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European Jewish leaders call for better policing of online hate speech

Rabbis say social media platforms should monitor incitement in light of recent attacks; Facebook security expert cites need to balance free speech, benefits of dialogue

By DAVID RISING

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German police officers stand in front of the Bayerischer Hof hotel on the first day of the Munich Security Conference in Munich, Germany, Feb. 14, 2020. (AP/Jens Meyer)b

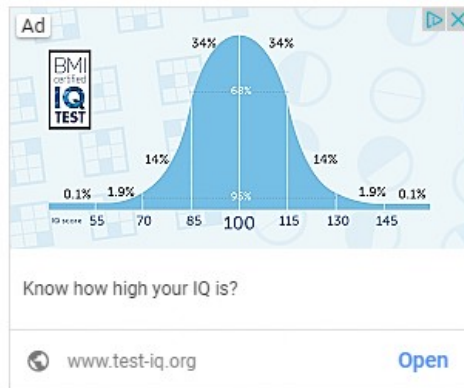
MUNICH, Germany (AP) — Jewish leaders called Friday for better policing of hate speech on social media platforms over concerns prompted by recent attacks that people on the margins of society are being incited online to violence.



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Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, president of the Conference of European Rabbis and chief rabbi of Moscow, said online radicalization was giving rise not only to more anti-Semitic incidents, but also hate crimes directed at Muslims and others.



“The strength and power given by social media to people on the margins of society is causing chaos,” he said, citing attacks in New Zealand, Germany and the United States.

“Last year, 2019, there were quite a few attacks against houses of worship – mosques, synagogues and churches.”

The event, sponsored by Goldschmidt’s organization and the World Jewish Congress, came on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference, which was being attended by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, though he was not present for the discussion.

Goldschmidt said that with legal protections for free speech, it was hard for governments to police hate speech effectively, but that private companies had more flexibility.



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“A private company that gives a platform, whether it’s a theater or a Facebook page, definitely has the ability and the right to limit speech,” he said.



Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt, seen writing a new Torah scroll at an event attended by Israeli and European rabbis, marking the Hebrew date of 69 years since the liberation of Jews in Europe, in the Western Wall tunnels, in Jerusalem's Old City, May 21, 2014. (Flash90)

Michel Friedman, a prominent German Jewish leader, said, however, that governments could do more if they made the issue a priority, saying that authorities have been effectively combating online financial crimes.

“If we are able when it’s about the economy to react very quickly on cyber crime, why not hate crime?” he said.

But regulating what can and can’t be said is a thorny issue, said Alex Samos, former chief security officer of Facebook.



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“Discussions about what is lawful or not lawful speech are extremely complicated,” he said.

He noted that there are many different layers to Facebook — private pages, public groups, private groups and the person-to-person Messenger application which, to monitor, would be akin to listening in on private phone calls.

“I don’t think that anybody here would say that Deutsche Telekom should listen in to every phone call in Germany, and if you say something racist someone pops in and tells you you’re wrong,” Samos said.

He also stressed that social media had given voice to far more than just hate speech, saying that the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements in the US were able to address long-standing issues of racism and sexual harassment and sexual assault only because a broader group of people were able to speak out.

“Those two problems existed 30 years ago, the difference is that the people who decided what political topics were acceptable in the United States were 40 middle-aged white men,” he said.

“People love to focus on the negative impact of new things, but there’s a huge amount of positive impact from allowing a much broader set of people to speak in a democracy,” Samos said.

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