

The bloodied hands of the Canada-Israel drone warfare relationship

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More by Matthew Behrens

In one of the most gut-wrenching scenes from decades of Israeli attacks against Gaza, four children playing on a beach were murdered in 2014 by an Israeli drone strike. Last December, Canada quietly purchased from Israeli war manufacturer Elbit Systems a \$36-million, next-generation version of the drones implicated in that notorious murder.

The Hermes 900 drone that Canada is purchasing is a larger and more advanced version of the Hermes 450, an aerial attack and surveillance drone that was notoriously used by the Israeli army to deliberately target civilians in Gaza during Israel's 2008-2009 onslaught, according to Human Rights Watch. Such Israeli drones have been in continuous use over Gaza, both surveilling the people below and then bombing them ever since.

There has been increased focus on the growing Canadian relationship with Israel's drone warfare industry over the past month, as the Israeli military — which ranks No. 20 in the Global Firepower Index and possesses at least 90 nuclear weapons — pulverized Gaza with a relentless 11-day terror bombardment that targeted medical facilities, schools, roads, housing complexes, and electrical systems.

The Elbit Systems Hermes drone that Canada purchased was widely advertised as “combat proven” against the Palestinian people in Gaza in 2014, when 37 per cent of Palestinian casualties were linked to drone strikes. At that time, Amnesty International condemned Israeli forces for the commission of war crimes in what was then their third military offensive against Gaza in less than six years. Amnesty also called out Hamas for activities that they said amounted to war crimes as well.

Palestinians have long served as human targets for the lethal testing of Israeli war equipment. As the Israeli army's “technology and logistics” division head Avner Benzaken told Der Spiegel shortly after the murder of 2,100 Palestinians in 2014:

“If I develop a product and want to test it in the field, I only have to go five or 10 kilometres from my base and I can look and see what is happening with the equipment. I get feedback, so it makes the development process faster and much more efficient.”

Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East have been urging Transport Minister and Liberal MP Omar Alghabra to cancel the Elbit drone contract, demanding to know why Canada would be enriching the bottom line of a company so clearly complicit in the murder of Palestinians and the devastation of Gaza.

Elbit Systems is one of Israel's largest war manufacturers, but its financial fortunes have been less than lucrative lately, with CEO Bezhael Machlis bemoaning the fact that "Elbit is still suffering from the COVID-19 pandemic because there are no air shows to showcase its equipment."

The balance sheets will likely improve, however, given the most recent display of their firepower in action against the people of Gaza. Indeed, *Forbes Magazine* is already examining the role new weapons systems played in the assault as investors look for the next good bet for war profiteering; early estimates reveal a 50 to 100 per cent increase in Israeli bombardment over the 2014 slaughter.

Elbit's border controls

Like many war industries, Elbit also specializes in surveillance and "border security," with \$171 million in contracts to provide U.S. officials with equipment to prevent refugees from crossing the border with Mexico, and a xenophobic Fortress Europe \$68-million contract to prevent refugees from crossing the Mediterranean.

Critically, Elbit provides technical infrastructure to monitor Israel's border wall. In 2004, the International Court of Justice found the wall to be illegal, called for it to be torn down, and for Palestinians whose homes and businesses were stolen because they were in the wall's path to be properly compensated. The wall, of course, remains standing.

While the Trudeau government touts itself as a beacon of respect for international law and human rights, the Elbit drone purchase is certainly not a good look. Nor is the fact that in 2019, Israel was the top non-U.S. recipient of weapons export permits from Global Affairs Canada, with 401 approvals in military technology totalling almost \$13.7 million.

Since Trudeau was elected in 2015, over \$57 million in Canadian war exports have been delivered to Israel, including \$16 million in bomb components. In 2011, the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions National Committee called for an arms embargo against Israel similar to the one imposed against apartheid South Africa.

Perhaps to deodorize the drone's war crimes stench, last December's Canadian purchase of the Elbit weapon was couched in gaslighting terms of humanitarian concern, green economies, and, perhaps most tiresomely, respect for Indigenous sovereignty. Anita Anand, minister of public services and procurement, and then transport minister Marc Garneau announced the deal as an opportunity to "keep Canadian waters safe, and to monitor pollution."

As if this weren't noble enough, the release also pointed out that prior to the purchase, "Transport Canada engaged with Indigenous groups in Canada's North," though it is not clear (given Canada's total failure to fully engage with the principle of free, prior, and informed consent) who it was that picked up the phone message stating Canada would be

flying a drone over stolen lands and waters. There was certainly no small irony in the fact that a settler colonial state is buying drones to monitor stolen lands and water from another settler colonial state that uses the same drones to spy on and bomb the imprisoned population whose lands and waters were also stolen.

Cancelling the drone purchase

Minister Alghabra's silence on the issue is not surprising, given his apparent acquiescence in accepting Canada's \$15-billion weapons deal for Saudi Arabia and refusal to join 24 Liberal and NDP MPs and senators who jointly called on Canada to impose sanctions on Israel in a remarkable May 20 letter to Trudeau. Indeed, throughout the 11 days of Israeli bombing, Alghabra confined his Twitter feed to statements about life jackets, railroad safety, and anodyne cheerleading over pandemic vaccination numbers.

While the MP who prides himself on providing "constituents a strong voice on both local and national issues" hides away, it must be increasingly difficult for Alghabra to ignore the fact that over 10,000 people have emailed him protesting the drone purchase.

It may only be a matter of time before Ottawa is forced to respond. Public pressure has played a key role in distancing and divestment from Elbit Systems for over a decade. In 2009, the Norwegian Pension Fund said having shares in Elbit Systems "constitutes an unacceptable risk of contribution to serious violations of fundamental ethical norms as a result of the company's integral involvement in Israel's construction of a separation barrier on occupied territory" in the West Bank. Then Norwegian finance minister Kristin Halvorsen declared, "We do not wish to fund companies that so directly contribute to violations of international humanitarian law."

At the end of 2018, global banking giant HSBC confirmed that it had divested completely from Elbit Systems after a year of campaigning. This followed a similar divestment from Barclays and AXA Investment Managers, which objected to the firm's production of cluster bombs and white phosphorous and pulled a significant chunk of its shares out as well. In February 2021, the East Sussex Pension Fund also divested itself.

Meanwhile, a petition for the EU to stop purchasing or leasing Israeli drones continues to grow; Australian organizers are also trying to end a governmental partnership with Elbit Systems; and U.S. migrant rights activists are also opposing the role of companies like Elbit in the further militarization of the border.

Palestine Solidarity Network Aotearoa reports that although the New Zealand Superfund divested its Elbit shares in 2012, the military continues to purchase war materiel from the Israeli firm. Notably, the Australian military has decided in a most unprincipled fashion to end its use of a battle management system produced by Elbit simply because they feel the company is charging too much.

Direct action at Elbit subsidiaries has long been a focus of U.K. campaigners, who shut down for a day a U.K. Elbit factory earlier this month, part of a years-long campaign in solidarity with the people of Gaza. Members of the U.K.-based Palestine Action who had splashed red paint signifying blood on Elbit's U.K. subsidiary were also arrested earlier this year under the U.K.'s anti-terror legislation, with raids conducted on arrestees' homes.

The actions have been so effective that former Israeli minister of strategic affairs Orit Farkash-Hacohen reportedly told Britain's Foreign Minister Dominic Raab that she was concerned about whether Israeli firms like Elbit would be able to continue doing business in the U.K. if they were subject to this kind of nonviolent resistance.

Canada's own blood-stained drone industry

Were Minister Alghabra to discover a backbone and cancel the Israeli Elbit contract, he would no doubt try and turn it into a "good news for Canadian industry" announcement since there are numerous firms in this country that already enjoy a roaring drone warfare business.

While Elbit's Canadian subsidiary, GeoSpectrum Technologies, certainly works on drone warfare components from its offices in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, the longtime leader of Canada's drone warfare pack is Burlington, Ontario's L-3 Wescam (whose drone products have been frequently implicated in the commission of war crimes, as documented by Homes not Bombs and, more recently, by Project Ploughshares).

At the same time, L-3 Wescam is also a key player in a lesser-known joint Canadian-Israeli effort to reap the rewards of up to \$5 billion in planned armed drone purchases for Canada's war department. "Team Artemis" is a partnership between L3 MAS (a Mirabel subsidiary of L3Harris Technologies, which also owns drone targeting equipment manufacturer L-3 Wescam) and Israel Aerospace Industries.

It is proposing what they call a Canadian version of the Israeli Heron TP drone. The Heron saw significant use during Operation Cast Lead against Gaza in 2008–2009, another grouping of war crimes that resulted in the murder of over 1,400 Palestinians. Canada subsequently leased the "combat-proven" drones for use in Afghanistan in 2009.

According to a profile of the proposed drones in the *Canadian Defence Review*, Canada's occupation forces in Afghanistan were enthusiastic about the drones, with MGen (Ret'd) Charles "Duff" Sullivan gushing: "Canada's use of the Heron in theatre provided valuable experience and lessons learned," and MGen (Ret'd) Christian Drouin applauding "the Heron [as] a key asset in my arsenal."

Such drones are known as medium altitude long endurance (MALE), yet another in an endless line of subconscious nods to the fact that most generals suffer intense bouts of missile envy and just about everything in the military has a name that reflects profound male fragility.

The Canadian-Israeli Team Artemis proposal envisions the use of Canadian-made 1,200 shaft horsepower Pratt & Whitney Turbo-Prop PT6 engines and is expected to fly more than 36 hours at altitudes as high as 45,000 feet. It also promises “interoperability” with other military forces, with the capacity to “segregate” where needed “flight systems from intelligence and weapons systems.”

Given that the drones will play a significant role in spying, Team Artemis promises that its intelligence gathering will only be shared among the Five Eyes Alliance (Canada, U.S., U.K., New Zealand and Australia).

Israel’s mission-proven Canadian drone proposal

While Canada crows about the use of drones for civilian purposes, this drone comes prepared with a “standard NATO BRU rack capable of holding multiple payloads,” a euphemism for the rack that holds up to 2,200 pounds of bombs.

Critical with respect to the role of Israeli testing on Palestinians, *Canadian Defence Review* assures potential buyers that “the Artemis’ Heron TP platform is mission-proven. The Israeli Air Force (IAF) has flown the Heron TP UAV for tens of thousands of hours since 2010 and it has been operated extensively under combat conditions.” It conveniently leaves out the names of the Palestinian people who have been the targets of its missions.

As if that guarantee weren’t enough, Israeli Aerospace Industries CEO Moshe Levi notes:

“Team Artemis offers Canada a mature, low-risk [drone] that contains state-of-the-art technology; built upon the heritage and operational experience of all Heron TP customers, including the [Israeli Air Force].”

The Team Artemis folks also note that, in addition to the civilian public relations cover of the drones being used to detect forest fires, they will also help the Canadian military “provide enhanced security at international summits and other special security events, and aid law enforcement operations as required.”

In other words, the drones that flew over Black Lives Matter protests in the U.S. last summer will be similarly deployed against dissent in the land known as Canada, and no doubt prove extremely valuable in more “remote” locations where Indigenous land and water defenders are trying to prevent further invasions of their sovereign territories.

If Team Artemis wins the bid, the drones will be assembled by MAS in their Mirabel facility, which for three decades has worked to ensure Canadian CF-18 bombers are in mint condition and up to the task of dropping bombs.

As CTV reported earlier this month, Canada will be seeking official bids for drone warfare this fall, with plans to establish a drone warfare training centre in Ottawa. There's been little public discussion about the proposal, which could see Canada becoming a player in the growing club of nations that employ drones to engage in targeted assassinations, deliver Hellfire missiles, and provide surveillance of border areas, among other tasks.

CTV added:

“The government and military say the unmanned aircraft will be used for surveillance and intelligence gathering as well as delivering pinpoint strikes from the air on enemy forces in places where the use of force has been approved. The government has also said little around the scenarios in which force might be used, including whether they could be used for assassinations. Officials have suggested they would be used in the same way as conventional weapons such as fighter jets and artillery.”

No to military drones, period

To remain silent in this time is a betrayal of those whose bloodshed is produced by these drones, the majority of whom live in Gaza and the majority of whom are children. Last week, UN Secretary-General António Guterres declared: “If there is a hell on earth, it is the lives of children in Gaza.”

Guterres also:

“[p]ainted a grim picture of damaged civilian infrastructure in Gaza, closed crossings, power shortages affecting water supplies, hundreds of buildings and homes destroyed, hospitals impaired and thousands of Palestinians homeless. ‘The fighting has...forced over 50,000 people to leave their homes and seek shelter in UNRWA (the UN relief agency for Palestine refugees) schools, mosques, and other places with little access to water, food, hygiene or health services.’”

As the people of Gaza look warily on the latest ceasefire and worry about the next round of attacks — what the Israeli military refers to as “mowing the grass” — people in this country can demand an end to all Canadian weapons exports to Israel, insist on the cancellation of the Elbit Systems drone purchase, and shut down any consideration of building a weaponized drone force for the Canadian military.

In advance of a national day of action being organized by Homes not Bombs, those opposed to the Israeli Elbit drone purchase can generate an email with the handy [online tool](#) provided by Canadians for Peace and Justice in the Middle East.

Matthew Behrens is a freelance writer and social justice advocate who co-ordinates the Homes not Bombs non-violent direct action network. He has worked closely with the targets of Canadian and U.S. “national security” profiling for many years.

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