patrol its shoreline.

Just as importantly, Feinstein notes, "most countries don't understand the power of the surveillance tech" that they buy or "how it can come back to bite them." As countries strategically align themselves with Israel to gather data and monitor migrants, the medium- and long-term repercussions – how this data will be used, how it will be stored, how it will be used on countries' own citizens – does not appear to have been critically thought out.

By the time of publication, the Madleen had been intercepted by the Israeli navy, and all activists on board detained. It stands to reason that the Israeli government had been tracking their journey across the Mediterranean for days, gathering useful data and information. It took the activists seven days to reach the edge of Gazan waters. Along the way, they received an SOS call from a boat of migrants and asylum-seekers that had set off from the Libyan coast. The activists changed course to assist them.

"We don't need more borders," the German activist Yasemin Acar said in a video note from aboard the Madleen. Her face, framed by a black and white keffiyeh, bobbed gently with the rhythm of the waves. "We need more humanity."

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