



Executive Summary

2024

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| Executive Summary

This year, the consequences of the Hamas terrorist attack on 7 October 2023 and the subsequent war in the Middle East continue to significantly determine the choice of topics by creators on YouTube and TikTok. As many influencers from the pop culture milieu also frequently commented on the Middle East conflict and there are many overlaps in the content of their messages, these have also been included in the YouTube and TikTok analyses along with the core actors from the 'periphery of religiously motivated extremism' (PrE). When discussing the war in the Middle East, PrE actors as well as influencers from the pop culture milieu predominantly focus on Germany's historical role and positioning in the conflict and current internal social and political developments in Germany.

Even in previous bpb baseline monitoring reports, it was noticeable that the central messages of PrE actors and some key influencers from the pop culture milieu frequently reinforce each other. In addition to the numerous similarities in content, the following analyses also reveal clear differences between the Islamist and Salafist channel groups and the very individualistic, socially oriented pop culture channels. Prevention and political education specialists should therefore also take a careful and differentiated look at the individual voices on social media.

A statistical analysis of 45 YouTube channels in the period from January 2015 to October 2024 clearly shows the importance of the topic in the community since 7 October 2023. More than half of the videos (681 out of 1,215) on the Middle East conflict were uploaded since October 7, 2023. Of these, almost half of the videos (305) appeared in the first three months since the terrorist attack of Hamas. Although the number of videos has fallen since then over the course of 2024, it is still significantly higher on average than in previous years. The current Middle East conflict has shifted the thematic focus of the creators significantly.

The material can be summarised in three groups of narratives:

- 1 Narratives on the situation in Germany, in which democracy in particular is emphasised as an endangered or failed system that primarily discriminates against Muslims and fights Islam.
- 2 The Middle East conflict with a focus on Israel, the USA and the West as the enemy and the sole perpetrators and culprits in the almost hundred-year history of the conflict.
- 3 Interpretations of history that can be seen as attempts at a targeted propagandistic reinterpretation of history due to selective perspectives.

Compared to the other channel groups, the PrE Islamist channel group shows the highest level of activity on the topic of the Middle East conflict. It consists of the Hizb ut-Tahrir (HuT)-related channels 'Generation Islam' (GI), 'Realität Islam' (RI), 'Muslim Interaktiv' (MI) and 'Botschaft des Islam' (BDI). On YouTube, the channels 'GI' and 'RI' uploaded the most videos on the conflict. The social media focus of the 'MI' channel, on the other hand, was Instagram and TikTok.

By combining different communication strategies with consistent messages, the four channels created a mutually reinforcing, synergistic effect.

In contrast, the actors in the Salafi channel group kept a very low profile and focused more on religious education, missions and social problems in Germany. Pierre Vogel and Abul Baraa from the Salafist channel group were those who commented most on the Middle East conflict. Only a few videos from the Islamist group achieved above-average viewing figures on YouTube (>30,000).

The central narratives and the populist strategies employed have been continuously repeated in different variations over the last 12 months, as already summarised in the bpb Quarterly Monitoring Report 4/2023. The central messages of the four Islamist channels close to HuT (MI, GI, RI, BDI) include the following:

- | The continued existence of a colonial order through nation states characterises the region and is a cause of constant conflict,

- | Israel as a Zionist project is a satellite of the USA and the West with the aim of exploiting and controlling the region,
- | the nation state and democracy have failed,
- | the caliphate is the only solution for the region and is prophetically legitimised,
- | a two-state solution does not work,
- | the state of Israel has no right to exist and no right to self-defence,
- | in general, 'Israel' (Zionism), the USA and 'the West' are the only ones responsible for and guilty of the conflict,
- | Israel has never seriously worked towards peace and one cannot expect this to change in the future.

The group of pop cultural influencers, on the other hand, achieved a significantly greater reach on the topic of the Middle East conflict, particularly on TikTok. The content of their videos is more individualised and does not follow a common ideology, as can be seen in the channel group of the four Islamist channels close to HuT. However, there is a high level of agreement in terms of messaging between the three categorised channel groups in the monitoring on the topic of the Middle East conflict. The Islamist and Salafist channel group, as well as the very individualistic pop culture group and the independent preachers (e.g. Marcel Krass, Issam Bayan) show similarities with the following accusations against Israel: genocide, apartheid regime, occupying power, war crimes, torture. Germany is also complicit in the alleged genocide through the supply of weapons. German policy has also been characterised by double standards towards

Palestinians for decades. The media landscape in Germany also supports unconditional solidarity with the state of Israel. Freedom of opinion, freedom of religion, the right to demonstrate and civil rights are noticeably jeopardised by the proclaimed *raison d'état* and must be repeatedly demanded and reinstated through legal action.

Although numerous actors distance themselves from the actions of Hamas on 7 October 2023, they often contextualise their condemnation in a historical reference that assigns sole blame to the state of Israel or the Zionist movement. The actors therefore also generally speak of the Palestinian or Lebanese resistance or struggle against the illegal occupying power in relation to Hamas or Hezbollah.

Extreme statements by Israeli cabinet members and members of the settler movements also give influencers ample reason to suspect that the current war is being used to carry out the complete expulsion of the Palestinian popu-

lation. In addition, there are now numerous reports of torture and war crimes committed by Israeli soldiers and settlers. As the conflict continues, the observed trend within the PrE of denying the suffering and need for security on the Israeli side, which was already noted in October 2023, appears to be becoming more entrenched. The brutal crimes and rocket attacks by Hamas and Hezbollah are played down and concealed in numerous variations, e.g. by claiming that there is no evidence of rapes and atrocities on 7 October or that the rocket fire on Israel is played down in terms of its impact.

The assessment of the Middle East conflict as an anti-colonial struggle is also something the three channel groups have in common. In contrast to the Islamist channel group, however, most influencers in the pop culture milieu and preachers do not propagate the caliphate as the only possible solution to the Middle East conflict. On the contrary, they usually comment critically on or reject the demonstrations in favour of the caliphate.

Recommendations for prevention practice

The one-sided, selective and undifferentiated interpretations of history on the development of the Middle East conflict are particularly striking. Their narratives reproduce blanket attributions of blame to Israel, the USA and the so-called 'West' as being solely responsible for and causing the Middle East conflict. Particularly popular in this regard are explanatory approaches that attribute all developments in the region to the continuation of colonial and imperial structures.

Anti-Semitism related to Israel and other anti-Semitic motifs can also be found in numerous videos. In most cases, they are implicitly embedded in the messages and are difficult to detect, for example via an alleged criticism of Israel. Also worrying are statements in which the acts of violence and hostage-taking on 7 October are suppressed or even completely denied and terrorist organisations such as Hamas and Hezbollah are legitimised as resistance organisations. There also seems to be a tendency to pit the challenges anti-Muslim racism and anti-Semitism against each other, for example when it is claimed that state institutions are taking rigorous action against anti-Semitism and at the same time even promoting anti-Muslim racism.

All of the channels analysed purposefully spread doubt and mistrust of democratic institutions and the state of democracy as such. In addition to the Middle East conflict, the actors also use other key

topics. These include, for example, anti-Muslim racism or state or civil society measures against religiously motivated extremism with a focus on Islamism. As already mentioned several times in previous reports, it is therefore urgently necessary to recognise forms of anti-Muslim racism and to be able to adequately address experiences with anti-Muslim racism, as well as to strengthen basic knowledge of the democratic form of governance in Germany, its institutions and processes. It is also useful to draw attention to the numerous opportunities to participate in decision-making processes at various political and social levels, with and without German citizenship.

Mistrust and rejection are generally propagated against public media or established publishing houses. There are also widespread narratives that credible information and the truth can only be obtained through the social media. Based on these frequently repeated accusations, most of the creators claim to be a much needed corrective to mainstream media. However, their videos are often a mixture of fragments of news, fake news and personal opinions. In addition to critical media skills, knowledge about serious and professional journalistic work and standards, including on social media, should therefore be further strengthened. In future, civic education work should also include a critical awareness of populism and propaganda strategies online in order to be able to effectively expose them.

| Imprint

Publisher

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