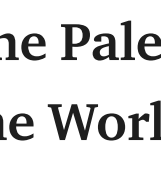


# Review: Why Israel tests its spyware on Palestinians

Antony Loewenstein argues persuasively that Israel profits from surveilling Palestine, but should have spoken more to those it's watching, writes Mairav Zonszein.

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Mairav Zonszein

Senior Analyst on Israel-Palestine, International Crisis Group

Image — Israeli soldiers with a Skylark surveillance drone during a drill in 2012 near Bat Shlomo, Israel. Photo: Uriel Sinai/Getty Images.

## The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World

Antony Loewenstein, *Verso*, £18.99

Even though *The Palestine Laboratory* apparently went to press before the protests that have gripped Israel this year, it is timely. Israelis have been out in the streets in record numbers to protest the plan of the far-right government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to undermine the independence of the country's judicial system.

Under the banner of 'democracy' and with slogans such as 'We must oppose dictatorship', protesters have warned that the country's economy, security and liberal institutions are under threat. Prominent among them has been Assaf Rappaport, the chief executive and co-founder of Wiz, a cloud security company, who has said that if the judicial overhaul passes, 'it would call into question Israel's ability to be a trusted centre of cybersecurity'.

## The world's leading exporter of spyware

Indeed, as Antony Loewenstein details in his book, Israel is the world's leading exporter of spyware and digital forensics tools. Yet he argues strongly that it has honed this expertise over decades as an occupying power acting with increasing impunity in the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and the coastal strip of Gaza.

For instance, Blue Wolf is a facial recognition technology used to scan Palestinians' faces at military checkpoints in occupied Hebron, the largest Palestinian city in the West Bank, and store the images in databases without consent. Drones armed with tear-gas canisters were first deployed in Gaza, the coastal strip where more than two million Palestinians live in what Loewenstein calls 'the perfect laboratory for Israeli ingenuity in domination'.

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Israel's technology has enabled it to deepen its control over millions of Palestinians

Such technology fulfils two purposes for Israel, argues Loewenstein, who writes as a journalist and an Australian Jew who was raised to support Israel. It has enabled Israel to deepen its control over millions of Palestinians and to do so at a profit.

Palestinians now constitute a slight majority over Jews across Israel and occupied

Palestinian territory, and every one of them is 'defined as a threat', writes the author. 'Today, you're able to identify and stop surveillance of the next Nelson Mandela before he even knows he's Nelson Mandela,' says an Israeli human rights lawyer quoted in the book.

Loewenstein wants to expose Israel as a hostile regime on a par with Russia and China. He conveys a palpable frustration with the fact that Israel has managed to excel at developing tools to maintain ethnonationalist rule and export them to dozens of countries, and at both a financial and diplomatic gain.

As he notes, Israel has become one of the top 10 weapons dealers in the world. 'Israeli arms sales in 2021 were the highest on record, surging 55 per cent over the previous two years to \$11.3 billion.'

Loewenstein provides an impressive and succinct – though at times simplistic – historical summary of Israel's shady track record in foreign policy since its establishment, from support of repressive regimes such as General Pinochet's in Chile and Iran under the Shah, to supplying weapons to Nicaragua and South Africa under apartheid and more recently to South Sudan.

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Loewenstein provides a succinct, if simplistic, summary of Israel's shady track record in foreign policy

## Defence and commerce

He also writes at length about private Israeli companies, staffed by former Israeli intelligence officers and often operating with a government licence, that have, for instance, provided surveillance drones to Russia which were used in the Syrian civil war. These private companies, Loewenstein shows, often do the bidding of the Israeli government, blurring the line between public and private sector, between defence and commerce.

He recounts the well-known story of how the Israeli NSO Group sold its Pegasus phone-hacking software to numerous governments, including Mexico, Morocco, Uganda and Saudi Arabia to spy on their critics. Yet, notes Loewenstein, the majority of Israelis expressed no outrage until Israel used the software to spy on its Jewish citizens.

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His description of how Netanyahu used such spyware to secure diplomatic gains specifically with Arab countries in the Gulf that culminated in the 2020 Abraham Accords doesn't stop with NSO. There are many more companies, he notes, among them Black Cube, Elbit and Cellebrite.

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Israeli surveillance technology has been sold to the border agencies of the US and the EU

The West is complicit in this network, too. Surveillance technology developed in Israel has also been sold to the United States, in the form of watch towers on the Mexican border, and to the European Union, whose own border agency Frontex has used Israeli drone technology to monitor refugees.

Loewenstein also argues convincingly that 'growing numbers of regimes globally [are] learning how Israel gets away with politicide,' citing the definition by Israeli academic Baruch Kimmerling as 'the dissolution of the Palestinian people's existence as a legitimate social, political, and economic entity'. This is a serious concern, considering explicit calls from senior members of the current Israeli government for the expulsion of Palestinians.

## A single Palestinian voice

Loewenstein, however, is less persuasive on Palestinian reaction in the face of this surveillance onslaught. He claims many are 'unaware of how the occupation has been privatized because it makes no difference if a state officer or private individual harasses or humiliates them', a generalization he substantiates with a single Palestinian voice.

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Loewenstein rightly says that while Israel may play a dominant role, it is but one player in a broad and global phenomenon. Nor does a government need to be an autocracy or committed to 'politicide' to employ surveillance technology. As such, 'it will take systematic, global change [to stop cybersurveillance companies] because the disappearance of NSO itself will not remove the demand for tools such as Pegasus by democracies and dictatorships alike,' he writes.

In that context, he nevertheless insists that Israel deserves singular attention. Yet arguing that Israel's foreign policy has always been 'amoral and opportunistic' hardly distinguishes it. Loewenstein may well conclude by calling on the world to take a stand and hold Israel accountable, but he is deftly aware that same world is buying what Israel is selling.

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Arguing that Israel's foreign policy has always been 'amoral and opportunistic' hardly distinguishes it

In that sense, he seems more interested in debunking an Israeli myth than in tackling surveillance as the increasingly dominant weapon of choice in our era – a pressing issue I would like to have seen further discussed in the book.

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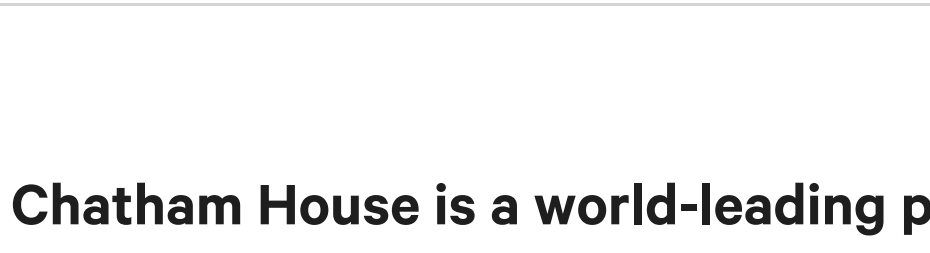
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