



Written by [Luis Miguel](#) on December 22, 2021

## Twitter Working With Saudis to Arrest Dissidents, Crush Free Speech?

Saudi Arabia's [recent jailing](#) of a dissident after linking him to anonymous Twitter accounts brings up questions about the relationship between the social-media giant and the Islamic absolute monarchy.

Ali Abu Luhum is a Saudi citizen who was sentenced to 15 years in prison for promoting "apostasy, unbelief, and atheism" on Twitter. According to [Human Rights Watch](#), Saudi authorities were able to connect anonymous Twitter accounts to phone numbers associated with Abu Luhum. It is not known how the connection was established, as the accounts did not have phone numbers publicly displayed.



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Saudi Arabia is known for paying spies to gather information about dissidents from Twitter. In 2015, the FBI told Twitter it had a "Saudi espionage problem."

Saudi officials claim Abu Luhum's since-deleted tweets promoted "that which prejudices public order, religious values, and public morals"; vague language in keeping with the type the Saudi government often uses to silence dissenting views.

Twitter has been infiltrated by the Saudis in the past. In 2014, the Saudi government paid a Twitter employee named Ahmad Abouammo over \$100,000 to collect information about Saudi dissidents.

A [press release](#) from the U.S. Department of Justice published at the time read:

"Acting in the United States under the direction and control of Saudi officials, the defendants are alleged to have obtained private, identifying information about users of Twitter who were critical of the Saudi government," said Assistant Attorney General for National Security John C. Demers. "Two of the defendants — Alzabarah and Abouammo — are former Twitter employees who violated their terms of employment to access this information in exchange for money and other benefits. Aside from being criminal, their conduct was contrary to the free speech principles on which this country was founded."...

"The FBI will not stand by and allow foreign governments to illegally exploit private user information from U.S. companies. These individuals are charged with targeting and obtaining private data from dissidents and known critics, under the direction and control of the government of Saudi Arabia," said FBI Special Agent in Charge John F. Bennett. "Insider threats pose a critical threat to American businesses and our national security."

The following year, the FBI warned Twitter that more than one employee had been compromised by the Saudi government.



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Saudi Arabia is not only the largest Twitter market in the Middle East; it boasts the highest Twitter users per capita of any country other than the United States and Japan.

Furthermore, the Saudi government owns a [major stake](#) in Twitter that is allegedly bigger than former CEO Jack Dorsey's.

Dorsey, in fact, was photographed meeting with Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Two sources at Twitter told the Washington Free Beacon that the tech giant will take pains to maintain friendly relations with Saudi Arabia.

As the Free Beacon notes, "High-ranking Saudi officials who appear to have been involved in the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi have kept their Twitter accounts. Saudi influencers say the government has forced them to tweet propaganda or risk having private information about them shared on Twitter."

Officials did not allow witnesses to speak at the trial of Abu Luhum. Charges mentioned in court documents also included "denial of the existence of God; impersonating, doubting and mocking God, Islam (and) the Prophet Muhammad," according to Human Rights Watch.

Abu Luhum made a confession but later retracted it. Under the Wahhabi interpretation of Islamic law, which Saudi Arabia follows, apostasy requires the death penalty, which prosecutors originally asked for. This was dialed back by the judge following the retraction of the confession.

The arrest comes as Twitter is criticized for the inconsistent application of its free-speech policies. Conservatives regularly have their content deleted and their accounts blocked or banned, but the platform allows terror groups such as the Taliban to continue using it.

In a [recent poll](#) of Americans by Axios and the Illinois Institute of Technology, the majority of respondents indicated that they want the government to rein in Big Tech companies on matters of size, oversight, and privacy,

Of those surveyed, 81 percent think "the government should be doing more to protect privacy," while 75 percent think "big tech companies are too big" and 71 percent said "there should be public oversight in use of algorithms."



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