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Intelligence, drones: Italian weapons against the people of Gaza

DI STEFANIA MAURIZI

 COMMENTI

They had announced a full arms embargo on Israel. Meloni and her government had even boasted of taking a more restrictive approach than other countries. And yet Italian weapons giant Leonardo will continue its program of remote technical assistance, repair, and spare parts supply for Israel's fleet of M-346 aircraft throughout 2025.

This fact was confirmed to our newspaper, *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, by the company itself, but when we asked how much the program is for 2025, Leonardo refused to specify. “At the moment, it is not possible to provide a precise figure on the amount of the assistance services for 2025. The Israeli M-346 program was initiated under a contract signed in 2012”, the Italian weapons giant told *Il Fatto Quotidiano*. And, apparently, it matters little that from 2012 to the present the situation has changed profoundly, with tens of thousands of civilians exterminated by Israel in Gaza since the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack. At least 64,260 human beings in nine months, from October 2023 to June 2024, according to estimates by the authoritative medical journal *The Lancet*.

But Leonardo’s dealings with Israel are not the only ones exposing our country to accusations of complicity with the Netanyahu government’s war crimes, which the largest human rights organization in the world, Amnesty International, has called genocide.

Il Fatto Quotidiano accessed data on military flights over Palestine and Lebanon from October 2023 to October 2024 that allowed Israel to receive supply and intelligence assistance, particularly from the United States and the United Kingdom.

The flight data reveals the role of U.S. military bases in Italy such as Sigonella, with at least 65 MQ-4C drone flights for intelligence gathering, and the role of the airports of Ancona, Bari, Brindisi, Ciampino, and Naples, where the Beech Shadow R1 aircraft, equipped with special sensors for intelligence gathering, departed or landed, and which flew to and from the Akrotiri base, the controversial U.K. Royal Air Force base in Cyprus.

A continuous air bridge

As revealed by Sanad, *Al Jazeera*’s fact-checking agency, in the course of a year at least six thousand military flights allowed Israel to receive supplies and intelligence from allies like the United States and the United Kingdom. Sanad extracted the data from RadarBox, an American commercial platform whose clients include NATO. The platform, now called AirNav, tracks airline flights in a manner similar to the better-known FlightRadar.

Based on an analysis of this data, which is public, Sanad concluded that those six thousand air flights enabled a continuous air bridge for supplies. “Among these flights”, Sanad reported, “were 1,900 military transport missions, 70% of which landed at military bases in Cyprus, Greece, and Italy, underscoring the depth of logistical support from Western nations.”

After Sanad shared it with us, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* analyzed the data on Italy. Of the six thousand military flights, 631 have our country as their origin or destination. Among these 631, there are at least 34 flights by Shadow R1 aircraft. This is a special aircraft, equipped with special sensors and intelligence-gathering equipment, and between October 2023 and October 2024 it shuttled between the UK base in Akrotiri, Cyprus, and Italy. Akrotiri’s role is controversial precisely because it is unclear how the intelligence gathered by Shadow R1 was used. Was it used to target the civilian population of Gaza? If so, what role did Italy play? British authorities claim that their missions conducted with this aircraft were aimed at attempting to locate hostages in the hands of Hamas. Questioned by former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, current British Defense Minister David Lammy said he would not comment “on operational issues.”

Il Fatto Quotidiano tried to clarify the role of Shadow R1 flights to and from Italy by putting some questions to the Ministry of Defense, but the ministry refused to answer.

Sigonella

The database shared with us by *Al Jazeera* contains at least 101 military flights from the Sigonella base, many of them to the U.S. Souda base in Crete, crucial infrastructure for U.S. military operations in the eastern Mediterranean. And of the 73 flights by the MQ-4C Triton drone, which according to *Al Jazeera* surveyed the area of Israeli operations, 65 departed from or arrived at the Sigonella base.

According to the international organization Progressive International, from November 2023 to May 2024 at least 13 cargo flights operated by the U.S. Transportation Command departed from Sigonella for the Nevatim air base in Israel. The United States Transportation Command is the U.S. Department of Defense’s command providing transportation services to the U.S. military and defense

agencies. “By assisting in the transport of military cargo and arms to Israel, the Italian government sends a clear message to its own people and to the international community: it is willing to arm war criminals in clear violation of domestic and international law “, Abdullah Farooq, research coordinator at Progressive International, told *Il Fatto Quotidiano*.

Leonardo

As for Leonardo, its program for Israel’s M-346 aircraft fleet will proceed throughout 2025. “Although these are components of military systems whose export had already been authorized since 2012”, Giorgio Beretta, an analyst at the Osservatorio permanente sulle armi leggere (OPAL), tells *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, “the continued supply of these components and other military materials to Israel after Oct. 7, 2023, constitute a possible violation not only of the Italian Law 185 of 1990, but especially of the United Nations’ Arms Trade Treaty, which Italy ratified in 2014 with the unanimous consent of the two Chambers [of the Italian Parliament]”.

Progressive International’s general coordinator, David Adler, has no doubts: “The fact that the Italian arms giant Leonardo has confirmed its collaboration with Israel even after the extent of Israel’s war crimes became fully documented — give a measure of Italy’s complicity with Israel’s war crimes”.

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