

Exposing Big Tech's Complicity in Genocide

Joining host Chris Hedges on this episode of The Chris Hedges Report are three courageous individuals who chose to put their careers on the line to fight against Big Tech's role in Israel's genocide.

By Chris Hedges

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The vast censorship and suppression campaign launched by American tech companies since October 7, 2023 has been both systemic and deliberate. Instagram, Facebook, X as well as other tech platforms and companies like Google, Microsoft and Apple have actively worked to stifle information regarding the genocide in Gaza. Dissent against policies or individuals who enable these decisions is often met with swift reprimand in the form of job loss.

Joining host Chris Hedges on this episode of The Chris Hedges Report are three courageous individuals who chose to put their careers on the line to fight against Big Tech suppression of voices fighting for Palestinian lives.

Saima Akhter, a former data analyst at Meta; Hossam Nasr, a former software engineer at Microsoft; and Tariq Ra'ouf, a former tech expert at Apple, speak about the internal struggles they dealt with in light of the genocide, which ultimately led to each of their dismissals.

Tariq recalls how Muslim Slack channels at Apple were often subjected to mass flaggings for innocuous things such as posting Quran verses yet Jewish Slack channels, "were advocating for the genocide... calling all Palestinians terrorists. They were saying that we need to stop this company supporting pro-Palestinian causes." Those messages, Tariq says, were never removed and nobody was ever fired for them.

Saima details the problematic dangerous organizations and individuals [DOI] policies, which she says are heavily influenced by the Israeli and American governments. "Even though this is a platform that is global—Instagram and Facebook is the way the world communicates, but it is an American company, and the American government heavily influences what it determines to be a terrorist," she tells Hedges.

The most critical and perhaps frightening part, Hossam describes, is the actual complicity many of these tech companies have on the genocide. “The truly scary part of this is that all the major American cloud companies—Google, Amazon and Microsoft—are deeply critical to that infrastructure, providing cloud services, storage services, artificial intelligence services without which the Israeli military would not have been able to be as effective,” Hossam says. Israel simply does not have the in-house power to be able to collect and process the data that is being used to target Palestinians, according to Hossam, and tech companies, at the objection of hundreds of employees, fill that need.

Transcript

Chris Hedges

The world's largest digital platforms censor information by removing posts, stories and comments, disabling accounts, restricting users' ability to interact, shadow banning, where the visibility and reach of a person's material is dramatically reduced, deplatforming, demonetizing and other techniques. This has been true for some time. But with the advent of the genocide in Gaza, and the strenuous effort to control information by Israel and its allies, this interference has become more pronounced and more intrusive. Outspoken critics within corporations such as Microsoft, Apple, Google or Meta who decry this censorship and the collaboration between these digital platforms and Israel and national security agencies have often been fired. Two Microsoft employees, Abdo Mohamed, a researcher and data scientist, and Hossam Nasr, a software engineer, for example, were fired in October after organizing a vigil for Palestinians in Gaza outside Microsoft headquarters in Redmond, Washington. The two were members of No Azure for Apartheid, a group of Microsoft workers protesting Microsoft's sale of its cloud computing technology to Israel. The same fate has befallen employees at Google who have criticized the corporation's \$1.2 billion contract to provide the Israeli government and military with cloud and machine learning services, codenamed Project Nimbus. At the same time, Meta, which owns Facebook, Instagram, Threads and WhatsApp, has reportedly deleted hundreds if not thousands of posts that condemn the genocide from employee resources groups, as well as removed content and suspended or permanently banned accounts on Facebook and out against the genocidelInstagram. In 2012, Apple opened its second largest Research & Development center in Herzliya in Israel. It has invested millions, if not billions, in the Israel economy. Joining me to discuss the suppression of information, the silencing of those who speak out against the genocide and the financial ties between these digital platforms and Israel and national security organizations such as Homeland Security is Saima Akhter, who was fired from Meta, Hossam Nasr, who was fired from Microsoft, and Tariq Ra'ouf, a former tech expert at Apple who lost his job after speaking out in public forums for Palestinian rights.

So Saima, let's begin with you. I want you to lay out a kind of picture of the power of these platforms to control the narrative and the techniques they use to silence dissenting voices and propel the dominant narrative.

Saima Akhter

Yeah, Chris. So at the highest level, there is a lot of power put into the hands of a few people. Just like we see in government, we see the same things at these big corporations and at the heads of these big tech companies—so at Meta, for example, you have people in leadership that have ties directly with the Israeli government. You have Jordana Cutler, who used to work in [Benjamin] Netanyahu's office, who is the head of the Jewish, advising on the Jewish Diaspora at Meta, is involved in a lot of policy work. You have Guy Rosen, who used to work in Unit 8200 in the IDF. And these are people that are heavily influencing the policies and the content moderation practices at Meta. The way that Meta is taking down a lot of the content and permanently banning accounts is through policies. You have policies, for example, like using Zionist as a proxy for Jewishness, and that's responsible for a lot of content take down. You also have policy like the DOI policy, which is the dangerous organizations and individuals [policy], which Meta determines what is a dangerous organization based on input by those leaders, as well as heavily influenced by the American government. Even though this is a platform that is global—Instagram and Facebook is the way the world communicates, but it is an American company, and the American government heavily influences what it determines to be a terrorist. So of course, you have Hamas on that list, and anything that's related to it, even things like if you have a red triangle on your account, they will flag that, and it could be grounds to permanently delete your account. Besides these policy issues, I believe there is just inherent biases within people that are coding content moderation policies, content moderation code and Meta is not giving it enough importance to investigate the issues that the public is bringing in. Because it's ethics, and these issues of Palestine suppression is not at the top of their list to prioritize. And ultimately, I think this is the way the world communicates, and this company has way too much unchecked power to determine what content should and should not be shared with the wider world.

Chris Hedges

Tariq, you are of Palestinian descent. Can you spell out for us what is the narrative that these digital platforms promote, and what is the narrative that these digital platforms suppress?

Tariq Ra'ouf

Yeah. I mean, on the suppression side, it's crystal clear—anything that supports Palestine, anything that advocates for, ironically, peace, ceasefire deals, anything that says "ceasefire now," those are things that get suppressed. While things that get supported, things that get uplifted are messages from the Zionist

communities, saying, I stand with Israel, advocating that all Palestinians are terrorists. You see this kind of narrative across all of these companies, because across all these companies, almost all of the leadership are Zionists. And it is no coincidence that we all are facing the same experiences, whether you're at Apple or Meta or Microsoft or Google, any support for Palestine because of the narrative that Americans and the world have been fed about Palestinians being terrorists, about Arabs being terrorists, right, this colonialist view that anyone from the Middle East is bad, it really comes from corporate and capitalism's insistence that they control trade, they control resources, all of that comes down to these digital platforms. And you can't start having people think that Palestinians are okay, that Middle Easterners are human beings, because then that destabilized the entire narrative that's been built for hundreds of years, that this is a bad place that needs our control, that we need to hold the peace in. I don't know if that really answers your question, but basically, because of the narrative that we've all been fed, that the Middle East is this bad place, those are...

Chris Hedges

Can you give me some concrete examples of stuff that's been suppressed—statements, information, stories that's been suppressed, and then concrete examples of stuff that's been disseminated. Because the Israeli government has perpetuated a series of false narratives—beheaded babies, systematic rape, human shields in Gaza, none of this is verifiable. Most of it is untrue. Can you give us just some concrete examples that illustrate this point?

Tariq Ra'ouf

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, so in early or mid to late October, right after October 7 last year, there is a Muslim Slack channel employee research group that Apple has—they have Slack channels for like Pride at Apple, Black at Apple, etc, etc. And in that group chat, you would see that people were sending messages condemning the genocide, messages advocating for peace, and specifically, it was the Muslim Slack channel—so someone would send out a Arabic Quran verse, those messages would get immediately reported, mass flagged, mass reported deleted from the platform. The woman who posted the Arabic Quran verse was subsequently fired. You look on the flip side of that, you look into the Jewish Apple Slack channel, which there was a heavy Zionist presence in. They were advocating for the genocide they're calling all Palestinians terrorists. They were saying that we need to stop this company supporting pro-Palestinian causes. They want to get Palestinian causes off of Benevity, which is their donation matching platform. And none of those messages reported, flagged, removed, not one. None of those employees, that we know of, were terminated or reprimanded for their inherent racism. So that is a very clear example of how these companies really support one side and allow one side to be able to speak

freely and talk for their people. While completely censoring and punishing Palestinians and any pro-Palestinian person.

Chris Hedges

And I believe you're talking about—so the company will match donations to nonprofits, but Zionist groups, I think, Friends of the IDF, the Israeli Defense Forces, one where they will match those donations, but if you want to donate to groups that help Palestinians, they won't match. Is that correct?

Tariq Ra'ouf

They match some Palestinian organizations on Benevity. They like optically, it looks very bad if they don't match them, but the problem is the inclusion of organizations that outright fund and arm illegal settlements and that contribute to committing war crimes. And this is, funny enough, this is also a shared experience across all of our companies, right? Most of our companies, if not all of our companies, Apple, Meta, Google, Microsoft, they use Benevity. And so in Benevity's own terms, even in Apple's own terms, when you look at the Apple internal like terms and use of Benevity, they say that we don't allow far-right, or we don't allow religious organizations on this platform. Well half of the organizations that are committing these war crimes claim to be religious organizations because they want to restore the land of Samaria, which is the West Bank. And so the inclusion of these organizations that are literally committing war crimes and it's not necessarily just about the 100% donation matching. It's the fact that they're even on there to begin with.

Chris Hedges

Maybe one of you, if you can't do it, you can pass it to someone else, Hossam. But let's talk about, just before we go on, algorithms. Because isn't most of this suppression done through algorithms? Or am I incorrect?

Hossam Nasr

Yeah, I think in terms of content moderation. I'm not really the expert here, but it is true that a lot of the content suppression does happen through algorithms. And it also is influenced a lot by individual decisions made by these high level executives who have very close ties to the military industrial complex, to the American intelligence industry, to the Israeli intelligence industry. So it's the self-fulfilling cycle of these personal biases, these personal relationships interfere and kind of inform these algorithms, which then continue the cycle of suppression. But on the point of algorithms, I think I want to point out also a very, very dangerous trend that is happening, as well, of algorithms being used and machine learning and artificial intelligence being used, not only to suppress content, but to effectively become weapons in their

own right and to target and kill the Palestinian people in Gaza, to be used to commit the genocide in Gaza. The Israeli tech industry and the Israeli military, in particular, has become a pioneer in developing killing machines that use algorithms, that use artificial intelligence to accelerate and empower their war machine so that we are, in fact, living in the world of the world's first AI-assisted genocide. They have developed systems such as the "Gospel," "Lavender," "Where's Daddy," these systems basically empower the Israeli army to classify the Palestinians as terrorists, to target them when they're at their most vulnerable, in their homes with their families, to track them wherever they are across the entire Gaza Strip. There are algorithms that track Palestinians in the West Bank, that enforce the apartheid system that allows only Palestinians to use certain roads, permits that they have to apply for to even move freely between towns, to go in and out of the West Bank. All of that is really empowered by technology. And the truly scary part of this is that all the major American cloud companies—Google, Amazon and Microsoft—are deeply critical to that infrastructure, providing cloud services, storage services, artificial intelligence services without which the Israeli military would not have been able to be as effective, because the Israeli military itself just doesn't have the in-house power to store all this treasure trove of data that they collect on Palestinians, to have the processing power needed to have these really advanced AI systems that they use to target the Palestinians. So there's this really again, scary dystopian video of an Israeli colonel talking about how they have basically been able to use what they call civilian cloud such as Google Cloud and Google, Amazon and Microsoft to effectively construct a weapons platform, to effectively treat cloud as a weapon in its own right, and they kind of flaunt and brag about how critical these companies have been, and this is a big part of the reason why they have been suppressing this content, both internally and externally, because it's in their business interest that Israel is not seen as an apartheid state committing a genocide. It affects their bottom line, because they, personally, have become, the tech industry as a whole, has become the military industrial complex of this century.

Chris Hedges

Yes, you raise a very important point the magazine 972 in Israel, which has done good work on this, but they talk about how those AI systems actually speed up the ability because it's the AI that's picking the targets. So in fact, they're carrying out targeted assassinations and bombings on a much faster rate, but it's all machine driven. I want to talk, Saima, a little bit about, before we get into your personal experiences, the fusion in the Twitter Files that Matt Taibbi wrote about. He talks about the close relationship that these companies have with the FBI, with Homeland Security and how they control content by hiring employees directly from these domestic intelligence agencies. I mean the Twitter files, I think, exposed the complete fusion between the national security state and these companies. Maybe, Saima, you can talk a little bit about that.

Saima Akhter

Yeah. So, as I had mentioned one of the biggest policies, being the DOI policy, the dangerous organizations and individuals, and that is directly impacted by American government informed intelligence. And the second piece is about how these tech companies, not just Meta, but all these tech companies, there's a pipeline from this Unit 8200 that I mentioned, which is the CIA of the Israeli government, how these tech professionals are taking on leadership roles at these tech companies, and it is that continuation of ties between these private tech companies and the Israeli government that is problematic in terms of American intelligence. I'm not sure, I don't know if I can speak to individuals that are being sourced that way, but I do know that there is collaboration with these tech companies and the US government. For example, Meta recently revealed that their AI technology, Llama, which is open source, they recently released that they are going to allow the US government to use that technology, that they are going to collaborate with the US government to really utilize this technology to benefit Americans. And it is forbidden to use this AI technology by any other government in the world, which again, now when we talk about digital colonialism and this power over the Global South, that is what the problem is. The biggest technology companies of our time are all American based, and they are seeking to work with the American government to continue keeping the US as a superpower at the hands of all of these other companies that it needs to exploit and keep suppressed.

Chris Hedges

Let's begin with you, Tariq, and then we'll get everyone else. Let's talk about your own attempts to challenge this perversion of information and what happened to you, and then all of you have similar experiences. I think you represent three of what the five largest tech companies in the United States, probably in the world. But let's begin with you, Tariq.

Tariq Ra'ouf

Yeah, I mean, so I think one thing to start off with and make it extremely clear is that this suppression did not start after October 7. I personally faced suppression for supporting Palestine in January of 2023 when I was wearing a Palestine flag pin on my lapel. Been wearing it like for months at that point, and a Zionist couple complained about it. And my managers, and this goes to show kind of like discrepancy between like people, like the people we work with every day in the corporations. My managers were super supportive, even though the Zionist couple wanted to force me to take it off in front of my manager, my manager was like, No, we're not going to do that. He ran the line up to HR. HR had a call with legal. HR and legal came back to me and said, I am—wearing the pin could be considered, not that it is, but it could be considered by customers to be political solicitation and had to be removed. That's when I first realized,

like, oh, what's going on? And then October 7 happened. Two days later, Tim Cook emails the entire company with the headline, stated Israel, advocating for sympathy for the loss of innocent civilian life and like niceties towards team members that may have lost families or have people in the area. Over a year now of this genocide, and Apple has not acknowledged any Palestinian suffering in the same way. And what that has prompted me to do is in March of this past year, I helped co-found an organization now called Apples Against Apartheid. It's an organization dedicated to advocating that Apple stands up for Palestinians the same way that they were able to stand up for Israelis and shedding a light into Apple's complicity in Israel. And we had over 400 current and former Apple employees sign an open letter demanding that they at least say something. And it has not really done much. You know, executives see our movement. I was explicitly told when I sent an email on October 10 responding to Tim Cook's October 9 email, I was explicitly told by my own manager that Tim Cook read my email. Tim Cook, nor any of the executive teams, did not feel like I was worthy of the respect to respond to, completely ignored our requests. When this community Slack channel was shut down after the Zionists were coming in and harassing and mass messaging people, we had three community chats with executive leaderships over the course of six months. No response. They did not bring the channels back. And what it has now evolved to is this past weekend, Black Friday weekend, we—Apples Against Apartheid—organized the second mass coordinated protests against Apple stores worldwide. We had protesters show up in over 12 cities in 10 countries to advocate that they end their silence, not just on Palestine, but also on Congo, because this is a global movement, all of our struggles are united. And we shut down the store on Black Friday weekend. We shut down the flagship in Seattle. We had to die-in, we chained ourselves to the table. And I think we will continue to move forward, and as much as we have to, because they, like many other companies, see these movements. They recognize what's happening. They've had conversations with many of us. They acknowledge that what we are asking them to do, which is be equitable, stand up for social justice, which is what you're marketing for, and they continue not to. And so for Apple, we will continue to bring the fight to their doorstep, until they actually stand up to their so called claims of social justice and racial...

Chris Hedges

Explain what's happening in the Congo and why—I mean, I think you were very prescient to raise that—you should explain why, and then also explain your own firing.

Tariq Ra'ouf

Absolutely. Yeah. So the reason that we—Apples Against Apartheid—worked with Friends of the Congo to bring awareness to Apple's silence in also the Congolese genocide, is because Congo is being exploited by these tech companies for all of their tech. Whether it's Meta for their glasses, they need tech,

they need minerals to make those glasses. Whether it's Microsoft for building the chips for their servers, right? They all use minerals that are mined directly from Congo. And there are artisanal scale mines where cobalt and other minerals are found and they're mined by civilians, children, women trying to feed their families because they get a paycheck for being able to bring these minerals and sell these minerals off. But what's happening is the mines are dangerous. They collapse in on themselves, and these corporations use third parties to extract these minerals, that's then sold to them, and they don't want any business in the actual mining, the problems on the mine. So they use third party sources to come in and check and go "are your minerals conflict free?" Which they aren't. There are armed groups—so basically, the way that it works is these minerals are mined in Congo. Many of the minerals are then sold to Rwanda by these armed groups. And Rwanda sells it and says, Oh, hey, look, you. We got those minerals ourselves. We don't have any any child labor or any human rights violations happening in our mines, and that's how they're able to get away with that. So basically, we're trying to bring attention to the fact that you were literally using minerals that come from Congo you should be paying the Congolese people adequately, and you should be making sure that the Congolese people are not suffering to get these my minerals that are required for your products.

Chris Hedges

And your own firing, tell me about that.

Tariq Ra'ouf

When it comes to my firing, I was fired two weeks, three weeks after I published an op-ed on Mondoweiss, going in depth into how racist Apple was being. It goes into the donation matching. It goes into the Slack messages, the meetings with executives and the racism that many Palestinian employees were facing all around the world. And two weeks later, I was trying to film a video of myself doing my job for some B-roll, because I was asked for it for an interview. I said, sure, I can do that. And apparently that is the technicality that they got on because I was using my personal device on the phone, and they're concerned about customer safety. I had an HR investigation the next day, and was fired three days later on that Monday, which is wild, because I've been a part of HR investigations, and these things normally take weeks, and they were able to action upon my mishap immediately. Never mind the fact that I worked for this company for over 10 years, was a solid employee, never had any sort of issue with the company whatsoever. They didn't care about that. They were waiting for me to mess up so that they can get me on that technicality, and not for the fact that I'm advocating for Palestine

Chris Hedges

Saima, let's talk about you, but let's begin with, because I read an article you wrote about when you first began working for Meta, what you thought Meta was, why you were excited to work for Meta and then follow that trajectory to your own dismissal.

Saima Akhter

Yeah, so I've been working in tech for a while, but my personal passion has been community building, and I've worked with various nonprofit organizations. And one of the organizations that I worked with was the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom, back when I lived in San Diego, where it brings together Muslim women and Jewish women together in friendship. And the idea is first establish these personal relationships, get to know someone as a human being, before engaging in these more controversial topics. So this chapter that we started in San Diego, I started it with my friend Eliza. It was really made possible by Facebook. You know, we just created this Facebook group, it allowed us to have discussions. It was easy to put up events. It was easy to see who's joining. By the end of it, we had almost 400 members. And I saw the power of Facebook to build community, and I thought, Wow, what a company that aligns with my personal mission statement of community building. Meta's mission statement is literally to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together. So I do think that I did come into this company enamored by the mission statement, which I don't think a lot of people are these days. I think they are coming in for the paycheck, and that's why I think I was so hurt when, when October 7 happened—and it started showing even before October 7. I mean, I think this company has changed a lot, even in just the past three years, in terms of focusing on profits over people, in terms of defunding all the social impact projects that I had actually initially joined for—I wanted to join the social impact team. They started defunding all those. They started defunding DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion]. They started rolling out all these new products and just focusing on numbers, numbers, numbers like, just get as much as many people to view content as possible, not really caring about what are we even building here? What are those real connections that made Facebook so popular in the beginning? So, yeah, I think it was a very harsh awakening for me in terms of what I came to do, versus this realization, oh, my God, this company is causing far more harm in the world than it is good at this point.

Chris Hedges

And talk about what happened to you in the end.

Saima Akhter

So my personal story as it relates to Palestine advocacy, so at the start of all of this, during October, a lot of us employees started noticing all of these issues of Palestinian content suppression on our platforms. I mean, and then at that point, you had Human Rights Watch releasing a 51 page report. You had Senator

Elizabeth Warren and Sanders have written multiple letters. And most importantly, we had our own circles, our own friends reporting on Instagram, like, what is happening? My content is being deleted. So we tried to raise these issues internally. We tried to speak to product teams, we tried to talk to leaders, and then we noticed our own posts, internally, so in our employee resource groups were getting deleted. Now these were simple messages like, Hey, I heard that my colleague here lost family in Palestine. I want to offer my condolences. The post would get deleted. Somebody said...

Chris Hedges

How quickly?

Saima Akhter

Very quickly, like same day. It started off slowly, but then it would just get into minutes, it would be gone. People saying, I'm concerned about the human rights crisis that's occurring in Gaza, deleted. I would take very contrasting posts, like I would see posts that were talking about the Holocaust Remembrance Day, for example, and I would just take the exact same verbiage and replace it with the Nakba, and my posts would get deleted. On the UN's National Solidarity Day with Palestine, we all got together, and we're like, let's write some nice messages to our Palestinian colleagues to offer them some support during this time. And we wrote about simple things, like I wrote about a hip-hop group that I came across in Gaza that was teaching children hip-hop to keep up spirits, or talking about Palestinian food, Palestinian clothing. All of these posts were taken down almost immediately. So I decided at that point to help write a letter, because I felt that this was happening kind of in a vacuum. Our posts were getting deleted. I was like, I don't know who else is knowing that this is even happening. So help write a letter addressed to our leaders to raise these concerns and appealing to them to please pay attention. And I helped circulate that letter, collected over 450 signatures. When Meta leaders found out about it, they told me to take it down immediately, and when I did not comply within a very short time period, they disabled my system access so they did not allow me back into any internal Meta systems for three months, put me under investigation for two of those months, without any insight into what they were even investigating, and deleted the letter, including going into employees trash cans and deleting the letter and never addressed the contents of that letter, which I will point out is a very direct violation of worker rights to organize, according to the NLRB. So after three months, I did start posting on social media about my experiences. I wonder if that scared them a little bit, but they contacted me after two months, they're like, Okay, the investigation is over, you can come back. Without again providing me any information on what were you even investigating for that long. So I came back, continued my worker organizing. At this point, I do feel like I just had a target on my back, and what I was ultimately fired for was I made a personal copy of a 47 page report that employees had voluntarily put together to summarize the issues of Palestinian suppression on our platforms. And this is,

again, not a work report. This is just us trying to summarize what we'd already been discussing for the past few months. And they said it was data exfiltration. They said I was putting employees at risk, because there are some employees names on there. Never mind that we're putting actual Palestinian lives at risk by suppressing this information. And they conduct an investigation, they fired me. After they fired me, they threatened to sue me if I didn't delete any information I had collected at Meta, and since then, I've just been advocating externally about the suppression of Palestinian content and Meta support of the apartheid regime through its—this isn't so much talked about, but Meta is also providing data to the IDF. In the last six month report, it was shown that they responded to 1,067 data requests by the IDF for which they complied with most of the requests, and the number of data that they provided to Palestinians zero. So, I still feel a very strong connection to Meta and like the responsibility I have to do what I can to hold it accountable and raise awareness that we need more public pressure and more accountability for how Meta is violating digital rights.

Chris Hedges

Data requests like, for instance, give me an example of what the IDF would be asking about.

Saima Akhter

So that's the issue, they don't disclose what the actual information is. I had posted internally, in one of the product work groups, raising this issue that the public and even employees deserve to know have transparency on what is the data that is being shared. And they deleted my post. They just want to suppress it. They want to claim that they're transparent because it is publicly available on their website, which they call Meta's transparency portal. They disclose the number of requests. They don't tell us what actually was in those requests, which is the crux of the problem. There's no transparency. There's no transparency with Meta.

Chris Hedges

Well, one would assume that this is personal information about Palestinians. Would that be a correct assumption?

Saima Akhter

If they don't tell us what's in it, we're going to assume that. And a lot of these concerns from employees was raised after the article came out from 972 about WhatsApp metadata being used in Lavender to kill Palestinians. And we asked, hey, is Meta providing WhatsApp metadata to the IDF? And again, if you're not transparent about what it is, the public is just going to be left assuming the worst.

Chris Hedges

Hossam, you were the latest to lose your job, October. Maybe you can talk about your own experience.

Hossam Nasr

Sure. I mean, I want to also echo what Tariq was saying earlier, that this does not really start on October 7 of last year. My own experience with retaliation, repression, intimidation at Microsoft started like mere months after I joined the company, before even turning my one year anniversary. It was in 2022 when, shortly after Russia invaded Ukraine, and then Microsoft, like many other American companies, just stopped selling any technology in Russia whatsoever. And I posted a question on an internal forum that is specifically designed to ask questions to leadership during a regularly scheduled Q and A, and I praise Microsoft for taking a principal stand for international law, for human rights and for applying its own policies that it commits to to uphold human rights around the globe. I simply asked, when do we decide to uphold these policies? Is it only when it's politically convenient? Is it only when the victims are white? And I mentioned multiple examples when we have not applied the same standard. One of the examples, I mentioned the Uyghur Muslims in China. I mentioned the bombings of Iraq and Syria and Yemen. But then one of the examples I mentioned is when in the previous year, in 2021, when Israel was murdering innocent Palestinian children and women, there wasn't even a statement of solidarity, let alone like kind of taking a more principled stance. And simply asking that question was enough to prompt an internal investigation by HR, where the first accusation that was made against me is remarkably that I was singling out Israel, which is funny, because I was doing the exact opposite, and they were the ones who were singling out Israel. And I was, I spent two hours in this HR call being grilled about my political views. The HR person who was interviewing me later revealed that she was Israeli herself and that her own biases were informing why she was talking to me in the first place. She asked me questions such as, are you aware that Arabs are actually thriving in Israel? When I pointed out that multiple human rights organizations had labeled Israel as an apartheid regime, and then after two hours of that intimidation, I basically made it clear to her that I'm not going to back down, I'm not going to apologize for what I said. I did nothing wrong. And basically I told her, if this is a fireable offense, you can go ahead and fire me. And then after that incident, I mean, a month after she concluded her investigation and told me that there has been no violation counts, but it was clearly an attempt at silencing and intimidation, and it shows to me the bar of acceptable discourse and internal dissent like that simply asking a question where Palestine is mentioned is not acceptable. That was my first interaction with that system that systematically dehumanizes Palestinians. Then you fast forward to October 7 of 2023 where the very first thing that first Monday, first business day, we all get an email that says, We stand with Israel, right? A couple of days later, like on October 9 or October 10, Kathleen Hogan, who is the head of HR, she releases this statement

to the public kind of internal forum, and every single employee can see it again, saying, We stand with Israel, offering resources and support to Israeli employees, mourning the tragic loss of civilian lives, and the horrible terrorist attack and whatever, at that point, already, hundreds of children had been killed in Gaza. Not a mention of Palestinians at all. Not a mention of Gaza, of Palestine, of the brewing genocide at the time. There was one sentence where she even mentioned Palestinian employees. And she said we have Palestinian employees who are concerned for the safety of their loved ones and condemn these terrible acts of terrorism. That was the one sentence where Palestinians were even mentioned. And then myself and many, many others started calling out the double standard and the hypocrisy and simply saying, why do the Palestinian lives not have value in this company? And simply, like Tariq was saying, simply asking them for equal recognition, simply asking them to even, like in the Benevity portal, in the donation portal, they had a big banner with the Israeli flag that says, We stand with Israel and encouraging employees to go and donate to Israeli organizations. And then why were not even donations for the Palestinians promoted in the same way. And obviously, all these conversations, all these questions, went nowhere. They tried to suppress us over the course of months after that, they suppressed, deleted, harassed, intimidated, Arab-Muslim, Palestinian and pro-Palestinian employees who tried to call out this issue. In some cases, they selectively applied their policies in really obvious ways. In other ways, they completely invented new policies altogether when the existing policies didn't fit their narrative. As a simple example, after some Palestinian group tried to invite a speaker to speak about Palestine, they shut down the event. They claimed it was not compliant. They put a 90 day pause on any employee group hosting any event until they come up with new guidelines for these communities. And basically the new guidelines said that no employee group is allowed to invite any external speaker whatsoever, and even more ridiculously, they even prohibited any sort of events that they deemed educational. And that educational clause was then used to suppress any mention of Palestine on the basis that this is educational, including a friend of mine, who's a Palestinian co-worker who was blocked and censored for months from being able to talk about her own family history in a regularly scheduled like employee spotlight series, because she was talking about the Nakba, because her family is originally from Palestine and was displaced outside of Palestine, and because now you're being educational, why are you talking about history, right? So that was as an umbrella term to block any sort of mention of the word Palestine. Myself and a group of other employees started "No Azure For Apartheid," which is an employee-led group aiming to end our relationship with Israeli military. We started, kind of doing more research into Microsoft relationship with Israel. We discovered things that were shocking even to me, honestly, about how Microsoft is deeply embedded in the Israeli war machine. How Microsoft was before Project Nimbus and in many ways, continues to be one of the main cloud providers to the Israeli government, which is essential in oiling its war machine that is committing these massacres against my people. And then I at some point, I kept

talking about these issues internally, I had a three months investigation at some point launched by HR against me, simply for putting a comment on an internal forum that said that, with or without I'm quoting here, with or without your sympathy, Palestinians will attain the dignity, the freedom, the liberation and the respect that they deserve everywhere, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. That was enough to launch a three month investigation, which resulted in—before I was even fired—resulted in extreme sanctions, every single lever they could pull short of termination, including financial sanctions, including having zero bonus that year, zero stock awards, zero salary increase. Including not being able to be promoted for a whole year. Meanwhile, dozens of these hateful, anti-Arab, anti-Muslim comments that we reported, including someone calling me a member of Hamas, someone calling me a terrorist, someone calling me [inaudible] who simply hates Jews, and again, remarkably, someone even saying, from the river to the sea, Israel will forever be. Not a single person was ever found to be in violation of the same policy that I was found to be in violation of. And then the cherry on top, the culmination of this arc was when our group, No Azure for Apartheid, decided to dare to humanize the Palestinian people and to bring the issue to campus. We hosted a vigil to honor the, at this point, hundreds of thousands of victims of a Microsoft powered Israeli genocide. We held this space on campus, we honored the lives that were lost, and simply because we dared to humanize Palestinians, and simply because we dare to do so on Microsoft campus, and because we dare to call out Microsoft's deep relationship with Israeli military and its own complicity in the genocide. That image to Microsoft was too offensive of Microsoft workers coming together and mourning Palestinians, humanizing Palestinians, it was more offensive than Microsoft employees literally serving as IDF reservists and committing these war crimes in Palestine or the images of Palestinian children being blown to pieces through technology that Microsoft is empowering. And within the same day, within that night, I got a phone call from HR, basically informing me that my employment is terminated, effective immediately. No HR investigation, no process, just immediately you're fired. You're not allowed back on Microsoft campus, and that was that.

Tariq Ra'ouf

And news of your firing went public before you even knew about it.

Hossam Nasr

That's right. There was this online group that's known for doxxing and and harassing Palestinians who had actually published a profile about me a couple months prior, calling on Microsoft to fire me, calling on [Microsoft CEO] Satya [Nadella] to end my employment, and that group actually posted that I was fired an hour and a half before I even got that phone call, proving that there is some level of collusion, or at the very least leaking, at very high levels of decision making at Microsoft, because they must have known I was fired before I was even informed an hour and a half before. And funny enough, Microsoft, to this day,

has refused to comment or provide an explanation for how the information was leaked an hour and a half before. But at the end of the day, I think it's proven to us, it's only grown our campaign a lot stronger. Microsoft thought that by intimidating me or Abdul, the other organizer who was fired, and retaliated against us, that they would suppress the movement. They would kill this discourse. Because the reality is that it's laid bare and brought more attention to the double standard. And the reality of Microsoft's relationship with the genocide, and our company has actually grown a lot since a month ago, when I was fired. And I think that just proves to Microsoft that if you really want this to go away, the only solution is to end your complicity with the genocide and stop murdering Palestinians, because we're not going away, even if you fire us, even if you silence us. The truth is, Microsoft employees and any honest employees of conscience doesn't want their labor being used to commit genocide against other people.

Chris Hedges

Great. Well, I just want to salute all three of you for standing up at great personal cost for what is right and what is just. It's not easy to get fired, I know. I got pushed out of the New York Times. Let's not pretend that this isn't a difficult experience. But all three of you are voices of conscience, and I can't praise you enough. I want to thank Diego [Ramos], Thomas [Hedges] Max [Jones] and Sofia [Menemenlis], who produced the show. You can find me at ChrisHedges.Substack.com.