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THE ISRAELI SPACE EFFORT - LOGIC AND MOTIVATIONS

Abstract

On September 19th 1988 Israel demonstrated its capability to launch and develop satellites by successfully launching "Ofeq-1" into space. This achievement marked Israel's entry into the exclusive "space club." Israel was the eighth country to do so.

The Israeli space program was established in the early 1980s. It was motivated mainly by security necessities and needs for self-sufficiency in cutting edge technologies. Yet, despite the understandable justification of security needs, the rationale of a small country like Israel to bear the high costs and risks involved with undertaking such a large scale project is not obvious. It requires a deep examination of the logic and motivations that made Israeli decision makers realize and believe Israel should have and was capable of developing an indigenous national capability to launch, develop and operate satellites.

In this paper I examine the logic and motivations of Israel to position itself among the larger and stronger members of the "space club" – the launching countries. Many involved in this effort in Israel argue that the Israeli space program is a result of a pragmatic policy aimed at satisfying substantial and tangible security needs. Yet, the examination of the history of the Israeli space effort based on primary documents, archival research, interviews, and media coverage regarding the decision making process, the development of the program over the years, and its public justification by Israeli officials reveals a much complex picture.

I argue that Israel's motivation and quest for such a high status is constructed out of its intensified perception of threat that goes beyond its strategic environment, backed by its national narratives and myths of its capability to perform highly complicated projects in a self-reliant manner. Israel's space program and its presentation to the Israeli public and the international community as an act of joining the space club served other less tangible needs of international image, status, self-esteem, international acceptance and legitimacy.

The paper reviews the history of Israel's space effort. Thus, it focuses on two interrelated periods of time. The first era is prior to the decision to establish the program in June 1981, starting in the late 1950s. The second era starts after the program was formed and until the successful launch of "Ofeq-1" in September 1988. I examine the logic and justification by Israeli officials for initiating the program as well as public statements after the successful launch.

In sum, although the main motivation was ensuring Israel's security and deterrence Israeli decision makers used the technological event of the first launch to upgrade Israel's political power in the domestic sphere of the Israeli people and of the international community of allies and adversaries.