



Beirut, September 3rd, 2015

"Internet Freedom in Lebanon"

“Internet Freedom in Lebanon” is a report produced by Maharat Foundation in cooperation with the UNESCO about the regulatory, legal and technical status of internet freedom in Lebanon. The report includes recommendations to develop this sector and protect this freedom, based on 4 keystones access, freedom of expression and content, privacy, and internet governance in Lebanon. The report highlights internet freedom based on Unesco’s vision to global knowledge societies and in line with internet freedom principles in Lebanon launched by “Haqouna” Campaign.

The report highlights the absence of a unified vision to run internet sector and the lack of transparent policies and political differences between the operator and management of internet sector which hindered its development. Despite the launching of developing plans that faded in propaganda, the successive authorities failed in providing the citizens with a quality access to internet with affordable costs and fast internet speed. The past years showed an increase in oppressing the online activists. The protection of Lebanese citizens’ privacy was not a priority of the legislative process, and the ministry of telecommunication did not engage main stakeholders in Internet Governance.

The report highlights the technical challenges related to the ability of government and private companies in providing sufficient resources and infrastructure that facilitates internet access to all Lebanese citizens with quality service and low cost; in addition to the administrative challenges related to managing this sector and engaging stakeholders to invest through preventing monopoly, developing standards for quality of service, and coping with global development of internet.

The report emphasizes the necessity of developing a more open vision for the circulation of information in the digital knowledge society, according to principles that secures the pioneering role of Lebanon in protecting freedoms and guarantees the non adoption of restrictive laws that limit freedom of internet, in addition to the necessity of applying on the internet the same laws that apply to normal life for protecting rights. This would make Lebanon on the right track to protect and promote internet freedom and develop this vital sector.

The report was based on information from experts in the fields of information technology, telecommunication, law, governance, and privacy, in the aim of initiating the debate among stakeholders to develop the internet sector, providing the right of internet access to everyone, protecting the privacy of users, providing a suitable environment for freedom of expression online and



free circulation of information on the internet, in addition to the importance of engaging all stakeholders in internet governance.

In the access

Status: There are 201 centers equipped with DSL out of 300 centers, which means there are 100 centers that are not yet equipped. The current service isn't good and still uses copper network. The 4G service provided by mobile phones companies covers only 16% of Lebanon, and Ogero doesn't provide additional capacity for internet service providers.

The internet speed still doesn't meet the international standards. The average internet speed in Beirut is 3.86 megabytes/second (the global average 23.38 and Lebanon rank is 174 out of 200 countries). In addition to the old legislation and stagnation where the law 431/2002 organizing the telecommunication sector is not applied, and other political differences that hinders the development.

In conclusion, the main obstacles of internet access are linked to the political constraints that led to lack of unified policies to manage this sector and the non appliance of the telecommunication law 431/2002 (which is now outdated) especially in terms of liberalization and privatization of the sector, and to the cancellation of the role of the telecom regulatory authority, and the ICT parliamentary committee that is not playing its role neither in legislation nor in monitoring and accountability. The most important obstacle is that the infrastructure is not developed and still using copper networks instead of optical fibers despite the promises of the authorities, and we are still waiting the application of "Lebanon 2020 - Digital Telecommunication Vision" launched recently by minister Boutros Harb, hoping that it wouldn't stay like the other plans just a political propaganda.

In the content:

Status: Lebanon is no longer considered as a suitable environment for internet freedom in terms of restrains on the content reflected in the calls of activists, journalists, and bloggers in front of the cybercrime bureau where they are forced to sign vows of silence as a condition to set them free which contradicts freedom of expression and free circulation of information over the internet. Moreover, the attempts of the national council for audiovisual media to extend its powers over electronic websites and the attempts of bringing restrictive



internet laws are also significant, in addition to illegal acts like blocking some websites without clarifying the reasons and their legitimacy.

In conclusion, it is important to promote the legal framework that guarantees the freedom of online activists especially with the absence of laws that protects freedom of expression on the internet. Thus it is significant to start procedures that prevent the detention of activists and all whom express their opinion on the internet, and to adopt the new draft media law presented by Maharat Foundation that highlights the necessity of protecting people's rights in their daily life same as their virtual life on the internet.

In privacy:

Status: despite the fact that internet users are 70.5% of total population according to the World Bank, and 86% according to the ministry of telecommunication, but the digital privacy is not a priority in the legislative process where the laws do not tackle the issue of protecting privacy. Since 2012, the Lebanese government has been violating the privacy of Lebanese citizens through presenting all telecommunication data to security departments. In addition to vague resolutions that forces internet providers and internet cafes to keep all data related to their internet services. The protection of data is weak, where internet service providers use security softwares that are not licensed and can be easily hacked, and that there is no law that specifies how to deal with data.

In conclusion, there is a draft law about digital procedures and data protection that is being discussed in the parliament, it sets the general framework for technology and guarantees privacy protection and gives rights for damaged persons to file cases when their privacy is breached and defines the responsibility of internet service providers in this regard. This law should be adopted to set the legal framework for privacy. In all cases, users should be aware of the consequences of publishing their data where privacy protection is not trusted in the virtual world.

Internet governance

Status: Lebanon is considered a suitable environment for freedom and governance of internet due to the existence of many private institutions and experts in the field of internet, but there is no common policy on how to manage the internet sector in Lebanon. Lebanon was supposed to play a significant role



in internet governance but the politics of the Lebanese government in internet governance is not transparent. The ministry of telecommunication did not engage the civil society and the private sector in developing policies about internet governance to the league of Arab states in December 2014 where they presented a paper entitled “Cairo Paper”, and the civil society and private sector were not able to review it for unknown reasons.

In conclusion, managing the digital information sector needs to engage all ministries and sectors like the ministry of finance, ministry of administrative reform, ministry of education, ministry of economy, civil society, academics, and private sector to increase the investments, enlarge the network and embedding new tools. It is also important to adopt a participatory approach that includes all stakeholders from civil society, academics, private and public sectors and to ensure gender balance in Multistakeholderism in internet governance.