

Perspectives

Vol. 11 Issue 8, August 2010

Freedom of Information: Reaching out to Iranians

by Helle Dale

A defining issue of the 21st century will be the breakdown of Internet “firewalls.” Some of the most repressive regimes in the world, Iran, Cuba, North Korea and China come to mind, have a tight grip on Internet usage with entire armies of censors and technicians working to control the lightning speed exchange of data over the Internet and mobile phone technology. And no wonder the rulers of these countries are fearful. The Internet is the fastest and freest medium ever invented, and the fact is that the 21st century is not a good time to be a control freak. Following Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s speech at the Newseum in Washington in January, Internet freedom has become official U.S. policy. That’s the good news. The bad news is that the wheels spin slowly in Foggy Bottom, and sometimes get stuck due to political pressures.

The Obama administration’s tone on Iran has taken a turn at least, dating back from January of this year. Faith in engagement has given way to an approach more in line with reality. Thanks to U.S. and European efforts, Iran was brought before the U.N. Human Rights Council, and denounced for its bloody crackdowns following the peaceful protests that occurred after the contested Iranian election on June 12, 2009. It was these elections that made the social website Twitter world famous as a tool of political opposition, even giving its name to the Iranian “Twitter Revolution.” It is high time the world focused on what is going on inside Iran. According to Iranian Radio Free Europe journalist Glonaz Esfandiari, speaking at the Heritage Foundation on June 9th, “Iran today is a prison.” Repression is reaching an all-time high.

In Geneva, U.S. Ambassador Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe stated that the situation in Iran was one of “grave concern.” Since last June, by the U.S. government’s count, some 250 people have been arrested, prosecuted and convicted for participating in post-election protests. Fifty among them are still serving terms. According to Amnesty International, the number people arrested in Iran since the June election is closer of 5,000. By the U.S. government’s count at least 35 journalists are currently imprisoned in Iran because of their efforts to report on political activity since the disputed election.

Specifically what can be done from Washington to support Iran’s Green Movement has been a matter of debate throughout the past year. In March, the U.S. Treasury Department amended the Iranian Transactions Regulations to ensure that individuals in Iran could exercise their right to free speech and information.

The new general licenses authorized exports from the U.S. of services and social mass market software, including

web browsing, blogging, email, instant messaging, and chat; social networking; and photo and movie sharing. This means that specific licenses may be issued on a case-by-case. It was prompted by a notification from Congress in December 2009 of a national interest waiver under the Iran Arms Non-Proliferation Act. In fact, Congress has been out in front of the State Department on Iranian Internet freedom. Between 2009 and 2010, Congress allocated \$35 million in funding for internet freedom.

Unfortunately, the State Department is still in the very early stages of figuring out how to use new media and technology to open up closed societies. As noted by Jared Cohen, a Member of Secretary Clinton’s Policy Planning Staff in this year’s Ogilvy lecture, there is still a lot of learning going on at State, which is still in the planning stages of its Internet Freedom initiative. And so the money

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allocated by Congress has not been spent by State, despite the demonstrable need both for a freer Iran and for an Iran where there the leadership is listening to international objections to its threatening nuclear program. (As well as Internet Freedom for other beleaguered dissidents around the world.)

The U.S. State Department is moving forward, but slowly, causing considerably criticism from Congress for its cautious approach. It has sent the names of designated recipients of the \$5 million in the 2009 budget to Congress for official notification, which presumably means that this year’s grants can be disbursed before the end of the fiscal year on September 30. A few companies have passed the strenuous and complicated applications procedure, which focuses on funding pilot projects.

The State Department has also increased its social media department, and starting this spring has been conducting technology delegations (“tech-dels”) abroad. The delegations meet with software engineers, entrepreneurs and tech CEOs in other countries to explore how to reach into closed societies with support for democracy movements.

A Global Internet Freedom Taskforce was established under Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and continued under Hillary Rodham Clinton. It is co-chaired by the

Under Secretaries of State for Democracy and Global Affairs and for Economics, Business, and Agricultural Affairs. State supports Internet Freedom by monitoring internet freedom and reporting in its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices. The State Department also responds in both bilateral and international forums to calls for support of Internet Freedom, and seeks to expand access to the Internet.

Secretary Clinton has proposed the following: Making Internet freedom an issue at the United Nations and the U.N. Human Rights Council; working with outside partners such as NGOs and academia; and providing grants for companies and organizations who want to break down barriers in closed societies. She has also proposed working with US media to challenge Internet censorship, and encourage work done by the Global Network Initiative.

The actions of the State Department have not satisfied members of Congress. Indeed but for their pressure, State might not even have come as far as it has. The Global Internet Freedom Caucus in the House, launched this spring and chaired by Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) and Rep. David Wu (R-OR), have advocated for the passage of the Global Online Freedom Act (GOFA). The act was introduced in 2006 and has passed three committees, but did not make it to a floor vote. The legislation would give IT companies the back-up of the U.S. government to negotiate with repressive governments. It would establish an Office of Global Internet Freedom in the State Department. US IT companies would have to report to the State Department any requirement by a repressive government for filtering or censoring search terms and the state Department would make the terms and parameters of filtering public knowledge, thus "naming and shaming" the repressive countries. US companies would also have to store personally identifying information outside of Internet-restricting countries, so that the repressive regime wouldn't be able to get their hands on it to track dissidents. US companies would have to notify the Attorney General whenever they received a request for personally identifying information from a repressive country. The case of Blackberry's dispute with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates could be a case in question. Because Blackberry automatically sends encrypted data to servers in Canada, the governments of the two Gulf States are unable to monitor certain communications from the handsets. It is precisely that loss of control has caused them to interrupt Blackberry service.

While the U.S. government continues to wrestle with the bureaucratic details of how to implement its policy, the Iranian people continue to live today under a regime of terror, which will continue until they are allowed their political and human rights to choose the government they want – and not the one the Mullahs have foisted upon them. Furthermore, a truly democratic Iran would be far less of a threat to international stability and security. Intensified focus on the human rights situation in Iran therefore should be part and parcel of a strategy towards liberty for Iranians and peace for their neighbors. As indeed it should be, in every case where the United States deals with repressive regimes around the world.



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