Executive Summary

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Inhalt

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Quarterly report 03/2023: 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.

During the third quarter of 2023, the PrE's main focus on TikTok and Instagram was the ban on wearing abayas in schools in France, the banning of the account of "Muslim Interactiv" and incidents of islamophobia in Europe.

YouTube and YouTube Shorts

The development on YouTube in the third quarter of 2023 confirmed the trend observed during the previous part of the year, which showed the emergence of a new constellation on popular channels. Several videos had an above average number of views, and the total view count was significantly higher compared to the year before. The guidelines for assessing the popularity of videos and channels were therefore adjusted: upwards of 30,000 views is considered a high view count within the framework of the basic monitoring, whilst view counts of under 10,000 are considered low. There have also been many developments within the PrE on YouTube; the channels "Macht's Klick" and "Star Moon Islam" are once again active after a long hiatus, and in addition, there has been strong growth in the popularity of "Abdelhamid Offiziell" and "Halal Podcast".

The first key YouTube and YouTube Shorts topic in the third quarter is an interview conducted by the channel "Botschaft des Islam" (BDI) with Raheem Boateng from "Muslim Interactiv" (MI). In terms of content, the video reveals several overlaps with regards to the political and social statements of the two channels, which incidentally also represent their respective agendas. Secondly, and equally relevant, is a series of videos from Abdul Baraa, in which he also primarily disseminates political and social messages, and which at first glance seem to correspond directly with the messages from BDI and MI. A closer comparison of the content shows that the

Islamist channels (GI, RI, MI, BDI) primarily take up political and social issues and predominantly argue historically and in terms of intellectual history. Abul Baraa, representative of numerous actors in the PrE Salafist group, on the other hand, develops his argumentation much more strongly in connection with Islamic sources.

The third key YouTube topic focusses on a central, often occuring narrative of the PrE, that is to say, "the writing on the wall" and the seemingly imminent apocalypse. This topic has been unfurling over many months in an extensive series on the YouTube channel "Lorans Yusef".

| TikTok and Instagram

While the multiple account banning of "Muslim Interaktiv" on TikTok sparked a lot of commotion among the respective actors, the PrE as a whole remained noticeably quiet on the subject. The creation of two new accounts by the original account hosts "raheem_mi" and "dawud_mi" was received very positively by the comment section. Comments posted on these accounts in response to statements about the banning are overwhelmingly supportive. In particular, on the "raheem-mi" account, many comments have been posted stating that the Muslim viewpoint should continue to be represented on TikTok. As well as this, the banning caused confusion among some followers, as a lot of other online content from the community is perceived to be

far more problematic. The overall picture which emerges is of a supportive following who see themselves represented in the standpoints and content created by the "Muslim Interactiv" actors.

In this quarter, the PrE activities on Instagram seem to point to an overall strategy aimed to stir up fear among Muslims in Germany and to embolden them to stand up against "the West". In order to achieve this, islamophobic events across Europe are overplayed, generalised or portrayed one-dimensionally.[1] Particular attention was given to the anniversary of the death of Marwa El-Sherbini and the ban on wearing abayas in French schools. The actors purposefully instrumentalise similar events using an obvious, pre-re-

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[1] At this point it is of utmost importance to emphasize that Anti-Muslim racism and Islamophobia is a recurring central theme in the basic monitoring reports. The serious grievances are a driving factor in radicalization processes and extremist messages.

hearsed rhetoric aimed primarily at mobilising their followers. There are two recognisable pillars to this approach: the first deals with the events and victims of islamophobia (murder, genocide, destruction of sacred sites). The second pillar, in contrast, evokes the ever-present awareness of death and employs the rhetoric of paradise and hell. Both pillars represent an inner and outer framework, which are in perpetual motion and which, at the same time, amplify and build upon each other. In this way, the actors are able to strengthen their core thesis by using political and religious influences and by developing an ongoing narrative, particularly one that justifies an insurrection against the West as self-protection.

| Implications for Practitioners

As has been emphasised in previous reports, interest in online Islamic religious education is on the increase. This is made evident by the comparison of YouTube data with that of the year before and the changed constellation of popular channels and accounts. On YouTube, information about Islam is largely dominated by the group of Salafist channels (Marcel Krass, Ibrahim al-Azzazi) and the hybrid channel "Anas Islam". Islamic channels (MI, GI, RI, BDI) only rarely receive above average view counts.

Islamic and Salafist channels disseminate, often by using different methods of arguing, a clear rejection of state institutions, Muslim associations, public media bodies and other central institutions of civic life. Key to taking on large parts of PrE content and being able to check for differentiation, is an ability to consume media critically as well as a basic religious knowledge of Islam. Moreover, democracy-building measures such as a knowledge and understanding of state institutions, civil rights, and points of contact within civil society in cases of discrimination and racism, can, very likely lead to a greater resilience against extremist messaging.

Again, this year, numerous videos have been spread online on the topic of the apocalypse and "the writing on the wall", content which projects an impending end of the world scenario and ties together clear images of "the" enemy and conspiracy theory narratives. These messages are redundant.

P/CVE prevention practice and civic education should emphasise the complex causes and effects as well as the real-world dangers of this type of content, rather than simply encouraging simplistic explanations of secret forces and a battle between good and evil. Within the areas of Islamic theology and education, this also requires the urgent task of communicating knowledge on an appropriate classification for Muslims.

The banning of the "Muslim Interactiv" account demonstrates the extremely fast-paced nature of TikTok. Within a very short space of time, it was possible for the actors to create new accounts

and increase their reach, which appears to have granted them a longer half-life. As a result, it is significantly more time-consuming for practitioners to stay up to date and to follow events in real time. Besides, the actions of "Muslim Interaktiv" have shown that blocking channels does not necessarily result in a modification or moderation of the content: the same content is still being disseminated and narratives are still being served - both on "dawud_mi" and on "raheem_mi" as well as the now deleted "muslim_interaktiv" account. Furthermore, the example of "Muslim Interactiv" illustrates how PrE channels can rely on a faithful set of followers, who will continue to follow them on new channels or social media platforms.

With this in mind, platform hosts should be ever aware that deleting an account is not an end solution in terms of extremist content. Instead, attention must be paid to whether the same actors reappear and what content they spread under a new name. In this regard, a systematic approach to keeping abreast of account banning and new accounts would support the work of both researchers and practitioners. What is more, the current example of "Muslim Interactiv" highlights how the blocking of accounts should happen across multiple platforms, otherwise we will see the offloading of content to other unaffected platforms. The reasons for blocking or banningaccounts should at the same time be communicated clearly and transparently to the relevant viewers. If this is not the case, the hosts of the channel are able to use the punitive measures as propaganda in order to strengthen their narrative and become the absolute authority on the situation. And it is precisely on the fringes of extremist propaganda, that the measures taken by platform providers up until now have indeed produced counter-productive results.

In the last quarter, the topic of islamophobia featured frequently in the PrE and is therefore also a focus of this quarterly report. The numerous (anti-Muslim) racist incidents are not solely concerning because of the high risk of manipulation by PrE actors, but rather illustrate the daily conflicts and tensions experienced by many (young) Muslims in Germany today. Although it remains an understudied topic in relation to other forms of discrimination, anti-Muslim racism is increasingly being taken up in (practice-oriented) research, most recently by the German Youth Institute (DJI) report Dealing with anti- Muslim racism among (potentially) affected young people.[2]

For multipliers working within prevention settings, it is of particular importance to take the experiences of racism and discrimination of young people seriously and to deal with them accordingly. Ultimately, work carried out with diverse groups should be based on a cross-phenomena, anti-racism approach within education.

2 Jungmann, Annika/Langner, Joachim (Eds.): Auseinandersetzung mit antimuslimischem Rassismus unter(potenziell) betroffenen Jugendlichen. (Dealing with anti-Muslim racism among (potentially) affected young people) Munich/Halle (Saale) 2023. C.f. references to the studies in the chapter: "Abul Baraa: Politik, Medien, Islam und Konversion" ("Abul Baraa: Politics, Media, Islam and Conversion").

Imprint

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politische Bildung