Is Israel a leader in Security Technology? Examining recent failures with Dr. Hever

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AcTVism Munich: Thank you for your time. Although Israel is known as a leader in security technology, we continue to see failures. Can you talk about the recent setbacks in the technology apparatus and discuss their significance?

Dr. Shir Hever: Yeah, I think we have to distinguish between the hype and the way that the Israeli government or Israeli companies use the brand name of Israel, as if Israel has the best technology, especially the best security technology in the world. When we look a bit closer, it's a little bit more complicated than that. And especially we can see that the companies like NSO Group, that became very famous now with the Pegasus programme, or if we look at the Black Cube, which is a company established by former members of the Mossad and which worked for Harvey Weinstein, for example, these companies are not very successful. They use the hype to reach their customers, they make these contracts with their customers, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they also get the information they need for their customers. And many times they become discovered. When they are discovered, like the case of NSO, like the case of Black Cube, this is very bad for the company, and this is exactly what customers don't want to happen. I think we have to distinguish, though, between this hype that is built towards the outside part of the Israeli economy's method of getting export contracts with other countries and what happens inside Israeli society. And the way that Israelis are treating technology is a substitute for politics because there are very serious problems with the occupation, with the apartheid situation, Israel Palestine, with the way that Palestinians have already become the majority of the population under Israeli control. They did not give up their fight for freedom and independence. They did not give up their fight for human rights and equal rights. The Israelis know this. They understand that this is not a sustainable

situation. Does that mean that they are willing to make compromises to negotiate, to find some kind of way in which Palestinians and Israelis can live together in a peaceful situation? No. Instead, they want to rely on technology. I think the events of the last couple of weeks really demonstrate how this reliance on technology has altered the way that a lot of Israelis look at reality. Even the Israeli newspapers, the Israeli politicians, and they don't see the reality as it is, but they see through a lens that is, this lens is if you can solve any kind of problem with technology. First of all, let's talk about the six Palestinian prisoners who escaped from the Gilboa prison. These six prisoners, their escape has become a very hotly debated topic, a very symbolic issue. It inspired a lot of people, even though they were eventually captured after a very long and very expensive manhunt, which was launched by the Israeli police force and military and with help of the Palestinian Authority, I have to say that as well, the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, which assisted the Israeli forces in capturing the six prisoners. But the way that this happened? Let's talk about how these prisoners escaped in the first place. Palestinians used the symbol of the spoon, and that's a very powerful symbol. But, you know, a symbol as much as it can be inspiring, you know, there were 300000 spoons that Palestinians threw at the Israeli Embassy in Washington D.C., in the United States as a symbol for the freedom of the escaped prisoners. Very nice as a symbol, but in reality, it wasn't the spoon that allowed the Palestinians to escape. What really allowed them to escape was their phones. And this is something that was completely published in the Israeli media. It's not very well known, but the way that the prisoners were able to escape was because they were on the phone, on their mobile phones with friends from outside the prison who managed to find the blueprints of the prison online and told them where they have to dig and how they can escape. And this information was crucial and also to tell them who can pick them up once they escape and at what time and so on. All of that was only possible because they could speak on the phone. Now the prisoners, sorry, the prison guards, the prison authorities, know that phones enabled the prisoners to coordinate and to escape and to send messages to the outside world. They don't want that, of course, they try various means to prevent that. There are two ways to prevent that. The most obvious way is that the guards, like in every prison around the world, will go from cell to cell, search the prisoners, search their cells, confiscate any form that they find, punish the prisoners. But the Israeli prison guards don't want that. They feel like such a behaviour humiliates them because it creates a situation of this kind of cat and mouse game where the prisoners are trying to hide the phones, they're trying to find the phones and they feel they are not necessarily going to win in this cat and mouse game. So they don't want to play it at all. Instead, they decided to look for technology for a solution. And it's a very Israeli state of mind to think you can solve everything with a device, with a technological device. And this device is a device that broadcasts radiation that interrupts and interferes with cellular communication- makes phones all over the prison not functioning. So they installed the device and then prisoners, especially from the Hamas party, not the six prisoners who escaped, but just in general Hamas prisoners in Israeli jails said that this device that broadcasts this radiation is dangerous, dangerous to their health, and they demand that the device will be turned off. And they started to go on protests, various kinds of protests, and at some point the prison guard said, We don't want to

deal with this protest. We don't want to confront these prisoners or reach some kind of compromise with them, and we do want to keep using the device. So we'll just turn it down a little. We turn the knob a little bit more and a little bit more. And eventually the Hamas prisoners stopped protesting. And that's when the prison authority said, OK, good, so the situation is solved. They still have the device. But when did the Hamas prisoners stop protesting? They stopped when they could use the phones again. So actually the phones were working, but the Israelis didn't think about it because they have a technological solution. So when the six prisoners did escape, there were a lot of discussions about the Israeli media, what a terrible mistake, what an embarrassment for the Israeli Prison Authority, how one of the most best guarded and technologically advanced prisons in Israel was breached so easily by these prisoners and they tried to find various excuses. They blamed a prison guard, a female prison guard, that later was revealed not to have existed. This is also a misogynistic thing to say, well, the guard that must have fallen asleep has to be a woman. Later, they found out that no, there was no such guard. They just invented the woman. But what they did write, for example, is that the prison is not technologically enough, not technologically advanced enough because they discovered that the prison guards write the names of the prisoners on a piece of paper. And when they leave the prison, the piece of paper is turned upside down. When they return, they turn it again like a card. And they said, how is it possible that in the 21st century, they don't use a computer for this? But let me ask you this. Let's say that they did have a computer to keep track of the prisoners in prison and the ones who are outside. Will that have prevented the escape? Of course not. The technology in itself is not the solution. And this device that is supposed to stop cellular communication is not in itself the solution. It has to be implemented. If the prison guards will really consider the prisoners as human beings and try to think what are they planning and try to form counter strategies and this kind of respect for the prisoners as human beings who might be planning their escape and might have their own ideas and might be intelligent people is something that the Israeli prison guards cannot do. You know, they cannot see the Palestinians as human beings. They have to see them as a function that needs to be solved with a technological device. That's one very interesting story, but the second story that has happened in the last couple of weeks is the story of the big scandal in the United States in the Congress about funding for the Iron Dome system. The Iron Dome is maybe the most famous weapon used by the Israeli military. Even though it is a missile defence system, it's not used to kill people. It's used to intercept rockets fired from the Gaza Strip, specifically some rockets which the Hamas fighters in Gaza developed as a weapon that they can throw against Israel. It's not a very effective weapon, the Qassam rockets, they're not something that can defeat the Israeli military, cause a lot of people to die on the Israeli side, but they certainly cause a lot of fear. They certainly cause a lot of noise. And a lot of Israelis suffer from psychological problems because the rockets fall nearby and they feel like they could have been killed and they can be traumatised by that. Absolutely. The Iron Dome system solves the problem again, a technological solution. It's a system that tracks these Qassam rockets when they arrive and fires and interceptor missiles to blow up the rocket in the sky. And the name of it, Iron Dome is a very interesting metaphor because it looks at the skies, yet another frontier that has to be stopped with a wall. So if you

put a wall above you, it's called the dome. And of course, there are also the walls, the separation wall that Israel built in the West Bank to separate from Palestinians. There are different fences around Gaza. There are fences in the border with Egypt, in the border with Lebanon. So the more and more walls and fences, again, the kind of technological thinking of how can a device, in this case a wall, serve to solve a political problem, that people on the other side don't like us, maybe they want to rebell, maybe they want to come in, maybe they have a right to come in, but we want to stop them. So that's what the Iron Dome is also doing, blocking the sky. The problem is, in order to be sure to intercept one of those Qassam rockets, you need two interceptor missiles because one of them might miss. And these interceptor missiles cost $50000 each. Right, so you need one hundred thousand dollars whenever you see a Qassam rocket. Hamas have found a way to build those Qassam rockets in very, very difficult conditions within the besieged Gaza Strip, where they don't have access to a lot of raw materials and they have very basic components. For example, these Qassam rockets don't have a warhead, they don't have explosives in them. It's just a pipe with a little bit of fuel to make it fly. And that's it. And it costs them less than $100 to build one Qassam rocket. So if the Hamas fighters are able to assemble a thousand Qassam rockets and fire them into Israel, that thing would cost them maybe $100000, which is for the Hamas party a lot of money, but something they can afford. On the Israeli side in order to intercept a thousand Qassam rockets, they have to spend millions of dollars, well worth hundreds of millions, and this becomes very, very expensive. And this is unsustainable. Now again, we have a problem, a political problem, basically. The Israeli military wants to keep attacking Gaza. The Israeli government wants to keep the siege on Gaza. They don't want to recognise the right of Palestinian refugees from Gaza to return to their homes inside Israel. They don't want to allow the freedom of movement, of people in Gaza even to leave the Gaza Strip or just, you know, to go not necessarily to Israel, but to study in other countries. And they know that as long as they deny the basic rights of Palestinians, the Palestinians will continue to try to fight. And instead of reaching some kind of solution or or compromise or long term arrangement, the technological solution means to use the Iron Dome to make the Palestinian resistance useless. But it's not useless. It just costs a lot of money. It drains the Israeli economy. And here came the great idea of the Israeli government. Let's ask the Americans for the money. Because if the US gives money for Iron Dome, then the Israelis don't have to feel that the money comes out of their own pockets. And this creates the illusion as if it's sustainable. But instead of spending money, they're spending the goodwill of the United States. Already in 2016, Barack Obama, before the end of his second term, has made an agreement with Israel and with the US Congress and Senate, which is called the Memorandum of Understanding, which limited the amount of aid the United States can give to Israel. And he said there's a certain fixed amount of money that will not be increased, even if there will be inflation. And if the Israelis want more aid, for example, if they also want the Iron Dome batteries to be replenished, that would have to be passed by the Congress and approved by the Senate by a separate bill and will have to be discussed. And now this is exactly what happened because the several members of the Democratic Party, the progressive members of the Democratic Party, known as The Squad, and these women of colour who are progressive and who

recognise the rights of Palestinians, they said, why should we vote in favour of this? And because this extra money for the Iron Dome, about a billion dollars was added into the spending bill of the US government altogether, then the Democratic Party became very anxious that if those few members of Congress would vote against it, the whole spending bill will fall and they decided to take out the funding for the Iron Dome system, out of the bill. And when they did that, there was a state of panic in Israel, and all the Israeli newspapers put that on their front page. I think it's very interesting the way that different Israeli newspapers have responded to this. For example, they drew a caricature in which Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, one of the members of The Squad, was firing a missile to intercept the Iron Dome missiles. A very interesting and funny caricature. And of course, the Israeli government knows that, you know, without this billion dollars, they are still going to buy and replenish the Iron Dome missiles, they're still going to do this, even if the United States doesn't give them the money. And also, they knew that the United States is eventually going to give them the money. I mean, after some debates, they found a way to pass it in the Congress anyway, to pass it to the Senate. So the money will come. But of course, by the time it comes, it created a very heated discussion within the United States. Why should the United States spend so much money to protect the State of Israel, which is supposed to have the most powerful military in the Middle East? Why do they need so much support from the United States? Why aren't they not defending themselves? Why should American taxpayers pay for the political decisions of the Israeli government towards Gaza, rather than the Israeli government take responsibility for its own actions? And of course, within Israel, there was a whole debate about what does it mean if the United States will no longer give the Israeli military one hundred percent support for everything they do? And what if it spreads? And today they're voting against replenishing the Iron Dome system, but tomorrow they might also say, why should we send missiles like Hellfire missiles that are used by helicopters to blow up Palestinian homes. This is much more difficult to defend publicly, that Israel really needs those missiles compared to the Iron Dome system, which at least appears to be on the face of it, a defensive system. It is not, but it is pretended to be a defensive system. And I'm saying it's not a defensive system, just to clarify because it enables the Israeli military to operate with impunity. It deprives Palestinians in Gaza from their one means of self-defence, so it makes it easier for the Israeli military to bomb and attack in the Gaza Strip, so I would not call it a defensive system.

AcTVism: What does Israel's dependence on technology say about its role vis-à-vis Palestinians? And do you think this approach is sustainable?

Dr. SH: I think this is a very recurring feature of colonial situations. This is, actually it reminds me of a famous poem that was written about the British Empire. "Whatever happens, we have got the Maxim Gun and they do not". This was written just after the battle in which the British Army lost the battle to Zulu warriors. And the British soldiers had firearms, guns, they also had the Maxim Gun, which is mentioned in this poem, which was the first version

of the machine gun that was invented in that time of the very late 19th century. But the Zulu warriors had spears, and they still won. The British Empire was so shocked that technology did not save them, and technology was not able to give them the advantage they wanted over the people that they perceive to be primitive. The poem was written after the battle not before, because even the poet was not able to acknowledge the fact that actually the Maxim Gun does not solve the problem. Having seen very clear evidence of that. And I think this is what is happening in Israel today. Israelis, they understand that the occupation is labour intensive and requires a lot of Israelis to do military service and standing the checkpoints and break into Palestinian homes and torture Palestinians, interrogate them, imprison them, all of that hard work. This is colonial work. They don't want to do it. And no colonial power ever wanted to do it. Maybe the first generation is willing to do this. The second generation is doing it reluctantly, the third generation and this is now what we are having in Israel, a third generation of colonists who are saying, Why did my father and grandfather fought in the army, conquered all this land, tortured all these people, imprisoned them? I don't want to do the same. I just want to enjoy the fruits of the work of my father and grandfather. So there has to be some kind of solution that would enable me to live as the ruler of the land without doing the dirty work. And this is where this technology is coming in. But the second thing is that is also: recruiting the Palestinians themselves to do the dirty work for them. So now we have the Palestinian Authority, which is cooperating very closely with the Israeli military in order to control the territory. I mentioned that without the help of the Palestinian Authority, it would not have been possible for the Israeli military to recapture the six escaped prisoners. And of course, it's not only the Palestinian Authority, there are also informants and collaborators that are recruited within the Palestinian population. But every time this is done, the power imbalance between the Israelis and Palestinians is gradually shifting, and technology just cannot fill that gap.

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