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Freedom on the Net 2023 - Iraq

PARTLY FREE

43

/ 100

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LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

42 / 100 Partly Free

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

Overview

Internet freedom in Iraq, including the Kurdistan region, is limited. While internet speeds and access have improved due to recent infrastructural investments, Iraq still has some of the region's weakest telecommunications networks and highest costs. During the coverage period, authorities launched a crackdown on social media users. Legislation that could increase government-ordered censorship and increase criminal penalties for a wide swath of online speech was also proposed. Security forces routinely arrest internet users, and physical attacks against journalists, activists, and social media users due to their online activity are common. These violations, which have created an environment of fear, have forced many Iraqis to self-censor. Others, particularly reporters, have left the country.

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, ready to repress dissidents and peaceful protesters. Increasingly, Iran 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.

Key Developments, June 1, 2022 - May 31, 2023

- Authorities in Iraq and the Kurdistan region disrupted connectivity during exams throughout the coverage period (see A3).
- In January 2023, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior introduced the Balgh platform, which allows users to report social media content that could be considered offensive or inappropriate (see B2 and C3).
- Iraqi lawmakers proposed Regulation No. 1 of 2023 for Digital Content; if passed, the regulation would allow authorities to remove online content, impose administrative fines on content providers, and issue criminal penalties against internet users (see B3, B6, and C2).
- The Iraqi government reintroduced two bills, the draft Law on Freedom of Expression and Peaceful Assembly and the draft Cybercrimes Law, which would impose severe penalties for individuals' online activities (see C2).
- In January 2023, a YouTube influencer was murdered by her father in an alleged "honor killing" (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

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 in recent years to improve telecommunications services through several projects that include extending fiber-optic cables outside of urban areas, installing new towers, and building the capacity of telecommunications staff.¹

In February 2021, the National Internet Project (NIP) began delivering high-speed service to underserved parts of the country (see A3).² As part of the NIP, the Ministry of Communications is working to implement a modern fiber-to-the-home (FTTH) network and has deployed over 100 communication centers as of June 2023.³ During the coverage period, the number of FTTH subscribers reached 100,000.⁴ By January 2023, the NIP had expanded service to areas including Babil, Maysan, Al Muthanna, Najaf, and Dhi Qar governorates.

Internet access and speeds remain poor, however. Internet penetration stood at 74.9 percent as of January 2023, and there were an estimated 33.72 million internet users in Iraq. The number of mobile connections stood at 45.76 million.⁵ As of May 2023, the median mobile download and

upload speeds were 30.67 megabits per second (Mbps) and 13.96 Mbps, respectively. The median fixed-line broadband download and upload speeds were 28.25 Mbps and 26.94 Mbps, respectively.⁶

Much of Iraq's mobile infrastructure is based on third-generation (3G) technology.⁷ Service is threatened by regular power outages and a majority of schools and libraries still have no internet access at all. 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.⁸ 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.⁹ While the region's two main mobile service providers, Asiacell and Korek Telecom, provide 4G services, their quality is poorer than ADSL services.¹⁰ In February 2022, Asiacell announced that 7,200 new communication towers were in operation.¹¹

During the coverage period, NIP cables were destroyed in several governorates, limiting access to NIP subscribers.¹²

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 \$33.65,¹³ while the average cost of one gigabyte (GB) of mobile data is 68 cents.¹⁴

According to the Iraqi Digital Media Center, poor quality internet services are sometimes sold at more than 50 times their actual value.¹⁵ This leads many service 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 does not exceed \$4.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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.¹⁸ As of 2021, EarthLink and Symphony offered four monthly packages; the least expensive option cost 35,000 Iraqi dinars (\$23.74) for a

15 MB package, and the most expensive was 100,000 dinars (\$67.82) for a 150 MB package.¹⁹

Internet service is relatively better and prices are more affordable in the Kurdistan region.²⁰ An unlimited 4G package from Newroz Telecom costs 22,000 dinars (\$16.57).²¹ FastLink provides an unlimited family package for 18,000 dinars (\$13.56), which blocks pornographic and other “inappropriate” websites.²²

In terms of mobile service pricing, a monthly 30 GB 4G long term evolution (LTE) package from Zain cost 30,000 dinars (\$20.34) in July 2021.²³ Korek Telecom offered a monthly 30 GB package for 35,000 dinars (\$23.74) in September 2022,²⁴ while Asiacell and Zain offered an unlimited subscription for 40,000 dinars (\$27.13) in September 2022.²⁵

In December 2022, the Council of Ministers, with the support of the Ministry of Communications, decided to end the 20 percent communications services tax that had been in place since 2013.²⁶ While the tax cut decreased prices in theory, several local vendors increased their baseline prices in response, leaving prices unchanged for customers.²⁷

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 to these areas. Even in areas that have 3G access, the service quality can be poor.²⁸ 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.

Internet smuggling, which occurs when companies illegally transport telecommunications connections across borders, has cost Baghdad billions of dinars in recent years.²⁹ In June 2021, the Ministry of Communications discovered internet smuggling operations in governorates bordering the Kurdistan region. Approximately four billion dinars’ worth of services were effectively smuggled out of the national budget, according to a ministry spokesperson.³⁰ Several internet smuggling operations occurred during the coverage period.³¹

A3 0-6 pts

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

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 because authorities in Iraq and its Kurdistan region cut internet access during exams.

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.³² 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.³³

Both the Iraqi government and the KRG implemented network disruptions during national exams throughout the coverage period. In the Kurdistan region, internet cuts occurred for four hours a day over a two-week period during ministerial exams in June 2022.³⁴ Access was again restricted for one week in August 2022 around final exams.³⁵ Similarly, the Ministry of Communications in Baghdad announced daily eight-hour internet cuts in February 2023 during exams.³⁶ Reports also found that several social media platforms were blocked in Iraq during this period (see B1).³⁷

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.³⁸ 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 Barzani family and the 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 Talabani family and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).³⁹

The development of the NIP, specifically the Ministry of Communications' management of the fiber-optic network, could further centralize the internet backbone under the Baghdad government (see A1). The Ministry of Communications has already said that the contracted companies will not bear any responsibility for any service disruptions.⁴⁰

A4 0-6 pts

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

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.⁴¹ 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.⁴² 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.⁴³

The CMC is responsible for issuing licenses. Service providers wishing 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.⁴⁴ ISPs must pay 400,000 dinars

(\$270) 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.⁴⁵ ISPs face legal consequences for contract noncompliance, but the conditions of said contracts remain unknown.

In the Kurdistan region, telecommunications companies must provide user information following judicial request under Law No. 6 of 2008 and the Law to Prevent Misuse of Telecommunications Devices (see C6).⁴⁶ ISPs are also required to register SIM cards and electronic communication devices with the government within six months.⁴⁷

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 illegally acquired from the KRG in the rest of Iraq (see A2).⁴⁸

Three major companies—Zain, Asiacell, and Korek Telecom—operate over 90 percent of the mobile-tower infrastructure in Iraq.⁴⁹ EarthLink is the most popular ISP and provides service to 60 percent of Iraqi internet users via the national fiber-optic network.⁵⁰ Newroz Telecom and FastLink operate solely in the Kurdistan region.⁵¹ Many ISPs have close ties to the government and security services. For example, Korek Telecom is owned by KRG military commander Sirwan Barzani.⁵² While the entry of foreign investments in recent years has helped increase market competition, government-affiliated companies are still dominant.⁵³

Many telecommunications companies operating in Iraq and the Kurdistan region are linked to powerful political parties or militias, which provide them with the necessary protection from any legal accountability for disruptions (see A5).⁵⁴

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 oversees and regulates the Iraqi 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 the telecommunications sector in the Kurdistan region, and the Ministry of Transport and Communications oversees the sector in practice. The Barzani family has been criticized in recent years for their control of the sector.⁵⁵

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 parliament to supervise the performance of the regulator. Ordinance No. 65 of 2004 defines the functions and powers of the CMC's board of directors.⁵⁶ Despite these guarantees, board

members are not chosen in an independent manner, 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.⁵⁷

The telecommunications sector in Iraq is heavily influenced by militias and political parties, and the appointment of most board members relies on quotas for different political parties.⁵⁸ In March 2023, a presidential council accused the communications minister of removing Sunnis 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 “non-compliance with the specialization.”⁵⁹

Regulatory decisions are neither fair nor transparent, but rather are subject to political and partisan pressures and government directives.⁶⁰ 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 agency 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.⁶¹

Corruption remains a problem for the telecommunications sector. Most directors are appointed by political parties.⁶² Additionally, ISPs have been known to bribe the CMC to ensure consumer prices stay high.⁶³ In February 2022, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists reported on telecommunications company 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 their cellular networks in Iraq.⁶⁴

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 (\$1.2 million) from the operation.⁶⁵

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

While the Iraqi information landscape opened after the fall of Saddam 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.⁶⁶ The government rarely blocks political websites, but it has blocked some gambling and video-gaming sites in the past.⁶⁷

During the coverage period, authorities blocked social media platforms during national exams (see A3). Under the auspices of preventing

cheating, the Ministry of Communications blocked access to several social media and communications platforms for eight hours a day for one week in February 2023.⁶⁸

In August 2023, after the coverage period, the Ministry of Communications blocked Telegram, ostensibly for national security reasons.⁶⁹ The app was unblocked a few days later.⁷⁰

In November 2022, the communications minister issued a directive to block pornography websites.⁷¹ According to source within the ministry, the minister “ordered the formation of a technical team to delete pornographic websites,” adding that over 400 sites were blocked within days.⁷² The minister also called for the blocking of websites that publish content about homosexuality and atheism. As of June 2023, there has been no official blocking of websites hosting content related to LGBT+ issues or atheism.⁷³

In August 2022, the KRG’s Ministry of Transport and Communications issued a directive requiring companies to provide “family packages” that would block pornography and other online content that incites violence, offends religious symbols, or promotes drug or weapon use.⁷⁴ The KRG vowed to punish noncompliant companies.⁷⁵

There is little or no formal oversight regarding internet usage, and there is no legislation that requires the blocking of certain websites (see B3).⁷⁶ Advanced technology to automate censorship is not used outside the banking sector in Iraq.⁷⁷

B2 0-4 pts

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

Officials often use pressure or harassment to compel journalists who publish articles online to take down content, particularly criticism of the government. In the past, the government, often acting through the CMC, has pressured social media companies to remove accounts or delete specific content.

During the 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 passed, the regulation would allow authorities to remove a wide swath of online content and restrict users and online platforms from publishing certain kinds of content. Article 32 gives the CMC broad discretion to remove online content that violates the vague and long list of items deemed “prohibited.”⁷⁸ For example, Article 5 prohibits online content that “insults the state, its public authorities, or natural and legal persons in Iraq,” while other articles ban any content that “promotes homosexuality.” Article 23 prohibits the sharing of disinformation during electoral periods, which could hinder political mobilization and speech online. As of June 2023, the draft regulation has not been passed.

In January 2023, the Iraqi Ministry of Interior introduced Balgh, which allows users to report social media content that could “destabilize social stability” or be considered offensive to “public taste or modesty.”⁷⁹ In February 2023, the Ministry of Interior announced it had received 96,000 reports of undesirable content through Balgh.⁸⁰ It is unclear what action the ministry could take to remove that content. Some users have reported that authorities have forced them to delete content that was reported through Balgh. As of February 2023, at least 14 people have been charged with publishing “indecent or immoral” content (see C3).⁸¹

Content that contains commentary on government corruption or Iranian influence in Iraq is often removed. According to Google’s transparency report, the company received requests from the Iraqi government to take down 13 items in 2022.⁸²

Authorities in Iraq and the Kurdistan region have pressured journalists to delete online content.⁸³ In May 2022, after posting about Shiite militias in Iraq, Erbil-based political commentator Emad Bajalan was threatened by members of both the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) in Baghdad and KDP in Erbil and told to refrain from further discussion.⁸⁴ In July 2022, the KDP forced him to delete his post.⁸⁵ Also in July, the Facebook pages of Zhyan News were taken down.⁸⁶ According to an employee, the pages were not removed by Meta but rather by security forces who raided the outlet’s office and gained access to the account through the journalists’ computers.⁸⁷

In June 2022, the KRG’s Ministry of Culture issued a statement warning media organizations and social media platforms to abstain from publishing articles criticizing the Kurdistan region or any other content that they believe would incite fear among residents or raise concerns about regional stability.⁸⁸ The ministry also promised to sanction those who do not comply.

There is currently no legal liability for third parties or content hosts.⁸⁹ During the coverage period, several social media accounts that were allegedly used for electronic extortion were removed.⁹⁰ Similarly, nonconsensual photos that were posted online were removed.⁹¹

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 because they often fulfill the interests of the government and contradict the Iraqi constitution. 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 (see A3).⁹² Content removal

decisions are often linked to the influence of the government or powerful political parties.

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). Article 19 states that "it is prohibited to promote or advertise mechanisms that encourage and allow users to access blocked content," which could prohibit the use of circumvention tools such as virtual private networks (VPNs) (see B7).⁹³ Following significant pushback to the draft law, the head of the CMC called on journalists and media professionals to "send their proposals to the Commission," which they will review and come up with an "acceptable list" of prohibited content.⁹⁴ The regulation had not been passed as of June 2023.

Because there is no law governing content restrictions, online censorship is often imposed without accountability.⁹⁵ 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.⁹⁶

In June 2022, a joint ministerial committee was reported to be drafting media regulation legislation. If passed, television channels and social media pages would no longer be allowed to distribute content deemed to insult "the martyrs and the flag of Kurdistan."⁹⁷

While the state rarely blocks or filters content, few avenues to appeal censorship decisions exist in practice. If the government requests the Ministry of Communications to block or filter online content, the ministry presents a "feasibility study" to the Iraqi parliament, after which a decision is made.⁹⁸ Someone who wishes to appeal a content removal decision could approach the CMC but this rarely happens in practice.⁹⁹ In 2014, the KRG issued regulations that it has relied on to block publications or ban "inappropriate" comments.¹⁰⁰

At times, social media companies remove Iraqi content without transparency or proportionality, a byproduct of their poor Arabic-language content moderation capabilities.¹⁰¹ On a positive note, during the coverage period, the Iraqi Network for Social Media worked with TikTok to identify accounts that publish harmful pro-Islamic State content and in some cases delete these pages.

B4 0-4 pts

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

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 a November 2022 statement, the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq's Human Rights Office warned that the media environment in the country was worsening. It also reported "a nearly unanimous tendency to self-censor due to fear of retaliation or attack" based on interviews conducted earlier in the year.¹⁰²

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.¹⁰³ 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.¹⁰⁴ Similarly, Hassan al-Shammari announced that he had removed some posts that contained "offensive" content. Al-Shammari goes by Madiha online, which represents the personality of a strong Iraqi woman, and his videos have more than three million followers.¹⁰⁵ Also in February, the cleric Ali al-Sharifi, another controversial content creator, announced he was removing videos deemed "offensive to the Iraqi family" from his platforms.¹⁰⁶

Crimes against the media in Iraq push journalists to pursue self-censorship.¹⁰⁷ Iraq remains one of the world's most dangerous places for journalists, with Reporters Without Borders (RSF) noting that many killings of journalists occur with effective impunity; the lack of safety has had a significant impact on online speech.¹⁰⁸ 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).¹⁰⁹ 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 outside Iraq self-censor at times.

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, terrorist groups, or criminals—especially because the perpetrators of such abuses typically enjoy impunity.¹¹⁰ In response to these risks, many journalists and news outlets have refrained from discussing public affairs or the political situation.¹¹¹

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 violations or their outlets were shuttered.¹¹² 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.¹¹³ During the coverage period, journalists working in the Kurdistan region reported refraining from publishing content about violations committed by security forces for fear of retribution.¹¹⁴

While there is no law prohibiting the use of social media to express one's opinion, users fear government surveillance on social media platforms, leading them to self-censor (see C5).¹¹⁵ Self-censorship is not only driven by fear of government retaliation, but also by the fear of being targeted by other citizens. According to the Iraqi Center for Supporting Freedom of Expression, some violations against journalists, bloggers, and online commentators are committed by government agencies or their employees, while other "societal" violations are perpetrated by relatives or tribal leaders who persecute content producers and prevent them from carrying out their work.¹¹⁶

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.¹¹⁷

The media environment has a progovernment bias due to political manipulation and a dearth of independent outlets. This is particularly evident around elections, when political parties flood the online sphere with misleading information and propaganda.¹¹⁸ Ahead of the October 2021 elections, supporters of politician Nouri al-Maliki and the Dawa political party opened Facebook pages that linked to the party's website and published false election-related statistics.¹¹⁹ Similarly, in early October 2021, Sabereen News, a pro-Iran outlet, claimed that a UN representative was affiliated with the Mossad, an Israeli intelligence agency. The claim was widely shared on Telegram and was then reported in mainstream media.¹²⁰

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; journalists were asked to do the latter during the coverage period.¹²¹ In February 2023, a journalist working to expose corruption within a government body was asked to support an individual whose corrupt activity was exposed and to launch a countercampaign in their favor.¹²²

Rewards are typically given to state-affiliated journalists and outlets, such as members of the progovernment Journalists' Syndicate in the Kurdistan region.¹²³ That region's dominant political parties, the KDP and the PUK, additionally own dozens of media outlets through which they promote their political narratives.¹²⁴ These media networks, known as "shadow media," claim independence but powerful politicians covertly fund their

activities.¹²⁵ Online outlets owned by these parties are given prioritized access to public information, putting independent or opposition-aligned outlets at a disadvantage.¹²⁶

Inauthentic accounts impersonate political figures, parties, activists, and news outlets with the intent of spreading false information or defaming opposition groups.¹²⁷ In June 2021, Facebook reported that it had removed 675 accounts, 16 pages, and 10 Instagram accounts that targeted users and shared support of Iran and various Shiite militias active in Iraq.¹²⁸ In June 2022, *Politico Europe* reported that an Iranian-affiliated Iraqi news organization purchased Facebook ads that disseminated pro-Russia disinformation about Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy; the content was deleted after the outlet approached Meta.¹²⁹

Inauthentic accounts impersonate government authorities in an attempt to spread disinformation. During the coverage period, a TikTok account impersonating the Iraqi Ministry of Interior published a misleading video about an arrested social media user claiming they were one of the accounts targeted via Balgh (see B2). The video was watched by more than three million users. The account was later deleted.¹³⁰ In November 2022, Twitter removed an inauthentic account impersonating President Abdul Latif Rashid, which had gained many followers including media professionals, politicians, and foreign diplomats.¹³¹

Authorities have issued gag orders or reporting guidelines in the past, particularly during politically sensitive times. 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.¹³²

B6 0-3 pts

**Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively 2 /
affect users' ability to publish content online? 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 and 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.¹³³ Those outlets cannot afford the staff or facilities that government-affiliated outlets enjoy and are consequently uncompetitive against organizations like Rudaw, Kurdistan 24, and KurdsatNews, all of which receive funding from prominent KRG political figures or parties.¹³⁴

The CMC's draft regulation on content introduces new regulations for online users, platforms, and website hosts (see B3). According to Article 28 of the proposed regulation, websites and platform administrators will be required to register with the CMC. Platforms with more than 100,000

subscribers will be subject to a \$35 fee while those with over one million subscribers will face a \$70 fee.¹³⁵

There is no law regulating online advertisements or foreign investment.¹³⁶ 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.¹³⁷

The CMC's regulations lack criteria for licensing approval, but several international news outlets have had their licenses suspended in recent years.¹³⁸ For example, in April 2020, the CMC suspended Reuters's license after it 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).¹³⁹

In May 2022, the KRG's Ministry of Culture issued new guidelines which require social media networks to register with the ministry within three months.¹⁴⁰

Ahead of the October 2021 elections, Meta placed restrictions on political advertisers; political advertisements could only appear if they were domestically sourced to prevent external parties from influencing the election. Advertisers had to confirm their official identity issued by the Iraqi government, their political affiliation, as well as the amount spent on advertising; Meta made this information publicly available (see B2).¹⁴¹

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).¹⁴²

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and 2 / reliability? 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.¹⁴³ Furthermore, online misinformation is rampant and has a serious impact on public opinion.¹⁴⁴

During the coverage period, Meta announced it was taking new measures to limit the spread of false news in Iraq. Specifically, the company will warn Facebook users about pages that repeatedly publish misleading news. Furthermore, pages that continue to spread such content will be alerted that the visibility of their publications could be reduced; pages may also lose access to advertising funds.

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. These outlets function as 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 discussion on religious and sectarian issues (see B5). They have headquarters, channels, newspapers, radio stations, websites, and “electronic armies” in different parts of Iraq.¹⁴⁵

People usually rely on Iraqi 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. Increasingly, people have turned to social media for their news.¹⁴⁶

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.¹⁴⁷ Those who search for LGBT+ information often find headlines meant to intimidate the user from searching further, and this has increased since the Iraqi parliament presented a draft law to ban LGBT+ advertising and publishing online (see B1). According to this draft legislation, those who promote LGBT+ content could be financially punished and their work in Iraq could be “permanently stopped.”¹⁴⁸

In July 2022, activists, journalists, and civil society organizations called on the parliament to expedite the passage of an access-to-information law.¹⁴⁹ The absence of this law has posed challenges to journalists and prevented them from accessing government information.

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 to publish content anonymously (see C4 and C5).¹⁵⁰ Vague language in the draft CMC regulation on content may ban the use of such tools, although the regulation did not take effect by June 2023 (see B3).¹⁵¹

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users’ ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues? ^{4 / 6}

Score Change: The score improved from 3 to 4 because authorities in the Kurdistan region did not curtail internet access during protests, as they had done in previous years.

Iraqi citizens rely on social media to organize and mobilize protests. Authorities have blocked certain social media applications or internet access during times of unrest, though authorities in the Kurdistan region did not do so during the coverage period.

During the coverage period, social media was used to demand the release of several imprisoned activists and journalists.¹⁵² In December 2022, #FreedomforHaideral-Zaidi was used to call for the release of an activist who was sentenced to three years in prison after being accused of insulting an Iranian-backed paramilitary group on Twitter (see

C3).¹⁵³ Additionally, social media was pivotal in mobilizing people to gather in Tahrir Square to demand freedom for Haider al-Zaidi.¹⁵⁴

In March 2023, the House of Representatives passed controversial changes to the electoral law.¹⁵⁵ Before the law was passed, Twitter users launched a hashtag campaign calling for demonstrations in Baghdad, coinciding with the parliamentary vote.

Political mobilization on social media often occurs around elections. Calls to boycott the October 2021 elections were organized online.¹⁵⁶ Similar calls were made via social media before the 2018 elections, but authorities responded to those efforts with localized internet cuts (see A3).¹⁵⁷

Social networking sites have played a prominent role in organizing protests. In October 2019, Iraqi protesters and activists used social media to organize and plan assemblies, which prompted the government to disrupt internet access and block popular apps (see A3).¹⁵⁸ In December 2020, thousands of people in the Kurdistan region participated in peaceful protests, which 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 (see A3).¹⁵⁹

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, 2 / including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary 6 that lacks independence?

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.”¹⁶⁰ 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.¹⁶¹ 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 2009.¹⁶²

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.¹⁶³ Similarly, the region’s Law to Prevent Misuse of Communications Equipment (LPMCE) 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).¹⁶⁴

Neither the Iraqi judiciary nor the Kurdistan regional judiciary can be considered independent.¹⁶⁵ 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.¹⁶⁶ 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.¹⁶⁷

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.¹⁶⁸

In December 2022, the Supreme Judicial Council in the Kurdistan region announced that judges would be prohibited from using social media.¹⁶⁹

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 and the 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 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 (\$0.03).¹⁷⁰ 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 Iraqi 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.¹⁷¹ 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 (\$0.14).¹⁷² 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.¹⁷³

In May 2022, the Iraqi 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.¹⁷⁴

During the coverage period, Iraqi lawmakers proposed a regulation on digital content (see B3). The draft legislation includes fines for those who post prohibited content ranging from 500,000 dinars (\$350) to five million dinars (\$3,500).¹⁷⁵ Rights groups and activists condemned the draft regulation, arguing that broad definitions of prohibited language hinder free expression and that certain provisions “seem to have been written to protect the ruling political class from criticism.”¹⁷⁶

Authorities in the Kurdistan region use the regional penal code, the Journalistic Work Law, and the LPMCE to curtail freedom of expression.¹⁷⁷ 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.¹⁷⁸

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.¹⁷⁹

Iraqi authorities proposed two additional laws that impose criminal penalties for online activity, although neither had passed by the end of the coverage period. In June 2022, a parliamentary committee announced that it would reintroduce a cybercrime bill, which includes vaguely worded provisions that assign imprisonment or fines for using “computers and information networks” to “harm the country” or for “establishing, managing, or supporting” websites that contain immoral or indecent content.¹⁸⁰ In March 2023, lawmakers proposed a bill on assembly and freedom of expression, which would allow authorities to seek legal charges against individuals who violate “public morals” or “public order” through public comments, including online.¹⁸¹

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those 2 / that are protected under international human rights standards? 6

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 because fewer internet users received long prison sentences for their online content during the coverage period.

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

During the coverage period, several activists and journalists were arrested for their online content. In June 2022, activist Haider al-Zaidi was arrested by Baghdad security forces because of social media posts criticizing Iranian interference in Iraq (see B8). He was sentenced to three years in prison.¹⁸² In March 2023, KRG authorities arrested online journalist Ayoub Warti because of his investigative reporting and online communications with sources. He was fined one million dinars (\$635).¹⁸³ In February 2023, activist Kazal Mustafa was arrested because of a social media post and charged with insulting police. She was later released on bail.¹⁸⁴ In December 2022, a court in Duhok sentenced Kurdish artist Bland Amedei to six months in prison after he published a song online declaring support for a group of activists who had previously been arrested because of their opposition to the ruling parties.¹⁸⁵

Social media users were also arrested for their online content during the coverage period.¹⁸⁶ In January 2023, social media user Umm Fahd was sentenced to six months in prison on charges of “publishing derogatory content” after posting videos of her singing and dancing.¹⁸⁷ In February 2023, TikTok user Ahmed Ali was arrested and detained for three days because one of his videos that criticized the KRG’s internal security forces.¹⁸⁸ Also in February, TikTok user Aboud Skaiba was arrested for posting a video where he was singing with an English accent. In June 2023, after the coverage period, Skaiba received a one-year suspended prison sentence.¹⁸⁹ Another TikTok influencer, Assal Hossam, received a two-year prison sentence in February 2023 after posting videos of herself wearing a tight military uniform.¹⁹⁰

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.¹⁹¹ In June 2021, the KRG’s Court of Appeals upheld the sentences.¹⁹²

During the coverage period, the Balgh platform facilitated the arrests of dozens of online users (see B2).¹⁹³ Users who were found to post “indecent content” did not receive prior notification about their content, and often faced arbitrary penalties that lacked due process. Specifically,

Iraqi authorities used Article 403 of the penal code to impose penalties on those who were identified for sharing inappropriate content (see C2).¹⁹⁴

C4 0-4 pts

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

The government generally does not place significant restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption services.¹⁹⁵ 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.¹⁹⁶ To buy a SIM card users must register with the CMC. Customers must submit information including their name, phone number, address, and other identifying information.¹⁹⁷

In January 2023, the chairman of the CMC announced the trial launch of the E.SIM smart card service.¹⁹⁸ According to the CMC, this service will protect privacy when a mobile phone is lost or stolen. Chips cannot be removed from devices.

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 personal information including their official residence address, full name, government identification number, and other identifying information.¹⁹⁹

Online 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.²⁰⁰

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' 3 / right to privacy? 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 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.²⁰¹

Despite this, government monitors are known to access private discussions.²⁰² The 2021 edition of the US State Department's *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices* found credible evidence that Iraqi and KRG authorities "monitored private online communications without appropriate legal authority."²⁰³

In August 2021, the national-level Supreme Judicial Council announced the formation of a committee to monitor online publications. The committee is tasked with monitoring violations and issuing recommendations to investigative courts.²⁰⁴ That body also issues arrest warrants for those whose content is flagged by the Balgh platform, suggesting 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 Iraqi communications landscape lacks oversight or sufficient regulation, technical experts believe that the state may possess the ability to monitor online activities. Militias—specifically Iran-backed groups—are likely able to conduct surveillance of their own.²⁰⁵ 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.²⁰⁶

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 100 dinars (\$0.06) or either of these two penalties.”²⁰⁷

In July 2021, the *Washington Post* and other outlets reported Iraqi citizens were among those who may have been targeted with Pegasus, spyware produced by the NSO Group of Israel. Then president Barham Salih's phone number was among those that appeared in a list of potential targets.²⁰⁸ KRG prime minister Masrour Barzani was also allegedly targeted; people with ties to the United Arab Emirates had reportedly infected Barzani's phone with Pegasus and surveilled him for over a year. Individuals close to Barzani, including a security adviser, may also have been targeted.²⁰⁹ Several journalists and activists were also believed to have been targeted with Pegasus in recent years.²¹⁰

Authorities may have purchased spyware from vendors outside Israel. According to a former KRG intelligence service member, spyware was purchased from Italy in 2021. Surveillance technology was also purchased from the Chinese company Xiaomi.²¹¹

Authorities have been known to search electronic devices during arrests, sometimes as a tactic to force journalists to reveal their sources.²¹² 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.²¹³

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.²¹⁴

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 the Kurdistan region.²¹⁵ While telecommunications companies do not systematically collect user data, the information they do store may be vulnerable to abuse given the lack of legal safeguards.

While the Iraqi government may not request user data without a judicial order,²¹⁶ experts agree authorities may carry out such activities without legal cover due to the lack of data protection or oversight.²¹⁷ Some telecommunications companies are required to retain user data, including call records, for a period of five years.²¹⁸

ISPs in the Kurdistan region, many of which have close ties to the ruling political parties, may also monitor online activity.²¹⁹ According to a local ISP employee, telecommunications companies 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.²²⁰

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 the Zanyari Agency 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.²²¹

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 (see C1).

Kidnappings and enforced disappearances are not uncommon. In February 2023, researcher Hussein al-Khalifawi was kidnapped after posting religious content to social media. It is unclear who kidnapped al-Khalifawi, but militias affiliated with the Sadrist movement had previously sent him death threats. As of June 2023, al-Khalifawi's location remains unknown.²²² Some relatives believe he may have been formally arrested after the kidnapping.²²³ In July 2021, journalist Ali al-Makdam was kidnapped and physically assaulted in Baghdad.²²⁴ Before his kidnapping, al-Makdam had shared a Facebook post where he blamed militias for the deaths and disappearances of Iraqi citizens.²²⁵

Activists and journalists have been killed for their online content in recent years. In October 2021, activist Haider Muhammad was found dead under suspicious circumstances. Prior to his death, Muhammad had questioned the integrity of that month's elections on social media. According to local media, his murder was related to a specific Facebook post, which depicted supporters of some political parties as sheep, that he had shared a few days before his death.²²⁶

Journalists have faced physical violence while reporting. In June 2022, Nabaz Rashad, a reporter at Westga News, was attacked while live streaming a military operation in Erbil.²²⁷ Security forces physically attacked Rashad and broke his recording equipment, despite his protests that he was a journalist.²²⁸ In May 2022, security forces in Duhok violently attacked two members of the Kaf News team and confiscated their devices.²²⁹

Online intimidation and threats are used as a tool to silence critical voices or certain communities. In February 2023, Deutsche Welle journalist Jaafar Abdul Karim was threatened by government agents in response to his online talk-show programming.²³⁰ In February 2023, government- and militia-affiliated media outlets and progovernment trolls launched an online harassment campaign against journalist Adnan al-Taie and the outlet he works for; the outlet's headquarters later came under a grenade attack.²³¹

Gender-based discrimination is common online, and women are specifically at risk of offline violence in retaliation for their online content.²³² In January 2023, YouTube influencer Taiba al-Ali was murdered by her father in an alleged "honor killing."²³³ In March 2022, an activist in the Kurdistan region who provided feminist and human rights information on her social media channels was murdered one day before International Women's Day. Prior to her murder, she received death threats from her followers on the pretext that her work was contrary to local customs and traditions.²³⁴

LGBT+ people receive regular online harassment and often receive death threats.²³⁵

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 the 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. Activists have had their social media accounts deactivated by hackers.

In May 2023, Shar Press News announced that its homepage had been hacked and was inaccessible to staff.²³⁶ The Iraqi News Agency

announced that its Twitter account had been hacked in August 2022;²³⁷ it is unclear who perpetrated the attack.

In December 2022, the database of a government institution in Dhi Qar Governorate was hacked. Iraqi security forces detained the attacker, who admitted to working for a hacking network.²³⁸

Independent media organizations have reported cyberattacks, with the apparent aim of intimidation. A local independent news outlet, Diplomatic Magazine, was hacked in March and June 2022, resulting in the removal of its Facebook page. Both hacks occurred after the outlet published articles relating to high-level official corruption.²³⁹ After the second attack, the outlet's editor in chief accused authorities and security forces of perpetrating the incident, although this has not been corroborated.²⁴⁰

A group with ties to the pro-Iran Sabereen News, the al-Tahirah Team, has claimed responsibility for several cyberattacks within Iraq and abroad (see B5). For example, in April 2022, the group deployed distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks against the websites of two television stations. The attacks are apparently related to Khamis al-Khanjar, the head of a Sunni parliamentary faction who is tied to those stations.²⁴¹

Iraqi websites and users are also vulnerable to attacks that originate outside the country, often from Iran. In October 2020, Iranian hackers targeted telecommunications and government agencies in Iraq as part of a systematic espionage campaign.²⁴² In August 2021, two websites that had posted articles about how an Iran-backed militia was providing false university degrees to militia leaders suffered DDoS attacks.²⁴³

As part of its cybersecurity efforts, the government created the Iraqi Electronic Response Team (CERT) in coordination with the prime minister's office. The CERT aims to develop cybersecurity measures and procedures.²⁴⁴

Footnotes

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