

Social Media Insights from the Middle East in 2023



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About this Report / Introduction

This report examines social media trends and developments across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region during 2023. Now in its twelfth year of publication, this annual study continues a tradition that began in 2012 of documenting how social media platforms, practices, and policies evolve across one of the world's most dynamic digital landscapes.

The analysis draws on research from over 100 sources, including industry reports, academic studies, news media coverage, platform announcements, and social media posts. This curated approach allows us to identify key themes and developments that shaped the regional digital ecosystem throughout the year, from platform innovations and creator economy growth to content moderation challenges and freedom of expression concerns.

It goes without saying that 2023 proved to be a particularly consequential year for social media in the Middle East. The outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October placed unprecedented pressure on content moderation systems, exposed algorithmic biases, and intensified debates about misinformation, hate speech, and the responsibilities of platforms operating in complex geopolitical environments. Simultaneously, the region witnessed continued commercial expansion, with platforms launching new monetization features, e-commerce initiatives, and partnerships with regional content creators and brands.

Three overarching themes emerged from our analysis of 2023:

First, platform innovation and regional partnerships accelerated, with Meta, Snapchat, YouTube, and TikTok all launching new services, creator tools, and commercial initiatives tailored to MENA markets. From augmented reality lenses celebrating Saudi culture to expanded monetization opportunities for creators across seven countries, platforms demonstrated sustained commitment to the region's lucrative and growing user base.

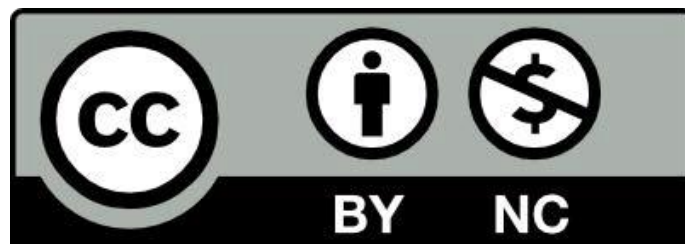
Second, concerns intensified about social media's impact on youth wellbeing and addiction. The Arab Youth Survey 2023 revealed that nearly three-quarters of young people surveyed struggle to disconnect from social media, while health professionals warned about rising eating disorders linked to platform content. These findings prompted renewed questions about platform design, algorithmic amplification, and the psychological toll of constant connectivity.

Third, the role of social media in spreading misinformation and facilitating government surveillance came under sharp scrutiny. From allegations that X shared user data with Saudi authorities to Meta's contested moderation of Palestine-related content, 2023 highlighted ongoing tensions between platforms' commercial interests, users' rights to free expression, and governments' demands for control over digital discourse.

As in previous years, this report examines major platforms individually—including Meta's properties (Facebook and Instagram), messaging apps, Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, and X (formerly Twitter)—before turning to thematic analyses of the influencer economy, freedom of expression, and misinformation challenges. A regional comparison table and key statistics throughout provide context for understanding how social media adoption and usage patterns vary across the diverse nations of the Middle East and North Africa.

The research documents a region where social media continues to serve simultaneously as a space for creative expression, commercial opportunity, political organizing, and social connection—even as platforms face mounting pressures to address content harms, protect user privacy, and navigate the competing demands of users, advertisers, and governments across dramatically different political and cultural contexts.

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Executive Summary

This report examines social media trends in the Middle East during 2023. To help us do this, as in [previous annual studies](#) we examined data and information from over 100 different online sources. This includes industry reports, news media coverage, interviews, and articles.

Although there are numerous trends and developments contained throughout this report, in this section we highly three main themes from 2023.

Theme 1: Social media innovation and collaborations

A host of new services launched in the Middle East region from Meta, Snapchat, YouTube and TikTok.

- Meta expanded its paid verification service, Meta Verified, to Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The paid service, which is available on Facebook and Instagram, provides users with enhanced account support, including a blue check mark, exclusive features, and increased visibility. Arab News [reported](#)¹ that “subscription[s] to Meta Verified will cost users \$14.99 in Saudi Arabia and 46.99 Emirati dirhams (\$12.80) in the UAE.
- **Snap Inc.** [announced](#)² an exclusive partnership with MBC Media Solutions (MMS) to launch new augmented reality (AR) lenses for the first ever season of Saudi Idol, the localized edition of its global franchise.



Image [via](#) Campaign Middle East

¹ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2343961/media>

² <https://campaignme.com/snap-launches-saudi-idol-inspired-ar-lenses-with-mms/>

- The company also unveiled an AR lens to aid interactive experiences of the deaf community. The event took place at the Riyadh Book Fair in Saudi Arabia and marks the [first Arabic sign language lens](#)³ introduced in the region.

Image [via](#) Dataechvibe

Snapchat continues to explore AR in retail this Ramadan with the [Snap AR Ramadan Mall](#).⁴ Snapchatters have access to the mall through the carousel, as well as on the organic lens explorer, where a personalized tile alongside a collection of nine lenses will be displayed throughout the month of Ramadan.



- **YouTube** launched a new partnership program enabling eligible creators to activate fan-funding features such as [Super Chat, Super Thanks, and Super Stickers](#). The also launched channel memberships across seven countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Oman, [noted](#)⁵ Campaign Middle East and others. "Channel memberships," Google [explained](#),⁶ "let[s] viewers join your channel

³ <https://campaignme.com/snapchat-launches-ar-lens-for-deaf-community/>

⁴ <https://campaignme.com/snapchats-ar-mall-will-return-this-ramadan/>

⁵ <https://campaignme.com/youtube-opens-doors-for-creators-with-latest-partnership/>

⁶ <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7636690?hl=en>

through monthly payments and get exclusive members-only perks in return like badges, emoji, and other goods.”

- **TikTok** users can now create viral videos soundtracked by some of the Arab world's biggest pop stars. This follows a new licensing agreement between the social media platform and major label Rotana Music Group.



Users now have access to a catalogue featuring hits by regional superstars including Elissa, Amir Diab, Najwa Karam, and Mohammed Abdo, [observes](#)⁷ The National.

Image [via](#) Flickr

Rotana is

headquartered in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, [notes](#)⁸ Music Business Worldwide, with branches in Jeddah, Dubai, Kuwait, Cairo, and Beirut.

Theme 2: Concerns over youth “addiction” to social media platforms

The [Arab Youth Survey 2023](#) revealed the continued power of social media platforms and the economic and cultural influence they wield over the youth demographic. This annual report —now in its 15th year— is based on data from over 200 million youth aged 18-24.

- According to the survey, nearly three- quarters of youth surveyed self-report struggling to disconnect from social media.
- Psychologists and doctors are warning that hugely popular social platforms such as TikTok are paving the way for a rise in eating disorders and distorted body image

⁷ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/music-stage/2023/01/12/music-by-elissa-amr-diab-and-other-arab-stars-on-tiktok-after-rotana-deal/>

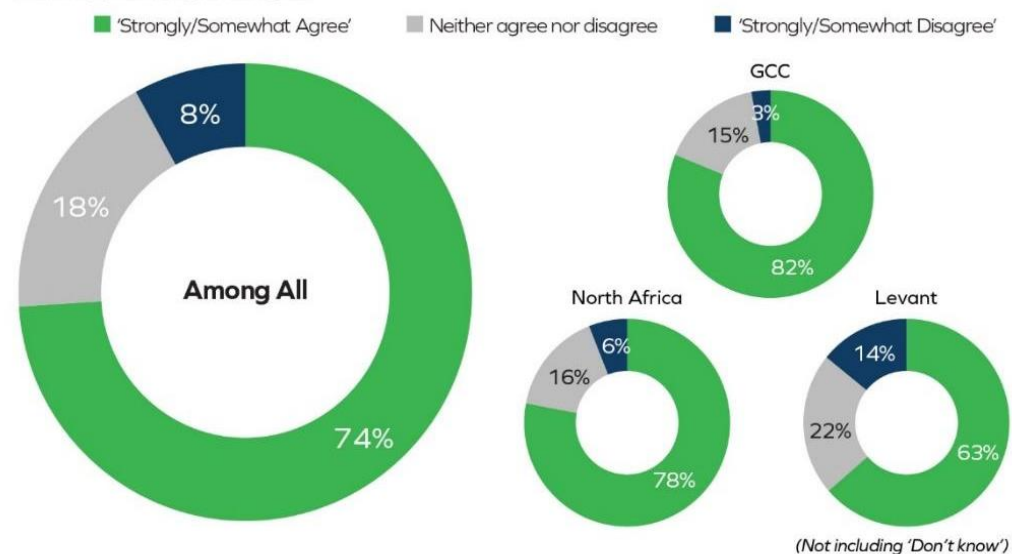
⁸ <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/tiktok-strikes-licensing-deal-with-warner-backed-rotana-music-group/>

perceptions among teenagers in the United Arab Emirates the wider Middle East, and elsewhere, reports a story [published](#) by Al Arabiya.⁹

Three-quarters say they struggle to disconnect from social media

Do you agree or disagree that “I often find it difficult to disconnect from social media?”

(Showing percentage among all)



©ASDA/A BCW ARAB YOUTH SURVEY 2023

Theme 3: Social media's increasing role in mis and disinformation

Obstacles to free speech on social media in the MENA region continue.

- According to the [Guardian](#),¹⁰ X (formerly Twitter) came under scrutiny for its handling of the Israel-Hamas conflict, following a “deluge” of fake posts and Elon Musk’s [recommendation of accounts](#)¹¹ that have made false claims or antisemitic comments. The EU issued a warning to less than two months after the Digital Services Act¹²— EU regulations on online content—came into effect.

⁹<https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2023/01/12/TikTok-thinspiration-videos-contribute-to-eating-disorders-among-UAE-teens-Experts>

¹⁰<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/09/x-twitter-elon-musk-disinformation-israel-hamas>

¹¹<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/09/x-twitter-elon-musk-disinformation-israel-hamas>

¹²<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/10/eu-warns-elon-musk-over-disinformation-about-hamas-attack-on-x>

- **A US lawsuit accused X of assisting Saudi Arabia in efforts to stifle dissent on the platform.** The legal filing alleges that the platform disclosed user data to the Saudi authorities “significantly more often” than to the US, UK and Canada,” Middle East Eye [reported](#),¹³ “and ignored “red flags” of a systemic crackdown on dissent that began in December 2014, when the platform was allegedly infiltrated by three Saudi agents.”
- **Premium users of Twitter/X may need to government-issued ID and a headshot to an Israel-based company,** [said](#)¹⁴ The New Arab and other news sources. Some users expressed concern about the potential move.



Tweet via <https://x.com/PCMag/status/1692587937219678228>

Naturally AU10TIX — the Israeli tech firm [@elonmusk](#) wants to deploy for users to hand information over for verification purposes — have engineers who worked / work in Unit 8200, the intelligence unit of the Israeli Occupation Forces. pic.twitter.com/QE2wPkp5q

— Jennine (@jennineak) August 20, 2023

¹³ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-twitter-accused-assisting-crackdown-dissent>

¹⁴ <https://www.newarab.com/news/twitter-send-users-info-israel-verification>

1: Market Context

In this opening chapter, we provide an overview of social media usage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in 2023.

Key Indices

The Middle and Africa is the global leader for time spent each day on gaming (1 h 24 min) and podcasts (1 h 04 min), notes [The Global Media Intelligence Report 2023](https://www.emarketer.com/content/global-media-intelligence-report-2023).¹⁵ The study also reveals that internet users in the region spend nearly 3 hours a day (2 h 58 mins) on social media, the second highest daily usage – on a regional basis - worldwide.

Where the World Spends Its Media Time, H1 2023 hrs:mins per day among internet users

	Asia-Pacific	Southeast Asia	Western Europe	Central & Eastern Europe	Latin America	Middle East & Africa	North America	Global
PC/laptop/tablet	2:22	2:55	2:56	3:44	3:52	3:37	3:35	2:52
Mobile	3:35	4:29	2:44	3:52	5:00	4:34	3:33	3:48
Broadcast radio	0:50	0:37	1:14	0:57	0:58	1:02	1:03	0:54
Music streaming	1:24	1:27	1:13	1:10	2:02	1:32	1:55	1:29
Broadcast TV	1:28	1:33	2:14	2:14	2:23	1:56	2:44	1:50
Online TV/streaming	1:29	1:13	1:10	1:13	1:35	1:40	1:47	1:27
Print press	0:58	0:37	0:31	0:26	0:34	0:46	0:34	0:46
Online press	1:07	1:03	0:43	0:47	1:50	1:08	0:47	1:05
Gaming	1:07	1:16	0:49	0:43	1:10	1:24	1:13	1:06
Social/messaging	2:08	2:53	1:44	2:23	3:31	2:58	2:13	2:25
Podcasts	0:56	0:51	0:36	0:35	1:02	1:04	0:53	0:53

Leader

Laggard

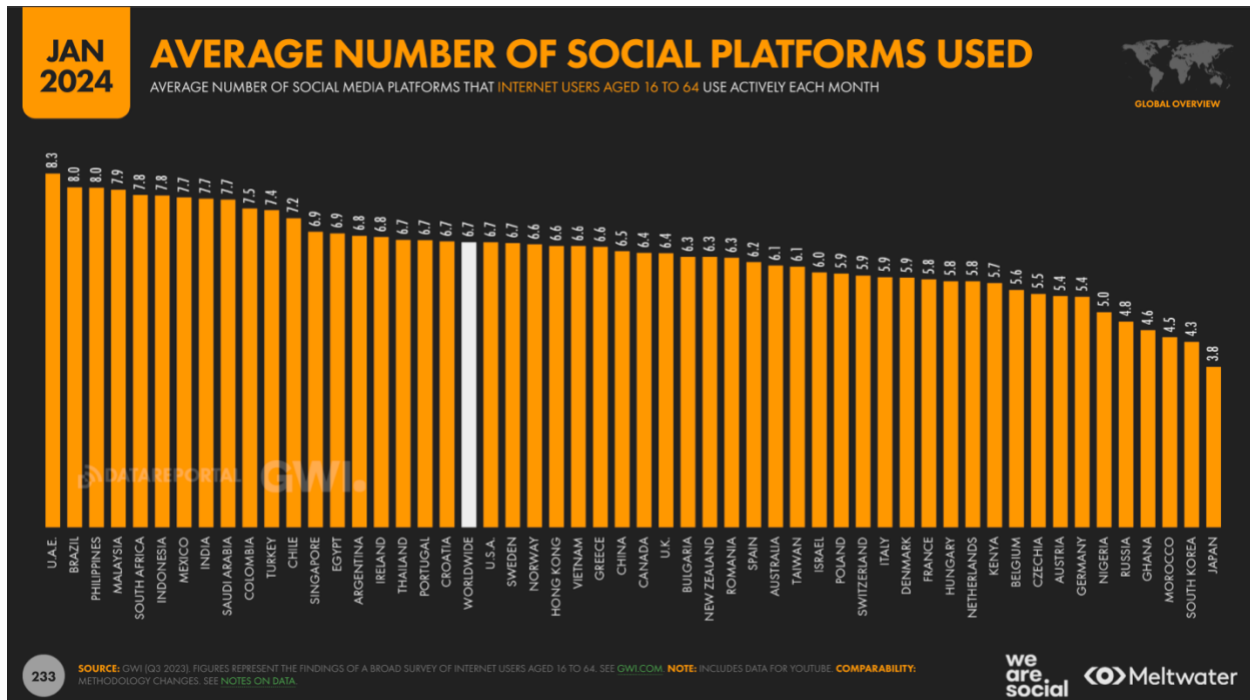
Note: respondents were asked, "Roughly how many hours do you spend on a given media activity during a typical day?"; respondents selected a period of time (ranging from less than 30 minutes up to 10 hours), with GWI then averaging these figures; the averages also include those who selected "do not use"

Source: GWI, August 2023
350583

INSIDER
INTELLIGENCE | eMarketer.

¹⁵ <https://www.emarketer.com/content/global-media-intelligence-report-2023>

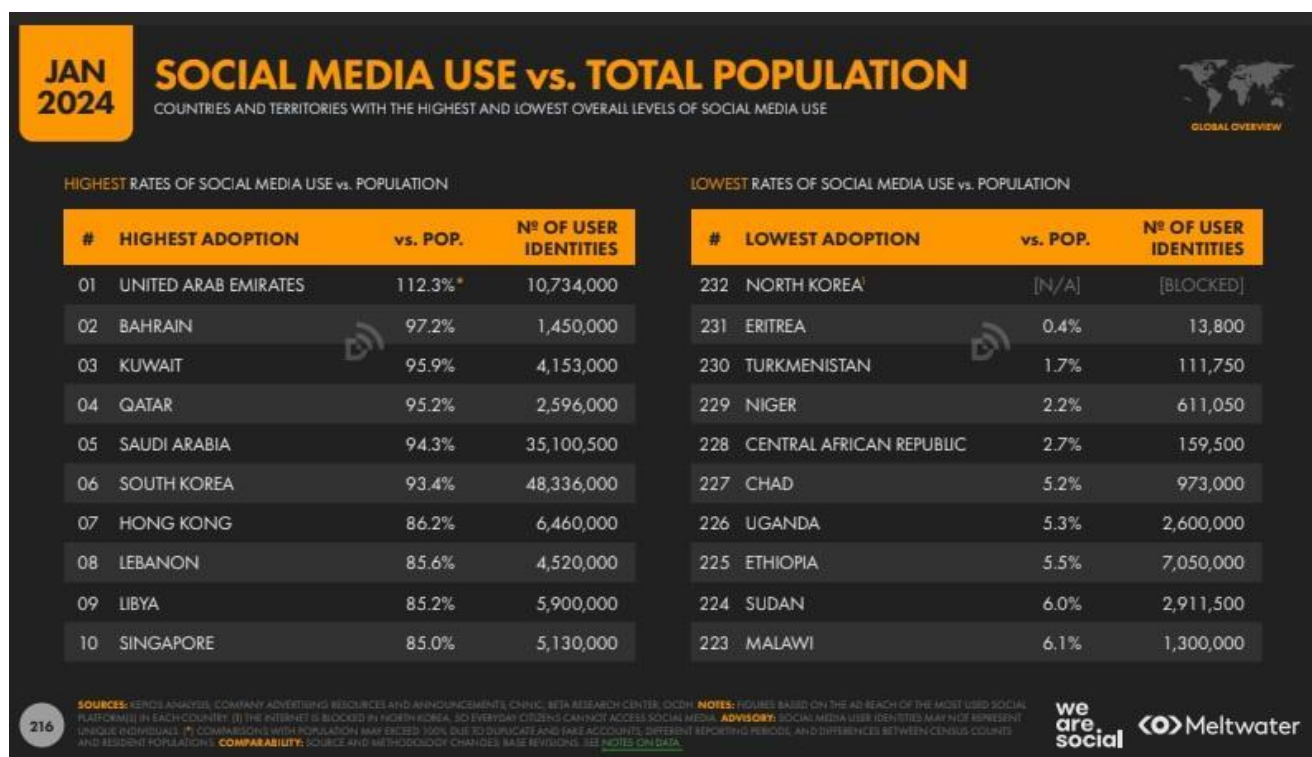
When it comes to social media platforms used on a monthly basis, the UAE ranks number one globally. In the Emirate, users - on average - harness 8.3 social media platforms each month. Saudi Arabia (7.7) and Egypt (6.9) were among other MENA nations above the global average of 6.7 platforms.



*Source: Q3 2023 data in [Global Digital Report 2024 \(DataReportal\)](#). p.233

Seven Middle East nations can be found in the Top 10 most social media connected countries worldwide.

- UAE is the market leader in social media use (vs. total population), with over 112% percent active social media users (10.73 million users), attributed to a high number of duplicate or fake accounts.
- This is followed by **Bahrain (at No 2, 97.2%)** and **Kuwait (No 3, 95.9%)**.
- In fact, all five top spots are occupied by Gulf Nations.
- At the other end of the spectrum, **Sudan is among the nations with the lowest adoption of social media take up**. Ranked 224 worldwide, just 6% of the Sudan's near 3 million population use social media.

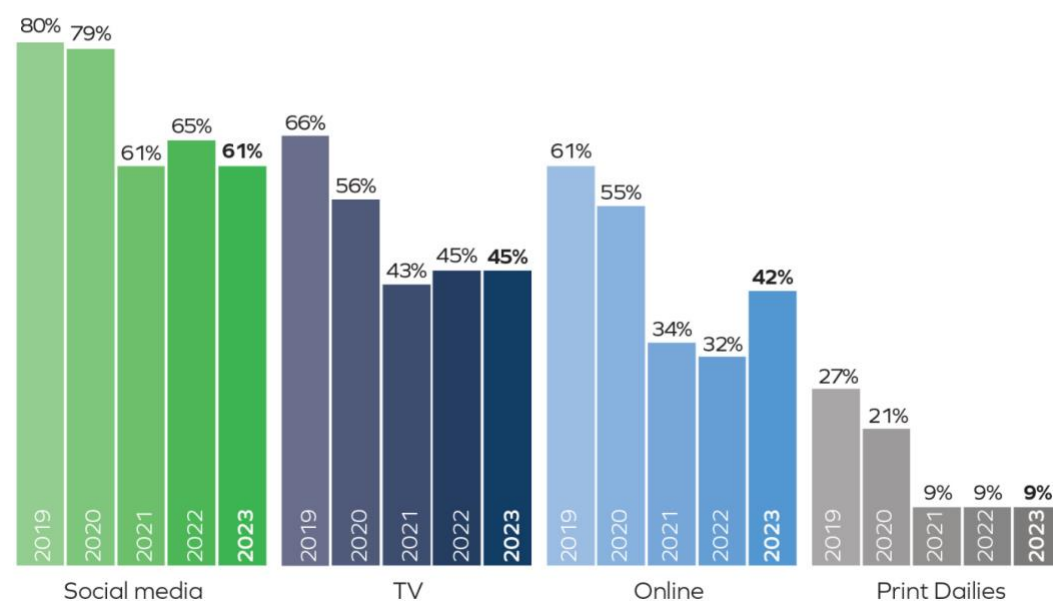


Interestingly, “Television continues to hold on its own as the second preferred source of news for nearly half of young Arabs (45%),” they find.

Social media followed by TV remain the most important news sources for Arab youth, while online news has gained in popularity

Where do you get your news?

(Showing percentage among all)



©ASDA'A BCW ARAB YOUTH SURVEY 2023

The popularity of social media in the MENA region meant that it dominates digital ad spend. In 2023, social media advertising in the region was worth c.\$3.4 billion U.S. dollars. Overall digital ad spending in the region stood at about \$6.5 billion U.S. dollars that year, Statista [reveals](https://www.statista.com/statistics/1274882/mena-digital-ad-spending-by-format/).¹⁷

Meanwhile, social media platforms—including Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok—**projected to add \$10 billion in additional revenue over the next five-year period**, [Arabian Business](https://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/media/facebook-instagram-tiktok-ad-revenue-to-skyrocket-as-social-media-spending-surges-to-10bn-in-5-years-report)¹⁸ reports.

Driven by social commerce, MENA retailers “should shift their focus towards Gen Z and millennials, as these demographics tend to be impulse purchasers and are heavily influenced by social media players.”

¹⁷ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1274882/mena-digital-ad-spending-by-format/>

¹⁸ <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/industries/media/facebook-instagram-tiktok-ad-revenue-to-skyrocket-as-social-media-spending-surges-to-10bn-in-5-years-report>

2: Meta (Facebook and Instagram)

In this section, we examine how two of Meta's biggest platforms – Facebook and Instagram – are being used in the MENA region, and key developments from 2023.

Facebook

Egypt has the highest Facebook base in the region with 45.40 million—out of 82 million internet users, or 72.2% of its 113.6 million total population. Turkey has 34.35 million Facebook users.

Globally, India leads ahead of USA and Indonesia.¹⁹ With MENA's most populous Facebook using countries being ranked 10th (Egypt) and 14th (Turkey) respectively.

Leading countries according to the Facebook audience size based on April 2023

Facebook: Leading countries as per the audience size

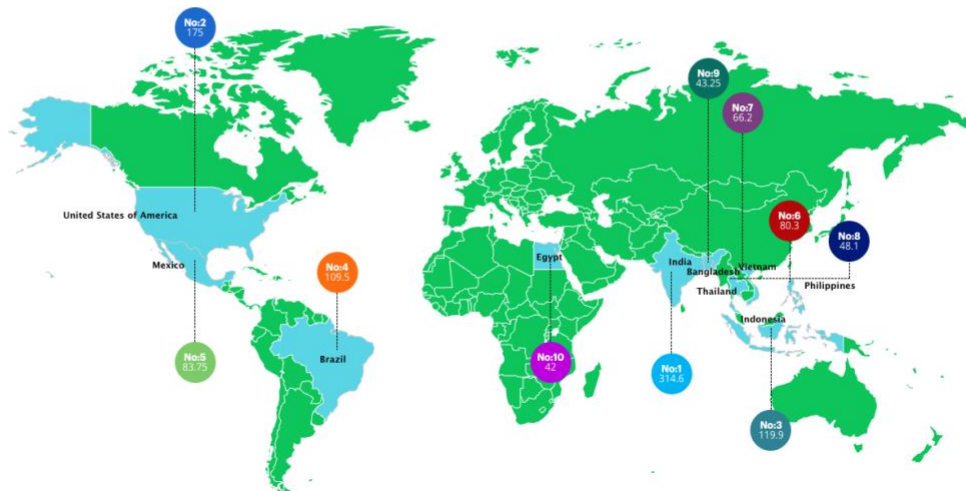


Image [via](#) Acodez

Key Developments:

- Meta has expanded its paid verification service, Meta Verified, to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which have 14.6 million and 9.1 million Facebook users, respectively.
- Available on Facebook and Instagram, Meta Verified, provides users with enhanced account support, including the blue check mark, exclusive features, and increased

¹⁹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/268136/top-15-countries-based-on-number-of-facebook-users/>

visibility. According to [Arab News](#),²⁰ a subscription to Meta Verified will cost users \$14.99 in Saudi Arabia and 46.99 Emirati dirhams (approximately \$12.80) in the UAE.

- Meta also [launched the region's first metaverse academy in Saudi Arabia](#),²¹ which aims to focus on shaping the metaverse ecosystem by providing training to 1,000 individuals in the first 18 months.



Image via Meta, published in The National

Publishers Rue News Feed Loss

Facebook's news retreat signifies "a death knell" for independent MENA local news, an [article on Global Voices contended](#).²² Author [Saoussen Ben Cheikh](#) argued that "media outlets in the MENA region have long struggled with challenges such as digitalization, limited resources, and political repression," adding:

These unique obstacles have rendered their reporting and survival fragile. In an increasingly frail digital news landscape, publishers find themselves at the mercy of third-party platforms, where algorithmic changes beyond their control have led to news shaping and, in some cases, layoffs or even business collapse.

As noted in the piece, [Echobox](#), a social media management company, reported that the most recent significant Facebook algorithm change occurred in February 2023 and accelerated in

²⁰ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2343961/media>

²¹ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/technology/2023/02/07/meta-launches-the-mena-regions-first-metaverse-academy-in-saudi-arabia/>

²² <https://globalvoices.org/2023/09/25/facebook-s-news-retreat-a-death-knell-for-independent-mena-local-news/>

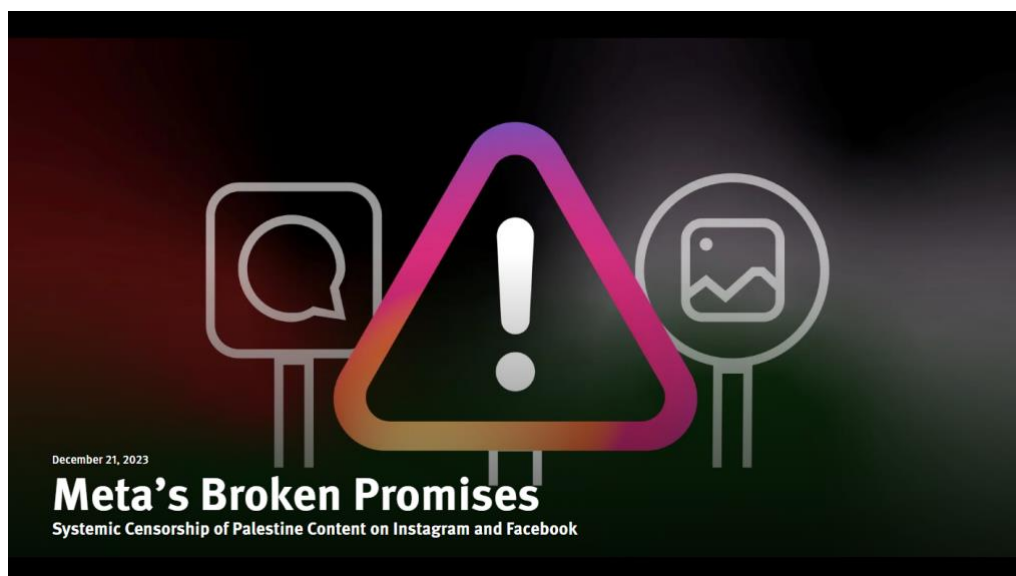
May 2023. This change resulted in content from publisher pages nearly disappearing from user feeds in the MENA region and elsewhere. This matters given the reliance on social media referrals for many news providers.

Alongside these developments, we also saw **concern expressed about the role of Meta platforms in the spread of misinformation and fake news**—particularly in relation to ongoing wars and regional conflicts.

- A series of advertisements submitted to Facebook, calling for violence and genocide against Palestinians, were approved by the platform, **The Intercept** [revealed](#).²³ Adverts were submitted in Hebrew and Arabic, the site notes, and designed to test “the limits of Facebook’s machine-learning moderation.”
- Elsewhere, **Human Rights Watch** [reported](#)²⁴ that they had tracked “censorship of content related to Palestine on Instagram and Facebook [that] is systemic and global.”

“Between October and November 2023,” they wrote, “Human Rights Watch documented over 1,050 takedowns and other suppression of content Instagram and Facebook that had been posted by Palestinians and their supporters, including about human rights abuses.”

Human Rights Watch’s analysis identified “four underlying, systemic factors” leading to this, including flaws in Meta policies, inconsistent and opaque application of these policies, “apparent deference to requests by governments for content removals,” and a “heavy reliance on automated tools for content removal to moderate or translate Palestine-related content.” The report ended with a series of recommendations to address these issues.



Screenshot of the report page, [via](#) Human Rights Watch

²³ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231124-facebook-permitted-ads-calling-for-holocaust-against-palestinians/>

²⁴ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metass-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>

Human Trafficking and Social Media

Facebook campaigns exposed human trafficking and forced labor practices affecting Ethiopian migrant workers in Saudi Arabia. Human rights researchers condemned the program, citing dangerous working conditions, exploitation, and rampant abuse of migrant workers in Saudi Arabia—abuses that largely go unpunished, [according to](#) The Globe and Mail.

Freedom United [explained](#)²⁵ that “Under the guise of economic recovery and foreign currency relief, the Ethiopian government initiated a program to export 500,000 Ethiopian women for domestic work in Saudi Arabia.”

To attract potential recruits, the government turned to Facebook. More than 200 Ethiopian state institutions, including ministries and district administrations, have utilized their official [Facebook] pages to promote the Saudi recruitment drive,” they added, “enticing women with the promise of a brighter future. However, the reality awaiting these workers in Saudi Arabia is far from the rosy picture painted on social media.”

In Egypt, two women were sentenced to three years in prison in April 2023 for offering a newborn baby for sale on Facebook, [reported](#)²⁶ Al Araby.

Instagram

In November 2023, The New York Times [reported](#)²⁷ on how Palestinians were using Instagram to share their experiences with the outside world.

“While Israel and Egypt are preventing most journalists from entering Gaza, these Palestinians are documenting the devastation of [Israel’s airstrikes](#) and [ground invasion](#) in stories and reels. Their posts are intimate and raw — capturing images that mainstream media might consider too graphic to run.”

The report highlighted the profiles of [@motaz_azaiza](#), [@hindkhouday](#) and [@noor.harazeen](#).

²⁵ <https://www.freedomunited.org/news/facebook-ethiopia-saudi-arabia/>

²⁶ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/society/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%A3%D9%85-%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%AA-%D8%B7%D9%81%D9%84%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%83>

²⁷ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/09/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-war-instagram.html>



Screenshot [via](#) The New York Times

In a separate story, also published in November, The New York Times also reported on research which had indicated how hate speech had grown on social media platforms such as X, Facebook and Instagram. The piece, entitled [Antisemitic and Anti-Muslim Hate Speech Surges Across the Internet](#)²⁸ highlighted cases from the across the MENA region and impacts beyond it.

Some other Instagram developments to note in MENA during 2023 include:

- Vox, and others, [shared concerns](#)²⁹ about **shadow banning** as some Instagram users accused the platform of “**suppressing content**” related to Palestine.³⁰
- Instagram’s parent company Meta [issued an apology](#)³¹ for apparently adding a ‘terrorist’ tag to some Palestinian user profiles, blaming a “bug.” The company [told the BBC](#)³² it had fixed a problem “that briefly **caused inappropriate Arabic translations.**”

²⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/15/technology/hate-speech-israel-gaza-internet.html>

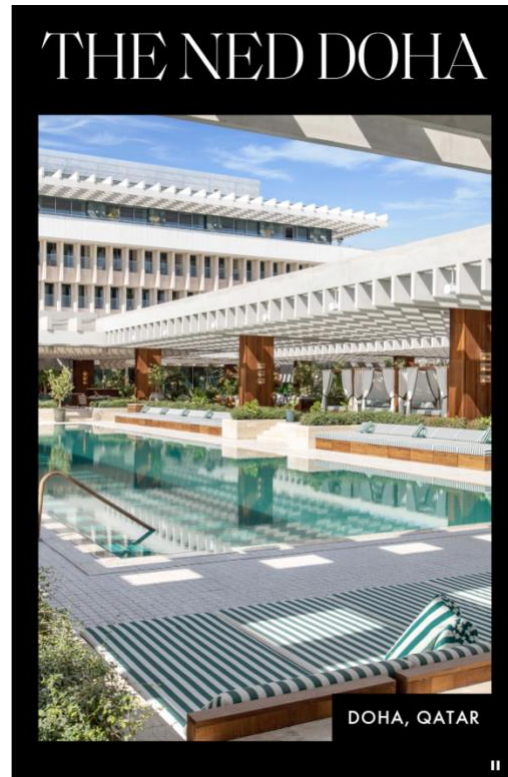
²⁹ <https://www.vox.com/technology/23933846/shadowbanning-meta-israel-hamas-war-palestine>

³⁰ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-instagram-accused-suppressing-content>

³¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/20/instagram-palestinian-user-profile-bios-terrorist-added-translation-meta-apology>

³² <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-67169228>

- Popular American writer and activist **Shaun King** said that **Instagram banned his account for his “pro-Palestine” content**. The anti-racism activist, whose social media account had more than six million followers before it was deleted, said Meta removed his account because he was “fighting for Palestine, and speaking up for the human rights and dignity of Palestinians,” Al Arabiya [reported](#).³³
- Egypt officials ordered the detainment of **fashion blogger Salma Elshimy** on alleged charges of “spreading immorality” and publishing videos and photographs that “contradict social morals and values,” Middle East Monitor [shared](#).³⁴
- Earlier in the year, Al-Nassr, the Saudi Arabian football club, was [purported](#)³⁵ to have added over five million followers on Instagram after signing five-time Champions League winner [Cristiano Ronaldo](#). The soccer star has the [most followed individual account](#) on the photo and sharing platform.
- Elle included The Ned Doha, a hotel and members club in the Qatar capital, on its list of [ELLE’s 30 Places to Instagram in 2023](#).³⁶



³³ <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2023/12/26/Instagram-bans-famous-anti-racism-activist-Shaun-King-over-Palestine-content>

³⁴ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230404-egypt-fashion-influencer-to-be-detained-on-morality-charges/>

³⁵ <https://hypebeast.com/2023/1/cristiano-ronaldo-instagram-followers-al-nassr>

³⁶ <https://www.elle.com/culture/travel-food/a27561982/best-instagram-spots/>

3: Messaging Apps

Messaging Apps continue to play an important role in the communication habits of people in the Middle East, being used for a myriad of different purposes ranging from chatting with family and friends, through to engaging with communities and businesses alike.

WhatsApp

The world's biggest messaging platform rolled out a number of new features, with more countries expected to gain access to services like [Channels](#), a one-way broadcast feature that allows admins to send text messages, photos, videos, stickers, and poll invitations to their followers.

- **WhatsApp Channels** [launched in UAE and Saudi Arabia](#)³⁷ in September 2023, following [rollout in Egypt and Morocco](#)³⁸ a month prior.
- **Emirates NBD**, a banking group in the MENAT (Middle East, North Africa and Türkiye) region, **launched an upgraded version of its WhatsApp banking service**, allowing customers to access 15 popular banking services [via the app](#).³⁹

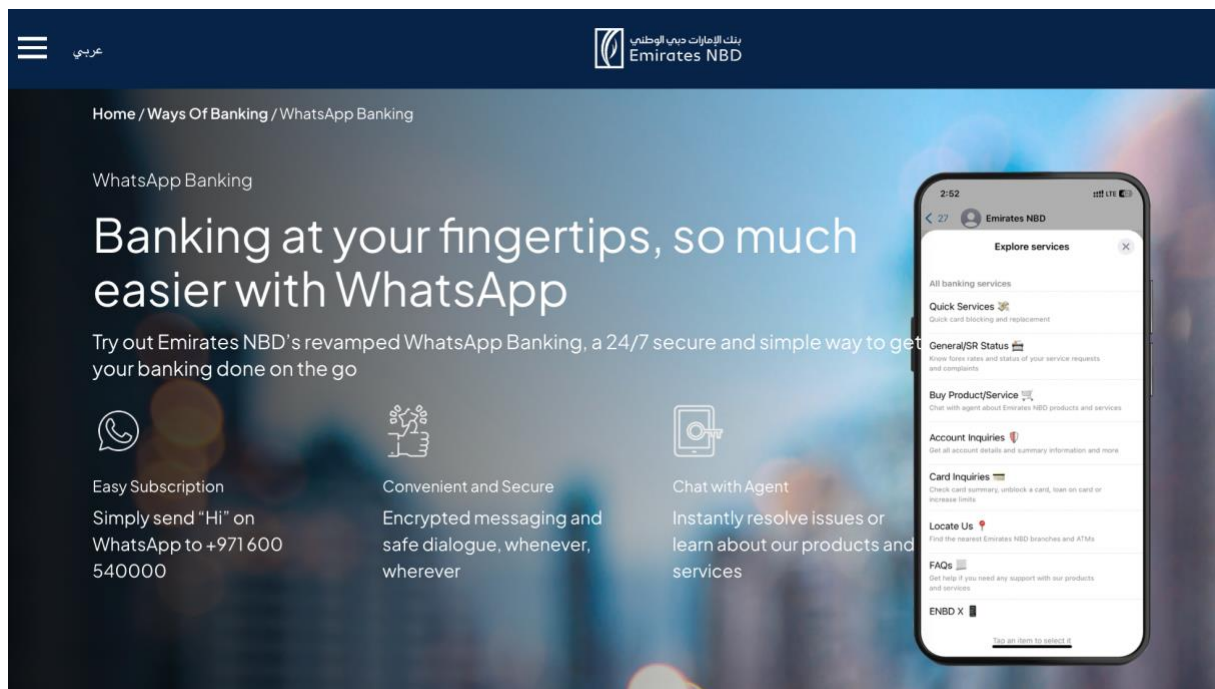


Image [via](#)⁴⁰ Emirates NBD

³⁷ <https://campaignme.com/whatsapp-channels-set-to-roll-out-in-uae-and-ksa/>

³⁸ <https://campaignme.com/whatsapp-channels-expands-to-the-region/>

³⁹ <https://thefintechtimes.com/emirates-nbd-encourages-shift-from-phone-banking-to-whatsapp-with-upgraded-service/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.emiratesnbd.com/en/ways-of-banking/whatsapp-banking>

- [Lulu Hypermarket launched Salem, a new AI-powered customer service channel⁴¹ available on WhatsApp](#). The platform enables customers to receive in-app purchase receipts, track online order deliveries, and request purchase-related assistance, using the messaging platform.



Image [via](#)⁴² Lulu

Boycotts, Racism, Hackers and Malware Contagion Increase

As with all social media platforms, there were media reports throughout the year about negative and nefarious uses of the platform.

- A report by [the BBC](#)⁴³ highlighted an apology by Israel's education minister to a group of Ethiopian Israeli schoolgirls whose teachers mocked them in a WhatsApp chat group during a school trip.

Evidence of the chat group, labelled “Black School Trip,” was filmed over a teacher’s shoulder by one of the girls. “The teachers involved were suspended and the incident is being investigated,” the BBC reported, noting that “there are about 150,000 citizens of Ethiopian origin in Israel, the first of whom arrived in sizeable numbers in a series of top secret Mossad-led operations in the 1980s.”

⁴¹ <https://gulfbusiness.com/lulu-hypermarket-ai-powered-cx-on-whatsapp/>

⁴² <https://www.luluretail.com/media/news/lulu-hypermarket-launches-new-ai-powered-customer-experiences-on-whatsapp-in-collaboration-with-yellowai>

⁴³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64919768>

- Local news [reports](#)⁴⁴ suggested that Israeli settlers from Ma’ale Adumim, had utilized the platform to intimidate Palestinians and “diminish” their presence in the city. [According to the Times of Israel](#),⁴⁵ “WhatsApp group run by Otzma Yehudit candidates in municipal elections urges boycotts of businesses catering to Arabs, [and] harasses Arabs roaming city’s streets.”
- Hackers targeted distributed spying malware through user-created WhatsApp mods – which customize or add new features to the service - [impacting users in nations such as Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Azerbaijan](#).⁴⁶

Telegram

The Dubai-based messaging app continues to enjoy a significant user base.

A decade after its launch, Telegram has 55.2 million daily active users and 700 million active users per month, [notes](#)⁴⁷ the World Population Review website.

Within this, **8% of users are in the MENA region**. More widely, use is largest in Asia (38%), followed by Europe (27%), and then Latin America (21%).

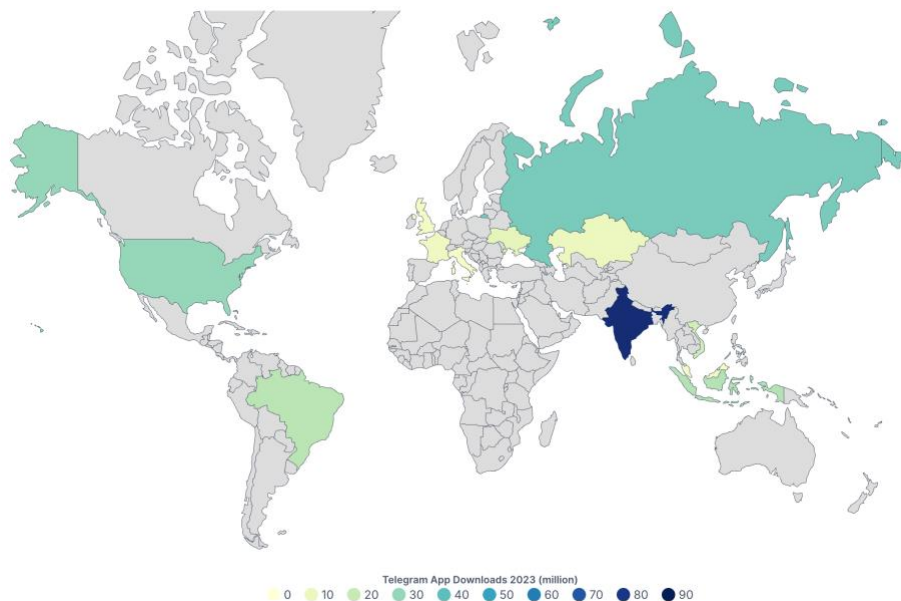


Image [via](#)⁴⁸ World Population Review

⁴⁴<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230906-israel-settlers-using-whatsapp-to-plot-to-harrass-boycott-palestinians/>

⁴⁵<https://www.timesofisrael.com/far-right-activists-in-maale-adumim-try-to-curb-palestinian-presence-in-settlement/>

⁴⁶<https://therecord.media/whatsapp-mods-android-spyware>

⁴⁷<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/telegram-users-by-country>

⁴⁸<https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/telegram-users-by-country>

Key developments from 2023 include:

- **ISIS confirmed the death of its leader Abu Hussein Al Hussein Al Qurashi** in a recording posted on the extremist group's Telegram channel in August 2023, [reported](#)⁴⁹ The National. The move came four months after his death had been [announced](#)⁵⁰ by the Turkish government, following an operation led by Turkey's MIT intelligence agency. Telegram had long been the group's "app of choice," Vox has previously [observed](#).⁵¹
- **An October 2023 report by National Public Radio (NPR) shared that the messaging app, Telegram, blocked a number of channels with ties to Hamas**, although a number of others remained available.⁵² "Meta, Google and X, formerly Twitter, block all accounts with links to Hamas," NPR noted, adding that "Telegram's more hands-free approach to moderating Hamas has led to a surge in subscribers."
- **The Israeli military is operating a Telegram channel named "72 Virgins—Uncensored,"** the Israeli daily newspaper Haaretz [reported](#).⁵³

"The channel boasts of showcasing 'exclusive content from the Gaza Strip' and has published over 700 posts, images and videos of Palestinians being killed and footage of the destruction of the besieged enclave," [says](#)⁵⁴ Middle East Monitor.

The IDF initially denied that it operated the channel. However, following an [investigation from Haaretz](#),⁵⁵ representatives from the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) admitted in early 2024 to running it, [Vice](#)⁵⁶ and other outlets noted.

"Telegram is uncensored and unruly," journalist [Matthew Gault, wrote](#).⁵⁷ "The lack of moderation on the platform makes it valuable, but it also means places like "72 Virgins—Uncensored" will proliferate," he added.

⁴⁹ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/2023/08/03/isis-confirms-death-of-its-leader-abu-hussein-al-husseini-al-qurashi/>

⁵⁰ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/isis-leader-abu-hussein-al-qurashi-killed-erdogan-syria-turkey-intelligence-agency/>

⁵¹ <https://www.vox.com/world/2017/6/30/15886506/terrorism-isis-telegram-social-media-russia-pavel-durov-twitter>

⁵² <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/31/1208800238/the-telegram-app-has-been-a-key-platform-for-hamas-now-its-being-restricted-ther>

⁵³ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2023-12-12/ty-article/.premium/graphic-videos-and-incitement-how-the-idf-is-misleading-israelis-on-telegram/0000018c-5ab5-df2f-adac-febd01c30000>

⁵⁴ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231213-israel-army-operates-channel-to-share-gruesome-killing-of-palestinians/>

⁵⁵ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/security-aviation/2024-02-04/ty-article/.premium/israeli-army-its-admits-staff-was-behind-graphic-gaza-telegram-channel/0000018d-70b4-dd6e-a98d-f4b6a9c00000>

⁵⁶ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/idf-israel-run-telegram-72-virgins-psyop/>

⁵⁷ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/idf-israel-run-telegram-72-virgins-psyop/>

"It's trivially easy to find channels displaying the grim horrors of war on Telegram, but you can never be sure of the agenda of those showing them to you. It's a sewer, but it's a valuable sewer. Mainstream coverage of conflict sanitizes its rough edges. Bodies are blurred. The human cost of a bombing campaign is too easy to abstract. On Telegram, the opposite is true. The toll of conflict is available to anyone with the stomach will to look. But you have to constantly ask yourself who is showing you the horror, and why."

- Middle East Eye [reported](#)⁶⁶ that Sheikh Ekrima Sabri, the imam of Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, is among "dozens of Palestinians whose names and locations have been posted in a far-right Israeli Telegram channel calling for them to be killed." The channel, called Nazi Hunters 2023, provides GPS coordinates for Sabri's home, Middle East Eye said, and calls for it to be attacked, they wrote.

"Religious leaders, political figures, journalists, public officials, and student activists, as well as alleged members of Hamas and Palestinian fighters," are also identified in the Telegram channel, the site said.



Image: Screenshot of the Nazi Hunters 2023 Telegram channel, [via](#)⁵⁸ Middle East Eye.

⁶⁶ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-aqsa-imam-far-right-telegram-hit-list>

⁵⁸ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-aqsa-imam-far-right-telegram-hit-list>

4. Snapchat

Snapchat continues to maintain a significant presence in the Middle East, particularly in Gulf nations, though the platform faces both opportunities and challenges in the region.

Regional User Base and Market Position

Snapchat had over 33 million users across the Middle East and North Africa region in 2023, with the highest concentrations in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, according to [industry reports](#).⁵⁹

Notably, **three Middle Eastern countries—Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—rank among the [top 15 global markets](#)**⁶⁰ for total Snapchat users.

Saudi Arabia represents Snapchat's strongest market in the region, with over 22 million monthly active users, according to Ronan Harris, President for Europe, Middle East, and Africa at Snap Inc. Harris described Snapchat's popularity in the Kingdom as ["an extension of the social fabric"](#) of the country.

"I think community and family have always been very fundamental values for culture in Saudi Arabia, and Snapchat is a place where people come to and at builds and enhance the relationships that matter most to them." Ronan Harris, Snap Inc



Globally, **Snapchat reported 414 million daily active users in Q4 2023**, according to the company's [earnings reports](#),⁶¹ an increase of 39 million, or 10%, year-over-year.

DataReportal [shared](#)⁶² that “marketers can now reach more than **677 million** users via ads on the platform each month.”

⁵⁹ <https://kgime.com/2023/08/17/what-is-happening-to-snapchat-in-the-uae-ksa/>

⁶⁰ <https://www.muscatdaily.com/2023/10/10/61-arab-youth-say-social-media-addiction-leading-to-decline-in-mental-well-being/>

⁶¹ <https://investor.snap.com/news/news-details/2024/Snap-Inc.-Announces-Fourth-Quarter-and-Full-Year-2023-Financial-Results/default.aspx>

⁶² <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-global-overview-report>

Advertising and Revenue Challenges

Like other social media platforms, Snapchat experienced headwinds in 2023 due to broader economic conditions and regional conflicts.

The company reported **reduced advertising spending tied to the Israel-Hamas war**, [according to](#)⁶³ Deadline, raising questions about impacts on other media companies as earnings rolled out throughout the quarter.

Platform Innovations and Partnerships

Snap Inc. launched several notable initiatives in the region during 2023, including:

- **Partnerships in Saudi Arabia**

In partnership with MBC Media Solutions (MMS), Snapchat [launched](#)⁶⁴ **exclusive augmented reality (AR) lenses for the first season of Saudi Idol**, the localized edition of the global franchise. This partnership demonstrated Snapchat's continued investment in AR technology tailored to regional content.



The company also made headlines at **Riyadh Fashion Week**, where it showcased an exhibition titled **"Tasawa"** featuring creations from five Saudi designers.

⁶³ <https://deadline.com/2023/10/snap-mideast-war-advertising-evan-spiegel-1235582111/>

⁶⁴ <https://campaignme.com/snap-launches-saudi-idol-inspired-ar-lenses-with-mms/>

The [exhibition](#) merged physical and digital realms through augmented reality, [notes](#)⁶⁵ Harpers Bazaar Saudi Arabia, with the event offering visitors an immersive experience with designer showrooms, virtual runways, and dress try-ons.



Image [via](#) Zawya.

- **Accessibility Initiatives**



At the Riyadh Book Fair, Snapchat [unveiled](#)⁶⁶ an **AR lens designed to support the deaf community**, marking the first Arabic sign language lens introduced in the region.

This initiative highlighted Snapchat's efforts to expand accessibility features for diverse user communities.

Image via CampaignME, citing The Arabian Marketer

⁶⁵ <https://www.harpersbazaararabia.com/hbanews/memos-from-the-middle-east-snapchat-unveils-its-tasawar-exhibition-during-riyadh-fashion-week>

⁶⁶ <https://campaignme.com/snapchat-launches-ar-lens-for-deaf-community/>

Ramadan Campaigns

Snapchat's AR Ramadan Mall [returned](https://campaignme.com/snapchats-ar-mall-will-return-this-ramadan/)⁶⁷ in 2023, featuring major retail brands including Ounass, Bath & Body Works, American Eagle, Eyewa, NiceOneSA, Faces, Max Fashion, Toyota, and Nestle.

Snapchatters accessed the mall through the carousel and organic lens explorer, where a personalized tile alongside a collection of nine lenses was displayed throughout Ramadan.



⁶⁷ <https://campaignme.com/snapchats-ar-mall-will-return-this-ramadan/>

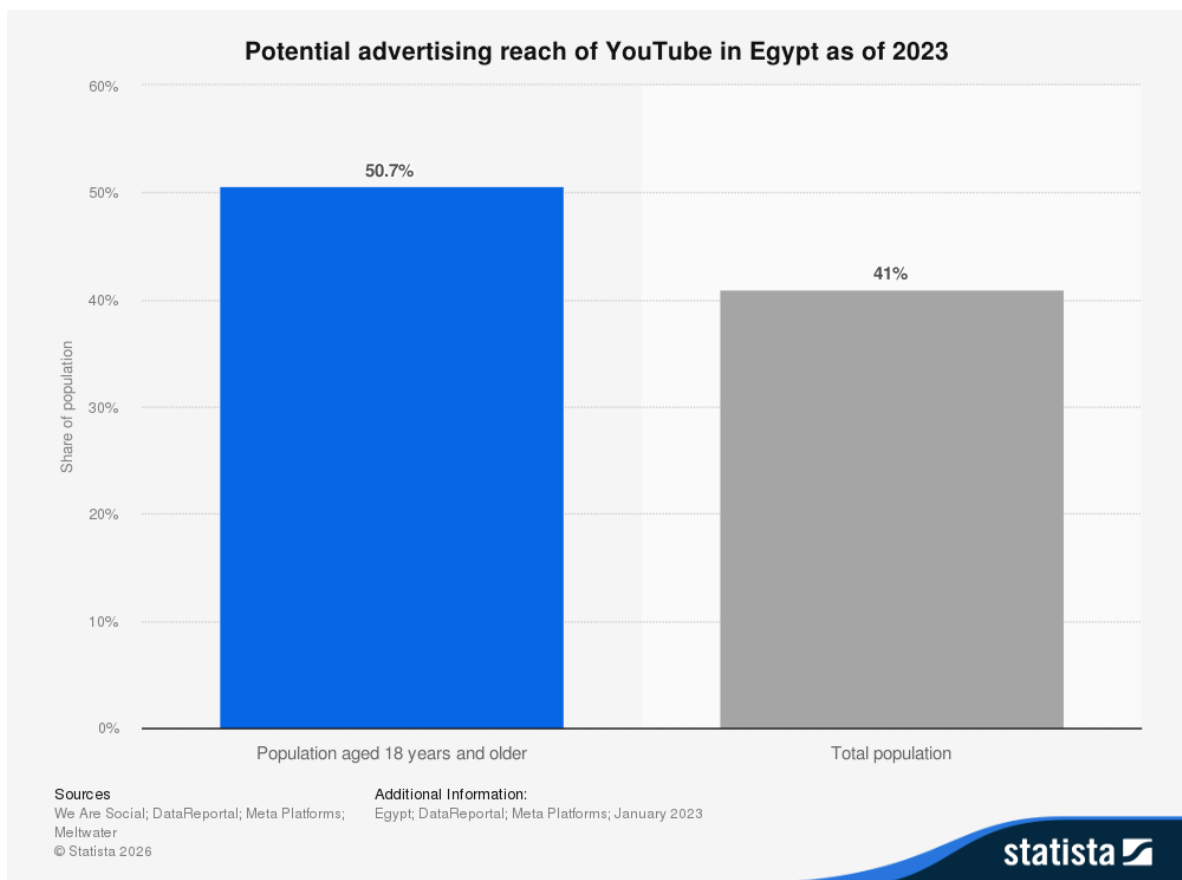
5. YouTube and Online Video

YouTube maintains its position as a dominant platform for video content across the Middle East, with strong engagement metrics and expanding creator opportunities in 2023.

Market Reach and Penetration

YouTube demonstrates exceptional reach across multiple MENA markets.

- According to [DataReportal](#),⁶⁸ YouTube had 8.82 million users in the United Arab Emirates in early 2024. **The platform's advertisements reached 93.2% of the UAE's total internet user base** (regardless of age), equivalent to 92.3% of the country's total population.
- **In the more populous Egypt, YouTube reaches 41% of the total population**, [according to](#)⁶⁹ Statista, **and just over half of those aged 18+ in the country.**



⁶⁸ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-United-Arab-Emirates>

⁶⁹ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1400731/youtube-potential-advertising-reach-in-egypt/>

New Services, Creator Monetization and Partnership Programs

YouTube launched several opportunities for content creators in the region during 2023.

- In October, the platform [announced](#)⁷⁰ the **expansion of its partnership program, enabling eligible creators to activate fan-funding features including Super Chat, Super Thanks, Super Stickers, and channel memberships** across seven countries in the Middle East and North Africa.
- These countries included Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Oman.
- Channel memberships, as Google [explained](#),⁷¹ allow viewers to join channels through monthly payments and receive exclusive member-only perks including badges, emojis, and other benefits.



XP Music Futures and YouTube [announced](#)⁷² a partnership to support Saudi Arabia's music industry and emerging artists from the Middle East.

As part of this, YouTube sponsored the XPERFORM initiative a three-day event in which a number of participants were chosen following live auditions in Riyadh.

As a press release for the partnership explained, “The judges will then select the top 10 contestants, who will participate in an exclusive boot-camp that involves one-to-one coaching from YouTube on how to utilize and reach a wider audience using YouTube’s multiple formats including Shorts, livestream and long form content. The bootcamp will also help coach the artists on channel optimization to increase their reach on YouTube and how best to prepare for the next stage of the competition.”

The winner of the music talent initiative in 2023 was **AJ Truth**, a producer, sound engineer, and artist. In 2024, he [performed](#)⁷³ at the Saudi Arabian F1 Grand Prix.

⁷⁰ <https://campaignme.com/youtube-opens-doors-for-creators-with-latest-partnership/>

⁷¹ <https://support.google.com/youtube/answer/7636690?hl=en>

⁷² <https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/companies-news/xp-music-futures-and-youtube-collaborate-to-support-saudis-music-industry-and-emerging-talent-in-the-middle-east-phfu4haw>

⁷³ <https://safarnews.net/xperforms/>



The move is part of a series of wider initiatives and growing recognition of the Middle East's music scene, and its [potential](#).⁷⁴

In a feature highlighting the rise of female artists, Nylon [observed](#)⁷⁵ that there is a “transformative wave of Arab women artists is fearlessly reclaiming their own narrative, challenging and rejecting the distorted mainstream perception of Arab womanhood and refusing to be confined as mere objects of oppression or fetishization.”

“They are also just creating some of the most eclectic and diverse soundscapes in music right now, some singing solely in Arabic or English, or seamlessly blending both languages and sometimes even incorporating a third.”

Alongside this, New Lines Magazine, a US-based publication with a global focus, explored in a how “rural” and folk music had grown in the region.

The [deep dive](#)⁷⁶ includes the role played by

channels such as YouTube in bringing this material to new audiences

Image below [via](#) Nylon. Check out their Spotify [playlist](#) of “Rising Arab Women Artists To Know Right Now.”



⁷⁴ <https://www.economist.com/the-world-ahead/2023/11/13/the-middle-east-s-music-business-has-huge-potential>

⁷⁵ <https://www.nylon.com/entertainment/rising-arab-women-musicians-elyanna-manal-felukah-zeina>

⁷⁶ <https://newlinesmag.com/argument/how-rural-music-in-the-middle-east-bypassed-cultural-gatekeepers-using-tech-and-weddings/>

Advertising Performance

Some of MENA's biggest brands have seen YouTube as pivotal to reaching audiences **Three MENA advertisers made the platform's annual ranking of the top 10 most-watched ads on YouTube** over the past 12 months.



Alongside the likes of Netflix, Apple and Bulgari, the [YouTube Ads Cannes Leaderboard 2023](#) included adverts from **Qatar Airways** ([Official FIFA World Cup song featuring DJ Rodge and Cheb Khaled](#)), **Orange Egypt** ([World Cup 2022 campaign – Crazy about Football](#)) and **Telecom Egypt** ([WE Summer Campaign 2022 with Akram Hosny](#)).

Telecom Egypt's ad was ranked second on the list and has currently been viewed more than 34 million times.

Content Creators

In a list [published](#)⁷⁷ on the official Google Blog, Abdulrahman Hussein, Culture & Trends Manager at YouTube, shared three **Top 10's showcasing the trending videos, top creators and most-streamed songs from across the region.**

- YouTube's top trending video in MENA came from Bandar Madkhal, one of MENA's top gaming creators. In the video, he [talked openly](#)⁷⁸ about his experiences with depression and recovery.

The impact, and purpose, of the video was explored more fully in an [interview on the official YouTube blog](#)⁷⁹ in early 2024.

"At the end of the day I want my content to have a positive impact on whoever is watching my channel, and if I do that with a sketch, or gaming, or being honest about my struggles, then it doesn't matter."

BANDAR
BANDERITAX

⁷⁷ <https://blog.google/intl/en-mena/product-updates/connect-communicate/a-year-on-youtube-2023s-top-trending-videos-creators-in-mena/>

⁷⁸ <https://youtu.be/U94yu-uj108?si=Zsl7LDBSrY48xaHQ>

⁷⁹ <https://blog.youtube/creator-and-artist-stories/banderitas-story/>



Image: BanderitaX

Other popular content included:

- #2 [Al Dama](#) (12 million views) – an Algerian social drama Al Dama, which gained widespread attention in Ramadan 2023.
- #3 [Firecracker Youth](#) (13 million views) the Saudi comedy Firecracker Youth (Shabab Al Bomb)'s eleventh season continued to resonate with audiences.
- #4 [Mr. Beast](#)'s take on the [Olympics](#) (147 million views) featured a Libyan contestant as the winner.
- #5 Egyptian Comedian [Bassem Youssef's viral interview with Piers Morgan](#) about the crisis in Israel and Gaza (21 million views), which also featured an interview – and exchange – with the co-founder of the Daily Wire website, Jeremy Boreing.

Meanwhile, Iraqi artist Mahmod Alturky's song "[Ashiq Majnoon](#)" was the top trending song on YouTube in 2023, and gaming creator [AboFlah](#) continued to draw a huge audience, with over 35 million subscribers and over 5 billion views.

A further list [published](#)⁸⁰ by YouTube also highlighted the most popular Shorts in the region, as well as the Top 10 breakout creators.

⁸⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/trends/2023/mena/>

These findings demonstrate some of the [trends identified by Google](#)⁸¹ about how Gen Z – a sizeable population in the region, around 60 million people (16% of MENA's population) – use YouTube.

Gen Zs across MENA turn to concerts, music, and fashion for entertainment

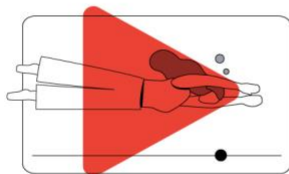


42% of Gen Z in Egypt and 32% in UAE and Saudi Arabia watch fashion-related content.

32% of Gen Z in UAE and Saudi Arabia, and 35% in Egypt, watch concerts and music content.

Key drivers include entertainment, tapping into passions, finding unique content and using YouTube to inform purchase decisions.

MENA Gen Z visit YouTube several times a day to deep-dive their interests



69% listen to music or audio

64% find recipes and food inspiration

Arabic Content and AI Dubbing

The MENA region represents an "enticing" market for using artificial intelligence to translate and dub foreign-made video content into Arabic, [according to](#)⁸² Amir Jirbandey, head of growth and marketing at UK-based AI start-up Papercup.

This technological development could significantly expand the reach of international video content to Arabic-speaking audiences. However, it also raises questions about content authenticity and cultural adaptation.

⁸¹ <https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/en-emea/marketing-strategies/video/capture-gen-z-attention-through-video-ads/>

⁸² [according to](#)

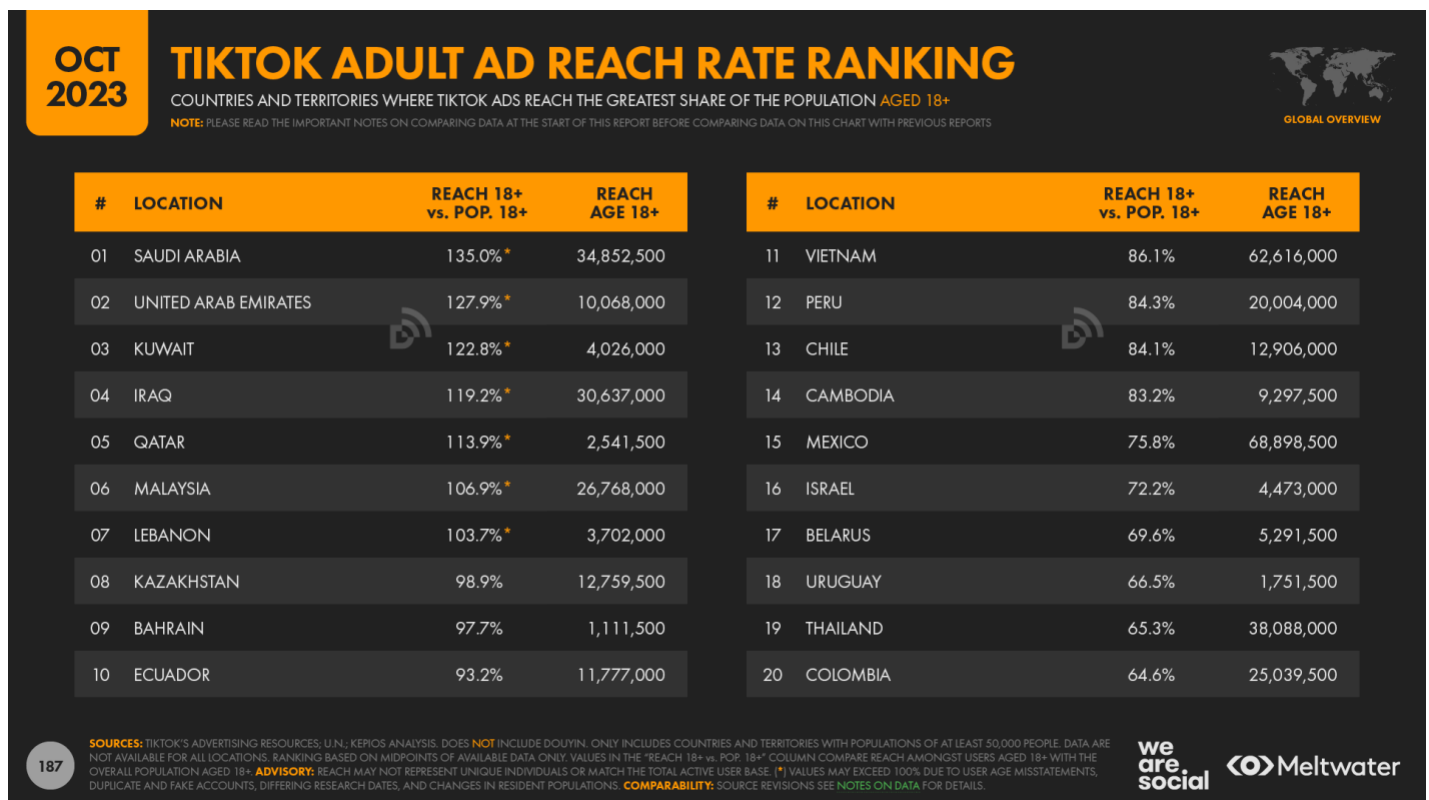
6. TikTok

TikTok continued its rapid growth across the Middle East in 2023, though this expansion brought increased scrutiny regarding content moderation, misinformation, and the platform's role in regional conflicts.

Market Performance and User Growth

The MENA region continues to be a major market for TikTok. Data published in October 2023 by DataReportal [reveals](https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-october-global-statshot)⁸³ that **seven of the ten biggest markets globally for TikTok – as measured by percentage of population using the app - are in the Middle East.**

Within this, **the top five markets** Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Iraq and Qatar, **are all in the MENA region.**



That said, TikTok “had a choppy 2023 in MENA” [contended](https://omdia.tech.informa.com/om120604/tiktok-had-a-choppy-2023-in-mena-with-user-base-transformation-and-skepticism-over-live-streaming)⁸⁴ Omdia, a technology research and advisory group. While revenue remained robust, the platform experienced a decline in monthly active users (MAUs), they observed, with one potential factor being a lack of interest in live streaming features. This is a format that has proven highly successful in Chinese and other Southeast Asian markets but gained less traction in the Middle East.

⁸³ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-october-global-statshot>

⁸⁴ <https://omdia.tech.informa.com/om120604/tiktok-had-a-choppy-2023-in-mena-with-user-base-transformation-and-skepticism-over-live-streaming> (\$)

Nevertheless, e-commerce features continue to be rolled out (live shopping being an important part of streaming's success on the platform in China).

- A [TikTok report](#) on shopping behaviors and trends highlighted the platform's growing influence on consumer purchasing decisions in the region, with social commerce emerging as a significant revenue stream alongside traditional advertising.
- **TikTok Shop** launched its "all-inclusive" consignment model targeting the Middle East in May 2023, [according to](#) the Singapore-based Momentum Works. Under this model, which is similar to that employed by Temu, merchants supply products to TikTok Shop while the platform handles pricing, uploads, customer service, marketing, and fulfillment. The move is part of TikTok's push into social commerce, positioning the platform to compete directly with other e-commerce players in the region.
- **MBC Media Solutions (MMS)** the commercial arm of MBC Group, was [appointed](#) as the official TikTok reseller in Egypt, providing advertisers with direct access to the platform's advertising formats and aiming to deliver faster turnaround times and local servicing capabilities.

Creators

Recognizing 2023 achievements, the **inaugural TikTok MENA Awards took place in January 2024**. This celebrated content creators across diverse categories including fashion, entertainment, beauty, food, music, and education, [reported](#)⁸⁵ Cosmopolitan Middle East.



The event, held under the theme "Celebrating New Dreams," featured performances by Middle Eastern stars and **recognized Mohammed Shamsi as TikTok MENA Creator of the Year 2023**, who Cosmopolitan described as "a comedic genius."

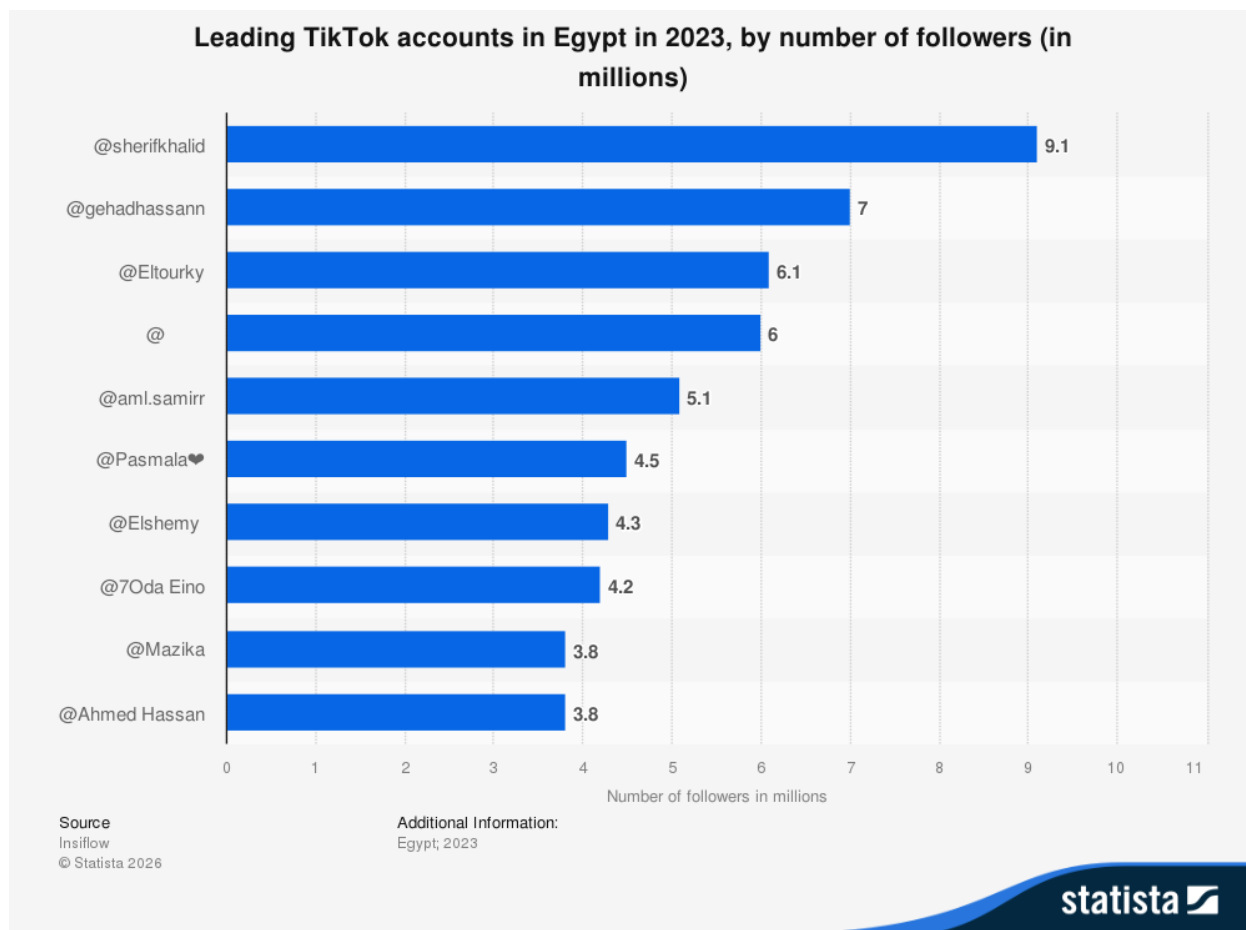
Image, left, [via](#) Instagram

Other categories recognized creators in areas such as Fashion & Beauty, Entertainment, Food, Gaming, Music and Sport.

Among Egyptian TikTok creators, **Sherif Khalid and Gehad Hassan** emerged as leading figures with 9.1 million and 7 million followers respectively, Statista [reported](#).⁸⁶ Their success demonstrated the platform's role in creating new forms of digital celebrity and cultural influence across the region, including MENA's largest market.

⁸⁵ <https://www.cosmopolitanme.com/celebs/tiktok-mena-awards>

⁸⁶ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1327339/most-popular-tiktok-influencers-in-egypt-based-on-number-of-followers/>



More widely, based on data in mid-December 2023, **TikTok Middle East** shared a list of **MENA's most influential TikTokers**, which was [published by Forbes](https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/consumer/entertainment/menas-top-20-tiktokers-1).⁸⁷

Rank	Name	Country of Residence	Followers
1	Khaby Lame	UAE and Italy	161.8 million
2	Abir El Saghir	Lebanon	24.4 million
3	Mohammed Shamsi	Saudi Arabia	17.5 million
4	Noor Naem	UAE	9.1 million
5	Thamer AlDairem	Saudi Arabia	8.3 million

⁸⁷ <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/consumer/entertainment/menas-top-20-tiktokers-1>

In early 2023, **TikTok expanded its Arabic music offerings** through a licensing agreement with Rotana Music Group, allowing users to create videos featuring music from Arab superstars including Elissa, Amr Diab, Najwa Karam, and Mohammed Abdo, [reported](#)⁸⁸ The National. Rotana, which is headquartered in Riyadh, is one of the Arab world's largest music labels.

Commenting on the move, Hari Nair, Head of Music – Middle East, Africa and South Asia, [said](#)⁸⁹ “As TikTok continues to grow across the Middle East and North Africa, becoming a cultural force in the region, we’re delighted to bring the biggest independent catalog to our platform.”

A 2022 [report](#)⁹⁰ from IFPI (International Federation of the Phonographic Industry) revealed that recorded music market revenues in MENA grew by 35% in 2021, making it the fastest-growing region in the world.

⁸⁸ <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/music-stage/2023/01/12/music-by-elissa-amr-diab-and-other-arab-stars-on-tiktok-after-rotana-deal/>

⁸⁹ <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/tiktok-strikes-licensing-deal-with-warner-backed-rotana-music-group/>

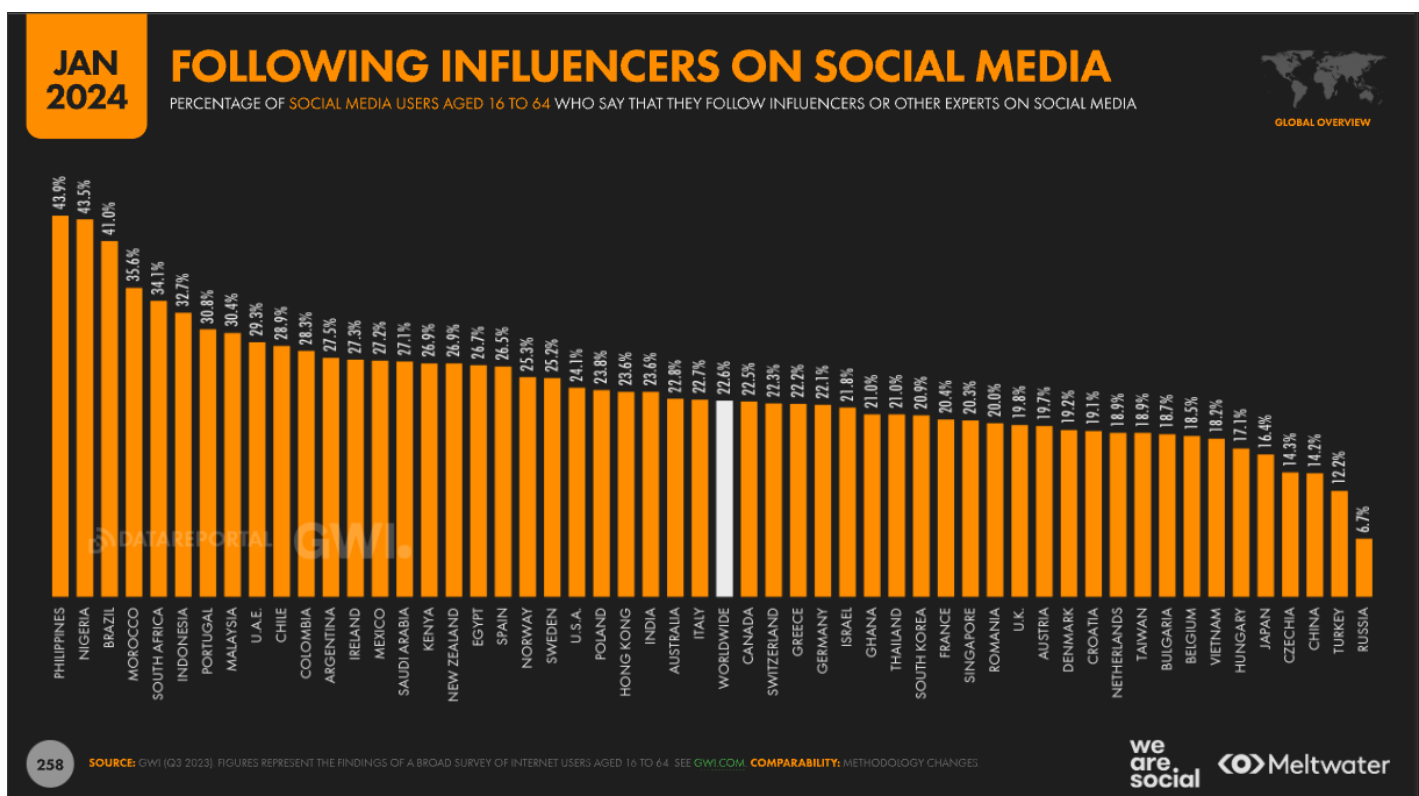
⁹⁰ <https://www.ifpi.org/new-research-confirms-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-as-thriving-music-region/>

7. Influencers and the Creator Economy

The Middle East and North Africa region witnessed significant growth in influencer marketing and the creator economy during 2023.

Regional Leadership in Influencer Engagement

Morocco and UAE emerged among the global leaders for following influencers. According to the [Global Digital Report 2024](#),⁹¹ which uses Q3 2023 data (p. 258), both countries ranked among the top ten nations worldwide (Morocco at #4 and UAE at #9) based on the percentage of users aged 16-64 who say they follow influencers or other experts on social media.



This high engagement rate reflects the region's receptivity to influencer marketing and the integration of digital personalities into consumers' daily media consumption habits.

The Middle East's market was projected to reach \$1.3 billion in 2023, the Dubai-based website The Liberum [reported](#).⁹²

⁹¹ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-global-overview-report>

⁹² <https://theliberum.com/influencer-marketings-saw-unprecedented-growth-in-2023-in-the-middle-east/>

Major Events Driving Influencer Content

- Ramadan 2023

Ramadan remains the most significant period for influencer marketing and social media engagement across the region, underscoring Ramadan's importance to brands, platforms, and creators in MENA.

- Data firm Emplifi [reported](#)⁹³ that the **potential impressions for all Ramadan-related content captured during the holy month were equivalent to \$418.51 billion in media value.**
- **The theme of Ramadan was mentioned in 3.73 million posts during 2023**, with 2.34 million mentions from users in Saudi Arabia and 185,755 mentions from those in the United Arab Emirates.
- **The Crown Prince of Dubai's (@faz3) [Ramadan greeting](#)**⁹⁴ on March 23, 2023, was the top-performing Ramadan post (see below).



⁹³ <https://emplifi.io/press/ramadan-highlights-middle-east-demand-for-influencer-marketing-on-social/>

⁹⁴ <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CqGJxRsoMdl/>



The campaign focused on:

1. **Hala Dahrouge** - Founder of Lebanon-based LibanTroc, established in 2019 as Lebanon's economic crisis worsened
2. **Marouan Zitane** - Founder of Moroccan Travelers Community, championing sustainable travel
3. **Rania Atef** - Egyptian entrepreneur who created a support system for female entrepreneurs through "I Make This!"
4. **Ibrahim Safwat** - Founder of Cairo Runners, one of the largest sports groups in Egypt

⁹⁵ <https://hypebeast.com/2023/1/cristiano-ronaldo-instagram-followers-al-nassr>

⁹⁶ <https://about.fb.com/news/2023/02/amplifying-the-voices-of-unsung-heroes-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>

- Sports and Celebrity Influence

The signing of Cristiano Ronaldo by Saudi Arabian football club Al-Nassr created an immediate and dramatic impact on the club's social media presence.

The club gained over five million Instagram followers after announcing the signing of the five-time Champions League winner, [reported](#)⁹⁵ the website Hypebeast.

The site noted that the club received 32 million likes and over 3.5 million new followers within hours of the announcement—a 400% increase.

Moreover, the club's Instagram following scaled from 834,000 to 6.2 million followers, demonstrating the extraordinary power of celebrity associations in potentially driving social media growth.

- Community Impact

Meta's [#CommunityStoriesMENA campaign](#)⁹⁶ showcased four community builders using the platform's features to create social impact across the region.

Commenting on the launch, Rawya AbdelKader, Communications Manager, MENA at Meta [said](#):⁹⁷ “On a daily basis, we see stories that showcase the best of humanity. It may not always make the public spotlight, but every day people are using our apps to help others and support their community - becoming blood donors, connecting with people who need help or joining a collective movement to change and discover.”

Examples of Major Influencers

- United Arab Emirates

The UAE's influencer landscape remained dominated by beauty, fashion, and lifestyle creators. According to [The Media Lab](#),⁹⁸ the top Instagram influencers in the UAE for 2023 included:

- **Huda Kattan** (@hudabeauty) perhaps the region's most successful beauty entrepreneur and influencer, with over 52 million Instagram followers. In 2013, Kattan and her sister established the cosmetics powerhouse Huda Beauty, named after the blog she had launched three years prior.
- **Joelle Mardinian** (@joellemardinian, 20.6 million followers) ranked as the second most prominent Instagram influencer in the UAE. A Lebanese fashion model, actress, and entrepreneur, Mardinian founded Joelle, a beauty products company.
- Other top UAE influencers included Noorstars (13.6 million followers), Noha Nabil (, Nour Arida (11 million), and Narins Beauty.

- Turkey

Turkey's influencer ecosystem sees food content creators achieving exceptional reach. According to [Statista](#), the country's top Instagram influencers in 2023 included:

- **Nusret Gökçe** (@nusr_et) widely known as "Salt Bae." The former butcher, chef, and restaurateur achieved global fame in January 2017 when his distinctive technique for preparing and seasoning meat [went viral](#),⁹⁹ becoming a popular internet meme.
- **Burak Özdemir** (@cznburak) built his massive following through preparation and presentation of oversized Turkish dishes while smiling directly at the camera.
- **Hakkı Akdeniz** (@hakkiakdeniz) is a Turkish-born restaurateur and founder of the Champion Pizza chain in New York City, demonstrating how [immigrant success stories](#)¹⁰⁰ can translate into social media influence.

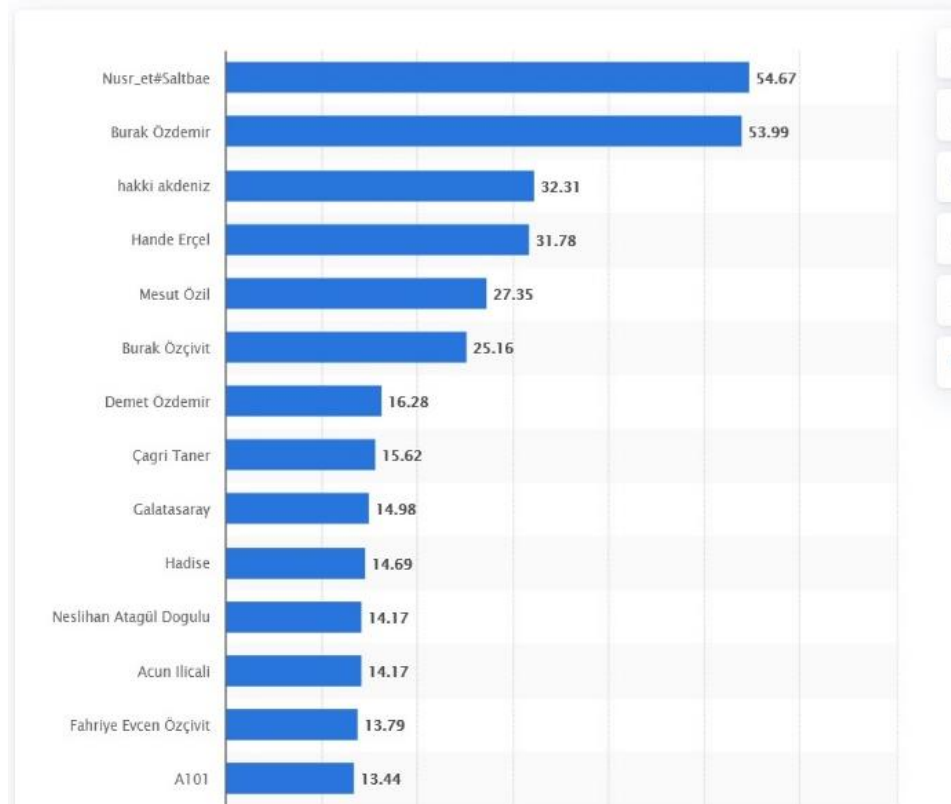
⁹⁷ <https://business.facebook.com/community/whats-new/the-voices-of-Metas-unsung-heros/>

⁹⁸ <https://www.themedialab.me/top-uae-instagram-influencers/>

⁹⁹ <https://www.thewrap.com/who-the-hell-is-salt-bae/>

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.carnegie.org/awards/honoree/hakki-akdeniz/>

Leading Instagram accounts in Turkey as of February 2024 (in millions)



Influencers and Political Discourse

The Israel-Hamas conflict that erupted in October 2023 drew numerous influencers into political commentary. This included:

- **American model Gigi Hadid** who faced criticism from Israel's official Instagram account after sharing a statement about the ongoing conflict. As Middle East Eye [noted](https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-gigi-hadid-attacked-official-instagram),¹⁰¹ "Hadid, whose Palestinian father and his family were forced from their home during the Nakba, posted an infographic stating: 'There is nothing Jewish about the Israeli government's treatment of Palestinians. Condemning the Israeli government is not antisemitic and supporting Palestinians is not supporting Hamas.'" The post promoted follow-ups from official Israeli government accounts.
- **Tunisian tennis star Ons Jabeur** faced an official complaint filed by the Israeli Tennis Association, [reported](https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2023/10/17/tunisias-ons-jabeur-faces-backlash-following-free-palestine-instagram-story/)¹⁰² The National. This followed an Instagram story showing support for Palestinians amid war, the paper said.

¹⁰¹ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-gigi-hadid-attacked-official-instagram>

¹⁰² <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/palestine-israel/2023/10/17/tunisias-ons-jabeur-faces-backlash-following-free-palestine-instagram-story/>

8. X (formerly Twitter)

X, the platform formerly known as Twitter, experienced significant challenges in the Middle East during 2023, including declining user numbers, verification controversies, and intense scrutiny over its handling of the Israel-Hamas conflict and relationship with governments in the region.

Verification Changes and Privacy Concerns

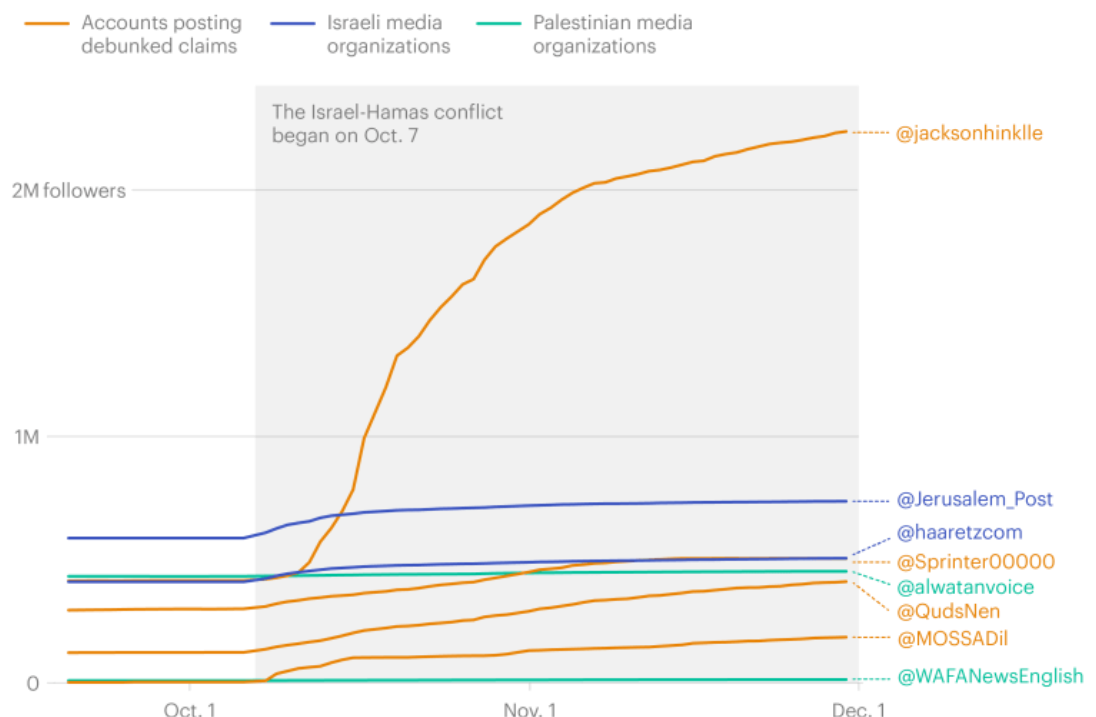
Campaigners expressed alarm at reports that verification for premium X users would be carried out by an Israel-based company founded by former Israeli intelligence officials, [according to](#)¹⁰³ Middle East Eye. The new measures would involve users uploading copies of government-issued identification and headshots, with third-party software collecting biometric data to be stored for up to 30 days, [reported](#)¹⁰⁴ The New Arab, citing PC Magazine.

This development raised particular concerns among users in countries with contentious relationships with Israel or among activists worried about potential surveillance.

Following the gutting of content moderation initiatives at X, accounts with blue verification checks—once a sign of authenticity—were found to be disseminating debunked claims while gaining more followers, [reported](#)¹⁰⁵ ProPublica.

The platform's fact-checking system, Community Notes, had not scaled sufficiently to address the volume of misinformation, particularly during major breaking news events.

Image [via](#) ProPublica



¹⁰³ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/x-twitter-israel-concerns-verification>

¹⁰⁴ <https://www.newarab.com/news/twitter-send-users-info-israel-verification>

¹⁰⁵ <https://www.propublica.org/article/x-verified-accounts-misinformation-israel-hamas-conflict>

The Israel-Hamas Conflict

X's handling of the Israel-Hamas conflict came under intense scrutiny after a "deluge" of fake posts and recommendations from Elon Musk of accounts that had made false claims or antisemitic comments, [wrote](#)¹⁰⁶ The Guardian.

"One in five social media accounts participating in online conversations about the Hamas attacks and their aftermath are fake," the article says, citing Cyabra, an Israeli analysis firm. The company found that approximately 30,000 fake accounts had been spreading pro-Hamas disinformation, The Guardian said, alongside gathering sensitive details about their targets.

The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media (7amleh) [documented](#)¹⁰⁷ more than 19,000 cases of hate speech and inciting content in Hebrew language on X, noting "a significant increase in this type of content since October 7th." The cases documented included various forms of harmful content, such as hate speech, fake news, and content promoting violence and incitement.

Alongside this, 7or - the Palestinian Observatory for Digital Rights Violations – reported 357 cases from Oct. 7th through Oct. 11th, covering account restrictions on Palestinian activists and supporters, as well as hate speech and incitement primarily targeting residents of Gaza.

Canadian psychologist and conservative influencer Jordan Peterson came under fire for urging Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to unleash "hell" on Palestinians in Gaza, [reported](#)¹⁰⁸ Middle East Eye, an example of how prominent figures on both sides have used the platform to make statements about the conflict.

Celebrity Departures

Egyptian Canadian star Mena Massoud, who rose to fame portraying Aladdin in Disney's 2019 live-action remake, quit Twitter in May 2023 following backlash over a comment he made about the upcoming "The Little Mermaid" film, [reported](#) Arab News.

The tweet has now been deleted Arab News said, noting that the post had said: "Our film ('Aladdin') was unique in that audiences went to watch it multiple times. It's the only way we reached the billion-dollar mark with our opening. My guess is ('The Little Mermaid') doesn't cross the billion mark but will undoubtedly get a sequel."

In response, Halle Bailey, who plays the lead in The Little Mermaid, described his comment as "bitter."

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/oct/09/x-twitter-elon-musk-disinformation-israel-hamas>

¹⁰⁷ <https://7amleh.org/post/7amleh-documents-19-000-violent-tweets-in-hebrew-on-x>

¹⁰⁸ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/gaza-israel-jordan-peterson-faces-criticism-netanyahu-unleash-hell>

9. Freedom of Expression and Digital Rights

Throughout 2023, freedom of expression on social media platforms remained constrained across much of the region, with governments employing various measures to control online discourse. Here are some key developments that caught our eye over the past year:

YouTube

In July 2023, YouTube blocked 18 channels associated with Yemen's Iran-backed Ansar Allah Movement (the Houthis), [according to](#) MEMRI, the D.C. based Middle East Media Research Institute. Hours later, the Houthis' media center responded by condemning the removal as unfair and likening it to terrorism.

The case of an Iraqi YouTuber, Tiba al-Ali, drew international attention to the dangers that can be faced by content creators.

As the BBC [explains](#)¹⁰⁹, “Young, vibrant and bubbly, YouTuber Tiba al-Ali became a hit with her fun-loving videos about her life.

She started her channel after moving from her native Iraq to Turkey at the age of 17 in 2017, talking about her independence, her fiancé, make-up and other things. Tiba appeared happy and attracted tens of thousands of subscribers.

This January she went back to Iraq to visit her family - and was murdered by her father. However, the killing was not considered to have been “pre-meditated” and her father was sentenced to only six months in prison.”

The death sparked [outrage](#)¹¹⁰ in Iraq, Al Jazeera noted, saying that “Al-Ali’s death has sparked uproar among Iraqis on social media, who have called for protests in the capital, Baghdad... to demand justice in response to her death.”

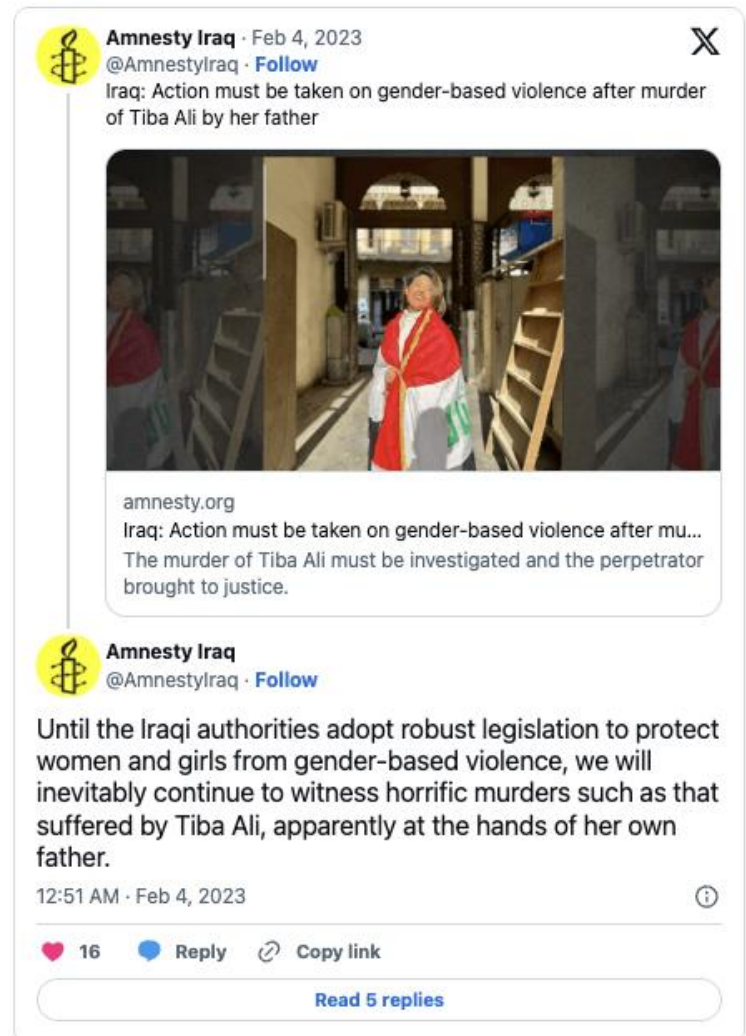


Image [via](#) Twitter/X

¹⁰⁹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-64533577>

¹¹⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/4/iraqis-outraged-after-father-kills-youtube-star-daughter>

Snapchat

Despite—or perhaps because of—Snapchat's popularity in Saudi Arabia, the platform faced increased scrutiny from authorities during 2023.

In June 2023, Saudi state media issued an explicit warning that insulting authorities on social media platforms such as Snapchat constitutes a criminal offense, [according to](#) The Guardian.¹¹¹

In their reporting, The Guardian [highlighted](#) concerns about privacy on the platform and examples of where users had fallen foul of the authorities, noting that the company had “recently forged a new “cooperation” deal with the kingdom’s culture ministry.”

In response, a Snapchat spokesperson said in a statement to the publication that: “We uphold and respect the value of universal human rights and our goal is to serve our community, enabling them to unleash their creativity and broaden their understanding of the world.”

TikTok

TikTok emerged as a crucial platform for Iranian protesters following the death of [Mahsa Jina Amini](#)¹¹² in September 2022. The platform played a significant role throughout 2023 in sustaining global attention on Iran's "Woman, Life, Freedom" uprising. A [Carnegie Endowment analysis](#)¹¹³ described how Iran's "TikTok generation" used the platform to circumvent government censorship enabling them to “to formulate different world views and expectations for their lives.”



The protest song "Baraye" by singer Shervin Hajipour, became the movement's unofficial anthem on TikTok. As the Ajam Media Collective [explains](#),¹¹⁴ “25 year old Shervin Hajipour chose 29 tweets out of millions posted online and turned them into the songs’ lyrics.” “

Haipour was already nationally famous following his participation in the Iranian talent show *Asr-e Jadid* (New Era).,” they added.

The song [won the Grammy for "Best Song for Social Change"](#)¹¹⁵ in February 2023, the inaugural winner of

this new category.

Image AFO via Getty Images, [published](#) by The Los Angeles Times

¹¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/jun/04/snapchat-social-media-saudi-arabia-authorities>

¹¹² <https://www.dw.com/en/jina-mahsa-amini/t-63431146>

¹¹³ <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/01/irans-uprising-and-the-tiktok-generation?lang=en>

¹¹⁴ <https://ajammc.com/2023/02/09/baraye-irans-song-of-protest/>

¹¹⁵ <https://time.com/6253188/iran-grammys-shervin-hajipour/>

- **Arab News [wrote](#)**¹¹⁶ **about calls to boycott TikTok in Saudi Arabia**, following accusations that the platform has censored and banned pro-Saudi accounts. In response, TikTok said “The rumors regarding TikTok removing content related to Saudi Arabia are not true,” adding that “we strongly reject these allegations that are inconsistent with our policies and values.”
- During August, **the Egyptian senate discussed banning TikTok and “other similar applications that fail to meet the nation’s safety policies and standards.”** Freedom House [notes](#)¹¹⁷ that “despite these conversations, TikTok remained available in Egypt.”
- **[Al Arabiya reported](#)**¹¹⁸ **that psychologists and doctors were seeing rising eating disorders and distorted body image perceptions among teenagers in the UAE and wider Middle East**, attributing the trend partly to “thinspiration” videos on the platform.
- Alongside this, **dentists in the UAE [issued warnings](#)**¹¹⁹ about the dangerous trend of people buying dental braces online following TikTok posts on this topic. The medical community’s concerns highlighted how viral trends on the platform can potentially encourage risky health behaviors among impressionable youth.

TikTok, along with other social media platforms, have had to navigate a number of major challenges since the Israel-Hamas war began in October 2023.

In a November 2nd [statement](#),¹²⁰ the company said that “Since the start of the Israel-Hamas war, we have **removed more than 925,000 videos** in the conflict region for violating our policies around violence, hate speech, misinformation, and terrorism, including content promoting Hamas.” They also commented that “Since Oct. 7, we’ve **removed more than 24 million fake accounts** globally and more than **half a million bot comments** on content under hashtags related to the conflict.”

Alongside this, the statement also **addressed [concerns](#)**¹²¹ **that TikTok’s algorithms were “pushing pro-Palestine content over pro-Israel content to U.S. users”** “That’s simply false,” they wrote, stating that “in the U.S., the hashtag #standwithisrael has gained 1.5x more views than #standwithpalestine: 46.3M views compared to 29.4M views.”

¹¹⁶ <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2419606/media>

¹¹⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/egypt/freedom-net/2024>

¹¹⁸ <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2023/01/12/TikTok-thinspiration-videos-contribute-to-eating-disorders-among-UAE-teens-Experts>

¹¹⁹ <https://english.alarabiya.net/life-style/healthy-living/2023/02/01/UAE-dentists-advise-against-buying-dental-braces-aligners-online-amid-TikTok-hype>

¹²⁰ <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/ensuring-a-safe-authentic-space-during-times-of-conflict?lang=en>

¹²¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/10/tiktok-faces-renewed-calls-for-a-ban-amid-pro-hamas-anti-israel-claims>

In a [statement](#)¹²² later that month, the company was at pains to point out “Our recommendation algorithm doesn't “take sides” and has rigorous measures in place to prevent manipulation.” They also noted that added more Arabic and Hebrew-speaking moderators to their global safety team.

At the same time, they also noted that “Support for Israel (as compared to sympathy for Palestine) has been lower among younger Americans for some time,” and that “Attitudes among young people skewed toward Palestine long before TikTok existed.” Or as Vice put it, in the [headline](#)¹²³ of an article covering the statement: “TikTok Says It’s Not the Algorithm, Teens Are Just Pro-Palestine.”

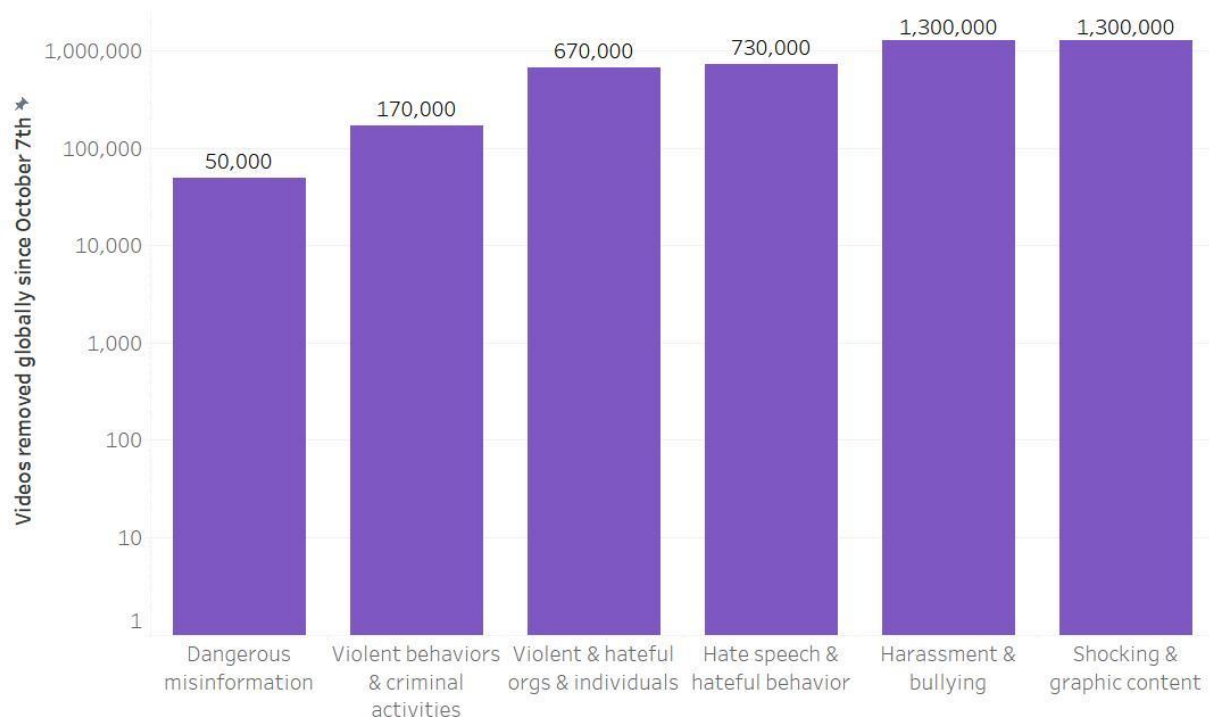


Image [via](#) TikTok

X (formerly known as Twitter)

- Egypt

The Digital Forensic Research Lab (DFRLab) reported that a Twitter network appearing to align with the Egyptian government was amplifying hashtags favorable to President Abdel

¹²² <https://newsroom.tiktok.com/the-truth-about-tiktok-hashtags-and-content-during-the-israel-hamas-war?lang=en>

¹²³ <https://www.vice.com/en/article/tiktok-its-not-the-algorithm-teens-are-just-pro-palestine/>

Fattah El-Sisi and the police force, resulting in those hashtags [trending within Egypt](#).¹²⁴ The network also amplified a hashtag attacking the fact-checking organization Saheeh Masr.

According to the DFRLab report, the network included 21 active accounts, several with tens of thousands of followers, including one with over 54,000 followers.

“Some accounts exhibit highly suspicious posting rates and engage with pro-government hashtags during overlapping timespans. They also frequently reply to each other’s tweets with the hashtags in an apparent bid to boost amplification,” their research suggested.

- Saudi Arabia

A US lawsuit accused X of assisting Saudi Arabia in efforts to stifle dissent on the platform, [reported](#) Middle East Eye. The legal filing alleged that the platform disclosed user data to Saudi authorities "significantly more often" than to the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada, MEE said. The filing also suggested that the company had ignored "red flags" of a systematic crackdown on dissent that began in December 2014, when the platform was purportedly infiltrated by three Saudi agents.

More than a dozen rights groups called on X to [ensure user safety](#)¹²⁵ Middle East Eye wrote. The move came after a Mohammed al-Ghamdi, a retired teacher, was [sentenced to death](#)¹²⁶ following tweets from an anonymous account with just nine followers.

Image [via](#) X.



An American citizen who had been sentenced to 19 years in Saudi prison for posting criticism of the Kingdom's rulers on social media was eventually [released](#),¹²⁷ according to i24 News, though he was unable to leave the country due to a travel ban.

¹²⁴ <https://dfrlab.org/2023/03/23/egyptian-twitter-network-amplifies-pro-government-hashtags-attacks-fact-checkers/>

¹²⁵ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-twitter-rights-groups-call-protect-users-after-death-sentence>

¹²⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/29/saudi-arabia-man-sentenced-death-tweets>

¹²⁷ <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/middle-east/the-gulf/1679379184-saudi-arabia-releases-u-s-citizen-imprisoned-for-critical-tweets>

UN experts urged Saudi authorities to release two women—Salma Al-Shehab and Noura Al-Qahtani—who were imprisoned over tweets criticizing the authorities. The Working Group on Arbitrary Detention stated that the women were being detained arbitrarily and should be released, [reporting](#)¹²⁸ by Middle East Monitor found.

- Turkey

X filed objections to the Turkish courts in response to requests for bans on certain accounts and tweets [reported](#)¹²⁹ Reuters. At the same time, while these objections were going through the courts, the company “took action” on some content (four accounts and 409 tweets) in order to keep the platform open during May’s presidential and parliamentary elections.

Separately, **thousands of Russian- and Hungarian-speaking X accounts were reactivated** as Turkish users in the weeks leading up to the May 14 elections, raising [concerns about election interference](#)¹³⁰ via social media.

Turkish authorities imposed restrictions on Twitter/X across the country following devastating earthquakes in February 2023, [reported](#)¹³¹ Middle East Eye. The outlet noted that the move provoked outcry from campaigners who argued the restrictions could hinder rescue efforts in affected areas.

Image [via](#) NetBlocks

Telegram

Iraq temporarily blocked access to Telegram in August 2023, after its government expressed security concerns related to the [publishing of citizen’s private data](#)¹³² on the app. The [suspension was lifted](#)¹³³ after the company agreed to address these concerns.

¹²⁸ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230710-saudi-urged-to-release-2-women-detained-for-tweets/>

¹²⁹ <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/twitter-objects-turkish-court-orders-after-pre-election-warnings-2023-05-16/>

¹³⁰ <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-elections-thousands-russian-speaking-accounts-activated-twitter>

¹³² <https://www.reuters.com/technology/iraq-blocks-telegram-app-cites-personal-data-violations-2023-08-06/>

¹³³ <https://techcrunch.com/2023/08/14/iraq-lifts-ban-on-telegram-after-messaging-app-complies-with-authorities/>

NetBlocks [@netblocks](#) · Follow

⚠️ Confirmed: Real-time network data show Twitter has been restricted in **#Turkey**; the filtering is applied on major internet providers and comes as the public come to rely on the service in the aftermath of a series of deadly earthquakes

📄 Report: netblocks.org/reports/twite...

ISP	ISP Name	ISP Type	Feature	Platform	Status	Reachability	Notes
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Mobile API	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Link Shortener	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Distribution API	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Tweet Embed API	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Image CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Website	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	JS/CSS CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Video CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Photo/Video Upload	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Video CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Image CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
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AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	JS/CSS CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Video CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Photo/Video Upload	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
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AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Website	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	JS/CSS CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
AD20078	TT_MOBIL Internet TR	Türk Telekom Mobil	Video CDN	Twitter	DOWN	0%	
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Arrests and Prosecutions of Content Creators

- Egypt

A professor of dentistry at Egypt University for Science and Technology, Ahmed El-Tabbakh, was forcibly removed from his home due to a Facebook post criticizing the rising cost of living, [according to](#)¹³⁴ regional news media reports. The Arab Organisation for Human Rights, a UK-based NGO, [said](#)¹³⁵ in September that he was still being detained and that he had been denied medical treatment during an interrogation.

Political activist Mohammed Adel received a four-year prison sentence in September 2023, five years after he had been arrested on charges of spreading false news on social media. Adel had been detained throughout that time.

Twenty eight human rights organizations [published an open letter](#)¹³⁶ that month demanding his release.



A satirical video about a prison visit led to the arrest of five people in Egypt at the start of the year. The Wall Street Journal [observed](#)¹³⁷ that "Egyptian authorities are arresting social-media influencers whose content goes viral, even if that content is apolitical, as part of a crackdown on free speech by President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi." According to Al Jazeera, the three-minute video, titled *The Visit*, had been viewed more than seven million times on Facebook.

Fashion blogger Salma Elshimy (photographed overleaf) was detained at the start of April by Egyptian officials on alleged charges of "spreading immorality" and publishing videos and photographs that "contradict social morals and values," [reported](#) Middle East Monitor. She was later [sentenced](#)¹³⁸ to two years in prison and fined 1000,000 Egyptian Pounds. In November, An appeals court canceled the prison term and reduced the fine the U.S. State Department [noted](#)¹³⁹ in an annual round-up of human rights practices in the country.

¹³⁴ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230404-egypt-professor-thought-to-be-arrested-for-critical-cost-of-living-facebook-post/>

¹³⁵ <https://aohr.org.uk/egyptian-academics-detention-extended-over-freedom-of-expression-charges/>

¹³⁶ <https://dawnmena.org/egypt-immediately-release-political-activist-mohamed-adel-jailed-for-peaceful-exercise-of-freedom-of-expression/>

¹³⁷ https://www.wsj.com/articles/egypt-arrests-social-media-influencers-in-deepening-crackdown-b26835bc?st=Yk9Hq7&reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink

¹³⁸ <https://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/details/2867838>

¹³⁹ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/egypt/>



- Bahrain

Three members of a religious and cultural society in Bahrain that advocates open discussion of Islamic issues were jailed at the end of March, [reported](#) the BBC.

[According](#)¹⁴⁰ to DW, prosecutors said the group made blog posts and YouTube videos "about the lives of the messengers and prophets, which included a denial of what was mentioned in the Holy Quran (the Islamic holy book) regarding them and a mockery of what was mentioned."

More widely, using the Bahrain government's own data, the U.S. State Department [observed](#)¹⁴¹ that arrested 10 individuals had been arrested during 2023 for posting illegal content on social media. Of these, six of them were tried and convicted, while the other cases were pending at the end of the year.

- Lebanon

A Lebanese man was arrested after displaying the Israeli flag in a TikTok video while after identifying Israel as his "favorite" Middle Eastern country. [As described](#)¹⁴² by the Algemeiner website, "Ali Attieh appeared with images of a Lebanese and an Israeli flag above his head. A text at the top of the screen asked him to choose his "favorite Arab country," following which he

¹⁴⁰ <https://www.dw.com/en/bahrain-jails-3-for-online-debates-questioning-islam/a-65187420>

¹⁴¹ <https://www.state.gov/reports/2023-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/bahrain/>

¹⁴² <https://www.algemeiner.com/2023/09/19/lebanese-tiktok-user-arrested-posting-image-israeli-flag/>

turned his head in the direction of the Israeli flag, which was then stamped with a purple heart emoji.”

“Flags of other Middle Eastern countries appeared on the screen with the same question. Attieh continued to tilt his head toward the Israeli flag, apparently showing his preference for the Jewish state over other countries in the region,” they wrote. The video has now been removed from TikTok (although it’s [still available](#) via third parties on X).



- United Arab Emirates

In Dubai, a social media influencer was arrested over a satirical video portraying a brash Emirati on a spending spree in a luxury car showroom, [reported](#)¹⁴³ the Associated Press.

“A vaguely-worded cybercrime law enacted in January 2022 [heavily restricts expression and assembly](#), criminalizing virtually any form of political opposition and anything that could harm the reputation of the UAE or its leaders,” the AP said.

“Fifteen human rights groups [have called for the law to be repealed or amended](#),” they added.

¹⁴³ <https://apnews.com/article/uae-dubai-tiktok-arrest-satire-alrind-3a73fb34f8ab210372b563e67facc04f>

10. Misinformation, Disinformation, and Platform Integrity

The spread of false information across social media platforms in the Middle East reached alarming levels in 2023, particularly (and not surprisingly) during the Israel-Hamas conflict, exposing weaknesses in content moderation systems and raising questions about platform responsibility for the information shared on them.

The Israel-Hamas Information War

- Scale of Misinformation

News reports noted the rise in disinformation being spread online, with numerous cases where movie footage and video game graphics have been repurposed to make false claims about the conflict, [according to](#)¹⁴⁴ The Guardian. A [BBC report](#)¹⁴⁵ examined "who's behind Israel-Gaza disinformation and hate online," and noted that "determining whether a profile is actually fake and who exactly is behind it is a very difficult task." "It requires information from the social media companies that journalists don't often have access to," they said.

The New York Times [reported](#)¹⁴⁶ on the graphic imagery and footage that flooded social media since Hamas terrorists attacked Israel, including "bogus claims" which they note "risk obscuring real evidence of atrocities."

Image (right) shows "A paragliding accident in South Korea, not Israel," The New York Times revealed.

Platform Responses and Failures

X (formerly Twitter) appeared to have the worst levels of fake news related to the war, [noted](#)¹⁴⁷ Al Jazeera.

Despite the platform's Community Notes fact-checking system, misinformation from verified accounts (which can now be purchased, rather than determined by the platform) spread rapidly and gained significant reach before corrections could be applied.

A Palestinian terrorist attempting to enter Israel by air, getting stuck on an electrical wire, and frying!

I'll make an exception and order this meat well-done please!



¹⁴⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2023/oct/11/how-israel-hamas-war-disinformation-is-being-spread-online>

¹⁴⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-67114313>

¹⁴⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/article/israel-attacks-video-disinformation.html>

¹⁴⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/10/10/social-media-platforms-swamped-with-fake-news-on-the-israel-hamas-war>

"These massive companies are still stumped by the proliferation of disinformation, even as no one is still surprised by it."

"They put out numbers – how many posts they've taken down, how many accounts they've blocked, what settings you might want to change if you don't want to see carnage. What they don't put out are their metrics of their failures: how many distortions were not accompanied by 'Community Notes' or otherwise labelled, and for how long. It's left to the journalists and researchers to document their failures after they happen."

Irina Raicu, director of the Internet Ethics Program at Santa Clara University.

Poynter recommended [specific methods](#)¹⁴⁸ to spot fake news spreading online in the wake of the war, noting that the conflict had "created the perfect circumstances for misinformation to accelerate online." Alex Mahadevan, director of MediaWise, Poynter's digital media literacy project, recommended starting by asking:

- Who's behind the information?
- What's the evidence?
- What do other sources say?

The Telegram-to-Twitter Pipeline

Rolling Stone reported that [Telegram was fueling](#)¹⁴⁹ X's Israel-Hamas misinformation. The messaging app served as "a hub for raw, unverified conflict footage that often lacks context," it said, with Telegram-ordinated content frequently finding its way to other platforms where it was presented without proper verification or context.



Telegram, a multi-platform messaging app which runs with a much smaller staff than other platforms, conducts little to no moderation of its services," Rolling Stone said.

"The hands-off approach has made it the go-to platform for groups or individuals banned from mainstream networks, including ISIS, QAnon, and neo-Nazis," they added. "It's also made the service a frequent target of criticism from governments, who accuse Telegram of providing a digital safe harbor for terrorist propaganda."

¹⁴⁸ <https://www.poynter.org/fact-checking/2023/how-to-spot-fake-news-israel-hamas-war/>

¹⁴⁹ <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/telegram-fueling-israel-hamas-war-misinformation-1234854300/>

Wired similarly [explored](#)¹⁵⁰ “Telegram’s lax moderation” initially through the lens of gruesome images and videos posted by Hamas “that were designed to go viral.”

Observing how the platform can be home to content not seen elsewhere, they unpacked how Telegram operates for both users and behinds the scenes.

“Whatever happens,” they wrote, “as Telegram continues to develop into the de facto platform for witnessing war in real-time, unfiltered and unmoderated, it is changing the way the world experiences violent conflict.”

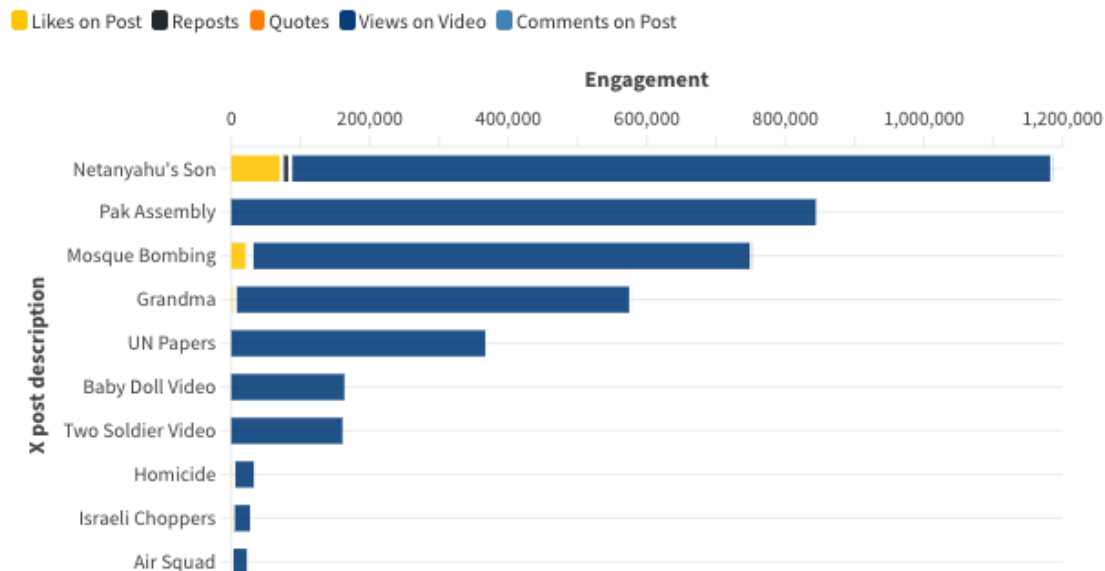
- Geographic Spread

India was an early-stage hotbed for misinformation related Israel-Hamas war [reported](#)¹⁵¹ Al Jazeera. The article framed this as part of a wider trend whereby India has sought to build closer ties with Israel over the past decade, as well as the shift in sentiment towards Islam seen in India during the Modi era.

The Narrative Research Lab in New Delhi, at Al Jazeera’s request, reviewed through trending hashtags and phrases on X, stemming from India and related to the war, as part of an effort “to better understand how political narratives about the war were being shaped.”

Top 10 fake news posts on X in India related to the Israel-Gaza war

An analysis of fake news originated or spread by users in India on the Israel-Gaza war.



¹⁵⁰ <https://www.wired.com/story/telegram-hamas-israel-conflict/>

¹⁵¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2023/10/27/shifting-politics-make-india-a-hotbed-for-israel-hamas-war-misinformation>

Meta's Content Moderation Challenges

- Systemic Censorship Allegations

Meta engaged in "systemic and global" censorship of pro-Palestinian content since the outbreak of the Israel-Gaza war on October 7, according to a report from Human Rights Watch, [shared](#)¹⁵² by The Guardian.

Between October and November 2023, Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented over 1,050 cases of takedowns and other forms of content suppression. This material had been posted by Palestinians and their supporters on Instagram and Facebook, and included content related to human rights abuses, [HRW's report](#)¹⁵³ said.

The organization identified four underlying systemic factors: flaws in Meta policies, inconsistent and opaque application of these policies, what they describe as "apparent deference to government requests for content removals," and a heavy reliance on automated tools for moderating to moderate or translating Palestine-related content.

- Translation Errors and Bugs

Instagram apologized for apparently adding a 'terrorist' tag to some Palestinian user profiles. The company [told the BBC](#)¹⁵⁴ it had fixed a problem "that briefly caused inappropriate Arabic translations."

As the website 404 [explained](#),¹⁵⁵ "Instagram was auto-translating user bios that included "Palestinian" and an Arabic phrase that means "praise be to God" to say "Palestinian terrorists are fighting for their freedom," which the platform says it's very sorry for."

Image via 404 Media



¹⁵² <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2023/dec/21/meta-facebook-instagram-pro-palestine-censorship-human-rights-watch-report>

¹⁵³ <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metass-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>

¹⁵⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-67169228>

¹⁵⁵ <https://www.404media.co/instagram-palestinian-arabic-bio-translation/>

- Violent Content Approval

The Intercept revealed that a series of advertisements calling for violence and genocide against Palestinians were [approved by Facebook](#).¹⁵⁶ Submitted in Hebrew and Arabic by 7amleh - The Arab Center for the Advancement of Social Media – the ads were designed to test “the limits of Facebook's machine-learning moderation.”

As 7amleh [explained](#),¹⁵⁷ it ran a targeted campaign of 19 ads, including “calls to “wipe out Gaza, its women, children and elderly” and other inflammatory phrases that explicitly called for killing Palestinians, burning all of Gaza, deporting people to other countries, and calls to carry out a second Nakba.”

These ads were approved by Meta and who then shared these materials with The Intercept. “However, shortly after journalists at The Intercept reached out to Meta for comment, 7amleh received notices that the ads had been retroactively rejected,” they said. “Though 7amleh hopes that Meta takes this issue seriously, it is important to note that in the past the social media giant has a track record of apologizing for individualized problems without taking serious action to create systemic solutions.”

- Account Closures



In September 2023, Facebook deleted the profile of Al Jazeera Arabic presenter Tamer Almisshal a day after his show *Tip of the Iceberg* aired an investigation, titled [The Locked Space](#),¹⁵⁸ into Meta's alleged censorship of Palestinian content.

“It is not the first time that the presenter's account is targeted by Meta,” [commented](#)¹⁵⁹ the International Federation of Journalists (IJF). “Last March, his profile was restricted and in [December 2020](#)¹⁶⁰ many media workers, including him, were hacked by the Israeli spyware Pegasus.”

Almisshal [told](#)¹⁶¹ Al Jazeera that the deleted account was his personal page, a verified account with more than 725k followers (see screenshot). “It really does seem like some kind of revenge

¹⁵⁶ <https://theintercept.com/2023/11/21/facebook-ad-israel-palestine-violence/>

¹⁵⁷ <https://7amleh.org/post/meta-should-stop-profiting-from-hate>

¹⁵⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnj0rmnsAdI>

¹⁵⁹ <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/palestine-al-jazeera-presenters-facebook-profile-deleted-by-meta>

¹⁶⁰ [December 2020](#)

¹⁶¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/10/meta-deletes-al-jazeera-presenters-profile-after-show-criticising-israel>

for the programme,” he said. “We haven’t received any response from Facebook yet.” “There was no explanation, no warning,” Almisshal said. “There had been no issues with any of the content on my page before,” he added. “No message saying I had violated any rules.”

The Facebook account of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was hacked in April 2023, part of a series of cyberattacks against Israeli targets.

“The hacking of Netanyahu's personal account coincided with the anniversary of the Nakba, the ethnic cleansing of Palestine by Zionist militias,” [wrote](#)¹⁶² The Palestine Chronicle, while Middle East Monitor [noted](#)¹⁶³ that “the cyber-attack came as Israel celebrates its Independence Day.”

The page was filled with Quranic verses “but was quickly returned to normal,” The Times of Israel [said](#).¹⁶⁴ “It was not immediately clear if the Facebook hack was linked to Anonymous Sudan,” they added, pointing to wider hacks which the group had claimed responsibility for.



Screenshot via¹⁶⁵ Times of Israel citing Channel 12 news

¹⁶² <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/anonymous-sudan-netayahus-facebook-page-hacked-replaced-by-holy-quran/>

¹⁶³ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20230427-israel-hackers-leak-thousands-of-personal-details-as-netanyahus-facebook-account-targeted/>

¹⁶⁴ <https://www.timesofisrael.com/hacking-group-continues-to-target-israeli-websites-pms-facebook-briefly-taken-over/>

¹⁶⁵ Attribution by Times of Israel: “A screenshot shared by Channel 12 news of an apparent hack on Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Facebook page, April 26, 2023. (Screenshot used in accordance with clause 27a of the Copyright Law)”



Other Platforms

#TikTok has a particular obligation to protect children & teenagers from violent content & terrorist propaganda —as well as death challenges & potentially life-threatening content.

#DSA sets out very clear obligations TikTok must comply with.

Letter to TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew



TikTok said it immediately deployed resources and personnel to counter misinformation about the Middle East conflict [reported](#)¹⁶⁶ Silicon UK.

The move followed a **request from the European Union for the platform to comply with the requirements around content moderation** set out in the Digital Services Act which – as The Verge [explained](#)¹⁶⁷ – means digital platforms are “legally accountable for the content posted to them.”

A similar request was also made to X, the BBC [said](#).¹⁶⁸

Image (left) [via](#) X

Meta Platforms were also added to the EU's list of tech firms being scrutinized about how they were mitigating risks related to content spreading on their platforms amidst the Israel-Hamas conflict, [said](#)¹⁶⁹ Al Arabiya.

At the start of the year, the **Saudi Arabia's Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology (Etidal) and Telegram [shared](#)**¹⁷⁰ that they had removed 15,021,951 pieces of extremist content in 2022 and shut down 6,824 channels used to spread radical ideology.

7:15 AM · Oct 12, 2023 · 299.3K Views

¹⁶⁶ <https://www.silicon.co.uk/e-marketing/socialmedia/tiktok-eu-dsa-534096>

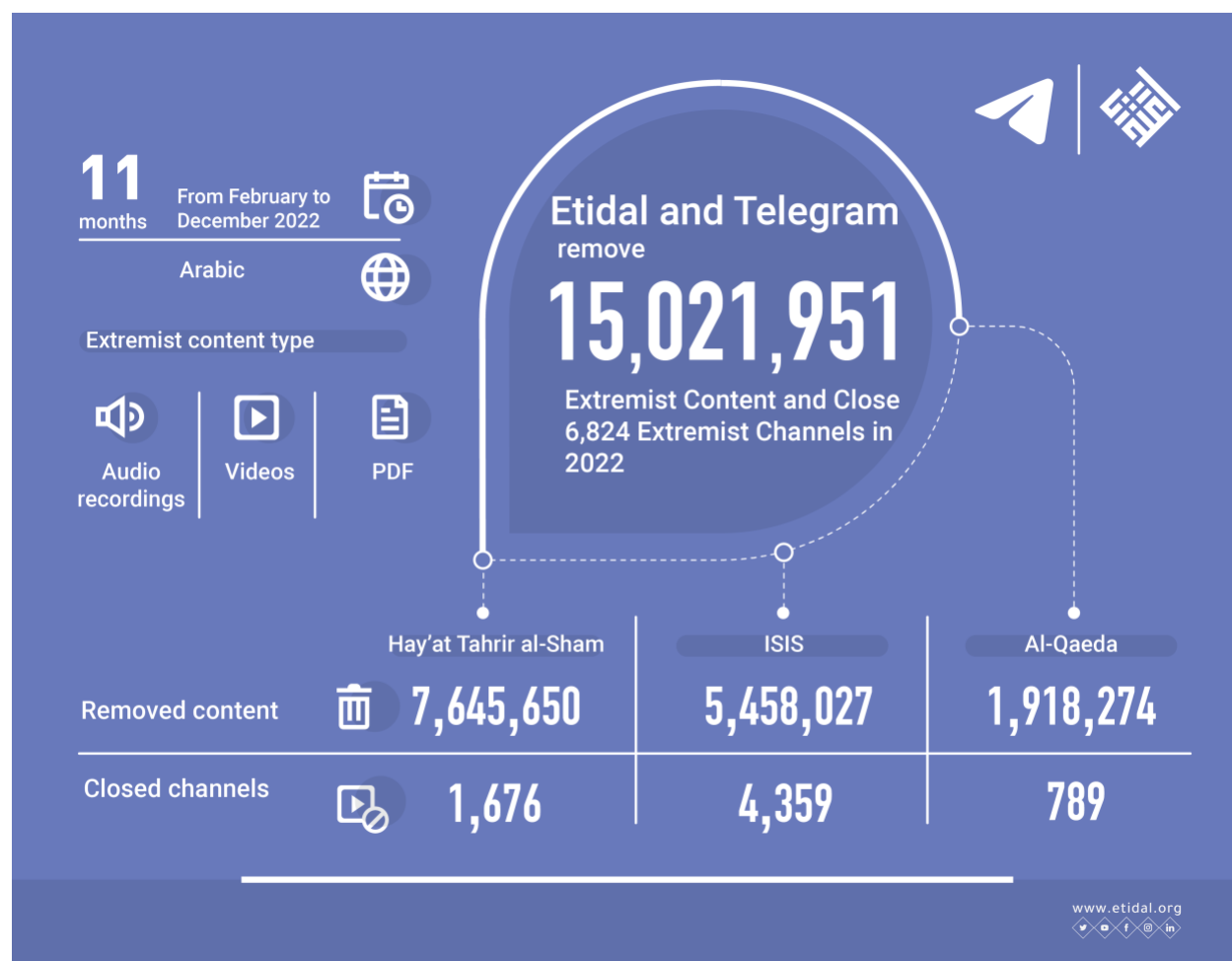
¹⁶⁷ <https://www.theverge.com/23845672/eu-digital-services-act-explained>

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-67066871>

¹⁶⁹ <https://english.alarabiya.net/topics/palestinian-israeli-conflict/2023/10/19/Meta-TikTok-added-to-EU-investigation-over-Hamas-Israel-violent-content>

¹⁷⁰ <https://etidal.org/en/etidal-and-telegram-remove-15-million-extremist-content-and-close-6824-extremist-channels-in-2022/>

Telegram blocked a number of channels with ties to Hamas in October 2023, though numerous others remained available, [reported](#)¹⁷¹ NPR. "Meta, Google and X block all accounts with links to Hamas," NPR noted, while "Telegram's more hands-free approach to moderating Hamas has led to a surge in subscribers."



Looking Forward

The events of 2023 highlighted some of the major challenges faced by social media platforms and their approach content moderation in complex geopolitical environments. Automated systems proved inadequate for understanding linguistic and cultural nuances, while human moderators struggled with the speed and volume of content being shared on these platforms.

The implications of this extend beyond both users in the Middle East, and content stemming from it, raising urgent questions about the future of moderation, digital literacy, algorithm transparency, factchecking and more. These factors look set to deepen in 2024 and beyond.

¹⁷¹ <https://www.npr.org/2023/10/31/1208800238/the-telegram-app-has-been-a-key-platform-for-hamas-now-its-being-restricted-ther>

Appendix: MENA social media active users vs internet users

*Source: Consolidated from DataReportal's 2024 country reports

Country	Total population	Internet Users (percentage)	Active social media users (percentage)
Algeria	45.95	72.9 (33.49m)	24.85 m
Bahrain	1.49 million	99 (1.48 m)	97.2(1.45m)
Djibouti	1.14 million	65 (744.2 k)	15.4 (176.5 k)
Egypt	113.6 million	72.2 (82.01m)	40 (45.4 m)
Iraq	46.01 million	78.7 (36.22 m)	69.4(31.95m)
Iran	89.5 million	81.7 (73.14 m)	53.6 (48.00 m)
Israel	9.24 million	92.1(8.51 m)	74.9(6.92m)
Jordan	11.36 million	91 (10.33 m)	56.2(6.38m)
Kuwait	4.33 million	99 (4.29 m)	95.9(4.15 m)
Lebanon	5.28 million	90.1 (4.76m)	85.6 (4.52m)
Libya	6.93 million	88.4 (6.13m)	85.2 (5.9 m)
Morocco	38.03 million	90.7 (34.47m)	55.7(21.2m)
Oman	4.68 million	97.8 (4.58 m)	84.8 (3.97 m)
Qatar	2.73 million	99(2.70 m)	95.2(2.60 m)
Saudi Arabia	37.21 million	99 (36.84m)	94.3(35.10 m)
Sudan	48.73 million	28.7 (13.99 m)	6 (2.91m)
Syria	23.79 million	35.8(8.51 m)	* Unavailable
Turkey	86.04 million	86.5(74.41m)	66.8(57.50 m)
Tunisia	12.51 million	79.6 (9.96m)	56.9 (7.12 m)
United Arab Emirates	9.55 million	99 (9.46 m)	112 (10.73 m)
Yemen	34.83 million	17.7 (6.16 m)	10.03 (3.60 m)

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**Information correct as of early 2024, when this report was researched and drafted.*

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