~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~

Syrian Rebel Use of Social Media

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The Syrian rebels and their support networks use social media for a variety of purposes including self-promotion, fundraising, directing attacks, and exchanging tactics. While the rebels would still be able to operate in the absence of social media, their financing and combat capabilities would be diminished, as would the influence of some high-profile rebel leaders.

FUNDRAISING

Social media plays a central role in the fundraising efforts of both rebel groups and of Gulf-based private funders such as the Kuwaiti *Haia al-Shaabiya l-Daam al-Shaab al-Suri* (The Popular Commission to Support the Syrian People). This financial network is run by two young Kuwaiti religious sheikhs, named Hajaj al-Ajmi and Irshid al-Hajri. During a late-May 2012 interview, al-Ajmi discussed his efforts to arm and fund Syrian rebel groups, both in the Free Syrian Army and the Salafist *Ahrar al-Sham* network. Al-Ajmi emphasized the power of Twitter where, at the time, he had over 42,000 followers, many of whom retweet his religious guidance and appeals for funds.[1] Today, al-Aljmi boasts over 120,000 Twitter followers who receive his tweets encouraging donations.[2]

Twitter also gives al-Ajmi the ability to target potential donors in Saudi Arabia where the government has shut down similar private networks. In late-May, a group of Saudi sheikhs established *al-Lajnah al-Ulama l-Nusra Suriyah* (The Committee of Clerics to Support Syria) to raise funds for the Syrian rebels. They created a Facebook page and posted the contact information of several sheikhs that were collecting donations.[3] The following day, the Committee announced on their Facebook page that they were no longer accepting donations at the request of the Saudi government.[4] Saudi Arabia's efforts to limit private involvement with the Syrian rebels has left a large pool of potential donors without a direct connection to private organizations sending funds to Syria. Al-Ajmi's use of social media allows him to reach this valuable population through tweets that call on his "brothers in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Qatar to support the battalions struggling in Syria," followed by a phone number where he can be reached. One such tweet, sent on September 30, was retweeted 1,509 times.[5]

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[1] '' أشرف بنفسي على تسليم السلاح للثوار'',الشيخ حجاج العجمي مطمئنا المتبرعين: متدياب الثورة السورية, May 31, 2012, accessed October 11, 2012, http://www.syria2011.net/t33021-topic.
[2] Hajaj bin Fahid al-Ajmi, Twitter, October 10, 2012, https://twitter.com/hajjajalajmi.
[3] Al-Lajnah al-Ulama l-Nusra Suriyah's Facebook page, May 27, 2012, accessed October 10, 2012
[4] Ibid.
[5] Hajaj bin Fahid al-Ajmi, Twitter post, September 30, 2012, 11:57am, https://twitter.com/hajjajalajmi/status/252482339488296960.

The Commission has also used social media to reach Kuwaitis sympathetic to the cause of the Syrian rebels, who are outside of the sheikhs' traditional social network. In early June, al-Ajmi uploaded a YouTube video featuring prominent Kuwaiti artists, athletes, and religious figures making heartfelt appeals for donations to the Commission.[6]

As part of the fundraising effort, rebel groups that receive support from the Commission use their social media outlets to thank the Commission, confirming to donors that their money is reaching active rebel groups. Ahrar al-Sham, a network of Salafist rebel groups, tweeted a thank you to the sheikhs on July 1st.[7] The Umma Brigade, a Libyan led rebel group based in southern Idlib Province, posted a thank you on its Facebook page on June 30th for funds that were likely transferred to the Brigade during a June 29th meeting in Turkey between Sheikhs al-Ajmi and al-Hajri and the Brigade's leader, Mahdi al-Harati. A photo this meeting was promptly tweeted by the Commission's twitter account.[8] Other rebel groups have posted thank you videos on YouTube. The leader of the Rastan-based Hamza Battalion, Ibrahim Ayoub, publicly thanked the Commission for sending $10,000 in a video dated August 1st.[9]

SELF-PROMOTION

Rebel groups most commonly use social media to promote their brand, establishing themselves as powerful players, and in some cases, defenders of the people. *Suqour al-Sham*, a rebel group based in the Jebel al-Zawiyah village of Sarjeh, uses social media particularly effectively. As is the case with most rebel groups, *Suqour al-Sham* has dedicated staff managing its social media outlets. Ahmad al-Assi leads this effort, managing the Brigade's website which features reports and interviews in French, English, and Arabic. In mid-September, *Suqour al-Sham*'s media team gathered in a conference room for media training in an effort to improve their use of YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook.[10] In recent weeks, *Suqour al-Sham* videos have become more professional, featuring a member of the group playing the role of a reporter, followed by interviews with leading members of the group and clips of their work helping the community. In one recent example, the reporter delivered a report on *Suqour al-Sham* members repairing a school damaged by regime shelling.[11]

Rebel groups use social media to shape public opinion, establishing themselves as providers of the people and important military leaders. During Ramadan, *Suqour al-Sham* distributed food to needy families and publicized the effort through YouTube videos, featuring interviews with commanders involved in the endeavor.[12] The Umma Brigade made a similar effort to promote their establishment of a civilian hospital in southern Idlib with medical supplies donated from Libya.[13]

Many of the individuals who are considered important rebel leaders use social media to cement their reputations. Jamal Maaruf of *Shuhada Suriya* established himself as one of the top leaders in southern Idlib when he appeared in a YouTube video standing next to the ruins of a MiG fighter jet during his group's September attack on the Abu Dhuhur airbase. Ahmed Abu Issa of *Suqour al-Sham* received attention on Islamist web forums after his group posted a YouTube video of Abu Issa delivering a sermon extolling the virtues of Jihad, likely giving his group access

[6] الهيئة الشعبية لدعم الثورة السورية," June 10, 2012, "الهيئة الشعبية," YouTube video, 6:33, posted by "الهيئة الشعبية," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mjvwcWUo42I.

[7] Al-Haia l-Daam al-Shaab al-Suri, Twitter post, July 1, 2012, 1:05pm, https://twitter.com/alhayahalshabyh/status/219522141614374912/photo/1.

[8] Al-Haia l-Daam al-Shaab al-Suri, Twitter post, June 29, 2012, 2:28pm, https://twitter.com/alhayahalshabyh/status/218818256612507649/photo/1.

[9] كتائب الحمزة فيديو شكر للشيخ حجاج العجمي من الكويت | أموي سوريا لطرد الاحتلال النصيري الشيعي," YouTube video, 0:30, posted by "OmawiLive," August 1, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uDD2sG3jVzk.

[10] The Suqour al-Sham Brigades, Twitter post, September 18, 2012, 6:37am, https://twitter.com/SQORALSHAM/status/248053168913653760/photo/1; The Suqour al-Sham Brigades, Twitter post, September 24, 2012, 1:41am, https://twitter.com/SQORALSHAM/status/250152904491692033/photo/1.

[11] الوية صقور الشام تقوم باعادة تاهيل المدارس," YouTube video, 1:46, posted by "sqoralsham," October 5, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1YXa1S4mWI.

[12] ثوار ألوية صقور الشام يوزعون زكاة الفطر," YouTube video, 2:26, posted by "sqoralsham," August 20, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82ok_DA5RjM&feature=plcp.

[13] لواء الأمة | مشروع إنشاء مشفى ميداني," YouTube Video, 2:54, posted by "liwa alummah," August 22, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBK_R8z6a1Q&feature=youtu.be.

to new sources of funding.[14] The Farouq Brigade's commander, Abdul Razzaq Tlass' youth, charisma, and brash confidence made his YouTube videos an instant sensation, earning him an international following.

Members of rebel media offices regularly produce montages of rebel operations, often with inspiring background music that prominently feature the rebel group's logo. Publicizing joint operations, however, has led to tensions between rebel groups. One example of this was the August 14th car bombing of a regime checkpoint in Idlib city carried out jointly by the Tawhid Brigade and the Shuhada Idlib Brigade. The YouTube video of the attack, produced by the Tawhid Brigade's media team, featured only Tawhid's symbol.[15] A post on Shuhada Idlib's Facebook page dated August 18th, accused the Tawhid Brigade's media office of an "injustice," asserting that is was also their right to be proud of their accomplishments.[16]

ARMED OPERATIONS

Syrian rebels also use social media during combat operations. This phenomenon can be seen in the role played by Local Coordination Committees (LCC) Facebook pages during the early September rebel attack on the regime-held town of Harem near Syria's northwestern border with Turkey. As the operation began, area LCC pages posted a Google Maps image with pins marking regime positions in and around Harem.[17] When a unit from the Uthman Dhu Nurain Battalion got pinned down by regime machine guns positioned on the town's citadel, the LCC Salqin Facebook page posted a call for rebel groups to relieve the trapped unit. The post read: "Urgent: Important, for immediate dissemination and wide publication: …A Free Syrian Army battalion is trapped in Harem by Assad's military…to all battalions in the area, provide cover to get them out."[18] The following day, the trapped rebels posted a detailed description of their escape on Facebook. Although the post criticized the rebel groups that thought the call for help was a deception and did not respond, it established that the rebels were monitoring social media during the battle.[19]

As the battle continued for a second day, the LCC pages announced that a regime convoy was travelling north on Route 56 toward Harem to provide support for the regime troops. The post ended with the instruction "for wide publication and circulation in order to cut off supplies to Assad's army in the battle to liberate Harem."[20] Interestingly, IED attacks on the regime convoy were reported that day in the area of Salqin.[21] In other instances, rebels have circulated diagrams explaining how to defeat the Syrian regime's Russian made T-72 tanks and Hind attack helicopters using the small arms found in rebel arsenals, as well as videos detailing the production of advanced IEDs.[22]

Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube are strategic communication tools deployed by the rebels to raise funds, trade tactics, direct attacks, and publicize their individual roles in fighting the Syrian regime. In the absence of these tools, the rebels would still be carrying out operations albeit with diminished fundraising and operational capabilities. Social media has, however, enabled certain rebel groups and commanders to gain a popular following beyond their immediate area of operations. This accounts for some rebel groups' ability, such as *Suqour al-Sham* and the Farouq Brigade, to establish nationwide networks that could become important bases of support in post-Assad Syria.

[14] www.Muslm.net, accessed October 11, 2012, posted April 21, 2012, http://www.muslm.net/vb/showthread.php?478398-خطبة-الجمعة-لقائد-لواء-صقور-الشام-في-ريف-إدلب

[15] "لواء التوحيد تدمير حاجز كازية الفلاحين" YouTube video, 5:36, posted by "zaher2w," August 15, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wUqB2hbMYk0&feature=youtu.be.

[16] Shuhada Idlib Brigade Facebook Page, August 18, 2012, accessed October 10, 2012, http://www.facebook.com/Brigade.idlib?ref=ts&fref=ts.

[17] Local Coordination Committee Salqin's Facebook page, September 1, 2012, accessed October 10, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=268673023250293&set=a.255380841246178.57266.255239994593596&type=1&relevant_count=1.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Local Coordination Committee Isqat's Facebook page, September 2, 2012, accessed October 11, 2012.

[20] Local Coordination Committee Kafertachrim's Facebook page, September 2, 2012, accessed October 10, 2012 http://www.facebook.com/Tkafartakharim?ref=ts&fref=ts.

[21] Syrian Observatory for Human Rights Facebook Page, September 2, 2012, accessed October 10, 2012, https://www.facebook.com/syriaohr.

[22] Ahfad al-Sahaba fi Ghouta Sharqiya's Facebook Page, September 8, 2012, accessed October 10, 2012, http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=474698669220417&set=a.431425953547689.100273.423377597685658&type=1&theater; "هام وخطير/ كتيبة أتباع الرسول/ طريقة تصنيع المتفجرات" YouTube video, 6:37, posted by "sleimand4x," July 4, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=00YZhtOG-Gk.