

Israel's Role in Training US Law Enforcement

Promoting militarized enforcement of racial segregation as “counter-terrorism”

By Justine McCabe

The murder of African American George Floyd by Minneapolis police last year has spearheaded national attention on police brutality, a significant element of US systemic racism. Underreported is Israel's role as “booster” of the militaristic-style of US policing we've seen in cities like Baltimore, Chicago, Ferguson, Louisville, and New York—places where Israel has trained law enforcement with its “counter-terrorism” mentality.

Why should Blacks—actually, all Americans—care? Because we don't want to be treated like Israeli police treat Palestinians. And we want to stop US police from enforcing racial segregation.

Like the US, Israel is a settler-colonial state, founded on supplanting indigenous people—with Europeans in the US, Jews in the Israeli case. However, practicing ethnic cleansing a century later, Israel hasn't been as “successful” as America's decimation of Native Americans: at least as many non-Jews as Jews remain in historic Palestine, according to Columbia University Professor Rashid Khalidi.

Still, Israel continues dispossessing Palestinians who, like American Blacks, endure systemic racism and apartheid. Misery, resistance and national insecurity are familiar consequences. Since its inception, Israel has been a “security state.” Enforcers are indispensable in sustaining racism, as is the case in our own country. Police function to separate whites from non-whites here, Jews from Palestinians there; to privilege security of white-Americans over non-white Americans and that of Jewish-Israelis over Palestinians. Both employ members of their oppressed groups—“suboppressors” to Fanon—Black American police and Palestinian Authority police who abuse and detain other Palestinians, including those protesting Israeli occupation.

MILITARIZED LAW ENFORCEMENT

Unquestionably, US law enforcement has been militarized since its creation, particularly to maintain slavery. However, militarization has grown in recent decades, especially since the transfer to local police departments of surplus military weapons, which encourages excessive force—thanks to Israel's help, especially since 9/11.

American-Israeli anthropologist Jeff Halper elaborates: “Israel provided the US—and particularly the US police and security agencies—with ready-made policies, doctrines, paramilitary structures, and weaponry they lacked but needed in order to construct an American Security State. Israel provided the model and the hardware.”

The main difference, however, is America's theoretical fire wall between domestic law enforcement and the military through the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878—lines blurred by Israel since its founding, according to Halper: "Israel's fundamental concept of itself is of a nation-in-arms, whereby the body politic is so diffused with military and securocratic practices and values that little separates policing, domestic security, intelligence gathering and military operations, either juridical or operational."

Following African American Freddie Gray's 2015 homicide by Baltimore police, Amnesty International reported that, like Baltimore, thousands of police from other US cities and states had received training either in the US or in Israel, a documented human rights violator. The latter's abuses against non-Jews—both Palestinian Israeli citizens and those living under Israeli occupation—include extrajudicial executions, torture, land seizure, suppression of free speech/association, and "excessive use of force against peaceful protesters."

Sound familiar?

Minnesota police participated in these trainings: Minneapolis police in a 2012 counterterrorism training conference hosted by Israel's Chicago consulate and the FBI; and, according to the Minneapolis *Star Tribune*, current Anoka County Sheriff, James Stuart, traveled to Israel in 2019 for security training sponsored by the Jewish Institute for the National Security of America (JINSA) Program.

Did police who murdered Floyd attend these trainings? Was "kneeling on the neck" included? It's unclear. A British lawmaker was dismissed for endorsing Israeli responsibility for this tactic as an "anti-Semitic conspiracy theory," and Israeli police spokesman Mickey Rosenfeld denies this practice exists in any Israeli police textbook. Yet it is familiar to Palestinians, according to Harvard Law School rights attorney Fady Khoury, with "plenty of documentation out there of violent arrests that involve kneeling on detainees' heads and necks," something Israeli activist Neta Golan has experienced: "When I saw the picture of killer cop Derek Chauvin murdering George Floyd by leaning in on his neck with his knee as [Floyd] cried for help and other cops watched, I remembered noticing when many Israeli soldiers began using this technique of leaning in on our chest and necks when we were protesting in the West Bank sometime in 2006."

OPPOSITION TO ISRAELI TRAININGS

Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP) opposes these trainings and support by Jewish groups like the ADL—created to defend Jews from discrimination but now unequivocally defending Israel. Recently, when the ADL's head, Jonathan Greenblatt, tweeted solidarity with the Black community after the killing of George Floyd, JVP's Stephanie Fox responded with this meme: "Now would be a good time for the ADL to stop arranging police exchanges with Israel." Indeed, JVP and RAIA (Researching the American-Israeli Alliance) developed a project, "Deadly Exchange," including a database revealing hundreds of US police departments who have participated in these trainings (including erupting Seattle and Portland) supposedly to learn law enforcement strategies from a close ally experienced in counter-terrorism. However, instead of being models for real security promotion for everyone, JVP found "these programs

facilitate an exchange of methods of state violence and control, including mass surveillance, racial profiling, and suppression of protest and dissent.”

Deadly Exchange suggests that police intolerance of civil protest encouraged by Israeli trainings may be as harmful to democracy as its brutality is to Blacks. “The delegates thus returned home with technical know-how based in disregard for the right of Palestinians to oppose the Israeli occupation. This entails seeing protest not as a right, but rather as a security threat that must be dealt with through repressive police violence. This framing normalized a complete intolerance of protest—in defiance of the First Amendment.”

Popular opposition emerged especially in 2014 amid growing Black-Palestinian solidarity which recognized similar violence against Ferguson’s Michael Brown and Palestinians, especially visible then in Israel’s fifty-day war on Gaza. Demonstrators across the country were chanting “from Ferguson to Palestine, occupation is a crime,” with solidarity echoed in a joint video message: “When I see them, I see us.”

In 2018, Durham, NC was the first city to ban Israeli training of its police, having been among those who sent delegates to Israel—its former Police Chief, Jose Lopez, attended a training in Israel with the ADL, as did its current chief, Cerelyn Davis, who attended while serving as Deputy Chief of the Atlanta Police Department. The ban resulted from a sustained grassroots campaign by the *Demilitarize from Durham2Palestine!* coalition, which opposed these trainings because they encourage US police to terrorize people of color.

ZIONIST PUSHBACK

Three lawsuits against Durham’s ban by the North Carolina Coalition for Israel claimed discrimination and anti-Semitism. All were dismissed in 2019. But as opposition to racism grows in the US, Israel and Jewish lobbying groups have tried to breach solidarity between Blacks and Palestinian activists, even accusing the Black Lives Matter movement of being co-opted against Israel while “conflating principled anti-colonialist views expressed by anti-racism activists with anti-Semitism,” according to Israeli-American writer Yaov Litvin.

Similarly, head of the Zionist Organization of America, Morton Klein, sees Black Lives Matter as a “hate group,” tweeting on June 6, 2020: “I urge the Southern Poverty Law Center to immediately put Black Lives Matter on their list of hate groups. BLM is a Jew-hating, white-hating, Israel-hating, conservative Black-hating, violence-promoting, dangerous Soros-funded extremist group of haters.”

Besides American taxpayer funds, trainings are supported by Jewish organizations like JINSA, the American Jewish Committee (Project Interchange), and the Jewish Federations. And strategies for rupturing solidarity are documented in two Israeli reports: Reut Institute and the ADL in 2017; and Reut and the American Jewish Council for Public Affairs in 2019. Both concern fighting “intersectional coalitions”—collaborations among different, oppressed minority groups like Blacks and Palestinians claiming, “This trend undermines Jewish communities’ agendas, including support for the State of Israel.”

Is support for Israel more important than strengthening American solidarity against US racism, including police brutality? At this significant historical moment of growing national, multi-ethnic opposition to US police violence, ridding ourselves of Israeli “assistance” would be a step toward stopping it. It would also be a step in separating our government from a “special relationship” that not only encourages the terrorizing function of US police but also corrupts genuine American strivings for justice and equality.

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