



# Iranian Devolution: Tehran Fights The Digital Future

November 22, 2015 **Ilan I. Berman** *World Affairs Journal*

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As we contemplate the complex diplomacy that created the recent agreement between the international community and Iran regarding the Islamic Republic's nuclear future, it is worth remembering Thomas Friedman's momentarily famous remark of a few years ago that, whatever else it may be, Iran is also a country ripe for catalytic political change. In passing this judgment, the New York Times columnist took special note of Iran's youthful and vibrant population, the deep knowledge base of Iranian society as a whole, and its interconnectedness with the outside world.

However counterintuitive it seemed, given the deep authoritarianism of the Iranian political system then and now, Friedman's observation had legs - particularly the part about interconnectedness. While hungrier than ever for hegemonic power in its neighborhood, Iran is also a country of first-world expectations, widespread educational and technological advancements, and a citizenry increasingly chafing under the clerical status quo. The median age of its population of nearly 82 million is just 28.3 years, which means that for the majority of the country, the 1979 revolution is part of history rather than personal experience. More to the point, that population is extremely sophisticated; according to statistics compiled by UNICEF, overall adult literacy in Iran stands at 85 percent, higher than in neighboring Iraq (78.5 percent) and nearby Egypt (73.9 percent), and far greater than in countries like Yemen (65.3 percent). As of 2010, nearly 13 percent of the country's adult population held at least a basic university degree - more than any other country in the Middle East, save Israel. And that population is also increasingly online.

Iran is currently among the most "wired" nations in the Middle East, with Internet penetration estimated at nearly 56 percent of the population. Moreover, it boasts the third-largest blogosphere in the world, right behind those of the United States and China. And that is a huge problem, in fact as well as theory, for the regime in Tehran.

The practical implications of this connectivity were on full display in the summer of 2009, when the fraudulent re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the Iranian presidency brought millions of protesters into the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities - a groundswell of popular outrage that coalesced into the so-called Green Movement. Months of unrest aimed at the ruling clerical regime followed, presenting the Islamic Republic with its most fundamental political challenge since 1979.

The Green Movement relied heavily on the Internet and social-networking tools to organize its efforts, communicate its messages to the outside world, and rally public opinion to its side. The Iranian regime, in turn, utilized information and communication technologies extensively in its successful suppression of the protests in the months that followed.

This focus was subsequently reinforced at the outbreak of the Arab Spring in December 2010. Publicly, officials in Tehran took an exceedingly optimistic view of the anti-regime sentiment that swept the region. In their comments, high-ranking Iranian officials portrayed the ferment taking place in Tunisia, Egypt, and other nations as a delayed outgrowth of the 1979 revolution and the start of a regional "Islamic awakening" in which Iran would inevitably play a leading role.

Privately, however, officials in Tehran understood that the anti-regime sentiment prevalent in the region represented a mortal threat to their corrupt rule. Iran's leaders likewise determined that they could not win a digital competition with their civic opposition. Rather than continue trying to play defense on the Internet, they have since expended enormous time, resources, and effort to isolate the Islamic Republic's cyberspace from the outside world and deny its citizens access to the Internet as a social, political, and cultural meeting place.

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In his March 2012 message to the Iranian people marking the Persian New Year, President Obama alluded to the Iranian regime's cyber counter-revolution when he noted that an "electronic curtain has fallen around Iran." "The Iranian people are denied the basic freedom to access the information that they want," Obama said, because of "a barrier that stops the free flow of information and ideas into the country, and denies the rest of the world the benefit of interacting with the Iranian people, who have so much to offer."

The description was apt. In a very real sense, the Iranian regime is erecting a digital barrier aimed at isolating its population from the Web, quelling domestic dissent, and curtailing the ability of its opponents to organize.

Far and away the most ambitious effort by the Iranian regime to control cyberspace is its attempt to create a national intranet as a substitute for the global Internet. Originally slated to go online in August 2012, this "halal internet," or "second internet," is intended as a more sophisticated alternative to the filtering systems used by other authoritarian regimes. While those systems tend to simply deny users access to proscribed sites, Iran's halal internet will reroute them to regime-approved search engines, websites, and online content. By doing so, it will effectively sever Iran's connection to the Web and give Iranian authorities the power to create an isolated, regime-approved online reality for their citizens.

For the moment, Iran's great digital step backward remains something of a work in progress. As of October of 2012, some 10,000 computers - in both private and government use - were found to be connected to this second internet. Today, that figure is believed to be considerably higher, although still far from comprehensive. Nevertheless, the project is unmistakably moving forward. Experts now project that Iran's national intranet could be fully online by next year. And its impact is already being felt. For example, in December 2012, regime authorities launched Mehr, a homegrown alternative to YouTube that features government-approved video content designed specifically for domestic audiences. In July 2013, the Iranian government activated an indigenous e-mail service intended to serve as a substitute for Gmail, Hotmail, and Yahoo. Not surprisingly, this new e-mail service requires citizens to provide their names, national ID numbers, addresses, and other vital information, facilitating regime efforts to carry out surveillance and monitor online behavior.

Simultaneously, Iran has launched a heavy-handed campaign aimed at filtering out and denying access to "immoral" content on the Internet. An August 2013 study conducted by the University of Michigan described this censorship as both extensive and ambitious, resulting in the blockage of significant content related not only to politics and pornography, but also to art, society, and current events. Indeed, nearly half of the world's top 500 most-visited websites are blocked in Iran. And that number may grow soon: Iran's Supreme Council of Cyberspace has recommended that all websites should be registered with the country's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

Naturally, Iranian officials have put an intense focus on controlling social media and networking sites, which were so significant during the 2009 protests and afterward. The Islamic Republic is currently one of just a handful of countries in the world to block Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, although the ban does not extend to top Iranian officials: "moderate" President Hassan Rouhani and others have active social media accounts, and even Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, maintains a flashy website. Although Rouhani has talked gingerly about freedom and human rights, regime repression of online critics has deepened since he took office in the summer of 2013.

In addition to taking aim at Iran's digital universe, the regime has expanded its control of domestic phone and mobile communications. In the months after the summer 2009 protests, Iranian authorities installed a sophisticated Chinese-origin surveillance system. Since then, China's ZTE Corporation has partnered with the state-controlled Telecommunication Company of Iran to implement advanced monitoring of the country's telecom sector.

In addition to such tracking technologies, in the spring of 2013, for example, Iranian authorities blocked most of the virtual private networks used by Iranians to circumvent the government's Internet filters. Simultaneously, Iranian officials announced plans - since implemented - to reduce Internet speeds and increase costs of subscriptions to Internet service providers within the country.

Announced in early 2012, the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, tasked with implementing these regulations and restrictions, is led by top officials from both Iran's intelligence apparatus and the powerful Revolutionary Guard Corps. It is licensed to carry out "constant and comprehensive monitoring over the domestic and international cyberspace," with the power to issue sweeping decrees concerning the Internet. The council was formally inaugurated by Khamenei himself in April 2012, and now serves as a coordinating body for Iran's domestic and international cyber policies. They include new, restrictive governmental guidelines forcing Internet cafes to record the personal information of customers - including vital data such as names, national identification numbers, and phone numbers - as well as to install closed-circuit cameras to video all customers accessing the Web.

More and more, Iran's campaign of cyber repression has outstripped Iranians' resourceful efforts at circumvention. According to the Washington-based human rights organization Freedom House, the use of virtual private networks has proliferated in Iran over the past several years, spawning a black market that in 2013 was estimated in excess of \$100 million. Yet state repression has succeeded in constricting both the size and vibrancy of what has come to be known as Iran's "blogestan."

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Iran's efforts to suppress the Internet differ from those of other authoritarian regimes. Unlike Russia, the Islamic Republic does not seek to obscure objective truth through massive propaganda "noise" generated by numerous broadcast outlets and online news sources. Nor are Iran's efforts analogous to those of China, whose "Great Firewall" is intended as a barrier to interdict negative information that might influence its citizens, and to identify and stifle online dissent when it emerges.

Rather, Iran's campaign of digital repression is part of a larger regime effort to prevent the intrusion of Western values and cultural influence into the country. Iranian authorities see such penetration - which they view as a "soft war" being waged against them by the West - as an existential threat to their rule. In 2009, Khamenei identified this fight as the government's "main priority." Since then, he has called for more stringent regulation of the Internet as a way to "safeguard national and cultural values."

This accelerating cyber repression is the dramatic tip of a growing iceberg of censorship in Iran. Freedom House has estimated that more than 40 newspapers have been shut down by the Iranian government since 2009. And despite the occasionally reformist rhetoric of President Rouhani, this campaign has continued in recent months, with the Iranian government shuttering a number of additional publications under various pretexts, including the charge that they were guilty of "spreading lies and insulting the holy precepts of Islam."

This offensive has resulted in a regime of intellectual orthodoxy within the Islamic Republic. A spring 2014 survey of the Iranian press by journalist Hadi Anvari found that up to 60 percent of all content featured in the country's "reformist" media is pulled from sources affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards. In other words, Iran's hard-liners increasingly control both the official and the counter narrative in the Iranian press.

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Iran's mullahs are deeply aware that the Internet poses a mortal threat to their continued power, given its potential to provide Iran's citizenry with access to alternative worldviews, values, and information, and its ability to undermine their efforts to enforce intellectual orthodoxy. They understand very well that the Web is a practical as well as theoretical threat: a potential hub of coordination and communication for opposition forces, as it was for the Green Movement during the second half of 2009.

It is an arena where, sadly, Iran's ayatollahs have more and more freedom. In their rush to secure a diplomatic "solution" to the Iranian regime's long-running nuclear program, Western nations did not mention the worrying decline of freedom of information within the Islamic Republic. Rather, the topic - along with the parallel issue of Iranian human rights abuses - was ignored by the United States, Great Britain, France, and Germany, all of which have systematically downgraded their focus on the Iranian regime's domestic behavior as a result of their efforts to contain its atomic ambitions.

Thus, while the Obama administration in 2013 made preliminary moves to lift restrictions on technology exports to Iran (thereby making it easier for opposition elements to acquire smartphones, software, and laptops), these steps were quickly negated during the unfolding nuclear negotiations. Since that time, the US has done little of substance to expand the Internet space available to ordinary Iranians. In just one example, more than \$50 million in funds specifically earmarked for Internet freedom globally (including in Iran) remains unspent by the State Department, despite repeated congressional entreaties.

This retreat, moreover, takes place at a time when the Islamic Republic approaches a seminal crossroads. Although it is possible that the recently concluded nuclear deal may influence Iran's evolution, the country's ultimate course will be determined by the Iranian people themselves. The ayatollahs understand full well that a free and unrestrained Internet is their enemy, which is why they have moved so decisively to limit access to it.

Western powers, for their part, should grasp the old adage that the enemy of their enemy is their friend. They should then make it as difficult as possible for Iran's regime to continue fighting the digital future.

*Ilan Berman is the vice president of the American Foreign Policy Council, in Washington. This article is adapted, in part, from his new book, Iran's Deadly Ambition: The Islamic Republic's Quest for Global Power.*