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The View From Jerusalem



Central America presents today the dimensions of a major crisis: a high ratio of human rights violations, economic collapse, armed struggle and foreign military involvement. For decades, a region marked by blatant social injustice was kept away from the focus of world concern as regimes docile to the United States managed to keep control over the forces of change. Paradoxically, former Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon reacted to Washington's pressures on Israel by emphatically rejecting the idea of his country becoming a "Banana Republic." Now, a collusion course seems to have been established between both allies in an effort to regain command over adverse developments in Central America. The internationalization of conflict in this region does not exclude Israel as a participant. Its presence

there is not marked as a sudden arrival of a newcomer but rather by the renewed role of a veteran player. Recent events have shaped a different profile to the early image of the weak and heroic Israel-in-the-making. More than three decades later, the transformations have been manifold: Much has changed since the early days in which Zionist agents with Nicaraguan passports ensured indirect shipments of arms to their newly independent state. In its continuous struggle for survival Israel has become a strong regional power, whose military superiority has provided additional resources which can now be invested with a view towards global strategic considerations.

The Soviet Union has moved from an initial stand supportive of Zionism as the "National Liberation Movement of the Jewish

People" to become the main supplier of Israel's worst enemies. Added to such a changing Soviet role in the Middle East, the deterioration from detente to a renewed Cold War contributed to tighter bipolar realignments. The dramatic gain of Arab influence that followed the 1973 energy crisis increased the Israeli perception of growing isolation, so entrenched in the historic memory of its people.

Within this context, the unique position of the United States as Israel's sole and reliable ally has evolved. Sentiments apart, Israeli policymakers tend to emphasize that the recognition of their country as a true strategic asset to Washington will provide these close ties with the indispensable dimension of *realpolitik*.

Such external developments have influenced the mood of subsequent Israeli governments: given the adverse international conditions it would be utterly naive and even dangerous to expect the Jewish state to provide an "example to the nations." Hence, the call for skepticism and pragmatism in the conduct of international relations.

With the Likud victory in 1977, emphasis on the Arab threat tended to minimize the importance of other local and regional considerations in bilateral relations with countries on other continents. In addition, after nearly thirty years on the opposition benches, the active pursuit of such policies surprised not a few observers by the intensity of its nature. High-risk decisions were adopted particularly in the confrontation with Israel's neighbors and in its foreign relations in general. Playing high stakes for immediate returns and testing the limits of behavior could soon be recognized as the prevailing style of the new administration. These considerations may assist us in the analysis of Israel's current role in Central America. Before doing so, however, a cautionary remark should precede any easy generalizations. Policy towards this region is still full of inconsistencies. Decision making has often been erratic and uncoordinated. The gap between policy formulation and implementation can be traced in important

areas such as military transfers. Consumed by dissent on the more existential issues of peace and war with their neighbors, Israel's relations with the Third World are relegated to a lower level; in addition, the customary fog on issues related to military security have made it difficult to identify the real course of Israeli diplomacy in such a remote region. At the same time, the salience of criticism towards Israel has accompanied debate on Central America in Washington and its periphery. Distinctions between myth and reality have been purposefully blurred by Arab sources as part of an overall propaganda effort.

PLO-inspired messages emanating mostly from Havana, Managua and Mexico City have turned the focus of the most salient criticism of Israel from its Middle East policies to its activities in Central America. As the Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) states: "Israeli trade aims in Latin America are merely a modification of its aggression and expansion in the Middle East."¹ Efforts to associate events include the ambiguous use of the slogan the "Lebanonization" of Central America², defined in several ways: the temptation of the Salvadoran Defense Minister into what he allegedly called "a preemptive strike against Nicaragua,"³ Israel's plan to use Central America as a testing ground for experimentation of new sophisticated bombs and other weapons following the events in Lebanon,⁴ and "the promotion of Catholic-evangelical factionalism" in an effort to divide and conquer communities (in Guatemala) as the result of Israeli advice based on the successful exploitation of rivalries between Christian, Moslem and Druze communities in Lebanon.⁵ Alternatively, the expression the "Palestinization" of Central America is used in reference to Guatemala as "the way the indigenous population was destroyed through scorched-earth tactics, approximately one million displaced, (and) about one hundred thousand refugees outside the country."⁶

A parallel is drawn between the Israeli tactic in the West Bank of "tame local mayors" and the Civil Defense Patrol of Guate-

malan communities.⁷ Other images claim that to those same Guatemalan military-controlled villages are inspired by the *kibbutz* or *moshav*, communal and cooperative settlements in Israel. An even more confused statement comments that "the actions of the Israeli Zionists have become an irresistible model for the Guatemalan military." Colonel Wholers, director of Programa de Ayuda a las Areas en Conflicto (PAAC) stated that he finds it fascinating to transform the face of Guatemalan heights and convert it into a *moshav*, the model of the Palestinian refugee settlements in Israel.⁸ The Soviet Union supports this stand by exaggerating Israel's role as second to the United States in arms supply to "reactionary regimes" in Central America.⁹ Palestinian sources concur by characterizing Israel as a "global and strategic partner of the United States" and as a "tool of Washington" in order to disguise Israeli intervention in Central America and the Caribbean.¹⁰ These statements are accompanied by figures of alleged arms sales in which Israel appears to be the sole supplier, as in the notorious case of sales to Somoza, whereas six other countries have been mentioned as providers of weaponry during the last two years of his regime.

Exaggerations, inaccuracies and imaginary acts are accompanied by references out of context, highlighting Israel's military relations with Latin America without mentioning other areas of exchange. A most interesting illustration comes from *Covert Action* in which an article carries a boxed underlined paragraph: "Two thousand seven hundred and sixty-nine Latin Americans have been trained in Israel, mostly in short courses including police and military training."¹¹ Although the paragraph carries a quotation, neither references nor specifics are provided regarding the period this figure presumably covers. The closest I have come to such a conclusion are the official figures of Israel's Foreign Ministry's Department of International Cooperation which shows that 7,726 Latin American trainees were in Israel from 1958 to 1982 and, more specifically, 2,526 from Central America and the Carib-

bean from 1974 to 1982. The courses dealt with agriculture, youth programs, community development and education, while the "various" category covered no more than five percent.

There are many ways of manipulating numbers and figures but the subject matter needs to be explored further. Although a doctoral dissertation, "The Military Dimension in Israeli-Latin American Relations" (unavailable) has recently been submitted by a Palestinian student, reliable data on the subject are still unobtainable.¹²

It has been nearly impossible to procure related Israeli documentation. The lack of information may initially be seen as an ostrich policy of "no comment," yet the silence may also reflect some of the members of the defense establishment's satisfied attitudes toward Israel's exaggerated role. Their opinion stems from the salesman's logic that business breeds more business, and that is just what they are after. Silence from Foreign Ministry officials is often the combined result of an unawareness of complete military transactions and a precept that it is often wise not to document reactions to disclosures of fact. Exasperated journalists have tried to piece together miscellanea from non-Israeli sources as well as unheralded comments by unauthorized Israelis. Leading world newspapers have carried analytical articles with a remarkably Machiavellian bent regarding Israel's activities in Central America, opting for the worst possible scenario. Such attitudes may lead to academic writings legitimizing an incomplete and distorted picture.

Such speculations were made regarding the visit of former Defense Minister Sharon to Honduras on December 6, 1982, only two days after President Reagan's departure from Tegucigalpa. However, what is seen as a logical result of a well planned follow-up, appears to have been a personal act of an unpredictable character. Sharon's journey took place without prior consultation with his colleagues and with only a last minute announcement to then Foreign Minister Shamir. His trip may have been triggered by the refusal of an official invitation to visit

Washington in order to make himself visible and relevant in the U.S. backyard. His visit was resented by Israeli officials, may have spoiled some incipient agreements and was, by and large, of no consequence.

At the present initial stages, no definite statements can be made without a more sustained and long-term effort. Some general trends can be discussed but great caution is required. My initial reaction to the descriptions of the Israeli concerted efforts in this area was quite sceptical. No single responsible source of authority within the government seems connected with the events in Central America. Israel's decision making seems to be dominated by representatives of the Defense Ministry and the industrial-military complex, without any serious participation by the Foreign Ministry, the Knesset or other elements which could present additional considerations. No important cabinet decisions have been reported¹³ and the traditional influence of the Defense Ministry has dominated the area of arms transfer at the highest level. The Foreign Ministry has dealt exclusively with the areas of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy in the region. The Knesset has paid only marginal attention to the issue with no committee monitoring the transactions. Occasionally, opposition members from the Zionist Left and the Communists have criticized governmental policy. Abba Eban and other members of the Labor Alignment have openly expressed concern regarding arms sales to Guatemala and El Salvador. However, Labor Alignment was not willing to sponsor an individual motion by one of its members calling for a cessation of sales. Pressure groups have not concerned themselves publicly with this issue. The industrial-military complex clearly has a vested interest in widening the markets for arms exports. The position of the Histadrut Confederation of Labor is rather ambivalent; once critical of arms sales to Guatemala, it has become an important partner in some of the military industries. To date, no extra-parliamentary opposition has taken a stand. Israeli liberals and radicals alike seem to have their hands full with domestic and

peace issues and they do not find policies toward Central America of equal importance.

Israel's lack of interest concerning Latin America is in contrast to the increasingly prominent image of Israel in that region. Dissension is manifest in the Latin American area regarding Israel's relations with the Arab countries and the Palestinians. Policies in other areas, perhaps with the exception of those with the United States, tend to be subordinated. The declining support in the Western hemisphere may be the result of Israel's growing isolation in the international community, due to her autonomous decision making (i.e., reunification of Jerusalem, annexation of the Golan Heights, the Lebanon War) and to the worldwide increase of Arab influence. This trend, particularly significant over the last decade, may also explain the fading support traditionally given to Israel by Latin American countries in the past.

Within this context we may analyze the possible impact of Israel's specific bilateral policies with Central American countries in determining possible payoffs. It has been fashionable to look at Begin's 1977 electoral victory as a turning point in Israel. Subsequently, such attributes were given to its policies towards Latin America. However, the elements of continuity seem to have prevailed over the elements of change. Yet there are significant quantitative differences in these relations which translate into qualitatively distinct traits.

ISRAEL'S INSTRUMENTS OF FOREIGN POLICY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

Traditionally, Israel's objectives in the region were within the diplomatic-political realm. In the crucial days of the establishment of Israel, when every vote counted, the small Central American republics were the object of sustained Zionist efforts. Zionist emissaries working from the New York Jewish Agency office established a wall-to-wall committee for a Hebrew Palestine in each country, and together with the tiny Jewish

communities they successfully lobbied the personalized regimes of the area.¹⁴ Through persuasion and because of the post-Holocaust trauma, the Central American governments were supportive of Israel at discreet levels at the United Nations, particularly Guatemala under President Arevalo. The role of Jorge Garvia Granados as a leading figure in the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine (UNSCOP) was essential in leading UNSCOP to endorse the Partition Plan in 1947, which legitimized the creation of a Jewish state. This was followed in 1949 by the Central American states' immediate recognition of Israel's independence and an overwhelmingly positive vote for its acceptance as a U.S. member. Israel's influence declined gradually with the increase of the twenty-one-Arab-member bloc at the United Nations and the decrease of the proportion of Latin Americans in the total membership of the organization. The situation had deteriorated so extensively that the issue of favorable resolutions was no longer the concern, but rather the extent of defeat facing an avalanche of pro-Arab resolutions. Hence, the main interest shifted from a multilateral to a bilateral level of relations.

For nearly two decades bilateral diplomatic relations were carried out by honorary consuls chosen among the local Jewry and an industrious roving ambassador. Although Guatemala was the first country to move its embassy to Jerusalem in 1955, Israeli ambassadors did not arrive in Central America until a few years later.¹⁵ Bilateral ties were most friendly, with all Israeli counterparts establishing their missions in Jerusalem. Even at the peak of such relations, no resident representatives were exchanged with Nicaragua and Honduras. The limited network abroad of diplomatic representation, along with the necessary budget constraints, of these two countries were not seen as justifying an additional embassy in Israel.

The repercussion of the 1981 Reunification of Jerusalem Law provided a serious setback to what was for years considered a diplomatic success. Led by Venezuela, twelve Latin American countries and the

Netherlands—the only embassies remaining at that time in Jerusalem—reluctantly moved their missions to Tel Aviv. A year later a further deterioration occurred when Nicaragua's Sandinistas announced the break of relations with Israel as a reaction to the war in Lebanon. Efforts to reestablish the diplomatic presence in Jerusalem are now underway. Costa Rica and El Salvador are providing such leads despite Arab hostility and threats.

With the polarization of political forces in Central America and the increase of Israel's presence in the area, what was in the past considered to be a situation of seeking solidarity and support from these governments towards Jerusalem has now turned into demands of support and assistance for themselves. In such a situation, Jerusalem's diplomacy of traditional neutrality in regional disputes has now sided with the pro-U.S. camp. Efforts to keep options open were undermined by a quick sympathetic reaction from the Israeli ambassador in Washington to the U.S.-sponsored landing in Grenada. The ambassador, deluded by Israeli officials, may have tilted a previous carefully balanced statement of support for the Contadora initiative, issued at the request of some of the governments involved. By 1983 Israel was seen hand-in-hand with Washington as perceiving common threats emanating from the Grenada-Havana-Managua axis; as a result it is now suggested that Israel is an active ally of the United States in the area. Lately, Israel's longstanding diplomatic relations with Central America has hardly been mentioned. Since the coming into power of the Sandinistas, arms transfer and security assistance from Israel have been overemphasized.

Israel has often been ranked as the seventh arms exporter in the world. Its military and electronic-related equipment exports have been estimated as quadrupling between 1977 and 1981, reaching the total value of an assessed 1 to 1.5 billion dollars. This figure apparently decreased in 1983. From this amount, *Time* magazine (March 28, 1983) concluded that the sales to Central America

for 1982 doubled from the previous year to an expected \$45–50 million. Although in the last decade Israel has sold different types of weaponry to every Central American country (with the possible exception of Belize), 18 additional countries have also supplied arms to the region. Within this context it is hard to corroborate the statement that Israel (in the last period of Somoza) supplied 98 percent of Nicaragua's total military imports¹⁶ or the statement that "Israel was in fact the main supplier of arms to at least six other Latin American countries, and a principal supplier to three more."¹⁷ As Israel's military industry has not reached a total level of self-sufficiency, how could it supply such a high portion of the military needs of other countries? In order to understand the nature of Israel's military negotiations with Central America, one must realize that Israel would not refrain from selling arms to any regime, whatever the political orientation of that regime. Although Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala are often purposely singled out, one should not forget to mention Israeli military transactions with China, the nationalist reformist regime of General Velasco Alvarado in Peru and Allende's regime in Chile. The national principle is that Israel should make efforts to become less dependent of other powers. Military equipment is particularly important in the context of the nearly permanent state of war in the Middle East. In a financially weak country, such a vast industrial-military complex cannot survive on a deficit basis. For an "economy of scale" larger markets have to be found. There is more access if a non-restricted policy is observed.

Furthermore, the rapid arms race makes modern weaponry obsolete in the Middle East while it is still in use in other regions of the world. Vast funds are required for research and development of new weaponry for which commitments could only be made if future markets larger than Israel's were considered. In addition, the many wars continually result in booties of arms which could not always be easily integrated and adapted to the needs of the Israel Defense Forces.

Finally, an elastic market is an important requirement for an industry that, during time of war may urgently need to expand in order to serve domestic needs. Hence, sales without preference to the type of regime can be seen as the prevailing consideration.

However, if political gains can be obtained as a bonus, they are not to be ignored. Such was the case in September 1973 when the first arms negotiation with El Salvador preceded the announcement of the first exchange of embassies in Jerusalem and San Salvador by half a year. Israel's neutral position in Central America was reinforced in 1975 when it concluded an arms agreement with Honduras, the country which confronted El Salvador in the 1969 "Soccer War." In the polarized context of present day Central America, arms supplies to only one side clearly put Israel in the anti-communist camp. At the same time, no limitations have been imposed on countries with severe domestic conflicts. As previously mentioned, the opposition in the Knesset has spoken out about the need to restrict arms sales to countries with a pattern of gross human rights violations, but the test of the seriousness of such instances can only be tested if a Labor-oriented coalition prevails in the July elections.

In the last five years, one can discern a tendency to look at Central America from a strategic point of view, as an extension of a continuous battlefield between Israel and the Arab countries. Such an approach reached its peak during the days of General Sharon as Minister of Defense. An added dimension was formulated in terms of helping "our allies" to succeed in their struggle with the Libyan-PLO partners in the region.

The more global strategic consideration of taking into account U.S. policies in Central America seems to be prevalent among many Israeli cabinet ministers. Indirect benefits may be obtained if military relations with regimes in the region can be coordinated with the Reagan administration. Israel is able and willing to play a role in this area. In this case, U.S. interests are narrowly defined in the White House perspective and there is a

need to overcome the limitations imposed on them by Congress. This position emphasizes the importance of a strategic alliance between Israel and the United States, especially if it provides better markets for Israeli weaponry in Central America, while at the same time Israel is being rewarded by Washington at the bilateral level. The attractions of such an option seem, at least in the short run, undeniable. However, a convergence of interest may not always be possible. In the past, the Carter administration put pressure on the Begin government to stop arms deliveries to Somoza and during the Falkland-Malvinas War contradictory trends emerged between Jerusalem and Washington. A corollary of this triangular conception will implicitly create the expectation that such close cooperation between Israel and the Reagan administration over Central America may in-

elite, arms transfers have helped to save Jewish lives. In Central America, the small Nicaraguan Jewish community has practically disappeared, perhaps because of socioeconomic changes, but also possibly due to the climate that arose from the hostile attitude towards Israel. When guerrilla movements in El Salvador and Guatemala threatened individual members of the Jewish communities, the allegation that Israel was a major arms supplier to the ruling regimes in those countries was mentioned. So far, commercial considerations seem to have prevailed. Arms are being supplied regardless of the possible consequences concerning the well-being of the recipient country's Jewish community.

After having weighed possible considerations in policy formulation towards arms sales to Latin America, it may be worth

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duce some liberal segments of the Jewish public and pro-Israeli congressmen to take a second look at the region. It may also modify their critical attitudes towards the administration's hardline policies. Yet there is a risk that the opposite situation may arise. Sympathizers of Israel, found among liberal public opinion in the United States, would become alienated toward Israel rather than change their attitudes about Central America.

Finally, a "Jewish" angle has been mentioned in regard to the repression in Argentina under military rule. Some in Israel suggested that arms supplies to Argentina should cease because of the probability that such weapons could be used against innocent civilians, among them a large Jewish contingent. Others argued that due to the special relationship developed with the military

mentioning that implementation has not necessarily always followed such lines. Often, to the embarrassment of the Defense Ministry, arms sales in the region go through too many hands. The ministry has tried to put an end, so far ineffectively, to unnecessary intermediaries, agents and arms merchants, and conduct business in a more centralized way. Personal connections between retired high-ranking Israeli officers and the generals of the region have often determined the success of a transaction. In addition, given the prestige of the Israeli army, many former officers have been traveling through Central America offering their personal services as anti-terrorist consultants, permanent advisers, trainers, and even as simple bodyguards. While the mercenary nature of these offers should be stressed, the fact that their nationality and background are Israeli raises the

question of whether their unofficial presence can be restricted by a purposeful official policy. Their presence blurs the line between those who may be in charge of security assistance on official assignment and other unplanned adventures.

Arms sales have bypassed all figures of normal commercial transactions in previous years. Imports and exports to and from Central America have been rather insignificant, given the distance and traditional market orientations of both sides. However, Israeli commercial firms and private individuals have started increasing business relations mostly on a consultancy basis as well as adding to infrastructural, training, water and agricultural products by establishing permanent residence, particularly in Panama. To a large extent, such developments characterize Israel's recent presence, while the number of experts in the field of technical assistance sent through international cooperation projects is gradually shrinking. The cutback is a result of the severe economic problems of Israel, as well as the diminution of international and inter-American funding.

A reduction of Israel's role in the area of development was considered by many as unfortunate, particularly at a time when the volume of military transfers has significantly increased. The political payoffs due to the presence of Israeli experts in different areas of development could not be clearly calculated. However, the impact of experts in rural and remote areas in small countries, such as those in Central America, has created sympathy toward Israel. Such trends may now be revised with the emergency of the Caribbean Basin initiative and the recommendations of the National Bipartisan Commission on Central America led by Henry Kissinger. Israel is hopeful that the terms of strategic cooperation with the United States will provide her with an important role to play in the area of economic development in Central America. Meanwhile, large numbers of trainees continue to come to Israel for such courses as cooperativism, regional agriculture, and the role of women.

Israel has used cultural, scientific and academic ties with Central America in an effort to maintain public sympathy. A flow of visitors from the intellectual and artistic circles—prelates and lay leaders associated with the Catholic church, trade union journalists and public opinion makers—has continuously been maintained. Exhibitions and other forms of artistic expression have been circulated in the region and steady exchanges have been kept by a bilaterally coordinated cultural institute in Jerusalem. No matter how strongly the pragmatic dimension of arms transfer is emphasized, it is still possible to find good friends of Israel among many Central Americans who feel a commitment to the cause of the Jewish people.

Of all the Central American states, Costa Rica has provided the most support throughout the years. Amity towards Israel resulted from a common heritage of a large sector of public opinion and leadership. Although crossing party lines, traditional close ties were initiated by President Figueres who saw the 1948 Revolution coincide with the making of the Jewish state. His *Liberacion Nacional* party has since become particularly close to Israel because of institutional links with Israel's Labor Party through the Socialist International movement. In addition to the interests expressed in new social experiences, many policymakers in Costa Rica have felt that a common bond unites them because each is a democratic state within a hostile and authoritarian environment. Concrete expressions of such a friendship were evidenced in the support clearly shown by Costa Rica at the United Nations and at the bilateral level, often an isolated voice. On the other hand, Israel reciprocated with approximately one hundred experts working in different spheres of development aid, and has also engaged in the recent training and reorganizing of Costa Rica's national police. This function became a priority given the emergence of terrorism, mostly brought into the country by substantial groups of various exile factions. The United States is prevented by law from training police personnel in Latin America.

A small but efficient (2000–3000) Jewish community has been helpful in creating a more positive attitude towards Israel. This has been emphasized by the exceptional influence of important personalities such as the Reverend Benjamin Nunez, whose central position in *Liberacion Nacional* and his attraction to Israel have enabled him to play a major role, twice as ambassador to Israel, in international governmental organizations, and as a close advisor to President Monge.

Israel's relations with Nicaragua have become controversial. Public debate reflects the dichotomous view that each side blames the other for the deterioration. Anastasio "Tacho" Somoza facilitated the purchase of weaponry by providing Nicaraguan documents to Israel's emissaries in Europe in 1948, the time of the United States arms boycott to the fighting parties in the Middle East. To connect this "debt of honor" to the fact that Israel continued to supply arms to his son until the last seems a trivial and unconvincing argument. Under pressure from the Carter administration, by July 1979 Israel had announced the cessation of arms transactions. All supplies in transit came to a halt. Despite word from Jerusalem, an arms dealer from Mexico continued to sell weapons until the very last moment, which undoubtedly reinforced the negative reactions of the Sandinistas. Nevertheless, one should not take at face value that "Israeli military aid to Somoza pushed the Sandinistas into the PLO's arms."¹⁸ There has been evidence of cooperation between the Sandinista Front of National Liberation (FSNL) and the PLO from as early as 1969. References are made to the Nicaraguan revolutionaries joining the Palestinians in their struggle against King Hussein during the tragic "Black September" of 1970¹⁹ as well as anti-Israel terrorist acts. Since then, contacts have been close, including the alleged training of the guerrillas in Palestinian camps in Lebanon. Hence, rather than explain the deterioration of relations causally, it may be more realistic to consider it as interaction in a process of continuous escalation. Israeli

diplomats have attempted to present their credentials to the Sandinista-controlled junta, to no avail. By 1982, Managua officially severed all relations with Jerusalem.

Such a hostile Sandinista stand should not come as a surprise since the PLO has made strong inroads in Managua. An embassy with over 50 members on its staff, the granting of a loan to Nicaragua, Arafat's visit honoring the first anniversary of the dictator's overthrow, Palestinian training camps for guerrilla warfare and Air Force pilots all exemplify their presence in the country. In addition, Libya has been active in transferring weaponry and large loans to the Sandinistas which will also be diverted to other revolutionary movements in Central America. There is no question that when adopting a position towards Israel, the Nicaraguans have more than a grudge regarding arms sales to Somoza.

Israel's connections with the counter-revolutionaries have been repeatedly referred to by different sources. Allegedly, arms captured in the Lebanon War have been allocated to the forces fighting against the Sandinistas from the southern border. These groups are associated with ARDE, the organization led by Eden Pastora, the legendary "Commandante Zero." Israel's official denial of such transfers is a departure from the traditional policy of "no comment" and may reflect its uneasiness regarding such an operation. Denying supplies of such weapons leaves the possibility of indirect transactions or other subtle options. From a Washington perspective, Israel's involvement with the Contras, together with Brazil and Venezuela, might have served as an alternative source of weaponry at the time when congressional scrutiny made covert operations more difficult, or to make the limited budget earmarked for the CIA more flexible and divert it to not less destabilizing ventures. From the Contras' angle, it may have served the original purpose of denying any direct connections with the CIA as well as taking advantage of the captured Sandinista weaponry and ammunition, now

largely provided by the Soviet Union and Cuba, and similar to those seized by Israel in Lebanon.

From an Israeli official perspective, the cost of the operation could be generously compensated for by receiving larger amounts of U.S. military aid as well as displaying goodwill towards an administration which has not enough room for maneuver south of its border.

The issue of the 150-member Jewish community in Nicaragua has been blown out of proportion by many Jewish organizations in the United States. Numbers began to dwindle after the 1972 earthquake, and the controversy regarding the cause of the exodus of those few remaining Jews after the revolution again reveals the polarized nature of the public debate. Whether Marxism or anti-Semitism was the cause for their departure may not necessarily relate to the question. Without going into great depth, it may be fair to assume that some decided to leave and had their property confiscated because of their links with the Somoza clan. Others may have just followed because the socio-economic changes were perceived as a threat to their well-being. The last few may have fled because the number of remaining Jews was so small that it could no longer function as a community.

According to a Palestinian source, "the key to Israeli reliability as a U.S. surrogate lies in the fact that Zionist interests in these endeavors are equal to those of the United States."²⁰ On the other hand, as President Reagan has stated, "It is no secret that the same forces which are destabilizing the Middle East—the Soviet Union, Libya, the PLO—are also working hand-in-glove with Cuba to destabilize Central America..."²¹ Is it necessary for Israel to be boxed into such a dichotomy? For many in Jerusalem, this is the unavoidable result of the facts established in Central America by the Marxist-Arab coalition. Within a two-camp strategic vision, the Israeli policymakers may share Jeane Kirkpatrick's differentiation between the "communist totalitarians" and the "be-

nevolent authoritarian." Nowadays, the Middle East and Central America provide the best scenarios of Cold War polarization. Alliances with superpowers are now intrinsically linked to the autochthonous roots of the conflict within the region. Moreover, by relinquishing an autonomous stand in Central America, current policymakers in Israel are undermining the very premise of independence that lies behind the main justification for a self-sufficient military capability. Furthermore, the short-term considerations of allying Israel with a party currently involved in a highly divisive issue may alienate some of the more devoted American friends in political circles within the Jewish community and the public-at-large. Thus far most Jewish Congressmen have continued to vote against President Reagan's policy in Nicaragua and some have specifically asked Israel not to undermine such a stand. A wider interpretation of American concerns in Central America could shift the emphasis to cooperation in schemes of economic development and technical assistance, areas in which Israel possesses unique qualifications.

The image of Israel's association with the "pariah" states looks, over the last years, more and more like a self-fulfilling prophecy. Previous Israeli governments preferred to highlight their relations with democratic regimes in Latin America. By now, the growing isolation of Israel within the international system plus the fact that right or wrong, an automatic Eastern bloc Third World majority has been assembled against it, allows for a fatalistic view which will inevitably denounce Israel for being in collusion with such countries. Even if we no longer discuss the cause and effect sequence of the deterioration of Sandinista Nicaragua-Israel relations, why should Israel unremorsefully accept a close association with regimes that have been universally seen as major violators of human rights, and as perpetrators of political killings by the thousands? Israel's danger regarding such a far-reaching conclusion is that a short-term op-

tion may have adverse results in the future. The case of Nicaragua still remains open for a hypothetical reassessment of Israel's alternate options prior to the downfall of Somoza.

The present Likud-led coalition seems relatively satisfied with the results of the policy in the area. Yet, the departure of General Sharon from the defense portfolio may provide for a more cautious policy in terms of direct involvement of Israeli personnel in the region. Such changes, however, may be marginal. If a Labor-led coalition is to be formed, its leaders may have to reassess such behavior. Although past Labor governments have laid the groundwork for the development of present policies in Latin America, concern expressed within the ranks of the party may lead to a reevaluation of the scope of military relations. There might be a difference between a Likud and Labor government—whereas the first has expressed an unsolicited willingness to operate as a proxy for the United States, the latter may not volunteer such a predisposition. If approached by Washington, strategic cooperation may be considered on a case-by-case basis, with some reticence. Once more, it should be stressed that the subject of Israeli-Latin American relations has been a low priority among decision makers which might be an indication of more continuity versus change. Yet if a hypothetical dramatic event were to occur (i.e., the death of an Israeli officer serving in a military function in the region, a crisis concerning a Jewish community), that could produce a more salient debate within Israeli political circles and the general public.

Israel's industrial-military complex will continue to be a strong input in decision-making, transfers being overwhelmingly guided by the drive to increase arms sales. Such needs may be reinforced by Israel's severe economic crisis, the priority of increasing exports, facing a negative balance of payments and a large foreign debt. Still, prospects of arms transactions in Latin America may diminish due to the unavailability of funds, a less restrictive American

policy of arms transfers often with better financial terms, and the development of the production of military equipment by the large Latin American countries (Brazil and Argentina). Such increased capabilities may compete with Israeli exports to the region and require even more innovative terms. The emphasis can be put on better financial terms, fringe political tradeoffs or additional special training benefits for the recipient countries.

The Arab offensive in Latin America may influence the parameters of Israeli involvement, although the drastic increase of activities of Arab countries and the PLO in the region over the last decade may have reached a plateau. Divisions among Arab countries themselves with and within the PLO could present obstacles for a more concerted and intensive action in Central America. However, conflict and lack of unity have not prevented a few of the more extreme and activist forces from continuing, and even escalating, their activities there.

Additionally, PLO losses in Lebanon or changes in its leadership could lead to a renewed involvement in terrorist worldwide activities. Thus, an anti-terrorist policy coordination between Israel and affected Latin American regimes could be envisioned. We have come full circle since the first days of Israel's independence. The creation of the Jewish state was forcefully sponsored by a progressive regime in Guatemala under growing accusations made under the influence of the "international communist movement" and by 1954 out of power by a CIA-sponsored invasion. Today, revolutionary Nicaragua is perceived as one of Israel's most bitter enemies. Interestingly, while the State Department, during the first years, was lobbying in the region against the Zionist initiatives, it now seems that Israel is willing to play a role in Central America which coincides with the White House's designs. Is that the result of changes within Israel, Arab activities, Central America or the world? The answer is, as in most cases, that a combination of these factors has produced the situation portraying Israel in a very con-

troversial light. Jerusalem may have to take into account the winds from the north, and the currents of opinion south of the Rio Grande, particularly given the trend towards democratization in South America. Otherwise, Israel may find itself in an isolated position, in an area where traditional friendship has produced long-term assets which must be weighed against the immediate returns.

NOTES

1. As the Popular Front of the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) puts it: "Israel arms trade in Latin America is but a modification of its aggression and expansion in the Middle East," *Democratic Palestine*, no. 1 (January 1984), p. 29.
2. *Expresso* (Guayaquil: January 30, 1983), reporting on a statement by former Guatemalan Foreign Minister Guillermo Toriello at a session of the Russell Tribunal held in Madrid.
3. *Palestine Human Rights Newsletter*, (Chicago) vol. 2, no. 5 (August 1983).
4. Statement by Zhedid Labib Terzi, Ambassador of the Organization for the Liberation of Palestine at the United Nations, *Excelsior* (Mexico City: January 12, 1983).
5. *NACLA Report* (May/June 1983), p. 45.
6. *Palestine Human Rights Newsletter*, *ibid*.
7. *NACLA Report*, *ibid*.
8. *La Voz* (Buenos Aires: November 20, 1983).
9. *Sovietskaia Rasia* (January 18, 1983); *Izvestia* (December 3, 1983); and *Pravda* (December 24, 1983).
10. Statement by PLO representative in Mexico. *El Dia* (Mexico City: August 5, 1983). Similar statements can be found in the proceedings of deliberations of the Coordinating Bureau of the non-aligned countries which met in Managua in January 1983, as reported in *Novedadas* (Mexico City: January 15, 1983).
11. Clarence Lusane, "Washington's Proxy: Israeli Arms in Central America, *Covert Action*, no. 20 (Washington, D.C.: winter 1984), pp. 34-37.
12. Bishara Assad Bahbah, "The Military Dimension in Israeli-Latin American Relations," August 1983. The doctoral dissertation was presented to the Department of Government, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Public access restricted for five years.
13. Nathaniel Lorch, "Latin America and Israel," *The Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 22 (winter 1982), pp. 70-84. In his opening remarks Lorch stresses the absence of discussion regarding Latin American policies at the Israeli Cabinet level.
14. For a very personalized account of Israel's first years of pre- and post-independence lobbying in the area, see the memoirs of a roving ambassador, Moshe A. Tov, *El Murmullo de Israel-Historical Diplomatico* (Jerusalem: La Semana Publicaciones, 1983).
15. For an overall analysis of the period ending in 1973, see: Edy Kaufman, Koram Shapira and Joel Barromi, *Israel-Latin American Relations* (New Brunswick: Rutgers Transaction, 1979).
16. The figure of 98 percent sales to Somoza may have been taken from *The Latin American Weekly Report*, WR 80-19 (May 16, 1960) which relates it to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. Still, no reference to the primary source, the period of time which such a high estimate is covering and who is responsible for the other 2 percent is given. The addition of Israel being the main supplier of many other countries (in plural) could not be traced.
17. Eric Hoogland, *Israel's Arms Exports-Proxy Merchant for the U.S.* ADC Background Paper #8 (Washington: American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, no date).
18. Interview with Rabbi Klepfisz of Panama, published in the Jewish weekly *Nueva Presencia* (Buenos Aires, November 8, 1980).
19. *Al Wattan* (Kuwait: June 6, 1979). Other references to PLO involvement with the Sandinistas and guerrilla organizations in Central America have been mentioned in Israeli official and semi-official publications, as well as an article by Robert F. Lamberg, "The PLO in Latin America," *Swiss Review of World Affairs* (June 1982), p. 12.
20. *Democratic Palestine*, *ibid*.
21. President Reagan's speech to the Anti-defamation League Convention in Washington (June 10, 1983), reported by *Jewish World* (Long Island: February 24-March 1, 1984).