

The Palestine Laboratory: How technology helps Israel cosy up to the world's autocrats

In his latest book, journalist Antony Loewenstein explores Israel's ties with autocracies and how they have contributed to human rights violations



Loewenstein takes a hard look at Israel's support for autocrats across the world (MEE)

By Patrick O. Strickland

14 June 2023 11:09 BST | Last update: 14 hours 33 mins ago

78 Shares

In 1965 and 1966, under the authoritarian rule of General Suharto, **Indonesia** killed hundreds of thousands in a blood-soaked anti-communist purge.

Nicolae Ceausescu, notoriously **anti-Semitic**, began his steel-fisted rule of **Romania** in 1965, a 24-year tenure that included blocking **Holocaust** survivors from leaving.

Over nearly 29 years, the Duvalier family mass murdered and exiled political opponents in Haiti until their regime's belated collapse in 1986.

In all three cases, the dictatorships in question enjoyed warm - and politically lucrative - relationships with **Israel**.

But you don't have to crawl too far back in history to find such grim examples. From the European Union's borders to the US-Mexico frontier, and from Myanmar's violence against Rohingya to India's assaults on Kashmir, Israel has played a part in supplying its weaponry or technology later used in violations of human rights.

Stay informed with MEE's newsletters

Sign up to get the latest alerts, insights and analysis, starting with Turkey Unpacked

Your email

So writes longtime journalist Antony Loewenstein in his new book, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World*, an incisive exploration of Israel's sordid ties with autocracies, regimes engaged in mass displacement campaigns and governments needling their way into your phone. *The Palestine Laboratory* takes a hard look at the history and present of such relationships.

Loewenstein, who started reporting in Israel and **Palestine** in the early 2000s, recounts early in the book his own familial history with displacement. His grandparents fled Nazi Germany and Austria as Jewish refugees in 1939. In Australia, he was raised in what he describes as a liberal Zionist home.

Early in his reporting career, he still clung to the beliefs around which he grew up: a two-state solution that would ensure Israel's existence as a Jewish state. But bearing witness to the systematic decimation of Palestine and its people can make one rethink those positions.

"Today I support a one-state solution to the conflict where all its citizens can live equally," Loewenstein writes. "My evolution in the last twenty years mirrors the growing global awareness of what Israel has always been and where it's headed."

Probing Israel

That's the starting point for *The Palestine Laboratory*, and it animates everything that follows: an exhaustive probe into Israel's dealings with arms sales around the world, dictatorships and global surveillance.

Loewenstein recounts Israel's ties with the **Chilean** regime of Augusto Pinochet, whose fascistic military rule endures as a symbol of Cold War-era anti-communism through the memes of far-right extremists who admire it for tossing leftists from helicopters.

Much of Loewenstein's probe into Israeli-Chilean ties, for instance, centres around the story of Daniel Silberman, a Chilean Jew whose father was arrested, jailed, tortured and eventually forcibly disappeared.



Loewenstein's book examines Israeli arms and dealings in several countries, including apartheid South Africa (Ernest Cole)

The surviving Silbermans later escaped to Israel, but it "took a long time for Daniel to become fully aware of US and Israeli state complicity in Pinochet's rule and his father's death", Loewenstein explains. Israel had continued to hawk arms to Pinochet's regime throughout its blood-soaked lifespan.

Elsewhere, Loewenstein touches on Israeli arming of and dealings with apartheid South Africa, South Sudan and Myanmar, among other countries steeped in systemic human rights violations.

Crucial to Loewenstein's analysis is the advertising value of Israel's 56-year occupation of the **West Bank** and East Jerusalem, as well as its 16-year blockade of the **Gaza Strip**, one of the most densely populated parts of the world.

The Israeli military's use of high-grade technology to restrict and monitor the movement of millions of Palestinians, as well as saturate bomb the besieged coastal enclave, often play into the sales pitch. After all, no marketing strategy rings quite as effective as "battle-tested".

An especially lucrative boon to business came in the form of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US. Even before the attacks, the Israeli arms industry "had become addicted to the never-ending cash cow of autocracies needing armaments".

But after the **attacks** on New York City and **Washington DC**, the global war on terror "turbocharged Israel's defence sector", Loewenstein argues. Because Israel's Ministry of Defence oversees foreign deals, there's no argument to be had about state complicity.

Business as usual

Drones, missiles and surveillance equipment have brought in billions over the years, and Israel earned a global reputation as a supplier of surveillance tools, counterterrorism technology and weapons.

But reputations aren't always good, and as Loewenstein points out, public opinion towards Israel has plummeted over the last two decades. Still, business goes on.



The Heron drone was first tested in the occupied Palestinian territories before being exported to Europe and the US (AFP/Ahmad Gharabli)

The Heron drone used by Frontex, the European Union's external border agency, to monitor migrant boats in the Mediterranean, had been used on Palestinians for years. "The EU has partnered with leading Israeli defence companies to use its drones, and of course years of experience in Palestine is a key selling point," Loewenstein explains.

Even in 2004, more than a decade before the uptick in refugee arrivals to the EU, **US border authorities used the Hermes 450** drone to keep a watchful eye on the US-Mexico border, where the aircraft played a pivotal role in preventing migrants from crossing into the country. In August 2022, the Times of Israel published a puff piece recycling Israeli military talking points that boasted of how the Hermes 900 afforded "surgical" precision during an assault on the Gaza Strip.

Such "surgical" strikes killed **at least 17 Palestinian civilians**, among them women and children, according to Haaretz. In other words, more than half of those slain were civilians.

Political reportage

In this way, Israel has turned its occupation into a profitable enterprise, and Israeli arms and surveillance companies have rarely been shorted an opportunity to turn a buck - even at the expense of lives.

Take the tragic demise of Javier Valdez Cardenas, a Mexican journalist who investigated corruption and the cartels' drug operations and was shot and killed in 2017. Later, his wife discovered the Mexican government had spied on him using Pegasus, a phone-hacking tool sold by an Israeli company called NSO Group.

Profit can come in many forms, and as Loewenstein convincingly argues, outfits like NSO work "with the Israeli state to further its foreign policy goals". When Israel or Israeli companies furnish the means for repression, Israel could depend on the client country's support on the global stage.

The Palestine Laboratory places Israel, its arms industry and its surveillance architects in the web of global human rights violators from North America to China, and no one with a red hand and a cash bag gets let off the hook.

As the Israeli colonisation of Palestine plods forward at a breakneck pace and its own facade of democracy trembles, Loewenstein's book stands out as a new addition to the pantheon of important works of political reportage about Israel's role in the world, and what toll - especially for Palestinians - that role may take.

The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World by Antony Loewenstein is published by **Verso**.

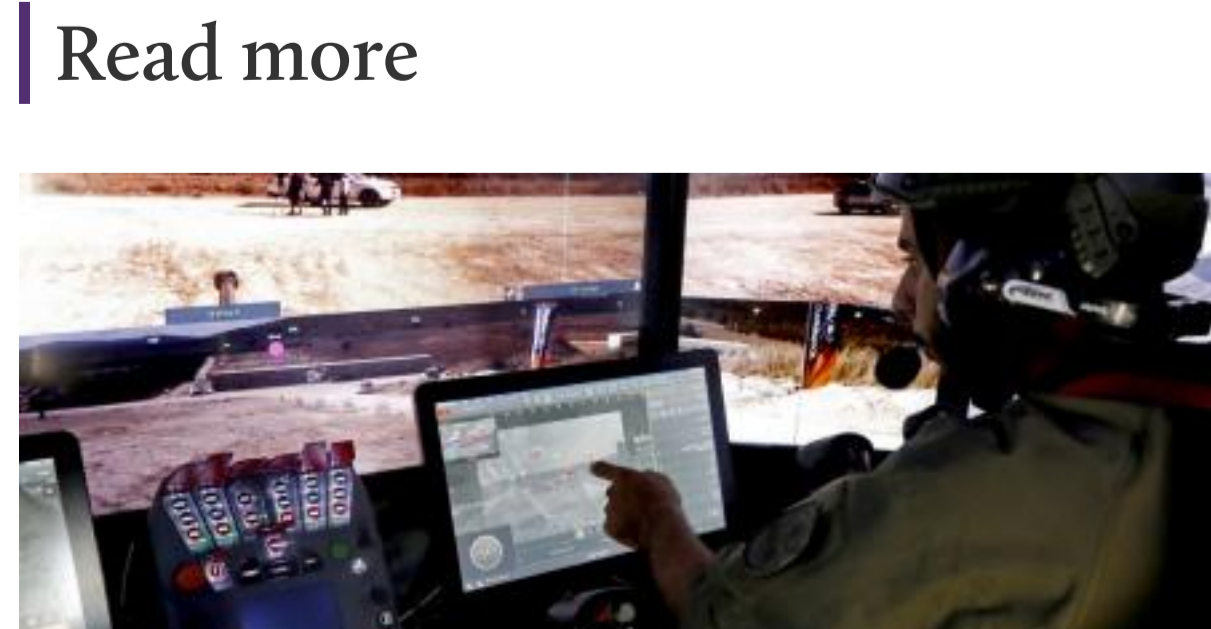


Israel's arms and spyware: Used on Palestinians, sold to the world

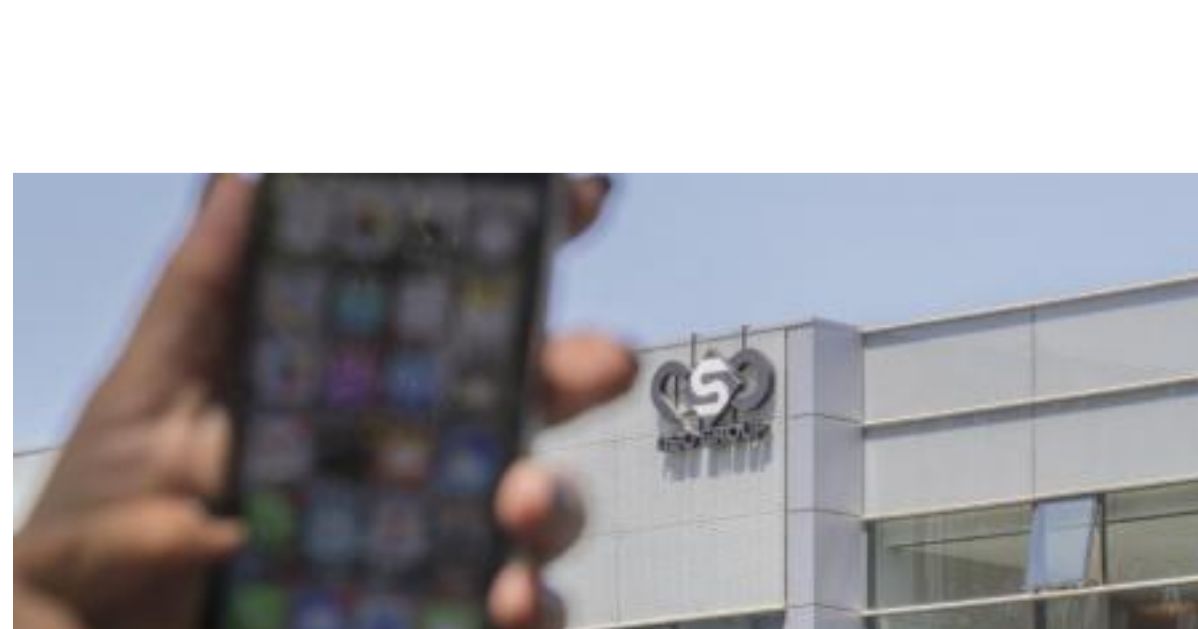
[Read More >](#)

Middle East Eye delivers independent and unrivalled coverage and analysis of the Middle East, North Africa and beyond. To learn more about republishing this content and the associated fees, please fill out this [form](#). More about MEE can be found [here](#).

Read more



Inside Israel
 "Israel's arms and spyware: Used on Palestinians, sold to the world"
 Antony Loewenstein



Occupation
 "How Israel turned Palestine into a surveillance tech dystopia"
 Nadim Nashif



Pegasus spyware
 Pegasus and other spyware threatens UN human rights work, Guterres warns