Nov 04, 2016 by APDS Bloggers

Iran and the Internet: Burdened by Great Expectations? [1]

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Since the violent aftermath of Iran's presidential elections, American policymakers have struggled with how best to approach the opposition Green Movement without jeopardizing U.S. efforts to limit Iran's nuclear ambitions. There are signs that an increasingly popular approach might not be more sanctions – but fewer, at least when it comes to Internet technologies.

The current Iranian regime's jamming of BBC and Voice of America signals and its decision to ban Gmail have deepened the link between censorship issues and U.S. policy toward Iran. Few would argue that improving the Iranian public's access to online information is an unworthy goal. But at the same time, it may be impossible to predict the effects of such a policy, partly due to uncertainty about the democratic movement's strength and Iranian attitudes in general.

The perceived role of social media in the protests that rocked Tehran in June 2009 helped spark discussion about the utility of the internet as a tool against oppression and prompted the U.S. Senate to pass the VOICE Act, which allocated funds to assist Iranian victims of censorship. In January 2010, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton delivered remarks on U.S. support for the principles of Internet freedom which, though not focused on Iran, endorsed the importance of the free flow of information and the ability of technologies to empower individuals.

Momentum has been growing behind calls to put the internet freedom agenda into practice in Iran. Headlines have proclaimed "Bombard Iran…with Broadband" and "Supporting Dissent with Technology," calling for the U.S. to provide satellite internet to Iran and trumpeting U.S. government efforts to support the development of technologies to evade censorship and surveillance. Various op-ed columns endorse a State Department proposal to waive U.S. Treasury restrictions on the export of technology to Iran, which would make it legal for U.S. companies to provide resources from social networking programs to encryption software that could protect the identities of dissidents.

Adjusting U.S. policy to eliminate barriers to Iranians' access to online technologies could help empower a broader range of voices in the Iranian public. But are the expectations for the effects of less restricted Internet access in Iran unrealistic?

Though YouTube and Twitter announced the existence of the Green Movement to the world, there has been increasing uncertainty about the actual strength and breadth of the opposition within Iran. Recent reports question whether the protests that drew thousands into the streets of Tehran were inspired by vast numbers of Twitter users based inside the country, or if the

voices of very few activists were amplified by sympathizers abroad. The lack of protests around the 31st anniversary of the Islamic Revolution suggests a lack of cohesion within the Green Movement, or at least that its ability to mobilize its supporters through online networks has been exaggerated, if not significantly frustrated by the regime.

To add further confusion, while the controversy persists over the June election results that prompted the protests, a recent analysis of several pre- and post-election polls casts significant doubt on the claim that most Iranians favored regime change. While this is just one gauge of public opinion inside Iran, it only complicates perceptions of the popular mood when compared with the images of thousands who took to the streets.

If the effects of Twitter and other online media have overstated the existence of a technology-driven democratic opposition movement in Iran, what does this mean for policies intended to expand Internet freedom there?

Following the challenges to the online roots of the Iranian protests, critics of "techno-utopianism" have issued warnings about characterizing new technologies as natural allies of democracy and emphasize that while the Internet can facilitate communication in decentralized organizations, "one can't have a revolution without revolutionaries." Evgeny Morozov also warns against the danger of associating Google, Facebook, YouTube and other tools with democracy or the State Department at the risk of automatically creating an association between their users and dissidents, which could prohibit their use all together or pose severe risks to users in authoritarian countries.

It's debatable whether U.S. policymakers need this kind of reality check about the inherent nature of technology. There does not seem to be any illusion within the State Department that the internet can only be used for good. In Clinton's Internet freedom address, she clearly noted the dual nature of new technologies and stated they are not "an unmitigated blessing." One only need look to al Qaeda for ways in which online technology has been used to incite violence – and the current Iranian regime provides its own examples of employing technology to limit access to information.

In any scenario where Iranians gain greater access to online technologies, it is safe to assume that a more diverse array of voices would be heard. What cannot be predicted is whether the State Department will like what these voices have to say.

Any expectation that aggressively pursuing internet freedom for Iran will automatically result in a bolstered democratic movement would be overly optimistic – such efforts may not even produce a regime that would abandon Iran's nationalism-driven nuclear ambitions.

At the same time, if U.S. policymakers can commit to pursuing Internet freedom for Iran in principle, they may succeed in providing Iranians with the tools to help determine their own fate. But they will have to avoid giving the impression that a policy of Internet freedom is intended to enable a U.S.-backed movement to take power. Iranians may be divided on many issues, but they tend to reject the idea of U.S. intervention in their internal affairs.

The Internet freedom agenda may not provide an instant or certain resolution to the U.S.

policy dilemma on Iran – but it may be the best option for now.

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