



# Social Media in the Middle East 2022: A Year in Review

By Damian Radcliffe and Hadil Abuhmaid  
with Nii Mahliaire

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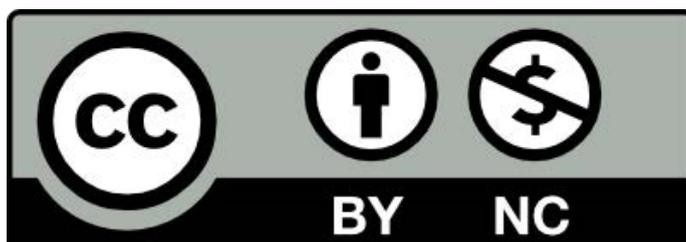
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## About this report

Welcome to the latest annual study on Middle East Social Media Trends. This report, the eleventh in a series dating back to 2012, provides an in-depth analysis of the current state of social media in the Middle East. As the most comprehensive and up-to-date study of its kind, it is an invaluable resource for anyone interested in the region's digital landscape.

In this report, we examine the most popular social media platforms and the ways in which people are using them. We explore the impact of social media on politics, business and culture in the region. Our findings will be of interest to anyone interested in how social media shapes the way we connect with one another, as well as the ways in which we consume and find information. These trends are relevant to marketers, journalists, brands and businesses, as well as government agencies and public bodies.

Over the past decade, the Middle East has seen a significant increase in social media adoption. Today, it boasts some of the highest penetration rates of social media in the world, making it a key market for platforms and businesses looking to engage with Arab audiences.

From staying in touch with friends and family to consuming news and entertainment, social media - as it is around the world - is an integral part of daily life in the region. Social media is also playing an increasingly important role in politics, with many politicians and activists using the platforms to connect with the public and mobilize support for their policies.

Much of this takes place on Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp. These platforms, all part of the Meta family, have a combined user base of over 200 million in the region. Other platforms such as Snapchat, TikTok and Twitter also have a significant audience.

Social networks are changing shopping habits too. Networks like TikTok, Instagram and Facebook are becoming key channels for e-commerce, both in terms of direct sales and inspiration for purchases. The rise of social commerce offers opportunities and challenges for businesses and brands looking to tap into the digital habits of connected consumers.

This is the fourth report we have written together, drawing on our extensive experience and expertise in the region. We are grateful, as always, to the phenomenal data produced by [Simon Kemp](#), CEO of Kepios, a marketing strategy consultancy, and chief analyst at DataReportal, whose work informs so much of the material that we present.

Our further thanks to [Professor Peter Laufer](#) and the [University of Oregon-UNESCO Crossings Institute](#), which is publishing this report for the first time; and continued support from the University of Oregon's [School of Journalism and Communication](#). [Nii Mahliaire](#), a communication and media studies doctoral student, provided additional research assistance.

We hope you enjoy reading this latest annual report.

*Damian Radcliffe & Hadil Abuhmaid  
March 2023*

# Executive Summary

This report examines social media trends in the Middle East during 2022. To help us do this, as in previous studies, we absorbed information from over 100 different online sources, in English and Arabic. This includes research reports, media coverage, interviews and articles.

Three key themes stood out to us this year: 1) How the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is a market leader for social media use on multiple platforms, 2) Growing issues related to Freedom of Expression; and 3) The role of social media in the 2022 Iran protests.

None of these are new developments (social media has also played a role in previous protests across Iran), but these trendlines have become more pronounced in the past year.

## Theme 1: MENA is a Social Media Market Leader

Social media is highly prevalent in the MENA region, with a significantly higher adoption rate across many platforms than in other countries. Some notable examples include:

- **Five MENA nations can be seen in the Top 10 for take-up of social networks.** The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Qatar, have the highest levels of adoption in the world, according to findings [published](#)<sup>1</sup> by DataReportal.
- **Globally, social media use around the world remains at 2019 levels. With one exception: MEA.** The Middle East and Africa region [surveyed](#)<sup>2</sup> by GlobalWebIndex reveals that users are often on social media for more than three hours a day.

Egypt and Turkey, MENA's most populous countries, often appear on the Top 20 lists for the biggest national markets for many social networks. More notable, however, is the prevalence of countries in the region at the top of the charts when platforms are analyzed by reach.

- **The Top 5 countries in the world for reach on YouTube are all in the region, with Lebanon leading the way.**
- Similarly, **TikTok's ascendancy means the top five spots for the app - by reach - are all held by Middle East nations.** Nine MENA nations are in the Top 20.
- In terms of reach, **nine of the Top 16 nations in the world using Snapchat are in MENA, as are five of the Top 20 markets - by total audience size - globally.** **Bahrain, with 79.8% are on the app, has the highest reach of any national market.**
- **On Facebook, Libya has the largest reach for the platform globally, with 96.1% of those aged 13+ using the social network.**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/LetciaXavier2/2022-gwi-report-social>

- **For Instagram, four MENA nations can be found in the Top 20 for reach**, while Turkey is now the 5th largest market for Instagram, globally, with nearly 49m users.
- **Four MENA nations are also found in the Top 20 for Facebook Messenger users** worldwide. Libya is ranked second, with 75% of the population using the app.
- **And three countries in MENA can be found in the Top 20 markets for Twitter.**

## Theme 2: Challenges to Freedom of Expression

We have [charted](#)<sup>3</sup> in previous annual reports the rise in [obstacles to free speech](#)<sup>4</sup> on social media in the MENA region. This has included examples of governments [blocking certain apps](#),<sup>5</sup> particularly during times of protests and even [exam periods](#).<sup>6</sup>

Alongside this, we have seen the [emergence](#)<sup>7</sup> of (often purposefully vague) laws pertaining to the spread of “fake news” and a number of high profile cases of users being given jail time as a result of posts on social media.

The last of these trends feels particularly prevalent this year, and we have highlighted a number of cases throughout the report, not just in the final two chapters which specifically detail developments related to Freedom of Expression and Online Misinformation.

Some of the key findings in these areas from the past year include:

- **Continued platform manipulation** by governments and other agencies pushing state narratives; and the efforts by platforms and law enforcement to manage this.
- **Arrests in a number of countries** including Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey, **of social media users**. Often the driver for these arrests are posts that are critical of a regime, leading to charges of spreading misinformation or attempts to destabilize the country and/or government. Account holders often do not have a large number of followers.
- **Female social media influencers can seem particularly vulnerable**. Many of the most high profile case studies that we highlight from nations such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia feature women posting content that is not deemed culturally acceptable.

We have seen these trends in previous years too, but in 2022 they feel more pronounced.

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<sup>3</sup>

<https://medium.com/damian-radcliffe/censorship-and-freedom-of-expression-online-in-the-middle-east-4dfd7a2540d2> (extract from the 2020 study)

<sup>4</sup>

<https://medium.com/damian-radcliffe/censorship-and-freedom-of-expression-in-the-middle-east-eda09f372aee> (extract from our 2019 report)

<sup>5</sup>

<https://damianradcliffe.wordpress.com/2018/07/11/social-media-in-the-middle-east-censorship-privacy-and-freedom-of-expression/> (extract from 2018’s round-up)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-36570808>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.zdnet.com/article/middle-east-has-a-big-problem-it-loves-tech-but-cant-stop-blocking-it/>

### Theme 3: Social Media and Protests in Iran

As protests [continue](#)<sup>8</sup> in Iran, social media remains an important platform - as it was during the Arab Spring - for organizers on the ground, as well as a means to share what is happening with the wider world.

This is despite repeated attempts by the government in Iran to [block access](#)<sup>9</sup> to the internet and various social networks, and the [efforts](#)<sup>10</sup> of citizens to [by-pass](#)<sup>11</sup> these attempts to restrict access to information and to control the narrative, both within Iran and outside it.

Arguably, this is the biggest geo-political story of the past year in the region, so it's not surprising that dimensions of this story can be seen throughout our report.

Image [via](#) Twitter

### The Bigger Picture

Beyond these themes, we've continued to see other important developments, ones that we have charted in this study.

This includes the use of social media for good (such as charitable and public health campaigns) as well as Ramadan based programming, creativity manifest in the growing creator economy, and the use of social networks for a range of purposes related to travel, tourism and global events such as the [FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022™](#).

Collectively, these examples - and this report - highlight the evolving nature of social media as a tool for communication and entertainment, while also acknowledging the challenges faced by users in a region where freedom of expression is not always guaranteed. These are trends that we will continue to monitor, map and share during the coming year and beyond.

8

<https://www.npr.org/2023/04/02/1167645484/six-months-after-the-death-of-22-year-old-mahsa-amini-iranians-are-still-protest>

9

<https://www.foxbusiness.com/technology/iran-blocks-internet-social-media-mahsa-amini-protests-grow>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/iranians-circumvent-internet-restrictions/31933593.html>

<sup>11</sup> <https://vpnoverview.com/unblocking/censorship/internet-censorship-iran/>

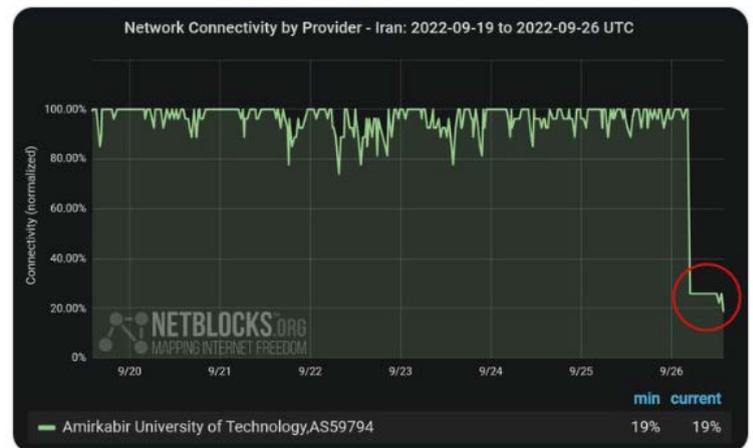


Confirmed: Live metrics show the loss of internet connectivity at [#Amirkabir](#) University in [#Iran](#) as students strike over the death of [#MahsaAmini](#).

Meanwhile:

- Daily mobile disruptions continue
- Social media restrictions remain in place

Report: [netblocks.org/reports/intern...](https://netblocks.org/reports/intern...)



7:11 AM · Sep 26, 2022

403 Retweets 55 Quotes 836 Likes 2 Bookmarks

# 1: Market Context

In this opening chapter we provide an overview of the key data related to social media adoption and usage in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

## - Social Media Take-Up

The Middle East is a market leader in social media use. Multiple countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region rank above the global average in terms of the percentage of the population using social networks.

Five MENA nations can be seen in the Top 10 for take-up of social networks.

- UAE (1st) is ranked top with over 100%, a figure which can be attributed to duplicate and fake accounts, this is followed by Bahrain (2nd, 98.7%), Qatar (3rd, 96.3%), Lebanon (6th, 90.5%) and Oman (7th, 90.5%).
- At the other end of the spectrum, South Sudan has one of the lowest levels of social media use. Less than 5% of the population (4.3%), some 470,000 citizens in a country of nearly 11 million people, use social media.

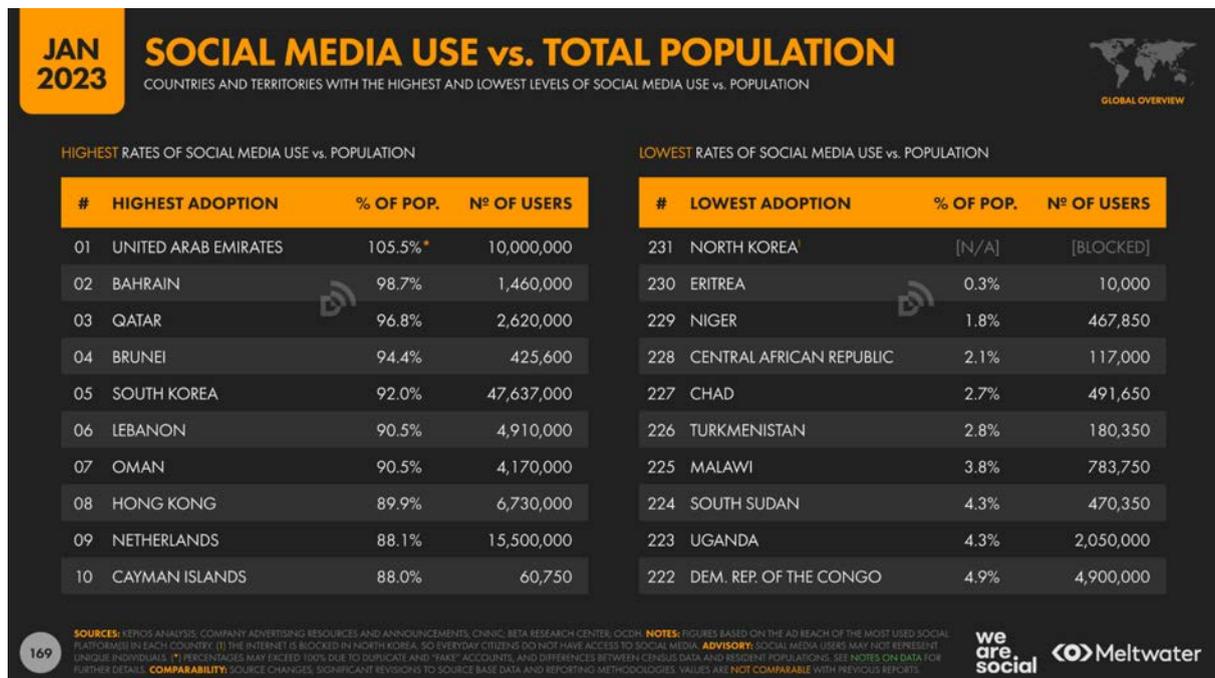


Image: Social Media Use vs. Total Population, [via DataReportal](#)

- And when examining social media adoption in larger markets, five MENA nations - UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel and Morocco - all rank above the worldwide average of 59.3%.

- Egypt, the region’s most populous nation, is still some way off this level of adoption. Under half (44.5%) of the country’s 112 million inhabitants are currently social.

**- Social Media Use**

**Around the world, “social media usage has plateaued” GlobalWebIndex says,<sup>12</sup> with the exception of markets in the Middle East and Africa (MEA) region. “If we take MEA out of the equation, the global is what it was three years ago.”**

- GWI’s MEA data (published in 2022, but only including data at that point for up to the end of 2021) also includes African countries such as Ghana, Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa.
- In those nations, users all average more than three hours a day on social, which pushes the overall MEA figures some way above the global average. Nonetheless, we can see that many Middle East nations surveyed also exceed the global average.

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
<b>Global ave</b>	2:16	2:20	2:26	2:25	2:26
<b>Egypt</b>	3:07	3:05	3:02	2:52	2:57
<b>Israel</b>	-	-	1:59	2:02	2:02
<b>Morocco</b>	2:23	2:34	2:31	2:34	2:31
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	2:38	2:52	3:08	3:11	3:16
<b>Turkey</b>	2:49	2:53	2:56	3:01	3:03
<b>UAE</b>	2:56	3:01	3:04	3:07	3:12

*Table: Average time using social networks on an average day in h:mm. [Source](#): GWI*

**Many MENA social networkers use a wide variety of social media platforms; often ahead of - or in line with - the global average.**

- On a monthly basis, the average number of social media platforms harnessed by internet users aged 16-64 was 8.2 in UAE, 7.9 in Saudi Arabia, 7.6 in Turkey and 7.2 social networks in Egypt.
- Globally, the average user can be found on 7.2 networks in a given month. Internet users in India use the most social networks, averaging 8.7 platforms in a given month.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/LetciaXavier2/2022-gwi-report-social>

Globally, the wider Middle East and Africa (MEA) region is ranked second for time spent on social and messaging.

- In H1 2022, internet users in the region spent an average of 3 hours, 5 minutes (3:05) per day using these services, Insider Intelligence [reveals](#).<sup>13</sup>
- Only internet users in Latin America do this for longer (3 hours, 35 mins a day).

## Where the World Spends Its Media Time, H1 2022

hrs:mins per day among internet users

	Asia-Pacific	Southeast Asia	Western Europe	Central & Eastern Europe	Latin America	Middle East & Africa	North America
PC/laptop/tablet	2:25	3:08	3:09	3:43	4:08	3:50	3:39
Mobile	3:27	4:31	2:41	3:49	5:07	4:35	3:26
Social/messaging	2:12	2:56	1:48	2:26	3:35	3:05	2:11
Broadcast radio	0:59	0:44	1:19	0:55	1:01	1:05	1:11
Music streaming	1:34	1:33	1:15	1:11	2:04	1:45	1:54
Podcasts	1:07	0:57	0:38	0:33	1:04	1:03	0:57
Broadcast TV	1:31	1:38	2:20	2:17	2:26	2:05	2:52
Online TV/streaming	1:34	1:20	1:13	1:08	1:35	1:53	1:52
Print press	1:04	0:44	0:35	0:26	0:37	0:51	0:41
Online press	1:19	1:13	0:50	0:46	1:56	1:19	0:56
Gaming	1:16	1:21	0:52	0:43	1:14	1:29	1:22

■ 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 2022  
 g278311

INSIDER INTELLIGENCE | eMarketer

Image [via](#) Insider Intelligence

Given these adoption levels, it's no surprise that online ad spend in the region is heavily focused on social networks.

- [Internet ad spend in MENA](#)<sup>14</sup> amounts to around \$4.4 billion U.S. dollars a year. This market is anticipated to grow to be worth \$7.9 billion U.S. dollars a year by 2024.

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/content/global-media-intelligence-2022-middle-east-and-africa>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/799847/mena-internet-advertising-spending/>

- In 2020 (the last year for which this [data](#)<sup>15</sup> is available), 47% of this outlay was [spent](#) on social media.

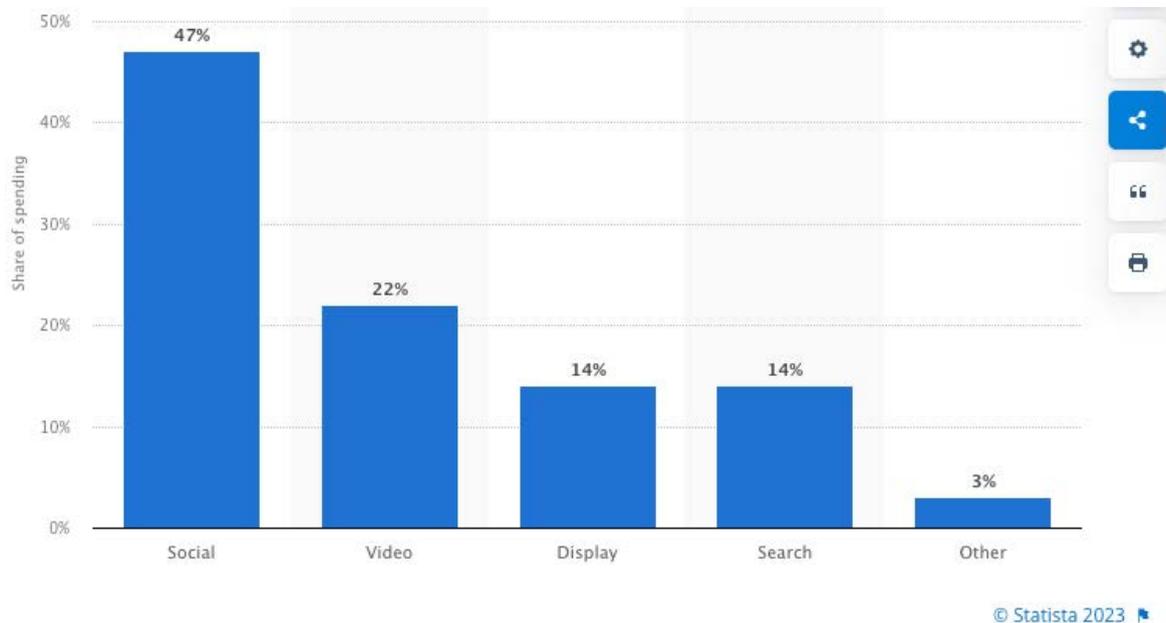


Image: Distribution of digital advertising spending MENA 2020, by format, [via Statista](#)

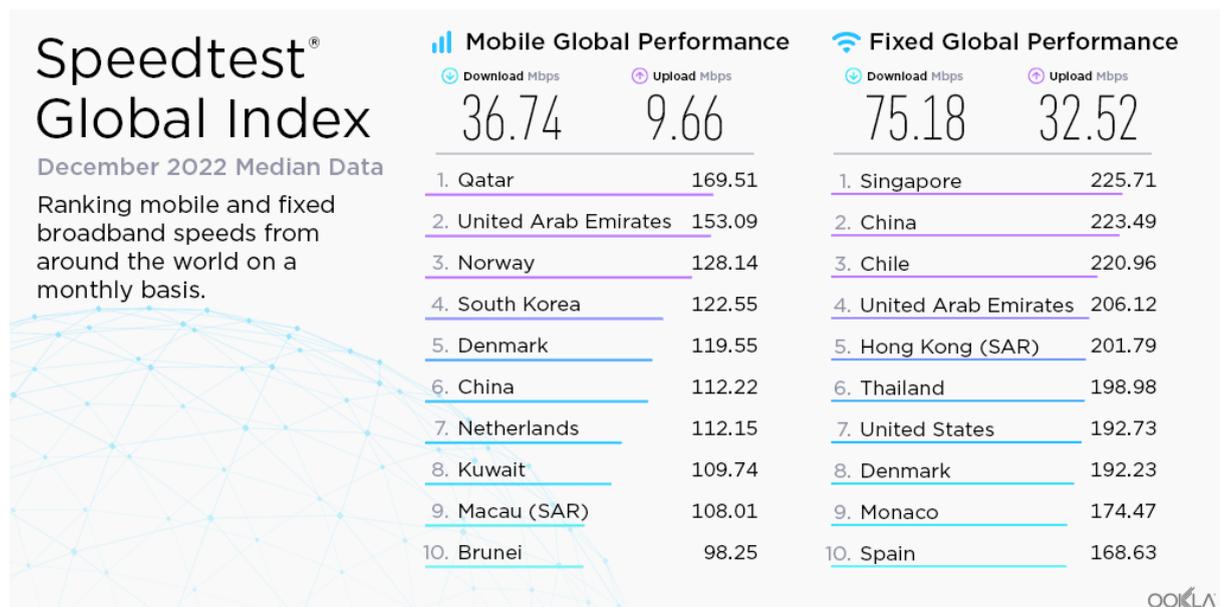
## - Drivers for Social Media Usage

There are multiple factors that continue to drive social media habits in the Middle East, including high levels of smartphone adoption and mobile internet speeds.

- **Data for December 2022 from [Ookla](#), ranked Qatar and then UAE as the fastest markets in the world for mobile.** UAE was also ranked fourth for fixed broadband.
- Positions can fluctuate, but these two Gulf nations are consistently near the top of the monthly [Speedtest Global Index](#), which ranks mobile and fixed broadband speeds from around the world. **Kuwait** can also be found in the Top 10 for mobile speeds most months.
- At the other end of the spectrum, **Yemen and Syria** are often found in the list of nations with the slowest mobile broadband.

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<https://www.statista.com/topics/9068/digital-advertising-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/#topicOverview>



- Similarly, **Social Commerce on Facebook Marketplace and Instagram’s Shopping Bag has the second highest regional engagement in MEA**, with 38% of social media users having used this service in the past month, GlobalWebIndex (GWI) 2022 Social Media Report shows.<sup>16</sup>
- However, it’s worth noting that this data is from Q3 2021, although published in 2022 and MEA only covers the biggest markets. Within that, there are wide fluctuations...

With that in mind, a [report](#)<sup>17</sup> by the World Bank posits that the MENA region is home to a “digital paradox.”

- The region’s use of social media accounts is high relative to what would be expected given its level of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita—an indicator of economic development - yet its use of digital tools, such as the internet, to make payments is low,” the authors note.<sup>18</sup>
- They argue that “without wider diffusion of digital payments, the region’s digital economy will remain nascent,” and that to address this it is essential to boost societal trust in the government (especially e-government) and in connected banking and financial services.

To this, we also need to add the continued need for more Arabic language content.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/LetciaXavier2/2022-gwi-report-social>

<sup>17</sup>

<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/37058/9781464816635.pdf?sequence=10&isAllowed=y>

<sup>18</sup> Cusolito, A. P., Gévaudan, C., Lederman, D., & Wood, C. A. (2022). The Upside of Digital for the Middle East and North Africa.

- **Arabic is just 15th on the list of the most common languages found across content online.**
- **According to Babel**, the language learning provider, **Arabic is the fourth most popular language in the world in terms of native speakers (362 million)**, behind English (373m), Spanish (485m) and Chinese (1.3 bn).<sup>19</sup>

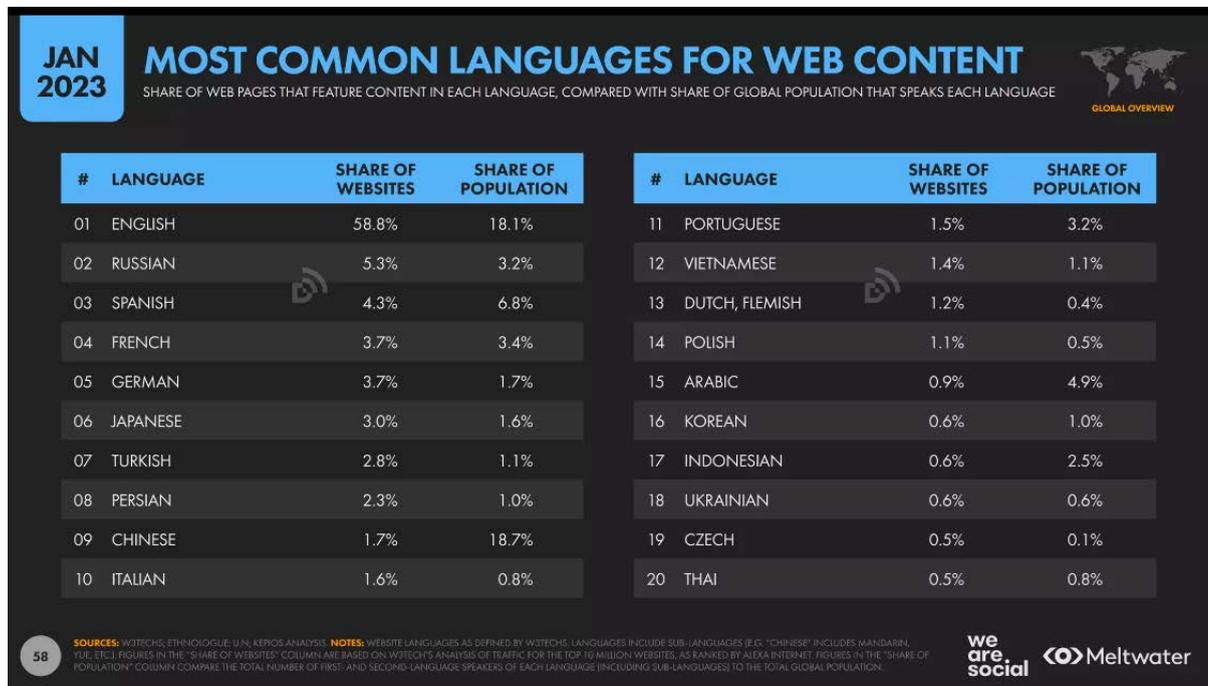


Image via DataReportal

**Digital Content Purchased in major MENA markets is also typically behind the curve.**<sup>20</sup>

- Globally, more than 7 in 10 internet users (71.5%) aged 16-64 pay for some kind of digital content each month. **The only MENA nations above this average are Morocco (76.9%) and UAE (72.4%).**
- Others, like Turkey (66.6%), Egypt (56.1%) and Israel (48.5%), are some way behind.

### - Adoption by MENA nation

Looking more widely at adoption on a country-by-country basis in the region:

- **Internet penetration is almost universal across the Gulf Region**, with five GCC countries having adoption levels of 99%. Not surprisingly, poorer and/or war-torn nations such as Sudan, Syria and Yemen rank lowest in take-up.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/the-10-most-spoken-languages-in-the-world>

<sup>20</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report> (Slide 385)

- **There is some variance between the number of Internet and Social Media Users.** Social Media adoption is also highest in the Gulf.

Country	Total Population	Internet Users %	Active Social Media Users %
Algeria	45.3 million	70.9% (32.09m)	52.9% (23.95m)
Bahrain	1.5 million	99% (1.46m)	98.7% (1.46m)
Djibouti	1.1 million	68.9% (778k)	8.3% (94.1k)
Egypt	111.8 million	72.2% (80.8m)	41.4% (46.3m)
Iran	88.8 million	78.6% (69.8m)	54% (48m)
Iraq	45 million	74.9% (33.7m)	56.7% (25.5m)
Israel	9.1 million	90.3% (8.2m)	77.5% (7m)
Jordan	11.3 million	88% (10m)	58.4% (6.6m)
Kuwait	4.3 million	99% (4.3m)	83.7% (3.6m)
Lebanon	5.4 million	86.6% (4.7m)	90.5% (4.9m)
Libya	6.9 million	45.9% (3.1m)	82.5% (5.7m)
Morocco	37.6 million	88.1% (33.2m)	56.6% (21.3m)
Oman	4.6 million	96.4% (4.4m)	90.5% (4.2m)
Palestine	5.3 million	74.6% (4m)	55.6% (3m)
Qatar	2.7 million	99% (2.7m)	96.8% (2.6m)
Saudi Arabia	36.7 million	99% (36.3m)	79.3% (29.1m)
Sudan	47.5 million	28.4% (13.5m)	Unavailable
Syria	22.7 million	35.8% (8.1m)	Unavailable
Tunisia	12.4 million	79% (9.8m)	58.4% (7.2m)
Turkey	85.6 million	83.4% (71.4m)	73.1% (62.6m)
UAE	9.5 million	99% (9.4m)	105.5% (10m) <sup>21</sup>
Yemen	34 million	26.7% (9.1m)	9% (3.1m)

Table: Data [via](#) DataReportal<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Per Data Reportal's explanatory notes (slide 169) "Social Media users may not represent unique individuals. Percentages may exceed 100% due to duplicate and "fake" accounts, and differences between census data and resident populations."

<sup>22</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report>

<sup>22</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-local-country-headlines>

## 2. Meta (Facebook and Instagram)

Meta is a social media behemoth. For ease of use, we have included two of its biggest social networks - Facebook and Instagram - in one combined chapter. Insights related to two of its other major channels - WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger - can be found in a dedicated chapter looking specifically at Messaging Apps.

### - Facebook

Two of the [biggest audiences for Facebook](#)<sup>23</sup> can be found in the MENA region. **Egypt is home to 42 million users, making it the 10th biggest national market for the platform. Meanwhile, Turkey, with 32.8 million users is ranked 14th.**

**Libya has the largest reach for the platform globally, with 96.1% of those aged 13+ using the social network. UAE with 88.9% reach is ranked 4th and Qatar at 83.6% is 8th on the list.**<sup>24</sup>

Cairo is home to the 7th largest audience on Facebook, with 8.9m users, while Istanbul is ranked 11th with 7.7million users.<sup>25</sup> Dhaka (14.8m), Delhi (13m) and Bangkok (10.5m) are the three cities with the biggest reach for the network.



Image [via](#) DataReportal

<sup>23</sup> [https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1dcFScsqn1m\\_VRNZRn3rui1RI5qB6u-Ox](https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1dcFScsqn1m_VRNZRn3rui1RI5qB6u-Ox) (Slide 217)

<sup>24</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report> (Slide 218)

<sup>25</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report> (Slide 221)

Although, as we noted in the opening chapter, **Arabic is the 15th most common language for content on the internet, it is ranked 4th in terms of the primary language used by those on Facebook.**<sup>26</sup> Turkish is ranked 14th.

**Over a third (35%) of internet users aged 16-64 in Egypt say Facebook is their favorite social network, with just under a third of this cohort (31%) in Morocco saying the same thing.**<sup>27</sup>

**Meta opened its regional headquarters in Dubai Internet City in March 2022.** Shaikh Hamdan bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Crown Prince of Dubai and chairman of the Executive Council, inaugurated the office. Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer of Meta, also [attended the event](#).<sup>28</sup>



**Hamdan bin Mohammed** ✓

@HamdanMohammed

الإمارات العربية المتحدة حساب حكومي رسمي

Today, I attended the opening of [@Meta](#)'s regional headquarters in [@DIC\\_Community](#). Dubai continues to consolidate its partnerships with global technology players as part of its ambitious vision to shape the future.



4:59 AM · Mar 8, 2022

Image [via](#) Twitter

<sup>26</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report> (Slide 220)

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/LetciaXavier2/2022-gwi-report-social>

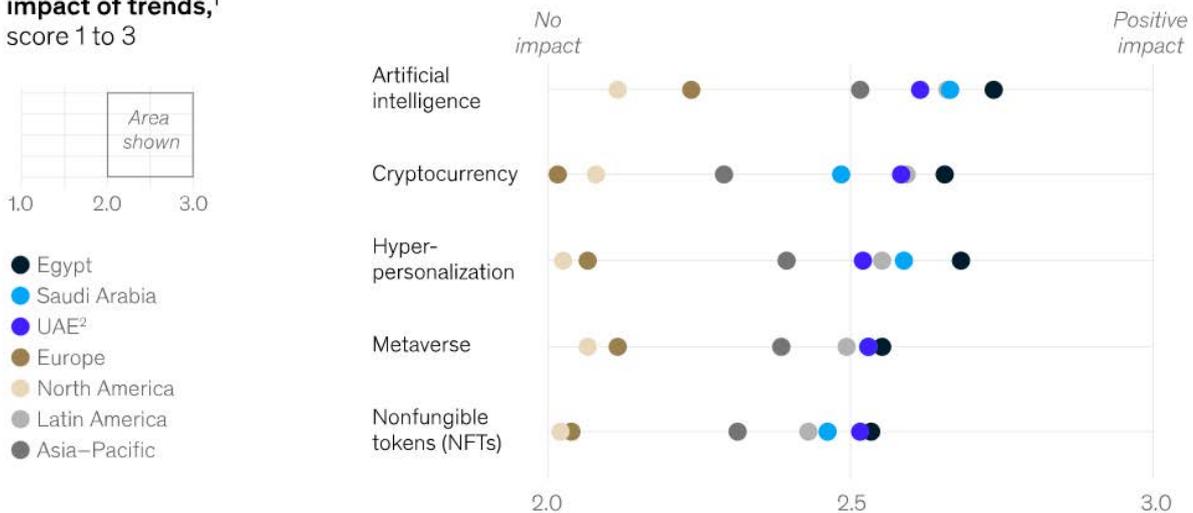
<sup>28</sup> <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395303027845>

There's some potentially good news for Meta (the company formerly known as Facebook), and other tech players, after a [new study](#)<sup>29</sup> from McKinsey found consumers in the MENA region are among the most enthusiastic about the potential for AI, hyper-personalization, the Metaverse, and other emerging new tech.

“To date, the potential of these offerings hasn’t translated to widespread adoption, because consumers are still seeking to determine their utility,” McKinsey notes. “However, digital users in the region expect these new trends to have a significantly positive impact, with Egypt slightly ahead of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.”

### Middle Eastern users are among global leaders in embracing emerging technologies.

Average expected impact of trends,<sup>1</sup> score 1 to 3



Note: No country or region averaged a negative expected impact score.

<sup>1</sup>Question: “How do you think these new trends and technologies will impact your digital interactions in the future?” Answer options: “1: Negative impact”; “2: No impact”; and “3: Positive impact.”

<sup>2</sup>United Arab Emirates.

Source: McKinsey Global Digital Sentiment Survey



Meta's Ramadan #MonthofGood hashtag included a [range of content and initiatives](#) during the Holy Month.<sup>30</sup> This included Ramadan Talks, live content on Facebook and Instagram, as well as a Ramadan-themed AR effects [filter](#) on both services.

Image [via Instagram](#)

29

<https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/mckinsey-digital/our-insights/digital-consumers-in-the-middle-east-rising-adoption-and-opportunity>

<sup>30</sup> <https://campaignme.com/ramadan-2022-meta-is-bringing-back-monthofgood-this-april/>

In partnership with Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum Global Initiatives (MBRGI), Meta's 'Meals for Reels' campaign worked with more than 120 influencers and 70 content creators across the region and around the world.

Content creators sought to raise awareness and funds for the distribution of over one billion meals in 50 countries, SME10x [reports](#).<sup>31</sup> They did this by including a [#MealsForReels](#) donation wallet on their 'Ramadan Reels' on Facebook and Instagram throughout the month.



Image [via](#) Grazia

Participants in the initiative included Emirati chef [Manal Al Alem](#), Iraqi chef [Shaheen](#), Emirati influencer [Khalid Al Ameri](#), Egyptian actor [Mohamed Henedy](#), and Lebanese-British influencer and fashion entrepreneur, [Karen Wazen](#).



Image [via](#) Campaign Middle East

31

<https://www.sme10x.com/10x-industry/middle-east-records-more-than-321-million-mentions-across-social-media-during-ramadan>

The Meta Journalism Project, working with the Arab Reporters for Investigative Journalism (ARIJ) and its Arab Fact-Checkers Network (AFCN), [launched](#)<sup>32</sup> an interactive course focused on learning fact-checking in Arabic. The self-guided training, which was announced in October 2022, takes about 2 hours to complete. At the end of it, trainees receive a certificate of completion signed by both Meta Journalism Project and ARIJ.



Header image for Meta Journalism Project's [Facebook group](#) for Arabic-speaking journalists

Meta and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) also unveiled a new training program, “Engage” which offers training in Storytelling, Video reporting, Data Journalism, and Engagement and Audience Development. The initiative [included](#)<sup>33</sup> 24 90-minute webinars followed by a Q&A session, led by expert trainers, as well as 20 grants, each worth c.\$1,500, so that participants could apply some of the lessons from the training to new projects.



Image [via](#) ICFJ

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/formedia/blog/MENANews2022H2Update>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.icfj.org/our-work/engage>

Other noteworthy developments, include:

Hacking, platform manipulation and issues related to freedom of expression continue to dominate Meta's platforms in the region (and indeed globally). Here are a few of those stories from the past year:

- In March, Pakistan's Foreign Office [disclosed](#)<sup>34</sup> that several of the social media accounts belonging to their embassy in Algeria, including Facebook, had been hacked.
- Jordanian journalist Adnan Al-Rousan was arrested in August following critical columns posted on Facebook, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [highlighted](#).<sup>35</sup>



Adnan al-Rousan, 71, was accused of "inciting conflict, sowing division... spreading false news that harm the prestige of the state, slandering an official body and humiliating a civil servant", AFP [reported](#).<sup>36</sup>

In one Facebook post, Al-Rousan [wrote](#) Jordanians "are silent and stifled by anger, waiting for the king to reform himself and abandon festivals, films, trips and conferences and focus on the country."

He was [purportedly](#)<sup>37</sup> released on bail a month later and is again [active on Facebook](#).

Image [via](#) Facebook

- Tunisian authorities handed down a [six-month prison sentence](#)<sup>38</sup> to the blogger and civil society activist Amina Mansour in May 2022, following satirical posts on Facebook the year before. The move was a reduction on a 12 month sentence issued in absentia in 2021 The New Arab [notes](#).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup>

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2346014/social-media-accounts-of-pakistan-mission-in-algeria-hacked-fo>

<sup>35</sup>

<https://cpj.org/2022/08/jordanian-journalist-adnan-al-rousan-arrested-over-critical-columns-posted-on-facebook/>

<sup>36</sup>

<https://www.barrons.com/news/jordanian-journalist-on-trial-over-social-media-posts-lawyer-01661184307>

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220914-jordan-releases-writer-who-criticised-the-king-on-bail/>

<sup>38</sup> <https://ifex.org/tunisia-activist-amina-mansour-faces-six-month-jail-term-for-facebook-posts/>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.newarab.com/news/tunisian-blogger-sentenced-6-months-prison-over-fb-post>

She had [previously](#)<sup>40</sup> been charged back in 2018 with violating article 128 of the penal code and article 86 of the telecommunications code.

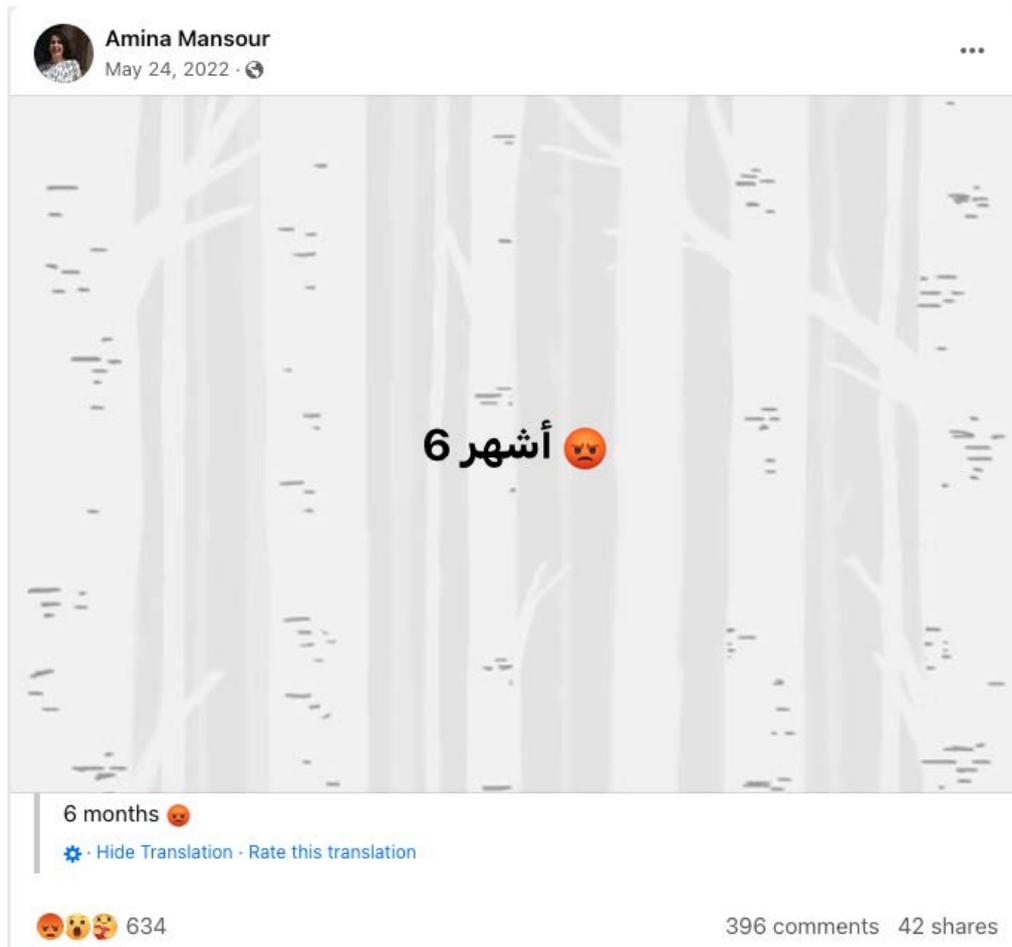


Image [via](#) Facebook

- Meanwhile, Turkey's competition authority levied fines of 346.72 million lira (\$18.63 million) on Meta platforms in October [writes](#)<sup>41</sup> Middle East Monitor. The move stemmed from a decision that the company operated in violation of the country's competition laws.
- Meta [promoted](#)<sup>42</sup> [Fares Akkad](#) to the role of regional director for the MENA region earlier in the year. Prior to this he had been the Global Director of Media Partnerships for Facebook & Instagram for Growth Markets (APAC, LATAM, MEA). As he notes<sup>43</sup> on his LinkedIn, in the role his job is “to design and lead the commercial growth of META and its portfolio of apps, services and businesses across MENA.”

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40

<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/tunisia-cracks-down-on-bloggers-for-speaking-against-the-government-24646>

41

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221027-turkiye-fines-meta-platforms-18-63m-for-violating-competition-law/>

42 <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2021541/media>

43 <https://www.linkedin.com/in/faresakkad/>

- Instagram

Turkey is now the 5th largest market for Instagram, globally, and the 4th largest in terms of reach. The visual-led platform has nearly 49 million users in the country, representing more than 7 in 10 people (71.1%) in the country aged 13+.

Nearly half (45%) of internet users aged 16-64 in the country told GlobalWebIndex (GWI) that Instagram was their favorite social network.<sup>44</sup>

In terms of sheer number of users, **Egypt is ranked 19th with 15.4m users (19.3% reach) and Iraq 20th with 14m users (46.5%).**

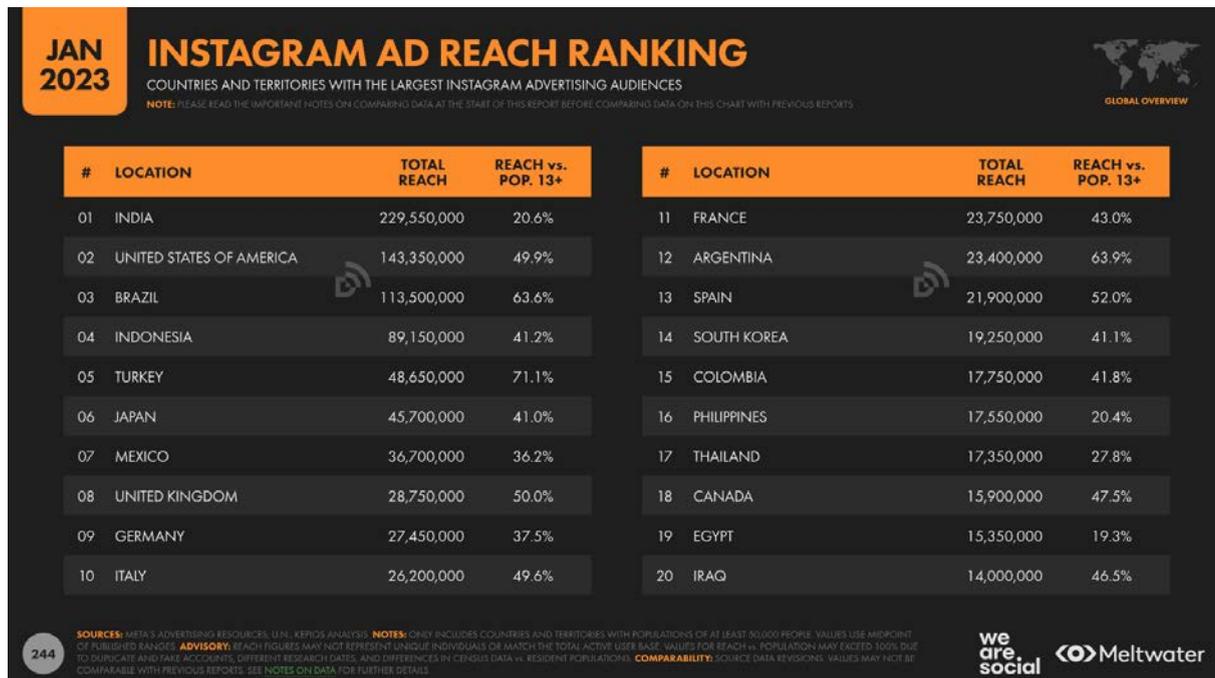


Image [via DataReportal](#)

When it comes to reach, four MENA nations can be found in the Top 20.

DataReportal [records](#)<sup>45</sup> Bahrain is ranked 3rd with 72% reach, just ahead of Turkey, while UAE is ranked 17th (60.3%) and Kuwait 20th (58%).

But user habits are changing. “Instagram will lose its No. 2 ranking in the Middle East and Africa to TikTok,” Insider Intelligence [predicted](#)<sup>46</sup> in May.

<sup>44</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/LeticiaXavier2/2022-gwi-report-social>

<sup>45</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report> (Slide 245)

<sup>46</sup> <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/insights/instagram-user-statistics-trends/>

An [Instagram post](#)<sup>47</sup> by the Argentinian footballer Lionel Messi, after his team won the 2022 World Cup in Qatar, has become the most-liked post in the history of the platform, garnering more than 75.4 million likes.

“I almost got trapped, but just got trapped in the right place,” says Getty photographer [Shaun Botterill](#) who snapped the image. “I think if most of us [photographers] are honest, you always need a bit of luck and I had a bit on Sunday night,” he [told CNN](#).<sup>48</sup>

“Qatar was Mr Botterill's eighth World Cup finals as both an editor and a photographer,” the BBC [commented](#).<sup>49</sup> “His first was in 1986 - coincidentally when Argentina last won the tournament.”

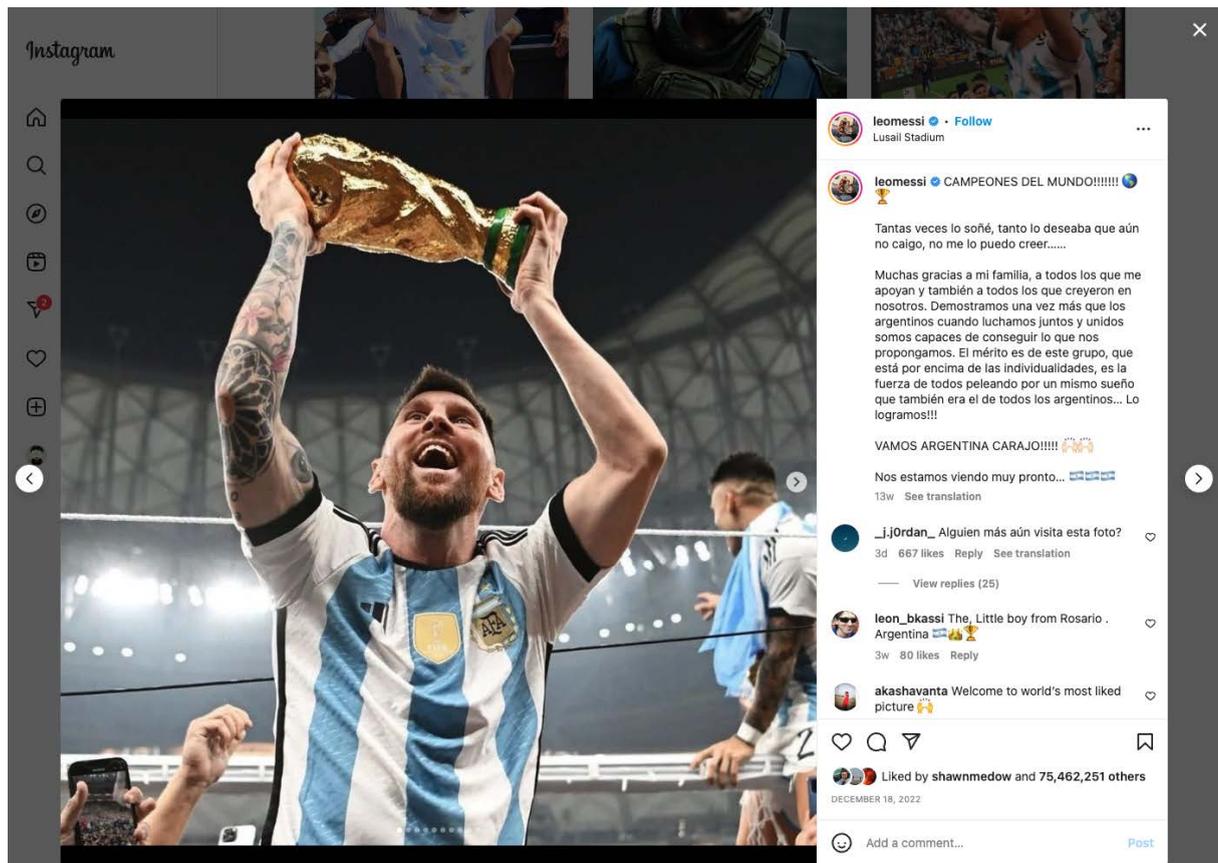


Image: Screenshot [via](#) Instagram

Alongside influencers and food porn, Instagram is also a hub for archive content too. In a September 2022 feature, GQ [spotlighted](#)<sup>50</sup> five of them: [AfrooFruits](#), [Egyptian Cassette Archive](#), [Vintage Zaman](#), [Algerian Archives](#) and [Waasta](#).

<sup>47</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/CmUv48DLvxd/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/CmUv48DLvxd/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

<sup>48</sup>

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/12/21/football/shaun-botterill-photographer-lionel-messi-instagram-most-liked-spt-intl/index.html>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-northamptonshire-64075826>

<sup>50</sup>

<https://www.gqmiddleeast.com/culture/best-instagram-accounts-archiving-middle-eastern-north-african-culture>

Later in the year, the also [explored](#)<sup>51</sup> the origins of the Instagram account, Doha Fashion Fridays, which “showcases the best of migrant worker street style.” (The Guardian [produced](#)<sup>52</sup> a feature on the same topic later that same month.)

Founder Khalid Albaih who has lived in Qatar since the 1990s explained that a key driver for the account was to find “a way that brings out the worker’s voice without victimization and showcases the individualism that they are so clearly trying to show.”

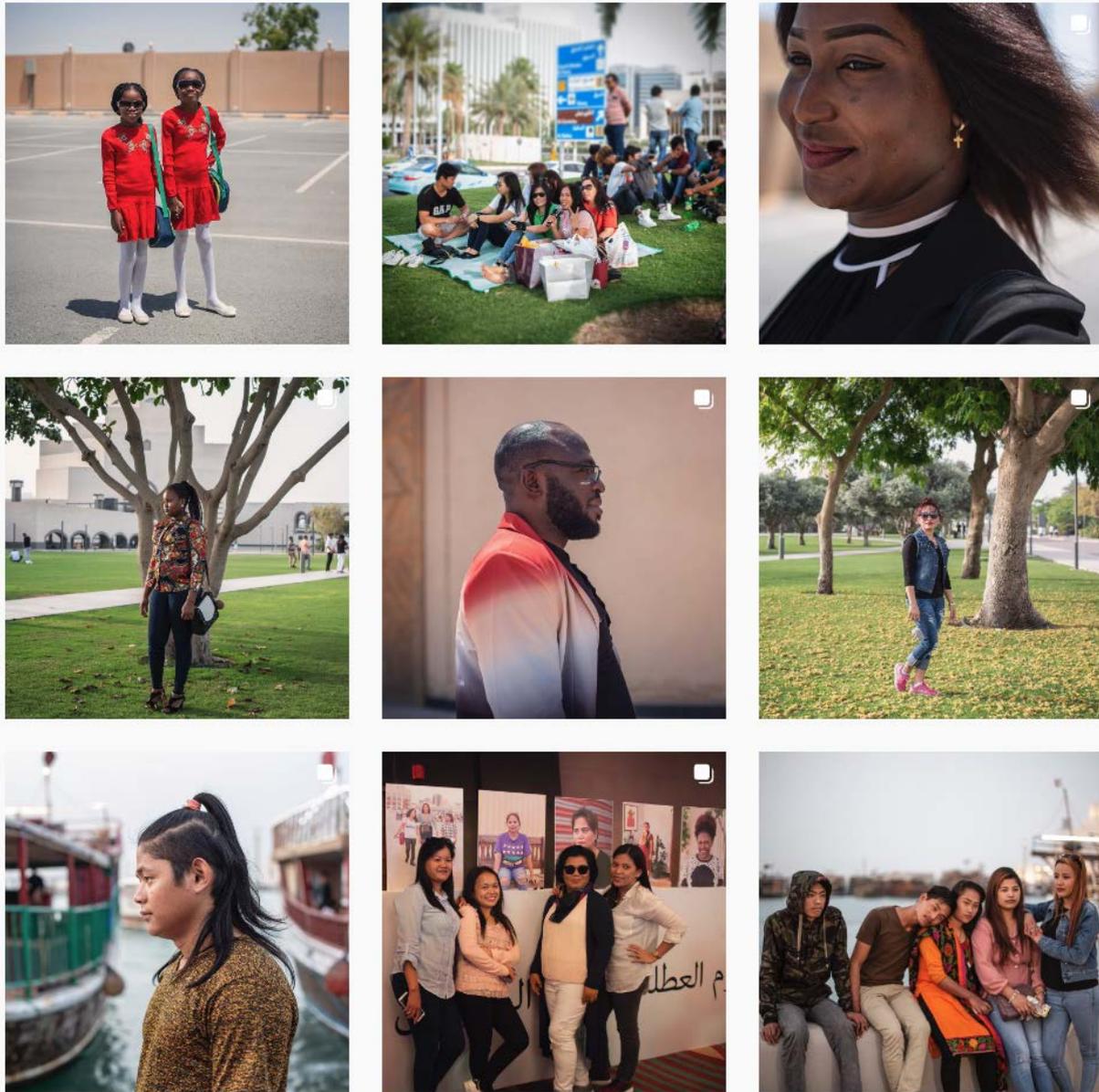


Image: Screenshot of Doha Fashion Friday’s [Instagram grid](#)

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.gqmiddleeast.com/style/doha-fashion-fridays-migrant-worker>

<sup>52</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/nov/25/doha-fashion-fridays-migrant-workers-how-off-their-style-a-photo-essay>

**A report into actions by Meta during 2021’s Gaza war shows that the company “violated the rights of Palestinian users to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, political participation and non-discrimination,” the AP [said](#).<sup>53</sup>**

The [report](#)<sup>54</sup> from the independent consulting firm Business for Social Responsibility (BSR) was commissioned by Meta, in response to criticism of how the company had handled content related to the war on Facebook and Instagram.

As The Washington Post [explained](#),<sup>55</sup> BSR’s analysis “found that the social media giant had denied Palestinian users their freedom of expression by erroneously removing their content and punishing Arabic-speaking users more heavily than Hebrew-speaking ones.”

The Intercept, which [broke the story](#)<sup>56</sup> ahead of the report’s publication pointed out that the report “absolves Meta of ‘intentional bias.’ Rather, BSR points to what it calls ‘unintentional bias,’ instances ‘where Meta policy and practice, combined with broader external dynamics, does lead to different human rights impacts on Palestinian and Arabic speaking users.’”

Meta has undertaken to implement, or consider implementing, 20 of the 21 recommendations in the study, The Intercept says.

*Other noteworthy developments, include:*

- [Eye on Palestine](#), an account with 3.2 million followers was briefly suspended in October, Middle East Eye [recorded](#).<sup>57</sup> The account highlights Israeli human rights abuses against Palestinians. It was back up and running a few hours later.

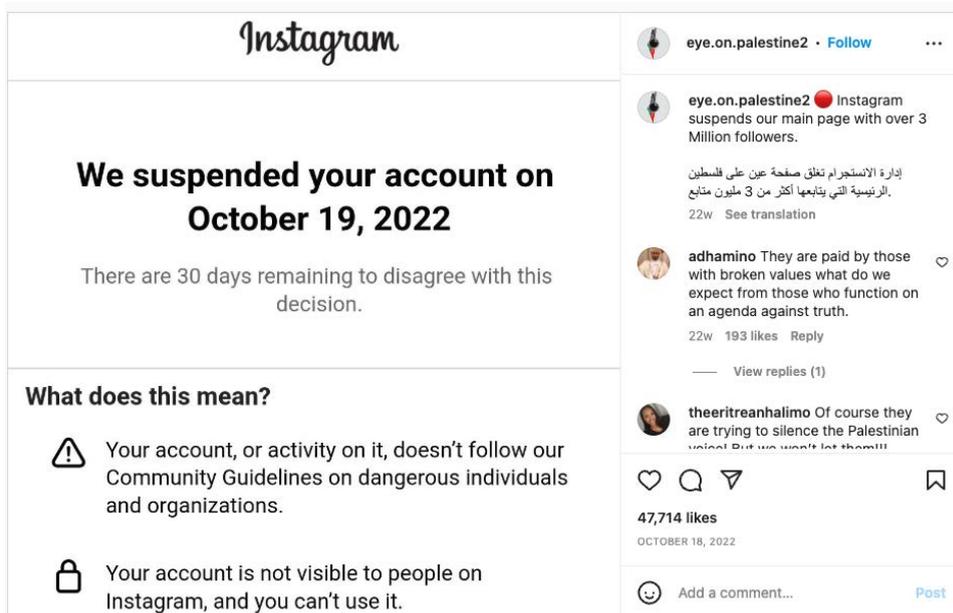


Image [via](#) Eye on Palestine’s back-up account on Instagram

<sup>53</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/technology-middle-east-israel-8587529541424ca7882bf88ba96e2799>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.bsr.org/en/reports/meta-human-rights-israel-palestine>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/09/22/facebook-censorship-palestinians/>

<sup>56</sup> <https://theintercept.com/2022/09/21/facebook-censorship-palestine-israel-algorithm/>

<sup>57</sup>

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/instagram-eye-on-palestine-suspended-not-following-guidelines>

- In partnership with Art d’Egypte, Meta released 11 AR filters “to transport visitors into the heart of the art” of the *Forever is Now II* exhibition at the Pyramids of Giza.



As the company explained, “each filter features a guide, Bastet, an animated cat inspired by the ancient Egyptian deity of the same name, who accompanies people as they explore the backstory of each art piece and its creation through immersive videos, images and illustrations — all powered by AR technology.”

Image [via Meta](#)

- Iranian intelligence officials have offered Instagram content moderators money to remove the Instagram accounts of journalists and activists, BBC News [claims](#).<sup>58</sup>
- ARTICLE 19, Access Now and the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) came together to offer [recommendations](#)<sup>59</sup> to Meta and Meta’s Oversight Board designed to ensure freedom of expression is protected for users relying on the platform in Iran. Nearly [half the population](#)<sup>60</sup> (c.44%) use Instagram, one of the few western social media platforms available in the country. That figure has dropped from nearly 90% earlier in 2022, however, data from Statcounter Global Stats suggests.
- Earlier in the year, Meta [removed a network](#)<sup>61</sup> of more than fake accounts targeting Instagram users in Scotland with content supporting Scottish independence. The accounts originated in Iran; part of ongoing statecraft concerned with platform manipulation. About 77,000 accounts followed one or more of these Instagram accounts, Meta [revealed](#).<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-61516126>

<sup>59</sup> <https://ifex.org/iran-meta-must-overhaul-persian-language-content-moderation-on-instagram/>

<sup>60</sup> <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/iran>

<sup>61</sup>

<https://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/tech/meta-removes-iran-based-fake-social-media-accounts-targeting-scots-and-indy-3537554>

<sup>62</sup>

<https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/December-2021-Coordinated-Inauthentic-Behavior-Report-2.pdf>

### 3. Messaging apps

Here we explore take-up and developments related to popular messaging applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, Telegram, Yalla and Clubhouse.

#### - WhatsApp

With more than 2 billion users, WhatsApp is the most popular messaging app in the world, and the third most popular social network (after Facebook, 3bn and YouTube 2.6 bn users).

- **WhatsApp is the most popular social network among internet users aged 16-64 in Israel, Saudi Arabia and UAE**, data from GlobalWebIndex (GWI) reveals. Their 2022 Social Media Report<sup>63</sup> found that 51% of those sampled in Israel, 20% in Saudi Arabia and 30% in UAE, identified WhatsApp as their favorite messaging service.
- Research by the Saudi Center for Public Opinion Polling, during February 2022, [reinforced](#)<sup>64</sup> other findings related to the popularity of WhatsApp in the Kingdom. Results indicated that **92% of Saudis use WhatsApp**, some way ahead of YouTube (79%), Snapchat (77%) and Twitter (61%).

**WhatsApp was also the most preferred application (indicated by 32% of respondents)**, although this result skews older, with younger consumers preferring TikTok and Snapchat.

- In **UAE**, WhatsApp is [used](#)<sup>65</sup> by more than eight in ten (80.2%) of the population, some way ahead of Facebook Messenger (64%).
- In **Turkey**, the average WhatsApp user [spends 11.9 hours a month](#)<sup>66</sup> using the app. That might seem like a lot, but it's actually some way behind the global average of 17.3 hours.

**WhatsApp is the most popular platform among Arab Youth.** The 14th annual Arab Youth survey, which features findings from 3,400 Arab men and women aged 18-24, [revealed](#)<sup>67</sup> that more than 8 in 10 said they used the messaging app daily, some way ahead of Facebook (72%), Instagram (61%) and YouTube (53%).

Reflecting on these wider social networking habits, the authors comment that “Arab youth are hooked on social media more than ever.” Given the breadth of services available to them, “76% find it hard to disconnect from social media,” they noted, adding that this rises to “83% in the GCC.”

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<sup>63</sup> <https://www.slideshare.net/LeticiaXavier2/2022-gwi-report-social>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2054631/media>

<sup>65</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1276849/uae-share-of-messenger-app-users-by-app/>

<sup>66</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report> (Slide 308)

<sup>67</sup> <https://arabyouthsurvey.com/en/whitepaper/> (NB: you need to download the paper and this URL remains the same for each annual study)

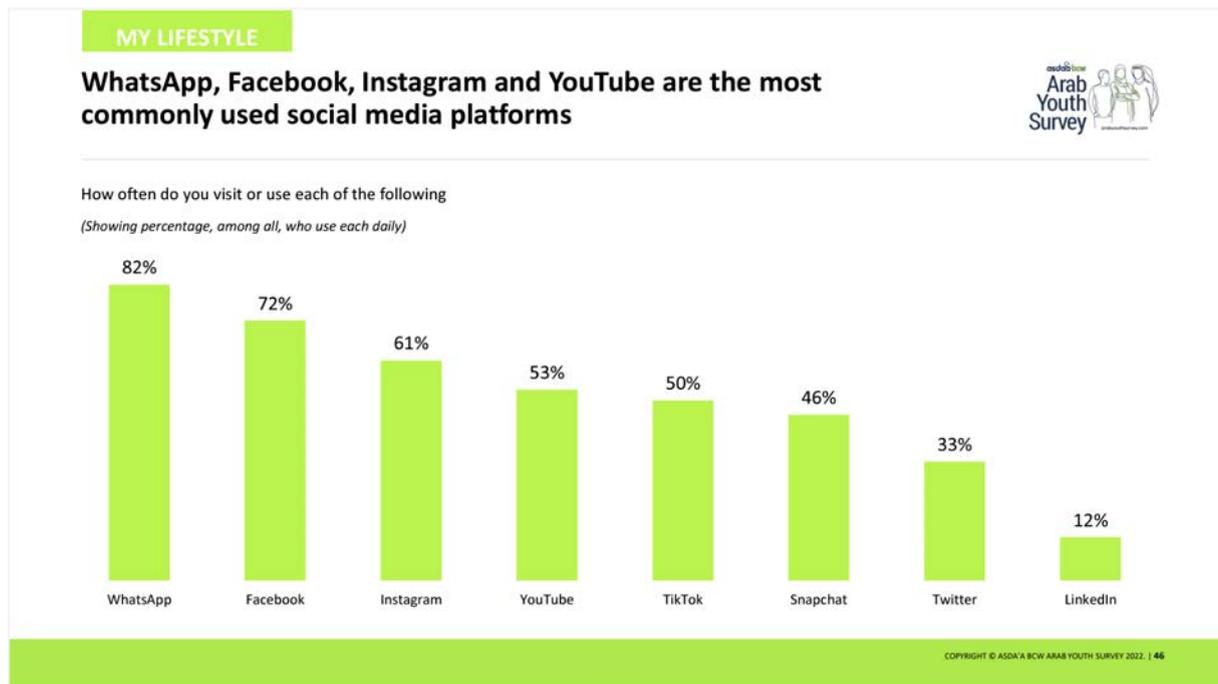


Image [via](#) Arab Youth Survey 2022

**Prism Digital**, a digital marketing agency in the UAE launched an AI-Driven WhatsApp Chatbot Service designed to support the Hotel Industry in MENA.

WhatsApp Chatbot enables customers to search for, and book rooms directly, through the app. The chatbot can be programmed to communicate in over 50 languages, they state in a [press release](#),<sup>68</sup> and is fully automated to deal with [15,000 potential instructions](#).



The [CIO website](#) [comments](#)<sup>69</sup> that “the development and adoption of Arabic chatbots are picking up speed.” Deployment of chatbots in the Middle East has been slower than in some regions due to nuances and complexity of the Arabic language, but “technological advances in the field of machine learning have introduced a bevy of new automated chat services that use natural language processing (NLP) to engage customers in organic conversations in local dialects like Egyptian, Emirati, and Saudi Arabic.”

Image [via](#) CampaignME

<sup>68</sup>

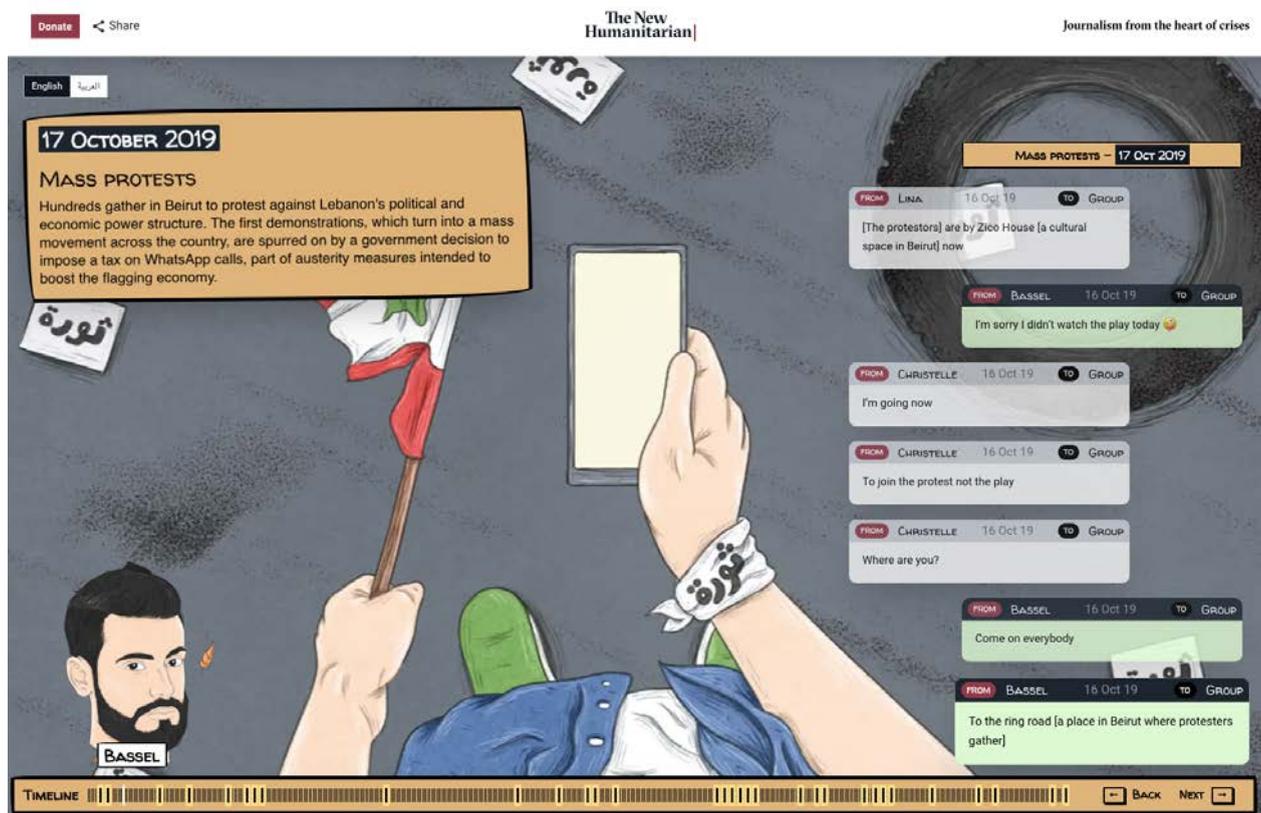
<https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/companies-news/prism-digital-introduces-whatsapp-auto-chatbot-service-for-the-hotel-industry-hw1tcdyl>

<sup>69</sup> <https://www.cio.com/article/307232/arabic-chatbots-make-inroads-in-the-middle-east.html>

In a detailed interactive, [The New Humanitarian](#)'s illustrated Lebanon's collapse - with 80% of the population thrown into poverty in recent years - through the conversations of five people using WhatsApp. *WhatsApp, Lebanon?* sought to get people to share their exchanges and experiences behind the headlines, as reflected in their WhatsApp messages.

WhatsApp messages [are] an excellent – and untapped – reporting tool,” The New Humanitarian [observed](#)<sup>70</sup>.

”Such conversations are a way into moments journalists just don’t see or hear. But asking people to share their exchanges had its challenges, too... [including the risk of traumatizing participants by asking them to review years of WhatsApp messages; and how they came to question the traditional relationship between journalists and their sources.”



Screenshot [via](#) The New Humanitarian

Given the financial challenges faced by many people in Lebanon, getting access to hard currency can be difficult, reports [Abby Sewell](#), in a [feature](#)<sup>71</sup> for Rest of the World. As a result, “many people turn to black market money changers operating on WhatsApp,” she explains.

In the story she profiles Mohamad, a former chef turned freelance currency exchanger, who she notes “begins each day by scrolling through some of the 100 or so groups that have popped up on WhatsApp and other platforms that are dedicated to buying and selling U.S. dollars in Lebanon.”

<sup>70</sup> <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/2022/07/28/whatsapp-lebanon-go-behind-scenes>

<sup>71</sup> <https://restofworld.org/2022/how-to-buy-dollars-in-beirut/>

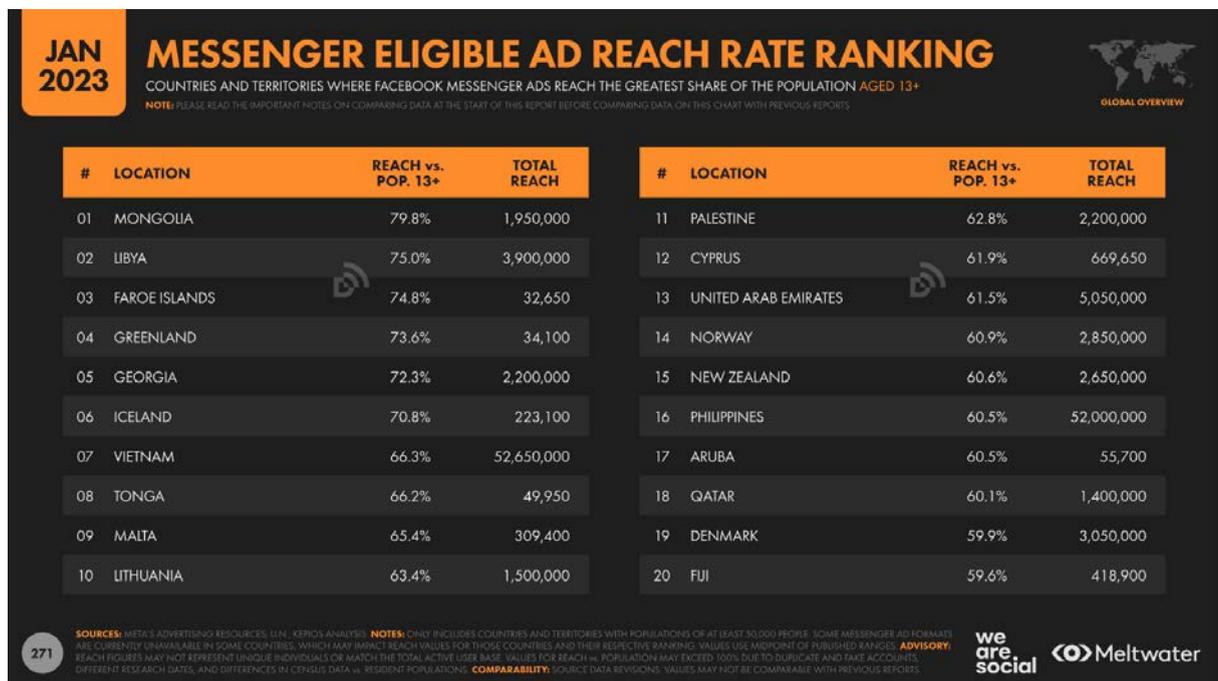
## - Facebook Messenger

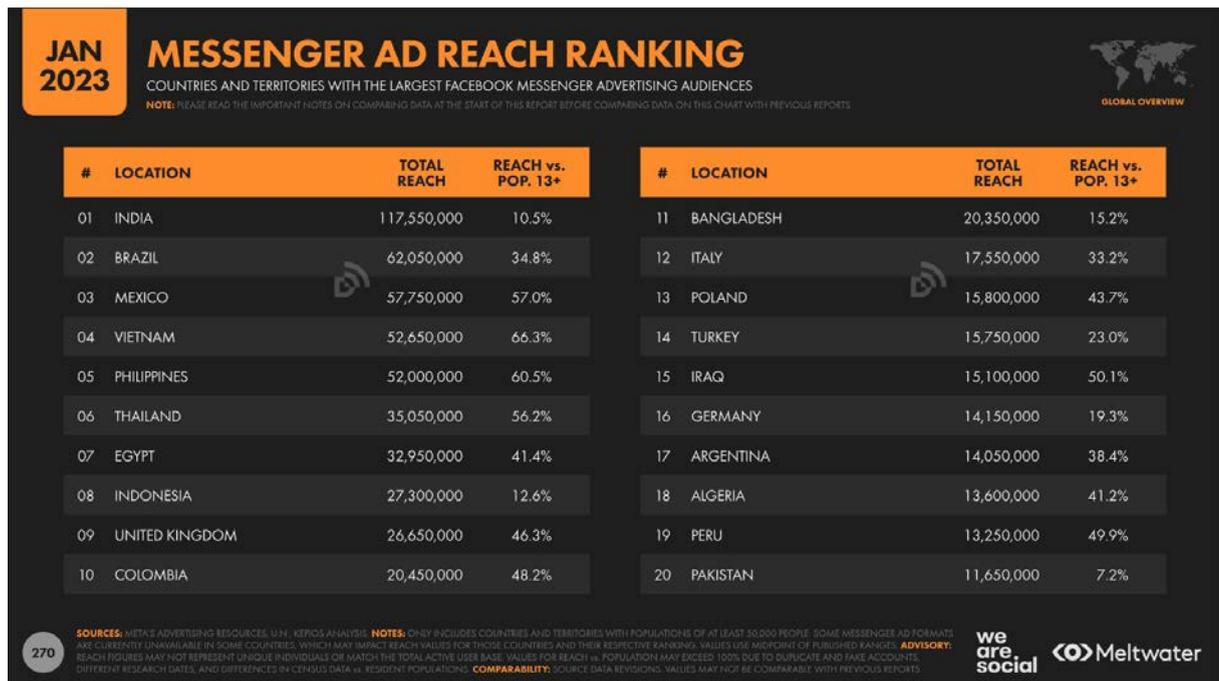
Globally, nearly 1 billion people are using Facebook Messenger and it's a major platform in multiple MENA nations. **In terms of reach, four MENA nations are found in the Top 20 for the app worldwide.**

- In **Libya three-quarters of those aged 13+ (75%) use the app**, the second highest reach globally for the service.
- Nearly **two-third of Palestinians (62.8%) use the service**, as well as **61.5% of people in UAE and 60.1% in Qatar**. This reach means three nations are ranked 11th, 13th and 18th, respectively.

Meanwhile, **four MENA nations can also be found in the Top 20 for the app worldwide, based on the largest national markets.**

- **Egypt is home to nearly 33m users of the service, akin to 41.4% of the population aged 13+**. This makes it the seventh biggest market for the app.
- **This is followed by Turkey (14th with 15.8m users), Iraq (15th, 15.1m users) and Algeria (18th, 13.6m users).**





Images [via](#) DataReportal

Meta introduced custom camera stickers for Messenger to be used in Ramadan. Social networks have often developed stickers and other special materials for the Holy Month. The company also provided users with Ramadan Avatar Stickers on Facebook and Instagram.

## Messenger camera stickers



Image [via](#) Meta

## - Telegram

Dubai-based Telegram now has [700 million](#)<sup>72</sup> monthly active users. In June it [announced](#)<sup>73</sup> the launch of a paid-for premium service offering a range of benefits from increased storage to no ads, premium stickers and faster downloads.

The service has long been popular in Iran. [According](#)<sup>74</sup> to [IFP News](#) (Iran Front Page) an English-language publication based in Tehran, “Telegram posts and messages had 1.2 billion visits over the one month period before September 6 and that figure has surged to 2.8 billion in the one month period after the date.”

They also note that despite the service being very popular in the Republic, “Telegram has been blocked for at least the past four years in Iran and is only accessible with VPNs.”

VPN rates soared in Iran, as users sought to use services [blocked by the authorities](#)<sup>75</sup> in response to rallies triggered by the death of 22 year-old Mahsa Amini. VPN downloads soared more than 3,000% in the country, part of a global trend [highlighted](#)<sup>76</sup> by [TechRadar](#).

Image [via](#) Statista



RadioFreeEurope [described](#)<sup>77</sup> how Iranian authorities had blocked two-step verification codes from social media applications, noting that “text messages containing login codes for the applications for Telegram, Twitter, and WhatsApp were filtered by cell phone operators in Iran and could not be received.”

“This means that if a user in Iran is logged out of the application, it is not possible to log back into the account again,” they explained.

<sup>72</sup> <https://datareportal.com/social-media-users>

<sup>73</sup> <https://telegram.org/blog/700-million-and-premium>

<sup>74</sup> <https://ifpnews.com/telegram-app-doubled-iran-protests-riots/>

<sup>75</sup>

<https://www.techradar.com/news/iranian-authorities-restricts-instagram-as-last-effort-to-silence-protesters>

<sup>76</sup> <https://www.techradar.com/news/vpn-use-soars-in-worldwide-period-of-unrest-and-warfare>

<sup>77</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-two-factor-verification-codes-blocked/31994626.html>

Outside Iran, social media posts - many originating on Telegram and Instagram - were a [key way](#)<sup>78</sup> for audiences around the world to keep up to date with the protests happening in the country.

It's also been a key way for Iranian youth to "see the misfortunes of their country in real time, be it through nationwide or localized protests, violent crackdowns viewed on Instagram accounts like [@1500tasvir](#), or the disparity of wealth between themselves and regime elites through viral posts and accounts like [@therichkidsoftehran](#)," [writes](#)<sup>79</sup> Holly Dages, an Iranian American, in [Foreign Policy](#).



**Masih Alinejad** |   
@AlinejadMasih



Women of Iran-Saghez removed their headscarves in protest against the murder of Mahsa Amini 22 Yr old woman by hijab police and chanting:

death to dictator!

Removing hijab is a punishable crime in Iran. We call on women and men around the world to show solidarity.

[#مهسا\\_امینی](#)



6:50 AM · Sep 17, 2022

**38K** Retweets   **3,151** Quotes   **122.4K** Likes   **1,091** Bookmarks

Image [via](#) Twitter

<sup>78</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/iranians-use-social-media-to-keep-protest-movement-alive/a-63767075>

<sup>79</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/11/01/iran-protests-gen-z-mahsa-amini-social-media/>

The Iranian government has begun using Telegram to "identify and harm" protesters activists. Middle East Eye [reported](#)<sup>80</sup> that "the Telegram channel called Setade114, which has been linked to the Iranian government, has garnered almost 20,000 subscribers, in what activists are calling a "snitch line."



Image [via](#) Twitter

Other noteworthy developments, include:

- In response to protests, Iran [restricted access](#)<sup>81</sup> to a range of social media and messaging platforms, including Instagram and WhatsApp. On Twitter, Meta took the unusual step of [publicly stating](#)<sup>82</sup> that it would “do anything” within its technical capacity to keep the service accessible.

The screenshot shows a Twitter thread. At the top, there is a back arrow and the word "Thread". The main tweet is from WhatsApp (@WhatsApp) with a verified badge, posted on Sep 22, 2022, at 8:48 AM. The text of the tweet reads: "We exist to connect the world privately. We stand with the rights of people to access private messaging. We are not blocking Iranian numbers. We are working to keep our Iranian friends connected and will do anything within our technical capacity to keep our service up and running". Below the tweet, it shows 851 Retweets, 377 Quotes, 5,458 Likes, and 45 Bookmarks. There are icons for replying, retweeting, liking, bookmarking, and sharing. Below this, there are two replies from WhatsApp. The first reply is in Persian: "هدف اصلی ما فراهم نمودن امکان ارتباط محرمانه در همه جای دنیا است. ما باور داریم که دسترسی به شیوه های ارتباطی خصوصی و محرمانه حق همه مردم است. ما تلفن های مرتبط به ایران را مسدود نکرده ایم". It has 1,231 replies, 774 retweets, and 2,597 likes. The second reply is also in Persian: "ما در تلاشیم که دوستان ایرانی ما بتوانند با هم در ارتباط بمانند و در حد امکانات خود از هیچ کاری دریغ نمیکنیم تا سرویس های ارتباطی ما به طور مستمر فعال بمانند." It has 713 replies, 319 retweets, and 1,801 likes.

<sup>81</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-restricts-access-instagram-netblocks-2022-09-21/>

<sup>82</sup> <https://twitter.com/WhatsApp/status/1572976018771656706?s=20>

- Signal, an encrypted messaging app blocked in Iran back in 2021, [compiled a short user guide](#)<sup>83</sup> so Iranians can use proxies to bypass censorship and access the app.



Sarah A | ساره ✓  
@sa0un



Don't forget: you can help folks in [#Iran](#) connect to [@signalapp](#) by running a proxy server. It's easy to set up, and detailed instructions are provided.  
[#IRanASignalProxy](#)



signal.org

Help people in Iran reconnect to Signal – a request to our community  
Signal is currently blocked in Iran. To help people in the country access Signal, we are republishing and revising a post that we originally posted in February, ...

10:46 AM · Oct 10, 2022

45 Retweets 1 Quote 66 Likes

*Image [via](#) Twitter*

- **Saifi Ismail, the Group President of Yalla, was included in Arabian Business' list of the [Middle East's 50 Most Inspiring Business Leaders](#).**<sup>84</sup> He joined the voice-centric social networking and entertainment and the UAE's first unicorn technology company to list in the New York Stock Exchange, in 2019.

Social media influencer and businesswoman **Huda Kattan** also featured in the list. Her company, Huda Beauty, sells more than \$200 in sales from 140 product lines.

Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Al Saud, a prominent investor in social media, and Sultan Al Jaber, UAE's Minister of Industry and Advanced Technology, also made the list.

<sup>83</sup> <https://www.signal.org/blog/run-a-proxy/>

<sup>84</sup> <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/powerlists/2022-most-inspiring-business-leaders>



Yalla’s revenues hit AED 1.1 billion, (\$303.6 million) in 2022, an [increase](#)<sup>85</sup> of 11.2% compared to AED 1.0 billion in 2021.

Monthly active users (MAUs) were up 14% to 32 million during Q4 2022, up from 28.1 million in Q4 2021.

Image [via](#) Asian Business Review

- [Baaz](#), which aims “to be the largest gathering of Arab communities on cyberspace (the Internet), the widest in the Arab world, and the most used by all Arabs and Arabic speakers,” [launched in Egypt](#),<sup>86</sup> the region’s most populous country last year. It’s been [downloaded](#)<sup>87</sup> more than 5 million times, according to the Google Play Store; and had 3 million users at the time of its rollout in Egypt.

Advantages

— ?What does Baz offer

**Live broadcast**

Interact with your community moment by moment



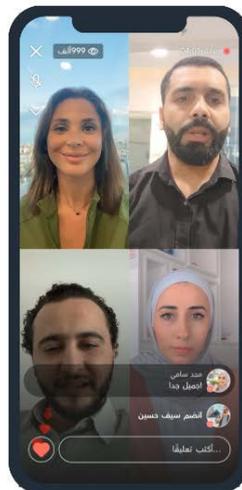
**Video and audio calls**

Easily communicate with your loved ones



**Buzz Studio**

Share your moments and interact with your friends



**Arab societies**

Follow communities that share your interest



**hashtags**

Follow all new



**acoustic rooms**

Discuss everything that interests you with your communities

Image: Screenshot [from](#) the Baaz website. (NB: browser translated text Arabic to English)

85

<https://menafn.com/1105797888/Yalla-Group-Reports-Record-Revenues-Of-AED-11-Billion-In-2022-Mid-EastInfo>

86

<https://www.dailynewsegypt.com/2022/09/15/first-arab-social-media-platform-baaz-launches-in-egypt/>

87 [https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.baaz.baazapp&hl=en\\_US&gl=US](https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.baaz.baazapp&hl=en_US&gl=US)

## 4. Snapchat

Snapchat's community in the MENA region continues to grow and the Middle East remains a major market for the app.

- There are now more than 75 million unique Snapchatters in the Middle East, with numbers growing 33% year over year.<sup>88</sup>

In terms of major markets for the app some of the biggest are in MENA.

- Five of the Top 20 markets - by total audience size - are in MENA. Three of these are in the Top 10, with one just outside (Turkey at No 11).
- Saudi Arabia ranks highest (6th) with 21.2 million users, followed by Iraq (9th) at 16.1m, Egypt (10th) has 15.4m users, Turkey (11th) 14.8m Snap users and Algeria (18th) enjoys 6.95 million users, according to [data shared](#)<sup>89</sup> by DataReportal.

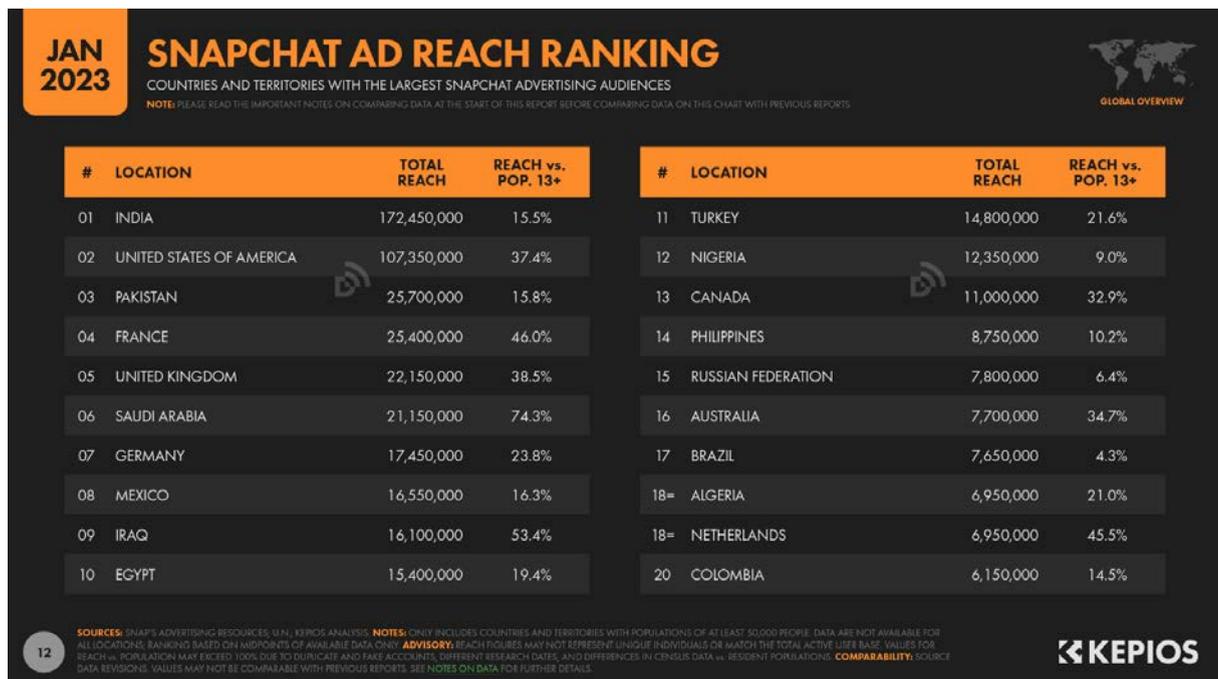


Image [via](#) Digital 2023 Snapchat Platform Report Q1 2023 v01, by DataReportal

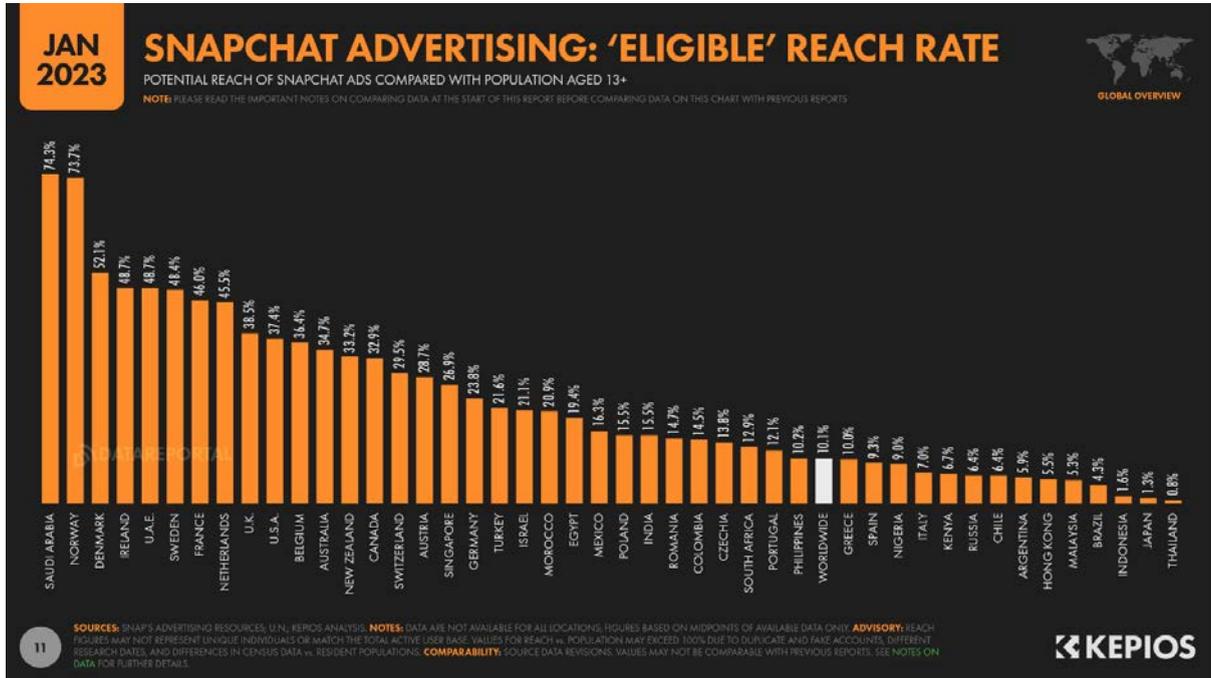
When we look at reach, nine of the Top 20 nations in the world are in MENA. In fact, it's actually nine of the top 16! Six of the countries featured in the Top 10 can be found in the Middle East, underscoring the importance of the Middle East region for the app.

- Bahrain leads the world, with 79.8% of those aged over 13 on the app.

<sup>88</sup> <https://www.arabonline.com/en/details/news-in-brief/MBC-GROUP-programs-will-air-on-Snapchat>

<sup>89</sup> <https://indd.adobe.com/view/f399453c-c3af-4f49-88bc-a355a3adfb1c?allowFullscreen=true&wmode=opaque>

- Other MENA nations in this list are: **Saudi Arabia** (3rd with 74.3% of those aged 13+), **Kuwait** (5th, 60.8%), **Iraq** (6th, 53.4%), **Oman** (8th, 50%), **UAE** (10th, 48.7%), **Palestine** (12th, 47.1%), **Qatar** (15th, 41.8%) and **Jordan** 16th (39.6%).



**JAN 2023** **SNAPCHAT ELIGIBLE AD REACH RATE RANKING**  
 COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES WHERE SNAPCHAT ADS REACH THE GREATEST SHARE OF THE POPULATION AGED 13+  
 NOTE: PLEASE READ THE IMPORTANT NOTES ON COMPARING DATA AT THE START OF THIS REPORT BEFORE COMPARING DATA ON THIS CHART WITH PREVIOUS REPORTS

#	LOCATION	REACH vs. POP. 13+	TOTAL REACH	#	LOCATION	REACH vs. POP. 13+	TOTAL REACH
01	BAHRAIN	79.8%	975,000	11	SWEDEN	48.4%	4,350,000
02	LUXEMBOURG	76.0%	427,500	12	PALESTINE	47.1%	1,650,000
03	SAUDI ARABIA	74.3%	21,150,000	13	FRANCE	46.0%	25,400,000
04	NORWAY	73.7%	3,450,000	14	NETHERLANDS	45.5%	6,950,000
05	KUWAIT	60.8%	2,150,000	15	QATAR	41.8%	975,000
06	IRAQ	53.4%	16,100,000	16	JORDAN	39.6%	3,250,000
07	DENMARK	52.1%	2,650,000	17	UNITED KINGDOM	38.5%	22,150,000
08	OMAN	50.0%	1,750,000	18	FINLAND	38.3%	1,850,000
09	IRELAND	48.7%	2,050,000	19	UNITED STATES OF AMERICA	37.4%	107,350,000
10	UNITED ARAB EMIRATES	48.7%	4,000,000	20	BELGIUM	36.4%	3,650,000

**SOURCES:** SNAP'S ADVERTISING RESOURCES; U.N.; KEPIOS ANALYSIS. **NOTES:** ONLY INCLUDES COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES WITH POPULATIONS OF AT LEAST 50,000 PEOPLE. DATA ARE NOT AVAILABLE FOR ALL LOCATIONS; RANKING BASED ON MIDPOINTS OF AVAILABLE DATA ONLY. **ADVISORY:** REACH FIGURES MAY NOT REPRESENT UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS OR MATCH THE TOTAL ACTIVE USER BASE. VALUES FOR REACH vs. POPULATION MAY EXCEED 100% DUE TO DUPLICATE AND FAKE ACCOUNTS, DIFFERENT RESEARCH DATES, AND DIFFERENCES IN CENSUS DATA vs. RESIDENT POPULATIONS. **COMPARABILITY:** SOURCE DATA REVISIONS; VALUES MAY NOT BE COMPARABLE WITH PREVIOUS REPORTS. SEE NOTES ON DATA FOR FURTHER DETAILS.

Images [via](#) Digital 2023 Snapchat Platform Report Q1 2023 v01, by DataReportal

In August, Snap [signed](#)<sup>90</sup> a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with Qatar’s Government Communications Office (GCO) to open a new office in Doha, as part of its efforts to expand its footprint in the MENA region. They [opened an office in Dubai](#)<sup>91</sup>, their first in the region, back in 2017. They also have offices in Tel Aviv and Riyadh.

In December, it was announced that **Snap is moving to the Jax cultural district in Diriyah as the home for its latest Saudi base, which includes a content creator studio** (the latter of which was [revealed](#)<sup>92</sup> in 2021).

“Jax district is considered the Kingdom’s trendiest creative hub boasting galleries, studios, and capabilities that incubate art and artists alike while inspiring the nation’s cultural movement,” [Saudi Gazette noted](#).<sup>93</sup>

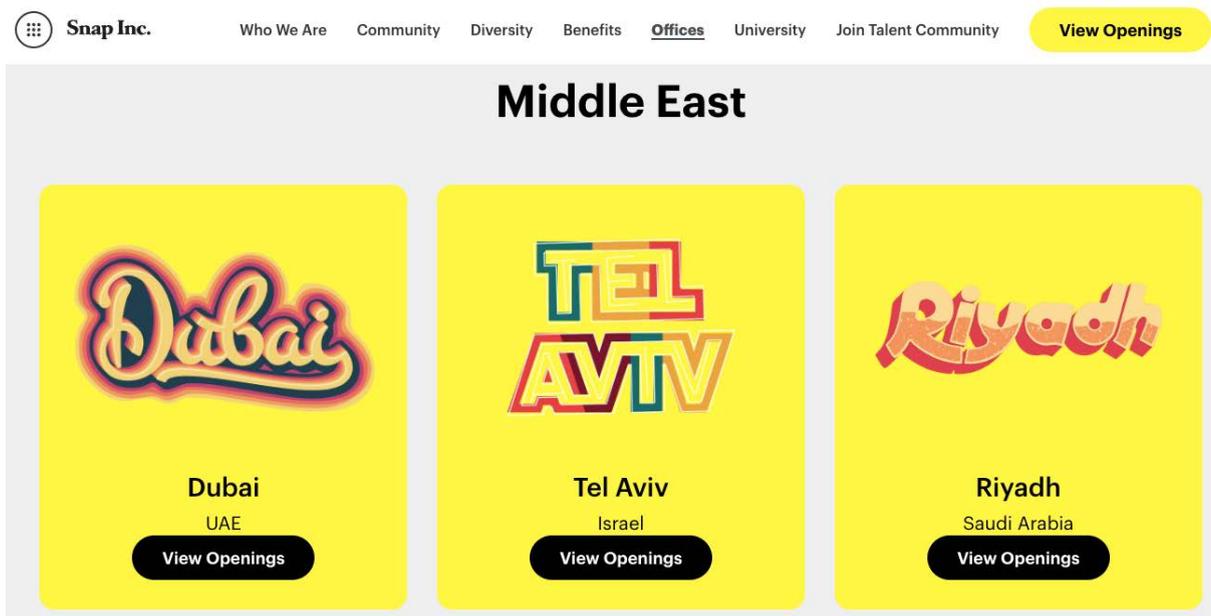


Image [via](#) Snap

Nearly 90% of our daily users in Saudi Arabia use lenses every single day; and in the UAE and KSA brand-integration with an AR experience leads to a 94% higher conversion rates, Sophia Dominguez, Head of AR Platform Partnerships at Snap Inc, [told](#)<sup>94</sup> [Digital Studio](#) last summer.

90

<https://www.zawya.com/en/business/technology-and-telecom/snap-plans-mena-expansion-with-new-office-in-qatar-yb5rn970>

91

<https://www.digitalstudiome.com/production/content-business/article-10708-snapchat-opens-office-in-dubai>

92

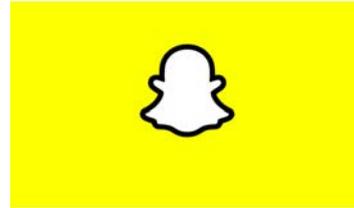
<https://campaignme.com/snap-inc-will-launch-creator-studio-in-riyadh-to-empower-local-creative-community/>

93 <https://saudigazette.com.sa/article/628265>

94 <https://www.digitalstudiome.com/technology/the-genius-of-snapchat>

MBC has partnered with Snap to bring more of its content to users in the region. The move enables<sup>95</sup> Snapchatters across the region enjoy access to popular MBC shows, daily news content from *Al Arabiya*, as well as exclusive and behind-the-scenes content from across the group.

Image [via ArabAd](#)



“Last year, MBC Group recorded 4.2 billion views on Snapchat during Ramadan, marking a 392% increase compared to the previous Ramadan,” Arab News [reported](#).<sup>96</sup>

During Ramadan 2021, Snapchatters in the KSA viewed AR Lenses over 90 billion times, 2021 data released in early 202 [revealed](#).<sup>97</sup>

In keeping with the emphasis that the platform has demonstrated over the past few years, **Snapchat has partnered with broadcasters, digital publishers and creators across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region to bring 70 shows to its Discover platform during Ramadan.**



Image [via Arab News](#)

<sup>95</sup> <https://www.arabonline.com/en/details/news-in-brief/MBC-GROUP-programs-will-air-on-Snapchat>

<sup>96</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2056836/media>

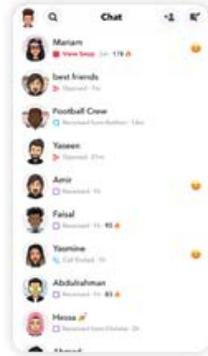
<sup>97</sup>

<https://communicateonline.me/category/industry-insights/post-details/saudis-snapchat-community-hits-20-million-milestone#:~:text=Concepts%20that%20many%20consider%20futuristic.billion%20snaps%20to%20their%20stories.>

## Snapchat is the one place for everything that matters this Ramadan.



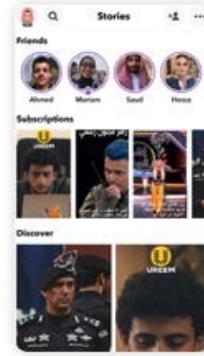
Check what your friends are up to



Chat with people who matter the most



Seek new experiences



Consume tailor-made Ramadan Content



Be part of the trend this Ramadan

**+82%**

During Ramadan 2021, Snap Map opens in MENA increased 82% YoY.<sup>9</sup>

**90B**

During Ramadan 2021, Snapchatters in the KSA viewed AR Lenses over 90 billion times.<sup>9</sup>

**1.03B**

During Ramadan 2021, Snapchatters posted more than one billion Snaps to their Stories.<sup>10</sup>

**+33%**

Snapchatters spent an increase of 33% more time enjoying Ramadan shows compared to the year prior.<sup>11</sup>

Image: Screenshot of data from Snapchat's "[Your Ramadan 2022 Guide](#)" via Snap.

During Ramadan 2022, Snap [introduced](#)<sup>98</sup> Snap Ramadan Mall, the first-ever, AR-powered virtual mall in the MENA region. Accessed via a Snapchat World Lens through the platform's outward-facing camera, the virtual mall featured popular consumer brands in MENA, such as L'Oreal, AL Futtaim- IKEA, Namshi and Samsung.

Jake Thomas, Head of UAE at Snap Inc. said, "Snapchatters in the region are seeking inspiration for their shopping experience this Ramadan. Today, shoppers want an experience that is more than just transactional. While they expect the convenience and efficiency of online shopping, they also want a true-to-life, in-store experience. AR caters to this need when accessed through universally available and always-on mobile devices - a game-changer for both retailers and shoppers.

Our virtual mall is the perfect platform for this, bridging the gap between the digital and physical world and offering consumers and brands the opportunity to explore the potential of digital commerce. Catering to consumers' needs during Ramadan, Snapchatters can browse from beauty and apparel, home and design and electronics brands at any time, wherever they happen to be. We are confident that Snapchatters will enjoy this unique offering and explore some of the leading brands we have on board."

98

<https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/companies-news/snap-introduces-snap-ramadan-mall-the-first-ever-ar-powered-virtual-mall-in-the-mena-region-oxf8pw83>



Image via Zawya

“Snapchat’s monthly addressable reach in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has reached 20 million. Today, Snapchat is one of the most popular platforms in Saudi Arabia, reaching 90% of 13-34 year-olds,” Communicate [reported](#) in March 2022.<sup>99</sup>



Image via Snap

Snapchat has proven popular not only with younger audiences in the Kingdom but also with parents. A 2021 study conducted by Kantar and Snap, [discovered](#)<sup>100</sup> that 71% of parents in Saudi Arabia are on the app.

KSA was among the first Arab countries to [launch](#)<sup>101</sup> Snap’s new [Family Center service](#).<sup>102</sup> Their app tool enables parents to see their friends list on Snapchat and who they have been communicating with, without revealing the substance of those conversations.

99

<https://communicateonline.me/category/industry-insights/post-details/saudis-snapchat-community-hits-20-million-milestone>

<sup>100</sup> <https://forbusiness.snapchat.com/blog/understanding-snapchat-parents-in-ksa>

<sup>101</sup>

<https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/companies-news/snap-inc-launches-family-center-in-saudi-arabia-hm08lr2x>

<sup>102</sup> <https://values.snap.com/news/introducing-family-center-on-snapchat>

## 5. YouTube and Online Video

YouTube is now the second most popular social network in the world, with more than 2.5 billion users. In the MENA region it's a powerhouse, especially in the Gulf region.

The impact of YouTube in the Middle East can be seen by the fact that the Top 5 countries in the world for reach are all in the region. More widely, eight of the Top 13 spots are allocated to MENA nations.

Charts for YouTube's reach, by nation, are topped by Lebanon, Bahrain, Oman, Qatar and the UAE. Kuwait (10th), Israel (11th) and Saudi Arabia (13th) also [rank highly](#),<sup>103</sup> with the platform being used by more than 9 in 10 adults in those countries.

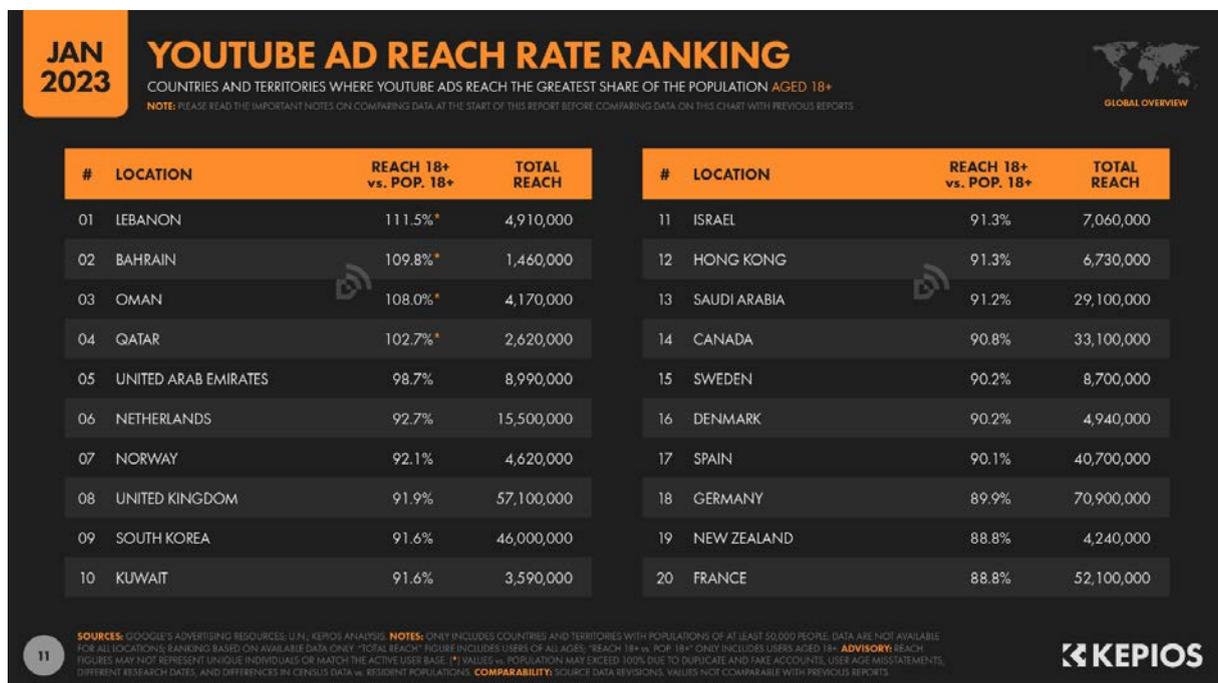


Image from Digital 2023 YouTube Platform Report Q1 2023 v01, [via DataReportal](#)

NB: Reach figures may not represent unique individuals or match the active user base. (\*) values vs. population may exceed 100% due to duplicate and fake accounts, user age misstatements, different research dates, and differences in census data vs. resident populations. comparability:

In terms of the **biggest numeric markets for YouTube around the world**, MENA's two most populous nations feature in the Top 20. Turkey is ranked 10th with 57.9m users (and 74% reach), while Egypt is ranked 15th with 45.9 million users (and 50.7% reach).

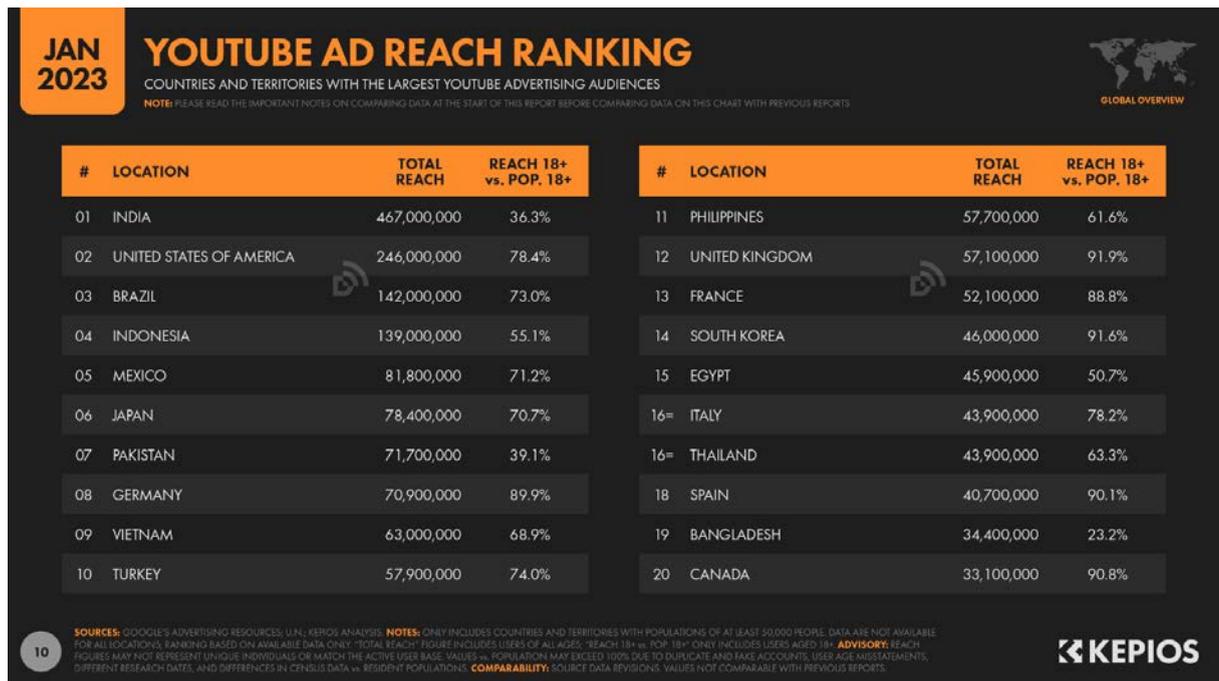
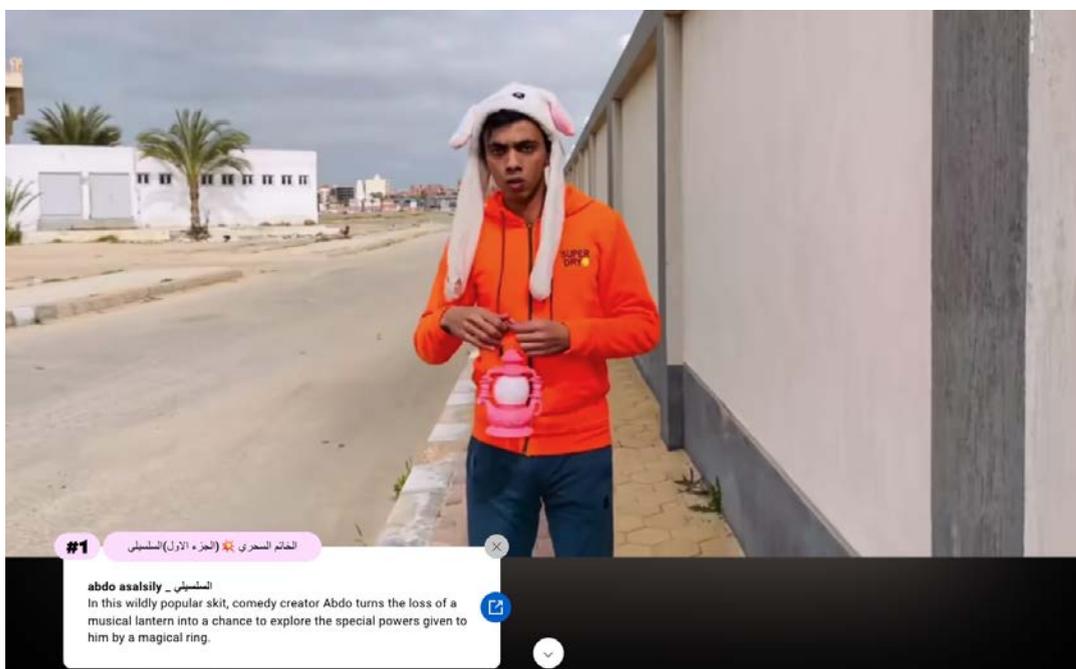


Image from Digital 2023 YouTube Platform Report Q1 2023 v01, [via DataReportal](#)

At the start of December, YouTube unveiled a series of lists for major markets around the world, [including the Middle East and North Africa](#).<sup>104</sup> The lists explore the most popular videos and creators of 2022 and features five Top 10's covering trending videos, top shorts, music videos, creators and breakout creators.



A special microsite allows users to scroll through content from each of the 10 entrants in a given list.

Each entrant features a short introductory text about each channel/video.

Image: Screenshot of the top trending via from abdo asalsily \_ السلسلي

<sup>104</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/trends/2022/mena/>

Reflecting on the list, Digital Studio [pointed out](#)<sup>105</sup> that gaming creator **AboFlah** was the top creator for the second year in a row, the “ Top Shorts” list, was topped by Omani football freestyler, [Mohamed Alnoufali](#) who shared three tricks on Shorts, while the music videos list showed the **growing emergence of the North African rap and hip-hop scene.**

**The top breakout creator is an Arabic voiced version of content produced by the American YouTuber [MrBeast](#). It already has 2.3 million subscribers (his original, English language channel has 138 million subscribers).**

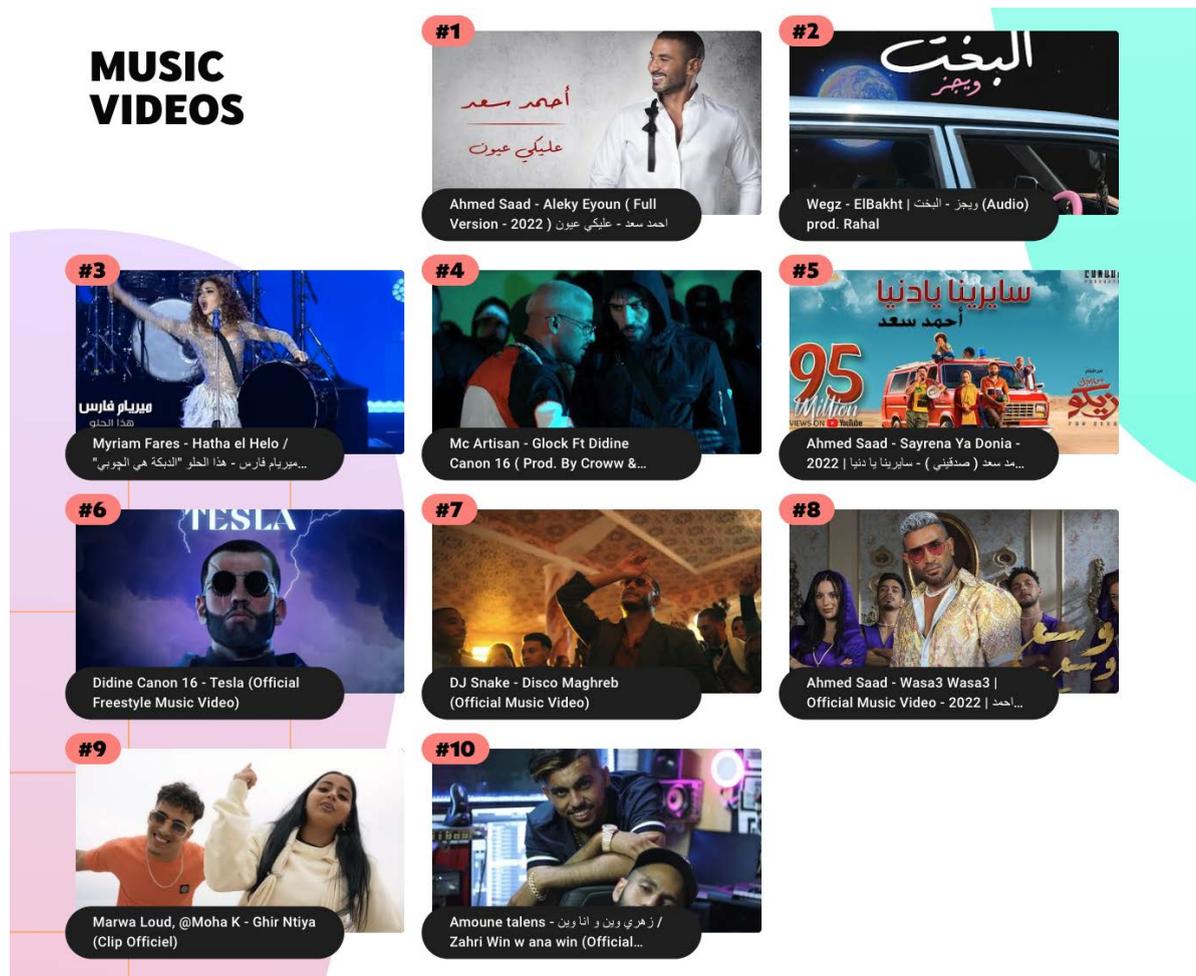


Image: Screenshot showcasing the Top 10 Music Videos viewed in MENA in 2022

Writing on *Think with Google*, the tech giant’s marketing blog, Roya Zeitoune - who oversees YouTube’s Culture and Trends team for Europe, the Middle East, and Africa - and Abdu Hussein [outlined](#)<sup>106</sup> some further consumer trends on the platform.

<sup>105</sup>

<https://www.digitalstudiome.com/technology/youtube-unveils-2022-end-of-year-lists-in-the-middle-east-north-africa>

<sup>106</sup>

<https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/en-145/consumer-insights/consumer-trends/gen-z-soothing-video-s/>

“Popular forms of soothing content in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) include [journaling](#), [cooking](#), and [ASMR](#) videos (aka whisper videos).

However **compilations of ‘[oddly satisfying](#)’ clips and [mukbang](#)**, live-streamed videos often produced by South Koreans and featuring a person eating large quantities of food while chatting to viewers, are also popular,” they wrote.

“In MENA, [exploratory travel videos](#) are particularly popular,” they added. “Their travel-show like visuals and narrative really do inspire wanderlust, if the many comments underneath these videos are anything to go by.”

**“Play it Forward with YouTube,” a new short video and podcast series (Hekayat YouTube in Arabic) [launched](#)<sup>107</sup> at the end of 2022.**

The five part series aims to shed light on the path and goals of Middle Eastern and North African content creators. It is available on Google Podcasts, [Apple Podcasts](#), [Spotify](#), and [Deezer](#) as well as the [YouTube Arabia channel](#).

In the limited series, **Tarek Amin, YouTube’s Director of Partnerships in MENA interviews creators from Egypt (Passant Nur El Din and Mostafa Attia), Iraq (Zainab Al Eqabi), Saudi Arabia (Rehab Saad) and the United Arab Emirates (Anas Bukhash).**



Image [via](#) CampaignME

<sup>107</sup> <https://campaignme.com/youtube-announces-play-it-forward-video-and-podcast-series/>

YouTube is the most popular [social network platform in the UAE](#),<sup>108</sup> Statista reports, overtaking Facebook in the share of users. Perhaps not surprisingly, in the UAE, the [main online activity](#)<sup>109</sup> Internet users do is watch videos.

Data from Ipsos (on behalf of YouTube) as part of their [YouTube Culture & Trends Report 2022](#)<sup>110</sup> revealed that across the 13 major markets they surveyed (which included Egypt and Saudi Arabia) **69% of Gen Z say they often find themselves returning to creators or content that feels comforting to them.** [Turning to MENA](#),<sup>111</sup> 76% of Gen Z in Saudi Arabia have used YouTube to watch content to feel nostalgic, jumping to 81% in Egypt.

A New York Times [feature](#)<sup>112</sup> in June highlighted how “the rise of social media platforms, YouTube in particular, is changing the power dynamic for Arab women, allowing them to turn the kitchen into a source of income and influence.”

The trend is especially notable given that only about 25 percent of women in the Middle East [participate in the labor force](#) — the lowest such figure in the world - the report notes, with YouTube offering a means to enable women to work from home and generate income for their families.



Image: Screenshot of Karima Boukar’s [YouTube channel](#), via The New York Times. The channel features more than 1,000 videos and 4.4 million subscribers.

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1276846/uae-share-of-social-network-users-by-platform/>

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1274015/uae-share-of-online-content-by-activity/>

<sup>110</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/trends/report/2022>

<sup>111</sup>

<https://www.thinkwithgoogle.com/intl/en-145/consumer-insights/consumer-trends/gen-z-soothing-video/>

<sup>112</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/07/05/dining/arab-women-youtube-cooking-videos.html>

In terms of online video, the US-based streaming technology company Brightcove signposted some of the key data points in a [2022 blog post](#).<sup>113</sup> Using 2021 data, they pointed out that **SVoD use in Egypt had jumped from 46.8% of internet users in 2020 to 57.2% in 2021. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia and UAE the reach of digital video trumps traditional TV.**

“In [Saudi Arabia](#), the vast majority (95.5%) of internet users watched digital video in 2021—this is more than the share of internet users that spent time with broadcast TV (91.4%),” they wrote. “In the [United Arab Emirates](#), digital video also beat traditional TV with a greater percentage of internet users watching streaming over broadcast—95.4% vs. 86.1% respectively.”



**In Turkey last summer, a YouTube journalist and her cameraman were attacked in the street by men carrying guns, IFEX [shared](#).**<sup>114</sup>

Reporter Ebru Uzun Oruç and her partner and cameraman Barış Oruç were attacked following threats from ultra-nationalist groups in response to her street interview series on the Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) leader Devlet Bahçeli.

Street interviews for [Sokak Kedisi TV](#) feature interviews with citizens asking their opinions about a certain political figure or an official. Oruç later posted on social media reporting that they were uninjured and condemning the attack.

Image: [Tweet](#) from the International Press Institute (IPI)

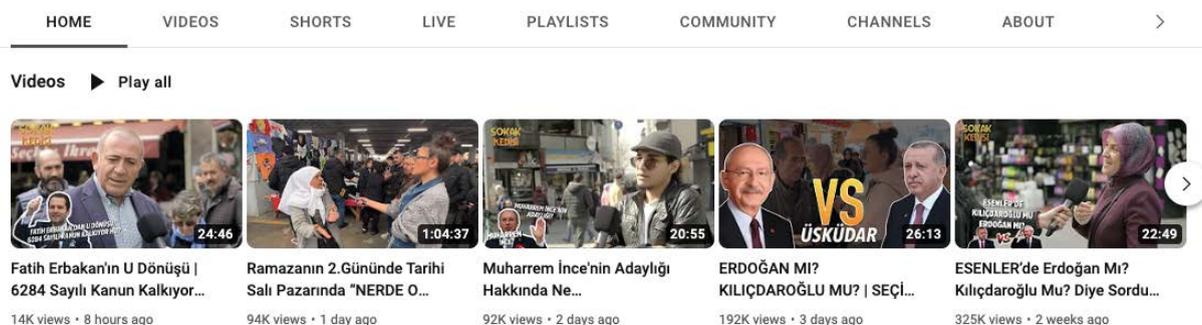


Image: Screenshot from the [Sokak Kedisi TV](#) YouTube page

<sup>113</sup> <https://www.brightcove.com/en/resources/blog/mena-ott-opportunity-2022/>

<sup>114</sup> <https://ifex.org/turkey-youtube-journalist-and-cameraman-attacked-in-street-by-men-carrying-guns/>

Lebanese singer [Nancy Ajram](#) came under fire after putting on [blackface](#) to 'prank' her fans for a video, in a story covered by [Middle East Eye](#), [The New Arab](#)<sup>115</sup> and others.

The video, which shows Ajram darkening her face with make-up and putting on a black curly wig is [still on her Instagram account](#)<sup>116</sup> where it has enjoyed more than 2.5 million views. In the film she walks around Beirut to see if people will recognize her.



nancyajram • Follow ...

nancyajram هي أو من هي؟  
Celebrating my birthday in a special way 🥳🎉🎂

@elie.khater  
44w

rabati2018 J ai adoré et c est bien bien que vous puissiez vous balader comme n'importe qui sans être envahi par des centaines de personnes .moi je nous adore depuis 2006 ou lors d un voyage au Maroc j ai pris un DVD de vous sur un marché a rabat (Maroc).moi si je ne parle pas arabe ,j aime la mélodie et je dirai votre prestance , c est la classe 🍌❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤❤

2,627,572 views  
MAY 16, 2022

It ends as she removes her make-up in a restaurant and taking pictures with fans.

Middle East Eye points out that alongside criticism on Twitter and elsewhere, “the Instagram comments for Ajram's post were littered with posts of support, with many not identifying anything wrong or controversial about the singer's actions.”

Others were more open in their condemnation.

Image: Screenshot taken 3-25-23 [from Instagram](#)

Danny Hajjar داني حجار  
@DanielGHajjar

Waking up to seeing Nancy Ajram in blackface was not what I expected this morning. The casual racism and anti-Blackness that still permeates the region, this is gross and shameful.

5:49 AM · May 17, 2022

49 Retweets 7 Quotes 375 Likes 22 Bookmarks

 **The New Arab** ✓  
@The\_NewArab

Lebanese singer Nancy Ajram has been condemned for racism after putting on blackface for a 'prank' to celebrate her 39th birthday.

There is no excuse for this.

<sup>115</sup> <https://www.newarab.com/news/lebanese-star-nancy-ajram-blasted-blackface-prank>

<sup>116</sup> [https://www.instagram.com/p/Cdn5nFcr5YB/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link](https://www.instagram.com/p/Cdn5nFcr5YB/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link)

## 6. TikTok

The short video app continued to grow in usage and influence, including in the MENA region. However, this growth is resulting in increased scrutiny about the app, including its ownership model and usage trends.

Globally, seven of the Top 10 countries for the app - by reach - are in MENA; and nine of the Top 20. The top five spots are all held by Middle East nations.

- Usage of the app is ubiquitous in UAE and Saudi Arabia where penetration is over 100%.\*
- That's closely followed by Kuwait (98.8% reach), Qatar (96.5%) and Iraq (94.5%).
- Meanwhile more than three-quarters of the adult population use the app in Bahrain (78.7%) and Lebanon (76.3%); and more than six in ten adults in Jordan (62.9%) and Israel (62.8%).

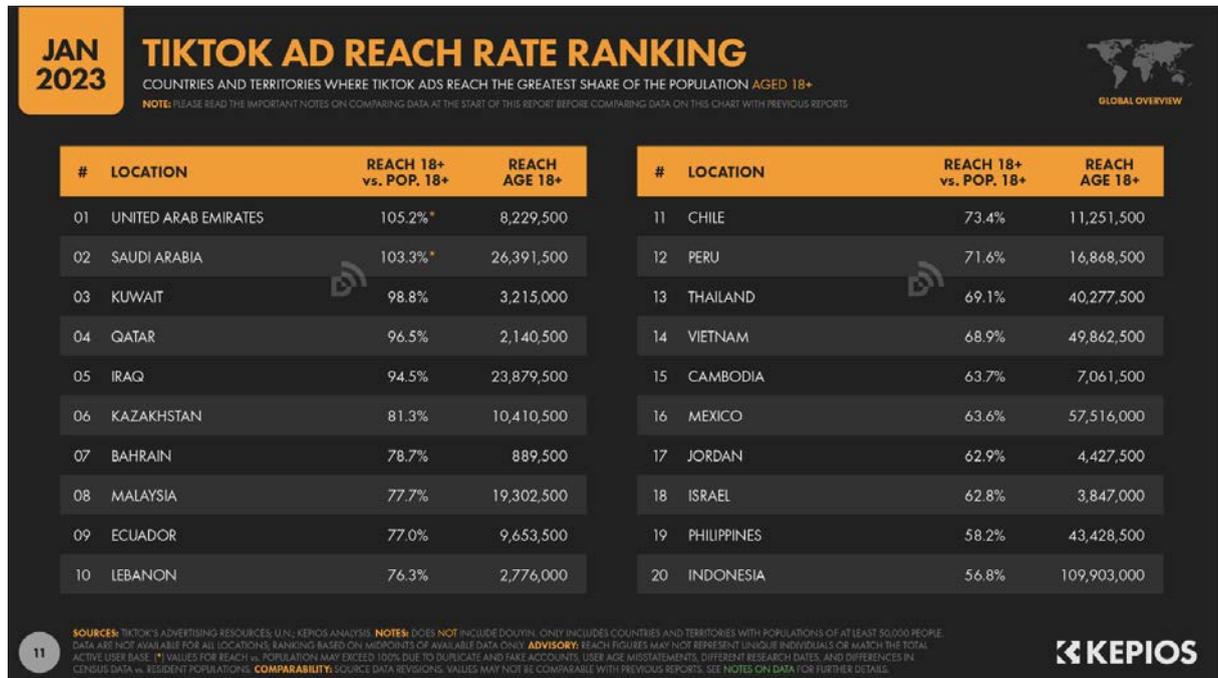


Image [via DataReportal](#)

\*NB: Reach may exceed 100% due to duplicate and fake accounts, user age misstatements, different research dates and differences in census data vs. resident population.

When looking at the largest markets for the app, four MENA nations are in the Top 12. Turkey is ranked 9th (29.9m users, 48.2% penetration), Saudi Arabia 10th (26.4m, 100%+), Iraq 11th (23.9m users, 94.5%) and Egypt 12th (23.7m, 34.3%).

JAN 2023

# TIKTOK AD REACH RANKING

COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES WITH THE LARGEST TIKTOK ADVERTISING AUDIENCES AGED 18+

NOTE: PLEASE READ THE IMPORTANT NOTES ON COMPARING DATA AT THE START OF THIS REPORT BEFORE COMPARING DATA ON THIS CHART WITH PREVIOUS REPORTS



#	LOCATION	REACH AGE 18+	REACH 18+ vs. POP. 18+	#	LOCATION	REACH AGE 18+	REACH 18+ vs. POP. 18+
01	UNITED STATES OF AMERICA	113,250,500	42.7%	11	IRAQ	23,879,500	94.5%
02	INDONESIA	109,903,000	56.8%	12	EGYPT	23,729,500	34.3%
03	BRAZIL	82,207,000	50.4%	13	FRANCE	20,954,000	40.9%
04	MEXICO	57,516,000	63.6%	14	JAPAN	20,696,000	19.5%
05	RUSSIAN FEDERATION	54,864,000	47.9%	15	GERMANY	20,648,000	29.7%
06	VIETNAM	49,862,500	68.9%	16	COLOMBIA	20,114,000	52.1%
07	PHILIPPINES	43,428,500	58.2%	17	UNITED KINGDOM	19,658,500	36.7%
08	THAILAND	40,277,500	69.1%	18	MALAYSIA	19,302,500	77.7%
09	TURKEY	29,862,500	48.2%	19	ITALY	17,153,000	34.3%
10	SAUDI ARABIA	26,391,500	103.3%*	20	PERU	16,868,500	71.6%

10

SOURCES: TIKTOK'S ADVERTISING RESOURCES; U.N.; KEPIOS ANALYSIS. NOTES: DOES NOT INCLUDE DOURN; ONLY INCLUDES COUNTRIES AND TERRITORIES WITH POPULATIONS OF AT LEAST 55,000 PEOPLE. DATA ARE NOT AVAILABLE FOR ALL LOCATIONS; RANKING BASED ON MOST RECENT AVAILABLE DATA ONLY. ADVISORY: REACH FIGURES MAY NOT REPRESENT UNIQUE INDIVIDUALS OR MATCH THE TOTAL ACTIVE USER BASE. \* VALUES FOR REACH % POPULATION MAY EXCEED 100% DUE TO DUPLICATE AND FAKE ACCOUNTS, USER AGE MISSTATEMENTS, DIFFERENT RESEARCH DATES, AND DIFFERENCES IN CENSUS DATA % RESIDENT POPULATIONS. COMPARABILITY: SOURCE DATA REVISIONS; VALUES MAY NOT BE COMPARABLE WITH PREVIOUS REPORTS. SEE NOTES ON DATA FOR FURTHER DETAILS.



Image [via](#) DataReportal

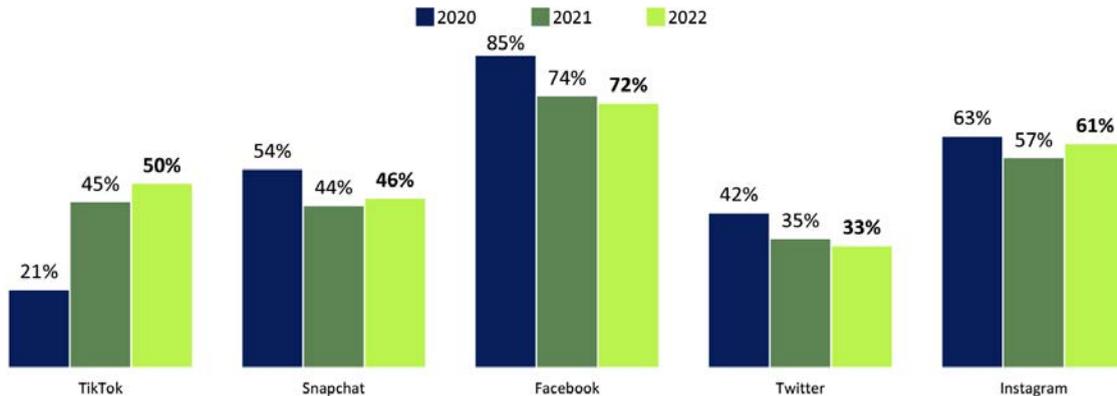
## MY LIFESTYLE

### Use of TikTok more than doubled in three years while that of Facebook and Twitter declined



How often do you visit or use each of the following?

(Showing percentage who use each daily)



COPYRIGHT © ASDA' A BCW ARAB YOUTH SURVEY 2022 | 47

Image [via](#) Arab Youth Survey 2022

TikTok [marked](#)<sup>117</sup> the end of 2022 in MENA with #ForYouParty, an immersive event held at Sound Stage 2, Dubai Studio City and in-app activations.

The event celebrated the most inspiring creators with the TikTok Creator Awards and the platform’s popular communities, including #BookTok and #FoodTok.

Those communities, according to the app’s regional manager, “have been a driving force behind some of the exciting trends of 2022.”<sup>118</sup>

Image [via Arab News](#)



Awards were given to a host of TikTok creators. [Abir El Saghir](#), a Lebanese chef and influencer who has more than 20 million followers, was named “Creator of the Year.”

Meanwhile, the “Breakthrough Creator” title was bestowed on business coach [Nora Achmaoui](#). After getting married in early 2023, her account name has been changed to [noraandkhalid](#).

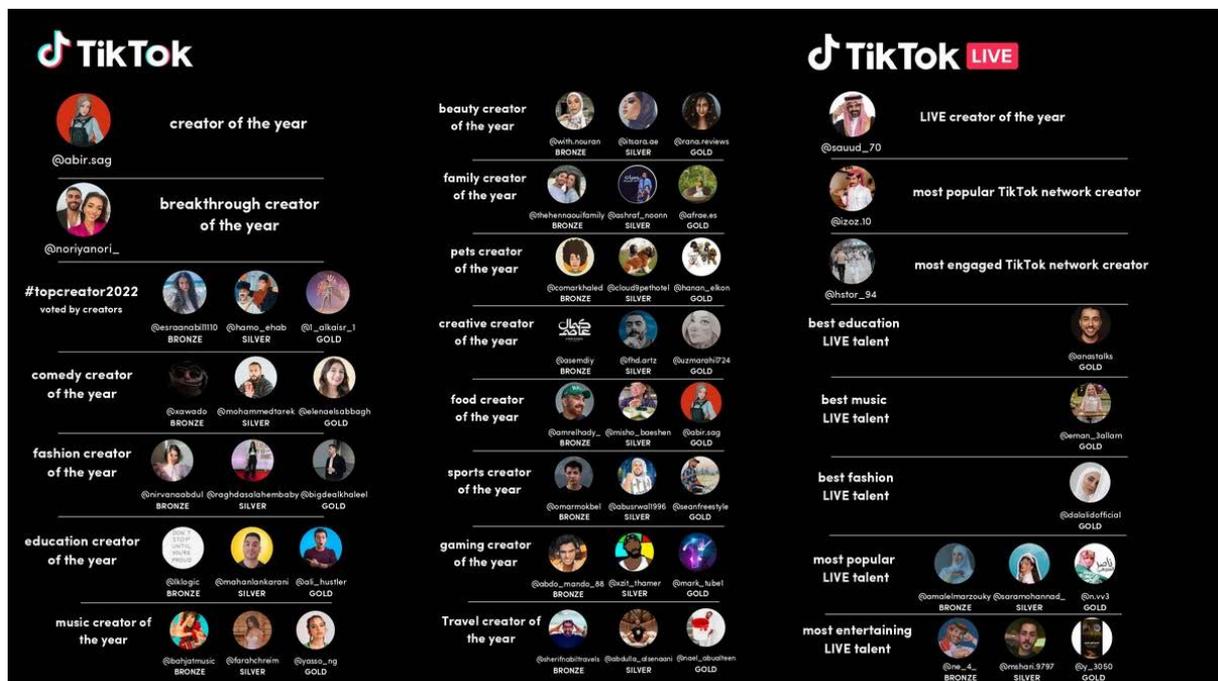


Image [via Arab News](#)

<sup>117</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2220601/media>

<sup>118</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2220601/media>

Jordanian authorities imposed a [temporary ban](#)<sup>119</sup> on TikTok in December 2022, after a police officer was killed during protests over fuel price hikes. It was [still banned](#)<sup>120</sup> a month later, with no clear indication of when the ban would be lifted. Jordan's Public Security Directorate justified the suspension of the app "after its misuse and failing to deal with publications inciting violence and disorder."<sup>121</sup>

At the same time, in Egypt, a member of the Egyptian parliament [requested a ban](#)<sup>122</sup> on TikTok following the serious injury of a 13-year-old student who fractured his neck participating in the "Throw Your Friend" TikTok challenge. Several outlets, including Gulf News, [citing](#)<sup>123</sup> local and social media reports, reported that the student, "Egypt's judo champion Ahmed Khaled had been left paralyzed as a result.

**Displaced Syrian families in refugee camps can be seen begging for money on the social media platform. However, a [BBC investigation](#)<sup>124</sup> found that the short video streaming app is taking up to 70% of the money given in donations.**

According to the report, children in refugee camps spend hours on live streams during which they can earn up to \$1,000 an hour. However, the families receive only a tiny fraction of this.<sup>125</sup> "In the camps in north-west Syria, the BBC found that the trend was being facilitated by so-called "TikTok middlemen", who provided families with the phones and equipment to go live," they said.



Jane Lytvynenko [@JaneLytv](#) · Oct 12, 2022

Displaced Syrians use TikTok to ask for donations.  
- TikTok takes ~70%  
- Money transfer stores take 10% of that.  
- Middle men take 35% of that.

TikTok promises to strengthen "global policies around exploitative begging" in response.  
Gutting report:



bbc.com

TikTok profits from livestreams of families begging  
Children are among those pleading for hours for digital gifts, as the company takes a cut of up to 70%.

2 43 52

Image [via](#) Twitter

<sup>119</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/jordan-bans-tiktok-police-officer-killed-protests-rcna62229>

<sup>120</sup> <https://smex.org/beyond-jordans-tiktok-ban/>

<sup>121</sup> <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/jordan-bans-tiktok-police-officer-killed-protests-rcna62229>

<sup>122</sup> <https://egyptindependent.com/egyptian-mp-calls-to-shut-down-tiktok/>

<sup>123</sup>

<https://gulfnnews.com/world/mena/egypt-13-year-old-student-paralysed-after-taking-part-in-tik-tok-challenge-1.92654616>

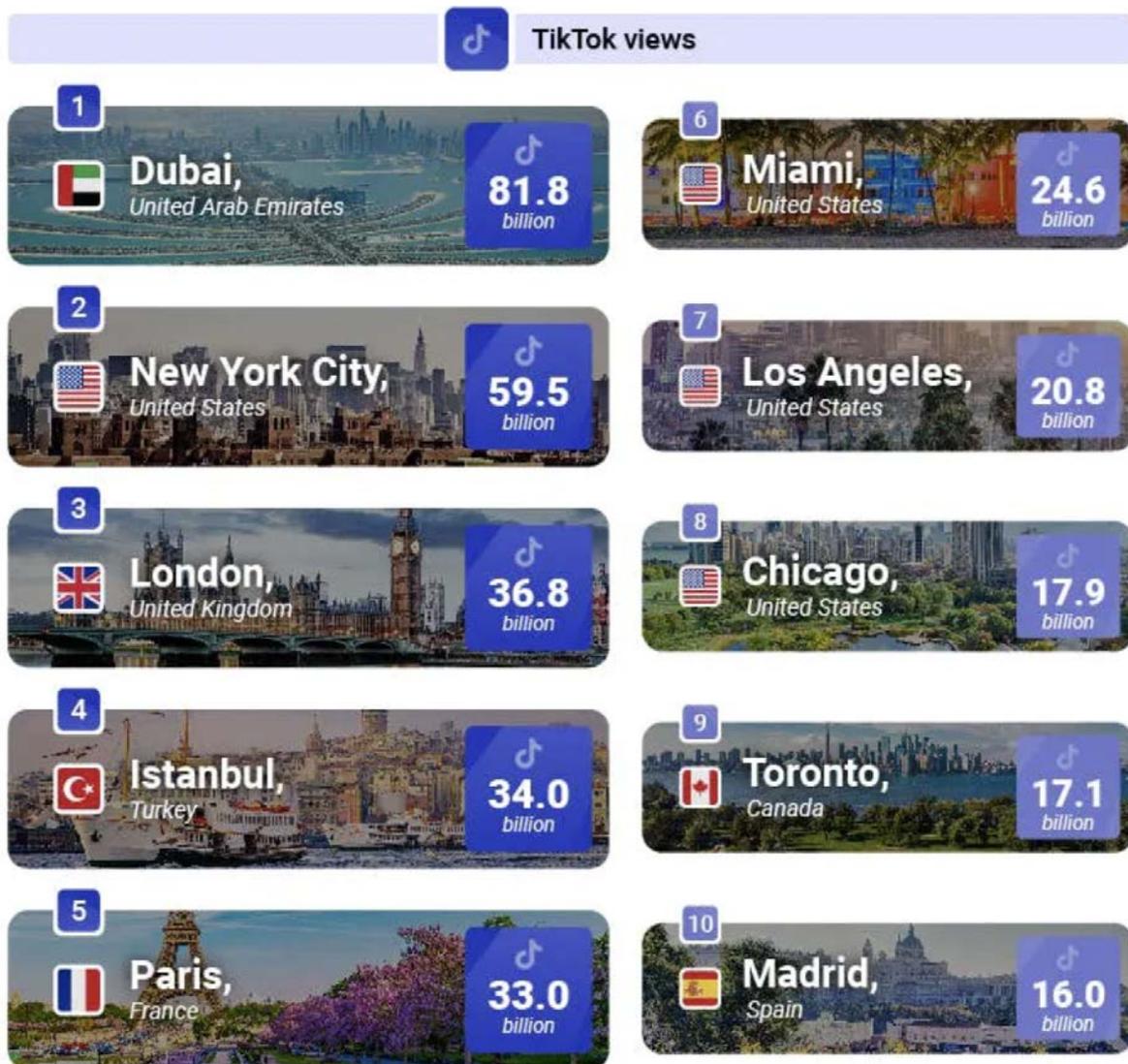
<sup>124</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-63213567>

<sup>125</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-63213567>

**TikTok Travel Index**<sup>126</sup> 2022, published by the [luggage storage](#) service Bounce, reported that more people have watched videos with the #Dubai hashtag than any other city in the world.

“Synonymous with wealth and luxury, Dubai has become one of the most sought-after destinations for holidaymakers who want to soak up the sun in style. This ultra-modern city is home to some of the world’s most astounding architecture, such as the tallest building on Earth, the Burj Khalifa.” (Bounce)

With c.82 billion views of the hashtag #Dubai, the city surpassed New York City as the most viewed destination last year. That number has leapt to 130 billion at the time of writing. Dubai ranked second in their list in 2021, behind NYC. Videos related to the emirate had more than 20 billion more views in 2022 than those related to the Big Apple, GQ MENA [points out](#).<sup>127</sup>



The top TikTok travel destinations. Image [via](#) Bounce.

<sup>126</sup> <https://usebounce.com/blog/tiktok-travel-index-2022>

<sup>127</sup> <https://www.esquireme.com/brief/dubai-is-the-most-popular-city-in-the-world-on-tiktok-by-far>

TikTok [launched](#) a limited podcast series titled [The Future of Retail](#)<sup>128</sup> to highlight the evolution of the retail industry in the lead up to Black Friday. The six part series, hosted by the [Aref Yehia](#), the Head of Business Partnerships for Retail and E-Commerce at TikTok in the MENA region, are available through TikTok Channels.

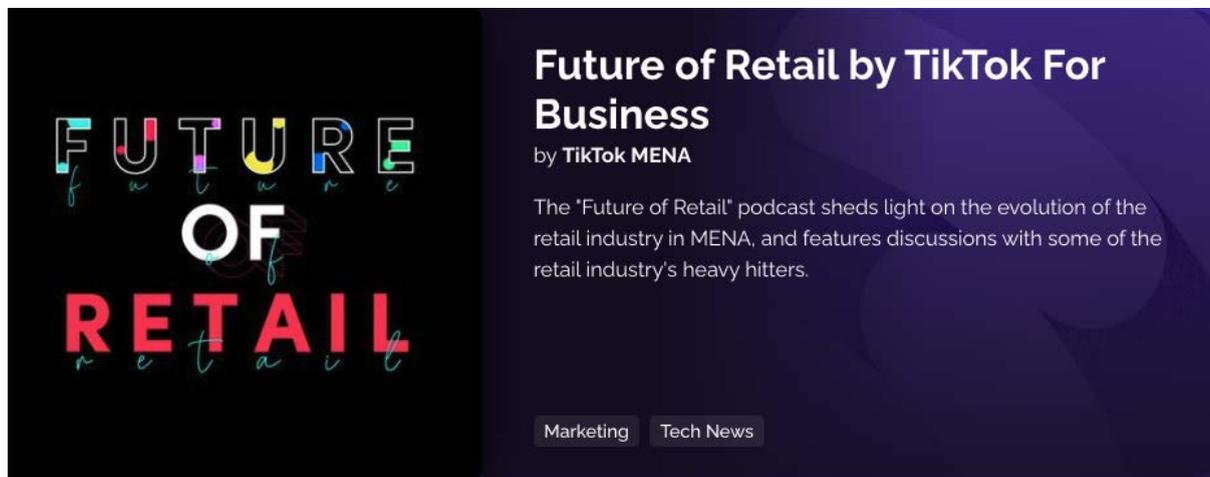


Image [via](#) RSS.com

In September, TikTok MENA [launched](#)<sup>129</sup> its inaugural [TikTok Creator Hub](#) program. Open to creators in the UAE and Egypt, the program will identify a theme each year for registered creators to produce a creative content around. With the 2022 United Nations Climate Change Conference of Parties (COP27) taking place in Egypt, not surprisingly, the theme for the 2022 TikTok Creator Hub was Climate Change.



Successful applicants participate in three stages of activity: online learning modules, a live training session and the judging process to name the competition's winner.

In November, five winners, (from left) [Anfal Saheb](#), [Deema Naser](#), [Aya Shiha](#), [Rabih Takkoush](#) and [Kareem Abdel Samad](#) were announced.

Image [via](#) The National

<sup>128</sup> <https://rss.com/podcasts/future-of-retail-by-tiktok-for-business/>

<sup>129</sup> <https://martechvibe.com/news/tiktok-launches-mena-creator-hub/>

In October, the MENA-based music and streaming platform [Anghami](#) launched a TikTok talent hunt, called “Sound of Saudi.”

As their website [explains](#),<sup>130</sup> Saudi’s all over the world - and in the Kingdom - are “asked to show their talents whether it’s singing, composing, producing, mixing or even playing musical instruments of any kind.”

Image [via Anghami](#)

Using the Sound of Saudi hashtag [#صوت\\_السعودية](#) and a special branded filter, competition winners will see their work professionally produced, and distributed via Anghami. They will also be invited to perform at concerts in the region.

A [month after launch](#),<sup>131</sup> “Sound of Saudi” had enjoyed over 327 million views on TikTok, and more than 22,000 talents had taken part. Engagement was bolstered by endorsements from regional celebrities such as Saudi hip hop rapper, DJ and Hip Hop artist Big Hass, Lebanese singer, actress and TV star Maya Diab, Saudi singers Zena Emad and Ayed Yousef and the multi-talented Iraqi singer and composer Saif Nabeel.



Image [via Anghami](#)

130

<https://talks.anghami.com/anghami-launches-sound-of-saudi-global-contest-on-tiktok/#:~:text=Celebrating%20the%20Kingdom's%20expanding%20music,social%20media%2Dbased%20talent%20hunt.>

131

<https://talks.anghami.com/anghamis-sound-of-saudi-talent-hunt-in-collaboration-with-tiktok-receives-saudi-arabia-music-commission-endorsement/>

TikTok Israel invited startups in the country - or startups backed by an Israeli VC fund - to take part in a short once session a week, four-week training [program](#).<sup>132</sup> Participants have to be new to TikTok (i.e. they don't already advertise on it,) and demonstrate "a real interest in making TikTok a meaningful marketing channel."

The graphic features the TikTok logo and 'for StartUps' in the top left. A teal 'Apply now' button is in the top right. The main headline reads 'Grow your startup with TikTok' in large, bold, pink and white text. Below this, a paragraph describes the program: 'TikTok for Startups IL is an exclusive program designed to help promising Israeli startups scale with TikTok globally. Our on-site bootcamp offers best-of-class training together with high-value benefits aiming to increase your success within our worldwide community.' A second pink 'Apply now' button is centered below the text. The bottom section contains three images: a person in a green inflatable costume with a megaphone and a '1000%' sticker; a TikTok video of a woman with 9845 likes and a comment 'Hey Jay! Did you see our upload?? What did you think?'; and a smartphone displaying a TikTok video of three people in a meeting.

Image [via](#) TikTok for Startups

As TikTok grows in popularity, issues of inappropriate content, and attempts to stifle freedom of expression are growing. Here's a few examples of this in action:

- **TikTok moderators in Morocco have reported they're watching hours of graphic videos with little psychological help and monetary compensation.** In an [investigation](#)<sup>133</sup> by [Insider](#), moderators [noted](#)<sup>134</sup> they were paid less than \$3 an hour and that graphic content - such as videos of suicide and animal cruelty - are becoming more common as the app grows in popularity.

<sup>132</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/07/tiktok-launches-new-program-israeli-startups>

<sup>133</sup> <https://www.businessinsider.com/tiktoks-african-factory-line-of-terrors-2022-7>

<sup>134</sup>

<https://www.businessinsider.com/tiktok-moroccan-content-moderators-speak-out-psychological-distress-abuse-2022-7?r=US&IR=T>

**The article contains several harrowing examples of these cases and the psychological impact of this on moderators.** Live videos can be especially difficult to deal with, as moderators see potentially traumatizing events, such as those related to violence and suicide, unfolding in real time in front of them.

**A former moderator, Samira aged 23, described how “she was tasked with reviewing 200 videos every hour while maintaining an accuracy score of 95%,” after three months, “her manager increased those metrics so much that she only had 10 seconds to review a video.”**

"The devil of this job is that you get sick slowly — without even noticing it," says Wisam, a former content moderator at Facebook who now trains others for the Luxembourg-based firm Majorel (TikTok outsourced some of this work in areas like MENA). "You think it's not a big deal, but it does affect you," he told Insider.

- **Egyptian TikTok star, Haneen Hossam, was [sentenced](#)<sup>135</sup> to three years in jail and a fine of 200,000 Egyptian pounds (\$10,759) for “indecenty,” “violating family principles,” and “human trafficking” charges.**



Hossam, who had more than one million followers at the time of her arrest, argued that her content was taken out of context.

**“Human rights activists say she has been prosecuted as part of a crackdown on female social media influencers,” in the country the BBC [says](#).**<sup>136</sup>

*Image [via](#) Egypt Today*

“They argue that the charges Hossam and at least 11 other women with millions of followers have faced since 2020 violate the rights to privacy, freedom of expression, non-discrimination and bodily autonomy.

- **Ibrahim Malik, an Egyptian TikToker, was [arrested](#)<sup>137</sup> in October 2022 on charges of “promoting immoral content.”** Malik gained notoriety on TikTok for going live and asking girls and women to do various challenges, which the court claimed to be disrespectful and insulting.
- **Another Egyptian TikToker with five million followers, Tala Safwan, was [arrested](#)<sup>138</sup> in Saudi Arabia and accused of posting sexually suggestive content**

<sup>135</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-tiktok-star-three-years-jail-human-trafficking>

<sup>136</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-61139566>

<sup>137</sup> <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/10/another-tiktok-star-arrested-egypt>

<sup>138</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62289674>

with lesbian undertones. Safwan argued that the clip in question was taken out of context.

- In late-September, **the Kuwaiti Public Prosecution [sentenced](#) two TikTokers on charges of violating public morals.** The two female influencers will face two years of prison and a fine between \$6,500 and \$16,200.<sup>139</sup>

*Other developments to note include:*

- TikTok [launched](#)<sup>140</sup> **a sector-first advisory council for the MENAT region, two years after setting up a similar council in the United States.** The council is made up of six inaugural experts from academia and the civil society who will provide advice on the platform's content moderation policies and practices.
- In the summer, TikTok [launched a new safety campaign](#)<sup>141</sup> in MENA, based on a series of video tutorials to shed light on the safety features available on the platform.

The campaign is part of TikTok's #SaferForYou program. The videos, featuring creators Logina Salah and Fadi AlKhatib, teach users step-by-step how to access safety features such as screen time management and family pairing.

Also during the summer, TikTok [rolled out](#)<sup>142</sup> **a number of new features and tools,** designed to diversify recommendations, as well as offer parental controls and a content classification system.

- In April, FIFA [launched](#)<sup>143</sup> their [@FIFAWorldCup](#) account on TikTok, to provide fans with behind the scenes action - and during - the **FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.**
- In conjunction with World Mental Health Day, TikTok [hosted](#)<sup>144</sup> **its first mental health summit in Egypt using the hashtag #EndTheStigma.**

The summit aimed to provide support to the TikTok community by focusing on how to manage their mental health on/using the app, as well as managing screen time and search interference, content alerts, and how the platform addresses bullying and harassment.

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139

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220930-kuwait-sentences-tiktok-influencers-to-2-years-for-violating-public-morals/>

140

<https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/tiktok-establishes-regions-industry-first-menat-safety-advisory-council-to-guide-safety-best-practice-and-wlz77c5f>

141 <https://www.broadcastprome.com/news/tiktok-launches-saferforyou-campaign-in-mena-region/>

142

<https://www.digitalstudiome.com/news/tiktok-launches-new-content-classification-system-and-tools-to-customize-viewing-experiences>

143 <https://campaignme.com/fifaworldcup-launches-channel-on-tiktok/>

144 <https://egyptindependent.com/tik-tok-launches-first-mental-health-summit-in-egypt/>

**TikTok launched the #RamadanValues campaign championing the spirit and values of kindness, togetherness, tolerance, and giving of the Holy Month.**

The short video platform positions itself as the main regional and cultural entertainment source during Ramadan. It saw noticeable growth during the month of Ramadan in 2021 with video views increasing by 21% and engagement increasing by 22%, CampaignME [reports](#).<sup>145</sup>



Image via [TheBrandBerries](#)

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<sup>145</sup> <https://campaignme.com/tiktok-ramadan-values-campaign-a-creative-and-social-success/>

## 7. Influencers

Brands and marketers continue to want to work with influencers, and they play a significant role in the online experience of many social networkers too.

Data from GWI, and featured in DataReportal's [Digital 2023 Global Overview Report](#),<sup>146</sup> demonstrates that in multiple MENA markets (only the biggest were surveyed), social media users in the region are more likely to follow influencers on social media than the global average. That said, numbers might be lower than you expect...

- In Saudi Arabia just over 3 in 10 (30.1%) social networkers follow influencers.
- UAE (27.2%) and Egypt (24.2%) also ranked above the global average (22.1%).
- In contrast, fewer than one in five users in Morocco (18.7%), and only just over one in ten in Turkey (11.7%) of social networkers say they follow influencers or other experts on social media.

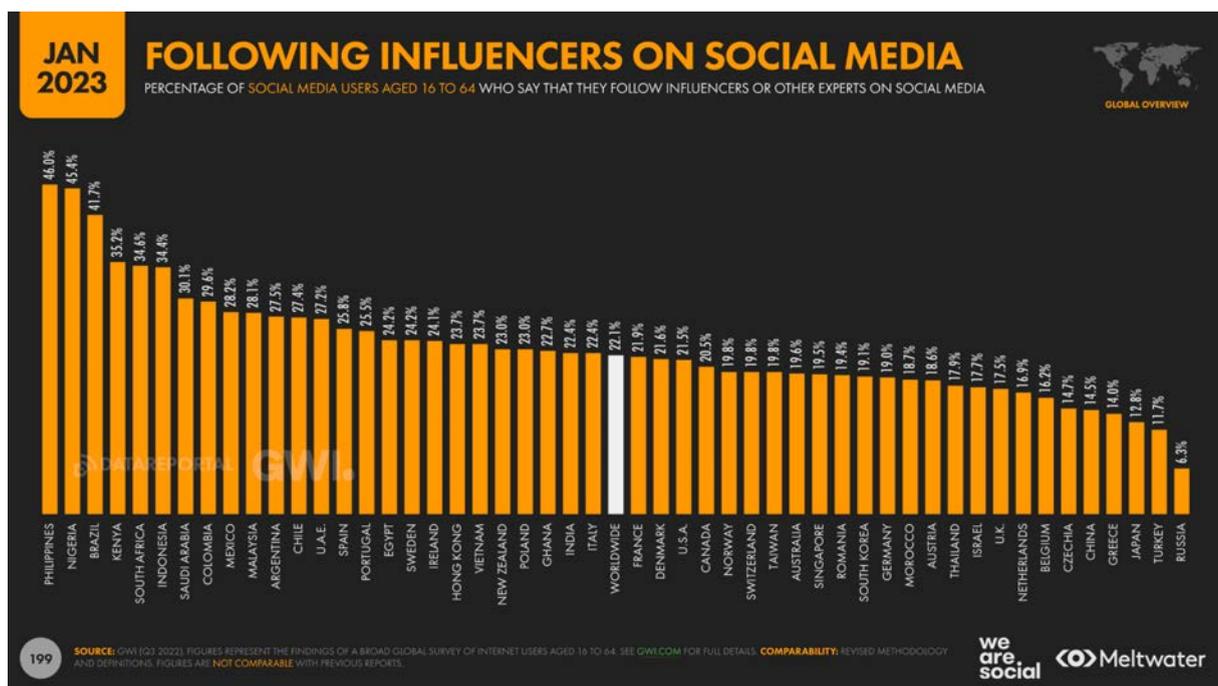


Image [via](#) DataReportal

One of the reasons why these numbers might be lower than you expect (especially given the media narrative about the rise of the Influencer) can be seen in the latest Arab Youth Survey.

The 14th Arab Youth Survey highlighted that among 18-24 years old in the region, this is a cohort that is pretty evenly split about the trustworthiness of social media influencers. Just over half (54%) said influencers were trustworthy as a source of

<sup>146</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2023-global-overview-report>

news, with only 8% fewer (46%) disagreeing. TV remains the most trustworthy news source for Arab Youth, even though only 45% use this medium regularly.

More widely, social media is only in fourth place in this trust index, behind TV, newspapers and online news portals. This is [despite the fact](#)<sup>147</sup> “that news is largely consumed via social media (up 4% to 65% in 2022).”

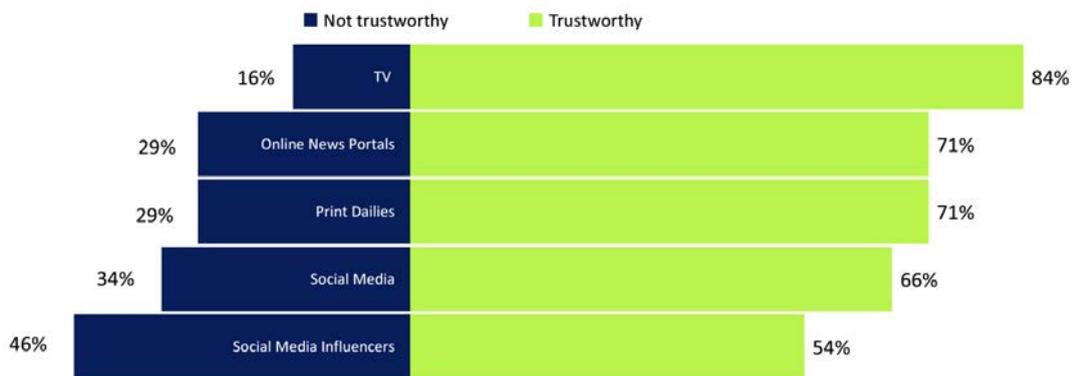
### MY LIFESTYLE

## TV, newspapers and online portals are seen as more trustworthy than social media or by influencers



How trustworthy do you think is each of the following as a source of news?

(Showing percentage among all)



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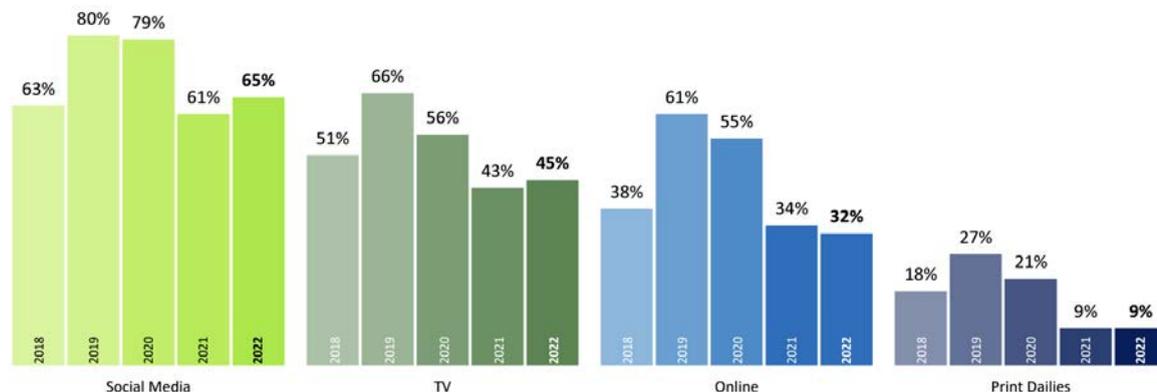
### MY LIFESTYLE

## News consumption is declining with social media being the most important source of news



Where do you get your news?

(Showing percentage among all)



COPYRIGHT © ASDA'A BCW ARAB YOUTH SURVEY 2022. | 48

Images [via](#) Arab Youth Survey 2022

<sup>147</sup> <https://arabyouthsurvey.com/en/whitepaper/>

“Such a low level of trustworthiness is to be expected, particularly in the Arab world,” argues [Jain Akerman](#) - a writer, journalist and editor based between Dubai and Beirut - in the latest annual Arab Youth Survey.

There are multiple reasons for this, he notes, including concerns about “fake news” and criticism of suppression on social media (e.g. Palestinian voices), both of which are covered in this report and in our previous studies over the past few years.

To this, Akerman contends, “**misinformation and deceit have hampered the influencer market, particularly in the GCC**, where influencers have consistently failed to disclose branded content or brand partners.” “Only when transparency is embraced is that likely to change, although the chances of that occurring remain slim,” he suggests.

*Nevertheless, as we have seen throughout this report, influencers do still play a role in MENA’s social media scene. And their role can be influential, as well as potentially contentious.*

At the end of 2022, [Cosmopolitan Middle East](#) created a list of 40 must-know Middle Eastern influencers. The [list](#)<sup>148</sup> included names such as the Lebanese fashion star [Karen Wazen](#), YouTuber [MoVlogs](#), the Canadian-Syrian [Saif Shawwaf](#), and many other content creators with thousands - or millions - of followers.

In March 2022, Meta [unveiled](#)<sup>149</sup> #SheCreates 2.0, an eBook celebrating the work of “30 women from the region’s tech and media industries who have created meaningful change, broken down barriers and inspired others with their leadership.”



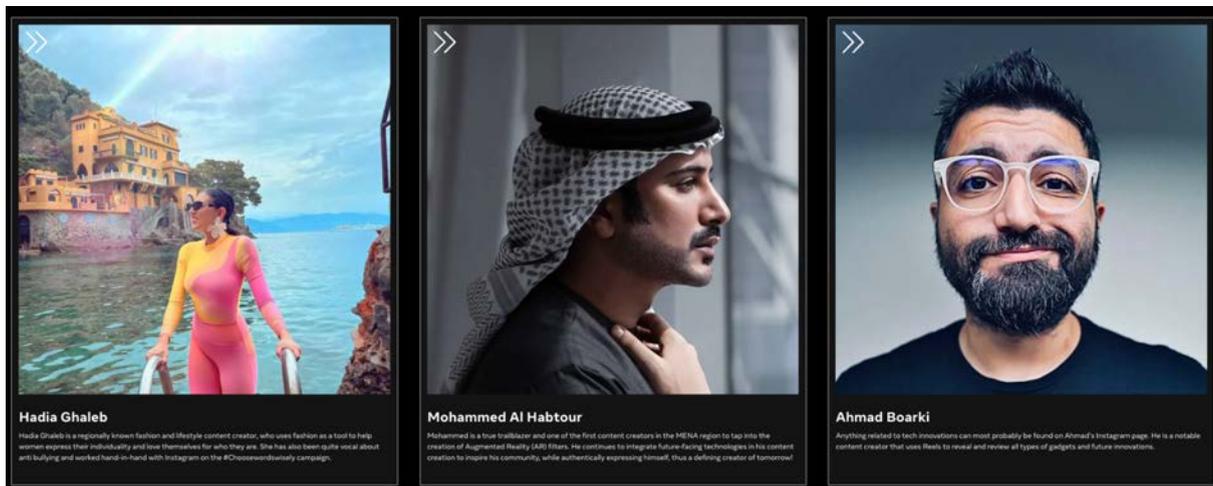
Image [via](#) Meta

<sup>148</sup> <https://www.cosmopolitanme.com/celebs/middle-eastern-tiktokers-to-follow>

<sup>149</sup> <https://about.fb.com/news/2022/04/shecreates-initiative-returns-for-a-second-year-celebrating-30-women-in-mena/>

Meta also **launched**<sup>150</sup> ‘**Creators of Tomorrow**’ which they described as a “new global campaign that celebrates emerging talents who are inspiring a new movement of creative content online.” **In the MENA region, 12 content creators were selected** “for displaying innovative approaches to video content and being recognized amongst their communities for championing key creator territories,” a press release **noted**.<sup>151</sup>

They are technology gurus [Faisal Al Saif](#) and [Ahmad Boarki](#); lifestyle and fashion creators [Hadia Ghaleb](#), [Yara bou Monsef](#), and [Hadban twins](#); graphic illustrator and artist [Nourane Oweis](#); Augmented Reality (AR) pioneer [Mohammed Al Hابتour](#); comic creators [Amr Maskoun](#) and [Mai Abdelal](#); and avid gamers [Ahmad AlNasheet](#), [Bashar Kayal](#), and [Ahmed Al-Maimani](#). Separately, a **post** on Meta’s corporate newsroom also highlighted the contributions of “AR pioneers like [Mohammed Sultan](#) from the UAE... [and] NFT artists such as [Inbar Levii](#) from Israel, [Ecem Dilan Köse](#) from Turkey.”



Screenshot [via](#) the *Creators of Tomorrow* website

In December, Dubai hosted a **One Billion Followers**,<sup>152</sup> an “Expo for Content Creators” featuring more than 100 influencers and content creators from all around the world.

The summit, which was hosted at Atlantis The Palm, included two full days of sessions, workshops, and discussion from industry experts.<sup>153</sup> Their [Instagram](#)<sup>154</sup> bio suggests they’ll do it all again in 2023.

<sup>150</sup>

<https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/companies-news/meta-launches-creators-of-tomorrow-in-the-emea-region-nw4zhlpk>

<sup>151</sup>

<https://www.zawya.com/en/press-release/companies-news/meta-launches-creators-of-tomorrow-in-the-emea-region-nw4zhlpk>

<sup>152</sup> <https://1billionsummit.com/>

<sup>153</sup>

<https://www.arabianbusiness.com/lifestyle/arts/dubai-hosts-one-billion-followers-influencer-summit-global-social-media-stars-attending>

<sup>154</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/1billionsummit/>



Screenshot of some of the speakers at the 1 Billion Followers Summit, [via](#) their website

**Mr Q**, a Qatari whose real name is Khalifa Al Haroon, gained popularity during the days leading up to the World Cup Qatar 2022, *Al-Monitor* reported,<sup>155</sup> by sharing cheerful #QTip videos on several topics from labor rights to saying “Hello” in Arabic.



Haroon has been producing these videos on multiple social media platforms for the best part of a decade, but the hosting of the FIFA 2022 World Cup in Qatar brought his informative, short, light-hearted, videos to a wider audience.

*Mr Q, aka Khalifa Al Haroon, in action. Image [via](#) Al-Monitor.*

**Another Qatari gained social media prominence in the wake of the World Cup: 16-year-old Abdulrahman Fahad al-Thani.** As the South Morning China Post [explained](#)<sup>156</sup> “Facial expressions of sadness and exasperation as his country’s soccer team slumped to an opening game defeat at this year’s soccer World Cup have propelled a 16-year-old member of Qatar’s royal family to social media stardom in China.”

<sup>155</sup>

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2022/09/ahead-world-cup-influencer-mr-q-lifts-veil-qatar#ixzz7rEgIedMN>

<sup>156</sup>

<https://www.scmp.com/news/people-culture/article/3201536/dumpling-wrapper-prince-millions-go-mad-china-cute-young-qatari-royal-whose-world-cup-antics-make>

Al-Thani's facial expressions along with his Qatari headdress led Chinese on social media to compare him to La'eeb, the World Cup mascot. This has gained him 15 millions followers on [Douyin](#), the Chinese version of TikTok, Shanghai Daily [reported](#).<sup>157</sup>



A collage of images comparing Al-Thani to La'eeb. Image [via](#) WION.

On the sidelines of the main event, content creators from across the globe [took part](#)<sup>158</sup> in The Influencer Cup, representing America, Europe, Asia and MENA. Meanwhile, 10 Regional YouTube stars took place in a [giant game](#)<sup>159</sup> of Hide and Seek in Qatar's Al Bayt Stadium. At stake, \$10,000...

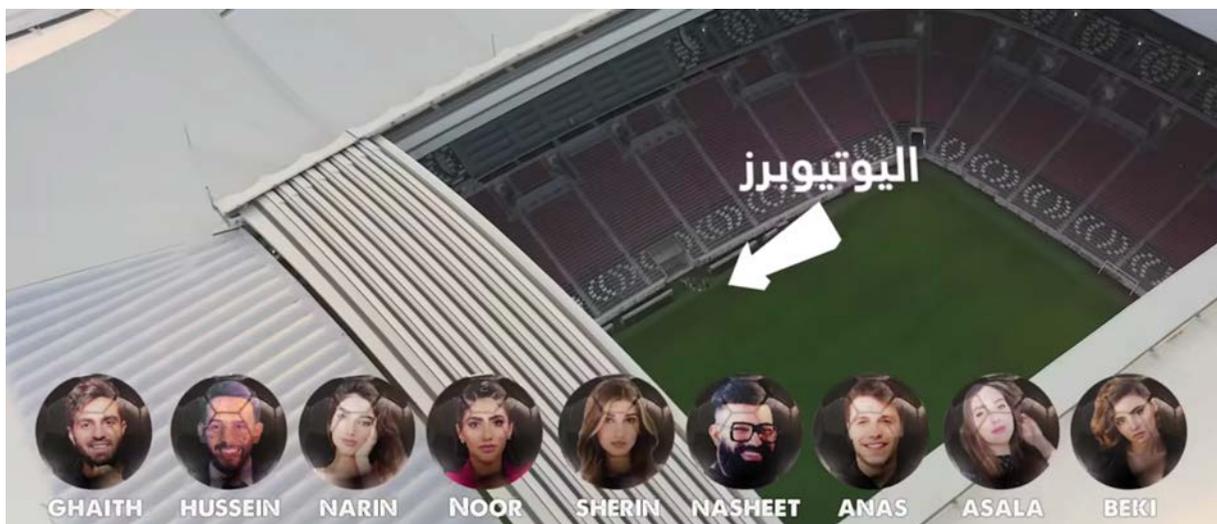


Image: Screenshot [via](#) YouTube

<sup>157</sup> <https://www.shine.cn/news/in-focus/2212204213/>

<sup>158</sup>

<https://www.goal.com/en-us/news/influencer-cup-2022-what-is-it-who-s-playing-and-how-to-watch/blt10de235894d85e2f>

<sup>159</sup>

<https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/pop-culture/2022/11/26/top-youtube-stars-in-the-middle-east-to-check-out/>

The Jordanian YouTuber, Ahmad Aburob, was crowned as the Middle Eastern Social Media star by E! at the 2022 People’s Choice Award.



The Middle Eastern version of the Award was introduced in 2021.<sup>160</sup>

As Cosmopolitan [notes](#): “Ahmad Aburob was born in Dubai and raised in Amman, Jordan. He’s a 25-year-old YouTuber who started his YouTube channel in 2018.

With over 15 million followers across all his social media channels, he quickly became one of the most popular [content creators](#) and social media personalities in this region with his skits and challenge-based vids.”

His [YouTube channel](#) has had more than 1 billion views and has nearly 6.5 million subscribers.

*Announcement poster [via](#) ITP Live.*

Moroccan influencer and activist Ihssane Benalluch, [won](#)<sup>161</sup> the Sharjah Government Communication award for “Best social media influencer in the Arab World.” Benalluch is a goodwill ambassador of the European Union who worked on projects related to raising awareness on various social and environmental issues. Currently, she has four million followers on [Instagram](#).<sup>162</sup>

[The Content Creator Awards](#), a new event for MENA hosted by Brand Ripplr, in collaboration with Mediaquest, **took place for the first time in 2022**. “Sponsored by YouTube, the event was attended by over 600 leading brands in the industry and top content creators in the region, where they announced [45 winning content creators](#)<sup>163</sup> across 25 award categories, including Food Vlogger, Beauty Icon, YouTube Trailblazer, YouTube Gaming Creator and more,” Arab News [reports](#).<sup>164</sup> Between them, attendees have a potential audience of 150 million, Campaign Middle East [noted](#).<sup>165</sup>

<sup>160</sup> <https://www.cosmopolitanme.com/celebs/ahmad-aburob-winner-at-2022-pca>

<sup>161</sup>

<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2022/10/351663/moroccos-ihssane-benalluch-receives-best-arab-influencer-award-in-uae>

<sup>162</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/ihssanebenalluch/?hl=en>

<sup>163</sup> <https://menacreatorsawards.com/winners>

<sup>164</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2094731/corporate-news>

<sup>165</sup>

<https://campaignme.com/mena-content-creators-awards-the-regions-largest-event-for-content-creators-and-talents/>



Image [via Arab News](#)

Other developments worth noting include:

- A new social media influencer licensing system [took effect](#) in Saudi Arabia in October.<sup>166</sup>

The law requires every Saudi and non-Saudi content creator who earns revenue through advertising on social media platforms to obtain a permit from the General Commission for Audiovisual Media (GCAM). The permit (a similar system exists in UAE) costs roughly about \$4,000.

Image [via Arab News](#)

- Two Tunisian women [sparked controversy](#)<sup>167</sup> over posting videos on social media “glamorizing” risky migration from Tunis to Italy through the Mediterranean. Many criticized the influencers for “normalizing” a journey that has left thousands dead every year.

<sup>166</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2140406/media>

<sup>167</sup>

<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/2022-02-15/ty-article/tunisian-influencers-glamorize-risky-migrant-crossings-to-europe/0000017f-f1ae-d497-a1ff-f3aea5c70000>

## WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- The influencer permit costs SR15,000 and is valid for 3 years.
- All Saudi influencers, including those abroad, can get their permit directly from GCAM.
- Non-Saudi residents must first obtain permission from the Ministry of Investment to work in the Kingdom before applying for an influencer permit.
- Non-Saudi residents must also be represented by specific advertising agencies.
- The permit allows influencers to work with as many private entities as they wish and to promote any product or service, as long as it does not violate the Kingdom's laws or values.

- **An Arab female Snapchat influencer has been banned from advertising in Saudi Arabia**, Gulf News [reported](#)<sup>168</sup> in the summer, **after the creator published videos promoting tobacco**. The influencer violated laws promoting smoking, as well as advertising without a license. They were fined SR400,000 (c.\$106k).

**Three Arab female influencers, Amy Roko, Hadeel Marie, and Maha Jafar, [starred](#)**<sup>169</sup> in a new Discovery+ Original reality show, **Dare to Take Risks**. The show aired on the regional channel Jawwy TV in October. The six-part series depicted the influencers traveling through Saudi Arabia while doing adventurous challenges.



*Image: Hadeel Marein, Amy Roko, and Maha Jafar in Saudi Arabia, [via](#) Gulf News.*

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<sup>168</sup>

<https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/saudi/saudi-arabia-bans-influencer-from-advertising-for-promoting-smoking-1.88283621>

<sup>169</sup>

<https://gulfnews.com/entertainment/arab-celebs/arab-influencers-amy-roko-hadeel-marei-and-maha-jafar-star-in-new-reality-show-dare-to-take-risks-1.91212863>

## 8. Twitter

*It was all change at Twitter HQ in 2022 after Elon Musk purchased the platform. Although usage of the platform in MENA garners fewer headlines than a decade ago, it continues to be a significant part of the social media landscape.*

**MENA is home to three of the biggest markets for Twitter in the world.**

**Turkey is ranked 7th with 18.6 million users, and Saudi Arabia is 9th at 15.5 million users. With 5.8 million users, Egypt is the platform's 20th largest national market.**

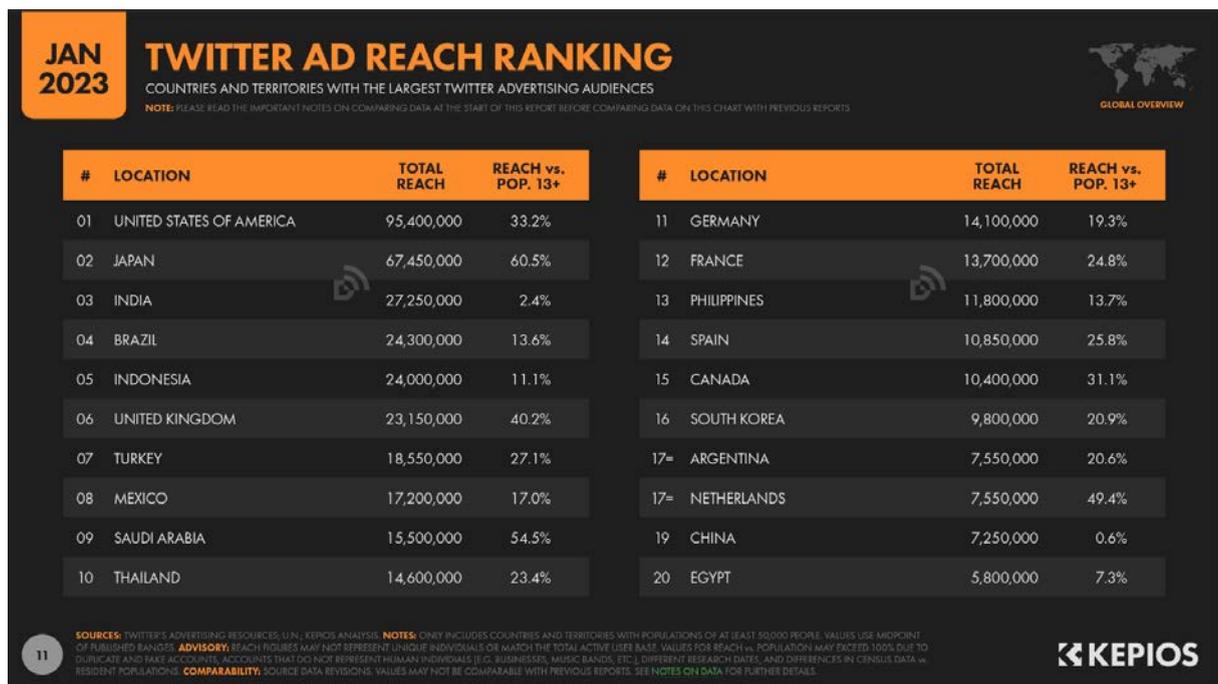


Image [via](#) Digital 2023 Twitter Platform Report Q1 2023, by DataReportal

**When viewed by market share, however, the region has five spots in the top twenty.**

More than half of those aged 13+ in **Saudi Arabia** (7th, 54.5%) and in **Bahrain** (8th, 51%) use the network. **Kuwait** (11th, 45.2%), **Qatar** (12th, 45%) and **UAE** (20th, 37.1%) round-out MENA's spots in this list.

**Collectively these five markets are home to 21,822,850 million users of the micro-blogging social network.**

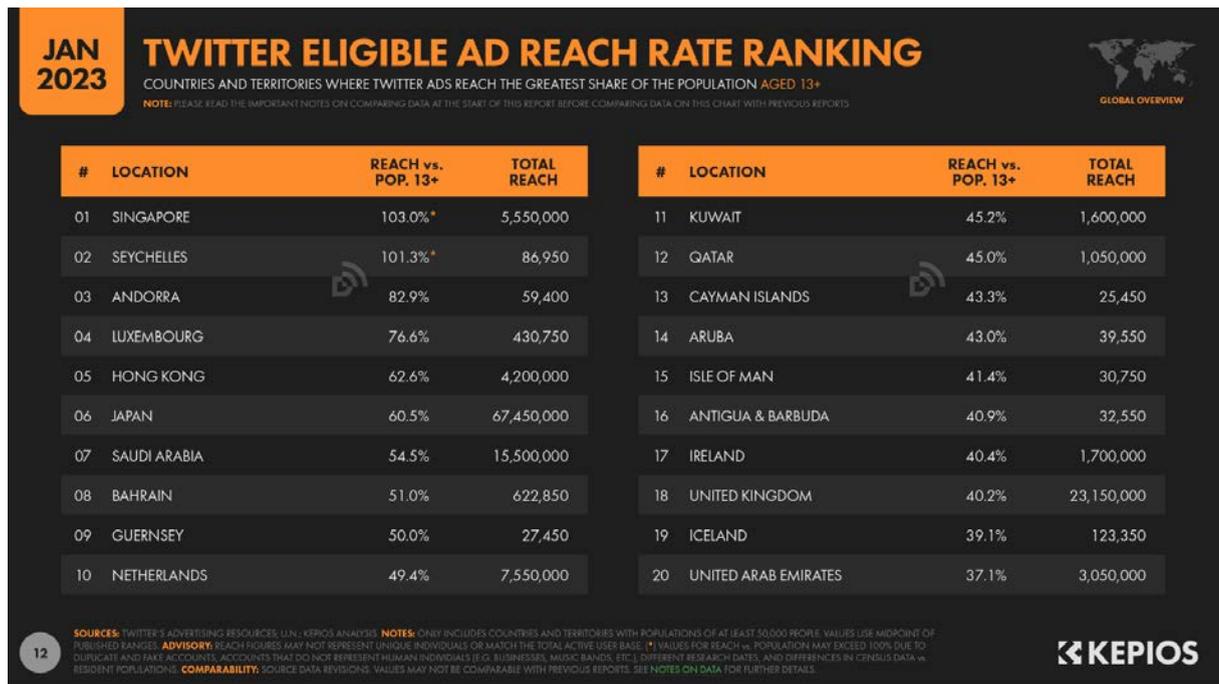


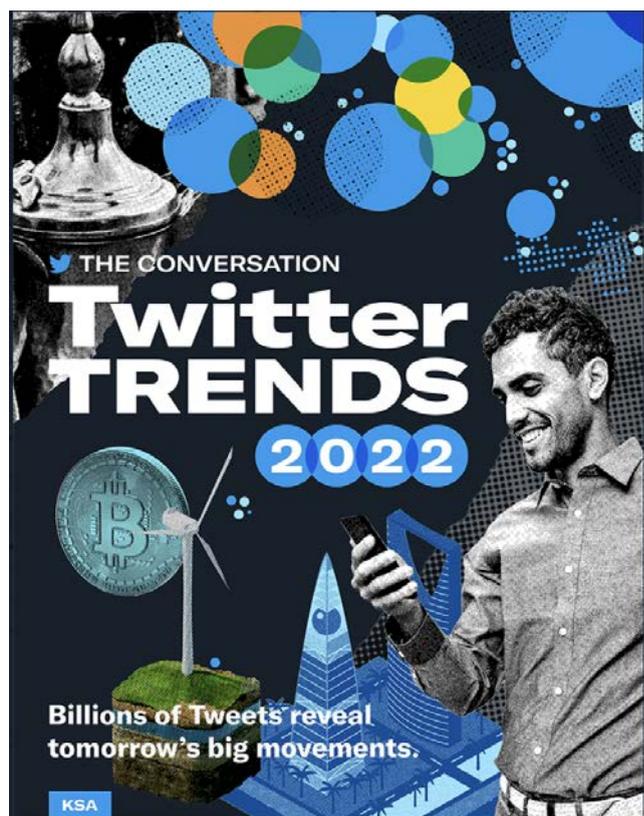
Image via Digital 2023 Twitter Platform Report Q1 2023, by DataReportal

Twitter MENA released a [report<sup>170</sup>](#) on the emerging topics people in Saudi Arabia are talking about on the platform.

Three key trends - Finance Goes Social; Eco-innovation; and Identity in Transit - were identified. These translate into conversations about smart cities like [Neom](#),<sup>171</sup> “chasing the Saudi dream,” cryptocurrencies and [Saudi’s 2030 vision](#).<sup>172</sup>

Another [popular theme](#)<sup>173</sup> is soccer. In August, Twitter saw a 74% increase in average monthly football conversations compared to the previous 12 months.

Image via [Twitter](#)



<sup>170</sup> [https://marketing.twitter.com/en\\_gb/insights/the-conversation-twitter-trends-2022-ksa](https://marketing.twitter.com/en_gb/insights/the-conversation-twitter-trends-2022-ksa) (registration required)

<sup>171</sup>

<https://www.zdnet.com/article/a-city-that-knows-your-every-move-saudi-arabias-new-smart-city-might-be-a-glimpse-of-the-future/>

<sup>172</sup> <https://www.zdnet.com/article/can-oil-shock-help-kickstart-a-new-tech-dawn-for-saudi-arabia/>

<sup>173</sup>

<https://gulfbusiness.com/twitter-mena-reports-16-yoy-growth-in-average-monetisable-daily-active-users-in-q2-2022/>

Talking of soccer... the hashtag **#Morocco** was tweeted more than one million times in less than an hour after **Morocco's victory over Portugal**<sup>174</sup> in Qatar's World Cup 2022. The country became the **first African and Middle Eastern team**<sup>175</sup> to ever reach the international soccer competition's semi-finals.

Their dream of reaching the World Cup final was scuppered by a 2-0 loss to France in the semi-finals, after a run of victories that defied the expectations of many football fans.

Image (r) [via Twitter](#)

Twitter signed a deal with beIN Sports who holds exclusive media rights to the 2018 and 2022 World Cups across the MENA region.

The deal entails highlighting major moments throughout the Qatar 2022 World Cup and provide brands and marketers with association opportunities via Twitter Amplify sponsorship.<sup>176</sup>

**Through the partnership**,<sup>177</sup> each match would be highlighted on Twitter through content clips, one match recap and an in-studio analysis, aired through the beIN SPORTS official handle, **@beINSPORTS**.



GIANT KILLERS 🔥🔥🔥

Morocco 🇲🇦 have now beaten European giants Belgium, Spain and Portugal at this World Cup and held Croatia to a goalless draw in their opener.

Respect the Atlas Lions! 🦁🦁🦁



9:12 AM · Dec 10, 2022 from Doha, Qatar

757 Retweets 43 Quotes 5,192 Likes 29 Bookmarks

<sup>174</sup>

<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2022/12/352945/world-cup-morocco-tops-twitter-hashtags-after-victory-against-portugal>

<sup>175</sup>

<https://www.newsweek.com/twitter-reacts-morocco-makes-history-reaching-world-cup-semi-finals-1766151>

<sup>176</sup>

<https://www.sportbusiness.com/news/twitter-and-bein-strike-2022-world-cup-content-deal-in-mena-region/>

<sup>177</sup>

<https://www.albawaba.com/sport/bein-sports-and-twitter-partner-ahead-fifa-world-cup-qatar-2022-1487513>

**A former Media Partnerships Manager for Twitter MENA, Ahmad Abouammo, was [convicted](#)<sup>178</sup> by a federal jury in the USA on spying charges in December.** According to court documents, Abouammo received bribes in exchange for accessing, monitoring, and conveying personal identifiable information for over 6,000 Twitter accounts to officials of Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Royal Family.

“Mr. Abouammo violated the trust placed on him to protect the privacy of individuals by giving their personal information to a foreign power for profit,” [said](#)<sup>179</sup> Assistant Attorney General Matthew G. Olsen of the Justice Department’s National Security Division. “His conduct was made all the more egregious by the fact that the information was intended to target political dissidents speaking out against that foreign power.”



*Image [via](#) Twitter*

**An investigation based on Twitter's internal files reported that Twitter worked with the Pentagon to promote the United States military's activities in the Middle East.**

“The social networking giant provided direct approval and internal protection to the U.S. military’s network of social media accounts and online personas, whitelisting a batch of accounts at the request of the government,” [revealed Lee Fang](#), an investigative reporter for [The Intercept](#).<sup>180</sup> “The Pentagon has used this network, which includes U.S. government-generated news portals and memes, in an effort to shape opinion in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, and beyond,” he added.

<sup>178</sup>

<https://americansecuritytoday.com/former-twitter-employee-guilty-of-spying-on-behalf-of-saudi-arabia/>  
<sup>179</sup>

<https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/former-twitter-employee-sentenced-42-months-federal-prison-acting-for-foreign-agent>  
<sup>180</sup>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2022/12/21/twitter-secretly-boosted-us-military-propaganda-investigation>

Assistant professor of Middle East Studies and Digital Humanities at Doha's Hamad Bin Khalifa University, [Dr. Marc Owen Jones](#), [shared in a Twitter thread](#)<sup>181</sup> that around 5,000 fake Twitter accounts were used to disrupt a trend which saw Arabic hashtags expressing discontent against normalizing relationships between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

Jones analyzed approximately 40,000 tweets from 12 to 22 July 2022, using the Arabic hashtag "millions\_against\_normalisation" and the rival hashtag "million\_".



Images: [Tweets](#) 1 and 8 (of 8) from Jones' analysis of the anti-normalization tweets.

181

[https://twitter.com/marcowenjones/status/1550455406652268547?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1550458824976384000%7Ctwgr%5Ea85d4d8cc1801a491397eedd9c4d36e43ccd248f%7Ctwcon%5Es2\\_&ref\\_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.middleeastmonitor.com%2F2022-07-26-5000-fake-accounts-drowned-out-anti-normalisation-hashtag-during-bidens-saudi-trip%2F](https://twitter.com/marcowenjones/status/1550455406652268547?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1550458824976384000%7Ctwgr%5Ea85d4d8cc1801a491397eedd9c4d36e43ccd248f%7Ctwcon%5Es2_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.middleeastmonitor.com%2F2022-07-26-5000-fake-accounts-drowned-out-anti-normalisation-hashtag-during-bidens-saudi-trip%2F) - see also <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220726-5000-fake-accounts-drowned-out-anti-normalisation-hashtag-during-bidens-saudi-trip/>

The Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal is the second largest shareholder of Twitter with 34,948,975 shares - \$1.89 Billion. The prince posted a [statement](#)<sup>182</sup> on Twitter addressing Musk and announcing his commitment to the deal.



الوليد بن طلال  
@Alwaleed\_Talal

Dear friend "Chief Twit" @elonmusk

Together all the way 🤝 @Twitter

**Press Release**  
For more information contact:  
Kingdom Holding Company  
+1111-211-11-966  
www.KINGDOM.com.sa  
Media@kingdom.com.sa



**المملكة  
KINGDOM**

**Issue Date**  
Friday 28\* Oct 2022  
@Kingdom\_KHC

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**Announcement from Kingdom Holding Company and the  
Private office of HRH Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Al Saud**

Kingdom Holding Company (KHC) and the private office of His Royal Highness Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (PO) announce the roll over of their ownership of the existing Twitter shares (34,948,975 Shares) valued at USD 1.89 Billion to the “New” Twitter, led by Elon Musk, KHC & PO are jointly the second largest investor after Elon Musk.

This deal is in line with the long-term investment strategy for which Kingdom Holding Company is known for.

**اعلان من شركة المملكة القابضة والمكتب الخاص بصاحب السمو الملكي الأمير  
الوليد بن طلال بن عبد العزيز**

---

تعلن شركة المملكة القابضة (KHC) و المكتب الخاص لصاحب السمو الملكي الأمير الوليد بن طلال بن عبدالعزيز آل سعود (PO) عن انتهاء تحويل حصتهما في أسهم تويتر الحالية (34,948,975 سهماً) والتي تبلغ قيمتها 7 مليار ريال سعودي إلى شركة Twitter الخاصة الجديدة. وبذلك تكون شركة المملكة القابضة والمكتب الخاص بصاحب السمو الملكي الأمير الوليد بن طلال بن عبدالعزيز آل سعود ثاني أكبر المساهمين بعد إيلون ماسك.

وتتماشى هذه الصفقة مع استراتيجية الاستثمار طويل الأجل التي تميزت بها شركة المملكة القابضة.



Elon Musk @elonmusk · Oct 27, 2022

the bird is freed

5:42 AM · Oct 28, 2022

1,733 Retweets 1,118 Quotes 5,334 Likes 318 Bookmarks

Image [via](#) Twitter

Following the launch of Elon Musk’s new paid subscription, Twitter Blue, several users [took advantage](#)<sup>183</sup> of the service to tweet ironic and offensive remarks while pretending to be high profile figures or brands.

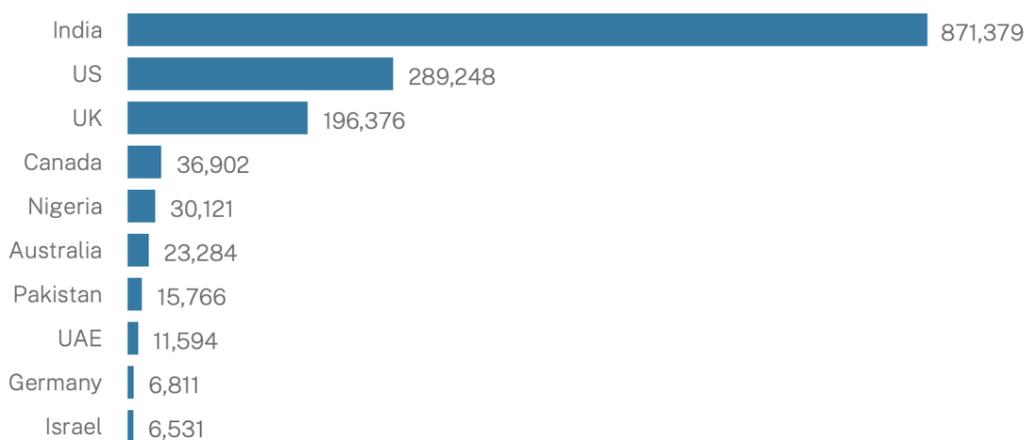
Some of those tweeted about Israeli rights abuse, islamophobia, the Iraq war, and the 9/11 attacks.



*Image: A screengrab of two blue-ticked profiles tweeting as the former U.S. President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair.*

A [report](#)<sup>184</sup> by the Islamic Council of Victoria (ICV) in Australia found that nearly 86% of geo-located anti-Muslim posts on Twitter come from the United States, the United Kingdom, and India. There were at least 3,759,180 Islamophobic posts made on Twitter between 28 August 2019 and 27 August 2021, the report found.

In response, their recommendations included calling on policymakers to impose a statutory duty of care to protect users from Islamophobia on social media platforms, and for Twitter to begin developing new capabilities for the automatic detection and removal of hateful content; as well as working with experts in Islamophobia to establish an independent oversight body comprised of “to continuously evaluate the effectiveness of moderation policies.”



*The top 10 countries have the largest number of geolocated Islamophobic tweets. Figure source: [Islamophobia in the Digital Age: A Study of anti-Muslim Tweets](#).*

<sup>183</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/twitter-blue-descends-farce-fake-middle-east-takes-spread>

<sup>184</sup> <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2022-08/apo-nid318935.pdf>

In November, Twitter **suspended**<sup>185</sup> the **Palestine Online** account which has over 80,000 followers and is considered to be one of the most influential Palestinian news outlets. The now-active account was suspended for violating Twitter rules, argued Twitter without giving any further details.

Twitter **took down**<sup>186</sup> the Arabic-language account of the Houthi military spokesman **Brigadier General Yahta Saree**. By the time of suspension, the account had over 300,000 followers and has been active since 2018. However, at the time this was reported, a second English-language account was still active on Twitter.<sup>187</sup>

**Over 100,000 people have signed a petition urging Elon Musk to ban Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei from Twitter.**

A petition on [Change.org](https://www.change.org)<sup>188</sup> argues that Ayatollah’s regime uses Twitter to spread calls violence and hate while at the same time banning 83 million people from using the platform in his own country. The Ayatollah has nearly two million followers across his five Twitter accounts (which are in English, Spanish, Russian, Farsi and Arabic).

*A tweet (r) from the Iranian journalist and activist [Masih Alinejad](#) urging Twitter to ban Ayatollah from the platform. Screenshot via [Twitter](#).*

The head of research at Twitter MENA said that Twitter users in Saudi Arabia “are spending more consciously - in an era of high inflation, frugality is a hallmark of smart living.” The report was based on a survey on shopping habits ahead of White Friday, the Middle Eastern equivalent of Black Friday.<sup>189</sup>

Nearly half (52%) of buyers are actively using Twitter to discover White Friday offers. Nearly half (49%) said when looking to buy a new product that they trust Twitter, and 32% would visit a retailer if they saw a tweet about a sale.



<sup>185</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221117-twitter-suspends-palestine-online-account/>

<sup>186</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220411-twitter-suspends-arabic-language-account-of-houthi-military-spokesman/>

<sup>187</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220411-twitter-suspends-arabic-language-account-of-houthi-military-spokesman/>

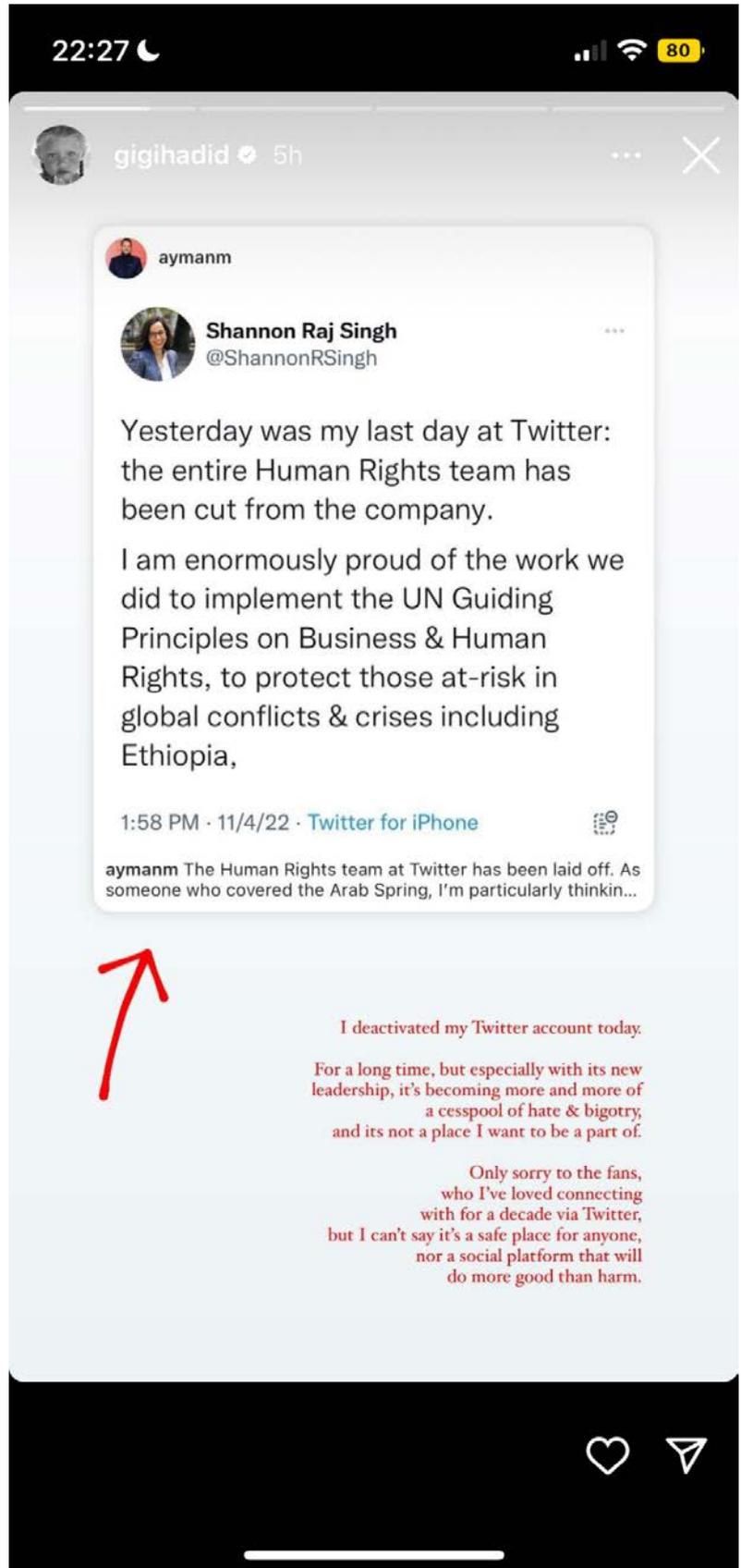
<sup>188</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/elon-musk-ban-ayatollah-khamenei-from-twitter>

<sup>189</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2180751/media>

In September, Twitter [replaced](#)<sup>190</sup> the “like” emoji with the flag of Saudi Arabia on the occasion of the Kingdom’s 92nd National Day calling users to express feelings of love using the hashtag #Hey\_Lana\_Dar92.

The Palestinian-Dutch model Gigi Hadid [quit Twitter](#)<sup>191</sup> in November, following Elon Musk’s takeover of the platform. In her statement, Hadid [mentioned](#) that Twitter has become a place of a cesspool of hate and bigotry and that it’s no longer a safe place for anyone, especially with its new ownership.

*Hadid announcing that she is leaving Twitter on Instagram. Image [via Elle](#).*



<sup>190</sup> <https://www.spa.gov.sa/viewfullstory.php?lang=en&newsid=2386701>

<sup>191</sup> <https://people.com/style/gigi-hadid-quits-twitter/>

## 9. Freedom of Expression

*One of the biggest, and most notable trends seen in 2022 has been multiple efforts to stifle freedom of expression and free speech on social media in the MENA region.*

**Amnesty International [reported](#)<sup>192</sup> that at least 75 people are in jail in at least four countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) in what they referred to as violation of the right to freedom of expression, association, or peaceful assembly.**

“Governments in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain repeatedly repress dissent while investing heavily in rebranding themselves as rights-respecting states. Sport fans should pause for thought and consider the dozens of people languishing behind bars in GCC countries simply for exercising basic rights, and call for their release,” said [Amna Guellali](#), Amnesty International’s Deputy Director for Middle East and North Africa.



**Among the cases highlighted by Amnesty is the imprisonment of [Salma al-Shehab](#) who received a 34 year prison sentence - followed by a 34-year travel ban - for her [Twitter activity](#).<sup>193</sup> She [used Twitter](#) to follow and retweet dissidents and activists, the Guardian [noted](#).<sup>194</sup>**

*Image: Salma al-Shehab and her family, via European Saudi Organisation for Human Rights (ESOHR)*

**Shehab, a PhD student at Leeds University in the UK, was arrested in early 2021 after returning to Saudi Arabia for a holiday. Shehab was [given a six-year prison sentence for violating the country's counter-terrorism and anti-cybercrime laws](#).<sup>195</sup> This was increased to 34 years on appeal, with the additional travel ban added on to the end of her prison sentence. “**The ruling is the longest prison sentence given to a Saudi women’s rights defender,**” [remarks](#)<sup>196</sup> [The Freedom Initiative](#), a Washington D.C. based NGO.**

<sup>192</sup>

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/10/gulf-dont-believe-the-hype-gcc-states-are-as-repressive-as-theyve-ever-been/>

<sup>193</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62574102>

<sup>194</sup>

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/16/saudi-woman-given-34-year-prison-sentence-for-using-twitter>

<sup>195</sup>

<https://thefreedomi.org/statements/saudi-womens-rights-activist-and-mother-of-two-sentenced-to-34-years-in-jail/>

<sup>196</sup>

<https://thefreedomi.org/statements/saudi-womens-rights-activist-and-mother-of-two-sentenced-to-34-years-in-jail/>

**“A Saudi court has sentenced a woman to 45 years in prison for allegedly damaging the country through her social media activity,” AP [reported](#)<sup>197</sup> in August.** According to court documents, Nourah bint Saeel al-Qahtani was accused of damaging the country and “disrupting the cohesion of society” with her posts. “It remains unclear what al-Qahtani posted online or where her hearing was held,” AP added.

**In October, the Saudi government [sentenced](#)<sup>198</sup> a 72-year-old U.S.-Saudi dual national to 16 years in prison - plus a 16-year travel ban - after tweets were used to find him guilty of trying to destabilize the kingdom and of supporting and funding terrorism.**

Almadi was released from prison in March 2023, Axios [reports](#)<sup>199</sup>, “but the 72-year-old is still under a Saudi imposed travel ban that prohibits him from returning home to Florida.”

The tweets in question were “posted while inside the United States, some of which were critical of the Saudi regime,” The Washington Post [said](#).<sup>200</sup> Saad Ibrahim Almadi, was arrested in November after he traveled from Florida to Riyadh to see his family.

His sentence was based on 14 tweets, Almadi’s son [told](#) the BBC. These included criticism of the demolition of old parts of the cities of Mecca and Jeddah, a reference to the slain Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoggi and concerns over poverty in the Kingdom.



*Image: Saad Almadi and his son Ibrahim (left) in an image shared by the Almadi family, via AFP - Getty Images [and](#) NBC News*

**A university professor in Algeria, Hakima Sabayhi, faces six months in prison and a fine of 50,000 dinars on charges of using Facebook to insult the President of the Republic and a statutory body.** “Since the news of her prosecution broke, many academic peers, politicians and citizens have stood in solidarity with Sabayhi,” [writes](#)<sup>201</sup> Middle East Monitor. “They contend that her trial was part of the effort to restrict activists and prevent them from expressing their opinions.”

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197

<https://apnews.com/article/middle-east-social-media-dubai-united-arab-emirates-012f564dd8590142b03d23bff21be0dd>

198 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63301158>

199 <https://www.axios.com/2023/03/22/saudi-arabia-american-saad-ibrahim-almadi-prison-tweets>

200 <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/10/17/almadi-sentenced-tweets-saudi-arabia/>

201

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20221110-algeria-judge-issues-prison-notice-to-professors-for-facebook-posts/>

A group of 38 regional and international organizations [launched](#)<sup>202</sup> a 9-day social media campaign last May to draw attention to attempts by the Algerian authorities to **stifle dissent**. The online #NotACrime campaign saw bodies such as Human Rights Watch, Justitia Center for Legal Protection of Human Rights in Algeria and the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) use their social media accounts to call for an end to the criminalization of those exercising their right to free expression.

More than 300 people had been arrested in the first 3.5 months of 2022 for activities related to freedom of speech, peaceful assembly or association, Amnesty [said](#).<sup>203</sup> Hundreds of others were arrested between 2019-2021 as part of a series of [pro-democracy protests](#)<sup>204</sup> known as '[Hirak](#)' (Arabic for “movement”).



Image [via](#) Article 19

According to a [report](#)<sup>205</sup> by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI), Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia are the three most “prolific perpetrators” of state-linked disinformation on social media. The impact of this may well shape freedom of expression in these countries; [as well as overseas](#).<sup>206</sup>

“Our analysis demonstrates that there is a proliferation of state actors willing to deploy information operations targeting their own domestic populations, as well as those of their adversaries,” they wrote. The report was accompanied by a [website](#) that provided analysis on 17 countries with accounts taken down by Twitter over recent years.

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<sup>202</sup> <https://www.article19.org/resources/notacrime-stop-assault-on-fundamental-freedoms-in-algeria/>

<sup>203</sup>

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/05/algeria-campaign-against-increasing-government-repression-of-human-rights/>

<sup>204</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/21/algeria-3-years-repression-protest-tightens>

<sup>205</sup> [https://www.aspi.org.au/report/understanding\\_global\\_disinformation\\_information\\_operations](https://www.aspi.org.au/report/understanding_global_disinformation_information_operations)

<sup>206</sup>

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/twitter-disinformation-state-sponsored-russia-iran-saudi-arabia-worst>

In January 2022, a missile attack by Yemen’s Houthis on the UAE capital Abu Dhabi was [thwarted](#)<sup>207</sup> by the US military and their UAE partners.

Subsequently, WAM, the official Emirates News Agency, [reported](#)<sup>208</sup> that “the Public Prosecution has met with several individuals who circulated a social media video that showed defense forces intercepting Houthi terrorist attacks against critical facilities in the UAE.”

“The Public Prosecution advised the public that such videos threaten vital and military facilities in the country and national security and stability,” they added, “and urged the public not to circulate videos that may harm the country’s security interests.”

Image [via](#) Twitter



Twitter has blocked the account of the Palestinian journalist and author Dr. Ramzy Baroud claiming that his recent posts about the Israeli attack on Gaza violated their rules. In his response, Baroud argued Twitter’s bias against Palestinian freedom of expression on the platform.<sup>209</sup>



A screengrab showing Baroud’s ban from Twitter and a Tweet from [Ramzy Baroud’s](#) Account announcing the lift of the ban and accusing Twitter of censoring him [via](#) Twitter.

<sup>207</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/24/middleeast/uae-ballistic-missiles-abu-dhabi-intl-hnk/index.html>

<sup>208</sup> <http://wam.ae/en/details/1395303015124>

<sup>209</sup> <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220811-twitter-blocks-prominent-palestinian-academic-ramzy-barouds-account/>

In line with previous reports, tech companies were [again criticized](#)<sup>210</sup> for allegedly suppressing Palestinian voices online. The freezing of social media accounts - and the blocking of content - on western owned platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Twitter, has led Palestinians to move to TikTok, Arab News [declared](#).<sup>211</sup>



Tweet by [Omar Ghraieb](#), Palestine based Policy and Campaigns Officer at Oxfam, [via](#) Twitter

[Kollona Amn](#) is an app that enables all citizens and residents in Saudi Arabia to “play the role of a police officer.”

Designed to encourage citizens to flag incidents like road accidents, critics [fear it's being used](#)<sup>212</sup> to encourage people to point to areas of dissent on social media.

“Despite billing itself as a utility app to speed up ‘rescue missions’, rights campaigners say it helps authorities cast a wider net for activists and dissidents seen as a threat to the Saudi government,” [writes](#)<sup>213</sup> Nazih Osseiran, for the Thomson Reuters Foundation (TRF).

Image [via](#) Twitter ([Context News](#) is run by TRF)



<sup>210</sup>

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-gaza-social-media-companies-accusations-silencing-voices>

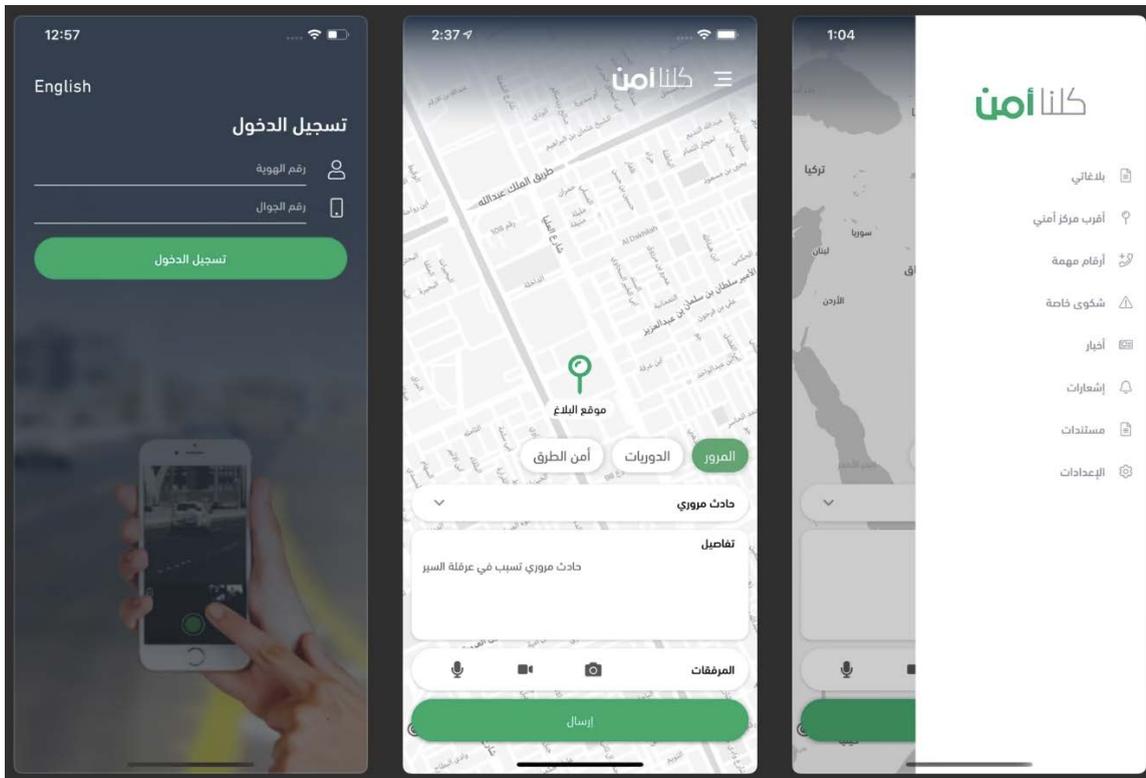
<sup>211</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2068206/middle-east>

<sup>212</sup>

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-gaza-social-media-companies-accusations-silencing-voices>

<sup>213</sup> <https://jp.reuters.com/article/saudi-tech-rights-idINL8N302364>

Alongside this, “Rights groups say government-employed Twitter trolls scour social media on the lookout for dissent, harassing anyone who appears to digress from the official line,” the article says.



*Kollona Amn app. Screenshot from the App Store*

**Iran imposed a near blackout of social media platforms such as Twitter following an outburst of anti-government protests across the country.**

A fierce battle to control the narrative is now being fought online,” CNN [wrote](#),<sup>214</sup> “where supporters and opponents of the government alike are taking to social media to tell their version of the truth and, in some cases, go beyond the truth.”

As part of this, the Iranian government is pushing citizens to use their own version of services like WhatsApp (the Iranian equivalent is called [Rubika](#)). However, these apps are vulnerable to surveillance and censorship, Scientific American [warns](#).<sup>215</sup>

At the same time, as [DW](#)<sup>216</sup> and the [BBC](#)<sup>217</sup> explored, opposition groups and activists argued that platforms such as Twitter and Instagram were removing some anti-Government content.

<sup>214</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2022/10/05/middleeast/social-media-disinformation-mime-intl/index.html>

<sup>215</sup>

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/how-iran-is-using-the-protests-to-block-more-open-internet-access/>

<sup>216</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-are-social-media-platforms-censoring-dissent/a-63347228>

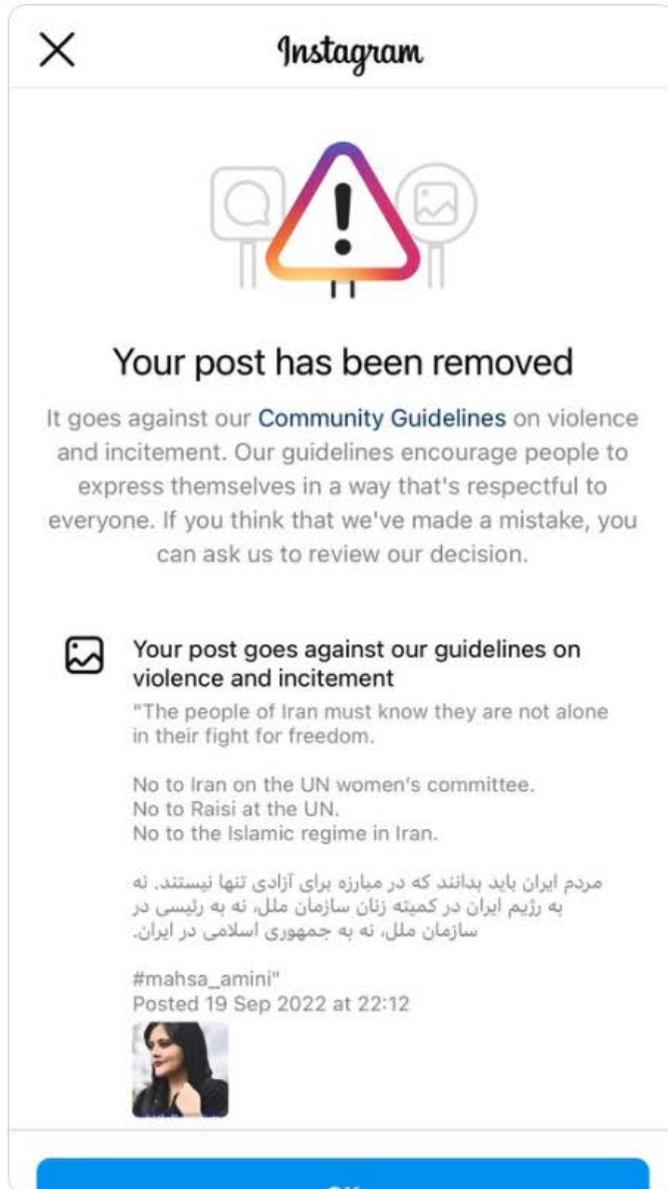
<sup>217</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-62996100>



Emily Schrader - امیلی شرایدر امیلی شرایدر  
@emilyschrader

Instagram has removed my video about the murder of #MahsaAmini and telling the people of #Iran they are not alone. This video had 75k likes and over 1.8 million views. IG also doesn't allow me to appeal. This is from a VERIFIED account outside of Iran.

@instagram @Meta



10:33 AM · Sep 21, 2022

850 Retweets 105 Quotes 2,053 Likes 14 Bookmarks

... Although the Iranian government is enforcing the blackout in an effort to control the narrative, critics argue this will only encourage the protests to go.

[Dr. Babak RezaeeDaryakenari](#), and Iranian-born an Assistant Professor in the Institute of Political Science at Leiden University in the Netherlands, also [points to a tension](#)<sup>218</sup> for the Iranian authorities and their relationship with social media.

“There are millions of Iranians who generate something of an income through Instagram and other social media. For instance, by advertising their shops or the products that they sell. We are talking about one million direct jobs and eight million indirect ones. This puts the Iranian regime in a bind...”

The Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI) is just one body [tracking the blocking](#)<sup>219</sup> of major social media platforms as well as efforts to by-pass these controls.

“While some circumvention tools (such as [Psiphon](#) and [Tor](#)) seem to work in Iran, the [blocking of Google Play Store](#) and [Apple App Store](#) may limit Iranians’ ability to install or update apps,” they reflect. “Meanwhile, the [increased blocking of encrypted DNS services](#) in Iran raises alarms, because the blocking of encrypted DNS will make censorship circumvention – *in an already heavily censored environment* – harder.”

Image (left) [via](#) Twitter

<sup>218</sup>

<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/news/2022/11/iranian-regime-in-a-bind-you-cant-just-block-social-media>

<sup>219</sup> <https://ooni.org/post/2022-iran-blocks-social-media-mahsa-amini-protests/>

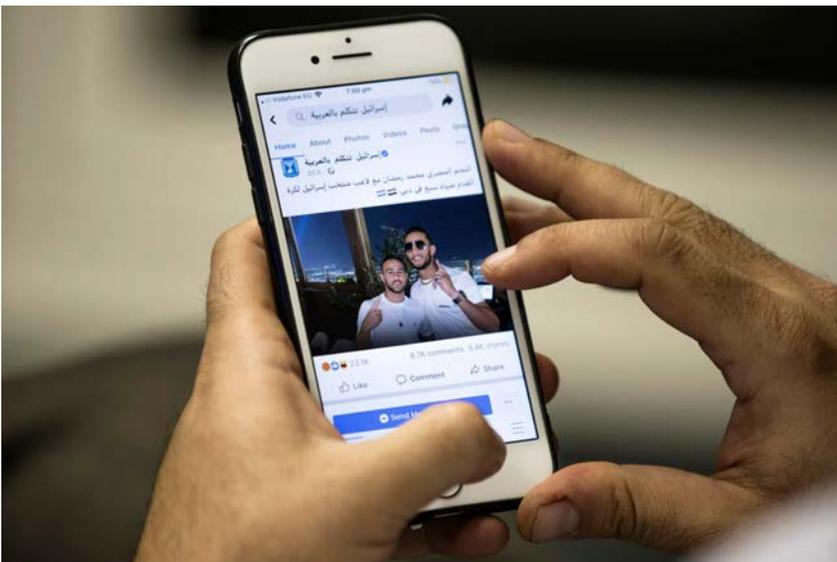
## 10. Fake News and Online Misinformation

*False information - intentional and accidental - continues to plague online consumers around the world, including in the MENA region.*

“Suspected Kremlin agents peddle falsehoods masquerading as Instagram models. The terrorist organization Hezbollah posts propaganda updates as if it were a news organization. More than 2 million Iraqis join Facebook groups where guns are bought and sold without checks.

Welcome to the world of Arabic-language social media — a Wild West where content moderation is minimal, foreign governments act with abandon, and jihadists foster online hate in arguably some of the world's most war-torn countries.”

This memorable opening featured in a Politico [article](#)<sup>220</sup> arguing that social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter have little effort in enforcing rules that restrict misinformation and politically divisive information in Arabic-language social media.



The claims are based on an analysis by [Digital Bridge](#), Politico's transatlantic tech newsletter, which highlighted issues such as “state-backed falsehoods,” lack of monitoring and disparities between how tech giants are addressing misinformation in major western markets and other parts of the world.

*Image via Khaled Desouki/AFP via Getty Images and [featured](#) in the Politico piece*

Meta, Facebook's parent company, has [determined](#)<sup>221</sup> that the U.S. military was behind a coordinated campaign that targeted several Middle Eastern countries including **Algeria, Iran, Iraq, and Syria**. Facebook reported that it removed 39 accounts, 16 pages, and two groups and 26 accounts on Instagram for their “coordinated inauthentic behavior.”

In total, Meta found about 22,000 accounts followed on one or more of these pages, approximately 400 joined at least one of those groups, and around 12,000 accounts followed one or more of the Instagram accounts.

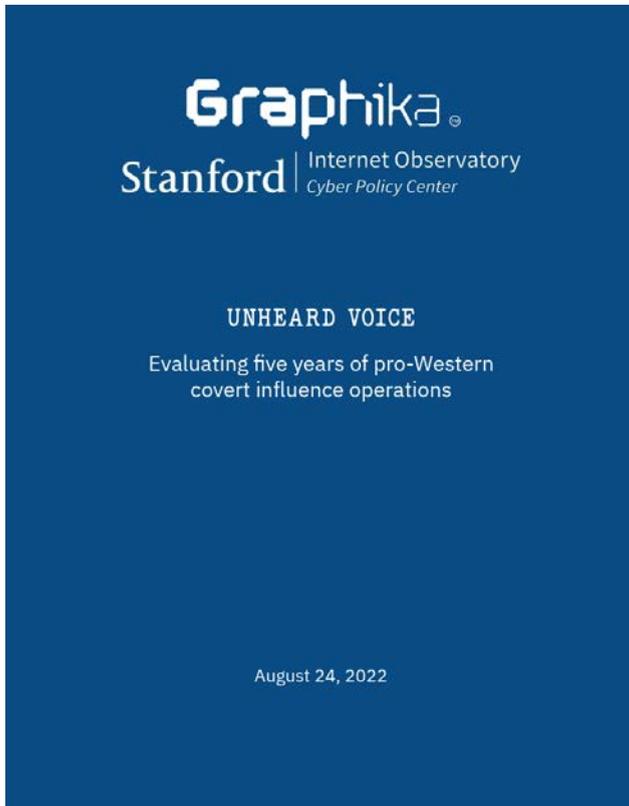
<sup>220</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/social-media-arabic-twitter-facebook-content-moderation/>

<sup>221</sup>

<https://therecord.media/facebook-attributes-fake-social-media-campaign-targeting-middle-east-to-us-military/>

“The people behind this network posed as locals in the countries they targeted,” Meta said in their [report](#).<sup>222</sup> “Some of these accounts used profile photos likely generated using machine learning techniques like GAN (generative adversarial networks).”

“Typically, each cluster posted about particular themes,” they added, “including sports and culture in a particular country; cooperation with the United States, including military cooperation; and criticism of Iran, China, or Russia.”



“With few exceptions, the study of modern IO (online influence operations) has overwhelmingly focused on activity linked to authoritarian regimes in countries such as Russia, China, and Iran,” notes Graphika and the Stanford Internet Observatory, “with recent growth in research on the integral role played by private entities.”

Their August 2022 report, “[Unheard Voice](#)” points out<sup>223</sup> that this is a global phenomenon, and “the wider range of actors engaged in active operations to influence online audiences.”

*Image screenshot of the report cover*

**Turkey’s parliament adopted a new law that could jail journalists and social media users for up to three years for spreading disinformation.** However, the law’s Article 29 has raised concerns over freedom of expression as there is no clear definition of what constitutes false or misleading information, [Reuters says](#).<sup>224</sup>

**Two months later, in December 2022, a Turkish court ordered the arrest of a Sinan Aygul, journalist in southeast Turkey, on charges of spreading disinformation on social media.**<sup>225</sup> Aygul’s arrest comes after he tweeted that a 14-year-old girl was allegedly abused by men including police officers and military personnel. He later retracted the story and apologized for publishing it without confirming it with authorities first. **In February 2023, he was purportedly sentenced to 10 months in prison** the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) [shared](#).<sup>226</sup> Aygül is the first journalist, that they have documented, to be prosecuted under this new law.

<sup>222</sup>

<https://about.fb.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Quarterly-Adversarial-Threat-Report-Q2-2022-1.pdf>

<sup>223</sup> <https://purl.stanford.edu/nj914nx9540>

<sup>224</sup>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/law-that-would-jail-those-spreading-disinformation-progress-es-turkey-2022-10-13/>

<sup>225</sup>

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/first-turkish-court-arrests-journalist-under-disinformation-law-2022-12-15/>

<sup>226</sup>

<https://cpj.org/2023/02/turkish-journalist-sinan-aygul-sentenced-to-10-months-in-prison-under-new-disinformation-law/>

In a similar vein, the **Israeli authorities are preparing to pass a bill that, if approved, will allow the Israeli government to remove any social media content they believe constitutes incitement or causes harm.** Arab News [reports](#)<sup>227</sup> that the bill will also allow the authorities to block content on all websites including news sites.

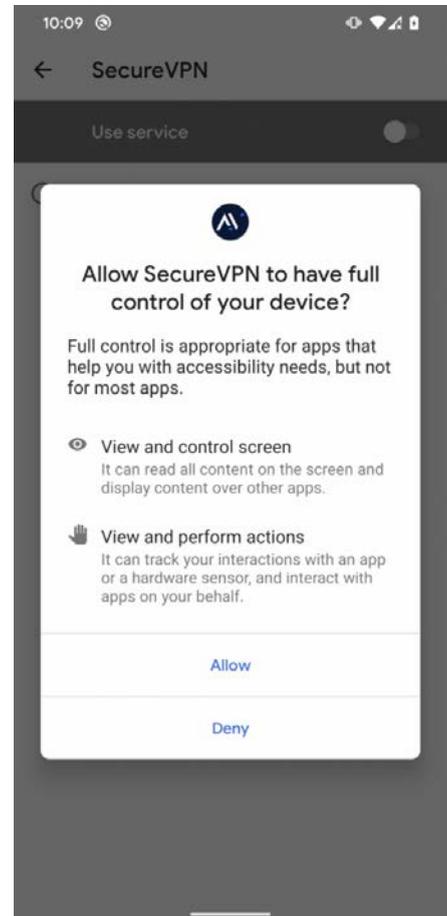
**A new report from ESET,**<sup>228</sup> an IT security software and services provider, found that **Android users in the Middle East and South Asia were being targeted by a government-linked group with spyware posing as a fake SecureVPN website.**

The malware has no association with SecureVPN and is distributed through a fake SecureVPN website as trojanized versions of two legitimate apps – [SoftVPN](#) and [OpenVPN](#). It was also distributed through two legitimate VPN apps, they explain.

**“Malware is able to exfiltrate sensitive data such as contacts, SMS messages, call logs, device location, and recorded phone calls.**

**It can also actively spy on chat messages exchanged through very popular messaging apps including Signal, Viber, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook Messenger,”** the author’s comment.

*Image source: ESET*



An assistant professor of Middle East Studies and Digital Humanities at Doha’s Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Dr. Marc Owen Jones, [shared](#) that **an army of Twitter sockpuppets usually impersonating female characters are helping drive propaganda messages across the Middle East.** According to Jones, the use of female sock puppets was designed to attract men and aimed at having a “disarming effect” on Twitter users.<sup>229</sup>

Writing for Time, Owen Jones [argued](#)<sup>230</sup> that **“when it comes to social media manipulation, the US needs to look closer at its allies, not just its enemies.”** “Authoritarian regimes in the Gulf, along with Western companies and expertise, are [using digital technology](#) and social media to try and hack democracy wherever they find it, including in the U.S.,” he wrote.

<sup>227</sup> <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2127121/media>

<sup>228</sup>

<https://therecord.media/android-users-in-middle-east-south-asia-targeted-with-spyware-posing-as-fake-vpn-apps>

<sup>229</sup>

<https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/young-female-and-fake-a-guide-to-online-disinformation-in-the-middle-east-53504>

<sup>230</sup> <https://time.com/6206725/disinformation-middle-east-allies-russia/>

“The effect is clearest, however, in the Middle East,” he added, noting the shift from the optimism of the Arab Spring and the excitement at that time of social media as a tool for good. “With critics silenced through incarceration, surveillance, torture, or death, opposition voices are increasingly fearful of self-expression, meaning that the digital public sphere is simply a space to praise the regime or engage in banal platitudes.”



*Tweet 2 of 16 Jones published on his [account](#) examining and identifying MENA sockpuppet networks. Screenshot via [Twitter](#).*

“Yemen’s horrifying civil war is paralleled by a second conflict in the information space—in digital and traditional media and over control of the internet itself,” [writes](#)<sup>231</sup> the political scientist [Robert Muggah](#) in Foreign Policy. “As we all know by now, persistent contact with fake news is disruptive even in stable contexts. In war zones, it can be lethal,” he adds.

“Fortunately, a generation of tech-savvy Yemini activists is taking the lead in pushing back against digital harms,” he observes.

“Young Yemenis are leveraging Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok to advocate for more attention to the crisis. Some users are weaving hard facts and figures about the armed conflict into catchy mini-videos reaching hundreds of thousands of viewers. Their efforts—together with outside support to bolster trusted networks and promote awareness of online influence operations—will help Yemenis build immunity against the digital warfare that is inflaming local grievances and prolonging the conflict.”

<sup>231</sup> <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/01/06/yemen-war-internet-media-houthis-iran-saudi-arabia/>

## About the Authors and Report Team

[Damian Radcliffe](#) is a journalist, researcher, and professor [based at the University of Oregon](#). He holds an endowed chair as the Carolyn S. Chambers Professor in Journalism, and he is also a Professor of Practice, an affiliate faculty member of the Department for Middle East and North Africa Studies (MENA) and the Agora Journalism Center, and a Research Associate of the Center for Science Communication Research (SCR).



Damian is a three time [Knight News Innovation Fellow](#) at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University, an [Honorary Research Fellow](#) at Cardiff University's School of Journalism, Media and Culture Studies (JOMEC), and a life fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (RSA).

In spring 2023 he will be a Visiting Fellow at the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, his alma mater.

With over 25 years of experience in the media industry, Damian has worked in editorial, strategic, research, policy and teaching roles in the USA, Middle East and UK. He continues to be an [active journalist](#), writing regular features for leading trade publications such as [Digital Content Next](#), [International Journalists' Network \(IJNet\)](#), [What's New in Publishing](#), [journalism.co.uk](#) and [other outlets](#).

He is a globally recognized expert on digital trends, social media, technology, the business of media, the evolution of present-day journalistic practice and the role played by media and technology in the Middle East.

Damian has produced an annual report charting social media developments across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since 2012; and he wrote a [monthly column](#) on technology in the MENA region for [ZDNet](#) between December 2013 and May 2022. 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.

As an analyst, researcher and trainer, he has worked with a range of industry and academic organizations including the BBC World Service, Facebook, FIPP, INMA, Thomson Reuters Foundation, World Association of News Publishers (WAN-IFRA) and the United Nations.

He has been quoted on issues relating to digital media and journalism by major outlets such as AFP, BBC, Business Insider, Editor & Publisher, NPR, The New York Times, Snapchat, Wired and Voice of America. As a freelance journalist his work has also been published by leading publications and trade outlets such as the BBC, Columbia Journalism Review (CJR), Harvard's Nieman Lab, HuffPost, PBS MediaShift, Poynter, TheMediaBriefing and ZDNet.

Originally from the UK, Damian lives on the west coast of the US with his wife and three young children. He tweets [@damianradcliffe](#).

[Hadil Abuhmaid](#) is a Media Studies Doctoral Candidate at the University of Oregon, Oregon. This is the fourth annual social media report she has co-authored with Damian Radcliffe

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 identity and self-representation.

Through her research, Hadil aims at examining the effects of soft and hard borders constructed by the occupation on the formation and self-representation of the national identity in Palestinian feature films produced post-second *Intifada*.

Her research interests include cinema studies, diasporic studies, race and representation, and national identity.

In addition to academic work, Hadil is a member of the Graduate School Advisory Board at the University of Oregon, a member of the Student Advisory Board for the Office of the Dean of Students, a member of Rehearsals for Life; a theater ensemble made up of graduate students that utilizes applied theater to inspire dialogue and provide experiential learning experiences around issues of diversity, equity and access across campus and beyond, and a board member of Creating Connections; a graduate student group that supports traditionally marginalized populations in U.S. higher education.

[Nii Mahliaire](#) is a Ph.D. Candidate in Communication and Media Studies at the University of Oregon. They are proudly enrolled in the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior (Ojibwe) having grown up in Northern Minnesota, surrounded by a wonderful community and traditional Indigenous values.

She graduated from Bemidji State University with a B.S. in Mass Communication and a B.F.A. in Creative and Professional Writing.

Her focus is on Health Communication. Nii provided Damian and Hadil with additional research support for this report.



# Previous Annual Research Reports

## **How the Middle East Uses Social Media: 2021 edition**

By Damian Radcliffe with Hadil Abuhmaid

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## **How the Middle East used Social Media in 2020**

By Damian Radcliffe and Hadil Abuhmaid

Available in [English](#) and [Arabic](#) from the [New Media Academy](#) website. Also available via [University of Oregon Scholars' Bank](#), [ResearchGate](#), [Academia.edu](#), [SlideShare](#) and [SSRN](#).

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**Reports produced by Damian Radcliffe for Qatar's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology ([ictQATAR](#)):**

**2013 Social Media in the Middle East: The Story of 2013** ([English](#), [Arabic](#))

**2012 Social Media in the MENA – 2012 Review** ([English](#), [Arabic](#))

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This report is being hosted by the [University of Oregon-UNESCO Crossings Institute](#).

The University of Oregon-UNESCO Crossings Institute for Conflict-Sensitive Reporting and Intercultural Dialogue was launched at the University of Oregon in 2013 with offices at the School of Journalism and Communication Turnbull Center in the White Stag block in Portland and on the University of Oregon campus.

It continues the work begun by the UO's Center for Intercultural Dialogue – which was established in 2008 to engage students, faculty and community members in building a global community through education and dialogue.

The faculty directors at the University of Oregon are [Peter Laufer](#), the James Wallace Chair Professor in Journalism, School of Journalism and Communication; and [Steven Shankman](#), Professor Emeritus, UNESCO Chair in Trans-cultural Studies, Inter-religious Dialogue, and Peace; Distinguished Professor of English and Classics; Participating Faculty Member, Comparative Literature.

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With a century-long history, the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication is one of the first professional journalism schools in the country, the only accredited comprehensive journalism program to include advertising and public relations in the Pacific Northwest, and one of only 112 accredited programs worldwide.

It is home to nearly 2,000 undergraduate students in four majors and more than 150 graduate students in six programs, supported by over 75 instructional faculty members and 35 staff.

Founded in 1916 by renowned newspaper journalist Eric W. Allen, the SOJC is built on a legacy of ethics, innovation, action, and excellence that's over a century in the making. is a community dedicated to excellence in learning, research, and creative projects.

The SOJC studies issues that champion freedom of expression, diversity and equity, and democracy in service to current and future generations. By integrating theory and practice, we advance scholarship and prepare students to become professional communicators, critical thinkers, and responsible citizens in a global society.

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