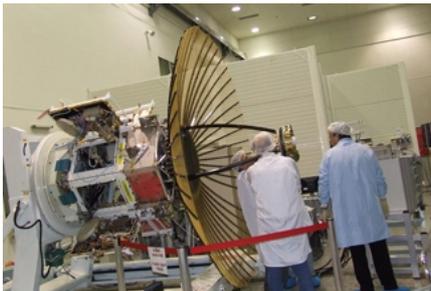


Critics slam India-Israel arms trade

By Jeremy Kahn | February 25, 2008 10:00am



The Israeli TecSar satellite, widely described as a spy satellite that Israel would use to gather intelligence on Iran, was launched in India in Jan. 2008. (Israel Aerospace Industries)

NEW DELHI (JTA) – India’s growing defense ties to Israel are prompting a negative backlash among some of India’s political leaders.

Though India and Israel only established diplomatic relations in 1992, their relationship has blossomed over the past 15 years, particularly in the defense arena. India has become the Israeli defense industry’s top foreign customer, with some \$1.5 billion in annual purchases, and Israel is now India’s second most important weapons supplier after Russia.

With India planning to spend an additional \$40 billion over the next decade to modernize its armed forces, which until now have relied primarily on antiquated equipment originally purchased from the Soviet Union, Israeli companies are poised to capture even more business.

That was quite evident at last week’s Defense Expo, a large defense industry trade show in New Delhi. Israeli companies were eager to show off their high-tech product lines – everything from missiles to advanced night-vision equipment to unmanned aerial drones – but reticent to talk about what they currently are supplying to the Indian armed forces.

“We can’t talk about that,” said Dan Zeevi, the marketing information officer for Israeli Military Industries Ltd., a defense contractor.

India’s growing dependence on Israeli-made military technology has caused consternation among India’s left-wing politicians and intellectuals, who fear their country is abandoning its traditional support for the Palestinian cause and jeopardizing its warm ties with Arab states – in particular Iran, upon which India is increasingly dependent to meet its surging energy needs.

“It is a matter of serious concern that India and Israel are deepening their military relationship,” said D. Raja, general secretary of the Communist Party of India. “We hold [Israel] responsible for crimes perpetrated on the people of Palestine.”

Opposition to closer India-Israel defense ties is strongest in India’s Left Front, a group of four political parties – including the Communists – that provides critical support to the ruling United Progressive Alliance, a coalition government led by the Congress Party.

The leftist parties are especially upset over India’s launch last month of an Israeli TecSar satellite, widely described in both the Israeli and Indian media as a spy satellite that Israel would use to gather intelligence on Iran.

India’s Space Research Organization has an agreement to launch two more such satellites for Israel. In return, Israel has agreed to share certain images from the satellites with India, according to a report in The Times of India.

The leftist parties noted that the TecSar launch coincided with Israel’s ongoing blockade of the Gaza Strip and several Israeli raids into the Hamas-ruled area.

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"The UPA government is keeping a shameful silence on this criminal blockade by Israel," the Communist Party of India said in a statement released immediately after the launch. "It is instead collaborating with Israel to enhance its military capability."

The statement accused Israel of being "responsible for state terrorism, violence and aggression."

Many Indian political analysts describe such statements as bluster.

"I think they are just making noises," said S. Samuel C. Rajiv, a researcher at the Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses, a think tank in New Delhi. "I don't think they have the ability to stop [the India-Israel defense] relationship from going forward or to prevent these deals from getting done."

But opposition to closer defense ties to Israel has resonance in a country with the second largest Muslim population in the world after Indonesia, and which had been hostile to Israel for much of its history.

Shahid Saddiqui, a minister of parliament in India's upper house for the opposition Samajwadi Party, which draws support primarily among Muslims and lower-caste Hindus, said his constituents do not favor strong Indian-Israeli defense relations.

"Indian Muslims are not against ties with Israel," he said. "But Indian Muslims are not for military alliances with Israel."

Several prominent Indian writers and former diplomats have joined in castigating New Delhi for its push to strengthen relations with Jerusalem.

"Our leadership is humiliating the country," said M. Bhadrakumar, a former Indian ambassador to Turkey and Uzbekistan who is now a columnist for the Asian Age newspaper. "They should reread the history of India's freedom struggle. Hopefully then they'd know the pain, the tragedy and the humiliation of Gaza. Gandhi would be turning in his grave."

India's founding father, Mahatma Gandhi, penned a famous 1938 essay in which he compared centuries of Jewish persecution to the treatment of India's low-caste "untouchables."

Gandhi wrote that he sympathized completely with the Jews but could not support their ambition of creating a Jewish state in Palestine. Instead, Indian nationalists like Gandhi supported the creation of an independent Arab Palestine.

Opposition to Israel was a hallmark of Indian foreign policy under Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first post-independence prime minister and founder of the Congress Party, and remained so until 1992 when a Congress-led government reversed course and recognized Israel.

India's relations with Israel thawed gradually until 1998, when the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, or BJP, came to power. The BJP, which often is accused of being anti-Muslim, wanted to distance India from its traditional pro-Arab position and looked to enhance relations with Israel dramatically.

During India's 1999 Kargil war with Pakistan, Israel rushed military support to India, cementing the nascent defense relationship. Many expected India-Israel relations to cool after the Congress Party regained power following elections in 2004, but instead the Congress-led coalition has pressed ahead with expanding defense ties.

Given its fragile coalition, however, the Congress Party has to be cautious of jeopardizing the Left Front's support.

On Feb. 12, India's Foreign Ministry released a statement condemning Israel's "use of force" in Gaza, calling on Israel to exercise restraint and pledging a package of humanitarian aid for the Palestinian Authority. Raja, of the Communist Party, attributed this move to Left Front pressure on the government.

Cognizant of political sensitivities, Lior Weintraub, a spokesman for the Israeli Embassy in New Delhi, said it was the embassy's policy not to comment on military assistance and arms sales to India.

He defended Israel's blockade of Gaza as justified by the ongoing rocket attacks from the Hamas-controlled territory but declined to comment on India's condemnation, saying Israel expresses its sentiments to the India government "through the appropriate channels," not "on pages of newspapers."

As for the TecSar launch, Weintraub said it was "a commercial tie-up" between India's Space Research

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Organization and Israeli Aerospace Industries Ltd., the defense contractor that built the satellite. He referred all further questions to the company.

Israeli companies clearly see more military sales to India in the offing. Israel Aerospace Industries, which built the TecSar satellite, announced a partnership this month with the Indian conglomerate Tata to develop and manufacture missiles, radars, unmanned drones and other defense equipment.

Israel Military Industries also is optimistic about further sales.

"I think the Indian market is a huge one," said Zeevi, the spokesman, adding that Israeli companies offer "good products, good technology and combat-proven experience."

India-Israel military relations have been given a boost by warming relations between the United States and India. The United States would like India to counterbalance Chinese influence in Asia, and as such it has approved of Israeli sales of advanced radars and missiles to India.

The United States exercises a de facto veto over such sales because many Israeli systems incorporate U.S. technology and also because of the exceedingly close strategic relations between the United States and Israel. Several years ago, Israel had to call off a huge arms sale to China at the last minute because of U.S. objections.

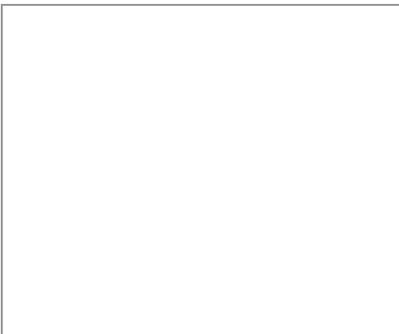
Rajiv, the think tank analyst, said the India-Israel defense relationship will continue to grow, criticism notwithstanding.

"I think we are pretty bullish about this," he said of India. "We want this to develop further."

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Jeremy Kahn is a contributing writer to JTA.



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