

BLUE FLAG 2017

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The “Blue Flag” exercise originated in 2013 as a result from the exclusion of the Israeli Air Force from the NATO exercise Anatolean Eagle. Patrick Roegies reports from Ovda and the 2017 edition.



*A pair of F-16I Sufas taxiing out to their training sortie
Photo by Theo van Vliet*

Blue Flag 2017

Although there has been a strong support with military aviation there has been a reluctance to conduct joint military aviation training programs in Israel in the past. This position somehow changed with the organization of the "Blue Flag" exercises in Israel with the first event taking place in 2013.

The "Blue Flag" exercise originated in 2013 as a result from the exclusion of the Israeli Air Force from the NATO exercise Anatolean Eagle. Since the first edition in 2013 the Blue Flag exercise is organized bi-annually at Ovda Air Force Base in the south of Israel. During the first edition of Blue Flag four foreign nations participated.

The Italian Air Force was present with AMX and Tornado aircraft, the Hellenic Air Force and the Polish Air Force joined with F-16 aircraft and the United States Air Force attended with F-15E aircraft.

Each of these nations have trained separately with the Israeli Air Force in the past, and some of these nations have been deployed to Israel earlier, but the Blue Flag exercise was the first joint multinational exercise organized on Israeli territory.

The second edition of Blue Flag took place in 2015 and during this edition the number of participating foreign nations increased to five. This year event, which was the third edition of the exercise took place between 6 November 2017 and 16 November 2017.

With an increasing number of international nations the extend of the exercise is still developing and is currently the largest air force exercise in the region.

Participants

During the 2017 edition of Blue Flag a total of seven foreign Air Forces attended to the exercise. Participants from France, Germany, Greece, Poland, Italy, USA and India are participating with both aircraft and personnel.

- **German Air Force**
JG73: EF2000
EF2000T
- **French Air Force**
EC03-003: Mirage 2000D
- **Hellenic Air Force**
335 Mira: F-16C-52CF
F-16D-52CF
- **Polish Air Force**
6.ELT: F-16C-52CF
F-16D-52CF
- **Italian Air Force**
6 Stormo: Tornado IDS
Tornado ECR
- **United States Air Force**
510 FS/31 FW: F-16CM
- **Indian Air Force**
77 squadron: C-130J

The Indian Air Force deligation is limited to a single C-130J to perform droppings of Gurad Commandos, a special forces unit of the Indian Armed Forces.

Blue Air is tasked with protecting the C-130J by performing Combat Air Patrol (CAP) strategy while Red Air is tasked with preventing Blue Air from succeeding. Unlike all other units this aircraft operated from Nevatim AFB.





The home team

Although The Israeli Air Force participates with a large number of their own squadrons.

- **Israel Air Force**
 - No. 101 sqn: F-16C-40-CF-Barak
 - No. 106 sqn: F-15A Baz
 - F-15C Baz
 - F-15D Baz
 - No. 107 sqn: F-16I Sufa
 - No. 110 sqn: F-16C-30CF Barak
 - No. 115 sqn: F-16C-30CF Barak
 - No. 117 sqn: F-16C-30CF Barak
 - No. 119 sqn: F-16I Sufa
 - No. 133 sqn: F-15A Baz
 - F-15C Baz
 - F-15D Baz
 - No. 201 sqn: F-16I Sufa

Most of the squadrons have been operating from Ovda Air Force Base. It was mentioned that No. 110 squadron, No. 119 squadron and No. 201 squadron were also participating operating from their home base, but remained unconfirmed.

Preparations

The preparations of the Blue Flag exercise started a year ago. A year before the exercise commences the Israeli Air Force aircraft were selected and are submitted to an extensive maintenance program.

The participating squadrons are selected and the aircrews receive their initial instructions working up to the actual exercise. These preparations also include the practice of take offs and landings using only the English language in order to prepare the aircrews for the large scale international exercise.

An exercise of this extend also requires a thorough preparation of all logistical processes during the extend of the exercise for both the domestic and the foreign participants. Ground services have to be available as well as full fuel reserves for the duration of the exercise. During the last year the hardened aircraft shelters have been renovated as well.

Exercise objectives

The strategic objective of the Israeli Air Force is the development of military cooperation between the Israeli Air Force and the international nations in order to cope with future hostile threats.

The main objectives of the Blue Flag exercise are the joint training of real time mission scenarios in air tactics and the exchange of experiences between the participating nations with the purpose to develop the skills of the aircrews of the various nations.

By operating together during the daily sorties military doctrines are shared and experiences are exchanged. Throughout the course of the exercise extreme combat scenarios are simulated, while operating in a coalition force, in order to be able to cope with the future developments of hostile coalitions and to be able to effectively counter any enemy force.

The entire exercise is led by the air boss who is responsible for all sorties and the overall safety during all scenarios. The air boss has the disposal over the military air traffic control and airborne early warning and control capabilities.

The exercise simulates realistic air to air and air to ground missions by means of pre-determined scenarios. Each day comprises two sorties in which a different mission leader is appointed to lead the designated sortie. During each mission the "Blue Air" forces can expect hostile actions from the opposing "Red Air". During the entire extend of the exercise no live ordnance is being used.

During each sortie the entire southern air space of Israel is closed south of Jerusalem to Ovda and the borders of the surrounding countries. As a result the civilian air traffic is redirected to different routes and the remaining military air traffic not participating in the exercise is limited to the periods of time there are no flying activities during the "Blue Flag" exercise.



Aggressors

The exercise includes the No. 115 "Flying Dragons" as the aggressor squadron, supplemented with assets from other Israeli Air Force squadrons participating in the exercise, and several air defense assets like patriot systems positioned throughout the Southern territory of the country simulating an actual threat situation. The "Flying Dragons" have been trained in simulating several opposing air forces tactics and present an as real as possible presentation with the purpose to train the participating squadrons.

The "Red Air" assets and the "Blue Air" assets both conduct their daily pre-flight brief separately. During each brief the rules of engagement are provided with a strong focus on flight safety. As a result the "Blue Air" forces do not know what they will encounter on "Red Air" forces besides the planned scenario selected for that specific sortie.

After each sortie an evaluation takes place where one representative of "Red Air" will participate the "Blue Air" debrief and will answer all questions there might be.

Exercise course

The Blue flag exercise is organized during a two week period and the course of the exercise is built up in several stages. The first week is used as a familiarization training for the foreign participants to acclimate to Israeli air space, the Ovdia airbase procedures and for all participants to build up the intensity of the daily sorties. After the familiarization is completed defensive counter air missions are conducted and the intensity during the first week is further increased by a "Blue air" versus "Blue Air" exercise without the projection of the opposing aggressor capabilities.

Different missions

The second week comprises a complex military campaign including the opposing aggressor forces. These opposing forces are projected by means of surface to air missile batteries including the use of shoulder fired missiles in combination with the aggressor aircraft assigned to "Red Air" presenting a scenario which requires the "Blue Air" forces to synchronize the different weapon systems in the different types of aircraft in order to understand and defeat the "Red Air" Forces.

During these scenarios other forces including the use of helicopters, the application of electronic warfare assets, heavy military airlift and airborne air traffic control, in order to train the participants in mission support capabilities and other active combat divisions in the area of operations. Both night time missions and aerial refuelling missions are included as well initially during two full days of small force exercise sorties succeeded by the last day in which a large force exercise sortie is projected in which the full scale scenario is projected.

Conclusion

By organization of this great exercise, Israel is clearly looking for a coalition to maintain itself in a turbulent Middle East. The deteriorated relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia will affect Israel somehow. In that case clear allies and a streamlined operation are indispensable.

