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Iraqi Sovereignty Won't Extend to the Web

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When an interim government takes over from the U.S.-led occupation next week, Iraq will regain its place among the world's sovereign nations - except on the Internet.

More than 240 places have their own two-letter Internet country codes, from ".ac" for Ascension Island to ".zw" for Zimbabwe. There's even ".ps" for the Palestinian territories.

But the domain assigned to Iraq, ".iq," is stuck in a strange bureaucratic limbo - the company that had administered it is under U.S. criminal indictment - and could remain there for months.

As a result, if Iraq's government, national institutions or regular Iraqis want a Web site, they need to use international domains, such as ".com," ".org" or ".net", which are maintained in the United States.

"To me, having `iq' is probably one of the most important steps toward giving Iraq its identity and independence," said Hisham Ashkouri, an Iraqi-born architect who has lived in the United States since 1972 and is designing several projects for Baghdad. "The information technology part today is extremely important."

Ashkouri said people in Iraq he works with use Web-based services like Yahoo! or America Online or domains with other countries' codes, including Bahrain or the United Arab Emirates.

The Baghdad Museum, which is still trying to recover from its April 2003 looting, could use an ".iq" address to identify itself as Iraqi, just as the Louvre proclaims its Frenchness with www.louvre.fr. Instead, it has registered http://the.iraq.museum

There's also a practical downside to using other countries' slices of the Internet. With many common site names already registered, "major brand names or organizational names in Iraq cannot even use their own name in their Internet address unless and until the .iq domain is reactivated," said John Simmons, an American who co-founded the Dialogue Channel, which promotes communication between Iraqis and international organizations.

Simmons says he's gotten more than 130 people to sign a petition imploring the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers to free up ".iq."

Part of ICANN's job is to select responsible parties to operate such "top-level domains," which includes registering Web addresses and ensuring that traffic is properly routed within them.

In 1997, when Saddam Hussein's dictatorship was blocking the Internet, an ICANN body granted responsibility for the ".iq" domain to InfoCom Corp., a Texas-based company that sold computers and Web services in the Middle East. The domain's "technical contact" was listed as Bayan Elashi, InfoCom's chief executive.

In 2002, a grand jury indicted InfoCom, Elashi and four of his brothers on charges that they exported computer equipment to Libya and Syria and funneled money to a member of the Islamic extremist group Hamas. Trial for the Elashi brothers began this month in Dallas.

The case put the ".iq" domain on ice.

A Google search for sites in the domain yields only 20 links, all unavailable. In comparison, there are at least 290,000 in Iran's domain, ".ir," and more than 34 million in Britain's ".uk."

The U.S. administrator in Iraq, L. Paul Bremer, and the head of Iraq's new National Communications and Media Commission, Siyamend Ziad Othman, have both urged ICANN to free up ".iq" as soon as possible, partly so government ministries can standardize their Web addresses.

More than one group has applied to take over as ".iq" registry operator, said ICANN's general counsel, John Jeffrey, refusing to specify the number.

For a while after the war ended, ICANN told applicants there were too many uncertainties about the stability of Iraq to assign the domain to someone else.

Recently, however, ICANN began evaluating the technical qualifications of applicants and whether they truly have the support of the Iraqi "Internet community." Jeffrey wouldn't say how long the process might take.

One hopeful applicant is Asaad Alnajjar, a technology businessman in Los Angeles who left Iraq in 1982. Alnajjar said he would run ".iq" on a nonprofit basis, subsidizing Web hosting for Iraqis and helping them with Web site design.

He said he could have the domain up and running in three days if ICANN would only give the nod. Alnajjar said he understands the demands on ICANN but wishes it could move faster to free the sidelined domain.

"We need it like yesterday," he said.

Alnajjar said that at an ICANN meeting in Tunisia last year, he was turned down when he asked that at the very least, www.iraq.iq be opened, just one page, to show the country's flag and the words "Republic of Iraq."

His goal, he said with a slight laugh, was "to show that there is a country."