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Hate Speech and Democratic Challenges: Navigating Jordan's 2024 Elections

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Introduction

Jordan's path to democratic maturity has been marked by both progress and setbacks. The 2024 parliamentary elections represented a critical juncture, testing the nation's ability to conduct fair and inclusive political processes. However, deep-seated societal divisions continue to shape public discourse. The backdrop of conflicts and regional instability also influenced domestic political narratives.

ISD analysed social media data and found that hate speech continues to threaten democratic participation, with women candidates and Palestinian-Jordanians among the minorities most frequently targeted. We propose five key reforms, including stronger legislation against online hate speech, education campaigns led by civil society, and improved content moderation on the part of social media companies.

This Digital Dispatch is part of a research series examining how online polarisation manifests in Jordan, helping to inform local and national policy and practice. Understanding the dynamics of hate speech in this context is crucial not only for Jordan's democratic development but also as a case study for other nations grappling with similar challenges in the digital age.

Key Findings

Jordan's 2024 parliamentary elections revealed persistent challenges in political discourse, with targeted hate speech undermining democratic processes. Our analysis of online content, primarily on X (formerly Twitter), uncovered:

- A notable pattern of gender-based discrimination against women candidates, with their political ambitions often being trivialised
- Widespread ethnic stereotyping, particularly the derogatory term "**Belgians**," used to delegitimise Palestinian-Jordanian ISD identified 436 posts on X between 1 August and 19 September describing Palestinian Jordanians as "Belgians".
- Accusations that candidates committed treason or held foreign allegiances, often linked to the Palestinian issue.

These findings underscore the urgent need for reforms including:

1. Civil society-led education campaigns to counter discriminatory narratives and promote digital literacy.
2. Improved content moderation on social media platforms (particularly for Arabic), employing local moderators and refined algorithms — enhanced to better identify and distinguish hate speech, account for linguistic and cultural nuances and reduce moderation errors.
3. Investment in inter-community initiatives to foster dialogue and understanding among diverse groups.
4. Collaborative research to develop better tools for detecting and analysing hate speech in Arabic, accounting for cultural and linguistic nuances.

Our analysis focused primarily on online discourse on X (formerly Twitter). BrandWatch was used to capture posts exhibiting hate speech, political demonisation and calls for violence. The study concentrated on content targeting individuals or groups based on their descent, ethnicity, gender, or religion.

The Dynamics of Hate Speech in Jordan's 2024 Elections

1. Gender-Based Discrimination: The Persistence of Misogyny in Politics

We examined a total of 34,329 posts between 1 August and 19 September 2024. Of these, 1,741 were identified as having negative sentiments, particularly when directed at specific candidates, ethnic groups, or political parties. Our in-depth analysis focused on the 44 most relevant posts, which were part of larger trending conversations during this period. These 44 posts garnered a total of 618,256 views, indicating their influence in shaping public discourse, even though the precise reach is difficult to quantify with full accuracy.

For this research, we used ISD's definition of hate speech: activity that seeks to dehumanise, demonise, harass, threaten, or incite violence against an individual or community on the basis of their race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, sex, disability, or migrant status. This comprehensive definition reflects the broad scope of hate speech across multiple contexts, ensuring that our findings accurately capture the nature of harmful discourse in Jordan.

One significant challenge came from the complexity of Arabic; a combination of dialectal variations as well as sarcasm, idioms and culturally specific references makes automated sentiment analysis less effective. As such, our team manually reviewed collected data to ensure accuracy.

ISD found that pervasive gender-based discrimination significantly impacted women's political participation and undermining democratic representation in [Jordan's political landscape](#). This manifested in forms including questioning women's competence in leadership roles and outright harassment. Such attacks undermine representative democracy by targeting individual candidates and reinforcing societal norms that discourage other women from pursuing public office.

We found that two female candidates, Noor Abugoush and Razan Al-Armouti, faced particularly widespread misogynistic rhetoric that reinforced harmful societal norms. For example, a comment targeted at Palestinian-Jordanian Abugoush said that "Women are the cause of every disaster, ignorant and foolish".

Many online comments directed at female candidates went beyond questioning their competence into targeted harassment. Parliamentary candidate Al-Armouti received a comment stating, "Women sit crying, their tears flowing, screaming, and when her hormones act up, she curses everything around her. Positions of authority require a strong personality. Why are you crying, Razan? Tell me, dear" (Figure 1). Such remarks trivialise women's roles in public life and reinforce patriarchal expectations which confine them to the [domestic sphere](#).



Figure 1 A derogatory comment targeting Razan Al-Armouti, trivialising women's political participation by mocking their alleged emotional instability and reinforcing gender stereotypes: "Women sit crying, their tears flowing, screaming, and when her hormones act up, she curses everything around her. Positions of authority require a strong personality. Why are you crying, Razan? Tell me, dear"

Some comments called for patriarchal control over women's political participation. In a video published on her campaign page on Facebook Al-Armouti alleged that her uncle, Saleh Al-Armouti (a prominent Muslim Brotherhood candidate,) had threatened her and even sent a thug to disfigure her face to prevent her from running for the elections. ISD did not verify those allegations, and there were no official reports or complaints filed by her against him. As of 19 September 2024, the videos have been deleted.

In response, several online comments called for women to be controlled by male family members. One particularly troubling example stated, "The girl is poorly raised, and her uncle should be stricter with her. Since when have women been useful in public work? 'And stay in your homes'". This infantilises adult women and justifies male control, invoking religious and cultural justifications for restricting women's public roles. The persistent use of these narratives reinforces [societal norms](#) that position men as guardians of women's actions, further marginalising women from leadership and public life.

2. Ethnic Stereotyping: The 'Belgian' Narrative and Its Impact on Democracy

The surge in ethnic stereotyping against Palestinian-Jordanians during the elections reflects a deeper societal issue regarding identity and belonging in Jordan. One common term is 'Belgians', likely stemming from distinctive Belgian-made military gear worn by Palestinian guerrillas in the 1960's; its use delegitimises their political engagement by portraying them as foreigners within Jordan despite their deep-rooted historical ties to the country.

ISD identified 436 posts on X between 1 August and 19 September which described Palestinian Jordanians as 'Belgians'. One tweet stated: "Oh Jordanian, elect any Jordanian candidate, but make sure he is not from the Brotherhood, the left, submissive, or a Palestinian candidate, even if he were a prophet." This statement simultaneously delegitimises Palestinian-Jordanian candidates and groups them with other perceived

political outsiders. This creates a false dichotomy between "true Jordanians" and "others".



Figure 2 A derogatory post targeting Palestinian-Jordanians, using the term "Belgians" to insult them while glorifying Jordanian tribes like Bani Hassan, reinforcing ethnic and tribal divisions: "The 'Belgians' have made things worse, these sons of dogs, and they don't even have tribes like Bani Hassan and Sakhr, who are worthy of respect."

ISD also found evidence of the intersection of ethnic and class-based discrimination. The comments, "The 'Belgians' have made things worse, these sons of dogs, and they don't even have tribes like Bani Hassan and Sakhr, who are worthy of respect" (Figure 2), suggests that [tribal identity](#) is the only valid claim to political legitimacy in Jordan.

These narratives actively undermine the democratic process by casting doubt on the legitimacy of a significant portion of the electorate. Ethnic stereotyping threatens the fabric of Jordanian society, potentially deepening divisions and hindering the development of a truly inclusive democracy.

3. Political Demonisation: The Weaponisation of Ethnic and Religious Prejudices

The Jordanian elections were also marred by a troubling trend of weaponising ethnic and religious prejudices to demonise political opponents. This pattern of accusation and defamation threatens to undermine the integrity of political debate and exacerbates existing polarisation.

This manifests in a stark "[us versus them](#)" mentality, where political disagreements are framed not as differences of opinion but as battles between patriots and traitors. Candidates are often portrayed as either defenders of Jordan's interests or as agents of foreign powers, leaving little room for nuanced political discourse. This binary

framing erodes trust in the democratic process and discourages compromise, as cooperating with the “other side” is seen as capitulation to an existential threat.

One of the most pervasive forms of political **demonisation** involved accusations of treason, where candidates were portrayed as acting on behalf of foreign entities. The Muslim Brotherhood, a legally authorised opposition party that has recently topped Jordan's parliamentary elections—though without securing a majority—has been a target of such rhetoric. For example, one comment claimed: “Surely one of the Brotherhood's lackeys has been tasked with opening a front in Jordan, dragging it into a conflict to push it away from its position of rejecting the plan to expel the Palestinians” (Figure 3). Such rhetoric not only targets individual political figures but also fuels public fear by suggesting that certain leaders are undermining Jordan's sovereignty.



Figure 3 A post accusing political figures of destabilising Jordan, linking them to the Muslim Brotherhood and reinforcing narratives of foreign intervention and treason: “Surely one of the Brotherhood's lackeys has been tasked with opening a front in Jordan, dragging it into a conflict to push it away from its position of rejecting the plan to expel the Palestinians.”

This discourse discourages political participation from moderates who fear being labelled as extremists or traitors. It also makes it difficult for politicians to work

across ideological lines, even on issues of national importance. Finally, an environment of suspicion and hostility can worsen the marginalisation of minority voices, as groups accused of divided loyalties may find themselves excluded from the political process altogether.

Political opponents were also frequently accused of being part of radical or extremist movements. One tweet exemplified this, stating: “We stand with the devil himself against the terrorist Hezbollah, Iran, and the Persians, not just with the Jews” (Figure 4). By associating political figures with groups/states such as Hezbollah or Iran, the discourse aims to alienate them from the electorate, framing them as existential threats to the country. These associations invoke fear and distrust, framing opposition groups not just as political adversaries but as dangerous enemies to the state and national security. This kind of rhetoric closes off opportunities for constructive political engagement.



Figure 4 A derogatory post targets a Muslim Brotherhood member with insults and sarcastic remarks, reflecting political and sectarian tensions while reinforcing societal divisions: “We stand with the devil himself against the terrorist Hezbollah, Iran, and the Persians, not just with the Jews”

Religious prejudices are also used to demonise political opponents, particularly by portraying certain groups as untrustworthy or unpatriotic. For example, one post, paired with a video of a Muslim Brotherhood demonstration in support of Gaza, stated: "Damn a democracy that grants rights to rabble with no loyalty or patriotism... glorifying enemies." This comment not only questions the loyalty of specific groups but also frames democracy as dangerous when extended to those who supposedly lack patriotism, such as members of the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). The use of religious language to delegitimise political opponents reinforces the idea that certain groups are incompatible with national unity.

The rhetoric often escalated into direct incitement against certain groups, further fuelling political polarisation. This is exemplified in the comment "Cast your vote for any candidate, even if you dislike them, as long as they are Jordanian and their priority is Jordan." This binary framing of [political loyalty](#) versus betrayal makes compromise and cooperation – key elements of democratic governance – nearly impossible, as each side is painted as a mortal enemy rather than a legitimate political actor.

Conclusion

The 2024 Jordanian Parliamentary Elections have laid bare the intricate tapestry of challenges facing the nation's democratic journey. Our analysis reveals a political landscape where progress and regression coexist, highlighting the need for a delicate balance between fostering open dialogue and safeguarding against divisive rhetoric.

The [weaponisation of ethnic](#) and gender-based prejudices, exemplified by the use of the 'Belgian' slur and misogynistic attacks on female candidates,

threatens to erode the very foundations of inclusive governance. These manifestations of hate speech are not mere electoral sideshows; they are symptoms of deeper societal fissures that, if left unaddressed, could undermine Jordan's stability and democratic aspirations.

To address these challenges, a broader strategy that includes civil society efforts to promote [digital literacy](#) and foster cross-cultural understanding will be essential. Empowering communities through education campaigns and fostering inter-community dialogue will help bridge societal divides and counter years of polarising discourse. Additionally, collaborative efforts to refine content moderation and develop more culturally nuanced hate speech detection tools are critical, particularly as social media platforms often struggle with [effective moderation in Arabic](#) and other non-English languages. A lack of proactive measures to address harmful content in Jordan reflects a broader issue of inadequate platform oversight in non-English contexts, exacerbating the impact of such rhetoric.

Jordan's experience provides valuable insights for the broader Middle East region. Its ability to balance its diverse ethnic and political landscape while promoting democratic ideals could inspire neighbouring countries facing similar struggles. However, in the digital age, this balance is at risk if not extended to the online sphere. [Effectively managing diversity](#) in social media discourse is crucial for Jordan to transform electoral challenges into opportunities for meaningful democratic evolution, potentially influencing the wider region.

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