



3 December 2005

[Quick Links](#)

Search OCPA

[AKO](#) | [Army A-Z](#)

General Information

[Mission](#)

[Chief, Public Affairs](#)

[SGM, Public Affairs](#)

[Media Contacts](#)

[Public Affairs Contacts](#)

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News Media Resources

[Army News Service](#)

[Press Releases](#)

[Soldiers Stories](#)

[Civilian Stories](#)

[Army Images](#)

[Detainee Operations](#)

[Press Kits](#)

[Investigations](#)

[Speeches](#)

[Army Newspapers](#)

Outreach Division

[Homepage](#)

[Army Calendar](#)

[Request for Army Assets](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Aerial Requests](#)

[COMREL Awards MOI](#)

[Public Affairs Contacts](#)

P.A. Links



National Guard begins exchange with Israeli forces

By Master Sgt. Bob Haskell

TEL AVIV, Israel (Army News Service, Nov. 29, 2005) – National Guard leaders visited Israel last week to forge a new relationship with that country's Home Front Command – to help keep both countries safe.

Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, led a 25-member delegation to Israel that included two state adjutants general.

The six-day visit ended Nov. 22 when Blum and Maj. Gen. Yitzshak (Jerry) Gershon, Israel's Home Front commander, signed two letters proposing to exchange ideas, to train in each other's country and to expand their expertise about responding to natural disasters and terrorist attacks.



Lt. Gen. H Steven Blum, chief of the National Guard Bureau, met Israeli Soldiers who were training in urban warfare techniques while visiting the Israeli Defense Force's National Center for Ground Training in the Negev Desert during the week before Thanksgiving. Master Sgt. Bob Haskell

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Gershon: National Guard viewed as family

"We see the American people, and particularly the National Guard, as our family," said Gershon who leads the branch of the Israeli Defense Force that has been committed to homeland defense since 39 Iraqi SCUD missiles hit Israel during the 1991 Gulf War. The Home Front Command is Israel's equivalent to the National Guard. Both are comprised of reserve troops.

"Let's do business to protect our Soldiers, to protect our people and to strengthen our relationship," added Gershon. "I would ... propose that we pursue expanded training opportunities for National Guard personnel visiting Israel and for Home Front Command personnel visiting the United States," he stated in his letter to Blum.

It is the Ministry of Defense's policy to be completely open with the Americans, he said. Deputy Minister of Defense Saul Horev signaled his support by attending a meeting with the Israelis and Americans at the Home Front Command's headquarters on Nov. 20.

The National Guard would participate in the program under the auspices of the U.S. European Command, Blum explained.

"I think this is a natural marriage. This is appropriate," he said. "We are two nations in a world that is a very, very dangerous place. We are two democracies with a common purpose and common values. There are some things that we can offer to you back in the states, and there are some magnificent opportunities for us over here."

Safeguarding from terrorists is paramount

Keeping their people safe from terrorist attacks is paramount among the civilian and military leaders of both countries. The United States has waged its Global War Against Terrorism for four years, following the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Israel has been conducting that grim business in the name of self defense for 57 years, since it was declared an independent nation in 1948.

Indeed, members of the Israeli Defense Force fought off a raid by Hezbollah guerillas against Israeli outposts along the northern border with Lebanon on Nov. 21, the night before Blum and Gershon signed their proposals for mutual cooperation on the Tuesday morning before Thanksgiving in Tel Aviv.

Terrorist attacks against the Israeli people have increased in recent years as outright warfare against neighboring Arab countries has declined, Gershon pointed out. That, he indicated, is why it is important for American and Israeli military people to put their heads together.

Israel, National Guard building relationship

Israel is the second Middle East country with which the National Guard is building a relationship. The Colorado National Guard and the Kingdom of Jordan, Israel's eastern neighbor, established a State Partnership alliance in April 2004 to exchange military, civil and cultural ideas.

In Israel, the National Guard put its best foot forward when Lt. Col. Patrick Tennis, the Guard Bureau's deputy director of Domestic Operations, explained how the National Guard responded to Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma which devastated the Gulf Coast in August and September.

Tennis also explained how the Guard's civil support teams and its chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, high-yield explosive enhanced response force packages (CERFPs) are trained and ready to support civilian authorities in the event of natural disasters and terrorist attacks.

The visit was an outgrowth of two previous meetings between Blum and Israel's Home Front leaders. Blum visited Israel for a couple of days in September 2004. Gershon, who has had the Home Front command for 10 months, visited Blum in Washington last July.

The generals have discussed ways to explore such matters as emergency response to mass terror events and natural disasters, consequence management, and urban search and rescue.

The Guard delegation in November included the adjutants general from Oregon, Maj. Gen. Raymond Rees, and from Washington, Maj. Gen. Tim Lowenberg, and Brig. Gen. Steve Saunders, director of Doctrine, Training and Force Development for the Guard Bureau. The group also included representatives from nine of the Guard's regional CERFPs.

They visited some of the world's most holy shrines in Old Jerusalem and they viewed some of Israel's most modern military facilities to learn about that country's culture.

The Israelis explained their sophisticated system for detecting and responding to an attack or incident anywhere in the country and how an extensive network of sensors makes it possible for people at the national command center and for troops on the ground to share the same information.

The Americans were also escorted to the headquarters for Israel's 200-member National Search and Rescue Unit, whose reserve personnel are sent on missions around the world, and to the National Search and Rescue and Civil Defense School where the young Soldiers are trained.

Military service mandatory for all Israelis

Military service is mandatory for all Israeli men and women when they turn 18, it was explained. Men serve for three years; women for two.

The Americans saw some of those troops sharpening their urban warfare skills at the Israeli Army's vast National Center for Ground Training, located west of the Gaza Strip and north of Egypt in the Negev Desert.

Yes, the National Guard leaders maintained that they lead solid Citizen-Soldiers and Airmen. Lt. Col. Bruce Holloman, commander of the CERFP in Colorado, told of how the 950 members of Task Force St. Bernard, which he commanded for three weeks after Katrina, were determined and proud to help their fellow Americans in Louisiana.

But the Guard leaders also acknowledged that they can learn some valuable lessons from the Israelis.

Capt. Michael Day, commander of a CERFP in California, said after watching two demonstrations at the search and rescue school: "They are a globally deployable force on the things that we want to be able to do in our own states and in neighboring states. I'd like to come back. I'd love to bring my search and rescue folks here."

The American general Blum and the Israeli general Gershon are making every effort to make that possible.

(Editor's note: Master Sgt. Bob Haskell writes for the National Guard Bureau.)

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