

The world wrapped in 2023

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Contrary to expectations of progress and stability in the wake of recovery from the Covid, 2023 unfolded with significant turmoil and challenges. Marking a grim start to the year, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists set the Doomsday Clock to a mere 90 seconds to midnight, the closest it has ever been, signalling the risk of an imminent disaster in a year fraught with heightened global tensions and uncertainties. As United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres aptly summarised at this year's G20 Summit, "Our world—particularly developing countries—face a perfect storm: Growing inequalities, climate chaos, conflicts, and hunger." But he may have overlooked the biggest victim of this consequential year: democracy.

Freedom House announced 2023 as the 17th straight year in which global freedom and democracy declined, putting to rest all hopes of a fourth democratic wave. Starting with Asia: the Indian government made headlines suspending 142 opposition lawmakers, and arresting vocal opposition leader Rahul Gandhi in what was called an attack on democracy. This was followed by accusations that the government misused laws to arrest its critics. Thailand danced around democracy as their progressive party won decisively, only to have it be taken away by the military. For Pakistan, on the brink of bankruptcy, former Prime Minister Imran Khan, popular with the masses, emerged as a leader with the potential to shatter the military's political power—only to be defeated.

Across the pond, former US President Donald Trump increasingly echoed fascist rhetoric and even promised to be a dictator for one day while maintaining a dominant lead on all polls. The incumbent President Joe Biden, however, floundered on foreign policy. As tensions simmered between the US and China, Biden rebuked Xi Jinping, calling him a "dictator." But Biden's support for Israel, in the wake of Hamas' attack, showed (more clearly than ever) that the US' value-based order is a selective political tool, misusing human rights and democracy to maintain the nation's dominance globally. Europe, on the other hand, saw a

far-right resurgence while restricting freedom of speech using regulations such as the landmark Digital Services Act. The parties in power have also impeded hard-earned progress on climate change regulation, coddled far-right conspiracies, and endeavoured to erode democratic institutions and progress.

A staggering one in six people is estimated to have been exposed to conflict so far in 2023. The year also saw a 27-percent increase worldwide

In 2023, a year marked as the hottest on record, the world experienced a dramatic increase in extreme weather events, ranging from wildfires in the Northern hemisphere to cyclones in the Southern hemisphere. At COP28 in the UAE, attended by 85,000 delegates, a landmark agreement was reached, hailed by the UN as the "beginning of the end" for the fossil fuel era. The agreement underscored the critical urgency of the situation,

offering a glimpse into the transformative potential of AI in our future. Inevitably, companies and even governments plunged into the forefront of the "AI Gold Rush," driven by the vision of endless possibilities. China has prioritised its goal to lead the world in AI by 2030. Concurrently, prominent figures, including the "Godfather of AI" and Elon Musk warned of grave potential danger. Warnings of the dangerous use of AI in governance

a significant geopolitical impact, notably affecting Ukraine's funding in its conflict with Russia, as the US reported that it ran out of money for the war as it reached its second anniversary.

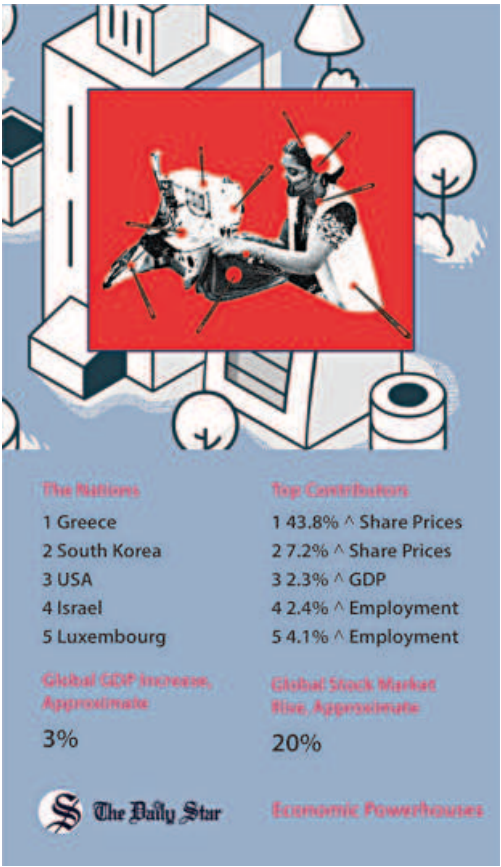
The Russia-Ukraine conflict has largely remained a stalemate with no large victories on either side. Russia has made a net gain of 188 square miles and even though reports of heavy casualties were seen, they continue to outnumber Ukraine's

part by the Abraham Accords, and marked by growing regional stability. It also occurred as normalisation ties between Israel and Middle Eastern countries were inching closer. Israel's response in the aftermath of the Hamas attacks is smattered with allegations of "violations of international humanitarian law" by Israel and a callous disregard for Palestinian lives. The death toll has already reached 20,000 civilians, with the majority being women and children. Initially supporting Israel, the US and its allies have begun to express concern in light of reports of indiscriminate bombing, indicating a shift in their diplomatic posture. But the outlook for a peaceful resolution acceptable to all parties, particularly the Palestinians, remains bleak. This unresolved situation in the Middle East is part of a broader pattern observed in 2023: a year marked by a discernible escalation in armed conflict, casting a shadow on the future of global democracy.

The geopolitical landscape was further dominated by rivalries between superpowers and aspiring superpowers, leading political discourse to consider the possibilities of a multi-polar world. India, hosting the G20 Summit this year, unveiled the Indian-Middle East-Europe Corridor, a vision set to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative. IMEC positions India in a key role in global connectivity, and serves the US in the Cold War with China, by providing it with an opportunity to enhance its trade and investments. Growing US-China rivalry unravelled the expansion of BRICS to dismantle dollar domination. It signals an effort to introduce an alternative world order—championing the importance of the Global South on a surface level—but also reflects symptoms of deeper malaise in the geopolitical fore. Disagreements in a club of nations that don't see eye-to-eye on many global issues has overtaken the initial focus of economic collaboration to geopolitics. On the other hand, global trade is projected to have decreased by 4.5 percent—a change attributed to the geopolitical landscape now playing a more significant role in shaping international commerce than market factors alone.

As 2023 concludes, the year's global events have underscored the need for unified solutions to the complex challenges we face, highlighting the importance of global cooperation in addressing the multifaceted issues that transcend national boundaries.

Geopolitical Games of 2023: Who won, who lost? *The Daily Star* takes a look back at the critical year of rapidly changing world politics.



in political violence, with 50 countries categorised as "turbulent" or "extreme," according to an ACLED report. Africa experienced significant turmoil this year, with over 35 armed conflicts primarily in its sub-Saharan region. Africa also faced a severe humanitarian crisis, with over 40 million people displaced, partly due to these conflicts and exacerbated by extreme climate events, including floods and a drought in the Horn of Africa declared worse than the 2011 famine.

as the Earth is on course to surpass the target temperatures established by the Paris Agreement, but fell short of addressing concerns in developing countries.

This year also marked a pivotal moment in the evolution of artificial intelligence, with more countries beginning to embrace AI in governance. The EU passed the world's first AI regulation during what is widely being called the Year of AI. These developments revolutionised scientific and biomedical research,

was evidenced in Israel using its AI target creation platform, "The Gospel," to target civilian structures, sparking concerns of producing a line of targets that officials have called a "mass assassination factory."

Regardless, the AI boom sparked a year-long stock rally that kept markets alive in spite of the Fed interest rate hikes. Accompanying these developments were record-high global debt levels, prompting warnings from various experts about an impending debt crisis. This had

troops nearly 3:1 on the field. There was also a growing sense of apathy in what is being called "Ukraine Fatigue" as Republicans remained hesitant to send further aid. Undoubtedly, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine was overshadowed in the second part of the year with the first official declaration of war between Israel and Hamas since 1973.

The Israel-Hamas war erupted during a time that had been considered relatively peaceful in the Middle East, an era influenced in

Christmas in Occupied Palestine: 'Dreams buried under rubbles'

Archbishop Theodosius Atallah Hanna, Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem speaks to Ramisa Rob of The Daily Star in an exclusive interview about the cruel reality in occupied Palestine during Christmas.

Can you describe the occupation in the West Bank and Jerusalem, and the treatment of Christians and Muslims since the onslaught in Gaza?

Unjust settler practices targeting our Palestinian people in the West Bank and in Jerusalem have not stopped for many years, but what is currently happening in Gaza is not an ordinary act of aggression or war, but rather ethnic cleansing and a genocide. Civilians are paying the bill for this war and the systematic destruction of everything in Gaza, not excluding churches, mosques, hospitals and all the buildings that serve our people there. Incursions—including arrests and assassinations—have increased in the West Bank, and settlers are roaming everywhere, carrying their weapons and provoking our Palestinian people.

As for the city of Jerusalem, there are many conspiracies against our holy city with the aim of undermining its identity, history and heritage. Al-Aqsa Mosque, which has a great importance among Muslim brothers, is often targeted by Israeli settlers. Christian endowments have also been targeted. When Al-Aqsa is being attacked, Muslims and Christians are attacked together, and when our Christian endowments are attacked, Christians and Muslims are attacked together. We are one family and one people, clinging to



Children sit amid the rubble of a building in the aftermath of an Israeli strike in southern Gaza Strip on November 10, 2023.

PHOTO: AFP

our roots and belonging to this blessed part of the world.

As an archbishop, how do you respond to the Western countries celebrating Christmas with what's happening in Gaza? What is Christmas like this year for Christian Palestinians?

We are living under pain and suffering during the glorious Christmas holidays.

Our people in Gaza are being bombarded with shells; the tragedies are uncountable and irreversible. The Christian churches

in Jerusalem and Palestine have announced the cancellation of all Christmas celebrations. The rituals and prayers in churches have been shortened so that we can raise our supplications and prayers for our people in Gaza.

The message that the Christians and the Christian churches in Jerusalem are sending to all the Christians of the world is this: "Remember that Palestine is the land of Christmas. Remember that the birth took place in Bethlehem. Remember that the people of this land, the people of Palestine, are

suffering from occupation and colonialism, and our people in Gaza are exposed to the most inhumane situation possible."

In other words, for the Christians who are celebrating Christmas around the world, we send our best wishes but, at the same time, we ask them to remember that they are celebrating the holiday while eating and drinking in their homes. Remember that people in Palestine don't have the same privilege. Remember while eating in comfort, that the people in Palestine are starving to death. Pray for them,

stand in solidarity with them. We all must. This Christmas, we appeal and demand that all Christian churches in the world raise their voices loudly and demand an end to this bloodshed and destruction.

How do you view Israel and the West's depiction of Hamas and the claims of human shields to justify indiscriminate bombings?

There is no justification for what has been happening in Gaza for over 70 days. One can never justify killing innocent people. Israel says that it is fighting terrorism and Hamas, but what we see on the ground is that it's targeting all the Palestinian people, whether it be in Gaza, the West Bank, or all of Palestine.

The majority of the political leaders in the West—there are some exceptions and we won't generalise—are involved in manufacturing an unjust conspiracy about Palestinian land. In this war, there are mercenaries participating in the war from different countries. The US sends its missiles and weapons, and others do so as well. All of them bear a moral and humanitarian responsibility towards these injustices. Those who support and justify the occupation are part of this cleansing plan, to make the Palestinians disappear. We appeal to all the free people of all religions in the world, to take action and stand with the people in Gaza.

We appreciate all the marches,

all the demonstrations, and all the sit-ins. The cause of Palestine and the cause of Gaza has ignited humanity in people. We hope the voices for humanity get louder and louder and that humanity prevails.

How did you view the truce that was reached earlier—the exchange of prisoners and hostages—and what do you believe is the solution to stop this genocide?

The reality of the hostage situation and the negotiation issue is up to the politicians. As for my duty, I defend my Palestinian people, as a Christian and as a Palestinian. My faith always teaches me and urges me to defend those hurting, those who are being oppressed mercilessly, in this world. We cannot ever support or stay silent when so many human beings are being killed and lives are being destroyed in the most grotesque circumstances.

For politicians and everyone involved, we demand that all efforts are made to reach a ceasefire. But we should also note that even when the genocide stops, many, many more tragic facts and images will be revealed from Gaza. So far, what people know about the horror unfolding in Gaza is only the tip of the iceberg. Dreams have been buried under the rubble. The horrors are unimaginable and they must not be allowed to continue any further. We demand for this war to stop. Now. Today. Not tomorrow.