

Google, Amazon; Did you mean 'Genocide enablers'?



⬆ Demonstrators stage a "die-in" protest outside Google offices in San Francisco, the US, on December 14, 2023, over Google's contract with Israel that provides facial recognition and other technologies amid the Israeli genocide in Gaza.
● SANTIAGO MEJIA/THE CHRONICLE



⬆ Workers held a 10-hour sit-in protest at Google offices in Sunnyvale, California, on April 16, 2024. Some workers were arrested minutes after taking this photo.
● X

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PERSPECTIVE EXCLUSIVE

I'm not going to lie. There was a time, not very long ago, when I, too, believed that certain giant companies hold higher values than others. The more modest their beginnings, the humbler their founders, and the more worker-friendly their offices were, the more I bought into that idea. I hardly think it's an overstatement that most of us view companies like Google and Microsoft more favorably than some others like Amazon, Tesla, and Meta (formerly, Facebook). Not all of that was due to my naivete. As time went by, I discovered more and more, through investigative journalists and whistleblowers, that companies spend lavishly on carefully curating their image. On the more disturbing side of it, they employ tactics like releasing information about their dealings to the public, signing non-disclosure agreements (NDAs), settling lawsuits, and firing and silencing workers who speak out to keep the lid on their shady business. On the less disturbing side of it, the faces of the company put out a sweet, cheery, and friendly air to themselves and their management style just to stand out from the crowd of cutthroat, money-hungry CEOs and build a loyal clientele. The two companies in question today arguably took one of these paths: Amazon took the former path while Google took the latter. Yet, they converged when they signed basically the same contract with an obvious evil force: the Israel Defense Force (IDF).

Of course, we are talking about Project Nimbus. Like a nimbostratus — the dark rain clouds that it got its name from — it's been haunting these giants and making their public events gloomy for over two years now, which they should have seen coming over the horizon.

As far as we know — and you will see that it's a big if — Project Nimbus was a \$1.22 billion contract signed by both Google and Amazon in May 2021 to provide cloud technology to the Israeli cabinet. Some would argue that providing services to the most benign ministry of the infamous cabinet must have been enough to raise some alarms. What made the contract worse was that the Israeli military was one of the main recipients of these cloud services and apparently more — and that is an important piece of information that was once strongly denied by representatives of Google.

Mind you, the Israeli military and defense ministry have long been accused of committing crimes against the humanitarian rights of Palestinians, Lebanese, and other peoples of the Middle East, even before Israel's recent onslaught of civilians in Gaza.

If cloud services, which are leveraging powerful computing resources without having to purchase or maintain hardware and software, sound foreign or harmless to you — which shouldn't be — you'd be upset to know that this is not the only dealing of these parties.

In July 2022, the Intercept reported that training documents for Israeli government personnel indicate Google is providing software that the company claims can recognize people, gauge emotional states from facial expressions, and track objects in video footage. The same mind-blowing technology that helps Google Photos find the exact or similar pictures to the one you have in your computer is at the moment helping the Israeli military to expand its campaigns of arresting, imprisoning, and torturing thousands of Palestinian civilians with little to no evidence in the slim hopes of getting their hands on a captive taken by Hamas.

Employees, concerned public fight back

If Project Nimbus started in 2021, why did we say that its name has been haunting Amazon and Google for only two years? That's roughly when some employees came forward with their newfound discovery that the project is not serving peaceful purposes as promised. Since then, they have been organizing protests and trying to keep the public from forgetting that their beloved Google and their indispensable Amazon have been facilitating crimes against humanity — the most recent of which is the genocide in Gaza.

More than 1,000 workers have stepped up and put their careers on the line, and their calls have been responded to by over 97,000 signatories who have backed their cause on

notechforapartheid.com. The movement posits that "technology should be used to bring people together, not enable apartheid, ethnic cleansing, and settler-colonialism." While some big companies — like Microsoft in 2020 — caved under maybe less pressure in the past and changed their way, Google and Amazon have been defiantly and forcefully pushing back.

Google Cloud spokesperson Atle Erlingsson told Wired in September 2022 that the company proudly supports Israel's government and said critics had misrepresented Project Nimbus. "Our work is not directed at highly sensitive or classified military workloads," he told Wired. Erlingsson, however, acknowledged that the contract will provide Israel's military access to Google technology. According to former Google worker Ariel Koren, who was one of the first instances from many to come of Google firing anti-Nimbus employees, "Google systematically silences Palestinian, Jewish, Arab, and Muslim voices concerned about Google's complicity in violations of Palestinian human rights." In March 2022, The Times reported allegations by Koren — at the time a product marketing manager at Google for Education — that Google had retaliated against her for criticizing the contract, issuing a directive that she move to São Paulo, Brazil, within 17 business days or lose her job.

Since those early days, employees angry at being made complicit in genocide are not few and far between anymore. They have gathered under the banner of the No Tech for Apartheid movement, but this has not made them immune to retaliation as these giant firms drafted their contracts with their employees in a way that would allow them to hold all the cards.

Alphabet Workers Union, which provides resources to union members in an anti-military working group, has not taken a formal stance on Project Nimbus, either. Mohammad Khatami, a YouTube software engineer based in New York got involved with the Alphabet Workers Union and participated in a small protest of Project Nimbus at a July Amazon Web Services conference in Manhattan. Khatami stressed, "Greed and corporate interests were being put ahead of workers, and I think the layoffs just illustrated that for me very clearly."

"Google has given us no reason to trust them," said Joshua Marxen, a Google Cloud software engineer who helped to organize some protests, according to the Los Angeles Times. "I am very worried that Google has no scruples if they're going to work with the Israeli government."

As is unfortunately expected from such cases, the three demands of the No Tech for Apartheid movement are simple and moral, so much so that one worries why they should have been demanded for over two years and still not accommodated. The movement demands that Google drops