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For Israel and U.S., a Growing Military Partnership

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WASHINGTON WATCHING foreign affairs is sometimes like watching a magician; the eye is drawn to the hand performing the dramatic flourishes, leaving the other hand — the one doing the important job — unnoticed.

So it seemed last week as the United States aired its grievances against Israel over the affair of Jonathan Jay Pollard, the United States Navy employee sentenced to life in prison for selling bundles of vital intelligence information to Israel.

While American officials, Congressmen and Jewish leaders were expressing indignation over the espionage, officials in the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency and the State Department were quietly conducting business as usual with Israel, maintaining the intimate relationship that has grown up around military cooperation, mutually agreed intelligence sharing and joint weapons research. "We consider the Pollard business very compartmentalized and not having a broader effect," said a senior Administration official. "I can't guarantee that there won't be any spillover," he said, but added, "We are going to try not to allow this to spread at all. It is not going to affect any other aspects of the relationship." In fact, he and other Administration officials expect an expansion in what they call "strategic cooperation" with Israel.

What infuriated Washington were both the scope of Mr. Pollard's espionage and the Israeli Government's promotion of two key figures involved — Col. Aviem Sella, who was given command of the Tel Nof air base

south of Tel Aviv, and Rafael Eitan, a former adviser to the Prime Minister on terrorism who was named head of a state-run chemical company.

After Colonel Sella was indicted by a Federal grand jury in Washington, the Reagan Administration ordered that no American official — whether civilian or military — have any contact with him or his air base, a largely symbolic gesture. And Secretary of State George P. Shultz characterized the case as "very disheartening," while adding that the relationship with Israel "has developed and matured for good reasons, and we want to keep it that way."

Like the hand that goes unnoticed, Israeli-American military cooperation has been kept mostly secret as it has expanded during the Reagan Administration — hidden by the United States to avoid antagonizing pro-Western Arab governments and by Israel to avoid provoking the Soviet Union into including Israel as a target in any Soviet-American clash.

The secrecy is especially tight on the storing of American military equipment in Israel for use by American troops in a crisis in the eastern Mediterranean. Both countries have confirmed that medical supplies have been placed in Israeli warehouses, and some American servicemen in Turkey are being sent to Israel for medical care rather than to American military hospitals in

West Germany. But neither country will disclose what weapons, spare parts and other "lethal" items have been put in place.

Other activities are more visible. Planes from American aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean use Israeli bombing ranges in the Negev Desert for practice, then return to their ships. Old, Israeli-built Kfir jet fighters have been leased free of charge to the United States Navy and marines to help train American pilots in flying against Soviet-built MIG-21's, which have similar characteristics. The Israelis have a lucrative contract to maintain the planes in the United States. Joint American-Israeli anti-submarine exercises have been held in the Mediterranean, and anti-terrorist teams from the two countries have trained together.

Israel — designated by Washington as a non-NATO ally similar to Japan and Australia — is also participating in American programs of advanced weapons research. Israeli engineers and scientists are reportedly ahead of their American colleagues in developing a missile designed to shoot down a short-range missile, such as the Soviet-built SS-21 possessed by Syria. Israel has asked for American funds to proceed with a testing program in two years. The United States, which has signed about \$10 million in research contracts with Israel for the space-based defense system, plans to wait about a year to decide whether the Israeli "anti-tactical ballistic missile," as it is known, is better suited to the "Star Wars" program than lasers or other technology.

In addition to the \$1.8 billion in American military aid to Israel this year, Pentagon purchases of Israeli electronics, mine-laying and bridge-laying equipment and other military items have grown rapidly, from \$9.4 million in 1983 to \$205 million in 1986.

Air Base Boycott

But the Pentagon has also judged a proposed Israeli jet fighter, the Lavi, too expensive to produce, a view now shared by key Israeli officers. Pentagon officials would like to see more Israeli money in antisubmarine warfare to counter a growing fleet of old, Soviet-built diesel subs being supplied to Libya and Syria.

Many of the joint research programs were begun after Mr. Pollard's arrest in 1985. Indeed, the boycott of the Tel Nof air base seems a minor inconvenience in this context.

The base contains about one-sixth of the Israeli air force, including the largest contingent of American-built

F-15 jet fighters, whose pilots are routinely debriefed after missions in Lebanon by American Air Force attachés on the planes' performance and the characteristics of Soviet-built weaponry they encounter. But as one official noted, the debriefings can take place elsewhere.

"I think in the end the main impact of the Pollard affair is not on strategic relations but on human relations," said Joyce Starr of Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies. "In terms of technical cooperation, I don't think it will be affected because it is in our interest."