

Somerset Council speaking slot 20th February 2024 - Alison Morgan

Council sale of 600 Aztec West

- As a Somerset resident I was sickened to learn that my council is landlord to the Israeli weapons manufacturer, Elbit Systems; that its predecessor, Sedgemoor D.C. had invested council funds in the site at Aztec West in 2020, knowing who its sitting tenant was and what that company does; and that Sedgemoor D.C. proceeded with that purchase despite opposition from Labour councillors making it clear that this was an unethical investment. And that when Somerset council came into being last year, you did not reconsider your position as landlord taking over this lease, but simply continued taking rent money generated from Israel's occupation and war crimes against the Palestinian people.
- Any investment in the arms industry would be bad enough, but even worse – Elbit Systems is part of Israel's biggest private arms company. Elbit supplies the Israeli military with drones, bullets, tanks, and even weapons such as cluster bombs and white phosphorus that are illegal under international law, and Iron Sting missiles that are designed to cause chemical burns through the victims flesh.
- Elbit manufactures and trials its products in close cooperation with the Israeli military, using Palestinian civilians as their test subjects. Israeli arms companies like Elbit have a Unique Selling Point – they are sold as battle tested to other oppressive regimens - tested on Palestinian civilians in Gaza and the West Bank.
- When Sedgemoor D.C. bought the site at Aztec West, and when Somerset inherited it, Israel had illegally occupied the West Bank, Gaza and East Jerusalem for over 50 years – probably the most brutal and oppressive occupation in history. It is well recognised and documented by Amnesty International, Human Rights watch and B'Tselem, that Israel has been operating an Apartheid state since 1967. And Israel has been besieging Gaza since 2007, turning it into an open prison and mercilessly bombing its people every 2-4 years – operations that the Israeli government describes as 'mowing the lawn'. Everything about Israel's occupation of the Palestinians violates international law on a daily basis.
- I have personally spent a lot of time in the occupied West Bank over the last 12 years, and as a human rights observer, I have witnessed firsthand Israel oppression and abuse of Palestinians providing non-violent protective presence to Palestinian communities.
- My duties have included providing protective presence to Palestinian children just walking to school. I have seen how children in villages up and down the West Bank are harassed, tear-gassed, attacked and abducted by the Israel soldiers every day. I saw Israeli soldiers, simply grabbing a young boy of 12 as he walked to school in Hebron.
- Every year, the Israeli military abduct a quota of 6-800 children from the West Bank. Many of them are taken from their beds in the middle of the night, beaten and abused and imprisoned by an apartheid legal system that affords Palestinians no rights.



- In 2013, I was in Aida refugee camp in Bethlehem, occupied West Bank, when there was an Israeli military incursion with IDF soldiers using the camp for an exercise, with highly trained snipers shooting at unarmed children and youths at close range. I saw five young boys get shot in the legs by snipers that afternoon. A month after I returned home, a 13 year old was shot dead at close range.



- In December 2013 I witnessed another Israeli military exercise, in which 5000 troops invaded a poor rural village, throwing families out of their homes in the middle of the night in bad weather, and bombing the Bedouin pastoralists in their grazing lands.

- Now Israel is carrying out a genocide and ethnic cleansing of the 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza – slaughtering defenceless civilians and children in tens of thousands, targeting hospitals, schools, mosques and churches, UN Workers, journalists and medics.
- By buying the Aztec West site with Elbit as your tenant and continuing this lease to the present day, you are complicit in Israel's war crimes, and you have made the ordinary people of Somerset complicit.
- I understand that you now plan to sell the Aztec West site – not because you have suddenly developed an ethical sense but because of financial necessity.
- But this is not enough. It is not enough to just pass the problem on for another unethical investor to make money out of Palestinian suffering. It does not absolve you or us of our responsibilities to humanity.
- And as British people we have a very particular responsibility to the Palestinians, as it was the British government that gave away their country to Zionist settlers, leading to the ethnic cleansing of 750,000 Palestinians in 1948 and all the suffering that has followed.
- Somerset Council has a responsibility to terminate the lease and evict Elbit immediately, before selling the site.
- I understand that you are concerned about the loss of rent and possible legal issues and costs associated with breaking the lease, but there are bigger legal issues in play now: In view of the International Court of Justice ruling on 26th January, Somerset Council and the British Government are currently complicit in genocide and Britain is breach of duties as a party to the Genocide Convention.