

Digital rights and legal protection in unstable countries: An Iraqi youth view

by Reman Mohammed

Introduction

In today's digital world, online threats easily cross borders. In conflict-affected areas, people face heightened risks from online surveillance, disinformation, and privacy violations. Iraq is one such country, where weak legal protections, limited digital literacy, and fragile cybersecurity infrastructure leave communities, especially displaced people and youth, exposed to virtual threats that mirror their real-world vulnerabilities.

The reality on the ground

As a legal expert working in Iraq, I have witnessed how online threats deepen the struggles of already marginalized populations. Internally displaced people (IDPs), returnees, and young activists face serious risks, ranging from online harassment and identity theft to defamation and data breaches. Yet, Iraq's legal system remains ill-equipped to either address cybercrimes or hold perpetrators accountable.

Gaps in law and awareness

Iraq lacks a comprehensive legal framework for cybersecurity and digital rights. Critical issues like cyberbullying, online gender-based violence, and unauthorized surveillance are largely unaddressed in current laws. This legal vacuum endangers youth and human rights defenders who use online platforms to document abuse, advocate for justice, or organize their communities.

Humanitarian work and digital threats

In my role managing protection programs, I lead legal awareness sessions that often focus on documentation and housing rights. Increasingly, though, participants raise concerns about social media threats, scams targeting displaced persons, and cyberintimidation. These issues highlight the urgent need to incorporate digital protection into humanitarian legal assistance.



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Youth as agents of change

Young people in Iraq and other fragile contexts are not just victims of digital threats, they are frontline defenders of justice. Through youth-led initiatives supported by the International Trade Centre (ITC), I have seen young leaders use digital tools to raise awareness, mobilize support, and promote rights. But they need targeted training in cybersecurity and legal literacy to safeguard these digital spaces.

Digital trust as critical infrastructure

In post-conflict recovery, trust in digital systems is as vital as rebuilding roads and schools. Cyber protections must be rooted in human rights, transparency, and accountability. A sustainable response to digital threats requires humanitarian strategies to include cybersecurity, especially for vulnerable youth.

Key steps orward

- Legal reform: Iraq must enact legislation that defines and penalizes cybercrimes while protecting free expression and privacy rights.

- Capacity building: Legal actors, NGOs, and youth leaders must receive training in digital safety, privacy law, and secure communication tools.
- Youth participation: Digital policymaking should reflect the lived experiences of youth, particularly in conflict zones.
- International support: Global agencies should integrate cybersecurity into humanitarian programming and provide technical support for digital protection systems.

Conclusion

Online threats are not abstract or futuristic; they are immediate and linked to justice, human rights, and community resilience. Youth in Iraq and across the MENA region are ready to lead, but they need safe, legally protected digital spaces to do so. That is the new frontier of justice.

About the Author

Reman Mohammed is a senior Legal Expert and Humanitarian Program Manager with over 11 years of experience in protection, governance, and legal reform in conflict-affected areas. He currently serves as a Multi-Core Competency Program Manager with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in Iraq, where he leads multi-sectoral Protection and Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) interventions. Reman previously served as the National Legal Advisor for the Institute for International Law and Human Rights (IILHR), where he specialized in legislative drafting, justice sector reform, and policy development. With a B.A. in Law, a PMP certification, and an advanced background in International Humanitarian Law, he has a proven track record of managing large-scale donor portfolios and bridging the gap between human rights and technology to promote inclusive justice.

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