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Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology: Paper No. 4

# Following the Whack-a-Mole

## Britain First's Visual Strategy from Facebook to Gab

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## Key Points

The focus of this paper is on the extremist group Britain First. As such, it does not explore online terrorist activity but rather examines how a group regarded as extremist is subject to online sanctions.

The removal of the extremist group Britain First from Facebook in March 2018 successfully disrupted the group's online activity, leading them to have to start anew on Gab, a different and considerably smaller social media platform. The removal also resulted in the group having to seek new online followers from a much smaller, less diverse recruitment pool. This paper demonstrates the further impact of the group's platform migration on their online strategy – particularly on their choice of images and the engagement levels generated through them. The paper puts forward a number of key recommendations, most importantly that social-media companies should continue to censor and remove hateful content.

## Recommendations

- Mainstream social media companies should continue to seek to remove extremist groups that breach their terms of service.
- The UK and US governments should work towards developing better relationships with newer, smaller and fringe platforms in order for content to be regulated on these sites.
- Mainstream social media companies should continue and intensify the sharing of best practices of the removal and monitoring of extreme content, as well as resources, with smaller and newer platforms.
- Policymakers should strengthen the response to extremist content through further collaboration (beyond the major social-media platforms) to ensure the consistent removal of content.

## Introduction

Governments and law enforcement are concerned about the volume and spread of internet use in general and social media networks in particular by extreme right groups. For example, a 2016 report by the UK Home Affairs Select Committee titled *Radicalisation: The Counter-Narrative and Identifying the Tipping Point*, unambiguously stated in relation to extreme right groups' use of social media that '[n]etworks like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are the vehicle of choice in spreading propaganda and they have become the recruiting platforms for terrorism'.<sup>1</sup>

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1. House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 'Radicalisation: The Counter-Narrative and Identifying the Tipping Point', HC 135, p. 4, <<https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/135/135.pdf>>, accessed 1 July 2019.

Following US President Donald Trump's retweeting of posts from Britain First in November 2017, UK Prime Minister Theresa May was quick to point out that he had been 'wrong' to do so<sup>2</sup> – highlighting governmental concern about the use of social media by extreme right groups. Just over four months later, in March 2018, and following the conviction of the leaders of the extreme right group Britain First, Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen, on counts of hate crime, the group's Facebook account was removed.<sup>3</sup> The removal sparked debate about the group's social media presence. This was not surprising, given that it had at the time reached 1.8 million followers and had more than 2 million likes, making it the second most-liked Facebook page within the politics and society category in the UK, after the royal family.<sup>4</sup> However, experience shows that as soon as something is removed from the internet it pops up somewhere else. By May 2018 Britain First had created an official page on an emerging and popular social media site that is known for low-level censorship: Gab.

This paper examines Britain First's use of first Facebook and then Gab. Specifically, it examines the effect that Facebook's removal of Britain First's official page had on: the group's dissemination and influence, in terms of numbers of followers, quantity of content posted and engagement level; and its visual communication strategy, specifically regarding its choice of images and the level of engagement that these generated.

## Background

### Britain First

Britain First was formed in 2011 by Jim Dowson, a former member of the British National Party, as a product of the decline of the English Defence League.<sup>5</sup> Britain First describes itself as a 'patriotic political party and street movement that opposes and fights the many injustices that are routinely inflicted on the British people'.<sup>6</sup> The group's leaders state that they are not a racist party, claiming that many of their supporters come from ethnic minority groups. Yet, they also claim that their goals are to protect British and Christian morality, and to preserve the ancestral ethnic and cultural

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2. *BBC News*, 'Donald Trump Prepared to Apologise for Britain First Retweets', 26 January 2018.
  3. Alex Hern and Kevin Rawlinson, 'Facebook Bans Britain First and its Leaders', *The Guardian*, 14 March 2018.
  4. Patrick Hermansson, 'Online Hate: The Year In Numbers', Hope Not Hate, undated, <<https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/research/state-of-hate-2018/online-radicalisation/online-hate-year-numbers/>>, accessed 22 June 2019.
  5. Matthew Collins, 'The Truth About Britain First – The One-Man Band With a Knack for Facebook', *The Guardian*, 25 February 2015.
  6. Britain First's Mission Statement was available at <<https://www.britainfirst.org/mission-statement>>, but has now been removed.

heritage of the UK while supporting the indigenous British people as the demographic majority.<sup>7</sup> On their Facebook page (removed on 14 March 2018), Britain First's leaders claimed to not be against individual Muslims, but specifically against the ideological doctrine and religion of Islam itself.

The leaders of Britain First created Gab profiles around the same time they were banned from Twitter in December 2017. However, they did not create an official Britain First Gab page (which is the focus of this paper) until May 2018. Since starting their Gab accounts in December 2017, both leaders have managed to attain around 15,000 followers each and at the time of writing the official Britain First page has attracted 11,181 followers.

## Gab

Gab was founded in August 2016 and, at the time of writing, is said to have 850,000 users.<sup>8</sup> Gab's homepage currently states that it is '[a] social network that champions free speech, individual liberty and the free flow of information online. All are welcome'.<sup>9</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that Gab is particularly favoured by public figures associated with the radical right, including Stephen Yaxley-Lennon ('Tommy Robinson'), Milo Yiannopoulos and Paul Joseph Watson.<sup>10</sup> Gab previously stated that it is anti-censorship, declaring previously on its homepage: 'Censorship and closed systems are ultimately about two things: destruction and control ... the goal of censorship is to silence the storytellers, the truth seekers, the contrarians, the artists, those who question the status quo'. It argues that the internet belongs to 'The People', that Gab is for 'The People' and that it is powered by 'The People'.<sup>11</sup> As such the use of this platform by Britain First makes for a worthwhile comparison to their use of Facebook in terms of content posted and level of engagement with the group.

## Social Media Regulatory Landscape

Although social media platforms are exempt from legal liability for the content that their users post on them in Europe by the e-Commerce Directive

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7. Andrew Brindle and Corrie MacMillan, 'Like & Share if you Agree: A Study of Discourses and Cyber Activism of the Far-Right British Nationalist Party Britain First', *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* (Vol. 5, No. 1, 2017), pp. 108–33.
  8. Kelly Weill, 'Gab is in Full Meltdown, and Founder Andrew Torba Blames the "Deep State"', *Daily Beast*, 30 January 2019.
  9. Gab Homepage, 'Gab', <<https://gab.com/>>, accessed 27 June 2019.
  10. Tom Bennett, 'Gab is the Alt-Right Social Network Racists are Moving to', *Vice*, 5 April 2018.
  11. A Torba, 'Building a People First Community, a Response to Mark Zuckerberg', *Medium*, 2017, <<https://medium.com/@getongab/building-a-people-first-community-ff97a97f21e9>>, accessed July 2018. This article is no longer available as *Medium* has since removed all of Gab's articles from their site.

2000/31/EC<sup>12</sup> and in the US by Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act,<sup>13</sup> they are still expected to take on much of the responsibility for tackling the use of their services by both terrorist and extremist groups and individuals. In recent years, social media platforms have been under pressure from the UK government to do more to remove terrorist and extremist content.<sup>14</sup> The European Commission has repeatedly expressed the responsibility that these companies have to remove illegal content and illegal hate speech online.<sup>15</sup> The direction of regulation recommendations introduced by the European Commission over recent years regarding terrorist and extremist content has been to encourage platforms to take proactive measures that are proportionate to the level of risk, to implement automated detection tools, and to remove content within very short time periods of notification of the content.<sup>16</sup>

Social media platforms address the issue of problematic content and activity through the creation and implementation of their own rules or guidelines, which their users must follow. Otherwise, the platform can take action against those users, groups or content in the form of adding warnings to content, removing content and/or banning users. In practice, these rules and guidelines differ quite dramatically between platforms, which can result in content being removed on one platform but allowed on another.

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12. The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, 'Directive 2000/31/EC of 8 June 2000 on Certain Legal Aspects of Information Society Services, in Particular Electronic Commerce, in the Internal Market (Directive on Electronic Commerce)', *Official Journal of the European Communities* (L 178/1, 17 July 2000).
  13. 'Communications Decency Act 1996 (US)', Section 230.
  14. Rob Merrick, 'Google and Facebook Among Tech Giants Theresa May Will Order to Remove Extremist Content', *The Independent*, 19 September 2017; Heather Stewart and Jessica Elgot, 'May Calls on Social Media Giants to do More to Tackle Terrorism', *The Guardian*, 24 January 2018; Nicholas Mairs, 'Theresa May Calls on Social Media Firms to Take Down Christchurch Mosque Attack Video', *Politics Home*, 15 March 2019.
  15. European Commission, 'The EU Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online', undated, <[https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combatting-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/countering-illegal-hate-speech-online\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/combatting-discrimination/racism-and-xenophobia/countering-illegal-hate-speech-online_en)>, accessed 22 June 2019; European Commission, 'Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Preventing the Dissemination of Terrorist Content Online: A Contribution from the European Commission to the Leaders' Meeting in Salzburg on 19–20 September 2018', COM(2018) 640 final, 12 September 2018, <<http://ec.europa.eu/transparency/regdoc/rep/1/2018/EN/COM-2018-640-F1-EN-MAIN-PART-1.PDF>>, accessed 22 June 2019.
  16. *Ibid.*

As far as the two platforms under examination are concerned, Facebook has created what it calls ‘Community Standards’ that cover a wide variety of issues, ranging from violence/incitement to suicide/self-injury and false news. Under ‘Dangerous individuals and organisations’ Facebook states that it does not allow organisations or individuals that engage in ‘terrorist activity’ or ‘organised hate’, and that any content that expresses support or praise for either will result in removal.<sup>17</sup> It defines a hate organisation as ‘any association of three or more people that is organised under a name, sign or symbol and that has an ideology, statements or physical actions that attack individuals based on characteristics, including race, religious affiliation, nationality, ethnicity, gender, sex, sexual orientation, serious disease or disability’.<sup>18</sup> In addition to removing Britain First in March 2018, Facebook banned several groups and individuals in April 2019 for violating this policy.<sup>19</sup>

Gab also has what it has termed ‘Community Guidelines’ and enforces them through ‘[r]eminding you to kindly follow our Community Guidelines ... [and that] in the event that a breach has occurred, beyond a reasonable doubt’, illegal content will be removed, and accounts suspended.<sup>20</sup> The relevant section of Gab’s Community Guidelines for this paper is ‘Threats and Terrorism’, which states that:

Users are prohibited from calling for the acts of violence against others, promoting or engaging in self-harm, and/or acts of cruelty, threatening language or behaviour that clearly, directly and incontrovertibly infringes on the safety of another user or individual(s). We may also report the user(s) to local and/or federal law enforcement, as per the advice of our legal counsel. Gab follows the U.S. Department of State’s definitions of terrorism and list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, along with the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s proscribed list of terrorist groups, organizations and/or individuals.<sup>21</sup>

## Methodology

The dataset for the research for this paper comprises 995 images that were collected from the official Britain First pages of two social media platforms: Facebook (731) and Gab (264) during January to April 2017 and May to August 2018, respectively. The dataset includes images that were posted by Britain First – rather than any other users or followers – on their own official Facebook and Gab pages.

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17. Facebook, ‘Community Standards’, <<https://www.facebook.com/communitystandards/introduction>>, accessed 22 June 2019.

18. *Ibid.*

19. Alex Hern, ‘Facebook Bans Far-Right Groups Including BNP, EDL and Britain First’, *The Guardian*, 18 April 2019.

20. Gab, ‘Community Guidelines’, last updated 24 May 2019, <<https://gab.com/about/guidelines>>, accessed 22 June 2019.

21. *Ibid.*



The scheme for coding the dataset is provided in Appendix 1. It provided information regarding the type of images used across platforms and the type of engagement that each image type generated (see Results and Discussion); as well as the themes represented in the images (see Results and Discussion). Results were compared cross-platform, and given their different time spans, diachronically, in order to identify any changes to the Britain First's image use strategy in the move from Facebook to Gab.

## Results

### Number of Followers, Image Type and User Engagement

At the time of its removal from Facebook, Britain First had achieved a following of 1.8 million Facebook users. However, at the time of writing (exactly one year since the creation of the official Britain First Gab page), the total number of followers on Gab is 11,181. This is an enormous loss of followers and reach for the group.

Table 1 shows the range of image types for Facebook, the total number of each image type, the number of comments, reactions and shares per image type, and how many times each image type contained text requesting to be liked and/or shared. Table 2 shows the equivalent data for Gab.<sup>22</sup>

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22. Gab (2019) provide the following description of up-voting on their help page (which is no longer available): 'Content on Gab runs on a voting system. Up-voting content is essentially "liking" it. Down-voting is "disliking" it. Click on either the up or down arrows underneath a post to engage with it and "vote" for that piece of content. The numbers you see next to the arrows represent the total amount of up-/down-votes that post has received'. Reposting is very similar to Facebook's definition of sharing; Gab (2019) states that 'reposting will share the content with your followers so they can see it as well. This feature is only available for public accounts'.

**Table 1:** Facebook Image Types

Image Type	Total	No. of Comments	No. of Reactions	No. of Shares	No. of Asks to Like and Share
Photo	574 (74.8%)	104,729	1,076,185	1,486,185	153
Photoshopped	97 (13.3%)	4,940	110,104	98,178	4
Painting	18 (2.5%)	2,392	31,252	495	4
Graphic	35 (4.8%)	2,111	40,135	27,380	3
Text	6 (0.8%)	133	2,341	1,222	0
Drawing	1 (0.1%)	14	158	47	1

Source: Authors' research.

**Table 2:** Gab Image Types

Image Type	Total	No. of Comments	No. of Up-Votes	No. of Reposts	No. of Asks to Like and Share
Photo	244 (92.4%)	1,339	11,432	4,757	7
Photoshopped	12 (4.5%)	92	858	361	0
Graphic	5 (1.9%)	17	133	67	2
Cartoon	2 (0.8%)	8	112	47	0
Drawing	1 (0.4%)	7	72	26	0

Source: Authors' research.



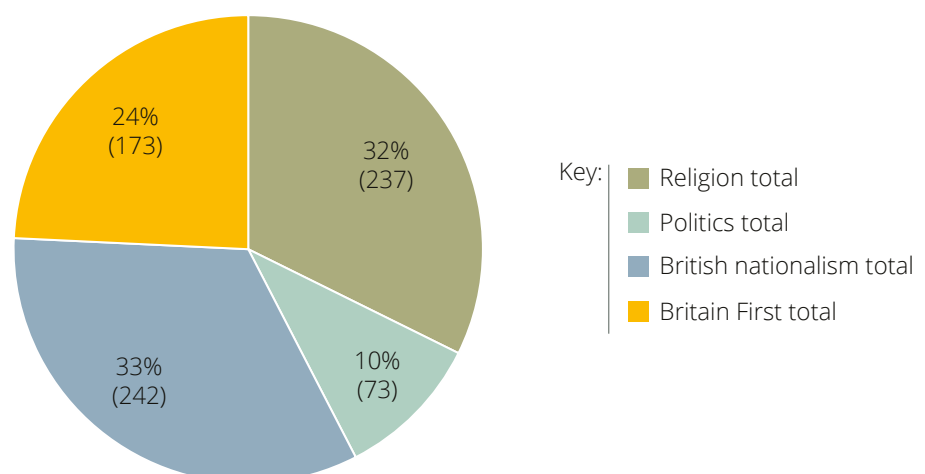
Two findings stand out from these tables: the first is that Britain First posted 731 images in total on Facebook over a four-month period, whereas they only posted 264 images on Gab over a four-month period. Second, the images on Facebook were receiving a much larger number of comments, reactions/up-votes and shares/reposts than those posted on Gab.

Although it is important to note that Britain First was far more established on Facebook at the time of data collection than they were on Gab, removal from Facebook did create disruption for the group: the number of images they were posting decreased and the number of engagements their content received decreased during the period of data collection.

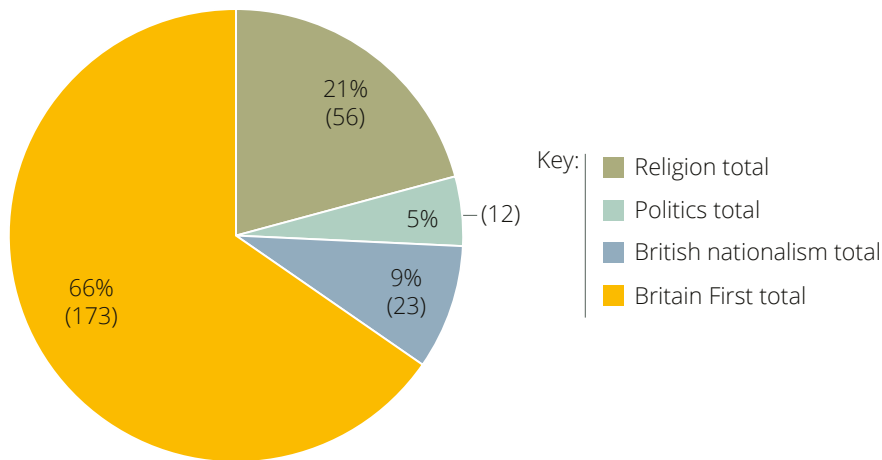
### Image Themes

Four image themes were identified: religion; politics; British nationalism; and Britain First. Religion refers to any images that included any kind of faith-related artefacts or symbols (for example, the Christian cross and the Muslim crescent and star). Politics refers to images which had a political focus, ranging from political figures to political events and issues. British nationalism refers to any image which depicted anything to do with the British nation: its people, landscape, culture, traditions (for example, ‘national dishes’) and institutions. Britain First refers to any images related to the behaviours and membership of the group as well as advertising of the group’s merchandise. Within each category, different thematic layers (sub-themes) were identified (see Figures 1–18, which illustrate the number of images in each category for Facebook and then for Gab).

**Figure 1:** Facebook Category Total No. of Images

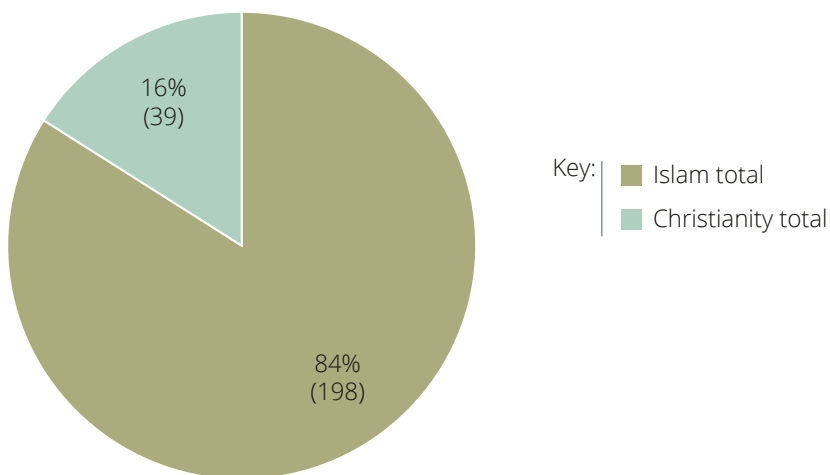


**Figure 2: Gab Category Total No. of Images**

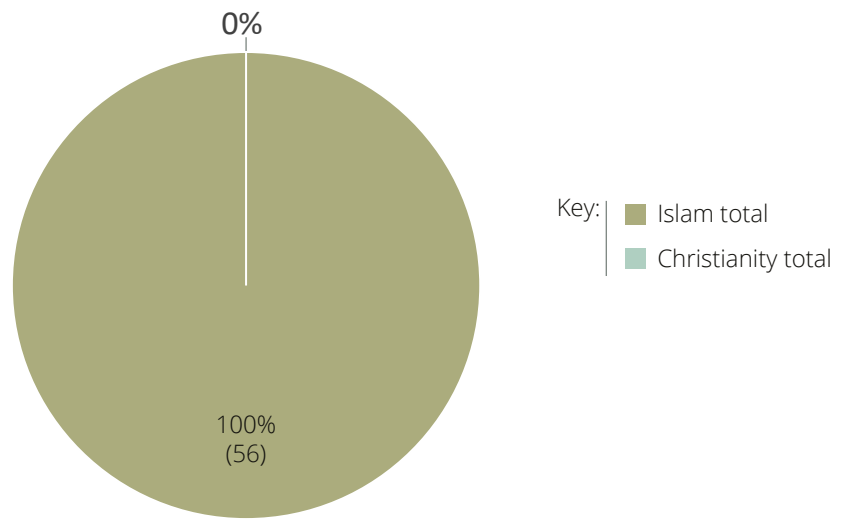


Figures 1 and 2 show the total number of images in each of the four thematic categories across both platforms: religion; politics; British nationalism; and Britain First. The category with the highest number of images for Facebook is British nationalism (33%), whereas for Gab it is Britain First (66%). This suggests a renewed focus on building the group’s identity. Religion is the second-largest category for both platforms (Facebook 32%; Gab 21%), emphasising its importance to the group.

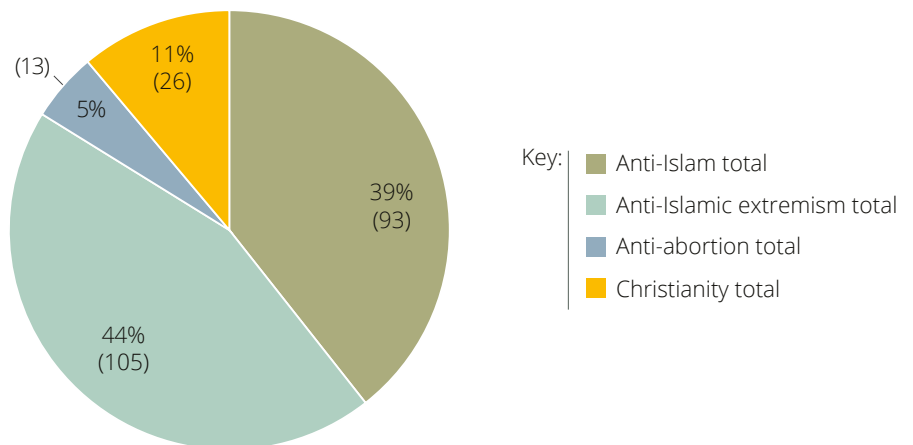
**Figure 3: Facebook: Religion No. of Images**



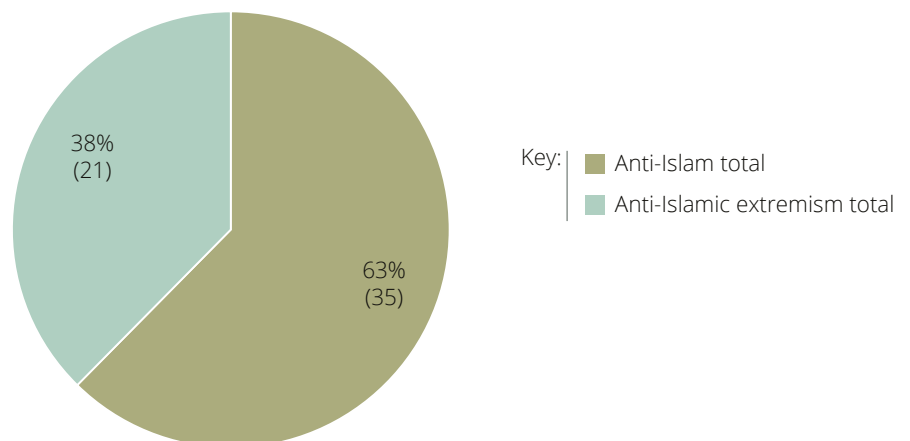
**Figure 4: Gab: Religion No. of Images**



**Figure 5: Facebook: Religion No. of Images (Sub-Themes)**

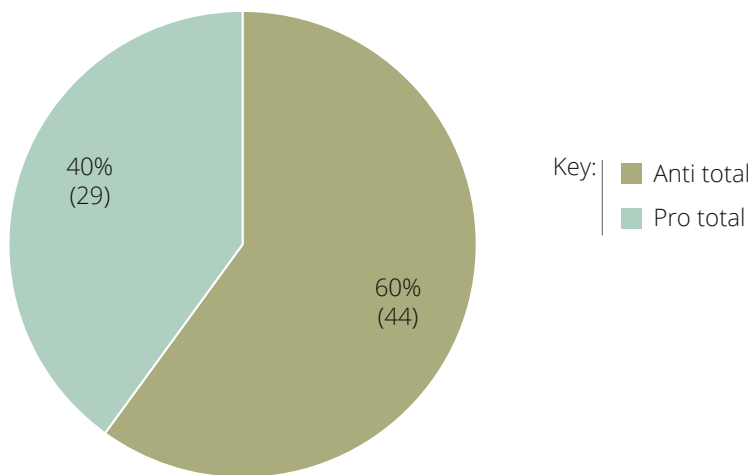


**Figure 6: Gab: Religion No. of Images (Sub-Themes)**

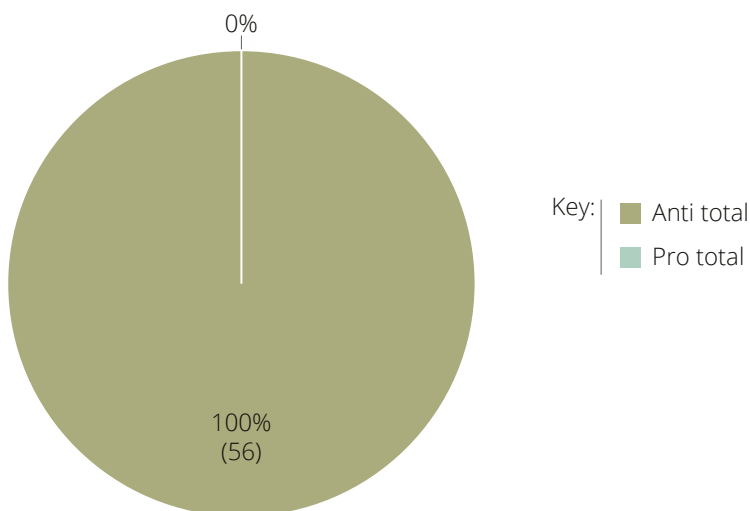


Figures 3 and 4 show the number of images for each theme of the religion category: Islam and Christianity. Figures 5 and 6 show the sub-themes of the religion category. Facebook contained images for both themes, but Gab only contained Islam-related images. The Christianity images did not receive as many likes, shares and comments on Facebook as many other categories and themes, which may explain why Britain First failed to carry this theme over to Gab.

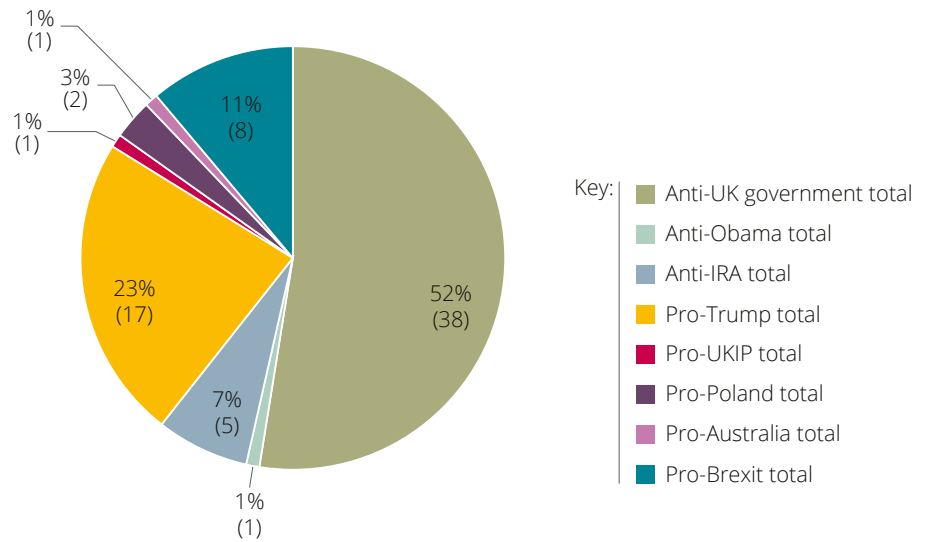
**Figure 7:** Facebook: Politics No. of Images



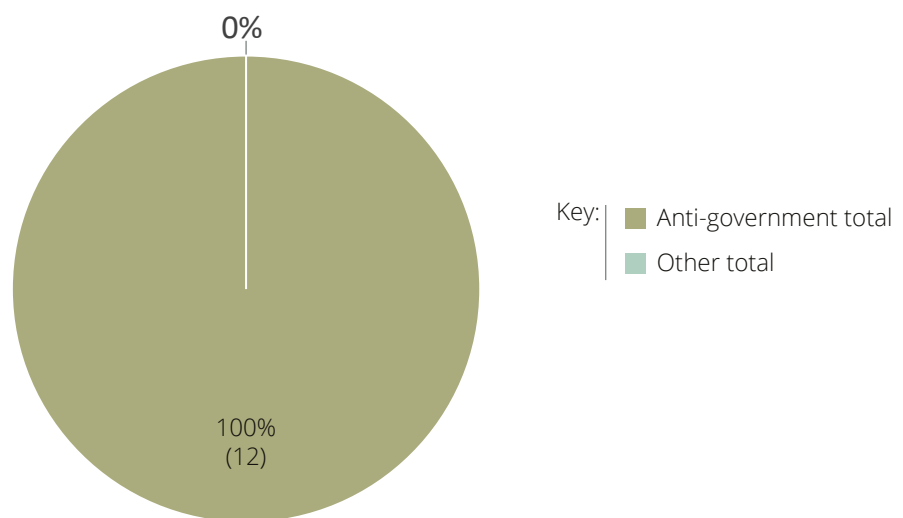
**Figure 8:** Gab: Politics No. of Images



**Figure 9: Facebook: Politics No. of Images (Sub-Themes)**

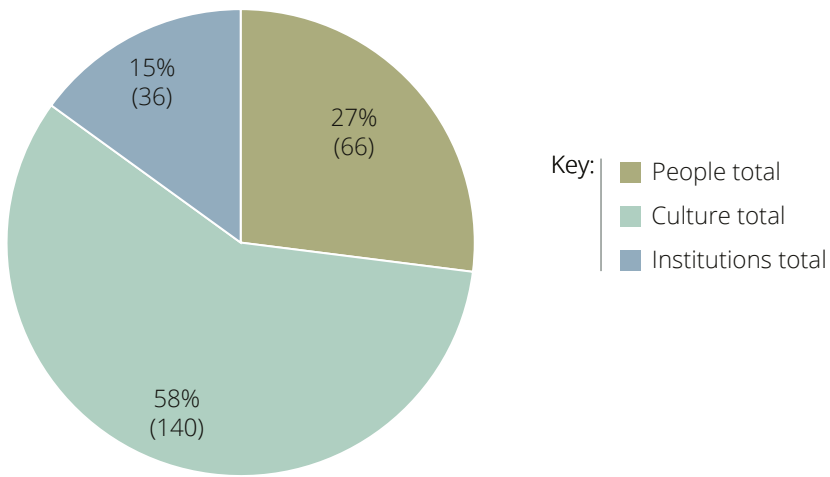


**Figure 10: Gab: Politics No. of Images (Sub-Themes)**

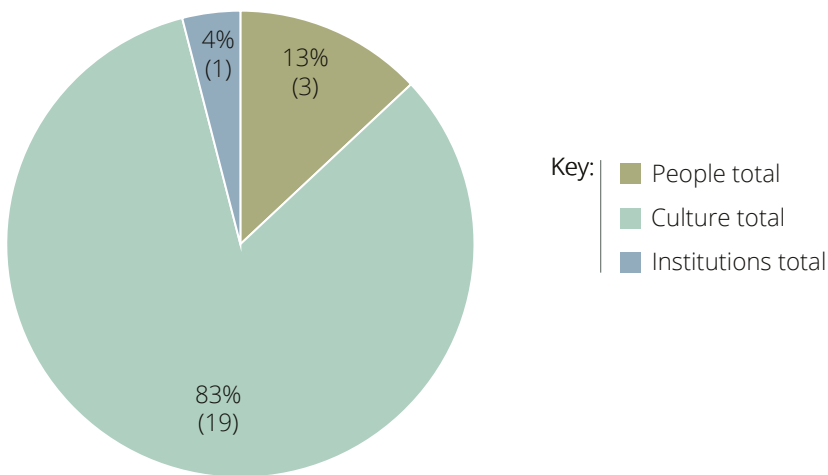


Figures 7 and 8 show the number of images for each theme in the politics category. Figures 9 and 10 show the sub-themes in the politics category. Facebook contained a variety of political sub-themes, but this was not carried over to Gab. This may, similarly to the earlier Christianity theme, be the result of the content receiving less engagement than other content.

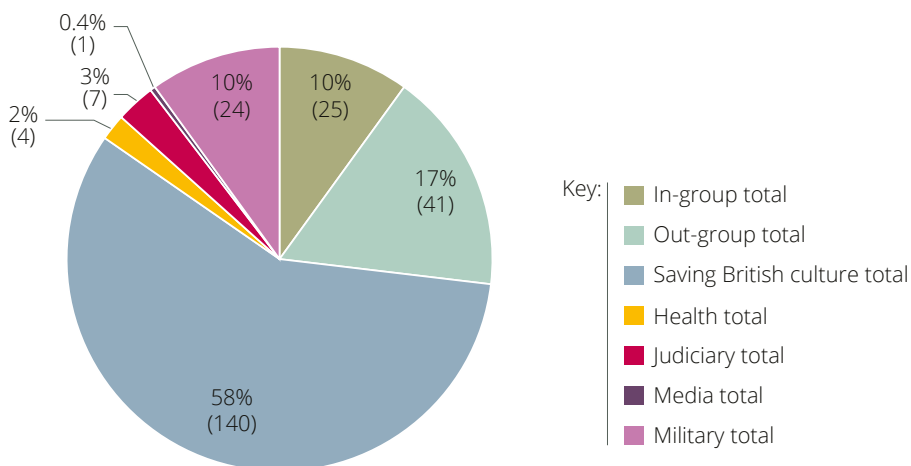
**Figure 11: Facebook: British Nationalism No. of Images**



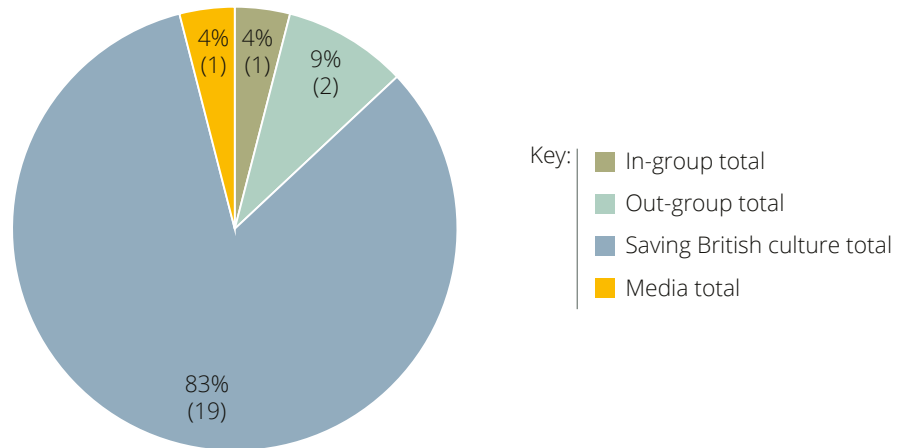
**Figure 12: Gab: British Nationalism No. of Images**



**Figure 13: Facebook: British Nationalism No. of Images (Sub-Themes)**

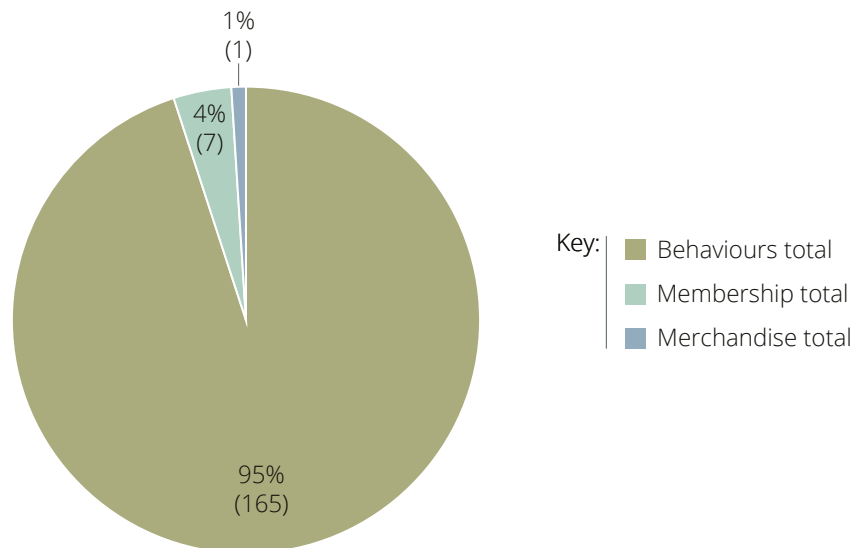


**Figure 14:** Gab: British Nationalism No. of Images (Sub-Themes)



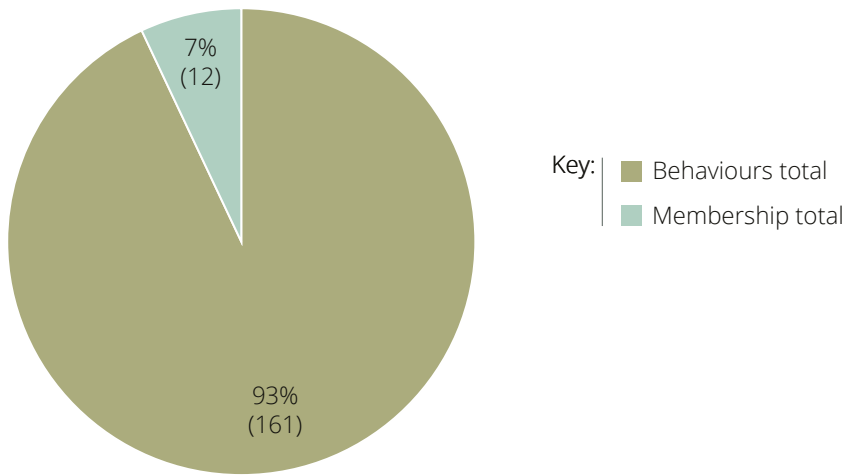
Figures 11 and 12 show the number of images in the British nationalism category. Figures 13 and 14 show the sub-themes within the British nationalism category. Facebook had a variety of sub-themes that included images related to a variety of institutions, but these were not carried over to Gab. Instead the focus on Gab is narrowed down to in- and out-groups and saving British culture.

**Figure 15:** Facebook: Britain First No. of Images

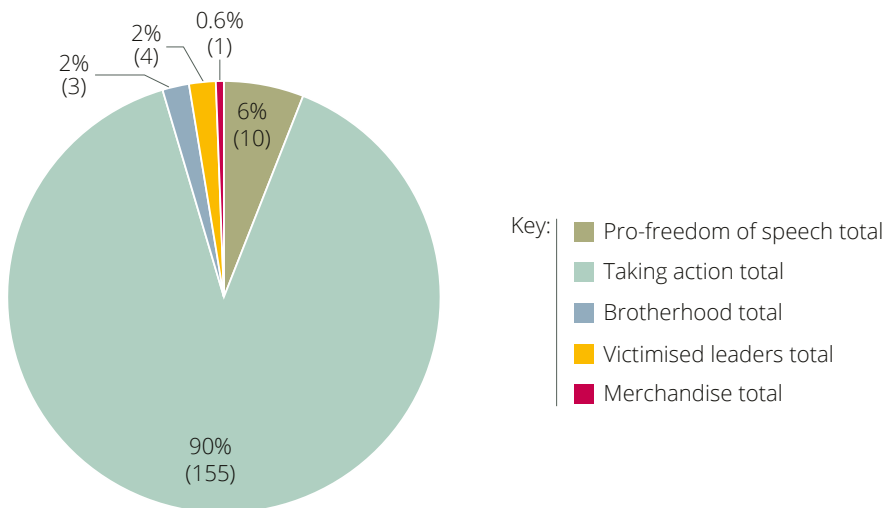




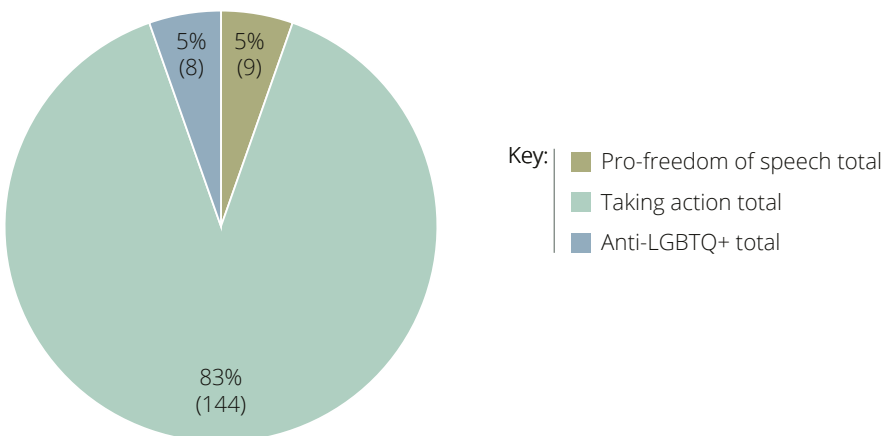
**Figure 16: Gab: Britain First No. of Images**



**Figure 17: Facebook: Britain First No. of Images (Sub-Themes)**



**Figure 18: Gab: Britain First No. of Images (Sub-Themes)**



Figures 15 and 16 show the themes for the Britain First category. Figures 17 and 18 show the sub-themes for the Britain First category. Once again, Facebook has a wider variety of sub-themes than Gab. On Gab there are new themes that were not present on Facebook, such as anti-LGBTQ+ images, and images that appeared under further sub-themes of 'taking action', which included threatening to 'dox' individuals (publish private or identifying information about an individual online with malicious intent), and paedophile shaming. Whether or not this is simply a new strategy that the group is trying out or a result of being on a platform that is less likely to censor, it is important to watch how these sub-themes progress and the traction they gain.

## Discussion

Since its removal from Facebook and subsequent migration to Gab, Britain First has lost its unprecedentedly large following. Through its Facebook page, Britain First was posting images daily and had a large number of engagements, as noted over the four-month period of research. To date, the group has not managed to carry that following or number of engagements over to its new home on Gab. This suggests that its ban from Facebook (as well as from Twitter in December 2017) has left it without a platform to provide a gateway to a larger pool of potential recruits. Its removal from the major social media platforms has arguably left it without the ability to signpost users to sites such as Gab, which Britain First is still using freely.

Changes to the themes of the images used by Britain First on both Facebook and Gab have been identified. The group's most common image type on Facebook (British nationalism) focused on British people, culture and institutions. After moving to Gab, Britain First became the most prominent theme, with images focusing on the behaviours and members of the group. This suggests a renewed focus on building the group's identity and emphasising the notion of a brotherhood by joining the group.

Religion was the second-largest image category for both platforms. The group posted pro-Christianity, anti-abortion, anti-Islam and anti-Islamist extremism images on Facebook, but appeared to drop considerably its use of pro-Christianity and anti-abortion images on Gab. This may be due to these images receiving less engagement than the anti-Islam and anti-Islamist extremism images. It is likely that the group would have decided to continue posting images based only on the themes that were known to receive more traction.

A change was also noted in the politics image theme. On Facebook this theme had many sub-themes, while on Gab it only had an anti-government sub-theme, which could indicate a move away from

the group's push to gain political legitimacy since the migration to Gab (although this is not necessarily directly evident from the data).

The final notable change is in the Britain First theme. New sub-themes have appeared on Gab, including threatening to 'dox' individuals, paedophile shaming and anti-LGBTQ+ images. This could be part of a new strategy of identity polarisation, whereby certain individuals or groups (the out-groups) are vilified and Britain First (the in-group) is exalted. For example, the posting of paedophile-shaming images – an image of a person who the group claims has been identified as a paedophile – portray Britain First as 'heroes' defending society from arguably the worst deviants known.

Finally, the anti-LGBTQ+ images may have been something Britain First always wanted to post but were unable to on Facebook due to its stricter policies. Alternatively, the appearance of all three of these themes may just be a result of Britain First taking advantage of Gab being less likely to censor content online.

## Conclusions

Britain First's removal from Facebook has disrupted the group's online strategy, which has had to migrate to a new platform – Gab. This has meant it has had to re-establish an online following on a smaller platform, resulting in a much smaller recruitment pool in terms of users. Further, removal from Facebook has brought about changes in the types of images Britain First posts online. Despite the decrease in followers on Gab, the themes found in Britain First's imagery demonstrate a move towards more extreme content in the course of their migration to Gab, likely due to the platform being less likely to censor content. It is therefore recommended that future research investigates how this social media strategy progresses.

## Policy Recommendations

In light of the above, the following steps are recommended:

- Removal is clearly effective, even if it is not risk-free. Despite the risk of groups migrating to more permissive spaces, **mainstream social media companies should continue to seek to remove extremist groups that breach their terms of service.** This research for this paper shows that in doing so the possibility for groups to use these platforms as gateways to signpost followers to more extreme content on less stringent sites is removed, and that the pool of potential recruits is reduced.
- **The UK and US governments should work towards developing better relationships with newer, smaller and fringe platforms in order for content to be regulated on these sites.** Otherwise, content removal from mainstream sites could just worsen the content posted on other platforms that are seen to be more lenient.

- **Mainstream social media companies should continue and intensify the sharing of best practices of the removal and monitoring of extreme content, as well as resources, with smaller and newer platforms.**
- **As a complement to regulation, policymakers should strengthen the response to extremist content through further collaboration (beyond the major social media platforms) to ensure the consistent removal of content.**

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## Appendix 1

### Coding Scheme for Dataset

Date Posted	
User engagement	Facebook: sum total of reactions to the image, total number of comments on the image Gab: total number of up-votes, comments, and re-posts
Image type	Photograph, drawing, painting, etc.
Accompanying text	In-image text; caption
Image content	Description of elements (social actors, objects, etc.) in focus/out of focus
Image technical properties	Focal angle, focal length, blurring, etc.

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## About The Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology

The Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology is a consortium of academic institutions and think tanks that conducts research and shares views on online terrorist content; recruiting tactics terrorists use online; the ethics and laws surrounding terrorist content moderation; public-private partnerships to address the issue; and the resources tech companies need to adequately and responsibly remove terrorist content from their platforms.

Each publication is part of a series of papers released by the network on terrorism and technology. The research conducted by this network will seek to better understand radicalisation, recruitment and the myriad of ways terrorist entities use the digital space.

The network is led by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI) in the UK and brings together partners from around the world, including the Brookings Institution (US), the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (Netherlands), Swansea University (UK), the Observer Research Foundation (India), the International Institute for Counter-Terrorism (Israel), and the Institute for Policy Analysis of Conflict (Indonesia).

The research network is supported by the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). For more information about GIFCT, please visit <https://gifct.org/>.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and do not reflect the views of RUSI or any other institution.

Published in 2019 by the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies. RUSI is a registered charity (No. 210639).



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