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Special Report

“The Lab”: Israel Tests Weapons, Tactics On Captive Palestinian Population

By Jonathan Cook



Scenes from “The Lab”: ABOVE: Israeli soldiers on patrol. (Gum films)

Shimon Peres, Israel’s president and the man who oversaw the country’s secret development of a nuclear bomb in the 1960s, held a star-studded 90th birthday party masquerading as a presidential conference in June (see August 2013 *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, p. 12).

Aside from the cloud cast by the decision of the renowned British physicist Stephen Hawking to boycott the event, it was an unabashed celebration of Peres’ life and work by a long list of the international “great and good,” from former U.S. President Bill Clinton to songstress Barbra Streisand.

However, as one Israeli website noted, this \$3 million salute to the head of the Israeli state was financed chiefly by the arms industry. The three biggest funders were major arms dealers, including the honorary chair of the conference, Aaron Frenkel.

That was fitting given Israel’s stunning ascent through the international rankings of the arms trade over the past decade. Despite having a population smaller than New York City, Israel has emerged in the last few years as one of the world’s largest exporters of weapons.

In June defense analysts at Jane’s put Israel in sixth place, ahead of China and Italy, both major weapons producers. Surveys that include Israel’s growing covert trade put it even higher—in fourth place, ahead of Britain and Germany, and beaten only by the United States, Russia and France.

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The extent of Israel's success in this market can be gauged by a simple mathematical calculation. With record sales last year of \$7 billion, Israel earned nearly \$1,000 per capita from the arms trade —up to 10 times the per capita income the United States derives from its weapons industry.

The Israeli economy's huge reliance on arms dealing was underscored in July, when local courts forced officials to reveal data showing that some 6,800 Israelis are actively engaged in exporting arms.

Separately, Ehud Barak, the defense minister in the last government, has revealed that 150,000 Israeli households—or about 10 percent of the population—depend economically on the weapons industry.

Aside from these disclosures, however, Israel has been loath to lift the shroud of secrecy that envelopes much of its arms trade, arguing that further revelations would harm “national security and foreign relations.”

Traditionally Israel's arms industry was run by the Defense Ministry, as a series of state-owned corporations developing weapons systems for the Israeli army.

But with the rise of the hi-tech industries in Israel over the past decade, a new generation of officers recently discharged from the army saw the opportunity to use their military experience and their continuing connections to the army to develop and test new armaments, for sale both to Israel and foreign buyers.

In the process Israel's arms industry was reinvented as a major player in the Israeli economy, now accounting for a fifth of all exports.

Or as Leo Gleser, who runs an arms consultancy firm that specializes in developing new markets in Latin America, observes: “The [Israeli] defense minister doesn't only deal with wars, he also makes sure the defense industry is busy selling goods.”

Gleser is one of several arms dealers interviewed in a new documentary that lifts the lid on the nature and scope of Israel's arms business.



Director Yotam Feldman fires an Israeli-manufactured weapon. (Gum films)

“The Lab,” which won a recent award at DocAviv, Israel's documentary Oscars, is due to premiere in the U.S. in August. Directed by Yotam Feldman, the film presents the first close-up view of Israel's arms industry and the dealers who have enriched themselves.

The title relates to the film's central argument: that Israel has rapidly come to rely on the continuing captivity of Palestinians in what are effectively the world's largest open-air prisons.

The reason is that there are massive profits to be made from testing Israeli military innovations on the more than four million Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

According to Feldman, that trend began with Operation Defensive Shield, Israel's re-invasion of the West Bank and Gaza in 2002, which formally reversed the process of Israeli territorial withdrawals initiated by the Oslo accords.

Following that operation, many army officers went into private business, and starting in 2005 Israel's arms industry started to break new records, at \$2 billion a year.

But the biggest surge in sales followed Operation Cast Lead, Israel's month-long assault on Gaza in winter 2008-09, which killed more than 1,400 Palestinians and 13 Israelis. Record sales in the wake of that attack reached \$6 billion.

These military operations, including the most recent against Gaza, last year's Pillar of Cloud, the

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*Remember
These
Children*



Remembering
Richard H. Curtiss
(06/13/1927-
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film argues, serve as little more than laboratory-style experiments to evaluate and refine the effectiveness of new military approaches, both strategies and weaponry.

Gaza, in particular, has become the shop window for Israel's military industries, allowing them to develop and market systems for long-term surveillance, control and subjugation of an "enemy" population.

Given that most Palestinians are now tightly contained in urban settings, traditional policies designed to maintain a distinction between civilians and fighters have had to be erased.

Amiram Levin, former head of the Israeli army's northern command in the 1990s and now an arms dealer, is filmed at an arms industry conference observing that Israel's goal in the territories is punishment of the local population to create greater "room for maneuver."

Considering the effects, he comments that most Palestinians "were born to die—we just have to help them."

The film highlights the kind of inventions for which Israel has become feted by foreign security services. It pioneered robotic killing machines such as the airborne drones that are now at the heart of the U.S. program of extra-judicial executions in the Middle East. It hopes to repeat that success with missile interception systems such as Iron Dome, which goes on display every time a rocket is fired out of Gaza.

Israel also specializes in turning improbably futuristic weapons into reality, such as the gun that shoots around corners. Not surprisingly, Hollywood is also a customer, with Angelina Jolie marketing the bullet-bending firearm in the film "Wanted."

But the unexpected "stars" of "The Lab" are not smooth-talking salesmen but former Israeli officers turned academics, whose theories have helped to guide the Israeli army and hi-tech companies in developing new military techniques and arsenals.

Theorists of Death

Shimon Naveh, a manically excited philosopher, paces through a mock Arab village that provided the canvas on which he devised a new theory of urban warfare during the second intifada.

In the run-up to an attack on Nablus' casbah in 2002, much feared by the Israeli army for its labyrinthine layout, he suggested that the soldiers move not through the alleyways, where they would be easy targets, but unseen through the buildings, knocking holes through the walls that separated the houses.

Naveh's idea became the key to crushing Palestinian armed resistance, exposing the only places—in the heart of overcrowded cities and refugee camps—where Palestinian fighters could still find sanctuary from Israeli surveillance.

Another expert, Yitzhak Ben Israel, a former general turned professor at Tel Aviv University, helped to develop a mathematical formula that predicts the likely success of assassination programs to end organized resistance.

Ben Israel's calculus proved to the army that a Palestinian cell planning an attack could be destroyed with high probability by "neutralizing" as few as a fifth of its fighters.

It is precisely this merging of theory, hardware and repeated "testing" in the field that has armies, police forces and the homeland security industries of the U.S., Europe, Asia and Latin America lining up to buy Israeli know-how.

The lessons learned in Gaza and the West Bank have useful applications, the film makes clear, in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Or as Benjamin Ben Eliezer, a former defense minister turned industry minister, explains in the film, Israel's advantage is that "people like to buy things that have been tested. If Israel sells weapons, they have been tested, tried out. We can say we've used this 10 years, 15 years."

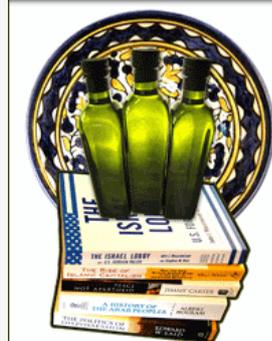
Yoav Galant, head of the Israeli army's southern command during Cast Lead, points out: "While certain countries in Europe or Asia condemned us for attacking civilians, they sent their officers here, and I briefed generals from 10 countries so they could understand how we reached such a low ratio [of Palestinian civilian deaths—Galant's false claim that most of those killed were Palestinian fighters]."

"There's a lot of hypocrisy: they condemn you politically, while they ask you what your trick is, you Israelis, for turning blood into money."

The film's convincing thesis, however, offers a disturbing message to those who hope for an end to Israel's occupation of Palestine.

That is because, as Israel has made its arsenal more lethal and its soldiers ever safer, Israeli society

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has become increasingly tolerant of war as the background noise of life. If Israelis pay no price for war, then the army and politicians face no pressure to end it.

Rather, the pressure acts in the opposite direction. With the occupied territories serving as an ideal laboratory, regular attacks on Palestinians to test and showcase its military systems provide Israel with a business model far more lucrative than one offered by a peace agreement.

Or as Naftali Bennett, the far-right industry minister, observed—both hopefully and euphemistically—after a trip to China in July: “No one on earth is interested in the Palestinian issue. What interests the world from Beijing to Washington to Brussels is Israeli high-tech.”

But possibly worse still, as foreign governments line up to learn from Israel’s experience, the question arises: who else among us faces a Palestinian future? □

Jonathan Cook is a journalist based in Nazareth and a winner of the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His most recent book is Disappearing Palestine.

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