



Executive Summary

1/2023

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Executive Summary

Quarterly report 01/2023: Basic monitoring of the periphery of religiously motivated extremism

Introduction

The main objective of the basic monitoring of the periphery of religiously motivated extremism (PrE) is to simplify and improve knowledge transfer from research to P/CVE¹ prevention practice and civic education. The PrE refers to a cluster of approximately 200 German-language YouTube, TikTok and some Instagram channels, most of which disseminate Sunni fundamentalist narratives, reject violence, and can be classified as non-jihadist. Some of their common denominators are a strong missionary aspiration and a rejection of all other religions, including Shiite, Alevi and

mystical Muslim sects. Their communication strategies are centred around the dissemination of polarising judgments and a highly selective and biased usage of information. This is paired with the propagation of non-differentiated interpretations of religious terms based on their respective fundamentalist ideologies and belief-systems.

The project is realised on behalf of the *German Federal Agency for Civic Education* and implemented by *modus | zad*.

YouTube and YouTube Shorts

The first quarter of 2023 already showed exciting developments on YouTube. Compared to the previous year, a new constellation of most-viewed PrE channels is emerging: „Deen Akademie“ (Marcel Krass), „Anas Islam“ and „IMAN TV“ have taken over the lead positions within the PrE. Furthermore, these three channels register an increase in the number of subscribers of up to 52% („Anas Islam“).

The earthquake in Turkey and Syria, the burning of a copy of the Quran in Sweden, increasing tensions in Israel/Palestine, and the violence on New Year's Eve 2022/23 in Germany dominated the news headlines during the first quarter of 2023. However, with two exceptions, the PrE videos on YouTube on these current socio-political issues receive surprisingly little attention (<33,000 views). Interestingly, two rather opposing trends

¹ P/CVE = Preventing and Countering Violent Extremism

emerged during the first quarter of 2023 concerning the conception of channels and formats on YouTube. On the one hand, the channels “Deen Academy” and “Federal Islamic Union” (FIU) feature videos with Marcel Krass that are set in a formal framework (e.g. sermons, lectures) and are designed to emphasise their supposed factuality. For this reason, they are set in a mosque, Muslim academies or an organisation for the protection of the rights of Muslims in Germany.

On the other hand, the formats of “Anas Islam” are often highly confrontational and focus on interaction (e.g. live talk formats), reaction videos, and actions in public spaces (e.g. interviews, protests, street dawah). While the channel’s contents are quite diversified, it emphasises conversation and encounters with people.

A third trend already began to emerge during the second half of 2022. It relates to the stronger involvement of current socio-political topics and exclusively male influencers from the pop cultural milieu outside the usual filter bubble of PrE.

Thus, increasingly more PrE actors pick up on the trend to publish reaction videos. PrE actors also tend to appear on channels outside the filter bubble that do not primarily focus on Islam.

A fourth trend concerns the expansion of the “social media orchestra²” within the PrE. Similar to non-PrE social media influencers, actors from within the PrE are likely to further expand their range of content to include more chat and live talk formats on platforms such as Twitch or Discord in the coming months.

Finally, the first quarter of 2023 showed that the use of YouTube Shorts can indeed increase awareness and popularity for some channels. YouTube Shorts usually receive much higher view counts (>400,000 views) than longer, regular YouTube videos. This format, in coordinated use with TikTok, significantly contributes to the expansion of low-threshold targeting.

² a compound term introduced by the monitoring team

| TikTok and Instagram

In addition to TikTok, Instagram was selectively analysed for the quarterly report 01/2023.

The low interaction margin of Instagram PrE accounts is striking, especially when compared to TikTok. In addition, Instagram content is receiving a much lower number of views from followers than content on TikTok. On Instagram, the Muslim audience is mainly targeted by digital discussions or Q&A formats, in addition to numerous images/sharepics with religious content. However, some important PrE actors (e. g. "MuslimInteraktiv") are using Instagram more intensively than YouTube for campaign mobilization and short propaganda messages.

At the beginning of 2023, the PrE actors were extremely political on TikTok and Instagram. Among many accompanying topics, the events of and especially the ensuing discussions around New Year's Eve 2022/23 in Germany caused a stir and seamlessly replaced the fierce criticism of the World Cup. Attacks on emergency forces and numerous rioters on New Year's Eve in Berlin led to racist comments by CDU politicians which some PrE actors, mainly „Realitaetislam“ and „Musliminteraktiv“, interpreted in a polarising manner on their social media channels. In the process, the multi-layered echo of the German media landscape was ignored. Rather, the aforementioned TikTok channels interpreted the politicians' statements as exclusively islamophobic.

During the negotiations regarding Sweden's accession to NATO, nationwide protests and demonstrations culminated in a right-wing extremist burning a copy of the Quran in front of the Turkish embassy while Swedish

police was present. PrE actors on TikTok and Instagram also recorded the incident in their videos. "Musliminteraktiv" organised a counter-rally in Hamburg on February 4, 2023 and "Realitaetislam" accused governments of having commissioned the Quran burning.

The earthquake in Turkey and Syria on February 6, 2023 also found its way into the PrE's canon of topics. Some PrE actors interpreted the devastating natural disaster as a sign from God and an indication of the approaching end times, respectively. Actors such as "Realitaetislam" and "Musliminteraktiv" described the event as a test for the Muslim community and urgently insisted on keeping the faith rather than questioning it. „Musliminteraktiv“ expressed indignation regarding the Charlie Hebdo earthquake cartoon and criticised its lack of sensitivity under the "guise" of freedom of expression. Thus, different interpretations and calls to action can be found within the PrE on TikTok and Instagram. On the moderate side is "anas_islam_official," on the more radical "musliminteraktiv" and "realitaetislam." The latter received the most attention on TikTok in terms of the significantly higher click numbers and the amount of videos uploaded.

Lastly, a debate between Yunus Peace and Ibrahim al-Azzazi reemerged on the accounts "yunuspeace" and "islamcontent5778ii", which was already described in the first quarterly report of 2021 quarterly report. In addition, a reaction debate also arose between the influencers Sharo and Ibrahim al-Azzazi, which continues to be played out on TikTok.

| Implications for practitioners

Information on Islam, sermons and Islamic life advice continue to be in high demand among the PrE audience. However, the platforms analysed in the basic monitoring are dominated by extensive and one-sided Sunni fundamentalist and Islamist content. Furthermore, a lack of more differentiated content on Islamic topics is evident.

Online users and influencers must also contend with an active and vocal community that propagates these beliefs and defends them against criticism in the comment section. Individuals are often the targets of such attacks. In the future, it is also conceivable that such (coordinated) action will be increasingly directed against P/CVE projects and staff.

The debate on reaction videos shows once again that there is an urgent need to strengthen resilience and tolerance of ambiguity. Formats in which different opinions can be discussed and a lively and differentiated culture is cultivated still seem to show little effectiveness in the community observed here. Differentiated positions or messages are rarely found, not even in the chat threads and comments sections. Influencers rarely receive critical comments about deficits in their moderation or their attempts to implement journalistic formats (e.g. interviews, commentary formats). It is clear that there is still a wide field to be worked on for content-based and digital outreach projects.

Platforms such as Discord and Twitch, that enable direct messaging, chat and live talk formats as well as voice and video conferencing are promising social media platforms and tools for future or existing online projects.

Prevention projects should also examine the extent to which they can integrate TikTok and YouTube Shorts into their work in a supportive manner. A wide range of users and target groups can be reached through these formats. In addition, these short video formats currently seem to be developing into an increasingly important field of work for outreach prevention work due to the high number of toxic content and comments.

Events such as the burning of a copy of the Quran or New Year's Eve 2022/23 in Berlin must be dealt with and discussed in a protected space. The actors of the clearly Islamist subgroup of PrE channels consistently use current events as an opportunity to twist them into hooks to spread and consolidate their ideological messages and one-sided explanatory patterns. The PrE's core topics on TikTok and Instagram show how important political education remains, especially for young people. The ability to deal with different information in a critical and differentiated way is of utmost importance in order to be able to classify and evaluate the messages of the PrE actors and influencers close to them.

| Imprint

Publisher

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