



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
26 June 2019

English only

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## Human Rights Council

Forty-first session

24 June–12 July 2019

Agenda item 7

Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories

**Joint written statement\* submitted by the International Organization for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (EAFORD), Indian Movement "Tupaj Amaru", International-Lawyers.Org, Kayan - Feminist Organization, Union of Arab Jurists, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status, International Educational Development, Inc., World Peace Council, non-governmental organizations on the roster**

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

[03 June 2019]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## **The rise in hate speech by political representatives and on Social Media in Israel**

### **Introduction**

The issue of hate speech targeting Palestinians is becoming a pervasive phenomenon within Israeli society exacerbated by the popular use of the internet.

Globally, there has been an increasing trend of distorted use of social media platforms, which are being used, more and more commonly, to target and harass individuals with different backgrounds including based on racial or ethnic origins. This is happening with the active support of politicians who, instead of denouncing such conduct and framing these incidents as harmful to all of society, incite and contribute to them.

The aim of this statement is to analyse the issue of hate speech inside Israeli society targeting Palestinians, with a focus on current trends such as hate speech on social media, hate speech by political representatives, and the link between hate speech and hate crimes. Our aim is to show that hate speech has become an issue of serious concern that cannot be dismissed and must be taken into consideration by the Human Rights Council and Member States.

### **Hate speech on Israeli Social Media**

Everyday hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of inciting, violent or insulting posts against Palestinians are published on social media, particularly on Facebook. It was estimated by a study conducted in 2018<sup>1</sup> that in that year alone, 474,250 inciting posts against Palestinians were written, whose content included racist slurs, insults, and calls for violent actions.

The survey showed that social media hate speech has increased since 2017. Frequently, posts are addressed to Arab political representatives in the Knesset, particularly during the period when the Nation State Law was discussed, or to Palestinian personalities, such as the activist Ahed Tamimi. According to the report, Facebook is the main platform for violence and the most common words used to insult Palestinians are *burn, wipe from the face of earth, death, terrorist and rape*.

Not only is Israel completely ignoring these attacks, it is making use of its cybersecurity technologies and surveillance in order to limit the freedom of expression of Palestinians. On platforms like Facebook and Twitter, it uses predictive social media policing systems to target Palestinian users by censoring their posts and pages and, in the worst cases, arresting them.

It is clear that Israel does not have any intention of acting against online racist rhetoric against Palestinians; therefore, Israel is failing to protect Palestinians from hate speech on social media.

### **Hate speech by political representatives**

Hate speech by political representatives and people in positions of power has an alarming impact on society, since it gives legitimacy to discriminatory behaviours and contributes to widespread xenophobia. Disinformation, misinformation, inaccurate portrayals of people of different ethnic backgrounds, information based on false accounts, and hate speech have the result of instilling fear of vulnerable groups and minorities among the larger population. This form of manipulation allows politicians to win and govern a country based on fear and hatred with the strong possibility of enacting discriminatory and racist laws. In this context,

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<sup>1</sup> 7amleh Center: <https://7amleh.org/2019/03/11/the-index-of-racism-and-incitement-in-israeli-social-media-2018-an-inciting-post-against-palestinians-every-66-seconds/>

a central role is played through social media by politicians, due to its effectiveness to reach a mass audience, its easy accessibility and large-scale usage.

This situation has a serious impact in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT), where far-right political representatives are publicly delivering hate speech against Arabs. One example is when a member of the Knesset, Bezael Yoel Smotrich, called for the killing of 700 Palestinians, one for every rocket. He also called for massive physical damage “so it would take them years to recover”. He was referring to the escalation of violence between Israel and Hamas that ended on 6 May 2019, where rockets were launched by Hamas and heavy airstrikes were conducted over the Gaza Strip by Israel in retaliation. It resulted in the death of 24 Palestinians and 4 Israeli civilians.

The last Israeli election campaign held in Israel witnessed the large-scale spread of hatred and verbal violence against Palestinians. The leader of the Blue and White party, Benny Gantz, running for prime minister, published a video campaign boasting about the bombing of Gaza. In these videos, he showed images of Gaza after the 2014 war, expressing pride in the fact that he sent parts of the Gaza Strip “back to the Stone Age”. He also reveled in other such ‘achievements’, such as the destruction of targeted Hamas posts and the killing of terrorists, under the title: “Only the Strong Survive”. The videos were censored by Facebook because of “violent or graphic content”. In this context, we support the warning that “hate speech” should not be considered just as an act of incitement to racist violence but, more broadly, as any dissemination of ideas which might potentially lead to further expressions of hatred, as the promotional video of Gantz amounted to.

Another example of the mainstreaming of hate speech is the statement by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during the last Knesset elections on 9 April 2019, which made it clear to the Arab minority living in Israel that being Israeli means being a Jew. Netanyahu said on Facebook after a local celebrity criticized his assertion that Arab parties don’t belong in any government formed after the 9 April vote: “Israel is the national state, not of all its citizens, but only of the Jewish people.” Netanyahu added later that Arabs have equal rights under the law but that Israel is the nation-state of the Jewish people – and only them, while still repeatedly attacking Arab parties and exploiting fears over the Arab vote to drive up right-wing turn-out.

Hate speech by politicians is playing a crucial role in increasing hate crimes across the world, but particularly so against Palestinians. Words fuel extremism and trigger the worst human reactions.

## **Hate crimes**

The intimidation and threats Palestinians face on social media platforms can evolve into violent acts amounting to hate crimes. In addition, racism and hate crimes are fed by political instrumentalization and manipulation, which create misconceptions and fear.

Hate crimes against Palestinians are often direct or indirect, targeting their property. On 8 January 2019 in the Palestinian village of At-Tuwani, 15 olive trees were chopped down and two nearby rocks were painted with Hebrew sentences saying “Death to Arabs” and “Revenge.”

Other hate crimes directly target Palestinians, threatening their personal safety or their lives. Recently, on 16 May 2019, a Palestinian teenager from East Jerusalem, aged no more than 16, was hospitalized after being attacked by a group of Jewish teens shouting “Death to Arabs”. That same night, the young man’s father went to the Neveh Yaakov police station to file a complaint; an investigator took down his complaint, telling him that the police would contact him. However, no one has contacted the father, interviewed the boy or interviewed any of the friends who were with the boy.

In another case, which took place in December 2018, a bus driver that was dropping off passengers in the ultra-orthodox settlement of Modi’in Illit, was insulted and beaten by two men. They yelled at him calling him a “dirty Arab” and other racist remarks. However, after an investigation had been opened by the police, who believed that the attack was

motivated by nationalism, the Jerusalem Magistrate ruled that it was just a “road rage incident”.

In another example, Fatima Suleiman, a 42-year old teacher from the village of Taqoua near Bethlehem, was killed when a settler hit her car and escaped. While there are conflicting accounts of the event, eyewitnesses are quoted as saying that the settler not only rammed his truck into her car, but also afterwards deliberately ran her over again when she was thrown out of her vehicle. In addition, witnesses claim that the Israeli police came to remove camera footage, but not to investigate the alleged murder.

These examples show how hate crimes against Palestinians very often occur without accountability, largely due to a lack of commitment by the Israeli authorities to prosecute the offences. It is clear that hate speech has the devastating effect of inciting and increasing violent hate crimes against Palestinian civilians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. It is part of the grim daily reality under occupation for Palestinians, producing a situation of constant fear and insecurity among them.

## **Recommendations**

- We call on this Council to take prompt action against the widespread phenomenon of hate speech in Israeli society and to ensure accountability for the crimes that have been committed.
- We call on this Council to put pressure on Israel to enact and implement specific domestic legislation aimed at criminalizing racist and xenophobic hate speech, particularly those made by politicians, in accordance with international standards.
- We call on the international community to develop and enforce fair and effective content moderation policies for social media.
- We call on this Council to put pressure on Israel to implement the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) and the Rabat Plan of Action.
- We restate the fundamental right of self-determination of the Palestinian people as well as their right of return to their lands and properties, as recognized under international law and by UN Resolutions, and we call upon the international community to endeavor towards its implementation.

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Geneva International Centre for Justice (GICJ), The Arab Lawyers Association-UK, Human Rights Defenders (HRD), The Brussels Tribunal, The Iraqi Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), Association of Humanitarian Lawyers (AHL), Association of Human Rights Defenders in Iraq (AHRD), General Federation of Iraqi Women (GFIW), Organisation for Justice & Democracy in Iraq (OJDI), The Iraqi Centre for Human Rights, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.