



October 5, 2021

## **Open letter to President Barham Salih — keep the internet open and secure throughout the upcoming elections and thereafter**

The President of the Republic of Iraq, H.E. President Barham Salih

CC: Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi  
Minister of Communication, Arkan Shahab  
Head of the Iraqi National Security Services (INSS) - Abdul Ghani al-Asadi  
Head of the Iraq National Security Advisor, Qasim al-Araji  
Head of the Communication and Media Commission, Dr. Ali Almuayad  
CEO of Zain Iraq, Ali Al-Zahid  
CEO of AsiaCell, Amer Sunna  
CEO of Korek, Humam Amara  
EVP of Earthlink, Dr. Alaa Jassim  
All other ISPs in Iraq

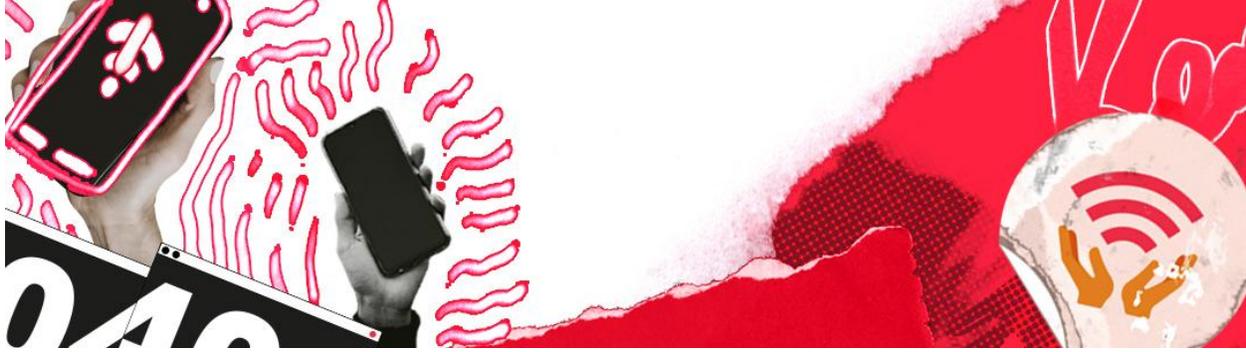
We, the undersigned civil society organizations and members of the [#KeepItOn coalition](#) — a network that unites over 240 organizations from 105 countries that work to end internet shutdowns<sup>1</sup> globally — write to urgently **appeal to you, the President, to ensure that the internet, social media platforms, and all other communication channels remain open, secure, and accessible throughout the election period and thereafter, scheduled for October 10, in the Republic of Iraq.**

Iraq is one of the countries that have a history of imposing internet shutdowns. As a result, Iraq remains on the #KeepItOn Coalition's radar, and the world is watching to ensure that the rights of the people are upheld during the upcoming elections and at all times.

The internet and social media platforms play a critical role in enhancing participatory governance in a democratic society. They provide space for communicating, public debate, seeking information on election processes and candidates, [reporting and documenting events and outcomes](#), and holding government officials and political candidates accountable for their actions — including their promises to the people. Journalists, human rights defenders, election observers, civil society actors, and other relevant stakeholders count on the internet to monitor and report on elections, facilitating transparency, inclusiveness, and openness in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> An internet shutdown is defined as an intentional disruption of internet or electronic communications, rendering them inaccessible or effectively unusable, for a specific population or within a location, often to exert control over the flow of information. See more at: <https://accessnow.org/keepiton>.



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## Iraq's history of internet shutdowns

Iraq has a long history of shutting down the internet, particularly during mass protests and politically important events, in order to suppress public criticism and dissent. In [2019](#), [thousands](#) of Iraqis took to the streets in massive anti-government protests to [protest](#) rising unemployment, failing public services including long power outages, and government corruption. Iraqi authorities responded to the protests by imposing a near-total internet shutdown, as well as shutting down government offices. A few hours after the protests started, the authorities also [blocked Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, and other social and messaging apps](#). Similarly, in 2018, when thousands protested corruption and unemployment in the city of Basra, the Iraqi authorities [shut down](#) the internet. That same year, and during the 2018 elections, while calls on social media were circulating to boycott the elections, [connection was restricted](#) by a cut in the submarine carrying large parts of the country's traffic.

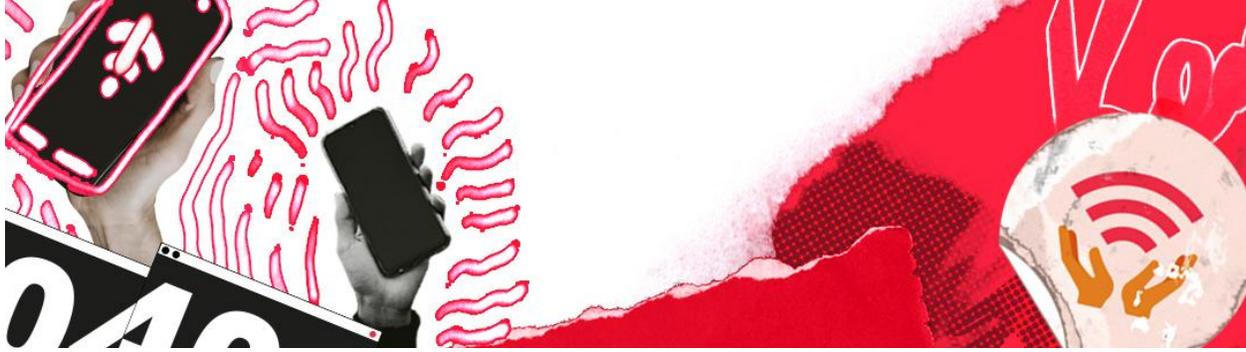
Iraq is also [one of the countries](#) in the Middle East and North Africa Region (MENA) to constantly shut down the internet during national exams to prevent cheating, a practice that indiscriminately affects the entire population. For instance, In 2018, Iraqi authorities imposed [curfew-style internet shutdowns](#) in an effort to prevent cheating during exams.

Given the above-mentioned precedents, we are concerned that such provide authorities and government officials a license to abuse their powers to infringe on people's fundamental rights to freedom of opinion and expression, and freedom of assembly during this upcoming election.

## Internet shutdowns harm human rights, disrupt emergency services, and cripple economies

Research shows that [internet shutdowns and violence](#) go hand in hand. Shutting down the internet during a [deadly pandemic](#) would add fuel to the fire. Internet shutdowns violate fundamental human rights such as freedom of expression and opinion, access to information, [press freedom](#), and freedom of peaceful assembly. By disrupting the free flow of information, shutdowns exacerbate existing tensions, and create space to conceal potential violence and human rights violations perpetrated by both state and non-state actors.

Internet shutdowns cut off access to vital, timely, and life-saving information, as well as to emergency services, plunging whole communities into fear and confusion. Internet shutdowns could spur a sense of insecurity, particularly among more vulnerable groups, and may instigate violence, and facilitate the spread of both misinformation and disinformation. Internet shutdowns also deny people to actively participate in the electoral process which is a fundamental value of every democratic society.



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## **Internet shutdowns contravene international human rights laws and standards**

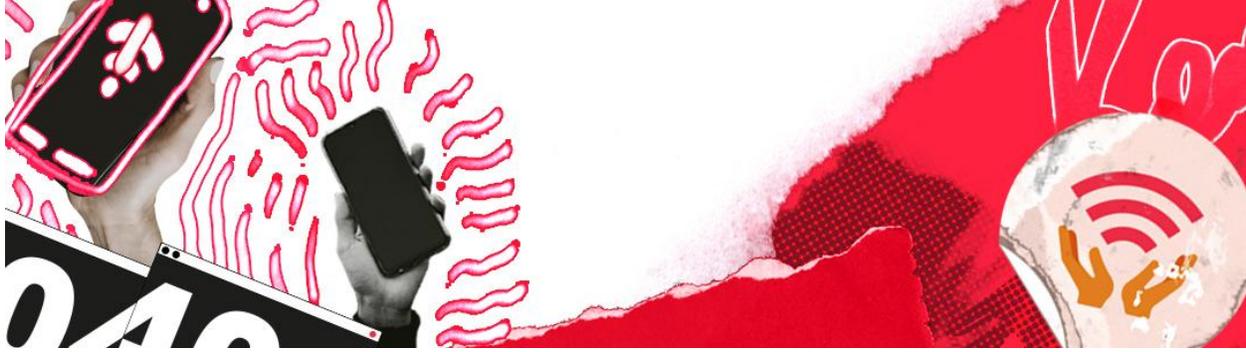
The Government of Iraq has ratified regional and international frameworks including the legally binding [International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights](#) (ICCPR), which provides for the protection and promotion of the rights of freedom of opinion and expression, assembly, and access to information, both offline and online.

The United Nations has repeatedly condemned internet shutdowns, and [U.N. experts and high-level officials](#) —including the U.N. Secretary-General — have formally affirmed that, "blanket Internet shutdowns and generic blocking and filtering of services are considered by United Nations human rights mechanisms to be in violation of international human rights law."

## **Telecom companies must respect human rights**

Telecom companies and businesses have a responsibility under the [U.N. Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights](#) and the [OECD Guidelines for Multinational Enterprises](#) to respect human rights, prevent or mitigate potential harms, and provide remedy for harms they cause or contribute to. It outlines, "states should take additional steps to protect against human rights abuses by business enterprises that are owned or controlled by the State."

Therefore, telecommunications companies and Internet Service Providers in Iraq, including most notably, Zain Iraq, AsiaCell, and Korek, Earthlink, and all ISPs in Iraq have the responsibility to uphold and respect human rights by providing quality, open, and secure access to the internet and digital communication tools throughout the elections and beyond. Internet shutdowns — whether in Iraq or other countries — must never be allowed to become the new normal, and we encourage Iraqi enterprises to integrate these practices for responding to censorship and network disruptions.



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**Recommendations:**

As organizations that believe in the power of the internet as an enabler of all other human rights, we are confident that access to the internet, social media, news websites and mobile money platforms during the elections in Iraq has the potential to foster transparency and inclusivity in the upcoming elections, and ensure active citizen and other stakeholder participation.

We respectfully request that you use the important positions of your offices to:

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- 1. Ensure full internet access nationwide and refrain from arbitrarily blocking access to social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, Telegram, and Facebook, and websites of media outlets throughout the election period and thereafter;**

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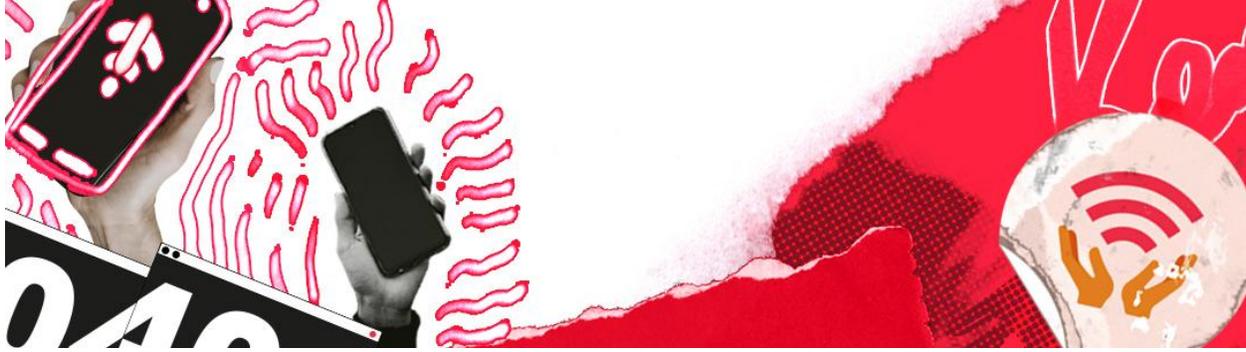
  - 2. Publicly assure the people of Iraq that the internet and all other digital communication platforms, will remain open, accessible, inclusive, and secure across Iraq throughout the election and thereafter;**

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  - 3. Order all internet service providers in Iraq to provide everyone with high-quality, secure, inclusive, and unrestricted internet access throughout the election period and thereafter; and**

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  - 4. Order all internet service providers, to inform internet users of any potential disruptions, and to take all reasonable steps to fix any identified disruptions likely to impact the quality of service they receive.**
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October 5, 2021

Sincerely,

## ORGANIZATIONS

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Access Now  
Advocacy Initiative for Development (AID)  
Africa Open Data and Internet Research  
Foundation (AODIRF)  
Azerbaijan Internet Watch  
Bareedo Platform Somalia  
Body and Data  
Change Tanzania movement  
Common Cause Zambia  
Computing and Information  
Association-Tanzania  
Digital Rights Kashmir  
Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF)  
Freedom House  
Global Voices  
Ideas Beyond Borders  
Info Center for research and development -  
Iraq  
International PEN Melbourne Centre  
Internet Protection Society (Russia)  
Internet Sans frontières  
Iraqi Network for Social Media - INSMnetwork  
Iraqi Social Forum  
Kijiji Yeetu, Kenya

Last Mile4D  
Media Diversity Institute - Armenia  
Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA)  
Media Matters for Democracy  
Miaan Group  
OXCON, United Kingdom  
Open Observatory of Network Interference  
(OONI)  
Organization of the Justice Campaign  
PEN America  
Paradigm Initiative (PIN)  
Pen Iraq  
Ranking Digital Rights  
Right2Know Campaign  
SMEX  
SOAP  
Sassoufit collective  
Shaquqyan for Culture and Development  
Ubunteam  
Wikimédia France  
YODET  
Zaina Foundation

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