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Israel-Sri Lanka Defense Ties

by Dr. Punsara Amarasinghe

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Documents recently declassified in Israel have disclosed the gravity of an arms deal that came into effect between Sri Lanka and Israel in the mid-1980s, a turbulent period during which Tamil militant separatism was severely threatening the short-lived political-economic prosperity of J.R. Jayawardene's government in Colombo. While the relationship between the two countries has long been complex, their defense collaboration has remained nearly constant.

Sri Lanka's earliest arms deal with Israel dates back to the formative years of its post-colonial state-building. The country's first gunship, the SLNS Gajabahu, was acquired from Israel in 1958, having previously served in the Israeli Navy during the 1956 Sinai War. Defense cooperation came to a halt in 1970, when Sri Lanka severed diplomatic ties with Israel. However, in the 1980s, when Sri Lanka found itself without military support from its traditional Western allies, engagement with Tel Aviv was renewed and defense collaborations revived. Israel's assistance during this critical period was made possible in large part by former CIA official Vernon Walters, who facilitated a key arms deal in 1984.

The first consignment of military equipment, consisting of mini-Uzi submachine guns and night-vision goggles, arrived in Sri Lanka in the final quarter of 1984. This equipment significantly enhanced the operational capabilities of the Sri Lankan armed forces, particularly during nocturnal search operations. Colombo's repeated requests to acquire Dvora-class patrol boats were initially met with reluctance from Israeli officials, but that changed following a meeting between Ravi Jayawardene, President J. R. Jayewardene's son, and Israeli Prime Minister Shimon Peres, who subsequently authorized the release of two Dvora boats to Sri Lanka.

Beyond the initial provision of small arms and military equipment, Israeli assistance played a significant role in supporting the transformation of the Sri Lankan armed forces from an institution with limited operational experience into a more capable and combat-oriented force. This assistance was particularly notable with regard to a Special Task Force (STF) established in the early 1980s. In 1984, advisers from Israel's Shin Bet visited Colombo to help Sri Lankan authorities train the first cadre of STF personnel. It was widely speculated that the LTTE's bombing of the Oberoi Hotel in Colombo that year was intended, at least in part, to target Shin Bet personnel who were reportedly stationed in Colombo at the time to provide training and advisory support to the STF.

Arms transactions between the two nations surged, even as Colombo maintained an ambivalent diplomatic posture. The weapons and equipment acquired from Israeli defense firms proved highly effective on the battlefield. The Israeli-supplied Dvoras, for instance, became a formidable threat to LTTE operations at sea, prompting the Sri Lankan Navy to intensify its acquisitions from Israel throughout the 1990s and into the early 2000s. The Navy's only fast missile vessels are two Sa'ar 4-class attack craft purchased from Israel in 2001, while its fleet of swift patrol craft is largely modeled on dozens of Shaldag-class boats designed by Israeli shipyards. Eventually, the Sri Lankan Navy began manufacturing its own ultra-fast "Colombo Class" attack craft, inspired by the Shaldag design.

In 1995, the Sri Lankan Air Force acquired seven Kfir fighter jets, followed by an additional eight in 2000. The Israeli-manufactured aircraft were instrumental in operations, with one Kfir squadron recording over 2,800 operational flight hours and deploying more than 3,500 tons of ordnance. The Sri Lankan ambassador to Israel confirmed that Sri Lankan pilots received training in Israel, while a spokesman for the Sri Lankan embassy in Washington stated that Israeli pilots had also flown the aircraft.

Colombo's diplomatic ambivalence towards Tel Aviv reflected its trepidation due to the island nation's significant Muslim population and Sri Lanka's traditionally friendly relations with countries in the Arab world. However, those concerns did not disrupt the military ties Sri Lankan forces were forging with the Israeli defense sector. Sri Lanka's defense collaborations with the Jewish State continued, notwithstanding its pro-Palestinian stances in international fora, indicating its pragmatic strategies for survival. During the Elephant Pass military debacle, for example, in which LTTE guerillas humiliated the Sri Lankan army, then Sri Lankan President Chadrika Bandaranaike opened a resident embassy in Tel Aviv.

Along with the increase in defense-related purchases from Israel, Sri Lanka also became increasingly dependent on Israeli suppliers for the upgrading and maintenance of those systems. Israel's arms trade with Sri Lanka thus expanded significantly, with Colombo frequently concluding defense procurement agreements with Israeli arms suppliers. Zvi Yosef and Moshe Stav were among the key suppliers involved in these transactions, playing a significant role in facilitating arms deals between Israel and Sri Lanka. For instance, in 2003, Yosef facilitated a $20 million agreement for the acquisition of new weapons-control systems for the Dabur-class naval patrol boats that the Sri Lankan Navy had purchased from Israel several years earlier.

Allegations of corruption and irregularities periodically emerged in connection with certain defense deals between the two countries, with politicians and arms agents reportedly seeking financial gain from such transactions. One notable example involved former Israeli minister Gonen Segev, who reportedly attempted to negotiate an arms deal with the Sri Lankan military by offering weapons at discounted prices. Sri Lanka's defense procurement from Israel remained closely connected to, and ultimately fell within the purview of, the Israeli Ministry of Defense.

During President Mahinda Rajapaksa's tenure, two years before the end of Sri Lanka's Civil War, Israeli arms supplies to Sri Lankan defense forces experienced a significant setback. Israel was concerned that its military technology could be transferred to Iran, which was actively supporting Rajapaksa's government during the final phase of the conflict. As a result, Tel Aviv suspended defense shipments to Sri Lanka until the war ended in 2009. In the years following Sri Lanka's victory, the relationship steadily improved, highlighted by Israel's strengthening of Sri Lanka's cyber security. In 2021, Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI) concluded a mega-deal with Sri Lanka; and this year, another significant milestone was achieved when the Sri Lankan Air Force upgraded its Kfir fighter jets, refurbished by IAI, under a $50 million agreement.

The volatility that has pervaded the two states' diplomatic relations has scarcely affected their defense collaboration. Israel's defense exports to Sri Lanka, and the strengthening of professional ties between their respective armed forces, follow a twofold logic. On the one hand, Israel considers it imperative to secure ties with small states, with arms trade standing as the pinnacle of such relations. On Sri Lanka's side, its armed forces are well aware of the reliability of Israeli supplies. Defense collaboration remains the focal point of the relationship between the two states, which continues regardless of political or diplomatic hindrances.

Dr. Punsara Amarasinghe is a Lecturer at the Department of International Law, Faculty of Law, General Sir John Kotelawala Defense University. His research interests are military strategy, asymmetric warfare, Israel-Sri Lanka relations, and Indian Ocean studies.

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