

DIVEST FROM WAR CRIMES AND MIGRANT DEATHS

by Ursula Rozum



Gaza has been under a land and sea blockade by Israel and Egypt since 2007. The two million people living in this 7-mile-long area are facing a humanitarian crisis. Medicines are close to running out. 95% of the water is unfit for drinking.

Since March 30, 2018, Israel has killed 250 Palestinians involved in the Great Return March protests—those killed include journalists wearing “PRESS” and medics like 20-year-old Rouzan Al-Najjar, whose murder the *New York Times* referred to as “possibly a war crime.” Protesters have been gathering weekly at the border to demand their internationally recognized right to return to their families’ lands—from which they were expelled in 1948—and an end to the blockade that makes Gaza unlivable.

The people of Gaza face continuous assaults from the Israeli military, which treats the territory as a laboratory for testing weapons. These weapons are

then marketed abroad as “battle tested” and “combat proven.” In 2014, a 51-day bombing campaign on Gaza killed over 2000 civilians, including at least 550 children. Less than a month after the massacre, Israel hosted its annual drone expo to showcase the weaponry that had been “battlefield proven.”

Elbit Systems is Israel’s largest weapons company and has helped make Israel the world’s leading exporter of military and surveillance drones. Elbit’s weaponized drones are involved in all of Israel’s major offensives on Gaza. Presently, Elbit surveillance drones guide the Israeli snipers who kill Palestinian protestors involved in the Great Return March. Outside of Gaza, Elbit provides surveillance technology for Israel’s apartheid wall in the West Bank, a structure which the International Court of Justice declared as illegal.

Israel maintains its occupation and repression of the Palestinian people largely through the military aid and diplomatic support provided by the United States. The Obama administration approved \$38 billion in US military aid to Israel over the course of 10 years (roughly \$10

million every day in US taxpayer dollars). 1% of this military aid must be spent with US weapons manufacturers Lockheed Martin, Raytheon, Boeing and Northrup Grumman. This tight-knit relationship is reciprocal and benefits Israeli weapons companies. Elbit is a top recipient of US Department of Homeland Security contracts for surveillance along the US-Mexico Border.

In 2004, Hermes drones (manufactured by Israel’s Elbit Systems) were the first unmanned aerial surveillance vehicles deployed at the US southern border. US Customs and Border protection contracted with Elbit Systems in 2014 for sensors, cameras, radars and “integrated fixed towers” in the desert along the Arizona border. The towers are based on the technology used by Elbit in the construction of Israel’s apartheid wall in the West Bank, which separates Palestinians from their ancestral lands and families. The towers in the Arizona borderlands, like the border itself, are an assault on the lands of the indigenous people of the area, the Tohono O’odam, many of whom actively oppose the construction of these structures on their land.

The Elbit surveillance towers in southeast Arizona are intentionally positioned in the desert miles away from the border wall to track migrants once they have crossed. According to testimony from migrants, when Border Patrol locates groups of people who have crossed, they fly their helicopters close to the ground. This tactic purposely scares and scatters groups, separating them in the desert and decreasing chances of survival.

The Arizona Elbit towers are rooted in a sinister 1994 Clinton-era strategy of “Prevention Through Deterrence” which aimed to prevent illegal immigration by sealing off urban entry points into the US such as those in San Diego and El Paso. The intention was to funnel migrants through wilderness routes where they risk injury, dehydration, heat stroke, exhaustion and hypothermia. Rather than decrease migration, the policy only

continued on next page

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continued from previous page

increased migrant deaths. According to Border Patrol, over 6,000 people have died trying to cross the desert since the 1990s. Volunteers from organizations like No More Deaths hike the trails and leave water, food, socks, blankets and other supplies. In unnecessary acts of cruelty, Border Patrol agents are known to destroy the water pitchers. Meanwhile, volunteers from No More Deaths currently face federal felony charges for providing aid to undocumented migrants.

In October 2017, when camera crews gathered in San Diego, California for the unveiling of President Donald Trump's border wall prototypes, the only foreign contractor on display was ELTA, a subsidiary of Israel Aerospace Industries. US and Israeli military contractors are making billions in profits for their investors from a system that activists have come to call "border imperialism." A term coined by anthropologist Harsha Walia, border imperialism conceptualizes how capitalism and racism manifest in the form of militarized border enforcement to control land, maintain inequality and oppression, and reinforce white European cultural dominance. This is the case

in Israel, where Elbit and US military contractors allow Israel to maintain and expand its occupation of Palestinian lands. Border imperialism is on full display in the Americas as politically imposed borders are increasingly militarized, migration is criminalized, and corporations like Elbit and the for-profit prison company Core Civic reap profits.

The borderlands migrant justice movement has shined a light on the presence of Israeli military contractors there since they first arrived. Elbit Systems has factories and university partnerships throughout the United States and donates money to Congressional campaigns every year in order to maintain access to US government contracts. The movement to divest from war and repression is growing. Recently, after a successful campaign by UK activists, HSBC bank announced that it would divest from Elbit Systems, citing concerns over human rights. Swedish and Norwegian pension funds divested from Elbit in 2009, and over the last decade activists worldwide have pushed universities and banks to follow suit.

In the US, CODEPINK is launching a campaign to push the investment

firm Bank of NY Mellon to divest from Elbit Systems. BNY Mellon claims to be committed to socially responsible investment and UN Sustainable Development goals, yet holds shares in Elbit Systems. Israel is able to maintain its occupation and repression of Palestinian people through technology from companies like Elbit, and through military aid and diplomatic support from the United States. Support for Palestinian rights is on the rise in the US, as is opposition to unconditional support for Israel. While the US Congress is unlikely to approve sanctions against Israel, banks divesting from Elbit Systems is a piece of eroding the institutional and economic support that allows Israel to commit war crimes with impunity.

In the Spring, CODEPINK and partners around the country will be organizing rallies at BNY Mellon branches across the country, including in Syracuse and New York State. Learn more and join the fight to divest from war and Elbit Systems at codepink.org/stopelbit.




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