

International

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Israel drone industry becomes global force

UAVs tested and fine-tuned against neighbors

AIRPORT CITY: In a fierce battle for market share against world superpowers China and the United States, Israel's drone industry likes to say it has a secret weapon - military experience. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) are used daily by Israel's military in and around its borders, whether dropping tear-gas canisters on Palestinian demonstrators, monitoring Hezbollah positions in Lebanon or striking Islamic Jihad bases in Gaza. The senior echelons of the country's industry are populated by former military and intelligence officials, many of whom became founders or engineers in local startups.

Israel's first rudimentary drone dates back to 1969: It was a remote-controlled plane with an attached camera to spy on neighboring rival Egypt. Drones became more common, though not much more technically advanced, during the war in Lebanon from 1978. But half a century later, tiny Israel is now a global force in the multibillion-dollar UAV industry, competing against China and the US. It trades on its unique selling point: Enemies at its borders and therefore plenty of opportunities to test and fine-tune its UAVs.

Ronen Nadir was a military commander specializing in missile development before establishing his company, BlueBird Aero Systems. It sells combat drones across the globe, including the WanderB VTol that takes off and lands vertically like a helicopter, but has wings to improve speed. These drones can take off and land in a town, a jungle or the deck of a boat. "You will not believe it, but it took only four and a half months" from the first

concept, scribbled on paper, "until this UAV was demonstrated to the first customer", Nadir said. Hundreds have been sold since Oct 2018, he added.

Real-time feedback

"When an American company develops a mini-UAV and then it is used by the Marines in Iraq or Afghanistan, it takes a few years from the development of the system until it is used on the battlefield," Nadir said. "In Israel all the people (in the industry) are ex-army soldiers, officers. The engineers who work on the development of the systems are actually operating the UAVs in the (military) reserves, in actual service. Then they come back to the office with actual and real-time feedback."

Development cycles are therefore short, he said, ensuring that Israel is at the "cutting edge" of the industry. One study often cited by local authorities put Israel as the world's largest exporter of drones, but it dates to 2013. Since then, the US has vastly increased exports of its Global Hawk, a higher cost and performance drone, as well as the Predator. These have sold particularly in European markets, pushing the country ahead of its ally Israel.

China, which offers cheaper, lower-quality solutions, is perhaps also ahead of Israel now, often selling to countries the Jewish state has no relations with, said Philip Finnegan, director of corporate analysis at the American firm Teal Group. "The difficulty with ranking Israeli companies in the market is that they are very secretive over what they are selling and to who, as are the Chinese," he said. Teal estimates the global drone market to be worth



TEL AVIV: In this file photo taken on Nov 07, 2019, ThunderB (up) and Spylite, mini unmanned aerial vehicles by Israeli company BlueBird, are displayed during the 8th International Conference and Exhibition on Unmanned Systems at Airport City. —AFP

around \$12 billion in 2019, with that expected number to double in a decade. "They (Israel) are certainly in the top three, if not the top two."

'A stage ahead'

At a recent conference for Israeli drones at Airport City, an industrial zone close to the airport in Tel Aviv, a discreet guest sneaked in: Nadav Argaman, head of the Shin Bet internal intelligence services. His message was clear: "We buy Israeli technologies before anything else." The technology,

he said, helped allow Israeli civilians to live "comfortable daily lives, without knowing what happens under the surface" - or in this case above it.

"In order to be alive we have always to be a stage ahead, including in drones," said Zohar Dvir, the former deputy police chief reported to have inspired the Adam Sandler film "You Don't Mess with the Zohan". Today Dvir is a board member at Gold Drone, which specializes in agricultural drones. Even here, military expertise comes in handy. —AFP

Israel demolishes Palestinian homes

HEBRON: Israel yesterday demolished the West Bank homes of four Palestinians accused of a deadly attack, sparking clashes with stone-throwing protesters, the army and an AFP journalist said. The houses in the village of Beit Kahil near Hebron in the occupied West Bank were home to men who were "part of the squad that carried out the stabbing attack" which killed an off-duty soldier in August, the army said. Clashes broke out during the demolitions, the army said, with Palestinians hurling "rocks and burnt tyres at troops". "In response, troops used riot dispersal means."

Residents stared at piles of concrete after bulldozers reduced one house to rubble, an AFP photographer said. After the demolitions one Palestinian died in a car accident at a junction near Hebron. Palestinian official news agency Wafa said his car was hit by an Israeli military bulldozer, but the army said he drove into the stationary vehicle. "A Palestinian vehicle deviated off the road and



HEBRON: Palestinians check the house of a man after it was demolished by Israeli authorities yesterday in the village of Beit Kahel. —AFP

hit the (Israeli military) vehicle, which had stopped on the side of the road," an army spokeswoman told AFP, without confirming the death.

Wafa named the dead man as Mohammed Al-Nawajaa, saying his son was also injured in the incident. In August, off-duty soldier Israeli Dvir Sorek was ambushed and killed, and his body was dumped near a settlement in the West Bank. He had been studying at a Jewish seminary in the settlement. Israel routinely demolishes the homes of those accused of carrying out attacks. It argues that such measures act as a deterrent, but critics say it amounts to collective punishment. —AFP

Iran arrests eight 'linked to CIA' in street unrest

TEHRAN: Iran has arrested eight people it accused of CIA links and sending abroad information on recent urban unrest, days after the United States said it had received thousands of messages on a protest crackdown in the Islamic republic. New York-based Human Rights Watch has accused Tehran of "deliberately covering up" more than 140 deaths that it said came when security forces suppressed demonstrations against a sharp fuel price hike.

Iran said that among the more than 500 people arrested were eight who were "linked to the CIA", state news agency IRNA said late Wednesday, citing the head of the intelligence ministry's counter-espionage department. "Some elements who tried to collect information about the recent riots and send them out of the country... were identified and arrested," the director-general was quoted as saying. Six of them were alleged to have been at "the riots and carrying out orders," IRNA reported, without naming the official.

Two others were arrested before they could leave the country, the news agency said, and all

had been "trained in different countries on how to collect information... as citizen-journalists". Iran's arch-foe the United States has said it received thousands of messages from the Islamic republic about the protests, including photos and videos, after issuing an appeal for people to defy sweeping Internet restrictions. "We've received to date nearly 20,000 messages, videos, pictures, notes of the regime's abuses through Telegram messaging services," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Tuesday, referring to the encrypted app.

The unrest came after a year and a half of biting sanctions reimposed by US President Donald Trump that aim to heap "maximum pressure" on Iran and contain its regional influence. The sanctions followed Trump's decision in May 2018 to unilaterally withdraw the United States from an international agreement on Iran's nuclear program.

Iran has also come under pressure in neighboring Iraq, where protesters infuriated by Tehran's influence on the government in Baghdad torched its consulate in the city of Najaf late Wednesday. Tehran, which sees the nearly two months of protests in Iraq as a "conspiracy", on Thursday demanded decisive action against the Iraqi "aggressors" behind the consulate attack. Iran has also blamed the unrest within its own borders on "thugs" backed by its foreign enemies, including the United States, Israel and the People's Mujahedeen of Iran, an exiled armed opposition group it considers a "terrorist" cult. —AFP