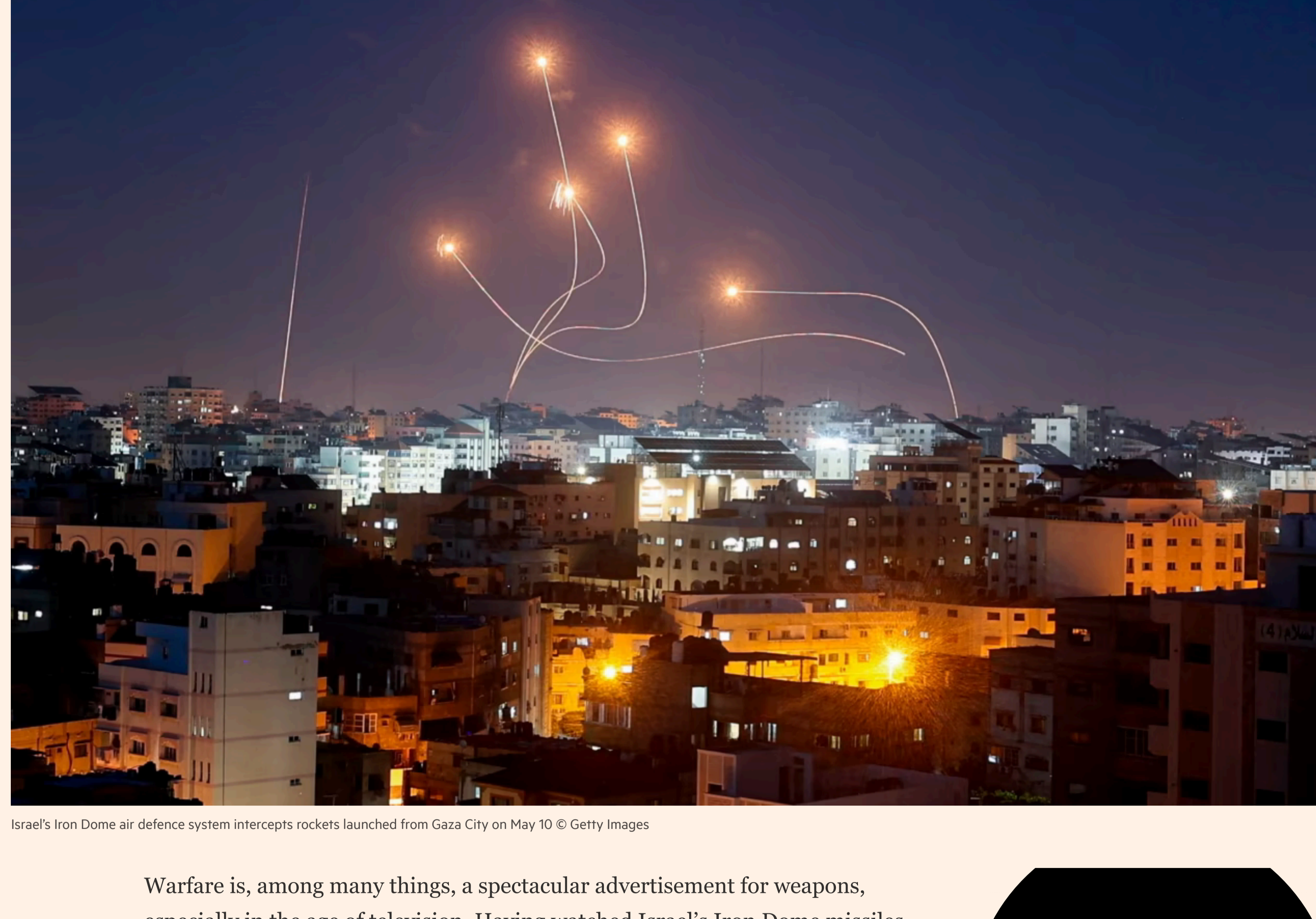
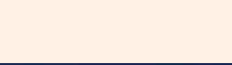


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The Israeli weapons and spyware falling into the hands of despots

Two books raise serious questions about the country's exports of intelligence weapons — but both fail to fully address the implications

Mehul Srivastava 26 MINUTES AGO



Israel's Iron Dome air defence system intercepts rockets launched from Gaza City on May 10. © Getty Images

Warfare is, among many things, a spectacular advertisement for weapons, especially in the age of television. Having watched Israel's Iron Dome missiles streak over Tel Aviv hunting down Hamas rockets, the Ukrainian government contacted its Israeli counterpart last October, hoping to buy the air defence system to fend off the Iranian drones swarming their skies.

If they'd read Antony Loewenstein's *The Palestine Laboratory*, they would have known not to bother. The tiny country's weapons exports, which hit just over \$11bn in 2021, are a means to an end, he argues. Despots and dictators are welcome to them, so long as they serve a geopolitical necessity.

Arming Ukraine may be a key foreign policy objective of the US, Israel's military and financial patron. But Israel was not about to upset Moscow, especially with Russian forces so deeply entrenched next door in Syria. The answer was a firm no.

This complicated dance — perhaps immoral, perhaps necessary — is the subject of Loewenstein's well-researched but tragically bloodless recounting of how and why Israeli weapons regularly show up in distant battlefields, often tipping the scales for unpalatable regimes with scant regard for human rights.

This is nothing new. Since its birth in 1948, the state of Israel has sold weapons to apartheid South Africa; Chile during the horror of the Pinochet years; Myanmar even after well-documented atrocities against its Rohingya minority. In exchange, Israel has sought support — especially on Palestinian issues — in international arenas such as the UN, and more recently, in convincing recalcitrant neighbours such as the UAE, and maybe soon Saudi Arabia, into recognising its existence.

Israeli officials defend these decisions as hard-nosed realpolitik. But to Loewenstein, an investigative journalist, this is a failure of Zionism, and a baton with which to bludgeon the Israeli state for its many, well-documented failures to place human rights, especially those of Palestinians at, or near, the centre of its foreign and domestic policies.



It is indeed revealing how complicated any criticism of Israel is that Loewenstein spends his first few paragraphs underlining his Jewish credentials, as if earning the right to critique the Jewish State. (The grandson of Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany and the son of liberal Zionists in Melbourne is now an avowed One-Stater.)

He argues that the Sparta-like reputation of Israel's military in subjugating Palestinians and defeating larger neighbours, alongside the all-seeing mystique of the Mossad, drives demand for Israel's "battle-tested" weapons.

Loewenstein probes deeper into the psyche of a military-industrial entanglement that has led to the dehumanisation of Palestinians (Ordering an air strike should be like ordering a pizza, one Israeli colonel is quoted saying), and how that extends to an official, and societal, disregard for the rights of all but Jewish Israelis.

But one wishes he had spent more time on the ground — the book reads much like the careful research of a voracious reader, rather than that of the tenacious reporter he is known to be. Nearly every page cites other sources, and he regularly pauses to criticise others' coverage of this issue, slowing down a story that would have been better served with the voices of people who've suffered from Israeli weapons.

Who should be allowed to operate a weapon so sophisticated and powerful, who should such weapons be used on, and who should police the policemen?

It wasn't just the Iron Dome that the Ukrainians wanted. Even before Russia invaded, they'd hoped to buy Pegasus, a cyberweapon made by Israel's NSO Group, seeking to learn of Russia's belligerent plans.

Built by the highly paid graduates of Israel's signals intelligence units, the weapon can mirror the contents of a smartphone remotely — stripping away the encryption of apps such as Signal or WhatsApp.

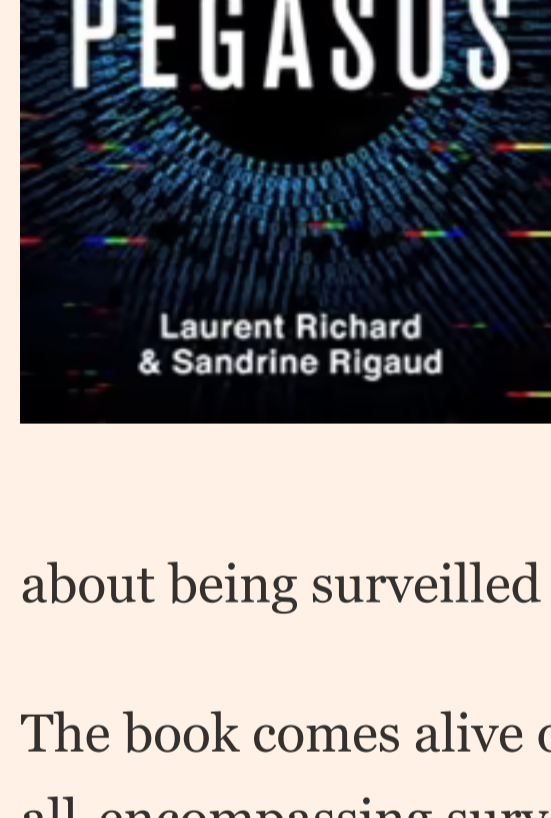
This too, Israel denied. It reportedly even turned off the ability of Estonia, a Pegasus customer and ex-Soviet bloc nation, to use its \$30mn purchase to surveil Russian phones. Meanwhile, Israel has enthusiastically and repeatedly approved its sale to countries such as Saudi Arabia, Rwanda, Mexico and others, despite overwhelming evidence that they've used it on dissidents, instead of terrorists or cartels.

In their book *Pegasus*, authors Laurent Richard and Sandrine Rigaud promise to show how the encryption-piercing malware "threatens the end of privacy, dignity and democracy".

Instead, they take us on a slightly plodding victory lap about a global consortium of journalists who in 2021 published a series of reports about how the weapon was being abused by governments around the world.

All The President's Men this is not. There is barely enough on the central challenge posed by the very existence of commercial spyware such as Pegasus — who should be allowed to operate a weapon so sophisticated and powerful, who should such weapons be used on, and who should police the policemen?

This is a missed opportunity. Richard and Rigaud's 2021 reporting, shepherded by the Paris-based Forbidden Stories and Amnesty International, had immediate impact around the world. Relying on a leaked database of 50,000 phone numbers their unnamed source described as a potential target list, they described a global pattern of abuse by NSO's customers, often countries buying for a few million dollars a technology they lack themselves.



The reporters confirmed infection on less than 50 of those phones, but the mere existence of a number on that list was enough to provoke alarm, diplomatic opprobrium at Israel and eventually, commercial problems for NSO.

French President Emmanuel Macron scolded former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett after his personal number popped up on that list; Jamal Khashoggi's fiancée's phone was found to be compromised and India's Rahul Gandhi tut-tutted about being surveilled by the Modi government.

The book comes alive only when it zooms in on the impact such insidious and all-encompassing surveillance has on its victims. Pegasus not only mirrors a phone's contents — be they encrypted messages or calendar invitations — it also turns on the camera and microphone secretly.

For instance, an Azerbaijani journalist who had previously been secretly videotaped in her own home having sex with her boyfriend, laments that photographs of a friend's recovery from breast cancer were likely exfiltrated from her phone, alongside conversations with sources and documents that propelled her reporting.

It's a graphic reminder of something we all suspect to be true — that our phones are now an extension of our minds, a warehouse of memories and a road map to our secret failures, foibles and dreams.

That this intimacy can be so thoroughly pierced by a software sold to Israel's allies is worth exploring in detail. As is the underlying assumption that such technology is both necessary and the inevitable side-effect of widespread encryption — itself the result of the disclosures of mass surveillance made by Edward Snowden a decade ago.

Alas, Richard and Rigaud's book is more interested in reliving their journalistic quest, rather than grappling with the more serious questions this sophisticated technology presents.

Both books raise serious questions that they don't fully answer. This is a shame, because others have revealed eye-popping details of Israel's excess, from Ronen Bergman's documentation of the hundreds of assassinations Mossad has carried around the world to activists such as Eitay Mack (cited extensively) who have used Israeli courts to force open secret archives that reveal the extent of the state's involvement.

A deep documentation of Israeli weapons exports would make for sordid reading. These two books make a dent on the subject, but a full reckoning awaits.

The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World by Antony Loewenstein, *Verso £18.99, 304 pages*

Pegasus: The Story of the World's Most Dangerous Spyware by Laurent Richard and Sandrine Rigaud, *Macmillan £20, 336 pages*

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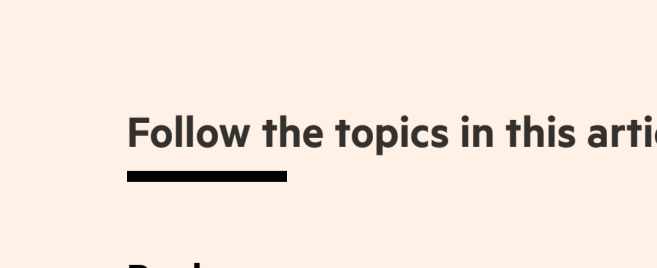
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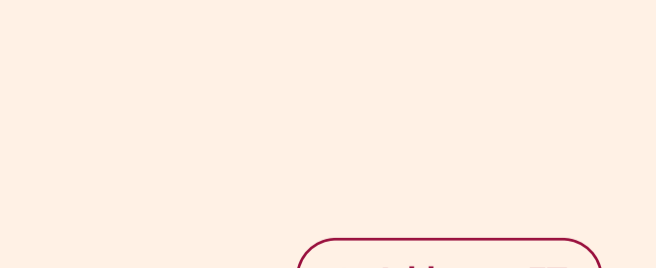
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