

Syria Wages Cyber Warfare as Websites Hacked

By ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

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While Syrian protesters and security forces are engaged in a war of attrition on the ground, a different kind of battle is emerging online.

Pro- and anti-government activists in Syria are increasingly turning to the Internet, hacking and defacing websites in an attempt to win a public relations victory.

Shadowy online activist groups have hacked into at least 12 Syrian government websites in recent days, replacing their content with interactive maps and statements detailing atrocities by security forces against protesters.

The groups say their actions are in response to the regime's tactics.

Since early in the uprising, a group of pro-government hackers known as the Syrian Electronic Army has used the Internet to attack opposition activists and their perceived backers, flooding Facebook and other social networking sites with pro-regime messages like 'I love Bashar' or other, often threatening, statements.

On Monday, pro-Assad hackers briefly defaced Harvard University's website, replacing the home page with an image of Assad together with a message accusing the U.S. of supporting the uprising against him and threatening retaliation.

The hackers posted a message claiming "Syrian Electronic Army were here."

Harvard spokesman John Longrake said the attack appeared to be the work of "a sophisticated individual or group."

Other websites or Facebook pages reportedly targeted by the group include those of Oprah Winfrey, Newsweek magazine and Brad Pitt. Pitt's partner, Angelina Jolie, is a U.N. goodwill ambassador who visited thousands of Syrian refugees in Turkey in June.

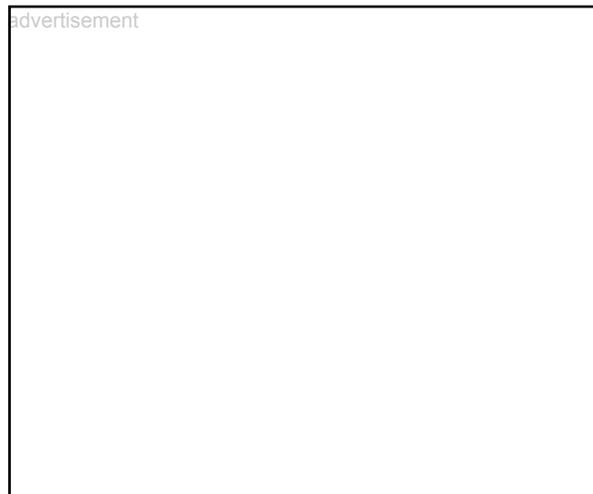
"The Syrian Electronic Army has been trying to root out prominent activists in Syria and recent evidence suggests it has begun waging cyber-war against entities from countries that oppose the regime," said Anthony Skinner, associate director at Maplecroft, a British-based risk analysis company.

The Syrian Electronic Army claims on its Facebook page that it has no affiliation with the Assad regime and was founded by ordinary Syrians who want to defend the country against "fabrications and distortions of events in Syria."

But anti-government activists say they are certain the group was formed by Syrian intelligence agents and die-hard Assad supporters and volunteers.

Assad praised their efforts in a speech in June in which he lauded the role of young people in the effort, describing the group as a "real army in a virtual reality."

The group's actions were damaging at first, said Omar Idilbi, a spokesman for the Local Coordination Committees, a grass roots anti-government activist group. But the impact of the online attacks has been limited since counterattacks were launched by the hacker group Anonymous as well as two other loose groupings of hackers made up mostly of Syrian



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activists, the so-called Free Hackers Union and RevoluSec.

"It is an electronic war. It's legitimate. As long as it isn't hurting anyone, we are ready to wage it until the end," Idilbi said.

He said the difference between the tactics of anti-government hackers and the Syria Electronic Army was that the latter publishes threats against anti-government activists along with their phone numbers and addresses, putting their lives in danger.

RevoluSec and Anonymous said Monday they were behind the latest attacks targeting the websites of several Syrian government ministries and some major Syrian cities.

The activists said they replaced the websites with caricatures of Assad and messages that read: "Don't let Bashar monitor you online."

They also published interactive maps detailing casualty figures since the start of the uprising.

Skinner said Monday's hacking shows that the Syrian government has not erected sufficient defensive safeguards, despite reported training from its ally Iran on how to deal with the protest movement and mounting a sophisticated response.

The online attacks "underscore its vulnerability to curve-ball attacks," he said. "It will undoubtedly require a strong response from the regime on the PR front."

Anonymous said on its website that 12 government websites had been defaced by RevoluSec. Most have since been restored, but some were still down. The cartoons of Assad were removed.

"We hear that Syrian President Assad likes computers. Guess what? So do we," read a message Monday on the Twitter account of RevoluSec.

"Our goal is to raise public awareness of the abhorrent actions of the brutal Assad regime and the bloody war that it wages on its own people," a member of the group told The Associated Press Tuesday, speaking on condition of anonymity for fear of government retaliation.

Assad, a British-trained eye-doctor who succeeded his father as president, was once seen as someone who could herald reforms in Syria. Prior to becoming president in 2000, he headed Syria's Computer Society and pushed youth to become more computer-

savvy.

Now activists seeking to oust him are using the Internet as a weapon against his rule, uploading graphic videos shot in secret of assaults on protesters and using social media websites to organize protests and relay messages.

Syria has banned journalists from reporting on the unrest, but videos posted online by activists have offered a rare and crucial glimpse into the far reaches of the country where the military has been deployed to crush protests.

Assad's regime tightly controls traditional media outlets in Syria, such as television, radio and newspapers. State-run channels often blame the unrest on a foreign-inspired conspiracy and Islamic extremists.

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