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FREEDOM ON THE NET 2024

Iraq

PARTLY FREE

40
/100

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	10 /25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	16 /35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	14 /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

43 /100 **Partly Free**

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free). See the research methodology and report acknowledgements.



Key Developments, June 1, 2023 – May 31, 2024

Internet freedom in Iraq declined during the coverage period, as authorities blocked several independent websites and more users received long prison sentences for their online content than in the preceding year. Security forces in the country, including in the Kurdistan region, routinely arrested internet users, and physical attacks against journalists, activists, and social media users due to their online activity remained common.

- Authorities in Iraq, including Iraqi Kurdistan, implemented 66 internet outages in 2023, with most occurring during academic exams (see A3).
- In mid-2023, regulators advanced a plan to geographically divide the country among internet service providers (ISPs) for the provision of Wi-Fi service, in a decision that lacked a competitive tender process. The move threatened to negatively affect market competition and raised the risk of higher prices and poorer service for consumers (see A4).
- The messaging platform Telegram was temporarily blocked in August 2023, and at least two independent websites were blocked indefinitely during the coverage period (see B1).
- Authorities continued their crackdown on LGBT+ content by issuing directives to social media companies, pressuring users to remove their posts, and imposing criminal penalties for the promotion or publication of such material (see B2, B3, and C2).
- In December 2023, three individuals were sentenced to six years in prison for promoting the ideas of the banned Baath Party through social media platforms (see C3).

Political Overview

Iraq holds regular, competitive elections, and the country's various partisan, religious, and ethnic groups generally enjoy representation in the political system. However, democratic governance is impeded in practice by corruption, militias operating outside the bounds of the law, and the weakness of formal institutions.

In the Kurdistan region, democratic institutions lack the strength to contain the influence of the two ruling parties, each maintaining its own internal security forces and ready to repress dissidents and peaceful protesters. Increasingly, Tehran has been able to influence politics in Baghdad. State officials and powerful militias routinely infringe upon the rights of citizens through legal and extrajudicial means.

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
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Iraq’s telecommunications infrastructure remains relatively underdeveloped, and the country’s internet penetration rate is one of the lowest in the region. However, the Ministry of Communications has made efforts to improve services through projects that include extending fiber-optic cables outside of urban areas, installing new transmission towers, and building the capacity of telecommunications staff. 1

As of January 2024, internet penetration stood at 78.7 percent, and there were approximately 36.22 million internet users in Iraq. 2 Fixed-line and mobile internet speeds remained relatively slow. As of May 2023, the median mobile download and upload speeds were 29.85 megabits per second (Mbps) and 14.96 Mbps, respectively. The median fixed-line broadband download and upload speeds were 33.99 Mbps and 31.39 Mbps, respectively. 3

The government, in partnership with ISPs, has sought to improve internet access across Iraq in recent years. EarthLink, the country’s largest ISP, is working with the government to extend infrastructure to underserved urban and rural areas. 4 However, rural connection development remains challenging (see A2), particularly because the Ministry of Communications has been slow to activate fiber-optic distribution terminals constructed by EarthLink. 5 During the coverage period, EarthLink installed 800 fiber-optic distribution terminals, which should bring high-speed internet access to 600,000 people once they become operational. 6

In February 2021, the National Internet Project (NIP) began delivering high-speed service to underserved parts of the country (see A3). ⁷ By February 2024, the number of fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) subscribers reached 180,000 via the NIP, which had also expanded service to more rural areas in governorates including Babil, Maysan, Muthanna, Najaf, and Dhi Qar.

In some Iraqi cities such as Mosul and Karbala, certain political parties use their influence over the local governments to favor or disfavor particular companies.

⁸ This influence may prevent a given ISP from entering the area and providing services or building infrastructure. Some tribes sabotage the infrastructure or demand bribes to grant access to a company's repair crews. In addition, some tribes outright refuse entry for any companies or their crews, arguing that the internet has a negative impact on society. ⁹

Much of Iraq's mobile infrastructure is based on third-generation (3G) technology, ¹⁰ although in June 2023, the minister of communications announced that Baghdad intended to introduce 5G services in order to facilitate the development of high-tech investment projects. ¹¹

Service is threatened by regular power outages, and a majority of schools and libraries still have no internet access at all. Stress on the power grid, particularly during the summer months, led to electricity outages and connectivity issues during the coverage period. For some residents, especially those without private generators, electricity and internet service may only be available for a few hours of the day during the hottest portion of the year. ¹² In the Kurdistan region, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) provided no more than 12 hours of electricity per day during the summer months, restricting access to broadband service. ¹³ Most cafés provide free, but low-quality, internet access.

Due to greater foreign and domestic investment, internet infrastructure in the Kurdistan region is more developed than in the rest of Iraq. 4G service has been available in the region's major cities since 2015, meaning speeds are considerably faster, although rural areas may have poorer service (see A2). The region's fixed-line broadband market is also more developed. Newroz Telecom provides such services and operates asymmetric digital subscriber line (ADSL) networks in Erbil and Duhok. While the region's two main mobile service providers, Asiacell and Korek Telecom, provide 4G services, their quality is poorer than ADSL services. ¹⁴

During the coverage period, NIP cables were destroyed in several governorates, limiting access for NIP subscribers. ¹⁵ In February 2024, EarthLink announced that sabotage attacks had severed fiber-optic connections across eastern Baghdad. The company confirmed that armed groups targeted 16 fiber-optic distribution terminals and cables, which led to a complete internet outage that lasted for around a day and affected more than 40,000 users, including governmental and private institutions. ¹⁶

A2 0-3 pts

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

1/3

Iraq's internet costs are among the highest in the region, despite the poor quality of service. The average cost of a monthly fixed-line broadband package is \$36.14, ¹⁷ while the average cost of one gigabyte (GB) of mobile data is \$1.07. ¹⁸

According to the Iraqi Digital Media Center, poor-quality internet services are sometimes sold at more than 50 times their actual value. ¹⁹ This leads many providers to rely on cheaper black-market internet services rather than government-sold packages. For example, the Ministry of Communications sells one megabyte (MB) of data for \$24 to private companies, while the black-market price does not exceed \$4. ²⁰

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 increase prices for low-capacity data packages and SIM cards. ²¹ In December 2022, the Council of Ministers, with the support of the Ministry of Communications, decided to end the 20 percent tax on communications services that had been in place since 2013. ²² While the tax cut decreased prices in theory, several local vendors increased their baseline prices in response, leaving costs unchanged for customers. ²³

A range of internet packages are available to customers under the NIP, though contracted providers have the right to change their prices at any time. ²⁴ In addition, internet pricing is more expensive in rural areas compared with urban areas, which exacerbates geographical disparities in access. As of March 2024,

EarthLink offered four monthly packages; the least expensive option cost 29,000 dinars (\$21.90) for 40 MBs in Baghdad and 39,000 dinars (\$29.40) in other governorates. The most expensive package cost 85,000 dinars (\$64.10) for 150 MBs in Baghdad and 100,000 dinars (\$75.50) in other governorates. **25** While EarthLink dominates the market (see A4), other companies offer similar services, often at similarly expensive prices. **26**

Internet service is somewhat better and prices are more affordable in the Kurdistan region. **27** An unlimited 4G package from Newroz Telecom costs 25,000 dinars (\$18.90). **28** For 18,000 dinars (\$13.60), FastLink provides an unlimited family package, which blocks pornographic and other “inappropriate” websites (see B1). **29** Mobile internet costs are high; for example, a monthly mobile data package from Zain costs 40,000 dinars (\$30.20). **30**

Rural areas suffer from particularly poor internet service. Many regions of Iraq are still using 2G technology due to the Ministry of Communications’ inability to deliver 3G service to these areas. Even in areas that have 3G access, the service quality can be poor. **31** In the Kurdistan region, there is a large gap in access and quality between major cities and rural areas, despite prices remaining the same across the region.

During the coverage period, the CMC announced several plans to deploy digital networks in remote areas. **32** For example, in December 2023, it announced the implementation of a series of projects targeting 53,000 people within 57 remote areas, including in the governorates of Karbala, Anbar, Diwaniyah, and Kirkuk. **33**

Internet smuggling, in which companies illegally extend telecommunications connections across borders, has cost the government billions of dinars in recent years. **34** The practice continued during the coverage period, despite several announcements by the government about its efforts to control the problem and hold smugglers accountable. Internet smuggling is cheaper for ISPs than paying the Ministry of Communications; for example, the cost of smuggling 1 MB of internet data into Iraq is approximately \$1, while ISPs pay approximately \$20 to the Ministry of Communications for 1 MB. **35**

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 cutting internet access during national exams, elections, and mass demonstrations. ³⁶ Because the Kurdistan region has some ISPs that operate separately from those in the rest of Iraq, it is not necessarily affected by internet disruptions in the south. ³⁷

Officials in Iraq implemented 66 internet outages in 2023, more than any other country in the world, and a majority of the restrictions were imposed during academic exams with the aim of preventing cheating. ³⁸ According to reporting from SMEX, a single day of internet shutdowns costs the Iraqi economy around \$1.4 million. ³⁹

During the coverage period, both the Iraqi government and the KRG implemented network disruptions amid national exams. For the first round of exams in 2023, which occurred from June 1 to June 17, the Ministry of Communications approved daily internet shutdowns from 4:00 a.m. until 8:00 a.m. For the second round of exams, between September 17 and September 28, the internet was shut down from 4:00 a.m. to 7:00 a.m. In the Kurdistan region, internet access was similarly suspended in July and August 2023. ⁴⁰

The negative impact of internet disruptions extends to the general public, and outages during exams affect all users, not just students. According to EarthLink, the disruptions significantly affect the quality of service provided to citizens even after the official outage hours, because the technology requires 10 or more hours to restabilize. ⁴¹ This leaves users with poor internet connectivity throughout the full exam period. According to the Ministry of Education, solving the problem of internet disruptions is one of its priorities, and the ministry has reportedly experimented with other ways to prevent cheating. ⁴²

The fiber-optic backbone in Iraq is centralized under the government, and the Ministry of Communications rents out fiber-optic infrastructure to private ISPs. The state's Informatics and 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 ITPC approval. **43** This policy discourages investment and allows the government to more easily limit access to communications services.

Similarly, in the Kurdistan region, the two ruling parties' ownership of ISPs and the fiber-optic backbone can facilitate government-ordered internet shutdowns. For example, O3 Telecom, which has close ties to the family of KRG president Nechirvan Barzani and his Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), is based in Erbil and Duhok and is the only company allowed to import fiber-optic services through Turkey, which it then distributes to smaller companies like Newroz and FastLink. Several major companies in Sulaymaniyah Governorate, such as IQ Group, Kurdotel, and Fancy Net, have close ties to or are owned by members of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the family of that party's leader, Bafel Talabani. **44**

The development of the NIP, specifically the Ministry of Communications' management of the fiber-optic network, could further centralize the internet backbone under the national government (see A1). The Ministry of Communications has already said that the contracted companies will not bear responsibility for any service disruptions. **45**

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?	2/6
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Score Change: The score declined from 3 to 2 because Iraqi regulators announced that certain ISPs would only be able to offer Wi-Fi service in specific areas of the country, effectively limiting competition and potentially leading to higher prices and poorer service for consumers.

There are several 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 sector. **46** 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. **47** 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. **48**

The CMC is responsible for issuing licenses. Service providers seeking to import, trade, and maintain wireless and wired communications equipment must apply for a license and obtain security approval from the CMC and the National Security Agency. **49** ISPs must pay 400,000 dinars (\$300) for a year-long license, which can then be renewed. In February 2023, the CMC issued a statement requiring ISPs to visit the CMC headquarters to obtain licenses for the sale and import of technological devices, including SIM cards. **50** ISPs face legal consequences for contract noncompliance, but the conditions of said contracts remain unknown.

During the coverage period, the Ministry of Communications issued a decision aimed at geographically dividing the country for the provision of Wi-Fi services, allocating certain areas to specific companies. The decision lacked transparency, and competitive tenders were not offered when determining which companies would be able to operate in the five areas. Observers warned that the decision would limit market competition, further encourage regional monopolies, and lead to poorer service. **51**

In the Kurdistan region, telecommunications companies must provide user information in response to judicial requests under Law No. 6 of 2008 and the Law to Prevent Misuse of Communications Equipment (LPMCE) (see C1 and C2). **52** ISPs are also required to register SIM cards and electronic communication devices with the government within six months. **53**

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. As a result, some ISPs resell services that were illegally acquired from the KRG in the rest of Iraq (see A2). **54**

Three major companies—Zain, Asiacell, and Korek Telecom—operate over 90 percent of the mobile-tower infrastructure in Iraq. **55** EarthLink is the most popular ISP and provides service to at least 60 percent of Iraqi internet users via the national fiber-optic network. **56** Newroz Telecom and FastLink operate solely in the Kurdistan region. **57** Many ISPs have close ties to the government and security services. For example, Korek Telecom is owned by KRG military

commander Sirwan Barzani. **58** While the entry of foreign investments in recent years has helped to increase market competition, government-affiliated companies are still dominant. **59**

Many telecommunications companies operating in the Kurdistan region and the rest of Iraq are linked to powerful political parties or militias, which provide them with the necessary protection from any legal accountability for disruptions (see A5). **60**

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 regulates the telecommunications sector but is neither fair nor independent. There is no clear separation of powers between the CMC and the Ministry of Communications, and both suffer from overwhelming political interference.

There is no legal framework regulating telecommunications services in the Kurdistan region, and the KRG Ministry of Transport and Communications oversees the sector in practice. The Barzani family and the Talabani family have been criticized in recent years for their control of the market. **61**

An explicit constitutional guarantee protects the independence of any entity tasked with regulating the internet. Article 61/2 of the constitution calls for the parliament to supervise the performance of the regulatory body. Ordinance No. 65 of 2004 defines the functions and powers of the CMC's board of directors. **62** Despite these guarantees, board members are not chosen in an independent manner, as the government directly selects them. The commission lacks transparency and impartiality in its work, and it is subject to undue political and commercial influence. **63**

The telecommunications sector in general is heavily influenced by militias and political parties, and the appointment of most companies' board members relies on quotas for different political parties, many of which have sectarian affiliations.

64 In March 2023, a presidential council accused the communications minister of removing Sunni Muslims from senior ministerial positions without just cause and

without appointing replacements. For example, the undersecretary for administrative and financial affairs and the technical adviser to the ministry were terminated for “noncompliance with the specialization.” ⁶⁵

Regulatory decisions are neither fair nor transparent, but rather are subject to political and partisan pressures and government directives. ⁶⁶ The Association for Defending Freedom of the Press in Iraq (ADFPI) monitored violations committed by the CMC over 10 years, noting a pattern under successive governments in which the commission closed satellite channels and media outlets that were considered critical of incumbent political forces. The ADFPI’s 2020 report found that most of the CMC’s decisions against the media were based on political interests. ⁶⁷ In July 2023, the head of the CMC suspended the license of Ericsson, a Swedish telecommunications company operating in Iraq, after it was reported that a copy of the Quran and the Iraqi flag had been burned in Sweden. ⁶⁸

Corruption remains a problem for the telecommunications sector. ISPs have been known to bribe the CMC to ensure that consumer prices stay high. ⁶⁹ In February 2022, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists reported on Ericsson’s history of bribery and corruption in Iraq, including a \$1.2 million payment to the Barzani family for “facilitation to the chairman” to maintain and expand the company’s mobile network in Iraq. ⁷⁰

In February 2023, five employees from Diwaniyah Telecom were arrested on charges of illegally smuggling unlicensed broadcast and wireless internet services into Iraq and reselling those services to private companies (see A2). They allegedly gained more than 1.8 billion dinars (\$1.36 million) from the operation. ⁷¹

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?

4/6

Score Change: The score declined from 5 to 4 because Telegram was briefly blocked in August 2023, and at least two independent websites were also blocked during the coverage period.

While the Iraqi information landscape opened after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, the government occasionally blocks websites and—more frequently—social media sites, usually citing security concerns or the need to maintain stability during times of unrest. **72** The government rarely blocks political websites, but it has blocked some gambling and video-gaming sites in the past. **73** Authorities have also taken steps to block pornography sites. **74**

In August 2023, the Ministry of Communications blocked Telegram, **75** citing “reasons related to national security and the integrity of personal data.” The messaging application was unblocked a few days later. **76**

At least two independent websites were blocked over the past year. The news website Ultra Iraq was blocked in November 2023 and remained inaccessible at the end of the coverage period. **77** According to the Gulf Center for Human Rights, the blocking was done without prior notice from the relevant government authorities and was believed to be a response to the site's criticism of government performance and its coverage of certain corruption cases. **78** In February 2024, the Ministry of Communications blocked Al-Hudood, a website that published political and satirical content. The ministry did not provide justification for the blocking, which remained in place at the end of the coverage period. **79**

In March 2023, the Ministry of Communications directed ISPs and telecommunications companies to link their domain name system (DNS) servers with the ministry's DNS. This gives the ministry the ability to block any website across Iraq aside from the Kurdistan region. The ministry is working to provide companies with a list of blocked websites or blocking requests and update its DNS accordingly. **80**

In December 2023, the Federal Supreme Court issued a provisional order to halt and block all pornographic websites nationwide, including in the Kurdistan region.

81 The order was reissued in March 2024, with additional paragraphs that ban “publishing content that is indecent, blasphemous, or disrespectful to the divine, holy books, prophets, or religious symbols, as well as promoting and disseminating

immorality, prostitution, sexual deviance, and insulting others.” It is understood that this ban could allow for the blocking of websites hosting such content, and the court concluded the decision by ordering the blocking of “other websites containing offenses and attacks on the customs and values of Iraqi society.” ⁸² It is unclear whether any websites have been officially blocked under this order.

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 their content, particularly material that is critical of the government. In the past, the government, frequently acting through the CMC, has also pressured social media companies to remove accounts or delete specific content.

The government has taken an increasingly repressive stance on LGBT+ content. In April 2024, amendments to an existing law banned the promotion or publication of LGBT+ content, imposing prison sentences of up to seven years and steep fines for those found guilty (see C2). ⁸³ Although the amendments do not specify whether promotion or publication of such content extends to the online space, rights groups concluded that the legislation’s vague wording could be used to criminalize online content. ⁸⁴

Security forces at times delete content from activists’ and journalists’ phones and social media accounts. In June 2024, after the coverage period, several journalists and activists who are part of Protect Goyzha, a civil society organization, had their phones confiscated by security forces during a gathering in Sulaymaniyah Governorate. Several of the Protect Goyzha members reported that security agents deleted photos from the confiscated phones. ⁸⁵

During the previous coverage period, a draft of the CMC’s Regulation No. 1 of 2023 for Digital Content in Iraq was leaked (see B3 and C2). If adopted, the regulation would allow authorities to remove a wide swath of online content and restrict users and online platforms from publishing certain kinds of material. Article 32 of

the regulation would give the CMC broad discretion to remove content that violates a long and vague list of “prohibited” items. ⁸⁶ Article 5 would prohibit online content that “insults the state, its public authorities, or natural and legal persons in Iraq,” while other articles would ban any content that “promotes homosexuality.” Article 23 would prohibit the sharing of disinformation during electoral periods, which could hinder political mobilization and speech online. As of June 2024, the draft regulation had not been adopted.

In January 2023, the Ministry of Interior introduced a platform called Balgh, which allows users to report social media content that could “destabilize social stability” or be considered offensive to “public taste or modesty.” ⁸⁷ A month later, the ministry said it had received 96,000 reports of undesirable content through Balgh.

⁸⁸ It is unclear what action the ministry could take to remove such content. Some users have reported that authorities forced them to delete content that was reported through Balgh (see C3). ⁸⁹

In June 2022, the KRG’s Ministry of Culture issued a statement warning media organizations and social media platforms to abstain from publishing articles that criticize the Kurdistan region or any other content that they believe would incite fear among residents or raise concerns about regional stability. ⁹⁰ The ministry also promised to sanction those who do not comply.

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

Restrictions to online content are not transparent, as they are often manipulated to serve the political interests of the government and contradict the constitution. There is currently no clear legal framework governing content restrictions 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 their practices cannot be considered transparent or proportionate (see A3). ⁹¹ Content removal decisions are often linked to the influence of the executive leadership or powerful political parties. For example,

there was no reason given following the blocking of the satirical political website Al-Hudood (see B1).

The CMC's draft Regulation No. 1 of 2023 for Digital Content lacks transparency and contains broad and arbitrary provisions. Many of the provisions and definitions in the proposed regulation contradict the constitution and do not meet international human rights standards. For example, content can be removed if it is deemed insulting to the state, threatens national security, or violates "public and private taste" (see B2). **92** The regulation had not been adopted as of June 2024.

Because there is no law specifically governing content restrictions, online censorship is often imposed without accountability. **93** While the government sometimes explains why it has restricted content or connectivity, its 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 disrupting internet access and blocking social media during protests. **94**

In August 2023, the CMC directed all media outlets and social media platforms operating in the country not to use the term "homosexuality" and to replace it with "sexual deviancy." In addition, all digital services companies licensed by the CMC are prohibited from promoting these terms in their applications and programs. **95**

While the state rarely blocks or filters content, few avenues to appeal censorship decisions exist in practice. If the government asks the Ministry of Communications to block or filter online content, the ministry presents a "feasibility study" to the parliament, after which a decision is made. **96** Those who wish to appeal a content removal decision could approach the CMC, but this rarely happens in practice. **97** In 2014, the KRG issued regulations that it has since relied on to block publications or ban "inappropriate" comments. **98**

At times, international social media companies remove Iraqi content without transparency or proportionality, partly because they have poor Arabic-language content moderation capabilities. **99**

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.

In anticipation of expected legal consequences, many content creators have appeared on their platforms to apologize to the Ministry of Interior and promise to delete their “indecent” content. ¹⁰⁰ For example, in February 2023, musician Saadoun al-Saadi posted a video apologizing for a certain word in one of his songs, after one of his colleagues was sentenced to prison for similar content. ¹⁰¹

In February 2024, the acting speaker of the parliament directed the body’s legal department to file lawsuits “against any institution or individual who defames the parliament and its deputies.” The Alliance for Defending Freedom of Expression in Iraq issued a statement condemning this directive, describing it as “extremely dangerous” because of the vague wording, which could be used to punish anyone who criticizes the government or expresses a political opinion. ¹⁰²

Crimes against the media motivate journalists to pursue self-censorship. ¹⁰³ Iraq remains one of the world’s most dangerous places for journalists, with Reporters Without Borders (RSF) noting that many killings are carried out with effective impunity; the lack of security has had a significant impact on online speech. ¹⁰⁴ Intimidation, arrests, and assassinations of social media users, online activists, and journalists are not uncommon, with social media posts sometimes triggering violent reprisals (see C7). ¹⁰⁵ This has led users to refrain from publishing critical content or voicing opposition to the government, militias, and party policies online. Self-censorship is most prevalent among journalists based in Iraq, yet even those who publish from abroad self-censor at times.

Some journalists continue to pursue their careers in Iraq despite the risks, but many have chosen to remain in the Kurdistan region or flee to Turkey or other countries after their colleagues were subjected to various abuses or their outlets were shuttered. ¹⁰⁶ While the Kurdistan region has been considered a relatively

safe place for journalists and online activists, the KRG has cracked down on free speech in recent years, leading to more self-censorship. **107**

Self-censorship is driven not only by fear of government retaliation or surveillance, **108** but also by the fear of being targeted by fellow citizens. According to the Iraqi Center for Supporting Freedom of Expression, some violations against journalists, bloggers, and online commentators are committed by relatives or tribal leaders who persecute the content producers and prevent them from carrying out their work. **109**

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 heavily 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 respective agendas. **110**

The media environment has a progovernment bias due to political manipulation and a dearth of independent outlets. This is particularly evident around elections, when competing parties flood the online sphere with misleading information and propaganda. **111** In Kirkuk Governorate, misleading news coincided with the December 2023 governorate council elections, fueling some disorder during the coverage period. **112**

Public officials and other powerful figures are known to influence online journalism by offering bribes or other benefits, or by asking journalists to skew their coverage to favor a specific party or politician. **113**

Rewards are typically given to state-affiliated journalists and outlets, such as members of the progovernment Journalists' Syndicate in the Kurdistan region. **114** That region's dominant political parties, the KDP and the PUK, also own dozens of media outlets through which they promote their political narratives. **115** These media networks, known as "shadow media," claim independence, but powerful politicians covertly fund their activities. **116** Online outlets owned by the two

governing parties are given prioritized access to public information, putting independent or opposition-aligned outlets at a disadvantage. **117**

Inauthentic accounts impersonate political figures, parties, activists, and news outlets with the intent of spreading false information or defaming opposition groups. **118** In August 2023, a coordinated disinformation campaign that began on the social media platform X and later made its way to online and traditional news media falsely claimed that the United States was planning to overthrow the governments in Iraq and Syria. The story first spread via automated amplification of hashtags on social media, and politicians and state-run television hosts quickly took up the false story. **119**

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 the Kurdistan region and the rest of Iraq allow outlets that align their reporting with powerful figures to receive funding and advertising revenues that smaller, independent, or opposition-aligned outlets lack. **120** The latter outlets cannot afford the staff or facilities that government-affiliated outlets enjoy, and they are consequently uncompetitive against organizations like Rudaw, Kurdistan 24, and KurdsatNews, all of which receive funding from prominent KRG political figures or parties. **121**

The CMC's draft regulation on content would introduce new rules for users, platforms, and website hosts (see B3). According to Article 28 of the proposed regulation, websites and platform administrators would be required to register with the CMC. Platforms with more than 100,000 subscribers would be subject to a \$35 fee, while those with over a million subscribers would face a \$70 fee. **122**

There is no law regulating advertisements or foreign investment in the online media sector. **123** 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. **124**

The CMC's regulations lack criteria for licensing approval, but several international news outlets have had their licenses suspended in recent years. **125** During the coverage period, the head of the CMC blocked the website of the National News Center for not obtaining a license. In March 2024, the outlet won its case at an Iraqi federal court, and the site was unblocked after demonstrating that it was indeed licensed by the Iraqi Journalists Syndicate. **126**

In May 2022, the KRG's Ministry of Culture issued new guidelines that require social media networks to register with the ministry within three months. **127** Website owners or bloggers seeking to obtain an Iraqi domain must submit an application to the CMC or accredited registrars and provide certain identification information (see C4). **128**

In December 2023, the CMC announced that it was working on a regulatory framework specific to licensing mobile applications in Iraq. The regulations, if enacted, would affect applications that provide certain services, including but not limited to delivery apps, e-commerce platforms, health care apps, educational platforms, and electronic payment apps. **129**

During the coverage period, the CMC provided financial grants to Iraqi webpages that published content supporting government policies or initiatives, including positive articles about the Iraqi dinar, **130** the security forces, and efforts to combat illegal narcotics.

B7 o-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. **131** Furthermore, online misinformation is rampant and has a serious impact on public opinion. **132**

Independent media outlets struggle to compete with those affiliated with political parties. Apart from progovernment media, there are also “civil media” outlets, which are owned by investors and businesspeople but are not necessarily independent. They function as fronts for political parties and powerful authorities to achieve certain goals and sway public opinion on certain topics. Many civil media outlets focus on issues of nationalism and sectarianism, and most seek to manipulate online discussion of religious and sectarian issues (see B5). They have headquarters, channels, newspapers, radio stations, websites, and “electronic armies” in different parts of Iraq. **133**

Many Iraqis rely on state-owned websites and Arabic-language television channels to access news, but pan-Arab outlets based abroad, such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, are also popular. In addition, residents have increasingly turned to social media for their news. **134**

Online content related to LGBT+ issues is difficult to access. Because LGBT+ rights are not protected under Iraqi law, websites and blogs avoid publishing content on these issues for fear of retribution. **135** Those who search for LGBT+ information often receive results meant to deter further searches through intimidation, and this has increased since the parliament introduced legislation that banned LGBT+ advertising and publishing (see B2 and C2). According to the legal amendments, which were adopted in April 2024, those who promote LGBT+ content could face serious criminal penalties. **136**

In July 2022, activists, journalists, and civil society organizations called on the parliament to expedite the passage of an access-to-information law. **137** The absence of such a law has posed challenges to journalists and prevented them from obtaining government information. In February 2024, the parliament’s first reading of the draft law took place. **138** According to rights groups, the draft narrowed down the originally proposed scope of freedom to access and disseminate information. The law had not passed at the end of the coverage period.

Users sometimes employ virtual private networks (VPNs), though not necessarily to bypass censorship, as the government does not block many websites. Instead, users rely on the tools as a safeguard against surveillance or to publish content anonymously (see C4 and C5). **139** Vague language in the draft CMC regulation on

content may ban the use of VPNs, though the regulation had not been adopted as of June 2024 (see B3). **140**

B8 0-6 pts

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

4/6

Iraqis rely on social media to organize and mobilize protests. Authorities have blocked certain social media applications or internet access during times of unrest in previous coverage periods.

During this coverage period, social media were used to demand the release of several imprisoned activists and journalists (see C3). **141** In January 2024, for example, a social media campaign was launched after the arrest of journalist and political analyst Mohammed Nana. Users organized on X to demand Nana's release. **142** A similar campaign called for the release of blogger Yasser al-Jubouri after his arrest in February 2024 (see C3).

Social media platforms have played a prominent role in organizing protests, and in the past authorities have shut down the internet in response to such online mobilization. In October 2023, major demonstrations were organized—partly on social media—to protest Israel's military offensive in the Gaza Strip following a massive terrorist attack by the Palestinian militant group Hamas. **143** In December 2020, thousands of people in the Kurdistan region participated in peaceful protests that were organized on social media, demanding payment of their salaries and calling on the government to hold snap parliamentary elections. The KRG responded by restricting internet access regionwide for about eight hours.

144

In December 2023, the parliament held its first reading of a draft law on freedom of expression, assembly, and peaceful protest. The law, if passed, would require prior approval for any assembly or peaceful protest. **145** In February 2024, the draft was narrowed somewhat, and while the new version would not require approval for protests, it would require organizers to provide notice to the governor, subgovernor, or head of the local administrative unit at least 48 hours before a planned protest or demonstration. The draft legislation had not adopted as of June 2024. **146**

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

The Iraqi constitution includes protections for the freedoms of expression, association, and communication, including electronic communication.

Article 38 of the constitution guarantees “freedom of expression of opinion by all means, freedom of the press, printing, advertising, media and publication.” ¹⁴⁷

Article 4 of the CMC 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. ¹⁴⁸ Some national laws specifically constrain freedom of expression, contradicting the protections offered by the constitution and the CMC Law (see C2). While the KRG does not have its own constitution, one was drafted in 2009. ¹⁴⁹

Several judicial decisions made during the coverage period were deemed by rights groups to be in violation of Article 38 of the constitution. ¹⁵⁰ In March 2024, the Federal Supreme Court upheld a decision that ordered the blocking of pornographic websites and platforms that contain “indecent content, insults, and mockery of sacred symbols” (see B1). ¹⁵¹

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. ¹⁵² Similarly, the region’s LPMCE protects the content of electronic communications, but vaguely worded articles allow for restrictions, and the law has been used to penalize journalists and activists in the past (see C2). ¹⁵³

Neither the Iraqi judiciary nor the Kurdistan regional judiciary can be considered independent. ¹⁵⁴ 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. ¹⁵⁵ In the Kurdistan region,

the Cassation Court's 10 judges are sworn in by the KRG's prime minister after being selected by the main parties, undermining the judiciary's independence. **156**

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 militias backed by the Iranian regime—often operate with impunity. **157**

In December 2022, the Supreme Judicial Council in the Kurdistan region announced that judges would be prohibited from using social media. **158**

C2 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

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

The 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 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). **159** Although few individuals receive defamation-related prison sentences, the criminal process itself amounts to a form of punishment. Authorities often file charges as a way to intimidate activists and journalists, knowing that cases will eventually be dismissed or end in acquittal.

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. **160** Article 403 states that those found guilty of publishing “writings, drawings, pictures, films, symbols, or other things” deemed “immoral to the public” can face up to two years in prison and a minimum fine of 200 dinars (\$0.15). **161** The penal code also

includes broader speech offenses such as insulting the “Arab nation” or any government official.

Articles 210 and 211 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. **162**

In May 2022, the parliament unanimously approved a law criminalizing any form of “normalization” with Israel. Under the law, those engaging in any connections with Israeli counterparts, including via social media, could face the death penalty. **163**

Authorities in the Kurdistan region use the regional penal code and the LPMCE to curtail freedom of expression. **164** Criminal proceedings have been directed either under Article 433 of the penal code, which prohibits “defamation,” or under Article 2 of the LPMCE, which prohibits, among other things, the publication of defamation and misinformation, both of which carry fines and prison sentences.

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. **165**

Article 2 of the KRG’s LPMCE 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. **166**

In April 2024, the Iraqi parliament passed amendments to the Law on Combating Prostitution, No. 8 of 1988. Along with other criminal penalties for same-sex relations, the new law criminalizes “promoting homosexuality” and imposes prison sentences of up to seven years and fines of 10 to 15 million dinars (\$7,500 to \$11,300). **167** The vague wording in the law and the lack of a clear definition for

“promoting” has led rights groups to interpret the measure as an attack on both online and offline forms of LGBT+ expression and content (see B2). **168**

C3 0-6 pts

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

1/6

Score Change: The score declined from 2 to 1 because more people received long prison sentences for their social media content than in the previous coverage period.

Online journalists and activists are routinely detained and arrested in the Kurdistan region and the rest of Iraq. While long prison sentences for online content remain relatively rare, they have recently grown more common.

Several users received prison sentences during the coverage period. In December 2023, three individuals were sentenced to six years in prison for promoting ideas of the banned Baath Party through social media platforms. **169** The poet Ahmed Salam was brought before a military court in July 2023 and charged with contempt of religion after sharing a photo of religious figures online. He was sentenced to one year in prison and dismissed from his job. **170**

In June 2023, TikTok user Aboud Skaiba received a one-year suspended prison sentence for posting a video in which he sang with an English accent. **171** In February 2024, civil society activist Haider Hussein Hameed (Haider Hawija) was arrested and taken to the Dhi Qar Court of Appeal, where he was sentenced to six months in prison for using his Facebook page to air criticism of local officials, including a district mayor who personally filed several lawsuits against him. **172**

Social media users are increasingly being charged for posting “immoral” content (see B2). In September 2023, authorities in the Kurdistan region detained two cosmetics experts, both of whom were minors, on charges of posting immoral content after they appeared wearing women’s clothing and makeup in pictures on their social media pages. **173** Also in September, the Karkh Investigation Court issued an arrest and search warrant against the artist Joanna al-Asil on charges of posting “indecent content” through her social media accounts. **174** In November 2023, security forces arrested the singer Taiseer, known as Sparrow of Baghdad,

175 and Hadeel Khalid, known as Umm al-Loul, for social media videos of them dancing in nightclubs. **176** In June 2024, after the coverage period, the Department of Content Supervision at the Ministry of Interior arrested two Syrian singers, Mohsen al-Farati and Angie Farah, on charges related to inappropriate content. **177**

During the coverage period, the Balgh platform facilitated the arrests of dozens of users (see B2). **178** Those found to have posted “indecent content” did not receive prior notification about their alleged transgressions, and often faced arbitrary penalties that lacked due process. Specifically, authorities used Article 403 of the penal code to impose penalties on those who were identified for allegedly sharing inappropriate content (see C2). **179**

In February 2024, the Karkh Appeals Court in Baghdad sentenced Inas al-Khalidi to four months of imprisonment on charges of indecent content after he shared photos of himself singing in “revealing clothing.” **180** Two TikTok users, Shivan al-Zubaidi and Fadel Arkan, were each sentenced to four months in prison on charges of indecent content for sharing videos in which they performed short theatrical sketches. **181**

Social media users may also be arrested for religious or atheist speech. In March 2024, police in Muthanna arrested an individual on charges of managing a Facebook page called “Atheists of Samawah.” Specifically, the individual allegedly appeared in a video “wearing inappropriate clothes” and sharing “immoral” photos online. **182** In July 2023, the Karkh Investigation Court summoned Abu Habeib al-Safi, a well-known religious figure, on charges of posting indecent content on social media. **183**

Multiple bloggers and journalists were arrested during the coverage period for their online reporting or content. In February 2024, Yasser al-Jubouri, a prominent activist and blogger known for addressing corruption issues in Iraq, was arrested at the Baghdad airport while attempting to leave the country for Ireland, where he resides. According to a statement from his family, his arrest was related to a post he had previously published online, discussing “the appointment of relatives of senior government officials in the Iraqi government.” **184** He was released after several days, but he reported that “authorities retained his personal phone and conducted a search on it.”

In August 2023, journalist Islam Kashani was arrested at his home in Zakho by a unit affiliated with the KRG's internal security forces. His home was raided without a judicial warrant, and he was released the next day on bail. Local sources confirmed that his arrest was related to social media posts in which he criticized corruption in the Kurdistan region's institutions, nonpayment of salaries to employees, and poor public services. ¹⁸⁵

Social media users were arrested or faced other repercussions for criticizing the government or politicians during the coverage period. In January 2024, journalist Mohammed Nana was arrested following several social media posts in which he criticized the government and the prime minister. ¹⁸⁶ Also in January, journalist Omid Baroshki was arrested on charges of defamation for a social media post about a member of the Kurdistan National Congress. ¹⁸⁷ He was released in February 2024. Media personality Ann Salah was permanently banned from appearing on Iraqi television in March 2024 due to her criticism of the high cost of living on her Instagram account. ¹⁸⁸

Activists face persecution for their online content. In March 2024, activist Saad Amer was arrested in Mosul following a defamation complaint filed against him by the Ministry of Culture for his Facebook posts. He was released on bail of 5 million dinars (\$3,800) the day after his arrest. Amer stated on his Facebook page that his mobile phone was confiscated and not returned after his release. ¹⁸⁹ Also in March, civil society activist Karar al-Zirjawi was arrested in Nasiriyah by a special forces team from Baghdad. Local sources confirmed that his arrest was linked to his work as a correspondent for the Yalla website, which focuses on Iraqi public affairs. ¹⁹⁰

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?	3/4
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The government generally does not place significant restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption services. ¹⁹¹ While there are some legal limits on anonymity, people in Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, are able to use encryption tools in practice.

SIM-card registration is required in Iraq, though unregistered SIM cards can easily be found on the informal market. ¹⁹² To legally buy a SIM card and register it with the CMC, customers must submit their name, phone number, address, and other identifying information. ¹⁹³

As part of the NIP, the Ministry of Communications and the contracted ISPs are building an information base for all subscribers (see A1 and A3). NIP users will have to submit their official residence address, full name, government identification number, and other identifying information. ¹⁹⁴

Users seeking to obtain an Iraqi domain must submit an application to the CMC or accredited registrars (see B6). 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. ¹⁹⁵

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy?	3/6
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Article 40 of the 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 CMC Law states that telephone calls and private communications may not be monitored, wiretapped, or disclosed except in accordance with the law and a court decision. ¹⁹⁶

Despite these protections, government monitors are known to access private discussions. ¹⁹⁷ The US State Department’s annual *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* have repeatedly cited credible evidence that Iraqi and KRG authorities “monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority.” ¹⁹⁸

During the coverage period it was reported that the National Security Agency was working on implementing a deep packet inspection (DPI) system that would enable more thorough monitoring of online activities in Iraq. The agency has reportedly asked internet companies to install the relevant components of this system. ¹⁹⁹

In August 2021, the country's Supreme Judicial Council announced the formation of a committee to monitor online publications. The committee is tasked with identifying violations and issuing recommendations to investigative courts. **200** The body also issues arrest warrants for users whose content is flagged by the Balgh platform, indicating that social media monitoring is underway (see B2 and C3).

Neither the Kurdistan region nor the rest of Iraq has data-protection legislation or a cybersecurity authority. As the communications landscape lacks adequate oversight or regulation, even militias—specifically those supported by the Iranian government—are likely able to conduct surveillance of their own. **201**

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 penal code, which prescribes “imprisonment for a period not exceeding one year and a fine not exceeding 100 dinars (\$0.08) or either of these two penalties.” **202**

Authorities in Iraq may have purchased commercial spyware in recent years. According to a former KRG intelligence service member, spyware was purchased from Italy in 2021, and surveillance technology has also been purchased from the Chinese company Xiaomi. **203**

Authorities have been known to search electronic devices during arrests, sometimes as a tactic to force journalists to reveal their sources. **204** In August 2022, journalist Sanour Karim Muhammad had her phone searched after she was arrested while covering protests in Sulaymaniyah Governorate. She was forced to unlock her phone, which was then examined by security agents. **205** In March 2024, security forces arrested several people, including journalists, at demonstrations in Sulaymaniyah Governorate. Several journalists reported that their equipment had been confiscated and all their footage had been deleted (see B2). **206**

According to a March 2023 report from Human Rights Watch (HRW), security forces have surveilled LGBT+ people on social media and dating applications and then targeted them with blackmail and harassment. **207**

Intelligence services in the Kurdistan region, specifically the Parastin and Zanyari agencies, which are controlled by the KDP and PUK, respectively, are known to monitor communications, including the phones of employees. In September 2021, the president of the PUK confirmed that Zanyari had monitored phone calls in the past. In a press conference, he stated that members of the PUK were afraid to use Asiacell to communicate for fear of surveillance. **208**

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 comprehensive data-protection or privacy laws in the Kurdistan region or the rest of Iraq. **209** The absence of such a law was one of the main reasons for the blocking of Telegram during the coverage period; the restriction was reportedly imposed in response to a data leak incident involving the personal information of millions of Iraqis (see B1). **210**

While the government may not request user data without a judicial order, **211** experts agree that authorities may carry out such activities without legal cover in practice due to the lack of adequate data protection or oversight. **212** Some telecommunications companies are required to retain user data, including call records, for a period of five years. **213** While telecommunications companies do not systematically collect user data, the information they do store is vulnerable to abuse given the lack of legal safeguards.

ISPs in the Kurdistan region, many of which have close ties to the ruling political parties, may also monitor online activity. **214** According to a local ISP employee, telecommunications companies in the region store and monitor user data and information. Specifically, technicians have been able to access old Facebook accounts belonging to customers and monitor how many times they were logged in and out, how many devices were logged in, and the location of users' devices. **215**

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

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. Those who perpetrate physical attacks and assassinations often go unpunished.

Kidnappings and enforced disappearances are not uncommon. Activist Hussein al-Shahmani was abducted in January 2024 by an unknown armed group in Basra. Al-Shahmani, who is active online, was warned to stop his social media activity and was subjected to torture and severe beatings before being released hours after his abduction. **216**

Activists and journalists were killed for their online content during the coverage period. Ayser al-Khafaji, a Shiite activist and blogger, was abducted and killed in February 2024 in Babylon. He was affiliated with the Sadrist movement and worked within its Saraya al-Salam faction. While the motivation behind his murder was not known with certainty, it was thought to be related to his recent online activity. **217** In October 2023, prominent civil society activist Ali Mahmoud Abboud al-Sabayi was assassinated in central Baghdad. Al-Sabayi had been active in mobilizing protests in 2019, and his killing was likely a response to Facebook posts in which he urged citizens to participate in further demonstrations. Shortly before his assassination, he participated in a protest in Tahrir Square and posted a photo on his Facebook page that showed him with a banner listing the goals of the October Popular Movement. **218**

People who express or are suspected of an LGBT+ identity face regular online harassment and often receive death threats. **219** In September 2023, blogger Noor al-Saffar, known as Noor BM, was killed in Baghdad by an unknown gunman. Al-Saffar, who was active on TikTok and Instagram, had identified as male but often appeared in videos wearing women's clothing and makeup. **220**

In March 2024, a couple with a large following on TikTok, known as Hussein and Shahinda, were subjected to an assassination attempt at their home in Baghdad. Hussein stated that they had been threatened more than once, especially during their TikTok livestreams. **221**

Journalists, including those working for online outlets, have faced physical violence while reporting. In September 2023, security forces attacked members of

the Sharp Press media foundation and confiscated their personal phones and other equipment. **222**

Gender-based discrimination is common online, and women are especially at risk of offline violence in retaliation for their online content. **223** In January 2023, YouTube influencer Taiba al-Ali was murdered by her father in an alleged “honor killing.” **224** In April of that year, he was sentenced to just six months in prison on the grounds that the killing was not premeditated. **225**

Women in politics also frequently face gender-based online violence. In October 2023, Zeina Hafiz al-Salhi, a candidate in the Diyala Governorate legislative elections, announced that she was ending her campaign after receiving death threats online, including threats against her son. **226** In November 2023, Wijdan Abdul Amir, a candidate representing the Civil Values Alliance, was targeted alongside several other candidates with an online harassment campaign in which groups of fake accounts attempted to smear their reputations by posting false claims about them. **227**

Yazidis, a religious minority group concentrated in northern Iraq, also face harassment and hate speech online. After false reports of Yazidis throwing stones at mosques circulated in April and May 2023, a wave of violent hate speech and death threats against the community spread on platforms such as Facebook and WhatsApp. **228** The online harassment continued even after authorities confirmed that the reports about damaged mosques were false. **229**

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 the Kurdistan region and elsewhere in Iraq 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. Activists have had their social media accounts deactivated by hackers.

In February 2024, an organized cyberattack targeted the Facebook page of a Kurdish news outlet, Bwarnews. In a statement, Bwarnews said that “due to the scale and organization of the cyberattack,” it was unable to publish new articles. The outlet said it suspected that the attack was in response to certain investigative articles that had been published several hours earlier. **230**

In March 2024, the official Facebook page of the prime minister’s office was hacked using software that exploited publishing permissions on websites and over email. This software began publishing reports and news related to the activities of a company specializing in artificial intelligence called Biorobotec. **231**

In November 2023, Iraqi security authorities announced that they had dismantled an espionage and information network linked to foreign entities. The group of five individuals had allegedly targeted the databases of state security institutions and leaked information belonging to the National Security Agency for the purpose of selling it. Officials said that the perpetrators had admitted to receiving training courses abroad and to being linked to external entities. **232**

As part of its cybersecurity efforts, the government has created the Iraqi Cyber Events Response Team (CERT) in coordination with the prime minister’s office. The CERT is tasked with developing cybersecurity measures and procedures. **233**

Footnotes

- 1** “Quick information about the National Internet Project,” INSM, February 16, 2021, <https://insm-iq.org/en/archives/327>; Nassar Al-Hajj, “Communications reveals the largest infrastructure modernization process that adopts modern Internet technologies,” INA, March 8, 2021, <https://www.ina.iq/131918--.html>. “Specifications & Quality Standards,” Iraq National Backbone, Accessed September 2022, <https://ftth.iq/specifications/>
- 2** Simon Kemp, “Digital 2024: Iraq,” Data Reportal, February 2024, <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-iraq>
- 3** Speedtest Global, “Iraq,” Accessed June 2024, <https://www.speedtest.net/global-index/iraq>
- 4** Interview with Dr. Alaa Mousa, CEO of Earthlink, February 8, 2024, Baghdad.
- 5** Interview with Dr. Alaa Mousa, CEO of Earthlink, February 8, 2024, Baghdad.

More footnotes



On Iraq

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Country Facts

Population

44,500,000

Global Freedom Score

30/100 **Not Free**

Internet Freedom Score

40/100 **Partly Free**

Freedom in the World Status

Not Free

Networks Restricted

Yes

Social Media Blocked

Yes

Websites Blocked

Yes

Pro-government Commentators

Yes

Users Arrested

Yes

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