



# Hate Speech in Eastern Syria

Implications and Mechanisms of Confrontation

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# Hate Speech in Eastern Syria

## Implications and Mechanisms of Confrontation

A Brief Report on the Rhetoric of Incitement and the Role of Local Influencers in  
Confronting it - Syrian Democratic Forces' Control Areas in Deir Ezzor as a Model

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## Introduction

In eastern Syria, the past three years have seen several phases during which voices calling for the protection<sup>1</sup> of pluralism, the preservation of freedom of expression, dialogue and acceptance of others have been rising, despite the accompanying measures that limit these rights and freedoms. Moreover, voices inciting violence, hatred and the rejection of the different views raised. The most prominent of these phases was demonstrations<sup>2</sup> demanding participation<sup>3</sup> in the administration of areas outside the control of the Syrian authorities, which took place in Deir Ezzor governorate during 2019 and 2020, and the decision of the President of the United States to withdraw from Syria at the end of 2019 where there were incitement and counter-incitement during this period as a result of the various positions on this resolution. Furthermore, arbitrary arrests and military incursions<sup>4</sup> were launched by the Syrian Democratic Forces in various areas of the province and the resulting division between supporters of these campaigns and those who reject them on the grounds that they violated human rights rights, and finally, the debate, related to the school curriculum<sup>5</sup> between supporters and opponents.

Freedom of expression in the eastern Syria is not authentic and does not stem from a genuine political desire, but is subject to complex and complicated political and security balances in the region. There is more expression space in north-eastern Syria than in other areas of Syria, but it expands and narrows according to the issue, the entity or the person. We note that the claims of economic and social rights (services - daily living rights) have a wide area to claim, while this area narrows gradually as we move to political rights (criticism of self-administration and the

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<sup>1</sup> Human Rights and Local Community in Deir Ezzor, Justice for Life Organization, 2020.

<https://jfl.ngo/human-rights-and-local-community-in-deir-ezzor/>

<sup>2</sup> Deir Ezzor ... Protests, Proliferation of Crime, and Soaring Prices, Justice for Life Organization, 2020.

<https://jfl.ngo/deir-ezzor-protests-proliferation-of-crime-and-soaring-prices/>

<sup>3</sup> Deficient Participation, Justice for Life Organization, 2020.

<https://jfl.ngo/deficient-participation/>

<sup>4</sup> Implications of Fragile Stability and Human Rights Violations, Justice for Life Organization, 2020.

<https://jfl.ngo/implications-of-fragile-stability-and-human-rights-violations/>

<sup>5</sup> Education From a Means of Conflict to a Vehicle of Peace and Communal Living, Justice for Life Organization, 2020.

<https://jfl.ngo/education-from-a-means-of-conflict-to-a-vehicle-of-peace-and-communal-living/>

way it works). Parties and figures, particularly tribal leaders close to the administration, have greater freedom of expression<sup>6</sup>.

Freedom of expression is surrounded by many restrictions and social customs that prevent individuals belonging to a region, religion or ethnic group from singing out of tune of the community, as well as the fear factor of the actions of the local authority, especially with the fact that there is a ready charge of belonging to ISIS or dealing with factions close to Turkey. There is also a complete absence for clear laws governing the exercise of the right to freedom of expression<sup>7</sup>.

The actions taken by the local authorities in response to some ways of expression, incitement in public discourse and social media, which have become a place of protest, have been negatively reflected in fear for the local community, and despite the existence of constructive positions calling for dialogue, the inflammatory rhetoric has been overwhelming and has reinforced the already existing lineups and increased tension at the community level not only on a regional or national basis, but also among those with different views of the same region and nationality.

The availability of space to talk in eastern Syria is a double-edged sword; on the one hand, it has a role in fuelling conflicts and increasing divisions, where the "battlefields" have spread to Facebook and Twitter, through which parties tried to make their voice the highest and impose their vision through the intensive and unprofessional use of these means. On the other hand, the use of social media has many advantages, highlighting the situation in the region and issues not concerned with the media, documenting violations in detention centers and advocated popular demands such as demanding the restart of Hajeen hospital in eastern Deir Ezzor, which came to fruition<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Interview via Gmail Meeting conducted by JFL with a Human Rights Organization Director, on 16 September 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Interview via Zoom conducted by JFL with a member of NGO working in northeastern Syria, on 24 September 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with a community notable in Deir Ezzor, on 15 September 2020.

Incitement was not limited to religious or ethnicity, but extended to those who disagreed and objected to prevailing attitudes, and included incitement to boycott, dissemination of false information, defamation and sometimes a call for physical abuse. Messages of incitement were one of the driving factors for conflicts.

The main motives for inciting violence are to keep the rich region in a vulnerable status, and the parties to the Syrian conflict and local community leaders are exploiting these conditions to achieve their interests<sup>9</sup>. The controlling forces increase the space for freedom of expression if they are under considerable pressure, for example, it is not easy to form an independent political party<sup>10</sup>.

Community notables<sup>11</sup>, actors, civil society organizations and the media were also divided and did not play their role in finding ways to communicate and seek acceptable solutions, on the contrary, a number of media pages and figures played negative roles.

This report highlights the most prominent issues in Deir Ezzor province/ areas of SDF control, which have seen the prohibition of the exercise of the right to freedom of expression and measures that restrict it, incidents that have led to severe societal divisions and mutual incitement, and sheds a light at some international experiences to deal with freedom of expression, pluralism, different opinions, the role of civil society and the media, legal texts and international efforts in this context, and the role of local leaders and actors in the protection and preservation of human rights principles.

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<sup>9</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with a female employee in the self-administration institutions in Deir Ezzor, on 12 September 2020

<sup>10</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with a community notable in Deir Ezzor, on 15 September 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Deir Ezzor and Peace, Justice for Life Organization, 2019.

<https://jflngo/deir-ezzor-and-peace/>

## Target Area Context

In March 2019, the SDF declared<sup>12</sup> the end of the war against ISIS after taking control of its last stronghold in the town of Al-Baghuz, east of Deir Ezzor, which had taken control of most areas north of the Euphrates River in Deir Ezzor at the end of 2017. The Syrian government and its allies have taken control of areas south of the river.

SDF has set up civil councils to regulate the provision and management of services in the region. International organizations provide assistance for services as well.

Civil society organizations re-emerged after ISIS worked to end it completely by prosecuting and killing civil activists, and many civil associations and initiatives were formed, most of which provided services such as rehabilitation of irrigation systems, electricity, drainage and roads, and support for agricultural associations, hospitals<sup>13</sup> and schools.

Thousands of civilians have been displaced from Syrian government-held areas to the north of the Euphrates River. Hundreds of families have returned after fighting has stopped, others are moving between the two banks, while thousands of civilians<sup>14</sup> are unable<sup>15</sup> to return for security reasons<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Islamic State 'caliphate' defeated, yet threat persists, Reuters, 2019.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-islamic-state-idUSKCN1R407D>

<sup>13</sup> The Western Countryside in the North of Euphrates River School are in Need for Support and Hospitals that Do Not Meet the Needs of Civilians, Justice for Life Organization, 2019.

<https://jfl.ngo/the-western-countryside-in-the-north-of-euphrates-river-school-are-in-need-for-support-and-hospitals-that-do-not-meet-the-needs-of-civilians/>

<sup>14</sup> Documentation paper issued by Justice for Life about IDPs camps in Deir-ez-Zor, Justice for Life Organization, 2018.

<https://jfl.ngo/documentation-paper-issued-justice-life-idps-camps-deir-ez-zor/>

<sup>15</sup> Reconciliations The Last Option for Deir Ezzor Populations, Justice for Life Organization, 2019.

<https://jfl.ngo/reconciliations-the-last-option-for-deir-ezzor-populations/>

<sup>16</sup> The Main Reasons behind Unwillingness of People Displaced from Deir Ezzor to Return to the Areas of Control of the Syrian Regime in the Province, Justice for Life Organization, 2019.

<https://jfl.ngo/the-main-reasons-behind-unwillingness-of-people-displaced-from-deir-ezzor-to-return-to-the-areas-of-control-of-the-syrian-regime-in-the-province/>

Theoretically speaking, the civil administration is a hierarchy more clearly than its predecessors. It has worked to develop the management of the regions. Security forces organized security campaigns "to confront extremist groups and outlaws". In addition to the existence of civil organizations and initiatives, including in relation to media and human rights, but the region has not enjoyed security and stability and has gone through many dangerous stages that have largely reflected on people's daily lives, interests and personal security. The area has seen repeated assassinations<sup>17</sup>, kidnappings and killings, in addition to theft, armed robbery, and local conflicts between residents, where the controlling forces offer limited solutions.

### Turning Points that Exacerbated Hate Speech and Incitement to Violence

Justice for Life organization observed dozens of posts circulated by activists – who have followers- on social media, local pages that are not new and have followers that included an explicit call to arms and fighting, as well as inflammatory language by local parties. More than 100 posts were posted and observed, during which JFL found the most incidents of incitement and calls to arms.

JFL also conducted 10 interviews with human rights activists, civil society activists and social leaders, most of which was mentioned during the interviews about specific incidents, as well as a focus on the role of local authorities, civil society and community leaders.



<sup>17</sup> Eleven Syrian Organizations Strongly condemn the Repeated Assassinations in Deir Ezzor Against Tribal Leaders, 2020  
<https://jfl.ngo/11-syrian-organizations-strongly-condemns-the-repeated-assassinations-in-deir-ezzor-against-tribal-leaders/>

## Assassinations, Insecurity and the Spread of Weapons

The province witnessed the killing of a number of people, including leaders of reputation and social standing, with gunfire by unknown persons, as well as the bodies of people found after they went missing. Gunmen set up roadblocks between a number of villages as a result of tribal disputes, some of which were old, and villages in the eastern countryside witnessed clashes between residents. Facebook posts and at least two messages circulated frequently were monitored through WhatsApp naming the perpetrators of assassinations, kidnappings and physical assaults without any support or evidence and calling for the carrying of weapons. Incitement in these areas, as well as the failure of the competent agencies of the control forces to deal with them, has led to an increase in community tension.

The large number of statements issued by many tribal parties, some of which contain positions rejecting the actions of the controlling forces and others supporting them, and accusing the competitors of each other's lack of representation, which may cause the loss of the basic<sup>18</sup> issues of the people.

The self-administration and military forces supported the meetings of the community leaders who did not hold the administration responsible for the assassinations, and the media played a negative role by publishing news contrary to the truth about leadership positions at the clan level, which increases the internal<sup>19</sup> clan division.

An armed group of a local clan surrounded a local school in protesting against the low exam scores of a relative at the school and demanded that these marks be amended, accusing one of the female teachers of giving good marks only to the members of her clan, and the problem was only solved by responding to the demands of the militants and the intervention of the SDF<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with a female employee in the self-administration institutions in Deir Ezzor, on 12 September 2020

<sup>19</sup> Interview via Zoom conducted by JFL with a civil society activist in Deir Ezzor, on 10 September 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with a female teacher in Deir Ezzor, on 13 September 2020

## The Security and Military Incursions

Several statements and reports have been issued accusing the SDF of committing violations during the incursions carried out in Deir Ezzor areas, most notably the "Counter-Terrorism" operations joint with the international coalition in the eastern countryside of the province during July 2020. The media close to these forces confirmed that the target was ISIS cells in the targeted areas.

Some have been accused of covering up violations, while others have been accused of trying to protect and cooperate with extremist organizations. Arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, prolonged detention<sup>21</sup> without trial<sup>22</sup>, charges against the security services of torture and the resulting deaths<sup>23</sup> of people have led to incitement speeches and the widening gap between the controlling forces and the local community.

Fake news incites hatred and sectarian and ethnic division, and provides a very dangerous cover for the parties to continue committing violations and claiming that they are not true, for example a video of a group of elements insulting a woman and indicating that they belong to the SDF, to be found later to be used by the Ahrar Al-Sharqiya<sup>24</sup> group.

Recently, the sound of flights and the sounds of clashes were heard, some social media pages published news of the storming of a town in the eastern countryside, while others published that government forces began to advance. Some young people took up arms based on this news to face any intrusion. Later on, it was discovered that it is a joint military training of the SDF and the international coalition<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Mutiny of Detainees in Deir Ezzor, Justice for Life Organization, 2020.

<https://jfl.ngo/mutiny-of-detainees-in-deir-ezzor/>

<sup>22</sup> The Trial of the Islamic State's Members.. Fundamental Proceedings for Justice, Justice for Life Organization, 2020.

<https://jfl.ngo/the-trial-of-the-islamic-states-members-fundamental-proceedings-for-justice/>

<sup>23</sup> Signs of Electrocutation and Eyes Distortion, Justice for Life Organization, 2020.

<https://jfl.ngo/sings-of-electrocutation-and-eyes-distortion/>

<sup>24</sup> Interview via Gmail Meeting conducted by JFL with a Human Rights Organization Director, on 16 September 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with an employee in the self-administration institutions in Deir Ezzor, on 12 September 2020

The populations gain their information from local media; the problem of these means is that they do not have a high level of professionalism and do not have enough space of freedom, so the information emanating from them is often inaccurate<sup>26</sup>.

### School Curriculum

The curriculum proposed by self-administration as an alternative to the government curriculum was rejected by various popular actors. The administration was accused of trying to impose a certain ideology on the community using education as a means, but this refusal included mutual accusations not only between supporters and rejectionists, but also among the rejectionists themselves.

A number of posts have been observed accusing the controlling "Kurdish" forces of working to impose their ideology on the region, similar to the actions of the Damascus government on education, while other posts included accusations of rejecting the curriculum that they were motivated by ideology as well. Activists demanded not to exclude the subject of Islamic education and rejected all what they considered to be contrary to the local culture. Others have been accused of colluding with the self-administration or the Syrian government for not dealing positively with the rejection statements. JFL researcher said that self-administration representatives were not cooperative in the discussion sessions that preceded the leaks of its content.

The proposed curriculum was approved by the local administration despite widespread rejection by the education and civil society sectors for fear of marginalization or dismissal, as happened with a legislative council official, and teachers refusing the curriculum were robbed near a military SDF<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Interview via Zoom conducted by JFL with a member of NGO working in northeastern Syria, on 24 September 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Interview via Zoom conducted by JFL with a female civil society activist in Deir Ezzor, on 10 September 2020.

## U.S. Withdrawal from Syria

Once the U.S. forces began implementing the decision<sup>28</sup> of the President of the United States to withdraw from Syria and impose Syrian armed factions with Turkish support control of a number of major cities and towns such as Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ain, a sharp division appeared in east Syria. Some considered that the negotiations held by the Syrian Democratic Forces with the Syrian government and handing over border villages and towns have a warning to abandon some areas, which may put hundreds of thousands of civilians at risk. Activists demanded during a meeting with military leaders of SDF to disclose the details of these negotiations. In return, calls have emerged on social media to abandon areas and hand them over to government forces in exchange for further protection from Turkish intervention. These calls were documented by JFL. Other parties have gone to demand that Syrian regular forces and their allies enter into a settlement agreement similar to what happened in southern Syria. Many of the posts observed by JFL refer to negative developments in the relationship between the supporters of each direction, especially between those who demanded the remaining of the coalition and those who demanded the handover of the territories to the regular forces.

SDF has imposed a penalty on anyone who is openly engaged in the topic of the U.S. withdrawal, and expelled employees from their posts because of the reconciliation they made with the Syrian authorities in the wake of the U.S. decision<sup>29</sup>.

## Demands to Participate in the Civil Administration

Deir Ezzor witnessed demonstrations that began in 2019, which were interrupted and returned from time to time, the most recent of which was in a number of villages in September 2020 demanding the release of detainees in SDF prisons. Meetings of community actors and civil

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<sup>28</sup> Trump Orders Withdrawal of U.S. Troops From Northern Syria, The New York Times, 2019.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/13/us/politics/mark-esper-syria-kurds-turkey.html>

<sup>29</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with an employee in the self-administration institutions in Deir Ezzor, on 12 September 2020

activists were held to demand the effective engagement<sup>30</sup> by the self-administration to the residents in the management of their areas, and to give them powers to carry out their work. The demonstrators accused the administration of hiring persons close to it and not relying on efficiency and equal opportunities principle in selecting its employees<sup>31</sup>. The response of the administration was not enough and even assaulted a number of participants in the demonstrations. Two people were documented being beaten by security forces, several arrested and released. At least two people were threatened with expulsion or relatives being expelled from self-administration institutions for participating in demonstrations. The reactions of the local authorities and the continued popular movement without a clear horizon to resolve the issues raised by the demonstrators created a debate between those who wanted to calm down and demand only through the institutions of self-administration and those who insisted on continuing the demonstration.

Self-Administration officials have a role in incitement. The lack of response is limited to local options to claim rights, for example, for several weeks the delivery of salaries of some employees of the administration institutions was delayed, when the Directorate of Finance was asked why, the directorate confirmed that they had done everything necessary to secure salaries but without result. Employees in the directorate incited those who did not receive their financial dues to cut off roads and set tires until the case is resolved<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>30</sup> Urgent Demands and Others that Require a Schedule, Justice for Life Organization, 2019.

<https://jfl.ngo/urgent-demands-and-others-that-require-a-schedule/>

<sup>31</sup> A survey conducted by JFL in 2020, about 40% of the surveyed sample said that the representatives of Deir Ezzor within the self-administration institutions have no role in decision making. Close percentage of the sample said that they do not know if they have a role or not. For more results, see reference 3.

<sup>32</sup> Interview via Zoom conducted by JFL with a civil society activist in Deir Ezzor, on 10 September 2020.

## The Relation between Host Community and IDPs

Areas north of the Euphrates River received waves of IDPs as government forces and their allies took control of areas south of the Euphrates River, displaced from the cities of Deir Ezzor, Mayadinn, Albukamal, and the surrounding towns and villages. Displaced people from Raqqa, Jarabulus and Al-Bab areas returned to the north of the Euphrates River in search of jobs.

Relief assistance, employment opportunities, high house rents, and different customs from one area to another have led to numerous tensions between displaced persons and the host community. JFL has documented three recent conflicts including the use of weapons and observed the refusal of groups of residents and displaced persons to cooperate with each other in training sessions. Civil society played a clear role in holding dialogue meetings to understand the roots of the problems between the two groups and try to find realistic perceptions to deal with them, but inflammatory rhetoric from each side is still strongly present.

Some families of the host community refuse to allow their women to deal with displaced women as women displaced from cities can go out alone, work and enjoy a level of freedom. A resident told a displaced female civil activist from Deir Ezzor said that resident women in the area have learned some new and unwelcome customs from displaced ones<sup>33</sup>. Some of the IDPs were harassed at the beginning of their displacement by some resident families, and there are some calls to return to their areas under the pretext of accessing jobs and humanitarian assistance at the expense of the host community<sup>34</sup>.

## The Role of Local Influencers (Local Leaders- Civil Society organizations) in Preventing the Effects of Hate Speech and Incitement

Many tribesmen in Deir Ezzor rely on the efforts of community leaders and influencers in dealing with the repercussions and consequences of conflicts. These endeavors are sometimes successful and sometimes not.

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<sup>33</sup> Interview via Zoom conducted by JFL with a female civil society activist in Deir Ezzor, on 10 September 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with a civil society activist in Deir Ezzor, on 13 September 2020.

However, it is clear that addressing the causes of conflicts resulting from hate speech and incitement for prevention needs to be joined by different parties in the region, as individual and unregulated efforts based on emergency intervention are insufficient to deal with the cumulative consequences of hate speech that has been going on for several years<sup>35</sup>.

In order for tribal leaders to truly influence society, self-administration must respond to their demands, which constitute the demands of their clans. The role of civil society organizations, whose role has been limited to humanitarian operations and has not provided support to the real influencers, has not put forward the experiences of other countries to motivate them to find ways to suit the context of their region and confront hate speech. Moreover, we cannot go beyond the important role of the judiciary in promoting the right of freedom of expression. Yet, the judiciary in Syria in general, and specifically in northeastern Syria, is not independent, unqualified and uses the terrorism courts (the People's Defense Court in northeastern Syria) in political matters, public affairs and expression of opinion<sup>36</sup>.

The local figures and notables can rein in those around them and put an end to all those who incite by adopting a balanced rhetoric calling for tolerance, brotherhood and acceptance of the other. The rivalries and accusations of each other that some community leaders, figures, and notables have been following has a negative impact on the local community<sup>37</sup>.

The community figures and notables play a role in the local reconciliation, and the various parties to the conflict are trying to attract them in the service of their political interests.

The relation between the community figures and the civil society organizations has a level of mistrust as the latter are not authentic within the community and newly formed structures. Some community figures have concerns that these organizations might play a role overlapping with the role of those figures and notables<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>35</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with a media activist in Deir Ezzor, on 11 September 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Interview via Gmail Meeting conducted by JFL with a Human Rights Organization Director, on 16 September 2020

<sup>37</sup> Field interview conducted by JFL with a female employee in the self-administration institutions in Deir Ezzor, on 12 September 2020

<sup>38</sup> Interview via Zoom conducted by JFL with a member of NGO working in northeastern Syria, on 24 September 2020.

## International Experiences

### South Sudan

A Report<sup>39</sup> on Peace in South Sudan issued by the United Nations on February 22, 2018, noted that restrictions on freedom of expression "are increasingly narrowing the debate, while incitement to hatred also continues to create mistrust, fear and violence". Representatives of the United Nations Mission in the state stressed the need to hear the voices of all people, regardless of their differences, to achieve a comprehensive peace.

According to the report, security forces and their broad powers prevented people from "participating and discussing the status of the country or human rights", arresting dozens, blocking websites, closing newspapers and expelling people from their jobs on charges of "dealing with sensitive issues."

### Central African Republic

The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights said it had noted<sup>40</sup> an increase in the number of messages inciting hatred and discrimination after each major security incident in some areas of the Central African Republic. The OHCHR representative said "Hate messages that have spread through traditional media and online have been characterized by causing physical and psychological violence to individuals or groups", and the messages constituted "calls for hatred, discrimination, hostility, violence, tribalism or xenophobia in national, ethnic or religious terms".

### OHCHR's efforts in the Syrian Context

In cooperation with a number of Syrian organizations and after a number of meetings facilitated by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Syria, a campaign was launched on 10 December 2019 on International Human Rights Day, which aimed to highlight hate speech in

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<sup>39</sup> Report on the Right to Freedom of Opinion and Expression in South Sudan since the July 2016 Crisis, United Nations, 2018

[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SS/UNMISS-OHCHR\\_Freedom\\_of\\_Expression.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/SS/UNMISS-OHCHR_Freedom_of_Expression.pdf)

<sup>40</sup> Preventing incitement to hatred and violence in the Central African Republic, OHCHR, 2019.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/PeacekeepersDay2019.aspx>

a number of Syrian regions and its impact on marginalized groups. The campaign included dialogue sessions, meetings with community leaders and media materials.

## Freedom of Expression, Counter-incitement and Hate Speech from International Perspective

Principle 9 of the Camden<sup>41</sup> Principles on Freedom of Expression and Equality ranked on the media playing a role in “promoting intercultural understanding and taking care to report in context and in a factual and sensitive manner’ ‘.....’ ‘ Being alert to the danger of discrimination or negative stereotypes of individuals and groups being furthered by the media’’. To spread intercultural understanding, the tenth principle indicated that “Politicians and other leadership figures in society should avoid making statements that might promote discrimination or undermine equality “.

The Principles also demanded the civil society organizations to “respect pluralism and promote the rights to freedom of expression and equality “, “In particular, they should promote intercultural understanding, acknowledge dissenting voices, and support the ability of members of different communities, and particularly marginalized groups, to voice their perspectives and concerns, in a way that recognizes the internal diversity of communities’ ‘.

The Joint<sup>42</sup> Declaration on Freedom of Expression and responses to conflict situations was “Deeply concerned about the impact of systematic attacks’ ‘ “by State and non-State actors in many countries which take place in different contexts, including international and non-international armed conflicts’ ‘. The attacks include “physical attacks on those exercising their

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<sup>41</sup> Camden Principles of Freedom of Expression and Equality

<https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/standards/the-camden-principles-on-freedom-of-expression-and-equality.pdf>

<sup>42</sup> The declaration was issued by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Opinion and Expression, the OSCE representative on Freedom of Information, the OAS Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression, the Special Rapporteur of the African Commission on Human and People's Rights on Freedom of Expression and Access to Information, 2015.

<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15921&LangID=E>

right to freedom of expression, and which can lead to widespread self-censorship and the suppression of open debate about certain public interest issues'. The declaration emphasizes that "open and critical debate is an important part of any strategy to address systematic attacks on freedom of expression and their underlying causes, and that overbroad criminalization of expression can drive grievances underground and foster violence'.

The general principles of the declaration also state that "non-State actors bear direct responsibility for their actions where these represent breaches of domestic law, or of international humanitarian or criminal law'.

The "Plan of Action<sup>43</sup> for religious leaders and actors to prevent incitement to violence that could lead to atrocity crimes' has made recommendations for monitoring, preventing and countering incitement to violence, particularly in societies divided along identity lines and in situations where tensions are high, can contribute to prevention efforts. The recommendations were addressed to state institutions, civil society organizations, and religious institutions as they have direct impact on their local communities. The plan is based on human rights, specifically the right to expression and freedom of opinion.

In its general comment<sup>44</sup> 10 Article 19 of the International Covenant<sup>45</sup> on Civil and Political Rights, the committee says that everyone has "right to hold opinions without interference" right to freedom of expression, which includes not only freedom to "impart information and ideas of all kinds", but also freedom to "seek" and "receive" them "regardless of frontiers" and in whatever medium, "either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice".

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<sup>43</sup> Plan of Action for Religious Leaders and Actors to Prevent Incitement to Violence that Could Lead to Atrocity Crimes, 2017.

[https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan\\_of\\_Action\\_Advanced\\_Copy.pdf](https://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/documents/Plan_of_Action_Advanced_Copy.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Commission on Human Rights, Article 19 (Nineteenth session, 1983),

<https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G94/189/63/PDF/G9418963.pdf?OpenElement>

<sup>45</sup> International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, 1976.

<https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/ccpr.aspx>

Exercising freedom of expression, according to the article 10 of the European Convention<sup>46</sup> on Human Rights, includes “duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, , for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary “. According to article 20 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, “Any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law “.

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<sup>46</sup> The European Convention on Human Rights, 1950.

[https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention\\_eng.pdf](https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/convention_eng.pdf)

## Conclusion

What has been observed by JFL researchers on social media, media outlets, circulated messages, examples of key people in the 10 interviews, what some international documents have touched on, and the experiences of other countries, hate speech has serious implications for the stability of societies and a role in increasing the number and level of conflict.

In northeastern Syria in general, and Deir Ezzor in particular, there is space where the right to expression can be exercised. However, what happens is that this space is used to pass inflammatory and hateful messages. These messages intensify every time topics of interest to the community at large arise. Factors that reinforce hate speech play a role in increasing doses of incitement, including abuses by controlling forces such as arbitrary arrests, torture in detention centres, repression of protesters, insecurity, disregard for popular demands and general media failure to adhere to professional standards. Clan lineups that have even affected civil society activists have made the situation more complicated. Northeastern Syria lacks clear procedures that limit the consequences of incitement and hold perpetrators accountable.

The controlling forces should develop measures that respect human rights principles to curb the negative use of media and social media sites. Furthermore, establishing safe spaces for dialogue involving different community groups has become a necessity. The role of civil society organizations, community leaders and the judiciary is central to the censorship process in the face of hate speech and incitement to violence.

The debate continues to rage over what is the exercise of the right to freedom of opinion and what is considered incitement and hateful speech. Significant efforts by civil society are needed through intensive field research to identify factors that provoke hatred within the community and the consequences it may cause in order to raise awareness of the need to avoid them.

## Recommendations for Protecting Local Community from Consequences of Incitement

- 1- Setting a work plan on the local level to confront hate speech and incitement to violence and engaging influential community leaders as they have relations and power to impact on their communities.
- 2- Monitoring incitement messages through public discourse, statements and means of communication., and raising local awareness concerning the danger of such messages.
- 3- Making use of the media to spread the culture of dialogue, freedom of expression and the fight against incitement.
- 4- Civil society activists, academics, and teachers should be engaged in all projects that combat incitement to violence and promot a culture of human rights as they have access to all society segments.
- 5- Creating spaces for dialogue especially for women and young people from different components in order to make use of their potentialities and capacities in order to raising their awareness concerning the hate speech and promote their role in combating it, bearing in mind that these segments are at most effect of conflicts.
- 6- Setting forth a schedule to resolve outstanding issues and their impact on the community such as the issue of participation in local administration, arbitrary arrests, missing persons in ISIS prisons, and fragile security.

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