ASIA, **Myanmar** and **Israel** develop military pact

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**INTRODUCTION:**
Although allegations of a secret military partnership between **Myanmar** and **Israel** continue to be denied by both sides, reports suggest that **Israel** is aiding **Myanmar**'s military modernisation. William Ashton examines the commercial and strategic links between the two countries.

**TEXT:**
EVER SINCE the **Myanmar** armed forces (or Tatmadaw) formed the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in 1988, and took back direct control of the country, there have been persistent rumours throughout the Asia-Pacific region attesting to a secret military partnership developing between **Israel** and **Myanmar** (Burma). Despite repeated denials by Israeli officials in Yangon, Bangkok and **Singapore**, reports continue to surface that **Israel** is closely involved in the military regime's ambitious programme to expand and modernise **Myanmar**'s armed forces.

According to some of these reports, certain aspects of **Israel**'s current relationship with the Tatmadaw come close to assisting the military regime (known since November 1997 as the State Peace and Development Council -- SPDC) to retain its hold on power.

**Military ties 1948-88**

**Myanmar**'s military ties with **Israel** are long-standing.

**Israel** was one of the few countries to which **Myanmar** turned for assistance and advice after it regained its independence from the **UK** in 1948. As a former British mandate, **Israel** shared a certain identity with **Myanmar**. It had similar administrative procedures, educational methods and public service organisation. The fledgling government of Prime Minister U Nu related closely to **Israel**'s attempts to build up a modern state from diverse peoples, with limited resources, surrounded by enemies, but united by a common religion. Both governments had strong socialist and democratic ideals. (At the Asian Socialist Conference held in Yangon in 1953, **Myanmar** and **Israel** were the only two countries in Asia in which a Socialist Party was in power.) Also attractive to Yangon was Tel Aviv's 'non-aligned' status in world affairs. For its part, **Israel**, threatened on all sides by Arab countries, was anxious to find allies who could provide diplomatic support in international forums like the UN.

Close bilateral ties had developed by the mid-1950s. While **Myanmar** was keen to obtain Israeli advice and technical assistance in areas like agriculture and construction, its initial interest centred on **Israel**'s armed forces.

In 1954 a military mission from **Myanmar** visited **Israel** to study the most suitable structure for a national defence force that utilised reserve forces. In particular, the delegation looked at **Israel**'s national service scheme, with a view to its introduction into **Myanmar**. That did not occur but, during a visit to **Israel** the following year, Prime Minister U Nu took a great interest in the kibbutz system of self-defended frontier settlements. Four villages modelled on this system were later built in the Shan State, west of the Salween River, about 200km from the sensitive Chinese border. The Pyu Saw Hti town and village defence scheme (introduced in 1955) also borrowed several features from the defence of collective settlements in **Israel**. This scheme later evolved into the People's Militia. **Myanmar** copied the structure of the Israeli women's
auxiliary force, and the Defence Services Institute, an independent commercial organisation run by the Tatmadaw to supplement the official defence budget, established a number of joint projects in Myanmar with Israeli construction and housing companies.

Other military links between the two countries were more direct. During the mid-1950s, for example, Israel sold Myanmar 30 second-hand Supermarine Spitfire fighters with related equipment, machine gun ammunition, bombs, rockets and spare engine parts. Israel's Air Force also trained (in Israel) six Myanmar Air Force pilots in the operation of these aircraft and sent a technical team to Myanmar to show Myanmar Air Force mechanics how to maintain them. Israel also sent officers and materiel to Myanmar to help modernise the Myanmar Army. It is believed that some of the training courses provided by Israel covered aspects of military intelligence. So close was the relationship that, in 1958, Israeli Chief of Staff of the Defence Forces Major General Moshe Dayan and Director General of the Defence Ministry Shimon Peres visited Myanmar. The following year General Ne Win paid an official visit to Israel, both as prime minister of Myanmar’s ‘caretaker’ government and as chief of the country’s defence forces.

Despite these contacts, bilateral ties declined significantly under the Revolutionary Government which seized power in Yangon in 1962. They further diminished after 1974, as Ne Win's ostensibly civilian Burma Socialist Programme Party government continued to shun most contacts with the outside world. Because of its earlier defence assistance, however, Israel enjoyed a special place in the minds of Myanmar's top military leaders and modest links were maintained during this period.

Assistance to SLORC 1988-97

After the Tatmadaw took back the government of Myanmar in 1988, it was fiercely condemned by many countries and faced strong sanctions from its traditional arms suppliers, including the UK and USA. This posed severe problems for the SLORC, which not only feared further urban unrest and an upsurge of insurgent activity in the countryside, but possibly even an invasion by the Western democracies in support of Myanmar's burgeoning democracy movement. Also, over the longer term, the new regime wished to introduce a massive military expansion/modernisation programme.

In order to replenish Myanmar’s dwindling military supplies, the SLORC turned first to Singapore and Pakistan. It later developed very close ties with China. The SLORC also actively sought to develop military links with other countries, such as Yugoslavia, Poland and Russia. These countries were prepared (often secretly) to assist with supplies of arms and military equipment. It would appear that Israel should be counted among this latter group.

The first arms shipment Myanmar received after the 1988 takeover was from Singapore. The second, which arrived by sea in August 1989, was a diverse collection of weapons and ammunition from Belgium and Israel. Arranged through a newly-formed joint venture between Myanmar and Singapore, this weapons shipment reportedly included second-hand 40mm RPG-2 grenade launchers and 57mm anti-tank guns of Eastern bloc origin. It has been suggested that this equipment may have been taken from Palestinian stocks captured in southern Lebanon by Israel in 1982, and re-sold to Myanmar.

Since then, there have been several other reports that Israel has transferred arms and weapons technology to the Tatmadaw. In 1991, for example, an Israeli team visited Myanmar, apparently to sell the military regime 9mm Uzi sub-machine guns. Weapons of this kind were subsequently observed on issue to the bodyguards who provided close protection to the members of the SLORC, and who now surround senior members of the SPDC when they venture out in public. There have also been unconfirmed reports that the army may have tried to develop an indigenous version of this weapon, to be known as the BA-94. If these reports are true, the effort does not seem to have amounted to much, but Myanmar has clearly had greater success in drawing on Israeli expertise in its efforts to develop a whole new family of 5.56mm infantry weapons. The MA (Myanmar Army) series of assault rifles and light machine guns, for example, which is now in serial production at a closely guarded factory in central Myanmar, appears to include several elements of the Israeli 5.56mm Galil assault rifle.
Other military developments in Myanmar have sparked additional rumours in Yangon, and consequent reports in the media. Although difficult to prove, many observers believe that at different times, the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad has provided training, technical advice and other forms of assistance to Myanmar's powerful Directorate of Defence Services Intelligence which is responsible for both internal security and support for military operations. As the SLORC progressively upgraded Myanmar's military communications network, including its signals intelligence capabilities, more stories surfaced about possible Israeli involvement. It has been suggested, for example, that Israel and Singapore have provided the Myanmar Army with specialised intercept and encryption equipment, with training packages. Also, the Israeli Army -- or perhaps ex-Israeli Army specialists -- has reportedly provided training to Myanmar's élite counter-terrorist squad.

These reports of arms sales, technology transfers and other ties to the military regime in Yangon have been repeatedly and strenuously denied by official Israeli representatives in the region. They have pointed out that most of the accusations levelled at Israel since 1988 have been based on unsubstantiated rumours, speculation in the international news media, and purely circumstantial evidence. Since the Yangon regime re-invented itself as the SPDC in late 1997, however, military contacts between the two countries have become harder to deny. Whether or not these earlier contacts took place, it is now clear that all three arms of the Tatmadaw are receiving direct help from Israeli companies. Given its sensitive nature, it is difficult to see how this assistance could be given to Myanmar without the active involvement, or at least the full knowledge and support, of the Israeli government.

Links to the SPDC 1997-2000

In August 1997 it was revealed that the Israeli defence manufacturing company Elbit had won a contract to upgrade Myanmar's (then) three squadrons of Chinese-built F-7 fighters and FT-7 trainers. The F-7 is a derivative of the Mikoyan MiG-21 'Fishbed' jet fighter. The FT-7 is the export version of the GAIC JJ-7, itself a copy of the MiG-21 'Mongol-B' trainer. Since they began to be delivered by China in 1991, the Myanmar Air Force has progressively acquired about 54 (or four squadrons) of these aircraft, the latest arriving at Hmawbi air base only last year. In related sales, the air force has also acquired about 350 PL-2A air-to-air missiles (AAM) from China and at least one shipment of the more sophisticated PL-5 AAMs.

Since their delivery to Myanmar, these new aircraft have caused the air force considerable problems. Several aircraft (and pilots) have already been lost through accidents, raising questions about the reliability of the Chinese technology. There have also been reliable reports that the F-7s were delivered without the computer software to permit the AAMs to be fired in flight. Also, the air force has complained that the F-7s are difficult to maintain, in part reflecting major differences between the structure and underlying philosophy of the Myanmar and Chinese logistics systems. Spare parts have been in very short supply. In addition, the air force seems to have experienced difficulties in using the F-7 (designed primarily for air defence) in a ground attack role. These, and other problems, seem to have prompted the air force to turn to Israel for assistance.

According to sources in the international arms market, 36 of Myanmar's F-7 fighters are to be retro-fitted with the Elta EL/M-2032 air-to-air radar, Rafael Python 3 infrared, short range AAMs, and Litening laser designator pods. The same equipment will also be installed on the two-seater FT-7 fighter trainers. In a related deal, Israel will also sell Myanmar at least one consignment of laser-guided bombs. Since the Elbit contract was won in 1997, the air force has acquired at least one more squadron of F-7 and FT-7 aircraft from China, but it is not known whether the Israeli-backed upgrade programme will now be extended to include the additional aircraft. Myanmar's critical shortage of foreign exchange will be a major factor in the SPDC's decision.

The army has also benefited from Myanmar's new closeness to Israel.

As part of the regime's massive military modernisation and expansion programme, considerable effort has been put into upgrading the army's artillery capabilities. In keeping with its practice of never abandoning
any equipment of value, the army clearly still aims, as far as possible, to keep older weapons operational. (Pakistan, for example, has recently provided Myanmar with ammunition for its vintage 25 pounder field guns). The older UK, US and Yugoslav guns in the Tatmadaw's inventory have been supplemented over the past 10 years with a range of new towed and self-propelled artillery pieces. Purchased mainly from China, they include 122mm howitzers, anti-tank guns, 57mm Type 80 anti-aircraft guns, 37mm Type 74 anti-aircraft guns and 107mm Type 63 multiple rocket launchers. In a barter deal brokered by China last year, the SPDC has also managed to acquire about 16 130mm artillery pieces from North Korea. Despite all this new firepower, however, the army has still looked to Israel to help equip its new artillery battalions.

Around 1998 Myanmar negotiated the purchase of 16 155mm Soltam towed howitzers, possibly through a third party like Singapore. These guns are believed to be second-hand pieces no longer required by the Israel Defence Force. Last year, ammunition for these guns (including high explosive and white phosphorous rounds) was ordered from Pakistan's government ordnance factories. Before the purchase of these new Chinese and North Korean weapons, Myanmar's largest artillery pieces were 105mm medium guns, provided by the USA almost 40 years ago. Acquiring the Israeli weapons thus marks a major capability leap for Myanmar's army gunners. It is possible that either Israel or Pakistan has provided instructors to help the army learn to use and maintain these new weapons.

Nor has the Myanmar Navy missed out on Israeli assistance. There have been several reports that Israel is playing a crucial role in the construction and fitting out of three new warships, currently being built in Yangon. Myanmar's military leaders have long wanted to acquire two or three frigates to replace the country's obsolete PCE-827 and Admirable-class corvettes, decommissioned in 1994, and its two 1960s-vintage Nawarat-class corvettes, which have been gradually phased out since 1989. As military ties with China rapidly grew during the 1990s, the SLORC hoped to buy two or three Jiangnan- or even Jianghu-class frigates, but it could not afford even the special 'friendship' prices being asked by Beijing. As a compromise, the SPDC has now purchased three Chinese hulls, and is currently fitting them out as corvettes in Yangon's Sinmalaik shipyard.

According to reliable reports, the three vessels will each be about 75m long and displace about 1,200 tons. Despite a European Community embargo against arms sales to Myanmar, the ships' main guns are being imported (apparently through a third party) from Italy. Based on the information currently available, they are likely to be 76mm OTO Melara Compact guns, weapons which (perhaps coincidentally) have been extensively combat-tested by the Israeli Navy on its Reshef-class fast attack missile patrol boats. The corvettes will probably also be fitted with anti-submarine weapons, but it is not known what, if any, surface-to-surface and SAMs the ships will carry.

Israel's main role in fitting out the three corvettes is apparently to provide their electronics suites. Details of the full contract are not known, but it is expected that each package will include at least a surface-search radar, a fire-control radar, a navigation radar and a hull-mounted sonar.

The first of these warships will probably be commissioned and commence sea trials later this year.

Only sales or a strategic imperative?

While Myanmar remains a pariah state, subject to comprehensive sanctions by the USA and European Community, it is unlikely that Israel will ever admit publicly to having military links with the Tatmadaw. Until it does, the reasons for Israel's secret partnership with the Yangon regime will remain unclear. A number of factors, however, have probably played a part in influencing policy decisions in Tel Aviv.

There is clearly a strong commercial imperative behind some of these ventures. From a regional base in Singapore, with which it shares a very close relationship, Israel has already managed to penetrate the lucrative Chinese arms market. It is now aggressively seeking new targets for sales of weapons and military
equipment in the Asia-Pacific. These sales are sometimes supported by offers of technology transfers and specialised advice. This approach has led to fears among some countries that Israel will introduce new military capabilities into the region which could encourage a mini arms race, as others attempt to catch up. The weapon systems being provided to the Myanmar armed forces are not that new, and the Asian economic crisis has dramatically reduced the purchasing power of many regional countries, but Israel's current activities in Myanmar will add to those concerns.

Given the nature of some of these sales, and other probable forms of military assistance to Myanmar, these initiatives would appear to enjoy the strong support of the Israeli government. In addition to the ever-present trade imperative, one reason for this support could be a calculation by senior Israeli officials that closer ties to Myanmar could reap diplomatic and intelligence dividends. For example, Myanmar is now a full member of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) which, despite the economic crisis, is still a major force in a part of the world which has received much closer attention from strategic analysts since the end of the Cold War. Israel's regional base will remain Singapore, but it is possible that Tel Aviv believes Myanmar can provide another avenue for influence in ASEAN, and a useful vantage point from which to monitor critical strategic developments in places like China and India.

In particular, Israel is interested in the spread of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, and the transfer of technologies related to the development of ballistic and other missiles. Myanmar has close military relations with China and Pakistan, both of which have been accused of transferring sensitive weapons technologies to rogue Islamic states, such as Iran. Myanmar is also a neighbour of India, another nuclear power that has resisted international pressure to curb its proliferation activities. Yangon could thus be seen by Israel as a useful listening post from which to monitor and report on these countries.

Also, despite accusations over the years that Myanmar has developed chemical and biological weapons, and more convincing arguments that Israel has a sizeable nuclear arsenal of its own, both countries share an interest in preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Myanmar's support for anti-proliferation initiatives, in multilateral forums like the UN General Assembly and the Committee on Disarmament, would seem to be worth a modest investment by the Israeli government in bilateral relations with the SPDC. In addition to training Myanmar agriculturalists in Israel, assisting the Tatmadaw to upgrade its military capabilities seems a sure way of getting close to the Yangon regime.

Israel's repeated denial of any military links with Myanmar are not unexpected. Israel has never liked advertising such ties, particularly with countries like Myanmar, South Africa and China, which have been condemned by the international community for gross abuses of human rights. Even Israel's very close military ties with Singapore are routinely denied by both sides. Yet there seems little room for doubt that, after the 1988 takeover, Israel did start to develop close links with the SLORC, which are continuing to grow under the SPDC. In these circumstances, it would be surprising if Israel was not still looking for opportunities to restore the kind of mutually beneficial bilateral relationship that was first established when both countries became independent modern states in 1948.

Pro-democracy

CAPTION:
Pro-democracy campaigners protest against the Myanmar military dictatorship. As Myanmar remains very much a pariah state within the international community, any commercial and strategic links between Israel and the Yangon regime are likely to remain secret. PA News/0070265

Exiled Myanmar...
CAPTION:
Exiled Myanmar students call for the international community to take action against the military regime in Myanmar. However, the commercial and strategic benefits of developing a secret alliance with the military junta are likely to weigh heavily against their calls. PA News/0070266

_In order to reduce..._

CAPTION:
In order to reduce the costs of military imports, Myanmar has modified vehicles for military purposes. These include the Special Combat Vehicle. Bruce Hawke/0039362

_In order to reduce..._

In order to reduce the costs of military imports, Myanmar has modified vehicles for military purposes. These include the Armoured Fighting Car. Bruce Hawke/0039363

Myanmar is now...

CAPTION:
Myanmar is now a full member of ASEAN. Myanmar Prime Minister Than Shwe (far left) joined other heads of state at the 3rd ASEAN Informal Summit last November. PA News/0070267

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