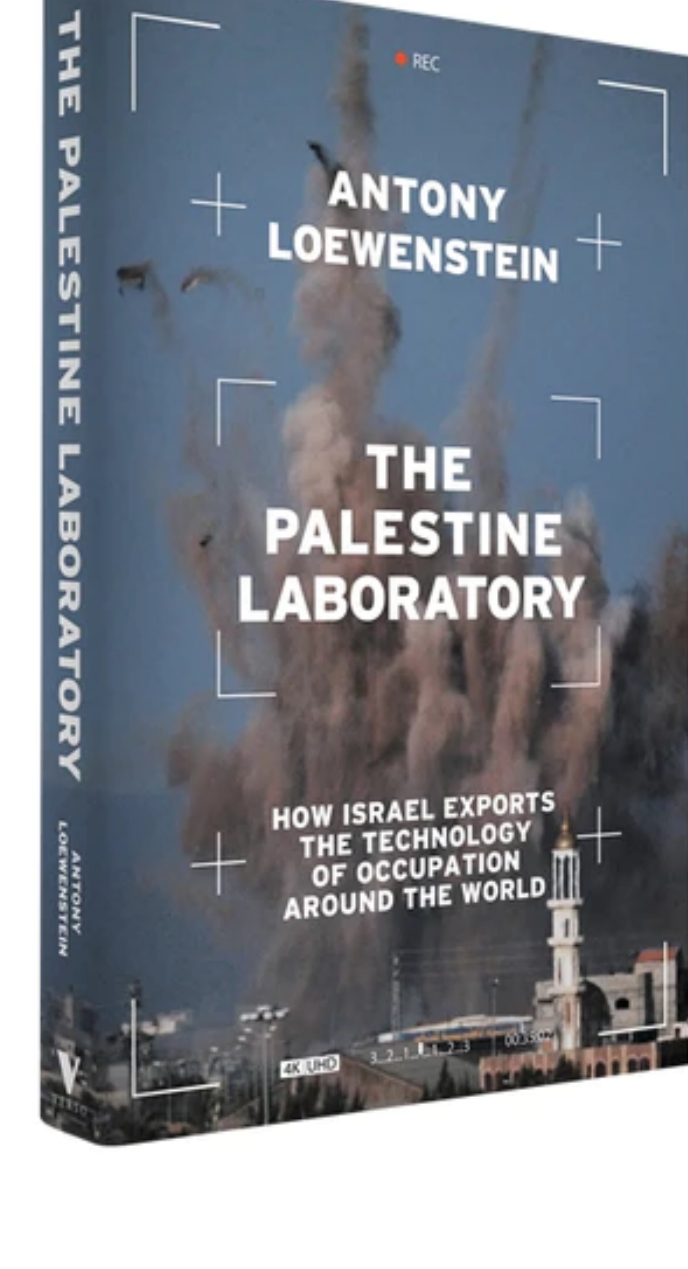


The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel exports the technology of occupation around the world

Mon 17 Jul 2023



JVL Introduction

Antony Loewenstein's book "The Palestine Laboratory" is a comprehensive account of how Israel's military industrial complex uses the occupied Palestinian territories as a testing ground for weaponry and surveillance technology that is then exported around the world to both despots and democracies.

War is big business, and the scale of the enterprise is staggering. Israeli arms production is central to the country's economic survival – and helps buy it diplomatic protection as well. As Loewenstein says: "Exact figures are impossible to obtain...but today there are over three hundred multinational companies and six thousand start-ups that employ hundreds of thousands of people. Sales are booming..."

Sales of these weapons poses a great threat to civil liberties worldwide. And as Israeli society divides irreconcilably, Israeli surveillance techniques are likely to be deployed internally as well...

The Palestine Laboratory is reviewed here by Andrew Hornung.

The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel exports the technology of occupation around the world

Antony Loewenstein, *Verso Books*, 2023

reviewed by Andrew Hornung

On 2 October 2018, Jamal Khashoggi was assassinated by agents of the Saudi government at its consulate in Istanbul. The body of the Saudi dissident journalist was dismembered and disposed of without trace. It was immediately obvious that Khashoggi's murder was carried out at the behest of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Gradually it became clear that critical to the success of this crime was the use of the Pegasus phone-hacking spyware developed by the Israeli cybersecurity company NSO.

All this is well known. What is much less well known is the vastness of Israel's cyber-security and surveillance sector, of which NSO is just one of the more prominent companies. This is the core subject of Antony Loewenstein's book "The Palestine Laboratory". It is a sector which embraces large-scale civilian monitoring and drone aid to bombing raids, cyber hacking to border control.

Of course, NSO claims only to supply its products to entities that can be relied on to use them ethically. These models of virtue include the Moroccan regime (who used it to spy on France's President Macron), the Ugandan and Rwandan governments, the Myanmar military junta, India's Hindu ethnonationalists and many other agencies of the Global South as well as by such European antisemitic thugs as Viktor Orban. Bahraini and Omani activists have also been targeted. The head of Spain's intelligence agency was forced to resign after it was revealed that it was using NSO products to spy on Catalan separatists. As Antony Loewenstein's book "The Palestine Laboratory" points out "NSO had contracts with twenty-two law enforcement bodies in the European Union."

Loewenstein's great contribution is to pull together a vast trove of information about this sector, its activities, its origins, its power and its effects. The book's central idea, reflected in its title, is that Israel's expertise in this area – indeed, its Unique Selling Point – derives from its use as a tool in suppressing the struggle for Palestinian rights, in particular in the Occupied Territories. If facial recognition technology can be successfully used in Hebron to monitor Palestinians, why not use it in South America, in Myanmar or Uganda?

In this context the author sees Israel's victory in 1967 and its consequent occupation of Palestinian territory beyond Israel's internationally agreed borders as a turning point. As the Zionist occupiers saw it, the more the enemy was *within* the area under the state's authority, the greater was the need to generate a gigantic network of surveillance and population control. Thus new technologies had to be developed and used to supplement conventional weapons and military and police tactics. In Loewenstein's view "From the 1990s onward Israel (also) moved to become more autonomous from Washington".

For a highly militarised nation with a well-funded educational system and one already active in secret missions on behalf of the US, the development of this new sector was a logical step.

If the growth of this sector was promoted by the state, the effect was to spawn a multitude of private companies acting with varying degrees of state aid, state protection and promotion. According to Loewenstein, "The centrality of Israeli arms to the country's economic survival is impossible to overestimate...Exact figures are impossible to obtain...but today there are over three hundred multinational companies and six thousand start-ups that employ hundreds of thousands of people. Sales are booming, with defense exports reaching an all-time high in 2021 of US\$11.3 billion, having risen 55 percent in two years. Israel's cybersecurity firms are also soaring, with US\$8.8 billion raised in one hundred deals in 2021. In the same year, Israeli cyber companies took 40 percent of the world's funding in the sector."

It should be emphasized, however, that from the state's point of view these company profits are not the only plusses from this activity. Part of the deal is diplomatic support.

Loewenstein provides copious details about NSO and similar Israeli companies like Black Cube, Intellexa, Frontex, Cellebrite, Elbit and others – all players in the global cybersecurity (that is, cyberinsecurity) sector. The relationship between these companies and the Israeli state is a central aspect of his investigation as is the complex collaborator/competitor relationship between this sector and its US counterparts. Indeed, one of Loewenstein's important subthemes is the privatisation of repression.

The reach of these companies is truly global. As Loewenstein points out, "Bahraini and Omani activists have been targeted...Rwanda used Pegasus to monitor dissidents...Morocco used Pegasus to spy on senior French politicians including President Emmanuel Macron...Viktor Orban bought Pegasus to spy on opposition politicians and critical journalists...Catalan's pro-independence politicians were spied on."

Not even US citizens are exempt from phone-hacking using this company's system, it seems. Loewenstein tells us: "Pegasus is designed so that any phone numbers with the +1prefix, for the US, can't be targeted, something Israeli officials NSO install to avoid global clients spying on US citizens. However, NSO planned a workaround, called Phantom, which it demonstrated to the FBI in 2019 as a way for the agency to hack Americans."

The historian AJP Taylor is often quoted as saying that war has "always been the mother of invention". In this sense it is not surprising that Israel's hot war against the Palestinians and its guerilla activities against its critics should have led it to generate, test and perfect a new arsenal of military and repressive techniques often dependent on the ongoing digital revolution. And once created, they are marketed: techniques learned from building and monitoring Israel's anti-Palestinian wall, say, soon find themselves power-point-presented to a US audience.

An obvious case in point is Elbit's multi-million dollar contract to build surveillance towers along the US-Mexico border. As Loewenstein points out, "Weeks after the 2016 US election...Israel's Magal Security Systems Chief Executive Saar Koursh told the Financial Times that "without going into politics, we have the most prestigious and battle-proven technology worldwide in border security"" In the event, capitalism often being merciless even to its proponents, government-backed Elbit outsold Magal.

Elbit, like NSO, is a giant in the security-surveillance field. [On Elbit Systems generally see the comprehensive report on the [WhoProfit's website](#).] The company – owners of the Leicester-based drone factory UAV tactical systems against which Palestine Action has directed its protest – see reports [here](#) and [here](#) – was founded in 1966. As Loewenstein reports, Elbit started out supplying equipment for Israeli tanks and aircraft and later became "a major exporter of weapons to both democracies and despots, working closely with the US military and a host of other nations to develop a range of equipment, from drones to night vision goggles and land surveillance systems to deadly high-tech munitions.

If Loewenstein's documenting Israel's "exporting" its "battle-proven" technologies is unquestionably of great value, his suggestion that Israel's ethnocentrism should be seen as an ideological export seems to me wrong. The fact that many of Israel's clients are ethnonationalists – and often outspoken antisemites – may make table talk between their representatives easier when brokering deals but the Orbans, Modis and Hliangs of this world don't need Zionism to justify their respective hatreds.

One important issue highlighted by "The Palestine Laboratory" is the way the Israeli state's protection of its highly secretive cyber-surveillance industry is corrosive of its vaunted democratic guarantees as they apply to its Jewish population. "When Mack [Eitay Mack, a campaigning Israeli lawyer now resident in Oslo] tried in 2016 to force the Israeli state to stop granting NSO an export license, the government succeeded in making all deliberations private. Supreme Court President Justice Esther Hayut was honest about what was at stake: 'Our economy, as it happens, rests not a little on that export.'"

All in all, Lowenstein has produced a very effective analysis and critique of Israel's repressive role in the world today. It should be widely read.

Antony Loewenstein is an independent journalist, best-selling author, filmmaker and co-founder of Declassified Australia. He's written for *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Review of Books* and many others. His books include *Pills, Powder and Smoke*, *Disaster Capitalism* and *My Israel Question*. His documentary films include *Disaster Capitalism* and the Al Jazeera English films *West Africa's Opioid Crisis* and *Under the Cover of Covid*. He was based in East Jerusalem 2016-2020.

His website can be found at antonyloewenstein.com; and Twitter: @antloewenstein.

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Ian Cave 18th July 2023 at 14:59
It's shocking to see the scale of the problem revealed so clearly with all the evidence laid out so convincingly.

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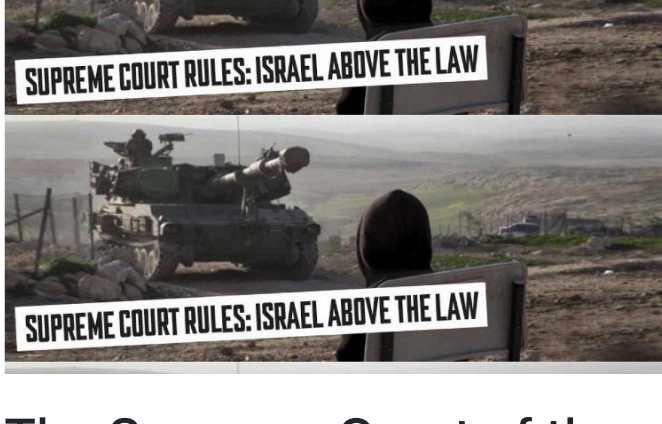
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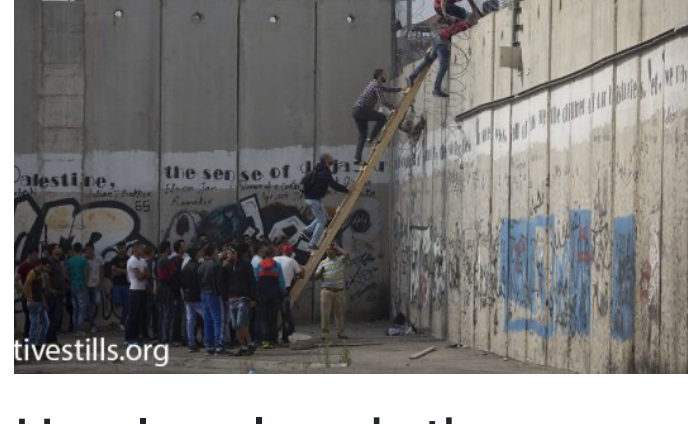
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