

The Web: Arabic-language Internet

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The Egyptian Tourist Authority this week launched a new Web site, but the domain name, www.Egypt.travel, like all others in the Arab world, is in English, not Arabic. That may change in the coming years, however, experts tell United Press International's The Web column, as interest in Internet usage is growing in the Arab world, and authorities consider the creation of Internet addresses made up of Arabic alphabet characters, not just ones from the English language.

"The Web has become increasingly important," Zoheir Garranah, the Egyptian minister of tourism, told the media.

This summer the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers is going to experiment with the use of international characters in domain names, ones that use diacritical marks, like Arabic and some Asian scripts. "The geographic extent of the Internet is constantly expanding, with a corresponding increase in its use by the diverse linguistic groups of the world," said ICANN, an independent, federal agency, in a statement. "Content reflecting this linguistic diversity has long been available online." The multilingual domain names will actually be stored inside of standard Internet characters -- but will present images that show the Arabic scripts.

The move comes as interest in the Internet is picking up in the Arab world. According to the International Telecommunications Union, a U.N. body, the penetration rate for the Internet is just 3.7 percent in the Arab world. Overall, modern telecommunications usage in the region lags the rest of the world, with only 8.59 percent of households having

landlines, and 14.51 percent of them subscribing to a mobile phone service. Governments there also restrict Internet use, with the United Arab Emirates banning the photo-sharing services like Flickr, Microsoft Network's MySpace and Google's Orkut. The UAE also bans online translation tools -- a barrier for non-English speaking Arabs.

Government restrictions on the Internet are not unique to the Arab world, however. James Kolka, an international legal consultant, based in Atlanta, tells The Web that the European Union is reviewing concerns over Apple Computer's iTunes service there. This is not necessarily to be seen as anti-American, however, a partner with the law firm of Parker Poe, Catharine Biggs Arrowood, based in Raleigh, N.C., told The Web. It should be viewed as concern for consumers there.

There are signs of growth of the Internet in the Arab world, though, and liberalization too.

Research shows that Internet usage is growing in Jordan and Yemen. A new report, "Jordan's Internet and Datacomm Landscape," was released last week by the Arab Advisor Group, a consultancy, based on arabadvisors.com. The study notes that there are now eight Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Jordan, including Batelco-Jordan, Cyberia, IONet, Link, MEC, NEXT, TE Data and Wanadoo. Growth in the Internet market there will reach the \$52 million per year level by 2010, the study said. The researchers, in another report, indicated that there are now two ISPs in Yemen, Y.net and YemenNet. Internet usage has soared in Yemen, and is expected to grow from 2.4 percent to 6.81 percent by the end of 2010.

The Egyptian tourist site is part of the government's outreach to foreigners, as the www.Egypt.travel site includes news and events, as well as information about cultural attractions in Egypt, and visa information for travelers. The URL that Egypt is using comes from

Tralliance Corp., a travel registry for the Internet which controls the ".travel" domain. "Egypt's new portal places all of their tourism assets in front of the global consumer audience," said Ron Andruff, president and CEO of Tralliance Corp., based in New York City. The Egyptian site is being published in Arabic, English, German, Spanish, French, Italian and Russian.

Americans are increasing their interest in foreign language sites, experts tell The Web.

There are a number of consultancies that help companies integrate other languages into their Web sites, like RedDot, and sites like www.translations.com help localize and translate Web sites into several foreign languages.

Organizations, like the Cato Institute, the think tank in Washington D.C., post their materials online in a number of tongues, in addition to English, Evans Pierre, a spokesman for Cato, told The Web. This includes Spanish, at www.elcato.org; Arabic, at www.misbahalhurriyya.org; and Russian, at www.cato.ru. Those sites are part of the think tank's outreach effort on global economic liberty, Pierre said.

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