Germany Can no Longer Restrict Arms to Israel Without Risking its Own Air and Naval Defences

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Berlin's leverage over Israel's Gaza conduct weakens as Bundeswehr dependence grows

TKMS, general contractor for the German Navy's MEKO A-200 DEU (F128) frigates, has contracted Elbit Systems Deutschland to supply combined radar electronic support and countermeasure (RESM/RECM) suites for four ships. The systems detect hostile radar emissions and jam radar-guided threats. The Bundestag approved €6.3bn for four ships in July and an option for four more in October. Saab is supplying the combat system and radars.

Electronic warfare (EW) is the least visible and most sovereignty-sensitive layer of a warship. A RESM/RECM suite is only as good as its threat library, the emitter database that tells it what a hostile radar looks like and how to defeat it. Israeli suppliers' edge is that their libraries are refined in recent wars against Iranian and Russian-origin systems in Ukraine and the Middle East. Berlin is therefore buying not just hardware but access to an operational data pipeline it cannot replicate, and whose necessary updates will likely depend on continued German-Israeli cooperation.

The alternative technology is not sovereign either. Hensoldt, Germany's flagship EW corporation, partnered with Israeli firm RAFAEL in 2023 to pitch naval jamming to the Bundeswehr. Israeli EW has, therefore, become integral to German naval self-protection.

Berlin's main lever over Israeli conduct in Gaza has been restricting German arms exports, which was credible as dependence ran mostly one way. Israel relies on German submarines and frigates, while Israeli kit in the Bundeswehr was largely replaceable. Arrow 3 and the F128's EW suites change that, as both need continuing Israeli software and threat-data updates. This strategic dependence could be leveraged if arms exports were restricted again: by simply delaying software and threat-data updates, Israel could quietly erode the Bundeswehr's air and naval defences.

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