

Iran's Next Internet Blackout Is Inevitable

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Articles & Testimony

Flipping the kill switch is a potent exercise of authoritarian control, but expediting countermeasures like D2C can help prevent regimes from using this tactic in the future.

Starting May 26, a tsunami of posts flooded social media from Iranians, who had largely not been heard from since the war began on February 28. Video calls reunited diaspora families who had spent three months staring at a single checkmark on WhatsApp—the app's signal that a message has been sent but not yet received. One Iranian user [captured \(https://x.com/hdagnes/status/2059353689702473915?s=20\)](https://x.com/hdagnes/status/2059353689702473915?s=20) what many felt: “Hello from Iran’s prison after three months. We came from solitary confinement to the general ward.”

Internet blackouts have become routine in Iran, imposed during anti-regime uprisings and now two wars. But this one—Iran’s fifth—was the world’s longest, according to [NetBlocks \(https://x.com/netblocks/status/2047580728154542466?s=20\)](https://x.com/netblocks/status/2047580728154542466?s=20), the global internet monitor. [Some \(https://x.com/Ammir/status/2059603651979579866?s=20\)](https://x.com/Ammir/status/2059603651979579866?s=20) online connection is now [restored \(https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-president-orders-reopening-international-internet-access-state-media-2026-05-25/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-president-orders-reopening-international-internet-access-state-media-2026-05-25/), but for many Iranians, the partial reopening [feels \(https://x.com/hdagnes/status/2059357368157454609?s=20\)](https://x.com/hdagnes/status/2059357368157454609?s=20) like the removal of a few bricks from the digital wall the Islamic Republic has built: Enough for Iranians to glimpse the outside world, but not enough for them to enter it, and the opening comes with the knowledge that the regime can brick the wall back up at any time.

This is a problem that Iranians will need international cooperation—and new technology—to solve. During the 2022 protests that became known by the slogan “Woman, Life, Freedom,” smuggled Starlink kits brought some reprieve. Today at least 50,000 Iranians are [estimated \(https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgzk91leweo\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cvgzk91leweo) to use Starlink. But this year, Iranian authorities have [cracked down \(https://www.reuters.com/world/musks-starlink-faces-high-profile-security-test-iran-crackdown-2026-01-16/\)](https://www.reuters.com/world/musks-starlink-faces-high-profile-security-test-iran-crackdown-2026-01-16/) on that technology, charging users with spying on behalf of the United States and Israel. At least one owner of a Starlink terminal appears to have been [beaten and killed \(https://x.com/IranRights_org/status/2050298399820263624\)](https://x.com/IranRights_org/status/2050298399820263624) as a result.

A technology called direct-to-cell (D2C) offers a promising alternative. It would allow the next generation of cellphones to connect to the next generation of satellites in space without needing to pass through a physical terminal on the ground. Starlink’s terminals have proved to be its vulnerability in Iran, as they have to be smuggled over borders, paid for, and concealed from a punitive state; D2C would be much harder for the authorities to stanch, as it would effectively be disseminated among millions of users on their indistinguishable personal phones.

A group of international human-rights and technology advocates called the Direct-to-Cell Coalition has been campaigning for the expansion of this technology, which seems on track for release in 2027. “The question,” Mahsa Alimardani, who established the coalition and works on technology-related issues for the human-rights organization Witness, told me, “is whether it develops in a way that protects populations during internet shutdowns, or whether authoritarian governments succeed in blocking it by design.”

An internet kill switch is not a problem only for the very online. The latest blackout in Iran had economic consequences so severe that even the regime eventually could not ignore them. One Iranian business leader [estimated \(https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/10/world/middleeast/iran-economy-layoffs.html\)](https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/10/world/middleeast/iran-economy-layoffs.html) that the outage cost the country \$80 million in losses every day. Iranian businesses that rely on apps such as Instagram, the most popular social-media platform in the country, were hit

especially hard. Many Iranian women [use Instagram \(https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iranians-on-social-media/\)](https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/iranians-on-social-media/) to build small businesses from home, whether through online commerce or by becoming influencers. During wartime, [roughly \(https://www.iranintl.com/en/202604279001\)](https://www.iranintl.com/en/202604279001) 20 percent of Iranians who depended on the internet for their jobs were out of work. [Hundreds \(https://x.com/sina_jahaani/status/2048840673819034007?s=20\)](https://x.com/sina_jahaani/status/2048840673819034007?s=20) of jobs were lost at major Iranian e-commerce companies, including the Iranian versions of Amazon (Digikala), DoorDash (Snappfood), and Netflix and YouTube (Aparat).

For their own purposes, Iranian authorities made several end runs around the outage they imposed. They kept a domestic internet (or intranet) functioning, which allowed basic services such as banking, food delivery, and ride hailing to operate. In order to burnish their desired image of the country, they continued to [offer \(https://iranwire.com/en/features/146582-iran-internet-ban-the-islamic-republic-filters-for-millions-of-people-not-for-its-own/\)](https://iranwire.com/en/features/146582-iran-internet-ban-the-islamic-republic-filters-for-millions-of-people-not-for-its-own/) “white SIM cards” to preferred journalists, officials, and Western social-media [influencers \(https://x.com/bushra1shaikh/status/2050955049908478296?s=46\)](https://x.com/bushra1shaikh/status/2050955049908478296?s=46) doing propaganda tours inside Iran. And they introduced a state-regulated, tiered service known as Internet Pro, which was prohibitively [expensive \(https://iranwire.com/en/features/152537-widespread-sale-of-pro-internet-profiting-from-public-suffering-yet-again/\)](https://iranwire.com/en/features/152537-widespread-sale-of-pro-internet-profiting-from-public-suffering-yet-again/) for most ordinary people, in addition to being unstable and insecure. Some students and content creators [boycotted \(https://iranwire.com/en/news/151831-students-creators-reject-irans-internet-pro-plan/\)](https://iranwire.com/en/news/151831-students-creators-reject-irans-internet-pro-plan/) Internet Pro and demanded fair internet access for all. Others [refused \(https://x.com/sweetwordsvaez/status/2059285001770860834?s=20\)](https://x.com/sweetwordsvaez/status/2059285001770860834?s=20) to use domestic apps, which are known to be monitored by the security apparatus.

Iranian officials claim that communications blackouts are a national-security necessity, but in practice the Islamic Republic uses them to control its public image and conceal human-rights violations. The first time Iran turned off the internet, in November 2019, security forces killed about 1,500 protesters, according to [Reuters \(https://www.reuters.com/article/world/special-report-irans-leader-ordered-crackdown-on-unrest-do-whatever-it-take-idUSKBN1YR000/\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/world/special-report-irans-leader-ordered-crackdown-on-unrest-do-whatever-it-take-idUSKBN1YR000/). This January, the Islamic Republic imposed a communications shutdown just before [massacring \(https://www.en-hrana.org/the-crimson-winter-a-50-day-record-of-irans-2025-2026-nationwide-protests/\)](https://www.en-hrana.org/the-crimson-winter-a-50-day-record-of-irans-2025-2026-nationwide-protests/) thousands of protesters. Even in ordinary times, the Islamic Republic blocks news outlets, websites it deems harmful, and all the social-media platforms that Iranians could use to raise their voices internationally. Iranians normally access these only through circumvention tools, such as VPNs.

The most recent blackout was gutting not just for Iranians inside Iran but also for the estimated [4 million to 10 million \(https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2024/11/03/736545/The-huge-potential-of-Iranians-living-abroad-?ht-comment-id=20989568#:~:text=Estimates%20of%20Iranian%20immigrants%20range,4%2C037%2C258%20Iranians%20were%20living%20abroad\)](https://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2024/11/03/736545/The-huge-potential-of-Iranians-living-abroad-?ht-comment-id=20989568#:~:text=Estimates%20of%20Iranian%20immigrants%20range,4%2C037%2C258%20Iranians%20were%20living%20abroad) people in the Iranian diaspora. This population has grown accustomed to texting friends and relatives inside Iran about daily life, sharing memes, trading jokes, and checking in over FaceTime and WhatsApp video. Members of the diaspora lost [contact \(https://x.com/3mmmod/status/2049330919568540150?s=20\)](https://x.com/3mmmod/status/2049330919568540150?s=20) with those inside Iran at exactly the moment when their loved ones’ fates were most in doubt.

Noshene Ranjbar, an Arizona-based psychiatrist, co-leads a network of more than 100 professionals inside Iran trained in large-scale trauma-healing work. Her group provides services through Zoom and Google Meet to more than 7,000 adults and children coping with stressors such as cancer and chronic pain, as well as with anxiety, depression, and PTSD. Those videoconferencing applications were rendered useless during the wartime blackout. Her group was afraid to use Iran’s intranet with clients, as it is known to be monitored by the government.

“For therapy to work, the person needs to be able to share what is bothering them,” Ranjbar told me. “But without free private internet, no one feels safe to go to therapy.”

The war has left Iranians under the boot of a regime that is bolder, more hard-line, and more repressive than before. The systemic mismanagement, corruption, and repression that have fueled anti-regime protests for years remain unaddressed, and U.S.-Iran tensions are far from settled. Domestic unrest and foreign conflict both carry the same implication: another shutdown.

With a little effort, the infrastructure for D2C could be in place by 2027 (the technology will take years to reach people at scale, however). But the project will first need to clear some international regulatory hurdles. China and Iran will likely lobby to keep an off switch in the hands of states; countries that value open communications may work to counter those efforts. The Direct-to-Cell Coalition is pressing for the companies developing D2C—Starlink is one of them—to make populations affected by state-imposed shutdowns part of the technology’s design from the outset, in order to build in the features that will make it usable in such a crisis.

In Iran, the partial restoration of internet access is a relief, but it has also [left \(https://x.com/arashramezani68/status/2058281665533763595\)](https://x.com/arashramezani68/status/2058281665533763595) many Iranians more conscious than ever of what they [lost \(https://x.com/golshan_fathi/status/2060335024386310218?s=20\)](https://x.com/golshan_fathi/status/2060335024386310218?s=20) during the months of total shutdown.

“I have a strange feeling; I’m happy but also really angry,” a young Iranian told me shortly after coming back online. “They took our rights away from us, and that was very degrading.”

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