

Israel's eye in the sky

The Arab nations of the Mideast will now have to get used to the uncomfortable feeling that someone is looking over their shoulders. The someone is, of course, Israel which just launched its first satellite on Monday. Israel's version of Sputnik—or perhaps we should call it a Kibbutznik—is a remarkable and dramatic technological feat.

It may also have been no coincidence that Israel's satellite was launched just before Yom Kippur, 15 years after a joint Syrian-Egyptian attack took an over-confident Israel by surprise.

What precisely was launched into low orbit remains something of a mystery. The best guess is that it was either a test package designed to pave the way for a forthcoming launch of a spy satellite or an electronic eavesdropping system to monitor Arab communications. No doubt, another more sophisticated system will soon be put into orbit to give Israel its most important intelligence need: Early warning of any enemy attack.

Israel has long put intense pressure on the U.S. government to obtain an Israeli-controlled channel on U.S. spy satellites. The U.S. military resisted this but was forced by Congress to grudgingly supply Israel with edited satellite imagery and electronic data.

America's Arab allies were outraged that such data were passed on to their enemy.

The vital importance of such imagery was seen in the Iran-Iraq War. Satellite photos provided by the U.S. allowed Iraq to see where Iranian attacks would be mounted and to prepare countermeasures. Everything Iran did was observed by U.S. satellites and quickly relayed to Baghdad.

Deprived of the element of surprise, Iran lost its only chance to win the war.

An Israeli satellite will perform a similar useful role. It will be almost impossible for the Arabs to secretly mass troops for a surprise attack on

Punch



"In my opinion, if Picasso had been alive today he would have been a soccer hooligan."

**ERIC
MARGOLIS**



Israel. Every major Arab army, air and missile base will be under the watchful gaze of Israel's eye in the sky. In the treeless, open terrain of the central Mideast, there is no place to hide from satellites.

Monday's launch also delivered another message to the Arab states. The missile that lofted the satellite was likely an Israeli-built Jericho II. This missile, developed with secret aid from France, can carry a nuclear warhead over 900 miles. Last August, the Soviet Union protested to Israel after the Jericho was test-fired into the Mediterranean. The missile's range puts the southern USSR under risk of Israeli nuclear strikes.

And so, too, for almost every Arab capital of note and every base from which ground-to-ground missiles with chemical warheads might be fired at Israel. These targets were already well within range of Israeli strike aircraft but nuclear-tipped missiles add a powerful psychological punch.

How Israel, with a chronically ailing economy, and under a tight austerity program, managed to find the hundreds of millions needed to build a spy satellite system remains a most intriguing mystery. One must wonder if this hugely expensive project was not funded by the U.S. through top-secret "black programs."

Whatever the source of the money, it was, I think, well spent. With one or more spy satellites in orbit and batteries of nuclear missiles—not to mention nuclear bombs and shells—Israel is not about to be surprised again by a major Arab attack. Nor will Israelis be driven into the sea by hordes of attacking Arab tanks, as some of its North American supporters too often believe. Neutron warheads, delivered by F-16s or 155mm guns, will see to that problem.

Thanks to a dazzling technology and lots of money from who knows where, Israel has confirmed it is a mini-superpower, and perhaps the world's fourth or fifth-ranking military power. In ability to deliver nuclear weapons on target, Israel probably ties with China for fifth place.

Which should allow Israelis to sit back and ponder their national security. There is no Mideast space or nuclear race. While the Israelis are in space, their Arab foes still can't even keep more than 60% of their aircraft flying because of poor maintenance. Israel is a whole military generation ahead of the Arabs and will likely remain so in the foreseeable future.

The greatest danger is no longer Arab armored divisions but the seething revolt in the occupied territories and the moral rot it is causing inside Israel. The territories have been turned by Israel into a mammoth penal colony for Palestinians.

Perhaps Israel's eye in the sky will give its political leaders the perspective to realize that holding on to the West Bank no longer serves Israel's true security interests.