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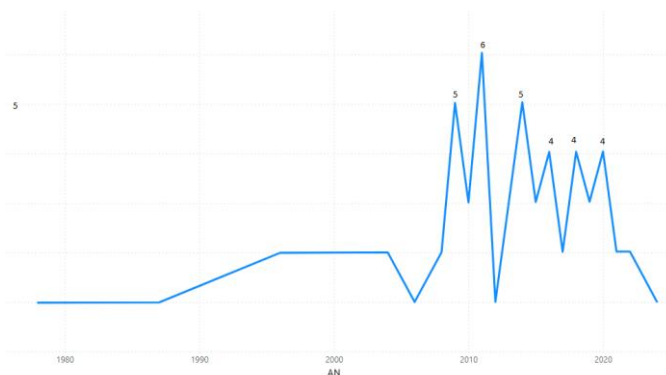
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SUNNI RADICAL CLERICS – DO THEY HAVE A ROMANIAN AUDIENCE?

Abstract:	<p><i>Sunni radical online speech maintains great importance as a security matter, considering its potential impact on the views of individuals originated in regions with terrorist activity, as well as their potential impact on Romanian converts active on social media.</i></p> <p><i>In the light of its relevance, the current research aims to map the visibility of Sunni radical clerics in high ranked research publications, as well as factors that impacted this (in)visibility; the second part will question whether unrestricted social media activity of the digital community of Romanian converts on Facebook reflects an appetite for content, sermons and narratives of radical Sunni clerics, questioning whether Romanian converts share and appreciate such content– confirming their relevance on digital platforms.</i></p> <p><i>Furthermore, the paper raises potential research avenues, highlighting the need to focus on coded messages; our hypothesis is that as legal sanctions increase, be they administrative or legal (no flight lists, asset freeze, visa cancelation, social media ban), Sunni radical clerics will switch from an explicit to a latent, implicit hate speech, preserving content but altering form. Future research will investigate messaging in the context of tensions in Palestinian territories, as active conflicts were observed as a catalyst for enhanced radical speech.</i></p>
Keywords:	Coded Language; digital radicalization; extremism on social media; analyzing coded messages; machine learning in counterterrorism
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Literature Review

Despite being associated with terrorist organizations, designated as a source of radical discourse and a catalyst for violent acts, radical clerics have been of somewhat limited interest for scholars, if we compare the numbers of studies focused on radical sheikhs to those on terrorism in general and terrorist groups in particular.

**Figure 1. Distribution of research articles on radical clerics 1978-2024¹**

In our quest for literature focused on radical religious figures, we have identified to date several 56 research articles starting 1978 on radical clerics, with an uneven distribution of years (Figure 1). These articles were selected

¹ Generated as result of the author` research

on the following criteria: a) including the term cleric or adjacent terms in their titles and/or abstracts (fatwas, sheikh/shaykh/sheykh, ulama/ulema) or names of specific radical Sunni clerics, b) were published in peer reviewed journals and c) discussed the role of radical Sunni clerics¹. A comparison to the numbers provided by Bart Schuurman in his 2020 literature review on terrorism shows us the focus of scholars between 2006 and 2017; respectively, the number of articles published in the nine leading journals of the terrorism/counterterrorism journals is 3442. As shown in the cited source, interest in the terrorism phenomenon is constant². Yet interest in radical vectors such as Sunni radical clerics were not, despite being clearly titled by the Radical Awareness Network in 2022 as highly relevant vehicles as radicalization – designated as non-violent Islamist extremists.

Certain trends in 2024 in the study of radicalization impact and touch the subject of radical clerics and their activity in supporting terrorist organizations – including recruitment for regional or global organizations, legitimizing their violence, exploitation of the online in promoting radical speech while circumventing moderation policies. Research spanning social sciences like sociology, religious and cultural studies, psychology touches upon methods radical clerics use to engage and influence converts or born believers.

Among the main trending approaches, we will name the theory of *Charismatic Authority and Influence* stemming from Weber's charismatic authority theory, with a body of research indicating that radical clerics often possess charismatic authority (despite struggling with issues to define charisma), allowing them to exert significant influence over their followers; charismatic leaders in general create a compelling narrative of purpose, belonging which can be attractive while struggling with more mundane issues. Furthermore, research on the psychological dynamics of radical clerics shows that clerics employ emotional and moral appeals to incite strong responses from their audience, using rhetoric that mixes religious, political, cultural themes. The Charismatic Leadership Theory posits that radical clerics gain followers through their ability to present themselves as legitimate, divinely guided leaders. Recent shifts of the theory point out the growth of relevance of online charisma, where clerics can craft an online *persona* that appeals to young and impressionable audiences; this persona-building is often bolstered by symbolic language, a strong ability to induce certainty, as well as calls for action framed as religious duty. Angela Gendron shows that this charismatic bond is triggered by a range of psychological, social and environmental factors which make certain individuals more susceptible to militant Islam than others³. No lesser contribution is brought by Quintan Wiktorowicz in *Radical Islam Rising: Muslim Extremism in the West*, highlighting how charismatic radical leaders use persuasive language, emotional appeal, and simplified theology to attract individuals searching for purpose, which often includes converts⁴.

A second trend in radicalization theories which touch the subject of radical clerics is the Digital Radicalization Theory; theory tackles how radical clerics use digital platforms to reach wide audiences, particularly vulnerable or isolated individuals. Scholars note that social media and encrypted messaging applications allow clerics to broadcast radical explicit messages, recruit followers without physical contact. The *Digital Radicalization Theory* indicates that online engagement enables clerics to amplify their reach globally, often decentralized and harder-to-regulate-spaces. This theory builds on the concept of the *virtual caliphate*, where the internet serves as a virtual space for ideological expansion. Limitations include addressing radicalization solely as an online phenomenon, excluding offline/real life radicalization processes which are complementary to online affairs. As such, Siegel observes the large volumes of religious content on Twitter on the verge of political events in the Middle East and Northern Africa; during political events, social media provides a space for cross-sectarian

¹ Al-Kandari Dashti, 2014; Alkandari Alburass, 2022; Alrasheed Mabon, 2020; Bartal, 2015; bin Mohamed Osman, 2009; Brachman Levine, 2011; Condra, Isaqzadeh, Linardi, 2019; Coulson, 2022; Fodeman et.al., 2020; Gendron, 2016; Gregg, 2018; Hamm, 2009; Hariss-Hogan et al, 2022; Hitchens, 2012 and 2020; Klausen, 2014; Klausen et.al., 2018; Lahoud, 2009; Megari, 2022; Mustaqim, 2018; Perlinger, 2016; Pokalova, 2018; Renfer & Haas, 2008; Shane, 2016; Schuurman et al, 2016; Schurman, 2018; Sealy, 2021; Siegel, 2015; Seraphin et.al., 2019; Suljic, 2021; Taylor, 2008; Vidino et.al., 2022; Wagemakers, 2009; Wiktorowicz et.al., 2006; Yazbeck et.al., 2008

² Bart Schuurman, *Research on Terrorism, 2007–2016: A Review of Data, Methods, and Authorship*, "Terrorism and Political Violence", Vol. 32, No. 5, 2020, pp. 1011–1026

³ Angela Gendron, *The Call to Jihad: Charismatic Preachers and the Internet*, "Studies in Conflict&Terrorism", Vol. 40, No.1, 2021, pp. 44-61

⁴ Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Radical Islam Rising, Muslim Extremism in the West*, Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, 2005

discourse and activism as well as for “sectarian vitriol spewed by influential clerics”¹. Findings are consistent with a report issued by the Swiss Intelligence Service SAP, in the sense that Islamist content is virally spread on social media, especially Twitter, concluding that “Intelligence Services have been aware that the Internet is used as the most important tool for the dissemination of Jihadist propaganda”².

Meleagrou-Hitchen, Wagemakers, Lahoud, Brachman and Levine, Al-Kandari & Dashti, Taylor developed a series of case-studies on how jihadi clerics use social media to promote themselves – highlighting the importance of social media, PR, marketing techniques and switching to English as *lingua franca* to disseminate content influenced the impact of their message. In the light of former studies, one can see how social media permanentizes radical speech, and enhances the effects of these messages even after the death of clerics, now martyred and, thus, legitimized. Yet the afore mentioned studies limit their approach to either Western based radical activity or overtly radical message dissemination. Mia Bloom and Charlie Winter examine in *Jihadism on social media: Radical Clerics and Youth Engagement* the use of visual, audio content to appeal to the youth, exploring how clerics simplify religious messaging to increase, reach and generate engagement on platforms like TikTok and Instagram, with a focus on digital recruitment. The study is consistent with Radical Awareness Network reports showing that not only radical content is targeting young people and vulnerable segments, but also correlating with the trend of converts to Islam to be young people and to draw their religious sources from the internet.

Merlyna Lim and Noorhaidi Hasan, tackling on digital media’s role in religious movements, especially in Southeast Asia, in their research *Digital Da’wah: Islamic Radicalization and Visual Culture* from 2024 analyze how religious figures adapt traditional Islamic outreach to digital spaces, using engaging formats to communicate complex ideas effectively. Yet studies like this are limited to one region. Jytte Klausen and Peter Neumann, experts in jihadist networks and the psychological aspects of online radicalization, focus on radical Sunni clerics who use memes and video clips to attract new followers – which shows an adaptation to new media and digital channels to address a wide segment of audience³.

There is unanimity within scientific literature on the digital impact of radical clerics on terrorist acts, as well as in influencing homegrown jihadis and indoctrination; some scholars argue that notorious radical clerics can influence political and social developments in their home countries, while official reports show that religious scholars and imams in Europe have historically been educated and influenced by radical figures in prestigious Muslim establishments. A third series of theories – the *Ideological Framing and Simplified Theology* focuses on how radical clerics employ ideological framing by presenting a binary worldview portraying Islam as oppressed and under attack and gives extreme calls to actions as a form of defense; simplified storytelling can resonate with vulnerable segments of the population, as well as with converts lacking a nuanced understanding of Islamic teachings and may view clerics as a legitimate authority. In this niche we mention Thomas Hegghammer and his research on Islamist movements, whose works highlight how radical clerics may present a distorted version of Islam that emphasizes violent or apocalyptic narratives. Hegghammer suggests that clerics exploit the limited religious literacy of some converts by framing violence as a religious duty, thus legitimizing extremist actions⁴. But valuable contributions were also Joe Whittaker with *Online radicalization. What we know*⁵.

Closer to our field of preoccupation, the dimension of *The Use of Coded Language and Dog Whistles* examines how terrorist groups use codes that may sound innocuous but carry specific meanings for initiated followers. Codification allegedly allows organizations and Jihadist groups to evade detection by authorities and convey extremist messages subtly. Within the segment, *Signaling Theory* suggests that coded language acts as a signal to followers who understand hidden meaning. This enables clerics to reach radicalized followers without directly using extremist rhetoric that would otherwise attract attention from counter-terrorism authorities.

¹ Alexandra Siegel, *Sectarian Twitter Wars: Sunni-Shia Conflict and Cooperation in the Digital Age*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2015

² *Idem*

³ Jytte Klausen, *Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, “Studies in Conflict & Terrorism”, Vol. 38, No. 1, 2014, pp. 1-22

⁴ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2017, p. 273

⁵ Joe Whittaker, *Online radicalization. What We know*, Radicalisation Awareness Network, Luxembourg, Publications Office of the European Union, 2022

Punctually, Signaling Theory is referred to in Richard Nielsen's research *Deadly clerics: Blocked ambition and the paths to Jihad*¹, which applies Signaling Theory to understand how certain clerics, motivated by career frustrations and lack of mainstream opportunities, turn to jihadist preaching as a form of signaling their commitment to radical ideology. Studies in 2024 look at how clerics use culturally specific terms, Quranic references, and subtle ideological hints that resonate only with audiences familiar with radical discourse. This tactic is particularly effective in environments with strict surveillance, allowing clerics to subtly advocate for extreme views. Researchers suggest that clerics utilize Quranic verses selectively, presenting them in a way that resonates only with individuals familiar with radical interpretations, which subtly reinforces extremist views while maintaining plausible deniability. This strategy effectively bypasses detection, as only audiences already attuned to radical narratives grasp the ideological significance of these references. Again, RAN reports in 2021 like Root causes of violent extremism show a strong influence of non-violent Islamist extremism figures which use specific language, and highlight the importance of the human factor in investigating and researching the field².

Also, studies from the Yaqeen Institute examine how political dynamics shape both counter-radicalization discourse and religious messaging, suggesting that clerics' methods evolve to elude monitoring by leveraging ambiguous language that aligns with extremist ideology for select listeners. Meanwhile, research by authors like Abdul Mustaqim in *De-Radicalization in Quranic Exegesis explores reinterpretations of Quranic "violence verses"*, noting that radical clerics exploit these verses to frame violence as religiously legitimate, particularly for audiences inclined toward extremist interpretations³. Additionally, some sociological analyses emphasize the importance of understanding how clerics signal ideological alignment with global jihadist movements through references to shared grievances and Quranic exegesis, which resonate with certain subcultures and ideologically primed audiences. These findings underscore the clerics' sophisticated approach to messaging, blending overtly neutral or benign religious language with covertly radicalized signals aimed at specific audiences. Finally, another trending dimension of radicalization studies tackling or mentioning the activity of radical clerics is the *Adaptation to Counter-terrorism Efforts* – indicating that jihadist groups are adapting their tactics to circumvent counter-terrorism frameworks, often operating within legal limits to avoid prosecution. Synonymously, some clerics now frame their views in less overtly extremist terms, presenting themselves as simply advocating for Islamic morality or justice. The *Adaptation Theory* proposes that as Governments increase their surveillance and intervention measures, radical clerics adapt their strategies to continue their influence. They may switch to using indirect language, emoticons, graphic content, avoiding terms that would clearly signal extremism. This too shows the importance of the human factor complementary to AI to investigate trends in coded extremist language.

Researchers have observed that some clerics promote "grey-zone" content—messages that fall short of incitement but still encourage radical ideologies. This enables them to appeal to potential followers while staying under the radar of authorities, creating a challenge for counter-terrorism efforts. Notable mentions are Richard Nielsen's afore mentioned research – and to a lesser extent, Matteo Vergani's *The Radicalization of Individuals in Context: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Literature*⁴.

Touching the subject of the impact of radical religious figures on groups in the Western world, Yazbeck Haddad and Balz see indoctrination of religious communities in Europe as being severely influenced by radical clerics from Saudi Arabia, as the former are involved in training European imams to adapt their discourse with a

¹ Richard N. Nielsen, *Deadly Clerics: Blocked Ambition and the Paths to Jihad*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2017

² Magnus Ranstorp, Marije Meines, *The Root Causes of Violent Extremism*, Radicalisation Awareness Network, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2024, p. 5

³ Abdul Mustaqim, *De-Radicalization In Quranic Exegesis (Re-Interpretation of "Violence Verses" Toward Peaceful Islam)*, Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research, Proceedings of the International Conference on Qur'an and Hadith Studies (ICQHS) 2017

⁴ Matteo Vergani, Muhammad, Ekin Ilbahar&Greg Barton, *The Radicalization of Individuals in Context: A Systematic Review of Qualitative Literature*, Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, Taylor&Francis Journals, Vol. 43, No.10, October 2018, pp 854-854; Lorenzo Vidino, Seamus Hughes, *The Islamic State in America: After the Caliphate* Program on Extremism, George Washington University; National Counterterrorism Innovation, Technology, and Education Center, *Reports, Projects, and Research*, 2022

radical lens¹. Wiktorowicz and Kaltenthaler indicate the grave impact of radical sheiks on conversions, as well as jihadist attacks, alongside other socio-psychological factors². Hamm advocates for radical clerics being a definitive factor in prison conversion to Islam³. Political implications of proselytism, indoctrination and Da'wah conducted radical clerics had also received some attention in Western research; Coulson's report *Education and Indoctrination in the Muslim World: Is There a Problem? What Can We Do about It?* shows not only that radical indoctrination in the spirit of hate poses a grave security threat not only to the U.S., but also the Western world, as well as the influence of clerics in religious and political education⁴.

Nawab Bin Mohamed Osman, Levtzion, Al-Rasheed and Akram, Barta, Alrasheed and Mabon focus on the impact of radical clerics on domestic policies and international policies in their home states, as well as influencing relations between diverse social and religious groups in their countries, concluding that radical clerics can produce impact in domestic developments. Julie Taylor highlighted in a 2008 study that a Saudi cleric managed to mobilize population and protest the secular Saudi regime – relevant in showing that the *ulama* may also impact domestic policy in a somewhat authoritarian Islamic regime.

The report *From Cradle to Grave: The Lifecycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria* highlights that radical clerics seem to impact homegrown jihadists more than foreign fighters, indicating that studies on *returnees* show that a 25% percentage of the later segment stored religious content produced by jihadi clerics in their smartphones. This confirms the impact of radical clerics and their potential to trigger attacks on national soil⁵. Gregg's research on *Religious resources and terrorism* indicates that religion is an important factor influencing terrorism acts, and that, through a religious authority, jihadis can be impacted to challenge the social and political status quo "by shaping the group's ideology; through religious authority: as a code of conduct that binds members of the group together; by providing social and material resources; and as a form of identity"⁶. However, consensus hasn't been achieved whether converts would be more violent than born Muslims under the influence of radical messages; emerging from the very definition of terrorism as a social-psychological construct, the paths of radicalization were demonstrated to be quite particular for converts and born Muslims. Several studies suggest that converts may follow distinct radicalization pathways, often related to a rapid and quite enhanced immersion in their new belief system, making them more permeable to radical narratives. In some cases, it appeared that radicalization had led to a heightened sense of identity and purpose, on a background of feeling misunderstood, isolated, and a misfit in the societies they were born. In this respect, Harris-Hogan, Dawson, Amarasingam discuss in their 2024 study on Western foreign fighters that some converts exhibit higher susceptibility to radicalization, possibly linked to their need to "prove" their faith to themselves or their communities might lead to embracing more extreme views⁷. A relevant study (Fodeman, Snook&Horgan, 2020) showed that converts demonstrate to have higher activism and radicalism intentions scores, compared to natural born Muslims⁸; a series of research articles indicate that Muslim converts tend to be rather overrepresented in terrorism engagement and acts of terrorism, as opposed to *nonconvert* Muslims – and particular within their overrepresentation among Western foreign fighters. *Lower levels of Islamic knowledge* were touched upon in research which posits that converts who became radicalized may have had a less comprehensive understanding of Islamic teachings compared to individuals born into the faith. This limited knowledge has had the potential to make them more receptive to oversimplified or extreme interpretations

¹ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, Michael J. Balz, *Taming the Imams: European Governments and Islamic Preachers since 9/11*, Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, Vol. 19, No. 2, 2008, pp. 215-235

² Quintan Wiktorowicz, Karl Kaltenthaler, *The Rationality of Radical Islam*, "Political Science Quarterly", Vol. 121, No. 1, 2006, pp. 295-319

³ Michael S. Hamm, *Prison Islam in the Age of Terror*, "British Journal of Criminology", Vol. 49, No. 5, 2009

⁴ Andrew J. Coulson, *Education and Indoctrination in the Muslim World: is there a problem? What can We do about it?*, CATO Institute Policy Analysis, No. 511, 2004

⁵ Andre Perlinger, Daniel Milton, *From Cradle to Grave: The Lifecycle of Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria*, Combating Terrorism Center at Westpoint, 2016

⁶ Heather S. Gregg, *Religious Sources and Terrorism*, "Religion and Terrorism", Vol. 65, No. 2-3, 2018, pp. 185-206

⁷ Shandon Harris-Hoggan, Lorne L. Dawson, Amaranth Amarasingam, *A comparative analysis of the nature and evolution of the domestic jihadist threat to Australia and Canada (2000-2020)*, "Perspectives on Terrorism", Vol. 14, No. 5, 2024, pp.77-102

⁸ Ari D. Fodeman, Daniel W. Snook, John G. Horgan, *Picking Up and Defending the Faith: Activism and Radicalism Among Muslim Converts in the United States*, "Political Psychology", Vol. 41, No. 4, 2020, pp. 679-698

of Islam, especially when introduced to these ideas by charismatic figures or online radical content. Relevant for this is the *Muslim Converts and Terrorism in the West: A Comparative Analysis* by Lorenzo Vidino and Seamus Hughes, bringing arguments that certain converts in Western countries might have lacked a deep grounding in Islamic scholarship, which can leave them more vulnerable to misinterpretations of doctrine that justify violence¹.

While research indicates that Muslim converts who radicalize may sometimes have less formal religious education and unique vulnerabilities, it is essential to approach this topic without generalizing findings. Most converts do not radicalize or adopt extremist views, and factors influencing radicalization are complex and multifaceted. Furthermore, the findings do not support a blanket statement that converts are inherently more violent or less educated in Islam but rather suggest that some may be susceptible to specific pathways influenced by social, psychological, and ideological dynamics. Focusing on the 56 selected articles which are aimed specifically towards radical Sunni clerics, the distribution of topics in articles focused on radical clerics shows a dominance of political topics, followed by the activity of clerics online and less to devotional aspects, as shown in Figure 2 below.

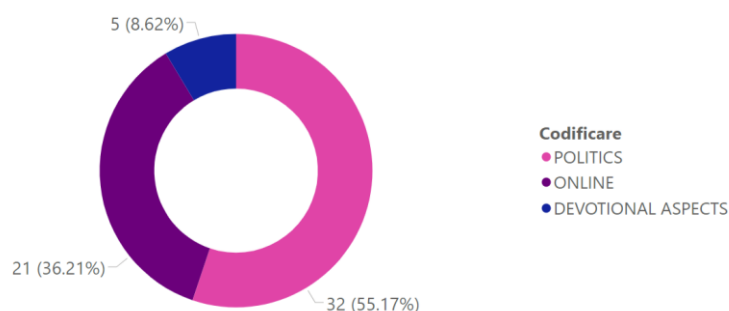


Figure 2. Article distribution on topics²

Interest in jihadi clerics seems to have been influenced by policy priorities, which in their turn were impacted by events in the terrorist/counterterrorist realm. We argue that research has been conducted because of Governmental and international interest in terrorism sources, to fuel policies and sometimes to justify and fuel a call to action within the Global War on Terror of the Bush administration. Historically, there seems to have been a causality relation between political developments and research; indicators of a research interest in radical clergy and the connection between the political realm and the religious establishment spike at the end of 1970^s, the first articles being drafted in 1978, mainly focused on the Shi'a clergy in Iran – probably in the context of turmoil and the Islamic revolution in Iran; later on, attention drifted to the Shi'a clergy's connections to Hizballah, a Lebanese political organization with an armed wing notorious for pursuing worldwide operations, involvement in terrorist acts, as well as transnational criminal activities. Furthermore, in the context of the Soviet conduct of the Afghan file, Al-Qaeda emerged as a point of interest, especially after the 1987 terrorist attacks at the American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, making Al-Qaeda a central point of research in the years to come; 9/11 enhanced research on the afore mentioned terrorist organization, in the context of GWOT and the American change of pace in international anti-terrorism policies. As we speak, even after the Syrian conflict emerged, Al-Qaeda remained the main concern for Anglo-Saxon research on terrorism and counterterrorism policies.

¹ Lorenzo Vidino, Seamus Hughes, B Clifford, *Op.cit.*, p. 5

² Generated as result of the author's research

Following the London attacks in 2005, Madrid in 2007, the Paris attacks in 2015 and the ones in Bruxelles in 2016, research suffered a change of scope, focusing both on homegrown jihadis, the export of radical mindsets and narratives in the online, as well as on suggestions on how to improve domestic policies in Europe to prevent terrorist attacks and the spread of extremist narratives.

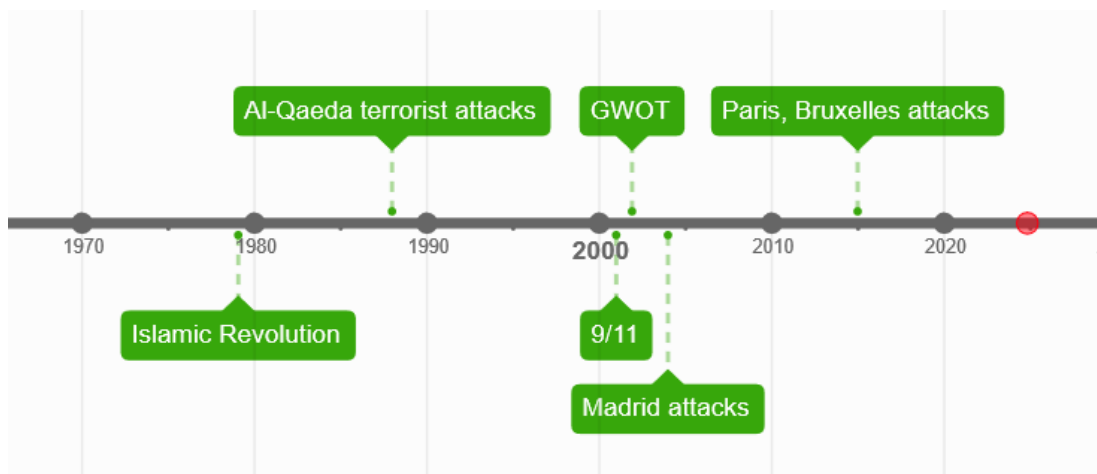


Figure 3. Events that impacted the scope and topics of terrorism/antiterrorism research¹

As shown in Figure 4, the distribution for topics of interest in connection to the Muslim radical clerics and their chronological development shows that the political dimension and impact of sheikhs promoting extremism was tackled starting the end of the 1970^s and maintained as an interest until late 2010; following terrorist attacks conducted by European born-Muslims and/or convert, lone wolves and online-radicalized individuals, attention shifted slowly towards the spread of radical content in the digital world. As such, we advocate that research was influenced by politics and events, and responded to political needs; yet the existing corpus of literature focused little on coded messages, as literature mainly specialized on content analysis of explicit radical narratives.

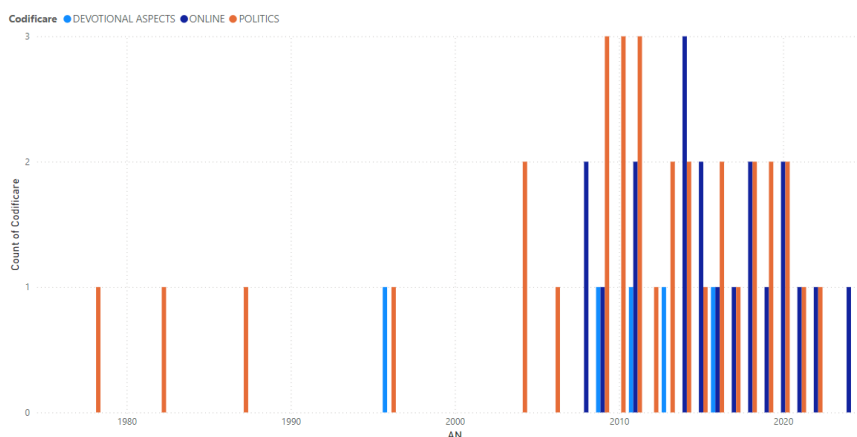


Figure 4. Chronological distribution of research topics²

¹ *Idem*

² *Idem*

Furthermore, content analysis applied to the titles of research articles identified in the analyzed timeframe highlights the main research topics of scholars within the discipline; the main interest lay in the political conduct of Saudi Arabia, on the use of the term Jihad in online and offline communication of clerics, as well as acts with violence and terror committed as a result of exposure to sermons, radical ideas and calls to action. A secondary interest lay in the impact clerics have historically had in domestic policies and developments in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Bahrain, Pakistan, Afghanistan; less interest was shown to the online field, as reflected in the seldom-use of “digital”, “media”, “online”.

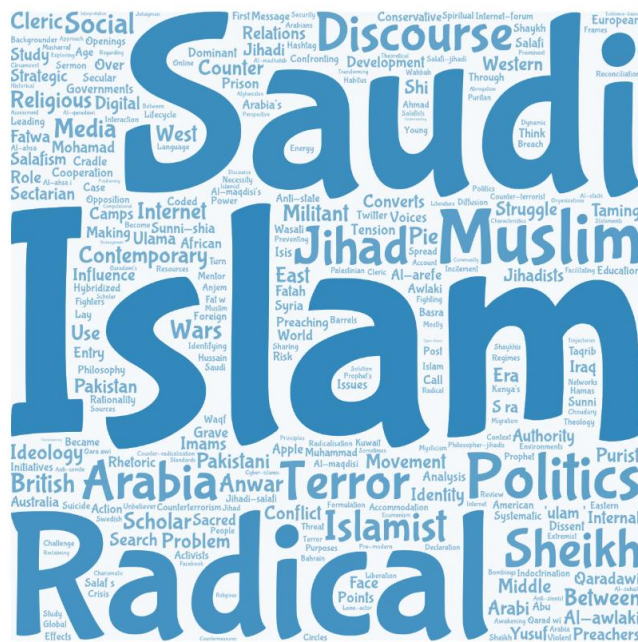


Figure 5. Word cloud content analysis of research articles titles¹

Design of Research

In the light of the above, considering the consensus of scholars regarding the impact of social media usage in spreading a deterritorialized radical message, we used comparative analysis to explore the potential impact of the official accounts used by radical clerics. We compared them to the audience of famous public figures, to offer contextualization. We used quantitative methodology in the form of statistical analysis to research whether a digital community of 101 Facebook accounts follows and shares content provided by radical clerics and conclude on whether Sunni radical clerics have a Romanian converted audience, the reasons for picking certain clerics and potential general features that would describe the afore mentioned options. The criteria for selecting the specific accounts considered were a) signs of Romanian origins (having Romanian name components, indicating Romanian location and/or having Romanian contacts and distributing content in Romanian), b) showing signs of conversion (Islamic name components, displaying signs of conversion or announcing it, sharing Islamic religious content), c) liking pages of radical Sunni clerics and/or sharing content originated from Sunni radical clerics and d) having a wide audience of more that 1000 accounts (criterium chosen to assess on their relevance and outreach as well, as potential impact – which makes the 101 accounts slightly relevant). Accounts were chosen based on stratified sampling, to assure representation of all Romanian regions, as well as gender representation – considering previous studies cleared that most converts are women, converting in the purpose of marriage. As such, the distribution of accounts by region and gender shows an overrepresentation of resident population from Muntenia (mostly Bucharest, which hosts most converts), and a predominance of accounts presumed to be managed by women. Clerics names were not clearly indicated in the present study to comply with GDPR regulations, as well as for ethical concerns (the purpose of this article was not to target individuals, nor to advertise for Islamist radical content).

Results and Discussions

Many religious Muslim leaders with a heavy body of followers indeed reside, as previous research would indicate, on the X platform (former Twitter); considering the lack of content moderation and restrictions, disseminating religious content with potential Islamist layers and potential coded extremism would go unmoderated on the said channel. Despite these findings, we observed that radical Sunni clerics indeed achieved a significant body of followers both on Facebook and Twitter/X; in this sense, we mapped the presence of notorious

¹ *Idem*

Sunni clerics with radical stances: MaA (prominent Saudi preacher and scholar, known for calls to violence and Jihad, anti-Semitic speech, intersectorian opinions, known for his support for the Muslim Brotherhood and Al-Qaeda), SaO (prominent Sahwa leader and reformist cleric, campaigning for human rights, political reform in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, while calling to anti-Semitic attacks and call to actions to Jihad in Syria for people to join the resistance against the establishment), ZN (Indian televangelist, considered the moral author of terrorist attacks in India and Bangladesh, notorious for justifying terrorist attacks and recruitment for DAESH), OA (Egyptian cleric referring to 9/11 and the Charlie Hebdo attack as being a joke, encouraging believers to commit violent antisemitic attacks), BP (Jamaican cleric, known for recruitment for terrorist organizations and terrorism promotion, active supporter of Al-Qaeda), AaQ (known for promoting violent Jihad and quoted by Al-Qaeda cells)¹.

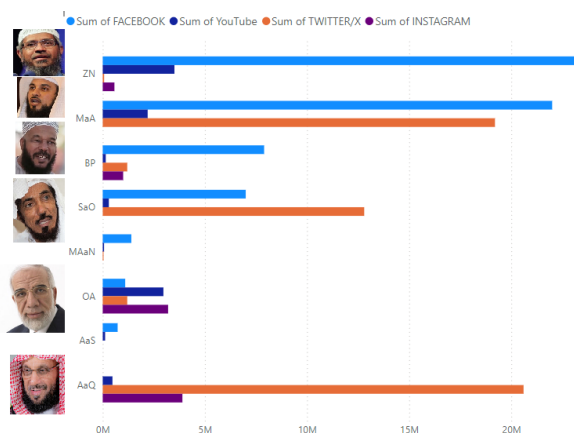


Figure 6. Followers' headcount of radical clerics on various social platforms²

Comparing their potential impact to the audience of well-known social media owners and pop artists, we can observe that radical clerics are addressing a rather extended audience than the later echelon of world-renowned public figures or rock bands:

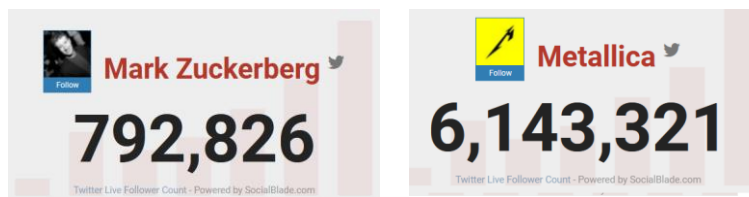


Figure 7. Followers of rock bands and owners of social-media trusts³

As Figure 6 indicates, heavy audiences are achieved mainly on Facebook (*for older clerics affiliated to Al-Qaeda and Muslim Brotherhood*), followed by Twitter for Saudi preachers. These numbers of followers show great impact of content disseminated on social platforms, giving them a free, instant and global audience that defies time, space and borders. This contradicts previous research showing the social platform indicated used most frequently by Islamist groups and extremism figures – is Twitter. The impact of radical clergy was previously analyzed and quantified in a series of studies; an honorable mention is Condra, Isaqzadeh and Linardi applied in 2017 a questionnaire to a sample of 305 Afghan men who participated in the armed conflicts in the region. Their

¹ <https://www.eman-network.com>, www.memri.org, www.counterextremism.com, www.pomeps.org (12.04.2025)

² Generated as result of the author's research

³ Generated as result of the author's research with the tool socialblade.com

conclusions indicated that the impact of the clergy on the population is significant¹. Multiple punctual research on the influence of jihadist clergy confirm their relevance in inspiring terrorist attacks - as for example, Anwar al - Awlaki, who inspired the Charlie Hebdo attack in 2015, continuing to influence even after his death².

Yet, the question resides on how popular radical clerics are in our region. We have mapped a digital community of 101 Facebook accounts administered by Romanian citizens showing marks of conversion (Romanian and Arabic religious name components, sharing both Romanian general content and Islamic religious material, with a large segment of contacts of Romanian descent and a similar profile, with unrestricted activity and indicating their residency) which followed official accounts of radical clerics. The socio-demographic profile of the sample shows an even distribution function of their location, as well as an even distribution on gender. Age could not be mapped or considered as a factor, as most accounts did not make theirs publicly available. Data shows that most women had converted to Islam in the context of their marriage to a believer, and most people included in the study had lived before overseas. In this respect, most converts included in the study live in the Romanian region of Muntenia, followed by Transylvania, as shown Figure 8. The gender distribution is mostly followed by women (60%), followed by men (39,22%), with two accounts where gender could not be established function of the username or public data, as shown in Figure 9.

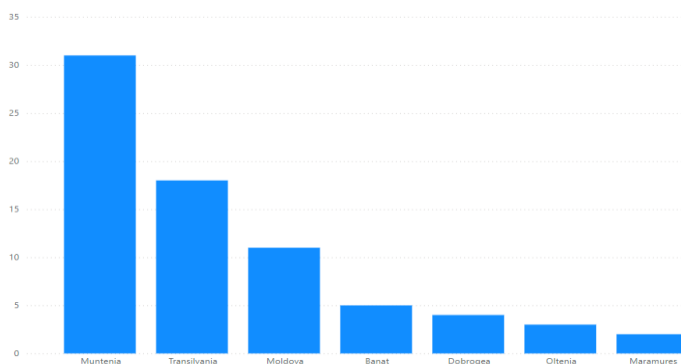


Figure 8. Regional distribution of converts included in the study³

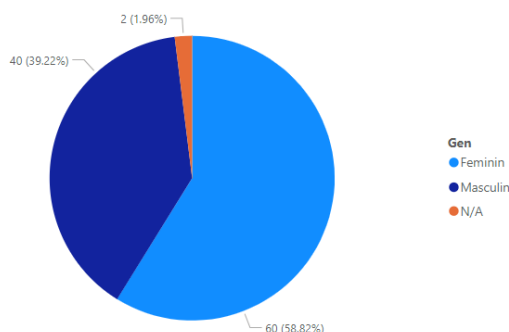


Figure 9 Gender distribution of converts included in the study⁴

¹L. N. Condra, Isaqzadeh Sinardi, *Clerics and Scriptures: Experimentally Disentangling the Influence of Religious Authority in Afghanistan*, "British Journal of Political Science", Cambridge University Press, Vol. 49(2), April 2019, pp. 401-419

²S. Shane, *The Enduring Influence of Anwar al-Awlaki in the Age of the Islamic State*, CTC Sentinel, July 2016, Vol. 9(7), Westpoint University Press, New York, 2016

³ Generated as result of the author` research

Most converts follow one single radical cleric (with a percentage of 56,2%), followed by accounts who follow two radical clerics (29,2%), converts following four clerics (8,76%) and a minority following 5, respective 3 clerics, as described in Figure 9.

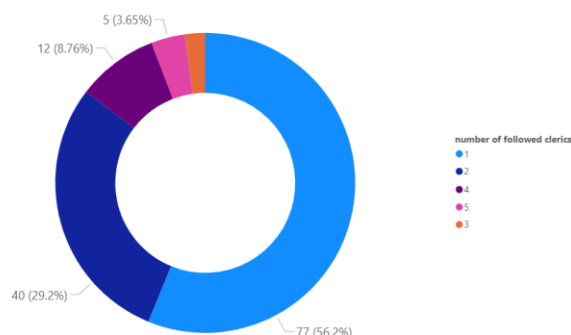


Figure 10. Distribution function of the number of followed radical clerics¹

In relation to the nature of interaction with the clerics' content, majority by a wide margin follows the accounts of radical clerics, with a minority of 9,8% which also distributes content generated by radical clerics, as shown in Figure 11.

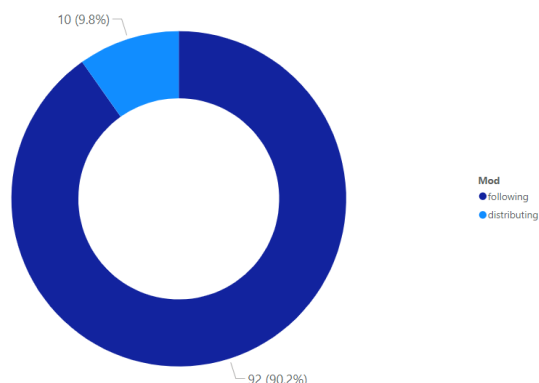


Figure 11. Distribution on the criterium of interaction with the accounts of radical clerics²

In which concerns the distribution on the gender of accounts on the mode of interaction with radical clerics' accounts, we can observe that there is an almost equal distribution, meaning that accounts managed by men distribute and follow content provided by the accounts of radical clerics equally (Figure 12).

⁴ *Idem*

¹ *Idem*

² Generated as result of the author's research

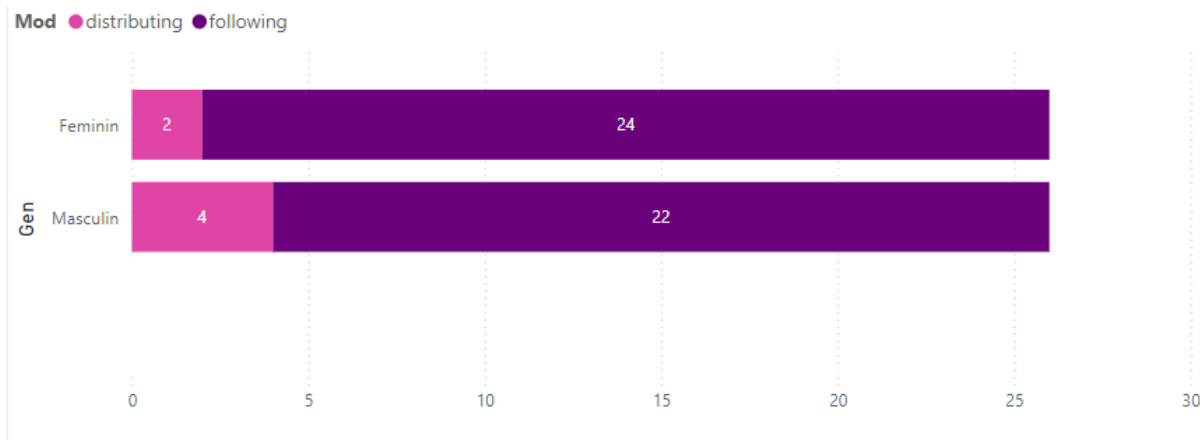


Figure 12. Distribution on the criterium of interaction with the accounts of radical clerics¹

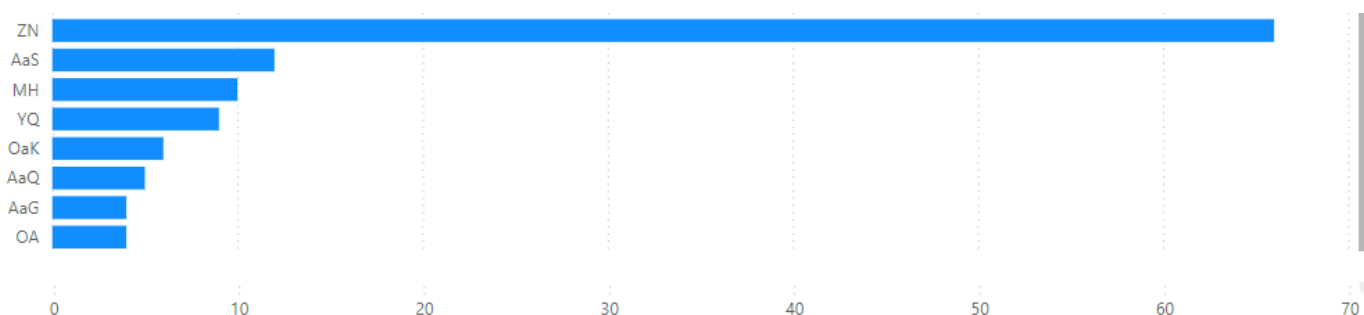


Figure 13. Accounts of radical clerics with most followers among Romanian converts²

The radical cleric accounts on Facebook with most followers among identified converts in Romania are, as *Figure 13* would indicate, ZN, AaS, AaQ, YQ, AaG, MH, OA. It appears that among the leading clerics, both ZN and AaS appear to have more male followers, as opposed to AaQ whom has many female followers, as shown in (Figure 14).

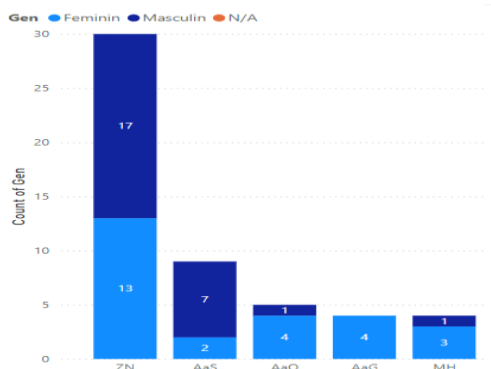


Figure 14. Distribution of genders on modes of interaction with radical clerics' content³

¹ *Idem*

² Generated as result of the author's research

³ *Idem*

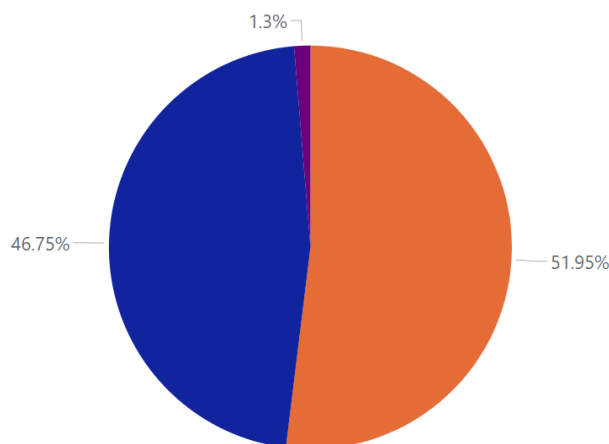


Figure 15. Distribution of language of preaching of radical clerics followed by Romanian converts¹

Finally, we concluded that radical clerics followed by the analyzed converts Facebook community preach evenly in Arabic and English, with a small minority of 1,3% French preachers (*yet, content which was reshared by Romanian converts has English subtitles in almost all cases*). This leads to the conclusion that half of the analyzed community accessed Arabic religious content - leading us to suspect that their conversion might have been doubled by Islamic and Arabic language education.

Conclusions, Approaches, and Potential Avenues of Research

As highlighted by the existing corpus of literature on clerics and adjacent fields (radicalization, counterterrorism, social and cultural studies), radical Sunni clerics can exercise relevant influence in the digital realm; they have been considered a direct influence and a source for radical hate speech, as well as terrorism attacks and violent acts. Punctual research on radical clerics is reduced in volume, yet scholars have started to show interest in the topic. Previous research was reactive - either triggered by a shift in policy, or by violent acts with global impact. Furthermore, research on how radical clerics use language has been focused mainly on explicit speech, rather than a symbolic, diluted form of language.

The current paper shows that the most well-known radical Sunni clerics with a massive online presence use, contrary to previous research, Facebook and Twitter as main platforms for expression, their main audience residing in the two platforms, followed by YouTube. Most content is present in the form of text or as video-sermons, leading us to conclude with the following hypothesis: considering the iconoclasm of Islamic cultures, words achieve a more profound significance for an initiated, educated audience, having enhanced power of penetration. In this sense, we suggest that, as words weigh differently within an Islamic culture and to an Islamic audience, radical clerics, as previous studies had shown, reduced their explicit narratives and probably shifted to a more dissimulated form of online communication, which can appeal to an audience which can decode radical or extremist messages².

Furthermore, we propose further research in the realm of online dissimulated radical messages spread by radical Sunni clerics, which can enrich knowledge in radicalization and counterterrorism disciplines.

Radical clerics have been found to have an audience in Romania. A small digital community of Romanian converts on the Facebook platform follows and/or shares content spread by radical clerics, leading us to conclude: (i) they adhere to some ideas spread by radical Sunni clerics; considering that what radical clerics preach isn't entirely radical, this cannot lead to the unequivocal conclusion that the analyzed community adhere to radical speech and radical ideas; (ii) their interpretation of Islam can be influenced by the lenses provided by the aforementioned group of radical Sunni clerics with explicit extremist views. Furthermore, considering radical Sunni clerics seem to be reaching to a Romanian audience formed of national converts to Islam, we conclude and highlight that this interest in their content isn't reflected into literature, as it should be. Since a need to understand what specific content does its audience consume and to assess the impact of this consumption, we propose

¹ *Idem*

² <https://www.eman-network.com>, www.memri.org, www.counterextremism.com, www.pomeps.org (21.05.2025)

addressing this gap in literature with a content analysis on content spread by Sunni radical clerics and understand how message is formed, transmitted, intertextual aspects with a solid anchor in Islamic and cultural studies.

Future research on the topic can explore whether consumption of content provided by radical clerics can be connected to an appetite for Islamist appetite in the context of political turmoil in regions with most of the Muslim population. Such research can tackle, using comparative analysis (between explicit and dissimulated forms of messaging), whether clerics do maintain content and radical messages and alter form, as well as whether political developments do enhance the dissemination of radical messaging and whether the audience for such content spread by radical clerics can expand or enhance their interaction with radical content.

Proposal: in the light of the above, we propose systematic research of implicit, dissimulated radical narratives of radical clerics, considering that the community Sunni radical clerics heavily use social media platforms, therefore they would be expected to adapt their message to both circumvent social media moderating policies, and appeal to an audience with radical convictions.

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