

49th IAA HISTORY OF ASTRONAUTICS SYMPOSIUM (E4)
History of Israeli contribution to astronautics (3)

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FROM MONOBLOC TO JERICHO, HOW FRANCE PUT ISRAEL INTO SPACE

Abstract

On 21 July 1962, Al Kahir and Al Zafir missiles were launched in front of Gamal Nasser, before being paraded in Cairo two days later. The consequences would be profound.

At the time heavily equipped with French military hardware, Israel immediately asked France for a missile of 500 km range. Within a few weeks Sud Aviation's Groupe Technique de Cannes (GTC) put forward a proposal for the BAR mobile weapon system, based upon the family of sounding rockets Bélier-Centaure-Dragon-Eridan, for which a full scale mock-up of 800 mm diameter was built. It was to be tested in 1964.

Interestingly, SEREB (Société pour l'Etude et la Réalisation d'Engins Balistiques), also proposed its VE 111 Topaze of 800 mm diameter, one of the testbeds under development within the French nuclear strategic missile program, and at the time essentially developed... by GTC, still at the time the premier European rocket center.

Unsurprisingly, the latter, already first flown on 19 December 1962, was selected.

Dassault also had been contacted in September, being the supplier of all Israeli air force fighters (Ouragan, Mystère IV and Super Mystère B2), as well as a member of SEREB. This offered to the, as always, dynamic company a good opportunity to expand its portfolio, while founder Marcel Dassault also was Jewish.

Topaze thus was transferred to Dassault, who sold it to Israel as the MD 620 Jericho on 26 April 1963.

The fascinating story of this program, which also led to the Shavit space launcher, will be told for the first time in this paper.