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## Shady Deal



IAF chopper. From Gaza to Jungles  
 Photo: AP


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## IDF choppers in service of drug cartel

**American officials demand Israel provide explanations for how U.S.-made choppers sold to Israel ended up in service of Columbian drug cartel. Incident may cloud relations between countries**

Itamar Eichner

**Another diplomatic incident threatens to taint U.S.-Israeli relations:** The American government has recently demanded Israel clarify how five U.S.-made helicopters sold to Israel in the mid-70s found their way into the hands of a Columbian drug cartel.

An U.S. embassy official met with an Israeli foreign ministry official in Jerusalem several days ago, where he informed him that the American Foreign Ministry has requested the embassy to launch an investigation into the matter.

According to American sources, the military copters currently serve the drug mafia in the South American country.

Top diplomatic sources fear that this incident will once again heat-up tensions between Israel and the U.S. and cloud the strategic dialogue between the two countries, which is scheduled to renew in November, after talks were suspended for more than a year-and-a-half.

### Kosher deal went sour

The dubious affair, which was already investigated by the Israeli Defense Ministry, and later turned over to the hands of the police, was uncovered about two years ago.

Investigators revealed that the Defense Ministry signed a deal with an Israeli company three years ago, contracting it to negotiate the sale of five IAF helicopters for a sum of USD 100,000 per aircraft.

The ministry permitted the choppers, of a MD 500 Defender model, be sold either to the Mexican federal police, or to the Spain firefighters department. However, contrary to the terms of the license, the copters ended up in Columbia, by way of Canadian mediators.

A Defense Ministry spokeswoman said in response that "after suspicions were raised that an illicit exchange took place, the ministry launched an initial investigation into the matter last year."

"According to instructions of the chief prosecutor, the case was handed over to the police in 2004," she added.

Sources at the Defense Ministry refused to comment on the matter.

**Itamar Eichner writes for Yedioth Ahronoth, Israel's leading newspaper**

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