

# The National business

## Net profit is there for the taking in Iraq

**A** Omar Barzanji, is the chief executive of Technology Partners, an internet communications and technology services company based in Dubai. After spending years introducing new technologies to the Gulf, the Iraqi-American businessman talks about getting his company off the ground and why he sees Iraq as the next great opportunity in the region:

**Q How did you start your own business?**

**A** In 1996, I joined a UK company called Madge Networks to start up their operations in Dubai. Four years later the company was struggling and my boss called me and said the bad news is, you're fired. But the good news is that you can take on the business. I took on the company and renamed it Technology Partners.

**You first went back to Iraq in 2003. What was that like?**

Iraq missed the internet revolution through decades of war and economic sanctions. I worked in Silicon Valley. I go to Iraq and was shocked to see that it was circa-1985 with old machines, analogue systems and no web browsing or broadband technology.

**What was your first project there?**

The Arabsat station, which connects telephone exchanges via satellite to other countries, was bombed during the war. When we imported the equipment from the US company General Dynamics they told us [we] had to install it, and without any training we installed the stations. They are working today providing communication between 20 Arabsat countries and Iraq.

**How often do you go to Iraq?**

I try to go to once a month.

**Doesn't that worry your family?**

Sometimes I won't tell my wife that I am going to Baghdad, I'll say I'm going to Beirut or Amman.

**How big is the market there for internet communications?**

It's worth about US\$300 million (Dh1.1 billion) a year, the largest growth market in the region. It can grow to double that number in the next 24 to 48 months.

There's massive consumer demand for laptops, software and internet access.

**What is the biggest impediment?**

Under the current law, any fibre under the ground belongs to the government. I am vice chairman of a lobby group, called the Iraqi Telecom and IT Association, with representatives from mobile operators, internet service providers and system integration [companies] like us to improve the Iraq telecoms law, which is in a draft version.

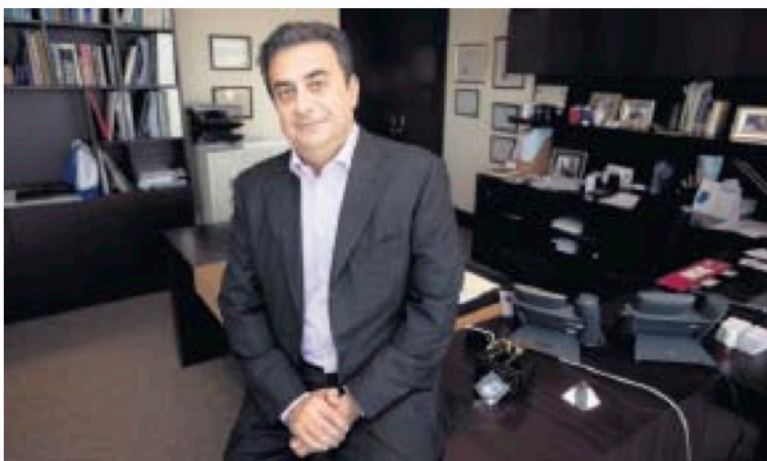
**What do you think the Iraqi government needs to do?**

They should provide licences to internet providers through bidding rounds to allow international companies and Iraqi investors to pool together the right amount of money and invest in data infrastructure. Gulf countries, including Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, achieved this in the mid-1990s.

**What else needs to be done to bring Iraq into the internet age?**

We have just partnered with Cisco to launch a training facility in Iraq. There is a tremendous amount of people coming out of universities in Iraq looking for a career. We want them to find jobs, get training and keep them in Iraq.

★ Hadeel al Sayegh



**Omar Barzanji, the chief executive of Technology Partners, talks of great opportunities in Iraq.** Jaime Puebla / The National