Lebanon’s Presidential Candidates in the Social Media Debate

NO PLACE FOR POLICY

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INTRODUCTION

This study is part of a series of reports that monitor the social media discursive trends accompanying Lebanon’s electoral cycles. The objective of this particular study is to analyze the primary headlines and sentiments surrounding the presidential election within the Lebanese public opinion. The study covers the period between May 15 and June 14, 2023; the latter date marking the last failed parliamentary session held to elect a president.

Our focus is to better understand the trends related to hate speech, disinformation, political violence, and human rights. To achieve this, we have gathered data from tweets discussing or mentioning the presidential election. To assist us in sorting and analyzing the vast amount of information available in the online public debate, the Samir Kassir Foundation (SKF) has partnered with Reputell, a data service provider with access to extensive data and software technology to sort the wealth of information.

This report begins with background information on recent developments in Lebanon. Following that, we provide an overview of the data collected and our analytical framework. We then proceed with a thorough analysis of the information. Finally, the report concludes by highlighting key takeaways and indicators.

BACKGROUND

Following the economic crisis and subsequent financial collapse that plagued Lebanon after October 2019, along with the devastating Beirut port explosion in August 2020, the nation has experienced significant social transformations and escalations. These developments have been punctuated by noteworthy events, including the 2022 parliamentary elections. Subsequently, the elected Members of Parliament (MPs) have convened 12 sessions in an attempt to elect a president. The term in office of former President Michel Aoun ended on October 31, 2022.

In this context, the parliamentary session on June 14, 2023 emerged as a crucial turning point with regards to the interpretation and framing of the session and the polarization around different candidates in the media landscape. This not only encompasses the failed election session itself but also extends to various media outlets, both traditional and alternative, as well as interactions among users on social media platforms.
This election carries significant indicators, serving in the background as a referendum on Hezbollah’s armed presence, the relationship between Lebanon and the Syrian regime, and the specter of political violence in Lebanese political life overall. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri, leader of the Amal Movement, and Hezbollah, which are the two most influential Shiite political factions in the country, nominated former minister Sleiman Frangieh, the head of the Marada Movement and a longstanding ally of the Syrian regime. This nomination led anti-Hezbollah parties, namely the Lebanese Forces, the Kataeb Party, the Renewal Bloc (gathering Independence Movement MPs and their allies), and certain independent and opposition MPs, to throw their support behind former Minister of Finance Jihad Azour.

Conversely, Frangieh’s role in the Maronite Christian political landscape is relatively minor, as evidenced by the Marada Movement’s sole parliamentary representative, his son Tony Frangieh. Consequently, the second-largest Christian bloc, led by the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Gebran Bassil, son-in-law of former President Aoun and a Hezbollah ally, contested Frangieh’s nomination. Bassil’s opposition to Frangieh has led the FPM bloc to intersect with the aforementioned anti-Hezbollah parties and MPs in support of Jihad Azour. Some MPs, whether affiliated with the non-sectarian opposition or traditional parties, have expressed their rejection of the dichotomy between Frangieh and Azour, opting to vote for either former Minister of Interior and Municipalities Ziyad Baroud or Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Commander General Joseph Aoun.

Naturally, these contentious events have given rise to heated escalations in the online realm, particularly with regard to the scrutiny of the candidates themselves. The next section of this report will elaborate on the data and methods employed to extract popular sentiments and identify manufactured trends that incorporate elements of hate speech and misinformation. Additionally, we will provide a general interpretive analysis of the political landscape throughout this process.
Reputell has provided SKF with four comprehensive Twitter-extracted spreadsheets that delve into the tweets related to the four presidential candidates leading up to and during the June 14 session: Jihad Azour, Sleiman Frangieh, Ziyad Baroud, and Joseph Aoun. The spreadsheets contain detailed information such as tweet content, reach (retweets and likes), positioning (with, against, neutral), and political affiliation. Based on this data, we have organized the information into three subcategories:

1. Numbers and primary analysis: Through a basic survey of the extensive data across all four spreadsheets, we have focused on indicators related to the number of tweets and accounts supporting or opposing each candidate.

2. Indicators of political affiliation: To gain deeper insights, we conducted a more detailed micro-profiling exercise to determine the political affiliation of Twitter users. In this process, we eliminated users whose position on the elections was unclear or not explicit.

3. Qualitative and interpretive analysis: We examined highly retweeted or liked tweets that had a relatively significant impact compared to others. This analysis enables us to scrutinize thematic trends within different clusters of online communities.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that while the data and analyses are rich, this study does not provide a comprehensive view of the entire digital landscape. Instead, its focus is on identifying prominent actors, platforms used, and potential patterns, with a particular emphasis on human rights, free speech, and elements of political violence.
In this subsection, we will present the information pertaining to the first two categories of data. However, it is essential to acknowledge that the data, although extensive, has certain limitations. These limitations include unclean data and potential shortcomings in terms of randomness and representativeness. Despite these challenges, we will provide an analysis based on the available sample size.

**Figure 1. Number of tweets mentioning each candidate**

- **Jihad Azour**: 37,340 tweets (50.5%)
- **Sleiman Frangieh**: 29,942 tweets (40.5%)
- **Ziyad Baroud**: 5,354 tweets (7.2%)
- **Joseph Aoun**: 1,374 tweets (1.9%)

**Figure 2. Number of tweets mentioning each candidate**

- **Jihad Azour**: 37,340
- **Sleiman Frangieh**: 29,942
- **Ziyad Baroud**: 5,354
- **Joseph Aoun**: 1,374
The analysis of Twitter content over the monitoring period reveals that the majority of the Twitter conversation revolves around Jihad Azour and Sleiman Frangieh (as opposed to Joseph Aoun and Ziyad Baroud). This finding emphasizes the high level of polarization in the discussion surrounding the presidential election.

![Figure 3. Distribution of Jihad Azour-related tweet types](image)

A significant observation is that the majority of tweets mentioning Jihad Azour are retweets. This suggests that many users are primarily sharing and endorsing already-established opinions and news related to the matter, rather than formulating their own unique insights or perspectives.

![Figure 4. Distribution of user types in Jihad Azour-related tweets](image)
Figure 5. Distribution of Sleiman Frangieh-related tweet types

- Original: 11,072
- Retweets: 18,870
- Total tweets: 29,942

Figure 6. Distribution of user types in Sleiman Frangieh-related tweets

- Original contributors: 4,690
- Retweeters: 4,253
- Common: 1,100
Figure 7. Distribution of Ziyad Baroud-related tweet types

![Pie chart showing distribution of tweet types: Original (2,903), Retweets (2,451), Total tweets (5,354).]

Figure 8. Distribution of user types in Ziyad Baroud-related tweets

![Pie chart showing distribution of user types: Original contributors (1,070), Retweeters (1,674), Common (191).]
Figure 9. Distribution of Joseph Aoun-related tweet types

Original contributors: 310
Retweeters: 210
Common: 13
Total tweets: 1,374

Figure 10. Distribution of user types in Joseph Aoun-related tweets

Original contributors: 310
Retweeters: 210
Common: 13
When examining the number of tweets and accounts discussing the candidates, it is evident that there has been relatively limited content related to Ziyad Baroud and Joseph Aoun compared to Jihad Azour and Sleiman Frangieh. This is noteworthy considering that Joseph Aoun is reported to be a serious contender in the presidential race. The difference in attention and discussion surrounding these candidates raises interesting points for further analysis.

*Figure 11. Distribution of political affiliation behind Jihad Azour–related tweets*

![Figure 11. Distribution of political affiliation behind Jihad Azour–related tweets]

A significant majority of tweets mentioning Jihad Azour are attributed to Hezbollah, Amal, and their allies. This suggests a substantial level of “negative” campaigning from this group directed against Azour, along with their simultaneous “positive” campaigning in support of Sleiman Frangieh. The dominance of these factions in shaping the discourse highlights the intensity of their engagement to undermine the candidate in the days leading to the election session.

*Figure 12. Distribution of political affiliation behind Sleiman Frangieh-related tweets*

![Figure 12. Distribution of political affiliation behind Sleiman Frangieh–related tweets]
Independent activists and pro-Change MPs activists and political forces played a significant role in discussing and addressing Sleiman Frangieh’s candidacy, predominantly in opposition. Their involvement highlights their more active engagement in the discourse to oppose Frangieh’s candidacy compared to their involvement in support of Azour. Additionally, the data indicates a clear investment from Hezbollah and its allies in promoting Frangieh as a candidate.

An important observation from Figure 13 is the relatively large number of tweets originating from FPM partisans and supporters. This suggests that there is a notable debate and discussion taking place within FPM circles, possibly due to Ziyad Baroud’s previous alliance with the party, despite Gebran Bassil’s proclaimed support for Azour’s candidacy. The data indicates that there are differing opinions and perspectives within the FPM regarding the presidential election.

Figure 13. Distribution of political affiliation behind Ziyad Baroud-related tweets

Figure 14. Distribution of political affiliation behind Joseph Aoun-related tweets
The pie chart illustrates that there was limited deliberate investment from political forces in either promoting or countering Joseph Aoun’s candidacy. This can be attributed to the weak culture of proactive communication from or about the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and its Commander. The data suggests that various political actors may have refrained from actively endorsing or opposing Aoun’s candidacy to avoid burning bridges, especially if an international and local consensus eventually emerges in support of his election. The lack of substantial efforts from political forces in relation to Aoun’s candidacy reflects the cautious approach taken by these actors in navigating the evolving political landscape.

Figure 15. Distribution of themes in Jihad Azour-related tweets

Figure 16. Distribution of themes in Sleiman Frangieh-related tweets
What is noteworthy regarding the themes present in the monitored content across all candidates is the strikingly limited number of tweets that focus on policy matters. Instead, the predominant themes revolve around sectarianism, ad hominem attacks, security issues, and the case of Hezbollah’s arms and obstruction of constitutional processes, excluding other scattered miscellaneous content.
**Figure 19. Percentage of tweets per policy area, per candidate**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Presidential candidate</th>
<th>Human rights (%)</th>
<th>Ad hominem attacks (%)</th>
<th>Hate speech (%)</th>
<th>Economic issues &amp; policy (%)</th>
<th>Sovereignty and Hezbollah (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Jihad Azour (sample: 1,059)</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>15.77</td>
<td>3.78</td>
<td>8.21</td>
<td>6.32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sleiman Frangieh (sample: 426 tweets)</td>
<td>0.93</td>
<td>13.84</td>
<td>5.87</td>
<td>3.28</td>
<td>11.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ziyad Baroud (sample: 256)</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>4.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Aoun (sample: 141 tweets)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4.96</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.71</td>
<td>0.71</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ziyad Baroud’s name is primarily linked to the issue of human rights compared to the other candidates. Approximately 1.56% of tweets mentioning Baroud focus on human rights. Jihad Azour faces a significant amount of ad hominem attacks, with around 15.77% of tweets mentioning him containing vicious personal slurs. Tweets associated with Sleiman Frangieh often include hate speech targeting opponents and marginalized groups, accounting for approximately 5.87% of Frangieh-related tweets. Economic policies are more frequently discussed in tweets related to Jihad Azour, comprising nearly 8.21% of Azour-related tweets. Lastly, the debate concerning Lebanon’s sovereignty and Hezbollah’s weapons is relatively more prominent in tweets mentioning Sleiman Frangieh, specifically accounting for 11.03% of these tweets.

**Figure 20. Sentiment analysis of Jihad Azour-related tweets**

- Neutral: 54.5%
- Negative: 19.1%
- Positive: 26.4%
Figure 21. Sentiment analysis of Sleiman Frangieh-related tweets

- Neutral: 29.9%
- Negative: 31.4%
- Positive: 38.7%

Figure 22. Sentiment analysis of Ziyad Baroud-related tweets

- Neutral: 17.7%
- Negative: 43.1%
- Positive: 39.2%
In the pie charts above, the distribution of “feedback types” (positive, negative, neutral) highlights the extent to which certain candidates represent axes of tense political polarization, particularly Jihad Azour and Sleiman Frangieh (Figure 20 and Figure 21 respectively). In contrast, other candidates are associated with a more neutral popular sentiment, with Joseph Aoun being an extreme example of this.
Figure 25. Sentiment analysis of Sleiman Frangieh-related tweets as a function of time

- Week 1: Positive, Negative
- Week 2: Positive, Negative
- Week 3: Positive, Negative
- Week 4: Positive, Negative

Figure 26. Sentiment analysis of Ziyad Baroud-related tweets as a function of time

- Week 1: Positive, Negative
- Week 2: Positive, Negative
- Week 3: Positive, Negative
- Week 4: Positive, Negative
Furthermore, with the exception of tweets discussing Joseph Aoun, it is noteworthy that the overwhelming majority of positive and negative tweets related to Jihad Azour (Positive: 153; Negative: 502), Sleiman Frangieh (Positive: 223; Negative: 140), and Ziyad Baroud (Positive: 240; Negative: 120) emerged during the last week of the monitoring period, which was one week before the session on June 14. This observation suggests that the public debate is primarily reactive to events orchestrated by the country’s ruling sectarian political forces rather than being a result of long-term and robust issue-based campaigning. It also indicates a strong yet late involvement of pro-Hezbollah accounts in the online debate, actively seeking to influence public perception and create a hype around Sleiman Frangieh’s candidacy while undermining Jihad Azour’s standing through negative campaigning. Hezbollah’s efforts to shape the narrative around Frangieh and Azour demonstrate a deliberate attempt to sway public opinion in favor of their preferred candidate while discrediting his opponent.
The sentiment analysis presented above reveals important implications regarding the campaigning strategies employed to promote or delegitimize specific presidential candidates. Notably, a majority of tweets mentioning Jihad Azour convey a negative sentiment (54.5% - Figure 29). When considering that a significant portion of these Azour-related tweets (64.7% - Figure 11) comes from Hezbollah partisans and supporters, it becomes evident that “negative campaigning,” primarily in the form of ad hominem attacks, played a prominent role in portraying Jihad Azour as a candidate. This negative sentiment is in stark contrast to the strong “positive campaigning” (38.7% - Figure 28) aimed at emphasizing Sleiman Frangieh’s alignment with Hezbollah’s political agenda and foreign policy.
INTERPRETIVE ANALYSIS

The interpretive analysis focuses on closely examining specific content based on: (1) the terms used and their broader implications, (2) sociological references and allusions related to sect, class, religion, or gender, and (3) the “Twitter crowds” that are more receptive to a particular tweet or Twitter users.

SLEIMAN FRANGIEH “VERSUS” JIHAD AZOUR

Unlike the other candidates, Sleiman Frangieh made it unambiguously clear that he is running for President, releasing a set of tweets and statements from his personal account. These messages emphasize his political stance, including clear support for Hezbollah’s armed presence, opposition to sectarian partition, and so-called pan-Arab sentiments. Frangieh also highlights his personal character and close association and friendship with the Syrian president, further strengthening the geopolitical backing dimension. His supporters, whether from his own party and family members, as well as affiliates of Hezbollah and the Amal Movement, praise his unwavering loyalty to the “resistance” project spearheaded by Hezbollah and Bashar Al-Assad.

Moreover, Frangieh’s supporters, including journalists, influencers, or partisan activists, have focused their efforts on delegitimizing Jihad Azour and the broader coalition supporting his candidacy. They suggest that the coalition backing Azour is unstable and fragmented, highlight Azour’s history of alleged detrimental financial policies during his tenure at the Ministry of Finance in a cabinet headed by the controversial former Prime Minister Fouad Siniora, and raise suspicions about the movement supporting Azour’s candidacy, particularly regarding alleged ties to the United States and Israel. Notably, this rhetoric sometimes hints at political violence. For example, the Hezbollah-aligned newspaper Al-Akhbar featured a cover before the June 14 session that combined the faces of Jihad Azour and the late Mohamad Chatah, also a former Finance minister, Syrian regime and Hezbollah critic, who was assassinated in 2013. Furthermore, critics of Azour, even if not necessarily aligned with Frangieh, have accused him of “complicity” in various corruption deals, including but not restricted to alleged family “partnerships” with Gebran Bassil in the Mseilha Dam project. These accusations have been simplified into infographic visuals and videos containing half-truths and misinformation. More worryingly, homophobic slurs and questions about Azour’s sexuality were recurrently used to tarnish his reputation among a conservative constituency.
On the other hand, supporters of Azour have primarily focused on lobbying public opinion and hesitant MPs to support his candidacy in an effort to weaken Frangieh’s position as a presidential candidate. To this subgroup of Twitter users and pundits, Frangieh is a candidate who lacks representativeness and is imposed by Hezbollah and Speaker Nabih Berri. Frangieh’s candidacy is only made viable given Hezbollah’s ability to leverage violence and threats and Berri’s history in blocking the parliamentary process. While some have highlighted Azour’s credentials as a successful and highly connected and qualified economist at the International Monetary Fund (IMF), others, who are less interested in Azour’s qualifications, view him solely as a means to weaken Frangieh’s candidacy.

**ZIYAD BAROUD: INTRUDER POLITICS**

In the case of Ziyad Baroud, his name has mostly appeared in response to the dominant “Frangieh vs. Azour” discussion outlined above. Sleiman Frangieh himself dismissed Baroud in a speech and through a tweet that employed problematic homophobic innuendo commonly used in the local lingo to undermine male competitors. He used a term doubting Baroud’s masculinity and inferring his weakness to lead an increasingly polarized country. Interestingly, Frangieh faced widespread criticism for the use of this term, prompting a response from Ziyad Baroud himself.
TAKE-AWAYS: TRENDS AND FINDINGS

Based on the quantitative and interpretive analysis presented in the previous sections, the monitoring process has revealed several key trends:

■ Ad hominem attacks, hate speech (particularly homophobia), and misinformation were frequently employed by political actors online to delegitimize or promote specific presidential candidates.

■ Hezbollah partisans and supporters are the primary agents behind such behavior, exploiting or fabricating their opponents’ affiliations with external forces to enhance their candidate’s image among the public.

■ Sectarian forces in Lebanon have effectively co-opted the digital sphere, which was once utilized by alternative personalities and groups. The online space now serves as a platform for expressing polarizing national sentiments and for traditional political parties to crowd out nuanced voices.

■ The primary focus of the discussion revolves around the political contestation between Jihad Azour and Sleiman Frangieh. Conversations regarding Ziyad Baroud and Joseph Aoun are only relevant in connection to this contestation.

■ The distribution of original tweets and retweets mentioning each candidate indicates varying patterns in how different forces engage with the platform (section “Charts and Figures”). Notably, there is a higher proportion of original contributors in tweets mentioning Sleiman Frangieh compared to those mentioning Jihad Azour.

■ Change and independent forces played a crucial role in online debates, addressing the implications of a Frangieh presidency and the tactical considerations behind the choice to vote for Jihad Azour.

■ Political partisans supporting Frangieh, aligned with Hezbollah, actively promoted his candidacy, accounting for a significant share of the tweets mentioning Frangieh during the monitoring period. Interestingly, the same group of partisans also constituted the majority of tweets mentioning Azour, further reaffirming the importance of “negative” campaigning in their pursuit of political gains.