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Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures

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About this report

As part of ISD's Gen Z & The Digital Salafi Ecosystem project, this report provides an ethnographic deep dive into an emerging online Salafi ecosystem, referred to by its members as 'Islamogram'. This highly active online community merges Salafi ideas with alt-right memes and gaming subcultures, and represents a hybridised cross-platform challenge, speaking to an emerging trend characterised by increasing ideological fluidity between diverse online extremist communities.

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Executive Summary

In the two decades since the 9/11 attacks, online Salafi activism has fundamentally changed. Shaped by a generational shift involving younger followers, the ubiquity of video game devices and platforms, and the rise of message boards, social media platforms and encrypted messaging applications, this new strain of Salafi activism is borrowing and adapting the visual language of gaming, the alt-right¹ and the far right.



Figure 1 Pepe the Frog watches, and is pleased, by the attacks on Sept. 11, 2001. The image was shared in alt-Salafi-jihadist pages and groups on Facebook.

A growing subset of Generation Z (Gen-Z) Salafis are increasingly fluid in their ideology, internally conflicted, and building networks with the aim of attacking opponents and pushing an idiosyncratic set of ‘culture war’ tropes. They are a generation who were born at the height of the ‘Global War on Terror’ and immersed in identity-based polarisation both within and outside the Muslim community. They are now coming of age in a world where ISIS is active, and the Taliban’s takeover of Afghanistan has reshaped assumptions about global power.

This historical backdrop has informed an online community of Salafis who, unlike their predecessors, have only a limited interest in dawah, or evangelism, and are more concerned with broadcasting Salafist tropes designed to cause division among and between Muslims and non-Muslims around the world. The use of chan culture² memes, ‘edit’ videos and video game cultures born out of the likes of Minecraft add an additional dimension and complexity to understanding this subset of online Salafism.

To understand the shifts and emerging trends in this online Salafi subculture, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) set out to track the influence numerous malign online communities had on Gen-Z Salafis over the course of a year (2020–2021). Using data collected from six platforms, including mainstream social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Reddit and Twitter, as well as messaging-based applications such as the encrypted messaging platform Telegram and the gaming app Discord, ISD researchers analysed these deeply interconnected networks of young polyglot influencers who are altering the shape and discourse of Salafism online. The term ‘Islamogram’ is used to refer to this ecosystem and is defined in more detail later.

The researchers identified 60 Islamogram accounts on Instagram, with a total of 162,338 followers at the time of writing, generating almost 2.9 million interactions across their posts and growing their follower counts by 22% during the research period. Additionally, ISD researchers joined six Islamogram-linked Discord servers with a collective membership of 4,478 followers, and identified 22 Telegram channels (24,709 followers), 21 Facebook pages and groups (88,596 followers) and three Reddit threads affiliated with Islamogram influencers (7,203 followers).

Across all these platforms, researchers collected 5,467 memes and 3,524 videos. Roughly 20% of the memes and videos collected (1,727), were either supportive of militant groups including Hamas, the Taliban and Salafi-jihadist organisations such as Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, or ISIS. Most of the other memes were dedicated to attacking liberal Muslims, LGBTQ+ communities or other Salafis.

Our findings indicate that networks of thousands of ideologically agnostic young Salafis, cutting across geographical locations and languages, have blended traditional Salafism with alt-right-style activism by drawing on ubiquitous gaming and wider internet subcultures. This presents a new version of an old challenge: researchers, governments and civil society need to improve their understanding of the generational shifts within ideologically motivated movements, and their potential harms within wider communities.

Researchers have focused considerable attention on how far-right and white supremacist groups and supporters glorify Salafi-jihadist ideologues and principles.³ One of the most comprehensive studies to date on the influence of meme and chan culture on the far right was undertaken by the Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST). It specifically called for analysis of 'mainstream social media and combining knowledge of chan communities with other "push factors" to radicalization'.⁴ However, to date, there has been no comprehensive cross-platform analysis of how Gen-Z Salafis are adopting, altering and amplifying chan communities, alt-right and far-right narratives, and in some cases glorifying Nazism. This research is an attempt to bridge this gap and begin to understand the networks operating across both mainstream and fringe platforms, and what they represent in terms of a new generation of online Salafi mobilisation.



Figure 2 A Yes Chad! Meme that features a message of unity between a far-right Chad and an Arab Chad coming together to fight the LBGTQ+ community.



Figure 3 A Pepe the Frog in armed group garb, and a beret emblazoned with "There is no God, but God, and Muhammad (PBUH) is His Prophet." The image was shared in the largest alt-Salafi-jihadist meme page and group ISD researchers found on Facebook.

Background: Trolling, Producing Memes and Cultivating Online Subcultures

Salafi-identifying Gen-Z internet users are creating fringe digital communities of support that draw on the visual language used by the alt-right on platforms such as 4Chan, Reddit and Discord. Framing much of their discourse under an umbrella of 'pan-Islamism', these young Salafis are engaging in a self-declared 'meme war' with progressive and liberal Muslims. At the same time, they promote a set of culture war tropes also used by the alt-right that attack the inherent degeneracy of Western culture. In that sense, this subset of online Salafis represent a convergence of internet subcultures that cuts across platforms and is beginning to alter the shape of Salafi activism online.

Central to much of this Gen-Z Salafi activism online is what the academic Whitney Philips outlined in her seminal book *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, which explored online trolling (provocative behaviour designed to trigger a response) and how it fits 'very comfortably within the contemporary, hyper-networked digital media landscape'.⁵ By tracing the history of online trolling to the early 1990s, Philips gave the lie to a narrative that sought to peg it solely to the rise of 4Chan – the first of many forum-based websites. Philips charted the generational shift involved across time and platforms in terms of 'subculturing trolling' and its relationship to 'the corporate mainstream'.⁶ Trolling was firmly a feature of online forums before 2003, when 4Chan began to take shape, but it was ultimately 4Chan that further mainstreamed what came to be dubbed 'chan culture'.

Much of chan culture relies on the production of memes, famously defined and described as a cultural genetic process by Richard Dawkins and now as generic a term as 'the internet'.⁷ The cultural transmission of ideas through imitation has been the lifeblood of the internet since its founding. Memes are now, as noted media scholar Ryan Milner wrote, 'at once universal and particular, familiar and foreign. They're small expressions with big implications'.⁸ As such, memes convey a range of emotions, and can be organic or commercial, political and theological, and are thus the digital landscape's most replicable and adaptable cultural artefact. Memes are also the language of distinct subcultures on the internet, where their use signifies particular identities, differentiates enemies from allies, and acts as a digital mechanism for waging ideological and theological war.



Figure 4 A GigaChad wearing a Kufi – an Islamic hat – is being targeted for being homophobic. The image is representative of the deep-seated hatred for the LGBTQ+ community within Islamogram.



Figure 5 Adolf Hitler is often used by Islamogram accounts as a means to highlight their anti-Semitism, as well as drive likes and follows from a spectrum of extremist accounts.

Figure 6 A series of stills from a “Trollface” radicalizes meme video, which has been used by both alt-Right and alt-Salafijihadists. The video indicates a future bombing that would take place in Oslo and is part commentary on the internet’s power to aide radicalization and the user’s own world view of being influenced by chan culture.

Accordingly, our study focuses on these particular elements of Gen-Z Salafi networks: trolling, producing memes and cultivating online subcultures. It is as much a study of memes and their use as it is of cultural transmission between digital communities.

In recent years, research into meme communities has been an important element of media, communications and, in some instances, religious studies. Despite the abundance of research into meme communities, there has been scant work on memes as an identity construction mechanism in Salafi communities.

To date, there has been even less study of Gen-Z Salafis and their use of memes in a contemporary landscape. What does exist in the research canon tends to have a broader focus on the use of memes by Muslims, and the oddities of memes used by English Islamic State supporters.⁹ There is, however, a much richer spectrum of meme production between the poles of mainstream Muslims and Islamic State supporters. To date, research on Islamic State supporters’ meme production has also been limited to English-speaking communities. Our study seeks to go farther than previous research, not only highlighting the wide range of Gen-Z Salafi activism, but also identifying nuances in Arabic and English meme communities that support the Islamic State. By pinpointing specific communities within the much larger ecosystem of Muslim meme production online, our study seeks to understand not just the construction of identity through memes, but how the influences related to two seemingly oppositional subcultures – Salafism and chan culture – intersect online.

The starting point for our approach to understanding Gen-Z Salafi digital meme communities is understanding that the same spectrum of Salafis that exists offline also manifests itself online. Salafis often do not refer to themselves as Salafi, and instead subscribe to a certain scholarly lineage. To date, the Salafi spectrum has traditionally been broken down into categories such as quietist, politico and jihadist.¹⁰ This classification sought to highlight the similarities and differences in Salafi aqidah (creed) and manahaj (methodology). However, as some scholars have noted, Salafis do not always present themselves as Salafis, and in fact prefer to be known as either ‘al-salaf al-salih (righteous predecessors), ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama’a (followers of the Sunnah and community), or simply Muslims’.¹¹ According to our



research, this extends into online communities, where young Salafis do not refer to themselves as Salafi, but instead use their memes and videos to emphasise links to scholars who similarly identify as al-salaf al-salih, ahl al-Sunna wal-Jama'a or simply Muslim.

Nuances like this compelled noted Islamic studies scholar Joas Wagemakers to introduce more gradations than there were in the traditional understanding of the Salafi spectrum. Specifically, Wagemakers sought to rectify inconsistencies in Salafi classification by stating that all Salafis are supportive, in his words 'in principle', of the concept of jihad when non-Muslim countries invade Muslim countries. The question of how to wage war is where Salafis differentiate themselves, according to Wagemakers. He used the Jordanian Salafi-jihadist Sheikh Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi as an example when breaking down the categorisation of Salafi-jihadists further, dubbing al-Maqdisi a 'quietist jihadi-Salafi'.¹² Such nuances also apply to online communities of young Salafis, where there are tiers of jihadist support ranging between nativist movements, those affiliated with political parties, and those who support internationally recognised terrorist groups.

The Arabist and Middle East historian Roel Meijer specifically outlined the appeal of Salafism to 'disgruntled young people, the discriminated migrant, or the politically repressed'. He posited that, through Salafism, they were 'able to contest the hegemonic power of their opponents: parents, the elite, the state, or dominant cultural and economic values of the global capitalist system as well as the total identification with an alien nation which nation-states in Europe impose'.¹³ This appeal is precisely how Salafism has animated a Gen-Z cohort of young Salafis online, who are at odds with their home countries as well as other Muslims, even their families and friends.

A clear majority of Gen-Z Salafi activism online is focused on promoting the virtues of Islam, and more specifically Salafism. Vices, however, are weaponised through trolling in order to create divisions between Muslims as well as people of other faiths. Intra-Salafi schisms – such as broad-based hate of Madkhalism, a form of quietist Salafism – as well as those between sects such as the Ahmadiyya and Shia, are treated as prime targets for Salafi meme production. The same hatred gives rise to memes attacking 'liberal' Muslims who identify with Western culture and media. Tropes used by the alt-right and far right around the 'moral degeneracy' of the West are often further amplified by Salafi influencers seeking to own¹⁴ Muslims practising 'progressive' Islam.



Figure 7 A takfiri Wojak floats above cultural, ideological, political and social conflicts for believing in the battle between Islam and kufr, or in English, disbelief.



Figure 8 Islamogram accounts are self-aware of their behavior online, and the spectrum of accounts is represented in this image shared as a meme by an Islamogram account on Instagram. Of note, is the use of Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, one of the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombing of 2015.

The Taliban capture of Afghanistan had widespread support across this subset of online Salafi communities, with Gen-Z Salafis celebrating the return of the 'Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan', showing clear convergence of narratives and imagery with alt-right and far-right communities. However, a more complex relationship is evident with other violent extremist groups, such as the Islamic State, who command explicit support from a relatively small subset of accounts on Instagram, as well as an animated core of Arabic alt-Salafi-jihadists on Facebook, who produce chan culture memes supporting the Islamic State and other Salafi-jihadists. Instead, online Salafi influencers were more likely to support jihadist movements such as Hamas for its anti-Israel stance, as well as the Taliban for its conflict with the West and its establishment of sharia law in Afghanistan.

Our research points to an emerging global ecosystem of young Salafis defined not by ideological rigidity, but rather an ideational elasticity that allows these communities to draw on seemingly oppositional alt-right and far-right tropes. This interplay between the far-right, alt-right and young Salafi communities online is taking place internationally – with both English- and Arabic-speaking Salafi communities appropriating the language and imagery of the alt-right. This is a by-product of a rapid and parallel evolution of trolling subcultures across a generation that grew up in the shadow of 9/11, with significant differences in attitudes from the one preceding it.

Concepts and theories on convergence that view the ideological interplay between far-right and Islamist ideological principles in solely binary terms are seriously flawed. Gen-Z Salafis' online communities exhibit a great deal of ideological innovation, adopting an extensive toolkit of cultural reference points to propagate their overarching worldview. This includes the use of music, which has typically been rejected by Salafis of all stripes, edited into videos over scenes featuring proscribed terrorist groups' activities, dated historical jihad footage and meme characters. While these 'edit videos' are lauded for their aesthetics, some of which borrow heavily from alt-right subcultures such as 'fashwave', there is nonetheless a sense of conflict stemming from the belief that their use and promotion online is morally wrong.¹⁵ However, striking a balance between multiple digital worlds is the central ethos of Gen-Z Salafi activism.



Figure 9 Islamogram accounts often use the far-right trope about “rejecting modernity and embracing tradition” as a means to translate their ideological worldviews as Salafis to the world. This image uses the LGBTQ+ community as a means to define their hatred for the community.



Figure 10 Arabic alt-Salafi-jihadists will often use stills from Islamic State videos as a means to highlight their ideological world view. In this image the (top) are religious scholars from the Saudi Arabia labeled “the scholars of the ummah,” who are contrasted against Islamic State fighters breaking bread labeled “Khawarji,” as in English religious “outsiders,” meant to slander the Islamic State. The image is meant to be a sarcastic take on the religious authorities dining at tables like royalty while the Islamic State fighters share plates.

Community size by platform

On Facebook, researchers tracked and monitored young Salafi communities using both English and Arabic, trading primarily in pop culture memes melded with appropriated alt-right and chan culture memes such as Pepe the Frog,¹⁶ Wojaks,¹⁷ Soyjaks¹⁸ and Gigachads.¹⁹ Researchers found 21 central pages and groups with a collective follower base of 88,596 across the platform. Six pages and groups, representing 22% (20,131) of the overall follower base, were engaged in explicitly Salafi-jihadist meme discussions and production, mostly in Arabic and supportive of Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham. These smaller networks of Salafi-jihadists also linked to Telegram channels connected to a younger generation of alt-jihadist graphic designers, remixing and creating 8-bit graphic videos in support of both Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham.

On Instagram, a group of 60 young English-speaking Salafi influencers – all of whom are a part of a community known as 'Islamogram' – have cultivated a subculture steeped in video gaming and chan culture that is supportive of Salafism. Ideologically heterogenous, Islamogram is a network of young Salafi propagators who use the Instagram platform but draw heavily on the visual and linguistic culture of 4Chan, Reddit and Discord. The rise of these Islamogram influencers closely resembles the rise of the alt-right in 2016, in that it feeds off other noxious trolling subcultures online. At the start of the project, the Islamogram influencers had a collective follower base of 162,338. Over the past year, the top 30 have collectively received 2.2 million views of their memes and edit videos, and have grown their follower base by 20%.

On Reddit, three threads affiliated with Islamogram influencers had a collective subscriber base of 7,203. The largest of these threads was dedicated to promoting pan-Islamism, expressing support for Hamas and the Taliban, as well as the Chechnyan and Bosnian jihads. The curators of the threads on Reddit also drew on mainstream or halal (permissible) meme threads on the platform.



Figure 11 To deride Afghans escaping Afghanistan during the Taliban Takeover in August, memes such as this highlight an internal schisms promoted by Islamogram accounts meant to highlight “real Muslims” and “liberal Muslims,” who are not prepared to wage “jihad” against “infidels” such as the United States.



Figure 12 Islamogram accounts believe a culture war supported by the technology companies is being waged against Salafi beliefs on social media, with Jews at the helm of the war.

Researchers found 22 relevant channels on Telegram, with a collective follower count of 24,709, connected to or promoted by the Islamogram influencers on Instagram. Just under half of these channels (10) shared memes and edit videos in support of groups such as Hamas, the Taliban, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and, in some select cases, Islamic State. The Telegram channels affiliated with Islamogram influencers were rife with antisemitic, anti-LGBTQ+ content, and there was strong antipathy to 'liberal' Muslims. These Salafi channels also shared neo-Nazi content, blurring the lines between the two extremist communities. Islamic State, Nazi, neo-Nazi, alt-right and antisemitic sticker packs and memes were frequently used to express support for the killing of LGBTQ+ community members as well as 'liberal' Muslims.

On Discord, researchers found a small, tight-knit community of Islamogram influencers and their followers across six dedicated servers. These six servers had a collective membership of 4,478. The largest server was affiliated with the Islamogram influencer known as Abu Anon, whose memes have helped him amass a total of 56,353 followers across Twitter, YouTube, Instagram and Discord. Discord-based Islamogram communities segregate genders and require voice verification in order to be granted access. During the monitoring period, ISD researchers reported two additional Discord servers linked with Islamogram influencers that were sharing bomb-making information as well as the address and family details of a federal judge in the United States.

Across these six platforms, researchers collected 5,467 memes and 3,524 videos produced by a dedicated set of influencers. ISD researchers not only analysed each piece of content, but also developed a method of drawing distinctions between different Salafi communities. The memes primarily targeted 'liberals' and 'Western degeneracy', but they also made reference to a range of other culture war enemies that are key hate figures for Gen-Z Salafis. Most were dedicated to attacking liberal Muslims, members of LGBTQ+ community and other Salafis. Roughly 20% of the memes and videos collected (1,727), were either supportive of Hamas, the Taliban, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham or Islamic State.



Figure 13 Islamogram accounts on Discord shared much more explicit messaging around the "killing of kafirs," such as this Pepe the Frog complete with a bandana with the imagery from the Hamas-linked Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades.

Sizing up Islamogram

As the overview in the previous section showed, Islamogram encompasses a broad network of young users spanning the spectrum of Salafism on Instagram, Twitter and Discord. Groups' footprints and sizes vary across these platforms. Instagram is the primary platform – from which Islamogram derives its name and where it has the most active influencers.

As mentioned above, ISD researchers identified 60 key Islamogrammers of interest, and specifically analysed the accounts of the top 30, who cut across the Salafi spectrum, and were connected to a very active base of 154,016 followers. Over the course of the year (2020–2021), these 30 top Islamogrammers generated almost 2.9 million interactions across their posts, and a total of 2.8 million likes for videos, photos and IGTV videos, with 2.2 million video views and 355,754 video likes. This small, select group of influencers experienced a 22% growth in their follower count during the period of study.

While these are still relatively small numbers, their interaction and growth rates suggest an upward trajectory. For example, two key influencers were able to grow their follower bases over the course of the year by 62% and 76% respectively. However, there is a need to rightsize this community, as many members have recently faced takedowns for their support of the Taliban. Similarly, not all the followers of key influencers are active in the same style of Salafi activism. In fact, followers of key Islamogram accounts also cut across the ideological spectrum, with some being members of other chan communities online, such as fascists, Baathists, Assadists and, in select cases, the alt-right.

Similarly, Islamogram encompasses halal and haram (impermissible) posters, and our particular focus was on the haramposting influencers (the distinction between the two groups is discussed in detail later in this report). A much larger ecosystem of Islamogram Salafis are engaged in what could be defined as standard Salafi activism online, such as the promotion of select Quranic hadiths (teachings), rather than Muslim Chad meme production.

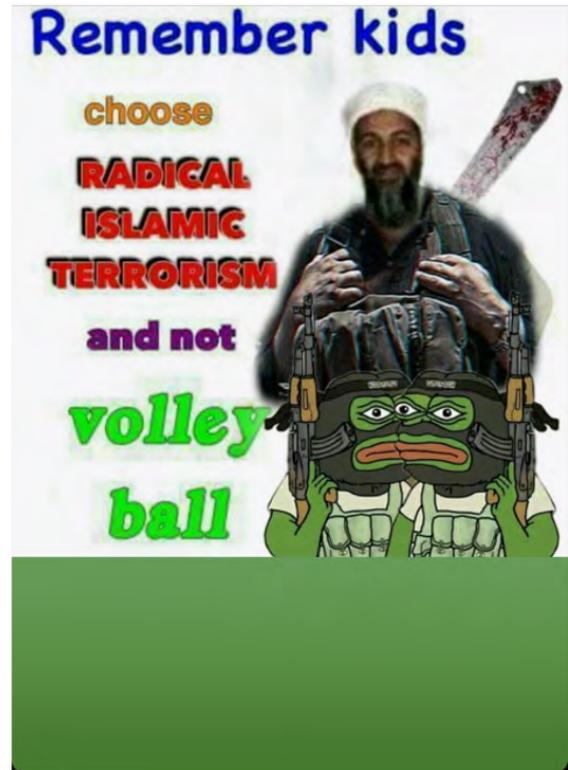
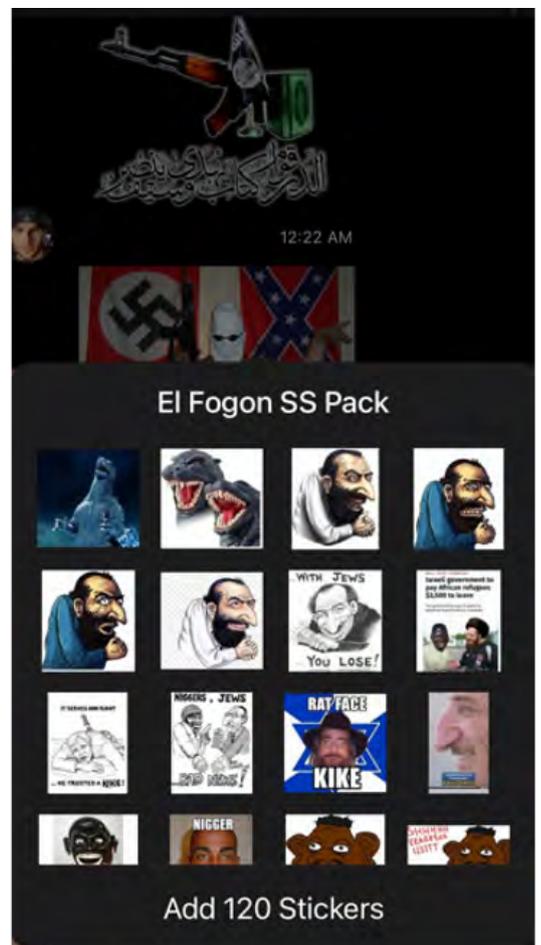
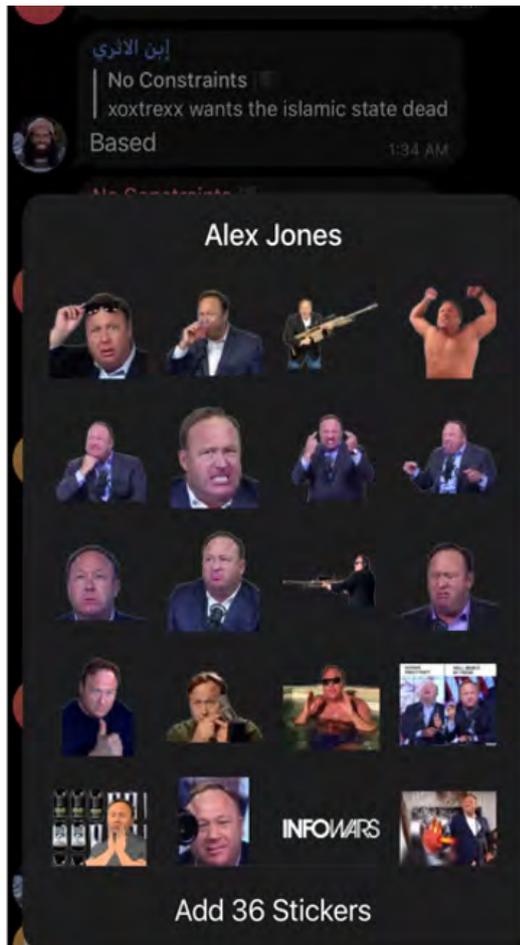


Figure 14 Islamogram accounts often shared irreverent posts that were part terrorist support, and alt-right imagery, such as the above.



Figure 15 Alt-Salafi-jihadists who support the Islamic State on Instagram would attack other groups, such as al-Qaeda, with this meme, where al-Qaeda leaders are seen as tools of Iran. The meme uses Aymenn al-Zawahiri to highlight this, with his face superimposed on a Shia worshipper performing self-flagellation, and a tire on this head representative of a slur used for Shia clerics.

Figure 16 In Telegram channels affiliated with Islamogram accounts, sticker packs that support Osama bin Laden, Nazi anti-Semitism, the Islamic State and Alex Jones are shared with one another and used to comment on news. The sticker packs highlight a cross-spectrum of terrorist, extremist, and conspiracy support.



As a community, Islamogram connects to other platforms, broadening its reach into otherwise closed digital spaces. One integral part of the Islamogram ecosystem is its use of servers dedicated to ideology, religious practice, video games and memes on Discord. These Discord servers function as closed spaces where theological discussions can take place, and coordinated attacks on other servers, accounts and platforms can be launched. Discord servers set up or supported by key influencers bring together the full spectrum of haram and halal posters from Islamogram. They are segregated by gender, and this is enforced through voice verification by moderators.

Islamogram Discord servers are heavily guarded by members, who are alert to ‘fedposting’ – police or other authorities, such as the Federal Bureau of Investigation, pretending to be members of the servers – and enforce even more strict rules with regard to support for terrorist groups. In select servers affiliated with Islamogram influencers who would be considered Salafi-jihadists, members were posting explicitly terrorist material. Much of the Salafi-jihadist content posted by members was dubbed either fedposting or ‘sus’ (suspect), or deleted by the server moderators; some was simply considered ‘larping’, a term derived from live action role playing, but meaning an internet-based persona in this context.

Researchers tracked Islamogram’s more noxious influencers to Telegram and Facebook, where much more extreme, polyglot alt-Salafi-jihadist subcommunities exist. Alt-Salafi jihadists appropriate elements of Arabic and English pop culture, as well as chan culture, to spread positive narratives about terrorist groups, ideologues and ideologies, including those of Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Telegram channels and groups such as ‘Sand N*****’ and ‘Soldiers of Allah’ were connected to the Islamogram accounts that support Salafi-jihadist groups and ideologues. Members used these channels to share Islamic State, Nazi, alt-right, and far-right sticker packs on subjects such as antisemitism, and support for jihadist groups and ideologues.

This set of Telegram influencers were more profoundly influenced by the chan cultures of imageboard sites and other platforms synonymous with the alt-right. Alt-Salafi-jihadists differentiated themselves by creating content that draws on subcultures such as ‘fashwave’ or other alt-right visuals as a defining feature of their group. Their



Figure 17 When an allegedly 13-year-old user on Discord asked if he could become a “jihadi” in a Discord server hosted by members of Islamogram, other users egged him on, and then quickly let him down. Instead of becoming a “jihadi,” in “real life,” they suggest he settles for becoming a “jihadi” on Discord. One user specifically noted “we jihad on Discord.”

use of synthwave graphic design or 8-bit graphics allows their support for groups like Islamic State or Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham to reach a new generation with different tastes. It is important to note that, in a similar way to the larger Islamogram ecosystem on Instagram, alt-Salafi-jihadist channels were on the fringe of a larger set of Salafi channels. Of the 22 Telegram channels researchers found to be linked to Islamogammers, 16 were dedicated to alt-Salafi-jihadists, with a collective follower base of 4,002 members. In comparison, the six Islamogram-linked Telegram channels that were not focused on Salafi-jihadist promotion had more than four times that number of followers in total, with 16,617 members. In these channels, much like on Islamogram as a whole, users derided liberal Muslims and the LGBTQ+ community, but there was no open support for proscribed terrorist groups. One such example was Raven Smiles, with 4,690 members, which was a part of a collective of Telegram channels sharing Salafi memes.



Figure 18 An Islamogram starter pack meme used to stereotype “liberal Muslims,” as a means to delieniate between the “pious” and Muslims who are not, in their estimation, Islamic.

'Islampilled'

The word 'Islamogram' was first used on Instagram in mid-2013 by Indonesian dawah accounts which shared feel-good messaging about Islam. This did not change substantially until the summer of 2019, when a group of accounts belonging to young Muslim influencers began to appropriate the term to describe a network of Salafis, Islamists and anyone in-between who appropriated chan culture memes and aesthetics to troll 'liberal' Muslims and encourage followers to become 'Islampilled'.²⁰

Islamogrammers represent a distinct internet subculture that draws on mainstream, fringe, Salafi and extremist views all at once. Its active participants will often share mainstream content as readily as they share extremist material expressing support for armed groups such as Hay'at Tahrir el-Sham, al-Qaeda or, in the most extreme cases, Islamic State. However, many Islamogrammers have a conflicted relationship with Islamic State. On one hand, they will refer to it pejoratively as 'dishes' – a derogatory name that is a pun on Daesh and 'dirty dishes' – and often call members khawarij, or outsiders. On the other hand, some Islamogrammers will praise the group's Islamic punishments of LGBTQ+ people.

Islamogram encompasses a broad network of young Muslims. Some segments spread Islamic dawah and attack what has been called 'progressive Islam'. Certain fringe segments are the main drivers of trolling, meme production and support for proscribed terrorist groups. Central to this fringe is the Islampilled network, which opposes evolutionary science, Western societies and liberal Muslims, as well as Ahmadi, Shia and Ismaili, the LGBTQ+ community and mainstream political movements.

Researchers mapped this network of influencers and their content to understand their worldviews, content, and network strategies and tactics.

Islamogram is primarily defined by what it stands against and is often in conflict about what it stands for. However, its doctrine might broadly be described as a mix of Salafi idealism, traditionalism and religious order for a world Islamogrammers view as chaotic. The Western world, specifically, is framed as rife with degeneracy, and many members of a certain subset of Islamogrammers will



Figure 19 A series of the same Wojak can't sleep video shared by an Islamogram account on Instagram, and used to attack enemies such as France, China and the LGBTQ+ community as well as the Black Lives Matter movement. The content was part meme, part video, with the inserted videos being primarily of Islamic State soldiers or affiliates.

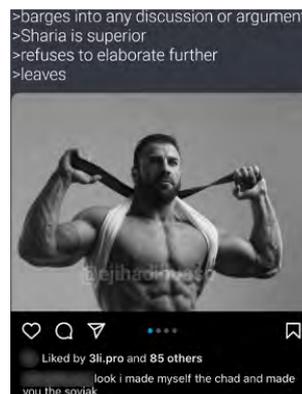


Figure 20 A GigaChad meme used by an Islamogram account supportive of Sharia Law.

argue that young Muslims are increasingly immersed in environments where they are taught to rest on their religious laurels and compromise their beliefs for the sake of Western values.

Muslims in the West are thus the target of much of their content, with a liberal reading of Islam drawing much of Islamogrammers' ire (outlined in greater detail in the 'Narratives of Islamogram' section). Muslims at ease with dating, the LGBTQ+ community, ex-Muslims and other Muslim sects, such as the Ahmadis or Shia, are all primary targets for Islamogram hate. To this end, Islamogrammers have essentially cobbled together the aesthetics of the alt-right and far right with some appropriated elements of the extreme right's worldview to serve their own conflict with 'Western indoctrination'.

Salafi variations on a familiar set of culture war tropes are the staples of Islamogram. The conflict focuses on, in the parlance of Islamogram, a set of 'enemies' that this Salafi community has turned into meme fodder, for example drawing on the 'Wojak' meme character popularised on 4chan and turning him into a Muslim. Another meme presents a 20-year old Salafi 'doomer' plagued with 'extreme doubt' after reading '6 collections of hadith by himself', and animated by his hatred of 'Soofes' (Sufis). The 20-year old Salafi-doomer is contrasted with a Salafi 'zoomer', who 'calls anyone he disagrees with a kafir', (apostate), and who never tried to 'understand the Quran for himself, just listened to some sheikh'. This underscores the community's clear self-awareness of the groups across the Salafi spectrum and their differences, focusing particularly on generational shifts and differences in levels of piety.



Figure 21 An Islamogram account polls followers on whether its is forbidden to take part in "killing apostates," and forewarns that they will be "disappointed that we don't get to slaughter losers."

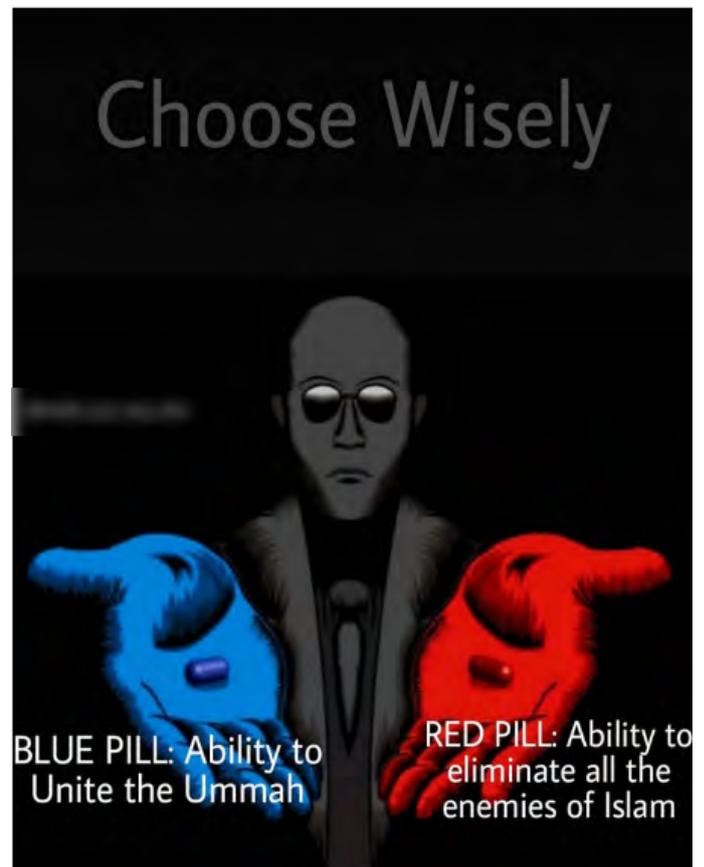


Figure 22 A Islampilled meme that is meant to be reflective of the internal conflict some Islamogram accounts wrestle with, namely uniting the Muslim ummah, or "eliminating" the "enemies of Islam."

A dividing line: Halalposters vs. haramposters

As noted earlier in this report, classification systems seeking to define various Salafi strands, such as quietest, politico and jihadist, are in practice quite fluid and nebulous. Online, such categories hold only limited importance among Islamogrammers, who are defined by their readiness to blur such lines and have much more ideologically amorphous relationships between religious expression, (theo) political activism and jihadist mobilisation.

To better understand these communities, ISD researchers used the language of the Islamogram space itself, which divides the ecosystem into so-called 'halalposters' and 'haramposters', to help classify different ideological actors. These self-professed categories stem from a set of rules that ultimately delineates a divide within this online community. On one side are the halalposters: those who do not post content that explicitly supports violent extremist groups, but who are still likely to exhibit hateful and extremist views of the LGBTQ+ community and 'liberal' Muslims. On the other are the haramposters: those who take much more aggressive political stances and explicitly support or pay deference to a range of extremist groups.

Halalposting is thus limited to memes framed as Islamic dawah (proselytisation) or jokes about the Muslim condition and Westerners. However, there is sometimes crossover with haramposting on key culture war issues such as gender and LGBTQ+ rights. Haramposting is multifaceted, multilayered and quite fluid, but fundamentally involves overt support for extremist groups, as well as, in some instances, trolling campaigns against 'libtard' Muslims (appropriating an alt-right term for liberals).

Haramposters intersect with a small but much more noxious group of young Salafis known as the 'akh-right', a play on the words 'akhi' (brother) and 'alt-right'. The name denotes a specific subset of haramposters: young Salafis who use elements borrowed from white supremacists in their posts. Akh-right posters are known for appropriating alt-right language to describe themselves, such as 'traditionalist Pan-European', and are supporters of 'white sharia'. They consciously reject a liberal, multicultural version of Islam. Within this idiosyncratic online space, we see reverence for alt-



Figure 23 A series of Wojak memes used to outline enemies, as well as slander and poke fun of Salafi and Muslim stereotypes, including minority sects, as well as Muslim liberals.

right figures like Alex Jones and Jack Posobiec, alongside kitsch support for the Balkan jihad of the 1990s, with supporters designing and sharing 'fashwave'-inspired edit videos glorifying Balkan jihadists for their so-called defence of the ummah (global Muslim community).²¹

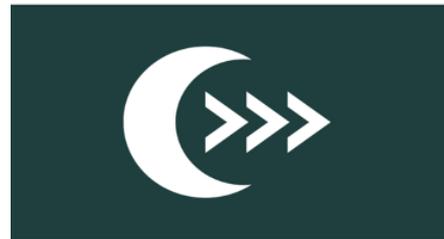
Akh-right posters are predominately active on Twitter, and are often mocked and ostracised by both Islamogrammers and other Muslims for their extreme stances. However, just as Islamogrammers cover a spectrum of ideas and stances, the akh-right incorporates a similar range of supporters, including but not limited to advocates of white Muslim reverts, those defending the honour of white Muslims, and those who are firmly aligned with the far-right.

The akh-right is generally supportive of the jihads in Bosnia and Chechnya, re-appropriating terms from the far-right, such as 'white sharia', to show support for Muslims in these conflicts, differentiating their jihadist support. In far-right circles, 'white sharia' was originally a meme that became a serious battle cry for some elements of these racist groups. Members of the akh-right often claim to be anti-racist, but pro-white-Muslim, signposting clear ethno-religious dividing lines within Islam. Such positions draw the ire of a range of strange bedfellows. Islamogrammers deride the far-right by making 'false flag' posts supposedly representing them. Similarly, progressives call the akh-right out for their extreme stances.



Figure 24 The phrase "white Sharia," made popular by the far right, is appropriated by members of the akh-right, who use it as a means to support Chechnya and Balkans-focused jihad.

Unofficial flag I made for the Akh-Right lol



13 2 Share

Figure 25 A redditor created and shared a symbolic flag for the akh-right.



Figure 26 Islamogrammers use NBA Star LeBron James as a vehicle to support the Islamic State in this meme that uses racially-charged language and a photograph of the Islamic State's current leader as a juxtaposition to the "apostasy" of the Saudi Arabian state.

Figure 27 Nothing highlights the ideological elasticity of Arabic alt-Salafi-jihadists and chan culture better than the use of the “hmmm today I’m 16 and I wanna become political” meme video. Instead of the character charting a course to white supremacy, passing through the stages of adopting gateway political, social and religious ideologies, the character in the alt-Salafi-jihadist version charts a course through supporting the late Muammar Gaddafi, to opposing LGBTQ+ rights, then communism, and finally becoming a supporter of Islamic State after watching a propaganda video on one of the group’s websites.

Parallel polyglot spaces: Facebook alt-Salafi-jihadists

Much like the fringe set of alt-Salafi-jihadists on Telegram linked to the Salafi-jihadist Islamogrammers, a community of English and Arabic alt-Salafi-jihadists have created ten public and private pages and groups on Facebook. These function as content hubs for alt-Salafi-jihadist trolling, meme production and subculture development. This community of pages and groups has a collective follower base of 20,131. This subset of the alt-Salafi-jihadist landscape has developed its own distinct subculture, with its own set of influencers who create and curate communities on their respective platforms, in a similar way to Islamogram.

The most popular page is known as the ‘Company for the Clanging of the Memes’, which is a pun on ISIS’s notorious ‘Clanging of the Swords’²² video series released in 2012, as equal parts snuff film and recruitment effort. The group and its affiliated page had 17,653 followers. The ‘company’ specialises in collating the latest alt-Salafi-jihadist memes from across the internet with three primary interests: attacking the leadership of rival terrorist organisations, mocking the United States and its global ‘ineptitude’ in the face of domestic civil unrest, and pining for the now-demolished caliphate.

These alt-Salafi-jihadists on Facebook exhibit similar ideological elasticity to Islamogrammers, sharing alt-right memes with Salafi-jihadist messaging, and sometimes more mainstream Muslim memes. This indicates that the interplay with the alt-right content and ideological fluidity of English-speaking Islamist supporters is a global phenomenon and not just one confined to Western Salafi audiences. Alt-Salafi-jihadists use direct Arabic translations of terms synonymous with chan communities, such as ‘based’,²³ ‘cringe’, ‘king’ and ‘waifu’ (a female anime character), in posts and on-meme text. They link to Islamogram content in some of their posts, indicating they are aware of like-minded parallel communities.



Conflicted Convergence Culture

The synthpop styling of the far-right internet subculture 'fashwave' has given birth to a number of parallel genres, one of which is 'mujahidwave' (in reference to mujahid or 'holy warrior'), which runs the gamut of Islamogram support among haramposters. These stylistic videos often come with soundtracks, despite strict Salafi readings of hadith regarding music as haram (forbidden). However, this cohort of supporters shared what are dubbed 'edit videos' in which music is used to soundtrack nasheeds (anthems), jihadi content and footage from proscribed terrorist groups. Some of this, in the parlance of Islamogram, has been labelled 'fedposting', but others have called it 'mujahidwave' or 'terrorwave', as well as the more widely used term 'edit videos'.

This highlights how the aesthetic of far-right subcultures has been appropriated by some Islamogrammers. It also shows how a younger generation of Salafis is interacting with pop music as well as nasheed content. It is even possible to envision a 'nasheedwave' subgenre emerging from these supporters. Often, such videos feature historical footage from Bosnia or Afghanistan. However, there are instances of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and Islamic State content being used in edit videos. Certain videos are stylistically discordant, featuring hazy graphics and wording in 8-bit graphic font that reads 'jihad' or 'Jihadi John' (referencing the nickname media outlets gave the British ISIS recruit Mohammed Emwazi).

Other users reference popular memes, such as 'Netflix and chill' in videos where a couple is seen cuddling and watching television. Islamogrammers made a series of these videos featuring different couples watching different videos on their TV, some of which were supportive of the Islamic State, and some of jihad more generally. One Islamogrammer shared a series of several 'Netflix and Chill' remix videos as a set, showing couples watching a range of videos on subjects from the Islamic State to Nazi Germany. As noted previously, the use of music in these meme videos is a departure from traditional Salafi norms. Videos also featured the 'drill' and 'chopped and screwed' genres of rap music to soundtrack battle scenes. 'Chopped and screwed' is a genre of hip hop pioneered in Houston by DJ Screw, who gives the genre its name and would slow songs down to 60 and 70 quarter-note beats per minute. It is now commonly used as a soundtrack for Islamic State battle scenes in edit videos.



Figure 28 Islamogrammers share support videos of Hamas Wojaks as a memes to highlight successful attacks on Israel.



Figure 29 A series of stills from a Netflix and Chill meme series, shared by an Islamogram account, whereby still images of a couple snuggling and watching TV is used to share embedded videos of Anwar al-Awlaki and Nazi propaganda, highlighting the concept of ideological elasticity.

Alt-scholars: Personality-driven identity

Identity-based communities defined by distinct chan, alt-right and far-right visual cultures are coalescing around self-anointed Salafi influencers across two key platforms – Instagram and Facebook. To understand the interplay between supporters and influencers, researchers looked at two influencers with distinct yet connected sets of followers that run across the Salafi ideological spectrum. While one influencer could be considered to be representative of Islamogram, speaking to a subset of Salafi mores in a Western context, the other is a key figure for die-hard alt-Salafi-jihadists who express support for Islamic State on other platforms.

Understanding that Islamogram is composed of halalposters and haramposters, ISD researchers homed in on an Instagram influencer with a wide reach who used both halal and haram posts. To represent alt-Salafi-jihadists who support the Islamic State and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, researchers found a community centred around a social media influencer who is a partly fictionalised meme character. Both of these influencers use chan culture memes as a core method of spreading key Salafi ideology in different languages across various platforms.

Gen-Z Salafi influencers: Abu Anon and Sheikh Mohsin

The birth of modern Islamogram has coincided with the rise of the subculture's most notable influencer: **Abu Anon**. A young Muslim from the greater Toronto area, Abu Anon has built the largest social media apparatus of any Islamogram influencer. His signature avatar is a 'Groyper', a fat cartoon frog associated with white nationalist and alt-right trolls, dressed in a dishdasha, the traditional garb of the Arabian Gulf.

At the time of writing, his primary Instagram account had 36,200 followers, his Twitter 6,949, and his Discord server 3,749 members. Abu Anon's rise as an Islamogram influencer was swift. In just over a year, he accumulated 32,000 followers on Instagram, posting over 1,255 times and averaging almost 26 follower interactions per post. He also built a network of auxiliary accounts in case he were ever to be taken down, and they too grew followings: his primary back-up has 8,470 followers.



Figure 30 The avatar used by Abu Anon, an Islamogram influencer with thousands of followers across a multiple platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Discord and Reddit.

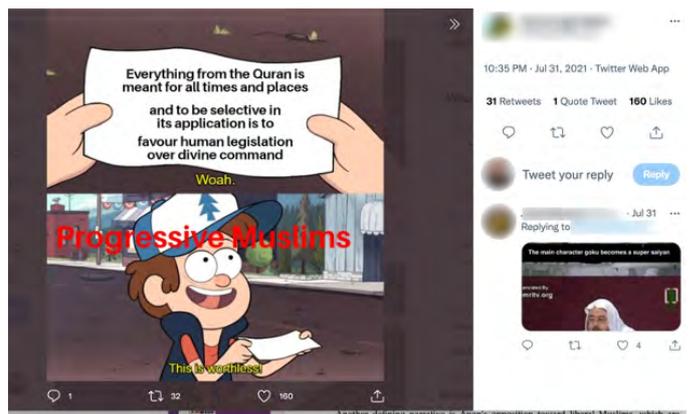


Figure 31 An Abu Anon post highlighting the divide between progressive Muslims and those that believe in a verbatim reading of the Quran, rather than the rule of man-made laws in nation states.



Figure 32 An Abu Anon post on Twitter about becoming an Alpha male, which was originally used by far right accounts, only augmented for Muslim audiences, includes joining "jihad" and "fedposting," which is to be blatantly supportive of terrorist groups online.

Abu Anon has defined his personality by who his enemies are. Much like the rest of Islamogram, it is not just irreverence and a distinct internet aesthetic that bonds his followers; there is also a deference to what they define as 'traditional' Islamic values, and opposition to the lax mores and religious pluralism that liberal Muslims represent and practise. Within Islamogram, Abu Anon has used memes to popularise a discourse that highlights a divide between pious and progressive Muslims.

The main targets of Abu Anon's campaigns are the LGBTQ+ community and Muslims who are allies. His recurring themes include the impermissibility of homosexuality in Islam and the 'indoctrination' of Muslims with LGBTQ+ values. Abu Anon toes the line of platform community guidelines by never explicitly calling for the deaths of LGBTQ+ community members. However, death threats are implicit in many of his posts about the LGBTQ+ community.

In early 2020, for example, Abu Anon posted a screenshot to Instagram of a news article with the headline 'The UK's first ever Muslim LGBTQ+ Pride festival is finally happening', adding the text 'OFF THE ROOFS'. Abu Anon's double entendre in the post was both a homage to slang to describe a wild party, and a reference to punishments doled out by the Islamic State for homosexuality. The first comment on the post was 'At least now ISIS doesn't have to kill innocent Muslims'.

Abu Anon's focus on the LGBTQ+ community gains him a great deal of traction with other Islamogrammers and is a central pillar of the narratives used to delineate true Muslims from 'libtard' Muslims. His opposition to liberal Muslims is another of Abu Anon's defining narratives. They are framed as the primary enemy of Islamogram and its ideals.

Such opposition to liberalism, and the fight against Muslims who have bought into the concept of progressive ideals, also defines another Gen-Z Salafi influencer on a different platform and using a different language.

Sheikh Mohsin is a Facebook personality who is central to the alt-Salafi-jihadist meme community on that platform. He is known for sardonic takes and support



Figure 33 An Abu Anon post on Twitter about boxes of "pills," which are obviously bullets in this case, that can be used to cure murtads, or in English, Muslims accused of apostasy, and Shias.



Figure 34 SSheikh Mohsin is a Facebook personality who is central to the alt-Salafi-jihadist meme community on that platform, his image is used by series of accounts that promote his brand of alt-Salafi- jihadism on Facebook.



Figure 35 Sheikh Moshin is used to confront characters from preventing violent extremism content such as the initiative "Nour's World," and its corresponding social media presence. Here Sheikh Moshin is beheading Nour, the hero and primary character of "Nour's World," with text that reads "the sword is stronger you kafir."

of Islamic State. The official page set up in his name features an avatar of a bearded Wojak in sunglasses and a ghutra – a traditional head-dress in the Arabian Gulf. Sheikh Mohsin’s Islamic State memes and edit videos are aggressively sectarian, calling out so-called ‘cute Muslims’, and form an integral part of the alt-Salafi-jihadist subculture’s activity on Facebook. The memes are branded with a Sheikh Mohsin avatar. One heavily circulated example shows Osama bin Laden raising his palm over a photograph of smoke billowing from the World Trade Center and text that reads ‘weak towers that I give 5 out 10’.

In a similar way to Abu Anon on Islamogram, Sheikh Mohsin acts as a figurehead around whom alt-Salafi-jihadists can congregate on Facebook. He is connected to a network of alt-Salafi-jihadist accounts that appropriate chan culture to spread Islamic State tropes. Sheikh Mohsin does not have the thousands of followers of Abu Anon, nor do the two influencers share the same ideology. However, their use of alt-right imagery, appropriation of chan culture and central position in their respective subcultures place them at opposite ends of the alt-Salafi continuum that is flourishing across platforms in multiple languages.

The two influencers are united in their disdain for liberal Muslims. While Abu Anon focuses on this group in the West, Sheikh Mohsin primarily targets Muslim regimes in the MENA region. The influence of these two distinct yet similar online personalities suggests that a shift toward more confrontational, chan culture tactics and visuals creates cohesive communities of similar practice. The authority in young Salafi digital spaces is decentralised and increasingly taking on new narratives for online activism, expressed using what would seem, on the surface, to be a counterintuitive visual language. However, these influencers’ use of gaming, chan, alt-right and culture clash narratives and iconography endear them to a new audience while simplifying the ideological dimensions of their identities. Identity-based communities form around these influencers,, and their particular language and visual culture incubates new Salafi subcultures.



Figure 36 An image that represents users passing through the account of Sheikh Mohsin and coming out supporters of the Islamic State.

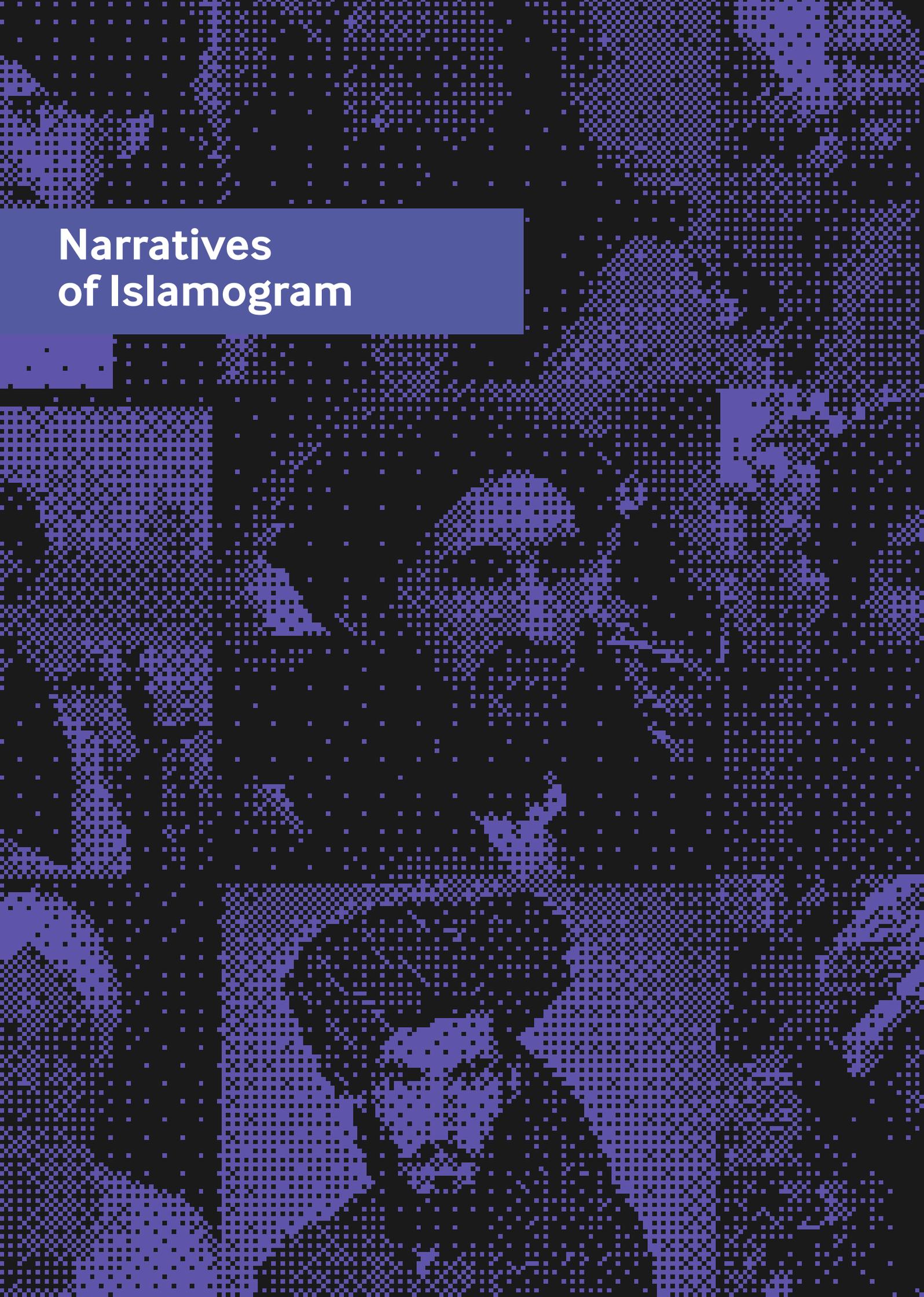


Figure 37 Abu Anon describes his persona online as being defined by far right politics, and controversies over sexism, racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, ableism, anti-Semitism, and other conspiracy theories.



Figure 38 Abu Anon uses alt-right imagery to convey the dividing line between liberal Muslims, represented by the amazed Wojak, and “Based Muslim,” represented by the Pepe the Frog in extremist garb.

Narratives of Islamogram



Investigating Gen-Z Salafis' representations of their in-group and out-group ('enemies') helped researchers to understand the narratives of Islamogram's culture war. This conflict focused on various 'isms' that Gen-Z Salafis perceive themselves to be fighting against, which imbue Islamogram with purpose through opposition. At the heart of these narratives is a disdain for liberalism (in particular liberal democracy), secularism, feminism, multiculturalism, Zionism and liberal tendencies within Islam.

Islamogrammers regularly produced visually simple content that drew on other online subcultures, such as those immersed in video gaming platforms, chan communities, or the alt-right and far-right. Examples included Gigachad Salafis confronting liberal Muslims about evolution, and a Muslim variant of the 'Yes! Chad' meme supporting the hijab and limits on the societal roles of women. Much of this memetic opposition had the goal of 'owning', or being intellectually superior to, 'liberal' Muslims among the Salafis on Islamogram, or 'exposing cute Muslims' among the alt-Salafi-jihadists on Facebook.

Overall, such content presents a set of opponents who promote democracy, feminist principles and multiculturalism at the expense of Islam. Democratic practices are presented as inferior to sharia law. LGBTQ+ rights are rejected, and women are expected to play a very narrow role in Islamic societies, with rigid rules on dress codes and employment. Alt-Salafi-jihadists focused on these liberal 'enemies' and their narratives to establish a demarcating line that defines 'real' Islam from mushrikin or religious traitors.

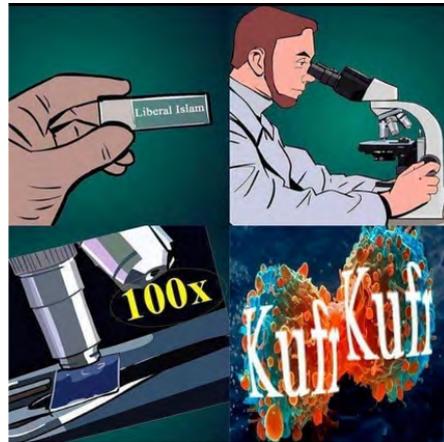


Figure 39 A comic book like meme that features liberal Islam being analysed by a scientist, and the microscope finding "kufri" as the building blocks of liberal Islam. Islamogrammers shared this meme to highlight the apostasy of what they have dubbed "liberal Islam."



Figure 40 A Pepe the Frog portrait created from the now infamous photograph of the Taliban inside of the presidential palace in Kabul. The post reads "jihad will win."



Figure 41 An Islamogram account posts a drawing of an Ottoman soldier and a Crusader agreeing to fight the "hoards" of liberals, such as Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ community members, as well as feminists in this meme used by Islamogrammers and the far right.

Attacking liberal Muslims: Libtards and cute Muslims

A key narrative shared by Salafis across the ideological spectrum of both Islamogram and alt-Salafi-jihadists is a disdain for progressive readings of Islam. A strict interpretation of Islam – with no room for LGBTQ+ allegiances or feminism — is central to both communities. Consequently, both groups use similar imagery to deride liberal Muslims who support women’s rights and democracy. The term ‘cute Muslims’ – coined by Arabic language alt-Salafi-jihadists on Facebook – is a label for ‘progressive’ Muslims who support gender equality and human rights across the Middle East and North Africa.

The status of such hate figures is at the centre of a debate about the appropriateness of takfir (excommunication) within the digital Salafi community. While the alt-Salafi-jihadists of Facebook consistently excommunicated detractors – basing their practice on the use of takfir by the Islamic State or al-Qaeda — Islamogram Salafis grappled with deploying it and indeed the concept of takfir itself. The core notion of ‘liberal Islam’ was framed by some Islamogrammers as the root of kufr (disbelief), but they did not publicly call for the death of liberal Muslims, unlike the alt-Salafi-jihadists. Instead, Islamogrammers were more performative in their pronouncements of kufr and takfir.

Most of the takfir deployed by Islamogrammers is focused on the LGBTQ+ community, and includes insinuations of death or actual death threats towards Muslims who support LGBTQ+ rights. Even when a post violates community guidelines, users will repost the content as a screenshot with the warning from Instagram. For instance, a key Salafi-jihadist Islamogrammer had a post flagged by the platform. He then reposted the original post as an Instagram story, claiming he ‘just violated gay rights again’ over the originally flagged post, which read ‘we do this thing called “wherever you find a gayonist just kill him.”’ Other performative pieces of Islamogram takfir content include using images from Islamic State execution films to highlight enemies. Symbols associated with anarchism, Christianity, communism, feminism, the United States, the European Union, Israel, and the LGBTQ+ community are added to the back of an Islamic State hostage who is then killed.



Figure 42 Two stills from an edited Islamic State execution video, where the prisoner has various flags represented on his back as a fighter is prepared to kill him. The flags on the back of the prisoner include the United States as well as feminism as part of the larger culture war being waged by Islamogrammers.

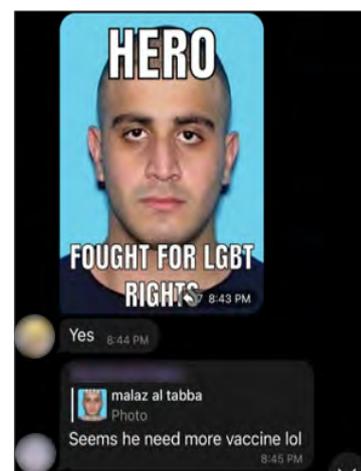


Figure 43 A user shares a meme on Telegram featuring the mugshot of Omar Mateen the perpetrator of the Orlando night club shooting in 2016 that left 49 dead. The meme reads “HERO” on the top and “FOUGHT FOR LGBT RIGHTS,” on the bottom.

Posters make associations between some of the violent takfir aimed at the LGBTQ+ community and terrorist offenders like Omar Mateen. Mateen – who killed 49 people and wounded 53 at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando in 2016 – is often venerated in sardonic posts. These include elements such as the gamification of the attack, using video game screenshots of a shooter showing up to a nightclub, or Mateen’s face with text that reads ‘HERO, FOUGHT FOR LGBT RIGHTS’.

Other instances of takfir allude to the death of the French teacher Samuel Paty. He was beheaded by one of his students after an online campaign of incitement against him that authorities claimed had a ‘direct causal link’ to his death.²⁴ Paty had showed cartoons of the prophet Mohammed in his classroom. Islamogrammers also posted antagonistic memes directed at the French satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo, which was subject to a terrorist attack in 2015 in which its staff were targeted by Islamic State supporters who killed 12 and injured 11.



Figure 44 An alt-Salafi-jihadist account uses a trollface meme coupled with stills from the Grand Theft Auto video game to recreate what appears to be the Orlando nightclub shooting of 2016.

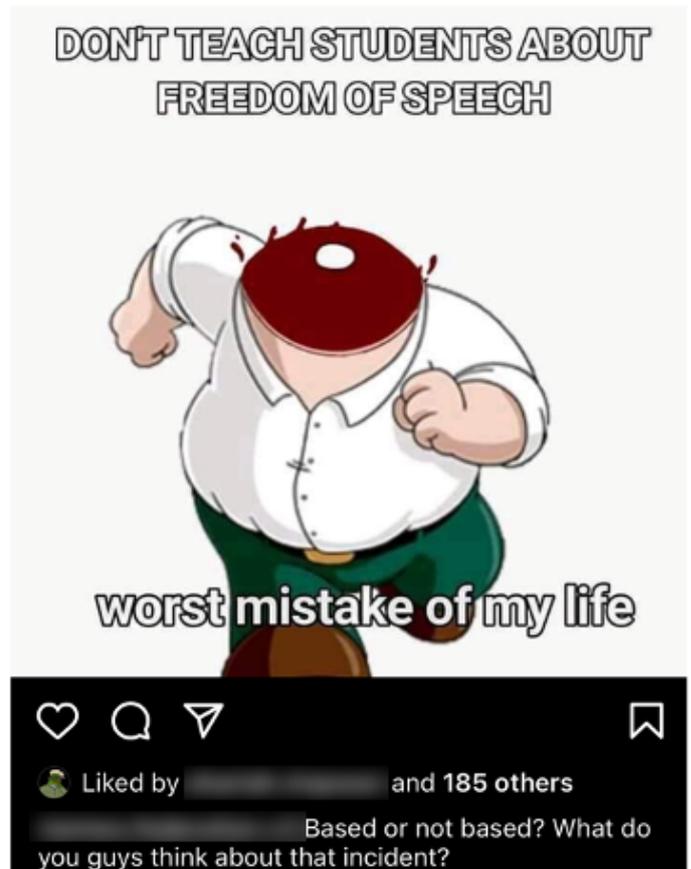


Figure 45 A user shares an image of a headless Peter Griffin of the Fox television series “Family Guy” with the words “don’t teach students about freedom of speech,” top text, and “worst mistake of my life,” bottom text, as a clear reference to the France incident in which a teacher was targeted and beheaded for showing a picture of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to his class.

Antisemitism and Attacks on non-Muslims

An integral part of Islamogram is an undercurrent of antisemitism that runs through the Instagram accounts but is more explicit on the Discord servers affiliated with Islamogrammers. Much of the Instagram antisemitism is directed at Mark Zuckerberg, who is considered to be part of a 'Jewish cabal' that controls the global media. This antisemitic trope is often used to attack Instagram after takedowns of content that supports the armed Palestinian groups Hamas and its military wing the Izz ad-Din al-Qassem Brigades, which is designated a terrorist organisation by numerous countries. In a clear instance of ideological convergence, the hate symbol 'the Happy Merchant', similarly employed by alt-right and far-right actors, was adapted by Islamogrammers to smear Zuckerberg.²⁵

Other Islamogrammers manipulated images of Zuckerberg's face, adding a long nose and a kippa emblazoned with the Israeli flag. This was in retaliation for what was seen as a cull of pro-Palestinian accounts on Instagram during the protests against the threat of the expulsion of Palestinian residents from the Sheikh Jarrah area of Jerusalem in May 2021. Other posts used antisemitic imagery associated with Nazi Germany, such as the yellow star Jews were forced to wear.

Islamogrammers also used the yellow star to denounce the Islamic State and its supporters, who are widely seen by non-Salafi-jihadists as being a tool of Israel and the United States to destabilise the Middle East and discredit the Muslim ummah. Users added a balaclava emblazoned with the words 'la illah ila Allah' ('there is no god but Allah'), an AK-47 and a military vest to label Islamic State supporters as 'sus' (suspicious). Other instances of antisemitism on Islamogram included calling the US President Joe Biden 'Jew Biden' for his support of Israel.

Alongside the use of cartoonish memes, researchers also saw historical figures being used to express antisemitism. Some users venerated the World War II-era Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Amin al-Husseini, who was elevated to ultimate 'Chad' status for his stance on Israel and his support of Nazi Germany in 1941. Much of the discourse around Mufti al-Husseini revolved around how supportive he was of the Nazi regime, his meeting with Adolf Hitler, and whether he sparked the idea of the



Figure 46 Islamogrammers use an augmented photograph of Mark Zuckerberg as the antisemitic meme the "Happy Merchant" as means to deride the company for striking Palestine accounts during the Sheikh Jarrah protests. The user called Instagram "Jewstagram," as means to deride the platform.



Figure 47 An Islamogrammer uses the antisemitic meme the "Happy Merchant" as means to suggest that the Islamic State is a Jewish conspiracy meant to slander Muslims and Islam.

Holocaust. These questions around Mufti al-Husseini were resurrected during the Israeli elections in 2015, when former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu attempted to persuade the Israeli public that Mufti al-Husseini had conceived the Holocaust. Netanyahu faced a widespread backlash for the accusation because it turned out to be false according to historical records of the meeting between al-Husseini and Hitler. Al-Husseini had in fact asked Hitler to support the development of a Pan-Arab army to fight the 'English and the Jews'.

Mufti al-Husseini is now used as a symbol to troll Israel, Israelis and people of the Jewish faith in some parts of Islamogram. One user posted a video of a Hamas al-Qassem Brigade Pepe, complete with Kataib al-Qaseem bandana, holding a Pepe version of Mein Kampf, over black and white footage of al-Husseini meeting Hitler, set to Nazi military chants. The video ends on a black and white photo of the Auschwitz concentration camp, with on-screen text that reads 'not long ago. Not far away' taken from the title of an exhibit at the Museum of Jewish Heritage.

In contrast to Instagram, where al-Husseini was often used as a relatively covert symbol to convey antisemitism, material on Discord servers and Telegram channels often expressed more overt support for the Nazis. One server affiliated with Islamogrammers featured World War II-era Nazi propaganda posters of Nazi soldiers shaking hands with a figure like Mufti al-Husseini from the Palestinian military under the heading 'The Alliance' in German, dated 1939–2004. Similarly, quotes from Hitler praising Muslim fighters made the rounds of Telegram channels.

Similar dynamics existed around Nazi support and 'the Happy Merchant' symbol. While insinuating that the Islamic State was a Jewish and American invention, some users nonetheless used Nazi symbols to suggest a unified mission between the Islamic State, the United States Civil War Confederate Army and Nazi Germany.



Figure 48 Alt-Salafi-jihadist use the World War II-era Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Amin al-Husseini, who was elevated to ultimate 'Chad' status for his stance on Israel and his support of Nazi Germany.

The Chadliban: A convergence culture case study

In the midst of the Taliban's push across Afghanistan, culminating in the fall of Kabul in August 2021, Islamogram witnessed both a renaissance and what would be dubbed a 'purge' and 'genocide' of Islamogrammer support for the Taliban.

In the month leading up to the fall of Kabul, Islamogrammers had been praising the Taliban, celebrating the group's victories and pushing supportive narratives. Islamogrammers posted stories wishing 'members of the Afghan National Government a very pleasant beheading', and claimed the Taliban takeover was 'the most epic troll on US military in this 21st Century'. Islamogrammers shared pictures of the white flag of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, commenting 'Based isn't it?' Videos of dancing Talibs with rocket-powered grenades were set to various songs and beats. The Taliban's borderline comical nasheed 'congratulations' became an instant classic among Islamogrammers.

Islamogrammers found their memes being used by a prominent social media personality who claimed to be a Taliban member, emboldening them further. A meme created by Abu Anon, Islamogram's unofficial spokesperson, was used by Malang Khosty – a celebrity Twitter personality who built a community around the promotion of Taliban-focused memes. Malang Khosty would function as a bridge between Islamogrammers and alt-right and far-right activists online. This social media personality used memes created by all of these groups, demonstrating their shared attitude to the decline of US military power on the global stage. The chan culture memes that were the primary ammunition of Islamogram were now front and centre in the contest for likes on Twitter. The Taliban had not just succeeded in propelling Islamogram's worldview on to a much larger stage, it was now gaining traction with potential allies on the alt-right, contributing to an 'owning of libtards' at the hands of Salafis.



Figure 49 A meme to describe Malang Khostay, a Taliban supporter – given folk hero status in Islamogram and far right circles online – is attacked for stealing memes.

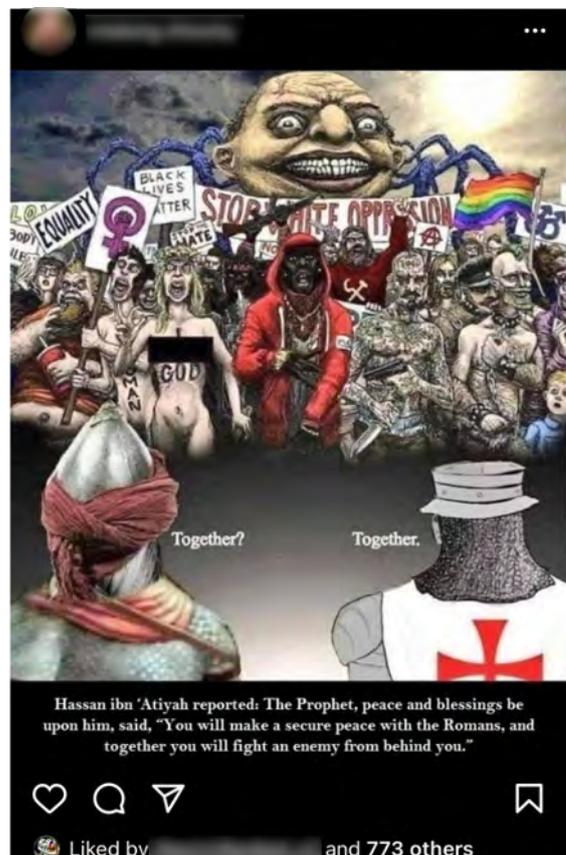


Figure 50 Malang Khostay shares an Islamogram meme depicting the uniting of a Muslim soldier and Crusader-era knight to fight worldwide culture wars. Malang became an internet folk hero for his memes supportive of the Taliban. He was banned on Twitter and then began diversifying his accounts across platforms.

Just as Islamogrammers were experiencing a high-water mark of social media success as the Taliban returned to power, companies began cracking down on Taliban support. Islamogram was hit particularly hard. Accounts such as Abu Anon's were disabled, as were Gen-Z Taliban news outlets on Instagram that combined Islamogram irreverence with 'on the ground' reporting. Accounts that had operated freely were subjected to mass reporting and takedowns. This soon resulted in a migration from Instagram, long the hub of Islamogram, to Telegram. Illustrating the lack of impact that deplatforming has on such movements, the same online activities that resulted in Islamogrammers being banned from Instagram continued unabated on Twitter and Discord.



Figure 51 A meme first used on the far right forum Kiwi Farms is used by a Taliban supporter on Twitter.



Figure 52 A still from a Taliban attack video, remixed with music from an Islamogrammers feed. Edit videos, such as this one, were meant to hyper stylize the Taliban and make them appeal to a new generation of supporters.

What's the Take?

Conclusion: Owning the Narrative

What's the Take?



A generational shift, inspired by other internet subcultures using platforms like Discord, Reddit and 4Chan, has become one of the defining aspects of Gen-Z Salafi aesthetics online. These internet subcultures of 4Chan, Reddit and other alt-right forums are increasingly being appropriated by Gen-Z Salafi members of Islamogram, and the akh-right, as well as younger supporters of the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and Islamist movements such as the Taliban.

Our research shows that a new generation of Salafis have been able to use self-created communities like Islamogram to build audiences and drive narratives across various mainstream platforms. Using a set of tropes originally espoused by the alt-right and far-right, Gen-Z Salafis are railing against a loss of tradition, and the enemies of that tradition. By adopting language and a visual culture familiar to the far-right and alt-right, Salafis are appropriating the power of exclusionary language and imagery as a means to define themselves.

The divisive narratives expressed by Gen-Z Salafis are often directed at the West and predominately focus on 'liberal Muslims' who approve of Western mores and work within Western social structures. By laying claim to the language of the alt-right, and the video and image aesthetic of a range of chan subcultures, Gen-Z have created their own unified online discourse for trolling and meme production. Using 'hipster jihad' filters to make videos look like old videotapes, soundtracked by electronic or trap music rhythms, Gen-Z Salafis' distinct aesthetic is a means to define themselves and their enemies.

These enemies are primarily liberal Muslims and the LGBTQ+ community, as well as the Islamic State. By focusing on two issues, one mainly in relation to theological practice and the other a 'Western' more, Gen-Z Salafis are able to articulate their principles based on their own Salafi worldview, in the process excommunicating others for showing any support for progressive views on Islam or gender and sexuality.



Figure 53 An Islamogrammer uses a series of stereotypes to describe the world's religions, with the only "normal" character being an Arab in traditional Gulf clothing. Antisemitic characters such as the one featured in this meme were used frequently by a certain subset of Islamogram.



Figure 54 A Discord server linked to an Islamogrammer is used to post Nazi-Muslim alliance propaganda.

Arabic language communities on other platforms vilify similar enemies – apostate ‘cute Muslims’ – and excommunicate people who take part in elections or support authoritarian leaders in the Middle East and North Africa. While Gen-Z Salafis seem to be primarily active in the West, there are nonetheless clear links to the Middle East and North Africa. All of these communities are positioned within a larger spectrum of Salafis operating across numerous platforms. This generational subculture is waging a cultural battle, and following the Taliban’s resurrection, it believes it is winning its war against liberal Muslims, ‘secular’ governments and the West.

By understanding the broad contours of these Gen-Z Salafi communities, and their re-appropriation of chan community, alt-right and far-right tropes and messaging, we have identified key narratives animating Gen-Z Salafi activism. ISD has found an emerging digital community not defined by the rigidity of its ideology, but rather the elasticity demonstrated by its use of language and imagery from other online subcultures of hatred and division.



Figure 55 In a Telegram channel linked to Islamogrammers, a user posted a series of mashup flags, which include this flag that contains elements of the Islamic State “flag,” the Nazi flag, and the Confederate flag used in the Civil War.



Figure 56 A video of a Hamas-linked Pepe the Frog holding a Pepe the Frog version of Mein Kempf was used by an Islamogrammer to deride people of the Jewish faith, and highlights the ideological elasticity of these communities.

Endnotes

- ¹ The 'alt-right' has become a catch-all phrase for a loose group of extreme-right individuals and organisations that promote white nationalism.
- ² Chan culture refers to online subcultures shaped by imageboard sites such as 4chan and 8chan. These sites were seminal in their influence on online culture by establishing 'memes' as a form of communication. While 4chan was originally founded to share anime images, the site's /pol/ board in particular became a key hub for the digital far right from the early 2010s onwards.
- ³ Criezis, M. (2020) 'Intersections of extremisms: White nationalist/Salafi-jihadi propaganda overlaps and essentialist narratives about Muslims', *Journal of Education in Muslim Societies*, 2(1): 88–96; Criezis, M. & Hughes, B. (2021) 'Erstwhile allies and community convergence: A preliminary study of online interactions between Salafi-jihadists and white supremacists', GNET, 31 August. Available online at: <https://gnet-research.org/2021/08/31/erstwhile-allies-and-community-convergence-a-preliminary-study-of-online-interactions-between-salafi-jihadists-and-white-supremacists/>; Bellaiche, J. (2021) 'Connecting the fringes: Neo-Nazi glorification of Salafi-jihadi representations online', GNET, 24 August. Available online at: <https://gnet-research.org/2021/08/24/connecting-the-fringes-neo-nazi-glorification-of-salafi-jihadi-representations-online/>
- ⁴ Crawford, B., Keen, F. & Suarez-Tangil, G. (2020) Memetic Irony and the Promotion of Violence within Chan Cultures. Available online at: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/memetic-irony-and-the-promotion-of-violence-within-chan-cultures/>
- ⁵ Phillips, W. (2015) *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship Between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Dawkins, R. (1976) *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press).
- ⁸ Milner, R.M. (2018) *The World Made Meme: Public Conversations and Participatory Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), p. 14.
- ⁹ Ahmet, R. (2016) 'The uncanny world of Muslim memes', *Wired*, 15 June. Available online at: <https://www.wired.com/2016/05/the-uncanny-world-of-muslim-memes/>
- ¹⁰ Wiktorowicz, Q. (2006) 'Anatomy of the Salafi movement', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 29(3): 207–39.
- ¹¹ Wagemakers, J. (2012) *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 7.
- ¹² Wagemakers, J. (2012) *A Quietist Jihadi: The Ideology and Influence of Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
- ¹³ Meijer, R. (2009) *Global Salafism: Islam's New Religious Movement* (London: C. Hurst & Co), p. 13.
- ¹⁴ The term 'own' or to be 'owned' is an internet slang term that means intellectually making a fool of someone.
- ¹⁵ 'Fashwave' stands for fascist wave, in reference to the attempts by alt-right communities to appropriate electronic music genres such as synthwave and vaporwave, often combining them with far-right symbols and speeches.
- ¹⁶ Pepe the Frog is an internet meme based around a cartoon character which has been widely used by the alt-right.
- ¹⁷ The Wojak meme depicts a bald man with an unhappy face, and is often used to symbolise isolation and regret.
- ¹⁸ The Soyjak meme shows a similar character to the Wojak meme, except that the man depicted shows clear signs of angrily overreacting to a specific statement.
- ¹⁹ In the terminology of the misogynist incel (involuntary celibate) online subculture, Chads are good-looking, athletic, masculine and sexually desirable alpha males. Gigachad is a term used to describe the ultimate Chads.
- ²⁰ 'Islampilled' is a variation of the 'red pill' meme used in extreme right communities as a metaphorical description of attitudinal change and the embrace of extremist ideologies. It is a reference to the Matrix film trilogy where individuals take a 'red pill' to escape life in an illusion (represented by the 'blue pill').
- ²¹ Smith, J. (2018) This is fashwave, the suicidal retro-futurist art of the alt-right, *Mic*, 1 December. Available online at: <https://www.mic.com/articles/187379/this-is-fashwave-the-suicidal-retro-futurist-art-of-the-alt-right>
- ²² Ayad, M. & Weiss, M. (2021) 'ISIS fans are using Drake, SpongeBob, and Marvel memes to galvanize new recruits', *The Daily Beast*, 5 March. Available online at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/isis-fans-are-using-drake-spongebob-and-marvel-memes-to-galvanize-new-recruits?ref=author>
- ²³ Based is a slang term that originally meant being addicted to crack cocaine, though it was first re-appropriated by rapper Lil B to mean behaving authentically and then by the alt-right to describe things in line with their anti-progressive values.
- ²⁴ BBC News (2019) 'Samuel Paty: French schoolgirl admits lying about murdered teacher', 9 March. Available online at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56325254>
- ²⁵ ADL (n.d.) *The Happy Merchant*. Available online at: <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/the-happy-merchant>

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