

IT Parks

The year was 1999. It was the year that the REACH Initiative was designed and formulated to provide our IT Sector the necessary strategy, planning, and support to place Jordan on the world IT map. At the time, the eyes and ears of global technology giants, ISPs, venture capitalists as well as academics were on Jordan. They were interested in and amazed by the depth, quality and vision of this far REACHing initiative with its well defined strategic thrusts that specified in practical terms everything that was needed to give Jordan more than a fair chance towards becoming a regional IT powerhouse. Well-deserved congratulations and commendations were the order of the day.

Within the Infrastructure component of REACH, one of the recommendations was related to the establishment of an IT Park in Jordan. It read as follows:

" This multifaceted project must conform to international standards while offering an appropriate mix of infrastructure, facilities, and supporting institutions to meet the needs of Jordanian firms. The private sector must play the lead role in planning and investing in this project, while the Government and perhaps relevant donors provide appropriate coordination, oversight, and support. Feasibility studies must be undertaken prior to committing to a given location. Efforts should be made to involve IT park developers and experts who can bring experience, capital, and promotional assets (including brand-name cache) to the project".

" Timing: This action should begin immediately and be in place in three years".

" Implementation: IT industry leaders & respective industry associations; relevant Government agencies; donor technical and financial support".

As with all good ideas, deliberations on practical implementation steps started almost immediately. While the benefits of establishing a modern state of art IT Park were clear and tangible, the focus shifted quickly from "why" to "where". Various stakeholders presented conflicting preferences as to the desired location for such a park. Suggested locations covered almost every governorate in the kingdom. Influential lobby groups were mobilized to favour one location over another. Interests ranged from promoting

accessibility to creating new employment opportunities to infrastructure all the way to real estate development. As a compromise solution, there was even a suggestion to start with a "Virtual IT Park" rather than a physical one. And the debates went on.

The year is 2003, which incidentally equals REACH + 4 years. Dubai's highly acclaimed and successful Internet City has been operational for over two years. Egypt has just announced the completion of its Smart Village project located halfway between Cairo and Alexandria. Both are variants of the same IT Park concept.

It is probable that the idea is still being debated. At this rate, it is quite likely that Kabul will have its own IT Park before we do.