

ROOTS OF HATE SWANA





NOOR is a new feminist and movement-driven think and do tank devoted to building the power of gender justice and progressive movements to obstruct far-right agendas and advance our transformative visions. We coordinate a transnational network, expose and oppose the resurgent right, and facilitate strategic alignment and strategy development. We organize to help bring systemic alternatives into reality.

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ROOTS OF HATE:

FASCIST AND FUNDAMENTALIST NARRATIVES AND ACTORS IN SOUTH-WEST ASIA AND NORTH AFRICA REGIONS.

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Roots Of Hate: Fascists and Fundamentalists Narratives and Actors in South-West Asia and North Africa Regions
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TOWARDS COLLECTIVE RESISTANCE: AN OVERVIEW

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In recent years, we have witnessed and experienced the rise of fascist anti-democratic discourses and strategies in different contexts across political, social, human rights - on and offline. We observe several groups and actors actively working to form cooperative alliances. They also spread discourses across borders to attack human rights and progressive values.

In the face of this continuous threat to our rights and autonomy, Noor was founded in 2022 - to contribute to the organizing power of feminist and progressive movements to challenge these growing forces in the Global South and North, and to aspire to better futures for all. Noor's knowledge-building team believes that the power of knowledge, when effectively framed politically, can inform our resistance and help confront fascism and fundamentalism.

We are also dedicated to amplifying nuanced Global South realities and movement contributions in confronting authoritarianism, fascisms, and fundamentalisms. We see fascisms and fundamentalisms not as isolated or fringe ideologies but as comprehensive political projects that have their own economic, social, and geopolitical goals, agendas and structures. These projects infiltrate every fragment of society, reengineering the fabric of everyday life in ways that are both subtle and fundamental; they alter how we live, work, and interact, creating an environment where fear, division, surveillance, and control become normalized.

FASCISMS AND FUNDAMENTALISMS ARE DESIGNED TO PERPETUATE THE ILLUSION THAT THEIR DOMINANCE IS INEVITABLE, THAT THE WORLD HAS ALWAYS BEEN THIS WAY, AND THAT RESISTANCE IS FUTILE.

Yet, as alarming as these trends are, we also recognize that these actors, tactics and narratives do not emerge in a vacuum. They are connected to existing systems of oppression as they are rooted within the fertile

soil of patriarchy, capitalism, racism, and colonialism. Fascisms and fundamentalisms are designed to perpetuate the illusion that their dominance is inevitable, that the world has always been this way, and that resistance is futile.

Recognizing the value of contemporary knowledge in building the antifascist organization of our dreams, we had to start by understanding the evolution of the narratives, strategies and systems of different fascist movements and regimes in the context of the Global South, especially regions that are not deeply researched and studied in the literature of modern antifascism. To challenge our fixed ideas of deep-rooted and interconnected systems of oppression that contribute to creating a fertile environment accelerating the development of fascist and fundamentalist movements and discourses, we began in 2023 by mapping the Middle East, North Africa (SWANA) and South and Southeast Asia (SSEA Asia) regions.

THIS MAPPING URGES US TO SCRUTINIZE WHAT MIGHT SEEM LIKE A 'NORMALIZED' REALITY AND RECOGNIZE IT THROUGH THE LENS OF FASCISM AND FUNDAMENTALISM. THIS MAPPING PROJECT IS A STARTING POINT FOR INTERVENTION. AFTER ALL, THE ONLY WAY TO COUNTER A POLITICAL PROJECT IS WITH A POLITICAL PROJECT OF OUR OWN.

This mapping navigates the delicate balance between historicizing systems of oppression and understanding the emergence of new actors and narratives embedded within these fascist and fundamentalist political projects. At Noor, we understand that these forces are evolving in ways that demand strategic responses. This is what this mapping is here to accomplish. It serves as a compass, guiding us through the ways fascist and fundamentalist forces are tightening their grip, gaining control and access. It unpacks the elements propelling their political project forward and the narratives they wield to hold us back. By examining how these forces operate from the grassroots to the highest levels of power, this mapping urges us to scrutinize what might seem like a 'normalized' reality and recognize it through the lens of fascism and fundamentalism. This mapping project is a starting point for intervention. After all, the only way to counter a political project is with a political project of our own.

A pressing question arises: why focus on fascist and fundamentalist political projects in these two specific regions now?

Choosing to focus on SWANA and South and Southeast Asia in our first pilot reports is an intentional choice to challenge the invisibilization of fascist and fundamentalist actors that are often overlooked and mischaracterized, obscuring their true infrastructure and connections. While some regions are heavily scrutinized through narrow lenses that may fail to name these actors for what they are, others are significantly neglected in cross-regional spaces, obscuring important links to regional and global counterparts where these forces are gaining traction. It is important to acknowledge that movements, local activists, researchers, and academics have long provided critical analyses, mappings, and resistance to these movements. However, fragmented knowledge production across regions often distorts the recognition of this broader interconnected threat that transcends borders, limiting both understanding and resistance.

In this mapping, we see fascist and fundamentalist narratives act as iterations that harness economic crises, neoliberal policies and social fractures to cement their fascist and fundamentalist power. Militarism, as it manifests across both SWANA and SSE Asia, is not only the overt presence of armed forces but a pervasive ideology that infiltrates every facet of life, intertwining with national identity and economic survival. It transforms the state into a perpetual war machine, justifying its existence through the continuous production of enemies, both within and beyond its borders. This militarized logic extends into the civilian sphere, where the lines between governance and warfare blur, turning populations into both subjects of control and instruments of violence, all in service of maintaining a homogenized, compliant society. At the same time, in both contexts we see digital fascism operating as the algorithmic extension of state power and the invisible hand that shapes state narratives, turning data into weapons of social control, and making the machinery of repression both flexible and invasive.

In both contexts, actors use narratives that weaponize misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia as deliberate strategies to enforce a rigid vision of 'purity' rooted in the protection of 'family values'. These ideologies do more than just marginalize; they are systematically deployed to fortify a societal hierarchy where gender and sexual conformity become symbols of national and cultural purity. In both contexts, we see how the calculated emphasis on purity serves to legitimize violence - both state-sanctioned and vigilante - against those who challenge these oppressive norms of gender and sexuality, further entrenching the power of fascist and fundamentalist projects.

These narratives, however, are not just rising. They do not only impact feminist and queer activists and organizers - ultimately everyone is implicated, and thus incriminated, at any given moment.

**FASCIST AND FUNDAMENTALIST
POLITICAL PROJECTS IN THESE REGIONS
OPERATE AS SOPHISTICATED MACHINES,
NOT JUST SUPPRESSING DISSENT BUT
PREEMPTIVELY WORKING TO ERASE THE
VERY POSSIBILITY OF REBELLION.**

Fascist and fundamentalist political projects in these regions operate as sophisticated machines, not just suppressing dissent but preemptively working to erase the very possibility of rebellion. The spread of ultra-nationalist discourse is part of a broader, interconnected phenomenon where old and new forms of racialization converge, intensifying processes of othering and dehumanization. These systems redefine the boundaries of the nation, dictating who truly belongs and who is to be excluded, reinforcing a hierarchy that justifies violence and discrimination against those seen as unworthy.

Everything you read here is not numbers or abstract systems, all of this is about real people—real lives. For most, fascisms and fundamentalisms are not a looming threat but rather the reality that people already endure. These forces, along with their narratives, define the reality for many othered and marginalized communities, movements, and individuals leading the resistance for their present and future. Every number, political system, and law shown in these mappings tells a story of oppression, affecting lives and restricting basic access and freedoms across various segments of society.

This mapping is designed to support movements in their political interventions. It is just the starting point. We hope these reports will be of help to movements that have been developing brave, solid and collective strategies that confront these threats head-on, offering us all a vision for collective liberation.

ROOTS OF HATE

**FASCIST AND
FUNDAMENTALIST
NARRATIVES AND ACTORS
IN SOUTH-WEST ASIA AND
NORTH AFRICA REGION**



INTRODUCTION

In late August 2024, anti-Syrian refugee riots erupted in Turkey's Kayseri province. Mobs went on a rampage, attacking people, vandalizing cars and torching Syrian-owned shops while demanding their expulsion. What began as a social media campaign over a reported crime by a Syrian rapidly escalated into widespread violence against refugees in Turkey. Seven people are reported dead from the attacks.¹

This violence is not confined to Turkey, as anti-Syrian sentiment is spreading like wildfire across the region. Nationalism-driven mob attacks and riots often begin with a narrative that is disseminated across various avenues, including social media, and are fueled by anti-refugee discourse that demonizes Syrians in Turkey, Lebanon and beyond.

THIS MAPPING ADDRESSES THE PRESSING NEED TO REFRAME OUR UNDERSTANDING OF HOW THESE ACTORS USE MYRIAD TACTICS THAT MANIFEST WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THE SWANA (SOUTH-WEST ASIA AND NORTH AFRICA) REGION.

Understanding this rhetoric as part of a broader set of narratives and tactics in the region is essential to grasp the rise of new – and the expansion of existing – fascist and fundamentalist actors. This mapping addresses the pressing need to reframe our understanding of how these actors use myriad tactics that manifest within the context of the SWANA (South-West Asia and North Africa) region.

While there has been growing interest to research and understand the development and expansion of fascist and fundamentalist movements in the world over the past decade, the terminologies used often assume a monolithic experience or understanding of fascism and fundamentalism, and particularly so in the SWANA region. This oversimplification overlooks the complex and diverse realities of these movements. This discrepancy is evident in the academic literature, which lags behind reality on the ground, where news and activist reports frequently highlight nationalist rhetoric, misogynistic and anti-feminist backlash,

¹ Syrian Women's Political Movement. (2024). The Syrian Women's Political Movement Statement Condemning Violence and Racist Incidents Against Syrians in Turkey.. <https://syrianwomenpm.org/statements/the-syrian-womens-political-movement-statement-condemning-violence-and-racist-incidents-against-syrians-in-turkey/>.

TERFism, anti-immigrant and anti-refugee discourse, and narratives of demonization cloaked in the rhetoric of national ‘purification’.

In the past decade and following the uprisings, the region has been facing a wave of political, social and financial crises, and an escalating militarization of states. These conditions have created fertile ground for the expansion of fascist and fundamentalist actors and narratives.

Long term economic challenges endured by countries in the SWANA region have been compounded by COVID-19, which led to a surge in poverty and inequality, creating a “new poor” class that fell into poverty after early 2020. Given this plummeting economic reality, North African governments, for example, have abandoned concrete economic models in favor of nationalist and xenophobic narratives, using these rhetorics to deflect blame and distract from their lack of long-term economic development plans. In Egypt, current President Sisi militarized the economy and funded infrastructure with external loans. In Tunisia, where there is no credible economic plan and the country is risking International Monetary Fund (IMF) brinkmanship, nationalist and anti-immigrant rhetoric became stronger and stronger as President Kais Saied blamed Islamists, the business class, African migrants, and Westerners for the country’s economic failures.²

METHODOLOGY

This paper aims to initiate a critical examination of fascist and fundamentalist key actors and narratives observed across different regions, serving as a launchpad for future in-depth research by highlighting questions that need further investigation. Relying on secondary data from diverse sources, including feminist and human rights movements’ and organizations’ publications, op-eds, academic papers, social media posts, analysis and news articles, the paper focuses

² ISPI. (2023). The Ukraine War’s Economic Impact on North Africa: Winners, Losers, and a Dangerous Lack of Long-Term Vision.

<https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/the-ukraine-wars-economic-impact-on-north-africa-winners-losers-and-a-dangerous-lack-of-long-term-vision-132037>.

on cross-cutting trends in several countries over the past five years (2019-2024).

IN THIS MAPPING, FASCISMS AND FUNDAMENTALISMS ARE NOT ONLY HIGHLIGHTED AS IDEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS BUT ARE ALSO USED AS MARKERS OF A SPECIFIC BACKLASH OCCURRING IN THE REGION.

In this mapping, fascisms and fundamentalisms are not only highlighted as ideological frameworks but are also used as markers of a specific backlash occurring in the region. Here, ‘fascist’ and ‘fundamentalist’ are not understood as rigid terminologies but as indicators of certain realities. Both are seen as movements that use narrative vehicles with the aim of creating a homogeneous national identity. Both share common tactics, such as the ‘othering’ of marginalized groups, the undermining of human rights frameworks, and the use of propaganda to justify violence and repression.

To do this, this mapping focuses on four main tactics: digital fascism, anti-LGBTQI+ campaigns, deployment of ultra-nationalist discourse, and the growing local manosphere. In each of these tactics, terminologies and frameworks are defined accordingly. Case studies are presented within these narrative frameworks and tactics, with clear links to explain why the markers of fascisms and fundamentalisms have been applied in each particular context.



CYBER SURVEILLANCE AND DIGITAL FASCISM

Cybersurveillance in the SWANA region is a multifaceted phenomenon that serves as a tool of control and repression in increasingly militarized states.³ While digital tools have been celebrated for their role in mobilizing social movements – most notably during the 2011 uprisings and more recent revolutions in Sudan,⁴ Lebanon,⁵ and Iran⁶ – governments across the region have responded with a concerted crackdown on digital and civic spaces.⁷ Internet shutdowns, the blocking of websites, and the aggressive application of cybersecurity laws are now commonplace, as regimes work to stifle dissent and control the narrative.⁸ These tactics are not isolated incidents but part of a broader strategy to dismantle digital platforms that have become understood, in one way or another, as a public sphere in which people can engage, mobilize, and call to action.

WHERE CYBERSURVEILLANCE BECOMES A WEAPON IN THE ARSENAL OF MILITARIZED REGIMES. DIGITAL FASCISM IS UNDERSTOOD AS A CONTEMPORARY EVOLUTION OF FASCIST IDEOLOGY, RESHAPED FOR THE DIGITAL AGE, WHERE HATE, EXCLUSION, AND VIOLENCE ARE AMPLIFIED THROUGH ALGORITHMS AND SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS.

This crackdown is intricately linked to the rise of digital fascism, where cybersurveillance becomes a weapon in the arsenal of militarized regimes. Digital fascism is understood as a contemporary evolution of fascist ideology, reshaped for the digital age, where hate, exclusion, and violence are amplified through algorithms and social media platforms.⁹ However, in the digital age, fascism is not limited to overt displays of online violence, and it also includes the more insidious use of surveillance

3 Access Now. (2021). MENA Surveillance Coalition: Stop All Surveillance Tech Sales to the Region's Autocratic Governments. Access Now. <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/pegasus-project-mena/>

4 Elmileik, Aya, and Seena Khalil. (2019). 'Tasgut Bas': #SudanUprising – How Social Media Told the Story." Al Jazeera 12 August. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/8/12/tasgut-bas-to-sudanuprising-how-social-media-told-the-story>.

5 Al-Shabaka. (2023). The Mobilizing Power of Palestinians in Lebanon. Al-Shabaka. <https://al-shabaka.org/commentaries/the-mobilizing-power-of-palestinians-in-lebanon/>

6 CO-FEM, 2022, Solidarity with Iran and the #MahsaAmini Protests. <https://cofemsocialchange.org/solidarity-iran-mahsaamini-protests/>

7 Fatafta. (2020). From Free Space to a Tool of Oppression: What Happened to the Internet Since the Arab Spring. <https://timep.org/2020/12/17/from-free-space-to-a-tool-of-oppression-what-happened-to-the-internet-since-the-arab-spring/>

8 Ibid.

9 Fuchs, C. (2022). "Conclusion: What Is Digital Fascism?" in Digital Fascism, Routledge. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/mono/10.4324/9781003256090-17/conclusion-digital-fascism-christian-fuchs>

technology to monitor, intimidate, and silence dissent.¹⁰ In the SWANA region, both surveillance capitalism and digital fascism are present within state and non-state apparatuses. Surveillance capitalism, a term coined by Shoshana Zuboff in her seminal work *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019), refers to a new economic system where human experience is commodified and transformed into data, which is then used to predict and shape future behavior for profit.¹¹ The connection between surveillance capitalism and digital fascism lies in their shared reliance on control and manipulation. While surveillance capitalism seeks to manipulate consumer behavior for profit, digital fascism utilizes the same technological tools, such as algorithms, data mining, and artificial intelligence (AI), to monitor, intimidate, and suppress dissent.

JORDAN'S ARTICLE 11 OF THE CYBERCRIME LAW OF 2015 IMPOSES PRISON SENTENCES AND FINES FOR PUBLISHING DEFAMATORY INFORMATION ONLINE, EFFECTIVELY LIMITING THE WORK OF JOURNALISTS AND ACTIVISTS. UNDER ARTICLE 24, PUBLISHING NAMES OR IMAGES OF LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICIALS WITHOUT AUTHORIZATION CAN RESULT IN AT LEAST THREE MONTHS IN PRISON AND FINES UP TO 25,000 JDS (USD 35,246).

Governments across the SWANA have sought to tighten their grip on civic spaces by leveraging laws designed to regulate both online and offline spheres. These laws serve as the legal arm of a broader surveillance apparatus, furthering digital fascism and stifling dissent.¹² For instance, Jordan's Article 11 of the Cybercrime Law of 2015 imposes prison sentences and fines for publishing defamatory information online, effectively limiting the work of journalists and activists. Under Article 24, publishing names or images of law enforcement officials without authorization can result in at least three months in prison and fines up to 25,000 JDs (USD 35,246). Article 33 empowers authorities to censor online content, ban users, and demand personal data, with non-compliance leading to fines up to 30,000 JDs (USD 42,295) or blocking entire platforms. Article 12 further criminalizes the use of VPNs or proxies to bypass restrictions, imposing similar harsh penalties. These provisions

10 Ibid.

11 GenderIT. (2023). *Feminists in the Panopticon: How Surveillance Capitalism Captures Feminist Movements*. GenderIT. <https://genderit.org/articles/feminists-panopticon-how-surveillance-capitalism-captures-feminist-movements>

12 Electronic Frontier Foundation. (2023). *The Growing Threat of Cybercrime Law Abuse on LGBTQ+ Rights in MENA and the UN Cybercrime Draft*. EFF. <https://www.eff.org/fr/deeplinks/2023/09/growing-threat-cybercrime-law-abuse-lgbtq-rights-mena-and-un-cybercrime-draft>

collectively stifle free expression and enforce stringent control over online activities.¹³

The 2023 update to this law, with its dangerously vague Articles 13 and 14, criminalizes the production, distribution, or even consumption of undefined “pornographic content” and anything deemed to “promote immorality,” opening the door to silencing digital discussions around gender, sexuality, and LGBTQI+ rights with threats of at least six months’ imprisonment and hefty fines. At the same time, Article 12 takes direct aim at the right to anonymity by effectively banning VPNs, proxies, and Tor – tools that many LGBTQI+ people rely on to shield their identities online.¹⁴

In Egypt, Law No. 175/2018 on Combating Information Technology mandates that Internet Service Providers (ISPs) retain user data and provide it to national security agencies, enabling widespread surveillance. This law also allows authorities to block websites or content under vague threats to national security, further criminalizing digital expressions that challenge the state’s narrative.¹⁵ As of 2021, Egypt had blocked 638 websites, including 118 related to news and media outlets like Al Jazeera and The New Arab.¹⁶ Similarly, the United Arab Emirates’ (UAE) Federal Law No. 5 of 2012 imposes severe penalties for online speech that is deemed insulting or slanderous, with particularly harsh consequences if the speech targets public officials. This law extends to content that ‘promotes sedition’ or ‘damages the state’s reputation’, effectively silencing opposition and dissent.¹⁷

IN 2022, CYBERCRIME LAWS IN SAUDI ARABIA LED TO NOURAH BINT SAEED AL-QAHTANI RECEIVING A 45-YEAR PRISON SENTENCE FOR SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS.

Digital fascism in action creates securitized environments where repression is normalized and civic space continues to shrink across

13 SMEX. (2023). Jordan’s new proposed cybercrimes law will strongly undermine digital rights. SMEX, 14 July. <https://smex.org/jordans-new-proposed-cybercrimes-law-will-strongly-undermine-digital-rights/>

14 Human Rights Watch. (2023). Jordan’s New Cybercrime Law Is a Disaster for LGBT People. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/08/14/jordans-new-cybercrime-law-disaster-lgbt-people>

15 Access Now. (2023) Egyptian Parliament Approves Cybercrime Law, Legalizing Blocking of Websites and Full Surveillance of Egyptians. Access Now. <https://www.accessnow.org/egyptian-parliament-approves-cybercrime-law-legalizing-blocking-of-websites-and-full-surveillance-of-egyptians/>

16 Masaar. (2021). Blocked Websites in Egypt. Masaar. <https://masaar.net/en/blocked-websites-in-egypt/>

17 article 19. (2022). United Arab Emirates: New Cybercrime and Anti-Rumour Law Violates Rights. article 19. <https://www.article19.org/resources/united-arab-emirates-new-cybercrime-and-anti-rumour-law-violates-rights/>

the region. In 2022, cybercrime laws in Saudi Arabia led to Nourah bint Saeed al-Qahtani receiving a 45-year prison sentence for social media posts. Her charges are broad and are based on counter-terrorism and anti-cybercrime laws – which appear to criminalize any government criticism, with no evidence of violence or criminal activity.¹⁸ Her case, along with the 35-year sentence of Salma al-Shehab for retweeting dissidents,¹⁹ illustrates the extent to which the Saudi regime²⁰ employs surveillance and laws that codify digital fascism to maintain its power, despite its new marketing of itself as a ‘liberalized’ country.²¹

IN SUDAN, INTERNET SHUTDOWNS HAVE BEEN A FREQUENT TOOL OF REPRESSION DURING THE REVOLUTION. AUTHORITIES BLOCKED ACCESS BETWEEN DECEMBER 21, 2018, AND FEBRUARY 26, 2019 AND THEN AGAIN FROM OCTOBER 25, 2021 UNTIL NOVEMBER 18, 2021.

In Sudan, internet shutdowns have been a frequent tool of repression during the revolution. Authorities blocked access between December 21, 2018, and February 26, 2019 and then again from October 25, 2021 until November 18, 2021.²² The head of Sudan’s National Intelligence and Security Service admitted that the decision to block these sites was a deliberate move to stifle communication and mobilization among protesters.²³ Despite a court order to restore internet access, the blackout persisted for 25 days, causing significant economic losses and forcing citizens to rely on international SIM cards to communicate.

This tactic isn’t isolated to Sudan. Across the region, internet shutdowns have become a common manifestation of digital fascism. In Algeria, authorities routinely disrupt internet services during national exams, protests, and elections,²⁴ while in Mauritania, mobile networks were

18 BBC News. (2022). Saudi Woman Given 45-Year Prison Sentence for Social Media Posts. BBC News, 30 August. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-62736118>.

19 CIVICUS. People Power Under Attack: Findings from the Middle East and North Africa. <https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings/middleeastandnorthafrica/>.

20 To read more about cyber-violence and the new Saudi identity, read this analysis from Towards Feminist Consciousness (in Arabic) (<https://feministconsciousnessrevolution.wordpress.com/2023/06/13/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%81-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD/>)

21 Human Rights Watch (2020). Saudi Arabia’s Image Laundering Conceals Abuses. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/02/saudi-arabia-image-laundering-conceals-abuses>

22 Internet Society. (2023). Internet Shutdowns. <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns>

23 Reuters. (2018). Sudan Restricts Social Media Access to Counter Protest Movement. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-sudan-protests-internet/sudan-restricts-social-media-access-to-counter-protest-movement-idUSKC-N1OW0Z7/>)

24 Internet Society. (2023). Internet Shutdowns in Algeria. <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns?search=dz>

disrupted during protests following the 2024 presidential election.²⁵ Iran, too, has gone offline during major protests, such as the 2019 protests sparked by a 300 percent fuel price hike, and the 2022 ‘jin,jiyan, azadi’ protests.²⁶ According to the Internet Society, there were 37 internet shutdowns across 11 countries in the SWANA in 2022, a sharp increase from the previous year.²⁷ These shutdowns highlight how authorities weaponize cyberspace against protest movements.

TOOLS AND TACTICS:

THE LEGAL APPARATUS

DIGITAL FASCISM FLOURISHES UNDER THE GUISE OF CYBERCRIME LAWS, LEVERAGING THEIR BROAD AND AMBIGUOUS LANGUAGE TO LEGITIMIZE STATE REPRESSION.

Digital fascism flourishes under the guise of cybercrime laws, leveraging their broad and ambiguous language to legitimize state repression. A common feature of these laws across the region is their deliberate vagueness, which grants governments sweeping power to define and prosecute what they consider cybercrime.

This ambiguous language not only targets individuals but also extends its reach to different factions of society, including civil society, media outlets, political parties and organizations. It also allows governments to securitize online media, criminalizing the dissemination of information that challenges official narratives or exposes state abuses. In Egypt, the government’s use of cybercrime laws has led to widespread blocking of media, political, and human rights platforms.²⁸ This process has been facilitated by United States (US) company Sandvine, known for its role in producing and selling internet surveillance and censorship technologies that have fueled human rights abuses. For example, Egyptian authorities have employed technology from the US company Sandvine to block websites. Sandvine has a documented history of enabling human rights

25 Internet Society. (2024). Mauritania: Mobile Internet Shut Down Amidst Protests. <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns/mauritania-mobile-internet-shut-down-amidst-protests>

26 The New Arab. (2023). 17 Months of Internet Shutdown Costs Iran Billions. The New Arab. <https://www.newarab.com/news/17-months-internet-shutdown-costs-iran-billions>

27 Internet Society (2022). Internet Shutdowns. <https://pulse.internetsociety.org/shutdowns>

28 Access Now, 2023, “Egypt: Rights Groups Condemn Latest Blocking of News Websites,” <https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/egypt-rights-groups-condemn-latest-blocking-of-news-websites/>

violations through its production and sale of internet surveillance and censorship devices.²⁹ Sandvine operates in a wide range of countries across the SWANA region, including, Jordan, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, Morocco, Oman, Yemen, Bahrain, Turkey, and the Israeli Occupation. Sandvine's technology enabled governments to monitor, block, and control online content.³⁰

This increasing power to silence dissent by controlling digital access is a hallmark of digital fascism. By 2023, Egyptian authorities continued their crackdown by blocking additional news websites, including Soulta 4 and Masr 360, further tightening government control over the media landscape. In 2022, three links to access the independent news site Al-Manassa were blocked within 72 hours, part of an ongoing campaign to silence one of the few remaining independent platforms in the country.³¹

INTERNET CENSORSHIP AND ACCESS BLOCKING ARE BROADER, REGIONAL, AND COLLABORATIVE SURVEILLANCE EFFORTS, OFTEN JUSTIFIED LEGALLY AS A FORM OF PROTECTION OF 'FAMILY VALUES'.

Internet censorship and access blocking are broader, regional, and collaborative surveillance efforts, often justified legally as a form of protection of 'family values'. Vaguely-worded charges related to family values and public morals have been frequently used in the Egyptian legal system to target women, marginalized groups, and others. These charges, rooted in the idea that the state acts as a guardian of public morals, are bolstered by Article 10 of the constitution, which mandates state protection of family cohesion and values, and are echoed in laws like the NGO Law and Article 178 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes content deemed against public morals with severe penalties.

Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), including the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman, have recently demanded that Netflix remove content they claim "contradicts Islam and societal values," particularly targeting content on sexual and gender expression.³²

29 Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2023, "Egypt: Government Called on to End Internet Censorship and Website Blocking," <https://cihrs.org/egypt-government-called-on-to-end-internet-censorship-and-website-blocking/?lang=en>

30 Masaar, 2023, "Sandvine: The Surveillance Octopus in the Arab Region," <https://masaar.net/en/sandvine-the-surveillance-octopus-in-the-arab-region/>

31 Ibid.

32 SMEX. (2023). From Sharing to Silence: Assessing Social Media Suppression of SRHR Content in WANA. SMEX.

Sometimes regulations that block access to certain websites are also affected by geopolitical and cultural factors, often coordinated across borders, leading to the creation of new laws and regulations that are framed as national security measures. For instance, Qatari news websites have been blocked in several Arab countries in 2017, including Egypt, the UAE, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, following Qatar’s diplomatic crisis that lasted until 2021.³³

IN THE UAE, THE CYBERCRIME LAW CRIMINALIZES ANY SHARED ONLINE INFORMATION ‘MOCKING’ OR DAMAGING ‘THE REPUTATION’ OF THE STATE, ITS INSTITUTIONS, RULERS, OR NATIONAL SYMBOLS, SUCH AS THE FLAG OR ANTHEM.

Sometimes these restrictions and regulations appear to be arbitrary. For example, in Syria, the BBC’s Arabic website is banned in some areas, while its English counterpart remains accessible.³⁴ Similarly, in the UAE, the cybercrime law criminalizes any shared online information ‘mocking’ or damaging ‘the reputation’ of the state, its institutions, rulers, or national symbols, such as the flag or anthem.³⁵

As cybercrime laws tighten the noose around organizing and dissent, serving as the legal scaffolding for digital repression, they are only the surface of a deeper, more militarized apparatus. For example, Saudi Arabia’s cybercrime laws have been weaponized to target dissent, as seen in the case of Manahel al-Otaibi, a 29-year-old fitness instructor and women’s rights activist, who was sentenced to 11 years in prison for her choice of clothing and online advocacy for women’s rights, including calls to end the male guardianship system. Despite the authorities’ claims of reform, her charges stem solely from her social media activity, such as posting videos of herself in “indecent clothes” and shopping without an abaya. Her sister, facing similar charges, fled the country fearing arrest. The authorities absurdly convicted al-Otaibi under articles of the Counter-

<https://smex.org/from-sharing-to-silence-assessing-social-media-suppression-of-srhr-content-in-wana/>

33 The Qatar diplomatic crisis erupted in 2017 when several Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, severed ties with Qatar, accusing it of supporting terrorism and fostering close relations with Iran. This blockade, marked by economic sanctions and a media blackout, fractured regional alliances and heightened tensions in the Gulf. The crisis ended in 2021. Read more here: Al Jazeera. (2020). Qatar-Gulf Crisis: Your Questions Answered. Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/6/5/qatar-gulf-crisis-your-questions-answered>

34 SMEX (2021). Censorship in Syria: A Double Virtual Penalty. SMEX. <https://smex.org/censorship-in-syria-a-double-virtual-penalty/>

35 article 19 (2022). United Arab Emirates: New Cybercrime and Anti-Rumour Law Violates Rights. article 19. <https://www.article19.org/resources/united-arab-emirates-new-cybercrime-and-anti-rumour-law-violates-rights/>

Terrorism Law, equating her peaceful online expression with “terrorist offences,” while her family has been denied access to court documents and evidence.³⁶

Under the veneer of legality lies a branched-out network of surveillance technologies and spyware that act as a machinery of control, where states don’t just regulate speech– they reach into the very fabric of digital spaces: monitoring, manipulating, and erasing any form of opposition.³⁷

SPYWARE AND SURVEILLANCE TECH

THE CORTEX SYSTEM, PROVIDED BY ERCOM/SUNERIS, ENABLED THE MASS INTERCEPTION OF COMMUNICATIONS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, TURNING EGYPT INTO A SURVEILLANCE STATE WHERE NO CONVERSATION OR ONLINE INTERACTION IS SAFE FROM GOVERNMENT SCRUTINY.

Egypt’s surveillance state is built on a foundation of sophisticated technologies supplied primarily by French companies, with additional support from regional allies like the UAE. The reach of Egypt’s surveillance extends far beyond targeted individuals. The CORTEX system, provided by ERCOM/SUNERIS, enabled the mass interception of communications across the country, turning Egypt into a surveillance state where no conversation or online interaction is safe from government scrutiny. This technology allowed the regime to monitor social networks, identifying and preemptively neutralizing perceived threats. The systematic monitoring of digital platforms not only suppressed free speech but also manipulated public discourse, ensuring that the regime’s narrative remained unchallenged.³⁸

Through this surveillance foundation, the Egyptian government has amassed vast amounts of personal data through the Morpho/Idemia database, initiated in 2016. This database centralizes citizens’ information, creating detailed profiles that the state uses to track

36 Amnesty International. (2024). Saudi Arabia: Woman Jailed for 11 Years for Online Expression Supporting Women’s Rights. Amnesty International, 3 April. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/04/saudi-arabia-woman-jailed-for-11-years-for-online-expression-supporting-womens-rights/>.

37 Alexander, A., & Krishna, T. (2022) “Pegasus Project: Re-Questioning the Legality of the Cyber-Surveillance Mechanism,” *Laws*, 11(6), 85, <https://doi.org/10.3390/laws11060085>

38 FIDH. (2018). Egypt: A Repression Made in France. FIDH. <https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/382873255-egypt-a-repression-made-in-france.pdf>

and control individuals. The intrusive nature of this data collection is compounded by the monitoring of private communications, with the government gaining unprecedented access to people's personal lives.³⁹ The UAE's involvement in supporting Egypt's surveillance efforts underscores the regional nature of this repression. In 2014, the UAE provided financial and technological support, including purchasing a \$11M espionage software for Egypt, facilitating the expansion of the Egyptian regime's surveillance capabilities.⁴⁰

The proliferation of sophisticated spyware in the SWANA region has become a key instrument of repression, with regional collaboration amplifying the impact of these surveillance tools. In late 2022, an investigation uncovered the covert delivery of Israeli surveillance technology to the Sudanese junta forces known as rapid support forces (RSF), linked to a Cessna jet that made multiple trips from the European Union (EU) to Sudan between April and August.⁴¹ Back in 2013, Citizen Lab revealed that the Sudanese regime at the time had employed BlueCoat Proxy SG devices, ostensibly designed for network security, but repurposed for political surveillance.⁴² These devices were used to restrict access to information and monitor private communications, effectively silencing opposition voices.

IN 2022, INTELLEXTA – A COMPANY ASSOCIATED WITH PREDATOR – SHOWCASED ITS CAPABILITIES AT MAJOR SECURITY EXHIBITIONS IN THE UAE, HIGHLIGHTING THE REGION'S DEEPENING INVESTMENT IN INVASIVE SURVEILLANCE TECHNOLOGIES.

Predator spyware, which is an invasive spyware that, once on a device, gains unrestricted access to its microphone, camera, and all data— such as contacts, messages, and photos— without the user's knowledge, and it cannot currently be independently audited— has been deployed across the region.⁴³ Its use was documented in December 2021 to hack the phones of Egyptians in exile, including Ayman Nour, a member of the

39 Ibid.

40 Middle East Monitor. (2017). UAE Gives Egypt \$11m Surveillance System. Middle East Monitor. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20170706-uae-gives-egypt-11m-surveillance-system/>

41 SMEX (2022). Sudan: Men with No Mercy Now Armed with EU-Linked Spyware. SMEX. <https://smex.org/sudan-men-with-no-mercy-now-armed-with-eu-linked-spyware/>

42 Citizen Lab. (2013). Planet Blue Coat Redux. Citizen Lab. <https://citizenlab.ca/2013/07/planet-blue-coat-redux/>

43 Amnesty International. (2023). Global Predator Files: Spyware Scandal Reveals Brazen Targeting of Civil Society, Politicians, and Officials. Amnesty International, 2 October 2. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/10/global-predator-files-spyware-scandal-reveals-brazen-targeting-of-civil-society-politicians-and-officials/>.

Egyptian political opposition living in exile in Turkey.⁴⁴ The spyware's also used by Oman and Saudi Arabia,⁴⁵ and in 2022, Intellexa – a company associated with Predator – showcased its capabilities at major security exhibitions in the UAE, highlighting the region's deepening investment in invasive surveillance technologies.⁴⁶

The role of spyware in this regional network of repression is further highlighted by the use of Pegasus, one of the most notorious Israeli surveillance tools. Pegasus, developed by NSO Group, is designed to hack devices without leaving a trace, making it a preferred choice for governments seeking to monitor and silence dissidents.⁴⁷ For instance, investigations by Access Now and Front Line Defenders have documented the hacking of Bahraini and Jordanian women human rights defenders, including prominent Bahraini human rights defender Ebtisam Al-Saegh,⁴⁸ who had her phone repeatedly compromised by Pegasus spyware multiple times in August, September, and November 2019. Jordanian lawyer Hala Ahed Deeb,⁴⁹ who has defended women's rights, workers' rights, and freedoms of expression, also had her phone compromised by Pegasus spyware on March 16, 2021.

NARRATIVE CONTROL THROUGH BOT FARMS AND MISINFORMATION

In 2017 and 2018, Turkey implemented a ban on Wikipedia after the site refused to remove content alleging Turkey's support for terrorist groups. This ban, which affected all language versions of Wikipedia, blocked people's access to the site even when using VPN. On July 15, 2016, Turkey experienced a coup attempt by a faction of the military that tried to overthrow President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's government. In the aftermath, Turkish authorities took digital access control measures to conceal the state's narrative surrounding the failed coup.⁵⁰

44 Citizen Lab. (2021). Pegasus vs. Predator: Dissidents Doubly Infected with iPhone Reveals Cytrox Mercenary Spyware. Citizen Lab. <https://citizenlab.ca/2021/12/pegasus-vs-predator-dissidents-doubly-infected-iphone-reveals-cy-trox-mercenary-spyware>

45 Ibid.

46 DFRLab. (2024). Markets Matter: A Glance into the Spyware Industry. DFRLab. <https://dfrlab.org/2024/04/22/markets-matter-a-glance-into-the-spyware-industry/>

47 The Guardian (2021). NSO Group: Israeli Firm Behind Pegasus Spyware Added to US Trade Blacklist. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/nov/03/nso-group-pegasus-spyware-us-blacklist>

48 Access Now. (2022). Women Human Rights Defenders Targeted in Pegasus Attacks in Bahrain and Jordan. Access Now. <https://www.accessnow.org/women-human-rights-defenders-pegasus-attacks-bahrain-jordan/>

49 Front Line Defenders. (2021). Report: Jordanian Human Rights Defenders and Journalists Hacked with Pegasus Spyware. Front Line Defenders. <https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/report-jordanian-human-rights-defenders-and-journalists-hacked-pegasus-spyware>

50 The Verge. (2018). Wikipedia Has Been Blocked in Turkey for a Year. The Verge. <https://www.theverge.com>

In a move reminiscent of the Turkish government's control over narratives, Sultan Al Jaber, CEO of the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (Adnoc) and president of the 28th United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP28), has been accused of attempting to “greenwash” his image by manipulating his Wikipedia page. Members of Al Jaber's team reportedly edited his Wikipedia entries to downplay his role in expanding the UAE's fossil fuel output while highlighting his involvement in green energy initiatives. This included suggesting the removal of references to a multi-billion-dollar oil pipeline deal and inserting quotes that cast him as an ally to the climate movement. Al Jaber tried to use Wikipedia in a strategic effort to control public perception and shape the narrative around his dual roles as both a climate leader and a key figure in the fossil fuel industry.⁵¹

RESEARCHERS AT THE STANFORD INTERNET OBSERVATORY UNCOVERED A SPRAWLING NETWORK OF SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS PUSHING THE SAUDI-LED ALLIANCE'S AGENDA, FLOODING PLATFORMS WITH OVER 36 MILLION TWEETS THAT PRAISED SAUDI LEADERSHIP WHILE VILIFYING QATAR AND TURKEY.

In Libya, the ongoing proxy war has become a battlefield not just of military but of narrative control. The conflict sees Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE alliance clashing with Turkey and Qatar, each vying for influence over Libya. In December 2019, researchers at the Stanford Internet Observatory uncovered a sprawling network of social media accounts pushing the Saudi-led alliance's agenda, flooding platforms with over 36 million tweets that praised Saudi leadership while vilifying Qatar and Turkey. This digital assault was part of a broader strategy to dominate the narrative, with Twitter and Facebook forced to shut down thousands of accounts for spreading this orchestrated disinformation.⁵²

In 2020, the narrative war in Egypt took a darker turn as the government exploited the pandemic to silence dissent under the guise of combating misinformation. The “Coronavirus Case” (Case No. 558 of 2020) became a tool for the regime to crack down on critics and dissidents. Since the March 25 decree imposing a partial curfew, the crackdown was swift and severe, with law enforcement not only fining businesses but arresting

[com/2018/4/30/17302142/wikipedia-ban-turkey-one-year-anniversary](https://www.ccr.org/2018/4/30/17302142/wikipedia-ban-turkey-one-year-anniversary)

51 Centre for Climate Reporting. (2023). UAE's Oil Boss Accused of Greenwashing Ahead of COP28. CCR. <https://climate-reporting.org/climate-uae-oil-greenwashing/>

52 Global Freedom of Expression. (2021). MENA Region Battles the Infodemic: From Fake News to Hashtag Washing in the Region's Ongoing Information Wars. Columbia University. <https://globalfreedomofexpression.columbia.edu/publications/mena-region-battles-the-infodemic-from-fake-news-to-hashtag-washing-in-the-regions-ongoing-information-wars/>

hundreds, 2,100 in Qalyubiya alone, within the first ten days. People were hauled off in overcrowded transport trucks, only to be briefly detained and paraded before a prosecution that often released them just as quickly. Dissenting voices such as Mohsen al-Bahnasi, was dragged from his home and slapped with charges of terrorism for using social media to call for the humane treatment of prisoners.⁵³

ON MARCH 24, 2020, AL-SHOROUK REPORTED THE ARREST OF TWO MEN IN ALEXANDRIA FOR ALLEGEDLY SPREADING FALSE COVID-19 INFORMATION, A GLIMPSE INTO THE BROADER CRACKDOWN UNFOLDING.

On March 24, 2020, Al-Shorouk reported the arrest of two men in Alexandria for allegedly spreading false COVID-19 information, a glimpse into the broader crackdown unfolding. By April, it became clear that these arrests were part of a larger “Corona Case,” where the state targeted those who criticized the government’s pandemic response, shared unapproved COVID-19 data, or called for the release of prisoners. These actions, under the guise of combating “false news,” often included charges of terrorism, leading to indefinite detentions and silencing dissent,⁵⁴ as well as charges of “spreading false news” leading to arbitrary detentions and enforced disappearances. Among those targeted were political activists, human rights lawyers, and even children, all swept up in a wave of repression justified by the need to control the pandemic narrative about the efficiency of the government’s response despite the calls to reform for those most vulnerable.⁵⁵

In 2023, Sudan witnessed a disturbing use of narrative control. The Rapid Support Forces (RSF)⁵⁶ employed sophisticated strategies to manipulate public perception and polish its image. RSF fighters

53 Association for Freedom of Thought and Expression. (2020). Position Paper on the Egyptian Government’s Response to COVID-19: Human Rights Violations and the Use of Emergency Powers. AFTE, 30 June. <https://afteegypt.org/en/advocacy-en/position-papers-en/2020/06/30/19612-afteegypt.html>.

54 Ibid.

55 IFEX. (2020). How Authorities in MENA are Leveraging the COVID-19 Pandemic to Silence Critical Voices. IFEX. <https://ifex.org/how-authorities-in-mena-are-leveraging-the-covid-19-pandemic-to-silence-critical-voices/>

56 The group originated from the Janjaweed militias, a paramilitary force used by President Omar al-Bashir’s government during the 2000s conflict in Darfur to suppress a rebellion, resulting in the displacement of 2.5 million people and 300,000 deaths. The International Criminal Court accused government officials and militia leaders of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. Over time, the militia evolved into the Rapid Support Forces (RSF) in 2013, initially serving as border guards, and by 2015, the RSF joined Sudan’s army in deploying troops to the Yemen war alongside Saudi and Emirati forces. In 2017, the RSF was officially legitimized as an independent security force by law. See: Al Jazeera. (2023). Sudan unrest: What are the Rapid Support Forces? Al Jazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/4/16/sudan-unrest-what-is-the-rapid-support-forces>

reportedly conducted phone searches to erase any incriminating content that exposes human rights atrocities the RSF has committed, ensuring that their narrative remained untarnished.⁵⁷ Moreover, reports have surfaced suggesting that the RSF collaborated with international lobbying firms specializing in propaganda. RSF leader, Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), is believed to have signed a \$6 million contract with the Canadian firm Dickens & Madson, led by former Mossad operative Ari Ben-Menashe, to enhance the militia's image and present it favorably to the global public.⁵⁸

The RSF has been misrepresenting civilians' statements in propaganda videos, showcasing merchants and drivers seemingly living 'normally' under their control, all to distort reality and sway public opinion in their favor. In reality, RSF fighters have entrenched themselves in residential neighborhoods, using people's homes as strategic bases to counter the Sudanese Armed Forces' (SAF) heavy weaponry.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the DFRLab uncovered that the RSF's online presence is bolstered by at least 900 potentially hacked Twitter accounts, relentlessly retweeting and engaging with RSF content to fabricate an illusion of widespread support.⁶⁰

SAUDI ARABIA, EGYPT, AND THE UAE ARE AMONG THE LEADING PLAYERS IN DEPLOYING BOTS AND FAKE ACCOUNTS TO FLOOD SOCIAL MEDIA WITH PRO-GOVERNMENT PROPAGANDA AND TARGET POLITICAL OPPONENTS.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE are among the leading players in deploying bots and fake accounts to flood social media with pro-government propaganda and target political opponents. Despite efforts by platforms like Facebook and X to curb these activities, the scale and sophistication of these operations are increasingly expanding.

57 SMEX (2023). Internet and Telecom Shutdowns in Sudan: Who Is Responsible? SMEX. <https://smex.org/internet-and-telecom-shutdowns-in-sudan-who-is-responsible/>

58 BEAM Reports. (2022). [How the Rapid Support Forces Are Trying to Improve Their Image Through Media](#)

59 SMEX (2023). How Disinformation Campaigns Endanger Lives in Sudan. SMEX. <https://smex.org/how-disinformation-campaigns-endanger-lives-in-sudan/>

60 DFRLab (2023). Potentially Hijacked Twitter Accounts Promote Sudanese Paramilitary Force. DFRLab. <https://dfrlab.org/2023/04/18/potentially-hijacked-twitter-accounts-promote-sudanese-paramilitary-force/>

SPOTLIGHT ON IRAQ'S VIOLENT CRACKDOWN ON ONLINE EXPRESSIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In August 2023, the Iraqi Communications and Media Commission (CMC) issued a directive banning the use of the terms homosexuality and gender in both digital and traditional media, mandating that 'sexual deviance' be used instead, under the guise of protecting "public morals."⁶¹

Earlier in January 2023, the Ministry of Interior launched an online platform, 'Ballegh', encouraging citizens to report "indecent content" that supposedly violated public morals. Within a month, the platform claimed to have received 96,000 reports, leading to the arrest of at least 20 people by June 2023, including several influencers. These arrests were justified under Article 403 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes the publishing of content that violates "public decency," a law originally intended for written materials but now applied to digital content as well.⁶²

VIOLENT PERSECUTION OF LGBTQI+ INDIVIDUALS IN PARTICULAR, FACILITATED THROUGH ONLINE SURVEILLANCE AND DIGITAL ENTRAPMENT. ARMED GROUPS, SUCH AS THE POPULAR MOBILIZATION FORCES (PMF), HAVE TAKEN TO USING SAME-SEX DATING APPS TO LOCATE AND PERSECUTE LGBTQI+ INDIVIDUALS.

This crackdown is part of Iraq's surveillance approach in general, and violent persecution of LGBTQI+ individuals in particular, facilitated through online surveillance and digital entrapment. Armed groups, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF),⁶³ have taken to using same-sex dating apps to locate and persecute LGBTQI+ individuals.⁶⁴ In testimony, one individual recounted how a journalist friend warned them about the existence of a 'kill list', which included the names of "civic engagers" and LGBTQI+ people, marking them for persecution.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Amnesty International. (2023). Iraq: Authorities must immediately reverse media ban on the terms "homosexuality" and "gender." Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/iraq-authorities-must-immediately-reverse-media-ban-on-the-terms-homosexuality-and-gender/>

⁶² SMEX. (2023). Iraq's controversial "Ballegh" platform for combating indecent content. SMEX. <https://smex.org/iraqs-controversial-ballegh-platform-for-combating-indecent-content/>

⁶³ The Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), also known as the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), is an Iraqi state-sponsored paramilitary network of about 67 factions, primarily Shia groups, some backed by Iran, formed in 2014 to fight ISIS, with roots tracing back to Iranian-supported insurgents, and later reorganized in 2018 under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch. (2022). "Everyone Wants Me Dead": Killings, Abductions, Torture, and Sexual Violence Against LGBT People in Iraq. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/report/2022/03/23/everyone-wants-me-dead/killings-abductions-torture-and-sexual-violence-against#_ftn102

⁶⁵ Ibid.

This online targeting extends to public figures. In 2018, Ahmad Majed al-Mutairi, known as Hammoudi on Instagram, was murdered in Baghdad, with his death broadcast on social media as he was taunted with homophobic slurs.⁶⁶ But the digital fascism fueling these atrocities is not confined to Iraq alone. In the Kurdistan Region, Grindr has been actively used by the Asayish (Kurdistan Regional Government's security forces) for digital entrapment. In a testimony, Dima, a trans woman, said that she was blackmailed on Grindr when a man threatened to expose her identity by revealing her location and contacting her father, demanding money in exchange for silence.⁶⁷ In 2022, Doski Azad, a Kurdish transgender woman and active online makeup artist, was shot dead by her brother in Duhok.⁶⁸

IN 2023, HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH DOCUMENTED AT LEAST 22 CASES OF ONLINE ENTRAPMENT, HARASSMENT, AND DEATH THREATS IN EGYPT, JORDAN, AND LEBANON, WHERE DIGITAL TOOLS ARE USED TO COMMIT THIS LEVEL OF VIOLENCE.


Across the SWANA region, state actors and armed groups have exploited social media and dating apps to entrap, harass, and persecute LGBTQI+ individuals in recent years. In 2023, Human Rights Watch documented at least 22 cases of online entrapment, harassment, and death threats in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, where digital tools are used to commit this level of violence.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Rudaw. (2022). LGBTQ+ community faces threats and violence in the Kurdistan Region. <https://www.rudaw.net/english/middleeast/iraq/23032022>.

⁶⁸ The Guardian. (2022). Kurdish transgender woman shot by brother had been hiding from family. The Guardian, 21 February. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2022/feb/21/kurdish-transgender-woman-shot-by-brother-had-been-hiding-from-family>

⁶⁹ Human Rights Watch. (2023). All This Terror Because of a Photo: Digital Targeting and Its Offline Consequences for LGBT People. Human Rights Watch, 21 February. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/21/all-terror-because-photo-digital-targeting-and-its-offline-consequences-lgbt>



PURIFICATION FORCES: ANTI-LGBTQI+ CAMPAIGNS

Government led and societal attacks on LGBTQI+ rights have long been a harsh reality in the SWANA region, but recent years have seen a marked intensification and expansion of these measures. A particularly alarming example is Iraq’s new law, passed in April 2024, that criminalizes “homosexual acts”, imposing prison sentences of up to 15 years. The amended law also targets transgender individuals and medical professionals, criminalizing “biological sex change based on personal desire and inclination” with penalties of up to three years in prison.⁷⁰

IN APRIL 2023, A TUNISIAN COURT REJECTED A TRANS MAN’S REQUEST FOR LEGAL GENDER RECOGNITION, CITING SHARIA AND SOCIAL VALUES AS THE BASIS FOR ITS DECISION. SIMILARLY, IN MAY 2023, A BAHRAINI COURT DENIED A TRANS MAN’S REQUEST FOR GENDER-AFFIRMING HEALTHCARE AND THE SUBSEQUENT LEGAL RECOGNITION OF HIS GENDER.

Trans individuals frequently face denial of legal gender recognition. In April 2023, a Tunisian court rejected a trans man’s request for legal gender recognition, citing Sharia and social values as the basis for its decision.⁷¹ Similarly, in May 2023, a Bahraini court denied a trans man’s request for gender-affirming healthcare and the subsequent legal recognition of his gender.⁷² These actions are part of a broader attempt to ‘purify’ the nation, casting LGBTQI+ identities as threats to the moral and cultural fabric that must be eradicated.

This ‘purification’ process often requires digital entrapment, but when entrapment fails, authorities have resorted to fabricating proof by any means possible. In Egypt, in 2020 detainees reported that when police officers couldn’t find “evidence” on their phones at the time of arrest,

70 The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. (2024). 2023 was a bad year for LGBTQ+ rights in the MENA region. 2024 is set to be even worse. TIMEP, 4 June. <https://timep.org/2024/06/04/2023-was-a-bad-year-for-lgbtq-rights-in-the-mena-region-2024-is-set-to-be-even-worse/>

71 Cairo 52. (2024). Tunis Court of First Instance: Gender identity disorder is not a valid reason for legal gender recognition. Cairo 52, 30 January. <https://cairo52.com/2024/01/30/tunis-court-of-first-instance-gender-identity-disorder-is-not-a-valid-reason-for-legal-gender-recognition/>

72 Cairo 52. (2024). Bahrain: Continued denial of legal gender recognition and gender-affirming healthcare for transgender people in the name of Islamic Sharia. Cairo 52, 7 February. <https://cairo52.com/2024/02/07/bahrain-continued-denial-of-legal-gender-recognition-and-gender-affirming-healthcare-for-transgender-people-in-the-name-of-islamic-sharia/>

they would download same-sex dating apps onto the phones and upload pornographic photos to justify their continued detention. The cases documented suggest a coordinated policy by the Egyptian government, both online and offline, aimed at persecuting LGBTQI+ people. In one example a police officer informed a detained man that his entrapment and arrest were part of an operation to “clean the streets of faggots.”⁷³

IN LATE 2021, QATAR’S MINISTRY OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY LAUNCHED INSPECTION CAMPAIGNS TO SEIZE AND CONFISCATE MULTICOLORED CHILDREN’S TOYS RESEMBLING RAINBOW FLAGS, FRAMING THIS AS A DEFENSE AGAINST WHAT WAS PERCEIVED AS WESTERN IDEOLOGICAL IMPOSITION

Homophobic social media campaigns in the SWANA gained momentum around the time Qatar hosted the World Cup (late 2022), as global media attention brought to light the rights violations faced by LGBTQI+ individuals in Qatar and the broader region. In late 2021, Qatar’s Ministry of Trade and Industry launched inspection campaigns to seize and confiscate multicolored children’s toys resembling rainbow flags, framing this as a defense against what was perceived as Western ideological imposition, which they argued contradicted Qatari values and traditions.⁷⁴

Multiple forces in the region frequently weaponize rhetoric around ‘importing Western values’ and ‘protecting family values’ as narrative vehicles. States like Egypt have taken it upon themselves to protect the ‘family’ and its values from various perceived threats. This strategy is designed to mold citizens into isolated units, granting the state greater access to the intimate details of their lives and making them easier to monitor, manage, and control.⁷⁵

Similarly, in the narrative of ‘fighting against Western values’ – here the fear of a potential threat to social values, perceived by a significant portion of society, is utilized to create a state of moral panic, where violence against LGBTQI+ communities is presented as a form of

73 Human Rights Watch. (2021). Clean the streets of faggots. Human Rights Watch, 4 August. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/04/clean-streets-faggots>

74 Human Rights Watch. (2022). Qatar World Cup ambassador’s homophobic comments fuel discrimination. Human Rights Watch, 10 November. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/10/qatar-world-cup-ambassadors-homophobic-comments-fuel-discrimination>

75 Sabala, T. (2023). The Family Values: Is It Really About the Family? Analyzing The Family in the Egyptian Discourse Through a Sociological Lens. <https://fount.aucegypt.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3046&context=etds>

protection and self-defense. In Iraq, for instance, in 2023, on the Islamic Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, politician Ammar al-Hakim called on legislative, executive, and judicial bodies to combat what he described as “deviations and agendas targeting human nature and instinct.”⁷⁶

FASCIST AND FUNDAMENTALIST FORCES IN THE REGION POSITION THEMSELVES AS PROTECTORS OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES FROM ‘FOREIGN’ INFLUENCES AND CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND AS DEFENDERS OF CHILDREN. THIS ALIGNS WITH GLOBAL FASCIST DISCOURSES, WHICH FREQUENTLY DEPICT MISOGYNIST ACTORS AS VICTIMS WHILE CREATING AND SPREADING MORAL PANIC ABOUT THE ‘INFILTRATION OF HOMOSEXUALITY’ AS A THREAT TO ‘THE FAMILY’ AND THE NATION.

At the core of the narratives in the examples provided is the framing of rights related to gender and sexuality as Western impositions on local cultures. This framing often manifests through discourses on cultural imperialism, ‘protection of children’, and the ‘preservation of the family’, serving to target and erase the struggles of LGBTQI+ communities in the region. Fascist and fundamentalist forces in the region position themselves as protectors of local communities from ‘foreign’ influences and cultural imperialism and as defenders of children. This aligns with global fascist discourses, which frequently depict misogynist actors as victims while creating and spreading moral panic about the ‘infiltration of homosexuality’ as a threat to ‘the family’ and the nation. These discourses, while sometimes containing elements of truth – such as the West’s control over media as pointed out by Fetra – are manipulated to advance anti-rights agendas. The narratives are employed to incite moral panic and justify the repression of LGBTQI+ people, framing them as a threat to societal values and stability.⁷⁷

Following Iraq’s lead in changing its laws and amplifying calls to violence against LGBTQI+ people, countries such as Algeria, Lebanon, the UAE, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Syria have implemented similar measures. For instance, on June 14th, 2022, the Saudi Ministry of Commerce tweeted that it would confiscate products bearing symbols that promote

76 Abrar Taha. Jummar Media. ARABIC (2023). “خلق الوحش.. عن معاداة السلطة والمجتمع للمثليين” <https://jummar.media/4339>

77 Association for Women’s Rights in Development. (2021). OURs report 2021: Rights at risk – Time for action. AWID. <https://www.awid.org/publications/ours-report-2021>

homosexuality and “contradict normal instinct.” Two days later, the Ministry reiterated its commitment to seizing products that allegedly violate “the teachings of our true Islamic religion, our traditions, customs, and culture,” and urged citizens to report any such items.⁷⁸ The Kuwaiti Ministry of Commerce and Industry echoed this sentiment five days later, encouraging citizens to report any slogans that “violate public morals” and including an image of the LGBTQI+ rainbow flag to guide users on what to watch for.⁷⁹ This has created a new infrastructure for an informant culture where people monitor and keep track of those who act ‘deviant’.

78 Gritten, D. (2022). Saudi authorities seize rainbow toys for promoting homosexuality. BBC News, 15 June. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-61813390>

79 The New Arab (2022). Kuwait asks public to help ‘monitor’ LGBT+ symbolism in latest crackdown. The New Arab, 20 June. <https://www.newarab.com/news/kuwait-asks-public-help-monitor-lgbt-symbolism-latest-crackdown>



INFORMANT CULTURE

THE RISE OF INFORMANT CULTURE, WHERE CITIZENS ARE ENCOURAGED TO REPORT ON OTHERS DEEMED 'DEVIANT', BY SOCIETY'S STANDARDS, PARTICULARLY IN THE CONTEXT OF LGBTQI+ COMMUNITIES, IS INTERTWINED WITH MILITARISM, SURVEILLANCE, AND THE RISE OF FUNDAMENTALISMS WITHIN THE REGION.

The rise of informant culture, where citizens are encouraged to report on others deemed 'deviant', by society's standards, particularly in the context of LGBTQI+ communities, is intertwined with militarism, surveillance, and the rise of fundamentalisms within the region. This culture is not limited to the actions of the state alone but is bolstered by the active participation of citizens who are seen as 'responsible' enough to monitor and report – to 'snitch' on – any behavior that deviates from the imposed societal norms or values.

In Jordan, in 2023 this informant culture fueled the blackmailing and harassment of LGBTQI+ individuals, driven both by political agendas and personal interests. Figures like ex-member of parliament (MP) Dima Tahboub and YouTuber Eyad Qunaibi have played pivotal roles, with their public condemnations of queer activists serving as rallying cries for their followers. These followers, in turn, magnify the rhetoric, escalating it into widespread harassment and violence against the LGBTQI+ community.⁸⁰ Each time figures like Tahboub or Qunaibi post on social media, naming individuals or criticizing activities associated with queer or feminist movements, they incite their followers to take action.

In Egypt 2020, the arrest of female TikTok influencers, prosecuted under Article 25 of the cybercrime law,⁸¹ was often sparked by influential male YouTubers who posted videos denouncing these women's 'indecent content' to their large audiences, sometimes explicitly calling for their

80 My.Kali. (2023). Report: Escalating attacks on queer initiatives and individuals in Jordan 2023. My.Kali Magazine, 29 June. <https://www.mykalimag.com/en/2023/07/29/report-escalating-attacks-on-queer-initiatives-and-individuals-in-jordan-2023/>

81 This law states that anyone who violates a family principle or value of Egyptian society shall be punishable by imprisonment for at least six months and a fine ranging from fifty thousand to one hundred thousand Egyptian Pounds, or by one of these two penalties.

arrest. Haneen Hossam, a 20-year-old TikTok influencer with over a million followers, was one such target. Her ‘crime’ – dancing and earning money from her content – led to her being charged with violating “the values of the Egyptian family and society,” resulting in a two-year prison sentence, asset seizure, and a hefty fine. This pattern of informant culture has seen at least five women sentenced to jail for their TikTok videos, with some still fighting their charges on appeal.⁸² In 2020, The Economic Court in Cairo sentenced two women, Haneen Hossam and Mawada al-Adham, to two years in prison and a fine of 300,000 Egyptian pounds (\$18,750) each for allegedly “violating family values and principles.” A similar fate befell Manar Samy, who received a three-year sentence and the same fine, with a bail set at 20,000 Egyptian pounds (\$1,250) to suspend her sentence pending appeal. All three were prominent TikTok users, with millions of followers between them. But the crackdown extends far beyond targeting women – In February 2020, blogger Anas Hassan was sentenced to three years in prison and fined 300,000 Egyptian pounds for managing the “Egyptian Atheists” Facebook page.⁸³

In Saudi Arabia, the government’s push for social policing is epitomized by the mobile application ‘We’re All Security’. Initially launched to report traffic violations and burglaries, the app quickly evolved into a tool for citizens to report social media accounts spreading “terrorist or extremist ideas,” effectively turning ordinary people into monitors for the state. The app, part of an interactive security system, was accompanied by strict warnings that offenders could face up to one year in prison or a fine of SR500,000 (USD 133,000).⁸⁴ This culture of surveillance and informant behavior is further highlighted by the case of a Saudi woman, Salma al Shehab (her case highlighted above), who was allegedly reported to authorities through this very app.⁸⁵ The app and the broader anti-cybercrime law, which enables violations of privacy via mobile devices, underscore the extent to which Saudi citizens are encouraged to snitch on each other under the guise of national security.

In Morocco, informant culture has manifested through a disturbing trend where individuals have used various dating apps to ‘out’ other users

82 Access Now. (2020). Women jailed for TikTok in Egypt: Free them now. Access Now, 18 September. <https://www.accessnow.org/egypt-women-jailed-for-tiktok/>

83 The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy. (2020). Egypt’s TikTok Crackdown and Family Values. TIMEP, 13 August. <https://timep.org/2020/08/13/egypts-tiktok-crackdown-and-family-values/>.

84 TahawulTech. (2017). Saudi Arabia rolls out privacy protection app. TahawulTech, 13 March. <https://www.tahawultech.com/news/saudi-arabia-rolls-out-privacy-protection-app/>

85 Trew, B. (2022). Saudi Arabia’s ‘snitching’ app helped jail Leeds student Salma al-Shehab for 34 years. The Guardian, 17 August. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/aug/17/saudi-arabia-snitching-app-jailed-leeds-student-salma-al-shehab>

without their consent, starting around mid-April 2020. This malicious behavior has led to severe consequences for those targeted, including ostracization by family and community, eviction by landlords, and job loss.⁸⁶

THE RISE OF THE FETRA CAMPAIGN

IN JUNE 2022, AN ONLINE CAMPAIGN CALLED FETRA EMERGED ON FACEBOOK. 'FETRA' IN ARABIC MEANS 'HUMAN INSTINCT,' AND THE CAMPAIGN'S SLOGAN WAS: "THERE ARE ONLY TWO GENDERS."

In June 2022, an online campaign called Fetra emerged on Facebook. 'Fetra' in Arabic means 'human instinct,' and the campaign's slogan was: "There are only two genders." The campaign was founded by Egyptian marketing professionals Abdallah Abbass, Mohammad Ibrahim,⁸⁷ with experience creating marketing campaigns for start-ups.⁸⁸ The campaign quickly spread to several countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Jordan, Libya, Qatar, and Iraq. Fetra was specifically launched during Pride Month as a way to fight against so-called "gender ideology".

In an interview with Al Jazeera, Abbas, one of the campaign founders, explained that it was launched in an effort to push back on narratives enforced by the West on the Arab world that "promote homosexuality".⁸⁹ He added that while the founders had the idea for quite some time, what finally prompted them to go ahead was Disney's 'promotion of homosexuality' in their cartoons, in fear that children would be influenced by this, and that this will impact the future of Arab societies. He went on to explain that while there are many who do not "accept homosexuality" in the region, there is no platform for them to express their concerns, and they fear being smeared by pro-LGBTQI+ movements. Before their social media accounts were banned by Facebook and Twitter in July

86 Human Rights Watch. (2020). Morocco: Online attacks over same-sex relations. Human Rights Watch, 27 April. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/27/morocco-online-attacks-over-same-sex-relations>

87 Al Jazeera Mubasher. (2022). حملة فطرة تواصل الانتشار عبر منصات بديلة. بعد إغلاق فيسبوك للصفحة.. <https://www.aljazeeramubasher.net/news/2022/7/21/%D8%A8%D8%B9%D8%AF-%D8%A5%D8%BA%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82-%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%B3%D8%A8%D9%88%D9%83-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A9-%D9%81%D8%B7%D8%B1%D8%A9>

88 Euronews. (2022). Arabic anti-LGBTQ+ campaign goes viral on Twitter. Euronews, 3 August. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/08/03/twitter-arabic-anti-lgbtq-campaign-goes-viral>

89 Al Jazeera Mubasher, 2022 - Prev. Cit (77).

2022, Fetra’s accounts had reached two million and 79K followers, respectively.⁹⁰

On June 9th, Meta, the parent company of Facebook and Instagram, banned Fetra’s account after reviewing its content in response to reports from digital rights activists. In reference to their accounts being shut down, Fetra campaigners posted the following message to their Telegram followers: “as is the custom of the West in restricting freedoms, if the opinion is contrary to their whims, they close the page, but they will not be able to finish the idea because it is in the minds now. The power of the idea terrifies them...the power of Fetra terrifies them....”. The campaign was then revived by other nationalist and fundamentalist religious Facebook groups that repurposed their activities to spread anti-LGBTQI+ content.⁹¹

The Fetra campaign quickly spread across Facebook through a wave of rebranded or newly created pages and groups, with at least six adopting the Fetra name between July 1 and July 10, 2022. DFRLab found that some of these groups, like فطرة_fetrah, originally focused on religious content but shifted to support the anti-LGBTQI+ campaign. Another group, initially the ‘New Iraqi Student Party’, rebranded to Fetra and began sharing anti-LGBTQI+ content while hypocritically claiming they opposed bullying. Even older pages, like one formerly called the ‘Arab Nationalist Movement in Yemen’, were repurposed under the Fetra banner, demonstrating a coordinated effort to push this agenda across social media.⁹²

In 2023, the release of the US movie “Barbie” sparked widespread alarm in several countries in the region, with social media abuzz with accusations that the film ‘promotes homosexuality’ and undermines ‘public morality’. In response, countries like Kuwait, Oman, Algeria, and Mauritania banned “Barbie” from cinemas.⁹³

90 Ibid.

91 DFRLab. (2023). Anti-LGBTQ+ campaigns spread on Arabic social media. DFRLab, 5 April. <https://dfrlab.org/2023/04/05/anti-lgbtq-campaigns-spread-on-arabic-social-media/>

92 Ibid.

93 BBC News. (2023). Barbie banned in Kuwait as Lebanon urges action. BBC, 10 August. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-66464852>

SPOTLIGHT ON LEBANON'S NEW ANTI-LGBTQI+ CRUSADERS

IN 2022, A NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH GROUP NAMED 'JUNOUD EL RAB' (ARABIC FOR 'SOLDIERS OF GOD') STARTED CONDUCTING PATROLS IN THE ASHRAFIEH NEIGHBORHOOD OF BEIRUT, WITH THE CLAIMED OBJECTIVE OF PROTECTING THE SECURITY OF THE AREA, ESPECIALLY IN THE WAKE OF LEBANON'S ECONOMIC MELTDOWN.

In 2022, a neighborhood watch group named 'Junoud el Rab' (Arabic for 'Soldiers of God') started conducting patrols in the Ashrafieh neighborhood of Beirut, with the claimed objective of protecting the security of the area, especially in the wake of Lebanon's economic meltdown.⁹⁴

According to an Al Akhbar report,⁹⁵ the Christian fundamentalist group publicly announced itself in October 2020. The group quickly spread to Jdeideh, Zahle, among different Christian areas in the country.⁹⁶ Its publicly stated goal is to form units capable of "protecting and defending Christian areas;" they have continuously rejected being described as a militia and insist that they are an unarmed evangelistic group. On their website, Junoud el Rab runs a Bible study group and shares analysis of biblical texts.⁹⁷

94 Al-Akhbar. (2023). «جنود الرب... بدايات الأمن الذاتي؟». Al-Akhbar, 8 August. <https://al-akhbar.com/Politics/350422>

95 Ibid.

96 Historically, Lebanon's 15-year civil war, which began in 1975, established informal 'borders' between different regions. Certain areas became known as strongholds for Christian parties, while others were dominated by Muslim parties, leading to heightened tensions. Over time, these divisions grew even more pronounced, further entrenching the sectarian divides across the country.

97 مقاطع الفيديو. جنود الرب. (n.d.). <https://www.jnoudelrab.com/music/videos/>



Photo from Junoud el Rab's website, April 4, 2024⁹⁸

They operate as an organized group and have a uniform of black shirts that carry their emblem (pictured above). The group opposes anything non-religious, secular, leftist, or communist, along with Palestinian refugees and Syrian refugees. They reject civil marriage, homosexuality, and abortion, and fight drug trafficking as “works of the devil”. Their mobilization efforts glorify the Crusades, and they accompany their social media posts with Bible quotes about peoples relationship with God and their duty to be His soldiers on earth to defend holy sites.⁹⁹ Their Facebook page has high engagement with 16K followers.¹⁰⁰ Reports indicate that members receive monthly salaries from Antoun Sehnaoui – the owner of the bank SGBL (Société Générale de Banque au Liban) and some members are employed as security personnel at branches of “Société Générale” bank. Most of these members have political and ideological backgrounds supportive of the Lebanese Forces and Kataeb parties.¹⁰¹

Antoun Sehnaoui is known to be well-connected both locally and internationally. He has strong links within the Lebanese parliament and has sponsored electoral campaigns of parliamentarians, mostly from the Lebanese Kataeb and the

98 <https://www.jnoudel-rab.com/2024/04/04/%d9%8a%d8%a7-%d8%b3%d8%a7%d8%a6%d9%84%d9%8a-%d9%84%d9%85%d8%a7%d8%b0%d8%a7-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%aa%d8%ad%d9%82%d8%aa-%d8%a8%d8%ac%d9%86%d9%88%d8%af-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b1%d8%a8-%d8%9f/>

99 Al-Majalla. (2023). كل ما تريد معرفته عن جنود الرب في لبنان. Al-Majalla. <https://www.majalla.com/nod/e/298496/%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9/%D9%83%D9%84%D9%91-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%91-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86>

100 Soldiers of God. 'Followers'. Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/soldiersofgod.lb/followers/>.

101 L'Orient Today. (2022). Who are Ashrafieh's 'Soldiers of God'? L'Orient Today, 9 August. <https://today.lorientjour.com/article/1304447/who-are-ashrafiehs-soldiers-of-god.html>

Lebanese Forces, both right-wing Christian political parties.¹⁰²

As CEO of SGBL, Sehnaoui was charged in 2019 with transferring 1,017 billion USD abroad in facilitation with the central bank governor, exploiting information they had that the currency would drop, which further harmed the currency and contributed to the Lebanese economic crisis. Sehnaoui's international connections span beyond the banking sector, and are concentrated in the US and France.¹⁰³

Notably, he is a member of the Board of Trustees of a US NGO called In Defense of Christians (IDC), which is a non-partisan institute of the Institute on Religion and Democracy.¹⁰⁴ The Institute on Religion and Democracy is led by Mike Tooley – a former CIA agent – with a mission to “lead the fight rallying Christians to champion biblical, historic Christianity and its role in democratic society, and to defeat revisionist challenges.” It was founded in response to what the founders viewed as the “politicization” of Christianity, particularly as church officials expressed their support for ‘Marxist ideas.’ Nowadays, the institution works to lobby against the “church elite” who they claim support “abortion rights, homosexual rights, big government, extreme environmentalism, pacifism, and anti-Americanism.”

IDC's website and blog are laden with extreme right-wing, anti-rights arguments across a multitude of issues, from their position that climate change is a thinly veiled argument for “statism, population control, and limits on development;” to an anti-migrant stance that references Christianity in that it “traditionally acknowledges some providential role in the existence of separate nations, which by definition must have borders;” to their work to oppose the divestment of church assets from companies that profit from the Israeli occupation.¹⁰⁵

THE FIRST PUBLIC APPEARANCE OF THE JUNOUD EL RAB WAS IN LATE 2019 DURING POPULAR AND CHURCH-LED PROTESTS AGAINST A MASHROU' LEILA' CONCERT IN ASHRAFIEH, ACCUSING THE BAND OF “PROMOTING HOMOSEXUALITY.”

The first public appearance of the Junoud el Rab was in late 2019 during popular and church-led protests against a Mashrou' Leila' concert in Ashrafieh, accusing the band of “promoting homosexuality.”¹⁰⁶ The group's name reappeared in another attack, this time on an art installation

102 Legal Agenda. (2023). The Maison Blanche shooting: How influential people get away with it. Legal Agenda, 19 July. <https://english.legal-agenda.com/the-maison-blanche-shooting-how-influential-people-get-away-with-it/>

103 Ibid.

104 In Defense of Christians. (2016). Groundbreaking held for Antoun Nabil Sehnaoui SGBL Athletics Center at LAU Byblos. In Defense of Christians, 5 July.

<https://indefenseofchristians.org/groundbreaking-held-antoun-nabil-sehnaoui-sgbl-athletics-center-lau-byblos/>

105 Institute on Religion & Democracy. About. Institute on Religion & Democracy. <https://theird.org/about/>

106 Ibid.

displayed in the famous Sassine Square in Ashrafieh in October 2021, that aimed to support breast cancer patients. Some of the mannequins by artist Mirna Maalouf were destroyed because they bore rainbow colors, with Jnoud el Rab accusing the exhibit of “promoting nudity and homosexuality.”¹⁰⁷

In an interview with Al-Hurra, Joseph Mansour, the founder and leader of the group, describes them as “children of the Lord Jesus, children of the Church. Everyone baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is a disciple of the Lord Jesus according to the Bible.”

He emphasizes that every word they speak is derived from the Holy Scriptures.¹⁰⁸ This emphasis is part of a holy approach that is rooted in an exclusionary logic that positions their followers as the only true disciples, implicitly marginalizing those who do not share their exact beliefs. One of the common verses they use is Psalm 18:46 and is translated as: “The LORD lives, and blessed be my rock, and exalted be the God of my salvation!”¹⁰⁹

**THE RISE OF JUNOUD ELRAB
IN JUNE 2022 COINCIDED
WITH A WIDER BACKLASH
AGAINST LGBTQI+ RIGHTS
BY DIFFERENT ACTORS IN
LEBANON.**

The rise of Junoud Elrab in June 2022 coincided with a wider backlash against LGBTQI+ rights by different actors in Lebanon. At the time, the Minister of Interior issued a directive to ban pro-LGBTQI+ events that were being advertised as part of Beirut Pride. This unlawful directive instructed security forces to ban pro-LGBTQI+ events, and despite a court order in November 2022 suspending it, he doubled down with a second directive banning any activities related to homosexuality. Citing vague claims about violating “customs and traditions” and responding to pressure from religious groups, al-Mawlawi targeted LGBTQI+ gatherings under the pretext of protecting societal values, without providing any

107 Videos collected by Al Majalla <https://www.majalla.com/node/298496/%D8%AB%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%B9/%D9%83%D9%84%D9%91-%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%81%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D8%AC%D9%86%D9%88%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%91-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86>

108 Alhurra, 2022. Prev Cit. (97)

109 Junoud al Rab’s website.

legal basis.¹¹⁰ The directive was later suspended and declared unlawful, to which the Minister responded by issuing a second directive prohibiting any conference, activity, or demonstration “related to or addressing homosexuality.” Around the same time, Junoud El Rab became more visible and outspoken, and also in June 2022 asked Lebanese Civil Defense to remove rainbow flags and symbols from Ashrafieh. The group also vandalized a billboard in the area.¹¹¹

In July and August of 2023, Hassan Nasrallah, head of Hezbollah, spoke of LGBTQI+ communities in a televised speech, saying that they were a “danger to society”.¹¹² In parallel, signatories to a bill – introduced by nine members of Parliament – to decriminalize same-sex sexual relations in Lebanon were targeted by an online harassment campaign from political and religious authorities. Consequently, one of the signatory MPs withdrew his signature from the bill. Around the same time, also in August 2023, Prime Minister Najib Mikati issued a statement calling for “all authorities, educational institutions, media and civil society to focus on national identity, its ethics and values, including the family”, and MP Ashraf Rifii and the caretaker Culture minister Mohammed Mortada introduced bills that would explicitly criminalize same-sex sexual relations.¹¹³ Junoud El Rab in parallel also became more vocal, and violently attacked a queer friendly bar in Beirut in late August of 2023.¹¹⁴

NARRATIVES OF FAMILY PROTECTION AND SOCIETAL VALUES ARE NOT ONLY EMPLOYED TO TARGET LGBTQI+ PEOPLE, WOMEN AND FEMINIST ACTIVISTS BUT ARE ALSO BEING USED TO SUPPORT BROADER FASCIST AND ANTI-DEMOCRATIC PROJECTS

In summary, the strategic use of narratives around gender and sexuality by state and non-state actors in the region serves to advance fascist and fundamentalist agendas. These narratives of family protection and societal values are not only employed to target LGBTQI+ people,

110 L’Orient Today. (2023). Lebanon’s LGBTQ+ community targeted from every direction. L’Orient Today, 7 July. <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1346389/lebanons-lgbtq-community-targeted-from-every-direction.html>

111 Junoud el Rab video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-zQsZSSCMg>

112 The New Arab. (2023). Who are the ‘Soldiers of God’ targeting Beirut’s LGBT+ scene? The New Arab, 27 July. <https://www.newarab.com/news/who-are-soldiers-god-targeting-beirut-s-lgbt-scene>

113 Human Rights Watch. (2023). Lebanon: Attack on freedoms targets LGBTI people. Human Rights Watch, 5 September. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/09/05/lebanon-attack-freedoms-targets-lgbti-people>

114 Amnesty International. (2023). Lebanon: Attack on LGBTI bar another ominous sign of deteriorating rights situation. Amnesty International, 25 August. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2023/08/lebanon-attack-on-lgbti-bar-another-ominous-sign-of-deteriorating-rights-situation/>

women and feminist activists but are also being used to support broader fascist and anti-democratic projects, highlighting the integral role of heteropatriarchal oppression in authoritarian control. By framing dissent as a threat to the moral fabric of society, authoritarian regimes weaponize these narratives to justify repression, thereby entrenching their power and silencing any challenges to their rule.



SWANA: NON-MONOLITHIC SYSTEMS OF RACIALIZATION AND RACISM

Racism and anti-migrant narratives and systems within the SWANA region cannot be understood as monolithic. Different countries within this region grapple with unique social, political, and economic challenges that shape their approaches to issues like labor, migration, and identity. For instance, the Kafala (sponsorship) system, which governs racialized labor primarily in the Gulf, impacts not only African workers but also those from South and Southeast Asia – whereas in Lebanon, the Kafala system specifically governs the regulation of domestic workers. This system, while ostensibly regulated, often results in exploitative conditions that differ significantly from the experiences of immigration or asylum. It's crucial to differentiate these varied experiences rather than applying a single theoretical framework to the entire region.

The Kafala system in Lebanon legally binds migrant domestic workers to their employers, creating a power dynamic that leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and severe restrictions on their freedoms. This system effectively traps workers in precarious living and working conditions, where their basic rights are often ignored, and any attempt to escape or seek justice is met with significant legal and social barriers. Employers have control over workers' legal status and documents, which are often withheld, making it nearly impossible for workers to leave abusive situations or access the protections that should be afforded to them under the law.¹¹⁵

The system also perpetuates a culture of impunity, where perpetrators of abuse – including sexual violence – face little to no accountability. Migrant domestic workers, especially women, are disproportionately targeted for sexual violence, both within their employers' homes and in public spaces, yet their legal recourse is severely limited by the very structure of the Kafala system. Even when laws exist to protect against

115 The Public Source. (2024). Invisible but everywhere: Sexualized violence against migrant domestic workers in Lebanon. The Public Source. <https://thepublicsource.org/invisible-sexualized-violence>

harassment or violence, such as Lebanon's Law No. 205/2020, the implementation and enforcement are often ineffective, leaving many workers to suffer in silence. The Kafala system, as it stands, not only facilitates but also legitimizes these abuses.¹¹⁶ This reality is worsened further by political or economic realities or crises within the country. For example, the pandemic has severely impacted households across all income levels, hitting the bottom 40 percent the hardest. Consequently, in Lebanon, migrant workers faced xenophobia and mistreatment, leading to abrupt contract terminations, forced departures without notice, and homelessness.¹¹⁷

The Kafala system in Qatar, which ties migrant workers' legal status to their employers, has led to widespread exploitation, particularly in the wake of the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Despite promises of labor reforms, many migrant workers, including those from India, Kenya, and Nepal, have continued to face severe wage theft, with employers withholding pay and end-of-service benefits. The system's flaws are highlighted by the inability of workers to change jobs without employer approval, effectively trapping them in abusive conditions. Even after the World Cup, Qatar has failed to compensate workers for the abuses they endured, and international bodies like FIFA have similarly neglected to address these injustices, despite profiting billions from the event.¹¹⁸

ULTRANATIONALIST AND FASCIST MOVEMENTS OFTEN EMERGE IN RESPONSE TO PERCEIVED THREATS AND ARE FURTHER COMPLICATED BY EU POLICIES AND FUNDING AIMED AT CURBING IMMIGRATION INTO EUROPE.

Instead of viewing the region solely through one lens, it is more insightful to analyze it through the dynamics of racialization, ultra-nationalism, and the resurgence of origin-based identities, such as neo-Pharaonism in Egypt.¹¹⁹ These ultranationalist and fascist movements often emerge

116 Ibid.

117 The World Bank. (2021). Distributional Impacts of COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa Region. The World Bank. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/publication/distributional-impacts-of-covid-19-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa-region>.

118 Human Rights Watch. (2023). Qatar: Six months post-World Cup, migrant workers suffer. Human Rights Watch, 16 June. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/06/16/qatar-six-months-post-world-cup-migrant-workers-suffer>

119 A resurgence of 'Neo-Pharaonism' has emerged in Egypt, driven by both the state and the public. Under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, the government has embraced ancient Egyptian aesthetics, exemplified by events like the erection of a 90-ton obelisk in Tahrir Square and extravagant parades celebrating Egypt's pharaonic heritage. This movement, however, has sparked controversy, including public outrage over the depiction of Cleopatra as a Black African in a Netflix series, with both citizens and the government asserting a narrative of national continuity and critiquing the portrayal as a

in response to perceived threats and are further complicated by EU policies and funding aimed at curbing immigration into Europe. This has led to increased border control measures across various North African countries, highlighting the intersection of local identity politics with broader geopolitical strategies, where the assertion of cultural purity and historical continuity becomes a tool for both domestic control and international bargaining, particularly in the context of migration and border security.

Displacement and refugeehood are driven by a multitude of geopolitical conflicts. The 2011 revolution and war in Syria led to 12 million Syrians being forcibly displaced. Eighty five percent of Syrian refugees are now hosted in neighboring countries, including Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt.¹²⁰ More recently, the ongoing war on Sudan has led to the displacement of over 3 million people, 2.4 million of them internally and the remainder to neighboring countries.¹²¹

NORTH AFRICA: THE GATEWAY TO EUROPE

North Africa is seen by many as a geographical gateway to Europe. The region's focus on border security has transformed into a broader apparatus of control that imposes devastating and fatal consequences on those fleeing and seeking safety.

SINCE 2016, EU MEMBER STATES, PARTICULARLY ITALY, HAVE ACTIVELY COLLABORATED WITH LIBYAN AUTHORITIES TO INTERCEPT AND RETURN PEOPLE ATTEMPTING TO FLEE BY SEA.

Libya is at the center of this migration route. Since 2016, EU member states, particularly Italy, have actively collaborated with Libyan authorities to intercept and return people attempting to flee by sea. This anti-migrant collaboration includes providing speedboats, training, and operational support to the Libyan Coast Guard, resulting in the capture and forced

"falsification of Egyptian history."

120 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2022). Eleven years on, mounting challenges push many displaced Syrians to the brink. UNHCR, 15 March. <https://www.unhcr.org/news/briefing-notes/eleven-years-mounting-challenges-push-many-displaced-syrians-brink>

121 ReliefWeb. (2023). Nearly 3 million displaced by conflict in Sudan. ReliefWeb, 13 June. <https://reliefweb.int/report/sudan/nearly-3-million-displaced-conflict-sudan>

return of an estimated 60,000 men, women, and children to Libya, including 8,435 individuals between January and September 2020 alone.¹²²

SINCE 2015, THE EU HAS FUNNELED 455 MILLION EUROS INTO LIBYA, PRIMARILY THROUGH UN AGENCIES, WITH THE INTENT OF BOLSTERING LIBYA'S COAST GUARD, REINFORCING ITS SOUTHERN BORDER, AND IMPROVING CONDITIONS FOR MIGRANTS.

In terms of funding flows, since 2015, the EU has funneled 455 million euros into Libya, primarily through UN agencies, with the intent of bolstering Libya's coast guard, reinforcing its southern border, and improving conditions for migrants. Yet, rather than achieving these goals, significant portions of these funds have been siphoned off to networks of militiamen and traffickers who prey on migrants, as revealed by a 2019 AP investigation.¹²³

Key figures in this violence include Mohammed Kachlaf, a militia leader sanctioned by the UN Security Council in 2018 for his role in migrant exploitation and smuggling, and Abdel-Rahman Milad, the commander of Zawiya's coast guard unit, also sanctioned for human trafficking. Milad and his associates have been directly linked to the sinking of migrant boats, according to UN experts. Despite these allegations, Milad denies involvement in human smuggling.¹²⁴ Meanwhile, in Tripoli's Abu Salim neighborhood, where a notorious detention center operates, the area is controlled by a militia led by Abdel-Ghani al-Kikli. Despite being accused of war crimes by Amnesty International, al-Kikli was appointed head of the government's Stability Support Authority, granting him even broader powers to arrest and detain individuals.¹²⁵ In 2023, EU Commissioner for Migration Ylva Johansson admitted that the Libyan Coast Guard had been infiltrated by criminal gangs. Yet, despite widespread criticism from

122 Amnesty International. (2020). Libya: New evidence shows refugees and migrants trapped in horrific cycle of abuses. Amnesty International, 24 September. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/libya-new-evidence-shows-refugees-and-migrants-trapped-in-horrific-cycle-of-abuses/>

123 Méchoulan, M., & Michaelson, R. (2019). EU funds end up in pockets of armed militias and traffickers. AP News, 31 December. <https://apnews.com/article/united-nations-tripoli-ap-top-news-international-news-immigration-9d9e-8d668ae4b73a336a636a86bdf27f>

124 United Nations Security Council. (2017). Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011) (S/2017/466). June 1, 2017. <https://reliefweb.int/report/libya/final-report-panel-experts-libya-established-pursuant-resolution-1973-2011-s2017466>.

125 Méchoulan, M. (2019). Making misery pay: Libya militias take EU funds for migrants. AP News, 31 December. <https://apnews.com/general-news-33fa5811cfa3406ebab0cf094ca946ff>

human rights and migrant justice groups, the EU continues to support the Coast Guard with funding and training.¹²⁶

Tunisia, like Libya, is a critical part of the migration route into Europe. On September 22, 2023, the European Commission announced plans to provide €67 million to Tunisia to ‘manage migration’, despite a lack of clear benchmarks to ensure that Tunisian authorities protect the rights of migrants and asylum seekers.¹²⁷

These funding efforts come on the heels of severe human rights violations against migrants, including the collective expulsions of over 1,300 African migrants and asylum seekers. The consequences of such actions have been catastrophic, with Libyan authorities reporting at least 27 deaths at their border in August 2023. Many of these migrants, expelled from Tunisia towards the Libyan border, were abandoned in the desert under relentless heat, leading to tragic fatalities.¹²⁸

**EU PLEDGED €7.4 BILLION
IN AID TO EGYPT, WITH FAR-
RIGHT ITALIAN PRIME MINISTER
GIORGIA MELONI ENDORSING
THIS DEAL AS THE “BEST WAY TO
ADDRESS MIGRATORY FLOWS.”**

The EU has been forging a number of deals with these countries, offering substantial financial incentives, advanced surveillance technology, and security training to prevent migrants from crossing the Mediterranean into Europe. Recently, amidst criticism by human rights groups, the EU pledged €7.4 billion in aid to Egypt, with far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni endorsing this deal as the “best way to address migratory flows.”¹²⁹ Additionally, the EU committed €1 billion in aid to Lebanon to bolster border control following increased Syrian migration to Cyprus, with EU Commission President Ursula Von Der Leyen stating the EU would work on a “more structured approach to voluntary returns...

126 Human Rights Watch. (2023). Already complicit in Libya migrant abuse, EU doubles down on support. Human Rights Watch, 8 February. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/08/already-complicit-libya-migrant-abuse-eu-doubles-down-support>

127 European Commission. (2023). Commission announces almost €127 million in support for the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding with Tunisia. 22 September. https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-announces-almost-eu127-million-support-implementation-memorandum-understanding-tunisia-2023-09-22_en

128 AP News. (2023). Libya migrants deaths in the desert near Tunisia border. AP News. <https://apnews.com/article/libya-migrants-deaths-desert-tunisia-d1030c82521aa6c32095f9098c0f9f35>

129 France24. (2024). EU pledges €7.4 billion in aid to Egypt as it seeks to curb migration. France24, 17 March. <https://www.france24.com/en/middle-east/20240317-eu-pledges-%E2%82%AC7-4-billion-in-aid-to-egypt-as-it-seeks-to-curb-migration>

in close collaboration with” the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).¹³⁰

In addition to these aid packages, to curb migration, the EU has signed deals and agreements on exchanging tactics, tools and weaponry.¹³¹ Refugees Platform in Egypt (RPE) has criticized the EU’s recent decision to fund the Egyptian Coast Guard with €80 million for ‘maritime border control equipment.’ The EU has not provided transparency on what this equipment entails or how it will be used, and it has failed to establish safeguards to prevent human rights abuses. The RPE also highlights that past EU funding to the government has only tightened restrictions on irregular migration in Egypt, particularly through the problematic Law No. 82 of 2016, which criminalized aid to migrants and exacerbates human rights violations. Additionally, the EU continues to push for stronger cooperation between Egypt and Libya on migration.¹³²

HUMAN RIGHTS ATROCITIES: THE COST OF BORDER CONTROL

MANUFACTURED HATRED, ROOTED IN FEAR AND RACISM, SANCTIONS BRUTALITY AGAINST THOSE SEEKING REFUGE. IN LIBYA, TUNISIA, AND LEBANON, REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS FIND THEMSELVES ENSNARED IN A WEB OF SYSTEMIC ABUSE

The architecture of border control and anti-immigration policies, increasingly bolstered by xenophobic narratives, has created an environment where human rights atrocities fester unchecked. This manufactured hatred, rooted in fear and racism, sanctions brutality against those seeking refuge. In Libya, Tunisia, and Lebanon, refugees and migrants find themselves ensnared in a web of systemic abuse – arrested, tortured, and discarded by societies that have been trained to see them as threats rather than human beings. The resulting atrocities are not isolated incidents but the natural consequence of a new border apparatus.

130 AP News. (2024). EU promises €1 billion to strengthen border control amid rising migration to Cyprus. AP News, 10 March. <https://apnews.com/article/lebanon-cyprus-eu-migration-europe-8639a76924445f2d2494684bc8e3b649>

131 Refugees Platform in Egypt. (2022). European Union Funding for the Egyptian Coast Guard: Implications for Human Rights. <https://rpegy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/EU-Funding-for-ECG-en.pdf>

132 Ibid.

Refugees and migrants in Libya face constant threats of arrest, detention, abduction by militias, and exploitation by traffickers. Many endure horrific conditions in detention centers, where torture, rape, and starvation are rampant, often with fatal outcomes.¹³³ Government officials and militias use racist language of ‘invasion’ and ‘contagion’, exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, to scapegoat migrants, accusing them of spreading the pandemic. Bani Walid, a notorious hub for human trafficking, has become a site of extreme violence where abducted refugees face brutal torture and extortion. Graphic videos shared online reveal the horrific conditions endured by these victims, who are held for ransom by armed gangs.¹³⁴ Migrants are regularly bought and sold in slave markets, with many subjected to horrific conditions, including sexual exploitation, being forced into sex work, and even murder by smugglers. In Sabha, a key entry point for refugees, bodies are often found abandoned, with many buried without identification.¹³⁵

ANTI-BLACK VIOLENCE IN TUNISIA REACHED ALARMING LEVELS, WITH AFRICAN MIGRANTS, REFUGEES, AND BLACK TUNISIANS FACING A SURGE IN RACIALLY MOTIVATED ATTACKS.

In March 2023, anti-Black violence in Tunisia reached alarming levels, with African migrants, refugees, and Black Tunisians facing a surge in racially motivated attacks. This wave of violence was fueled by anti-Black rhetoric from political figures, including President Kais Saied, whose speech in February warned against the supposed threat of African refugees to the ‘identity’ of the nation as Muslim Arab rather than African, leading to widespread xenophobic actions.¹³⁶ A Malian student was slashed with a razor while being subjected to racist slurs, and a Cameroonian asylum seeker was violently evicted and assaulted.¹³⁷ The situation rapidly deteriorated as African workers and students were fired,

133 Amnesty International. (2020). Libya: New evidence shows refugees and migrants trapped in horrific cycle of abuses. Amnesty International, 24 September. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/libya-new-evidence-shows-refugees-and-migrants-trapped-in-horrific-cycle-of-abuses/>

134 Amnesty International. (2020). Libya: New evidence shows refugees and migrants trapped in horrific cycle of abuses. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2020/09/libya-new-evidence-shows-refugees-and-migrants-trapped-in-horrific-cycle-of-abuses/>.

135 Al Jazeera. (2017). African refugees bought, sold and murdered in Libya. Al Jazeera, 29 November. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/29/african-refugees-bought-sold-and-murdered-in-libya>.

136 Al Jazeera. (2023). Black Tunisians lie low as violence against Black people worsens. Al Jazeera, 14 July. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/7/14/black-tunisians-lie-low-as-violence-against-black-people-worsens>.

137 Human Rights Watch. (2023). Tunisia: Racist Violence Targets Black Migrants, Refugees. Human Rights Watch, 10 March. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/03/10/tunisia-racist-violence-targets-black-migrants-refugees>.

evicted, and assaulted across Tunisia. This rise in anti-Black sentiment didn't differentiate between immigrants, refugees, or Black Tunisian citizens, creating a hostile environment for all.

In May 2024, Tunisian police conducted a raid in the early morning hours, forcibly rounding up hundreds of migrants and asylum seekers from makeshift camps in Tunis, including those near UNHCR and International Organization for Migration (IOM) offices. According to Refugees in Libya – a migrant justice NGO – the detainees, including men, women, and children, were placed on municipal buses and abandoned near the Algerian border, close to Jendouba, without any food or water. They described this as “mass desert dumping.”¹³⁸

In recent years, Syrians in Lebanon have faced escalating violence rooted in deeply ingrained xenophobia. Syrian refugees, along with many who have been in Lebanon for over a decade (for example, Syrians who have been living in Lebanon long before 2011), have experienced a surge in targeted abuse, including beatings, harassment, and even murder at the hands of vigilante gangs. This rise in violence has been accompanied by increased checkpoints and curfews, leaving many Syrians in constant fear, forcing them to hide or limit their movements to avoid further attacks.¹³⁹

NATIONALIST DISCOURSE AND ECONOMIC PANIC

IN A WORLD WHERE NATIONAL IDENTITIES ARE BEING FEVERISHLY RESURRECTED, WHERE THE ANCIENT SPECTER OF PHARAONISM IN EGYPT IS CALLED UPON TO FORTIFY THE WALLS OF EXCLUSION, THE LINES BETWEEN ASYLUM SEEKERS, IMMIGRANTS, AND CITIZENS DISSOLVE INTO AN INDISTINGUISHABLE MASS OF THE 'OTHER.'

In a world where national identities are being feverishly resurrected, where the ancient specter of Pharaonism in Egypt is called upon to fortify

138 The New Humanitarian. (2024). Tunisia Accused of Mass Desert Dumping of Migrants. The New Humanitarian, 7 May. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2024/05/07/tunisia-accused-mass-desert-dumping-migrants>.

139 The New Humanitarian. (2024). Syrians in Lebanon Face Growing Fear Amid Rising Xenophobia and Violence. The New Humanitarian, 22 April. <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/04/22/syria-lebanon-fear-xenophobia-violence>.

the walls of exclusion, the lines between asylum seekers, immigrants, and citizens dissolve into an indistinguishable mass of the ‘other.’ This return to ‘origin identities’ feeds the engine of racialized fear and economic panic.

In Egypt, 2023 saw the state’s official celebration of Pharaonism, with the opening of a new Egyptian museum, amplifying ultra-nationalist narratives through social media accounts and telegram channels that have gained significant traction with usernames such as “Egyptos” and “Kemet”.¹⁴⁰ These accounts promote a neo-pharaonic identity, often posed in opposition to Afrocentric perspectives, as seen in their campaigns against events like the Afrocentric conference in Aswan and Kevin Hart’s show in Cairo.^{141,142}

THESE IDEOLOGIES SERVE AS VEHICLES TO JUSTIFY EXCLUSIONARY POLICIES, MASS DEPORTATIONS, AND THE MARGINALIZATION OF VULNERABLE POPULATIONS, REINFORCING THE STATE’S CONTROL OVER NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL ORDER.

The recent resurgence of ultra-nationalist rhetoric in Egypt – such as neo-pharaonism – functions similarly to anti-refugee sentiments in creating an ‘us versus them’ narrative. This rhetoric not only glorifies a selective national identity but also aims to scapegoat immigrants and refugees as threats to the nation’s purity and stability. Consequently, these ideologies serve as vehicles to justify exclusionary policies, mass deportations, and the marginalization of vulnerable populations, reinforcing the state’s control over national identity and social order. In 2024, this rhetoric fueled a surge in online hate speech, with hashtags like #Stop_the_Refugees_Chaos and #Deportation_of_Refugees_is_the_People’s_Demand trending on platforms like X and Facebook. As Egypt faced economic crises, this nationalist discourse was weaponized to scapegoat and target refugees, leading to increased calls for their deportation and harsh government crackdowns.

140 TIMEP. (2023). Egypt’s Racial Nationalism: Neo-Pharaonism as a Tool of the State. TIMEP, 20 September. <https://timep.org/2023/09/20/egypts-racial-nationalism-neo-pharaonism-as-a-tool-of-the-state/#:~:text=The%20state%27s%20official%20celebration%20of,previously%20muted%20racial%20nationalist%20voices>.

141 African Arguments. (2023). Neo-Pharaonism: Egypt’s Ultras and the Hidden Hand of the State. <https://africanarguments.org/2023/06/neo-pharaonism-egypts-ultras-and-the-hidden-hand-of-the-state/>

142 A social media campaign in Egypt called for the cancellation of Kevin Hart’s comedy show in Cairo, accusing him of racism and “distorting Egyptian history.” The backlash stems from alleged comments attributed to Hart about the African origins of ancient Egyptian civilization. Many Egyptians have expressed anger, claiming these statements are an attempt to appropriate their history, leading to demands to boycott the event.

This surge in hostility came after the Egyptian government gave foreign residents a final deadline to regularize their status by September 30, 2024, under the threat of deportation. Despite agreements with the European Union, which provided Egypt with significant financial aid to address migration issues, the government intensified its crackdown, resulting in mass arrests and deportations, particularly targeting Sudanese refugees.¹⁴³

The anti-refugee social media campaign, which began in early July 2024, quickly gained momentum with the hashtag #ReportARefugee, generating over 11,000 posts and nearly 900,000 views. These posts often dehumanized refugees, likening them to animals and invaders and calling for their expulsion. The campaign was led by social media accounts such as Bassem El-Masry, who has a history of coordinating online harassment campaigns.¹⁴⁴ El-Masry explicitly stated the campaign's goal: to assist the Interior Ministry in locating undocumented refugees and ensuring their deportation.¹⁴⁵

TOXIC COMBINATION OF NATIONALISM, XENOPHOBIA, AND MISINFORMATION CONTINUES TO SHAPE PUBLIC DISCOURSE IN EGYPT, THREATENING THE SAFETY AND RIGHTS OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS.

The campaign's rhetoric was not only hateful but also misleading. It spread false information, such as videos purportedly showing refugees being deported, which were later debunked. These tactics were intended to further inflame public sentiment, leading to a broader online movement against refugees. The campaign extended beyond X, spreading to Facebook pages with nationalist and militaristic themes, where members celebrated unverified reports of mass deportations. This toxic combination of nationalism, xenophobia, and misinformation continues

143 Daraj. (2024). بلّغ عن لاجئ: موجة تحريض ضد اللاجئين في مصر. Daraj, 14 July. <https://daraj.media/%D8%A8%D9%84%D9%91%D8%BA-%D8%B9%D9%86-%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A6-%D9%85%D9%88%D8%AC%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B6-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%A8/>

144 DFRLab. (2023). Pro-Government Twitter Accounts Push Hashtag Promoting Egypt's Support for Human Rights. DFRLab, 31 May 31. <https://dfrlab.org/2023/05/31/pro-government-twitter-accounts-push-hashtag-promoting-egypts-support-for-human-rights/>.

145 Alhurra. (2024). حملات تحريضية ضد اللاجئين في مصر: من يقف وراءها وما تأثيرها؟ Alhurra, 3 July. <https://www.alhurra.com/egypt/2024/07/03/%D8%AD%D9%85%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AA%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B6%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AC%D8%A6%D9%8A%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D9%8A%D9%82%D9%81-%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%A1%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%88%D9%85%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D8%A3%D8%AB%D9%8A%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%9F>

to shape public discourse in Egypt, threatening the safety and rights of refugees and migrants.¹⁴⁶

Similarly in Lebanon, another campaign became popular: the “UNdo campaign”. The campaign was launched in March 2024 by a Lebanese NGO, World House of Lebanon, in partnership with the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture. The campaign uses billboards and TV advertisements to frame Syrian refugees as responsible for Lebanon’s economic crisis and calls to “undo the damage” caused by the country hosting a large number of refugees. Hinting at the ‘danger’ of demographic dominance by Syrians, one TV advertisement features a Syrian refugee introducing his seven children, with a voiceover that narrates, “Lebanon’s population is split in half: The first is made up of Syrian refugees, and the second is of Lebanese wanting to emigrate”.¹⁴⁷

SPOTLIGHT ON TUNISIA

FEBRUARY 21, 2023, PRESIDENT SAIED CONVENED THE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL, ISSUING A STATEMENT THAT FRAMED THE INFLUX OF AFRICAN MIGRANTS AS A DELIBERATE PLOT TO ALTER TUNISIA’S DEMOGRAPHIC MAKEUP, TURNING IT INTO “A PURELY AFRICAN COUNTRY” DETACHED FROM ITS ARAB AND ISLAMIC IDENTITY.

On February 21, 2023, President Saied convened the National Security Council, issuing a statement that framed the influx of African migrants as a deliberate plot to alter Tunisia’s demographic makeup, turning it into “a purely African country” detached from its Arab and Islamic identity. This rhetoric has fanned the flames of a state-sanctioned, civilian-backed campaign to purge Tunisia of “Africans.” Online platforms have been inundated with anti-Black sentiments, where self-proclaimed defenders of Tunisia’s so-called Arab-Muslim identity advocate for the removal of those they deem a threat to the nation’s cultural fabric.¹⁴⁸

Saeid’s statements echo the ‘great replacement’ theory, a conspiracy theory adopted by the European far-right that contends that global elites are orchestrating a plan to replace whites with non-white immigrants.

146 Daraj. (2024). Prev Cited (108)

147 L’Orient-Le Jour. (2024). Controversial New Campaign Calls to ‘Undo the Damage’ of Syrians in Lebanon. <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1369676/controversial-new-campaign-calls-to-undo-the-damage-of-syrians-in-lebanon.html>

148 ROAPE. (2023). Making Tunisia Non-African Again: Saied’s Anti-Black Campaign. ROAPE, 1 March. <https://roape.net/2023/03/01/making-tunisia-non-african-again-saieds-anti-black-campaign/>

The Tunisian version of the great replacement theory was formulated years before by the Tunisian Nationalist Party, which supported Saïed's presidency in 2019. In 2021, Saïed took office, suspended parliament, and changed the constitution to assign more powers to himself.¹⁴⁹ In late 2022, when Saïed was president, the party sent a document about a plan to "wipe out Tunisia from existence" to his office and launched a petition afterward calling for the deportation of Black migrants.¹⁵⁰

In the weeks following the president's statement, human rights organizations documented violations that included arbitrary arrests and detentions, evictions, job termination, and mob attacks targeting African migrants, where Tunisian police failed to intervene. On social media, pages spreading racist narratives that echoed the racist sentiments of the president became more visible. Posts ranged from echoing the conspiracy theory that there is a plan to erase Tunisians from existence, to alleging that African migrants were killing stray dogs and cats so they could eat them, to calling African migrants aggressive, and labeling them "invaders." One post referenced an alleged robbery incident in the US that was committed by an 'African American', tweeting, "[V]iolence in NYC - we cannot allow Tunisia to become infested with BLM [Black Lives Matter] thugs. This is what they do best. Kais Saïed deport all the illegal black invaders ASAP".¹⁵¹ The common thread in these narratives is the specific emphasis on the use of African.

On May 6th, 2024, Saïed also took aim at civil society organizations in a televised speech, referring to them as traitors who receive foreign funding to settle migrants in Tunisia illegally. Around the same time, Saïdia Mosbah, a black Tunisian activist who heads the anti-racism organization Mnemty, was arrested along with other activists and civil society workers. A youth hostel that houses migrants and two makeshift camps were raided, and hundreds of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers were either arrested or, once again, rounded up and expelled to the country's borders.¹⁵²

In this harsh landscape of rising fascism, xenophobia, and ultra-

149 The Soufan Center. (2023). IntelBrief: Tunisian President's Incendiary Comments Lead to Backlash Against Sub-Saharan Migrants. The Soufan Center, 7 April. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2023-april-7/>

150 ROAPE (2023). Prev Cit (137)

151 Uddin, R. (2023). Hate speech against Black Africans in Tunisia spreads on social media. Middle East Eye, 3 April. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-hate-speech-black-africans-social-media>

152 Amnesty International. (2024). Tunisia: Repressive crackdown on civil society organizations following months of escalating violence against migrants and refugees. Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/tunisia-repressive-crackdown-on-civil-society-organizations-following-months-of-escalating-violence-against-migrants-and-refugees/>

nationalism, the narratives driving anti-migrant attacks echo the same exclusionary logic as those targeting LGBTQI+ communities (these actors sometimes target both) in terms of 'purification', where these scapegoating narratives displace actual economic models, plans, and structures that could improve people's lives. In this distorted view, rights abuses are justified as necessary defenses of sovereignty. Leaders, grappling with economic crises exacerbated by global inequities, bolster these narratives, positioning themselves as guardians of the nation while labeling human rights defenders as traitors.



THE MANOSPHERE

In late 2022, Lakhrissi Elias – a former rapper known as ElSheikh Sar launched a campaign in Morocco urging men not to marry working women, claiming they are “not fit to be good mothers or wives.” Posts using the campaign’s hashtag (which is “لا تتزوج_موظفة” #Dont_marry_a_working_woman”) sometimes included divorced women, women above a certain age, or women with a college degree.¹⁵³ The arguments set forth include that working women will neglect ‘household duties’, are more likely to have past relationships with other men, might develop sexual relationships with their bosses and co-workers who are ‘alpha’ males, and may avoid sleeping with their husbands,¹⁵⁴ who in turn are portrayed as ‘beta’ males for “allowing” their wives to work. Additionally, Elias argues that working women are more powerful and thus more likely to file for divorce, citing higher divorce rates among women who work outside the home.¹⁵⁵ His plea is for men to unite, reclaim their power by collectively deciding not to marry certain women, and push back against feminist demands that contradict the “natural order of society.”¹⁵⁶

NUMEROUS TRANSLATED VIDEOS OF MALE SUPREMACIST INFLUENCER ANDREW TATE, WHO IS KNOWN FOR HIS MISOGYNISTIC VIEWS, DRAW HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF VIEWS.

On YouTube, numerous translated videos of male supremacist influencer Andrew Tate, who is known for his misogynistic views, draw hundreds of thousands of views. Tate – who was arrested in 2022 on charges related to human trafficking and sexual exploitation – converted to Islam that same year, which was met with positive reactions from some Arab audiences. Some religious figures, such as UAE’s Faris al Hammadi praised his conversion, claiming it led others to convert as well. Youtube channels like ‘Alasna ala al Haq’ and ‘Hayat Tate’ dedicate themselves to

153 Arabic Red Pill Facebook Group https://www.facebook.com/groups/348597479472032?multi_perma-links=1042634650068308&hoisted_section_header_type=recently_seen

154 Arabic Red Pill Facebook Group - Posts explaining why a man should not marry a working woman https://www.facebook.com/groups/348597479472032?multi_perma-links=1035706307427809&hoisted_section_header_type=recently_seen

155 Arabic Red Pill Facebook Group Posts https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0T-4Wr1iqqm9qnMatsauvY8XVZNXqaCXwAgTq7rNNnBhGgDnfm2oR5BdjhcPhNDJrl&id=100082830567678

156 Sheikh Sar. (2023). لا تتزوج الموظفة - مع الشيخ سار - استراحة صوتية - YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zVz-VRITZtPO>

translating and promoting Tate’s content, often aligning it with other anti-feminist and anti-liberal narratives.¹⁵⁷

THESE CONTENT CREATORS OFTEN WEAPONIZE THE LANGUAGE OF WELLNESS, SELF-IMPROVEMENT, AND PERSONAL GROWTH TO COMBAT WHAT THEY LABEL AS “THE FEMINIST THREAT.”

These content creators often weaponize the language of wellness, self-improvement, and personal growth to combat what they label as “the feminist threat.” Prime examples are the seemingly benign YouTube channels run by men interested in wellness, such as Jalal Abu Mweis¹⁵⁸ and Mohammad Shaarawy.¹⁵⁹ In one of his videos, Jalal emphasizes how women in specific socio-economic conditions allegedly exploit hardworking men to advance their own lives.¹⁶⁰ Meanwhile, Shaarawy has crafted his own narrative on how to embody the ‘alpha male’ archetype, who is powerful and is able to attract women.¹⁶¹ Another example is Karrar Bakkan, who has focused specifically on opposing anything related to gender, ‘exposing’ it as an attempt to take over people’s cultural identity.¹⁶²

This trend illustrates a broader pattern within the manosphere, in which the rhetoric of self-betterment is twisted into a tool to reinforce patriarchal norms and resist feminist politics or campaigns.¹⁶³

THE ALPHA AWAKENING: HOW THE MANOSPHERE BREEDS MISOGYNY

The ‘manosphere’ is often understood as the influx of content creators on different platforms trying to ‘raise awareness’ of men’s rights allegedly being stripped away by feminists and feminism turning them into ‘beta males’. The term manosphere refers to a loosely connected collection of misogynist online communities. They often present themselves

157 Arabi Facts Hub. (2024). The Manosphere and the Rise of Violent Misogyny Online. Arabi Facts Hub, 14 June. <https://arabifactshub.com/en/researches/details/28060>.

158 “The Most Important Video You’ll Ever Watch About Money!”. YouTube. Jalal Abuimweis <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v19gK4yQmbI>.

159 What do girls want?. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9UPScDOcgNw_

160 See ref. 147.

161 See ref 148.

162 A video of Karrar Bakan exposing feminists <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pK2PQldWcm4>

163 Karrar Bakkan [YouTube channel]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/@karrarbakkan>

as educational platforms focused on teaching men how to embody certain ‘masculine ideals’ to achieve sexual success, generally viewing women as objects to be manipulated. Examples of this include ‘Hustlers University 4.0’ (Andrew Tate’s university).¹⁶⁴

THE MANOSPHERE IS NOT CONFINED TO ANY SPECIFIC LOCATION, AS ITS PRESENCE ON THE INTERNET ALLOWS IT TO SPREAD INTO ANY SPACE WHERE MALE PRIVILEGE IS PERCEIVED AS BEING UNDER THREAT

The manosphere is not confined to any specific location, as its presence on the internet allows it to spread into any space where male privilege is perceived as being under threat, including mainstream online platforms. For example, inspired by Hustlers University, Coach Kareem, a Jordanian man, offers services such as courses and consultations on relationship issues and lectures on the “history of feminism” and “biological and psychological differences” between men and women. People can buy these courses through his website, ‘Red Pill Arabic.’ A 60-minute session goes for 216 USD, which is not in any way affordable given the wages in the region.¹⁶⁵

The manosphere is a relatively new phenomenon that has witnessed various significant developments within, from its formation on Reddit through the subreddit “The Red Pill” (TRP) - a reference to the movie *The Matrix*, where the protagonist takes a red pill to see the world as it truly is – and now into TikTok and various other platforms, where creators produce easy, trendy videos that explain to men how to be fully ‘awakened’.¹⁶⁶

These communities are unified by their anti-feminist and male supremacist stances and a belief that women, particularly feminists, need to be “put back in their place.”¹⁶⁷ They share a common vocabulary, including terms like “red pill” (as above) and classifications of men into ‘alpha’, ‘beta’, and ‘omega’ categories to delineate their

164 Hustlers University. (2024). Hustlers University. <https://hustlers-university.ca/>

165 Red Pill Arabic, services provided by Coach Kareem. <https://redpillarabic.com/service/>

166 Sarah Kaddoura. (2024). The Arab manosphere: A new wave of Western misogyny in the MENA region. *Feminism MENA*. Retrieved August 13, 2024. <https://feminism-mena.fes.de/e/the-arab-manosphere-a-new-wave-of-western-misogyny-in-the-mena-region.html>

167 Stoencheva, J. (n.d.). The Manosphere Travels East: Constructing misogynist social identities on a Bulgarian online platform. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1672235/FULLTEXT0>

positions within a perceived hierarchy of masculinity.¹⁶⁸ The discourse on alpha/beta masculinity revolves around two archetypes of modern masculinity as debated in online forums. The alpha male is depicted as independent, self-serving, goal-oriented, and sexually dominant. In contrast, the beta male is seen as dependent, self-sacrificing, sexually submissive, and aimless. Redpillers assert that women’s pursuit of equality has inadvertently made men more beta, leading to their social disempowerment. The stated goal of the manosphere is to empower the beta enough to become an alpha.¹⁶⁹

THE MANOSPHERE’S NEW FRONTIER IN SWANA

WITHIN THE SWANA REGION, MANOSPHERE COMMUNITIES BLEND TRADITIONAL PATRIARCHAL VALUES WITH MODERN ANTI-FEMINIST RHETORIC. BY PRESENTING THEIR IDEOLOGY AS A DEFENSE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE AGAINST PERCEIVED WESTERN FEMINIST ENCROACHMENT, THESE COMMUNITIES EFFECTIVELY STRENGTHEN THEIR INFLUENCE AND RELEVANCE IN THE REGION.

In their research, Balsam Mustafa and Reem Abd illustrate how, within the SWANA region, manosphere communities blend traditional patriarchal values with modern anti-feminist rhetoric. By presenting their ideology as a defense of cultural heritage against perceived Western feminist encroachment, these communities effectively strengthen their influence and relevance in the region.¹⁷⁰

The culture of the manosphere has transnationally moved to the SWANA region, overcoming language barriers through targeted translations and localized content addressing specific issues faced by women in this area. In her analysis of the SWANA manosphere, Sarah Kaddoura highlights that, much like their Western counterparts, many manosphere thought leaders in SWANA exploit the financial anxieties of their followers. For instance, the “Red Pill Arabic” streamer on YouTube encourages viewers to purchase coaching sessions to “unlock their masculine potential,

168 Ibid.

169 Ibid.

170 Balsam Mustafa, Reem Abd. Jummar Media. (2024). The Iraqi Right and Manosphere Against Women. <https://jummar.media/4865>

become leaders, and keep their women in line”. Red Pill Arabic itself has branched out across different countries in the SWANA, such as “Red Pill Morocco” (29K members, created 2021),¹⁷¹ “Red Pill Algeria” (8.9K members, created 2023),¹⁷² “Red Pill Sudanese” (4.5K members, created in 2022), “Red Pill EG” (3.6K members, created in 2023) – and the list goes on. Other groups are named after the Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) male separatist movement, which advocates for men to distance themselves from relationships with women and societal expectations, such as one named “MGTOW-Towards taking back the rights of men in Tunisia” (741 members, created 2021).¹⁷³

THIS SPACE NOW INCLUDES LONG-STANDING ACTORS WHO HAVE TRANSITIONED FROM OFFLINE DISCOURSE TO ONLINE PLATFORMS, AND THOSE FOLLOWING NORTH AMERICAN OR EUROPEAN PATTERNS OF MANOSPHERE-STYLE “BETTERMENT”, SUCH AS TATE AND PETERSON.

Simultaneously, there has been a surge of fundamentalist and conservative religious figures leveraging YouTube and podcast platforms to propagate anti-feminist ideas. Examples include Dr Haitham Talaat,¹⁷⁴ and Iyad Qunaibi – who have described gender as a new religion.¹⁷⁵ These voices issue dire warnings against feminism, accusing it of destroying the family, and poisoning Arab culture. This highlights a diversified audience within the manosphere. This space now includes long-standing actors who have transitioned from offline discourse to online platforms, and those following North American or European patterns of manosphere-style “betterment”, such as Tate and Peterson. This trend underscores how the manosphere has become a convergence point for various ideological streams, all united in their opposition to feminist principles.

The emergence and spread of the Arabic manosphere is deeply intertwined with the transnational exchange of anti-feminist ideas and influencers that have adapted to the Middle Eastern and North African contexts. This movement juxtaposes liberalism and feminism against Islam, portraying them as external threats to Arab societies. This dynamic

171 Red Pill Morocco Facebook Group <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100093231591805>

172 Red Pill Algeria Facebook Group <https://www.facebook.com/groups/500732121979035>

173 Take Back Men's Rights Tunisia Facebook Group <https://www.facebook.com/mgtowtn/reviews>

174 Haitham Talaat. YouTube. الهوية الجندرية وهم ولا حقيقة؟ Gender Identity: Reality or Delusion? Debunking the Agenda https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nfxW_0aIL80

175 Iyad Qunaibi. Gender - the new religion. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PxgCd3-k02Q>

became especially pronounced during the lead-up to the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar, where Western criticism of Qatar’s social norms ignited intense debates on gender, feminism, and LGBTQI+ issues within the Arab manosphere.¹⁷⁶

These debates in turn facilitated greater engagement with prominent manosphere figures, such as Andrew Tate and Mohammad Hijab.¹⁷⁷ Hijabi is a content creator whose anti-feminist views have gained traction, particularly through YouTube and podcasts, and is seen as among one of the popular ‘men’ voices in the region.¹⁷⁸ These figures capitalize on a narrative that frames gender equality as a Western elite project, contrasting it with what they describe as the ‘traditional values’ of Muslim societies.

VIRTUAL VIOLENCE, VIOLENT REALITIES

IN A DIGITAL LANDSCAPE WHERE ONLINE HOSTILITY HAS SKYROCKETED, IT IS IMPORTANT TO CONNECT IT WITH THE CONTEXT OF SURGING ‘OFFLINE’ VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND LGBTQI+ PEOPLE – WHICH IS NOW OFTEN FOLLOWED BY CELEBRATIONS OF IT ONLINE.

In a digital landscape where online hostility has skyrocketed, it is important to connect it with the context of surging ‘offline’ violence against women and LGBTQI+ people – which is now often followed by celebrations of it online. These brutal acts, far from being isolated, are celebrated in certain circles, fueling a dangerous cycle of imitation. An example is the 2022 murder of Nayera Ashraf, who was brutally stabbed outside Mansoura University in Egypt by a colleague whose marriage proposal she had rejected – a murder that was recorded and widely disseminated online.¹⁷⁹

176 Arabi Facts Hub. (2024). The Manosphere and the Rise of Violent Misogyny Online.” Arabi Facts Hub, 14 June. <https://arabifactshub.com/en/researches/details/28060>.

177 Live discussion between Andrew Tate and Mohammad Hijab. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=diqqTxR99JE>

178 Hijab speaking about liberalism, feminism and the West on a podcast <https://podcast.ps/257-%D9%85%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%AF-%D8%AD%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8-%B3%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%88%D9%83%D9%8A%D9%81-%D9%8A/>

179 The New Arab. (2022). Naira Ashraf’s murder must be the last, say Egyptian feminists. The New Arab, 23 June. <https://www.newarab.com/news/naira-ashrafs-murder-must-be-last-egyptian-feminists>

This was followed by the murder of Iman Rashid in Jordan by an older man while she was in university as well.¹⁸⁰ It was later revealed that Rashid had received a text message from the man saying, “Tomorrow I am coming to speak to you, and if you don’t accept, I am going to kill you just like the Egyptians killed that girl today.”¹⁸¹

The day after, Lubna Mansour was stabbed to death in the UAE by her husband for filing for divorce.¹⁸² These are not isolated incidents and are part of a wider trend of femicide in the region.¹⁸³ Notably, the highly publicized and brutal nature of the first attack on Ashraf, along with the details of the murderer’s reasoning behind it – which followed the killing of Rashid, in which Ashraf’s murder was referenced as an inspiration – speaks to the snowball effect and raises further concerns about the growth of the manosphere.

IT IS FAIR TO ASSUME THAT THE MANOSPHERE HAS A ROLE IN SPREADING NARRATIVES THAT JUSTIFY VIOLENCE. THIS, AMONG OTHER THINGS, MAKES MEN FEEL VICTIMIZED WHEN REJECTED BY WOMEN AND FEEDS INTO A SENSE OF ENTITLEMENT, THAT AT ITS EXTREME, CAN CONTRIBUTE TO WHAT WOULD DRIVE A MAN TO MURDER A WOMAN WHO REJECTS HIM

While there are no direct links between the SWANA manosphere and femicide in that sense, with the growth of the manosphere in the region, and with more content creators joining and views increasing, it is fair to assume that the manosphere has a role in spreading narratives that justify violence. This, among other things, makes men feel victimized when rejected by women and feeds into a sense of entitlement, that at its extreme, can contribute to what would drive a man to murder a woman who rejects him, as is the case of the 2022 trend in several countries in the region.

180 The New Arab. (2022). Brutal murder of Iman Rasheed shakes Jordan. The New Arab, 24 June. <https://www.newarab.com/news/brutal-murder-iman-rasheed-shakes-jordan>

181 Ibid.

182 Gulf Today. (2022). Jordanian woman stabbed to death by her ex-husband in Sharjah; rich tributes pour in. Gulf Today, 26 June. <https://www.gulftoday.ae/news/2022/06/26/jordanian-woman-stabbed-to-death-by-ex-husband-in-sharjah-rich-tribute-pour-in>

183 LEED Initiative. Femicide: The silent cancer in the SWANA region. LEED Initiative. <https://www.leed-initiative.org/blog/femicide-silent-cancer-swana-region>



CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this mapping highlights the entrenched nature of fascist and fundamentalist movements and narratives within the SWANA region, where these movements have adapted and evolved in response to socio-economic pressures: surveillance infrastructure that has built an informant culture monitoring all those deemed as ‘others’; ultra-nationalist and racist narratives that turn into lynching mobs; and a violent ‘virtual’ awakening that has incited assault against those who want to ‘remove male privileges’.

At the heart of these movements and narratives lies a process of othering, where individuals and groups are dehumanized and targeted based on their perceived identities – be it political, religious, ethnic, gendered, or racialized. This process is not only theoretical but is actively materialized through policies, practices and narratives that perpetuate exclusion and violence.

Fascist and fundamentalist movements in the region have become adept at undermining international human rights frameworks by using the rhetoric of ‘national security’, ‘protecting the nation’ and ‘family values’. While the narratives of these movements often appear monotonous and predictable – targeting refugees, migrants, LGBTQI+ people, feminists, activists, and journalists alike – it is this very consistency of messaging that makes them so insidious and effective across different contexts.



THIS MAPPING CALLS FOR A MORE NUANCED UNDERSTANDING OF THESE MOVEMENTS, EMPHASIZING THE NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH INTO THE SPECIFICITIES OF FASCIST AND FUNDAMENTALIST ACTORS IN THE REGION.



This mapping calls for a more nuanced understanding of these movements, emphasizing the need for further research into the specificities of fascist and fundamentalist actors in the region. This includes exploring the ways in which these movements are funded and sustained, particularly through transnational networks and alliances. As human rights frameworks are increasingly delegitimized, it becomes all the more critical to question how power dynamics within the funding landscape for civil society are distorted and whether local struggles are adequately documented and represented.

THE TRANSNATIONAL NATURE OF THESE MOVEMENTS ALSO MEANS THAT COUNTER-STRATEGIES MUST BE EQUALLY INTERSECTIONAL. ADDRESSING EACH SET OF RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN ISOLATION WOULD BE INEFFECTIVE WHEN THESE MOVEMENTS OPERATE ON MULTIPLE FRONTS, REINFORCING ONE ANOTHER.

The transnational nature of these movements also means that counter-strategies must be equally intersectional. Addressing each set of rights violations in isolation would be ineffective when these movements operate on multiple fronts, reinforcing one another. The rise of fascist and fundamentalist movements did not happen in a vacuum. They have been nurtured by specific actors and conditions, which future research should expand on.

