



# PERCEPTION AND CONSUMPTION OF HATE SPEECH IN THE LEBANESE MEDIA

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## RATIONALE AND OBJECTIVES

The multilayered crisis that Lebanon has endured since 2019 has, among other manifestations, translated into a rapid proliferation of harsh hate speech across social, digital, and mainstream media. Unsurprisingly, the deteriorating living conditions, the lack of effective public governance, and identity-based political messaging have fueled the escalation of discriminatory “us versus them” narratives in the public sphere.

The deeply entrenched sectarian and religious divisions, coupled with rigid partisan and ideological affiliations often disguised within nationalist discourses, perpetuated through various media outlets, play a significant role in the proliferation of hate rants. These divisions, present at varying degrees and proportions depending on political circumstances, serve as the foundation for the increasing prevalence of vitriolic rhetoric. Consequently, each instance of hate speech serves as a reminder of Lebanon’s traumatic civil war (1975 – 1990) and raises concerns about the potential resurgence of armed conflict.

Moreover, Lebanese politicians frequently exploit sectarian fears of the “other” to maintain their power and safeguard their political and economic interests. As a result, co-opted journalism becomes a tool for these politicians to further their agendas. Media outlets and journalists in Lebanon, irrespective of their political or religious affiliations, are often branded as “messengers of hate speech.” This perception not only undermines the credibility of the information they disseminate but also portrays them as agents of misinformation and division.

Reflective qualitative research conducted in January 2023 – as part of the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) “Inclusive Media, Cohesive Society” (IMeCS) program – delved into media practices in Lebanon, focusing on the relationship between hate speech and journalism during times of crisis. Targeting different Lebanese audiences from diverse religious backgrounds and age categories at the grassroots level, the study aimed to understand how individuals encounter, perceive, process, and respond to hate speech.

This study's objectives included:

- Identifying the channels through which media consumers receive hate speech messages.
- Analyzing the elements within hate messages that resonate with recipients.
- Examining the factors within an individual's personality and environment that influence their susceptibility to hate speech.
- Assessing the implications of hate messages for media consumers and their broader societal consequences.
- Proposing strategies to counteract hate speech in the media.

## MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Television emerges as the primary source of news among mainstream media for the majority of participants. They sample various television news bulletins and political programs to assess news credibility and truthfulness, preferring to discern the truth independently due to a widespread distrust of media. Participants are keenly aware of the confessional, sectarian, or partisan biases inherent in the media landscape.
2. All forms of Lebanese media – press, radio, television, and websites – are perceived as lacking ethics, credibility, objectivity, and professionalism by most participants. They consume media messages cautiously and skeptically, even when affiliated with their own religious community or political leanings. This generalized mistrust stems from the perception that every media outlet serves the particular interests of its owners, who often have political or business interests. Participants recognize that media organizations promote the agendas of their financiers and sponsors, contributing to a sense of manipulation and misinformation. Additionally, participants criticize media outlets for prioritizing sensationalism and ratings, as well as for practicing selective information dissemination based on vested interests.
3. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram and Facebook, enjoy widespread popularity among participants. Local pages are preferred for their accessibility via mobile phones and for providing timely hyper-local news updates. Many participants rely on private WhatsApp groups to stay informed about current events in their neighborhoods, trusting the information shared within these groups due to personal familiarity with the creators and consumers of the news.

4. Participants are aware of the economic motives and hidden political agendas driving Lebanese media productions, including the propagation of hate speech. Media outlets and journalists are accused of manipulating public opinion and inciting hostility, often at the behest of religious factions and political parties. Hate speech is identified as a tool used to reinforce sectarian divisions and promote political agendas, contributing to societal unrest and violence.
5. While participants' confessional and political affiliations play a role in their understanding of hate messages, their levels of education and critical thinking are more significant factors. Many participants exhibit information literacy and express resentment towards the political elite, acknowledging the role of social media platforms and electronic armies in disseminating hate speech. However, participants are not immune to hate speech and may struggle to identify it accurately, despite criticizing its exaggerations, aggressive tone, and underlying intentions.
6. Hate speech circulates between social media and television, exacerbating tensions among sectarian communities. Traditional divisions are exploited, but hate speech also targets internal divisions within religious groups, such as within Christian factions and Shia subgroups. The Shia community, in particular, is frequently blamed en masse for its perceived affiliation with Hezbollah.
7. Participants often encounter hateful discourse on social media but may refrain from intervening in the debate online due to perceived futility or potential risks of involvement in sectarian arguments. While some participants admit to being incited by hate speech, few actively engage in retaliatory actions.
8. Participants exhibit varying interpretations of hate speech, influenced by their political and sectarian biases. Some emphasize the manner of expression over the content itself when defining hate speech.

# INTRODUCTION

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## BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

There is not a universally accepted definition of hate speech, as “tolerance levels of speech vary dramatically from country to country,” according to the Ethical Journalism Network. However, a common understanding is whether speech aims to harm others, particularly when there is a threat of immediate violence. The United Nations, in its “Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech” issued in 2019, 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. This is often rooted in, and generates intolerance and hatred and, in certain contexts, can be demeaning and divisive.

In the Lebanese media landscape, hate speech is a persistent and pervasive feature of journalistic and communication productions, often aimed at politically “neutralizing,” if not physically “silencing,” opponents and dissenting voices. Notable examples include an article by Ibrahim Al Amin, chief editor of the Lebanese daily Al-Akhbar, which included direct threats to anti-Hezbollah activists, labeling them as “traitors and collaborators” and suggesting to “wring their necks.” Such incitement finds echo in the assassination of anti-Hezbollah publisher and activist Lokman Slim in February 2021. Similarly, the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 was preceded by hate speech, including branding him as “the poisonous serpent [*Barkeel*] of Qoraytem” by pro-Syrian regime former minister Talal Arslan.

Amid Lebanon’s ever-escalating crisis, hate speech is increasingly prevalent on social networks and throughout the media landscape, instilling fear and panic among media consumers. This surge in hate speech is acknowledged by users and experts alike, with psychologists and sociologists noting its polarizing social and political effects. The proliferation of “electronic armies,” “trolls,” and online proxies of political factions deliberately manipulate public opinion to serve their interests, exacerbating insecurities and enabling decision-makers to implement policies by instilling fear and division among the public. This manipulation is achieved through various means, including tarnishing the reputation of opponents and inciting strife among the Lebanese population, ultimately creating an illusion of voluntary compliance with intimidating directives. In all cases, the strategy consists of fabricating an enemy that must be eliminated.

Hate speech in the Lebanese media extends beyond inciting political violence to fueling sectarian rivalries, spreading false news to stoke hatred against specific groups or individuals. Syrian and Palestinian refugees, for instance, have been targeted in hate media campaigns, driven by racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual prejudices.

## AIMS

The current research engages Lebanese men and women of diverse ages, regions, religions, and political affiliations to delineate the spectrum of manipulative hate discourses, uncover the impacts of hate speech on Lebanese individuals and communities, and ultimately develop guidelines for addressing hate speech in news coverage and current affairs programs. A comprehensive understanding of how Lebanese citizens perceive, interpret, and respond to information manipulation hinges on elucidating the media processes for producing and disseminating such content, as well as discerning user reactions – whether passive, indifferent, negligent, or defiant – that may influence the potential escalation of hate speech into virtual or real-life confrontations.

This deeper understanding is attained through a detailed and comprehensive inquiry involving target audiences, specifically Christians, Shia, Sunni, and Druze, spanning various age groups and geographic regions, including Beirut (Tariq al Jdideh, Ain al Remmaneh, Shiyah), as well as the Shouf, Metn, Beqaa, and Akkar regions. Data for this report is derived from a series of homogeneous focus groups, with participants selected based on gender, religious affiliation, and age range.

The objectives of the focus groups are as follows:

- Identify the specific channels through which media consumers receive information (word-of-mouth, leaflets, religious speeches and sermons, radio, TV, print publications, social networks, specific websites, etc.).
- Understand which elements of message content, such as language and style, are more or less likely to influence recipients.
- Identify environmental factors (education, social conditions, living standards, geographic location, political beliefs, etc.) that make individuals more or less receptive to different messages.

The ultimate goal of this research is to provide policy recommendations that can:

- Limit the dissemination of hate speech by accurately assessing the most effective methods to promote critical thinking and comprehensive understanding of all news and media discourse among Lebanese citizens.
- Foster the development of professional and ethical news productions that enhance media consumption patterns.

# METHODOLOGY

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This research was conducted throughout January 2023 and comprised several distinct yet interconnected components aimed at formulating a comprehensive research strategy:

- Assessing the prevailing situation in Lebanon, with a particular focus on how hate speech impacts the daily lives of citizens and the political landscape.
- Recruiting participants for focus groups and facilitating these sessions to gather insights.
- Developing and refining a discussion guide tailored for use in focus groups to elicit valuable data.
- Analyzing the findings and triangulating the information to gain insights into media consumption patterns within the selected Lebanese demographics, as well as identifying the primary factors that attract and engage Lebanese audiences.

## FOCUS GROUP TECHNIQUE

The recruitment of focus groups was conducted in collaboration with Information International, a specialized research and statistics company based in Beirut since 1995. Contacts within various communities were engaged to assist in recruiting participants who fit specific demographic profiles:

- Young males and females from Ain al Remmaneh
- Young males from Tariq al Jdideh
- Young males and females from Shiyah
- Young males and females from Shouf
- Middle-aged males from Metn
- Middle-aged females from Beqaa
- Elderly females from Akkar
- Elderly males from Akkar

Participants were selected to represent diverse educational backgrounds, ranging from those who attended school to individuals with university degrees. Many were not professionally active and engaged in “small jobs,” reflecting the impact of high unemployment rates resulting from Lebanon’s socio-economic crisis since 2019.

Aligned with the research’s core objectives, participants were tasked with providing insights into their comprehension of and perspectives on the Lebanese media institutions’ editorial policies and





## ETHICS

Given the complex nature of the research topic and its profound impacts on both individuals and society, stringent ethical considerations were paramount throughout the study. The research team adhered to the Chatham House Rule, which ensures confidentiality by prohibiting direct attribution and the disclosure of participants' identities or affiliations. Participants were informed about the implementing organization, SKF, and the study's nature and objectives. These objectives primarily focused on assessing the extent and impact of hate messages on various segments of Lebanese society.

Participants were assured of the team's dedication to maintaining confidentiality and anonymity, especially when disseminating information resulting from the study. They were informed about the study's implementation stages in the short and medium terms, emphasizing the protection of their identities and personal information. To uphold ethical research practices, participants were assured that any identifying information, such as names, religion, or regional location, would not be used for purposes beyond participation mapping. All quotations have been anonymized to safeguard participant confidentiality.

# FINDINGS

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The findings are presented along two vectors:

- The key topics that the discussion guide sought to answer, i.e., the media consumption habits and the reactions to and interpretations of hateful messages.
- Significant variables based on the differences – if any – between the focus groups aligned according to:
  - a. The identification and interpretation of hateful messages
  - b. The potential impact(s) of hate speech

## MEDIA CONSUMPTION HABITS

A set of baseline questions was presented to each focus group, inviting open-ended responses to ascertain participants' media consumption habits and their levels of trust in various news sources, including news bulletins, talk-shows, and digital news sources. Participants were asked about their engagement with news information and their answers provided the basis for evaluating their media literacy levels and their perceptions of the issues they deemed significant.

The overwhelming consensus among participants was a **lack of trust in local news media**, with many asserting that no media outlet could be considered trustworthy. Participants frequently likened news to being “salted and peppered,” alluding to the addition of editorial biases that distort factual reporting. Regardless of demographic factors such as age, gender, region, or religion, participants primarily followed political, security, and economic news to stay informed about rapidly evolving developments affecting their daily lives.

Mainstream media, particularly television channels, received significant criticism from participants, who viewed them as politically biased and lacking credibility. Many participants expressed skepticism towards television news programs and talk shows, perceiving them as mouthpieces for political parties rather than impartial sources of information. Some individuals mentioned watching specific channels like LBCI, MTV, Al Jadeed, or Al Manar based on political leanings or preferences, but remained critical of their biases.

Interestingly, some participants, despite opposing Hezbollah, insist on watching Al Manar because they believe that “a significant portion of decisions in the country are made by this faction, and Hezbollah can impose its will more effectively than any other faction. It influences the course of events,” as they put it. Others prefer investigative shows on Al Jadeed since “fighting corruption” has become a prevailing trend and concern for citizens since the October 17, 2019 uprising.

No talk show manages to capture the participants’ interest on its own merits. Instead, some watch for specific guests who they believe bring added value, such as individuals with strong opinions on particular issues or influential sectarian leaders whose statements profoundly impact events.

In an attempt to cope with Lebanon’s dire socio-economic situation and widespread media distrust, some participants resort to humor. They turn the generalized lack of trust in the media and the critical economic conditions, marked by unprecedented poverty levels, into a source of satire. Particularly, some participants joke about barely watching television stations, not only due to their lack of trust in them as reliable sources of information but also because of the constant electricity shortages.

All participants confirm that, given their doubts about the accuracy of television news, they **gather news snapshots from various sources**, primarily via the internet. Paradoxically, despite turning to the internet, they often watch television channels through their Facebook pages. They compare information from different channels to ensure a diverse range of perspectives, aiding them in forming personal conclusions and “seeking the truth.”

Some individuals assert that they only watch television news during major events in the country, believing that television stations are less likely to distort facts during live broadcasts. Others rely on information that has circulated widely, considering news and facts spread across numerous **WhatsApp groups to be the most trustworthy**, in addition to information through local news pages on Facebook. Some rely on friends in different regions of Lebanon, especially for updates on security incidents and other specific events.

Social media is consistently cited as the primary source of information for several reasons:

- Limited time to follow traditional media like television stations, especially due to incompatible schedules with working hours.
- Easy access to information via mobile applications.
- **Higher credibility of hyper-local sources**, including local electronic websites and news platforms such as Megaphone, Political Pen, YaSour, BintJbeil, as well as Instagram and WhatsApp groups. X (formerly Twitter) is highly regarded among many young participants, who follow specific journalists for their perceived independent and credible perspectives and analysis on events.

Some participants, particularly among Shia women, express distrust in any source of information except “very close persons” who are well-informed, accessible, and deemed ethical, such as heads of local party sections or religious figures. Despite their alignment with political parties like Amal or Hezbollah, these “inside informers” are considered reliable sources. The **principle of personal proximity** appears to override other considerations in the evaluation of news and information.

## IDENTIFICATION AND INTERPRETATION OF HATE MESSAGES

Despite their diverse geographical, religious, and cultural backgrounds, most participants exhibit similar reactions to the hate messages they encounter. Their interpretations, while sometimes differing, suggest a significant familiarity with events in Lebanon. This familiarity likely stems from their consistent monitoring of news, understanding of Lebanese politics, awareness of local and regional power dynamics, comprehension of economic and social realities, and vigilance regarding the positions of local parties, factions, and politicians.

Interestingly, **hate messages themselves often fail to evoke strong emotions** or provoke substantial responses among the participants, **except in cases involving the Sunni-Shia divide**. One such instance is the intense campaign launched, a few weeks before the focus groups, by pro-Hezbollah electronic army against Saida Sunni MP Ousama Saad, who publicly denounced political assassinations following the killing of journalist and activist Lokman Slim, attributed to Hezbollah. Saad received support from his traditional adversaries, pro-Hariri Sunni men, out of mere sectarian solidarity, despite being political opponents.

Criticism also arises, albeit on ethical rather than political or religious grounds, in response to anchor Dalia Ahmad’s labeling of the six main Lebanese political leaders as “crocodiles.” Ahmad faced a racist hate campaign, predominantly led by Hezbollah’s supporters, depicting her as a “black dog” due to her skin color. Pro-Hezbollah social media users consider their leader, Hassan Nasrallah, “untouchable”, “unparalleled.” Some participants viewed Ahmad’s expression as impolite and believed she invited the severe targeting upon herself through the admonition she voiced.

Campaigns targeting Christian leaders such as late President Bachir Gemayel or Lebanese Forces president Samir Geagea or led by Christian political influencers do not evoke extreme passions to the same extent. Participants, regardless of their background, approach these campaigns with more rationality, critiquing them based on form rather than content or subject matter.

Overall, hate messages are criticized more for their presentation and credibility than for their content. While some participants acknowledge the importance of posting on social media to counter mainstream opinions or present facts accurately, **most exercise caution in interacting with or confronting hate messages**. They fear friction with their surroundings or attacks from individuals

who refuse to accept differing opinions. **Many believe that individual actions are futile against well-organized hate speech campaigns**, leading to a **sense of hopelessness** among participants regarding their ability to effect change. “It is a hopeless case” as one participant put it.

### Case Study 1 – Dalia Ahmad: Racism and Sexism

The anchor Dalia Ahmad hosts a satirical television show on Al Jadeed. In one episode, she characterized the six main sectarian and political leaders in Lebanon as “crocodiles,” a term used pejoratively to describe careless and insensitive individuals. In this context, the term suggests that these leaders are out of touch with the suffering of the Lebanese people amidst dire living conditions.

Following Ahmad’s remarks, she became the target of an extensive hate and criticism campaign on social media. Additionally, she faced racist attacks portraying her as a “barking black dog” due to her dark skin color. This campaign was predominantly led by Hezbollah’s supporters and electronic army, who revere their leader Hassan Nasrallah with an almost divine status, considering him “untouchable” and “unparalleled.”

While Ahmad’s intention was generally approved by most participants, some viewed it as impolite. These participants, from various focus groups, believed that Ahmad “brought it upon herself” through what they perceived as unethical admonition. Others criticized Hezbollah’s supporters for targeting her on personal rather than professional grounds.

Interestingly, participants noted that supporters of the other five criticized leaders did not engage in hate speech against Ahmad. They refrained from reproaching her, indicating that only pro-Hezbollah supporters initiated and perpetuated the extensive hate campaign in defense of Nasrallah. This observation underscores **the partisan nature of the hate speech**, with individuals aligned with certain leaders resorting to such tactics to protect their favored figures.

### Case Study 2 – MP Ousama Saad: Sectarianism and Political Differences

Despite having been a political ally of Hezbollah, Ousama Saad, a Sunni Member of Parliament representing Saida, became the target of a vicious hate campaign on social media simply for issuing a statement condemning political assassinations. This statement followed the assassination of the Shia journalist and activist Lokman Slim, which was widely believed to have been carried out by Hezbollah.

Participants did not attribute the hate campaign against Saad to the historical Sunni-Shia divide often cited to explain the deep-seated animosities between these groups. Instead, many categorized it as a response to the political “differentiation” or “distancing” Saad displayed, breaking away from his previous proximity with Hezbollah. This slight departure from the party line was perceived as

unacceptable by Hezbollah, leading to the hate campaign against Saad. It is noteworthy that Saad neither directly nor indirectly implicated Hezbollah in his statement.

Some participants, particularly Sunnis, interpreted Hezbollah's reaction, evidenced by the hate campaign against Saad, through a Lebanese proverb: "Whomever has a needle under the armpit is hurt." This saying implies that Hezbollah felt targeted despite not being explicitly mentioned in Saad's statement, suggesting that the party perceived it as an indirect accusation due to its presumed involvement in Slim's assassination.

### Case Study 3 – Dr. Sandrine Atallah: Sexism and Taboos

Renowned for her expertise in sexual education, Dr. Sandrine Atallah appeared as a guest on a show on MTV where she was collectively attacked by the presenters for using Arabic terminology to refer to sexual organs, which they deemed vile and abhorrent.

Younger focus group participants, both male and female, deemed the presenters' aggression towards Dr. Atallah unjustified, considering that the terminology she used was scientific and intended to increase people's awareness and knowledge. Some participants remarked that **Lebanese people often conceal or avoid facing uncomfortable truths**, metaphorically expressing this as "putting on masks and hiding before their fingers."

Additionally, some participants speculated that the presenters' hostile attitude was deliberately manufactured to boost views and ratings for their television program. They perceived this as a tactic employed to generate controversy and attract more viewership, rather than genuine criticism of Dr. Atallah's approach to sexual education.

### Case Study 4 – Marcel Ghanem: Sexism and Mockery

The famous television host was widely described as "professionally despicable" and "intentionally offensive," with most participants questioning his professionalism, ethics, and credibility.

In this instance, Marcel Ghanem is not the target of hate speech as in previous examples but is instead the perpetrator of denigration against supporters of the October 17, 2019 uprising. He made these remarks while commenting on a Lebanese expression used by one of his talk show guests to suggest that certain factions exploited the 2019 uprising by saying, "They rode the revolution." In a cynical and sexist manner, veiled in laughter, Ghanem likened this popular uprising to "a female to be ridden," intending to belittle and disparage the October movement, alluding to another slogan "Revolution is feminine/female."

The majority of focus group participants criticized Ghanem for his behavior. They view his cynical attitude, disdainful demeanor, sarcastic laughter, and satirical comments as irrelevant, provocative, and therefore unacceptable. His statements are seen as lacking in factual basis, instead undermining either the reality of events or the credibility of the guests he interviews. Some participants accuse him of bias, favoritism toward certain interviewees at the expense of others, and serving the interests of political figures. They also allege that he opportunistically “rides the wave of unfolding events,” with some even suggesting that he played a role in dampening the momentum of the October 17, 2019 uprising.

### **Case Study 5 – Rindala Jabbour: Sectarianism and Fearmongering**

Rindala Jabbour, the former spokesperson for the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), displayed an extremely Islamophobic attitude, taking a harsh political stance against Sunni political factions. During a televised talk show discussing the “distribution of shares and positions among the Lebanese political forces,” Jabbour goes as far as accusing Sunni Muslims of wanting to “eat the Christians.” She directly refers to Sunnis as “Al Mahmoudat,” with “Mahmoud” being a common first name among Muslims, in what she intended to be a disdainful attitude toward Sunnis. Her implication is that Sunnis aim to take over political positions traditionally held by Christians in Lebanon.





The majority of Christian and Muslim focus group participants express resentment toward Jabbour's statements. Some believe that political talk shows in Lebanon, aiming to attract public attention and boost ratings, deepen political and social divides by promoting hateful sectarian language. They argue that these platforms provide opportunities for resentful and "deranged" individuals to express extremist opinions and foster a sense of "fear of the other."

Interestingly, one Sunni participant acknowledged the legitimacy of Jabbour's fears. He stated, "What she says is true, but her way of saying these things is wrong and negative." He believes she is articulating a fear prevalent in the Christian community and attempting "to push back against it." However, others view her statements as "indicative of weakness," suggesting that if they were FPM members, they would sanction her for exposing their vulnerability.

While Jabbour's rhetoric is deemed hateful and offensive, it is not perceived as threatening or destabilizing, as it remains confined to words and complaints. Participants do not see it translating into actionable measures against Sunni political opponents.

### **Case Study 6 – The Syrian Social National Party: Praising Murder**

The Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) organized a parade in Hamra Street, Beirut, which took on the appearance of a military procession. During this event, former President-elect and Lebanese Forces (LF) founder, Bachir Gemayel, was jeered at as a "Zionist agent," and the current LF head, Samir Geagea, was threatened with a fate similar to Gemayel's assassination. These threats were widely viewed by participants, both Christian and Muslim, as dangerous hate speech capable of inciting armed confrontations in Lebanon.

Participants affiliated with SSNP, primarily among both Christian and Muslim, male and female participants in Akkar, did not see these slogans or the parade as inappropriate, threatening, or illegal. In their view, the parade and slogans are justified because they reflect a certain historical reality (such as the LF's perceived alignment with Israel during the 1975–1990 war, and Bachir Gemayel's election following the Israeli invasion of Beirut in 1982) and represent an expression of freedom of speech.

Conversely, non-SSNP participants regarded the parade as "illegal," arguing that "the Lebanese Army is the only legitimate military force in Lebanon," and asserting that "freedom of expression does not justify the display of weapons." Many expressed **concerns that such scenes may escalate into armed conflict** and criticized the actions of "a party lacking a sovereign ideology." However, these **participants would not actively engage in confronting such provocative speech** or parades. When asked about their reluctance to act, they unanimously expressed a lack of interest in engaging on social media platforms, deeming it futile and "pointless."

## Case Study 7 – Samir Geagea and Syrian Refugees

In a press conference, LF leader Samir Geagea emphasized the negative impact of the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and called for the compilation of “a detailed list of those who voted in favor of Bashar Al Assad in order to deport them.” He suggested that those who support Assad can safely return to their country.

While Geagea’s statement could be viewed as a threat to the safety of refugees in Lebanon, as LF supporters, particularly Christians and anti-Syrian, might be incited to take action against them, most participants did not interpret Geagea’s comments as such. On the contrary, they expressed support for Geagea’s stance.

Indeed, the majority of participants, except for some affiliated with Hezbollah and the SSNP, assert that **the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has profoundly impacted the country’s** infrastructure and contributed to increased unemployment among Lebanese citizens. Some even recall the period of Syrian military occupation of Lebanon, stating unequivocally, “We have a critical stance towards the Syrian regime;” “The Syrian army mistreated the Lebanese;” “No one, whether Christian, Palestinian, or otherwise, was spared from the Syrian regime.”

Ironically, SSNP and Hezbollah also harbor anti-refugee sentiments when the latter are perceived as supporters of the Syrian opposition. Therefore, the **position towards refugees is mostly linked to Lebanese political parties’** relations with the different feuding factions in the Syrian conflict.

## Case Study 8 – The Soldiers of the Lord’s Homophobia

“*Jnoud Al Rabb*” (Soldiers of the Lord) present themselves as a radical Christian group advocating for what they perceive as “Christian values” and “God’s precepts.” They are believed to be supported by banker Antoun Sehnaoui. They vehemently oppose the LGBTQ+ community, considering it religiously prohibited. Consequently, they engaged in forcefully removing LGBTQ+ decorations and slogans, particularly in the Christian district of Ashrafieh in Beirut, while issuing defamatory statements and aggressive threats against LGBTQ+ individuals.

Participants’ reactions to *Jnoud Al Rabb*’s actions and threats varied along three main lines. Some expressed opposition to the LGBTQ+ community based on their personal religious beliefs. Others stated outright opposition to homosexuality, with sentiments like “I am against homosexuality in all forms” or “I do not object to their existence but oppose their public visibility or ability to marry.” Another group affirmed the rights of individuals to express themselves freely, asserting that “They have the right to be who they are. It is about freedom.”

However, across all these categories, none of the participants approved of *Jnoud Al Rabb's* assaults on the LGBTQ+ community, except for a few male individuals from the Sunni focus groups in Beirut and Akkar.

It is noteworthy that **attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals did not appear to be age-related**, as young people from various regions and religious backgrounds exhibited as much strict opposition to the LGBTQ+ community as older individuals.

# CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The focus group participants exhibit several prominent features in their assessments of the hate messages presented to them and their attitudes toward such messages:

- 1. Detection of Hate Messages:** Participants, regardless of age, religious affiliation, or partisan leanings, demonstrate a **significant ability to identify hate messages**. However, while some reject these messages outright, others perceive them as “legitimate” “expressions of fear” or concern towards others, which they find “understandable.”
- 2. Concern for Others:** Many participants express **concern about the potential negative impacts of hate speech** on “others,” even if they personally believe they are “immune” to its effects. They worry about “less-aware or easily manipulated individuals” who could be influenced by such messages, potentially “leading to tragic confrontations within Lebanese society.”
- 3. Role of Education:** The **educational and cultural backgrounds of the participants play a role** in their identification and interpretation of hate messages. Nevertheless, **it is their political affiliations that can influence more significantly their assessment** of hate speech content and its potential impacts, either positively or negatively.
- 4. Generalized Restraint:** A common characteristic among the participants is a **reluctance to confront or take action against hate speech**. Many justify this inaction by believing that their intervention would not make a difference or could even lead to backlash against them. They cite the deeply entrenched political, partisan, and sectarian divisions within Lebanese society, as well as the organized structures dedicated to “destroy opponents” by propagating hate messages and launching hate campaigns, as significant barriers to effective intervention.

Most participants across various focus groups, irrespective of their religious, regional, or party affiliations, demonstrate a **keen awareness of media manipulation** and can identify hate speech in the messages they evaluate. They exhibit a capacity for rational thinking and critical analysis when assessing broader issues such as media performance and political actions. However, when it comes to personally relevant matters such as partisan affiliation or religious convictions, they often exhibit narrow-mindedness influenced by political and sectarian loyalties.

Participants express frustration with the pervasive presence of hate speech and distorted information in the media but generally lack tangible actions to counteract this trend. Addressing hate speech

requires raising awareness among citizens, journalists, and media administrators. Key points for follow-up actions include highlighting the tragic consequences of hate speech, **promoting fact-based reporting**, encouraging triangulation of news sources, fostering critical thinking skills among citizens, and creating platforms for countering hate speech and information manipulation.

Furthermore, there is a need to intensify awareness campaigns in collaboration with mainstream media and relevant authorities and to promote professional and ethical journalism. Journalists must prioritize social responsibility, refrain from sensational reporting, and avoid promoting extreme or hateful content on social media for personal gain. Their loyalty should lie with the public rather than with political or sectarian leaders.

Ultimately, **ethical and professional journalism is crucial for combating hate speech** and establishing hate-free media in Lebanon. It serves as a key tool for promoting accurate, truthful reporting and fostering a climate of tolerance and understanding among the Lebanese public.



# APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

## 1. INTRODUCTION: TO BE MADE BY THE FACILITATOR

The facilitator will first introduce the Samir Kassir Foundation and the purpose of the study: i.e., to understand how the Lebanese public consumes news content and what makes them fall victim of mis/disinformation.

### For the Moderator's Background

The study is conducted through a series of eight focus groups (FGs), each gathering 8-10 individuals. The FGs will be distributed in seven districts, covering different communities in the country. Since it is crucial to distinguish what makes people vulnerable to hate speech, eight hate speech examples will be discussed during the session. The study will allow CSOs to better target citizens in raising awareness on harmful content in media and to support factual coverage and the promotion of freedom of expression in Lebanese media.

The moderator will start the discussion by asking general questions to understand the type of news participants are interested in, where they get their news from (traditional media or social media), whether they trust media outlets and journalistic work in Lebanon, and if they double check news before sharing them on social media. Then, the moderator will start showing the hate speech examples and ask related questions. After displaying the messages, the moderator will ask the participants about their opinion about the content and impact(s) of the shown messages. Once the participants discuss the messages, the moderator will ask specific questions to each case.

## 2. PARTICIPANTS' GROUPS

Participant Profile	Participant Region
Young males/females	Ain Al Remmaneh
Young males	Tariq Al Jdideh
Young males/females	Shiyah

Participant Profile	Participant Region
Young males/females	Shouf
Middle-aged males	Metn
Middle-aged females	Beqaa
Elderly females	Akkar
Elderly men (Armed forces retirees)	Akkar

### 3. INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What kind of media do you use to follow up on the news?
2. Do you fully trust the media you get your news from? If yes, do you double check other sources? If no, why?
3. Have you, at any point, been exposed to any sort of material related to hate speech, discrimination, or stereotyping, if yes, what was it? How and why did you address (or not) the situation?
4. Should hate speech, according to you, be tolerated as a form of free speech? If not, what should be done about it and who should be taking the responsibility of dealing with it?
5. How would you address the hate speech situation in the media as of right now, would you intervene such as reporting the news, or responding to the individual sharing the content online?
6. How do you perceive the current context at the local and national levels in terms of polarization and hate speech?
7. Is there anything related to the topics we discussed you would like to add?

Participants will be presented with examples of hate speech from different outlets, and the moderator will use the below follow up questions to discuss with them.

#### ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS ON HATEFUL CONTENT EXAMPLES

##### Dalia Ahmad

- → Show tweets against Dalia Ahmad
- Do you remember what was the trigger for this campaign?
- How would you describe the language of the tweets?
- → Show excerpt of news bulletin
- What do you think of Ms. Ahmad's language?

##### Ousama Saad

- Where would you place Ousama Saad in the political spectrum of Lebanon?
- → Show examples of electronic campaign

- Why do you imagine this campaign was launched against him?
- → Show Saad's statement that triggered the campaign
- Would you say this warranted such a campaign?
- Would you say the campaign falls within freedom of expression, or hateful intimidation and instigation?

### Dr. Sandrine Atallah

- → Did you watch the episode?
- What do you think the co-host were doing?
- Do you know Dr. Atallah's work? If not, based on the interview, what would you assume she does?
- → Show some of Dr. Atallah's sex education videos
- Would you say she deserved what happened to her on the program?

### Marcel Ghanem

- How would you describe Marcel Ghanem, professionally?
- → Show Ghanem's remarks
- Please describe the attitude of the host?
- Do you think that a professional talk show host should be allowed to say offensive and sexist comments?

### Rindala Jabbour

- Do you think that political talk shows in Lebanon promote hateful sectarian language?
- → Show interview
- Would you describe Ms. Jabbour's comment as sectarian?
- What kind of impact would you say such comments would have on an audience?

### SSNP

- → Show parade
- How would you describe this? Does it offend or intimidate you?
- Do you think political parties should be allowed to organize military events?
- Why do you political parties do these parades? Why?

### Samir Geagea

- → Show statement
- How would you describe this statement?
- What, do you imagine, would be the reaction to such a comment by supporters of the LF.
- Do you think that such statements from public officials or political leaders can lead to violence against the targeted group?



***Jnoud al Rabb***

- → Show video
- Do you agree with their actions? Yes/No, why?
- Would you say that the call for violence falls under free speech?

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