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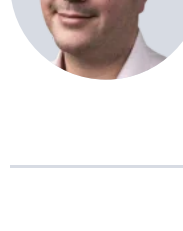
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The book interrogating Israel's military-industrial complex



Michael Ruffles
June 23, 2023 – 4:00pm

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The Palestine Laboratory

Antony Loewenstein

Scribe, \$55

Antony Loewenstein has brought a book to a gunfight, taking on Israel's enormous and expanding military-industrial complex and invasive cyber spy operations with the low-tech tool of words on paper.

In the right hands, there's nothing more powerful or incendiary than words and Loewenstein mounts a full-scale attack. He accuses Israel of not only running an apartheid state but profiting from the tools used to oppress millions, and selling them to some of the world's more murderous despots and least scrupulous governments.



Antony Loewenstein's new book investigates how Israel exports its defence and surveillance technology. WOLTER PEETERS

The scope of the argument is set out early: "Palestine is 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."

What follows is a polemic traversing Israel's history from its establishment in 1948, expansion in the Six-Day War of 1967, the post-September 11, 2001 war on terror through to today's cyber cold war. Along the way it explores the clandestine operations of Israeli intelligence's Unit 8200 and opaque security companies such as NSO Group and Black Cube, and sales of hardware, surveillance technology and know-how from Saudi Arabia to Myanmar and beyond.

It synthesises Loewenstein's own work and also takes advantage of once-secret documents, archives and growing media scrutiny both within Israel and from outside.

Examining these issues for 20 years has earned him the trust of insiders and activists alike, but also no shortage of criticism and enemies in the form of Israel's fiercest defenders. It's not an entry-level book, as it assumes a level of knowledge of and interest in Israeli history and global affairs, but it does stand on its own as an eye-opening account of a shadowy world.



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Many of his critics will no doubt take umbrage at the thesis and the rhetoric, but Loewenstein is adamant that believing in Israel's right to exist need not be at odds with supporting the human rights of Palestinians. Public perception of Israel has shifted in recent decades, meaning it might find a more receptive audience than his earlier works.

"A historical reckoning of Israel's involvement with some of the 20th and 21st centuries' most depraved regimes is required," he writes. "It's a history that's rarely discussed in the public sphere, and many of its details remain hidden in Israeli archives."

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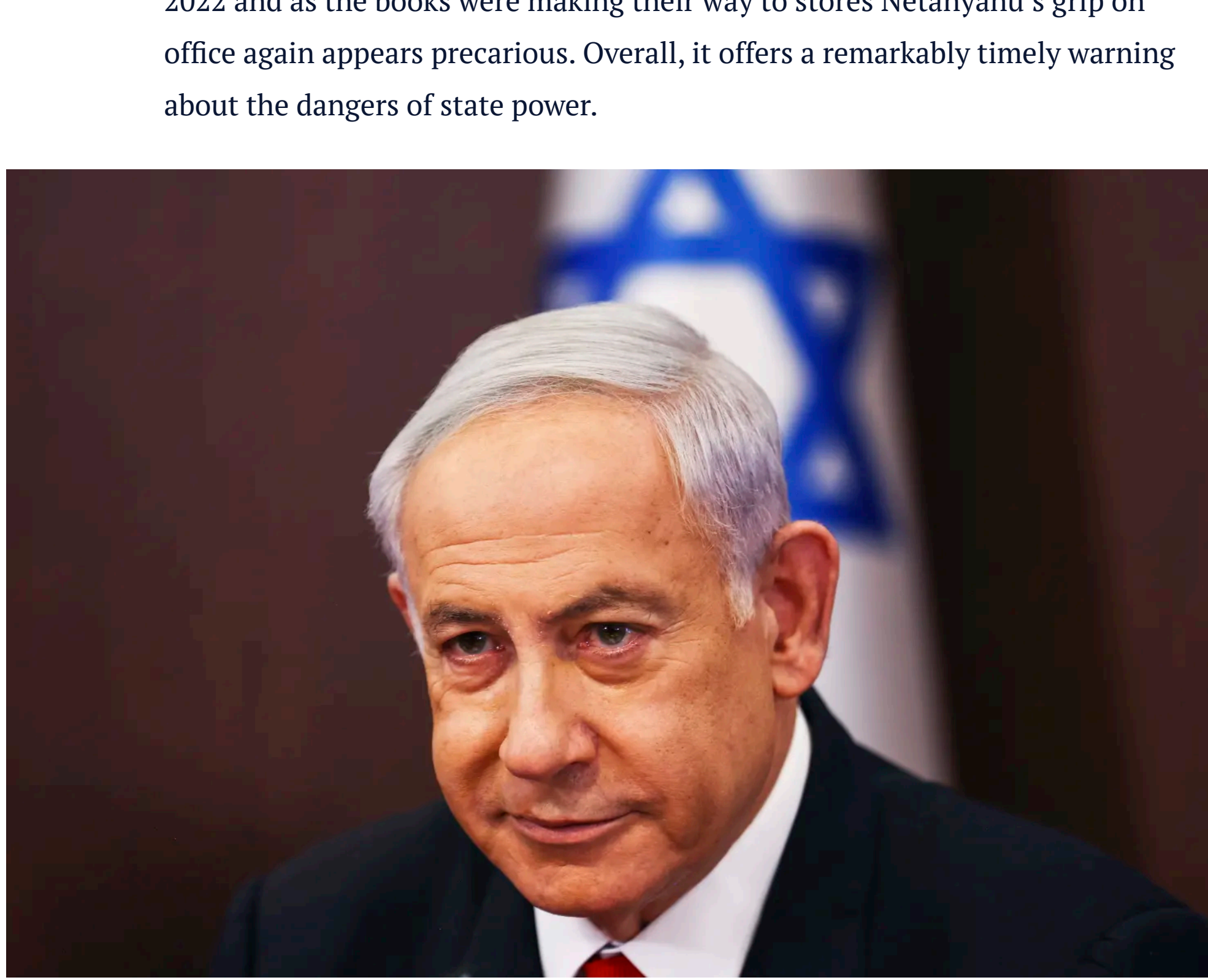
His research shows that from apartheid South Africa to antisemitic regimes in South America, Israeli governments have been willing to deal with ethnonationalists, autocrats and demagogues for various diplomatic and profit motives. A turning point was the Six-Day War, but Loewenstein argues the trend continues to this day.

He traces it to the exportation of NSO Group's Pegasus spyware, sold from Azerbaijan to Rwanda and used against Finnish diplomats and French President Emmanuel Macron. Most notoriously, the software was used to target dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi before he was butchered in Saudi Arabia's consulate in Istanbul.

The details are exhaustive and at times exhausting, although it is difficult to imagine how else to treat such topics as war, espionage, the deployment of drones against asylum seekers in the Mediterranean, and the abuses inflicted on the Rohingya in Myanmar or the Uyghur in China. Ever-present, too, is the plight of the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank.

The Palestine Laboratory is an important and powerful book, yet not a perfect one. Opposing viewpoints get little oxygen and the argument sometimes feels too blunt. Now and then the fog of facts obscures the point being made: details or nuggets will occasionally be spliced together from different decades, begging for a dollop of context or analysis. Passages like these seem less a product of cherry-picking than the result of a desire to have as much ammunition as possible for the broader argument; the idea has simmered for 20 years, and thoughts at times bubble over.

There is a commendable amount of new and recent material, yet a book can never move as fast as the news. There are references to Benjamin Netanyahu as former prime minister: as the conclusion notes, he returned to power in late 2022 and as the books were making their way to stores Netanyahu's grip on office again appears precarious. Overall, it offers a remarkably timely warning about the dangers of state power.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is once again in office. REUTERS

The most effective parts are the most human, where Loewenstein's on-the-ground reporting and descriptions of people come to the fore. The work required to unearth and piece together so much material is also impressive. Loewenstein appears determined to fire every shot he has. Not all hit their mark precisely, but readers will be left with no doubt about what he is aiming at and why.

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Michael Ruffles is the chief sub-editor of The Sydney Morning Herald. [Connect via email.](#)

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