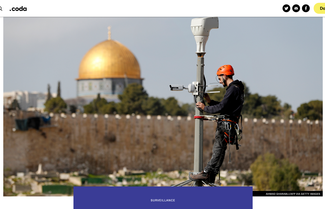

NOKIA SIEMENS LAWFUL INTERCEPT

SURVEILLANCE

Israel uses Palestine as a petri dish to test spyware

Journalist Antony Loewenstein discusses how Israel surveillance tech is tested in Palestine before being exported across the world

BY FRANKIE VETCH · 21 JUNE 2021 · Q&A

Israel is one of the world's biggest suppliers of surveillance technology. In defense companies provide spyware to everyone, from autocrats in Saudi Arabia to dictatorships in the European Union. It is an Israeli company that the widow of Washington Post columnist Jamal Khashoggi is suing for the hacking of her phone in the months leading up to her husband's murder in the Saudi Arabian embassy in Istanbul.

While Israeli companies are perhaps the most high-profile purveyors of spyware, several companies headquartered in the United States and in Europe also sell surveillance technology. And persistent regulatory inconsistencies and blindspots suggest that there is still considerable reluctance, globally, to legislate to prevent the misuse of such technology. In Europe, this week, countries including Germany and the Netherlands have been arguing for the need to install spyware to surveil journalists if security agencies deem it necessary.

As governments vacillate over regulation, human rights abuses continue. Last month, Israel was reported to be using facial recognition technology software called Red Wolf to deliberately and exclusively track Palestinians. Journalist Antony Loewenstein was based for several years in East Jerusalem. In his new book, "The Palestine Laboratory," he explores how Israel has turned Palestine into a testing ground for surveillance tools that Israeli companies then export to governments around the world. I spoke with Loewenstein, who lives in Australia, over the phone.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

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When did the privatization of the Israeli defense industry begin and why was that an important moment?

For the first decade of Israel's existence after 1948, it was all state run. The Six-Day War [in 1967], when Israel, in six days, took control of the West Bank and Gaza and East Jerusalem, really accelerated the defense industry. By the 1970s, there was a fairly healthy private Israeli arms industry. Some of the companies that had been public before were now private. But it's important to remember that both in the past, and also now, with organizations like NSO Group, most of these companies are private in name only. They are arms of the state.

They are used by the state to forward and advance their diplomatic aims. In the last 10 or so years, Benjamin Netanyahu, the prime minister, and Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, have gone around the world to countries that are not friends with Israel and have held out Israeli spyware as a carrot. Basically, Israel is saying, 'If you are friends with us, if you help us, if you join with us in the U.N. in certain ways, if you don't criticize us so much, we will sell you this unbelievably effective spyware.' And since the Russian invasion of Ukraine, there has been huge numbers of European countries and others desperately coming to Israel, wanting defense equipment to protect themselves from any potential Russian attack.

How has Israel's tech industry changed borders across the world?

Maybe the most prominent example, although not particularly well known, is the Israeli surveillance towers on the U.S.-Mexico border. They were installed a number of years ago, and it doesn't make much of a difference whether it's a Democrat or a Republican in the White House. In fact, Biden is accelerating this technological border, so to speak, and the company that America has used is Elbit, which is Israel's biggest defense company. They have done a lot of work in the West Bank and across the Israel-Gaza border. And the reason the U.S. used Elbit as a contractor was because they liked what Elbit was doing in Palestine. I mean, the company promotes itself as being 'successful' in Palestine.

Does this border technology change the willingness of states to commit violent acts?

I don't think necessarily violence becomes less likely. But I think in some contexts, Israeli surveillance tech, what you see being tested on Palestinians, makes it far easier for regimes to not go down the path of killing people en masse. Instead, they just massively surveil their populations, which allows them to get all the information they potentially need without the need for the bad images, so to speak, of mass violence. However, I also think that with an almost inevitable surge in climate refugees and with global migration at its largest since World War II, a lot of nations will actually revert to extreme violence on their borders.

You can see what the EU has been doing in the last few years with the assistance of Israeli drones, unarmed drones. The EU has made the decision with Frontex, their border — so-called — security, to allow the vast majority of brown or black bodies on boats to drown. That's a conscious political decision. They don't feel that way about Ukrainian refugees. And just for the record, I think all people should be welcomed. But the European Union does not see it that way. And the idea that you could possibly in years to come have armed drones hovering over the Mediterranean, firing on boats, shooting boats out of the water, I think is very conceivable.

Does Israel's defense industry pose a threat to its allies?

It does. To me, the relationship between Israel and the U.S. is like an abusive relationship. On the face of it, very close. I think they love each other. They're expressing admiration for each other all the time. Without the financial, diplomatic and military support from the U.S., Israel would arguably not exist. And yet, according to the most accurate figure that I could find, every single day the NSA, America's leading intelligence agency and the biggest intelligence agency in the world, has roughly 400 Hebrew speakers spying on Israel. Spying on their best friend. And rest assured, that works in reverse as well.

They don't really trust each other. More importantly, in the last few years, the Biden administration has talked about trying to curtail the power of Israeli spyware. A year and a half ago, they sanctioned NSO Group, the company behind Pegasus. A lot of the media saying, 'Oh, this is fantastic, the White House is now taking spyware seriously.' But I think that's misunderstanding the issue. America doesn't want competition. They don't want a real challenge to their dominance in spyware. They're pissed off that Israeli spyware, which has been sold to dozens and dozens of countries around the world, threatens their hegemony.

You wrote in the book about how the Covid pandemic has been a wake up call for Israelis to how they, too, are vulnerable to surveillance.

For many Israeli Jews, for many years, all the surveillance was happening over there. It was happening to Palestinians in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Israeli Jews didn't really feel it themselves. They were being sanitized, but they were either unaware of it or didn't seem to care. During the pandemic, Israel had lockdowns like a lot of other countries. A lot of Israel's biggest defense companies — Elbit and NSO Group — pivoted to developing various tools to supposedly fight the pandemic. But it was still mass surveillance, mass monitoring, which they now used within Israel itself.

For the first time, a lot of Israeli Jews discovered that they themselves were being monitored, that their phones had been hacked. Eventually, the occupation always comes home. Slowly, Israeli Jews are waking up to the reality that what's happening literally down the road in Palestine will inevitably bleed back into their own world.

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