

# IRAN

For several reasons, Iran has yet to fully utilise the Internet as a platform, mainly because of the ambiguous relationship between citizens and the establishment. Very severe prosecution and persecution are measures taken by the State in order to curb what it sees as a threat to the Iranian political system and the fabric of decent Islamic society. Nonetheless, Iran is also witnessing an excessive volume of online lawlessness<sup>1</sup> which can be attributed to a lack of Internet jurisdiction. It can also be argued that skewed attention to online activity in Iran has produced a vacuum which encourages harmful activities on the web. These conditions make Iranian Internet usage unique and some aspects of Internet governance less relevant, as outlined later in this report.

From a risk-analysis perspective, the Iranian establishment has a valid case for not promoting Internet access. Recent cases of cyber-espionage and sabotage in Iran provide a strong argument for limiting Internet penetration. Government plans to retract areas of public service which had been extended to the Internet back into physical offices areas, can be understood in this context. There is a prevalent assumption that the Internet is a vehicle for political and social change. However, it can be argued that the Iranian State's perspective on the Internet as a framework for political instability and change is

based on external attempts to use it in precisely that manner.

Many Iranians perceive the Internet as one of a limited number of means of engagement in political and social processes. Politicisation of the Internet narrows the perception of it to nothing more than a political entity. If it had not been regarded as hostile by the State, it could have been a more prevalent platform for other functionalities such as community development and social engagement.

Several factors including:

- (1) The unbalanced approach to Internet governance
- (2) Lack of interest in investing in and increasing Internet penetration rates, and
- (3) Politicisation of the Internet by major players including Western governments, outside NGOs and the Iranian diaspora, have resulted in a skewed Internet presence. Any serious discussion on current Internet presence in Iran and any realistic forecast for its future cannot and must not ignore these keys factors.

## LAWS AND COMPUTER CRIMES

The regime's agenda dominates the Iranian legislative system. Vague and ambiguous laws can be used by the State apparatus to detain individuals, as and when it pleases. The 'Law of

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1. Examples can be found, in Persian, on the website of Fata Police, the Iranian cyber police, at <http://www.cyberpolice.ir/> and Gerdab, which has stated ties with the IRGC, at <http://www.gerdab.ir/>.

Computer Crimes' which includes 56 Articles,<sup>2</sup> was approved by the Iranian Parliament in January 2009. This legislation has been instrumental in the prosecution and detention of several cyber-activists and bloggers.

A public prosecutor has categorised on his blog criminal content covered by this law as:<sup>3</sup>

1. Immoral
2. Anti-Islamic
3. Anti-security and disturbing the public peace
4. Criminal regarding intellectual property and audio and visual issues
5. Content which encourages, invites or provokes others to commit criminal acts
6. Content which is against State and public institutions and their responsibilities
7. Content used to facilitate other computer crimes

Whilst content which encourages, invites or provokes others to commit crimes is illegal, so too is posting a link to this (potentially filtered) content on a blog or social network. With this in mind, the mere act of linking a source could be considered as criminal as actually promoting violence. The regime's lawmakers also consider content which encourages 'squandering' (being wasteful) as against the law. In a socio-theological context this includes any encouragement of consumerism so that anyone who uses the Internet for commercial or marketing purposes could be questioned. 'Squandering' has not been clearly defined, leaving room for interpretation.

Vague publishing laws also make it illegal to publish any content which speaks out against the State, contradicts the Iranian Constitution, or harms to the 'principles' of the Islamic Republic. Under this ambiguous law, what would be considered ordinary social media activity in other countries is potentially criminal in the Iranian context. In recent years this has resulted in many prosecutions. For example, the Iranian blogger Omid Reza Mir Sayafi<sup>4</sup> was jailed for insulting religious leaders, and died in prison in 2009. This case provoked a lot of local media coverage and became a benchmark in the history of the persecution of bloggers. This ambiguity makes it impossible for an activist to know when they have 'crossed the line' into illegal activity. This results in self-censorship, which also limits the use of the Internet for social and political activity.

In summary, the legal framework related to online activity could have severe repercussions for activists, and its ambiguity leads to limited participation through widespread self-censorship. This means that the Internet is not sufficiently cultivated for online social and political activism.

## **NATIONAL INTERNET: A "FILTERED" WORLD WIDE WEB**

The Iranian regime aims to isolate its online citizens from the wider world, and its project to nationalise the Internet could assist them in achieving this goal. This Internet has been referred to by the Iranian authorities as 'Halal (clean) Internet'.

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2. <http://peyvandha.ir/0-2.htm>

3. <http://www.dadsetan.org/post-148.aspx>

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4. <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2009/03/19/omid-reza-mir-sayafi-iranian-blogger-dies-in-prison/>

The main goal of this project is to avoid the constant updating of filtering systems and new online technologies. As an alternative, the Iranian State means to create their own version of the Internet with limited content. This would allow citizens to roam freely on a 'national Internet', accessing information and interacting with business and official institutions. This would also give the Iranian regime full control of all data, including ways to deal with 'undesirable content'.

*Reporters without Borders* states that the concept of a national Internet is an attempt to combat the impact of the international Internet. The system '... consists of an Intranet designed ultimately to replace the international Internet and to discriminate between ordinary citizens and the 'elite' (banks, ministries and big companies), which will continue to have access to the international Internet.'<sup>5</sup> Others have argued that the Iranian regime's intention is to create an Internet where Iranians are 'safe' from pornographic content, hate speech and cultural influences which the World Wide Web permits, and that this project would still permit intra-national communications, commerce and business to prevail.<sup>6</sup>

Ambiguity has also surrounded the 'national Internet' project since its inception, and has been linked to fears of disconnection and central control. In 2008 *Hamshari*, an Iran-based news website, wrote that 'national Internet' is an

ambiguous term.<sup>7</sup> In 2010 *Donayeh Eghtesad*, an Iran-based newspaper wrote that 'The project was an initiative of Ahmadinejad's government five years ago and it has still four years to go before it becomes operational... there is a curtain of ambiguity on this project. It is not clear what, where, how or who is going to use the national Internet ... The Minister of Communication and Technology, Reza Taghipour, says that the national Internet will be a broadband, fast network inside the country to answer the government's electronic needs ... At present, the Internet for households is provided by private companies, although the Ministry of Communication is researching the possibility of doing it by itself.'<sup>8</sup>

Alireza Shirazi, the founder of a leading Iranian blogging platform, says that it has not been made clear to him what a 'clean Internet' is. However, he is concerned that, despite almost all social media being currently filtered, there will most likely be no Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, Myspace or any of the known social media services. He believes that instead of having an open Internet with a number of Internet sites on a filtered black-list, there should be a closed Internet with limited permitted sites.<sup>9</sup>

*New Scientist* magazine reported on the Halal Internet in its early stages. According to its security expert, Collin Anderson, the substitute network will contain Iran-specific content and alternatives for popular services including, for example, a substitute Facebook. The government

5. <http://en.rsf.org/iran-government-develops-national-03-08-2011,40738.html>

6. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/10/201210263735487349.html>

7. <http://www.hamshahri.org/news-62102.aspx>

8. [http://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/Default\\_view.asp?@=213707](http://www.donya-e-eqtesad.com/Default_view.asp?@=213707)

9. <http://shirazi.blogfa.com/post-319.aspx>

would limit connections to outside networks, rendering them too slow to be unusable and thereby forcing users onto the national network.<sup>10</sup> In October 2012, the Iranian media reported that 44,000 schools had been connected to the national Internet.<sup>11</sup> So far no information has been published regarding the characteristics of the interactions of these students and whether the network has become operational.

The National Internet Project (NIP) is a step backwards from the current filter-based framework. Some have argued that the tension around Iran's nuclear program, cyber-attacks and malwares targeting the Iranian nuclear facilities, have created an urgent need for the Islamic Republic to defend itself. The concept of a self-contained network has become a plausible and tempting alternative to the establishment. Nevertheless, given the enormous investment it demands in terms of infrastructure and security, it has been treated with scepticism. Although it is debatable, the latest cyber-attacks against Iran's nuclear program have been a contributing factor to the acceleration of plans for its implementation.<sup>12</sup>

When President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad initially requested funding to launch the NIP in 2005, the Iranian Parliament refused the \$10 million funding.<sup>13</sup> That decision forced the government to seek other financing sources; however they

remain unclear. The NIP threatens the very trans-border concept which represents the basis of the Internet. Furthermore, the lack of information on its exact aims and its sources of funding leave serious doubts as to whether the Iranian regime will be able to launch such a massive undertaking.

## **FILTERING: AN EVERLASTING PROBLEM**

The Iranian political regime has acquired and developed the technology to censor the Internet extensively. It can be argued that its filtering system is an extension of censorship practices exercised outside of Iran. As a result, different types of websites are being targeted with increasing regularity for censorship in a similar way to the physical world in which censorship is prevalent.

Abdolsamad Khoram Abadi, an official of the Iranian Judiciary, claimed that the Judiciary has blocked access to more than five million Internet websites perceived as immoral and anti-social.<sup>14</sup> In the official vocabulary of the Iranian state, 'immoral' does not only describe content of a pornographic nature. Civil society activists have also been labelled as advocating immorality. The Iranian filtering machine targets all kinds of websites, including news media and any which do not support the Iranian regime. This includes environmental blogs, social media websites, economic analysis websites and even unofficial pro-regime bloggers.<sup>15</sup>

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10. [www.newscientist.com/article/mg21628865.700-first-evidence-for-irans-parallel-halal-internet.html](http://www.newscientist.com/article/mg21628865.700-first-evidence-for-irans-parallel-halal-internet.html)

11. <http://khabarfarsi.com/ext/3595371>

12. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-preparing-internal-version-of-internet/2012/09/19/79458194-01c3-11e2-b260-32f4a8db9b7e\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-preparing-internal-version-of-internet/2012/09/19/79458194-01c3-11e2-b260-32f4a8db9b7e_story.html)

13. <http://www.hamshahri.org/news-131560.aspx>

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14. <http://www.ettelaat.net/08-november/news.asp?id=33351>

15. <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/07/31/iran-pro-ahmadinejad-blogger-jailed/>

Filtering mechanisms were established during the introduction of the Internet to Iran. Strategies were developed in 2001, when the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution required Internet Services Providers (ISPs) to enforce filtering systems. A committee tasked with determining unauthorised websites was established and, as of 2009, private ISPs were required to pass their traffic through government-controlled channels.<sup>16</sup>

The Iranian state does not advocate freedom of speech, and on 23 September 2012 the government announced that they would begin filtering Google and GoogleMail (gmail). A government official, Abdolsamad Khoramabadi, stated<sup>17</sup> that this was due to public demand caused by outrage at the presence of what was perceived as a blasphemous anti-Islamic video on YouTube (Google owns YouTube).<sup>18</sup> Khoramabadi is a key member of the Commission to Determine Instances of Criminal Content,<sup>19</sup> a governmental body chaired by the Public Prosecutor which looks into controversial contexts and produces reports to the Head of the National Security Council. Its mandate is legally binding on all ISPs.<sup>20</sup> However, this censorship did not last long, and gmail was unblocked. It was subsequently reported that the filtering system has adopted a new mechanism in order to block access to several audiovisual forms of content.<sup>21</sup>

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16. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/new-political-tools>

17. <http://goo.gl/4ETN1>

18. <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2012/09/17/did-google-do-the-right-thing/>

19. <http://internet.ir/law.html>

20. <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2010/11/23/iran-we-are-all-computer-criminals/> <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/09/24/iran-blocks-access-to-google-and-gmail-2/>

21. <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2012/11/14/mena->

This more segregated filtering mechanism, whilst permitting access to a specific Uniform Resource Locator (URL), banned access to Internet protocols which provide audio and video content within that URL.

Given this, the safety of citizen content providers (such as bloggers) is indeterminate, as the thresholds of legality are not defined clearly. Whilst the regime resorts to censoring techniques, some technically savvy Iranians are able to access 'blocked' websites using circumvention services.<sup>22</sup>

## **REPRESSION: VIRTUAL WRITERS, PHYSICAL VICTIMS**

Iranian regime involvement in online affairs is not limited to activities in the virtual world. The regime has been known to detain bloggers and active users for voicing their opinions on social network websites. The legal ambiguity which surrounds web-users and online activists is not limited to individuals who oppose the state, but also pro-regime bloggers who have been prosecuted for their online activities. In July 2012 several pro-Ahmadinejad bloggers were arrested.<sup>23</sup> The regime does not discriminate between criticism in the online and physical world.

The Iranian State is currently working to become more effective and organized in their censorship process and in curbing activity on social media sites. In January 2011, the Iranian authorities

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[netizen-report-porn-edition/](#)

22. <http://www.manoto1.com/ChannelNews/news1305>

23. <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/07/31/iran-pro-ahmadinejad-blogger-jailed/>

finalised the setting up of the Iranian 'Cyber Army', whose aim is to strengthen governmental control of the Internet. In May 2010, Ebrahim Jabari, an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander, officially confirmed the creation of an Iranian Cyber Army. The army had already been named in reference to several hacking and defacing efforts on the web. This acknowledgment confirmed the hacking of Twitter in December 2009 and Baidu (a Chinese search engine) in January 2010.<sup>24</sup>

In April 2003, Sina Motalebi was the first Iranian blogger ever jailed on the grounds of blogging. He was arrested by the intelligence division of the law enforcement agency for publishing opinions on his personal blog and for interviews with foreign media. Sina's arrest was to set the tone for a long period of detention for Iranian bloggers. Between August and November 2004, Judiciary agents operating on behalf of Tehran's Chief Prosecutor, Saeed Mortazavi, detained more than 20 bloggers and online journalists. Several later provided accounts of ill-treatment while in custody.<sup>25</sup>

On March 18 2009, Omid MirSayafi became the first blogger to die in prison under suspicious circumstances.<sup>26</sup> Omid was a journalist in the field of cultural affairs and ran a blog with a modest number of viewers. Nevertheless, he became a State target for allegedly insulting religious leaders in his personal blog. The latest victim is Sattar Beheshti, whose family was informed to prepare his body for burial after his

short detainment in prison in November 2012. He had been arrested for political activities on the social media website Facebook. Prior to his death, he told inmates and authorities that he had undergone severe torture whilst in custody. Accounts later published by his family, stated that his body exhibited clear signs of torture whilst in the custody of the State.<sup>27</sup>

The 2009 disputed presidential elections were followed by new rounds of repression in the Iranian virtual world. Following protests against electoral fraud, the Internet took a leading role in organising and reporting on developments. This wave of online activity targeted everyone who was involved with brutality. As a result, several bloggers were given long prison sentences including Sakhi Rigi. He was arrested in 2009, accused of having published false information and for acting against national security; he was sentenced to 20 years in prison - the longest sentence ever passed for blogging in Iran.<sup>28</sup> In 2010, 18-year old Navid Mohebbi, active in the Iranian movement for women's rights, became the world's youngest imprisoned blogger.<sup>29</sup>

As social media has begun to take on a more prominent Internet role, the Iranian authorities have targeted them harshly - particularly Facebook. In January 2012, a group called 'Daaf and Paaf' ('hot persons') was seized by Iran's Cyber Army. The group held an online competition, the purpose of which was to select

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24. <http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-iran,39777.html>

25. <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2008/12/19/iran-a-long-and-painful-story-of-jailed-bloggers/>

26. <http://www.march18.org>

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27. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/11/opinion-dont-abandon-irans-internet-generation-to-online-oppression.html>

28. <http://advocacy.globalvoicesonline.org/2011/06/10/iran-record-breaking-20-year-jail-sentence-for-blogger/>

29. <http://en.rsf.org/internet-enemie-iran,39777.html>

the most attractive male and female Iranian.<sup>30</sup> Individuals from the police unit announced on the group's Facebook wall that 'the administrators of this group have confessed to have been promoting banality'. It was stated that posting pictures on Facebook of women without the veil, is punishable.<sup>31</sup>

## INTERNET CONTROL TECHNOLOGY

Research has indicated that commercial web-filtering products from the United States and Europe have been extensively used in Iran.<sup>32</sup> One such product is SmartFilter, now maintained by McAfee.<sup>33</sup> It has been suggested that Iran acquired these products through indirect means and that their use in Iran is a violation of the licensing terms.<sup>34</sup>

Recent indicators suggest that Iran is no longer dependent on foreign filtering systems and is now using domestically manufactured filtering tools. A recent Freedom House report states that private ISPs are currently required to either use government-provisioned bandwidth or to send their traffic through filtering boxes provided by software companies based in Iran.<sup>35</sup>

AmnAfzar Gostar-e Sharif (also known as Sharif SecureWare) - a software firm with filtering products on the market - was founded in 2002. The company states that it targets the security

requirements of enterprise and medium-level organisations.<sup>36</sup> AmnAfzar is located in Pardis Technology Park (PTP), a technology hub developed by the Technology Cooperation Office (TCO) of the Islamic Republic of the Iran Presidency. AmnAfzar manufactures the Unified Threat Management (UTM) system 'ParsGate' which is a firewall-designed to provide content-filtering functionalities and intrusion prevention.<sup>37</sup> 'Separ', an Iranian web-Filtering product also provided by Amnafzar, is another product which provides URL-filtering functionalities.<sup>38</sup>

Filtering of the Internet is commonly assessed for its social and political implications. However, these are essentially technological endeavours and demand either the import of necessary equipment or self-sustained set-up. Whilst the Iranian Internet Censorship system was initially based on technology and tools adopted from Western providers, it has now moved toward a domestically-erected and maintained industry. This limits the possibility of weakening it through sanctions and embargoes.

## ACCESS TO INFORMATION

A 2011 report published by the Foreign Policy Centre<sup>39</sup> reviewed the current situation of access to information in Iran from a human rights perspective.<sup>40</sup> Sections of this report were written by Iranian social and political activists

30. <http://globalvoicesonline.org/2012/01/30/iran-police-controls-facebook-group-arrests-its-administrators/>

31. <http://ilna.ir/news/news.cfm?id=16099>

32. <http://opennet.net/studies/iran>

33. <http://www.mcafee.com/ca/products/smartfilter.aspx>

34. <http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn7589-iranian-net-censorship-powered-by-us-technology.html>

35. <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2012/iran>

36. [http://www.amnafzar.com/aboutus\\_eng.html](http://www.amnafzar.com/aboutus_eng.html)

37. [http://www.amnafzar.com/Pg\\_eng\\_0.html](http://www.amnafzar.com/Pg_eng_0.html)

38. [http://www.amnafzar.com/Separ\\_eng\\_0.html](http://www.amnafzar.com/Separ_eng_0.html) and [http://web.archive.org/web/20111005032131/http://www.amnafzar.com/Separ\\_eng\\_0.html](http://web.archive.org/web/20111005032131/http://www.amnafzar.com/Separ_eng_0.html)

39. <http://fpc.org.uk/>

40. <http://fpc.org.uk/fsblob/1369.pdf>

based outside the country. The report describes many narratives regarding the blocking of Internet access during current socio-political developments in Iran, as well as efforts by the activist community to provide training and alternative access mechanisms.

The report interviewed Saeed Valadbaygi, an activist in his late-30s based in Toronto, Canada. Saeed describes the challenges caused by the low speed of available Internet connections in Iran, hurdles caused by the pervasive filtering system and frequent attempts by hackers backed by the Cyber Army to infiltrate and shut down dissident sources. Saeed describes methods used by him and other activists outside Iran to provide alternative connections, including rerouting Internet traffic. As stated in the above report, 'To upload five minutes of footage on YouTube could take 50 minutes at home, so we use proxies through alternative domains, so the person in Iran is in effect uploading the video via our computers outside the country.'

It is clear that access to information via the Internet in Iran has been following a downward spiral. A 2011 study commissioned by Nokia Siemens Networks investigates the Connectivity Score of different countries.<sup>41</sup> This study assesses how 'usefully connected' various countries are - defined to 'encompass usage and skills as well as infrastructure'.<sup>42</sup> The report assigns a score of 2.41 to Iran - just below the median score of 2.73 for the group of Resource and Efficiency-driven Countries.<sup>43</sup> The report

suggests that Iran shows strong growth potential and yet is one of the least developed Information and Communications Technology (ICT) markets in the Middle East. It concludes that Iran's telecommunications market is challenged with excessive regulations and legal hurdles. The government of Iran is described as exerting a lot of control over the market and being the owner of most telecommunications companies.

Iran was one of the first countries to adopt the Internet in its early stages. An early report entitled *The use of the Internet in Iran* was published in 2002 in the Journal of Educational Technology Research and Development.<sup>44</sup> It tracks the first wave of Internet interaction through the Institute of Studies in Theoretical Physics and Mathematics (ISTPM). Figures from 1996 estimate the number of Internet users at more than 60,000. This number is based on account holders in the Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences (IRFS). The report concludes with an optimistic forecast for the growth of Internet access in Iran. However, it has not been able to follow other countries in its class, by extending usage.

Content published and consumed on the Iranian Internet has a strong socio-political element and is generally not in favour of the Iranian establishment. Consequently, access to Internet information has strongly positively correlated with criticism of and opposition to the Iranian establishment and has led to a defensive attitude towards the Internet by the establishment. Internet access has become

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41. <http://www.connectivityscorecard.org>

42. <http://www.connectivityscorecard.org/faq/>

43. <http://www.connectivityscorecard.org/countries/iran>

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44. Johari, Abbas. "Internet Use in Iran: Access, Social, and Educational Issues." *Educational Technology Research and Development* 50.1 (2002): 81-84.

a victim of efforts by the Iranian establishment to control social interaction and public debate in Iran. It has been argued that the Iranian Internet prematurely adopted a strong political identity which resulted in the State acting against it.<sup>45</sup>

## E-GOVERNMENT

E-governance is the effective use of information technologies to facilitate public administration. It necessitates the adoption of new skills and processes by government organisations and citizens. Therefore, strong incentives are necessary for both government and citizens to proceed through this modification of the public sphere.

An academic thesis, published by Lulea University of Technology in Sweden, examined the role of the Ministry of Commerce in establishing e-governance in Iran.<sup>46</sup> The thesis investigated several e-government readiness models available in the literature and suggested a novel one. A questionnaire was given to managers and staff at the Ministry of Commerce, and a list of obstacles was derived from statistical analysis of the responses on the questionnaire. They were as follows;

- IT Infrastructure obstacles.
- Social and cultural obstacles
- Lack of IT skills
- Legal and security-related obstacles

A similar assessment was carried out in a 2002 study on the e-government maturity status of 25

government agencies.<sup>47</sup> The authors of the report examined their online facilities and ranked them according to UN e-government benchmarks of 'maturity'.<sup>48</sup> Results indicated that the highest rank was assigned to the Atomic Energy Organization (ranked at 'enhanced'), whilst six organisations were ranked as 'non-existent' and the rest as 'emerging'. The relatively slow rate of adoption of e-government concepts in Iran is combined with a decline in the current position of the country when measured against internationally-devised and accepted scales of e-government utilization.

The National Cartographic Centre of Iran (NCCI) is the main authority for producing spatial information, and acts under the President's Deputy for Planning and Strategic Supervision.<sup>49</sup> Two directors of the NCCI have recently provided an analysis of the role of the NCCI in the development of e-governance.<sup>50</sup> The paper cites results from United Nations reports on e-government,<sup>51</sup> which indicate that between 2005 and 2008 Iran has increased its e-government readiness. The same report, however, puts Iran in the 98th and the 108th

45. A more complete profile of Internet access in Iran is available on the Open Net website <http://opennet.net/research/profiles/iran>

46. <http://epubl.ltu.se/1653-0187/2007/052/>

47. Ghasemzadeh, Fereidoun, and Safari, Hossein. "E-Government Maturity Level: A Study about Iran." *EurAsia-ICT. Proc. of EurAsia-ICT 2002*, Shiraz, Iran. Pages 231-35.

48. "Benchmarking E-Government: A Global Perspective-- Assessing the UN Member Status", United Nations - Division for Public Economics and Public administration, May 2000.

49. <http://www.ncci.org.ir/HomePage.aspx?TabID=1&Site=NccPortal&Lang=en-US>

50. Sarpoulaki, M., A. Eslami Rad, and A. Salekniac. "E-Government Concept and Spatial Information: A Case Study in Islamic Republic of Iran." *The International Archives of the Photogrammetry, Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences*. Beijing. Vol. XXXVII. Part B4, 2008. 19-24.

51. <http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan028607.pdf>

out of 192 ranks in the years 2005 and 2008, respectively. The authors conclude that this indicates how much slower Iran's approach towards e-government has been in comparison to the world average.

Similar results are reported in a 2010 report published by the Statistical Economic and Social Research and Training Centre for Islamic Countries (SESRTC).<sup>52</sup> The report examines the status of members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) in terms of e-government development and e-participation.<sup>53</sup> According to this report, in both 2007 and 2009, Iran had one of the lowest ranks in the group.

While such studies independently indicate that the growth of e-governance in Iran is slower than many other countries in its category, an assessment of the political conditions in the country also shows a lack of willingness to invest in and rely on moving government services over to the Internet. Recent cyber-attacks on several key ministries, including the sensitive Ministry of Petroleum, have convinced the establishment that a counter-move is necessary and, as a result, key ministries are to go offline. This was indicated by the Minister for Telecommunication Minister in an August 2012 interview.<sup>54</sup>

The move towards further adoption of e-government concepts and institutions is in direct conflict with the centralized security-minded authority presently existing in Iran. As elements of democratisation lose their

effectiveness, a move toward more open and responsive governance will clearly not be a priority. Consequently, a detailed investigation of current transparency and accountability of e-government in Iran is challenging.

The reasons why Iran should be pushing for more e-government services are presented in various publications. For example, a 2011 paper<sup>55</sup> examined the level of satisfaction amongst Iranian citizens regarding the Electronic Value Added Tax (EVAT) system implemented by the State Tax Organization (STO).<sup>56</sup> Researchers used a web survey method and concluded that efficiency, completeness, and usability were found to be the most significant contributors to overall satisfaction, while customization, reliability, and accessibility had a lower impact on overall satisfaction.

## THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON CIVIL LIBERTIES

Western mainstream media has generally praised the Internet, and social networks such as Twitter and Facebook, are becoming increasingly significant influences on Iran's socio-political situation. The 2009 presidential election was famously called the 'Twitter Revolution'.<sup>57</sup>

During times of crisis, social networks have carried timely information regarding developments

52. <http://www.sesric.org/sesric-about.php>

53. <http://www.sesric.org/files/article/407.pdf>

54. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/9453905/Iranian-state-goes-offline-to-dodge-cyber-attacks.html>

55. Yahya Sheibani, M., & Fariborzi, E. (2011). E-Government services in Iran: Looking at citizen satisfaction. 2011 International Conference on Communication Engineering and Networks (ICCSIT), 19, pp. 19-24. Singapore: IACSIT Press.

56. [http://www.vat.ir/ConceptVAT\\_htm.htm](http://www.vat.ir/ConceptVAT_htm.htm)

57. <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jun/16/irans-twitter-revolution/>

in Iran. Nevertheless, the idealisation of Internet-based tools as vehicles of progressive change has been criticised. Evgeny Morozov comprehensively assesses the functions of the Internet in less-democratic countries in his book *The Net Delusion*.<sup>58</sup> Morozov focuses on Iran to discuss cyber-utopianism - the assumption that the Internet is an all-good tool, which can radically transform societies into better conditions without side-effects - and cyber-centric approaches - the recommendation to activists in the field to focus their efforts on cyberspace. He compiles evidence to show that cyberspace can be used equally by different sides of a political struggle. He argues that the proponents of a closed society can benefit from online platforms as much as those seeking more liberal values do. On the other hand, Morozov discusses the implications of an unbalanced approach when it comes to performing social and political campaigning on the web. He argues that the nature and potential outcomes of offline and online advocacy attempts are intrinsically different.

A recent report by the Iran Media Program (IMP) examines the ways in which Iranians access news and information.<sup>59</sup> The report suggests that assertions on the role Twitter played in the Iranian uprising could have been over-stated. The report also shows that the State-run TV and domestic press remain the two most prominent sources for news in Iran, with the Internet occupying sixth place after Radio.

Another Iran Media Program report discusses

the relief effort - which used the Internet as a catalyst for online coordination - for victims of the 2012 earthquake in Azerbaijan.<sup>60</sup> The report provides a short commentary on the impact of social media in times of crisis, including criticism of weak coverage by the State-run broadcasting body Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). It compares the online mobilisation which occurred after the earthquake, with the aftermath of the contested 2009 presidential elections in Iran. This earthquake is rated as one of the three main causes which united online Iranians (the other two being the campaign to replace 'Arabian Gulf' and 'Persian Gulf', and efforts to support Iranian athletes on the international scene. The author suggests that 'IRIB's apology and Khamenei's visit to the quake-hit areas' are consequences of online efforts.

Assessment of the nature and extent of interactions between the Iranian users of different social networks indeed indicates that these platforms have given the population a new means for social and, to a lesser extent, political involvement. However, their role in influencing developments on the ground, has been over-estimated. Such over-statement is not only theoretical, but has had wider practical drawbacks. For example, the assertion that Facebook and Twitter have the ability to, or have succeeded in playing, a political role beyond the reality, has exaggerated their influence. However, this mistaken understanding has both radicalised the environment and agitated the establishment to take up an offensive position. As a result, it is argued that these social networks have not been able to accept a more neutral, and

58. Morozov, Evgeny. *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*. PublicAffairs, December 2010

59. <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/pdf/990>

60. <http://www.iranmediaresearch.org/en/research/pdf/1055>

therefore more effective position. The hyped-up labelling of social media platforms as political game-changers has actually limited their political efficiency.

There is no doubt that online social networks have become part of the fabric of society in many parts of the Iranian population. However, many are sceptical of the nature and extent of their accomplishments in social and political change.

## CONCLUSION

Analysis of the role of the Internet in Iran, and the assessment of its current (and projected) position in Iranian society must include careful attention to the relationship between the Iranian establishment and its citizens. For example, the clear presence of an active legal framework on the Internet is generally perceived as upholding the values and identity of Iran's ruling class. This framework allocates minimal resources to maintaining order on the web, unless it is felt that issues such as modesty and national security are at stake. Filtering is the key component of Internet policy in Iran. Nevertheless, many in Iran have found successful circumvention through the filtering system.

While Internet-filtering endeavours in Iran began with the consumption of foreign technologies, many major parts of the Iranian filtering system are now manufactured domestically. Nevertheless, the system is dissatisfied with the performance of the current filtering framework, and the possibility of establishing a domestic alternative to the International World Wide Web is now under discussion.

Many argue that the NIP is too difficult an undertaking for the Iranian regime. Repeated delays and the many conflicting narratives of what it will be able to accomplish, are cited by some observers as evidence for the nationalisation of the Iranian Internet facing major, perhaps insurmountable difficulties.

Due to legal ambiguity, harsh treatment of online activists in Iran has become a reality for many bloggers, online journalists, and even ordinary users of social networks. Cases of mistreatment, long prison sentences, and even death in custody, have been documented in relation to Iranian online activists. In this hostile environment, and as the Internet becomes a battleground between the establishment and its opponents, processes such as e-government are the victims.

Hostility on the net is not limited to confrontations between the Iranian regime and its citizens. Sensitive parts of the Iranian political and economic machinery have been targets of international espionage and sabotage attempts. Compared to other countries, Iran has been slow in adopting online governmental concepts. Because of this the regime tends to pull back its essential services from the web and citizens lose out.

Many sectors of the Iranian public have used the Internet to engage with the regime. However, this has proven to be less true of the physical world. It is therefore an over-simplification to suggest that the Internet is the main enabler of democracy in Iran.

The role of the Internet is extremely complicated and cannot be assessed in a reductionistic fashion. Whilst providing social and political

engagement, it has also been over-politicized and subsequently has failed to perform when it comes to liberalising the political platform.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

In many respects the virtual world mirrors the physical one, and the regime aims to control many aspects of both public and private life. The Internet, however, provides ways for average citizens to escape the cultural hegemony of Iran. People can express themselves and come together online for diverse reasons which include supporting campaigns, exchanging ideas, and content searching.

It is not only the politically-charged activities of Internet use which disturbs the Iranian state, but its mere existence as a space for sharing. The State continues its path to curb social capital on the Internet and shows no signs of change. Nevertheless, three initiatives could make it safer and easier for both users and the State.

### 1) A CALL TO POLICY MAKERS IN IRAN

Iranians used social media tools effectively in helping victims of the 2012 earthquake.<sup>61</sup> Many donated their blood; others sent goods. Both domestic and foreign media should focus on this non-political use of the Internet to emphasise the positive role it can play in Iranian society. This could modify the hostile image of the Internet held by some Iranian policy makers. Policy makers could begin to accept the Internet as

a social, rather than merely a political, enabler and could avoid underpinning the current international perspective with continued uncertainty. For example, on 13 August 2012, the ultra-conservative newspaper *Keyhan* wrote 'The event [earthquake] has provided the dishevelled opposition groups a good excuse to reorganize and re-energize themselves.'

However, the Islamic Republic is composed of different factions, some of whom express contradictory opinions from time to time. This dynamic enables those within the regime to use this disagreement to modify the image of the Internet to suit the regime. Ultimately, when an earthquake hits, it does not differentiate between victims, whether pro-regime or pro-democracy.

### 2) A CALL TO THE WEST

Due to International sanctions, two of the best-known free antivirus programs - AVG and Avast - last year prevented Iranian Internet Protocol users from downloading their software or updating their virus definitions. Whilst this has not been mandated by a sanction, it is the fact of the ground. Similarly, Adobe does not permit Iranian users to download its free Flash and PDF-reading software. These tools are used by hundreds of millions of people across the globe. This is particularly important in the case of Adobe Flash Player, the dominant streaming video plug-in. Western global corporations must provide the technology needed by the Iranians to secure their computer networks.

61. <http://www.arsehsevom.net/2012/08/eager-to-help-iranians-respond-to-earthquakes/>

### **3) WAKE-UP CALL FOR IRANIANS**

Iranian cyber-activists have been increasing their use of Western sites such as Facebook, YouTube, WordPress and other blogging tools, and have created their own platforms such as Balatarin.<sup>62</sup> This is reminiscent of Digg, and Gooya,<sup>63</sup> which served as a political ‘yellow pages’ before blogging, and predated blogging when they expanded into news-gathering and political forums.

The turmoil of 2009 attracted the attention of the world, and the Iranian online community proved capable of becoming an important part of the Iranian journey towards democracy. The question is what this diverse and talented community has been able to accomplish in terms of innovation, or even imitation of ideas which are already available on the Internet.

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62. <http://balatarin.com/>

63. <http://gooya.com/>