

Global Information Society Watch 2009

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*Dedicated to A.K. Mahan - an activist who valued
intellectual rigour and concrete outcomes.*

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Introduction

When speaking about access to online educational materials in Iraq, the roles of multi-stakeholders should be addressed. This includes Iraqi government entities, civil society and the international community. Iraqi higher educational institutions, in particular, have a key role to play in generating educational materials and creating platforms to access them.

However, the current educational and telecommunications infrastructure in Iraq has deteriorated due to the country's political instability for the past three decades. Post-2003, the Iraqi government, in partnership with Iraqi expat academics and the international community, has been trying to modernise the educational system. This includes an international partnership to enhance online educational libraries, and efforts to make more use of information and communications technologies (ICTs). The international community has also tried to support Iraq's universities by donating funds, providing expertise and launching cooperative initiatives.

This support has been helpful, but overall progress is very slow, and frequently interrupted. Greater effort is needed. If the Iraqi government is to play a leading role in information society transformation, then it needs a comprehensive programme of reform. The keys to this reform are the decentralisation of the Iraqi educational system and telecommunications sector liberalisation. Currently both are over-centralised. If decentralised, these entities will have freedom to determine their own policies, regulations and curricula, which will lead to more online content.

Policy environment

The Iraqi ICT policy landscape is far behind its neighbours. The country's Ministry of Communications is in charge of the national telecommunications and internet infrastructure. At the moment internet services rely on traditional telephony (i.e., dial-up), which is outdated. There is also no competition allowed from free-market internet service providers (ISPs) other than the incumbent. The ministry has not yet planned a national ICT policy development process, which is a foundational milestone. A United States (US) vendor¹ proposed an ICT roadmap for the country in 2003, but it was not taken forward.

As a sign of the lack of a coherent policy vision, an e-government project,² funded by the Italian government,

was one of the early ICT projects with promise after 2003. However, the administration of this project has shuffled backwards and forwards among many Iraqi entities, and little has been obviously achieved.

However, regarding the policy environment that is shaping access to information and knowledge in Iraq, the following key observations can be made, suggesting all is not lost:

- The Iraqi government has adopted constitutional policies regarding censorship and freedom of expression.³ Diverse civil society bodies (economic, business, human rights, media, etc.) now have the space to work freely online. Many have built their own websites and started to create online content. Despite the technical and administrative instability in the country, there are some success stories. Yet there also remains a long way to go.
- The government also encourages public-private partnerships in nation building – which has implications for developing online content and online content platforms.
- In order to encourage an online culture, it urges citizens to participate online, to give feedback, criticism and suggestions in connection with current and proposed governmental policies via email and online forms. However, it is also noted that the online culture in Iraq is weak due to education levels, technical know-how, and a general sense of desperation and uncertainty in the country.
- The government has drafted, with the aid of the World Bank, three new milestone laws, referred to as “Future of Communication” laws. These are the Telecommunications Liberalisation and Free Market Law, the Communications Sector Law (dealing with privatisation), and the Communications and Media Commission Law (which establishes regulatory conditions in the country).
- With the aid of the international community and expat Iraqi academics, the government held several workshops, study tours and summits in order to develop a vision of higher education reform.⁴

1 ICT roadmap for Iraq proposed by a US vendor in 2003: pws.prserv.net/sadowsky/papers/iraqpolicy.pdf

2 Willan, P. (2005) Italy, Iraq agree to strengthen e-gov't cooperation, *InfoWorld*, 14 January. www.infoworld.com/t/platforms/italy-iraq-agree-strengthen-e-govt-cooperation-348

3 Iraqi Constitution: www.uniraq.org/documents/iraqi_constitution.pdf; www.cabinet.iq/dostor.htm

4 International symposiums on higher education in Iraq: www.wmin.ac.uk/iraq-he; International Conference for Iraqi Experts in the Diaspora: www.parliament.iq/iete; UNESCO International Conference on the Right to Education in Crisis-Affected Countries: portal.unesco.org/fr/ev.php-URL_ID=43845&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

- In 2008, in light of an improved security situation in the country, the government issued a stimulus package to encourage the return of Iraqi expats and displaced intellectuals so that they can help rebuild their country.⁵ This is a step towards enhancing the country's transformation to an information society using their skills to modernise all sectors, with the education sector as a priority.
- That same year, it established a formal investment commission⁶ to encourage foreign direct investment. This will help in the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the country, including the development of infrastructure, which will have obvious spin-offs for accessing online information and knowledge.

Legislative environment

The Iraqi parliament⁷ is the sole legislative body in Iraq. Table 1 summarises the current status of key legislation that lays the foundations to the country's ICT roadmap.

The table suggests that not much has been done to encourage online content specifically. This is largely due to the country's political and security instability and corruption – all of which have been the focus of legislative debates and processes. Even for legislation that has been passed, not much has been done to implement it on the ground, due to the country's instability.

The parliament has convened various working groups and committees⁸ to shape sector roadmaps and form collaborations around certain activities. Online information and knowledge is a cross-cutting concern in a number of these activities. However, many of these activities are not meeting expectations.

Access to online education

Almost all aspects of life in Iraq have deteriorated over the past three decades due to three major wars and international sanctions. As a result, the country has fared poorly in a number of recent information society indices, such as the Arab World Competitiveness Report 2007,⁹ the World Economic Forum Global Information Technology Report 2008-2009,¹⁰ and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) ICT Development Index 2009.¹¹

Iraqi universities and institutes have also suffered from being cut off from progress in educational curricula,

teaching methods, modern technology and research. This, together with a lack of skilled teachers and lecturers, has had a massive negative impact on the country's educational system.

A further burden has come from outdated telecommunications, very limited internet access, and, up until 2003, a ban on citizens going online. The effect of this can be summarised in one simple statement: massive online ignorance. At the same time, after 2003, the assassination of Iraqi academics and other highly qualified intellectuals¹² had a highly destructive effect on the work of educational institutions and the state in general. Many intellectuals have also left the country because of the dangers they faced.

However, post-2003, there have been various efforts aimed at modernising education using ICTs, developing and sharing e-content, and building the required skills in this regard:

- In 2006, a major online educational project called Iraqi Virtual Science Library (IVSL)¹³ was launched to provide free access to thousands of scientific journals from major publishers and a large collection of online educational materials for different science categories. This project is a collaboration with various US government and academic bodies.
- Some Iraqi universities have started to offer partial online educational materials through e-libraries, including theses, research and journals. However, currently only two universities¹⁴ among 23 governmental universities, 18 private colleges and 37 technical institutions¹⁵ are doing this. The poor progress is due to a lack of skills and internet infrastructure and internal policy gaps.
- In May 2006, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) launched the Iraqi ICT Alliance,¹⁶ an initiative that encourages national and global public-private partnerships to enhance opportunities in the ICT sector in Iraq. However, little has been heard from the project since its unique inauguration launch.
- In 2007, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), in partnership with the Iraqi Ministry of Education, launched the Iraqi Schools Text Book Project.¹⁷ The project aimed to give pre-university students (primary, intermediate and secondary) access to official school text books.
- The Iraqi Commission for Computers and Information (ICCI),¹⁸ with the aid of Cisco Systems, has launched

5 www.moheiraq.org/MinistrActivity.ASP?whichpage=13&pagesize=10

6 www.investpromo.gov.iq/?q=en

7 www.parliament.iq

8 www.parliament.iq/english/Iraqi_Council_of_Representatives.php?name=singal9asdasdas9dasda8w9werwv8vw854vwvw5w0v98457475v38937456033t64tg34t64gi4dow7wnf4w4y4t386b5w6576i75page&pa=showpage&pid=4

9 World Economic Forum (2007) Arab World Competitiveness Report 2007. www.weforum.org/en/initiatives/gcp/Arab%20World%20Competitiveness%20Report/index.htm

10 World Economic Forum (2009) Global Information Technology Report 2008-2009. www.weforum.org/pdf/gitr/2009/gitr09fullreport.pdf

11 ITU (2009) Measuring the Information Society: The ICT Development Index 2009. www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/di/2009/index.html

12 List of Iraqi academics who have been killed, threatened or kidnapped: www.brusselstribunal.org/academicsList.htm

13 www.ivsl.org/enter.html

14 University of Technology: www.uotiq.org and University of Baghdad: www.uob.edu.iq

15 List of Iraqi academic institutions: unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001386/138665e.pdf

16 www.iraqictalliance.org

17 schooltextbooks.org

18 www.icci.edu.iq

Table 1: Status of key ICT legislation in Iraq

Law	Status	Notes
Joining the Arab ICT Organization (AICTO)	Under discussion since 2007	Although not a law, this would be a foundational step towards enhancing Iraq's regional knowledge and expertise.
Communications and Media Commission Law	Under discussion since 2008	A new law – replacing the former one set up by the US post-2003 – for regulating communications, licensing and related services.
Telecommunications Liberalisation and Free Market Law	Under discussion since 2008	Provides the platform for telecommunications modernisation and harmonisation.
Communications Sector Law	Under discussion since 2008	A new law that, amongst other things, governs the privatisation of state assets.
Investment Law ¹	Issued in 2008	Encourages foreign direct investment in rehabilitation and reconstruction projects.
7th Amendment of the Iraqi Higher Education Ministry Law ²	Issued in 2007	Establishes two new universities in two of the least-developed governorates of Iraq, Missan and Muthana.
Amendment of the Iraqi Education Ministry Law ³	Issued in 2008	Recruitment or employment of higher education degree holders (Master's & PhD) in the Ministry of Education to develop education curricula.
Universities Services Law ⁴		Aims to strengthen universities, including working conditions (e.g., salary packages, scholarships, etc.)

1. www.parliament.iq/Iraqi_Council_of_Representatives.php?name=articles_ajdsyawqwqjdjdasdba46s7a98das6dasda7das4da6sd8asdsawewqeqw465e4qweq4wq6e4qw8eqwe4qw6eqwe4sadkj&file=showdetails&sid=1003
2. www.parliament.iq/Iraqi_Council_of_Representatives.php?name=articles_ajdsyawqwqjdjdasdba46s7a98das6dasda7das4da6sd8asdsawewqeqw465e4qweq4wq6e4qw8eqwe4qw6eqwe4sadkj&file=showdetails&sid=654
3. www.parliament.iq/english/Iraqi_Council_of_Representatives.php?name=articles_ajdsyawqwqjdjdasdba46s7a98das6dasda7das4da6sd8asdsawewqeqw465e4qweq4wq6e4qw8eqwe4qw6eqwe4sadkj&file=showdetails&sid=8
4. www.parliament.iq/Iraqi_Council_of_Representatives.php?name=articles_ajdsyawqwqjdjdasdba46s7a98das6dasda7das4da6sd8asdsawewqeqw465e4qweq4wq6e4qw8eqwe4qw6eqwe4sadkj&file=showdetails&sid=1518

the Cisco Academy Training Center (CATC),¹⁹ to enhance the advanced networking infrastructure skills of Iraqi government staff. An e-library has also been developed.

- UNESCO has launched the International University Network for Iraq (IUNI),²⁰ a campaign calling for global collaboration to help Iraqi universities modernise.
- Some Iraqi expat academics are doing their best to assist their homeland through knowledge transfer, advice and links to global partners. Conferences and site visits have been held at higher education institutions. Two major Iraqi non-profit bodies founded by expats are leading these efforts: the Iraqi Higher Education Science and Technology Organisation (IHESTO)²¹ and the Network of Iraqi Scientists Abroad (NISA).²²
- Two international universities have opened branches in Iraq's Kurdistan region (the safe area in northern Iraq): the American University of Iraq-Sulaimani (AUI-S)²³ in Sulaimani and the Lebanese French University (BMU)²⁴ in Erbil. Their curricula content is online.

- Some Iraqi ministries have started building their own websites offering some online educational materials; these are the Ministry of Higher Education,²⁵ Ministry of Communications,²⁶ Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation,²⁷ and Ministry of Science and Technology.²⁸

However, despite these initiatives, several challenges remain. The Iraqi Ministry of Higher Education is over-centralised, like other state-run entities, which is a burden on the university system. In addition to outdated policies and regulations, and its total control of the education system, the ministry still does not accredit and approve the certificates of online/distance learning universities.

At the same time, while the Iraqi government's 2008 stimuli package encouraged the return of Iraqi expat intellectuals, many of them have not yet returned home due to ongoing threats to their security and uncertainty.

Bearing in mind the anticipated growth in subscribers in the country, mobile offers a good platform for online educational content, especially for students and researchers. However, the three mobile operators currently operating in Iraq have not yet provided online data services. Moreover, their voice-only services are generally of poor quality.

19 www.icci.edu.iq/Cisco/cisco%20academy.html

20 portal.unesco.org/education/en/ev.php-URL_ID=39422&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html

21 www.wmin.ac.uk/iraq-he

22 nisa-iraq.org

23 www.aui.org

24 www.bmu-me.net

25 www.moheiraq.org

26 www.iraqimoc.net

27 www.mop-iraq.org/mopdc

28 www.most.gov.iq/english/index.php

New trends

Various stakeholders in Iraq are proactively working towards developing online information and making the necessary technological changes in the country. The country's constitution, post-2003, supports this in theory. A turning point occurred in August 2008, with relatively better security conditions in the country due to efforts at reconciliation, striking political accord, a lessening of sectarian violence and fighting, and the formulation of legislation. Since August 2008, and in the wake of people feeling safer, more online information by civil and governmental bodies has appeared.

People have started to use their real names online, provide contact details, and make other data available. Citizen participation online is increasing with relatively better services such as electricity and the availability of the internet. The media and defenders of human rights and the freedom of expression, in particular, have flourished. Many have built online content aimed at citizen education using international funding.

Yet the Iraqi parliament is currently in a policy and legislative bottleneck, with fragmented policies seemingly having very little impact. National elections happen on 30 January 2010, and the country will have a new parliament. It is widely expected that major investments, reconstruction programmes and technological modernisation will happen after the elections.

While there are two new pieces of legislation awaiting debate and approval – dealing with the decentralisation of the higher education ministry and the privatisation and liberalisation of the telecommunications sector – a clear ICT policy is also needed. Citizens are waiting for a major scaling up in internet access, access to online courses, and the widespread availability of ICT training programmes. Legislation aimed at stimulating investment is in place, but the country awaits major investment initiatives to launch big projects successfully. The Iraqi government will not be able to develop online information projects without international aid. The Iraqi people are counting on international knowledge transfer in this regard.

Action steps

The following action steps need to be taken to improve access to e-content in education in Iraq:

- There is a need for an overall post-conflict reconstruction strategy, which includes improving electricity supply, internet availability, and other basic infrastructures.
- There is an urgent need for a coherent ICT policy to guide the development of the information society in Iraq.
- There is a need for capacity building for education policy formulation, planning and management.
- There is a need to decentralise the higher education sector.
- Greater emphasis needs to be placed on teacher training.
- International investment is needed to develop online content. ■

GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH (GISWatch) 2009 is the third in a series of yearly reports critically covering the state of the information society *from the perspectives of civil society organisations across the world.*

GISWatch has three interrelated goals:

- **Surveying** the state of the field of information and communications technology (ICT) policy at the local and global levels
- **Encouraging** critical debate
- **Strengthening** networking and advocacy for a just, inclusive information society.

Each year the report focuses on a particular theme. **GISWatch 2009** focuses on *access to online information and knowledge – advancing human rights and democracy.* It includes several thematic reports dealing with key issues in the field, as well as an institutional overview and a reflection on indicators that track access to information and knowledge. There is also an innovative section on visual mapping of global rights and political crises.

In addition, 48 country reports analyse the status of access to online information and knowledge in countries as diverse as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mexico, Switzerland and Kazakhstan, while six regional overviews offer a bird's eye perspective on regional trends.

GISWatch is a joint initiative of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and the Humanist Institute for Cooperation with Developing Countries (Hivos).

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www.GISWatch.org

