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British and Israeli Assistance to U.S. Strategies of Torture and Counter- insurgency in Central and Latin America, 1967-96: An Argument Against Complexification

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Although the role of the U.S. in supporting the anti-democratic, counter-revolutionary movements, governments, and dictatorships that flourished in Latin America from the 1960s to the 1990s is well known, this article examines the support provided to the U.S. by other countries. Principally this support was provided by Israel and the United Kingdom, but other countries were also involved, such as South Africa, Taiwan, France, and even Saudi Arabia. The article argues that a clear material framework underlies the assistance given by these countries. It also identifies a number of cultural and historical reasons why anti-democratic governments in Latin America found particular political empathy in Israel.

In the truly massive loss of civilian life accompanying the various U.S.-backed counter-insurgency campaigns that took place in Latin American countries such as Chile, Colombia and Guatemala during the 1970s and 1980s, remarkably underreported is the significant participation of other countries alongside the U.S. – namely Israel and the UK, but also France, Taiwan, South Africa and even Saudi Arabia. It is the *multiply-centered* nature of this relationship which forms the focus of this article. I argue that it was the collusion of aims and arms, or what one Reagan spokesman called “a convergence of

interests”, which brought together Israeli, South African, British and American strategies in line with the desires of Latin American military and financial elites.

Although ‘complexification’ describes any act or process which makes a situation more complex, I have decided to re-employ the word more cynically in this article. ‘Complexification’ here refers to any approach that exhibits the following characteristics in its analysis of a conflict:

- It gathers together an extensive range of different factors and variables.
- It levels or greatly diminishes any degree of relative importance between the many factors cited.
- It concludes from the plethora of factors examined that no single, overarching cause or culpable party can be identified.

My use of the verb ‘to complexify’, therefore, refers to a de-politicising process, which becomes so metaphysically overwhelmed with an abundance of detail, context and individual actors that it fails – or does not wish to see – profounder, palimpsest-like patterns beneath the web of perspectives.²

The opposite of ‘complexification’ is not ‘simplification’ or ‘monocausal explication’, but rather a more careful understanding of linkage within the delineation of complexities. Throughout the 1980s, the fact that the Guatemalan Right referred to indigenous uprisings as the “Palestinianisation” of rural regions illustrates not the irony of the metaphor, but the very real assistance that Israel provided the Guatemalan military in their repression of the rebellions (Black, 1984, p. 154). When leftist guerrillas in El Salvador kidnapped the South African ambassador in 1979, amongst their demands was a severance of ties with Tel Aviv and Capetown, and a recognition of the PLO (Bahbah, 1986, p. 149).³ When British mercenaries fought alongside South African soldiers in Angola in the 1970s, many of the Israeli military advisors who trained them would later reappear in the military workshops and parade-grounds of Central America, educating officers and soldiers from a variety of Latin American countries in techniques of torture, firearm use and general counter-insurgency tactics. This plethora of different national actors does not constitute a hopelessly intractable web of complexities, but rather a range of phenomena that nonetheless observes an overall definite and substantive pattern.

Simplistic Explanations of Foreign Involvement in Latin America

A simplistic explanation for the above examples would be a vulgar Marxist one: First-world capitalist nations and the pariah-states they support enthusiastically work together

with the wealthy elites of developing countries in order to militarise their infrastructures whenever the proletariat in these regions threaten to de-stabilise the plutocracies which international capital finds so amenable. Such a formulation, however, inevitably encounters difficulties in the negotiation of at least four complicating factors.

Firstly, there are enough examples of tension between social democratic nation-states during this period⁴ to show that, far from working harmoniously together, relations between capitalist economies, and even Cold War allies, were difficult and on occasion even hostile. Ideological similarity was no automatic guarantee of political collaboration. This could also be extended to Latin American countries: Galtieri and Pinochet's parallel persecution of the Left in their respective countries did not prevent them from planning military action against one another. Nor did generous finance and military support from the U.S. prevent the nationalism of Guatemalan generals such as Vicores and Montt from expressing itself in moments of anti-Americanism (Black, 1984, p. 6).

Secondly, each of these players contained mechanisms of dissent and factionalism. Pace Chomsky (1996), the differences between the Reagan and Carter administrations in their attitude towards Central America, for example, were still significant. To speak of countries such as Guatemala or the United Kingdom as monolithic entities is to overlook the considerable complexities within their structures. The internal military disputes that provoked Guatemala's sequence of coups – Lucas García, Montt, and Vicores – attests to a series of tensions not easily summed up by the blanket term 'regime'. Likewise, it fails to register the various wranglings within the British Labour party over arms sales to Latin America, or the leftist Israeli representatives who went to meet the new Sandinista government in Nicaragua (Phythian, 2000, p. 107 ff; Klich, 1990, pp. 69-74). These instances problematise the demonisation of supposedly homogenous entities such as 'British' or 'Israeli' actors.

Thirdly, reductionist attempts to divide conflicts into groups of 'oppressors' and 'oppressed' encounter difficulties when the latter reveal themselves to be internally fractured and divided. South African forces fought alongside one Angolan group (UNITA) against another (MPLA); in Colombia, anti-government guerrillas were split into at least three main factions (FARC, ELN, M-19), whilst Guatemala's considerable indigenous population probably offers the most striking example of problematic notions of victimhood, with tensions not only evident between the Mayans and Ladinos in the resistance movement, but also in the role played by indigenous soldiers in the atrocities of the Guatemalan military (Schirmer, 1998, pp. 81-103; Garrard-Burnett, 2010, pp. 98-107).

A fourth factor which might complicate simple notions of 'capitalist states' colluding with one another would be an insistence on the purely monetary dimension of

the weapons training or arms sales. In the case of Israel, this would mean pointing out not only how the Israeli state seemed willing to sell arms to almost anyone – the People’s Republic of China was one of its largest customers throughout the 1980s (Beit-Hallahmi, 1987, pp. 36-7) – but more importantly how a sizeable proportion of the training and assistance given was on a mercenary basis, through figures such as the infamous Yair Klein and his company Spearhead Ltd, which trained paramilitary death squads in Colombia in the early 1980s. The presence of mercenaries in at least some of these countries’ conflicts – Angola, Guatemala, Colombia – would suggest a series of individual, commercial ventures, rather than an alliance of ‘capitalist nations’ working to crush an insurgent, global proletariat.

Despite the relative validity of these four complicating factors, I will argue that they do not fundamentally disrupt an overall pattern of convergent interests in the examination of British and Israeli military assistance to U.S. strategies in countries such as Guatemala, Colombia and Chile. The complexities these four factors bring to the analysis are substantial; their incorporation is a precondition for understanding how a term such as ‘global oppression’ works at all. Nevertheless, the surprising, and at times even extraordinary, extent to which weapons and militaries from these different countries could be found operating next to one another seems to reinforce a larger picture of capitalist social democracies, working with local elites, to prevent the apparatus of international capital from being disrupted by whatever version of the proletariat was threatening to disrupt it – whether that be Palestinians, Namibians, indigenous peasants, or labor unions. In the following sections, we detail some of these moments.

British Military Assistance to Regimes in Central and Latin America

When it comes to foreign interventions in Latin America, the U.S. has had such a prominent and visible role in the undermining of ‘unsuitable’ governments and the financing of alternative regimes that a definite lack of attention can be seen with regards to other countries’ interests in the continent, such as those of Israel and the U.K. Most followers of such histories will be aware of, for example, the central role Kissinger and the CIA played in the overthrow of Allende’s socialist government and the bombing of the presidential palace in Santiago, all of which served to install the U.S. backed dictator, Augusto Pinochet, in 1973. However, relatively few historians will be aware that, in the murderous bombing of Moneda Palace, British Hunter aircraft played a vital part in the assault (Beckett, 2003, pp. 90-1).

Great Britain, both as a state but also less officially as a supplier of mercenaries and arms, has played a considerable role in the establishment and maintenance of military dictatorships in post-war Central and Latin America (Phythian, 2000, p. 105). As

we shall see in the next section, we have reports of British mercenaries training paramilitaries in Colombia (Castaño, 2001, p. 12).⁵ Up until the 1982 war with Argentina, both Labour and Conservative governments were enthusiastic suppliers of Sea Cat missiles and naval destroyers to the Argentine military regime. Indeed, the final sale took place ten days before the outbreak of war (Phythian, 2000, pp. 123, 125). Brazil, a country which saw a US-backed coup in 1964 and a dictatorship which continued in effect until 1985, was the largest purchaser of British arms during the 1970s, buying three times more than either Argentina or Chile (Phythian, 2000, p. 135). We even have an all-too-rare instance of popular outcry from British churches, unions and the media preventing the sale of military equipment to a right-wing dictatorship – this time El Salvador, which in 1977 attempted to buy a dozen armoured Saladin vehicles from the U.K., but found the British government unable to supply them due to intense public pressure (*ibid.*, pp. 137-40).

The case of Britain's relationship with Chile, however, is probably the only example of British interest in Latin America that a wider audience would know about, primarily because of the judicially unprecedented arrest of Pinochet in the U.K. in 1998. The arms historian Mark Phythian has been the most effective chronicler of the Anglo-Chilean relationship during the 1970s and 1980s, charting an evolving sequence of deals, denials, collusion and internal tensions whose history basically teaches us three things. Firstly, it reveals that the assistance Britain offered Pinochet's dictatorship was not only state-implemented, but also endorsed at every level all the way up to the office of the Prime Minister him/herself. In the year 1974 alone, by which time the newly-installed dictatorship had already murdered or 'disappeared' two thousand people (Wright, 2007, p. 55), 53 officers from the Chilean Navy and 223 ordinary seamen visited Britain for naval training courses (Phythian, 2000, p. 114). Air force bases such as RAF Bracknell were used to give training to Chilean pilots. In the early 1980s, so much weaponry was being flown to Chile that Luton Airport (in the U.K.) had a special 'Chilean depot'. British aircraft were flown to Belize, and then re-painted with Chilean Air Force insignia to fly reconnaissance missions over Argentina (*ibid.*, 116). Apart from these substantial arms sales (the U.K. had supplied effectively the bulk of the Chilean Navy) and training of military personnel, the British government's active collaboration with Pinochet's dictatorship did not merely agree to exercise moral self-denial, but also actively co-operated with the very worst of the regime's atrocities. Barely three months after the unmarked graves of over 600 dead had been found in Santiago cemetery, the British foreign minister claimed that the human rights situation was improving (*ibid.*, 114). Even worse, telegrams from the British Embassy to the Foreign Office indicated that a deal had been done: Pinochet would allow the British SAS to set up airbases on Chilean soil, and in return the British government would supply more weapons, silence its human rights

criticism, and actively work to undermine the UN investigation into the tortures and disappearances proliferating under the regime.

A second point that emerges from this mini-history is the extent to which British businesses worked to lubricate the UK's relationship with Pinochet. In 1975, Britain was the largest creditor to Chile after the U.S., to the tune of £14 million (ibid, p. 110). As Phythian (2000) points out, the visit of the British Trade Minister Cecil Parkinson in 1980 foreshadowed the Reagan administration's own warming of business and military relations after the Carter Ban was lifted (ibid, p. 116). Two years later, when Pinochet's DINA (the Chilean secret police) had murdered over a thousand people, another British trade delegation would declare Chile to be "a moderate and stabilising force" (ibid, p. 118; see also Wright, 2007, p. 80).⁶ A 1987 diary entry belonging to the British Trade Minister, Alan Clark, succinctly expresses how concerned the British government was about the torture and abuses of the Pinochet regime:

Earlier today a creepy official, who is "in charge" (Heaven help us) of South America, came over to brief me ahead of my trip to Chile. All crap about human rights. Not one word about the UK interest. (Quoted in Phythian, 2000, p. 122)

The story of how Chile's U.S.-backed dictatorship ushered in an era of neo-liberal economic policies has been told numerous times (most recently, Klein, 2007). Set against this background – that is, the apparent use of dictatorships to clear the way for free-market economic projects – the famous friendship between Pinochet and Thatcher was not merely one of *realpolitik*, as Thatcher often claimed, but also one born of ideological affinity. Although the latter point became less true as Chile's relations with the U.S. in the 1980s deteriorated – and its rapport with the U.K. strengthened because of the Falklands conflict with Argentina – it is fair to see economic interests, mostly in the realm of significant arms sales, as a driving force in the manufacture of intimacy between these two right-wing governments.

However, what the 'creepy official' in Alan Clark's diary passage also reveals is the existence of significant internal tensions within both Labour and Conservative governments regarding the sale of military equipment and weapons training to brutal dictatorships. Emerging most clearly from the various cables between internal elements within the British government – the Foreign Office and the British embassy – is a degree of anxiety about supplying such regimes, more than any genuine ethical reservations. At the outbreak of the Falklands conflict, British newspaper editors were asked by the government not to mention the U.K.'s rapidly developing relationship with Chile (Phythian, 2000, p. 110). The attempted purchase of 300 Centaur armoured vehicles by

Pinochet's regime in 1984 caused unusual consternation, as it coincided at the time with a new wave of repression towards leftists, students and labour unions. A British Conservative MP visiting Chile that year insisted, in a press statement which almost seemed to be trying to convince himself as much as his audience, that

The Chileans told me they wanted it for use in the northern desert and the boggy areas in the south and not for use against their own people ... the Centaur is simply a truck; it is certainly nothing like that dreadful AMAC riot vehicle which the Government banned from being sold to Chile. (Quoted in Phythian, 2000, p. 120)

Although the Centaur sale never went through, a vehicle based closely on the design was seen a year later on the streets of Santiago, being "used to kill students who were taking part in ... demonstration[s]" (Hansard, 24 July 1986, cols. 830-1 cited in Phythian, 2000, p. 120). The British MP's words seem to be an example of what the philosopher Žižek would call "fetishist disavowal" (Žižek, 2006, p. 353): a semantic disowning of torture and murder, whilst simultaneously facilitating the very process of the thing disavowed. This cynical observation of a distance between sign and act – a desire to perform a series of superficial gestures, whilst secretly pursuing a very different sequence of actions – can be seen in most of the British government's attitudes towards cultivating its public relationship with the Chilean government throughout the 1980s. Phythian quotes the amusing memo the British Foreign Office circulated in response to the considerable criticism arising in the British press, as well as from Church figures such as Cardinal Basil Hume. Headed "Possibilities for Curtailments of Relations", the document considered and dismissed various bans and boycotts the U.K. could inflict on Chile as punishment for its human rights abuses, concluding with its final resolution: a ban on cocktail parties at the Chilean Embassy.

We might consider a Ministerial and senior official boycott of Chilean embassy social occasions. This could either be confined to FCO contacts or be extended to the wider range of business between Whitehall and the Chilean embassy. (Phythian, 2000, p. 119)

Of course, we are now fully in the realm of satire. If the satirical, however, implies an ironic sense of distance between how things should be and how they are, then many of the evasions which the U.S., Guatemalan, British and Israeli governments employed to describe their behaviour had an element of the potentially satirical about them. This we shall see when we come to Guatemala, which re-branded the camps of forced labour it

ran for landless peasants it had dispossessed as “Poles of Development” (*Pollos de desarrollo*).

Although Britain was one of the principal arms suppliers and military allies of Chile, it was certainly not the only one. Quite apart from the U.S., other countries also helped Pinochet’s regime strengthen itself by acquiring military expertise and equipment. France not only sold them sixteen Mirage fighter jets, but also trained their pilots (Phythian, 2000, p. 114). Throughout the 1970s Israel sold Chile huge amount of weaponry: Shafirir air-to-air missiles, Reshef patrol boats, and not to mention Chile’s fleet of M-51 Israeli tanks, which the British government tried to supply its V-8 Condor engines for (Bahbah, 1986, p. 74; Phythian, 2000, p. 119). It was Britain, however, acting out of a mixture of business and geopolitical interests, coupled after 1979 with an increasing ideological compatibility, which seems to have had the least qualms in publicly declaring its support for a regime which, by 1990, was responsible for over 3,000 deaths and as many as 30,000 cases of torture.

Israeli Military Assistance to Regimes in Central and Latin America

“Treat the Indians like we treat the Palestinians – don’t trust any of them” – Israeli military advisors to Guatemalan trainees. (Jamal and Gutierrez, 1990, p. 141)

The breadth and depth of Israeli military assistance to regimes in South America is striking: Galil assault rifles and Uzi submachine guns to murder villagers in Guatemala, Israeli-made napalm to drop on top of them in El Salvador, torture workshops in Honduras, Nicaragua and Guatemala to train interrogators in the most efficient methods, computer technology to help compile ‘death-lists’ of subversives, and training in Israel itself for the crème-de-la-crème of the military elites. This military exchange even dates back to the very beginning of modern Israel’s history, when the Nicaraguan Somoza dictatorship agreed to ship arms to Jewish militias such as the Haganah in their fight against the British for control over historical Palestine (Aviel, 1990, p. 14).

Although the Nicaraguan dictator, Somoza, visited Jerusalem in 1961 (Klich, 1990, p. 44), the first real military exchanges between Israel and central America begin in 1964 when training courses are offered in Israel to the Guatemalan military. In the years between 1964 and 1971, over 160 visits to Israeli military bases are made by Guatemalan, Brazilian, and Bolivian military personnel, all subsidised by the U.S. (Cockburn, 1991, p. 218). What develops over the next thirty years is an extraordinary panopoly of influences – military, technical, political, and even agricultural. These influences emerge against a changing background of U.S. administrations, and spanning a truly enormous

geographical range – from Guatemalan regimes and the training of the Nicaraguan contras, through to the counterinsurgency operations in Colombia and Peru, to lending direct military assistance to regimes in Santiago and Buenos Aires.

The purpose of this brief section is neither to examine the reasons for Israel's presence in Latin American affairs ('special credit' with the U.S., the Carter Ban, reciprocal agreements, ideological commonalities or simple economic motivation), nor to give an exhaustive account of it, but rather to highlight six characteristics which relate to some of the 'complexities' mentioned at the outset of the article.

First, the extent to which Israel's intervention in Latin American situations developed in harmony with the U.S. needs to be stressed. It contrasts with the sometimes-tense relations Britain and France experienced with the U.S. when trying to sell arms to Latin American countries (which U.S. administrations tend to view as their 'backyard'). The CIA, for example, used former Israeli army officers such as Emil Saada to help train death squads in Honduras: by 1984, over 250 people in the country had been murdered. American-Israeli arms firms such as Sherwood International helped supply counterrevolutionary forces with arms (Cockburn, 1991, p. 225). U.S. National security advisors such as Robert McFarlane discussed with the director of Mossad how best to use Israel as a third party to arm and train the Contras (*ibid.*, p. 230). Israel's role as a 'dirty-work' contractor increased in the moments Congress cut off aid to such terrorist groups, particularly during the Carter ban. One consequence of the generally harmonious U.S.-Israeli interaction in Latin America was that it made Israel doubly attractive to Latin American regimes as a supplier of arms – purchasing weapons and training from Israel or Israeli companies bought, for countries such as Guatemala or Colombia, "special relationship credits" with the U.S. (Jamail and Gutierrez, 1986, pp. 16, 18; Bahbah, 1986, p.98).

Second, the statistical extent to which Israel features in Latin American counterinsurgency – and to which Latin American regimes such as Colombia and Guatemala have featured in Israel's arms exports – seems to suggest an unusual amount of reciprocal attention between these governments, rather than merely being 'business as usual'. In 1980, a third of Israel's arms sales went to Argentina and El Salvador alone (Bahbah, 1986, p. 61). For Argentina, this meant 17% of its arms imports. Latin America in general, by 1986, accounted for half of all Israeli arms sales (Jamail and Gutierrez, 1986, p. 15). Victor Perera estimates over half of the 45,000 Mayan Indians killed in Guatemala between 1978 and 1985 died at the hands of Israeli Galil and Uzi machine guns (quoted in Hunter, 1987, p. 36). Israel's significant interaction with U.S. strategies to protect economic interests in Central and Latin American countries, far from being the stuff of conspiracy theories or the artful selection of arbitrary data, is significantly reflected in arms sales statistics.

A third interesting feature is the extent to which Israeli intervention in central America involved other countries, including both the militaries of other rightwing countries (such as Argentina), as well as more distant countries such as the U.K., Taiwan and even Saudi Arabia (which gave an estimated \$32 million in aid to the U.S. Contra program [Klich, 1990, p. 51]). We have already mentioned how, in Israel itself, extensive training was provided in all kinds of techniques for Latin American militaries. The Colombian paramilitant, Castaño, describes one such school, four hours drive outside Tel Aviv, where in 1983 he met Chileans, Argentinians, Spaniards and Mexicans (Castaño, 2001, p. 109). In countries such as Guatemala, in particular, Israelis seem to have worked in close co-operation with counter-insurgents from other Latin American countries such as Argentina, Chile and El Salvador. The infamous Guatemalan army intelligence agency G-2 (called 'La Dos') was equipped and trained not only by Israelis, but also in conjunction with Argentina, Colombian, Chilean and Taiwanese expertise (Schirmer, 1998, p. 152). The Israeli embassy in Guatemalan City was used as a regular point of contact between Israelis, the U.S. and counterrevolutionary Nicaraguan Contras (Jamail and Gutierrez, 1990, p. 130). Torture workshops, it appears, were a frequent point of international collaboration (Landau, 1993, pp. 182-183). The scholar Israel Shahak describes, in a 1981 report, how:

An especially important item of Israeli export are the so-called 'anti-terror' Israeli specialists. Those are really experts in torture, especially in the more sophisticated methods of torture, such as inflict maximum amount of pain without killing. The Israeli 'specialists' who return home, blame very much the 'local torturers' for 'being emotional' and so 'killing too early', and in their opinion, 'unnecessarily'. Guatemala has become the centre for training of torturers by Israeli 'experts' in this trade, and for other states as well. The case of El Salvador where the Orden people are trained by Israelis in Guatemala has been known for some time. (Shahak, cited in Rubenberg, 1990, pp. 114-5)

Israelis were helping Argentines to train Cuban and Nicaraguan Contras at U.S. Army bases in Honduras and counter-revolutionary El Salvadorans in Guatemala, while Argentinian planes transporting Israeli arms to Guatemala (see Aviel, 1990, p. 33; and Bahbah, 1986, p. 186).⁷ What emerges here is not a single-country initiative, or simple case of Israel offering to do a one-time favour to strengthen the U.S. relationship, but rather a consistent network of anti-revolutionary alliances, overcoming local divides to fight against a groundswell of indigenous mobilisation, organized labour and armed leftist resistance.

The close relationship between the Israeli state and the 'independent' arms

dealers and mercenaries it tried, in response to human rights concerns, to distance itself from, is another interesting factor in these activities. The intimacy that existed between the Israeli government, arms firms and the ex-military personnel that supplied and trained death squads and drug cartels, further complicates the notion of state sovereignty as being based on the exclusion of non-state actors. It shows how political decisions in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem were taken in collusion with allegedly independent actors. Of course, state figures such as Peres and Sharon openly visited and contributed to regimes such as those in Nicaragua and Honduras (Shimon Peres in 1957, Ariel Sharon in 1984 [Aviel, 1990, pp. 31, 15]). However in many other ways, the Israeli state supported the whole spectrum of legal and illegal activities in Latin America, from the use of El Al planes to deliver shipments of arms to the regime in Managua (Jamail and Gutierrez, 1990, p. 128), to the Israeli industry minister who told Argentina there might be “difficulties” in meat imports from Buenos Aires if the Argentinian government didn’t go ahead with the purchase of six Arava transporters (Bahbah, 1986, p. 95).

Israeli arms firms enjoyed a special relationship with their government. Even today, Israel has one of the most nationalised arms industries in the world, with three of its four largest defence companies (IMI, Rafael, IAI) completely owned by the state (Lifshitz, 2010, p. 271). Arms firms from the 1970s and 1980s such as GeoMilTech and Sherwood International enjoyed a privileged status. They had well-located offices in Tel Aviv and Washington, and special access to captured Soviet weaponry in the Israeli-Lebanon conflict (Cockburn, 1991, pp. 227, 234). However, the most striking aspect of this intimacy is the extent to which some of the most notorious gunrunners and mercenaries involved – such as Mike Harari, Pesakh Ben Or, and Yair Klein – were directly connected with the highest echelons of the Israeli establishment. The trainer of paramilitaries in Colombia and South Africa, Yair Klein, operated under an official Israeli government license; Colonel Leo Gleser, a former Israeli commando, sold arms to Honduras through an Israeli firm (ISDS) publicised by the Israeli Ministry of Defence (*ibid.*, p. 225); and former Mossad operator Mike Harari, who sold guns to the Panama regime in the 1980s, was the brother-in-law of Israel’s attorney general, Dorith Beinisch (*ibid.*, p. 259). Israeli mercenaries, in other words, were not rogue outlaws, but rather semi-autonomous agents who could not have operated as efficiently as they did without the backing and the endorsement of the Israeli state.

A fifth point concerns the way Israeli influence in Central America was not merely limited to weapons supply, training activities, military expertise, or assisting the establishment of computer systems designed to detect and organise information on subversives. It was also manifested more subtly in the post-massacre re-organisation of the landscape and permanent fragmentation of communities. In Guatemala, hundreds of thousands of refugees, mostly indigenous, had fled their homes during the worst periods

of massacres. The 'poles of development' were forced re-settlements of displaced indigenous in highly controlled and tightly regulated units. Their inspiration was taken from, to a significant degree, the principles of Jewish kibbutzes and moshav agricultural collectivities in an attempt to regain control, both physical as well as ideological, of the rural population (one observer called them "a distorted replica of rural Israel" [Perera, quoted in Hunter, 1987, p. 42]). One of the architects of the scheme, a Guatemalan Air Force Colonel called Eduardo Wohlers, was trained in Israel.

These schemes – new village plans where forcibly resettled refugees bought all their food from military stores and were constantly supervised by resident soldiers and the police – created local patrols of villagers who were encouraged to take up arms and police their own communities. Jennifer Schirmer, in her classic study of the Guatemalan military project, shows in some detail how "nowhere else in Latin America has an army managed to mobilize and divide an indigenous population against itself" (1998, p. 81). Ideas of private ownership were systematically developed in the peasants of these resettlement camps as 'insurance' against future subversion. Conscription in these village militias was sometimes violent: when Mayan Indians refused to join such civilian patrols, entire villages were massacred to "teach them a lesson" (*ibid.*, p. 83). In a policy which, according to one counterinsurgency expert, was 60% Guatemalan, 20% inspired by U.S. experience in Vietnam and 20% by Israeli and Taiwanese operations, a confusing impression of civil war – of peasants fighting revolutionaries – was deliberately cultivated by the military in order to confuse human rights organisations and foreign observers (*ibid.*, p. 59). Indeed, by extending the use of civil patrols throughout the male peasant population, forced indigenous complicity in violent killings resulted in a convenient dispersion of responsibility. In other words, the involvement of locals in individual killings was so successful that even indigenous communities felt threatened by the presence of human rights investigators.

One final point to emerge from any study of Israel's involvement in Central and Latin America is the degree of internal dissent within Israel regarding, in this case, Shimon Peres's support for Nicaragua's autocratic dictatorship and, once it was overthrown, the U.S. backed contras who were trying to restore it. Israeli leftists and trade unionists – mostly from the Mapam party – displayed a show of solidarity with the left-wing Sandinistas, attempting to pass a 1982 bill that would have vetoed Israel's arm sales to El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. As Ignacio Klich (1990, p. 68) points out, party-to-party ties between Israel's Mapam and the Nicaraguan FSLN developed, with the Knesset leader Haika Grossman even visiting Nicaragua at the invitation of the Sandinistas in 1984. Internal dissent also came about, for somewhat different reasons, when it was revealed how, between 1976 and 1979, over a thousand Argentinian Jews (mostly leftists) had been abducted and tortured by the very same Argentinian military

the Israeli government was arming and training.⁸ Although this degree of dissent was never significant enough to change policy, it certainly deserves mention.

Cultural and Political factors: Positive Latin American Images of Israel

Even a small range of texts – the memoirs of a Guatemalan diplomat, interviews with a Colombian paramilitant, articles from a Guatemalan military journal – show how non-material factors facilitated what otherwise might have seemed an unlikely alliance: namely, the collusion of the Jewish state with right-wing and neo-fascist Latin American regimes.⁹ The categories of Latin American admiration for Israel are fourfold: anti-colonial, biblical, Enlightenment, and what may be termed 'Nietzschean'.

Anti-colonial sympathy for Israel from countries such as Guatemala and Nicaragua emerged in the very early days of the Israeli state (although it is resurrected in Somoza's 1980 memoirs [see Somoza and Cox, 1980, p. 156]). It stems from Latin Americans' sense of solidarity with a young, fledgling nation, newly-emergent from an independence struggle against the British – a situation some observers saw as historically analogous to the nineteenth-century independence struggles of Latin American nations against their Spanish overlords. One of the members of the 1947 UN Special Committee on Palestine was a Guatemalan liberal, Jorge Garcia Granados, and immediately after the experience of visiting the British Mandate of Palestine he wrote a book about it, *The Birth of Israel* (1948). Anti-colonial sympathy for the Jewish settlers in Palestine is a sentiment that pervades the book from beginning to end. In Granados' various disputes with the European delegates over the activity of Jewish resistance groups, the Guatemalan tells his colleagues: "For us Latin Americans ... you English have forgotten what it is to be stirred by revolutionary feelings" (ibid, p. 54). At the very start of the book, Granados states even more explicitly:

I was to find many parallels, both political and sociological, between Palestine and Guatemala ... Palestine had emerged from the yoke of the Ottoman Empire to find itself the victim of tremendous political and social pressures. Guatemala had been forged on a like anvil. For centuries Guatemala, from the time of the conquistadors in 1524, had suffered under Spanish absolutism.

Some of Palestine's problems appeared not dissimilar to those of Guatemala. Both are essentially agricultural countries with large masses of backward, ignorant peasantry. In Guatemala this peasantry, exploited by a small, rich, landed upperclass, represents fully two-thirds of the population. Vast areas of the country lie waste, and there is a desperate need for utilizing modern

technology to raise the standard of living. (Granados, 1948, p. 17).

There are some curious manoeuvres here. In his empathy for the anti-colonial struggle of the Haganah and admiration for the *Hatikvah* (Jewish national anthem), Granados airbrushes out the Palestinians from the picture. (In the same way, it is tempting to suggest, certain Latin American histories airbrushed the indigenous out from their own independence struggles). Granados is not cruelly indifferent to the Palestinians – in the book, he does acknowledge Palestinian losses of land and the difficulties they are encountering – but this never quite displaces the Jewish/Bolivarian struggle against British-Ottoman/Spanish rule that underlies the ultimate framing of the book.

A second factor in Latin American sympathies towards Israel lies in a biblical series of connotations which, however strange it may sound, do appear to have operated as a facilitating factor in certain Catholic right-wing nationalisms (not to mention the evangelical Protestantism of Rios Montt). It clearly features in Granados' visit to Palestine. As soon as he arrived, he writes, "I was all eyes for Biblical landscapes" (*ibid.*, p. 31). Repeated references to "the Jews [who] had never forgotten their ancient homeland" (*ibid.*, p. 63), "the land which is sacred to millions of human beings" (*ibid.*, p. 30), show how the Guatemalan diplomat's Christian background played a role in his privileging of the needs of Jewish settlers over Palestinian inhabitants. This bias also manifests itself in the most unlikely of places. Take, for instance, the words of Carlos Castaño, a Colombian paramilitary leader and narcotrafficker responsible for countless atrocities, including the murder of journalist Jaime Garzon. He speaks of his yearlong stay in Israel for military training at the age of eighteen as a life-changing experience. The religious aspect of this visit was by no means incidental:

The history of Israel is delightful and illuminating. You should start by taking a shekel in the hand, just like receiving Christ ... I admire the Jews for their courage in the face of anti-Semitism, for their strategy in the Diaspora, for the resolve of their Zionism, their mysticism, religion and, above all, their nationalism.

While living in Israel, I won a few friends, including an old man whom I loved to go and listen to whilst he sang or recited poetry in Hebrew, his native tongue, the language of the Bible itself. It was so moving. (Castaño, 2001, pp. 108, 110 – translation is my own)

Castaño's violent life as leader of the AUC finds an uncanny co-existence alongside his homage to the profound spirituality of the Holy Land, with the surreal image of the future

paramilitary, listening to Hebrew recitations of the Psalms. There is no time here to dwell on the relationship between mysticism and violence, although it is difficult not to see an element of Charles Maurras in the mystical inspiration of so violent a paramilitary.¹⁰ What is clear, however, is the extent to which Castaño's Christian background assisted his Israeli military training. Given the Guatemalan General Rios Montt's own fervent religiosity and interaction with American evangelicals during the worst years of the massacres, it is difficult not to see this Christian recognition of the biblical identity of Israel as playing some part, however small, in the extensive collaboration between Israel and Guatemala during this period.

Apart from biblical and anti-colonial sympathies, a third factor would be an admiration of Israel as a civilising, colonising, first-world power: an outpost of progress forever threatened by a deluge of indigenous fanaticism and backwardness. Analogous to Israel's own relationship with South Africa (Sharon seeing the ANC as an African version of the PLO, for example [see Polakow-Suransky, 2010, p. 8]), a definite Enlightenment sympathy for a fellow outpost of modernity can be detected in some of the ways the Guatemalan military wrote about Israel. "Israel is a small country who is doing a massive job", said one Guatemalan general to the newspaper *Ma'ariv* in 1981. "We see the Israeli as the best soldier in the world today, and we look to him as a model and an example for us" (quoted in Shahak, 1982, p. 48). In the 1977 issue of the military journal, *Revista Militar*, we find an outline of events in the Israeli-Palestine conflicts of 1948-1977. The picture presented is one of a developed nation, surrounded by envious Arab foes. The timeline begins not with the displacement of thousands of Palestinians by Jewish militias in 1947, but with the "Arab countries invading Palestine" in 1948 (Asturias, 1977, pp. 51-58). The Palestinians are repeatedly referred to as "terroristas" (p. 51), and emerge along with their Arab neighbours as consistently aggressive and "subversive", with Israel's actions largely being seen as retaliatory. In another 1984 issue of the same journal, the position of Israel as an island of modernity in a sea of barbarism is underlined by the reproduction of a series of conservative Argentinian newspaper articles on the Middle East, with severe portraits of Saddam Hussein, Muammar Gaddafi and Ayatollah Khomeini ("un fanatico medieval" [Ronen, 1984, p. 109]), alongside several photographs of explosions and mushroom clouds, generally presenting a Middle Eastern landscape of feudalism, violence and volatility.

The final factor in sympathetic Latin American responses to Israel I have decided to term 'Nietzschean', as it involves – as Nietzsche endorsed in *Genealogy of Morals* – an admiration for those who are not ashamed of exercising their power and, indeed, who embrace and affirm their aggression. This admiration is best expressed in Castaño:

There I became convinced that it was possible to defeat the guerrillas in Colombia. I began to see how a people could defend themselves against the whole world ... In fact, the concept of armed self-defense I copied from the Israelis, every citizen of this nation is a potential soldier.

In Israel managed to open my mind ... I learned from other wars and already possessed a panoramic vision of the country. I tried to absorb as much knowledge as possible of the Jews, a wonderful people of God, who have always lived in war and for thousands of years have been in the mode of defending themselves, invading and winning territory. The trip to the Holy Land was a momentous occasion in my life. (Castaño, pp. 108, 111 – my own translation)

Israel's performance in the Lebanon War impressed many Latin American observers in the military, and was a central factor in the successful arms sales of the period. The four factors we have cited here do not necessarily sit easily next to one another. Indeed, a liberal such as Granados has little in common with a murderer like Castaño. The extent to which such factors caused, facilitated, or merely resulted from the concrete assistance Israel gave to such regimes and paramilitaries in the 1970s and 1980s remains disputable and probably incalculable. What the above array of quotations does show, however, is that Israeli assistance to the (para)militaries of Guatemala and Colombia was no straightforward series of ideologically-neutral transactions, but rather an ongoing intervention coloured by a variety of different affinities – religious, political and colonial.

In their classic work, *Empire*, Hardt and Negri (2000, p. 46) consider some of the “real alternatives and the potential for liberation that exist within Empire”. They suggest that globalisation, far from being the source of all our woes, may contain within it positive emancipatory possibilities, ones which express “the power of the global multitude” (ibid., p. 47). Any study of British and Israeli involvement in Latin America during this time period suggests, at least, the need for some reservations. In the pre-digital world of the 1970s and 1980s, what is striking is the speed with which reactionary forces could bring all manner of assistance – economic, military, political, ideological, and cultural – to their counterparts, employing an appalling dexterity of common interest and, in the moments of most sublime co-operation, a terrifying sense of harmony. Here is not the place to contest Hardt and Negri's conviction that the globality of capital may well prove to be its undoing – indeed, current events across the world at the time of writing may well be reinforcing their thesis – but it is instructive to bear in mind that the assistance which sympathetic Middle Eastern and North African leaders like Muammar Gaddafi and the PLO offered leftist movements such as the Sandinistas began in earnest

over fifteen years after Israel had delivered its first arms shipment to Nicaragua.

The international support of military dictatorships, brutal governments, and paramilitary networks in Latin America during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s belonged to a pattern. It was not a pattern of perfect symmetry, not a mathematical model that could be used to predict future developments, and certainly not a paradigm free of any deviations, variations and spontaneous idiosyncrasies. It was a pattern, however, which produced phenomena – the displacement of peasants, the murder of indigenous peoples, the torture and disappearance of activists and labour organisers – which could be found as far afield as the hills of Oaxaca, the forests of Ixil, the streets of Bogotá, the police stations of Santiago and the underground garages of Buenos Aires. In the boardrooms of New York, London and Chicago, a certain familiar logic of preference for capital over people was cultivated, whose effects would echo themselves in endless command centres and training schools, and re-echo themselves in the elite clubrooms and closed offices of practically every Latin American country. The sad complexity of this plutocracy-preserving process, which would draw dollars, weapons and aid from Saudi sheikhs, Israeli ministers, Taiwanese officers, British businesses and South African generals, is not baffling but depressing; not enigmatic or impenetrable, but dark and profound.

A Latin American Nuremberg is called for. During the period in question, hundreds of thousands of human beings were not merely executed but literally strangled, gutted, skinned, electrocuted, disembowelled or physically beaten to death. Over thirty years have passed since the worst of the atrocities considered in this brief study. Obvious candidates for war crimes tribunals – such as the former U.S. secretary of state Henry Kissinger, the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, or the former Guatemalan president Efraim Rios Montt – are by now too old for any effective trial to take place. And although in Argentina and Chile some progress is now being made in identifying and prosecuting war criminals, a vast array of British, U.S. and Israeli senior officers and politicians – who were wholly supportive of the very worst massacres, abductions and torture programmes and participated, directly or indirectly, in their implementation – remain untouched by any form of judicial retribution. These include defence officials from all three governments; military officials who gave, allowed and organised training to perpetrators of the massacres; diplomatic staff, even up to the office of the Ambassador him/herself, who knowingly facilitated military instruction or aid to the perpetrators; government offices and their secretaries and staff who endorsed sales of arms to obvious human rights abusers; British, U.S. and Israeli lobbyists who helped to circumvent already extant structures of control and regulation – either to enable equipment and aid to be delivered, or to actively stifle news of atrocities from being widely disseminated. The relative paucity of international judicial attention to such

glaring crimes not only acts as a moral indictment of the West, but also encourages suspected war criminals such as Otto Perez Molina (the newly-elected president of Guatemala) to continue their political careers unperturbed.

Notes

- ¹ This paper was first given as a talk at the Amnesty International Chapters of Berry College (Rome, Georgia) and Georgia State University (Atlanta, Georgia) in 2012. Many thanks to Henry “Chip” Carey, Roberto Gutierrez and John Hickman.
- ² Take for example David Stoll (1993, p. 313), who sees the people of Nebaj as resisting “not just the Guatemalan army ... capitalism and colonialism but violence itself ... the mimetic contest in which Right and Left, counterinsurgent and insurgent, try to remake an entire society in their own starkly polarized images”. Even the otherwise excellent study of Virginia Garrard-Burnett (2010, p. 178) feels obliged to end the work with the words of former director of Amnesty International USA, William Schulz: “Human rights violators are not born, but made ... It’s a combination of social context, leadership, and political opportunity that often leads people astray”.
- ³ See also *Indiana Gazette*, 10 October 1980.
- ⁴ For example, consider American disapproval over British arms sales to Chile (Phythian, 2000, pp. 128-9), or the deteriorating relations between the British Wilson government and South Africa.
- ⁵ I am grateful to Staffan Lofving’s article (2004) for drawing my attention to this text.
- ⁶ For more on DINA, see Lawson (2004, p. 183ff.)
- ⁷ The involvement of U.S. training in these death squads has been detailed by Gill (2004, pp. 83-4).
- ⁸ For an interesting history of anti-Semitism in the Argentine Right, particularly the widespread association of Jews with the Argentine Left, see McGee Deutsch (1986, pp. 113-34).
- ⁹ As Chomsky (1996, p. 203) points out, some of these regimes openly admired Nazism in their pronouncements and publications.
- ¹⁰ On the relationship between mysticism and violence, see Žižek (2003, pp. 23-4). For an unusually lucid update on paramilitary and narco-trafficker violence in today’s Colombia, see Wilkinson (2011, pp. 38-42). On the incorporation of paramilitarism into the U.S.’s overall strategy in Colombia, see Stokes (2005).

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