"This is not simply between Israel and Hamas. It's much bigger than that."

An interview with Antony Loewenstein on the Hamas attack, the brutal Israeli response, and the wider context of the conflict

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Since the attack by Hamas on southern Israel on October 7, the situation in Israel and Palestine has been rapidly deteriorating and becoming increasingly scary for anyone who values human life. The death toll of the Hamas attack in Israel is over 1,400 people, with over a hundred more taken hostage in Gaza, while the death toll in Gaza continues to escalate, with at least 2,329 civilians killed by Israel's bombardment so far. The true figure is likely much higher with the bodies still buried under the rubble. According to the UN, over a million people in Gaza have been displaced.

Israel has cut off electricity, food, water, and fuel to Gaza, subjecting its civilians to collective punishment, an act that Israeli human rights group B'Tselem says constitutes a war crime. Meanwhile, the Defense Minister compared Palestinians to "human animals," an Israeli Defense Forces spokesperson said "the emphasis is on damage and not on accuracy," while prominent Israelis are sharing comics depicting their enemies as cockroaches, another example of ongoing dehumanization. Israel's ambassador to the UK went on Sky News to declare there isn't a humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

The Hamas attack was shocking and gruesome — there's no denying that. But it's being used as justification for an escalation of the occupation and apartheid system Israel has already been enforcing on Palestinians for decades, including the disregard for the Geneva Conventions, the international humanitarian law established in 1949 after the Second World War and the horrors of the Holocaust.

Antony Loewenstein, author of *The Palestine Laboratory*

To understand more about what's happening in Israel and Palestine, the broader context of this war, and how it benefits the Israeli defense tech industry, I spoke to Antony Loewenstein, an independent journalist and author of *The Palestine Laboratory* who was based in East Jerusalem between 2016 and 2020.

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How would you describe what we've been seeing over the past week, after the Hamas attack on southern Israel and then the Israeli retaliation on Gaza?

The attack by Hamas last week was incredibly shocking. I've been reporting from Palestine and Israel for 20 years, and I've got friends of mine who have been reporting for much longer than that. They've never seen anything like this: the level of coordination, sophistication, and the fact that the Israeli defenses seemed to apparently disappear, at least for a short amount of time. It was a shocking event, and incredibly brutal and callous. And obviously, there were huge amounts of Israeli Jewish civilians who were murdered, which to me was utterly indefensible.

In the broader picture, I fear that this is going to have a negative impact on the Palestinian cause, which I'm a big proponent of, because of that level of extremism. What you've had after that was the inevitable, brutal Israeli response, which was always going to be unlike anything we've seen before considering how "successful" the Hamas mission was.

What's happened in the last 15 or so years — since Hamas has ruled Gaza — is Israel has made a calculation that they would not overthrow Hamas; that Hamas wasn't a particular military threat. Yes, Hamas was firing rockets into Israel regularly. There were skirmishes. There were wars every two or three years. But in general, there was a belief within the Israeli military and political establishment that they could live with Hamas. They were not an existential threat. And I would argue they're still not.

Israel's response in the last week has been utter bombardment, blatant and wanton war crimes against Palestinians, huge amounts of killing of civilians, and cutting off electricity, water, and huge amounts of infrastructure. All predictable. All shocking. All backed by every Western state 110% with barely any criticism.

When Joe Biden or Secretary of State Antony Blinken say, *Look, I've spoken to Israel about making sure that they follow the laws of war*, my response is always: *like the US did Iraq and Afghanistan? Like the US does anywhere?* This is a joke. It's a sick joke. Everyone knows that the US is hardly the moral arbiter of international law when they flagrantly break it every day. So I'm concerned that the US and the world has given Israel carte blanche and now we're in for a massive escalation.

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Your book deals with how Israel has been developing technology through the occupation of Palestinians, and then selling it to governments around the world. Before we had a full accounting of the impact of this attack by Hamas, there was a video going around of the fighters breaching the smart fence or the Iron Wall, as it's called. After the long use of those technologies to oppress Palestinians, what did that image symbolize?

It shows to me that in 2023, technology can get you quite far as a state to "protect yourself," but it only gets you so far. I think back to 9/11 with the US, which was 22 years ago, but that was an undeniably catastrophic intelligence failure. The US is the most "sophisticated" nation in the world, and in turn has the biggest intelligence gathering network with the NSA, and they still missed it. The dots were not joined.

You'll probably see in the coming months various investigations into the Israeli intelligence failure and discover again that certain signs were missed or ignored. We heard this last week that the Egyptians apparently warned Israel about something big maybe happening with Hamas — it's impossible to know if that's actually true.

What Israel has done in the last two decades, and the US has followed them in a similar direction, is they've really moved far away from a lot of the use of human intelligence, which is what spy craft was back in the day (basically listening to people), to now using high tech weaponry and surveillance, some of which can be very effective. But the breach of the Gaza barrier was two things: it was an intelligence failure, but it was also a political failure.

It was a political failure because the Israeli government itself, particularly this year, is a far-right government which is obsessed with settling and annexing the West Bank. The huge focus was there, much less on Gaza. The second thing is there was not really a belief [that Hamas would attack]. From what I've been reading and hearing from various sources, Hamas was able to fool Israeli intelligence, suggesting they had no desire for escalation. Many Hamas operatives that Israel was using as spies were lying to the Israelis. In other words, there were Hamas officials, almost certainly who were "traitors" to their cause, initially, but in fact they were doubling back and they were lying to their Israeli handlers. All that detail is not 100% out yet, but there was a *Reuters* report last week which was very well sourced on the Israeli and the Hamas side and really backs that up.

It's important for people to remember, Israel has a massive network of Palestinian spies in Gaza, often from blackmailing Palestinians who want to leave the besieged strip. So a Palestinian X or Y might say, *I want to get go study overseas, I want my daughter to go study in the US, or my wife has breast cancer and I want her to get medical care in Tel Aviv that's not available in Gaza*. And in many, many cases, Israel will say, *you can come out if you spy for us*. We have no number exactly of how many spies are in Gaza, but it'd be a sizeable amount, as do the Egyptians.

The Egyptians probably have the best intelligence gathering in Gaza, much better than the Israelis do. And the Egyptians have a incentive and a great desire to eliminate Hamas as well. As readers will be aware, there has been a long-held hatred amongst the Egyptian political elite of the Muslim Brotherhood, who are obviously connected to Hamas. And the Egyptians have tens and tens of thousands of Muslim Brotherhood members in their prisons rotting away. So as far as they're concerned, they would love to eliminate Hamas as well.

Could the response we're seeing by Israel in Gaza ultimately hurt its surveillance and defense tech industries?

It's highly unlikely that the Israeli defense and arms sector will be impacted negatively. On the face of it, there's been a failure. This technology did not work. Hamas was unbelievably sophisticated, potentially with outside help to breach one of the most sophisticated militaries in the world. That would seem to be a reason why a lot of states would be more reticent to buy Israeli surveillance tech. But I doubt that'll happen for a few reasons.

One, since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the last year and a half, there has been massive and unprecedented demand for Israeli missile defense shields and other kinds of defense equipment from European nations who are fearful of Russia, rightly or wrongly. I do not see that changing. The Russia-Ukraine war is continuing, and those nations are still willing and able to buy that equipment. The huge amounts of spyware that Israel sells — Pegasus and others — wasn't "negatively impacted" by the breach last week; the spyware "works." Those nations are very happy to continue spying on their dissidents and human rights activists.

There will also be be a great deal of Western solidarity, which we're already seeing, with the Israeli state, along with this idea that it's almost our patriotic duty to support the Israeli defense industries. There was a piece in the *Financial Times* a few days ago about the supposed challenges of the startup nation, and it was written in such a depoliticized, clueless way. Essentially, it was saying, there's all these defense startups that are now sending their employees to the front to fight, potentially in Gaza. What's going to happen to these companies?

That seems like a story that could have been written by the HR department of those companies. What it ignored, principally, was what these companies have been doing for years. What do you think these weapons are for? Although there has been some coverage in the last week about the Israeli defense sector, those kinds of articles show a sense of disassociation between the reality of what happened and what the Israeli defense industry is doing.

[Ed. note: There was a similar story in the *Washington Post*, suggesting Israeli's tech industry is going to war, as if it hasn't been used to support — and even developed through — the occupation of Palestinians for years.]

The comparison I'm making in the last week or so is 9/11. 9/11 was arguably the most profound intelligence failure in modern US history. It had literally zero impact on the on the American defense industry. In fact, it had the opposite effect, because America goes into Iraq and Afghanistan, and the defense industries have never been more profitable. Israel is not going to invade Iraq or Afghanistan, but I fear Gaza will not be the end of it. A few days after the Hamas attack, the share price of a number of American defense companies started soaring.

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What do you make of the response of Western governments to what has happened so far?

For many Western elites, Western governments, and frankly, many in the mainstream media, Palestinians do not have the same value. Their lives are not as important as Israeli Jewish lives. I think that's been pretty clear in the last week and a half. It's legitimate to sympathize with Israelis after what they went through. I'm not saying the government, who was clearly at fault; I'm talking about Israeli civilians who were killed and their families. We've all heard the horrific stories, including of the people at the rave being murdered. Anyone rational is going to have sympathy with that. But as I've seen over decades, which really has gone back since 1948, there is a deep seated hatred, even contempt, for Palestinian rights that is ubiquitous amongst many elements of the political and media elites globally. And events like this really reveal how blatant it is.

You've had for decades the longest occupation in modern times of Palestine, and the only reason that's been able to continue for so long is because of Western government complicity. Obviously, the Israeli government is the one who's occupying Palestine, but they get away with it because they get complete Western impunity. The arms industry is part of that impunity. Because Israel is selling so many weapons to so many people, those nations are much less likely to be seriously critical or to suggest boycotts or divestments or sanctions or something that was used very effectively against South African apartheid back in the day. And I think the event last weekend will just strengthen those people's resolve.

But that double standard, that hypocrisy, that racism is so blatant to me. To be honest, this, again, is exactly the same as what happened after 9/11. Israel has been claiming this is their 9/11, and I understand they're going to use that for political and weaponized reasons. But the reality is that the vast bulk of the world showed solidarity with America as it undertook a brutal illegal, global campaign of terror, rendition, and torture, including invading Afghanistan and Iraq. I think it's going to be remarkably similar with Israel when they do their own horrific actions in Gaza and I fear beyond.

What's likely to happen in the coming months or year is Israel will begin or restart what they used to do decades ago, which is a global assassination campaign. I think you can almost count that as a given. In the 70s and 80s, it was very common for many Palestinian leaders or spokespeople to be assassinated by Israel. I'm not talking about in Israel, I'm talking about in European capitals and across the world. Of course, there are a lot of what Israel claims are enemies in Iran that they are killing, like Iranian nuclear scientists. But the vast bulk of the Hamas leadership is not in Gaza but around the Arab Muslim world and they will be looking over their shoulder a lot in the coming years. I suspect many of them who are comfortably living in Arab states may feel they need to move to safer, in their view, states, such as Iran or Syria. But I think Israel will go out of its way clearly to knock them off one by one — and the Western world will support that 110%.

Given what we've seen in the past week, where do you think this all goes from here, and is there anything that people can do in this moment?

A ground invasion is going to happen this week, almost certainly. Israel's planning it at the moment, but it's going to happen and it's going to be utterly devastating. There will be a massive increased number of Palestinian civilians who will die.

I've thought a lot about this in the last week and a half, and I very much see it akin to the US in Iraq and Afghanistan, where the US overthrew the Taliban and Saddam in a matter of weeks. That was the easy part. That's not difficult. Can Israel go into Gaza and decapitate Hamas militarily? Possibly. The leadership? Probably. But then what? We almost certainly will see an unbelievably brutal street-by-street guerrilla war, which will not benefit Israel because they haven't got that experience, like the US in Iraq and Afghanistan. They thought wrongly that overthrowing the Taliban and Saddam was the end of it, and of course, that was just the beginning.

America is obviously not cautioning Israel at all, which they should be, to not unleash overwhelming force. And secondly, what really worries me moving forward is what happens the next day? Let's say Israel will not tolerate any kind of major Hamas presence in Gaza and it's possible to overthrow Hamas. Then what? Who is in charge of Gaza? Who is helping the 2.3 million Palestinians living there?

Over the weekend, I noticed in the *New York Times* a paragraph that was very revealing, which is something I've been fearing for a long time: America and Israel and the Arab states are talking to the Palestinian Authority about its openness to ruling Gaza when or if Hamas is overthrown. That is possibly the longer term vision here, if you can call it vision: a corrupt, brutal Palestinian Authority that rules corruptly and brutally in the West Bank somehow riding in on Israeli tanks to rule Gaza.

There's a real deep and justified Palestinian fear when Israel demands Gazans move from the north of Gaza to the south. Yes, it's still within Gaza. But this is one more stage in a decades-long process of ethnic cleansing. Over last week, there's been a discussion I've been seeing with a lot of Israeli commentators and politicians talking about how their vision is millions of Palestinians living in tents in the Egyptian Sinai, forcibly kicked out.

Now, at the moment, Egypt apparently is refusing for that to happen. But it's real and legitimate to discuss this possibility. People need to remember that a lot of Palestinians in Gaza have been refugees. They come from generations of refugees from 1948 or 1967 — Israel's birth and the Six-Day War. And many people, including friends of mine and their families and friends are saying, *We will not leave Gaza*.

There's always been a side of me that thought the international community would not allow millions of Palestinians to be forcibly kicked out, but I don't really believe that anymore. Under the guise of keeping Palestinians safe, which would be nonsense, I worry that an Arab state could be bribed enough to take in a lot of Palestinians. That is the long-term Israeli vision; it's been designed as the vision from the beginning: as few Arabs in that territory as possible.

I've always wondered, what would be the trigger to potentially allow Israel to do something on a massive scale? I'm not just talking about low scale though horrific wars every two or three years or violence in the West Bank, as bad as that is. I'm talking about on a much larger scale, forced mass movement of people. I worry that this event is something that Israel will use to justify that and we need to raise our voices and make politicians aware that this is not simply between Israel and Hamas. It's much bigger than that.

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