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With oil and gas production taking place on a large scale in Iraq, the communications infrastructure needed to deal with the demands of this burgeoning industry is still being developed. Omar Barzani, CEO of Technology Partners, says his company is answering the call. See page 120

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Oil and gas production is taking place on a large scale in Iraq. However, the communications infrastructure needed to deal with the demands of this burgeoning industry is still being developed. Vaughan O'Grady talks to a company bringing better communications to an industry that urgently needs it.

Oilfield communications: who will answer the call?

“WE’VE BEEN DELIVERING projects every year — for electricity, SCADA, data centres. We put in the billing system for the incumbent — Iraq Telecom Posts Company (ITPC) in 2006. We have many projects.”

Technology Partners describes itself as a full service communications and information technology (ICT) integration and solutions company and, while it operates elsewhere in the Middle East, it has in recent years particularly focused on Iraq. As the list of projects outlined above by CEO Omar Barzanji indicates, the market for its services is a growing one in a country that is still, arguably, a decade or more behind much of the developed world in the

rollout of certain areas of communications infrastructure — particularly broadband.

The word ‘partners’ is the key in this case. Technology Partners’ portfolio of next generation ICT capabilities includes, as its website says, “the delivery of ERP and OSS/BSS software solutions from SAP, Microsoft, Oracle, Ericsson, Cisco network infrastructure, and computer hardware systems from HP, SUN, IBM and DELL”.

Roy Hodges, VP marketing, explains, “We have unique relationships with vendors all over the world. So, we bring in what we know are best-of-breed technologies.” Put very simply, the company takes wireline, copper, switches, fibre and any other relevant components of an IT infrastructure project, and integrates and assembles it all.



Omar Barzanji - CEO,
Technology Partners

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Access to some of the biggest names in ICT helps, but so too does having a local workforce of 45 trained engineers. Barzanji explains, "Part of what we do is work with our suppliers to design the solutions because they have a hand in the design with us. But we have developed a team that actually puts [in] the design architecture. Our guys have to be trained, they have to attend conferences and technical updates and so on. So we do engineering, detailed design for it, pricing it and then buying it, installing it, maintaining it and so on — the full cycle, if you like."

Barzanji himself is Iraqi born, with a strong background in ICT. It is this experience that he felt some years ago could be put to good use in helping with the reconstruction of critical IT and telecommunications infrastructure in Iraq.

The company began its focus on this work in 2003. Since then, it has been involved in about a dozen projects, including an Internet data centre for the prime minister's office, fibre infrastructure to connect the Basra international airport area to the ITPC southern SDH network, the ITPC Arabsat satellite earth station, a call centre project for Newroz Telecom in the Kurdish region and a number of other public sector and ministry-based projects. However, the Iraq Ministry of Oil nationwide VSAT WAN infrastructure project, completed in 2010, may be the clearest indicator of the company's future direction in the country. Barzanji, says of the ICT opportunities in the oil sector: "We see it as the one that's going to be the largest in terms of revenue." He continues, "We're going to be playing not just in the connectivity-to-the-cable but even more on the access side — delivering broadband services — so we're looking at a multitude of solutions."

For example, few people would necessarily think of oil camps in terms of complex communications requirements, but there could eventually be close to 30,000 staff, local and international, deployed in camps across the southern oilfields with, in theory, little except their mobile phones to rely on. That and no backbone save VSAT, which, unsupported, is very expensive.



Roy Hodges - VP Marketing, speaking at the recent Iraq Petroleum Conference in London

And such camps are going to need much more than that. A camp spec for 1500 people could mean 300mbits for data, independent of the cellular network. This means significant backhaul and microwave connectivity to other camps to give them redundancy for that backhaul, which means multiple VSATs across a backbone infrastructure. Within such a camp, there is likely to be a lot of fibre and copper: every single workstation will have multiple ports that a worker can connect a telephone into. Part of the solution for this is likely to involve deploying a complete voice over IP system. IP can also be used for videoconferencing, to allow meetings with head office, for example. And that same internal network will also, most likely, have to deliver television — over IPTV. Hodges explains, "You've got to put a satellite dish on the roof and an IPTV server [so that] you can deliver recorded or live video — video on demand. This needs a fibre infrastructure to every single building. On top of that, you've got internal systems that run on IP infrastructure like video surveillance [and] a totally integrated video security system." This will mean IP video cameras all the way round the camp, access control on every single door with card swipe machines linked into the video camera system, and even more sophisticated technology for monitoring perimeters.

Nevertheless, work on the oil camps goes ahead. Technology Partners is currently implementing the entire IT infrastructure for a Weatherford camp that will house over 700 people

And it's not just about entertainment or security. Barzanji adds: "You have to design your camps with all the services in mind; video, voice, IP television, data. The oil companies today rely heavily on data — all the seismic data, the geological data and so forth." Nor, he adds, is that the only consideration. "Part of the deal with the Iraq Ministry of Oil is that [oil companies] must keep all the new data in-country and the repositories of these data will be in large data centres and storage solutions in-country, obviously with disaster recovery solutions outside." Add the need for complete operations and management — as an outsourced service — on site to manage and support all of this and you will probably end up with quite a busy RFP, one that covers all the data communications, voice, videoconferencing and security — and is all IP-based. So it's not just useful, but essential to have access to the sort of capabilities Technology Partners can source. As Hodges says, "We're able to take advantage of the very latest convergent IP technology to deliver this."

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Iraq's international communications are still inadequate. Although there are a number of satellite, microwave and terrestrial fibre links with international gateways, significantly improved down and upload speeds will become available with the arrival in-country of FLAG, the undersea cable connecting Iraq with the world. That, however, has been delayed by the need to clear mines from FLAG's path to the shore around Al Faw.

Nevertheless, work on the oil camps goes ahead. Technology Partners is currently implementing the entire IT infrastructure for a Weatherford camp that will house over 700 people in the Rumaila Oil field near to Basra. The scope of work includes structured cabling, wireless networking, switching, security and telephony.

Just connecting such camps would be good business, of course, but for a full service communications and ICT integration and solutions company with access to partners like Cisco and Tropos Networks, a great deal more that is relevant to oil and gas needs in Iraq is possible. Also, some non-oil and gas-linked applications are market-ready and transferable. In Abu Dhabi, for example, technology Partners is in the final stages of deploying what is the biggest Wi-Fi network in the world across the entire emirate. This is a smart grid network for the Abu Dhabi Water and Electricity Authority and is going to cover 4,000 sq-km of contiguous Wi-Fi coverage reading three quarters of a million electricity and water meters and connecting tens of thousands of SCADA devices for control of the water grid, the electricity grid and the sewage networks.



Few people would think of oil camps in terms of complex communications requirements

Why is this important to the oil and gas industry? "If you look at what is shaping in the oil and gas industry," says Hodges, "the big push is towards the concept of the digital oilfield: real-time connectivity to hundreds of thousands of end points in the field." Yet again Rumaila, the biggest oilfield in Iraq, is a case in point. Eventually it will have 1,000 wells across about 2,000 square kilometres. That means tens of thousands of end points because on every single well there will be multiple SCADA devices.

And yet this is only half the size of what Technology Partners is doing with the smart grid in Abu Dhabi. So the company is proposing a multi-tier infrastructure that will allow blanket coverage across the entire oilfield, "in which case," says Hodges, "you can put any endpoint anywhere you like and have mobility and broadband mobility everywhere inside the field, using Wi-Fi mesh technology fed by WIMAX, coming from the same camps that are used as hubs that are connected by microwave and VSAT backhaul, so it's a full multi-tiered, multi-layered architecture."

Whether this proposal will be adopted is as yet undecided. However, things are clearly looking up for telecommunications in Iraq, although no one is pretending that it's been easy so far: government paralysis, slow decision-making, bandwidth problems, lack of electricity, the need to building indigenous expertise — all have been hurdles since 2003. Now, however, the actual rate of business is increasing, notably in the oil and gas sector. In fact, Barzanji says, "Every two weeks, we get a new RFP. We are as a company going to be investing more and more in the southern part of Iraq." ■



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