Iran Country Report | Freedom on the Net 2018

Key Developments:

**June 1, 2017 - May 31, 2018**

- In January, at the height of antigovernment protests across the country, authorities slowed down internet connections and at times completely blocked access to servers and data outside Iran (see Restrictions on Connectivity).
- Telegram and Instagram were blocked by authorities in response to the protests. While both blocks were lifted by mid-January, Telegram was permanently blocked in April for being a threat to national security (see Blocking and Filtering).
- New regulations entitled “Policies and Actions Regarding the Organization of Social Media Messaging Applications” released in August 2017 outline legal activities for messaging apps operating in Iran and formalize previous demands that foreign messaging apps work with Iranian authorities to obtain licenses and move their data centers inside Iran (see Legal Environment).
- Though prosecutions for online activities led to shorter prison sentences compared to previous years, six admins of reformist-aligned Telegram channels were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to five years in August 2017. Several other Telegram admins were arrested for various activities, using charges such as encouraging protests or promoting homosexuality (see Prosecutions and Arrests for Online Activities).

Introduction:

Internet freedom remained highly restricted in Iran over the past year due to the disrupting of internet connectivity and blocking of social media platforms in response to antigovernment protests. In late December 2017, protesters took the streets in the city of Mashhad to voice discontent with the country’s flagging economy and the soaring prices of basic goods. Within a week, the protests spread to several other cities, becoming the largest expression of dissatisfaction with the government since the nationwide protests against the 2009 presidential election results.

In response, authorities throttled and at times shut down mobile and internet networks; they also blocked access to the messaging app Telegram and photo-sharing platform Instagram for at least one week. Later in April, the government blocked Telegram completely under the pretext of national security; hard-liners within the Islamic regime argued that the platform supported terrorists and other dangerous groups. Telegram was then the most widely used social media and messaging app in the country, with an estimated 40 million users. Iranians employed the app to follow popular “channels,” including those of local and foreign news organizations whose websites are blocked in the country. Following the ban, Iranian authorities pursued a policy to promote and financially support domestic messaging apps. Meanwhile, the long-standing filtering of the Chinese messaging app WeChat was reportedly lifted.

Authorities continued to arrest numerous individuals for their online activities in the past year, though convictions led to shorter prison sentences compared to previous years. Six other Telegram admins were reportedly charged in September for “promoting homosexuality.” Separately, six admins of reformist-aligned Telegram channels who were arrested around the May 2017 presidential election were sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to five years in August 2017.

Obstacles to Access:

- Most improvements to internet freedom since the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013 relate to access and the information and communication technology (ICT) market. The ICT Minister announced in July 2017 new plans for the country’s national information network (SHOMA) to include the development of a national wireless network and an expansion of IP backbone projects, among other plans. Authorities slowed down internet connections and at times completely blocked access to servers and data outside Iran during antigovernment protests in January 2018.

Availability and Ease of Access:

Internet penetration, bandwidth, and speeds have increased markedly in recent years due to immense investment in ICTs. Both the Iranian government and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) estimated internet penetration at approximately 60 percent in 2017. According to Iran’s ICT minister, internet bandwidth increased from 724.4 to 4,000 Gbps during President Rouhani’s first term. The ICT Ministry set a target of 12,000 Gbps by the end of 2017.

Both Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, and the parliament have warned the administration against increasing bandwidth before the country’s national information network (SHOMA) is ready. SHOMA was defined in a 2011–16 development plan as “an IP-based internet supported by data centers that are completely undetectable and impenetrable by foreign sources and allow the creation of private, secure intranet networks.” In addition to protecting against foreign cyberattacks like the “Stuxnet” malware virus, identified in 2010, SHOMA is meant to improve internet access while moving much of the content and websites visited by Iranian users to domestic servers, where traffic can be closely monitored and censored by the authorities.

In July 2017, then ICT minister Mahmood Varaqi—who later became the president’s chief of staff—unveiled plans for the next phase of SHOMA at an event in the Tehran offices of the Mobile Telecommunication Company of Iran (MCI). The plans included development of the national wireless network, including 4.5G service in 710 cities; expansion of IP (internet protocol) backbone projects and fiber networks; expansion of the content delivery network (CDN) in Iran; and an agreement with Nokia for research and delivery of 5G mobile service.

The Rouhani administration has demonstrated a consistent commitment to developing SHOMA as part of its overall drive to boost connectivity. The deputy ICT minister claimed that domestic traffic accounted for 40 percent of all internet usage as of March 2017, up from only 10 percent one year earlier. The country’s proposed ICT budget for 2017–18 was cut by 2 percent from the previous year, though the 2016–17 budget had increased by 133 percent. Similarly, the amount devoted to SHOMA rose by 1 percent, having increased the previous year by 44 percent.
Iranian private and state-backed companies have also been seeking foreign investment. In May 2017 it was announced that South Africa’s MTN would invest US$484 million to bring fiber-optic networks to the cities of Tehran, Karaj, Qom, Tabriz, Shiraz, Isfahan, Ahvaz, and Mashhad; MTN would control 49 percent of the Iranian Net Company, a consortium established in 2015 to deliver fiber-optic upgrades. However, a move to prioritize local content through differential pricing threats neutrality, the principle that providers should not discriminate against certain types of content or services. In January 2017, Vaezi noted that Iranian internet users during the same period reported major disruptions in access to servers hosted by the New York–based hosting company DigitalOcean, apparently caused by ISPs inside Iran.

The Telecommunications Infrastructure Company (TIC), a state-owned enterprise controlled by the ICT Ministry, retains a monopoly on internet traffic flowing in and out of Iran. In addition, the heavy influence of the Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI) in the ISP market grants the security apparatus the ability to control third-party ISPs and monitor online activities, since TCI’s majority shareholder is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In February 2018, the supreme leader ordered the IRGC and other security forces to reduce any economic activities that are not related to their core missions, but the corps had no move to withdraw from TCI as of May. In October (after the report’s coverage period), the IRGC announced that it was selling its stake in the telecommunications giant.

in the months prior to the presidential election, when the reformist-aligned Telegram channels operated by Eshetablumen News, Eshetabt News, Majmuye Eshetablumen, and Hamaigam Dindat were either deleted or stopped publishing due to the arrest of their admins. Iran’s prosecutor general in 2017 that the judiciary issued orders to block tens of thousands of Telegram channels every week, but company representatives denied accusations that they complied with censorship beyond the removal of terrorist content.

On December 30, 2017, ICT minister Aazami Jahromi took to Twitter to directly ask Telegram chief executive Parsa Davoo to remove the channel of the website Azad News, which he accused of promoting violence among proponents of the June 2017 protests. Davoo responded by saying that if the claims were confirmed, the channel would be removed. Within hours it was removed temporarily, until it assured Telegram that its terms of use would not be violated. Iranian authorities later moved to ban Telegram entirely in April 2018 (see Blocking and Filtering).

Website owners must register their sites with the Ministry of Culture and are then subject to requests to remove particular posts deemed unacceptable by the government. The 2009 CCL makes service providers, such as bloggers and members of the Basij paramilitary group.

As Telegram grew in prominence in Iran, security forces turned their attention toward the administrators of the communication app’s various channels, which allow users to post public messages to large groups. This was particularly notable around the May 2017 presidential election, when security forces arrested 12 admins of reformist-aligned Telegram channels; six of them were charged and sentenced to prison terms ranging from two to six years in 2018.

The ICT Ministry and Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)—the state broadcaster whose head is appointed directly by the supreme leader—appear to be at odds on the right to license internet protocol television (IPTV) services. The Ministry has sought to capitalize on expanded bandwidth by promoting IPTV as a new avenue for media diversity. However, in November 2016, IRIB notified all private IPTV providers that licenses issued to them by the ICT Ministry were invalid, insisting that only IRIB has the power to issue licenses.

The majority of independent content producers lack the financial resources to operate in such a hostile environment. The online advertising market in Iran is exclusively limited to apolitical and progovernment websites. Although the United States adjusted its sanctions against Iran after the 2015 nuclear deal to enable American internet companies to provide services to Iranian users, Google still does not allow an advertising campaign to target Iran as a country, disadvantaging domestic content producers as well as content producers in the diaspora seeking to cultivate an audience inside Iran. Any Iranian-linked company or individual that wishes to use Google AdSense to monetize content must apply for a specific license in a process that is onerous for the majority of Iranian content producers.

Violations of User Rights:

On December 27, 2017, one day before a series of antigovernment protests began in Iran, US-based Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad posted an image of a woman engaging in a solitary protest against the mandatory hijab policy in Iran. Her image went viral, and authorities arrested her within hours. She was released after two years of imprisonment in 2019.

In June 2018, journalist and political activist Hengameh Shahidi was arrested after criticizing government policies on social media and participating in interviews with foreign media. She had previously been imprisoned for five months in 2017 as part of a government crackdown on dissidents and reformists ahead of the presidential election.

In February 2018, Azari Jahromi, the ICT minister, published drafts of five bills meant to codify the legal regime governing ICT policy in Iran. Although the United States lifted its sanctions against Iran after the 2015 nuclear deal to enable American internet companies to provide services to Iranian users, Google still does not allow an advertising campaign to target Iran as a country, disadvantaging domestic content producers as well as content producers in the diaspora seeking to cultivate an audience inside Iran. Any Iranian-linked company or individual that wishes to use Google AdSense to monetize content must apply for a specific license in a process that is onerous for the majority of Iranian content producers.

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The online sphere in Iran is heavily monitored by the state. In January 2017, it was announced that the administrators of Telegram channels with more than 5,000 members would be offered incentives to register with Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. There was no permission for noncompliance. Admins who registered were required to provide their channel name, full legal name, home address, and national identification number. In addition, they had to give “temporary co-administration” privileges to an “iransamandehibot” bot. The presence of a government bot monitoring all channel discussions would pose a serious threat to the privacy and personal security of channel admins and members, particularly in channels sharing content deemed to be politically, religiously, or culturally sensitive. In April 2017, it was reported that 8,000 Telegram channels and 1,000 Instagram pages had registered.

Two months later, a judge declared that she would not be released until Britain settled a US$394 million debt that Iran claimed it was owed under a 1976 deal involving military equipment. The legal status of encryption in Iran is somewhat murky. Chapter 2, Article 10 of the CCL prohibits “concealing data, changing passwords, and/or encoding data that could deny access of authorized individuals to data, computer and telecommunication systems.” This could be understood to prohibit encryption, but enforcement is not common. Nonetheless, the authorities have periodically blocked encrypted traffic from entering the country through international gateways, particularly during contentious moments such as elections.

In 2018, amid preparation for elections to the parliament and the Assembly of Experts, a body of clerics that appoints the supreme leader, the deputy interior minister for security announced that a new “Elections Security Headquarters” would be established to “monitor cyberspace.”

Various Telegram, Gmail, and social media accounts associated with the Imam Ali Popular Students Relief Society, an Iranian charity focused on combating poverty among women and children, were hacked in April 2018.

A survey of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) Iranians conducted by Small Media in early 2018 suggested that half had experienced online harassment, and one in five had reported being estranged by state or nonstate actors on dating apps. This is part of a long-term campaign of harassment against LGBTQ people, with examples of threatening text messages sent to individuals going back to 2016. The free expression organization Article 19 also identified numerous cases of online harassment against LGBTQ people in a February 2018 report.

State hackers often launch cyberattacks against Iranian activists and campaigners, including those in the diaspora. In February 2017, the research group Iran Threats reported that a “macOS malware agent, named MacDrooler, was observed in the wild as targeting the defense industrial base, and reported elsewhere to have been used against a human rights advocate.” The group tied the activity to hackers “believed to be based in Iran and connected to Iranian security entities.”

In August 2018, a prominent Iranian political activist based in Paris was the target of malware intended to gain remote access to a “wide range of content on Android smartphones including messages, photos, audio files, apps, GPS locators, and contact lists,” according to the Center for Human Rights in Iran.

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The identity of the attackers was unknown, though digital security adviser Amin Sabeti noted in an IranWire report that links to the IRGC were likely.

Notes:
12. 105 In June 2015, the Cyber Police (FATA) created a new unit for monitoring computer games.
13. 104 Similarly, the IRGC launched a military exercise named “Eghtedare Sarallah” in September 2015, which included the monitoring of social media activities.
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89 https://iranhumanrights.org/2018/06/telegram-channel-admin-could-get-death-penalty-for-insulting-the-prophet/
107 Ibid p. 95
109 Ibid p. 95
114 Iranwire, "available at: https://iranwire.com/fa/features/21867