



13 Million Users of Domestic Messaging Apps in Iran

OE Watch Commentary: Even before Iran's December 2017 unrest, Iranian officials sought to control and constrain the internet. For years, Iranian officials have debated creating a broad firewall around Iran and instead, construct a national intranet. The role of social media in catalyzing the spread of protests, however, has given new urgency to Iranian efforts to control online activity. The accompanying excerpted article from *Mehr News Agency* reports that earlier this year Iran's Supreme Cyberspace Council announced government loans and subsidized bandwidth tariffs for five local apps, including Soroush, Wispi, Gap, iGap and BisPhone. Abolhasan Firuzabadi, the secretary of the Supreme Cyberspace Council, now claims that at least 12 million Iranians use a domestically-produced and operated messenger service, which is presumably meant to undercut the popularity of Western social media channels. This shows that the Iranian strategy has gained some traction, at least in some quarters; however, with 74 million cell phone subscribers inside Iran (roughly 91 out of 100 Iranians) and with more than 36 million internet users, even 12 million domestic messaging app users suggests the majority of Iranians still utilize non-domestic messaging apps. Telegram, for example, which the Iranian government has struggled to shut down inside Iran, reportedly has 40 million users in the country. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

“There are currently 12 to 13 million users of the domestic mobile messengers.”

Source: “Takhir Qaveh Qasa’iyeh va Vizarat-e Ershad dar Ajrayi Mosubeh Hamayat az Peyam Rasanha” (“Delay of the Judiciary and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in the Implementation of the Bill for Developing Messaging Apps”), *Mehr News Agency*, 26 February 2018. <https://goo.gl/kHd6wt>

[Abdolhasan] Firuzabadi added, “Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting has been cooperating well with the implementation of this goal, and they have done what they were supposed to do.”

The secretary of the Supreme Cyberspace Council, noting that the Ministry of Communications had loaned five billion tomans to domestic messengers, said, “This ministry said there is no problem to achieve this, and they’re in the final stages of this field.” Firoozabadi added: “There are currently 12 to 13 million users of the domestic mobile messengers.”

Arresting Iranian Cyber Criminals

OE Watch Commentary: In the wake of the December 2017-January 2018 unrest, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and cyber police have gone on the offensive to counter those utilizing the Internet to conduct what security forces consider counter-revolutionary activities. In the excerpted article from the semi-official *Islamic Student News Agency (ISNA)*, Tehran Police Chief Hossein Rahimi announced that security forces have included those using the internet to incite in their round-up of “thugs.”

While some of the internet activity may have been political, the *ISNA* also reported that the “thugs” had used social media and Instagram to threaten and perhaps even blackmail other citizens. If this is accurate, then the range of internet crimes which Iranian security forces seek to counter has expanded from politics and pornography to blackmail and extortion as some Iranians post photographs of others in embarrassing situations. Such incidents, even if few and far between, will provide Iranian authorities with an excuse to further their monitoring of all online activity and Iranian government efforts to create a ‘Halal’ intranet strictly controlled by the Iranian government. **End OE Watch Commentary (Rubin)**

“Police have begun to deal with offenders in cyberspace.”

Source: “Dastgiri Arazil Faza’i Mojazi” (“Arresting Cyber Criminals”), *Islamic Student News Agency*, 2 March 2018. <https://goo.gl/SuPYUF>

General Hossein Rahimi, in a conversation with ISNA, with reference to the plan to deal with the thugs in Tehran that resulted in the arrest of 241 in different parts of Tehran on Wednesday, said the police plan to deal with the thugs and intruders in the neighborhoods with the assistance of the citizens themselves as well as the observation of my colleagues in specialized police units in different parts of Tehran. A report on the final stage of the operation was also released. When asked whether the “Instagram” thugs were also among those arrested among the mobs, the police chief of Tehran noted, “Three of the arrested individuals are thugs who used to bully, trash talk, and carry out offensive actions in cyberspace. They were identified and arrested.”

According to the ISNA report, for some time, thugs have created webpages to threaten people and create a sense of insecurity for citizens, and police have begun to deal with offenders in cyberspace.