

Twitter diplomacy

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The U.S. State Dept. is enlisting Silicon Valley companies such as Google and Twitter to help bring high tech to Iraq and Afghanistan.

"Sorry, my first tweet not pleasant; dust storm in Baghdad today & yet another suicide bomb. awful reminder that it is not yet all fine here." — First Twitter post from Barham Salih, Iraq's Deputy Prime Minister

On a warm spring evening in Iraq this April, months before Iranians made global headlines with angry Twitter posts, Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey and several other American tech leaders sipped wine with Barham Salih in the garden of his Baghdad home. Dorsey urged Salih to start using the microblogging service to publicize the inner workings of the Iraqi government. "The people of Iraq and the media will follow you," said Dorsey. "A technology like Twitter can bring access and transparency to government." The conversation led to Salih's first post on Apr. 24.

Dorsey was part of a first-of-its-kind technology delegation set up by the U.S. State Dept. Executives from Google (GOOG), AT&T (T), and several Silicon Valley startups traveled to Iraq to meet with government officials, business leaders, and students to offer ideas for using technology throughout the country. While the idea of promoting Twitter in a war-torn country without reliable electricity may sound far-fetched, the representatives found a receptive audience. Salih now has nearly 1,500 people following his posts, and he tweets about twice a day. "Review of Iraq's oil policy with PM Maliki & VP Mahdi today," he wrote last week. "Just did the Colbert Report. Great fun!" he said another time.

The Iraq digital delegation is part of a broader effort at the State Dept. U.S. officials are looking for ways to use the country's technology leadership as a diplomatic tool. Similar delegations are being planned for Afghanistan, Mexico, and other countries. To help manage these efforts, 37-year-old Alec Ross has been named the department's first-ever senior adviser on innovation.

Of course, the State Dept. has long organized business delegations to foreign countries. But the trip to Iraq marked the first time the government created a delegation specifically for tech companies. The idea is that countries such as Iraq and Afghanistan can hear directly from top executives about creative ways to use YouTube (GOOG), Twitter, or Facebook, while U.S. tech companies can market their wares and forge business ties abroad. "The work we've done with Jack and Twitter is a good example of the way we can work with Silicon Valley companies," says Jared Cohen of the State Dept.'s Policy Planning Staff.

Cohen argues that the U.S. has a unique opportunity to open doors abroad because of the strength of its tech sector, especially as young people around the world increasingly use technology to socialize, agitate, and organize. In Iran, for example, young Iranians have been posting stories, pictures, and videos capturing the protests roiling the streets of Tehran. On June 15, Cohen asked Twitter to delay an upgrade of its network, which would have disrupted communications in Iran. The department's involvement is separate from the tech delegations, but reflects the same tech emphasis.

The Iraq trip was the brainchild of Cohen, a 27-year-old former Rhodes Scholar. He started sounding out tech companies in February, and by April the delegation donned flak jackets to take a military plane from Jordan into Baghdad. For five days, the State Dept. escorted the visitors around the city in armored convoys, where they met with the Iraqi Prime Minister, the Minister of Science & Technology, and engineering students from the University of Baghdad.

Hunter Walk, product management director at Google, says the trip helped the search giant consider ways to make technology more accessible in areas where Internet service is spotty. "That goes to the heart of our mission," he says.

Several projects have been kicked off as a result of the trip. Google is working with the Iraqis to build a YouTube video channel where official events and speeches will be available to anyone. At the National Museum of Iraq, which was looted after the U.S. invasion, tech companies are helping to build a Web site to showcase art and artifacts. And Twitter is tweaking its software code to let Iraqis send out posts from mobile phones, since most don't have computers.

Farhad Alaaldin, an Iraqi who is director general of the London telecom provider Talia Communications, says the long-term changes may be more significant. Because of the visit, Salih established a task force to foster the use of digital media in Iraq. Alaaldin, who will co-chair the task force, says young people in particular are interested in taking advantage of new technologies. "The university students [who met with] the delegation are still buzzing with the ideas and thoughts they heard from them," he wrote in an e-mail.

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Getting around net censors

Over the last week, the Iranian government has blocked access to Facebook and other Web sites in an attempt to stifle protests over the nation's presidential election. But activists are finding ways around these blockades. One Web video financed by the U.S. State Dept.—called How to Circumvent an Internet Proxy—shows techies how to evade the censors.

To see the full video, go to <http://bx.businessweek.com/digital-media/>

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