

Wednesday, March 1, 2023

To The Human Rights Watch LGBTQ Team:

Thank you for your inquiry about our strategies with regards to the dangers faced by Grindr users in the Middle East-North Africa (MENA) region. It is a subject that carries a great weight in the hearts of our entire staff and has been a major focus of work for Grindr for Equality over the past eight years. I am always pleased for the opportunity to describe in detail the tremendous work we have and will continue to put into this crucial set of challenges.

Grindr was founded in 2009 in Los Angeles, California without a clear idea of the global success it would eventually achieve. Today, over eleven million unique users log in every month from virtually every country on earth. In order to respond to our own growth, the company has had to establish a variety of internal teams with the resources and charge to think through both the challenges and opportunities presented by LGBTQ safety in all of those profoundly varied circumstances.

We have also had to adapt to the reality that we have become a fixture in the global LGBTQ ecosystem, and even the possibility of turning off the service for certain geographies would not necessarily make the community in those places any safer.

Time and time again, over the fourteen years Grindr has been online, we have been told by organizations and activists in the MENA region that shutting down our platform for their country would decrease the overall safety of the local LGBTQ communities:

1. Decrease the avenues through which LGBTQ people could reach out and find life-saving connection and a sense of community
2. Push Grindr users to digital platforms whose parent companies do not pay attention to the unique safety needs of LGBTQ people in the region, and
3. Push Grindr users to analogue spaces for connection like cruising spots in public restrooms and parks that have long been proven unsafe

Even in the most extreme situation we have faced, the request from our on-the-ground partners remained clear – keep the app on. During the 2017-2018 anti-LGBTQ Egyptian crackdown that followed the unfurling of the rainbow flag at the Mashrou' Leila conference in Cairo, we repeatedly consulted with the coalition of the three main Egyptian LGBTQ organizations about whether to consider suspending the service. They never swayed from their unanimous recommendation. They repeatedly asked that Grindr remain open and on for Egyptians and that they be given the opportunity to use it as a channel for

communication so that everyone accessing Grindr could be told about the situation and warned to take extreme caution.

Of course the company does not generate profit in any of the markets of the Middle East or North Africa, but, we have nevertheless tried to honor the requests of our local partners to maintain service to the regional community by committing to making it as safe as possible, given the circumstances.

Grindr for Equality was created in 2012 to be the part of Grindr that promotes LGBTQ safety, health, and human rights around the world. Our work is divided into four pillars – educate Grindr users, activate Grindr users, fund the LGBTQ movement, and consult on app features that can bring more social justice into our digital space. Additionally, we are charged with building and maintaining relationships with human rights organizations and to lead in research processes to build the company’s understanding of what our users face in various jurisdictions.

Relationship Building

Grindr for Equality has engaged in establishing deep and meaningful connections with LGBTQ activists all over the Middle East-North Africa region and all over the world. From 2015, when I came on as the program’s first full-time director, I built upon my existing personal relationships from past posts in order to begin the process of establishing these direct connections.

In order to do this, our team has traveled to various parts of the region, making trips at least once a year, with the exception of the COVID years of 2021 and 2022. We have made official visits to Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, and Lebanon, in order to meet our partners in their own context and on their own terms and in order to get a real on-the-ground sense of what’s happening in these portions of our community. This emphasis on the MENA region outstrips the amount of time we’ve spent in any other region of the world.

Additionally, our commitment to the MENA movement has included making sure that our team includes Arabic-speakers and others whose personal experience is rooted in the LGBTQ issues of the region. Although neither of Grindr for Equality’s current staff members are Arabic-speakers, we have had team members of the past recruited directly from the regional movement. Additionally, as discussed below, the Customer Experience team is inclusive of staff with deep, direct experience in MENA.

Research

In addition to relationship building, Grindr for Equality is deeply engaged with research generation in order to better understand our users in the Middle East and North Africa and ultimately to be able to better meet their needs. Though we do not use formal human rights impact assessment tools, we are constantly investigating, documenting the stories of human rights abuses that involve our platform, and fighting against them.



Some of the research we have developed is proprietary and was not created in a way that would allow for it to be shared with external partners. For example, we have conducted in-person multilingual user focus groups in Morocco, Egypt, and Sudan, and have conducted country-level surveys in places like Iran. However, we have also engaged in processes to create research that doesn't only inform Grindr staff but can also contribute to the greater understanding of the LGBTQ movement.

Our first public effort in this area was in collaboration with the Lebanon-based organization, Middle East-North Africa Organization for Services, Advocacy, Integration & Capacity Development (MOSAIC) and the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE). Published in 2018, the report, which is titled [*The Regional Livelihood of GBTQ Using Grindr: Discrimination, Violence, Rights, and Relationships*](#). The information is based on the self-reported experiences of 1,794 gay, bi, and trans Grindr users from all around the region. The report itself has been made available in both English and Arabic.

We have also worked with our partners at Article 19 to gather information for publications that have not been made available to the public but are shared among our coalition of LGBTQ organizations, activist technologists, and social media companies. One example of this work is the publication, *Egypt, Lebanon, and Iran: LGBTQ and Online Dating - The Promotion and Protection of the Human Rights of LGBTQ Persons through Technology* from 2017.

Broadcast Partnerships

Grindr regularly leverages our ability to reach large segments of the LGBTQ community in partnership with organizations and grassroots activists to raise awareness for safety, public health, and other issues of importance to the community.

When I came on board in 2015, the world's biggest humanitarian crisis was the war in Syria. The war was displacing millions of people of all identities, but it was having a particular impact on LGBTQ people.

Of course, up until that point, no queer activists had been given the unique resources of a dating app and been asked to use it for social justice. But through consultation with the company's Product and Advertising teams as well as LGBTQ organizations working on the ground in the Middle East, we came up with a plan that has ultimately created the foundation for Grindr's broadcast partnership work all over the world.

We worked with our partners in Lebanon like MOSAIC and Marsa Sexual Health Center who were putting together services specifically for queer refugees, and used Grindr's advertising tools in ways that would be seen by those for whom these programs were created. We worked together to identify parts of Beirut and parts of Lebanon at large where we believed there were particularly high concentrations of refugees and placed location-specific messages on what services were accessible to them and how to find them.

For HIV-positive refugees, for example, we could point them towards where to get antiretroviral medications, and for all of the queer refugees who were deeply traumatized, we could funnel them into various queer mental health spaces.



The project was successful well beyond even my own expectations, proving that this model could and should be replicated all over the world. Since then, we have made a blanket offer to most LGBTQ organizations around the world we can offer free advertising space on the app to augment their already life-saving work, and many organizations in the region have worked with us on a variety of campaigns in this vein.

That's how Grindr for Equality was born and this pro-bono messaging program that we call our Broadcasting Community became the foundation of all the work we do.

Philanthropy

Although we are committed to taking short-term actions to help Grindr users in the Middle East and North Africa navigate their surroundings safely, we know that the ultimate solution to these problems lies with big-picture social change. That is why we have offered assistance to LGBTQ organizations in the region not only through collaboration but also through funding for their core work.

In the past seven years, Grindr has given away over one million US dollars to LGBTQ organizations in the region. Some of this money has gone to organizations whose work immediately impacts Grindr users today. For example, one now-defunct Egyptian organization who was providing legal aid to LGBTQ people, including Grindr users who had been entrapped on the app, was a major grantee of ours for many years.

Other grantees, however, have been those working primarily to build a movement that can ultimately change laws and policies like those that make it illegal for us to be who we are and love who we love or impose the death penalty if we do.

Features

In order to maximally empower Grindr users to navigate the dangers of their environment in the Middle East-North Africa region, and elsewhere, Grindr has worked extensively with activists to develop safety-features that are available in this and other regions where they are most needed.

- Users in the Middle East-North Africa region receive a safety warning message from Grindr reminding them that they are using the app in a place where they may face danger – the message links them to [our multilingual safety tips resource](#).
 - These messages are reset every week so all users in MENA see the message at least that often, depending on how frequently they sign in.
- In MENA, by default, the “show distance” feature is disabled. The profiles listed on the cascade still populate in the order of closest to farthest away, but the specific distance a given profile is from a user is not shown. Users may now choose to display an obfuscated distance if they would like to share more information with other users without revealing anything too exact.



- Users in MENA are able to “unsend” messages once they’re sent, to give users extra control over their words, for example if they detect suspicious behavior during a conversation.
- Users in MENA are able to send an unlimited number of disappearing messages.
- The “Explore” feature has been disabled such that users cannot use it to look into MENA from outside the country or to look at parts of the country where they are not physically present.
- Private Videos are disabled in MENA because we cannot properly block screenshots of videos at this time.
- Screenshots of profile images and images in chat are blocked for users in MENA.
- Users in MENA have access to Report a Recent Chat, where they’re able to report other users, even if they’ve been blocked by those users.
- The discrete app icon and PIN feature were developed to give users in MENA, and other particularly dangerous regions, more control over what shows up on their phone's home screen. This also provides an additional layer of security with a required pin code.
 - Today, this feature is available to all users, regardless of country, but it was originally developed with Egypt and similar countries in mind.
- We have internal alarms set to notify the Customer Experience and Grindr for Equality teams if there is a sudden spike in account creation in Egypt that might indicate a crackdown.

Safety Materials

In addition to features, Grindr and Grindr for Equality have developed safety information that is specific to LGBTQ people in parts of the world where we face the most danger, including the Middle East-North Africa region.

These take the form of two documents. The first is the [Grindr for Equality Holistic Safety Guide](#), authored by a former Grindr for Equality staff person whose experience was primarily as an activist in the Nile Valley region. It is intended to be a thorough exploration of online, offline, and emotional safety for Grindr users navigating difficult situations. The second is our [Safety Tips](#), which take much of the same information but reformats it into discrete bite-sized recommendations and information.

Moderation

Unlike many other social platforms, content moderation poses a relatively lesser threat than do other forms of abuse, and we see less content abuse overall on our platform. That said, Grindr’s Customer Experience department has worked to ensure that our moderation processes are inclusive of Arabic speakers.

To that end, we have dedicated moderation in Arabic. Our capabilities are inclusive of native Levantine dialects as well as Tunisian and Moroccan Arabic, in addition to other dialects. [Our Spectrum Labs moderation tools](#) also include Arabic language models for machine learning that are in the process of being put in place.



Additionally, Grindr's moderation team, along with the entire company, receives twice yearly training on the specific risks our community and our users face in the Middle East-North Africa region. The first of these trainings for 2023 has already taken place.

In terms of account reporting, we do not currently have features that allow individual users to track past reports and their results but related concepts are in process. However, we have created extensive avenues for reporting, including ways for users to report suspected bad actors, ways to report those actors even if they've been blocked by the potentially harmful accounts, and ways of reporting by email even if users have deleted their own accounts.

Grindr users always have the option to report a user who they believe to be a bad actor on the platform through our reporting feature. Additionally, we have responded to cases of perpetrators immediately blocking their victims and thus cutting off the normal reporting flow by creating a secondary reporting flow that our customer experience team can point users to where they are able to report even accounts that have already blocked them. Additionally, any user can contact the Grindr Customer Experience Team at help@grindr.com if they are unable to log back into the app and use either of the previously mentioned reporting flows.

Over the past eight years, I have personally been involved in every aspect of this work across Grindr's departments and over the course of three different ownership groups. There has been no single issue or part of the world that Grindr for Equality has put more focus on because of our unique position in the LGBTQ ecosystem of the region. And, we look forward to continuing this work until all LGBTQ people in the MENA region and beyond can live their truth without fear.

Sincerely,

Jack Harrison-Quinata
Director, Grindr for Equality



Executive Summary

- We keep the app on and operational for as many markets as possible, despite government censorship, in order to provide a space for connections between queer people.
- We were a founding member of a coalition on LGBTQ dating app safety in the Middle East-North Africa region, convened by Article 19.
- We have spent the past eight years networking with LGBTQ organizations in the Middle East-North Africa region in order to better understand the human rights concerns for our community there.
- As a result, we've worked with over twenty LGBTQ organizations based in the region to broadcast their services, events, and opportunities to get involved in their movements to Grindr users in their area.
- We published [*The Regional Livelihood of GBTQ Using Grindr: Discrimination, Violence, Rights, and Relationships*](#) along with two partners – Middle East-North Africa Organization for Services, Advocacy, Integration & Capacity Development (MOSAIC) and the Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality (AFE)
- We have produced other research that has only been shared with coalition partners, such as *Egypt, Lebanon, and Iran: LGBTQ and Online Dating - The Promotion and Protection of the Human Rights of LGBTQ Persons through Technology*.
- Grindr has given away over one million US dollars to LGBTQ organizations in the region in order to ultimately change the conditions on the ground for our community.
- We have developed extensive safety features to empower Grindr users in the Middle East-North Africa region to navigate the dangers they face.
 - Weekly warning messages reminding users that they are using the app in a place where they may face danger and linking to [our multilingual safety tips](#), which are themselves a version of our [Holistic Safety Guide](#).
 - Disabled “show distance” feature so that exact distances are not shown in MENA
 - Users in MENA are able to “unsend” messages once they’re sent, to give users extra control over their speech.
 - Users in MENA are able to send an unlimited number of disappearing messages.
 - The “Explore” feature has been disabled such that users cannot use it to look into MENA from outside the country.
 - Private Videos are disabled in MENA because we cannot properly block screenshots of videos at this time.
 - Screenshots of profile images and images in chat are blocked for users in MENA.
 - Users in MENA have access to Report a Recent Chat, where they’re able to report other users, even if they’ve been blocked by those users.
 - The discrete app icon and PIN feature were developed to give users in MENA, and other particularly dangerous regions, more control over what shows up on their phone's home screen. This also provides an additional layer of security with a required pin code.
 - We have internal alarms set to notify the Customer Experience and Grindr for Equality teams if there is a sudden spike in account creation in MENA markets that might indicate a crackdown.



- Grindr’s moderation team, along with the entire company, receives twice yearly training on the specific risks our community and our users face in the Middle East-North Africa region. The first of these trainings for 2023 has already taken place.
- Grindr has dedicated moderation in Arabic. Our capabilities are inclusive of native Levantine dialects as well as Tunisian and Moroccan Arabic, in addition to other dialects. [Our Spectrum Labs moderation tools](#) also include Arabic language models for machine learning that are in the process of being put in place.
- We have made user reporting as open as possible with avenues for users 1.) to report potential bad actors normally, 2.) to report even when the offending profile has already blocked a user, and 3.) to report even when a user has already deleted their profile.

