



Iran Cracks Down on Internet Café VPNs

OE Watch Commentary: In the wake of recent and continuing labor unrest and political protest in Iran, the Iranian government has engaged in a widespread debate about how to control cyberspace. While Iranian security forces and the Intelligence Ministry have moved to ban social media applications like Telegram and the regime has restarted a broader debate about creation of a national intranet, there has been comparatively little focus on how the public accesses the internet.

The Islamic Republic of Iran has long officially banned virtual private networks (VPNs) but, just as with the prohibition on satellite television receiver dishes, Iranians widely ignored such prohibitions. This flouting of the law extends to the managers of Iran's internet cafes. The accompanying excerpted article from a news agency affiliated with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps reports that Iran's national police force has begun to counter this with a crackdown on internet cafes using VPNs.

Such an action against utilizing VPNs, if obeyed and successful, will close an important loophole that enabled Iranians to browse the internet anonymously and communicate and coordinate with each other through anonymous email accounts. After all, while Iran hosts a number of private and semi-private internet service providers, because all must be licensed through the government, there is widespread suspicion about their use on politically sensitive issues. That dial-up service is still common among these ISPs also drives many Iranians to utilize internet cafes, if only to take advantage of faster and more reliable service. Some believe that inspections and raids on internet cafes may help the regime control and guard against anti-regime communications, but it may prove to be a Pyrrhic victory if the antagonism such a policy and raids drives the Iranian public further away from the regime. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

“The chief of the Law Enforcement Forces has announced a ban on the use of VPNs and filterers at Internet cafes.”

Source: “Barkhorad-e Entezami ba Kafe-netha-ye Istifandeh Konandeh az Filtirshokan (Police Crackdown on Internet Cafes Using VPNs),” *Tasnim News Agency*, 20 May 2018. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1397/02/30/1730491>

The chairman of the Computer Technology Union of Tehran, with reference to the growing use of VPNs in the country, said, “The head of the Law Enforcement Forces has given police chiefs urgent new regulations” Mehdi Mirmehdi, in a conversation with a correspondent from the International Technology Journalists’ Club, pointed to the heightened use of VPNs these days, and said the new chief of the Law Enforcement Forces has announced a ban on the use of VPNs and filterers at Internet cafes during a speech to the Computer Technology Union of Tehran and said we have provided the regulations to these business units. The chairman of the Computer Technology Union of Tehran added, “Certainly, such rules and regulations existed before this year, but I supposed that with the increased use of VPNs and because of the obstruction of foreign messengers [Telegram], these regulations have been conveyed emphatically. He emphasized that the Law Enforcement Forces are the only institution that can act without a warrant, and said, “Therefore, all classes should be bound to comply with the notification rules of this institution so that they do not encounter legal proceedings in the face of inspections.”



An Internet café in Tehran.

Source: Farhang News, http://www.farhangnews.ir/sites/default/files/content/images/story/94-06/15/farhangnews_144429-415993-1441533273.jpg