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Q&A with Antony Loewenstein, author of *The Palestine Laboratory*

Antony Loewenstein details his process and reasons for writing *The Palestine Laboratory*, with an insight on the events that have unfolded since the book's release.

Antony Loewenstein / 25 October 2023



Israel's military industrial complex uses the occupied, Palestinian territories as a testing ground for weaponry and surveillance technology that they then export around the world to despots and democracies.

For more than 50 years, occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has given the Israeli state invaluable experience in controlling an "enemy" population, the Palestinians.

Antony Loewenstein's *The Palestine Laboratory* uncovers this largely hidden world in a global investigation with secret documents, revealing interviews and on-the-ground reporting.

Verso Books: What brought you to *The Palestine Laboratory*?

Antony Loewenstein: I've been writing about Israel/Palestine for 20 years, working in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza during that time and living in East Jerusalem between 2016 and 2020. As the years progressed, I began to research the ways in which Israel was using the Palestinians as guinea pigs when developing the most "effective" ways to manage and monitor them; from "smart" walls to phone hacking tools and drones to facial recognition technology. I often saw these with my own eyes in Palestine and spoke to both Israelis and Palestinians involved in different sides of the battle.

I've written about the conflict for two decades but wanted this book to not just focus on the reality in Palestine/Israel itself but show how the conflict has been internationalized. For many nations, both democracies and dictatorships, Israel's permanent occupation offers inspiration and lessons in how to control their own unwanted populations, whether it's Muslims in India or human rights workers and critical journalists in Mexico.

I also grew up in a secular, Jewish home where supporting Israel was simply expected. As I've grown up, however, I've become increasingly disillusioned with this blind pro-Israel belief. Like many other young Jews in the Western Diaspora, Israeli actions in the West Bank and Gaza have defined my disenchantment with the concept of a Jewish supremacist state. There's a growing civil war in the Jewish communities of the UK and US over Israel and this will only grow as Israel deepens its commitment to the occupation. This book isn't about my personal identity but it infuses the reasons why I wrote it; to reframe what Jewish identity can mean in the 21st century.



The Palestine Laboratory

by [Antony Loewenstein](#)

Shortlisted for the 2023 Moore Prize for Human Rights WritingShortlisted for the 2023 Walkley non fiction journalism prizeIsrael's military industrial complex uses the occupied, Palestinian territ...

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Verso: What processes did you use to uncover the facts and data that inform *The Palestine Laboratory*?

AL: I've spent years researching this issue, both on the ground in Palestine/Israel but also with contacts across the world from Togo to India. I've uncovered declassified documents about Israel's relationships with some of the world's most repressive regimes, from apartheid South Africa to Pinochet's Chile to today's Myanmar. In the book, I publish information that has been largely kept in the Hebrew media in Israel, unknown in the wider world. I've spent years making connections with the victims of Israeli spying, from Pegasus to other phone hacking tools. I've spoken to the Israeli companies making money from this occupation industry, obtaining secret marketing brochures that they use to promote their products. I also look at my own identity as a Jew and how Israel in the 21st century impacts the future of the Jewish people.

Verso: Where and how have these repressive technologies been put to use?

AL: The list is long. The most infamous is the Pegasus phone hacking tool by NSO Group but that company is just the tip of the iceberg. I name and investigate the many other Israeli firms that are working with repressive regimes in the dark arts of surveillance. There's a major Israeli presence on the US/Mexico border with the use of massive Israeli-built surveillance towers, made by Israel's biggest defense company, Elbit, who work extensively across Palestine. The surveillance towers on the US/Mexico border hugely impact both refugees and Native Americans.

The EU use Israeli drones to monitor the Mediterranean, an eye in the sky for its border monitoring service, Frontex. I offer evidence that proves how the EU routinely ignores brown or black bodies at sea, letting them drown, or assisting the EU to send these refugees to Libya where they face slave markets and repression. Facial recognition technology is used at Israeli checkpoints, gathering huge amounts of information on Palestinians who must pass through. The companies behind this technology are selling it countless other institutions and countries. Israeli companies are leading the global disinformation industry, working for clients who want to disrupt or stop elections or smear political opponents.

Verso: What role did the IDF play in creating *The Start Up Nation*?

AL: The concept of the Start-Up Nation was a marketing tool used to promote the Jewish state as a technological innovator. Its advocates argue that the IDF is a natural place for innovation because young army recruits are pushed to find the most inventive ways to do their jobs (which for many units is maintaining the occupation). When these recruits leave the military, a huge number launch tech companies in the areas of surveillance, phone hacking and intelligence gathering. Per capita Israel has some of the highest number of these corporations in the world.

My book shows how this production line works. For example, highly decorated intelligence officers in Unit 8200 have gone on to build highly successful companies that often develop some of the sophisticated surveillance and intelligence gathering tools, sold to nations as diverse as Saudi Arabia and Myanmar.

Verso: Can you elaborate on how Israel has embraced and profited from *The War on Terror*?

AL: Israel was a global arms leader before 9/11 but the terror attacks in the 2001 turbo-charged its defense industry. Almost from the day of the attacks, Israeli spokespeople sold the message that now the world finally understood what the Jewish state had known for decades; endless war on Islamist violence was an unavoidable reality. There was a fetishization of the Israeli experience, with many US police chiefs and officers going to Israel to "learn" the best ways to do their jobs, and appropriation of Israeli language when fighting the US-backed "war on terror".

Israel was the model to be followed, so the narrative went, despite the Jewish state's brutal use of violence against Palestinians. Countless Israeli companies, whose staff had served in the IDF, turned into global masters of selling the supposed benefits of endless Israeli occupation and the techniques and tools needed to do so. From Elbit to NSO Group and Cyrox (a largely unknown Israeli company that's developed Pegasus-style infrastructure) to Raphael Defense Systems, these kinds of corporations have helped Israel to become one of the biggest defense sellers on the planet.

Verso: Can you explain how the occupation serves as both a lab and a showroom?

AL: The occupation, in the West Bank and Gaza, is the perfect place to develop and test new weapons systems including surveillance drones, intelligence gathering tools and artificial intelligence weapons. Once they've been used against Palestinians, the relevant companies market them at global weapons fairs. My book shows how "battle-tested" defense equipment is promoted with videos and photos taken in Palestine to show how "effective" it is to global buyers. I give evidence that some of the most repressive regimes on the planet, including Myanmar and Saudi Arabia, have purchased Israeli tech and weapons in the last decade with the authority and encouragement of the Israel. I also show how the occupation serves as both a lab and a showroom.

In 2023, Israel is the 10th biggest arms seller in the world, a remarkable feat for a country of 15 million people [in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza].

Verso: What is largely ignored or overlooked in the mainstream coverage of NSO Group's Pegasus phone hacking tool?

AL: NSO Group isn't a private company that's gone rogue. It's intimately tied to Israel and is used by successive Israeli governments over the last 15 years as a diplomatic tool to attract new friends. From Hungary to Mexico and Saudi Arabia to Togo, Netanyahu and the Mossad dangle NSO Group surveillance tools in front of prospective friends if they purchase them and (ideally) vote with Israel at the UN. NSO Group and the many other, less known Israeli surveillance firms are only private in name.

Verso: What is Facebook/Instagram's involvement in the Palestinian Occupation? Can you detail some Israeli social media operations?

AL: The advent of social media has been a challenge to Israel because for decades there were very few Palestinian voices in the Western media. With the rise of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, a multitude of voices, often critical of Israel's occupation, are spreading their message and challenging the dominant, pro-Israel narrative. As a result, Israel has formed close relationships with all these companies and my book shows many examples of critical posts about Israel often deleted, demoted or shadow-banned, particularly during periods of rising tensions in the Middle East.

My book shows a litany of interventions by social media company enforcers to either ban Palestinians or censor them.

This is the new battle space for Israel's war on Palestinians and anyone who seriously challenges its narratives.

The leading social media companies are often operating in line with US State Department priorities and highlighting and demoting "friends" and "enemies" accordingly.

Verso: As the US cracks down on TikTok, citing concerns over Chinese cybersurveillance, why do you think Israeli technology is not viewed similarly?

AL: TikTok finds itself in the crosshairs of US politicians who want to crack down on Chinese surveillance and the Chinese government. It's worth remembering that only a few days ago Beijing was a surveillance friend of the West and its leaders warmly welcomed. There's no doubt, however, that Chinese surveillance tech is both repressive at home, used against all its citizens but particularly minorities such as the Uighurs, but also increasingly sold globally to states that admire China's crackdown on freedoms.

As I show in my book, Israeli surveillance tech is far more ubiquitous around the world than anything China has developed, and yet Israeli companies are largely exempt from censure (NSO Group and its Pegasus tool is a notable exception in the US though the company's equipment is still widely used and abused across the globe).

The only way to view this double standard is that China is now an official enemy of the West while Israel remains a friend. The tools of repression are little different between the two countries but the West prefers to partner with states that share our "values".

Verso: How has the Russian invasion of Ukraine influenced the Israeli export of surveillance and defense hardware?

AL: Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Israeli defense companies have been overwhelmed with interest from European states. Missile defense shields, anti-missile and anti-aircraft systems, missiles and drones have been sold to a number of countries including Finland and Germany. Until recently, Israel refused to sell Ukraine any offensive weapons, afraid of Russia because it wanted to have freedom to continue bombing targets in Syria (where Russia has huge influence). However, in March 2023, Israel announced that it would sell anti-drone jamming systems to Ukraine to assist in its war against Putin's Russia. All this equipment was first developed and tested in Palestine, hence Europe's interest in the technology.

Verso: What does the new Israeli government mean for the laboratory of occupation?

AL: In short, little has changed. Israel has been selling weapons and surveillance tech for decades, regardless of who sits in the Prime Minister's chair. It's true that the last decade saw a massive surge in defense sales during the rule of Netanyahu because he expanded the development of cyber weapons, phone hacking tools and private intelligence gathering firms. His goal was to turn Israel into a global leader in defense tech. Alongside that, the rise of global ethno-nationalism, from India to Myanmar, has given Israel an opening in promoting itself as the ultimate ethno-nationalist model.

Verso: How did the extensive Israeli surveillance systems fail on Oct 7th, and how might the current Israeli retaliation ultimately feedback into this defense sector?

AL: Israel's vaunted surveillance capabilities in and around Gaza have been a combination of human intelligence, often by blackmailing Palestinians who want to exit Gaza for medical or educational reasons, drones and tailored ops. Before the recent Hamas attack on Israel, it was widely presumed that Israel had successfully controlled the land, sea and air borders of Gaza. What I'm hearing is that Israel, like the US after 9/11, overly relied on digital surveillance and far less on the human intelligence side in the last 5-10 years, leaving open the possibility of a major security breach. Of course, the wider context is that it's impossible to successfully occupy a people for decades and not receive violent resistance. Israel's devastating response to bombard Gaza will achieve little more than further extremism.

However, despite the recent Israeli intelligence failures, I expect Israel's defense sector to continue its upwards growth due to large numbers of nations around the world still overly reliant on Israeli surveillance tech, Russia's invasion of Ukraine pushing large numbers of the world to purchase Israeli missile defense shields and Western sympathy for Israel after the Hamas attack.



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