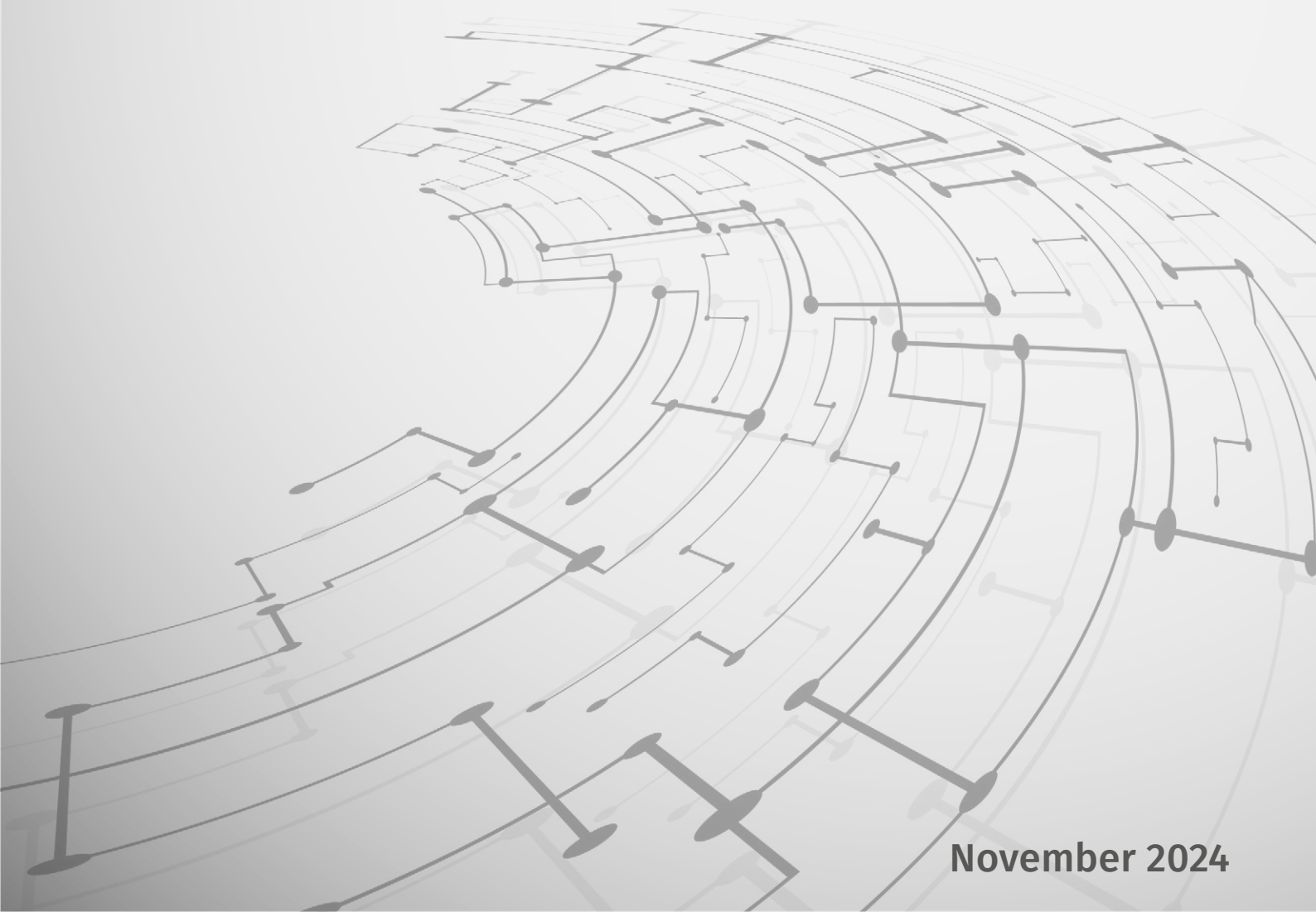




the Issue:

Tech Worker Testimonies
on **Palestinian Advocacy**
& Workplace Suppression



7amleh- the Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media

**Delete the Issue:
Tech Worker Testimonies on Palestinian Advocacy and Workplace Suppression**

November 2024

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Executive Summary

In this report, twenty-five tech worker testimonies, former and current, from Meta, Google, PayPal, Microsoft and LinkedIn, and Cisco, are analyzed to consider their experiences with Palestinian advocacy in the workplace. These tech worker testimonies represent varied perspectives on workplace advocacy for Palestine spanning different companies, centering experiences of censorship, suppression, and silencing. Conversations with these twenty-five tech workers reveal connections in how tech company leadership, across companies, similarly attempt to "delete the issue" of expression about, or support for, Palestine and Palestinian rights. In this report, supported by 7amleh's robust reporting on Palestinian digital rights violations spanning the last ten years at Meta, Google, PayPal and others, one can recognize how company policies pertaining to freedom of speech, political expression, community engagement, or worker-led movements are misapplied, over- or under-enforced, manipulated, or adapted in ways that further suppress Palestinian advocacy.

Shared both anonymously and publicly, depending on individual preference, these tech worker testimonies provide further insight into the larger political, economic, and cultural investments of both their respective tech companies, and also tech companies more broadly. In exposing tech leadership perspectives on Palestinian advocacy in the workplace, and the subsequent disciplining of tech workers who engage in such advocacy, these testimonies further reveal the investments of tech companies. Through considering these deeper systemic and structural tech investments in Israel-Palestine, one can better understand both the level of suppression tech worker advocates for Palestine experience, and also if, how, and when tech companies follow through on their commitments to equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Introduction

Through conversations with twenty-five tech workers, both current and former, at Google, Meta, PayPal, Apple, Microsoft and LinkedIn, and Cisco, it can be concluded, through assessing company responses to workplace advocacy related to Palestine, that there is a systemic and structural bias against Palestinians and pro-Palestinian workers within technology companies. This bias operates in alignment with the companies' larger economic interests that are reflective of, and in service of, U.S. hegemony and expansionism in the Middle East and greater MENA regions.

After engaging in hours of discussions with tech workers about their experiences within their workplace environments, it is clear several similarities exist across companies, which points to wider and deeper sentiments held by company leadership towards Palestinians and towards the longstanding situation in Israel and Palestine.

Workers who have expressed any sentiments related to Palestine, ranging from explicit support for Palestinian freedom and autonomy, to an extension of prayers for lives lost in Gaza, to sympathy for the ongoing violence, to sharing educational content to their colleagues, have experienced varying levels of discipline, harassment, bullying, doxxing, silencing, suppression, and discrimination, and at amplified levels since October 7, 2023.

In pairing this qualitative assessment of worker experiences with 7amleh's rigorous analysis on Palestinian digital rights violations both prior to, and after, October 7th, this report fills a necessary gap in the recent reporting on the workplace mobilization by tech workers, on the role of tech companies in the current war in Gaza and their complicity through products, services, and financial investments, and on the largely unmoderated power of these tech companies to determine the dissemination of information and news at a global level. Since October 7th, 7amleh has witnessed an unprecedented rise in digital rights violations, further revealing the exacerbated levels of violence and harm Palestinians experience both online and offline.

The public has been made increasingly aware of the censorship occurring on various online platforms through tech worker-led campaigns and mobilizations for Palestine, which have pointed to the companies' various investments in Israel, in its military,

or in the ongoing occupation of Palestine through either financial investments, or the sale, production, or collaboration on products or services. Additionally, these worker-led campaigns and mobilizations have begun to make visible the various ways in which workers have been silenced, suppressed, or discriminated against internally, through disciplinary measures taken by leadership, such as censorship, warnings, administrative leave, or even termination, and how that is reflective of the company position regarding Israel-Palestine more broadly.¹



1. See various worker-led campaigns in tech companies, including Google's [No Tech for Apartheid](#), [Metamates for Ceasefire](#), [Apples4Ceasefire](#) and [No Azure for Apartheid](#).

Literature Review

Western Perceptions of the MENA Region

The West has held problematic perceptions about the Middle East for a long time. Even the term "Middle East" itself, or even MENA (Middle East and North Africa), elides various cultures, countries, and religions, reducing and minimizing individual distinctions and autonomy. Western narratives and media have historically and problematically framed the Middle East, and its people and cultures, as one opposing the modernity of the West. American media representations throughout the 20th and 21st centuries have supported and stoked such misconceptions. For example, mainstream Western media's persistent framing of the Middle East through a lens of "terror," wherein civilians are often framed as "terrorists" or "potential terrorists," exhibits an overreliance on an overly simplistic and binary framing of West vs. Other. Such framing falsely assumes the West exists as a place of safety and modernity, in opposition to the notion of the Middle East as a faraway uncivilized place of danger.² Such problematic framings have been explored extensively by scholars of colonialism and imperialism.³

After the onset of the war on Gaza, Western bias, amplified widely by Western media, has only further extended narratives of Western colonial expansion, imperialism, and racism. As discussed in an article published by Al Jazeera in April 2024, Joseph Daher notes how Western mainstream media's defense of the Israeli narrative is connected to the same concepts of orientalism, racism, and imperialism discussed at length by famed Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said nearly fifty years ago.⁴ And since October 7th, Western media has exhibited an over-emphasis on Israeli suffering, Israeli self-defense, and the Israeli hostages, with little to no mention

2. Zaslavsky, Katherine (2017) "Kill or Be Killed: Seeing the Middle East as a Threat to the Western World," Proceedings of GREAT Day: Vol. 2016, Article 5. Retrieved from: <https://knightscholar.geneseo.edu/proceedings-of-great-day/vol2016/iss1/5>

3. See Edward Said's extensive writings on Western perceptions of the Middle East, and of subsequent Western colonialism and imperialism in the region.

Uddin, Rayhan (2023, 25 September). "Twenty years on: Edward Said's life and writings, in seven quotes." Middle East Eye. Retrieved from: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/edward-said-life-writings-seven-quotes-twenty-years-on>

Hibri, Cyma (2023, 12 February). "Orientalism: Edward Said's groundbreaking book explained." The Conversation. Retrieved from: <https://theconversation.com/orientalism-edward-saids-groundbreaking-book-explained-197429>

4. Daher, Joseph. (2024, 1 April). "Orientalism, Imperialism and The Western Coverage of Palestine." Al Jazeera Journalism Review. Retrieved from: <https://institute.aljazeera.net/en/ajr/article/2619>

of Palestinian suffering, Palestinian self-defense, or the thousands of Palestinian prisoner hostages. Such imbalance speaks to this skewed and ingrained Western narrative about the Middle East, about systemic bias against Palestinians, and Arabs and Muslims more broadly, and persistent Western investments in its imperialistic and colonial interests in the region over a regard for human rights.

Since the 1948 establishment of the Israeli state, the U.S. has consistently and steadfastly supported Israel. The U.S. was the first country to recognize Israel as an independent state, with President Harry Truman issuing a statement on May 14, 1948.⁵ And according to the U.S. Department of State, the "75-year partnership (between the U.S. and Israel) has been built on mutual interests and shared democratic values from its inception, with Israelis and Americans united by their commitment to democracy, economic prosperity, and regional security."⁶ And as the 2024 U.S. presidential race looms over the world, both the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates have reaffirmed their support for Israel and its "right to defend itself."⁷

While many have increasingly critiqued this steadfast support, the current horrors in Palestine persist. On January 26, 2024, the situation in Gaza was referred to as "plausible genocide" by the International Court of Justice (ICJ)⁸ and then on March 26, 2024, in a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Francesca Albanese, she determined there are "reasonable grounds" to believe Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians. As Albanese stated, "the genocide in Gaza is the most extreme stage of a long-standing settler colonial process of erasure of the native Palestinians." Albanese stressed that the "denial of the reality and the continuation of Israel's impunity and exceptionalism" is no longer viable.⁹ On July 19, 2024, the ICJ released a landmark statement designating

5. "Policy & History." U.S. Embassy in Israel. Retrieved from: <https://il.usembassy.gov/our-relationship/policy-history/>

6. "U.S. Relations with Israel – Fact Sheet." (2023, 30 January). U.S. Department of State. Retrieved from: <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-israel-2/>

7. In an August 29, 2024 interview with CNN, Democratic presidential nominee Kamala Harris asserted, "(I am) unwavering in my commitment to Israel's defense." See Kerry Boyd Anderson's "Harris walking a tightrope on US support for Israel" (2024, 2 September) in Arab News. Retrieved from: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2569779>

See The Washington Post article "Trump told donors he will crush pro-Palestinian protests, deport demonstrators" (2024, 27 May) by Josh Dawsey, Karen DeYoung, and Marianne LeVine. Retrieved from: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2024/05/27/trump-israel-gaza-policy-donors/>

8. Order Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel), International Court of Justice, 26 January, 2024, available at: <https://www.icj-cij.org/node/203447>

9. "Rights expert finds 'reasonable grounds' genocide is being committed in Gaza." (2024, 26 March). UN News: Global perspective, Human Stories. United Nations. Retrieved from: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147976>

Israel's presence in the Gaza Strip and in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as unlawful. The ICJ mandates that Israel "end its occupation, dismantle its settlements, provide full reparations to Palestinian victims and facilitate the return of displaced people."¹⁰

Amidst these realities, ongoing gaslighting by politicians who spin the largely debunked fantastical narrative of West=good and everyone else=bad, has pushed the American public, even those with perhaps no prior interest or connection to the Middle East, to recognize the dire consequences of U.S. interventionism abroad, and the racist, imperialistic, and colonial bias of Western media, seemingly desperate to maintain the facade. Recognizing how the U.S. itself is a settler colonial nation, repackaged as the romanticized Disney fairytale of Native American Pocahontas welcoming English settler John Smith into her home with open arms, one may be able to draw connections to continued Western interventions and military escalations in sites abroad.

Big Tech and Palestine

The situation in Palestine has exposed the persistent capitalistic investments of technology companies, despite and in spite of questionable violations to their own stated ethics.¹¹ Tech companies must similarly balance both serving their own business interests, while respecting international norms of Business and Human Rights in facilitating and empowering communication, connection, and the sharing of knowledge within the communities they serve.

Large technology companies in America, known as "Big Tech," have increasingly been a major driver of the U.S. economy and U.S. economic expansion.¹² Big Tech typically refers to five U.S.-based tech companies, including Alphabet (Google), Amazon,

10. "Experts hail ICJ declaration on illegality of Israel's presence in the occupied Palestinian territory as "historic" for Palestinians and international law." (2024, 30 July). United Nations Human Rights, Office of the High Commissioner. United Nations. Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/07/experts-hail-icj-declaration-illegality-israels-presence-occupied#:~:text=The%20landmark%20ruling%20of%202019,and%20use%20of%20natural%20resources>
11. Anderson, William C. (2024, 13 January). "Palestine Has Exposed How Our Governments Work for Their Own Interests, Not Ours." Truthout. Retrieved from: <https://truthout.org/articles/palestine-has-exposed-how-our-governments-work-for-their-own-interests-not-ours/>
12. Lilico, Andrew. (2024, 26 June). "Big Tech firms are powering the US economy. Politicians shouldn't stop them." The Telegraph. Retrieved from: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/06/26/big-tech-microsoft-apple-netflix-alphabet-economy/>

Apple, Meta, and Microsoft.¹³ Big Tech's influence on global communications and the dissemination of information is evident. With the power to control the visibility of all online content, to sell and market us goods, to center or decenter political news, to facilitate our work, and to maintain our connections with others around the world, the reach of Big Tech is unmatched and overpowering.¹⁴ The expansion of Big Tech has extended these companies' global reach to control communication and the management and dissemination of information.¹⁵ Amidst the ongoing current war in Gaza, Big Tech and other technology companies have played a pivotal role in facilitating access to communication, news, and various goods, services, and payment platforms.¹⁶ And U.S. tech companies, in particular, have affirmed and reaffirmed their commitments to Israel in various ways, including through sending company-wide communications to workers immediately after October 7th affirming that the company "stands with Israel" or sharing "thoughts and prayers with Israel," without any mention of Palestinians, the numerous lives lost, or the continued suffering, in any such communications. Consistent censorship, suppression, and silencing, evidenced through bias towards worker expressions related to, or in support of, Palestine further reaffirms the position of these tech companies. The latter point will be the focus of this report, in which tech worker testimonies on Palestinian advocacy and workplace suppression offer a window into the ways in which technology companies' unwavering support for Israel, alongside their simultaneous and systemic dismissal and denial of expressions related to Palestine, speaks to the larger investments of these companies, and their complicity in the current situation in Israel-Palestine through their censorship, silence, and suppression, all of which supports the consistent dehumanization of Palestinians.

It is important to note that Big Tech has affirmed their positions on Israel-Palestine in part through reiterating their long-standing commitments to Israel prior to October 2023. Big Tech investments in Israel prior to October are evident in their investments

13. Rosencrance, Linda. "Big Tech." TechTarget. Retrieved from: <https://www.techtarget.com/whatis/definition/Big-Tech>

14. Shaleen Khanal, Araz Taeihagh, and Hongzhou Zhang. "Why and how is the power of Big Tech increasing in the policy process? The case of generative AI." Policy and Society, 2024, puae012. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/polsoc/puae012>

15. See "Challenging Big Tech," Retrieved from: <https://www.somo.nl/our-work/sectors/big-tech/> and "How Big Tech is becoming the Government" (2021, 5 February), Retrieved from: <https://www.somo.nl/how-big-tech-is-becoming-the-government/> in SOMO, The Centre for Research on Multinational Corporations; and Carlos Saura Garcia's "Digital expansionism and big tech companies: consequences in democracies of the European Union." Humanit Soc Sci Commun 11, 448 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-024-02924-7>

16. "What role do US tech giants play in powering Israeli war crimes?" (2024, 28 April). Al Jazeera. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/the-bottom-line/2024/4/28/what-role-do-tech-giants-play-in-powering-israeli-war-crimes>

in surveillance and cloud technologies, which have been routinely weaponized against Palestinians. Further, 7amleh has consistently documented instances of Palestinian digital rights violations quarterly and annually, wherein Palestinian accounts and content has been banned, restricted, or deplatformed, alongside the under-censorship of hate speech and incitement to violence against Palestinians.¹⁷ Since October, however, these issues have expanded and been exacerbated.

According to the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGP), non-state entities, such as businesses including big tech companies, have specific obligations and duties to respect human rights, whether online or offline, and to work to reduce and prevent harm. These non-state entities must also cooperate in any processes aimed to mitigate negative human rights abuses they may have caused. These non-state actors have further duties to respect human rights in conflict-affected areas, per the UNGP.¹⁸ Simply put, businesses operating in conflict-affected areas are under obligation to not extend or exacerbate human rights abuses. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) further outlines how businesses can better operate in conflict-affected areas in the guide "Heightened Human Rights Due Diligence for Business in Conflict-Affected Contexts."¹⁹ In this guide, the UNDP further explains the importance of businesses engaging in a thorough assessment of the context of the conflict in which their business operates, further understanding the interaction between the business activities and the context, understanding the business' impact on human rights, and then using this understanding to avoid or mitigate negative impacts.²⁰

As Marwa Fatafta discusses in the March 20, 2024 article "Genocide in the Digital Age: What Role do Social Media Companies Play?" there "has been no shortage of red flags for tech companies since the start of Israel's brutal war on Gaza." And despite the massive scale of violence and destruction, wherein as of August 21, 2024,

17. For example, see 7amleh's 2022 Annual Report detailing Palestinian digital rights violations through both quarterly and annual reports, in addition to monthly and weekly updates. See <https://7amleh.org/annual22/eng/>

18. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights: Implementing the United Nations 'Protect, Respect and Remedy' Framework, UN - OHCHR, 2011, Available at: https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/guidingprinciplesbusinesshr_en.pdf

See "What do the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights say about protecting and respecting human rights against business-related adverse impacts in conflict contexts?" Retrieved from: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Business/WG/WhatdotheUNGPsayaboutconflict.pdf>

19. United Nations Development Programme (2022). "Heightened Human Rights Due Diligence for business in conflict-affected contexts; A Guide." New York, United States of America. Retrieved from: <https://www.undp.org/publications/heightened-human-rights-due-diligence-business-conflict-affected-contexts-guide>

20. Ibid., 11.

the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) noted that in Gaza at least 40,319 Palestinians have been killed since October 7th, another 92,743 Palestinians injured, and up to 1.9 million people (or nine in ten people) across the Gaza Strip internally displaced, including some who have been displaced repeatedly, some up to ten times.²¹ These numbers are likely much higher, as this data does not account for death, which has occurred from disease, lack of access to medical care, and Israel's blocking of aid including food and water, which has resulted in widespread famine. Additionally, Israeli forces have expanded their assault on the West Bank and Jerusalem, a situation that continues to escalate.²² The human rights group Amnesty International condemned the recent Israeli military offensive in the West Bank, with Amnesty International's Senior Director for Research, Advocacy, Policy and Campaigns, Erika Guevara, stating that "Ongoing military operations on this scale will undoubtedly lead to an escalation in deadly violence, resulting in further loss of Palestinian lives. It is likely that these operations will result in an increase in forced displacement, destruction of critical infrastructure and measures of collective punishment, which have been key pillars of Israel's system of occupation against Palestinians and of its unlawful occupation of the Occupied Palestinian Territory."²³

Despite the current horrors in Palestine being well-documented, and the clear obligations of businesses, including big tech, to mitigate harm, especially in zones of increased levels of conflict, violence, and genocidal acts, technology companies have largely remained complicit in exacerbating harms. Tech companies exhibit multiple degrees of complicity in the current situation in Gaza and in the ongoing situation in Israel-Palestine, which has been made clear through multiple conversations with tech workers. From tech worker testimonies, it is clear that tech company complicity can be identified from the following: enabling hate speech, violent rhetoric, propaganda, and mis- and disinformation to run rampant on their platforms;²⁴ taking actions to de-platform or content-moderate posts about Palestine

21. "UNRWA Situation Report #129 on the situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem." (2024, 21 August). United Nations. Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unrwa-situation-report-129-21aug24/>
22. See "Israel ramps up military assault on occupied West Bank for second day." (2024, 29 August). Al Jazeera. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/29/israel-ramps-up-military-assault-on-occupied-west-bank-for-second-day>
23. "Amnesty International 'concerned' over Israeli offensive in the West Bank." (2024, 29 August). Palestine News & Info Agency. Retrieved from: <https://english.wafa.ps/Pages/Details/148599>
24. Fatafta, Marwa. "Genocide in the digital age: What role do social media companies play?" (2024, 21 March). Association for Progressive Communications (APC). Retrieved from: <https://www.apc.org/en/blog/genocide-digital-age-what-role-do-social-media-companies-play>

or in Arabic at a disproportionate scale, and in ways that are biased compared to other cultures or conflicts;²⁵ disciplining and censoring employees who advocate on behalf of Palestinian human rights; and provide various products and services which explicitly power the surveillance and military technologies that inflict violence against Palestinians..

In each of the sections on individual tech companies that follow, worker perspectives, as shared by workers directly, are detailed in order to assess how company leadership has managed any expressions related to Palestine, both prior to and after October 7, 2023.

Research Objectives and Questions

Through acknowledging the bias, discrimination, or other retaliatory measures tech workers have witnessed and experienced, this report offers a complement to the quantitative data 7amleh has already gathered on the disproportionate ways tech companies censor, suppress, and silence expressions related to Palestine, especially since October 7, 2023, but also before.²⁶ By considering how tech workers are met with various forms of confrontation, harassment, and bullying both from other workers and from company leadership for expressions related to Palestine, we can think more broadly about how Palestinian advocacy threatens to unravel the financial and political investments that are seemingly central to the operation of these companies. In exposing these companies' political and ethical positioning related to Palestine, as experienced by workers who confront internal policies, one can better understand contradictions in the companies' external posturing.

Through this process the driving questions have been – How does worker advocacy for Palestine threaten to unravel and expose the greater values and ethics of tech companies? How has tech company responses to worker advocacy for Palestine, predominantly through censorship, suppression, and silencing, become revealing of systemic and structural anti-Palestinian bias? And finally, how might this writing, spotlighting worker advocacy for Palestine and tech worker experiences engaging in

25. Fatafta, Marwa. "It's not a glitch: how Meta systematically censors Palestinian voices." (2024, 19 February). Access Now. Retrieved from: <https://www.accessnow.org/publication/how-meta-censors-palestinian-voices/>

26. See 7amleh's 7or platform. "7or." 7amleh. Retrieved from: <https://7or.7amleh.org/>

Palestinian advocacy, support, motivate, and inspire others to leverage their power as workers to influence change in their workplaces and beyond?

Methodology

The following report centers the experiences of tech workers, current or former, from Meta, Google, and PayPal regarding the topic of workplace advocacy for Palestine. Additionally, tech worker perspectives from Apple, Microsoft and LinkedIn, and Cisco are also considered. Tech worker experiences with Palestine-related advocacy are assessed after conducting twenty-five interviews with workers from each of the above-mentioned companies in summer 2024. Through assessing worker experiences with advocacy for Palestine in the tech workplace, connections are drawn both between individual experiences within companies, as well as across companies, identifying points of similarities and distinctions. In doing so, one can better consider how tech companies have managed workplace advocacy related to Palestine, which has occurred predominantly through censorship, suppression, and silencing. As such, one can draw several conclusions concerning the various policies, principles, cultures, or ethics at play within each individual tech company, and within tech companies more broadly, which dictates responses to workplace advocacy for Palestine.

In the writing that follows, tech workers will be variously referred to by either their name if they have consented, or generally as "this worker." This method of address enables tech workers who have chosen to remain anonymous to not be specified, while naming those tech workers who feel comfortable self-identifying.



Findings



Meta platforms, formerly known as Facebook, owns and operates Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Messenger, and Threads. Operating out of Menlo Park, California, USA, Meta owns three out of the four biggest platforms, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, utilized by users.

Since Meta has such a prominent presence in the ways people connect digitally, its positions regarding censorship, bias, and unequal and disproportionate content moderation sets a critical precedent for the management and maintenance of digital freedoms, wherein digital rights exist as both a reflection and production of human rights ideologies. In a world where digital forms of representation carry such great weight in dictating the lived and material realities of people outside of the digital realm, it becomes urgent that we recognize, and call out, biased and inequitable treatment towards certain communities, identities, or expressions on digital platforms. Various perspectives shared by Meta workers, both current and former, exposes the censorship occurring internally, and offers more insight into Meta's positioning, as indicated by leadership's actions, rather than by just curated written or verbal statements. Recognizing Palestinian advocacy at Meta over the past several years, before October 2023, is important as it sets the stage for better understanding the current status of workplace advocacy.

Since 2020, three initiatives, among others, set the context for the current workplace advocacy at Meta. For example, in 2022, the "Meta, Let Palestine Speak" campaign launched,²⁷ after the May 2021 Uprisings, Meta's practices in Israel-Palestine were investigated in the Independent Human Rights Due Diligence report, and in 2020 the "Facebook, We Need to Talk" campaign launched, which represented a collective of voices from civil society organizations, digital rights experts, independent auditors, elected officials, and regular users, who joined together to highlight Meta's discriminatory treatment of Palestinian users and content. These initiatives offer

27. The 2022 "Meta, Let Palestine Speak" campaign has identified the silencing and censorship of Palestinian-related content through explaining how accounts are censored and over-moderated at disproportionately high rates, and in a way that reveals built-in systemic bias. One example is the lack of, or under-moderation of Hebrew language content on Facebook ads compared to Arabic language ads, even if the Hebrew ads are explicitly hate speech or incitements to violence.

some background to the present situation at Meta, wherein Metamates, a collective of current and former Meta workers, addressed the company internally through a letter on December 19, 2023, and then externally in a public letter published on May 1, 2024.

The December 2023 internal letter was deleted and dismissed due to what was explained to workers as "Community Engagement Expectations (CEE) on what can be discussed internally."

————— *The public 2024 letter explains Metamates' disappointment at the "lack of acknowledgement and care" leaders of the company have shown toward the Palestinian community and its allies. They describe how open support for Palestinian colleagues or those facing a humanitarian crisis in Palestine "is met with internal censorship of employee concerns, biased leadership statements showing one-sided support, and external censorship that is raising public alarm and distrust of our platforms." They explain that they have called out the months of silencing on internal workplace forums, where spaces for workers like the Muslims@ and Palestinians@ groups have faced high degrees of censorship, wherein even posts from colleagues expressing grief, to support the annual United Nations-recognized International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, fundraiser links to help those in Gaza, or simply asking questions have all been taken down.* —————

The letter reveals further evidence of the bias and inequity at play in Meta, as several Meta leaders have posted numerous strong statements in support for Israeli colleagues along with condemnations of October 7th without these statements being taken down or censored. Importantly, the letter also notes how other instances of violence, such as that pertaining to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, are met with very different responses, such as an outpouring of leadership support on all fronts, certain offices flying the Ukrainian flag, and additional resourcing and investment being granted through social impact initiatives. In articulating the double standards at play regarding censorship of Palestine-related content on Meta platforms, both internally for workers and externally in terms of content moderation that is now largely run by machine-learning and AI algorithms, Metamates signal other, and various, flagrant violations of both company standards and human rights policies occurring on the platform in the past several years.

Censorship on Meta's Internal Platforms

Conversations with tech workers at Meta, both current and former, speak to both the internal and external ways in which Meta has dealt with expression related to Palestine, and reveal several concerning issues regarding how Meta has responded to workplace advocacy for Palestine. The first issue pertains to the suppression and silencing of expressions related to Palestine on the internal worker groups, such as Jews@, Muslims@, or Palestinians@. These groups are meant to provide a space for workers to sustain and develop community with their colleagues, and the specific groups that gather people based on shared identity are meant to further enable workers to form connections and develop networks with their colleagues. Several Meta workers expressed that these groups provided a much-desired space of camaraderie and connection. After October 7th, however, these groups became a much more toxic and sinister place. Various examples from testimonies of Meta workers reveal examples of the bias, double standards, and intentional over/under-censorship at play in these groups.

The next issue evident through conversations with Meta workers is the ways in which leadership's behavior both makes explicit, and hints at, the company's political and economic investments.

————— *Meta's disciplining of workers related to Palestine appears more subtle, wherein workers are often "in violation of community guidelines" or "causing discomfort" or engaging in "conversations inappropriate for the workplace," rather than being disciplined for something directly related to Palestine.*²⁸ —————

Meta is likely aware that such a subtle approach to discipline is legally necessary, although workers have repeatedly noted the obvious hypocrisy in this wherein Meta violates its own ethics related to equity and social justice by disproportionately censoring worker advocacy for Palestine, which workers found especially troubling after reaffirming those commitments in recent years.

28. See "Meta's Broken Promises: Systemic Censorship of Palestine Content on Instagram and Facebook." (2023, 21 December). Human Rights Watch. Retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>

And "Palestinian Digital Rights Coalition Calls on Meta to Stop Dehumanizing Palestinians and Silencing Their Voices." (2023, 11 July). 7amleh – The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media. Retrieved from: <https://7amleh.org/2023/11/07/palestinian-digital-rights-coalition-calls-on-meta-to-stop-dehumanizing-palestinians-and-silencing-their-voices>

My conversation with several workers from Meta highlighted the level to which Meta employees are being censored on internal platforms. Conversations also revealed the risks associated with speaking up about Palestine, in any capacity, including in generic terms, or speaking out against Meta's actions, such as critiquing their management of "community standards," which many workers have described as inadequate and vague. Workers explained that the internal workplace platforms, such as Palestinians@ or Muslims@ have been heavily censored since October 7th.

————— A worker noted that posts in November and December were only in the single digits, and that posts that "in no way would violate community guidelines," such as sharing things like "I lost a family member" or "this space is a grieving space for people to share" would be taken down. The over-censoring of those groups was explained internally to be due to community engagement expectations prohibiting discussion about "armed conflict or things that cause disruption," as one worker explained it. Several workers discussed how these community guidelines were updated and reaffirmed after the 2022 Russia invasion of Ukraine. Many workers spoke to the disproportionate ways in which posts on the internal workspace related to Palestine are censored seemingly more than posts pertaining to Russia or Ukraine. —————

Leadership has explained the "over-censorship" of Palestinian content as being due to not meeting expectations related to community engagement guidelines, but workers have noticed that these same expectations do not seem to be applied to posts about other groups of people, or within groups outside of the Palestinians@ or Muslims@ groups. For example, several workers spoke to the "under-censorship" of content on groups like Jews@ or Tel Aviv@, even if the content appears to be in violation of community engagement guidelines. This idea of selective censorship in the application of community engagement guidelines is incredibly problematic and is consistent with other reports of bias and double standards at play within Meta both internally and externally. One worker expressed that there was a sense that "higher-ups and leadership do not care or prioritize" issues related to Palestine. One worker gave the example that when translation errors happened on the platform, mistranslating Arabic into English, it took a great deal of internal escalation for that to be remedied. This worker felt that "company leadership does not engage with workers in good faith," which puts those who support Palestine in a position where all expression of opinion, solidarity, or care for the plight of the Palestinian people becomes limited and scrutinized.

Content Moderation

Several workers spoke to the experiences of Palestinian and Muslim workers at Meta, and the sense that many feel neglected by their company due to the consistent lack of acknowledgement of the harm and suffering their communities have been experiencing since the onset of the War in Gaza and ongoing assaults on Palestinians across both Gaza and the West Bank. The ongoing deletion of commentary on Palestinians@ and Muslims@ groups, while simultaneously allowing various pro-Israel comments, many of which are explicitly violent or exhibit hate speech and dehumanizing rhetoric against Palestinians, to bypass content moderation, both makes the community guidelines appear as a facade in their unequal application and becomes indicative of Meta's broader position on Israel-Palestine.

Current initiatives and escalations at Meta have centered on how there is both a lack of content moderation related to hate speech or violent rhetoric towards Palestine, and an over-censoring of Palestinian content. This situation actively and continuously upholds the dehumanization of Palestinians, especially as Meta fails to rectify such issues, or even prioritize them, even after workers make reports about bias and discrimination.

————— *Meta's lack of care for human rights related to Palestine becomes more apparent through what a worker has described as the consistent desire to "delete the issue" by literally deleting and removing posts and comments related to Palestine in internal workspace platforms.* —————

This worker described the workplace environment since October as one where "any sort of data, privacy policy, or non-compliance will get you fired." This worker shared one example that spoke to this environment post-October 7th, describing an advertisement that was widely shared on Instagram, and that sought out individuals who would be willing to travel to Washington D.C. to attend the pro-Israel rally, and undoubtedly to escalate and agitate in-person at the rally. The advertisement stated that individuals would be paid \$250 for attending. This worker explained that this advertisement, which was widely shared on Instagram, was originally a leak from a post shared in an internal workspace group in Meta. This same advertisement was repeatedly reported internally by members of the Palestinians@ group to be in violation of community engagement guidelines. This worker explained that Meta's delays in investigating and responding to this report resulted in it being leaked to the public Instagram forum before eventually being taken down.

An Arab and Muslim worker who left Meta due to disappointment with Meta's response to the situation in Gaza and, more broadly, their treatment of Palestinian workplace advocacy, spoke about noticing an increased level of suppression of Palestinian voices both on the internal and external Meta platforms, alongside the distinct lack of censorship of pro-Israel expressions.

_____ This worker described noticing how language played a role in triggering censorship of a post. For example, the use of the word "genocide" seemed to trigger an immediate shutdown or deletion of a thread on the internal platforms. This environment of heightened censorship resulted in many feeling uncomfortable with posting at all, and especially Palestinian employees. One memorable incident this worker described was a post that a Palestinian advocate came across on a section of the Jews@ page, where pro-Israel workers were frequently posting. The post was an individual who was thanking their colleagues for "taking care of things" while they were gone serving in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Such a post was of great concern to many pro-Palestinian advocates because the post was both not censored, and it also revealed that Meta supported its workers who elected to serve in the IDF, would hold their job for them, and then would allow them to return back to work after. The lack of censorship related to this post, after many reported it for violating content policies, speaks to the types of posts that are being investigated and that are allowed to remain visible. _____

This worker stated that they had "expected more from such a company that centers its ability to connect people to one another around the world." After October 7th, this worker recalled an instance where their product testing team was asked to test out a virtual reality game that was romanticizing war in the Middle East. Feeling like such an ask was tone deaf in the context of the War on Gaza, this worker expressed discomfort to their boss in being asked to test this game. In this instance, the boss eventually canceled the test, but this stands out to them as one of the first instances where they and several others felt discomfort at Meta's seeming disregard and obliviousness related to the current situation in Palestine.

Language, Triggers, and Community Guidelines

Another worker shared more on how various posts made in the Palestinians@ or Muslims@ group were immediately taken down for supposedly violating the NDA-protected community guidelines. This worker explains that many of the posts taken down were explicitly not political, but seemingly only violated community guidelines by mentioning the words "Palestine" or "Gaza."

————— For example, this worker shared that if any individual wrote a post sharing that they lost family members in Gaza or Palestine and asked others for prayers, explicitly using the word "prayers" in a non-denominational sense, the post would immediately get taken down. For posts to get taken down, however, they must be reported. The recognition that "prayer request" posts were immediately taken down after being reported, and the fact that Meta expeditiously responded to those reports, left many workers feeling discouraged, hurt, and uncomfortable to share anything at all. —————

This worker, and others, noticed that any mention of Palestine or Gaza related to the "war" would be taken down. If pro-Israel workers also mentioned the "war" in Palestine or Gaza in some way, ranging from expressing feeling "unsafe" at witnessing protests or speaking directly about the situation, their posts would also get taken down, although they intentionally rarely mentioned Palestine or Gaza in their posts. Additionally, this worker expanded on how pro-Israel colleagues had seemingly been aggressively monitoring and reporting all Palestine content. Workers noted that pro-Israel colleagues seemed to be reporting all things posted related to Palestine, which resulted in Meta HR being forced to review those posts. And due to Meta's policies related to speech and expression internally, this resulted in many more posts from Palestinian advocates being taken down. Once Meta advocates for Palestine became more aware of this exacerbated monitoring and reporting, however, they engaged more directly in escalating and reporting problematic content. This worker shared that through increasingly targeted efforts to combat the posting of such content, the rate of Meta approval for these posts to be taken down increased and may now be up to 80%. Workers appeared encouraged by Meta's increasingly speedy response to reports pro-Palestinian advocates have been making regarding problematic and hateful content, and noted the need to continue focusing on these targeted efforts.

As the NDA-protected community guidelines have seemingly played such a pivotal role in enabling the internal censorship of Palestine-related expressions, it is important to think more critically about what communities the community guidelines seemingly protect. Several workers noted the importance of community guidelines in general to prohibit harmful or violent language or other forms of discrimination.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, several workers recalled the mass number of posts in support of Ukraine on the internal workspace platform, posts that no one reported and that remain visible to this day. One worker noted that although the current community guidelines may prevent one from naming Ukraine directly, this was seemingly not applied to posts about Ukraine, and thus those posts were not censored, locked, or deleted, unlike posts mentioning Palestine.

One worker importantly noted that the nature of Meta, as a social platform, means that they hold responsibility for enabling communication and connection of all types. This worker states, "you can't choose who is bad...it's not up to us to decide who gets to speak and who doesn't," which speaks to the power of Meta, and other big tech, in enabling, or limiting freedom of speech.

As this worker aptly explained, "they (Meta) are creating the rules of the game, but they are also a player in the game and that is not okay...either you're a referee and out of the game, or you're in the game and someone else makes the rules." The vagueness and ambiguity surrounding Meta's NDA-protected community guidelines stands out critically within many conversations. Without clarity on the actual language of the policy, and alongside biased and uneven enforcement of said policy, critique of the system becomes difficult, or nearly impossible as it is a moving target.

Meta workers attempted to test out the NDA-protected community guidelines to learn more about what the system would flag or remove, and the rate at which it would do so. On November 29, 2023, observed by the United Nations as International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, one worker described how approximately fifteen workers posted various informational and educational links on internal workspace groups, modeling this after the same ways in which workers made posts to celebrate Juneteenth or Indigenous Peoples' Day. These workers included in their posts a link to the UN website about the International Day of Solidarity with the

Palestinian People, which featured an image from the UN. Shortly after workers shared this link widely on their own walls and in the Palestinians@ and Muslims@ groups, places where they felt it seemed logical to share this post, all of the posts, from all workers in all locations where it was posted, were taken down. Workers asked leadership why this happened, especially when the posts centered Palestinian culture rather than issues related to war, as that was known to be a prohibited category according to community guidelines. Workers screenshot all the posts and the comments on the posts to contribute to their assessments. The worker who described this action explained that after taking these types of "risks," leadership would often reach out to them to discuss the violation of community guidelines. After a worker was contacted about four or five times, then an Employee Relations Business Partner (ERBP) would reach out to them. This worker noted that these ERBP roles existed prior to October 7th, but that they were given "more effort" after October. This worker also shared that the ERBP representative who reached out to them shared the amount of violations they had, and stated that if they received one more then they would receive a "formal warning on your personal file."

Workplace Advocacy and Professional Risk

In my conversation with Saima, a former Meta employee, we spoke a great deal about the seeming distinction between what Meta conveyed and communicated about its values, versus the actual actions Meta took. Saima was fired from Meta on June 14, 2024, and was originally drawn to Meta from her experiences working in community-building. She reflected on the various cuts made to social impact projects at Meta over the past two years, and an increased focus on monetizing products and production, with less focus on content or fostering connections. And after October 7th, with Meta's subsequent response to workplace advocacy for Palestine, it became clearer that these commitments to social impact and community were deprioritized.

Saima described the atmosphere at Meta after October as marked by both silencing and pressure to avoid the topic of Palestine, with a continuous emphasis on productivity. Enduring increasing censorship on the internal side of the platform, alongside recognition that social media users were increasingly experiencing censorship on the external side, left workers like Saima and others feeling gaslit and heavily burdened by their desire to do more. Saima lamented that so many workers with good intentions were getting pushed out, stoking an environment of fear amongst workers.

This culture of fear and intimidation at Meta appeared to come from multiple directions, from leadership down, laterally amongst workers, and internally from self-censorship due to the increasing recognition of the disciplinary results of speaking out. Saima spoke to this culture and how it was especially felt by Muslim and Arab workers, and not just at Meta, but also at other companies. And despite this culture, many workers expressed they felt it was necessary to speak out, and especially because the financial cushion that many tech workers have enables them to withstand the risks of speaking out. Saima discussed how many advocating for Palestine within Meta were having these conversations about risk. At the same time, while realizing the privilege of many to be able to risk losing their job, many other workers who might agree with workplace advocacy for Palestine may feel unable to take that same risk due to family concerns, needing to maintain benefits like health insurance, concerns regarding residency or citizenship status, or very real fears of harassment or doxxing. For workers who are Palestinian, or who are Arab and/or Muslim, these risks are greater.

Workers who felt the desire to be more vocal about censorship occurring both on Meta and its platforms, despite potential risks, decided to write an internal open letter to share with colleagues and leaders. The letter listed three demands:

1. We demand acknowledgement – that Meta leadership acknowledge the suffering of all lives, the ongoing genocide, and at minimum, an acknowledgement of the humanitarian crisis in which "Gaza is becoming a graveyard for children."
2. We demand support – that Meta leadership commit to creating an environment where all impacted communities feel seen, safe, and supported, particularly our Palestinian colleagues, as we witness a genocide unfold on our platforms.
3. We demand action – that Meta leadership allocate resources to transparently investigate and rectify both the bugs and biases enabling the ongoing censorship of Palestinian and allied voices on our platforms.

The external open letter that was circulated further noted how workers felt "disappointment and astonishment at the lack of acknowledgement and care the leaders of this company have shown toward the Palestinian community and its allies."²⁹ To further articulate the situation, Saima described a situation where a

29. "Open Letter – Meta Stop Censoring Palestine." Retrieved from: <https://metastopcensoringpalestine.com/>

scheduled community check-in was canceled the night before, perhaps for potential violations to the community engagement guidelines, and/or due to too many people attending the Zoom.

————— *When asking about the cancellation further, leadership explained that employees cannot offer prayers for Palestine because it violates community engagement guidelines since it is a "disputed region" and that workers cannot have prayers for any location where there is a war in process, or that relates to war-related content. Maxine Williams, Chief Diversity Officer at Meta, was sent multiple messages about this issue, and other issues, and after months of promises from leadership that this issue would be "looked into," workers never received a response. Eventually, Williams reiterated the need to stick to community engagement guidelines, advancing the position that war-related content, regardless of the framing, would be "disruptive." This directly contradicted internal posts offering prayers for Ukraine or Israel that were not censored and allowed to remain visible. Further, posts in the Jews@ or Tel Aviv@ group that discussed "disputed regions" and "war-related content," were rarely taken down.* —————

And if so, not expeditiously, speaking to the contrast between how the company viewed expression in relation to Russia-Ukraine as distinct from that related to Israel-Palestine. Operating from this biased position, Meta seemingly accepts that regions or conflicts other than Palestine, such as Ukraine or Israel, are deserving of prayers, while Palestine is written off as a "war-related issue" undeserving of prayers, sympathy, or even simply discussion. Meta's consistent denial of internal censorship such as this, alongside its public statements that also deny external suppression, has left workers advocating for Palestine at Meta feeling gaslit and lied to.³⁰

30. Paul, Kari. "Rights groups urge Meta shareholders to end pro-Palestinian content 'censorship.'" (2024, 29 May). The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/may/29/meta-censorship-palestine>

Investments and Interventions

Another Meta worker further articulated the complexity of the situation internally, sharing how some leadership in high positions hold specific connections with the Israeli government and with the Israeli security sphere.

It was reported, for example, that Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg donated \$125,000 to ZAKA after October 7th.³¹ ZAKA is an "Israeli organization that is the source of most of the disinformation that was used to dehumanize Palestinians and justify the genocide in Gaza." ZAKA's false claims about beheaded babies and mass rape,³² disproved by Israeli and other international sources alike, were repeated by Israeli and U.S. politicians, as well as news media around the world, to promote a "narrative of savagery that was exploited by Israel."³³

This worker, and others, noted that recognizing these linkages may inform how workers perceive the suppression and censorship that trickles down from leadership.³⁴

As workers advocating for Palestine expressed growing awareness of the various linkages and investments of Meta in Israel, it left many of them questioning how to intervene, and how to advance support, concern, and care for Palestinians. Further, how does this work environment impact Palestinian workers, both in the diaspora,

31. Hamedin, Ali. "Meta's staunch support for Israel shines through amid Gaza genocide." (2024, 26 August). Tehran Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/502930/Meta-s-staunch-support-for-Israel-shines-through-amid-Gaza-genocide>

Also, reported on by Muhammad Shehada from:
<https://x.com/muhammadshehad2/status/1745563285728969081>

And, corroborated in multiple interviews with tech workers

32. See William Audureau, Samuel Forey, and Assma Maad's "'40 beheaded babies': Deconstructing the rumor at the heart of the information battle between Israel and Hamas." (2024, 3 April). Le Monde. Retrieved from: https://www.lemonde.fr/en/les-decodeurs/article/2024/04/03/40-beheaded-babies-the-itinerary-of-a-rumor-at-the-heart-of-the-information-battle-between-israel-and-hamas_6667274_8.html

And Rami G. Khouri's "Watching the watchdogs: Babies and truth die together in Israel-Palestine." (2023, 13 October). Al Jazeera. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/10/13/watching-the-watchdogs-babies-and-truth-die-together-in-israel-palestine>

33. Hamedin, Ali. "Meta's staunch support for Israel shines through amid Gaza genocide." (2024, 26 August). Tehran Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/502930/Meta-s-staunch-support-for-Israel-shines-through-amid-Gaza-genocide>

34. For example, see The Jerusalem Post's interview with Jordana Cutler. (2020, 1 November). Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aPfD41gNMGM>



and Palestinian workers based out of the Meta Tel Aviv office? If, based on worker testimonies, leadership operates from a position of bias, and internal and external communications further corroborate this bias, how can workers intervene in such a workplace environment of fear and silencing?

More recently, as an attempt to curb bias in the application of community engagement guidelines, workers created the "Palestine Working Group" to open communications. Leadership has access to this group, and all posts are visible, but they have allowed the group to remain up. This worker believes that recent efforts by many workers to counter-report, constantly question leadership on decisions to remove posts, and engage in repetitive posting strategies in a push to keep posts visible has resulted in more progress regarding combating internal censorship. After experiencing so many battles with leadership, this worker expressed that it has become clear how workers are being siloed internally, with systems being set up to prevent workers from communicating with one another about what is occurring, and what is and is not working to combat suppression. And further, and despite many workers fearing losing their job, with more workers pushing leadership to make policy changes, and in accordance with their individual capacity to endure different levels of risk, more change is possible.



Like Meta, Google renewed its commitments to equity, anti-racism, and social justice after the initiation of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020,³⁵ and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine.³⁶ And like Meta, Google similarly violated many of its own commitments to equity and inclusion in suppressing expressions related to Palestine, such as on its own internal workspace platforms and on the Dory Q&A platform.³⁷ Many are familiar with the Google and Amazon No Tech for Occupation campaign that demands that Google and Amazon stop their “collaboration with Israeli occupation.”³⁸ This collective of over 1,000 Google and Amazon workers have organized against the contract Project Nimbus and its investments in the Israeli state, which involves the \$1.22 billion contract to provide cloud technology to the Israeli government and military signed by Amazon Web Services and Google Cloud executives.³⁹ In April 2024, fifty Google employees involved in sit-in protests at Google offices in New York City and Sunnyvale, California were fired, some of whom were fired for their participation in the protests, and other “non-participant bystanders” were fired for simply being in close proximity to the protests, mistakenly read as participating.⁴⁰ Conversations with Google workers, some currently employed, and some of whom were fired after the April 2024 sit-in protests, reveals the various ways in which workers have contested what they view as Google’s clear complicity in the current war in Gaza.

35. Pichai, Sundar. “Our commitments to racial equity.” The Keyword – Google Product and Technology News and Stories. Retrieved from: <https://blog.google/inside-google/company-announcements/commitments-racial-equity/>

36. Walker, Kent. “New ways we’re supporting Ukraine.” The Keyword – Google Product and Technology News and Stories. Retrieved from: <https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/public-policy/new-ways-were-supporting-ukraine/>

37. Refer to the live interactive Dory Q&A platform. See <https://dory.app>

38. No Tech for Apartheid. Retrieved from: <https://www.notechforapartheid.com>

39. Ibid. Citing the critical role of divestment actions in the fight to end apartheid in South Africa as a model from which to engage in the call to support Palestinian freedom today, NOTA demands that Amazon CEO Andy Jassy, Amazon Web Services CEO Adam Selipsky, Google CEO Sundar Pichai, and Google Cloud CEO Thomas Kurian end all ties with Israeli apartheid and cut the Project Nimbus contract. NOTA shows how Amazon and Google’s collaboration with Israeli apartheid is just one part in a larger pattern of Big Tech fueling state violence globally. They refer to Amazon and Google as “the new war profiteers” with “dismal human rights records.” Amazon and Google’s powering of various technology systems, such as surveillance and drone technologies, has directly supported policing, the criminalization of Black and Brown communities, and state violence both nationally and internationally.

40. Thorbecke, Catherine. “Google has fired 50 employees after protests over Israel cloud deal, organizers say.” (2024, 23 April). CNN. Retrieved from: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/04/23/tech/google-fires-employees-protest-israel/index.html>



Assessing Bias and Suppression at YouTube

One conversation with a Google employee from YouTube (Google having owned YouTube since 2006), speaks to issues outlined in 7amleh's April 2024 paper assessing YouTube's impacts on Palestinian digital rights in the context of the war on Gaza.⁴¹ In this paper, YouTube's advertising, and their compatibility with international human rights laws, are assessed through analyzing war propaganda dissemination, specifically advertisements from the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Authors also discuss YouTube's content moderation policies, in particular those that depict discriminatory practices such as demonetization or restrictions on content creations due to criticism of Israel's actions in Gaza. Discriminatory practices of demonetizing and restricting content critical of Israel's actions in Gaza speak to YouTube's community guidelines not protecting freedom of expression, and limiting the sharing of information about Palestinian lives. Authors of the paper have called for YouTube to now uphold the terms of service in a non-discriminatory manner, offer additional transparency on countries targeted by advertisements, such as the ones sponsored by the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and to maintain deleted advertisements in YouTube's Transparency Center. It was also recommended that YouTube provide more detailed transparency reports on cases that violate guidelines, on deleted content, and further information on demonetized content. This background offers some context in considering how YouTube has handled the current situation in Gaza.

————— *Conversations with a trust and safety professional made it evident that YouTube leadership has enabled the suppression of Palestinian content through allowing double standards in moderation, and by censoring Palestinian topics in YouTube videos through situating such content as an exception to Google's own policies surrounding bias, violations, and what counts as content exhibiting extremism. This worker discussed their pushback against skewed standards within their YouTube team, wherein they would "do exactly what they were supposed to" according to company policies, but that when it related to Palestine all policies seemed skewed to proactively protect a pro-Israel narrative.* —————

41. 7amleh. "Youtube's Impact on Palestinian Digital Rights during the War on Gaza. (2024, 4 April). Retrieved from: <https://7amleh.org/2024/04/25/youtube-s-impact-on-palestinian-digital-rights-during-the-war-on-gaza>

For example, policies that were enforced in relation to video content about Russia and Ukraine were not applied equally towards Palestine. Related to Russia and Ukraine, there had been a discussion amongst workers with leadership, for example, about not treating everything a combatant says in video as literal. This would mean that if a soldier, regardless of what side, expressed the notion of removing or eliminating the other side, that one cannot say they literally mean the elimination of that entire group of people, but could be speaking to certain groups within that larger population group. After October 7, 2023, however, this same policy was not applied to Palestinians, wherein a Palestinian expressing an opinion in the context of video could never benefit from this assumption that not everything is always literal. For Palestinians, it seemed that whatever they said was judged as literal, and their ability to freely express was not protected in the same way as it was for other identity groups.

As this worker explained, a trust and safety professionals' job involves assessing and determining what content violates company policy, and how, and then responding accordingly. The purpose is to protect as many individuals as possible, and they bear a great responsibility in filtering out content prior to its dissemination within the general public. In thinking more about these duties, this worker explained that usually once a cluster of videos was released on YouTube, workers would start to train for how to assess it.

————— *But, when it came to the topic of Palestine, YouTube developed a new system that would take down the hostage videos as soon as they were posted, with the goal being to take down the videos first "in case" and then later would determine if they would remain off the platform. According to this worker, the goal of initiating this new system was to have "zero views on these types of videos." When Palestinian detainee videos started to surface, this became an exception to the new rule of "take down first and assess later." When workers pushed back against this unevenly applied policy, leadership responded by essentially indicating their belief that the emphasis was on "hostages" rather than "prisoners" with the belief that " Hamas takes hostages and Israel takes prisoners." —————*

Workers questioned how it would even be possible to determine and discern who is a prisoner and who is a hostage from a video, and without clearly articulated definitions from agreed upon sources. When workers pushed leadership to clarify company policy and to further explain instances of suspected bias, there seemed to be a great deal of deflecting. Workers were repeatedly told, "we will talk about this later."

This trust and safety worker spoke to the ambiguity of being asked to determine what counts as a violation when tasked with such a decision based on individual interpretation of language according to policy guidelines. For example, "deadly violence" has been cited as a violation, wherein individuals are responsible for determining not only what counts as "deadly violence," but also the boundaries and limits of what is "deadly," as well as what is considered "violent" in and of itself. The many interpretations of violence as it pertains to visual and video-based content, such as explicitly violent imagery, suggestions of violence in the future, or hints at violence in the past, further complicates this determination. Is violence just characterized by bloodshed, physical acts of aggression, or physical harm, or would things like starvation also count as violent? This worker posed similar questions to leadership, to which they reiterated a description of "deadly." But, as this worker asked, isn't starvation deadly if it produces, quite literally, death? And thinking further on this amidst the current situation in Gaza, one is pushed to ask, isn't the intention to cause physical harm through slow measures also "deadly," even if it is not violence in an explicit way?

This worker also recognized other indications of bias in the application of company policies with regards to Palestinian YouTube content. They noted multiple "exceptions" or unusual approaches to handling content that suddenly emerged regarding Palestine-related content, and in ways that had never come up previously in content focused on other regions or identities. This worker and their team worked together collaboratively to escalate and defend equal enforcement of content on YouTube. One example provided was team discussions with leadership surrounding the phrase "from the river to the sea." Workers argued that if this phrase is censored, then it must be censored from both the Israeli side and the Palestinian side, because from the Israeli side, multiple governing officials have expressed a version of the phrase to describe desires for an expanded Israeli state, or to express expansionist ideologies. If "from the river to the sea" is being interpreted as genocidal, regardless of that being a misinterpretation or its actual meaning, then the expression of Israel expansionism across and beyond other sovereign nations must also be viewed as genocidal. Team members argued that if censorship occurs, it must be equally applied to all sides.

This worker explained that although their team was more aligned in combating biased enforcement of company policy, the higher an issue was escalated, the harder it seemed to be to challenge company ideology. Additionally, the fear of losing one's job once an issue escalated to a higher level was very real, especially

in the face of what this worker described as leadership who felt higher levels of pressure to "maintain the narrative." This worker spoke to the notion of "discipline by example," wherein individual workers seem to self-surveil and self-censor out of fear of discipline from leadership, resulting in workers potentially avoiding workplace advocacy altogether.

Double Standards in Censorship

One worker who is a member of No Tech for Apartheid, and who was terminated from Google in April 2024 after the protest against Project Nimbus, shared thoughts on glaring double standards witnessed at Google in regard to silencing and suppression of speech related to the war in Gaza.

————— *This worker noted how after Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, higher-level leadership would often discuss Ukraine and offer words of solidarity with the Ukrainian people. In the context of the war in Gaza and the situation in Palestine, however, no such words of solidarity had been offered to the Palestinian people from leadership. In fact, after October 7th, Google prohibited organizing any event related to Palestine within Google internal workspace platforms, either shutting down or completely deleting the threads.* —————

This worker explained that pro-Israel workers who were a part of the internal workspace group the "Jewglers" would consistently and expeditiously report posts about Palestine to get them taken down. Google would respond quickly to such reports, shutting down the threads or deleting them completely right away. A worker shared how they explained their rationale by stating, "if this makes someone feel unsafe then we will shut it down." This approach effectively impeded efforts of Google workers to plan and strategize workplace advocacy for Palestine. On the other hand, when pro-Israel content was posted that explicitly incited violence, utilized hate speech, or featured explicitly racist, Islamophobic, or discriminatory content, and other workers reported this, those posts were rarely, if ever taken down. Workers described how many debunked rumors and lies used to stir tensions, generate support for Israel, and advance anti-Palestinian perspectives would be repeated in the Jewglers group and allowed to remain on the platform, such as the "beheaded babies" rumor, which was picked up by the media and repeated by U.S. President

Joe Biden, although unverified at the time by any Israeli or international sources.⁴² Workers recognized this biased approach to censoring content as blatant – pro-Palestinian posts or posts discussing Palestine at all were both over-reported by pro-Israel workers and were also over-moderated by HR and leadership, while pro-Israel anti-Palestinian posts were rarely, if ever taken down, even when they were repeatedly flagged and reported. And further to this point,

————— *one worker shared that at one point donation links were maliciously set up to divert donations away from Palestinian organizations, redirecting shortcut links such as "go/donate2palestine" or "go/support4gaza" to donate to pro-Israel organizations. When this was reported to HR, this worker shared that nothing happened, although disciplinary actions should have been issued for "deceiving co-workers and stealing donations."* —————

These various examples of double standards in censorship made workers feel that Google seemed to operate with a sense of urgency to remove certain content, and not others, and that these actions were understood to be representative of Google's larger position on Israel-Palestine.

Expressions of Grief and Mourning

One story that stood out from conversations with Google workers is the story of Mai Ubeid.⁴³

————— *Mai Ubeid was a young woman software engineer from Gaza. Mai was tragically killed in November 2023, along with her entire family, in an Israeli airstrike.⁴⁴ Another former Gaza Sky Geek, a young man named Asam, was also reportedly killed by an Israeli airstrike.⁴⁵ Google did not acknowledge their deaths, so Google workers*

42. Khouri, Rami G. "Watching the watchdogs: Babies and truth die together in Israel-Palestine." (2023, 13 October). Al Jazeera. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2023/10/13/watching-the-watchdogs-babies-and-truth-die-together-in-israel-palestine>

43. YouTube. "GeeksTell: Mai, The Developer." (2022, 11 January). Gaza Sky Geeks. Retrieved from: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GSb_IgNawK0&t=24s

44. Johana Bhuiyan and Blake Montgomery. "'A betrayal': Google workers protest Israeli military contract at vigil for ex-intern killed in airstrike." (2023, 1 December). The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/dec/01/google-intern-gaza-israel-military-contract-project-nimbus>

45. Workers shared that Asam, a Gaza Sky Geek, was also killed, but further details about him and the spelling of his name are not confirmed at this time.

attempted to organize a vigil to honor them, as former Google workers. This worker explained that Mai was a graduate of the Google-funded coding bootcamp the Gaza Sky Geeks.⁴⁶ Mai had muscular dystrophy and was a wheelchair-user, and hoped to one day develop a platform for people with disabilities to connect with one another.⁴⁷ Every attempt Google workers made to share the event information on the internal workspace platform was shut down. When workers shared an event poster that pictured an image of a candle with the simple caption "Vigil for Mai," this was taken down by Google as "hate speech."

Google workers tried using various types of language to describe the event in their posts, but no matter the phrasing the thread would be deleted. The worker who shared this story noted the cruel irony in Google selecting Gaza as one of the locations of this Big Tech-backed entrepreneurial philanthropic project, the same location where Google investments "support the same military whose bombs killed Mai," as one worker described.

Mohammad, who was fired from Google on April 17, 2024, spoke about Mai and the attempts to organize a vigil for her. Mohammad noted how Google's efforts to delete posts sharing information about the vigil made many feel as if Google was attempting to "silence our grief and how we mourned the dead." Several workers shared how pro-Israel workers would repeatedly report any posts expressing grief or mourning, including posts from Palestinian workers who requested "prayers for my family." Such posts would be reported and then expeditiously taken down by Google for "safety reasons" or for "hate speech," according to workers. As Mohammad eloquently explains,

"even in grief we were targeted and silenced."

Like other workers, Mohammad noted how the use of certain words in the internal workspace would trigger censorship, resulting in an immediate shutdown or deletion of the thread. The word "genocide" was one such word, and several workers explained that Google perceived the word as hate speech by conveying that Israel is committing a genocide, an opinion that Google seemingly had issue with. Another word that seemed to trigger a thread shutdown, deletion, and/or an HR response,

46. Ibid.

47. Mai excelled in tech, and worked as a developer at UNRWA, collaborating closely with UK researchers and specializing in Data Science. See "Gaza Sky Geeks." (2023, 2 November). LinkedIn. Retrieved from: https://www.linkedin.com/posts/gaza-sky-geeks_geekstell-mai-the-developer-activity-7125888756229844993-UGo0?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop

was "martyr" or "martyrdom." Mohammad explained that with the term "martyrdom" Google seemed to assume a "glorification or encouragement of terrorism." But, as Mohammad noted, "martyr" or "martyrdom" has specific meaning in Islam and is not a call to violence or a support of "terrorist activities." Similar debate over the acceptability of the use of the term "martyr" also occurred at Meta,⁴⁸ eventually resulting in the July 2024 decision to lift the blanket ban on "martyr," and on "shaheed," the Arabic word for martyr.⁴⁹

Bullying & Harassment in the Workplace

Zelda, a former software engineer at Google, was also fired and arrested after the April 2024 sit-ins. Working in YouTube learning, Zelda grew with Google over the years, attending Google's pre-college computer science summer institute, and interning three times while studying computer science at Yale, before joining Google full-time right out of college. After October, noticing that Google had not expressed any sympathy for the thousands of Palestinian deaths, coupled with their censorship of workers speaking about Palestine on internal platforms, Zelda became more involved in Palestine advocacy, and began to ask more questions in Google's Dory Q&A sessions about Palestine as it related to their specific work in YouTube. Additionally, Zelda began to set up a table during lunch in the cafeteria, featuring a sign stating, "Ask me about Project Nimbus," alongside providing flyers with more information on Project Nimbus. Due to this advocacy, Zelda began to

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48. Meta had also similarly judged and interpreted the use of "martyr" or "shaheed," as "praise for terrorism," or as expressing a political stance that calls for or incites violence. Referring to someone as a martyr, or shaheed, in death, however, is not a call to violence or a call to support "terrorist activities," and in fact is a term used frequently in Arabic to refer to individuals who were murdered, individuals who passed away from nonviolent causes while performing religious duties, or individuals who died in a secular line of duty who were assassinated. According to a report published by the Integrity Institute on April 18, 2023, authors discuss "shaheed" in relation to Meta's previous conception of shaheed as praise for terrorism. Integrity Institute authors explain that understanding shaheed as praise "undermines freedom of expression by limiting critical discourse in conflict zones and beyond, and fails to account for the terms' positive meaning across regions, languages, and dialects." See "Comment on Meta's Approach to the Term 'Shaheed.'" (2023, 18 April). Integrity Institute. Retrieved from: <https://integrityinstitute.org/blog/comment-on-metas-approach-to-the-term-shaheed>
49. The oversight board found, in agreement with the recommendations published by authors of the Integrity Institute report, "Meta's rules on 'shaheed' failed to account for the word's variety of meanings and resulted in the removal of content not aimed at praising violent actions." "Meta to end ban on the word 'shaheed' on oversight board's recommendations." (2024, 3 July). The Indian Express. Retrieved from: <https://indianexpress.com/article/technology/social/meta-to-end-ban-on-the-word-shaheed-on-oversight-boards-recommendations-9429612/>

experience various forms of harassment and bullying from pro-Israel co-workers, including comments they would often make in the Jewglers group assessing how to better "file mass complaints" against Zelda.

— Additionally, Zelda was doxxed, and their photo ended up on an Israeli mailing list, and was later removed after filing a complaint with HR. Zelda ended up filing fourteen separate complaints with HR about various incidents, including this one. At one point, Zelda even asked Google security guards to look out for them in the physical office due to feeling unsafe. After these various incidents, Zelda realized that workers in support of Palestine seemingly do not experience the same protections as pro-Israel workers. In recognizing how expeditiously Google responded to pro-Israel worker reports about Palestinian advocacy, while simultaneously not responding to reports of anti-Palestinian hate speech or incitement to violence, alongside the censorship of Palestinian content, Zelda noted that it felt that "Google let them (the pro-Israel workers) do the dirty work of the company." —

After the April 2024 sit-in organized with No Tech for Apartheid, Zelda was fired alongside others, and Google explained to Zelda that their termination was due to them being "a part of creating an unsafe working environment." On the other hand, the various pro-Israel workers who were harassing, intimidating, and doxxing Zelda both on the internal Jewgler platform and in-person, were never called out by HR or leadership for "creating an unsafe working environment."

Questioning Google's Commitments

In conversations with a worker in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, it became clearer the various ways in which Google constantly and consistently seemed to violate its self-proclaimed policies relating to social justice and racial equity, especially after the start of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in 2020. This worker explained how after BLM, they were impressed with how Google took issues of racism seriously. But, with regard to Palestine after October 7th, the same principles of racial justice, equity, and anti-discrimination seemingly did not apply to Palestinians. This worker noted how this was evident in how any conversations related to Palestine were consistently suppressed.

They felt "the hypocrisy clearly ran deep," and shared an incident from about two years ago, prior to October 7th, from one of Google's internal Q&A Dory forums.

Here, someone asked about the racial commitments Google has made to the Black community in the U.S., and if Google could also commit to making those same commitments to Palestinian workers and users. This worker remembered that there were a lot of "down votes" in response to this question, and that one person commented expressing their confusion at similarities between the Black experience and the experience of Palestinians. This worker shared that they had offered various resources in the chat at that point, including writing from Black Americans who visited Palestine and their reflections on their experiences, and writings relating South African apartheid to the Israeli occupation of Palestine. At that point, the Q&A thread was shut down, preventing workers from being able to add additional comments. Leadership did not respond to any of those questions or comments, and then this worker soon received communication from the content moderation team, who flagged their comments. The content moderation team explained that "for now" this worker's comments were acceptable since they discussed "a nation and not a group of people," but issued an informal warning to "be careful about how you talk about this." Someone then reported this worker to their team leadership requesting that they be fired, explaining that they felt unsafe due to this worker's explanation of the comparison between the "apartheid in South Africa with the situation in Israel."

At Google, when threads are "shut down," "locked," or even deleted, leadership often cites a violation related to "appropriateness" in their explanation of why said thread was removed. For example, this worker shared that when someone posted an article about Project Nimbus, the thread was locked for being "inappropriate." The invocation of "appropriateness" as a metric for assessing when to allow or when to disallow conversations is tricky. For other global or geopolitical conflicts aside from those in Israel-Palestine, the gauge of "appropriateness" is seemingly looser, but when assessing a topic related to Palestine specifically, the strictest interpretation of what counts as "appropriate" is put forward.

This worker described how posts sharing donation links on internal Google platforms further revealed indication of the double standards at play.

Posts that shared donation links for relief organizations serving Ukraine would receive no negative comments from HR or leadership, and these links remained visible with no attempts to lock or delete the thread. After October, similar donation links to relief organizations working out of Gaza would be circulated, such as UNRWA, the Palestinian Red Crescent Society, or others. These links, however, would be shut down or removed with the comment that "the content was

inappropriate." In addition to the invocation of "appropriateness," discussions on the internal workspace platforms related to Project Nimbus or Google Cloud, would also get flagged, with the content moderation team explaining this decision by stating such content was "not related to work." The irony with this is, however, that such discussions about Google products and services are, quite literally, exactly related to work...they are work. From these worker stories, it became clear how Google has problematically been selectively applying a vague notion of "work appropriateness" to censor Palestinian advocacy.

Various other problematic things occurred within the Jewglers group, including Google's overwhelming lack of interest, or intentional delays, in taking down content that was in fact inappropriate and harmful. One worker shared how posts from pro-Palestinian Jewish Google employees who challenged the pro-Israel anti-Palestinian posts in the Jewglers group, and elsewhere, would be deplatformed and censored. This worker explained that any criticism of Israel would be perceived as anti-Semitic and shared a story of a Jewish co-worker who critiqued the definition of anti-Semitism seemingly agreed upon by the pro-Israel workers, explaining that they and others felt uncomfortable with it. The Jewish workers who questioned this definition would be bullied by pro-Israel members in the Jewglers group, which caused many of them to leave that group entirely. One Jewish worker who critiqued the definition of anti-Semitism being put forward was called a "self-hating Jew" by a pro-Israel worker. In the Jewglers group, someone had listed the Canary Mission as a resource, a list well-known, and widely critiqued, for supporting doxxing efforts and targeting pro-Palestinian voices for decades. Other workers had reported the listing of the Canary Mission as a resource in the Jewglers group as highly problematic, especially for its weaponization in attacking freedom of speech, expression, and its use in doxxing efforts. This worker shared how slow Google was to address these reports, explaining it took many months for its removal.

This sense that Google was utilizing time, or an "intentional slowness" to respond to certain complaints over others, was evident through multiple conversations with current and former Google workers. All workers similarly expressed that this "intentional slowness" was strategic, as was taking complaints or reports seriously made by certain individuals more than others. Google's quick investigation of any claims against Palestinian-related expressions, with the expeditious shutdown or deletion of those threads, and subsequent disciplinary actions launched against those who posted them, speaks to this biased approach in enforcing policies related

to community engagement. This coupled with the comparatively and objectively long waiting periods that characterized Google investigations of hate speech, harassment, and/or bullying directed towards Palestinian, Arab, and/or Muslim employees, speaks further to the double standards at play.

Based on conversations with Google workers, one can ask further questions regarding company complicity through slowness, inaction, and/or silence. From these Google worker testimonies, one may ask:

How might workers address the "political nature" of their company's products or services, especially if and when these products or services are found to be in support of a particular political or national cause, in a way that challenges invocations of "work inappropriateness," and subsequent censorship?

How have concepts of appropriateness, comfort, and politics been manipulated and unevenly applied to certain instances of violence, and not others?

And how are tech company cultures of silencing, surveillance, and fear leveraged in ways that suppress rightful worker inquiry about the products and services they create, support, and sustain?



PayPal and its discrimination against Palestinians, have been well-documented by 7amleh and various others since 2016.⁵⁰ PayPal prevents Palestinians in both the occupied West Bank and Gaza, excluding Palestinians in East Jerusalem who have an Israeli bank account, from equal and fair access to its services. At the same time, PayPal offers full access to Israeli users in illegal settlements in the West Bank. PayPal operates globally, in over 200 countries and territories, including regions with major political and economic instability, such as Yemen or Somalia, while it continues to prevent Palestinians with bank accounts in the West Bank and Gaza access to its platforms. 7amleh has determined that PayPal's policy, which services Israelis and not Palestinians, is discriminatory towards national or ethnic origin, or identity, rather than towards geographic location.⁵¹ PayPal's denial of services to Palestinians represents another instance in which technology companies serve users in disproportionate ways, a translation of the material realities of a biased system to the digital realm. Preventing Palestinians from accessing the digital economy impacts both daily lives and global initiatives that attempt to support Palestinians. Bias is further evident by denying services to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza, while also continuing to serve countries with similar risk profiles and serving Israeli settlers residing in illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

PayPal's complicity in operations in illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, through offering its services and engaging in business operations, contributes to the sustaining of such illegal settlements and supporting their expansion, which is in violation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPR). The discriminatory and differential treatment of Palestinians regarding PayPal access due simply to their identity as Palestinians violates fundamental prohibitions against discrimination under international human rights law. This differential treatment further exacerbates a situation in which

50. "#PayPal4Palestine: PayPal Makes Your Life Easier Unless You Live in Palestine." 7amleh. Retrieved: <https://p4p.7amleh.org/>

McGreal, Chris. "US Congress members demand that PayPal end ban on Palestinian business." (2023, 24 May). The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/may/24/paypal-palestine-ban-us-congress->

Al Tahhan, Zena. "Rights groups to PayPal: End discrimination against Palestinians." (2021, 7 October). Al Jazeera. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/10/7/rights-groups-paypal-end-discrimination-against-palestinians>

51. AlAboudi, Ubai. "Palestine & PayPal: Towards Financial Equality." 7amleh. Retrieved from: <https://7amleh.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Palestine-PayPal-English.pdf>

Palestinians have far fewer opportunities for financial growth and wealth-building than Israelis, as they face high unemployment rates, and an economy stifled due to Israel, as an occupying power, placing restrictions on imports, exports, and access to resources and movement in both the West Bank and in Gaza.

Several civil society organizations have challenged PayPal's policy in Palestine, issuing a 2016 letter to the PayPal CEO, an online campaign in 2017, and calls to boycott PayPal. As a result of these mobilizations, PayPal issued limited statements between 2016 and 2018 that did not result in any actual change. In 2020, 7amleh in cooperation with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) and other partners, submitted a statement emphasizing the importance of providing Palestinians with access to PayPal. PayPal stated that they hope to assess the risk of operating in Palestine in the future. In excluding Palestinians from PayPal's digital payment platform, PayPal contradicts and violates both its own company's code of business conduct and ethics, and several human rights declarations.⁵² This context is critical to understand the current repressive workplace climate for PayPal workers who advocate for Palestine, and in ways both similar and distinct from worker experiences at Google and Meta.

— Shortly after October 7th, PayPal sent a message to all employees urging them to reach out to their Israeli teammates, to be kind to them, and shared various fundraisers or campaigns for Israeli organizations. In this message, there was no mention of Palestine, and they included no campaigns for Palestine. Some workers questioned the lack of acknowledgement of Palestinians in the message. Eventually, PayPal agreed to share information for organizations operating in Gaza, but workers noted that none of the organizations shared were Palestinian organizations, but were more neutral international relief organizations. Workers questioned this, as it seemed that working with Palestinian organizations directly may be a more effective way to deliver aid, so it was proposed that the Palestinian Children's Relief Fund (PCRF) be listed. PayPal responded by explaining that the vetting process to get organizations listed was "really difficult" and that the PCRF "wouldn't make it through." Workers noticed that Palestinian organizations were not listed as an option to receive donations, but Israeli organizations were promoted outwardly. —

52. "#PayPal4Palestine: PayPal Makes Your Life Easier Unless You Live in Palestine." 7amleh. Retrieved: <https://p4p.7amleh.org/>

PayPal workers also addressed the censorship, suppression, and silencing occurring on internal workspace platforms. Rather than referencing community engagement guidelines like Meta or Google, PayPal instead seemed to approach censorship in a more definitive way. Workers explained that anything posted on internal workspace platforms that PayPal seemingly did not agree with, would be deleted, swiftly, and without explanation. The workers who shared their experiences stressed how anything related to Palestine has been met with silence. Leadership would state that conversations related to Palestine were not taking place in an "appropriate forum." Workers would push back asking what forum would be appropriate, and leadership would either not respond, evade the answer, or would explain that the subject was "complicated" and they wanted to avoid "offending people." For workers, framing the issue consistently as "complicated" and "inappropriate" spoke to PayPal's glaring avoidance of the issue. Workers described the silencing as abusive and as gaslighting. All workers spoke to the sense of a palpable fear that speaking up would result in termination. As one worker explained, "PayPal doesn't seem to mind letting employees go, and they are at a moment of cost-cutting anyway... the whole situation is psychologically cumbersome."

PayPal, like Meta and Google, also has internal workplace platforms that feature community groups oriented around a specific identity category. These groups are called "Believe Groups," so, for example, "Believe-Jews" or "Believe-Muslims," and others. Like Meta and Google, the "Believe-Jews" group had become overwhelmed by pro-Israel workers, often explicitly self-identifying as Zionists or in support of Zionist ideology, and who posted at a disproportionately higher rate than any other group members. Meanwhile, those group members would often shame or silence pro-Palestinian Jewish workers, or self-described "anti-Zionist" Jewish workers, from posting an opinion that critiqued Israel or that expressed sympathy or support for Palestine in any way. Much of what workers referred to as "Zionist rhetoric" was anti-Palestinian speech that was not taken down.

— One example a worker referenced was a post from a worker at the director-level, in which this person shared a link to the American Jewish Committee with the text "don't let Hamas win," urging folks to oppose calls for a unilateral ceasefire. This worker felt this was a hateful post that should be removed from the internal workspace platform. After several reports, this post (as of this August 2024 conversation), however, has yet to be removed. This worker also spoke to the culture of silence surrounding Palestine, which appeared to them to be "in direct contrast to other causes like Black

Lives Matter." Another worker echoed this sentiment, lamenting, "It feels like a bigger systemic thing just because of how exclusive this is, it's literally only about Palestine where there are issues..." All of the PayPal workers who shared their experiences expressed that many of the internal policies seemed biased, but that workers tended to not realize this until an issue arose and then the whole thread would be deleted. Any use of words like "Palestine" or "genocide" were quickly recognized as trigger words that would initiate an investigation and/or immediate deletion. Additionally, leadership seemed to take specific issue with the word "ceasefire," and there was discussion surrounding the banning of the term. Once workers realized comments were getting deleted, they began to fear for their job, and oftentimes felt scared to ask why. One worker shared that at one point there was a resource page for workers to offer support or further educational resources about Palestine, but that this was also swiftly deleted and literally replaced with a page that stated both the community guidelines and PayPal's general guidelines.

PayPal workers described the types of posts they witnessed in the "Believe-Jews" internal workspace group. Posts that were explicitly hateful and violent would remain visible in these groups, even after workers repeatedly reported them.

Workers shared that they saw posts that celebrated the rescue of hostages while at the same time celebrating the murder of Palestinians, posts that were asking for donations or advertising fundraisers for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF), and posts that urged workers to call their representatives to demand "no ceasefire campaigns" or "oppose the ceasefire." These posts were not taken down and remained visible.

Workers then attempted to test what sorts of things they could post to gauge if and what would be taken down, and how quickly. Posts about E-Sims, a fast-a-thon campaign during Ramadan in solidarity with the people in Palestine fasting, and a prayer-request were all quickly taken down. Meanwhile, if antagonistic or hateful posts against Palestinian expression were eventually removed after multiple reports, the posts were not always fully removed. For example, workers recalled that the "call your congressman to oppose the ceasefire" post was taken down, but the comments on it, which included phone numbers, bank information, and the actual ways to achieve said goal, remained. Since any worker could join any group, many pro-Israel workers joined the Believe-Muslims group. This move seemed to be intentional,

according to workers, because if one reported a post or comment from a group they were a member of, it would be taken more seriously and potentially removed more expeditiously.

PayPal workers ended up circulating a letter advocating for care and concern towards Palestinians near the end of June 2024. The open letter was taken down within three hours of it being shared on the company network, without any explanation from leadership or HR. Some workers were told that the letter was "offensive," without any specification as to what content was offensive or what company policies were violated. Occurring simultaneously with this suppression, during a recent company-wide meeting, PayPal proclaimed their role in managing the technology that disburses funds with GoFundMe. This was something workers were previously unaware of, and they found this especially troubling as GoFundMe crowdfunding is known for presenting various obstacles to Palestinians and pro-Palestinian activists who attempt to raise funds.⁵³

Another example these PayPal workers gave of what they understood as blatant double standards and bias, was PayPal's approach to other nations marked by "instability" or "risk" and the ability to offer PayPal services there. After Russia invaded Ukraine, PayPal closed all services in Russia, leaving Russians with no access to PayPal at all, and PayPal even closed an office there. PayPal at the same time expedited many services for Ukraine, waived fees for more than a year, and boasted in their social impact reports about bringing large amounts of relief funds into Ukraine.

————— *Workers witnessed various instances where if a customer mentioned Gaza or Palestine in their transactions, the money would not go through, and the account would get restricted. One worker expressed how sad it was to realize that "you're working for a company that is shutting down mutual aid initiatives that are trying to support people who are attempting to escape from a genocide."* —————

53. See Mila Sato's "As Gaza is bombarded, GoFundMe donations are stuck in limbo" (2024, 29 February) in The Verge. Retrieved from: <https://www.theverge.com/2024/2/29/24085175/gofundme-gaza-palestine-fundraiser-under-review-esims>. Marlon Ettinger's "GoFundMe axed a group providing tents for displaced Gazans—freezing \$250,000 in donations" (2024, 6 September) in Daily Dot. Retrieved from: <https://www.dailydot.com/debug/gofundme-palestine-relief-gaza/>. Sebastian Shehadi's "How pro-Israel saboteurs are derailing lifesaving Gaza fundraisers" (2024, 17 April) in The New Arab. Retrieved from: <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/how-pro-israel-saboteurs-are-derailing-gaza-fundraisers>. Ezgi Toper's "What obstacles do crowdfunding pages face in Palestine's Gaza?" (2024, June). Retrieved from: <https://www.trtworld.com/middle-east/what-obstacles-do-crowdfunding-pages-face-in-palestines-gaza-18176376>

One PayPal worker spoke more specifically about hypocrisy and double standards they had witnessed over the last several years of employment. This worker explained that PayPal's explanation for not offering servicing in Palestine, or to Palestinians, is under the guise of "financial crime risks" and potentially supporting terrorism. This worker and others attempted to argue that Palestine is not a high-risk jurisdiction and could be managed so that services could be offered, but PayPal has maintained their blanket ban. The fact that Israeli settlers, however, residing in the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the West Bank, can access and use PayPal services discredits and exposes PayPal's blatant discrimination against Palestinians, wherein the supposedly high-risk region is only high-risk for certain residents of a certain cultural and ethnic background, but not for others. Another worker similarly asked, "how are settlers who are living in the Occupied Palestinian Territories able to use PayPal, if Palestine apparently does not have the 'rails' to operate in Palestine for Palestinians?" This worker also expressed frustration and confusion on this issue, and shared that many PayPal workers have asked about the lack of servicing available to Palestinians, but are often met with silence or a gesture towards the heightened potential for suspicious transactions related to Palestine.



Tariq, a Palestinian-American former Apple worker of over ten years who was fired on June 5, 2024, addressed leadership's inability to acknowledge Palestinian suffering. Two days after October 7th, Tariq recalls receiving Apple CEO Tim Cook's email, where he expressed "our heart goes out to all the people in Israel," without any mention of Palestinians. This email prompted Tariq to begin working on the Apples4Ceasefire campaign, which began as an open letter and has since shifted to a collective organizing campaign.⁵⁴ For Tariq, whose family is from Gaza and Lifta and who has lost over a dozen family members in Israel's current war in Gaza, organizing has been critical and sustaining. Organizing internally, and now externally after being terminated, Tariq noted how important this is to get others to recognize and care about Palestinian lives and suffering. Tariq, like other workers, pointed out the hypocrisy regarding company commitments to equity and social justice made after the 2020 murder of George Floyd, and the subsequent Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. Seemingly, when it comes to Palestinians, commitments to equity and social justice do not apply. In January 2021, Apple launched its \$100 million Racial Equity and Justice Initiative (REJI) to "help dismantle systemic barriers to opportunity and combat injustices faced by communities of color," but when employees would endure anti-Palestinian, anti-Arab, or anti-Muslim racism and discrimination both in the physical workplace and online on Apple's internal workspace platforms, Apple seemed to conveniently forget or disregard its reaffirmed commitments.⁵⁵

In November 2023, Tariq explained that Apple completely shut down both the Muslim and Jewish Slack channels after an influx of reporting occurred. Like the internal workspace platforms discussed by workers from other companies, it seemed as if pro-Israel workers often reported any and all comments and posts related to Palestine, and en masse, in the internal Apple platform. Posts written in Arabic or even posts sharing verses of the Quran would be reported. Apple began to delete these threads, rather than moderating these spaces, until they eventually completely shut down both the Muslim and Jewish channels. Apple did not explain why they shut down the channels.

54. Apples4Ceasefire. Retrieved from: <https://www.apples4ceasefire.com/>

55. "Apple launches major new Racial Equity and Justice Initiative projects to challenge systemic racism, advance racial equity nationwide." (2021, 13 January). Apple Newsroom. Retrieved from: <https://www.apple.com/uk/newsroom/2021/01/apple-launches-major-new-racial-equity-and-justice-initiative-projects-to-challenge-systemic-racism-advance-racial-equity-nationwide/>

_____ At the same time, Apple has been facilitating donations to support Israel through Benevity, the giving portal Apple workers can use to make donations, which are then matched by Apple. Tariq noted that various far-right groups are listed as potential recipients of donations on Benevity, including several religious organizations that are known to fund and arm illegal settlements in the West Bank. In early 2024 it was revealed externally to the media that one of the organizations Apple was matching donations to was Friends of the IDF, "an organization that collects donations on behalf of soldiers in the Israeli military, as well as a number of groups that contribute to the settlement enterprise in the West Bank, including HaYovel, One Israel Fund, the Jewish National Fund, and Israel Gives."⁵⁶ Apple workers organizing with Apples4Ceasefire authored an open letter with 133 signatures calling on shareholders to halt donations linked with Israel's war effort. Apple seemingly "resolved the optics of donation-matching with Friends of the IDF," but according to Tariq, there are still various ways for donors to continue to contribute to Friends of the IDF and other organizations that financially support Israel and its military campaigns in Palestine. In addition to the internal platform censorship, Tariq recalled several colleagues who experienced various forms of in-person racism in Apple offices. Additionally, he spoke to the operation of Apple offices in Israel, wherein they abide by Israeli law to continue to pay Apple employees in full while serving for the IDF; "While employees are engaged in Israeli military service, they are entitled to salary continuation at their normal rate of pay."⁵⁷ _____

Such complicity is seemingly in violation of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPR), wherein, as stated above, non-state entities, such as businesses like big tech companies, have specific obligations and duties to respect human rights and work to reduce and prevent harm, whether online or offline.

56. Murtaza Hussain and Sam Biddle. "Apple Matches Worker Donations to IDF and Illegal Settlements, Employees Allege." (2024, 11 June). The Intercept. Retrieved from: <https://theintercept.com/2024/06/11/apple-donations-idf-israel-gaza-illegal-settlements/>

"Apple under Fire for Matching Employee Donations to IDF and Illegal Settlements." (2023, 12 June). Middle East Monitor. Retrieved from: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240612-apple-under-fire-for-matching-employee-donations-to-idf-and-illegal-settlements/>

57. Erika C. Collins and Megan A. Childs. "Considerations for Israeli Employers During Israel-Hamas War." LaborSphere. Retrieved from: <https://laborsphere.com/considerations-for-israeli-employers-during-israel-hamas-war/>



A Microsoft worker offered various insights into what has been happening internally with regards to Palestinian workplace advocacy. Prior to October 7th, there was some awareness of Microsoft's connections to, and investments in Israel. In 2020, a campaign and corresponding petition urged Microsoft to drop its investments in AnyVision, an Israeli facial recognition company led by former IDF members.⁵⁸ After Microsoft's \$74 million investment into AnyVision, whose technology claims to "streamline the operation of West Bank checkpoints," human rights activists and researchers raised the alarm. And further, once NBC News confirmed that AnyVision was also being used for secret surveillance that "enables the Israeli military to identify individuals in any live camera feed and track targets as they move between different feeds," it became more difficult for Microsoft to explain and justify its financial investment as being in alignment with self-described commitments to them being the "moral conscience" of the tech industry.⁵⁹ Microsoft dropped AnyVision in 2020, divesting, and forcing Microsoft to launch an external audit.⁶⁰ Such a win is notable in that the over 75,000 petitions circulated resulted in the company being forced to divest, and to reckon with the fact that their financial investments and actions were in violation of their own ethical principles.

Another instance prior to October 7th that this worker explained as further evidence of Microsoft's position on Israel, was in regards to a question posed to leadership during the monthly Q&A on the internal workspace platform named Viva Engage.⁶¹ This question came after Microsoft decided to stop selling technology to Russia after their invasion of Ukraine, and this worker posted a question praising Microsoft for upholding its human rights commitments, but also asked how these commitments are upheld in the same way when the victims are not white or it does not seem politically expedient to do so. This worker went on to cite various examples, such as the persecution of the Uyghurs in China, or the bombings of Iraq, Syria, or Yemen, or deaths in Palestine in 2021 in relation to Sheikh Jarrah. This worker received a

58. "Tell Microsoft: #DropAnyVision." Retrieved from: <https://dropanyvision.org/>

59. Ibid.

60. Jewish Voice for Peace. "Microsoft drops AnyVision - #DropAnyVision campaign celebrates." (2020, 28 March). BDS. Retrieved from: <https://bdsmovement.net/news/microsoft-drops-anyvision-%E2%80%93-drop-any-vision-campaign-celebrates>

61. <https://learn.microsoft.com/en-us/viva/engage/overview>

"surprising number of responses" to their question, and then later received an email from the "global employee relations team" of HR, requesting a meeting. In the call, HR "heavily insinuated" that this worker was not being respectful of co-workers, wasn't offering a "growth mindset," and that they were "singling out Israel" in an unfair manner. In a subsequent conversation with HR, this worker was repeatedly told to adhere to Microsoft expectations and policies.

A former LinkedIn worker, LinkedIn being owned by Microsoft, also shared experiences of being called out by HR after posting comments about Palestine. This worker became more involved with Viva Engage after witnessing the "most disgusting, racist, dehumanizing" posts being shared on internal platforms and being motivated to intervene. This worker explained how the community of Palestinians and allies would repeatedly report such posts to be removed, but nothing happened. As such, this worker became more vocal and would respond in comments saying that those remarks were unacceptable, racist, and genocidal. Additionally, the worker explained that they shared a lot of links to news articles, many from Al Jazeera, and they were always attacked by pro-Israel workers, and were called things like "terrorist sympathizer," " Hamas sympathizer," and "anti-Semitic." After a colleague threatened to report this worker to LinkedIn's Chief Product Officer, HR called in the worker to have a meeting. Eventually, HR issued a formal warning and stripped this worker of some of their privileges at LinkedIn, asking them to sign the warning paperwork and that if they had another violation they would be fired. This worker could not afford to be fired at that time, so withdrew from Viva Engage to avoid further violations, despite being told by their manager multiple times how valuable of a worker they were and receiving consistently high-performance reviews. Eventually, this worker was let go, but it was apparent to them and others that this was not coincidental, and not due to performance or attitude alone, but that their Palestinian advocacy advanced this decision.

Like tech workers from other companies, the Microsoft worker who shared their experiences noted the clear over-moderation of Palestinian-related content, alongside the under-moderation of "Israeli, pro-Israeli, or Zionist" content. After October 7th, like Apple and other companies, Microsoft released a statement reaffirming that the company "stands with Israel," even encouraging donations to Israel in the company-wide message. This worker recalled that after the "we stand with Israel" message, the head of HR released a statement that seemed to be the company's attempt to include "both sides," communicating that "we have Palestinian employees concerned with the safety of their loved ones and condemn these acts of terrorism."

— This Microsoft worker described the atmosphere on the internal workspace platform as explicitly anti-Arab, and referenced several posts that insinuated that Palestinians are subhuman, that justified the killing of children and the bombing of hospitals, that stated that all Palestinians are complicit in terrorism, and even a comment that read "from the river to the sea, Israel will forever be." Microsoft workers would repeatedly report these comments, but none were found to be in violation of company harassment and discrimination policy. When this worker posted a comment stating something like "Palestinians will attain the dignity they deserve from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea," it was swiftly reported, and the subsequent investigation took about three months. This comment was later found to be in violation of the company's anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policy. In response to this post, this worker was harassed, called "anti-Semitic," and even called a "member of Hamas." —

Despite submitting a lengthy email to HR to put a stop to these comments, and to more broadly address the problems with this type of hateful rhetoric still being visible on the internal platforms, the comments still did not stop. And in fact, this worker shared that none of the comments they reported were found to be in violation of company anti-harassment and anti-discrimination policies. Later, after posting a meme that stated "Israel is committing genocide against Palestinians in Gaza," this worker was found to again be in violation of Microsoft policy, the second violation, and was banned from Viva Engage for six months, was marked the lowest possible score on their performance review, was required to do thirteen trainings within two weeks, had to undergo ongoing "coaching" with their manager, and received zero in their cash rewards, salary increase, cash bonus, or stock contribution for the entire year.

The general Microsoft atmosphere seemed to be explicitly oriented around silencing all discussion of Palestine. After Microsoft announced that they would provide free Azure AI services to Israeli defense startups at Y Combinator, "a startup program that actively silences its Arab and Palestinian founders," in November 2023,⁶² Microsoft workers released a petition on November 6, 2023 calling for a ceasefire, and received about 1,000 signatures in just a few days. Microsoft employees organizing and speaking out against Azure, which powers Elbit System Technology and the Israeli military through tech and surveillance services, launched the "No Azure for Apartheid" campaign, situating themselves in conversation with Google's No Tech

62. "A Marriage Made in Hell: An Introduction to Microsoft's Complicity in Apartheid and Genocide." (2024, 21 May). Medium. Retrieved from: <https://medium.com/@notechforapartheid/a-marriage-made-in-hell-an-introduction-to-microsofts-complicity-in-apartheid-and-genocide-d7dfad65a196>

for Apartheid campaign in which Google workers speak out against Project Nimbus.⁶³ After the November 6th petition, this worker described the increasing hostility felt at work, and although the ceasefire petition received so many signatures in such a short time, nothing resulted.

Whenever posts in support of Palestine were shared on the internal platform, leadership immediately shut down the forum. The "all company" forum, which featured every Microsoft worker globally, was completely shut down to any posts except those from administration beginning in November. The more workers started to notice this atmosphere of suppression, the more they realized HR's approach. The selective application of policies, or the invention of completely new policies, seemed to characterize Microsoft's response to efforts by the Palestinians and Allies at Microsoft (PAAM) group and a newly-formed MENA at Microsoft group,⁶⁴ to host events or bring in external educational speakers. Any attempt to bring in external speakers resulted in leadership communicating about a new 90-day pause on the ability for employee networks to host any events. Posts related to Palestine shared in the PAAM Teams team were allowed to remain, but when the group would try to host an event that was understood to be "educational," then it would be shut down. According to this worker, Microsoft's understanding of what counted as "educational" was widely applied, and in a way that even impacted workers who shared personal family stories, such as accounts of the Nakba. Although experiencing numerous setbacks in workplace advocacy for Palestine, Microsoft workers, and specifically those organizing as No Azure for Apartheid, released a statement and petition in May 2024, demanding:⁶⁵

- 1. IOF off Azure:** End Microsoft's complicity in Israeli genocide and occupation by terminating all Azure contracts and partnerships with the Israeli military and government.
- 2. Disclose all ties:** Make all ties to the Israeli state, military, and tech industry publicly known, including weapons manufacturers and contractors. Conduct a transparent and independent audit of Microsoft's technology contracts, services,

63. No Tech for Apartheid. Retrieved from: <https://www.notechforapartheid.com/>

64. The newly-formed MENA at Microsoft group broke away from a previous MENA group that was hijacked by pro-Israel Zionist ideologies, once it was realized that the former broad definition of MENA the group was utilizing had included the state of Israel. This was an attempt to control programming coming out of the MENA at Microsoft group.

65. <https://medium.com/@notechforapartheid/a-marriage-made-in-hell-an-introduction-to-microsofts-complicity-in-apartheid-and-genocide-d7dfad65a196>

and investments, and ensure Microsoft products and services are not being used to violate the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the Geneva Convention and their Additional Protocols, or Microsoft's own Global Human Rights Statement, in Palestine or elsewhere.

- 3. Call for a ceasefire:** Honor the demands of the over 1,000 employees who signed an earlier petition calling on Microsoft's leadership to publicly endorse an immediate, permanent ceasefire.
- 4. Protect employees and uphold free speech:** Ensure the safety of Palestinian, Arab, Muslim and allied employees by protecting pro-Palestinian speech, actions, and fundraising initiatives on internal company platforms.

As No Azure for Occupation campaign members reiterate the phrase "we refuse to be complicit," we are reminded of the previous 2020 mobilization at Microsoft, and subsequent victory regarding divestment from AnyVision. Microsoft workers, like others engaged in advocacy at Meta, Google, PayPal, and Apple, have consistently called out suppression as a way to recognize the hypocrisy, bias, double standards, and discrimination at play.



A group of workers from Cisco, a networking, security and collaboration company that also is involved in surveillance, discussed what they described as the "very clear bias and censorship" occurring in their workplace. Worker organizing at Cisco has led to the creation of two internal groups, one being the Palestinian Network at Cisco, an official Cisco employee resource group (ERG), and the other Bridge to Humanity, an advocacy group that put forward the open letter, shares educational resources about Palestine, and supports marginalized workers. When the signature collection bot and internal website promoting the open letter with its 1,700+ signatories was shut down, leadership expressed that it was due to "divisiveness" and "discomfort." Despite Cisco workers having gathered over 1,700 signatures on this letter, which called on Cisco to be compliant with its Code of Business Conduct and Human Rights Policy by divesting from the Israeli military due to what has been referred to as a genocide, the complaints of thirty-five pro-Israel workers convinced HR and leadership to shut down the whole effort. The pro-Israel workers framed the letter as "divisive" and as going against the company and its values. These workers and other signatories explained that this letter and surrounding conversation was the opposite of being divisive; that they were trying to save the "Conscious Culture" at Cisco, and were concerned about their work "being used to murder tens of thousands of innocent civilians."

Cisco worker advocates met with leadership and were told that they had violated the "solicitation policy," and they then published newly-created "expressions guidelines" to further address any similar actions workers may take in the future in questioning Cisco's positioning. Leadership did not specify what part of the policy was violated nor why this new policy was created against them, and reiterated a discretion clause in the expressions guidelines that states "we reserve the right to make final determinations on what is considered appropriate communication and expression within our company." Workers asked why their conversation was not permissible under the company's "Conscious Culture" which is meant to empower meaningful employee expression and create space for open conversation. And despite executive leadership affirming and encouraging the Bridge to Humanity conversation, leaders later reneged and cited that "on Cisco tools, they have the ultimate discretion."

Many took issue with leadership's directive, pursuant to the company's new expressions guidelines that cropped up post-Palestine advocacy. Workers questioned these guidelines in relation to both Palestinian advocacy and other social justice efforts, asking if or how Cisco might engage in such discourse in the future if the company prohibits the use of company resources for political or social justice discourse. Workers noted their discomfort with this, especially when reflecting on Cisco's previous efforts related to politics or social justice, such as the 2020 Social Justice Action office, which emerged with the stated purpose of supporting Black Lives Matter, the LGBTQIA+ community, and the Stop Asian Hate movement, among other social justice efforts. According to workers, however, only issues affecting Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims seemed problematic in the company's view. At the same time, workers noted that Cisco often sent out communications that were "political" or that did engage in "social justice." For example, after presidential nominee Donald Trump was shot in the ear, Cisco sent out an email condemning political violence, and, a short while later, the company declined to support workers following the August 2024 UK riots driven by Islamophobia and white supremacy. Another example of Cisco's "social justice" engagement was when Francine Katsoudas, the Executive VP and Chief People, Policy and Purpose officer, posted a blog on supporting Ukraine, written using "purpose inclusive language," and stressed the importance of calling out injustice to support Ukraine. Workers noted that "everything has been the complete opposite on Palestine." These workers explained that so far posts about Palestine in the internal workspace platforms have not been blatantly taken down, as seen in other tech companies, but that they have dealt with a great amount of hate speech targeted towards them as both individuals and within the Palestinian Network group and Bridge to Humanity group.

_____ Workers explained that within the Connected Jewish Network ERG, explicitly hateful and violent posts shared by pro-Israel workers, such as those that "compared Palestinians to four-legged animals" and labeling all Muslims as "Muslim terrorists" remain visible, but that any Palestine-related posts get addressed and dealt with immediately. For example, workers were even asked to blur an image of the map of Palestine pictured on t-shirts within a video from a worker-led volunteer trip to Lebanon supporting Palestinian refugees due to the "discomfort" it caused. And shortly after, the Executive Vice President and Chief People, Policy, and Purpose officer requested that workers delete personal LinkedIn posts that included photos of them taken with Palestinian Network at Cisco members at a company-wide event wearing those same shirts. _____

The uneven censorship of pro-Palestinian expression and advocacy, alongside the convoluted and contradictory communications from leadership regarding company policies, have left workers questioning the commitments and "Conscious Culture" Cisco claims. Despite these challenges, Cisco workers advocating for Palestine persist in standing up for social justice and the maintenance of a workplace receptive to equal and inclusive dialogue amongst all workers.

Discussion

Connections and Correspondences in Company Responses to Workplace Advocacy

In reflecting on the twenty-five testimonies provided by tech workers representing various companies, roles, and identities, it is evident that there are many similarities and overlaps regarding the ways in which tech companies have responded to workplace advocacy for Palestine. Tech company leadership from Google, Meta, PayPal, Apple, Microsoft and LinkedIn, and Cisco have overwhelmingly responded to workplace advocacy for Palestine with censorship, suppression, and silencing. These connections have become evident through worker testimonies, and reiterate larger critiques of tech companies. Some major connections identified through tech worker testimonies across companies include:

- The existence of censorship, suppression, and silencing on internal workplace platforms.
- The uneven and disproportionate ways in which HR and leadership respond to both reporting/flagging of posts related to Israel and Palestine on internal workplace platforms, and to bullying and harassment.
- HR and leadership asserting community engagement protocols, policies, "work appropriateness," or "comfort" in responding to workplace advocacy for Palestine.
- The felt sense from workers that tech companies are in violation of their own commitments to DEI, social justice, inclusion, and/or anti-racism, much of which was reasserted and reaffirmed after the onset of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 and after the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.
- Worker recognition that companies engage in a simultaneous "over-moderation" of pro-Palestinian content, and an "under-moderation" of anti-Palestinian racism.
- Worker realizations about their companies' various complicity and methods of support for violations of Palestinian human rights through technologies, services, and programs which actively contribute to real world harm.

These various connections enable us to think more about tech company complicity in what has been referred to as a genocide. Additionally, as we think about worker experiences broadly, we should also think specifically about the extremely precarious

position of not only Palestinian workers in the diaspora, but also Palestinian workers who work in-person in offices in Israel. And further, in reflecting on these connections, it becomes clear that when companies profess supposed neutrality, or exhibit inaction or lag in addressing internal issues related to workplace advocacy for Palestine, this is not accidental or unintentional, but, rather, deliberate. A stance that is neutral, marked by inaction, or exhibiting "lack" is taking a position.

Conclusions

After speaking with twenty-five workers, current and former, of tech companies working at Meta, Google, PayPal, Apple, Microsoft and LinkedIn, and Cisco, it is clear that an anti-Palestinian bias is pervasive across the tech industry. Furthermore, there is a great hypocrisy with how tech companies have been proclaiming adherence to principles of equity, inclusion, diversity, and social justice more generally, but in actual practice, do not abide by them. And alongside their empty proclamations of care, these companies have largely exploited marginalized communities and identities for show, without seemingly backing up their verbalized commitments with any real action. Palestine is the test. Palestine is the issue where these companies can "put their money where their mouth is," so to speak, and all of them seem to be failing miserably. Advocating for Palestinians, and supporting an end to their suffering, should be uncontroversial. The issue at its core concerns basic human rights, advocating for the oppressed, the underprivileged, and the exploited, and especially in urgent times of crisis and amidst extreme violence, what many have described as a genocide. At the time of this writing, with over 40,000 Palestinians killed, and many more lives unaccounted for within this number, many now injured and ill, and left with worsened conditions of health for the future, we cannot ignore the glaring violations to human rights, and we cannot remain silent in the face of them.⁶⁶

The twenty-five testimonies provided by tech workers from all over the world, who represent various major tech companies, offer some hope amidst the constant bad news that seems to just be getting worse. These tech workers, and many others, are committed to calling out injustice and to holding their employers accountable for the harm they have, and continue to, cause through both their explicit and implicit

66. AJLabs. "Israel-Gaza war in maps and charts: Live tracker." (2023, 9 October). Al Jazeera. Retrieved from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker>

investments, products, and services, all of which contribute in various ways to the exacerbation of harm and the violence Palestinians are facing. The topic of Palestine has awakened many to not only tech's complicity in causing harm and its role in the military-industrial complex,⁶⁷ but also to the ways in which these technology companies serve interests which are often in stark contrast to the needs and desires of most of the global population. Small successes and victories in changing company policy point to incremental change that will only continue to accumulate over time. As tech workers continue to leverage their power, others will be awakened to our collective power as workers, as consumers, as voters, and the incredible power of community and solidarity.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow emerge from conversations had with these twenty-five tech workers, and reflect 7amleh's expertise in human rights frameworks and the necessity of the application of these frameworks in digital space. In supporting and encouraging tech companies to adhere to their commitments to providing digital rights to all, 7amleh's recommendations are in alignment with their mission to support a safe, fair, and free Palestinian digital space.

Companies:

1. Respect Workers

- A. Worker's freedom of expression should be respected.
- B. Maintain a workplace wherein all workers are allowed to share and vocalize their beliefs without fear of harassment, bullying, doxxing, or retaliation from leadership.
- C. Encourage and support all workers to engage in respectful dialogue, without selective censorship based on differences of opinion.

67. See Sype, Eric. (2024, 24 July). "Big tech terror: For Palestinians, AI apocalypse is already here." The New Arab. Retrieved from: <https://www.newarab.com/opinion/big-tech-terror-palestinians-ai-apocalypse-already-here>

2. Protect Digital Rights

- A. Streamlining processes for addressing digital violations reported by workers, users, and civil society actors, ensuring that every report is met with timely and well-founded responses.
- B. Maintain proportionality and accountability through due process as an additional safeguard to protect Palestinian digital rights.
- C. Ensure user data privacy is protected, and individual user data cannot be weaponized to put individuals, especially vulnerable populations, in harm's way.
- D. Services provided to clients which include technologies with a known weaponized use case are not being used to facilitate, war crimes, crimes against humanity, or genocide.

3. Commit to Human Rights Due Diligence

- A. All companies providing technology, telecommunication, or social media services in Israel and Palestine need to prioritize a comprehensive approach that genuinely mainstreams and safeguards human rights and addresses the root causes of discrimination against the community and narratives, in full transparency and in line with the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights.
- B. All companies must commit to conducting independent human rights impact assessments, which must be made public.
- C. Company assessments on human rights must provide timely solutions with the aim of ensuring company practices and policies are in adherence with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Workers:

1. Know Your Rights

- A. Prioritize understanding worker rights to be better positioned to ensure your rights are not violated.
- B. Educate co-workers about their rights to raise general awareness in your workplace.

2. Collaborate

- A. Reach out to civil society and organized labor for support when needed.
- B. Ask civil society organizations for support and resources about digital rights issues.
- C. Ask organized labor for support and resources about workers' rights.

3. Demand Human Rights Impact Assessments

- A. Worker demands for greater transparency and accountability should be founded in a call for Human Rights Impact Assessments.
- B. Workers should demand the HRIA is done by an independent actor, and that their company commit to making the results publicly available.

Civil Society & Organized Labor:

1. Support Workers

- A. Respecting workers must be an essential demand of all campaigns for Big Tech Accountability.
- B. Provide legal resources and technical assistance to workers experiencing unjust professional reprisal for speaking out against Palestinian digital rights violations.

2. Demand Human Rights Impact Assessments

- A. Demands for greater transparency and accountability should be founded in a call for Human Rights Impact Assessments.
- B. These assessments must be done by an independent actor, and the companies must commit to making the results publicly available.

State Actors:

1. Strengthen Regulations

- A. The European Commission should ensure that online platform content moderation obligations, as set by the DSA, are evaluated in a non-discriminatory manner and systematically taking into consideration all the specifics of the context, in full compliance with the DSA requirements and spirit⁶⁸.
- B. The European Commission should fix loopholes in its regulatory frameworks, such as the AI Act, which does not require any obligations for technologies sold outside of Europe,⁶⁹ and to generally advocate for the enforcement of regulations and alternative measures to compel online platforms, big tech, and telecommunications companies to cease discriminatory practices against Palestinians.
- C. The United States and other state actors should pass regulations to ensure greater oversight of Big Tech with the goal of protecting digital rights for all.

2. Protect Workers

- A. As worker-led initiatives in support of the Palestinian people have been met with fierce repression, state actors should make public statements in support of workers' rights and corporate obligations.
- B. States should ensure proper mechanisms are in place for workers to access when that have been unjustly targeted and punished.

3. Respect Human Rights & International Humanitarian Law

- A. Aligned with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, state actors should encourage all companies in their jurisdiction providing technology, telecommunication, or social media services in Israel and Palestine to immediately conduct a Human Rights Impacts Assessment.
- B. Make a public statement that all companies within their jurisdiction must do everything in their power to not contribute to further negative human rights impacts, as aligned with the International Court of Justice's provisional ruling.

68. Domínguez de Olazábal, I., Palestinian Digital Rights and the Extraterritorial Impact of the European Union's Digital Services Act, 7amleh, April 2024, Available at: <https://7amleh.org/2024/04/08/palestinian-digital-rights-and-the-extraterritorial-impact-of-the-european-union-s-digital-services-act>

69. Abrougui, A., The European Union's AI Act and its Implications for Palestinian Digital Rights, 7amleh, July 2024, Available at: <https://7amleh.org/2024/07/23/paper-on-the-eu-s-ai-act-and-its-implications-en>

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