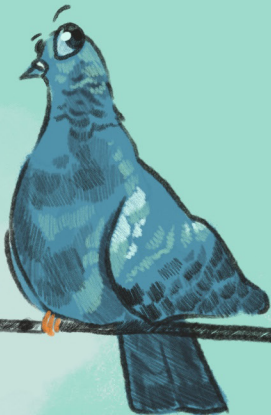


Annual Activity Report



2024



SMEX

Table of Contents

Executive Director’s Note.....3

1. Vision.....6

2. Mission.....6

3. Strategic Shift and Planning
for 2025–2027.....6

01 Shaping Knowledge for Advocacy

1. The MENA Alliance for
Digital Rights (MADR).....7

1.1. Wins at the Meta Oversight
Board.....7

1.2. MADR Campaigns that Created
Ripples.....8

2. Advocacy in Times of War.....9

02 How We Served Our Community
in 2024

1. Protecting the Online Civic Space:
Threat Lab at SMEX.....11

1.1. SMEX’s Digital Safety Helpdesk:
Direct Support for At-Risk Indi-
viduals and Organizations.....11

1.1.1. Platforms and Issues
Addressed.....13

1.1.2. Geographic Reach.....13

1.1.3. Quality and Impact.....13

2. Digital Forensics Analysis:
Responding to Emerging Threats
with Evidence-Based Support.....14

2.1. Qualitative Insights and
Trends.....14

2.2. Digital Forensics Lab.....14

3. Digital Security Training.....16

Table of Contents

03 Writing Under Fire

- 1. Publishing in Times of War..... 18**
 - 1.1. Editorial Theme.....18
 - 1.2. Our Readers.....19

04 Building A Sustainable Digital Rights Movement

- 1. Bread&Net 2024: Digital Rights in Times of War; Stories from an Online Frontline.....23**
 - 1.1. A Space to Speak and Strategize.....21
 - 2.2. Twelve Major Topics of Discussion.....22
 - 2.3. What Bread&Net taught us in 2024.....22
- 2. Shaping the Next Digital Rights Leadets in WANA 21**
 - 2.1. SMEX's Fellowship as a Movement Building Tool.....23
 - 2.2. Meet the 2024 Fellows.....23
 - 2.3. Reflections from the 2024 Mariam Al-Shafei Fellowship.....24
- 3. Funding Grassroots Initiatives: Sub-Grants to Localize and Sustain the Fight for Digital Rights.....26**
 - 3.1. MasarTech Fund 2025: Fighting SRHR Silencing with Digital Access.....27
 - 3.2. Digital Rights Fund for WANA: Localized Rapid Response.....28

Executive Director's Note

2024

In the struggle for our digital rights has been indivisible from the political realities of this region. As part and parcel of these lived realities, online spaces mirror the experiences on the ground: just as streets and squares are stripped of dissent, people are using online platforms as the only tools to express themselves, personally and politically.

Surveillance, algorithmic bias, and platform censorship hit harder here. They constrain the precarious work of activists, journalists, and civil society. The unfolding genocide in Gaza has demonstrated just how critical online spaces are for documenting war crimes and violations, mobilizing international solidarity, and telling our narrative. It has also created new restrictions on internet access and freedom of speech, and diminished accountability from global tech companies. Amid these challenges, our mission has remained unchanged: to defend and advance digital rights across West Asia and North Africa.

Our struggle for better digital rights has become an avenue to negotiate power. Now, more than ever, we must strengthen our movement and carve out strategic entry points for change. To achieve this, SMEX is committed to promoting greater accountability and respect for freedom of expression and privacy among tech companies and governments.

2024 also revealed a collective shift towards demanding better technologies, ones that could serve those who need them the most. More people are critically

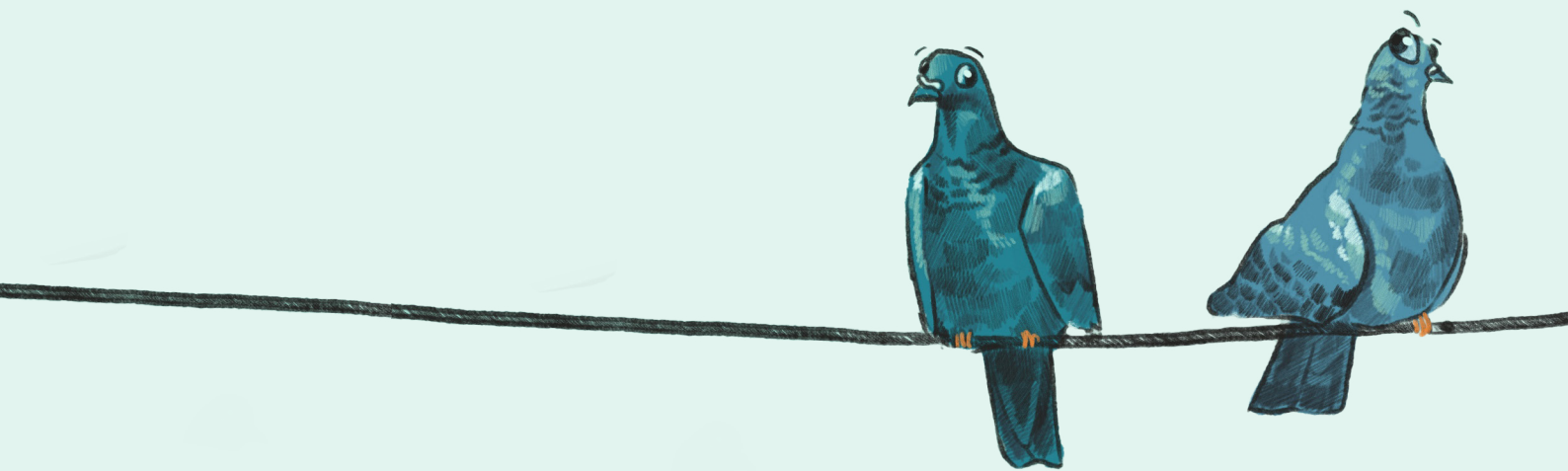
interrogating the role of technology in their lives and recognizing the dangers of exploiting data.

Throughout the year, we cultivated a network of critical thinkers, journalists, researchers, students, and grassroots actors who drove change within their local contexts, rooted in the needs of their communities. Seeing the flourishing of lasting coalitions and partnerships gives us immense hope.

SMEX's annual digital rights event, Bread&Net, continues to play a crucial role in bringing together hundreds of this region's most dedicated human rights advocates. This event allows us to bridge the gaps between various struggles and communities, emphasizing how the fight for digital rights intersects with broader political, social, and human rights issues.

This report highlights the adaptive strategies and commitments that shaped SMEX's work in 2024. This progress would not have been possible without the unwavering dedication of our team members. We also owe our momentum to the network of partners, grassroots organizations, subgrantees, and individuals who continue to stand with us as we elevate the state of digital rights in the region.

The road ahead is undoubtedly challenging, but through solidarity, resilience, and collective action, we can continue to advocate for a digital landscape that respects our freedoms and rights.





Our vision is for everyone living in West Asia-North Africa and the diaspora to be able to access and engage with the internet, mobile services, and other networked spaces safely and without fear of censorship, surveillance, or repercussion.



SMEX advances freedom of expression and the right to privacy in West Asia and North Africa through research and reporting, monitoring state and tech companies' policies, protecting the safety and security of online users, and collaborating with regional advocates to sustain a safer digital space.

Strategic Shift and Planning for 2025–2027

In early 2024, SMEX undertook a series of internal reflection and strategic planning exercises to prepare for the next three years. These sessions allowed the team to critically assess emerging threats in the digital rights ecosystem and evaluate how best to respond to the growing power and influence of tech companies operating in the WANA region.

As a result of this process, SMEX launched a new strategic plan covering the period 2025 to 2027. This strategy focuses on two core human rights: the right to privacy and the right to freedom of expression, guided by two strategic objectives:

Objective 1: Promote greater accountability and respect for freedom of expression among tech companies and governments.

Objective 2: Strengthen digital privacy protections and enhance access to digital security for communities across the region.

In parallel, the team developed a comprehensive Theory of Change, outlining how change might unfold over the next three years and identifying key pathways to impact. Building on this foundation, SMEX developed its annual action plan to drive the implementation of the strategy and guide its work in 2025 and beyond.

01

Shaping Knowledge for Advocacy



SMEX believes that strong advocacy must be grounded in credible, accessible, and timely knowledge. In 2024, our research outputs became essential tools for civil society, policy-makers, and digital rights defenders seeking to confront the expanding threats to online freedoms in West Asia and North Africa. We published 14 research reports on a range of critical issues spanning digital repression, data governance, and content moderation on social media.



Research Reports:

- ▶ Policy brief on [Meta's treatment of the word "Shaheed"](#) (martyr)
- ▶ Mapping of SRHR content moderation [trends](#) in WANA
- ▶ Ongoing investigations into Palestinian content suppression and the disparity in [moderation](#) between Gaza and Ukraine-related content
- ▶ Supported [four research fellows](#) and provided strategic research input to campaigns such as Masarouna and advocacy efforts, including OVOF learning circles.

1. The MENA Alliance for Digital Rights (MADR)

MENA Alliance for Digital Rights ([MADR](#)) is a network of 20 global human rights organizations that coordinate advocacy efforts to defend digital freedoms across West Asia and North Africa. In 2024, the MADR pushed the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to officially call out Meta, Telegram, X, Google, the US, the UAE, and the illegal government of Israel, for their complicity in digital rights violations in Gaza. This outcome was the result of consistent coordination between MADR members connected with UN bodies.

1.1 Wins at the Meta Oversight Board

The MADR scored two significant victories that protected rightful free speech on Meta's platforms. In the first, they [challenged the blanket ban](#) on the Arabic term "Shaheed." In a widely cited Policy Advisory Opinion, Meta's Oversight Board (OSB) concluded that the platform's approach to the term "substantially and disproportionately restricts free expression," echoing arguments made by SMEX and other MADR members in a coordinated submission of public advisories. Three MADR submissions were

made public, and the decision marked a breakthrough after years of advocacy.

The second win came through the [OSB's review of the phrase "From the river to the Sea."](#) Again, MADR mobilized a wave of submissions explaining the historical and cultural significance of this phrase, proving that it does not inherently constitute hate speech. The Board's final decision quoted submissions by MADR members including SMEX, Access Now, and Article 19, showing how regional voices, when united, can influence global platform governance.

1.2 MADR Campaigns for Real Change

In 2024, SMEX and MADR co-led or supported several impactful campaigns:

► **#StopSilencingPalestine**

called out systemic content bias, where Palestinian and global digital rights groups bring top Meta executive to the table on issues of anti-Palestinian censorship.

► **Joint statements condemned the targeting of telecom infrastructure in Gaza.**

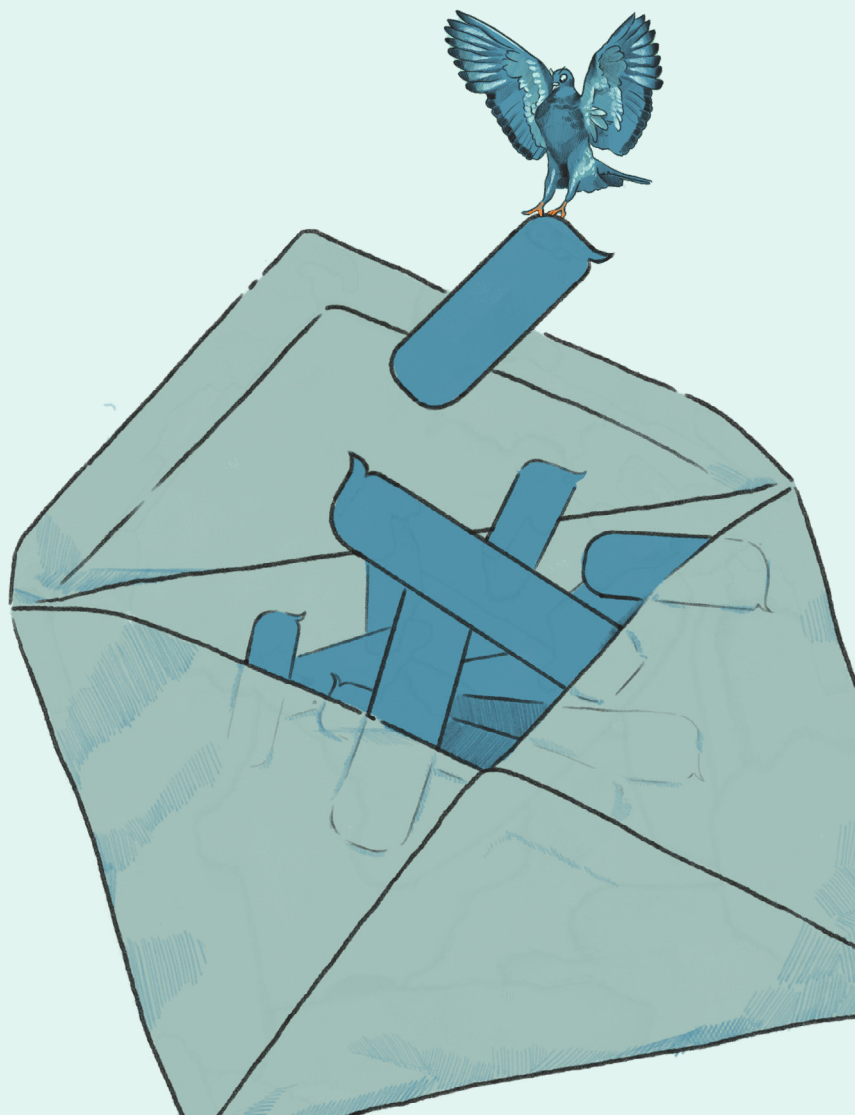
Through articles, expert testimonies, and advocacy messaging, SMEX drew attention to Israel's ongoing restrictions on Gaza's connectivity (limiting telecoms to insecure 2G networks for years), and the devastating consequences of blackouts on safety, accountability, and press freedom. The campaign called on governments, telecom companies, and international bodies to push for an end to deliberate internet shutdowns in Gaza and to recognize connectivity as a fundamental digital right.

► **Public actions pushed back against Project Nimbus and Google's role in enabling surveillance.**

This campaign emphasized that tech companies are not neutral actors. By providing critical digital infrastructure to the Israeli military, corporations like Google and Amazon risk becoming complicit in genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity. The call was clear: global tech must be held accountable and must refrain from aiding atrocity crimes against Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank.

► **MADR supported tech workers fired for speaking out.**

This campaign reframed the issue beyond workplace rights, for it exposed how corporate complicity in genocide is a global human rights crisis. By amplifying the voices of tech workers and civil society, we urged accountability from Google and all tech companies enabling Israel's military actions, demanding an immediate end to their role in atrocity crimes against Palestinians.



2. Advocacy in Times of War

When the war in Lebanon erupted in September 2024, SMEX responded immediately. We launched a biweekly newsletter, "Digital Rights in Times of War," in both Arabic and English over nine editions, from October 1 to November 21, 2024.

These dispatches highlighted urgent concerns in Gaza and Lebanon: connectivity black-outs, misinformation, spyware, and digital security. Shared on our social media and website, the newsletters reached over 36,327 users across Meta's platforms, keeping people informed in times of crisis.

We also published 24 articles and 14 videos that exposed digital security threats faced by internet users in Lebanon and Palestine, and advocated for equitable access to the internet for all.

Since the outbreak of the war in Gaza and Lebanon, social media users, including activists and journalists, have faced unjust measures against their expression on communications platforms, ranging from post removal, shadowbanning, content moderation, and having their accounts suspended.

Through its networks and alliances, SMEX demanded more just policies from social media companies and more robust measures to keep Gaza connected. Our policy team held more than five meetings with Meta and TikTok, drafted or signed statements and petitions. It made substantial efforts to reverse Meta's decisions when they led to silencing Palestinian voices from Gaza and beyond.

Over the course of 2024, our Digital Safety Helpdesk received 708 cases related to the war in Gaza, and another 53 cases related to the war in Lebanon. Activists and journalists accounted for most cases, 36% and 31% respectively. By the end of the year, we managed to intervene and resolve around 51% of the cases successfully.

Our interventions aimed to go beyond mere statements, serving as a prototype for social justice within the digital rights ecosystem. By doing so, we sought to guide relevant stakeholders, including policymakers and technologists, to recognize that digital repression is a documented daily reality.

Over the course of 2024,
our Digital Safety Helpdesk received
this number of cases:

708 cases related to the
war in Gaza,

53 cases related to the
war in Lebanon.

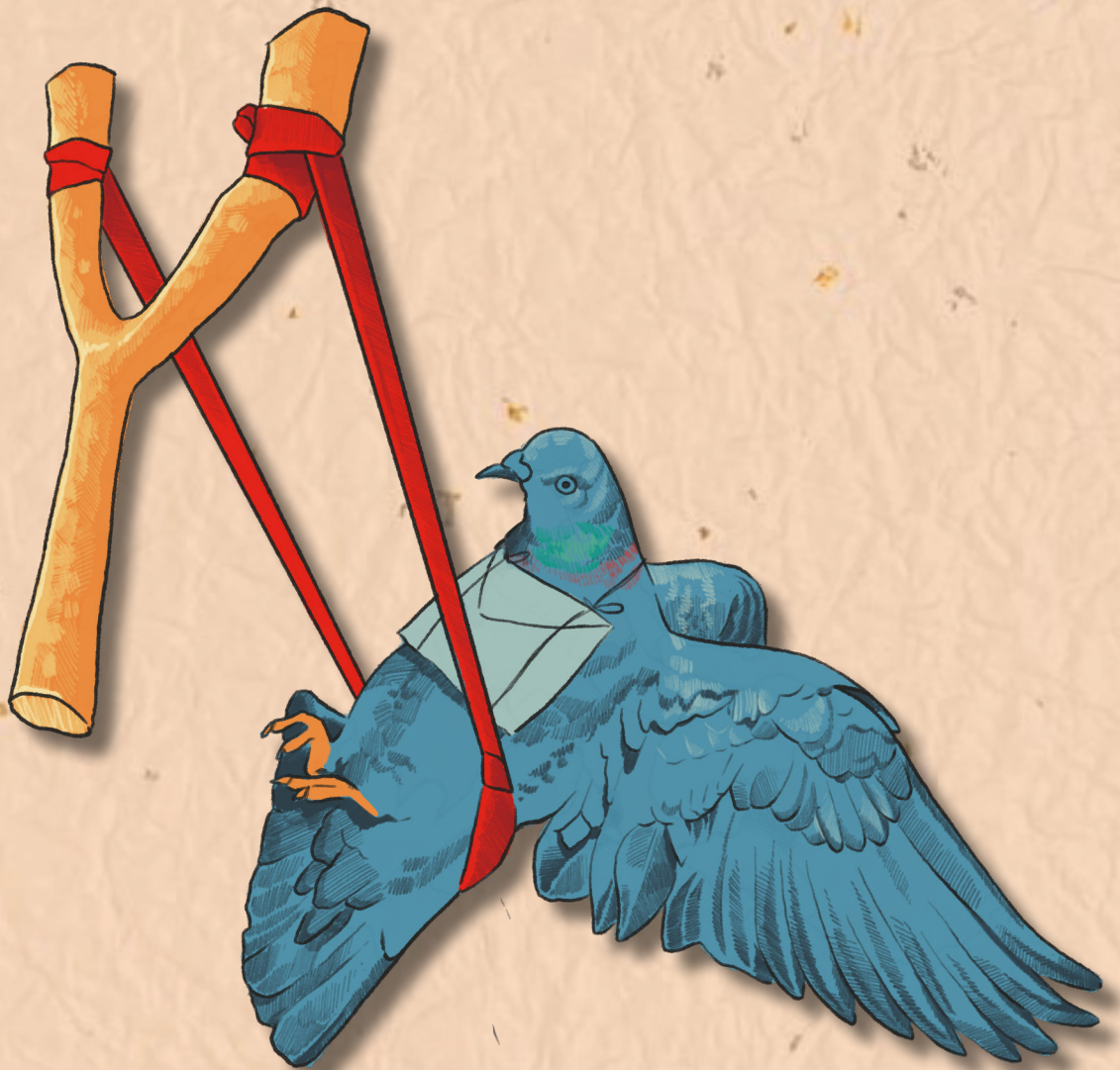
**Activists and journalists accounted
for most cases,**

36% and 31% respectively.

51%
Resolved cases

02

How We Served Our Community in 2024



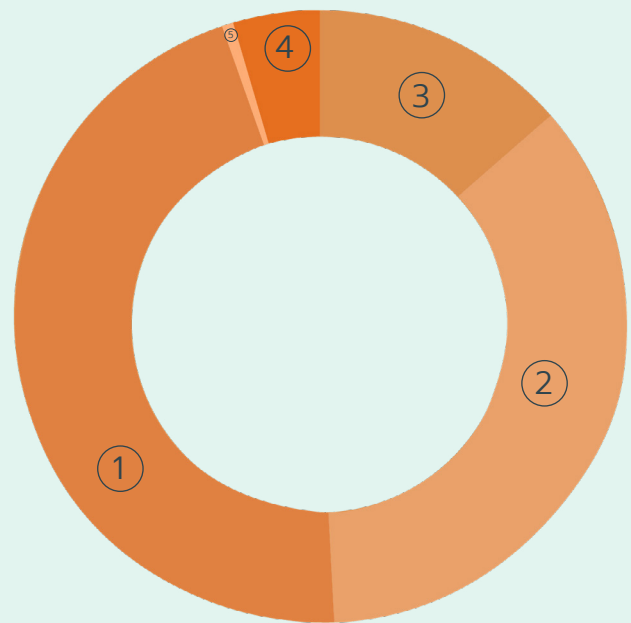
In 2024, SMEX continued to defend and expand digital civic spaces across West Asia and North Africa through a combination of direct support, strategic research, policy advocacy, and movement building.

1. Protecting the Online Civic Space: Threat Lab at SMEX

S MEX's Threat Lab is a digital security and response initiative that provides a range of cybersecurity and digital safety solutions to organizations, activists, and human rights defenders across West Asia and North Africa. Under the **Threat Lab**, we provide three core offerings: **Digital Safety Trainings/Assessments**, the **Digital Safety Helpdesk**, and the **Digital Forensics Lab**.

1.1 SMEX's Digital Safety Helpdesk: Direct Support for At-Risk Individuals and Organizations

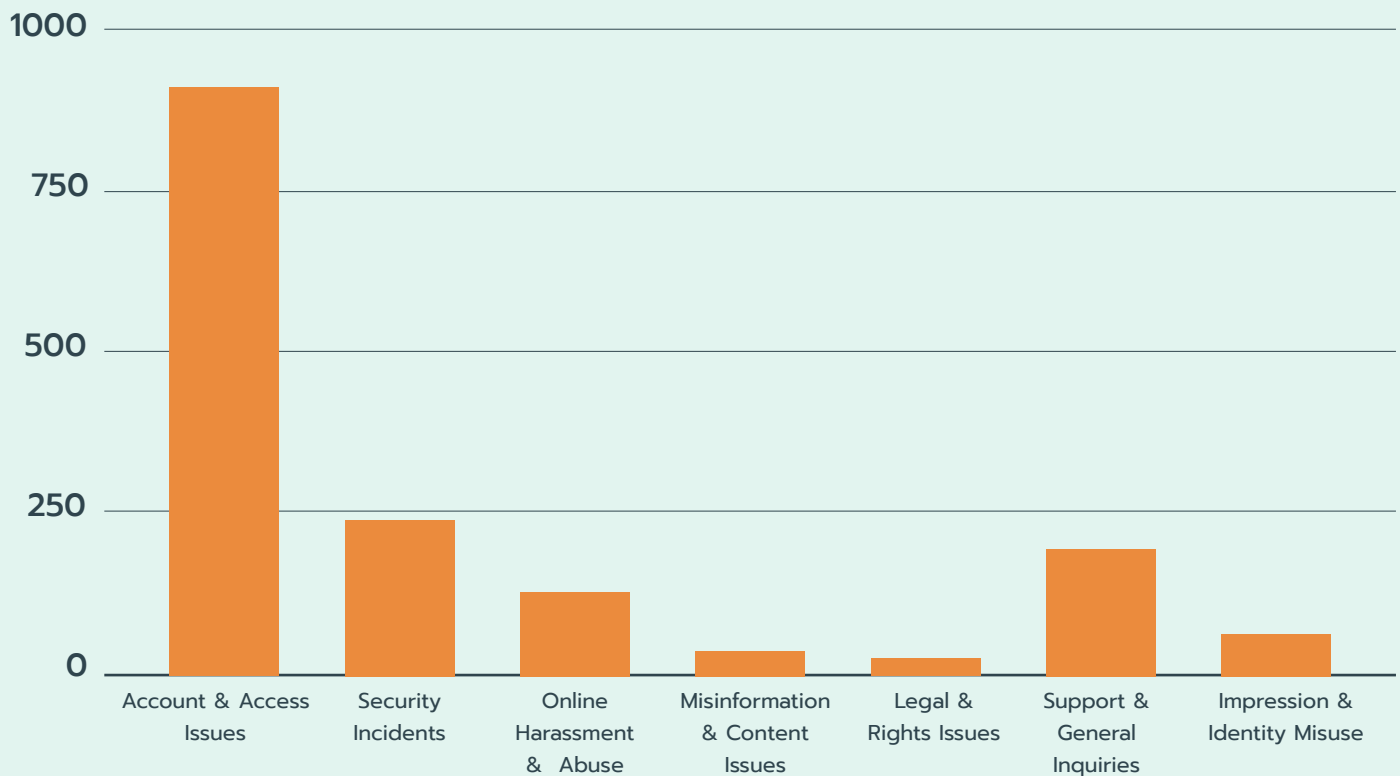
SMEX's **Digital Security Helpdesk** provided real-time, context-specific digital security assistance to journalists, activists, and civil society organizations under threat in West Asia and North Africa. In 2024, the **Helpdesk** processed a total of **1,517** cases ranging from suspended and compromised accounts to content moderation concerns, demonstrating the increasing need for accessible expert guidance on digital rights challenges. Of these, **578** tickets were escalated for more customized intervention directly with social media companies, while **1,314** tickets were closed, with **565** cases fully resolved.



Number of tickets per gender

- ① **45.6%**
Male
- ② **35.5%**
Female
- ③ **13.7%**
Entity
- ④ **4.7%**
Undisclosed
- ⑤ **0.4%**
Non-Binary/Fluid

Number of tickets vs. category



Our **Helpdesk** serves individuals from different backgrounds. In 2024, the majority of support requests were

423

tickets from activists

401

tickets from internet users

353

tickets from journalists

We also supported business professionals, artists, educators, and health sector workers facing online threats. Among the cases received,

692

from men

539

from women

6

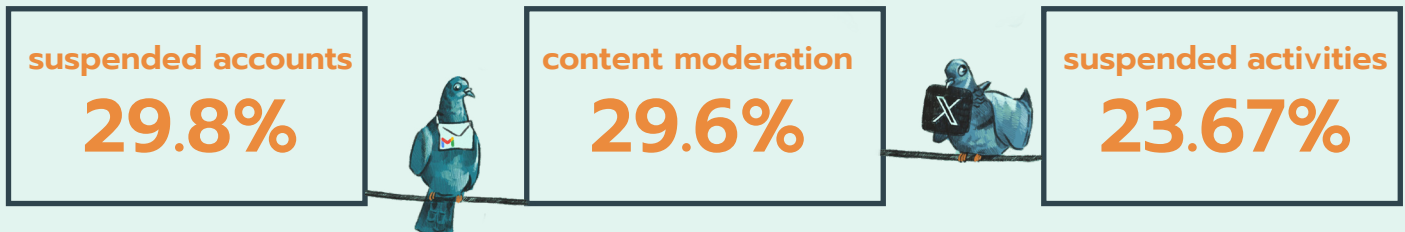
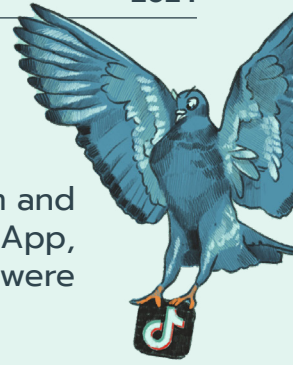
from non-binary or
fluid individuals,

208

from entities or organizations,
underscoring our commitment
to providing accessible ser-
vices to diverse groups.

1.1.1 Platforms and Issues Addressed

Most of the incidents we addressed took place on Meta's platforms, Instagram and Facebook, accounting for **838** and **313** tickets respectively, followed by WhatsApp, TikTok, and other social media tools. The most prominent issues users faced were related to:



1.1.2 Geographic Reach

Our regional focus remained firmly on West Asia, which accounted for the majority of tickets at **932**, followed by:



Egypt
141



North Africa
79



Gulf region
101

We also received support requests from users in Europe, North America, and other global locations.

1.1.3 Quality and Impact

87.37%

of Helpdesk users rated their experience as highly satisfactory (level 5), signaling trust and confidence in our support. This feedback encourages continuous improvement and adaptation of our support offerings to meet the evolving needs of digital rights defenders.

2. Digital Forensics Analysis: Responding to Emerging Threats with Evidence-Based Support

1.1 Qualitative Insights and Trends

2024 saw a noticeable increase in forensic requests following [political events](#), mass arrests, summoning from authorities, and crackdowns on activists and journalists in Tunisia, Lebanon, Yemen and Egypt. It was also the year of [intensified surveillance campaigns](#), especially in conflict-affected or authoritarian contexts. Phishing attempts triggered follow-up analyses, as did impersonating platforms like WhatsApp or email service providers.

One emerging trend was the **targeting of individuals through fake apps or malicious software**, often disguised as legitimate communication tools. This tactic was particularly noted in cases submitted by journalists and human rights defenders. In several instances, the forensics team collaborated closely with our policy and research units to further document and

report platform-related abuses or state-linked cyber operations, thereby informing broader advocacy efforts.

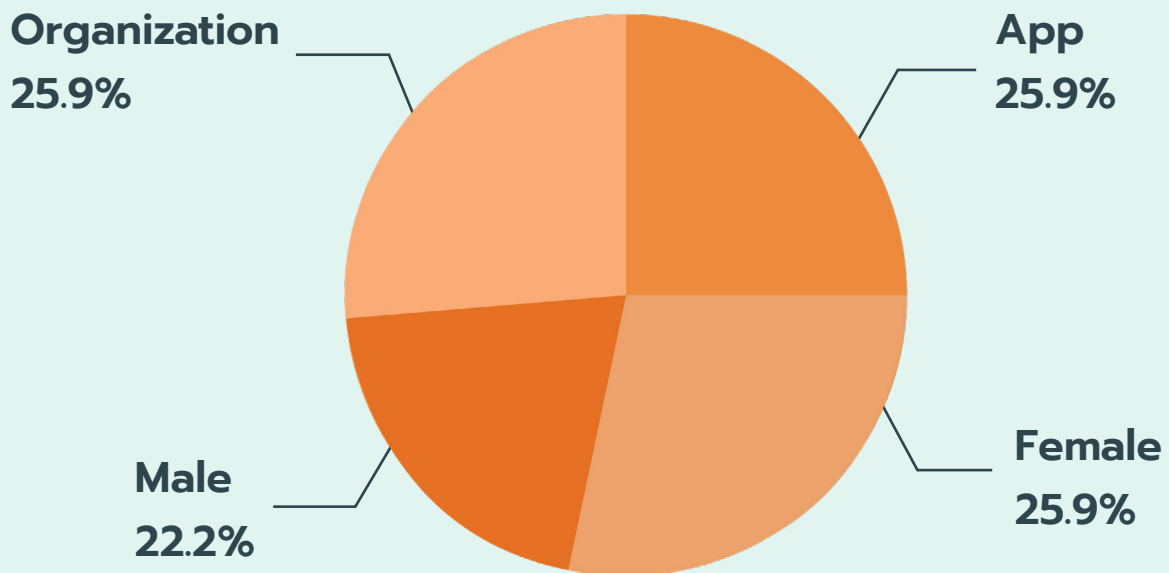
The growing trust in SMEX's forensics capacity is also worth noting. In many cases, individuals reached out to SMEX after having been refused support by global platforms or institutions, underlining the crucial role of regionally rooted expertise in the global digital rights landscape.

As digital threats become more sophisticated, our responses must also be more robust. Moving forward, SMEX aims to build more detailed protocols, invest in tooling and secure infrastructure, and deepen cross-team collaboration between digital security, Helpdesk, and forensics services to ensure timely, holistic support for those at risk.

2.2 Digital Forensics Lab

SMEX launched the **Digital Forensics Lab (DFL)**, a specialized unit dedicated to **investigating, analyzing, and mitigating digital attacks**. The DFL provides expert technical support to individuals and organizations experiencing digital threats, with the dual aim of strengthening their resilience and contributing to broader accountability efforts. By combining advanced forensic tools with localized expertise, the Lab not only helps victims understand the nature and scope of attacks but also equips them with strategies to prevent future incidents.

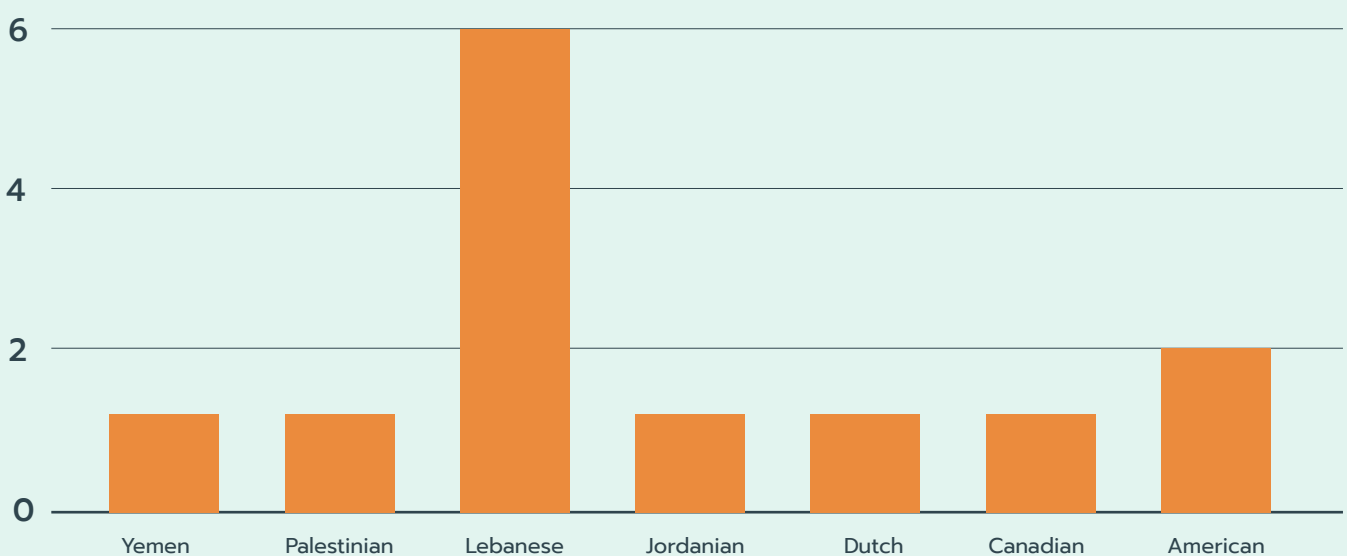
In 2024, the Lab acquired new software and hardware to expand its capacity to respond to increasingly sophisticated digital threats targeting activists, journalists, and civil society across West Asia and North Africa. Throughout the year, we handled a total of **27 forensic analysis cases**. These cases included 14 application analyses, with 7 cases supporting civil rights organizations and 13 supporting individuals (7 women, 6 men). Our procedures encompassed digital forensic investigations, application analysis, incident response, and threat intelligence.



Forensic Case Applications by Gender and Organizational Affiliation



Distribution of Forensic Cases by Type of Incident



Forensic Case Applicants by Occupation



Research Reports:

- ▶ **10 cases resulted in positive findings**, confirming the presence of spyware, compromised systems, or suspicious activity.
- ▶ **13 were determined to be negative**, meaning no forensic evidence of breach or compromise was found.
- ▶ **4 cases were inconclusive or still under review**, pointing to the inherent complexity of forensic work in environments with limited access to devices or hostile technical ecosystems, in addition to devices being unintentionally altered due to a lack of awareness about evidence preservation.

3. Digital Security Training

Through 2024, SMEX offered digital security trainings and assessments providing a range of cybersecurity and digital safety solutions to working civil society organizations pushing for better human rights in the WANA region. These organizations are under digital threats, whether from their own governments or malicious actors.

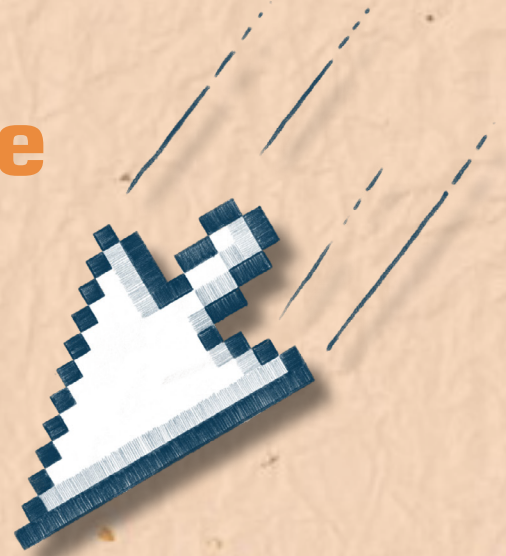
These trainings were essential for achieving SMEX's mission and enhancing digital rights in the region. It equipped human rights defenders, activists, academics, journalists, and students with the necessary knowledge and best practices for how to keep themselves safe online.

With new digital threats emerging in 2024, SMEX's digital security officers revamped our digital security assessments and reviewed the curriculum of the digital security training to make it more customized and curated to counter unique challenges.

During 2024, we trained seven civil society organizations working across different countries in the WANA region (Lebanon 4, Iraq 1, Tunisia 1, Libya 1), where we trained 341 individuals (130 men, 209 women, and two).

03

Writing Under Fire



1. Publishing in Times of War

In 2024, our team, partly based in Beirut and partly abroad, witnessed first-hand the Israeli aggression on their towns and homes. Some of us lost our homes, others were displaced, and many had to live in daily terror that their loved ones might be in danger's way. Writing about this daily reality became an outlet for sanity, a way to ensure human rights abuses are not forgotten after the ceasefire. But we were not alone. The region at large was undergoing seismic changes. Uncertainty became the only constant.

Through 91 original editorial pieces, our team, alongside activists, journalists, policy thinkers, and technologists, tried to make sense of a digital world increasingly shaped by war, surveillance, and censorship. Our pieces were not merely neutral reflections; they were contributions from our network of digital rights defenders, who often documented direct testimonies of digital rights violations occurring in the region's repressive systems and continued to advocate for a freer internet through their writing.

1.1 Editorial Themes

In the **shadow of war (16%)**, we explored how tech platforms suppressed Palestinian voices, how content moderation became political, and how digital blackouts isolated besieged communities. For instance, during the war in Lebanon, we published several articles on Israel's use of AI for precise targeting, their leveraging of social media to spread propaganda, and our efforts to uncover trending stories, such as the pagers attack.

We tracked the shrinking space for **freedom of expression (15%)** in Lebanon, Tunisia, and the Gulf, challenging the role of both states and corporations. Our coverage has examined how countries such as Iraq and Turkey have banned numerous websites and platforms, including TikTok and Instagram. We also discussed the controversial legislation in Saudi Arabia and Jordan, and the worsening state of freedom of expression across most Gulf countries.

We returned, again and again, to **data privacy (12%)** and **telecom abuses (10%)**, where mass data extraction met government overreach. The articles covered a wide range of topics,

such as the use of Starlink in Sudan and Lebanon. They also explored the integration of AI into pilgrimages in Saudi Arabia and the resulting data privacy concerns. Furthermore, the articles addressed the impact of electricity disruptions in Egypt on internet access and the ongoing internet disruptions in several countries, including Iraq, Jordan, and Syria. These outages are often linked to examinations or protests, and they raise concerns about violations of the rights to internet access and freedom of expression.

Newer themes emerged, like sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) online (8.89%), where we challenged content moderation biases that silence educational content and feminist expression in Arabic. Our research investigated the impact of online gender-based violence (OGBV) on women's online presence in Egypt and Lebanon. We also examined how misinformation negatively affects women's sexual and reproductive health rights online, leading to significant mental, psychological, and physical health consequences.

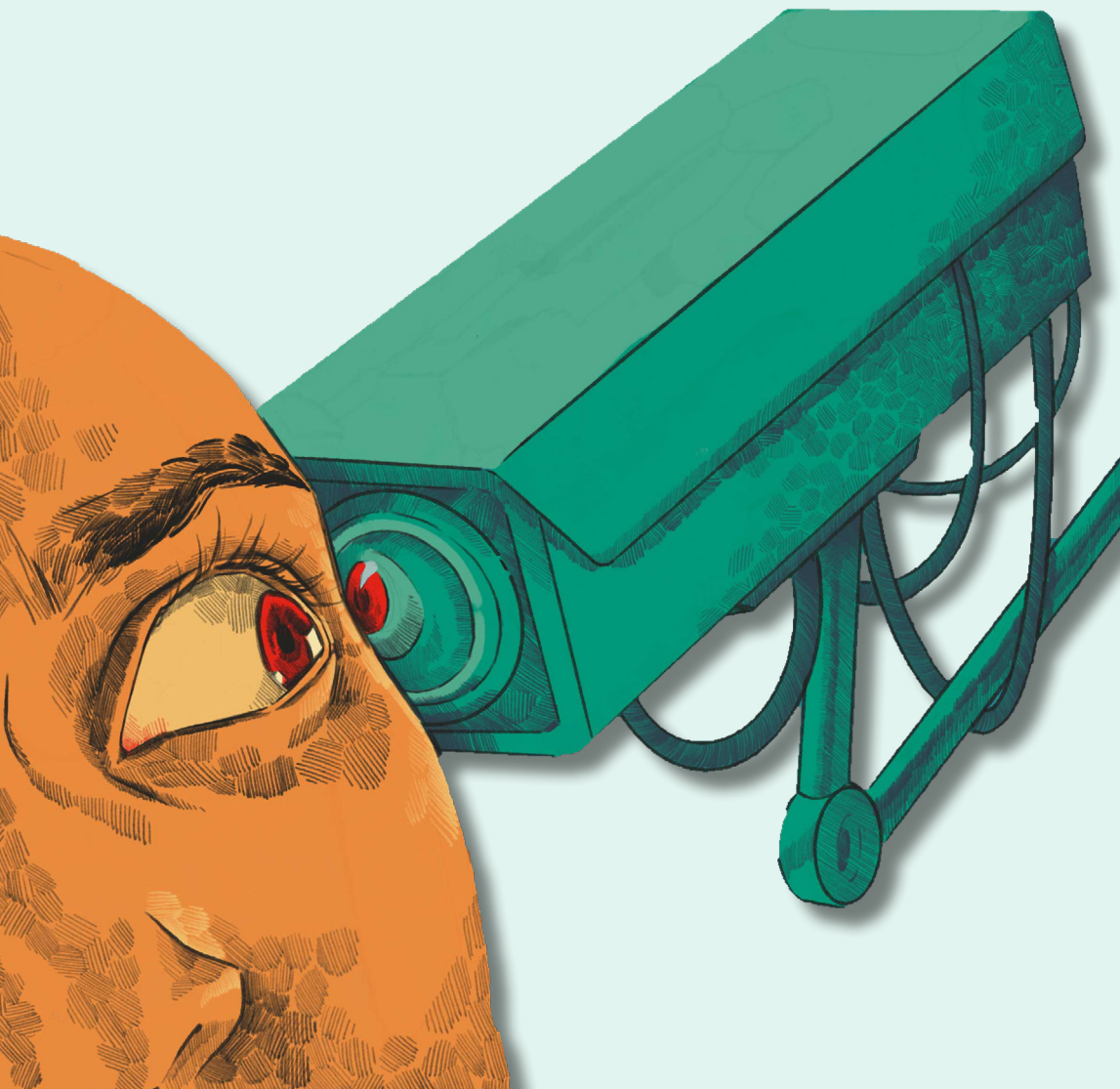
Every article was a small act of resistance, pushing back against erasure, rewriting the region's digital story in real time.

1.2 Our Readers

On average, **2,830 people** visited our website each month to read these stories. But beyond raw numbers, it was who showed up that mattered. SMEX's allies from civil society translated our pieces into local dialects. Researchers cited our work in international forums. Journalists in the region used our original analyses and reports to challenge bias in mainstream newsrooms.

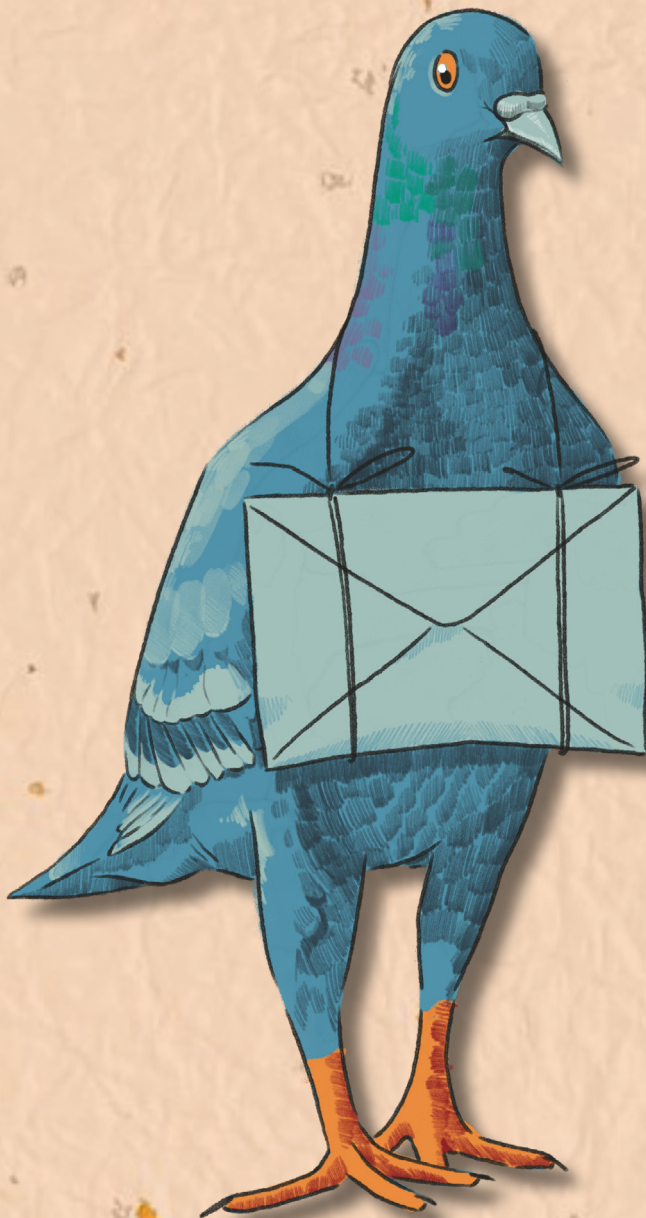
Our readership spiked in September (**4,150**) when the internet shutdown intensified during the Lebanon/Gaza war. Our work during the war served as a testament to the critical need for reliable and expert information in times of crisis, which SMEX has provided through its timely articles, updates, and informative videos.

During a year when algorithms and unfair platform policies erased us, and media institutions failed us, we created our own record through our website. SMEX's editorial platform served as a space for documenting, promoting solidarity, and archiving the region's most significant digital rights violations. It served as a place where grassroots defenders and digital rights experts can write plainly, freely, and away from local repressive censorship laws.



04

Building A Sustainable Digital Rights Movement



1. Bread&Net 2024: Digital Rights in Times of War | Stories from an Online Frontline

Bread&Net 2024 unfolded not in a physical space, but across screens and borders. Held entirely online, the gathering became a rare and vital meeting ground for **283 unique individuals** from across WANA, where connection itself has become a radical act.

Despite our careful planning for Bread&Net 2024 to take place in Beirut, the attack on Lebanon and Palestine ultimately compelled us to move the event to be held entirely online.

The gathering, which took place under the theme of **“Digital Rights in Times of War,”** brought together **activists, journalists, technologists, and researchers** navigating one of the most repressive digital moments in the region’s recent history.

Spread over **13 powerful sessions**, the event tackled urgent topics like content moderation, spyware, surveillance, internet shutdowns, telecom blackouts, sexual and reproductive rights, and the growing digital divide in wartime.

1.1 A Space to Speak and Strategize

Bread&Net 2024 reflected our vision to create a space of connection and reflection. The sessions were visited some 580 times, where participants came together to grieve, question, brainstorm, and build.

In “Facing Threat Actors,” a Yemeni rights worker shared how spyware surveillance forced their organization offline for weeks. In “SRHR in Times of War,” a Lebanese activist exposed how content moderation algorithms continue to erase Arabic-language educational campaigns. In “The Meta Effect,” a Palestinian researcher warned: “What we’re watching is no longer just digital bias, it’s a digital war.”

With an average of 45 attendees per session, the gathering became a mosaic of voices determined to protect one another and push back.



62% of attendees said the forum significantly deepened their knowledge of digital rights.

31.3% said it expanded their understanding to some extent.

76% of SMEX staff reported the sessions impacted their daily work, from Helpdesk protocols to content moderation advocacy and new policy research.

“

This session gave us the push we needed. We're now launching digital literacy training across Yemeni governorates.”

“

After Bread&Net, I began connecting more dots between shutdowns, spyware, and platform discrimination. It's all the same war.”

“

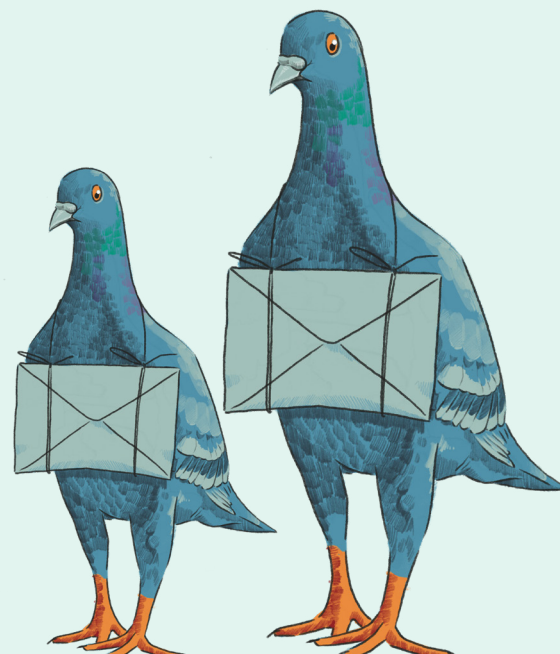
I'm a PhD student in cybersecurity. The speakers inspired me to change my dissertation focus entirely.”

1.1.1 Twelve Major Topics of Discussion

Twelve major themes shaped Bread&Net 2024, from internet shutdowns and surveillance to SRHR in wartime and telecom blackouts. The sessions became shared ground where participants learned tools, brainstormed solutions, and collaborated in solidarity to address the region's most prominent digital threats. Behind each session was a strategy. Behind each screen was someone not giving up.

1.1.2 What Bread&Net taught us in 2024

Many of Bread&Net's sessions prioritized movement-building. In the face of conflict and the growing indifference from tech platforms, it reminded us that digital rights are not abstract, but vital tools for our autonomy. Despite the hopelessness and dispirited feel of the region at the time, the people that tuned in to attend the discussions proved one vital thing: it is that the digital rights community in our region is not giving up.



2. Shaping the Next Digital Rights Leaders in WANA

WANA not just through knowledge, but through courageous, collective action.

2.1 SMEX's Fellowship as a Movement-Building Tool

In 2024, SMEX launched the second edition of the **Mariam Al-Shafei Fellowship on Technology and Human Rights**, honoring the legacy of our beloved colleague Mariam Al-Shafei. Her commitment to digital inclusion and accessible technology inspired the work of four brilliant fellows who joined the program from across West Asia and North Africa.

The fellowship brings together researchers, advocates, and technologists to investigate, innovate, and advocate at the intersection of digital rights and human dignity. From Yemen to Lebanon, and Sudan to Bahrain, these fellows are not just asking difficult questions, they're building roadmaps for a freer digital future in the region.

The 10-month part-time fellowship is structured to offer fellows the space and support to pursue in-depth, original projects. Each fellow receives technical mentorship, tailored training, and access to regional and global digital rights networks. A monthly stipend and additional funding for convenings help minimize the financial and logistical barriers to meaningful research. Fellows also participated in SMEX's flagship event, Bread&Net, where they connected with allies and experts across the movement.

This year's cohort dives into topics ranging from content moderation and SRHR to infrastructure failures during conflict and the chilling climate for freedom of expression.

2.2 Meet the 2024 Fellows

Aisha Aljaedy (Yemen)

A feminist writer and human rights advocate, Aisha brings her lived experience and political insight to her project on the digital threats facing Yemeni women's rights defenders. Her goal: a resilience toolkit rooted in women's testimonies that empowers activists navigating systemic harassment online.

Reem Khalil (Sudan)

An expert in IT governance and socio-technical systems, Reem's project investigates how telecommunications infrastructure shapes disaster response in conflict-torn Sudan. Her research bridges academic theory and field-based realities, aiming to improve digital tools for humanitarian efforts.

Siba Mroueh (Lebanon)

A political anthropologist and writer, Siba turns her lens on the shrinking space for freedom of expression in Lebanon. By documenting legal cases, interviewing those impacted, and engaging legal experts, she seeks to challenge the escalating repression of digital speech.

Mohammad Abobakr (Yemen/Lebanon)

With experience in renewable energy and a passion for inclusive education, Mohammad's project explores digital resilience in Yemen's fintech and education sectors. He aims to document strategies that help communities survive and adapt amidst systemic infrastructure failures.

2.3 Reflections from the 2024 Mariam Al-Shafei Fellowship

This year's fellowship was a commitment to the community. Fellows participated in monthly virtual check-ins, quarterly convenings, and regional events. They shared ideas, offered feedback, and built bonds that extend beyond borders. In turn, SMEX pushed their voices across platforms including through Bread&Net, research mentorship, and advocacy initiatives. By supporting these fellows, we aim to grow the field of digital rights.

For ten months, they worked on topics ranging from the censorship of feminist expression to telecommunication failures in times of war. Their journeys were deeply personal, and yet tied together by a shared commitment: to grow the field of digital rights in a region where digital life is both a battleground and a lifeline. But its curriculum does not just define the fellowship, it's defined by its people and the paths they carve.

Personal Growth Each fellow joined with their own purpose. For some, it was about deepening research experience; for others, it was the opportunity to plug into a regional civil society network. Half of the fellows explicitly noted that they joined out of an interest in digital rights, with one fellow stating: "I wanted to be part of the shift in the digital ecosystem in our region."

At the end of the program, 100% of the cohort stated that they would recommend the fellowship to others, reflecting the professional value they found in it. Three out of four felt the experience met or exceeded their expectations. All fellows recognized its impact on their career and employability, with several securing new professional opportunities during or immediately after the program.

Still, their experiences were not uniform. While some saw the fellowship as an immersive learning space, others perceived it as a task-oriented experience lacking the structure and support needed to fully benefit.

Mentorship and Coordination

The experience with mentorship varied greatly. While some fellows strongly credited their mentors for opening doors, introducing new ideas, and offering technical guidance, others reported deep dissatisfaction describing the experience as disconnected or lacking substance.

Integration, Learning, and Support

On training and support, feedback was more nuanced. One fellow was particularly critical, calling for a structured curriculum of research methods and advocacy skills. Others reported moderate satisfaction and requested more hands-on workshops.

This feedback aligns with a consistent theme: where there was investment, there was impact. Fellows who spent over 30% of their time learning through the fellowship reported significantly higher satisfaction than those who dedicated minimal time. As one fellow put it, “The more I gave it space, the more it gave back.”

What Did Fellows Gain?

Across seven skill areas, 71% of all responses indicated an increase or strong increase, especially in research, scientific writing, project management, and knowledge of digital rights.

Notably, there was improvement in open-access awareness and project management over the previous cohort. However, maintaining an international network, a key metric in such fellowships, dropped from 75% to 50%.

Several fellows noted that the fellowship’s greatest strength lay in professional development, while research-related support still had room to grow.

Making Room for the Personal

Beyond the metrics, the 2024 cohort emphasized something deeper: the Fellowship’s personal impact. One fellow spoke of gaining confidence in the face of digital threats. Another felt the joy of finally connecting with others who “speak the same advocacy language.”

At the same time, fellows were honest about what didn’t work. Some felt siloed. Others struggled to find relevance in parts of the reporting structure. Yet through the challenges, a common thread emerged: The fellowship was a stepping stone not just to a better career, but to a stronger purpose.

Recommendations and Renewal for the Future

SMEX is taking these insights seriously. Based on the 2023 and 2024 cohorts, several improvements are now being explored:



- ▶ A structured induction with clear expectations, deadlines, and reporting templates.
- ▶ A training curriculum tailored to core skills like advocacy, research, communication, and data ethics.
- ▶ Better mentor matching, including guidance on expectations and feedback mechanisms.
- ▶ More visibility into SMEX's work, allowing fellows to engage beyond their individual projects.
- ▶ Building a fellowship alumni network, fostering continuity and shared leadership.

As we pause to reflect on the future of this program, we remain committed to honoring Mariam Al-Shafei's legacy not just by naming a fellowship after her, but by designing it to reflect the values she embodied: equity, openness, innovation, and compassion.

The fellowship is evolving. But at its core, it remains what it started as: a living space for bold ideas, regional solidarity, and the right to dream of and demand a freer digital future.

3. Funding Grassroots Initiatives: Sub-Grants to Localize and Sustain the Fight for Digital Rights

In a year marked by increasing repression and crackdown on activism—where governments in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen arrested dozens of activists—continued economic decline, budgetary reductions in international aid, and escalating conflicts across the region, SMEX reaffirmed its commitment to redistributing resources and support by expanding its direct grantmaking to community-based organizations and activists. This year's sub-granting was a strategic investment in regional knowledge, autonomy, and resilient infrastructure.

SMEX's 2024 sub-granting strategy stemmed from this belief: Funding was not the end goal, but designing and implementing activities in a way that leads to tangible, measurable change for communities. With **25 projects across the WANA region**, SMEX sub-grantees turned funding into action, producing an array of tangible, community-responsive, and locally grounded outputs. From online podcast series on bodily autonomy to data dashboards for human rights documentation, and from digital safety toolkits to disinformation counter-strategies, these projects embodied the creativity and resilience of civil society in times of crisis.

Through two primary initiatives, the **MasarTech Fund 2025** and the **Digital Rights Fund for WANA (DRF)**, SMEX supported **25 local and grassroots projects across eight countries**, disbursing over **\$600,000** in funding in 2024.

In an environment where access to information is closely monitored, content moderation disproportionately affects Arabic-language, and civil society faces digital attacks and structural defunding, it is crucial to rapidly and flexibly provide funds to those on the ground who are closest to the challenges.

3.1 MasarTech Fund 2025: Fighting SRHR Silencing with Digital Access

Launched in late 2024, the MasarTech Fund 2025 aimed to strengthen safe online SRHR access for communities that are persistently silenced. Whether through tech platforms that label Arabic educational content as “inappropriate” or through state-level crackdowns on bodily autonomy, SRHR work in the region is systematically repressed.

SMEX issued **13 grants (ranging from \$14,000 to \$50,000)** to grassroots and community-based groups in **Lebanon, Egypt, Tunisia, and Iraq**. These projects tackled:

- Digital safety for feminist SRHR educators
- Online helplines and capacity-building workshops
- Multimedia awareness campaigns
- Intersectional storytelling initiatives reaching youth, LGBTQIA+ communities, and refugees



Examples:

▶ **“Bala Label” in Lebanon:** Tackling gender taboos through digital campaigns and influencer collaboration where they produced a podcast series and built community networks while establishing financial sustainability channels for ongoing feminist digital content.

▶ **“SpeakUp Helpline” in Egypt:** A secure reporting and resource platform for SRHR-related online harassment which launched a content moderation and response team, bolstered with legal and psychological support.

▶ **“My First Period:”** A campaign that reached hundreds of adolescent girls with culturally relevant reproductive health content in Arabic.

As of December 2024, four of the 13 projects had closed, with the remainder expected to continue till the end of 2025. SMEX’s grants team closely tracked progress through narrative reports, financial statements, and check-in calls, helping grantees (many of them being first-time fund recipients) strengthen their documentation and compliance practices.

Outputs from the MasarTech Fund 2024

MasarTech grantees focused on expanding SRHR access online, with creative formats tailored to marginalized and often excluded groups. Their work generated:

7 Social media campaigns targeting taboo-busting SRHR narratives

6 Trainings for educators, activists, and content creators

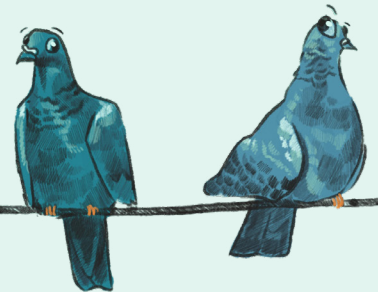
4 Guides, toolkits, or online safety materials on SRHR and digital empowerment

3 Education platforms, including youth-friendly content

3 Podcasts addressing gender, sexuality, and care

2 New helpdesk/content monitoring systems for SRHR digital support

1 Online course ("My First Period") on reproductive education in Arabic



3.2 Digital Rights Fund for WANA: Localized Rapid Response

The Digital Rights Fund for WANA (DRF) addressed the most urgent digital threats faced by activists and civil society in 2024, including cybercrime, spyware, surveillance, censorship, and content takedowns. DRF provided 12 sub-grants to individuals, informal networks, and unregistered organizations operating in Sudan, Tunisia, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, Algeria Tunisia, and Lebanon.

Key Projects:

With amounts ranging from **\$9,000 to \$30,000**, DRF grantees led highly targeted interventions such as,

- Training journalists and WHRDs in safe communication practices
- Documenting censorship and website blocking
- Creating digital security guides in Arabic
- Launching public awareness campaigns about spyware and phishing threats
- Research studies for advocacy

Examples:

- **"Libyan Digital Resilience"**: A project focused on strengthening digital hygiene for community organizers.
- **"Combating Cybercrime in Yemen"**: A grassroots initiative that trained over 60 participants in threat response and built a public-facing education campaign.
- **"Securitizing the Digital Infrastructure of the Accountability Archive" (Palestine)**: This project, still ongoing, protects critical war documentation from digital intrusion.

All DRF recipients submitted quarterly updates and financial reports, with SMEX providing hands-on support to help new and emerging groups meet compliance benchmarks.

Outputs from the Digital Rights Fund (DRF)

Grantees under the Digital Rights Fund focused on urgent digital rights concerns, including surveillance, phishing attacks, and a shrinking civic space.

8

Trainings on digital safety and digital rights

5

Public awareness campaigns across platforms and regions

4

Toolkits and guides, including localized DS protocols

4

Webinars and roundtables on online safety and policy

3

Strategic digital security upgrades (dashboards, helpdesks, platforms)

3

Research and analysis products, including a disinformation analysis report, a policy paper in Yemen, and a digital safety status report in Libya

- ▶ [A digital security training curriculum](#) and implementation via “Protect Yourself Pro” in Iraq
- ▶ A revamped, [secure documentation dashboard](#) for Palestine’s Accountability Archive
- ▶ A policy endorsement roundtable and community campaign on cybercrime in [Yemen](#)
- ▶ A digital security toolkit and multi-platform campaign tackling misinformation in Tunisia

As part of our commitment to accountability and shared learning, each grantee submitted narrative and financial reports, while SMEX staff conducted regular accompaniment, coaching, and documentation reviews. This ensures not just compliance but also capacity-building, helping newer or informal groups navigate funding relationships confidently and securely.

Through both funds, SMEX maintained its core belief: those closest to the problem must lead the solutions. In 2025, many of these projects will share their learning in public reports, Bread&Net panels, and regional forums continuing to shift power from central institutions to the margins where change is already happening.

Closing Remarks:

More than ever, 2024 was a testament to how human rights in West Asia and North Africa are inseparable from the day to day technologies that work both for and against those rights. War has wrought the region apart. Human rights defenders continue to be targeted, silenced, and prosecuted. Technology companies play deaf to the needs and warning signs brought to them by Arabic-speaking and marginalized communities. At a time when the world is more connected than ever, we still believe the internet could still serve the people. Throughout the year, our team came together around one shared message: **digital rights are human rights and must be defended.**

▶ **We monitored major social media platforms** and challenged their biased moderation decisions against freedom of speech, particularly in the case of Palestine, forcing them to reinstate terms and phrases like “from the river to the sea” and “shaheed,” terms historically rooted in Palestinian solidarity. Furthermore, we stood with Google workers when they protested the use of Google services for genocide.

▶ **We enriched the body of digital rights knowledge** in Arabic by publishing 14 intersectional research and policy papers, establishing SMEX as a go-to resource for academics and researchers studying digital rights in the WANA region.

▶ **We built and strengthened a movement for digital rights** from the ground up by fostering partnerships and welcoming new members into the MENA Alliance for Digital Rights, working collectively toward a more stable and collaborative ecosystem..

▶ **We opposed internet shutdowns** across different WANA countries through the #Keep-ItOn campaign, in collaboration with Access Now and local partners in Syria, Jordan, and Iraq.

▶ We stood up against internet shutdown from various arab region through the #Keep-ItOn campaign in collaboration with Access Now in Syria, Jordan and Iraq.

▶ **We hosted Bread&Net 2025: Digital Rights in Times of War**, an online conference that amplified the voices of digital rights activists confronting censorship, surveillance, and the Israeli occupation’s crimes in Palestine and Lebanon. The event explored 13 intersectional themes addressing digital rights challenges across the WANA region.

▶ We supported internet users and human rights defenders getting silenced by social media platforms as well as young people targeted by online sextortion simply for expressing their sexuality and intimacy online.

▶ **We established our Digital Forensics Lab**, updating our security protocols and acquiring advanced software and hardware that enabled us to detect and investigate 10 cases involving spyware, compromised systems, and other suspicious digital activities.

- ▶ **We hosted four exceptional research fellows** who explored critical digital rights issues across the WANA region — from Sudan’s internet infrastructure, to digital threats and resilience among Yemeni women activists, to freedom of expression in Lebanon and how online dissent is being criminalized. Their work enriched the regional knowledge base with fresh, localized insights and set a precedent for future iterations of the Fellowship.
- ▶ **We empowered 25 grassroots projects** across the region to design and implement interventions advancing digital rights. Through our **MasarTech** and **Digital Rights Fund** programs, we provided over \$500,000 in funding, strengthening South-to-South collaboration and supporting local innovation in the digital rights ecosystem.
- ▶ We stood united as a movement in the face of Israeli aggression on Gaza and Lebanon, documenting its impact on internet access and the right to information. We also monitored and reported on social media platforms’ bias in removing verified content shared by Palestinian journalists working on the ground.

The past year presented numerous challenges and external factors that impacted our programming. We anticipate 2025 will also be a demanding year. Despite this, it was a productive year for digital rights in the region. Generous supporters showed increased interest in this movement, seeking to understand how technology influences human rights and how digital rights intersect with every aspect of our lives. Our most significant contribution to this movement has been our active participation, working alongside our partners, friends, technologists, subgrantees, and, most importantly, our dedicated staff to push for corporate accountability, data privacy and freedom of expression online. Together, these efforts remind us that collective action is our greatest strength. As we look ahead, we remain committed to defending digital rights, amplifying marginalized voices, and ensuring that technology serves the people.

