

How Israeli High-Tech Security Firms Are Turning the U.S.-Mexico Border into a “New Kind of Hell”

U.S. borderlands are laboratories for nightmarish innovations.

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It was October 2012. Roei Elkabetz, a brigadier general for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), was explaining his country’s border policing strategies. In his PowerPoint presentation, a photo of the enclosure wall that isolates the Gaza Strip from Israel clicked onscreen. “We have learned lots from Gaza,” he told the audience. “It’s a great laboratory.”

Elkabetz was speaking at a border technology conference and fair surrounded by a dazzling display of technology — the components of his boundary-building lab. There were surveillance balloons with high-powered cameras floating over a desert-camouflaged armored vehicle made by Lockheed Martin. There were seismic sensor systems used to detect the movement of people and other wonders of the modern border-policing world. Around Elkabetz, you could see vivid examples of where the future of such policing was heading, as imagined not by a dystopian science fiction writer but by some of the top corporate techno-innovators on the planet.

Swimming in a sea of border security, the brigadier general was, however, not surrounded by the Mediterranean but by a parched West Texas landscape. He was in El Paso, a 10-minute walk from the wall that separates the United States from Mexico.

Just a few more minutes on foot and Elkabetz could have watched green-striped U.S. Border Patrol vehicles inching along the trickling Rio Grande in front of Ciudad Juarez, one of Mexico’s largest cities filled with U.S. factories and the dead of that country’s drug wars. The Border Patrol agents whom the general might have spotted were then being up-armored with a lethal combination of surveillance technologies, military hardware, assault rifles, helicopters, and drones. This once-peaceful place was being transformed into what Timothy Dunn, in his book [The Militarization of the U.S. Mexico Border](#), terms a state of “low-intensity warfare.”

The Border Surge

On November 20, 2014, President Obama [announced](#) a series of executive actions on immigration reform. Addressing the American people, he referred to bipartisan immigration legislation [passed](#) by the Senate in June 2013 that would, among other things, further up-armor the same landscape in what’s been termed — in language adopted from recent U.S. war zones — a “border surge.” The president bemoaned the fact that the bill had been stalled in the House of Representatives, hailing it as a “compromise” that “reflected common sense.” It would, he pointed out, “have doubled the number of Border Patrol agents, while giving undocumented immigrants a pathway to citizenship.”

In the wake of his announcement, including executive actions that would protect five to six million of those immigrants from future deportation, the national debate was quickly framed as a conflict between Republicans and Democrats. Missed in this partisan war of words was one thing: the initial executive action that Obama announced involved a further militarization of the border supported by both parties.

“First,” the president said, “we’ll build on our progress at the border with additional resources for our law enforcement personnel so that they can stem the flow of illegal crossings and speed the return of those who do cross over.” Without further elaboration, he then moved on to other matters.

If, however, the United States follows the “common sense” of the border-surge bill, the result could add more than \$40 billion dollars [worth of](#) agents, advanced technologies, walls, and other barriers to an already unparalleled border enforcement apparatus. And a crucial signal would be sent to the private sector that, as the trade magazine *Homeland Security Today* puts it, another “[treasure trove](#)” of profit is on the way for a border control market already, according to the latest forecasts, in an “[unprecedented boom period](#).”

Like the Gaza Strip for the Israelis, the U.S. borderlands, dubbed a “[constitution-free zone](#)” by the ACLU, are becoming a vast open-air laboratory for tech companies. There, almost any form of surveillance and “security” can be developed, tested, and showcased, as if in a militarized shopping mall, for other nations across the planet to consider. In this fashion, border security is becoming a global industry and few corporate complexes can be more pleased by this than the one that has developed in Elkabetz’s Israel.

“The Palestine-Mexico Border”

Consider the IDF brigadier general’s presence in El Paso two years ago an omen. After all, in February 2014, Customs and Border Protection (CBP), the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) agency in charge of policing our borders, contracted with Israel’s giant private military manufacturer [Elbit Systems](#) to build a “virtual wall,” a technological barrier set back from the actual international divide in the Arizona desert. That company, whose U.S.-traded stock shot up by 6% during Israel’s massive military operation against Gaza in the summer of 2014, will bring the same databank of technology used in Israel’s borderlands — Gaza and the West Bank — to Southern Arizona through its subsidiary [Elbit Systems of America](#).

With approximately 12,000 employees and, as it boasts, “10+ years [securing](#) the world’s most challenging borders,” Elbit produces an arsenal of “homeland security systems.” These include surveillance land vehicles, mini-unmanned aerial systems, and “smart fences,” highly fortified steel barriers that have the ability to sense a person’s touch or movement. In its role as lead system integrator for Israel’s border technology plan, the company has already installed smart fences in the West Bank and the Golan Heights.

In Arizona, with up to a billion dollars potentially at its disposal, CBP has tasked Elbit with creating a “wall” of “integrated fixed towers” containing the latest in cameras, radar, motion sensors, and control rooms. Construction will start in the rugged, desert canyons around Nogales. Once a DHS evaluation deems that part of the project effective, the rest will be built to monitor the full length of the state’s borderlands with Mexico. Keep in mind, however, that these towers are only one part of a broader operation, the [Arizona Border Surveillance Technology Plan](#). At this stage, it’s essentially a blueprint for an unprecedented infrastructure of high-tech border fortifications that has attracted the attention of many

companies.

This is not the first time Israeli companies have been involved in a U.S. border build-up. In fact, in 2004, Elbit's Hermes drones were the first unmanned aerial vehicles to take to the skies to [patrol](#) the southern border. In 2007, according to Naomi Klein in [The Shock Doctrine](#), the Golan Group, an Israeli consulting company made up of former IDF Special Forces officers, [provided](#) an intensive eight-day course for special DHS immigration agents covering "everything from hand-to-hand combat to target practice to 'getting proactive with their SUV.'" The Israeli company NICE Systems even [supplied](#) Arizona's [Joe Arpaio](#), "America's toughest sheriff," with a surveillance system to watch one of his jails.

As such border cooperation intensified, journalist Jimmy Johnson [coined](#) the apt phrase "Palestine-Mexico border" to catch what was happening. In 2012, Arizona state legislators, [sensing](#) the potential economic benefit of this growing collaboration, declared their desert state and Israel to be natural "trade partners," adding that it was "a relationship we seek to enhance."

In this way, the doors were opened to a new world order in which the United States and Israel are to become partners in the "laboratory" that is the U.S.-Mexican borderlands. Its testing grounds are to be in Arizona. There, largely through a program known as [Global Advantage](#), American academic and corporate knowhow and Mexican low-wage manufacturing are to fuse with Israel's border and homeland security companies.

The Border: Open for Business

No one may frame the budding romance between Israel's high-tech companies and Arizona better than Tucson Mayor Jonathan Rothschild. "If you go to Israel and you come to Southern Arizona and close your eyes and spin yourself a few times," he says, "you might not be able to tell the difference."

Global Advantage is a business project based on a partnership between the University of Arizona's Tech Parks Arizona and the Offshore Group, a business advisory and housing firm which offers "nearshore solutions for manufacturers of any size" just across the border in Mexico. Tech Parks Arizona has the lawyers, accountants, and scholars, as well as the technical knowhow, to help any foreign company land softly and set up shop in the state. It will aid that company in addressing legal issues, achieving regulatory compliance, and even finding qualified employees — and through a program it's called the Israel Business Initiative, Global Advantage has identified its target country.

Think of it as the perfect example of a post-NAFTA world in which companies dedicated to stopping border crossers are ever freer to cross the same borders themselves. In the spirit of free trade that created the NAFTA treaty, the latest border fortification programs are designed to eliminate borders when it comes to letting high-tech companies from across the seas set up in the United States and make use of Mexico's manufacturing base to create their products. While Israel and Arizona may be separated by thousands of miles, Rothschild assured *TomDispatch* that in "economics, there are no borders."

Of course, what the mayor appreciates, above all, is the way new border technology could bring money and jobs into an area with a nearly 23% poverty rate. How those jobs might be created matters far less to him. According to Molly Gilbert, the director of community engagement for the Tech Parks Arizona, "It's really about development, and we want to

create technology jobs in our borderlands.”

So consider it anything but an irony that, in this developing global set of boundary-busting partnerships, the factories that will produce the border fortresses designed by Elbit and other Israeli and U.S. high-tech firms will mainly be located in Mexico. Ill-paid Mexican blue-collar workers will, then, manufacture the very components of a future surveillance regime, which may well help locate, detain, arrest, incarcerate, and expel some of them if they try to cross into the United States.

Think of Global Advantage as a multinational assembly line, a place where homeland security meets NAFTA. Right now there are reportedly 10 to 20 Israeli companies in active discussion about joining the program. Bruce Wright, the CEO of Tech Parks Arizona, tells *TomDispatch* that his organization has a “nondisclosure” agreement with any companies that sign on and so cannot reveal their names.

Though cautious about officially claiming success for Global Advantage’s Israel Business Initiative, Wright brims with optimism about his organization’s cross-national planning. As he talks in a conference room located on the 1,345-acre park on the southern outskirts of Tucson, it’s apparent that he’s buoyed by predictions that the Homeland Security market will grow from a \$51 billion annual business in 2012 to [\\$81 billion](#) in the United States alone by 2020, and [\\$544 billion](#) worldwide by 2018.

Wright knows as well that submarkets for border-related products like video surveillance, non-lethal weaponry, and people-screening technologies are all advancing rapidly and that the U.S. market for drones is poised to create 70,000 new jobs by 2016. Partially fueling this growth is what the *Associated Press* calls an [“unheralded shift”](#) to drone surveillance on the U.S. southern divide. More than 10,000 drone flights have been launched into border air space since March 2013, with plans for many more, especially after the Border Patrol doubles its fleet.

When Wright speaks, it’s clear he knows that his park sits atop a twenty-first-century gold mine. As he sees it, Southern Arizona, aided by his tech park, will become the perfect laboratory for the first cluster of border security companies in North America. He’s not only thinking about the 57 southern Arizona companies already identified as working in border security and management, but similar companies nationwide and across the globe, especially in Israel.

In fact, Wright’s aim is to follow Israel’s lead, as it is now the number-one place for such groupings. In his case, the Mexican border would simply replace that country’s highly marketed Palestinian testing grounds. The 18,000 linear feet that surround the tech park’s solar panel farm would, for example, be a perfect spot to test out motion sensors. Companies could also deploy, evaluate, and test their products “in the field,” as he likes to say — that is, where real people are crossing real borders — just as Elbit Systems did before CBP gave it the contract.

“If we’re going to be in bed with the border on a day-to-day basis, with all of its problems and issues, and there’s a solution to it,” Wright said in a 2012 interview, “why shouldn’t we be the place where the issue is solved and we get the commercial benefit from it?”

From the Battlefield to the Border

When Naomi Weiner, project coordinator for the Israel Business Initiative, returned from a trip to that country with University of Arizona researchers in tow, she couldn't have been more enthusiastic about the possibilities for collaboration. She arrived back in November, just a day before Obama announced his new executive actions — a promising declaration for those, like her, in the business of bolstering border defenses.

“We've chosen areas where Israel is very strong and Southern Arizona is very strong,” Weiner explained to *TomDispatch*, pointing to the surveillance industry “synergy” between the two places. For example, one firm her team met with in Israel was [Brightway Vision](#), a subsidiary of Elbit Systems. If it decides to set up shop in Arizona, it could use tech park expertise to further develop and refine its thermal imaging cameras and goggles, while exploring ways to repurpose those military products for border surveillance applications. The Offshore Group would then manufacture the cameras and goggles in Mexico.

Arizona, as Weiner puts it, possesses the “complete package” for such Israeli companies. “We're sitting right on the border, close to Fort Huachuca,” a nearby military base where, among other things, technicians control the drones surveilling the borderlands. “We have the relationship with Customs and Border Protection, so there's a lot going on here. And we're also the Center of Excellence on Homeland Security.”

Weiner is referring to the fact that, in 2008, DHS designated the University of Arizona the lead school for the [Center of Excellence](#) on Border Security and Immigration. Thanks to that, it has since received millions of dollars in federal grants. Focusing on research and development of border-policing technologies, the center is a place where, among other things, engineers are studying locust wings in order to create miniature drones equipped with cameras that can get into the tiniest of spaces near ground level, while large drones like the Predator B continue to buzz over the borderlands at 30,000 feet (despite the fact that a [recent audit](#) by the inspector general of homeland security found them a waste of money).

Although the Arizona-Israeli romance is still in the courtship stage, excitement about its possibilities is growing. Officials from Tech Parks Arizona see Global Advantage as the perfect way to strengthen the U.S.-Israel “special relationship.” There is no other place in the world with a higher concentration of homeland security tech companies than Israel. Six hundred tech start-ups are launched in Tel Aviv alone every year. During the Gaza offensive last summer, *Bloomberg* [reported](#) that investment in such companies had “actually accelerated.” However, despite the periodic military operations in Gaza and the incessant build-up of the Israeli homeland security regime, there are serious limitations to the local market.

The Israeli Ministry of Economy is painfully aware of this. Its officials know that the growth of the Israeli economy is “[largely fueled](#) by a steady increase in exports and foreign investment.” The government coddles, cultivates, and supports these start-up tech companies until their products are market-ready. Among them have been innovations like the “skunk,” a liquid with a putrid odor meant to stop unruly crowds in their tracks. The ministry has also been successful in taking such products to market across the globe. In the decade following 9/11, sales of Israeli “[security exports](#)” rose from \$2 billion to \$7 billion annually.

Israeli companies have sold surveillance drones to Latin American countries like [Mexico](#), Chile, and [Colombia](#), and massive security systems to India and Brazil, where an electro-

optic surveillance system will be deployed along the country's borders with Paraguay and Bolivia. They have also been involved in preparations for policing the 2016 Olympics in Brazil. The products of Elbit Systems and its subsidiaries are now in use from the Americas and Europe to Australia. Meanwhile, that mammoth security firm is ever more involved in finding "civilian applications" for its war technologies. It is also ever more dedicated to bringing the battlefield to the world's borderlands, including southern Arizona.

As geographer Joseph Nevins [notes](#), although there are many differences between the political situations of the U.S. and Israel, both Israel-Palestine and Arizona share a focus on keeping out "those deemed permanent outsiders," whether Palestinians, undocumented Latin Americans, or indigenous people.

Mohyeddin Abdulaziz has seen this "special relationship" from both sides, as a Palestinian refugee whose home and village Israeli military forces destroyed in 1967 and as a long-time resident of the U.S.-Mexico borderlands. A founding member of the Southern Arizona BDS Network, whose goal is to pressure U.S. divestment from Israeli companies, Abdulaziz opposes any program like Global Advantage that will contribute to the further militarization of the border, especially when it also sanitizes Israel's "violations of human rights and international law."

Such violations matter little, of course, when there is money to be made, as Brigadier General Elkabetz indicated at that 2012 border technology conference. Given the direction that both the U.S. and Israel are taking when it comes to their borderlands, the deals being brokered at the University of Arizona look increasingly like matches made in heaven (or perhaps hell). As a result, there is truth packed into journalist Dan Cohen's comment that "Arizona is the Israel of the United States."

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