

Defencenews20140812 Israeli Forces Praise Elbit UAVs in Gaza Op By Barbara Opall-Rome

Israeli military commanders are crediting unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) by Elbit Systems for delivering added operational value in recent combat in Gaza.

From the one-ton Hermes 900 debuted by the Israel Air Force (IAF) to the soldier-launched Skylarks supporting ground-force brigades, officers here say assets acquired from the Haifa, Israel-based firm boosted combat effectiveness of Operation Protective Edge.

While the Skylark mini-UAV has been operational here since 2008, Protective Edge marked the first time it was used in quantities for high-tempo support of ground forces, said Brig. Gen. Roy Riftin, IDF chief artillery officer.

"This was the first time we deployed it broadly," Riftin said of the system, known here as SkyRider, operated by the Artillery Corps.

"Every brigade -- even the reserves -- got at least two air vehicles and flew them nonstop; at the same time," he said.

In an Aug. 12 interview at a base in southern Israel, Riftin said some 18 systems flew hundreds of hours, generating intelligence and streaming target-acquisition data to myriad shooters on the ground.

"It was phenomenal; a real asset," Riftin said.

"We stretched these systems to the edge of their capability," he said of the 7.5 Skylark and its 1.1 kilogram payload.

"They created intel; helped close the loop with other shooters ... and served up targets of opportunity for Tammuz," the officer said of the electro-optic, precision strike system built by Rafael and operated by IDF gunners.

At the opposite end of Elbit's unmanned portfolio is Hermes 900, which the IAF fielded for the first time during the operation that began July 8 and has not yet officially concluded due to unresolved ceasefire negotiations.

Known here as Kochav (Star), Hermes 900 is the newest system to be integrated into the IAF's unmanned force. With a maximum takeoff weight of 1.1 tons and payload capacity of some 300 kilograms, it's double the size of Elbit's Hermes 450S. The 900 model also carries nearly twice the weight and flies some 12 hours longer than its predecessor.

"The Kochav was introduced during the operation for unique missions that it could perform in a much better way than Hermes 450," Capt. Grisha, an officer who managed the operational integration of Hermes 900.

In an account published on the IDF's website, the officer said the Hermes 900 was still undergoing test flights and wasn't planned for operational deployment until later next year.

"In addition to the aircraft itself, the cockpit and flight systems are much more advanced, which enables greater operational flexibility," said the officer, whose surname was withheld from publication.

The IDF officer said that following conclusion of the still ongoing operation, Hermes 900

would resume operational integration and flight testing. "There's still some significant milestones that need to be met," he said.

Dalia Rosen, a spokeswoman for Elbit, declined comment on company systems deployed in the Protective Edge operation.

"It's always preferable to hear what the customer has to say," she said.