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The clandestine network smuggling Starlink tech into Iran to beat internet blackout



BBC

Sahand packs a Starlink terminal he is preparing to send to Iran

"If even one extra person is able to access the internet, I think it's successful and it's worth it," says Sahand.

The Iranian man is visibly anxious, speaking to the BBC outside Iran, as he carefully explains how he is part of a clandestine network smuggling satellite internet technology - which is illegal in Iran - into the country.

Sahand, whose name we have changed, fears for family members and other contacts inside the country. "If I was identified by the Iranian regime, they might make those I'm in touch with in Iran pay the price," he says.

For more than two months, Iran has been in digital darkness as the government maintains one of the longest-running national internet shutdowns ever recorded worldwide.

The current blackout began after the US and Israel launched airstrikes on 28 February. Before that, internet access had been partially restored for just a month following a previous digital shutdown in January, imposed during a deadly regime crackdown on nationwide protests.

More than 6,500 protesters were killed and 53,000 arrested, according to the US-based Human Rights Activists News Agency (HRANA).

Officials say the government shut down the internet during the war for security reasons, suggesting the aim is to prevent surveillance, espionage and cyber-attacks.



AFP via Getty Images

Without access to independent information sources, Iranians are reliant on media sources that are run by the regime or close to it

The Starlink devices Sahand sends to Iran are one of the most reliable ways of bypassing the shutdown. The white, flat terminals, paired with routers, provide internet access by connecting to a network of satellites owned by Elon Musk's SpaceX company, allowing users to completely bypass Iran's heavily controlled domestic internet.

According to Sahand, several people can connect to each terminal at the same time.

He says he and others in the network buy them and "smuggle them through the borders" in a "very complex operation", though he declines to give details.

Sahand says he has sent a dozen to Iran since January and "we are actively looking for other ways to smuggle in more".

The human rights organisation Witness estimated in January that there are at least 50,000 Starlink terminals in Iran. Activists say the number is likely to have risen. The BBC contacted SpaceX for more details about the use of Starlink in the country but did not receive a response.

Last year, the Iranian government passed legislation that made using, buying or selling Starlink devices punishable by up to two years in prison. The jail term for distributing or importing more than 10 devices can be up to 10 years.

State-affiliated media has reported multiple cases of people being arrested for selling and buying Starlink terminals, including four people - two of them foreign nationals - arrested last month for "importing satellite internet equipment". It has also reported that some of the arrests include accusations of possessing illegal weapons and sending information to the enemy.



SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

Protesters in London have joined calls for unrestricted internet access in Iran

However, a market for the terminals in Iran continues, including through a public Persian-language Telegram channel called NasNet.

A volunteer involved with the channel from outside Iran told the BBC that approximately 5,000 Starlink terminals have been sold through it in the past two and a half years.

Iran has a long history of controlling information, both by pushing its own anti-American and anti-Israeli narratives via state-run media and by restricting reporting about repressive measures used by the regime against its critics.

Yet during the January protests, even with the internet shut down, reports and video evidence of extrajudicial killings, arrests and beatings trickled out. Much of this information is known or believed by human rights organisations to have come from people accessing social media platforms via Starlink.

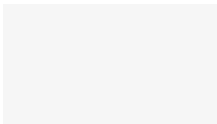
Iran's current internet set-up has been described as a "tiered system".

All Iranians have access to a state-controlled domestic network on which services such as banking, ride-hailing and food delivery operate, as well as state-run media.

Before the blackouts, Iranians were also able to access the global internet. But many sites and services such as Instagram, Telegram, YouTube and WhatsApp were blocked, and the government set higher prices for access than for the domestic network.

Many Iranians circumvented the restrictions by using virtual private networks (VPNs), which connect users to websites via remote servers, concealing their locations. Subscriptions for these also pushed up costs.

Now, under the blackout, only a select few officials and other individuals, including journalists working for state media, have unfettered internet access using what are known as "white sim cards".





Getty Images

Satellites owned by SpaceX - carried here by a Falcon 9 rocket over California - are used to provide Starlink internet

In 2022, Musk said he was activating Starlink in Iran following severe internet disruptions during protests sparked by the death in custody of an Iranian woman, Mahsa Amini.

Since then its use has grown, especially during shutdowns.

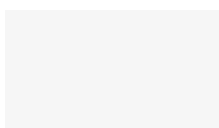
Now, with the authorities increasingly on the hunt for Starlink terminals, Sahand and his network are advising users to use VPNs with the satellite technology in order to remain incognito. But many people cannot afford it, particularly at a time of economic crisis.

Sahand is one of three people the BBC has spoken to who say they are involved in smuggling Starlink devices.

He says the operation he is involved with, including the purchase of the terminals, is funded by Iranians abroad and others who want to help those in the country. He says they do not receive funds from any states.

The terminals are sent to individuals they believe will use them to share information internationally.

"People need internet to be able to share what's happening on the ground," says Sahand. "We believe these terminals should be in the hands of those who really need it to make change."





EPA/Shutterstock

US and Israeli airstrikes on Iran continued as the internet shutdown took effect

A digital rights group, which asked not to be named, told the BBC it estimates at least 100 people have been arrested for possession of the terminals.

Sahand says he also knows people who have been arrested for accessing or owning one - none of them procured the device through him.

Yasmin, an American-Iranian whose name we have also changed, has told the BBC a male member of her family has been arrested in Iran and accused of espionage for possessing a Starlink terminal.

The BBC asked the Iranian embassy in London why only a few people are allowed access to the internet in Iran and why penalties for using Starlink are so severe, but received no response.

The Iranian government has, however, admitted the shutdown has hit some businesses hard, with a minister saying in January that every day of internet blackout cost the economy at least 50 trillion rials (\$35m; £28m).

It recently launched a scheme called "Internet Pro", which allows certain businesses some access to the global internet.

One man who works for a company in Iran has told the BBC he has been given access via the initiative.

Government spokesperson Fatemeh Mohajerani said the intention was "to maintain business connectivity during the crisis". She also said the government was "completely opposed to communication injustice" and once the situation returns to normal "the situation of the Internet will also change".

"Communications blackouts are a clear violation of human rights and they can never be justified," Marwa Fatafta, regional policy and advocacy director at Access Now, a digital rights group, told the BBC World Service, ahead of World Press Freedom Day on 3 May.

She warns that internet blackouts are becoming a "new norm". According to Access Now, there were 313 of them across 52 countries in 2025, the highest number globally since it began tracking them in 2016.

The executive director for the Abdorrahman Boroumand Centre for Human Rights, Roya Boroumand, says that an information vacuum in Iran "allows the state to broadcast its narrative, ie portray protesters as violent actors or foreign agents, while its victims, including those sentenced to death, and informed sources are silenced".

This is a major motivation for Sahand.

"The Iranian regime has proven that during a shutdown, they can kill," he says. "It is super crucial for Iranians to be able to portray the real picture of the situation on the ground."

He says those who voluntarily sign up to help with the smuggling "are aware of the risk". But he adds "it's a fight" and "we feel somehow we have to intervene and help".

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