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Algorithmic State Violence: Automated Surveillance and Palestinian Dispossession in Hebron's Old City

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Abstract

This article provides an ethnographic account of automated surveillance technologies' impact in the occupied West Bank, taking Blue Wolf—a biometric identification system deployed by the Israeli army—as a case study. Interviews with Palestinian residents of Hebron subjected to intensive surveillance, a senior Israeli general turned biometric start-up founder, and testimonies from veterans tasked with building up Blue Wolf's database provide a rare view into the uneven texture of life under algorithmic surveillance. Their narratives reveal how automated surveillance systems function as a form of state-sponsored terror. As a globalized information economy intersects with the eliminatory aims of Israeli settler colonialism in Hebron, new surveillance technologies erode Palestinian social life while allowing technocratic settlers to recast the violence of occupation as an opportunity for capital investment and growth. Attending to the texture of life under algorithmic surveillance in Hebron ultimately reorients theories of accumulation and dispossession in the digital age away from purely economic framings. Instead, I foreground the violent political imperatives that drive innovations in surveillance, in Palestine and worldwide.

Keywords: Surveillance; Artificial Intelligence; Palestine; Israel

More than fifty-five years of Israeli military rule over the occupied West Bank has transformed Hebron's Old City into the quintessential fantasy of militarism in the digital age. Once the mercantile heart of the southern West Bank, today Hebron's Old City is covered in technologically advanced surveillance systems that deliver the Israeli army total control with minimal boots on the ground, at least according to the Israeli generals promoting the technologies. Motion and heat sensors, license plate scanners, facial recognition algorithms, 24/7 CCTV surveillance cover one of the most violently contested sites in the occupied West Bank, where hundreds of Jewish settlers and soldiers encroach on Palestinian homes within a few square kilometers.¹ Most of this multimillion dollar apparatus was prototyped through collaborations with military technicians and industry-leading private firms, refined by combat conscripts with an unlimited source of raw data: Palestinian civilians living under Israeli military rule.

¹ Hebron, or al-Khalil as it is known in Arabic, is home to one of the holiest sites in both Islam and Judaism: the Ibrahimi Mosque or Cave of the Patriarchs. As detailed further in this article, Hebron's religious and political symbolism has made it a representative, yet non-the-less extreme, case of Jewish settler expansion and Israeli militarism across the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. Alongside Jerusalem, Hebron is one of two cities in the occupied Palestinian territories where Jewish Israeli settlements encroach on Palestinian homes within the same urban space. For this reason, Hebron is often characterized as a microcosm of Israel's military occupation writ large. See "Special Focus on Hebron: A Microcosm of the Israeli Occupation," Al-Haq, 19 November 2015, www.alhaq.org/cached_uploads/download/alhaq_files/images/stories/PDF/2012/Special.Focus.on.Hebron.Nov.2015.pdf.

Israeli military surveillance in Hebron came under global scrutiny in 2021, when the *Washington Post* reported that the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) installed artificial intelligence (AI)-powered cameras capable of identifying human faces across the Old City. The cameras are connected to the IDF's Blue Wolf program. Blue Wolf is a mobile application that allows soldiers to detect and categorize Palestinians across the West Bank vis-à-vis an extensive biometric database in which most have not consented to enroll.² The database—called Wolf Pack—houses biographical information and an assigned security rating of Palestinian civilians—red, yellow, or green.³ As of spring 2022, Israeli soldiers were adding scores of civilians to the system every day: stopping them on the street, photographing children outside schools, or pulling families out of their homes to photograph them.⁴ Israeli military officials touted the system as part of an official move toward a “frictionless” occupation, expedited by homegrown innovations in AI and image processing. But when international press reported on the use of Blue Wolf in the city, their dystopian accounts conjured up images of Gilles Deleuze's control society.⁵ A society where the single, panoptic gaze of a military watchtower is replaced by assemblages of electronic monitoring devices powered by computers and code.⁶

This article provides an ethnographic account of AI-powered surveillance technologies' impact in the occupied West Bank—taking Blue Wolf in Hebron as a case study. I thread between the narratives of soldiers, generals, and Palestinians subjected to intensive surveillance to show how a globalized information economy entangles with the imperatives of Israeli settler colonialism in Hebron's Old City. Framing Blue Wolf as a form of state violence, I chronicle how new surveillance systems erode Palestinian social life while allowing technocratic settlers to recast the violence of occupation as an opportunity for capital investment and growth. Attending to the texture of life under algorithmic surveillance in Hebron reorients theories of accumulation and dispossession in the digital age away from purely economic framings. Instead, I foreground the violent political imperatives that drive innovations in surveillance, in Palestine and worldwide. My findings emerge from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Israel and Palestine between 2021 and 2022 as part of a dissertation examining AI's impact on Israeli military rule. Interviews with Palestinians subjected to intensive state surveillance in Hebron and Israeli military personnel excerpted here are a portion of that larger ethnographic project.⁷

² Elizabeth Dvoskin, “Israel Escalates Surveillance of Palestinians with Facial Recognition Program in West Bank,” *Washington Post*, 8 November 2021, www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/israel-palestinians-surveillance-facial-recognition/2021/11/05/3787bf42-26b2-11ec-8739-5cb6aba30a30_story.html.

³ A 2023 report by Amnesty International details how the Wolf Pack database and Blue Wolf application work in tandem with Red Wolf, a relatively new facial recognition program installed at major checkpoints in Hebron. Red Wolf will automatically enroll anyone crossing through the checkpoint into the Wolf Pack database, storing their biometric data without consent. For more, see “Automated Apartheid: How Facial Recognition Fragments, Segregates and Controls Palestinians in the OPT,” Amnesty International, 2 May 2023, www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde15/6701/2023/en/.

⁴ Yaniv Kubovich, “Israeli Troops’ New Quota: Add 50 Palestinians to Tracking Database Every Shift,” *Haaretz*, 24 March 2022, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-soldiers-not-allowed-off-shifts-until-they-enter-50-palestinian-names-in-database-1.10694278.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze has described a shift away from Foucault's theory of a disciplinary society toward a “society of control.” It is a prophetic description of moveable algorithms and code-replacing spaces of enclosures at the dawn of the digital era; see Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59 (1992): 3–7.

⁶ For further revisions to Foucault's writing on surveillance at the dawn of the digital age, see Kevin D. Haggerty and Richard V. Ericson, “The Surveillant Assemblage,” *British Journal of Sociology* 51, no. 4 (2002): 605–22.

⁷ My dissertation draws from twenty-four months of fieldwork conducted between Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, Hebron, and Ramallah to examine how AI-powered surveillance technologies are changing Israel's military rule over the occupied Palestinian territories. I leverage multi-sited qualitative methods to consider automated surveillance from the perspectives of ordinary people bound up in the mechanizations of regional conflict: Palestinian digital rights advocates, civilians subjected to intrusive surveillance, Israeli veterans of intelligence units, and Israeli technology industry workers.

Beyond Surveillance Capitalism

Global political economic shifts have made military surveillance systems like Blue Wolf possible. They have their origins in the advent of what sociologist Shoshanna Zuboff calls “surveillance capitalism”: an economic system that emerged at the turn of the 21st century, wherein economic growth is predicated upon technology firms’ ability to capitalize on users’ private information, turning human data into a free source of profit.⁸ In Palestine, and other settler colonial contexts, this economic system articulates the goals of colonial domination to form what Darren Byler, in his study of Uyghur dispossession in Northwest China, names “terror capitalism”: a process that combines capitalist demands for data and cheap labor with state drives to prototype and experiment with digital and automated surveillance in the name of security.⁹ By placing a study of colonialism at the center of a globalized information economy, Byler provides an important revision to normative theories of accumulation in the digital age. Under surveillance capitalism, protected consumers of digital technologies are coerced into producing data and feeding novel configurations of corporate power.¹⁰ Under terror capitalism, private firms work with military and policing apparatuses to systemically extract social data from minoritized populations.¹¹ The result is a system of dispossession and exploitation that surveils and manages populations deemed outside civil rights protections.

In the following pages, I expand and revise Byler’s definition of terror capitalism to chronicle how new technologies abet Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine. “Terror capitalism, unlike state terror,” Byler contends, “focuses attention on the social life of production and expropriation, which my research shows was driven primarily by economic incentives rather than political power.”¹² Yet in Hebron, social media monitoring CCTV cameras, biometric surveillance, spyware, and location-tracking devices do not simply facilitate wealth accumulation for private firms collaborating with the Israeli military. These so-called security solutions also intensify the brutal impact of military rule for millions of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation, facilitating the political imperatives of Israeli settler colonialism that have long hinged on state-sanctioned terror.¹³ New surveillance technologies enable the dispossession and confinement of certain populations while simultaneously abetting wealth accumulation within settler society. Palestinians are restricted to smaller tracts of urban space covered in continuously updated surveillance systems, for example, while the Israeli state brands itself as an innovative start-up nation and homeland security capital. Rather than a “new economic order” as Zuboff wagers, surveillance capitalism articulates long-standing processes of colonial dispossession in Palestine. New technologies render life for those Palestinians who remain in their homes in spite of military and settler violence all the more untenable.¹⁴

By turning to the development and deployment of algorithmic surveillance in Hebron, I also offer a corrective to studies of Israel’s surveillance apparatus in the occupied West Bank. As Israel’s surveillance capacities proliferated in the years following the second intifada (2000–5), so did academic attention to Israel’s increasingly digital occupation. Critical analyses of the political economy of military surveillance took shape alongside scholarship that

⁸ Shoshanna Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power* (New York: Hatchett Books, 2019).

⁹ Darren Byler, *Terror Capitalism: Uyghur Dispossession and Masculinity in a Chinese City* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 8.

¹⁰ McKenzie Wark, *Capitalism Is Dead: Is This Something Worse?* (London: Verso Press, 2019), 45.

¹¹ Darren Byler, “The Social Life of Terror Capitalism Technologies in Northwest China,” *Public Culture* 34, no. 2 (2022): 167–93.

¹² *Ibid.*, 170.

¹³ For a detailed overview of how Israeli state violence manifests as terror in the lives of Palestinians across occupied Palestine, see Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Security Theology, Surveillance and the Politics of Fear* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 7–11.

¹⁴ Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 1.

emphasized the changing nature of Israel's military rule over Palestine.¹⁵ Much of this work took the colonial legacies, material infrastructures, technological makeup, and military strategy of Israel's surveillance regime as its object. Today, scholars often frame Palestine as a laboratory, a closed space where Israel's military works with private technology firms to develop exceptional capabilities in monitoring and tracking populations.¹⁶

The so-called laboratory thesis has come under critique in recent years. Rhys Machold cautions that even critical framings of Israeli surveillance and security technologies as exceptional inadvertently reify the claims of those sustaining the occupation, who are eager to recast military rule as a marketing asset for the Israeli security industry.¹⁷ Generals-turned-start-up founders and politicians who sit on the boards of private technology firms frame innovations in surveillance and policing technologies as unparalleled—and always temporary—solutions to a chronic cycle of violence, solutions Israel is eager to offer to the world. Yet Israel's military rule over Palestine is hardly a temporary flex of military power that will dissipate when peace comes around. Challenging “assumptions that Palestine and Israel can be studied in terms of their uniqueness and exceptionality,” Kareem Rabie urges critical analyses of Israeli occupation in the West Bank to be contextualized within long-standing “settler-colonial imperatives in Israel.”¹⁸ Similarly, Wassim Ghantous and Mikko Joronen ask scholars to bridge studies of Israeli settler colonialism “with works focusing on capitalist logics and political economies of violence.”¹⁹ The ethnographic material presented in the following pages—testimonies from a general-turned-biometric start-up founder, soldiers tasked with building up Blue Wolf in Hebron, and Palestinians subjected to intensive surveillance in the city—builds on these calls. I underscore how Israel's occupation manifests as a political economic force congruous with, rather than exceptional to, global shifts in accumulation and dispossession in the digital age (Fig. 1).

Shrinking the Conflict

(Retired) General Dany Tirza works out of a home office in the Israeli settlement of Kfar Adumim, a fortified suburb erected atop a hill in the occupied West Bank, not far from Jerusalem. I interviewed him in February 2022.²⁰ We met in the annex-turned-conference room attached to his family home, a cozy bungalow framed by freshly shorn lawns and shady pine trees. Wooden walls were lined with maps of Israel and the occupied

¹⁵ For work on the political economy of Israel's occupation, see Shir Hever, *The Privatization of Israeli Security* (London: Pluto Press, 2021); and Neve Gordon, “Israel's Emergence as a Homeland Security Capital,” in *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine: Population, Territory and Power*, ed. Elia Zureik, David Lyon, and Yasmeen Abu-Laban (London: Routledge, 2010), 153–70. Scholarship on the technological and infrastructural changes to Israel's occupation includes Gil Z. Hochberg, *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); Helga Tawil-Souri, “Surveillance Sublime: The Security State in Jerusalem,” *Jerusalem Quarterly*, no. 68 (2016): 56–65; Ariella Azoulay and Adi Ophir, *The One-State Condition: Occupation and Democracy in Israel/Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca L. Stein, *Digital Militarism: Israel's Occupation in the Social Media Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Sophia Goodfriend, “A Street View of Occupation: Getting around Hebron on Google Maps,” *Visual Anthropology Review* 37, no. 2 (2021): 222–45.

¹⁶ See, for example, Darryl Li, “The Gaza Strip as Laboratory: Notes in the Wake of Disengagement,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 35, no. 2 (2015): 38–55; and Stephen Graham, “Laboratories of War: Surveillance and US-Israeli Collaboration in War and Security,” in Zureik et al., *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine*, 133–52.

¹⁷ Rhys Machold, “Reconsidering the Laboratory Thesis: Palestine/Israel and the Geopolitics of Representation,” *Political Geography* 65 (2018): 88–97.

¹⁸ Kareem Rabie, *Palestine Is Throwing a Party and the Whole World Is Invited: Capital and State Building in the West Bank* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 201, 4.

¹⁹ Wassim Ghantous and Mikko Joronen, “Dromoelimination: Accelerating Settler Colonialism in Palestine,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 40, no. 3 (2022): 407.

²⁰ I use the real names of Dany Tirza and Issa Amro after they consented to being identified and provided information that would render anonymization difficult if not impossible. All other names of interviewees that appear here are pseudonyms.



Figure 1. A settler outpost in Hebron's Old City guarded by Israeli soldiers. Photo by author.

Palestinian territories; bay windows gazed out over arid valleys stretching to the Jordan River. I introduced myself over emails in Hebrew as a Jewish American researcher who wanted to understand how the Israeli military framed the benefits of biometric surveillance. Tirza, who is best known for planning the route of Israel's snaking separation wall and expansive checkpoint regime in the West Bank throughout the 2000s, was eager to broadcast his expertise to an international audience.²¹

Like many career generals, Tirza frames his knowledge as generalizable. For example, after four decades in the IDF, he now runs a tour group, serves as a talking head on cable TV, and frequently travels to the United States for security conferences and military trade shows. Tirza has worked as a consultant, advising President Donald Trump on how to erect a concrete barrier on the US/Mexico border and helping Jared Kushner mastermind the never-implemented "Deal of the Century," the Trump administration's so-called 2020 peace plan between Israel and Palestine that legalized Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank and recognized Jerusalem as Israel's undivided capital. When Tirza retired from his military post in the late 2010s, he founded a private biometric surveillance firm,

²¹ My ability to ask these questions was enabled and foreclosed by the ethnonationalist logic of Israel's occupation. Like others who have "studied up" in Israeli military institutions, as a Hebrew-speaking, Jewish American researcher I could gain access to Israeli military veterans, archives, and technology firms in a way that most Palestinian researchers never could. However, high-ranking military personnel like Tirza were only willing to talk so long as my questions did not breach what Rebecca Stein describes as "the public secret of the missing occupation," which refigures the brutality of Israeli military "through the tropes of innovation and humanitarian engagement." While Tirza mobilized such tropes, my research engages with his narrative to paint a rare picture of the back end of technological development in and beyond Israel's military apparatus. For more on the ethical entailments of studying Israel's military institutions, see Rebecca L. Stein, *Screen Shots: State Violence on Camera in Israel and Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2021), 21, 128; Rebecca L. Stein, "The Boy Who Wasn't Really Killed: Israeli State Violence in the Age of the Smartphone Witness," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 53, no. 4 (2021): 620–38; and Ariel Handel and Ruthie Ginsberg, "Israelis Studying the Occupation: An Introduction," *Critical Inquiry* 44, no. 2 (2018): 331–42.

Yozmot Inc. Today, he partners with an Israeli AI start-up, Corsight AI, to market body cameras equipped with facial recognition technology to police forces and militaries worldwide.

As we spoke over cups of steaming Earl Grey tea at his conference table, Tirza explained that biometric surveillance in Palestine was implemented to meet a set of particular challenges. The intensive policing happening on streets and at checkpoints during and following the second intifada, as he put it, was ineffective. Throughout the 2000s, when Palestinian suicide bombers attacked Israeli civilians and lethal Israeli military raids on the West Bank were carried out almost daily, the Israeli army's policy was to monitor all Palestinian men who fit a particular profile of "terrorist." Monitoring entailed strip-searching them at checkpoints across the West Bank, stopping civilians on Palestinian city streets for questioning, and detaining them without a warrant. "We thought every young guy from seventeen to twenty-five could be a terrorist, if he was single and coming from a refugee camp especially. But people were slipping out from under our watch," Tirza said. An upsurge in "lone wolf attacks" by civilians who did not fall into a classic "terrorist profile" forced the army to change course.²² New surveillance systems were implemented, according to Tirza, to optimize military surveillance tactics as the first decade of the 21st century came to an end. Facial recognition technology promised to pinpoint those who posed a credible security threat to Israeli authorities, without subjecting all civilians to intrusive policing. "Biometrics were a solution," he said, "to find the right people, and leave everyone else alone."

Tirza echoed a techno-utopian investment in mass surveillance often proffered by Israel's military and political establishment, particularly to foreign reporters and researchers. New technologies, generals claim, reduce the dehumanizing effects of military rule in Palestine while maintaining Israeli control over the territories in the name of preserving Jewish Israeli security. Facial recognition technologies will monitor Palestinian movement but mitigate the long lines at checkpoints, drones offer effective reconnaissance while minimizing the boots deployed on the ground, and cyber weapons can mine Palestinian communications and still lessen the number of interrogations.²³ Political leaders say these tactics bolster an official move to "shrink the conflict" by reducing "friction" between Israelis and Palestinians, thereby rendering military rule less invasive to all—leaving "everyone else alone," as Tirza put it.²⁴ Israel's center-right camp touts the Israeli philosopher Micah Goodman, who proposes the abandonment of a lasting peace resolution in favor of enhancing Palestinian living conditions under Israeli military rule by reducing restrictions on movement and promoting economic autonomy, believed to be the current administration's "unofficial advisor."²⁵

While the technologies undergirding contemporary attempts to "shrink the conflict" are new, Tirza's framing of Israel's military rule over Palestinians as humane is not. Israel's political and military leadership promised a more "enlightened occupation" (*kibosh naor*) since seizing control of the Palestinian territories in 1967.²⁶ Despite these claims, humanitarian organizations note that restrictions on movement, stifling of freedom of speech, detention without trial, a complex permit system, and smothering the freedom to protest remain

²² Yaakov Katz, "Officials Urge Changes at Checkpoints," *Jerusalem Post*, 11 April 2007, www.jpost.com/israel/officials-urge-changes-at-checkpoints.

²³ Adam Rasgon, "Israel Opens New Qalandiya Checkpoint, Phasing Out Inadequate Crossing," *Times of Israel*, 25 April 2019, www.timesofisrael.com/israel-opens-new-qalandiya-checkpoint-phasing-out-inadequate-crossing/.

²⁴ "Incoming Prime Minister Naftali Bennett's Speech at the Knesset," *Haaretz*, 13 June 2021, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/elections/full-text-incoming-prime-minister-naftali-bennett-s-speech-in-the-knesset-1.9901473.

²⁵ Micah Goodman, *Catch-67: The Left, the Right, and the Legacy of the Six-Day War*, trans. Eylon Levy (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

²⁶ Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso Press, 2007).

hallmarks of Israel's military regime.²⁷ For Israel's political establishment, the promise that such conditions were temporary always distracted from their carceral effects.²⁸

Biometric monitoring was the natural outgrowth of Israel's "enlightened" occupation, supposedly making it more humane while expanding Israeli surveillance capabilities.²⁹ Israel's Ministry of Interior introduced biometric ID cards as early as 1999, promising the technology would facilitate the passage of more Palestinian laborers through the Erez crossing between Gaza and Israel.³⁰ By 2004, all Palestinian workers in the West Bank and Gaza held such biometric ID cards.³¹ In 2019, Israel outfitted major border crossings with biometric cameras to monitor the movement of all Palestinian civilians in and out of the occupied territories, regardless of their permit status. Then, investigative reporting revealed that the military had also installed facial recognition cameras in urban areas across the West Bank and East Jerusalem.³² Blue Wolf was rolled out shortly thereafter, inaugurated as early as 2020.

Rebecca Stein reminds us that Israel's technologized occupation hinges upon "radical inequalities."³³ The expansion of Israel's surveillance apparatus during and following the second intifada produced an IT workforce of army-trained developers, analysts, and hackers who poured into the private sector. Many of the systems developed for use in a military context assumed a second life in civilian technology markets. By the mid-2000s, Israel had rebranded itself as an "innovative start-up nation" and its technology sector was experiencing an unprecedented economic boom while Palestinians were subjected to ever more invasive forms of surveillance. Foreign capital poured into cities like Tel Aviv while the occupied Palestinian territories experienced the economic fallout of unending military occupation. Economic liberalization coexisted with regional political conflict as Israel's war economy was restructured to meet the demands of the digital era.³⁴ Meanwhile, a lasting peace plan receded further and further from view. Tirza, the retired general-turned-biometric start-up founder, exemplifies these trends.

These transformations to the form and sustainability of Israel's occupation did not occur in a vacuum. The shift toward biometric surveillance that Tirza describes began at the dawn of the digital era. The rise of the digital economy and the ascendance of post-9/11 homeland security states intensified long-standing intimacies between the technology sectors and intelligence apparatuses of countries around the world. The United States was a pioneer in this field. As Zuboff writes, in the early 2000s heads of the US National Security Agency and Federal Bureau of Investigation restructured their agencies to operate "more like Google."³⁵ Leaders of the US intelligence community frequently consulted with technology executives in business development, restructuring federal units to meet the demands of the digital era.

In the United States, this restructuring also rested on more formal collaborations with the civilian technology sector and the military. The proliferation of personal computers and cell phones allowed Google, Apple, and Facebook's data analytics to track and record personal

²⁷ "A Regime of Jewish Supremacy from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea: This Is Apartheid," B'Tselem, 12 January 2021, www.btselem.org/publications/fulltext/202101_this_is_apartheid.

²⁸ See, for example, Ra'anana Alexandrowicz, dir., *The Law in These Parts* (independent Hebrew documentary released 2011).

²⁹ For a sustained analysis of how contemporary surveillance practices in Palestine emerge from Mandate-era colonial surveillance, see Elia Zureik, *Israel's Colonial Project in Palestine: Brutal Pursuit* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

³⁰ Michelle Spektor, "Imagining the Biometric Future: Debates over National Biometric Identification in Israel," *Science as Culture* 29, no. 1 (2020): 100–126.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Olivia Solon, "Why Did Microsoft Fund an Israeli Firm That Surveils West Bank Palestinians?" *NBC*, 28 October 2019, www.nbcnews.com/news/all/why-did-microsoft-fund-israeli-firm-surveils-west-bank-palestinians-n1072116.

³³ Stein, *Screen Shots*, 8.

³⁴ See also Jonathan Nitzan and Shimshon Bichler, *The Global Political Economy of Israel* (London: Pluto Press, 2002).

³⁵ Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 48.

information. These platforms also often shared this information with governments in the name of national security.³⁶ The intensification of state surveillance in all realms of civilian life demanded more creative and convenient solutions to collect and manage this information.³⁷ The private technology sector, a hub for experimentation in AI, data collection, and analysis, met this demand.

Israel's intelligence apparatus mirrored these global developments. In magazines circulated among soldiers and veterans of Israel's elite intelligence Unit 8200 in the early 2000s, now housed in Israel's Intelligence Commemoration Archives next to the Gilot Junction military base north of Tel Aviv, military journalists described the advanced capabilities of US and British intelligence agencies with awe. Israeli military leadership began consulting with tech CEOs and corporate managers, renovating what had been a passive signal intelligence unit into what generals described in these magazines as a collection of mini-start-ups "devoted to cyber hacking, AI development, and data analysis."³⁸ When soldiers left the army, they streamed into a growing number of private surveillance firms, often founded by veterans of intelligence units, devoted to offensive and defensive cybersecurity, biometric monitoring, remote sensing, and image collection and analysis.³⁹ Frequently, international tech conglomerates or venture capital funds bought up these firms for millions of dollars. By the 2010s, Israel's surveillance and homeland security sectors were on par with those in the United States and the United Kingdom. Israel's foreign office branded the country a "homeland security capital" and military generals like Tirza were hailed as global security experts.⁴⁰

As in the United States and the United Kingdom, Israel's civilian technology sector has always been closely tied to the military establishment.⁴¹ These ties were fortified as Israel's military sought new ways to make the occupation "frictionless," or less conspicuous to Palestinians on the ground and easier for the military to manage.⁴² Close collaborations with budding technology firms—often founded by generals-turned-CEOs—were critical to this tactical shift. The technologies developed and deployed in the occupied Palestinian territories, in turn, found a second life on global private surveillance markets. A civilian population denied access to basic privacy protections provides an unlimited stream of data for technology firms to refine AI-powered products. At weapons expositions and security trade shows, private companies rebranded these technologies as "frictionless security solutions," promising a convenient and humane salve to global instability (Fig. 2).⁴³

Product Development

Israeli soldiers dressed in army-green fatigues stand out against the winding cobblestoned streets and monochromatic facades of Hebron's Old City, where sandstone dug from nearby quarries centuries ago drenches the city in faded white. Since 1990, the number of Israeli troops patrolling a crowded urban space built up around the Ibrahimi Mosque—one of the most ancient and contested sites in Islam and Judaism—has steadily increased. Hundreds of Israeli soldiers guard the 800 Jewish Israeli settlers who have forcibly evicted

³⁶ Joseph Masco, "Ubiquitous Surveillance," in *Life by Algorithms: How Roboprocesses Are Remaking Our World*, ed. Catherine Besteman and Hugh Gusterson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 125–44.

³⁷ Zuboff, *Surveillance Capitalism*, 49.

³⁸ Eli Bar, Gabi Ayalon, Amnon Angor, and Zvi Fishler, "Haveet 8200: DNA Oh Tarbut Irgonit," *MigdalOr*, June 2007.

³⁹ Joseph F. Getzoff, "Start-Up Nationalism: The Rationalities of Neoliberal Zionism," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 5 (2020): 811–28.

⁴⁰ Gordon, "Israel's Emergence," 158.

⁴¹ Stein, *Screen Shots*, 12; see also Erez Maggor, "The Politics of Innovation Policy: Building Israel's 'Neo-developmental' State," *Politics & Society* 49, no. 4 (2020): 1–37.

⁴² Gordon, "Israel's Emergence," 15.

⁴³ Sophia Goodfriend, "The Start-Up Spy State," *+972 Magazine*, 6 April 2022, www.972mag.com/isdef-surveillance-tech-israel-army/.



Figure 2. Military surveillance camera installed on the roof of a private Palestinian home in the Old City, with the remainder of Hebron in the background. Photo by author.

Palestinians from their houses overlooking storefronts, market stalls, and mosque minarets.⁴⁴ Despite decades of violent displacement, home invasions, militarized policing, and settler terrorism, some 30,000 Palestinians remain in this part of the divided city, refusing to leave their ancestral homes.

Today, Israeli military leaders promise that a growing network of facial recognition cameras, license plate scanners, and portable biometric databases will reduce the violence that has become a hallmark of life in Hebron. On a good day, gangs of Israeli settler youth roam the streets, launching rocks and refuse into Palestinian yards while soldiers outfitted with assault rifles strip-search Palestinian civilians outside their businesses. On a bad day, thousands of armed settlers descend on the city, storming into private Palestinian homes, brandishing pistols and military-grade weapons, assaulting Palestinians while Israeli soldiers look on. In October 2020, when the military first launched Blue Wolf, Israel's commander of the West Bank, Amit Cohen, boasted that Hebron was a "smart city" featuring "a network of sensors that knows how to monitor the space in real-time and identify what is unusual and what is not," allegedly making information available to soldiers "quickly and accurately."⁴⁵

In theory, Blue Wolf made military surveillance more expedient. To verify a Palestinian's identity before the system's inauguration, soldiers patrolling the streets surrounding Palestinian homes and businesses had to call an operations room. The operations room passed identification information on to a brigade. Someone in the brigade then verified everything with the District Coordination Office. This cumbersome communication chain would take around twenty minutes to half an hour, forcing armed soldiers to stand guard over pedestrians or motorists they chose to stop until they were instructed to let them

⁴⁴ Bethan McKernan, "Hebron's Jewish Settlers Take Heart from Far-Right Polls Surge in Israel," *Guardian*, 12 November 2022, www.theguardian.com/world/2022/nov/12/hebrons-jewish-settlers-take-heart-from-far-right-polls-surge-in-israel.

⁴⁵ Elyahu Galil, "Hebron Smart City: Ha HMLim Hahadashim b'IOS N'hafshim," *Israel Hayom*, 13 October 2020, www.israelhayom.co.il/article/807893.

carry on their way to work, school, or visit with a friend. Blue Wolf expedited the procedure, using a system of automatic verification previously only used at major checkpoints between the occupied West Bank and Israel's 1948 borders. After it was implemented, a soldier carrying a smartphone or tablet could instantly retrieve the biographical information of any Palestinian they chose to stop. Alongside addresses, employment records, and permit information was a color-coded security rating that soldiers used to determine if the suspected individual should be detained (red), delayed (yellow), or let go (green). All a soldier had to do was scan their identification card or take a picture of their face.⁴⁶

In practice, Blue Wolf relied on policing practices that had long constrained Palestinian life in Hebron. Testimonies provided to the Israeli NGO Breaking the Silence (BTS) by combat veterans who built up the system in Hebron framed these intrusive processes as necessary. A large amount of data—photographs of Palestinians across the West Bank—was necessary to refine Blue Wolf's algorithms and ensure the databases' accuracy. One testimony described this process:

We head out with Blue Wolf with the goal: "Collect ten faces. Collect ten matches with Blue Wolf" ... you go around with this Galaxy [cell phone]. You grab the person, open the Blue Wolf app, "How are you, good morning, nice day, can I have an ID?," enter the ID [into the computerized system]. "Can I take a photo of the ID?" Great, take a photo of his ID. Ask to take his photo in order to enter him into the database. Take his photo.⁴⁷

As the day-to-day work of soldiering was put to the service of data collection and classification, combat units came to function as what scholars of the information economy refer to as "data janitors," low-wage technicians tasked with the gruelling work of compiling and sorting information for technology firms.⁴⁸ As in other settler colonial contexts, here Israeli brigades provided a free source of labor to the private companies contracted with Israeli intelligence units to develop technologized surveillance systems.⁴⁹ Mass data collection easily mapped onto the Israeli army's routinized policing of a targeted population, where stopping Palestinian civilians on the streets, outside their homes, and on the way home from school was par for the course.

But under Blue Wolf, such altercations intensified. As soldiers put it, the army incentivized brigades to collect as much data as possible through petty competitions. Rewards, like a movie night off base, were given out to those who made the most "pairings" in a week.⁵⁰ A process that entailed photographing civilians who passed by an official checkpoint, moveable roadblock, or even just a group of soldiers, and matching the image to biographic information in a database. In the words of a veteran who served in Hebron in 2020:

We don't need suspicious signs in order to take photos, the point was to take photos. There was even like a bit of competition. Before the guarding [shifts] when you have

⁴⁶ "They Scan the Face," Breaking the Silence, 2021, www.breakingthesilence.org.il/testimonies/database/837133. While the testimony referenced here indicates soldiers asked for consent before taking photos, human rights organizations and researchers have indicated otherwise. See "Central Hebron: Soldiers Enter Residential Building and Conduct Lineup for School-Age Children," B'Tselem, 17 November 2021, www.btselem.org/video/20211117_soldiers_enter_residential_building_and_conduct_lineup_for_school_age_children_in_central_hebron#full; and "Automated Apartheid."

⁴⁷ "The Military Wants to Enter the People into Its System for Control," Breaking the Silence, 2020, www.breakingthesilence.org.il/testimonies/database/424318.

⁴⁸ Lilly Irani, "Justice for Data Janitors," in *Think in Public: A Public Books Reader*, ed. Sharon Marcus and Caitlin Zaloom (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 23–40.

⁴⁹ Byler, *Terror Capitalism*, 54.

⁵⁰ Dwoskin, "Israel Escalates Surveillance."

like these meetings with the deputy commanders. And then [the officer] can say, like, I want at least twenty matches, so we say, okay, we'll bring twenty.⁵¹

Others recounted being instructed to compile at least 1,500 pairings a week.⁵² This means that individual soldiers were required to photograph at least fifty Palestinians each time they were stationed at a guard-post or checkpoint.⁵³ Another veteran's testimonies detailed the brutal practices soldiers resorted to when taking photographs:

You're standing there, like, four people with weapons. Some of them say, "I'm not willing to be photographed, I'm not willing to be photographed," but if there's an assertive squad commander then he photographs him anyway.⁵⁴

For Palestinians, such practices caused significant disruptions to everyday life. Soldiers bent on collecting as much data as possible stopped pedestrians on streets, children leaving school, and drivers in vehicles stalled at roadblocks to photograph them.⁵⁵ Reports of troops systemically knocking on doors to photograph residents in villages surrounding Hebron, and even pulling children out of bed in the dead of night near Nablus to take their photos, surfaced.⁵⁶

Issa Amro, who cofounded Youth Against Settlements in the early 2000s, detailed the impact of such practices in Hebron. I met him on a cold December morning. I drove down with a colleague from a local digital rights organization I worked with throughout my fieldwork a few months after Issa had collaborated with Breaking the Silence and reporters from the *Washington Post* to draw attention to Blue Wolf. Issa is brusquely professional, and seasoned in talking in rapid English to the tour groups, independent researchers, and journalists that circulate through one of Palestine's more notoriously violent cities. He carries himself with a confidence that comes from being injured to the soldiers and settlers stationed outside one's home. When young settlers harassed us, Issa curtly reprimanded them. When we passed soldiers clutching iPads, he switched to Hebrew and told me to ask them if I could see the system upfront in a stage whisper.

As we wound our way through the residential backstreets of Hebron's Old City, Issa pointed out new CCTV cameras lining street corners and peering off the roofs of private homes. He was well versed in the IDF's talking points, particularly the claims that these technologies are more humane. Issa emphasized, in contrast, how soldiers tasked with manually aggregating data actually produced more friction between Palestinians and Israeli soldiers. He recounted stories of soldiers detaining minors who purportedly refused to be photographed and holding them for hours. Issa said his own fears of detention and violent altercations were heightened as Blue Wolf was refined in operation.

The problem is these technologies are a few years ahead of market trends. They don't always work so well. So no matter what we do, who is to say we won't be misidentified by the system? There was a thirteen-year-old girl who [Blue Wolf] identified as a security threat when she was coming home from school earlier this year. They [the army] detained her for five hours. And now that is the scariest thing. Now that it's up to

⁵¹ "The Point Was to Take Photos," Breaking the Silence, 2020, www.breakingthesilence.org.il/testimonies/database/280983.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Kubovich, "Israeli Troops' New Quota."

⁵⁴ "The Point Was to Take Photos."

⁵⁵ Issa Amro, "Occupation 2.0," Breaking the Silence, 8 November 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZGLHhUfZKk0.

⁵⁶ Ali Awad, "They're Not Arriving with Trucks to Deport Us, but the Goal Is the Same," *+972 Magazine*, 29 June 2022, www.972mag.com/masafer-yatta-army-census/; "Israeli Forces Pull Palestinian Children Out of Bed to Photograph them during Raid," *Middle East Eye*, 17 November 2021, <https://tinyurl.com/dpy62zk2>.

the algorithm to say I am a threat, how do I know I won't be stopped, arrested, or even shot, by some fanatical soldier who has my data?

As Issa puts it, while soldiers provided a convenient labor source through which to refine a new automated system, Palestinian civilians bore the brunt of these developments. Issa underscored that the algorithms underpinning Blue Wolf were subject to error, especially as they are being built up and refined.⁵⁷ In Palestine, where Israeli soldiers use lethal force with impunity against unarmed civilians on a regular basis, such technological lapses heightened the risk of detainment or even death. "Who's to say a soldier won't shoot me if they stop me on the street and see I have a red security rating?" he asked. "This is the cost of leaving it up to machines," he continued, "they never work properly."

It may be tempting to dismiss the harms posed by Blue Wolf as the inconvenient fallout of technological development—growing pains that will ease once the system has consumed enough data to avoid previous errors. However, other residents of Hebron say life under technologized surveillance is marked by a pervasive kind of terror, months after the system had been deployed. As they put it, Blue Wolf's high-tech surveillance apparatus rested on analog forms of policing that upended their day-to-day routines and that of their neighbors.

User Experience and State Violence

Samira lives in a tall house nestled in the hills overlooking the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron. Issa introduced us on that chilly December day, walking over from the center of Hebron's Old City. Our path skirted behind Palestinians homes and settler compounds to elude the soldiers covering the main road, but was tracked by webs of military-grade CCTV cameras covering building facades and light posts across the neighborhood. As we strolled up to Samira's front door, Issa pointed out two new cameras, bulky and white, peering down from her rooftop. Their shiny lenses, not yet dulled by the elements, followed Issa and me as we walked through Samira's front door.

A mother of six and life-long resident of Hebron, Samira said she had made her home into a refuge from the occupation unfolding just beyond the door. Portraits of family members and landscape photographs of the West Bank lined the walls, while houseplants climbed up the windows to block out the soldiers strolling down the street. But over mint tea served on red couches in her dimly lit living room, Samira explained how the new surveillance system was encroaching on this last domain of autonomy. Since the military installed the cameras on her roof in early 2021, Israeli soldiers had returned regularly for upkeep and maintenance. Cameras need to be rebooted after a power outage, are subject to breakdown in inclement weather, and their software often needs updating. The army can only access the cameras by walking through her front door and up a winding staircase leading from the ground floor, through the living room, and to the rooftop. Soldiers regularly entered without warning to maintain the surveillance system:

They don't say anything, they just come with the equipment. I'm always surprised when they come in and if I had my way I wouldn't [allow them]. But I can't stop them. They act as if we're not even there. Once no one was home to let them in, so they just broke the door off the hinge. We have our own norms here, we don't want soldiers barging in, walking up the stairs, at any moment.

⁵⁷ For a solid overview of algorithmic error in automated policing software, see Richard A. Berk, "Artificial Intelligence, Predictive Policing, and Risk Assessment for Law Enforcement," *Annual Review of Criminology* 4 (2021): 209–37.

Samira framed the constant invasion of her private space as the most dehumanizing part of surveillance in Hebron, emphasizing that the new technologies rationalized rather than reduced the army's intrusion on her life. "Did the army not come in before the cameras were installed?" I asked Samira. "Of course they did," she said, "but only every so often." This was something different:

Now I feel like I cannot leave my house in case they come. My son called the COGAT [Coordinator of Government Activity in the Territories] to complain, but they said it was necessary, that they have to check the footage. When I'm sitting here alone, I keep my hijab on in case someone walks in. Because I never know when they could come. I just don't feel secure inside my own home. And this was the last place I felt secure.

Before Blue Wolf, Israeli soldiers adhered to a mantra of "making their presence known" across the West Bank. The military's dehumanizing practices were designed to remind Palestinians they lived under military occupation. Soldiers would march into private homes to map the architectural makeup of a neighborhood or conduct home raids in the middle of the night to search for weapons. Innovations in remote sensing—infrared cameras that could purportedly see through walls and facial recognition technology that could track anyone's movement through urban space—promised to change this.⁵⁸ Yet as Samira indicates, even these advanced technologies hinged on invasive policing practices—from data collection to technological upkeep—that only intensified the occupation's hold on Palestinian life. These updates radically transformed how surveilled communities felt within their own homes—thinking twice before running errands or keeping hijabs and outside clothes on at all times for fear of being watched or walked in on by soldiers. For Samira, the fear that a soldier could enter her home at any moment to reboot a camera eroded the last place she felt free from the gaze of an occupying army.

Samira's fear was not the inconvenient by-product of technological development—a phenomenon that would disappear once the systems were updated to withstand inclement weather and power outages. Neighbors whose rooftops were clear of military-grade cameras and who were spared regular army incursions echoed her anxiety and also changed how they behaved within the privacy of their own homes. The cameras that soldiers broke into some private homes to maintain were peering into other families' bedroom windows, tracking who came and went through front doors, and monitoring children playing in private gardens. Across town, reports swirled about Blue Wolf's capabilities—whispers that the military could see through walls and record intimate conversations. Whether or not Blue Wolf worked as effectively as the Israeli military boasted, it was said there was nowhere beyond the gaze of Israel's surveillance state.

Amahl indicated as much when we met on a sunny morning in January 2022. Amahl lived just a few hundred meters away from Samira, in a new and sprawling stone home secured by tall fences, barbed wire, and a big black dog tied up just outside the front door. He barked intermittently when we spoke in her front patio, bundled up in jackets and sipping black coffee from plastic cups. Amahl had endured the steady encroachment of settlers into her neighborhood over the past two decades. She raised a family of four as settler caravans expanded across the hill above her property and Israeli military watchtowers cropped up in the yards of expropriated Palestinian homes. Many of her neighbors had been displaced. Amahl conjured images of Israeli settlers taking over Palestinians' living rooms while they were out of town, the illegal expropriation abetted by the Israeli soldiers standing guard outside. The black dog patrolling her front entrance and the barbed wire erected over the patio were, she told me, security measures to withstand an increasingly hostile urban

⁵⁸ "Israeli Camera Sees through Walls from over 300 Feet," *I24 News*, 13 February 2022, www.i24news.tv/en/news/israel/technology-science/1644768827-israeli-camera-sees-inside-houses-from-over-300-feet.

environment. Settlers storm past her home regularly, lobbing trash into the patio and shouting racist slurs. Dirty socks, glass bottles, and cans were wedged between the twists of metal shielding Amahl's garden.

The cameras that peered directly at us from just beyond the property line were a new addition. A few months before we spoke, soldiers had cut down a tall oak tree that provided a curtain of foliage over Amahl's front patio, shielding her living room and kitchen windows from public view. The army erected a thin wooden post in its place, with a camera affixed to the top, its wide lens pointed at Amahl's front door. "My son called the civil administration [COGAT] to complain," Amahl told me. "He complained that the whole house was watched by the camera, that anyone who comes in and goes out is being watched, but he got no answer, they just said, 'it's our business.'" Undeterred, Amahl said her son erected a tarp to obscure the garden, front door, and windows from the camera's view. The army showed up the next day and took it down. "There's nothing we could have done."

Amahl said surveillance had always been a hallmark of life in Hebron. Before the army branded her neighborhood as the testing ground of new "smart city" technology, she was subjected to analog policing practices. The Israeli army once declared her house a closed military zone and barred her and her family from entering the premises for hours so they could keep watch over her neighbors. Soldiers periodically stormed into her home at the dead of night to map the interior of her home to keep their records up to date. Innovations in surveillance promised to reduce the frequency of these confrontations. Yet like Samira, Amahl emphasized that Blue Wolf had only made the violence of Israel's occupation more prevalent and unpredictable:

Now checkpoints are everywhere. If my son leaves the house to go to work and comes back late I'm worried that they [the Israeli army] might arrest him. And if they take him, they have the backing of the government and the law. If my children are late coming home from school, I worry that they got stopped and photographed and were arrested.

In Amahl's words, the proliferation of cameras and soldiers with access to the Wolf Pack database intensified the policing her family had endured for years. Intrusive practices once confined to major checkpoints leading between the occupied West Bank and Israel's 1948 boundaries had multiplied throughout Hebron's Old City. Soldiers tasked with data collection and analysis staffed permanent and make-shift checkpoints that now fractured the city. Armed not just with guns, but also iPads, and a vast biometric database, soldiers were at liberty to stop anyone, anywhere—her son going to work, her children coming home—to scan their faces and let an automated system decide if they should be detained.

The introduction of Blue Wolf also transformed how Amahl felt inside her own home. Prior to Blue Wolf, Amahl said her house was one of the last refuges she had in a city covered by soldiers, settlers, and cameras. "I used to go out here without a scarf," she gestured to the concrete patio surrounded by flowerbeds and herb gardens. Amahl recalled how her children would play beneath the trees as she prepared meals and hung the laundry. But the new cameras changed all that. "I feel like my whole house is watched, even inside the house, even inside my bedroom, I think or I feel like I'm being watched even inside my own bedroom." Rumors were circulating about the new system's capabilities, she said, which made her afraid the cameras peering through her windows were able to record everything, even when the doors were closed and the curtains pulled shut. The pervasive sense of being monitored by an occupying army made Amahl feel as if she had no privacy whatsoever.

Fear and insecurity are the inevitable consequence of life under rampant surveillance.⁵⁹ The expansion of Israel's policing apparatus was driven by an endless pursuit of data. Surveillance technologies expanded from checkpoints and army bases into city streets

⁵⁹ Zureik, *Israel's Colonial Project*, 109; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, *Security Theology*, 45–46.



Figure 3. Military surveillance cameras on a side street in Hebron's Old City. Photo by author.

and, finally, private homes, turning the intimate details and behaviors of a targeted population into data streams feeding biometric algorithms. Women like Samira and Amahl bore the brunt of these practices. The expropriation of their information ate away at their last vestiges of autonomy—transforming their living rooms and bedrooms into dangerous spaces where they could not feel at ease. Technological updates to military rule made life in Hebron progressively intolerable. New surveillance technologies thus facilitated a larger project of Palestinian dispossession; Blue Wolf was not just stealing civilians' personal data, but also the viability of a dignified life itself if they remained in their homes. And while neither indicated that Blue Wolf would drive them away from Hebron, Samira and Amahl each emphasized again and again that it was unbearable to go on living a life dictated by state-sanctioned terror (Fig. 3).

Security Know-How

The violence of life in Hebron was nowhere to be seen at Israel's Defense Exposition (ISDEF), held in March 2022 at a convention center sandwiched between Tel Aviv University and a theme park. Thousands of participants circulated between booths showcasing facial recognition cameras, missile defense systems, drones, and spyware. Robotic dogs capable of deactivating explosives and gun models paraded between the throngs of visitors. Many of the firms advertising their products at the biennial exhibition, Israel's largest weapons exposition, had contracts with the Israeli military: from Oosto, a facial recognition start-up that outfitted major checkpoints in the West Bank with cameras, to Cellebrite, a start-up supplying cyber-hacking technologies to Israeli intelligence and police forces. Here, however, these technologies were rebranded as generic security products that might streamline airport screening times or combat human trafficking. Corsight AI, the firm partnering with Tirza's biometric start-up, was advertising "smart-policing solutions" to law enforcement worldwide.

Drawing from feminist theories of capital accumulation, Byler frames algorithmic systems as "conversion devices" or systems that generate value by rendering objects, people, and

practices “abstracted and cut off from their origins.”⁶⁰ Such technologies convert the minute details of daily life into information about an aggregate population, building up datasets that, in turn, refine technological products circulating on global markets. Under surveillance capitalism, these datasets might hone targeted advertising or refine Google Maps’ interface—generating value for corporations. Under terror capitalism, this information enhances the capabilities of biometric cameras and predictive policing software private firms produce to monitor populations racialized as threats.⁶¹ By converting social life into an unlimited data stream, militarized surveillance and policing are easily retooled as opportunities for capital accumulation for a settler society.

Tirza evidenced as much when we spoke at his home office enclosed within a fortified settlement in February 2022, a month before ISDEF. In that interview, cited above, he advocated for the expansion of biometric surveillance in Palestine and beyond by glossing over the terror such technologies inflicted in Hebron. Instead, he emphasized biometrics’ generic utility to security regimes worldwide. Indeed, when I asked Tirza how biometric surveillance had enhanced Israeli security in the West Bank he emphasized Blue Wolf’s abstract efficacy in any context it might be deployed:

I learned how to strike the right balance between the security needs and the human rights of the people. We are trying to fish the wanted, the suspicious people, from the crowds, and only them. All the others we aim to leave alone. We’re trying to minimize humiliation. Israel has been implementing this for years with all kinds of machines—facial recognition and more—and we can offer these solutions to the world.

When I pressed Tirza for more specific examples of biometric surveillance’s benefits to Israel and those other places he described it serving, he answered in the same generic terms:

We learned how to not make people our enemies. How to control them, but with automatic systems, to reduce terrorism. And this is the future. Because if you’re working with an automatic system anywhere, if you’re identifying people immediately without them knowing, you’re taking care of anger while maintaining your own security.

By praising the technical and humanitarian efficiency of biometric monitoring, Tirza was able to elide the specific effects of automated military rule, which do not bring a radical departure from long-standing policies like home invasions or detention in places such as Hebron. Tirza instead moved from the particular affordances of biometric surveillance at Israeli checkpoints—supposedly catching security threats quickly and efficiently—to the general value such data provides to security services around the world: “to fish the wanted, the suspicious people, from the crowds.” For this reason, Tirza describes those subjected to intensive, and often violent, surveillance in abstract terms. Simply referred to as “suspicious people,” Palestinians are made to stand in for any ambiguously threatening population that challenges social order and stability around the world. Refracting the racial logic of Israeli settler colonialism, Tirza’s words did not simply rationalize dragnet surveillance in the West Bank by construing all Palestinians as potentially deviant security threats. He also demonstrated how militarized surveillance is converted into economic value by promising a generically humane salve to global insecurity.

Tirza was not the only one eager to convert his experience in maintaining Israeli military rule into abstract security know-how, parsing two decades of planning Israel’s sprawling separation wall and checkpoint regime as simple “solutions” the Israeli army “wants to offer the world.” Intelligence operatives who built up and managed surveillance systems like Blue Wolf—coding facial recognition algorithms, analyzing surveillance data, tracking those

⁶⁰ Byler, *Terror Capitalism*, 34.

⁶¹ Byler, “Social Life of Terror Capitalism.”

who constituted so-called security threats—also translated their military experience into the parlance of high-tech careerism. On professional networking sites like LinkedIn, they euphemistically referred to their work as “development operations,” “user-experience,” or “product management.”⁶² Soldiers even nicknamed Blue Wolf “Facebook for Palestinians” describing the user-friendly interface as familiar, akin to using a social media application to look up the biographical details of a friend. Like the branding strategies of weapons firms, veterans leveraged such comparisons to recast military experience as general technological know-how.

The development and deployment of new surveillance technologies in Hebron is thus tangled with the specific aims of Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine, turning algorithmic monitoring into a new domain of state violence. The day-to-day work of soldiering—protecting an expanding settler movement, breaking into Palestinian homes, and harassing civilians on the street—provided a convenient labor source through which to develop new technologies. Palestinians subjected to ever more repressive forms of surveillance were converted into unlimited data supplies on which algorithms could be trained. These dehumanizing forms of policing and self-policing strengthened the Israeli military’s hold on Palestinian life while offering a valuable resource for a burgeoning entrepreneurial class of army trained developers and corporate CEOs.

Algorithmic State Violence

Ethnographic attention to the texture of life under algorithmic surveillance troubles the Israeli army’s claims that new technologies reduce the dehumanizing impact of Israeli occupation, delivering a “frictionless” mode of control. Front doors taken off their hinges, detention without trial, cameras peering into private homes, and forced into civilians’ faces are hallmarks of life in Hebron. The military celebrates the technologies underpinning such efforts as “innovative security solutions” that promise to quell a volatile political landscape, likening them to surveillance systems deployed in civilian contexts around the world. Yet the introduction and implementation of systems like Blue Wolf make Israel’s occupation all the more dehumanizing as new technologies eat away at Palestinian civilians’ last reserves of privacy. The experiences of those whose lives have been upended by these systems demonstrate how new technologies are congruous with a long-standing imperative of Zionist colonization in Palestine: to sustain a Jewish majority vis-à-vis racially enforced dispossession across the region.⁶³

Terror capitalism, in Byler’s writing, operates as a predominately economic force that drives the expansion of digital and biometric surveillance in Northwest China. Yet this article has outlined how terror capitalism in Hebron is, first and foremost, politically congruous with the imperatives of Israeli state-building and settler expansion. Even as systems like Blue Wolf convert combat soldiers and intelligence conscripts into a convenient labor source for Israel’s booming security technology sector, the net cost of maintaining Israel’s military rule over the occupied Palestinian territories makes any economic benefit from this status quo for Israeli society writ large tenuous at best.⁶⁴ Yet in Hebron, global flows of capital and expertise do converge to abet the eliminatory aims of Israeli settler colonialism. A technologized occupation sustains an elite class of settler entrepreneurs while making life for those Palestinians who remain in their homes untenable. While broadcast as a humane salve to

⁶² Corin Degani, “An Elite Israeli Intelligence Unit’s Soldiers Are Sworn to Secrecy—but Tell All on LinkedIn,” *Haaretz*, 18 November 2021, www.haaretz.com/israel-news/tech-news/2021-11-18/ty-article/.premium/an-israeli-intell-units-soldiers-are-sworn-to-secrecy-but-tell-all-on-linkedin/0000017f-e0e5-d568-ad7f-f3ef63350000.

⁶³ Brenna Bhandar and Rafeef Ziadah, “Acts and Omissions: Framing Settler Colonialism in Palestine Studies,” *Jadaliyya*, 14 January 2016, www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32857.

⁶⁴ For more on the net economic cost of the occupation to Israeli society, see Shir Hever, “Economic Cost of the Occupation to Israel,” in *The Impacts of Lasting Occupation: Lessons from Israeli Society*, ed. Daniel Bar-Tal and Izhak Schnell (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 326–58.

regional instability, digital and biometric surveillance are experienced as a form of state-sanctioned terror, exacerbating the very violence they promise to mitigate.

Remarking on this irony, Machold writes that “what disappears in the laboratory thesis is the recognition that security solutions (Israeli or otherwise) always remain a fetish,” their value derived from a “mystical value not based on its use-value.”⁶⁵ Indeed, while biometric and digital surveillance ate away at Palestinian social life, it did not stop a series of suicide attacks within Israel’s 1948 boundaries in the spring of 2022, which gave way to an onslaught of Israeli military raids across the West Bank. And so, only a few months after Blue Wolf was implemented, the occupied West Bank was plunged into its bloodiest period since the second intifada. The year 2022 was the most lethal on record in Israel and Palestine in almost two decades, with 167 Palestinians killed by Israeli forces in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and 29 Israelis killed by Palestinian assailants. By year’s end, technocratic pledges to more efficiently manage the occupation had been drowned out by the unchecked racism of (re) elected politicians, who pledged to raze Palestinian cities across the West Bank.⁶⁶ In June 2023, the Israeli army bombarded Jenin’s refugee camp with AI-powered attack drones, causing widespread damage to civilian infrastructure and leaving twelve Palestinians dead. As promises to shrink the occupation give way to unbridled Jewish supremacy and unending violence, the true cost of investing in such “solutions” becomes evident.

Acknowledgments. My thanks, first and foremost, to those who appear in this article: Issa Amro, the anonymous interlocutors who welcomed me to Hebron, and those veterans who provided testimonies to *Breaking the Silence*. None of this would have been possible without the help of Bashar Bakri, the brilliant staff at 7amleh, and all the friends who spent hours thinking and writing with me in Jerusalem. Special thanks to the editors of *IJMES* for constructive feedback throughout the editorial process. Rebecca Stein, Gala Rexer, Ely Sandler, and three anonymous reviewers provided careful and critical engagement with this piece throughout the editorial process. The Palestinian American Research Center, the National Science Foundation, the Fulbright–Hays Program, and Duke University’s Center for Jewish Studies provided generous financial support throughout many years of fieldwork.

⁶⁵ Machold, “Reconsidering the Laboratory Thesis,” 92.

⁶⁶ “National Security Minister MK Ben Gvir to Knesset Plenum,” *The Knesset News*, June 21, 2023, <https://main.knesset.gov.il/EN/News/PressReleases/Pages/press21623q.aspx#:~:text=%E2%80%8BMinister%20of%20National%20Security,buildings%2C%20we%20need%20targeted%20killings>.

Cite this article: Sophia Goodfriend (2023). “Algorithmic State Violence: Automated Surveillance and Palestinian Dispossession in Hebron’s Old City.” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 55, 461–478. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743823000879>