



UNIVERSITY OF  
OREGON

School of Journalism  
and Communication



# **SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST: 2019 IN REVIEW**

KEY DEVELOPMENTS, STORIES AND  
RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM THE PAST 12 MONTHS

**DAMIAN RADCLIFFE AND HADIL ABUHMAID**

# INTRODUCTION

This report is the eighth in an annual series of publications, dating back to 2012, designed to share the latest stories, trends and research in social media usage from across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

Using a wide variety of academic, industry and media sources, this White Paper identifies important insights from social media's development over the previous year.

Of particular note in 2019 is the continued, growing, importance of social media in the lives of Arab Youth, outside of Saudi Arabia and Turkey the declining usage of Twitter (once the poster child social network for the Arab Spring,) as well as greater scrutiny of social media usage by platform owners and governments alike.

Last year's report highlighted the increasing weaponization of social networks, a trend which continued in 2019. Facebook, Twitter and Telegram each closed hundreds of accounts due to inappropriate use by state sponsored actors and terrorist groups. Social networks were also the target of governments across MENA, in the midst of protests in many countries throughout the region.

Meanwhile, the importance of social video and visually-led social networks, continued to grow. Snapchat introduced new advertising formats to the region and other exclusive functionality, Google highlighted the importance of YouTube in supporting parents and parenting, and in major markets such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Twitter has emerged as a leading platform for online video consumption.

The year ahead is likely to result in a continuation of many of the trends outlined in this report, as social media becomes increasingly engrained across the lives of businesses, governments and residents across the MENA region.

We hope you find these observations as rich and interesting as we do.

***Damian Radcliffe and Hadil Abuhmaid***  
***University of Oregon, January 2020***

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# ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Damian Radcliffe** is the Carolyn S. Chambers Professor in Journalism, and a Professor of Practice, at the University of Oregon. In this role, he undertakes a wide range of teaching, research and journalistic work, which includes writing a monthly column on technology in the Middle East for CBS Interactive's [ZDNet](#) (which he has done since December 2013).

He has produced an annual report charting social media developments across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since 2012. Between 2012-2014 he worked for Qatar's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (ictQATAR) as an analyst and researcher. He joined the University of Oregon in 2015.

Alongside holding the Chambers Chair at the School of Journalism and Communication (SOJC), he is also an [affiliate](#) of the Department for Middle East and North African Studies at the University of Oregon, a [Fellow](#) of the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, an [Honorary Research Fellow](#) at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture Studies, and a fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).

An experienced Digital Analyst, Consultant, Journalist and Researcher, Damian writes about digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, and the evolution of journalism. He tweets [@damianradcliffe](#).

Damian's Middle East expertise is evident through the wide range of publications which he has [written for](#), and been [quoted in](#), on this topic. This includes: Al Bawaba, Al-Majalla Magazine, ArabNet, Arabian Business, Arabian Gazette, Arabian Marketer, Arab News, Arab Weekly, ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller (Arab Youth Survey), BBC Academy / BBC College of Journalism, Canvas8, CommsMEA, The Conversation, Georgetown University, Gulf News, The Huffington Post, Hurriyet Daily News (Turkey), IJNet (International Journalists' Network), journalism.co.uk, MediaShift, MBN (Middle East Broadcasting Networks), Northwestern University in Qatar, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at Oxford University, TheMediaBriefing, The Media Line, The National (UAE), The Times of Oman, Timeturk, Your Middle East and others.

As a speaker on Middle East matters, he has participated as a trainer, keynote, panelist and conference chair, at events in the Middle East, Europe and the United States, in cities such as Dubai, Doha, Istanbul, London, Portland (Oregon) and Springfield (Virginia).



**Hadil Abuhmaid** is a Media Studies PhD student and a Graduate Employee at the University of Oregon. Her primary area of research interest explores [national identity and culture](#) in Palestinian cinema.

Hadil earned a BS in Journalism and Political Science from Bir-Zeit University in Palestine and an MA in Nonprofit Management from the University of Oregon, with a focus on Arts Administration. She is the co-founder of Filmlab: Palestine, a nonprofit company based in Ramallah, that aims at developing the cinema industry in Palestine.

Her work in the field of cinema has created a base for her research interest in Palestinian self-representation. Through her research, Hadil aims at examining the formation and self-representation of the national identity in Palestinian feature films produced within the historical map of Palestine by researching their production, audience, and aesthetics. Her research interests include cinema studies, diasporic studies, representations, and national identity.

In addition to academic work, Hadil is a member of the Graduate School Advisory Board at the University of Oregon and a board member of Creating Connections; a graduate student group that supports traditionally marginalized population in the U.S. higher education. She is also a member of the University of Oregon campus planning committee.



**Kelly Kondo** is an [Advertising and Brand Responsibility](#) graduate student at the University of Oregon [School of Journalism and Communication](#). Kelly graduated from the SOJC with a Bachelor's of Science in Advertising. Kelly is a freelance designer and art director for the SOJC's student-run advertising agency Allen Hall Advertising.

Kelly formerly worked as the art director for the [Daily Emerald](#), an independent student-run media organization. During her time at the Emerald, her work was featured as a finalist for the [Associated Collegiate Press](#) Design of the Year award. Kelly is responsible for the design and layout of this report. More of her work can be viewed at her online [portfolio](#).

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>2</b>	Introduction
<b>3</b>	About the Authors
<b>5</b>	Table of Contents
<b>6</b>	Summary: 2019 in Review — 19 standout stats
<b>8</b>	Market Context — Key Growth Areas
<b>11</b>	Facebook
<b>14</b>	Twitter
<b>19</b>	Instagram
<b>22</b>	YouTube
<b>24</b>	Messaging Apps
<b>30</b>	Arab Youth
<b>32</b>	Censorship and Freedom of Expression
<b>35</b>	Extremist Groups
<b>38</b>	Israel / Palestine
<b>40</b>	Year of Protest
<b>40</b>	Sudan
<b>42</b>	Lebanon
<b>43</b>	Iran
<b>44</b>	Palestine
<b>45</b>	Egypt
<b>46</b>	Previous Reports
<b>47</b>	References / Endnotes

# SUMMARY: 2019 IN REVIEW

## 19 STANDOUT STATS

1. **Mobile social media penetration in the region has more than doubled to 44% in the past five years**, data from the GSMA shows.<sup>1</sup>
2. **9 out of 10 young Arabs use at least one social media channel every day**, although the use of individual networks varies considerably across the region, the 11th annual Arab Youth Survey found.<sup>2</sup>
3. **Facebook now has 187 million active monthly users** in the region.<sup>3</sup>
4. **Egypt is the largest market for Facebook in MENA.** It is home to 38 million daily users and 40 million monthly users.<sup>4,5</sup>
5. **Half of Arab Youth say they get their news on Facebook on a daily basis, some way ahead of other channels**, such as online portals (39%), TV (34%) and newspapers (4%).<sup>6</sup>
6. **Social media users spend around 2 million more hours daily on Facebook during Ramadan.** That translates to around 58 million more hours.<sup>7</sup>
7. **Facebook removed 259 Facebook accounts, 102 Facebook Pages, five Facebook Groups, four Facebook Events and 17 Instagram accounts, in summer 2019** “for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior” originating in UAE and Egypt.<sup>8</sup>
8. **In September, Twitter shared that it had suspended over 4,500 accounts from countries including the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, due to platform manipulation and state-backed information campaigns.**<sup>9</sup>
9. **Twitter usage among Arab nationals has fallen by half since 2013**, data from Northwestern University in Qatar finds.<sup>10</sup> Across the six counties surveyed, use of the network among internet users has fallen from 45% in 2013 to 22% in 2018.
10. **Saudi Arabia and Turkey are the fifth and sixth largest markets for Twitter in the world.** More than 10 million users are active on the social network in Saudi Arabia, akin to 38% of the population, and 8.3 million in Turkey (13%).<sup>11</sup>



11. **Twitter unveiled over 16 premium video content collaborations across sports, entertainment and news at an event in April.**<sup>12</sup> Partners include MBC Group and AMS, Abu Dhabi Media, Dubai Media Inc., Rotana Group, and the Saudi football clubs Al Ahli and Al Ittihad.<sup>13</sup>
12. **Up to 72% of Twitter users in KSA and UAE, and 62% of users in Egypt, consider Twitter one of their main sources for online video content.**<sup>14</sup>
13. **There are more than 63 million users of Instagram in the Middle East.**<sup>15</sup> Data from We Are Social [finds](#) that **Turkey is the sixth largest for market for Instagram worldwide, with 37 million members.**<sup>16</sup> At 56% penetration, Turkey is the third largest market - as a percentage of population - for Instagram in the world. Take-up is also notably high in Kuwait (6th and 54%) and Bahrain (10th at 50%.) Israel (15th at 48%).<sup>17</sup>
14. **Saudi Arabia is the fifth [largest market](#) for Snapchat in the world, with over 15.65 million users. Turkey, with 7.45 million users, is the tenth largest market.**<sup>18</sup>
15. Among Arab Internet users in six nations [studied](#) by Northwestern University in Qatar, **WhatsApp is the most used Facebook owned service, with 75% penetration.**<sup>19</sup>
16. **Half of all mothers in the Middle East watch kids content on YouTube,** Google data shows.<sup>20</sup> Parents in MENA increasingly use YouTube to bond and share experiences with their children, as well as relying on the channel “to act as a third parent or advisor who offers support.”<sup>21</sup>
17. **More than 60% of YouTube viewers in MENA are millennials.**<sup>22</sup> **In Egypt, 77% of millennials watch YouTube every day.** “That’s more than any other platform, even TV,” Google says.<sup>23</sup>
18. **Israel has the highest percentage of adults (77%) in advanced economies using social media,** the Pew Research Center found.<sup>24</sup>
19. **TV dramas and soap operas see a 151% increase in viewership on YouTube during Ramadan,** Google says. “Although it may appear a contradiction for Muslims to spend their fasting hours on YouTube, the holy month also marks a high point in viewership of religious content,” [notes](#) The New Arab website.<sup>25</sup>

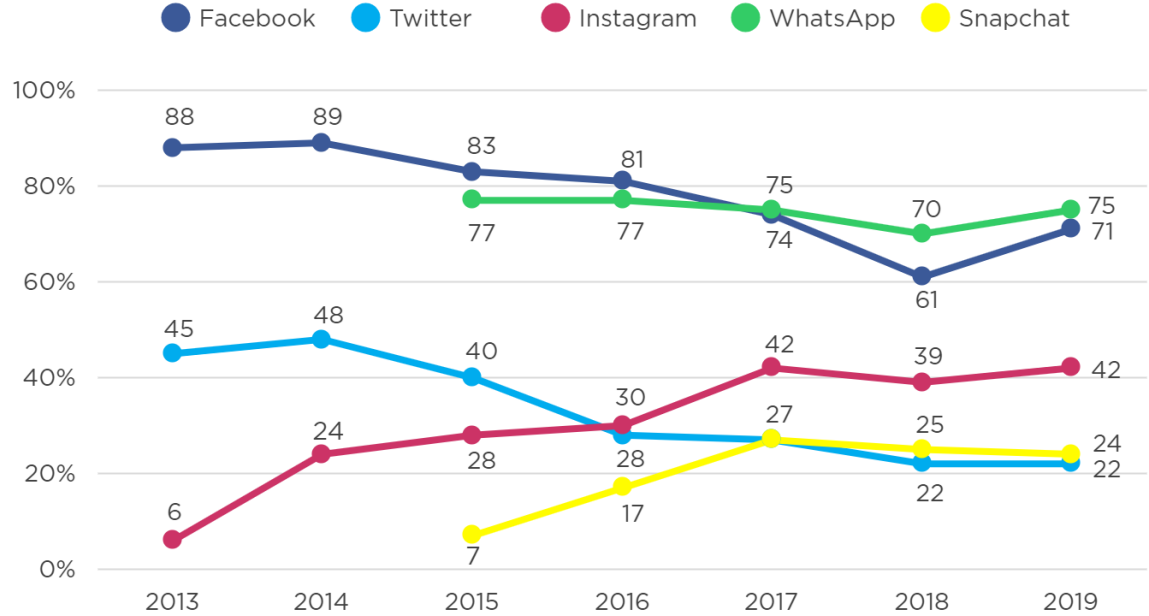
# MARKET CONTEXT

## GROWTH OF SOCIAL MEDIA

- More than seven out of ten Arabs use Facebook and WhatsApp**, the latest data from Northwestern University in Qatar (NU-Q) [revealed](#). Their findings - based on internet users in six nations, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (KSA), Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) - showed that usage of these networks far outstripped other social channels.<sup>26</sup>

However, this **aggregate figure masks a wide range of differences**. “Facebook penetration varies widely across the region—from nine in 10 Egyptian internet users to just one-third of Qatari users,” the authors note. Similarly, “Twitter penetration varies widely—ranging from six in 10 Saudis to only 4% of Tunisians.”

% who use the following social media platforms (among internet users)



Base: Nationals only, internet users; 2013 n=2,856, 2014 n=2,427, 2015 n=2,764, 2016 n=3,384, 2017 n=3,539, 2018 n=3,897, 2019 n=4,114. Jordan not included in calculations as 2014, 2015, and 2016 data not collected in Jordan.

*Social Media Use, 2013-2019, Arab Nationals in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and UAE. Via: Northwestern University in Qatar*



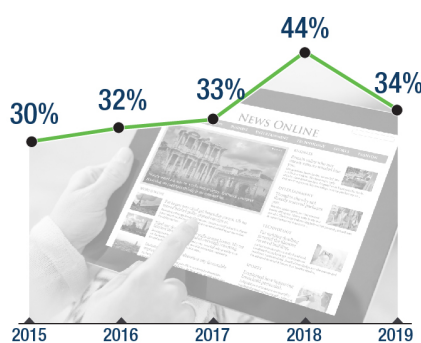
- **Around one-in-five adults in Lebanon (19%) and Tunisia (18%) use the messaging app Viber**, the Pew Research Center [found](#). Their research revealed that Viber was more popular than Twitter and Snapchat in those countries. Pew’s 11-nation global study into emerging economies - which included Mexico, Kenya and Philippines - found usage of Viber was much less prevalent, with a median of 4% of adults, in other nations.<sup>27</sup>
- **Israel has the highest percentage of adults (77%) in advanced economies using social media**, data from the Pew Research Center [established](#). This is just ahead of South Korea (76%), Sweden (73%), Netherlands (72%), Australia and USA (both 70%).<sup>28</sup>
- In 2018, the annual Arab Youth survey revealed that **social media was the top news source for young people in the region**. It [maintained](#) that position in 2019.<sup>29</sup>

“Over the past five years, social media has become the dominant source for news among Arab youth,” the study reported, “with 80% polled saying that it was their preferred choice, compared with 25% of those surveyed in 2015.”

- “Globally, internet users maintain about 8 social media accounts on average,” according to survey data [shared](#) by GlobalWebIndex. **UAE (with an average of 9 accounts), Saudi Arabia (9) and Egypt (10) all follow and are slightly above this trend, whereas the average number of social media accounts drops to 5.5 in Morocco.**<sup>30</sup>

## OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS, SOCIAL MEDIA HAS BECOME THE DOMINANT SOURCE FOR NEWS AMONG ARAB YOUTH, WHILE ONLINE NEWS PORTALS ARE NOW ON PAR WITH TV

### WHERE DO YOU GET YOUR NEWS?



Top news sources for informed Arab youth

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
TV	TV	TV	TV	Social media	Social media
Online news	Online news	Online news	Online news	TV	TV
Social media	Social media	Social media	Social media	Online news	Online news
Family/friends	Family/friends	Family/friends	Family/friends	Family/friends	Family/friends
Newspapers	Newspapers	Newspapers	Newspapers	Radio	Newspapers
Radio	Radio	Radio	Radio	Newspapers	Radio
Magazines	Magazines	Magazines	Magazines	Magazines	Magazines

Top news sources for Arab Youth, 2015-2019. Via: Arab Youth Survey

# MARKET CONTEXT

## IMPORTANCE OF MOBILE

- Since 2014, mobile social media penetration in the region has more than doubled to 44%, data from the GSMA - a trade body that represents the interests of mobile network operators worldwide - shows.<sup>31</sup>

Figures from the GSMA also finds that 3G and 4G networks, which are essential for connecting to the internet by mobile, now cover 89% and 62% of the region’s population.<sup>32</sup>

- However, the cost of data and phones, as well as concerns about reliable mobile reception, are issues for mobile owners in nations such as Lebanon, Tunisia and Jordan.<sup>33</sup> In turn, this impacts on their social media habits.

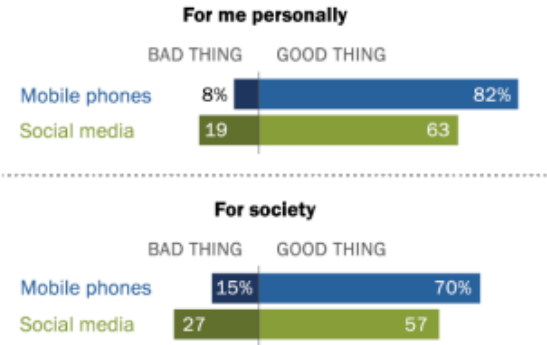
In some countries, mobile owners’ problems are particularly striking,” the Pew Research Center notes.<sup>34</sup>

“In Lebanon, for example, 77% of phone owners report having problems getting reliable mobile connections, and about two-thirds (66%) say they avoid doing things with their phones because those activities use too much data. In Jordan, nearly half (48%) report having trouble paying for their phone, while in Tunisia four-in-ten (40%) say it can be a challenge to find places to recharge their phones.”

- Separately, Pew highlighted in a survey of emerging economies (which included several Middle East nations) that mobile phones have had a more positive effect - on both a personal and societal level - than social media.<sup>35</sup>
- From the same survey sample, Pew commented in a different study that adults in Jordan (92%), Tunisia (80%) and Lebanon (79%) were the most likely to agree that although technology has made people more informed, it also makes them easier to manipulate.<sup>36</sup>

### Mobile phones viewed as having a more positive personal, societal impact than social media in 11 emerging economies

% of adults who say \_\_\_ have mostly been a good/bad thing ...



Note: Percentages are 11-country medians.  
 Source: Mobile Technology and Its Social Impact Survey 2018. Q11a-b & Q12a-b.  
 “Mobile Connectivity in Emerging Economies”

Attitudes to the impact of mobile technology.  
 Via: Pew Research Center

# 1. FACEBOOK

- **Facebook hit 181 million monthly users in the MENA** by March 2019, growing to **187 million active monthly users** towards the end of the year.<sup>37</sup>

**Egypt is home to 38 million daily users** and 40 million monthly users, making it the leading market for the network.<sup>3839</sup>

**Saudi Arabia**, the second most populous country in MENA, **has 16 million monthly Facebook users**.<sup>40</sup> Globally, Facebook's audience reached [2.45 billion](#) monthly active users as of September 30, 2019.<sup>41</sup>

- **Young people in the region are considerably more likely to get their news from Facebook than traditional media**, the Arab Youth Survey [revealed](#).<sup>42</sup>

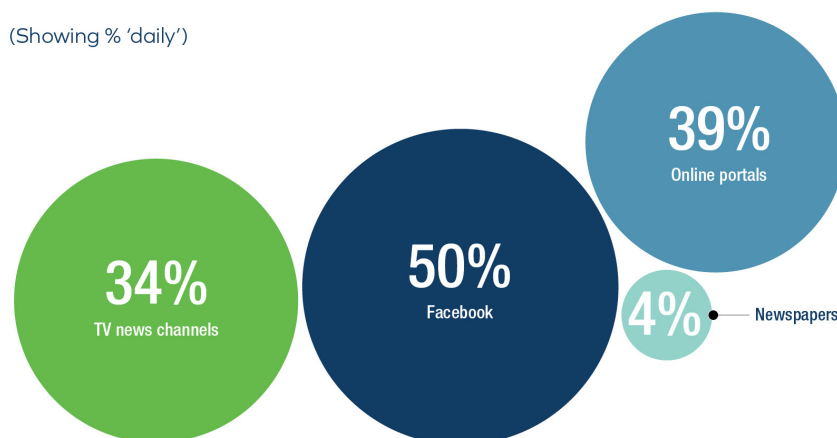
One key reason for this, is that “social media is trusted ‘to do the right thing’ more than traditional media among young Arabs, with 60% stating they had trust in social media (to do the right thing)... This compares with 55% of respondents saying they had trust in traditional media (TV, newspapers, radio).”

- **Half of Arab Youth say they get their news on Facebook on a daily basis, some way ahead of other channels.**

## MORE YOUNG ARABS GET THEIR DAILY NEWS ON FACEBOOK OR ONLINE PORTALS THAN TV NEWS CHANNELS

HOW OFTEN DO YOU GET YOUR NEWS ON THE FOLLOWING NEWS SOURCES?

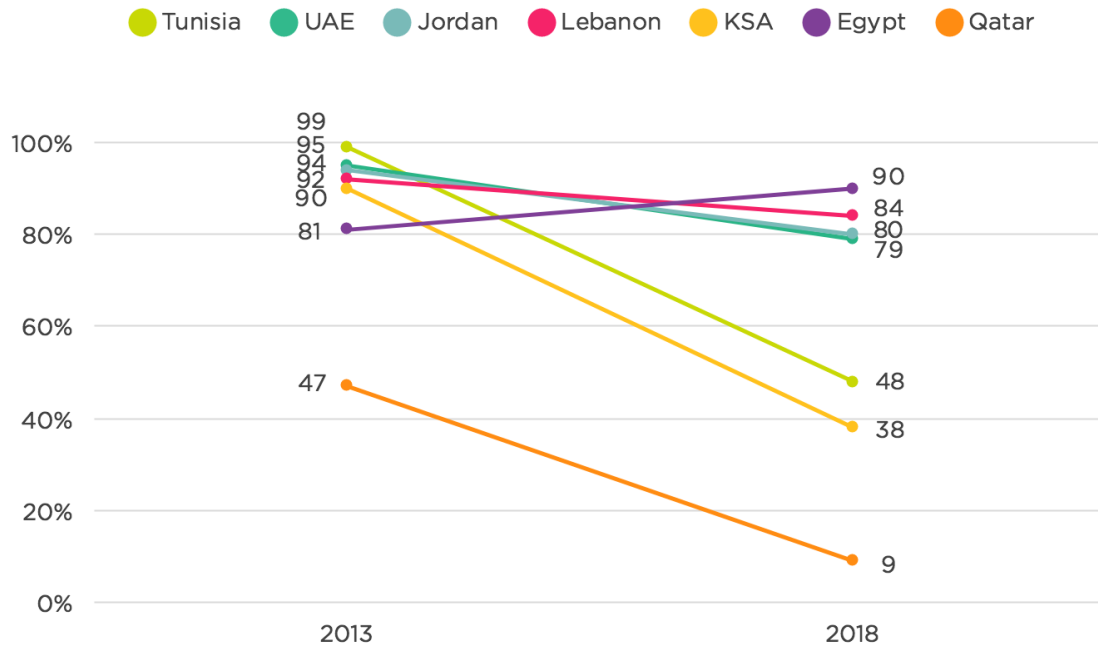
(Showing % 'daily')



Daily News sources for Arab Youth. Via: Arab Youth Survey 2019

- Despite this development, across the region, **Facebook usage has declined dramatically with Qatari, Saudi and Tunisian nationals**, research from Northwestern University in Qatar [ascertained](#). Usage also declined, although less precipitously, in Jordan, UAE and Lebanon. Only Egypt saw a growth in Facebook take-up among internet users in the past five years.<sup>43</sup>

### Facebook penetration among internet users



Base: Nationals, internet users;  
2013 n=3,342, 2018 n=4,694.

MEDIA USE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 2018  
EGYPT | JORDAN | LEBANON | QATAR | SAUDI ARABIA | TUNISIA | UAE  
[MIDEASTMEDIA.ORG](http://MIDEASTMEDIA.ORG)

*Facebook penetration among Arab Nationals, 2013 vs. 2018.  
Via: Northwestern University in Qatar*

- **Social media users spend 5% more time - or almost 2 million more hours - daily on Facebook during Ramadan.** During the Holy Month that translates to around 58 million more hours on the social network, [says](#) Facebook’s managing director for the Middle East and North Africa, Ramez Shehadi.<sup>44</sup>
- In 2019, **Agence France-Presse (AFP) expanded its fact-checking partnership with Facebook to include debunking stories shared in Arabic across the social network.**

Arabic is the fifth language covered by the Agency, after English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. The work is led by a new team based in Beirut, Lebanon.<sup>45</sup>



*This video claims to show a huge celebration of the Prophet's birthday in Indonesia. AFP reports: "In fact, it shows an election festival of presidential candidate Prabhu Supianto in Indonesia, with prayers, prayers and religious songs."<sup>46</sup>*

- **During the summer Facebook removed 259 Facebook accounts, 102 Facebook Pages, five Facebook Groups, four Facebook Events and 17 Instagram accounts, “for engaging in coordinated inauthentic behavior” originating in UAE and Egypt.**

More than 13.7 million accounts followed one or more of these pages, which frequently posted “about local news, politics, elections and topics including alleged support of terrorist groups by Qatar and Turkey, Iran’s activity in Yemen, the conflict in Libya, successes of the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, and independence for Somaliland.”<sup>47</sup>

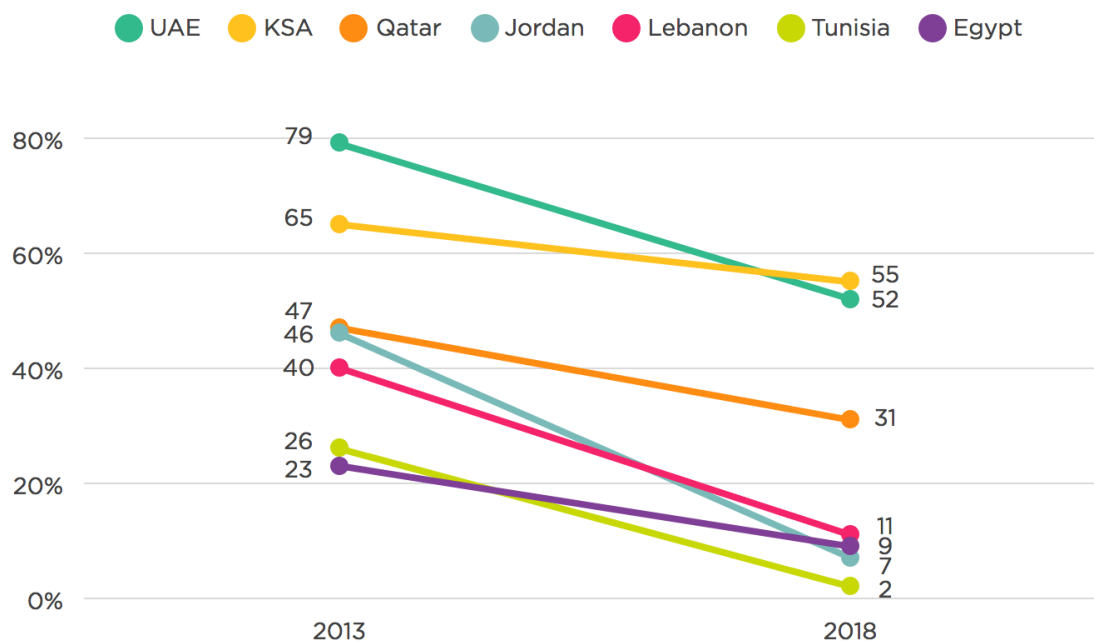
Facebook said the pages had spent \$108,000 (£89,000) on advertising. It’s unclear what happened to these monies.

## 2. TWITTER

- Facebook is not the only established social network to see declines in usage across much of MENA. **Twitter usage among Arab nationals has fallen by half since 2013**, data from Northwestern University in Qatar [found](#).<sup>48</sup>

Across the six countries surveyed, use of the network among internet users has fallen from 45% in 2013 to 22% in 2018. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Snapchat all have higher levels of penetration in the region than Twitter.

### Twitter penetration among internet users



Base: Nationals only, internet users;  
2013 n=3,342, 2018 n=4,694.

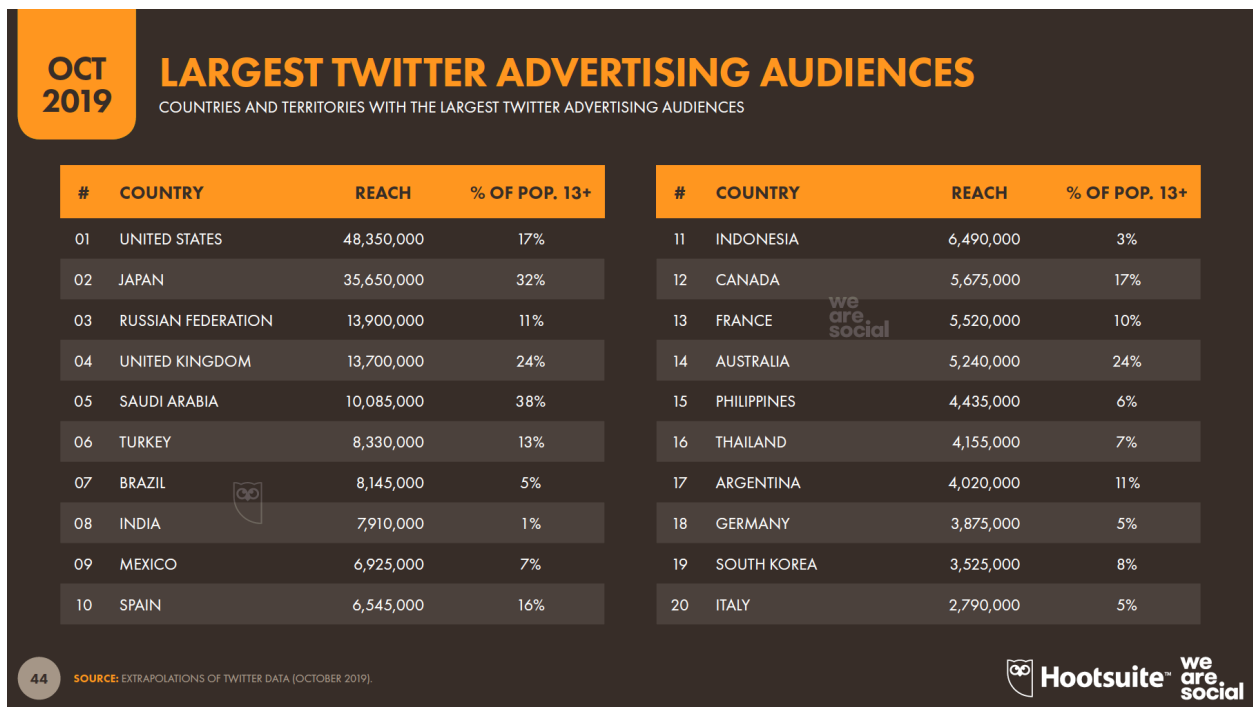
MEDIA USE IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 2018  
EGYPT | JORDAN | LEBANON | QATAR | SAUDI ARABIA | TUNISIA | UAE  
[MIDEASTMEDIA.ORG](http://MIDEASTMEDIA.ORG)

*Twitter penetration among Arab Nationals, 2013 vs. 2018.  
Via: Northwestern University in Qatar*

- Despite this decline, **Saudi Arabia and Turkey remain significant markets for Twitter. They are the fifth and sixth largest markets for Twitter in the world.**

**More than 10 million users are active on Twitter in Saudi Arabia, akin to 38% of the population. There are 8.3 million active users in Turkey (13%).**

The biggest markets for the network all have either larger populations (like the United States, Japan and Russia,) or (in the case of the United Kingdom) higher levels of social media and smartphone penetration.<sup>49</sup>



*Top 20 markets for Twitter (by reach). Via: We Are Social and Hootsuite*



- In January 2019, Haaretz, which [describes](#) itself “as an Israeli independent daily newspaper with a broadly liberal outlook both on domestic issues and on international affairs,”<sup>50</sup> [highlighted](#) how the **Israel Defense Forces’ (IDF) official Twitter account had trolled Iran following Israeli air strikes** which Prime Minister Netanyahu said had “pounded” Iranian targets in Syria.<sup>51</sup> The tweet provoked [reactions](#) from all sides.<sup>52</sup>
- In September, Twitter [shared](#) that it had **removed accounts from a number of countries, including the UAE, Egypt and Saudi Arabia due to platform manipulation and state-backed information operations.**<sup>53</sup>



Source: [Israel Defense Forces @IDF on Twitter.](#)

This included 271 accounts originating in the UAE and Egypt, targeting Qatar and Iran, while at the same time amplifying “messaging supportive of the Saudi government.”

A further 4,248 accounts operating uniquely from the UAE, and mainly directed at Qatar and Yemen were also closed. “These accounts were often employing false personae and tweeting about regional issues, such as the Yemeni Civil War and the Houthi Movement,” Twitter said.

Twitter also “permanently suspended the Twitter account of Saud al-Qahtani,” [described](#) by the New York Times as “a former close adviser to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia,”<sup>54</sup> “for violations of our platform manipulation policies.”

The network also closed “a small group of six accounts linked to Saudi Arabia’s state-run media apparatus which were engaged in coordinated efforts to amplify messaging that was beneficial to the Saudi government.”

“The account suspension is more symbolic than anything else. Twitter probably hopes that the account suspensions will bring in a new era of a less toxic Arabic Twitter,” argued Marc Owen Jones, an assistant professor of Middle East studies and digital humanities at Hamad bin Khalifa University in Qatar. “This is unlikely to happen,” he wrote in an article for The Washington Post.<sup>55</sup>

“The reality is that it is easy to set up a Twitter account. Like a game of Whack-a-Mole, suspended fake accounts will be replaced by more sophisticated efforts at deception.”

- In Iran, **Twitter suspended several Iranian news accounts**, the BBC [reported](#) in July, over the alleged harassment of people following the Baha’i faith. “Although there are more than 300,000 members of the Baha’i community in Iran, the country does not recognize the religion,” the BBC noted.
- In November, the **AP [reported](#) that “The Saudi government**, frustrated by growing criticism of its leaders and policies on social media, **recruited two Twitter employees to gather confidential personal information on thousands of accounts that included prominent opponents.”**<sup>57</sup>

***“The reality is that it is easy to set up a Twitter account. Like a game of Whack-a-Mole, suspended fake accounts will be replaced by more sophisticated efforts at deception.”***

**The United States Department of Justice (DOJ) charged the former employees for spying on users on behalf of Saudi**

**Arabia**, CNBC [stated](#). The DOJ alleged that employee credentials had been used to gather specific information - including their email addresses, birth dates, phone numbers and internet protocol addresses - about more than 6,000 users.<sup>58</sup>



Getty Peter Macdiarmid / Getty Images, [Via Mashable](#).

- Twitter [unveiled](#) over 16 premium video content collaborations across sports, entertainment and news at an event in April.<sup>59</sup> Partners [include](#) MBC Group and AMS, Abu Dhabi Media, Dubai Media Inc., Rotana Group, and the Saudi football clubs Al Ahli and Al Ittihad.

**New and live original productions for Ramadan were also announced**, including Sayidaty Group’s ‘Your Ramadan Morning with Sayidaty’, an all-female morning show by and about women, online network UTURN Entertainment’s ‘Who’s Turn is it?’, a live program showcasing stand-up comedians.<sup>60</sup>

- Twitter [launched](#) three new emojis in seven languages (English, Arabic, Bahasa, Spanish, Turkish, Hindi and Bengali) which users could unlock by using relevant Ramadan related hashtags, unlocking “a crescent moon, a glass of yoghurt (which is commonly used to break fast) and a lantern.”<sup>61</sup>



## #RamadanLanterns 🏮

*Example of a Ramadan-related emoji. Via: Twitter*

- Research [conducted](#) by Toluna, and shared by Twitter, found that **up to 72% of Twitter users in KSA and UAE and 62% of users in Egypt consider the platform one of their main sources for online video content.**<sup>62</sup>

Entertainment, fashion, cooking and travel are among the top five [popular video content genres](#) for Twitter users in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

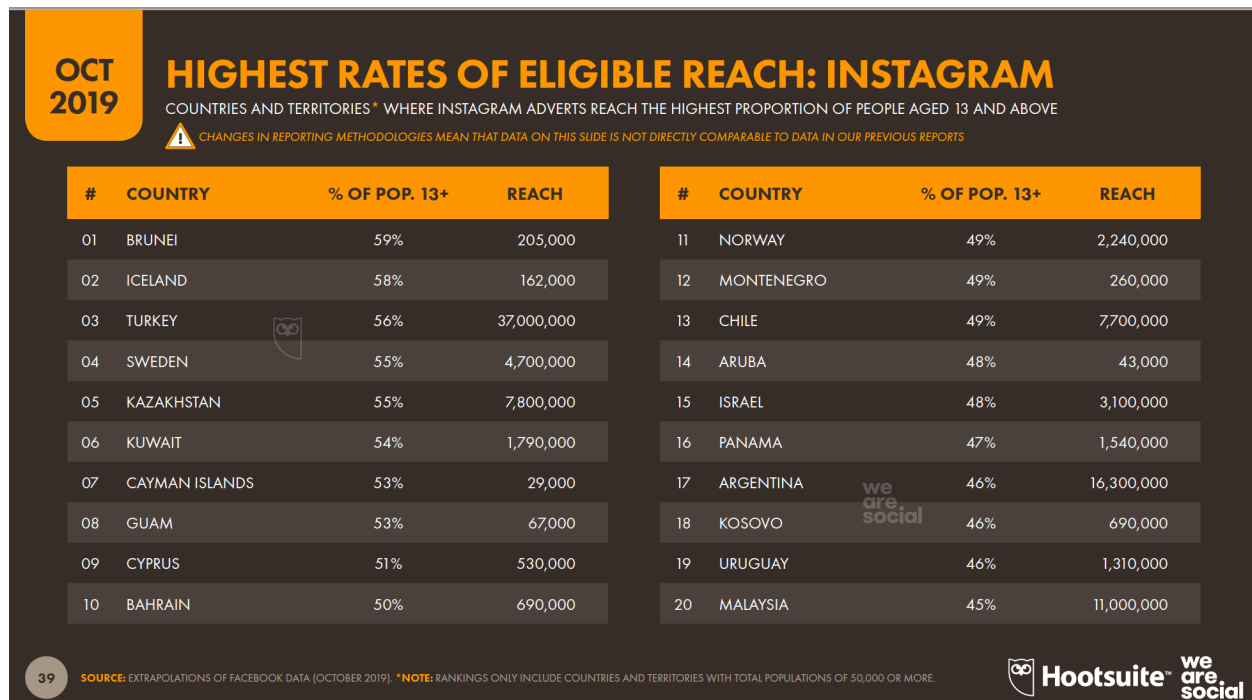
The most viewed categories for entertainment videos are humorous clips (47%), highlights from TV shows (29%) and celebrity interviews (26%).<sup>63</sup>

# 3. INSTAGRAM

- Across the Middle East **there are more than 63 million users on Instagram**.<sup>64</sup> Globally, the network has more than **1 billion monthly active users**.<sup>65</sup>
- **The Middle East is home to some of the largest markets, as a percentage of population, for Instagram, including Turkey (3rd at 56%), Kuwait (6th and 54%) and Bahrain (10th at 50%.)**

Data from We Are Social also [reveals](#) that **Turkey is the sixth largest market for Instagram worldwide, with 37 million members.**

**More people use Instagram in Turkey than Japan (27m), United Kingdom (23m), Mexico (22m) and Germany (20m).** The biggest markets, based on users, are the USA (116m), India (73m), Brazil (72m), Indonesia (60m) and Russia (42m).<sup>66</sup>



*Top 20 markets for Instagram (by reach as a % of the population).  
Via: We Are Social and Hootsuite*



- Bloomberg [reported](#) on [Gateway KSA](#), an initiative working with Universities and social media influencers to organize visits to Saudi Arabia.

As StepFeed [noted](#):

“A key goal under Vision 2030 is to increase the number of tourists who visit Saudi Arabia.”

“It’s true that much of that number comes from religious tourism, but that doesn’t mean effort hasn’t been put into the growth of the leisure tourism sector.”<sup>67</sup>

“A program like Gateway KSA would have been inconceivable in Saudi Arabia five years ago, when religious police roamed the streets shouting at women to cover up,” Bloomberg stated. “Now **the kingdom is eager to use social media to show a softer side,**” adding that “more than 200 people have visited through the program so far...their costs are covered, though they don’t receive any other fees.”<sup>68</sup>



Image via [Instagram/Gateway KSA](#)

- Another high profile visitor to the MENA region, Prince William, embarked on a [four-day solo trip to Kuwait and Oman](#) in early December 2019. **The Duke of Cambridge posted a video to Instagram to showcase highlights from his trip**, which touched on [topics](#) such as education, security, defense, cooperation and environment.<sup>69</sup>



Prince William in Oman. [Via AP and Esquire Middle East.](#)

- **Almarai**, a Saudi-based conglomerate, which specializes in food and beverage manufacturing and distribution, **launched the first Middle East’s first ever branded Instagram AR filter for Saudi National Day.**<sup>70</sup>

“Instagram opened its platform for brands to launch AR lenses in early August,” their websites [records](#), with Alamarai launching its AR experience the following month.

By following a [link](#) from their phone, users could overlay colors of the Saudi flag and fun 3D KSA glasses over pictures of themselves.

- **Usage of Instagram has grown from 6% of Arab Nationals in 2013, to 42% at the end of 2019.** [Research](#) from Northwestern University in Qatar shows that - of services owned by Facebook - take-up of Instagram has been the fastest.<sup>71</sup>

# 4. YOUTUBE

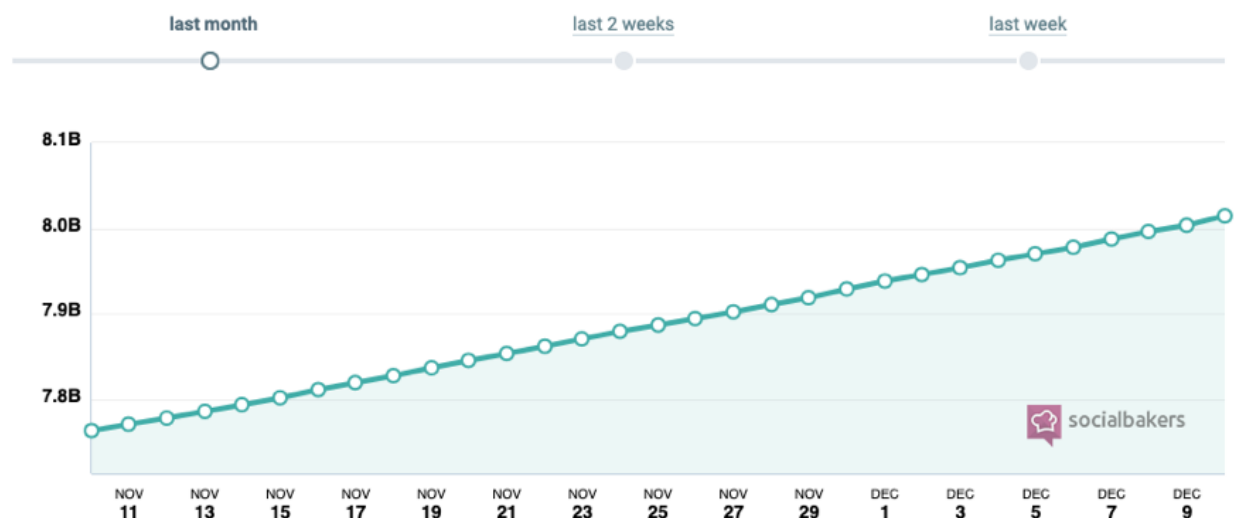
- Saudi Arabia is the biggest user of YouTube per capita worldwide, Google [reports](#).<sup>72</sup>
- More than [60% of YouTube viewers in MENA are millennials](#).<sup>73</sup> The Washington D.C. based Pew Research Center [defines](#) “anyone born between 1981 and 1996” as a millennial.<sup>74</sup>
- In Egypt, 77% of millennials watch YouTube every day. “That’s more than any other platform, even TV,” Google [declared](#).<sup>75</sup>
- Saudi vlogger Muhammad Moshaya hit 8 billion views to his YouTube channel in late 2019, according to [data](#) from Socialbakers.

The family oriented YouTuber - who uses his channel to depict his life with his children and his travels around the world - has 14.5 million subscribers.

In contrast, the next most popular channel, [Super Soma](#), which features a Super Kid, Soma, who helps solve the problems of all humans in general, and his friends in particular, has 2.1 million subscribers and just under 9 million views.

- Dads run the top 3 parenting channels in MENA, Google has [established](#).<sup>77</sup>

## mmoshaya Uploaded Video Views



Views to <https://www.youtube.com/user/mmshaya/>, via Socialbakers.



- Meanwhile, **parents in MENA increasingly rely on YouTube “to act as a third parent or advisor who offers support,”** Google insights [show](#).<sup>78</sup>

The platform is the most-used site by parents in Saudi Arabia, and the second most-used site by parents in the UAE after Google Search. And with more and more millennials becoming parents, YouTube views on parenting content in the MENA region is growing 4.3x faster than the rest of the planet.

Parenting advice and guidance, using videos as a way to connect with your children - for example by recording families doing things together, pranks and challenges - as well as using the platform as a way to [reminisce about their childhood](#), with their children, are all popular uses of the channel.

- **Half of all mothers in the Middle East watch kids content on YouTube,** Google [told us](#), primarily as a way to spend time with their children.
- YouTube is the sixth highest ranked brand in UAE, and the third highest in KSA and Egypt, the latest [YouGovBrandIndex](#) revealed.<sup>80</sup>
- **YouTube Music and YouTube Premium [launched](#) in the Middle East** in September.<sup>81</sup>

TechRadar reported that YouTube Premium, a paid subscription service offering an ad-free experience on YouTube, is now available in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman and Qatar.

YouTube Music operates as a standalone app, showcasing content from international and Middle Eastern artists on YouTube.

- **TV dramas and soap operas see a 151% increase in viewership on YouTube during Ramadan,** Google (which owns YouTube) has outlined.

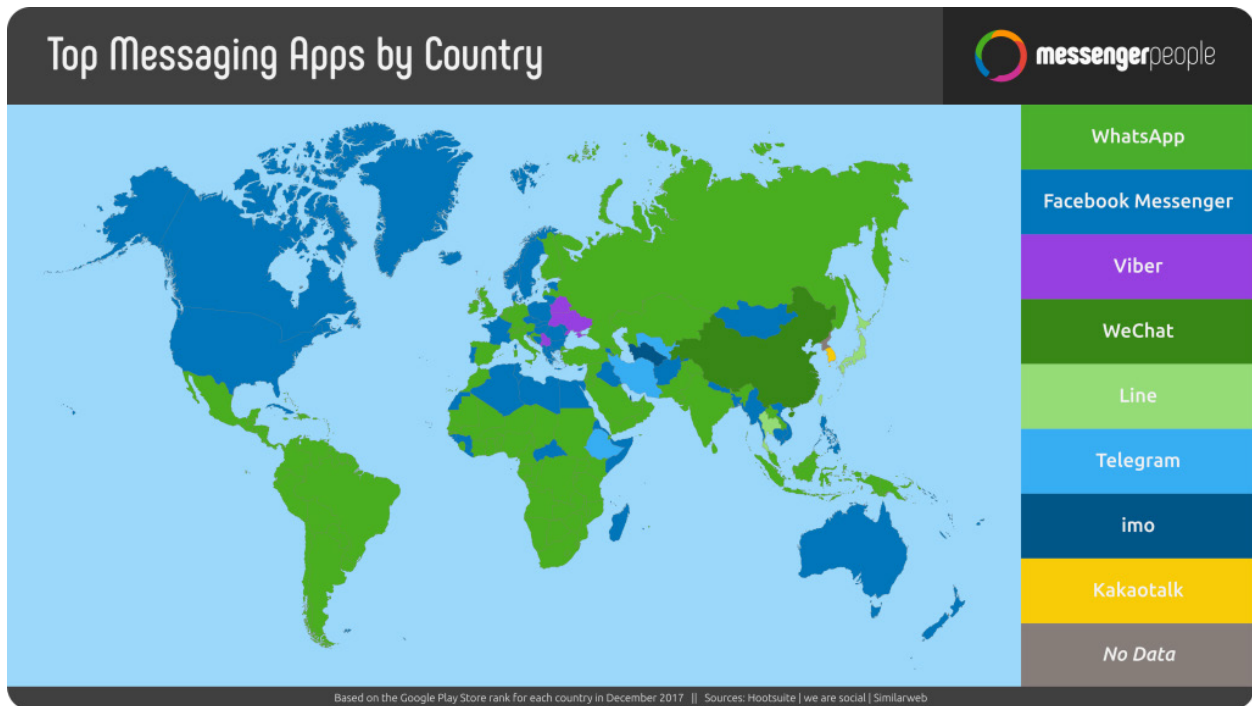
In Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, time spent watching sports videos rises by 22%, travel videos by 30%, and action, simulation and video games by 10-20%.

“Although it may appear a contradiction for Muslims to spend their fasting hours on YouTube, the holy month also marks a high point in viewership of religious content,” [notes](#) The New Arab website.<sup>82</sup>

***The platform is the most-used site by parents in Saudi Arabia, and the second most-used site by parents in the UAE after Google Search with more and more millennials becoming parents, YouTube views on parenting content in the MENA region is growing 4.3x faster than the rest of the planet.***

## 5. MESSAGING APPS

- **The popularity of messaging apps** - such as Snapchat, WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook messenger - **varies considerably across the region.**
  - » Facebook Messenger dominates in North Africa and Iraq.
  - » WhatsApp leads the way in the Gulf
  - » Telegram is most popular in Iran, with an [estimated](#) 50 million users.<sup>83</sup>



*Top Messaging Apps by Country. [Via](#) MessengerPeople*

# WHATSAPP

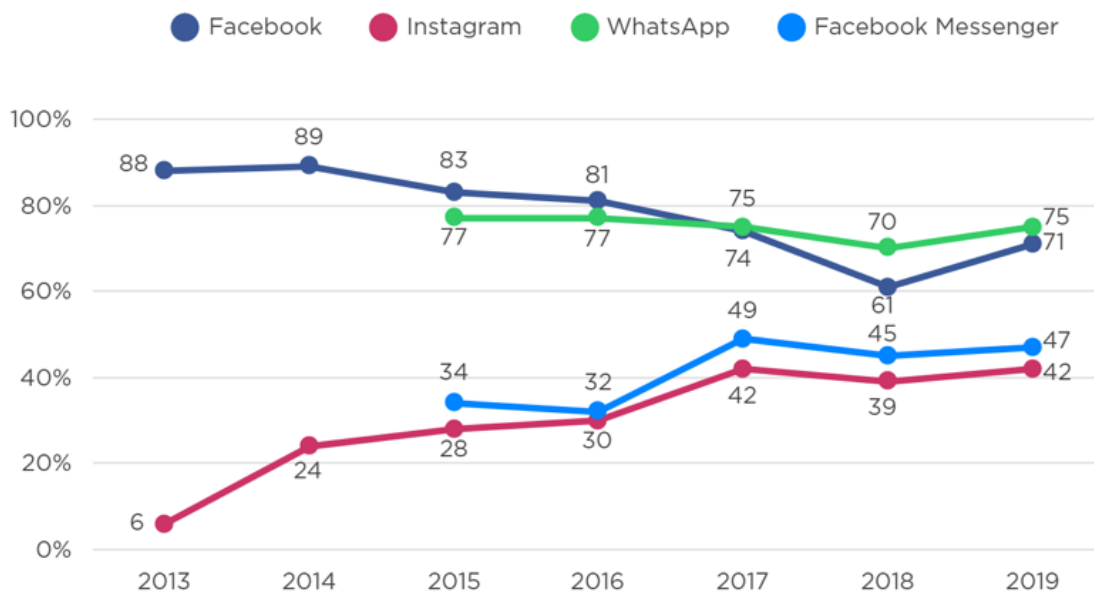
- **WhatsApp is the fourth most trusted of all brands in [KSA](#)**, YouGov’s 2019 BrandIndex study [found](#). The survey “continuously measures public perception of thousands of brands across dozens of sectors.”<sup>84</sup>

**In [UAE](#), the platform performs even better. It is ranked second**, behind Emirates, the UAE’s national airline.

**WhatsApp also ranks second in [Egypt](#)**, ahead of Facebook (fourth place) and YouTube (third), but behind Google.<sup>85</sup>

- Among Arab Internet users in six nations [studied](#) by Northwestern University in Qatar, **WhatsApp is the most used Facebook owned service, with 75% penetration.**<sup>86</sup>

**% who use Facebook and Facebook-owned platforms (among internet users)**



*Use of Facebook and Facebook owned platforms among internet users 2013 - 2019. Via: Northwestern University in Qatar*

Digging [deeper into Northwestern’s data](#), instead looking at all nationalities, identifies low levels of take-up in Tunisia, and a slight decline in usage in Qatar, UAE and KSA (2019 vs. 2017). In all other markets the messaging app continues to see growth.<sup>87</sup>

- In October, Facebook [filed](#) a lawsuit against the NSO Group, an Israel-based company. Reuters [reported](#) that “WhatsApp, which is owned by Facebook, accused NSO of facilitating government hacking sprees in 20 countries. Mexico, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain were the only countries identified.”

WhatsApp stated that around 1,400 users across four continents had been affected, including diplomats, political dissidents, journalists and senior government officials. NSO Group denied the claims.<sup>89</sup>

Will Cathcart, head of WhatsApp, in an opinion piece for The Washington Post argued that the case “should serve as a wake-up call for technology companies, governments and all Internet users.”

***“The mobile phone is the primary computer for billions of people around the world. It is how we have our most private conversations and where we store our most sensitive information. Governments and companies need to do more to protect vulnerable groups and individuals from these attacks. WhatsApp will continue to do everything we can within our code, and within the courts of law, to help protect the privacy and security of our users everywhere.”<sup>90</sup>***

- **UAE may soon lift its ban on being able to make calls through WhatsApp,<sup>91</sup> CNBC [reported](#), following an interview with Mohamed Al Kuwaiti, executive director of the UAE’s National Electronic Security Authority.<sup>92</sup>**

Despite this functionality being unavailable on the app, around 8 million people (from a population of c.9.5 million) still [use WhatsApp](#) in the Emirates.<sup>93</sup>

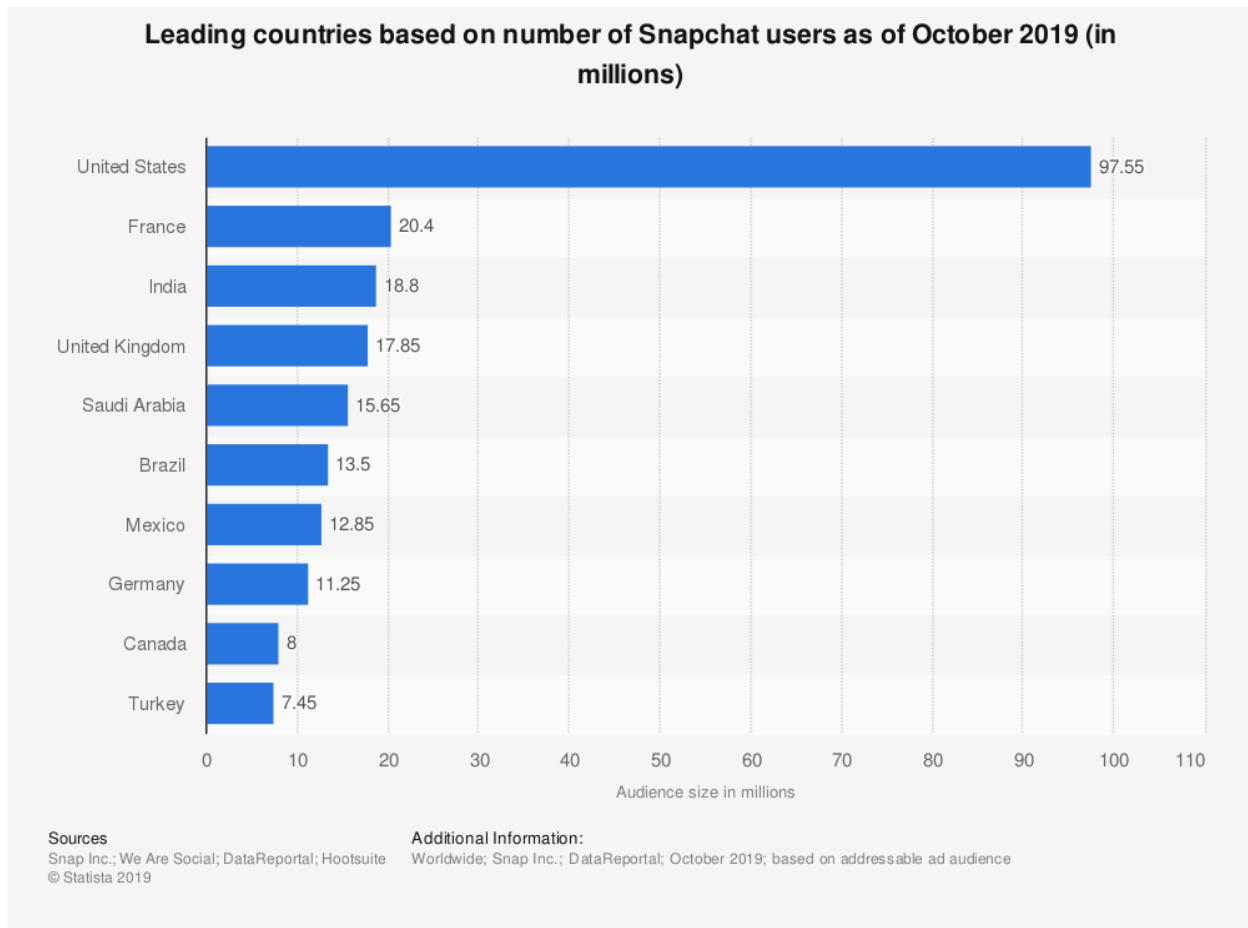
- **Meanwhile, in Lebanon, plans to charge WhatsApp users in Lebanon up to \$6 per month - \$0.20 a day - for making phone calls on the service were met with strong opposition.<sup>94</sup>**

The move, which Al Jazeera [notes](#) was part of plans to raise lacklustre Government revenues, “could potentially bring in up to \$250m in annual revenues from the country’s estimated 3.5 million VoIP users.” However, following protests, the plans were [quickly dropped](#).<sup>96</sup>

“We are not here over the WhatsApp, we are here over everything: over fuel, food, bread, over everything,” said Abdullah, a protester in Beirut told the BBC.<sup>97</sup>

# SNAPCHAT

- Saudi Arabia is the fifth **largest market** for Snapchat in the world, with over 15.65 million users. Turkey, with 7.45 million users, is the tenth largest market.<sup>98</sup>



*Biggest markets, by number of users, for Snapchat. Via: Snap (chart via Statista)*

- Snapchat **added 18 new shows, and 9 new seasons of existing programs, to Snapchat Discover in the region.**

Content partners include Telfaz11, a Saudi Arabia-based digital media company, the Saudi Broadcasting Authority- which offers highlights from the Saudi Pro League - as well as Dubai TV and the Online Lifestyle Network.

The Tarek Show from Rotana Media Group, House of Comedy from TREND and Without a Filter from Al Aan TV, all of which are made specifically for mobile consumption, were renewed.<sup>99</sup>

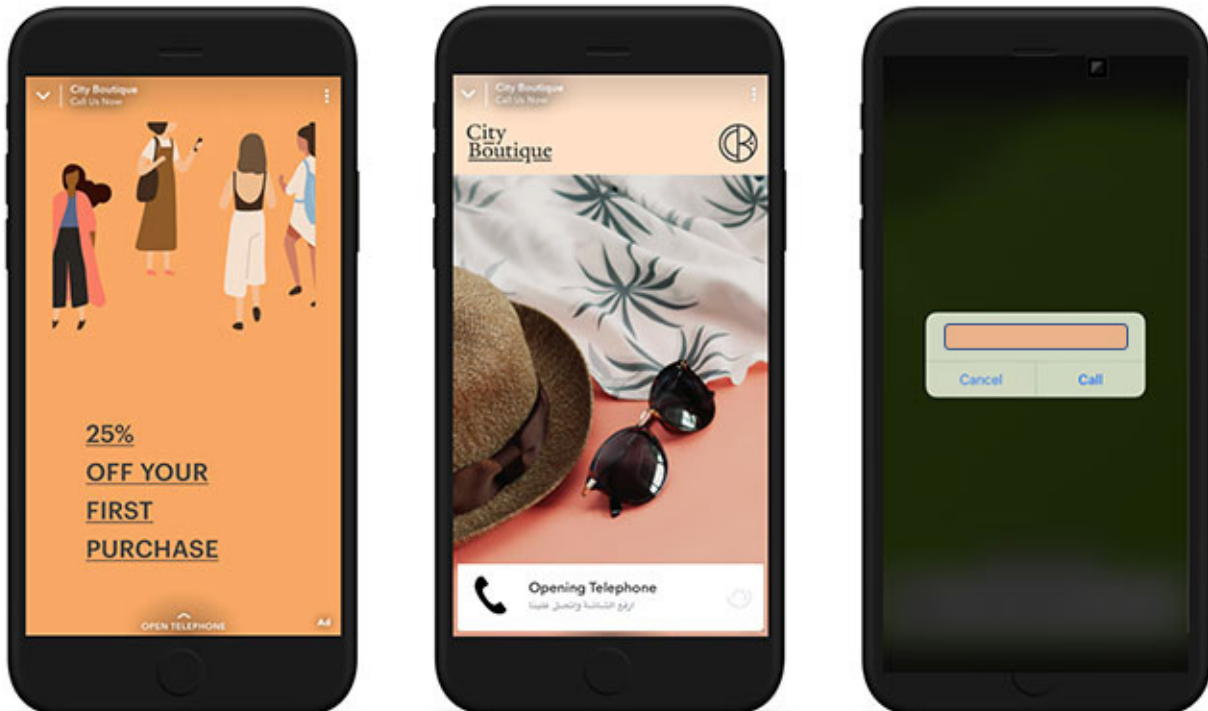
- **Snapchat introduced a new advertising product, Commercials, in UAE and KSA in 2019.**

The ads - for premium ad partners such as Nestlé, BMW, Mini Cooper, Samsung , Louvre and Almarai, “which are Snapchat’s **six-second unskippable ads that run across Snapchat Shows,**” ArabianIndustry.Com [explained](#).<sup>100</sup>

- The ephemeral messaging app also **added a new “Swipe Up to Call” feature in December. The functionality, which is exclusive to users in the Middle East, allows customers to call a business they see advertised on Snapchat for no fee.**

“This new ad product is built on the insight that consumers in the Middle East still enjoy phoning their friends and family, and similarly, they also like calling small, medium, and large businesses to learn more about their products and services, and make purchases,” an announcement from Snapchat said. “An advertiser’s website and app is extremely useful in the Middle East, but there are occasions where a call can speed up the consumer’s decision and purchase journey.”<sup>102</sup>

Saudi Telecom Company and Zain Group were among the first advertisers to take advantage of the new product.<sup>103</sup>



**Snap Ad**  
CTA to “Open Telephone”

**Snap Card**  
Processing the action

**Native Prompt**  
Confirmation to call

*Snapchat’s “Swipe Up to Call” feature. Via: Snap.*



- In October, **NBC News reported how protestors in Iraq were using Snapchat to document - and share - footage from demonstrations.**<sup>104</sup> Other apps, such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram were [blocked](#) at the time.<sup>105</sup>

As NBC's [Emmanuelle Saliba](#) explained:

“NBC News was able to view hundreds of videos coming in from cities across Iraq documenting the entire day of demonstrations via [Snapchat’s interactive heatmap](#). Footage shared from the capital, [o]f Baghdad, showed thousands of protesters flooding Tahrir Square waving Iraqi flags in the air.”

“[Snap Map](#)” allows users to watch videos from specific locations - in this case Baghdad - around the world. It [launched](#) in June 2017.<sup>106</sup>



*Screenshot, via NBC, of Snapchat’s interactive heatmap.*



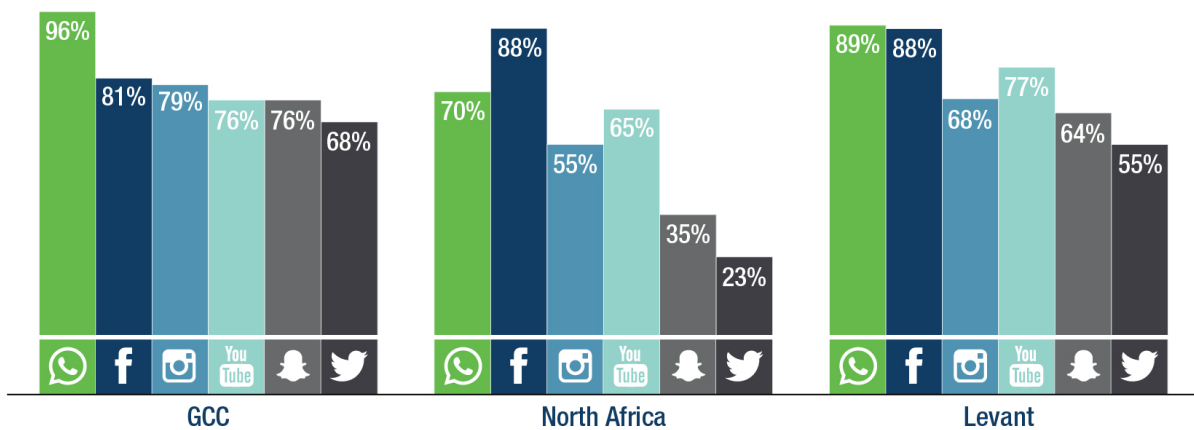
## 6. ARAB YOUTH

- Among Arab Youth, those aged 18-24 years old, **9 out of 10 young Arabs use at least one social media channel every day**, although the popularity of individual networks varies across the region, findings from the 11th annual Arab Youth Survey demonstrated.<sup>107</sup>

### NINE IN TEN YOUNG ARABS USE AT LEAST ONE OF THE MAJOR SOCIAL MEDIA CHANNELS DAILY

#### HOW OFTEN DO YOU VISIT EACH OF THE FOLLOWING?

(Showing % 'daily')



FINDING 10.E

©ASDA/A BCW ARAB YOUTH SURVEY 2019

*Daily use of major social networks, by sub-region. Via: Arab Youth survey 2019*

- **“Millennials in the MENA region spend over three hours per day on online video, surpassing time spent on messaging apps and games,”** details StepFeed, [citing](#) research published by Think With Google MENA.
- Millennials in MENA are **“twice as likely as their global counterparts to post content online, and show others how to do things online,”** Google [finds](#).<sup>109</sup>

**“In KSA and the UAE, 68% consume more video digitally than they do on TV.”**

Meanwhile, in **Egypt, 77% of millennials watch YouTube every day. “That’s more than any other platform, even TV.”**<sup>110</sup>

- **Snapchat reaches over 90% of all 13-34-year olds in Saudi Arabia,** Rami Saad, head of international content partnerships at Snap, [says](#).<sup>111</sup> This cohort also spends twice as much time on Snapchat’s Discover feature as their global peers.<sup>112</sup>

Data from GlobalWebIndex [found](#) that **55% of 16-24 year-olds in Saudi Arabia use Snapchat everyday,** compared to 4 in 10 among all age groups.<sup>113</sup>

**In UAE, 33% of people between 18 and 34 use Snapchat daily,** Jeremi Gorman, Snap’s global chief business officer, has [revealed](#).<sup>114</sup>

- **Social media has grown dramatically as a source for news among Arab Youth in the past five years.**

Interestingly, the Arab Youth survey [shows](#) that all news sources had seen an increase in engagement in the past half-decade. None, however, had witnessed the same growth as social.<sup>115</sup>

Around a third (35%) of young Arabs - those aged 18-24 - say they update themselves daily on news and current affairs.

- **“Social media is now more popular among Arab youth than traditional media,”** observes [Jain Akerman](#), a Dubai based Journalist, Writer & Editor, in commentary published as part of the 2019 Arab Youth Survey.

**“It is also viewed as more trustworthy; has become their dominant source of news; and has overtaken TV as the most important news medium among 18-to 24-year-olds in the Arab world. This is in stark contrast to just a few years ago, when the consumption of news was still dominated by television.”**

# 7. CENSORSHIP AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The past year witnessed several new restrictions, in various countries across the region, related to the use of social media as a platform for expressing opinions.

- A [special report](#) by the **Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ)**, listed three Arab World nations in their list of 10 Most Censored Countries, while also noting that “The conditions for journalists and press freedom in states such as Syria, Yemen, and Somalia are also extremely difficult, but not necessarily attributable solely to government censorship.”

**Saudi Arabia ranked fourth and Iran seventh, while Eretria**, an observer - but not a member - of the Arab League, **topped the CPJ’s list.**

According to the report, the environment for the press in **Saudi Arabia** has deteriorated under Mohammed bin Salman. As of December 2018, 16 journalists were imprisoned, and at least nine were detained in the first half of 2019.

Under a 2011 regulation, journalists, bloggers, and anyone posting news online must have a license from **KSA’s** Ministry of Culture and Information. The Authorities have also expanded control over online content and they can block any websites they deem objectionable.

The Iranian government blocks websites and jails journalists while maintaining a “climate of fear,” the authors wrote, with surveillance that extends to reach the journalists’ families.

In Eretria, as all independent media were shut down by the government in 2001. The country is the leading jailer of journalists in sub-Saharan Africa. The state retains a legal monopoly of broadcast media and the local’s alternative source of media are restricted through occasional signal jams and the poor internet quality.<sup>116</sup>



Reuters/Huseyin Aldemir

- Towards the end of the year, **Twitter [suspended](#) accounts belonging to Al Quds News Network (QNN)**, which have hundreds of thousands of followers.

This came weeks after the **Palestinian Authority (PA) suspended more than 50 websites and social media accounts, including QNN, after accusing them of violating a cybercrime law** in the occupied West Bank.<sup>117</sup>

- In Egypt, the 25-year-old **activist Radwa Mohoamed was [arrested](#) in November after her series of videos criticizing President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and his wife went viral.**<sup>118</sup> The “[Where is Radwa](#)” hashtag started trending in Arabic across Egypt following her arrest.<sup>119</sup>
- **Security forces in Egypt also detained three journalists from [Mada Masr](#), an independent Egyptian online newspaper**, the Guardian wrote.<sup>120</sup> Shady Zalat, Mada Masr editor, was arrested by plainclothes police at his home. Following his arrest, **activists used the hashtag [#FreeShady](#)** to highlight his case and the situation of press freedom in Egypt.
- **Iranians have faced a major shutdown** in what activists referred to as “a coup against internet freedom.” This is not the first time the Iranian government has shut down the internet, however, **this is the first time when experts haven’t been able to circumvent the blockages.**<sup>121</sup>

- In September, **internet access was blocked in Algeria, following demonstrations against the influence of army leaders in the civic space.** This internet disruption is consistent with previous shutdowns during the regime of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika.<sup>122</sup>

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had been in power for two decades, [resigned](#) in April 2019 following weeks of massive street protests.<sup>123</sup>

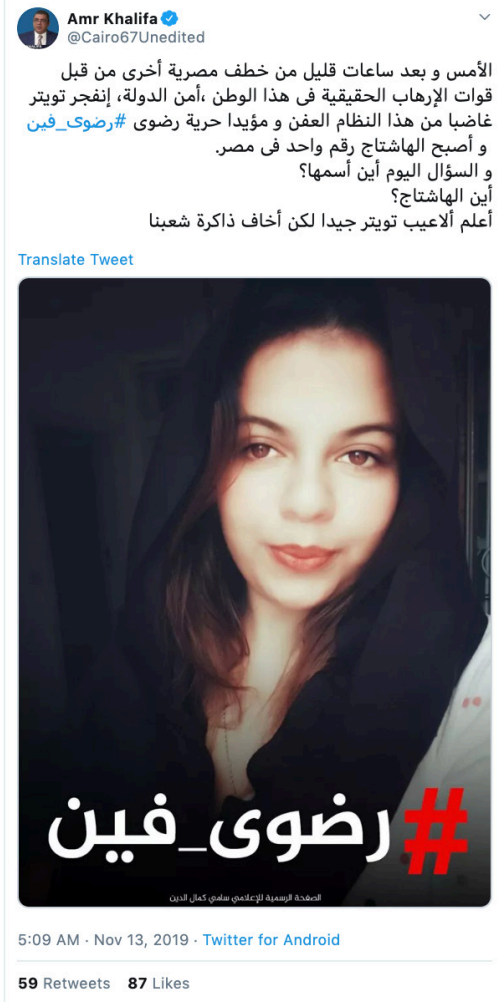
Prior to this, the internet monitoring organization, [NetBlocks](#), identified several internet disruptions across Algeria beginning on February 22nd. The disruptions were meant to stop the flow of information stemming from the protests.<sup>124</sup> Reuters [described](#) the events as “the country’s biggest anti-government demonstrations since the Arab Spring eight years ago.”<sup>125</sup>

**Further social media blocks took place during the summer, in a bid to make it harder for students to cheat during their exams.**<sup>126</sup> They did the [same thing](#) in 2018.<sup>127</sup> [And](#) in 2016.<sup>128</sup>

- **In August, a Palestinian student, Ismail Ajjawi, who grew up as a refugee in Lebanon, was denied entry to the United States after immigration officials objected his friends’ social media posts.**

As the website Inside Higher Ed explained: “Ajjawi is one of 54 students attending U.S. colleges this fall with the help of the Hope Fund, a program run by the nonprofit organization AMIDEAST, which helps high-achieving Palestinian students compete for scholarships to U.S. institutions. An undergraduate, he plans to study chemistry and physical biology.”<sup>129</sup>

He was later allowed to take up his studies, after The Harvard Crimson - the nation’s oldest continuously published daily college newspaper<sup>130</sup> - and others, [drew attention](#) to his case.<sup>131</sup>



*Tweet from Political analyst and columnist Amr Khalifa, highlighting the “Where is Radwa” hashtag and discussion.*

## 8. ONLINE EXTREMISM

- **A court in Abu Dhabi sentenced a Filipino man to 10 years imprisonment for using social media to promote “the ideology of terrorist organizations.”**

The charges included setting up and running several accounts on Twitter, Facebook, and Telegram that urge young people to join and provide financial support to terrorist groups and their affiliates around the world.<sup>132</sup>

- In May, **Twitter [reported](#) that in the second half of 2018, it had removed 166,513 accounts for violations related to promotion of terrorism.**

“Of those suspensions, 91% consisted of accounts flagged by internal, purpose-built technological tools,” they wrote, adding:

“The trend we are observing year-on-year is a steady decrease in terrorist organizations attempting to use our service.”<sup>133</sup>

- A few months later, in July, **Facebook [published](#) a blog post that explained their efforts to identify and take action against terrorist groups online.**

Efforts include developing a shared database of digital fingerprints that allows them to safely share known terrorist images and video propaganda with their partner companies, which will help in identifying terrorist content.<sup>134</sup>

“When terrorists misuse the internet, they often upload the same piece of content to multiple platforms to maximize their reach. To disrupt this behavior we jointly developed a shared industry database of “hashes” — or digital fingerprints — that allows us to safely share known terrorist images and video propaganda with partner companies. This enables us to more quickly identify and take action against potential terrorist content on our respective platforms.”<sup>135</sup>



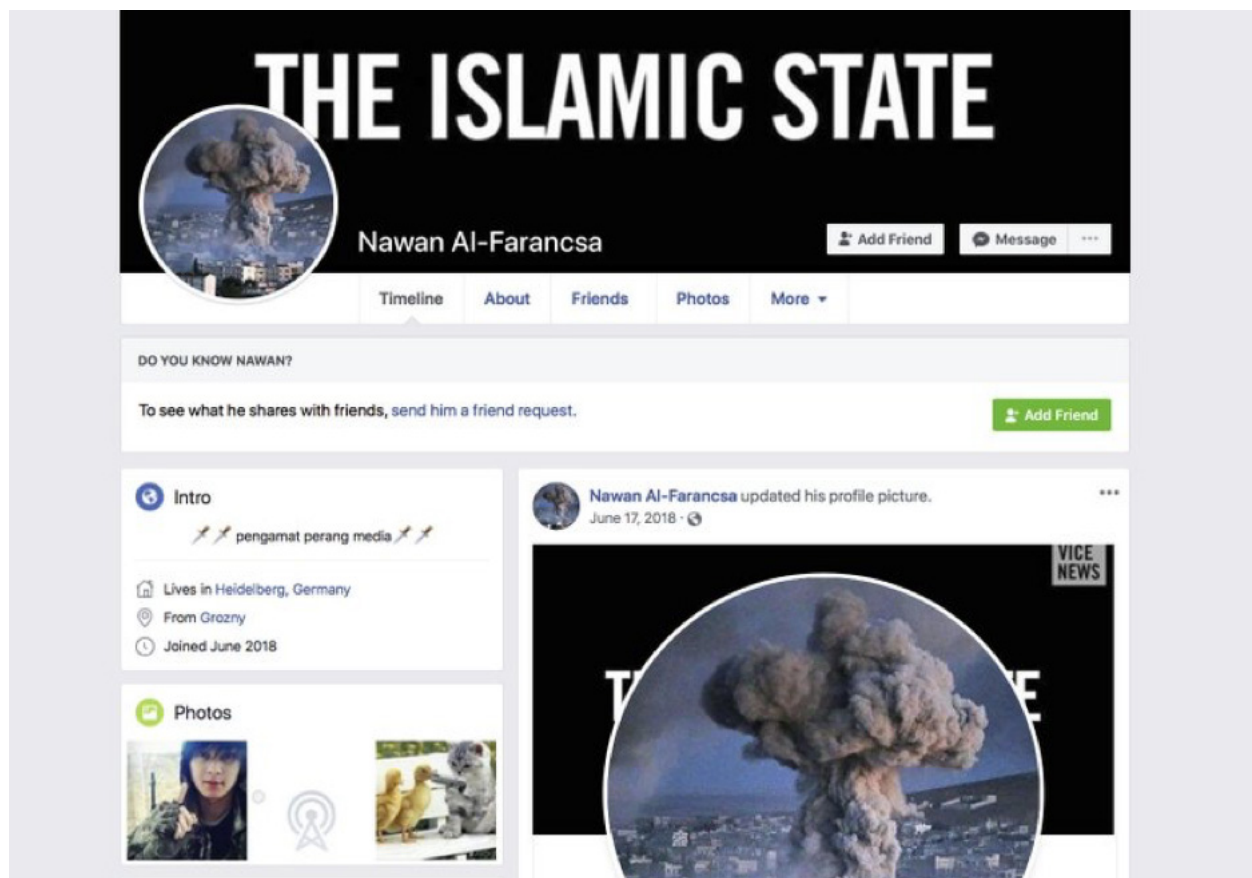
- AP [reported](#) at various points [throughout](#) the year on how Facebook was auto-generating pages promoting Islamic State and al-Qaida.<sup>136</sup>

“Facebook concedes that its systems are not perfect,” AP [wrote](#) in May, “but says it’s making improvements.”

Like other tech companies, Facebook relies heavily on AI, artificial intelligence, to automatically “weed out violent posts” before they can be published.

“After making heavy investments, we are detecting and removing terrorism content at a far higher success rate than even two years ago,” the company said in a statement. “We don’t claim to find everything and we remain vigilant in our efforts against terrorist groups around the world.”

“Facebook would like us to believe that its magical algorithms are somehow scrubbing its website of extremist content,” they [quoted](#) John Kostyack, executive director of the National Whistleblower Center, as saying in September. “Yet those very same algorithms are auto-generating pages with titles like ‘I Love Islamic State,’ which are ideal for terrorists to use for networking and recruiting.”<sup>137</sup>



Screengrab from 7 May 2019. [Via](#) AP.



- **Europol, the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation, announced in November that they had shut down a number of Islamic State-linked servers.** The targeted servers contained content that included “propaganda videos, publications and social media accounts supporting terrorism and violent extremism.”

“Over 26,000 items... were flagged by authorities as being terrorist propaganda,” NPR [reported](#). “Europol, the European Union’s law enforcement agency, sent those items to several online service providers for removal.”<sup>138</sup>

“For the time being, for as far as we know, IS is not present on the internet anymore. And we will see how fast, if ever, they will regain surface,” said Eric Van Der Sypt, a spokesman for the Belgian prosecutor’s office.”

**Although most of this content was found on the Telegram app, Google, Twitter, Instagram, and Telegram were among the nine operators who collaborated with the operation.**

- Also in November, **Twitter announced that they suspended content affiliated with groups the U.S. State Department considers Foreign Terrorist Organizations, like Hamas and Hezbollah, following a request from the Congress.**

The suspension included closing the official English and Arabic language accounts of Hamas, Hamas television channel, Al-Quds News Network, and Hezbollah television channel and news service Al-Manar, in addition to several accounts of Hamas and Hezbollah affiliated activists.<sup>140</sup>

- Earlier in the year, both the [New York Times](#) and [Bellingcat](#) had written about how **Hezbollah had been successfully by-passing efforts by social media companies to promote their message and target potential supporters.**<sup>141</sup>

## 9. ISRAEL / PALESTINE

- In January 2019, the hashtag **#TweetYourThobe**, the Palestinian traditional dress, started trending after the Democrat Congresswoman, Rashida Tlaib, was sworn in wearing one.<sup>142</sup>
- The **Israeli Prime Minister's son, Yair Netanyahu, tweeted** in April **that there's no such thing as Palestine since there's no letter "P" in Arabic.**

The now-deleted tweet backfired as many commentators pointed out that the Arabic word for Palestine is "Filistine."

Others noted the words Jewish and Jerusalem start with the letter "J," yet there's no letter in the Hebrew alphabet that has a "J" sound.<sup>143</sup>

- In August, the hashtag **#BoycottIsrael** was trending in the United States for a few hours after Israel banned following the Israeli government's [decision](#) to deny entry to Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar over their support to the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement.<sup>144</sup>

There is some [speculation](#) that Israel's decision was affected by US President Donald Trump's tweet asking Tlaib and Omar to be barred.<sup>145</sup>

- Following this, the hashtag **#MyPalestinianSitty**, which translates into **"my Palestinian grandmother,"** gained traction after Israel's ban meant that Tlaib would also be prevented from visiting her 90 year old grandmother who lives in the Israeli-occupied West Bank.

As CNN [explained](#), "Tlaib and her congressional colleague, Rep. Ilhan Omar, had planned to visit Israel and the Palestinian territories... but the Israeli government banned them over their support for boycotting and divesting from the nation."<sup>146</sup>

After requesting an exception, "Israel decided to grant Tlaib entry, but under a set of restrictions that the lawmaker later said amounted to an attempt to silence her."



*Tweet showing Congresswoman Tlaib at her swearing in ceremony. Via: Twitter.*

- Earlier in the year, **supporters of the Somali-American Democrat Congresswoman, Ilhan Omar, tweeted their support using the hashtag [#IStandWithIlhan](#).**

As WCCO/ CBS Minnesota explained:

“Twitter users are proclaiming their solidarity with Minnesota Rep. Ilhan Omar after President Donald Trump continued to bash the freshman congresswoman at a rally in North Carolina.

During the Wednesday night rally, the president depicted Omar and the three other congresswomen of color in “The Squad” – Reps. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, of New York; Ayanna Pressley, of Massachusetts; and Rashid Tlaib of Michigan – as left-wing extremists who hate America.

“If they don’t want to love our country, if they don’t want to fight for our country, they can [leave],” Trump said. “I’ll never change on that.”

Much of Trump’s harshest criticisms was aimed at Omar, the only one of The Squad who was born outside the United States. At one point, the crowd began chanting, “Send her back! Send her back!”

On Twitter, hundreds of thousands of people spoke out in defense of the Somalia-born congresswoman, who came to Minnesota as a teenager after spending much of her childhood in a Kenyan refugee camp. The hashtag #IStandWithIlhan became the No. 1 trending topic in the U.S.”<sup>147</sup>

Among those who used the hashtag were Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors and writer and political organizer George Ciccariello-Maher.<sup>148</sup>



*Support for the #IStandWithIlhan social media campaign  
Via: Jewish Voice for Peace*

# 10. YEAR OF PROTEST

The year of 2019 witnessed multiple protests across the Middle East. This included responses to [rising bread prices](#) in Sudan, a [proposed WhatsApp](#) tax in Lebanon, and [fuel price increases](#) in Iran. Each of these instances had two things in common: first, they're primarily led by young people, and secondly that this is a demographic adept at utilizing social media to highlight their demands and situation with the outside world.

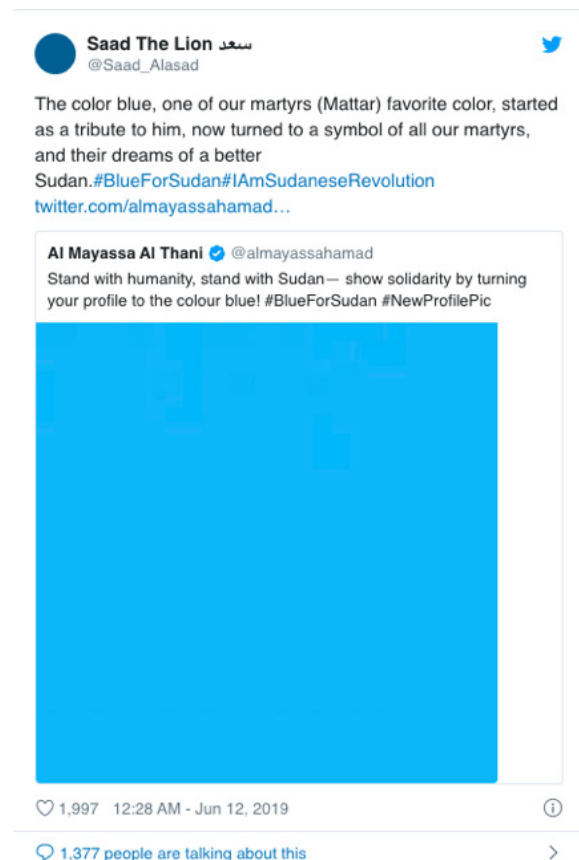
*Here are some examples of these principles in action from across the region during the past twelve months.*

## SUDAN

- Thousands of social media users took part in a campaign to show solidarity with Sudan by using the hashtag **#BlueforSudan**. The initiative was [inspired](#) by the color of the **avatar on the account of Mohammed Mattar, who was killed during an attack by Sudanese security forces in June.**<sup>149</sup>

The Sudanese military blocked the internet later that month, meaning that many in the country don't know about #BlueForSudan and the global interest it had [sparked](#).<sup>150</sup>

**Communication for local Sudanese continued to be difficult due to repeated internet shutdowns. However, the Sudanese diaspora utilized their social media accounts to spread the word about the campaign.**



*Example of a tweet promoting the #BlueforSudan campaign. Via: Twitter.*

**On-going social media blocks however also made it difficult for the diaspora to keep abreast of the latest developments on the ground.**

“Those outside Sudan have been forced to rely on phone calls or word of mouth to receive information from the ground, without any visual footage, which they, in turn, had shared on social media,” Al Jazeera [said](#).<sup>151</sup>



*Faces of those killed in anti-government protests in Khartoum.*

*[Photo Credit](#): Andrew Renneisen for BuzzFeed News*

- **Social Media was seen as playing an important role in organizing protests in the country which led to the removal of President Omar Hassan al-Bashir earlier in the year, after 30 years in power.**

“**Protesters in Sudan used social media to organize and VPNs to evade censors,**” noted the Wall Street Journal. Activists used Facebook to share the time and location of protests, the Journal explained, as well as to encourage participation.



Social networks were also important in terms of showing what was happening on the ground. **“Social media proved to be crucial because the state had a tight grip on conventional forms of media,”** [wrote](#) Voice of America’s [Ayen Bior](#).

“With a ranking of 175 out of 180, Sudan is one of the least free countries globally, according to this year’s World Press Freedom index.” As a result, social media was often a pivotal way to “receive and disseminate information,” as well as a channel to address misinformation and “fake news.”

## LEBANON

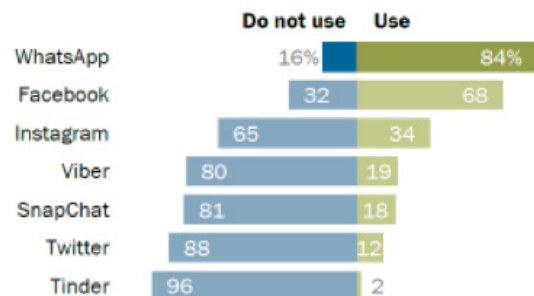
- **In Lebanon, protests were prompted - in part - by the governments’ proposed tax on the use of the messaging app, WhatsApp.**<sup>154</sup>

The protests grew into a nation-wide movement, further fueled by concerns about government [corruption and poverty](#) levels in the country.<sup>155</sup>

- More than **84%** of Lebanese locals use WhatsApp for messaging and phone calls. **98%** of Lebanese adults ages 18 to 29, and **94%** of adults ages 30 to 49 use WhatsApp, the Pew Research Center [reports](#).<sup>156</sup>
- **Many Lebanese protestors accused mainstream media of letting them down. As a result, they used their social media accounts to directly broadcast their message** around the world.<sup>157</sup>
- **A video of a group of protestors singing the famous children’s song “Baby Shark” went viral after they spontaneously started singing to a crying toddler.** The infant was in a car with his mom driving through a protest taking place on the streets in Beirut.<sup>158</sup>
- The [Lebanon is Rising](#) hashtag in Arabic became popular as protests [continued](#). As of late-December, the protest movement was in its [third month](#).<sup>160</sup>

### WhatsApp is the most commonly used platform in Lebanon

% of Lebanese adults who use/do not use ...



Note: Don't know responses not shown.

Source: Survey of Lebanese adults conducted Sept. 10-Nov. 21, 2018. Q10a-g.

PEW RESEARCH

*WhatsApp use in Lebanon.  
Via: Pew Research Center.*

# IRAN

- In November, Iranians took to the streets to protest a 50% increase in petrol prices. Amid those protests, the Iranian government [shut off](#) the internet.<sup>161</sup>

As the Atlantic Council, a Washington D.C. based think tank, has [outlined](#), “3,000 Toman petrol” and “expensive petrol” hashtags in Persian became popular among protesters. Other hashtags requested the government to stay away from Gaza and Lebanon.<sup>162</sup>

- Online videos which later circulated on social media “indicate violent suppression of peaceful protesters,” the LA Times [reported](#).<sup>163</sup> Quoting the Center for Human Rights in Iran, a New York-based nonprofit, the LA Times said that more than 2,700 people have been arrested, and that Amnesty International had stated at least 106 protesters had been killed in clashes with security forces across the country.

Separately, Brian Hook, the U.S. special representative for Iran, told Bloomberg News that:

“We are calling on are social-media companies like Facebook and Instagram and Twitter to shut down the accounts of Supreme Leader [Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei, the Foreign Minister [Mohammad Javad] Zarif and President [Hassan] Rohani until they restore the Internet to their own people.”

An extract from the interview was posted on the [U.S. State Department’s official Twitter account](#).<sup>164</sup>

***“We are calling on are social-media companies like Facebook and Instagram and Twitter to shut down the accounts of Supreme Leader [Ayatollah Ali] Khamenei, the Foreign Minister [Mohammad Javad] Zarif and President [Hassan] Rohani until they restore the Internet to their own people.”***



# PALESTINE

- In Palestine, **social media users [protested](#) the suspected honor killing of Israa Ghurayb**, a 21 year-old woman who died after she apparently posted to friends on social media a photo of herself and her fiancé in a coffee shop. “The contents of the account have since been deleted,” the BBC reported.

The hashtags “we are all Israa Ghurayeb,” “no honor in honor crimes,” “Israa Ghurayeb,” started trending in several Arab countries and were used by some Arab celebrities.

According to the BBC, **the trending hashtags played an important role in pushing the authorities to work harder to solve the case.**<sup>165</sup>

In September, the Palestinian News & Information Agency, Wafa, [reported](#) that the Attorney General, Akram al-Khatib, had convicted three Palestinians, all relatives, for Israa’s death.<sup>166</sup>

- In November, **an Israeli sniper shot Muath Amarneh, a Palestinian journalist from Gaza, in the eye.** Following that incident, dozens of Palestinian journalists rallied [protesting with one eye covered](#) in solidarity.

**Hundreds of social media users, including celebrities and politicians, imitated her condition** using the hashtags **#MuathEye**, **#EyeofTruth**, We are Muath Amarneh in Arabic.<sup>167</sup>



Image [via](#) The New Arab

# EGYPT

- **Following a train crash that killed 25 people** in Cairo earlier in the year, the **Egyptian activist Ahmed Mohy went to Tahrir Square with a poster saying “step down, Sisi” in Arabic.**

Shortly after that, Egyptians authorities arrested Mohy, which he live streamed for 11 minutes on Facebook.

Following this, “leave Sisi” and “returning to Tahrir” hashtags [started trending](#).<sup>168</sup>



*Ahmed Mohy in Tahrir Square. Photo [via @maitelsadany](#)*

- In September, **the Egyptian actor and businessman, Mohamed Ali, released a video asking Egyptians to use their social media to pressure Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi to step down as a president.**

Hours after Ali posted the video, “that’s enough, Sisi” hashtag in Arabic trended in Egypt at number one and worldwide at number six.

Facebook temporarily deleted the video, but people were able to re-share it and show their support for Ali.<sup>169</sup>

Currently, **Ali has an official [Facebook page](#) with 1.4 million followers and a [YouTube channel](#) with 128,000 subscribers, where he shares his videos.**

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