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Law Enforcement Responses to Digital Hate Speech in Qatar: A Qualitative Study of Cybercrime Policies and Practices

Abstract

Digital hate speech has emerged as a significant challenge for law enforcement agencies in Qatar, as social media platforms increasingly host content that incites hostility, discrimination, and social division. This study examines how Qatari law enforcement responds to digital hate speech within the framework of existing cybercrime legislation and broader security policies. Using a qualitative research design based on document and policy analysis, the article analyzes core legal texts, official statements, and selected case materials to explore how harmful digital expression is defined, framed, and addressed in practice. The findings highlight both the strengths and limitations of current approaches, including the reliance on broad legal provisions, the centrality of security and social cohesion rationales, and the operational challenges of detecting, investigating, and prosecuting hate-motivated online offenses. The study argues that clearer legal definitions, more transparent enforcement guidelines, and enhanced non-criminal preventive measures are needed to ensure consistent and rights-respecting responses to digital hate speech. It concludes with practical recommendations for refining cybercrime policies, improving institutional capacities, and strengthening community engagement to prevent and counter harmful online incitement in Qatar.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Qatar has witnessed a rapid expansion in the use of social media platforms and digital communication technologies across all segments of society. These platforms have become central spaces for public debate, social interaction, and the expression of political, religious, and cultural views (Hoover Institution, 2017; Al Nuaimi & Al Ketbi, 2021). Alongside their benefits, however, they have also provided fertile ground for the circulation of digital hate speech, including content that incites hostility, discrimination, and social division along sectarian, national, ethnic, and other lines (ISD Global, 2026; Rahim & Hashim, 2023). Such forms of online communication can undermine social cohesion, erode trust between different groups, and pose tangible risks to community and national security (Alshurideh & Alzoubi, 2022; Al Nuaimi & Al Ketbi, 2021).

Recognizing these risks, Qatari authorities have introduced and updated legal and policy frameworks aimed at regulating online behavior and preventing cyber-enabled offenses (State of Qatar, 2014; Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2023). The Cybercrime Prevention Law (Law No. 14 of 2014) and related provisions of the Penal Code, as well as official warnings and awareness campaigns, explicitly address acts such as online defamation, incitement to hatred, and digital content that threatens public order (State of Qatar, 2014; Al-Thani Law Firm, 2025). Law enforcement agencies, particularly specialized cybercrime units, are therefore increasingly tasked with detecting, investigating, and prosecuting incidents that may constitute digital hate speech (Ben Hassine, 2016). Their responses are central not only to the enforcement of the law, but also to the broader effort to safeguard community security and maintain social stability in a rapidly evolving digital environment (Al Nuaimi & Al Ketbi, 2021; Alshurideh & Alzoubi, 2022).

At the same time, the regulation of digital expression raises complex questions about the appropriate balance between protecting security and upholding fundamental rights, including freedom of expression (Ben Hassine, 2016). International and regional human rights organizations have expressed concerns that broad or vague legal provisions can be used to criminalize legitimate online speech, especially in Gulf states, including Qatar (Berkeley Law, 2021; Amnesty International, 2026). In this context, it becomes crucial to understand how law enforcement practitioners on the ground interpret and apply cybercrime legislation in cases that involve digital hate speech: which types of content are prioritized, how decisions are made about investigation and prosecution, and what dilemmas emerge when security considerations intersect with rights-based norms (Ben Hassine, 2016; Berkeley Law, 2021).

Existing research on digital hate speech and law enforcement responses has focused predominantly on Western jurisdictions or on technical aspects such as automated detection of hate speech on social media (Alotaibi, 2024; Rahim & Hashim, 2023). Studies in the Arab region have begun to explore the impact of social media on societal and national security and, more recently, the dynamics of online hate speech in specific national contexts (ISD Global, 2026; Al Nuaimi & Al Ketbi, 2021; Alshurideh & Alzoubi, 2022). However,

there is still a notable gap in qualitative, context-sensitive research that examines how Gulf-based law enforcement agencies conceptualize and respond to digital hate speech within their own legal and security frameworks (Cherif, 2021). In particular, little is known about the everyday practices, challenges, and professional judgments that shape enforcement in Qatar.

This article seeks to address this gap by providing a qualitative analysis of law enforcement responses to digital hate speech in Qatar, with a specific focus on cybercrime policies and practices. It examines how digital hate speech is defined and framed within official documents and legal texts, how relevant provisions are implemented in practice, and how practitioners perceive the challenges of enforcing the law in the digital sphere (State of Qatar, 2014; Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2023). Drawing on document and policy analysis, the study explores the extent to which current approaches succeed in protecting community security while respecting fundamental rights (Ben Hassine, 2016; Berkeley Law, 2021).

The objectives of the study are threefold: first, to explore law enforcement understandings of digital hate speech and its perceived security implications in Qatar; second, to analyze the practical application of cybercrime and related legal provisions in handling hate-motivated online incidents; and third, to identify key gaps and tensions in current enforcement practices and propose recommendations for more effective and rights-respecting responses. By foregrounding institutional texts and public enforcement discourse, the article aims to contribute to both scholarly debates on digital hate speech and policy discussions on the future development of cybercrime and community security strategies in Qatar and the wider Gulf region.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The literature on digital hate speech has expanded rapidly across legal, communication, and computational fields. Much of the international scholarship focuses on platform governance, automated detection, and the legal tension between regulation and freedom of expression (Alotaibi, 2024; Rahim & Hashim, 2023; Cambridge Journal of International and Comparative Law, 2024). Comparative debates often distinguish between protected offensive speech and unlawful incitement to discrimination, hostility, or violence, especially in the light of international human rights standards such as the Rabat Plan of Action and the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (OHCHR, 2013; United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention, 2019).

In Arab contexts, research remains less developed but has grown in response to rising concerns about online hostility, sectarian discourse, and digital harassment. Studies from Jordan and the wider region show that online hate speech can silence vulnerable communities, deepen social fragmentation, and reinforce exclusionary narratives in digital public spheres (ISD Global, 2026; Maharat Foundation & Democracy Reporting International, 2022). Arabic-language scholarship has also explored conceptual approaches to digital hatred, the representational forms of online hostility, and the role of

media in spreading or countering hate narratives (Aleph, 2023; Cherif, 2021).

The present article also draws on societal or community security literature. Research from the Gulf, especially studies from the United Arab Emirates, suggests that social media can influence public trust, perceptions of stability, and the broader security environment by amplifying misinformation, polarization, and hostile discourse (Al Nuaimi & Al Ketbi, 2021; Alshurideh & Alzoubi, 2022). From this perspective, digital hate speech is not merely an individual communicative harm; it can also be understood as a risk factor affecting social cohesion, public order, and national resilience.

At the theoretical level, this article adopts a security-governance lens combined with a rights-based perspective on digital regulation. The security-governance lens helps explain how states frame and regulate online content in the name of cohesion, order, and prevention of unrest, while the rights-based perspective highlights the need for precision, proportionality, and safeguards in restricting expression (Berkeley Law, 2021; Global Partners Digital, 2024). This dual framework is particularly useful for understanding the Qatari case, where cybercrime law and official discourse operate simultaneously as instruments of protection and as mechanisms with potentially restrictive implications for free expression.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative document and policy analysis design to examine law enforcement responses to digital hate speech in Qatar. Rather than collecting primary data from individuals, the research focuses on publicly available legal texts, official policy documents, and related statements that articulate how digital hate speech and cyber-enabled offenses are framed and addressed within the Qatari context. This approach is appropriate for exploring institutional understandings and practices as they are formally codified and communicated, and it avoids the ethical and practical complexities of conducting interviews with law enforcement personnel or affected individuals.

Data sources

The analysis is based on three main categories of documents. First, core legal instruments are examined, including the Cybercrime Prevention Law (Law No. 14 of 2014) and relevant provisions of the Qatari Penal Code that address online defamation, incitement, and threats to public order. Second, official policy documents, press releases, and public statements issued by Qatari authorities—particularly the Ministry of Interior and other security or judicial bodies—are analyzed to identify how digital hate speech is described, prioritized, and linked to community and national security in practice. Third, secondary reports and analyses produced by regional and international organizations, legal practitioners, and research institutions are incorporated to provide contextual understanding and critical perspectives on the implementation of cybercrime legislation and the regulation of online expression in Qatar and the wider Gulf region.

Data collection and selection

Documents were selected purposively based on their relevance to digital hate speech, cybercrime, and law enforcement practice. Legal texts were obtained from official legislative repositories, while policy documents and public statements were drawn from governmental websites and verified media outlets. Secondary reports were identified through academic databases and institutional repositories, focusing on publications that directly address cybercrime, online expression, or community security in Qatar or comparable Gulf states. The selection process aimed to ensure coverage of both the formal legal framework and its practical articulation in official discourse.

Data analysis

The collected documents were analyzed using qualitative content and thematic analysis. The analysis proceeded in several stages. First, all texts were read in full to gain an overall understanding of their scope, language, and key messages. Second, passages that referred to digital hate speech, incitement, social division, national or community security, and enforcement procedures were systematically coded. Third, codes were grouped into broader themes, such as legal definitions and categories of harmful digital expression, security rationales for regulating online speech, enforcement mechanisms and sanctions, preventive and educational approaches, and tensions between security and freedom of expression.

Where appropriate, elements of critical discourse analysis were integrated to examine how specific linguistic choices, metaphors, and narrative structures construct digital hate speech as a security threat and legitimize particular enforcement strategies. This combination of content- and discourse-oriented analysis allowed the study to move beyond a descriptive summary of legal provisions and to highlight underlying assumptions, priorities, and power relations embedded in official texts.

Ethical considerations

Because the study relies exclusively on publicly available legal and policy documents and does not involve human participants, it raises minimal ethical risk. Nevertheless, the analysis is guided by principles of research integrity and fairness. Interpretations of legal and policy texts seek to remain faithful to their content while acknowledging possible alternative readings. Secondary reports are cited transparently, and care is taken not to overstate claims or attribute motives that are not explicitly supported by the documents themselves.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Legal Definitions and Categories of Harmful Digital Expression

A central finding of this study is that Qatari law does not explicitly use the term digital hate speech as a standalone legal category. Instead, the regulatory framework relies on a set of overlapping legal concepts—such as insult, defamation, spreading false news, incitement to hatred, disturbing public order, and undermining national unity—to capture forms of harmful online expression (State of Qatar, 2014; Al-Rawashdah, 2018; Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2023). This means that harmful digital communication is addressed not through a narrow speech-specific definition, but through a broader legal logic that treats certain forms of online content as threats to public

order, social peace, or state legitimacy (State of Qatar, 2014; Berkeley Law, 2021).

The Cybercrime Prevention Law (Law No. 14 of 2014) provides the main statutory basis for regulating unlawful online expression in Qatar. Its provisions criminalize the use of websites, information systems, or digital networks to publish or disseminate content that violates social values, infringes privacy, threatens public order, or harms the state and its institutions (State of Qatar, 2014). In the official legal text, the law does not define hate speech in the doctrinal sense commonly used in international literature; rather, it treats harmful expression through broader offense categories that can be activated when online messages are understood to provoke hostility, discord, or instability (State of Qatar, 2014; Tamimi & Co., 2014).

This legal structure is reinforced by interpretive and enforcement-oriented discourse surrounding the law. Legal commentary on the Qatari cybercrime framework notes that the law imposes sanctions for a wide range of internet-based conduct, including content offenses committed through online platforms, and that these offenses may attract custodial penalties and fines depending on the seriousness of the act (Tamimi & Co., 2014; Al-Rawashdah, 2018). In practical terms, this gives law enforcement and prosecutors a relatively broad legal foundation to respond to expressions that may not be labeled expressly as “hate speech” but are considered harmful because they insult groups, encourage antagonism, or contribute to social fragmentation (Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2023; Berkeley Law, 2021).

A notable aspect of the Qatari framework is that the boundary between individual harm and collective harm is often blurred in official and legal discourse. Online insult and defamation may be treated not merely as interpersonal offenses, but also as acts capable of escalating into wider threats to social cohesion when they involve public dissemination, communal targeting, or inflammatory language (State of Qatar, 2014; Doha News, 2016; The Peninsula, 2024). This is especially important in the context of digital hate speech, where hostility directed at individuals may simultaneously function as hostility toward broader identity-based groups. As a result, the regulatory logic moves beyond protecting personal reputation alone and extends toward preserving social harmony and preventing discord within society (The Peninsula, 2024; Doha News, 2015).

Official public warnings further clarify how these legal categories are operationalized. Qatari authorities have repeatedly emphasized that online comments, posts, or messages that insult others, provoke division, or incite hatred may constitute criminal conduct even when users perceive them as jokes, personal opinions, or ordinary online exchanges (Doha News, 2016; SafeSpace Qatar, 2021). In July 2024, for example, authorities announced the arrest of four individuals and their referral to the Public Prosecution for “inciting hatred and discord,” indicating that the state treats such digital conduct as sufficiently serious to warrant formal criminal intervention (The Peninsula, 2024). These official statements suggest that harmful digital expression is not evaluated solely by its linguistic content, but also by its perceived social effect—especially its capacity to trigger

public tension, erode trust, or threaten communal stability (Doha News, 2015; Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2023). From an analytical perspective, the absence of a precise statutory definition of digital hate speech produces both flexibility and ambiguity. On one hand, broad legal categories allow authorities to respond to evolving forms of harmful online communication, including new expressions of hostility that may not fit older legal terminology (State of Qatar, 2014; Tamimi & Co., 2014). On the other hand, this breadth can make it difficult to distinguish clearly between unlawful hate-inciting content and other controversial or offensive speech, thereby increasing the discretionary space available to enforcement agencies and courts (Ben Hassine, 2016; Berkeley Law, 2021; Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2023). This ambiguity is significant because it shapes how practitioners classify online expression and determine when a digital communication becomes a punishable offense rather than a protected, though objectionable, form of speech.

Overall, the findings indicate that harmful digital expression in Qatar is conceptualized primarily through a security-and-order framework rather than through a narrowly codified hate speech framework. The legal and official discourse surrounding cybercrime emphasizes protection of public order, national unity, social values, and state authority, and it is within this broader frame that speech resembling digital hate speech is identified and regulated (State of Qatar, 2014; Berkeley Law, 2021; Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2023). This finding is important because it explains why law enforcement responses to digital hate speech in Qatar are likely to be shaped less by the language of minority protection or anti-discrimination and more by the language of security, cohesion, and prevention of discord.

Theme 2: Security Rationales – Framing Digital Hate Speech as a Threat

Official discourse in Qatar consistently frames harmful digital expression, including content resembling digital hate speech, through the lens of security and social cohesion. Statements issued by the Ministry of Interior emphasize that online messages which “incite hatred and spread discord among members of the community” are not merely inappropriate, but constitute acts that threaten the fabric of society and its stability (The Peninsula, 2024). This language directly associates incitement and divisive digital speech with risks to community security and national stability, positioning law enforcement as a guardian of societal cohesion.

Beyond individual incidents, broader enforcement campaigns illustrate how digital content is linked to public order and national security concerns. In early 2026, Qatari authorities reported the arrest of 194 individuals of various nationalities for filming, circulating, and publishing misleading information and rumors related to a regional crisis, describing these actions as capable of “inciting public opinion” and violating official instructions (Qatar News Agency, 2026). The Ministry’s statement urged the public to obtain information only from official sources and warned that legal measures would be taken against anyone who records or disseminates unauthorized videos that could inflame public opinion (Qatar News Agency, 2026; Qatar Living,

2026). Although these cases are framed primarily in terms of misinformation and unauthorized recording rather than hate speech strictly defined, they reveal a broader security rationale in which online content that may generate fear, anger, or polarization is treated as a potential threat to public order and national security.

This security-centered framing is reinforced by educational and preventive materials directed at youth and the general public. SafeSpace Qatar explains freedom of speech in the digital era by highlighting both the right to express opinions and the consequences that may arise when online expression is misused, including legal liability and harm to social relations (SafeSpace Qatar, 2021). Such materials emphasize that the misuse of social media—through spreading rumors, insulting others, or posting inflammatory content—can have serious repercussions for individuals and communities, thereby integrating legal and ethical narratives into a unified security discourse.

Human rights organizations and monitoring groups have noted that authorities in Qatar frequently justify the prosecution of online activists by accusing them of sowing hate messages, inciting revolt, or insulting the country's authorities, even when the activists themselves claim that their posts were critical but non-hateful (European Centre for Democracy and Human Rights, 2025; Civicus Monitor, 2025). These cases illustrate how the concept of inciting hatred may be deployed within a broader security narrative that conflates the protection of state institutions and public trust with the suppression of perceived hostile or destabilizing speech.

From a critical perspective, this security rationale serves several functions. It legitimizes robust law enforcement intervention against digital content by framing such intervention as necessary to protect community cohesion and national stability, rather than as censorship. It also shifts the focus of regulation from specific protected groups to the abstract “fabric of society” and “public opinion,” which can make enforcement appear more neutral and collective in intent (SafeSpace Qatar, 2021; Gulf Centre for Human Rights, 2023). However, broad uses of terms like hatred, discord, and public concern can blur the distinction between genuinely dangerous hate speech and legitimate, if critical, online expression (Ben Hassine, 2016; Berkeley Law, 2021).

Overall, the findings show that in Qatar the primary rationale for regulating digital hate speech and related harmful expressions is rooted in security considerations—protecting social cohesion, preventing the spread of discord, and preserving trust in state institutions. Harmful digital content is framed less as a matter of individual rights violations or discrimination, and more as a risk to collective stability and national security. This security-oriented framing plays a decisive role in shaping law enforcement responses and underpins the broad enforcement actions observed in recent years.

Theme 3: Enforcement Mechanisms and Sanctions in Practice

The Qatari framework for addressing harmful digital expression, including conduct that resembles digital hate speech, relies on a combination of legally prescribed sanctions and expanding enforcement practices in the cyber domain. The Cybercrime Prevention Law sets out

detailed provisions on content crimes, including publishing or disseminating material through information networks that violates public morals, infringes privacy, or undermines public order and state interests (State of Qatar, 2014; Communications Regulatory Authority, 2014). These provisions are backed by graduated penalties that range from fines to custodial sentences, depending on the nature and severity of the offense.

Recent legislative developments have further clarified and strengthened specific enforcement mechanisms, particularly in relation to privacy and unauthorized recording. In 2025, Qatar introduced Law No. 11 of 2025 amending the Cybercrime Prevention Law by adding Article 8 bis, which criminalizes infringing upon individuals' privacy by publishing or circulating images or video clips of them in public places without consent through information networks or other information technology (State of Qatar, 2025; The Peninsula, 2025). The amendment provides for imprisonment of up to one year, a fine of up to 100,000 Qatari Riyals, or both, thereby giving law enforcement and prosecutors a clear tool to address the circulation of unauthorized visual content that can provoke public anger or expose individuals to harm.

Enforcement practices observed in recent years demonstrate how these legal tools are applied in practice. In March 2026, the Ministry of Interior announced that the Economic and Cyber Crimes Combating Department had arrested 194 individuals of various nationalities for filming and circulating video clips and publishing misleading information and rumors that incite public opinion and violate instructions issued by relevant authorities (Qatar News Agency, 2026). Similar enforcement actions resulted in large-scale arrests for disseminating misleading information online during the same period, highlighting the intensity of law enforcement interventions in the digital sphere (Times of Israel, 2026; News of Bahrain, 2026).

In addition to large-scale campaigns, targeted arrests and prosecutions illustrate how law enforcement responds to content explicitly associated with hatred and discord. In July 2024, Qatari authorities reported the arrest of four individuals for inciting hatred and spreading discord, with the Ministry of Interior stating that such acts are considered serious offenses under the cybercrime and penal laws and that violators will be referred to the Public Prosecution (The Peninsula, 2024). Other cases involve arrests for insulting state institutions or spreading false information about public affairs, with authorities citing both the Cybercrime Prevention Law and general penal provisions on defamation and incitement (Gulf News, 2026; Qatar News Agency, 2026).

Institutionally, the Cybercrime Combating Unit within the Ministry of Interior plays a central role in investigating digital offenses, supported by the Public Prosecution and, where relevant, international cooperation mechanisms outlined in the cybercrime law (State of Qatar, 2014; International Labour Organization, 2014). Internet service providers are required to retain subscriber information for specified periods and to comply with requests from competent authorities, including blocking websites or content when ordered, with substantial fines for non-compliance (The Peninsula, 2014). These obligations

create a technical and procedural infrastructure that facilitates enforcement actions, from evidence collection to takedown orders, thereby reinforcing the capacity of law enforcement to respond quickly to harmful digital expression.

Taken together, these legal provisions and enforcement practices demonstrate a robust and increasingly proactive approach to regulating online content in Qatar. Sanctions are tailored not only to traditional cybercrimes such as hacking and fraud, but also to content-related offenses, privacy violations, and the spread of misleading or inflammatory information (State of Qatar, 2014; State of Qatar, 2025). Enforcement mechanisms rely on a combination of criminal penalties, administrative measures, cooperation with service providers, and public warnings, which collectively signal a strong deterrent stance toward behaviors considered harmful to public order and community security.

Theme 4: Balancing Security and Freedom of Expression – Gaps and Tensions

The security-oriented approach to regulating harmful digital expression in Qatar, while aimed at protecting community cohesion and national stability, has generated significant debate about its implications for freedom of expression and press freedom. Human rights reports and legal analyses argue that the broad and sometimes vague language of the Cybercrime Prevention Law allows authorities considerable discretion in deciding what constitutes false news, harmful content, or incitement, thereby creating a risk that legitimate critical speech may be criminalized alongside genuinely dangerous hate speech (Ben Hassine, 2016; Berkeley Law, 2021; IFEX, 2014).

Domestic and international media freedom organizations have repeatedly expressed concern that these provisions, while presented as tools to combat cybercrime and protect social values, may have serious consequences for press freedom and chill public discourse in Qatar (Doha News, 2014; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2025). Criticism has focused particularly on articles that criminalize publishing false or misleading information and those that prohibit the publication of images or videos of individuals in public places without consent, as these rules could be used to prosecute journalists and citizen reporters for documenting events of public interest (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2025; IFEX, 2014).

Broader regional assessments indicate that Qatar is part of a wider Gulf trend in which cybercrime and speech-related laws have been used to intensify restrictions on online expression during periods of political or security tension. Amnesty International reported in 2026 that Gulf states had arrested more than 1,000 people in connection with war-related expression, including for sharing content or expressing views on the conflict, highlighting a sweeping crackdown on online speech across the region (Amnesty International, 2026). The U.S. Department of State's human rights reporting on Qatar similarly noted concerns regarding the use of cybercrime legislation and other laws to restrict speech, including the prosecution of individuals for criticizing the government or discussing sensitive topics online (U.S. Department of State, 2025). International actors, including UN and EU representatives, have urged Qatar to reconsider aspects of

its cybercrime legislation, particularly provisions that criminalize false information and disrespect toward rulers or state institutions, on the grounds that they are vaguely worded and risk violating citizens' rights to free speech (Arab News, 2020). In their view, the difficulty lies not in the state's legitimate interest in countering incitement and hate speech, but in the absence of precise definitions and safeguards that would clearly distinguish unlawful incitement from robust public debate (IFEX, 2014; Berkeley Law, 2021). This lack of clarity can lead to self-censorship among journalists, activists, and ordinary users who fear that critical or controversial posts might be interpreted as harmful to state security or social order.

From an analytical standpoint, these gaps and tensions highlight a central challenge in Qatar's approach to digital hate speech: the same legal and enforcement mechanisms that enable authorities to act quickly against genuinely harmful incitement can also be used to suppress non-violent, rights-based expression when definitions remain broad and oversight limited (Ben Hassine, 2016; Berkeley Law, 2021; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2025). The findings suggest that achieving a more balanced framework will require clearer legal definitions of hate speech and harmful digital expression, stronger procedural safeguards to prevent misuse of cybercrime provisions, and more transparent criteria guiding law enforcement decisions.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight a distinctive configuration in Qatar's regulation of harmful digital expression and speech resembling digital hate speech. Rather than defining hate speech as a discrete legal category, the Qatari framework relies on broader offense definitions related to public order, national unity, privacy, and respect for state institutions. This approach reflects a security-and-cohesion paradigm in which digital content is assessed primarily through its potential impact on social stability and state legitimacy, rather than through a narrow focus on discrimination against specific groups (State of Qatar, 2014; The Peninsula, 2014; Berkeley Law, 2021). In comparative perspective, many jurisdictions have confronted similar tensions in regulating digital hate speech. Legal and policy analyses from Europe and other regions emphasize the need to balance protection against harmful speech with safeguards for freedom of expression, often relying on principles of necessity, proportionality, clarity, and legitimate aim (Hogan Lovells, 2020; Cambridge Journal of International and Comparative Law, 2024). International scholarship also notes that laws targeting hate speech and disinformation risk being misused when drafted in broad or vague terms, particularly in contexts where political authorities may have incentives to suppress criticism (Global Partners Digital, 2024; IJFMR, 2026). The Qatari case fits within this global pattern: while cybercrime and content provisions provide tools to address genuine harms, their breadth and interpretive flexibility raise concerns about potential overreach.

At the same time, the security rationales identified in Qatar's official discourse cannot be dismissed as purely rhetorical. Research on social media's impact on societal and national security, including studies from the United

Arab Emirates and the wider Gulf region, demonstrates that digital platforms can amplify polarization, spread incitement, and erode trust in institutions, thereby posing real risks to community security (Al Nuaimi & Al Ketbi, 2021; Alshurideh & Alzoubi, 2022). Studies on online hate speech in Arab contexts, such as Jordan, further show that hostile digital discourse can silence vulnerable groups and deepen social inequalities (ISD Global, 2026; Online Hate Speech in Jordan, 2025). From this standpoint, Qatar's emphasis on protecting the fabric of society and preventing the spread of discord reflects legitimate concerns about the destabilizing potential of digital hate speech and related harmful expression.

The challenge, therefore, lies not in the existence of regulation, but in its design and implementation. Comparative work on digital hate speech regulation argues that effective frameworks should clearly distinguish between content that directly and imminently incites violence or discrimination against protected groups, content that contributes to harmful polarization or misinformation but does not meet the threshold of incitement, and content that is merely offensive or critical yet falls within the scope of protected expression (Universitas, 2023; IJFMR, 2026). In Qatar, the current legal categories partially capture these distinctions but do so through general formulations that can be applied flexibly to diverse forms of speech (State of Qatar, 2014; Doha News, 2014).

The enforcement patterns documented suggest that Qatari law enforcement agencies have embraced a proactive, deterrence-oriented strategy in the digital domain (Qatar News Agency, 2026; The Peninsula, 2024; State of Qatar, 2025). While such strategies may succeed in curbing some forms of harmful content, comparative evidence indicates that heavy reliance on criminal sanctions can also lead to self-censorship, especially when users perceive enforcement criteria as opaque (Global Partners Digital, 2024; Freedom of expression, hate speech and regulation of social media in Uganda, 2021). For researchers and policymakers concerned with community security, this raises the question of whether long-term stability is best served by emphasizing punitive responses or by combining them with more transparent, participatory, and preventive measures.

Given these dynamics, the discussion points toward several directions for refining Qatar's approach to digital hate speech in ways that maintain security objectives while strengthening rights protections. First, legal definitions of harmful digital expression, particularly those used to address incitement and hate-related content, could be clarified through more precise statutory language, drawing on international standards and comparative best practices while remaining sensitive to local cultural and security conditions (Cambridge Journal of International and Comparative Law, 2024). Second, procedural safeguards—such as clearer guidelines for prosecutors, transparent criteria for law enforcement interventions, and mechanisms for independent review—could help ensure that cybercrime and content laws are applied consistently and proportionately (Berkeley Law, 2021; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2025). Third, complementary non-criminal measures, including digital literacy programs, positive counter-narratives, and

collaboration with platforms, could reduce reliance on criminal enforcement alone and foster a more resilient digital public sphere (SafeSpace Qatar, 2021; Maharat Foundation & Democracy Reporting International, 2022). In sum, the Qatari case underscores the broader global dilemma of regulating digital hate speech: the need to protect communities and states from genuine harm while preserving the openness and contestation that are essential to healthy public discourse. The themes identified in this study—broad legal definitions, security-centered rationales, robust enforcement mechanisms, and persistent tensions around freedom of expression—provide a structured basis for future research and policy debates on how to recalibrate this balance in Qatar and across the Gulf region.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This article has shown that Qatar's regulatory and enforcement approach to harmful digital expression—including content resembling digital hate speech—is structured around broad legal categories, strong security rationales, and increasingly proactive cybercrime enforcement. While these measures reflect genuine concerns about the impact of online incitement, misinformation, and hostile discourse on community and national security, they also create zones of ambiguity in which the boundaries between necessary protection and undue restriction of freedom of expression are not always clear (State of Qatar, 2014; Berkeley Law, 2021; Amnesty International, 2026). The qualitative analysis of legal texts, official statements, and secondary reports suggests that refining this balance is both a pressing policy challenge and an opportunity for Qatar to contribute to emerging global debates on digital hate speech regulation. Several recommendations follow from the findings. First, legal provisions addressing incitement, hate-related content, and misleading information should be reviewed and, where necessary, revised to include clearer, context-sensitive definitions and thresholds, in line with principles articulated in instruments such as the Rabat Plan of Action and the United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech (OHCHR, 2013; United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention, 2019). Second, procedural safeguards and oversight mechanisms—such as transparent guidelines for prosecutors and law enforcement, opportunities for judicial review, and accessible complaint channels—should be strengthened to ensure that cybercrime and content regulations are applied in a proportionate, non-discriminatory manner (Berkeley Law, 2021; Global Partners Digital, 2024). Third, non-criminal, preventive strategies should be expanded, including digital literacy initiatives, positive counter-narratives, and multi-stakeholder cooperation with platforms and civil society, in line with United Nations policy recommendations on addressing online hate speech (United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention, 2023).

By implementing these measures, Qatar could maintain its commitment to protecting community and national security while enhancing the protection of freedom of expression and the transparency of digital governance. For scholars and practitioners in security studies, law, and digital policy, the Qatari case illustrates the complexities

of regulating digital hate speech in highly securitized environments and underscores the importance of nuanced, rights-respecting frameworks that remain responsive to evolving threats.

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