

9/14/2021 Myanmar

8/26/2023 Gabon

023 Suriname

3/9/2023 Ukraine

2/26/2022 Russia

4/23/2023 Sudan

5/3/2023 India

10/20/2021 Turkmenistan

1/4/2020 Ethiopia

10/26/2023 Palestine

# SHRINKING DEMOCRACY, GROWING VIOLENCE

Internet shutdowns in 2023

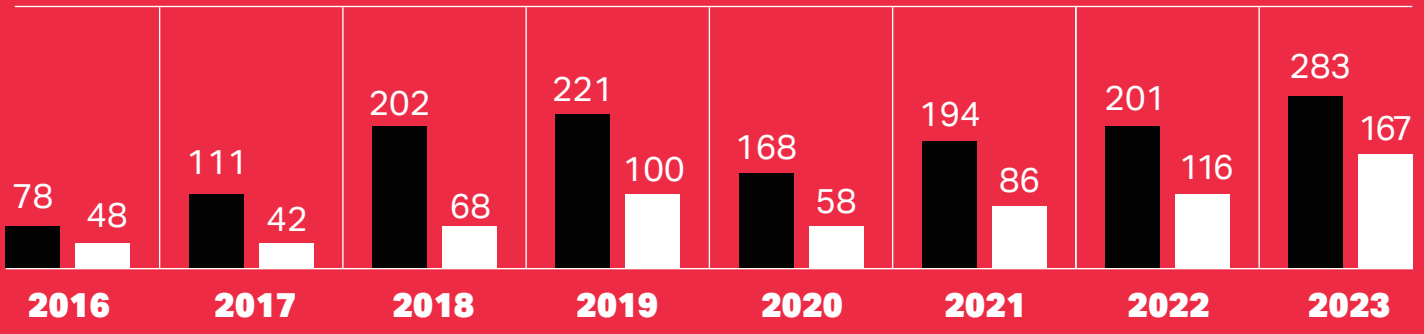
#KeepItOn 



# Overview of 2023 data

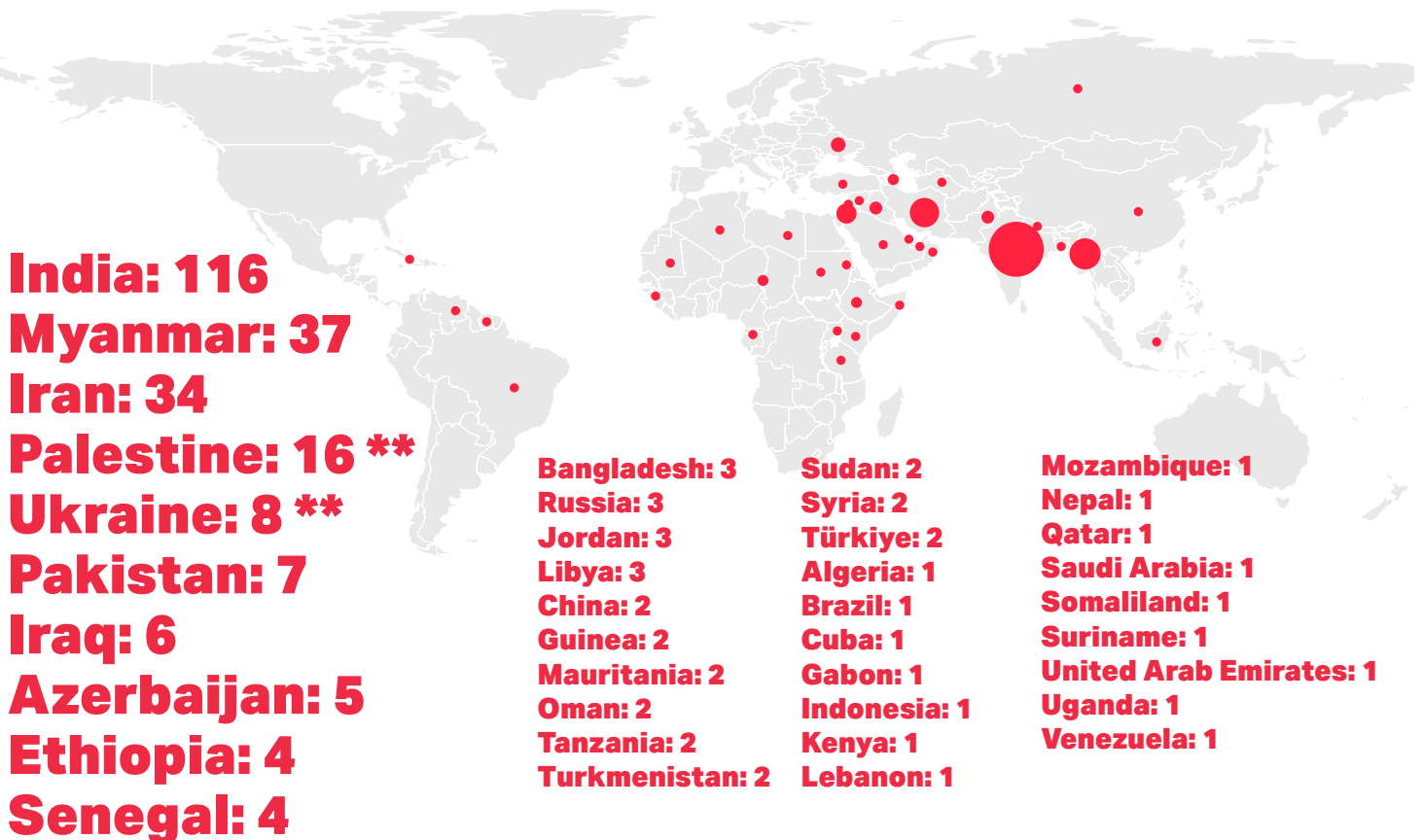
## Documented internet shutdowns by year \*

■ Total number of shutdowns  
 ■ Total number of shutdowns, not including India







































\* 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



\*\* Shutdowns were imposed by external parties in Palestine and Ukraine.

# Shutdown triggers in 2023

 Conflicts	 Protests	 Exams	 Elections
<b>74</b> shutdowns in <b>9</b> countries during conflicts	<b>63</b> shutdowns in <b>15</b> countries during protests	<b>12</b> shutdowns in <b>6</b> countries "to prevent exam cheating"	<b>5</b> shutdowns in <b>5</b> countries tied to elections
2023: <b>74</b> 	2023: <b>63</b> 	2023: <b>12</b> 	2023: <b>5</b> 
2022: <b>36</b> 	2022: <b>63</b> 	2022: <b>8</b> 	2022: <b>5</b> 
2021: <b>19</b> 	2021: <b>39</b> 	2021: <b>11</b> 	2021: <b>7</b> 
2020: <b>15</b> 	2020: <b>16</b> 	2020: <b>8</b> 	2020: <b>10</b> 
2019: <b>52</b> 	2019: <b>65</b> 	2019: <b>8</b> 	2019: <b>12</b> 
2018: <b>2</b> 	2018: <b>45</b> 	2018: <b>11</b> 	2018: <b>12</b> 
2017: <b>3</b> 	2017: <b>37</b> 	2017: <b>7</b> 	2017: <b>6</b> 
2016: <b>3</b> 	2016: <b>27</b> 	2016: <b>6</b> 	2016: <b>5</b> 

Emerging trigger in 2023:



**Natural disasters**

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

## 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

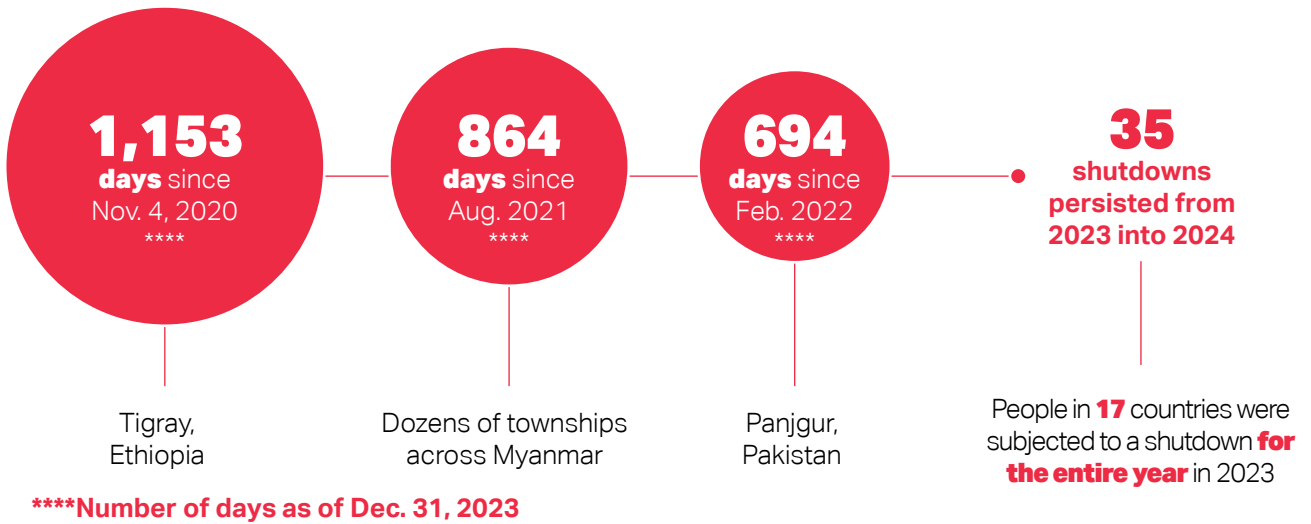
**53** blocks across **25** countries in 2023, up from **39** blocks across **29** countries in 2022

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



### 3. Worst offenders are entrenched and emboldened in the use of shutdowns



### 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.

#### 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**

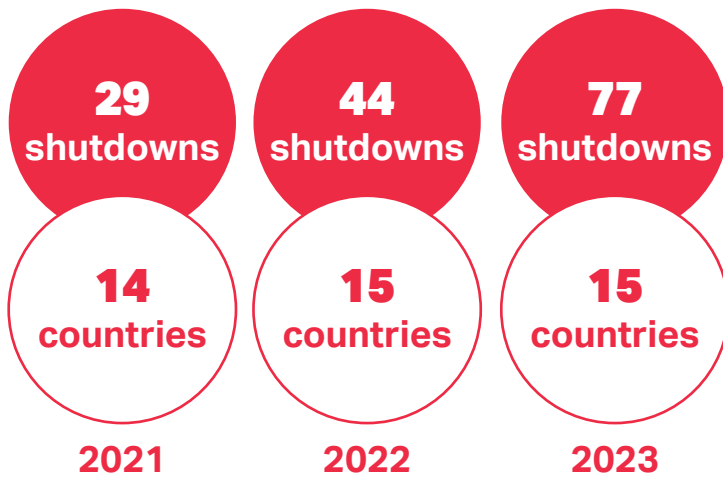
**Qatar**

**United Arab Emirates**

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

# Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

## Regional overview in 2023



**Iran: 34**

**Palestine: 16\***

\*all imposed by Israel

**Iraq: 6**

**Jordan: 3 Libya: 3 Mauritania: 2**  
**Oman: 2 Sudan: 2 Syria: 2**  
**Türkiye: 2 Algeria: 1 Lebanon: 1**  
**Qatar: 1 Saudi Arabia: 1**  
**United Arab Emirates: 1**

### Grindr is blocked in 8 countries:

Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Türkiye, United Arab Emirates

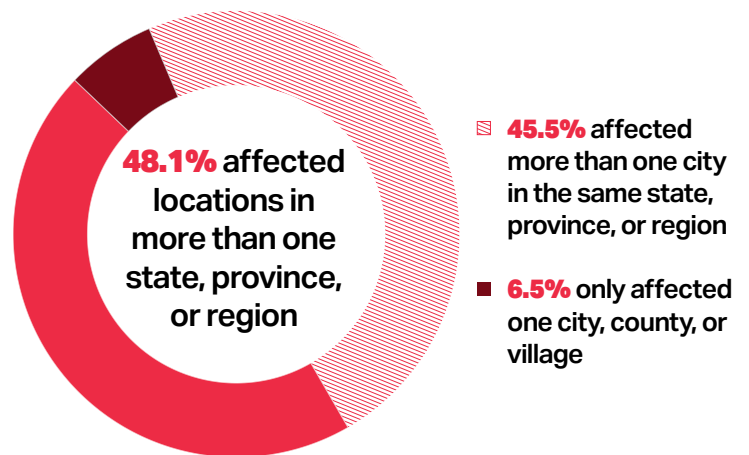
### Shutdowns during natural disasters:



Earthquake  
in Türkiye  
and Iraq



Floods  
in Libya



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.<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>1</sup> Atlantic Council (2023). *2023: A year in the Middle East*.

<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/2023-a-year-in-the-middle-east>

## 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> Israel'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.<sup>4</sup> UN human rights experts have issued stark warnings about the potential genocide in the Gaza Strip,<sup>5</sup> the International Court of Justice (ICJ) has ordered Israel to respect and uphold its binding obligations to prevent genocide,<sup>6</sup> and the UN Security Council has passed a resolution calling for a "lasting sustainable ceasefire."<sup>7</sup> Access Now supports this call.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> 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.<sup>11</sup> 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,

<sup>2</sup> NPR (2024). *Gaza's death toll now exceeds 30,000. Here's why it's an incomplete count.* <https://www.npr.org/2024/02/29/1234159514/gaza-death-toll-30000-palestinians-israel-hamas-war>

<sup>3</sup> Refugees International (2024). *Siege and Starvation: How Israel Obstructs Aid to Gaza.* <https://www.refugeesinternational.org/reports-briefs/siege-and-starvation-how-israel-obstructs-aid-to-gaza/>; BBC News (2024). *World Food Programme says northern Gaza aid convoy blocked.* <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-68486248>; International Rescue Committee (2024). *The collapse of Gaza's health system.* <https://www.rescue.org/article/collapse-gazas-health-system>; Human Rights Watch (2023). *Gaza: Unlawful Israeli Hospital Strikes Worsen Health Crisis.* <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/14/gaza-unlawful-israeli-hospital-strikes-worsen-health-crisis>; Al Jazeera (2024). *How Israel has destroyed Gaza's schools and universities.* <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/24/how-israel-has-destroyed-gazas-schools-and-universities>; Wired (2023). *The Destruction of Gaza's Internet Is Complete.* <https://www.wired.com/story/gaza-internet-blackout-israel/>; *Supra* note 10. Access Now (2023).

<sup>4</sup> Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus (@DrTedros). X post. 12:22 pm. March 6, 2024. <https://x.com/DrTedros/status/1765352292197261356>

<sup>5</sup> OHCHR (2023). *Gaza: UN experts call on international community to prevent genocide against the Palestinian people.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/11/gaza-un-experts-call-international-community-prevent-genocide-against>; OHCHR (2024). *States must adhere to obligations under Genocide Convention to prevent further loss of life in Gaza, says Special Rapporteur Francesca Albanese.* <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/03/states-must-adhere-obligations-under-genocide-convention-prevent-further>

<sup>6</sup> International Court of Justice (2024). *Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip (South Africa v. Israel): The Court indicates provisional measures.* <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-pre-01-00-en.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Amnesty International (2024). *UN resolution must pave way for enduring ceasefire to alleviate mass suffering in Gaza.* <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/un-resolution-must-pave-way-for-enduring-ceasefire-to-alleviate-mass-suffering-in-gaza/>

<sup>8</sup> Access Now (2023). *Human rights organizations join the open call for an immediate physical and digital ceasefire in Gaza, and for Palestinians globally.* <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/palestine-israel-physical-digital-ceasefire/>

<sup>9</sup> Access Now (2023). *Palestine unplugged: how Israel disrupts Gaza's internet.* <https://www.accessnow.org/publication/palestine-unplugged/>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Supra* note 25. Access Now (2023); see also Access Now (@accessnow). X post. 4:30 pm. December 7, 2023. <https://x.com/accessnow/status/1732799830131351995>; Paltel (@paltelco). X post. 2:54 pm. December 17, 2023. <https://x.com/Paltelco/status/1736398936750117082>

while they were traveling to repair telecommunications infrastructure in Khan Yunis.<sup>12</sup> 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.”<sup>13</sup>

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.<sup>14</sup> Since October 7, advocates have faced increased censorship online.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

## 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.<sup>18</sup> The tragic situation has led to what experts describe as “one of the world's worst” humanitarian crises.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> 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<sup>21</sup> which impacted the entire country after the RSF reportedly took over telecommunications facilities in Khartoum.<sup>22</sup>

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

<sup>12</sup> Jawwal (@JawwalPal). X post. 5:12 pm. January 13, 2024. <https://x.com/JawwalPal/status/1746218633221591108>

<sup>13</sup> ReliefWeb (2024). *The war in Gaza must end - Statement by Martin Griffiths, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator, 5 January 2024*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/war-gaza-must-end-statement-martin-griffiths-under-secretary-general-humanitarian-affairs-and-emergency-relief-coordinator-5-january-2024-enhear>

<sup>14</sup> Al Jazeera (2023). *Are social media giants censoring pro-Palestine voices amid Israel's war?* <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2023/10/24/shadowbanning-are-social-media-giants-censoring-pro-palestine-voices>

<sup>15</sup> 7amleh (2023). *Briefing on The Palestinian Digital Rights Situation Since October 7th, 2023*. <https://7amleh.org/2023/11/01/briefing-on-the-palestinian-digital-rights-situation-since-october-7th-2023>; 7amleh (2024). *Hashtag Palestine 2023: Palestinian Digital Rights During War*. <https://7amleh.org/2024/01/17/hashtag-palestine-2023-palestinian-digital-rights-during-war>

<sup>16</sup> Human Rights Watch (2023). *Meta's Broken Promises*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/12/21/metas-broken-promises/systemic-censorship-palestine-content-instagram-and>; Access Now (2024). *It's not a glitch: how Meta systematically censors Palestinian voices*. <https://www.accessnow.org/publication/how-meta-censors-palestinian-voices/>

<sup>17</sup> Access Now (2023). *#StopSilencingPalestine: Meta must overhaul its biased content moderation*. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/meta-stop-silencing-palestine/>; see also Access Now (2023). *A coalition of international organizations demands that Meta refrain from censoring criticism of Zionism on its platforms*. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/meta-zionism-policy/>

<sup>18</sup> Al Jazeera (2024). *Nearly eight million people displaced by war in Sudan: UN*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/1/31/nearly-eight-million-people-displaced-by-war-in-sudan-un>; UN OCHA (2024). *Sudan Situation Report*. <https://reports.unocha.org/en/country/sudan/>

<sup>19</sup> AA (2023). *Sudan suffering 'one of world's worst humanitarian crisis': UN*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/americas/sudan-suffering-one-of-worlds-worst-humanitarian-crisis-un/3081788>

<sup>20</sup> ReliefWeb (2024). *Sudan Humanitarian Update (4 February 2024)*. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/sudan-humanitarian-update-4-february-2024>; UN World Food Programme (2024). *Sudan's war risks creating the world's largest hunger crisis, warns WFP Chief*. <https://www.wfp.org/news/sudans-war-risks-creating-worlds-largest-hunger-crisis-warns-wfp-chief>

<sup>21</sup> Cloudflare Radar (@cloudflareradar). X post. 2:52 pm. March 3, 2024. <https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1764302833715749347>

<sup>22</sup> See Access Now (2024). *#KeepItOn in times of war: Sudan's communication shutdown must be reversed urgently*. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/keepiton-sudan-shutdown/>



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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> With hundreds dead and millions trapped in their homes in Khartoum running low on food and water amid the fighting, a tensely negotiated 72-hour ceasefire was set to begin the night of April 24.<sup>25</sup> In the hours leading up to the ceasefire deadline, yet another nationwide blackout went into place across multiple providers.<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> 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.<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>30</sup>

Military actors in Sudan have a long track record of committing heinous crimes against people amid internet blackouts — from the weeks-long shutdown during the infamous Khartoum massacre in June 2019 to the at least four disruptions during the #June30March protests demanding return to civilian rule in 2022.<sup>31</sup> People in Sudan have been subjected to internet shutdowns every year since 2018, and 2024 has proven no exception. Both the RSF and SAF have continued to weaponize internet shutdowns during the ongoing conflict, worsening the suffering of **millions** who were cut off from the world once again.<sup>32</sup>

## Iran

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

<sup>23</sup> Ayin network (2024). *Sudan Conflict Monitor #10*. <https://3ayin.com/en/scm10/>

<sup>24</sup> Reuters (2023). *Sudanese telecom providers block internet services, MTN official says*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/sudan-politics-internet/sudanese-telecoms-provider-mtn-blocks-internet-services-mtn-officials-say-idINS8N35N0D8/>; see also Cloudflare (2023). *Effects of the conflict in Sudan on Internet patterns*. <https://blog.cloudflare.com/sudan-armed-conflict-impact-on-the-internet-since-april-15-2023/>

<sup>25</sup> Al Jazeera (2023). *Sudan factions agree to 72-hour ceasefire as foreigners evacuated*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/24/us-says-sudan-factions-agree-to-ceasefire-as-foreigners-evacuated>

<sup>26</sup> Cloudflare Radar (@cloudflaradar). X post. 11:09 pm. April 23, 2023. <https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1650275825126629377>

<sup>27</sup> Reuters (2024). *How Arab fighters carried out a rolling ethnic massacre in Sudan*. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-politics-darfur/>

<sup>28</sup> Reuters (2024). *Ethnic killings in one Sudan city left up to 15,000 dead, UN report says*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/ethnic-killings-one-sudan-city-left-up-15000-dead-un-report-2024-01-19/>; OHCHR (2024). *UN experts alarmed by reported widespread use of rape and sexual violence against women and girls by RSF in Sudan*. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2023/08/un-experts-alarmed-reported-widespread-use-rape-and-sexual-violence-against>

<sup>29</sup> See Dabanga Radio TV Online (2023). *Communication problems in Darfur as clashes continue*. <https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/communication-problems-in-darfur-as-clashes-continue>; Hamid Khalafallah (@HamidMrutada). X post. 7:45 am. April 24, 2023. <https://x.com/HamidMurtada/status/1650405615498305543>

<sup>30</sup> Reuters (2023). *The Slaughter of El Geneina*. <https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/sudan-politics-darfur/>

<sup>31</sup> Access Now (2023). *#IAMTheSudanRevolution: There's a direct link between internet shutdowns and human rights violations in Sudan*. <https://www.accessnow.org/iamthesudanrevolution-theres-a-direct-link-between-internet-shutdowns-and-human-rights-violations-in-sudan/>; Access Now (@accessnow). X post. 10:35 am. June 30, 2022. <https://x.com/accessnow/status/1542456849802244097>

<sup>32</sup> See *supra* note 22; Access Now (2024). *The Sudan conflict: how internet shutdowns deepen a humanitarian crisis*. <https://www.accessnow.org/the-sudan-conflict-how-internet-shutdowns-deepen-a-humanitarian-crisis/>

<sup>33</sup> Access Now (2023). *Internet shutdowns in MENA in 2022: continued abuses and impunity*. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2022-mena/>



(Jini) Amini in 2022.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup>

Throughout 2023, Iranian authorities maintained long-standing blocks of specific apps and services, such as Signal, which has been restricted since January 2021,<sup>37</sup> and WhatsApp, Instagram, Skype, LinkedIn, and Viber, all of which have been restricted since 2022.<sup>38</sup> Iranians rely heavily on the internet and these platforms for organizing protests, communicating, and sharing important information.<sup>39</sup>

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.<sup>40</sup> This caused significant disruption, negatively impacting businesses and people residing in those areas.<sup>41</sup> Authorities also cut internet access in Kurdistan in November, aligning with Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi's visit.<sup>42</sup>

**34** Access Now (2023). *The world must not forget Mahsa Amini*. <https://www.accessnow.org/the-world-must-not-forget-mahsa-amini>

**35** Reuters (2023). *Iran steps up internet crackdown one year after Mahsa Amini death*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSL8N3AJ203/>

**36** Filterwatch (2023). *Cloudflare and Protests in Sistan and Baluchestan become targets of internet disruptions*. <https://filter.watch/en/2023/03/22/cloudflare-and-protests-in-sistan-and-baluchestan-become-targets-of-internet-disruptions/>

**37** Al Jazeera (2021). *Iran blocks Signal messaging app after WhatsApp exodus*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/26/iran-blocks-signal-messaging-app-after-whatsapp-exodus>

**38** Euronews (2023). *Iran maintains block on WhatsApp and Instagram*. <https://www.euronews.com/2023/02/01/iran-maintains-block-on-whatsapp-and-instagram>; OONI (2022). *Technical multi-stakeholder report on Internet shutdowns: The case of Iran amid autumn 2022 protests*. <https://ooni.org/post/2022-iran-technical-multistakeholder-report/>

**39** Access Now (2023). *Stop suppressing the population: authorities in Iran must #KeepItOn*. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/iran-authorities-must-keepiton/>; see also Los Angeles Times (2022). *In protests over death of Mahsa Amini, internet is key to planning. Can Iran block access?* <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2022-09-28/for-iranian-protesters-a-digital-double-edged-sword>

**40** Filterwatch (2024). *Old Policies, New Laws: Legal Developments Around Iran's Internet Take Centre Stage*. <https://filter.watch/en/2023/06/23/old-policies-new-laws-legal-developments-around-irans-internet-take-centre-stage/>; Digiato (2021). *Jahormi: One of the reasons for the internet disruption in the past days was to prevent the sale of exam questions*. <https://digiato.com/article/2021/07/03/%D8%A7%D8%AE%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%AA-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B7%D8%B1-%DA%A9%D9%86%DA%A9%D9%88%D8%B1/>

**41** *Ibid.*

**42** IODA (@IODA\_live). X post. 7:19 am. November 2, 2023. [https://x.com/IODA\\_live/status/1720053084020240693](https://x.com/IODA_live/status/1720053084020240693)



## SHUTDOWNS DURING EXAMS

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.<sup>43</sup> 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.<sup>44</sup> The governments of Iraq, Syria, Algeria, and Iran imposed a total of **10** shutdowns during exams in 2023.

<sup>43</sup> See SMEX (2022). *Internet Shutdowns to Prevent Cheating During Exams: The Impact on Society and Economy in the MENA Region*. <https://smex.org/internet-shutdowns-to-prevent-cheating-during-exams-the-impact-on-society-and-economy-in-the-mena-region/>

<sup>44</sup> See Access Now (2023). *Tell MENA authorities: #NoExamShutdown*. <https://www.accessnow.org/campaign/no-exam-shutdown/>

**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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

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.<sup>47</sup> The government of **Algeria** flipped the kill switch for five consecutive days during national exams on June 11–15.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup>

**Jordan** and **Mauritania**, which have imposed exam shutdowns in the past,<sup>50</sup> 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 #NoExamShutdown 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.<sup>51</sup>

## Platform blocks and other events

In 2023, **nine** countries across MENA — Iran, Iraq, 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.<sup>52</sup>

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

<sup>45</sup> Access Now (2023). *Open Letter: The Prime Minister of Iraq must commit to #KeptOn at the upcoming cabinet meeting, and put an end to internet shutdowns during exams*. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/open-letter-iraq-prime-minister-must-keepiton-during-exams/>; SMEX (@SMEX). X post. 3:13 am. February 6, 2023. <https://x.com/SMEX/status/1622523800704221187>; Cloudflare (@CloudflareRadar). X post. 7:23 am. Jun 15, 2023. <https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1669319814869860352>; Cloudflare (@CloudflareRadar). X post. 9:06 am. July 15, 2023. <https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1680217252971401216>; Cloudflare (@CloudflareRadar). X post. 9:35 pm. August 20, 2023. <https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1693451780963618945>; OONI (2023). Iraq temporarily blocked Telegram. <https://explorer.ooni.org/findings/64077907701>; Cloudflare (@CloudflareRadar). X post. 9:10 pm. September 16, 2023. <https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1703230002303476058>

<sup>46</sup> Iraqi News Agency (2023). *Minister of Communications: We rejected a request to cut off internet service during ministerial exams*. <https://www.ina.iq/185179--.html>; Iraq Ministry of Education (وزارة التربية العراقية).

Facebook post. 9:31 am. May 29, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/Iraq.Ministry.of.Education/posts/pfbid02vDYcpc8db8m2bgGkEvrfscZGEoA4QkPLUG8A19Y6jqq5pckdB3qHs23VzLLBDDF2I>

<sup>47</sup> Dyn Research (2016). *Syria goes to extremes to foil cheaters*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20161221030229/http://research.dyn.com/2016/08/syria-goes-to-extremes-to-foil-cheaters/>; Cloudflare Radar (@cloudflare). X post. 2:09 pm. June 25, 2023. <https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1672970318401421312>; IODA (@IODA\_live). X post. 12:48 pm. June 26, 2023. [https://x.com/IODA\\_live/status/1673312245114195971](https://x.com/IODA_live/status/1673312245114195971)

<sup>48</sup> Cloudflare Radar (@cloudflareradar). X post. 12:26 pm. June 16, 2023. <https://x.com/CloudflareRadar/status/1669682739568693248>; SMEX (2023). *Internet shutdowns in Algeria: a blow to human rights and the national economy*. <https://smex.org/internet-shutdowns-in-algeria-a-blow-to-human-rights-and-the-national-economy/>

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

<sup>50</sup> See Media Foundation for West Africa (2019). *Authorities Shut Internet during National Exams*. <https://www.mfwa.org/country-highlights/mauritania-shuts-internet-during-national-exams/>; Roya News (2021). *Instant messaging apps to be blocked in schools during Tajjhi exams: TRC*. <https://en.royanews.tv/news/28968/2021-06-20>

<sup>51</sup> *Supra* note 44.

<sup>52</sup> OONI (2023). *Grindr blocked in Jordan: Shrinking LGBTQ spaces*. <https://ooni.org/post/2023-jordan-blocks-grindr#conclusion>

2023, expanding the list of social media apps banned in the country, which includes TikTok and Clubhouse.<sup>53</sup> 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.<sup>54</sup> 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.<sup>55</sup>

Authorities in Jordan also continue to block VPNs, a practice that has been ongoing for years.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup>

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.<sup>59</sup> 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.<sup>60</sup>

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.<sup>61</sup> 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.<sup>62</sup> Internet access was restored on September 19, following a wave of criticism against the government.<sup>63</sup> The incident only underscores the value of the internet and digital platforms as a critical lifeline for people to access information during crises.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*; SMEX (2023). *Beyond Jordan's TikTok Ban*. <https://smex.org/beyond-jordans-tiktok-ban/>; JOSA (2021). *Blocking Clubhouse in Jordan: A Quick Analysis of Internet Censorship Methods in Use*. <https://www.josa.ngo/ar/blog/78>.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Monitor (2023). *Jordan's LGBTQ community faces increased attacks, including from Islamists*.

<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2023/07/jordans-lgbtq-community-faces-increased-attacks-including-islamists>

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> 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%A8%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%8-4%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%B5%D8%A9-vpn/>.

<sup>57</sup> Access Now (2023). *Jordan's new proposed cybercrimes law will strongly undermine digital rights*. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/jordans-cybercrimes-law/>

<sup>58</sup> Middle East Eye (2023). *Jordan blocks satirical news site AlHudood*.

<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/jordan-blocks-satirical-news-site-alhudood>

<sup>59</sup> Al Jazeera (2023). *Death toll climbs above 50,000 after Turkey, Syria earthquakes*.

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/2/25/death-toll-climbs-above-50000-after-turkey-syria-earthquakes>; Access Now (2023). *In the aftermath of devastating earthquake, authorities in Turkey must #KeepItOn*. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/earthquake-turkey-keepiton/>

<sup>60</sup> X Global Government Affairs Team (@GlobalAffairs). X post. 3:29 pm. May 15, 2023. <https://x.com/GlobalAffairs/status/1658208072215437314>; Reuters (2023). *Twitter objects to Turkish court orders after pre-election warnings*.

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

<sup>61</sup> France 24 (2023). *UN says death toll at least 11,300 in Libya's flood-hit Derna*. <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20230917-aid-arrives-as-libya-copes-with-flooding-aftermath>; Front Page (2023). *Libya: Flood update Flash Update No.6*

(21 September 2023) (as of 4pm local time). <https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/libya/libya-flood-update-flash-update-no6-21-september-2023-4pm-local-time>

<sup>62</sup> Access Now (2023). *Libya floods: people need reliable internet now*. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/libya-floods-internet/>; BBC News (2023). *Libya flood: Derna mayor's house burnt down in protests*.

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-66849131>; Elizia Volkmann (@EliziaVolkmann). X post. 11:45 am. September 19, 2023. <https://x.com/EliziaVolkmann/status/1704099303168352621>

<sup>63</sup> The New York Times (2023). *Residents see Signs of Crackdown on Dissent After Libya Floods*.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/09/21/world/middleeast/libya-floods-derna-crackdown.html>; LPTIC (@LPTIC). Facebook post. 7:32 am. September 19, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/LPTIC/posts/pfbid02P4cqlPpKF4RCz4rzqNyCjZvEGp7Mvp19iu8pytStZ59t8H7YvZTfqdwpPJ7gFe13l>



# #KeepItOn

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.

The authors would like to especially thank Donna Wentworth, Ángela Alarcón, Bridget Andere, Golda Benjamin, Raman Jit Singh Chima, Giulio Coppi, Marwa Fatafta, Osei Manu Kagyah, Natalia Krapiva, Jaimee Kokonya, Namrata Maheshwari, Peter Micek, Kassem Mnejja, Wai Phyo Myint, Shruti Narayan, Laura O'Brien, Naro Omo-Osagie, Gaspar Pisanu, Prateek, Alexia Skok, Vakau, Aymen Zaghdoudi, and Anastasiya Zhyrmont for their contributions. We would also like to thank Advocacy Assembly Shutdown Academy, Athan, Cloudflare, Digitally Right, Internet Outage Detection and Analysis (IODA), Kentik, Miaan Group, Myanmar Internet Project, Open Observatory of Network Interference (OONI), Software Freedom Law Centre India (SFLC.in), and other members of the #KeepItOn coalition for providing valuable information and insights, reviewing data and sources, and contributing to the report. Any errors, misrepresentations, or inaccuracies are ours alone, and we welcome your feedback.

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



#KeepItOn

# SHRINKING DEMOCRACY, GROWING VIOLENCE

Internet shutdowns in 2023



9/14/2021 Myanmar

Gabon

8/26/2023

Suriname

3/9/2023 Ukraine

2/26/2022 Russia

