Understanding the Salafi Online Ecosystem:
A Digital Snapshot

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About this report

As part of ISD's Gen Z & The Digital Salafi Ecosystem
project, this report presents the findings from ISD's
data-driven snapshot of the Salafi digital landscape
across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram,
TikTok and a range of standalone websites. This dataset
of almost 3.5 million posts across nearly 1,500 channels
and accounts provides unique insights into the scale,
platform landscape and narrative tone of discussions
within these online spaces.

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Introduction

Like no other generation before them, Generation Z (Gen-Z) have had their social and political life shaped by social media, constant connectivity and on-demand communication. These ever-evolving technologies have not just enabled connection, but also stirred up political polarisation and social clashes around issues of identity that have particularly affected young Muslims growing up in the shadow of the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing 'Global War on Terror'.

While ISIS and its so-called 'caliphate' may have been territorially defeated, there is a continuing ideological threat and morphing patterns of mobilisation targeting young people, especially online. Regressive movements and ideas are outpacing open, pluralistic interpretations of Islam, not only because of a skewed digital playing field, but also because there is little wider understanding of the identity struggle that is unfolding. Salafism has proven highly attractive to young people as an emerging youth counterculture, with its provocative black-and-white value system, strong group identity and profound contrast with the orthodoxies of the Islamic establishment.

Despite this, decision-makers lack a genuine understanding of the online environment where a broad ecosystem of Salafi-inspired groups — from apolitical to activist to jihadist — have a near-monopoly on search queries around religion[1] and dominate the field of theological videos on YouTube,[2] while sectarian clerics with reaches of millions are influencing audiences globally. [3] Not restrained by its supposed rejection of (religious) 'innovation', Salafism has constantly adapted to the media of its times, to appeal to new generations and new constituencies. Today, the internet and social networks are proving to be powerful forces for proselytisation. Salafis use the internet for a range of purposes — to provide ideological resources, as a platform for communicating and devising strategies, to raise money and to recruit new members.

While research has often narrowly focused on the sharp end of Salafi activity, such as proscribed terrorist groups like al-Qaeda and ISIS, our understanding of the broader Salafi ecosystem is lacking. Without a data-driven understanding of their online space and how it shapes and is shaped by Gen-Z, any responses or counter-efforts run the risk of being misplaced, ineffectual or, even worse, counterproductive.

To fill this gap, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) has undertaken a one-year research programme analysing Salafism's online footprint, with a focus on Gen-Z audiences. As part of these efforts, ISD used data analytics tools to map Salafi communities in Arabic, English and German across a range of platforms to capture the scale, nature, actors and narratives of this broad online ecosystem.

Through this research, ISD sought to answer a number of questions to provide an in-depth, fine-grained analysis of the Salafi online ecosystem: What are the key platforms used by Salafi communities online? How influential are different subgroups within the movement? What are their key narratives and grievances, and how, if at all, do they differ between Arabic, English and German communities? What are the key formats used by online influencers to convey their messages to existing and potential followers? And what are the emerging trends affecting Gen-Z Muslims in particular, including the resonance of specific subcultures, narratives and youth-oriented platforms?

In this project, ISD has sought to go beyond the usual narrow focus on violent manifestations of Salafism. While exact proportions are difficult to estimate, many researchers have pointed out that the vast majority of Salafi adherents do not advocate violence,[4] and many if not most Salafis abstain from political activism (although the latter point is more contested).[5] Yet Salafism is still often framed and perceived as an exclusionary, regressive and dogmatic movement. ISD therefore took a data-driven approach to identifying potentially harmful expressions of Salafism online.

This allowed us to analyse the groups that are being targeted by Salafis; against whom they justify discrimination, exclusion or, at the extreme end, even violence; how frequently Salafis use dehumanising, sexist, racist or threatening language; and what, if any, differences there are between Arabic-, English- and German-speaking Salafi communities online. This paper focuses on the findings of ISD's digital research into the Salafi online ecosystem during 2020 and 2021, which sought to answer these important questions. The methodological approaches adopted are described in a separate methodological annex.

Key findings

- **Much of Salafi content is anodyne and geared towards identity formation and practical religious guidance.** Two-thirds of Salafi material coded by researchers discussed general religious concepts and activities, while 9% discussed specific political grievances, such as anti-Muslim racism and the oppression of Muslim populations around the world.

- **The number of daily messages from Salafi accounts more than doubled between October 2019 and July 2021.**[6] While there was an increase of more than 112% in the number of Arabic Salafi messages across social media platforms in this period, English Salafis posted 110% more content per day in 2021 than they did in 2019, compared to a 77% increase among German Salafis.

- **The online reach of Salafis is growing across languages.** Followers of English-speaking Salafis increased by 35%, compared to 24% for German and 19% for Arabic Salafis over the research period. Arabic-language accounts represented the largest overall online Salafi community, with 117 million followers across all platforms (although we are likely counting some of the same people multiple times across accounts and platforms). There were 109 million followers of English accounts, while German accounts had 3 million followers.

- **Online Salafism is increasingly a cross-platform ecosystem.** Salafi influencers reach millions of followers across mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, but are also communicating and growing their audiences on smaller alternative platforms such as Telegram.

- **Salafi content is becoming increasingly popular on Gen-Z-focused platforms such as TikTok**, where influencers with a reach in the millions make full use of the platform's features to amplify and promote sectarian ideological narratives.

- **Salafi clerics and influencers, both formally educated and self-appointed, offer their followers easily accessible and comprehensive online guidance for all aspects of their lives.** Using a variety of formats and platforms, from lengthy sermons and interactive Q&A sessions to snappy TikTok clips, Salafi preachers offer answers to all aspects of life, from the spiritual to the political and the private sphere. They provide often binary, black-and-white responses about the supposedly definitive Islamic stance on complex questions concerning issues such as gender roles, family life, sexuality, forms of entertainment and education.

- **While only 8% of posts were classified as 'toxic' (e.g. threatening, dehumanising or othering), different types of 'toxicity' were found across the Salafi ecosystem.** From sectarianism to misogynistic content to rejections of democracy, our bespoke 'ontology' of Salafi toxicity revealed a clear ideological disposition towards 'othering' attitudes in the data, which was highly dependent on political and social context.

- **The targets of Salafi toxicity varied across languages.** English- and German-speaking communities target non-Muslim out-groups more often than they target Muslim out-groups, while the reverse is true for Arabic-speaking Salafis online. This suggests that political and social context is key in the selection of the out-groups targeted.

- **Mainstream social media platforms continue to struggle with 'post-organisational' violent extremist Islamist content.** Despite advocating violence, ideologues such as the notorious scholars of the al Shu'aybi School, who justified 9/11, and grey zone groups such as Tauhid Berlin appear to be able to operate on mainstream platforms until legal authorities officially move against them. Other companies, such as TikTok, seem to have similar struggles in keeping their platforms continuously and consistently free from harmful Salafi accounts they have previously banned.

The findings of this report show that Salafism is on the rise, but it also documents a range of potential reasons for the increasing digital popularity of the movement.

Firstly, Salafi influencers, activists, scholars and preachers who use the online space to advance their cause are adaptive and innovative. They skilfully tailor their formats, narratives and approaches to specific, often younger, audiences and platforms.
Secondly, Salafis are able to tap into the discontent caused by legitimate grievances about anti-Muslim racism, restrictions on freedom of religion and the oppression of Muslims internationally.

Thirdly, tech platforms struggle to appropriately respond to the different types of Salafi content, from the merely divisive to the outright violent, especially when the messengers are not directly connected to proscribed terrorist groups.

Lastly, Salafism is able to offer those striving for certainty and guidance a strong moral code, a sense of belonging and a countercultural identity. Adolescence and young adulthood are important developmental phases for forming an identity and find meaning and a sense of belonging.[7] The quest for identity and belonging in modern societies that are marked by fragmentation, ambivalence and uncertainty can be daunting to those striving for guidance and stability. In this context, Salafism's straightforward, binary, black-and-white answers on how to have a life worth living can be highly attractive.

Findings

Community size and reach across platforms

The sections that follow provide an overview of the size, reach and activity of Salafi communities across social media platforms. The findings suggest that a dynamic cross-platform ecosystem, formed by a broad range of Salafi-inspired groups, has not just become more active but also increased its reach during the research period. However, Arabic and English Salafis have much greater numbers of followers than German Salafis, with high-profile influencers reaching audiences in the (tens of) millions, compared to the hundreds of thousands reached by the most popular German influencers.

The case studies in this section highlight that while Salafi content is popular on social media, including emergent Gen-Z-focused platforms such as TikTok, stand-alone websites still play a major role in the digital Salafi ecosystem. This suggests that Salafi digital mobilisation continues to survive, evolve and adapt to new opportunities emerging online.

Based on the approach outlined in the data gathering section (see the Methodological Appendix), ISD researchers identified the following dataset of Salafi accounts and websites across the different platforms of interest:

The identification of Arabic-, English- and German-language Salafi communities across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, Telegram and TikTok, as well as stand-alone Salafi websites, revealed a number of interesting overall trends.

For example, overall, the Arabic accounts have much greater levels of activity on most platforms. This difference is particularly pronounced on Facebook and Telegram, although the pattern is also found on Instagram and YouTube. While English-language Salafis are the most active on Twitter, the overall number of tweets is comparatively low across languages.

Salafi YouTube comment sections are much more active in Arabic and English, with both having almost three times as many comments per video as German Salafi channels. Interestingly, ISD researchers were able to identify more German- than Arabic- and English-language Salafi accounts on TikTok.

	Arabic	English	German
Facebook groups/pages	121	49	68
Facebook posts	1,526,042	37,501	47,721
Instagram accounts	122	151	94
Instagram posts	103,153	47,048	14,258
Twitter accounts	19	72	18
Tweets	19,216	33,580	5,171
YouTube channels	82	63	91
YouTube videos	7,560	6,452	4,622
YouTube comments	651,435	545,813	139,073
Telegram channels/groups	96	54	75
Telegram posts	229,012	30,557	19,353
TikTok accounts	70	50	116
Stand-alone websites	32	39	63

Table 1: Number of Arabic-, English- and German-language Salafi accounts and levels of activity across different platforms
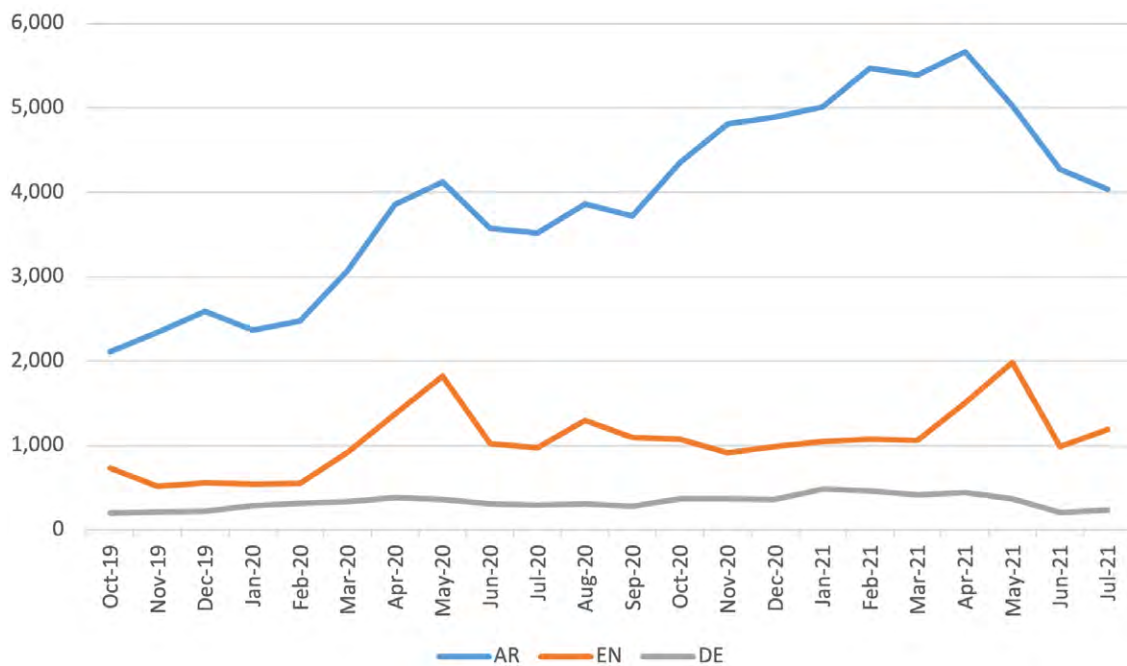
Figure 1: Number of Arabic-, English- and German-language Salafi messages per day

In terms of volume, Salafi messages per day more than doubled between October 2019 and July 2021. While there was a 112% increase in the number of Arabic Salafi messages across social media platforms in this period, English Salafis posted 110% more content per day in 2021 than they did in 2019, compared to a 77% increase for German Salafis.

Salafi accounts also increased their online reach across languages during the period of study. The number of followers of the five most popular English-speaking Salafi accounts on Facebook, Instagram and YouTube grew by 35% between October 2019 and July 2021, compared to 24% for German and 19% for Arabic Salafis.[8] However, Arabic and English Salafis had considerably higher follower numbers than German Salafis overall. Based on both the account with the biggest reach and the cumulative follower numbers, we can estimate that Arabic Salafis have 23–117 million followers, more than either English (22–109 million) or German (320,000–3 million). It should be emphasised that these numbers do not mean of course that all of the followers of these channels are adherents of Salafism. It is not possible to systematically assess how many researchers, journalists or non-Salafi Muslims follow these accounts. Similarly, there is no reliable data on how much the audiences between communities and influencers overlap, and how many users have multiple accounts on different platforms.

On Facebook, YouTube and TikTok, the three platforms where German Salafis have the most significant audience, Arabic and English Salafis still have at least twice as many, and in some cases over 50 times the Germans' reach (including Arabic Salafis on Facebook as well as English Salafis on YouTube). The next section provides detailed outlines of the specific platform landscape of digital Salafism.

Case study 1:
Salafi content on TikTok

The Chinese social media platform TikTok is hugely popular among Gen-Z users. Due to the platform's limited data analysis functions, ISD undertook an ethnographic scoping exercise to examine how Salafi preachers, content creators and supporters use TikTok. This case study indicates that Salafi content is highly popular on TikTok, that Salafi proponents make full use of the platform's features to amplify their ideas, and that there may be a significant gap in TikTok's enforcement actions against problematic users.

ISD used a 'snowball' methodology to build out from the TikTok account of a prominent Salafi influencer, finding 50 relevant English-language channels of varying sizes expressing support for various strands of Salafism, a number of which had follower numbers in the millions.

Of these, ISD found that 32 accounts featured external links on their profiles. Salafi TikTok accounts make frequent use of this feature, and this perhaps illustrates that TikTok is now central to the social media strategies of leading online Salafi preachers/activists. Furthermore, as is evident from the inclusion of crowdfunding or donation links among these accounts, there are also signs that TikTok may be regarded as a prime promotional tool for soliciting fundraising or financing for various efforts. Like any other user on the platform, Salafi TikTok accounts make full use of the platform's many features, including, hashtags (#salafi has 50.6 million views), share functions, video effects and music.

Audio is central to the user experience on TikTok. Songs, music, clipped fragments of TV shows or films, the sounds from a camera recording — these are all part of TikTok Sounds. Sounds are used to express creativity and create trends, and could also be used strategically by channel creators to promote their content.

For example, among our sample was a TikTok channel that posted various clips of the Zimbabwean preacher Mufti Menk speaking in front of a congregation.9 The audio from these videos was often shared as a Sound and formed the basis of individual clusters of videos. The example below shows one such video of Menk, on the left, and on the right are some of the new videos posted by other users that make use of the original audio to spread Menk's message and amplify this content. TikTok Sounds operate independently of videos. If the original Menk video was removed from TikTok for any reason, these supplemental videos would remain live, and other users would still be able to use this Sound in new videos — even after the original had been removed.
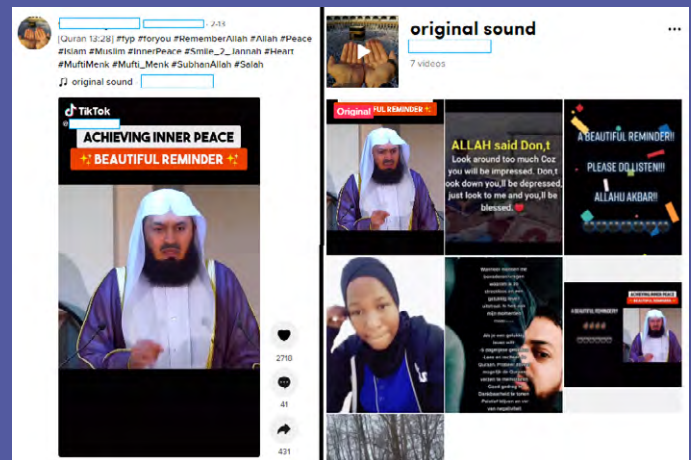

Figure 2: Video screenshots showing TikTok's Sounds being used to promote Salafi content on the platform

Aboo Hafsah, for example — a British Salafi preacher and content creator with a number of accounts across social media platforms and 98,000 followers on TikTok — was banned for 'multiple Community Guidelines violations', according to a banner now visible on his account on TikTok.[10]

Despite the ban, when viewing Hafsah's account on the TikTok app, links to his Instagram and YouTube accounts are still live, and users can simply click through to these platforms without hindrance. This double standard indicates a significant gap in TikTok's enforcement actions against users held to have contravened the platform's standards.

A small-scale manual review by ISD also found that content originally posted by Hafsah and since used in subsequent videos is still live on the platform. Such related videos are made with the Duet feature (which allows creators to record new content alongside existing TikTok videos) and the Stitch feature (which offers creators the opportunity to crop existing videos and add their own part to create a new recording that they then publish on their own account). However, the limitations to systematic research on TikTok mean it is impossible to determine how much content from the banned account still remains live on the platform or the nature of this content.

Finally, Hafsah has returned with an almost identical username, simply adding an underscore to his original 'handle'. Less than one month after posting its first video, it had amassed over 15,700 followers and posted 74 videos, with this content receiving at least 205,600 likes and 2.1 million views.

Facebook

Facebook remains one of the most popular platforms for Salafism online, allowing users to share quotes from scripture and religious authorities, sermons, and theological and life advice with relatively sizeable audiences. The list of Facebook groups and pages in our dataset comprised 121 accounts posting in Arabic, 49 posting in English, and 68 posting in German. During the research period between October 2019 and July 2021, Arabic-language groups and pages generated 1,526,042 posts, compared to 37,501 posts from English Salafis and 47,721 posts by German Salafis. The five largest Arabic Facebook pages had an average of 7,080,000 followers, compared to 8,380,000 for English Salafis and 150,200 followers for German Salafis.
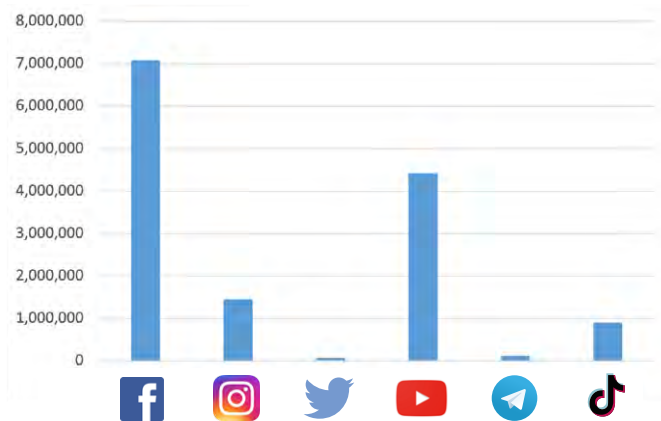
Twitter

While Twitter is generally less important for Arabic and German Salafis, the platform is still used to share inspirational quotes, as well as to attempt to engage in and influence contemporary political debates concerning grievances shared within Salafi communities. On Twitter, ISD researchers collected data from 19 Arabic, 72 English and 18 German accounts. The Arabic accounts collectively posted 19,216 tweets during the research period, while English-speaking accounts posted 33,580 tweets and German accounts 5,171 tweets. The five largest Arabic Twitter accounts had an average of 75,000 followers, compared to 1,965,200 for English Salafis and 4,200 followers for German Salafis.

Figure 3: Average reach of the five Arabic Salafis with most followers across platforms

Figure 4: Average reach of the five English Salafis with most followers across platforms

Instagram

Instagram is increasingly popular among Salafis. Compared to more text-heavy platforms, content is usually more concise and visual. For example, images using quotes from scripture and religious authorities are commonly posted on Instagram, with Salafis employing professional graphic design and typography, rather than posting lengthy treatises or sermons (as they often do on Facebook, YouTube and Telegram). On Instagram, researchers analysed 122 Arabic-language accounts, 151 English accounts, and 94 German accounts. The Arabic Salafi accounts produced 103,153 posts within the observed time frame, compared to 47,048 posts from English-language accounts and 14,258 posts by German-language pages. The five largest Arabic Instagram pages had an average of 1,460,000 followers, compared to 1,250,800 for English Salafis and 43,600 followers for German Salafis.

YouTube

YouTube's importance within the online Salafi ecosystem cannot be overstated. The follower numbers of prominent preachers and activists are significant, and influencers draw on a wide variety of original and at times lively and interactive formats to maximise YouTube's opportunities for proselytisation. Beyond sermons, speeches and Q&A sessions, high-profile Salafi influencers also use the platform to directly report from political and religious events and broadcast missionary efforts. ISD researchers collected data from 82 Arabic-language, 63 English and 91 German YouTube channels. The Arabic channels collectively posted 7,560 videos, which received 651,435 comments, compared to 6,452 videos with 545,813 comments for English Salafis and 4,622 videos with 139,073 comments for German Salafis. The five largest Arabic YouTube channels had an average of 4,420,000 subscribers, compared to 1,940,000 for English Salafis and 80,800 for German Salafis.

Telegram

While Telegram's use by Salafi-jihadi and far-right extremist groups has been documented previously, a wider spectrum of Salafi groups and individuals also use the platform to communicate with their followers.[11] For Salafis, Telegram serves as the ideal platform for a range of purposes, such as advertising courses and seminars to their core followers, and publishing in-depth responses to theological questions, long-form descriptions of Islamic history and commentary on religious scripture. Even though much of the material is not overtly political or violent, Telegram is also used as a content repository for Salafi-jihadist material that channel operators may fear would be removed from other platforms. On Telegram, ISD researchers analysed 96 Arabic channels, 54 English channels and 75 German channels. The Arabic channels collectively created 229,012 posts in the observed time frame, compared to 30,557 posts by English and 19,353 posts by German Salafis. The five largest Arabic Telegram channels had an average of 120,800 subscribers, compared to 9,200 for English Salafis and 2,400 for German Salafis.

Figure 5: Average reach of the five German Salafis with most followers across platforms

TikTok

Gen-Z's favourite platform — TikTok — is popular in Salafi circles as well. Salafi influencers do not just share videos by well-known preachers, but make full use of the platform's features, such as Sounds, Duet and Stitch, to amplify and promote their ideas (see Case study 1). ISD identified 70 Arabic accounts, 50 English accounts and 116 German accounts on TikTok. The five largest Arabic TikTok accounts had an average of 906,000 followers, compared to 214,000 for English Salafis and 97,200 for German Salafis.
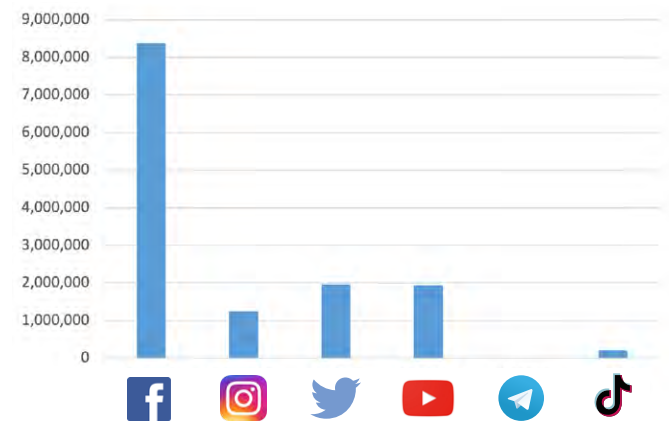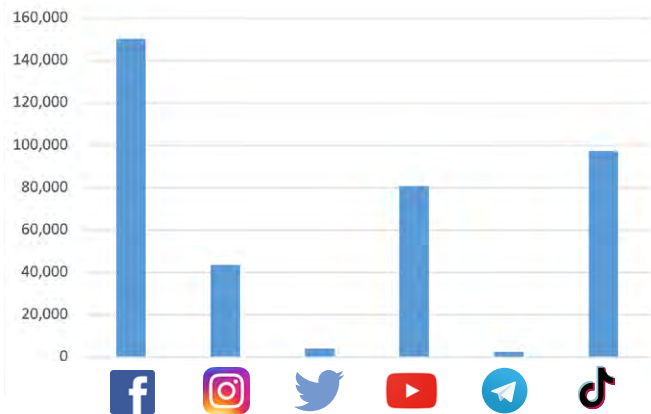
Case Study 2:
Website analysis

Outside social media, stand-alone websites still play a major role within the digital Salafi ecosystem. Three of the main types of Salafi websites are dawah, Q&A and refutation websites.

Dawah websites provide advice on the practical aspects of dawah (proselytisation) including instructions on how to recruit volunteers or communicate, present and debate confidently and effectively. A UK based dawah organisation, S.A.L.A.M Initiative, which is associated with the popular preachers Ali Dawah, Mohamed Hijab and Hamza Andreas Tzortis (who is not known as a Salafi), specifically produces content for 'Muslim youths and Muslims who are experiencing a crisis of faith'. Similarly, websites such as Knowledge College or Sirat Seminary advertise religious courses targeting adult Muslims living in the West.

There are also pages which offer both in-person and online courses (e.g. IMAN, Islam Study, Islamictutors, EVIDENCE) taught by men in their early 30s and 40s who received their Islamic Studies degrees in Europe, potentially enabling Gen-Z Muslims to identify with them more than with older scholars teaching at mosques who have usually received their degrees in Middle Eastern countries.

Salafi preaching websites are a form of *dawah* towards Muslims, with curated content outlining the tenets of Salafism. Most of them have separate sections dedicated to *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence), *hadith* (sayings of the prophet Mohammed), *aqeeda* (creed), *manhaj* (methodology), the Quran, *dawah* (calling to Islam) and *tawheed* (monotheism). Overall, such websites are less focused on the conversion of non-Muslims and are more concerned with attracting Muslims to Salafism.

Q&A websites mainly target Muslims who may not be well versed in religion or who have a limited understanding of various theological traditions. The advice offered will reference scholarly texts but is delivered in a simple manner to reach as many individuals as possible. The goal is to provide quick and easily digestible answers to questions about social and religious matters.

For example, the interactive website Islamqa.com was set up to facilitate communication with ordinary Muslims, who can send a question after registering and creating an account. Sheikh Muhammad Saalih al-Munajjid, a well-known Salafi scholar who studied under Sheikh ibn Baaz and Uthaymeen, created Islamqa.com in 1996 and still oversees the religious advice provided via the site.

Refutation websites issue warnings against other Muslims that deviate from the Salafi *manhaj* (methodology), primarily accusing them of idolatry and undermining the Muslim *ummah* (community), while condemning 'innovation' (*bidah*). Salafis regularly refer to a *hadith* attributed to the prophet Mohammed, claiming that the Muslim *ummah* will split into 73 sects, all of which will end up in hellfire except for one.

Websites typically criticise what they term *khawarij* (outsiders), who are regularly associated with jihadi groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, followers of the Muslim Brotherhood, Sufis and Shia. Some websites are set up solely to refute extremism, terrorism and violence generally or the Islamic State and its supporters specifically. Most of the sources used to refute violent extremism rely on fatwas made by Salafi scholars who reject rebellion or revolution against political leaders and renounce violence to achieve political goals, such as Sheikh al-Fawzan, al-Madkhali and Ibn Uthaymeen.

These Salafi websites serve different purposes within the wider movement. While *dawah* websites are geared towards attracting new followers and spreading Salafi views to broader audiences, Q&A websites are also designed to strengthen the beliefs of those who already part of the movement. Lastly, refutation websites demarcate the boundaries of the movement, and create a strong in-group identity through their condemnations of various out-groups. While social media is crucial for direct communication with followers, and Gen-Z Muslims in particular, these stand-alone websites are important as more in-depth resources to attract new followers, and strengthen the in-group and its beliefs while distinguishing the Salafi movement from the outside world.

Key Narratives and Formats in Online Salafism

Social movements rely on narratives to make sense of the world. In order to understand the appeal of Salafism to Gen-Z Muslims online, ISD therefore sought to identify their key narratives and grievances, and how these differ across the communities using Arabic, English and German. ISD also attempted to pinpoint messages targeting and attacking different out-groups to identify those potentially at risk of discrimination, social exclusion, harassment or attacks. These out-groups may include non-Muslims, whether they are followers of other religions, atheists or ex-Muslims, or Muslims viewed by Salafis as 'heretical' or too liberal.

Beyond understanding the messages themselves, this research additionally sought to understand how messages are conveyed. Therefore, this section also looks at the key formats used by these communities to convey their messages to existing and potential followers online.

In our findings, discussion of religious concepts and activities emerged as, by far, the most prominent theme among Salafis online. However, when politics are discussed, Salafis are able to tap into the discontent caused by legitimate grievances about anti-Muslim racism, restrictions on freedom of religion and the oppression of Muslims internationally.

The case studies in this section provide in-depth examples of the broad spectrum of themes discussed by Salafis, from content focused on gender, sex, relationships and family life through to takfiri (excommunication) content spread by violent groups.

Our findings also show that Salafis are highly adaptive and innovative online, skilfully tailoring formats, narratives and approaches to specific, often younger, audiences striving for certainty and guidance. Through straightforward, binary, black-and-white answers to questions of religion and morality, Salafism offers a strong ethical code that also has countercultural appeal because it allows young people, in particular, to transgress and rebel against mainstream norms.

The results in the following sections are based on the coding of randomised samples of Arabic-, English- and German-language Salafi posts, tweets, videos and comments from Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter and Telegram into a category framework established through an ad hoc coding exercise (an approach outlined in the Methodological Appendix).

Narratives of Salafis online

Thematically, the discussion of religious concepts and activities emerged as, by far, the most prominent category across languages and most platforms, totalling 63% of all posts. When compared across languages, Arabic Salafis discussed religious concepts even more than their English and German counterparts, ranging from 65% of posts on Twitter to 89% on Instagram. In the samples of English messages, discussions of religious concepts and activities ranged from 49% on Twitter to 76% on Instagram, and between 20% (Twitter) and 60% (Instagram) among German Salafis. Given that Salafism is primarily a religious movement, this emphasis should not come as a surprise.

Messages focused on religious concepts and activities, such as the unity of God, the afterlife, prayer or Ramadan, account for a much greater share of the total than messages about overtly political issues, which only account for an average of 9% across languages and platforms. This suggests a primary focus on religious rather than political issues, at least in public communications.

ISD researchers identified by far the most messages concerning out-groups among German Salafis (averaging 17% across platforms) followed by Arabic- (9%) and English-speaking (4%) communities. Similarly, German Salafis (19%) aired political grievances much more frequently than their English (5%) and Arabic (2%) peers. The analysis of political grievances voiced by German Salafis across different platforms showed

that domestic issues such as anti-Muslim racism played a prominent role (26% of posts about political grievances). The emphasis on anti-Muslim racism is notable for two reasons. Firstly, this is a grievance that will resonate widely among Gen-Z Muslims in Germany, and potentially allow Salafis to reach audiences far beyond those who are already interested in their ideology. Secondly, it has been widely documented that Islamist extremists have strategically used experiences of anti-Muslim racism to make the case that joining their movement is the only alternative in societies supposedly intrinsically hostile to Muslims and their faith.[12]

The Israel-Palestine conflict was a major cause for concern across the spectrum of German Salafis (referenced in 21% of posts about political grievances). It is interesting to note that this issue was more frequently discussed within our sample than Western foreign policy, the plight of the Uighurs in Xinjiang or criticism of France over its support for Samuel Paty combined (13% of German posts about political grievances). Both Arabic- and German-speaking Salafis frequently called on their followers to support Salafi-jihadists who are imprisoned either in Germany or abroad, usually by attending trials, writing letters of support or keeping them in their prayers. This suggests that, alongside tapping into widely shared and legitimate grievances to communicate with broader audiences, some Salafi communities also focus on causes that are likely of greater interest to people who are already supportive of extremist groups.
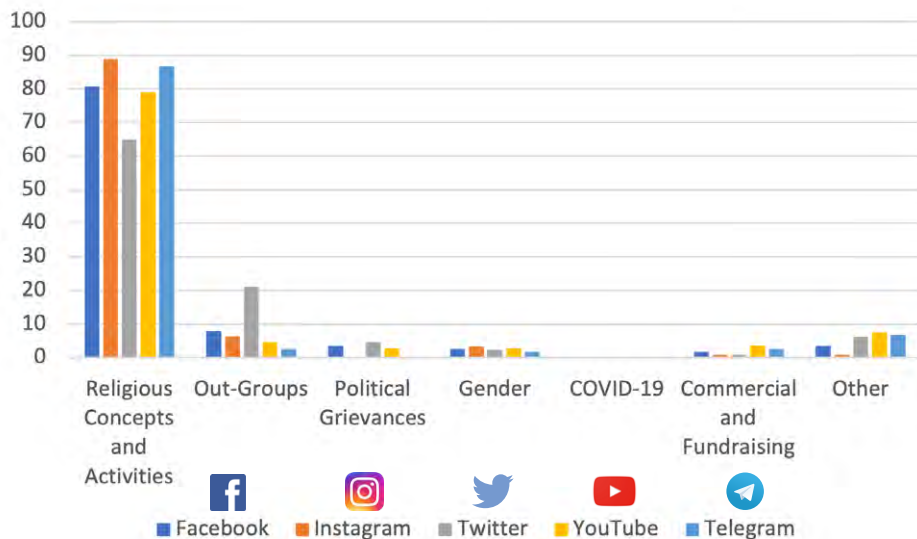

Figure 6: Narratives among Arabic Salafis across platforms

While the overall share of messages by English-speaking Salafis which either attacked out-groups or aired political grievances was relatively low, it should be noted that the two platforms with most posts about political grievances also frequently targeted out-groups (Telegram and YouTube). The two platforms that simultaneously had the fewest political messages and most discussion of religious concepts (Facebook and Instagram) also had fewer messages targeting out-groups. Similarly, Twitter was the platform with the least discussion of religious concepts and activities, and the biggest share of political discussion, as well as the most messages from Arabic-speaking Salafis targeting out-groups.

For German Salafis, there does not necessarily seem to be as strong a correlation between the discussion of political grievances and attacks on out-groups. While the very small community of German Salafis on Twitter are highly political compared to other platforms (52% of posts) and relatively rarely discuss religious concepts (20% of all tweets), their YouTube videos most frequently target out-groups, but focus little on political grievances. While there are exceptions to this pattern, our findings indicate that attacks on out-groups are more common in Salafi communities that focus on politics comparatively often, rather than those who merely discuss religious ideas.

As identified during the toxicity analysis (detailed in the next section), Salafis living in a non-Muslim-majority context more frequently target non-Muslims than other Muslims. This included messages targeting followers of other religions, such as Christianity and Judaism, as well as atheists and ex-Muslims.

Arabic Salafis, on the other hand, seemed more concerned with criticising Muslims deemed to be 'heretical', too liberal and, in rare cases, too extreme (e.g. by comparing contemporary takfirists to the early Islamic Kharijite sect). This suggests that the political and social context is key in the selection of out-groups. The proportion of messages attacking various out-groups differed significantly between platforms: for example, only 3% of Telegram but 21% of Twitter messages by Arabic Salafis were coded as 'othering'.

Discussions of gender, sex, relationships, family life and marriage were also a less common theme than religious concepts and activities, though such posts did constitute around one in ten German-language posts on YouTube, Facebook and Telegram, as well as English YouTube videos (see Case study 3 on norms around gender, family and relationships for further analysis).
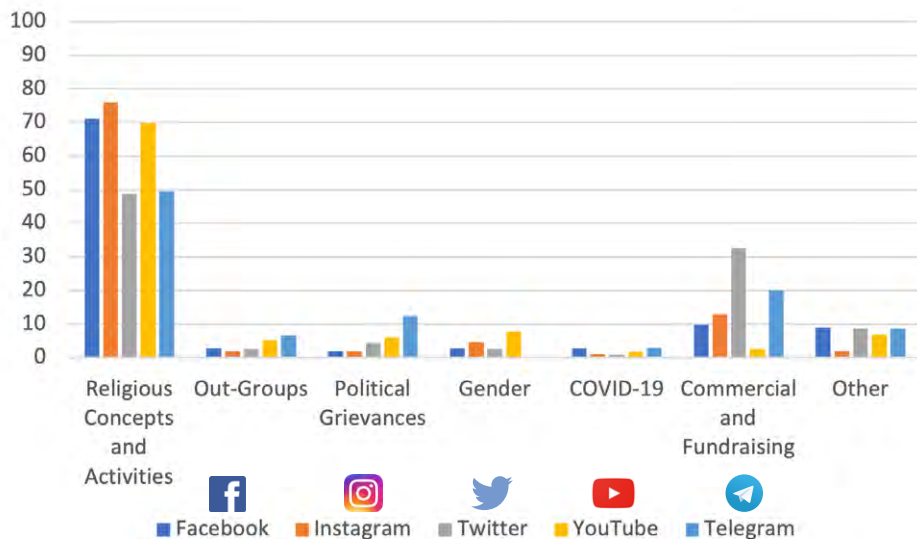
Figure 7: Narratives among English Salafis across platforms
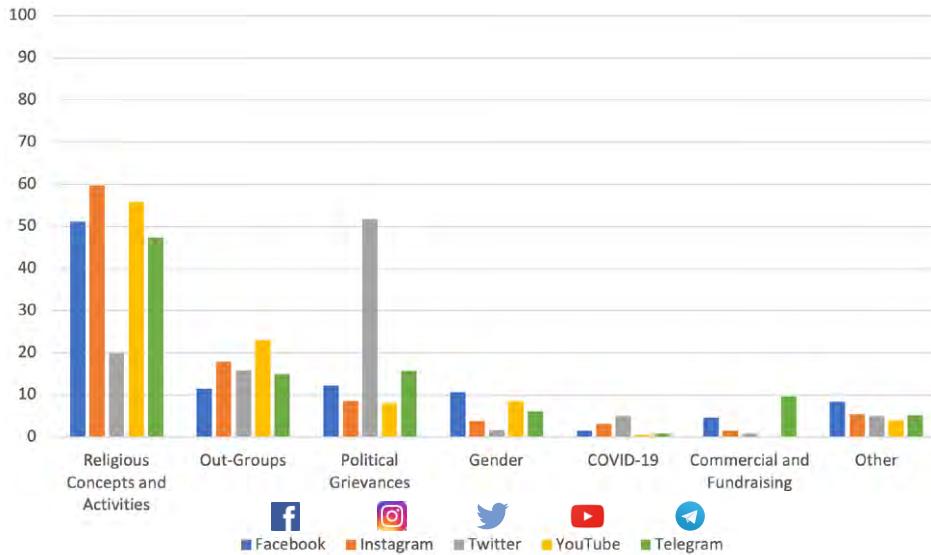
Figure 8: Narratives among German Salafis across platforms

One in three English-language posts on Twitter and one in five on Telegram included commercial advertisements and fundraising calls, including publicity for Islamic courses and to raise finance for various causes. Such fundraisers and advertisements played a less prominent role among German Salafis, accounting for fewer than 10% of posts across all platforms investigated. Further research could unpack the nature of the courses promoted and the amount of revenue that can be raised for Salafi groups through such messaging.

1 in 3
English-language posts
on **Twitter** and

1 in 5
on **Telegram**

included **commercial advertisements** and **fundraising calls**

Case study 3:
Norms around gender, family and relationships

Gender roles, sex, relationships, family life and marriage are crucial themes about which Gen-Z followers of Salafi preachers are looking online for clear guidance. Through straightforward, binary, black-and-white answers about how to live life and what makes an authentic, 'real' Muslim, Salafism offers a strong moral code, but also countercultural appeal as it allows young people, in particular, to transgress and push back against the religious and societal mainstream. It should be noted that Salafi positions on these matters can have some overlaps with traditionalist and conservative Islamic views, and are therefore not exclusive to Salafi communities.

Many websites that focus on Salafi creed contain a section on family, outlining a woman's role and rights according to Salafi teachings. For example, fiqh is used to argue that women cannot travel (by plane) without a mahram (legal guardian), or that women should only talk to members of the opposite sex if there is a purpose such as asking a knowledge-based question. Other websites detail rules about how women should dress, how to behave during menstruation and the benefits of polygamy. Moreover, certain websites specifically call on women to join the dawah effort as they are more likely to influence members of their own sex.

Another theme that emerged across platforms was marital advice. Preachers provide guidance and tips on how to maintain a strong marriage and respect the needs of your wife or husband. A strong and stable marriage is emphasised as an important pillar of family life. One of the key questions asked is whether women are allowed to refuse sexual intercourse with their husband. The German Salafi preacher Abdul Baraa, for example, argued that sex was a fundamental right within marriage, and that he was not interested in the objections of 'kuffar' who marry just to 'save taxes'. While he admitted that husbands should not violently enforce their right to sex, he added that women committed a 'sin' by refusing sex for 'egoistic reasons', and that men were allowed to divorce such a wife and remarry.

As these examples show, Salafi views on gender issues can be highly prescriptive, imposing clear commands, duties and restrictions on women in particular. On issues including the right to education, clothing, freedom of movement and sex, Salafism offers binary, black-and-white responses about the supposedly definitive Islamic stance towards these vital aspects of

life concerning gender roles, family life and sexuality. These stances leave Salafi adherents little room for non-traditional forms of sexuality, gender expression or self-determination. It is worth emphasising again that Salafi positions on these matters are sometimes shared by traditionalist and conservative strains of Islam. Rather than fundamentally Salafi positions, these should therefore be seen as positions held by Salafis.

Figure 9: Salafi advice on how women should dress. Left: 'This is the true path, my dear, so pay attention and be careful, may Allah protect you.' Right: 'I wonder about some men who cover their cars fearing scratches, dust and sunlight, but they don't cover their wives and girls fearing Allah.'

Figure 10: Salafi advice against the sexes mixing in public spaces Left: 'In this matter, I have come to the conclusion that the woman is not allowed to study at a mixed [sex] university.' Right: 'Ibn Uthaymin, may Allah have mercy on him, said: "If men and women are mixed, then there is no prestige for men from women, no shame for women for men."'

Case study 4:
Salafi-jihadist group Tauhid Berlin

In February 2021, the Interior Senator of Berlin banned the Salafi-jihadist group Tauhid Berlin (also known as Jama'atu Berlin). The authorities claimed that the group supported ISIS and opposed the 'constitutional order' as well as 'the idea of peaceful coexistence between peoples.'[13] Tauhid Berlin had actively spread its ideology using a number of platforms, namely Instagram, YouTube and Telegram, while also operating its own website. The website and Instagram page were immediately shut down in the aftermath of the ban, and YouTube quickly followed suit (a previous YouTube channel appeared to have been taken down by the platform in June 2020). Even though Tauhid Berlin never had a major online audience, the 18 videos on its YouTube channel, all overtly promoting extreme takfiri positions, had amassed almost 25,000 views over the course of less than a year. Materials archived by ISD researchers form an interesting case study of the group's online presence.

According to its self-description, Tauhid Berlin wanted to provide useful information to Muslims, especially in relation to refuting other Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood, the Murjiites (an early Islamic group who believed in postponing the judgement of major sins, instead leaving such a judgement to God alone) and the Jahmiyyah (an early Islamic group who believed the Quran was created and who denied Allah's names and attributes).

This focus on declaring other Muslims to be unbelievers was the main theme of Tauhid Berlin's online presence. Other strands, organisations and individuals that were excommunicated by the group included Shia Muslims, the Mu'tazilites (a rationalist school in early Islamic history who were influenced by Greek philosophy), Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdoğan and German Salafi preacher Pierre Vogel. Tauhid Berlin viewed takfir as a key duty for Muslims, stating that Allah will judge those who fail to excommunicate other Muslims. Following the authority of 'false' teachers was not viewed as a legitimate excuse. On its Telegram channel, Tauhid Berlin justified its broad application of excommunication:

We believe that any country in which the laws and rulings of Kufr prevail instead of the rulings of Islam is Dārul-Kufr... We believe that secularism, with all its various banners and doctrines such as populism, nationalism, communism and Baathism, is kufr, nullifies Islām and expels one from the religion.

On the other hand, Tauhid Berlin favourably cited and called for the 'liberation' of Salafi-jihadist ideologues such as Sulaymān al-ʿAlwān (see Case study 8 about the al Shu'aybi School) and the German preacher Abu Walaa.[14] Its combination of advocating on behalf of violent ideologues imprisoned for supporting al-Qaeda (al-ʿAlwān) and ISIS (Abu Walaa) alongside a particularly insular and broad application of takfir made Tauhid Berlin an especially extreme group.

As this case study indicates, mainstream platforms continue to struggle to proactively identify violent extremist Islamist content. Tauhid Berlin, a group whose takfiri ideology likely limited its mainstream appeal, was able to operate on mainstream platforms until it was classified as a threat to the German constitutional order as well as a national security concern.

Formats used by Salafis online

Sermons and speeches constituted the most common format in the dataset, accounting for one-third of all content. This number was especially high among Arabic-speaking Salafis, where 55% of messages were based around speeches, a significantly higher number than in German (22%) and English (20%) Salafi content.

Presentations and Q&A sessions were unsurprisingly very prominent on the video-sharing platform YouTube (39% in English, 61% in German and 93% in Arabic). YouTube stood out in a number of other ways, likely owing to the specific opportunities provided by a video-based platform. Among English-speaking Salafis, for example, it hosted not only the highest percentage of sermons and speeches (39%), but also of Q&As (23%), citizen journalism (14%), conversations (7%) and street dawah (5%).[15]

Quotes from the Quran, hadith and religious authorities played a major role on most platforms, making this the second most popular format (constituting 21% of overall content). Broken down by language, such quotes were more common in English (23%) and German (24%) than in Arabic (16%). This trend was particularly pronounced on Instagram, Facebook and Telegram. On Instagram, for example, one-third of the German and Arabic content and over half of English-language posts sampled by ISD researchers were quotes from scripture or religious authorities.

Q&As were a regularly used format for Salafi content, totalling 12% of material. Nasheeds (anthems) were also particularly popular among German accounts, accounting for 13% of Facebook and 24% of Telegram posts.

These findings demonstrate how the functionality of platforms can incentivise production of content in certain formats, but also how Salafis are adept at adjusting their outputs to the demands of audiences on different platforms.
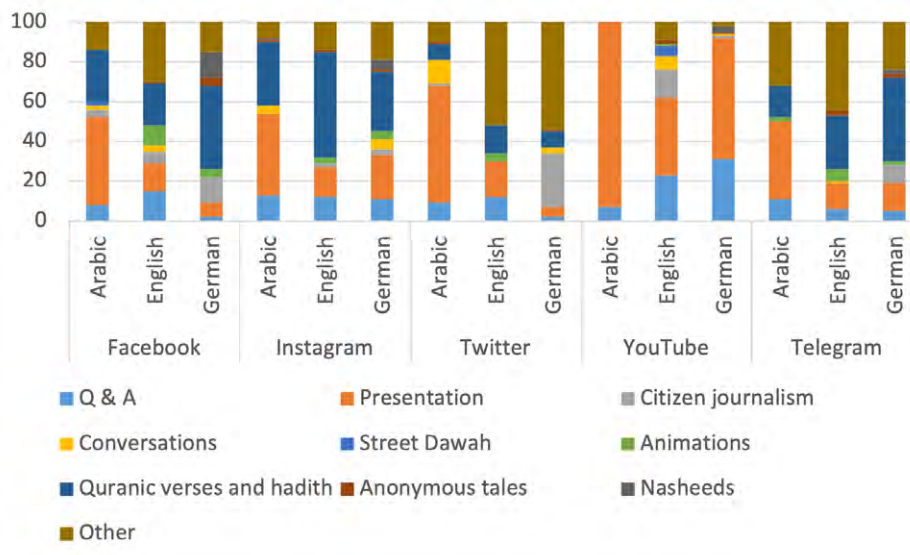

Figure 11: Formats used by Arabic, English and German Salafis across platforms

Case Study 5:
YouTube dawah influencers

YouTube is one of the most popular platforms among Salafis. Previous research has found that a wide variety of formats and channels are available on the video-sharing site, including channels centred around individual preachers, animated formats, anonymous narrations and preacher collectives. Additionally, recommendation algorithms and suggested pages might skew the landscape of religious debate on YouTube in favour of Salafi views.[16] For example, a YouTube user in Germany searching for videos relating to Islam will most likely be confronted with a large number of Salafi channels, which begin to form a filter bubble within the wider YouTube landscape because a user who follows one Salafi channel frequently follows several.[17]

An entire cohort of young, charismatic and tech-savvy YouTube influencers, such as Ali Dawah, Mohammed Hijab, Dawah Man and Shamsi, have been gaining popularity among Gen-Z users through their widely viewed videos. Popular formats include 'street dawah' (as noted earlier, dawah means calling people to Islam through proselytisation) and confrontational debates at Speaker's Corner in London. During such debates, these activists defend their Salafi interpretation of Islam from speakers with opposing views, including feminists, Shia Muslims, atheists, LGBTQ+ people and followers of other religions.

Conversations between these influencers frequently explore other trends, ideas, thinkers and online subcultures. Mohammed Hijab, for example, has discussed the men's rights movement, identifying some overlaps with his own negative views of feminism, and critically (though not entirely unsympathetically) reviewed the Canadian psychologist and author Jordan Peterson's assessment of Islam. The outputs of these young influencers have been highly controversial: during the Israel-Palestine conflict, Hijab and Dawah were accused of antisemitism after confronting Jews in Golders Green (an area in North London known for its large Jewish population) during Shabbat and asking them to denounce the actions of the Israeli government, which these influencers compared to the Holocaust.[18]

Other formats on YouTube may be slightly less cutting edge, but still offer important insights into the way the platform is used to spread Salafi messages. Videos of sermons, for example can often be lengthy, lasting more than an hour and making a quantitative analysis difficult. Videos in which widely recognised Salafi preachers discuss theological questions in depth are nevertheless very popular.

Qualitative analysis of such content can reveal interesting aspects that would likely be beyond quantitative text-based approaches such as the toxicity analysis presented in the next section. One video by the German Salafi preacher Marcel Krass, for example, outlines his understanding of the tenets of Islam. Even though the 70-minute video ranges widely across general religious concepts, Krass ultimately makes the case that human rationality and democracy are unable to solve social issues because they are limited as they change with the norms of the times.

Krass argues that the core of the faith is blind obedience to God's commands, which are not to be questioned either morally or logically. Identifying the subtle antidemocratic message of such content would be difficult to do at scale, and would benefit from more time-intensive qualitative approaches with subject matter experts monitoring and analysing the messages contained in these long-form videos.

Case study 6:
Material for younger internet users

Salafi channels and pages on social media produce content designed for a range of different audiences, including content specifically for audiences even younger than Gen-Z. This cohort has been labelled 'Generation Alpha' and will, according to estimates, number 2 billion people by 2025.[19] This wide-ranging content includes short animated clips that aim to teach children how to act decently, emphasising the importance of behaviour like not littering and performing good deeds.

Other content focuses more on specifically Islamic issues, with educational videos teaching children about Islamic history, such as the life of Saladin, and the birth of the prophet Mohammed or his migration from Mecca to Medina. There are also many animated videos providing lessons on how to read and understand Arabic letters and nouns to help with reading the Quran. The Bayyinah Institute YouTube channel ran a live-streamed series called 'Fajr Club' for children, featuring lessons about Islam mixed with exercises that young viewers could follow.

Overall, much of the content aimed at children is educational. The German self-described 'first official Islamic channel for children' on Telegram, for example, shares children's stories, crafting content and Quranic stories explained in a child-appropriate manner. The channel has been recommended by German takfiri channels. (It is not clear whether the children's channel was aware of or happy about the endorsement.) Even though the content of this children's channel does not itself appear to be inherently problematic, it has been shared by actors at the most violent extreme of the Salafi spectrum.

There are also posts relating to children that are aimed at parents, providing, for example, ideas for fun family activities with kids and children's book reviews. Others give advice on parenting, such as stressing the importance of showing affection, or guidance on 'diplomatically' teaching children not to draw faces when sketching, but to draw landscapes instead.

Case study 7:
Life advice

Adherents of Salafism strive for certainty and a firm sense of identity. In their search for the one authentic interpretation of Islamic scripture, Salafis are ultimately looking for comprehensive guidance on spiritual and political questions, as well as a sense of belonging. Notably, the desire for clear answers extends to seemingly mundane aspects of everyday life as well. Therefore, a key theme for Gen-Z Muslims online is whether or not certain behaviours are permissible within Islam, and what the relationship is between everyday issues and Salafi teachings.

For example, in an English-language Q&A session with the Saudi preacher Assim Alhakeem, a caller asked whether nutmeg is permissible. The sheikh outlined debates among scholars about substances that can act as intoxicants in large quantities before delivering his opinion that the potential of nutmeg to act as an intoxicant when a considerable amount is consumed makes the consumption of even a small amount forbidden.

Abdul Baraa, a German Salafi preacher, also often responds to questions about the permissibility of popular activities. For example, he weighed in on the video game 'Fortnite', discouraging his followers from play the game due to the depiction of non-Islamic deities, saying it was 'between a small sin and kafir'. He also declared working in a supermarket to be forbidden as individuals were enabling others to consume items considered to be 'haram'. Other German preachers have given similar pronouncements. Eyad Hadrous argued that picking one's eyebrows constitutes a 'major sin', and another preacher declared that while being vegetarian is permissible, criticising non-vegetarians is not, as the prophet and his companions consumed meat.

The main purpose of such content is to provide concise and straightforward advice to Muslims. At times, certain preachers will integrate such advice into larger narratives. YouTuber Young Muslim, for example, shared a ten-minute video arguing that attending public swimming pools was impermissible for Muslims, including men and burkini-wearing women. Within seconds of describing the sinfulness of public swimming pools, Young Muslim warned his followers about constructing buildings higher than the Kaaba ('Shaytan towers') before abruptly turning to the subject of violence, recounting the death tolls of the World Wars and the 'Global War on Terror' ('War on Islam') and identifying all of these as signs of the end times. The short time it took the presenter to shift from public swimming pools to mass violence and the end times suggests that he was seeking to present small transgressions against his teachings as a precursor to more serious infringements.

Analysis of Toxicity in Salafi Social Media Messages

While the discourse surrounding Salafism often focuses on security concerns associated with a minority within the movement, most Salafis do not support violence or pursue any definite political agenda. Nevertheless, some Salafis regularly voice exclusionary, regressive and dogmatic stances. This section attempts to account for these nuances through a data-driven approach to identifying and distinguishing 'toxic' from 'non-toxic' online Salafi content at scale.

The findings of this analysis suggest that, while the majority of Salafi content is relatively banal in nature, there is a significant core of 'toxic' Salafi material that is threatening, dehumanising and othering. Such potentially harmful Salafi content presents a cross-platform challenge, affecting both mainstream and alternative platforms.

The targets and typologies of such 'toxicity' varied according to language, with English- and German-speaking Salafi communities more frequently targeting non-Muslim out-groups while Arabic-language Salafi channels focused more on Muslim out-groups. This suggests that the political and social context is key to the selection of out-groups to be targeted. Case study 8 on the al Shu'aybi School of Salafi clerics suggests that platforms continue to struggle with violent extremist content that is increasingly 'post-organisational'.

Toxicity analysis

The use of pejorative language on social media and its real-life impacts in society are an active field of study for various academic disciplines, from linguistics to sociology and political science. Most often, the language involved is referred to as 'hate speech' or sometimes also as 'abusive language', 'harmful language' or 'offensive language'. These categories are not often well defined, and generally imply that there is always a target of the hatred or abuse. Our analysis focused on toxicity, with 'toxic' covering language use on a scale from unpleasant to objectionable, and with a spectrum of manifestations such as profanity, ridicule, verbal aggression and targeted hate speech.[20, 21] The terminology of 'toxicity' has also been used by platforms themselves, most notably Google's in-house research unit Jigsaw.[22]

In cooperation with Textgain, a start-up specialising in language technology and artificial intelligence (AI), ISD researchers supported the development of a ranking tool that recognises over 10,000 Salafi expressions in English, German, Arabic and Latin Arabic. Every word in the list was manually assigned a toxicity score from 0 (neutral) to 4 (very toxic) by domain and language experts. The English and German lists were annotated by two experts and the Arabic list by three, reviewing the scores and labels assigned by the other coders. Each expression assessed on this scale was assigned at least one multiple fine-grained label (e.g. OTHERING, THREATENING) or a combination of them. The tool can be used to automatically scan large collections of texts for 'toxic' discourse related to Salafism (see the Methodological Appendix for more detail).

Using this ranking algorithm, Textgain conducted analysis on the nearly 3.5 million Salafi social media messages collected by ISD between October 2019 and July 2021 across Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Telegram. Each of these messages was assigned a toxicity score between 0 and 100, based on the recorded toxicity of the words and word combinations the algorithm was able to identify. The sections that follow present a breakdown of the findings of the toxicity analysis.

Results of the toxicity analysis

Distribution of toxicity

Table 2 shows a breakdown of toxicity by platform, language and label. In total, around 9% of messages by English Salafis were identified as 'toxic' (i.e. above a 'normal' threshold based on standard deviation of toxicity levels within the dataset). Toxic messages were particularly common on Telegram (20% of messages). English Salafi messages often involve CONTEMPT (63%) and discuss RELIGION (95%). The average toxicity score for English messages is 10/100. By comparison, the average score of discourse in 'Dabiq' and 'Rumiyah', two official ISIS online propaganda magazines is 45/100, while the average score for random English tweets is 3.5/100, and the Wikipedia article on Salafism scores 5/100.[23]

	EN	DE	AR
Number of messages	650K	200K	2M
Toxicity AVG	0.10	0.08	0.06
Toxicity SD	0.20	0.20	0.21
Toxicity > AVG + SD	9%	8%	7%
... on Twitter	7%	4%	12%
... on Facebook	9%	13%	9%
... on Instagram	18%	16%	7%
... on Telegram	20%	12%	6%
... on YouTube	7%	6%	5%
... with CONTEMPT	63%	74%	79%
... with RIDICULE	26%	42%	40%
... with DEHUMANIZATION	23%	24%	36%
... with RACISM	1%	14%	2%
... with SEXISM	19%	7%	1%
... with OTHERING (NON-MUSLIMS)	23%	34%	28%
... with OTHERING (MUSLIMS)	16%	32%	37%
... with THREATENING	57%	47%	63%
... about RELIGION	95%	96%	68%
Toxicity > 0.9	3%	3%	5%

Table 2: Breakdown of toxicity by platform, language and labels

The results show that harmful and 'toxic' Salafi content poses a cross-platform challenge, with both mainstream and alternative platforms hosting significant amounts of 'toxic discourse'. Among Arabic Salafis, the highest percentage of toxic messages can be found on Twitter (12%). In contrast, Facebook (13%) and Instagram (16%) are the two platforms with the highest percentage of toxic messages in German. Lastly, the highest percentage of toxic messages in English can be found on Telegram (20%), which has limited content moderation policies.

The analysis also suggests that English- and German-speaking communities target non-Muslim out-groups more often than they target Muslim out-groups, while the reverse is true for Arabic-speaking Salafis online. The highest percentage of MUSLIM OTHERING messages was identified among Arabic Salafis (in 37% of all toxic Arabic messages). It is conceivable that in Muslim-majority contexts Salafism is less concerned with Christian and Jewish out-groups (28%) and more with guarding Muslims against 'straying' from a Salafi interpretation of their faith.[24] As noted above, English and German Salafi messages contained more NON-MUSLIM OTHERING. Prior research on Salafi extremist discourse online shows that expressions often use negative out-group nomination (cf. CONTEMPT, OTHERING).[25]

About 3% of all messages are marked as very toxic (scoring more than 90/100). When comparing across languages, the proportion of very toxic messages is almost twice as high among Arabic Salafis (5%) as among English- (3%) and German-speaking Salafis (3%).

Distribution of toxicity by platform and language

Figure 12 shows the distribution of toxic messages across platforms. For example, about 12% of all toxic messages identified within the data appeared on YouTube, with around one-third of those (4.5%) coming from English Salafis. Most toxic messages were identified on Telegram and Instagram, with English messages accounting for the largest share. Intuitively, this makes sense for Telegram, as the anonymity and lack of content moderation make it a favoured platform of (English-speaking) users for discussing sensitive topics. It is noteworthy that ISIS migrated to Telegram after being ousted from Twitter and YouTube,[26] and extreme right-wing communities and conspiracy theorists have similarly thrived on Telegram.[27] The smallest percentage of toxic messages was found among German Salafis on Twitter.
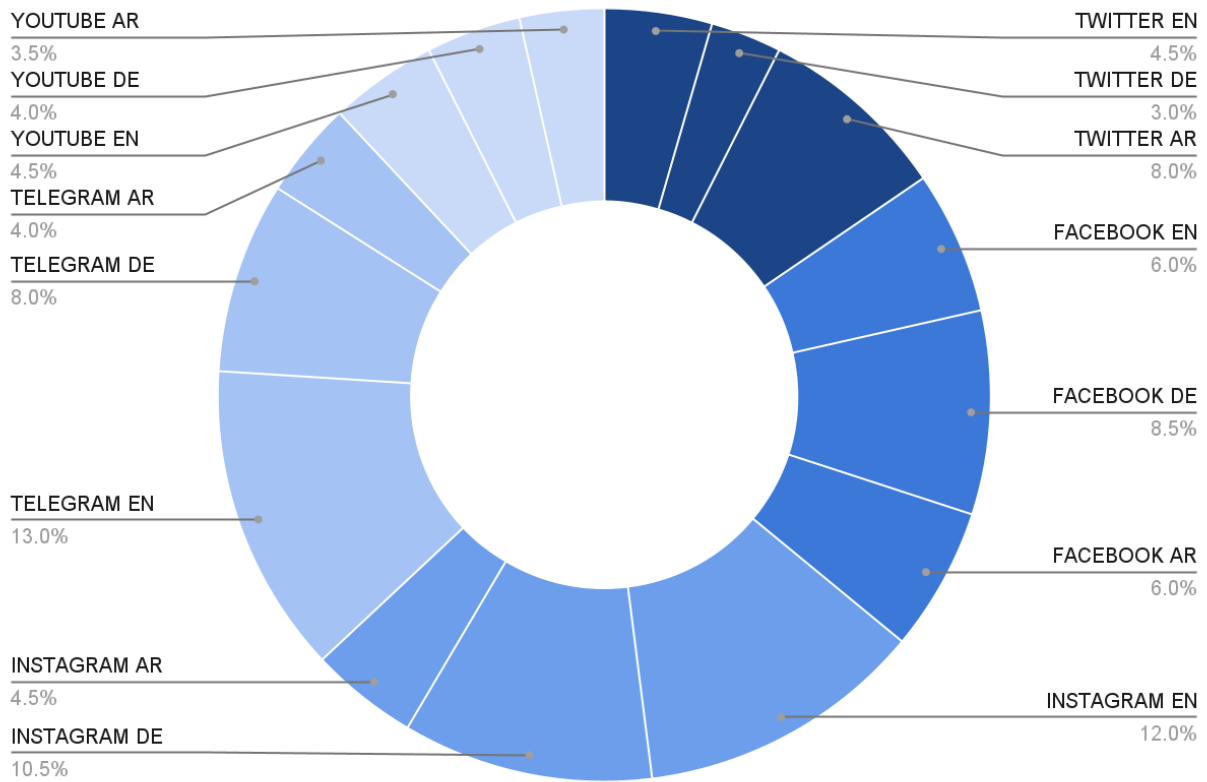

YOUTUBE AR 3.5%
YOUTUBE DE 4.0%
YOUTUBE EN 4.5%
TELEGRAM AR 4.0%
TELEGRAM DE 8.0%
TELEGRAM EN 13.0%
INSTAGRAM AR 4.5%
INSTAGRAM DE 10.5%
TWITTER EN 4.5%
TWITTER DE 3.0%
TWITTER AR 8.0%
FACEBOOK EN 6.0%
FACEBOOK DE 8.5%
FACEBOOK AR 6.0%
INSTAGRAM EN 12.0%

Figure 12: Percentage of toxic Arabic, English and German Salafi messages across platforms

Case study 8:
Support for sheikhs who sanctioned 9/11 on Facebook and YouTube

The findings of the toxicity analysis suggest that problematic Salafi content remains a cross-platform challenge. Even mainstream platforms continue to struggle to take appopriate action on terrorist and violent extremist content that is not directly published by proscribed organisation. For example, a group of establishment-trained Saudi Salafi clerics, often referred to as the 'al Shu'aybi School', in reference to Hamud al Aqla al Shu'aybi, have a long-standing and deep presence across major social media platforms despite their religious rulings justifying terrorism. Even though they are at the very sharp end of Salafism that supports violence, they enjoy a cult-like status in digital circles in Saudi Arabia and beyond. Their videos, speeches, fatwas and books are shared on pages with tens of thousands of followers on Facebook, and video playlists with hundreds of pieces of content on YouTube.

The rulings of a core group of scholars inspired by al Shu'aybi, consisting of Nasir al Fahd, Ali al Khudair, Ahmed al Khaledi and Sulaiman Al-Alwan, have mainstreamed martyrdom operations by venerating jihad against both 'near and far enemies', and established the religious grounding of Osama bin Laden's jihad, both in Saudi Arabia, and in the United States and beyond. [28] Nasir al Fahd and Ali al Khudair, for instance, sanctioned al-Qaeda's quest for nuclear weapons, with al Fahd writing the primary edict and al Khudair endorsing it.[29] Arrested by Saudi authorities numerous times, Alwan was similarly linked to raising funds in Saudi Arabia for Abu Mus'ab al Zarqawi, the first leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), which would later mutate into ISIS.[30] Despite these links to banned terrorist groups, the al Shu'aybi School are not included in the United Nations Designated Terrorist Groups and Targeted Sanctions List (UN Security Council Resolution 1267:1999), which likely enables them to avoid moderation teams and automated responses on social media.

Figure 7: In a YouTube video titled 'Jihad is the only solution', Hamud al Aqla al Shu'aybi issues a call to arms against the 'disbelievers'

For example, more than a hundred of Alwan's videos have been shared on Facebook, garnering a collective total of 112,215 views. The 11 primary Facebook pages and two groups set up in his name have more than 135,000 followers. There are also at least 28 YouTube playlists dedicated to the controversial cleric, with some carrying 200 pieces of content, and others as many as 435. Additionally, Alwan supporters have created accounts in his honour, such as the Facebook page titled 'The Shaykh of Scholars Sulyeman bin Nasser Alwan' (30,459 followers), which shares snippets of his speeches, and influential sayings. Another group set up in his name, 'Al Shaykh Sulyeman bin Nasser Alwan' (more than 12,000 likes), claims that its mission is to 'spread the flag of Shaykh Sulyeman Alwan', using his 'tweets, fatwas (visual and written), lectures, scientific lectures, articles, and books'.

Distribution of toxicity by month and language

Figure 13 shows a timeline of toxic messages relative to the total number of messages per language. For example, in December 2019, about 11% of all messages written in English were marked as toxic.
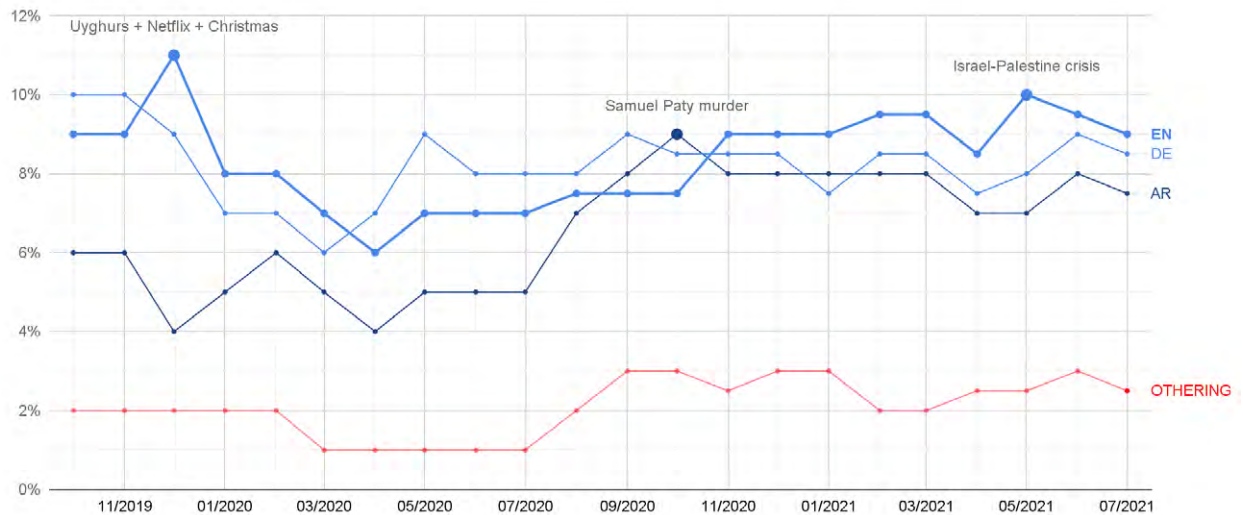

Figure 13: Percentage of toxic Salafi messages over time

The red line at the bottom indicates the relative amount of toxic messages that were labelled as OTHERING across languages (e.g. messages that target out-groups such as 'Westerners' and Shia Muslims). When it rises, it is likely that a specific event sparked resentment in the Salafi community. Three events in particular correlated with notable spikes:

- The **Uighur internment camps** in Xinjiang, China, contributed to a spike in toxic English messages in December 2019 after the German footballer Mesut Özil publicly tweeted about human rights violations against the Uighurs.[31] Other themes during this spike were a **Netflix** series called 'Messiah' (resulting in posts saying 'Netflix is *kufr*/Christian propaganda/brainwashing people into believing Dajjal [a false messiah] is not bad') and **Christmas** ('Christmas is *shirk*/pagan').

- The **Samuel Paty murder** refers to the beheading of a French teacher on 16 October 2020 after he allegedly showed a cartoon of the prophet Mohammed in class. French president Emmanuel Macron subsequently announced that France would train its own imams instead of financing foreign (Salafi) imams. This took place two weeks after he had called Islam a 'religion in crisis', drawing ire from Muslims worldwide.[32] These events correlated with a spike in toxic messages in Arabic, particularly those containing OTHERING. Popular hashtags used in these messages included '#StopMacron' and '#MacronGoneMad'.

- The **Israel-Palestine crisis** in May 2021 correlated with a rise in toxic messages in all languages, particularly those containing OTHERING. Popular hashtags used in these messages included '#FreePalestine' and '#GazaUnderAttack'. About 10% of English messages in May and June contained references to Israel, Palestine and Gaza, compared to about 0.5% in other months.

Distribution of toxicity by label

Figure 14 shows the relative frequency of labels assigned to toxic messages. For example, 80% of toxic messages co-occur with general religious discourse. About 25% target out-groups such as Christians and Jews (NON-MUSLIM OTHERING), and about 30% target Muslim out-groups (MUSLIM OTHERING).
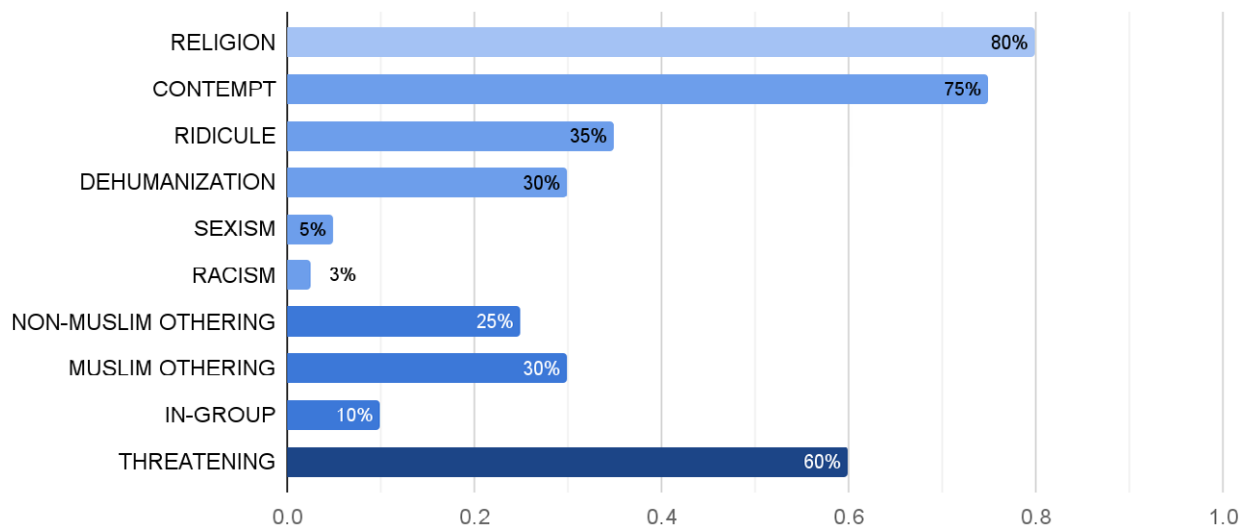

Figure 14: Percentage of the different labels found in toxic Salafi messages

Toxic messages can contain combinations of the labels assigned by the ranking algorithm. For example, combinations that tend to occur frequently include CONTEMPT + RIDICULE + DEHUMANIZATION, or CONTEMPT + MUSLIM OTHERING. Combinations that occur less frequently are SEXISM + MUSLIM OTHERING, RACISM + MUSLIM OTHERING, or RACISM + IN-GROUP.

Examples of toxic messages

Toxic messages in Arabic
Longer toxic messages by Arabic Salafis often outlined the differences between 'unbelievers', 'apostates', 'rejectionists' (i.e., Shiites), 'hypocrites' (especially Iran and Saudi Arabia), 'innovators', 'sorcerers', 'degenerates' and 'liars', warning them of what awaits them in the afterlife. Similarly, longer toxic messages frequently discussed supposed obligations to destroy the works of 'Satan' by means of 'jihad', and described different forms of sinful behaviour tempting righteous Muslims. Particular resentment is reserved for Jewish people ('Zionists', 'oppressors') in light of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and outrage at US geopolitical interference ('crusade'), especially in shorter messages.

As noted, a core principle in the Salafi belief system is that every aspect of society has already been laid out by God in his words as written down by his prophet, and carried on by the prophet's companions. Therefore, toxic messages often present democracy as a sin (shirk), because it is an innovation imposed by tyrants (taghut) that challenges pure Islamic law (sharia). Such messages also argued that each Muslim living in a democracy is at a risk of sin.

SCORE	MESSAGE
0.94	ما حكم قتل السُيّاح الألأحيّا في جانب الدول في الإسلامية ؟ What is the rule on **killing foreign tourists** in Islamic states? Facebook · THREATENING OTHERING CONTEMPT
0.93	الله معاك على الكفار وعملاء الصهاينة و الغربين Allah be with you against the **non-believers** and the agents of the **Zionists** and the **Westerners** YouTube · THREATENING OTHERING RACISM
0.93	كلامة كذب هذا عميل العلمانيين من الكولك عملاء الصهاينةٓ! Lies, this is an agent of secularists **owned by the Zionists**. YouTube · THREATENING OTHERING RACISM RIDICULE

Figure 15: Examples of toxic messages in Arabic

Toxic messages in English

Shorter toxic English messages involved warning others about religious sin (*shirk*), using pejorative names for out-groups (e.g. *kuffar, rafida, murtaddin, mushrik,* respectively infidels, rejectionists, apostates, idolaters) and linked to interpretations by sectarian clerics.[33] A large number of messages discuss contested concepts such as *dajjal* (false messiah) and *al-wala' wa-l-bara'* (wala: loving those who are obedient to God; *bara*: hating those who oppose God).[34] Long toxic messages typically included the pronouncements of Salafi scholars.

SCORE	MESSAGE
0.96	The **Aqeedah of the Rafidah** can never be accepted but by a **filthy** hard hearted individual. Twitter · RELIGION CONTEMPT OTHERING DEHUMANIZATION
0.95	Whoever takes a **Kafir** as a close friend is not a **believer**. Telegram · RELIGION THREATENING OTHERING
0.94	A Man will tie his **mother, daughter, sister and aunt** for fear they will go to the **Dajjaal**. Facebook · RELIGION SEXISM THREATENING
0.92	**Alhamdulillah die in your rage** you bloody islamophobe maniac!! Twitter · RELIGION THREATENING RIDICULE
0.91	**Shut up u jahil** qahdi, **munafiq** YouTube · RELIGION CONTEMPT RIDICULE OTHERING

Figure 16: Examples of toxic messages in English

Toxic messages in German

Short toxic messages in German were notable for a considerable amount of 'Möge Allah …' ('may Allah …') curses that combine pejoratives for out-groups with dehumanisation mechanisms, i.e., comparing humans to animals, dogs, filth (respectively Tiere, Hunde, Dreck) on YouTube. On Facebook, the numerous messages addressing, sharing or supporting Pierre Vogel stood out for their high levels of toxicity.[35]

SCORE	MESSAGE
0.95	Möge Allah den **murtad Amir vernichten** und ihm **erniedrigen**. May Allah destroy the Murtad Amir and humiliate him. YouTube · RELIGION CONTEMPT OTHERING THREATENING DEHUMANIZATION
0.95	Möge Allah die **khawarij rechtleiten** oder diese **Hunde der Hölle vernichten**, Amin. May Allah guide the Khawarij or annihilate these dogs from hell, Amin. YouTube · RELIGION CONTEMPT OTHERING THREATENING DEHUMANIZATION
0.93	Darf man **Kuffar** in Deutschland **beklauen**? Is it permissible to steal from the Kuffar in Germany? Telegram · RELIGION CONTEMPT OTHERING THREATENING

Figure 17: Examples of toxic messages German

Longer toxic messages in German often contained rulings attributed to scholars such as Ibn Taymiyyah, or citations from Surah At-Tawbah (a Quran chapter that deals with wartime ultimatums for unbelievers), but in a less 'official' way than the 'e-fatwas' common in English messages. Long messages often contained vitriolic descriptions of 'Juden die die welt kontrollieren' (Jews controlling the world), 'unbedeckte Russinnen' (uncovered Russian women), 'Grabanbeter' (grave worshippers), 'Feueranbeter' (fire worshippers) or 'widerlichen Muschrikin bewaffnet mit Pfefferspray' (disgusting polytheists armed with tear gas). Muslim women were warned not to go outside by themselves without the supervision of their husband or brother.

Non-toxic messages

Non-toxic messages were those with a score < 30/100. Such messages made up 91% of the dataset (see the earlier section on the distribution of toxicity).
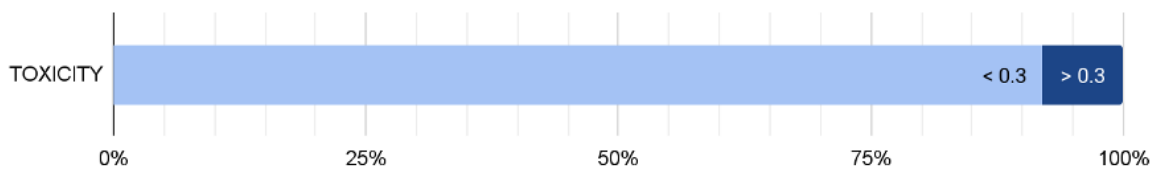

Figure 18: Distribution of toxic and non-toxic messages

Figure 19 presents some example messages in English, German and Arabic with a score of 0/100. Many of these were about events in the Islamic calendar, like the holy month of Ramadan. Another key theme within non-toxic messages was marriage: how to find a good wife or husband, and whether having several potential candidates is allowed. Other messages discussed the relationship between Muslims and Christians, how and if they should deal with each other's lifestyles and holidays, or whether inter-faith marriage is permissible. Converts to Islam from Christianity, in particular, were frequently praised.

More politically inclined non-toxic messages shared news articles about perceived Islamophobia (e.g. mosque attacks, Macron's statements) or asked for donations to help injured children and persecuted Muslims (e.g. in Xinjiang, Kashmir, Gaza). Some messages discussed coronavirus and its impact on everyday life. Non-toxic messages by Muslim organisations often provided a constant stream of recommendations and religious quotes.

SCORE	MESSAGE
0.00	A **Muslim** cannot be a Muslim if he doesn't believe in **Jesus PBUH**. But most our **christian bros and sister** don't know that. YouTube · RELIGION
0.00	**Allah swt** bless everyone in this blessed month **Ramadan Mubarak Asalamu alaikum** rahmatullahi wa barakatu YouTube · RELIGION
0.00	How to tell my husband to quit smoking? Twitter
0.00	Der **#Christchurch-Terrorist** muss für den Rest seines Lebens in Haft. The #Christchurch-Terrorist will remain imprisoned for the rest of his life. Twitter · THREATENING
0.00	Sie starb ohne ihre Eltern an ihrer Seite, weil **Israel** sie daran hinderte, **Gaza** zu verlassen und bei ihr zu sein. She died without her parents at her side because Israel prevented her from leaving Gaza to be with her. Twitter · OTHERING
0.00	اللهم اهدِ كل مسيحي إلى طريقك الحق يا رب Oh Allah, guide every **Christian** to your path YouTube · RELIGION OTHERING
0.00	🌸🍃 قصص وعبر من حياة الصحابيات 🍃🌸 Stories and lessons from the lives of the **female companions** Instagram

Figure 19: Examples of messages with a toxicity score of 0/100

Toxic users

The dataset contained messages from 500,000 YouTube users, each posting about 3 messages, from about 200 Facebook pages and groups, from a similar number of Telegram channels, and from hundreds of Instagram and Twitter accounts. Among English-speaking Salafis, the Facebook page of Dr. Zakir Naik, the Salafi Centre of Manchester Telegram channel, and the Instagram account of the_authentic_sunnah (each of which had around 1,000 associated toxic messages) stand out.

Zakir Naik is a controversial Islamic televangelist and preacher who has been banned from the UK and Canada, and criticised for statements supporting suicide bombings and his regressive views on women, homosexuality, evolution and the media.[36]

Figure 20: Example posts by @the_authentic_sunnah

On Facebook, his rhetorical style involves framing provocative statements as questions, like 'Why is it permitted for a man to have sex with a female slave?', 'Is coronavirus a punishment from Allah?' or 'Was Islam spread by the sword?'. On Telegram, the Salafi Centre of Manchester posts links to longer PDFs on WordPress, discussing topics such as 'South Asian polytheists', 'Islam antagonists in Western Europe', 'tyrants amongst Banee Israa'eel', and 'idolaters, raafidah and Khawaarij'. Another rhetorical device involves posting 'brief rebuttals' against journalists and commentators. The Centre has also stated that 'women talk too much' and that 'belief in Darwin's theory of evolution is kufr'. It should be noted that opposition to Darwinian theory and evolution in general is not restricted to Salafis, but found among many religious conservatives across faith traditions.

On Instagram, the_authentic_sunnah seems to push toxic narratives presented with professional graphic design and typography. In general, toxicity often takes the same forms: non-Salafis are ridiculed ('stooges', 'fools') and dehumanised ('dogs', 'pigs'). The account argues that these non-believers will suffer punishment in the afterlife, and that democratic regimes must be opposed.

Notable German accounts include the Facebook group Im Namen Allah's, des Allerbarmers, des Barmherzigen (2,000 toxic messages), DieRECHTLEITUNG (500 toxic messages) and groups whose title includes Die Wahre Religion (a Salafi-jihadist group proscribed in Germany). Im Namen Allah's, for example referred to the floods in Belgium, Germany and Austria, and a sandstorm in Saudi Arabia as 'a little warning' from God. DieRECHTLEITUNG also frequently posts details of such warnings, which signal the end of times and the coming of the false messiah, after which the 'stinking' unbelievers will be punished.

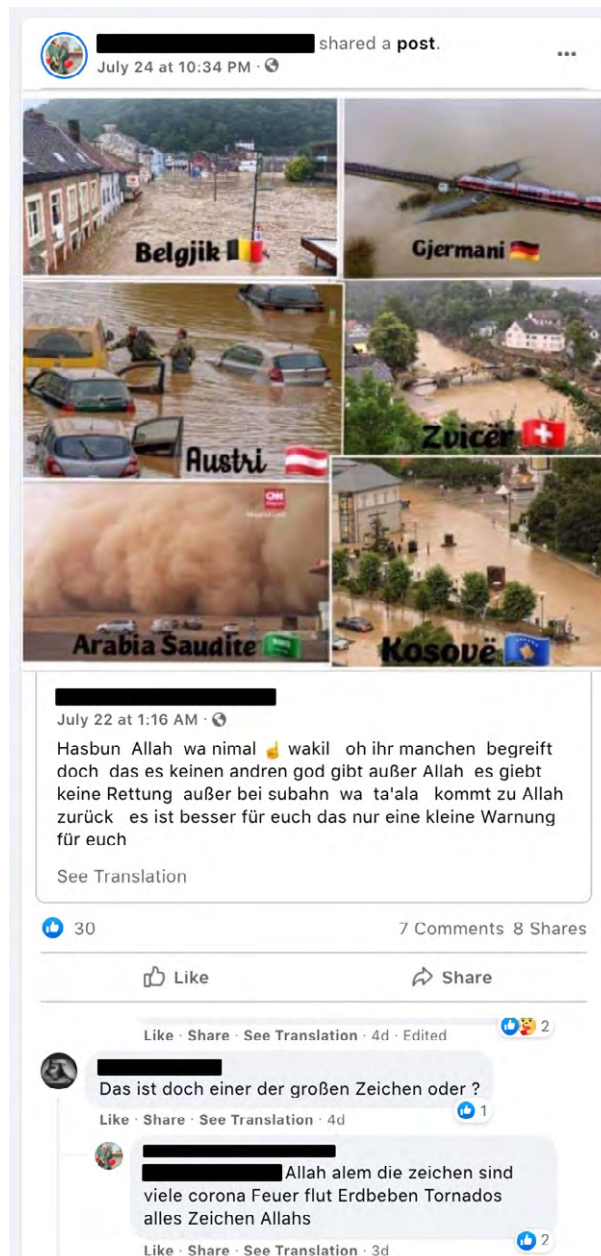| Platform	Users	Avg. messages
Twitter	70	375
Facebook	200	5,000
Instagram	350	475
Telegram	200	1,350
YouTube	500K	3

Table 3: Users and messages by platform

Figure 21: Example posts by @Im Namen Allah's

Toxic communities

Finally, Textgain performed a short experiment to see how users in the dataset interacted with each other. On Facebook, 50 of the English groups and accounts in the dataset posted toxic messages that mentioned one of the other accounts. The largest community had 17 (33%) accounts mentioning each other's names in their messages (including Dr. Zakir Naik).
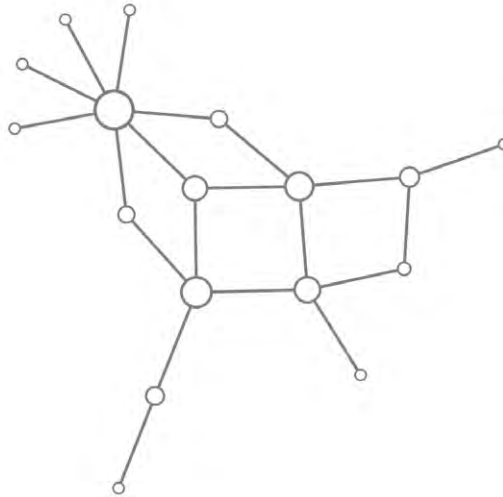

Figure 22: Toxic community of English-speaking Salafis on Facebook

The community can be represented as a network diagram, as shown in Figure 22. The node size represents 'centrality' (PageRank). The biggest node in the network is Mufti Menk. While Menk's was not the most toxic account, he appeared to facilitate information flow between other accounts.
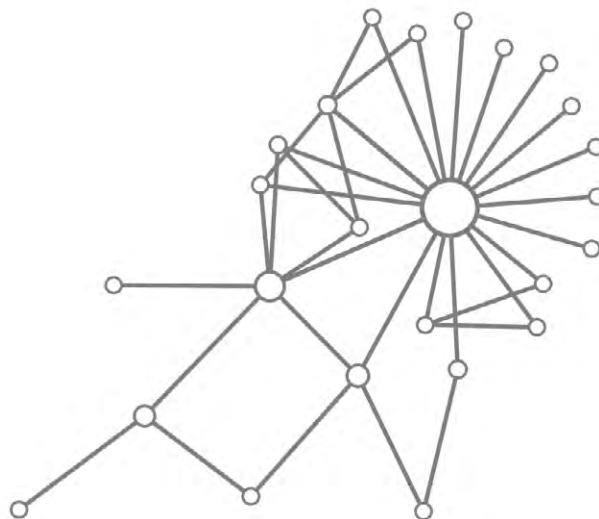

Figure 23: Community on Twitter

On Twitter, about one-third of English, German and Arabic accounts could be connected to each other in a network of toxic messages that mentioned each other's names, most notably including the Salafi Centre of Manchester. The biggest node in this network (Figure 23) is @anwarphilly, the translator of Ibn Taymiyyah's work 'The Obligation of Opposing the People of the Hellfire'.

Conclusion and Implications

Our research maps a broad ecosystem of Salafi-inspired groups – from influencers with broad, international, mainstream appeal all the way to niche takfiri groups prone to violent rhetoric – competing for the support of Gen-Z Muslims, especially online. The internet and social media have become one of the key arenas in which Salafis can spread their message. As this report documents, Salafi ideologues and influencers have been able to notably increase the reach of their ideas through a variety of formats, narratives and approaches tailored to specific, often younger, audiences and platforms since October 2019.

The success of these tech-savvy digital influencers can hardly be explained without taking into account the real and legitimate grievances of young Muslims growing up and coming of age during the 'Global War on Terror'. While the 9/11 attacks may be a vague memory rather than a defining moment for Gen-Z followers of Salafism, they live in a world still profoundly shaped by them. Hate crime against Muslims is prevalent across Western countries, anti-Muslims attitudes are widespread, and policies singling out Muslims for immigration restrictions have been implemented in countries as far apart as the United States and India. Authoritarian regimes in China, Myanmar and Syria, among others, have used 'War on Terror'-inspired rhetoric to justify mass killings, internment camps and genocidal campaigns against Muslims.[37] Time and time again, Salafi preachers online are able to tap into the discontent created by experiences of anti-Muslim racism, restrictions on freedom of religion, real or perceived double standards between the treatment of Muslims and members of other minority religions, and grievances about the oppression of Muslims around the globe. A number instrumentalise these grievances to spread their divisive ideology.

Our research shows that a minority of harmful and 'toxic' types of Salafi content still pose a cross-platform challenge, affecting mainstream platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, less moderated alternative platforms, such as Telegram, and emerging platforms such as TikTok, which is highly popular among Gen-Z users. The issue of 'toxic' Salafi content is likely exacerbated by both platform design and platforms' struggles with increasingly 'post-organisational' forms of (violent) Islamist extremism.[38] While previous research suggests that recommendation algorithms and suggested pages might skew the landscape of religious debate on YouTube in favour of Salafi filter bubbles,[39] this report documents (mainstream) platforms' failure to enforce their own standards consistently, as well as their shortcomings in dealing with ideologues and preachers who support violent extremism but do not belong to proscribed groups.

Debates around Salafism too often narrowly focus on its violent manifestations, and the terrorist threat posed by a minority within the movement. The results of the toxicity analysis and the narrative coding in this research hint at a more complex picture. A wider body of banal and often purely religious expressions of Salafism co-exists online alongside a significant amount of political, supremacist or even violent content. While much of what Salafis voice should be legal within a liberal society, the movement's core tenets make it prone to othering and regressive attitudes, rejection of democracy and binary worldviews. This spectrum between the banal and the highly toxic creates a dilemma for policymakers, tech platforms and civil society in seeking to effectively and proportionately respond to the spread of Salafism. This dilemma is even more difficult to resolve as Salafis feed off widespread and legitimate grievances about anti-Muslim discrimination, the stigmatisation of a minority religion in Western contexts and Western foreign policy.

Beyond the innovative and skilful orators, the legitimate grievances and the struggles of tech platforms, any analysis of the rise of Salafism needs to also take into account the perceived shortcomings of modern societies. Open societies based on liberal, pluralistic, democratic and secular ideals can seem indecisive and devoid of meaning. Their evasion of burning existential questions creates dissatisfaction. For those striving for certainty and guidance, 'anything goes' is not an attractive option. By contrast, a movement like Salafism offers Gen-Z Muslims a strong moral code, with straightforward, binary, black-and-white answers on how to have a life worth living. Salafism offers an identity and sense of belonging in a world of ambivalence, uncertainty and relativism. It may seem counter-intuitive, but Salafism has become a counterculture that allows young people to transgress social norms and rebel against mainstream society. This is why the case studies in this report that focus on the comprehensive advice Salafi preachers provide on mundane aspects of everyday life are not a sideshow, but a core part of their offer.

Those concerned with liberal democracy, human rights and inclusive societies are at risk of losing the ongoing battle

Endnotes

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8   Data on Facebook followers was gathered via Crowdtangle, analysis software from Facebook, which can be used to analyse public pages and groups on the platform. Instagram and YouTube data was gathered using Social Blade, an open-source analysis software. As data from TikTok, Twitter and Telegram was inconsistently available for key Salafist influencers, they were not included in the analysis.

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10 It is not known to the authors which content was said to violate the guidelines.

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