

Antony Loewenstein

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

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Antony Loewenstein's book, *The Palestine Laboratory: How Israel Exports the Technology of Occupation around the World*, traces a history of diplomatic and military links between Israel and other nations as well as dictatorships, highlighting how it has exported weapons, surveillance technology and methods of domination. Palestine is Israel's laboratory for methods of control and separation of populations, of course.

Loewenstein opens his first chapter on Israeli state complicity in Pinochet's regime, considering the story of Daniel Silberman, who was six years old when the coup occurred in Chile. He and his family left the country for good and settled in Israel in 1977. Daniel sought news regarding the disappearance of his father, who had been kidnapped from a Santiago prison in 1974 and never seen again. After some research, Israel refused to disclose relevant information to Silberman's relatives concerning his disappearance. Later on, it became clear that Israel had an important role in Pinochet's brutality, training Chilean personnel to aid the repression of its own people and supplying arms. After that, working closely with the US for decades, Israel supported the police forces of Guatemala, El Salvador, Argentina, Honduras, Paraguay and Costa Rica during the Cold War,

for instance, or trained and armed death squads in Colombia in the 2000s.

"Israeli history can be split into two eras: before and after 1967" according to Loewenstein. "Before the Six-Day War (1967), Israeli policy was not noble but at least gave the rhetorical impression of (sometimes) opposing repression" (60). In 1963, referring to apartheid in South Africa, for instance, Israeli stated that it opposed policies of apartheid, colonialism and racial or religious discrimination wherever they exist since Jewish people understand what it means to be victims. Moreover, at that time, in the mid-1960s, Israel bonded with newly independent African states as well, supporting their postcolonial freedoms—even though its advocacy was basically a way to go against what it perceived as Arab and communist defamation.

After the Six-Day War in 1967—with combat experience and having tested weapons, equipment and an ideology of domination through the occupation of Palestinians in East Jerusalem, The West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights—Israel gained a new, important position as a military powerhouse. Furthermore, the 1982 Lebanon War served as a warning of the limits of Israel's power because of a series of attacks and counter-attacks that had caused civilian casualties on both sides.

11 September was “good for business”, as Loewenstein provocatively suggests in the title of the second chapter, since “terror attacks on New York and Washington turbocharged Israel’s defence sector and internationalized the war on terror that the Jewish state had been fighting for decades”, as the author writes (85). Prime Minister Netanyahu himself has stated more than once that the assault strengthened the bond between the two nations since Israel had experienced over so many decades the same terror that the United States was experiencing at that time. The *Israelification* of US security services accelerated immediately after that. Israel wanted to show the World how to fight a War on Terror. In the 21st century, it began to play a key role under the radar in supporting different regimes (such as Sri Lanka and Myanmar) in their ethnic cleansing, negotiating deals for drones, mobile phone-hacking systems, rifles, military training, and warships. Israel is exporting what Loewenstein calls the “politicide”, a process it is employing against Palestinian people, in order to dissolve their existence “as a legitimate social, political, and economic entity” (105). In the third chapter, titled “Preventing an Outbreak of Peace”, the author refers also to Israel’s positioning during the Syrian Civil War. It maintained a close relationship with Russia, negotiating a drone program developed by the company Xtend. These drones could be remotely controlled, using Israeli intelligence and augmented and virtual-reality technology, and then armed with Russian missiles.

The COVID-19 pandemic seems to mark another turning point, offering the perfect opportunity for Israeli surveillance firms to attract business. Israel’s response to COVID-19 was unprecedented in the Western world. Indeed, the country used the internal security service, the Shin Bet, to track and monitor potential COVID cases and social media posts to scout for any evidence of social gatherings. By April 2020, Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett announced that the government was partnering

with the spyware company NSO to tackle the pandemic. After that, Israel started using its arsenal of surveillance capabilities and hired private firms to provide extra controlling services. Moreover, since 2019, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has used extensive facial recognition with a growing network of cameras and mobile phones to document every Palestinian in the West Bank, through the Blue Wolf app, which serves to capture faces and compare them to a massive database of images on social media. In 2022, the IDF installed a crowd remote-controlled system, with the ability to fire tear gas, sponge-tipped bullets, and stun grenades, as well as a modular light remote-controlled weapon station (LRCWS) that recognizes the target and can predict its movements through advanced image processing. This equipment was sold to more than a dozen countries.

The final chapter of *The Palestine Laboratory* focuses on how social media companies censored Palestinian content, with the result, at times, of inciting violence and spreading disinformation. Facebook, YouTube, TikTok and Twitter have accepted Israeli government requests to take down content which were critical of Israel or showed the Palestinian point of view in order to prevent violence from extremist elements. Loewenstein writes of the number of posts that have been removed in 2021, when the IDF stormed the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem as hundreds of Palestinians prayed since the geo-tagged location had mistakenly associated with “violence or a terrorist organization”. The Holy site’s name had been confused with the Palestinian militant group Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades. On the other hand, “Israeli intelligence officers in the West Bank manage Facebook pages to promote the idea that the occupation is nonexistent, Palestinian resistance is immoral, and that Jews and Arab co-exist peacefully” (309). Loewenstein talks about *digital orientalism* as a new form of control used by Western social media companies, discriminating against people from the Middle East and North Africa, seen with

suspicion by definition. This trend seems clear comparing how social media companies viewed the conflict in Ukraine and Palestine, that “one occupier was evil while the other deserved respect” (276).

In conclusion, the book poses a question: if dictatorships such as China or Russia can be considered a threat, then why is Israeli’s ideology treated more leniently? The answer could be that Israel, as an ally of many Western countries, has perfected and led the “global pacification industry”, and there is currently no political or financial price being paid for maintaining this system. Our time of conflict, insecurity, wars and even the climate crisis will benefit Israel’s defence industry, extending its appeal. In addition to the nations that more directly seek to obtain some of the most intrusive and lethal military equipment on the planet, ethnonationalism is growing,

countries are turning against multiculturalism and liberal values, reducing democratic possibilities—and Israeli technology can bolster these tendencies. Since the re-election of Netanyahu as prime minister in November 2022, with the most extreme right-wing coalition in the country’s history, there has been an increasing escalation in the threats facing Palestinians. Nowadays, after the Hamas-led attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, it is clear how this book stands as a warning of “the frightening world that could be born if Israeli-style ethnonationalism continues its ascent” (293), since the government wants to legitimize its occupation as well as that “despotism has never been so easily shareable with compact technology” (34).

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