TECH   ISRAEL-HAMAS WAR

Exclusive: Google Workers Revolt Over $1.2 Billion Contract With Israel

11 MINUTE READ

Protesters in front of Google's San Francisco offices on December 14, 2023.   Tayfun Coskun/Anadolu via Getty Images

BY **BILLY PERRIGO** X

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In midtown Manhattan on March 4, Google's managing director for Israel, Barak Regev, was addressing a conference promoting the Israeli tech industry when a member of the audience stood up in protest. "I am a Google Cloud software engineer, and I refuse to build technology that powers

The Google worker, a 23-year-old software engineer named Eddie Hatfield, was booed by the audience and quickly bundled out of the room, a video of the event shows. After a pause, Regev addressed the act of protest. "One of the privileges of working in a company which represents democratic values is giving space for different opinions," he told the crowd.

Three days later, Google fired Hatfield.

Hatfield is part of a growing movement inside Google that is calling on the company to drop Project Nimbus, a $1.2 billion contract with Israel, jointly held with Amazon. The protest group, called No Tech for Apartheid, now has around 40 Google employees closely involved in organizing, according to members, who say there are hundreds more workers sympathetic to their goals. TIME spoke to five current and five former Google workers for this story, many of whom described a growing sense of anger at the possibility of Google aiding Israel in its war in Gaza. Two of the former Google workers said they had resigned from Google in the last month in protest against Project Nimbus. These resignations, and Hatfield's identity, have not previously been reported.

No Tech for Apartheid's protest is as much about what the public doesn't know about Project Nimbus as what it does. The contract is for Google and Amazon to provide AI and cloud computing services to the Israeli government and military, according to the Israeli finance ministry, which announced the deal in 2021. Nimbus reportedly involves Google establishing a secure instance of Google Cloud on Israeli soil, which would allow the Israeli government to perform large-scale data analysis, AI training, database hosting, and other forms of powerful computing using Google's technology, with little oversight by the company. Google documents, first reported by the Intercept in 2022, suggest that the Google services on offer to Israel via its Cloud have capabilities such as AI-enabled facial detection, automated image categorization, and object tracking.

what else Project Nimbus entails and the full nature of the company's relationship with Israel. Neither Google, nor Amazon, nor Israel, has described the specific capabilities on offer to Israel under the contract. In a statement, a Google spokesperson said: "We have been very clear that the Nimbus contract is for workloads running on our commercial platform by Israeli government ministries such as finance, healthcare, transportation, and education. Our work is not directed at highly sensitive or classified military workloads relevant to weapons or intelligence services." All Google Cloud customers, the spokesperson said, must abide by the company's terms of service and acceptable use policy. That policy forbids the use of Google services to violate the legal rights of others, or engage in "violence that can cause death, serious harm, or injury." An Amazon spokesperson said the company "is focused on making the benefits of our world-leading cloud technology available to all our customers, wherever they are located," adding it is supporting employees affected by the war and working with humanitarian agencies. The Israeli government did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

There is no evidence Google or Amazon's technology has been used in killings of civilians. The Google workers say they base their protests on three main sources of concern: the Israeli finance ministry's 2021 explicit statement that Nimbus would be used by the ministry of defense; the nature of the services likely available to the Israeli government within Google's cloud; and the apparent inability of Google to monitor what Israel might be doing with its technology. Workers worry that Google's powerful AI and cloud computing tools could be used for surveillance, military targeting, or other forms of weaponization. Under the terms of the contract, Google and Amazon reportedly cannot prevent particular arms of the government, including the Israeli military, from using their services, and cannot cancel the contract due to public pressure.

Protestors gather in front of Google's San Francisco offices demanding an end to its work with the Israeli government, on December 14, 2023. Tayfun Coskun/Anadolu via Getty Images

Recent reports in the Israeli press indicate that air-strikes are being carried out with the support of an AI targeting system; it is not known which cloud provider, if any, provides the computing infrastructure likely required for such a system to run. Google workers note that for security reasons, tech companies often have very limited insight, if any, into what occurs on the sovereign cloud servers of their government clients. "We don't have a lot of oversight into what cloud customers are doing, for understandable privacy reasons," says Jackie Kay, a research engineer at Google's DeepMind AI lab. "But then what assurance do we have that customers aren't abusing this technology for military purposes?"

With new revelations continuing to trickle out about AI's role in Israel's bombing campaign in Gaza; the recent killings of foreign aid workers by the Israeli military; and even President Biden now urging Israel to begin an immediate ceasefire, No Tech for Apartheid's members say their campaign is growing in strength. A previous bout of worker organizing inside Google successfully pressured the company to drop a separate Pentagon contract in

Hatfield as an attempt at silencing a growing threat to its business. "I think Google fired me because they saw how much traction this movement within Google is gaining," says Hatfield, who agreed to speak on the record for the first time for this article. "I think they wanted to cause a kind of chilling effect by firing me, to make an example out of me."

Hatfield says that his act of protest was the culmination of an internal effort, during which he questioned Google leaders about Project Nimbus but felt he was getting nowhere. "I was told by my manager that I can't let these concerns affect my work," he tells TIME. "Which is kind of ironic, because I see it as part of my work. I'm trying to ensure that the users of my work are safe. How can I work on what I'm being told to do, if I don't think it's safe?"

Three days after he disrupted the conference, Hatfield was called into a meeting with his Google manager and an HR representative, he says. He was told he had damaged the company's public image and would be terminated with immediate effect. "This employee disrupted a coworker who was giving a presentation – interfering with an official company-sponsored event," the Google spokesperson said in a statement to TIME. "This behavior is not okay, regardless of the issue, and the employee was terminated for violating our policies."

Seeing Google fire Hatfield only confirmed to Vidana Abdel Khalek that she should resign from the company. On March 25, she pressed send on an email to company leaders, including CEO Sundar Pichai, announcing her decision to quit in protest over Project Nimbus. "No one came to Google to work on offensive military technology," the former trust and safety policy employee wrote in the email, seen by TIME, which noted that over 13,000 children had been killed by Israeli attacks on Gaza since the beginning of the war; that Israel had fired upon Palestinians attempting to reach humanitarian aid shipments; and had fired upon convoys of evacuating refugees. "Through Nimbus, your

Workers argue that Google's relationship with Israel runs afoul of the company's "AI principles," which state that the company will not pursue applications of AI that are likely to cause "overall harm," contribute to "weapons or other technologies" whose purpose is to cause injury, or build technologies "whose purpose contravenes widely accepted principles of international law and human rights." "If you are providing cloud AI technology to a government which you know is committing a genocide, and which you know is misusing this technology to harm innocent civilians, then you're far from being neutral," Khalek says. "If anything, you are now complicit."

Two workers for Google DeepMind, the company's AI division, expressed fears that the lab's ability to prevent its AI tools being used for military purposes had been eroded, following a restructure last year. When it was acquired by Google in 2014, DeepMind reportedly signed an agreement that said its technology would never be used for military or surveillance purposes. But a series of governance changes ended with DeepMind being bound by the same AI principles that apply to Google at large. Those principles haven't prevented Google signing lucrative military contracts with the Pentagon and Israel. "While DeepMind may have been unhappy to work on military AI or defense contracts in the past, I do think this isn't really our decision any more," said one DeepMind employee who asked not to be named because they were not authorized to speak publicly. "Google DeepMind produces frontier AI models that are deployed via [Google Cloud's Vertex AI platform] that can then be sold to public-sector and other clients." One of those clients is Israel.

"For me to feel comfortable with contributing to an AI model that is released on [Google] Cloud, I would want there to be some accountability where usage can be revoked if, for example, it is being used for surveillance or military purposes that contravene international norms," says Kay, the DeepMind

A Google spokesperson did not address specific questions about DeepMind for this story.

Other Google workers point to what they know about Google Cloud as a source of concern about Project Nimbus. The cloud technology that the company ordinarily offers to its clients includes a tool called AutoML that allows a user to rapidly train a machine learning model using a custom dataset. Three workers interviewed by TIME said that the Israeli government could theoretically use AutoML to build a surveillance or targeting tool. There is no evidence that Israel has used Google Cloud to build such a tool, although the New York Times recently reported that Israeli soldiers were using the freely-available facial recognition feature on Google Photos, along with other non-Google technologies, to identify suspects at checkpoints. "Providing powerful technology to an institution that has demonstrated the desire to abuse and weaponize AI for all parts of war is an unethical decision," says Gabriel Schubiner, a former researcher at Google. "It's a betrayal of all the engineers that are putting work into Google Cloud."

A Google spokesperson did not address a question asking whether AutoML was provided to Israel under Project Nimbus.

Members of No Tech for Apartheid argue it would be naive to imagine Israel is not using Google's hardware and software for violent purposes. "If we have no oversight into how this technology is used," says Rachel Westrick, a Google software engineer, "then the Israeli military will use it for violent means."

"Construction of massive local cloud infrastructure within Israel's borders, [the Israeli government] said, is basically to keep information within Israel under their strict security," says Mohammad Khatami, a Google software engineer. "But essentially we know that means we're giving them free rein to use our technology for whatever they want, and beyond any guidelines that we set."

some described as fear of retaliation. "I know hundreds of people that are opposing what's happening, but there's this fear of losing their jobs, [or] being retaliated against," says Khalek, the worker who resigned in protest against Project Nimbus. "People are scared." Google's firing of Hatfield, Khalek says, was "direct, clear retaliation... it was a message from Google that we shouldn't be talking about this."

The Google spokesperson denied that the company's firing of Hatfield was an act of retaliation.

Regardless, internal dissent is growing, workers say. "What Eddie did, I think Google wants us to think it was some lone act, which is absolutely not true," says Westrick, the Google software engineer. "The things that Eddie expressed are shared very widely in the company. People are sick of their labor being used for apartheid."

"We're not going to stop," says Zelda Montes, a YouTube software engineer, of No Tech for Apartheid. "I can say definitively that this is not something that is just going to die down. It's only going to grow stronger."

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