

Germany rearms with Israeli weapons

As Russia's invasion of Ukraine spurs the German government to rebuild its military, Israel offers much of what it lacks.

Last month, Chancellor Olaf Scholz made a special address to the Bundestag and the German public, in which he declared a "turning point" in the modern history of the country. The era of a shrinking German military is over, he said. The days in which only three German combat aircraft are operational, and no submarine can put to sea because of technical problems, are at an end. The time has come to invest in the Bundeswehr, which steadily withered after the collapse of the Iron Curtain and the end of the Cold War. There's a new war in the neighborhood. Russia invaded Ukraine unprovoked, and the biggest battles on European soil since the Second World War are taking place just hundreds of kilometers east of the German capital. "Soon," Scholz promised, "Germany will have the largest conventional army in Europe within NATO."

Such militant talk has been heard from Berlin several times in the past century or so, but this time, the decision by the Bundestag after Scholz's speech to allocate one hundred billion euros immediately to massive rearmament of all Germany's armed forces did not arouse waves of fear around the world, but rather plaudits. The current democratic Germany is well anchored in NATO, and even more so in the European Union. Rearmament is coming after years of appeals from the West for greater military involvement.

The German pendulum, one that in recent decades has remained steadily at the diplomatic end, where dialogue is always preferable to unilateral action and concepts such as "soft power" and "change through trade" are constantly heard, has swung sharply to the other side over the past three months. Germany is now on a clear path to rearmament, after decades of neglect and downsizing, abolition of mandatory conscription, and limited military procurement.

"I'm the one who must give answers about the unpreparedness of the German army," Chief of German Army Lieutenant General Alfons Mais posted on social media just days after the war broke out, in a post critical of his country. "For

decades, we conducted a mistaken military policy,” lamented former Minister of Defense Ursula von der Leyen. It seems clear, now that it is enjoying the public legitimacy it previously lacked, that the time has come for the German military’s star to shine once more.

And this time, one relatively small country, one with a thriving arms industry and “special relations” with Germany, suddenly finds itself at the heart of the German procurement campaign. What began in the 1990s with unilateral and one-time German compensation to Israel in the form of submarines, has in the past decade become a closer and more reciprocal security relationship than ever, turning over billions of euros. UAVs built in Israel, air-to-surface missiles fired from UAVs developed by Israel’s defense industry, small arms, German warships, electronic warfare systems and of course sophisticated submarines made in Germany - all have already changed hands. Even Israel’s Arrow 3 missile defense system with its state-of-the-art radar is there for purchase, as is the Iron Dome system for short-range rocket defense.

The German switch of direction, the *Zeitenwende* (“change of eras”) mentioned by Scholz, catches Israel when it has closer than ever security relations with Europe’s biggest economy, meaning an opportunity for a financial bonanza. “From the moment the German army’s procurement list was published, that is, the key areas where it intends to spend the €100 billion, the phones have not stopped ringing,” an Israeli source familiar with security procurement relations between the two countries told “Globes”. “Every Israeli company, state-owned or private, believes it can find an item that fits the systems it develops, and that now is the time to sell to the Germans.”

In the past, fearing the reaction of the Arab countries and their possible recognition of East Germany, West Germany refused to build submarines for Israel; they were built in foreign shipyards according to German design. The turning point in relations occurred only after the Gulf War in 1991, which coincided with reunification, and the desire of a newly united Germany to gain legitimacy from Israel. In those days, after two world wars, the very idea of a unified Germany scared the West.

Five German submarines have already been delivered to Israel. Among other things, these have become, according to foreign reports, Israel’s strategic home defense, capable of launching a “second round” of nuclear cruise missiles in the

event of a nuclear attack. Four corvettes were also provided. The sixth submarine is currently under construction at the Howaldtswerke-Deutsche Werft (HDW) shipyards in Kiel and is supposed to be the glory of Germany's naval shipbuilding industry, the biggest built in Germany since World War II. Last year, a contract was signed for the supply of three even more advanced submarines at close to three billion euro. According to the SIPRI Arms Transfers Database, over the last three decades, Israel has become the German arms industry's fourth largest export destination, after Greece, Turkey and South Korea.

But what has changed in recent years is reciprocity. The German army finds in Israel a modern and relatively proximate army that it can learn from, with similar potential enemies, like Iran and Russia (which are operating in Syria). In addition, Israel is a leading arms exporter in areas where Germany is relatively weak, such as modern warfare. Instead of just receiving submarines, Israel now sells anti-tank missiles and missile defense systems to Germany. It even leases advanced UAVs to the German army and will soon arm them with advanced air-to-surface missiles. Security relations are flourishing, and past attempts to make them conditional upon political progress with the Palestinians, as Merkel tried to do briefly, have evaporated.

"Germany is changing the way it thinks about war and its military procurement," explains Dr. Peter Lintl, of Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs) and an expert on Germany-Israel relations. "The Germans see clearly that Israel arms work, and there's no doubt that Israel is a leading country in this area. In addition, it's important to remember that most German politicians have a basic ambition to strengthen relations between Israel and Germany. There are many considerations in buying weapons systems, but they are undoubtedly always joined by a longstanding German consideration - reinforcing ties between the countries, because of the history."

Dr. Lintl believes that these days "There's a consensus not to sell weapons related to the occupation, but only a minority within the political system say that weapons should not be bought from or sold to Israel at all because of the conflict with the Palestinians" But, he says, "Should there be another confrontation with Gaza, some will say, once again, that Germany needs to be more careful. In fact, there is a constant tension between the desire to strengthen the special relationship, because of the past, and the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. "

Strangely, the Holocaust created a special bond between the countries, Dr. Lintl believes. “Just as pacifism has been, so far, a part of German national identity, so has battle readiness been in Israel. Both sides came out of the Holocaust saying ‘Never again’. In Germany it meant ‘No more war, ever,’ and in Israel it meant and still means ‘We will never again go like sheep to the slaughter.’”

The present global Zeitgeist is clearly leaning towards the Israeli approach. The war in Ukraine has led many European militaries to announce they are rearming, and Germany sees in Israel an arms industry that complements what it lacks: creativity, computing, innovation, and everything related to digitization and software. The close relationship between the two countries is reflected, for example, in the 2018 German deal to lease seven Heron-TP UAVs, which allows for training and information sharing between the parties, and not just purchasing a “black box” weapons system. Last April, the German government even announced that it would equip the drones with Israeli missiles, for which it will pay at least €150 million. The Germans hope this will also help them develop future European UAVs, and they are willing to pay billions of euros for that.

The German army’s generational shift is also doing its part. “The older generation with its forms and rubber stamps is gone, and younger people are coming in,” says an informed Israeli source. “They travel to Israel, go to the beach, visit Air Force bases, see the weapons systems in action – and they get excited. The same dynamics that made Israel the start-up nation also works in selling advanced weapons.”

Joint flights and training exercises

About €40 billion of the approved €100 billion are earmarked for equipping the Luftwaffe, which maintains the warmest of ties with its Israeli counterpart. The joint flyovers above Dachau and the Negev are symbolic, but also reflect the depth of the relationship forged between the forces, especially in recent years. At the Israel Air Force’s Tel Nof base, a German squadron trains UAV pilots, German and Israeli families walk around the base, and all have lunch together, shoulder to shoulder, each wearing their own uniform. The name of the squadron – The Red Baron – was suggested by the Israelis in honor of the German World War I flying ace.

The depth of this relationship was evident last month at a ceremony held near

Berlin's Brandenburg Gate. The commanders of the Israeli and German Air Forces - General Amikam Nurkin (who retired about two months ago) and General Ingo Gerhartz - jointly received the Ernst Cramer Medaille, a medal awarded by the Deutsch-Israelische Gesellschaft (DIG, the German-Israeli Society). This was the first time the award was presented to military personnel, and the Air Force commanders of both countries praised the cooperation between them.

Gerhartz later told newspaper Die Welt how much he valued his Israeli counterpart. "Israel has the most active air force in the world and a very efficient military industry. We, on the other hand, have complex bureaucratic structures." Gerhartz added that the German Air Force was preparing for the day when it would be called upon to side with Israel in the name of the commitment made by former Chancellor Merkel and current Chancellor Scholz, that viewed ensuring Israel's existence as part of the Federal Republic of Germany's Staatsraison (meaning, 'reason for being'). "If we say this," Gerhartz said, "then we should also stand behind it. It means that the two air forces must be able to work together. The question of whether that will actually happen will depend on a political decision."

Yoram Erlich, an Israeli who has lived in Germany for more than four decades and deals in tourism, is one of the members of the DIG leadership who decided to award the medal to both commanders. "I saw it as very natural," he tells "Globes". "The photos from the exercises in the Arava and the joint flights over Jerusalem or Dachau are part of very broad cooperation on security issues, much more than in the past." Beyond that, he says, "there are very close personal relations between many Germans and Israelis these days. The Germans have a kind of attraction to Israel, because of the past. There are many exchange visits, whether for youth, journalists, military personnel, or politicians."

Ehrlich says that he sensed security relations were growing closer when he began to see more and more German military personnel, especially from the Luftwaffe, at the Tel Aviv hotels he visits as part of his travels. "On one flight, I found myself sitting next to the German chief of staff who had apparently come to visit the country for security talks, and on another visit, in a Tel Aviv hotel lobby, I met German helicopter pilots who boasted to me that they had purchased an important component from the Israeli Air Force."

"But, of course, you have to have a good product," Ehrlich adds. "The German

army won't buy just for its own sake, just because of the history, or the special relationship. All my German acquaintances saw on television the Iron Dome system in action last year. One of the first things I have been told since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine is that Germany needs such a system, too."

A slice of the budget pie

Meanwhile, Israel's defense companies are not wasting time, with all of them trying to obtain a share of the heavy German military budget. Last week, the Innovation and Leadership in Aerospace (ILA) trade show was held in Berlin, after two years during which the Covid-19 pandemic halted international security conferences. Israel - which SIPRI ranks as the world's ninth largest arms exporter - was lavishly represented at a variety of defense industry booths. Meanwhile, Rafael's German subsidiary Dynamit Nobel Defense (DND), has already won a major contract to supply anti-tank rocket launchers to the German army.

At present, the German request to be the world's first Arrow 3 customer is also being discussed. German political delegations have already visited Israel to discuss the purchase, and Gerhartz told the media he had recommended that the German government should purchase it. The sophisticated EL/M-2080 Green Pine missile-defense radar, which is part of the system, is supposed to protect not only Germany but the Baltic states and Poland as well. The initial cost of the project is estimated at €3 billion.

These billions are proof that security relations between Israel and Germany could hardly be closer. Less than 70 years after the Holocaust, German submarines are protecting Israel, and Western Europe's defensive architecture is about to be "Made in Israel".

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