



VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM ONLINE IN 2023

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
INTRODUCTION.....	7
PART I. THE ONLINE AFTERMATH OF HAMAS’ 7 OCTOBER TERRORIST ATTACK.....	8
HAMAS’ ONLINE ACTIVITY IN 2023.....	9
SURGING ONLINE AND OFFLINE ANTI-SEMITISM AND ANTI-MUSLIM HATE POST-7 OCTOBER ATTACK.....	12
RADICALISING POTENTIAL OF 7 OCTOBER AND AFTERMATH	13
PART II. JIHADI ONLINE CONTENT AND ACTIVITY IN 2023	17
JIHADI TERRORISM IN 2023	17
TRENDS IN JIHADI ONLINE CONTENT AND NARRATIVES.....	20
JIHADI USERS’ CURRENTLY PREFERRED ONLINE PLATFORMS, SPACES, AND APPS.....	21
PART III. RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST AND TERRORIST ONLINE CONTENT AND ACTIVITY IN 2023	25
RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST EVENTS AND ATTACKS IN 2023.....	25
TRENDS IN EXTREME RIGHT ONLINE ACTIVITY AND NARRATIVES IN 2023	28
EXTREME RIGHT USERS’ CURRENTLY PREFERRED ONLINE PLATFORMS, SPACES, AND TOOLS.....	29
PART IV. RESPONSES TO ONLINE VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM IN 2023	32
LEGISLATION	32
PLATFORMS	36
CONCLUSION: WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2024.....	41

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Catalytic factors impacting online extremism and terrorism in 2023 were world conflicts, particularly Hamas' 7 October terrorist attack in southern Israel and its aftermath; rapid technological developments (e.g., generative AI); tech company restructuring (e.g., the 'Big Tech Backslide'); and both the ramping-up of and the coming into force of new EU regulations (i.e., Terrorist Content Online Regulation, Digital Services Act). Along with *quodidiana* Jihadist and extreme-right online activity, each of these factors raised specific concerns for the European Union (EU) and its Member States, transnationally and locally.

In broad terms, world conflicts provide violent extremist and terrorist propagandists and recruiters increased opportunities to leverage and manipulate war zone imagery, political discourses, and social narratives to promote violent ideology and radicalise potential followers. The digital nature of the political contestation over contemporary conflicts enables amplification and wide circulation of these materials to new and varied audiences globally.

Detailed in the report are the outcomes and effects of Hamas' 7 October 2023 terrorist attack on southern Israel, including Hamas' preferred platforms for disseminating content as well as both their pre- and post-attack online messaging. The official Hamas propaganda related to the attack made particular use of perpetrator (i.e., attacker-shot) footage during and immediately after the attacks. In later months, their messaging shifted to focus on Israel's campaign in Gaza, using images of civilian suffering as its primary narrative.

The report also outlines Hamas' platform use and responses by companies and regulators during the period of the attack through to the end of the year, along with details about the radicalising potential of their content and activity. Of specific concern in the EU is a resultant surge in both online and 'real world' anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim hate; related high-volume circulation of hate, extremist, and terrorist content potentially overwhelming platform capability for content moderation generally and more specifically with respect to the TCO and DSA regulations; and that the conflict is being used across different ideological milieus, including particularly Jihadist and extreme right, to further their goals with the potential for increases in attacks.

The most concerning technological development in 2023 with respect to online extremism and terrorism was the rapid expansion and increased versioning of publicly accessible, web-based generative AI tools. These tools (e.g., ChatGPT v3, v3.5, v4, Character.ai, Dall-E, Gemini / Bard, Midjourney) offer a range of services (e.g., text, voice / sound, image, and video creation, as well as translation and code writing) through easy-to-use chatbot interfaces many with free services which allow users to remain anonymous.

In 2023, both Jihadist and far-right propaganda incorporated AI-generated content, with it becoming clear by year's end that while potential worst-case use scenarios had not yet materialised, extremist and terrorist interest in these technologies, paired with their rapid-paced development, ensured they remain a high priority security threat.

In the Jihadist context, 2023 saw 3 attacks in the EU—all toward the end of the year—conducted by single actors or small cells independent of transnational Jihadist groups although allegiance was claimed. Additionally, over 60 Jihadi-related plots, arrests, and prosecutions were documented in the EU during the year. A concerning shift in 2023 was the inclusion of minors in Jihadist plots and activities, which also had online components.

Globally, Jihadist actors and their supporters were both active on the ground and continued to disseminate content widely on a variety of online platforms. Prominent in both settings were Islamic State, Al Qaeda affiliates (specifically JNIM, AQAP, al-Shabab, Hurras al-Din, AQIM, and AQIS), and Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan. The styles and narratives of online content remained relatively stable and in line with the last few years. Notable new

narratives focused on the governance of disputed territories (e.g., ISPK), and the use of Quran-burnings in Scandinavia as a catalyst for legitimising Jihad in Europe.

There was also widespread platform-based disruption of Jihadist content and accounts during the period under review, which led to continued dispersal and migration across the Jihadist online ecosystem. Moreover, heavy reliance on both archiving sites and decentralised services continued in 2023. There remains a clear desire by Jihadist propagandists to utilise mainstream platforms to spread content too, given that despite relatively rapid removals on these platforms attempts to circulate materials recurred regularly.

Of note, in November and December Bin Laden's post 9/11 propaganda tract "Letter to America" was circulated on TikTok by non-extremist / non-terrorist affiliated GenZ users concerned about the US's role in the Israel-Palestine conflict, causing sweeping controversy and viewed by some as a potential security threat.

In the right-wing extremist and terrorist context in 2023, extreme-right *terrorist* attacks were down, however far-right *extremist* content was widely and easily available, and extreme-right *terrorist* content was also accessible. A growing relationship between digital practice and event-based phenomena—particularly mobilisations in relation to national elections—became apparent in this milieu. Such mobilisations started in 2021 with the Capitol insurrection in the US and continued to have knock-on effects in 2023, including the January Brasilia riots and the December prosecution, for a similar type of attack plot, by German Reichsbürger extremists.

While no right-wing terrorist attacks occurred in the EU in 2023, two US attacks—one in Allen, Texas and the other in Jacksonville, Florida—highlight potential evolutions in *terrorist* practice offline linked to frameworks of fragmentation and "fuzziness" common to the digital right-wing extremist context.

In 2023, extreme right online narratives incorporated a focus on international conflicts, continuing to leverage the war in Ukraine as well as capitalising on Hamas' 7 October attack and its aftermath. Apparent in both cases were the taking-up of positions that further signaling the fragmentation of ideology within the digital context. Moreover, extreme right propagandists viewed the expanding Israel-Palestine conflict as offering the potential to recruit across ideological lines by drawing in far-left supporters of Palestine through anti-Israel / anti-Semitic propaganda content.

In 2023, Telegram remained a core node in broader right-wing extremist and terrorist networks. Continuing their prominence as alternatives to mainstream platforms were 'alt-tech' platforms (e.g., Gettr, Gab, BitChute, Goyim TV), , decentralised block-chain-based platforms (e.g., DLive, Odysee), and gaming platforms (e.g., Discord). Of note during the year was the shift of Twitter to X after the former's purchase by Elon Musk. Changes in X's policies and Musk's general amnesty for banned users—particularly accounts previously banned for posting / spreading extreme right, QAnon, and 6 January content—enabled a surge in hate-filled and far-right *extremist* content on previously a mainstream platform.

In terms of legislative responses to online extremism and terrorism, 2023 was the first full year of implementation of the Terrorist Content Online (TCO) regulation. While it got off to somewhat of a slow start, there was a significant uptick in TCO-based removal orders post-7 October albeit informal referrals continued to dominate overall. The TCO is not without contestation however, with a group of six civil society organisations taking a case to France's highest court over the "specific measures" allowed to be implemented by internet companies under the regulation, particularly potentially error prone automated tools, with respect to free speech and human rights. A ruling in the case is expected in 2024.

Along with the TCO, the Digital Services Act (DSA) came into force in 2023 for designated Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs)—platforms with >45 million EU users—and is slated to apply to all platforms with an EU-user base from February 2024. Of note, in wake of the 7 October attack, were the EU Commission's warnings to a suite of companies regarding compliance with the DSA in the realms of especially disinformation and terrorism content. Arising from this, X/Twitter now faces the first formal investigation under the DSA. X/Twitter's owner,

Musk, challenged the Commission regarding the disinformation issue specifically, having already exited the EU's voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation in May of 2023.

In the US, Florida and Texas state laws framed to enable users and/or the state to challenge account suspensions and moderation decisions that are viewed as 'politically motivated' were agreed, in September, to be adjudicated upon by the US Supreme Court. If the US Supreme Court upholds the states' laws, it could result in a 'worst case' scenario wherein platforms cease to moderate content in fear of breaching the law. This could make violent extremist and terrorist content more accessible to EU users despite strong EU regulation seeking to ensure the opposite.

Individual platforms also made notable decisions with impacts on responses to online extremism and terrorism in 2023. Among these was a very large increase in the number of cases selected for review by the Facebook Oversight Board (FOB)—from 16 in 2022 to 47 in 2023—the majority having extremism or terrorism aspects. The FOB cases fell into four potential policy violation categories: 'Dangerous Organizations or Individuals,' 'Violence and Incitement,' 'Hate Speech', and a new category of 'Designated Organizations or Individuals.' Of concern was a lack of transparency about how the categorisations—particularly changes in the category structure—were determined and what they encompass.

In addition, the first two cases adjudicated under the FOB's 'Expedited Review' process were assessed during the period under review herein, both in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict. Of note too was Meta's supposedly temporary content moderation changes arising out of the latter that pose potential problems in relation to free speech and human rights protections, and were not reversed by year's end, as far as we could determine.

Of concern in relation to platforms too were continuing large-scale tech industry layoffs, blamed by companies on over-hiring during the COVID 19 Pandemic, but which anecdotally included the decimation of 'trust and safety' teams at major internet companies. At a minimum, considerable restructuring of trust and safety functions at these companies occurred in 2023. These shifts paired with the limited knowledge, resources, and capabilities of micro, small, and medium sized providers does not portend well for surging event-based content, as with the Israel-Palestine conflict, specifically in light of 2024's many elections globally, including the June 2024 EU Parliamentary elections.

To meet regulatory requirements of the TCO and DSA, which include protection of users' rights to free speech and related, human-in-the-loop content moderation (i.e., paired human and AI-based content moderation practices, also called 'augmented intelligence') remains the platinum standard for content moderation overall and with specific regard to online extremist and terrorist content. The reliance on automation-heavy solutions supported by only skeleton trust and safety teams jeopardises compliance.

Finally, what is the outlook for 2024? The suffering of Palestinian civilians due to Israeli military actions will remain a potent tool in Hamas and Jihadist propaganda, likely fueling terrorist activities globally. Growing political polarisation, mis- and disinformation, and conspiracies surrounding major elections, notably the US presidential and EU Parliament elections, will heighten the risk of political violence and potentially terrorism too.

AI has the capacity to supercharge the production of extremist, especially conspiracist, content around not just the above-mentioned elections, but also ongoing conflicts, including Israel-Gaza, thereby also calling into question real and true content.

Finally, backsliding on the part of companies in terms of resourcing of online extremism and terrorism response, including reductions in trust and safety staff, will likely worsen the situation, with even major companies ill equipped to address risks. Implementation of the TCO and DSA will nevertheless continue to ramp-up in 2024 and, along with the US Supreme Court decisions, have the ability to essentially 'make or break'—perhaps both?—extremist and terrorist content moderation in the year ahead.

INTRODUCTION

This report describes and discusses developments in the violent extremist and terrorist online scene(s) in the 12-month period from 1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023. It accomplishes this by surveying, synopsising, and integrating the findings of relevant articles and reports produced by academics, think-tanks, civil society, and governmental organisations; high quality press reports; and the first-hand online experience and primary research of the authors.

The report is divided into four major parts: Part I focuses on the online aftermath of Hamas' massive marauding terrorist attack in southern Israel on 7 October 2023; Part II on online Jihadism, particularly that linked to al-Qaeda and the so-called 'Islamic State' (hereafter IS); Part III focuses on the online activities of the extreme right, particularly its European and US variants; and Part IV details the responses of a range of legislators and Internet companies to online extremist and terrorist activity over the course of the last 12 months.

We conclude by pointing to a five issues in the violent extremism and terrorism online realm(s) that bear watching in 2024.

PART I.

THE ONLINE AFTERMATH OF HAMAS' 7 OCTOBER TERRORIST ATTACK

Hamas' 7 October attack in Israel's south was the most consequential terrorist attack of 2023 and, indeed, for many years. Not just in terms of numbers of killed and injured, but also the wider repercussions for Israel, Gaza, and the region. Both the scale of the original attack and its online—not to say also its 'offline'—aftermath warrant its description and discussion leading our 2023 report. Provided in this section is analysis of Hamas' post-attack online narratives and its preferred platforms, including the upsurge in their Telegram posts and subscribers post-7 October. Addressed in this section too are the upsurges in both anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim sentiment, both online and off, arising out of the Israel-Gaza conflict. The final part of this section draws attention to assertions by authorities that the 7 October attack and its aftermath, including its online components, will have security implications, including for EU member states (MS), going forward.

Around 6.30am on the morning of Saturday, 7 October, 2023, militants from Hamas' al-Qassam Brigades and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) launched an attack, called by them 'al-Aqsa Flood,' on southern Israel. The attack began with the firing of rockets and militants breaking through Israeli checkpoints and military positions. This led to unprecedented marauding violence against nearby Israeli military positions, kibbutzim, and the Supernova music festival, which drew an intensive military response from the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) titled 'Operation Iron Swords.' The attacks launched by Hamas and the subsequent Israeli airstrikes and invasion of Gaza resulted in the deaths of 1,139 Israelis and over 20,000 Palestinians—c.8,000 of them children—by the end of 2023. By the end of the year too, over 120 hostages taken by Hamas from Israel were still being held, along with c.1.9 million people or nearly 85% of Gaza's population having been displaced.¹

The attack and the Israeli response appear a seminal moment in terrorism globally, not just for the size, audaciousness, and hyper levels of inter-personal violence of the attack—including the close-quarters murder of babies and children—nor the intensity of Israel's response and the further actions taken by a range of groups, including Lebanon's Hezbollah and Yemen's Houthis, on Israeli, American, and other targets, and the resultant fears of a wider regional war, but also the unprecedented amounts of hate, extremist, and terrorist content circulating online. While this section is largely focused on explicitly terrorist content circulated by terrorist groups, it is worth underlining that this content was not just circulated by the latter and their supporters, but conflict content, including hate, extremist, and terrorist content, was widely shared by citizens, journalists, researchers, and others. Almost immediately too conflict-related content was showing signs of conspiracism, disinformation, and some being AI-generated (see Box 2). All of this is thought to have contributed to rising levels of polarisation globally, including in the EU.

¹ UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). 2023. '[Hostilities in the Gaza Strip and Israel – Flash Update #81](#).' OCHA, 30 Dec.

HAMAS' ONLINE ACTIVITY IN 2023

Box 1. Backgrounder: Hamas and PIJ

A 1987 spin-off of the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist militant group Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement) took power in Gaza after defeating its rival political party, Fatah, in 2006 elections. A late 1970s split from the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, Palestinian Islamic Jihad is a smaller militant group than Hamas that, unlike Fatah or Hamas, does not participate in the political process.

Dozens of countries and the EU designate both Hamas and PIJ terrorist organisations because of their armed resistance against Israel, including rocket barrages and suicide bombings. The designations generally cover the groups 'military wings'—Hamas' Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades (estbd. 1991) and PIJ's Al-Quds Brigades (estbd. 1981)—also.

Hamas has a longstanding and sophisticated approach to propaganda, largely focused on its constituents in Gaza, but incorporating global-focused content too. Most traditional media outlets in Gaza are affiliated with either Hamas or the PIJ (see Box 1). Hamas' al-Aqsa TV (estbd. 2006) is a particularly important outlet, which regularly airs Hamas propaganda, including al-Qassam Brigades content.² In terms of 'new' media, the group has maintained a suite of websites since at least the mid-1990s, has official presences on Telegram since 2015, and supporters less clearly affiliated with Hamas spreading its propaganda on mainstream social media.³ While previously active on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, Hamas has not been permitted to operate official accounts on those platforms for some years, with their official Twitter accounts being the last to be shut down

by a major platform for contravening its terms of use in November 2019.⁴

Previous to the 7 October 2023 attack, Hamas had a stable suite of official Telegram accounts and websites that were updated regularly. Post-attack, both the posting tempo and quantity of content surged, along with their numbers of followers on Telegram. By the end of the year, Hamas' online presence was less stable than it had been pre-attack, but nonetheless persisted. The group's core online narratives also altered from pre- to immediate post-attack and subsequently.

Hamas' Post-attack Online Narratives

Attack-related content began to spread across online spaces, including mainstream social media platforms, almost immediately the 7 October attack got underway. Through their official Telegram channel, the al-Qassam Brigades disseminated carefully curated messages, videos of pre-attack training, and official statements, emphasising the preparation for the attack and the group's capabilities, including the use of gliders, kamikaze drones, and rockets. Formats included both professionally produced multimedia content and shaky perpetrator mobile phone footage, with the al-Qassam Brigades applying official branding to both.

Perpetrator footage was an important online component of the 7 October attack, with images and videos from the attackers themselves widely circulated both by the official media wings of the groups involved and by mass media and wider publics, in Israel and Palestine. Graphic content shared by perpetrators and bystanders, especially those depicting Israeli and Palestinian casualties, played a central role with a large quantity of disturbing content shared as the attacks unfolded. Other types of content shared by pro-Hamas channels included international news coverage, and content from other groups, like PIJ's al-Quds Brigades and Lebanon's Hizbollah.

In the days following the attack, as the Israeli military began to bombard Gaza, Hamas' online narrative shifted to focus on the civilian casualties in Gaza. Following commencement of the Israeli invasion of Gaza, the publication of videos displaying al-Qassam Brigade and al-Quds Brigade fighters ambushing IDF patrols and

² For more on al-Aqsa TV, see Dana Doulah and Kaylan Geiger. 2024. 'The Evolution of Hamas Media Operations.' *Monitor*, Iss. 31 (Winter 2023/24), p.5.

³ Daniel Byman and Emma McCaleb. 2023. *Understanding Hamas's and Hezbollah's Uses of Information Technology*. Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), 31 July.

⁴ Devorah Margolin. 2022. '#Hamas: A Thematic Exploration of Hamas's English-Language Twitter.' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 34(6), p.1077.

attacking Israeli tanks were spread widely as the narrative focus of Hamas propaganda shifted again, towards resistance against an invading enemy.

Hamas' Preferred Online Platforms, Spaces, and Apps

While Hamas content and activity could be observed on a range of platforms in 2023, the group's preferred online spaces both pre- and post-October 7 were their Telegram channels and their own websites, both of which they were relatively free to operate official versions of pre-attack, but later came under removal pressure.

Hamas (and PIJ) websites were disrupted by distributed denial-of-service attacks (DDoS) on 7 October.⁵ In the absence of Hamas' websites, other online spaces—such as the Hamas and al-Qassam Brigades Telegram channels, al-Qassam Brigades app, and a wide network of Hamas supporter accounts and channels—quickly came to prominence in disseminating content related to the ongoing violence. New Hamas websites subsequently emerged, were shut down, and re-emerged over the remainder of the year, pointing to Hamas' desire to retain its own websites as a key component of its propaganda dissemination.



Figure 1. Screenshot of al-Qassam Brigades App Download Page

This forced domain-hopping likely also affected the working of the al-Qassam Brigades app. The application first appeared on 10 October, 2023, on the official al-Qassam Brigades' Telegram Channel (see Figure 1). It was configured to communicate with a domain that hosted the official al-Qassam Brigades' website, which resolved to a variety of different IP addresses from 11 October onward. A test of the app by researchers resulted in it installing and successfully launching, but failing to load content based on a "connection failure." This was almost certainly due to the app being unable to communicate with the host website due to it being offline.⁶

A study focused on the activity of the official al-Qassam Brigades Telegram channel three days prior to and three days after 7 October, showed the channel had a low level of activity in the three days leading to the attack, but erupted with activity thereafter. There were just 16 posts made in the three days pre-attack, all featuring images and 12 accompanied by outlinks to the al-Qassam Brigades website. A dramatic increase in the quantity of propaganda was apparent post-attack, as was a dramatic decrease in outlinks to the group's website, likely due to the DDoSing of Hamas websites on 7 October (see Table 1).⁷

The al-Qassam Brigade's Telegram channel saw their number of subscribers radically increase across the three-day period post-attack and subsequently. It grew from 205,000 subscribers to just over 629,000 in the immediate

⁵ Lily Hay Newman and Matt Burgess. 2023. '[Activist Hackers Are Racing Into the Israel-Hamas War—for Both Sides.](#)' *Wired*, 9 Oct.

⁶ Insikt Group. 2023. '[Hamas Application Infrastructure Reveals Possible Overlap with TAG-63 and Iranian Threat Activity.](#)' Recorded Future.

⁷ Sean McCafferty and Kamil Yilmaz. 2023. '[Hamas Telegram in the Immediate Wake of Their 7 October Terrorist Attack\(s\): Part 1 – Activity Levels.](#)' *VOX-Pol Blog*, 8 Nov.

aftermath of the attack (see Table 1) and reached over 694,000 subscribers at its peak. Similarly, on 6 October, the official Hamas Telegram channel had c.41,000 subscribers, which tripled to 120,000 by 11 October.⁸

Both channels saw subsequent reductions in subscriber numbers, but these numbers remained significantly increased by 31 December versus the pre-attack period. Due to the headline grabbing nature of the violence, it is unlikely that the huge subscriber increases represented hundreds of thousands of supporters of the terrorist organisation. The mass media attention tied to such seminal violence, likely led journalists, analysts, academics, and the curious to these channels. The desire for direct and up-to-date insights into the violence and to keep in step with new content boosted the reach of Hamas propaganda. Content shared within these channels was spread very widely across mainstream online spaces too.⁹

	4 – 6 Oct. 2023	7 – 9 Oct. 2023
Total no. of posts	16	74 (↑362%)
No. of outlinking posts	12	1 (↓92%)
No. of in-linking posts	0	3
No. of posts with content embedded or attached	16	70 (↑337%)
No. of items including graphic content	0	23
No. of videos	0	35
No. of still images	19	34 (79%)
No. of official Hamas propaganda items	16	73 (↑356%)
No. of subscribers	205,000	629,894 (↑207%)

The subsequent reduction in subscriber numbers to the official al-Qassam Brigades and Hamas Telegram channels that followed may be due to subscribers' fears of being associated with a terrorist organisation and/or waning interest in the conflict by some users. The most significant factor, however, was probably the implementation of blocks from late October on the official al-Qassam Brigades and Hamas Telegram channels.

In mid-October, following criticism from Israel, Telegram CEO Pavel Durov argued via a post on his personal Telegram account that shutting down Hamas' Telegram channels would only exacerbate the conflict, pointing to the example of Hamas using Telegram to warn Israeli civilians to evacuate an area before they launched rockets at it. He questioned whether closing their channels would save lives or put more lives in danger. Nonetheless,

three days later, users in Germany attempting to access the official Hamas and al-Qassam Brigades channels received a notice stating "[t]his channel cannot be displayed because it violates local laws." Telegram had been forced to yield to a raft of 'removal orders' from Germany's Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) under the Terrorist Content Online (TCO) Regulation.¹⁰ (For more on the TCO, see Part IV of this report).

Google's decision later in the month that the official al-Qassam Brigades and Hamas channels contravened Google Play Store guidelines around violent content "related to terrorism" essentially forced Telegram to block these much more widely, though only for Android users.¹¹ By the end of the month similar steps by Apple meant Telegram blocked four Hamas channels, including the official Hamas, Qassam Brigades, and the latter's spokesman's channel, for Apple users too. The upshot of these decisions by the app stores was that Hamas' official Telegram channels became inaccessible on most mobile devices from the end of October 2023.

Summing-up, on 31 December, 2023, Hamas were under online pressure to a much greater extent than they had been for some years, but continued to have relative freedom to disseminate their propaganda through their official online media channels and websites, despite disruption to their main websites and restriction of access to their Telegram channels for mobile users.

⁸ Doulah and Geiger, 2024, p.6.

⁹ Mark Scott. 2023. '[Graphic videos of Hamas attacks spread on X.](#)' *Politico*, 9 Oct.

¹⁰ Christoph Koopmann. 2023. '[Warum Telegram plötzlich dem BKA hilft.](#)' *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 3 Dec.

¹¹ Wes Davis. 2023. '[Telegram Has Blocked Hamas Channels on Android Because Google Forced It To.](#)' *The Verge*, 25 Oct.

SURGING ONLINE AND OFFLINE ANTI-SEMITISM AND ANTI-MUSLIM HATE IN WAKE OF 7 OCTOBER ATTACK

Post-7 October, there was a surge of both anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim content online, with some platforms responding much more effectively than others. For example, a study of both X/Twitter and Facebook in the weeks following Hamas' attack noted that while there was a huge 900%+ increase in anti-Semitic content on X/Twitter, Facebook's numbers remained relatively stable, an increase of 'only' 28% indicating an important role for content moderation in the management of hate-based content.¹² It remains unclear to researchers how content moderation practices have been specifically deployed at Facebook beyond their limited messaging on 13 October (and subsequent brief updates; latest 7 December), however.¹³ In acknowledgement of this issue and its potential harms, the EU communicated to both X/Twitter and Facebook's parent company Meta on 11 October, 2023 their responsibilities to remove not just terrorist but also hate content under the Digital Services Act.¹⁴ (For more on relevant EU regulation, see Part IV of this report). Along with X/Twitter and Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and Telegram have also experienced swells in hate content.¹⁵

Increases in anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim content were also very large—approximately 500%—on platforms associated with fringe far-right cultures, such as Bitchute, Gab, Odysee, and 4Chan.¹⁶ These platforms are often referred to as “alt-tech” indicating their use by the online extreme right as a means of evading moderation on more mainstream platforms. In fact, these platforms often portray themselves as ‘free speech’ havens, in effect selling their limited moderation of hateful content. Thus, anti-Semitism and anti-Muslim hate on these sites tends to be much more violent and vitriolic, using a wide range of racist slurs and graphic depictions.¹⁷ Importantly, ideas and content originating on these ‘fringe’ platforms can quickly infiltrate ‘mainstream’ social media and the wider infosphere, however.

While the late 2023 surge in online hate and harassment has been called “alarming” by researchers and others, it is part of a longer pattern of increases in anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, and anti-immigrant expressions online within the last several years.¹⁸ Having said this, far-right online cultures have seen the potential for radicalising even far-left ideologically oriented individuals to their viewpoints via the Israel-Gaza conflict.¹⁹ Along with this, Jihadist extremists have also sought to use not just the conflict generally, but the circulation of specifically anti-Semitic content to recruit and radicalise.²⁰ Furthermore, reports have noted that, along with individual user activity and the potential for networked circulation of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim content (e.g., by coordinated

¹² ADL. 2023. '[Online Antisemitism Increased after Hamas Attack](#).' *ADL Blog*, 9 Nov.

¹³ Meta. 2023. '[Meta's Ongoing Efforts Regarding the Israel-Hamas War](#).' *Meta Newsroom*, 13 Oct.

¹⁴ Makena Kelly. 2023. '[EU gives Meta 24 Hours to Respond to Pro-Hamas Content](#).' *The Verge*, 11 Oct.

¹⁵ Sheera Frenkel and Steven Lee Myers. 2023. '[Antisemitic and Anti-Muslim Hate Speech Surges Across the Internet](#).' *The New York Times*, 15 Nov.

¹⁶ Global Project Against Hate and Extremism (GRAPHE). 2023. '[4chan: Violent Antisemitic and Anti-Muslim Hate Escalating Online in Wake of Hamas Attacks on Israel](#).' *GRAPHE*, 12 Oct.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Frenkel and Myers. 2023. '[Antisemitic and Anti-Muslim Hate Speech Surges](#).'

²⁰ The Soufan Centre. 2023. '[Anti-Semitic and Islamophobic Incidents on the Rise as Gaza Conflict Continues](#).' *IntelBrief*, 17 Nov.

groups of users), state actors are also leveraging the conflict to sow chaos and division. State spreaders of anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim content include Russia, China, Iran, and Iraq.²¹

Crucially, the surging hate focused on Jewish and Muslim people has not stayed online. Late 2023 saw a surge in hate targeting Jewish and Muslim communities, with a wide variety of incidents extending offline in the EU and UK.²² Examples include a Berlin lawmaker of Kurdish-Syrian background facing hate-filled flyers and physical attack from a hammer-wielding assailant,²³ a far-right Polish lawmaker disrupting a Hanukkah celebration in the parliament,²⁴ UK police responding to a pig's head dumped outside a proposed mosque,²⁵ and Star of David graffiti—reminiscent of the Nazi occupation in World War II—daubed on Paris walls.²⁶ Such incidents are part of a global trend, including a number of shootings²⁷ and the fatal stabbing of a child²⁸ in the US. Worth noting too is the likely very large numbers of instances of hate occurring, online and in the 'real world,' which have not made news headlines.

RADICALISING POTENTIAL OF 7 OCTOBER AND AFTERMATH

Jihadist propaganda narratives immediately pivoted to the Israel-Palestine conflict following the 7 October attacks by Hamas. Some groups, such as the TTP and al-Qaeda, released statements expressing solidarity and calling for further attack, with the former also producing a podcast discussing the attack. IS did not initially comment on the attack, probably due to ideological differences with Hamas, but later circulated content encouraging its supporters to strike against Jews globally, including an *al-Naba* (no. 413) editorial titled 'Practical Steps to Fight the Jews.' On 30 December, AQAP published a long form video through their al-Malahem media network with references to 'Open-Source Jihad'—terminology familiar from their *Inspire* magazine—aimed at providing guidance for individuals to carry out attacks in the West.²⁹ The video targeted the West over the ongoing Israeli military action in Gaza, urging attacks against targets in the European Union, United States, and the United Kingdom.

This, among other things, caused security officials from numerous EU member states, large and small, along with those from other Western democratic states to warn of potential spill over from the conflict. In mid-October,

²¹ Steven Lee Myers and Sheera Frenkel. 2023. '[In a Worldwide War of Words, Russia, China and Iran Back Hamas.](#)' *The New York Times*, 3 Nov.; Soufan Centre. 2023. '[Anti-Semitic and Islamophobic Incidents on the Rise.](#)'

²² Amy Braunschweiger, Almaz Teffera, George Wilkes. 2023. '[Interview: Antisemitism and Islamophobia Spike in Europe.](#)' *Human Rights Watch (HRW)*, 18 Dec.

²³ Layli Foroudi, Thomas Escritt, Andrew Macaskill and Sarah Marsh. 2023. '[Muslims in Europe Feel Vulnerable to Rising Hostility Over Israel-Gaza.](#)' *Reuters*, 29 Nov.

²⁴ Vanessa Gera. 2023. '[Far-right Lawmaker Extinguishes Hanukkah Candles in Polish Parliament.](#)' *Associated Press*, 12 Dec.

²⁵ TellMAMA. 2023. '[Hate Crime Investigation Ongoing After Pig's Head Left Outside Proposed Mosque.](#)' *TellMAMA*, 11 Oct.

²⁶ Agence France Presse. '["Anti-Semitic" Graffiti Possibly Ordered from Abroad, Paris Prosecutor Says.](#)' *France 24*, 7 Nov.

²⁷ An example was the shooting of three university students in Vermont; see Bill Hutchinson, Deena Zaru, Brian Hartman, and Davi Merchan. 2023. '[New Details Emerge in Shooting of Students of Palestinian Descent; Moms Speak Out.](#)' *ABC News*, 28 Nov.

²⁸ Holly Yan, Brad Parks, Lauren Mascarenhas, and Virginia Langmaid. 2023. '[A 6-year-old Palestinian-American was Stabbed 26 Times for Being Muslim, Police Say. His Mom Couldn't Go To His Funeral Because She Was Stabbed, Too.](#)' *CNN*, 16 Oct.

²⁹ Maura Conway, Jodie Parker, and Sean Looney. 2017. '[Online Jihadist Instructional Content: The Role of Magazines.](#)' In Maura Conway, Lee Jarvis, Orla Lehane, Stuart Macdonald, and Lella Nouri (Ed.s), *Terrorists' Use of the Internet*. IOS Press: NATO Science for Peace and Security Series.

the heads of the UK's domestic counter-intelligence and security agency MI5 and the US's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) issued warnings on potential heightened danger to Jewish communities and other groups from lone actor terrorists, Iran, and/or other militants.³⁰ In particular, MI5's Director General, Ken McCallum, pointed to the risk of "self-initiated" individuals who may have been radicalised online responding in "spontaneous or unpredictable ways" in the context of the terrorist attacks on Israel and the wider conflict.³¹

French and German officials, followed-up with pronouncements in early December 2023 relating to elevated threat levels arising from the increased likelihood of Jihadi terrorist attacks. Thomas Haldenwang, head of Germany's domestic intelligence agency, the *Bundesverfassungsschutz* (BfV), stated "[t]he danger is real and greater than it has been for a long time." Nicolas Lerner, head of France's domestic intelligence agency, the *Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure* (DGSi), noted IS has had a longstanding "aversion to nationalist causes" such as that of Hamas, but has since called for solidarity with its "Palestinian brothers,"³² including online.

In early December, EU Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson told journalists "[w]ith the war between Israel and Hamas, and the polarization it causes in our society, with the upcoming holiday season, there is a huge risk of terrorist attacks in the European Union." Johansson said that her assessment was based on, among other things, an increase in anti-Semitic incidents, as well as increased hate speech and extremist content online.³³ The Commissioner was speaking just days after the third Jihadist attack in Europe post-7 October (for details on which, see Part II below). Authorities raised their terrorist threat levels in Belgium and France in mid-October, and the Netherlands in mid-December, all citing the risk of Islamist/Jihadist terrorism arising out of the Israel-Gaza conflict, the Netherlands also citing right-wing extremism and invoking the role of the Internet too.³⁴

Box 2. Generative AI Use for Extremist and Terrorist Purposes in 2023

Generative artificial intelligence (i.e., Generative AI or, sometimes, GenAI) is the use of complex algorithms trained on trillions of words, images, audio, and videos, generally culled from the open internet, to produce fabricated text, images, audio, and video. It is based on large language models (LLMs), which acquire human-like language capacities by learning statistical relationships from text—or indeed, images, audio, and/or video—during computationally very intensive self-supervised or semi-supervised training processes. Today, this technology often takes the form of chatbots, like ChatGPT, which was released online by the company OpenAI on 30 November, 2022. It was quickly followed by a raft of similar technologies (e.g., Character.ai, Dall-E, Gemini/Bard, Midjourney, etc.), some freeware and other subscription-based, and the rapid release of new versions of ChatGPT itself (i.e., ChatGPT-3, 3.5, and 4), throughout 2023.³⁵ Almost immediately, researchers, law enforcement, policymakers, and others highlighted the risks and threats posed by GenAI technology in the extremism and terrorism realms.

³⁰ Dan Sabbagh. 2023. '[US and UK Spy Chiefs Warn Middle East Crisis Could Raise Domestic Terror Threat.](#)' *The Guardian*, 17 Oct.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Guy Chazan and Leila Abboud. 2023. '[European Officials Warn of Higher Terror Risk Over Holiday Season.](#)' *Financial Times*, 9 Dec.

³³ Lorne Cook. 2023. '[Senior EU Official Warns of Huge Security Risk in Europe over Christmas as Israel-Hamas War Rages.](#)' *Associated Press*, 5 Dec.

³⁴ [Dutch] National Coordinator for Counterterrorism and Security. 2023. '[Terrorist Threat Level Raised to "Substantial."](#)' *Press Release*, 12 Dec.

³⁵ For more on ChatGPT's evolution in 2022-2023, see Cheyenne DeVon. 2023. '[On ChatGPT's One-year Anniversary, It Has More than 1.7 billion Users—Here's What It May Do Next.](#)' *CNBC*, 30 Nov.

Such fears were not unfounded as, as early as 2016, previous iterations of GenAI tools had to be retracted when they generated headline such as ‘Microsoft Shuts Down AI Chatbot After it Turned Into a Nazi.’³⁶ Over the course of 2023, multiple studies were conducted on discreet generative AI technologies to test them for potential uses by violent extremists and terrorists.³⁷ Primary concerns included a “leveling up” in terms of scope and scale of propaganda creation and dissemination, as well as accessing detailed information on kinetic dangers (e.g., weapons making, improved tactical planning).³⁸ While generative AI platforms and companies have now built-in features to help prevent exploitation for malign purposes, these work differently across different technologies as well as across different versions of the same technologies, and are not immune from harmful ‘prompt tailoring.’³⁹ So what did we observe in terms of the use of GenAI by extremist and terrorists in 2023?

GenAI has played a role in the Israel-Gaza conflict, but not as great a one as many first feared. This is not to say that Israel-Gaza-related mis- and dis-formation, hate, extremist, and terrorist content is not prolific, but that within the mass of such content, AI’s role is not outsized.⁴⁰ It is argued that journalists, fact checkers, researchers, and ordinary users are struggling less with AI-generated stills—never mind ‘deep fakes’⁴¹—than, for example, the widespread sharing of out-of-context images, so using images from, say, the Syria conflict, claiming that they’re portraying current events in Gaza.⁴² From a practical perspective, while the creation of AI images can be fast and free, searching out real images from other conflicts can be faster and easier still. Crude manipulation has also been widespread, such as video game footage presented as a Hamas attack,⁴³ as have conspiratorial narratives accompanying real—oftentimes outdated—images claiming, using for example the #pallywood hashtag, that Palestinian victims of the conflict are ‘crisis actors.’⁴⁴

Having said this, many thousands of AI-generated images, have been posted and continue circulating online in the context of the Israel-Gaza conflict showcasing horrific violence and carnage, used primarily to generate outrage and fear.⁴⁵ In mainstream social media and digital contexts, these AI-generated images have primarily been utilised to sow distrust in mediated representations of the conflict, which is feeding into broader patterns of polarisation and distrust globally, including within the EU.⁴⁶ The conflict has been further leveraged by users creating and sharing anti-Semitic inflected content,⁴⁷ which is utilised by violent extremists and terrorists in both extreme right and Jihadist milieus. For example,

³⁶ Amy Kraft. 2016. ‘Microsoft Shuts Down AI Chatbot After it Turned Into a Nazi.’ *CBS News*, 25 March.

³⁷ See, for example, Miron Lakomy. 2023. ‘Artificial Intelligence as a Terrorism Enabler? Understanding the Potential Impact of Chatbots and Image Generators on Online Terrorist Activities.’ *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, [Online First]; Gabriel Weimann, Alexander T. Pack, Rachel Sulciner, Joelle Scheinn, Gal Rapaport, David Diaz. 2023. ‘Generating Terror: The Risks of Generative AI Exploitation.’ *CTC Sentinel*, 17(1).

³⁸ Lakomy. 2023. ‘Artificial Intelligence as a Terrorism Enabler?’

³⁹ ‘Prompt tailoring,’ sometimes also ‘prompt engineering,’ is a term widely used in AI to refer to developing and refining prompts to suit specific domains or tasks by incorporating domain-specific vocabulary, jargon, or terminology.

⁴⁰ Will Bedingfield. 2023. ‘Generative AI Is Playing a Surprising Role in Israel-Hamas Disinformation.’ *Wired*, 30 Oct.; David Klepper. 2023. ‘Fake Babies, Real Horror: Deepfakes from the Gaza War Increase Fears About AI’s Power to Mislead.’ *Associated Press*, 28 Nov.; see also, Felix M. Simon, Sacha Altay, and Hugo Mercier. 2023. ‘Misinformation Reloaded? Fears About the Impact of Generative AI on Misinformation are Overblown.’ *Misinformation Review*, 4(5).

⁴¹ A ‘deep fake’ is video and/or audio of a person in which their face/body and or speech has been digitally altered so that they appear to be someone else, generally used maliciously, oftentimes to spread dis-information.

⁴² Agence France Presse. 2023. ‘War of Narratives: Syrian Imagery Falsely Illustrates Gaza.’ *France 24*, 29 Dec.

⁴³ Sardarizadeh, Shayan [@Shayan86]. “This video certainly doesn’t show a new air assault on Israel by Hamas militants, because it’s actually from the video game Arma 3.” (Quoting a post with a video embedded). X/Twitter, 9 Oct., 2023.

⁴⁴ Lara Bullens. 2023. ‘“Pallywood Propaganda”: Pro-Israeli Accounts Online Accuse Palestinians of Staging their Suffering.’ *France 24*, 21 Nov.; Sophia Khatsenkova. 2023. ‘“Pallywood”: Gazans Falsely Accused of Staging Injury and Death Online.’ *EuroNews*, 1 Nov.

⁴⁵ Klepper. 2023. ‘Fake Babies, Real Horror.’

⁴⁶ Center on Extremism. 2023. ‘Generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) and the Israel-Hamas War.’ *ADL*, 10 Nov.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

Tech Against Terrorism has shown that both Al Qassam Brigades and English-speaking far-right extremist accounts have been sharing AI generated images related to the Israel-Gaza conflict.⁴⁸

In 2023, online Jihadis utilised generative AI for a variety of purposes including translation, image generation, and knowledge sharing. Jihadist propagandists used chatbots for translation to convert and spread terrorist messaging in Arabic, Indonesian, and English.⁴⁹ This ability to automatically translate content into multiple languages provides substantial time and effort savings in spreading propaganda and messaging to vastly wider audiences. Al-Qaeda support networks also appear to be sharing AI generated propaganda images through their networks, though the specific tools used to generate them are unclear. It is likely that freeware versions were used as these can be used anonymously to generate materials as paid versions pose threat of de-anonymisation and discovery.⁵⁰ One notable point of discussion regarding AI in the 12 months under review occurred in May 2023, when some Jihadist groups warned members about concerns over voice-related deep fake technologies in response to counterterrorism discussions of using voice analysis to uncover propagandists.⁵¹

Like other users, most right-wing extremists are in the preliminary stages of their engagement with AI, focusing on exploring and discussing its potential applications and sharing knowledge about how to utilise it effectively, including bypassing—known as “jailbreaking”—AI safety rules.⁵² By the end of 2023, most of the AI-generated content took the form of still images, much of it relying on highly gendered and raced portrayals of tradition, heritage, and the military, especially WWII Nazi symbols, uniforms, and paraphernalia, some of it realist and other animated. In Germany, a far-right Alternative for Deutschland (AfD) politician tweeted a series of anti-immigrant images he generated on Midjourney in April 2023 highlighting the use of generative AI within the EU to pollute political information, influence public opinion, and spread ideological materials.⁵³

A foresight analysis pointing to potential methods of AI application by violent extremist and terrorist actors drew attention to GenAI’s utility for multi-language translation, media spawning (i.e., the use of a single image to generate a vast quantity of variations, as with Christchurch attack videos), variant recycling (i.e., using old propaganda in new ways), personalised (i.e., individual-targeted) propaganda creation, and subverting moderation.⁵⁴ In the UK, a man was jailed for nine years in October 2023 for arriving at Windsor Castle on Christmas day 2021 with a crossbow for the purpose of killing the queen. He was encouraged to carry out the attack by his chatbot ‘girlfriend,’ raising additional concerns about chatbot radicalisation.⁵⁵

Given the speed at which AI-based technologies are being developed and changed, as well as the fact that like social media platform algorithms, generative AI tool changes and updates related to ethical concerns are black boxed and known only by their companies,⁵⁶ the potential for new possibilities and existing pathways to real harm and the further development of violent extremist and terrorist use of generative AI remains a high priority threat.

⁴⁸ Tech Against Terrorism. 2023. [Early Terrorist Adoption of Generative AI](#). London: Tech Against Terrorism.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Lakomy. 2023. [‘Artificial Intelligence as a Terrorism Enabler?’](#)

⁵¹ Aliyu Dahiru. 2023. [‘Jihadists Warn members to Beware Online ‘Deepfakes.’](#) *HumanAngle*, 17 May.

⁵² Tech Against Terrorism. 2023. [Early Terrorist Adoption of Generative AI](#).

⁵³ Friederike Haupt. [‘KI-generierte Bilder: Die AfD macht Stimmung mit Fotos, die keine sind.’](#) *FAZ.NET*, n.d.

⁵⁴ Tech Against Terrorism. 2023. [Early Terrorist Adoption of Generative AI](#).

⁵⁵ Emily Pennink. 2023. [‘AI Chat Bot Encouraged Star Wars Fan to Attempt Attack on Late Queen, Court Told.’](#) *The Standard*, 5 July.

⁵⁶ Lingjiao Chen, Matei Zaharia, and James Zou. 2023. [‘How is ChatGPT’s Behavior Changing Over Time?’](#) *Arxiv*, 31 Oct. (v3.0).

PART II. JIHADI ONLINE CONTENT AND ACTIVITY IN 2023

Jihadist groups remained a global threat in 2023 and were particularly active in unstable regions such as the Sahel, Mozambique, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Groups such as Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan (TTP), al-Shabaab, al-Qaeda, IS, and their affiliates were the most active Jihadist groups during the 12 months under review. Following the death of al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri in 2022,⁵⁷ and IS leader Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi on 29 April 2023,⁵⁸ the two main transnational Jihadist actors, al-Qaeda and IS, both lacked clear leadership structures. The unclear succession for both groups, alongside their decreased territorial influence, appears to have had an impact on both their capability to initiate complex centrally organised attacks and their propaganda production. Affiliate groups and provinces of both IS and al-Qaeda were the groups' most active components in terms of online content production in 2023. Despite counter-terrorism efforts, and a decrease in attacks by major groups,⁵⁹ Jihadists were able to carry out acts of terrorism across a variety of regions, including the EU, and sustain their online propaganda throughout 2023.

JIHADI TERRORISM IN 2023

European Union

Three Jihadist attacks took place in the European Union in 2023. All three attacks took place towards the end of the year and were carried out by lone actors or cells acting independently of transnational Jihadist groups. The attack perpetrators may have been inspired not only by IS, to whom they all claimed allegiance, but also grievances associated with the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict. On 13 October, in Arras, France a lone perpetrator entered a school where he stabbed and killed one teacher and injured three other staff members.⁶⁰ The attacker filmed himself before the attack pledging allegiance to IS and referencing Hamas' 7 October attack, but without linking the attack directly to it. He also did not post his *baya'h* video online; it was located by authorities on his phone.⁶¹ On 16 October, in Brussels, Belgium, a shooting attack by an individual, again claiming allegiance to IS, killed two Swedish football fans.⁶² The 45-year-old perpetrator posted a video claiming responsibility for the attack online. Images of him were subsequently shared by IS's Amaq News agency, which claimed the attack, and featured prominently in the following edition of IS's *an-Naba* 'newspaper' too. Finally, on 2 December, a stabbing and blunt force trauma attack was carried out in Paris, France, by a third individual claiming allegiance

⁵⁷ Kanishka Singh and Jonathan Landay. 2023. '[Al Qaeda Succession After al-Zawahiri's Death Still Unclear - U.S. Official.](#)' *Reuters*, 10 Jan.

⁵⁸ Agence France Press (AFP). 2023. '[ISIS Chief Killed in Syria by Turkey's Intelligence Agency, Erdogan Says.](#)' *CBS News*, 30 April.

⁵⁹ Mina al-Lami. 2023. '[What Happened to IS in 2023?](#)' *BBC News*, 26 Dec.

⁶⁰ Le Monde, with AFP. 2023. '[Teacher Killed in Knife Attack at School in Arras. What We Know So Far.](#)' *Le Monde*, 13 Oct.

⁶¹ News Wires. 2023. '[Killer of French School Teacher Claims Attack for Islamic State Group.](#)' *France 24*, 17 Oct.; John Leicester. 2023. '[French Prosecutor Says Alleged Attacker in School Stabbing Declared Allegiance to Islamic State.](#)' *Associated Press*, 17 Oct.

⁶² George Wright. 2023. '[Brussels Shooting: "Europe Shaken" After Two Swedes Shot Dead.](#)' *BBC News*, 17 Oct.

to IS.⁶³ The attack killed one and injured two. Also worth mentioning in the context of attacks was the lethal 23 April stabbing attack in Duisburg, Germany, which killed one and injured four. The attacker claimed to have been radicalised online based on consuming Islamic State propaganda since 2020. He was put on trial for murder, not terrorism, and was convicted of same on 19 December, 2023.⁶⁴

The Washington Institute's Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map documented over 60 Jihadi-related plots, arrests, and prosecutions within the EU in 2023.⁶⁵ Many of these had online components, including the online radicalisation of plotters and the production and/or circulation of online propaganda by arrestees. Notable too were a series of arrests of minors, which also featured significant online activity.

In October in Milan, Italy, two individuals were arrested for recruiting online for IS.⁶⁶ They shared instructional material, with a particular focus on their weapons expertise and willingness to share training. Additionally, they praised IS, sent money to individuals in Yemen and Palestine, and attempted to radicalise family members, particularly minors. Later in the year, in Spain, an individual was convicted of incitement to terrorism for sharing Jihadist propaganda, including text and images, as well as online communication with group members in conflict zones and claiming membership of IS in the Sahel. In the autumn, again in Spain, an individual was arrested for disseminating instructional material including bomb-making manuals, cyber security advice, instructions for secure financial transactions, and recruitment of new members to IS. The arrestee, having engaged in extensive online consumption of violent terrorist content, planned to join the group in an active conflict zone. A third instance of arrests for online propaganda dissemination occurred in Spain in November when two Brazilian brothers were arrested for IS links. The brothers used encrypted messaging platforms to consume and disseminate Islamic State propaganda, including instructional material on explosive production, poisoning, cybersecurity, hacking, and justifications for violence.⁶⁷ A final notable case occurred in December in Brescia, Italy, where two individuals were arrested for spreading Palestinian Islamic Jihad, al-Qaeda, and Islamic State propaganda online.⁶⁸ This arrest underscores a trend of sharing pro-Jihadist online content from ideologically opposed groups, such as al-Qaeda and IS.

A notable theme in 2023 was the involvement of minors in pro-Jihadist activity, with at least three cases in which minors were arrested, which also had significant online components. On 30 May in northern Italy, a 17-year-old was arrested for belonging to a pro-IS network, plotting an arson attack, and possessing Jihadist propaganda.⁶⁹ The teenager had been quickly radicalised online and was found in possession of instructional material for the creation of explosives. In Germany, at the end of November, a 15 and 16 year old were arrested for threatening an attack on a Christmas market in Leverkusen, near Cologne. One minor posted the threat online in a group chat, claiming to be stockpiling gasoline for an explosive truck attack. Both planned to leave Germany to join Islamic State Khurasan Province post-attack.⁷⁰ This plot stands out due to it involving online radicalised minors willing to carry out a large-scale attack. Also at the end of November, this time in Spain, two minors were arrested for sharing Jihadist propaganda through a video game platform and encouraging others to do the same.⁷¹ They progressed from consuming and disseminating online terrorist material to creating their own pro-IS media entities. This case highlights concerns over the rise of online 'prosumers' (i.e., users who are at once

⁶³ France 24. 2023. ['French Prosecutors Open Probe Into "Terrorist Plot" After Deadly Paris Knife Attack.'](#) *France 24*, 3 Dec.

⁶⁴ Associated Press. 2023. ['Court in Germany Convicts a Man Inspired by the Islamic State Group of Committing 2 Knife Attacks.'](#) *Associated Press*, 19 Dec.

⁶⁵ Aaron Zelin. 2023. [Islamic State Worldwide Activity Map](#). Washington DC: The Washington Institute.

⁶⁶ Italian Ministry of the Interior. 2023. ['Milano: 2 arresti per associazione con finalità di terrorismo.'](#) *Press Release*, 17 Oct.

⁶⁷ Spanish Ministry of the Interior. 2023. ['La Guardia Civil detiene en Estepona \(Málaga\) a dos hermanos presuntamente vinculados a DAESH.'](#) *Press Release*, 27 Nov.

⁶⁸ Alvise Armellini. 2023. ['Two Arrested in Italy for Spreading Islamist Propaganda – Police.'](#) *Reuters*, 4 Dec.

⁶⁹ Italian Ministry of the Interior. 2023. ['Terrorismo: arrestato a Bergamo sostenitore jihadista.'](#) *Press Release*, 31 May.

⁷⁰ DW. 2023. ['Germany: Teens Allegedly Planned Christmas Market Attack.'](#) *Deutsche Welle*, 30 Nov.

⁷¹ Paudal. 2023. ['Two Minors Arrested for Spreading Daesh Proclamations on Video Game Platforms.'](#) *Paudal*, 30 Nov.

both ‘producers’ and ‘consumers’ of online content) and the use of video game adjacent platforms to share extremist content.

Rest of the World

In 2023 Jihadist groups continued to maintain a presence, carry out attacks and, in some cases, expand their activities in geographic areas weakened by fragile security and poor governance. The below listed actors and their supporters also continued to produce and disseminate jihadist content that was circulated and consumed widely online, including by users in the EU.

Islamic State (IS): IS’s loss of significant territorial control in Iraq and Syria during 2017 has continued to limit the group’s centralised organisation, its operational capabilities, and its production of propaganda. Nonetheless, IS has established control and consistent areas of operation in geographic areas with fragile security. Alongside continued but lowered levels of activity in Iraq and Syria, the most active IS ‘provinces’ in 2023 were West Africa, the Sahel, Afghanistan, and Mozambique (in that order). The same ‘provinces’ accounted for the bulk of the year’s IS propaganda, with consistent bulletins and photosets of attack claims shared weekly. IS West Africa (ISWA) accounted for the most attack claims in 2023,⁷² but an end-of-year spate of attack claims was also apparent in the Philippines.⁷³

During 2023, IS trumpeted its resurgence in East Asia, including a return of IS-claimed activity in the Philippines; for example, a bombing at Mindanao State University on 3 December, 2023.⁷⁴ Propaganda associated with IS East Asia (ISEA) and IS in the Philippines, including an *an-Naba* article titled ‘The Philippines... A Jihad Arena’ sought to frame the importance of East Asia to the global reach of IS ideology. IS Khorasan Province (ISKP), the IS affiliate active in Afghanistan and Pakistan, continued to target the Taliban government in Afghanistan and, in August, staged a deadly suicide bombing in the district of Bajaur, Pakistan, killing 54 people and injuring over 200.⁷⁵ Throughout 2023 ISKP staged consistent attacks against Taliban governors, Taliban forces, and complex IED attacks, suicide bombings, and shootings against political and symbolic targets.⁷⁶ On 6 July, seven foreign nationals hailing from Central Asian countries—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—were apprehended in the German state of North Rhine-Westphalia for supporting ISKP. The group had collectively journeyed from Ukraine to Germany in the spring of 2022, with the intention to carry out attacks within Germany, and six members actively raising funds online—including via Telegram—for the Islamic State in Syria.⁷⁷ Notably, two more individuals were apprehended in Eindhoven, the Netherlands, on charges of belonging to the same ISKP-linked cell.

Al-Qaeda: Three al-Qaeda affiliates, Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in the Sahel, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen perpetrated attacks in 2023.⁷⁸ With the Sahel featuring a security vacuum following the withdrawal of many Western forces and a chain of military coups, JNIM was emboldened to take advantage of the situation. Through their media wing, JNIM posted 125 attack claims across the Sahel in November alone. This propaganda was disseminated as posts on a Twitter-style platform and on JNIM’s own website. These 125 posts represent 41 unique items of propaganda, including attack claims, photosets, and bulletins. Attack claims by the group were focused on Mali and Burkina Faso. Notable were an attack on the town of Djibo, Burkina Faso, on 28 November that led to the death of 40 civilians and

⁷² al-Lami. 2023. ‘What Happened to IS in 2023?’

⁷³ Colin P. Clark. 2023. ‘Trends in Terrorism: What’s on the Horizon in 2024?’ Foreign Policy Research Institute, 19 Dec.

⁷⁴ Karishma Vaswani. 2023. ‘The Philippines Is Battling a Resurgent Islamic State Threat.’ *Bloomberg*, 5 Dec.

⁷⁵ Abid Hussain. 2023. ‘Attacks in Pakistan Buttressed by Region’s ‘Militant’ Landscape: Analysts.’ *Al-Jazeera*, 2 Aug.

⁷⁶ Amira Jadoon, Andrew Mines, and Abdul Sayed. 2023. ‘The Enduring Duel: Islamic State Khorasan’s Survival under Afghanistan’s New Rulers.’ *CTC Sentinel*, 16(8).

⁷⁷ Reuters. 2023. ‘Seven Arrested as Part of IS Financing Probe in Germany.’ *Reuters*, 31 May.

⁷⁸ Clark. 2023. ‘Trends in Terrorism: What’s on the Horizon in 2024?’

assaults on MINUSMA forces in Kidal, northern Mali, on 30 November. Three other al-Qaeda franchises—Syria’s Hurras al-Din, al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) in South Asia, and Algeria’s al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—were active to greater or lesser extents, on the online front, but not on the ground.

Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan Resurgence: Following the return of Taliban control of Afghanistan, Tehreek-e-Taliban-e-Pakistan had a resurgence of activity in 2023. The group has displayed significant operational capabilities, including a sustained campaign of violence against Pakistan’s security forces, which increased in tempo over the course of the year and was accompanied by the production of extensive multi-media propaganda by their Umar Media propaganda wing.

TRENDS IN JIHADI ONLINE CONTENT AND NARRATIVES

Jihadist groups continue to produce and disseminate multi-media propaganda, including bulletins, images, videos, audio, and written publications. Throughout 2023, there was consistent sharing of well-established Jihadist publications such as the weekly IS-central ‘newspaper’ *an-Naba*⁷⁹ and ISKP’s monthly magazine *Voice of Khurasan*.⁸⁰ Consistent with previous years, most of the propaganda was generated from IS provinces and affiliate groups, particularly the Africa franchises in 2023.⁸¹ Attack claims and photosets remained a consistent feature with sporadic production and dissemination of new video and audio content.

Following the death of IS leader Abu al-Hussein al-Husseini al-Qurashi on 29 April 2023, pledges of allegiance followed, including Bay’ah photosets and videos.⁸² Notable was the decreased amount of such content on this occasion versus following the death of previous leaders. The reduced quantity of Bay’ah content in 2023 may indicate a reduced capability by IS provinces and affiliates to produce propaganda such as the long form Bay’ah videos observed in 2022.⁸³ Consistent with patterns of other types of content production, the Bay’ah images and videos from ISWAP and ISGS were the most highly produced and showcased the greatest capabilities in terms of the numbers of men and weapons displayed.

Jihadist propaganda continued to be translated into multiple languages, either by supporter networks or dedicated translation media entities. IS propaganda was translated into the widest range of languages, including Bahasa Indonesian, Bengali, English, French, Hindi, Pashto, Russian, Swahili, and Urdu. Al-Qaeda and associated groups’ content was translated into multiple languages too. Jihadist content in languages other than Arabic, English, and other EU languages, continues to be locatable on even mainstream social media platforms.⁸⁴ For example, in a trend observed over previous years too, al-Shabaab content in Swahili and Somali languages continued to be hosted on large mainstream technology platforms, including Facebook.⁸⁵ The hosting of Jihadist

⁷⁹ Fifty-two issues, no.372 to no.423, appeared in 2023.

⁸⁰ Twelve issues, no.16 to no.27, appeared in 2023.

⁸¹ Atta Barkindo .2023. ‘[Boko Haram-ISWAP and the Growing Footprint of Islamic State \(IS\) in Africa.](#)’ *Counter Terrorist Trends and Analyses*, 15(2).

⁸² Aaron Zelin. 2023. ‘[The Islamic State’s Fourth Bayat Campaign.](#)’ *Jihadology*, 6 Aug.

⁸³ Haroro J. Ingram and Andrew Mines. 2022. *The Islamic State’s Second Global Pledqe Campaign: New Challenges in an Era of Great Power Competition*. Washington DC: George Washington University Program on Extremism.

⁸⁴ Moustafa Ayad, Anisa Harrasy, and Mohammed Abdullah A. 2022. *Under-Moderated, Unhinged and Ubiquitous: Al-Shabaab and the Islamic State Networks on Facebook*. London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

⁸⁵ Author data.

content in these mainstream spaces highlights the dual issue of language capabilities in content moderation and the difficulties of moderating content that is sometimes framed as authentic news or journalistic content.

A feature of 2023 Jihadist propaganda was its targeting of governance in disputed territories. ISKP targeted the Taliban as an illegitimate and un-Islamic government in their propaganda, alongside their campaign of violence. Al-Shabaab published propaganda mirroring their narrative in recent years, so a dual focus on their governance and provision of services to the population alongside more global Jihadist narratives. The TTP similarly produced extensive propaganda targeting the government of Pakistan as they claimed attacks against members of the police and government institutions.

The phenomenon of Quran-burning, particularly in Scandinavia, rose to prominence as a global geo-political issue in 2023.⁸⁶ Disinformation and controversy were at the heart of the issue, which featured prominently in Jihadist propaganda narratives. IS propaganda focused on Rasmus Paludan as a key figure in its narratives, using anti-Muslim hate in Europe to justify Jihad.⁸⁷ In April, five people, reported as having IS ties, were arrested in Sweden for preparing an attack influenced by Paludan's January Quran burnings in Stockholm.⁸⁸ In a July 2023 edition of *an-Naba* (no.398), IS targeted the West, especially Sweden and Denmark, as waging a "War on Islam." The IS editorial argued that Jihad and violence were necessary to confront anti-Muslim activity in the West. Following this, ISKP released a statement 'Warning to Sweden and the Netherlands' threatening acts of terrorism in response to anti-Muslim sentiment. Al-Qaeda, and al-Shabaab also focused on the Quran burnings in their propaganda releasing statements calling for attacks against the perpetrators, as well as the embassies and diplomats of Sweden and Denmark.⁸⁹ In August, the Swedish Security Service raised the country's terrorist threat level from Level 3/5 ('elevated') to Level 4/5 ('high').

JIHADI USERS' CURRENTLY PREFERRED ONLINE PLATFORMS, SPACES, AND APPS

IS and its supporters continued to work to maintain their online networks in 2023, but in the face of significant disruption by major and a raft of medium and small platforms. While al-Qaeda and its affiliates and other Jihadis were relatively less affected, they too were subject to widespread takedown in 2023. As a result, Jihadi networks came to be spread across an even wider array of platforms and online spaces than previously. Over the course of the year the EU-funded Tech Against Terrorism Europe (TATE) project identified 242 platforms hosting terrorist content, the vast majority of it jihadi.⁹⁰

The 2023 Jihadi online ecosystem retains many features consistent with its 2021 and 2022 variants. The resurgence of TOWs remained in evidence, with a reliance on de-centralised messaging platforms by several Jihadist online communities also apparent.⁹¹ In 2023, a popular Jihadi content dissemination strategy remained the use of outlinking from mainstream social media or Jihadist channels to content hosted on file-sharing services.⁹²

Distinctions between the dissemination strategies of IS and other Jihadist groups continued in 2023. IS shared their propaganda in the most varied ways, using multiple dissemination tactics and a broader range of content formats that were less widely used by other groups.⁹³ Groups such as al-Shabaab and al-Qaeda had more

⁸⁶ Al-Jazeera. 2023. 'Outcry over Quran burning in Sweden: A Timeline.' *Al-Jazeera*, 20 July.

⁸⁷ Rasmus Paludan is a Danish-Swedish national and right-wing politician who has used Quran burning as a theatrical and provoking component of his anti-immigration rhetoric for several years.

⁸⁸ Associated Press. 2023. 'Swedes Arrest 5 Suspected of Terror, Ties to Quran Burning.' *Associated Press*, 4 April.

⁸⁹ BBC Monitoring. 2023. 'Al-Qaeda Incites Attacks on Swedish, Danish Diplomatic Missions Over Quran Burning.' *BBC Monitoring*, 14 Aug.

⁹⁰ For more on TATE, see <https://tate.techagainstterrorism.org/>.

⁹¹ Peter King. 2019. 'Analysis: Islamic State's Experiments With the Decentralised Web.' *BBC Monitoring Insight*, 22 March.

⁹² Stuart Macdonald, Connor Rees, and Joost S. 2022. *Remove, Impede, Disrupt, Redirect: Understanding and Combating Pro-Islamic State Use of File-Sharing Platforms*. Washington DC: Resolve Network.

⁹³ Stuart Macdonald and Sean McCafferty. 2024. *Online Jihadist Propaganda Dissemination*. VOX-Pol: Forthcoming.

hierarchical and limited modes of content dissemination, with bursts of content shared via outlinks less regularly. Online networks spreading IS propaganda have continued to experiment with various hosting service providers throughout 2023 using a rotating cast of small file-sharing platforms, exploiting the weaknesses of content moderation on small and micro platforms.

Mainstream Social Media

Jihadists sporadically attempted to post their content and regenerate supporter networks on mainstream social media throughout 2023. Media wings and supporter networks of groups such as IS created Instagram and Twitter accounts that generally survived for only short periods of time. Nonetheless, continuous attempts to regain a foothold on these platforms displays an unrelenting desire to use mainstream social media to spread Jihadist propaganda. Action by Spain’s *Centro de Inteligencia contra el Terrorismo y el Crimen Organizado* (CITCO) and Europol led to the removal of over 2,000 items of terrorist propaganda from TikTok in early October.⁹⁴ In mid-November, a wave of viral videos feared to glorify Osama bin Laden’s 2002 ‘Letter to America’ were widely shared on Tik Tok, and other platforms, amid the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict (see Box 3).⁹⁵

Box 3. Controversy Over Spread of OBL’s ‘Letter to America’ Post-7 October Attack

In mid-November 2023, a series of videos began circulating on TikTok in response to the ongoing Israel-Gaza conflict urging users to read Osama Bin Laden’s ‘Letter to America,’ a tract written over 20 years ago as a supposed justification for the 9/11 terrorist attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people. The at-a-minimum several hundred users posting these videos, like many TikTok users, are part of ‘Gen Z, so born after 2001, the year of the attacks.

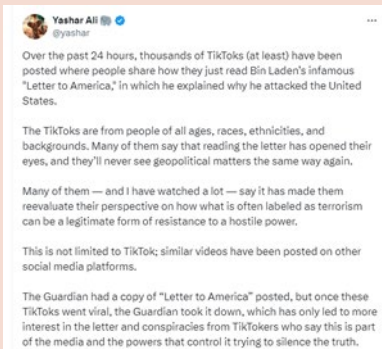


Figure 2. Screenshot of Journalist Yashar Ali’s X/Twitter Post Accompanying His TikTok Video Compilation

Of specific concern for the video creators—of which there eventually may have been thousands—was a sense of not fully understanding history, even of being lied to about the US’s role in Middle East politics with a particular focus on Bin Laden’s claims about the US’s support of Israel.⁹⁶ The videos became highly controversial and claims that the videos were promoting terrorism and glorifying the 9/11 attacks followed. To many these youth, who cannot remember the violence of 9/11, were “cherry picking” sections of the document while overlooking its blatant promotion of and calls for violence against ordinary citizens.⁹⁷

The original hashtag on the videos (i.e., #lettertoamerica) had garnered about 2 million views when a journalist with a large following on X/Twitter shared a compilation of the videos to his timeline garnering 38 million views on X/Twitter (see Figure 2). Subsequently, TikTok views for videos using the hashtag shot up to more than 15 million. While the affordances of the TikTok platform (i.e., short form, networked video blogs) certainly contributed to the letter’s increasing popularity, interest in it had been growing in the preceding days according to Google search statistics.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ Europol. ‘[Europol and TikTok Collaborate to Bolster Efforts Against Terrorist Content](#).’ 5 Oct., 2023.

⁹⁵ Alexander Ward and Matt Berg. 2023. ‘[Why Bin Laden’s Letter Went Viral on Social Media](#).’ *Politico*, 16 Nov.

⁹⁶ Mallory Moench and Simmone Shah. 2023. ‘[Why Osama bin Laden’s “Letter to America” Went Viral on TikTok](#).’ *Time*, 16 Nov.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Drew Harwell and Victoria Bisset. 2023. ‘[How Osama bin Laden’s ‘Letter to America’ Reached Millions Online](#).’ *The Washington Post*, 16 Nov.

The controversy linked into other ongoing political debates and concerns through exacerbation of polarised progressive and conservative views about the Israel-Hamas conflict. It was also fuelled by political concerns about TikTok's relationship to the Chinese government—its parent company, Byte Dance, is Chinese—and the potential for “indoctrination” of Western youth was also discussed.

TikTok acknowledged that the content violated its terms of service regarding support for terrorism but maintained that the videos were a very small portion of their platform's content. The company was slow to remove the videos but did make their corresponding #lettertoamerica hashtag unsearchable to ostensibly help stem the traffic.⁹⁹

Use of Archiving Sites

Archiving platforms too continued to be exploited by Jihadist actors to host their propaganda in 2023. IS propaganda, including official content such as *an-Naba*, photosets, and bulletins were consistently hosted on archiving services, such as Files.fm, JustPaste.it, and MediaFire, throughout the year.¹⁰⁰ While the moderation of Jihadist content remains inconsistent, in the last three months of 2023 the Internet Archive saw a weekly pattern develop of content removal by the platform followed by new pro-IS accounts appearing with similar usernames. The re-creation of accounts with almost identical names, used as single use dissemination points, is likely for ease of discovery by supporters and mirrors the past response of pro-IS Twitter accounts to moderation and de-platforming.¹⁰¹

Use of De-centralised Services

The use of de-centralised and self-hosting services, such as Rocket.Chat, Matrix/Element, and similar, as harbours for Jihadist communities and propaganda has been a concern, due to the limited opportunities they present for moderation and disruption, since the adversarial shift that followed core Jihadi groups de-platforming by large technology companies pre-2020.¹⁰² These online spaces continued to be a key jihadist online node throughout 2023, but with some changes in the methods of sharing content within these channels apparent. At the start of the year items such as IS's *an-Naba* were largely shared as PDF and images directly in chats rather than in the batches of outlinks that were previously commonplace.¹⁰³ Towards the end of 2023, *an-Naba* was again being shared through outlinking, but with a much smaller batch of outlinks to the content hosted on a small selection of file-sharing platforms and terrorist operated websites.¹⁰⁴ This minor change likely reflects the continued iterative evolution of Jihadist propaganda sharing in response to moderation and the affordances of relatively stable online spaces such as de-centralised and self-hosted messaging apps.

Terrorist Operated Websites (TOWs)

The use of TOWs has re-emerged as a concern for researchers, policymakers, and counter-terrorism practitioners.¹⁰⁵ These websites are terrorist owned and operated, posing challenges in terms of content moderation and de-platforming. Web hosting providers and domain name system registrars are key actors in combatting TOWs that have traditionally been outside of the framework of online counter terrorism.¹⁰⁶ Throughout 2023, TOWs remained a relatively stable online space for Jihadist groups, providing—sometimes

⁹⁹ A.W. Ohlheiser and Li Zhou. 2023. [‘The Controversy Over TikTok and Osama Bin Laden’s “Letter to America,” Explained: Why Bin Laden’s 2002 Letter Became the Latest TikTok Moral Panic.’](#) Vox, 17 Nov.

¹⁰⁰ MacDonald and McCafferty. 2024. [Online Jihadist Propaganda Dissemination.](#)

¹⁰¹ Maura Conway, Moign Khawaja, Suraj Lakhani, Jeremy Reffin, Andrew Robertson, and David Weir. 2019. [‘Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and Its Impacts.’](#) *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42(1-2).

¹⁰² King. 2019. [‘Analysis: Islamic State’s Experiments With the Decentralised Web.’](#)

¹⁰³ MacDonald and McCafferty. 2024. [Online Jihadist Propaganda Dissemination.](#)

¹⁰⁴ Based on data drawn from an ongoing joint project by researchers at Dublin City University and Swansea University.

¹⁰⁵ Maura Conway and Seán Looney. 2021. [Back to the Future? Twenty First Century Extremist and Terrorist Websites.](#) Brussels: Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN).

¹⁰⁶ Tech Against Terrorism. 2022. [The Threat of Terrorist and Violent Extremist-Operated Websites.](#) London: Tech Against Terrorism.

massive—repositories of relevant links and content. While domain names were often revoked due to action by relevant authorities and domain registrars, there are a wide range of accessible domain registration and hosting services available. TOWs run by, for example, al-Qaeda, IS, and the TTP, were all removed and re-appeared with new domain names during 2023. Other groups, such as JNIM, operate websites that have, in contrast, faced limited disruption. In 2023, TOWs remained a key node in Jihadist propaganda networks despite increased attention by researchers and counter-terrorism actors.

Telegram (Bots)

Table 2. Number of IS Bots and Channels Banned by Telegram Per Month in 2023*	
Month	Number of Bots and Channels Banned by Telegram per Month in 2023
Jan-23	13,279
Feb-23	10,941
Mar-23	12,098
Apr-23	16,076
May-23	19,423
Jun-23	8,747
Jul-23	10,508
Aug-23	11,691
Sep-23	11,732
Oct-23	10,392
Nov-23	8,508
Dec-23	7,329
TOTAL	148,634

*Per data supplied on Telegram’s official ‘ISIS Watch’ Channel

Despite the improved moderation of Jihadist content on Telegram following joint action by Telegram and Europol in 2019, the platform remains a core node in the online Jihadist ecosystem. This is especially due to the widespread use of Telegram bots by Jihadists to augment their propaganda dissemination.¹⁰⁷ These bots are often outlinked to from other online spaces and dispense Jihadist propaganda automatically once interacted with by a Telegram user.¹⁰⁸ While the number of IS bots and channels banned by Telegram in 2023 was the lowest since 2018, at 148,634 it was still substantial (see Tables 2 and 3).

Other encrypted messaging applications employed by Jihadis in 2023 were WhatsApp and, with a massively lower user base, ChirpWire. Also worth noting is an increased reliance by Jihadis in 2023 on paid encrypted services, such as the messaging app Threema.

Table 3. Number of IS Bots and Channels Banned by Telegram Per Year (2023)*	
Year	Number of Bots and Channels Banned by Telegram Per Year 2023
2016**	2,625
2017	82,789
2018	91,233
2019	176,602
2020	311,703
2021	254,976
2022	200,125
2023	148,634
TOTAL	1,268,687

*Per data supplied on Telegram’s official ‘ISIS Watch’ channel
** December 2016 only

¹⁰⁷ Abdullah Alrhoun, Charlie Winter and, and János Kertész. 2023. ‘Automating Terror: The Role and Impact of Telegram Bots in the Islamic State’s Online Ecosystem.’ *Terrorism and Political Violence* [Online First].
¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

PART III. RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST AND TERRORIST ONLINE CONTENT AND ACTIVITY IN 2023

While right-wing terrorist attacks were down on previous years, right-wing *extremist* content was easily and widely available; right-wing *terrorist* content was accessible too. This section begins by describing and discussing the increasing connection between extremist digital practice and event-based phenomena, including the Brasilia riots and the expansion of so-called ‘active clubs’; it then addresses the right-wing terrorist attacks that took place in Allen, Texas and Jacksonville, Florida, USA in May and August respectively; before identifying and analysing trends in right-wing extremist narratives in the period under review. The third and final sub-section identifies a range of platforms and other online spaces and services utilised by extreme right users in 2023.

Following developments of the last several years, 2023 highlights at least three issues of note: 1) the extreme right’s increasing ideological fragmentation and ‘fuzziness’; 2) its capitalising on widespread mobilisations, political and conflict events, and interconnecting on-and-offline interactions; and 3) the growth of digitally networked extremism.

RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST EVENTS AND ATTACKS IN 2023

Event-based Social Media Mobilisation

Extremist and terrorist use of ‘real world’ events allows extremist actors and propagandists to engage through seemingly mainstream political issues—and even, on their face, non-political issues and activity, such as exercise and wellness—thus exposing non-extremist populations to extreme views and engaging mainstream populations in violent mobilisations supporting extremists’ anti-democratic aims. This strategy has been expanding in use across the ideological spectrum—far-right, conspiracy (e.g. QAnon), and Jihadist—in recent years.

In January 2023, the storming of Federal buildings in Brasilia, Brazil, mirrored the US Capitol attack in 2021, driven by a politically motivated far-right digital campaign.¹⁰⁹ Similar to the US incident, planning for the Brazilian attack was prominently visible on major social media platforms. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Telegram played pivotal roles in promoting the riots.¹¹⁰ The campaign employed thinly coded language (e.g., referring to the attack as a ‘beach party’) and hashtags (e.g., #BrazilianSpring) for widespread cross-platform

¹⁰⁹ Carla Bridi. 2023. ‘[Explainer: Roots of the Brazilian Capital’s Chaotic Uprising.](#)’ *Associated Press*, 10 Jan.

¹¹⁰ Elizabeth Dwoskin. 2023. ‘[Come to the “War Cry Party”: How Social Media Helped Drive Mayhem in Brazil.](#)’ *The Washington Post*, 9 Jan.

organising,¹¹¹ but with Telegram emerging as the preferred platform for explicit calls to violence.¹¹² After the attack, participants shared real-time footage across platforms, again akin to the events of 6 January, 2021 in Washington DC. Following a local judge's ruling, Facebook, Telegram, and YouTube removed materials promoting violence. The events underscore the influence of digital platforms in coordinating and disseminating extremist actions globally.¹¹³

In the EU, a notable prosecution was the late 2023 charging by German authorities of 27 individuals associated with the *Reichsbürger* ideology for a planned event sharing similarities with both the 2021 attack on the US Capitol and the January 2023 events in Brasilia. The charges were in relation to a plan to storm the German parliament and take over the government, with the individuals involved having gathered a huge collection of firearms and other weapons and stockpiled nearly 150,000 rounds of ammunition.¹¹⁴ While organised in this instance, the *Reichsbürger* 'movement' as a whole is dispersed, with diffuse beliefs, and has become entangled with more recent digital conspiratorial movements including QAnon and the *Querdenker* (i.e., 'lateral thinking') movements in Germany over the last several years.¹¹⁵ Such interconnections are enabled by the digital spread and networking of actors and adherents within these various digital cultural milieus. Of concern is the blending of anti-government ideology with conspiratorial movements that have proven capable of fomenting large offline mobilisations.¹¹⁶ This case highlights the continuing development and interconnection of web-based extreme conspiratorial movements (e.g., QAnon, *Querdenker*), especially when connected with anti-government extremist ideologies, like *Reichsbürger*, as an increasing security threat in the EU.

An example of, on the face of it, non-political organising and the online-to-offline pipeline (and vice versa) in 2023 is the expansion of 'active clubs' on Telegram. Active clubs blend offline 'fitness' and health cultures, including mixed martial arts (MMA) training, with white nationalist extremist ideology. Such clubs' Telegram networks saw a marked increase in channels and posting volume between the last half of 2022 and the first half of 2023. The number of channels reportedly increased by 67% in 2023 growing from 17 to 53 channels in the first half of 2023, with those 53 channels generating 14, 351 posts.¹¹⁷ Importantly, the network is monetised, selling merchandise as well as promoting propaganda, and linked to channels on other social media platforms, including Gab and Odysee.¹¹⁸ Both Gab and Odysee are considered 'alt-tech' platforms, which extremists,

¹¹¹ Associated Press. 2023. ['Brazil Rioters Plotted Openly Online, Pitched Huge "Party."'](#) (2023, January 11). *Politico*, 11 Jan.

¹¹² Dvoskin. 2023. ['Come to the "War Cry Party"'](#); Associated Press. 2023. ['Brazil Rioters Plotted Openly Online.'](#)

¹¹³ Dvoskin. 2023. ['Come to the "War Cry Party."'](#)

¹¹⁴ Reuters. 2023. ['German Prosecutors Charge 27 Over Far-right Coup Plot.'](#) (2023, December 12). *Reuters*, 12 Dec.

¹¹⁵ Alexander Ritzmann. 2023. ['The December 2022 German Reichsbürger Plot to Overthrow the German Government.'](#) *CTC Sentinel*, 16(3); Merlina Herbach. 2023. ['Banning, Designating, Disarming? Legal Implications of countering the Reichsbürger Movement.'](#) *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT)*, 7 June.

¹¹⁶ Florian Hartleb, Paul Schlieffsteiner, and Christoph Schiebel. 2023. ['From Anti-Measure Activism to Anti-State Extremism? The "Querdenker" Protest-Movement and Its Interrelation ad Dynamics with the "Reichsbürger" in Germany and Austria.'](#) *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 17(1); Mohamad Hoseini, Philipe Melo, Fabricio Benevenuto, Anja Feldmann, and Savvas Zannettou. 2021. ['On the Globalization of the QAnon Conspiracy Theory Through Telegram.'](#) In *15th ACM Web Science Conference 2023 (WebSci '23), April 30-May 1, 2023, Austin, TX, USA*. New York: ACM.

¹¹⁷ Ciarán O'Connor, Laurie Wood, Katherine Keneally, and Kevin D. Reyes. 2023. ['Active Clubs: The Growing Threat of "White Nationalism 3.0" Across the United States.'](#) London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* Odysee is a decentralised, blockchain-based video streaming platform, often viewed as a YouTube alternative.

particularly far-right extremists, use to circumvent bans and moderation on major platforms.¹¹⁹ The active club network on Telegram shows connections across the US, Canada, and Europe highlighting further the transnational nature of far-right extremist networks both on and offline. This network, like ‘Siege’ ideology networks (i.e., Atomwaffen Division and affiliates), appears to be using a strategy of socially networked development to enable their growth as a decentralised structure, with the goal of limiting legal interventions.¹²⁰

Social Media’s Role in the Ideologically Diffuse Allen, Texas, Attack

Overall, there were few extreme right terrorist attacks in 2023, and none in the EU. Worth mentioning however is the 6 May, 2023, Allen, Texas, USA, mass shooting in which eight people were killed and seven others injured, in which concerns around ideological instability that have been increasing in various sectors focused on the analysis and countering of extremism and terrorism online appear to have played out. Also in the USA, August’s Jacksonville attack appeared to hew to more traditional right-wing extremist targeting of, in that case, the black community.

The Texas attacker, 33-year-old Mauricio Martinez Garcia’s social media presence was unusual for several reasons. First, his selection of social media platforms was limited, and his accounts were generally isolated (i.e., lacking followers, shares, likes, etc.). Second, his posted content included multiple ideological markers—both misogynist Incel and Nazi ideology—particularly because the attacker was a Hispanic American.¹²¹ The incorporation of Incel language and ideology with clear expressions of neo-Nazi ideology and images (e.g., photos of the attacker’s swastika tattoo) caused intense debate in the media and among analysts as well as plausible deniability by other extremist actors about the attacker’s true motivations. Moreover, inconsistent with recent trends, the attacker did not leave or send a manifesto or statement via social media, nor did he livestream his attack. He did, however, post a video to YouTube shortly before the attack indicating that it was coming.

In this case, the attacker took pictures of or scanned pages from his personal journal, more than 300 in total, and posted them individually to his social media account on the Russian platform Odnoklassniki (OK).¹²² Along with the images of his journal pages were stand-alone posts and other images including those taken as part of his reconnaissance of the attack site, as well as of his stockpile of weapons, ammunition, and gear. These materials were not, as with other manifestos (e.g., the Christchurch attacker’s manifesto), easily searchable or prepared for wide scrutiny. Importantly, this case highlights the effects of digital and social media on ideological formation that showcase how ideological fragmentation—often referred to as ‘pick and mix,’ or ‘salad bar’ extremism—is more clearly linking racial/ethnic and misogynist grievances. This sort of ideological blending is likely to be an increasing aspect of both radicalisation and violence, particularly when linked to digital enculturation to extremist belief and practice.

Later in the summer, on 26 August 26, 2023, a 21-year-old white male, Ryan Christopher Palmetter, entered a general store in Jacksonville, Florida, USA, and shot three people dead. The attacker subsequently shot and killed himself. The attack was racially motivated. The three people killed were black, in keeping with the attacker’s purpose stated in a number of manifestos, including those addressed to the news media and federal agents, found on his body. The local police also released images of the shooter’s rifle, which had a swastika drawn on it, along with racial slurs. Prior to the attack, the gunman released a TikTok video of himself putting on a bulletproof vest. The gun’s markings bore similarities to those on the Christchurch attacker’s weapons, pointing to the

¹¹⁹ Greta Jasser, Jordan McSwiney, Ed Pertwee, and Savvas Zannettou. 2021. [“Welcome to #GabFam”: Far-right Virtual Community on Gab.](#) *New Media & Society*, 25(7); R.Y. Lazerson. 2023. [‘The Growing Security Threat from Alternative Platforms.’](#) Berkeley: Center for Security in Politics (CSP).

¹²⁰ Ashley Mattheis. 2022. [Atomwaffen Division and its Affiliates on Telegram: Variations, Practices, and Interconnections.](#) Washington DC: Resolve Network; O’Connor, Wood, Keneally, and Reyes. 2023. [Active Clubs.](#)

¹²¹ Ashley Mattheis, Amarnath Amarasingam, Graham Macklin, and Marc-André Argentino. 2023. [‘The Allen, Texas, Attack: Ideological Fuzziness and the Contemporary Nature of Far-Right Violence.’](#) *CTC Sentinel*, 16(6).

¹²² ‘Odnoklassniki’ (OK) roughly translates from Russian to English as “classmates.”

globalisation—largely via the Internet—of not just extreme right logos and symbols, but also mimicry of attack minutiae.

TRENDS IN EXTREME RIGHT ONLINE ACTIVITY AND NARRATIVES IN 2023

Extreme Right Leveraging of Ongoing Conflicts

A heavy focus of extremist and terrorist propagandists in 2023 was leveraging ongoing violent conflicts, including continued far-right extremist use of the Russian invasion of Ukraine and broad cross-ideology usage of the Gaza war.¹²³

Continuing since 2021, European and US far-right, often neo-Nazi, extremists have leveraged the invasion of Ukraine for recruitment and propaganda as well as to promote right-wing extremist foreign fighters travel to join the conflict and gain combat experience.¹²⁴ Different ideological variants of the extreme right have claimed support for both Ukraine and Russia due to battling narratives regarding Ukraine as both a Jewish-controlled (conspiracy narrative) or a Nazi-run (Russian narrative) state, leading to a complex situation for far-right engagement with the conflict.¹²⁵ While there are differing opinions across the far-right milieu about which side to support, and the actual migration of extremist foreign fighters has not materialised to significant levels as yet, the conflict remains useful for the extreme right for growing networks, circulating propaganda, and engaging with potential recruits.¹²⁶

The Gaza conflict is also providing purchase for extremist and terrorist propagandists and digital communities. Uniquely, the Gaza conflict is being leveraged by both far right and Jihadist actors through each ideology's focus on antisemitism. Some right-wing extremists initiated a sweeping digital campaign supporting Hamas and violent, genocide of Jewish people within hours of Hamas' 7 October attack. They utilised platforms, including 4Chan, Gab, and Telegram, for spreading propaganda, specifically memes, and posts glorifying Hamas violence. They have also promoted the anonymous donation of cryptocurrency to Hamas via the Monero platform.¹²⁷ On the other hand, several extreme-right channels monitored by the authors displayed pro-Israeli sentiment, while yet others celebrated the pain and violence on both sides as the positive mutual suffering of non-white populations.

¹²³ Tech Against Terrorism. 2022. *State of Play: Trends in Terrorist and Violent Extremist Use of the Internet*. London: Tech Against Terrorism; Colin P. Clarke. 2023. 'Opinion: How Jihadist Groups are Using the Israel-Hamas War to Inspire and Recruit Lone Wolf Extremists.' *Los Angeles Times*, 6 Nov.; Kiara Alfonseca. 2023. 'US Extremists Exploit Israeli-Palestinian Tensions with Calls for Violence, Hate: Experts.' *ABC News*, 15 Nov.

¹²⁴ Ben Makuch. 2023. 'Russian Militia Has Links to American Neo-Nazi and Anti-Trans Figures.' *The Intercept*, 8 July; Mohamed. (2023, March 3); The Soufan Center. 2023. 'Meet the "White Power Rangers": The Far-Right Violent Extremist Group Gaining Traction in Russia.' *Intelbrief*, 3 March.

¹²⁵ Soufan Center. 2023. 'Meet the "White Power Rangers."'

¹²⁶ Tech Against Terrorism. 2022. *State of Play*.

¹²⁷ Liram Stenzler-Koblentz, Kate Chavez, and Uri Klempner. 2023. *Countering Hate in the Digital Age: Analyzing Far-Right Extremist Responses to the Israel-Hamas War*. Herzliya, Israel: International Institute for Counter-Terrorism.

EXTREME RIGHT USERS' CURRENTLY PREFERRED ONLINE PLATFORMS, SPACES, AND TOOLS

Platform migration has been a focus in recent years and remains a concern in 2023, although extremist and terrorist actors are finding ways to adapt migration as a strategic practice. Telegram remains a primary platform for migration across ideologies given that perception of its encryption confers more privacy for ideological content and conversations. However, the ecosystem of alternative platforms has expanded and now provides spaces for a variety of extreme perspectives and a wide range of technological capacities.¹²⁸ These options include so-called 'alt-tech' platforms, or extremist recreations of major platforms, like Gab, Gettr, and Truth social as replacements for X/Twitter; Bitchute or Goyim TV as replacements for YouTube; or Element as an alternative to Telegram for encrypted chats. It also includes newer platforms, such as Odysee and DLive, which blend YouTube-like streaming functions with direct monetisation via cryptocurrencies, by utilising blockchain and decentralised distribution technologies.¹²⁹ Along with this, gaming platforms have been of interest, particularly Discord, which offers fragmented server-based groups enabling both extremist community-building while simultaneously providing barriers to oversight.¹³⁰

Use of alt-tech and fringe platforms offers a way to evade oversight and moderation, while ensuring chat and discussion forums remain accessible for extreme content and chatter disallowed on other platforms.¹³¹ Having said this, newer trends suggest that rather than a focus on direct migration, whether forced or strategic, from a single platform to another, today many right-wing extremist actors are creating multi-platform strategies. In other words, they are utilising combinations of major social media platforms; 'alt-tech' platforms, including mirror platforms, encrypted messaging platforms, and blockchain platforms; as well as topically specific platforms, such as gaming platforms, to create a more robust and agile digital footprint.¹³²

Telegram Remains a Core Node in Right-wing Extremist and Terrorist Online Networks

Telegram received a massive bump in subscribers post-the events at the US Capitol on 6 January, 2021. Pavel Durov described the influx of subscribers in January 2021 as "maybe the largest digital migration in human history." Contributing to this was an influx of far- and extreme right users. The leader of the Proud Boys—which has since been proscribed as a terrorist organisation by Canada (see Table 4)—Enrique Tarrío, sang Telegram's praises on his Telegram channel: "Welcome, newcomers, to the darkest part of the web. You can be banned for spamming and porn. Everything else is fair game." In the wake of this mass migration, Telegram announced they had blocked hundreds of extreme right user posts calling for violence. At around the same time, they also banned at least two dozen neo-Nazi channels that had been operating on the platform for some time.¹³³ In 2023, Telegram nevertheless remained a preferred app of extreme right users and is the largest major hosting service provider supplying access to extreme right terrorist content.

Numerous Western democratic governments, including Canada, the UK, the US, and others, as well as the EU and UN, produce lists of proscribed terrorist organisations. These render decisions around what does and does not constitute terrorism content and should therefore be removed from online platforms easier for technology companies. Terrorism designation lists have included right-wing terrorist groups (see Table 4) for just over seven

¹²⁸ Tech Against Terrorism. 2021. [Terrorist Use of E2EE: State of Play, Misconceptions, and Mitigation Strategies](#). London: Tech Against Terrorism.

¹²⁹ For more information on newer, particularly decentralised, generative, and immersive technologies, see Mauritius Dorn, Sara Bundtzen, Christian Schwieter, and Milan Gandhi. 2023. [Emerging Platforms and Technologies: An Overview of the Current Threat Landscape and Its Policy Implications](#). London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

¹³⁰ Henry Tuck, Jakob Guhl, Julia Smirnova, Lea Gerster, and Oliver Marsh. 2023. [Researching the Evolving Online Ecosystem: Telegram, Discord and Odysee](#). London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

¹³¹ Jasser *et al.* 2021. ["Welcome to #GabFam"](#); Mattheis. 2022. [Atomwaffen Division and its Affiliates on Telegram](#).

¹³² R.Y. Lazerson. 2023. [Platform Characteristics and Cross Platform Extremism: A Case Study of Telegram](#). Berkeley: Center for Security in Politics (CSP).

¹³³ Maura Conway, Amy Louise Watkin, and Seán Looney. 2022. [Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2021: The Year in Review](#), pp.'s 14-15. Brussels: RAN PS.

Table 4. Designated Extreme Right Terrorist Groups by Democratic Countries and Supranational Organisations (2023)

	UN	EU	UK	US	Canada	Australia	Germany	New Zealand
Atomwaffen Division	---	---	✓	---	✓	---	---	---
<i>National Socialist Order</i>	---	---	✓	---	✓	✓	---	---
The Base	---	---	✓	---	✓	✓	---	✓
Combat 18 (C18)	---	---	---	---	✓	---	✓	---
Sonnenkrieg Division	---	---	✓	---	---	✓	---	---
Proud Boys	---	---	---	---	✓	---	---	✓
Russian Imperial Movement	---	---	---	✓	---	✓	---	---
Blood and Honour	---	---	---	---	✓	---	---	---
Feuerkrieg Division	---	---	✓	---	---	---	---	---
James Mason	---	---	---	---	✓	---	---	---
National Action	---	---	✓	---	---	---	---	---
<i>National Socialist Anti-Capitalist Action</i>	---	---	✓	---	---	---	---	---
<i>Scottish Dawn</i>	---	---	✓	---	---	---	---	---
<i>System Resistance Network</i>	---	---	✓	---	---	---	---	---
✓ Designated terrorist entity ✓ Designated under a synonym or umbrella group/affiliation <i>Adapted from Terrorist Content Analytics Platform’s (TCAP) ‘Group Inclusion Policy’ at https://www.terrorismanalytics.org/policies/designation.</i>								

years; the first of which was the banning of National Action by the UK government in December 2016. In 2023, this report’s authors located channels and content associated with a number of designated groups and individuals on Telegram. It is important to note that none of these is banned by the EU, however, and their content thus not necessarily removable via the EU’s Terrorist Content Online Regulation. (For more on the latter, see Part IV of this report).

Atomwaffen Division (AWD)—known as the National Socialist Order (NSO) after July 2020—content was the most regularly and prolifically extreme right terrorist content shared on Telegram in the period under review. This included both official AWD propaganda and supporter generated content using Atomwaffen branding. Important to note is that no new official Atomwaffen content was created during the year however, so the circulated content largely drew on historic AWD videos, posters, and images. Other content associated with Table 4 designees and observed on Telegram over the course of 2023 included copies of James Mason’s *Siege*, videos produced by Mason and Siege Culture, and videos produced by and others branded as The Base. The amount of this content was dwarfed by AWD content, however.

As regards attack footage, copies of the Christchurch attack livestream were shared across both AWD channels and channels devoted to supporting the Christchurch attack. Copies of the livestream included the original video—in full or part—and supporter-made edits of the original video, such as gaming HUD (i.e., heads up display) overlays, compilation videos, GIFS, and heavily edited versions. The latter, which included effects such as quick cut compilations, overlays, and gamification elements, were likely attempts to disrupt the effectiveness of hashing algorithms, as well as developing fresh content from the limited source material available to these communities. A HUD is a transparent overlay used in military technology to provide combatants with data on the battlefield. These displays have become a mainstay of video game mechanics and culture, particularly first-person shooters, with overlays providing data such as targets, ammunition, kill counts, and achievements. The use of HUDs is a form of gamification that links terrorist propaganda and violence to popular video game culture. Several examples of re-creations of the Christchurch attack and livestream on gaming platforms such as Roblox

were observed too. Extensive sanctification of the Christchurch shooter, Brenton Tarrant, and other extreme right terrorists included edited images of the attackers and AI-generated images (see Box 2) glorifying their acts.

X/Twitter's Extreme Right Shift

X/Twitter had an unusual and devolving trajectory in relation to extremism on the platform in 2023. The primary driver of this change was the direct involvement and decision-making of the platform's new owner, Elon Musk. A core focus of Musk's changes was to reinstate previously banned users, especially high-profile right-wing extremist and conspiracist users, such as Andrew Anglin, Tommy Robinson, Andrew Tate, and Alex Jones.¹³⁴ Moreover, large numbers of QAnon conspiracy accounts that had been banned after the 6 January 2021 attack on the US Capitol were reinstated in late 2022 and early 2023 under Musk's so-called 'general amnesty.'¹³⁵

Musk also changed the blue check system—a legitimacy affordance on the Twitter platform—offering blue checks for pay and allowing far-right organisations like Britain First to acquire blue check status.¹³⁶ These changes led to a resurgence of far-right extremist, anti-Semitic, and conspiracy extremism on the platform.¹³⁷ One CNN Business article noted, “[a]s owner of X, Musk has promoted a number of conspiracy theories, flirted with and elevated extremists, launched ugly attacks on the Anti-Defamation League and George Soros, smeared the press, and sought to chill the speech of critics through lawsuits.”¹³⁸ At least one of these lawsuits is against a critical research and advocacy organisation, the Center for Countering Digital Hate (CCDH), which is alleged to have breached the platform's terms of service by scraping it for data subsequently used in its research. Musk effectively removed research access to the platform API by requiring exorbitant sums to access the data, making external research on the platform untenable.

These changes have led to large swathes of advertisers and users leaving the platform.¹³⁹ Internet traffic analytics firm SimilarWeb reported X/Twitter lost over half a billion visitors—a decline of 10%—globally between August and September 2023 alone.¹⁴⁰ The changes have also led to concerns about practices on X/Twitter in relation to the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA). In late December, X/Twitter was identified for the first illegal content probe conducted by the EU under the DSA in relation to X/Twitter's practices generally, as well as in relation to the ongoing conflict in Gaza.¹⁴¹ (For more on this, see Part IV of this report).

¹³⁴ Damien Leloup and William Audureau. 2022. '[Conspiracy Theorists, Homophobes, Neo-Nazis: Ten Accounts that Embody Twitter's Change Under Musk.](#)' *Le Monde*, 19 Dec.; Chris Vallance and Shayan Sardarizadeh. 2023. '[Tommy Robinson and Katie Hopkins Reinstated on X.](#)' *BBC News*, 6 Nov.; James Robinson. 2023. '[Alex Jones: Conspiracy Theorist has X Account Reinstated After Poll by Elon Musk.](#)' *Sky News*, 10 Dec.

¹³⁵ Center for Technology and Society. 2023. '[QAnon is Resurgent on Twitter.](#)' Anti-Defamation League, 22 May; Drew Harwell. 2022. '[QAnon, Adrift After Trump's Defeat, Finds New Life in Elon Musk's Twitter.](#)' *The Washington Post*, 14 Dec.

¹³⁶ Center for Technology and Society. 2023. '[Evaluating Twitter's Policies Six Months After Elon Musk's Purchase.](#)' Anti-Defamation League, 9 May.

¹³⁷ Center for Technology and Society. 2023. '[QAnon is Resurgent on Twitter.](#)'

¹³⁸ Oliver Darcy. 2023. '[Elon Musk's Welcoming of Extremists Puts a Spotlight on the NFL's Mega-partnership with X Amid Renewal Talks.](#)' *CNN Business*, 11 Dec.

¹³⁹ Ryan Mac and Kate Conger. 2023. '[X May Lose Up to \\$75 Million in Revenue as More Advertisers Pull Out.](#)' *The New York Times*, 26 Nov.

¹⁴⁰ Nhari Djan. 2023. '[X Continues to Lose Users—And It Could Be a Problem for Elon Musk's Subscription Plan.](#)' *Yahoo! Finance*, 21 Oct.

¹⁴¹ Supantha Mukherjee. 2023. '[EU Targets Musk's X in First Illegal Content Probe.](#)' *Reuters*, 18 Dec.

PART IV. RESPONSES TO ONLINE VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM IN 2023

This section takes up the role of the two most important actors in responding to online extremism and terrorism: governments via legislation and Internet companies. The most consequential legislative actor in this space is the EU and 2023 was a particularly consequential year due to 1.) it being the first full year of implementation of the EU's Terrorist Content Online (TCO) regulation and 2.) the August entering into force of the EU's Digital Services Act (DSA) for very large hosting service providers and search engines. The United States is also a major player in this space, if for no other reason than many of the aforementioned VLOPs being American. The September decision by the US Supreme Court to decide on the constitutionality of controversial Florida and Texas laws on content regulation may thus also have outside consequences—or not, depending on the Court's decision—going forward.

As regards platform activity around countering online extremism and terrorism, 2023 was the third full year of operation of Facebook's Oversight Board, in which it introduced the new labelling category 'Designated Organizations and Individuals' and ruled on its first expedited cases, in relation to the Israel-Gaza conflict. While massive surges in disinformation, hate, extremist, and terrorist material were observed post-7 October, 2023 also witnessed widespread tech company layoffs, with many trust and safety teams decimated. One way companies sought to mitigate fallout from the latter was further leveraging AI for extremism and terrorism content moderation, but with concerns raised about overreliance on AI tools.

LEGISLATION

European Union

"The dissemination of illegal content," including online hate and terrorism, are "[s]ystemic risks" per Art.34.1(a) of the Digital Services Act (DSA). Systemic risks are those that could lead to the collapse of an entire system, in this case the EU. This explains why the EU has been at the forefront of global efforts to combat online extremism and terrorism, including via the EU Internet Forum (EUIF) (estbd. 2015), EU's Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online, EU Directive (2017/541) on combating terrorism, EU Regulation (2021/784) on addressing the dissemination of terrorist content online (TCO), and, most recently, the Digital Services Act (DSA).

Terrorist Content Online (TCO) Regulation: The TCO, which came into effect in July 2022, was created to stem the dissemination of specifically terrorist content via the Internet. It enables duly designated competent authorities of EU Member States (MS) to send legally binding removal orders to hosting service providers (HSP) to remove or block access to terrorist content. At the core of the regulation is a requirement that tech companies remove content or disable access to it in all EU member states within one hour of having received a removal order from a competent authority. Under the regulation too, platforms *and* competent authorities must publish

annual transparency reports that include information on the removal orders and actions taken by them to address the dissemination of terrorist content.¹⁴²

EU MS implementation of the regulation got off to a relatively slow start. On 26 January, 2023 the EU Commission sent letters of formal notice to 22 of its 27 MS for failing to comply with certain obligations under the Terrorist Content Online Regulation, among which the obligation to designate a competent authority or authorities to issue removal orders, and requesting them to adapt their national rules “as quickly as possible.”¹⁴³ By the end of the year however, 23 MS had designated a competent authority or authorities with the power to issue removal orders,¹⁴⁴ and 18 had shared data with the Commission on actions taken by them in accordance with the TCO.¹⁴⁵ In addition, 11 of the infringement proceedings initiated in January were closed by the end of the year.¹⁴⁶ MS still to designate a competent authority on 31 December 2023 were Greece, Poland, Portugal, and Slovenia.

By the end of the year too, a minimum of 349 removal orders had been sent by six MS’ competent authorities to 13 hosting providers. The relevant competent authorities were Austria (8), Czechia (2), France (26), Germany (249), Romania (2), and Spain (62). The removal orders were sent to Archive.org, Catbox, DATA ROOM, FLOKINET, Jumpshare.com, Justpaste.it, Krakenfiles.com, Meta, Soundcloud, Telegram, TikTok, Top4Top.net, and X.¹⁴⁷ There were ten cases in which the terrorist content was not removed or blocked by the HSP within the one-hour time window required by the Regulation.¹⁴⁸ Just one unnamed service provider “argued the impossibility to execute a removal order.”¹⁴⁹

The first two removal orders under the regulation were issued by Spain’s competent authority, CITCO, on 24 April 2023. They were related to two pieces of terrorist content, one a PDF document appearing publicly on Telegram glorifying right-wing terrorist attacks and advocating for further terrorist violence and the other an Islamic State combat video hosted on Internet Archive. Spain sent the second highest number of removal orders (62) during the 12 months under review; the highest number (249) was sent by Germany’s competent authority, the BKA (*Bundeskriminalamt*). The German orders were all sent after Hamas’ 7 October attack and largely targeted Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad content on Telegram. While the German authority initially sent

¹⁴² [Regulation \(EU\) 2021/784 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 on Addressing the Dissemination of Terrorist Content Online](#). A primer on the regulation is Sophia Rothut, Heidi Schulze, Diana Rieger, Catherine Bouko, and Brigitte Naderer. 2023. [Improving Your Counter-Terrorism Response: A Six-Step Guide to Adhering to the EU’s TCO Regulation](#). Tech Against Terrorism Europe (TATE); available in English, French, and German versions.

¹⁴³ European Commission. 2023. [‘Terrorist Content Online: Commission Takes Action to Protect People from the Risk of Online Radicalisation and Recruitment by Extremists.’ Press Release](#), 26 Jan.

¹⁴⁴ A regularly updated ‘List of National Competent Authority (Authorities) and Contact Points’ for the TCO is at https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/policies/internal-security/counter-terrorism-and-radicalisation/prevention-radicalisation/terrorist-content-online/list-national-competent-authority-authorities-and-contact-points_en.

¹⁴⁵ EU Commission. 2024. [Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council on the Implementation of Regulation \(EU\) 2021/784 on Addressing the Dissemination of Terrorist Content Online](#). Brussels: EU Commission, p.5.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.1 and pp.s 5-6.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.13.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

referrals (i.e., voluntary requests that were in use prior to the coming into force of the TCO), these were not acted upon, so they were obliged to follow-up with removal orders.¹⁵⁰

PERCI, a tool developed and deployed by Europol to streamline the TCO implementation process went live on 3 July 2023. It can be used to, among other things (e.g., de-confliction to avoid conflict with ongoing investigations having an online content component), transmit both removal orders and referrals from a MS competent authority to the relevant platform(s). In addition to removal orders, over 14,600 referrals were processed in PERCI in the six months between its July launch and 31 December 2023.¹⁵¹

While none of the removal orders sent in 2023 were challenged by the receiving hosting service,¹⁵² the TCO faced concerted action against it late in the year when, on 8 November, 2023 a coalition of six civil society organisations filed a complaint before France’s *Conseil d’État* (i.e., the supreme administrative court), against the French decree implementing the TCO. The civil society litigants point out that, under the TCO, HSPs can be:

...forced to implement “specific measures” to prevent the publication of terrorist content. These “specific measures”—the choice of which remains at the discretion of the service providers—may include, for example, automated upload filters which scan all content before publication. Such automated systems are unable to take account of the context of the publication and are notoriously prone to errors that result in the censorship of protected speech such as journalism, satire, art, or documentation of human rights abuses. Furthermore, the obligation to adopt “specific measures” may violate the prohibition of imposing a general monitoring obligation under the Digital Services Act.¹⁵³

The French government is expected to file their arguments in defence of the TCO in early 2024, with the decision of the *Conseil* not expected before the end of the year.

Digital Services Act: The DSA, probably the most comprehensive piece of Internet-related legislation yet developed globally, has as its main goal the prevention of illegal and harmful activities online, including the spread of disinformation, hate, and terrorism, and will come into full effect on 17 February 2024. Since the end of August 2023, the DSA applies to designated platforms with more than 45 million users in the EU (i.e., 10% of the EU’s population), the so-called Very Large Online Platforms (VLOPs) or Very Large Online Search Engines (VLOSEs). It is in this context that, in October, warnings to Internet companies, including Meta, TikTok, and X/Twitter, advising them that they faced investigations and potential penalties under the Digital Services Act, if they didn’t take sufficient steps to combat disinformation surrounding the Israel-Hamas conflict on their platforms.¹⁵⁴ The other providers responded promptly to the Commission, highlighting steps they had taken to deal with disinformation on their platforms, but Musk challenged the Commission on the latter. X/Twitter exited the EU’s voluntary Code of Practice on Disinformation¹⁵⁵ in May 2023.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.6.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.2 and p.9.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p.2.

¹⁵³ EDRI. 2023. ‘[A Coalition of Six Organisations Takes EU’s Dangerous Terrorist Content Regulation to Court.](#)’ *EDRI*, 8 Nov.

¹⁵⁴ EU Commission. 2023. ‘[Daily News 19 / 10 / 2023.](#)’ *Press Corner*, 19 Oct.; EU Commission. 2023. ‘[The Commission Sends Request for Information to X Under the Digital Services Act.](#)’ *Press Release*, 12 Oct.

¹⁵⁵ The updated 2022 version of the Code is available at <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/policies/code-practice-disinformation>.

On Monday, 18 December, 2023, the EU announced Elon Musk's X/Twitter would be the first Internet company to face an investigation under the DSA. "Today we open formal infringement proceedings against @X," European Commissioner Thierry Breton said in a post on the platform formerly known as Twitter.¹⁵⁶ The investigation will examine, among other things, whether X/Twitter took sufficient steps to curtail the spread of illegal content, including hate and terrorism, to its c.112 million strong EU user-base. Concern was also raised that "fake and manipulated images and facts" were widespread across the platform, including manipulated images and videos.¹⁵⁷

Also raised by the EU were "suspected shortcomings" in researchers' access to X's publicly accessible data, which is mandated by the DSA. To be taken-up in the investigation too is whether users are being subjected to so-called "dark patterns"—also known as 'deceptive design'¹⁵⁸—via X/Twitter's interface, specifically as regards its blue check subscription service.¹⁵⁹ Previously, blue checkmarks signified that the individual or institution behind an account was genuine, but now may be purchased for a small monthly payment (i.e., €8 for 'Premium Tier'), including to have posts boosted above users without the checkmark.¹⁶⁰

X/Twitter, meanwhile, says it is "committed to complying with the Digital Services Act, and is cooperating with the regulatory process...X is focused on creating a safe and inclusive environment for all users on our platform, while protecting freedom of expression, and we will continue to work tirelessly towards this goal."¹⁶¹ There's no cut-off date for a decision on the X investigation.

USA

In May 2021, Florida's Governor Ron DeSantis signed the Stop Social Media Censorship Act. Only months after former US President Trump was suspended from a number of platforms, the Act seeks to stop tech platforms from suspending the accounts of political candidates prior to elections and would also make it easier for users and the Florida Attorney General to legally challenge tech companies' moderation decisions. In addition to being criticised as unconstitutional, the Act is also criticised as conflicting with America's Communications Decency Act's (CDA) Section 230, which provides platforms with immunity from liability over their content moderation decisions.¹⁶²

In September 2021, Texas introduced a bill with broadly similar purposes. The proposed Texas law would apply to social media companies with more than 50 million monthly active users in the United States, including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. It would require them to produce reports on illegal or potentially policy-

¹⁵⁶ Breton, Thierry [@ThierryBreton]. "Today we open formal infringement proceedings against @X: [Suspected breach of obligations to counter #IllegalContent and #Disinformation](#) [Suspected breach of #Transparency obligations](#) [Suspected #DeceptiveDesign of user interface #DSA.](#)" X/Twitter, 18 Dec., 2023.

¹⁵⁷ Emma Woollacott. 2023. 'EU Launches Investigation of X for Potential DSA Violations.' *Forbes*, 18 Dec.

¹⁵⁸ For a primer on deceptive design, go to <https://www.deceptive.design/>.

¹⁵⁹ European Commission. 2023. 'Commission Opens Formal Proceedings Against X Under the Digital Services Act.' *Press Release*, 18 Dec.

¹⁶⁰ Pricing information was sourced from <https://help.twitter.com/en/using-x/x-premium#tbcost> and details of 'X Premium' member benefits from <https://help.twitter.com/en/using-x/x-premium#tbfeatures>.

¹⁶¹ Adam Satariano. 2023. 'Illicit Content on Elon Musk's X Draws E.U. Investigation.' *The New York Times*, 18 Dec.

¹⁶² Gilad Edleman. 2021. 'Florida's New Social Media Law Will Be Laughed Out of Court.' *Wired*, 24 May.

violating content, as well as build a complaint system via which users could challenge companies’ content moderation decisions or flag illegal activity. In addition, users and the Texas Attorney General could file suit if they believed that tech companies wrongfully banned them. “It is now law that “conservative viewpoints in Texas cannot be banned on social media,” Texas Governor Greg Abbott prematurely stated.¹⁶³

After a series of decisions by lower courts and requests for review by the Supreme Court from technology industry organisations and Florida, on 29 September, 2023 the US Supreme Court announced it would decide on the constitutionality of the controversial Florida and Texas laws. They decided, in other words, to hear the cases *Moody vs. NetChoice* and *NetChoice vs. Paxton* in 2024. Two questions in particular will be focused upon: “whether provisions in the Texas and Florida laws that regulate tech companies’ ability to remove, edit, or arrange the content that appears on their platforms violate the [US Constitution’s] First Amendment, as well as whether provisions that require tech companies to explain their decisions to remove or edit specific content violate the First Amendment.”¹⁶⁴

If the US Supreme Court were to uphold what are often termed “must carry” provisions in the Florida and/or Texas laws, it could result—in a ‘worst case scenario’—platforms ceasing to moderate content at all in fear of contravening conflicting US state laws. It is notoriously difficult to judiciously and effectively apply geography-based online filters however, which could make it a lot easier and cheaper for HSPs to simply apply the provisions USA-wide. While the US is an outlier among Western democratic states when it comes to speech protections and it is thus unlikely that these provisions will be emulated by large numbers of other countries in a type of reverse ‘Brussels effect,’¹⁶⁵ a win for Florida or Texas could result in EU users having increased access to—especially right-wing—violent extremist and even terrorist content due to its likely proliferation on US platforms. On the other hand, a win for the platforms would considerably strengthen the hand of an unelected elite, in the guise of private corporations, in decision-making around permissible online speech in the US for the foreseeable future.

PLATFORMS

Facebook Oversight Board Cases and Decisions 2023

Table 5. Facebook Oversight Board Cases Relating to Hate, Extremism, and Terrorism in 2023			
Category	2021 (18 total)	2022 (16 total)	2023 (47 total)
Dangerous Organizations and Individuals	3	2	12
Violence and Incitement	3	2	12
Hate Speech	7	3	13
Designated Organizations or Individuals	---	---	2
Total	13	7	39

There was a marked increase in appeals brought to the attention of the Facebook Oversight Board (FOB) in 2023, with 47 total cases, including 39 cases in categories that may relate to extremism or terrorism (see Table 5). It is difficult from the Meta transparency pages to understand what has driven the substantial increase in cases selected by the Facebook Oversight Board for review (i.e., whether there was an increase in cases overall, whether the FOB saw more relevant cases in need of resolution, or whether there was an increase in the number of cases appealed by users). Moreover, there is no clear information on whether changes to categorical designation, designation lists, or other internal Meta policy shifts and moderation practices factored into this increase.

¹⁶³ Cat Zakrzewski. 2021. ‘Texas Governor Signs Bill Prohibiting Social Media Giants From Blocking Users Based on Viewpoint.’ *The Washington Post*, 9 Sept.

¹⁶⁴ Amy Howe. 2023. ‘Justices Take Major Florida and Texas Social Media Cases.’ *SCOTUSblog*, 29 Sept.

¹⁶⁵ Anu Bradford. 2020. *The Brussels Effect: How the European Union Rules the World*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Of these 37 cases adjudicated in 2023, 12 were categorised as ‘Dangerous Organizations or Individuals,’ 13 as ‘Hate Speech,’ 10 as ‘Violence and Incitement,’ and two under a new categorisation ‘Designated Organizations and Individuals.’ Eighteen, or roughly half of the overall cases, had potential associations with extremism or terrorism. These seem to be split evenly relative to extreme right and Jihadist terrorism related concepts, organisations, and/or narratives. Importantly, and following other 2023 trends, the potentially extreme-right associated materials were primarily couched as ‘hate’ and linked to ideas and narratives rather than specific groups or organisations. These narratives included anti-trans/LGBTQ+ hate, racism, and anti-Semitic hate.

A total of eight of the 37 cases taken-up by the FOB in 2023 were Europe-related, but with only three of these potentially connected to extremism or terrorism. A review of all 37 cases on the Meta ‘transparency’ pages and the Oversight Board’s website indicate that many of the problems the Board is addressing are related to incorrect applications of policy, either incorrect removal of content or failing to identify problematic content. Here, Meta have often removed posts critical of hate, violence, and extremist organisations or ideas, while also (in fewer cases) leaving up posts that the Oversight Board determined did potentially promote hate, incite violence, or other infractions of existing Meta policy.

It is notable that the new category, ‘Designated Organizations and Individuals,’ is being used in addition to the ‘Dangerous Organizations and Individuals’ category, which may indicate that Meta is now working from both lists in assigning categories to removals and for oversight. This new category of violation is among a set of newer, more nuanced categories that appear on the Meta transparency case listings in 2023 cases. A breakdown of the 18 cases with linkages to extremism or terrorism in 2023 shows that eight have associations with known organisations, six Jihadist terrorist organisations and two right-wing extremist organisations. Both right-wing extremist-linked cases stem from Europe, while no Jihadist terrorist cases stem from Europe. Of the eight cases linked to specific organisations, seven of Facebook’s content decisions were overturned by the Board due to the posts being judged not to support those organisations. The single pending case stems from Europe and regards elections in Greece, specifically support for the newly formed Spartans party, which is potentially connected to extreme-right Golden Dawn members.

Finally, for this subsection, in December of 2023, the FOB accepted its first two “expedited” cases both related to the Israel-Gaza conflict. Expedited review is only accepted in exceptional circumstances where the issues have potential global consequences. This is because the timeline for review response is lowered to 30 days—from the standard 90 days—and the process is streamlined because the timeline necessarily “precludes the level of extensive research, external consultation or public comments that would be undertaken in cases reviewed on ordinary timelines.”¹⁶⁶ Rulings in expedited cases are issued by a five-member Oversight Board panel, but without majority approval of the full Board as in non-expedited cases.¹⁶⁷

The two cases selected for expedited review—a video posted to Facebook of Hamas taking a woman hostage on 7 October and a video posted to Instagram of the aftermath of the Israel Defence Force bombing of Gaza’s Al-Shifa Hospital—were part of the intense increase in content volume apparent post-7 October.¹⁶⁸ In response, Meta made a series of supposedly temporary moderation changes including lowering the confidence score of the automated removal system, essentially casting a much wider net in attempts to ensure they did not fail to remove violating content. In recognition of this action’s potential for generating more removal errors, Meta also stopped assigning strikes to accounts associated with content removed in this fashion to prevent accounts from being banned in error. Meta noted that Israel-Gaza content could be potentially violative across six different Meta policies: 1) Dangerous organizations and individuals, 2) Violent graphic content, 3) Hate speech, 4) Violence and incitement, 5) Bullying and harassment, and 6) Coordinating harms.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ Oversight Board. 2023. [Al-Shifa Hospital – 2023-049-IG-UA – Overturned](#). Oversight Board, 19 Dec.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* and Oversight Board. ‘[Hostages Kidnapped From Israel – 2023-050-FB-UA – Overturned](#).’ Oversight Board, 19 Dec.

¹⁶⁹ Meta. ‘[Meta’s Ongoing Efforts Regarding the Israel-Hamas War](#).’ 7 Dec., 2023.

Recognising that the hostage-taking and bombing videos were not violative, but rather raising awareness of catastrophic events, Meta ultimately reinstated both pieces of content (prior to the Board's decision), but added a warning screen marking them as disturbing content. This labelling feature has two effects on the labelled content's circulation, first the content is not visible to users under 18 years old and second, it is not circulated via the recommender system (i.e., it is a form of algorithmic suppression). In both cases, the FOB overturned Meta's original decision to remove the content and agreed that the warning screen was appropriate per Meta's own policies. However, it disagreed with the algorithmic suppression of the content viewing it as a potential violation of rights to freedom of expression.¹⁷⁰

The Israel-Gaza conflict, as detailed throughout this report, has been utilised by malign actors across a range of violent extremist and terrorist ideologies for their own propagandistic purposes. Underlying Meta's original decision making process and the choices to moderate more broadly via technological means around Israel-Gaza were likely: the massively high volume of incoming content related to the conflict; as well as the complexities of the on-the-ground situation, including Hamas being both a governmental and a designated terrorist organisation; and the potential of violation across a range of Meta safety policies. These expedited FOB cases nevertheless highlight the necessity of human-in-the-loop moderation for a variety of reasons and most urgently with respect to platform duties of care related to protecting human rights and freedom of expression.¹⁷¹

Tech Industry Layoffs

Huge increases in online posting about the Israel-Gaza conflict have pushed platform content moderation to its limits, especially for small to medium sized platforms. This online activity across a variety of very large, large, medium, small, and micro platforms has correlated with high volume increases in 'real world' anti-Semitic incidents and violence across the globe, but particularly in Europe.¹⁷² And, as already mentioned, segued with a rise in terrorist attacks in the EU.¹⁷³ How well placed is the tech industry to respond to these risks and threats? Efforts by online platforms and social media companies to limit harmful content, including hate and extremist content, which increased after the 2016 US presidential election, have recently decreased, if not reversed entirely.

It has been estimated that tech companies—not all, it has to be said, in the broadly social media industry, but also health tech, fintech, etc.—laid off more than 260,000 workers globally in 2023, continuing a layoff wave that began in 2022.¹⁷⁴ These cuts were mostly blamed on “over-hiring” during the Covid pandemic. Booming job markets in other industries and considerable ongoing profits in the tech sector itself have raised questions about

¹⁷⁰ Oversight Board. 2023. '[Hostages Kidnapped From Israel](#)' and Oversight Board. 2023. '[Al-Shifa Hospital](#).'

¹⁷¹ Stuart Macdonald, Ashley Mattheis, and David Wells. 2023. '[Using Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning to Identify Terrorist Content Online](#).' Tech Against Terrorism Europe.

¹⁷² Clarke. 2023. '[Opinion: How Jihadist Groups are Using the Israel-Hamas War to Inspire and Recruit Lone Wolf Extremists](#).'

¹⁷³ Lynne O'Donnell. 2023. '[After Hamas Attacks, Terror Threats Are on the Rise](#).' *Foreign Policy*, 23 Oct.

¹⁷⁴ See the live tracker at <https://layoffs.fyi/>.

the validity of this—and other—explanations.¹⁷⁵ When it comes to the social media industry, wholesale worker scale backs initiated by Elon Musk on his purchase of Twitter, which progressed with almost no pushback, may have been interpreted as granting permission to other companies to follow suit in an effort to do more with less and thereby increase profits.

What has been termed “the Big Tech Backslide”¹⁷⁶ is causing considerable unease in some quarters however, especially in the wake of increased polarisation, hate, and extremism online and off, including around the Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Gaza conflicts, and the swathe of forthcoming elections globally, including the June 2024 EU Parliament elections. While sufficiently systematic and granular data is difficult to come by, anecdotal information suggests that 2023 saw the decimation of ‘Trust and Safety’ teams at major companies. ‘Trust and Safety’ covers everything from disinformation, hate, conspiracies, extremism, and terrorism to fraud, election manipulation, and child sex abuse.¹⁷⁷ During the 12 months under review, Meta, YouTube, and X/Twitter, among others, downsized and/or restructured their teams responsible for policing harmful information and activity on their services. Some platforms are, at the same time, offering new features (e.g., private one-way broadcasts) that are particularly difficult to monitor.¹⁷⁸ Many medium, small, and micro providers already had only small such teams, not providing 24/7 coverage; some had no such team(s) at all, instead addressing issues on an ad hoc basis as they arise; and many, especially small and micro providers, display little-to-no knowledge of their responsibilities with regard to even terrorism content.¹⁷⁹ This caused Japan, at Canada’s urging, to invite representatives from the industry organisation Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) to the December 2023 G7 Interior Ministers Meeting in Mito, Japan, to address the decline in attention to extremist and terrorist content by their member companies. One way they have sought to do this is via the use of AI.

Leveraging AI for Countering Extremism and Terrorism

In light of concerns over a variety of issues related to the use of GenAI specifically, including its use by violent extremists and terrorists, but also its use in the production of mis- and dis-information, online child sex abuse, and a raft of other cybercriminal and security threats, as well as labour-based issues such as copyright infringement, the EU came to provisional agreement on the AI Act in December 2023.¹⁸⁰ It will come into effect by 2026, but already there are concerns that it doesn’t deal adequately with potential future uses in a variety of spaces, including extremism and terrorism.

¹⁷⁵ Gerrit De Vynck, Danielle Abril, and Caroline O’Donovan. 2024. [‘The U.S. Economy is Booming. So Why are Tech Companies Laying Off Workers?’](#) *The Washington Post*, 3 Feb.

¹⁷⁶ Nora Benavidez. 2023. [Big Tech Backslide: How Social-Media Rollbacks Endanger Democracy Ahead of the 2024 Elections](#). Free Press.

¹⁷⁷ Tiffany Hsu. 2022. [‘Sympathy, and Job Offers, for Twitter’s Misinformation Experts.’](#) *The New York Times*, 28 Nov.; Tiffany Hsu, Stuart A. Thompson, and Steven Lee Myers. 2024. [‘Elections and Disinformation Are Colliding Like Never Before in 2024.’](#) *The New York Times*, 11 Jan.

¹⁷⁸ Benavidez. 2023. [Big Tech Backslide](#).

¹⁷⁹ Pal Boza, Noah Douglas, and Pierre Sivignon. 2023. [Mapping Report on Needs and Barriers for Compliance Understanding Small and Micro HSPs’ Needs and Awareness in Relation to Implementing the TCO Regulation Requirements](#). FRISCO Project. The [FRISCO](#), [ALLIES](#), and [TATE](#) projects were established, following a call via the EU’s Internal Security Fund, specifically to assist smaller hosting service providers in implementing the TCO.

¹⁸⁰ See the Future of Life Institute’s (FLI) dedicated website <https://artificialintelligenceact.eu/developments/> for regularly updated information on the [AI Act](#).

In the meantime, AI-generated hate, extremist, and terrorist materials fall within the ambit of the EU’s existing TCO and DSA. To meet their requirements, which include protection of users rights to free speech and related, human-in-the-loop content moderation—that is paired human and AI-based content moderation practices, also called ‘augmented intelligence’—remains the platinum standard for content moderation overall and with specific regard to online violent extremist and terrorist content.¹⁸¹ However, a former trust and safety operations manager for X/Twitter, who departed the company in 2023, told *The New York Times* that currently “[m]any social media companies are leaning heavily on unreliable AI-powered content moderation tools, leaving stripped-down crews of humans in constant firefighting mode.”¹⁸²

Increased collaboration between technology companies, hosting service providers, and social media platforms is advised to strengthen the network of responders as well as provide the development of tools that can be utilised across the board from small one-person organisations to very large online platforms (VLOPs). Moreover, these companies should focus, according to a 2023 TATE report, on developing AI tools that support human moderators as well as technology-focused solutions, particularly with regard to harms associated with long-term and high-volume immersion in violent, abusive content.¹⁸³ From a technology perspective, platform tagging of GenAI content,¹⁸⁴ the robust application of existing platform “harm” policies, as well as clear external oversight, should be pursued, particularly around high impact political and/or conflict events. Along with this, increased spending on effective media and digital literacy programs—perhaps even AI generated interactive learning?—provides a much-needed long-term social resilience building strategy.

¹⁸¹ Macdonald, Mattheis, and Wells. 2023. [Using Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning to Identify Terrorist Content Online](#), p.22; see also Stuart Macdonald, Ashley Mattheis, and David Wells. 2024. [Using AI to Monitor the Internet for Terror Content is Inescapable – But Also Fraught with Pitfalls.](#) *The Conversation*, 7 Feb.

¹⁸² Hsu, Thompson, and Myers. 2024. [Elections and Disinformation Are Colliding Like Never Before in 2024.](#)

¹⁸³ Macdonald, Mattheis, and Wells. 2024. [Using AI to Monitor the Internet for Terror Content is Inescapable – But Also Fraught with Pitfalls.](#)

¹⁸⁴ Nick Clegg. 2024. [Labeling AI-Generated Images on Facebook, Instagram and Threads.](#) *Meta Newsroom*, 6 Feb.

CONCLUSION: WHAT TO WATCH FOR IN 2024

The number of Jihadi and extreme right terrorist attacks in the West have trended downward post-pandemic, with just five such attacks taking place across the EU and USA in 2023. In October in southern Israel however, Hamas, together with the PIJ, carried out one of the largest terrorist attacks globally for many years. In terms of *online* extremist and terrorist content and activity, Hamas hugely increased its content production and dissemination post-7 October; its Telegram subscribers also grew. There was continued high availability of extreme right content online during the year too, including a significant uptick in both anti-Semitic and anti-Muslim content in the aftermath of the Hamas attack. Jihadi material, including especially IS content, continued to suffer widespread disruption, but was still locatable on Telegram and other online platforms, including especially file sharing sites and TOWs. The use of AI for especially image generation was observable across ideologies, but had not yet come to play an outsized role in online extremism and terrorism. This is likely to change going forward.

In terms of the narratives displayed in online content, Hamas content shifted from attack-focused to resistance-focused between October and December 2023. Both Jihadis, including IS and al-Qaeda associated groups and supporters, and extreme right users contributed online content and discussion around the 7 October attack and its aftermath. In particular, Jihadi groups and their supporters took the opportunity to encourage lone actor attacks in the West on the basis of Western governments' support for Israel's actions in Gaza post the Hamas attack.

While X was notable for welcoming back a swathe of 'celebrity' extreme right users under its new owner Elon Musk and recorded an increase in extreme right activity overall, it was not alone in laying off large numbers of its workforce in 2023. These layoffs hit trust and safety professionals, including those responsible for decision-making around extremism and terrorism, particularly hard. Sustained—but, in some cases, reduced—disruption by companies of Jihadi and right-wing *terrorist* content across not just major but also medium-sized platforms meant that shifts already underway to small and micro platforms nonetheless continued in the twelve months under review.

As regards regulation, the most consequential events of 2023 were the progress in implementation of the TCO in its first full calendar year of operation, the entering into force for VLOPs of the EU's DSA in August, and the September decision by the US Supreme Court to hear the Florida and Texas content moderation cases in 2024.

Finally, five things to watch for in the online extremism and terrorism realms in 2024:

The plight of Palestinian civilians as a result of the Israeli military response to the 7 October attack has become a touchstone in Jihadist propaganda and will likely continue to be leveraged as a compelling component of their content, calls to violence, and recruitment in 2024—even were a ceasefire to be agreed or the conflict to cease—and thus likely to encourage terrorist plots and attacks in the EU and elsewhere.

Growing political polarisation, inflammatory speech, mis- and disinformation, and conspiracies around the large number of major elections taking place in 2024—especially the November US presidential election, but potentially also the EU Parliament elections in June—and their amplification online will increase the possibility of political violence, including acts of terrorism.

AI has the capacity to supercharge the production of extremist, especially conspiracist, text, image, audio, and video-based content around not just the above-mentioned elections, but also ongoing conflicts, including Israel-Gaza, and thereby also calling into question real and true content.

All of the above could be exacerbated by not just 1.) the emergence of new online platforms and services attractive to extremists and terrorists but with no strategies in place to deal with these—and other—harms, but also 2.) even very large existing companies—never mind medium, small, and micro companies—no longer being sufficiently well-staffed to respond effectively to known risks and threats.

The ‘Brussels Effect’ refers to the significant influence that EU regulation has on global markets and industries, effectively shaping business practices and policies—and thereby effectively societies—beyond the EU’s borders. EU regulation in the online hate, extremism, and terrorism space(s) has already contributed to the ‘Brussels Effect,’ with the TCO and DSA anticipated to contribute further. The implementation of these two pieces of legislation will continue to ramp-up in 2024 and, along with the US Supreme Court decisions, have the ability to essentially ‘make or break’—perhaps both?—extremist and terrorist content moderation in the year ahead.

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