



Centre for Documentation
and Counter Extremism

Islamist Extremism Online

Current Trends and Early Prevention

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Introduction

This report by the Centre for Documentation and Counter Extremism (CDE) provides insight into what currently characterizes Islamist extremism online and what implications this has for the field of prevention. The purpose of the report is to provide practical, applicable knowledge that can support local prevention work and the work of other relevant authorities.

Specifically, the report presents an overview of current trends in communication methods and online content shared by Islamist extremist milieus on their public online communication channels. The report is part of CDE's publication series on extremism and prevention in Denmark, and draws on relevant research. The report focuses on knowledge especially relevant for early-stage prevention, and contextualises its analysis accordingly.

CDE is a governmental center. Among its various functions, it works to prevent extremism in Denmark at the national, regional and local levels. As part of its remit, the centre monitors extremist milieus in Denmark, including their public online communication channels. CDE provides specialised support within the themes covered in this report, including support on addressing local challenges involving extremism.ⁱ

The focus of this report is Islamist extremism. In this context, extremism refers to groups, organisations, and/or more loosely organized networks that commit or seek to justify violence or other illegal acts based on dissatisfaction with societal conditions.ⁱⁱ CDE defines extremist Islamism as a political ideology that is legitimised through specific interpretations of religious texts. Its adherents advocate for a revolutionary transformation of the current global order, and in some cases, the establishment of a strictly regulated Islamic state. In Denmark, extremist Islamism is often linked to—and significantly influenced by—violent conflicts in other countries.ⁱⁱⁱ

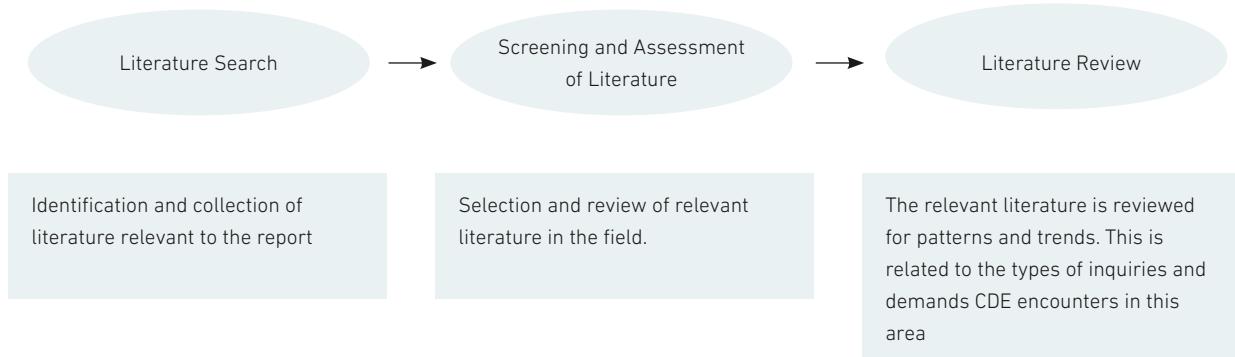
i Learn more about the Centre for Documentation and Counter Extremism at stopekstremisme.dk and us.dk.

ii Extremism is defined according to the national action plan "Prevention and Countering of Extremism and Radicalisation" from 2016, [url](#). See the national action plan for further conceptual clarification.

iii For more information on extremist Islamism, visit CDE's website at stopekstremisme.dk.

Methods

The report is based on recent research in the field. The methodological approach is illustrated here:



The report draws on literature identified through a three-pronged search strategy: a database search to identify key publications in the field; consultation with researchers and experts, who pointed to key research; and a snowball method, identifying further literature via references in the initial sources.

All identified literature underwent a systematic screening and assessment based on predefined criteria. Initially, all literature was screened for relevance based on abstracts and summaries. The assessment applied five criteria: reliability, transparency, validity, and relevance to the Danish context.^{iv}

The report includes the following types of literature:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles.
- Publications by recognized research institutions or similar entities.
- Relevant reports, analyses, and studies published by NGOs, consultancies, and comparable organizations.

The report has been subject to both internal and external quality assurance. The analyses and conclusions have been reviewed and validated by Professor Lasse Lindekilde of Aarhus University.

^{iv} For more on methodological research principles, see for example: Bryman, Alan. 2012. *Social Research Methods*. Oxford University Press; Brinkmann, Svend & Pedersen, Lene Tanggaard. 2015. *Kvalitativ metode* [Qualitative Method], Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Communication Methods by Islamist Extremist Milieus

The Islamist extremist milieu primarily use online platforms to recruit and spread propaganda

The Islamist extremist milieu^v in Denmark is mainly found in and around the largest Danish cities.¹ What the Danish Islamist extremist milieu has in common, however, is that in recent years it has mainly recruited and spread propaganda online - especially on social media.² The internet and social media have changed the way people interact, enabling new forms of community and facilitating the sharing of information on an unprecedented scale.³ In Denmark, 91 percent of the population use social media, including 100 percent of young people aged 16–19, of whom four out of five have profiles on at least five social media platforms.⁴ Consequently, the dissemination of ideological, religious, and political worldviews, along with recruitment into Islamist extremist milieus is no longer confined to specific regions or cities. Increasingly, Danish professionals working in the field of extremism prevention report concerns related to elements of online radicalisation.⁵

Islamist extremist milieu primarily target young people

Extremist propaganda today is often designed for social media and aligned with current trends and modes of communication.⁶ For example, extremist milieus make use of popular *memes*^{vi} and current hashtags to enhance their reach.⁷ This allows them to reach young people easily, as many spend large parts of their lives online.⁸ Many of these milieus also continuously adapt their propaganda to the latest social media platforms, enabling them to reach even younger users active on these platforms.⁹ Social media platforms have evolved significantly over the past decade¹⁰. They feature powerful recommendation algorithms^{vii} that continuously offer content similar to or building upon what the user has previously viewed or searched for.¹¹ With the rise of social media and their algorithms, problematic online content that was once limited to encrypted, niche forums with few followers has become significantly more accessible and widespread.¹² Consequently, younger and more diverse online audiences now find their way into extremist online milieus via social media.¹³

v 'The Islamist Extremist milieu' is an umbrella term to Islamist Extremist groups, organisations, and/or more loosely organized networks.

vi A *meme* is an internet phenomenon, typically consisting of an image combined with text placed above and/or below the image. The distinctive feature of a meme is the interaction between image and text, which conveys a message in an ironic, sarcastic, or symbolic way. Memes can be humorous and creative—but also crude and hateful (Red Barnet, 2023). For more on memes, see for example: Lindekilde, Lasse & Jesper Rasmussen. 2022. "Had, humor og bystander-reaktioner: danske unges reaktioner på politisk hadefulde memes" Politica 54(2): 170–203, [url](#).

vii Recommendation algorithms or recommender systems are algorithms that attempt to predict what users will like based on their previous behavior and preferences, [url](#).

Islamist extremist forums can function as echo chambers

For a large share of the population—particularly young people—social media has become the primary source of news.¹⁴ For those who follow Islamist extremist milieus online, the forums can function as *echo chambers*^{viii}, where specific narratives or worldviews are normalised or reinforced.¹⁵ A hallmark of these extremist online profiles is the promotion of a relatively black-and-white worldview, where followers mostly encounter like-minded individuals and are rarely challenged in their opinions or beliefs.¹⁶ The internet also provides a platform where individuals can express highly extremist views with relative anonymity, and without the risk of facing negative social consequences.¹⁷ This may serve to strengthen and affirm the individual's worldview.¹⁸ While 'online radicalisation' does not necessarily involve unique drivers and mechanisms, extremist echo chambers in virtual milieus can accelerate and intensify radicalisation processes.¹⁹

Extremist content is also spread through gaming

Extremist propaganda is also being disseminated through online gaming platforms.²⁰ This means that young people may be exposed to extremist content—such as hateful symbols, polarising worldviews, and strong enemy images while gaming.²¹ Research specifically demonstrates that young people encounter extremist content such as antisemitism within gaming milieus or via communication platforms like Discord, Telegram, and Reddit in connection with gaming.²² This development is concerning, as extremist content may become normalised in gaming spaces, where sharing transgressive or provocative content can be perceived as a means of gaining status.²³ Extremist milieus also use the gaming world as a recruitment arena, both through in-game chats and on related gaming and communication platforms such as Discord, Telegram, and Reddit.²⁴

Open online platforms are also key communication arenas

The field of prevention has long discussed the use of the dark web and closed, encrypted online forums by extremist milieus. These are spaces where content is only accessible to users with approved access. However, through open social media profiles, extremist milieus can reach a large online audience with their propaganda.²⁵ Open social media platforms where content is freely accessible to anyone are therefore also a high priority among current extremist milieus.²⁶ Encrypted messaging apps such as Telegram and Discord are still used, particularly to form closed communities for those who have already shown interest or engagement via more open platforms.²⁷ Extremist milieus can then communicate in more private spaces.²⁸ This process frequently occurs simultaneously across multiple platforms, which can make preventive efforts more complex and challenging²⁹.

viii An echo chamber is a forum for the exchange of opinions in which everyone shares the same views, and where one is therefore only exposed to opinions identical to one's own (The Danish Dictionary, entry: *ekkokammer*, [url](#)).

Trends in Online Content Shared by Islamist Extremist Milieus

Islamist extremist milieus is once again more active online and showing greater consistency

Looking back over the past decade, the war in Syria/Iraq in particular has played a major role in the Islamist extremist milieu in Denmark.³⁰ Where the scene was once marked by ideological unity and emerging organisation, the war in Syria/Iraq caused increased fragmentation within Denmark's Islamist extremist milieu.³¹ A relatively large number of individuals from the Islamist extremist milieu joined the war zone in various ways, and the Islamic State's break with Al-Qaeda caused division and disagreement among those who remained in Denmark.³² As a result, the Islamist extremist milieu in Denmark became far less visible and cohesive.³³ However, this may have shifted in the past year. According to research, international wars and conflicts tend to unite Islamist extremist milieus.³⁴ In particular, following Hamas' attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, international extremist organisations have focused their online content on the war between Israel and Palestine.³⁵ At present, the online content displays several shared features in terms of agenda and themes.³⁶

Militant messages are rare in current Danish propaganda, but prominent internationally

Online content shared by Danish Islamist extremist milieus during the war in Syria/Iraq often included explicit calls for armed struggle.³⁷ This has not been the case in recent years, during which the propaganda has little to none explicit calls to violence.³⁸ This shift may be attributed, partly, to stricter legislation and the moderation policies of tech companies, and, partly, to an increased security awareness within virtual extremist milieus.³⁹ In contrast, propaganda currently shared by international extremist organisations on their online communication channels continues to include militant messages, such as calls for attacks on Jews, countries allied with Israel, and the West.⁴⁰

Extremist online content is 'coded' using internal symbols and implicit language

Militant messages in current extremist online content can, however, be difficult to recognise or identify.⁴¹ This is because the propaganda shared by extremist milieus on social media today is *coded* in such a way that the message is made subtle and/or implicit through the use of internal symbols and insider language.⁴² According to research, coded texts and illustrations are currently the primary means by which extremist content is communicated and distributed, as coded content is more likely to bypass moderation by major tech platforms and therefore remain online longer.⁴³

Islamist extremist online content also includes “awful but lawful” content

The content shared by extremist milieus today is not predominantly militant or otherwise in violation of the tech companies' content policies. A large amount of the content currently shared

by extremist milieus can be defined as borderline content, often described in research as "awful but lawful" or "legal but harmful" content.⁴⁴ In short, this means that the content is not explicitly violent or inciting violence and therefore does not violate legal restrictions or the moderation policies of tech companies.⁴⁵ As a result, borderline content is more likely to remain on social media platforms for longer periods.⁴⁶ However, such content often relies on the same narratives as militant propaganda, such as strong enemy imagery, anti-democratic values, and, in some cases, hate speech.⁴⁷ Although the content may lack explicit militant messaging, it can still be considered problematic. Borderline content tends to have a polarising effect and can serve as a gateway into extremist milieus by normalizing black-and-white worldviews, harmful expressions, and hate speech.⁴⁸

Irony, sarcasm, and humour are used to avoid takedowns and communicate strategically

One of the ways in which strong enemy images, anti-democratic values, and hate speech are normalised in online content is also through the use of irony, sarcasm, and humour.⁴⁹ When Islamist extremist milieus employ these rhetorical strategies, the content becomes harder to detect and decode by tech companies. This allows it to potentially fly under the radar of platform moderation.⁵⁰ Most people can recognize extremist propaganda when it features swastikas or the flag of the Islamic State. However, it is far more difficult to identify when the hateful message is presented as a humorous meme.⁵¹ Internal symbols and coded language, as well as irony and sarcasm, also function as a form of in-group communication, fostering a sense of belonging and solidarity because only those familiar with the milieu and its codes are able to decipher the content.⁵² This strategic form of communication is referred to as *dog whistling* because the hidden messages are only intelligible to the initiated.⁵³ The fact that hateful messages are not explicit makes the content appear more harmless to outsiders, thereby increasing its reach and enabling Islamist extremist milieus to connect with a broader audience through their online propaganda.⁵⁴

The Islamist extremist milieus use the Hamas–Israel war for radicalisation and recruitment

Wars and conflicts in the Middle East have long featured in Islamist extremist propaganda, being used as tools for radicalisation and recruitment, among other things.⁵⁵ The attack by Hamas on 7 October 2023, and the subsequent military response by Israel, have led to a renewed focus on the Israel–Palestine conflict in online extremist content.⁵⁶ The war is used in Islamist extremist propaganda as frame of reference constructing strong enemy images, targeting for example Jews.⁵⁷

Few instances of explicit support for international terrorist organisations

In the early years of the Syria war, parts of the Islamist extremist milieu in Denmark openly expressed support for several international organisations listed by the EU as terrorist milieus, including Hamas, Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, and associated subgroups.⁵⁸ This support was expressed not only on encrypted or closed online platforms but also open social media platforms.⁵⁹ The Danish Islamist extremist milieu also shared propaganda produced by international terrorist organisations.⁶⁰ However, such explicit support and propaganda are now found only to a very limited extent

on the public social media profiles of Islamist extremist milieus.⁶¹ In recent years, propaganda from Danish extremist milieus has increasingly focused on a national context, especially Danish political initiatives regarding Muslims and Islam in Denmark.⁶²

Anti-government messages are central to Islamist extremist online content

Similar to far-right extremism,⁶³ extremist Islamism is also characterised by a strong element of anti-government sentiment.⁶⁴ This can be expressed through calls to resist or oppose the state.⁶⁵ It may also take the form of anti-democratic content expressing hatred or aversion toward democracy as a system of governance, or actively encouraging people not to participate in democratic processes.⁶⁶ While the specific messages may differ, Islamist extremist propaganda generally advocates for a radical transformation of the existing world order and, in some cases, for the establishment of a strictly regulated Islamic state.⁶⁷

Antisemitism and conspiratorial narratives are part of extremist online content

Antisemitic^{ix} statements and other forms of racist hate speech are currently evolving and spreading in new ways through social media and online gaming platforms⁶⁸, including within a Danish context.⁶⁹ Research also points to a growing normalisation of antisemitism, particularly through social media.⁷⁰ Some of the antisemitic and extremist online content is also embedded in broader conspiratorial narratives.⁷¹ The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a rise in both the number of people who believe in conspiracy theories^x, and the volume of conspiracy-related content circulating on social media.⁷² These conspiratorial frameworks are especially apparent in content relating to Jews or Judaism, often rooted in negative stereotypes about Jewish power and privilege.⁷³ In the Danish context, these narratives are for example centred around a global Jewish conspiracy and claim that Jews control the Danish government.⁷⁴ In recent years, antisemitic ideas have been disseminated and camouflaged through modern, visual memes and within online subcultures.⁷⁵ These antisemitic narratives are also sustained and amplified through current international events, such as the war between Israel and Hamas.⁷⁶ Social media has enabled conspiratorial communities and extremist milieus to rebrand traditional antisemitic ideas, tailoring them to current political events in a visually appealing format—sometimes using perceived humor or satire to make them appear more legitimate or to attract young audiences.⁷⁷

ix Antisemitism is a general term for a specific perception of Jews that may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed at Jewish and non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, as well as at institutions and religious gathering places belonging to Jewish communities (IHRA, 2022).

x A *conspiracy theory* is a general term for beliefs that an event, phenomenon, or social order is the result of a conspiracy by hidden forces or networks. Such narratives often present a clear enemy image of who these hidden actors are and claim that the conspiracy aims to undermine or harm the milieu with which the conspiracy theorist identifies. (Den Store Danske, entry: *konspirationsteori*, [url](#); see also Petersen, Kit Stender & Peters, Rikke. 2020. Kortlægning af viden om forebyggelse af ekstremisme online blandt børn og unge, 19-21, [url](#)).

Parts of extremist online content on social media visually resemble gaming culture

The content shared by Islamist extremist milieus on social media is, in several cases, *gamified*.⁷⁸ This means that visual styles and symbolic elements from gaming is merged into the content shared on platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube.⁷⁹ For example, Quranic verses about armed jihad^{xii} is texted on images of battle scenes from popular first-person shooter games such as *Call of Duty*, *Counter-Strike*, and *Battlefield*.⁸⁰ Another example includes YouTube videos from war and conflict zones such as Gaza, where footage from the front lines is filmed in the style of a first-person shooter (FPS)^{xii}.

xi *Jihad* can be understood in various ways, ranging from an internal spiritual struggle to achieve true faith through words and deeds, to individual or military struggle aimed at advancing and defending Islam. In this context, the term refers specifically to armed struggle against perceived enemies of Islam. For further reading on the different meanings of jihad, see for example: Peters, Rudolph. 2004. *Jihad i klassisk og moderne islam*. Copenhagen: Forlaget Vandkunsten.

xii FPS (First-Person Shooter) is a genre of shooting game in which the player experiences combat from a first-person perspective. In the context of this report, it means that viewers of war videos shared by the extremist Islamist milieu may experience the conflict as if through the eyes of the person wielding the weapon. For further information, see also: Tech Against Terrorism. 2023. "Gaming & Extremism: Identity Fusion", [url](#).

Implications for Prevention: A Summary

In efforts to prevent extremism, there has long been awareness of the increasing role that the internet and online communities play in relation to radicalisation and extremism.⁸¹ However, research indicates that radicalisation is now occurring online to an even greater extent⁸², making it crucial to stay updated on trends in this area, and on their implications for prevention.

The first part of this report therefore addresses current trends in online communication methods among extremist milieus. In summary, it demonstrates that Islamist extremist milieus heavily use online platforms to recruit and disseminate propaganda, and that they primarily target young people. It also highlights that extremist online forums can potentially function as echo chambers, and that extremist content is also being spread within gaming. More specifically, the report emphasises that open social media platforms are currently also a prioritised communication channel for extremist milieus.⁸³

The second part of the report more specifically focuses on current trends in extremist online content. In summary, it demonstrates that while militant messaging remains present in today's Islamist extremist online propaganda, a large portion of it also consists of internal symbols, coded language, and "awful but lawful" content. Irony, sarcasm, and humour are used strategically to avoid takedowns and to normalise problematic expressions and hostile enemy images.⁸⁴ Islamist extremist propaganda also focuses on the Hamas–Israel war, and anti-government messages, anti-semitism, and conspiratorial narratives are central components of this content. This is relevant for prevention efforts, as research shows that strong emotions, such as hate, anger, powerlessness, and shame are among the most effective recruitment tools and key drivers for entry into extremist milieus.⁸⁵ From a prevention perspective, it is also important to note that the content currently circulating on social media about the Israel–Hamas war is highly graphic. This includes, for instance, images of death, livestreams of mass destruction, and videos of dying children in conflict zones.⁸⁶ Research indicates that repeated exposure to disturbing or violent footage may cause online followers and consumers of the content to experience symptoms similar to anxiety or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), even if the conflict occurs far from where they live.⁸⁷

Of particular relevance to this report is the fact that there is no real opposition between online radicalisation and radicalisation outside the internet. Most individuals engaged in extremist milieus operate both online and offline.⁸⁸ Furthermore, radicalisation in online spaces does not rely on fundamentally different drivers or mechanisms when compared to radicalisation within physical spaces.⁸⁹ While recent trends demand greater awareness and understanding of online radicalisation and recruitment, this does not necessarily require a fundamental shift in existing prevention strategies.

Among other things, research recommends continued training for professionals^{xiii}, open dialogue with citizens about online life and risk behaviour, and the facilitation of meaningful communities and relations as an alternative to those within extremist milieus.⁹⁰

This report, published by the Centre for Documentation and Counter Extremism (CDE), outlines current trends in online content disseminated by Islamist extremist milieus.

CDE provides specialised support on the topics covered in this report, along with training and support to help address local challenges related to extremism and polarisation. CDE also offers support on development and implementation of plans and preventive strategies against extremism.

You can contact CDE via email at ekstremisme@us.dk or by phone at +45 72 14 27 00.

CDE also provides insights into topics such as far-right extremism, antisemitism, and prevention through podcasts, videos, and reports. These resources are available at stopekstremisme.dk.

Additionally, CDE is responsible for assessing whether individuals or organisations should be recommended for inclusion on two public sanctions lists: the national sanctions list and the list of prohibited recipients of donations. For more information, visit us.dk.

xiii For more information, visit stopekstremisme.dk to explore CDE's training and advisory services.

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