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Deborah Tyroler

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Israeli Involvement In Central America Nothing New

by Deborah Tyroler

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* For the majority of Americans Irangate provided the first hint of Israeli military involvement with the contras. However, Israel's support of reactionary governments and other groups in Central America is nothing new. That nation has provided arms to the military, advice and training to police forces, and sophisticated counter-insurgency techniques to Central American dictatorships for at least 30 years. Israel has not broadcast its role in Central America, nor has the mainstream US media considered Tel Aviv's actions in the region worthy of consistent coverage. Torn between gaining the good will of the American right-wing, on the one hand, and with offending liberals, on the other, Israel has opted for a low profile. In part, Tel Aviv's reaction to the Iran-contragate revelations stems from fear that the full story of Israel's role in Central America will become widely known. In the 1977-1984 period, the three major US television networks ran only four stories for a total of 12 minutes on the Israeli presence in Central America. Major newspapers, while providing better coverage, tend to bury mention of Israeli involvement within general stories on Central America. This conspiracy of silence is illustrated by two reports. Warren Hoge (NEW YORK TIMES, 05/03/81) writes about how the Guatemalan government dealt with the cut-off of US aid during the Carter administration: "The Guatemalans have been resourceful since then, turning to France for aircraft, Argentina for anti-guerrilla strategy, South Korea for uniforms and Yugoslavia for howitzers." Hoge did not mention Arava aircraft; the Galil rifle, which became standard army infantry issue; the Israeli-built munitions plant, or the Israeli advisors who helped form and direct the notorious counter-insurgency campaign during which thousands of Guatemalans were murdered. The Kissinger Commission report of 1984 (or the report by the "National Bipartisan Commission on Central America") goes a step further in overlooking Israeli involvement. Thus, the Commission praised Guatemalan government for effectively dealing with the guerrilla movement "despite the lack of outside assistance." The reality, however, is that Israel has been providing arms and military advice to Guatemala since 1964, and by 1975 had become that country's major military supplier. In 1975 Britain persuaded Washington to cut back on arms sales to Guatemala for fear of a Guatemalan invasion of Belize. Israel stepped in with Arava aircraft, Uzi sub-machine guns and heavy weaponry. In 1977 when the Carter administration cut off all US military aid because of the Guatemalan government's horrific record of human rights abuses, Israel stepped up arms shipments. (See Tim Coone, "Israel's Dangerous Exports," NEW STATESMAN, 05/09/80.) In the case of Nicaragua before the Sandinista revolution, Israeli involvement was similar. From the mid-1950s to the late 1970s Israel sold the Somoza regime large quantities of arms. Between 1974 and 1978, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Israel accounted for 98% of the Somoza government's military equipment. When the US cut off arms shipments to Nicaragua in September 1978, Israel became the major, if not the exclusive source of military supplies. In the 11/13/79 issue of Israeli newspaper DAVAR ("Israel's Global War"), Prof. Israel Shahak of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem describes Tel Aviv's complicity with Somoza's campaign of terror as follows: "Galil rifles sold by Israel to the regime of Anastasio Somoza in mid-1978 were sent directly to a special terror unit commanded by Somoza's son, which carried out the murder of political opponents, among them women and children. The rifles were sold to Somoza in contravention of normal usage, and no account was taken of the political damage that this deal would cause Israel in Latin America." As

pointed out by the WASHINGTON POST (Edward Cody, "Nicaraguan Rebels Go Covert Again," 11/12/83), since 1982 Israel has supplied weapons to the contras. According to a senior Reagan administration spokesperson, "Israel, at the request of the US, has agreed to send weapons captured from the Palestine Liberation Organization to Honduras for eventual use by Nicaraguan rebels." Sen. Claiborne Pell, concerned that part of US economic and military aid to Israel was used to supply the contras, introduced an amendment to the 1986 foreign aid bill that would have prevented such transfers. The amendment was dropped when President Reagan threatened a veto. (See Kai Bird and Max Holland, "Dispatches," in THE NATION, 09/28/85.) Israeli assistance is not limited to military hardware. In May 1984 TIME magazine reported that "Israel funnels arms to the contras through the Honduran army. Israeli intelligence experts have helped the CIA train the contras, and retired or reserve Israeli army commanders have been hired by shadowy private firms to assist the rebels." (From "An Israeli Connection?" TIME 05/07/84) On Nov. 30, 1981 Caspar Weinberger and Ariel Sharon signed a memorandum of understanding on "strategic cooperation." Suspended and then revived in 1983, the memorandum could grant third countries permission to spend a portion of their U.S. military credits in Israel, a convenient mechanism to bypass congressional restraints on direct aid to governments of ill-repute or to the contras. In April 1984 David Kimche, then Director of the Israeli Foreign Ministry, met with US officials to establish a special fund for underwriting Israeli aid to Central American and African countries. This is the same David Kimche who was Lt. Col. Oliver North's chief Israeli contact, and who is alleged to have first suggested the transfer of Iran arms sales profits to the contras. For Israel, Central America is no aberration. Israel's military support for reactionary regimes extends world-wide. Even in the face of US sanctions against South Africa, Tel Aviv continues to maintain a close military relationship with that country. It is rumored that such collaboration involves the development and production of nuclear weapons. Why should a country whose people have so recently suffered from the ultimate in reaction, the Holocaust, pursue policies that some Israeli leaders admit are comparable to those of Hitler? One explanation is Israel's enlistment in the anti-communist camp led by Washington. Having adopted the Cold War agenda promulgated by the US, Israel acts as a proxy for Washington throughout the Third World, including in Central America and South Africa. In this way Israel ensures the continuity of US aid, which totaled a whopping \$4.5 billion in 1986. It would be a mistake, however, to believe that Israeli politicians are acting against their finer sensibilities in collaborating with Washington's realpolitik. Religious fanaticism and fascist-like thinking are rampant in the higher levels of government and the military, as spokespersons for the Israeli peace movement have made abundantly clear. Israel Shahak, in "Is Israel on the Road to Nazism?" (FREEDOMWAYS, 3rd quarter 1983) provides revealing quotes from General Eitan, former Israeli Chief of Staff: "My father has taught me that no Arab should be trusted...All Arabs are the same whether in Arabe (a village in Israel), Ramallah or Gaza. All of them should be finished off...To punish the parents for the deeds of their children this works well with Arabs." [The author wishes to express his gratitude and indebtedness to Milton Jamail and Margo Gutierrez, whose five years of painstaking research of the world literature on Israeli actions and policies in Central America are summarized in "It's No Secret: Israel's Involvement in Central America", (AAUG Monograph Series No. 20, Association of Arab-American University Graduates, Inc., Belmont, Massachusetts, 1986).] *Malcolm Gordon, professor emeritus of biochemistry, is active in Central America solidarity and peace movement organizations.

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