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Pegasus, 'The Palestine Laboratory' and our dystopian destiny?



Israeli troops take position at the border with Gaza in southern Israel on Oct. 9, 2023. (AFP/Jack Guez)

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About 20 years ago, I had a burning desire to have a Pegasus tattooed on my body, either on my arm or ankle. The reason? I loved the image of this beautiful Greek mythological white winged horse, symbolizing speed, strength, artistic inspiration and the human spirit, which transcends the physical world.

Somehow I never got around to getting inked, maybe because I didn't quite relish the pain of the tattoo needle. But when I found out that Pegasus is the name of an Israeli made spyware used by repressive regimes to spy on their citizens, I was so relieved I didn't get the tattoo after all!

But despite that, I – and many of us – may have Pegasus embedded on ourselves in a much more sinister way: in our mobile phones that can detect and monitor our every move, and potentially, control us. Big Brother is watching you! Shades of George Orwell's 1949 dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*!

It was the title of chapter six of the book *The Palestine Laboratory. How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation around the World* (Verso, 2023), that brought it home to me: "Israeli Mass Surveillance in the Brain of Your Phone", (page 142) about the Pegasus spyware. How ironic, and what a travesty of the symbolism of its namesake mythical creature!

The Pegasus spyware was made by a company called NSO (Niv, Shalev and Omri) Group Technologies, which uses exploits – software, chunks of data, sequence of commands – that are capable of remote zero-click surveillance of smartphones.

Zero-click? Yup, "an attack that requires no user interaction to operate", i.e. no key presses or mouse clicks. These exploits are the most sought after, as the target is unaware they have been hacked. Reportedly in 2020, the NSO group was selling zero-click exploits to governments for breaking into individuals' phones.

The Palestine Laboratory is written by Antony Loewenstein (born 1974), an Australian-German freelance investigative journalist, best-selling author and film-maker. He refers to himself as "an atheist Jew" – someone who is ethnically and to a certain extent culturally Jewish, but not religious. He has authored several other books, among others *Disaster Capitalism* (2015), and *My Israel Question: Reframing the Israel/Palestine Conflict* (2009).

Loewenstein is certainly not a Zionist, i.e. adhering to the concept of a Jewish state, because by definition it discriminates against non-Jews. By the same token, he is also against the notion of a Hindu, Muslim or Buddhist state that denies the rights of others who are not of that faith or ethnicity. He is part of a growing trend of younger Jews who don't just accept the values and beliefs held sacred by their elders.

Loewenstein was in Indonesia recently, at the 20th Ubud Writers Festival (UWF), speaking among others on a panel titled "Clashes and Hope: Unpacking the Israeli-Palestine Conflict", on Oct. 22, the last day of the four-day festival. It was not an Indonesian launch, but it was the first Indonesian event for the book.

Given the horrendous attack by Hamas on Israel on Oct. 7, his talk at the UWF could not have been more timely. Predictably, there was a huge turnout at his session – standing room only – and his book sold out like hot cakes.

If the title of the book isn't intriguing enough, let me give you a glimpse of the content. Chapter one: "Selling Weapons to Anybody Who Wants Them"; chapter two: "September 11 Was Good for Business";

chapter three: "Preventing an Outbreak of Peace"; chapter four: "Selling Israeli Occupation to the World"; chapter five: "The Enduring Appeal of Israeli Domination"; chapter six: "Israeli Mass Surveillance in the Brain of Your Phone"; chapter seven: "Social Media Companies Don't Like Palestinians".

But none of these titles actually convey the horrific and dystopian reality of what is behind the seemingly "innocuous" title of the book.

The Israeli state's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza for over 50 years has given it invaluable experience in controlling the Palestinians - an "enemy" population. They have used the occupied territories as testing ground for weaponry and surveillance technology that they then export around the world - to as many as 140 countries.

"Israel has sold so much defense equipment to so many nations that it hopes to insulate itself from any political backlash to its endless occupation. Allies, whether real or transactional, have given Israel the protection it craves from international censure or appearances at the International Criminal Court" (page 217).

"The Palestine Laboratory shows in depth, and for the first time, how Israel has become a leader in developing spying technology and defense hardware that fuels some of the globe's most brutal conflicts - from the Pegasus software that hacked Jeff Bezos's and Jamal Khashoggi's phones, and the weapons sold to the Myanmar army that has murdered thousands of Rohingyas, to the drones being used by the European Union to monitor refugees in the Mediterranean who are left to drown". This is the introduction of Loewenstein's talk at the Institute of international Affairs New South Wales in Sydney on Aug. 2 this year.

Indeed, with the growth of ethnonationalism around the world in the 21st century, "Israel has built the ultimate tool for both despots and democracies".

In chapter five: "The Enduring Appeal of Israeli Domination", Loewenstein goes into detail about the links between Israel and many countries. By way of example: India, whereby the ties between the two countries "were represented in raw financial terms. Between 2015 and 2020, Israel's leading weapons export market was India, at 43 percent of total sales, and in 2020 India was Israel's largest purchaser of weaponry. In 2019, Israel was named the eighth biggest arms dealer in the world. Israeli Heron drones fly over Kashmir, just as they fly over the Palestinian occupied territories [...].The growing affection between Israel and India was not just ideological, a mutual embrace of ethnonationalism - the exchange of defense equipment helped enforce it" (page 126).

What about Indonesia?

The alleged use of Pegasus has been reported widely in the Indonesian media. According to IndonesiaLeaks, Pegasus has been used in Indonesia since 2018, allegedly by the National Police and the State Intelligence Agency (see "Israeli-made spyware Pegasus used in Indonesia since 2018, says IndonesiaLeaks", The Jakarta Post, June 14). "The National Police head of technology, informatics and communication division Insp. Gen. Slamet Uliandi denied that the institution had ever used Pegasus or other Israeli-made spyware." Naturally.

It's pretty ironic that Indonesia, a country that refuses to have diplomatic relations with Israel, would use its spyware. But this kind of hypocrisy is not uncommon among many nation states, who profess to be democratic, but who oppress and control peoples outside as well as within their boundaries, using technology developed by what the world claims to see as a pariah state. Not that the hypocrisy of governments is a surprise, but Loewenstein's book reveals the astounding extent and depth of it.

In the concluding chapter of his book, Loewenstein writes: "This book is written as a warning of the frightening world that could be born if Israeli-style ethnonationalism continues its ascent in a century already dominated by unaccountable state power from Russia and Israel to China and the United States".

I found Loewenstein's book fascinating, rich with factual and historical details, with a nuanced intertwining of journalistic immediacy, scholarly political analysis and historical reflection. The book takes a *longue durée* perspective of history, i.e. providing an understanding of long-term historical structures rather than merely "eventual history" short-term time-scale, which merely chronicles events.

Maybe now instead of a Pegasus, I will get a Phoenix tattoo. Given the death and destruction in the world, we will have to find a way to rise from the ashes.

Ooops! Phoenix also is the name of a malware. Is a dystopian future our destiny?

*** The writer is the author of *Julia's Jihad*.

