

Why disinformation about Syria has been going viral on TikTok

Michal Kranz

Hussein Hajj, a native of Deir ez-Zor in eastern Syria, has been living in Toronto, Canada since 2018. But even from afar, he has continued to speak out against the government of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad online. Although Hajj gets most of his news about the Syrian conflict from Twitter, Telegram, and WhatsApp, TikTok has become his megaphone.

“The people who use TikTok to as a platform to support the Syrian revolution are a minority,” Hajj said, referring to the anti-Assad opposition in the country. “There are many Syrians who are with the revolution who use TikTok, but don’t mention the topic of the revolution.”

But along with making his voice heard on the platform, Hajj has had to combat disinformation on TikTok, both from misinformed users and Assadists themselves.

“There are many people that were spreading the false idea that in Syria the war is sectarian, or that Assad is fighting terrorism,” he said. “Our mission as Syrian activists is to show the real situation in Syria.”

Although the reach of overtly regime-linked activity on TikTok remains limited, more broadly accessible misinformation about the Syrian conflict can be found all over the platform, with demonstrably inaccurate videos about the Syrian war being viewed and liked millions of times. Syria-focused disinformation on TikTok does not appear to be as widespread as on other platforms, but the propensity for individual pieces of content to go viral as a result of TikTok’s unique interface, young user base, highly personalized sharing mechanism, and uneven moderation seem to have allowed misleading content about the Syrian War to take root more easily. The nature of the platform and the type of content posted on it means that most Syrians on TikTok are there for apolitical reasons, and have looked to other social media platforms to get news from back home and to stay in touch with their communities.

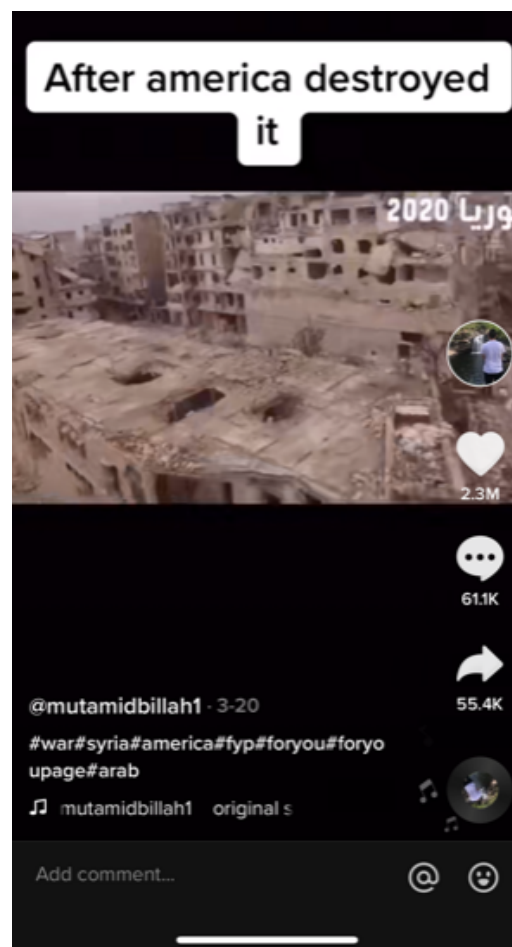
“There’s a particularly odd circumstance to the war in Syria, which is how it has evolved and what it means now is very difficult to comprehend,” said Cameron Hickey, the program director at the Algorithmic Transparency National Conference on Citizenship who has studied disinformation on social media platforms including TikTok. “It’s not clear even where the United States and its foreign policy [is]. All of these factors are equally as important in creating the right atmosphere for mis- and disinformation.”

The US has been involved on the ground in Syria since it launched [Operation Inherent Resolve](#) in 2014 to combat the spread of the Islamic State. The US has since funded the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), supported their campaign against the fundamentalist group with airstrikes, and has set up military bases in the country’s southeast and northeast.

An [Amnesty International report](#) from 2019 claimed that the US-led coalition was responsible for as many as 1,600 civilian casualties during its 2017 campaign to capture Raqqa, the Islamic

State's capital at the time. But by far the most widespread disinformation narrative spread on TikTok since 2020 has claimed that the United States has been chiefly responsible for destruction across all of Syria, rather than the Assad government and the Russian military, who have indiscriminately bombed [residential areas](#), [hospitals](#), and [schools](#) in various opposition-held areas and killed [hundreds of thousands of civilians](#) in the process.

One video in particular, posted on March 20 by a British Syrian user, shows images of Syria before and after "[A]merica destroyed it," all while displaying images of cities like Homs and Aleppo which were bombed by the Syrian military and its allies. Another video posted on January 15 places the blame for Syria's destruction equally on "America Russia and any other foreign invaders," while yet another posted on December 29 of last year begrudges that "this is where the American tax money goes," while showing a picture of a bloodied Syrian boy. The [original picture](#) of the boy however is from 2012, long before the United States became involved in Syria, and was taken by AFP photographer Aris Messinis after an Assad regime helicopter shelled the boy's home in Aleppo.



A screenshot of the viral video from March 20

While the number of views for the latter two videos numbered in the hundreds of thousands, the first video was viewed over nine million times.

Although research on TikTok as a venue for disinformation remains in its infancy, Hickey hypothesized that the unique user interface on the platform which recommends content from accounts that users don't necessarily follow may allow disinformation to spread more easily.

"The chance that you will see something that relates to your interests but does not come from someone you already know and trust is higher on ticktock as a result," Hickey said. "Therefore, the potential for content to go viral in ways that are less controlled would seem to possibly be higher."

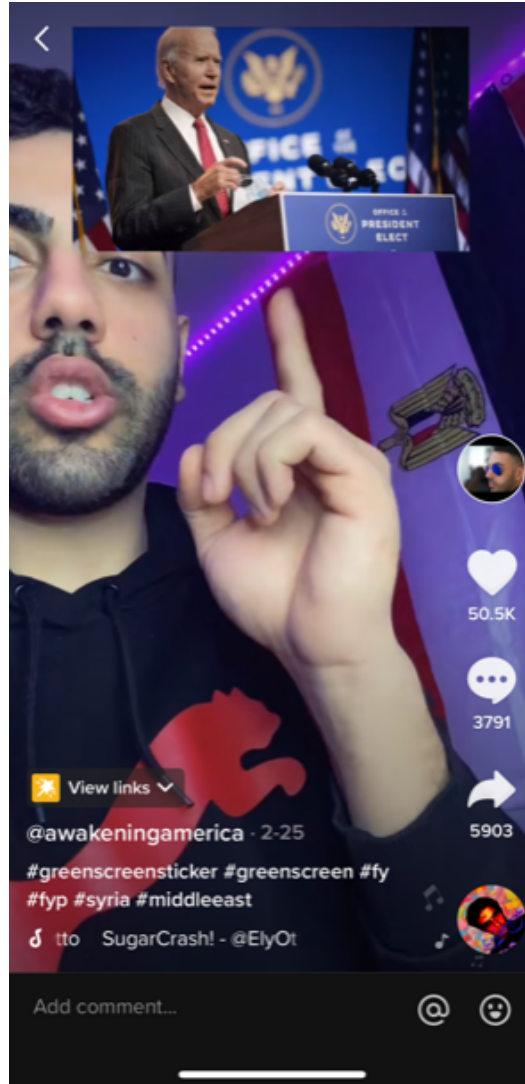
Unlike the retweet on Twitter for example, content amplification on TikTok is highly customizable, and prompts users to either "duet" or "stitch" the video in order to share it. Both options require the user to create a new piece of content which may or may not feature the original video in its entirety. What results resembles a game of telephone, where every person in the line of transmission interprets the content in question, adds their own input, and passes it along in a subtly altered form.

In this way, reshared videos become unique pieces of content in and of themselves — the March 20 video was a reshare of another video that presented images of Syria in 2010 and after the war in 2020, but with an added, inaccurate caption, the message of the video was entirely transformed from its original. Reshares of this new video, which often took the form of reaction "duets" in which a user shares their own video side-by-side with the original, also garnered hundreds of thousands of views on their own.

According to Hickey, the young age of many users on TikTok plays a role in disinformation about a far-away conflict that began over a decade ago.

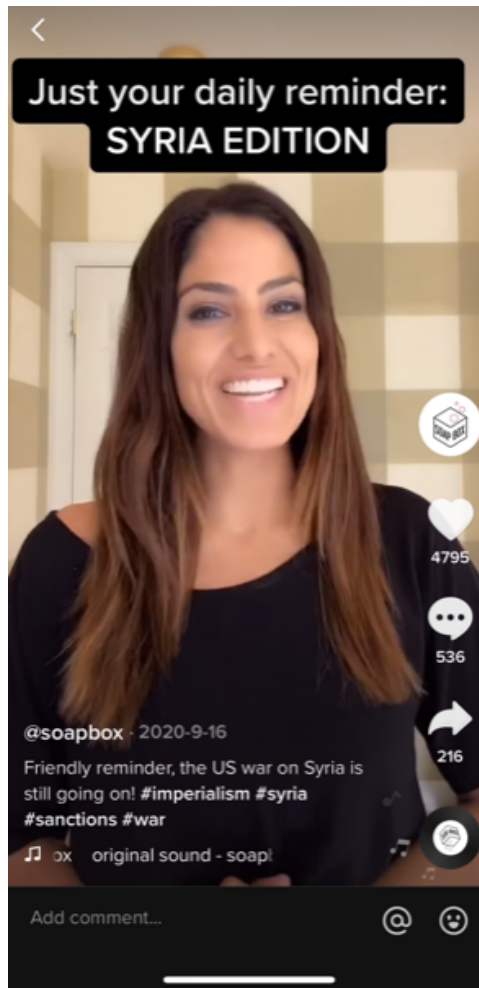
As one American TikTok user who created a "duet" with the March 20 video put it, "I was like seven when these buildings were around. I didn't even know this place used to be, like, beautiful... I knew we had something to do with the destruction of it, but I didn't know at what extent. This place used to be a paradise. What the fuck, why were we there?"

A key moment for many otherwise uninformed observers took place on February 25 of this year when President Joe Biden [ordered a strike](#) against Iran-backed militias in eastern Syria. This event set off a flurry of activity in Syria-focused TikTok spaces, with users comparing the one-off air strike to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, resharing videos of Assad government airstrikes while suggesting they were perpetrated by Biden, and contrasting the strike with four years of "peace" under former President Donald Trump. Trump however struck Syrian government positions twice during his presidency — once [in 2017](#) and once [in 2018](#).



A screenshot of one of the videos posted in response to Biden's February Syria strike

The majority of this type of disinformation content appears to have indeed been shared by under-informed users reacting to headlines and videos as they were seeing them. But less detached users have also been active in the Syria disinformation space as well. Rania Khalek, a Lebanese-American journalist who [frequently appeared](#) on Russian government-funded news outlets RT and Sputnik and, according to [Bellingcat](#), received a cash prize from the Assad government, has frequently posted on a TikTok channel called @soapbox, which is hosted by her and other contributors. Khalek has posted videos on the channel which denied that Assad had used chemical weapons on civilians, alleged that the US had organized a coup in Syria, and that America had armed Al-Qaeda in the country. Some of these videos have racked up over 700,000 views.



A screenshot of one of Rania Khalek's videos from 2020

According to TikTok's [community guidelines](#), misinformation that incites hatred, harms users, creates "panic," and denies tragic events is banned, although misinformation alone is not mentioned as grounds for punitive action. The platform released a [transparency report](#) earlier this year about actions it had taken to enforce its guidelines in 2020, however in the Syria-focused realm, little action appears to have been taken.

One particularly notable TikTok video which purported to show a woman begging Biden to stop bombing Syria was [fact-checked by the AFP](#) in March 2021 and was later taken down by TikTok itself (the original video was taken in 2019 and was unrelated to Biden's airstrikes). Yet the March 20 video that garnered two million likes and nine million views has remained available, and many other flagrantly inaccurate videos like Khalek's have avoided moderation.

Meanwhile, TikTok suspended Hajj's account on May 1 for the second time in two months. Hajj blames TikTok's reporting system, which he said allowed pro-Assad users, often called the regime's "electronic army" by opposition Syrians, to baselessly flag his videos.

“TikTok is like a dictatorial regime,” Hajj claimed, faulting the platform for its design and its unresponsiveness to his concerns.

TikTok could not be reached for comment.

For Syrians like Sarah Esper, a Syrian Christian who has been living in Pennsylvania since 2017, TikTok’s short video format opens the door for incomplete understandings of the Syrian conflict, especially because TikTok is not available in Syria.

“For me, I feel like that would give [users] the opportunity to talk about incorrect information or maybe false information,” Esper said. “That’s because they are only seeing a part, not the whole thing.”

Unlike Hajj, Esper is not involved in politics on TikTok, and instead uses it to promote her acting work and to practice English. She said she relies on other platforms like WhatsApp to keep up with her friends in the country, and has managed to visit in December of last year. Despite having left Syria when she was in her early teens, she continues to treasure her early memories of the country before the war began in 2011.

Another Syrian on TikTok, Sandra Salibi, feels similarly, but has no plans to visit anytime soon.

“I don’t want to go there unless the country gets better because I don’t want to see it the way it is right now,” Salibi said. “I’d rather keep the good memories.”

Rather than using TikTok as a way to keep up on events in Syria, Salibi said it’s more useful as a means of escape.

“I don’t want to see what’s happening there because it just hurts,” she said. “On TikTok, the ‘for you’ page for me, it’s just never about Syria.”

TikTok’s many apparent shortcomings when it comes to discouraging disinformation and connecting like minded diaspora communities have only recently begun to be unearthed, and much work still needs to be done. Although the platform has claimed to have taken steps to mitigate rule-breaking, it appears to have failed to flag and moderate misleading content as other social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have, allowing false information about topics like Syria to spread largely unencumbered across its user base. TikTok’s younger users, many of whom were not politically aware when the Syrian war began, appear to be getting a great deal of exposure to it now as a result of their engagement on the platform, which means they be forming political viewpoints on the conflict for the first time. For Syrians and non-Syrians alike, the consequences on public opinion about the war could be enormous.