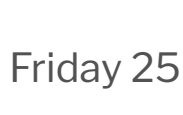


By **Miriam Scharf**



Friday 25 August 2023
Issue 2870

Long Reads

How Israel exports its terror

Two new books, *The Palestine Laboratory* and *Pegasus*, will arm Palestine solidarity activists



Two books expose Israel's lucrative military exports

Israel has turned all of Palestine into “an open-air prison” through its bureaucratic, military and surveillance machinery, according to a recent UN report. Antony Loewenstein’s new book *The Palestine Laboratory* looks at how Israel exports this expertise in surveillance and weaponry—“battle tested” in occupation—around the world.

He shows how the army, its elite Unit 8200, many private companies and tech “start-ups” cooperate to develop and market this equipment to whoever will buy it.

Israel uses **surveillance technology** in the occupied territories and inside its official borders, which Palestinians call ‘48 Palestine because it was all Palestine before Israel’s creation in 1948. The state gives out rewards for the number of photos that the police and army can take of Palestinians anywhere, any time.

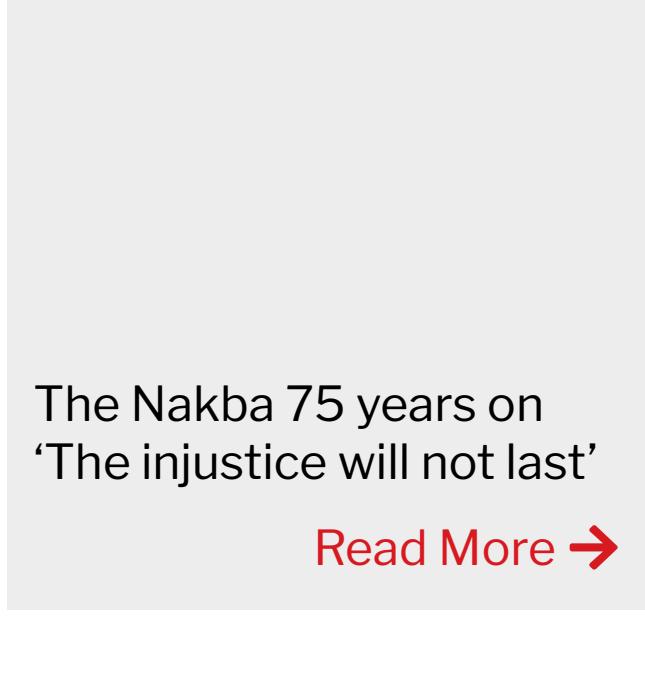
Israel uses them to build up a database where Palestinian lives are made transparent to the security services. Its aim is to completely control Palestinians and prevent any resistance to the continued take-over of their land.

Loewenstein describes Palestine as “Israel’s workshop where an occupied nation on its doorstep provides millions of subjugated people as a laboratory for the most precise and successful methods of domination”.

The horrors Loewenstein describe flows from the Israeli settler-colonial state’s foundations, and backed by its founding ideology Zionism. **The Nakba**—the violent, forced expulsion of over 750,000 Palestinians in 1948—created the basis for the setting up of Israel. Israel’s first prime minister Ben Gurion said, “The cleansing of Palestine remains the prime objective.”

In 1967 Israel occupied East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza. After the Oslo Accords in 1993 only 11 percent of historic Palestine was left—nominally managed by the Palestinian Authority, in reality ruled by Israel.

The *Palestine Laboratory* doesn’t explore the history of Israel. But Loewenstein does note, “Israel’s status as an ethnic nationalist state was there from its birth in 1948, but it’s been turbocharged in the 21st-century.”



Having stolen the land from Palestinians, the Israel state never planned to share it with them and was obsessed with maintaining a “demographic majority”. As Ben-Gurion said, “Only a state with at least 80 percent Jews is a viable and stable state.” So Israel keeps out large numbers as Palestinian refugees, denying their right to return. It ensures that Palestinians live under siege and war in Gaza, as second class citizens in ‘48 Palestine and under occupation in the West Bank.

Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and B’Tselem, among other bodies, have all said Israel is as **apartheid state**. And, millions of people around the world have marched in solidarity with the Palestinians in recent years.

But for many states, Israel is a model they want to emulate—whose methods of repression they want to buy. Loewenstein quotes a New York Times journalist saying, “Israel’s old-style ethnic nationalism and its headline treating the Palestinians, once an international liability, has become an asset”.

He cites many military analysts and experts. An investigation by writer Andrew Feinstein revealed that a video advertising **Israeli firm Elbit’s drones** featured a drone that killed a number of Palestinians, including children. Feinstein says other countries would not dare publicise their weapons in this way—but Israel doesn’t care. He quotes US military analyst Yossi Norman, “Israel incubates arms dealers, security contractors and technological wizards, worships them and turns them into untouchable heroes for the homeland”.

Loewenstein shows that for the Israeli government, questions over human rights have never been a consideration. Where questions are raised, spokespeople blatantly lie—or blatantly admit—and callously justify. He reminds us that Israel sold arms to apartheid South Africa and to Augusto Pinochet’s Chile. He shows it continues to sell to whoever will buy. One example of many in the book is the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Shipments from Israel included Uzi machine guns and hand grenades—both before and during the mass killings.

Loewenstein argues various developments in the 21st century have been good for the weapons and surveillance business—and helped turn Israel into an industry leader. **After 9/11**, the West fermented the idea that Muslims are terrorists. Covid sanctioned the monitoring of all citizens everywhere. Clamping down on migrants has become a priority for many governments. And the war in Ukraine has boosted global arms sales.

Israeli arms sales in 2021 were the highest on record, surging to 11.3 billion US dollars. Many sales are to brutal authoritarian regimes, such as Myanmar, and governments cracking down on Muslims such as China and India. But Loewenstein points out that Europe was the biggest recipient of these weapons.

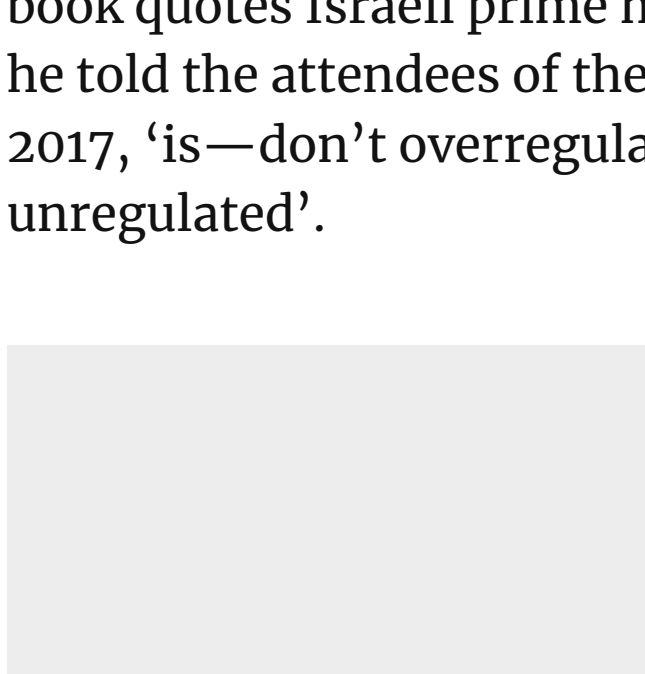
For all the book’s strengths, Loewenstein does not explain why **US imperialism gives Israel impunity**, no matter how many international laws it breaks or war crimes it commits. It’s because it is in the West’s interests to back Israel—an armed outpost of US imperialism in the Middle East. But he does provide valuable information exposing Israel’s exploitation of this impunity in its extensive arms trading.

Advances in technology have opened up the possibility of deeply intrusive surveillance of a marginalised minority, or even a civilian population as a whole. **The Pegasus spyware**, developed by Israeli company NSO, was at the top of the surveillance industry in 2016. Its illegal and alarming reach was exposed when the team led by Laurent Richard and Sandrine Rigaud—authors of new book *Pegasus*—fed the information to the world’s press in 2021.

Successfully deployed, *Pegasus* essentially owns everything on a mobile phone without the owner’s knowledge. Their concern is how this **encryption-piercing malware** “threatens the end of privacy, dignity and democracy”. The book describes the process of investigating and exposing the spyware that “was coveted by national security specialists around the globe”.

There is no doubt about the bravery and brilliance of the team who uncovered its illegal uses. They had a database of 50,000 phone numbers leaked by an unnamed source. This revealed a global pattern of abuse by NSO’s customers. While advertised as a way to stop criminals, Richard and Rigaud found it was used to target journalists, human rights lawyers and other activists and dissidents.

Richard and Rigaud abhor the fact that NSO, like many private companies, evades the rule of law. They write “The Israeli defence chieftains trusted NSO with sales to regimes like Saudi Arabia or the UAE or Morocco because they trusted NSO executives to abide by the one unwritten but inviolable rule: they kept their mouth shut about the identities of their end users.” The book quotes Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu. “‘The first don’t,’ he told the attendees of the Cybertech conference in Tel Aviv in January 2017, ‘is—don’t overregulate.’” And they show *Pegasus* is ‘remarkably unregulated’.



However, Richard and Rigaud are less alive to “legal” abuses when it comes to Israel. They actually provide and accept the Zionist narrative justifying the Israeli state’s need for endless “security” against its Arab neighbours. For them the context is, “constructing a new country’s defence” where “governments in the neighbourhood range from the cold and unfriendly to the hostile to the irrational and hateful”. “A few have attempted to destroy the Jewish safe haven by force of arms,” they

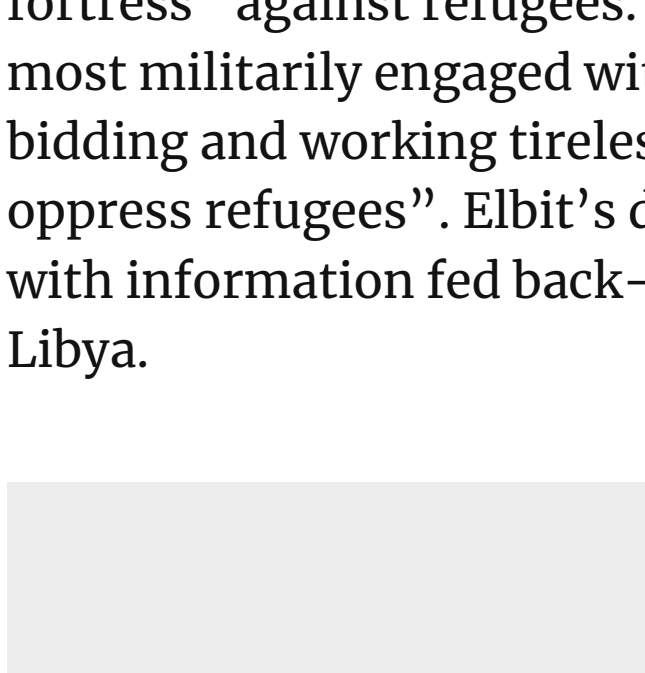
write.

The authors do not mention the Palestinians. They admire how Israel has built its successful cybersecurity industry, describing how these tech “brains” are selected early in the school system. And then, after serving in the military’s cyberintelligence units, they move on to private sector high-paying jobs—often teaming up with former army contacts. They explain Apple based their research and development centre in Israel to have access to this pool, and other tech giants followed.

The book shows *Pegasus*, like so much Israeli tech, was sold to regimes whatever their human rights record. Selling it to the Saudis led to NSO being implicated in the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Other bad press was bad for business. They note Cherie Blair was signed on in 2020 as a paid consultant to NSO to help “incorporate human rights considerations into NSO activities”.

Loewenstein shows many other private surveillance and weapons companies crossing red lines. This interplay of state and private actors makes it easier for Israel to distance itself from any responsibility when Israeli-based arms and surveillance are evidently abusive.

Another use of Israeli-based surveillance companies is in border control. Loewenstein is concerned with this. He details Israeli firms getting million dollar contracts with **EU border agency Frontex**, which is building a “digital fortress” against refugees. He notes that Greece is the European country most militarily engaged with Israel because Greece is “doing the EU’s bidding and working tirelessly to monitor, punish, isolate and violently oppress refugees”. Elbit’s drones locate migrant boats in the Mediterranean with information fed back—not to rescue people, but to return them to Libya.



Loewenstein wants Palestinian voices to be heard. Looking at social media, he says Palestinian voices of resistance, although severely and unjustly digitally censored, are more evident than in the past. That’s despite Facebook and other social media platforms’ algorithms being influenced by the pervasive Palestinian equals terrorist narrative, and their policy that deem criticism of Zionism as “hate speech”.

Unfortunately, the book’s conclusion is weak. “Israel and its supporters must make a choice between their commitment to Zionism and adherence to liberal values,” he says. At the time of writing this review, there are indeed huge divisions in the Israeli population—but they are over **how best to repress Palestinians**. Neither side is breaking with Zionism. There is no sign that either supports Palestinian liberation, a right to their land, to homes, schools, safety, or any of the freedoms that a democracy is meant to guarantee.

The *Palestine Laboratory* and *Pegasus* show how Israel is ready to supply the ruling classes with the tools to ruthlessly suppress dissent. We should use this knowledge in the fight for Palestinian freedom—which can come through a wider revolt against imperialism in the region, boosted by our solidarity here.

- **The Palestine Laboratory**: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World by Antony Loewenstein (Verso) £18.99
- **Pegasus**: The Story of the World’s Most Dangerous Spyware by Laurent Richard and Sandrine Rigaud (Macmillan) £20

TOPICS Arms, Imperialism, Israel, Military, Palestine

Sign up for our daily email update ‘Breakfast in Red’

Enter your email...

Sign Up

Get Socialist Worker updates
Sign up for Breakfast in Red



JOIN YOUR LOCAL SWP MEETING



Discuss socialist politics and local campaigns

Related News



Why we must back art boycott of Israeli state

Reviews & Culture

22 August 2023