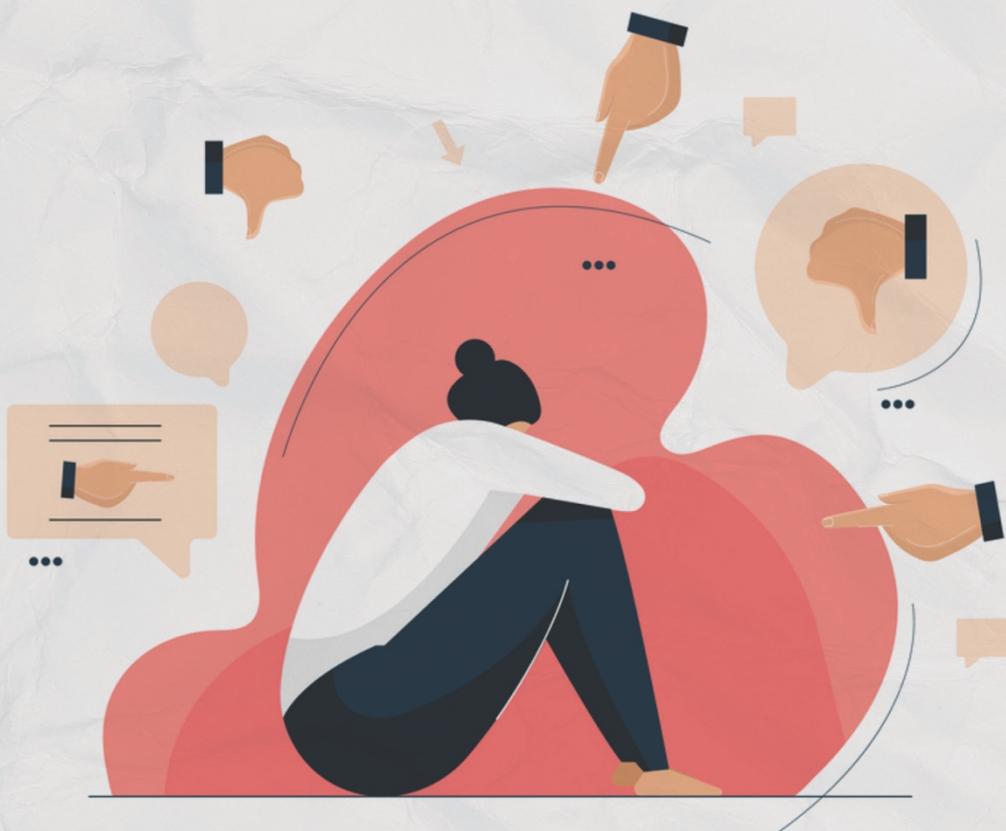


The Impact of Hate Speech on Facebook On Syrian Users (Arabs and Kurds)



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Prepared by
Slava Sheikh Hassan
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The social movement in Syria in 2011 led to a peaceful revolution that included all Syrians from different affiliations and ethnicities, but with the severity of the repression, the protests began to turn into armed movements to protect themselves. This transformation soon led to the formation of new forces that took control over parts of Syria, and as the conflict became more complicated the general features of these forces began to crystallize, and the communities started to be polarized based on ethnic sectarian, and religious sub-identities. This polarization became one of the general features of the current situation in Syria, as we find that certain forces controlled certain areas which were different from others.

Perhaps one of these conflicts that surfaced is the Arab-Kurdish tension which may seem to be due to the new controlling forces, but the tension has deep roots and it is related basically to the political authorities that did not follow a policy to manage the diversity and integrate the components of Syrian society, but rather followed a policy that managed hatred to guarantee the continuation of its dominance.

The decline of the Syrian regime's control, and the emergence of new forces in Syria, brought forth hate speech between the Syrian components in a clear and explicit way. Perhaps, hate speech is most visible on social media platforms, as some activists (Syrian Arabs and Kurds) made Facebook a platform to express their views that are often manifested in the form of racism against each other, and ideas that incite hatred and violence when there are events and military conflicts on the ground.

Therefore, it was necessary to study hate speech on social media, particularly on Facebook, which is the most commonly used platform among Syrians, to know the impact of hate speech on Facebook among Syrian Arab and Kurdish users.

Research Objective: To answer the following questions:

1. The followers' knowledge about the concept of hate speech on both sides.
2. The role of Facebook in propagating hate speech between both sides.
3. The impact of hate speech on the attitudes towards the other on both sides.
4. To identify the attitudes of both sides towards each other, concerning hate speech.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH INSTRUMENT

This study followed the descriptive analytical approach, and a questionnaire was the main study tool. The subjects filled it in through phone interviews that targeted a sample of 40 users of Facebook among Syrian Arabs and Kurds living in Turkey over the period between December 2019 and February 2021, taking into consideration variables such as sex, age, and profession, in order to monitor their exposure to hate speech or contribution to spreading it on social media, and observing the impact of hate speech on the views they have about the other side.

In the theoretical framework, the study touched on the concept of hate speech that has been defined as “a statement or an act that would foment sedition, religious or sectarian or ethnic strife or call for violence or incite or justify it or publish rumors against anyone that would harm the other party’s body or his money or his reputation and aims to murder, incitement, stigmatization, or exclusion. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights identified three types of incitement, which constitutes an exception to the freedom of expression, namely: incitement to violence, incitement to hostility and hatred, incitement to racial discrimination. Then, there was a detailed presentation about the relationship between Arabs and Kurds throughout the history of the Syrian State. This presentation constitutes a basis for understanding the analysis in this study.

THE STUDY FINDINGS:

The study concluded a number of results, which revealed the role of individuals in the dissemination of hate speech and how they are affected by it. Among the most important results, we mention the following:

- The largest ratio in the sample is Facebook users for “1-2 hours a day”. The majority among them have over 2000 friends and followers on Facebook.
- The use of Facebook for the majority of the sample is restricted to following general news: Artistic/social/economic. The second largest percentage was following political news.
- 77.5% of the study sample thought that the credibility of the information on Facebook for them depended on the source that publishes the information and the second largest percentage had special channels to get information.

The confidence among the sample members ranged between complete confidence and doubt or linking the information to certain groups or individuals. However, we

can say in general that there was an acceptable margin of confidence in the sources of information on Facebook among the sample members.

- Facebook as a free space for expression and sharing opinions and ideas was still subject to doubt and lack of confidence among the highest percentage among the subjects of the study.
- Regarding the extent of comfort about sharing ideas and opinions on Facebook, the majority did not feel comfortable. The second largest majority felt comfortable sometimes about expression on Facebook.
- When asked about the reason for feeling comfortable or uncomfortable about expression on Facebook, the majority replied that they do not feel comfortable due to differences in views, and the second largest percentage answered “sometimes” and most of them expressed their feeling that there was disrespect of other people’s freedom on Facebook.
- To show the correlation between thinking of Facebook as a free space, and connecting it with the ethnicity variable, the highest percentage felt unsafe based on the discussed topic, for the Arab subjects, and for security reasons based on the place of residence, for the Kurdish subjects.
- The largest percentage of the subjects were aware of the concept of hate speech, and the largest majority of those who know the concept were Arabs.
- The largest percentage of the sample has been exposed to hate speech several times on Facebook. The percentage among males and females was similar.
- The subjects have been exposed to hate speech and they connected that to the ethnicity variable. The percentages were similar among Arabs and Kurds, which indicates that not only ethnic minorities are exposed to hate speech.
- As for the forms of hate speech, the majority said it was in the form of (cruse words and insults to a group I belong to a certain ethnicity/refugees/regions/gender). As for the biggest source of hate speech, it was individuals with whom the subjects disagree in opinion. Regarding what the subjects did as a reaction, the largest percentage of Kurds answered “do

nothing” in contrast to “blocking these persons”, the answer that was given by 80% of the Arab subjects.

- The periods in which Kurdish areas were targeted militarily, were the periods where hate speech between Arabs and Kurds increased by 55%.
- The largest percentage of the study subjects did not publish or share anything that incited hate speech on Facebook. By linking this with the basic characteristics of the sample, we find that the majority of those who answered with “No” was among males. Their academic level was “university graduate” or above. Their age group was 28-37 and they were Arabs.
- As for the subjects’ behavior when they witnessed hate speech between Arabs and Kurds on Facebook, the majority of the subjects tried to communicate with friends (Arabs and Kurds) to calm them down and understand their perspectives. The second largest majority preferred to ignore the subject and not go through it for personal/security-related reasons.
- Regarding the periods when publications inciting hatred between Arabs and Kurds were published by some of the survey subjects, 41% of them refused to answer, while 10% of the Kurdish sample said it was during the time when “Kurdish areas were targeted” and 5% said they did when Arab areas/ Arab activists were targeted. A positive sign on both sides was the preference not to engage in topics that may provoke hate speech.
- As for the subjects’ knowledge about laws that protect persons who are exposed to hate speech on Facebook, the majority of them was not aware of that. Their academic level was university graduate and above, and they were Arabs.
- The vast majority of the study sample, 90%, prefer that legal action should be taken to protect Facebook users from being subjected to hate speech, the largest number among this majority were Arabs.
- When asked about the impact of hate speech, and if there were any changes in the views of the study sample towards the Arab or Kurdish ethnicity due to Facebook posts, the highest percentage answered with “No”. The majority of

this group were Arabs and the reason they gave was their previous knowledge about the other side.

- The highest majority of those who changed their view towards the Arab or Kurdish ethnicity and answered with “yes” were Kurds and they described the change as negative, either due to their feeling of a chasm between the two ethnicities or because hate speech strengthened their ethnic identity above their national identity as Syrians.

