In the Dark and in Danger: Iran's Internet Shutdown and Wartime Repression

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Brief Analysis

Human rights experts diagnose the current public mood in Iran and discuss how foreign

governments can help counter the regime's growing use of internet blackouts and other digital repression tools.

On April 10, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Mahsa Alimardani, Nazanin Boniadi, and Roya Boroumand. Alimardani is the associate director of technology threats and opportunities at the human rights organization WITNESS. Boniadi is a human rights advocate, actress, and producer. Boroumand is cofounder and executive director of the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran. The following is a rapporteurs' summary of their remarks.

Mahsa Alimardani

Iran's state-imposed internet shutdowns have created a compounding crisis in the information environment. The shutdowns are used as both a censorship tool and a content strategy designed to silence authentic Iranian voices and project a single state-sanctioned narrative to the outside world. This strategy was made explicit when Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi declared live on American television that he is "the voice of Iranians," with internet access granted to him exclusively as the Islamic Republic's designated spokesperson while 93 million others remain cut off.

Artificial intelligence has made this information environment significantly harder to navigate. The unprecedented massacres committed against the people during the anti-regime uprising in January illustrate this clearly, laying the ground for the "liar's dividend"—a concept whereby the mere existence of AI fabrication gives bad actors cover to discredit anything. For example, the photograph of a lone protester facing security forces during the protests—known as Iran's "tank man" moment—was verified from multiple angles by independent sources, yet it was dismissed as "AI slop" when editing software was used to sharpen its resolution. Authenticity simply stopped mattering.

This dynamic runs in both directions. The Islamic Republic's long history of propaganda has conditioned people to distrust anything the state amplifies, and that reflex became dangerous during the war. The February 28 airstrike that killed more than a hundred children at a school in Minab was confirmed by credible sources, but because the regime turned those deaths into propaganda, many Iranians concluded that the story was invented. Out of that distrust, unfortunately, some people engaged in unsafe behaviors based on the assumption that they were not in danger from the bombs.

The influx of 50,000-100,000 Starlink terminals offered a narrow window into the January uprising and the current war, but smuggling hardware into a country of 93 million people is not a solution. The real fight is regulatory. Direct-to-cell (D2C) technology, which routes connectivity directly from satellite to a cellphone without a physical terminal, could place internet access beyond the reach of state control within two to five years; in fact, the spectrum governance frameworks that D2C depends on are being shaped right now. Yet China and Russia have taken a predominant role in this process within the UN's International Telecommunication Union. The major ITU meeting scheduled to be held in Shanghai next year will be a critical juncture in this matter, but the international norms being written ahead of that meeting cannot be ceded to governments that have the most to gain from keeping their populations in the dark.

Nazanin Boniadi

After the horrific forty-eight-hour spasm of regime violence against the Iranian people in late January, sporadic conversations with political prisoners, activists, and dissidents living in Iran revealed a groundswell of support for foreign intervention under the humanitarian principle of "responsibility to protect" (R2P). And when Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and other senior regime figures were killed by military strikes a few weeks later, many Iranians celebrated. As time went by, however, it seemed like the regime might stay in power, and a feeling of despair took over. This morphed into alarm when President Trump voiced threats of mass attacks on civilian infrastructure and the destruction of Iranian civilization.

Meanwhile, today marks the forty-second day of Iran's internet shutdown—the longest in the country's history. The likelihood is growing that this shutdown could continue for some time; many Iranians fear it could become permanent. No government that claims legitimacy in the eyes of its people would ever need to cut them off from the internet and the outside world.

Some Iranians feel that the regime has spent forty-seven years trying to replace the core of Iranian culture and civilization with an Islamist lens, underscored by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's 1979 statement that patriotism is paganism. When U.S. leaders and other Western officials make threats about the existence of Iranian civilization, it feeds the regime's narrative, which is not representative of the Iranian people on the ground or the future they desire. Although the United States and Israel have achieved some kinetic victories, they have lost the messaging war simply because the internet is still shut off. If regime leaders are willing to sacrifice hundreds of millions of dollars to continue this blackout despite the country's dire economic conditions, it would be further proof that they lack legitimacy.

For those considering what policies to pursue toward Iran going forward, several points stand out. First, regime change has not happened yet; policymakers must recognize that the Iranian people are still being silenced. Second, any forward-thinking policy must incentivize Iranian defections at the mid-tier level, including officials who may not have blood on their hands but are pivotal to keeping the regime in place. The current U.S.-Iran discussions are not being held with moderate representatives, but rather with a more emboldened and vengeful Iranian

contingent. Third, freeing political prisoners must be prioritized. And lastly, the internet must be brought back so that the voices of the Iranian people can reach Western media outlets. Regime voices are proliferating in media reports and panel discussions, enabling them to continue suppressing voices inside Iran while angling to control the narrative and spread propaganda. Indeed, the international conversation has shifted away from the humanitarian impact of the crisis. Policymakers need to understand that the conflict's toll on the Iranian people could have negative effects that reverberate for decades, especially if the regime remains in power.

Roya Boroumand

In frank conversations with Iranian citizens who have been harmed by the Islamic Republic, they tend to focus not on ideological concerns, but on simply enduring day to day. Outside observers need to remember that the war has taken place within the lingering sociopolitical context of the January protests. Initially, protesters had reason to be hopeful—the international community publicly supported their cause, and the United States warned the regime that any brutality against the people would be met by force. Yet when the promised help failed to materialize, the Islamic Republic retaliated against protesters through mass arrests and executions.

As the conflict continued, even those who were not initially impacted saw increasingly direct effects. The Basij militia and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps began using unmarked buildings in residential neighborhoods to avoid aerial targeting, endangering civilians nearby. Many city dwellers left their homes for rural areas in the early days of the war, but others remain. And as cities become militarized and bombing continues, the economic damage is starting to mount. At night, the Basij conduct regular patrols, impose random inspections, and fire their weapons in the air. During the day, civilians shelter in place and businesses remain closed. The price of glass increased early in the war, leaving many shattered windows unreplaced. And now the prices of food and medication are increasing daily.

Yet the longest tail of the war will be the psychological impact on the Iranian people. The lasting trauma of the January crackdown has left people anxious, depressed, and isolated by ongoing internet blackouts, while the ubiquitous Basij presence has fostered an environment of fear, with troops increasingly moving from marked barracks into mosques, schools, and hospitals.

The relentless bombing has not deterred authorities from intimidating the population—rather, they have used the war as an excuse to militarize cities, suppress speech, increase executions, and encourage neighbors to inform on one another. The conflict has been framed not just as an external war, but as an internal battle against "traitors," justifying the execution of so-called "enemy agents." After the June 2025 war, the Islamic Republic passed a law to enhance the punishment for espionage, and this measure has been used to justify heavy prison sentences for people who simply share information or express dissenting views. The number of state executions and arrests has also multiplied since June, with judges accepting confessions under torture and handing down death sentences based on exaggerated espionage charges.

Now that officials have agreed to a ceasefire, it sends a message to both the people and the regime that these arrests and executions are acceptable to the international community. The Islamic Republic will likely interpret this development as tacit permission to act with impunity at home, and the public knows the arrests will continue. As one young Iranian put it, "A ceasefire means execution lines…The world once again left us alone in the slaughterhouse of the clerics." Meanwhile, defections are unlikely because regime operatives have no meaningful alternative and no path to leave the Islamic Republic. And strategic bombing is insufficient to change an authoritarian regime, since the repressive apparatus is entrenched in every institution and has loyalists worldwide.

This summary was prepared by Kate Chesnutt, Shivane Anand, and Wiam Hammouchene. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Winkler Lowy Foundation. ❖

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