

Israel's gun wariness grows

Nation is poised to tighten its already-strict rules after an increase in deaths.



An armed soldier watches as women pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Israel's private gun ownership rate is among the world's lowest. (Jim Hollander / EPA / June 9, 2013)

By Edmund Sanders

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JERUSALEM -- A former Israeli border police officer walked into a Beersheba bank last month and shot to death four people over a disputed \$1,600 debt before killing himself with his handgun.

In March, a Haifa security guard was accused of using his work-issued gun to kill a family friend whom he apparently suspected of sleeping with his girlfriend, and then committed suicide. The same month, another security guard shot to death his estranged wife as they drove with their teenage daughter in the back seat, police say.

An unusual increase this year in the number of people killed with privately licensed firearms is pushing the Israeli government to tighten what are already some of the toughest civilian gun control regulations in the world.

Unconcealed weapons are an everyday sight in Israel. Soldiers carry automatic rifles on buses. Every school is protected by armed guards. "Do you have a weapon?" is a frequent question at security checkpoints for malls, government offices and restaurants.

But the rate of private gun ownership in Israel is among the lowest in the world. With 290,000 civilian gun licenses, the country has about 3.6 guns per 100 citizens, not including police, military and illegal weapons. In the United States there are roughly 90 guns per 100 civilians.

The government is expected to issue new rules by August to bring that figure down even more by limiting the types of businesses or institutions that automatically qualify for

armed security guard protection. Among those under review are supermarkets and schools, officials said.

The government is also working on a plan to enforce a rule prohibiting security guards from taking guns home with them. And in April, it mandated that every private gun kept in a residential setting be stored in a wall-mounted safe.

"As opposed to the U.S., in Israel the right of civilians to bear arms is a privilege granted by the government, not an obligation," said Yakov Amit, head of firearms licensing at the Public Security Ministry.

He said the recent Beersheba bank shooting, the deadliest in years, led the government to seek an even more "drastic" reduction in the number of guns, especially those held by private guards.

"The ministry has decided to reduce the number of guns held by security guards in places they are not needed," Amit said. "Weapons in the hands of a public that does not actually need them can be dangerous and cause more harm than good."

Fatal shootings with licensed guns averaged about three per year from 2002 to 2012, Amit said. This year, eight people have died in such incidents.

Israeli police won't release the nation's overall gun homicide rate, including deaths involving illegally held weapons, but the World Health Organization estimates that about 60 people are shot to death in Israel per year on average. In the U.S., an estimated 10,000 gun homicides and 19,000 gun suicides occur each year.

To obtain a gun permit, an Israeli citizen must undergo firearms training and pass a physical and mental health exam every three years. The applicant must also meet a "needs" criteria to justify gun ownership, such as working in a job transporting explosives, living in a West Bank settlement or working as a hunter or gun vendor.

Fewer than half the licenses are granted to security guard firms. Former army officers, park rangers and firefighters also qualify.

Even before the recent crackdown, the government had narrowed its list of professions eligible for gun permits, removing jewelry store and lottery shop workers and bus drivers, Amit said, adding that today, half of all applicants are rejected. Since the end of the last Palestinian uprising nearly a decade ago, the government has halved the number of gun licenses for private citizens.

That's a shift from the 1980s and '90s, when licenses were relatively easy to obtain and renew because guns were seen as important tools against terrorism. The government began clamping down in 1999, particularly after several high-profile shooting attacks on Palestinians. In 1994, settler Baruch Goldstein killed 29 Muslim worshipers in the West Bank city of Hebron.

The crackdown faces some opposition, though not as powerful as that in the U.S. Critics say Israel's privately held guns are vital to combating crime and terrorism, and that the government should focus instead on confiscating illegal weapons, which account for most of the deaths.

"The number of homicides carried out with these [licensed] weapons is a fraction of the overall homicides," said Lior Nedivi, a forensic expert and former police officer who recently founded a group to promote gun ownership. "If someone kills his wife with a vacuum cleaner, are we going to outlaw vacuum cleaners?"

At the Combat shooting range in Jerusalem, where licensees stock up on mirrored sunglasses and laser guides, shop manager Ronen Rabani says the government should increase the number of guns held by "good" citizens.

"I'm pro-gun-control, but they are going too far," he said. "Many of my customers have stopped terrorist attacks from becoming worse. And we never know when Palestinians

will start suicide attacks again. If a civilian with a gun had been in the bank [during the Beersheba attack], he might have stopped it."

But Amit does not expect strong political opposition to the new rules. "Most Israelis have served in the army, which might explain their lack of America-style enthusiasm for guns," he said. "Guns are understood to be dangerous and therefore should be restricted. It's a practical issue, not a political one."

Women's groups praise the effort, saying wives and girlfriends account for more than half the victims of shootings with licensed guns, mostly in incidents of domestic violence involving off-duty security guards.

"There are just too many guns," said Smadar Ben Natan, attorney and co-founder of Gun-Free Kitchen Tables, an advocacy group seeking reforms. "The security situation in Israel does not demand it anymore. When guns are in the home, they are more dangerous, to women in particular."

Ben Natan said the government should target private security guards, an industry that ballooned over the last 15 years. By some estimates, more handguns are held by security guards than by the entire Israeli police force.

She said guard jobs tend to be low-paying and generally attract immigrants who are poor and less educated.

But Pini Schiff, head of the Assn. of Security and Guard Cos., said private guards are better trained and supervised than individual gun holders.

He agreed that tighter rules were likely to be imposed, but said they should focus on private citizens.

"I'm the CEO of a security firm and I'm telling you we don't need so many guns," he said. "Half the people who have guns right now don't really need them. A gun is a risky toy."

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