# Israel Has Turned the Occupied Territories Into a Laboratory for State Terror

AN INTERVIEW WITH
ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN

Israel's decades-long occupation of Palestinian territories has given it a special know-how in imposing military control over civilians. Governments around the world admire its example — and are ever keener to import its repressive technologies.

A police officer keeps watch from an observation tower at the Gilboa Prison in northern Israel on September 6, 2021. (Jalaa Marey / AFP via Getty Images)

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Wars and occupations have long been testing grounds for technology, science, and surveillance. In a domain mostly controlled by the oppressor, subject populations are sure to find ingenious ways to rise up — but their captors also find new ways to subjugate them. This is the reality in the occupied Palestinian territories, where Israel has maintained the longest occupation in modern times — fifty-six years and counting.

The Israeli state — and its closely aligned military-industrial complex — writes its own rule book. Its soldiers watch as extremist Jewish settlers launch pogroms against Palestinians in the West Bank. Over one thousand Palestinians are held in indefinite detention without charge in Israeli jails.

Palestinian access to water is used as "a potent state-controlled weapon for the settler movement." Meanwhile, Israeli arms companies promote their weapons with real footage in which Palestinian children are left injured.

But in the court of international opinion, the tide is turning against Israel. In May, the United Nations special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories denounced the "apartheid" system over which "colonial power" Israel rules Palestinians. Tens of millions of dollars are sent from the United States by registered charities to bankroll illegal settlements in the occupied West Bank, but the New York State Assembly will soon consider a bill that would prevent the tax-deductible practice.

As journalist, author, and filmmaker Antony Loewenstein writes in his latest book, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World*, this permanent occupation has allowed Israel to "perfect the architecture of control" through weaponry, surveillance, and other means. He told *Jacobin*'s Mattha Busby how Israel is exporting this technology of death to democracies and despots around the world, clad with its ethno-nationalist ideology.

**MATTHA BUSBY** In the book, you note that the occupation of the Palestinian territories has allowed Israel to perfect the architecture of control through various means, and that it is effectively exporting these methods in the form of weapons and tech sales, along with training and advice. Why is it so important to raise these issues today?

**ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN** I've been visiting Palestine since 2005, reporting regularly from the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel, and I lived in East Jerusalem between 2016 and 2020. I've written two books about the conflict and yet over the past five or so years I started seeing so much more evidence of Israeli surveillance tech being spread around the world. Israel's brutal, deepening occupation is now the longest in modern times. But what Israel has done very cleverly, from its perspective, is to use the Palestinians as guinea pigs to test new methods of control and repression. So I'm talking about everything from so-called smart walls, to drones, to weapons, to spyware. The Israeli companies that are selling this equipment say that it's been "battle-tested" on Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and elsewhere.

The majority of that technology is increasingly sold around the world by Israeli companies that are very, very close to the Israeli state. The occupation is exportable, and the tools that are used to maintain it are increasingly found in many other countries. The bottom line is that countless governments, both democracies and dictatorships, use Pegasus, the most sophisticated spyware (deployed on everyone from Amazon founder Jeff Bezos to the late Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi), through which people can get access to your phone, and your information can be used, saved, and stored. Your phone and camera can be turned on, and essentially your phone becomes a surveillance tool. Beyond Pegasus, there are many other Israeli spyware companies operating today: facial recognition companies, biometric firms, and repression tech.

**MATTHA BUSBY** How do you know you're not being surveilled?




**ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN** The sad reality is that there's no way to know if your phone has been hacked by Pegasus or any other spyware. Only a forensics team can determine if every detail of your life, including photos and sexting messages, have been compromised and viewed by others. So, beware! In reality, there's no way to be 100 percent safe when using a mobile phone or any form of digital communication. Everything is hackable. Some journalists joke that the safest way to communicate with a source is by meeting in a field with no communication devices nearby. For most people, though, pushing for greater encryption on our devices is one way to try and ensure safe communication.

**MATTHA BUSBY** How do Israel's actions lead other states to feel more legitimized in their own actions against oppressed communities?

**ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN** I don't think, for example, that Mexico is buying Israeli hacking tools because it wants to be an ethno-nationalist state. It wants to buy these tools because they're effective in spying on dissidents and human rights workers. But in other countries like India, there's a much more ideological affinity. Of course, India is not acting brutally in Kashmir because of Israel. But they have an intimate relationship due to an affinity: ethno-nationalists stick together. India under Modi wants to create a Hindu fundamentalist state where Muslims are discriminated against, as they already are today; there's mass violence against Muslims, pogroms, an attempt in Kashmir to bring in many more Hindus. As Indian officials have said: akin to what Israel is doing in the West Bank, bringing in lots of Jews to settle the land. They're inspiring each other and it very much reminds me of how Israel was behaving during apartheid South Africa, working together and sharing an ideological bond.

> "Hungary's top leadership is openly antisemitic, but Israel doesn't care. Why? Because these leaders see an ideological alignment."

Then there's the idea that people on the far right, who are often neo-Nazis, admire a Jewish state. On the face of it, this seems absurd. Of course, they don't like Jews, but what they see is this proud nation that has no care for human rights and is simply promoting and deepening an unapologetic, Jewish supremacist state. They want to create the same thing in their own countries: a hard-line, Christian majority state.

It also makes perfect sense that Israel is increasingly close to far-right countries like Hungary, which is only quasi-democratic. Its top leadership is openly antisemitic, but Israel doesn't care. Why? Because these leaders see an ideological alignment. That, to me as a Jew, is totally outrageous, dangerous, and increases genuine antisemitism, when states like Israel collude with open antisemites.

**MATTHA BUSBY** One thing that really struck me in the book is how the chief censor of the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), Ariella Ben-Avraham — who was responsible for the unit that vets all stories related to foreign affairs and security prepublication — went to work for the rogue cyber-surveillance company NSO Group.

**ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN** NSO Group is nominally a private company, but it's essentially an arm of the Israeli state. Its most infamous tool is Pegasus. This is really only the tip of the iceberg. Many other companies are now doing exactly the same thing: zero-click hacking into your smartphone. In the last few years, NSO has received a lot of bad press and been sanctioned by the Biden administration (though parts of the US security state still use Israeli spyware). For years, Israel used NSO as a diplomatic tool: Netanyahu would go to a certain, often repressive country and say, we want relations with you, or better relations, and dangle spyware or surveillance tech as a carrot.

**MATTHA BUSBY** And how does this technology relate to the occupation of the Palestinian territories?

**ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN** The people behind NSO Group and many other weapons, spyware, or intelligence tech firms are mostly all IDF veterans. They've been part of something called Unit 8200, which is basically the surveillance and intelligence-gathering unit. These are people who have spent years and years surveilling Palestinians. The tools they create have been used against Palestinians in Palestine: there's evidence from the last few years that it was used on key human rights activists in Palestine itself, and on some Israelis in Israel. The occupation always comes home eventually. Unit 8200 is like a production line; it's basically training and encouraging individuals to surveil Palestinians. But the longer-term goal is also to create individuals who want to build the next generation of high-tech surveillance. Once they leave the military, they then develop these companies, whether it's a weapon, drone, spyware, or hacking tools, and they remain close to the Israeli government. This means that the Israeli government can use those tools as a diplomatic weapon or threat.

**MATTHA BUSBY** You've ruffled feathers before. This caused you to be subjected to a "relentless vilification campaign" over your best-selling first book from 2006, My Israel Question, on the global Israel lobby and the diaspora's complicity in the Israeli occupation. And for a question you asked in Jerusalem in 2016 to a senior Israeli minister, Yair Lapid, about how he felt about Israel potentially becoming a pariah in years to come in the footsteps of apartheid South Africa — a question that sparked calls for your deportation from Israel. Does this not all bother you?

**ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN** Hopefully, my new book will receive a lot of interest. Some good; I'm sure some bad, which is the nature of media coverage of Palestine. In certain media circles in the West there is still an uncomfortableness, or awkwardness, about covering Palestine, regardless of how extreme Israeli politics become, how horrendous the occupation is, or how many Palestinians are killed. This is for two reasons. The Israel lobby is very powerful in these countries, and they attack media outlets for being critical of Israel. And there is still what I would call a liberal Zionist protection racket going on in the West to protect the image of Israel, despite it being labeled an apartheid state by the world's leading human rights organizations. Many people have spent decades loving and protecting Israel; their life's work is to support Israel. But that image is starting to crumble, because Israel itself is becoming so far right and fascistic. And public opinion is shifting toward Palestine in many Western states.

**MATTHA BUSBY** Israel is also one of the top ten exporters of arms and weaponry, which is particularly remarkable since it is about the ninety-first most populous country, with ten million people (fifteen million people under its control, if the occupied West Bank and Gaza are included). How did this happen?

**ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN** Decades of occupation. Israel's moral soul is deformed, because you can't occupy a people for over half a century and not become compromised in all manners of life.

9/11 really turbocharged the arms industry in Israel, because the Jewish state said to the world, "We've been fighting this war on terror for our whole existence, come and learn from us. This is how you do it." You've had huge numbers of American police officers coming to Israel, hanging out with Israeli police, seeing what they're doing, learning tactics; not that the American police need to learn racism from Israel, let's be clear about that. But to choose to go to Israel, of all nations, to learn the so-called best tactics to fight a war on terror is concerning. You also had lots of Indian soldiers going to Israel in the last twenty years, including ones that are operating in Kashmir, learning from Israeli forces. A friend of mine, the writer Jeff Halper, calls this "Globalized Palestine"; what's happening in Palestine is not staying there.

> "Israel's moral soul is deformed, because you can't occupy a people for over half a century and not become compromised in all manners of life."

**MATTHA BUSBY** Are most of these weapons sold to countries who are allied or otherwise have some sort of affinity with Israel?

**ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN** Gross human rights abuses aren't an impediment to Israeli arms sales. The Jewish state has sold weapons to the junta in Myanmar and exported arms to the government in Rwanda during the 1994 genocide. The hyper-militarized society that Israel has created is appalling and racist — but it's very attractive to a lot of countries. One major example is the US-Mexico border, or on Europe's borders monitoring refugees in the Mediterranean who are left to drown by EU border force Frontex. Russia's war against Ukraine has also revealed the European desire for Israel's missile defense shields, tested in countless Israeli wars against Gaza.

Key surveillance equipment on the US-Mexico border is Israeli. It's made by Elbit, which is Israel's biggest defense company. There are huge surveillance towers all along the border. That's not the only equipment that the United States uses, but it's vital infrastructure. And how did that contract happen? Because Elbit says: "We achieved so much in Palestine, we can do the same for you, America, on your border." The occupation is globalized and bleeds into many other areas around the world.

Israel has perfected the art of indefinite detention for Palestinians. There are currently over one thousand behind bars without charge, constant demolitions of Palestinian houses (a tactic now used by the Indian authorities), and a range of other high-tech repression including facial recognition and biometric tools. These are all used and tested in Palestine, and many Israeli companies then sell them to nations across the globe. The occupation is highly exportable.

**MATTHA BUSBY** What's the future of global surveillance, and how does Israeli tech fit into it?

**ANTONY LOEWENSTEIN** We're entering an age where there's going to be far more refugees globally, including climate refugees. A lot of countries are thinking about how they're going to "protect" themselves. The border-industrial complex is real and worsening. Israel is going to benefit from this fear. Smart walls, high-tech repression, spyware, drones. It's all there. Israel is currently the tenth-biggest arms dealer in the world. Growing global instability will likely benefit its defense sector. As a Jew, this is an awful legacy for a Jewish state that was born in the ashes of the Holocaust.

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