SHRINKING DEMOCRACY, GROWING VIOLENCE

Internet shutdowns in 2023
Overview of 2023 data

Documented internet shutdowns by year *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total number of shutdowns</th>
<th>Total number of shutdowns, not including India</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>221</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>194</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>216</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These numbers reflect the latest data available as of publication of this report and include updates to previously published totals for past years.

Number of countries where shutdowns occurred

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2021</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2022</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2023</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

India: 116
Myanmar: 37
Iran: 34
Palestine: 16 **
Ukraine: 8 **
Pakistan: 7
Iraq: 6
Azerbaijan: 5
Ethiopia: 4
Senegal: 4

Bangladesh: 3
Russia: 3
Jordan: 3
Libya: 3
China: 2
Guinea: 2
Mauritania: 2
Oman: 2
Tanzania: 2
Turkmenistan: 2
Sudan: 2
Syria: 2
Türkiye: 2
Algeria: 1
Brazil: 1
Cuba: 1
Gabon: 1
Indonesia: 1
Kenya: 1
Lebanon: 1
Mozambique: 1
Nepal: 1
Qatar: 1
Saudi Arabia: 1
Somaliland: 1
Suriname: 1
United Arab Emirates: 1
Uganda: 1
Venezuela: 1

** Shutdowns were imposed by external parties in Palestine and Ukraine.
### Shutdown trends in 2023

1. **Shutdowns continue to shroud grave human rights abuses and violence**

   - **51 shutdowns in 11 countries** coinciding with documented grave human rights abuses ***
   - Azerbaijan, Ethiopia, Iran, Jordan, Mauritania, Myanmar, Palestine, Russia, Somaliland, Sudan, Ukraine

   *** Grave human rights abuses include cases where there is evidence of violence, including murder, torture, rape, or apparent war crimes by governments, militaries, and police or security forces.

2. **Authorities must refrain from normalizing platform blocks**

   - **53 blocks across 25 countries in 2023**, up from **39 blocks across 29 countries in 2022**

   - Grindr is the second-most blocked messaging platform outside of India after Facebook, impacting people in **12 countries and targeting LGBTQ+ spaces**
   - China, Indonesia, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, Türkiye, United Arab Emirates

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### Shutdown triggers in 2023

#### Conflicts

- **74 shutdowns in 9 countries during conflicts**
- **63 shutdowns in 15 countries during protests**
- **12 shutdowns in 6 countries “to prevent exam cheating”**
- **5 shutdowns in 5 countries tied to elections**

#### Protests

- **63 shutdowns in 15 countries during protests**
- **2022: 63**
- **2021: 39**
- **2020: 16**
- **2019: 65**
- **2018: 45**
- **2017: 37**
- **2016: 27**

#### Exams

- **12 shutdowns in 6 countries “to prevent exam cheating”**
- **2023:**
- **2022:**
- **2021:**
- **2020:**
- **2019:**
- **2018:**
- **2017:**
- **2016:**

#### Elections

- **5 shutdowns in 5 countries tied to elections**
- **2023:**
- **2022:**
- **2021:**
- **2020:**
- **2019:**
- **2018:**
- **2017:**
- **2016:**

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**Emerging trigger in 2023:**

- **Natural disasters**
  - **4 shutdowns in 4 countries during natural disasters**

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**shutdown triggers in 2023**

**Emerging trigger in 2023:**

- **Natural disasters**
  - **4 shutdowns in 4 countries during natural disasters**
3. Worst offenders are entrenched and emboldened in the use of shutdowns

- **1,153 days** since Nov. 4, 2020: Tigray, Ethiopia
- **864 days** since Aug. 2021: Dozens of townships across Myanmar
- **694 days** since Feb. 2022: Panjgur, Pakistan
- **35 shutdowns** persisted from 2023 into 2024

****Number of days as of Dec. 31, 2023

4. The geographic scope of shutdowns is broadening

In 2023, only **30.4%** of all shutdowns were on the smallest scale (only affecting one city, county, or village), whereas **46.8%** of all shutdowns were on this scale in 2022.

**80** shutdowns impacted multiple regions or entire countries, the highest number of such shutdowns recorded since 2016.

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Since 2016

- **1,458 shutdowns** around the world
- **82 countries** affected
- **334 #KeepItOn coalition members** from **106 countries**

New offenders in 2023

- **Kenya *******
- **Mozambique**
- **Nepal**
- **Suriname**

**** First shutdown imposed by the government of Kenya; previous shutdowns in 2020 were imposed by a third party

- **Lebanon**
- **Qatar**
- **United Arab Emirates**

Countries with multi-year platform blocks in place appearing in the STOP database for the first time
INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN 2023

### Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

#### Regional overview in 2023

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2021</th>
<th>2022</th>
<th>2023</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>29 shutdowns</td>
<td>44 shutdowns</td>
<td>77 shutdowns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Palestine</td>
<td>14 countries</td>
<td>15 countries</td>
<td>15 countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total shutdowns</td>
<td>77 shutdowns in 15 countries</td>
<td>44 shutdowns in 15 countries</td>
<td>77 shutdowns in 15 countries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 2023, people across the MENA region faced an onslaught of violence and upheaval, including the outbreak of conflict between competing military factions in Sudan and Israel’s war in Gaza following the Hamas attack on October 7. The region also saw devastating natural disasters in Libya, Syria, Iraq, and Türkiye and a continued crackdown on protesters and women in Iran. Amid these tumultuous and tragic developments that have resulted in some of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history — including tens of thousands of deaths, famine, and displacement of millions across the region — authorities tightened control over the flow of information, causing further havoc and suffering.

In 2023, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition documented 77 shutdowns in 15 countries — the highest annual number of both shutdown incidents and perpetrators on record in the region since 2016. In 2022, we documented 44 shutdowns in 15 countries. Iran, which is known for its repressive tactics, accounted for 34 shutdowns in 2023, most of which targeted protesters. Israel perpetrated all 16 shutdowns recorded in Palestine as part of its attack on the Gaza Strip.

The increasing deployment of internet shutdowns during armed conflicts, continued use of shutdowns during exams, and targeting of vulnerable groups in the MENA region in the past few years is alarming and must be condemned by all actors.

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Palestine

Since Hamas attacked Israel on October 7, 2023, the Israeli military has committed unspeakable horrors against Palestinians in the Gaza Strip. As we write, the official death toll exceeding 30,000 people is still climbing daily as thousands more remain missing under the rubble. Israeli authorities have systematically impeded entry of humanitarian aid, including food, water, and healthcare, while destroying all essential civilian infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, including telecommunications, hospitals, and schools. Israeli's incessant disruption of humanitarian and emergency aid in Gaza is severely limiting people's access to food, spurring the World Health Organization (WHO) to warn of looming famine and starvation that put children especially at risk. UN human rights experts have issued stark warnings about the potential genocide in the Gaza Strip, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has ordered Israel to respect and uphold its binding obligations to prevent genocide, and the UN Security Council has passed a resolution calling for a "lasting sustainable ceasefire." Access Now supports this call.

Since the start of the war, Israeli authorities have weaponized internet shutdowns through a range of tactics, including imposing intermittent communications blackouts coinciding with intense bombing and shelling, destroying telecommunications infrastructure, cutting off traffic to individual internet service providers (ISPs), and blocking access to fuel required to power telecommunications services. Together, these shutdowns have kept people in Gaza almost entirely in the dark and have cut them off from an essential lifeline.

Starting on October 9, at least 15 out of the 19 ISPs in Gaza were facing complete shutdown of their mobile and broadband services, while the remaining four were encountering substantial, though differing, degrees of disruption, affecting millions across the Gaza Strip. Throughout the rest of the year, and with heavy bombardment continuing and fuel depleting, internet traffic in the Gaza Strip significantly plummeted, with at least eight full communication blackouts for the entirety of the Strip occurring between October and December. Israel has also reportedly targeted repair workers attempting to restore internet access after the destruction. This includes two workers from Palestinian telecom provider Jawwal who were killed when an Israeli missile hit their car on January 13,


4 Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (@DrTedros). X post. 12:22 pm. March 6, 2024. https://x.com/DrTedros/status/176532292197261356


10 Ibid.

while they were traveling to repair telecommunications infrastructure in Khan Yunis. These ongoing internet shutdowns deepen the suffering of people in Gaza, and make the work of UN bodies and humanitarian organizations to assist over two million people — 85% of whom are internally displaced, starved, and traumatized — an “impossible mission.”

While people in Gaza struggled to stay connected and get help, major social media platforms were simultaneously censoring Palestinian and pro-Palestinian voices on their platforms. Since October 7, advocates have faced increased censorship online. This censorship has been particularly heavy on Meta-owned platforms Facebook and Instagram, where activists have documented systematic silencing of Palestinian voices through arbitrary content removals, suspension of prominent Palestinian and Palestine-related accounts, restrictions on pro-Palestinian users and content, and shadow-banning. Through the #StopSilencingPalestine campaign, Access Now and our partners have called on Meta to put an end to its long-standing practice of censoring Palestinian voices and to overhaul its content moderation policies.

Sudan

In Sudan, the ongoing conflict between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) has taken a devastating toll, claiming at least 12,000 lives by the end of 2023, with the numbers of people killed, injured, and displaced continuing to climb daily. The tragic situation has led to what experts describe as “one of the world's worst” humanitarian crises. Within Sudan, more than nine million people have been forced to flee their homes, with the World Food Program (WFP) warning of an impending hunger crisis of unprecedented proportions. We recorded at least two shutdowns in 2023 during this conflict, but the impact on telecommunications services has been more far-reaching than has been possible to document and verify under current conditions. Major shutdowns continue in 2024, including a month-long shutdown starting in February which impacted the entire country after the RSF reportedly took over telecommunications facilities in Khartoum.

Sudanese authorities have a long history of using internet shutdowns to curtail fundamental human rights, control the narrative during turmoil, and cover up atrocities. The warring parties in Sudan have weaponized internet shutdowns by instructing

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telecommunications companies to limit access or by damaging ISP data centers — a tactic to gain control and impede the free flow of information in areas controlled by opposing factions.\textsuperscript{23} When fighting between the ruling SAF and paramilitary groups led by the RSF broke out in Khartoum on April 15, 2023, SAF authorities immediately ordered telecommunications providers to shut down their services nationwide.\textsuperscript{24}

With hundreds dead and millions trapped in their homes in Khartoum running low on food and water amid the fighting, a tense 72-hour ceasefire was set to begin the night of April 24.\textsuperscript{26} In the hours leading up to the ceasefire deadline, yet another nationwide blackout went into place across multiple providers.\textsuperscript{26} At the same time, in the city of El Geneina in West Darfur, RSF fighters began escalating attacks on civilians as SAF forces withdrew to their base, leaving the community to fend for themselves.\textsuperscript{27} This was the start of a months-long reign of terror claiming at least 10,000 lives, with reports of mass killings, rampant sexual violence, forced labor, and other war crimes and crimes against humanity.\textsuperscript{28} During this period, fighting between RSF and SAF forces caused significant damage to telecommunications infrastructure, contributing to ongoing intermittent blackouts and overall degradation of connectivity.\textsuperscript{29} These disruptions severely limited people’s ability to access essential information and to communicate with the world about the crimes being perpetrated.

Witness reports also point to a clear strategy by RSF fighters to cover up their attacks on civilians and to prevent documentation, including by confiscating mobile devices during raids on people’s homes and at checkpoints where people were trying to flee the city.\textsuperscript{30} Militarily, RSF and SAF forces continued to weaponize internet shutdowns during the ongoing conflict, worsening the suffering of millions who were cut off from the world once again.\textsuperscript{31}

**Iran**

In 2023, Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition recorded a surge in internet shutdowns in Iran, reaching \textsuperscript{34} compared to \textsuperscript{19} in 2022.\textsuperscript{33} Iran continued its oppressive tactics with internet shutdowns and platform blocking, a trend that intensified following protests responding to the tragic death of Mahsa

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\textsuperscript{26} Cloudflare Radar (@cloudflareradar). X post. 11:09 pm. April 23, 2023. https://x CloudflareRadar/status/1650275825126629377


INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN 2023

Iranian authorities use a range of methods to interfere with internet access, silence people, and stifle dissent, from shutting down the global internet to force people onto the highly censored national intranet, to restricting mobile access and blocking social media and messaging platforms. In 2023, this authoritarian approach reached its peak during protests and crackdowns on ethnic minorities, with at least 28 shutdowns coinciding with weekly protests during Friday prayers in Sistan and Baluchistan.

Throughout 2023, Iranian authorities maintained long-standing blocks of specific apps and services, such as Signal, which has been restricted since January 2021, and WhatsApp, Instagram, Skype, LinkedIn, and Viber, all of which have been restricted since 2022. Iranians rely heavily on the internet and these platforms for organizing protests, communicating, and sharing important information.

Iran has also expanded its use of internet shutdowns in other contexts. In January 2023, authorities disrupted local internet access during university admission exams in an attempt to prevent leaking of exam questions and other forms of cheating. This caused significant disruption, negatively impacting businesses and people residing in those areas.

Authorities also cut internet access in Kurdistan in November, aligning with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi’s visit.

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41 Ibid.
Authorities in the MENA region have clung to using internet shutdowns as a method to stop cheating during exams, which has proven to be disproportionate, draconian, and a violation of human rights. Not only do these shutdowns disrupt businesses, banking, emergency services, and people’s daily lives, they have failed to stop cheating or leaking of exam questions.\textsuperscript{43} Our monitoring underscores the need for governments and educational leaders to identify measures to address cheating that do not have broad negative impacts for entire populations.\textsuperscript{44} The governments of Iraq, Syria, Algeria, and Iran imposed a total of 10 shutdowns during exams in 2023.


INTERNET SHUTDOWNS IN 2023

Iraqi officials ignored the public outcry against the use of shutdowns during exams, disrupting internet access on six occasions during academic exams in February, June, July, August (including platform blocks), and much of September. This resulted in 58 total exam periods where the internet was shut down, with seven affecting Kurdistan alone, eight impacting all states except Kurdistan, and 43 impacting the entire country. Iraq's Ministry of Education persisted in requesting the shutdowns despite the Ministry of Communication's initial commitment to ensure open and secure internet access throughout the exam period, and ultimately got its request fulfilled, failing the test for respecting human rights.

Authorities in Syria disrupted internet access on two occasions during exams, while Algerian and Iranian authorities each perpetrated one exam shutdown. Syria, which has a long history of imposing exam-related shutdowns, enforced nationwide internet blackouts on June 25 and 26, imposing a three-and-a-half-hour blackout each day. The government of Algeria flipped the kill switch for five consecutive days during national exams on June 11–15. And as we note above, Iranian authorities cut access for university exams in January, but officials in the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology were reportedly able to prevent additional disruptions during the July exam period.

Jordan and Mauritania, which have imposed exam shutdowns in the past, seem to be departing from such restrictive measures and showing a commitment to finding alternatives that respect people's rights. Access Now, the Internet Society, and SMEX began the NoExam Shutdown campaign in 2023 to encourage more of these countries to do the same, and in 2024, we will continue to advocate for an end to exam-related shutdowns across the MENA region and beyond.

**Platform blocks and other events**

In 2023, nine countries across MENA — Iraq, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — continued to block access to digital communications platforms that facilitate people's access to information and discourse on national issues. Grindr, a social networking app for gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, is blocked in eight countries. Seven of these blocks have been ongoing for years (Iran, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, UAE) and were retroactively added to our STOP dataset in 2023.

Authorities in Jordan began blocking access to Grindr for the first time, as one of their three shutdowns in

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49 ZoomIT (2023). *Ministry of Communications: Internet will not be interrupted for any test.* [https://www.zoomit.ir/tech-iran/405167-internet-outage-final-exam/]


51 Supra note 44.

2023, expanding the list of social media apps banned in the country, which includes TikTok and Clubhouse.\(^{53}\) The blocking of Grindr came as part of a wave of attacks — including calls to criminalize homosexuality by the country’s conservative parliamentarians — against the country’s LGBTQ+ community.\(^{54}\) In recent times, Jordan has seen a hike in the level of hate speech and threats against members of the LGBTQ+ community and its supporters on social media sites.\(^{55}\)

Authorities in Jordan also continue to block VPNs, a practice that has been ongoing for years.\(^{56}\) Many widely used VPN services and servers remain inaccessible, and further restrictions have been imposed under Jordan’s new cybercrime law passed in 2023. Article 12 of the law stipulates penalties for IP address circumvention, making it more risky for people to use tools that allow them to bypass blocking, such as VPNs, proxies, and Tor.\(^{57}\) This comes at a time when Jordan is blocking more websites, such as the satirical news website AlHudood, which has been blocked since June 2023.\(^{58}\)

When southern and central Türkiye and northern and western Syria were hit by series of earthquakes on February 6, 2023, which killed over 55,000 people, authorities in Türkiye began blocking access to social media platform X (formerly Twitter), thereby denying people access to critical information regarding relief or humanitarian assistance.\(^{59}\) In an unrelated incident, just a few months later, in the lead-up to Türkiye’s 2023 national elections, authorities issued threats of throttling against platforms for non-compliance with content removal demands. X publicly disclosed that Turkish authorities singled it out as the only platform not complying with removal requests, influencing X’s decision to take action on the content.\(^{60}\)

In September in Libya, access to the internet was disrupted for at least 42 hours following the flooding disaster in Derna, one of the cities hit hardest by floods that claimed at least 11,300 lives and displaced 43,000 others.\(^{61}\) Although the government said the internet disruption was a result of cut fiber optic cables, the shutdown occurred amid large protests demanding answers about the catastrophic flood and burst dams, and while authorities reportedly asked journalists to leave the city during these protests,\(^{62}\) Internet access was restored on September 19, following a wave of criticism against the government.\(^{63}\) The incident only underscores the value of the internet and digital platforms as a critical lifeline for people to access information during crises.

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55 Ibid.

56 7iber (2021). About blocking of virtual private networks (VPN) in Jordan. https://www.7iber.com/technology/%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%A3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%A9-vpn./


The #KeepItOn campaign unites and organizes global organizations and efforts to end internet shutdowns. The campaign was launched by a coalition of about 70 organizations in 2016 at RightsCon in Silicon Valley. Membership of the coalition has since increased rapidly to more than 334 members from 106 countries around the world ranging from civil society, rights, and advocacy groups to research centers, detection networks, foundations, and media organizations.

This report is a publication of Access Now for the #KeepItOn coalition and was written by Zach Rosson, Felicia Anthonio, and Carolyn Tackett in collaboration with the Access Now team.

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Design and data visualization by Loren Giordano and Sage Cheng.

A note on our data

This #KeepItOn report looks at incidents of internet shutdowns documented by Access Now and the #KeepItOn coalition in 2023. While we try to build a comprehensive database, our data relies on technical measurement as well as contextual information, such as news reports or personal accounts. The constraints of our methodology mean that there may be cases of internet shutdowns that have gone unreported, and numbers are likely to change if and when new information becomes available after publication. In 2023, we gained insight into shutdowns from previous years that were added to the dataset retrospectively, and documentation of these changes can be found here: https://accessnow.org/keepiton-data. All data below reflects the most up-to-date information as of publication.

Visit https://accessnow.org/keepiton-data-methodology for the latest information on our methodology, commonly asked questions, and ongoing work.

May 2024
Internet shutdowns in 2023

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#KeepItOn

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