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Freedom on the Net 2021 - Iraq

- PARTLY FREE

41

/ 100

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Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)

Overview

Internet freedom in Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, is limited. In recent years, investment in the telecommunications sector in the Kurdistan region has led to better service and lower prices, but other parts of Iraq still have some of the weakest telecommunications networks and highest costs in the Middle East. Pervasive physical attacks and harassment against journalists, activists, and social media users due to their online activity has forced many Iraqis to self-censor, and others—particularly reporters—have left the country. While authorities do not block many political or social websites or restrict much online content, government officials resort to network shutdowns and social media blocking during times of political unrest. Security forces use legal and extralegal measures to pressure journalists and activists to avoid discussing certain topics online, such as corruption or Iranian interference in Iraq. Law enforcement agents routinely arrest internet users, often accusing them of defamation under the penal code. The online media environment lacks independent voices, as political parties and powerful authorities spend large amounts of money to spread propaganda and disinformation.

Iraq holds regular, competitive elections, and the country's various partisan, religious, and ethnic groups enjoy some representation in the political system. However, democratic governance is impeded in practice by corruption and security threats. In the Kurdistan region, democratic institutions lack the strength to contain the influence of long-standing power brokers. Civil liberties are generally respected in Iraqi law, but the state has limited capacity to prevent and punish violations.

Key Developments, June 1, 2020 – May 31, 2021

- In December 2020, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) shut down internet service for eight hours amid antigovernment protests that drew a violent response from security forces (see A3).
- In June 2020, Facebook revealed that a network of inauthentic accounts originating in the Kurdistan region was impersonating local politicians, political parties, and news outlets. The platform found that this activity was tied to individuals associated with the intelligence services of the KRG (see B5).
- In December 2020, Iraqi lawmakers withdrew a draconian cybercrimes bill after pushback from civil society (see C2).
- In February 2021, three independent journalists in the Kurdistan region were sentenced to six years in prison by an Erbil criminal court after being found guilty of “undermining national security.” All three were arrested shortly after they expressed support for antigovernment protests and criticized government corruption on their social media accounts (see C3).
- A number of journalists and activists were killed in reprisal for their online content during the coverage period. In one case, prominent researcher Hisham al-Hashemi was assassinated in July 2020 after criticizing militias affiliated with the Iranian regime in his online writings (see C7).

A Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections? 3 / 6

Telecommunications infrastructure in Iraq is still relatively underdeveloped, and the country's internet penetration rate is one of the lowest in the region. Under the Saddam Hussein regime, which was ousted in 2003, the internet was tightly controlled, and very few people were online; it is estimated that only about 1 percent of Iraqis were able to access the internet during this period.¹ After 2003, internet usage began to flourish, although armed conflicts have destroyed some of the country's telecommunications infrastructure, especially cable internet and digital subscriber lines (DSL).²

The internet first became available to citizens in Iraq around the year 2000.³ At the time, the government adopted wireless internet service as a temporary means of access until suitable fixed-line networks could be created to deliver fast and reliable broadband service. However, most users still depend on costly satellite connections or Wi-Fi hotspots from private companies that often operate without licenses (see A4). Telecommunications companies note that infrastructure limitations make penetration and bandwidth improvements difficult. Because of these factors, mobile broadband has become the preferred method to get online, as fixed-line connections are more costly and difficult to obtain (see A2).⁴

Internet penetration stood at 75 percent as of January 2021, according to Datareportal. As of January 2021, there were an estimated 30.52 million internet users in Iraq, a 2.3 percent increase from 2020. The number of mobile connections stood at 40.01 million in January 2021, a 3.6 percent increase from January 2020.⁵

Internet speeds remain low, due in part to infrastructural limitations. As of June 2021, the average mobile download speed was 37.37 Mbps, and the average upload speed was 16.21 Mbps. The average fixed-line broadband download speed was 31.56 Mbps, and the average upload speed was 28.08 Mbps.⁶ A 2019 study prepared by the Akamai Internet Corporation, which

specializes in internet speeds, downloading, and international downloading, ranked Iraq 179th out of 185 countries examined.⁷

Despite recent investments, service is unreliable. A report published in 2019 warned that many internet users faced a risk of service termination within two years. It found that more than four million homes in Iraq, minus the Kurdistan region, received wireless service from just 20,000 towers, and the infrastructure was not keeping up with increasing demand.⁸ Service is also threatened by constant power outages. A majority of schools and libraries still have no internet access at all. Most cafés provide internet access as a free service for customers, but the quality is poor.

Much of Iraq's mobile infrastructure is based on third-generation (3G) technology, but 4G service is available in the Kurdistan region.⁹ In January 2021, Zain became the first telecommunications company to launch 4G-LTE (long-term evolution) services across Iraq.¹⁰

Due to greater foreign and domestic investment, internet infrastructure in the Kurdistan region is much more developed than in the rest of Iraq. 4G service has been available throughout the Kurdistan region since 2015, meaning speeds are considerably faster. The fixed-line broadband market in Kurdistan is also more developed. Newroz Telecom provides such services across the region, and operates asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) networks in Erbil and Duhok.¹¹

Internet access is particularly limited during times of armed conflict (see A3). Many of the internet companies operating in Iraq are linked to powerful political parties or militias, which provide them with the necessary protection from any legal accountability for disruptions (see A5).¹² Specific armed militias effectively control some of the telecommunications infrastructure and fiber-optic cables, and during periods of conflict, work on this infrastructure ceases.¹³ A manager at an internet company said, "It is not possible to work on any project in Iraq, especially in the capital, Baghdad, without the consent of the parties and the armed entities affiliated with them, which makes the work very difficult."¹⁴

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for 1 / geographical, social, or other reasons? 3

Iraq's internet costs are among the highest in the region, despite the poor quality of service. This has exposed the government to a great deal of criticism from citizens, who have launched campaigns on social media to demand improvements. Small companies must spend more than \$1,000 a month to secure connections with multiple internet service providers (ISPs) so as to avoid disruptions and ensure reliable access.¹⁵

EarthLink is the largest ISP in Iraq and provides service for 60 percent of Iraqi users. A monthly 8 Mbps package costs around 290,000 dinars (\$240).¹⁶ A monthly 30 GB 4G-LTE subscription package from Zain costs 30,000 dinars (\$25).¹⁷

Rural areas suffer from particularly poor internet service. Many regions of Iraq are still using 2G technology due to the inability of the Ministry of Communications to deliver 3G to these areas. Even in the areas that have access to 3G networks, the service quality and infrastructure are poor.¹⁸ According to the Iraqi Digital Media Center, most of what is provided to citizens is a "fake" internet, based on its standards of processing and operation, and it is sold to them at more than 50 times its actual value.¹⁹

Internet service is much better and pricing is more affordable in Iraq's Kurdistan region, due in part to greater investment—both domestic and foreign—in the infrastructure.²⁰ A monthly 15 GB package from Newroz Telecom costs 10,000 dinars (\$8.30).²¹ A 4G-LTE monthly package with 40 GB from Fastlink costs 15,000 dinars (\$12.50).²²

There are no clear pricing policies in Iraq, and neither the Ministry of Communications nor the Communications and Media Commission (CMC) have set any pricing conditions for ISPs. This has allowed providers to hike up prices for low-capacity data packages and SIM cards.²³ In February 2021, the Kurdistan region's regulatory body, the Ministry of Transport and Communications, announced that telecommunications companies operating in that region would have to pay a 20 percent tax to the government. A spokesperson for Korek Telecom offered assurances that this would not change prices.²⁴

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of 3 / restricting connectivity? 6

The Iraqi government and the KRG exercise control over the internet infrastructure and regularly restrict connectivity during times of protests or unrest. Iraqi authorities have admitted in the past to being responsible for cutting off the internet during national exams, elections, and mass demonstrations. For example, Adel Abdul-Mahdi, the Iraqi prime minister from October 2018 to May 2020, said about the interruption of internet service in the country, "the authorities [are] sometimes force[d] to restrict the internet when it is used to promote violence, hatred, and conspiracy against the homeland and disrupt[s] public life."²⁵

Because the Kurdistan region has some ISPs that operate separately from those in the rest of Iraq, it is not necessarily affected by internet shutdowns in the south.²⁶ However, KRG authorities have implemented their own network disruptions. In December 2020, thousands of people in the Kurdistan region participated in peaceful protests, demanding payment of their salaries and calling on the government to hold snap parliamentary elections. The demonstrations turned violent as security forces responded with excessive force. On December 7, the KRG shut down an opposition media channel and restricted internet access across the region for about eight hours.²⁷

In October 2019, antigovernment protests erupted in various cities across Iraq. The government instituted a massive internet shutdown to quell the demonstrations, and social media and communications platforms were blocked nationwide, aside from the Kurdistan region.²⁸ Access to social media was not restored for up to 50 days in some places.²⁹ In November, the Coalition against Blocking the Internet, an alliance of civil society groups, sent a letter to the communications minister urging the government to keep the internet on during protests.³⁰ Similarly, in July 2018, antigovernment protests broke out in Basra and spread to other cities. Authorities restricted internet access on July 14 to limit coverage of the protests, and social media sites were completely inaccessible for several days, even though internet connectivity was restored on July 15.³¹ A report from Amnesty International quoted sources saying that internet service was cut to prevent people from sharing images that showed the use of excessive force, including live ammunition, against the demonstrators.³²

During the 2018 elections, there were deliberate network restrictions caused by a cut in the submarine cable that carries a large part of the country's internet traffic. No government entity took responsibility at the time, but the disruption came amid calls on social media to boycott the elections.³³

In June 2014, when the Islamic State (IS) militant group seized control in large parts of northern and western Iraq, the government forced telecommunications companies and service providers to shut down the internet. A spokesman for Korek Telecom said at the time that the government had asked it and Zain to prevent data from being circulated via mobile phones.³⁴

The Iraqi Ministry of Communications rents out the fiber-optic infrastructure to private ISPs to increase government revenues. The state's Informatics & Telecommunications Public Company (ITPC) is the only entity that has the right to own and operate fiber-optic infrastructure, and no company can plan fiber-optic cables without approval.³⁵ This policy discourages investment and makes it easier for the government to shut down the network during politically sensitive events.

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers? 3 / 6

There are a number of legal obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers in Iraq. The Ministry of Communications owns and operates much of the telecommunications infrastructure, and the CMC is responsible for regulatory oversight of the internet. The KRG's Ministry of Transport and Communications oversees the telecommunications sector in the Kurdistan region, but the regulatory framework there is more relaxed, and the ministry has sought to promote investment and market diversity.³⁶

Regulatory obstacles often arise due to the unorganized management of infrastructural resources. The Ministry of Communications owns infrastructure and sells access to ISPs, often for high prices. Furthermore, this process is neither transparent nor simple. As a result, some ISPs access illegal service from the KRG and resell it in the rest of Iraq. The ministry's high fees, despite the poor quality of service, can be attributed to its need to cover the salaries of its large workforce of approximately 15,000 employees.³⁷

The Iraqi government owns the country's international internet gateways.³⁸ Until 2003, the state-owned telecommunications company Uruklink was the sole service provider; it now faces competition from other ISPs. Three major firms—Zain Iraq, Asiacell, and Korek—operate over 90 percent of the mobile tower infrastructure in Iraq.³⁹ EarthLink is the most popular ISP and provides service to 60 percent of Iraqi internet users;⁴⁰ the government imposes a 20 percent income tax on the company, which delivers connections via the national fiber-optic network.⁴¹ Newroz Telecom and Fastlink operate solely in the Kurdistan region.⁴² While ISPs in Iraq are private companies, many have close ties to the government and security services.

Service providers are often able to operate without any legal cover due to poor regulation and oversight, and some companies provide internet connections without a license. There is currently no telecommunications law in Iraq or its Kurdistan region. A draft law proposed by Iraqi authorities in 2018, which had yet to be passed at the end of the coverage period, includes confusing language about licensing. Specifically, it does not classify licensing obligations or offer clear rules for issuing or revoking licenses.⁴³ Currently, the Ministry of Communications and the CMC are in charge of licensing. The application process is quite complicated, and ISPs must acquire security approvals from more than one government ministry.⁴⁴

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner? 1 / 4

The CMC is the oversight and regulatory body for the telecommunications sector in Iraq, but it fails to work in a fair and independent manner. There is no clear separation of powers between the CMC and the Ministry of Communications. The draft telecommunications law of 2018 fails to support an independent and neutral regulatory authority.⁴⁵ There is no legal framework regulating the telecommunications sector in the Kurdistan region, and the KRG's Ministry of Transport and Communications oversees the sector in practice.

An explicit constitutional guarantee protects the independence of any entity tasked with regulating the internet. Article 61/2 of the Iraqi constitution calls for the Council of Representatives (parliament) to supervise the performance of the regulator. Ordinance No. 65 of 2004 defines the functions and powers of the Board of Directors of the CMC.⁴⁶ Despite these guarantees, the members of the Board of Directors are not chosen in an independent manner in practice, as the government directly selects them. The body lacks transparency and impartiality in its work, and it is subject to both political and commercial interference.⁴⁷

Regulatory decisions are neither fair nor transparent, but rather are subject to political and partisan pressures and government directives.⁴⁸ The Association for Defending Freedom of the Press in Iraq monitored violations committed by the CMC over 10 years, noting a pattern under successive governments in which the agency closed satellite channels and media outlets that were considered critical of the incumbent political forces. The association's report found that most of the CMC's decisions against the media were based on political interests.⁴⁹

In January 2021, Ali al-Khoweily, the head of the CMC, was dismissed after being charged with financial and administrative corruption.⁵⁰ One of the most prominent corruption cases involving al-Khoweily was revealed in 2018 by the *Financial Times*, which documented systemic malfeasance in the communications sector in Iraq. In addition to the corruption charges, al-Khoweily was accused of failing to provide the parliament with contracts and licenses for mobile phone companies.⁵¹

B Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 5 / 6

Under Saddam Hussein, censorship in general was extensive, and website blocks were common. While the internet opened up after the fall of Hussein's regime in 2003, the Iraqi government occasionally blocks websites and—more frequently—social media sites, usually citing security concerns or the need to maintain stability during times of unrest (see A3).⁵²

The government rarely blocks political websites, but it has blocked some gambling, video gaming, and pornography sites in the past. In 2019, the parliament banned the video game website PUBG as well as certain pornography sites on the grounds that they had a negative impact on the health, culture, and security of Iraqi society.⁵³ In January 2019, clerics in the Kurdistan region petitioned the Ministry of Transport and Communications to block pornography websites.⁵⁴

The Iraqi government and KRG authorities frequently block social media sites during times of unrest and protests. Amid the 2019 antigovernment protests, the central government blocked Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Instagram. In some parts of the country these sites remained inaccessible for 50 days (see A3).⁵⁵ During earlier protests in July 2018, the Iraqi government blocked major social media networks and requested that the KRG do the same. However, some users were able to use virtual private networks (VPNs) to circumvent the blocking.⁵⁶ Authorities have justified these restrictions by claiming they want to protect citizens from violent imagery.

During the war with IS, the government disabled the internet in certain regions, blocked social media websites, and instituted restrictions on VPNs as part of their defense strategy (see A3). In 2014, the Ministry of Communications ordered internet companies to block YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and Viber as IS militants prepared for an attack on Baghdad. Supporters of IS were active on social media sites such as Twitter during previous offensives, and the government sought to preemptively block these sites, citing security concerns.⁵⁷ Authorities also banned VPNs in 2014, and while it is still technically illegal to use circumvention tools, the ban is not strongly enforced.⁵⁸ Iraqi internet users are able to use Psiphon, TunnelBear, and other secure and insecure VPNs to bypass censorship attempts by the government.

In 2015, the Ministry of Communications suggested introducing a “positive censorship” law that would block websites and ban content related to pornography, hate speech, and terrorism in order to protect families.⁵⁹ The law was not passed that year, after civil society groups strongly objected, but the ministry made another attempt to pass it in 2017.⁶⁰

There is little or no formal oversight regarding internet usage, and there is no content moderation law that requires the blocking of certain websites (see B3).⁶¹ Advanced technology to automate censorship is not used outside the banking sector in Iraq.⁶²

In 2014, an analysis conducted by Citizen Lab found that the Iraqi authorities had filtered content from prominent Arab news sites, particularly those that were known to be critical of the government. For example, the website Herak Iraq, which reported on the oppression of Sunni citizens, was blocked on June 24, 2014. Other blocked sites included Muslm.org, an Arab-Islamic news site, and Hanein.info, a discussion forum that contained militant content and criticism of the government for being sectarian.⁶³ As of June 2021, it was unclear whether these sites were still blocked.

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards? 1 / 4

Officials often use pressure or harassment to compel journalists who publish articles online to take down sensitive content, particularly criticism of the government.

Journalists, activists, and social media users have received threats and warnings from the government or militias in response to their online content (see C7). During the reporting period, the government, acting through the CMC, pressured social media companies to remove activists’ accounts or delete specific content.

According to Facebook’s transparency report, between July and December 2020 the platform received 12 content removal requests from the Iraqi government.⁶⁴ Between January and June 2020, Twitter received 10 content removal requests from the Iraqi government.⁶⁵ According to Google’s transparency report, the company had received requests to take down a total of 26 items from the Iraqi government as of January 2021.⁶⁶

Members of the media have reported that politicians, officials, tribal leaders, and powerful business figures have pressured them not to publish articles that include critical material.⁶⁷ In July 2019, after a journalist asked parliament member Kazem Finjan al-Hamami about the affairs of certain ministers, al-Hamami threatened to sue the journalist and demanded that he be barred from entering the parliament in the future.⁶⁸ In 2014, at least two independent media outlets received written warnings from the CMC that their licenses would be revoked if they continued to publish online content that included criticism of the government.⁶⁹

Activists have faced prosecution because of the content they publish online. Authorities in Iraq and its Kurdistan region use their respective penal codes to threaten journalists and force them to stick to government-approved narratives, and will often summon or arrest those who stray from such topics (see C3).⁷⁰ More broadly, indiscriminate harassment of online journalists and publishers creates an environment that encourages self-censorship (see B4 and C7).

Content that contains commentary on government corruption or Iranian influence in Iraq is often removed. For example, social media posts about the deaths of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in a January 2020 US drone strike were taken down.⁷¹ Content about certain political or militia groups, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces, has also been removed.

There is currently no legal liability for third parties or content hosts.⁷²

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process? 1 / 4

The restrictions imposed on the internet cannot be considered transparent because they often fulfill the interests of the government and contradict the Iraqi constitution (see C1). There is currently no legal framework governing content restriction in either the Kurdistan region or the rest of Iraq.

There is no truly independent oversight body tasked with regulating or making decisions on online content restrictions. The Ministry of Communications and the CMC technically make decisions pertaining to network shutdowns and social media blocking, but they cannot be considered transparent or proportionate. For example, the Ministry of Communications has ordered network shutdowns amid protests in the past,⁷³ and the CMC has revoked the licenses of online media outlets due to their reporting (see B6).⁷⁴

Because there is no law governing content restrictions, online censorship is often imposed without accountability (see A3 and B1).⁷⁵ While the government does at times explain why it has restricted content or shut down networks, the explanations are not transparent; the justification is usually to control “security chaos and conspiracy against the homeland.” Some politicians, members of the media, and activists assert that the authorities have violated civil liberties by shutting down the internet and blocking social media during protests.⁷⁶ International organizations have similarly called on the government to refrain from shutting down the internet during times of civil unrest and to stop interfering in the work of media outlets.⁷⁷

Technically, if someone wanted to appeal an online content removal, they could approach the CMC, as it has a monitoring function and a responsibility in this field.⁷⁸ However, this does not happen in practice.

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship? 1 / 4

Self-censorship is prevalent in Iraq, including in the Kurdistan region. Although the constitution guarantees freedom of opinion and expression, factors such as harsh criminal penalties for online content and harassment or intimidation by government authorities, political parties, and armed groups create an environment that encourages self-censorship.

Crimes against the media in the country “push journalists to pursue self-censorship, which necessitated the development of a United Nations action plan on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity.”⁷⁹ According to statistics from the Iraqi Center for Freedom of Expression, more than 420 Iraqi journalists have been killed in various circumstances since 2003 (see C7).⁸⁰ Intimidation, arrests, and assassinations of social media users, online activists, and journalists are not uncommon, with reprisals sometimes triggered by nothing more than a Facebook post. This has led users to refrain from publishing critical content or voicing opposition to government and party policies online.

Certain topics are known taboos. For example, users avoid commenting on government corruption, criticizing officials, or denouncing armed groups due to a credible fear of reprisals by the government, political parties, ethnic and sectarian forces, extremist terrorist groups, or criminal gangs—especially because the perpetrators of such abuses typically enjoy impunity.

Journalist Imad al-Shammari, who has been threatened due to his Facebook posts, noted that criticizing officials or talking about corruption may lead to threats of kidnapping aimed at both himself and his publisher. Many journalists and news outlets have responded to these risks by attempting not to engage in public affairs or to discuss the reality of the political situation (see C7).[81](#)

While there is no law prohibiting the use of social media to express one's opinion, the reality is that users fear government surveillance on social media platforms, leading them to self-censor (see C5).[82](#) A member of the Iraqi Center for Supporting Freedom of Expression, Zaid Shiber, stated that the violations against journalists, bloggers, and online commentators are twofold: some are committed by government agencies or their employees, while other, "societal" violations are perpetrated by relatives or tribal leaders who persecute such content producers and prevent them from carrying out their work.[83](#)

Some journalists continue to pursue their careers in Iraq despite all the risks, but according to Al-Jazeera, dozens have chosen to remain in the Kurdistan region or flee to Turkey and other countries after their colleagues were subjected to various violations, including murder, kidnapping, extortion, and the closure of their outlets (see C7).[84](#) While the Kurdistan region for many years was deemed a safer place for journalists and online activists, more recently the KRG has cracked down on free speech, leading to more self-censorship.[85](#)

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest? 1 / 4

Online sources of information are strongly manipulated by powerful actors. The government, political parties, and other influential forces spend large amounts of money to spread false or misleading news online and advance their political agendas.[86](#)

The online news space in Iraq cannot be viewed as independent. The effects of political manipulation and the lack of independent outlets have led to a heavily biased and progovernment media environment. This is particularly evident around elections, when political parties flood the sector with misleading information and propaganda.[87](#) The traditionally dominant parties in the Kurdistan region, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), own dozens of media outlets through which they promote their political narratives.[88](#) Online outlets owned by these parties are given prioritized access to public information, putting independent or opposition-aligned outlets at a disadvantage.[89](#)

Online content is influenced by public officials who reward positive reporting with bribes including money, land, and other benefits. These rewards are typically given to state-affiliated journalists and outlets, such as members of the progovernment Journalists' Syndicate in the Kurdistan region.[90](#)

Due to the Iranian regime's strategic interests in Iraqi politics, Iranian content manipulation is visible online in Iraq. For example, in January 2021, pro-Islamic Republic social media activists launched a Twitter campaign aiming to replace the current Iraqi governmental system with an Iranian-style Wilayat al-Faqih (Rule of the Jurist), which would effectively allow Iran's supreme leader to be the final arbiter of Iraqi policy decisions. Iraqi social media users fought back against the campaign, which was reportedly driven by the online wings of Iran-backed militias.[91](#)

Authorities regularly issue gag orders or reporting guidelines on particular issues or during politically sensitive times. On June 18, 2014, the CMC issued mandatory guidelines to regulate the media "during the war on terror." These sorts of directives are a clear attempt to prevent critical coverage of important events and silence debate, particularly when the country is facing security or political crises.[92](#) Amid violent protests in October 2019, the Interior Ministry banned all media outlets—including online outlets—from directly covering or sharing live footage of the demonstrations.[93](#)

Fake accounts impersonate political figures, parties, activists, and news outlets with the intent of spreading false information or defaming opposition forces.[94](#) In June 2020, Facebook reported that it had removed 324 pages, 71 accounts, 5 groups, and 31 Instagram accounts that were tied to a network of inauthentic behavior originating in Iraq's Kurdistan region. Facebook traced the fraudulent activity to individuals associated with the intelligence services of the KRG.[95](#)

During the protests in October 2019, an influence campaign on Twitter encouraged support for a revolution, but it was determined that many of these accounts were fabricated with the intent to sow anti-Iranian and pro-Saudi Arabian sentiment; both countries' regimes have vested geopolitical interests in Iraqi politics. In response, progovernment "electronic flies" joined the debate, spreading propaganda against the protests online.[96](#)

Apart from progovernment media, there are also "civil media" outlets, which are not necessarily independent. They often belong to merchants and investors and may be "fronts" for political parties and powerful authorities to achieve certain goals and sway public opinion on certain topics. Many of these civil media outlets focus on issues of nationalism and sectarianism, and most seek to manipulate the online space on issues of religion or sect. They have headquarters, channels, newspapers, radio stations, websites, and electronic armies in different parts of Iraq.[97](#)

The Iraqi Media House, a watchdog group, has reported on the large role of politicized funding in shifting local reporting. Even small local outlets are influenced by the financial largesse of political parties, and often promote sectarian discourse in their reporting. In addition, broadcast news outlets and their online presences are often partial and biased toward specific issues at the expense of other, general national issues.[98](#)

With regard to defamation, media institutions that are established by political parties and formed on the basis of sectarian ideas work to shape the media landscape by attacking their ideological opponents. For example, certain outlets function as a countercurrent to the women's rights movement, producing media and advertising materials that contribute to discrimination and violence against women. In some cases these media institutions have become a tool for defamation campaigns that specifically target women journalists and activists (see C7).[99](#)

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to publish content online? 2 / 3

Media outlets and service providers with favorable connections to government officials tend to be more economically viable. In many cases these connections extend to the officials' political parties or affiliated armed militias.

Privately owned media face financing obstacles. Patronage systems in Iraq, including in the Kurdistan region, allow outlets that align their reporting with powerful figures to receive funding and advertising revenues that smaller, independent, or opposition-aligned outlets lack.[100](#)

There is no law that prevents the media from accepting advertisements and foreign investment from any source.[101](#) No special taxes or licensing fees are imposed for the establishment or management of news outlets, blogs, or social media groups. However, owners of websites that provide commercial services may face some fees.[102](#)

The CMC's regulations lack criteria for licensing approval, but a number of international news outlets have had their licenses suspended in recent years.¹⁰³ For example, in April 2020, the CMC suspended Reuters's license after the news agency published a story suggesting that Iraq had a higher number of COVID-19 cases than was officially reported. The CMC fined Reuters 25 million dinars (\$21,000) and suspended its license for three months, claiming that it had violated media broadcasting rules (see B3).¹⁰⁴

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability? 2 / 4

Structural obstacles stemming from the country's history of media suppression have challenged the growth of independent media in Iraq. Partisan ownership of news outlets and lack of political will to encourage independent online media have left the sector without a diversity of voices. Furthermore, outlets with ties to powerful politicians and businesses tend to fair better financially, which has created a media environment that is largely co-opted by political actors and their interests (see B6).¹⁰⁵

There are a few websites that Iraqis trust and consider independent and credible. However, a survey conducted by BBC Media Action in 2018 demonstrated declining trust in mainstream media and government-affiliated social media pages.¹⁰⁶ The National Center for Electronic Media—an independent entity that provides local news about politics, society, culture, and sports—has worked to improve the performance and credibility of online media.¹⁰⁷

People usually rely on Iraqi state-owned websites and television channels in Arabic to access news, but pan-Arab outlets based abroad, such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, are popular as well. Increasingly, people have turned to social media for their news.¹⁰⁸

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic that began in 2020, false news has increased, especially on social media. As a result, a group of journalists announced the establishment of the first independent Iraqi effort to combat pandemic-related misinformation. The coalition works to track misinformation and address false statements about the coronavirus online.¹⁰⁹ A poll showed that 65 percent of Iraqis do not trust the numbers published by the government regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.¹¹⁰

Many of the most popular news sites in the Kurdistan region have ties to the KRG or powerful Kurdish political figures, and they typically promote progovernment agendas. For example, one of the region's most popular news sites is Khandan, which is part of a media institution funded by the Kurdish politician Barham Salih, the current president of Iraq. Another prominent site is Rudaw, which is part of the Rudaw Media Foundation; according to Kurdish sources, the entire organization is affiliated with the prime minister of the KRG, Masrour Barzani. The Alsumaria News website is affiliated with a Kurdish opposition group and publishes criticism of the KRG.¹¹¹

Another site, Basnews, is relatively new compared with Khandan and Rudaw. However, it has been able to expand and diversify in record time, as it now has an affiliated Kurdish- and Arabic-language newspaper that is published weekly in Iraqi Kurdistan.¹¹²

Outlets that outwardly have either Sunni or Shiite sectarian affiliation are considered very weak, and they lack credibility and professionalism. Sites that are considered relatively discreet, such as Al-Mada Press, writings and voices of Iraq and Nina, for example, have very little access to them, and they lack a large marketing campaign.¹¹³

Users sometimes employ VPNs, though not necessarily to bypass censorship, as the government does not block many websites. Instead, users rely on them as a safeguard against surveillance or cyberattacks (see C5 and C8).¹¹⁴

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues? 3 / 6

Iraqi citizens rely on social media to organize and mobilize protests. However, authorities have blocked certain social media applications or shut down the internet during times of unrest.

In December 2020, thousands of people in the Kurdistan region participated in peaceful protests, demanding payment of their salaries and calling on the government to hold snap parliamentary elections. The protests started on social media, where activists and citizens alike planned sit-ins and demonstrations. On December 7, the KRG responded by restricting internet access across the region for about eight hours (see A3).¹¹⁵

Social networking sites also played a prominent role in the antigovernment protests that broke out across Iraq in October 2019. Protesters and activists used social media to organize and plan assemblies, which prompted the government to shut down the internet and block popular apps (see A3). When demonstrators were exposed to violence from security forces during the protests, activists would use hashtags on social media to rally calls for an end to violence and urge the United Nations and international human rights organizations to pressure the government to respect the human rights charters that Iraq had ratified.¹¹⁶ In late 2019 and early 2020, demonstrators and activists used social media platforms to make their voices heard after progovernment media deliberately refused to cover the protest movement.¹¹⁷

Social media were instrumental in the organization of calls to boycott the 2018 elections, but once again authorities responded with localized internet shutdowns (see A3).¹¹⁸

C Violations of User Rights

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence? 2 / 6

Iraq's constitution includes protections for the freedoms of expression, association, and communication, including electronic communication, and Article 4 of the Communications and Media Commission Law calls for adherence to the international principles of freedom of expression and freedom of the press, but these provisions are often violated in practice.¹¹⁹ While the KRG does not have its own constitution, one was drafted in 2009, and in May 2021 the region's president, Nechirvan Barzani, promised to bring together political parties to agree on a new draft constitution.¹²⁰ Neither the Iraqi judiciary nor the Kurdistan regional judiciary can be considered independent.¹²¹

Some national laws specifically constrain freedom of expression and press freedom, contradicting the protections offered by the constitution and the Communications and Media Commission Law. For example, Article 8, Paragraph 11 of the National Safety Law, which was announced by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki in June 2014, obliges all media outlets to submit their materials for review before publishing or broadcasting. This law was still in place at the end of the coverage period, though it is unclear whether it is actively enforced.¹²²

In the Kurdistan region, the 2007 Press Law protects freedom of expression and press freedoms, though a number of loopholes leave many of the articles open to interpretation.¹²³ Similarly, the region's Law to Prevent Misuse of Communications Equipment protects the content of electronic communications (see C5 and C6), but vaguely worded articles

allow for restrictions, and the law has been used to penalize journalists and activists in the past (see C2).[124](#)

Researchers, scholars, and observers of the Iraqi judiciary agree on its lack of independence. Judges and judicial proceedings are controlled by political authorities and external parties. Impartial judges are often manipulated or threatened if they rule against government decisions.[125](#) In the Kurdish region, the cassation court's 10 judges are sworn in by the prime minister of the KRG after being selected by the main parties, undermining the judiciary's independence.[126](#)

At times, Iraqi and KRG courts have ruled against attempts to penalize journalists or activists for their online content. However, those who perpetrate crimes against journalists, bloggers, or online activists rarely face punishment, and armed groups—including Iran-backed militias—often operate with impunity.[127](#)

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are 1 / protected under international human rights standards? 4

Authorities in Iraq and its Kurdistan region use vaguely worded laws and penal codes to criminalize online activities.

The Iraqi penal code of 1969 includes various defamation-related crimes and is often employed to threaten or punish journalists, publishers, and internet users. Anyone convicted of defamation is subject to detention or a fine. Article 434 of the penal code prohibits newspapers, publications, or any other media outlets—including online media and social media—from disseminating defamatory material, which is considered an aggravating offense.[128](#) Article 435 criminalizes insulting another person, including in a telephone conversation or a letter, and prescribes punishments of up to six months in prison and fines of no more than 50 dinars (\$0.04).[129](#) In addition, the penal code includes broader speech offenses such as insulting the “Arab nation” or any government official.

Articles 210 and 211 of the Iraqi penal code assign criminal liability—including potential imprisonment—to anyone who publishes false news or provocative propaganda, particularly if it destabilizes public security, causes terror among people, or harms the public interest. Those found guilty under these articles can effectively be held criminally responsible for the consequences of the content they publish.[130](#)

Although few individuals are actually sentenced to prison on defamation charges, the criminal process itself amounts to a form of punishment. Authorities often file charges as a way to intimidate activists and journalists, knowing that the case will eventually be dismissed or end in acquittal. Activist Ammar Khazali said, “The constant arrests, handcuffing in front of people I know are all emotionally stressful things and sometimes they make me cry. I spend money on lawyers constantly, and my family and friends are always worried about me, and I am still being targeted.”[131](#)

There were no criminal laws pertaining specifically to the internet as of June 2021, but the prevalence of cybercrime in recent years led the government to propose a draconian Cybercrimes Law in 2019; it was ultimately withdrawn in December 2020 due to pushback from civil society.[132](#) The draft law would have provided authorities with the legal backing to prosecute anyone for online posts that were deemed threatening to “governmental, social, or religious interests.” It provided penalties for those who use a computer or the internet with the aim of “undermining the independence, unity, or safety of the country, or its supreme economic, political, military, or security interests or participating, negotiating, promoting, contracting with, or dealing with a hostile entity in any way with the purpose of disrupting security and public order or endangering the country.” If found guilty, users could be sentenced to life in prison and a fine of roughly \$21,000.[133](#)

KRG authorities use the regional penal code, the Journalistic Work Law, and the Law to Prevent Misuse of Communications Equipment to curtail freedom of expression.[134](#)

Article 2 of the Kurdistan Press Law (Law No. 35 of 2007) states that a journalist may not be charged with defamation if “he published or wrote about the performance of an official or a person assigned to a public service” and “if what he published does not go beyond the affairs of the profession.” Nevertheless, many journalists and online activists have been charged with criminal offenses under this article, especially when publishing content about corruption.[135](#) Authorities in the Kurdish region generally ignore the protections in the Press Law, frequently arresting and charging journalists and activists without legal backing (see C3).

Article 2 of the KRG’s Law to Prevent Misuse of Communications Equipment includes criminal penalties for “misusing cell phones and email to: threaten someone, use profanities, spread misinformation, disclose private conversations or share images counter to the public’s values, or take any other action that might harm someone’s integrity or honor or motivate a crime or an immoral act, or share private information even if it is true.” Those found guilty of these crimes can face steep fines or imprisonment.[136](#)

In July 2020, KRG lawmakers presented a draft digital media regulation bill to the regional parliament. The bill sparked criticism due to its harsh criminal penalties for online content hosts and publishers. For example, Article 15 stipulates that “a website editor-in-chief or owner of account or official pages on social media platforms will be fined from 1,000,000 to 5,000,000 dinars [\$840 to \$4,200] if they defame, insult or threaten an individual.”[137](#) As of June 2021, the bill had not been passed.

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human 1 / rights standards? 6

Online journalists and activists are routinely detained and arrested in Iraq and its Kurdistan region, although long prison sentences for online content are rare.

A number of online journalists were arrested for their coverage of protests in the Kurdistan region during the fall and winter of 2020. Harem Majed, a reporter for the website Bazianpress, was arrested in Sulaymaniya Province in December 2020 for covering demonstrations against political corruption and high unemployment rates. Zosk Ballak was arrested a few days later after writing two articles about the protests for the Rojnews TV website.[138](#)

In February 2021, three independent journalists in the Kurdistan region were sentenced to six years in prison by an Erbil criminal court after being found guilty of “undermining national security.” The three journalists—Sherwan Sherwani, Guhdar Zebari, and Ayaz Karam—had been arrested in October 2020, shortly after they expressed support for antigovernment protests and criticized government corruption on their social media accounts.[139](#)

Journalists have been arrested for critiquing the Iranian regime and Iran-backed militias in their online reporting. In October 2020, an arrest warrant was issued for Suadad al-Salhy, a reporter for the Middle East Eye news website, after she posted an article revealing that Iran’s supreme leader had ordered militias in Iraq to stop attacking US interests. She was charged with “defamation” under the Iraqi penal code and faced a one-year prison sentence and a fine. The case was pending at the end of the coverage period.[140](#)

Many other journalists, activists, and ordinary internet users were arrested and charged with defamation during the coverage period, often for criticizing political parties or the government. In September 2020, journalist Bahroz Jafeer was arrested in the Kurdish city of Sulaymaniya and charged with defaming the president of Iraq. He was arrested after the president's lawyer filed a complaint about an editorial Jafeer published on the Peyser Press website, titled "How long will the president keep going in the wrong direction?" As of June 2021, Jafeer was still held in pretrial detention. In January 2021, a poet was accused by the KRG of "defamation and inciting violence" in a video clip that included criticism of the government.¹⁴¹ In November 2020, arrest warrants were issued for four bloggers after they criticized the country's lack of medical resources in their posts. Two of the bloggers were released on bail later that month; it was unclear whether the others had also been released.¹⁴²

In February 2018, anticorruption activist Bassem Khashan was sentenced to three years in prison for defaming the Integrity Commission, a government body.¹⁴³ In January 2019, journalist Hussam al-Kaabi was arrested in Najaf Province for using Facebook to criticize a spelling mistake in a message from a national security official. He was released a day later.¹⁴⁴ In April 2019, activist Muhammad Jasem was arrested for criticizing the mayor of Habanyia in a Facebook post. He was held in custody for one day before a judge ordered his release on bail. While in detention, Jasem had his head shaved in an attempt to humiliate him. He was later charged with defamation.¹⁴⁵

In April 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities came to the house of Haitham Suleiman and warned him against writing about corruption on his Facebook page. He had been organizing anticorruption demonstrations near Baghdad, and in early April, after learning that the local health department might be reaping huge profits from paper masks, he posted the allegation on Facebook and called on the authorities to investigate. The next day, agents from the Interior Ministry's intelligence services came to his home and left a warning that instructed him to stop writing about corruption. Days later, men in civilian clothes arrested him and took him to the intelligence office, where he was beaten and forced to sign a document stating that the Iraqi protest movement in 2019 was funded by the United States (see C7). Then they accused him, under the penal code, of intentionally spreading false or biased information that would "disturb public security."¹⁴⁶

Hemin Mamand, a freelance journalist in the Kurdistan region, was arrested in March 2020 after publishing a Facebook post that called on the KRG to stop withholding the salaries of public servants. He was released after 13 days. In early April, he was arrested again after he posted on Facebook about the previous arrest, stating that he had been detained by officials who did not identify themselves or have an arrest warrant. Mamand was charged with defaming the police and encouraging people to break the COVID-19 lockdown under Article 2 of the Kurdistan region's Law to Prevent Misuse of Communications Equipment and Article 433 of the penal code.¹⁴⁷

A number of human rights organizations have called on the KRG to stop arbitrarily detaining journalists, activists, and political opposition figures, and to end the prosecution of journalists for allegedly insulting or defaming public figures. The Asayish, the security apparatus in the Kurdistan region, frequently arrests journalists for publishing articles that are critical of government officials online. Once arrested, online activists, journalists, and bloggers have also been detained and held without charge or trial for long periods of time.¹⁴⁸

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption? 3 / 4

The government generally does not place significant restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption services.¹⁴⁹ While there are some legal limits on anonymity, people in Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, are able to use encryption services and VPNs in practice.

SIM card registration is required in Iraq, though it is easy to find unregistered SIM cards on the informal market.¹⁵⁰

Website owners or bloggers seeking to obtain an Iraqi domain must submit an application to the CMC or accredited registrars. If a university, company, government agency, civil body, or civil servant applies for a domain name, they are required to produce civil status identification such as a nationality certificate or a passport, in addition to a residence card.¹⁵¹

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy? 3 / 6

Article 40 of the Iraqi constitution guarantees the freedom to communicate without surveillance or monitoring, "except for legal and security necessity and by a judicial decision." Article 47 of the Communications and Media Commission Law also states that telephone calls and private communications may not be monitored, wiretapped, or disclosed except in accordance with the law and a court decision.¹⁵² However, there have been reports that the government monitors private online communications without appropriate legal authority.¹⁵³

There is no legal framework that allows state security agencies to collect, keep, and examine users' personal data. The invasion of privacy—presumably offline and online—is a crime punishable under Article 438 of the Iraqi penal code, which prescribes "imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year and a fine not exceeding one hundred dinars [\$0.08] or either of these two penalties."¹⁵⁴

Neither the Kurdistan region nor Iraq as a whole has a data protection law or a cybersecurity authority. Due to the weakness of oversight and regulation in the field of communications, technical experts believe that the state may possess the ability to monitor online activities, and it is likely that armed militias—specifically Iran-backed militias—have the capacity to conduct surveillance of their own.¹⁵⁵ However, Iraqi government departments generally lack modern electronic devices and applications, and tend to use rudimentary methods of electronic communication, making it unlikely that they have the technical means to surveil private user activity.¹⁵⁶

In a 2018 report by Citizen Lab, a Canadian internet watchdog, Iraq is listed as one of 45 countries worldwide in which devices were likely breached by Pegasus, a targeted spyware software developed by the NSO Group, an Israeli technology firm. Pegasus is known to be used by governments to spy on journalists, human rights defenders, and the opposition, though it is unclear whether the Iraqi government is a Pegasus client.¹⁵⁷

In 2011, it was revealed that the United States had provided the Iraqi government with mobile-phone and text-message monitoring devices. US military officials reportedly provided these tools to help Iraqi forces prevent terrorist attacks.¹⁵⁸

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users' right to privacy? 3 / 6

There are no data protection or privacy laws in Iraq or its Kurdistan region, and while ISPs and technology companies do not systematically collect user data, the information they do store may be vulnerable to disclosure.

Article 47 of the Communications and Media Commission Law stipulates that phone calls and private communications may not be monitored, wiretapped, or disclosed except in accordance with the law and with a court decision (see C5). However, this protection is not upheld in practice. For example, Communications Minister Muhammad Allawi said in 2011 that "more than 90

percent of the calls of persons and officials in the Iraqi state are monitored by more than one international party.” While he did not provide details, he said that “the issue of monitoring has become easy,” and that complicated or expensive hardware was not required.¹⁵⁹

There is no provision in Iraqi law that allows the government to collect user data itself, and the government may not request user data legally without a judicial order.¹⁶⁰ but experts agree that it is possible for the government to carry out such activities without legal cover.¹⁶¹ Some telecommunications companies in Iraq are able to keep user data, including call records, for a period of five years.¹⁶²

Between January and December 2019, Facebook received 18 requests for user data from the Iraqi government.¹⁶³

There are no storage localization requirements for the online data of Iraqi users.

C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in relation to their online activities? 0 / 5

Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, is one of the world’s most dangerous places for online journalists, activists, bloggers, and social media users. Journalists and activists are frequently harassed and intimidated online, and they are at times subjected to physical violence—including assassinations—by state and nonstate actors in reprisal for the content they post.

Government authorities, armed groups, and individuals have all carried out physical attacks on internet users for their online activities. There has been a significant rise in violence against journalists and activists since antigovernment protests broke out across Iraq in October 2019. According to government figures, 565 protesters and security personnel were killed during the protests, including dozens of activists and journalists who were assassinated by unidentified gunmen.¹⁶⁴ Some assassinations were seen as retribution for content that journalists and citizens posted online. For example, a prominent Iraqi journalist, Ahmed Abd al-Samad, was shot and killed by two unidentified men. He was outspoken in his reporting and on social media, often covering taboo topics such as government corruption or the influence of militias in Iraqi politics. He had been the target of intimidation and harassment for years, and received many death threats. Two days before his assassination, Abd al-Samad posted on social media about the death of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani and criticized the Iranian regime’s role in Iraqi politics. In a video clip he posted just hours before his assassination, Abd al-Samad again challenged Iran’s influence in the country.¹⁶⁵

In August 2020, Rahim Yaqoub, a prominent doctor and human rights defender who was an active part of the 2018 Basra protest movement both online and offline, was killed by two unidentified gunmen. Yaqoub had often criticized Iraqi authorities and the influence of armed groups on social media. He was just one of many activists killed in Basra since 2018, although not all were active on social media.¹⁶⁶

In July 2020, prominent researcher Hisham al-Hashemi was assassinated in front of his home by unknown assailants. In the months leading up to his death, al-Hashemi had been threatened by Iran-backed militias, and in November 2019 he had stopped speaking to the media after threats from the Kata’ib Hezbollah militia. Al-Hashemi was very active on social media, publishing daily analyses on the security situation in Iraq and commenting on powerful Shiite militia groups.¹⁶⁷

In April 2020, a man who was active in the 2019 protests was threatened by authorities after posting about government corruption on his Facebook page. Intelligence services showed up at his house and told him to stop writing about corruption. Days later, men in civilian clothes arrested him and took him to the intelligence office, where he was beaten and forced to sign a document stating that the Iraqi protest movement in 2019 was funded by the United States (see C3).¹⁶⁸

A woman who has actively protested against corruption in Basra for years, including through vocal social media posts that criticize the government and political parties in Iraq, was threatened and harassed by masked men in August 2018. The men opened fire on her house, but she was able to flee with her children. When she returned to Basra, a masked man threatened her, claiming she would be killed for criticizing certain political parties on social media. She was subsequently forced to leave Iraq with her children.¹⁶⁹

Those who perpetrate physical attacks and assassinations often go unpunished (see C1). The government is trying, though not effectively, to confront the groups that target activists and journalists. In February 2021, Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kazemi announced the arrest of the “death gang” responsible for killing activists and journalists in Basra Province, in the south of the country. However, security sources in the province revealed to foreign media outlets that Iraqi authorities had only arrested four people with ties to the gang, which has been carrying out its systematic assassination campaign in the area since October 2019.¹⁷⁰

As a result of the violent attacks, journalists have resorted to changing their addresses or in some cases leaving Iraq. Those who seek to relocate for safety reasons sometimes face travel restrictions. An online journalist from Najaf noted in 2019 that he was afraid to return to his home because security forces would arrest him over his coverage of the protests. He was planning to flee to the Kurdistan region, but his name was on the “wanted” lists, preventing him from traveling.¹⁷¹

Those who manage to flee to the Kurdish region or abroad are still harassed and intimidated. One man who managed to flee his hometown of Erbil received threatening text messages from unknown numbers in 2019. The threats were related to his posts on social media pages. Some of the threats warned him against “publishing anything related to the demonstrations,” and used intimidation tactics such as assertions that his “accounts are known and monitored.”¹⁷²

Members of the Iraqi diaspora community and their relatives in Iraq are targeted with harassment and kidnappings. Iraqi intellectuals stated that the family of the young blogger Amin Muhammad Ali, who had been living in Europe for years, was kidnapped in February 2017, and the kidnappers demanded that the blogger return to Iraq and surrender himself to them.¹⁷³

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? 1 / 3

Cyberattacks have been reported in Iraq and its Kurdistan region in the past, and both governmental and nongovernmental websites are vulnerable to cyberattacks of domestic and international origin. Hackers are rarely held accountable for their attacks, and there are no laws criminalizing these kinds of offenses. Opposition news outlets have been subject to cyberattacks, and activists have had their social media accounts deactivated by hackers.

The forms of electronic predation in Iraq vary from stealing emails and internet lines prepared for homes to seizing control of social media accounts and threatening and extorting their owners. Governmental and nongovernmental websites are constantly exposed to piracy in Iraq, where technical expert Shuja Faris says virtually anyone could learn to become a hacker without fear because there is no one who can hold such individuals accountable.¹⁷⁴

Following the October 2019 protests in Iraq, a cyberattack targeted a range of government websites, including those of the Defense Ministry and the Interior Ministry, as well as Shiite militia groups. The hacker stated that he obtained 180 GB of important documents and files, and that they included contracts and correspondence that implicated the government in corruption.¹⁷⁵ Many citizens responded to the hacking with hashtags in Arabic that read “the Iraqi government falls electronically,” in some cases mocking the government’s fragile digital security measures.¹⁷⁶ The attack was presented in part as retribution for the authorities’ violent crackdown on the protesters.¹⁷⁷

Iraqi websites and users are also vulnerable to attacks that originate outside the country, often in Iran. In October 2020, Iranian hackers targeted telecommunications and government agencies in Iraq as part of a systematic espionage campaign.¹⁷⁸ During the reporting period, two websites that had posted articles about how an Iran-backed militia was providing fake university degrees to militia leaders suffered distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks.¹⁷⁹ As of June 2021, one of the websites was still inaccessible as a result.

In 2014, amid the war with IS, local armed groups used malware to steal information and target one another. Specifically, the malware program Njrat was used to steal files and turn on cameras and microphones on infected computers. Most attacks were aimed at participants in the conflict, though some civilians were also targeted.¹⁸⁰

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