

Political Implications of Europe's Arms Trade with Israel



Shir Hever at the Second Palestine Solidarity Conference in Stuttgart, Germany 10th to 12th May 2013

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As activists, the arms trade is something that is not easy for us to affect. The BDS movement calls on us to boycott Israeli goods, but this leads us to focus on consumer goods. Few of us will be in a position in which we consider whether to buy an Israeli-made weapon.

The importance of Israel's arms exports to the Israeli economy is immense, and we should not neglect this very important aspect of the struggle against Israeli violence, occupation and repression. Furthermore, it should be stressed that the arms trade is the struggle which demonstrates better than other types of trade exactly why the struggle for Palestinian freedom is a global struggle. Therefore, protest against Israel's arms trade and security industry is one of the key elements of the struggle against Israeli colonialism, occupation and apartheid.

As a counter argument, one could say in a very cynical way that Palestinians, being a rather small group (possibly eleven million Palestinians live around the world, not one of the world's largest peoples), do not deserve such a global campaign to fight for their justice. Indeed, why is it that we don't see such media interest, such efforts by donors and international NGOs, such widespread solidarity movements around other topics of injustice around the world?

Indeed, this very argument is frequently made by pro-Israeli groups and by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs itself. The Israeli "hasbara" agents imply that the reason for our commitment to Palestinian freedom and justice is not our love of Palestinians, but rather our hatred of Israel. In 2012 Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs even went so far as to distribute letters to pro-Palestinian activists, urging them to travel to Syria and defend human rights there, instead. Although the purpose of this argument is to divert the discussion away from Israel's crimes, we should nevertheless be ready to answer it.

Our response is that while Israeli exports fuel Israel's military and help finance the occupation and the repression apparatus in Palestine, Israel's exports also affect the countries which import Israeli goods. We should honestly acknowledge, that the struggle for Palestinian freedom and justice is also a struggle for freedom and justice in Europe, and in the entire world.

However, Israel is not the biggest weapons exporter in the world. Although weapons exports promotes violence, we should explain how Israeli weapon's export differs from other countries. Israel is ranked between place 5 and place 10 in the past fifteen years. It exports fewer weapons than the U.S, Russia, the UK and Germany. There are already global campaigns against the arms trade of these countries, and these campaigns are extremely important, but why should we pay special attention to Israel's role in the arms trade?

The reason is that Israel's military and security exports are qualitatively different. If we analyze the type of military and security products produced in Israel, we'll find that these technologies are not designed in order to maximize the number of enemy casualties or to overcome enemy fortifications, these are technologies designed to control civilians, to invade their privacy, to imprison, restrain and silence unarmed or lightly armed people. As the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 demonstrated, an army (in that case, the Georgian army) heavily equipped with Israeli equipment was crushed by a larger and stronger military force. **Israeli designed and manufactured equipment was not intended to serve against an organized army. It is designed to help the strong repress the resistance of the weak.**

This element of Israel's arms export is not new. The quote from Israel Shahak's 1982 book, *Israel's Global Role: Weapons for Repression*, was pertinent thirty years ago as it is today: "from Rhodesia to apartheid South Africa to the Gulf monarchies, Israel ties its interests not with the masses fighting for freedom, but with their jailers." Bear in mind that Israel hasn't fought a conventional war since 1973, forty years ago. But its military and police engage in a constant struggle to repress resistance.

The Israeli Ministry of Defense gives an almost automatic permit to deal in arms to retired officers with the rank of colonel or above. Because the retirement age in the Israeli military is so young, many officers seek a second career. Their experience from serving in the Israeli military for twenty-something years leads them directly to the security industry. If they develop a product and sell a sample unit to the Israeli army (not a difficult thing for them, as they often still have friends in the military), they can boast that their equipment has been already used by the Israeli army.

This line helps to convince potential buyers to buy the equipment, which has already been tested by the Israeli army. This is what convinced Naomi Klein to write in 2007 that Israel has turned the occupation into a laboratory. The Palestinian victims of the Israeli army contribute to the profits of weapon companies, although they do not share in the profits which these companies make thanks to the Palestinians.

In 2000, Israel was only the 10th biggest arms exporter in the world (still, a very high place considering the size of Israel, all countries above Israel in this list are far larger and more populous than Israel). But it was the 4th biggest exporter of arms to developing countries, militias and para-military organizations. Israeli companies routinely ignored UN-imposed arms embargoes, and made great profit specifically in those places in which more "respectable" arms traders (if such a thing exists) have been wary to get involved.

After the attacks of September 11, Netanyahu commented that the attacks are "good for Israel," because they will help prove the point that Islam is the enemy, and Israel's brutal methods against terrorism are justified.

But they were not only good for Israel's image, they were good for Israel's security industry. The term "homeland security" came into use after those attacks. The U.S established the Department of Homeland Security which today has a budget the size of the entire military budget of the UK.

But the true capital of the "homeland security" industry is Tel Aviv. Over 600 homeland security companies are registered in Israel, not counting simple security companies and arms companies who also produce homeland security products. Tel Aviv holds an annual trade fair in which hundreds of companies offer the technologies which they develop: surveillance cameras, biometrical tracking and classifying technologies, behavior analysis systems, anti-riot gear, demonstration dispersion means, handcuffs and leg-cuffs, and data-mining computer programs. Israel has been declared in May 2013 as the world's biggest exporter of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), or drones. UAVs are a symbol of this new type of warfare. Wealthy, developed countries are loathe to send their own citizen-soldiers into harms way, but drones can be operated in comfort from an air-conditioned room, and be used to collect data, photograph people and even kill from the air, with no risk to the operators.

Israel's largest customers today for its specialized equipment are India and Brazil, and to a lesser extent South Korea and Ghana, Angola and other countries which are plagued by very high inequality. Inequality is the key. Extreme neoliberal policies over the past forty years have excluded large segments of the population from the economy. No longer sought even as cheap labor, the residents in the Brazilian "favelas" for example, are treated by their governments as "excess population." Rising inequality creates a constant demands for mechanisms of control and repression.

Jeff Halper wrote in 2008 about the management of these excess people through imprisonment, reliance on security and surveillance as "warehousing" and pointed out that the Gaza Strip is the paradigmatic example of "warehousing" of a civilian population.

Indeed, Israeli technologies which can contain the resistance in Gaza become hallmarks of the Israeli security exports. After the invasion of Gaza in the winter of 2008-2009, the Israeli army held a fair to demonstrate new technologies used in that

attack. The famous “Iron Dome” missile system was made famous during Israel’s bombardment of Gaza in November 2012. Palestinians fire the Qassam rocket, which is a homemade weapon costing about 100\$ to make, but even that simple rocket threatened the ability of Israelis to sit in their coffee shops and relax while Palestinians in Gaza live in unbearable conditions.

The Iron Dome missiles cost 50,000\$ each, and two of them are needed to intercept a single Qassam rocket, so they cost a thousand times more than the Qassam. But they are still worth it to Israel, because what they buy is the image – that you can sit in a coffee shop and ignore the fact that a million and a half people living a few kilometers away don’t have drinkable water.

And indeed, this is the image which they use to sell this equipment. The Iron Dome missiles were already put on sale in an Indian trade show, three months after they were used during the bombardment of Gaza.

And this image, is precisely the reason which brings the international community to take such a great interest in the politics of Palestine. The immense support which right-wing parties and leaders offer Israel is because they wish to legitimize Israeli policies, and then copy them.

Right-wing European leaders offer support to Israel (and invited Israel to join the OECD) not because they are Zionists, but because if Israel can be a member of the civilized world and its actions are acceptable, this would mean that European countries could also imprison asylum-seekers without trial, assassinate those who protest against their foreign policies and use surveillance and control mechanisms against their own citizens.

It is therefore in the interests of citizens of the world to cry out that Israel’s policies are not legitimate and unacceptable, lest we find ourselves tomorrow in the shoes of Palestinians today.