

# Spotlight<sup>2024</sup> LOOK AHEAD



MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

## High time to turn the page

Revival and recovery of Arab world not inconceivable despite persistent threats to regional security and stability

Paul Iddon |rbil, Iraqi Kurdistan

As 2023 moves into the rearview mirror, the Middle East and North Africa can look ahead to the new year with a mixture of hope and trepidation.

For many in the region, it has been a tumultuous 12 months, featuring some of the worst violence and natural disasters in years.

While several conflicts are likely to continue into 2024, not least in Gaza and Sudan, there are some positive signs for the new year.

### Unified GCC visa

Over in the Arabian Gulf, travelers may soon be able to apply for a unified Gulf Cooperation Council visa.

Unveiled in October by Abdullah bin Touq, the UAE minister of economy, the single visa will permit travelers to visit all six members of the Gulf alliance — Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

The new travel permit is billed as the Gulf's equivalent of the European Schengen visa, with the potential for transforming the region's travel, tourism and hospitality industries.

### New BRICS members

The five-member intergovernmental organization BRICS, often touted as a rival to the G7 bloc, could expand.

At the bloc's summit in South Africa last August, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Iran, Ethiopia, and Argentina were invited to join Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa as part of the trading body of emerging economies.

At the time, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, the Saudi foreign minister, said that the Kingdom was studying the proposal and could become a leading member of the bloc, given its vast resources and strategically important location.

### Israel-Hamas war

Israel is locked in a prolonged fight with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, triggered by the killing by Palestinian militants of at least 1,200 people and abduction of another 240 on Oct. 7.

Israel's retaliatory operations have pulverized swathes of Gaza, killing more than 21,000 people and injuring another 50,000, causing a dire humanitarian crisis.

Despite efforts to secure another temporary ceasefire, the conflict is likely to continue into 2024.

### Looming leadership changes

The Oct. 7 attack led by Hamas militants was a massive political setback for Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, who has long depicted himself as the guardian of the nation's security.

Briefly voted out of office in 2021, Netanyahu returned to power in late 2022, leading the most right-wing Israeli

**The Sudan conflict has killed at least 9,000 people, internally displaced 4.5 million, and led 1.2 million to flee to neighboring countries.**

government in history.

He then went on to push through an unpopular judicial overhaul that led to massive protests in 2023. It is likely that 2024 will be his last year in office.

It may also be the year that Iran's 84-year-old supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, relinquishes power in the Islamic Republic.

### Grand Egyptian Museum opening

In the first quarter of 2024, Egypt hopes to finally open the long-awaited Grand Egyptian Museum, situated near the Giza pyramid complex on the outskirts of Cairo.

After 20 years of planning and \$1 billion in spending, the largest archaeological museum on the planet will feature more than 100,000 artifacts from Egypt's ancient civilization, many of which have never been displayed in public before.

### Sudan deterioration

Sudan has been plagued by violence since fighting broke out between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces on April 15.

A total of 6.3 million people have been displaced since April alone.

More than 1.4 million Sudanese have sought shelter in neighboring countries since the onset of the conflict. With no end in sight, the conflict in Sudan will undoubtedly continue into 2024.

**In recent times, Iran has increased its production of highly enriched uranium, reversing a previous output reduction from mid-2023.**

### Hindu temple in Abu Dhabi

The first Hindu temple in the UAE capital, Abu Dhabi, is set to open in February. The temple will be inaugurated by Narendra Modi, the Indian prime minister, after seven deities are consecrated and blessed in special morning prayers.

Modi launched the project in 2018 when he revealed the first model showing a monument with seven spires to reflect the seven emirates. Sculpting work began in 2020.

### Yemen settlement

There are hopes that the truce between the Houthi militia and the Coalition to Restore Legitimacy in Yemen could become a permanent ceasefire agreement in 2024. A two-month UN-negotiated truce came into effect in April 2022 and formally ended the following October. However, hostilities did not recommence.

Saudi Arabia praised the "positive results" of negotiations with the Houthis in September after a visit by a delegation from the group.

### Iran nuclear enrichment

Another issue that is likely to continue into 2024 is the advancement of Iran's nuclear program.

Iran continued to stockpile uranium enriched to 60 percent throughout 2023, giving Tehran the capacity to quickly enrich this material to weapons-grade levels

of about 90 percent.

In December, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Iran's foreign minister, dubbed any attempt to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, which put restrictions on the Iranian nuclear program in return for sanctions relief from the West, a "useless" endeavor.

### GERD dam divisions

Egypt and Ethiopia are likely to remain locked in a simmering dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Years of stop-start talks over the shared management of the Nile River have proved unsuccessful, making open conflict a real possibility.

Egypt has long opposed Ethiopia's dam project because of concerns over its water supply. Sudan has likewise expressed worries about its own water supplies and dams.

### Captagon trade persistence

The many challenges posed by the illicit trade in the stimulant commonly known as Captagon are expected to continue into 2024.

Syria is estimated to produce about 80 percent of the world's supply of the narcotic, exporting it across the Middle East, with a particular focus on the Gulf market.

According to Western governments, Captagon exports net sanctions-squeezed Damascus billions of dollars in revenues each year.

# Spotlight <sup>2023</sup> IN REVIEW



## THE SAHEL

# Too many crises to keep count of

From coups and conflicts to displacement and natural disasters, headlines from Africa's impoverished Sahel were grim

**Robert Bociaga**  
Nouakchott, Mauritania

**W**ith world attention fixated on the war playing out in Gaza between

Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas, conflicts elsewhere, particularly the violence in Sudan and instability across the Sahel, are in danger of being forgotten.

The Sahel belt of Africa, stretching from Mali in the west to Sudan in the east, was catapulted into the global spotlight in early 2023 by a wave of political upheaval, humanitarian challenges, and security threats.

Given its strategic significance for Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, the region's recent spate of coups, extremist insurgencies, and proliferation of migration routes have made it a particular source of concern for policy planners.

International actors, from former colonial rulers including France to multilateral bodies such as the African Union, have been left increasingly concerned by a perceived disinterest in the region and a failure to help resolve problems.

### Sudan crisis

The region's first major upheaval of 2023 arose in Sudan, where violence erupted in mid-April

between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces, triggering a massive wave of displacement that has since rippled through neighboring countries.

The capital, Khartoum, the troubled Darfur region, and other parts of the country have ended the year ravaged by fighting and mass displacement, triggering an economic collapse, the disintegration of the health system, and a growing risk of famine.

The recruitment of foreign fighters from across the wider Sahel, many of them children and destitute farmers driven to desperation, has led to fears the conflict could spill over into the wider region, proliferating the spread of light weaponry and destabilizing neighboring states.

Saudi Arabia and the US have brokered multiple rounds of ceasefire talks with Sudan's warring parties, while the Intergovernmental Authority on Development, an eight-country trade bloc in Africa, has also sought to reach a settlement.

As for a domestic resolution, initial hopes for a non-military government in Sudan, after the military overthrew the civilian-led administration in late 2021, have been all but dashed.

Aid agencies have issued repeated calls for the warring parties to stop perpetrating violence against civilians, particularly women and girls,

shedding light on the humanitarian dimensions of the turmoil.

**●● The world was caught off guard in July when a coup in Niger marked the latest in a series of military takeovers in the region, Mali and Burkina Faso having witnessed coups of their own recently.**

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Experts have also warned that the conflict and resulting breakdown of government authority could be exploited by extremist groups such as Daesh and Al-Qaeda, or open the way for the creation of new radical organizations with similar objectives.

### Niger coup

Amid the focus on Sudan, the international community was caught off guard in July when a coup in Niger marked the latest in a series of military takeovers in the region — Mali and Burkina Faso having witnessed coups of their own in recent years.

This development underscored the fragility of governance structures in the Sahel, raising questions about the efficacy of international efforts to promote stability and democratic institutions.

Niger, a landlocked country of 25 million, had been a beneficiary of Western programs aimed at stopping migrants from traveling further north. However, the junta turned its back on the West, aligning with the broad public sentiment that little of this money had trickled down to local communities.

The coup had wider implications, particularly for the flow of migrants transiting through the region.

Prior to the coup, Niger had worked with Western governments

**●● The year draws to a close with the fall of Sudan's city of Wad Madani to the RSF, despite ceasefire talks and prior US warnings. The RSF's latest battlefield success followed three days of intense fighting.**

to help manage these migration routes. As a result, European states looked to Tunisia and Libya to control irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea.

In tandem with these developments, support for anti-immigration politicians has grown across Europe. In turn, moderates have been forced into offering heightened border protections and revised asylum policies to head off electoral challenges.

### Storms and earthquakes

Beyond the conflicts and coups, nature also made its capacity for devastation felt in September when Morocco was hit by a catastrophic earthquake and Libya suffered cataclysmic flooding, leaving thousands dead and many more missing.

These twin disasters sparked a global aid response, but the support delivered to suffering Moroccans differed greatly from that provided to Libya, with the latter remaining closed off to the world, while militias preyed on the local population and the large number of migrants transiting through the country.

### Displacement

The result of these multiple, overlapping disasters has been the mass displacement of the Sahel's population, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. International agencies have drawn particular attention to the ongoing

recruitment of child soldiers across the Sahel. The spread of child exploitation added a grim dimension to an already complex set of challenges and underscored the need for international cooperation to protect the most vulnerable in times of crisis.

Simultaneously, the UN expressed alarm about the mounting hunger crisis in Sudan. This humanitarian emergency added urgency to the critical need for food assistance and aid to address the escalating challenges faced by the population.

By November, warnings had re-emerged about the potential for a genocide in Sudan's Darfur, echoing past tragedies in the region. Analysts said this ominous development underscored the need to address the root causes of conflict, prompting renewed calls for diplomatic initiatives and peacekeeping efforts.

The year drew to a close with the fall of Sudan's city of Wad Madani to the RSF, despite recent ceasefire talks and prior US warnings. The RSF's latest battlefield success followed three days of intense fighting, leading to a mass exodus of residents toward the south.

The tragic result of these mass displacement episodes was made all too clear on Dec. 16 when 61 migrants, many of them from Sudan, South Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea, drowned in the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Libya when the small smuggling vessel they were traveling in got into difficulty.

# Spotlight 2023 IN REVIEW



SYRIA

## Between paralysis and progress

Natural disasters, political discontent and economic crisis notwithstanding, 2023 saw Damascus return to the Arab fold

Anan Tello London

From a deadly earthquake in the country's northwest and protests in its far south to a return to the Arab fold after more than a decade out in the cold, Syria has witnessed several major events and changes in the past year.

These developments have taken place against the backdrop of a deepening economic crisis, humanitarian challenges, a resurgent Daesh insurgency, and violence associated with Syria's unresolved civil war.

### Suweida protests

Anti-regime protests erupted in August in southern Syria, predominantly in the governorate of Suweida, in the wake of government decisions that have contributed to a mounting cost-of-living crisis.

Echoing Deraa's demonstrations of 2011, which ignited a country-wide civil war, Suweida's protesters have called for the overthrow of the regime of Bashar Assad — the first and most determined challenge to his rule in years.

In August, the Assad government reduced fuel subsidies and raised gasoline prices by nearly 250 percent. And although the government doubled public sector wages and pensions, the average Syrian breadwinner is still struggling to make ends meet amid rising prices.

Years of conflict and Western-imposed sanctions have left Syria's economy in tatters. Hyperinflation, fuel shortages, prolonged power cuts, and devastated infrastructure are just some of the challenges people in the war-torn country face every day.

The UN World Food Programme estimated in May that around 12.1 million people in Syria — representing more than half of the population — are food insecure. As such, Syria was already on its knees at the beginning of 2023.

But worse was still to come.

### The earthquakes

In the early hours of Feb. 6, people across southern Turkiye and northern Syria were shaken from their beds by a magnitude 7.8 earthquake, the largest to hit the region since the 1939 Erzincan temblor. Nine hours later, a second earthquake of magnitude 7.5 shook the region.

In Syria, the twin quakes killed more than 8,000 people, destroyed some 1,900 buildings, caused around \$5.1 billion in direct physical damage, and displaced thousands of people, many of whom had already been displaced multiple times by the conflict.

Although the death toll and physical damage were far more extreme in Turkiye, where the strongest tremors were felt, Syria's political isolation and years of impoverishment intensified the suffering of its people.

Shortly after the earthquakes,

Hyperinflation, fuel shortages, power cuts, and devastated infrastructure are just some of the challenges facing the country.

the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, estimated that approximately 5.37 million people in Syria were in need of shelter assistance.

Three days after the disaster struck, the US Treasury announced a 180-day exemption from sanctions on "all transactions related to earthquake relief efforts" sent to Syria by overseas donors.

Several Arab states responded to the disaster by sending aid convoys even before the sanctions were eased, including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq, Algeria, and Bahrain.

### Return to the Arab fold

In part, it was because of the Arab world's response to the earthquakes that a dialogue between regional governments and the Assad regime became possible.

After years of isolation and dependence for survival on Russia, Iran and the Iranian regime's regional proxies, Assad was finally brought back into the Arab fold on May 7, when the Arab League gave him a warm welcome at that month's summit in Jeddah.

Following its crackdown on anti-government protests in 2011, which sparked the civil war, the Syrian regime was made an international pariah, ostracized by many Arab states, and suspended from the Arab League.

While Assad's return to the Arab fold signaled the end of the regime's isolation, this was conditional on his commitment to curbing drug trafficking into

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Prior to the Jeddah summit, a meeting of Arab foreign ministers, including Syria's Faisal Mekdad, in the Jordanian capital Amman saw Damascus agree to tackle drug smuggling on its shared borders with Jordan and Iraq.

### Captagon crackdown

On May 8, a day after Damascus was reinstated into the Arab League, Jordanian warplanes targeted one of the region's most prominent drug traffickers, Marai Al-Ramthan, in Syria's southern province of Daraa, killing him and his family.

Since the start of the Syrian civil war, Jordan has been a major transit point for the trade in Captagon, a highly addictive amphetamine, which has enjoyed a large market in oil-rich Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia.

Since 2014, Amman has launched multiple raids against drug traffickers inside Syria.

The Syrian government previously denied accusations it was involved in the trade and manufacture of Captagon, despite a body of evidence indicating people close to the Assad regime were involved in the industry.

### Israeli airstrikes

In October, Israel carried out airstrikes against civilian airports in the capital Damascus and the northern city of Aleppo.

Although Israel has repeatedly struck targets inside Syria

in recent years, claiming it was bombing Iran-linked targets, these particular raids came in the wake of the deadly Hamas attack on southern Israel.

On Oct. 7, the Palestinian militant group carried out a surprise attack on Israel, killing at least 1,200 people and taking around 240 hostages.

Israel responded to the unprecedented attack by launching a massive bombing campaign and ground operation against Gaza.

As of Dec. 20, at least 20,000 Palestinians have been killed, according to Gaza's Hamas-run Health Ministry.

Israeli fighter jets extended their strikes to include targets in both Syria and Lebanon, which have both played host to militias backed by Iran and sympathetic to Hamas.

Aerial attacks on Syria since Oct. 7 have reportedly hit both military and civilian sites, including the Syrian army air defense base and a radar station in Tel Qulaib and Tel Maseeh in Suweida province.

Strikes on targets inside Syria are part of a shadow war between Israel and Iran's proxies in the region, which have long been accused of transferring Iranian weaponry to armed groups in Lebanon and elsewhere.

If hostilities between Israel and these groups escalate in the coming days, there are fears that Arab nations like Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen could find themselves dragged into a devastating regional conflict.

# Spotlight 2023 IN REVIEW



MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

## Events that shook the Arab world

A year of earthquakes — both literal and figurative — has thrown plans into disarray and reignited dormant conflicts

Paul Iddon Irbil, Iraqi Kurdistan

The Middle East and North Africa region has witnessed another tumultuous year, marked by events ranging from the worst earthquake of the century to the bloodiest chapter yet of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

At the same time, however, the year has also seen promising signs of reconciliation between old rivals and foes as well as progress on tackling the causes and mitigating the effects of climate change.

### Qur'an burnings

The burning of a copy of the holy Qur'an by far-right agitators outside the Turkish Embassy in the Swedish capital, Stockholm, on Jan. 21 ignited furious protests across the Islamic world.

While demonstrations in Bahrain, Jordan, and Lebanon were peaceful, supporters of Iraqi cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr clashed with police as they attempted to attack the Swedish Embassy in Baghdad.

The Sadrists would mount subsequent protests in July following additional Qur'an burnings in Sweden and Denmark.

Earlier this month, by a 94-77 vote, Denmark passed what is known as the Qur'an law, which bans the "inappropriate treatment" of religious texts. Offenders now face a fine or up to two years in jail.

### Turkiye-Syria earthquakes

Two earthquakes caused havoc on an unprecedented scale in southern Türkiye and northern Syria on Feb. 6, killing more than 50,000 in the former and 8,000 in the latter.

The quakes — the worst Türkiye

had witnessed since 1939 — were felt as far away as Egypt and Türkiye's Black Sea coast.

While devastating, the disaster did contribute to notable improvements in regional diplomatic relations. Late in the month, Egypt's foreign minister visited Syria and Türkiye for the first time in more than a decade. Several regional governments also delivered humanitarian aid to Syria, leading to a thaw in relations with the hitherto isolated government in Damascus.

### Saudi-Iran deal

March 10 would see further reconciliation in the region with Saudi Arabia and Iran agreeing to restore diplomatic relations and reopen their respective embassies as part of a deal brokered by China.

Having severed ties in 2016, the two countries marked an important turning point with this move, especially given Tehran's long-running support for militia proxies throughout the region, including the Houthis in Yemen. The development renewed hopes that many of the Middle East's lingering disputes involving proxy armies could finally see peaceful resolution.

### Sudan conflict

After years of instability following the overthrow of long-time ruler Omar Bashir in 2019, Sudan descended into civil war on April 15 amid clashes between the rival Sudanese Armed Forces and the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces.

The ongoing war has claimed the lives of approximately 10,000 people, displaced millions, and devastated the capital, Khartoum. It has also led to renewed fears of another genocide in the troubled Darfur region. With ceasefire



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talks making scant progress and global attention fixated on the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, the conflict in Sudan has become a neglected crisis that nonetheless threatens wider regional security.

### Syria returns to the Arab fold

Foreign ministers from Arab League member states gathered on May 8 at the organization's headquarters in Cairo and voted to reinstate Syria — a country that had long been a pariah on the world stage. Syria's Arab League membership was revoked following a deadly regime crackdown on anti-government protesters in 2011, which later escalated into an all-out civil war.

Although the conflict is not yet fully resolved, the thaw marks an important step toward the reconstruction of shattered infrastructure and ending the hardship of millions of displaced Syrians.

### Turkiye-PKK conflict intensifies

On June 13, the Kurdistan Workers' Party, more commonly known by its acronym PKK, ended a unilateral ceasefire it put in place with the Turkish state following the February earthquakes.

In response, Türkiye dramatically increased strikes against the group's hideouts in Iraqi Kurdistan, along with targeted assassinations against its leadership.

The leftist guerrilla group has led a decades-old insurgency against the Turkish state with a view to creating a semi-autonomous Kurdish state in southeast Türkiye.

### Protests in Israel

Israel's parliament, the Knesset, passed the first bill of the



**With ceasefire talks making scant progress, the conflict in Sudan has become a neglected crisis that none-the-less threatens wider regional security.**

controversial judicial overhaul pushed forward by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on July 24.

The bill's ratification came despite widespread domestic protests in Israel since the start of the year and calls from US President Joe Biden to postpone it.

In an unprecedented move, thousands of reservists in the Israeli military warned they would stop reporting for duty if the bill was passed.

However, the government's apparent determination to power ahead with its controversial overhaul was tempered by the Oct. 7 attack.

### New Syria protests

While 2023 saw the Syrian government's gradual reintegration into the Arab fold, the situation in the country remained dire for many of its citizens.

On Aug. 17, Syrians in the southern Druze-majority city of Suweida began protesting against the country's debilitating economic conditions and record-high inflation.

The protests quickly spread, leading to renewed calls for the removal of President Bashar Assad — the most open criticism of his regime since the 2011 uprising.

August also saw unprecedented clashes in Syria's east after the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces arrested an Arab leader of the Deir ez-Zor Military Council.

### Morocco and Libya

September was a particularly tragic month for North Africa. On Sept. 8, an earthquake devastated Morocco's Marrakesh-Safi region, killing almost 3,000 people and destroying several of

Marrakesh's historic landmarks.

It was the second-deadliest earthquake of the year following the February quakes in Türkiye and Syria.

Then, on Sept. 9, Storm Daniel passed through eastern Libya, bringing devastating floods, which caused two dams to collapse on Sept. 11, sending 1 billion cubic feet (30 million cubic meters) of water into already inundated areas.

Derna in east Libya, home to around 90,000 people, suffered the worst of the resulting damage, with 25 percent of the city disappearing into the Mediterranean Sea.

### Israel-Hamas war

October saw the start of the most destructive war between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

On Oct. 7, Hamas launched an unprecedented cross-border attack on southern Israel, killing more than 1,200 Israelis — most of them civilians — and kidnapping 240 Israeli and foreign nationals.

Israel responded with a devastating military operation, which has killed more than 20,000 Gazans to date — the majority of them women and children. The Israeli offensive has triggered a displacement of civilians of epic proportions and one of the biggest humanitarian disasters in recent memory.

### COP28

The 28th UN Climate Change Conference — COP28 — was hosted by the UAE from Nov. 28 to Dec. 12, welcoming almost 80,000 delegates and guests from around the world to Dubai to discuss and seek solutions for the pressing challenges posed by climate change.

# Spotlight 2023 IN REVIEW



LEBANON

## Victim of a perfect storm of crises

After years of political and economic dysfunction, the crisis-racked country is ending 2023 on the precipice of war

Nadia Al-Faour Beirut

**W**ith its economy still in tatters, its government in a state of paralysis, and fears that the war raging in Gaza between Israel and Hamas could soon spill over its borders, Lebanon's woes have only deepened in 2023.

### Economic crisis

With some 80 percent of Lebanon's citizens now living in poverty, the country has been mired in a crippling economic crisis, which commentators have declared "unprecedented" in modern times, since 2019. In early 2023, inflation hit 190 percent.

While the Lebanese government reached an agreement for a program worth \$3 billion with the International Monetary Fund, obstacles to the deal's requisite reforms have seen the bailout trapped in limbo.

In response to these delays, the IMF said the crisis was being compounded and prolonged by those with vested interests seeking to ensure the reforms did not materialize.

A subsequent report published by the international body stated that without urgent reform, public debt could hit 547 percent of Lebanon's gross domestic product by 2027.

### Political deadlock

Central to pushing ahead with the reforms is the need to resolve the country's political deadlock. However, Lebanon has been waiting for a new president since Michel Aoun's presidential term ended on Oct. 31, 2022.

Parliamentary elections — the first since 2019 — took place in May 2022 and saw 13 independent self-proclaimed reformists win seats. However, with a caretaker government still in place well over a year later, Lebanon is yet to see any positive change as a result.

The failure to challenge this status quo has meant that any serious effort to investigate the cause of, and prosecute those responsible for, the Aug. 4, 2020, Beirut Port explosion has continued to face obstruction and little cooperation from the political elite.

Families of the victims have demanded a UN-mandated, independent fact-finding mission to bring those responsible to justice. However, their calls have not been answered.

Moreover, the internal investigation into the blast has been repeatedly suspended after politicians lodged complaints against presiding judges.

### Child abuse

In parallel with its economic and political unraveling, Lebanon's social fabric seems to be fraying. One example of this institutional collapse was the revelation this

**With some 80 percent of Lebanon's citizens now living in poverty, the country has been mired in a crippling economic crisis.**

year of widespread child abuse.

It was the case of six-year-old Leen Talib, who died in August this year after allegedly being raped by her maternal uncle, that highlighted the failure of Lebanon's authorities and its threadbare social services to prevent such cases.

Other crimes exposed in the wake of Leen's death involved an employee at the Gardereve child care center, who reportedly recorded himself striking toddlers and force-feeding them.

Another case involved a local NGO called Village of Peace and Love, established to care for neglected children, which was shut down after evidence emerged that it was trafficking children for sexual abuse.

Child-protection experts who spoke to Arab News this summer said they had witnessed an avalanche of abuse cases in the wake of these high-profile stories, but claimed they were too badly resourced to cope with the sheer scale of need.

### Anti-Syrian sentiment

Lebanon's economic pains have hit its large Syrian and Palestinian refugee communities — who have found themselves increasingly marginalized and even blamed for the country's ills — particularly hard.

Lebanon hosts nearly 1 million registered Syrian refugees, while the government estimates another 500,000 live within its borders

**The IDF and Hezbollah fighters sympathetic to Hamas traded fire over the Lebanon-Israel border, raising fears of a new 'front.'**

undocumented. Their lack of legal status and residency makes them prone to harassment, detention, arrest, and deportation.

And, as the social fabric has frayed, a growing number of Lebanese citizens have started to associate Syrian refugees with immoral behavior and to call for their expulsion from the country.

In September, a Syrian refugee died while in the custody of State Security, allegedly after being tortured. While there have been calls for the arrest of the officers involved, the lack of independence in military and judicial courts does not bode well for the family of the deceased.

### Camp clashes

Lebanon also hosts more than 175,000 Palestinian refugees who have settled in camps in the years since they were driven out of Israel in 1948.

In July and September, armed clashes broke out in the Ain Al-Helweh camp in Saida between supporters of Fatah, the party of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, and Muslim Youth, an extremist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

The clashes followed the assassination of Abu Ashraf Al-Armoushi, a high-ranking commander in Fatah, and lasted more than a month. At least 13 Palestinians were killed and dozens wounded, while hundreds of families have since opted to leave the camps.

### Israel v Hezbollah

Decades since the end of the Lebanese civil war and the disarmament of many of the country's militia factions, Iran-backed Hezbollah remains the most powerful political force and most heavily armed entity in Lebanon.

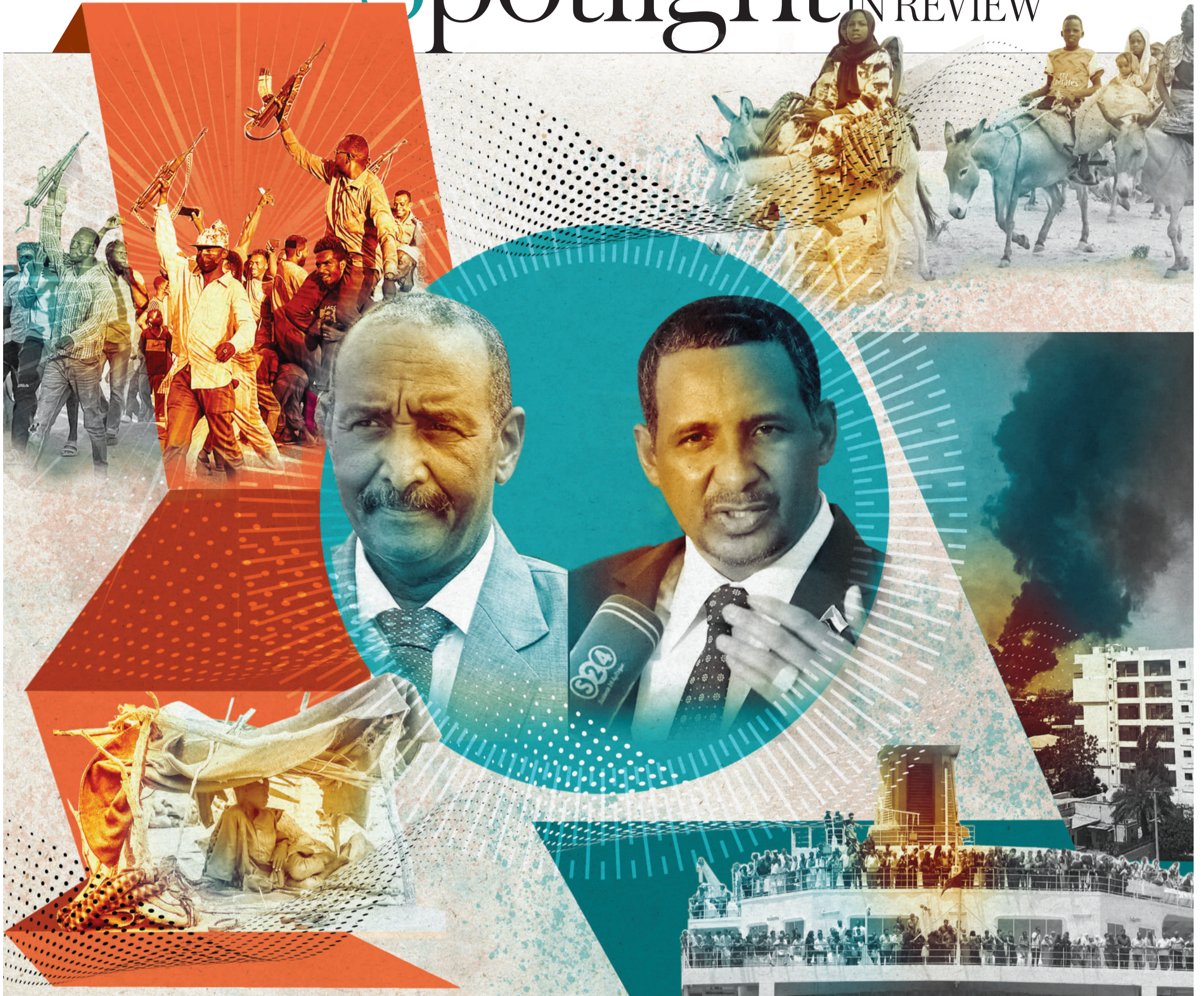
Since the conflict between the Israeli military and Palestinian militant group Hamas began in October, the Israel Defense Force and Hezbollah fighters sympathetic to Hamas have traded fire over the Lebanon-Israel border, raising fears of a new "front" in the war.

In fact, the armed exchanges began in the summer when both sides accused one another of violating UN resolutions governing the boundary established 18 years ago after the withdrawal of Israeli troops from southern Lebanon. Matters escalated quickly after the Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, leading to almost-daily bombing of Lebanon's southern towns, which has left at least 150 people dead, including Reuters cameraman Issam Abdullah.

Although the Lebanese government insists it does not want a confrontation with Israel, the crisis-racked country has been gearing up for the worst, mindful of the carnage suffered in the 2006 war.

Officials and commentators alike continue to speculate on whether Hezbollah intends to increase its attacks on Israel in support of Hamas — a scenario that would almost certainly drag Lebanon into war.

# Spotlight <sup>2023</sup> IN REVIEW



SUDAN

## The forgotten 'other war' of 2023

Sudan conflict grabbed global attention initially, but fell off the radar by end of the year despite no let-up in violence

Robert Bociaga Nouakchott, Mauritania

**E**rupting in April, a feud between two Sudanese factions captured the headlines for months, but later fell off the radar, despite the loss of 12,000 lives so far and the displacement of more than 7 million people.

The conflict, which erupted on April 15, has slipped from the top of the foreign policy agenda as world powers focus their humanitarian and diplomatic attention on Israel's war with the Palestinian militant group Hamas and the ongoing conflict in Ukraine.

Meanwhile, African leaders, preoccupied with daunting domestic challenges, have been slow to address the Sudan crisis, Africa's third-largest country.

Despite organizing conferences to end the war, they have struggled to rein in the warring sides, putting the region's political and economic stability in jeopardy.

The consequences of this combination of neglect and failure are becoming increasingly obvious.

The conflict between erstwhile allies — the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces and the Sudanese Armed Forces — has devastated the country that they jointly seized in 2021 in a coup aimed at thwarting a transition to democratic governance.

The International Monetary Fund has forecast a nearly 20 percent contraction in Sudan's economy this year, highlighting the dire impact of the conflict. Sudan now holds the dubious distinction of having the world's largest number of internal refugees.

A total of 6.3 million people have been displaced since April alone, adding to the 3.7 million Sudanese who had already fled their homes during previous conflicts, along with 1.1 million foreigners who had earlier sought refuge in Sudan.

More than 1.4 million Sudanese have sought shelter in neighboring countries since the onset of the conflict, piling pressure on regional states already grappling with their own humanitarian issues and political upheavals.

Meanwhile, aid agencies warn that more than 6 million people are on the brink of famine.

More concerning still are reports of ethnic cleansing in the Darfur region in harrowing echoes of the events of the early 2000s. During that period, the Janjaweed militia, a precursor to the RSF, mounted a campaign of genocide.

Amid this catastrophe, Wad Madani, the capital of Al-Jazirah state, located roughly 85 miles southeast of Sudan's capital, Khartoum, stands as a somber testament to the relentless brutality of the conflict.

“While conflicts in other parts of the world draw attention, Sudan's silent suffering remains largely neglected.”

As the latest city to fall to the RSF this December, this once bustling urban center is now enduring the nightmare of looting, abuses, and open warfare.

Mohamad Abdel, a 32-year-old Sudanese, said his relatives have once again been forced to flee. “The thought of repeatedly reliving this nightmare is terrible,” he told Arab News.

“My father finds himself on the road once again, fleeing the horrors of war. May someone finally put an end to this war,” he added.

Towns and villages throughout Al-Jazirah state are now under the control of the RSF, marking a major strategic advance for the militia. The group's tactics, characterized by information warfare, have shifted the military dynamics in the region.

They have also raised concerns about food security and local health systems.

The Sudan Doctors' Trade Union also highlighted the dire situation in Wad Madani. In a statement, the union said: “All 22 hospitals in the city are rendered completely non-operational following the RSF invasion.”

Since violence erupted in the eastern neighborhoods of Wad Madani, such as Abu Haraz and Hantoub, many residents have found they can no longer reach Sennar, the nearest urban area outside RSF control.

“My father finds himself on the road once again, fleeing the horrors of war. May someone finally put an end to the fighting.”

Muawiya Abdulrahman, a member of the Khartoum Resistance Committee, a grassroots pro-democracy movement, told Arab News he was turned back at one of the RSF's newly established checkpoints.

He said: “I don't know where to go next. We are just waiting for the right time to leave after determining our destination.”

Abdulrahman remains confined to the city's Maki neighborhood, where he has witnessed “widespread looting, with militia members raiding empty houses, stealing money, gold jewelry, and cars, especially under the cover of night.”

Abdulrahman's movements were already restricted under SAF rule, during which time he feared arbitrary arrests by Islamist factions and military intelligence.

“This was based on discriminatory grounds against those with origins in western Sudan, including Darfur and Kordofan,” he added.

As thousands flee eastwards, the conflict has given rise to massive disease outbreaks.

Aid workers on the ground report a desperate situation, with limited resources available to address the growing health crisis.

Will Carter, Sudan country director for the Norwegian Refugee Council, told Arab News: “This is one of the most underfunded humanitarian

responses in the world.

“The fall of Al-Jazirah state has had a very, very deep impact on the restructured humanitarian operation. “It's a very precarious position to be in, in terms of security and stability, in terms of the logistics as well. It creates an even more limited space to help millions of people at the moment, just when they need us the most.”

Beyond the logistical challenges, the fall of Wad Madani has profound implications for public morale and the reputation of the SAF, which has been accused of strategic failures, relying too heavily on allied militias, and lacking sufficient troops despite its recruitment campaigns.

Some fear that these weaknesses could lead to the RSF's eventual victory.

Carter, of the Norwegian Refugee Council, says that the world's loss of interest in the conflict has been a serious mistake.

“While conflicts in other parts of the world draw global attention, Sudan's silent suffering remains largely neglected,” he said.

He said the influx of Sudanese refugees into already underserved and fragile areas, including South Sudan, eastern Chad, and regions in Ethiopia, “makes it exceedingly difficult to assist people in a fair and proper manner given the severely limited resources.”

# Spotlight <sup>2023</sup> IN REVIEW



SAUDI ARABIA

## The signposts of transformation

From successes in tech, culture and diplomacy to big strides on the world stage, the Kingdom had a lot to be proud of

Rawan Radwan Jeddah  
Lucas Chapman Athens

**S**audi Arabia will look back on 2023 as a year of triumphs, having hosted major events in the fields of technology, culture, sport and diplomacy, while continuing on its path of impressive economic expansion and diversification.

In the past 12 months, the Kingdom has played host to sports stars, tech experts, fashionistas, and music and movie legends. Having secured its bid to host World Expo 2030, Saudi Arabia has a lot to celebrate as it enters the new year.

### Diplomacy

Reflecting the Kingdom's growing confidence at the international level, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman gave a wide-ranging interview in English to US broadcaster Fox News on Sept. 21, winning plaudits for its clarity of thought and ambition.

The conversation with Fox News political correspondent Bret Baier covered topics such as relations with Israel, Iran's nuclear program and the many positive changes taking place in the Kingdom.

A week prior to the interview, the crown prince made a state visit to India at the invitation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. After heading the Saudi delegation to the G20 summit in New Delhi,

he was welcomed with a grand ceremonial reception.

The crown prince oversaw the signing of several joint agreements between the Kingdom and India in the fields of energy, agriculture, industry, and petrochemicals, among other areas, cementing a relationship with one of the world's fastest-growing economies.

### World Expo 2030

In November, Saudi Arabia emerged victorious in its bid to host World Expo 2030. The Kingdom won by a landslide at the Bureau International des Expositions vote, receiving 119 ballots compared to runners-up South Korea with 29 votes and Italy with 17.

The eagerly anticipated event will take place in the Saudi capital Riyadh under the theme "The Era of Change: Together for a Foresighted Tomorrow," with a focus on technology, innovation, climate action, and addressing global inequality — ideas that fall in line with Vision 2030.

According to the Riyadh Expo 2030 website, the event is expected to welcome 40 million in-person visitors to a site measuring more than 6 million square meters, in addition to a billion metaverse visits.

### Business and innovation

In January, Saudi Arabia established its place as a future leader

**Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman gave an interview in English to US broadcaster Fox News on Sept. 21 that conveyed a sense of the Kingdom's ambitions.**

in tech with the launch of its brand-new smart city, The Line, which completely reimagines sustainable urban living.

At an exhibition in Riyadh, the Kingdom displayed several of the designs to be implemented at The Line, which is currently under construction as part of northwest Saudi Arabia's NEOM project.

The 200-meter wide, 500-meter high, and 170-km-long city, with a planned capacity of 9 million people, will function without cars, roads, or emissions, utilizing 100 percent renewable energy and hydroponic gardens.

### Technology

The Kingdom took the tech world by storm in February with its four-day LEAP conference in Riyadh.

The second annual iteration of the conference, held at the city's International Convention and Exhibition Center, saw more than a quarter of a million registrations on the first day alone.

At the conference, Abdullah Al-Swaha, the Saudi minister of information, announced more than \$9 billion in investments to support tech startups and entrepreneurship.

In March, Saudi Arabia made another major leap in the business world, with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announcing the establishment of the country's second flag carrier, Riyadh Air.

**In March, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced the establishment of Saudi Arabia's second flag carrier, Riyadh Air, to serve more than 100 destinations.**

Having already received its airline designator code from the International Air Transport Association, Riyadh Air's fleet of Boeing 787 aircraft will soon serve more than 100 international and domestic destinations.

The crown prince also announced in February the launch of the New Murabba project, a planned 19-sq. km development in Riyadh that will offer hundreds of thousands of residential units, hotel rooms, retail spaces, leisure assets, and community facilities.

### Sport

The Kingdom hosted a range of internationally acclaimed sporting, cultural, and music events in 2023, changing the football world forever when Portuguese megastar Cristiano Ronaldo joined Saudi club Al-Nassr.

A promotional video of the five-time Ballon d'Or winner donning traditional Saudi attire for Saudi National Day quickly went viral. March saw Jeddah hold the 2023 Saudi Arabian Grand Prix, where a crowd of 150,000 watched some of the world's top drivers take on the 6-km track.

During the high-octane event, Khalid Al-Falih, Saudi Arabia's minister of investment, oversaw the signing of 14 agreements to support the sports sector.

This was followed in October by the Battle of the Baddest, the heavyweight boxing match

between WBC champion Tyson Fury and former UFC champion Francis Ngannou. Fury won the fight, which was held in Riyadh's Kingdom Arena, by a 10-round split decision.

### Culture

During the summer season, Riyadh hosted Grammy Award-winning rapper Macklemore as well as the multi-platinum band Imagine Dragons during a stop on their Mercury World Tour.

Coinciding with the 93rd Saudi National Day, the third edition of AlUla's AZIMUTH Festival captivated visitors at the world-renowned cultural heritage site in September and featured international acts, Saudi DJs and other Arab musicians.

Fashionistas flocked to the inaugural Riyadh Fashion Week in October, which showcased dozens of Saudi designers and set the stage for the city's emergence as a new Middle Eastern fashion capital.

Then, in December, Soundstorm 2023, hosted by MDLBeast, rocked Riyadh, with musical guests including 50 Cent, the Black Eyed Peas, David Guetta, Calvin Harris, Metallica, and Wiz Khalifa.

If the tech, investment, tourism and entertainment offerings of the past 12 months are anything to go by, Saudi Arabia is well on track to becoming the Middle East's top must-visit destination.