



Executive Summary

4/2023

Inhalt

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	3
YouTube and YouTube Shorts	3
TikTok and Instagram	4
Implications for practitioners.	5

Executive Summary

Quarterly report 04/2023: 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 the knowledge transfer from research to 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 central messages are characterised by largely polarising judgements and a highly selective and biased usage of information as well as a reinterpretation of terms in order to propagate beliefs and ideologies. The project is realised on behalf of the German Federal Agency for Civic Education and implemented by modus | zad.

In the fourth quarter of 2023, the conflict in the Middle East had a significant impact on the content put out by PrE actors across all platforms. This was occasionally punctuated by other topics, such as dress codes for Muslim women or the so-called “Sharia

basement”, allegedly a location in Berlin where radical Salafists indoctrinate young people.

YouTube and YouTube Shorts

Islamist channels such as “Botschaft des Islam (BDI)” and “Generation Islam (GI)” are particularly active in the current debate on the conflict in the Middle East. As well as operating online, the hosts, such as the spokesperson for “GI”, have also given speeches at demonstrations. Generally, the Islamist group channels do not offer any new messages, instead they largely repeat narratives and motifs that appear in their videos on similar themes from previous years. Key PrE topics such as “Islamic identity” or “caliphate” are linked to the current situation in Israel and Gaza and presented in entertaining, easy-to-understand storytelling formats.

The silence of the Islamist group’s channels surrounding the atrocities committed by Hamas on 7th October, 2023 and the abduction of hostages is striking. Although the channels address current events, they mainly do so in order to spread their messages, which emphasise Islamic identity and the concept of the caliphate,

whilst ignoring Hamas atrocities. The role played by the militant Islamist Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other extremist groups in the region is also largely neglected in the videos. The group of Islamist channels does, however, condemn states which they classify as belonging to the so-called West and all governments of Islamic countries, as well as Muslim organisations and associations in Germany, that deviate from the stance of the Islamist PrE actors. In particular, governments in Islamic countries and Islamic associations in particular are accused of inactivity and pandering to “the West”, as well as distancing themselves from their own people and those whose interests they are supposed to represent. Withal the Sunni-oriented Islamist channels do not address the support of Hamas by the Shiite regime in Iran but stick to their sweeping judgment.

Israel's right to exist as a nation-state is explicitly rejected as a Zionist project, and its current existence is viewed as a colonialist project by Western states to gain control in the region. Moreover, the selective representation of the Middle East conflict and the reduction of complex historical events, results in a simplified narrative of friend vs. foe and the battle between good vs. evil. In this way, PrE actors interpret the situation as an existential conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, which can only be resolved through a redevotion and a reawakening on the part of Muslims. A further step would be the dissolution of all Islamic nation states and the unification of all Islamic countries under a caliphate. This, they claim, is the only way to regain the strength to resist the influences of the West and its claim to power, and to achieve a lasting solution for Palestine.

TikTok and Instagram

On TikTok, the PrE mainly posted videos on Germany's pro-Israel stance and its handling of pro-Palestinian demonstrations. The tone becomes sharper in particular with regard to Germany's *Staatsräson*, or reason of state, a principle that places support for Israel at the core of national identity, as well as the perceived “dictatorship of opinion” and the double standards that go with it. This can be seen, for example, in the video by “raheem_mi” entitled “Adolf (Olaf) Scholz”, which alludes to the Nazis' antisemitism and persecution of Jews and suggests that Muslims are subject to similar persecution today. The actors have varied approaches to Pro-Palestinian demonstrations. Whilst “Muslim Interaktiv (MI)” itself rallied for an event that resulted in a raid on the actors, “isso_bayan” was much more reserved, calling on its followers to only take part in authorised protests and to demonstrate peacefully.

Independent of the conflict in the Middle East, “isso_bayan” and “mahmoudtv.1” addressed the topic of the so-called “Sharia basement” on TikTok. This phenomenon allegedly involves men who manipulate and instrumentalise women under the guise of their own interpretation of Islam. Those affected should contact the two above-mentioned TikTokers. What exactly should happen as a result remains, however, unclear.

On the social media platform Instagram, the conflict in the Middle East and Germany's stance towards it are interpreted in a similar way to TikTok. The criticism of the solidarity only shown to victims on one side of this war, which ignores the suffering of Muslims and Palestinians,

supports their persistent claim of anti-Muslim racism by the German state. However, despite the criticism voiced, their own actions also reveal a certain one-sidedness, as their posts focus almost exclusively on the situation of Palestinians and give hardly any space at all to the deadly attacks on Jewish lives. Within the Salafist scene, the conflict is addressed on a theological level. Abul Baraa draws attention to the tragic situation of Palestinian women in Gaza who, despite the war, continue to fulfil their religious duties and wear their hijabs even when sleeping. The suffering of Muslims in Gaza is used here as a reminder of the supposed religious duties of Muslims. Therefore, the primary concern is not to depict the situation as it is there, but to instrumentalise the situation in order to serve purposes closer to home.

Implications for practitioners

The conflict in the Middle East currently rouses more emotions than almost any other issue, and is resulting in an increasing polarisation around the world. Against this backdrop, the extent to which the current escalation in Israel and Gaza is being intensively discussed within the PrE is not surprising. Although there are some common narratives which have been featured before, what is new now, is a sharpening of the tone and an increased political commitment by some of the channel hosts. For example, “Generation Islam” and “Muslim Interaktiv” are both heavily involved in Islamist demonstrations in Essen and Hamburg and use them to spread their messages online as well as offline. This also has benefits for PrE channels and their followers - videos on the Middle East conflict generate a

lot of interest on YouTube and TikTok and are commented on, liked and shared extensively.

Whilst the Salafist actors, with a few exceptions, only comment indirectly on the current situation in the Middle East, or do not mention it at all, the Islamist cluster on the other hand positions itself clearly on all social media channels analysed. Empathy and compassion for human suffering is focused exclusively on the Palestinian side and the devastating humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, while the atrocities of the 7th October and the victims of the attacks go unmentioned. The PrE actors, presumably, deliberately use one-sided images and video material that are characterised by a particularly high level of cruelty and brutality. **How this material is received, in terms of media education and its categorisation, is currently of increased importance in prevention settings. In addition, the large volume of misinformation and disinformation on social media must be identified and labelled as such.**

Regarding the debate within Germany, the behaviour of German politicians in particular is condemned in the PrE. The unconditional solidarity shown towards Israel, the concept of Israel's security being part of Germany's *Staatsräson*, and the partial bans on pro-Palestinian demonstrations are interpreted as a threat to Muslim communities in Germany. On the other hand, references to critical voices within the German media, for example regarding the initial blanket ban on pro-Palestinian demonstrations and differentiated reporting that includes the perspective of the Palestinians, do not feature.

However, despite the criticism expressed, their own actions also reveal a certain one-sidedness, as their contributions almost exclusively describe the situation of the Palestinians while ignoring the deadly attacks on Jewish lives. Recognising and understanding this contradiction can form part of current P/CVE prevention practice.

When assessing the current situation, many PrE actors draw on international discourses and interpretations of events from Arabic-speaking countries or parts of the Global South.

Their focus is not on questions of human rights and national self-determination, instead the situation is interpreted exclusively as an existential conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims. While solidarity with the civilian population in Gaza is understandable, the solutions to the escalating conflict, offered by the Islamist spectrum of the PrE in particular, are problematic. On an individual level, they believe the reawakening and redevotion to an Islamic identity by all Muslims should bring about the

necessary change. Politically, the ultimate goal is the dissolution of all Islamic nation-states and to unify all Islamic countries under a caliphate.

As a result, the crisis is being used as an attempt to create a perceived sense of unity among Muslims and to pressure individual Muslims to conform to “correct” religious practices.

Those working in P/CVE prevention practice and civic education should therefore highlight this overarching goal of the PrE actors and keep it in mind when carrying out a differentiated analysis of the propagated content.

Particularly within Muslim communities, many people are personally affected by the current conflict as they have friends and family members living in the Gaza Strip and other Palestinian territories. The understandable high level of emotion should be pedagogically met with empathy and without any anti-Muslim sentiment.

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