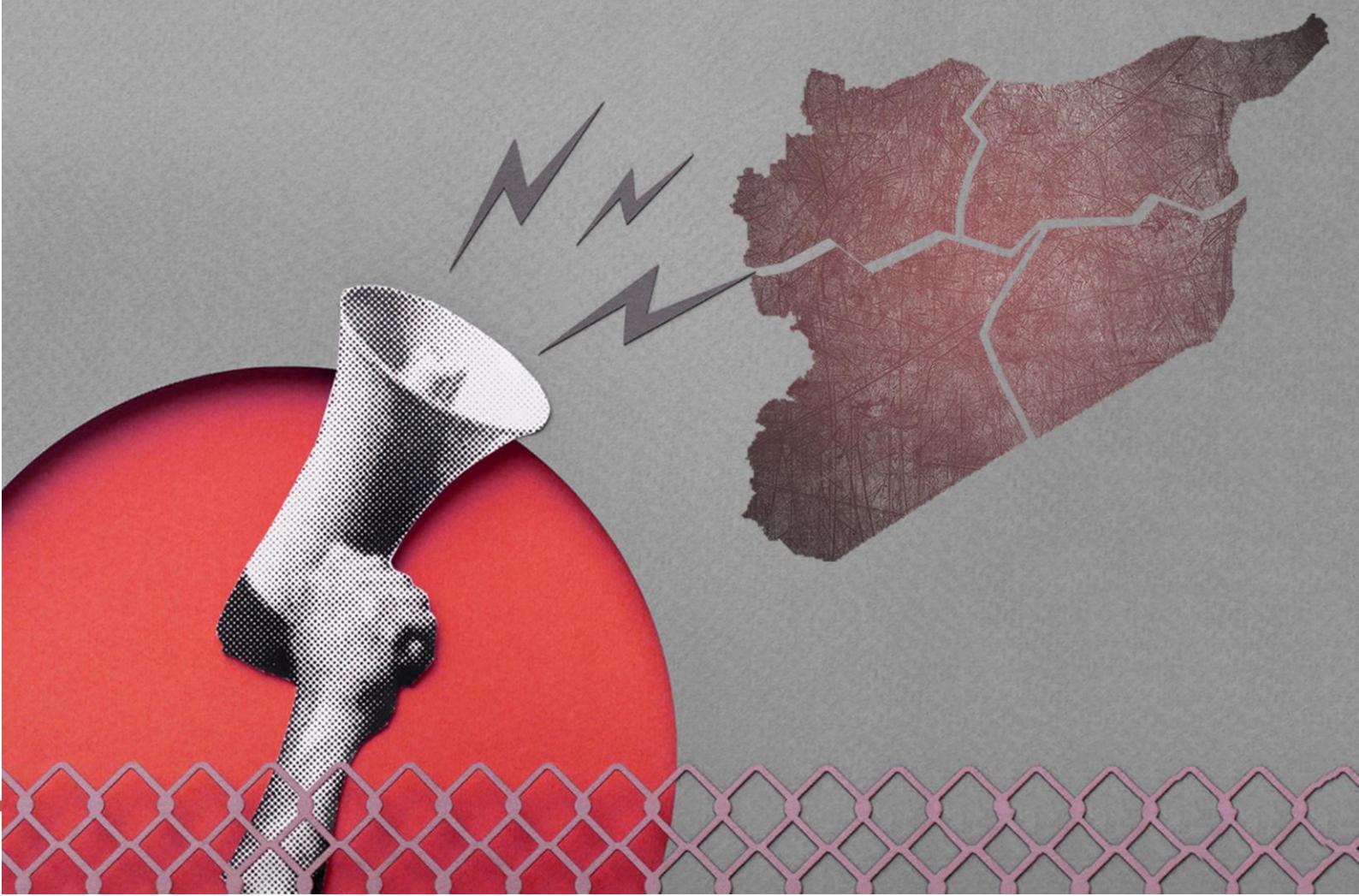


## How Hateful Narratives Are Produced in the Syrian Context

An Analysis of the Mechanisms Behind Division and Hate Speech

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## How Hateful Narratives Are Produced in the Syrian Context

*An Analysis of the Mechanisms Behind Division and Hate Speech*

Mohammed Al-Jaseem

The harsh expressions that have come to permeate the Syrian public sphere in recent years, such as “kill,” “burn,” “exterminate,” “ISIS,” “traitors,” “remnants,” and “separatists”, are no longer just words spoken in moments of anger. Instead, they have become a core part of a discursive framework that reshapes relationships among Syrians and defines the boundaries of inclusion and hostility within the society. Here, words are not fleeting sounds but tools used to alter collective consciousness and turn political, religious, or regional differences into existential conflicts.

With the fall of the dictatorial regime, the country experienced a significant power vacuum in the symbolic realm, abruptly shifting from a single, tightly controlled discourse by state agencies to a chaotic mixture of competing narratives. Every individual gained the ability to create an opinion, spread hatred, or produce a harmful story that generalizes an isolated event to an entire group. This chaos was not just temporary; it evolved into a phenomenon of its own, generated from the ground up through brief posts, sharp satire, and video clips spreading in an unregulated space.

The Balgh Violence and Hate Speech Combat Initiative documented over three months (from July to September 2025) more than 250 reports,<sup>1</sup> showing how hateful narratives are created by demonizing entire groups, stripping away their humanity, and framing them as an existential threat. The issue is not just the direct insults themselves but the stories built around them. These stories transform the other person from a political rival into an “essential enemy” and portray them in ways that promote their exclusion or justify violence against them.

From this perspective, the current article aims to analyze how hateful narratives are created in the Syrian context: how they begin with a single word or a joke; how an entire group is reduced to a single characteristic; how an isolated incident is transformed into an existential threat; and finally, how elites adopt this discourse and give it symbolic legitimacy.

## 1. Framing a Definition of Hate Speech

First, distinguishing hate speech from other forms of discourse is essential, given the widespread confusion on this issue. Hate speech is neither a simple insult directed at an individual nor merely an emotional outburst; it is a framework for understanding and framing the other. It can be defined as “a form of communication produced and reproduced within intersecting contexts, aimed at dehumanizing a targeted group,

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<sup>1</sup> The Balgh Violence and Hate Speech Combat Initiative: A volunteer effort established in 2025 to address the rise of hate speech and the normalization of violence following the fall of the Syrian dictatorship. Balgh brings together Syrian researchers, activists, and professionals by utilizing legal accountability, an AI-based language model in the Syrian dialect to monitor incitement, and awareness campaigns/media productions that deconstruct violent narratives and promote citizenship. The initiative seeks to reshape public discourse and create a safer, more inclusive communicative space.

excluding it, or portraying it as a threat, drawing on the social, linguistic, and technical structures of communication platforms. Through repetition and circulation, it contributes to the formation of hostile publics or counter-publics.” Accordingly, discourse is not simply a collection of words but a communicative system composed of:<sup>2</sup>

- Actors (individuals, groups, and authorities) who produce the discourse;
- The technical infrastructure that enables its amplification (algorithms and modes of interaction);
- The social and political context that grants it meaning and the capacity to influence and spread;
- The function it performs (exclusion, demonization, hostile mobilization, or the justification of violence).

From this perspective, hate speech functions as a communicative system that reshapes the public sphere, targeting groups defined by attributes such as religion, sect, ethnicity, gender, nationality, or other inherent or ascribed characteristics.

The rise of hate speech is usually linked to a complex mix of factors, which discourse studies often identify as seven primary triggers: political polarization; economic crises; populist rhetoric; technology and social media; major events like terrorist attacks; and religious and ethnic tensions.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, all these factors have come together in the Syrian case, resembling a room filled with highly flammable materials that only needs a tiny spark to set off an explosion.

## 2. Mechanisms for Producing Hate Speech and Hateful Narratives in the Syrian Context

Hateful narratives do not arise by chance; they are constructed through a series of social, psychological, and media-driven processes that transform a brief comment into the foundation of an entire “interpretive frame” through which collective understanding is reshaped. As these processes accumulate, sectarian, religious, ethnic, or regional differences are transformed into existential confrontations between groups, rather than disagreements that can be debated or managed.

### First: Psychological Preparation: When Language Redefines the Boundaries of Humanity

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<sup>2</sup> Niklas Barth et al., ‘Contextures of Hate: Towards a Systems Theory of Hate Communication on Social Media Platforms’, *The Communication Review* 26, no. 3 (2023): 209–52, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714421.2023.2208513>.

<sup>3</sup> Negi Advocate and Dr Chitrangali, ‘The Rise of Hate Speech Around the World’, SSRN Scholarly Paper no. 4719266 (Social Science Research Network, 7 February 2024), <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4719266>.

Societies everywhere have a long history of intertwined relationships, encompassing both periods of coexistence and episodes of tension and mutual stereotyping. In times of upheaval, the negative aspects of this history are selectively invoked to inflame tensions and justify potential acts of violence.

The creation of a hateful narrative often begins with a seemingly minor detail, a trending word, a harsh joke, or a sarcastic remark, which, at its core, serves to redistribute “humanity” within the public sphere, determining who is considered worthy of it and who is excluded.

At this point, the targeted group is redefined using terms that dehumanize them, such as “germs,” “ISIS,” “agents,” “traitors,” or other derogatory labels. This language is not just an expression of anger; it functions as a systematic way of dehumanization.<sup>4</sup> Over time, a shift occurs in moral perception: abuse begins to seem “justified” as long as it is directed at a group that has been symbolically removed from the human sphere.

In Syria, this shift is driven by a long history of official narratives that established the idea of an “internal threat,” demonizing many parts of society as dangers to the state’s survival, sovereignty, or social cohesion. When the dictatorship fell, these mechanisms did not disappear; instead, they surged freely, shifting from being controlled by the authorities to being used by individuals. Syrians, either intentionally or unconsciously, reactivated these old exclusion tactics, now turned against each other.

As fear and perceived threats escalate, labels become the first step in constructing an “enemy identity,” paving the way for harsher rhetoric and the justification of exclusion or violence. In this process, political or religious differences are transformed into rigid boundaries that define self and other according to an existential logic, leaving little room for nuance or dialogue.

### **Second: Reduction: From Diversity to a Single Mass**

In the second stage, the hateful narrative shifts from dehumanizing individuals to oversimplifying reality by turning the true diversity within each group into a single, rigid stereotype.<sup>5</sup> Here, nuance vanishes and complexity dissolves, making statements such as “they are all terrorists,” “they are all traitors,” or “they are all separatists” serve as

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<sup>4</sup> Albert Bandura, ‘Moral Disengagement in the Perpetration of Inhumanities’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3, no. 3 (1999): 193–209, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327957pspr0303_3).

<sup>5</sup> Edward Jones and George A Quattrone, ‘The perception of variability within in-groups and out-groups: Implications for the law of small numbers’, *ResearchGate*, 29 September 2025, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232523035\\_The\\_perception\\_of\\_variability\\_within\\_in-groups\\_and\\_out-groups\\_Implications\\_for\\_the\\_law\\_of\\_small\\_numbers](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232523035_The_perception_of_variability_within_in-groups_and_out-groups_Implications_for_the_law_of_small_numbers).

ready-made explanations for the crisis. These phrases give people a sense of mental clarity while reducing the effort needed to understand a highly complex reality.

Reduction and generalization are not just cognitive errors, even if they may seem like so on the surface; instead, they are key tools used by hateful narratives to reinforce the boundaries of division. They eliminate differences within a single group, replacing them with a uniform label, so that one person's behavior is taken as proof of the entire community's nature. This mechanism was clearly seen in the reports submitted to the initiative, where individual posts were used to claim a fixed and unchanging identity for an entire social group, completely ignoring the diverse political alignments that cross sectarian lines in many parts of Syria.

In the Syrian case, which saw widespread and severe violations under the previous dictatorial regime, the Alawite sect, to which the regime's leader belongs, is often seen as entirely responsible for the abuses that took place. The overlooked truth, however, is that people from all Syrian sects participated in extensive violations against regime opponents. Today, the same pattern is apparent with recent events in As Suwayda: despite the significant political diversity and different alignments within the Druze community, this plurality is rarely recognized in public discussion. Instead, the entire sect is lumped into a single stereotype, as if it were a uniform group sharing one political stance or acting on a single will.

In this way, reduction serves as a way to establish a "solid identity" for the hostile other, while also creating a "symbolic purity" for the self. Hateful narratives thus seem appealing: they provide a simple explanation for a complex reality and give their audience quick certainty in times of ambiguity and chaos.



### Third: Exaggeration and the Construction of Collective Fear: Manufacturing an Existential Threat

In the third stage, hateful discourse shifts from merely portraying a group in negative terms to framing it as an existential threat that endangers the survival of the other group.<sup>6</sup> Phrases such as “If we do not eliminate them, they will eliminate us,” “If we do not break their power, they will remain a dagger in our side,” or “This group causes the country’s instability” begin to circulate. Such formulations are not new in the history of conflicts; however, in Syria, they have gained amplified force due to their massive horizontal spread through social media and under the influence of digital echo chambers, whose operating mechanisms have been carefully documented by the Violence and Hate Speech Combat Initiative.

In this context, an isolated incident becomes a symbol of a broader danger, and facts are exaggerated to create a threat that seems both inevitable and poised to erupt at any moment. Algorithms help amplify this by hiding moderate or dissenting voices,<sup>7</sup> making fear, through this algorithmic choice, seem like an undeniable reality. As a result, fear shifts from a personal experience into a form of “collective consciousness” that influences social behavior: increased tension in daily interactions, breaks in social cohesion, rising verbal violence, and sometimes the initial signs of readiness for physical violence.

This stage is seen as the most dangerous part of the cycle of hateful narratives because it gives implicit approval to violence and turns sectarian discourse into a closed system that avoids scrutiny or questioning. Any effort to ask critical questions is viewed as another threat, turning the exaggerated narrative itself into a tool for creating more fear and increasing polarization.

### Fourth: Institutionalization of the Narrative

Hate speech peaks when it moves beyond street-level emotions and popular reactions to a higher level of elite involvement, meaning political, media, and religious leaders start producing a “solid” narrative. This narrative is presented as a well-established historical interpretation rather than a temporary opinion. At this point, discourse becomes an institutional structure that relies on interconnected mechanisms to reinforce and spread hostility.

The process begins with selective memory, in which elites rely on shared historical moments from past conflicts or narratives of betrayal and tension, often removing them

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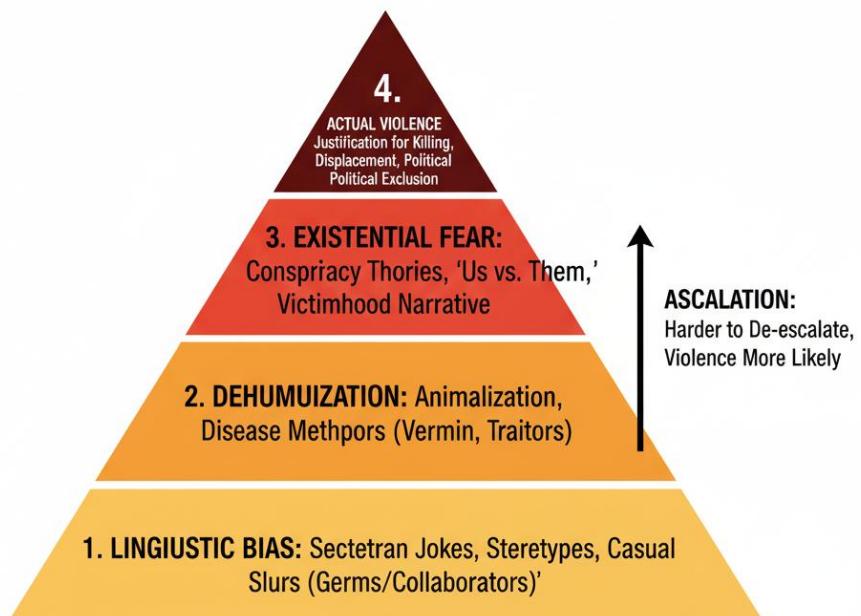
<sup>6</sup> Daniel Bar-Tal, ‘From Intractable Conflict through Conflict Resolution to Reconciliation: Psychological Analysis’, *Political Psychology* 21, no. 2 (2000): 351–65.

<sup>7</sup> Cass R. Sunstein, *#Republic: Divided Democracy in the Age of Social Media* (Princeton University Press, 2018).

from their original context. This turns the past into a source of raw emotion used to argue that the threat is deep-rooted and persistent. When conflicts happen with the Druze, stories of “betrayal” are often brought up, while the important role of the leaders of the Great Syrian Revolution is minimized. This process rewrites history in ways that serve current hostility.

From this reconstructed memory, collective fear is reframed as a moral obligation, and using violence is depicted as a necessary choice to protect the group. Here, the language of the politician merges with that of the media figure and the armed actor: the post that demonizes a group, the news report that highlights an isolated incident, and the statement that presents an existential threat all work together to give violence initial legitimacy and to make it seem like a “natural response.”

Once ideologically aligned media platforms engage with these discursive structures, the narratives are reshaped and repeated, while losing their overtly political framing and appearing to the audience as undeniable facts. Algorithms further narrow audience exposure by presenting multiple versions of the same story until the narrative becomes the only framework for understanding. At this stage, hate speech is no longer a fleeting linguistic outburst; it evolves into a comprehensive interpretive system, managed by elites to secure loyalties, discipline opponents, and control the public sphere. The hateful narrative thus shifts from emotional outbursts on the fringes to a central part of political practice.



### 3. Conclusion

This analysis shows that hate speech is not just a fleeting emotional outburst but a comprehensive system that feeds on fear, selective memory, and power vacuums, constantly reshaped through social media platforms and by political and media elites. Over time, these narratives become solidified into circulating “truths” that redefine belonging and determine what is possible and what is forbidden within the public sphere.

The danger of this path lies in its ability to create long-lasting divisions among Syrian communities, turning hatred into a ready-made understanding of others and turning politics into a continuation of division through symbolic means. Without institutions capable of managing public discourse or holding those who incite violence accountable, and amid ongoing economic crises and social breakdowns, these narratives increasingly infiltrate daily life, resulting in tangible acts of exclusion or violence.

Nevertheless, dismantling hateful narratives is possible. Field monitoring by the Violence and Hate Speech Combat Initiative indicates that much of Syrian society recognizes the seriousness of the threat and is eager to restore moral boundaries in public discourse. This willingness can become a social force if legal penalties are enforced, awareness campaigns are expanded, and alternative narratives that highlight the importance of coexistence are developed.

The future of Syrians depends on their ability to prevent hateful narratives from taking root permanently. In this period of societal collapse, resisting hate speech may be one of the few practical and meaningful ways to halt the community’s slide into another cycle of violence. Words that wound pave the way for harm, while words that promote understanding can help recover what has been lost.

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## About Partners



Baligh Initiative to Combat Hate and Violence Speech is a voluntary initiative established in 2025 in response to the rise of hate speech and the normalization of violence in Syria following the fall of the dictatorship. The initiative brings together Syrian researchers, activists, and professionals and aims to curb hateful discourse due to its serious consequences for social cohesion and the political transition. It operates through three interconnected tracks: advancing legal accountability in cooperation with a network of lawyers inside and outside Syria; developing an artificial intelligence-based language model in the Syrian dialect to monitor inciting content; and implementing awareness campaigns and media productions that deconstruct violent narratives and promote citizenship-based alternatives, contributing to a safer and more inclusive public sphere.



### True Platform: Independent Syrian Fact-Checking and Countering Hate Speech

True Platform is an independent Syrian initiative specializing in fact-checking and combating misinformation. It was founded by independent Syrian journalists in March 2023 and is one of the projects under the Info Check Network (ICN).

Our team monitors news, analyzes it, and verifies its accuracy to help recipients think critically and make informed decisions.

The True Platform project aims to enhance public awareness of the risks of deception and hate speech, as well as to build a more responsible and free media environment.



Syrians for Truth and Justice (STJ) started as an idea in a co-founder's mind while attending the U.S. Middle-East Partnership Initiative's (MEPI) Leaders for Democracy Fellowship program (LDF) in 2015. The idea became a reality and flourished into an independent, non-profit, impartial, non-governmental human rights organization. STJ's beginnings were more than humble; initially, it only reported stories of Syrians who experienced arbitrary arrest, enforced disappearance, or torture. Planted in fertile soil, the seed of this project grew into an established human rights organization licensed in the Middle East and the European Union. STJ today undertakes to detect and uncover violations of all types committed in all Syrian parts by the various parties to the conflict.

