

A Social Media Analysis **of the Public Debate around** **Tarek Bitar's Investigation**

A report by
Dr. Nasri Messarra



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THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

Author

Dr. **Nasri Messarra** is an associate professor at Saint-Joseph University of Beirut (Lebanon). He teaches digital marketing strategies and social networks analysis. He heads the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and directs the University's Information and Communication master's program. He also works as senior expert and consultant on policy, election and security sector reform projects for local and international organizations, including the European Union, the United Nations Development Program, and Siren Associates among others.



THE SAMIR KASSIR FOUNDATION

The Samir Kassir Foundation is a Lebanese non-profit organization officially established in Beirut under registry number 30/A.D. on February 1, 2006. It is named after Samir Kassir, a Lebanese journalist assassinated in Beirut on June 2, 2005. It aims to spread democratic culture in Lebanon and the Arab world, encourage new talents in journalism, and build the movement for a cultural, democratic, and secular renewal. The Foundation strives to defend freedom of media and culture through its SKeyes Center for Media and Cultural Freedom, which, since its establishment in 2008, has become the largest center monitoring violations against journalists and artists in the Arab Levant, as well as a reference for research on journalism and for training media professionals and enhancing their skills.

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Introduction and Background

On February 20, 2021, the Lebanese Supreme Judicial Council appointed judge Tarek Bitar to replace judge Fadi Sawan in the investigation of the explosion in the Beirut Port on August 4, 2020.

In the course of his investigation, judge Tarek Bitar summoned top politicians for questioning, including former Prime Minister Hassan Diab, MPs and former ministers Nohad Machnouk, Ali Hassan Khalil, and Ghazi Zeaiter, former minister Youssef Fenianos, as well as a number of high security officials.

Backed by their respective political parties or claiming they enjoy parliamentary or administrative immunity, most of these officials did not show up to any of the summonses, which led judge Bitar to issue an arrest warrant against former Finance minister and senior Amal Movement lawmaker, Ali Hassan Khalil, who lashed out against the judge, threatening of a “political escalation” if the course of the investigation “was not rectified.”

On October 14, 2021, supporters of Amal and Hezbollah organized a protest near the ministry of Justice in Beirut calling for the dismissal of the judge. The protest degenerated into deadly fights, involving automatic weapons and rocket launchers when demonstrators moved close to Ain el Remmaneh, a Christian-majority neighborhood with a strong symbolic value as it was one of the main frontlines during the 1975-1990 civil war in the fights that opposed Christian and Palestinian militias, the former’s Lebanese allies, and the Syrian army.

This study analyses 38,500 tweets, replies, and retweets, from 17,771 users, from October 12 to 16, 2021, containing one of the following words combinations:

- البيطار and طارق (Tarek & el Bitar)
- بيطار and طارق (Tarek & Bitar)
- بيطار and قاضي (Bitar & judge)
- Tarek and Bitar
- بيطار and مرفأ (Bitar & port)
- قاضي and مرفأ (judge & port)

The data was purchased from trackmyhashtag and analyzed using Microsoft Access, Microsoft Power BI, and NodeXL.¹

1- <https://www.smrfoundation.org/nodexl/>

Initial Observations: The Meta-data

The Network's Geographic Spread

At first glance, two pieces of information catch our attention. The first is the number and influence power of non-Lebanese discussion leaders. While the “location” indication is a user input and can be imprecise or fake, some accounts speak for themselves, either through the dialect used, the photos published including the profile picture, or the owners themselves (a public figure in a foreign country with a verified account).

Due to the fact that the location is manually entered by the user and may contain any type of information in lieu of the “location” of the user, like a city or a country, a nickname (“sunshine state”), a political statement (“the city of the resistance”), a joke (“the worst place on earth”, “hell,” “here”), undecipherable phrases, or an empty string (no entry), we had to process the locations manually to link each entry with a country's name. We used both Google Search and Google Translate to find the right country based on cities' names or to translate cities written in Chinese, Japanese, or Hebrew characters.

In the few cases where the users entered more than one location including Lebanon or a city in Lebanon in the set (“Beirut, Florida, Dubai”), we picked Lebanon, considering that this could be a Lebanese emigrant. Otherwise, we picked the first location in the list.

We cannot, however, verify the accuracy of the information since it is user-generated; but we believe it is precise enough to be used as an indicator for extra-territorial involvement in the discussion.

We were able to pinpoint the country of 7,617 users while the other 10,154 users did not type their location or used irrelevant or ambiguous information.

The chart below shows the number of users by country.

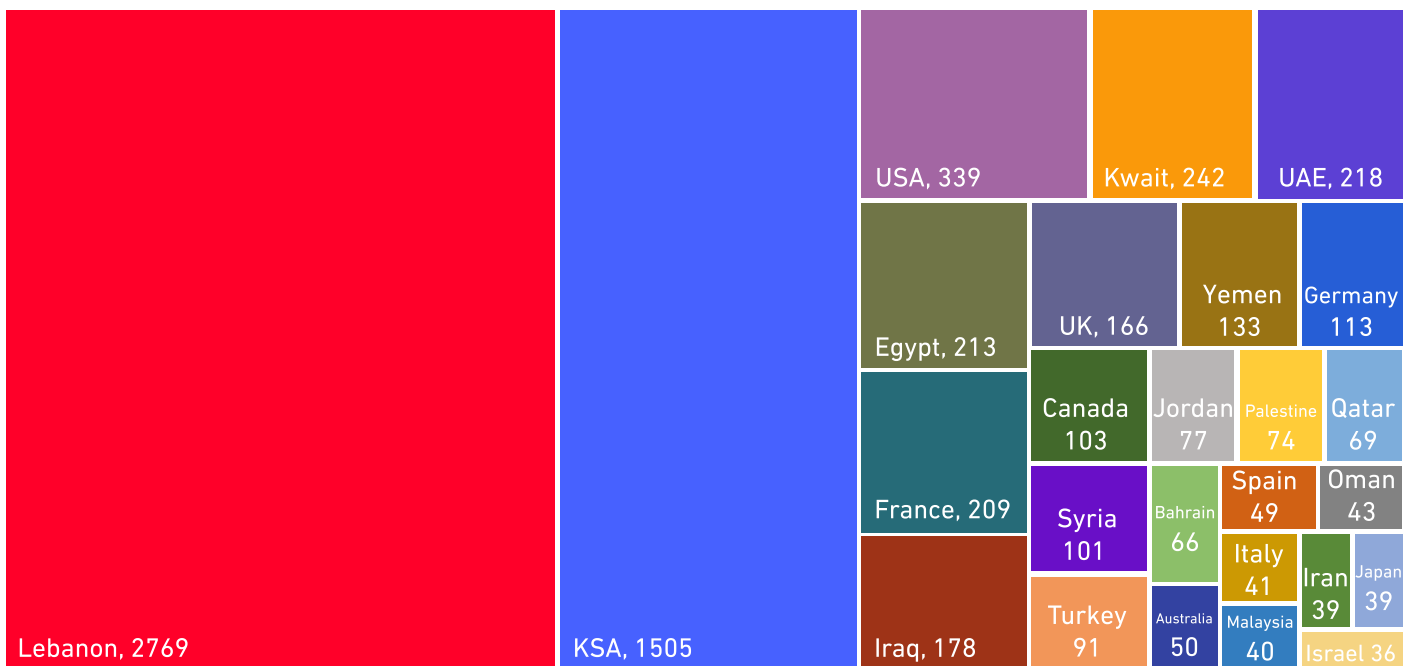


Fig.1: Breakdown of the network per user's location

It is worth mentioning that Saudi Arabia comes second after Lebanon, with 1,505 users, and that Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Iraq, Yemen, and Iran are also present but in smaller numbers.

Also, 74 accounts joined the conversation from Palestine and 36 set their location to “Israel” or wrote the location in Hebrew.

Professional Publishing Tools

Our second observation is linked to the tools used. While regular users would use their smartphone or their desktop to tweet, professional users or “digital armies” would use other digital tools to monitor, tweet, and schedule tweets for delayed automatic publishing.

We found, for instance, that 325 accounts used TweetDeck, a free monitoring and publishing tool developed by Twitter that allows users to monitor several accounts, lists, hashtags, or searches in real-time and publish instantly from one or more accounts.

Also, 129 accounts tweeted using Twitter Media Studio, a platform to manage, measure, and monetize Twitter content.

Other tools include Tweetbot, Springlr, direct publishing from WordPress, Hootsuite inc., Publr.io, SocialFlo, as well as proprietary tools for media outlets (Al-Arabiya Social Media Poster, Akhbaralyawm.com, Autopost for CH23, WhiteBeard News Suite, AnbaaOnline, etc.).

The chart below shows the percentage of tweets and interactions (retweets, replies) using professional tools against the ones with regular tools (smartphones, tablets, desktops). Based on our analysis, 3.13% of tweets (1,205 tweets) were published using a professional tool.

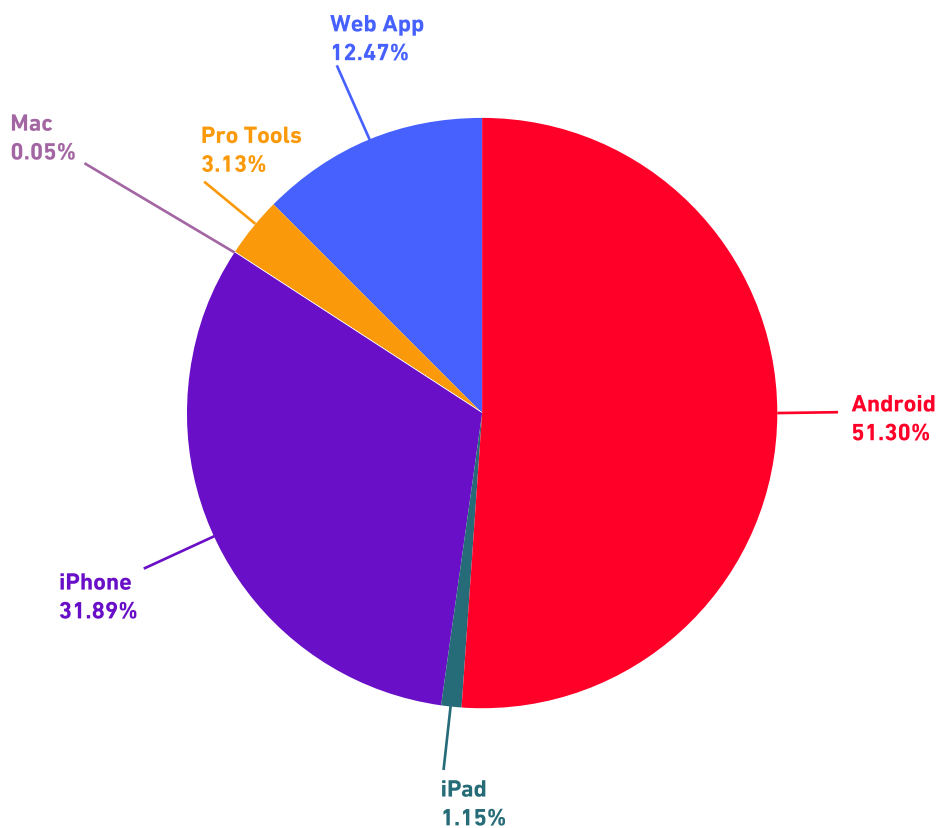


Fig.2: Breakdown of the network per publishing tool

Top Influencers

The top influencer of the discussion with 1,567 active interactions (retweets, replies) is Hussein al Ghawi (@halgawi), a Saudi journalist living in Riyadh, KSA (based on his Twitter profile). His post, dated October 14, mentions the casualties following Amal and Hezbollah's demonstration, the arrest warrant against MP and former minister Ali Hassan Khalil, and the fact that the former is under US sanctions.



This account is directly followed, as a top influencer with 993 active interactions, by Al Mayadeen (@AlMayadeenNews), a pan-Arab satellite television channel. Al Mayadeen has several tweets published on October 15, the most retweeted being a video post with the sister of one of the victims of the clashes, Ms. Mariam Farhat, saying that "we're sad, of course, but the most important thing for us is not to sadden Sayyed Hassan [Nasrallah]. We will not give up on the resistance even if we die from hunger. We're all under the command of the Sayyed's turban."



The second post, with fewer interactions, relays a declaration from Hashem Safieddine, head of Hezbollah's executive council, accusing the Lebanese Forces party of the fights in Ain el Remmaneh and of trying to ignite a new civil war.



In third position, comes Firas Hatoum (@ferashatoum), an investigative journalist, involved with Al Jadeed television and the director of a production house. Mr. Hatoum exposes the contradictions in Hassan Nasrallah's discourse by comparing the inconsistent declarations in relation to judge Bitar and his predecessor. Nasrallah accused Bitar's predecessor, judge Fadi Sawan, of seeking an artificial political and sectarian balance in his list of suspects, then accused Bitar of choosing all his suspects from the same political camp.



The fourth influencer in our dataset is another Saudi journalist, Riyad al Wadaan (r_alwadaan), accusing Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah of threatening Judge Bitar and not accepting the Lebanese judiciary system. He compared Lebanon's situation to a "farce" because of Nasrallah.



The fifth influencer, Hayvi Bouzo (@hayvibouzo), a Syrian-born American journalist of Kurdish descent and a television host and presenter, currently chief of the Washington, D.C. bureau of Orient News, also accused Hezbollah and Amal of trying to end the port investigation if one of their members is called for questioning. She joined a picture alluding to Nasrallah's role in the port explosion.



In sixth position, comes Ghassan Saoud, a journalist known for his pro-Assad regime and pro-Hezbollah positions, casting doubt on the judge's approach, attacking a talk-show on MTV hosted by Marcel Ghanem for "fabricating false witnesses," and accusing Bitar of "joining the zajal band of Souhaid, Koteich, and

Geagea". Zajal being a traditional verbal duel between two or more poets. Nadim Koteich is a UAE-based commentator on Al-Arabiya known for his radical anti-Hezbollah position; Fares Souhaid is a former MP and a vocal anti-Hezbollah critic, and Samir Geagea is the leader of the Lebanese Forces.



It is worth mentioning that in seventh position was the Lebanese Presidency of the Republic's account (@LBpresidency), denying a claim by journalist Simon Abou Fadel that Bitar had informed President Michel Aoun, during a meeting, of his wish to stand down from the probe. The tweet went viral with 1,400+ likes, 97 comments and 337 retweets.



The Discussion Network

From a discussion network perspective, we find 540 different groups, most of which having less than 10 users.

In this analysis, we focus on the groups with more than 100 users.

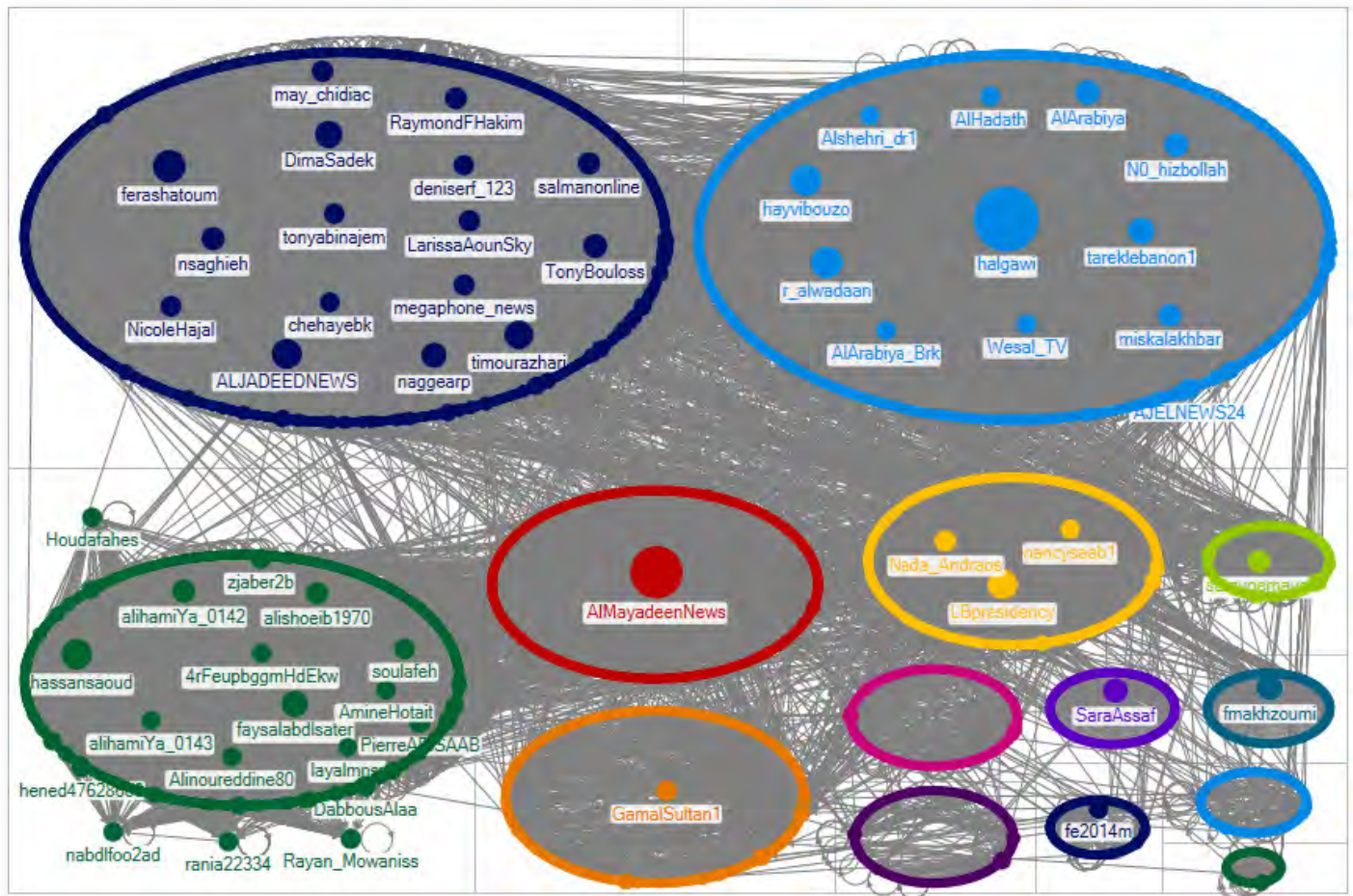


Fig.3: Clusters of the discussion network around Tarek Bitar

Group 1

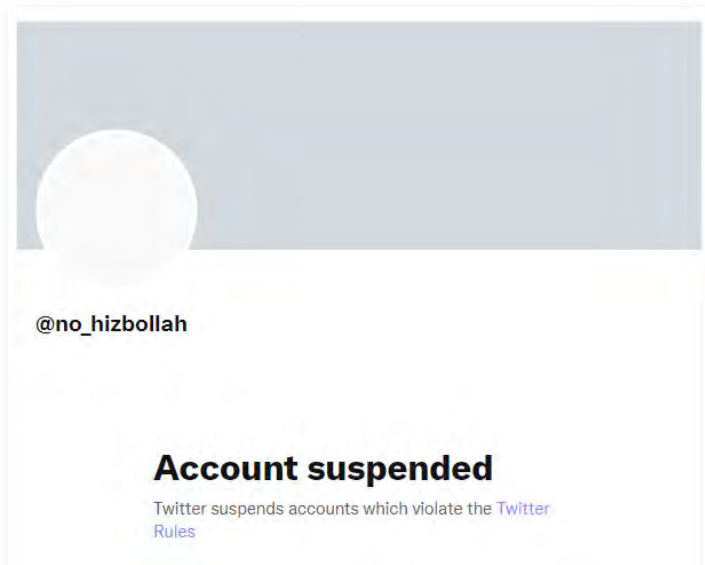
The top group with 3,537 users is one dominated by civil society figures most of whom support judge Bitar and accuse Hezbollah of interfering with the course of justice. The group includes public figures and journalists, like former LF-affiliated minister May Chidiac, journalists Firas Hatoum, Dima Sadek, Nicole Hajal, Salman Andari, and Larissa Aoun, the father of a young victim of the port explosion, Paul Naggear, as well as media channels like Al Jadeed and Megaphone News.

Group 2

The second group is largely dominated by Saudi journalist Hussein al Gawi and several media channels like Al Arabiya, Al Hadath, Wesal TV, and Khabar Ajel. We also noticed an account “@no_hizbollah” that was suspended at the time of writing this report. However, based on the data collected, the account describes itself as a “Hezbollah dissident” (منشق عن حزب الله) and suggests that Hezbollah sacrificed some of its fighters (in the Tayyounh fights) to threaten civil peace and stop the port investigation. This account also suggested that all the videos only show Hezbollah fighters and no one else.

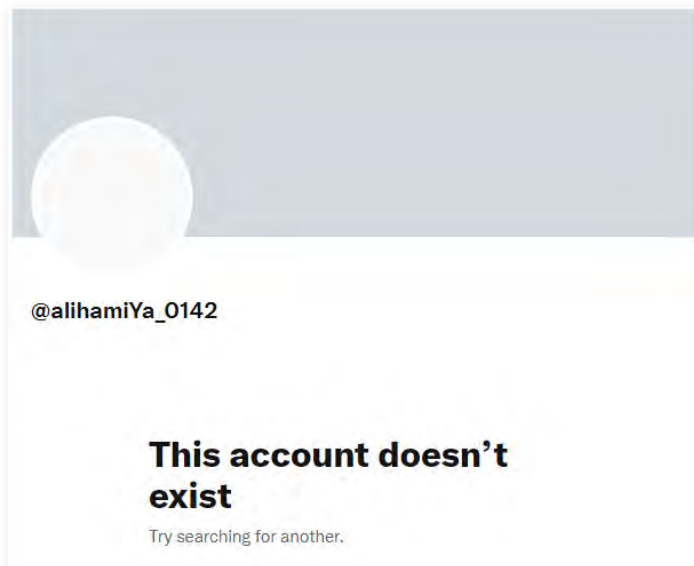
طبيعي جدا مليشيا حزب اللات تضحى ببعض عناصرها وتقتلهم غدرا من أجل هدف أكبر وهو اشاعة الفوضى وتهديد السلم الاهلي لإيقاف تحقيقات القاضي بيطار الذي بدأ بكشف دور حزب اللات بانفجار مرفأ بيروت، لحد الان عشرات الفديوات لسلاح الحزب ولا يوجد فيديو واحد ل²

The account received 183 interactions on this post and was followed by 19,144 users before its suspension.



Group 3

Ghassan Saoud leads group 3 with 321 interactions, followed by Faysal Abdelsater, a Lebanese pro-Hezbollah commentator, Al-Akhbar then-deputy Editor-in-Chief Pierre Abi Saab, and alihamiYa_0142, an account that was no longer accessible at the time of this report.

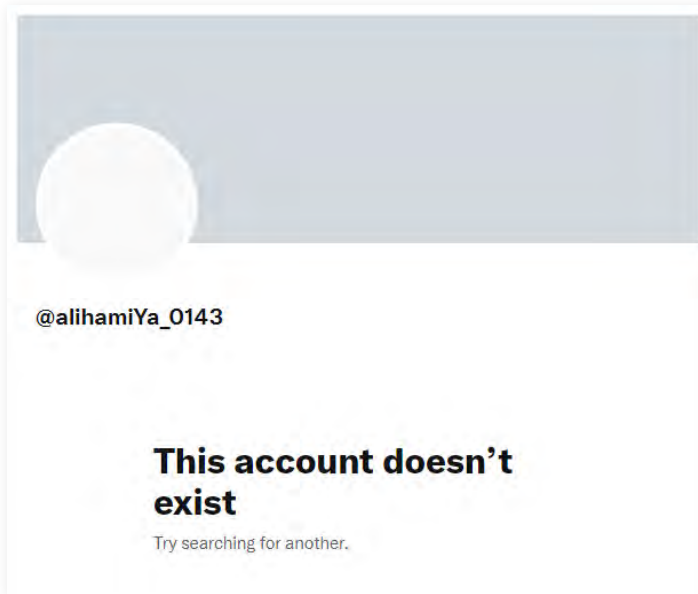


This user posted 10 different tweets, one of which echoed a rumor that the French Embassy took Bitar's family under its protection and evacuated them to Paris.

(RT @alihamiYa_0142: قامت السفارة الفرنسية* بإجلاء عائلة #طارق_البيطار واولاده الى #باريس وهي اصبحت بحماية فرنسية)

2- Due to import limitation, the tweet was truncated.

A closer investigation revealed a second account with the same name but a different numeric suffix @alihamiYa_0143 that posted 8 times and was also deleted at the time of this report.



Interestingly, one of the tweets, was a replica, word for word, published by both accounts. This leads us to believe that both accounts are part of a dissemination network. The tweet says that “it is no longer time to ask the criminal Tarek Bitar to resign but also for President Michel Aoun and the Commander of the Army Joseph Aoun to resign because they were not up to their responsibility, and they acted with negligence of and disrespect to the blood spilled by Christian treachery. Get out of your community... #Tayyouneh_trap”

لم يعد المطلوب
استقالة المجرم #طارق_البيطار
بل على الرئيس #ميشال_عون
وقائد الجيش #جوزيف_عون الاستقالة
لأنهم لم يكونوا بقدر
المسؤولية وتصرفوا باستهتار واستهانة
بالدماء التي سقطت برصاص الغدر المسيحي
أخرجوا من طائفيتكم ..
#كمين_الطيونة

We also notice, in the same group, a major influencer, Ghaleb Jawad, with a handle that seems bulk-generated (@4rFeupbggmHdEkW). While the account looks genuine, the handle raises some questions regarding the origin and usage of the account.



Published on October 13, a tweet from this account was retweeted 93 times. It reads: “Don’t play with fire! O Bitar don’t play with fire! You are just a little judge. Don’t get dragged behind the American Embassy for a small amount of money and a promised position that you will never get. Go back to your conscience and judge with justice”.



The “messenger” (the account initiating the message) being a key element in viral marketing, journalists and other public figures play a major role – as real or perceived “experts” – in spreading and influencing users. As per other discussions in the Lebanese Twittersphere, here again, journalists are strongly present as group leaders; in this case Ghassan Saoud and Pierre Abi Saab.

Other key figures are present in this group as major influencers, including but not limited to former Army General Amine Hotait, a current scholar at Al Maaref University, and Faysal Abdelsater.

However, as mentioned earlier in this section, several non-public figures and questionable profiles join the lead in this group. Those profiles, lacking two major virality factors, authenticity (messenger) and centrality (bridging), can only influence people in the same circle and their impact is limited to the current group.

In summary, group 3 features pro-Hezbollah journalists and supporters staunchly attacking judge Bitar and his supporters. Because the nature of the leading profiles in this network is polarizing or uses computer-generated Twitter handles, it looks clear that this group has a local or same-group influence and has limited reach outside its own circle.

Group 4

Group 4 is a broadcast network where tweets from Al Mayadeen are retweeted with limited user-to-user discussion. In this group, Al Mayadeen shares three posts on October 15 related to the events in Beirut:



قناة الميادين @AlMayadeenNews · Oct 15

صفى الدين: حزب #القوات_اللبنانية كان يسعى إلى إحداث حرب أهلية داخلية من جديد في #لبنان.

#كمائن_الفتنة
#كمائن_الفتن
#كمين_الطبيونة
#انفجار_مرفأ_بيروت
#لبنان_#الطبيونة
#طارق_بيطار #بيروت



16 76 450



قناة الميادين @AlMayadeenNews · Oct 15

شقيقة الشهيدة #مريم_فرحات لـ #الميادين: نحن حزناً طبعاً لكن ما يهمنا هو ألا يحزن السيد حسن #نصرالله ولن نتخلى عن #المقاومة ولو متنا من الجوع ونحن بأمر "عمامة السيد".

#كمائن_الفتنة
#كمائن_الفتن
#كمين_الطبيونة
#انفجار_مرفأ_بيروت
#لبنان_#الطبيونة
#طارق_بيطار



48 173 751



قناة الميادين @AlMayadeenNews · Oct 15

صفى الدين: القوى الأمنية أبلغتنا بأن كل شيء على ما يرام وأن الأمن مضبوط لذا أكملنا التحرك.

#كمائن_الفتنة
#كمائن_الفتن
#كمين_الطبيونة
#انفجار_مرفأ_بيروت
#لبنان_#الطبيونة
#طارق_بيطار #بيروت



21 119 567

Group 5

The Lebanese Presidency's account leads the fifth discussion group with a single tweet (aforementioned) where the President's office denies meeting judge Bitar.



Yet, on this day, the President's personal account (@General_Aoun) was very active with general statements calling to avoid violence in resolving conflicts and to refer to legal institutions and the constitution.



Even though the President did not share a clear position to support, or not, judge Bitar, two journalists, known for their allegiance to the President, Nada Andraos and Nancy Saab, had a stronger position in publicly supporting the judge.

While Nada Andraos's post was published almost 10 days prior to our data sample's date range, it was strongly retweeted by the community surrounding the President's account during the monitoring period.

The post publishes news about the Appeals Court rejecting the requests to prevent Tarek Bitar from pursuing his investigation in the Beirut Port explosion and ends with a strong declaration that can be translated by "justice is above all and nothing is above it."



Nancy Saab, a reporter for OTV television, affiliated to the President's party, the Free Patriotic Movement, attacks those who refused to testify when called by the judge and says that they should have gone willingly and voluntarily instead of referring to their political parties. "It is forbidden to hide" says the tweet.



While much smaller in size (783 users) than the first group (3,537 users), and despite timid positions by FPM supporters (no major influencers in this group), it looks like the President's supporters, as individuals, still support judge Bitar in his investigation.

Group 6

Leading group 6 is Egyptian journalist Gamal Sultan (@GamalSultan1), the Editor-in-Chief of Al Masriyoun, taking a strong position against Hezbollah and writing that judge Bitar is now the symbol of the State. The group is also a broadcast network with Gamal Sultan as the main leader and numerous followers.



Remaining Groups

Several smaller groups follow with no significant number of users (330 and less) or characteristics. Minor Twitter leaders take a position in support of judge Tarek Bitar, mainly:

■ Samy Gemayel, resigned MP and leader of the Kataeb party, saying that all security officials should be interrogated and that “we” know that Hezbollah had a presence and access to everything in the Port of Beirut. He also talks about threats to judge Bitar from Wafiq Safa (a high-ranking Hezbollah security official), saying that Wafiq Safa should be sent to jail.



■ Fouad Makhzoumi, a businessman and MP, received 232 active interactions following a support poster picturing judge Tarek Bitar with his own name in Arabic and Latin imprinted over the poster, denouncing a “judiciary May 7.”³



3- This date refers to May 7, 2008, when Hezbollah fighters took over large segments of Beirut in an attempt to bring down the March-14 led cabinet of former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora. The May 2008 clashes led to the Doha Accords, which consecrated Hezbollah's veto power in the cabinet.

Conclusion

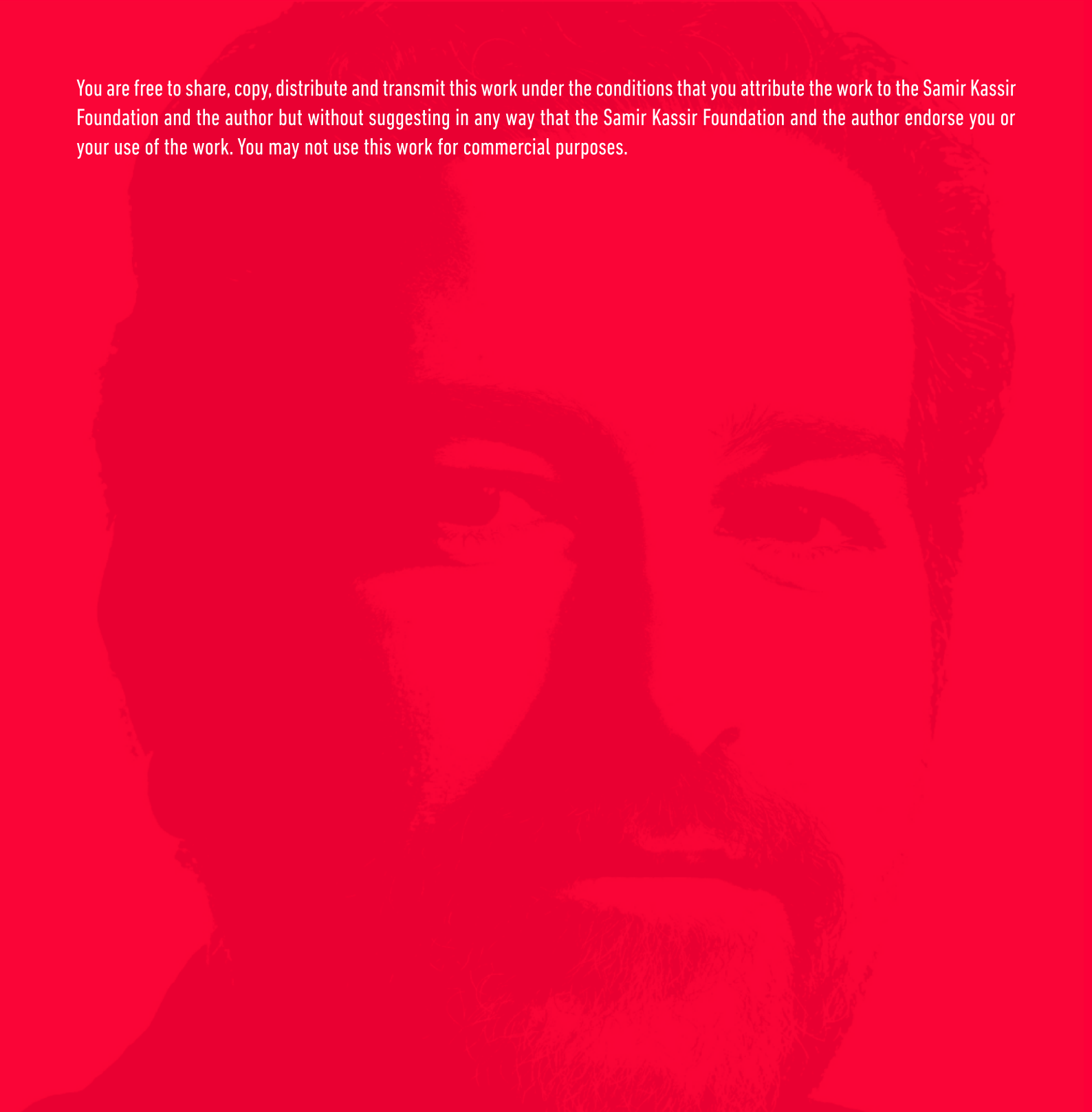
Based on the analysis of the 38,500 tweets by 17,771 users, the investigation around the port explosion has grown outside the limits of the judiciary or even the country. 42% of the users who added their country to their profile declared being residents or citizen of countries other than Lebanon. More than a hundred countries can be found as part of the profiles: from KSA to the USA, the UAE, Egypt, Palestine, Australia, and others.

The other noticeable result is that 3.13% of tweets have been published using professional tools. While this may not come as a surprise knowing that social media has become part of any communication strategy, this result proves scientifically that not all tweets are genuinely true declarations, but that some of them are prepared and thought off, both in terms of content, messenger characteristics, and dissemination.

A closer look at the professional tool's usage shows that 1.58% of the tweets of the civil society group were published using professional tools against 3.84% of tweets published by the KSA group. This percentage jumps to 13.62% in the Hezbollah supporters' group.

The study also showed the scarcity of FPM's influencers in this period and on this matter, even though FPM supporters are usually very active on Twitter and other social media platforms. However, the majority of FPM accounts who reacted approved posts supporting judge Bitar.

In short, there is a strong majority of local and international influencers and players depicting judge Bitar as a symbol of justice and accusing Hezbollah of trying to bring down the investigation. On the other hand, only 12.75% of our sample endorse Hezbollah's accusations against Bitar, with a large number of hubs/disseminators in the group, which leads the standard Twitter user to be under the impression that this group is much larger than it actually is.



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Riverside Bloc C, 6th floor
Charles Helou Street, Sin el-Fil, Metn - Lebanon
+961 1 499 012 / +961 1 499 013

www.skeyesmedia.org