

Introduction

This paper is part of an initiative to develop a more grounded and structured local approach to addressing hate speech in the Syrian context. It is informed by an understanding of hate speech as a complex, multi-layered phenomenon that extends beyond overt hostility to include more entrenched forms of exclusion, social stigma, and the political and media instrumentalization of victims' suffering—dynamics that perpetuate marginalization and undermine recognition and redress.

The paper proceeds from the premise that hate speech in Syria cannot be effectively analyzed or addressed in isolation from the broader structural conditions in which it is produced. Chief among these are the absence of justice, the limited representation of victims, and the erosion of trust among social groups. Addressing hate speech therefore requires a shift from treating victims as subjects of discussion to engaging them as key actors in shaping public discourse on issues that affect them.

This analysis draws on the outcomes of six community dialogue sessions held in Qamishli, Al-Hasakah, Raqqa, Salamiyah, Afrin, and Homs between 5 and 12 April 2026. The sessions brought together 88 participants, including 48 women, reflecting a range of experiences and perspectives.

These dialogues convened victims alongside influential public actors to examine the relationship between hate speech and victim representation, and to explore ways of fostering alternative narratives grounded in justice, recognition, and accountability—contributing to reduced polarization and stronger social cohesion.

I. Methodological Framework

The sessions were structured around a focused discussion methodology, designed to bring together a small but diverse group of participants in order to foster in-depth, balanced exchanges between individuals with lived experience and actors who shape public discourse. This approach is particularly well suited to the topic, as it enables the integration of victims' firsthand perspectives with the views of those influencing public narratives.

Participants reflected a broad cross-section of stakeholders, including victims and their families, journalists and content creators, civil society representatives, youth activists, and local community leaders. Gender balance was a core consideration, with women accounting for no less than 40% of participants in each session.

The sessions were guided by a set of core principles, most notably the creation of a safe and respectful space for dialogue, the protection of privacy and individual experiences, the avoidance of direct political confrontation, and a commitment to ensuring that victims' voices were neither sidelined nor instrumentalized.

Taken together, these findings point to hate speech in the Syrian context as a dynamic and evolving phenomenon, sustained by political deadlock, the absence of justice, competing narratives, and the lack of an inclusive national framework for mutual recognition.

6) A far-reaching impact beyond victims, affecting social peace and cohesion

The sessions showed that the impact of hate speech extends well beyond victims to the broader fabric of social relations. Narratives that diminish suffering, differentiate between victims, or privilege certain violations over others contribute to the accumulation of new grievances and the erosion of trust.

Participants cautioned that the persistence of such patterns risks deepening social fractures and increasing the likelihood of renewed conflict, particularly in the absence of equal recognition of victims' rights. At the same time, there was a clear recognition that engaging responsibly with shared experiences of suffering can provide an entry point for building solidarity that transcends divisions.

The discussions also highlighted the psychological impact of such discourse, including heightened fear, a diminished sense of belonging, social isolation, and withdrawal into narrower circles, alongside the reinforcement of retaliatory tendencies and the gradual erosion of trust within communities.

7) The dynamics shaping the production of hate speech in the Syrian context

These findings suggest that hate speech in Syria can no longer be understood as a localized or isolated phenomenon. Rather, it emerges from a complex interplay of digital, political, and social factors that operate across regions and contexts.

The digital sphere plays a central role in both the production and amplification of hate speech. Social media platforms enable the rapid and largely unregulated circulation of information, including inaccurate or decontextualized content, accelerating the formation of narratives while limiting opportunities for verification or correction.

Hate speech also exhibits a translocal character, with narratives moving across contexts without regard for local specificities, leading to broad generalizations that deepen divisions. Discussions further indicated that a significant share of such discourse is produced or reframed outside the local context, whether by actors in the diaspora or by entities seeking to shape public debate in line with particular agendas.

In many cases, this discourse relies on amplifying isolated incidents and recasting them as representative of entire communities, generating rapid and disproportionate escalation dynamics.

This process is further fueled by the absence of reliable sources of information and the weakness of legal and regulatory frameworks governing the public sphere, leaving ample space for manipulation and instrumentalization.

Taken together, these dynamics underscore the need to approach hate speech in Syria as a multi-layered phenomenon that extends beyond individual behavior to the structures, contexts, and systems that produce and sustain it. Addressing it therefore requires integrated responses that combine legal measures, media regulation, and the strengthening of the role of societal actors.

III. Areas of Convergence and Divergence Among Participants

The sessions revealed broad convergence on several key issues. Chief among these was the limited representation of victims in the public sphere, alongside the dominance of selective, politicized, or low-impact narratives. Participants also agreed that the absence of justice, recognition, and accountability is a primary driver of hate speech, and that enabling victims to articulate their own experiences is a critical entry point for addressing this dynamic.

There was also clear agreement on the existence of a trust deficit between victims and certain media and civil society actors, shaped by past experiences marked by inaccuracy or the politicization of how their suffering was represented.

At the same time, differences emerged regarding pathways for response. Some participants called for prioritizing stronger legal and regulatory frameworks to govern media and digital discourse, while others stressed that meaningful change must begin with advancing justice and accountability processes.

Divergence was also evident in approaches to transitional justice. While some participants emphasized the primacy of accountability, others expressed openness to more reconciliatory approaches—provided these do not come at the expense of truth, rights, and recognition.

IV. Key Takeaways from the Sessions

The sessions point to a set of core insights that deepen understanding of hate speech in the Syrian context. These can be summarized as follows:

- Hate speech is embedded in broader structural dynamics that extend beyond language or media, encompassing systems of justice, representation, recognition, and institutional performance—requiring comprehensive approaches to address it.
- The absence of comprehensive and equitable justice across different victim groups, regions, and perpetrators is a central driver of frustration and polarization, and sustains an environment conducive to hate speech.

- The marginalization of victims, or speaking on their behalf without their meaningful participation, reproduces patterns of exclusion and limits the potential for building a more just and accountable public discourse.
- Prevailing media practices exhibit significant shortcomings, including reducing victims' issues to superficial news coverage, subjecting them to politicization, weak documentation standards, and limited opportunities for victims to express themselves directly.
- Hate speech is shaped by translocal dynamics and by the expanding role of the digital sphere in amplifying and generalizing narratives, accelerating the production of division.
- There are tangible opportunities to foster more responsible alternative narratives, grounded in the empowerment of victims, strengthened community-based documentation, expanded civic participation, improved media practices, and the development of more just and effective legal and institutional frameworks.

V. Practical Recommendations

1) State and public authorities

- Establish a comprehensive legal and institutional framework for victim-related issues, grounded in a clear and inclusive definition of “victim” and ensuring equal recognition without discrimination.
- Ensure transparency and access to information, and develop regular, institutionalized channels of communication with victims and their families that enable meaningful participation.
- Accelerate efforts to document violations, investigate cases, and locate mass graves, while strengthening verification capacities, including the use of DNA analysis where appropriate.
- Advance justice, accountability, and reparations processes in ways that build trust and curb impunity.
- Develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of policies and measures aimed at reducing hate speech.
- Enact legal provisions and mechanisms to address hate speech, including the criminalization of incitement and collective attribution, while reinforcing the principle of individual responsibility.

