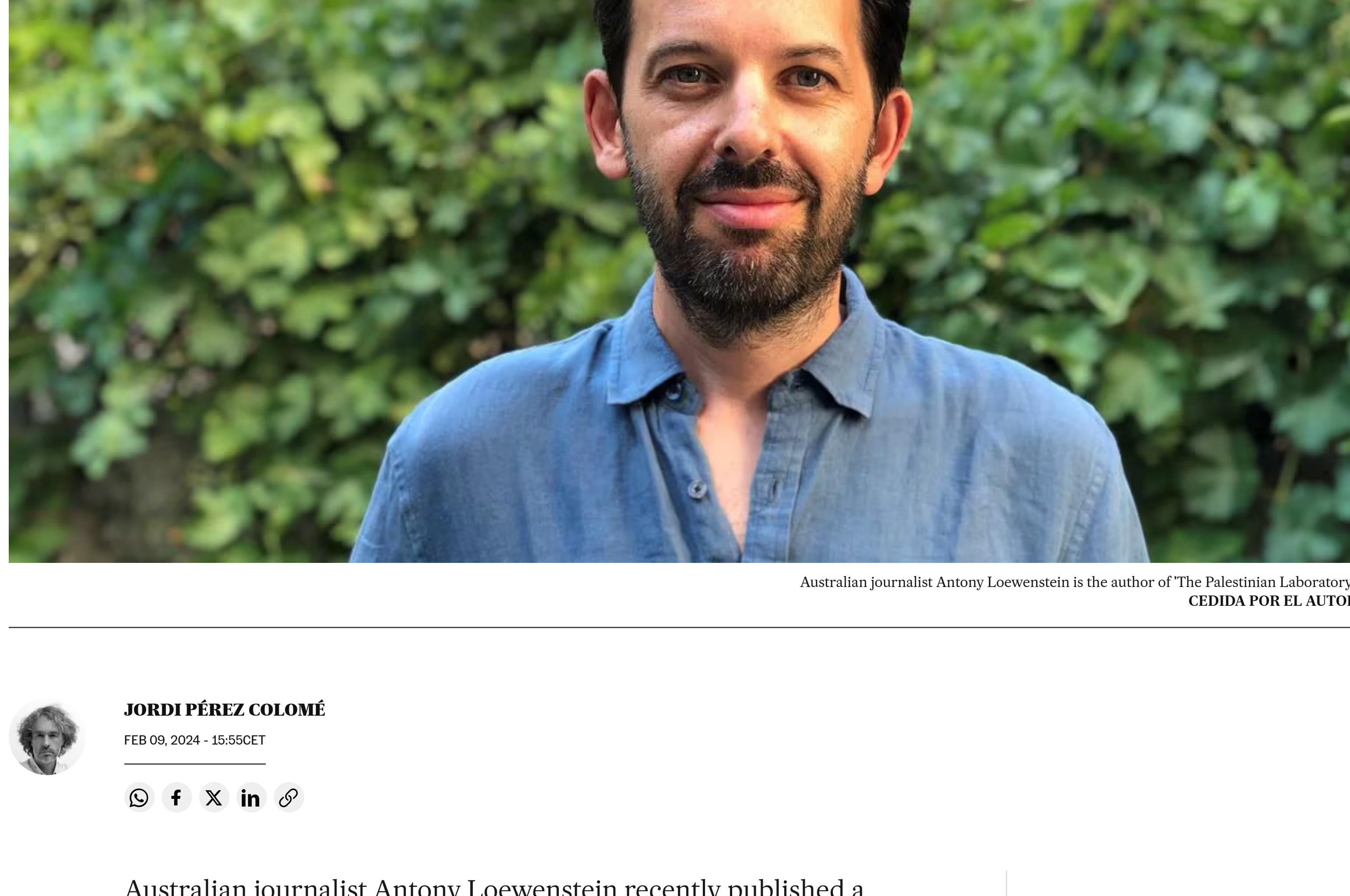


Technology

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Journalist Antony Loewenstein: 'Israel uses apps that make killing Palestinians as easy as ordering pizza'

A new book describes the technology used against Palestinians and their alleged ineffectiveness against the October 7 Hamas attack



Australian journalist Antony Loewenstein is the author of 'The Palestine Laboratory: CEDIDA POR EL AUTOR



JORDI PÉREZ COLOMÉ FEB 09, 2024 - 15:05 CET

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Australian journalist Antony Loewenstein recently published a book titled 'The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World' (Verso Books, 2023).

In his book, Loewenstein describes biometric tools used by Israel and its soldiers to create a comprehensive database of nearly every Palestinian citizen. He also describes the cameras Israeli police use to identify people covering their faces with traditional Palestinian keffiyeh scarves, and smartphone apps that facilitate killing.

Question. One argument in your book suggests that Israel's global leadership in cyber weapons is closely tied to the occupied territories.

Answer. Absolutely. It's hard to imagine Israel as a world leader in this area without the occupation of Palestinian territories. Much like the United States, which gained significant war experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. And also in Ukraine, although its troops aren't directly engaged in combat.

Q. According to a source in the book, an increasing number of countries believe that Israel's control over the Palestinians is not as effective as they thought. Is this what we saw three months ago with the Hamas attack on October 7?

A. My book came out in May last year. I put that in there because it was almost like a dissenting view of my thesis. But I maintain that October 7 did not change that. The barbaric Hamas massacre was an Israeli military and political intelligence catastrophe. We've seen a few things unfold over the last four or five months. First, there is little interest on Israel's part for any introspection about why its intelligence failed, even though there's a war going on. Second, new products for cyberwar continue to be tested in Gaza for sale abroad.

Q. Won't the failure of October 7 affect Israeli sales of these products?

A. So far, there is no indication that it will. Many European nations were eager to acquire Israeli surveillance technology before October 7, after Russia invaded Ukraine. In September last year, Israel sealed its largest arms sale to Germany for \$3.5 billion. Despite the events of October 7, my experience suggests that the Israeli arms and intelligence industry will thrive. It may seem counterintuitive, ridiculous and short-term, but we should not underestimate the number of countries that seek to show solidarity with Israel and align themselves with a war-on-terror mentality. An analogy would be 9/11 in the United States. Despite being the largest intelligence failure in American history, it had zero impact on the American defense industry. In fact, it had the opposite effect.

Q. Exactly what type of Israeli technology failed on October 7?

A. Several types, both low tech and high tech. As for low tech, Israel stopped monitoring Hamas walkie-talkies a year before October 7, considering it unimportant and a waste of time. Despite spending billions to upgrade the fence around Gaza, it remained vulnerable to the low-tech drones used by Hamas. But the main intelligence failure on October 7 was not due to technology, but rather an ideological unwillingness to imagine that Hamas was capable of such an attack. The deterioration of Israel's human intelligence and reliance on its technological supremacy proved to be a tragic mistake. Most of the coverage in the last five months has focused on what technology failed, and I think that's a mistake.

Q. According to the book, Israel allegedly uses sales of Pegasus [surveillance software] to gain diplomatic favor. But Spain bought and uses Pegasus, and is often sympathetic towards the Palestinians.

A. Spain is an exception. Pegasus is considered somewhat outdated technology today. However, it is still widely used in various countries, ranging from Greece to Togo, from India to Bangladesh. I should note that not every country in the U.N. always aligns with Israel. Over the past decade, Israel has successfully wagered that these nations would acquire high-tech surveillance technology with no real political cost to Israel. Zero cost, actually.

Q. If Pegasus is considered outdated technology and its creator, the NSO group, were to go out of business tomorrow, what would happen?

A. Nothing. All its clients would go to other companies. There are other Israeli firms in that space with less negative publicity. But they do the same thing as NSO.

Q. There are also companies like NSO in other countries.

A. Yes, no doubt. The appeal of what Israeli firms are selling is not just the technology, but of the ideology that dresses it up. Israel is dressing their technology up with a mantra that says we have successfully controlled a population with these tools for over 50 years. October 7 does challenge some of that, but that's what they've been saying for years and they're going to continue saying that.

Q. In your book, you quote a well-known Israeli journalist — Ronen Bergman — who rejects your thesis. He claims to be unaware of any instances where Israeli companies use the occupied territories to increase weapons sales.

A. I was utterly baffled by his quote, especially considering his work. I interviewed him and included it in the book for readers to see. It's just not true. It may seem like I'm making this up, but I said to him, 'What are you talking about? The evidence is overwhelming.' There are videos and marketing materials. So, you have to ask him. I honestly don't understand his reasoning. I sense he's very concerned about the Israel's image. He's a journalist, but he's also very keen on maintaining what he thinks is a noble image of Israel. The idea that Israel would be selling weapons and surveillance technology, and has been testing weapons, is dirty — it's a bad look. I'm only guessing he's either in denial or he doesn't want to admit it publicly.



"Israel is dressing their technology up with a mantra that says we have successfully controlled a population with these tools for over 50 years."

Q. Perhaps everyone assumes that these weapons can be used against the Palestinians so Israel doesn't have to use that sales pitch.

A. But they do. There is a movie called 'The Lab', made in 2013, which includes footage of foreign military leaders observing weapons tests. I'm not making this up. The evidence is overwhelming.

Q. In the book, you quote someone saying that killing a Palestinian is as easy as ordering a pizza online. What's he talking about?

A. It's a smartphone app, but obviously not one you and I use. In my book, I emphasize the central role played by the dehumanization of Palestinians in the Palestine laboratory. It can only operate if Palestinians are not viewed as equal citizens. When a significant number of Palestinians are viewed as potential terrorist threats, any app that can be easily used to harm them is seen as a rational means of self-protection. You're protecting Jews who are building a state from the ashes of the Holocaust. TikTok videos show Israeli soldiers in Gaza humiliating Palestinians, tying them up, and demolishing their homes, violating international law. These actions stem from a belief in the dehumanization of Palestinians. It is true that parts of Palestinian society have become radicalized, but it's equally important to acknowledge the radicalization within Israeli society. I say this as someone who is Jewish. You cannot occupy a people for over half a century and not become deformed as a society.

Q. The book says that Israel monitors all Palestinians regardless of age, location or intention. What do you mean?

A. It's like what the NSA [National Security Agency] does in the U.S. I'm not suggesting that every American is being watched every day. What I mean is that Unit 8200 — the NSA equivalent in Israel — basically monitors, controls and collects information on all calls and emails that Palestinians make within Palestine. It doesn't mean they're reading all of it. No one has the computing power to read it all.

Q. Is this information used to blackmail Palestinians into becoming informants?

A. Very much so. It's very common for Israel to try to blackmail Palestinians when they leave [the enclaves] for school or to get medical care. I'm not saying that every Palestinian accepts that role — of course they don't. But we don't know how many Palestinians do. The information they use for blackmail comes from surveillance. They search for weaknesses in the Palestinians — a love affair, an out-of-wedlock child. It's quite a conservative society. Since October 7, there have been huge numbers of Israeli government ministers speaking openly in the Knesset [Parliament] about how important it is for Israel to maintain its massive network of informants in Gaza. What's not often mentioned is how they get these informants. So you have a situation where the entire Palestinian population — roughly 5 million — is monitored 24/7.

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