

Report

Closing of the Gates

Implications of Iran's Ban on the Telegram Messaging App



Closing of the Gates

Implications of Iran's Ban on the Telegram Messaging App

Copyright © 2018 by the Center for Human Rights in Iran

All rights reserved. No part of this report may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including mechanical, electric, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the Center for Human Rights in Iran.

Center for Human Rights in Iran
New York
Tel: +1 -347-689-7782

www.iranhumanrights.org

Closing of the Gates

Implications of Iran's Ban
on the Telegram Messaging App

June 2018

Center for
**HUMAN
RIGHTS**
in Iran

www.iranhumanrights.org



About us

The **Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI)** is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights in Iran. CHRI investigates and documents rights violations occurring throughout Iran, relying on first-hand accounts to expose abuses that would otherwise go unreported. We bring these violations to the attention of the international community through news articles, briefings, in-depth reports and videos, and work to build support for human rights inside Iran as well. CHRI engages in intensive outreach and international advocacy aimed at defending the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Iranian people and holding the Iranian government accountable to its human rights obligations.

Table of Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	6
RECOMMENDATIONS	8
ROLE OF TELEGRAM IN IRAN	13
INTENSIFYING STATE HOSTILITY TOWARD TELEGRAM	15
MIXED MESSAGES BY ROUHANI ON THE BAN	17
IMPLICATIONS FOR DIGITAL RIGHTS IN IRAN	20
Some in Iran will be hurt more than others	22
Privacy and security will be compromised	24
Blocking Telegram will strengthen state censorship	25
Political campaigning and mobilization will be constrained	26
IMPLICATIONS FOR ROUHANI	27
IMPLICATIONS FOR IRANIANS' SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC RIGHTS	31
CONCLUSION	37
ENDNOTES	38

Executive Summary

On May 1, 2018, the popular messaging app Telegram was blocked in Iran by order of the Iranian Judiciary. The app has some 40 million active users in Iran, a country of 82 million people. By 2018 it had become the central platform for internet use in Iran, used in all walks of life including personal communications, news, business (state-run and private), politics, education, healthcare, art and culture, entertainment and social life, and its use cut across all socioeconomic, age and geographic divides. Foreign-owned and with its servers based outside Iran, Telegram is not under the control of the country's state censors. The authorities' willingness to disrupt what has become the principal means of digital communication in Iran—and since the ban, to disrupt access to circumvention tools—demonstrates the primacy of their commitment to state censorship.

The ban, together with simultaneous efforts to push Iranians onto state-controlled domestic messaging apps, is the inevitable outcome of a decade-long process in which the government has been steadily developing the domestic capacity to restrict the people of Iran to state-controlled digital communication and information. While many of Telegram's users in Iran will likely continue to access the app through circumvention tools, many others will lose access due to limited financial and technological capabilities, especially given the state's demonstrated determination to disrupt circumvention tools and the Judiciary's moves toward criminalizing continued use of the app. Those who lose access and migrate to Iran's domestic apps will be communicating on censored platforms where only state-approved information is available. Moreover, these users will be vulnerable to state monitoring and surveillance of online activities, as domestic apps enable state access to personal accounts. The Telegram ban, and the authorities' broader efforts to confine Iranians to a digital world that they control, represents a profound violation of Iranians' fundamental rights to access information, privacy and freedom of speech.

The ban will disrupt the most important, uncensored platform for information and communication in Iran, one that is used extensively by activists, independent and citizen journalists, dissidents and international media. It will also impact electoral politics in Iran, as centrist, reformist and other relatively moderate political groups that are allowed to participate in Iran's elections have been heavily and successfully using Telegram to promote their candidates and electoral lists during elections. State-controlled domestic apps and media will not provide these groups with such a platform, even as they continue to do so for conservative and hardline political forces in the country, significantly aiding the latter.

In addition, the ban's order by the Judiciary, and not cross-governmental state bodies that normally handle internet censorship decisions, indicates the growing centralization of power over internet policy in Iran's most hardline bodies, and the political irrelevance of President Hassan Rouhani, who spoke out against the ban but took no public or effective action to oppose it. Indeed, since the ban, his Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) has sought to disrupt access to the circumvention tools necessary for Iranians to continue using Telegram. These developments will likely further diminish Rouhani's credibility in the eyes of his supporters and call into question the meaningfulness of any statements by the president in support of internet freedom.

The ban will also erode people's economic and social rights. Telegram has become deeply integrated into daily business in Iran and is central to many people's livelihoods. Its channels are especially important to small and mid-size companies, family-based operations, entrepreneurs and startups, for transactions ranging from marketing and advertising to communications and sales, and the ban will impact the incomes and employment of significant numbers of Iranians. At a time when the Iranian economy is already under strain due to decades of economic mismanagement, years of debilitating sanctions, disappointing foreign investment after the nuclear deal, and now the withdrawal of the US from the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the economic costs of the ban on Telegram will be keenly felt. If this precipitates further unrest, the diminishing space for public dissent in Iran would suggest that a severe crackdown and further erosion of civil and political liberties is likely.

In sum, the ban on Telegram shows the Iranian leaders' deep fear of the free flow of information and their reckless prioritization of censorship at any cost. The ban demonstrates the state's growing technological capability and its willingness to use it to restrict Iranians to a digital world controlled by the state. It signals the growing urgency of defending Iranians' digital rights.

Recommendations

To the Rouhani administration

- > The Rouhani administration should challenge the legality of the state prosecutor's ban on the Telegram messaging app in a transparent fashion and report the findings to the public.
- > President Rouhani's Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) should immediately stop disrupting encrypted international traffic, which Rouhani's own ICT minister has stated is being done to block Iranians' access to circumvention tools, as it represents a further restriction on people's internet freedom and violates international norms.
- > The Rouhani administration should ensure that the privacy of users who move to domestic messaging apps will be protected and that the full ownership profile of these companies will be transparent and made available to the public.
- > The administration and its Ministry of ICT should stop interfering in the market to favor domestic apps through price, speed and other incentives.

To the Iranian Judiciary

- > The Iranian Judiciary should reverse the decision made by the state prosecutor to ban Telegram, and it should not allow opaque decisions that affect the entire nation to be made by individual prosecutors.
- > The Judiciary should respond to any complaints made by lawyers regarding violations of internet freedom or privacy, it should review any legal challenge to judicial decisions in an impartial manner, and it should not penalize lawyers who legally challenge judicial decisions.
- > The Judiciary should cease all moves to criminalize continued use of the Telegram app.

To the Iranian Parliament

- > The Iranian Parliament should review the country's Law on Cybercrimes, especially its Article 1, which contains vague language that has been used by state officials to justify the blocking of circumvention tools necessary for internet access and privacy.
- > Parliament should hold the Rouhani administration accountable for any actions that endanger Iranian users' privacy or access to the internet and it should also investigate the role of the Judiciary in violations of Iranians' online privacy and access.
- > Parliament's Article 90 Commission should call Minister of ICT Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi for questioning on internet disruptions that have been caused by the ICT Ministry's blocking of circumvention tools and which have negatively impacted people's livelihoods.

To the international community

- > Governmental officials worldwide should state directly to their Iranian counterparts in bilateral meetings and to the international community in multilateral settings their view that the Iranian Judiciary's ban on Telegram is a violation of Iranians' access to information and freedom of expression, and condemn it as such.
- > All governments, in particular the United States, should ensure that personal communications tools, circumvention tools and any other services that facilitate open and secure access to the internet are available to the people of Iran.
- > Private technology companies and their respective home governments should make every effort to make personal communication and information tools and services available to the people of Iran, so that they may have access to any censorship circumvention tools available, and means should be made available whereby the people of Iran can download and/or purchase such tools and services.
- > The UN, including the Secretary General and the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of the Right to Freedom of Opinion David Kaye should hold Iran accountable to its international obligations regarding online access and privacy and condemn the ban on Telegram as a violation of these obligations.

“Cyberspace has...brought the enemy into our homes. Mothers should protect their children against cyberspace that is polluted with the enemy.”¹

[Ahmad Khatami](#), member of Iran’s Assembly of Experts, April 1, 2018

On May 1, 2018, the Iranian Judiciary put into effect a ban on Telegram, the popular online messaging app that has some [40 million active users](#) in Iran.²

Iran has long banned, filtered, hacked and otherwise sought to restrict and violate Iranians’ internet freedom to varying degrees of effectiveness. Yet the authorities’ willingness to block what has become the central platform for digital communication in Iran indicates the primacy of its commitment to state censorship and repression. The state’s ability to implement the ban, disrupt access to circumvention tools and offer state-controlled domestic messaging apps as alternatives to Telegram reflects the technological capacities the state has been steadily amassing over the last decade in its efforts to control the use of the internet in Iran. While many of Telegram’s users in Iran will likely be able to continue using the app through circumvention tools, there will also be many who will lose access, with profound implications for their online access and privacy, as will be discussed in this report.

The ban also indicates that hardline state officials who view internet freedom as a threat to the Islamic Republic are intensifying their political dominance in Iran. The ban’s order by the Judiciary, which reports directly to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, instead of by the state bodies encompassing all branches of government in Iran which normally handle internet censorship decisions, is a reflection of this growing centralization of power over internet policy in the most hardline of state bodies in the country. It also demonstrates the growing political marginalization—and irrelevance—of President Hassan Rouhani, who had argued against the ban but was either unable or unwilling to take any effective or public action against it. Moreover, the action his administration did take in the wake of the ban—the disruption by his Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) of access to circumvention tools that Iranians are using to bypass the ban and maintain access to Telegram—suggests that Rouhani’s verbal support for internet freedom is just that, only verbal. Indeed, the ban needs to be seen as the inevitable outcome of the state’s project in Iran to build its online control and censorship capabilities—a project that was supported and implemented by all branches of government, including the Rouhani administration.

In addition, the ban will erode people’s economic and social rights. Telegram has become deeply integrated into daily business in Iran and is central to many people’s livelihoods. Its ban will make business transactions more difficult, especially for small and medium-sized companies that use the app for everything from advertising to sales, negatively impacting employment and incomes. This is especially true for those at the lower end of the socioeconomic spectrum who may not have the financial resources or technical know-how to use circumvention



As of May 2018,
the Telegram
messaging app
had some 40
million active
users in
a country of 82
million people.

"I'm a community organizer and 90 percent of our communications are done on Telegram. Our friends coordinate their parties, weddings and funerals on Telegram. Even our community mosque uses it to organize their activities."

Farid, 42, social worker and community organizer, Tehran

tools. This segment of the population, traditionally supportive of the regime, has already registered unprecedented levels of discontent with the state over economic conditions in the protests that erupted in December 2017. Yet it is this segment that will be hit hardest by the ban, and at a time when already serious economic strains in the country will be made worse by the withdrawal of the US from the Iranian nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Closing of the Gates: Implications of Iran's Ban on the Telegram Messaging App by the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) examines the ban on Telegram and what it means for Iran—for its people and their digital rights, for the Rouhani government and its professed support for internet freedom, and for Iranians' broader economic and social rights. The report is based on in-depth CHRI research and analysis conducted over the last five years on digital access and privacy issues in Iran, detailed review of Iranian state policy, practices and technological initiatives, and interviews done in April and May 2018 with a diverse range of Iranians inside the Islamic Republic, including tech experts, journalists, business people, activists, factory workers, students, bankers, state employees and artists.

Role of Telegram in Iran

In Iran, the Telegram messaging application is used for personal communication, accessing news, conducting business, political campaigning, education, healthcare, entertainment and culture, and community and social life. The app has some [40 million active users](#) in Iran, in a country of 82 million people, and its use crosses all socioeconomic, age and geographic divides.³

Launched in 2013 by Russian-born brothers Pavel and Nikolai Durov, the Dubai-based Telegram quickly gained favor in Iran, dwarfing the number of users of other social media networks. Easy to use, fast, accessible to Farsi, and with text, voice, video and phone capabilities, as well as channels that allow messages to be broadcast to large audiences, use of the messaging app spread rapidly among the population.

Telegram's popularity in Iran has also been fueled by the company's refusal to submit to Iran's state censorship rules, which means content censored by the state is still available on the app. In addition, because the company's servers are based outside Iran, communication on Telegram is secure from state authorities. [Domestic Iranian apps](#) are subject to state censorship rules and communication on them can be accessed and monitored by the state.⁴

Yet Telegram's exponential growth in Iran (its Iranian users account for roughly [20 percent](#) of Telegram's customers worldwide)⁵ has been due more than anything to the app's ability to fill the huge demand among Iranians for a highly effective platform for online communication that is mobile-based, as Iranians' principal means of [accessing the internet](#) is through their phones.⁶

As such, by 2018 Telegram had become integrated into almost all aspects of daily life in Iran. Iranians interviewed by CHRI for this report consistently relayed the extent to which the app had become deeply embedded in the political, economic and social fabric of the country:

"I'm a community organizer with several associations and 90 percent of our communications are done on Telegram. Our friends coordinate their parties, weddings and funerals on Telegram. Even our community mosque uses it to organize their activities."

Farid, 42, social worker and community organizer, Tehran

"I'm a photographer and earn my living through Telegram by posting and selling content. My father introduced a brand and I did the marketing through Telegram. My musician friends promote and sell their work on Telegram and the film industry advertises on it."

Amir, 28, fashion photographer, Tehran

"We do a lot of public benefits and NGO activities through Telegram because of its ease of use and technical capabilities. We use it for information sharing, advertising, coordinating volunteers, organizing plans, identifying people in need, attracting business partners and supporting charity workers and philanthropists."

Mohsen, 34, public health worker, Tehran

Even government workers and state-owned organizations have become dependent upon the app for daily transactions:

"Email is not widely used. But with Telegram, email has become irrelevant. We send files, reports, letters and office communications through Telegram. When Telegram was blocked in January, it created serious problems for us. Sometimes the ministerial offices could not send letters because of problems with installing circumvention tools.⁷ Eventually, they had to be delivered by hand until one of our guys installed circumvention tools for the entire division."

Ahmed, 39, government employee, Tehran

Prior to the ban, it was estimated that 40 percent to 60 percent of Iran's bandwidth was occupied by Telegram (with the higher number cited by Iranian state officials), meaning that more than half the internet traffic in Iran was on this messaging app. The deputy director of Iran's National Cyberspace Center stated in September 2017:

"There are 580,000 [Telegram] channels in the country, with 16 of them having over one million members."

[Amir Kharakian](#), deputy director of Iran's National Cyberspace Center, September 2017⁸

It was this unprecedented reach of Telegram among the people of Iran—along with the Iranian authorities' inability to censor or monitor content on the app—that placed the messaging app directly in the crosshairs of state officials who have prioritized state control over internet use and have been steadily building the domestic technological infrastructure to enable this control.



"Cyberspace has...brought the enemy into our homes. Mothers should protect their children against cyberspace that is polluted with the enemy."

Ahmad Khatami, member of Iran's Assembly of Experts, April 1, 2018

The authorities' willingness to block what has become the central platform for digital communication in Iran indicates the primacy of its commitment to state censorship.

Intensifying state hostility toward Telegram

While hardline officials in Iran were also often avid users of Telegram, relations between the Iranian authorities and the company had been deteriorating for several years. Tensions, and the state's periodic disruptions of the app, long revolved around the placement of Telegram's servers: Iran wanted them placed inside Iran (where content would be accessible to the state), and Telegram, understanding the importance of the app's security to its brand, [refused](#).⁹

"Iranian ministry of ICT demanded that @telegram provided them with spying and censorship tools. We ignored the demand, they blocked us."

[Tweet](#) by Telegram CEO Pavel Durov, October 20, 2015¹⁰

Telegram also clashed with the Iranian authorities over its refusal to abide by Tehran's censorship rules. The secretary of Iran's Supreme Cyberspace Council (SCC) said:

"Foreign messaging networks should comply with the policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran and should not publish immoral material. If they cooperate with us, there won't be any problem. Otherwise, we will move towards introducing restrictions against them."

[Abolhassan Firouzabadi](#), secretary of Iran's Supreme Cyberspace Council (SCC), November 14, 2017¹¹



The Judiciary's ban on Telegram reflects the growing centralization of power over internet policy in Iran's most hardline state bodies.

"This is a political victory for hardliners who have long said—and wanted to show—that Rouhani could not deliver."

Ali, human rights activist, 38, May 5, 2018

In December 2017, [street protests](#) broke out across Iran over unemployment and state corruption.¹² This unrest, crushed by the state by early January 2018, deeply unsettled the authorities in Iran, because the protestors were largely drawn from the traditional constituencies of the regime—working class citizens in provincial towns and cities. Because news of the street protests was spread largely via Telegram, many [officials blamed](#) the app for the unrest, and state hostility toward Telegram intensified.¹³

"The SNSC decided to filter Telegram because some people used it to take advantage of the circumstances in the country and create a climate of violence and chaos."

[Ramazanali Sobhanifard](#), a member of the Taskforce to Determine Instances of Criminal Content, January 6, 2018¹⁴

These protests were a turning point for the state's relationship with Telegram. With reports of state corruption, mismanagement, payments to religious officials and institutions—as well as news of the various street protests—circulating largely on Telegram, the authorities saw that for the first time the constituency that had long been the bedrock of their support was now exposed to a narrative they didn't—and couldn't—control.

The ban would impact many layers of society, but it would be most effective at stopping this constituency from being exposed to alternative (and not state-approved) information, thereby allowing the state to reassert some semblance of control. Dissidents, activists, the educated professional class and intellectuals would likely use circumvention tools to continue using (any) banned network, but

they were a constituency already lost to the hardliners. The rank and file, however, were vital to the regime, and a constituency that they had long been able to feed a steady diet of state-controlled information through the state media.

Control over the mobilization of the public and the ability to monitor civil society activities has long been a priority for the Islamic Republic. Yet now Telegram was playing a role in social and political awareness and mobilization in a way that the government could not control. Iranian officials, religious figures, military officials, even the supreme leader himself and the entire political system of the Islamic Republic and the policies it promulgated were being challenged, and the state's powerlessness to censor this sealed Telegram's fate.

A [succession of state moves](#) in April 2018 indicated the ground was being laid for a ban. The Ministry of Education banned the use of foreign-made messengers at public schools, executive branch agencies were ordered to stop using foreign apps for official business, Khamenei announced he would no longer use his personal Telegram account (prompting other officials to follow suit) and Iran's Supreme Cyberspace Council (SCC) ordered Telegram removed from Iran's CDNs, slowing the transfer of multimedia data.¹⁵

Statements by the chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for National Security Affairs and Foreign Policy indicated that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei had given his blessing to the ban:

"Despite talks between the government and Telegram's CEO regarding filtering channels that have encouraged actions against security, Telegram's officials have not been cooperative with Iran.... Telegram will be replaced by a similar national one and this is a decision that has been made at the highest level."

[Alaeddin Boroujerdi](#), chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for National Security Affairs and Foreign Policy, March 31, 2018¹⁶

On May 1, 2018, the [ban on Telegram](#), ordered by the prosecutor of Branch 2 of the Culture and Media Prosecutor's Office in Tehran on April 30, was instituted.¹⁷

Mixed messages by Rouhani on the ban

Soon after the ban, the Rouhani administration took pains to distance itself from the move.

"This government has not and will not block any social media network or messenger."

[President Hassan Rouhani](#), Instagram post, May 4, 2018¹⁸

The Telegram ban demonstrates the growing political irrelevance of President Rouhani, who argued against the ban but was unable or unwilling to take any effective action against it.



"This government has not and will not block any social media network or messenger."

President Hassan Rouhani, May 4, 2018

This claim, however, was misleading. CHRI's research confirmed that as of May 6, 2018, Telegram began to be [directly blocked](#) by the mobile phone and internet service providers (ISPs), and not by Iran's Telecommunications Infrastructure Company (TIC), the main network carrier in the country, which operates under the authority of Rouhani. Previously, mobile phone operators or ISPs would send access requests to the TIC, which had exclusive control over the gateway that sends and receives online data in Iran.¹⁹

Yet the ISPs' authority to bypass the TIC and block directly was originally instituted as part of the policy framework of Iran's [National Information Network \(NIN\)](#), the massive, decade-long project to create a state-controlled and censored internet in Iran that was developed and implemented under the Rouhani government.²⁰

Moreover, after the ban on Telegram, the government—and specifically, Rouhani's Ministry of ICT—began to disrupt access to the circumvention tools that enable Iranians to access (any) blocked application or site, and were immediately being used to bypass the ban and maintain access to Telegram.

On May 15, 2018, Rouhani's Minister of ICT Jahromi employed national security justifications for the disruptions, stating:

"The pervasive use of circumvention tools has many consequences and for this reason, action is underway to block them...these [tools] also have anti-security characteristics and, in a way, they hold you ransom and collect information."

[Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi](#), minister of ICT, May 15, 2018²¹

While such disruptions can be continuously surmounted by ever-renewing VPNs and other circumvention tools, this endless cat-and-mouse game makes the use of such tools more onerous and time consuming. Numerous interviewees expressed to CHRI frustrations over the inconvenience of needing to constantly find a new VPN to use.

“Sometimes it’s difficult to access Telegram. Sometimes we can access it with circumvention tools and sometimes there’s no internet at all.”

Marzieh, 32, homemaker, Tehran

“I used Telegram for my work and have experienced a lot of problems sending reports and photos. The connection has become very slow and difficult to use even when you have a working circumvention tool. Fortunately, a new VPN comes out every day and those that don’t work get updated.”

Leila, 37, labor activist, Tehran

“These days connecting to Telegram is a struggle. Since Telegram was filtered, the internet has slowed and circumvention tools stop working after a few days and you’re forced to search for new ones. Even when a tool works, the connection speed is bad.”

Mitra, 36, computer programmer, Tehran

“If I have to send an urgent message I use WhatsApp because if I do it on Telegram they’ll tell me they couldn’t connect and haven’t seen it. Family group and prisoners... have gone over to WhatsApp. I have a good VPN but several of the good channels I followed have either migrated or are operating with disruptions.”

Reza, 24, web developer, Tehran

This ability to block access to circumvention tools was significantly enhanced by the development of Iran’s NIN—a state effort that was supported by all branches of government, including the Rouhani administration.

Iran had long blocked VPNs and other sites where circumvention tools can be accessed, but to do this it had to employ filters that disrupted domestic internet traffic in Iran as well. As society became more dependent on technology, anything that disrupted all online traffic, including domestic, became increasingly costly.

One of the central [goals of the NIN](#) was to develop the technological capacity to separate Iran’s domestic internet traffic from international traffic. This enabled the state to do two things: promote use of domestic traffic, sites and services through internet price and speed incentives, which encouraged Iranians to use the state-controlled and censored domestic network, and cut Iranians off from international internet traffic (during politically sensitive times) without disrupting needed domestic online use.²²

This second capacity was demonstrated for the first time during the December 2017 street protests, when the [authorities cut off](#), for some 30 minutes, access to the global internet.²³

Thus the ability to block apps and circumvention tools more effectively was significantly advanced by major state technological initiatives that were actually accelerated under the Rouhani government. In this light, the administration's attempts to distance itself from the actual ban on Telegram are problematic.

Implications for digital rights in Iran

The ban on Telegram is a direct violation of Iranians' right to access information and freedom of expression. The [UN has explicitly stated](#) that internet freedom—including the right to access online information and the protection of free speech on it—is a fundamental human right.²⁴

The ban's impact on the people of Iran, however, will vary. Many Telegram users will continue to use the app, as Iranians are well versed in accessing blocked applications via VPNs and other circumvention tools. This is how they have continued to use (the banned) Facebook and Twitter. State officials acknowledged that during the brief shutdown of Telegram during the December 2017 protests, three-quarters of Telegram's users in Iran continued to access the app via VPNs.

"In today's legislative session [Parliament Speaker Ali] Larijani quoted a report by the telecommunications minister to the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) that during the few days when Telegram was filtered, more than 30 million people used circumvention tools."

[Tweet](#) by Mahmoud Sadeghi, MP from Tehran, March 18, 2018²⁵

After the ban was implemented on May 1, 2018, there was an initial drop-off in Telegram use, especially once the ICT Ministry's efforts to block access to circumvention tools got underway. But since then, the number of Telegram users in Iran has reportedly begun to rise again. On May 18, ICT Minister Jahromi posted a chart on his Instagram account showing the drop in the number of Iranian users after the ban was first imposed, and then the rise in numbers that began by May 13-17, which according to [his chart](#), were approaching pre-ban levels.²⁶

Interviews with a broad range of Iranian citizens conducted by CHRI for this report support Jahromi's assessment, and indicate that use of Telegram in Iran is expected to remain significant despite the ban.

"When WeChat was blocked, everyone went over to Viber. When Viber was blocked, everyone joined Telegram. But when Telegram was blocked, no one went away. Everyone installed circumvention tools and continued to use it. Don't forget: The same strategy will not work every time!"

Tweet by Amir Seyedin, member, International Federation of Journalists, May 3, 2018



The ban is the inevitable outcome of a decade-long project supported by all branches of government in Iran to develop the technological capacity to restrict the people of Iran to state-controlled digital information.

"My Telegram channel specializes in publishing cultural, artistic and literary announcements. In an [internal] survey, at least 90 percent said they would use circumvention tools."

Sohrab, 47, writer and editor, Tehran

"Using circumvention tools is always difficult but in recent days the situation has not been much different than before the ban."

Hassan, 32, law student, Tehran

"[The ban] has not had an impact. I have been able to connect with various VPNs."

Taraneh, 26, women's rights activist, Tehran

"The desire to access Telegram has not gone away among the general public and they have not migrated to alternative messengers."

Zahra, 22, law student, Tehran

"Overall, [since the ban] my usage [of Telegram] has changed very little."

Golab, 36, journalist, Rasht

"[Since the ban] all my relatives, who are mostly older, have installed circumvention tools. During the past six or seven years...my work has only been affected on a few occasions coinciding with [sensitive] government periods when there was VPN disruption but each time the problems with VPNs went away."

Ali, 33, graduate student, Mashhad

Many interviewees noted the resiliency of Iranian users, and in particular, their commitment to maintaining Telegram use. Explained one journalist, in a typical comment:

“When WeChat was blocked, everyone went over to Viber. When Viber was blocked, everyone joined Telegram. But when Telegram was blocked, no one went away. Everyone installed circumvention tools and continued to use it. Don’t forget: The same strategy will not work every time!”

[Tweet](#) by Amir Seyedin, member, International Federation of Journalists, May 3, 2018²⁷

Some in Iran will be hurt more than others

Yet some in Iran will lose access to Telegram, and these will be the people who do not have the financial resources or technological sophistication to use VPNs and other circumvention tools.

Many Iranians in lower socio-economic brackets cannot afford household internet, but they do have mobile phones and [access the internet](#) this way.²⁸ Their Telegram accounts are not only used for the group chats that have become ubiquitous among Iranians in which family news and photos are shared—they are also used for the second jobs and to run the small businesses in the informal sector that are increasingly critical for this demographic.

“Blocking this social network will hurt the earnings of many, many people and will no doubt bring a lot of pressure on society’s middle and lower classes.”

Hamid, 37, journalist, Tehran

“I produce content on Telegram—gathering news, clips and images for a channel as my second job. For people like me who don’t have a high salary it’s a supplement. If Telegram is filtered, it will wipe out half of my income.”

Azar, student, 21, Tehran

For others, the issue is more one of technological sophistication, and these individuals are unlikely to be able to navigate circumvention tools.

“I work for a company that organizes training classes for 4000 doctors across the country via Telegram. We had a problem with older doctors who didn’t use the internet but when we started using Telegram, many of them signed up and began using it for information, registering for classes and sending receipts, which before was done by hand because they didn’t know how to email.”

Zahra, 36, private medical training company employee, Kerman

"I'm 60-years-old and I'm not familiar with computers. My son installed Telegram on my phone and I could easily use it to exchange photos and chat with relatives. Now my son has installed a circumvention tool and I don't understand what I have to do and when it doesn't work I don't know how to fix it. Now we have to use the telephone again!"

Azam, 60, former Tehran municipality employee, Tehran

"Everyone I know uses circumvention tools but they constantly get cut off ... People who don't use the internet that much and older people don't have the patience to install and change circumvention tools and they're probably giving up on Telegram."

Fatemeh, 27, English literature university student, Kerman

As some segments of society will be impacted far more severely by the ban, the ban is deeply discriminatory.

"Those familiar with technology have always had circumvention tools, and so has the younger generation because they hate [state bans]. But the older generation has to beg people to install [the tools] for them."

Davoud, 25, independent computer programmer, Shiraz

"Those who don't go online a lot don't have the patience to try different VPNs."

Azam, 35, women's rights activist, Tehran

"Working with VPNs is hell for older people. Many of them don't know how to find the right VPN and the ones on their smartphones don't work."

Mitra, 36, computer programmer, Tehran

Because the domestic apps that the government is trying to promote and replace Telegram with do not have the same degree of functionality, the ban will also hurt individuals who rely on certain features of the app. For example, this person with disabilities said to CHRI:

"No other app has the same voice quality as Telegram and this is useful for me. I have difficulty typing because of my disability. [Since the ban], it's become hard to connect with clients and my costs have gone up because I have to use the phone. Many of my clients have to rely on others to help with VPNs. This has caused disruptions in my work."

Vahid, 32, person with disabilities who owns a start-up, Tehran

Those individuals in Iran who either do not have the resources to access circumvention tools or cannot manage and use them will be forced to migrate to domestic apps if they wish to maintain mobile app access. This carries profoundly negative implications for their online access to anything but state-approved content and for their privacy.

Given Telegram's huge reach among the Iranian citizenry by 2018, once the company refused to submit to Iranian state censors and place its servers inside Iran, its fate in the country was sealed.



"Iranian ministry of ICT demanded that @telegram provided them with spying and censorship tools. We ignored the demand, they blocked us."

Tweet by Telegram CEO Pavel Durov, October 20, 2015

Privacy and security will be compromised

Due to the fact that Iran's technological infrastructure is state-controlled and its servers are inside the country, state authorities have [access to all accounts](#), allowing intelligence and security agencies to monitor personal communications at will.²⁹

"The facilities needed to develop the [domestic messaging apps] are exclusively in the hands of two companies tied to the state. Under these circumstances, users will not trust domestic messengers."

[Hamideh Zarabadi](#), MP, March 17, 2018³⁰

There is a long history, [documented](#) by the UN and many rights organizations, of the Islamic Republic using this access to conduct online surveillance, unlawfully enter accounts, and retrieve information,³¹ despite the fact that such privacy is ostensibly protected in Iran's [Constitution](#).³²

This content is then used to prosecute critics of the state on various national security-related charges in judicial proceedings lacking any semblance of due process. Intelligence and security agencies work hand-in-hand with Iran's Judiciary to conduct such operations, and many individuals have been imprisoned in Iran on the basis of such unlawfully obtained online content.

Iranian citizens who must migrate to domestic messaging apps will thus be communicating and sharing information on a platform completely open to the state.

“The people I see and know trust foreign apps more than domestic ones. None of them care if some foreign power will steal their information. All they care about is that their information won’t fall into the hands of domestic security forces and surveillance agencies.”

Davoud, 25, independent computer programmer, Shiraz

“Personally, I would send messages by smoke signals, the pony express or pigeons before I ever touch domestic messengers.”

[Tweet](#) by Maryam, 29, political activist, March 17, 2018³³

In effect, only those individuals with the resources and the technical capability to bypass the ban through the use of circumvention tools will be able to maintain user privacy. Those without such resources or capabilities will have to use domestic apps that make these users deeply vulnerable to state surveillance.

Blocking Telegram will strengthen state censorship

The state’s capabilities to censor and monitor internet content in Iran are increasing in both scope and sophistication. Iran’s [national search engines](#) (developed as part of the broader NIN project) have enabled the state to implement filtering more systematically and effectively; they employ automatic filtering of selected words and phrases on an expanding range of issues and deliver users to state-approved and even fabricated content.³⁴

Telegram has represented a critical lifeline within this growing state censorship capacity, providing Iranian citizens with a vital channel for information and communication to and from the outside world—and with each other—that is not state-controlled.

“Before Telegram, websites and newspapers had a lot of limitations in terms of impact on society, income generation, freedom of speech and autonomy. Lack of financial independence, state control and interference, and the threat of closure and censorship made life difficult. With Telegram, censorship became impossible. Telegram’s popularity has allowed private, small media outlets to generate income. Before it was impossible to build a profitable media organization without dependence on the state. One of the conditions necessary for media independence and impartiality is financial autonomy.”

Amir, 43, editor of a popular news channel on Telegram, Tehran

Millions of websites are blocked in Iran, including those of foreign media outlets, international NGOs and human rights organizations. Yet these sites have continued to be available to the people of Iran via Telegram. For example, international media organizations such as BBC Persian, VOA, and Radio Farda, and human rights organizations such as the Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI) have all continued to post their content on Telegram, bypassing Iranian state censors.

This channel will now be closed for those unable to maintain access to the app through circumvention tools. Those who do migrate to domestic messaging apps will be fed only a diet of state-approved information.

In their efforts to lay the groundwork and justification for the ban on Telegram, the Iranian authorities pointed to the app's role in spreading news of the protests during December 2017-January 2018, blaming the app for fomenting the unrest. This response followed a pattern well established over decades in Iran, in which the state shut down the means by which people communicated discontent—shooting the messenger, if you will—be it tape cassettes, print shops or messaging apps, instead of addressing the causes of people's discontent.

Yet any use of Telegram to share news of the December 2017 protests only accelerated what was an inevitable showdown between the state and the app. State efforts—supported by all branches of the state in Iran—to restrict Iranians to a domestic network in order to control the flow of information and the narrative of events, was a project long in the making. Given Telegram's huge reach among the Iranian citizenry by 2018, once the company refused to submit to state censors and place its servers inside Iran, the ban was inevitable and simply a matter of time.

Political campaigning and mobilization will be constrained

Telegram has also been vital to political campaigning and mobilization. While all political groupings in Iran have used Telegram heavily for campaigning, hardline and conservative groups have also had other options to disseminate their message, given their control over newspapers, the state broadcasting company (IRIB), Friday prayers and the various platforms of other state and semi-official organizations such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the paramilitary Basij force and religious institutes. For centrists, reformists and other more moderate groups that were allowed to participate in the system and which did not have the same access to these state and semi-official platforms, Telegram was singularly important to their ability to reach the electorate.

In the parliamentary elections of February 2016 and the presidential election of May 2017, Telegram was used exhaustively by centrist and reformist groups to field candidates and lists, mobilize the electorate and garner support. The effectiveness of these efforts on Telegram was startling: despite concerted efforts by hardliners and ultraconservatives to disqualify more moderate groups' candidates and relentlessly promote their own candidates on state media, centrist and reformist candidates and lists—including those supporting Rouhani and his allies—greatly benefited from using Telegram's "channel" feature to rally support among the electorate.

“For political opposition groups, Telegram is a blessing to connect and get close to people who have become distrustful of the official media that constantly lies.”

Azin, student activist, 32, Tehran

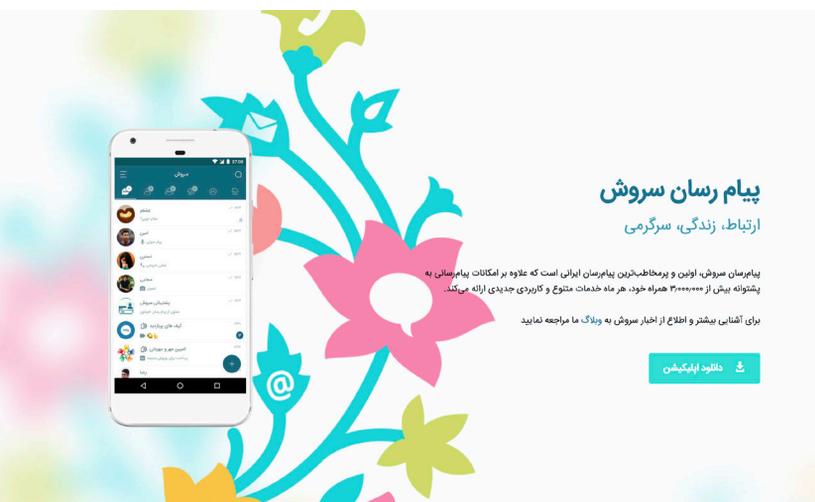
This capacity to mobilize and garner electoral support through Telegram will be lost to these political groupings if the ban endures, and domestic apps, given their control by the state apparatus, will not be likely to duplicate this platform for them.

Implications for Rouhani

The ban on Telegram, and Rouhani’s weak and conflicting response to it, has eroded the credibility of the president amongst his supporters. A typical remark posted by Iranians on social media in the wake of the ban reflects this disillusionment with Rouhani:

“They have filtered Telegram like they filtered Twitter. The only difference is that 90,000 people make a living off Telegram. Yesterday, Rouhani said his government has been the first with a surplus in job creation. Ha!”

[Tweet](#) by Hesam Fatemi, April 30, 2018³⁵



“The people I see and know trust foreign apps more than domestic ones. None of them care if some foreign power will steal their information. All they care about is that their information won’t fall into the hands of domestic security forces and surveillance agencies.”
Davoud, 25, independent computer programmer, Shiraz

Those who migrate to Iran’s domestic apps will be on platforms where only state-approved information is available and they will be vulnerable to state surveillance.

Rouhani [campaigned for the presidency](#) in 2013 and again in 2017 on a platform of strengthening civil and political liberties, which specifically included defending internet freedom. Indeed, his second win, on an even larger scale than his first, was largely on the basis of an electorate that became galvanized by his overt embrace of strengthening basic freedoms. He has issued public statements reiterating his support for internet freedom, and has on occasion taken action, such as when he reversed the ban on the WhatsApp messaging app in 2014 and refused requests by security forces to block Telegram during the run-up to the February 2016 parliamentary elections.³⁶

Yet Rouhani's overall record on internet freedom, public rhetoric notwithstanding, has been poor. His Minister of ICT has openly boasted of the millions of websites they have blocked, and major social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube have remained officially blocked throughout his years in office. The accelerated development of Iran's NIN has taken place under his watch and with technical implementation by his Ministry of ICT. He has remained publicly silent on the pervasive state-sponsored cyberattacks against Iranian citizens and the catastrophic consequences they have had for the many individuals who have been imprisoned on the basis of unlawfully retrieved online content.

As a result, even as his verbal support for more moderate positions has provoked public admonitions by hardliners, his unwillingness or [inability to deliver](#) on his pledges of greater freedoms has eroded his credibility among his supporters.³⁷

The ban on Telegram brought into particularly sharp relief the difference between his statements and his actions. Shortly after his re-election in 2017 he said, referring to his minister of information and communications technology (ICT):

"Right here the minister [of ICT] will give a pledge to the people that his hand will not be on the filtering button."

[President Hassan Rouhani](#), December 19, 2017³⁸

On April 22, 2018, one week before Telegram was banned, Rouhani stated on Instagram:

"Eliminating monopolies and helping to strengthen domestic messengers does not mean the restriction of other social networks. The people have the right to choose and they can be active in various social networks at the same time. The government will protect cyberspace and the people's ability to access it and communicate."

[President Hassan Rouhani](#), April 22, 2018³⁹

On April 30, on the eve of the ban, Rouhani's minister of ICT argued for its futility:

"[It's] impossible to block citizen's access to information.... Even if we ban the use of software, other software will be found and information will start

to circulate freely again.... Technology is not intrinsically guilty, corrupt, or deviant, it is human beings who misuse it to promote crime and corruption in the virtual world, just as they do in real life.”

[Tweet](#) by Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi, minister of ICT, April 30, 2018⁴⁰

The ban was ordered nonetheless, demonstrating (at best) the administration’s powerlessness. As one Iranian human rights activist put it:

“This is a political victory for hardliners who have long said—and wanted to show—that Rouhani could not deliver.”

Ali, human rights activist, 38, May 5, 2018

After the ban, ICT Minister Jahromi indicated the decision was taken without the administration’s agreement, effectively broadcasting the administration’s increasing irrelevance to the internal debate on internet freedom in Iran.

“On the question of filtering (social networks), we said and repeated that this is not the only solution.... The competent authorities heard our arguments and made their decision.”

[Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi](#), minister of ICT, April 20, 2018⁴¹

On May 1, the administration issued a statement questioning on procedural grounds the legitimacy of a nation-wide ban issued by a judicial official, and not by the state-wide bodies encompassing all three branches of government that are charged with making such decisions:

“The SNSC has sole authority to determine threats, make policy and take appropriate actions regarding national security. Others are required to coordinate with this higher body. Issuing orders regarding public affairs that concern the needs and wishes of tens of millions of citizens cannot be solely based on selective judicial decisions. Unfortunately, differences of opinion regarding the limits of authority and public interest has resulted in interferences, rulings and other actions that have at times been in conflict with the public’s access to social media portals and networks. It is completely wrong and against public interest to create questions and doubts in society. The effectiveness of any action in the public sphere depends on the people’s consensus, solidarity and cooperation.”

[The Government’s Information Dissemination Council](#), May 1, 2018⁴²

On May 4, Rouhani said in a message posted on his official Instagram page,

“This government has not and will not block any social media network or messenger.... If a decision has been made by the highest level of the state to restrict or block people’s communications, the people, who are the real owners of this country, should be informed.”

[President Hassan Rouhani](#), May 4, 2018⁴³

In this he was [referring](#) to the aforementioned fact that the ban had not been implemented by the government's TIC, but rather directly by the mobile phone operators and ISPs.⁴⁴ In Farsi, he added the [hashtags](#) [#محرمانه_نداریم](#) (WeHaveNoSecrets)⁴⁵ and [#حکم_سفارشی](#) (A Special Order)⁴⁶ which was widely seen as a reference to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's role in imposing the ban, further disassociating himself from the decision.

Consistent with Rouhani's pattern, however, his verbal statements of disapproval of the ban have not been accompanied by any action to challenge it—despite the fact that the procedural abnormalities surrounding the ban opened the door to a legal challenge. Indeed, on May 7, six Iranian lawyers challenged the judicial order banning Telegram. In an interview with CHRI, one of the lawyers, argued:

"The order not only violates the Criminal Procedures Regulations but also the Constitution.... The assistant prosecutor's job is to collect evidence and present it to the court and then the judge makes a preliminary ruling and after that it will reach the appellate stage. None of these steps have been followed."

[Payam Derafshan](#), attorney, May 7, 2018⁴⁷

"We send files, reports, letters and office communications through Telegram. When Telegram was blocked in January, it created serious problems for us. Sometimes the ministerial offices could not send letters because of problems with installing circumvention tools. Eventually, they had to be delivered by hand until one of our guys installed circumvention tools for the entire division."

Ahmed, 39, government employee, Tehran



Telegram has become deeply integrated into daily business in Iran and is central to many people's livelihoods; the ban will negatively impact employment and incomes.

Yet even as Iranian lawyers directly took on the unlawfulness of the ban, Rouhani made no public comment on the case, the legality of the ruling or the legitimacy of challenging it.

Rouhani's continued refusal to take more effective action to defend Iranian citizens' rights, and his effective cooperation with the ban by allowing the blocking of circumvention tools and facilitating development of the NIN, all cast significant doubt on the relevance or meaningfulness of any rhetorical support, past or future, by Rouhani for internet freedom in Iran.

Implications for Iranians' social and economic rights

Discontent is on the rise in Iran, to a degree rarely seen since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. High levels of unemployment, low (and often unpaid wages), a plummeting rial and inflation, environmental mismanagement so severe it has left many towns across the country without water, and rampant state corruption have combined to produce strikes, the aforementioned December 2017 protests, and unprecedented criticism of state leaders and policies.

At a time when the population, especially the middle and lower classes, is under economic strain, the disruptions that the Telegram ban will cause will likely fuel further discontent. Telegram has become deeply integrated into daily business in the country and many people's livelihoods are dependent upon communications and transactions conducted on the messaging app. At present, there is no equivalent platform to replace Telegram that has the same features, functionality and reach amongst the citizenry. As a result, people will suffer financial losses due to the ban on Telegram—a view that was repeatedly relayed to CHRI in our interviews for this report, as the following excerpts indicate.

"We contact our students through Telegram and train them in needlework as another source of income. Filtering Telegram will prevent me from communicating with my students throughout Iran."

Three female knitters working for the handicrafts industry in Sistan and Baluchestan

"[Blocking Telegram] will impact our visibility. It's like forcing us to reduce circulation. If [we have] to move to a new platform, we will have to cut employees that are posting content on Telegram."

Hossein, 38, journalist and owner of online media platform, Tehran

"I'm a painter and I teach art. Telegram has a direct impact on my work and life. I use it to organize classes, follow the work of my students, make financial arrangements and sell my work. If the network is filtered, it would cause a lot of problems for me."

Nasrin, 34, artist and educator, Tehran

“Filtering Telegram will affect at least 30 percent of my business.”

Mohammad, 35, publishing house employee, Tehran

While individuals and small companies may take a significant financial hit, losses will be shared by firms across the board. Banks, already under strain in Iran, have also reported to CHRI concern over the economic impact of the ban:

“We were in the process of signing a contract with several banks to offer their desired content on Telegram and its channels. But after recent rumors about the possible blocking of Telegram, they grew afraid and our contract is now up in the air.”

Ali, 44, banking professional, Tehran

“It’s expensive to advertise on the state radio and television and small firms like us can’t afford it. Our bank ended our contract with the [state broadcaster] IRIB three years ago. Telegram enabled us to directly communicate with our customers. Due to the economic situation, most banks are losing money, and if Telegram is shut down, they will have to go back to IRIB to advertise and pay huge amounts to communicate with their customers even for simple things like telling customers when their debit cards expire.”

Mehran, 36, bank manager, Tehran

Even government workers have expressed concern over the impact of the ban:

“During the two weeks when Telegram was blocked, our communications with contractors were virtually cut off. In some ways, we operate as part of a ministry and all our communications with contractors are on Telegram. If we don’t have that, I don’t know how we would be able to handle such large volumes of communications.”

Karim, 42, employee at state organization attached to one of the ministries, Tehran

Moreover, the Rouhani administration’s efforts to disrupt access to circumvention tools has caused much broader disruptions to internet traffic in Iran. The Ministry of ICT sought to block the international infrastructure (such as international data centers, web hosting services and cloud services) used by circumvention tools, but this meant that other businesses, services or sites using this same infrastructure were blocked as well. Similarly, the authorities tried to target and block encrypted international traffic used by circumvention tools, but recognizing encrypted traffic can be difficult and consequently other websites and applications were unintentionally swept up in the block and also disrupted.

Responding to this state of affairs in a typical comment was Mahdi Taghizadeh, co-founder of the Iranian company Delion Foods, who tweeted on May 7:

“In order to filter Telegram, they have messed up the internet in the entire country. Now the only thing that works is Telegram but our whole business and livelihood have been wasted.”

[Tweet](#) by Mahdi Taghizadeh, May 7, 2018⁴⁸

If the government decides to go after violators of the ban, use of the banned app may drop further and the disruptions and costs would thus be greater. On May 18, 2018, Assistant Prosecutor General Abdolsamad Khorramabadi [warned Iranian businesses](#) to stop their operations, such as the marketing of their services, on Telegram.⁴⁹ ICT Minister Jahromi posted a message on the state messaging app Soroush saying:

“Commercial activities on Telegram are prohibited. Commercial units and business firms must move their activities over to domestic social networks.... Last week there was a meeting at the prosecutor general’s office between members of the National Cyberspace Center, the Industries and Mines Ministry’s Commercial Affairs Center, the Center for Electronic Commerce, the Chamber of Commerce, NAJA cyber police force and the Cyberspace Business Union to discuss a decree issued by the police on March 13, 2018, regarding the prohibition of commercial and business activities on foreign social media.”

[Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi](#), minister of ICT, May 18, 2018⁵⁰

One way the authorities can enforce the ban is by blocking the website of any business continuing to use Telegram. While it is unclear that the authorities would have the will or capacity to do this on a large scale, they have already gone after a few businesses in what seems to be an attempt to set an example. For example, on May 20, the authorities blocked a major Iranian advertising agency, AdVenture, with about 3,000 clients that was on Telegram. Alireza Aghasi, the CEO of AdVenture told CHRI in an interview:

“Today [May 20] I was contacted on the phone by someone who said he was from the Workforce to Determine Instances of Criminal Content and he said I have to shut down my site because it has been determined to be inappropriate.”

[Alireza Aghasi](#), the CEO of AdVenture, May 30, 2018⁵¹

He added that the internet company which hosts his website in Iran had received an email that it should immediately cease to provide services in accordance with Article 23 of the [Computer Crimes Law](#), which states, “Hosting companies are obliged to block access to any site containing criminal content as soon as they receive an order from the Workforce to Determine Instances of Criminal Content.”⁵² The CEO continued:

“Twenty people work directly in our company and about 3,000 admins of Telegram channels use our product for advertising. Our income has dropped 60 percent and obviously, our situation will have an impact on others as well.”

[Alireza Aghasi](#), the CEO of AdVenture, May 30, 2018⁵³

Reza Olfatnasab, spokesman for the Internet Trades Union of Iran, told Hamshahri newspaper on May 20, 2018, that online businesses must shift their operations to domestic apps:

“We have emphasized to all businesses and vendors that they are not allowed to conduct advertising and share information on Telegram and they must carry out all these activities on domestic messengers.”

[Reza Olfatnasab](#), spokesman for the Internet Trades Union of Iran, May 20, 2018⁵⁴

The authorities could also take businesses not complying with the ban to court, yet blocking a company’s website is likely to do enough damage –effectively shutting a business down—to make prosecutions unnecessary.

With Iran’s economy under strain due to decades of economic mismanagement, years of sanctions, disappointing foreign investment after the nuclear deal, and now the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, economic pain is only set to increase in Iran. It is in this context that the ban has been ordered, disrupting business relationships, processes and transactions that have been developed and have become entrenched on Telegram. With [unemployment](#) at 12 percent (and youth unemployment at 27 percent),⁵⁵ wages that are typically [below the official poverty line](#) in Iran,⁵⁶ and one-third of Iran’s citizenry employed in the [informal sector](#),⁵⁷ such disruptions will only further erode Iranian’s livelihoods and standard of living. As one Iranian activist put it:

“The people who asked for Mir Hossein Mousavi [Green Movement leader under house arrest for seven years] and couldn’t get him [released] were only 1 million, but now those who will be pissed off will be 40 million.”

Mina, 33, human rights activist, Tehran

Those most hurt are usually those least well off. With this decision, the Islamic Republic risks losing further support from the very constituency that has long comprised its base. It is ironic that these are the very people the state likely sought to win back via intensified censorship. Yet in closing them off from (open) information, they have also barred them from needed economic opportunities in Iran’s increasingly struggling economy. Moreover, the authorities have presented themselves as indifferent to the needs, hardships and realities of daily life for vast numbers of people in Iran. This will not bolster support for the state. As one Iranian put it:

After the ban on Telegram, Rouhani's Ministry of ICT began to disrupt access to the circumvention tools that enable Iranians to access (any) blocked application or site, and were immediately being used to bypass the ban and maintain access to Telegram.



"The pervasive use of circumvention tools has many consequences and for this reason, action is underway to block them...these [tools] also have anti-security characteristics...."

*Iran's Minister of ICT Mohammad Javad Azari
Jahromi, May 15, 2018*

"Providing circumvention tools to 50 million users is not simple. Almost everyone is upset about this situation.... Networks that used to be places for people to make money have now been turned into anti-state networks."

Davoud, 25, independent computer programmer, Shiraz

Moreover, as one of the only uncensored mediums used on a vast scale in Iran, Telegram has been a vital platform on which citizens could air their concerns, and citizen journalism flourished on the app. As such, it provided a vital snapshot of the country—not only for other Iranian citizens or international media, but for the Iranian authorities as well.

"Criticism raised by people on this network has caused officials to fix their behavior. Transparent criticism and news sharing has even prevented corruption and forced officials to be accountable. It has had a good impact on society's morale. I hope in this regard, the authorities will make the right decision and avoid disillusioning people toward the state and the government."

Karim, journalist and digital marketer, 37, Tehran

With the ban, Iran's authorities risk losing a valuable channel of information regarding the people's issues and concerns. Effective governance, critically needed to deal with the serious economic and social issues facing the country, is dependent upon accurate information regarding conditions on the ground. This will only be made more difficult by the ban on Telegram.

Conclusion

State censorship and control of the internet in Iran are not new. But banning Telegram is qualitatively different from what has come before. The government's faceoff with more than 40 million users who have deeply integrated Telegram into their personal, professional and financial lives, regardless of the widespread discontent created by the move, shows the Iranian leaders' deep fear of the free flow of information and their reckless prioritization of censorship at any cost.

The ban also demonstrates the state's increasing technological capacity, one that has flowed from the massive, decade-long investment in the country's national internet infrastructure. This infrastructure now allows the state to disconnect the public from access to the global internet. Even though the state has not used this capacity for more than brief moments, it is indicative of the state's broader aim—of which the Telegram ban is a part—of restricting Iranians to a domestic digital world controlled by the state. That the authorities in Iran have acquired this capability is dangerous and alarming, given their history of repression.

The expansion of Iran's censorship system has also been underpinned by the strong state consensus behind it—public statements by the Rouhani administration notwithstanding. Indeed, all three branches of the Iranian government have supported the growth in the state's capacity to cut Iranians off from all but state-approved online content.

The Telegram ban will only fuel discontent at a time when it is already rising and the country is under significant economic strain. If political and social unrest ensues and human rights violations follow, the government is likely to use its expanding censorship capabilities to ensure its narratives of events are promoted, and the voice of activists, independent journalists and human rights defenders are suppressed. The ban on Telegram is a pivotal moment for all international observers who work to improve human rights and digital freedom in Iran, signaling the diminishing digital rights of the Iranian citizenry and the imperative of defending those rights.

Endnotes

- 1 “The Infected Enemy’s Cyberspace Has Been Brought into the Homes,” Tasnim News, April 12, 2018 <https://tinyurl.com/ydxb2ukn>
- 2 Personal Telegram channel of Telegram CEO Pavel Durov <https://t.me/durov/63>
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 “Guards at the Gate: The Expanding State Control Over the Internet,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, January 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/EN-Guards-at-the-gate-High-quality.pdf?x96855>
- 5 See the Telegram blog at <https://telegram.org/blog/200-million>
- 6 See the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) at <http://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/idi/2017/index.html#idi2017economycard-tab&IRN> and “The Number of Smartphones in Iran Increased to 98 million,” Islamic Students’ News Agency (ISNA), February 22, 2017 <https://tinyurl.com/yc7hlews>
- 7 In conversational speech in Iran, people use a term for circumvention tools that can most directly be translated as “filter breakers,” but for this report the term “circumvention tools,” which is technically more correct, is used.
- 8 “Telegram Occupies 60% of the Country’s Bandwidth,” Iranian Student News Agency (ISNA), September 18, 2017 <https://tinyurl.com/y9jksmhx>
- 9 “With Eye on Telegram, Internet Body Says All Social Media Apps Must Store Data Inside Iran,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, August 13, 2017 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2017/08/with-eye-on-telegram-internet-body-says-all-social-media-apps-must-store-data-inside-iran/>
- 10 Tweet by Pavel Durov, October 20, 2015 <https://twitter.com/durov/status/656551981226528768>
- 11 “Iranian Officials Threaten ‘Restrictions’ on Social Media Networks That Reject State Censorship Policies,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, November 18, 2017 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2017/11/iranian-official-threatens-restrictions-on-social-media-networks-that-reject-state-censorship-policies/>
- 12 “Silencing the Streets, Deaths in Prison: The December 2017 Crackdown in Iran,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, February 19, 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/02/irans-suppression-of-december-2017-unrest-marked-by-brutal-violations-of-law/>
- 13 For example, Mehdi Mohammadi, a conservative commentator for the Kayhan newspaper wrote on his Telegram channel on January 13, 2018, “[There is] proof of the network’s role in the recent riots,” <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/01/iran-unblocks-widely-used-messaging-app-telegram-after-two-weeks/>
- 14 “Removing the Telegram Filter Based on the Decisions of the Supreme National Security Council,” Mehr News, January 6, 2018 <https://tinyurl.com/y9zk4ft4>
- 15 “Khamenei’s Dropping of Telegram Channel Lays Groundwork for Banning Messaging App,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, April 18, 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/04/khameneis-dropping-of-telegram-channel-lays-groundwork-for-banning-messaging-app/>
- 16 “By the End of April Telegram Will Be Replaced with the National Messenger” Islamic Consultative Assembly News Agency (ICANA), March 31, 2018 <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/News/376662>
- 17 “In a Desperate Move to Squash Internet Freedom, Iran Blocks Telegram,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, April 30, 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/04/in-a-desperate-move-to-squash-internet-freedom-iran-blocks-telegram/>
- 18 President Hassan Rouhani, Instagram post on May 4, 2018 <https://www.instagram.com/p/BiXSzOEFQMF/?taken-by=hrouhani>

- 19 “Iran’s Telegram Ban Reveals New Authority By Judiciary to Directly Order Online Content to Blocked,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, May 12, 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/05/irans-telegram-ban-reveals-new-authority-by-judiciary-to-directly-order-online-content-to-blocked/>
- 20 “Guards at the Gate: The Expanding State Control Over the Internet,” Ibid.
- 21 “Blocking Circumvention Tools Has Started,” Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), May 15, 2018 <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/82916267>
- 22 “Guards at the Gate: The Expanding State Control Over the Internet,” Ibid.
- 23 “Silencing the Streets, Deaths in Prison: The December 2017 Crackdown in Iran,” Ibid.
- 24 See UN statement of June 27, 2016 at https://www.article19.org/data/files/Internet_Statement_Adopted.pdf
- 25 Tweet by Iranian MP from Tehran Mahmoud Sadeghi, March 18, 2018 https://twitter.com/mah_sadeghi/status/975434209392254978
- 26 “Iran’s Telegram Users Back on the Rise Three Weeks After State Banned the App,” Center for Human Rights in Iran, May 22, 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/05/irans-telegram-users-back-on-the-rise-three-weeks-after-state-banned-the-app/> and for chart see <https://persian.iranhumanrights.org/wp-content/uploads/00000-656x1024.jpg>
- 27 Tweet by Amir Seyedin, member of the International Federation of Journalists, May 3, 2018 <https://twitter.com/amirsevedin/status/992032632631422977>
- 28 See the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) at <http://www.itu.int/net4/ITU-D/idi/2017/index.html#idi2017economyocard-tab&IRN>
- 29 “Guards at the Gate: The Expanding State Control Over the Internet,” Ibid.
- 30 <https://tinyurl.com/y94kkz5n>
- 31 See the latest report (March 2018) of the Office of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/IRIndex.aspx>
- 32 See Article 25 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran at <http://fis-iran.org/en/resources/legaldoc/constitutionislamic>
- 33 Tweet by Maryam Abdi, March 17, 2018 https://twitter.com/Marii_Abdi/status/974920193913868288
- 34 “Guards at the Gate: The Expanding State Control Over the Internet,” Ibid.
- 35 <https://twitter.com/HesamFatemi/status/991006871787057153>
- 36 “Guards at the Gate: The Expanding State Control Over the Internet,” Ibid.
- 37 “Guards at the Gate: The Expanding State Control Over the Internet,” Ibid.
- 38 “President: We Stand with the People in a Pact,” Iran, December 19, 2017 <http://www.ion.ir/News/305537.html>
- 39 Statement by President Hassan Rouhani on his Instagram account, April 22, 2018 <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bh3ZW2xl5wv/?taken-by=hrouhani>
- 40 Mohammad Javad Azari Jahromi’s comments on Twitter, April 30, 2018 <https://twitter.com/azarijahromi/status/991145153804029952>
- 41 “Minister of Communications Answers about Telegram Filtering,” Iranian Students’ News Agency (ISNA), April 28, 2018 <https://www.isna.ir/news/97020804738>

- 42 Statement by the Government's Information Dissemination Council, May 1, 2018 <http://dolat.ir/detail/307750>
- 43 See President Hassan Rouhani's personal Instagram page at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BiXSzOEFQMF/?taken-by=hrouhani>
- 44 "Iran's Telegram Ban Reveals New Authority by Judiciary to Directly Order Online Content Blocked," Center for Human Rights in Iran, May 12, 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/05/irans-telegram-ban-reveals-new-authority-by-judiciary-to-directly-order-online-content-to-blocked/>
- 45 https://twitter.com/search?q=%23%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%B1%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87_%D9%86%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%85&src=typd
- 46 https://twitter.com/search?q=%23%D8%AD%DA%A9%D9%85_%D8%B3%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4%DB%8C&src=typd
- 47 "Six Lawyers in Iran File Petition Challenging Ban on Popular Telegram App," Center for Human Rights in Iran, May 10, 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/05/six-lawyers-in-iran-file-legal-petition-challenging-ban-on-popular-telegram-app/>
- 48 Tweet by Mahdi Taghizadeh, May 7, 2018 <https://twitter.com/mahdi/status/993549455981973504>
- 49 "Khorramabadi: Business Activity on Telegram Is Prohibited," Islamic Students News Agency (ISNA) May 18, 2018 <https://tinyurl.com/ycqpmglp>
- 50 "Iran's Telegram Users Back on the Rise Three Weeks After State Banned the App," Center for Human Rights in Iran, May 22, 2018 <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2018/05/irans-telegram-users-back-on-the-rise-three-weeks-after-state-banned-the-app/>
- 51 "Judicial Order for Closure of Telegram-based Businesses Causes 60% Drop in Revenues," (in Farsi), Center for Human Rights in Iran, May 20, 2018 <https://persian.iranhumanrights.org/1397/02/judicial-pressure-to-shut-down-telegram-business-units/>
- 52 See Iran's Computer Crimes Law at <http://www.hsu.ac.ir/it/1390/12/03/1390-12-03-14-21-27/>
- 53 "Judicial Order for Closure of Telegram-based Businesses Causes 60% Drop in Revenues," Ibid.
- 54 <http://newspaper.hamshahri.org/id/16867>
- 55 See the IMF 2018 Article IV Consultation at <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2018/03/29/Islamic-Republic-of-Iran-2018-Article-IV-Consultation-Press-Release-Staff-Report-and-45767>
- 56 Navid Kalhor, "Iran's Poorest Citizens Still Waiting for Some Semblance of Parity After 39 Years," Al-Monitor, March 11, 2018 <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/03/iran-inequality-wealth-tax-subsidy-reform-poverty-line.html>
- 57 "Growth in Informal Sector Undermining Economy," Financial Tribune, August 22, 2016 <https://financialtribune.com/articles/domestic-economy/48138/growth-in-informal-sector-undermining-economy>

