

Home / The Listener / World

LISTENER

Writer's 'uncomfortable truth' about Israel's 'battle-tested' weapons tested on occupied Palestinians

LISTENER

By Peter Bale

21 Jul, 2023 05:00 AM ⌚ 11 mins to read

Israel's surveillance technology helps maintain control over five million Palestinians. Photo / Alamy

“Israel has developed a world-class weapons industry with equipment conveniently tested on occupied Palestinians, then marketed as ‘battle-tested,’” Australian journalist Antony Loewenstein writes in *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World*. “Cashing in on the IDF [Israel Defence Forces] brand has successfully led to Israeli security companies being some of the most successful in the world.”

It is an uncomfortable truth that Israel has built a high-tech export industry based on highly efficient methods of mass surveillance, communications interception and societal control. Autocracies and democracies alike buy those products knowing they are proven tools Israel uses to maintain the occupation, as well as its better-known defensive weapons.

For those brought up with the idea of “plucky” Israel as a beacon of democracy in a hostile region, Loewenstein’s assertion is confronting. For those hostile to Israel or just concerned at the plight of Palestinians, the book will validate their belief that Israel plays the “anti-Semitism” card to shield itself from criticism over the occupation.

Those who defend Israel come what may, or who see it as singled out by secret and not-so-secret anti-Semites will loathe the book as much as some loathe Loewenstein, who is visiting New Zealand this month. He is accused of being a “self-hating Jew” who betrays the memory of his family members obliterated in the Holocaust, that central pillar of the creation story of modern Israel.

All these facets are in the book and in Loewenstein’s evidently painful personal journey to question some of the founding shibboleths of Israel.

His grandparents fled Berlin for Australia in 1939; most of the family they left behind died at the hands of the Nazis. Melbourne-born Loewenstein’s first book exploring his identity, *My Israel Question*, came in 2006. In 2011, he surprised his family by becoming a German citizen (he retains dual citizenship). “My identity is a conflicted and messy mix that incorporates Judaism, atheism, anti-Zionism, Germanic traditions and Anglo-Saxon-Australian beliefs,” the filmmaker and freelance journalist wrote in the *Guardian* in 2013. “And yet I both routinely reject and embrace them all.”

Now based in Sydney, he tells the *Listener*: “Israel claims to speak in my name as a Jew. [Prime Minister Benjamin] Netanyahu and various Israeli leaders and Jewish leaders routinely say that Judaism and Zionism are inseparable. My response to that has always been, and even more so now, based on the fact that they’re supporting and backing pogroms: ‘Not in my name.’”

His latest book tackles the dichotomy of a nation founded on ideas of freedom and self-determination presiding over the oppression, since the 1967 occupation of Palestinian

territories, of another people to whom it is inextricably tied. In the occupation, Israel has developed highly scalable technologies that allow it to maintain control over five million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza – something it could never do with purely military or policing tactics. The technology makes it viable.

Defying a hostile world

Loewenstein argues Israel befriends and supplies autocratic regimes with the technologies they need to oppress their people partly as insurance against future criticism of the occupation. Since its foundation, Israel has had uncomfortable bedfellows – relationships built on a mutual need to defy a hostile world: apartheid-era South Africa, Pinchot-era Chile, then-Burma, Sri Lanka, and the then-Rhodesia.

Today, that policy of realist, some would say cynical, alliances is a little more transparent. Supporters would say it's built on the idea Israel faces uniquely existential threats and must do what it can to survive.

Israel evidently sold Saudi Arabia the snooping technology it needed to snare and then dismember Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi and intercept the phone messages of Amazon founder Jeff Bezos. Mexico uses Israeli technology to track journalists and activists. The United Arab Emirates, Morocco and Rwanda keep tabs on their people with Israeli tools.

“Israel's defence industry is amoral because that's how it grows. It will sell to anyone except for official enemies like North Korea, Iran or Syria,” Loewenstein writes.

Less-autocratic administrations also take advantage of Israeli skills: using drones to track would-be immigrants across the Mediterranean, surveilling the US border with Mexico, or sending police and other agents of the state to Israel for “real-world” training.

The surveillance and containment technology is in addition to the well-known historical Israeli expertise in more kinetic military technology developed over decades facing the threat from Arab neighbours.

Few would argue that Israel needed a defence industry and used its skill – and the support of the US – to develop it. It is also widely known – despite its best efforts to keep it secret – that Israel is an undeclared nuclear power.

Israel is among the top dozen military exporters in the world. Loewenstein's argument is that its most modern cyber tools are those best suited to social and population control, based in the technologies needed to maintain a large-scale occupation.

"Israel is admired as a nation that stands on its own and is unashamed in using extreme force to maintain it," Loewenstein writes, frequently using the Human Rights Watch label that Israel has become "an apartheid state".

The Palestine Laboratory is almost as much a business book as a critique of the occupation. Loewenstein lists familiar companies such as NSO – developer of the Pegasus software used to penetrate Apple and Android phones – but describes many others we hear less of such as Cellebrite – used by police forces around the world, including in New Zealand.

Israeli vendors of surveillance technology from facial recognition to watchtowers and unscalable walls are world leaders – often stock market-listed companies or darlings of venture capitalists. Israeli cyber companies raised US\$8.8 billion from 100 deals in 2021 – 40% of global funding for cyber, the book says. They and the defence hardware companies from Israel are brilliant at what they do and known for innovation.

Loewenstein argues they are also arms of an increasingly right-wing Israeli government and what he calls an "ethnonationalist" state based on ethnic or religious supremacy.

Pipeline of skills

Much of this tech sector, whether related to surveillance and defence or from advertising to mapping, has its origins in the Israel Defence Forces, especially the famed unit 8200, which hires bright young things to hack, devise, develop, deploy and defend whatever is needed to keep the IDF ahead of Israel's foes – domestic or foreign.

It is a pipeline of skills that connects the foundational ideas of Israel as a fragile crescent in a hostile region; a homeland for Jews whose civilisation endured an attempted obliteration in the Holocaust; a porcupine not to be messed with; and the fast-evolving world of modern technology, encrypted communications, cloud computing and money.

There is much to be proud of in the Israeli tech sector, but Loewenstein argues that there is a darkness at the core: all that talent put at the service of increasingly right-wing

governments bent on containing Palestinians and marketing those skills to oppressive regimes.

The book is not what you might call balanced. It does offer context, but it is a perspective, a polemic even, based on years of reporting in and on Israel and the occupied territories. It is, in a sense, asking questions that Jews in the diaspora and in Israel ask: Is this the Israel we want? Is this what the founders imagined? Is this who we are?

“There will be a reckoning and there will be a turning point. It won't happen tomorrow, and it won't happen next week. It will happen,” Loewenstein says.

Loewenstein has clearly taken personal risks and personal hits because of his views and what some may see as an activist approach to his journalism on Israel. His is not a disinterested view.

However, he is not a single-issue fanatic and has reported on other countries and authored books and documentaries on a wide range of subjects.

In a Zoom interview ahead of his New Zealand visit, it proved hard to separate the book and its exposition on the risks of Israel supplying its surveillance skills to almost anyone prepared to pay for it from the personal story of Antony Loewenstein, the secular Jew and critic of Israel. He is dealing with profound personal concern at the direction of Israel, knowing it is increasingly difficult to separate an anti-Zionist position from the evil of anti-Semitism.

“While the word ‘Zionist’ can be used in an anti-Semitic smear, it removes the ability of Palestinians to condemn the daily violence and oppression by Zionist actors,” Loewenstein writes. “Many Palestinians and Arabs use the word ‘Zionist’ when referencing colonisation of Palestinian lands and not to demonise Jews.”

He challenges acceptance of the definition of anti-Semitism published by the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance, which includes criticism of Israel when couched in terms of collective Jewish identity. That definition, clearly the result of deep thought, is often used by supporters of Israel to label criticism of Israel as anti-Semitic.

“I think it's nonsense and needs to be pushed back against,” he says. “The belief that Israel should not be a Jewish state but should be a democracy is a legitimate point of

view. The second point is that the Jewish groups that advocate this say 'we should be the final arbiter of what is anti-Semitic'. Are we going to trust the judgment of organisations and groups that have spent decades backing a brutal occupation? Those groups want to tell me or you what's anti-Semitic? I reject that entirely."

A fresh voice

Loewenstein is a fresh voice in a long line – centuries long – of Jewish critics of Israel and Zionism (the drive for a Jewish homeland – most often in the Holy Land, but with detours to Crimea and Uganda). German-born American historian and political philosopher Hannah Arendt, who defined totalitarianism and the "banality of evil", was labelled a self-hating Jew, as was British-American historian and philosopher Tony Judt.

Loewenstein says, "I think there is a way to have a modern Jewish identity, which is anti-Zionist, which is proudly Jewish, which believes in human rights for all Jews and Palestinians, and not feel somehow that I have to, as a Jew, apologise for not doing my apparent duty ... as a person whose family were killed in the Holocaust. I don't need to justify my position to people who dare to claim that somehow I'm not being a good Jew."

Some of those who speak out for Israel argue that critics pick on Israel as opposed to other less-democratic, more-oppressive, or more-militaristic states. One way or another, they will usually say it is rooted in anti-Semitism or at least what the US historian David Nirenberg calls "anti-Judaism" – a historical sense of Jews as "other" and worthy of blame.

In New Zealand, some pro-Israel Jewish groups may use the fact Loewenstein's book tour is backed by the John Minto-led Palestine Solidarity Network Aotearoa to dismiss his case.

An alternative view could be that Israel has been a focal point of world history and a sense of collective guilt since its modern foundation. Israel matters. It is precisely because Israel claims a special status that Loewenstein is so critical.

He understands the argument that the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza are not reliable or desirable interlocutors for their people with Israel. However, he argues that in the realpolitik world Israel inhabits, that is the way leaders

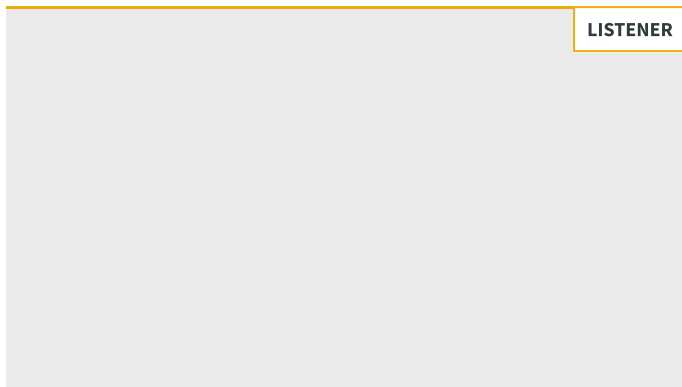
want it – a corrupt and brutal set of counterparties who make negotiation impossible. He advocates a one-state Israeli democracy, not a Jewish state or a two-state solution.

“I am proud of being Jewish. I’m secular. I’m an atheist. I don’t practise my faith, but I’m proud of being Jewish. But there has been, as I see it, a profound moral failure, that a Jewish establishment – advocates of Israel born in the ashes of the Holocaust – have turned the lessons from that on their head. They have a view that it’s legitimate to occupy and brutalise and murder Palestinians.”

The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation Around the World, by Antony Loewenstein (Scribe Publishing. \$40). Loewenstein’s visit to New Zealand (July 17-21) is supported by the Palestine Solidarity Network Aotearoa.

- Peter Bale is a New Zealand-born journalist who has held senior roles at Reuters, the Financial Times, the Times and CNN.

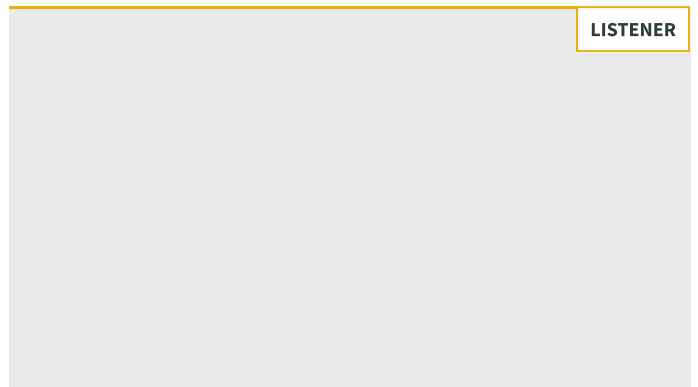
Latest from The Listener



LISTENER

Wine guide: Top organic wines to try this weekend

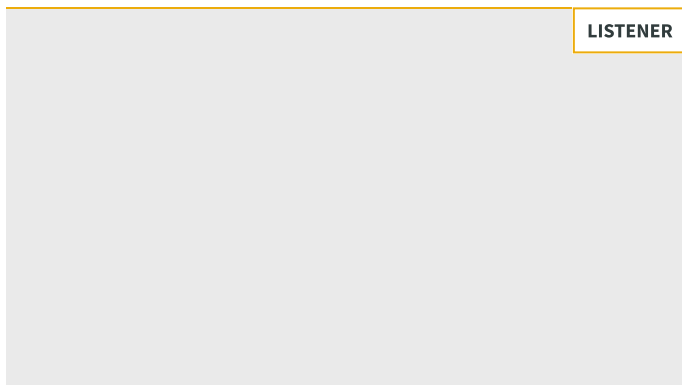
21 Jul 12:01 PM



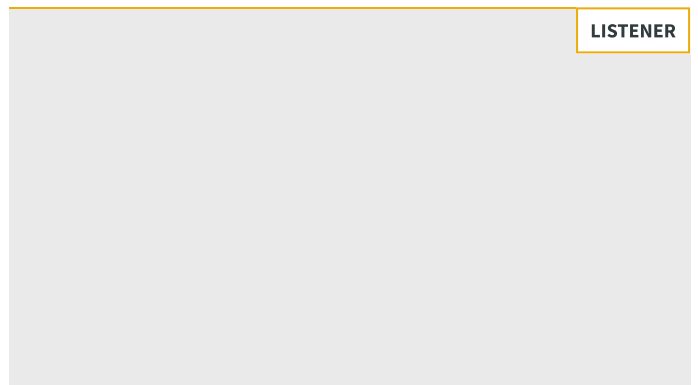
LISTENER

Why TV series serves James Cook an embarrassing moment

21 Jul 12:00 PM



LISTENER



LISTENER

Will the Football Ferns be able to ride feel-good wave deep into the World Cup?

20 Jul 05:00 AM

Top 10 best-selling New Zealand books this week

21 Jul 08:45 AM