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Threats to Iranian Instagram: Analyzing Iran's Internet Landscape

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Brief Analysis

Iran's conservative administration has threatened to block one of the country's last standing social media platforms, signaling a shift to more restrictive media censorship.

Iran's conservative administration has pushed to block one of the country's last standing social media platforms, Instagram. Despite this threat, a ban is unlikely to affect the media environment. Given the widespread use of social networking sites by Iranian politicians and the extensive use of virtual private networks (VPNs) and other circumvention techniques, Iranians will continue to use Instagram or be forced to use domestic equivalents. As mentioned in the [August 2021 NIAC report](#), U.S. sanctions are making it easier for the government to censor, surveil, and repress its population by removing citizen access to major internet services, platforms and tools. Banning platforms only hurts civilians and encourages Iran to develop its own domestic services, further isolating its users from the outside world and allowing for increased state censorship.

Iran's Technology and Social Media Environment

Iran's media landscape is a fascinating dichotomy of heavy usage and limited access. In 1993, the Islamic Republic of Iran became one of the first countries in the Middle East to connect to the internet. Since then, the country has experienced a rapid rise in connectivity, with nearly 70% internet penetration. Of these tens of millions of users, Instagram is by far the most popular social media site, in part due to limited competition. It's estimated that as of

last month, [69% of Iranians use Instagram](#), as compared to the [approximately 11% who use Twitter and nearly 18% use Facebook](#)—both of which are technically banned as of 2009. In 2018, Iran was already [ranked the world's 7th Instagram user](#). And during COVID-19, Instagram use has further saturated the country as [over 190,000 businesses moved online](#) in the last year.

Despite high levels of technical knowledge, Iran remains one of the most restrictive countries in the world in terms of internet freedom. Though the government has historically held tight control over the country's media landscape, restrictions sharply increased after the disputed 2009 presidential election. In the aftermath, authorities blocked Twitter, Facebook, and other popular platforms. After a near total rejection of foreign applications, Instagram remained one of the only platforms not officially banned, despite a [temporary block in 2014](#). A decade later, the government enacted a near total internet blackout in response to the November 2019 protests, cutting off the country from international communication for nearly one week.

The current attempts to block Instagram not only hurt every day Iranians trying to make a living; these efforts also raise important questions regarding Iran's technology policy including privacy, censorship, and media access. Officials claim platforms like Instagram corrupt Iranians by exposing them to lewd and immoral foreign content. After the 2021 presidential election, a new bill restricting internet access was introduced to parliament, threatening booming e-commerce on Instagram during the pandemic. But blocking Instagram would result in the government developing its own domestic apps and would signal a further step toward a sovereign internet, similar to China's stronghold on network infrastructure.

Ironically, prominent Iranian officials are active users of the same services they condemn and disparage; former [President Hassan Rouhani has over 2.2 million Instagram and Twitter followers](#) and the Supreme Leader's account [@khameini_ir has over 3.6 million followers](#).

Media Restrictions, Censorship, and Surveillance

Iran's case demonstrates the risk of equating internet connectivity to the democratic value of free and independent media. While internet technology can certainly foster lively public debate and bolster healthy civil society, the same technology accessed under repressive conditions can be leveraged by authoritarian leaders to suppress, surveil, and censor. Rather than idealize the internet as the free flow of international information, attention must be given to the severe media restrictions in authoritarian governments and efforts by the United States government (USG) and international actors should be made to bridge the digital divide that threatens the world wide web.

Unfortunately, most major technology companies have been reluctant to support applications and software developed by Iranians for fear of violating sanctions, which stifles the tremendous engineering potential of the Iranian community. Apple and Google application marketplaces are not available in Iran, preventing Iranians from using global software and forcing them to use their own domestic versions. Apple began removing Iranian developers' apps from its App Store in 2017 and [completely cut Iran off from the App Store in 2018](#). Examples of Iranian domestic alternative apps now include Sib ("Apple")—a domestic equivalent to Apple's app store complete with the apple logo—and the popular video streaming platform Aparat, Iran's equivalent to Youtube.

Yet Iran's young, tech savvy population is creative, subtle, and innovative in their tactics of circumventing censorship. Much attention to how Iranians navigate internet restrictions focuses on the use of Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), but other tactics deserve attention and continued funding from the U.S. government. Canadian circumvention software company Psiphon benefits from U.S. funding and a Treasury license. In [January 2020, Psiphon reported a 25% increase in usage in Iran](#) with over three million users.

Another strategy is routing internet traffic through satellite and other modes of communications, often providing

regular content packages to users with news, media, and other files. For example, services such as [Toosheh](#), created by Mehdi Yahyanejad, helps Iranians bypass censors through satellite signals. The simple satellite signal solution enables even Iranians in remote or impoverished regions of the country to obtain daily packages of information available on the internet through alternative mediums.

Compiler accounts that collect and disseminate information likewise allow Iranians to circumvent restrictions and view banned information in cases where they cannot access the content directly. The Telegram channel “Farsi Twitter” compiles Persian tweets and reports on an encrypted channel, allowing its over [500,000 subscribers](#) access to these blocked discussions.

These workarounds clearly demonstrate that even if Instagram is banned, Iranians will continue to access the services just as they have done with Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram. This circumvention is often accomplished with outside assistance, which is why Washington should continue funding for enhanced privacy, digital freedom, and access.

Even so, the rise of a sovereign and controlled internet in Iran should raise serious concerns. The USG should work to ensure sustainable funding for efforts to provide access for Iranians. Despite the risks of misuse, social media platforms remain critical venues for public expression, international communication, and diplomacy. Efforts should be made to preserve access and prevent future shutdowns such as those that occurred in November 2019 and 2020. The U.S. government should especially encourage technology companies to work with Iranian developers currently blocked from offering their applications on major marketplaces such as Google and Apple. Washington should also foster partnerships and collaborations to improve diplomacy and to establish transnational teams that can address global issues like the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic that threatens the national security and public health of all nation-states.

Information from Iranian use of social media provides valuable insights into a country that is isolated from policy analysis. The alternative to U.S. government promotion of internet access is the development of draconian domestic alternatives that will increasingly resemble the current isolated media environment in China. It is precisely because social media data is such a vital source of information communication in repressive contexts that these channels must remain open. ❖



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