

Pandemic Hate: COVID-related Antisemitism and Islamophobia, and the Role of Social Media

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Executive Summary

As pandemic restrictions intensified in Western Europe, so too did a wave of COVID-related antisemitism and Islamophobia, proliferating on social media. Considering antisemitism and Islamophobia as joint and intersecting phenomena, this report investigates the ways in which, eighteen months after the start of the pandemic, anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim narratives continue to be created, spread and accessed on social media. Through interviews with thirteen Jewish and Muslim community leaders, subject-area experts and representatives of inter-governmental organisations, this report presents not only the key trends both on and offline, but the ways in which they have impacted the targeted communities, and the ability of Jews and Muslims in Western Europe to live and practice their religion threat-free. This research makes ten key recommendations for social media companies, governments and civil societies, in order to urgently address the spiralling radicalisation which is evidenced throughout this report.

Key Findings

- With the COVID pandemic, a new wave of antisemitism and Islamophobia proliferated on social media, repackaging existing anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim narratives to target minority communities across Europe and blame them for the pandemic.
- Eighteen months since widespread COVID containment restrictions came into effect in Western Europe, COVID related antisemitic and Islamophobic online content has not dissipated, and remains highly accessible to the wider public.
- Social media companies appeared initially overwhelmed by a new wave of online racism, and despite some efforts to reduce online harms, have demonstrably not acted with enough will or efficacy to prevent the spread of antisemitism and Islamophobia on their platforms.
- COVID conspiracist online movements have successfully engaged new audiences, exposing increasing numbers of people to antisemitic and Islamophobic worldviews.
- Online antisemitism and Islamophobia have translated to the offline targeting of Jewish and Muslim individuals and communities, particularly at anti-lockdown and anti-vaccine protests and rallies, where huge numbers of online users were mobilised.
- Some COVID conspiracists have expressed willingness to use violence in pursuit of antisemitic and Islamophobic goals linked to the COVID pandemic, demonstrating an evolved threat landscape.
- Some European faith communities, particularly in Germany, have identified an increased perceived threat among Jews and Muslims, where communities feel more scared to express Judaism or Islam publicly due to the proliferation of online hate they have seen or experienced.

Key Recommendations

1. Flag antisemitic and Islamophobic content on social media in the same manner as COVID misinformation.
2. Promote increased collaboration and information sharing between social media platforms to ensure the wider public is sufficiently shielded from malicious actors.
3. Increase provisions for identifying anonymous social media users to aid hate speech prosecutions.

4. Governments should urgently introduce legislation regulating social media platforms, accompanied with sufficient funding and provisions to see its success.
5. Adequate punishments for noncompliance should be established, encompassing both illegal and legal but harmful content.
6. Ensure that antisemitic and Islamophobic hate speech online is punished with equal severity as offline.
7. Resource systematic monitoring and analysis of incidents of Islamophobia both on and offline.
8. Muslim and Jewish communities should engage in meaningful and productive interfaith work on the joint threats faced by both communities.
9. Civil society should aim to build resilience to disinformation and racist conspiracy theories on social media by promoting civic education for young people.
10. Reduce cross-platform posting from alternative to mainstream platforms.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has “brought out the worst in human rights offences.” That is the opinion of Council of Europe spokesperson and special representative on antisemitic and anti-Muslim hatred and hate crimes, Daniel Hölting. According to Hölting and other research participants, the pandemic has brought with it a new wave of antisemitic and Islamophobic narratives and conspiracy theories, festering in online ecosystems facilitated by the inaction of social media companies. Many of the community leaders, experts and inter-governmental officials involved in this research expressed the view that social media companies are profiting from the hate speech spread on their platforms, to the detriment of Jewish and Muslim communities experiencing ever-increasing prejudices and threats to religious freedoms.

In the context of a global health crisis, what the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks describes as the “virus” of antisemitism has mutated once more, infecting new people and adapting to new social and political realities.¹ So too, have existing Islamophobic narratives been warped and twisted to accommodate changing contexts, achieving increased success as crisis deepens. The site of infection of these growing viruses is social media.

This research takes steps to understand the increase in antisemitism and Islamophobia on social media since the pandemic. In consultation with experts on racism and the communities it impacts, this report uniquely presents the joint threats faced by Jewish and Muslim communities, and considers the ways in which meaningful interfaith work can be the pillar of a robust response. A number of policy recommendations use data analysis as a springboard for promoting positive, relevant and realistic solutions to the identified threats.

A recent report published by the European Commission identified a seven-fold increase in French-language online antisemitic content, and over a thirteen-fold increase in antisemitic German-language content during the first stages of the vaccine rollout, quantifiably demonstrating an increase in COVID-related online antisemitism.² Building on such existing research, this report provides expanded and updated insight into antisemitism on social media, identifying trends across Western Europe. Complementing the European Commission’s findings on the quantitative increase of online antisemitism, this research will seek to understand the qualitative nature of online antisemitic content, applying this methodology to the study of online Islamophobia and taking the first steps to understand their offline impact on Jewish and Muslim communities across Europe.

Over eighteen months since the global pandemic was declared, this report evidences the enduring proliferation of racist COVID-related content on mainstream social media platforms. Research participants piece together a story of a booming conspiracy movement, partially constituted of previously apolitical individuals, who in the search for answers to pandemic confusion, stumble upon antisemitic and Islamophobic conspiracy theories on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Gradually, such people are engaged in a growing mass movement and normalised to racist worldviews. Some are mobilised to action, marching alongside known far-right actors and reproducing carefully packaged antisemitic and Islamophobic conspiracy theories. In the background, the increased efforts of social media platforms to moderate COVID misinformation have fallen short of their duty to prevent Jewish and Muslim users from harm, and have failed to recognise how

1 Jonathan Sacks, “The Mutating Virus: Understanding Antisemitism,” *The Office of Rabbi Sacks*, September 27 2016, <https://rabbisacks.org/mutating-virus-understanding-antisemitism/>.

2 Milo Comerford and Lea Gerster, “The Rise of Antisemitism Online During the Pandemic: A study of French and German content,” *European Commission*, 32.

new narratives of antisemitism and Islamophobia have germinated and spread on their platforms. Beyond the pandemic context, faith communities can explicitly identify social media as the cause of a heightened perceived threat. While social media companies’ profits grow, European Jews and Muslims’ freedoms shrink.

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

This research has been conducted using a mixed-methods approach. Firstly, semi-structured interviews with Jewish and Muslim community leaders, experts in antisemitism and Islamophobia, and representatives of inter-governmental organisations were conducted. Interview methodology benefits this research through its ability to gain perspectives not only on the nature of antisemitism and Islamophobia, but how it has been received by impacted communities. Interview participants were chosen in order to provide a broad expertise across the subject area, as well as ensuring a diverse geographical spread, the inclusion of voices of all ages, and placing the voices of impacted communities at the forefront. However, this should not be regarded as fully representative of multi-dimensional and diverse Muslim and Jewish communities across Europe.

Research participants’ interviews were recorded and stored securely online, only available to the author and supporting IFFSE staff. Participants were informed of the steps taken to ensure data confidentiality, whereby a participant could end an interview at any time, the recording would not be saved and there would be no detriment to them or their organisation. Research participants are detailed in appendix one.

Secondly, this research employed non-participant observation methods on social media platforms where the movements in question were known to be active. Online searches were conducted using keywords discussed in research interviews. In the included examples of social media content, account details have been removed in order to avoid signposting to racist content. Social media platforms have been named where they are regarded as mainstream or have been otherwise named in research concerning extremist content online. Where these conditions have not been met, the name of the social media platform has been omitted. Platforms named in this research therefore include; Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Telegram and 4chan. These platforms were chosen in order to give insight into the most common and readily available content, in addition to providing understanding into a range of racist content on platforms where extremist actors are known to be active.

This report covers online content in Western Europe, an endeavour which is complicated by the inability to verify the location of online accounts. As much as possible, this has been mitigated by conducting research into the location, or likely location, of accounts, given other content posted, profile information and language. It should also be noted that as this content is available in Western Europe, regardless of its origins the impact is similarly received by Jewish and Muslim communities.

This report classifies antisemitism using the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of antisemitism as “a certain perception of Jews, which may be expressed as hatred toward Jews. Rhetorical and physical manifestations of antisemitism are directed toward Jewish or non-Jewish individuals and/or their property, toward Jewish community institutions and religious facilities.”³

3 “Working Definition of Antisemitism,” *International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance*, <https://www.holocaustremembrance.com/resources/working-definitions-charters/working-definition-antisemitism>.

Islamophobia is defined in line with the Runnymede Trust, who originally coined the term in reference to “any distinction, exclusion, or restriction towards, or preference against, Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.”⁴

Structure

This report is arranged in four sections. A first chapter considers antisemitic COVID-related narratives, encompassing conspiracy theories concerning Jewish power, claims that Jews are profiteering from the pandemic and using Holocaust comparisons. Subsequently, COVID-related Islamophobia will be investigated, with regards to how Muslims are blamed for spreading the pandemic, conspiracy theories of COVID as a jihadist weapon, and allegations that Muslim communities are given a free pass by authorities. A third section will consider these joint threats together, and the ways in which the online COVID conspiracist movement mobilises antisemitism and Islamophobia offline to target Jewish and Muslim communities. Finally, this report will present ten policy recommendations for social media companies, governments and civil society.

⁴ “Islamophobia: Still a challenge for us all”, *The Runnymede Trust*, 1997, <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/Islamophobia%20Report%202018-Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

Antisemitic Online Narratives and COVID-19

Political, economic and health crises sparked by the spread of the COVID pandemic brought with them a new wave of antisemitic conspiracies. Council of Europe spokesperson Daniel Hölting identified that “the Council of Europe, across its membership, has been observing that the pandemic has had a profound effect on the dissemination of discrimination and other threats against Jews in Europe”. Hölting identified that “across Europe we are seeing increased antisemitic discrimination online, and the pandemic has been an important contributory factor.”

Many research participants mirrored the assessment from Dave Rich, the Community Security Trust’s Head of Policy, that COVID-related antisemitism is “old wine in new bottles”, where classical antisemitic conspiracy theories have been adapted to contemporary crises in order to gain relevance and popularity. Antisemitism thrives off its malleability, set in the context of a continuous two-thousand-year history of attributing blame for crises on Jewish communities, including the Black Plague, where accusations of Jews poisoning wells sparked vast pogroms.⁵

Social media functions as an “incubator” for antisemitic expressions due to feelings of impunity, according to Yonathan Arfi, Vice President of the *Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France* (CRIF). Even before the pandemic, data from the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency found that nine out of ten Jews in Europe saw the internet as the most problematic source of antisemitism, where this rate rose among young Jews.⁶

Claudia Mendoza, CEO of the Jewish Leadership Council, and Rich identified that while antisemitism is not the driving force of COVID conspiracy movements, they are driven by actors with antisemitic worldviews, whereby those engaged in such movements are highly likely to absorb antisemitic content on social media. As such, those who previously engaged in non-racist political beliefs are exposed to increasingly radical antisemitic content, even if inadvertently. While many research participants agreed that a majority of COVID conspiracist activists are likely to be primarily motivated by the pandemic, not antisemitism, Aron Schuster, Director of the *Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland* (ZWST), laments those who join such movements do so despite the clear participation of antisemitic actors. He comments that COVID conspiracists “do not care about antisemitism; most of them do not even know Jews, and they do not think of themselves as a danger against Jews”. And so the stage is set for what Milo Comerford, Head of Policy and Research in the Institute for Strategic Dialogue’s Counter Extremism team, describes as a greater pickup and purchase of antisemitic narratives in the mainstream than has historically been the case.

This section will present three key ways in which the online COVID conspiracist movement engages in antisemitism. Firstly, the manner in which centuries-old tropes of Jewish control and power have been repackaged to paint Jews as the source of the pandemic. Secondly, antisemitic tropes that Jews are profiting financially from suffering associated with the pandemic. Finally, the use of Holocaust inversions and comparisons in the COVID conspiracist movement will be discussed. In doing so, the availability and reach of antisemitism on both mainstream and alternative platforms will be evidenced.

⁵ “Coronavirus and the Plague of Antisemitism”, *Community Security Trust*, 2020, 3.

⁶ “Experiences and perceptions of antisemitism: Second survey on discrimination and hate crime against Jews in the EU”, *European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights*, 2018, 11.

Antisemitic Online Narratives and COVID-19
Accusing Jews of controlling the pandemic and using it to grab power.
Conspiracy theories of Jews profiting from the pandemic.
Holocaust inversion and revisionism, comparing anti-COVID activism to Jews in the Holocaust.

Figure one: A table summarising the key antisemitic online narratives relating to the pandemic.

Accusations of Jewish control and power

Existing conspiracy theories, such as the New World Order, were rapidly adapted to encompass new realities, and were quick to place blame on a perceived shadowy elite, often defined as “globalists”; a common antisemitic dogwhistle. Comerford notes that in the early stages of the pandemic, social media companies struggled to adequately moderate the proliferation of antisemitic content on social media, under new hashtags and key words. Although he credits social media companies with making increasingly successful efforts in the face of a constantly changing conspiratorial and antisemitic online ecosystem, this research found that on Instagram alone, the hashtag #jewishworldorder had 13,900 related posts 16 months after the global pandemic was declared.

Similarly, posts with hashtags which included the phrase “New World Order” in English, French, Spanish and German totalled over 45,000 by July 2021. Although these posts may not all be explicitly related to the pandemic, Figure one exemplifies Spanish language content on the #NuevoOrdenMundial hashtag, where a star of David indicates the user’s association of the UN’s perceived agenda with Jews, and graphics 13 “population surveillance” and 17 “implanting microchips” blame Jews for perceived associations with pandemic control.



Figure two: A Spanish-language antisemitic infographic found on Instagram. The graphic names 17 alleged “objectives for depopulation” alongside the logo of the United Nations and a star of David.

From such conspiracy theories emerged the designation of COVID as the “Jew Flu” across social media platforms, such as Figure three, where the user tweeted that “the jews [sic] have ALWAYS been behind EVERYTHING.” This tweet had not been removed many months after being posted.



Figure three: A Tweet accusing Jews of spreading a “Jewflu”.

Other social media users, such as the Facebook user in Figure four, labelled COVID as the “Holo-cough.” Such denotation not only causes gross offence to Jewish people through its trivialisation of Jewish genocide, but is used to delegitimise the severity of the pandemic. This phrase was also found to be popular on alternative and extremist social media platforms, where it was even a dedicated video sub-category on an antisemitic video hosting platform, shown in Figure five.

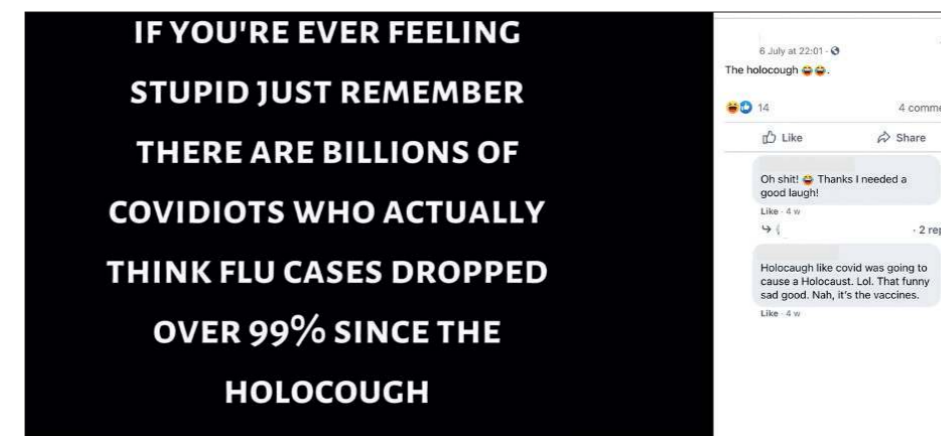


Figure four: A Facebook post and comments mocking the use of the term “HoloCough”.

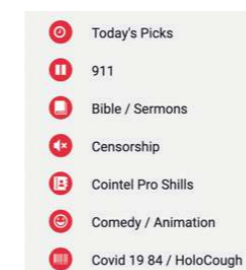


Figure five: A section of video categories on an antisemitic video-sharing platform. One category is “Covid 19 84/HoloCough”. 1984 refers to the George Orwell dystopian novel by the same name, which is commonly used in COVID conspiracy ecosystems to denote perceived dystopian circumstances.

Conspiratorial antisemitic thinking was also demonstrated in social media posts which used less explicit language, which may have been in order to avoid content moderation. Tropes concerning George Soros or the Rothschild family are common examples of dogwhistle antisemitism, as evidenced in Figures six and seven, where they are accused of being dictators, members of a “trillionaire shadow government” or its “billionaire disciples,” and responsible for “population control,” “lockdown masks and distancing” and the “vaccine ID microchip.” Although the proponents of dogwhistle terms may or may not be consciously engaging in antisemitic tropes, Dave Rich affirms that their impact on the Jewish community is the same as overt antisemitism, as the user cannot control where and how their posts spread.

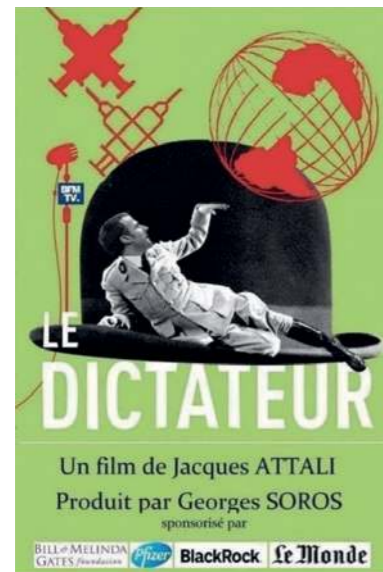


Figure six: A French language graphic accusing Hungarian Jewish philanthropist George Soros of aiding a dictatorial vaccination system.



Figure seven: An infographic found on Instagram from a UK-based account.

Conspiracy theories about Jews and money

A second antisemitic narrative relating to the COVID pandemic accuses Jewish people of making profit out of the health crisis. Yonathan Arfi identifies that as the French government and health institutions scrambled together an initial response to the emerging crisis, antisemitic actors noted the Jewish identities of the French Health Minister, the CEO of the French Institute of Health, and the General Health Director. The Jewishness of key government COVID response figures was instrumental to the construction of anti-Jewish COVID conspiracies in France. Such theories continued through later stages of the pandemic, where national vaccine rollout programmes, perceived to be run by Jews, were seen as mechanisms for consolidating perceived totalitarian state power.



Figure eight: An antisemitic infographic found on Twitter. Altered versions of the same graphic were also found on Instagram.

Tropes concerning Jewish financial control date back to medieval Christian antisemitism, having been repackaged throughout the centuries to associate Jews with profiteering off contemporary crises. In the COVID crisis, this narrative has been repeated across European states, with one neo-Nazi Spanish language Telegram channel claiming that Jewish power is “the true power behind the PLANDEMIC, the WHO, the UN, pharmaceutical companies, COVID-19, current restrictions on freedom, vaccines which are not vaccines, the New Reality, Globalist Agendas, Lobbies and much more;” as well as being responsible for controlling “news media, entertainment, the banking and financial systems.” The channel states that regarding the pandemic and all the other ills of the world that it sees, “the Jewish Question is the key to the problem.” This follows in the centuries-old antisemitic tradition of over-inflating perceptions of Jewish influence in order to blame Jews at convenience.

Holocaust Inversion and “post-Shoah antisemitism”

A final key area where antisemitism has proliferated during the pandemic is what German monitoring centre RIAS refer to as “post-Shoah antisemitism”; “the way in which the subject of National Socialist mass crimes is dealt with, for example when the memory of Nazi crimes is rejected or they are trivialized.”⁷

In France, President Macron’s introduction of COVID passports as part of the vaccine drive was labelled online as the *Passporte Nazitaire*, and Macron was compared to a Nazi under the hashtag *#DictatureSanitaire*. Similarly, Figure nine, accessed on Telegram, depicts the vaccine drive as a move towards a “fourth Reich”, with sheep following each other into notorious Nazi concentration camp Auschwitz. The sign at the Auschwitz gate has been modified from “work sets you free” to “the vaccine sets you free.” This trope is also popular among German social media conspiracy theorists, who regularly use the phrase “*impfen macht frei*” as exemplified in Figure 10, found across various social media platforms including Instagram and Facebook.



Figure nine: A French-language graphic comparing Pfizer, Moderna, the World Health Organisation and Bill Gates to a “fourth Reich”. It depicts sheep being herded into Auschwitz concentration camp, where the infamous sign “*arbeit macht frei*” has been edited to “the vaccine sets you free”.

⁷ “Antisemitic incidents in Germany 2020”, RIAS, 2021, 9.



Figure 10: A cartoon on Facebook showing the gates of Auschwitz, where the sign has also been changed to say “the vaccine sets you free”, and showing the guards carrying syringes.

Furthermore, antisemitic Nazi comparisons are evidenced in the formation of the “White Rose” group, and its equivalent in multiple European languages, where the group compares itself to the German resistance group of the same name in the Nazi era. The group encourages followers to place centrally-created stickers around their neighbourhoods, such as the example in Figure 11, which compares the vaccine rollout to the Nazi SS unit. Depictions of government figures as Nazis runs parallel to that of anti-vaxxers as Jewish victims, such as in Figure 12.



Figure 11: A sticker produced by the White Rose regional group in France. The text, ordering people to “obey” with a picture of a syringe, has “SS” highlighted in the same font used by the Nazi killing squad of the same name.

The use of yellow stars in the anti-vaccine movement has also had significant uptake offline and at rallies in Europe and beyond,⁸ and has received criticism from governments.⁹ Yonathan Arfi sees the use of yellow stars as a “sign that the Jewish Question is not very far away” from COVID conspiracists’ minds. Particularly in the German context, Aron Schuster sees Holocaust inversion as “increasingly transparent”, whereby antisemitic actors use it to distance themselves from the stigma of historical Nazism and present themselves as on the side of the victim, which in turn compounds the offence caused to Jewish people.



Figure 12: A graphic found on Instagram of a yellow star badge, stating that it is a “new badge created which will permit you to go back to work, travel, take the plane, train or the bus, and buy and sell [goods].” The yellow star with a microchip is intended to indicate those who have been “vaccinated”.

One anti-vaccine rally, organised on social media platforms including Telegram, was located at the former concentration camp Mauthausen in Austria. Online promotional material stated that “no one can tell us we’re Holocaust deniers if we’re demonstrating at the camp”, which European Union of Jewish Students President Bini Guttmann describes as an attempt to “whitewash themselves from antisemitism”.¹⁰ At the demonstration itself, organisers played an Adolf Hitler speech.¹¹ In these ways, even if some COVID conspiracists do not set out to express antisemitic views, employing likeness between the pandemic and the Holocaust causes great offence to Jewish people.

8 Angela Charlton and Constantin Gouvy, “Anger as French protesters compare vaccines to Nazi horrors”, *AP News*, July 19 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/europe-health-government-and-politics-coronavirus-pandemic-race-and-ethnicity-e3757c1c51abd7ce56473c455f6f880d>; Mathilde Frot, “Anti-lockdown protesters wear yellow stars and carry ‘vaccine holocaust’ banners”, *The Jewish Chronicle*, April 26 2021, <https://www.thejc.com/news/uk/anti-lockdown-protesters-wear-yellow-stars-and-carry-vaccine-holocaust-banners-1.516062>.
9 “German call to ban ‘Jewish star’ at Covid demos”, *BBC News*, May 7 2021, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-57020697>.
10 @bini_guttmann, “Tweet by Bini Guttmann”, *Twitter*, May 14 2021, 10:43am, https://twitter.com/Bini_Guttmann/status/1393139885683445765?s=20.
11 @deltamikeplus, “Tweet by Dietmar Muhlbock”, *Twitter*, May 14 2021, 11:10am, <https://twitter.com/deltamikeplus/status/1393146575552143360>.



Figure 13: A graphic from Telegram giving information on the logistics of a COVID-conspiracist protest, posted to Twitter.¹²

Conclusions

The above narratives constitute a new wave of antisemitic conspiracy theories, characterised by its adaptation of medieval classical antisemitic tropes for contemporary purposes. COVID-related antisemitism has attracted a broader support-base where conspiracy theories spread online have led individuals to encounter antisemitism where they previously have not.

Antisemitic narratives continue to have a significant presence on mainstream social media platforms. Although platforms have somewhat attempted to reduce the exposure of antisemitism on their systems, the continued proliferation of antisemitic keywords and hashtags remains a significant gap. Research from the Centre for Countering Digital Hate recently noted the ease with which one can access antisemitic content on social media, concluding that when reported to the platform, 84% of antisemitic content was not removed and remained online.¹³ Similarly, in their landmark court case against Twitter, the *Union des étudiants juifs de France* identified that only approximately 20% of notified illegal content was removed within 3 to 5 days.¹⁴ These findings have been mirrored in this research, which evidences antisemitic content from several months ago which remains online.

There is no doubt among the Jewish community that social media fuels both the spread of wider antisemitism and is responsible for a “mass panic”, according to Claudia Mendoza, where one incident is circulated widely online, generating anxiety of a level that Mendoza has not seen before. Anecdotally, she knows of people who express that they are afraid to be noticeably Jewish, particularly during the May 2021 period of heightened antisemitism in the UK.

12 @scharlatanjanja, “Tweet by Tanja Malle”, *Twitter*, May 14 2021, 7:06am, <https://twitter.com/scharlatanjanja/status/1393085259760214018>.
13 “Failure to Protect: How tech giants fail to act on user reports of antisemitism”, *Centre for Countering Digital Hate*, 2021.
14 Daniel Hölting, “The recent escalation of antisemitic attacks requires a Europe-wide response. Governments should join forces to prevent new waves of antisemitism by countering hate speech on the Internet and supporting education about the Holocaust and human rights”, *Council of Europe*, <https://rm.coe.int/sgr-text-03-06-21-10h30-master-version-2767-8460-3651-1/1680a2ce90>.

Islamophobic Online Narratives and COVID-19

Council of Europe spokesperson Daniel Hölting identifies that “in the same way that Jews have been blamed for the pandemic, Muslims have also”. According to Hölting, it is “clear that the internet is used for spreading conspiracy theories including the import of COVID”, where “the expressions used against Muslims are very similar to the hate and death threats against Jews, and are becoming more common”.

Islamophobia on online forums has adopted pandemic-related narratives in various manners. A recent survey of Muslim community leaders by the Council of Europe found that all respondents “reported an increase in anti-Muslim conspiracy theories on the Internet, in particular during the Covid pandemic.”¹⁵ The report identified “far right, racist and/or anti-immigration groups as the most frequent authors of anti-Muslim hate speech”, further noting that the threshold for acceptance of anti-Muslim content online is decreasing.¹⁶

Director of the *Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland*, Aiman Mazyek, has recognised a noticeable uptick in online Islamophobia in recent years, highlighting in particular the *Querdenker* movement, which has an “increased aggression towards Muslims”. Mazyek identifies a pattern of thought among the movement’s proponents, who often start with criticism of Angela Merkel’s government, then moves to her policies on refugees and migrants, and subsequently moves to target Islam and Muslims.

This section will identify three key narratives which anti-Muslim social media users employ in the COVID context; firstly blaming Muslims for spreading the virus; secondly employing conspiracy theories that Muslims are deliberately spreading COVID as a form of biological jihad, and thirdly ideas that Muslims are given preferential treatment by government and law enforcement.



Figure 14: An Islamophobic Telegram post to a channel with over 7,000 members.

Islamophobic Online Narratives and COVID-19
Accusations of uncleanliness and deliberate infections.
“Corona Jihad” and the perceived weaponisation of the pandemic.
The “double standards” charge and accusations of police bias towards Muslims.

Figure 15: A table summarising the key Islamophobic online narratives relating to the pandemic.

¹⁵ “Online hate speech is a growing and dangerous trend: Initial results of a consultation of Muslim organisations”, Spokesperson of the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, *Special Representative on antisemitic, anti-Muslim and other forms of religious intolerance and hate crimes*, July 2021, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

Blaming Muslims for spreading the virus

Throughout the pandemic, Muslim communities have been accused of playing a disproportionate role in spreading the virus. One 4chan user commented that “even today most Muslims are quite dirty and smelly”, and that they are “getting away with not following the hygiene regulations because of muh hammed [sic]”, serving to homogenise the community as unclean. A second user responded “good, let them infect one another, they are surely still having meet-ups in their mosques”, and that they “cant wait to see those faggy old Muslims in their gay dresses fucking die”, employing a homophobic and violent form of Islamophobia. Comerford assesses that this essentialisation plays on existing tropes on the lack of integration of Muslim communities, where they are perceived to lack effort in curbing the virus and are accused of poor engagement in their wider community structures.

Celebrating the potential deaths of Muslims, one 4chan user posted in March 2020 at the start of the pandemic that they hope that “all the mudslimes get sick and die”, while a second user responded that given the proximity of the Muslim festival of Ramadan, Muslim people “will purposefully weaken themselves then gather with their elderly and die in [sic] masse”, which they say “will be beautiful”. While the location of users cannot be verified, they claim to hail from a variety of Western European states.

Some online users have accused Muslim communities of deliberately spreading the virus. For example, Figure 16 shows a Reddit user spreading a conspiracy theory that individuals are encouraging their followers to infect banknotes in order to spread the virus. The user on TikTok was perceived by online actors to be Muslim, and the Reddit post was subsequently shared to other platforms, such as 4chan, supposedly as evidence of a campaign by Muslim communities to spread COVID.



Figure 16: A Reddit post where a TikTok video of an individual allegedly spreading the virus on banknotes has been reposted.

As Associate Professor at Leiden University Tahir Abbas affirms, racists often mix up Muslims with Asian minorities, Sikhs, Hindus or a perceived monolithic migrant or refugee community, leading Islamophobia to be targeted at non-Muslims. This has manifested in Germany, where both Aron Schuster and Ahmad Mansour, Managing Director at MIND Prevention, identify the utilisation of Islamophobic narratives to blame refugees, some of whom identify as Muslim, for the spread of the virus and bringing it to Germany from abroad. These talking points about loss of border control and increased focus on national responses are merely rehashed from existing political debates in order to increase the visibility of anti-migrant narratives, according to Comerford. Mansour further notes that migrant communities who travelled through Turkey and the Balkans are accused of “refusing” to be vaccinated in targeted narratives against migrant communities.

“It’s biological jihad”; the perceived weaponisation of COVID

In many cases, accusations of Muslims spreading the pandemic have adopted a conspiratorial nature. Comerford pinpoints the origins of the “Corona Jihad” phenomenon, a conspiracy theory that Muslims are purposefully spreading COVID as a bioweapon, in India, where it has been proliferated by Hindu nationalists. The conspiracy theory that Muslims communities are deliberately spreading the virus, and the perception of a “biological jihad” has had significant purchase in Europe, among existing anti-Muslim and far-right extremist online communities.

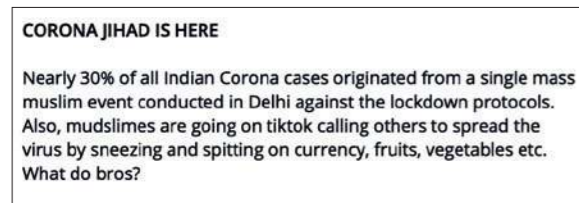


Figure 17: An islamophobic 4chan post, which was reposted to Telegram.

On anonymous online forum 4chan, where a significant far right population is active on the extremist messaging board /pol/, one British user theorised that “Muslims in europe [sic] are being told by imams – if they believe themselves infected – to spread the virus far and wide wherever the infidel may be found. They are told to lick their hands before touching public door handles, hand rails, cash machines and light switches etc”. Similarly, a user based in Germany commented that “shrine lickers are the new suicide bombers” and called for a “final solution to the Muslim question”, in reference to the Nazi plan to exterminate European Jews.



Figure 18: An islamophobic 4chan post.

One user on a Telegram chat of supporters of British anti-Muslim extremist Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, popularly known as Tommy Robinson, commented that they are “fully expecting a third lockdown with the new Islamic Jihad variant of Covid”, of which they claim the symptoms are making “Pakistani muslims want to rape children”. This claim mirrors a key rallying trope for the radical

right, where framings of “Muslims grooming gangs” have attempted to attribute criminality to ethnicity, culture and migrant status.¹⁷

Such conspiracy theories are based on the Islamophobic essentialisation of Muslim communities, and as Comerford notes, stem from the existing conflation of Muslim communities with Islamist actors, which aims to “problematise entire communities for the perceived actions of a minority”. Wider Muslim communities have been deliberately associated with Islamist groups such as the so-called Islamic State, who Comerford explains have “used the pandemic to consolidate power”, through designating the virus as a “soldier of Allah” and seizing the opportunity to promote Islamic governance as an antidote to the virus.

“One rule for some and another for others, the Non Muslims”

A further Islamophobic narrative circulating on social media is the claim that Muslim communities have been allowed to break COVID restrictions or that double standards exist in the enforcement of restrictions, where the system is perceived to be biased towards Muslims. A Telegram channel thought to be run by Yaxley-Lennon shared an article of police officers “kneeling for photos with Pakistanis in notorious Muslim rape gang town Telford while they had a 200 people wedding while the English aren’t allowed to go to weddings”. One user responded that “the Muslims are flooding their mosques today...breaking covid laws, and there is not a single police officer ever in sight”. British Islamophobia monitoring charity TellMAMA was forced to raise concerns over such anti-Muslim misinformation and its prevalence on Twitter, and the Islamophobic backlash it sparked.¹⁸ The spread of such narratives is rooted in existing anti-Muslim prejudices aimed to present white populations as victims.

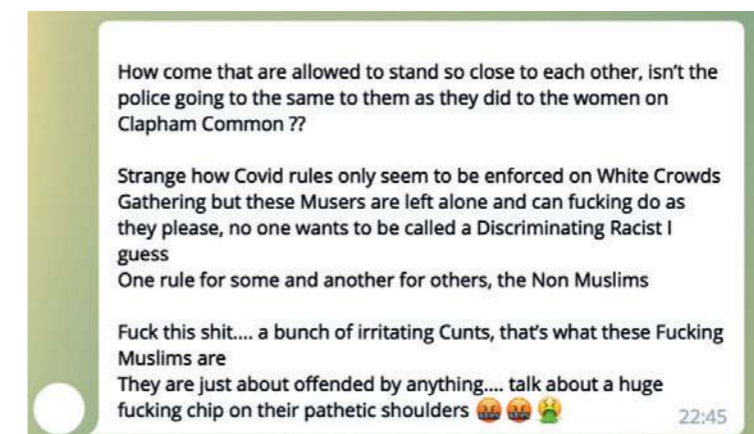


Figure 19: An Islamophobic Telegram post, referring to clashes between police and participants of a vigil for a murdered woman in London.

Some conspired that Muslim communities have been allowed to ignore COVID restrictions as the authorities are too scared to criticise Islam for fear of being accused of racism. This narrative stems from radical anti-left and anti-establishment sentiments that have long been popular in far-right online forums, but found renewed purchase during the pandemic. Far right extremists have

¹⁷ For example, see Ella Cockbain and Waqas Tufail, “Failing victims, fuelling hate: challenging the harms of the ‘Muslims grooming gangs’ narrative”, *Race and Class* 61, no. 3:3-32, January 2020.

¹⁸ “No, the Muslims praying in this video aren’t ignoring the coronavirus lockdown. It’s far-right fake news”, *TellMAMA*, March 26 2020, <https://tellmamauk.org/no-the-muslims-praying-in-this-video-arent-ignoring-the-coronavirus-lockdown-its-far-right-fake-news/>.

theorised that the legal, political and economic systems are stacked against them, in the grasp of a leftist, politically correct, Muslim or Jewish agenda. This has been transplanted to the pandemic context, where Telegram users have claimed that it is “Strange how Covid rules only seem to be enforced on White Crowds gathering but these Musers are left alone and can fucking do as they please” as “no one wants to be called a Discriminating Racist”. As seen in extremist conspiracy theories, such as the Great Replacement, liberal democratic institutions and public bodies are blamed for the perceived actions of Muslim communities, and as such, these narratives serve not only to target and threaten Muslim people, but liberal democracy as a whole.



Figure 20: An islamophobic Telegram post.

Such examples highlight the intersectional nature of anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish conspiracy narratives, whereby Muslims are not afforded enough agency in the far-right mentality to have the ability to orchestrate a global plot, and therefore a Jewish puppet master is imagined. Comerford points to the 2018 Pittsburgh synagogue attack as an example of this conspiracy theory, noting the Islamophobic motivations of the shooter, who chose a Jewish location due to the synagogue's recent event with a pro-migrant group.

Conclusions

As evidenced in discussion on antisemitism, COVID-related Islamophobia is rooted in existing tropes and conspiracy theories, where the pandemic is slotted in to extremists' worldviews to attempt to explain the crisis in a convenient and simple manner. Although not all social media posts explicitly encourage violence, they individually contribute to the construction of an increasingly radical digital ecosystem, where actors who are predisposed to violence gain new Islamophobic narratives.

By accusing Muslim communities of disproportionately spreading the virus, building on essentialised views of Muslims to describe this perceived super-spreading as a deliberate biological jihadi weapon, and blaming liberal democratic institutions of failing to act upon these allegations, Islamophobic social media users have created another building block in their extremist worldviews.

Research by the Council of Europe in consultation with eight Muslim community organisations from different European states emphasised the threat of online Islamophobia, with six out of eight organisations believing that online hate speech is now equally or more threatening than traditional verbal and physical attacks as it is directed at a whole group rather than an individual. Spokesperson Hölting opines that “by spreading things online, you can incite others and build a larger wave of hate than perhaps an individual attack on the road”.

From Online Hate to Offline Mobilisation

With the increasing role that social media has played in information communication, it becomes ever more difficult to neatly distinguish the online from the offline, whereby the same actors and narratives are active both on and offline. Ahmad Mansour finds that inflammatory and uncontrolled online behaviours that have developed and been normalised online during the pandemic are now being applied to offline spaces. “Civil behaviour”, according to Mansour, “has effectively been un-learned; the control mechanisms are no longer there”. He speaks of the same processes happening in classrooms, where children who have not attended school for a significant period of time “are no longer able to deal with conflict in a constructive way”, citing a decrease in empathy and an increase in poor mental health. It is with these processes in mind that this section will explore the ways in which online antisemitic and Islamophobic communities which have been cultivated during the pandemic have mobilised offline, and their potential for violent actions.

Protests, Rallies and Individual Direct Action

Social media has played a central and vital role in the organising of anti-vaccine and COVID conspiracy rallies and marches. Figure 21 shows posters promoting a coordinated “WorldWide Rally” against vaccines in July 2021 across the world. This particular organising movement has presence in dozens of countries, with individual Telegram channels for each local rally, demonstrating its transitional nature and reach. The ‘official’ Telegram group for the London-based rally had over 12,000 followers at the time of writing. In Germany, RIAS recorded over 300 similar demonstrations where antisemitic stereotypes were employed between March 2020 and March 2021.¹⁹

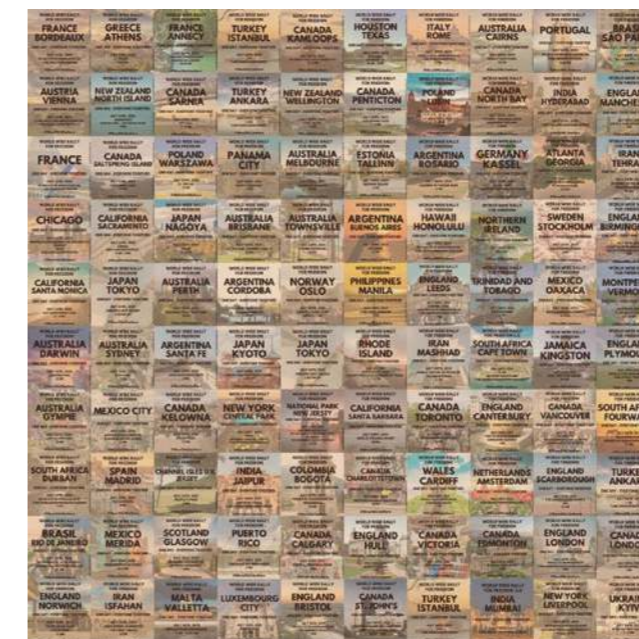


Figure 21: A graphic from Telegram of posters advertising a July 2021 World Wide rally against COVID restrictions and the vaccine in various cities.

¹⁹ “Antisemitische Verschwörungsmymen in Zeiten der Coronapandemie”, *AJC Berlin Ramer Institute*, 2021, 17.

In Germany, a COVID conspiracy protest attended by a reported 38,000 people attempted to storm the Reichstag on 29 August 2020.²⁰ Such intentions demonstrate both the presence of more pernicious extremist actors within the movement, and their anti-government and anti-democratic motivations. European Union of Jewish Students Vice President Ruben Gerczikow describes how the rally was organised on Telegram, by a group, *Querdenken 711*, with over 16,000 followers on Facebook at the time.²¹ Daniel Poensgen, a scientific advisor at German antisemitism monitoring centre RIAS, identifies that many people taking part in such demonstrations are likely to not have been politically active before the pandemic, given the lack of political experience evidenced in their activities. Therefore, online COVID conspiracies are able not just to reach new people, but radicalise them to the extent that for the first time they are protesting on the streets. Dave Rich highlights that “this is a movement that can definitely get people off sofas and mobilise in the streets”, even mobilising a significant number of people who are willing to break the law in order to protest.

Destruction of property is a key concern for Rich. Police forces in France have accordingly been forced to increase security on vaccination centres due to vandalism of 22 health sites in the month between 12 July and 12 August 2021.²² A number of graffiti employed the same antisemitism and Holocaust revisionist tropes identified on social media, including the use of yellow stars, “Nazi” and “collabos”, using the war-era word for those who collaborated with the regime.

A further direct action mobilised on social media is a vast stickering campaign orchestrated by the aforementioned White Rose Group. On the group’s Telegram page, stickers are centrally designed and instructions for printing and dissemination are provided. In the official Telegram page, and its associated chats, activists post pictures of stickers they have put on public places, condemning the pandemic as a hoax, employing antisemitic imagery and spreading dangerous misinformation. This key activist mechanism has been made possible by the impunity offered to conspiracy theorists on social media platforms.

Rich emphasises that although antisemitism is a component part, rather than the primary motivator of COVID conspiracist actors, any significant event involving Jewish people or Israel may easily prompt such actors to turn their attention to Jewish buildings or organisations.

Racist incidents and innovations

Local monitoring bodies RIAS and CST in Germany and the UK respectively are able to demonstrate how narratives, many of which have been adopted online, have translated into antisemitic incidents. It should be noted that similar analytical frameworks cannot be applied to Islamophobia as equivalent quantitative data is not collected.

The recorded 561 antisemitic incidents related to the pandemic recorded in Germany from March 2020 to March 2021 evidence the success pandemic-related narratives have had in moving from the online milieu to offline realities, and manifesting in incidents directed towards Jews, where only 128 of the 561 incidents were recorded online.²³ In a further 113 incidents of COVID-related antisemitism, a Jewish person was directly targeted.²⁴ Daniel Poensgen gives a typical example where a woman in a Berlin supermarket wearing a star of David noticed a nearby couple acting

20 “German coronavirus: Anger after attempt to storm parliament”, *BBC News*, 30 August 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-53964147>.

21 Ibid.

22 Kim Willsher, “French Police on alert after Covid testing centre attacks”, *The Guardian*, August 12 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/12/french-police-on-alert-after-covid-testing-centre-attacks>

23 “Antisemitische Verschwörungsmymen in Zeiten der Coronapandemie”, 17–18.

24 Ibid, 18.

suspiciously towards her. Having identified that the woman was Jewish, the man said to his partner that Jews were responsible for the pandemic. Poensgen further noted that COVID-conspiracy protests sometimes demonstrate in front of synagogues, and while the location may sometimes be unintentional, the impact felt by the Jewish community is the same.

This high number of incidents has generated anomalous data for the year 2020 in RIAS’ recordings of antisemitic incidents. Whereas in a typical year, RIAS would expect Israel-related antisemitism to constitute the highest proportion of overall incidents, in 2020 “post-Shoah” antisemitism was recorded as the most common form, using narratives evidenced in this report.²⁵ 2020 also saw a “significant increase in modern antisemitism”, where the number of related incidents more than doubled in Bavaria and Brandenburg compared to 2019. RIAS notes that “these trends are based in antisemitic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic”, where antisemitic conspiracy theories “attributed the responsibility for the spread of both the virus and the anti-COVID measures to Jews.”²⁶

In the UK, in the period January to December 2020, CST recorded 41 incidents of COVID-related antisemitism, 13 of which occurred in March where restrictions first hit Western Europe.²⁷ CST note “the opportunity and necessity for innovation” which has been available to antisemitic actors. It is in this context that a new type of incident, “zoombombings” was recorded, referring to the digital gatecrashing of zoom meetings, religious services and educational events. Zoombombing has been utilised by far-right and racist actors as a new manner in which to abuse faith and minority communities. Zoombombings were recorded from the very start of the pandemic, where details of synagogue services and events were circulated on extremist online forums, with 19 incidents in the UK and a similar number in Germany, according to Poensgen.²⁸ In the UK, individuals joined the zoom events and expressed antisemitic comments, in Germany they displayed pornographic photos and pictures of Adolf Hitler and in Switzerland individuals reported to be linked to far-right group *Eisenjugend* shared Nazi iconography.²⁹ These tactics have also been used against Muslims, such as in a call with the Concordia Forum of Muslim leaders from across the world, where racial abuse and pornographic content was shared.³⁰

Incitement to violence

While few explicitly violent or terrorist actions have been linked to the COVID conspiracy movement, violence has played a role in the language used on social media. On 4chan’s /pol/ board, a user who claimed to be located in India stated that they “can’t wait to kill some Muslims when the lockdown ends...I need to kill them all”. This thread also received engagement from European users, highlighting the transnationalism of violent online radicalisation. A user who identified as living in Denmark similarly employed violent language, urging followers in India to “stir up

25 “Antisemitic incidents in Germany 2020”, 9.

26 Ibid, 10.

27 “Antisemitic Incidents: Report 2020”, *Community Security Trust*, 2021, 19.

28 Ibid.

29 Jane Wakefield, “Coronavirus: Racist ‘zoombombing’ at virtual synagogue”, *BBC News*, April 1 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-52105209>; AP and Raphael Ahren, “German police open probe into hack of Israeli Holocaust memorial event on zoom”, *The Times of Israel*, April 22 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/german-police-open-probe-into-hack-of-holocaust-memorial-event-on-zoom/>; Kurt Pelda and Kevin Brühlmann, “Kopf der Winterthurer Eisenjugend verhaftet”, *Tages-Anzeiger*, January 20 2021, <https://www.tagesanzeiger.ch/kopf-der-winterthurer-eisenjugend-verhaftet-576774125297>.

30 Taylor Lorenz and Davey Alba, “‘Zoombombing’ Becomes a Dangerous Organized Effort”, *The New York Times*, April 3 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/03/technology/zoom-harassment-abuse-racism-fbi-warning.html>.

emotions, make them hate the muslims...blame the outbreak on them especially if it gets bad. Then start prosecuting and genociding every Muslim that didnt [sic] flee to pakistan”

Rallies, organised online, have shown their potential for violence. For example, a gathering of anti-vaccination protestors at what was thought to be the studios of the BBC in London attempted to storm the building, engaging in physical violence when clashing with police.³¹

Finally, the explosion of a homemade bomb at a COVID testing facility in the Netherlands in March 2021 has raised the alarm on the potential targeting of key COVID-related sites, although at the time of writing, little is known about the perpetrator or their intentions.³² Similarly, the fatal shooting of a petrol station cashier in Germany following an argument with a customer after asking him to wear a face mask has raised concerns of the potentiality for violent anti-mask action, although it is not known if the perpetrator was embedded in the *Querdenker* movement or committed the act for ideological or political motives.³³



Figure 22: A Telegram post inciting violence with opposition to vaccinations.

Conclusions

With the pandemic, Bini Guttman notes that we have seen “the largest far right mobilisations in a generation”. As restrictions ease and governments plan for a return to normal with the successful rollout of vaccination programmes, the COVID conspiracist, activist core, imbued with racism and highly motivated, will be forced to evolve.

Rich has noted that in the United Kingdom, since the easing of all restrictions on July 19 2021, there has been no appetite for a reduction in activism. What is left, he identifies, is an anti-government core which “feels like it is here to stay,” given the central role that conspiracy theories have played in people’s minds for an extended period.

Of broad concern, Abbas identifies the increased exposure of young people to online radicalisation pathways and extremist forums, due to increased social media usage. Abbas emphasises feelings of exclusion and socio-economic realities as factors which make young people vulnerable to radicalisation, and notes that, emerging from the pandemic, the workforce is more competitive, inequality has heightened and the economic outlook is uncertain, thereby compounding such vulnerabilities. Combined with increased exposure to radical online content, the potential for radicalisation is “of a different magnitude” than pre-pandemic.

31 Jim Waterson, “Anti-vaccine protesters storm BBC HQ – years after it moved out,” *The Guardian*, August 9 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/aug/09/confused-anti-vaccine-protesters-storm-bbc-hq-years-after-moved-out>.

32 William Adkins, “Dutch coronavirus test center hit by homemade bomb, police say,” *Politico*, March 3 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/dutch-coronavirus-test-center-hit-with-a-bomb-say-police/>.

33 Lucy Mansfield, “Germany: Petrol station worker shot dead following mask row as man arrested on suspicion of murder,” *Sky News*, September 21 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/germany-petrol-station-worker-shot-dead-following-mask-row-as-man-arrested-on-suspicion-of-murder-12413527>.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research has identified and exemplified the ways in which the COVID pandemic has altered and emboldened narratives of online antisemitism and Islamophobia. Research participants, from academic experts to faith community leaders to representatives of international organisations were unanimous in their expressions that social media companies are not acting effectively to reduce the spread of racism, conspiracy theories and misinformation on their platforms. A wave of new narratives of conspiracy theories and disinformation left platforms unprepared and unable to cope in the early days of the pandemic, and while many research participants noted the steps that had been taken to address COVID misinformation in particular, there remains more work to be done in order to adequately address the threats outlined in this research.

This report conducted social media research via non-participant observation, obtaining data through hashtag and keyword searching. Antisemitic and Islamophobic content was obtained from mainstream platforms almost eighteen months since the emergence of such narratives. While social media companies have taken steps, stark deficiencies have been evidenced throughout this report with the sheer ease with which this research obtained its data. Research participants verified that social media companies could demonstrably do more to prevent racism due to the continued proliferation of such content on their platforms. Many participants noted that platforms actively profit from hate, due to increased sharing and usage, and so are monetarily disincentivised to prevent it.

As a result, this report presents ten key recommendations to counteract the explosion of antisemitic and Islamophobic conspiracy theorist narratives on social media:

For Social Media Companies

- *Flag antisemitism and Islamophobia in the same manner as COVID misinformation.*
In the pandemic context, large social media companies have invested in labelling and flagging COVID-related misinformation, recognising the real-world harm caused by such content and their responsibility to address it. These existing capabilities and technologies should be applied to antisemitism and Islamophobia. Dave Rich rightly identifies that “if it is against their standards to post untrue information about the virus, because it is a real-world harm, then it should also be against their rules to post untrue information about Jews, or about Israel, or about the Holocaust, because that has a real-world harm and it incites hatred.” Companies must now recognise their responsibility to prevent the spread of racism and the targeting of minority communities, and apply their existing technologies to the challenges that have faced their platforms from inception.



Figure 23: An example of an Instagram post where COVID-related information is flagged but antisemitic imagery is left unchecked.

- *Foster increased collaboration and information sharing between social media platforms.*
Racist or extremist individuals use different social media accounts for different purposes, often toning down their ideology in order to avoid content moderation policies on mainstream social media platforms, while using these accounts to direct users to alt-tech platforms where they express more radical opinions. For example, conspiracy theorist Atilla Hildmann’s Twitter account remains active, despite him being removed by Apple and Android, as he has carefully moderated his language. This permits him to continue exposing the wider public to misinformation and antisemitism. Social media companies should collaborate to ensure that they are not permitting extremist or racist individuals who have had accounts removed from other platforms, even when they have not explicitly violated an individual platform’s content moderation policy.
- *Increase provisions for identifying anonymous online users.*
Since English footballers were faced with anti-black racism after the Euro 2020 Final, there has arisen significant public debate on the issue of online anonymity. While Twitter states that “ID verification would have been unlikely to prevent the abuse from happening” given that “99% of the accounts suspended were not anonymous”,³⁴ Dave Rich identifies cases where prosecutions for hate speech online have been unable to proceed based on platforms being unable to identify their own users. Those who oppose such measures correctly identify that dissidents or whistle-blowers would be endangered by such measures. While outward anonymity online should be protected, platforms should establish provisions which help law enforcement to identify those who commit hate speech online. Users should be required to prove their identity to a platform, while maintaining the right to operate anonymously.

³⁴ Twitter UK, “Combating online racist abuse: an update following the Euros”; *Twitter*, August 10 2021, https://blog.twitter.com/en_gb/topics/company/2020/combating-online-racist-abuse-an-update-following-the-euros.

For Governments

- *Introduce legislation regulating social media platforms, accompanied with sufficient funding and provisions to see its success, and adequate punishments for noncompliance.*
Governments should ensure the timely passing of legislation that seeks to regulate social media companies, such as the UK Online Harms Bill and the EU Digital Services Act. Such legislation must adequately prioritise extremism and racism against the myriad of other online threats. Regulation policies should differentiate between those companies which are unable, due to financial, staffing or technological resources, to implement effective content regulation, and platforms which are unwilling or extremist in nature. Legislative proposals should be accompanied by sufficient support and knowledge-sharing in order to give smaller platforms the best chance at securing platform resilience. Katharina von Schnurbein, the European Commission's coordinator on combatting antisemitism and fostering Jewish life, notes that the DSA aims to set out rules for social media platforms to increase transparency concerning money and data flows, provide regular reporting and clear redress mechanisms. However, she emphasises the importance of capacity building among prosecution and law enforcement agencies.
In the case of non-compliance for any platforms, legislative regulatory proposals must be accompanied with sufficient penalties, such as fines which materially impact the company. Dave Rich further suggests imposing legal liability upon senior executives of social media companies, in order to ensure the effectiveness of such proposals in the face of companies and individuals with access to such significant funds.
- *Include provisions for the moderation of content which is legal but harmful.*
Whereas illegal content should be prosecuted through law enforcement, penalties must also apply to companies which do not take sufficient steps to moderate legal but harmful content. For example, Holocaust denial, which is legal in some European states, should be included under content which violates platforms' terms of service across Europe, and should be moderated, regulated and penalised as such.
- *Ensure that antisemitic and Islamophobic hate speech online is punished with equal severity as offline.*
A double standard exists where antisemitic or Islamophobic speech which would be faced with prosecution on the street would result in few legal consequences when made on social media. For example, Dave Rich emphasises the "completely deficient" nature of UK malicious communications legislation, developed in 1988 before the mere existence of social media, which he says is "not fit for purpose". The European Commission against Racism and Intolerance's September 2021 General Policy Recommendation correctly identifies that "effective prosecution and other measures" should be brought equally against online perpetrators as those who commit the same acts offline, combined with robust and effective content removal policies.³⁵
- *Resource comprehensive public monitoring of Islamophobic incidents.*
Attempts to reach fully-informed conclusions and subsequently direct appropriate counter-measures will struggle given insufficient data on the number, nature and trends in incidents of anti-Muslim hatred. Monitoring of Islamophobic incidents should be created in coordination with the communities themselves, in order to ensure competence and confidence, thereby improving the rate of self-reporting.

For Civil Society

- *Muslim and Jewish communities should engage in meaningful and productive interfaith work on the joint threats faced by both communities.*
Currently, interfaith efforts succeed in humanising Muslims and Jews, and reducing stereotyping, but fall short of uniting communities in common endeavours with concrete goals. Tahir Abbas expresses concern regarding how opportunities to align efforts between progressive Muslims and Jews have been lost. As such, Muslim and Jewish communities should unite in joint opposition of the common threats they face in the European-wide bolstering of far-right extremism and populism, the endangering of religious rights such as Halal and Kosher slaughter, and a rise in targeted racism on social media.
- *Civil society should aim to build resilience to disinformation and racist conspiracy theories on social media by promoting civic education for young people.*
Claudia Mendoza expresses her desire for broader understanding of how to be "civil and civilised", lamenting the ways in which reliance on social media has altered the manner in which we consume information and build personal and societal values. A number of Jewish community leaders, including Aron Schuster, noted a broad inability to identify fake news and racism, and a lack of societal resilience and emotional intelligence. Civic education efforts from a young age are vital to counteract these threats, giving individuals the tools to spot disinformation and racist content themselves, and preventing radicalisation at its earliest stages.
- *Reduce cross-platform posting from alternative to mainstream platforms.*
Where more extremist and overtly racist content is spread on alternative platforms, away from the preoccupation of the majority of the impacted communities, Gerczikow expresses frustration at those who screenshot and post unmoderated and unmitigated racist content from alternative platforms on mainstream platforms. Doing so unravels the efforts of mainstream platforms to remove posts which spread such narratives, bringing the extremist actor back into relevance and inadvertently promoting their ideologies. Researchers and social media users alike should be careful with the ethical implications of any source content they share.

Increasing polarisation, germinating in online environments, threatens not just minority communities, but the fabric of democracy for all Europeans. Unrestrained and undeterred malicious online actors are incubating the joint viruses of antisemitism and Islamophobia with increasing success, sewing mistrust in liberal democratic institutions and placing European Jews and Muslims in the firing line of their conspiratorial worldviews. Social media companies have an active responsibility to recognise the threats to pluralism, truth and coexistence which are emerging in the online environments that they have created. Meaningful, focused and impactful interfaith work must be the cornerstone of the response to the joint threats faced by Jews and Muslims, but in the face of a spiralling threat, it is not just faith communities that must act, but all European citizens.

³⁵ "ECRI General Policy Recommendation no. 9; on preventing and combating antisemitism," *European Commission against Racism and Intolerance and Council of Europe*, September 14 2021, Strasbourg, 15.

Appendix 1 Research Participants

Ahmad Mansour	Mansour-Initiative für Demokratieförderung und Extremismusprävention (MIND Prevention)	Managing Director
Aiman Mazyek	Zentralrat der Muslime in Deutschland	Chairman
Aron Schuster	Zentralwohlfahrtsstelle der Juden in Deutschland (ZWST)	Director
Bini Guttman	European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS)	President
Claudia Mendoza	Jewish Leadership Council (JLC)	CEO
Daniel Höltgen	Council of Europe	Spokesperson; Special Representative on Antisemitic and Anti-Muslim Hatred and Hate Crimes
Daniel Poensgen	Recherche und Informationsstelle Antisemitismus (RIAS)	Scientific Advisor
Dave Rich	Community Security Trust (CST)	Head of Policy
Katharina von Schnurbein	European Commission	Coordinator on combatting antisemitism and fostering Jewish life
Milo Comerford	Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD)	Head of Policy and Research
Ruben Gerczikow	European Union of Jewish Students (EUJS)	Vice-President
Tahir Abbas	Leiden University	Associate Professor
Yonathan Arfi	Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France (CRIF)	Vice-President

Our Method

Research

Evidence-based research is one of IFFSE’s major tools. Through reports and research notes, we highlight threats, document good practices, and provide practical recommendations for policymakers.

Our researchers are currently working on reports dealing with:

- The impact of the Covid pandemic on hate speech;
- Good practices in the education of religious leaders.

Dialogue

Outreach and dialogue are at the core of IFFSE’s work. Through conferences and events, we facilitate engagement among faith communities, between faith leaders and policymakers, as well as with the European public.

We have organised events on:

- Religious extremism and terrorism in Europe;
- Countering extremism in schools;
- Online hate speech.

Campaigns

IFFSE seeks change. Through policy briefings and the media, we draw attention to threats and promote better ways of securing religious freedoms.

At the end of 2021, we will be launching a Europe-wide campaign on protecting the safety of religious minorities and houses of worship.

Who we are

The *Institute for Freedom of Faith and Security in Europe* (IFFSE) is a non-partisan, non-denominational initiative by the *Conference of European Rabbis*. Our purpose is to promote security, religious freedom and inter-faith dialogue in Europe.

IFFSE is incorporated as a Foundation ("Stiftung") in Germany.



Maj. Gen. (rtd.) Amos Gilead,
Interdisciplinary Centre Herzliya, Israel



Chief Rabbi Pinchas Goldschmidt,
President of the Conference of European Rabbis



Archbishop Antje Jackelén,
Archbishop of the Church of Sweden



Cem Özdemir,
Member of Parliament, Germany



Imam Yahya Pallavicini,
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Professor Andrea Riccardi,
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H.E. Manuel Valls,
former Prime Minister, France



Alexander Graf Lambsdorff,
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