



The politicicide of Palestinians

The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World

By Antony Loewenstein

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First published mid-2023, this book began attracting significant interest well before 7 October 2023, when an armed militant raid from the Gaza strip into Israel, made it essential reading. As that day dawned, Israel was in a bullish mood. Just a fortnight before, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had held up before the United Nations General Assembly a map that erased the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) amid boastful claims that goodwill for Israel transcended all barriers, with the malign exception of Iran.

October 7 changed all that. Events since then, as Antony Loewenstein ruefully admits in a newly added Preface, have filled him with deep shame. He has been unable, as a Jewish person, to accept that Israel's genocidal rampage through Gaza has been carried out in his name, and with "unqualified backing" from the "vast bulk of the organized Jewish community in the world".

Born in Australia, the grandson of refugees from Hitler's Germany, Loewenstein as an adult reclaimed German citizenship in solidarity with his ancestors killed in the Holocaust. As an independent journalist, when he began writing on Palestine early this century, and began witnessing the "daily grind" of life in the OPTs, he found the loyalty to Israel, part of every Jewish upbringing, collapsing. From then on, he has been on a journey of inquiry, into the mythology of Israel's creation, as well as its claims to being a responsible member of the world community.

What makes Israel unique, aside from its projected self-image, as "a nation that stands on its own and is unashamed to use extreme force"? Ethnic cleansing and institutionalised racism have been part of Israel's existence from its very foundation. It was created by fading colonial powers and propped up ever since by the imperial power that inherited their mantle. And even if Israel was at one time spurned by most nations born in the retreat of colonialism, today it counts many countries of the Global South, amongst them India, among its loyal clients.

Netanyahu talked up these foreign policy achievements at a 2016 meeting with the editorial board of *Haaretz*, a newspaper published in Israel, that retains a sliver of liberalism. As reported by Gideon Levy, an unbowed and robustly critical journalist, Netanyahu delighted over the fact

that Israel had "the world almost all in our hands". All that was left was a "problem with Western Europe", which clung to notions of liberal democracy long dispensed with in Israel.

Curiously, Netanyahu has also been anxious at the same time, to claim a solidarity of values with Europe, gesturing darkly towards the threat of the "other". "Europe must decide if it wants to live and prosper or wither and disappear", he has warned on record. "I am not being politically correct... Europe ends in Israel. East of Israel, there's no more Europe."

While claiming Europe's allegiance, Netanyahu believes that the values of liberalism, tolerance and equality have no place in the future. As

Israel's objective has always been the "politicide" of the Palestinians. As Baruch Kimmerling, an Israeli sociologist quoted by Loewenstein describes it, the aim is "the dissolution of the Palestinian people's existence as a legitimate social, political and economic entity". That strategy would work best only where its victims are helpless and quiescent. Resistance would be met with brutal, genocidal force. And the world would remain silent. That is the reality in play in Gaza today

Loewenstein sees it, Netanyahu's future world leadership would be all about "authoritarian capitalism", which would combine "aggressive and often racist nationalism with economic and technological might".

Israel has sustained an illegitimate occupation for over 75 years with absolute impunity. The US and its European understudies have made international law a performance prop when dealing with adversarial states. Yet Israel gets away with violations many orders more egregious. There is good reason for this, which Loewenstein is keen to expose. Among the foremost is Israel's willingness to do things that would otherwise embarrass White Western nations. They cannot yet say it out loud and the US as the guardian of the new imperial order is sometimes hobbled by domestic politics and public opinion. Israel has never had any such scruple or restraint.

In its early years, Israel did the US a vital favour, rendering aid to a

Paraguayan military dictator whose brutality deeply embarrassed even his US patrons. It simultaneously did itself a favour by securing an agreement to transfer a tenth of the population of Gaza to Paraguay for permanent resettlement. The plan never worked out but as its part of the deal, Israel in 1969 stopped searching for Nazi war criminals in Latin America.

The Chilean military dictator Augusto Pinochet was the recipient of generous assistance through his decades of torture and liquidation. He also received instruction on the means of concealment, though his patrons slipped up just a bit in the case of one disappeared person, a Jewish political leader whose family later migrated to

Israel. His son, after years of effort against severe odds, uncovered evidence of Israel's deep involvement in the atrocities of the Chilean dictatorship.

When a wave of Central American insurgencies threatened US hegemony in the 1980s, Israel stepped up to help. Its strategic marriage with Guatemalan tyranny, Loewenstein records, "was cemented with the elevation of President Efraim Rios Montt, who ruled between 1982 and 1983 and committed mass violence against the indigenous Maya population, possibly killing up to 75,000 people". Forensic examinations later carried out at the site of one of the worst massacres revealed the large-scale application of munitions made in Israel.

From its early days of posturing as an outpost of idealism, to being despotism's most reliable ally across continents – Latin America, Asia and Africa – Israel effected a transformation of global values by a singular focus on eliminating all opposition to its

occupation in perpetuity of Palestine. It hesitated little about selling arms to any nation, for whatever purpose, taking care only where a clash with US geopolitical interests was likely.

Netanyahu today revels in Israel's leadership in the technology of warfare and surveillance. "Cyber is a great business," he told Tel-Aviv University's 7th annual cybersecurity conference in 2017. "It's growing geometrically because there is never a permanent solution, it's a never-ending business." And that state of a forever war is perfect for Israel.

Since the complete conquest of Palestine in 1967, Israel's next moment of providential fortune came in 2001, with the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US. Israel was prepared then to seize the opportunity, transforming the technologies of occupation it had perfected into lucrative business opportunities. It was, says Loewenstein, a "wholesale reimagining of what societies would look like in the twenty-first century", a world that had continuously be on guard against disruptive violence. Israel had the perfect message to sell its skills in the new environment: "We have been fighting a War on Terror since our birth. We'll show you how it is done."

India's blossoming relationship with Israel comes in for much attention. Opposition to Israel's colonial annexation of Palestine was integral to India's early stance as a leader of the Global South. As adversities cropped up in the nation's pathway, and internal dissonances emerged, India's commitment to those principles began to wear thin.

A political dispute over Kashmir broke out in insurgency in the 1990s, roughly when India was warming to Israel. The US sponsorship of a peace process in Palestine, for all its ambiguities, was for a while, a major political convenience for countries anxious to make peace with Israel. India took that pathway of convenience, and from then on, Israel's strategy in the OPTs began gaining favour as India's best option in Kashmir.

With Narendra Modi's ascent to the prime minister's office, the alliance with Israel became a matter of mutual pride. Like Palestine was for Zionism, a "land without a people" that could be reclaimed on the basis of scriptural sanction, Kashmir was for Modi, "a clean slate on which a new vision of Indian identity (could) be imposed". India has become in recent years the biggest customer for Israeli weapons systems. Every year, India sends some of its top security officials for training in the skills of occupation and control that Israel has made its unique gift to the world. And India's ultimate act of homage perhaps was in applying home demolitions, widely practised by Israel in the OPTs, in containing domestic unrest by religious minorities.

Where does all this lead? Israel's objective has always been the "politicide" of the Palestinians. As Baruch Kimmerling, an Israeli sociologist quoted by Loewenstein describes it, the aim is "the dissolution of the Palestinian people's existence as a legitimate social, political and economic entity". That strategy would work best only where its victims are helpless and quiescent. Resistance would be met with brutal, genocidal force. And the world would remain silent. That is the reality in play in Gaza today. ■