

ISRAELI MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO LATIN AMERICA

Allan Metz
Drury College

- THE ISRAELI CONNECTION: WHO ISRAEL ARMS AND WHY.* By Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi. (New York: Pantheon, 1987. Pp. 289. \$18.95.)
- IT'S NO SECRET: ISRAEL'S MILITARY INVOLVEMENT IN CENTRAL AMERICA.* By Milton Jamail and Margo Gutiérrez. (Belmont, Mass.: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1986. Pp. 117. \$10.00.)
- ISRAEL AND LATIN AMERICA: THE MILITARY CONNECTION.* By Bishara Bahbah, with Linda Butler. (London: Macmillan and the Institute for Palestine Studies, Beirut, 1986. Pp. 210. \$29.95 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)
- ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY: SOUTH AFRICA AND CENTRAL AMERICA.* By Jane Hunter. (Boston, Mass.: South End, 1987. Pp. 274. \$25.00 cloth, \$9.50 paper.)
- CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST: THE INTERNATIONALIZATION OF THE CRISES.* Edited by Damián J. Fernández. (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990. Pp. 239. \$26.95 cloth, \$14.95 paper.)
- ISRAEL'S GLOBAL REACH: ARMS SALES AS DIPLOMACY.* By Aaron S. Klie-man. (Washington, D.C.: Pergamon-Brassey's, 1985. Pp. 240. \$30.00.)
- DANGEROUS LIAISON: THE INSIDE STORY OF THE U.S.-ISRAELI COVERT RELATIONSHIP.* By Andrew and Leslie Cockburn. (New York: Harper Collins, 1991. Pp. 416. \$24.95.)

Since the 1970s, the military dimension of Israel's relations with Latin America—especially with Central America—has taken precedence over all other aspects. Given this development, the seven books under review offer significant information and analysis on the military component of Israeli foreign policy in Latin America.

Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi, in *The Israeli Connection: Who Israel Arms and Why*, entitles his chapter on Latin America "The Friendly Hemisphere." According to this academic at the University of Haifa, Israel has not only won friends but made true believers out of many Latin Americans. Admirers of Israel have included Chile's General Augusto Pinochet, Guatemala's General Romeo Lucas García, El Salvador's Roberto D' Aubuisson, General Alfredo Stroessner of Paraguay, and the late Anastasio Somoza Debayle of Nicaragua. Indeed, Israel is generally admired in Latin Ameri-

can military circles for its macho image of firmness, ruthlessness, and efficiency. Although Israel has friends in the civilian sector as well, the Latin American military establishment is where most of Israel's friends are found and where Israel continues to cultivate support.

Beit-Hallahmi also details Israeli military involvement in South American countries, but most of the chapter on Latin America is devoted to Central America, where Israel has been most heavily involved. Central America developed into a high priority area for Israel in the late 1970s. By 1980 Israel had become the single major arms supplier to Central America. The station of the Mossad (the Israeli intelligence service) in Tegucigalpa was actually run by a Mossad deputy chief, an indication of Central America's significance for Israeli policymakers. The Mossad was responsible for all sensitive Israeli military-related operations in the region, such as training the Nicaraguan Contras. Thus Israel has become an intricate part of Central American history, and analysis of the region's recent history would be incomplete without considering the Israeli role.

Beit-Hallahmi explains how Israel became involved in Central America: the overriding reason for the Israeli military role there has been to serve as a proxy for the United States. Beit-Hallahmi maintains that Israel has demonstrated its willingness to do the bidding of the United States by providing military aid to regimes from which Washington wishes to distance itself, as in Guatemala. By the late 1980s, however, the degree of Israel's Central American involvement had lessened as direct U.S. involvement increased in Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. And so it appears that Israel's heyday in Central America is over now that the United States no longer needs Israel to act as its Central American proxy.

Another of Beit-Hallahmi's major theses is that Israel has counted on allying itself with the military in Latin America as a basis for future relations with countries in the region. A psychologist by profession and a critic of Israeli foreign military policy, Beit-Hallahmi has written a non-technical study of a complex subject. *The Israeli Connection* demonstrates his expertise in the subject and also substantiates his main argument that Israeli military activity in Latin America, like Israeli activities throughout the world, must be viewed in the larger context of U.S.-Israeli relations.

Four of the books under review are highly critical of Israel's military policy in Latin America and elsewhere, and they will be reviewed together, moving from the most specific in geographical area discussed to more general treatments. The volume entitled *Central America and the Middle East*, edited by Damián Fernández, includes several essays on Israeli assistance to Central America that focus on specific countries. Cheryl Rubenberg discusses "The United States, Israel, and Guatemalan Interests and Conflicts." This volume also includes a relevant contribution by Milton Jamail and Margo Gutiérrez. Bishara Bahbah broadens the geographical scope by including Latin America in *Israel and Latin America: The*

Military Connection, and Jane Hunter's *Israeli Foreign Policy: South Africa and Central America* compares Israel's foreign policies toward South Africa and Central America.

Rubenberg's contribution to *Central America and the Middle East* devotes considerable attention to Israeli arms sales to Guatemala and discusses the evolution of Israeli-Guatemalan relations. Israel sold its first weapons to Guatemala in 1975 and became Guatemala's major supplier of arms from 1977 to 1981. In 1977–78 a program was started involving Israeli military training and advisors in Guatemala. Unlike many other analysts, Rubenberg argues that Israel is not necessarily a military surrogate for the United States in Latin America, especially in Central America, and that when U.S. and Israeli interests converge, it is only coincidentally. She maintains that such factors as Israel's policy goals in the Middle East, its domestic political situation, and economic considerations have been much more significant in determining Israeli policy toward Guatemala than were U.S. interests there or even Israel's desire to appear to be a strategic asset to the United States. Rubenberg concludes with respect to Israel's role in Guatemala and elsewhere that "the analysis of Israel's independent role in Guatemala, wherein it pursued interests and objectives deriving from wholly its own considerations, is applicable to an analysis of all its foreign policies. Its increasingly active role throughout the globe should be seen not in terms of its acting as a surrogate or proxy for the United States, but on the basis of its own considerations and interests" (p. 111).

Central America and the Middle East also contains pertinent essays by editor Damián Fernández on the Central America–Middle East theme, a discussion by JoAnn Fagot Aviel of the Arab-Israeli conflict as played out in Nicaragua, and a well-researched essay by Ignacio Klich on Israel, the PLO, and Nicaragua. Klich's contribution discusses at length Israeli military assistance to Nicaragua (first to the Somozas and then to the Contras) and includes many astute observations. To cite only one example, Klich comments, "In placing its interest in an active pro-American role above everything else, including the limited economic rationale of handling the small and politically unstable Central American arms market, apparently worth less than 5 percent of Israel's annual total of defense-related exports, Jerusalem appears to have overlooked its traditional efforts to prevent its international standing from being eroded as well as its declared goal of countering Arab and PLO influence" (pp. 76–77).

This edited volume also includes an essay by Milton Jamail and Margo Gutiérrez, "Israel's Military Role in Central America." A slightly revised version of an article published in the March–April 1987 issue of the *NACLA Report on the Americas*, this essay also draws on their earlier book, *It's No Secret: Israel's Military Involvement in Central America*. In all three of these works, the authors assert that the political fallout from the Iran-Contra affair focused attention on Israel's involvement in Central

America. Jamail and Gutiérrez speculate on five motivations behind Israel's policy in the region. The first is that Israel has historically had a "special relationship" with Central America dating back to Nicaraguan and Guatemalan support for a Jewish state in the 1930s and 1940s. Until the 1967 and 1973 wars, however, Israel's relationship with Central America was largely political. Following these wars, Israel became more and more isolated internationally. As its military industry expanded greatly, so did its need for outside markets. Thus Israel's "special relationship" with the region assumed a more military nature.

Second, Israel has built up a considerable arms industry, which employs 18 to 25 percent of the industrial labor force and generates yearly foreign sales ranging from one and a half to two billion dollars. The military industry's arms trade has become a pillar of the Israeli economy. Israel is currently the ninth-largest international weapons dealer and the largest of the arms-exporting nations in the Third World.

Third, for a country that is diplomatically isolated, selling weapons becomes a direct means of buying foreign friends. In turn, countries buying arms from Israel view such purchases as a way to curry favor with the United States by appealing to its influential Jewish community.

Fourth, although Israel has occasionally served as a U.S. proxy in Central America, Israel has policy objectives of its own and is no mere "errand boy" for the United States. Jamail and Gutiérrez's larger point is that it makes little difference whether Israel serves as the U.S. surrogate in the region or whether there is simply a "convergence of interests" like that cited by Cheryl Rubenberg. As Jamail and Gutiérrez comment in their essay, "If Washington did not condone Israeli military sales and advice to 'friendly' Central Americans, it would certainly attempt to squeeze its ally out of the region. But as long as relations between the two countries remain too controversial to discuss, the United States will likely use Israel to pursue its objectives in Central America" (p. 126).

Fifth, ideology has played a major role in the convergence of U.S. and Israeli policy in Central America. Going along with cold war anticommunist ideology and assisting the United States in the international crusade against communism definitely bolstered Israel's position vis-à-vis the United States. According to Jamail and Gutiérrez, "the Israelis have adopted the cold-war agenda of the United States, which requires them to act as a U.S. surrogate in Central America. Not motivated by an overriding fear of communism nor intense interest in the region, the Israelis have sought to ingratiate themselves with the United States, embellishing their image as a 'strategic asset,' increasing revenues and political contacts, and ensuring continued economic support from the United States. . . ." (p. 127).

Jamail and Gutiérrez also contend that "Israel does not care much about events in Central America, only about its survival. And it sees itself as acting in its best national interests through military involvement in the

region" (p. 144). They warn, however, that this is a shortsighted view. Israeli weaponry, advice, and military-oriented technical assistance to the area have been deadly for Central Americans and may in the future be detrimental to the way in which Israel determines its national interests.

Jamail and Gutiérrez conclude overall, "The Israelis are very good at what they do militarily and they are secretive. Their military involvement in the region helps accomplish U.S. . . . policy goals. . . . If Israeli military involvement in the region is not openly and honestly examined and discussed, the . . . [United States] . . . will continue to use the sensitive nature of the issue to further discourage debate about . . . [its] policy in Central America" (p. 144).

An outstanding feature of Jamail and Gutiérrez's *It's No Secret*, in addition to its extensive bibliography, is an appendix on "Sources of Information on Israel's Military Involvement in Central America." As Jamail and Gutiérrez explain: "Although our bibliography is comprehensive to date, to keep abreast of this topic we recommend that the researcher consult on a regular basis the following news and indexing sources" (for the list, see pp. 81–82).

Jane Hunter's *Israeli Foreign Policy: South Africa and Central America* concentrates on the military component of that policy. Hunter first provides background information on the development of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, the evolution of Israel's arms industry, Israeli arms sales, and her view of Israel as a proxy for the United States. She then devotes separate chapters to Israel's (primarily military) policy toward El Salvador and Guatemala and three chapters on Nicaragua. Hunter asks rhetorically, "What use is it to save Central America from death at the hands of U.S.-sponsored governments and mercenary bands if it is only to deliver them to the same clients and cutthroats courtesy of Israel?" (p. 185). She concludes, "Until the message is received in Washington that an end to Israel's foreign activities is an integral part of the progressive agenda, Israel's ability to take on the rejected fragments of U.S. policies will remain a problem with profound consequences for politics and foreign policy decisions in this country [the United States]. For Israel's victims in Central America . . . and elsewhere, the consequences will be fatal" (pp. 199–200).

Bishara Bahbah's *Israel and Latin America: The Military Connection* is a comprehensive study that extends beyond Israel's military role in Central America to include all of Latin America. The author provides necessary background information in chapters titled "Arms Exports and Israeli Government Policy," "Israel's Arms Industry," and "Israel and Latin America." Much of this information has already been discussed in conjunction with the other works already reviewed in this essay. Bahbah also presents two South American case studies of Israeli military involvement in Ecuador and Argentina as well as an analysis of Israel's role in Central

America. *Israel and Latin America* ends with an assessment of Israeli policy on exporting arms in which the author acknowledges that Israel has built up an impressive and technologically diversified arms industry. Bahbah cautions nevertheless that this industry cannot grow indefinitely and that the influence of Israeli military assistance could wane in the region, as Beit-Hallahmi predicted in his study. This growing reality has led some Israelis to call for a reevaluation of their country's arms policy. Some have argued that Israel's long-range interests could be achieved better by re-channeling military production more toward civilian production, or at least significantly reducing costs by abandoning more ambitious military projects and weaponry. Bahbah, however, concludes on a pessimistic note:

[G]iven the depth of the government's commitment to its arms export policy and the particular structure of the Israeli political-military establishment, a change is not likely in the near future. Until such time as a reassessment occurs, Israel's arms clients are increasingly apt to be international pariah states or right-wing dictatorships waging war against their own people and in need of Israel's particular military expertise. And this will ultimately be to Israel's detriment politically, and certainly to the detriment of the populations of the countries it supplies. (Pp. 187-88)

Aaron Klieman's *Israel's Global Reach* has been included in this group of books because it has become a standard work for its overview of Israeli international arms sales, which places more detailed studies of Israel's military-related activities in Latin America in a larger context. Klieman's study also contains pertinent information and statistics on Israel's military involvement in Central and Latin America. An indication of the book's importance is that it is cited in all six of the other works under review here and continues to be a source for more current articles and books on Israel's military sales policy.

Among the more current literature is Andrew and Leslie Cockburn's *Dangerous Liaison: The Inside Story of the U.S.-Israeli Covert Relationship*. Beyond this emphasis, the authors devote two chapters and refer throughout the book to the Israeli-Latin American connection, including naming individual Israelis who have served in military-related advisory capacities in Latin America. Two of the most notorious are Mike Harari in Panama and Yair Klein in Colombia.¹ While written in a style that is more journalistic than academic, *Dangerous Liaison* is well documented. Particularly helpful in this regard is the brief bibliographic essay, "A Note on Sources and Further Reading," which also discusses doing research on Israeli foreign policy. The book's relative newness and coverage of more

1. On the Klein case, see Allan Metz, "The Israel-Colombian Connection," *Hemisphere* (Summer 1991):24-28.

recent events (such as the Klein scandal) make it a complement to the more detailed but less current books.

Conclusion

The works under consideration all directly address the issue of Israeli military involvement in Latin America, Central America in particular. This participation has greatly declined with the end of the cold war, which has freed the United States to a considerable extent from its anticommunist obsession in Latin America (with the notable exception of Cuba). Such dramatic ideological shifts are reflected in current political conditions in Central America. The FMLN and the El Salvadoran government signed a historic peace accord in January 1992, ending a tragic twelve-year civil war. The agreement in El Salvador was preceded by the end of another civil war, the one in Nicaragua, which eventually led to an electoral defeat for the Sandinistas and the election of Violeta Chamorro. Israel was heavily involved in providing military assistance in both these former areas of conflict. Looking to the future, it is to be hoped that Israel will be able to leave behind these and other embarrassing Central American involvements and the nefarious actions of former military officials like Mike Harari and Yair Klein. The works under discussion reveal a consensus that all these activities have had a deleterious effect not only on the recipient nations but on Israel as well, reflecting the great influence that the military industry and trade has in that country's economy. Israel's long-term interests in winning friends in Latin America and elsewhere may be best served not by providing military assistance but by curtailing the military force it employs at home in dealing with the occupied territories and by eventually reaching a meaningful settlement via negotiations with its Arab and Palestinian neighbors. This would be the best example that Israel could set for cultivating friendships in Latin America and the rest of the world.

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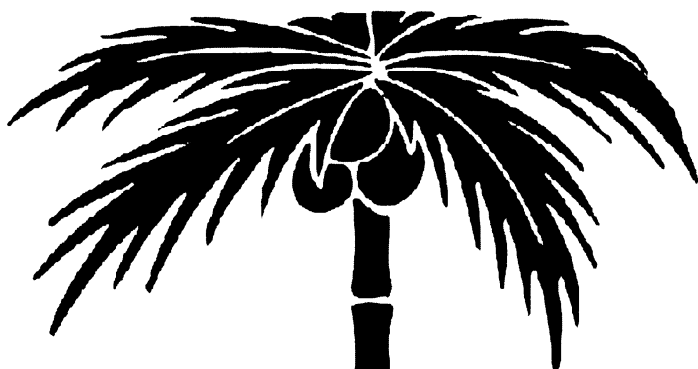
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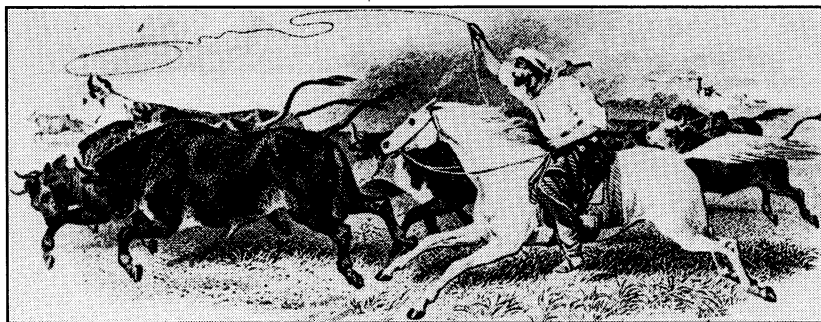
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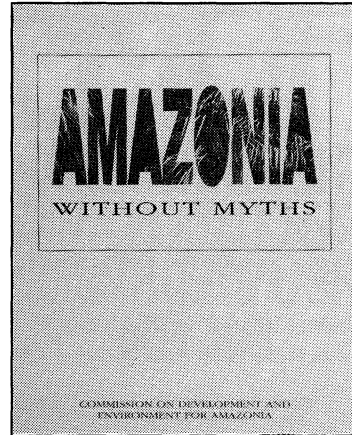
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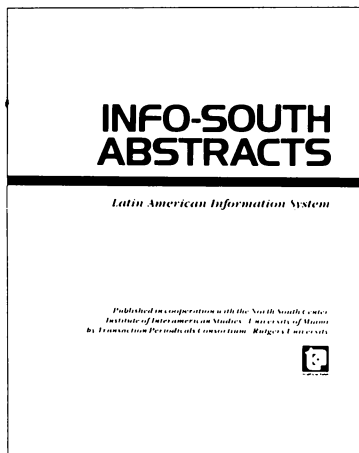
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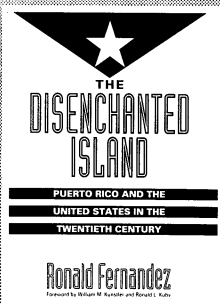


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