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How Lebanese Elites Coopt Protest Discourse: A Social Media Analysis

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How Lebanese Elites Coopt Protest Discourse: A Social Media Analysis

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Executive Summary

Massive protests ignited around Lebanon on October 17, 2019, with protestors blaming their sectarian elites for the country's political, financial, and economic woes. This reports aims to understand how the political elites coopted the protest narratives on social media. For this purpose, we analyze the Twitter handles of 159 Lebanese political elites, and track their use of the most popular protest hashtags, the vast majority of which were supportive of the revolution. We find that the Lebanese elites quickly coopted revolution hashtags, beginning to incorporate them into their strategic communication strategies almost as soon as the October 2019 protests erupted.

Introduction

On October 17, 2019, massive protests ignited around Lebanon, catalyzed by the government's announcement of new taxes in an attempt to reduce its chronic budget deficit. The proposed new taxes angered many Lebanese who feel that the country's economic crisis is due to the inability of Lebanon's political elite to address citizens' grievances surrounding rising prices, high levels of unemployment, and a lack of basic public goods provision. Critically, many blame Lebanon's sectarian-based power-sharing institutions for the country's political stagnation, economic woes, and high levels of corruption. Consequently, despite the entrenchment of sectarianism in Lebanese politics and society, the protests have been enthusiastically cross-sectarian in nature, with many citizens demanding an end to sectarian power-sharing.

How have Lebanon's elites responded to this counter-sectarian mobilization? When have they employed strategies of cooptation and when have they advanced counter narratives? Decades of social science literature have explored how authoritarian regimes use repression and cooptation to demobilize opposition movements,¹ but less is known about how ethno-nationalist power-sharing systems employ these strategies in the face of anti-regime protests.²

In this report we leverage social media data to provide real-time measures of how diverse elites have strategically coopted protest narratives during Lebanon's 2019 October revolution. Social media data provides temporally granular measures of elites' political communication strategies, as well as their ability to spread their messages and influence online discourse more broadly. Qualitative evidence suggests that Lebanese elites have often engaged in cooptation strategies aimed at undermining and fragmenting opposition movements,³ including during the 2019 revolution.⁴ Twitter data enables us to track elites' shifting strategies systematically, evaluating when and how they pursue cooptation and counter-narrative strategies in real-time.

According to recent Pew surveys tracking global social media use, 72% of Lebanese citizens report using social media platforms, compared to 69% of Americans, and a global average of 53%.⁵ Estimates based on social media companies' advertising metrics suggest that about 4 million people, or 66% of Lebanese citizens, are active social media users. The vast majority of these individuals are active on Facebook, which boasts 3.8 million active users as of 2019.⁶ While Twitter penetration is much lower, the platform is widely used by politicians and activists, and therefore provides a valuable window into political elites' strategic communication strategies.

To track the behavior of Lebanese elites on Twitter, we compiled Twitter handles of 159 Lebanese political elites including elected officials and religious authorities. We then used the Historial PowerTrack

¹ For an overview of this literature, see: Holdo, M. 2019. 'Cooptation and Non-Cooptation: Elite Strategies in Response to Social Protest.' *Social Movement Studies*, 18(4): 444-462.

² Geha, C. 2019. 'Co-optation, Counter-Narratives, and Repression: Contesting Lebanon's Sectarian Power-Sharing Regime.' *The Middle East Journal*, 73(1): 9-28; and Parreira, C. 2020. 'Party Cooptation and Resurgent Partisanship in Lebanon's October Revolution.' Unpublished Working Paper.

³ Geha. 2019. 'Co-optation, Counter-Narratives, and Repression.'

⁴ Parreira. 2020. 'Party Cooptation and Resurgent Partisanship in Lebanon's October Revolution.'

⁵ Survey results available at: <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2018/06/19/3-social-network-adoption-varies-widely-by-country/>

⁶ Social media usage statistics compiled by Hootsuite are available at: <https://www.slideshare.net/DataReportal/digital-2019-lebanon-january-2019-v01>

API to collect all of their tweets from January 1, 2019, until July 1, 2020, for a total of about 175,000 tweets. The Historical PowerTrack API provides access to the entire historical archive of public Twitter data—dating back to the first tweet—using a rule-based filtering system to deliver complete coverage of historical Twitter data. To assess how elites' tweets influenced broader online political discourse, we used the same API to collect all tweets from this period containing the Arabic language term for 'Lebanon'—a broad term designed to capture general protest discourse as well as other topics—for a total of 24 million tweets.

The preliminary analysis we present here tracks which elite actors used protest hashtags, as well as how their use of these terms spread throughout the Lebanese Twittersphere. Hashtags structure discussion between people who do not necessarily know or follow each other on Twitter and are used to indicate the subject of tweets, define subjects of discussion, and reach broad audiences by joining subjects together and connecting disparate networks.⁷ They therefore provide a useful way to track how narratives spread on Twitter.

Here we focus on elites' use of the most popular protest hashtags, the vast majority of which were supportive of the revolution. In future analysis, we plan to explicitly track the spread of counter-narratives, improving our understanding of when various elites advance different types of discourse about the protests. Ultimately, we will use this analysis to inform experimental evaluations of how everyday Lebanese citizens respond to these elite strategies, improving our understanding of the downstream effects of elite communication strategies on political attitudes and behaviors more broadly.

I Which Protest Narratives Do Elites Engage With?

First, we present the most common hashtags used during the October revolution in the Lebanese Twittersphere. We then explore the degree to which diverse elite actors used these hashtags in their own online communications. While most hashtags exhibited a brief spike in popularity at the start of the October 17 revolution and then faded away, hashtags translated as 'Lebanon Revolts', 'Strong Covenant', 'All of Them Means All of Them', and 'Time's Up' remained in use through the summer of 2020 (figure 1). In addition to these generally pro-revolution hashtags, we also see the emergence of counter-narrative hashtags such as 'Revolution Stolen by Thugs', which first gained popularity in early 2020.

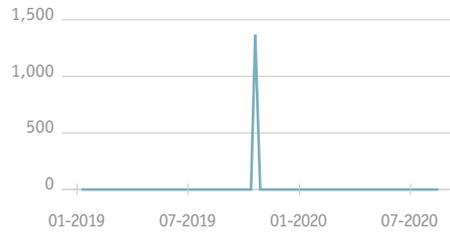
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Bennett, W. L., A. Segerberg, and S. Walker. 2014. 'Organization in the Crowd: Peer Production in Large-Scale Networked Protests.' *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(2): 232-260; and Munger, K., R. Bonneau, J. Nagler, and J. A. Tucker. 2019. 'Elites Tweet to Get Feet Off the Streets: Measuring Regime Social Media Strategies During Protest.' *Political Science Research and Methods*, 7(4): 815-834.

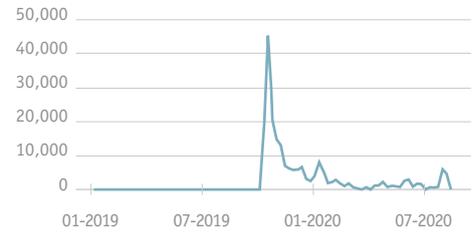
Note This figure shows the weekly volume of all tweets containing revolution hashtags in a dataset of 24 million tweets containing the Arabic keyword 'Lebanon' from January 2019 through July 2020.

Figure 1 Weekly volume of pro-revolution hashtags

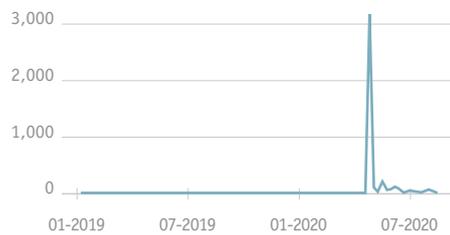
Abolish Political Sectarianism



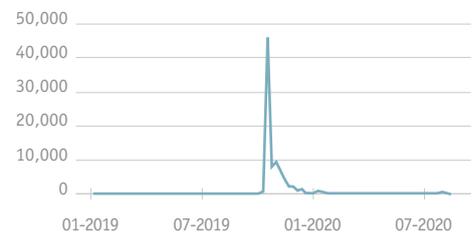
All of Them Means All of Them



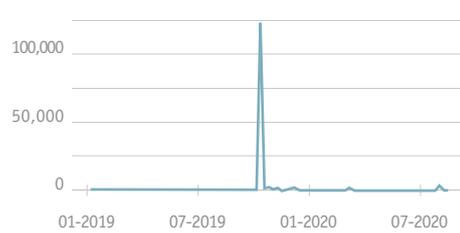
Gebran Failure



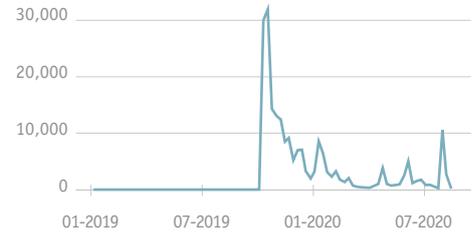
Lebanon Diminished



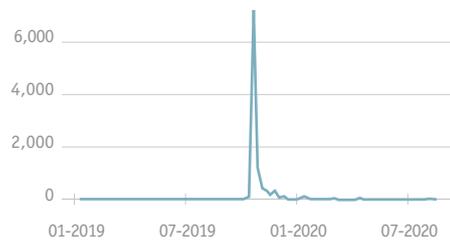
Lebanon Is Burning



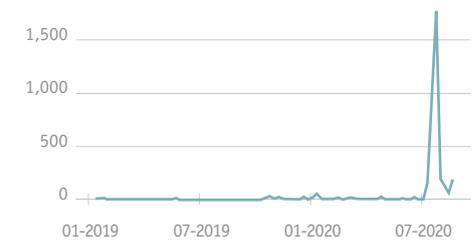
Lebanon Revolts



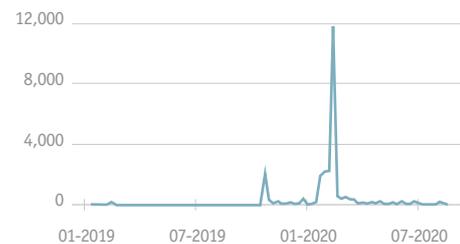
Nasrallah Is One of Them



Neutrality



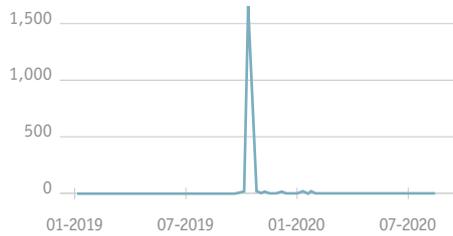
No Trust



Revolution



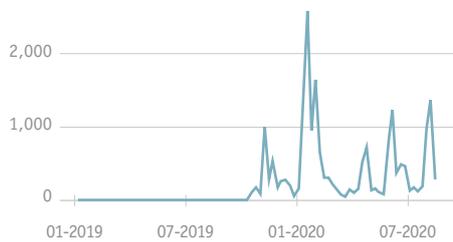
Revolution of the Oppressed



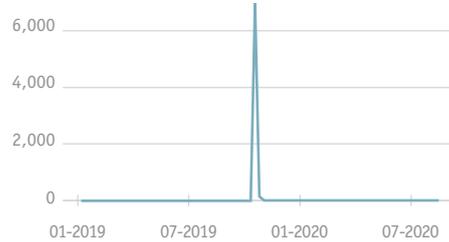
Revolution of the People



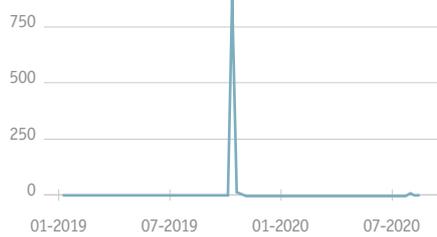
Revolution Stolen by Thugs



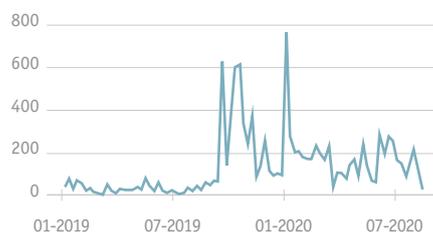
Saturday Squares



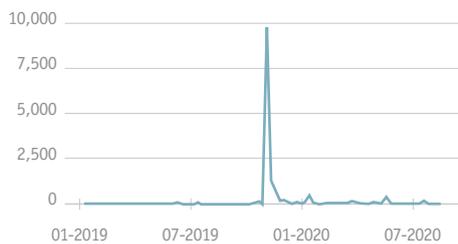
Save Lebanon



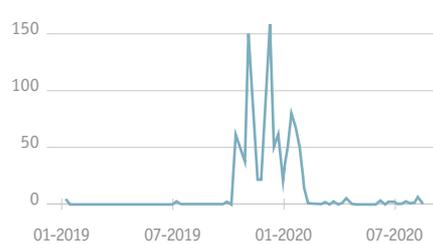
Strong Covenant



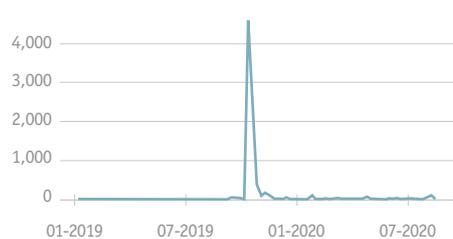
Students' Revolution



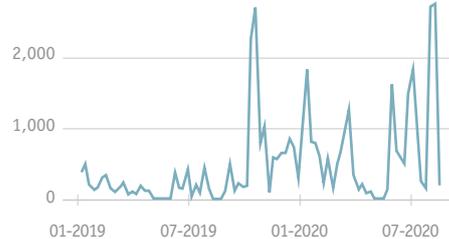
Technocrat Government

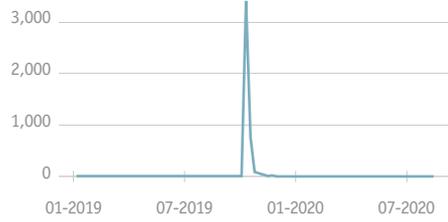
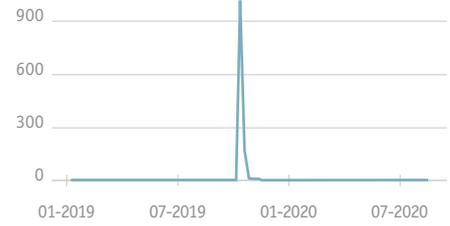


The People Want the Fall of the Regime



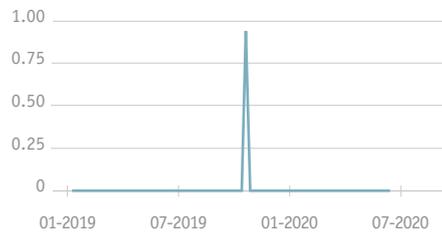
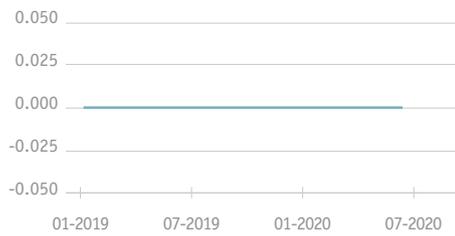
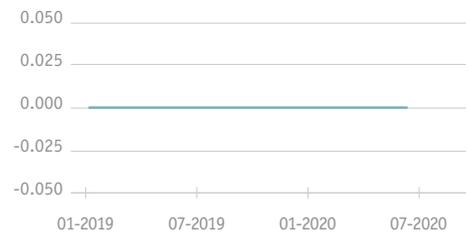
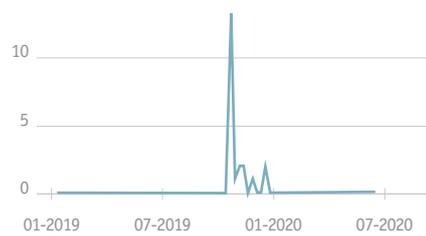
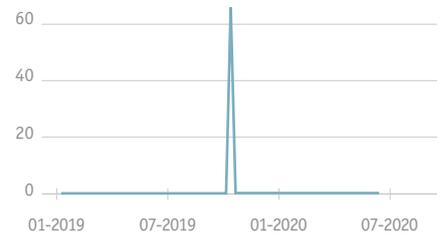
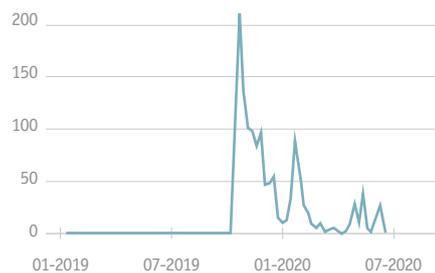
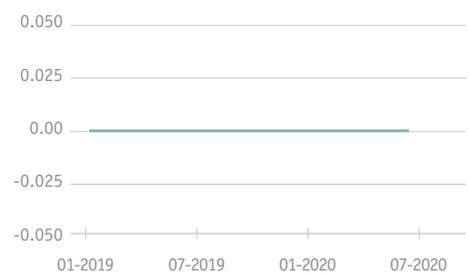
Time's Up



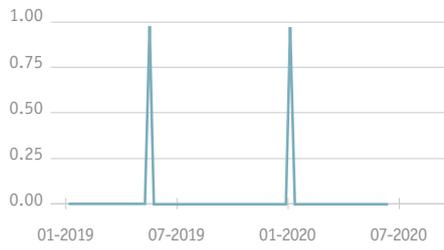
Time's Up for Nahas**Whatsapp Revolution**

Note This figure shows the weekly volume of all tweets containing revolution hashtags in a dataset of all tweets produced by 159 Lebanese elites (175,000 tweets in total) from January 2019 through July 2020.

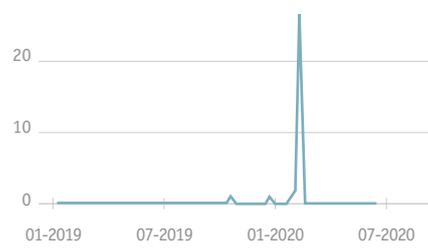
Figure 2 Weekly volume of revolution hashtags tweeted by elites

Abolish Political Sectarianism**All of Them Means All of Them****I'm Financing the Revolution****Gebran Failure****Lebanon Diminished****Lebanon Is Burning****Lebanon Revolts****Nasrallah Is One of Them**

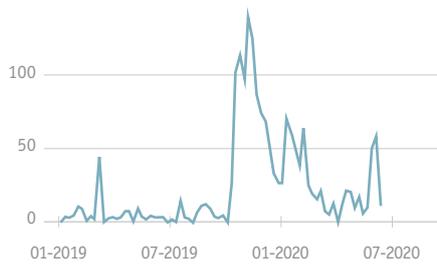
Neutrality



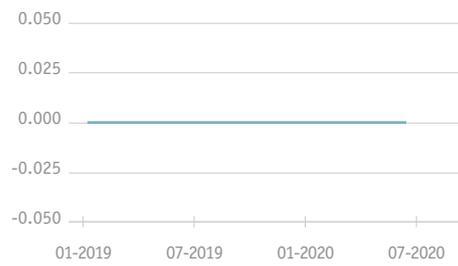
No Trust



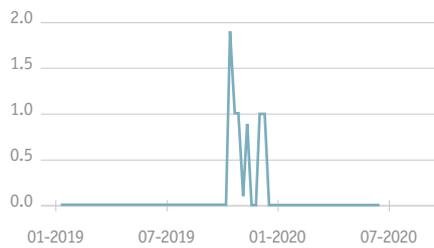
Revolution



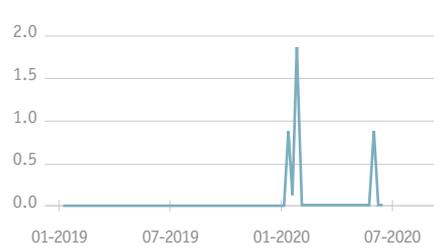
Revolution of the Oppressed



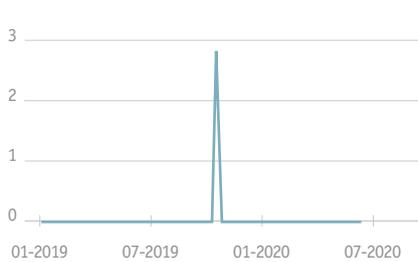
Revolution of the People



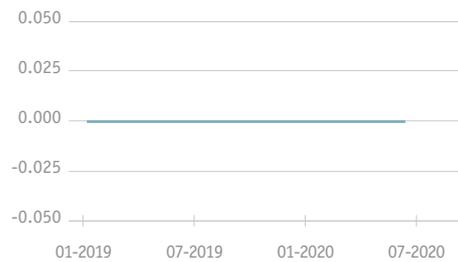
Revolution Stolen by Thugs



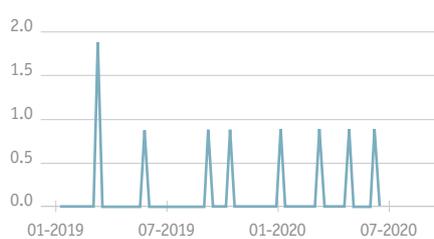
Saturday Squares



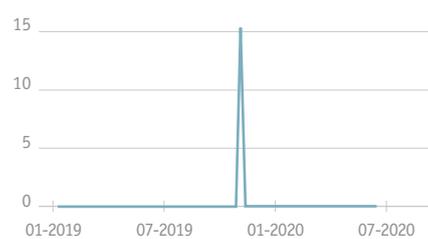
Save Lebanon

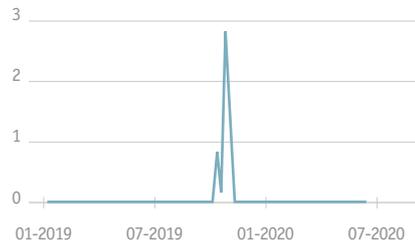
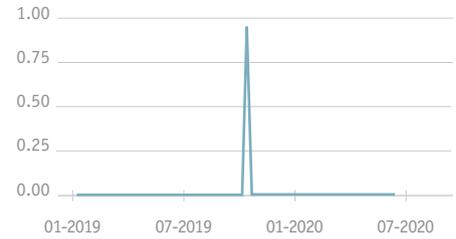
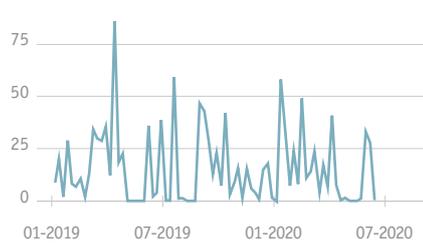
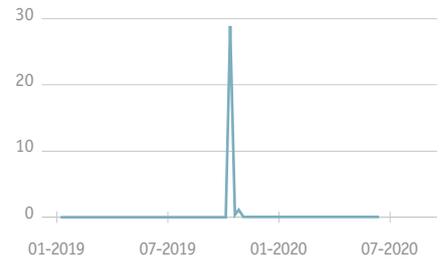
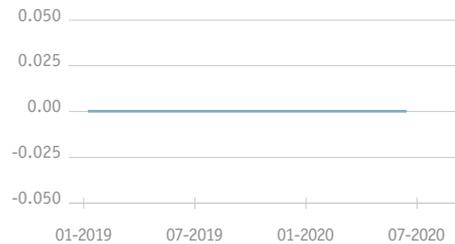


Strong Covenant



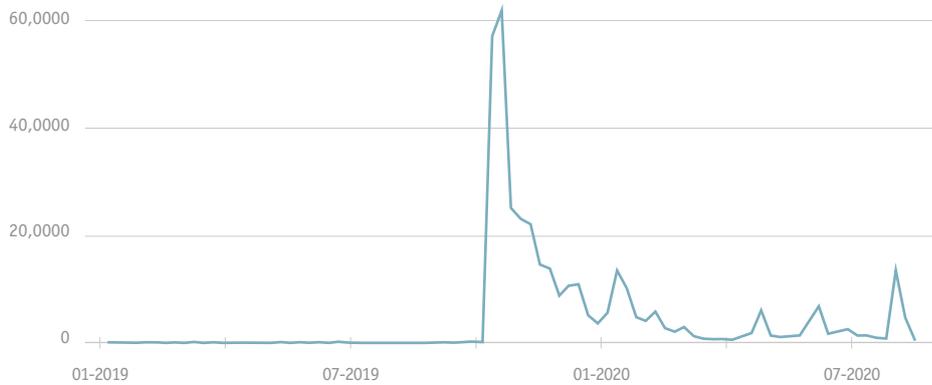
Students' Revolution



Technocrat Government**The People Want the Fall of the Regime****Time's Up****Time's Up for Nahas****Whatsapp Revolution**

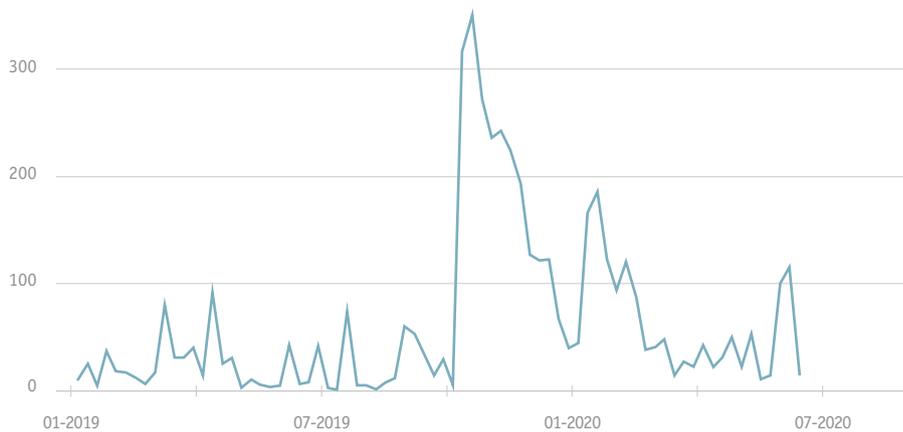
As seen in figure 2, elites coopted the most popular pro-revolution hashtags including 'Lebanon Revolts,' 'Revolution,' 'All of Them Means All of Them,' and 'Time's Up'. They began using these hashtags shortly after the start of the October 17 revolution and continued throughout our data-collection period into the summer of 2020. The figures gathering weekly volumes of revolution-related hashtags sent by elites further highlight how elites began using revolution-related hashtags early on—incorporating them into their tweets almost as soon as these narratives began to emerge in the Lebanese Twittersphere (figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3 Total weekly volume of revolution-related hashtags



Note This figure shows the weekly volume of all tweets containing revolution hashtags in a dataset of 24 million tweets containing the Arabic keyword 'Lebanon' from January 2019 through July 2020.

Figure 4 Weekly volume of revolution hashtags tweeted by elites



Note This figure shows the weekly volume of all tweets containing revolution hashtags in a dataset of all tweets produced by 159 Lebanese elites (175,000 tweets in total) from January 2019 through July 2020.

II Which Elites Are Using Revolution Hashtags?

In addition to examining the use of hashtags by elites over time, we can also see which elites use protest hashtags at high rates. Out of all the elites, the volume of tweets that contain revolution hashtags was highest for Elias Hankach from the Kataeb party, followed by Paula Yacoubian—the only MP elected on a civil society platform—who called for protests early on, referring to the October 17 revolution as the 'revolution of the people' (table 1). We also see current head of the Kataeb party, Samy Gemayel, as well as the account of 'Mouwatinoun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla' (Citizens in a State), a Lebanese political party headed by Charbel Nahas—who is also on the list—which participated actively in the 2019-2020 protests.

Table 1 Top 20 elites using revolution hashtags

Name	Frequency
Elias Hankach	413
Paula Yacoubian	315
Samy Gemayel	256
Mouwatinoun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla page	219
Marada Movement page	200
Neemat Frem	144
Ali Hassan Khalil	133
Fadi Abboud	118
May Chidiac	113
Fouad Makhzoumi	107
Richard Kouyoumjian	107
Imad Wakim	101
Selim El Sayegh	93
Ashraf Rifi	89
Antoine Haddad	84
Ibrahim Kanaan	83
Charbel Nahas	80
Michel Mouawad	76
Vera Yammine	74

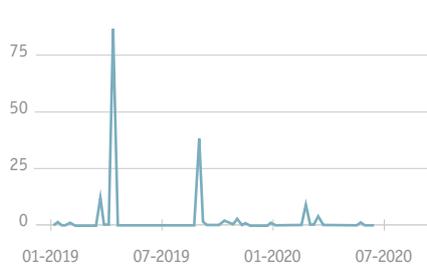
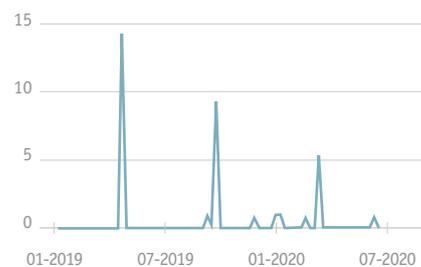
A clearer pattern emerges when examining the volume of tweets produced by each bloc in aggregate and over time. Table 2 suggests that the Kataeb party and Strong Lebanon Bloc—headed by the Free Patriotic Movement—sent the largest volume of tweets containing protest hashtags, followed by the Lebanese Forces and the Amal Movement. The use of these hashtags by Kataeb is particularly noteworthy: 17% of their tweets from January 2019 to July 2020 contained revolution hashtags, compared to just 5% of the tweets by the Lebanese Forces and Amal Movement. By sect, we find that Maronite elites sent a disproportionate number of tweets containing revolution-related hashtags, followed by Armenian Orthodox and Greek Orthodox elites (table 3). Figures 5 and 6 show how these dynamics shift over time by bloc and sect, respectively, with different actors adopting hashtags at different moments in time.

Table 2 Total number of tweets with revolution hashtags sent by each bloc (elites only)

Bloc	Frequency
Kataeb	691
Strong Lebanon Bloc	656
No Bloc	447
Lebanese Forces	321
Amal Movement	172
Future Movement	169
Progressive Socialist Party	42
Azm Movement	37
Syrian Social Nationalist Party	21
Marada Movement	7
Hezbollah	3

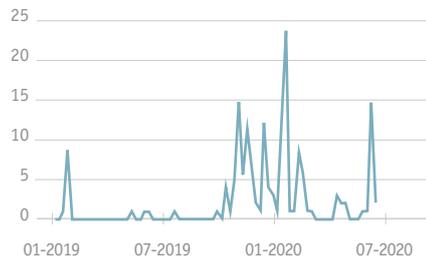
Table 3 Total number of tweets with revolution hashtags sent by elites from each sect

Sect	Frequency
Maronite	1,372
Armenian Orthodox	334
Greek Orthodox	321
Sunni	275
Shia	190
Druze	29
Greek Catholic	20
Protestant	11
Christian minorities	6
Armenian Catholic	5
Alawite	3

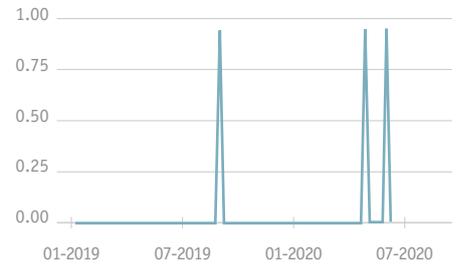
Figure 5 Volume of revolution tweets by bloc**Amal Movement****Azm Movement**

Note This figure shows the weekly volume of all tweets containing revolution hashtags in a dataset of all tweets produced by 159 Lebanese elites (175,000 in total) from January 2019 to July 2020.

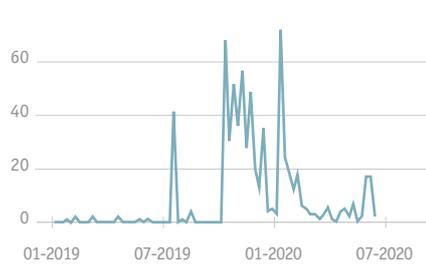
Future Movement



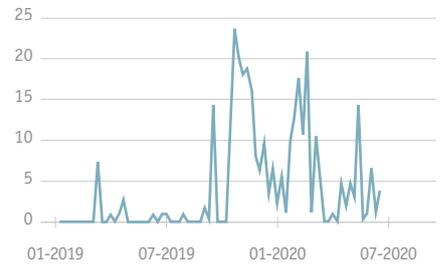
Hezbollah



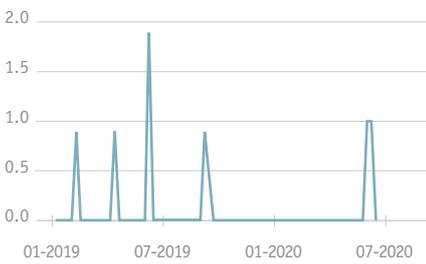
Kataeb



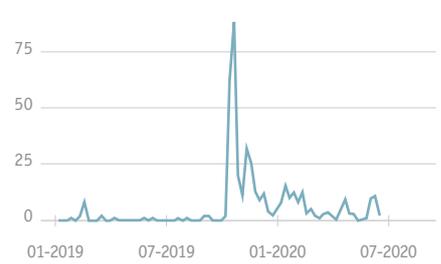
Lebanese Forces



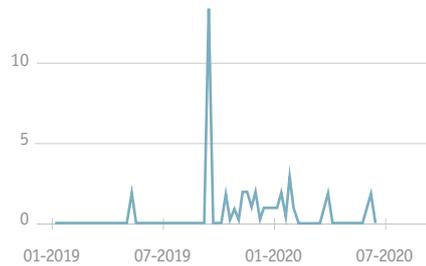
Marada Movement



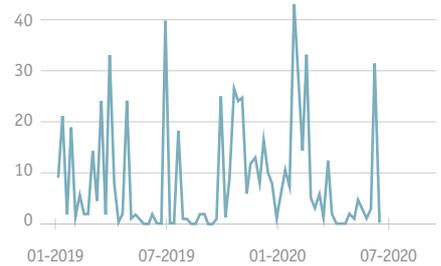
No Bloc



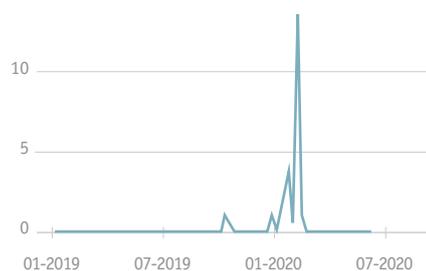
Progressive Socialist Party



Strong Lebanon Bloc



Syrian Social Nationalist Party



N/A

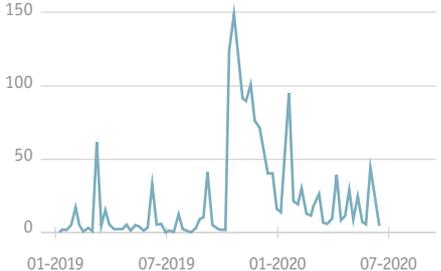
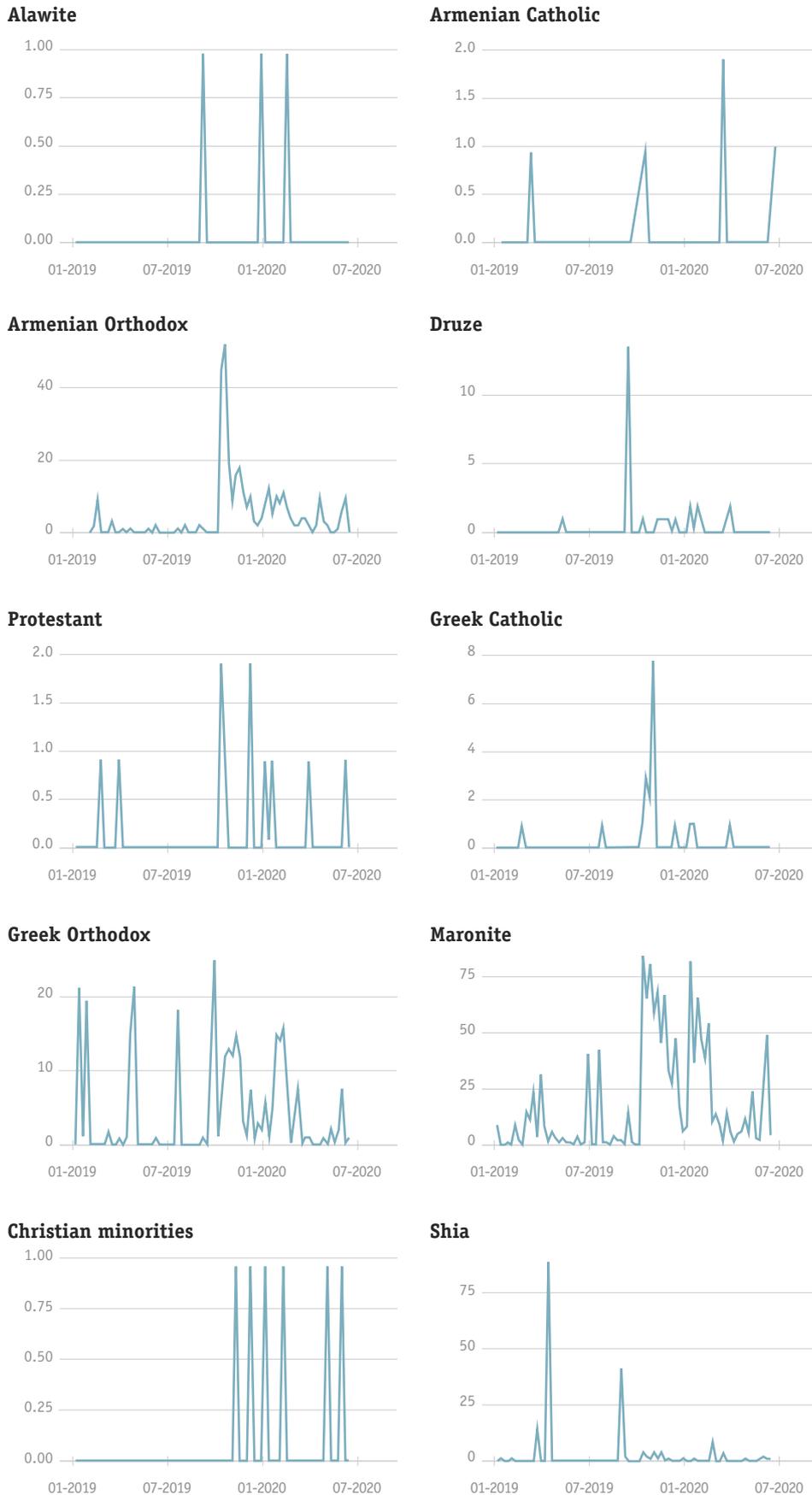
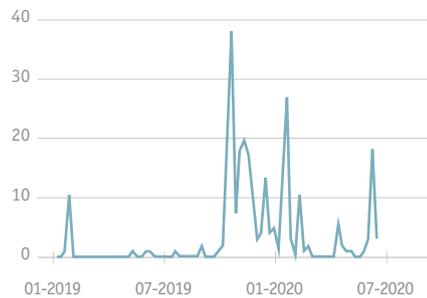


Figure 6 Volume of revolution tweets by elites' sect

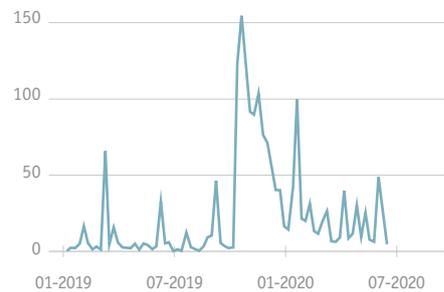
Note This figure shows the weekly volume of all tweets containing revolution hashtags in a dataset of all tweets produced by 159 Lebanese elites (175,000 in total) from January 2019 to July 2020.



S Sunni



N/A



III Which Elites Are Most Influential in Spreading Revolution Hashtags?

Beyond the rates at which different actors tweet revolution hashtags, social network analysis enables us to examine which elites are most influential in spreading those hashtags. For this purpose, influence is measured by the size of the retweet networks of individuals tweeting revolution hashtags.⁸ Retweet networks demonstrate how Twitter users pass content onto their followers, which may then be passed on to their followers' followers and so on.

A user's 'influence' on Twitter can be understood as their ability to spread content and pass information to others. We measure this as retweet frequency, the raw number of times a given user producing a particular type of rhetoric is retweeted, and retweet reach, a measure of a user's prominence in the network determined by the eigenvector centrality.⁹ In terms of retweet frequency, a user is 'influential' in a retweet network if their tweets are retweeted by a large number of Twitter users. These measures allow us to assess which actors are more or less influential in spreading revolution-related hashtags.

The network graph below plots all actors in the dataset of tweets containing the Arabic term for 'Lebanon' who tweeted messages containing revolution hashtags that collectively garnered at least 500 retweets. Elite nodes are highlighted in red, and nodes are sized by degree of centrality, with more influential nodes displayed as larger dots. Nodes closer to the center of the graph are better connected, meaning they have a higher degree of 'authority' or are linked to more hubs in the network. Most of the elites in our sample did not garner enough retweets to be displayed in the retweet network graph but the figure highlights several influential elites: Paula Yacoubian, Elias Hankach, Samy Gemayel, Fouad Makhzoumi, Selim El Sayegh, Ashraf Rifi, Charbel Nahas, the account of 'Mouwatinoun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla', May Chidiac, and Ghassan Atallah.¹⁰ The large size of Paula Yacoubian's node and her placement in the center of the network suggests that she was particularly influential in spreading revolution hashtags. We see similar patterns when ranking elites by eigenvector centrality, displayed in table 4.

8

Siegel, A., J. Tucker, J. Nagler, and R. Bonneau. 2018. 'Socially Mediated Sectarianism.' Unpublished Working Paper. 13.

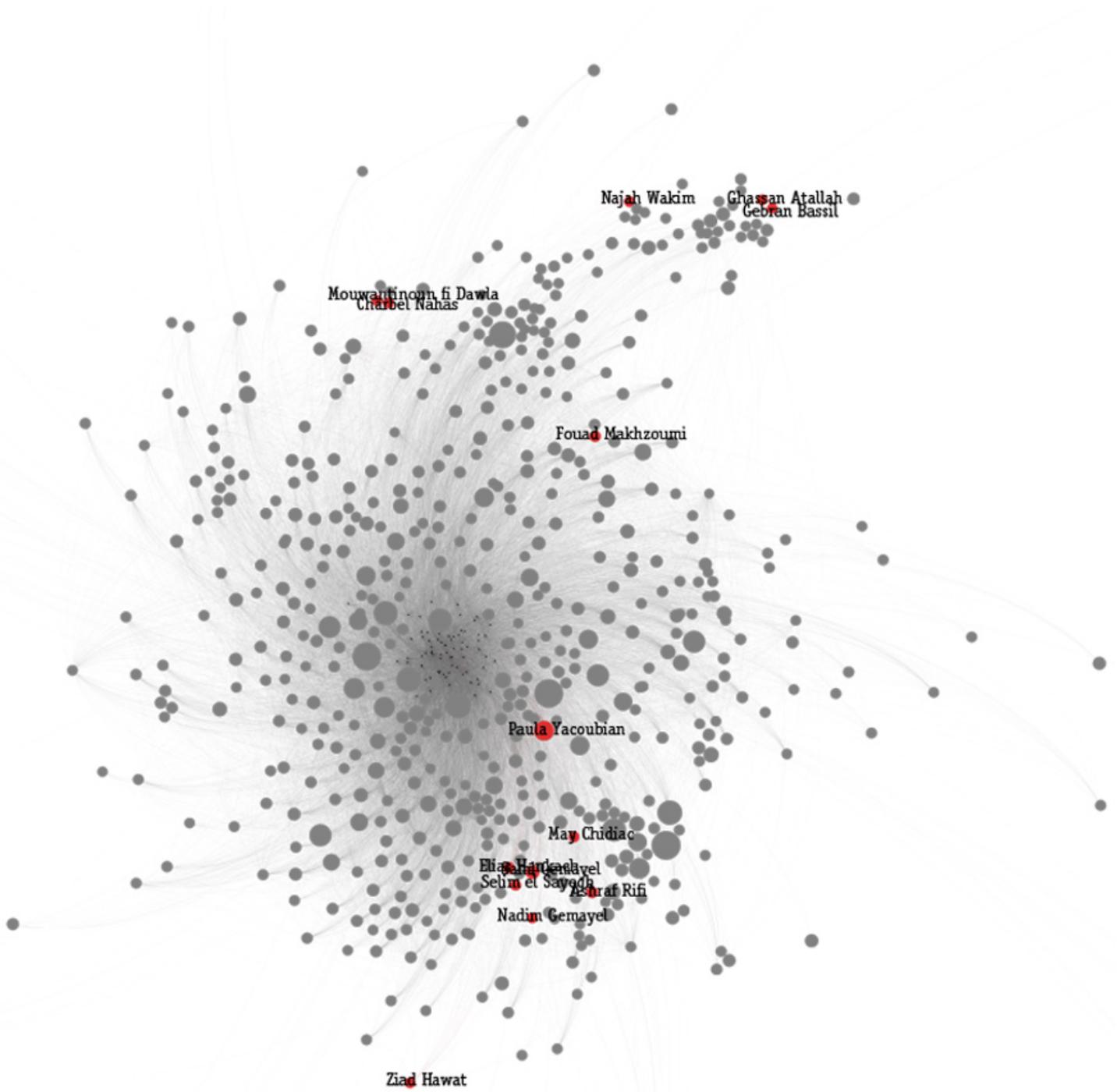
9

The eigenvector centrality is another measure of influence that takes into account both how often an individual is retweeted as well as the influence level of the people who retweet them.

10

Selim El Sayegh is the former Minister of Social Affairs (2009-2011) from Kataeb; Ashraf Rifi is the former Minister of Justice (2014-2016) and 2018 parliamentary candidate in Tripoli; May Chidiac is the former Minister of State for Administrative Reform (2009) from the Lebanese Forces and a former popular television journalist and anchor; Ghassan Atallah was a FPM candidate in Chouf in the 2018 parliamentary elections; and Fouad Makhzoumi is an MP from the National Dialogue Party.

Figure 7 Elite influence in revolution hashtag retweet network



Note This network graph looks at how influential the elites in our sample were in spreading revolution hashtags. Influence is measured as in degree centrality. The data includes all tweets containing revolution hashtags in the dataset of 24 million tweets containing the Arabic keyword 'Lebanon' from January 2019 through July 2020.

Table 4 Top 20 most influential elites by Eigenvector Centrality

Individual	Eigenvector centrality
Paula Yacoubian	0.0419
Samy Gemayel	0.0139
Elias Hankach	0.0109
Ashraf Rifi	0.0066
May Chidiac	0.0052
Antoine Haddad	0.0038
Selim El Sayegh	0.0029
Fouad Makhzoumi	0.0017
Mouwatinoun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla page	0.0015
Nadim Gemayel	0.0015
Charbel Nahas	0.0013
Ziad Hawat	0.0012
Richard Kouyoumjian	0.0011
Samir Geagea	0.0009
George Okais	0.0008
Neemat Frem	0.0008
Ziad Baroud	0.0008
Raya El Hassan	0.0007
Pierre Bou Assi	0.0007
Imad Wakim	0.0006

Conclusions and Steps for Future Research

Our preliminary analysis suggests that Lebanese elites quickly coopted revolution hashtags, beginning to incorporate them into their strategic communication strategies almost as soon as the October 2019 protests erupted. However, we observe a great deal of variation in elites' use of these hashtags, with members of the Kataeb party and the 'Mouwatinoun wa Mouwatinat fi Dawla' party account using these hashtags at higher rates than other actors. In addition, we observe variations among elites from different confessional groups, with Maronite Christian elites using those hashtags more than elites of other confessions. Additionally, individual politicians such as Paula Yacoubian were particularly influential in spreading hashtags, tweeting both at high rates and receiving a high level of engagement across the Lebanese Twittersphere.

Moving forward, we plan to manually code tweets and train machine learning classifiers to better distinguish between cooptation and counter-narrative strategies, and exploit the time-series nature of our data to better understand when particular elites began to employ different strategies in response to events on the ground. Informed by

this analysis, we then plan to assess the downstream effects of these strategies on the political attitudes and behaviors of everyday citizens by using Facebook experiments to evaluate how everyday Lebanese social media users respond when they are exposed to messages from elites using diverse protest hashtags and counter-narratives.

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