

## Sectarian Disinformation: How Truth Is Lost in the New Syria



Photo: Samer Al-Doumy (AFP).

In post-Assad Syria, the battles have shifted to the digital realm, where social media platforms have become new arenas for fueling sectarian divisions and stoking communal violence.

With every security flare-up or political upheaval, a flood of fake news and doctored videos emerges, designed to provoke emotions and rekindle hate speech.

As a result, Syrians find themselves immersed in a media landscape saturated with disinformation, where distinguishing fact from fiction has become increasingly difficult.

The recent events in Sweida reveal the depths of this crisis. Armed clashes were accompanied by a wave of fabricated videos falsely claiming massacres or bombings by government forces—footage that was later found to belong to different times and places.

What is striking is the calculated nature of this disinformation, which plays on identity and affiliation, reinforcing divisions within Syrian society.

It exploits an information ecosystem riddled with fragility, mistrust, and a readiness to believe anything that reinforces one's sectarian or political narrative.

This phenomenon goes beyond mere polarization. It is exacerbated by foreign actors who deploy disinformation as a strategic tool to deepen Syria's societal fractures. These campaigns capitalize on the institutional collapse that followed the regime's downfall and on the vacuum left by the absence of a unified official narrative.

In today's Syria, a piece of fake news is more than just a lie—it is a potential detonator, capable of inciting violence, igniting unrest, or destroying any remaining hope for long-awaited national recovery.

### Why Lies Dominate the Syrian Narrative

There's a well-known adage taught to journalism students, attributed to psychologist Jonathan Foster: "If one person tells you it's raining and another says it's sunny, don't just quote them—look out the window yourself." The point is clear: verify before believing. Even if you can't witness an event firsthand, you should consult trustworthy sources—or at least maintain skepticism until truth is confirmed.

This principle is urgently applicable to Syria today, where a torrent of misleading content has flooded the digital space. Far from merely confusing the public, this content has directly contributed to escalating tensions on the ground.

Fact-checking is no longer just a professional duty for journalists—it has become a personal necessity for anyone engaging with online content, especially during moments of security crises or political polarization.

One stark example is a video posted by Lebanese Tawhid Party leader Wiam Wahhab, which purported to show a government airstrike on Sweida. The footage was later revealed to date back to 2022 and depicted a Russian strike on Kharkiv, Ukraine.

The real danger, however, lies not only in distorting public perception or undermining narratives, but in triggering real-world crises. In April, a fake audio recording allegedly insulting the Prophet Muhammad sparked deadly clashes in the predominantly Druze towns of Jaramana and Sahnaya, near Damascus,

resulting in numerous casualties, including security personnel.

Although the Interior Ministry later denied the audio's authenticity, the damage was already done—another painful reminder that a doctored word can be as lethal as a bullet.

Compounding the danger is the phenomenon known as the “illusory truth effect,” where repeated exposure to a piece of information increases its perceived credibility, even if it's implausible or contradicts one's own beliefs. In such cases, users tend to share and react to content as though it were real.

This effect is particularly devastating in Syria's polarized environment. Ahmad Primo, executive director of the “Taqqad” platform, notes that Syria is especially vulnerable to disinformation due to deep societal divides. Every major security event—like those in Sweida in July or on the coast in March—triggers a parallel battle online, where fake news is weaponized to inflame emotional biases.

These observations are echoed in a study titled *The Psychology of Fake News*, which highlights how fabricated content often leverages intense emotions—shock, fear, anger, moral outrage—to make audiences more susceptible to believing and sharing it. If a story reinforces one's preexisting beliefs or sectarian identity, the likelihood of spreading it rises dramatically.

This was evident in a video circulated during the Sweida clashes, allegedly showing the al-Hajri militia executing six civilians in the city center. The video actually dated back to 2022 and depicted a field execution by fighters loyal to Laith al-Balous against members of the Raji Falhout group.

A report by the Atlantic Council points out that rumors in Syria have not been mere informational anomalies—they've been deliberately weaponized to spread fear and deepen sectarian rifts, especially after the fall of the regime. The report documents how fabricated stories of massacres and looming revenge campaigns created panic in Alawite-majority areas along the coast, intensifying existential anxiety among specific communities.

Throughout the Syrian conflict, regional and international actors have used social media as a covert battleground to manipulate public opinion and dominate narratives. Ahmad Primo emphasizes that these tactics did not end with the fall of the regime.

The Atlantic Council report details coordinated disinformation campaigns by actors such as Iran, Israel, and Hezbollah, exploiting Syria's broken media landscape to inflame sectarianism and sow distrust—ultimately reshaping the local power dynamic under the cover of information chaos.

In the same vein, a BBC investigative report published in May uncovered intense

activity by foreign-linked accounts on X (formerly Twitter) during the coastal rebellion. Of 50,000 posts, 60% originated outside Syria, primarily from Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Iran. One widely shared falsehood claimed that a priest from Mar Elias Church had been executed by “Julani’s gangs”—a story later debunked by the church itself.

The investigation also revealed parallel activity by accounts operated from Saudi Arabia and Turkey, which, since November 2024, had published around 100,000 incendiary comments targeting the Alawite community. Many of these posts used explicit sectarian slurs such as “Nusayri,” “infidels,” and “Alawite clique.”

These campaigns appear neither spontaneous nor sporadic, but organized and ongoing. Syrian Information Minister Hamzeh al-Mustafa recently announced that the country is facing sustained cyber-attacks, reporting that some 300,000 accounts from four main countries are actively spreading disinformation.

In this toxic atmosphere, fact-checking platforms have emerged as a critical line of defense. Al Jazeera’s “Sanad” agency, for instance, debunked ten false claims within just 48 hours, including a video allegedly showing President Ahmad al-Shara among fighters in Sweida. The footage was traced back to an earlier visit to rural Idlib in early 2024.

Social media algorithms operate on a simple yet perilous logic: what you engage with, you get more of. Merely watching or sharing a post primes the algorithm to feed you similar content—regardless of its truth. In Syria’s charged environment, this creates a feedback loop that amplifies falsehoods, deepens divisions, and spreads hatred.

Ahmad Primo warns that these algorithms prioritize profit, not truth. They promote the most provocative content, regardless of accuracy. For content creators, who earn money based on view counts, fake news becomes an easy path to virality and profit—fueling an unregulated disinformation market.

In her book *How Civil Wars Start—and How to Stop Them*, researcher Barbara Walter identifies deep identity-based divisions, particularly when armed and led by opportunistic figures, as key precursors to state collapse. She highlights the role of social media in accelerating this disintegration through algorithms that amplify fear and anger, granting lies a louder voice than facts.

### The Information Vacuum in New Syria

While fake news is a global phenomenon, its impact is far more severe in fragile contexts like post-Assad Syria. The sensitive political transition has coincided with the collapse of the state media system, creating a deep information vacuum—a perfect storm for the spread of rumors.

Since the complete shutdown of state media in December, Syrians have come to rely almost entirely on social platforms, especially Facebook, as their primary source of news.

In this vacuum, the power of fabricated content has grown exponentially. With no reliable official sources covering or responding to developments, disinformation thrives.

Primo notes that the transitional government's failure to fill this gap has worsened the crisis from delays in appointing spokespersons or establishing unified communication platforms to poor coordination between ministries and a confused response to major events like the coastal rebellion or the Sweida clashes.

Its sluggish media performance and imprecise messaging have left a dangerous void.

Primo concedes that the government's inexperience may partly explain this disarray. Lacking both institutional capacity and crisis-management expertise, the administration faces challenges that even established governments often struggle with—let alone one rising from the rubble of authoritarianism and war.

In Syria's case, fake news has become a tool of mobilization and incitement, a weapon to demonize opponents and redraw the lines of division. Combating disinformation must now be a national priority.

It is a wake-up call for the transitional government to fill the information gap and build a transparent, effective communication system—one that shields society from digital discord and empowers Syrians to pause and verify before they believe or share.