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Death by 'security': Israel's services in Latin America

The country has supported repressive governments in the region to suppress indigenous movements and uprisings.

Belen Fernandez

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According to a Mexican **news article** that surfaced in May, the Israeli military will begin training the police force in Mexico's southeastern state of Chiapas, where the predominantly indigenous Zapatista National Liberation Army is based.

Yaron Yugman, Israel's defence ministry representative in Mexico, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic, is quoted as affirming that "a country's security is fundamental to its growth" and that human rights would be one of the focuses of military instruction.

Of course, "security" and "growth" aren't luxuries usually intended for domestic indigenous groups. A May **article** in *The Electronic Intifada* recalls the aftermath of the 1994 Zapatista uprising, which coincided with the inauguration of the North American Free Trade Agreement:

*"The Mexican government found itself needing to respond to the dictates of foreign investors, as a **famously leaked Chase-Manhattan Bank memo** revealed: 'While Chiapas, in our opinion, does not pose a fundamental threat to Mexican political stability, it is perceived to be so by many in the investment community. The government will need to eliminate the Zapatistas to demonstrate their effective control of the national territory and of security policy'."*

As for the alleged focus on human rights, Israel's expertise in oppressing indigenous populations and squelching dignity happens to be more marketable.

The Israeli embassy in Mexico has reportedly denied military machinations in the southeast, but not even **Fox News Latino** is convinced:

"The Israeli Embassy's denial of its government working in Chiapas is puzzling, given the long history that Israel's government has of working with Mexico. Since the early 1970s, the Mexican government has purchased airplanes, helicopters, missile boats, small arms and other weapons from either the Israeli army or Israeli military contractors."

Contributions to genocide

Mexico's indigenous Mayans are not the only group to have found themselves on the receiving end of Israel's arsenal.

In an email to me, acclaimed author and historian **Greg Grandin** outlined a previous episode of such charitable regional intervention:

"In [civil war-era] Guatemala, Israel, acting on behalf of the Reagan administration, stepped in to supply military equipment, including helicopters and Galil rifles, and training that had been cut off during the previous Carter administration. Israel also supplied [the Guatemalan regime with] computers, software, and other equipment used for surveillance. This was at the height of the genocide, which ultimately left 200,000 dead, including many Mayans."

Investigative reporter Jeremy Bigwood, who as a photojournalist covered Latin American civil wars in the 1980s and 1990s, confirmed that the Israelis were "up to their ears in the genocide" in Guatemala. He said the Israelis had supplied the military with Arava STOL planes and armoured personnel carriers, and established an ammunition factory in the city of Coban. Bigwood added: "The Israelis used telephone analysis - similar to what the NSA is now doing - and were able to utterly destroy the Guatemalan urban guerrillas. They assisted in the countryside by mapping out each family farmhouse and identifying the politics of the inhabitants."

A 2012 **report** entitled *Israel's Worldwide Role in Repression* by the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network notes that Israel's extensive experience in displacing Palestinians enabled the state to assist in the planning and implementation of "scorched earth" policies in both Guatemala and El Salvador. According to the report, the Guatemalan operations "were combined with 'development poles' - concentrated villages of displaced populations that allowed for greater government control over the popular movement and the repression of any grassroots organising".

Giong back further, a 1986 **article** by the Middle East Research and Information Project quotes a former member of the Knesset foreign affairs committee as defending Israeli involvement in Guatemala: "Israel is a pariah state. When people ask us for something, we cannot afford to ask questions about ideology. The only type of regime that Israel would not aid would be one that is anti-American".

From Palestinian laboratory to 'trail of terror'

One advantage to being forced to comply "[w]hen people ask us for something", obviously, is that sizable profits accompany weapons sales.

As for Israel's alleged pariah-hood, this tragic scenario is seemingly contradicted by Bigwood's **2003 article** for Al Jazeera, *Israel's Latin American trail of terror*, in which he lists countries in the region where Israel has supplied, trained, and advised right-wing groups and regimes: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela. So much for lonesomeness.

Ideology's negligible importance is confirmed in Bigwood's article by Israel's support for the Argentine military junta's dirty war of 1976-1983 - which was characterised by mass forced disappearances and torture - despite, as Bigwood notes, the junta's anti-Semitic orientation. Ideological overlap is, however, seen in the case of Colombia, where President Juan Manuel Santos has not only appeared in a **promotional video** for an Israeli private security firm but has also **announced**: "We've even been accused of being the Israelites [*sic*] of Latin America, which personally makes me feel really proud."

Inside Story - The shift in the global arms trade

Beyond verifying Santos' clunessness, this statement is particularly relevant given that Carlos Castano - the founder of modern Colombian paramilitarism - was trained in Israel and **acknowledged copying the paramilitary concept from the Israelis**.

Israel's hobby of collective punishment has, it seems, proven especially instructive; although formally disbanded, Colombian paramilitaries continue to terrorise civilian populations, often reportedly in concert with the military - which is itself famous for **slaughtering civilians and dressing the corpses up as anti-government guerrillas**. A primary goal of this terrorisation is to clear land of indigenous groups, campesinos, and other people whose existence impedes the proper exploitation of resources.

In Chiapas, meanwhile, the indigenous movement has rudely imperiled the flourishing of neoliberalism. *The Electronic Intifada* **article** explains: "The Zapatistas took back large tracts of land [from the government] on which they have since built subsistence cooperatives, autonomous schools, collectivised clinics and other democratic community structures."

Enter the Israeli army.

John Collins, chair of the Global Studies Department at New York's St Lawrence University, **describes** Israeli military collaboration with the Mexican government in Chiapas as "further evidence of how tools of surveillance and repression field-tested on Palestinians are being used

throughout the world", quoting Israeli anthropologist Jeff Halper's **assessment** that "[t]he Israeli economy is based on exporting the occupation [of Palestine]".

Although Israel may contend that "a country's security is fundamental to its growth", the fact is that global *insecurity* is fundamental to Israel's growth.