

India exports rockets, explosives to Israel, documents reveal



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PERSPECTIVE

In the early morning hours of May 15, the cargo vessel *Borkum* stopped off the Spanish coast, lingering in the waters a short distance from Cartagena. At the port, protesters waved Palestinian flags and called on authorities to inspect the ship based on suspicions that it carried weapons bound for Israel.

Leftist members of the European Parliament sent a letter to Spanish President Pedro Sánchez requesting that the ship be prevented from docking. "Allowing a ship loaded with weapons destined for Israel is to allow the transit of arms to a country currently under investigation for genocide against the Palestinian people," the group of nine MEPs warned.

Before the Spanish government could take a stand, the *Borkum* cancelled its planned stop-over and continued to the Slovenian port of Koper. "We were right," Inigo Errejon, the spokesperson for the hard-left Sumar party wrote on X, arguing that the *Borkum's* decision to skip Cartagena confirmed the suspicions.

But missed in the debate over whether the ship ought to be allowed to dock in Spain were the unlikely origins of the *Borkum's* cargo.

According to documents seen by Al Jazeera, the ship contained explosives loaded in India and was en route to Israel's port of Ashdod, some 30km (18 miles) from the Gaza Strip. Marine tracking sites show it departed Chennai in southeast India on April 2 and circumnavigated Africa to avoid transiting through the Red Sea, where Yemen's Houthis have been attacking vessels in reprisal for Israel's war.



Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi (front-R) and his Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, pose for photographers after Netanyahu arrived at the Air Force Station in New Delhi, India, on January 14, 2018.
● PRAKASH SINGH/AFP

The identification codes specified in the documentation, obtained unofficially by the Solidarity Network Against the Palestinian Occupation (RESCOP), suggest the *Borkum* contained 20 tonnes of rocket engines, 12.5 tonnes of rockets with explosive charges, 1,500kg (3,300 pounds) of explosive substances, and 740kg (1,630 pounds) of charges and propellants for cannons.

A paragraph on confidentiality specified that all employees, consultants, or other relevant parties were mandated that "under no circumstances" were they to name IMI Systems or Israel. IMI Systems, a defence firm, was bought by Elbit Systems, Israel's largest weapons manufacturer, in 2018.

The commercial manager of the ship, the German company MLB Manfred Lauterjung Befrachtung, told Al Jazeera in a statement that "the vessel did not load any weapons or any other cargo for the destination Israel."

A second cargo ship that had departed India was denied entry on May 21 to the port of Cartagena. Spanish newspaper El País reported that the Marianne Danica left from India's port of Chennai and was en route to Israel's port of Haifa with a cargo of 27 tonnes of explosives. Minister of Foreign Affairs Jose Manuel Albares confirmed in a news conference that the vessel was denied entry on the grounds that it was shipping military cargo to Israel.

These incidents add to mounting evidence that weapon parts from India, a country that has long advocated dialogue over military action in resolving conflicts, are quietly making their way to Israel, including during the ongoing months-long war in Gaza. A lack of transparency on India's transfers helps them slip under the radar, say analysts. Zain Hussain, a researcher at the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), told Al Jazeera that "the lack of verifiable information makes it hard to determine whether transfers have taken place."

But "collaboration between India and Israel has been happening for quite a few years now," Hussain said, therefore "it's not unfeasible that we may see

some made-in-India components being used by Israel [in its war on Gaza]."

'Made in India'

On June 6, in the aftermath of Israel's bombing of a United Nations shelter at the Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza, the Quds News Network released a video of the remains of a missile dropped by Israeli warplanes.

Amid the tangled parts, a label clearly read: "Made in India."

Hussain, who researches the transfer of conventional arms at the Stockholm-based think tank, said the video required further investigation but observed that a large share of the collaboration between India and Israel is known to revolve around missile production, in particular the Barak surface-to-air missile.

According to SIPRI, the Indian company Premier Explosives Limited makes solid propellants — a significant part of the rocket motors, but not the whole motor — for MRSAM and LRSAM missiles. These are the Indian designations for Barak medium and long-range surface-to-air missiles of Israeli design. The company's Executive Director T Chowdary admitted to exporting to Israel amid the current war in Gaza, during a conference call on March 31. "We have received the pending revenue from the Israel export order, and this has shown an exponential jump in the revenue of the quarter," he told investors, according to the minutes of the meeting. "We are happy to announce that we have highest ever quarterly revenue."

On that occasion, Chowdary presented Premier Explosives Limited as "the only Indian company which specialises in the export of fully assembled rocket motor". In addition, he said the company had begun manufacturing mines and ammunitions and started exporting RDX and HMX explosives, commonly used in military weapons systems.

In its January 2024 overview, the company listed exports to Israel in the "defence & space" sector, which SIPRI deemed likely to include propellants for Barak missiles.

Premier Explosives did not respond to Al Jazeera's requests for comment. According to SIPRI, the Indian components can be used for Barak missiles that are then also re-exported by Israel.

Indian-made UAVs

Yet, India's collaboration with Israel goes far beyond rocket propellers.

In December 2018, Adani Defence & Aerospace — the defence arm of Indian multinational holding company Adani Enterprises Ltd — and Israel's Elbit Systems inaugurated the Adani Elbit Unmanned Aerial Vehicles Complex (UAV) in Hyderabad.

The facility was presented in a joint statement as "the first outside Israel to manufacture the Hermes 900 Medium-Altitude Long-Endurance UAV," which can fly for up to 36 hours at an altitude of 30,000 feet (9,000 metres).

"The factory shall start operations with the manufacturing of complete carbon composite aero-structures for Hermes 900, followed by Hermes 450," the statement added. Both drones can be fitted with anti-tank guided missiles, according to the drone inventory of the United Kingdom's leading defence think tank the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI).

"The production of Hermes drones is as important for India as it is for Israel," SIPRI's Hussain said. "For Israel, it means they have a factory outside of the country. For India, it's about technology transfer, so that it can also produce drones based on the Israeli model."

Earlier this year, India announced its first indigenous medium-altitude long-endurance drone, the Driшти 10 Starliner, built on the Hermes model. The factory is currently producing the UAVs, including for shipment to Israel, according to SIPRI, but India has not disclosed any information about their transfer.

Israel is known to be systematically using drones as it wages its war on Gaza, which has killed more than 37,000 people, most of them women and children. In November, in the aftermath of Hamas's attack on October 7, Elbit deputy CEO Joseph Gaspar said the

company had been working "round the clock" to meet demand by Israel's military.

The use of Hermes drones has been documented by Human Rights Watch (HRW) and other organisations in previous conflicts in Gaza as well. Earlier last month, Lebanon's Hezbollah fighters said they shot down an armed Hermes 900 drone in its airspace. Since October, Israeli strikes on Lebanon have killed more than 400 people, including more than 70 civilians.

"If we see Hermes drones being used in Gaza, they're not necessarily coming from India," as Israel also produces them in-house, SIPRI's Hussein said. But the possibility that India has begun exporting the drones as per the terms of the agreement and that they are currently being used against the Palestinian population in the besieged Strip cannot be ruled out, he added.

Elbit Systems did not respond to Al Jazeera's request for comment. The Adani Group, which includes Adani Defence & Aerospace, told Al Jazeera in a statement that the company exported a small consignment of UAVs for non-combat operations.

"We reiterate that these drones are built for surveillance and reconnaissance and cannot be used for attack roles," it said. "We categorically deny having exported any UAVs to Israel since October 7, 2023."

India's balancing act

India has been pursuing a longstanding balancing act in its relationship with Israel. New Delhi has attempted to cast itself as a conciliatory actor and a possible mediator in the conflict in Gaza, calling for peace and supporting calls for a cease-fire while also demanding that Hamas return captives still held in Gaza.

More broadly, Indian officials — from Prime Minister Narendra Modi to his Minister of Foreign Affairs S Jaishankar and the country's diplomats at the UN — have consistently argued that the country believes in dialogue and negotiations, not war, as the only means to resolve conflicts. That has been India's