

## **Dissidents Shift Discussion to Web**

Once crushed political forum starts thriving Facebook group.  
A Syrian pro-democracy forum that was shut down by the authorities in 2005 has found a new life in cyberspace and discussion is thriving.

The Atassi forum has rallied more than 250 members to its Facebook group to share views on civic issues that are not aired in the state-controlled and state-monitored media.

The police state bars intellectuals and dissidents from holding that kind of discussion face to face.

Now pro-democracy groups are hoping that social networks like Facebook will help give vigour to their cause and connect opponents inside and outside the country, despite official attempts to block them.

The Atassi forum, once a thriving social gathering of eminent Syrian intellectuals and political dissidents, launched its Facebook group in December in order to hold discussions about democracy-related issues, like the future of peaceful civil movements.

In a few weeks, the group has managed to attract more than 270 members, including prominent thinkers and dissidents living in Syria or exiled.

“Our goal is simple,” said Suheir al-Atassi, the forum’s president. “We want to pursue the dialogue, which had been interrupted, in order to reach a deeper understanding of our causes and find solutions together.”

The original Atassi National Dialogue Forum was named in memory of Jamal Atassi, Suheir’s father and a leading Syrian ideologue and staunch supporter of Arab nationalism who died in 2000. It started in 2001 along with more than 70 other intellectual forums in a period that was known as “the Damascus Spring”.

Political discussion groups mushroomed in this period, following the death of Syrian president Hafez al-Assad, when dissidents saw a window of opportunity to press for democratic reforms.

But the movement was quickly crushed by the regime’s hardliners, who argued that, against a backdrop of external threats, reformers were jeopardising Syria’s domestic unity and stability.

The forums were forcibly shut one after another and civil society activists were jailed. The Atassi salon under Suheir Atassi was the last to survive, being tolerated until 2005. It was then abruptly closed down after one member read a statement from the banned Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist organisation that was brutally crushed by the Baath regime in the 1980s.

Security forces encircled the building where the forum was being held, blocking access. Eight of the group’s leading members were arrested.

Atassi said the forum has spent the last five years trying to regain its place in the public arena.

At first, small-scale discussions were held on Facebook until an official virtual version of the Atassi forum was launched on December 26 last year, she said.

The group members vote on the site to choose a topic of discussion, Atassi explained.

After that, a member drafts a paper around the selected topic, which becomes the subject of an open debate for two weeks. A comprehensive report is then put together encompassing the main recommendations and opinions and then posted on various websites.

The three topics that have been discussed so far are youth and its participation in public affairs, non-violent struggle and the future of the Damascus Declaration, a banned coalition of Syrian dissidents whose main leaders are currently prisoners of conscience.

Although the authorities in Syria barred access to Facebook in November 2007, officially to prevent direct communication between Syrians and Israelis, observers say that the site is one of the most popular in the country, especially among young people.

Internet users can easily connect to Facebook using proxy servers, which trick the censors by masking the details of the connection. Other websites, including Twitter and MySpace, are also used by Syrian youth and activists but to a lesser extent.

One of the main benefits of this new form of discussion for Syrian dissidents is that it allows opponents inside and outside the country to communicate.

“The internet is today my only window into Syria,” said Samir al-Dakhil, a Syrian dissident living in Beirut. He said he could not meet or call his colleagues because most of them were banned from travelling outside the country and their telephones are tapped by the security services.

A political analyst, who asked to remain anonymous, said that it was vital for dissidents inside the nation to attract the attention of the large Syrian diaspora and engage their interest in Syrian affairs.

“Syrians abroad can make a difference, first, because they are not afraid, and second because they live in democratic nations where they have the freedom to organise demonstrations and pressure groups against the Syrian regime and its repression of freedoms,” he said.

Inside Syria, the authorities regularly crack down on cyber dissidents. In September, Karim Arabji was sentenced to three years in jail for “spreading false news”, one of nearly a dozen individuals identified as bloggers who are believed to be in prison.

Many participants in the forum use nicknames to conceal their identity from authorities.

But despite fears, Atassi said she was hopeful.

She said that members of the forum abroad will ensure the continuity of discussions regardless of restrictions imposed inside the country.

“This time they won’t be able to block access to the forum because we have the means to break any siege,” she said.

**Location:** [Syria](#)

**Focus:** [Syria](#)

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