

# Israelis have guns, will sell

Critics of Israel have been having a field day over reports that some Israelis were filmed training hit teams belonging to Colombia's drug gangsters. There have even been suggestions the Israeli government was somehow in cahoots with the Medellín cartel.

Nonsense. Israel has dealt with some pretty shady characters but never with the drug trade, unless you count Lebanon's hashish-running Christian warlords.

The Israelis filmed in Colombia were freelance toughs. Israelis aren't all violin players and scientists. Israel has criminals and mercenaries like other nations, only smarter and better ones. At war for much of its existence, Israel has a lot to teach about fighting and covert operations.

But this curious little episode leads to a far more interesting story. The instructors in Colombia were merely the tip of the Israeli iceberg in Latin America.

Israel has been active in Latin America since its birth. Without key support from Central American and Caribbean nations, the UN partition plan that created Israel would have been voted down. Long isolated by hostility in Asia and Africa, Israel turned to Latin America for diplomatic support—and for business.

Today Israel is an important, if highly discreet, supplier of arms, military gear and training to governments from one end of Latin America to the other. Argentina is a customer for Israeli military goods, a fact that has angered Britain which fears it may face Israeli-made weapons and aircraft if more fighting erupts over the Falkland Islands.

Chile, cut off from U.S. arms because of its authoritarian regime, is another key market for Israeli military sales. Ironically, it's even possible that Israeli cluster-



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bomb technology has been included in Chilean munitions exported to Iraq. There also seems to be a moderate degree of covert joint military co-operation between Chile, Israel and South Africa—which remains Israel's most lucrative foreign arms customer.

Israeli arms and equipment are also found in Ecuador, Colombia and Paraguay. The excellent Uzi sub-machinegun, for example, has become a status symbol for macho Latinos.

Less known are Israel's activities in Central America. Mossad, the Israeli intelligence service, long used Panama as a base. There are persistent reports that Mossad was involved with Gen. Manuel Noriega in covert dealings. The full story may come out if the still suppressed facts of the Iran-Contra case are ever revealed.

When the U.S. Congress cut off military aid to the governments of El Salvador and Guatemala over alleged human rights abuses, Israel quietly moved in to fill the gap with weapons and advisers on anti-guerrilla warfare and security. It's likely the Reagan Administration encouraged the Israelis to do so, and to lend important support to the Nicaraguan Contras.

Israel was happy to assist. Besides making money,

Israel gained new friends and was also able to keep an eye on Nicaragua and Cuba, both of which are strong supporters of the PLO. For a while, it even seemed there might be a little mini-war in Central America between Palestinian and Israeli agents.

Some liberal supporters of Israel have been fretting that Israel's reputation would be damaged by association with unsavory regimes. Israel, they hold, had no business doing business with right-wing juntas in Argentina, Chile and Guatemala. Nor with the shah of Iran and his vicious secret police, the Savak. Nor with the former Nazi-harboring regime in Paraguay.

As for Israel's extensive dealings with South Africa, which include co-operation on nuclear weapons and their delivery systems, this could be a time bomb waiting to explode.

And what on earth has been going on in Mexico? Some months back, one of Israel's top Mossad agents, Amiram Nir, a key figure in the Iran-Contra affair, was killed in a mysterious plane crash there. Israel claimed Nir was simply involved in the avocado business. Avocados? Israel happens to be Europe's biggest supplier of avocados. Rumor has it that Nir had been sent to squash competition from Mexican avocados. A pretty odd mixture, the Mossad and avocados.

Personally, I have nothing but admiration for Israel's arms salesmen and their top-quality, combat-tested merchandise. I wish I could afford a new Merkava III tank. Besides, if you want to hire military professionals, better battle-proven Israelis than the kind of betterfin-gered American commando "experts" who botched the Iran rescue mission and almost lost the invasion of Grenada.