

CLOSE ALLIES: AUSTRALIA AND ISRAEL

DRONES

(UAVS: UNMANNED AERIAL VEHICLES)



OVERVIEW

Remote controlled aircraft have come a long way since Austria sent unmanned, bomb-filled balloons to attack Venice¹ in the mid-1800s. Aircraft without human pilots are now commonly referred to as 'drones', but can also be referred to as an unpowered aerial vehicle (UAV) or remotely piloted aircraft (RPA). When talking about their use in combat they can be unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs), though the preferred use is becoming or unmanned aerial systems (UASs), because they are² 'holistic capability system rather than a single autonomous flying machine.'

The United States is easily the largest user of drones for warfare in the world. Israel has significant industry around the manufacture and development of drones, including their regular use to maintain the blockade of Gaza, and was the world's largest exporter of UAS³ in 2013. Australia's use of drones in warfare is relatively small, however the 2013 Australian Defence White Paper⁴ calls for an increase of use of drones by the Australian Defence Force (ADF).

USE AND BENEFITS

Drones are used for a variety of purposes, including filmmaking, journalism, law enforcement, scientific research, conservation, surf-life saving, animal rights and crop spraying, but by far the most controversial use of these devices has been by the military, both in targeting and delivering aerial attacks. The US, UK, Israel, Pakistan and China all possess drones capable of delivering missiles.

Military missions using drones, compared to fighter planes, are significantly cheaper to run and have a reduced risk of injury to pilots, who need be nowhere near their target. Pilots dropping deadly payloads on Afghani civilians⁵ can be over 11,000km away, for example. Drones can also remain in the air for up to 24 hours.

CRITICISM OF DRONES

The primary criticism of drones in terms of warfare is that they cause greater unintended casualties than fighter planes with human pilots. According to the Guardian⁶ 'A study conducted by a US military adviser found that drone strikes in Afghanistan during a year of the protracted conflict caused 10 times more civilian casualties than strikes by manned fighter aircraft.' A 2013 Amnesty International report⁷ stated that in 330 to 374 US drone

strikes in Pakistan between 2004 and September 2013 'between 400 and 900 civilians have been killed ... and at least 600 people seriously injured.'

Another significant criticism is that the use of drones reduces warfare to the level of being a computer game, distancing pilots geographically and emotionally from the tasks they are performing. A former Predator drone operator⁸ has been quoted as saying 'it is a lot like playing a video game. But playing the same video game for four years straight on the same level.' Indeed, a documentary released in 2015 claims⁹ that the US government has recruited gamers to fly drones in Pakistan.

While a majority of the US public (62%) approves of the use of drone strikes, there is considerable public opposition around the world¹⁰, including China (55% disapproval), Greece (90%) and Egypt (89%).

ISRAEL'S DRONE INDUSTRY

A 2014 research report by British-based group Drone Wars UK¹¹ notes that Israel has been developing and using drones since the 1970s. The peak of the Israeli government's use of drones is believed to be in the November 2012 assault on Gaza, where 'for the first time there were no Israeli "boots on the ground" in Gaza during a major offensive. An anonymous source stated¹² 'The type of surgical warfare fought over Gaza could not have been performed without the massive use of unmanned platforms.' According to the United Nations' Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), by the end of this Israeli government assault on Gaza, 165 Palestinians had been killed in Israeli attacks, with 99 believed to be civilians, including 33 children and 13 women.

Israel's primary producers of drones are Elbit Systems, Israel Aerospace Industries and RAFAEL. Elbit Systems produce a variety of drone technology. Elbit describes their UAS as¹³ being designed on 'decades of operational experience' and being 'the backbone of the Israel Defense Force's (IDF's) UAS force. Their arsenal includes aircraft that operate at a variety of altitudes and endurances. They are developing unmanned surface vehicles which will operate on water.

IAI boast¹⁴ 'an unsurpassed track record of over 1,300,000 operational flight hours for over 50 users on five continents,' and have a wide range of 'combat-proven' vehicles and accompanying systems. These include 'strategic' vehicles like the Heron, which can be armed

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with missiles, tactical vehicles like the Hunter, which are used for surveillance, and various smaller vehicles, including ones with vertical take off and landing (VTOL) capabilities.

While not manufacturing drones, RAFAEL contribute to the high-end technology used, including the Recce-U high resolution imaging systems that are used by operators to scan targets and deliver payloads.

AUSTRALIA'S USE OF DRONES

The 2013 Australian Defence White Paper¹⁶ calls for an increase of use of drones by the Australian Defence Force (ADF). The Australian Army¹⁷ currently operates a small low-altitude drone in Afghanistan. Called the RQ7B Shadow 200 it was developed by US industrial conglomerate Textron systems via its Australian subsidiary Aerosonde.

Since 2010, the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) has leased an Israeli built Heron from IAI via a Canadian company MacDonald Dettwiler & Associates. The Heron is a medium altitude, long endurance vehicle that can remain in the air for up to 24 hours. It was operated out of Kandahar Air Field, Afghanistan until December 2014¹⁸. Two Heron drones are currently being used at the RAAF base in Woomera for training purposes. This is ahead of the planned purchase of seven long endurance, high altitude, MQ-4C Triton drones from US-based Northrop Grumman, the fifth largest defense contractor in the world.

It was recently reported that¹⁹ the Australian and Israeli government are exploring 'opportunities to collaborate on defence technologies as part of a "continuing, modest relationship" between the two countries', including the use of drones and counter improvised explosive devices.

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