



## Do Small Town Cops Need Training in Israeli Counterterror Techniques?

**U.S. taxpayers have been paying for training that encourages aggressive policing.**

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June 20, 2022

Georgia state Rep. Jason Spencer believed he was being trained by an Israeli special forces officer, but was actually an unwitting participant in a sketch by British comedian Sacha Baron Cohen. Under the impression that he was at risk of a terrorist kidnapping, the Republican agreed to Cohen's increasingly absurd instructions, shouting racial slurs, dropping his pants, and threatening to turn any would-be attacker into "a homosexual." [Footage of the encounter](#) made it onto the comedy series *Who Is America?* and ended Spencer's political career.

Spencer is not the first Georgia politician to fall in love with the mystique of Israeli counterterrorism training. There's a thriving cottage industry for American officials who believe their towns and cities are under terroristic threat and that exotic special tactics are necessary to quell the danger.

The practice of Israeli-style police training began at the Georgia International Law Enforcement Exchange (GILEE) in the 1990s. The institution also organized a U.S.-Chinese police exchange at the request of China's government, among other programs.

The specific interest in Israel spread across America after the 9/11 attacks. At the same time the public was reeling from terrorism, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was also in full swing, inspiring U.S. officials to look to Israeli security tactics as a model.

Nonprofit organizations from the liberal Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to the conservative Jewish Institute for National Security of America (JINSA) set up exchange programs allowing U.S. law enforcement officials to study in Israel. Local and federal taxpayer money helped finance the Mediterranean junkets for local cops.

"It is the tragic reality that these heinous [Palestinian] attacks have taught Israeli officials lessons that no nation ever wants to learn first-hand," former FBI Assistant Director Steven Pomerantz, who created the JINSA program, [wrote in a 2020 op-ed](#) for *Forward*. "Nearly two decades after 9/11, and following more recent attacks in San Bernardino, Orlando, and New York, these lessons unfortunately remain pertinent to the U.S. law enforcement community."

Training abroad was one of many war on terror measures that changed the face of American policing, from the 1033 program that supplied local police with military surplus equipment to the "fusion centers" that created a nationwide domestic intelligence network.

"There was this thought that some of the things that were occurring within Israel—whether suicide bombings or the bombings of really soft targets like universities—we would start to see them in the United States," says John Skinner, a former Baltimore deputy police commissioner who attended the first JINSA trip to Israel in 2002. "I think relationships to share ideas are always helpful, but obviously we never needed the techniques and tactics they were using on a day-to-day basis there."

A more recent social movement is starting to push American law enforcement in the other direction. As the Black Lives Matter protests erupted in the early 2010s, activists turned their attention to the role of military-style tactics in police brutality.

Israeli police training became a target of scrutiny. After all, Israeli authorities operate in the Palestinian territories under martial law, and most Palestinians do not have Israeli citizenship rights.

A coalition of activists, led by the left-wing group Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP), has begun organizing against Israeli police training. The activists published a report in 2018 detailing imported Israeli techniques they believed have changed American policing for the worse.

"Upon their return, U.S. law enforcement delegates implement practices learned from Israel's use of invasive surveillance, blatant racial profiling, and repressive force against dissent," the report states. "Rather than promoting security for all, these programs facilitate an exchange of methods in state violence and control that endanger us all."

At the very least, visits to Israel have helped American police justify more snooping on citizens and stricter secrecy. Critics also assert that Israeli training encourages excessive force, but there is less evidence the training is responsible for American law enforcement uses of excessive force.

In a draft memo leaked earlier this year, ADL officials themselves wondered whether the training they sponsor could lead American officers to act more aggressively toward civilians. Publicly, the ADL still insists that the U.S.-Israel police exchanges are appropriate, although its exchange program is suspended with no word on when it will resume.

Foreign terrorism was once the center of American politics. But some 20 years after 9/11, Americans now have a growing concern over the changes in policing brought on by the attack. The fate of U.S.-Israel police exchanges will show whether the practices 9/11 wrought are here to stay.

**'Fear Factor'**

Israel has been haunted by the specter of terrorism for much of its modern existence. In 1948, amid a civil war in the British Mandate of Palestine, Jewish nationalists declared the new state of Israel. Both the Israeli independence movement and its Palestinian opponents used tactics such as car bombs to kill and intimidate their enemies.

Israel found itself at war with neighboring Arab countries for the next several decades, and it captured the remaining Palestinian territories (the West Bank and Gaza) in 1967. All the while, Palestinians fought for a state of their own, sometimes with direct military resistance against Israeli rule and sometimes with terror against Israeli civilians.

In the late 1980s, Palestinians launched a popular uprising called the intifada, leading to the Oslo peace agreement, which promised self-rule for the West Bank and Gaza. But the peace process stalled out, and a much more violent Palestinian rebellion known as the second intifada broke out in the early 2000s.

As part of its security strategy, the Israeli government has given itself expansive police powers. Since the end of British rule, Israel has been in a legally declared state of emergency, allowing authorities to jail people without trial, censor news reports, seize property without a warrant, restrict civilians' movement, and set up a vast surveillance network.

The Supreme Court of Israel officially outlawed torture in 1999, but the Israeli human rights group B'Tselem says that the country's intelligence services continue to use "abusive interrogation techniques."

American interest in Israeli police tactics began in the early 1990s when Atlanta was gearing up to host the 1996 Summer Olympics.

"I immediately thought of Munich 1972 and how to prevent that from happening in '96," says George State University criminologist Robert R. Friedmann, referring to the 1972 Summer Olympics, where Palestinian nationalists kidnapped and murdered 11 Israelis.

So Friedmann created GILEE through the university's criminology department in 1992. He tells *Reason* that he found the Israeli government "more than willing to share its lessons learned with other police forces simply for the sake of saving lives."

Over the decades, over 1,100 law enforcement officials have gone through 290 GILEE training programs, according to the institution's website. GILEE not only runs U.S.-Israel exchanges but also boasts of relationships in countries ranging from Hungary to China.

"Nations have different political systems, and countries have different systems to maintain law and order," then-Georgia police Colonel George Ellis said in a 2002 review posted to the GILEE website. "Our visit to China promoted a good international relationship and led to a delegation from China visiting Georgia thanks to the GILEE Program."

Friedmann says that exchange came at the request of Chinese authorities, who were looking to prepare for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing and to create a police training center of their own.

At the U.S. State Department's request, GILEE also gave American-style law enforcement education to police from post-Communist countries "not exactly known for democratic traditions," like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, according to Friedmann.

"I think in the West and particularly the United States, the issue of—I don't want to start talking about the First Amendment and free speech, but I think we are incapacitating ourselves as a society by not taking incitement more seriously," Friedmann later added in response to a question about the likelihood of future terrorist attacks.

Within the United States, there had been a move toward more "military-style" policing due to the war on drugs and all the violence associated with it, according to Skinner of the Baltimore police, now a lecturer at Towson University. But crime was starting to decline by the early 2000s.

The 9/11 attacks, however, unleashed a legion of new fears.

Through coordinated surprise attacks on New York and Washington, Al Qaeda murdered over 3,000 people. Leaders of the underground Islamist group cited U.S. support for Israel as one of their grievances.

With smoke still billowing from the fallen skyscrapers, President George W. Bush warned the American public they were now in a war "without battlefields or beachheads" against "opponents who believe they are invisible."

"The fear factor within the United States was just tremendous," Skinner says, emphasizing the worry at the time "that 9/11 was the first of many [attacks] to come."

At the same time, the second intifada was raging in the Middle East. Palestinian militants shot up bar mitzvah ceremonies and bombed restaurants. Israeli forces opened fire on demonstrations and raided neighborhoods with helicopter gunships.

In response to the violence, Israeli authorities imposed curfews on Palestinian cities, set up checkpoints on Palestinian roads, and eventually built a massive wall through the West Bank to separate it from the pre-1967 territory of Israel.

American politicians began to see Israel as an ally in the new shadow war—and its tactics as an example of a gloves-off approach the U.S. could learn from.

"9/11 taught our country, this country, a lesson that Israel has long known: Inaction against terrorists is a form of action. It's called appeasement," Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist declared at the 2004 Republican National Convention.

Soon after 9/11, a delegation of New York officials flew to Israel on a solidarity tour, and the New York Police Department (NYPD) set up a permanent liaison office there. The city ended up implementing one of the first post-9/11 counterterrorism programs that explicitly followed the Israeli model.

In 2002, the NYPD tasked a secret "Demographics Unit" with spying on Muslim-American communities. Dedicated "mosque crawlers" infiltrated local Muslim congregations and attempted to bait worshippers with talk of violent revolution.

The program's architect, Larry Sanchez, said that it was based on Israeli intelligence operations in the West Bank, according to the book *Enemies Within* by Matt Apuzzo and Adam Goldman, the journalists who revealed the program's existence in 2011.

"Sanchez's proposal ignored some important differences between the U.S. and Israel," Apuzzo and Goldman noted. "Brooklyn and Queens, for instance, were not occupied territories or disputed land."

### **'Law Enforcement-Sensitive'**

Cops across the country began taking counterterrorism more seriously as the Bush administration set up billions of dollars in Homeland Security grants to local governments.

"Sometimes the narrative is, 'this what police wanted to do, this was a decision within policing,' but I also think it was a decision by society," Skinner says. "There was a direction through federal funding, through this fear that had grown in the United States and calls for police to do something about it."

The federal government has given out \$480,466 in Homeland Security grants for police trips abroad since 2015, according to Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) press secretary Jeremy Edwards. Over 80 percent of that money was for training in Israel.

The Atlanta Police Department spent at least \$25,500 per year on GILEE training from 2017-2021. The department told *Reason* by email that it does not spend any federal money on training in Israel.

In 2018, police in Long Beach, California applied for a Homeland Security grant to send three officers to an ADL seminar in Israel.

"I'm told out of state training is highly scrutinized, but this was approved immediately, which I believe lends credibility to the program's value," Long Beach Police Commander Randy Allen wrote in a memo later released to MuckRock, an online public records platform.

Private, ideologically-motivated donors have also stepped up.

JINSA, a think tank focused on bolstering U.S.-Israel military ties, had previously run exchange programs for military officers. It began bringing American police to Israel as part of regular

delegations in summer 2002. The organization pays all participant costs, according to JINSA managing director Leo Nayfeld.

Much of the funding for both GILEE and JINSA has come from businessman Bernard Marcus, founder of the Home Depot and an outspoken Republican donor. His foundation has given GILEE at least \$1.25 million since 2005 and JINSA at least \$2.38 million since 2011, according to federal tax filings.

Marcus praised "this experience of going to Israel and learning from people who have lived their lives under the kind of threat that we're now facing here in the United States" in a 2017 speech.

The ADL created its own Advanced Training School for law enforcement in 2002 and began hosting seminars in Israel in 2004. The organization was founded as a Jewish-American civil rights group, with a history of working with law enforcement on racism issues. Now, it was dabbling in counterterrorism.

According to the leaked ADL memo, the organization spent \$115,000 of its own money on each trip to Israel, as well as \$200,000 per year on staff to support the trips. However, police departments also have to pay around \$5,000 per officer out of pocket, public records show.

JINSA and the ADL insist that their programs in Israel do not include practical field training but rather tours of the country and meetings with local counterparts.

Attendees at the 2016 ADL seminar talked to Israeli officers about intelligence work, toured Jerusalem with a retired Israeli general, dined with Israeli soldiers, visited holy sites and the Holocaust memorial, and even met Palestinian police in Bethlehem.

The ADL tour also included some more controversial stops, such as the maximum-security Gilboa Prison, a paramilitary riot control unit, and the West Bank city of Hebron, whose downtown has been cleared to make way for a fortified Israeli settlement.

Pomerantz, who runs the JINSA tour, did not respond to an email asking for its itinerary.

Meanwhile, GILEE has used the war on terror as a justification for its program and a shield from outside scrutiny.

JVP activists began paying attention to GILEE in the aftermath of the 2006 police killing of Kathryn Johnston, according to local JVP chapter co-leader Connie Sosnoff. GILEE came up incidentally during coverage of the case. In 2011, a group of students at Georgia State University filed an Open Records Act request for public records on GILEE, but authorities treated them as a threat to national security.

Friedmann believed that specific details about the GILEE trip to Israel were "none of anybody's business" and "could make it a target," he tells *Reason*, accusing the student activists of harboring "ties to known terrorists." Friedmann brought the issue up with then-Georgia Attorney General Sam Olens, who warned a local news station that releasing the information could "aid

terrorists" and even hinted that the students were working for sinister outsiders. Georgia legislators quickly passed a law allowing officials to seal records that could "compromise security against sabotage or criminal or terrorist acts."

GILEE eventually released a broad list of training topics. The Atlanta Police Department declined to allow *Reason* to interview any of its officers who had completed GILEE training.

Others have echoed the idea that information about the U.S.-Israel exchanges should be treated as sensitive information.

In 2018, the ADL emailed police departments warning them that JVP, a "radical anti-Israel activist group," had been using MuckRock to send out public records requests. The message asked police to notify ADL lawyers "if your agency considers disclosing any of the documents or information we've provided." (Ironically, that email was revealed as part of a public records request posted to MuckRock.)

When the *Orlando Sentinel* asked then-Orlando Police Chief John Mina about his 2016 training with the ADL, he claimed the information was "law enforcement-sensitive." However, Mina praised Israel's system of random checkpoints, which ensured that "the terrorists never know where or when to expect a police presence."

"We wouldn't do something like that, but it did give me a few ideas about security measures here in Orlando that I won't share," he added.

In the end, the Israeli experience turned out to be quite different from the American one.

Within a few years, the second intifada killed more than 1,000 Israelis and 3,000 Palestinians—in a region the size of New Jersey. As officials like former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu often pointed out, it was the proportional equivalent of several 9/11 attacks.

In 2006, Israel went to war in neighboring Lebanon, during which Lebanese guerrillas bombarded Israeli cities with missiles. That same year, Islamist guerrillas came to power in Gaza, beginning an armed standoff with Israel that drags on to this day.

The U.S. has not faced another attack like 9/11. Terrorist incidents in America killed 184 people from September 12, 2001 to the end of 2017, according to a Cato Institute study. Friedmann, however, insists that authorities must assume another "9/11-like attack is likely to happen."

"The working assumption should be that people are conspiring to cause harm, whether we know about it or don't know about it," he says.

### **'Ferguson Was Gaza'**

Although terrorism continued to be a concern in American politics, there was also growing pushback against the national security state. A series of high-profile leaks and a wave of global protests in the early 2010s ignited a new public debate around government overreach.

In New York, journalists uncovered the NYPD's practice of spying on mosques. The revelations became a major embarrassment for the city. Civil rights organizations filed a series of lawsuits against the police department for unconstitutional surveillance. Subsequently, the NYPD shut down the Demographics Unit in 2014 and agreed to rewrite its surveillance guidelines as part of a legal settlement in 2016.

New York had tried imitating Israeli counterterrorism tactics, and those tactics got the authorities in trouble, as civil libertarians pushed back against war on terror excesses. But there was no movement to reject Israeli police techniques as such.

That changed on August 9, 2014, when a white police officer killed Michael Brown, a black teenager, during a confrontation in the St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri. Local tensions over police brutality and racism boiled over. Protests broke out with the slogan "black lives matter," and the movement quickly spread across the country, as did images of police in military-style gear clashing with protesters.

Meanwhile, another round of violence between Israel and Gaza was ongoing. Israeli forces besieged the Palestinian enclave as Palestinian fighters shelled Israeli communities across the border.

Activists invoked the war in Gaza to explain how militarized American police had become.

"If only the images of the police and not of the demonstrators had been shown, one might have assumed that Ferguson was Gaza," University of California, Santa Cruz, professor and former Black Panther Angela Davis claimed in a [2014 interview](#).

Journalists and activists learned that St. Louis County police chief Timothy Fitch had gone on an [ADL training seminar](#) to Israel a few years before. (Ferguson is part of that county.) It also wasn't lost on them that Bassem Masri, a prominent Ferguson protester, was Palestinian-American.

In May 2020, a Minneapolis police officer knelt on the neck of George Floyd until he died, bringing the Black Lives Matter movement back to the forefront. A few months later, civil unrest broke out in Jerusalem, followed by another battle in Gaza, and activists again compared the two situations.

"I remember learning that the same equipment that they used to brutalize us is the same equipment that we send to the Israeli military to police and brutalize Palestinians," Rep. Cori Bush (D–Mo.), who participated in the Ferguson protests, said in a [May 2021 speech](#) on the House floor honoring the now-deceased Masri.

For better or for worse, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was now tied to the controversy over the state of American policing.

In 2017, JVP inaugurated a formal campaign against Israeli police training called Deadly Exchange, which was endorsed by several anti-war activist groups, black groups, and



Palestinian-American groups. The campaign made public records requests for Israel-based course materials, held protests outside ADL offices, and lobbied towns to ban "military-style" police exchanges.

JVP also worked with activists in Georgia to revive the debate around GILEE. In 2019, the Muslim-American civil rights organization Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) accused GILEE of promoting anti-Islam conspiracy theories and violent police tactics.

"We have seen techniques that are used in the occupied [Palestinian] territories used here as well," CAIR-Georgia Executive Director Murtaza Khwaja tells *Reason*. "There's too much secrecy that GILEE is shrouded in for us to say that there's a direct causal connection, but the parallels in tactics and techniques are too close to be ignored."

Friedmann has pushed back against the criticism. He told *The Times of Israel* in June that Israeli use-of-force guidelines are "much more restrictive" than American police rules and touted a new "Shoot to Incapacitate" program in LaGrange, Georgia, which was partially inspired by the town police chief's experience on a GILEE exchange in 2004.

The local ADL chapter, meanwhile, publicly distanced itself from Friedmann's institute. "We do not do law enforcement programs in Israel, and I have never been on GILEE's trip, so I don't think I have anything to add here," ADL Southern Division Vice President Allison Padilla-Goodman wrote in an email to *Reason*.

In 2018, Deadly Exchange scored its biggest win in Durham, North Carolina, where the city council agreed to ban overseas "military-style training" for its officers.

A few days later, Deadly Exchange published its study on U.S.-Israel police exchanges, based on the public records it had gathered as well as previous media reporting.

The report identified several instances when American police cited Israeli models for more overbearing measures—including the New York mosque infiltration program and a citywide video surveillance center in Atlanta—or praised Israeli crowd control tactics.

In 2020 and 2021, videos of Israeli police using chokeholds during arrests were widely shared on social media, and some pro-Palestine influencers claimed that American police were learning chokehold techniques in Israel. There is no evidence for this claim, which the Israeli national police, JINSA, and the ADL have denied.

"Seeking to link Israel to U.S police misconduct excuses the centuries-long history of racism and injustice that has plagued our nation since its inception," ADL San Diego Regional Director Tammy Gillies wrote in a 2020 op-ed for *The San Diego Union-Tribune*. "For centuries, conspiracy theorists have claimed that Jews are at fault for global problems. These activists have merely refreshed an old trope to try to be relevant in society today."

Khwaja is clear that Israel is not responsible for the problems of American policing, which he says date back to the era of slavery. But at a time when domestic policing "needs significant

overhaul, we don't need foreign actors with their own human rights violations" educating American officers, he says.

Sosnoff, the JVP chapter leader, said Israeli training serves mostly to "normalize" aggressive tactics that American police already want to implement.

In the leaked draft memo written in June 2020, ADL Vice Presidents George Selim and Greg Ehrie questioned the wisdom of the police exchanges and recommended ending the program. At the time, the exchanges had been suspended due to pandemic restrictions.

When the memo was leaked to *Jewish Currents* and *The Guardian* in May 2022, Selim emphasized to both newspapers that it was just a draft, and that he had advised the ADL in his final recommendation to "continue the program with updated curriculum."

It has not yet resumed.

"We must ask ourselves why it is necessary for American police, enforcing American laws,...to meet with members of the Israeli military," the draft memo states. "We must ask ourselves if, upon returning home, those we train are more likely to use force."