ISRAELI SURVEILLANCE SYSTEM: HEAVY CONSEQUENCES FOR PALESTINIANS

ACHRS STATEMENT | MATTHIAS ALFFRAM

The Israeli authorities use surveillance as a tool to eliminate rights, physical space or presence, and even - in extreme cases - life

Last month during the United Nations General Assembly, António Guterres - the UN secretary General - addressed concerns over the threat that spyware programs, such as the Israeli military-grade software "Pegasus", pose for human rights activists and organizations. He expressed particular concern for the safety of Palestinian, Bahraini and Moroccan human rights defenders, especially those having links with the United Nations; as some of them had been subjected to arbitrary detention, torture and sexual assault by security forces.

The Pegasus spyware is a surveillance software, developed by the Israeli cyber surveillance company NSO Group, licensed and sold to governments around the world. It has the ability to "infect" and collect data from billions of mobile phones worldwide without the user's consent. It can extract any information, record calls, copy messages, track and even secretly videotape from mobile devices.

The Pegasus spyware is considered to be one of the most advanced surveillance systems ever developed however, it is only one of the many weapons in Israel's growing arsenal of surveillance technologies.

Israel: a surveillance State

Israel is a surveillance state par excellence. It possesses a wide range of vigilant technologies, a diverse military and intelligence agency, as well as a large military-industrial complex allowing Tel Aviv to establish itself as a world leader in the development and export of surveillance technologies.

This expertise and technological know-how allows the Israeli government to legitimize - especially in the West - its abusive control and surveillance practices towards Palestinians. They do not only target suspected Palestinians, but also political opponents, journalists, members of civil society and anyone they perceive as a threat.

In the Palestinian Territories, Israeli surveillance is systematic and daily. It combines a mix of low and high-tech tools, but also old-fashioned intelligence and data gathering methods. High-tech tools are generally sophisticated technologies, enabling remote data gathering and surveillance such as drones, robots, cameras, computer viruses and spyware - namely Pegasus.

Low-tech tools, on the other hand, include older or less sophisticated technologies such as identity cards, checkpoints, telephone tapping, but also old-fashioned information gathering methods like the use of intelligence agents, police forces, informants and spies. These different tools and methods are complementary, allowing a total control of the population and territory; two central aspects of Israeli's surveillance system.

According to Scholar Helga Tawil-Souri - who focuses on spatiality, technology and politics in the Middle East - Israel's surveillance system controls and "keeps an eye on Palestinians while constituting them as security threats and dangerous population". Its aim is essentially articulated around the exclusion of Palestinians, through restriction to mobility and access to territory, rather than inclusion. In other words, as Ariel Handel puts it: "the Israeli authorities use surveillance as a tool to eliminate rights, physical space or presence, and even - in extreme cases - life" rather than trying to integrate Palestinians into society and allowing them to lead a normal life.

Surveillance system implemented in Palestinian Territories
In Jerusalem and in the West Bank, checkpoints, security cameras and internet monitoring are among the most widely used surveillance methods implemented by the Israeli regime.

Checkpoints

The original objective of checkpoints was to regulate population movement, but also to identify and gather information. However, since the emergence of the second intifada - in the early 2000's - their purpose has drastically changed. Checkpoints and roadblocks were no longer means of regulation and data gathering, but rather a mean of restricting all Palestinian movement, in order to deter them from moving at all.

Today, in most of the the 600 checkpoints spread across the West Bank, nothing is even written down, recorded or even transmitted, and passage regulations are unclear and constantly changing. They are often improvised checkpoints, without any technological equipment, and their function "resembles more to a piece of theatre than an administrative act", according to Handel.

Some scholars - such as Lyon, Zureik and Abu-Laban - argue that this method of surveillance and control enables Israeli authorities to "radicalize" Palestinian time. According to them, mastering time is an essential condition because it allows humans to distinguish themselves from animals. However, with the use of checkpoints and roadblocks "Palestinian space shifts, time slows and mobility is constrained" while Israelis, on the other hand, have "freedom of movement and expansion through space and control", states Handel.

Security cameras & biometric devices

Today, Jerusalem in one of the most monitored cities in the world. Thousands of digital cameras and biometric devices are spread across the city. According to 2014 estimations, there was one security camera for every 100 Palestinian resident. Most of them are ultra-sophisticated, capable of facial recognition and reading license plates, but also equipped with tracking systems, aerial view and some even able to see behind walls.

Recently, the Washington Post revealed that the Israeli army is using a new advanced facial recognition technology in the West Bank dubbed "Blue Wolf".

It is a smartphone technology that collects pictures of Palestinians - captured in the streets, checkpoints and in their homes by soldiers and security cameras - and later stocked in a database run by the Israeli military and intelligence. This new technology alerts soldiers if a person is to be detained, arrested or left alone and is often used against international human right activists to prevent them from re-entering Israel.

Internet monitoring

In addition to ultra-sophisticated cameras, the Israeli government has also invested millions of dollars in other surveillance methods, such as the Special Intelligence unit called "unit 8200". It is comprised of several thousand people, capable of intercepting almost all kinds of tele-communications; including phone calls, text messages, emails and online content in Israel, Palestine, but also abroad.

Although Israel's surveillance system continues to use low-tech surveillance equipment and old-fashioned data gathering methods in everyday life, the emergence and constant evolution of new surveillance technologies encourages the Israeli secret services to adapt and redirect their attention towards social media and the internet. In 2021, according to Palestinian Prisoners' Center for Studies, 390 Palestinians were arrested for "inciting violence" on social media.

Jonathan Hempel, a human rights activist and co-founder of the Database of Israeli Military & Security Export (DIMSE), flagged the Israeli surveillance as "not just an invasion of privacy" but "a real threat to our most basic rights".

Consequences of the surveillance on Palestinians
The daily, systematic and constant surveillance of Palestinians by Israeli authorities has generated many lasting negative effects. Palestinians have the impression that they live in a panopticon and that they are all prisoners of Israeli surveillance. The restriction to mobility and the exclusion from society have greatly contributed to the creation of a collective psychosis among Palestinians, often associated with fear, paranoia, anxiety and distress.

This intrusive surveillance is also at the root of trauma and many mental health problems observed among many Palestinians today. Moreover, not being able to control one's time, access to resources and move freely, significantly reduces future prospects and economic prosperity for Palestinians. According to Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS), the unemployment rate in Palestine has reached 26% in 2021; 16% in the West Bank and 47% in Gaza. However, according to UNCTAD, by the end of 2021, 54% of Palestinian women were unemployed compared to 30% of men. Latest data also reveal that 36% of Palestinians live below the poverty line today.

Gaza

In the case of Gaza, the blockade and numerous travel, economic and social restrictions have inflicted a heavy psychological toll on the population, resulting in high trauma and suicide rates, especially among the youngest. In 2017, for example, around 225,000 children, more than 10% of the population of Gaza, needed psychological support. Lana Matar, a mother of two explains that, "because of this continuing state of fear, children have little hope that they'll live a long life in Gaza". Mustafa Al-Masri, a specialist in psychology and mental health, describes life in Gaza as "psychological torture".

Jerusalem and West Bank

Although the effects of Israeli surveillance in Jerusalem and the West Bank are less extreme than in Gaza, they are still intrusive and impact the lives of Palestinians everyday. Yaser Abu-Markyah, a resident in the southern West Bank city of Hebron, reveals that he no longer lets his children play outside and that Palestinians are no longer comfortable socializing, as cameras are always filming them. According to him, the surveillance technologies have stripped Palestinians of the last vestiges of their privacy. Jalal Abukater, a Palestinian residing in Jerusalem, explains that surveillance is so pervasive that he found himself living in a "surveillance society, not that different from the dystopian science fiction books and films that are popular these days".

ACHRS' position

ACHRS strongly condemns Israel's surveillance system, as it violates Palestinians' basic human rights. The intrusive surveillance perpetuated by Israeli authorities is contributing to the erosion of Palestinians' right to privacy, assembly, movement and freedom of expression.

We firmly condemn NSO's Pegasus Spyware and Blue wolf technology, as well as all act of discrimination, violence and human rights abuse perpetuated against Palestinian civil society.

ACHRS calls on all UN member states, especially the five permanent members of the Security council, to take concrete measure to protect Palestinians' basic fundamental human rights and put an end to these long-lasting abuses.

We encourage the UN to ban the use of the Pegasus and Blue Wolf spyware and conduct a comprehensive investigation into the use of these technologies against Palestinian civil society and members of the public at large.

Furthermore, we call on the UN to compile a comprehensive list of individuals and entities responsible for perpetuating these human rights violations and submit them for blacklisting or sanctioning.

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