HP and the Occupation

written by Creede Newton | January 29, 2013



In December 2009, the Israeli Knesset passed a law allowing for the creation of a biometric database of the inhabitants of Israel. As of January 2013, the program is in its initial testing stage.

On December 1, 2008, the American corporation Hewlett-Packard won the contract for the development and dispersal of 5 million biometric identification cards as well as the creation and maintenance of the biometric database, a year before the law was passed. The contract was worth 270 million New Israeli Shekels (NIS), or $72 million. In that same month, an HP subsidiary, Electronic Data Systems (EDS), won a yearly 8 million NIS contract for the systemization of biometric data and the installation of the biometric data system in government offices that would issue the ID cards.

The political and philosophical implications of the creation of such a thorough biometric database for a nation's citizenry are complex and worthy of exhaustive discussion, but the implications of the creation of the same system for a population that has been militarily occupied for over 40 years and has no say in its occupier's government deserves international outcry.

There already is a biometric database for the Palestinians, the use of which is oppressive and a serious concern for whatever hope of peace that remains.

Biometrics and Restrictions on Palestinian Movement: The Basel System

Israeli officials contend that the separation wall, which snakes through the occupied West Bank dissecting agricultural lands from their owners, and the arduous, congested checkpoints that serve as the only permeable entry points for Palestinians laboring in Israel, are necessary and simply intended for security. Since the construction of the aforementioned wall, human rights organizations, church bodies, the international community and the International Court of Justice (save one US judge) have all expressed condemnation of the wall's effect on Palestinian livelihood.

In order to soften the international perception of the wall and checkpoints, a new system designed to reduce "friction" was implemented at many checkpoints. Here "friction" can be defined as "contact between Israeli soldiers and Palestinians." The Basel system, as it came to be called, has been in use since 2005 and it requires that all Palestinians hoping to enter Israel carry a magnetic identification card on which biometric data is stored.

Unlike the biometric data stored in passports issued by the United States and the European Union, these cards hold information on facial dimensions, hand geometry and other biometric templates, as well as personal and security data. Upon entering any checkpoint equipped with this system, such as that separating the occupied Palestinian territory from its presumptive capital, East Jerusalem, Palestinians are subjected to a particularly clinical and dehumanizing process.

The identification procedure occurs in a hallway which contains several small rooms whose walls

are made of unidirectional glass. In the first room, a voice comes over the speakers and tells the subject to leave his or her personal belongings and step outside. Once outside, the room is locked and security officials enter to examine the subject's effects. When the examination is complete, the voice returns to tell the subject to collect their things, continue to the next room and place their magnetic ID card in a bowl. The card is then passed through a small window to the computerized screening station. One must remember that the only people subject to these checks are Palestinian.

The Basel system is not limited to checkpoints separating the Palestinian territories from Israel. Several of these checkpoints are located deep within the West Bank and have contributed to the moratorium on travel for intellectuals, medical complications and even death resulting from their placement between villages and hospitals. Such severe restrictions on freedom of movement, even during childbirth, exhibit complete disregard for internationally-accepted standards of human rights.

The Palestinian Biometric Database

In order to deal with the disparate populations residing within its borders, Israel developed a color-coded system of identification. A blue ID is issued to all Israeli citizens (Jews and Palestinians) and permanent residents. The latter include the 253,000 Palestinians who found themselves inside Israel's "borders" when East Jerusalem was annexed after the 1967 war. The vast majority of these have neither de facto nor de jure citizenship. They are permitted to apply for citizenship if they swear allegiance to Israel and meet certain other conditions, but most have not done so because they view their application as a validation of Israel's sovereignty over their annexed capital. Several thousand have applied for and been granted citizenship in the past decade, but in the last two years the Ministry of the Interior has slowed down approvals.

On the surface it would seem that the inclusion of these Palestinians defeats the idea of stratified citizenship, but until 2003 the "nationality" of the cardholder (Jewish, Druze, Palestinian, Bedouin,) was explicitly listed. After 2003, it was replaced with asterisks.

Though no longer named outright, the "nationality" of the cardholder is easily gleaned by taking note of the identification number's prefix (the cardholder's ethnicity is stored in the population registry) and whether or not the surname of the paternal grandfather is included.

Israeli policy concerning East Jerusalem has been discriminatory since the inception of the occupation. If a Palestinian fled Jerusalem due to the war and was unable to return for their original Israeli census, their right to reside in their home was annulled. If a Palestinian has been away from Jerusalem for 7 years or more, their citizenship is revoked. Over 1,360 Palestinians fell victim to this policy in 2006 alone. A newborn is awarded this non-citizenship blue ID only if both of its parents hold the blue East Jerusalem ID.

The residents of the rest of the occupied territory were originally given orange IDs, but their color was later changed to green. These cards go as far as to list religion, but do not mention citizenship of any kind.

Any holder of a green ID that should wish to enter Israel must apply for a permit, and since 2005 they must also attain the same magnetized biometric identification cards dropped in the bowl at every Basel system checkpoint. This requirement has led to nearly every person over 16 years of age in the occupied Palestinian territories being listed in a biometric database in which their facial dimensions, hand geometry, iris scans and fingerprints are maintained.

In 2008, Hewlett-Packard acquired EDS, the main developer of both the Palestinian database and the Basel checkpoints. Since then, HP and its subsidiary have been responsible for the upkeep of this

system of biometric oppression.

Hewlett-Packard contra American Foreign Policy: An Occupation Catalogued

In any conceivable 2-state solution, the Palestinian government will face a tall order. Substantial unemployment figures, over 350,000 Jewish settlers in the West Bank, settlements the size of cities, annexed East Jerusalem and the Palestinian Right of Return. The question of a military force is not among these concerns; under most 2-state proposals, a Palestine in charge of its own external defense is prohibited, leaving the duty to the Israelis Defense Force (IDF). Many Palestinians are concerned about the IDF's continued presence further undermining civil society in their future state.

There is marked cooperation that strengthens this concern, as shown by the blind eye turned by the Palestinian Authority to the December 11, 2012 Israeli raids on the prisoner support organization Addammeer, the Union of Palestinian Women's Committee and the Palestinian Nongovernmental Organizations Network.

Palestinians fear that their future state will be more of the same, more violations of their sovereignty masquerading as the responsibility of defense.

Domestic and international voices have taken note of these apprehensions and many now claim that a 1-state solution is the only feasible answer to this tiresome dispute.

The complete biometric cataloguing of the Palestinian populace is yet another grievance to address, another blow to the increasingly invalid 2-state solution.

Though there is no parallel to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a few passable comparisons may be drawn. Would the international community have been so forgiving of Serbia holding a comprehensive database of the citizenry of Bosnia and Herzegovina after its withdrawal from the hills surrounding Sarajevo? If Turkey currently knew the address of every Greek Cypriot; as well as their religious and marital status, would this not be seen as a threat to the island republic's independence?

Further Infractions

America's expressed foreign policy concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a 2-state solution based on the 1967 borders with mutually-agreed land swaps. The actions of HP and EDS are in direct opposition to this policy. The Orwellian reservoir of biometric data at the disposal of the Israeli government is perhaps the most significant, but one cannot discount the many contracts HP with various branches of the occupation.

HP supplies all computers to the Israeli army, including those used at checkpoints. The company also won a contract for the outsourcing of the Navy's intelligence technology infrastructure, including the management and operation of its computer and communications centers, information security, and user support.

This is the same Navy that in the wake of a ceasefire tells the fishermen of Gaza, who may or may not have voted for Hamas, that their new boundary has been augmented by 3 nautical miles to a paltry 6 in total, only to attack and arrest them when they dare to venture out.

Many of these men were the sole breadwinners for large families. With their boats impounded and destroyed, they are left with no recourse to provide for their loved ones.

Even if the Israeli Navy allowed the fishermen free movement within the newly delineated

boundaries, it would still be flying in the face of international standards, which set the minimum at 12 miles. Under the Oslo accords, the fishermen of Gaza were afforded a full 20 nautical miles.

A computerized storage system provided by HP sits in the illegal settlement of Ariel, which houses the school recently awarded university status, and will reportedly always be under the sovereignty of Israel.

Ariel is located almost halfway into the occupied West Bank between Ramallah and Nablus and the notion that it should always remain under Israeli control elucidates the hopelessness of the 2-state solution.

Hewlett-Packard contra the Rhetoric of the Right

"In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem."

Since President Reagan uttered those epitomical words during his inaugural address on January 20, 1981, the American Right has framed political discourse in the United States as a battle between government and personal freedom.

In their worldview, government feeds on personal liberty, and any regulation placed on big business serves as seasoning for government's meal of choice.

While this rhetorical hat-trick has resonated with the workers and voters of the United States (so much so that American organized labor seems to be on its last leg), one only needs to look to the actions of largely unregulated transnational corporations to see the error in this line of thinking. Indifference and contempt for workers and the environment abound, but the American Right seems to be unfazed by these transgressions.

Oddly, when debating this philosophy, Orwell's *1984* is cited nearly as much as any work by Ayn Rand. Orwell was a self-professed socialist who despised reactionary policy, something largely lost on the proponents of his critique of "Big Government".

Perhaps the role of HP in creating these databases, and thereby helping the Israeli Ministry of the Interior inch ever closer to the role of the deplorable Ministry of Love, could serve as sufficient cause for alarm and reflection concerning boundless Big Business.

After all, it is our principle ally in the Middle East, the region's "only democracy", who is subjecting not only its own citizens but those under the purview of the occupation, those who have no right to vote, to this Orwellian reality.

In the case of the Israeli Biometric Database, Big Government and Big Business have come together to further the suffering of the occupied, limit the freedom of the occupiers and deal yet another blow to the moribund 2-state solution.

Any person, regardless of political inclination, can easily find something to hate, including the founders of HP, Bill Hewlett and David Packard, who came up with guidelines to govern their company known as the "HP Way." One of the tenets asserts that their employees ". . . at every level are expected to adhere to the highest standards of business ethics and must understand that anything less is unacceptable."

While commonly accepted standards of business ethics have effectively been forgotten in the globalized economy, one cannot help but contrast the original philosophy of HP's founders with the

corporation's profiting from illegal settlements, population-wide restrictions on movement, military occupations and vulgar indifference towards the announced foreign policy of the United States and to common decency.

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