REPORT

Islamist content on Telegram

Children and young people lack protection

February 2019

JUGEND SCHUTZ.NET

Telegram fails to protect young users from endangering or harmful Islamist content. Over the year, there has been a decrease of hate speech and explicit depictions of violence on Telegram, however, this kind of content is easy to find and still widely disseminated specifically in this messaging service. The percentage of subtle propaganda from the Islamist spectrum closely following young people's lifestyle in Germany has increased – this, in particular, offers low-threshold access to Islamist ideology.

Direct communication and 'real-life' propaganda

In recent years, the messaging service Telegram has become one of the most important distribution channels for Islamist propaganda on the internet. The death or arrest of many extremist actors especially from the violent spectrum as well as territorial losses in Syria and Iraq has influenced online propaganda. Up to 2017, the so-called Islamic State (IS) and all its sympathizers called on new followers to leave their country and used images and videos to promote an alleged ideal and intact 'caliphate'.

There still are apparent Jihadist messages on Telegram, however, content communicated to young users through 'real-life' topics and in a subtle way trying to win them over for their ideology increasingly dominates Islamist propaganda: Tips on how to behave 'right' in everyday life, campaigns tying in with experiences of discrimination or channels discussing love life, are just a few examples. Very often Jihadists cite religious sources: They use surah[1] of the holy Quran or various Hadith[2] quotes regardless of their historical context to reinforce their ideology and enemy images.

Calls for terrorist attacks increasingly aim at home countries

At the same time, jugendschutz.net observed a focus shift of Jihadist propaganda in 2018: more and more calls for attacks with detailed instructions on how to carry on the fight 'at home' (i.e. in the users' home towns). On Telegram, practical guidance for the fight 'at home' could be found, for example on how to build bombs and carry out bomb attacks.
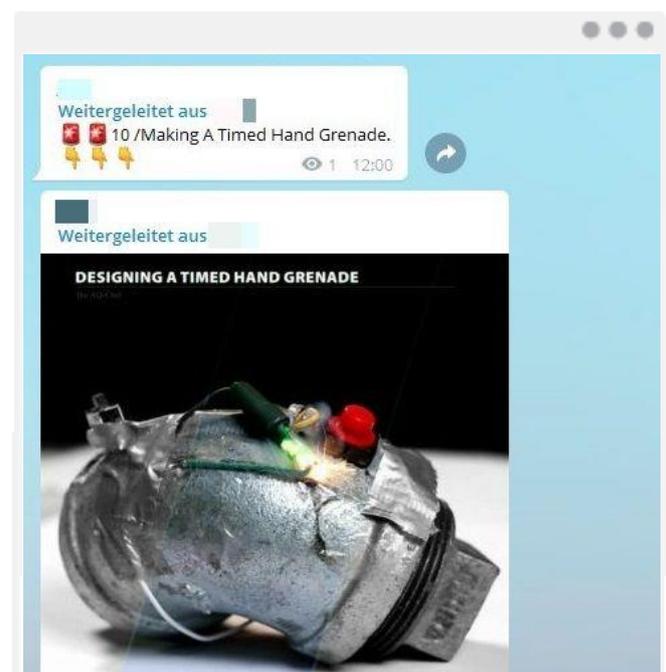
Image of a pipe bomb with step-by-step instructions on how to build it.
(Source: Telegram; original not pixelated)

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[1] Chapter of the Quran

[2] Islamic traditions

But also topics such as encrypting data or creating computer viruses for the 'digital Jihad' accompanied by detailed how-to guides are brought to young users. This propaganda also addresses potential sympathizers outside the Islamist scene who can pick up on these instructions and apply them without any direct communication with Jihadist actors.

Support for 'brothers and sisters in faith': alleged charity channels

Several German-speaking channels encourage users to pray for 'brothers and sisters' in need – very often these are Islamists in prison – and to help them with money or other donations. This is how Islamist users carrying out a 'prisoner mission' want to make sure that inmates and their relatives keep following their ideological approach and do not turn their backs on the Islamist scene. They particularly want to keep up the image of a strong community that young people are attracted to.
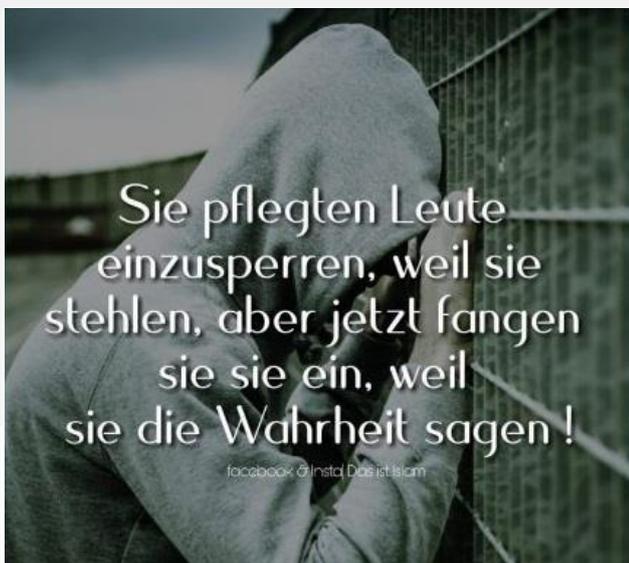
Islamists call for solidarity with allegedly wrongly imprisoned Muslims: 'They used to incarcerate people, because they steal, but now they catch them, because they tell the truth.' (Source: Telegram)

Islamist propaganda makes convicted 'hate preachers' and terrorists alleged idols that young people can identify themselves with. They are said to be 'living martyrs' who have been wrongly imprisoned. This is mostly linked to a scenario of the 'clash of cultures'

and the soon-to-be fall of the Islamic community should they not join the battle. Following conspiracy theories Islamists create an enemy image in the form of 'the West' apparently going after 'resistant Muslims' and incarcerating and suppressing them. Verses from the Quran quoted out of context and religious writings shall underpin this 'friend-enemy scheme'. This is how they legitimize serious acts of violence and terrorist attacks and depict these as worth copying.

Current social debates offer easy access

Islamist content on Telegram takes up issues regarding identity, cultural belonging, respect and racism. A gender-specific approach, real-life communication and an attractive design promote greater outreach to young people. Again and again, up-to-date topics that move young people are also integrated into various Islamist Telegram channels. For example, the racism debate after soccer player Mesut Özil announced his decision to quit the national team or the discussions about North Rhine-Westphalia's plan to legally ban girls under 14 from wearing headscarves.

Islamists fuel social debates on Telegram and use intensely emotional elements such as images and videos and interweave these with ideology in pieces. Here, they often tie in with experiences of discrimination that specifically young Muslims might have gone through.

Again, they promote the alliance of 'all Muslims' and at the same time the separation from majority society to deepen social conflict lines.
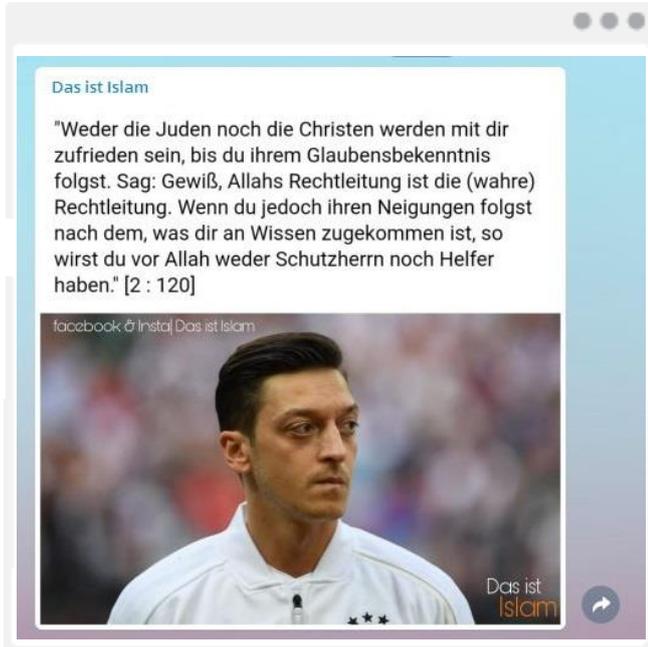
Islamists take up the racism debate on Mesut Özil to fuel social conflicts.
(Source: Telegram)

Graphic content still available online

The infringements jugendschutz.net mostly recorded on Telegram included the dissemination of symbols of unconstitutional organizations, the violation of human dignity (depictions of suffering) and the glorification of war (glorification of militant Jihad). Depictions of violence made up 8 % of all infringements on Telegram (2017: 14 %).

jugendschutz.net documented 95 cases (2017: 68) and took 137 actions (2017: 83). Since flagging was not successful in most cases, the second step consisted in directly forwarding the cases to the provider. This resulted in a success rate of 58 % (2017: 85 %).

Thus, Telegram had a substantially worse removal rate than in the previous year.

Need for quicker removal and a proactive approach

In order to better protect children and young people, Telegram must improve its reporting system and remove harmful content quickly and consistently. However, in some cases it took several weeks until the content went offline after notice from jugendschutz.net. Since there was no feedback it is unclear if Telegram has arranged for the content to be deleted or, for example, has even removed channels.

Another problem: Whenever Islamist channels are removed, they very often reappear under the same or similar name. Here, Telegram must also be proactive, e.g. use technical means to make sure that Islamist content or actors disappear permanently from the platform.

Further information

www.bpb.de/extremismus

www.hass-im-netz.info

What can be done?

www.hass-im-netz.info/was-tun/user

Reporting options

www.hass-im-netz.info/hass-im-netz-melden

**Allow children and young people to grow up well in a digital world**

jugendschutz.net is the German center at federal and state level concerning the protection of minors on the internet.

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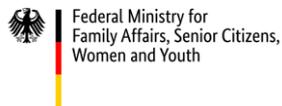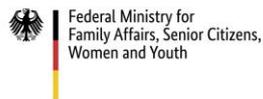
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