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## Enemies of the Internet 2011 - Iran

Domain name: .ir

Population: 76,923,300

Internet users: 28, 200,000

Average cost of a one-hour cybercafé connection: 3 to 4 U.S. dollars

Average monthly salary: about 560 U.S. dollars

Number of imprisoned netizens: 11

### Toughening and broadening Internet censorship

In January 2011, the authorities finished setting up the first Iranian cyberpolice to strengthen their control of the Internet. On 20 May 2010, Ebrahim Jabari, an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander, officially confirmed the creation of an Iranian "Cyber Army" which has already cracked down on online networks deemed "destructive," and arrested hundreds of netizens.

Internet service providers were already leasing bandwidth to the Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI), controlled by the Revolutionary Guards, who are responsible for ordering the blocking of websites. Although the authorities boast that they have blocked hundreds of thousands of websites, it is certain that thousands of them and millions of associated pages are now inaccessible in Iran. Under Ahmadinejad's administration, the censorship of news sites covering politics and human rights has been considerably tightened.

Filtering software developed in Iran is used in these blocking efforts. Censorship criteria are formulated by the Committee in Charge of Determining Unauthorised Websites (CCDUW). In January 2010, the authorities had issued a "list of Internet offences" drawn up by a "committee of experts" which was already implementing a genuine Net filtering system. This "list" is an inventory of banned websites. Targeted are contents "contrary to the morals of society," "to religious values" and "to security and social peace," "hostile towards government officials and institutions" or which "facilitate the commission of a crime," including circumventing censorship or bypassing filtering systems. It is forbidden "to sell filter circumvention software" in the country. This list supplements the law enacted by the Iranian Parliament over a year ago which imposes sanctions of up to several years in prison. At least two netizens have been arrested for using censorship-circumventing software.

The "committee of experts" includes members from several government branches and the judicial wing, representatives of the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the Ministry of National Security and Teheran's Public Prosecutor.

Iran's censors combine URL blocking with keyword filtering to ensure optimal censorship and act promptly in the event of breaking news. The *Reuters* press agency and Yahoo! websites have allegedly been [censored](#) since the Tunisia and Egypt uprisings. Google is also said to be partially blocked and some links to foreign news sites supposedly have been replaced by official sources.

A system for censoring conservative sites has been set up which reveals internal divisions in the leadership. In October 2010, several news portals were blocked, including those of the three influential Grand Ayatollahs –

Ayatollahs Saanei ([saanei.org](http://saanei.org)), Bayat Zanjani ([bayatzanjani.net](http://bayatzanjani.net)) and Dastgheib ([dastgheib.ir](http://dastgheib.ir)) – inaccessible since 3 October 2010.

In February 2010, the Gmail messaging service was suspended. According to the authorities, a national messaging service will soon be launched. Several websites such as Radio Zamaneh and Twitter have been the target of cyberattacks. Blog platforms like [blogfa.com](http://blogfa.com) are not totally blocked, but those run by individuals are. Participative photo- or video-exchange websites are among those targeted by censors: Flickr, [Photobucket](http://Photobucket) and YouTube are blocked.

### **The regime's propaganda and tampering against Internet and social networks**

Iran's government seems to be launching a real war against social networks which has been intensifying since the latter's presumed role in the disputed re-election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The authorities are shamelessly advancing the theory that it was a plot.

In September 2010, a state-owned Iranian TV station declared that Facebook and Twitter were the country's [hidden enemies](#) used by Western secret services to recruit new members and collect information. Facebook and Twitter are accused of being implicated in a "psychological and propaganda war." At the end of 2008, the Revolutionary Guards announced their plan to create 10,000 blogs to support Iran's paramilitary militia, the basij, and to promote the regime's ideology. Several websites and blogs were created to disseminate propaganda and infiltrate social networks, which they used mainly to spread messages to incite hatred.

Through the agency of its Cyber Army, the government itself repeatedly initiated politically motivated cyberattacks on various opposition or news sites such as [Jaras](#), [Kalameh](#), Balatarin, etc. In the morning of 14 February 2010, a day of demonstrations, [Fararu.com](#) and the site [sahamnews.org](#), which have close ties to opposition leader Mehdi Karubi, were hacked, as was the supposedly secure Voice of America (VOA) website. Hackers claiming to be members of the Cyber Army managed to post messages on the page in Farsi, calling for an end "to U.S. meddling in the Muslim world" and labelling the media as a "spying tool for the United States."

The regime is also spying on cyberdissidents and attempting to infiltrate social networks, blocking various profiles on Facebook. On 18 December 2009, the Iranian Cyber Army succeeded in hacking Twitter. The website displayed the following message: "This site has been hacked by the Iranian Cyber Army": [iranian.cyber.army@gmail.com](mailto:iranian.cyber.army@gmail.com). In January 2010, the Chinese search engine Baidu was also the target of cyberattacks, probably to counter the Chinese netizens' support of the Iranian people. Lastly, the regime launched a call for online collaboration and denunciation with the website Gerdab ("vortex"), spearheaded by the Organised Crime Surveillance Centre.

Ever since its creation in March 2009, the Organised Crime Surveillance Centre, established by the Revolutionary Guards, has played an active role in tracking down and arresting netizens. In March 2009, the Centre officially announced the dismantling of a "malevolent" online network and the arrests of several moderators of incriminated websites. A few days later, "confessions" of those arrested, together with their photos, were posted online, notably by the Gerdab website. The accused were allegedly forced to admit to the existence of websites which were critical of Islam and Iran's incumbent government, and to their intention of "corrupting" Iranian youth by publicising pornographic sites. They also had to confess to participating in a plot supported by the Americans and the Israelis.

Some of the regime's opponents have created their own "Green Cyber Army," which sometimes adopts the regime's methods. For example, some activists have attacked the Basij militia's website, [moghavemat.ir](http://moghavemat.ir), as well as sites created by individuals or Iranian agencies close to the government, such as Farsnews. In 2010, this Green Cyber Army also posted photos of people suspected of being government agents.

### **Slowing down the network and censoring SMS's**

Under normal circumstances, bandwidth speed is slow. By order of the Ministry of Communications and Internet Technology, households and cybercafés are prohibited from having high-speed access, which is limited to speeds of 520 kb/s. Individual connection speed is slow in Iran and limited to 128 kb/s. This technical obstacle limits Internet users' ability to upload and download photos and videos. According to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), Iran's Internet penetration rate is the sixth highest in the region. However, its slow connections place the country 15th in a regional ranking of countries with Internet access. Worse still, according to Speedtest.net, Iran placed 176th (in terms of connection speed) in a 185-country survey.

In periods of social unrest, speed is intentionally made even slower. Following Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election, the regime intentionally jammed all means of communication. Two days prior to the presidential polls, the authorities had already cut the SMS network and slowed down Internet speed. In June and July 2010, they systematically shut down mobile telephone networks in the centre of Iran's major cities during the demonstrations, and decreased Internet network even more.

As of 10 February, after several calls had been posted on the Internet for a demonstration to coincide with the Islamic Revolution's anniversary on 14 February, bandwidth speed was slowed down sharply in several of the

country's major cities. As they have done with the approach of every opposition event or potential demonstration, the authorities intensified censorship of all media likely to relay the call for demonstrations on Monday 14 February 2011. Independent news websites, or those deemed to have close ties to the opposition, such as Jaras, Kalameh, or Balatarin – one of the opposition movement's online bastions – and [Gooya.com](http://Gooya.com), one of the most popular news portals, have been blocked. Two news websites, fararu.com and sahamnews.org (the latter having close ties to opposition leader Mehdi Karoubi), were made inaccessible for several hours after being attacked by hackers. Access to Gmail, Google Reader and Yahoo ! was made more difficult in several regions of the country. The term Bahman, which corresponds to the 11th month of the Iranian calendar, was added to the blacklist of filtered keywords. Bloggers were ordered to withdraw any photos of the demonstrations from their websites. Cell phones and SMS's were also jammed. The same scenario reoccurred during the demonstrations on 20 February.

### **Anti-netizen repression is escalating: Record penalties, the world's youngest imprisoned blogger and death sentences**

Authorities rely on Iran's Press Law, Penal Code and the Cyber Crime Act of 2009 to prosecute Internet users. Article 18 of the latter provides for prison terms of up to two years and a fine for anyone found guilty of "disseminating false information likely to agitate public opinion." By virtue of Articles 500 and 514 of the Penal Code, "anyone who somehow insults the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Khomeini, or the Supreme Leader of the country should be sentenced to imprisonment from six months to two years" (Art. 514) and "anyone who undertakes any form of propaganda against the state will be sentenced to between three months and one year in prison" (Art. 500). Again this year, netizens – and especially the regime's opponents and advocates for women's rights – have been the target of countless arrests, summons and threats on the part of the authorities. The government has created numerous VPNs (virtual private networks) in order to gather information on dissidents. Seven netizens are still behind bars in the country.

On 16 February 2011, in response to recent demonstrations, **Mohammad Hussein Khoshvaght**, webmaster of fararu.com, and **Gholam Ali Dehgan**, webmaster of [aftabnews.ir](http://aftabnews.ir), were arrested by officials of the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security, and later released.

On 22 September 2010, **Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani**, Editor-in-Chief of the Feminist School [website](http://website), was summoned and interrogated by the Fifth Chamber of the Tehran Revolutionary Court located inside Evin prison, before being released on bail. On 8 June 2010, blogger, journalist and women's rights activist Jila Bani Yaghoob was sentenced by the 26th Chamber of the Tehran Revolutionary Court to one year in prison and a 30 -year ban on working as a journalist because of her opinions. Various "feminist" websites have been blocked, including [we-change.org](http://we-change.org), [roozmaregiha2.blogfa.com](http://roozmaregiha2.blogfa.com) and [pargas1.blogfa.com](http://pargas1.blogfa.com).

**Hossein Derakhshan**, an Irano-Canadian blogger, was given the harshest prison term ever meted out to a netizen in Iran: 19 and one-half years in prison, a five-year ban on engaging in political and media-related activities, and a fine of about 42,280 U.S. dollars. The netizen appealed his sentence, but is still waiting for a new trial. This excessive sentence was followed, in January 2010, by the conviction of blogger **Navid Khanjani**, a young student, who received a 12-year prison term. The Revolutionary Guards arrested netizen and human rights activist **Hossien Ronaghi Maleki** on 13 December 2010 during an "operation to dismantle a counter-revolutionary network." He was charged with developing and using anti-filtering software, and of assisting and hosting websites and blogs actively involved in defending human rights. This netizen, now gravely ill and deprived of medical care, was sentenced to 15 years behind bars.

The Iranian regime is now using the pornography pretext to definitively muzzle dissident voices and tighten its iron grip on information in the country. Second only to China in the number of people it has executed, Iran sentenced to death two Internet website administrators in December 2010, **Saeed Malekpour** and **Vahid Asghari**, for "agitating against the regime" and "insulting the sanctity of Islam." The verdicts were sent to the Supreme Court for confirmation. Close to 70 people have already been executed in Iran since early 2011.

It has intensified repression by sentencing to death – for the first time this year – individuals with dual nationalities, while the international community is forced to stand by, being unable to intervene.

Saeed Malekpour, a 35-year-old web designer, is a Canadian national. He has lived in Canada since 2004. In 2008, he was arrested in Iran while visiting his dying father and sentenced to death for having created pornographic websites. The cybernaut allegedly created a programme enabling the user to upload photos, but which was used without his knowledge to post pornographic images. Vahid Asghari has also been held since 2008. Like many prisoners, he was kept in solitary for seven months and tortured to make him admit that he had organised a pornographic network which blasphemed Islam. The two netizens were actually managing several news and opposition websites.

This year, Iranian authorities have unfortunately outdone themselves by incarcerating **Navid Mohebbi**, who was 18 at the time – the world's youngest blogger behind bars. This netizen, editor of the [blog](http://blog) called "The writings of Navid Mohebbi" and women's rights activist in Iran, was arrested in his home on 18 September 2010 by eight Ministry of Intelligence agents. Beaten at the time of his arrest, he has been held in a cell with regular inmates ever since. The authorities accused the blogger of "activities contrary to national security" and "insulting

the Islam Republic's founder and current leader" by means of "foreign media." He was also charged with being a member of the "One Million Signatures movement to petition for changes in laws that discriminate against women." The Revolutionary Court in the city of Amol (in northern Iran) had sentenced him to three years in prison, but he was freed on parole on 25 December 2010.

### Reactions of the international community

The European Union recently [recalled](#) that the sanctions against Iran cannot be limited to penalising nuclear proliferation, but must also target against human rights violations. Scottish Conservative Struan Stevenson recently called for the EU "to impose tougher sanctions on the clerical regime for its flagrant human rights violations."

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently [praised](#) "the courage of the Iranian people," who refuse to abandon their right to free speech.

Despite all the risks, the Iranian blogosphere remains one of the most active in the world. It can count on the attention and support of bloggers around the globe, who, even in the middle of the 2009 protests, were relaying photos of the repression and launching support groups on Twitter via hashtag #CN4Iran. Iranian cybernauts do not fear censorship and have learned to use such circumvention tools as the Farsi versions of UltraReach, FreeGate and Nassim – software developed by the Global Internet Freedom Consortium in the United States and originally intended for Chinese netizens. The recent events in Egypt and Tunisia have revitalised Internet mobilisation in Iran, but also to closer scrutiny on the part of censors. The Iranian Internet is once again navigating a turbulent period.