

Have guns, will travel

This week's intriguing scandal over not-so-secret American arms and spare parts deliveries to "terrorist" Iran also cast light on the curious and little-known role of Israel as a sort of super covert-action agency for the U.S. government. Almost everywhere one looked, up popped Israeli spooks, generals and arms dealers.

The past 15 years have seen a liberal-dominated Congress intrude into the foreign policy process. As a result, the president has often been prevented by Congress from doing what he deemed necessary for the national good. Witness the epic struggle to supply a measly \$100 million to the Contras.

So Ronald Reagan's administration found a way around congressional restrictions by using foreign governments to do nasty jobs it could not do itself. Most frequently used are Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Israel. Of the three, Israel is by far the most active.

By now, almost everyone knows that Israel has been secretly supplying Iran with arms and spare parts for many years. Less appreciated is how the Reagan administration has used Israel as a conduit for arms to other American "friends." In Nicaragua, for example, the Contras got much of their arms from Israel and have Israeli military advisers. So does the government of El Salvador.

Honduras, the linchpin of U.S. strategy in the region, has close military links with Israel. So too does Guatemala, whose army was reequipped with Israeli weapons when Congress cut off American aid due to that nation's violations of human rights.

Israeli arms and military equipment are going to Argentina. This allows Washington to keep in the good graces of the Argentines without causing a major rumpus with the British. Military goods

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from Israel were delivered to Paraguay, a nation on Washington's human rights blacklist and, it seems, a place where unrepentant Nazis still lurk about. Arms sales evidently took precedence over Nazi-hunting.

Similarly, Washington is able to ensure that South Africa and Taiwan receive reasonably modern defence technology by the Israeli back door. American military electronics, for instance, go to Israel and then are repackaged for supply to the two outcast nations. Atomic secrets are also shared.

Israeli arms and advisers are now in evidence in Sri Lanka where they are being used by Washington to discreetly support that nation's government against the growing Tamil insurrection. In Africa, three of the continent's nastiest regimes, Zaire, Liberia and Ethiopia, have received Israeli arms and advisers. They are all massive violators of human rights and untouchable, so far as Washington is concerned. The practical Israelis do not seem to share America's quite selective moral daintiness.

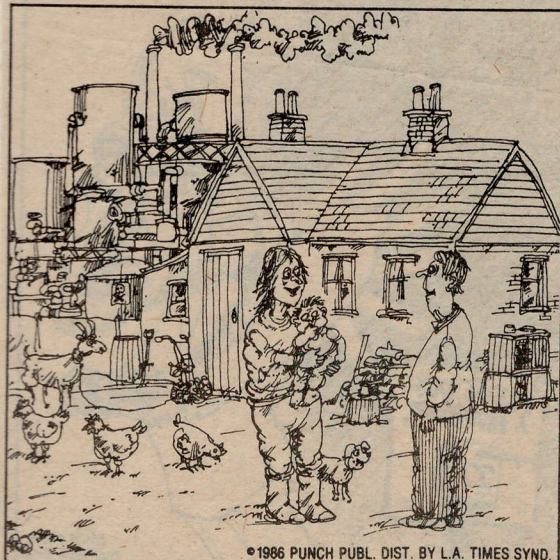
In fact, Israel appears to be happy, even eager, to co-operate. Doing so brings in hard currency and expands Israeli influence in the Third World. And, of course, it creates IOUs in Washington and makes Israel seem indispensable. Conservatives in the Reagan Administration have been the strongest proponents of using Israel as a sort of foreign legion for bashing reds and Arabs — and for stymieing the almost-as-bad liberals.

Stymied they certainly are. If the U.S. sent arms to South Africa, for example, liberals would run amok. But when Israel does so, congressional liberals suddenly see no evil. In Congress, you simply don't criticize Israel. Thus, Israel could ship arms to pariah regimes or make atomic weapons — as we were reminded again this week — while liberals, who provide the funds to keep Israel afloat, fell strangely mute. Reagan had outfoxed them.

This neat and cozy relationship is not pleasing to all Israelis. Right-wingers there may be happy to act as American surrogates, but many moderates and leftists are worried that Israel will come to be seen by the outside world as a kind of welcome wagon for ugly regimes. Lessening Israel's isolation may not, these critics say, be worth linking it to such despots as Zaire's Mobutu or Liberia's Samuel K. Doe. Nor, they add, was Israel created to be a giant arms factory.

And a lot of Israelis are asking the same question being posed in America. Just what was Israel doing secretly supplying arms to Iran while loudly demanding its boycott and isolation as a promoter of state terrorism? Were Israeli soldiers in southern Lebanon killed by Israeli munitions supplied to Iran? All in all, not a very good week for the crusaders against terrorism.

Punch



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