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**Digitalisation within Conflict Zones:
Driver of Peace or Instability in Iraq?**

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Abstract

This paper explores the economic and social impacts of digital infrastructure development in conflict-affected regions. We often see investments in digital technologies and connectivity as catalysts for economic growth. In reality, the potential of digitalisation to drive peace depends on inclusiveness, governance capacity, policy design and political context. The paper examines both pathways using Iraq as a case study. We examine whether digitalisation fosters stability and improved economic opportunity, or uneven access and digital surveillance exacerbated existing tensions. Leveraging a mixed-method approach, the study evaluates the role of digital infrastructure in shaping economic resilience. The report concludes with policy recommendations for developing equitable digital solutions in unstable environments, focusing on digital inclusion, local capacity building, and conflict-sensitive ICT governance.

Keywords: digitalisation, conflict, digital inclusion.

1. Introduction

In our interconnected world, digital technologies are usually perceived as transformative tools capable of catalysing economic growth and bridging social divides. However, their impacts in conflict-affected regions remain underexplored and, at times, controversial. While digitalisation holds the promise of improved access to services, information, and economic opportunity, its effects in fragile settings can distance themselves from these optimistic projections. In contexts marked by political instability, fragile and weakened institutions, and social fragmentation, digital development can be a double-edged sword—serving either as a platform for peacebuilding or as a vector for surveillance, exclusion, and renewed conflict.

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This paper examines this duality in the case of Iraq, a country that continues to grapple with the legacies of war, sectarian division, fragile governance and external interventions. Amid efforts to rebuild, stabilise and modernise its economy, Iraq has seen a surge in digital infrastructure projects and investments. Yet, questions remain about who benefits from these developments, how they intersect with local power dynamics, and whether digital technologies are truly contributing to post-conflict recovery and stability.

By analysing both the potential and drawbacks of digitalisation in Iraq, this study seeks to contribute to the broader debate on the role of technology in conflict transformation. It draws attention to the need for inclusive, context-sensitive, and conflict-aware digital strategies that do not merely replicate existing inequalities under a digital guise but instead foster economic resilience and social cohesion in a fragile setting

2. Literature Review

The intersection of digitalisation and conflict has gained growing academic attention in recent years, particularly in studies of development, peacebuilding, and post-conflict reconstruction. There is although a debate between the effects of digitalisation over state capacity, economic growth or revitalisation, surveillance, inequalities or the empowerment of non-state actors or normative leaders in conflict-affected areas. The core of the debate lies in questioning if digital infrastructure is or is not a foundation for inclusive development and long-term peace in sensible areas of the world.

Technology can never be neutral, politically or economically. As most aspects and products of human labour, it cannot only be emancipatory. Technological developments act as a driver of productive forces and a tool through which the beneficiaries and dominant forces in society consolidate their power. Especially in conflict-affected societies, digital technologies risk reinforcing or even creating structures of domination, if not used towards emancipatory purposes. This sensible setting which usually encompasses corrupt governance structures or sectarian patronage networks risks entrenching inequalities between regions, classes and social groups. Critical theory authors such as David Harvey via *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* or Herbert Marcuse via *One-Dimensional Man* present the idea that technological changes not only impact the economy and macro/state entities, but also the nature of social relations in society. It can restructure labour markets, change or impose patterns of surveillance and control and shape forms of resistance within the state. It can intensify fragmentation and even commodify post-conflict reconstruction efforts for external economic and political interests (Marcuse, 1964). Thus, according to critical theorists, digitalisation in Iraq requires a more in-depth examination in order to observe who controls the technological infrastructure, whose interests it serves and how it aims to reshape the power dynamics in a society scarred by occupation, social unrest, authoritarian rule and external interventions. Moreover, imposing a digital (re)construction of Iraq might be affected by the accumulation by dispossession theory of David Harvey, digital information being extracted from the

vulnerable population and concentrated in the hands of elites and corporations that can deepen the inequalities (Harvey, 2014). While in theory digital platforms can give a voice to the majority of the population, they can also be used for surveillance, manipulation and consolidation of authoritarian rules and external interests. Predicting and influencing human behaviour obtained via surveillance capitalism can undermine political stability and give more power to the powerful and less power to the powerless.

The discussion surrounding labour is even more complex. In the present day, individuals are working/producing value for digital companies without even knowing or doing it on purpose, just by using and accessing social media. This dynamic might lead to new forms of exploitation of labour, increasing the revenues for companies while extracting surplus from even more sources from the simple man. (Fuchs, 2014) Moreover, since Iraq does not dispose of companies with a voice in the digital industry, the reconstruction cannot be achieved without the help of foreign intervention via companies like Amazon or Google, risking the economic sovereignty of the country. Telecommunications, internet provision, and digital services are starting from 2004 dominated by multinational companies that naturally seek profit, and in classical capitalistic fashion they present limited investment in local capacity building and the self-deterministic nature of post-war Iraq. Moreover, history cannot forget the fact that Iraq is a former British colony for 12 years, a period in which the country was plagued by pacified forces against Iraqi resistance that battled for independence.

The democratic transition in Iraq led to a sudden increase of media liberty and political and media pluralism. Even if this was the case, the media discourse kept most of the particularities of the previous political system: political interventionism, staff affiliations and pressure from political groups on media agendas. The digital transformation of the country led to the emergence of hundreds of media channels and newspapers, the expansion of internet access and to the rise of social networks and digital journalism. The former, as an example, while being mostly considered an advancement in the field of media, impacted Iraqi journalists and their work, since they were not prepared for the digitalisation of the country and the changes it brought to the country and their field. Religious and ethnic minorities, plus most women, faced almost the same challenges of the last regime, while the majority of the media channels remained politicised because of political pressures (Haddad, 2024). The digital boom led to an even bigger enemy to the idea of a unified public sphere, entrenching social divisions as media channels were increasingly aligned with their sectarian, ethnic, religious, or political factions. The discussion surrounding the regional disparities highlighted by the digitalisation of Iraq sees Baghdad and Basra as stable digital entities, while rural and most conflict-affected areas remain digitally behind, a phenomenon that is visible in most countries, especially in the case of Iraq.

The bravest idea of the paper lies in the fact that most studies about digitalisation and digital infrastructure and their social impact are mostly Eurocentric. The concept of democracy, stable societies, liberal capitalism are understood in Occidental ways of thinking and seeing the world, while the outsiders such as Arab or Islamic

countries perceive these terms differently. Postcolonial countries, post-war affected states and most international actors with strong collective identities such as Iraq are affected differently by digitalisation, in comparison with France, Germany or, why not, Romania. Political fragmentation, sectarianism, state fragility and the presence of paramilitaries and civil wars are not common for the West, and therefore even if they are studied and observed from the outside by the Europeans, the situation will always be different from the point of view of the residents. The implication of digitalisation in Iraq, being different from the implications of digitalisation of a European nation with a very different past, present and future ahead, must be concretely analysed by observing and understanding their living conditions, their culture, power dynamics, needs, and wants. Consequently, analyses based solely on Western experiences of digital empowerment risk neglecting the complex realities and struggles of a post-conflict society and why not a non-Occidental state such as Iraq. Language and cultural barriers create challenges for the Arab world, translating key terms and concepts into Arab or Kurdish from English affecting how those terms are used by Iraqi citizens in comparison to English speakers from the West. The inclusion of English terms in a country that does not prioritise the teaching of English language can also be a challenge, according to Fahed Al-Sumait's study of Kuwait. According to him, researchers and promoters of digitalisation in Arab-majority countries need to adapt their methods, being more locally informed, not just simply copied from the West (Al-Sumait et al., 2023).

3. Methodology

The intent of this paper is to map the scientific perspectives which explain the impact of digitalisation within conflict zones. One of the best examples is Iraq, which offers complex post-war power dynamics and a compelling case of unsteady and long economic recovery. The digital world provides opportunities, fosters innovation, connects people and enhances accessibility. Through document analysis, first part of our approach was to find arguments to prove digitalisation can also be a peacemaker. Similarly, we analysed sources that present instances where digitalisation has contributed to fragility, discrimination, oppression and ultimately instability.

Once we have gathered a collection of reasons and examples for both perspectives, we were able to group them in order to showcase connections between them. By analysing the data collected and the comparison map created, we were able to build a discursive paper which evaluates the role digitalisation played in the reshaping of Iraq as a fragile state. We followed each pathway to understand weaknesses and opportunities, so we could drive conclusions and suggest policy recommendations.

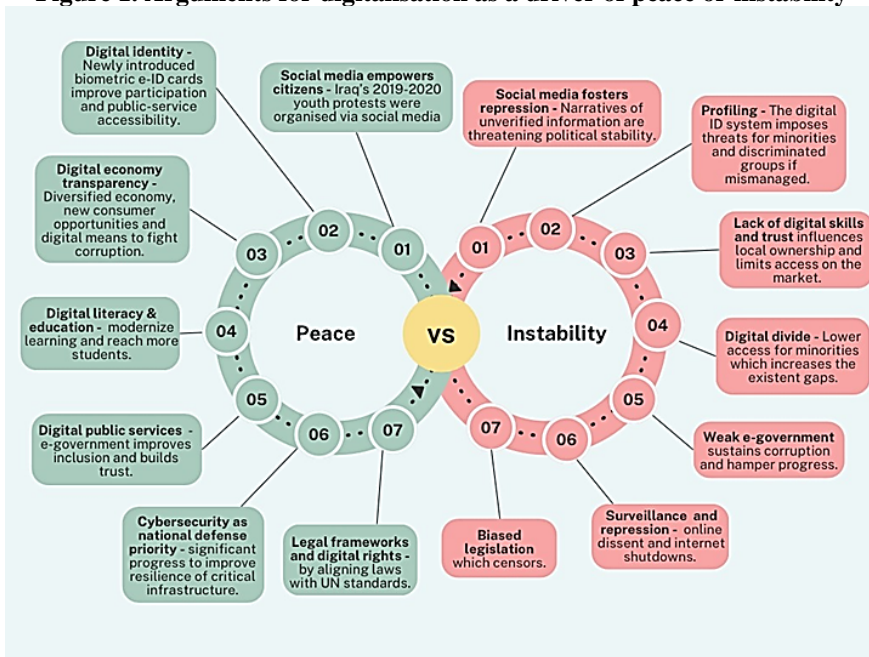
4. Analysis/Results Interpretation

Since the 2003 invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime, Iraq has faced persistent political instability, sectarian conflict, and governance challenges that have deeply affected its reconstruction and modernisation efforts.

Iraq is actively pursuing digital transformation, but the progress is slow and uneven. Some of the most significant challenges are poor infrastructure, a widening digital divide, and dependence on foreign technology. In the past years, several efforts were made to improve digital capabilities, particularly in government, agriculture, and education.

Given the political situation and the ongoing efforts to become digital, Iraq made the perfect case study to analyse digitalisation within conflict zones. Being far from reaching academic consensus, we have noticed the opposite portraits of digitalisation in literature: either a driver of peace or additional instability. This dynamic allowed us to link and group the concepts & instances, so we synthesized in pairs of arguments to better understand and describe the multitude of implications.

Figure 1. Arguments for digitalisation as a driver of peace or instability



Source: own elaboration based on literature review.

4.1 Social Media Activism versus Repression

Firstly, improving communication between members of the diverse community is a key way that digitalisation promotes peace in Iraq. A culture of communication and trust between diverse groups in society is fostered by the emergence of independent media and social media platforms, which enable the exchange of

opposing viewpoints (Gjerazi, 2023). Peacebuilding groups can reach a larger audience and spread their messages through the digital sphere, which fosters intercultural understanding and peaceful coexistence amongst divided communities (Setia & Rahim, 2024).

Furthermore, digitalisation has a significant impact on political mobilisation. Many groups have successfully used social media to plan protest and engage in politics. Transnational solidarity and unprecedented grassroots activism were made possible through new media. For instance, young Iraqis of all backgrounds ... stand up to Iraq's political elites from all religious backgrounds participated in the 2019-2020 Tishreen protests. Diaspora communities mobilised support (protests, fundraising, etc.) for Iraq's reform movement and disseminated information about abuses via Facebook, Twitter, Telegram, and other apps (Kadhun, 2023).

A rapid emergence of opposing narratives, frequently along sectarian lines, has emerged in Iraq through digital media. Scholarly analyses highlight how online rumours thrive in Iraq's unstable post-2003 political order. Even so, after 2019, several online media outlets appeared to report on social issues and protests, providing a forum for underrepresented voices.

On the other hand, a critical aspect of digitalisation affecting political instability is the rapid spread of misinformation and propaganda through digital platforms. In a politically charged setting like Iraq, this can exacerbate societal polarisation. Radical or divisive narratives can spread widely due to the ease of online information dissemination, which could threaten governmental authority and stoke dissent (Haddad, 2024). A further complicating factor in this situation is the population's low level of digital literacy, which can allow political actors to manipulate people and use online platforms to further their own agendas (Collington, 2021).

Social media has, nevertheless, also exacerbated sectarian tensions and misinformation. It has been used by Iraq's highly politicised media landscape to disseminate unsubstantiated claims. Disinformation narratives in the Iraqi public sphere are threatening to collapse an already precarious political system, according to experts. Analysts point out that effectively combating false information through fact-checking or civil society involvement can help to stabilise the situation. False narratives, however, frequently remain uncorrected in practice because Iraq still lacks a robust independent fact-checking infrastructure.

This information war intensifies sectarian hostilities. Especially in Iraq, which has a history of unrest linked to dissatisfaction with government and political corruption, the cyclical battle between empowerment and repression in digital spaces can create circumstances for instability (Asaad & Marane, 2020).

4.2 Digital Economy

In addition to fostering communication, digital transformation can improve the quality of services and governance, directly linked to peace and stability. The tourism industry in Iraq, for instance, has been highlighted as a major area for development that could help to stabilise the economy. Digital tools' integration into this industry enhances visitor experiences, supports local employment, and

promotes economic growth, all of which are vital in creating a more peaceful and stable society.

Furthermore, the expansion of the digital economy in areas like banking and finance reflects a changing way to attain economic empowerment and financial inclusion. Digital financial services can uplift underprivileged groups, including women and young people, which could help to offset the social unrest usually linked with economic inequality. Digitalisation not only improves personal lives but also helps to promote more general society peace by means of fair access to financial resources (Adeniran et al., 2020).

New e-stores and expanding internet access are diversifying Iraq's economy. Online marketplaces let small enterprises reach consumers outside of local areas. Investing in digital infrastructure is generating consumer possibilities and new jobs (IT startups). Additionally, Iraq's 2024 digital payments law also aims to increase transparency, streamline transactions, and lessen reliance on cash. In addition to providing the state with better transaction data for planning and auditing, this facilitates bill payment and banking access for citizens, even those living in remote areas.

Despite these potential benefits, it is essential to recognise that political unrest coupled with technological advancements has substantial economic implications. Although digitalisation can drive economic growth, it can also draw attention to and worsen disparities in Iraq's access to economic opportunities and technology (Yousif & El-Joumayle, 2024).

Cyber risks and weak laws hinder technologies. If not strictly monitored, vague guidelines and a lack of financial literacy can result in fraud or illegal use (money laundering, terrorism financing). Due to insufficient regulations, poor delivery logistics, and low consumer trust in online payments, e-commerce continues to lag. Growth is also hampered by expensive internet and unstable connections.

4.3 Digital Inclusion versus Divide

Recent connectivity projects (nationwide fiber and new telecom centres) are extending the infrastructure beyond urban centres. This is the first step in reaching a more equitable access to e-services, education, and markets.

Online education platforms enabled Iraqi schools to continue lessons during COVID-19 closures. They modernized learning (video lectures, e-textbooks) and reached displaced or remote students, improving educational inclusion.

Moreover, the newly deployed national AI strategy aims to leverage data analytics for social good (healthcare diagnostics, precision farming, public safety). By integrating AI with the Sustainable Development Goals, Iraq seeks better government planning and economic growth.

Despite the efforts, wide gaps persist rural, poor, women and internally displaced people have far lower internet access and digital skills. This exclusion can reinforce economic and political inequalities.

Many public and rural schools lack computers, internet, and even electricity. Teachers are often untrained in edtech. Poor infrastructure means e-learning often

serves wealthier private schools while leaving others behind. The shortage of skilled professionals and limited collaboration among stakeholders can hinder effective digital transformation.

The approach to integrating digital technologies must be nuanced, ensuring that while they facilitate communication and service improvements, they do not inadvertently become tools for division, such as during the dissemination of extremist ideologies (Ali, 2020). Thus, careful regulation and support for inclusive digital policies are paramount to ensure that the digital landscape in Iraq emerges as a vehicle for peace rather than conflict.

4.4 Digital Public Services

A digital government holds the promise of transparency and accountability. According to studies, e-government can reduce corruption and improve public trust. One Iraqi study, for example, suggests using e-government to lower the incidence of administrative and financial corruption as well as fraud and enhance the quality of service delivery (Hassnain Talab et al., 2019). Recent legislative changes in Iraq reflect a new rule on digital payments that specifically seeks to lower cash handling and hence lower chances for fraud and corruption. Digital government and finance could improve resource and service monitoring, therefore drawing investment and supporting stability.

Transparency and inclusivity can be significantly increased by growing e-government. Travel burdens and in-person corruption are lessened by online portals and mobile apps for services (license, tax filing, registrations). This supports SDG 16 (peace and institutions) and fosters trust.

Currently, Iraq ranks very low (145/193) in e-government development (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). The state struggles with insufficient digital infrastructure, which perpetuates the disconnect between the public and the government. This relationship is complicated by widespread corruption and inefficiency in Iraq's political structures. The perception of digitalisation being a tool for the wealthy or only helps a small number of people can exacerbate public disenchantment and spark instability (Asaad & Marane, 2020). As a result, it becomes more difficult for the already precarious political institutions put in place after 2003 to preserve stability (Yousif et al., 2023).

Political unrest coupled with technological developments has substantial economic implications. Although digitalisation may drive economic progress, it can also worsen disparities in Iraq's access to economic opportunities and technology (Yousif & El-Joumayle, 2024). Political instability is exacerbated by this imbalance, which intensifies complaints against the government for neglecting to meet the demands of all groups (Khalaf, 2018).

Low levels of digital literacy, inadequate inter-agency cooperation, and even a lack of the fundamental infrastructure required for online bureaucracy are among the difficulties. As a result, a lot of potential advantages are still untapped: citizens report minimal improvements in service delivery, and public procurement is still frequently opaque. National reconciliation is weakened in the absence of strong e-governance.

4.5 Cybersecurity versus Surveillance

New security issues have also emerged with the digital age. Enhanced crime-fighting and cyber-defences are viewed as critical to national security. According to experts, a robust national cybersecurity plan is necessary to protect infrastructure and assist law enforcement in tracking down terrorists and cybercriminals. Protecting data networks, electricity grids, and banking systems should promote stability and economic expansion.

Iraq has lately strengthened its cyber defences with the help of a high-level cybersecurity committee and the national security agency. These steps strengthen the resilience of vital infrastructure and discourage cyber espionage in an unstable area. Even with advancements, there is still a significant regional threat. Cyberattacks by hostile states or groups endanger stability. Without ongoing attention, a significant disruption (financial, electricity grid) can lead to insurrection.

Privacy and Digital Surveillance Biometric databases and CCTV cameras are examples of surveillance technology that can help combat terrorism and crime. For instance, biometrics are used by secure voter-ID systems to prevent fraud and increase election stability. Pervasive surveillance, however, can target vulnerable communities and poses a privacy danger. It facilitates authoritarian practices in the absence of checks.

Well-targeted cybercrime enforcement can reduce online fraud, money laundering, and terror financing, contributing to stability. In reality, Iraq's cybercrime legislation is harsh. Authorities are able to control VPNs, ban or remove any content they consider insulting, and fine users. Shutdowns have actually been enforced during demonstrations, which has further stifled criticism. This erodes open public discourse and encourages self-censorship.

Human Rights Watch released a report in June 2020 detailing the different laws that the Iraqi government employs to suppress dissenting opinions. It revealed the imprisonment and abuse of journalists and activists who believed they were singled out by the government to scare off other critics. Parliament has not yet received an adjusted version of the law from the government (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

While cybersecurity measures are necessary to combat harmful actors, Iraq's experience demonstrates a blurring of security and censorship. Due to the absence of strong legal safeguards, digitalisation has occasionally made it easier for state security agents to censor online content just as much as it has given citizens more power.

5. Conclusions

Our study reveals the complex role digitalisation plays in the development and reconstruction of fragile states. While digital transformation happens, governments play a vital role in ensuring safety, accessibility, and equal opportunities for all citizens.

Digitalisation has the potential to both worsen already-existing conflicts in Iraq and serve as a catalyst for political instability. The interaction of digital innovations with

the political landscape has serious consequences for government, community cohesiveness, and public confidence. The nation's unstable political climate has been reflected in and occasionally exacerbated by digitalisation, which has led to both greater transparency and new types of political turmoil.

Given its ability to stimulate communication, improve accessibility, and increase community engagement, digitalisation in Iraq is increasingly being viewed as a possible peacemaker. Digital technology integration opens up new forums for interaction and discussion, essential in a post-conflict society seeking peace and stability.

Although digitisation offers great potential for promoting peace in Iraq, its success depends on resolving current issues and carefully implementing policies that encourage cooperation, inclusivity, and communication among all facets of society.

To conclude, we have summed up a collection of policies that might enhance digitalisation's potential as a driver of peace. First, the government should formulate a comprehensive digital strategy coordinated by a central body. Next, it should pass laws for data protection, while digitizing key services and publishing open data.

The state should protect digital speech and transparency in content takedowns. Arrests for peaceful online expression must be prohibited. To combat disinformation, authorities should support independent fact-checkers and foster media education to help citizens identify fake information online.

To close existing gaps, schools should benefit from broadband, computers should be subsidised in underserved areas, and teachers should be trained in online pedagogy. Moreover, part of the budget should be allocated to run digital literacy programs for both students and parents.

Cybersecurity laws must be revised to align with human rights, according to the amendments suggested by civil society. The parliament should reject any censorship laws, while aligning with international regulations in terms of free speech. Internet freedom is going to be viewed as a peace asset. To maintain cyber defence, government networks must undergo audits regularly and identify any vulnerabilities. International partners are an important stakeholder in ensuring online safety.

Lastly, to fully benefit from the economic advantages of digitalisation, clear e-commerce and consumer protection laws are needed. Through developing trusted local payments and subsidising entrepreneurial training for e-commerce start-ups, citizens may begin to trust and leverage e-commerce more.

On the one hand, technology provides instruments for political engagement and mobilisation; on the other, it serves as a catalyst for instability by disseminating misinformation, inflaming political tensions, and exposing governmental deficiencies. The future of Iraq's political stability is dependent on how digital technologies are managed and regulated within the larger sociopolitical framework. Digitalisation is a tool, and its impact on our world mirrors the world itself. If digitalization makes the world a better place, it is because it has fallen into the hands of good.

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