# Hate Speech and National Security: Risks, Impacts and Counter-Measures

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*(Source: Global Handbook on Hate Speech Laws)*

## Introduction

The practice of free speech is a must to ensure an open society. Freedom of speech is one of the significant pillars of a democratic society. However, the challenge arises when the practice of offensive speech in society poses a serious risk to a certain group. Hate speech can play a vital role in endangering the condition of human security as well as national security. That is why this issue has been addressed in Human Rights Treaties as a violation of human rights. National security concerns escalate when a certain group of people is targeted, and the process of

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'otherization' results in threatening the national security of a state by radicalizing and mobilizing people towards violence. A prominent example is the Holocaust, where the "us vs them" mentality took an extreme version causing the death of not only millions of Jews but the Nazis also committed genocide against the Roma, the Sinti, people with disabilities, homosexual men, Slavic people, political opponents and many others.[2]

In this commentary, firstly, the concept of hate speech will be discussed as there is no universal definition of the concept, and different institutions have defined it in different words. So, a clear understanding of the concept is required. Secondly, the author will discuss how hate speech can pose a threat to human security with relevant examples. Lastly, the link between national security and hate speech will be analyzed focusing on the ongoing crises on this issue.

## Defining Hate Speech

In simple terms, using offensive or abusive words targeting a certain group of people for their inherent characteristics can be termed hate speech. Different treaties, dictionaries and international organizations have termed it in different words; however there is no universal definition of hate speech in the international human rights law. The United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action has defined it 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 whom they are, in other words, based on their religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, color, descent, gender or other identity factors."[3]
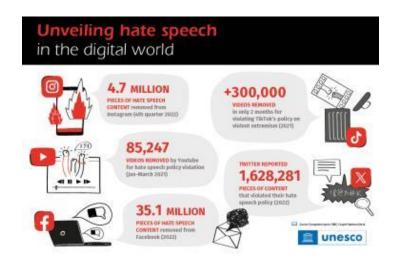
According to the Cambridge Dictionary, hate speech is "public speech that expresses hate or encourages violence towards a person or group based on something such as race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation".[4] The consequences of hate speech are far-reaching, and it is not only limited to the individuals who are targeted but also the entire minority or group to which they belong. It poses a serious threat to human rights and the rule of law. Especially in this modern era of digitalization, online hate speech comes with specific challenges and the consequences can be

[2] CMHR. "Us vs. Them: The process of othering | CMHR," n.d. https://humanrights.ca/story/us-vs-them-process-othering#:~:text=Othering%20sets%20the%20stage%20for,another%20group%20is%20even%20human.
[3] United Nations, "What Is Hate Speech? | United Nations," n.d., https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech.
[4] "Hate Speech," May 1, 2024, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/hate-speech.

dire. It creates a division in society that is not only limited to any specific areas, nor even the national boundaries, but the challenge is spread further. The ultra-nationalistic, xenophobic, racist, LGBTI-phobic sentiments are some of the examples that can be caused as consequences of hate speech.[5]



*(Source: The UNESCO Courier)*

The United Nations has outlined three important attributes of hate speech:

> ➢ *Hate speech can be conveyed through any form of expression, including **images**, **cartoons**, **memes**, **objects**, **gestures and symbols,** and it can be disseminated offline or online.*

> ➢ *Hate speech is **"discriminatory"** (biased, bigoted or intolerant) or **"pejorative"** (prejudiced, contemptuous or demeaning) of an individual or group.*

> ➢ *Hate speech calls out real or perceived **"identity factors"** of an individual or a group, including: **"religion, ethnicity, nationality, race, colour, descent, gender,"** but also characteristics such as language, economic or social origin, disability, health status, or sexual orientation, among many others.[6]*

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[5] "What Is Hate Speech and Why Is It a Problem? - Combating Hate Speech - www.coe.int," Combating Hate Speech, n.d., https://www.coe.int/en/web/combating-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech-and-why-is-it-a-problem-.
[6] United Nations, "What Is Hate Speech? | United Nations," n.d., https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech.

# Hate Speech and Human Security

The concept of human security is an evolving one. Unlike traditional security, it goes beyond military security and also deals with the issues of human rights, food, water, energy and other issues related to human existence. In resolution 66/290 of the General Assembly, it is noted that "human security is an approach to assist Member States in identifying and addressing widespread and cross-cutting challenges to the survival, livelihood and dignity of their people". It calls for "people-centered, comprehensive, context-specific and prevention-oriented responses that strengthen the protection and empowerment of all people".[7] The resolution has called for the freedom from fear and want of even the vulnerable people.

Hate speech violates the dignity of a person and thus challenges the rights of humans. It is very challenging to rank hate speech since it is psychological. The same hate speech can affect different groups or ethnicities differently. But one thing is for sure, it affects the mentality of a person and leads to prejudice, dehumanization, and lack of empathy.[8] Targeting a specific community or a group of people causes erosion of social cohesion. It can be based on specific religion, ethnicity, race, gender and so on. Often, it transcends from the minds of the people to direct physical violence. As a result, riots and bloodshed take place which is a direct threat to human security. Examples can be found in the genocide of Rwanda or in the genocide of Bosnia. In the case of Rwanda, the hate propaganda against the Tutsi people, which dehumanized them and made them a target, laid the foundation of the genocide. The Hutu majority represented oppressing the Tutsi people as legitimate. The infamous Radio Libre des Mille Collines played a crucial role in this process.[9] In the words of Ms. Mutegwaraba, "For a long time, the roots of hatred ran very deep in our society. To see the Government was behind it, there was no hope that there were going to be any survivors."[10] Similarly, in the case of the Bosnian genocide, the continuous campaigns of hate speech and disinformation by the state-controlled media made the

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[7] "Trafficking in Persons & Smuggling of Migrants Module 4 Key Issues: Human Security," n.d., https://sherloc.unodc.org/cld/en/education/tertiary/tip-and-som/module-4/key-issues/human-security.html.
[8] Agnieszka Pluta et al., "Exposure to Hate Speech Deteriorates Neurocognitive Mechanisms of the Ability to Understand Others' Pain," *Scientific Reports* 13, no. 1 (March 13, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-31146-1.
[9] "Radio_Télévision_Libre_Des_Mille_Collines - Genocide Archive Rwanda," Genocide Archive Rwanda, n.d., https://genocidearchiverwanda.org.rw/index.php/Radio_T%C3%A9l%C3%A9vision_Libre_des_Mille_Collines.
[10] "INTERVIEW: How Hate Speech Triggered Genocide Against the Tutsi in Rwanda," UN News, April 23, 2023, https://news.un.org/en/story/2023/04/1135902.

Bosnian Muslims portrayed as a target group for the Serbs and thus eventually resulted in the genocide. In between 1992 to 1995, more than 100,000 people were killed in this war. [11]

## Hate Speech and National Security

The perpetrators of hate crimes often pose severe risks to a country's national security. That is because some hate crimes result in massive casualty attacks. Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START) has compared the issue of hate speech and terrorism and shown that these two are overlapping phenomena. Just like hate speech, terrorism is also ideologically motivated violence that goes beyond the physical target. It rather focuses on a mass audience who can get psychologically and politically impacted from the incidents. Also, both hate crimes and terrorist activities can be generated from both online and offline social networks, and the functions are quite similar. Hate crime can be seen as a generator of further terrorist activities and mass atrocities. According to the research of START, 90 percent of hate crime perpetrators targeted people of colors, religious minorities and LGBTI people.[12]

In the United States of America (USA), white supremacists came up with all those revolutionary ideas and spread hatred for people of color as well as religious minority people. Even the white supremacists also call for a racial holy war (RAHOWA).[13] This is how hate speech can turn into the shape of a mass casualty tactic and thus, threatens the lives of millions. Hate crime becomes an issue of national security when this transition takes place.

The internationalization of jihadism has created a serious concern for the world in the field of conflicts because this kind of conflicts goes beyond the border of a nation and thus, it becomes the national security issue for more than one state. Just like this, the internationalization of white supremacists also creates national security risk. According to START, since 2025, the percentage of extremism is on the rise in the USA, especially those of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrants. That is why the national security of the country as well as human security is at risk with those targeted community and eventually, it can give rise to a mass atrocity conflict.

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[11] https://www.voanews.com/a/un-hate-speech-in-bosnia-herzegovina-an-incitement-to-violence/6398285.html

[12] "Hate Crime Is a National Security Issue | START.umd.edu," November 12, 2020, https://www.start.umd.edu/news/hate-crime-national-security-issue.

[13] Anti-Defamation League, accessed May 5, 2024, https://www.adl.org/resources/hate-symbol/rahowa.

# Conclusion

The capability of affecting a huge amount of people by spreading propaganda and making it look legitimate to cause harm to the group have made hate speech a dangerous tool. Just like the terrorist activities, as these two are compared by the START, hate speech can prove to be very dangerous and in many cases, it works as a foundational base of a mass atrocity conflict. Even in many terrorist and genocidal activities, it starts with spreading hate speech, certain propaganda against a certain group. Later on, it transcends from ideological conflict to physical violence which can turn into the shape of riots and cause the death of thousands. The psychological impact can vary from person to person and country to country and the level of uncertainty can be very challenging to a country's national security. This is how hate speech can pose a serious threat to human security as well as national security. Also the fact that it goes beyond a country's border and can impact multiple countries at the same time, the consequences on the national security can be very severe.