

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Israel and the Contras:  
a Buried History

By

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Long denied by Israeli officials, Israel maintained military support for the Nicaraguan Contras in Honduras and Costa Rica from at least 1982 until late 1986 and most likely even later. Various reports on such contacts circulated before November of 1986, after which the Iran-Contra Affair painted a tangled web involving not only Israel and the Contras but also Iran, the United States and several other disparate countries. Israeli newspaper reports at the time focused on the weapons shipments to Iran, a formal enemy of Israel. The Contra side of the scandal attracted less coverage in the media with accusations going back and forth between the Israelis and U.S. officials as to who came up with the idea of diverting profits from the Iran deal to the Contras in Central America. Ever since, Israeli involvement in supporting the Nicaraguan anti-Sandinistas received considerably less attention, since the entanglement laid in the shadow of a sensational affair, in which nations that officially saw each other as enemies engaged in a secretive, years-long arms trade. My paper seeks to rescue the Israel-Contra connection from the Iran-Contra shadow and place it within a new context of Israeli-U.S. relations and Latin American history.

Since the mid-1970s, Israel supplied weapons up and down Latin America on a rapidly growing rate.<sup>1</sup> Due to a relative abundance of sources on an otherwise secretive and murky arms trade, Israel's connection to the Nicaraguan Contras offers a window into a dark and secretive aspect of Israeli foreign relations, the complex and evolving U.S.-Israel relations and Latin American history rarely and scarcely researched in the field of history. Out of all the connections Israel maintained over the 1970s and 80s in the Western Hemisphere, the Central American involvement of the Middle Eastern country, not forty years following its establishment, stands

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<sup>1</sup> Aaron S. Klieman, *Herev Pifiyot: Ha-Yetsu Ha-Biḥoni Shel Yiśra'el Ve-Shuḳ Ha-Nesheḳ Ha-'olami* (Tel Aviv: 'Am 'oved, 1992, 199-209.

out due to its notoriety and breadth of sources. Thanks to official investigations in the U.S. and Israel, in conjunction with the close attention paid by the news media, the Iran-Contra Affair offers a brief look into Israeli involvement in Latin America during the Late Cold-War.

Focusing on Nicaragua and the Contras to the exclusion of Honduras, Costa Rica, El-Salvador and Guatemala, artificial as that may be, became essential in researching this topic. Therefore, obvious advantages and disadvantages followed the constructed imposition. First and foremost, focusing on one nation state allowed me to pursue this avenue of research within the limited time allotted to me. A much larger scope for a history that includes Central America, Latin America and Israel's entire arms and military services export operation of the 1970s and 80s is possible, and in my view badly needed, but the time and place for that will have to be elsewhere. As a consequence of my decision to narrow my research scope, some topics have systematically been looked over, much like any attempt by historians to narrow down their topics. For example, while reading about Israel's involvement in Nicaragua, its embroilment in the weapons shipments to Iran received only a cursory glance, despite being a more well-documented case. This paper does not intend to give a holistic overview of the entire Iran-Contra Affair, nor the entirety of just the Israeli involvement in the matter. What it does rather, is piece together from bits and pieces, scattered in many books and various primary sources, the ways in which Israeli institutions, as well as supposedly "private" Israelis, supported Nicaragua before its 1979 revolution, and the Contras following those dramatic events. The paper focuses on Israeli supply of arms and other military equipment as well as military expertise and know-how by both actively serving personnel and former officers in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF). Consequently, the paper consciously avoids looking very deeply into the American aspect of the story when not directly relevant to understanding the Israeli one; it avoids looking deeply at Israel's complex

connections with Honduras, Costa Rica, Guatemala and Argentina unless directly relevant to Israel's connection to the Contras; lastly, my paper does not attempt to connect the scope of Israel-Contra relations to important contemporaneous political and economic developments, leaving the work of such articulation to future research. Instead, I tackle a set of straight forward questions: what role did Israel have in supplying the Nicaraguan government before the 1979 Sandinista revolution and what role did it have after it in supplying the anti-Sandinista paramilitaries who later came to be known collectively as "the Contras?"<sup>2</sup>

Both official and private channels connected arms, military equipment and expertise from Israel to various Contra groups. According to U.S. documents, undisputed by the American government and generally ignored by the Israeli one, Israel supplied arms and equipment captured in Lebanon from the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) to the Contras at least twice, once in 1983 and once again over the following year. Israel and the U.S. claimed for some time that the top political strata were not aware of the destination of those shipments, and only

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<sup>2</sup> Different names are used in the literature to describe the paramilitary groups that were sponsored by the CIA with the ultimate goal of toppling the Sandinista government in Managua, Nicaragua. I prefer the term Contra or Contras for several reasons. After the 1980s it became the most used term to describe the collectivity of groups that I will be talking about. In the present moment "Contras" is relatively neutral in its use, meaning that it does not necessarily promote any specific political point of view. Unless directly quoting a source of some kind, this paper sticks to the general term "Contras." Having said that, it is important to note that there were several factions within that umbrella term, and in some sense the term masks those differences. However, for the sake of simplicity and flow I will use the more generalizing term, unless I want to denote a specific faction or group tied to a specific geographic location. The use of the term is not meant to promote a simplistic view of the different anti-Sandinista Nicaraguan organizations, but since the story is very complex at times and the focus of the paper is more on Israel than Nicaragua, I simplified where I could so as to keep the focus where needed.

the people running the resupply networks for the Contras knew the full scope of the operation. I argue that knowledge went all the way up and even seems to have been directed from above. In contrast to the definite conclusion I came to regarding official Israeli weapons sales to the Contras, I encountered a much murkier history of private or semi-private Israeli citizens training and consulting right-wing governments and paramilitaries all around Latin America. Even though a fair amount of writings address these connections, some of them very assertively, I argue that available sources still paint only an unclear picture of the extent of such private activities as well as their motives and likely linkage to Israel's strategic objectives in the region. Hence, I argue it is early to conclusively conclude the extent to which these private actors trained and advised the Contras in Honduras or Costa Rica.

The central works studying Israel's relation with Nicaragua and Israel's global arms trade include recent ones as well as works from the 1980s and 90s. Over time, work on the subject became sporadic after the early 1990s with the conclusion of the Cold War, the collapse of the Eastern Block and the end of the Civil War in Nicaragua. Bishara Bahbah and Linda Butler's *Israel and Latin America: The Military Connection* from 1986 offers the first comprehensive work partly focusing on the Israel-Nicaragua connection in the wider context of Central America.<sup>3</sup> Most works that followed Bahbah and Butler cite them extensively or at least acknowledge their important contribution to understanding Israel's role in the region.<sup>4</sup> The book

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<sup>3</sup> Bishara Bahbah and Linda Butler, *Israel and Latin America: The Military Connection* (London: Macmillan in association with the Institute for Palestine Studies, Washington, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Bahbah has been cited extensively. Following are a sample of works relying on his research, Milton Jamail and Margo Gutiérrez, "Israel's Military Role in Central America," in *Central America & The Middle East: The Internationalization of the Crises*, ed. Damián J. Fernández (Miami, FL: Florida International University Press, 1990), 122, endnote 1; Ariel C. Armony, "Transnationalizing the Dirty War: Argentina in Central America," in *In from the*

relies on newspaper articles and interviews conducted by the authors. They argue that Israel deployed a vast network of operatives who supplied weapons and know-how to various Latin American right-wing regimes and militias since the mid-1970s. Understandably, because Bahbah and Butler published the book in 1986, most revelations relating to the Iran-Contra Affair were yet to be publicly available, especially any governmental documents associated with the matter. Though the book inspired my focus on Israel's influence on right-wing governments and organizations in Latin America, my own work differs in methods. I focus on official documents when possible, maintaining a skeptical approach towards them, and supplementing with newspaper reports and personal accounts. In my view, I seek to not only expand Bahbah and Butler's work but to better ground it in sources he had no access to at the time.

Many great works have been produced about the Iran-Contra Affair. *A very thin line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* by historian Theodore Draper is considered by many to be the gold standard when it comes to the inner workings of the complicated affair.<sup>5</sup> In the 1996 book about the Reagan Doctrine, James M. Scott cites Draper as “arguably the most thorough” in offering a

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*Cold: Latin America's New Encounter with the Cold War*, ed. Gilbert M. Joseph and Daniela Spenser (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 146-9, and endnote 66; Jeff Halper, *War against the People: Israel, the Palestinians and Global Pacification* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 219-20. A 2022 book review from the Mexico and Latin American historian, Alexander Aviña, “Profiting from Terror in Cold War Latin America: Bishara Bahbah's Israel and Latin America: The Military Connection - Liberated Texts,” *Liberated Texts - An Independent Book Review Website*, January 3, 2022, <https://liberatedtexts.com/reviews/profitting-from-terror-in-coldwar-latin-america-bishara-bahbahs-israel-and-latin-america-the-military-connection/>;

<sup>5</sup> Theodore Draper, *A very thin line: The Iran-Contra Affairs* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

detailed analysis of the Iran-Contra Affair.<sup>6</sup> Twenty years later, Draper continues to be heavily cited in an important book on the subject by National Security Archive's expert on the Iran-Contra Affair and its deputy director, Malcolm Byrne among others.<sup>7</sup> Draper's book did not conduct interviews, since in his eyes, "interviews must be taken on faith [...] because the reader knows only as much as the interviewer chooses to tell him." Instead, Draper consulted more than 50,000 pages of documents, including twenty-seven volumes of depositions in the congressional hearings of 1987 and the many pages of Oliver North's notebook.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, mentions of Israel in the book are minimal, and not much attention is given to their involvement with the Contras unless it included an American official. My goals are quite different from Draper's, and I am less concerned with finding a culpable party or exposing corruption in U.S government. Instead, this paper looks at Israel's involvement with the Contras.

Between outdated though critical works and thorough yet irrelevant writings, my work gravitated towards primary sources. Contemporaneous newspapers reported consistently on the Civil war in Nicaragua and US's role in it, but only sporadically on Israel's presence in the conflict. Such journals include Haaretz, Ma'ariv, Hadashot, The New York Times and the Washington Post. These reports feature interviews with people on the ground and come in a variety of mediums, print and TV. Additionally, I consulted the records of the Iran-Contra affair,

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<sup>6</sup> James M. Scott, *Deciding to Intervene: The Reagan Doctrine and American Foreign Policy* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 177, 265.

<sup>7</sup> Malcolm Byrne, *Iran-Contra: Reagan's Scandal and the Unchecked Abuse of Presidential Power* (University Press of Kansas, 2014). See also, Alex Douville, "Chapter 2 The Iran-Contra Affair," in *Case Studies Working Group Report*, ed. Richard Weitz, vol. II (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, 2012), 87–148; Lori Cox Han, *New Directions in the American Presidency* (Oxfordshire, UK: Taylor and Francis, Routledge, 2023), 195.

<sup>8</sup> Tom Wicker, "My President Right or Wrong," *New York Times*, May 26, 1991, sec. 7.

its investigations and related court cases, declassified U.S. Government records available online on different platforms, and U.S. foreign office documents. As I learned, American government sources revealed much more than Israeli ones since declassification did not occur on the same scale around the topic in both countries.<sup>9</sup> I read all sources against the grain; after all, my research resides within covert international relations, which produces obscure and sometimes misleading accounts. Therefore, I center the importance of the close reading of sources and, together with a continual assessment of their validity, I piece together a rather complex and unfinished story.

Scholarship on Israel in Latin America remains scarce, let alone on Israel in Nicaragua. The history discipline has yet to leave its mark on the topic. It has been clear for a while that Israel supplied weapons and military knowledge throughout the region since the mid-1970s. Yet, a detailed account of events, participating parties and the historical significance of such involvements has failed to emerge so far. This paper serves as the first step towards gaining a better grasp on those historical events.

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<sup>9</sup> Central American sources do not feature in a major way in my work, not because they do not hold valuable information, quite the contrary, it has only to do with the fact that accessing them from Chicago is very difficult and sometimes not possible at all. I hope one day to correct that and spend time in Central American archives and meet people who can illuminate some of the less clear parts of my story.

## **The Road to 1979: Becoming Somoza's Principal Arms Suppliers**

The interplay between Israeli and U.S. relations with Nicaragua over the 1970s, ultimately positioned Israel as the main supplier to Nicaragua's National Guard. On the one hand, the United States supported the ruling Somoza family for forty years until President Carter decided to withdraw support after 1977. On the other one, Israel maintained a minimal yet friendly relationship with said family since the 1940s, making the transition into main supplier in the latter half of the 1970s relatively seamlessly. These relations paint Israel as opportunistic in its military export endeavors and also suggest that they might have had an interest in supporting the Contras in the 1980s, considering their ties to the Somoza controlled Nicaraguan National Guard whose top officers left Nicaragua with their president following the revolution. Though this section serves as background to the events of the Reagan presidency, Israel's involvement in Nicaragua during the Carter era clearly positions Israel at the center of civil unrest in the Central American country. Such position meant that connections between the countries were substantial and the loss of income from the Somoza deals must have hurt some corners of the Israeli defense establishment.

In the years following its formation in 1948, Israel's foreign policy prioritized Latin America. At the time, Israel desperately needed diplomatic support, while relations with Asian countries were spotty at best and large portions of Africa were still under active colonization. These factors, alongside pre-1948 support from certain Central American states, quickly positioned Latin America as a strategic region. Israel's connection to Nicaragua and its ruling Somoza family went back to the early 1940s when the *Haganah*, the biggest Zionist paramilitary

organization in Mandatory Palestine,<sup>10</sup> sought to acquire weapons from any willing party. Similar to other Latin American rulers, Anastasio Somoza García, president of Nicaragua since 1937 and father of Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1967-1979),<sup>11</sup> received “aid in cash for his trouble in having Nicaraguan diplomatic passports issued to [*Haganah* operatives] Yehuda Arazi and Teddy Kollek,<sup>12</sup> and signing a letter authorising (sic) the purchase of machinery and military hardware to the value of \$5 million, for shipment to Palestine rather than his country.” On top of that, Somoza García probably received “political and military currency” alongside the cash.<sup>13</sup> This contact with the highest power in a sovereign state, made before the establishment of Israel, inevitably shaped foreign relations after it.

Up until 1977 and Carter’s decision to pull the plug on supporting Somoza, Israeli-Nicaraguan relations were warm but exceptionally close. Though diplomatic relations between the countries began before the establishment of Israel, exchanges between the two countries remained limited and sporadic prior to the mid-1970s. A 2019 article by Marshall Yurow demonstrated how the relationship between the countries experienced ups and downs over those thirty odd years. In the article, Yurow argues that the relationship between Israel and Nicaragua should not be seen through the sizeable military shipments of the late 1970s. In such a view, one

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<sup>10</sup> Terminated by the Zionist movement in 1948, the *Haganah* structure and members became the core for the Israeli military and its intelligence agencies.

<sup>11</sup> Between 1972 and 1974 a military junta ruled Nicaragua but in effect Somoza Debayle was still in charge. See Maria Dolores Ferrero Blanco , “Las Relaciones Interdependientes de Los Somoza de Nicaragua Con EE.UU. (1936-1979),” *Hispania Nova: Revista de Historia Contemporánea* 10 (2012): 77–78.

<sup>12</sup> Future mayor of Jerusalem 1965-1993.

<sup>13</sup> Ignacio Klich, “Latin America, the United States and the Birth of Israel: The Case of Somoza’s Nicaragua,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 20, no. 2 (1988): 389–432. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/156720>.

might wrongly assume that Israel always deeply supported Somoza. For Yurow, “[each] moment was part of a long chain of events preceding it, and each moment created consequences which stemmed from it.” Though a seemingly trivial point about any historical inquiry, Yurow reminds us that single events cannot define whole periods without losing something along the way.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the Israeli shipments of the late 1970s did not have to happen just because the countries were somewhat close, the fact that the U.S. stepped out of the picture contributed significantly to the spike in shipments.

Fifty years earlier, the U.S. founded the Nicaraguan National Guard which over time morphed into support for the Somoza family. Established during the American occupation of Nicaragua in 1925, the National Guard primarily safeguarded American interests. In 1932, the Americans and the Nicaraguan president hand-picked Anastasio Somoza García to head the force, inadvertently allowing him to amass political power within the state.<sup>15</sup> Once Somoza García was inaugurated as president of Nicaragua on January 1<sup>st</sup> 1937, the National Guard served as the main muscle for the entire family.<sup>16</sup> Even after his assassination in 1956, the Guard kept the regime in place allowing for a smooth transition to the presidency of his sons, first to Luis Somoza Debayle (1956-1963) and later to the West Point graduate and head of the National Guard after 1956, Anastasio Somoza Debayle (1966-1979). Through all those years, the United States played a heavy hand in supporting the Somozas, their Nicaraguan National Guard and the American interests in the country.

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<sup>14</sup> Marshall Yurow, “Evolving Relationships: Nicaragua, Israel, and the Palestinians,” *Latin American Perspectives* 46, no. 3 (2019): 149–63, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582x19831697>.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty: A History of the U.S.-Created Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua and the Somoza Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977), 134.

<sup>16</sup> Millett, 182.

Nicaragua experienced through the 1970s both natural disasters and political changes which reinforced each other's destabilizing effects on the country over the course of the decade. In 1972, an earthquake struck Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, prompting Somoza to exercise emergency powers to address the earthquake. As a result, a lot of international aid poured in, and Somoza and his close friends pocketed the majority of the aid sent to help rebuild Nicaragua. The blatant corruption consolidated Nicaraguan opposition to Somoza, especially among the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), also known as the Sandinistas, who were active in Nicaragua since 1961. In 1974, they kidnapped several members of the Nicaraguan elite at a Christmas Party. Among the captives were Nicaraguan Ambassador to the United States, the dean of Washington's diplomatic corps, and the Nicaraguan chief delegate to the United Nations. At the time, President Somoza Debayle was in Washington DC on an official visit. The moment news of the kidnapping arrived at the American capital, he immediately left. Arriving in Managua the President declared martial law and suspended "all Constitutional guaranties."<sup>17</sup> After the incident was over and thanks to a negotiated agreement with the FSLN, Somoza instituted a "reign of terror against rural populations in areas where guerrillas operated. Slowly he alienated the Catholic church, the Nicaraguan business sector and eventually even the United States."<sup>18</sup> Contemporaneously, in the United States, a political trend emphasized "Human Rights" in foreign affairs. The trend diverted attention towards Nicaragua's internal affairs and America's role in perpetuating them for the first time in many decades.

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<sup>17</sup> Alan Riding, "Guerrillas Kill 3 at Party, Seize Key Nicaraguans," *The New York Times*, December 29, 1974.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas W. Walker, "The Sandinist Victory in Nicaragua," *Current History* 78, no. 454 (1980): 57-84.

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/45319389>, 58.

As briefly mentioned above, once President Jimmy Carter took office in 1977, support for the Somoza family suffered a serious setback. The seemingly abrupt change in U.S. policy towards Nicaragua's ruling family did not come out of nowhere. During his electoral campaign, Jimmy Carter promised to center human rights in his foreign policy. In one of his campaign stops he expressed particular concern over the U.S. role in the global arms trade. In his words, he claimed to be "particularly concerned by our nation's role as the world's leading arms salesman."<sup>19</sup> In another one, Carter expressed his view on the importance of centering human rights in foreign policy. He mentioned human rights explicitly, arguing that "[i]f other nations want our friendship and support, they must understand that we want to see basic human rights respected."<sup>20</sup> Even though he went on to qualify the statement with what he called "a need for realism," he nonetheless made sure to use the language of human rights when considering his foreign relations goals during his presidential campaign.

Not surprisingly, about two weeks after President Carter took office, on January 10, 1977, the Ambassador to Nicaragua, James D. Theberge, appointed by the previous administration, met president Somoza. The Ambassador, relayed the concerns of the new American administration, specifically mentioning human rights issues in Nicaragua. Somoza answered that he welcomes Carter's concerns about human rights violations in Nicaragua yet feels targeted when other countries, in his eyes, committed much more egregious violations.<sup>21</sup> This meeting laid the ground

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<sup>19</sup> United States. Congress. House. Committee on House Administration. *The Presidential Campaign, 1976*.

Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1978, p 275.

<sup>20</sup> United States. Congress. House. Committee on House Administration. *The Presidential Campaign, 1976*.

Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1978, p 995.

<sup>21</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XV, Central America*, eds. Nathaniel L. Smith and Adam M. Howard (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2016), Document 59.

for the kind of relationship Carter's administration cultivated with the Central American country. Even though the American Ambassador aired Carter's concern over rights violations in Nicaragua, only in 1978, once President Carter cut off all aid to the Nicaraguan government, did Somoza lift the state of siege set in place after the 1974 FSLN kidnappings. At that point, it seemed like Somoza was only interested in getting back on U.S.'s good side.

Carter's administration slowly evolved from trying to push Somoza around to actively seeking to push him out. The highly cited paper by Martha L. Cottam, "The Carter Administration's Policy toward Nicaragua: Images, Goals, and Tactics," divides Carter's policy towards Nicaragua into two phases. The first phase, lasted from 1977 to July 1978, when "the main decision-making problem concerned human rights sanctions."<sup>22</sup> In this phase, "Using diplomatic pressure and military and economic aid sanctions, the United States sought to push Somoza toward political democratization and the elimination of abuses."<sup>23</sup> The second phase, from August 1978 until Somoza left Nicaragua in July 1979, the main concern "shifted from how to get Somoza to reform to how to guide the direction of change in Nicaragua to prevent the Sandinistas from winning a revolution."<sup>24</sup> In other words, the Americans wanted to get rid of Somoza, making sure his replacement is still friendly to them, which in practice meant putting in power anyone but the Sandinistas. In order to achieve that, the U.S. decided to ramp up pressure on the Nicaraguan regime, hoping to bring about Somoza's early exit from power while making sure major confrontations and American diplomatic efforts were kept to a minimum.

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<sup>22</sup> Martha L. Cottam, "The Carter Administration's Policy toward Nicaragua: Images, Goals, and Tactics," *Political Science Quarterly* 107, no. 1 (1992): 123–46, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2152137>, 128.

<sup>23</sup> Cottam, 138.

<sup>24</sup> Cottam, 141.

In an attempt to leverage every advantage held over Somoza, officials around President Carter suggested intercepting Nicaraguan supply efforts which according to them ran through Argentina and Israel. Foreign policy papers mention Israel in particular as the main supplier of military equipment to Somoza. The need to request and pressure the Israelis to stop shipments to the Nicaraguan president intensified in late 1978. In a cable from the American Embassy in Managua, Israel was identified as one of the “pressure points” available for the Americans, calling to “[p]ersuade Israel to suspend military sales to Nicaragua and engineer a public statement to this effect.”<sup>25</sup> A few weeks later and after the U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua talked to Somoza who declared he would not step down until the end of his term in 1981, the Ambassador recommended on November 11 to move forward with plans to ramp up pressure on the Nicaraguan President. One of the points in the plan mentioned by the Ambassador, was to “[g]et Israelis to terminate their military supply relationship” with the Nicaraguans.<sup>26</sup> However, Israeli support for the Nicaraguan regime suffered no setbacks. The following day Somoza expressed he felt the “full support of Brazil and Israel,”<sup>27</sup> and a few days later, the widely read Israeli newspaper *Ma’ariv* quoted a source in Washington DC that reassured the Israelis that no pressure could legally be put on Israel to stop arming Nicaragua. The *Ma’ariv* article pitted the Israelis against the Americans with the former denying any weapons delivery to Nicaragua while the latter claimed that according to their intelligence reports “there is almost no doubt” that military equipment was sent to the Central American country. An unnamed source in the article

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<sup>25</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XV, Central America*, eds. Nathaniel L. Smith and Adam M. Howard (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2016), Document 121.

<sup>26</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XV, Central America*, eds. Nathaniel L. Smith and Adam M. Howard (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2016), Document 137.

<sup>27</sup> Alan Riding, “Somoza Seeks Vote on Foes’ Strength: Opposition Refuses,” *New York Times*, November 12, 1978.

was quoted saying that “the streets of the capital are starting to seem like Jerusalem, because the Nicaraguan National Guard are wearing Israeli military berets.” Despite the seemingly extensive material support by the Israelis in late 1978, the Americans still felt they were “confident that their influence on Israel is enough to dissuade them.”<sup>28</sup>

Around the same time, Venezuelan president, Carlos Andrés Pérez met with a Nicaraguan delegation regarding an attempt to negotiate some kind of mediation between warring factions in Nicaragua. In a briefing he gave to the American Ambassador after the meeting he “said that the United States must stop Israel from supplying arms to Nicaragua.” The Venezuelan President even went as far as offering to threaten Israel, saying that the Americans can tell the Israelis that he will “criticise (sic) them before the world on behalf of Latin America if they do not cease the shipment of arms.” According to Pérez the Nicaraguan delegates told him that shipments from Israel “have been very large in recent weeks and months.”<sup>29</sup> Nearly two months later, in late December of 1978, discussions on Nicaragua in the Policy Review Committee<sup>30</sup> called for Carter’s administration to “be a little more explicit with the Israelis on our concerns about arms sales.”<sup>31</sup> These remarks express a certain frustration with both the Israelis and the Executive branch, and suggest that talks between the countries did not yield the desired arms embargo on

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<sup>28</sup> Associated Press, “Arhab Lo Timna Mishloah Neshek Israeli Le-Nicaragua,” *Ma’ariv*, November 19, 1978, 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XV, Central America*, eds. Nathaniel L. Smith and Adam M. Howard (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2016), Document 131.

<sup>30</sup> Established through a Presidential Directive on January 20<sup>th</sup>, 1977, the Committee was set up to deal with “foreign policy issues that contain significant military [...] aspects,” among other defense and intelligence issues that have to do with foreign policy. See PD/NSC-2, The National Security Council System, January 20, 1977, 2-3.

<sup>31</sup> *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XV, Central America*, eds. Nathaniel L. Smith and Adam M. Howard (Washington: Government Printing Office, 2016), Document 177.

Somoza. A week and a half earlier, the British Labour party condemned Israeli supplies to Somoza.<sup>32</sup> And in early January of 1979, the Israeli MK Amnon Rubinstein called for a stopping of all arms shipments to Somoza.<sup>33</sup> At the outset of 1979, external and internal pressure to cease resupply efforts to Somoza mounted on the Israeli government.

Nevertheless, sales by Israel continued up till the Sandinistas took over Managua in July of 1979. In December of 1978, the government owned Israel Military Industries (Ta'as) projected they would make big profits in 1979 selling to over 40 countries, one of which was Nicaragua.<sup>34</sup> Back on November 13<sup>th</sup>, Brzezinski briefed the president that “Israeli arms sales to Managua through the middle of [1978] have reached \$3.2 million and included armored cars, anti-aircraft artillery, and four or six Dabur-class patrol boats [...] an Israeli ship offloaded 125 tons of small arms and ammunition in July and one or two El Al commercial 707’s delivered arms to Managua in late October.” According to the National Security Advisor, the American embassy in Managua indicated that “Israel has replaced the U.S. as principal arms supplier for the Nicaraguan government.”<sup>35</sup> In June of 1979, weeks before Somoza was ousted by the Sandinistas, Brzezinski was briefed in a secret memorandum that Israel reported that they had no new contracts with the

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<sup>32</sup> Yoram Peri, “Ha-Leibor Megane Haspakat Ha-Neshek Le-Nicaragua,” *Davar*, December 15, 1978.

<sup>33</sup> Yehoshua Bitzur, “Lehafsik Mishlohei Neshek Le-Somoza,” *Ma’ariv*, January 10, 1979.

<sup>34</sup> Dan Arkin, “Ha-Ta’asia Ha-Avirit Teyatze Ha-Shana Be-240 Milion Dolar,” *Ma’ariv*, December 8, 1978, 28.

<sup>35</sup> *National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski provides President Jimmy Carter with information on the following world events: significance of Israeli arms sales to Nicaragua; details of China's willingness to reach a border settlement with India.* White House, 13 Nov. 1978. *U.S. Declassified Documents Online*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CK2349648200/USDD?u=chic\\_rbw&sid=bookmark-USDD&xid=f20873f2&pg=1](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CK2349648200/USDD?u=chic_rbw&sid=bookmark-USDD&xid=f20873f2&pg=1). Accessed 2 July 2023.

Nicaraguans, but they have continued to supply them according to “existing contracts.”<sup>36</sup>

Whether the Israelis were intentionally being evasive or whether one part of the government did not know what the other one was doing is hard to tell. Still, several sources indicate that contact and deals continued behind the backs of the Americans up until the very last moments of Somoza’s reign.

According to Yair Klein in his autobiography *Wild Warrior*, three months before the Sandinistas took over power in Managua, his friend Pesah Ben-Or arrived to meet him at his military office with the head of the Nicaraguan military.<sup>37</sup> Both of them offered to pay him a sum that “if [he] worked for during all of his military service years he would never get to.” For that sum they wanted him to come and train Nicaraguan units in pushing back the Sandinistas, three months before the collapse of the Somoza forces. Klein declined politely the generous offer only because he was still serving in the military and felt obligated to stay in his position. Klein describes how Ben-Or found a job working for the Israeli-Mexican arms dealer and Ta’as<sup>38</sup> representative in Central America, Marcus Katz as a driver when the millionaire came to visit

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<sup>36</sup> *National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski is provided with noon notes on world events. Issues include: Israeli arms shipments to Nicaragua; North Korean-U.S. relations.* White House, 22 June 1979. *U.S. Declassified Documents Online*, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/CK2349585098/USDD?u=chic\\_rbw&sid=bookmark-USDD&xid=7d7c96b8&pg=1](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/CK2349585098/USDD?u=chic_rbw&sid=bookmark-USDD&xid=7d7c96b8&pg=1). Accessed 2 July 2023.

<sup>37</sup> Klein uses the term “the Nicaraguan ramatkal,” an acronym used in Israel to denote the IDF’s Chief of General Staff. I doubt Klein was intimately familiar with pre-revolution Nicaraguan military ranks, hence it is unclear who he met in 1979.

<sup>38</sup> The Israel Military Industries also known as Ta’as was at the time (and until its privatization) a government owned Israeli weapons manufacturer which among other products developed and manufactured the Uzi submachine gun and the Galil assault rifle.

Israel and the IDF provided him with a driver. Ben-Or went on to work in some capacity for Katz in Nicaragua which Katz fled, according to Klein, once “the rebellion starts,” leaving Ben-Or in a great position to leverage Katz’s connections and keep feeding military equipment to the Nicaraguans. Klein, who nicknames Ben-Or “the bastard,” writes that his friend sold to the Nicaraguans two Dabur ships and one Arava airplane six months before the collapse of Somoza. Those purchases never made it to Managua in time, so Ben-Or was able to resell them to Guatemala and make millions in the process.<sup>39</sup>

Klein’s stories could be dismissed as high tales of a washed up IDF officer. Yet they consistently correspond with sources that are completely unrelated to him. Anastasio Somoza Debayle himself published an autobiography a few months after his departure from Nicaragua and a few short months before his assassination in Paraguay.<sup>40</sup> According to the former President, a few months before the fall of his regime, an Israeli armament ship was blocked by U.S. president Jimmy Carter and forced to reverse course and head back to Israel. In his account, the shipment carried ten thousand anti-tank and anti-personnel weapons among “other military items.” In Somoza’s eyes, the shipment would certainly have meant the difference between a Somocista loss and a victory in Managua.<sup>41</sup> To him the shipment was a matter of life and death,

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<sup>39</sup> Yair Klein, *Lohem Pir'i* (Wild Warrior), (Israel: ePublish, 2013), 1208-1216. [https://www.e-vrit.co.il/Product/2562/%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%97%D7%9D\\_%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%99](https://www.e-vrit.co.il/Product/2562/%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%97%D7%9D_%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%99).

<sup>40</sup> A fascinating story on its own, the Sandinista directed and Cuban backed assassination of Anastasio Somoza on the streets of Asunción Paraguay involved guerillas from around Latin America and by some accounts training from the Cuban government. For more information see the autobiography of one of the militants involved in the assassination, the Argentinian Enrique Haroldo Gorriarán Merlo in his book *Memorias de Enrique Gorriarán Merlo. De los años setenta a La Tablad* (2003).

<sup>41</sup> Somoza, 239-40.

but for our purposes, the story about Ben-Or's double dip sale proves consistent with the account by the ousted Nicaraguan President.

Be that as it may, there are some problems with Somoza's version of events. For one, it is understandable and even expected that Somoza would want to put the blame for his loss on anyone but himself. Perhaps he sought to placate his domestic and international supporters in the hopes that they will keep propping him up. His depiction of events puts all the blame on U.S. President Carter while carefully making sure Israel takes none of it. Somoza made sure to underline that Israel was actively forced to turn around the ship by "extreme pressure applied by the United States." In his eyes "Somewhere in Israel there is a large consignment of arms and ammunition which could have saved Nicaragua."<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless, the book makes it abundantly clear that Israel not only was involved with Somoza's regime but was seen by it as its only lifeline, at a time when no other former allies would back them in Latin America, North America or anywhere else.

Ultimately, the book did not convince many that Somoza suffered a betrayal, especially since the book came out in English and not in Spanish. Possibly meant solely for American audiences, the book puts the blame squarely on the laps of President Carter, in an election year. Even the film co-produced three years later by the co-author of the book Jack Cox, *Last Plane Out*, failed to make Somoza's rendering of the July 1979 events credible. In an early life, Cox served three terms as the Democratic member of the Texas House of Representatives, later changing sides and becoming a vital figure in the reactivation of the Republican Party of Texas

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

and the boom in conservative politics in the early 1960s in the lone star state.<sup>43</sup> A longstanding Republican by the late 1980s, he went on to publish Cold War anti-communist books about supposed Soviet meddling in Central America.<sup>44</sup> Cox's involvement in writing the book with former President of Nicaragua points to a possible Republican involvement with Somoza only a few months before the elections that brought Ronald Reagan into office. Once again, these connections intimate that the book could have been produced with American audiences in mind and not Latin American ones.

With all the caveats about *Nicaragua Betrayed* notwithstanding, the book's view of Israel illuminates part of the connection the Somoza family enjoyed with the Zionist movement at first and later the Israeli state. Up to the very end, Somoza looked to Israel for military supplies, only for President Carter to block a critical shipment. Whether blame should be put on the American Chief of Staff or not, becomes irrelevant for our topic. Instead, the mere possibility for Somoza and Cox to tell the story about the missing shipment from Israel, gets at the deep involvement of the Middle Eastern country in a region thousands of miles away from its borders. Somoza does not blame Israel for the ship's change of course, perhaps he could not afford to lose his very last international supporter. The need to stir away from criticizing Israel, could be attributed to the

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<sup>43</sup> Texas Legislative Reference Library, "Jack Cox," Legislative Reference Library | Legislators and Leaders | Member profile, accessed June 13, 2023, [https://lrl.texas.gov/legeLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=1287](https://lrl.texas.gov/legeLeaders/members/memberDisplay.cfm?memberID=1287;);

Michael L. Antle. *The Rise of the Republicans: Party Realignment in Twentieth Century Texas*, dissertation, December 2012; Denton, Texas. (<https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc177173/>; accessed June 13, 2023), University of North Texas Libraries, UNT Digital Library, <https://digital.library.unt.edu>.

<sup>44</sup> About his 1987 book *Requiem in the Tropics: Inside Central America*, see Jack Cox and Gary McCaleb. "Interview with Jack Cox, 1987." *The Portal to Texas History*, January 1, 1987.

<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph779661/m1/>.

possibility that Somoza continued to stay in contact with Israeli actors who wanted to support anti-Sandinista forces for a variety of ideological, strategical, and economical reasons. Though not nearly an explicit indication of such contacts at the time, it seems reasonable that Somoza saw in his interest putting the blame not on the Israelis but on a specific American, who happened to be a Democratic President in an election year.

Somoza's book highlights the tactical and strategic considerations of the exiled Nicaraguan president. He clearly felt a need to maintain a good connection with Israel in the absence of a supportive American President. The dynamics of the American snub in 1977 amidst the tumultuous political upheaval in Nicaragua propelled a previously minor friendly country with a lot of arms for sell to the position of sole supporter. Once the Sandinista revolution of 1979 came and went, Nicaraguan counter revolutionary forces started to congeal and take form. Partly based on Somoza's National Guard who were closely familiar with foreign military assistance, the Contras slowly materialized, itching for any military support they could get their hands on.

### **After the Revolution: When did the Israelis Contact the Contras?**

The beginning of the Israeli support for the Contras appears to be murky in the historical record. Some argue that support started on "day one" after the 1979 revolution, though such arguments still rely on unnamed "U.S. and Israeli officials."<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, I could not verify such statements independently since my work relies on primary sources and tries to avoid

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<sup>45</sup> Associated Press, "Israel-Contras Link Goes Back Years, According to Israeli," *The San Francisco Chronicle*, December 5, 1986.

second-hand information.<sup>46</sup> The general consensus among those who claim that Israel took an active role in training the Contras, places its beginnings in 1982, after Argentina's withdrawal from their deep involvement with the CIA supported forces. Following the Malvinas/Falklands war, Argentina felt betrayed by the U.S. who sided with the United Kingdom. The Argentines responded by slowly pulling their support from the Contras creating a space for a new force to come in and take their place. Israel, on the other hand, played an active role in supplying Argentina with weapons and ammunitions throughout their war.<sup>47</sup> In the next few pages I examine several sources that present different claims about Israel's first contact with the Contras. At the end of this section, I follow a number of serving and former Israeli ministers and their official visits in countries surrounding Nicaragua, from where the Contras operated. The trips do

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<sup>46</sup> According to a Boston Globe report from late November of 1986, Daniel Sheehan, a public interest lawyer, amassed evidence that CIA kept in touch with Somoza's forces through 1979 and until 1981 when they officially took over Contra affairs once Reagan took office. They maintained a supply network that "reportedly outfitted the remnants of Somoza's secret police, the core of the Contras based in Honduras." Sheehan took his claims to court and eventually got them thrown out for not having any evidence to support his claim, forced to pay the court expenses of the defendants. It is certainly possible that Sheehan was silenced by the establishment for exposing too much, similar things have happened in the past, but the fact is that his claims are supported by interviews that have not been corroborated to the best of my knowledge. A CIA connection to the Contras since 1979 could have indicated an Israeli connection as well but I have yet to find sufficient historical evidence for that claim. In the 1980s Sheehan was the head of the Christic Institute. Since I could not verify his claims sufficiently, I do not make use of any information that I could trace back to him or his institute.

<sup>47</sup> For more on Israel's involvement with the Argentinian Junta see: Hernán Dobry, *Operación Israel: El Rearme Argentino Durante La Dictadura (1976-1983)*, Buenos Aires: Lumiere, 2011.

not conclusively demonstrate an Israeli involvement with the anti-Sandinistas, but they support the claims that Israel supported the Contras by the end of 1982.

After the FSLN took over Managua, the high-ranking officers of Somoza's National Guard fled to Miami, Florida with the deposed president. Some of those officers became active in the Contra's efforts to take power back from the Sandinistas over the 1980s. It is completely possible that Israel kept supporting or maintained some contact with the people of the Nicaraguan National Guard through their transformation into the Contras. The same people the Israelis dealt with pre-July of 1979 would most likely become some of the people they would encounter in the Contra ranks after the Sandinistas took power. Though such accounts pass the plausibility test, satisfying proof has yet to surfaced.

The Cuban exile-turn-CIA operative, Félix Rodríguez, dipped his hand in many Latin American interventions by the CIA. From the Bay of Pigs invasion, training Bolivians to hunt down Che Guevara, and deep involvement in training the contras in Nicaragua, his 1989 book, *Shadow Warrior* tells his stories and puts forward his intelligence philosophy and analysis. In one of his only mentions of Israel in his book, he casually mentions that "back in the late seventies and early eighties, advisors from AMAN, Israeli military intelligence, and Shin Bet, the Israeli internal security service instructed a sizable number of Latin American students in the same elements of antiguerrilla warfare that I'd taught a decade before in Bolivia. The Israelis learned these techniques because they'd had to design similar antiterror intelligence operations in the occupied West Bank and Gaza." Without specifying much, Rodríguez mentions off handedly that Israel trained many Latin American antiguerrilla operatives. Though not very rich in details, his casual mention of Israel, one of the only mentions of the country in his book, lends credibility to the fact that Israel actively trained forces in Latin America. He does not specify the Contras in

particular, but just the presence of Israelis in the region could have spilled into training for the anti-Sandinistas.<sup>48</sup>

The account by Rodríguez brings to the fore the issue of memoirs and interviews by former spies and intelligence operatives. As a whole, spies do not have the reputation of being very reliable and honest. Nevertheless, at times spies have turned out to be valuable sources of historical information when read carefully. For example, the memoir of Benjamin Tallmadge, who ran a spy ring in New York City during the American Revolutionary War, is considered a classic in the history of modern espionage.<sup>49</sup> A more contemporary example would be Marcus Klingberg, an Israeli biologist who spied for the Soviet Union for 26 years and was caught in 1983. He revealed to the Soviets the extent of Israel's biological weapons program for which he was sentenced to 20 years in Israeli prison. After his release and move to France he wrote a book about his years as a Soviet Spy.<sup>50</sup> Though these are examples of spies who wrote reliably, not all of them did, and each case is different and must be examined closely. With that in mind, I do not blindly accept narratives produced by former spies, though I certainly consider them.

According to former Israeli military intelligence agent Ari Ben-Menashe, Israelis have been involved with supplying the Contras since 1981. Though hard to verify, he claims that retired Israeli general and soon-to-be Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon, created a network which was able to “provide military equipment from Israel to various Central American Countries.”

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<sup>48</sup> Félix I. Rodríguez and John Weisman, *Shadow Warrior* (New York, NY: Pocket Books, 1989), 142.

<sup>49</sup> Benjamin Tallmadge, *Memoir of Colonel Benjamin Tallmadge*. [New York]: New York times, 1968. A reprint of the 1858 edition.

<sup>50</sup> Marcus A. Klingberg and Michael Sfard, *Ha-Meragel Ha-aḥaron*, Tel-Aviv: Sifriyat Ma'ariv, 2007.

According to Ben-Menashe, CIA operative Robert Gates<sup>51</sup> got close to Sharon and his network, and “[b]y 1981 Sharon and Harari were running what Harari described as more of a CIA network than an Israeli one.” At that time, the former intelligence agent claimed, Sharon started providing for the Contras.<sup>52</sup> Ben-Menashe’s claims somewhat correspond to testimony given by José Blandón, former intelligence aid of Panamanian military leader Manuel Noriega, who testified before Senator John Kerry in a 1988 Senate subcommittee on drug trafficking. He talked there about a “Harari Network” but did not mention or hint on any involvement of Sharon. They also somewhat disagree on minor details. For example, Blandón claims the network was established in 1982-3, which corresponds with Sharon’s visit to Honduras in late 1982 as acting Defense Minister. On the other hand, Ben-Menashe dated the establishment of the network to 1981. It is possible that the former Israeli spy wanted to blame Sharon and any other Israeli officials as revenge for not supporting him through his apprehension and detention by the Americans in 1989. Conversely, both the Israeli and Panamanian intelligence men tied the network to attempts to smuggle cocaine into the United States. Ben-Menashe claims that the CIA used the profits from the drug sale while Blandón suggested the profits went into the hands of the Harari Network itself. In short, both seem to agree that some kind of Israeli-involved network brought weapons into Central America for the Contras and took out profits and drugs. More details about the operations of the network are hard to come by, making it hard to get a clear picture of the motives and scope of the operation. On top of that both were intelligence people who were

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<sup>51</sup> Gates became Director of the CIA about a decade later and Secretary of Defense under presidents George W. Bush and Barack Obama.

<sup>52</sup> Ari Ben-Menashe, *Profits of War: Inside the Secret u.s.-Israeli Arms Network* (New York , NY: Sheridan Square Press, 1992), 104-5.

involved various shady businesses before and after their testimonies.<sup>53</sup> Though Blandón comes across as a more reliable personality than Ben-Menashe considering the Israeli's future entanglement in illegal business practices, while Blandón went on to live a relatively decent life, their stories still echo each other.

During Blandón's testimony, the "Harari Network" referred to Michael Harari, an Israeli citizen "who has business with Noriega in Panama, who formed a series of companies for arms, contraband and smuggling to supply arms to Central America and to the contra revolution, the Nicaraguan contra revolution."<sup>54</sup> The former Panamanian intelligence aid went on to describe the "Harari Network" which was "established with Israeli citizens, Panamanians and U.S. citizens for arms supply purposes [...] in 1982-3, it functioned until 1986."<sup>55</sup> Though Senator John Kerry who was questioning Blandón referred to the network as a "private network," later journalistic reports claimed that the Harari Network closely worked with the Mossad and CIA. Acclaimed journalist Robert Parry wrote for *Newsweek* magazine in 1988 about Vice President at the time George H.W. Bush's involvement in a Contra resupply network. Parry wrote that Bush started his involvement with the resupply network in 1984-5, before Oliver North established his own operations that were investigated under the Iran-Contra affair. According to Parry, "[I]ate in 1983, with the cutoff of funds for the contras looming, unnamed officials in the Reagan administration were looking for alternatives" for supplying the Contras. Israel agreed to play that role if someone else would supply the funding for the operation. Parry reported that according to

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<sup>53</sup> Ben-Menashe seemed to not be able to stay out of trouble. See "Alexander Legault and Ari Ben-Menashe," episode, *CBC News: Disclosure*, March 5, 2002,

<sup>54</sup> Blandón, 01:15:00. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?2069-1/drug-control-central-america-day-1>.

<sup>55</sup> Blandón, 01:15:35.

“an Oregon businessman who has done work for both Mossad and the CIA,” Richard Brenneke, “the Israeli network was run by Michael Harari, a former Mossad agent who had become a close friend and adviser to the Panamanian strongman, Gen. Manuel Noriega.” Brenneke went on to claim that “Pesakh Ben-Or, who said was Mossad's Guatemala station chief, recruited him and William Northrop, a supposed Mossad agent who is under federal indictment in an alleged plot to smuggle arms to Iran.” On the financial side, “Brenneke and Blandon (sic) say the cartel volunteered to finance the arms deal, believing that would safeguard its drug flights to the United States.” Even though, as Parry himself points out, these testimonies were not verified by other sources and both Brenneke and Blandón “have their own axes to grind,”<sup>56</sup> the accounts by the Panamanian and American could lead to new questions about Israeli direct involvement with the Contra supply network. As of now, the claims need to find more evidence that can prove or disprove them which in either case will enrich our understanding of Israel’s involvement with the Contras and Latin America in the 1980s. Much more research needs to be done on the “Harari Network” to be able to make any conclusive claims.

According to journalist Steven Emerson “Beginning in February 1982, Deputy National Security Advisor Robert McFarlane set up with Israel a secret military cooperation program in Central America. According to NSC documents, McFarlane met with David Kimche, then director general of the Israeli Foreign Ministry and a former career Mossad official and agreed on a plan for Israeli participation in the U.S. covert program in Central America.” According to

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<sup>56</sup> Robert Parry with Rod Nordland in Washington. "Guns for Drugs?". *Newsweek*. May 23, 1988, United States Edition. <https://advance-lexis-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:3SJ4-GD00-0008-X2X1-00000-00&context=1516831>.

Emerson, that moment marked the beginning of US-Israeli cooperation in supporting and propping up the Contras. Emerson goes on to explain how that program unfolded.

At first, Israeli military advisers-proficient in preempting Arab terrorists attacks and waging offensive ‘low-intensity warfare’-trained Honduran and Guatemalan forces to attack leftist rebels. By the end of 1983, according to an NSC document, there were more than thirty Israeli advisers in Honduras, also training contras to attack Sandinistas. In 1982, Israel also began selling millions of dollars’ worth of military equipment to these two countries and to Costa Rica. Some of the equipment was passed through the contras.

The Israelis shipped mostly Soviet weapons captured from the PLO in Lebanon following their invasion of the country in June of 1982. The Israelis could not use the weapons as Israeli soldiers were trained in American weapons, and instead sought to secure a deal on the purchase of American fighter jets. Emerson places the U.S.-Israel official cooperation over the issue of the Contras in early 1982 around the same time the supposed private efforts by the Harari Network got set up.<sup>57</sup>

Emerson mentions that on March 21<sup>st</sup> 1983, Robert McFarlane sent several documents to National Security Advisor William Clark, one of which included “a description of Israeli paramilitary support to the contras.” Though the contents of the document have not been publicized anywhere I could find, it is clear that at least according to Emerson, Israeli involvement with the contras ran deep by the spring equinox of 1983. According to the journalist, McFarlane stated in the document that a year prior he “set [...] in motion” certain

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<sup>57</sup> Steven Emerson, *Secret Warriors: Inside the Covert Military Operations of the Reagan Era* (New York, NY: Putnam, 1988), 122-3.

unspecified plans concerning contra operations with Israeli counterpart, David Kimche. This memo, purportedly found in Oliver North's safe, included other documents from Donald Gregg and Félix Rodríguez who had their own plans on how to supply the contras without using any CIA resources.<sup>58</sup> These claims are not presented in the book with any annotations or citations, which makes it very difficult to track down any of the documents Emerson refers to. In the *Final Report of the Independent Counsel For Iran/Contra Matters*, published in 1993, a memorandum from Gregg to McFarlane arrived on the 17<sup>th</sup> of March, but no mention of forwarding it to Clark was reported, rather a forwarding to North. According to North in his testimony during his trial in 1989-90, he "did not recall what action, if any, he took in response to McFarlane's directive." The 1993 report does not include any mention of Israel in this memorandum, nor any document found in North's safe. It seems like such a document should have been available to them and would have been mentioned there.<sup>59</sup> These omissions do not support Emerson's reports completely, leaving us to wonder where the documents went, if they existed to begin with, and who else might know about them.

For some context, the latter months of 1982 stood in the shadow of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. On June 6<sup>th</sup> sixty thousand Israeli troops and over 800 tanks crossed Israel's northern border with Lebanon with the official goal of pushing PLO forces 40 kilometers away from its border. By June 14<sup>th</sup>, after intense fighting with the PLO and the Syrian army along their way north, a siege was put by the IDF on Beirut, roughly a hundred kilometers away from the Israeli border. The siege lasted until August, when an agreement was signed leading to the departure of

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<sup>58</sup> Emerson, 126.

<sup>59</sup> Lawrence E. Walsh, *Final Report of the Independent Counsel for Iran/Contra Matters* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit, 1993). Vol. I, p. 486.

14,000 PLO combatants from the city by boats, under the supervision of American-led Multinational Force in Lebanon (MNF). On August 23<sup>rd</sup>, Bashir Gemayel, the leader of the Israel-aligned, Christian-Maronite militia, the Lebanese Forces (LF), got elected President of Lebanon after no other candidates ran against him. On September 14<sup>th</sup>, Gemayel was assassinated in an explosion that killed him together with 26 other politicians from his Kataeb Party. In retaliation, FL members, with IDF cover, killed thousands of Palestinians during the Sabra and Shatila Massacres. On September 29<sup>th</sup> the IDF retreated from Beirut but otherwise stayed in place. In September of the following year, the Israeli forces retreated to the Awali river, roughly sixty-five kilometers from the Israeli border, staying in place until May of 1985. Between 1985 and 2000, the IDF occupied about ten percent of Lebanese territory close to the Israeli border, home to six percent of Lebanon's population. The war killed tens of thousands of people in Lebanon, including thousands of civilians. Israel and the U.S. suffered significant losses as well, mostly soldiers and other servicemen.<sup>60</sup>

In the last few months of 1982, Israeli acting and former ministers visited both Honduras and Costa Rica, raising many questions about Israeli involvement with the Contras. Following the intense few months between the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in June and its retreat from the city of Beirut in late September, acting Foreign Minister and future Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir (1983-4, 1986-1992) arrived at Washington in order to conduct talks with President Reagan and his Secretary of State George Shultz. Shamir stayed in the United States for about two weeks, during which he squeezed-in a three-day visit to Costa Rica, where he met President

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<sup>60</sup> Theodor Hanf, *Co-Existence in Wartime Lebanon: Decline of a State and Rise of a Nation* (London: Centre for Lebanese Studies in association with I.B. Tauris, 1993).

Luis Alberto Monge Álvarez, a longtime friend of Israel.<sup>61</sup> The Costa Rican President served as his country's first Ambassador to Israel between 1963 and 1966, volunteered in a kibbutz for a couple of weeks,<sup>62</sup> and arrived to Israel in 1960 as a guest of the Histadrut, Israel's Labor Union.<sup>63</sup> After Shamir's visit, the Foreign Ministry divulged that Israel will deposit seven million dollars in Costa Rican banks from its foreign currency reserves. The money was officially meant to "help the economy of Costa Rica." The visit was considered a success, though its timing seems to be a little odd.<sup>64</sup>

Two months later, Defense Minister Ariel Sharon conducted his own three-day visit, this time to Honduras, on the other side of Nicaragua. Two high-ranking ministers, following a highly controversial war, while investigations are ongoing in the Kahan Commission which will bring about the resignation of Sharon, still found time to travel to Central America in order to at least send money if not sell weapons. Sharon did not go on his visit to Honduras on his own, he flew there from Las Vegas on planes provided to him by Marcus Katz, the Jewish-Mexican arms dealer millionaire and the representative in Mexico of Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), the government owned Israeli aerospace and aviation manufacturer. He is the same Marcus Katz mentioned by Yair Klein, who skipped Nicaragua just before the 1979 revolution and left his extensive business network to his once driver-turned-arms dealer Pesah Ben-Or. When reporting on the Defense Minister's trip to Honduras, the Israeli newspaper *Ma'ariv* made sure to mention that "Marcus Katz has been friends with Sharon for years."<sup>65</sup> At the time and for many years

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<sup>61</sup> Guillermo Martinez, "Shamir Says Israelis Would Aid Costa Rica," *The Miami Herald*, October 21, 1982, sec. A, 28;

<sup>62</sup> Yosef Priel, "Costa Rica: Hayedida Ha-Ahrona," *Davar*, September 2, 1982.

<sup>63</sup> "Hegia Shagrir Costa Rica," *Ma'ariv*, April 17, 1963.

<sup>64</sup> "Israel Tafkid Shiva Milion Dolar Be-Bankim Be-Costa Rica Leidud Calcalata," *Davar*, October 20, 1982.

<sup>65</sup> Razi Guterman, "Sharon Ma'arich Shehuto Be-Niu York," *Ma'ariv*, December 10, 1982, 1.

later, Katz stayed very close to the religious-Zionist party Mafdal which held six seats out of 120 in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, in 1982. The Israeli government constituted of Likud together with several other smaller partners, one of which was the Mafdal. According to a report in the anti-establishment newspaper *HaOlam HaZe*, the Mafdal party leveraged its power in the government in favor of Katz's business deals in Latin America several times, making sure the Jewish-Mexican arms dealer held exclusive rights to sell Israeli weapons in the region, raking between 15 to 25 percent of the sale in revenue.<sup>66</sup> Several years later, Katz was accused by an Israeli Member of Knesset Matti Peled on the pages of *Newsday* of funding some of Ariel Sharon's elections campaign in 1986 while being described as "selling weapons to the contras."<sup>67</sup> Sharon's connection with Katz seems to come up every now and again and somehow always with connection to the Contras.

Shamir and Sharon's stopovers were by no means the only official visits these ministers conducted over the last quarter of 1982. Shamir visited Uruguay and Argentina, both at the time under a right-wing military dictatorship, in December. Sharon, on the other hand, visited Mobutu's Zaire in November, only a few weeks before his Honduras visit.<sup>68</sup> Around the same time but before December 12<sup>th</sup>, Sharon's predecessor as defense minister and future President of Israel Ezer Weizman went on a private visit to Costa Rica. It's unclear why Weizman found

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<sup>66</sup> Shlomo Frenkel and Marcel Zohar, "Ase Lecha Rav VeKne Lecha Neshek," *HaOlam HaZe*, March 9, 1983.

<sup>67</sup> Timothy M. Phelps, "Israel, Everyone's Arms Dealer," *Newsday*, December 14, 1986. In order to see that the Katz described in the *Newsday* article is the same Marcus Katz, see Avi Ganor, "'Soher-Neshek Mimen et Masa Ha-Bhirot Shel Sharon,'" *Hadashot*, December 16, 1986.

<sup>68</sup> Alan Cowell, "Israel's Toe Hold in Africa May Fall Victim of War," *New York Times*, June 19, 1982, sec. 1, 6.

himself in Costa Rica; the report about his visit came to the press only due to a leak about his conversation with the president of the Central American country regarding his electoral plans.<sup>69</sup>

Around the same time, early December of 1982, *The Miami Herald* reported on a videotape they acquired on which a defecting Argentinian intelligence officer named Hector Frances divulged many details about CIA involvement with the Contras in Honduras and Costa Rica. Claiming that the Contra forces consisted at the time of 4,000 men in Honduras and 1,000 in Costa Rica, Frances continued to detail Argentina's involvement with the paramilitary anti-Sandinista group as a CIA front.<sup>70</sup> In a translated transcript of the videotape published some months later, Frances claimed that “[t]he Ambassador of Israel [to Costa Rica] offered passports from his country [...] for the undocumented recruits to be able to travel to Honduras without any problem.”<sup>71</sup> It seems that at least since Frances' defection at some point between the Malvinas/Falkland War earlier that year and the beginning of December, Israel was close enough to their orbit that they could offer diplomatic cover for the Contra operations in Costa Rica. The circumstances by which the Israeli ambassador met, at least once, a high-ranking figure in the Costa Rican faction of the Contras are unknown, but Frances claimed that at least one meeting took place and that the ambassador was able to offer a valuable diplomatic façade in a pinch. It seems highly unlikely that the ambassador decided to give passports out of his own good will without any direction from his higher-ups. At the time, the ambassador to Costa Rica was David Tourgeman, a career diplomat who served in the Israeli embassy in Washington D.C. in the

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<sup>69</sup> Shlomo Frenkel, “Lahsom et Ha-Derech Le-Herut,” *HaOlam HaZe*, December 13, 1982.

<sup>70</sup> Juan O. Tamayo, “CIA is Waging ‘silent War’ on Nicaragua, Argentine Agent Charges in a Videotape,” *The Miami Herald*, December 2, 1982, 1, 24.

<sup>71</sup> Hector Frances and Carmen Alegría, “The War of Terror Against Nicaragua,” *The Black Scholar* 14, no. 2 (1983): 2–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1983.11414260>, 7.

1970s, among many other appointments in his 40 year career. Not many sources mention Ambassador Tourgeman, and it is hard to definitively assess if he would issue passports on his own accord or only if directed to do so. Seeing that he spent nearly forty years of his adult life as a diplomat, including nearly a decade after his service in Costa Rica, it seems unlikely that he acted out of his own initiative rather than following directives from the Israeli foreign ministry.<sup>72</sup> Like the sources mentioned above, and alongside the ministerial visits to Central America of Israeli government representatives, Frances' testimony also dates the beginning of Israeli involvement with the Contras to at least 1982.

In an interview on the 2013 Israeli documentary film *The Lab*, the director of the film, Yotam Feldman asks head of the Israeli security consulting firm International Security and Defense Systems (ISDS), Leo Gleser, as they tour his house, about a particular picture of him on the wall. "Oh, that is from many years ago" says Gleser, "in 84', it's from the beginning. We dealt with Central America." "What is it" asks Feldman. "It's training, military training. We trained and dealt with Americans and all sorts of groups" explained Gleser.<sup>73</sup> In his own words he admits that he worked in Central America as early as 1984 with Americans and other unnamed "groups." While talking about other photos, he had no problem identifying who or where he worked, be it Hugo Chavez or the Persian Gulf. It is very possible that in some capacity he was involved with the Contras as early as 1984. According to journalist and Israeli intelligence expert Yossi Melman:

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<sup>72</sup> Israeli Foreign Ministry, "David Tourgeman," *Gov.il*, April 19, 2016,

[https://www.gov.il/he/departments/memorialization/david\\_tourgeman](https://www.gov.il/he/departments/memorialization/david_tourgeman).

<sup>73</sup> *The Lab*. Directed by Yotam Feldman. Cinephil, 2013. <https://video.alexanderstreet.com/watch/the-lab>, 27:54-28:09.

In Israel the system works like this: The Defense Ministry, the Foreign Ministry or the Mossad gets a request to provide security advice or to train army or security service forces for the ruler of a country, usually a tyrant. Because the authorities cannot, or do not want, to assist the ruler directly, although they view his request as important in order to promote security or political interests - they ask a private company to provide the service being requested.

Founding ISDS in 1982, Gleser worked then in Honduras after a stint in Guatemala “in part because of the visit there of the defense minister, Ariel Sharon.” According to Melman the Sharon visit revolved around a proposed deal to sell Israeli Kfir airplanes there, a deal which fell through.<sup>74</sup> As revealed in Oliver North’s trial, in 1986, a scheme offered by Yitzhak Rabin’s office included a plan by Israel to supply Honduras with Kfir fighter jets which would come with Spanish speaking advisors who could be diverted for training the Contras.<sup>75</sup> The offer leaned on the fact that Israel needed the U.S. to approve the sale of the Israeli airplanes because they flew on American engines. The Kfir deal with Honduras lingered from Sharon’s tenure as Defense Minister to Rabin’s time in office four years later. Rabin took advantage of the American need for support for the Contras in order to advance a much more lucrative airplane deal with the government of the Nicaraguan neighbor, Honduras. The Israeli offer highlights Rabin’s understanding of the American involvement with the Contras and might recall a similar offer put forward by Sharon or to Sharon four years prior.

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<sup>74</sup> Yossi Melman, “Jewish Cowboy,” *Haaretz.com*, March 30, 2006, <https://www.haaretz.com/2006-03-30/ty-article/jewish-cowboy/0000017f-df0d-d3ff-a7ff-ffad51f70000>.

<sup>75</sup> Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1993), pp. 29, 88.

Israeli support for the Contras might have started in 1979; it might have started in 1981 or as late as 1982. What is clear is that the possibility of an Israeli involvement with the paramilitaries was floating around at the time. Whether the possibility materialized is hard to nail down to a specific person, place or time. For the people in the know, like intelligence officers and well-placed journalists, the idea that Israel provided arms and training for the Contras was never far-fetched. The next step must be to conduct further research in Central American archives in order to shed better light onto these connections.

### **Weapons to the Contras: Operations Tipped Kettle and Tipped Kettle II**

In the following few pages, I will closely analyze a set of U.S. Government documents that were declassified in 2010 and directly relate to the Tipped Kettle Operations. The operations involved two<sup>76</sup> U.S. Government initiatives to acquire weapons captured by Israel from the PLO in Lebanon. I first came across a mention of the documents in an article in the *Haaretz* newspaper, which sent me searching.<sup>77</sup> The only place I could find copies of the documents were on a website called Cryptome.org, which belongs to a tax-exempt private foundation from New York City.<sup>78</sup> The website claims to welcome “documents for publication that are prohibited by governments worldwide, in particular material on freedom of expression, privacy, cryptology, dual-use technologies, national security, intelligence, and secret governance -- open, secret and

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<sup>76</sup> A few newspaper reports suggested there were three such shipments, but only two came out of the documents.

<sup>77</sup> Amir Oren, “Giluyim Hadashim Mi-Shnot Ha-80: Tzahal, Neshek Shalal Ve-Ha-Machteret Be-Nicaragua,” *Haaretz.co.il*, November 18, 2010, <https://www.haaretz.co.il/misc/2010-11-18/ty-article/0000017f-db8d-df9c-a17f-ff9dbfe80000>.

<sup>78</sup> Internal Revenue Service, Determination Letter to Cryptome Incorporated, signed by Jeffery I. Cooper, October 19, 2015.

classified documents -- but not limited to those.”<sup>79</sup> Cryptome might not be very familiar to most but it “ is well-known in circles where intelligence tactics, government secrets and whistleblowing are primary concerns.”<sup>80</sup> According to different reports, “Cryptome is a website that began in 1996 and is seen by many as a precursor to WikiLeaks. [Cofounder John] Young also helped Assange start WikiLeaks in 2006.”<sup>81</sup> Though their methods might be controversial to some, for our purposes, their materials are vetted by many, even those who disapprove of them.<sup>82</sup> These documents shed light on the US-Israel relationship between 1982 and 1986 surrounding covert anti-Communist operations. They clearly demonstrate a willingness by Israeli officials to side with the United States in their clandestine operations at the time. Finally, they demonstrate that the operations involved high ranking officials in both countries. After a close read of the documents, I cross examine them against other sources to complete the picture and show that the operations went all the way to the top, involving the U.S. president and several Israeli Prime Ministers.

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<sup>79</sup> Cryptome, accessed June 30, 2023, <https://cryptome.org/>.

<sup>80</sup> David Crary, “Older, Quieter than WikiLeaks, Cryptome Perseveres,” Associated Press, March 9, 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20130509030520/http://bigstory.ap.org/article/older-quieter-wikileaks-cryptome-perseveres>.

<sup>81</sup> *Democracy Now!*, “Indict Us Too: Daniel Ellsberg & Cryptome’s John Young Demand U.S. Drop Charges against Julian Assange,” *Democracy Now!*, December 14, 2022, [https://www.democracynow.org/2022/12/14/daniel\\_ellsberg\\_john\\_young\\_assange\\_case](https://www.democracynow.org/2022/12/14/daniel_ellsberg_john_young_assange_case).

<sup>82</sup> See Ian Urbina, “Mapping Natural Gas Lines: Advise the Public, Tip off the Terrorists,” *The New York Times*, August 29, 2004, <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/08/29/nyregion/mapping-natural-gas-lines-advise-the-public-tip-off-the-terrorists.html>. The writer disagrees with what Cryptome does, but he does not suggest they are falsifying anything.

On November 17<sup>th</sup>, 1982, Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger sent a memorandum with the subject line “Need for Man-portable Weapons Captured by Israel in Lebanon.”<sup>83</sup> Weinberger sent the document to the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) William J. Casey “[i]n response to [... the director’s] request of November 1, 1982 regarding captured weapons.” The weapons Weinberger referred to in the document and requested by CIA director Casey could be procured in Lebanon either by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) or through a direct request from Israel. The memorandum, and the request by Casey two and a half weeks earlier, dates the initiative to ask the government of Israel to ship weapons directly to the Contras to the above-mentioned few busy months at the end of 1982. Unlike other Israeli involvements in Nicaragua, the weapon shipments of Operation Tipped Kettle and Tipped Kettle II went directly through Israel’s most official channels in the government and military. To emphasize this point, Weinberger recommends waiting until Israel’s military attaché, Menachem (Mandi) Meron returns since he was “out of the Washington area.” Approaching a military attaché of any foreign country constitutes the proper diplomatic way to procure arms from them. As far as Weinberger was concerned, according to his consultation with the State Department “there [was] no policy problem with this effort as long as it is not publicized.”<sup>84</sup> It is unclear whether the State Department did not want the deal to be publicized in the press or it does not want it to be publicized even outside the circles who will directly make the deal with Israel, but what is clear

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<sup>83</sup> To my estimation, the signature at the bottom of the memorandum matches other signatures on other documents I reviewed by the Secretary of State.

<sup>84</sup> “Tipped Kettle - Man-Portable Weapons Captured by Israeli Forces in Lebanon,” Cryptome, November 9, 2010, <https://cryptome.org/dodi/tipped-kettle/tipped-kettle.htm>, documents 1 & 2.

is that the operation was approved by the administration and was to be kept secret to some extent.

At the time of November 1982, the Israeli Ambassador, under which Israel's military attaché Meron operated, was Moshe Arens,<sup>85</sup> a top politician in the governing party of the Likud since after the Israel-Egypt war of 1973. Born in Lithuania in 1925 and growing up in Riga, Latvia, Arens immigrated to the United States at age 14, in September of 1939, at the outbreak of WWII. The Israeli politician attended high school in New York City, college at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and served in the U.S. military in the Engineering Corps during WWII. Never leaving continental U.S. during the war due to lucky circumstances, and immigrating to Israel/Palestine in 1948, Arens was more than acquainted with American culture, easily forging positive relations with American officials in his tenure as Israeli Ambassador many years later.<sup>86</sup> In contrast, relations with Defense Minister Ariel Sharon became sour by the end of 1982 due to various instances of friction between Sharon and Weinberger-Reagan.<sup>87</sup> Luckily for the Americans, between the November 17<sup>th</sup> memorandum to head of CIA Casey and the following document sent again from Weinberger to Casey on March 30<sup>th</sup> 1983, many changes took place in the Israeli government and Embassy. These changes turned out to work in favor of the Operation.

The Commission of Inquiry Into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut, or is it was better known, the Kahan Commission, was founded by Israel on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1982 and

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<sup>85</sup> Another key personnel in the Israeli Embassy in Washington at the time, and Arens's protégé, was none other than Benjamin Netanyahu, the current Prime minister of Israel.

<sup>86</sup> Moshe Arens, *In Defense of Israel a Memoir of a Political Life*, ebook, (Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 12-33.

<sup>87</sup> James Kelly, "A Sadly Deteriorating Relationship," *Time*, February 21, 1983.

published its recommendations on February 7<sup>th</sup> 1983. It investigated Israeli responsibility over the massacres in the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps outside Beirut. The massacres took place between September 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup>, 1982, in which as many as 3,500 people were killed, most of which were Palestinian, by the Lebanese Forces, a Christian-based militia, while Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) surrounded and blocked the refugee camps.<sup>88</sup> The Israeli investigation came in response to international pressure and Israeli public uproar over the shocking massacres. The Kahan Commission sought to find out to what degree its military assisted the killers; who was aware, and to what degree, that this was happening; why no one in a position of leadership acted to stop the massacres; and finally, who ultimately bore the responsibility for the bloodbath near Beirut. The commission found that the Minister of Defense Ariel Sharon “bears personal responsibility” and should “draw the appropriate personal conclusions.” In order to make things crystal clear, the commission saw it fit to elaborate and remind its readers that if said conclusions were not drawn by Sharon, Prime Minister Begin could always exercise his power to “remove a minister from office.”<sup>89</sup>

Shortly after the publication of the final report of the Kahan Commission and amidst intense demonstrations,<sup>90</sup> Ariel Sharon did “draw the appropriate personal conclusions” and resigned from his post as Minister of Defense. To fill his role, Prime Minister Begin called up

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<sup>88</sup> Leila Shahid, “The Sabra and Shatila Massacres: Eye-Witness Reports,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 32, no. 1 (2002): 36–58, <https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2002.32.1.36>, 44-5.

<sup>89</sup> Yitzhak Kahan, Yona Efrat, and Aharon Barak, *Final report: (authorized translation): The Commission of Inquiry Into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut, 1983* ; Yitzhak Kahan, commission chairman, (1983), 105-6.

<sup>90</sup> In one of these demonstrations, three days after the publication of the commission’s report, a right-wing activist threw a grenade into a crowd of peace activists who were protesting and calling for the resignation of Sharon, killing one activist and injuring nine others.

Moshe Arens from Washington. Begin had previously offered the position to Arens in May of 1980, after the resignation of his Defense Minister Ezer Weizamn. Back then, Arens rejected the offer because he did not want to take part in Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula as part of the 1978 Camp David Agreement with Egypt. Only in 1981, after Arens rejected Begin, was Ariel Sharon offered the minister position.<sup>91</sup> Serving a little over a year in the American capital, Arens returned to Jerusalem to finally assume the position of Defense Minister. As if the appointment of the former American Ambassador was not enough to satisfy the Reagan administration, Begin appointed the former military attaché Menachem Meron, with whom the Americans also enjoyed good working relations, to the position of Director General of the Ministry of Defense, a position he would hold until 1986.<sup>92</sup> Now that both Arens and Meron were in key positions, Operation Tipped Kettle drew support from deep within the Israeli defense establishment.

A second memorandum from Weinberger to Casey declassified in 2010, dated March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1983, focused exclusively on the option to buy weapons captured by Israel from the PLO in Lebanon. The memorandum informed Casey about a joint CIA and Department of Defense (DoD) survey team which visited Israel in January of 1983 and inspected "300 metric tons of captured weapons and ammunition suitable for your purposes." According to the document, the inspection trip took place after "numerous meetings with Israeli officials on this subject." Unfortunately, access to the notes from the meetings mentioned in the memorandum are nowhere to be publicly found, yet somewhere in an unknown archive, notes of these meetings should

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<sup>91</sup> Arens, *In Defense of Israel*, 66-7.

<sup>92</sup> Israeli Ministry of Defense, "Menachem Meron," *Mod.gov.il*, accessed June 20, 2023, <https://www.mod.gov.il/About/ceo/Pages/maron.aspx>.

exist. The documents, once available, could shed light on the nature of the US-Israeli cooperation around the Contras in 1982-3. These might be in the CIA archive, DoD archive, DIA archive or somewhere else. Either way, in order to get a better idea of this operation and the nature of U.S.-Israel relations during these critical months, these documents should be dug out and interpreted.

The March 30<sup>th</sup> memorandum went out to update Casey about the current state of the operation at hand. According to Weinberger, “[s]hortly after Ambassador Arens became the new Israeli MOD [(Minister of Defense)], the DoD was informed that these weapons would be provided to the US.” Though not explicitly stated, the Secretary of Defense links the completion of the deal of procuring PLO weapons captured by Israel in Lebanon to the new key position of former Ambassador Arens. It is not clear if the new Israeli Defense Minister directly approved the deal or pushed for it to be concluded, but the memorandum certainly implies so.

Moreover, Weinberger updated Casey that his “staff is in the process of setting up the movement of these weapons to the US.” In other words, the Secretary of Defense in coordination with the head of CIA was in contact with the Israeli Defense Minister, which in Israeli politics is the second most important political position in the government after the Prime Minister, to procure weapons “at a small percentage of their market value.” Generally speaking, countries do not tend to sell weapons on the cheap out of the goodness of their heart; some arrangement must have been arrived at which allowed for the deal to go through. These arrangements were reported on in several publications, but we still do not know for sure its particular details from official sources.<sup>93</sup>

On the same day of March 30<sup>th</sup> 1982, Weinberger sent another memorandum to the Secretary of the Navy asking for shipment assistance with the weapons purchased from Israel.

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<sup>93</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, document 4.

Without volunteering too many details, the Secretary of Defense requested transportation for “approximately 400 metric tons” of “military objects” to be shipped from Ashdod in Israel to the East Coast of the United States.<sup>94</sup> As a side note, this “400” figure contradicts the previous document I discussed from March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1983, which cited 300 metric tons. It also contradicts the document I will soon quote from June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1984, which also cited the “300” figure. I am not sure what significance to attribute to these differences, there might just be a meaningless mistake somewhere or a conscious attempt to hide the real amount of military equipment sent to the CIA. Either way, a large quantity of material left Israel in 1983 and only further declassification will shed light on the exact amount of arms received by the CIA.

Once again, at least to this point, the weapons deal between the U.S. and Israel followed what seems like reasonable procedures. This might seem surprising, since Congress blocked the executive branch from delivering weapons to the Contras only a few months prior. The first “Boland Amendment” introduced language to the Department of Defense Appropriation Act of 1983, passed in December 8<sup>th</sup> of 1982, that would “prohibit the CIA or Defense Department to use funds of the bill to furnish military equipment, military training or advice, or other support for military activities, to any group or individual, not part of a country's armed forces, for the purpose of overthrowing the government of Nicaragua or provoking a military exchange between Nicaragua and Honduras.”<sup>95</sup> As reflected from the documents held by Cryptome, since the beginning point of the project on November 1<sup>st</sup> 1982 until March 30<sup>th</sup> 1983, Operation Tipped

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<sup>94</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, documents 4 & 8.

<sup>95</sup> The United States Congress, “Amendments - H.R.7355 - 97th Congress (1981-1982): Department Of Defense Appropriation Act, 1983” *Congress.gov*, accessed June 21, 2023, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/97th-congress/house-bill/7355/amendments>.

Kettle did not deviate from its intended trajectory even one iota in response to the Boland Amendment, going full steam ahead with its intended objective to get cheap weapons to the Contras. It is certainly possible to interpret the bill as strictly disallowing the use of funds from the defense budget of 1983, leaving room for other sources of funding, which might explain Weinberger's insistence on obtaining the funds at lower than market rates.<sup>96</sup>

A month and a half later, on May 6<sup>th</sup>, Weinberger updated Casey that “[t]he captured PLO weapons the Department of Defense (DoD) is obtaining from Israel for Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) use are presently being loaded aboard a ship for transport to the East Coast of the United States.” The final destination was blacked out on the declassified document as of 2010. Cryptome does not host any more documents relating to the first round of arms shipments from captured PLO weapons in Lebanon to Contras' use in Central America. Though the documents are certainly enough to outline the general contours of the first Operation Tipped Kettle, they also open up an array of questions regarding the people involved and the extent to which the Operation was known.<sup>97</sup>

Around a year later, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, Richard Armitage, wrote a memorandum to Weinberger. The June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1984 document discussed the progression of a second attempt to procure PLO weapons captured by Israel in Lebanon. This attempt will be known in other sources as Operation Tipped Kettle II, yet in this one no name was attached yet. In the document, Armitage noted that in February of 1984, the CIA contacted the DoD again to ask “if there were additional weapons in Israel that might be obtained at little or no cost [...]” According to the document, International Security Affairs (ISA) contacted the

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<sup>96</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, document 5.

<sup>97</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, document 6.

Israeli government in March learning that they were holding more weapons captured from the PLO in Lebanon, and by April Armitage dispatched a joint DoD/CIA team to “view the items available.” The team learned that the Israelis wanted to overprice them on the weapons, asking for 50 million dollars more than DoD’s own appraisal of their worth, when the Americans were hoping to get them “at little or no cost.” Because getting the weapons on the cheap was part of the objective for the operation, Armitage decided to send Maj. Gen. Edward Tixier, who was possibly part of the April team,<sup>98</sup> again in late June to meet with General Meron.<sup>99</sup>

Several meetings took place over the summer of 1984 between the Americans and the Israelis over the weapons under negotiation. In preparation for those meetings the American drew down some instructions and sent them to the officials conducting them, revealing in the process American intentions and strategy adopted for the discussions. On May 23rd, 1984, a memorandum written by a still classified Israeli Desk Officer for the Near East South Asia (NESA) region of the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense International Security Affairs (ASD/ISA), briefed an unnamed American official, perhaps Tixier, before meeting general Meron. The briefing reminded the unnamed official that Israeli elections were fast approaching, set to take place on July 23rd of that year, which meant that their main contacts, Menachem Meron and Minister Moshe Arens, could be replaced overnight and that “establishing relations with new players could be time consuming.” For the Americans, time was at play, meaning that Arens and Meron were key to a successful and timely operation.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> United Press International, *“A high-level U.S. team has been dispatched to the...,”* April 11, 1984, <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1984/04/11/A-high-level-US-team-has-been-dispatched-to-the/6534450507600/>.

<sup>99</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, document 8.

<sup>100</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, document 10.

Another memo explicitly briefing Tixier, stressed the need to hide from the Israelis the involvement of CIA in the Operation. The CIA used the DoD as a front in order that “ Israel would not be aware that the weapons were being used by [CIA] in covert operations.” Still, Tixier received instructions to let the Israelis know that the Americans needed the weapons “[i]n order to continue to confront Soviet advances.” In other words, the DoD wanted Israel to know where the weapons were going, at least vaguely, but not that the CIA needed them for covert operations.<sup>101</sup> At the time, the CIA wanted to keep to a minimum the number of people who knew about their covert operation to arm the Contras, while elements in Congress actively tried to stop them from doing so. The document does not necessarily mean that no one in Israel was aware of the final destination of the arms, just that not all the people involved could know about the destination. The more likely scenario is that an understanding was reached on arming the Contras between high level officials from the U.S. and Israel and the way in which the CIA went about procuring the arms using by using the DoD as a front, allowed Israeli officials to reasonably claim if anyone asked that they were not aware of the destination of those arms.

According to the report sent by Armitage on August 7<sup>th</sup>, 1984, regarding the final deal between Israel and the U.S., Meron and Arens played key roles in smoothing out differences between Israel and The United States on the weapons shipment. They both helped tilt the Israeli decision-making-process toward preferring to grant the weapons to the U.S. rather than keeping them for use by allied forces in Lebanon. The decision went against the wishes of IDF Chief of Staff Moshe Levy who fiercely supported the option of keeping the weapons for allies in Southern Lebanon. This shipment, according to Armitage, included “about three times the weapons involved in the first shipment,” meaning 900 metric tons of equipment. It is no surprise

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<sup>101</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, document 11.

then that he concluded that Operation Tipped Kettle “can be seen as a success.” For him, DoD was “able to provide a large number of Soviet/Warsaw pact-origin weapons for use by CIA at a fraction of their true value.” It is clear how important the low price was to the success of this operation. The insistence on a very low price ties in my view, Tipped Kettle with the Contra arming operation by the CIA. At the time, Congress blocked the CIA from obtaining armaments for the Nicaraguan anti-Sandinista forces, a move which the documents seem to suggest the agency tried to circumvent.

Interestingly, Armitage went on to note that he sees success in the fact that the final deal “has shown that Israel is willing to work with us to combat pro-Communist forces in other regions of the world that are far removed from Israel’s borders.” Though not mentioned in any other part of the Tipped Kettle documents, this remark links the weapons transfer to an anti-Communist effort by the Americans in a region far away from the Middle East. Together with the fact that Armitage felt compelled to stress several times that the weapons were provided for a low price, by relying on the Cryptome documents alone, it is reasonable to conclude that Operation Tipped Kettle sent weapons to the Contras.<sup>102</sup>

During Oliver North’s 1989 trial, where he was convicted of shredding documents, accepting bribes and lying to Congress, the United States Office of Independent Council submitted a lengthy document to the court. The document contained a hundred and seven points which “the United States has admitted for purposes of this trial [...] to be true.” Point number one, on the very first page of the document, stated that “[a]lthough CIA advised Congress that the weapons [provided by Israel] would be used for various purposes, in fact many of them were provided to the Nicaraguan Resistance as appropriated funds ran out.” Clearly, the Americans

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<sup>102</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, document 9.

initiated the transfer of weapons procured from Israel to the Contra rebels. Moreover, point number one goes on to notify that “DoD assured Israel that, in exchange for the weapons, the U.S. Government would be as flexible as possible in its approach to Israeli military and economic needs, and that it would find a way to compensate Israel for its assistance [...]”<sup>103</sup> The fact that funds were cut from the CIA’s Contra project, just when the Israelis stepped in to provide cheap weapons suggest that there is more than just coincidence in Israel’s involvement with the CIA’s operations in Latin America.

The last document in the Cryptome series, produced on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1986, detailed an ongoing saga around the payment for Operation Tipped Kettle II of 1984. Israeli officials demanded payment for the arms and came to an understanding with the Americans. The deal struck between Meron and a redacted American official, allowed the U.S. company NUMAX, acquired by Tadiran, an Israeli company,<sup>104</sup> to “retain its security clearance and government contracts [...] for the items acquired in [Tipped Kettle II].”<sup>105</sup> The document has some inconsistencies with previous documents, which might be just mistakes, or might indicate a third weapons transfer. Either way, the document contributes to our understanding that the deals between Israel and the US, dubbed Operation Tipped Kettle and Tipped Kettle II by the Americans, involved many branches of government, mostly in Defense, of both governments.

In the beginning of 1986 several attempts were made to contract Israel for training purposes and another attempt was initiated, this time by Israel, to deliver PLO weapons to the

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<sup>103</sup> Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1993), pp. 1, 85.

<sup>104</sup> James O’Shea and Douglas Franz, “Israel Turns U.S. Aid Into Profit on Arms,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 17, 1986.

<sup>105</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, document 13.

Contras. The Iran-Contra investigations revealed that several meetings took place in 1986 that brought up the Israeli involvement with the Contras. According to the *Report of the congressional committees investigating the Iran- Contra Affair*, in May of 1986 Defense Minister of Israel, Yitzhak Rabin, “offered to provide Israeli military advisers for the Southern front,” meaning for the Contras fighting from Costa Rica. According to the report, “nothing came out of this offer,” yet in September, North and Rabin met again. This time, Rabin offered Soviet Block weapons recently seized from a “PLO shipment captured at sea.”<sup>106</sup> In a meeting between Oliver North and Manuel Noriega, the military leader of Panama, in September 22, 1986, in a London hotel, the two discussed the possibility of opening a school in Panama where Israeli trainers could train Contras and Afghani forces. The courses were to be 3-6 weeks long and be offered in English, Spanish, Arabic and French. The notes taken by North in his notebook mention that Defense Minister of Israel “Rabin approves” of the plan.<sup>107</sup> It seems very possible that the note made by North about Rabin’s approval for the Panamanian hosted training camp, came fresh off meeting the Israeli Defense Minister. The anecdotes in Oliver North’s notebook and revealed by the Select Committee indicate that Rabin was well aware of the role Israel played in Nicaragua, including the fact that PLO weapons were procured by the U.S. for the purpose of arming the Contras.

Moreover, additional points have been freely disclosed by the U.S. government during Oliver North’s trial in 1989. Besides officially admitting to the Tipped Kettle Operations, several

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<sup>106</sup> “Report of the Congressional Committees Investigating the Iran-Contra Affair with Supplemental, Minority, and Additional Views,” 1987. Washington: U.S. House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate Covert Arms Transactions with Iran.

<sup>107</sup> NSA, document 12, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB113/index.htm>.

meetings and agreements with Israel around the Contras and Central America were noted for 1984-6. First, Israel was contacted in 1984 and asked to supply financial support to the Contras. Israel rejected the request and consequently National Security Advisor Robert C. McFarlane reached out to Saudi Arabia who agreed to fund an ongoing stipend for the Contras. In preparation for asking for funding to the Contras from the Israelis, McFarlane directed an NSC staff member, Howard Teicher, through discussions with David Kimche, Israel's director general of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Teicher was instructed to communicate to Kimche that the U.S. Government (USG)

would not press Israel on assistance to the USG; that aid to the Resistance was an important matter to the USG; that the USG faced a temporary shortfall in supporting the Resistance; that the USG understood the risk involved for Israel; that Israeli aid to the Resistance should be arranged through Honduras; that the USG would furnish a point of contact; and that, although McFarlane was disappointed with Israel's reluctance to assist directly, the USG would not raise the matter further.

In other words, the U.S. made it clear that if Israel wanted to show its loyalty, supporting the Contras was the way to go. The Americans gave a high-ranking Israeli diplomat detailed instructions on how to support the Contras. The Israelis knew at this point in April of 1984, that the U.S. government actively supported the Contras and was actively shopping for backers.<sup>108</sup>

A year later, in May of 1985, according to the Americans' admission, David Kimche met with the U.S. Undersecretary for Political Affairs, Michael Armacost, to "negotiate the continuation of military aid from Israel to Central America." Though not exclusively concerning

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<sup>108</sup> Peter Kornbluh and Malcolm Byrne, eds., *The Iran-Contra Scandal: The Declassified History* (New York, NY: The New Press, 1993), pp. 3, 85.

the Contras, any discussion around Central America, in a general sense, must have included the anti-Sandinista forces present in Honduras and Costa Rica. On top of that, it seems that Kimche and Armacost engaged in some sort of negotiation, meaning that the U.S. expected Israel to provide certain things in Central America, while the Israelis likely wanted to leverage the American need to their advantage. The way in which the meeting was described by the Americans implies that at least some of the Israeli involvement in Central America at the time had more to do with American interests while Israeli interests revolved around appeasing the Americans so that support could continue and even increase.<sup>109</sup>

The document from the 1989 Oliver North trial stipulated that in 1986 Israel offered more ways in which they could send support to the Contras. In May, Oliver North notified his superior, National Security Adviser John Poindexter, that “a representative of Israeli Defense Minister Rabin had offered on behalf of Israel to furnish Spanish-speaking military trainers and advisors to the Resistance.” The scheme offered by Rabin’s office included a plan by Israel to supply Honduras with Kfir fighter jets that will be sent to the Central American country alongside advisors that could double as advisors for the Contras. On top of that, North apparently reported that the Israelis offered that “[o]ther advisors would be placed on the Southern Front,” suggesting that Israel was willing to send advisors to the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border as well. The extent of support Israel was volunteering to send is not very clear, nor is it clear whether this offer was a first time. In any case, the offer itself confirms the fact that the Israeli Defense Minister knew very well the extent to which the U.S. government was involved with the Contras in early 1986 and knew that the Americans could be interested in help from the Israelis.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Kornbluh and Byrne, Pp. 22, p. 87.

<sup>110</sup> Kornbluh and Byrne, Pp. 29, p. 88.

In another meeting between Rabin and North the Israeli Defense Minister expressed satisfaction with the American's positive response to his offer surrounding the Kfir shipment to Honduras that could cover for sending Spanish-speaking advisors for the Contras. Additionally, Rabin offered "recently seized shipment of PLO arms for use by the Resistance." In their conversation North and Rabin agree that a ship be sent to pick up the arms from the Haifa port in Israel making sure that "the transaction would appear to be a private deal between Retired General Secord and the Israelis." Since these discussions took place about a month before the whole Iran-Contra Affair blew up, it is unclear if the deal ever went through. Having said that, the document nonetheless shows a willingness to use privately-owned fronts to cover for high-level diplomatic deals between top officials in both countries.<sup>111</sup>

Around the same time, Israeli Prime Minister arranged to meet with President Reagan. In preparation for the meeting, Peres's advisor, Amiram Nir<sup>112</sup>, indicated that the Prime minister

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<sup>111</sup> Kornbluh and Byrne, Pp. 40, p. 89.

<sup>112</sup> Amiram Nir played a key role in the Iran-Contra Affair. Often described as Oliver North's Israeli counterpart, he coordinated with North the sales of weapons from Israel to the Iranians. According to North, Nir came up with the idea to use "residuals" from the sales to Iran to fund the Contras in January of 1986. Some described him as the true mastermind of the Affair and its real operator, while others see him as North's point man. Nir died in an airplane crash in Mexico in 1988 after leaving office a year prior. Some suspect he was murdered to "shut him up," yet evidence for that is scarce. See John G. Tower, Edmund S. Muskie, and Brent Scowcroft, *The Tower Commission Report: The Full Text of the President's Special Review Board* (New York, NY: Bantam Books, 1987), 53; Uri Avneri, "Zohi Parasha Israelit!," *HaOlam HaZe*, February 25, 1987, 6-8; Moav Vardi, episode, *Hamakor* (Givatayim, IL: Chanel 10, August 2, 2009). "Son of Israel's Ex-Counterterrorism Chief Claims Bush to Blame for 1988 Death," *Haaretz.com*, June 1, 2014, <https://www.haaretz.com/2014-06-01/ty-article/.premium/amiram-nirs-son-says-dad-was-murdered/0000017f-e66b-dea7-adff-f7fb098d0000>

will discuss the arms deal for the Contras with the president. Oliver North recommended that Poindexter instruct Reagan to “thank him, since the Israelis held considerable stores of weapons compatible with ordnance used by the Resistance.” This admission by the U.S. Government indicates that, at least in late 1986, the coordination of support for the Contra forces went up to the highest levels of both governments.<sup>113</sup>

Three years after the court case against Oliver North, a report in an Israeli newspaper confirmed that Israelis knew full well that the U.S. was supporting the Contras and that weapons deals between the countries were intended from the beginning and with full knowledge of all parties, to provide support to the Nicaraguan Contras. In August 20<sup>th</sup>, 1992, an article in the Israeli newspaper Ma’ariv reported on details from the notebooks of one of Rabin’s military aides, Hagai Regev. During an internal Israeli investigation surrounding the revelations of the Iran-Contra investigation, retired General Refael Vardi, who led the investigation, obtained copies of Regev’s notebooks. His notebook mentioned a meeting in September between Rabin, Regev, the deputy to the Israeli Director General of the Defense Ministry Haim Kermun<sup>114</sup>,

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<sup>113</sup> Kornbluh and Byrne, Pp. 41, p. 89.

<sup>114</sup> Kermun was a pillar of the Defense ministry for several decades. Born in 1927 in Poland, fought in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, bodyguard of Israel’s first Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, Karmun invented his own position in the Defense Ministry in 1958 only to retire from that position in 1992. As “Director of Security of the Defense Establishment” or “Malmab” he was put in charge of the security of the Defense Ministry, Israeli weapons industry and all institutions relating to Israel’s nuclear and biological capabilities, including making sure no information about them leaks to the general public. His office also oversaw the Science Affairs Bureau or Lekem, an intelligence agency which collected scientific and technical information from open and covert sources for use by Israeli industry in general but for its nuclear program in particular. Lekem was disbanded in 1986 following the Jonathan Pollard affair where an American intelligence analyst, was caught spying for Israel and sentenced to life in prison under the

Oliver North and his people and Iranian representatives. While reviewing Regev's notes on the meeting, he came across a particularly hard to decipher page. Naturally, investigator Vardi called up Regev's secretary and asked for a better copy of the page. Unfortunately for Regev, his secretary photocopied not only the page requested by the investigator, but also a few other ones that were never sent to Vardi before. The pages included incriminating materials that Regev kept away from retired General Vardi. Those pages indicated Regev's knowledge of North's extended connection with the Contras and the nature of those relations. Regev's notebooks blew apart the argument that Israel had no knowledge of the fact that weapons sent to the U.S. made their way to the Contras. Though Israel never released to the public the report produced by Vardi, Regev was made to leave his position. Only some fragments for the notebooks leaked, years later, making their way into the public record while leaving much to be desired.<sup>115</sup>

Several real-time reports confirm the success of the weapons deal between the U.S. and Israel. In a report for *Reason* magazine from 1984, an embedded reporter with the Contras in Honduras noted that the forces he was with were "well equipped." Weapons included Belgian and American made, as well as "a few Soviet RPG-7 grenade launchers, AK-47 Kalashnikov rifles, and AK-47 ammunition in boxes with Arabic lettering (captured PLO stuff very likely provided by the Israelis, though the Israeli government denies this)." The report by the *Reason* reporter from the front lines of the conflict between the government of Nicaragua and the Contra paramilitaries confirms that weapons provided by the Israelis in the Tipped Kettle operations

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Espionage Act. Pollard was released under parole in 2015 as part of a deal between the U.S. and Israel and moved to Jerusalem in 2020.

<sup>115</sup> *Ma'ariv*, August 20, 1992, cited in Yossi Melman and Daniel Raviv. *Shutafim Li-devar Ma'a'seh: Be-tokhekhe Haberit Ha-Yisre'elit-Amerikanit*. Or Yehudah: Ma'ariv, 1994, 202-3, 376; Aharon Klein, "'Zo Sha'aruria She-Regev A'dain Katzin Be-Tzahal,'" *Hadashot*, June 24, 1993.

successfully made their way to the battlefield.<sup>116</sup> In an Associated Press document from their archives, a report by journalist George Gedda from either 1987 or 1988 claims that “Nicaraguan rebel leader Adolfo Calero said [...] he asked officials from Taiwan, Israel and Egypt for military aid during the period when U.S. aid to the Contras was prohibited.” Once again, this time directly from a Contra leader, Israel’s name is mentioned in relation to military aid to the Nicaraguan anti-Sandinistas in Honduras during the Boland amendment period of 1982-6.<sup>117</sup> Though only minor little anecdotes, Calero’s admission and *Reason*’s embedded reporter confirm the conclusion that Israel supplied the Contras with weapons.

The most dramatic report on the weapons shipped from Americans to the Nicaraguan Contras broke on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1986 when the Nicaraguan government announced that, Eugene Hasenfus, an American pilot, was captured after his C-123 airplane was shot down from Nicaraguan skies a day earlier. After a night of hiding, Hasenfus was captured by the same people who shot him down and was quickly displayed to foreign reporters, including American ones. The pilot proclaimed that he was sent by CIA to drop ammunition and supplies for the Contras inside Nicaraguan territory. It was not his first mission, and over the course of his time in Nicaraguan custody and after his return to the U.S. in December of 1986, he went on to detail the work he has done and the people who he worked for. Some credit the capture of Hasenfus and the media attention it got with bringing about the eventual disclosure of the Iran-Contra

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<sup>116</sup> Jack Wheeler, “Fighting the Soviet Imperialists: The Contras in Nicaragua,” *Reason*, 1984.

<sup>117</sup> “Contras Miami. 1987-1988.” TS AP17.2; Box 16, Folder 25, Miami: Series II. Subject Files 1964-1997 (Bulk, 1972-1986). Associated Press Corporate Archives. *Associated Press Collections Online* (accessed June 25, 2023). [https://link-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/apps/doc/ESMTHH611943294/APOA?u=chic\\_rbw&sid=bookmark-APOA&xid=4792f2fc&pg=41](https://link-gale-com.proxy.uchicago.edu/apps/doc/ESMTHH611943294/APOA?u=chic_rbw&sid=bookmark-APOA&xid=4792f2fc&pg=41), page 41.

scheme. For our purposes, his capture helped reveal interesting Israeli connections to the CIA smuggling operation.

Almost two weeks after the capture of Hasenfus, the newspaper out of Long Island, NY, *Newsday*, ran an article by one of its writers who made it down to San Salvador in El Salvador. The journalist followed a lead given by Hasenfus to the Nicaraguans and printed over and over in many publications. The American pilot “participated in 10 supply flights for the *contras*,” leaving six times from Ilopango, El Salvador and four from a base built by Americans in Honduras.<sup>118</sup> The *Newsday* journalist tracked down the telephone records of the house used by Hasenfus and the two other operatives who died when the plane crashed on October 5<sup>th</sup>. The records showed that the three made calls to a company owned by Richard Secord who retired in 1983 from his position as the Defense Department’s chief Middle East arms sales negotiator after “allegations of links to overpayments and kickbacks.”<sup>119</sup> The Tipped Kettle documents mention that sometime before May 1983, “[d]iscussion between MG Secord (former DASD/NESA) and the former Israeli Attaché, MG Meron, allowed this transfer to take place.”<sup>120</sup> The 1993 Iran-Contra final report by Laurence Walsh, concluded that Secord co-founded Stanford Technology Trading Group International (STTGI) in 1983 once he left the Air Force following allegations of “improper dealings” with an ex-CIA agent convicted of arms smuggling to Libya. “Using a complex web of secret Swiss bank accounts and shell corporations,” Secord and his Swiss manager “built a lucrative Enterprise from covert operations business assigned to them by Lt.

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<sup>118</sup> Envío team, “Hasenfus: Nothing But the Fact,” *Envío*, November 1986. <https://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/3243>.

<sup>119</sup> Jim Mulvaney, “The Long-Distance Connection,” *Newsday*, October 19, 1986.

<sup>120</sup> “Tipped Kettle,” Cryptome, document 8.

Col. Oliver L. North.”<sup>121</sup> In short, fresh off negotiating a covert arms deal to the Contras with the Israelis in 1983, Secord opened a private business that three years down the road got exposed delivering arms to those same Contras in Nicaragua. According to the Nicaraguans, the Hasenfus plane carried “13,000 pounds of weaponry: 50,000 AK-47 rifle cartridges, 60 collapsible AK-47s, a similar number of RPG-7 grenade launchers and 150 pairs of jungle boots.”<sup>122</sup> The Soviet-made weapons found on Hasenfus’s plane happen to be ones that PLO and other forces in Lebanon used during the 1980s. Though there are no reports of “Arabic lettering” as in the *Reason* article from 1984, it is possible that the CIA still held PLO weapons from the deal with the Israelis in 1986, and contracted Secord to drop them off in Nicaragua. The more likely scenario however is that at this point weapons were obtained by Secord’s operation through ex-CIA agent Thomas Clines who “oversaw the logistics purchasing weapons from private suppliers in Europe and arranging for their delivery to Central America.”<sup>123</sup> According to Secord in his May 5<sup>th</sup>, 1987 testimony in front of the Iran-Contra Investigative Committee, his company and all its operations “were in the process of turning this over to the CIA”<sup>124</sup> after Congress approved a \$100 million support package to the Contras in September of 1986. The support package, which spelled the end of the Boland Amendment, meant that CIA operations did not have to go through a civilian front or look for under the table ways to arm the Contras anymore.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>121</sup> Walsh, 173.

<sup>122</sup> *Envío*, November 1986.

<sup>123</sup> Walsh, 181.

<sup>124</sup> “Iran-Contra Investigation Day 1,” C-SPAN, accessed June 24, 2023, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?8829-1%2Firan-contra-investigation-day-1>.

In an interview to acclaimed journalist Jon Lee Anderson in 1989, an ISDS operator put it very clearly: “We don’t advertise, because we don’t want publicity – those who need our offices know how to find us. And we know how to find our clients.”<sup>125</sup> For ISDS, much like most trade in military hardware and knowledge be it private or state sponsored, leaving behind minimal tracks is paramount. Compounded with the secretive nature of the Contra supply efforts, due to U.S. political circumstances, accessing primary sources for the purpose of historical writing proved tricky. To be sure, as a historian working in recovering stories interwoven into this trade, collecting clues and piecing them together becomes an arduous and lengthy process. In the period after Somoza was out of the picture and before Operation Tipped Kettle, the extent to which Israel kept in touch with the former members of the Nicaraguan National Guard and later the Contras is still very obscure. Similarly, contextualizing the proliferation of Israeli citizens training and supplying the Contras and the nature of their relationship with Israel’s Defense Ministry, Foreign Ministry and government policies, requires a lot more consideration.

While additional research is needed, certain aspects of the Israel-Contra relations are decidedly clear. Israel supplied Somoza’s Nicaraguan National Guard first and then the Contras through the CIA. Eminent Israeli ministers along with Prime Ministers certainly knew about the shipments to Somoza, but also about CIA’s secret Contra supply operation and the arms Israel fed into it. Sharon, Begin, Arens, Shamir, Rabin and Peres not only knew they were supplying the Contras, they also leveraged their involvement whenever relevant. Each document which was leaked, published or reported, revealed more about Israeli supply and training programs, altering our understanding of the extent of Israeli involvement with the Contras.

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<sup>125</sup> Jon Lee Anderson, “Loose Cannons: On the Trail of Israel’s Gunrunners in Central America,” *New Outlook*, February 1989, 28.

From out of the snapshot into Israel's relation with the Contras, answers to bigger questions start to take form. Israel's involvement in Latin America changed the course of events in the region, in the United States and in Israel itself. Israel supplied and trained forces of right-wing, U.S.-friendly governments in El Salvador and Guatemala, as well as for the Contra paramilitaries, during active civil wars in their respective countries. Was Israeli presence critical for the Central American governments' military abilities? Or was someone else waiting to do that job had Israel not stepped in? Another piece of the puzzle emerged out of scrutinizing the documents of the Israel-Contra relations, which is that Israeli politicians and bureaucrats believed that defense exports were important for the health of their country.

Keeping in mind that during the 1970s and 80s, hundreds of thousands of people were killed and severely tortured in Latin America by their own governments or by right-wing militias, understanding Israel's role in the oppression becomes critical for any attempt to make sense of this dark period in the region's history, a period which continues to cast a long shadow on current events and political developments in the continent. More than just a footnote or a passing comment, Israel's role in Latin America during the last two decades of the Cold war encompasses untold thousands of tons of military equipment and a vast network of Israeli arms dealers, military trainers, politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats, military men, intelligence men and strange middlemen. The network touched almost every single country in the region, from down in Argentina and Chile up to Mexico, yet the history of this network and an understanding of its role in the history of Latin America, its experience during the Cold War and relation to the United States, and relevance to today, seems to be trapped in a fugue state. Although there is a significant quantity of historical records scattered around, there is no one out there gathering them and assembling a comprehensible narrative. My modest attempt at piecing together the

basic facts underlying Israel's support for the Contras, stress the need for much more cognizance to this complex and hidden history.

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