

IJMA3-USA & IJMA3: The Arab ICT Organization
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Arab ICT Officials Roundtable, by IJMA3-USA and U.S. Department of State
Feltman, Zakka, Verveer and Allawi Agree on the importance of the Arab Spring and the role of ICT in
the future of the economic growth of the Arab world

The U.S. State Department and IJMA3-USA hosted an “Arab Telecommunications Officials’ Roundtable” discussion. The roundtable took place at the State Department and included both high-level U.S. Government officials and members of the IJMA3-USA Arab ICT Delegation to the U.S., examining IT policy and Internet freedom issues in the wake of the Arab Spring.

The Arab ICT Delegation was the largest of its kind since the unfolding of the Arab Spring last year, a seismic shift in the region that made apparent the impact of information and communications technology (ICT) as a fundamental tool for political freedom and economic development. Discussion between a delegation of this kind, consisting of Arab policy-makers and private sector leaders, and U.S. policy experts was a unique opportunity to advance the current momentum in trade, investment and public policy for the U.S. and the Arab world.

The Arab ICT Delegation included government officials and representatives, chairs of regulatory authorities and heads of sector associations alongside executives of private sector telecommunications companies. Representing their respective governments were: *H.E. Mohammad Allawi*, Minister of Communications for Iraq; and *Mr. Mohammad Tahboub*, Chairman of the Information Technology Association of Jordan and representative of Jordan’s Minister of Telecommunications, H.E. Basem Al-Rousan. Representing regulatory and other authorities were: *Mr. Salim Al-Ruzaiki*, CEO of the Information Technology Authority of Oman; *Dr. Imad Hoballah*, Chairman of the Telecommunications Regulatory Authority of Lebanon; *Mr. Majeed Al-Maamori*, Director General of the State Company for Internet Services in Iraq; and *Mr. Ali Nahle*, Director of Information Technology for the Central Bank of Lebanon. Heads of delegations from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Tunisia, and Yemen participated.

The roundtable was moderated jointly by *Ambassador Philip Verveer*, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and U.S. Coordinator for International Communications and Information Policy, and *Mr. Nizar Zakka*, CEO and President, IJMA3-USA and Secretary General, IJMA3 – The Arab ICT Organization. U.S. Government officials joined from several State Department bureaus as well as the Federal Communications Commission.

Following welcome remarks from Ambassador Verveer, *Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs, Jeffrey D. Feltman*, introduced the discussion topics, the first of which addressed the policy implications for the Internet after the Arab Spring, with an emphasis on Internet Freedom and access, infrastructure, cyber-security and the use of the Internet for public services like governance, health and education. “The Internet and social networks have been important avenues for galvanizing the public’s call for change and more responsive governments.

By embracing advances in ICT, governments will have the opportunity to increasingly engage their civil societies, provide citizens with more efficient services, and adopt a style of open governance, based on transparency and participation”, Assistant Secretary Feltman remarked.

The second topic focused on “ICT Economic Growth and Investment” and the factors necessary for the creation of a legislative and regulatory environment conducive to investment. This investment-friendly environment promotes ICT employment through corporatization and privatization of state enterprises, e-Commerce and cyber-security to protect e-Commerce. Assistant Secretary Feltman underlined that “ICT development is essential for growth across all economic sectors. It can help enhance competitiveness, integrate the region into the global economy, and offer good job opportunities, in particular to young people.” But he also added that “regulatory and legal frameworks are crucial to fully unlock the ICT potential. Our government and the U.S. high tech companies are willing to increase an already strong relationship with the region in this sector.”

Ambassador Verveer and Mr. Zakka opened the discussion with the role of Internet in the Arab Spring. Participants including *Mr. Daniel Baer*, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor; *Mr. Christopher Painter*, Coordinator for Cyber Issues for the Department of State; and Mr. Troy Tanner, International Bureau, Federal Communications Commission, joined the discussion.

The roundtable drew on themes from the recent Freedom Online conference held in The Hague in December 2011, which was organized to create an international coalition to strengthen and protect freedom on the internet. Opened with remarks from Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the conference drew participation from high level ministers and Internet freedom advocates from across the globe. Despite government-level participation, Mr. Zakka noted that IJMA3 was the only Arab organization represented during the discussions, signifying a missed opportunity to engage Arab civil society and private sector stakeholders during a period of rapidly shifting Internet and technology policies.

During the roundtable, the Arab ICT Delegation actively engaged with their U.S. counterparts, challenging them on Internet Freedom in an Arab context. Delegates from countries that underwent transitions during the Arab Spring spoke about the new context of online freedom, cyber-security and access. Mr. Zakka spoke on the Arab Internet Manifesto, which addresses Internet Freedom with Arab sensitivities and was signed by many of the countries represented in the room. All parties agreed that policies must take these sensitivities into account, while still upholding fundamental human rights.

The second topic on Economic Growth and Investment underscored the importance of a legislative and regulatory environment conducive to promoting foreign investment and private sector growth.

Mr. Troy Tanner, Deputy Chief of the International Bureau of the Federal Communications Commission; *Mr. Christopher Painter*; and multiple members of the delegation engaged in discussion on how to foster this growth.



The round table – Showing from Right to left:
Nizar Zakka - CEO & President, IJMA3 USA; Mr. Jeffrey Feltman - Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs; Amb. Philip Verveer - Deputy Assistant Secretary of State and Coordinator for Information and International Communication Affairs; Christopher Painter - Coordinator for Cyber issues for the Department of State.

Mr. Zakka of IJMA3-USA commented, "As the region evaluates the potential for longer-term democracy and the prospects for global investment, many young Arab entrepreneurs are reaching out to the U.S. in search of partnerships and trade opportunities that had often been difficult to access under the former regimes."

Mr. Verveer thanked the Arab government and private sector participants for providing their insights. He remarked that "the opportunities for collaboration between the Arab World and the United States on ICT matters can be found at the level of individuals and companies as well as governments. As to the latter, the U.S. especially looks forward to working with Arab governments in connection with the World Conference on International Communications that will take place in Dubai in December."

The roundtable provided the opportunity for U.S. government and the Arab ICT delegates from government, regulatory authorities, and private sector companies to discuss these crucial issues. The involvement of high-level representatives, influential policy-makers and perspectives from countries in transition after the Arab Spring provided a unique opportunity for open discussion about timely issues.

This type of dialogue is rare between multi-lateral stakeholders from so many Arab countries. The Arab ICT Delegation's presence in Washington opened the door for these discussions, which could not have taken place without the significant coordination of IJMA3-USA and the Department of State.

IJMA3-USA is a 501(c)(3) organization based in Washington, D.C. that brings together diverse stakeholders in pursuit of policies that support Arab ICT and Internet freedom, bolster civil society, and create growth opportunities and new partnerships for Arab ICT companies. IJMA3-USA is closely allied with its sister organization, **IJMA3 - The Arab ICT Organization**, based in the Arab region. IJMA3 is a non-governmental umbrella organization representing 19 national ICT associations from across the Middle East and North Africa. Together, IJMA3 and IJMA3-USA work to advocate policies that advance the ICT industry's growth and development; facilitate international trade and investment in ICT products and services; and harness ICT towards the fulfillment of critical development challenges.