

The Israeli Surveillance State: Did The “Shin Bet” Just Hack My Computer?

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I have been pondering - probably more than is wise - what happened yesterday, when I lost control of my computer for an hour shortly after I had contacted the Israeli prime minister's spokesman for a comment from the Shin Bet. I was working on a story about the various ways the Shin Bet seeks to exert pressure on Palestinians to recruit them as collaborators. For details of what happened, you can read about it [here](#).

Several people have pointed out, following my post last night, that we should all assume that we are being watched all the time, and especially people like journalists. Much as I would be secretly flattered to think that I have my own dedicated Shin Bet agent analysing my every keystroke, as I laboriously tap out my stories, I am realist enough to know that is a little unlikely. Even the Shin Bet must have worked out by now that it is simpler to wait a day or two to read the posts on my website. The Shin Bet has limited resources, and I and people like me are still a marginal problem (though maybe not for much longer).

The thing that has puzzled me most is the brazen manner in which this was done, while I was looking on trying to regain control of my computer. No effort was made to hide the hack. I and several other readers have speculated that I should interpret this behaviour as a warning, or threat. As I explained yesterday, one of the Shin Bet's main goals in recruiting collaborators is, in addition to gathering information, to sow fear and doubt, to isolate people and dissuade them from working together - in the Palestinian case, on resistance to the occupation.

Nonetheless, I don't find this explanation entirely satisfying either. I can't believe that the Shin Bet are so naive as to think that showing me they can watch me whenever they choose will force me to pack up my journalistic bags and take up another career, or tone down my reporting. After all, this is all I know how to do.

So what happened last night?

As I was trying to clear my mind to fall asleep, the penny dropped. In recounting the events yesterday, I overlooked an important element. Shortly after I emailed David Baker, one of the prime minister's spokesmen, with my question for the Shin Bet, he emailed back. This is what he wrote:

Jonathan, Please send me the names of those who asked for the permits and I will try to get you a response from the relevant authority.

Now, at the time I thought this a ludicrous request. What journalist is going to hand over a list of Palestinians who have complained to human rights lawyers that they were pressured into collaborating after requesting permits for emergency medical treatment? I ignored it and asked Baker just to get a response to my general question about whether such techniques were used. Now I consider his response both a little more sinister than I assumed and also the clue as to what happened.

First for the sinister. There's a famous saying: to a hammer, every problem looks like a nail. The Shin Bet's main operational tool is collecting intelligence, including human intelligence (i.e. collaborators, in all their various guises). So I suspect that when they received my mail their first institutional reflex was to try to ensnare me, clumsily, into collaborating, whether inadvertently or not. When I refused to take the bait, they started thinking along different lines.

I am guessing that when my request came through, the assumption with some mid-level Shin Bet officer was that I would have on my computer either my notes from conversations with Palestinians complaining about the Shin Bet, or a list from human rights groups of such Palestinians. Remember that the effort to recruit collaborators is a violation of the Geneva Conventions. In short, it's a war crime. So I think we can safely assume that the Shin Bet is understandably a little sensitive about this aspect of their operations.

I am also guessing that they were concerned I might start to worry and delete the information from my computer. Time was of the essence: hack my computer quickly and download whatever was on the hard drive for leisurely analysis. In essence, what happened was the equivalent of the journalist or gumshoe who returns home to find his apartment ransacked by the security services. The only difference was that in virtual-world they can ransack your computer while you stand there helplessly watching them do it.

I recount the above in this much detail because one of the things that I find so irritating about the Israeli documentary *The Gatekeepers*, and the general acclamation of it, is the impression it has created among more naive viewers, including most reviewers, that the Shin Bet's recent heads have been sensitive and liberal-minded individuals caught in an impossibly difficult situation. That's like thinking Mafia godfathers are really just nice guys working in a tough world.

The Shin Bet is run by people who have the minds of thugs, clever thugs, but thugs nonetheless. If that has always been true, it is all the more so now. The Haaretz newspaper recently revealed that three of the four top posts in the Shin Bet are currently occupied by people who describe themselves as national-religious - that is, the ideology of the extremist settlers.

That too might help to explain the arrogance of ransacking my computer while I looked on. If they do that to a journalist who has at least the odd feeble tool (like this blog) to fight back, what are they doing to desperate, vulnerable Palestinians who need permits to get emergency medical treatment outside Gaza? I think we know the answer.

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