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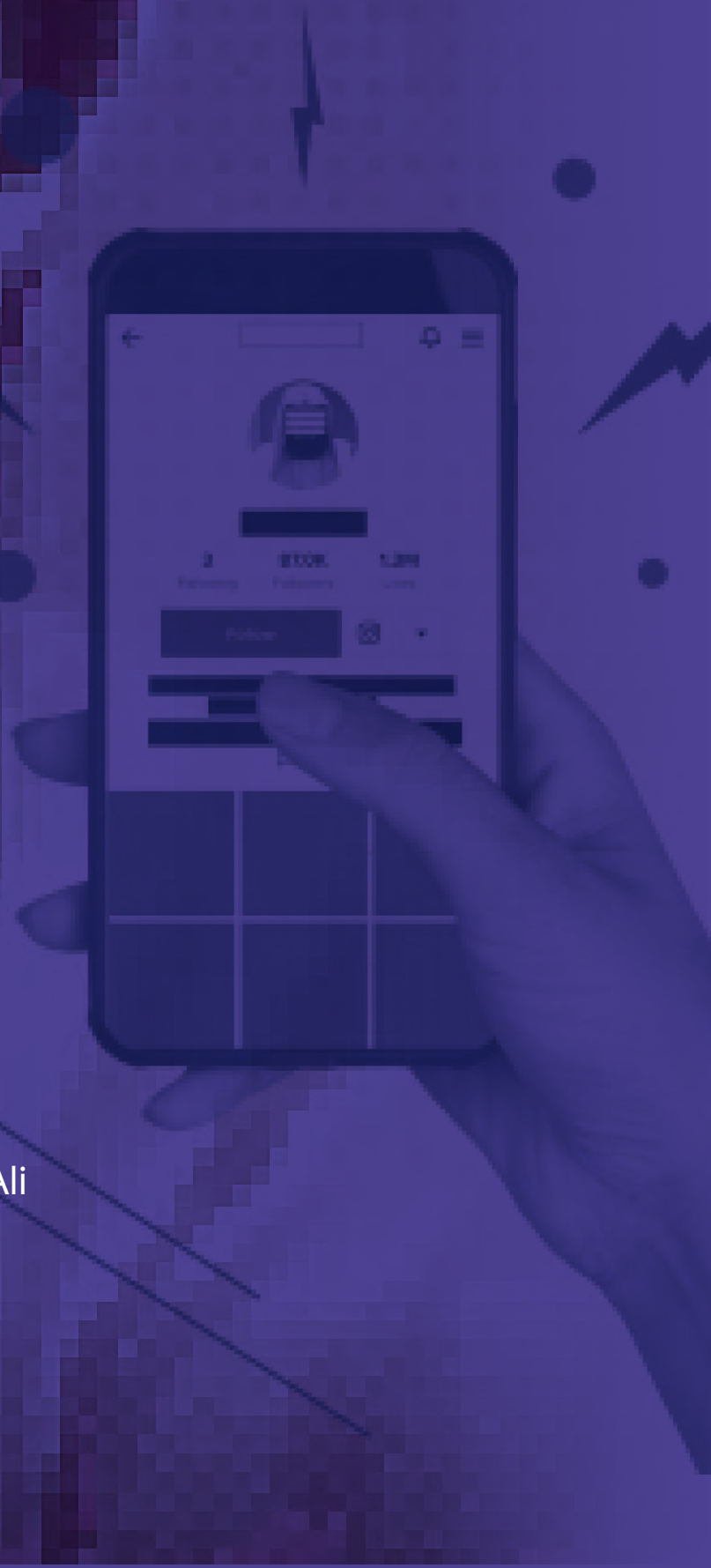
Gen-Z & The Digital Salafi Ecosystem: Executive Summary



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About this report

In this executive summary, ISD presents key findings from our pioneering research into the rapidly shifting online Salafi ecosystem. It outlines the findings of ISD's data-driven snapshot and an ethnographic deep dive into an emergent online Salafi ecosystem called 'Islamogram.' These findings are then contextualised within broader debates around Salafism and its online and offline manifestations, laying out the implications of the data findings for effective policymaking and proportionate civil society responses.

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Contents

Glossary **4**
Background **5**
A Data-driven Snapshot of the Digital Salafi Landscape **6**
Key Findings **7**
A diverse and expanding online Salafi ecosystem 7
Online Salafi narratives: Between toxicity and banality 7
Islamogram: The sharp end of digital Salafi mobilisation 8
Digital Salafism: Eluding traditional classifications and responses 8
Implications and Recommendations **10**
Anticipating the next generation of threat 10
Evolving our responses to meet current challenges 10
Defining and categorising the threat 11
Environmental factors are key to thinking about group challenges 12
Policy implications 12
– Moving beyond overtly securitised conceptions of Salafism 12
– Improved and ongoing mapping of this online space 13
– Digital policy considerations 14
A new playbook for responses 15
Addressing both the supply and demand sides of Salafism's appeal 16
End notes **17**

Glossary

Akh-right – a play on the words 'akhi' (Arabic for brother) and 'alt-right': a self-description used by Gen-Z Islamists who borrow memes and references from alt-right subculture.

al-Wala' wal-bara' – literally meaning 'loyalty and disavowal', a Salafi concept referring to the requirement to show undivided loyalty to Allah, Islam and Muslims, and treat anything un-Islamic with enmity. It serves a key role in demarcating the in-group from the out-group in Salafism.

Aqidah – literally meaning 'creed', this refers to the acceptance of and obedience to specific religious beliefs.

Bid'ah – refers to religious 'innovation.' As Salafis aim to return to the practices of Mohammed and his companions, one of their key aims is cleanse Islam of anything they perceive to be innovations of the faith.

Dawah – missionary efforts aimed at persuading new adherents to embrace Islam.

Fatwa – an Islamic ruling, traditionally by a qualified scholar.

Fiqh – Islamic jurisprudence and the human understanding of divine Islamic law.

Fitna – literally meaning 'trial' or 'test', in Arabic, the term is often used in reference to division and disagreement between Muslims.

Hadith – collections of stories, reports, customs or sayings of Mohammad and his companions.

Kharijites – a zealous historic sect which emerged in the seventh century. As Kharijites frequently pronounced other Muslims to be kuffar (unbelievers) their name is often used today as a pejorative term to describe groups
such as ISIS and al-Qaeda.

Kuffar – derogatory Arabic term used to describe non-Muslims.

Rafida – literally meaning 'rejectors', it is a derogatory term used to describe Shia Muslims in reference to their rejection of Abū Bakr and Umar, the two caliphs immediately following Mohammed. As Salafis view Abū Bakr and Umar as key sahāba (companions) of Mohammed whose version of Islam they are seeking to re-establish, the criticism of these figures in Shia Islam is seen as a very grave transgression.

Sahāba – companions of Mohammed.

Salafism – a form of Sunni Islam whose followers advocate a return to the practices of the first three generations of Muslims (the salaf or 'ancestors') who lived immediately after the prophet Mohammed. Within Salafism, there are different currents, which differ significantly in their interpretations of the holy scriptures of Islam and their implications for political action. Salafis are often subdivided into quietist Salafists, who reject political activism, political Salafis, who are actively engaged in transforming society according to their ideological ideas, and Salafi-jihadists, who use violence to implement a Salafi interpretation of Islamic law.

Sharia – Islamic law, though the term can also be used to more broadly to refer to God's will for humankind.

Shirk – the sin of idolatry (worship of any entity other than Allah).

Takfir – the act of excommunication (declaring other Muslims to be unbelievers).

Tawhid – a concept referring to the oneness of God (strict monotheism).

Taghut – a term referencing the worship of anything other than God, frequently used by Salafis to describe rulers who do not govern in accordance with Islam, and who place themselves in a position to be worshipped, thereby undermining the command to worship Allah alone.

Ummah – a term used to refer to the global Muslim community of believers.

Background

Like no previous group, Generation Z (Gen-Z) have had their social and political life defined by social media and ubiquitous connectivity. Alongside an ever-evolving technological landscape, Gen-Z identities have been shaped by the shadow of 9/11 and the ensuing 'Global War on Terror', and more recently by events such as the election of Donald Trump and the rise of ISIS. Consequently, young Muslims in particular have found their identities essentialised and polarised from a number of directions.

In this rapidly emerging youth constituency, with 1.2 billion people under 30 today, and expected to make up nearly a third of the world's youth by 2030, young Muslims are increasingly in the firing line in a war for identity that is challenging families, communities and societies across the world.[1]

Adolescence and young adulthood are important developmental phases. During these years, forming identities are key to figuring out who we are, and to finding meaning and belonging.[2] This universal yet personal quest is further complicated by societal and historical influences and contexts. Modern societies are marked by fragmentation, ambivalence, competition and uncertainty. While this may be liberating and exciting for some, it may be daunting for those searching for belonging, guidance and stability.

As well as challenges to traditional lines of authority and a growing backlash against a range of established '-isms' – from liberalism to globalism – regressive movements and ideologies are outpacing open, pluralistic ideas. This is exacerbated by a digital playing field that exacerbates division and atomisation. Meanwhile, there is little real understanding among decision-makers and civic leaders about the contours of the identity struggle unfolding among young people today.

In this context, Salafism – a reformist branch of Sunni Islam that champions a literalistic return to the faith practised by the prophet Mohammed and his earliest followers – has grown across Europe and North America. This cultural-religious phenomenon, which is frequently misunderstood and misinterpreted, has proven particularly attractive to Gen-Z as an emerging youth counterculture, providing a clear, black-and-white, rules-based value system in a chaotic 'post-truth' world, a strong group identity, and a provocative contrast to the orthodoxies of the Islamic establishment. It empowers its followers through a set of "sacred values" – which are not subject to utilitarian trade-offs with economic incentives.[3] We urgently need to explore the resonance of such ideologies and values among young audiences, and the ways they intersect with broader social movements, cultures and levers of influence.

Despite its conservative associations, Salafism has constantly adapted to the media of its times, to appeal to new generations and new constituencies. Building on 20 years of media innovation, digital platforms are proving to be powerful tools for Salafi proselytization, as ideologues use the internet to build communities, disseminate ideological resources, raise money, strategically communicate with their audiences and recruit new members.

A broad ecosystem of Salafi-inspired groups – from apolitical scholars to online activists and violent extremists – hold a near-monopoly on search queries concerning religion, and dominate the ecosystem of religious videos on YouTube.[4] Sectarian clerics are among the most popular online 'thought leaders' globally, with followings in the millions on Facebook and Twitter.[5] Yet decision-makers seem to lack any understanding of this ideological landscape or how it impacts on the changing patterns of behaviour and belonging among Gen-Z online.

A Data-driven Snapshot of the Digital Salafi Landscape

In this executive summary, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) presents findings from a one-year research project. Throughout the research, the aim was to provide the first digital snapshot of the rapidly shifting online Salafi ecosystem. The findings and methods are discussed in greater detail in a series of accompanying research reports, one of which also outlines our theoretical understanding of Salafism, its different strands and its boundaries. Looking in particular at the intersection of Gen-Z identities and communities, the research explores the connections that exist between a broad spectrum of English, German and Arabic Salafi content, including the resonance of specific subcultures, narratives and youth-oriented platforms.

We begin by presenting the findings from ISD's **data-driven snapshot** of the Salafi digital phenomenon 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.

We build on this snapshot with an overview of the findings from an **ethnographic deep dive** into an emergent online Salafi ecosystem, which is referred to as 'Islamogram' after its starting point on Instagram. This is a highly active online community which merges Salafi ideas with alt-right memes and gaming subcultures, presenting a hybridised threat and an emerging ideological trend within digital Salafism that is of concern.

Finally, we **contextualise this digital snapshot** within broader debates around Salafism and its manifestations, online and offline, laying out the implications of our findings for effective policymaking and proportionate civil society responses.

Key Findings

A diverse and expanding online Salafi ecosystem

- **Online Salafism is a cross-platform phenomenon**, ranging across established social media sites, like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, and emerging platforms like TikTok and the gaming chat platform Discord, primarily used by younger constituencies. Platforms play diverse roles in the ecosystem, and different platform architectures are used to maximise reach and engagement.
- **The largest Arabic and English Salafi accounts have audiences in the tens of millions**, with a cumulative cross-platform following of 117 million and 109 million respectively. Meanwhile, German content has a considerably smaller audience of 3 million cumulative followers, likely due to its more geographically limited footprint.[i]
- **Salafi digital activity is growing rapidly**. Between October 2019 and July 2021, researchers saw posting activity double in Arabic (112% increase) and English (110% increase) Salafi online communities, accompanied by a 77% increase among German Salafis.
- **This phenomenon is highly international and closely networked**. Our research points to independent but overlapping Arabic, English and German language communities, with internationally renowned Salafi figures like Zakir Naik and Mufti Menk[ii] serving as central nodes to facilitate connections and share content across the broader Salafi network.
- **Salafi content is becoming increasingly popular on Gen-Z-focused platforms such as TikTok**, where influencers with followings in the millions make full use of the platforms' features to amplify and promote polarising sectarian narratives.
- **Salafi influencers use a broad range of formats to connect with different audiences.** Ranging from lengthy sermons and interactive Q&A sessions to stylised informational videos, a broad spectrum of Salafi channels provide content relating to all aspects of life, from the spiritual and political to the private sphere. Binary black-and-white views are issued on the supposedly singular Islamic stance on complex questions relating to issues as diverse as gender roles, family life, sexuality, entertainment and education, including content aimed explicitly at children, and in largely gender-segregated online spaces.

Online Salafi narratives: Between toxicity and banality

- **Much Salafi content is anodyne and geared towards identity formation and practical religious guidance**. Two-thirds of Salafi material coded by researchers referred to discussion of general religious concepts and activities, while only 9% discussed specific political grievances, such as anti-Muslim racism and the oppression of Muslim populations around the world.
- **However, numerous axes of 'toxicity' are represented across the ecosystem**, from sectarianism to misogynistic content to rejections of democracy. Our development of a bespoke 'ontology' of Salafi toxicity revealed a clear ideological disposition towards 'othering' attitudes in the dataset, which was highly dependent on political and social context.
- **Targets for toxicity vary according to language**. While English- and German-speaking Salafi communities are more likely to express toxic sentiments towards non-Muslim out-groups, including Jews and Christians, Arabic-speaking Salafis online focus mostly on Muslim out-groups, such as Shia and Sufis.

[i] These cumulative follower numbers do not account for potential overlap in audiences between communities and influencers, as well as users with multiple accounts on different platforms. Based on comparing the following of the account with the largest reach and the cumulative follower numbers, we can estimate that Arabic Salafists have 23–117 million followers, more than either English (22–109 million) or German Salafis (320,000–3 million). It should also be emphasised that not all of the followers of these channels are necessarily adherents of Salafism, but could also be interested observers.

[ii] Mufti Menk graduated from Medina University in Saudi Arabia, but earned his title from a Deobandi seminary and has been influential in both Deobandi and Salafi circles.

- **Alt-tech platform Telegram leads in toxicity**. While Facebook is one of the most universally popular platforms for Salafis, Telegram, YouTube comments and Instagram were found to host the highest proportion of toxic posts, suggesting that standards of moderation diverge between platforms and that Salafi actors use different services in consciously distinct ways.
- **A notable core of Salafi posts are 'very toxic' in nature**. 1 in 20 Arabic Salafi messages and 1 in 30 English and German posts were very toxic according to our classification system. These included directly threatening, dehumanising and supremacist posts.
- **Mainstream platforms continue to struggle with 'post-organisational' violent extremist content**. Despite advocating violence, ideologues, such as the notorious scholars of the Shu'yabi school who justified 9/11, and groups such as 'Tauhid Berlin', are able to operate on mainstream platforms until authorities officially move against them. Companies such as TikTok seem to struggle to keep their platform continuously and consistently free from harmful Salafi accounts they have previously banned.

Islamogram: The sharp end of digital Salafi mobilisation

- **An emerging online ecosystem – Islamogram – constitutes a new 'alt-Salafi' threat**. At the sharp end of digital Salafism, an online community with over 160,000 members borrows heavily from the culture of the alt-right, with increasing ideological convergence around the alleged moral decline of the West and the need to return to an idealised 'pure' society.
- **The 'alt-rightification' of Gen-Z Salafi spaces online is metastasising into a new battleground for Muslim identity**. A community of Gen-Z Salafis are self-defining within their own language as part of an 'akh-right' subculture – a play on 'alt-right' and the Arabic word for brother – seeing themselves as locked in a microcosmic culture war against 'libtards' and 'cute Muslims' (labels for progressive Muslims).
- **These sub-communities are waging a self-conscious digital insurgency against liberal Muslims and democracy,** as well as LGBTQ+ and gender rights, using a new memetic toolbox of coordinated 'brigading' and semi-ironic 'shitposting' characterised by plausible deniability, as well as misogynistic mobilisation. A number of out-groups are on the receiving end of discrimination, exclusion or even violent threats.
- **A network of 22 Facebook pages and 20 linked Telegram channels**, with a cumulative total of over 110,000 followers, serve as a factory for the production of English and Arabic language memes geared towards young Salafi communities. These channels meld Salafi references with appropriated alt-right and chan culture references such as Pepe the Frog, Wojaks and Gigachads, while anti-Semitic digital sticker packs are shared alongside neo-Nazi content.6
- **The gaming chat app Discord plays an integral part in the Islamogram online universe**. Six Islamogram-linked Discord servers with a highly active collective membership of almost 5,000 accounts function as closed-door spaces in which activists can discuss theology, coordinate attacks on other servers, and launch new accounts and platform drives.
- **These Gen-Z online Salafi communities have an ambivalent relationship with overt violent extremism**. While generally opposed to ISIS as khawarij (outsiders), they frequently express support for local jihadist groups such as Hamas and the Syria-based Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. In the wake of the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, a number of prominent Instagram accounts within the network were removed for their overt support of the group, which they described as the 'Chadliban' for its 'epic troll of the US military', with a number of memes amplified by alt-right communities similarly opposed to 'US imperialism'.

Digital Salafism: Eluding traditional classifications and responses

- **Our current categorisations are not fit for purpose to describe this ideologically elastic online community**. The Salafi spectrum has traditionally been broken down into categories such as quietist, politico and jihadist. This classification sought to highlight the similarities and differences between Salafi aqidah, or creed, and manhaj, or method. However, such approaches are insufficient for conceptualising the increasingly hybridised online environments.
- **Understanding this online ecosystem requires scholars and researchers to reframe their categorisations of Salafism.** Reflecting the give and take between traditional classifications of Salafism and internet subcultures, as well as the intersections of extremist, fringe and mainstream political ideologies, this Gen-Z cohort of Salafis will continue to evolve, and undoubtedly pose a new set of challenges for those working on responses to the challenges of harmful and extremist content online.
- **These threats cannot be considered only through the lens of violent extremism**. This challenge is not just about a narrowly defined threat of violent extremism, but also a wider set of potential harms ranging from polarisation to disinformation, conspiracy theories and weaponised hate. Such online Salafi spaces – which have been described as operating on the 'periphery of extremism' – elude conventional approaches to moderation, intervention and prevention.[7]

Implications and Recommendations

Anticipating the next generation of threat

While our research shows that broader online Salafi networks have tens of millions of followers, the specific threats identified in our analysis within this context are still relatively small. At the sharp end of this ideological threat, which is the point of most concern, account networks still numbers in the thousands, with followings in the hundreds of thousands. These represent neither the scale nor the severity of the ideological challenge of ISIS follower networks at their mid-2010s peak, or the subsequent rapid rise in the size of far-right extremist groups and channels, reaching an audience of millions.

However, it is important to remember that there was only a very small community of people sharing niche chan culture memes just five years ago, before the meteoric rise of the alt-right around the election of Donald Trump. Similarly, challenges like QAnon were treated as online esoterica in the run-up to the 6 January Capitol attack, when their profound offline harms became evident. Rather than a fully realised threat, our research points to a concerning direction of travel, one for which governments, civil society and tech companies alike are totally unprepared.

Most notably, the specifics of the Gen-Z audience bring in a whole new set of factors, with huge implications for our understanding and forecasting, as well as how we build effective preventative responses. This represents a unique 'very online' constituency that operates freely across platforms (notably, many of the Salafi spaces mapped in this report have images and video formats as the default medium for proselytisation).

The broader online cultures and norms of Gen-Z also represent a particular set of challenges. The preferred communication formats at the cutting edge of digital Salafi discourse are no longer tedious three-hour lectures or lengthy online fatwas, but gamified theological conversations on Discord servers, religiously flavoured YouTube prank videos and reductive 60-second TikTok explainers on polarising ideological topics. Such broader cultures need to be understood for these ideological trends to be effectively addressed.

Furthermore, the nature of the ideological challenge is also new – this is not a problem associated with known and established extremist preachers, but rather charismatic influencers and ideologues from across a wider ideological spectrum. Amid these dramatic changes in the online Salafi landscape, scholarly conceptualisations of Salafism and its constituent parts have remained the same, and have not been modernised.

We are seeing a broad digital community of young Salafis emerging that is not ideologically cohesive, but nonetheless contains digital extremist subcultures associated with a generation that came of age in the wake of 9/11, and was shaped by the rise of social and political movements that challenged both mainstream and fringe establishments. We have therefore seen correspondingly convergent evolution and even network intersection with international far-right subcultures.

Evolving our responses to meet current challenges

The challenges encountered in our research are inherently post-organisational in nature – indeed many of these communities and subcultures are overtly anti-ISIS despite having emerged from related Salafi (and sometimes Salafi-jihadi) ideological milieus. As such, adopting group-based understandings of the threat will not help us to address the next generation of ideological challenges.

Beyond this, our research points to a threat that is increasingly hybridised in its ideology – not defined by ideological rigidity but rather elasticity. We need to better understand and analyse the way diverse networks are mainstreaming divisive narratives, including the sharing of meme cultures across Salafi and alt-right online groupings.

For both audiences, we see a new culture war serving as a core part of extremist ideologies, especially issues relating to gender, LGBTQ+ rights, and movements for racial equality like Black Lives Matter. Here, a hybrid online culture is emerging between Salafi spaces and alt-right 'based' themes, where ideologically extreme, young, tech-savvy figures, draw on, and react to, a blend of young millennial reference points, from woke culture to 'fashwave' (an alt-right variant of lo-fi 'synthwave' aesthetics).

A new model is required to establish an approach to this challenging hybrid. We cannot rely on responses that are geared towards a previous incarnation of the ideological challenge.

As such, we need to think afresh about the toolbox of responses, from kinetic takedown measures to counter-narratives and strategic communications, upstream education approaches, and broader prevention efforts to help build levies against emerging threats – rather than simply today's immediate challenges.
So much of the appeal of these online spaces is their direct and subversive countercultural foundations, which are imbued with an inherent cynicism and sardonic humour which makes traditional counterspeech responses unsustainable. Our research points to a range of potential platforms for engagement, from youth-oriented services like TikTok to gaming platforms like Discord.

In these spaces, Salafi credibility trades on its 'based-ness' – terminology derived from other online subcultures to describe authenticity of message. Humour forms a major part of the ideological appeal of these online spaces, in a way that has not been seen before at any real scale in Salafi or even Islamist propaganda. As a result, responses will necessarily need to engage with, rather than ignore, these subcultural elements, by out-trolling, out-competing and out-producing the mechanisms of meme production, especially the most toxic and harmful narratives, through targeted engagement, not broad informational correctives in the 'Think Again Turn Away' mould, which often backfired in their delivery. [8]

Defining and categorising the threat

One of the overriding policy questions arising from our research concerns the relationship between Salafism and extremism. In approaching this, policymakers and practitioners alike require a clear and consistent definition of extremism, with careful consideration of where this overlaps with (elements of) Salafism. [9]
One of the key questions about Salafism posed by policymakers is whether it is inherently extremist. As explained in greater detail in the theoretical briefing that is another part of this series of reports, the theology is undoubtedly takfiri (premised on declaring other Muslims to be apostates) and explicitly sectarian, rooted in a puritanical us-and-them view of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims. The potential impacts of this on social cohesion and inter- and intra-faith dynamics in pluralistic societies are profound. Furthermore, as Salafism morphs from being a movement of religious proselytisation into a project that is primarily political and ideological in nature, it certainly presents a regressive model of the relationship between religion and politics. Nonetheless, its relationship with violence is more ambivalent, as only a narrow jihadist subset of Salafis are defined by their belief in the legitimacy of using political violence to achieve their ideological aims.

However, despite a long-standing recognition that the majority of Salafis do not advocate political violence, Salafism is still predominantly approached by governments through a narrow security lens. Policymakers should be wary of oversimplifying the relationship between Salafi beliefs and violent radicalisation, reflecting the fact that the vast majority of Salafi adherents globally are non-political and non-violent.

This nuance is not universally appreciated. In Germany, for example, the word Salafism serves as a stand-in for extremist intent to subvert the state. This mischaracterisation of Salafism as a fundamentally ideological challenge faced by German society risks alienating conservative Muslims and ignoring the nuance and spectrum of Salafi thought.

Practically and conceptually, extremism is not necessarily the most useful lens through which to view the potential harms associated with online Salafism. Rather we need a policy framework that acknowledge the hybridised nature of the threat. This is not just about extremism, but also the broader harms of polarisation, disinformation, conspiracy theories and weaponised hate which may emanate from within the broader Salafi movement.

These considerations entail broader policy questions about the implications of governments clamping down on religious expression that is relatively mainstream, but not necessarily liberal, as well as about the appropriate role of the state in deciding on the acceptability of thought and ideas, and relatedly, properly distinguishing between extremism and social or religious conservatism.

Environmental factors are key to thinking about group challenges

Our research shows the importance of understanding the distinct cultural flavour of Salafi discourse, and how it is shaped in the online domain. While Salafism claims to be a universal global movement which rejects local cultural practices, analysis of Salafism still needs to account for its distinct manifestations across geographical locations and different environments.

For example, in the US, we have seen Salafi institutions like the Yaqeen Institute showing greater openness on LGBT-rights, as groups position themselves within the existing contexts of identity politics within different countries and root themselves in local community dynamics.[10]

As extremism scholar Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens argues in a report on Salafism in America, while Salafism, by its nature, largely transcends local culture and politics, 'since its establishment in America, strands of the movement have adopted traits unique to the national context', being shaped by national politics and social issues, resulting in the 'creation of an indigenous Salafi-influenced Islam which will continue to evolve in response to local and global events'.[11] Our research demonstrates a similarly elastic dynamic within Salafi activity, which adapts to reflect different online environments.

Such insights have considerable implications for responses to Salafism, which must grasp the way environmental factors impact on group dynamics across a broad ideological spectrum. As outlined in the theoretical briefing of this series, an example of how to understand such ideological fluidity within Salafism would be:

- Salafi Islamists might use their environment tactically, as a means to achieve their theopolitical objectives.
- A Salafi-jihadist fringe are inherently supportive of violence, which is predetermined by their ideological outlook.
- Loyalists, meanwhile, have their political and ideological position defined by state policies, most notably those of Saudi Arabia.

The ideological fluidity in the online spaces analysed for this report contradicts some established frameworks of Salafism. Clemens Holzgruber has documented such ideological elasticity using the example of two of the most influential Western Salafi preachers, namely the German Pierre Vogel and the Canadian Bilal Philips, both of whom have been denounced by ISIS as apostates who should be killed. Holzgruber analysed how Salafi influencers distance themselves from Jihadism by changing their lines of argument, maintaining that Vogel and Philips should be considered primarily to be pragmatic Salafi scholars who adapt religious doctrines and their applications to diverse and changing contexts.[12]

Because such figures cross the boundaries of the Salafi typology suggested by Wiktorowicz, placing them in a narrow ideological box risks misunderstanding the nature of their international appeal. It is crucial, therefore, that our policy responses to Salafism recognise the fluidity of the movement, and do not rely on overly fixed understandings.

Policy implications

Moving beyond overtly securitised conceptions of Salafism

One of the major problems with the deployment of the Salafi label in a policy context is the risk of subsuming and lumping together diverse groupings under the same conceptual category – without considering such groups' own perspectives and fault lines. This can lead to false equivalences between very different groups of believers and a general perception that Salafis represent a threat to society. [13]

The perceived threat from Salafi communities writ large among national and local policymakers is often influenced by overgeneralisation or simply equating the label 'Salafi' with a violent extremist ideology, or using it interchangeably with 'Islamist extremist'; similarly, others see a direct correlation between Salafism and Islamist extremism.

As Meleagrou-Hitchens has pointed out, European government policy has been broadly oppositional towards the Salafi movement, based on two main perceptions: that 'Salafism's anti-secular and illiberal social views have the potential to damage the social fabric of a Western nation, dividing Muslims and turning them against their host societies' and a belief that ideological Salafism in some way contributes to violent radicalisation.[14]

This frequently results in the stigmatisation of Salafi communities, which not only acts as a push factor towards radicalisation, but can also be leveraged by far-right movements to build their extremist narratives, further reinforcing the isolation and marginalisation of Salafi communities. As such, understanding the historical trajectory of the treatment of Salafi communities according to their respective local contexts is crucial in placing each community in its broader societal context. We have also seen the instrumentalisation of anti-Salafi narratives by the likes of the AfD in Germany and the broader far-right as a means of creating a hostile anti-Muslim environment,[15] mainstreaming discourse that portrays entire communities as a threat to society.

At the other end of the spectrum, meanwhile, we have seen governments try to co-opt quietist Salafism as a means to counter extremism, because of the perceived 'street' and religious credentials of the movement. However, such strategies are based on potentially flimsy assumptions about authority and credibility. As Rashad Ali, Resident Fellow at ISD, points out in a commentary for the Brookings Institution, 'the premise that quietist Salafism is an antidote needs to be questioned' and 'while engaging quietist Salafis may yield some immediate gains as a strategy, the pros do not outweigh the cons' as even quietist scholars are sometimes cited to justify violence, and may hold extreme positions and have a sectarian agenda.[16]

Improved and ongoing mapping of this online space

While this report presents an important baseline for research into digital Salafism, it will be crucial to map out and build ongoing knowledge and understanding around Salafi discourse, its trajectories and manifestations across the web and on the ground, and most importantly, its resonance with young people, particularly Gen-Z, in order to identify inclusive engagement approaches and ensure social cohesion within communities.

This research focuses mainly on the ideologues and influencers at the heart of online Salafi ecosystems. However, **considerably more work is required on understanding audiences** and recipients of this content, including how digital Salafism resonates and is received by different online communities. We cannot develop effective responses without understanding and talking to these audiences. There is a major **blind spot around the nuances of identity and belonging for young Muslims** in particular, including grievances, fears, priorities and visions for religious and political expression and practice.

It will be important to engage in a 'deep listening' exercise to explore how Salafi ideologies resonate and intersect with broader sociocultural movements, as expressed in Gen-Z's own words. To help assess the **real-world impact of Salafi content**, we can use a broad range of tools to develop a better understanding of the target audience, trends, conversations and networks underpinning the emerging Salafi youth subcultures. These approaches could range from attitudinal surveys and focus groups to **interviews with religious leaders, former extremists and cultural influencers**, who have privileged insights into youth trends, from across Europe, North America and the MENA region, allowing researchers to explore the factors that may **enable polarising narratives to succeed and proliferate**.

Beyond the scope of this research, and building on our work focused on the English, German and Arabic Salafi contexts in Western countries, a **comparative analysis looking at Salafism's appeal within the MENA region** would allow us to understand the different dynamics of Salafi online mobilisation in a Muslim-majority setting, as well as how elements differ across the contexts of different countries.

Finally, as this ecosystem is ever-evolving, ongoing mapping will be needed to understand the trajectory of this movement and how it is developing, and to provide early warnings of any major shifts in the scale or nature of activity. A **data dashboard could be used to visualise the salience and toxicity of specific Salafi narratives in real time**. Continuously updated Salafi narrative mapping across English, German and Arabic communities would provide a live data resource to feed into briefings, programming and new research.

However, while such research is crucial, data insights must be channelled towards concrete policy action. Mapping the challenge will not yield results without **a parallel shift in policy, message design and dissemination**, and the inclusion of new or 'non-traditional' actors in efforts.

Digital policy considerations

As detailed in this report, the ubiquitous proliferation of digital platforms has profoundly altered the scale and nature of Salafi mobilisation. This has implications for a broad range of policy areas beyond traditional counter-extremism, due to the complex landscape based on the interplay of disinformation, conspiracy and hateful content online, often skirting the boundaries of legality and gaming platforms' regulations to reach and engage ever-wider audiences.

Addressing the issues raised in this report through the prism of digital policy will involve facing fundamental challenges around a broad spectrum of largely legal but often harmful content.
Beyond considerations about takedowns and content moderation, this conversation intersects fundamentally with a developing policy conversation about systemic efforts to address online harms and rights-based tech policy and regulation approaches.

Our findings have implications for content knowledge, policy development and implementation gaps in both platform self-regulation and government regulatory approaches to mitigating harms associated with the online Salafi ecosystem while protecting freedom of expression. When considering online responses, all actors must take into account the dangers of previous securitised approaches to 'curbing' Salafism.

As outlined above, successful action will require the development of clear frameworks and definitions around social harms, recognising the additional sensitivities in an online universe which primarily identifies as a religious community, and regularly defends its (often highly polarising) discourse under the auspices of religious freedom, arguing that it is therefore entitled to special protections.

The cross-platform nature of this phenomenon also presents a challenge. Our research highlights considerable gaps in the moderation of content that is not al-Qaeda or ISIS branded but is nonetheless violent and extremist. Furthermore, there are examples of Salafi influencers deliberately looking to get around moderation (for example on TikTok). This poses questions about simply enforcing platforms' terms of service, and what systematic challenges might exist for handling Salafi content that clearly violates these.

Crucially, this digital policy conversation should not just be focused on the takedown of clearly illegal or contravening content. The focus of government and multilateral efforts to address online extremism to date has largely been on the removal of violent and terrorist content. However, this on its own fails to address user journeys towards violent extremist and terrorist content online, and the proliferation of 'grey area' or borderline content that is legal and may not contravene a platform's terms of service. While this content may remain just within the boundaries of legality, it may nonetheless lead users to more violent content or inspire them to take extremist action in other ways.

Content moderation alone cannot address the underlying factors driving the exponential proliferation of conspiratorial and hateful online content; the attention-based business model of major social media platforms has resulted in algorithmic amplification of harmful content.

Instead, as part of a comprehensive suite of prevention approaches, it is essential for governments to adopt a systemic approach to platform governance and regulation, one which advances meaningful transparency in decision making, algorithms and governance.

Furthermore, an approach to regulation requiring a duty of care from platforms with regard to user safety would allow an appropriate balance between protections for free speech and proportionate, risk-based safeguarding from online harms, such as hate and extremism.

A new playbook for responses

Beyond specific policy prescriptions, our research also points to the clear need for a more coordinated 'ground game' to ensure a networked community-led approach, rather than the siloed responses that only perpetuate our inability to effectively tackle the relevant issues.

It is crucial that we animate a broad global network, including policymakers, cities, youth constituencies, businesses, cultural influencers, community groups and religious leaders in our efforts to outcompete these actors.

This endeavour will require the development of a new playbook for navigating the potential challenges and opportunities in engaging Gen-Z. When considering the next generation of interventions, we need policymakers to set an ambitious agenda for future programming, funders to direct their investment into forward-looking work, communities to understand these new threats and hybrid ideologies, and practitioners to trial and test innovative approaches to compete in a crowded, creative and fast-paced online landscape.

Such innovative pilot communications interventions could include:

- Research into the group dynamics within Salafi online subgroups, to better understand the wedges and divisions that might be exploited by opponents;
- Testing a writers' room concept whereby comedic writers create viral concepts rooted in the reference points of these online subcultures, which could be used as part of a meme-based engagement and push-back strategy;
- Trialling a system for supporting civil society responses to these narratives, evaluating their impacts and providing insights on what communications responses best resonate within the relevant communities.

A strategic blueprint will be essential in developing the next generation of youth-focused interventions, both online and offline, drawing on a global network of policy leaders, technology companies, business visionaries and civil society pioneers. This framework will need to be data-led, and utilise methods that challenge accepted wisdom and adapt responses to the realities of digital engagement for a new generation. It will be necessary to draw on cultural intelligence experts and their data alongside social scientists studying child and adolescent development. Effectively addressing this challenge will require coalitions across the public, private and third sectors as an integrated and inclusive approach will be fundamental to successful policymaking.

However, we are still in the early stages. Within the commonly used strategic communications 'OODA' loop (observe, orientate, decide, act), we are still very much at an observe and orientate stage. To move beyond reactive responses, it will be crucial to develop a holistic approach rooted in a considerably improved understanding of the evolution of digital Salafism.

Key questions that still need to be answered before we move to action include:

- How do we engage with a culture framed around 'owning' and 'trolling', much like alt-right communities before it? Can lessons be learned from these communities for our engagement with Salafism?
- How do we communicate with inherently adversarial communities – a symptom of increasingly zero sum views on political discourse within wider society, a polarisation of which Salafism represents just a small part?
- How do we use the fact that many of these online communities are explicitly anti-ISIS, building on this to communicate a broader message about pluralism and diversity?
- How do we engage with fringe cultures and countercultures to produce communications that are reflective of the audience, and seen as meaningful and authentic?
- How do we develop subsets of responses that deal with the gender dimensions of Gen-Z engagement in a nuanced way?
- What is the likely growth of these movements if nothing is done to slow their progress?

This is a multilayered and complicated communications ecosystem, which needs to be untangled in order for us to understand its component parts. This will not be about developing a single communications approach, but rather community-based engagement and a network-based response.

Addressing both the supply and demand sides of Salafism's appeal

Fundamentally, the issues outlined in this report will not be addressed through a narrow strategic communications approach or counter-narrative campaign. Our research shows the online Salafi discourse is dominated by discussion of real-world concerns, ranging from growing domestic far-right extremism to systematic anti-Muslim oppression overseas. However, such legitimate grievances can be weaponised by influencers with a supremacist or prejudicial agenda.

This reality has considerable implications for responses, and means authentically engaging at a community level, dramatically scaling our engagement and programmes, and substantively addressing meaningful issues of concern, while also addressing the pull factors drawing Gen-Z to online Salafi influencers.

To make this engagement work, we need to understand both the demand and supply sides of the Salafism equation.

On the demand side, our research shows a plethora of legitimate grievances are key narratives within the data, from prejudicial treatment of Muslim communities as part of the 'Global War on Terror' to the securitisation of discourse around minority communities, and oppression of Muslim communities overseas, such as the persecution of Uighur Muslims in China's Xinjiang region.

While our report points to a number of challenges related to human rights within online Salafi discourse – including sectarianism, sexism, homophobia and supremacism – effective responses to demand will nonetheless need to be rooted in consistent human rights approaches (both domestically and abroad), and ultimately geared towards doing much more to build trust with communities and deliver on their needs. This means delivering localised, targeted support to communities regarding their safety as well as security (including protection from hate crime), further investment in local services, and responding to legitimate concerns about local extremist mobilisation, including the far-right. People need to feel they are benefiting from interventions and that their problems are being addressed if governments are to have a hope of enlisting them to counter polarising forces in their own communities.

The supply side of the equation is evident from our research: charismatic influencers reach large audiences across a diverse range of social media platforms, and action-oriented content framed in terms of dogmatic, black-and-white morality can be highly appealing as a counterculture. Considerable funding underpins this supply, including from state actors, while offline networks and associations provide genuine connections to real-world communities and activities, taking activists beyond digital content alone.[17]

Addressing this supply in the online domain will require the suite of responses outlined above, from takedowns of violent extremist content to limits on the ability of harmful organisations to proselytise, to efforts that decrease the reach of non-violent groups who might nonetheless feed polarisation, dehumanisation and exclusion through their online activity.

All of these efforts must be genuinely proportionate, avoiding the securitisation that has plagued this policy agenda, and consistently emphasise a rights-based discourse around freedom of religion, thought, conscience and speech. Governments need to understand this new threat, be bold and creative in designing policy for this new chapter, and decide whether they want to get ahead of the curve or simply respond when it becomes necessary.

Endnotes

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