

Microsoft

INVESTIGATION

HI-TECH HOLOCAUST: HOW MICROSOFT AIDS THE GAZA GENOCIDE

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Israel's genocide is being powered by Microsoft. From creating a massive digital dragnet, aiding in the production of A.I.-generated kill lists, hiring hundreds of Israeli spies to run its internal affairs, and suppressing figures opposing the slaughter, the Seattle-based tech corporation has played a key role in the violence.

MintPress has detailed the deep collaboration between the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) and Amazon, Google, TikTok, Apple, Palantir, and Oracle, but Microsoft's relationship with the government and armed forces of Israel is potentially the closest, leading then-CEO Steve Ballmer to state that "Microsoft is as much an Israeli company as an American company." MintPress explores the decades-long partnership between Microsoft and Israel, and the employees trying to break that marriage from the inside.

TURNING CODE INTO CARNAGE

"Among U.S. tech firms," the Associated Press wrote, "Microsoft has had an especially close relationship with the Israeli military." That relationship, it notes, massively expanded after the October 7, 2023, attacks.

In the months following October 7, the IDF's usage of Microsoft's Azure cloud service surged more than 200-fold. The amount of data from surveillance cameras, drones, checkpoints, biometric scanners, phone calls, and intercepted Palestinian personal data stored by the IDF on Microsoft servers doubled in the next nine months, reaching 13.6 petabytes by July 2024 – equivalent to 23,000 years of audio, or seven trillion pages of text.

The point of all this was to create an enormous digital dragnet, where Palestinians' every move, word, and keystroke was recorded and monitored in the greatest and most dystopian digital dragnet ever created. In the words of Yossi Sariel, the head of Unit 8200, the IDF's surveillance division, the plan was to "track everyone, all of the time."

Sariel argued that big data was the solution to Israel's problems, envisaging a future where Israel intercepted and stored "a million calls an hour" from Palestine, and used A.I. to search for keywords and identify threats.

There was no way, however, that Israel could do this alone, as it did not possess the expertise or anything like the storage capacity needed for such a project. To this end, Sariel travelled to Seattle in 2021 to meet with Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, to pitch him on the surveillance partnership whereby Microsoft would build Unit 8200 a customized and segregated area within its Azure platform.

The Israeli military uses Microsoft Azure to transcribe, translate, and otherwise process intelligence garnered via mass surveillance, which is then linked to Israel's A.I.-based weapons systems.

The largest and most controversial organization within the Israeli military, Unit 8200 has long been the centerpiece of Israel's hi-tech spying operation. The unit is dedicated to surveillance, cyberwarfare, and online manipulation operations. Last year, it carried out the Lebanese Pager Attack, an act that wounded thousands of civilians. Unit 8200 agents were also behind many of the most infamous international spyware and hacking cases, including the Pegasus software, that was used to surveil tens of thousands of the world's most prominent political leaders, journalists, and human rights campaigners.

Sariel's policy of mass surveillance changed the internal attitude at Unit 8200. "Suddenly the entire public was our enemy," said one officer. The gargantuan trove of information compiled in Microsoft Azure amounted to a vast repository on the entire Palestinian population – a giant database of kompromat that is used to extort and blackmail the region's indigenous people. If a person was secretly gay, or cheating on their spouse, for example, that information was readily available to Unit 8200 agents, who would then use it to turn their targets into informants. One former Unit 8200 member revealed that, as part of their training, they were made to memorize different Arabic slang words for "gay", so that they could identify them in conversations.



A Palestinian man passes through a biometric gate at the Qalandia crossing near Jerusalem. Sebastian Scheiner | AP

The cloud database is also used to provide after-the-fact justification for arrests of innocent peoples. Off-hand, out-of-context comments made years ago can be used to portray anyone as a member of Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, or another armed resistance force.

“These people get entered into the system, and the data on them just keeps growing,” an Israeli intelligence official who served in the West Bank said.

““ When they need to arrest someone and there isn’t a good enough reason to do so, [the Azure surveillance repository] is where they find the excuse. We’re now in a situation where almost no one in the [Occupied] Territories is ‘clean,’ in terms of what intelligence has on them.”

Unit 8200 has also used big data to compile A.I.-generated kill lists featuring tens of thousands of people. One program gave every Gazan, even women and children, a score of between 1 and 100, based on a number of factors. If they live in the same building or are in group chats with known or suspected Hamas members, for instance, their score is increased. Once their score reached a certain threshold, all Gazans were automatically placed on a kill list that was minimally overseen by humans.

According to multiple Unit 8200 agents, Microsoft Azure’s cloud-based storage platform allowed Israel to overcome targeting bottlenecks, using all manner of data to research and identify individuals for assassination, which led to the killing of tens of thousands of people during the first weeks of its post-October 7 onslaught.

Of course, the vast majority of the deaths have been civilians – around 70% were women and children. But Israeli officials can also go back after the fact and scour their digital dragnet to justify any killing, finding connections or any other incriminating evidence. A senior Israeli military officer described the cloud technology as “a weapon in every sense of the word.” Other officials, however, have gone so far as to raise concerns that Israel’s overreliance on Microsoft as a service is a strategic vulnerability that should be corrected.

MICROSOFT SEES NO EVIL, ONLY PROFITS

Throughout all this, Microsoft has protested its innocence – and ignorance – of Israeli crimes. “At no time during this engagement or since that time has Microsoft been aware of the surveillance of civilians or collection of their cell phone conversations using Microsoft’s services, including through the external review it commissioned,” a spokesperson for the company stated, adding, “Any allegations about Microsoft leadership involvement and support of this project ... are false.”

But leaked documents suggest Microsoft engineers understood exactly what sort of data was being stored in Azure, and what their clients hoped to achieve. “Technically, they’re not supposed to be told exactly what it is, but you don’t have to be a genius to figure it out,” one engineer said. “You tell [Microsoft] we don’t have any more space on the servers, that it’s audio files. It’s pretty clear what it is.”

Others felt that the idea that Microsoft did not know that one of the world's most notorious spying organizations might be using big data to spy on people was not credible, especially given how closely the two entities had been working together for years. "Microsoft says that it can't figure out if their customers are committing crimes against humanity or mass surveillance, while at the same time Microsoft employees are working alongside uniformed IDF. Absurd!" Paul Biggar, the founder of Tech For Palestine, told MintPress.

The corporation's claim of innocence seems even more tenuous, given the fact that Microsoft employs hundreds of former Unit 8200 agents, and recruits directly from the organization. A 2022 MintPress investigation found at least 166 former Unit 8200 operatives who went on to work for Microsoft, including many who helped design Azure itself.

One example of this is Michael Bargury, who enjoyed a long and successful career as a Unit 8200 leader and moved directly to Microsoft Azure in 2015, eventually becoming a senior architect for the platform. Another is Azure's current partner software engineering manager, Shlomi Haba. Haba spent six years as a Unit 8200, rising to become an officer and a team leader. Since 2014, he has worked for Microsoft Azure, and is now the company's software engineering manager, overseeing dozens of engineers designing the platform. Many of those engineers are also former Unit 8200 operatives. Hundreds more ex-spies work in key positions at Microsoft. Ayelet Steinitz, for example, was the company's former head of global strategic alliances, and continues to occupy a senior role at the company.

In short, Microsoft is filled with former Unit 8200 operatives whose jobs entail making custom software for current agents to use. According to Microsoft employees familiar with the situation, this intimate relationship between the two entities makes their collaboration "much easier," further undermining Microsoft's denials.

Microsoft also openly works with and recruits from the ranks of the Israeli military. In April 2024, for instance, it collaborated with the Israeli Ministry of Defense to host a group from its Combatants to Hi-Tech program for a TypeScript workshop and tour. And in 2022, again in collaboration with the IDF, it launched a free cybersecurity training program for Israeli military veterans.

This cooperation continues, despite the fact that Unit 8200 has attacked Microsoft before, the organization reportedly producing malware that targeted Microsoft products, such as its Windows operating system, finding loopholes in security to neutralize control panels, delete hard drives, and shut down key systems, such as Iran's energy grid.

CORPORATE ZIONISM: ROOTS IN ISRAEL'S WAR ECONOMY

The Azure/IDF partnership is the result of a decades-long relationship between Microsoft and the State of Israel, one which has helped both entities. Microsoft established its first branch in Israel in 1989, and two years later, opened a research and development center in the city of Herzliya near Tel Aviv. The first of its kind outside the United States, the center has continued to expand, and now directly employs an estimated 2,700 workers.

Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, Microsoft began signing deals with Israeli firms and government agencies, and, by the 2010s, was an integral part of the Israeli security state. In 2017, it inked a lucrative contract with the Israeli Prison Service, providing cloud services to the entity responsible for jailing tens of thousands of Palestinians without trial. Today, it maintains over 600 active subscriptions with the Israeli military.

The company has also moved to acquire at least 21 Israeli tech firms. Among these include cybersecurity group, Hexadite, purchased for \$100 million in 2017, and Oribi, a web analytics business founded by a former Israeli intelligence agent.



Microsoft founder Bill Gates meets with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in Tel Aviv during a 2005 visit highlighting Microsoft's growing role in Israel's tech sector.

Every CEO in Microsoft's history has flown to Israel to meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, including Bill Gates, who, in 2016, stated that hi-tech Israeli security was "improving the world."

In short, Microsoft is a cornerstone of Israel's burgeoning hi-tech sector, which accounts for 20% of the country's GDP and more than half of its total exports. Netanyahu himself has showered praise on the corporation, describing the Microsoft/Israel partnership as "a marriage made in heaven."

Others have been less enthused by this union. In June, Iran deliberately targeted a Microsoft center in Be'ersheva, carrying out a missile strike against it. Iran's Revolutionary Guard justified their actions, citing Microsoft's "close cooperation with the Israeli army and its being part of the system supporting aggression, and not just a civilian entity." "The cyber area that was attacked also includes the residences of people from the espionage and artificial intelligence fields, who operate in direct cooperation with the enemy army and its security apparatus," it concluded.

CRACKING DOWN ON INTERNAL RESISTANCE

A greater threat than Iran to Microsoft, however, is its own employees, hundreds of whom have organized to oppose its role in the genocide. Under the banner of No Azure for Apartheid, workers demand that: Microsoft terminates all Azure contracts with Israel; disclose all ties to the Israeli national security state; publicly call for a ceasefire, and stop persecuting employees who speak out about the genocide.

This fourth demand is particularly salient, as the corporation has shown little to no tolerance for dissent. In October 2024, it fired two workers for organizing a vigil for Palestinian refugees at its corporate headquarters near Seattle.

Months later, it sacked a worker who interrupted CEO Satya Nadella's keynote address at the company's annual developer conference. Joe Lopez, a firmware engineer who worked on Azure, shouted down Nadella, yelling, "Satya, how about you show how Microsoft is killing Palestinians. How about you show how Israeli war crimes are powered by Azure? As a Microsoft worker, I refuse to be complicit in this genocide!" Video of the incident went viral, causing a public relations nightmare for the company.

By this time, Microsoft realized that it had a serious employee revolt on its hands. Just days after the Lopez incident, the firm quietly implemented a policy blocking employee emails containing keywords such as "Palestine," "Gaza," or "genocide," on its internal exchange servers. The policy did little to dampen organizing efforts, and caused another round of embarrassing headlines, once it was leaked to the press.

Amid building pressure, in September, Microsoft announced that it had withdrawn some of its services to the Israeli military, a decision which implies reports of its complicity in the violence were indeed accurate.

“It is pretty clear that what Microsoft says about their policies, their human rights records and more is bullshit. So they are only going to respond to external embarrassment, and the No Azure for Apartheid people have really demonstrated how effective that can be,” Biggar told MintPress.

TARGETING ENEMIES

Company employees are far from the only target of Microsoft’s wrath, however. In May, Karim Khan, chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court, announced that Microsoft had locked him out of his official ICC email account, just as he was formalizing charges against Netanyahu and other top Israeli leaders. For many, the timing was not a coincidence, but rather a message.

The British lawyer joined a vast plethora of Palestinians who have complained that Microsoft has terminated their accounts without warning. A BBC investigation found dozens of Palestinians who, after attempting to use Microsoft services to contact relatives in Gaza, were banned for life. “I’ve had this Hotmail account for 15 years. They banned me for no reason, saying I violated their terms—what terms? Tell me,” one Palestinian-American user said.

IBM’s brand has forever been tarnished by its collaboration with Nazi Germany, aiding Hitler’s slaughter of millions of people. In much the same way, No Azure for Apartheid believe that Microsoft’s name will forever be linked with the destruction in Gaza. Microsoft has enjoyed a decades-long partnership with Israel, which has seen them slowly integrate themselves into the state, becoming a fundamental part of the system of oppression. From servicing the Israeli war machine, to hiring hundreds of Israeli spies to run its affairs, to cracking down on internal and external dissent against it, Israel’s mass killing of Palestinians is aided by Microsoft, whose technological prowess has helped Israel carry out the world’s first A.I.-powered genocide.

Feature photo | Illustration by MintPress News

Alan MacLeod is Senior Staff Writer for MintPress News. He completed his PhD in 2017 and has since authored two acclaimed books: *Bad News From Venezuela: Twenty Years of Fake News and Misreporting and Propaganda in the Information Age: Still Manufacturing Consent*, as well as a number of academic articles. He has also contributed to FAIR.org, *The Guardian*, *Salon*, *The Grayzone*, *Jacobin Magazine*, and *Common Dreams*. Follow Alan on Twitter for more of his work and commentary: @AlanRMacLeod.



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