



The case of Wikislam: scientification of Islamophobia or legitimate critique of Islam?

Edin Kozaric & Torkel Brekke

To cite this article: Edin Kozaric & Torkel Brekke (18 Oct 2023): The case of Wikislam: scientification of Islamophobia or legitimate critique of Islam?, Ethnic and Racial Studies, DOI: 10.1080/01419870.2023.2268154

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2268154>



© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 18 Oct 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 580



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

The case of Wikislam: scientification of Islamophobia or legitimate critique of Islam?

Edin Kozaric^a and Torkel Brekke^b

^aDepartment of International Studies and Interpreting, Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway; ^bMF Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society and Centre for Research on Extremism (C-REX), University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway

ABSTRACT

In this article we introduce and utilize the concept *scientification of Islamophobia* to analyze a website called Wikislam, and the way that its contents are used by websites and online users in a complex global ecology of knowledge production and consumption regarding Islam and Muslims. We have used an online content marketing platform called SemRush to locate the most disseminated Wikislam articles on the web, and we have conducted a content analysis of the most popular articles, as well as of the webpages that link to them. While practicing a seemingly academic means of referencing, we find articles on Wikislam to be selective, particularly when it comes to topics, and to some degree when it comes to sources. Furthermore, we find that articles from Wikislam are used as references in support of bigoted claims about Islam and Muslims on other websites. Finally, we find that some users who visit Wikislam do so while looking for basic information about Islam on Google, meaning that Wikislam has some success in functioning as an online encyclopedia about Islam. We conclude that these three findings highlight some of the key ways that the scientification of Islamophobia is manifesting online.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 22 November 2022; Accepted 4 September 2023

KEYWORDS Islamophobia; scientification; Wikislam; Ex-Muslims; backlink analysis; Islam online

Background¹

Several studies have showed that blogs, web portals and social media are important for spreading information and opinions about Islam and Muslims (cf., for instance, Rozehnal 2019; Evolvi 2018; Magdy, Darwish, and Abokhodair 2015; Hoffmann and Larsson 2013; Bunt 2009). These, and other, media technologies are on the one hand used by a large variety of Muslim groups for the dissemination of what is seen as accurate information about

CONTACT Edin Kozaric ✉ edinkoza@oslomet.no 🐦 @Twitter/X: @edinkozaric

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Islam (this entails of course large internal variations and even conflicts between different Muslim groups when it comes to deciding how Islam should be interpreted and applied), and on the other hand by individuals and groups that hold positive or negative opinions about Islam and Muslims. For the general online user who searches online for information about Islam, it is often difficult to navigate, unpack and critically assess the information that is retrieved. In an earlier article, Larsson (2007) addressed how the website Wikilslam was used for spreading and publishing anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim opinions. In the present article, we return to this website and ask new questions about its profile, its use, and its impact. The return to Wikilslam is both motivated by its consistency in generating traffic (as shown below), and by the fact that the website recently has been subject to a major revision, claiming to strive for "setting a high criteria of objectivity, neutrality, and professionalism".² According to Wikilslam, the editors of the site recently undertook a major revision of its content, which are described in detail under the heading Renovations that is found on its homepage. For instance, it is stated that the webpage now aims:

To provide accurate and accessible information from traditional and critical perspectives on the beliefs, practices, and development of Islam.³

In line with this statement, Wikilslam has adopted a stricter, or more academic, scope, which, according to the editors, means that it will more consequently use primary sources, as well as modern, historical-critical, scholarship on the origins of Islam (one example of this approach is found in Sinai 2017). Importantly, Wikilslam claims to have become more unbiased and less hostile towards Islam, and they stress that they have implemented: "A zero-tolerance policy on hateful, misleading, unencyclopedic, and polemical content".⁴ Furthermore, they stress that:

(...) given Wikilslam's newly encyclopedic spirit, articles are no longer permitted to maintain any point of view, be it political or religious – facts, straightforwardly described, are for the reader alone to judge.⁵

To sum up, it is evident that Wikilslam has made a serious effort to re-invent itself as a scientific, neutral, and unbiased website in several ways. Most importantly for our article, this implies that the current editors responsible for content on Wikilslam understand that the website was in fact used in biased and problematic ways prior to this reformation of the website.

Wikilslam was registered on October 27, 2005, and launched on September 4, 2006. The website is a so-called community edited site, but the initiative to start Wikilslam was taken by an Iranian Ex-Muslim, Ali Sina, in collaboration with individuals from the network Faith Freedom International (Enstedt and Larsson 2013, 162). In 2020, Wikilslam was taken over by representatives of an organization called Ex-Muslims of North America (<https://>

exmuslims.org), which is an organization devoted to defending the rights and interests of persons who leave Islam. This organization has an Atheistic worldview, and is particularly concerned with the threat against the lives and well-being of persons of Muslim background who criticize Islam, or who leave their religion. In line with this outlook, “Wikislam aims to provide accurate and accessible information from traditional and critical perspectives on the beliefs, practices, and development of Islam”.⁶

While it is hard to estimate the impact of Wikislam, it should be noted that the site, in the measured period, typically had between 100,000 and 300,000 monthly visits.

Below we show a distribution of traffic sources to Wikislam over time. This shows that most of the traffic directed to Wikislam comes via search engines, which means that most users reach the site by searching for keywords on Google or other search engines, and then clicking on a Wikislam-page that is suggested for those/that keyword(s).

The Wikislam site is primarily organized around several subheadings. These subheadings include topics like, for instance, the Qur’an, Islam and Science, Prophet Muhammad, Islam and Non-Muslims, Companion of the Prophet, Islam and Women, Islamic Law, Origins of Islam, Featured Articles, Qur’an, Hadith and Scholars, About Wikislam, and Other Resources. On close reading we see that Wikislam primarily contains information that is introductory or general, like overviews on specific topics, a theological discussion, or an episode in the history of Islam. However, the *selection* of topics included on Wikislam seems to be biased, and there is often a tendency to cast a negative light on Islam or Muslims. For instance, under the heading “Prophet Muhammad”, the visitor is directed to information about the “Ages of Muhammad’s Wives at Marriage” and under “Islam and Women”, we find information about “Wife Beating in Islamic Law”; “Rape in Islamic Law” and “The Meaning of Nikah”. The contents of these articles are not necessarily incorrect, but they rarely contain voices of contemporary Muslim scholars that have been critically engaged with these questions or any contextualization of these debates.

Encouraging Muslims to leave Islam was an important aspect of Wikislam prior to the enactment of the new mission statement (i.e. cf. Enstedt and Larsson 2013), and we know that the site is still associated with various networks of former Muslims (so-called Ex-Muslims) that support individuals around the world who want to leave the religion. Furthermore, within anti-Muslim discourses, Ex-Muslims often play the role of witnesses who are “telling the truth” about Islam and Muslims (cf., Larsson 2016). Such accounts are thereby also compelling for non-Muslims who want to criticize the religion for completely different reasons than those who leave Islam.

With this said, it is important for us to underline that we think that it is legitimate, even necessary, to criticize Islam, or any other religion for that matter.

Criticism of religions and beliefs is a fundamental right in any open and democratic society. We also strongly support the right to leave Islam without fear. At the same time, we hold the view that when internal variation and disagreement within Islamic traditions and between Muslims are glossed over or ignored, critique sometimes has the potential to contribute to fostering negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims. We also believe that this type of essentializing critique may appear particularly convincing to readers when they seem to abide by scientific standards of referencing and argumentation.

Our analysis of Wikislam is part of a wider research initiative where we focus on the flows and modalities that make Islamophobia into a truly global phenomenon, as explained in the introductory essay to this special issue (Ganesh, Frydenlund, and Brekke 2023). Wikislam, and the many uses of its resources, exemplify a discourse modality by which knowledge and truth-claims about Islam and Muslims are constructed and established across national and cultural boundaries. Given the self-proclaimed mission and actual outreach of Wikislam, the website is an interesting case for an investigation of what we call the *scientification of Islamophobia*. We develop the meaning of this concept in the section below, before presenting the research questions, methods, and data of this article.

Defining Islamophobia and scientification

Islamophobia is a highly contentious concept, and we are aware that opinions diverge sharply regarding its usefulness (see, for instance, Larsson and Sander 2015). For this article, we define “Islamophobia” as “undifferentiated negative beliefs, attitudes and emotions about Islam and/or Muslims”, thereby following Bleich’s definition a long way (Bleich 2011). However, we add the concept of belief to our definition because we do not feel that the cognitive aspects of Islamophobia are covered by the reference to attitudes. We use the term “undifferentiated” instead of Bleich’s “indiscriminate”, although these terms are very similar. The important point of adding “undifferentiated” is to have a definition that does not include all instances of hostility, but primarily those instances where Islam and Muslims are regarded as one undifferentiated whole. In other words, the term “undifferentiated” is included to denote what is often thought of as the tendency to essentialize both the religion and its followers and make value-judgements based on such essentialization or lack of differentiation. Furthermore, as pointed out by many scholars in the field, essentializations of Islam and Muslims are deeply rooted in cultural (Brekke 2021), political (Mondon and Winter 2017) and, we would like to add, technological processes, highlighting the structural dimensions of Islamophobia. Thus, scrutinizing the structures that facilitate and condition Islamophobia is crucial to Islamophobia research, and, for this particular paper, it means investigating

how information about Islam and Muslims manifests, travels, and is reproduced, online. Finally, we also want to point out that Islamophobia is a global set of similar or overlapping cultural schemas about Muslims in the sense that negative beliefs, attitudes and emotions about Islam and/or Muslims, can be found in significant degrees in societies separated by time and space, as in China, India, Europe and America (Frydenlund 2023; Stroup 2023; Brekke 2021; Bunzl 2007).

While there are large differences, and even conflicts, between different scientific fields (i.e. medicine, social science, arts, and humanities) when it comes to theories, methods, epistemology and ontology, there is a consensus that a scientific approach is different from, for instance, pseudo-science, general opinions, “feelings”, or guesses. Without expanding on some of the largest questions that have occupied the philosophy of science, a scientific method can be described and distinguished by some certain steps and measurements. For instance, it is necessary to consider previous research, especially studies that contradict your own presumptions or experiences, and the data and results should be presented in a transparent way. In modern science, results are typically submitted for independent peer-review. The boundary criteria between science and pseudo-science cannot be pinned down in an entirely satisfactory and unambiguous way, and there will always be contestation about what counts as truly scientific and not within a field. However, in this article, there is no need to discuss the philosophy and the politics of old and new demarcation problems (Wagner 2022). Our aim is not to judge whether or not WikIslam is “properly scientific”, but to look at how the website presents itself as scientific – and thus trustworthy and unbiased – in order to establish its own authority.

The concept of scientification refers to processes whereby a field or a topic is increasingly understood and described in the style and terminology of science. By this procedure, the text becomes presented in a “science-like” way. However, this does not automatically imply that the field or topic is being researched by scientific methods in a strict sense. Often, the style and terminology of science are applied to lend credibility to certain opinions or approaches, and to increase the status of the field or topic in question.

Science has enjoyed high status for at least a couple of centuries, and many fields and topics of social and political life have seen processes of scientification. For instance, it is striking how many religious leaders of the nineteenth century would go out of their way to demonstrate how their faith was compatible with recent scientific concepts, principles, and discoveries, like energy, electricity, and evolution (see, for instance, Stenberg 1996; Brekke 2011; Von Stuckrad 2014; Solberg 2013).

To proceed with our analysis of scientification, we want to distinguish between two different dimensions. On the one hand, we observe that Islam is often critiqued for containing a worldview that conflicts with

science or general ethical principles. Typical examples would be the way in which criticism of Islam picks out verses from the Quran or classical Islamic literature that refers to cosmology, and shows how these ideas are incompatible with scientific knowledge about, for instance, the creation of the world. Resembling Christian theologians defending the creation of the world by making references to the Bible, Muslim scholars who have distanced themselves from the theories of Charles Darwin and evolutionary theories, have attracted criticism from natural scientists (i.e. Dawkins and Ward 2006). Needless to say, this type of critique is legitimate and sometimes necessary.

On the other hand, we see that Islamophobic arguments are often couched in scientific terminology, and that prejudice against Muslims is justified with reference to research. A typical example would be the way in which criticism of Islam often contains explicit references to philological scholarship on classical Islamic texts, including the Quran, to show that Islam is necessarily violent, sexist, or homophobic (see, for instance, Ibn Warraq 1998; 2000; 2002; Spencer 2006; 2021).

While there could be some overlaps, these two applications of scientification are inherently different. One application is utilized to support the claim that Islam is essentially barbaric and tends to cause Muslims to be morally and politically dangerous people, while the other to support the claim that Islamic texts are illogical and inconsistent. Using scientific terminology to argue that Islam and Muslims are necessarily barbaric is certainly different from saying that Islamic ideas of, say, the cosmos or of nature, are unscientific and illogical considering modern science. The latter would be an argument based on a comparison between an understanding of Islamic cosmology and contemporary scientific knowledge, while the former would be an instance of what we call a *scientification of Islamophobia*. These are clearly fundamentally different arguments with very different moral and political corollaries.

Research questions, methods, and data

In this article we set out to answer the following three research questions:

- (1) To what extent can the content on Wikislam be understood as an instance of the scientification of Islamophobia?
- (2) What type of websites make use of Wikislam's content, and in what way?
- (3) To what extent is Wikislam used as an encyclopedia by online users looking for information about Islam?

Wikislam has, to the degree that we can establish, succeeded in positioning itself as a trusted Each of these questions is designed to investigate different aspects of the scientification of Islamophobia. To answer the first question, we will assess whether the contents on Wikislam can reasonably be said to

be a case of this phenomenon. The second question sets out to investigate whether Wikislam is used as a scientific source in promotion of Islamophobic arguments, that is, if it functions as an enabler of the scientification of Islamophobia by other online actors. Finally, the third question explores the characteristics of the searches of online users who access Wikislam via search engines. This, we believe, serves as a good indicator of whether Wikislam is accessed by users who are looking for encyclopedic knowledge about Islam. If the latter is the case, it would indicate that source about Islam and Muslims.

To retrieve data about Wikislam we have made use of SemRush, which is an online content marketing platform service.⁷ SemRush is primarily a tool used by commercial actors looking for information that can help generate traffic to their websites, usually by finding ways to outperform their competitors on Google's search result pages (See Sharma et al. 2019 for a review of search engine optimization). We have utilized three different databases available on SemRush: The traffic analytics database, the backlink database, and the search engine database.

The traffic analytics database consists of clickstream data⁸ gathered via third party. This data allows SemRush to provide estimates of a website's data traffic, making it possible to compare traffic, and source of traffic, over time. This database is the source for the traffic data displayed in Figures 1 and 2 below. It is important to note that these numbers are estimates, and that the precision of the data is hard to assess.

The backlink database contains all links that the tool has managed to "crawl" from the web. Crawling is an automated means of harvesting data, in which bots gather ("crawl") information from the websites that they visit. Such databases are valuable tools for commercial actors who are looking to identify the types of links that can help their sites perform well on search engines. The SemRush database consist of 6.7 trillion backlinks, and crawls 200,000 URLs per second.⁹ As of January 2021, the SemRush's backlink database contains 570,000 links to Wikislam, spread over 5,400 different



Figure 1. Estimates of monthly visits to Wikislam.net between January 2017 and December 2020. The data has been retrieved from the traffic analytics database on Semrush.com as of 24.01.21.

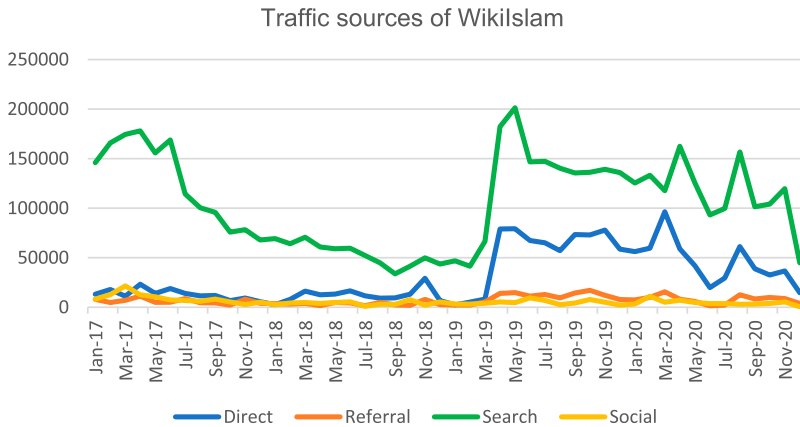


Figure 2. Estimated shares of traffic sources over time. Data has been retrieved from the traffic analytics database on Semrush.com as of 24.01.21.

domains. We have used SemRush’s backlink database both to identify the ten most disseminated Wikilslam articles on the web, and to investigate the most influential websites (defined through Authority Score which will be explained later) that link to Wikilslam. We have then used this data to carry out content analysis on these articles, investigate the ideological profiles of the sites that link to them, as well as to investigate how Wikilslam is used by the most influential sites that link to it.

Finally, the search engine database consists of data collected from the Google results pages for the 500 million most popular keywords on Google. This database is updated monthly and is useful for tracking the performance of websites on Google results rankings for keywords. We have used the database to locate the keywords that attract most visitors to Wikilslam in the US, UK, and India.

Research ethics

Both the collection of data via SemRush as well as the analysis of the data-traffic is conducted on a metalevel, and the collected data does not provide any information about individual users. No personal data has been collected for this article to avoid ethical dilemmas and to protect the safety and anonymity of individual users.

Analysis of backlinks to Wikilslam, and its most disseminated articles

In this section we identify the most successful articles on Wikilslam according to dissemination, and conduct a content analysis of the articles with the

purpose of investigating if, and how, Wikilslam is using a rhetoric based on what we call a “scientification” of Islamophobia.

As seen in the figure below, the total number of sites linking to Wikilslam has gradually been increasing since the SemRush crawlers first located links in May 2013, though flattening out after reaching a top in mid-2019 (Figure 3).

When mapping the ten most disseminated Wikilslam articles on the web, we wanted to make sure that we ranked articles by dissemination in the literal sense of the word, and not just by number of links. Some articles have thousands of links stemming from the same domain, giving a false impression of dissemination. Thus, we ranked Wikilslam articles by number of unique sites that link to the article.

Table 1 below lists the Wikilslam articles with the highest number of unique sites linking to them.

Having identified these articles as the most disseminated (Table 1), a relevant question for this article is to what extent Wikilslam uses a scientific approach when they write about Islam and Muslims. To evaluate this, we have investigated to what extent these articles, for instance, contain references to Islamic and academic sources (i.e. peer-reviewed articles published with international publishers or academic journals) and if they make use of clear definitions when they discuss specific topics.

Without going into any details, we can summarize our analysis of nine of the ten articles listed in Table 1 (the article titled Islam and Pedophilia is no longer available) by saying that the results are mixed. In line with the new vision statement of Wikilslam, the articles are in general supported by a large number of references taken from both Islamic sources like renowned Muslim scholars (i.e. Tabari, Ibn Hisham, Ibn Sa’d, Bukhari), Quran, the hadith- and Sira literature, as well as from well-established academic works

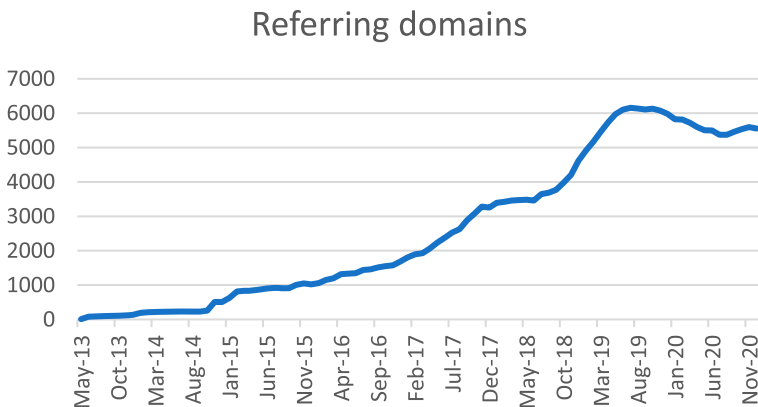


Figure 3. Number of referring domains over time. Data retrieved from the SemRush backlink database as of 24.01.21.

Table 1. Top ten Wikislam articles by backlinks. Data retrieved from the SemRush backlink database as of 24.01.21.

Article posted on Wikislam	Unique sites linking to article
1. List of killings ordered or supported by Muhammad	267
2. Hourī (Heavenly Virgin)	211
3. Compendium of Muslim texts	134
4. Islam and pedophilia	119
5. Muhammad's marriages	110
6. Cousin marriage in Islamic law	100
7. Rape in Islamic Law	99
8. Scientific errors in the Quran	90
9. Islam and homosexuality	79
10. Chronological order of the Quran	78

(i.e. Watt 1956; Stillman 1979; Rubin 1990; or Ali 2010). Several of the references to Islamic texts are also taken from the online publications of the Muslim Student Association at the University of Southern California (USC-MSA). In general, the reader is presented with how Muslim scholars have discussed and interpreted specific questions or episodes in the history of Islam, and internal variations, and even differences among Muslim scholars, are often presented. This way of presenting a topic provide the reader with a good opportunity to make his or her own inference. Even if the content seldom (if ever) considers contemporary discussions or progressive interpretations of historical episodes or controversial questions presented by Muslim scholars, like for instance Abou Diab (1989), Wadud (2013), or Barlas (2019), only a few articles present Islamic theology or Muslims as a homogenous entity or group of people. Even when controversial topics are presented, like the concept of Hourī (Heavenly virgins), a topic recently covered in a controversial book by Christoph Luxenberg, the reader is informed about the criticism that was directed against his analysis (i.e. De Blois 2003). The same is true for the entry on "Rape in Islamic law" that, for instance, contains descriptions of diverging opinions among Muslim scholars. From this point of view, Wikislam is true to its ideals, i.e. the vision presented in the Mission statement. Here we can read:

All content on Wikislam is required to reference either primary, historical sources (such as the earliest qur'anic codices, hadiths, siras and tafsirs) or scholarly secondary sources published by reliable academic journals and presses (e.g. Fred Donner's *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*, published by Harvard University Press). While the claims of latter-day Islamic scholars (e.g. Ibn Kathir or al-Suyuti) provide useful reference for the continuously developing positions of the various Islamic orthodoxies, they do not suffice as historical evidence for the claims they present.¹⁰

Still, one could argue that several of the topics covered by Wikislam are common themes that are associated with anti-Muslim discourses in the West. For instance, violence (i.e. List of Killings order or supported by

Muhammad), sexual abuse (i.e. Islam and pedophilia; Rape in Islamic Law), and the belittling of women (i.e. Muhammad's marriages, Hour).)

Furthermore, there is a tendency to show that the practice of Islam is contrary to modern scientific knowledge (e.g. when it comes to evolutionary theories, biology, and geology; cf. the entry "Scientific errors in the Quran") and established medicine. For instance, besides providing a description of the practice of cousin marriage in Islamic history which is based on references to the Qur'an, hadith and Sira literature, the entry on "Cousin marriage in Islamic law" gives an outline of the practice of cousin marriage in three countries/regions dominated by Muslims (Pakistan, Turkey, and Arab nations). This entry is supported by 18 footnotes from both Muslim and non-Muslim sources (i.e. articles in journals like *Science*, *Nature Genetics*; *PLOS Biology*) that presents the medical fact that "children born of cousin marriages face an increased risk of genetic disorders and childhood mortality".

To summarize our findings from reading the nine most linked entries, it is possible to say that Wikislam uses a scientific vocabulary and presents their references in a way that is easy to check, and that the sources are either taken from Islamic texts, debates among Muslim scholars, or within the academic study of Islam. However, there is a bias in the selection of topics addressed in Wikislam. Muslims are in general explicitly or implicitly linked to a non-rational worldview that is incompatible with a scientific outlook, and there is hardly any information that presents Muslims in a positive or neutral way.

Wikislam in context

In this section we take a closer look at how articles from Wikislam are utilized by websites that link to it. In keeping with the overall perspective of scientification, our point of departure is that websites will typically link to Wikislam to ground knowledge in what are perceived to be serious articles about Islam written by experts. We are only interested in websites of some significance to global discourse on Islam and Muslims, and for this reason we organize our search in the following way. We apply a SemRush filter that ranks websites according to authority with a score from 0 to 100. Authority Score is a metric used by SemRush to measure the overall quality of a domain. The score is based on the number of backlinks, referring domains, organic search traffic, and other data, and 100 is a maximum reachable Authority Score. We decided to look more closely at the backlinks to Wikislam at the 10 websites with the highest Authority Score that have at least three links to Wikislam. These are presented in [Table 2](#).

These ten domains are different in nature. Wikipedia is the largest online encyclopedia in the world and is among the ten most visited websites globally. It has more than 50 million articles in roughly 300 languages, with the

English language Wikipedia being the largest by far. The website with the second highest authority score in our search is iDNES, which is an important Czech news portal run by a media company called MAFRA. MAFRA is owned by Andrej Babiš, the Prime Minister of the Czech Republic since 2017 and the founder of the populist political party ANO (European Commission 2019). Breitbart is a large and well-known far-right international website for news and commentary, which ranks among the most popular news sites in the US. It has flouted several conspiracy theories and was an important supporter of Donald Trump's campaign in 2016 (Griffiths 2017). Namuwiki is the largest online encyclopedia in the Korean language with more users than the Korean Wikipedia (Park 2017). World Net Daily is a far-right website created by Joseph Farah in 1997. It is a supporter of former American president Donald Trump, and it supports several of the important conspiracy theories of the US far-right, like "birther movement", i.e. the claim that Obama is not really a US citizen (Roig-Franzia 2019). The Blaze is a conservative, self-styled pro-America media company in the US hosting famous far-right hosts like Glenn Beck (Breuninger 2018). Both PJ Media and American Thinker are self-styled conservative media websites giving comments on politics and other daily news.

To understand how articles from Wikislam are used by these highly rated websites we looked closely at the context and meaning of backlinks found at the ten websites. There is no space to discuss all these backlinks here, but in the following we present a small sample. For instance, the Spanish Wikipedia has an article on apostasy (Apostasia) with five recommended external sites.

Table 2. Top ten sites that have 3 or more links to Wikislam, ranked by Authority Score. Data retrieved from the SemRush backlink database as of 18.05.21.

AS	Domain	Links to Wikislam	Type	Self-representation
96	Wikipedia.org	48	Encyclopedia	Neutral
85	Idnes.cz	9	News and commentary	Neutral
79	Breitbart.com	54	News and commentary	Conservative
78	Namuwiki	3	Encyclopedia	Neutral
76	blogs.timesofisrael.com	4	News and commentary	Neutral
76	wnd.com	3	News and commentary	Pro-America, pro-free speech
75	theblaze.com	3	News and commentary	Pro-America, pro-free speech
74	israelnationalnews.com	4	News and commentary	Conservative
72	pjmedia.com	3	News and commentary	Conservative
72	Americanthinker.com	5	News and commentary	Conservative

Among these external sites is an article on Wikislam called “People who left Islam”. Spanish Wikipedia’s article on Jihad (Yihad) links to a Wikislam entry called “The Greater Jihad” to support an opinion about a *hadith* – a saying of the Prophet – concerning the inner Jihad versus the outer, or violent, Jihad. Likewise, the Turkish Wikipedia has an article about the Quran (Kuran) that also includes references to Wikislam. When presenting the cosmology in the Quran, the Turkish Wikipedia article links to the Wikislam article called “The geocentric Quran”. The Wikipedia articles that link to Wikislam seem consistently to use the linked articles to ground perspectives on Islam in neutral and research-based sources. A slightly different way of using Wikislam is demonstrated by the Czech Wikipedia’s article about Islam. In this article there is a link at the bottom that leads the reader not to a specific Wikislam article but rather to the Wikislam Czech pages of Wikislam in general for more information.

As concerns the Czech Idnes website, we find that articles on Wikislam were used by several individual bloggers on the blog-pages of the website. Wikislam was typically referred to in articles describing the dangers of immigration of Muslims to the Czech Republic or to Europe in general, and the Wikislam articles that were linked to were typically about women in Islam, apostasy in Islam, and stoning as punishment for adultery.

Among the Breitbart articles linking to Wikislam we find critical articles – often clearly Islamophobic – that link to Wikislam to support arguments about Islam and Muslims. Two examples must suffice here. For instance, the prolific Breitbart journalist Neil Munro published an article on Breitbart 2 February 2018 about how Jihadis got visas to the US where he links four times to articles in Wikislam to show that Islam is a violent religion (Munro 2018). Two of these links lead to the Wikislam article called “Islam and violence”. Furthermore, in a Breitbart article by British far-right politician Anne-Marie Waters called “Feminists need to know – Islam kills women” (Waters 2016) the author links to an article from Wikislam to establish that Islam mandates female genital mutilation. The article on Wikislam is called “Qur’an, Hadith and Scholars:Female Genital Mutilation”.¹¹

The uses of articles from Wikislam on the media websites World Net Daily, the Blaze, PJ Media and American Thinker follow the same pattern. These are all far-right websites and when they link to Wikislam it is clearly with the intention of giving legitimacy to very critical opinions about Islam and Muslims. They typically link to Wikislam articles about pedophilia in Islam, women in Islam and rape in Islam.

If we are to summarize our close reading of how these ten selected websites use Wikislam, the reasonable conclusion is that Wikislam is a useful point of reference in establishing legitimacy to opinions and claims about the negative and dangerous aspects of Islam. The two common ways for the above-named websites to refer readers to Wikislam are to embed links

in the text to support a particular argument, or to list Wikilslam among several sources at the end of an article to point the reader in the direction of further relevant reading. Most of the links we found to Wikilslam on these ten websites appear in articles that have Islamophobic contents according to the definition we introduced in the beginning.

From Google to Wikilslam

By investigating the search-engine route from Google search to Wikilslam, we can say something about the type of searches that lead online users to Wikilslam. We have already shown that most of the traffic to Wikilslam is directed via search engines (anywhere between 50% and 90% in each month). Using SemRush's Search Engine database we can see which Wikilslam articles get most traffic from searches on Google. The search-traffic database that we are using to explore this question categorizes search-traffic by country and month, including searches done on both desktop and mobile. In the tables below, we have listed the ten most visited Wikilslam-articles via Google Search in three countries, namely the US, India, and the UK for 2020. The following three tables list the search results by country for 2020 (Tables 3–5).

When analyzing the data from the three countries, the results indicate that Wikilslam indeed has some success in being recognized as an encyclopedia on Islam by online users who search for information. This is particularly indicated by the fact that articles like "Allahu akbar", "inshallah", "Allah knows best", and "Al Fatiha" are frequently accessed by users via Google. This can also indicate that the Google algorithms recognize Wikilslam as a trusted site on these topics. Some highly specific keywords from Indian searches, particularly Ghazwa e-Hind and Bhavisya Purana, indicate that Wikilslam also appears to have some success in attracting online users that are looking for very context-specific information, i.e. information that is not immediately relevant to anyone outside of the cultural context from which the search is

Table 3. Top ten Wikilslam articles accessed via Google from the US in 2020. Data retrieved from the SemRush search engine database on 20.05.21.

From Google to Wikilslam, US 2020	
Article	Average traffic per month
Allahu Akbar	2283
Inshallah	822
Waswas	670
Allah knows best	612
The Meaning of Islam	591
Shahadah	572
Al Fatiha	518
Kafir	487
Scientific errors in the Quran	392
Cousin marriage in Islam	359

Table 4. Top ten Wikislam articles accessed via Google from India in 2020. Data retrieved from the SemRush search engine atabase on 20.05.21.

From Google to Wikislam, India 2020	
Article	Average traffic per month
Ghazwa e hind	2238
Waswas	617
Kafir	592
Main page	305
Bhavishya Purana	297
Allah knows best	237
Allahu akbar	221
Scientific errors in the Quran	205
Angel Jibreel	149
Michael Jackson	143

taking place. Ghazwa e-Hind means a holy war on behalf of Islam to conquer India and it supposedly refers to a prophecy made by the Prophet Muhammad. The concept has been used in propaganda both by jihadists in Pakistan eager to garner support for war on India and by Hindu nationalists in India who warn about the danger they believe Islam presents against Hindus and against the Indian state (Kidwai 2019). Without providing any more information on this specific concept and its history, the important point for our research is that it is a local Indian concept that is easy to connect to a global discourse about the threat of jihad. It is also interesting to note that the same concept is quite high on the list of Wikislam articles accessed by users in the UK. For this article we have no way of knowing anything about the users, of course, but it would not be entirely unreasonable to assume that at least some of the people reading about Ghazwa e-Hind from a UK address are of South Asian origin, especially considering the presence and activities of Hindu nationalist (Hindutva) organizations in the UK (Leidig 2020). This also highlights Wikislam's potential role as a platform that articulates negative tropes about Islam from the perspective of multiple cultures,

Table 5. Top ten Wikislam articles accessed via Google from the UK in 2020. Data retrieved from the SemRush search engine database on 20.05.21.

From Google to Wikislam, UK 2020	
Article	Average traffic per month
Allah knows best	718
Shahadah	312
Al Fatiha	235
Michael Jackson conversion	194
Main page	181
Inshaallah	177
Ghazwa e hind	151
Angel Jibreel	146
Contradictions in the Quran	132
Waswas	101

which further reveals Wikislam's potential to facilitate a lending and borrowing of knowledge that can travel between cultures in global flows of anti-Islamic/anti-Muslim sentiments.

Concluding discussion

In this article we have investigated whether Wikislam can be said to represent what we have called a scientification of Islamophobia, in addition to investigating whether Wikislam plays an enabling role for websites that anchor prejudice against Islam and Muslims in a scientific jargon. We have used online research methods to look at backlinks to Wikislam and at the use of Wikislam by individual users and by other websites.

Our content analysis of the most disseminated articles from Wikislam shows that the articles are largely selective when it comes to topics covered, and to some extent selective in choice of references. In addition, some of these articles can also be said to espouse attitudes that are Islamophobic as we have defined it, but at the same time it is also important to underline that the articles often present alternative and conflicting opinions about the topics that are discussed. Furthermore, we have shown how articles from Wikislam are used to give legitimacy to arguments made on other websites, many of which contain Islamophobic messaging. From this point of view, Wikislam can be said to exemplify a scientification of Islamophobia while also lending authority and legitimacy to Islamophobic arguments elsewhere.

Still, it would be wrong to claim that Wikislam in its entirety is an Islamophobic platform, given that some of the articles do indeed present conflicting views and interpretations of controversial issues, while others simply criticize Islamic beliefs and practices through comparison with contemporary scientific knowledge. Having said that, our overall evaluation of Wikislam is that the information that it presents about Islam is far from neutral, and thus Wikislam does not meet all the requirements stated in their own vision document. To warrant that claim, the website would, for instance, have to include much more varied information about differences within Islam as well as among academics studying Islam and Muslims. Furthermore, our main concern is that Wikislam presents itself as an encyclopedic and scientific site without a political agenda and that it does not critically reflect upon how it can be used for serving other interests. With reference to websites like Breitbart and their use of Wikislam's contents, it is clear that Wikislam can be used to justify attitudes and worldviews that are Islamophobic. In the end then, the process that we call the scientification of Islamophobia is not only, or primarily, about the sinister intentions of editors and writers that create online content about Islam, but also about the flows and exchanges whereby seemingly scientific information about the negative sides of Islam and Muslims is used in a variety of global and local discourses.

Notes

1. Results from the research done for this article were presented at the 20th annual conference of the European Association for the Study of Religion (EASR) in Vilnius, 4th-8th September 2023.
2. https://wikiislam.net/wiki/WikiIslam#Policies_and_Guidelines, accessed 16.08.22.
3. <https://wikiislam.net/wiki/WikiIslam:Contribute>, accessed 16.08.22.
4. <https://wikiislam.net/wiki/WikiIslam:Renovations>, accessed 16.08.22.
5. <https://wikiislam.net/wiki/WikiIslam:Renovations>, accessed 16.08.22.
6. <https://wikiislam.net/wiki/WikiIslam:Contribute>, accessed 16.08.22.
7. See, <https://www.semrush.com/company/>, accessed 02.02.21.
8. "A clickstream is a sequential path of pages taken by an Internet user. Clickstream data is the result of analyzing large batches of such clickstreams through data processing, cleaning and organizing. This data can be used to understand how people navigate websites and pages on the Internet."
See <https://www.semrush.com/kb/26-traffic-analytics#5>, accessed 02.02.21.
9. It is important to note that the database by no means should be understood as a complete collection of all links that exist on the internet. For instance, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are excluded, and website administrators can block crawlers if they want to, and it is therefore difficult (if not impossible) to assert the number of websites that remain "uncrawled"
10. https://wikiislam.net/wiki/WikiIslam#Mission_Statement, accessed 16.08.22.
11. https://wikiislam.net/wiki/Qur%27an,_Hadith_and_Scholars:Female_Genital_Mutilation accessed 16.08.22.

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to Professor Göran Larsson for his feedback and comments on previous versions of this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by Norges Forskningsråd: [Grant Number 287230].

References

- Abou Diab, K. 1989. "Magali Morsy. Les Femmes du Prophète." *Politique étrangère* 54 (3): 540–540.
- Ali, K. 2010. *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Barlas, A. 2019. *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*. University of Texas Press.
- Bleich, E. 2011. "What is Islamophobia and How Much is There? Theorizing and Measuring an Emerging Comparative Concept." *American Behavioral Scientist* 55 (12): 1581–1600. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764211409387>.

- Brekke, T. 2011. *Fundamentalism: Prophecy and Protest in an Age of Globalization* (Vol. 3). Cambridge University Press.
- Brekke, T. 2021. "Islamophobia and Antisemitism are Different in Their Potential for Globalization." *Journal of Religion and Violence* 9 (1): 80–100.
- Breuninger, K. 2018, December 3. Glenn Beck's *The Blaze* and Mark Levin's *CRTV Merge to Form Right-Wing Outlet Blaze Media, Which Could Rival the new Fox News Streaming Service*. CNBC. Accessed February 18, 2022. <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/03/glenn-becks-the-blaze-and-mark-levins-crtv-merge-to-form-blaze-media.html>.
- Bunt, G. R. 2009. *iMuslims: Rewiring the House of Islam*. Univ of North Carolina Press.
- Bunzl, M. 2007. *Anti-Semitism and Islamophobia: Hatreds Old and New in Europe*. Prickly Paradigm Press.
- Dawkins, R., and L. Ward. 2006. *The God Delusion* (pp. 40–45). Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.
- De Blois, F. 2003. "Review of Die Syro-Aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache." *Journal of Quranic Studies* 5 (1).
- Enstedt, D., and G. Larsson. 2013. "Telling the Truth About Islam?" *Apostasy Narratives and Representations of Islam on WikiIslam. net. CyberOrient* 7 (1): 64–93. Accessed February 18, 2021. <https://cyberorient.net/2013/05/10/telling-the-truth-about-islam-apostasy-narratives-and-representations-of-islam-on-wikiislam-net/>.
- "European Commission Confirms Czech Prime Minister Andrej Babis has Conflict of Interest." 2019. Transparency International, June 05. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/european-commission-confirms-czech-prime-minister-andrej-babish-has-conflict>.
- Evolvi, G. 2018. "Hate in a Tweet: Exploring Internet-Based Islamophobic Discourses." *Religions* 9 (10): 307. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9100307>.
- Frydenlund, I. 2023. "Theorizing Buddhist anti-Muslim Nationalism as Global Islamophobia." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2268209>.
- Ganesh, B., I. Frydenlund, and T. Brekke. 2023. "Flows and Modalities of Global Islamophobia." *Ethnic & Racial Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2268192>.
- Griffiths, D. B. 2017. "Trump Thanks Bannon for his 'Service', Praises Breitbart Return." *Politico*, August 19. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/19/trump-thanks-bannon-for-service-241817>.
- Hoffmann, T., and G. Larsson. 2013. *Muslims and the New Information and Communication Technologies* (Vol. 7). Muslims in Global Societies Series.
- Kidwai, R. 2019. "Everyone Misinterprets Ghazwa-e-Hind, but a Jamiat Scholar Explains What it Really Means." *The Print*, October 7. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://theprint.in/opinion/everyone-misinterprets-ghazwa-e-hind-but-a-jamiat-scholar-explains-what-it-really-means/301686/>.
- Larsson, G. 2007. "Cyber-Islamophobia? The Case of WikiIslam." *Contemporary Islam* 1 (1): 53–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-007-0002-2>.
- Larsson, G. 2016. "'Most Muslims are Like You and I, but 'Real' Muslims . . .'" *Journal of Muslims in Europe* 5 (2): 205–223. <https://doi.org/10.1163/22117954-12341327>.
- Larsson, G., and Å Sander. 2015. "Urgent Need to Consider How to Define Islamophobia." *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 44 (1): 13–17. <https://doi.org/10.1558/bsor.v44i1.26849>.
- Leidig, E. 2020. "Reconfiguring Nationalism: Transnational Entanglements of Hindutva and Radical Right Ideology." Dissertation.

- Magdy, W., Darwish, K., & Abokhodair, N. 2015. "Quantifying Public Response Towards Islam on Twitter After Paris Attacks." arXiv preprint arXiv:1512.04570.
- Mondon, A., and A. Winter. 2017. "Articulations of Islamophobia: From the Extreme to the Mainstream?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40 (13): 2151–2179. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1312008>.
- Munro, N. 2018. "WH Shows 15 Jihadis who got Visas by Lottery or Chain Migration." Breitbart, February 2. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://www.breitbart.com/immigration/2018/02/02/wh-shows-jihadis-who-got-visas-via-lottery-chain-migration/>.
- Park, S. S. 2017. "For Better or Worse, All Roads Lead to Namuwiki in South Korea, Not Wikipedia." Korea Expose, March 23. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://korealexpose.com/battle-wikipedia-south-korea-namuwiki/>.
- Roig-Franzia, M. 2019. "Inside the Spectacular Fall of the Granddaddy of Right-Wing Conspiracy Sites." The Washington Post, April 2. Accessed August 18, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/inside-the-spectacular-fall-of-the-granddaddy-of-right-wing-conspiracy-sites/2019/04/02/6ac53122-3ba6-11e9-a06c-3ec8ed509d15_story.html.
- Rozehnal, R. 2019. *Cyber Sufis: Virtual Expressions of the American Muslim Experience*. Simon and Schuster.
- Rubin, U. 1990. "The Assassination of Ka'b b." *al-Ashraf. Oriens*, 65–71.
- Sharma, D., R. Shukla, A. K. Giri, and S. Kumar. 2019. "A Brief Review on Search Engine Optimization." In *2019 9th International Conference on Cloud Computing, Data Science & Engineering (Confluence)*, 687–692, January. IEEE.
- Sinai, N. 2017. *Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Solberg, A. R. 2013. *The Mahdi Wears Armani: An Analysis of the Harun Yahya Enterprise*. Södertörn University.
- Spencer, R. 2006. *The Truth About Muhammad: Founder of the World's Most Intolerant Religion*. Simon and Schuster.
- Spencer, R. 2021. *Did Muhammad Exist?: An Inquiry Into Islam's Obscure Origins—Revised and Expanded Edition*. Bombardier Books.
- Stenberg, L. 1996. *The Islamization of Science*. Life Stenberg, Lund University Press.
- Stillman, N. A. 1979. *The Jews of Arab Lands*. Jewish Publication Society.
- Stroup, D. 2023. "Loathsome Hui Parasites: Islamophobia, Ethnic Chauvinism, and Popular Responses to the 2020 Wuhan Coronavirus Outbreak." *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2023.2268155>.
- Von Stuckrad, K. 2014. "The Scientification of Religion." In *The Scientification of Religion*. de Gruyter.
- Wadud, A. 2013. *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam*. Simon and Schuster.
- Wagner, Wendy E. 2022. "No One Solution to the "New Demarcation Problem"?: A View from the Trenches." *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 92 (April): 177–185. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.shpsa.2022.02.001>.
- Warraq, I. 1998. *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book*. Prometheus Books.
- Warraq, I. 2000. *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*. Prometheus Books.
- Warraq, I. 2002. *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary*. Prometheus Books.
- Waters, A. 2016. "Feminists Need to Know – Islam Kills Women." Breitbart, April 9. Accessed August 18, 2022. <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2016/04/09/feminists-need-know-islam-kills-women/>.
- Watt, W. 1956. *Montgomery: Muhammad at Medina*. Oxford University Press.