



# Stopping the Spread:

Our Work Against COVID-19 Disinformation  
with MENA Region Youth

# Agenda



- 1. An Introduction to Ideas Beyond Borders (5-10 min.)**
  - a. Our Mission
  - b. Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) Through Translation
  - c. Our Successes, Our Partners & Where We Work
  
- 2. The COVID-19 MENA Landscape (10 min.)**
  - a. COVID-19 In the MENA Region
  - b. Exploiting the Pandemic: The Blame Game
  - c. Specific COVID-19 Campaigns affecting MENA Region Youth
  
- 3. Our Fight Against COVID-19 Disinformation (10 min.)**
  - a. The Goal & Key Messages
  - b. Objectives
  - c. Our Current Efforts
  - d. Resources Needed for Expansion
  
- 4. Q&A Session (25 min.)**



# An Introduction to Ideas Beyond Borders



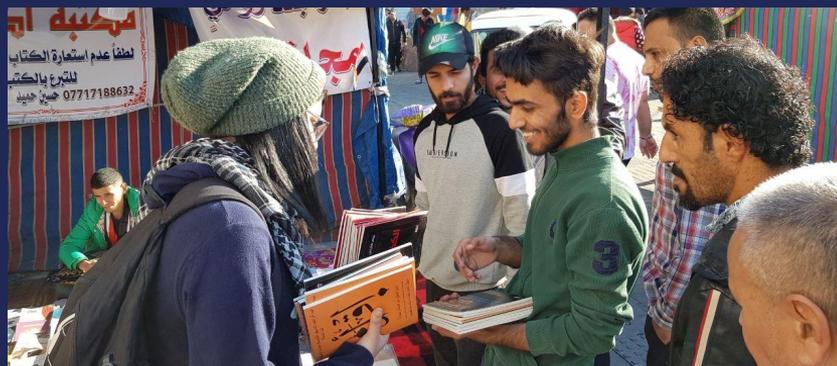
# Our Mission

Ideas Beyond Borders champions **a positive alternative** to the extremism, authoritarianism, censorship, and violence that plagues the Middle East.

We share, translate, and promote ideas that foster:

- Critical Thinking
- Civil & Human Rights
- Science
- Pluralism
- & more

***We want to ultimately bring to life a modern, pluralistic Middle East, led by the people of the region.***



# Preventing Extremism Through Translation: The Landscape

Youth under the age of 29 comprise  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the region's population (150 million people).<sup>1</sup> They are:



- Eager but unskilled
- Smart-phone savvy, but significantly less educated than their global peers
- Frustrated, citing feelings of hopelessness from decades of war and unrest
- **Desperately looking for change**

<sup>1</sup>Arab Human Development Report 2016: Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality. UNDP.  
<http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/2699/ahdr2016en.pdf>.  
Accessed 4 Mar 2020.

# Preventing Extremism Through Translation: The Landscape

Arabic-speaking youth can't find reliable, empowering content online *even when they want to*.

- Just **3%** of the internet is available in Arabic for **240 million Arabic speakers**.<sup>1</sup>
- **96%** of regional countries politically and ideologically censor content.<sup>2</sup>

## *From Orwell to 'Little Mermaid,' Kuwait Steps Up Book Banning*



Books were hung from a palm tree in Kuwait City on Saturday to protest official censorship. Yasser Al-Zayyat/Agence France-Presse — Getty Images

By Rod Nordland

Oct. 1, 2018



KUWAIT — No book, it seems, is too substantive or too insignificant to be banned in Kuwait. Recent targets of the government's literary censors include an encyclopedia with a picture of Michelangelo's [David](#) and a Disney version of "The Little Mermaid."

<sup>1</sup> Orcutt, Michael. *The Online Language Barrier*. MIT Technology Review. <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/535591/the-online-language-barrier/>. 6 Mar 2015. Accessed 6 Mar 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Noman, Helmi. *Internet Censorship and the Intraregional Geopolitical Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa*. Berkman Klein Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University. <https://theneetmonitor.org/bulletins/internet-censorship-and-the-intraregional-geopolitical-conflicts-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>. 15 Jan 2019. Accessed 6 Mar 2020.

# Preventing Extremism Through Translation: The Landscape

Foreign players spreading empowering information are often mistrusted or publically known to be government affiliated. Distrust of Western state-affiliated publications runs deep.

## The Arab Weekly

### Why conspiracy theories thrive in the Middle East

Only bringing back the primacy of reason will save the Arab world from the distorting prism of conspiracy theories.

Saturday 13/07/2019



## The New York Times

### *Suspicious Run Deep in Iraq That C.I.A. and the Islamic State Are United*

By David D. Kirkpatrick

Sept. 20, 2014



BAGHDAD — The United States has conducted an escalating campaign of deadly airstrikes against the extremists of the Islamic State.

# Preventing Extremism Through Translation: The Landscape

This knowledge gap, coupled with their thirst for information, leads youth to seek answers from anyone that can provide them, sometimes setting them on the **Road to Radicalization**.

0

vulnerable

people throughout the world - especially the young - who are susceptible to extremist narratives that promise a sense of identity and purpose

1

curious

the vulnerable who are exposed to extremist messaging are enticed enough to actively want to learn more and start communicating directly with its proponents

2

engaged

the curious who actively engage in extremist messaging; they discuss narratives with confidants and share ideas in person and online.

3

converted

the engaged become convinced that extremist narratives are their own narratives; they self-identify with the extremist group & believe in its tenets.

4

recruited

the converted have now actively joined an extremist community or organization; they participate in group activities like propagandizing

5

violent

the recruited now not only self-identify with and consider themselves an active member of an extremist group but enthusiastically join them in acts of oppression and violence



# Preventing Extremism Through Translation: The Bayt Al Hikma 2.0 Program

- IBB launched *Bayt Al Hikma 2.0* in 2017 to solve the **content scarcity problem for Arabic-speakers** by providing empowering content on critical thinking, civil rights, and science
- Free-to-access hub of knowledge and a bustling online community with a distribution network of over **4.2 million youth across the MENA region**
- Translations by Arabic-speaking youth, for Arabic-speaking youth
- **120 regional paid and volunteer young translators** living in Iraq, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, and more



# Preventing Extremism Through Translation: The University Translators Program

- In 2019, IBB seized the opportunity to empower **Iraqi university students**
- Launched a special program aimed at **developing participants' leadership and professional skills and engage them as leaders for a future, pluralistic Middle East**
- IBB works closely with regional and university partners, including:
  - University of Mosul
  - University of Tikrit
  - Wasit University
  - Kufa University
  - University of Duhok
  - University of Kurdistan
  - Leaders for Change in Anbar province



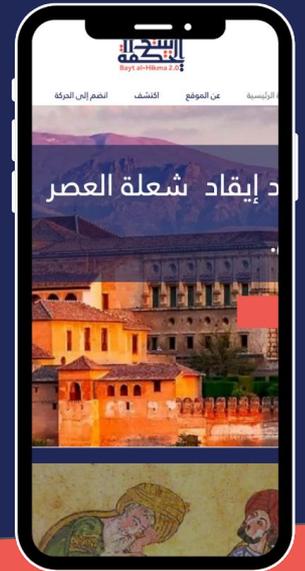
# Preventing Extremism Through Translation: The University Translators Program Annual Conference

- As a part of the University Translators program, IBB is launching its first annual **Pioneer Leadership Conference** in Erbil, Iraq in 2020
- Bring together student leaders from across Iraq to **combat sectarianism, promote gender equality, and empower youth via translation and leadership workshops**



# What Sets IBB Apart?

- Led by an Iraqi-American founder with firsthand experience living under authoritarian and extremist regimes
- Have local access to hard-to-reach communities because of key staff, brand positioning, advisory board, and strategic partner network
- Content selected and translated by MENA youth for MENA youth
- Emphasize meeting youth where they are with information that suits their needs
  - Culturally relevant
  - Optimized for mobile and lower internet speeds
- Promote gender equality in all of our programs, with a male/female gender split of participants at 1:1





# Where We Work



- **Thousands** of followers in each MENA country
- Workshops held in difficult-to-reach communities in **Syria, the West Bank, and Iraq**
- Paid and volunteer translators spread across the region
- Partnerships with key local actors

# Our 2019 Successes

- **35,421 unique BAH 2.0 website users;**
- **More than 4 million followers** in our distribution network;
- Translated **6,721 articles**, which were **viewed at least one million times;** and
- Published and/or distributed **13 books** which were downloaded **20,721 times**. 4,200 physical books were also distributed.



hello  
bonjour  
hola

بيل هاندلي



تاريخ العلوم

مونيرو كاكو



ويكيبيديا  
الموسوعة الحرة

الصفحة الرئيسية  
الاحداث الحديثة  
أحدث التغييرات  
أحدث التغييرات الأخيرة

تصلح

# Some of Our Strategic Partners



Row 1: IBIS, MBN, Wikimedia of the Levant, Egyptian Researchers, Leaders for Change Iraq, Rwanaga, University of Kufa, Information Safety & Capacity Project; Row 2: University of Mosul, University of Tikrit, Wikimedia Kurdistan, Fuse School, Parallel Networks, Masterword, Farsi Wikipedia, University of Kurdistan Hewler; Row 3: Asafeer, University of Duhok, University of Wasit, Hindawi



# The COVID-19 MENA Landscape

# COVID-19 Implications for the MENA Region



According to regional experts at the Brookings Institution, COVID-19 is likely to cause **macroeconomic instability and public unrest:**

- A conflict-multiplier as oil prices collapse
- Obliteration of safety nets for working classes
- Dilapidated healthcare systems unable to cope

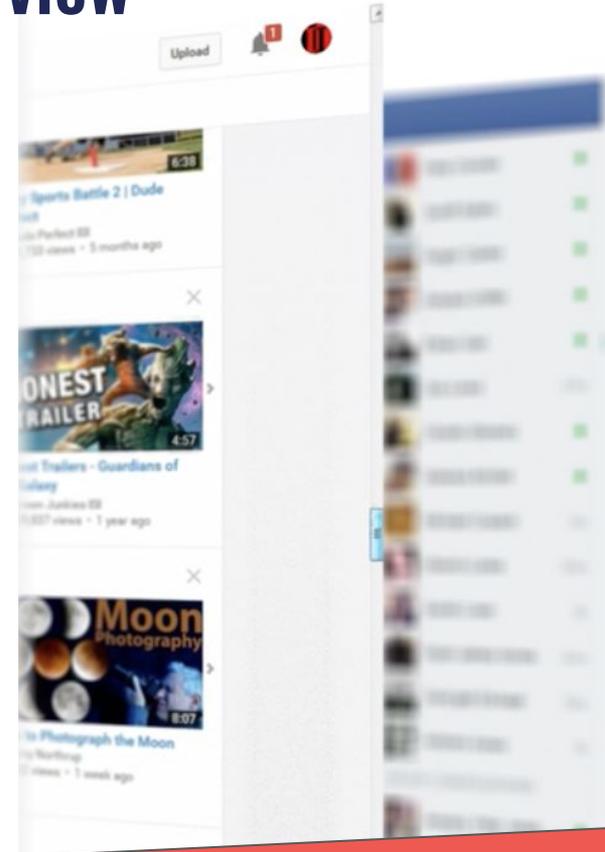
Against the backdrop of civil wars, wide displacement of peoples, migrant camps, regional conflicts, and sectarian divides, **COVID-19 leaves a vulnerable general public eager for answers.**

# COVID-19 Disinformation Campaigns: Overview

Research from the Institute of Strategic Dialogue indicates:

- State-sponsored media and extremist movements are exploiting the pandemic
- Extremists are calling for an acceleration of social conflict and violence in the face of the pandemic to under a “gain-control-before-it’s-too-late” mentality
- Dangerous misinformation on cures and treatments continues to circulate, causing fatal incidents and price-gouging

**This is taking place, overwhelmingly, on social media.**



# The Blame Game in the MENA Region



Governments and extremists alike are eager to assign blame and rationalize the pandemic, including:

- Coronavirus is a bioweapon, with news outlets saying that the Wuhan facility was funded by the 'Deep State' or the CIA;
- Coronavirus is a conspiracy to lock people up or impose military/totalitarian rule;
- The virus was advanced by Jewish people or Israel as a means of manipulating the market;
- The virus was created by Jewish people as a means of killing those who oppose them; and
- The virus is a religious scourge to punish the LGBT community and their supporters.

Institute for Strategic Dialogue. *Covid-19 Disinformation Briefing No. 1*. 27 Mar 2020.

# Disinformation on a Cure for COVID-19

Other disinformation includes:

- Drinking water every 15 minutes can 'wash' coronavirus out of the mouth (an Arabic language version has been shared more than 250,000 times)
- Cures exist and are being hoarded by Jewish people or the US government
- Coronavirus was created in a US lab



## CORONAVIRUS

### Iran leader refuses U.S. help, citing virus conspiracy theory

"I do not know how real this accusation is but when it exists, who in their right mind would trust you to bring them medication?"



Hoax claim circulates online that Israel has no COVID-19 cases after it developed a 'cure'

AFP Pakistan | Facebook | Twitter | Email | Published on Tuesday 17 March 2020 At 22:30

### Coronavirus: Iraqis criticise Muqtada al-Sadr for same-sex marriage claims

LGBT rights group accuses leading Shia cleric of 'weaponising' fears of Covid-19



# E.g. A COVID-19 Conspiracy with Millions of Likes & Shares

A specific example of a viral conspiracy theories is this one surrounding Charles Lieberman and the creation of COVID-19 in a US lab. Believers claim it was then purposefully exported to China.

These news articles were shared by accounts with a combined network of more than **15 million followers**, with **tens of thousands of shares**.



## Russian Times Arabic:

Corona was manufactured in America to target specific countries



## Al Masrawy Article:

COVID-19 was created by Harvard professor Charles Lieberman

## AlMasray News:

Created by Harvard professor Charles Lieberman, Exported to China

"تشارلز ليبير" صانع كورونا.. اكتشفه في أمريكا وصنعه في "الصين"... التفاصيل الكاملة لـ"كأزمة" نشر الوباء العالمي

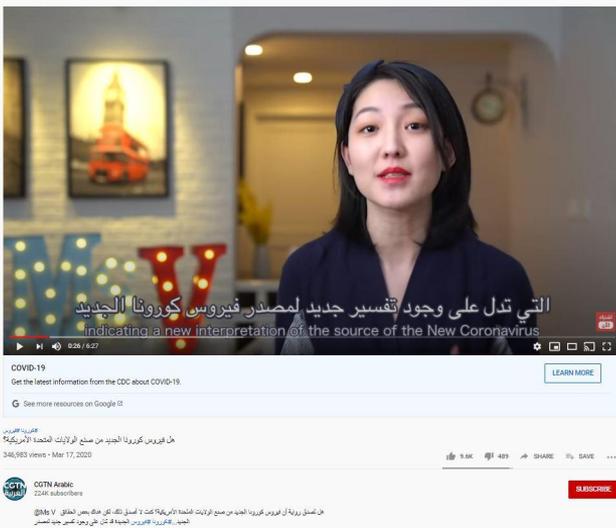


## Aliwa Newspaper:

Washington Admits to Manufacturing Deadly Virus

# State-backed Conspiracy Theories

Other state-backed conspiracies include:



**A Chinese-Government Official Claiming Coronavirus was made in the US in a YouTube video shared by CGTV Arabic with over 340K views and tens of thousands of shares.**



عالم بريطاني تنبأ قبل 17 سنة بحدوث "إرهاب بيولوجي" في عام 2020 يؤدي إلى قتل مليون إنسان.



**An Al-Jazeera account claiming that COVID-19 was predicted 17 years ago by a British Scientist, claiming that 1 million people would die due to biological warfare.**

Like Comment Share

25K - 1.8K Comments



# Our Fight Against COVID-19 Disinformation



# Our Fight Against COVID-19 Disinformation: **The Goal**

Create and implement a high-quality, evidence-based COVID-19 public health information campaign for MENA youth (ages 15-29) now through the end of 2020 to stop the spread of disinformation and the virus itself.







# Our Current COVID-19 Campaign Efforts

Leveraged partnership with Wikimedia of the Levant, the Wikipedia Medicine Project, and mega social media influencer *I Believe in Science* (IBIS - 3.3M followers) to:

- **Translating articles on COVID-19 and creating videos delinking Covid-19 from disinformation and conspiracies, e.g. “Top 10 COVID-19 Myths”**
- Launching several videos from IBB’s ***Critical Thinking Series***, e.g. “How to Spot Fake News”
- Identifying existing content and popularizing it via our distribution network
- Translating critical global health information from CDC & other reputable sources into **made-for-youth infographics**
- Initiating preliminary discussions with:
  - Public health experts like Shakir Jawad at the **Center for Public Health Engagement**
  - Policy think tanks experts like Rashad Ali at the **Institute for Strategic Dialogue** to translate briefings on disinformation materials into **actionable campaigns for youth**



# COVID-19 Is Driving Our Online Traffic

- Our video content alone has been viewed over **4.5M** times.
- Our Facebook page traffic has **increased over 60%** and our website traffic has **increased 83%**.
- Videos like “**Top 10 Coronavirus Myths**” and a satirical video titled “Corona #Conspiracy” have gone viral with over 1M views and tens of thousands of likes.
- **Arabic-speaking youth are eagerly hunting for accurate COVID-19 content.**



## Post Engagement

April 1 - April 7

861,730

Post Engagement **▲2308%**



## Page Likes

April 1 - April 7

17,020

Page Likes **▲27%**



## Post Reach

April 1 - April 7

4,281,395

People Reached **▲1182%**



## Videos

April 1 - April 7

3,449,800

3-Second Video Views **▲266912%**



# Why IBB Is Experiencing This Success



- An already trusted resource among Arabic-speaking youth
- Depth of social media and youth communications expertise, between founder, core staff, and partners like IBIS
- Specialize in creating information geared toward Arabic-speaking youth
  - Youth-to-youth content model
  - Focus on making content youth want to read, in ways they can access
    - Optimized for mobile
    - Leverage social media and memes
    - Designed for low-speed internet in a culturally relevant vehicle
- Hold established relationships with key Arab influencers and Middle Eastern media partners alike



# An Opportunity for Expansion: Objectives

IBB is seeking the resources from various funders to expand our current campaign objectives, which include:

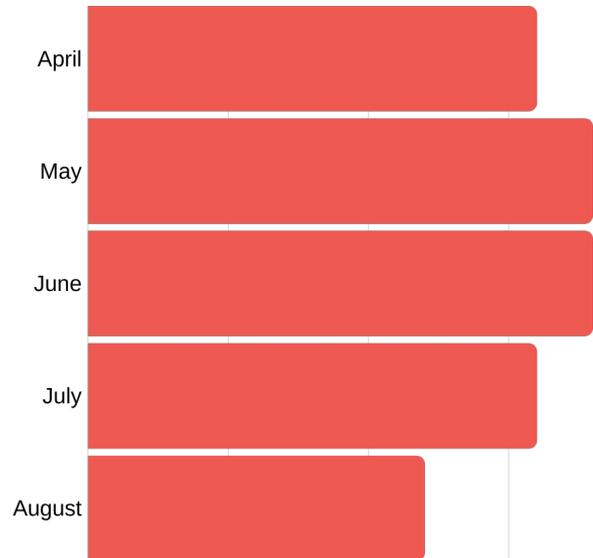
1. Produce critical thinking content that combats COVID-19 disinformation and provides accurate COVID-19 public health information, including **30 videos, updating and translating 220 articles, and 40 infographics**
2. Identify, curate, vet, and share **40 existing videos** and **50+ existing articles** from content partners, including local influencers and disinformation experts
3. Translate current efforts into a long-term digital public health awareness campaign aimed at MENA region youth (aged 15-29) and conspiracy theory consumers, aiming for more than **80 million engagements** over an **8 month period**

# An Opportunity for Expansion: **Key Activities**



1. **Urgently ramp up content production and distribution in the next hypercritical 90-120 days**
2. Elevate the voices of regional content producers already aligned with IBB's COVID-19 campaign
3. Partner with disinformation and health experts to guide campaign:
  - [Rashad Ali](#) (ISD)
  - Omar Mohammed (Mosul Eye)
  - And [Shakir Jawad](#) (Center for Public Health Engagement)
4. Leverage social media/youth communications expertise to make crucial, accurate public health information go viral, including video interviews and “memeable” content
5. Repurpose and popularize content from partners like MBN (AlHurra & Radio Sawa)
6. Accurately measure and evaluate the success of these initiatives stopping the spread of COVID-19 and COVID-19 disinformation

# An Opportunity for Expansion: **Key Activities**



**The next 90-120 days will be hypercritical.** Youth will be forming their opinions, deciding which resources to trust, and performing actions that could ultimately save lives.

IBB is planning to **ramp up quickly** in April, May, and June, creating and distributing a torrent of content on COVID-19 as the best way to stop the spread of disinformation.

We anticipate the campaign will continue at least through **the end of 2020.**

**Filling this critical knowledge gap now will build trust later for future PVE endeavors.**



# Thank you!

Thank you for the opportunity to share details on our work to stop the spread of disinformation & COVID-19.

We look forward to further discussion on this and other topics.



# Questions?

**[IdeasBeyondBorders.org](https://IdeasBeyondBorders.org)**

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