

*Israel uses vast network of
biometric cameras to terrorize
Palestinians*



Palestinians use a biometric card at an automated gate equipped with a facial recognition system, as they cross Qalandiya checkpoint, south of Ramallah, West Bank DAVID VAAKNIN FOR THE WASHINGTON POST VIA GETTY IMAGES

Tel Aviv, May 7 (RHC)-- Israel is deepening its system of apartheid in the occupied Palestinian territories by using artificial intelligence-powered biometric facial recognition technology to track and restrict the movements of Palestinian people. Facial recognition technology identifies and categorizes people on the basis of their physical features, including race, ethnicity, gender, age and disability status.

Facial recognition technology was first introduced into Israeli apartheid in 1999. But a new report from Amnesty International has examined the use of a novel facial recognition technology system known as Red Wolf, which has been deployed at military checkpoints in the occupied West Bank city of Hebron since 2022. It scans the faces of Palestinians, often denies them entry and adds them to massive Israeli government databases without their consent.

Facial recognition technology is increasingly being used to stalk Palestinians, keeping them under near-constant observation. The surveillance is accomplished with a ubiquitous network of closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras mounted on lampposts, the sides of buildings, surveillance towers and rooftops.

Israeli soldiers are given incentives to keep Palestinians under constant surveillance. In a shameful contest, soldiers are awarded prizes for the battalion with the highest number of Palestinians registered into the database.

The West Bank, including illegally annexed East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip remain under illegal Israeli military occupation. Israel controls the ingress and egress of Palestinians, who must have permits from the Israeli authorities to cross between Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank.

“The Israeli authorities are using sophisticated surveillance tools to supercharge segregation and automate apartheid against Palestinians ... using illegitimately acquired biometric data to monitor and control Palestinians’ movements,” said Agnès Callamard, Amnesty International’s Secretary General. “In addition to the constant threat of excessive physical force and arbitrary arrest, Palestinians must now contend with the risk of being tracked by an algorithm, or barred from entering their own neighbourhoods based on information stored in discriminatory surveillance databases.”

In a new 82-page report titled, *Automated Apartheid: How Facial Recognition Fragments, Segregates and Control Palestinians in the OPT*, Amnesty International details Israeli authorities’ extensive use of facial recognition technology “to support their continued domination and oppression of Palestinians” in the occupied Palestinian territories.

This report elaborates on Amnesty International’s 2022 report, *Israel’s apartheid against Palestinians: Cruel system of domination and crime against humanity*, which found that Israel maintains a system of oppression and domination over Palestinians in the occupied Palestinian territories and the diaspora. This segregation is conducted in a systematic and highly institutionalized manner through legislation and policies and practices that are intended to prevent Palestinians from enjoying equal rights to Jewish Israelis.

The new report cites Palestinian residents of Hebron and occupied East Jerusalem who describe the ways in which surveillance cameras invade their privacy, discourage activism, erode their social life and leave them feeling constantly exposed, even in their homes. They have to cover their windows with black blinds to avoid exposure to the electronic eyes.

“When the cameras were set up, if we stood by the window, we could be detected as if the cameras were just in our house,” Sara, who lives in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Silwan, said. “With cameras watching our every move, we were put in a terrible position. We couldn’t feel at home in our own house and had to be fully dressed all the time.”

Neda, a Palestinian resident, reported: “I’m being watched the whole time.... It gives me a really bad feeling everywhere in the street. Every time I see a camera, I feel anxious. Like you are always being treated as if you are a target.”

Israeli authorities often aim the biometric surveillance at sites with cultural and political significance, such as the Damascus Gate entrance to the Old City, where Palestinians frequently meet and hold protests in

support of prisoners on hunger strike and against repeated Israeli offensives in the occupied Gaza Strip.

The number of CCTV cameras increased in the neighborhoods of Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan in East Jerusalem after the 2021 protests against the forced evictions of Palestinian families to make way for Jewish settlers. In Silwan, the surveillance has increased as the number of settlers has risen.

“These surveillance cameras are not there to make the place more secure,” said Jawad Siyam, director of the Wadi Hilweh Information Center, which provides legal aid to children from Silwan who are arrested by Israeli forces for participating in protests. “They are there to scare Palestinians and protect settlers.”

“Everything is watched. My whole life is watched. I don’t have any privacy,” Issa Amro, a Palestinian activist in Hebron, said. “I feel they are following me everywhere I go.” Amro reported that Palestinians are angry because facial recognition surveillance is not used to identify Israeli settlers who have committed crimes against Palestinians.

That is because the Israeli government is not using the facial recognition technology to protect Palestinians, but rather to shield Israelis in the illegal settlements that are built on Palestinian land. Hebron and East Jerusalem are the only two cities in the occupied Palestinian territories that have illegal Israeli settlements within their boundaries. In Hebron, there are about 33,000 Palestinians and 850 settlers.

Surveillance is “part of a coercive environment aimed at forcing Palestinians to leave areas of strategic interest to Israeli authorities, by making their ordinary lives unbearable,” the report says. The report documents how this elaborate web of AI-driven surveillance violates international human rights and international humanitarian laws.

Under the Fourth Geneva Convention, Israel (the occupying power) is prohibited from settling civilians in occupied territory, forcibly transferring the population, annexing territory and carrying out collective punishments (punishing the population for crimes they didn’t commit).

In the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, “inhumane acts committed in the context of an institutional regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over another racial group, with the intent to maintain that regime” constitute apartheid.

The Apartheid Convention defines apartheid as “inhuman acts committed for the purpose of establishing and maintaining domination by one racial group of persons over any other racial group of persons and systematically oppressing them.”

The biometric surveillance system augmented by facial recognition technology violates the rights to freedom of movement, privacy, equality and nondiscrimination. It has a chilling effect on the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of peaceful assembly by discouraging Palestinians from demonstrating and intensifying the climate of fear and intimidation.

Because the settlers’ presence in the occupied territories is illegal under the Geneva Convention, the security justification for the surveillance is also illegitimate, the report notes.

“The deployment of remote biometric surveillance tools that restrict freedom of movement in the context of a prolonged military occupation, illegal settlement and annexation entrenches the segregation and fragmentation of the Palestinian people, and ultimately helps maintain and strengthen Israel’s cruel system of apartheid in the [occupied Palestinian territories],” the report states. “These tools contribute to the commission of prohibited acts constituting the crime against humanity of apartheid, as well as to war crimes. “

Amnesty International Urges Countries to Suspend Military Aid to Israel

The report concludes with Amnesty International's recommendation that countries immediately suspend the direct and indirect provision to Israel of "all weapons, munitions and other military and security equipment, and provision of training and other military and security assistance."

Amnesty International also recommends that Israel end the system of apartheid and cease the deployment of facial recognition technologies, mass surveillance and discriminatory targeted surveillance. In addition, it recommends that Israel end the regime of closures and other restrictions on freedom of movement that result in collective punishment. And the report says that Israel should immediately cease all settlement activity as a first step to dismantling all Israeli settlements.

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