

## Facebook Focuses on Political Content Ahead of Israeli Election

By Matthew Kalman

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- Fact-checkers, political experts, data security team deployed
- Analysts question whether effort will be effective

Facebook Inc. said it's sending its top data security and political experts to Israel to ensure the integrity of its platform in the run-up to the country's April 9 general election.

The social media giant also will remove fake accounts, work with political campaigns to increase transparency and team up with third-party fact checkers to "to reduce the distribution of false information," it announced in full-page newspaper advertisements in Hebrew March 31.

"We know that the final days of the election effort are the important days of the campaign, so we have chosen to concentrate some of the relevant teams in Israel in order to assess from up close what's happening on our platform now in real time, without differences in time zones and distance," Jordana Cutler, Facebook's head of public policy for Israel, said in the release.

Facebook unveiled the effort a day after CEO Mark Zuckerberg called for increased regulation to monitor harmful content, election integrity, privacy and data portability. "Regulation could set baselines for what's prohibited and require companies to build systems for keeping harmful content to a bare minimum," Zuckerberg said March 30.

The effectiveness of such a team arriving so late in the campaign is doubtful, said Nicholas John, a senior lecturer in the department of communication and journalism at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

"It is much better that Facebook take their responsibility seriously as a platform than that they do nothing, but at this stage it's a bit like Whack-A-Mole," John said.

### Account Removals

Facebook said it's already removed hundreds of pages, groups and accounts—many of them linked to Iran—"for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior." The company also said it released new advertising transparency tools in March "to help prevent foreign interference in the upcoming Israeli election and make electoral advertising on Facebook more transparent."

Facebook's decision to send data security personnel to Israel and to take out ads explaining its data security policies suggests the company has come a long way in understanding the role it plays in elections, analysts said.

"Facebook certainly appears to be seriously addressing potential misuse of the platform in the upcoming Israeli elections and has been engaged in a dialogue on this matter with the Central Elections Committee. It remains to be seen how effective those steps will prove to be in practice," Assaf Harel, head of the cyber-security and data protection practice at Gornitzky and Co. law firm in Tel Aviv, said.

Facebook has taken similar measures for elections in other countries, said Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, head of the democracy in the information age program at the Israel Democracy Institute, an independent think tank in Jerusalem.

"They send teams. They try to clean up Facebook as much as they can from bots and from fake accounts," Shwartz Altshuler said. "They partially succeed in removing the contamination from their network."

Shwartz Altshuler said the same technical features that allow people to use Facebook to connect with friends and sell products allow bad actors to spread disinformation. John agreed.

"It's all very well Facebook rocking up with their people to say we want to make sure the elections are clean," John said. "But this is a system that they created. Even if they do send people, they don't deserve a pat on the back."

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