



Maharat Social Media Monitoring - DRI Regional Report

About Maharat Foundation

Founded in 2006, Maharat is a women led, internationally accredited, Beirut based organization, working as a catalyst, defending and advancing the development of democratic societies governed by the values of freedom of expression and respect for human rights.

Maharat has been leading the media laws reform in Lebanon and acting as a watchdog organization monitoring the situation of freedom of expression, media freedom, safety of journalists and free flow of information in Lebanon and in the MENA Region.

Currently, Maharat's priority in Lebanon is to follow up on the upcoming May 2022 parliamentary elections through different activities that contribute in countering mis and disinformation, increasing factchecking opportunities and fostering voter's critical thinking to help them make informed choices. These activities include analyzing media and social media discourses and monitoring campaigns in terms of disinformation, propaganda, hate speech and VAWP, production of position papers and resources on electoral media, training journalists and alternative media platforms on professional coverage of the elections and factchecking. Moreover, Maharat is keeping pace with the election's democracy and freedom of opinion and expression issues, which are facing numerous challenges in terms of limiting civic space, and oppressing activists and journalists.

First: Local context

1. The media Landscape

Lebanon is considered one of the democratic countries in the Arab region in terms of freedom of press and freedom of expression. Although journalists and activists are subjected to numerous harassments related to the freedom of expression and information circulation, the Lebanese constitution guarantees pluralism and judicial provisions guarantee that journalists are not to be imprisoned. However, the use of social media by political activists exposes them to arbitrary prosecutions and the detention of temporary freedom under pretexts related to harming civil peace or blasphemy, or offending political and religious symbols, or disturbing Lebanon's relations with friendly countries.

On the other hand, well-known partisan groups seek to manipulate the democratic discourse on social media through electronic armies specialized in broadcasting political propaganda and media disinformation, as well as launching violent campaigns against political opponents or those who disagree with their opinion to the point of promoting hate speech.

In addition to the electronic armies of the traditional parties, online pages and groups that contest the ideas and proposals of the change movements in confronting the parties in power through the broadcasting of political propaganda and media disinformation, have appeared since the revolution of October 17, 2019.

2. The Lebanese scene with the launch of the preparation for the parliamentary elections

Amidst the impact of the severe economic and financial crisis that Lebanon is going through, the stage of preparations for the parliamentary elections began, in light of political tension between the pillars of the authority over several issues related to the timing of the elections, the participation of expatriates in the local elections, and the implementation of reforms related to the voting process in terms of adopting the magnetic card and polling stations "Central Mega Center". In addition to the political division and security tensions related to the issue of the investigation course into the port explosion, which lead to the disruption of the government's work and security incidents that resulted in deaths and injuries between areas in contact between Christian and Muslim residents. Despite this, the stage of registration of expatriates wishing to vote was completed at the end of 2021 and the door for candidacy for elections was opened at the beginning of 2022, as electoral campaigns actually started at the beginning of February, and the final electoral lists for candidates were announced at the beginning of April of 2022, less than two months away from the elections. Scheduled to take place on May 15, 2022 for residents, and May 6 and 8 for expatriates.

The records of candidates and lists showed enthusiasm to participate in the upcoming parliamentary elections, specifically among the youth category. The final number of candidates after the formation of the lists reached 718 candidates, about 30% of them are from the forces of change and political movements emerging after the October 17 revolution. The number of electoral lists reached 103 compared to 77 in 2018.

Political propaganda campaigns oscillated between statements questioning the authority's intentions to hold elections and political campaigns with the theme of Lebanon's neutrality from conflicts in the region, and the diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states as a result of statements by then-Information Minister George Kardahi criticizing the "futile war" in Yemen. Iranian interference in the internal affairs through the Lebanese Hezbollah, and counter-campaigns based on accusing a group of opposition candidates or those belonging to civil society and emerging parties of receiving financial support from embassies, specifically the US embassy in the service of foreign projects, and the development of this discourse to generalize that the goals of these emerging change movements serve the interests of the enemies and the matter of normalization with Israel, with the incitement and intimidation that this speech implies.

Social media plays a key role in political communication during electoral campaigns because it provides unlimited interactive means for political influence and political propaganda and for direct communication between the candidate and the voter.

On the other hand, it is easy to use social media as a tool to spread hate speech, false news, misleading information, or even influence voting trends in elections through the "facilitations"

provided by these platforms, including promoting unverified information, suppressing and intimidating voters, and deceiving voters through false or misleading affiliation, because it is possible to conceal the source, direction and objectives of propaganda.

Second: Objectives and Methodology of the Monitoring program

1. Objectives

The monitoring program launched by Maharat in cooperation with (DRI) during the electoral campaigns for the parliamentary elections scheduled to be held in Lebanon on May 15, 2022 aims to track political propaganda discourse and monitor hate speech and misleading political discourse to influence voters. Monitoring focuses on politicians' statements on party leaders and candidates' personal pages, false news and rumors that spread quickly through the pages of political influencers or those run by partisan supporters or what is known as "electronic armies", as well as tracking campaigns of manipulation on social media during the electoral campaign period.

2. Monitoring period

The period of monitoring and in-depth tracking for the purposes of issuing the first report extended from the first of February to the 31st of March.

3. Monitoring sample

The monitoring covered 155 actors, distributed as follows: 15 politicians from the first category, 107 candidates for the upcoming legislative elections, and 33 people who are influential on social media. The monitoring also included 47 pages and Facebook groups for the so-called "electronic armies" that are active in favor of political forces without revealing their identity.

4. Monitoring trends

• First trend

Monitoring the accounts and pages of political actors, including candidates and politicians, as well as the "electronic armies" pages and groups, through daily tracking of all statements and publications that are classified according to the monitoring and analysis mechanism below:

A- Daily monitoring of the misleading and violent political propaganda speech on any of the aforementioned pages and online accounts.

B- Classifying the misleading discourse used: The monitoring process includes various positions, fake and false news, and rumors circulated by political actors and influencers, and the pages of party supporters on social media. The following classification was adopted for its analysis:

- **Fake news:** It is fabricated news that has no basis in truth.

- **Misinformation:** It is news that misleads and distorts the facts, and it is incorrect or misleading information.
- **Rumors:** These are circulating information transmitted by a person who does not know or does not bother to check whether it is true and no effort is made to verify it before passing it on. It may be true, partially true, or it may be false.

C. Classification of violent speech:

- Hate speech: when there is an invitation or direct incitement to violence and discrimination based on religion, gender, race, or color...
- Violent speech: violent speech intended to provoke feelings of anger or violence.

- **Second trend**

Monitor campaigns and track positions based on the most controversial topics of the day, as election campaigns carry a number of controversial topics, thus each party seeks to use these topics according to different misleading narratives that serve its propaganda campaign with the aim of influencing voters and their electoral tendencies.

5. Adapting the toolkit to the specific monitoring strategy and methodology:

A wide range of tracking, monitoring and analysis tools have been adopted for advertising and manipulation campaigns.

The most prominent tools used and their purpose:

- Maharat Tracker program for daily tracking of political propaganda of politicians, candidates and influencers of the subject of the selected sample. One of its special features is the grouping of data based on keywords, facilitating the subsequent manual classification and analysis. It paves the way for a later stage of testing, which will constitute artificial intelligence an essential part of the classification and analysis process.
- The CrowdTangle program facilitates the process of monitoring and controlling the pages and groups of electronic armies on Facebook by preparing specific lists that allow tracking the discourse of political propaganda and disinformation, specifically in manipulated images and memes, as well as identifying the main source of manipulation and misinformation campaigns.
- Twitter's TweetDeck feature allows you to track the source of campaigns on Twitter when they are launched, as well as the most prominent hashtags used.

Open analysis and tracking tools:

- - VICINITAS, which provides a huge data collection on Twitter related to specific campaigns based on the use of campaign hashtags, keywords, or account addresses.

- Hoaxy- which allows identifying the structure, interconnectedness and influencers of networks.

Fake account verification tools:

- Like Botometer and Bot Sentinel
- These tools aim to take a human look at a computation and identify the characteristics that make them likely to be robots.

Third: The three main sections are the subject of the current study:

- Trends of political propaganda among influencers and "electronic armies".
- Campaigns to manipulate conversations on social media.
- Hate speech on social media platforms

5- Brief of the results:

The number of tweets and posts monitored during the months of February and March was as follows:

- 358 tweets and posts (on Twitter and Facebook) issued by candidates and politicians from traditional political forces.
- 146 tweets and publications (on Twitter and Facebook) issued by candidates and politicians from the emerging forces, making the total of tweets and publications issued by candidates and politicians 524. This number was distributed between the traditional political forces and the emerging political forces as follows: 402 tweets and publications for the first, and 120 for the second.
- 307 tweets and posts for the influencers being monitored, of which 255 are from influencers from traditional forces and 52 are from influencers from emerging forces.
- 1183 publications on Facebook pages issued by 47 electronic armies pages.

Monitoring the activities of candidates and politicians on social media platforms during February and March shows that their speech was primarily a propaganda and promotional speech aimed primarily at inflaming feelings and adopted general projections and accusations by more than 80%. This applies to traditional political forces as well as to emerging political forces, while the emerging powers were supposed to carry a reform project or at least a rational criticism against the forces that they seek to replace. The contents and tweets of the emerging powers were limited to about 3% of the topics of electoral programs and to 2.5% of solutions proposals.

The propaganda approach and arousing feelings dominated most of the contents observed in the positions of politicians, candidates and actors on social media, and it addressed three main trends:

corruption, elections, sovereignty and impartiality, which are often controversial topics in which competitors and actors compete by accusing each other with a discourse that stirs feelings and tries to influence voters by accusing the other party. The rational discourse that is based on practical suggestions and the issues that the country is suffering from, which the voters are waiting for someone to take responsibility for getting the country out of its crises, are absent.

What is striking is that the contents of the politicians' tweets and publications were devoid of any solution suggestions, as well as the absence of the electoral program, and this confirms the decline of the political discourse that was directed towards inciting feelings instead of proposing solutions to citizens' problems and turning to rational treatments. The "conspiracy theory" category also occupies a remarkable position, with a rate of approximately 8%, and it seeks to justify oneself and appear as a victim.

In the candidates' speech, the "electoral program" category carried a small percentage, close to 2%, as well as the "solutions" category. This percentage is considered very weak for an electoral candidate who is supposed to carry an electoral program and a vision of the problems at hand.

In observing the positions of the "electronic armies" of the political forces, it seems obvious that these "armies" go in the same direction, even if they are distinguished in their positions by defending the leader and trying to whitewash his page, as well as in the manner of sarcasm and spreading rumors, as they benefit from the fact that they operate in an unknown manner that allows them to by concealing her identity. Therefore, it stands in the first row in campaigns against opponents and releases false and misleading news, while such news was almost non-existent among politicians and candidates, as exposure to them would lose their positions, i.e. coincidence.

These "armies" played the role entrusted to them in attacking opponents through misleading and false news that appeared in the model of attacking Hezbollah MP Muhammad Raad and through hate speech in the campaign against the journalist Dalia Ahmed.

It can be asserted through this monitoring process that politicians, candidates and activists mainly use social media to serve their electoral battle through its promotional role based on arousing feelings, criticizing the opponent and justifying oneself, and absent rational discourse and reformist proposals.