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The Internet in post-Saddam Iraq

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The status of the Internet in Iraq, regarding both governmental policies and usage, underwent a fundamental change following Saddam Husayn's deposal in 2003. Still, as is true with so many other features of Iraqi life, Iraq does not constitute a single, homogenous unit with regard to the Internet. Along with blogs and Facebook groups of ordinary Iraqi citizens, and Internet sites of government institutions, armed Islamist and other insurgent groups also are present in cyber-space; so are foreign military and civilian forces stationed in the country. Ironically, the groups are intertwined: Iraq's Western patrons invest in the communications infrastructure used by the government, by the insurgents - partly in order to document their attacks on foreign and governmental forces and institutions - and by ordinary Iraqis, who write about their lives in the midst of the ongoing violent confrontation between the insurgents and foreign and government forces.

The Spreading of the Internet

The Internet made its first appearance in Iraq in 1998, but only became available for public usage two years later. During the last days of Saddam Husayn's regime, there were 45,000 users, out of a population of 24 million. Most were government officials, the rest were those who could afford to pay the very high fees which were beyond the means of average Iraqis; these fees were the product of legal limitations on the possession of modems and the absence of appropriate parts and infrastructure, owing to the international

sanctions against Iraq then in effect.

At the time, Saddam's regime created a network of 65 internet cafes, where access to all electronic e-mail services were blocked and connecting even to permitted sites was severely limited. One of the few ways by which these limitations could be bypassed was to travel to the Kurdistan region, where Internet usage was relatively free.[1]

Today, the Internet in Iraq is still a tool of the privileged few: according to official statistics, only 1% of the population can access it, the lowest rate among all Middle East states (Yemen, the next lowest, has a penetration rate of 1.6%, while Oman, the country above Yemen on the list, has a 13.6% rate).[2] However, the Iraqi picture is more complicated. According to a 2008 report, the state internet provider indeed had only 250,000 subscribers, but an American adviser to the Iraqi Communications Ministry estimated that the actual number of Internet users in Iraq was 12 million (!). Most of these users connected to the Internet illegally, through the secondary use of existing subscribers, in order to cope with the authorities' failure to meet the high demand for connectivity.[3]

Internet Usage Features

Much of Iraq's youth are Internet-savvy, have web based e-mail addresses and use the Internet for various purposes. There are many Iraqi bloggers,[4] both in-country[5] and outside; some of the latter resided in Iraq until recently.[6] They include men and women of varying ages, writing in English or Arabic. Their blogs, some of which have been active for a number of years, address the myriad goings-on in the country. [7]

One may find on Facebook scores of Iraqi groups and personal pages (both in-country and outside), in English and in Arabic, some with thousands of members, dealing with life in Iraq in general,[8] and a wide variety of specific subjects including: history,[9] the environment,[10] the Turkomen minority,[11] academic life,[12] Iraqi engineers,[13] the Iraqi stock market,[14] football,[15]

women,[16] and the Iraqi army.[17] One may also find groups devoted to Saddam Husayn (one labels him the “King of Iraq” and has 69 “fans”, but is almost entirely inactive),[18] and to the Iraqi journalist who threw his shoes at President Bush (the group has 1700 “fans”).[19] Some are updated regularly,[20] some have not been updated for a long while,[21] and others have been active for a number of years.

The Iraqi state authorities have an Internet presence, including the Presidency,[22] the Cabinet,[23] the Parliament (both national and regional Kurdish),[24] and various government agencies and companies, including the national airline.[25] However, many of the governmental links which appear on the Presidency website are broken,[26] evidence that the Internet in Iraq is still in its initial penetration stage, even at the official level.

The US effort to significantly upgrade the information infrastructure in Iraq is palpable. Its Department of Defense invested \$165m. in the creation of internet cafes, whose number grew accordingly from 36 in 2004 to 170 in 2006.[27] One may find in these cafes advanced computers with fast internet connections, a variety of software programs, and internet cameras, along with individual cubicles which provide a measure of privacy for the users.

The Internet as a tool for Islamic Extremist Groups.

Many of the various Islamic movements and organizations in Iraq have their own internet sites,[28] some of which are active,[29] others which have ceased being so.[30] Among the active sites is one devoted to the “Snipers of Baghdad.”[31] Another produced a multimedia unit devoted to “The Iraqi Islamic Army’s Harvest for 2008”.[32] In addition, there are discussion forums devoted to these groups.[33] Islamist groups also use YouTube to document their attacks against the foreign forces present in the country, from roadside bombs to sniper fire.[34] Their videos are often accompanied by religious songs.[35] One may also find evidence of the brutality of daily life, including murders,[36] as well as violence committed by government security forces.[37]

It was recently reported that the Islamists in Iraq had used the Internet to hunt down homosexuals participating in chat rooms and forums, in order to torture and kill them. As it is, these groups were said to be responsible for the deaths of 130 homosexual men since the beginning of the year.[38]

Limitations on the Internet

No instances of governmental interference or limitation on Internet usage have been documented in recent years, nor have there been any policy declarations to that end.[39] However, in recent months, the Iraqi authorities have taken a number of steps to limit the freedom of information, including preventing books from being published, and blocking Internet sites deemed to be injurious to the public, i.e. sites with sexual content, or ones which promote drugs, gambling, criticisms of Islam or violence. Internet cafe owners have been compelled to register with the authorities, or face closure. The authorities justify these measures by saying that the offending books and Internet sites encourage violence and have a bad influence on Iraqi youth. Opponents of these measures, for their part, claim that the government's actions threaten to return Iraq to the bad old days of Saddam Husayn, and make it more like neighboring states.[40]

To conclude, because of Iraq's severe isolation prior to 2003 and the resulting lack of appropriate infrastructure, plus the country's chaotic state of affairs since then, it will take quite some time before Iraq reaches the level of neighboring states regarding the degree of Internet penetration and usage. At the same time, it appears that at least a portion of the Iraqi populace is hungry for access to the new media. However, the situation remains fragile. Without a doubt, the more the country achieves in terms of stability and functioning governmental institutions, the greater the role that the Internet will play in the lives of its citizens.

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and the Islamic world. More material on the subject can be found on his site - middleeast-internet-monitor.com

NOTES

[1] <http://www.anhri.net/en/reports/net2004/iraq.shtml>

[2] <http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>

[3]

http://www.boston.com/news/world/middleeast/articles/2008/05/25/iraqi_software_pirate_likes_it_offshore_where_his_skills_mean_good_business/

[4] According to my own examination, many of the blogs are based on Google's "Blogger" platform. Also, in analyzing the blogs on <http://iraqblogcountexp.blogspot.com> (Iraq Blog Count), which maps Iraqi blogs, one finds that 110 out of 149 registered blogs are based on Google's platform

[5] <http://www.rosebaghdad.blogspot.com>, <http://moslawi.blogspot.com>,
<http://www.astarfrommosul.blogspot.com>, <http://iraqi-translator.blogspot.com>,
<http://baghdadentist.blogspot.com>, <http://confusediraqi.blogspot.com>,
<http://saminkie.blogspot.com>

[6] <http://aviraqi.blogspot.com>, <http://www.baghdadgirl.blogspot.com>,
<http://baghdadtreasure.blogspot.com>, <http://iraqimojo.blogspot.com>

[7] <http://www.astarfrommosul.blogspot.com> – Active since June 2004;
<http://secretsinbaghdad.blogspot.com> – Active since December 2003;
<http://neurotic-iraqi-wife.blogspot.com> – Active since August 2004;

[8]

<http://www.facebook.com/search/?flt=1&q=IRAQ&o=65&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1&s=10#/group.php?gid=2298113332&ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1> ,
<http://www.facebook.com/search/?flt=1&q=IRAQ&o=65&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1&s=10#/group.php?gid=9965939982&ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1> ,
<http://www.facebook.com/search/?flt=1&q=IRAQ&o=69&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1&s=10#/group.php?gid=35884694252&ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1> ,

[9]

<http://www.facebook.com/search/?flt=1&q=IRAQ&o=69&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1&s=10#/group.php?gid=55648240758&ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>

[10]

<http://www.facebook.com/search/?flt=1&q=IRAQ&o=65&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1&s=10#/pages/Keep-Iraq-Clean-/200170140345?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>

[11]

<http://www.facebook.com/search/?flt=1&q=IRAQ&o=65&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1&s=10#/pages/Kirkuk-Iraq/Iraq-Turkmeneli/58551125117?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>

[12]

<http://www.facebook.com/search/?flt=1&q=IRAQ&o=65&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1&s=30#/pages/baghdad-Iraq/University-of-Technology-IRAQ/27326700705?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1> ,
<http://www.facebook.com/search/?flt=1&q=IRAQ&o=65&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1&s=30#/iraqedu?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1> ,
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Iraq-Scholars-and-Leaders-Program-ISLP/124512469709?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>

[13]

<http://www.facebook.com/search/?flt=1&q=IRAQ&o=65&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1&s=10#/pages/Iraq/Iraq-Engineers/66550535071?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>

[14] <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Iraq-Stock-Exchange/24947317363?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>

[15] <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Hamilton-ON/iraq-fc-2009/86666973300?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1> ,
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Iraq-national-football-team/63534000107?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>

[16] <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Women-for-Women-International-Iraq/70579588419?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>

[17] <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Army-Of-Iraq/45571733506?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1> ,
<http://www.facebook.com/pages/-Iraq-Army/118879458567?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>

- [18] <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Saddam-HUSSEIN-King-of-Iraq-/106846778623?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>
- [19] <http://www.facebook.com/pages/brave-iraq-reporter-attacks-George-w-bush-with-his-shoes/105791760244?ref=search&sid=1431751423.1567501651..1>
- [20] <http://abutamam.blogspot.com>
- [21] <http://riverbendblog.blogspot.com>, <http://bethnahrain.blogspot.com>,
<http://www.theiraqiroulette.blogspot.com>
- [22] <http://www.iraqipresidency.net>
- [23] <http://www.cabinet.iq>
- [24] <http://www.parliament.iq>; <http://www.kurdistan-parliament.org>
- [25] <http://www.motiraq.org>, <http://www.iraqimoc.net>, <http://www.moheiraq.org>, <http://www.iq-airways.com>
- [26] <http://www.cbiraq.org>, <http://www.uruklink.net/oil>, <http://www.iraqelectric.org>,
<http://www.moeiraq.info>, <http://www.ieciraq.org>, <http://www.iraqi-mwr.org>,
<http://www.iraqiindustry.com>
- [27] <http://opennet.net/studies/iraq2007>
- [28] For a mapping of the Islamic groups active in Iraq, see, [Abdul Hameed Bakier](#), "Iraq's Islamic Mujahideen Profiled by Jihadi Websites: Part One," [The Jamestown Foundation](#), Publication: Terrorism Focus Volume: 5 Issue: 40, 26 November 2008 <
http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34183 >; and
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http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=34209 >
- [29] <http://www.ktb-20.net/ktb>, <http://ansar11.org>, <http://iaisite.org>, <http://rjfront.info>,
<http://jaami.info>, <http://al-rashedeen.info>
- [30] <http://www.kataeb20.com>, <http://al-hesbah.info>, <http://al-firdaws.info>, <http://al-ekhlaas.net>,
<http://m3ark.net>, <http://www.alrashedeenarmy.com>

- [31] <http://baghdadsniper.net>
- [32] http://alboraqmedia.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=116&Itemid=1
- [33] <http://alboraq.info>, <http://alboraqforum.info>, <http://alboraq.biz>, <http://muslm.net/vb>,
<http://hanein.info/vb>
- [34] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fs-OIJxDEEQ>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qORfqCZ3dLc>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSv6aOBocMY>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HY5z5r2UjYo>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O0kETEhxlis>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MgAH9SdwK6s>
- [35] <http://www.archive.org/details/Homaat-Aldaar>
- [36] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPUWXN3dn2o>
- [37] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rwbuFLLG71A>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNlplnIGMb9o>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kBztD75sOuQ>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2yLVyJBI5c>
- [38] <http://www.care2.com/causes/human-rights/blog/making-a-career-out-of-killing-gay-iraqis-using-internet-lgbt-genocide>
- [39] <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iraq>
- [40] http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/04/world/middleeast/04censor.html?_r=2&ref=world

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