

INVESTING IN THE POWER OF YOUTH

FOR COUNTERING AND ADDRESSING HATE SPEECH AND PREVENTING GENOCIDE

Conference Report | December 2025



The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) Lebanon, in collaboration with the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), held a conference titled “Investing in the Power of Youth for Countering and Addressing Hate Speech and Preventing Genocide” on Thursday, 11 December 2025, on the occasion of the International Day of the Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of the Crime of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime.

This conference marked the ninth edition of the annual collaboration between AGBU Lebanon and IFI, reflecting a sustained partnership committed to fostering critical discussions on genocide prevention, memory, justice, and human rights. Over the years, this collaboration has aimed to build intellectual coherence around the structural conditions that lead to mass atrocities and the mechanisms required to prevent them. This year’s focus placed particular emphasis on youth as key actors in confronting hate speech, shaping narratives, and strengthening resilience in societies affected by conflict, polarization, and digital misinformation.

In her opening remarks, **Yara Mourad**, Assistant Director at IFI, welcomed participants and emphasized that youth today constitute a vital population positioned at the forefront of the contemporary information ecosystem. She highlighted that young people play a decisive role in shaping online narratives and influencing public opinion, making them essential actors in countering hate speech and preventing mass atrocities. Mourad further noted that in a region marked by political instability and violence, empowering youth through media literacy, ethical digital citizenship, and historical awareness is a strategic investment rather than a symbolic gesture.

Arine Ghazarian, Executive Director of AGBU Lebanon, followed with an address underscoring AGBU’s long-standing commitment to education, humanitarian assistance, socio-economic development, and cultural preservation. She stressed that education remains the most powerful tool for prevention and resilience, enabling young people to challenge harmful narratives, resist manipulation, and speak out against injustice. Ghazarian emphasized that hate speech is never harmless, as it fuels prejudice, polarization, and dehumanization, historically proven precursors to genocide. She concluded by reaffirming that countering hate speech is a shared responsibility and an essential condition for peace, justice, and human rights.

PANEL 1: CONFRONTING HATE SPEECH

The first panel was moderated by **Roy Knocke**, Director of Lepsius Haus Potsdam. Dr. Knocke opened the discussion by framing hate speech as a central mechanism in the preparation of genocide, emphasizing that throughout history, mass violence has been preceded by processes of dehumanization and incitement. The panel explored hate speech from sociological, legal, and preventive perspectives, focusing on its role in eroding social cohesion and legitimizing violence.

Topic 1: The Sociological Dimensions of Genocide

Mazen Shaqoura, Regional Representative for the Middle East and North Africa at the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR),

introduced a sociological lens often absent from dominant legal frameworks on genocide. He focused on the concept of *social capital*, defined as the horizontal relationships that bind individuals and communities together and enable collective resilience, cultural production, and identity formation.

Drawing on examples from Palestine and Gaza, Shaqoura argued that genocide does not only target lives, but systematically destroys social cohesion, trust, and the relationship between people and land. He explained that while some societies may recover after mass violence if they remain rooted in their land and social structures, forced displacement and the erosion of social capital severely undermine the possibility of recovery. According to Shaqoura, the destruction of these horizontal ties represents a fundamental yet under-recognized dimension of genocide that should be more fully integrated into international discourse and prevention strategies.

Topic 2: Legal and Normative Frameworks on Hate Speech

Jessy Chahine, Public Information Officer at OHCHR for the MENA region, examined international mechanisms designed to address hate speech, focusing on the Rabat Plan of Action (2012) and the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (2019). She explained that the Rabat Plan establishes six threshold criteria: context, speaker, intent, content or form, extent of dissemination, and likelihood of harm, to distinguish protected expression from criminal incitement under international human rights law.

Chahine highlighted that while the Rabat Plan defines the legal boundaries for restricting speech, the UN Strategy provides a broader policy framework aimed at

prevention. The latter addresses the root causes of hate speech and promotes whole-of-society responses involving states, civil society, educational institutions, media, and technology platforms. She emphasized that hate speech must be understood primarily as a process of dehumanization, and that effective prevention requires education, ethical media practices, and responsible digital citizenship.

The panel discussion underscored the limitations of existing legal instruments and stressed the need to strengthen preventive approaches that address the social, cultural, and political drivers of hate speech.

PANEL 2: EDUCATION, TECHNOLOGY, AND THE ROLE OF YOUTH

The second panel was moderated by **Talar Atchetian**, Vice Director for Academic Affairs at Antonine University. The discussion focused on the role of education systems, emerging technologies, and youth engagement in shaping narratives, countering hate speech, and promoting inclusive societies.

Topic 1: Youth, Education, and Polarisation

Hana Addam, Lead for the Education Sector at UNESCO's Regional Office in Beirut, highlighted the increasing polarization experienced by youth both online and offline, particularly in the MENA region. She emphasized that social media platforms enable hate speech to spread faster and

further, while also intensifying its impact beyond the digital sphere.

Referring to UNESCO's 2023 Recommendation on Education for Peace, Human Rights, and Global Citizenship, Addam stressed the importance of investing in education that fosters critical thinking, media literacy, and ethical engagement. She argued that while digital technologies can amplify harm, they also hold significant potential to support education, dialogue, and peacebuilding when guided by clear ethical frameworks.

Topic 2: Artificial Intelligence, Ethics, and Context

Fatima Abu Salem, Professor of Computer Science at AUB, addressed debates around artificial intelligence through the lens of “decolonial AI.” She argued that the primary challenge lies not only in data bias, but in the socio-political contexts in which data are produced and interpreted. Abu Salem emphasized the limits of techno-solutionism and called for approaches that prioritize healing, contextual understanding, and human-centred policy design.

Wissam Saade, IFI Associate Fellow and Lecturer at Saint Joseph University examined the relationship between history, memory, and artificial intelligence, noting that AI is transforming how narratives circulate and how historical suffering is represented. He cautioned that while AI increases visibility, it does not deliver justice and may intensify competition over victimhood, particularly in contexts marked by unequal digital capacities.

Mohamad Najem, SMEX Executive Director focused on digital governance and the dominance of US-based technology platforms, arguing that traditional public and

civic spaces have increasingly been replaced by privately controlled digital arenas. He highlighted recent regulatory efforts such as the European Union's Digital Services Act and AI Act, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding digital rights and ensuring that technological systems remain human-centric.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The conference highlighted that genocide prevention begins long before violence erupts, within educational systems, digital platforms, and everyday discourse. By investing in youth, strengthening education, and critically engaging with technology, societies can confront hate speech, challenge dehumanization, and work collectively toward a more just and peaceful future.

In his concluding remarks, **Roy Knocke** recalled that hate speech has historically served as a precursor to genocide, citing cases such as the Armenian Genocide, the Holocaust, and contemporary conflicts. He emphasized that the digital age has profoundly transformed the conditions under which hate speech spreads, creating new challenges for prevention and accountability. Knocke concluded by calling on individuals, particularly youth and digital citizens, to adhere to ethical principles that promote respect, responsibility, and the protection of human dignity.

You can watch the full conference on IFI's YouTube Channel here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZ9Hh2Ov2fI>

ABOUT AGBU

The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) is the world's largest non-profit organization devoted to upholding the Armenian heritage through educational, cultural, and humanitarian programs. Each year, AGBU is committed to making a difference in the lives of 500,000 people across Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian diaspora.

Through the vision of its leaders and the generous support of devoted donors and members over the years, AGBU has played a significant role in upholding Armenian traditions and values by adapting to the needs of the worldwide community and the demands of the times. Since 1906, AGBU has remained true to one overarching goal: to create a foundation for the prosperity of all Armenians. AGBU currently operates with an annual budget of over \$45 million, made possible by our countless benefactors. Headquartered in New York City, AGBU has an active presence in 30 countries and addresses the needs of Armenians with traditional and progressive programs worldwide -- from schools, scouts, camps, and support for the arts to internships, virtual learning, and young professional networks.

Visit [AGBU's website](#) to know more.

ABOUT IFI

Inaugurated in 2006, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) is an independent, research based, policy-oriented institute. It aims to initiate and develop policy-relevant research in and about the Arab world.

The Institute aims at bridging the gap between academia and policymaking by conducting high quality research on the complex issues and challenges faced by Lebanese and Arab societies within shifting international and global contexts, by generating evidence-based policy recommendations and solutions for Lebanon and the Arab world, and by creating an intellectual space for an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, scholars, civil society actors, media, and policy makers.

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