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ARTICLE 19

Iran: Near total Internet shutdown in Khuzestan as food protests continue

Following publication, reports of shootings directly at protesters and individuals within the vicinity of protests have emerged. ARTICLE 19 is gravely concerned and highlights that the [ongoing impunity enjoyed by Iranian the authorities](#) emboldens them to continue to commit gross violations of human rights and international crimes in the context of protests resulting in killings.

ARTICLE 19 calls on Iran to immediately end the use of unlawful force against protesters and respect the right to protest, unconditionally release all those detained solely for exercising their right to protest, and end Internet disruptions.

We condemn the Iranian government's denial of people's right to protest in the Province of Khuzestan [once again](#), amid food price hikes for wheat and flour products. Protests against rising food prices have been met by tear gas and warning shots fired by authorities attempting to disperse crowds, arbitrary detentions and Internet shutdowns and disruptions across the province since 6 May 2022, and which continue to the time of publication. We are especially worried to have seen national Internet disruptions as the dire situation continues in the province. The disruptions suggest that the authorities made preparations in advance to stifle expression, which will continue to have an impact on protests elsewhere as the pressures from rising food prices mount nationwide. On 12 May, there were further [announcements about hikes](#) in the prices of cooking oil, eggs, chicken, and dairy products. The possibility of this continued food insecurity leading to further cycles of protests and protest suppression is deeply concerning.

Protests in Khuzestan

On 3 May, the government suddenly increased the price of wheat and flour by between five and ten fold, prompting shockwaves across Iran, which had already been suffering from inflation and an economic crisis. It took a heavy toll on the impoverished but oil rich southern Province of Khuzestan, and the price increases were widely criticised by [people](#) from across the political spectrum, [local media](#), and [current](#) and [former](#) officials. Amid [calls for protests](#), a partial Internet shutdown [was imposed](#) in the province and security forces [were dispatched](#) to the streets to prevent and suppress any form of dissent. Reports indicate that protests were held in multiple cities and towns including [Izeh](#), [Behbahan](#), [Susangerd](#), [Mahshahr](#), Ahvaz, Abadan, and Hamidiyeh.

The [partial Internet shutdown](#) and heavy presence of security forces continued as this statement was published. [Social media posts on 11 May](#) indicated protests and the near total shutdowns are continuing in cities such as Izeh, as protest footage and documentation struggles to seep out. Footage corroborated and [published](#) by the Persian service of the BBC also shows heavy presence of security forces in the city of Izeh.

The Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA) [has reported](#) that at least 30 people have been arrested during the protests. A civil rights activist [told HRA News](#) that the protests started in the city of Susangerd and spread to other areas of the province. According to HRANA's source, security forces used tear gas and fired warning shots to disperse crowds.

In cities where mobile Internet is cut off, it amounts to a near total shutdown

Multiple sources have reported the near total Internet shutdown in parts of Khuzestan Province since 7 May.

Covering the civil unrest in Khuzestan, Shargh Daily [reported on 7 May](#) that mobile and landline Internet had been slowed down and in some cities in Khuzestan Province mobile Internet has been entirely cut off. Shargh confirmed that Internet services provided by Iran's major mobile operators Mobile Telecommunication Company of Iran and MTN-Irancell were cut off, while landline Internet

was severely slowed down. Internet services offered by RighTel (an operator with a minuscule share of the market) were not affected much by the disruptions as of 7 May, but network data gathered by NetBlocks showed RighTel's disruptions across the country. Shargh listed the cities affected by the disruptions as Izeh, Ahvaz, Susangard, Hamidiyeh, and Abadan.

Data released by Iran's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) shows that while 76% of people in Khuzestan use the Internet, only 8.4% of the population have access to landline Internet.

This means that by disrupting access to the mobile services, the state can cut most of the population's access to the Internet. A similar situation took place in Khuzestan when the province experienced [shutdowns of mobile Internet in July 2021](#). We regard this a near-total Internet shutdown.

Tightly-controlled national Internet connected while the international Internet shuttered

On the same day, 7 May, the [Persian service of the BBC shared](#) user testimonies about the Internet shutdown in the province. A day later, on 8 May, [Jamaran News Agency reported](#) that since 6 May, mobile Internet was cut off in Ahvaz, Susangard, Shadegan and Hamidiyeh, while landline connections were slowed down. The news agency also reported disruptions in other areas of the province.

Notably, and emphasising concerns that the National Information Network, a tightly-controlled national Internet, [helps facilitate Internet shutdowns from the international Internet](#), Jamaran and [tech news website ZoomIt](#) both confirmed that as of 7 May, some services hosted on the national network were made available despite inaccessibility to international Internet services. By 8 May, people in the areas experiencing the shutdowns could only access websites and services with .ir domains. These services are hosted inside Iran and are offered through the country's national Internet (National Information Network), which is tightly controlled by the state.

As of 9 May, data from a few of Iran's [ASNs indicated momentary outages](#) across all of Iran, including further disruptions across major mobile networks on the [evening of 11 May](#). ASNs are automated system numbers representing autonomous systems (ASs). These are the networks that connect Iran's Internet Service Providers (ISPs) with the international Internet using the Border Gateway Protocol (BGP), the protocol by which the data travels through these systems to connect the global Internet. ARTICLE 19 outlined in detail these infrastructural systems in our [2020 Tightening the Net Report](#). We previously documented that the Iranian network has been struggling to maintain enough [international network bandwidth for the demand in the country](#). Evidence has indicated that this lack of supply in renewing existing connections or creating new ones (or ASs) is significantly [disrupting and slowing down the Internet for users inside the country](#). Disruptions seen across multiple ASs, as Cloudflare documented on 9 May, can result in devastating disruptions for users trying to access a free and secure international Internet. This is a worrying sign given previous efforts by authorities to throttle the Internet in the lead up to expected unrest, and follows within the wider policies of centralising control of the Internet under the project of Internet nationalisation and the policies that underpin the ['User Protection Bill'](#).

Trend of unaccountability continues

On 10 May, as [Iranian tech news website ZoomIt reported](#) that the partial shutdown had entered its fifth day, government officials and mobile operators refused to comment on the shutdowns. On 8 May, Iran-based journalist Milad Alavi [wrote on Twitter](#) that a member of parliament representing Hamidiyeh had refused to comment on the issue and his chief of staff said that the Internet had been cut off 'certainly with expediency'. According to him, provincial officials and telecom operators had also refused to comment.

Shahriar Heidari, a leading member of Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Committee, said [on May 10](#): 'Internet shutdowns are natural. [The Internet] cuts off sometimes since our country's communication infrastructure has worsened instead of progressing... The Internet shutdown [in Khuzestan] has not been due to security concerns. Sometimes it happens naturally.'

A day later, on 11 May, Iran's Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi [also denied](#) news about unrest in Khuzestan Province and the partial Internet shutdown, calling the reports 'false'. He added: 'Security is established in the country. There is no area with insecurity in the country.'

ARTICLE 19 has documented many instances of Iranian authorities shirking from transparency or accountability for their Internet shutdowns and disruptions. See our report on the denial of [freedom of information requests related to the November 2019 Internet shutdowns](#), as well as obfuscation of

other instances of such as disruptions during [June 2019](#) and [July 2020](#). We call on Iranian authorities to immediately cease their suppression of protest and their draconian Internet policies of disruptions, shutdowns and nationalisation in their aim to deny people in Iran the right to protest and their right to freedom of expression.

ecoi.net summary:



Khuzestan province:
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