

Israel: global arms merchant

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By Eric Margolis

Last December, United States customs agents in Florida seized 12,000 rifles being illegally shipped by Israel to Guatemala. This unusual incident highlights the growing worldwide role of Israel as a supplier of arms and military expertise.

Arms have surpassed agricultural produce to become Israel's primary export. With almost 25 percent of its industrial labor force engaged in military production, Israel is among the world's five leading exporters of arms and military equipment.

It has become particularly active in supplying conservative regimes in Central America, Africa and Asia with whom the United States does not want to deal openly.

When Nicaragua was ruled by Gen. Anastasio Somoza-Debayle, Israel became that country's principal arms supplier. Today, Israeli intelligence agents are reported active in supporting the anti-Sandinista Contras based in Honduras. The leftist government in Managua has responded by establishing close relations with the Palestine Liberation Organization and Libya.

Guatemala, denied U.S. aid because of human rights violations, is another important and growing market for Israeli arms. Counterinsurgency agents of Israel's secret service, the Mossad, are deeply involved in Guatemala's effective antiguerrilla operations and also active, to a lesser degree, in Honduras and El Salvador.

Congress may have blocked aid to Guatemala, but it has turned a blind eye to Israel's activities in Central America, even though they are largely financed by the United States. The level of coordination between Jerusalem and Washington in Central America remains unclear, though senior U.S. officials have indicated that Israel's activities there are "approved" and "beneficial."

Farther south, Israel is rapidly replacing Argentina's military losses in its disastrous Falklands war with Britain.

In Africa, Israeli activity is far more discreet but no less important. There is growing evidence that France is increasingly disturbed by what it sees as a new U.S.-Israeli-South African axis. The French fear this alliance may be aimed at supplanting Paris' influence in its former French West African colonies.

Two U.S. clients, Zaire and Liberia, are receiving extensive Israeli military aid; their intelligence and security forces are being reformed by Israeli ex-

parts. It is no coincidence that Zaire and Liberia became the first African states to re-establish diplomatic relations with Jerusalem, action spurred by promises of greater American aid and Israeli arms. Once again, Congress, which had been loath to grant more aid to either nation because of their dismal human rights records and rampant corruption, made no objection.

Israel also has been quietly expanding its military and intelligence cooperation with South Africa. Israeli gunboats, missiles, electronic systems and aircraft parts have been supplied in large quantities to Pretoria in spite of the United Nations boycott of South Africa—which is observed by the United States.

There is evidence, too, that Israel and South Africa are cooperating closely in developing nuclear weapons and delivery systems. Israel, which already has 30 nuclear devices, apparently is providing South Africa with technical guidance and electronics in exchange for enriched uranium. Some U.S. officials still suspect that Israel and South Africa may have already jointly tested a nuclear device over the south Atlantic.

Israel has been busy in East Africa as well. The Marxist regime in Ethiopia is receiving some Israeli weapons, spare parts and advisers.

For the last four years, Israel has been supplying Iran, through third parties, with arms and spare parts; last year alone, sales are reported to have amounted to \$140 million. This important aid to the Khomeini regime deeply angered Washington during the hostage crisis and continues to be a point of contention now that the Reagan administration is seeking to discreetly support Iraq.

In the Far East, Israel has managed the unlikely feat of supplying both Taiwan and China. Taiwan has turned to Israel for missiles, electronics and, possibly, aircraft. Israeli military technicians are also said to be providing China with assistance in manufacturing aircraft and military electronics.

Taiwan is considered a likely customer for Israel's new Lavi fighter, an aircraft being produced with the latest U.S. technology and financed by American taxpayers. Many U.S. defense contractors have complained bitterly that American aid is being used to finance foreign competition, since the Lavi will compete directly against the F-16 and F-20 in Third World markets.

It is difficult to tell where the Israelis and Americans are competing and where they are cooperating. Whatever the answer, the entrepreneurial Israelis have found that aircraft and weapons are a far more rewarding pursuit than growing oranges and lemons.

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