The Current Situation of ICT Development in the Middle East and ICT Support Policies
The Case of Syrian Arab Republic

Tatsuya Yamamoto

Graduate School of Media and Governance, KEIO University

Fujisawa, Kanagawa, Japan

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to examine how ICT development is progressing and what kind of political and social effects have been occurring (or could occur in the near future) in Middle Eastern Arabic countries. To examine this theme, this paper will adopt the Syrian Arab Republic as a case. To understand the Syrian government's policy toward the ICT development, it is necessary to examine the domestic political situation, since they are closely related. Under the Bashar Al-Asad's regime, we can confirm several reasons why they have to move forward on their ICT development policy and why it has become a crucial issue, which they cannot evade, as they had done under the previous regime, Hafez Al-Asad's regime. The situation that the Syrian government is facing right now is known by the term, "Dictator's Dilemma". This paper tries to provide bases in order to examine and explore this dilemma in Syria. Also, when we examine ICT development in Syria, it is important to consider the ICT support policies, which are mainly conducted by OECD countries and international organizations and stem from the issue of "Digital Divide". This is why international assistances could have great effect on ICT development in Syria. As a provisional conclusion of this paper, I will summarize how we can understand the current situation of ICT development in Syria, and I will also comment on the future prospect of the dilemma that the Syrian government is facing at the present time.

Keywords: ICT Development, Middle East, Syria, ICT Support Policies, Dictator's Dilemma.

1. ICT DEVELOPMENT IN MIDDLE EASTERN ARABIC COUNTRIES

It is commonly held that the Middle Eastern area is less developed in the ICT field. However, currently the ICT field of this area has been growing rapidly year-by-year, and it seems like that this tendency will continue at least for the next few years.

For instance, the Syrian government prohibited their citizens access to the Internet until the year 2000[1], when Bashar Al-Asad took his presidential position from his father, Hafez Al-Asad. Since then, Syria has tried to recover its delay in ICT development. At this time (2003), we can find Internet Cafes everywhere in main cities, and the number of computer shops are increasing every year. Also, we can easily find computer software shops in each city, though most of them are dealing in illegal copies.

Likewise, cellular phone service was prohibited for ordinary citizens under the previous regime, however, it was also permitted in 2000 almost at the same time as the Internet service was opened publicly. In spite of the relatively expensive registration fee, the number of cellular phone users is increasing rapidly every year.

Why did the Syrian government change its policy in the ICT field? As the result of this policy change, how does it effect ICT development in Syria, and to what point has Syrian ICT development reached thus far? Furthermore, what kind of political and social impacts could be expected when the degree of ICT development progresses? These kinds of questions arise when observing the present situation in the ICT field in Syria. In order to answer them, this paper tries to examine the current situation of ICT development in Syria and to indicate some future prospects on ICT related issues.

2. SYRIAN DOMESTIC POLITICS AND ICT DEVELOPMENT

To understand the Syrian government's policy toward ICT development, it is necessary to examine the domestic political situation carefully. The two are closely related. Under the regime of the ex-president, Hafez Al-Asad, an authoritarian or, perhaps more accurately, dictatorial

---

[1] The Syrian government introduced Internet access in 1997, however access was limited only to officials and some approved firms.

political system was structured and maintained. He organized complex structured secret police forces and a surveillance network to watch citizen's activities. Also, information regulation was carried out. From the point of view of information regulation, the Internet and cellular phones were not favorable medias for the regime, so they were in the category of restriction.

Even under this circumstance, the Syrian government started its investigation on introducing the Internet to their country. The representative organization for this matter was the Syrian Computer Society (SCS), which was led by Bashar Al-Asad, a son of the ex-president and now a president of this country.

Hafez Al-Asad died of a heart attack on June 10th, 2000. In spite of the anxiety of many Syrian political analysts and researchers, the power transfer to his second son, Bashar Al-Asad was rather smooth. Despite the fact that Syria is a republican form of government, Bashar, who was only 34 years old, became a new president hereditarily with over 97% of the confidence vote on July 10th, 2000. For this reason, his first political task was to ensure his legitimacy and to obtain the backing of public opinion to make his regime stable. It appears that the new and young Syrian leader appeals some key words such as like "newness", "reform", "intelligence", or "change" to obtain public supports.

The Internet and cellular phones were released to ordinary citizens under these circumstances. Many researchers of Syrian politics assume that president Bashar has a positive idea on the Internet personally, because he himself was leading the SCS for a long time. However, I may assume that the Syrian government's ICT policy change not only depending on the president's personal character but is also related to a broader view of Syrian domestic politics.

There are four main reasons why the Syrian government became active in ICT development. First, the Internet is considered to be one of new president's symbolic projects, highlighting his "intelligence". As I mentioned above, one of the ways to obtain this charisma is to show his intelligence. He married Asma Al-Akhras, who majored in computer sciences in England, in January 2001, and this marriage is also considered to show his talent as a standard-bearer of Syrian modernization, high technology, and globalization.

Secondly, the SCS, which president Bashar formerly led as head of the organization, has come to take a certain role in Syrian domestic politics. The SCS is considered as one of president Basher's political bases. Lately, the Minister of Communication was appointed from the SCS, and the tendency and phenomenon that the SCS has a certain relationship with the government have started to become obvious.

Thirdly, sustainable economic growth is one of the biggest tasks for the Syrian government, and in order to accomplish this objective, further ICT development is required. The growth of the private sector holds Syrian economic growth presently, while their economy contains many deficit and inefficient state-run enterprises. In contrast with domestic oriented, state-run enterprises, private enterprises tend to carry out their business internationally. If any enterprises want to benefit from the global market, which mainly functions through a liberal market mechanism, they have to push their ICT development and also have to consider how to apply ICT in their business. Therefore, the Syrian government cannot evade the issue of ICT development in order to stimulate and activate the private sector, even though it requires a structural reform, which may encroach upon one of the regime's bases.

Fourthly, international community has a consensus to encourage ICT development in developing countries based on the idea to stem the "digital divide". Especially, after the Kyushu-Okinawa summit, which was held in 2000, the issue of "digital divide" is widely recognized by the aid-providing community, and each donor has started to form ICT support projects toward developing countries. This tendency also encourages the Syrian government to provide an incentive to create bases of ICT development.

ICT development in Syria causes some kind of dilemma, which is known by the term, "Dictator's Dilemma". Dictator's Dilemma means that "economic efficiency and political efficacy are positively related to each other, and negatively related to authoritarian control" according to Christopher Kedzie and Janni Aragon[2]. ICT development is the key to ensure the nation's economic growth in the international market, which is spread globally. However, if the authoritarian governments undertake this task, they might face some difficulties in maintaining their regime, and also it might lead and progress democratization inside their countries[3]. This dilemma surely applies to Syrian

---

[2] Christopher R. Kedzie, with Janni Aragon, "Coincident Revolutions and the Dictator's Dilemma: Thoughts on Communication and Democratization," in Juliann Allison (ed.), *Technology, Development, and Democracy: International Conflict and Cooperation in the Information Age*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002, p.109.
[3] On this theme, see, for example, Leslie David Simon

politics. The diffusion of ICT means that it will create greater opportunities for information flow, which even contains the information of which the Syrian government does not approve, to the people, and also means that extra work is required of the government to censor that information. At the same time, it may stimulate the dissident use of the Internet, which will empower each individual, including dissidents. The Syrian government is asked to carry out ICT development policies while facing this severe dilemma.

3. THE CURRENT SITUATION OF ICT DEVELOPMENT IN SYRIA

The Internet

Currently, there are two Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Syria. One is the SCS, and the other is "Syria net", which is operated by state-owned telecommunication carrier, Syrian Telecommunication Establishment (STE). Although the ISP market is currently monopolized by these two organizations, the Syrian government issued a license to operate an ISP in 2002. This means that the government has opened the door to other organizations, which want to establish an ISP business.

In Syria, the Internet regulation or control is carried out by completely controlling the state-operated telecommunication carrier (STE) and national (or quasi-national) ISPs at the same time. Hence the government is able to collect detailed information on the Internet use by the people. For instance, the government can get the information regarding by whom, when, from which telephone number, how long, and what web site(s) each people accessed. Also, they impose contents regulation by using proxy servers. Contents regulation mainly targets adult sits, free mail services[4] and web sites of Palestine resistance groups such as Hamas. When we try to access web sites prohibited by the government, an error message shows up on the screen.

On the other hand, the mass of people try to escape the contents regulation to reach desired web sites by using mirror sites or making a suitable set up on their computers. In fact, most Internet users in Syria have "hotmail"

(ed.), *Democracy and the Internet: Allies or Adversaries?*, Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2002; Peter Ferdinand (ed.), *The Internet, Democracy and Democratization*, London: Frank Cass, 2000.
[4] For instance, the Syrian government regulates "Yahoo mail" and "Hotmail". However, "Excite" , which is the other popular free mail service provider, is not regulated up to now.

addresses, which is on the regulation list. Of course the detail of this kind of contents regulation policy are not announced publicly. Although we can only conjecture what kinds of regulations and controls are being carried out or how the government censors the people's Internet use actually, it is certain that the battle between the government, which tries to regulate the people, and the people, who put all their efforts into avoiding governmental control, will continue.

In June 2000, the Syrian government decided to issue licenses for operating Internet Cafes. Syria did not have any laws about Internet Cafe until then. Right after the government put this new law into operation, most Internet Cafes were closed down, simply because none of them had the license that was newly issued. However, after a few months, owners of Internet Cafes had started to receive licenses and restarted their businesses.

Internet access in Syria depends mostly on "dial-up". Although ISDN service is available in major cities, the number of subscribers for this service is very limited. Broadband access such as DSL has not yet started. However, the Ministry of Communication has repeatedly announced that it will be introduced in the very near future. Most Internet users in Syria prefer to access from Internet Cafes rather than connect from their own homes. One of the major reasons for this is the cost of the ISP subscription fee. It still remains relatively high considering their annual incomes[5].

Computer education has also started in Syria. There are plenty of computer learning schools in each major city. However, in many cases, those are rather small and sometimes they are just run by individual bases to provide a "home school" type of computer training. Though a private-based computer education has been started, there are only a few well-structured and organized institutions. At the university level, president Bashar ordered the establishment of an IT department in each of the four national universities in Syria a few years ago. The IT department mainly focuses on the software side of computer education, and students who want to study on the hardware side study in the Department of Engineering. Most of employees at Internet Cafes are students or graduates from one of these departments. It seems reasonable to suppose that a backbone of computer education and of some higher education is provided in

---

[5] The ISP subscription fee, which allows 20 hours of free access, is usually costs about 13USD per month. If they use over 20 hours of access per month, they have to pay an extra fee for the extra minutes.

Syria. Therefore, we can assume that certain numbers of human resources for ICT development already exist.

Cellar Phones

There are also two cellar phone service operators in Syria. One is "Syriatel", which is a joint venture between Egypt's Orascom Telecommunication and a group of Syrian investors, and the other one is "Investcom" which has been established by a consortium of Arab and Lebanese investors. The STE, which plays the role of cellar phone service regulator in Syria, draw up a 15-year plan for the cellar phone market. According to this plan, the STE will not issue cellar phone licenses to companies besides Syriatel and Investcom for the first seven years, and the STE expects new operators to enter the Syrian cellar phone market after this seventh year.

The system, which is adopted in Syria, is GSM, and it is reasonable, I can say, because most of the other Arabic countries also adopted GSM system, so the people are able to use their own cellar phones in other Arabic countries by using the roaming service. The Ministry of Communication often announces that consideration of the system transfer to third generation (3G) cellar phone technology is under way, and it will happen in the near future.

4. ICT SUPPORT POLICIES IN SYRIA

The ICT support policies, which are mainly conducted by OECD countries and international organizations such as the World Band and UNDP (United Nations Developing Programme), are also important when we consider ICT development in developing countries. This is because international assistance provides a notable effect on ICT development in developing countries. Therefore, I will illustrate the current situation of international efforts in ICT support policies, which are being conducted in Syria.

Bilateral Assistance

The number of countries that provide bilateral assistance in Syria is limited. The Japanese government grants more than 50% of this bilateral assistance. Therefore, when we explore the issue of bilateral assistance in Syria, we should focus on and examine the tendency of Japanese ODA (Official Development Assistance) carefully. However, at the present time, Japanese ODA projects on ICT support are very few. The main and almost only major project

related to ICT support is called the "Country Focused Training Course for Syria". Under this project, the Japanese government invites approximately 5 to 10 Syrian engineers to the JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency) training center in Okinawa to provide necessary technical knowledge and practical experience to design and operate small networks. Although ongoing projects are very limited, the Japanese government is investigating future possible projects in the field of ICT. For instance, they are trying to form the projects of E-government, E-village development, ICT training course for schoolteachers, and so on.

At the present time, I cannot confirm any major ICT support policies, which are conducted by OECD countries, in Syria. The countries that provide ICT support in Syria besides Japan are Pakistan and China. The Pakistani government established the IT cooperation center in Damascus and provides a computer education for Syrian people. However, it is practically difficult to show the differences from the other private based computer schools in town. Even the Chinese government retains from carrying out any large-scale projects. They only gift approximately 20 computers yearly.

International Organization

Only one international organization that conducts ICT support policies in Syria is the UNDP. Other international organizations are not currently involved in any activities. The UNDP formed two different kinds of ICT support projects in Syria. One is called the "ICT for Development" project and the other is called the "E-strategy" project.

At first, I would like to introduce the "ICT for Development" project, which is formed with five components.

1) The first component is the E-readiness project. Under this project, they investigate the current situation of ICT development both in urban and rural areas. The results will be widely used to form future possible ICT related projects in Syria.
2) The second component is the Tele-center establishment project. The UNDP is trying to establish several Tele-centers widely in Syria. The image of the Tele-center is a large-scaled Internet Cafe, so people will be able to access the Internet from their nearest Tele-center.
3) The third component is the community support project.

The UNDP plans to provide computer education in each community.

4) The fourth component is the computer-training project for engineers. This project mainly focuses on professionals to improve their computer skills.

5) The last, fifth, component is the wireless Internet access project. Like most developing countries, the gap in telecommunication infrastructures between urban and rural areas is terribly wide in Syria. This project mainly focuses on rural areas to ensure Internet accessibility by using wireless technology.

It is planned that the ICT for Development project be carried out form 2002 to 2005. The total budget is 1.3 million USD. However, at the present time, only E-readiness project has been completed and the other projects have not yet started.

Secondly, I would like to introduce the E-strategy project. The project term is only one year from June 2002, and the total budget is 40,000 USD from the Thematic Trust Fund, which is granted by the Japanese government. The aim of this project is to create a platform for analyzing national needs and to set a framework for a national strategy for using ICT in managing the opportunities and challenges posed by the new global environment. The committee members are from the Ministry of Communication, the STE, the Office of Prime Minister, the University of Damascus, and the State Planning Commission. Although the concept of E-strategy is a broader concept than E-government, some of the committee members do not understand this point, which according to a UNDP official became one of the difficulties in carrying out this project[6].

In conclusion, I have to say that the impact of the ICT support policies conducted by the international community remain low. However, those efforts only started one year ago, and plenty of new projects are planning and some of them will start soon. Therefore, I assume that ICT support by the international community will take on an important role in ICT development in Syria within the next couple of years.

5. A PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

I have to evaluate that the current degree of ICT development in Syria is still low. The governmental and international community's effort to develop the field of ICT in Syria has just started. However, I can assume that these efforts will be continued and even accelerated because of domestic political reasons and the international community's tendency.

Under these circumstances, the Syrian government is attempting to deal with "Dictator's Dilemma". The point is how the government achieves further ICT development and controls the flow of information at the same time. The "offense and defense battle" between the government that wants to control and regulate the Internet and the mass of people who try to avoid the government's attempts will be continued into the future.

Like Syria, most other Middle Eastern Arabic countries are facing the same kind of dilemma[7]. In this context, the Syrian situation in ICT development and its future is notable and provides certain implications when we consider the future of the other Middle Eastern Arabic countries.

---

[6] Interview with Wakako Hashimoto, a Junior Professional Officer in UNDP, October 2002.

[7] On the subject of Internet censorship in the Middle East, see, for example, Human Rights Watch, *The Internet in the Mideast and North Africa: Free Expression and Censorship*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1999.