Palestine Under Surveillance with Mona Shtaya

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The transcript below has been lightly edited for brevity and clarity.

Mona Shtaya 00:00

Unfortunately, today we are talking about mass surveillance of Palestinians in the digital spaces and on the ground. And it is clear that we are sinking in a pool of surveillance. And I'm not sure if we can get out of it.

Yara Hawari 00:20

This is *Rethinking Palestine,* a podcast from Al-Shabaka: The Palestinian Policy Network, a virtual think tank that aims to foster public debate on Palestinian human rights and self-determination. We draw upon the vast knowledge and experience of the Palestinian people, whether in Palestine or in exile, to put forward strong and diverse Palestinian policy voices. In this podcast, we will be bringing these voices to you, so that you can listen to Palestinians sharing their analysis, wherever you are in the world.

Over the last few weeks, we've seen some major news stories break about Israeli cyber surveillance of Palestinians from the hacking of Palestinian NGO staff phones to the mass deployment of facial recognition software to be used against Palestinians across the West Bank.

Now mass surveillance of Palestinians by the Israeli regime is nothing new. And

whilst this level of technological sophistication is novel. It's important to contextualize it within the power, not to can reality that Palestinians have always experienced since the establishment of the Zionist settler colonial project in historic Palestine. Joining me to discuss this topic is Mona Shtaya a digital communication and advocacy strategist and the advocacy advisor for 7amleh, the Arab center for social media advancement.

Mona thank you for joining me on *Rethinking Palestine*.

Mona Shtaya 01:46

Thanks, Yara for having me here. I really love the podcast.

Yara Hawari 01:51

Mona, Palestinians have long argued that they are essentially a laboratory or testing ground for weapons and surveillance technologies. Before we delve into what has been happening over the last few weeks. Could you summarize what surveillance looks like for Palestinians on a daily basis, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza..

Mona Shtaya 02:12

Definitely Yara. So nowadays with the spread of surveillance technologies and with the technologies, generally, I can say the Israeli colonization was also developed to include using people's data and privacy.

And for the past decade, the Israeli regime has been producing and testing surveillance technologies on Palestinians as a part of their military industry. And then it's produced it massively and sell it to the other governments and your regimes around the world to be used to control their people. facial recognition techniques, spyware on mobile phones, spreading cameras to control the population, monitoring every telephone call in the West Bank and Gaza strip.

And monitoring social media platforms and either arresting people based on what they published on social media or pushing the social media companies to take down specific content are all forms of the shrunk spaces that Palestinians are facing because of these systematic efforts to surveil them. Over the past couple of weeks, we saw many reports on the surveillance tools that are used to monitor Palestinians.

Some may be surprised by them, but digital rights defenders, we were expecting something like this, especially when the Israeli regime worked systemically during the pandemic to normalize surveillance culture in order to expand its profit from this occupation.

Yara Hawari 03:41

Mona, you mentioned that Palestinians were not particularly surprised by the recent events and the recent news of this mass surveillance. And that's because surveillance of Palestinians, even prior to these relatively new and novel technologies has a historic track record. The Israeli regime has often used human personnel, spies, various different mechanisms to surveil Palestinians. What does this mean for the daily life of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza? How does that surveillance affect their lived reality?

Mona Shtaya 04:13

Well, let's talk about people's feelings towards these surveillance technologies. Last week we at 7amleh have produced and published a new report on the facial recognition cameras that were in east Jerusalem, but also the same report came out of the Guardian, which mentioned the blue world and the white wolf. It also mentioned surveillance cameras and facial recognition and Hebron, and many other places around the west bank. This kind of surveillance usually creates higher self-censorship among Palestinians, and it creates a feeling of living in an unsafe place. While we are living under this kind of occupation or settler colonialism

regime that we are living under, like for the past decades, now we recognize that this kind of occupation is not only on the ground. It's also applicable to the digital spaces on the online spaces. So this kind of militarization and securitization affect people's behavior affect people's feelings towards the society that they are living in. And to be honest with you in our report, we've heard people's experience with these cameras.

One of them is a woman who's living in east Jerusalem. And she mentioned that she cannot take off her hijab even inside her home, because she feels that she is surveilled all the time. Even inside her home, she swears that she's sleeping with her hijab and this kind of politics of fear are intended to spread and to normalize amongst Palestinians, but people are much more.

We've seen also other kinds of surveillance that they also utilize and use with Palestinians. For example, during the May escalations, we saw how they sent SMS messages to people, to worshipers who were in Al-Aqsa mosque. They told them that you have participated in violent quote-unquote violent work in the Al-Aqsa mosque.

And because of that, we will hold you accountable. And by doing so, we recognize that they also are using the GPS to monitor Palestinians and to surveil Palestinians. And this is also a violation of their right to privacy. When we are violating people's right to privacy people kind of start fearing and start feeling afraid for their life.

And sometimes with self-censorship, they stop talking, stop criticizing, and even stop expressing themselves. And that's scary. That's disastrous in terms of the context that we are living in Palestine.

Yara Hawari 06:51

Mona, that's incredibly important to note that this kind of surveillance is not only

about gathering information, but it's also part of scaremongering tactics and attempts to make Palestinians constantly uncomfortable so that they can't do anything else.

And that they have to self-censor. So it's also part of this sort of attempt to de-politicize Palestinian society. Now some weeks ago, the Israeli ministry of defense criminalized, six Palestinian human rights NGOs. And it's not particularly surprising, but questions were asked why now? And what purpose does it serve? Particularly as the Israeli regime doesn't need any excuse to arrest Palestinians, to aid officers, to confiscate files. But what's becoming clear is that the Israeli regime likely rushed this criminalization because both Citizen Lab and Amnesty International found Israeli spyware, in particular Pegasus, on the devices of staff members.

And in other words, you know, one of the reasons for this criminalization was an attempt to whitewash or to excuse this hacking. And indeed it's a lot easier to justify this level of surveillance on organizations that, that you've claimed a terrorist rather than human rights organizations. So could you perhaps tell us a bit more about this?

Mona Shtaya 08:11

Well, the six Palestinians were surveilled by Pegasus, which is malicious spyware developed by the Israeli company NSO which was recently listed on the US black list for manufacturing and supplying foreign authorities with the spyware.

And as I mentioned previously, oppressive regimes, such as the Israeli regime usually use surveillance techniques to restrict human rights work, silencing human rights activists, and preventing them from documenting human rights violations against the occupied Palestinian Territories in a systematic matter.

And for years Palestinian civil society organizations, including the six mentioned organizations have faced restrictions on civic workspaces some of which had

previously faced systematic smearing campaigns with the aim of defaming them and restricting their work. Al-Haq was one of the organizations that were accused by the Israeli regime of being a quote-unquote terrorist organization, which had previously witnessed a smear campaign with the aim of restricting its work and preventing it from practicing human rights work and documenting human rights violations that we, as Palestinians are exposed to on the ground.

It is clear that these campaigns were not fruitful as the Israeli authorities desired and accordingly, the authorities began monitoring a group of workers in these organizations. And as we can see from the Frontline Defenders report, they had started surveilling two of these six human rights defenders since 2020, and earlier this year, Amnesty International had published a detailed report about NSO, which was historically used to be a suspicious link that should be clicked to hack your device.

But in the last couple of years, the company developed its technology to create this zero-click spyware, where they can hack your device whenever they want. And this dangerous spyware could have access to all your data, messages, photos, and calls. And this is not the first time that Israel either gene uses the logic of whitewashing the crimes and the human rights violations. This is their method of work.

For example, at the beginning of the pandemic, the authorities started using mobile applications under the pretext of protecting public health. And we knew that this reason was a justification for legislating the use of surveillance technologies and normalizing people's acceptance of them.

Unfortunately, many governments succeeded in this. The Israeli authorities also asked Palestinian citizens to download The Coordinator or Al-Munasiq application on their phones to obtain permits to go to work. And unfortunately, today we are talking about mass surveillance of Palestinians in the digital spaces and on the

ground. And it is clear that we are sinking in a pool of surveillance. And I'm not sure if we can get out of it.

Yara Hawari 11:18

If you're enjoying this podcast, please visit our website, www.al-shabaka.org, where you will find more Palestinian policy analysis, and where you can join our mailing list and donate to support our work.

And Mona, as if this spyware wasn't scary enough around the same time as the news broke about Pegasus, the Washington Post published an expose on how the Israeli regime is incorporating facial recognition software known as Blue Wolf into its mass surveillance of Palestinians across the West Bank. What will this look like? And what will it mean for Palestinians?

Mona Shtaya 12:00

The Washington Post report pointed to another type of surveillance that you've mentioned, Yara, where Israeli authorities are monitoring Palestinians by integrating facial recognition with a growing network of cameras and smartphones. As the report mentioned, over the past two years, when the world was struggling with a pandemic, the Israelis were developing a new surveillance initiative called the Blue Wolf that captures photos of Palestinians' faces and matches them to a database of images. Later on the phone app flashes in different colors to alert soldiers, if a person is to be detained, arrested, or left alone. The report also mentioned another smartphone application called the White Wolf that has been developed for use by the settlers in the West Bank.

So they can use a White Wolf app to scan Palestinian's identification cards before the person enters the settlement. The military in 2019 acknowledged the existence of the White Wolf in the right-wing, Israeli publications. Adding to that, the report was also talking about surveillance cameras that the Israeli authorities are using in

Hebron as I mentioned before, and as 7amleh's report mentioned, Jerusalem.

All of these are systematic efforts to surveil Palestinians to prevent them from living their normal life. Let's say, and also from practicing their normal life, especially people who are working in human rights documentation. But to be honest with you, if you are a Palestinian, you could not only be surveilled just because you are working in the human rights sector.

As we have seen over the past couple of weeks, we saw systematic efforts to surveil Palestinians, the normal people in the streets with the cameras, with these mobile applications. If you are going to work in the settlements, or if you are saying. Yesterday, we saw also another or a new report on the Middle East Eye, where they were telling us that the Israeli authorities or the Israeli regime is also monitoring all the phone calls and the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

And that is disastrous because people cannot call their loved ones or talk to their loved ones as they want. And as a human rights defender, but also as a normal person who's living in Palestine, I feel that this could restrict not only the freedom of expression and violate my privacy but it's also affecting my behavior.

It's also affecting how I communicate with my close family, with my first circle people. So that also could, on the long term, could change people's behavior, could also change people's mindset on how they use these technologies and on how they also receive this kind of surveillance and dealing with that in their daily life. And also it could affect people's trust of each other and also of their societies. And that's disastrous.

Yara Hawari 15:08

Yeah Mona, and I think it's really important to highlight how the Israeli regime manages to infiltrate even the most intimate areas of life, even the communication with your closest family members and friends.

If we go back for a moment to the notion that Palestine is this laboratory or testing ground for these kinds of surveillance technologies, what implications does this have for the rest of the world?

Mona Shtaya 15:37

Let's have a starting point. Colonial and oppressive regimes usually agree on one point, which is the oppression of people. For this, the Israeli regime usually sells these technologies to other repressive, in general, and to the regimes in the global south in particular. And this has an impact on the safety of the people first and contrary to the image that security companies and governments usually export that these technologies are important to maintain safety of people.

I see that in the first place it's violates people's safety, people's privacy, and it works to normalize militarization and securitization in people's subconscious. Thus violating their right to privacy. And because oppressive regimes and colonial regimes usually do not allow anyone to criticize them, so they use these techniques to prevent people from expressing their right to freedom of opinion and expression, and thus preventing them from the right to self-determination.

So we feel with all oppressed people who usually suffer with their governments, with the regime because of the use of surveillance technologies, especially those imported from the Israeli regime. If we have like a look back into other regimes history, like the UAE regime, for example, we can see how they also use the same technology, which is NSO or Pegasus against their political opponents.

For example, there is a human rights defender who passed away like a couple of months ago called Alaa. And she was living in the United Kingdom because she can't go back to the UAE. And after her death, we remember that they discovered that there was an NSO in her mobile phone. Also, Jamal Khashoggi was having such spyware in his mobile phone.

And in Morocco, the government was using surveillance technologies, specifically the NSO against their political opponents and against the human rights defenders and lawyers in the previous years. They have a long history of how they are using that. And in a systematic matter these regimes are using these against journalists who could criticize them, against political opponents and activists and the human rights defenders.

And it's clear that these colonial and oppressive regimes, they have, like one mission, which is surveil people and prevent people from living in a safe world without having this kind of feeling of being surveilled and monitored all the time.

Yara Hawari 18:14

So Mona, with all of that in mind and considering everything we've discussed, how can Palestinians protect themselves from this kind of pervasive surveillance? And, and what about non- Palestinians? What can they do to disrupt Israeli surveillance in Palestine, but also Israeli surveillance exports?

Mona Shtaya 18:34

So for Palestinians, I have this kind of fear that we can't trust, like our devices. We can't trust technology. That technology usually is being utilized by oppressive regimes and also by colonial regimes to suppress people.

And because of that, Palestinians should be aware that we can't trust technology and we can't trust anything that is being shared online. Communicating with our people is very important and using technology, utilizing technology to spread our narrative to the world is also important, but we should keep in mind that someone is watching us all the time while we are chatting with our even closest family members or beloved ones.

And because of that, people should be aware and should educate themselves more and more about digital safety and digital security tactics, where they can

protect themselves and protect their family members and their colleagues and friends.

So the first thing is raising awareness about the digital security practices that is really needed for the young people, for, for everyone in our society. And we should keep in mind that the Israelis, as The Guardian mentioned, that they use specific information about people who they surveil like with the LGBT community, with, with the females and so on, to intimidate them and to prevent them from practicing or living their normal life. And sometimes to get more information from them about their society.

Being aware of what could happen is very important. Change your settings, your mobile settings should be the safest. We know, even if we change that, even if we like prevented the location and so on, some applications could access your location, but we should make our maximum effort to prevent any kind of surveillance. We should not click on any suspicious link.

And I'm afraid of mentioning that because now NSO developed to be zero-class malicious. But for others, they can support Palestinians and support themselves. They can escalate the pressure on their governments, on their MPs, on their congressional representatives to prevent buying these technologies from the Israeli regime.

And to have better legislation that prevents their security forces, their governments from using such surveillance, spyware, and surveillance technologies. They can also through their government, through their representatives, escalate the pressure to prevent Israelis from using these technologies against Palestinians, because we believe that the international pressure could do something for Palestinians.

We've seen in May how the international pressure, how amplifying Palestinian voices, how the international pressure was really recentering the Palestinian cause.

And by doing that, it was, let's say it was fruitful to some extent. And because of that, we should escalate the pressure more and more and prevent their governments from buying such surveillance technologies.

Yara Hawari 21:58

Mona, thank you for ending on those really important points about international pressure and for the more practical security tips. This is such an important topic and, and it is incredibly worrying and I think that's why it's so important that we, that we highlight it. So really thank you so much for, for joining me on this episode of *Rethinking Palestine* .

Mona Shtaya 22:21

Thank you, Yara. Thanks for having me.

Yara Hawari 22:26

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