



# Antony Loewenstein: “Palestine has been a vital testing ground for cyber tools”

Antony Loewenstein is an Australian/German journalist, author and filmmaker. He is the co-founder of Declassified Australia, with articles published in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Washington Post*, *Al Jazeera*, *The New York Review of Books* and many others across his time in South Sudan, East Jerusalem, and Sydney.

For issue #31, *The Internationalist* editor Tanya Singh sat down with Loewenstein to delve into the findings of his groundbreaking book, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports The Technology Of Occupation Around The World*. The conversation is followed by an exclusive excerpt from his book, focused on the European Union’s use of Israel’s surveillance technologies to impede migrants from crossing its borders.

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**Tanya:** You mention the use of Israeli and U.S. weapons in controlling and pacifying the Global South in *The Palestine Laboratory*. I see this in the context of India, where there’s not only a growing pro-Israel sentiment, a phenomenon you talk about in your book, but also how **India is one of the largest buyers of Israeli-made weapons**. Could you provide more insight into the dynamics of this weapon trade and the implications for the affected regions?

**Antony:** Israel is now the 19th biggest arms exporter in the world, selling a range of weapons, spyware, drones and other equipment to countless democracies and dictatorships around the globe. The Global South has long been a target of Israeli weapons and so-called counterinsurgency techniques. During the Cold War, Israel was a key ally of some of the most brutal regimes in Latin and South America, including **Colombia, Guatemala, Honduras, and apartheid South Africa**. Many nations wanted to learn the ways in which Israel was halting its Palestinian population in the occupied, Palestinian territories. Brutality was the point.

Today’s India, led by Prime Minister Modi, is a vital Israeli ally. But it’s more than just a defence agreement. **But nations share ethno-nationalist dreams**, excluding anybody who isn’t Jewish or Hindu. With India now the world’s biggest self-described democracy, this presents a clear and present danger to millions of citizens who are being excluded. Too many in the West are turning a blind eye to Modi’s India because the country is viewed as a vital counterweight to China. This is dangerous and myopic thinking.

**Tanya:** By highlighting the involvement of global companies, such as Any/Vision and Corelight.AI in West Bank surveillance and biometrics, you shed light on the nature of the West Bank surveillance and biometric services. How would you characterize the international collaboration and complicity in these systems of surveillance, and what consequences does this have for privacy, human rights, and the broader global landscape of surveillance technology?

**Antony:** The implications for privacy in Palestine itself are profound with millions of Palestinians under 24/7 surveillance through **facial recognition technology**, biometric data gathering and intelligence gathering. Spyware tools like Pegasus or **Cyran**, founded by companies run by veterans of Israeli intelligence, are appearing in dozens of nations around the world, presenting a major threat to privacy and human rights. Without tight regulation, or ideally complete bans, these destructive cyber weapons will continue to metastasize.

Palestine has been a vital testing ground for these cyber tools over the **last decades**, with occupied Palestinians being the ideal guinea pigs. The rapid expansion of surveillance and repression tech, led globally by Israel and **tested on Palestinians**, is thriving because of the incalculable worldwide demand by governments who want to spy, track and monitor their own dissidents, journalists, critics or human rights activists.

**Tanya:** International legal frameworks, such as human rights and international humanitarian law, play a crucial role in addressing violations and promoting justice. What are your thoughts on the effectiveness of these frameworks in the context of Israel’s occupation of Palestine? Do you believe there is a need for further structural development or adaptation?

**Antony:** A key reason why Israel has maintained one of the longest occupations in modern times is impunity. Barely any nation is willing to challenge Israeli policies due to fears of being smeared as anti-Semitic or because they’re so keen for Israeli defence hardware; it’s the perfect insurance policy for the Jewish state as its occupation and **apartheid policies** deepen under a far-right government.

It’s long past time for an Israeli prime minister or military figure to **face justice at the International Criminal Court**. Likewise with American, British or Australian soldiers for war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

At this stage, it’s hard to see many countries actively challenging Israel in international forums as it’s left to civil society to **stand up**. This is already happening with the growing boycott, **divestment and sanctions (BDS)** campaigns, growing **Jewish dissent** in the US and beyond and **Palestinian resistance**.

## The rapid expansion of surveillance and repression tech, led globally by Israel and tested on Palestinians, is thriving because of the incalculable worldwide demand by governments who want to spy, track and monitor their own dissidents, journalists, critics or human rights activists.

“Selling Israeli Occupation to the World”, from *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports The Technology Of Occupation Around The World* (Verso Books, 2023).

Israel is a key player in the EU battle to both militarize its borders and **deter new arrivals**, a policy that hugely accelerated after the massive influx of migrants in 2015, principally due to the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan. The EU has partnered with leading Israeli defence companies to use its drones, and of course years of experience over Palestine is a key selling point.

In 2020 the EU announced partnerships worth US\$91 million with Airbus, Israel Aerospace Industries, and Elbit to use their services to maintain an ongoing **drone presence over the Mediterranean**. Elbit’s Hermes drone and IAI’s Heron drone were used during Israel’s wars against Gaza since 2008. There’s growing competition in drone sales—Turkey’s TB3 can carry laser-guided bombs, be piloted from a flatbed truck, and costs far less than Israeli or American drones, but Israeli models remain hugely popular. In 2017, Israeli drone manufacturers accounted for 60 percent of the global drone market in the previous three decades. The use of Israeli drones is only one part of the **Frontex infrastructure**. Weiss said that his group and the few other NGOs aiming to monitor the central Mediterranean for migrants had an **incredibly difficult task** because the aim of the EU was not to help those in trouble at sea. Instead, the EU left the refugees to drown or placed them in the hands of the Libyan coast guard, which then took people back to detention centers in Libya—though this is a breach of international law.

The EU started working with the Libyan Coast Guard in 2016. The guards on the so-called Libyan rescue ships, which mostly do not have life vests or speed boats, are allegedly sometimes drunk or use amphetamines. Many are forced to make money from people smuggling. Frontex sends migrant boat co-ordinates to Libyan officers via WhatsApp and claims that this does not represent direct contact but emergency communication. Frontex also sends surveillance footage to the Italian Coast Guard and Italy’s Maritime Rescue Coordination Center, which both share this information with the Libyans.

I asked Frontex about its relationship with Libyan authorities, and it denied it even existed: “Frontex has never engaged in any direct cooperation with Libyan authorities and does not cooperate with the Libyan Coast Guard.”

Sea Watch has little valuable communication with the Tripoli based Libyan rescue co-ordination center because they rarely answer or speak English. These Libyan forces are trained and equipped by the EU. I have seen horrific videos shot by Sea Watch of the Libyan Coast Guard forcing exhausted migrants to use a rope to climb onto their ship despite the dangers in doing so. Migrants often drown due to carbon monoxide poisoning or chemical burnings (when fuel containers mix with salt water and become dangerous). Rubber or plastic boats are the most vulnerable to capsizing. Another incident, on June 30, 2021, showed the Libyan Coast Guard firing weapons toward a nearby rubber boat in the Malta search-and-rescue zone in the Mediterranean. On that occasion, the boat eventually made it safely to the island of Lampedusa in southern Italy.

Frontex consistently denies any illegal activities, but Sea Watch witnesses these realities every day, using aircraft and a few ships to document the ways in which refugees are dying due to wilful blindness by Frontex and its Libyan partners. A common occurrence is Sea Watch using its own aircraft, observing a drone above and, soon after, the Libyan Coast Guard arriving to take the migrants back to Libya, where they face the possibility of torture, rape, or even death. “Without EU aerial surveillance, the Libyan Coast Guard would be practically blind,” Weiss pointed out. Frontex relies solely on aerial surveillance and never uses ships, showing that sea rescues are not its priority. European and British companies such as DEFA Aviation are contracted to provide the surveillance planes with multi-million euro contracts.

The idea of drones dropping lifeboats into the water is technically possible, Weiss told me, but unless many drones were used it would be useless to assist in the rescue of a 100-person boat. Sea Watch have considered dropping lifeboats but believed it might cause migrant distress on the water. Wind also made it an unprecise method. Weiss believed that Frontex would in future be relying less on drones and instead work with satellites for greater accuracy. Human Rights Watch condemned Frontex in August 2022 for colluding with Libyan officials and using “aerial assets” run by private companies such as drones.



The Martyr (1977) by Abed Abdi represents scenes that have become common in the West Bank and Gaza, that of displacement, continued violence and the loss of a homeland.

**Coming up next week: Acclaimed historian Quinn Slobodian on his new book, Crack-Up Capitalism: Market Radicals and the Dream of a World Without Democracy.**

“The secret of capitalism’s durability is one that thinkers like Friedrich Hayek underestimated well: its anarchy. Capitalism thrives under the illusion that the world’s inequalities are natural outcomes uncoordinated by any centralized authorities. It is an ideology that leads us to believe that the market’s uneven rewards are the outcome of a combination of our own hard work (or theft), our own natural ability (or lack) along with some measure of good fortune. This is a recipe for permanent global gaps in the exposure to early death but also a remarkably open matrix into which people project all kinds of supplementary ideologies whether religious, astrological, racial, cultural, or national.”

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