META CONSIDERING INCREASED CENSORSHIP OF THE WORD "ZIONIST"

"I think it may actually harm the fight against antisemitism," said the head of a Palestinian digital rights group briefed on the potential change.

[Sam Biddle](#)

February 8 2024, 7:50 p.m.

FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM'S parent company, Meta, is contemplating stricter rules around discussing Israeli nationalism on its platforms, a major policy change that could stifle criticism and free expression about the war in Gaza and beyond, five civil society sources who were briefed on the potential change told The Intercept.

"Meta is currently revisiting its hate speech policy, specifically in relation to the term 'Zionist,'" reads a January 30 email sent to civil society groups by Meta policy personnel and reviewed by The Intercept. While the email says Meta has not made a final determination, it is soliciting feedback on a potential policy change

from civil society and digital rights groups, according to the sources. The email notes that "Meta is reviewing this policy in light of content that users and stakeholders have recently reported" but does not detail the content in question or name any stakeholders.

"As an anti-Zionist Jewish organization for Palestinian freedom, we are horrified to learn that Meta is considering expanding when they treat 'Zionism' — a political ideology — as the same as 'Jew/Jewish' — an ethno-religious identity," said Dani Noble, an organizer with Jewish Voice for Peace, one of the groups Meta has contacted to discuss the possible change. Noble added that such a policy shift "will result in shielding the Israeli government from accountability for its policies and actions that violate Palestinian human rights."

For years, Meta has allowed its 3 billion users around the world to employ the term "Zionist," which refers to supporters of the historical movement to create a Jewish state in the Middle East, as well as backers of modern-day nationalism in support of that state and its policies.

Meta's internal rules around the word "Zionist," [first reported by The Intercept in 2021](link), show that company moderators are only supposed to delete posts using the term if it's determined to be a proxy for "Jewish" or "Israeli," both protected classes under company speech rules. The policy change Meta is now considering would enable the platform's moderators to more aggressively and expansively enforce this rule, a move that could dramatically increase deletions of posts critical of Israeli nationalism.

"We don't allow people to attack others based on their protected characteristics, such as their nationality or religion. Enforcing this policy requires an understanding of how people use language to reference those characteristics," Meta spokesperson Corey Chambliss told The Intercept. "While the term Zionist often refers to a person's ideology, which is not a protected characteristic, it can also be used to refer to Jewish or Israeli people. Given the increase in polarized public discourse due to events in the Middle East, we believe it's

important to assess our guidance for reviewing posts that use the term Zionist."

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In the months since October 7, staunchly pro-Israel groups like the Anti-Defamation League have [openly called for](Opens in a new tab) treating anti-Zionism as a form of antisemitism, pointing out that the word is often used by antisemites as a stand-in for "Jew." The ADL and American Jewish Committee, another pro-Israel, Zionist advocacy group in the U.S., have both been lobbying Meta to restrict
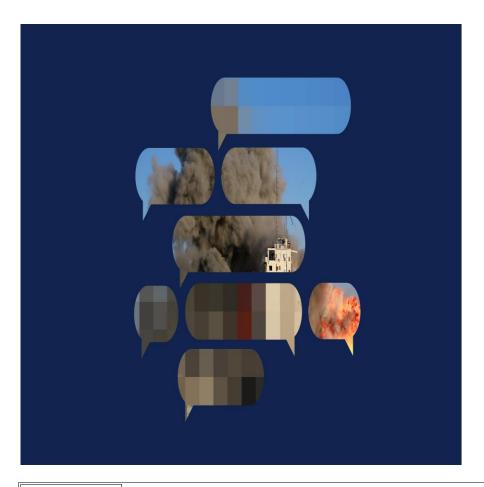
use of the word "Zionist," according to Yasmine Taeb, legislative and political director at the Muslim grassroots advocacy group MPower Change. In his statement, Chambliss responded, "We did not initiate this policy development at the behest of any outside group."

Taeb, who spoke to a Meta employee closely involved with the proposed policy change, said it would result in mass censorship of critical mentions of Zionism, restricting, for example, non-hateful, non-violent speech about the ongoing bloodshed in Gaza.

While a statement as general as "I don't like Zionists" could be uttered by an antisemitic Instagram user as a means of expressing dislike for Jews, civil society advocates point out that there is nothing inherently or necessarily anti-Jewish about the statement. Indeed, much of the fiercest political activism against Israel's war in Gaza has been organized by anti-Zionist Jews, while American evangelical Christian Zionists are some of Israel's most hardcore supporters.

"The suppression of pro-Palestinian speech critical of Israel is happening specifically during the genocide in Gaza," Taeb said in an interview. "Meta should instead be working on implementing policies to make sure political speech is not being suppressed, and they're doing the exact opposite."

ACCORDING TO PRESENTATION materials reviewed by The Intercept, Meta has been sharing with stakeholders a series of hypothetical posts that could be deleted under a stricter policy, and soliciting feedback as to whether they should be. While one example seemed like a clear case of conspiratorial antisemitic tropes about Jewish control of the news media, others were critical of Israeli state policy or supporters of that policy, not Judaism, said Nadim Nashif, executive director of the Palestinian digital rights group 7amleh, who was briefed this week by Meta via video conference. Meta plans to brief U.S. stakeholder groups on Friday morning, according to its outreach email.

Facebook's Secret Rules About the Word "Zionist" Impede Criticism of Israel

Examples of posts Meta could censor under a new policy included the statements: "Zionists are war criminals, just look at what's happening in Gaza"; "I don't like Zionists"; and "No Zionists allowed at tonight's meeting of the Progressive Student Association." Nashif said that one example — "Just read the news every day. A coalition of Zionists, Americans and Europeans tries to rule the world." — was described by Peter Stern, Meta's director of content policy stakeholder engagement, as possibly hateful because it engaged in conspiratorial thinking about Jews.

Israel's War on Gaza

In an interview with The Intercept, Nashif disagreed, arguing that criticism of the strategic alliance and foreign policy alignment between the U.S., European states, and Israel should not be conflated with conspiratorial bigotry against Judaism, or collapsed into bigoted delusions of global Jewish influence. In their meeting, Nashif says Stern acknowledged that Zionism is a political ideology, not an ethnic group, despite the prospect of enforcement that would treat it more like the latter. "I think it may actually harm the fight against antisemitism, conflating Zionism and the Israeli government with Judaism," Nashif told The Intercept.

It will be difficult or impossible to determine whether someone says they "don't like" Zionists with a hateful intent, Nashif said, adding: "You'd need telepathy." Meta has yet to share with those it has briefed any kind of general principles, rules, or definitions that would guide this revised policy or help moderators enforce it, Nashif said. But given the [company's systematic censorship of Palestinian and other Arab users of its platforms](#), Nashif and others familiar with the potential change fear it would make free expression in the Arab world even more perilous.

"As anti-Zionist Jews, we have seen how the Israeli government and its supporters have pushed an agenda that falsely claims that equating 'Zionist' with 'Jew' or 'Jewish' will somehow keep Jews safe," added Noble of Jewish Voice for Peace. "Not only does conflating

anti-Zionism and antisemitism harm all people who fight for human rights in the world by stifling legitimate criticism of a state and military, it also does nothing to actually keep our community safe while undermining our collective efforts to dismantle real antisemitism and all forms of racism, extremism and oppression."