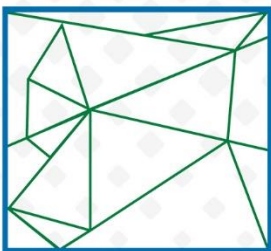


Syria: Hate Speech Unprecedentedly Surges during Deir ez-Zor Unrest



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Military operations between the SDF and Arab tribes were accompanied by media incitement and disinformation, resulting in the depiction of the conflict as Arab-Kurdish

On 27 August 2023, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) announced the launch of [Operation Security Reinforcement](#) in the Deir ez-Zor areas. As part of the operation, the SDF arrested Ahmed al-Khubail, better known as Abu Khawla, who was the commander of Deir ez-Zor Military Council. The SDF [declared](#) his removal on 30 August 2023, which led to protests by the Deir ez-Zor tribes against the SDF. The protests escalated into large-scale firefights between the two parties.

The confrontations were accompanied by hate speech in statements by all parties, media releases, and social media publications by activists and influencers. It is relevant to recall that on 5 September 2023, Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) issued a [statement](#) condemning the media campaigns that accompanied the recent turmoil and their attempts to depict the situation as a “Arab-Kurdish” fight and called to halt the use of media to incite hatred and violence among Syrians.

1. Monitoring and Documenting Hate Speech during September 2023

Last September, STJ conducted a series of interviews with media figures and human rights defenders in northeastern Syria. They were asked about the hate speech that occurred during recent events in Deir ez-Zor, including how widespread it was, its impact on the conflict, its causes, and the best way to address it. STJ also monitored various media outlets and active social media accounts in the region, which were associated with different parties involved in the conflict. As a result, we documented various forms of hate speech that took place during the unrest and continued unabated to escalate the conflict and tension.

Ali Nimr, head of the [Syrian Kurdish Journalists Network](#), spoke to STJ about rising level of hate speech during the recent Deir ez-Zor unrest saying,

“Throughout our observation of all social media platforms and some media outlets during the recent Deir ez-Zor unrest, we detected the use of all words inciting hatred and violence by both fighting parties.”

Documentations (interviews and observations) STJ carried out in September 2023 found that the level of hate speech by conflicting parties rose to the extent of trading accusations of affiliation to Daesh, regime, Iran, or the U.S., disseminating atheism, or being “Yellow Daesh”. Hate speech also fueled the conflict in some cases by labeling the other side as a non-believer, traitor, or terrorist and calling for jihad against it.

STJ noted that hate speech was disseminated not only by media outlets loyal to SDF and Arab tribes but also by pro-state and opposition media.

2. Hate Speech and the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression

The United Nations (UN) [defines](#) hate speech as, “Any kind of communication in speech, writing, or behavior that attacks or uses pejorative or discriminatory language with reference to a person or a group on the basis of who they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender, or other identity factor.”

International legislations prohibit hate speech; [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights \(ICCPR\)](#) states, “Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes

incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.” (Article 20.2); [International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination \(ICERD\)](#) states, “Shall declare an offence punishable by law all dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred, incitement to racial discrimination, as well as all acts of violence or incitement to such acts against any race or group of persons of another colour or ethnic origin.” (Article 4.A)

Attempts to tackle hate speech often have concerns about limiting freedom of expression, but in 2009, Article 19 Organization for promoting freedom of expression provided “[Camden Principles on Freedom of Expression and Equality](#)” as a standard for distinguishing between freedoms of expression, hate speech and incitement to violence. According to the principles, the terms ‘hatred’ and ‘hostility’ refer to intense and irrational emotions of opprobrium, enmity and detestation towards the target group, while the term ‘advocacy’ is to be understood as requiring an intention to promote hatred publicly towards the target group, and the term ‘incitement’ refers to statements about national, racial or religious groups, which create an imminent risk of discrimination, hostility or violence against persons belonging to those groups.

In a similar vein, the [Rabat Plan of Action](#) suggests a high threshold for defining restrictions on freedom of expression, incitement to hatred, and for the application of article 20 of the ICCPR. It outlines a [six-part](#) threshold test taking into account (1) the social and political context, (2) status of the speaker, (3) intent to incite the audience against a target group, (4) content and form of the speech, (5) extent of its dissemination and (6) likelihood of harm, including imminence.

3. Hate Speech and Incitement to Violence in Syrian Law

The current [2012 Syrian Constitution](#) does not contain provisions that prohibit hate speech. However, we can conclude from paragraph 3 of Article 33, which stipulates, “Citizens shall be equal in rights and duties without discrimination among them on the grounds of sex, origin, language, religion or creed,” that the Syrian Constitution prohibits any opprobrium or pejorative on any of the aforementioned grounds.

The Syrian Penal Code No. 148/1949, amended by Legislative Decree No.1/2011, does not specifically prohibit hate speech or refer to it in any way. However, Article 285 states that individuals who stir up racial or inter-confessional strife will be punished, but the penalty is limited to crimes against State security.

Nevertheless, this gap was rectified in Article 12 of [Media Law No. 108/2011](#), which stipulates that nothing must be published on media that endangers national unity and national security, offends religions and religious beliefs, stirs up sectarian strife, or incites crimes, acts of violence and terrorism, hatred, or racism. Article 97 of the same Law stipulates that anyone who commits an act of defamation using a media outlet shall be punished under the Penal Code. In the same vein, [Legislative Decree No. 17/2012](#) on cybercrime, whose rules were reorganized by [Law No. 20/2022](#), penalizes the crimes of electronic slander or humiliation (Articles 24 and 25).

Meanwhile, [Media Law of the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria \(AANES\) No. 3/2021](#) criminalizes the publication of any content that incites hatred and violence, harms the honor of individuals, affects their privacy, or involves insulting or defamatory.

Notably, as essential as these legislations are to tackle hate speech and incitement to violence, their overlap can be exploited politically to [suppress freedom of expression and silence the opposition](#).

4. Causes and Consequences of Hate Speech, Ways to Tackle It

Journalist Mohammed al-Haj believes that the widespread hate speech in the region is a result of the SDF's bad policies. The SDF has been accused of committing violations throughout the region and appointing incompetent and corrupt individuals to managerial positions, while ignoring the effective participation of Deir ez-Zor locals, who have voiced their complaints. As a result, some individuals who supported or participated in the conflict see the current situation as Arabs being oppressed under Kurdish rule. Al-Haj further elaborated on the issue,

“With the presence of a party demanding Arab administration for the region, it was easy to pass hate speech and serve to portray what is happening in Deir ez-Zor as an Arab-Kurdish conflict.”

In the same regard, Activist Sawsan Zakzak said to STJ,

“Hate speech stems from attempts to exclude others, and the weak democratic spirit of political and civic forces often leads to it. The most dangerous aspect of hate speech is the use of language that generalizes and applies to everyone associated with a particular nation, group, or party. This stigmatizes individuals and leads to harmful consequences. This is like saying all Kurds are criminals, or all Arabs are criminals, or all tribes are criminals, or all those belonging to the AANES are criminals. This generalization is dangerous because this desire for revenge extends beyond the individual responsible to the entire group.”

Regarding the consequences of the spread of hate speech in the region, the Executive Director of [Justice for Life](#), Jalal al-Hamad, stated,

“The spread of hate speech can have catastrophic outcomes, as it may drive the entire region into a tunnel of fire [destructive situation]. It could severely affect the relationship between the region's residents and administration, and hinder any prospects of a collaborative and inclusive administration that can ensure progress and stability in the area.”

On the ways to tackle hate speech, Jalal said,

“The compass must be directed towards the origin of the story, which is the right of local communities to manage their areas and participate effectively in administering their areas and all of northeastern Syria while averting exclusivity decisions, exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization.”

Ali Nimr believes that hate speech and violent incitement are major threats to Syria's civil peace, particularly after 12 years of conflict. He emphasizes that hate speech not only impacts the current generation but also future ones, who may face sectarian, religious, national, or ethnic tensions. Therefore, Ali stresses the need to criminalize hate speech while ensuring the preservation of freedom of opinion and expression.

Firas Allawi, director of the [Asharq News](#) website, confirmed that most of the hateful words that were used in the recent Deir ez-Zor unrest related to physical and psychological abuse and authoritarian rhetoric, as parties stigmatized each other as inferior. Firas explained,

“[In order to reduce hate speech], it is important to achieve stability and provide education, social rights, and allow participation in regional administration to both Kurds and Arabs. Other social and cultural awareness operations, such as organizing lectures and seminars, can also play a role in shedding light on this dangerous phenomenon. It is necessary to raise awareness about the importance of accepting and respecting others, as hate speech may disintegrate the structure of society.”

5. Forms of Hate Speech Spread during Deir Ez-Zor Unrest

5.1. Terrorist stigmatization

In the ongoing conflict in Deir ez-Zor, both parties have resorted to labeling each other as terrorists in an attempt to justify their fighting. In the [statement](#) announcing Operation Security Reinforcement on 27 August 2023, the SDF states that this Operation, with well-defined objectives, is a completion of prior operations in the Al-Jazeera and Raqqa areas. Its primary goals encompass eradicating the IS terrorist cells, thwarting their potential attacks, and pursuing criminals responsible for perpetrating injustices against the local population. It also aims at tracking down smugglers who exploit the populace's livelihoods. However, after clashes broke out between the SDF and tribal parties, the SDF began referring to all of its local opponents as "terrorists" and "mercenaries." This language was used in subsequent statements, including the 31 August 2023 "[Update on the Recent Situation in Deir Ezzor](#)" and the 2 September 2023 "[SDF General Command: “Our Commitment Remains Steadfast In Safeguarding The Region Against Any Attempt To Incite Discord”](#)"

Several videos, audio recordings, and text posts calling for "jihad" against the SDF were also spread through the social media accounts of members of the tribes, including Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hafel. Those publications included phrases such as "Qandil gangs," "SDF terrorist militia," and "Qandil mercenaries and their Arab traitor followers." The [statement](#) by Sheikh Ibrahim al-Hafel of 21 September 2023 announcing the formation of a military command for the fighters involved in the conflict against the SDF and his [statement](#) published the same month calling for a "general mobilization" against the SDF stated, "Fighting against the cadres of Qandil, the SDF, and the traitors is an obligation."

5.2. Disbelief stigmatization

During the current unrest, opposition media outlets have prominently fueled hate speech to the extent of inciting violent feelings and acts by triggering religious and ethnic emotions. For example, a Syrian TV. channel published a [video](#) on YouTube on 21 September 2023 entitled "Qandil Gangs Prevent Islam and Spread Zoroastrianism, Atheism, and Satanism in Deir ez-Zor, Raqqa, and al-Hasakah." This video not only used expressions of ethnic-based

discrimination in all its references to the SDF but also depicted it as a “group of atheist Kurds” targeting “Sunni Arabs.”

5.3. Gender-based hate speech

STJ observed a disturbing pattern of hate speech that is fueled by gender-based discrimination. This kind of speech uses traditional gender roles as its basis and is mainly spread through social media platforms.

This pattern of hate speech specifically targets the Women's Protection Units of SDF simply because they are women. STJ has detected publications that attack them, particularly by members of Arab tribes and the opposition.

5.4. The "Separatism" Accusation

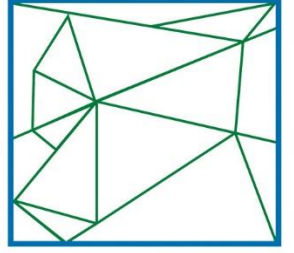
During the Deir ez-Zor unrest, the accusation of “separatism” was used to label certain parties as traitors and to further divide the disputing parties on both local and national levels. This form of hate speech was particularly rampant through the Syrian government's official media outlets and the loyalist media. They used this speech before the unrest and widely disseminated it during the conflict.

Journalist Sherine Ibrahim outlined in an interview with STJ last September the active role played by the Syrian official media and loyalist media in multiplying hate speech during the Deir ez-Zor unrest saying,

“To incite Syrians already living under the poverty line, you will find pro-regime media headlines like “Washington and its Terrorist Tools Continue to Plunder Syrian Strategic Resources,” and for further deception, the regime must blame a particular party for the misery of the entire people and for dividing the country and selling it using titles as “American Occupation Loots New Batch of Syrian Oil”.”

While the official Syrian media refers to the SDF as “[SDF/QSD separatist militia](#)”, the same rhetoric of treason is echoed in the unofficial loyalist media as well.

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About Us:

Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) is a nonprofit, nongovernmental organization monitoring human rights violations in Syria. Founded in 2015, STJ has been based in France since 2019.

STJ is an impartial and independent Syrian human rights organization operating across Syria. Our network of field researchers monitor and report human rights violations occurring on the ground in Syria, while our international team of human rights experts, lawyers, and journalists gather evidence, examine emerging patterns of violations, and analyze how violations break domestic Syrian and international law.

We are committed to documenting violations of human rights committed by all parties in the Syrian conflict and elevating the voices of all Syrians victimized by human rights violations, regardless of their ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, class, and/or gender. Our commitment to human rights monitoring is founded on the idea that professional human rights documentation meeting international standards is the first step to uncovering the truth and achieving justice in Syria.



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EDITOR@STJ-SY.ORG