

# Right and power

Israel is profiting financially and extending its global technological influence in response to the October 7 massacre, says investigative journalist Antony Loewenstein. **BY PETER BALE**

Israel may increasingly be seen as a pariah state over its obliteration of the Gaza Strip as a viable place for its two million Palestinian population to live, but the six-month campaign has been a showcase for the Israeli defence and surveillance industry.

The October 7 Hamas atrocities exposed failings of military intelligence and political tactics, but the war in Gaza and the crackdown on dissent in the West Bank have demonstrated the ruthless superiority of Israeli military prowess, according to the author of an award-winning study of an industry he argues is built around repression.

Antony Loewenstein released *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World* a few months before the devastating Hamas attacks, in which more than 1200 people were killed and about 250 were taken hostage – jolting Israel’s sense of confidence and provoking a furious counter-attack that has killed more than 33,000.

The *Listener* (July 22) interviewed Loewenstein ahead of his NZ visit to promote the book, a time when few would have expected Hamas to be able to launch such a devastating raid. Six months on from the October 7 attacks, and with the Israeli scorched-earth response ongoing, it seemed timely to talk again to Loewenstein.

His thesis is that repressive states crave the battle-proven defence and surveillance technology Israel has deployed in Gaza.

“On the face of it, October 7 shows Israel’s multi-billion-dollar intelligence

military apparatus failed,” he says. “Israel was caught asleep at the wheel, the military disappeared for hours, the wall, the surveillance, all disappeared or was knocked out by Hamas very effectively.

“You would think that would diminish the image of Israel as a technical marvel. I would argue that in fact the opposite is happening.”

Against the background of entire suburbs being flattened by Israeli munitions, and seemingly every movement of Palestinians – would-be guerrillas and civilians alike – tracked by drones and sensors, personal direct text messages being monitored and the exploration and destruction of the Hamas tunnel network, Israeli defence companies have continued to exhibit at major arms shows and sell their technology.

“Israel has spent the past six months testing and showing huge amounts of new weapons: drones, quadcopters, surveillance tech and various other equipment in Gaza,” says Loewenstein. “It’s too early to know exactly who’s buying that equipment. We do know, in the past six months, for example, that Israel has had a large presence at arms fairs.”

## STOCKS SOAR

Although some technology failed on October 7, the incursion was mostly seen as a governmental and intelligence failure to which the answer might be more gear.

“The companies that have deployed the

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**Unrelenting: More than 33,000 people have been killed in Gaza since the Israeli bombardments began.**





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# Middle East

technology and other surveillance tech on the border that failed haven't taken a step back. If anything, they've simply, very clinically, said, 'Let's not look at the past. Let's focus on the fact that we are now the saviours of Israel.' In other words, 'You need us to protect Israel.'"

The main publicly listed Israeli defence companies – IAI, Elbit, Rafael Advanced Defense Systems – have done record business since the Russian invasion of Ukraine two years ago and their stock prices have generally performed strongly this year.

## GLOBAL INTEREST

Life for Loewenstein has become more intense, as it has for many Jews in the diaspora, as well as in Israel. His book was somehow even more relevant and people worldwide wanted to know more about the failure of Israeli intelligence represented by the October 7 massacre and the implications of the devastating response.

"It's been very, very difficult. My book came out before October 7 and was doing pretty well. I got a lot of attention. Then October 7 happened and it's just exploded in ways that I could never have imagined. I wake up every day to interview requests from every corner of the globe."

The Sydney-based Loewenstein was already no stranger to attacks from fellow Jews and come-what-may backers of Israel. His journalism has been highly critical of the Israeli state and what he sees as decades of repression of Palestinians. His 2007 book, *My Israel Question*, was a searing indictment of Zionism and his rejection of it as a Jew.

He says Israel is profiting financially and in regional and global influence by demonstrating its military effectiveness and the depth of its monitoring capabilities. Far from failing on October 7 – a failing that may land on the military and not its equipment – Israel is exploiting the power of its weaponry deployed in Gaza.

Arab states that signed the so-called Abraham Accords (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Morocco) to normalise relations with Israel under the Trump administration have stuck with the relationship, as has Saudi Arabia, which had been close to establishing normal relations before October 7.

In each case, the authoritarian regimes may pay lip service to suppressed domestic protests against the Israeli destruction of Gaza, but in the end, Loewenstein believes, their political elites want access to Israel and its technology.

## The site of the Hamas attack on the Re'im music festival has become an informal memorial for Israelis.

"None of them have cut ties and none of them will. I'm talking about the Saudis, the Emiratis, the Bahrainis, the list goes on. They know their people, in general, are very against what Israel is doing. And, to some extent, they have to show deference to that anger.

"But ultimately, I would argue that these nations are increasingly fearful of their own people for a range of reasons of which Palestine is one among many. They feel like they need the most sophisticated, repressive technology that they're buying from Israel to control their own people."

Loewenstein expresses gloom about the outlook for Palestinians and for Israel, a country he sees as in the grip of a right wing that dehumanises Palestinians. Israel, he says, has no intention of bowing to what he sees as illusory and performative demands for a two-state solution – one which all who talk about it cynically know will never happen.

## ISRAEL RADICALISED

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu may be personally unpopular, but his policies and the right-wing elements in his coalition are popular, especially after October 7. Loewenstein says Israel is increasingly on a course that assumes Israeli ethnic superiority. Its uncompromising stance combines with extreme ideas of the end of days on the religious right to create sometimes odd bedfellows on the hard right of populist politics worldwide, especially given the history of the Holocaust. "There is a major constituency in Israel for an ongoing war for endless occupation. Israeli society has been radicalised very strongly for years. October 7 has certainly made that even stronger."

The hideous bragging videos of atrocities and the dehumanisation of Palestinians

“A massive amount of Israeli soldiers in cars are filming themselves on TikTok dehumanising Palestinians and this is not a handful of soldiers. This is ubiquitous.”



posted by Israeli soldiers involve “not just a few bad apples,” he says. “No. A massive amount of Israeli soldiers in cars are filming themselves on TikTok dehumanising Palestinians and this is not a handful of soldiers. This is ubiquitous.”

During our Zoom conversation, Loewenstein made a striking observation that put the scale of the destruction in Gaza into a historical context – one which should have been obvious but was somehow lost in the immediacy of the conflict: this war has displaced hundreds of thousands more people than the expulsion (or withdrawal, depending on who is telling the story) of Palestinians in 1948. The UN estimates 1.7 million people have been displaced in Gaza. In 1948, about 750,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled the region.



Known to Palestinians as the Nakba or Catastrophe, it is the origin of the occupation of the West Bank, the creation of an isolated Gaza Strip, and the status of Palestinians as refugees in camps created in that era, many of which are still there 75 years later. It's a scary calculus when you think how long the effects of the war against Hamas may last. "What's happening now is on a scale far bigger than 1948. There's more displacement. And the killing was not even close to where we are now," he says of the more than 33,000 people reported killed in Gaza.

"We all know that this is going to take literally decades to rebuild."

He expects a generational explosion of anti-Israel and anti-Western sentiment across the Arab world.

## SLOW DAWNING

With most domestic media in Israel reporting a strongly Israeli perspective on the conflict, and with social media tending to channel discussion into pre-existing camps, Loewenstein sees no sign that the Israeli public recognise the scale of the Gaza crisis or the likelihood they will live with its

**“The only silver lining, in a way, is that there are growing numbers of young Jews who have been at the forefront of opposition to what's going on.”**

consequences for decades to come.

Netanyahu may be the bogeyman, but he represents, or is in cahoots with, a large and robust portion of Israelis and certainly of Israeli hard-right politicians. He continues to face corruption charges, but he may well be replaced by someone just as hardline. Settlers continue to expand territory in the West Bank and even propose going to Gaza.

"It's fair to say that it's hard not to be even more despairing now than I would have been when we spoke [last July]," Loewenstein says. "Things are so grim. The only silver lining, in a way, is that there are growing numbers of young Jews who have been at the forefront of opposition to what's going on, mostly in the US, UK, Jewish Voice for Peace [for example]. They're a minority, but they're a growing minority." ■

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