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<http://www.rsf.org/iran-islamic-republic-poised-to-launch-21-09-2012,43431.html>

Middle East/North Africa - Iran

Two-tier Internet?

Government blocks Google and Gmail, while promoting National Internet

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The Iranian government announced yesterday that it has blocked access to Google and Gmail after receiving complaints about the anti-Islamic video "Innocence of Muslims." [Abdolsamad Khoramabadi](#), the head of the committee that decides which websites should be blocked, said he had acted at the Iranian people's request.

Tests carried out by Reporters Without Borders in Iran indicate that the blocking is effective in some places but varies according to the province and the Internet Service Provider. So not all Iranian Internet users are affected. On the other hand, some VPNs (virtual private networks), which are used for circumventing censorship, are reportedly no longer working.

YouTube has been blocked in Iran since June 2009, when the authorities wanted to prevent the circulation of photos and videos of the crackdown on protests after President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's disputed reelection. Previously, YouTube had been subject to targeted blocking and widespread filtering of videos that were not to the censors' liking.

The blocking of Gmail is conveniently timed because it coincides with the launch of a government-run "National Internet" and national email service with much rigorous methods for verifying the identity of users. So the real aim seems to be to get more Iranians to switch to the national service.

All government offices and civil service department throughout the country are now connected to the national Internet network that became operational on 22 September.

21.09.2012 - Islamic Republic poised to launch national Internet

In the past few days, several Iranian officials have referred to the imminent launch of a national Internet, called "Our Own Internet" or "Halal Internet," giving tomorrow as the date when it will finally begin operating.

Officials have talked about the national Internet in the past but until now the launch has been repeatedly postponed. This time it seems that a proper operational system is to be unveiled although it will initially be used only by the government and civil service and will not be imposed on the entire population until a later stage.

The regime has had technicians working on a "Halal Internet" since 2002, but President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration stepped up the process with the support of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, especially after various cyber-attacks on its nuclear installations.

Reporters Without Borders is disturbed by the launch of this national network because, as well as aiming to satisfy the security concerns cited by the authorities, it also aims to step up control of online information and surveillance of netizens, especially government opponents and human rights defenders.

A national Internet that meets the approval of Iran's censors could only be a highly censored and sanitized one with even more surveillance, as anonymity would be banned. Purged of

political, social and religious criticism, it would serve only to glorify the regime and its leaders and would leave no space for dissent.

For the time being, the authorities continue to maintain that the national and international Internets will exist side by side, but Reporters Without Borders fears that the public will sooner or later be confined to the national Internet while only the government and banking and financial institutions will retain the ability to connect to the international Internet.

Iran needs to stay connected to the international Internet for its business and financial dealings. This model allows it to cut off the public's access during crises without restricting access for political decision-makers and business executives. To this end, the authorities are likely to increase the cost of accessing the international network and reduce the connection speed, in order to persuade the public to use the faster and cheaper national network.

Reporters Without Borders cautions the Iranian authorities against treating Iranian Internet users in a discriminatory fashion. It is also concerned that other countries will follow the Iranian example, jeopardizing the Internet's integrity.

Official statements – and corrections

Iran's minister of communications and information technology, Reza Taghi Poor, announced on 3 September that: "The first phase of the national information network, consisting of separating the internal network from the international network, has been completed in 28 of the country's provinces.

"There are two provinces left before we complete this phase, but by 22 September [the end of the month of Shahrivar in Iran], the two Internet networks, the international network and the national information network, will be accessible."

The communications minister added that "this network's speed will initially be 8 MB per second, increasing subsequently to 20 MB per second." He did not mention the speed of the connection to the international network.

He qualified this on 18 September, saying: "The connection of the 42,000 civil service departments to the international network will be cut, but in this phase of the national information network, there will be no bandwidth availability for the public." In other words, only the state sector will initially join the national Internet.

First national Internet phase began last year

The national Internet's first phase already began last year when Iranian website servers were transferred to Iran. The Iranian parliament's website, for example, was hosted on servers in the United States until last year. According to Iranian media, this phase has not yet been completed and several of the regime's sensitive sites are still hosted abroad. [Fars News](#), a news agency close to the Revolutionary Guards, still has its site hosted in Turkey.

A national email service is now functional. This was announced in a text that the communications ministry sent to mobile phone owners at the start of September inviting them to use it (<http://mail.iran.ir/register/?module=new>).

Applicants must provide their name, surname, address, phone number and national ID card number. The account takes 24 hours to be created – the time taken for the authorities to check the applicant's identity, another step in the drive to eradicate online anonymity.

Security and other grounds

The grounds given by the government for creating a national Internet are the "danger of using foreign networks" over which they have no control, especially as regards data storage, and the need to protect the country against cyber-attacks, above all those targeting its nuclear programme, which Iran blames on the United States and Israel.

But isolating the country from the international network could also allow the authorities to neutralize the censorship circumvention tools that have been developed abroad and to use a filtering system adapted to censorship needs.

The authorities also argue that detouring via the international Internet in order to access domestic websites is "pointless." Two months ago, the communications minister said: "To use

the Internet in Iran you don't need a connection to the international network in 95 percent of cases. Why, in order connect with a shopping mall in the next street, do you have to first leave the national network in order to come back to it immediately?"

Creating a national Internet also addresses political and religious considerations. The government often accuses the Internet and social networks of being in the pay of western countries that use them to promote their values and enhance their international influence. By cutting Iran off at least partially, the regime demonstrates its determination to control the "values" circulating online.

In practice, Iranians who do not dare or know how to circumvent the censors' filters are already limited to a authorized version of the Internet, one that has been purged of political, social and religious criticism. Iran is on the list of "Enemies of the Internet" that Reporters Without Borders updates each year and is currently holding a total of 24 journalists and 18 netizens.

National Internet as seen by Iranians

An Iranian journalist told Reporters Without Borders: "This is a ploy by the regime. On the one hand, they are creating a national Internet with a good connection that only allows you to visit permitted websites. On the other, a weak and filtered connection to the international network. I don't see why Iranian Internet users should accept this. At the moment, the regime needs money and I don't think they are ready to lose Internet users and their subscriptions."

A blogger said: "The regime is under pressure and cannot cut Internet access altogether. But it has a two-fold strategy – speed and an increase in Internet charges. Those who want to have access to the international network will have to pay more. It's a 'soft' way to deprive Internet users of their rights, without provoking international bodies."

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