

Muslims and Jews worried about Twitter under Musk

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Elon Musk's Twitter profile as of April 28. (RNS photo by Kit Doyle)

Muslim and Jewish organizations are expressing concern about billionaire Elon Musk's impending ownership of Twitter, warning that the aerospace tycoon could roll back moderation policies and unleash a new wave of harassment against religious minorities often targeted on the platform.

"It strikes me as deeply troubling and potentially dangerous that two people—Musk and [Facebook cofounder] Mark Zuckerberg—essentially control the public square," Jonathan Greenblatt, CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, said in a statement. "That seems like a sad day for democracy."

Twitter announced on April 25 that Musk will take over the company, with the deal expected to be finalized sometime in the next three to six months. Musk has been a frequent critic of the platform's current moderation policies, and his expressed goals for Twitter have centered on free speech.

"Free speech is the bedrock of a functioning democracy, and Twitter is the digital town square where matters vital to the future of humanity are debated," he said in a statement announcing the deal. "Twitter has tremendous potential—I look forward to working with the company and the community of users to unlock it."

But since the announcement, Musk has promoted criticism of Twitter on the platform, and company staffers have reportedly expressed concern he may undo long-standing efforts to moderate content.

Some groups—including religious organizations—have also voiced ambivalence about Musk's interpretation of free speech.

The ADL, a Jewish civil rights organization, is one of several groups that help Twitter moderate hateful content by serving on the company's Trust and Safety Council.

"We know firsthand that hate and extremism in digital spaces can lead to physical violence, particularly against Jews and other marginalized communities," Greenblatt said in his statement.

"Twitter has made some strides in tackling online hate and extremism in recent years, and so while we want to be cautiously optimistic about how Elon Musk will run the platform, he has not demonstrated any focus on these issues to date. We worry that he could take things in a very different direction."

Greenblatt also expressed concerns that Twitter will lack transparency and accountability when it becomes a private company under Musk. A representative for the company noted that it's too early to tell how Musk's ownership of Twitter will impact the ADL's advising role.

Greenblatt was echoed by Sumayyah Waheed, senior policy counsel for Muslim Advocates, which also serves on Twitter's Trust and Safety Council.

"Even before this acquisition, Twitter was failing to enforce their rules and take down prohibited, dangerous content that encourages hate and threats," she said.

“Musk’s takeover threatens to make Twitter an even more dangerous place for Muslims and other marginalized people—and that includes the very real possibility of allowing [former president Donald] Trump back on the platform. Remember that Trump used his Twitter account to spread lies about the election and encourage the deadly January 6 insurrection. This kind of hate and disinformation is much more likely to spread if Musk further weakens the platform’s already weak content moderation policies, as he has suggested he would.”

People who belong to religious minorities have long been listed as those most likely to endure harassment on Twitter, alongside women, people of color, people with disabilities, and members of the LGBTQ community.

In a survey conducted by the ADL in 2021, 36 percent of Jewish respondents said they had experienced online harassment, comparable to 33 percent the year before. In addition, 22 percent said they had experienced “severe” online harassment, slightly up from 20 percent in 2020.

The same survey found that 46 percent of Muslim respondents said they had experienced online harassment, with 36 percent saying the harassment they experienced was severe. —Religion News Service