

On Sunday, October 29, Ahmed Azza was given permission to leave his neighborhood for the first time in three days. He passed the surveillance camera trained on his front door and the group of Israeli soldiers stationed on the hill above and walked eight minutes to the checkpoint at the end of his street. He placed his belongings on a table to be searched, made mandatory eye contact with the facial recognition camera, and crossed through the rotating metal barriers into Hebron. Ten hours later, he was given a one-hour window to return home before the checkpoint closed and he was locked out—or in—for the next two days.

Azza lives in Tel Rumeida, Hebron, the most tightly controlled neighborhood in the West Bank. Since 1997, Tel Rumeida has formed part of H2, a section of Hebron controlled by the Israeli government. Around 35,000 Palestinians and 850 Israeli settlers live in this area, where Israeli soldiers impose a system of segregation that heavily restricts the movement of Palestinians. It's enforced with a network of surveillance that includes at least 21 manned checkpoints, on-the-spot searches, and watchtowers, plus a vast array of CCTV cameras dubbed "Hebron Smart City." According to critics, the aim of this system is to make life as difficult as possible for Palestinians, slowly forcing them to leave their homes and make way for Israeli settlers.

The West Bank has long been seen as a testing ground for Israeli surveillance technology and tactics. Its defense exports have doubled in the past decade, partially thanks to the success of companies producing surveillance systems, like Elbit, Candiru, and Rafael, as well as NSO Group, which produces the Pegasus spyware. But on October 7, on the other side of Israel, the country's famed surveillance network apparently failed. Hamas gunmen breached the high-tech border separating Gaza from Israel and murdered 1,400 people, taking more than 200 hostages. Since then, a growing sense of paranoia has given Israel's government the impetus to ramp up restrictions and surveillance in the West Bank, according to analysts and activists working in the region.

"We're rats in a lab," says Azza, over a cup of tea at his workplace in Hebron. "I want to go to the beach, I want to see the sea, I want to taste the water. Here, we don't have this freedom."

The flagship component of the West Bank's surveillance infrastructure is known as "Wolf Pack." According to Amnesty International, its purpose is to create a database featuring profiles of every Palestinian in the region. One strand of this software, known as Red Wolf, uses facial recognition cameras placed at checkpoints to inform Israeli soldiers via a color-coded system whether to arrest, detain, or allow through Palestinians who approach. If the system doesn't recognize an individual, it will automatically enroll their biometric data into Red Wolf, without their knowledge.

Another strand, known as Blue Wolf, has been described as "Facebook for Palestinians." It requires Israeli soldiers to photograph Palestinians individually via a smartphone app in order to record them in the database. According to Breaking the Silence, an NGO made up of former Israeli soldiers that opposes Israeli military occupation of Palestinian territories, prizes were offered to different units based on how many Palestinians they could photograph within a week.

“There are indications that the data gathered by this software impacts whether a person can get a work permit, whether a person can move from place to place within the West Bank, whether a person can get into Israel and work there or leave the country via Ben Gurion Airport, and a whole range of other things,” says Antony Loewenstein, author of *The Palestine Laboratory*, a book investigating the links between Israel’s military and technology sector.

According to Azza, as he approaches a checkpoint and is picked up by a facial recognition camera, Israeli soldiers can see his profile from up to 100 meters away. They know who he is, who his family members are, where he lives, and his entire history of interactions with them. When he was 16, Azza was arrested for allegedly having a knife, but he denied the allegations and was later found to be innocent. He says this data is displayed every time he passes a checkpoint, meaning he is unfairly targeted and sometimes detained for up to three hours at a time. In recent years, he’s begun pre-emptively stripping to his underwear each time he enters a checkpoint, to avoid the lengthy process of being searched multiple times. “It’s a violation of our privacy,” he says.

Israeli officials claim the rollout of surveillance technology helps contribute to a “frictionless” occupation, reducing contact between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers. Instead of troops frisking every Palestinian who passes a checkpoint, this tech allows them to target only those who have a “negative” history. Instead of conducting night raids to gain intelligence, Israeli soldiers can simply use drones to spy on the specific people they are interested in.

The Israeli Defense Force declined to provide an attributable comment.

Many of Israel’s key surveillance technologies have been developed and tested in the West Bank. Israel’s military has promoted close collaboration with the private tech sector, meaning that military-trained engineers are able to learn new skills from private companies. After leaving

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“That’s a key aspect of the Israeli defense sector, showing that it’s possible to maintain and manage a brutal occupation for over half a century, which can then be exported like flat-pack repression to other nations across the globe,” says Loewenstein.

Since the war began on October 7, restrictions for Palestinians living in the West Bank have risen to unseen levels. Residents told me that now they are allowed to leave the neighborhood just three days per week. In addition to the curfew imposed in Tel Rumeida, raids against Palestinian militia groups have ramped up, and the number of Israeli soldiers on the streets has increased, due to the call-up of the army reserve. It’s also meant some Israeli settlers are now donning their army reserve uniforms, blurring the contours of the state. Across the wider West

Bank, at least 121 Palestinians have been killed by Israeli forces or settlers, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

“We are not just numbers,” says a doctor from Hebron, whose name has been withheld to protect his identity. During a break from his shift at Ramallah Hospital, he explains that he now lives locally, but his parents and siblings still live in Hebron. Normally, he’d spend his weekends visiting them, but in recent weeks he has been unable to travel due to delays caused by the closure of checkpoints across the region. Since October 7, he says, he’s treated two Palestinians who have been shot by Israeli forces. Three others who were also shot arrived at the emergency reception but were soon pronounced dead. “There’s a tragedy inside every single one of us in the medical team,” he says.

The task of investigating and documenting the killings of Palestinians in the West Bank has become more challenging in recent weeks. Normally carried out by NGOs such as Al-Haq—one of the key human rights organizations in the region—these groups have been unable to work properly due to the closure of checkpoints and the fear of violence enacted by Israeli settlers.

“Since the 7th of October, our field researchers have not been able to meet directly with victims or eyewitnesses because of the situation. They cannot move freely,” says Tahseen Elayyan, a legal researcher at Al-Haq, over a cup of coffee in their modest office in Ramallah’s Old Town. “Even before, they didn’t have full freedom, but now there are more restrictions on their movement and they’re sometimes afraid to go to areas because of settler attacks. We know about the killings, but we cannot document them properly.”

In October 2021, Al-Haq and a number of other human rights groups were controversially labeled terrorist organizations by the Israeli government. Weeks later, it was revealed by the NGO Front Line Defenders that six of them had previously had their devices hacked by Pegasus software. “They used technology and surveillance to control our work,” says Elayyan.

A question eliciting both fear and hope is whether surveillance technologies are even effective. Despite employing many of these systems across Gaza, Israeli security services were caught off guard by Hamas’ surprise attack on October 7. “On the one hand, we can talk about facial recognition technologies and how bad they are and how harmful they are for democracy, but on the other hand, you say to yourself, who wants to use them? What help did it give?” says Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, a senior fellow at the Israel Democracy Institute think tank.

Ori Givati, a former Israeli soldier and advocacy director for Breaking the Silence, says the surveillance program is now out of control. “We have to differentiate between securing Israel, which is Israel’s duty and responsibility, and expanding the occupation. There is a huge difference. Occupying more doesn’t mean more security for Israel,” Givati says, “I don’t think that in the long term, if we now use more systems of surveillance against Palestinians, this is what brings us security. We cannot accept this because it doesn’t work.’