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.

This chapter describes Maharat's work until March 2022 to follow up on the upcoming May 2022 parliamentary elections through different activities that contribute in countering mis and disinformation, increasing fact-checking opportunities and fostering voters' 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 fact-checking. 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. The analysis of the election and post-election periods will feature in the next regional report.

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 and classified as partly free according to the Freedom House report 2022. 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 activists expose them to arbitrary prosecutions and the detention of temporary freedom (refer to the case of Blogger and social media influencer Toufic Braidi) under pretexts related to harming civil peace or blasphemy, or offending political and religious symbols, or disturbing Lebanon's relations with friendly countries according to the article 23 (Defamation of the presidency) and article 25 (Criminalizing publications against religious sects and beliefs in the country).

From the media perspective, journalists are legally protected by the article 387 within defamation cases only if their act related to their framework is proven correct.

Across this context, well-known political militant groups seek to manipulate the democratic discourse on social media through what is known in the Lebanese context as "electronic armies" (defined below) aiming to spread 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.

> "Electronic Armies" as defined by the internet freedom advocates from Access Now "A group of people that assume false identities in order to participate in internet forums and social media to send — or suppress — a specific message."

In addition to the "electronic armies" affiliated with the traditional political parties, online pages and groups were created since the October 17th revolution, 2019 that reflected the ideas and proposals of the change movements in confronting the systems in power through the dissemination of political propaganda and media disinformation.

Figure 1: Example of disinformation in a "meme" format that was circulated by multiple pro-revolution pages.

Figure 2: Example of disinformation that was circulated by traditional political militant pages accusing opponent parties of financing electronic platforms to manipulate the currency exchange rate.

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 led 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 youth. The final number of candidates after the formation of the lists reached 718 candidates, about 65% 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 campaigning discourses oscillated between statements questioning the authority's intentions to hold elections and political campaigns within the theme of <u>Lebanon's neutrality (backed by religious figures)</u> in different scenarios: From conflicts in the region, and the diplomatic crisis with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states as a result of political statements by the Minister of Information Georges Kordahi, to the Iranian interference in the internal Lebanese <u>affairs</u> through Hezbollah.

Indeed, Lebanon's neutrality was a central topic since some political groups based their campaigns on accusing opposition candidates or those belonging to <u>civil society and emerging political movements of receiving financial support from embassies</u>, specifically the US embassy in the service of foreign projects. According to this discourse, these emerging movements serve international interests and <u>aim to normalize the relationship between Lebanon and Israel</u>. Furthermore, the emergence of social and economic crises, as well as the inflation of local currency, paved the way for political discourses centered on state corruption, the recovery of stolen assets, and forensic audits of public and governmental financial records used in political campaigns.

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, aimed to monitor hate speech and misleading political discourse aiming to influence voters on social media. Monitoring focused on politicians' statements on party leaders and candidates' personal pages, false news and rumors that spread through the pages of political influencers or those run by partisan supporters or what is known as "Electronic armies", as well as 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 (retrieved from Facebook and Twitter)**

The monitoring covered 155 actors based on Twitter as the primary monitored platform and Facebook as the secondary unit of monitoring (only for active users on this platform), and distributed as follows:(Annex 1)

-15 first rank politicians from among the elite in their respective parties, as well as with positions and activists on social media.

-107 candidates for the parliamentary elections and a group of candidates active on social media and representing the various traditional and "revolutionary" party movements.

-33 people (male and female journalists and influencers affiliated to specific political parties and coalitions) specifically those with a high number of followers, whom have high engagement and interactions with the public and reflect the views of the various political actors.

-47 pages and Facebook groups for the "electronic armies" that have direct endorsement of a political group, daily posting and interaction with posts in addition to anonymous digital activity in favor of political forces.

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

Maharat's monitoring team has been using a wide range of tracking, monitoring and analysis tools to track and counter 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 : To detect bot behaviors.

5. Monitoring streams
- **First Stream: Monitoring the accounts of politicians and candidates of the Parliament elections**

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 following classification was adopted for its analysis:

- **Disinformation:** 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.
- **Rumours**: These are circulating unverified information transmitted, that might 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 colour...

- Violent speech: violent speech intended to provoke feelings of anger or violence.

- **Second Stream: Monitoring campaigns and tracking positions** based on the most controversial topics of the day, as election campaigns carry several 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.

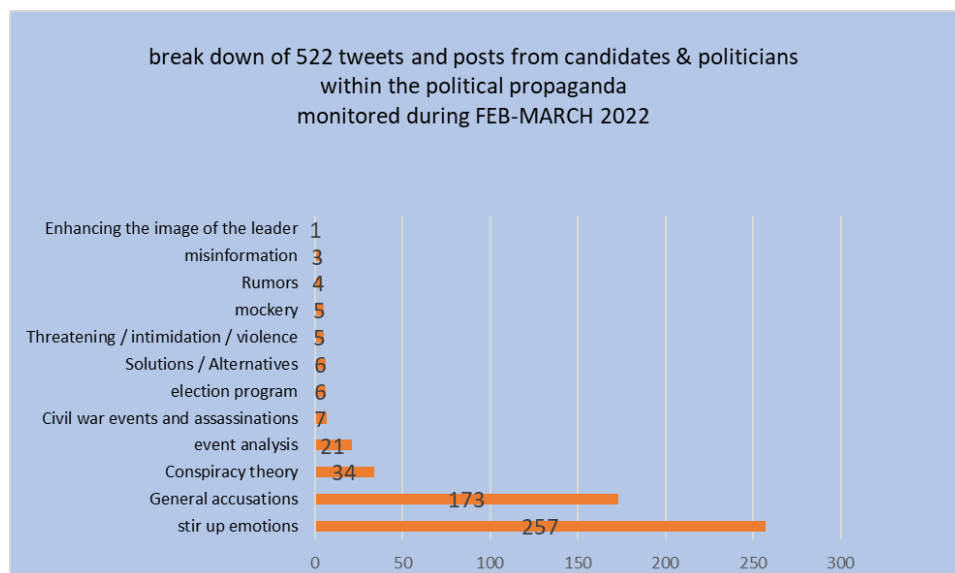| Date	#hashtags	New /Old	Party	Target	Event
24 Feb 11:30	#Civil-Lebanon	New	Free Patriotic Movement	Public Opinion	Political campaign launched by FPM as an invitation to the "Civil Lebanon" conference
6 mar - 10:34 pm	#Sanyoura-got-off-Beirut	New	Public Opinion	Fouad Sanyoura	Reactions upon rumors on Sanyoura's lead and running for elections in Beirut.
7 mar - 5:26 pm	#ISIS_14_March	New	Hezbollah	Revolution	Reactions against removing the pictures of Qassem Souleimani in the Book forum
11 mar 2:05 pm	#The_lying_revolution	New	Free Patriotic Movement	Revolution	Gebran Bassil short video attacking and accusing the revolution
24 mar 1:41am	#The_terrorist_Hezbollah	Old	Lebanese Forces	Hezbollah	President Aoun visit to the Vatican and credits given to Hezbollah presence in Lebanon

Third- Summary of the monitoring results of electoral campaigning period on Twitter and Facebook (February – March):

Social media has a key role in political communication during electoral campaigns specifically that it provides unlimited interactive means for political influence, propaganda and for direct misleading communication between the candidate and the voter. By extension, the use of such social platforms facilitate the spread of hate speech, false news, misleading information, or even influence voting streams in elections through the "services" provided by these platforms, including promoting unverified information, suppressing, and intimidating voters, and deceiving voters through false or misleading affiliation.

1- Main findings regarding political propaganda among influencers and "electronic armies".

The following data indicates the number of tweets and posts monitored during the months of February and March:
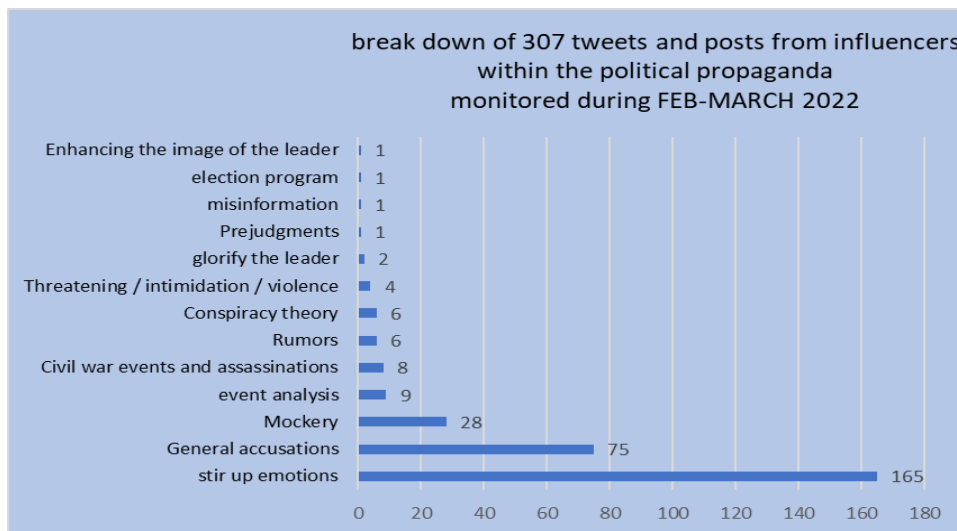
- The total number of tweets and texts published by 122 candidates and politicians who are in the monitoring sample in this study during the months of February and March reached 522 tweets and publications. This number was distributed between the traditional political forces and the emerging political forces as follows: 402 tweets and posts for the first, and 120 for the second.

break down of 522 tweets and posts from candidates & politicians within the political propaganda monitored during FEB-MARCH 2022

Category	Value
Enhancing the image of the leader	1
misinformation	3
Rumors	4
mockery	5
Threatening / intimidation / violence	5
Solutions / Alternatives	6
election program	6
Civil war events and assassinations	7
event analysis	21
Conspiracy theory	34
General accusations	173
stir up emotions	257

- The most discussed topic by the monitored candidates and politicians highlighted corruption primarily while refugees' topic was ranked as the last topic of interest in their discourses. (table 1 below)

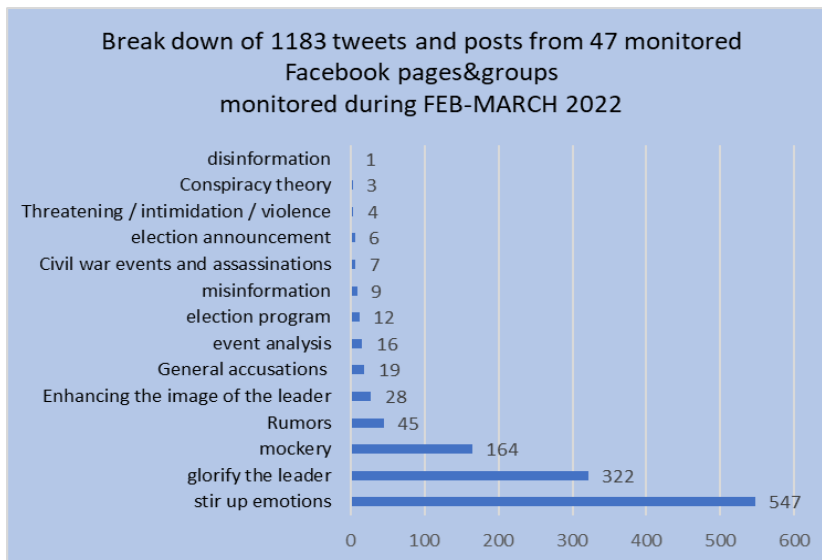|	
Corruption	180
Campaigns/elections	79
Impartiality/sovereignty	73
Political system	28
Money and monetary policy	27
Civil war and painful events	26
Justice and human rights	23
Security	18
Beirut blast	18
Energy	13
Performance criticism	12
Diaspora	10
International sanctions	8
Development	4
Refugees	3

- 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.

break down of 307 tweets and posts from influencers within the political propaganda monitored during FEB-MARCH 2022

Enhancing the image of the leader	1
election program	1
misinformation	1
Prejudgments	1
glorify the leader	2
Threatening / intimidation / violence	4
Conspiracy theory	6
Rumors	6
Civil war events and assassinations	8
event analysis	9
Mockery	28
General accusations	75
stir up emotions	165

- Most discussed topics by the monitored influencers focused also more on corruption rather than on the refugees' themes. (table 2 below)

Corruption	109
Impartiality/sovereignty	60
Campaigns/elections	30
Civil war and painful events	26
Money and monetary policy	24
Performance criticism	15
Justice and human rights	12
Political system	7
Security	6
Energy	5
Beirut blast	5
International sanctions	3
Diaspora	3
Subordination to the leader	1
Refugees	1

- 1183 posts on Facebook pages issued by 47 pages publishing content promoting certain political parties.

Break down of 1183 tweets and posts from 47 monitored Facebook pages&groups monitored during FEB-MARCH 2022

Early observations of monitoring the activities of candidates and politicians on Twitter and Facebook platforms during February and March show that their speech was primarily propaganda and promotional speech aimed mostly at stirring up feelings and adopted general projections and accusations by more than 80%. This applies to traditional political forces as well as to emerging political movements, while the emerging powers were expected to carry a reform project and/or 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.

It is worth noting that the content of politicians' tweets and posts was devoid of solution and reform suggestions, as well as any electoral program, resulting in a political discourse focused on inciting emotions rather than proposing rational solutions to citizens' problems.

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 minimal within electoral preparation and campaigning.

Examining the positions of the political forces' "electronic armies", it is clear that, despite their political affiliations, these coordinated groups have the same discursive direction in defending their leader and attempting to enhance their reputation, as well as in using sarcasm and spreading rumors, as they benefit from the fact that they operate anonymously.

2- Main findings regarding campaigns aiming to manipulate conversations on social media.

The percentage of manipulated news broadcasted by these accounts has reached 4.64% out of the 1183 publications, the majority of which are rumors.
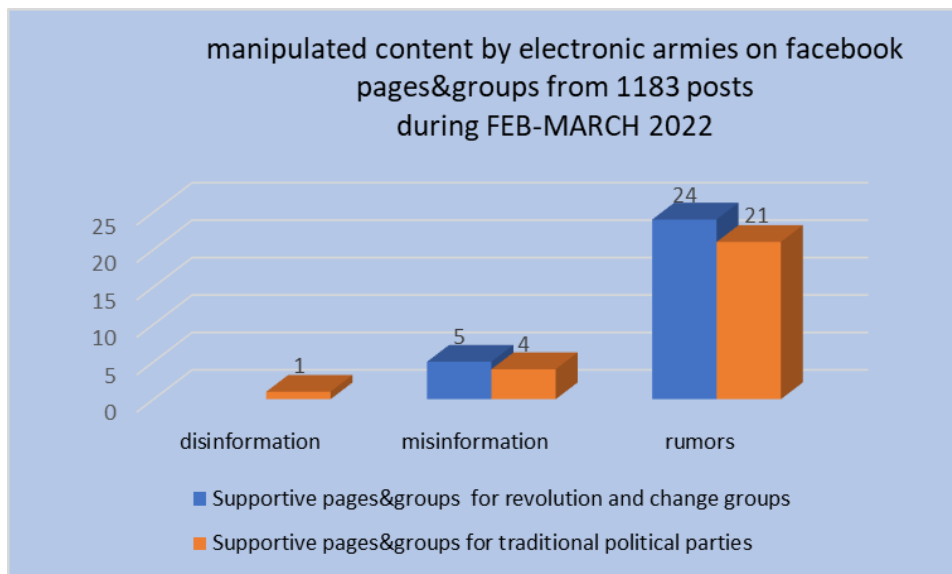
Manipulation campaigns were not limited to misleading news and propaganda campaigns, but this type of manipulation was used in campaigns aimed at defamation and discrediting political opponents.

These campaigns do not always appear as a trend on social media, as Maharat monitoring Team monitored a programmed manipulation campaign against a journalist and political activist close to one of the political parties.

The most prominent characteristics of the manipulation campaign mentioned above:

-This campaign was launched on February 17, 2022

- 15 newly created accounts were used in this campaign in December 2021 and were activated on January 11th.

-All used accounts have zero followers and zero following.

- Familiar pictures and names were used for Profiles accounts to make them seem real

-The user name includes non-sequential and random numbers

- He used a defamatory hashtag indicating that this journalist is promoting politicians who pay him money.

- The same tweet was published at the same time by several accounts and in the same order

- Through the Botometer, it was found that all of these accounts are bots

3- Main findings regarding hate speech campaign around the election on social media platforms:

Journalist Dalia Ahmed was subjected to a racist campaign on social media because of her criticism of Lebanese politicians on her television program, including President Michel Aoun and Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, Calling them crocodiles.

Among the violent expressions and images used in the campaign against Dalia Ahmed:

- Ethiopian black,

- black dog

- Sudanese bastard

- Dalia_Ahmed is a prostitute,

-Pimp and a thug's wife who works for a sucker,

- The damned black witch

Another campaign was launched in support of her on social media, denouncing racist expressions and supporting her right to expression.