

Why Israelis smuggled missile gunboats out of French shipyard*

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A world conditioned to watching the lightning-like offensive actions of the Israeli Army and Air Force suddenly found its attention focussed on the sea: the smuggling of the French-built gunboats across the length of the Mediterranean.

The saga of the five missile gunboats has turned the limelight on Israel's small Navy and its efforts to modernize; a Navy which long has been the "cinderella" among the Israeli defense forces. Israel's defense traditionally has been based on air power and highly mobile armor.

It was the sinking of Israeli destroyer *Eliath* in 1968, by Sovietmade Egyptian missile-carrier gunboats that brought forth Israeli's decision to purchase similar craft. It was hoped that these gunboats would provide a qualitative advantage over the Egyptian and Syrian navies, which are equipped with the Soviet KOMAR (Mosquito) and OSA (Wasp) missile gunboats. It was reported in the press that Egypt has 12 submarines, six destroyers, 20 missile boats and 30 motor torpedo boats. Israel has only three submarines and one overage World War II type destroyer. Thus, it is understandable why the Israelis pinned their hopes on the French-built gunboats.

Four countries involved

According to the authoritative French annual, "Combat Navies 1970," Israel ordered 12 gunboats, and seven of these were delivered prior to the French embargo imposed on Israel after the Six Day War; five were left in France at the French yard of Cherbourg. At least four countries were involved in the production of these gunboats: France, West Germany, Israel and Italy. The boats themselves were built in the French yard of Cherbourg. The engines, 4,000 horsepower each, were bought from West Germany. The Italian company La-Spezia provided the guns for the boats and Israel built a missile, especially

designed for it, code-named Gabriel. The boats' characteristics are impressive; they are 147.6 feet long, their range is assumed to be 3,500 kilometers, their speed 40 knots. It is estimated that the Israeli missile-head weighs 75 kilos (about 160 pounds) as opposed to the half-ton Russian Komar missile-head.

Gabriel is reportedly capable of streaking to its target five meters above sea level, which makes it extremely difficult to detect by radar. Its effective maximum range is 20 kilometers (12 to 13 miles).

The Israelis apparently were unable to find in any market, or other navies, a boat that would fit their special needs, so they decided to produce a craft which wedded to their missile would solve their particular problems.

Small budget for Navy

The Israeli Navy has not enjoyed much of Israel's security budget in years past, and there has been debate in Israel as to whether it was worthwhile at all to invest in a modern navy. Until 1953, the Israeli Navy consisted of various boats of Second World War vintage. Over the years, a serious gap between the requirements of the Israeli Navy and the tools at its disposal widened. Only in 1955, with the ascendancy of General Dayan, was a first move taken to bridge the gap; and it was under his leadership that two new destroyers and two submarines were added. These were also renovated World War II vintage, however. The two chiefs-of-staff that followed Dayan, Generals Laskov and Tzur, also were bent on strengthening the navy.

The appearance in the region of the Russian missile boats at the end of 1962 shook Israel's security authorities. Apparent to all was the fact that Egypt had the capability of shelling very important targets along the Israeli shoreline. It was also clear that drastic action had to be taken. Israel's

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answer was its decision to modernize and strengthen its navy.

War brought change

The Israeli Navy entered the Six Day War equipped with its revamped Second World War tools. The aftermath of the 1967 war changed Israel's Chief-of-Staff approach to the Navy. As a result of the Six Day War, Israel's Navy was faced with much expanded missions. The shorelines increased five times but the force to guard it remained essentially the same. The Navy had to spread over two long fronts, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. It was clear that the new burdens and security of Israel's shorelines would necessitate the modernization of its navy; Second World War vintage boats were not sufficient.

The major dilemma was of priority. Would destroyers or submarines be better? In various navies around the world, and especially in the Soviet Navy and small navies of advanced countries, a new trend has been developing; the introduction of small very powerful combat boats. These were the successors of the old torpedo and gunboats. New conditions made the development of these new weapons system both necessary and possible. In the '50s and '60s, new, sophisticated automatic guns, as well as sea-to-sea missiles with a considerable range made it possible for a relatively small boat to have a large fire power and speed and, therefore, fight large destroyers. The new boats were equipped with sophisticated electronic gear that allowed accurate fire power. An Israeli military correspondent described them as follows: "The missile boats are the last word in the speed versus armour and armament arguments that have been going on in naval as well as land forces since the beginning of time. Elephants or war chariots, torpedo boats or battleships; or light and fast tanks versus heavily armour-plated but slower vehicles."

The missile boats combine both qualities: the speed and agility of the motor torpedo boat and the punch and artillery "reach" of a full-sized battle cruiser.

Unlike the torpedo boats that had to come within point-blank of their target, the missile boats can shoot "over the horizon" — out of sight and range of the enemy.

A new generation

In the same period, new and efficient engines were developed. These allowed the introduction of unusual speed, combined with a large range of action. The development of the diesel engine and the introduction of the jet engine were added advantages. Among the rest, the danger of the boats being set afire as a result of a direct hit on their gasoline tanks decreased. This particular danger always accompanied the small torpedo boats that used high octane gasoline and were made out of wood. The introduction of new construction materials such as aluminium and other lights metals solved this particular problem.

A new generation of gunboats appeared; craft even smaller than its predecessor, the torpedo boat. Its total weight is between 270 to 350 tons. The introduction of the new gunboats decreased the usage of the conventional torpedo boats. The new gunboats are able to move faster than all torpedo boats and fulfill with success some of the tasks of the old destroyers or frigates which were mainly to combat submarines, fight large boats, and accompany merchant convoys. The fact that these multipurpose boats are smaller than the destroyer or the frigate, and the size of their crews are smaller, does not decrease their production cost. On the contrary, the introduction of very sophisticated, ultra-modern electronic systems, and sea-to-sea missiles that gave it a longer artillery arm, made these gunboats even more expensive.

The average price for such a gunboat in the West is not less than \$ 5 million each. Small nations that must defend their shores and want to equip their navies with combat capabilities cannot but turn to the new gunboat.

It seems the trend to prefer speed versus armour and armament is going to continue. Other navies will probably emulate and study with interest Israel's experience. The new generation small gunboat is futuristic. It serves the Israelis' Middle-East tactical needs in the narrow waters of Eastern Med admirably. Obviously, however, from a strategic standpoint, the future of Israeli naval power must function under the umbrella of the American carrier striking power of the U.S. Sixth Fleet. Any major war is bound to involve the big powers to some degree.