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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement* submitted by Al Baraem Association for Charitable Work, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[22 August 2023]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Role of Media in Promoting or Undermining Hate Speech in the Middle East

Media channels within the Arab region hold a prominent status in transmitting news and information, exerting substantial leverage in molding public perspectives and guiding collective thought. Moreover, the media is pivotal in advancing or eroding hate speech. The widespread occurrence of hate speech within media platforms represents a grave occurrence that led to a regression in the realms of freedom of expression and opinion.

The Role of Media in Undermining Hate Speech:

Media plays a crucial role in enhancing awareness, disseminating culture, and shedding light on the grave dangers of hate speech and its profound negative impact on society and human rights. Its efforts translate into guiding the public toward a proper understanding of any issue across all levels, providing accurate and reliable information that helps uncover fake news and prevalent misinformation. Media contributes to the construction of a resilient and peaceful community that is less susceptible to the negative influences of hate-driven discourse.

Despite the modest efforts of some journalists and certain Arab media outlets to promote the role of media in countering hate speech, the security and economic challenges faced by numerous Arab regions, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab Spring uprisings, have surrounded this task with various obstacles. Additionally, the transformation of media platforms, over a decade, into political, partisan, or religious platforms reflects the extent of societal divisions, contributing to the erosion of the remaining solid foundations of ethical journalism and media integrity.

The Role of Media in Promoting Hate Speech:

Media's negative role in promoting hate speech includes framing sensitive events in ways that influence audience responses. Additionally, many media outlets prioritize appeasing owners and funders, disseminating their agendas without considering societal and national repercussions, especially in the absence of laws against hate speech.

Hate speech in media distorts facts to fit hateful narratives, distorting reality for the audience. This worsens tensions and conflicts. Biased perspectives without balance can compromise media neutrality, eroding credibility and enabling hate propagation. Media outlets might face pressures to produce content that aligns with the prevailing hate speech, which could result in restrictions on freedom of expression and media diversity.

It is regrettable to say that Arab media plays a larger role in promoting hate speech rather than countering it within a political, social, and economic environment that supports such promotion. In the absence of serious laws and measures to combat all forms of incitement and hatred.

Economically, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a significant economic downturn worldwide, particularly in Arab countries that were already grappling with wars, security issues, and political problems. This has impacted the private media sector's ability to sustain self-funding, turning media outlets into arenas of influence for powerful figures in countries seeking economic assistance in exchange for promoting personal ideologies and policies. As a result, media outlets have been stripped of their neutrality and their ability to counter hate speech.

Socially, Arab media has witnessed a notable decline in addressing important social issues such as women's rights, child protection, the rights of people with disabilities, youth empowerment, and other critical topics. Instead, there has been a focus on issues where hate speech can play a negative role, targeting religious, ethnic, and national minorities, political opposition, bullying, and corruption.

Politically, this discourse has distorted the tolerant image of diverse political groups and individuals, leading to increased polarization and a failure to reach common solutions. Consequently, this has triggered revolutions, sectarian and political conflicts.

Some Arab media outlets utilize hate speech under the guise of freedom of expression. Despite the fundamental distinction between these two concepts, there is a thin line that superficially connects them. This behavior has had a negative impact on the fundamental right of freedom of expression, and it has been exploited for purposes reflecting bias and encouraging violence and escalation. As a result, these media outlets open the door for authorities to use these events as a pretext to hold opinion holders and critics of authority accountable, alleging that their views carry a hateful nature.

Therefore, it is necessary to stress the importance of the balance between protecting society from hate speech and ensuring freedom of expression, which is a delicate and complex issue. The Arab region, especially after the escalation of cases of exploiting the rights of freedom of expression to spread hate speech, needs to strike a balance that promotes human rights and ensures peaceful coexistence.

In Lebanon, hate speech within the media is a pressing issue that jeopardizes social harmony and national cohesion. Various media outlets might approach the same event differently based on their political biases, sometimes prioritizing political leanings over professionalism and media quality. The Lebanese media landscape displays a high level of political affiliation, with 78.4% of outlets directly linked to the state, parties, or political figures .

The existing legislative framework lacks true transparency from media owners and fails to establish adequate mechanisms for curbing hate speech. The discourse of hate and sectarianism became prominent in media coverage concerning the decision to postpone the switch to daylight saving time after Ramadan in Lebanon. This decision sparked a sectarian debate and an intense online conflict on social media platforms, heightening political, religious, and media tensions to unprecedented heights. The time change revived an atmosphere reminiscent of the 1975 civil war, this time manifesting as a virtual sectarian conflict on social media.

Lebanese media coverage of these events often adopted hateful and sectarian rhetoric. For example, using phrases like "civil war" and "Christian Uprising," further fueled tensions.

In essence, the problem of hate speech within Lebanese media illustrates the urgent need for better regulation and responsible reporting practices.

On another note, the phenomenon of hate speech against Syrian refugees has spread within the Lebanese media, exploiting sectarian and political dimensions to highlight refugees as a source of problems and crises in Lebanon. Derogatory expressions were employed, depicting refugees as a threat to national identity and the economy.

This type of discourse has deepened divisions within society and encouraged violence and escalation against refugees, exposing them to the danger of threats and targeting by extremist elements. Furthermore, it has diminished opportunities for cooperation and peaceful coexistence among different groups in Lebanon.

Regarding the distribution of hate speech against marginalized groups in Lebanon, studies have indicated that out of 12 reports, 6 reports contained hate speech against refugees, accounting for 50 %. This was followed by 5 reports containing hate speech against women at 41 %, and one report containing hate speech against foreign workers at 9 %.

As an example of the role of hate speech in the decline of freedom of expression and media freedoms, Tunisia has witnessed a noticeable regression in recent years in the realm of freedom of expression and media, as a result of hate speech and repeated attempts to intervene in and influence this vital sector.

The Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA), described, in a statement, press freedom in Tunisia as fragile and endangered, linking this to the rise in cases of violence directed at journalists and media personnel, as well as the spread of hate speech originating from political entities targeting the HAICA members and journalists.

Tunisia's position in the World Press Freedom Index by Reporters Without Borders has notably slipped since 2021, following its pivotal role in democratic transitions. Hate speech constitutes one of the contributing factors to this decline.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The Baraem Association for Social and Charitable Work and the Journalist Support Committee express their grave concern about the escalating hate speech in Arab media and its negative consequences on societies. Therefore, we call for the following:

- Enact laws that criminalize incitement to hatred, violence, and discrimination based on race, religion, gender, and nationality. And establish deterrent penalties for those who promote hatred and violence through media and digital platforms.
- Raise awareness about the distinction between freedom of expression and hate speech.
- Implement legal mechanisms to safeguard freedom of opinion and expression from being misused to propagate hate, violence, sectarianism, and other forms of harmful content.
- Intensify efforts to monitor media outlets and social media platforms to hold those who violate hate speech laws accountable.
- Encourage media institutions to adopt clear editorial standards that prohibit the dissemination of content inciting hatred.
- Provide training for journalists on professional event coverage and adherence to human rights principles.
- Promote and support media outlets and individuals in disseminating positive messages that enhance coexistence, tolerance, and encourage understanding and dialogue.

Journalist Support Committee, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

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