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Training for Terror

Israel develops a new export: security classes for professionals.

By Jessica Steinberg



A security guard, left, tackles a knife-wielding "attacker" during exercises at the International School for VIP protection near Tel Aviv. Photo by Brian Hendler for JTA

Poli, an attorney from Munich who preferred not to give his last name, decided to train as a security officer after his best friend was killed in a terrorist attack in an Egyptian coffee shop.

"I wanted some peace of mind, the knowledge that I could defend myself and my family, if the situation should arise," said Poli, a lanky corporate lawyer who does much of his business in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union and who refused to give his last name.

Where did Poli decide to go to learn how to defend himself?

Israel. And he's not alone — hundreds of people come to the Jewish state every year to learn security tactics.

Poli is finishing up an intensive International Security Academy (ISA) training course in Israel, where he spent four weeks learning the ropes from some of the best in the business — former Israeli commandos.

He has lost a few pounds, and his chest is bruised from shoving and punching during training, but he says he learned how to deal with almost any potentially dangerous situation.

"This kind of training gives you self-confidence," Poli said. "I'm not as big as some of these guys, but I can outrun most of them."



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The ISA was founded by David Mirza, a former high-ranking security officer who, like most of his 30 instructors, is still active in the Israeli security forces. The robust, jovial Mizna usually stands on the sidelines, occasionally shouting words of encouragement as the trainees wrestle, tussle and knee one another to the ground.

As Poli takes on two of his fellow trainees, sticking his regulation rubber knife in one and kneeling the other in the groin, Mirza smiles and claps, calling out, "And he's a lawyer!"

Most of the participants present are professionals or would-be security personnel from countries including Russia, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and Greece.

But more than a few are simply ordinary people who paid from \$2,500 to \$8,800 to spend 17 hours a day, for a minimum of one to four weeks, to learn how to detect, deter, push, kick, shove and, if necessary, shoot an attacker.

Most of the training takes place on the rolling lawns of Hotel Kibbutz Shefayim, about eight miles north of Tel Aviv. As the trainees go through their morning session of hand-to-hand combat and simulations of drive-by shootings, guests arriving at the kibbutz hotel do a double take.

It's a surreal scene, watching this group of men dressed in regulation black pants, royal blue ISA T-shirts and dark sunglasses as, grunting and grimacing, they throw one another to the ground.

Most of the participants are well aware of where they are and why they're being trained by Israelis. "Everyone knows the Israelis are the best at this kind of training," said Rohit Handa, a wiry Scottish investment banker who wanted to toughen himself up for future business trips in Russia, India and the Middle East.

About 60 percent of the ISA training is theory, with daily classes on becoming aware of one's surroundings and avoiding potential confrontations. After the participants have learned surveillance and avoidance techniques, they move to hand-to-hand combat, learning the unique Israeli "unarmed protection" methods.

The trainees practice combat shooting every day at facilities in nearby Kfar Saba and Caesarea, but the instructors emphasize that a gun is always a last resort.

"Israelis do a few things differently that are very natural, much simpler and more sensible," said Andrew, a Swiss security executive and ISA graduate who visits the program on a regular basis to scout out potential employees, and who also refused to give his last name. "There's no kung fu here."

There's no question that this group of 20 is enjoying the running, kicking, grunting and sweating of the intensive training. And it is mostly a male group, aside from two women graduates of the program who often serve as targets in various exercises.

As a training exercise, the group took a field trip to Rabin Square in Tel Aviv, where Yigal Amir assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995. The group went over each step of Rabin's walk through the "stitching points," the open, vulnerable area he passed through between the building and his car.

Their conclusion? Despite some inexplicable security lapses, Amir succeeded primarily because of his determination to kill the peace process. "It's impossible to be 100 percent secure," Andrew admitted. "When suicide bombers want to get in, you can't keep them from doing it. But you have to make it more difficult for them."

The current security situation in Israel didn't deter any of the ISA participants. In fact, most of them view the crisis as additional proof of their instructors' real-life credentials.

Most ISA trainees may not ever be in such a tense situation, but they say their experience in Israel at least makes them more aware of potential dangers.

"There's been more crime, more drugs in Germany ever since" the Berlin Wall came down, Poli said. "Terrorism is on the rise, and it makes you realize it can happen anywhere."

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