

'Google has no scruples.' Employees protest Google Cloud conference over Israel military contract

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A protest erupted Tuesday at a Google Cloud's conference in San Francisco, as employees critical of the company's contract with Israel's military sought to ratchet up pressure at the company's annual showcase of its latest products and technology.

Protesters lined up as attendees of the annual Google Cloud Next conference flowed out of the Moscone Center in downtown San Francisco for a scheduled 5 p.m. happy hour, having wrapped up speaker sessions and workshops for the day.

Some 30 protesters, including former Google employees and local community activists, chained themselves together on Howard Street, which runs through the convention center, between two large glass buildings, and overhead on a nearby pedestrian footbridge. Protesters unfurled a large banner reading "Google Project Nimbus fuels Israeli apartheid."

More than a dozen current Google workers positioned themselves nearby, passing out fliers explaining their objections to Project Nimbus, a \$1.2-billion contract that Google and Amazon Web Services entered into with the Israeli government and military.

A group of workers has opposed Project Nimbus since it launched in 2021, concerned that Google's technology could help the Israeli Defense Forces surveil and harm Palestinians.

In April, Google parent Alphabet reported that its 15-year-old cloud business had reached profitability in the first quarter, followed by a second quarter of profit from April through June.

Workers said Project Nimbus is the kind of lucrative contract that neglects ethical guardrails that outspoken members of Google's workforce have demanded in recent years.

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

The Tuesday protest represents continuing tension between Google's workforce and its senior management over how the company's technology is used.

In recent years Google workers have objected to military contracts, challenging Google's work with U.S. Customs and Border Protection and its role in a defense program building artificial intelligence tools used to refine drone strikes. Workers have alleged that the company has cracked down on information-sharing, siloed controversial projects and enforced a workplace culture that increasingly punishes them for speaking out.

Google did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the Tuesday protest and workers' concerns over Project Nimbus.

The Israeli Finance Ministry announced its contract with Google and Amazon in April 2021 as a "[project](#) is intended to provide the government, the defense establishment and others with an all-encompassing cloud solution."

Google has largely refused to release details of the contract, the specific capabilities Israel will receive, or how they will be used. In July 2022, the Intercept reported that training documents for Israeli government personnel indicate Google is providing software that the company claims can recognize people, gauge emotional states from facial expressions and track objects in video footage.

Google Cloud spokesperson Atle Erlingsson told Wired in September 2022 that the company proudly supports Israel's government and said

critics had misrepresented Project Nimbus. "Our work is not directed at highly sensitive or classified military workloads," he told Wired.

Erlingsson, however, acknowledged that the contract will provide Israel's military access to Google technology.

Former Google worker Ariel Koren, who has long been publicly critical of Project Nimbus, said "it adds insult to injury for Palestinian activists and Palestinians generally" that Google Cloud's profitability milestone coincides with the 75th anniversary of the Nakba—which refers to the mass displacement and dispossession of Palestinians following creation of the state of Israel in 1948.

In March 2022, the Times reported allegations by Koren—at the time a product marketing manager at Google for Education—that Google had retaliated against her for criticizing the contract, issuing a directive that she move to São Paulo, Brazil, within 17 business days or lose her job. Google told The Times that it investigated the incident and found no evidence of retaliation.

When Koren resigned from Google in August 2022 she published a memo explaining reasons for her departure, writing that "Google systematically silences Palestinian, Jewish, Arab and Muslim voices concerned about Google's complicity in violations of Palestinian human rights."

Koren said Google's apathy make her and others believe more vigorous protest actions are justified. "This is a concrete disruption that is sending a clear message to Google: we won't allow for business as usual, so long as you continue to profit off of a nefarious contract that expands Israeli apartheid."

Mohammad Khatami, a YouTube software engineer based in New York, participated in a small protest of Project Nimbus at a July Amazon Web

Services conference in Manhattan.

Khatami said major layoffs at Google announced in January pushed him to get more involved in the Alphabet Workers Union, which provides resources to Khatami and other [union members](#) in an anti-military working group—though the union has not taken a formal stance on Project Nimbus.

"Greed and corporate interests were being put ahead of workers and I think the layoffs just illustrated that for me very clearly," Khatami said.

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