Iranian Internet Infrastructure and Policy Report

April 2014
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INTRODUCTION

// Despite the election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani to the presidency last year, Iran's systematic filtering of online content and mobile phone apps continues at full-pace. In this month's edition of the Iranian Internet Infrastructure and Policy Report, Small Media takes a closer look at one of the bodies most deeply-enmeshed with the process of overseeing and directing filtering policies - the 'Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Content' (or CDICC).

This month's report also tracks all the usual news about Iran's filtering system, national Internet policy, and infrastructure development projects. As well as tracking high-profile splits in the establishment over the filtering of the chat app WhatsApp, this month's report also finds evidence that the government has begun to deploy the National Information Network (SHOMA), or 'National Internet', with millions of Iranians using it to access the government's new online platform for managing social welfare and support.

THE COMMISSION TO DETERMINE THE INSTANCES OF CRIMINAL CONTENT (CDICC)

OVERVIEW

The Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Content (CDICC) is the body tasked with monitoring cyberspace, and filtering criminal Internet content. It was established as a consequence of Iran's Cyber Crime Law (CCL), which was passed by Iran's Parliament in May 2009. According to Article 22 of the CCL, Iran's Judiciary System was given the mandate of establishing CDICC under the authority of Iran's Prosecutor's Office.

Despite its far-reaching mission statement, CDICC is shrouded in secrecy. The actual powers and responsibilities of the Commission are vague and poorly-defined, and details of CDICC's budget and organisational structures are not publicly available. Nonetheless, Small Media has collated all of the known information about CDICC's members, as well as indexing its activities from the past year and a half, in order to gain some insight into this influential conservative institution.

CDICC MEMBERS

CDICC consists of 13 members, of which a minority are members of the elected Iranian government. The rest are appointees of Parliament, or of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei:
  • Prosecutor General of Iran (Head of CDICC): *Gholam-Hossein Mohseni-Eje'i*
       • Secretary of CDICC (appointed by the Head of CDICC) - *Abdolsamad Khoramabadi*
  • Minister of Intelligence: *Mahmood Alavi*
  • Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance: *Ali Jannati*
  • Minister of Justice: *Mostafa Pourmohammadi*
  • Minister of Information and Communications Technology (ICT): *Mahmood Vaezi*
  • Minister of Science, Research and Technology: *Reza Farajidana*
  • Minister of Education: *Ali Asghar Fani*
  • Chief of Police: *Esmail Ahmadi Moghaddam*
  • Head of Cultural and Propaganda Affairs at Islamic Development Organisation (IDO): *Seyyed Mehdi Khamoshi*
  • Head of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB): *Ezzatollah Zarghami*
  • An ICT expert selected by the Parliamentary Industry and Mining Committee: *Ramezanali Sobhanifar*
  • A judicial expert who is selected by the Judiciary Committee, and approved by the Iranian Parliament: *Mohammad Ali Esfanani*
  • A representative of the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution: *Unknown* (Source)

Although the Prosecutor General of Iran is the nominal head of CDICC, the most powerful man on this committee is the Secretary, Abdolsamad Khoramabad, who has tended to serve as the public face of CDICC. This was the case back in 2012, when Khoramabadi announced the filtering of Google and Gmail, as a response to the presence of the anti-Islamic short film 'The Innocence of Muslims' on Youtube.

Recently, Khoramabadi has also come into conflict with President Rouhani. When the President attempted to veto CDICC's decision to block WhatsApp in Iran, Khoramabadi responded by stating that Rouhani did not have the power to obstruct CDICC's decisions.

CDICC retained its position as the most influential Internet-focused government body in Iran until 2012, when Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei signed an executive order establishing the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC). Small Media published an in-depth report about the activities and powers of the SCC in February 2014. Whilst the SCC took over responsibility for directing the general direction and manner of Internet filtering and infrastructure development, the day-to-day decisions about individual filtering actions still rests with CDICC.

SIGNIFICANT CDICC STATEMENTS AND ACTIVITIES IN 2013/14

• **February 6 2013**: Abdolsamad Khoramabadi, the Secretary of CDICC, announced a list of new cyber crimes relating to the June presidential elections. Included in the list are:
  • Encouraging the public to boycott the elections,
  • Publishing fake results of surveys and polling,
  • Publishing content that mocks the elections or candidates (Source)

• **February 6 2013**: According to Weblognews, a prominent conservative Persian-language blog, the filtering method for domestically hosted sites was changed, and in some cases CDICC has directly ordered companies to remove content from sites without notifying the owner. The report notes that one of its own posts that criticised Internet censorship was deleted by the host company under an order from CDICC. (Source)

• **June 3 2013**: CDICC issued an order to block Mehr News, due to the publication of an interview with the Director of Serat News, in which he criticised Iran's filtering system. The order was withdrawn by the authorities the next day. (Source I) (Source II)

• **July 24 2013**: Mohammad Reza Aghamiri, a member of CDICC, stated that Internet and SMS-based criminal activities relating to the presidential elections was at a far lower level than in 2009. (Source)

• **August 19 2013**: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Wikipedia page was blocked a few days after the end of his presidential term. CDICC claimed that the page contained misinformation and insulting references to the former president. (Source)

• **September 12 2013**: CDICC Secretary Abdolsamad Khoramabadi described Facebook as a CIA project that is working to collect data from individuals all around the world. Khoramabadi named Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, as the fourth most powerful Zionist in the world, citing an occasion when Israeli President Shimon Peres described Facebook as a powerful tool for the advancement of Zionism. (Source)

• **October 8 2013**: Khoramabadi announced that CDICC has no intention to unblock Facebook due to continuing concerns over intelligence and criminal content. (Source)

• **December 19 2013**: The mobile chat application WeChat was blocked by CDICC. Access to the app has been restricted despite a number of government authorities stating their opposition to the move. Esmail Ahmadi-Moqaddam, the National Chief of Police, stated that it would be wrong for the entirety of WeChat to be blocked, as the service had a number of merits. Despite this, the police voted to block WeChat in CDICC. ICT Minister Mahmood Vaezi said that his ministry disagreed with the policy of blocking WeChat, stating that the only issue that might have lead to the restrictions was the app's ability to display nearby users. CDICC subsequently published a statement noting that WeChat was blocked as a result of the app collecting users' data, and breaching users' privacy by monitoring their communications. CDICC stated that the app previously had around 4,000,000 Iranian users. There is conjecture that Iran has blocked the app in order to push users towards an Iranian-produced alternative named "Dialogue". There are further rumours that blocks are being imposed to stop the state-owned Telecommunications Company of Iran (TCI) losing text messaging revenue as a result of Iranians emigrating towards chat apps. (Source I, Source II, Source III, Source IV, Source V, Source VI)

• **December 29 2013**: Khoramabadi announced that CDICC has considered blocking upon a number of mobile chat apps: Tango, Viber, WhatsApp and Coco. He argued that if Iranian versions of these apps could offer a comparative level of service, then each of these communication apps would be blocked. He added that the final decision depended upon the agreement of the committee members. (Source)

• **January 2 2014**: Viber, an instant messaging mobile application, was blocked shortly after WeChat. CDICC subsequently denied that a block was imposed upon Viber. In the wake of this incident, Viber published an update for its Iranian users, advising them how to circumvent the filters placed on the app. Subsequently, some users reported that they could access Viber without any problems from 01:00 on 3 January 2014. (Source I, Source II, Source III)

• **January 3 2014**: Abdolsamad Khoramabadi announced that the chat app 'Viber' was not blocked, stating that news articles reporting on restrictions were mistaken. He also denied reports that CDICC possesses an official Twitter account, stating that the ability for users to easily create such false accounts serves as one of the justifications for banning Twitter in Iran. (Source)

• **January 24 2014**: Khoramabadi criticised increasing government activities on Facebook and Twitter during a live broadcast on IRIB 3. He announced that the restrictions imposed upon Facebook and Twitter are rooted in Iranian press laws, justifying this position by stating that, like newspapers, social networking sites are spaces upon which people may publish their opinions. He added that it is impossible to separate criminal content from permitted content on Facebook, and that the site was blocked with a large majority of CDICC member votes, including 6 government representatives. Khoramabadi also claimed that CDICC receives 800 filtering requests every day, before adding that the Iranian social network Cloob now receives more regular visitors than Facebook. (Source I, Source II)

• **January 29 2014**: Khoramabadi denied that CDICC has acted based on the personal opinions of its members. He stated that CDICC's previous actions have been based on the law, and that the organisation follows SCC directives relating to cyberspace. (Source)

• **February 15 2014**: Psiphon, one of the most popular circumvention tools in Iran, was blocked. Additionally, an anonymous member of CDICC stated that the circumvention tool ZenMate has been blocked since 8 February. According to the Fars News Agency, CDICC has developed a plan to block all eight major circumvention tools. These eight circumvention tools were not mentioned. (Source)

• **February 18 2014**: CDICC Secretary Abdolsamad Khoramabadi denied that the mobile communication app Line has been blocked, stating that CDICC has not yet made a decision as to the future of the app. On 17 February, some Iranian news websites reported that Line had been blocked due to a breach of users' privacy, and the sharing of criminal content by some users. (Source)

• **February 25 2014**: Mohammad Ali Esfanani, a member of CDICC, said that universities and educational centers can submit requests to access the Internet unfiltered, with these requests reviewed by CDICC before subsequently being granted/denied. Up to now, however, Small Media has been unable to find any evidence of such bans being lifted. (Source)

CONTENT FILTERING AND BLOCKED SITES ⬢

• **April 9**: Homian, a news website based in Lorestan Province, was blocked without any explanation. It was later unblocked on April 28, 2014. (Source)

• **April 12**: A cybercrime gang was arrested by Iran's Cyber Police (FATA) in Alborz Province. According to a statement from FATA, the 5-member gang committed several instances of fraud and money laundering. (Source)

• **April 13**: FATA (Kerman Province) arrested a blogger who used his blog to sell circumvention tools. (Source)

• **April 16**: Two people were been arrested by FATA (Zanjan Province) for abusing and insulting a female student. According to the Cyber Police, these two individuals created a false social network profile, and published a series of offensive images under the student's name. (Source)

• **April 23**: A hacker who had set up 108 phishing websites and stole more than 2 billion IRR (78,260 USD) from bank accounts across 15 provinces was captured by FATA (Markazi Province). According to FATA, 40,000 USD and 30 SIM cards was also seized. (Source)

• **April 29**: Abdolsamad Khoramabadi denied that Viber has been blocked in Iran and said CDICC has not yet made a decision about the future of this mobile app. (Source)

• **April 30**: CDICC announced that WhatsApp will be blocked in Iran, although the implementation date has not yet been announced. According to a member of CDICC, Facebook's acquisition of WhatsApp in February 2014 was a major factor in this decision. At the time of writing, WhatsApp itself has not been blocked, though its websites has been filtered. Fars News reported CDICC has passed along a blocking request to the ICT Ministry. (Source I, Source II)

STATEMENTS FROM MINISTRIES AND POLITICIANS

• **April 4**: Hamidreza Kafash, Cultural Deputy of Ministry of Education, announced that his ministry awaiting permission for the establishment of a new social network. According to Kafash, the social network will be targeted towards students with an interest in religion, poetry, literature, film and sport. (Source)

• **April 6**: The Islamic Parliamentary Research Center (IPRC) published a report about the price of Internet bandwidth in Iran. According to the report, Synchronous Transport Module level-1 (STM-1) is bought at 90,000,000 IRR (3,522.60 USD) and is sold to the end user at 2,320,000,000 IRR (90,804.80 USD). It means the Internet bandwidth is sold for roughly 25 times the initial buying price. The IPRC believes there are three main reasons behind these high prices:
  • Demand for bandwidth far outstrips supply
  • There are two different policy makers that regulate the cost of bandwidth - the Telecommunication Infrastructure Company (TIC), and the Communications Regulatory Authority of Iran (CRA)
  • The TIC is the only organisation holding the right to import bandwidth into Iran.
The IPRC proposed two potential remedies:
  • Abolishing the TIC's monopoly on Internet bandwidth importation.
  • Further development of Iran's network infrastructure. (Source)

• **April 6**: In an interview with the newspaper Hamshahri, Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli stated that he does not believe the usage of social networks such as Facebook and Twitter to constitute a criminal offence, despite their being blocked.Fazli insisted that his own children are not users of social networking sites. (Source)

• **April 6**: Vice President and Environment Minister Masoumeh Ebtekar joined Cloob, an Iranian social network. At the time of writing, her page has 19,259 likes. (Source)

• **April 7**: ICT Minister Mahmood Vaezi announced that the 'Economy of Resistance Committee' has been established at the ICT Ministry. It is not yet clear exactly what the committee's' responsibilities will include. (Source)

• **April 8**: Chief of FATA (Sistan and Baluchestan Province) Seyyed Mohammad Hosseinipour stated that most cybercrimes undertaken in Sistan and Baluchestan are related to security issues, including collaboration with anti-regime elements. This is unlike the situation in other provinces, where fraud and online scams constitute the most widespread cybercrimes. (Source)

• **April 8**: FATA's Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT) announced that some Iranian users are amongst the victims of the hacking of 18 million email addresses, discovered by German police. In addition, Iran's Passive Defense Organisation (IPDO) said most of the affected Iranian email addresses were affiliated with research centers and universities. According to IPDO's ICT Deputy, Mohammad Reza Farajipour, it seems that cybercriminals are interested in collecting information about Iranian research. A list showing some of the affected email addresses is available here. (Source)

• **April 12**: Nasrollah Jahangard, Deputy of ICT Minister, insisted that Iran was able protect the Hadafmandi website against a series of cyber attacks. Jahangard added that Iran had blocked all

non-Iranian IPs, and as a result and no-one from outside the country should be able to open the website. Hadafmandi is a website that people can use to apply for government welfare payments. (Source)

• **April 13**: Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, who serves as Dean of the Imam Khomeini Educational & Research Institute, stated that Internet censorship is no longer effective in Iran, and proposed that authorities consider launching initiatives to educate people about the dangers of Internet usage, as well. (Source)

• **April 14**: At the National ICT Quality Awards, Vaezi announced that:
> • Iran's government has invested 500,000 billion IRR (19.6 billion USD) into the development of ICT infrastructure.
> • Internet bandwidth will be increased ten-fold by the end of Iranian year (March 2015).
> • The ICT Ministryis opposed to blocking social network, as such actions have a negative economic impact. However, he insisted that his ministry will continue to block 'immoral' social networking sites.
> • The quality of Internet access will be improved over the course of the next 18 months
> • All cities will be connected to the National Information Network (SHOMA) by end of the next Iranian year (March 2016). (Source)

• **April 16**: Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Taghi Rahbar - a former MP and ex-member of the Cultural Committee in Iran's Parliament - strongly criticised Rouhani's government for inaction with regard to Facebook, asking: "Does Facebook bring food, jobs and life for [the Iranian] people?". Rahbar claims that the government has chosen the wrong path in confronting the perceived cultural problems facing Iranian society, and argues that Facebook and other foreign media sources have been responsible for undermining Iran's culture. (Source)

• **April 19**: Mohammad Reza Bidkham, Deputy of Telecommunication Company of Tehran, claimed that 1,500,000 ADSL ports will be launched in Tehran and Alborz Provinces by the end of March 2015. In addition, Bidkham announced that 315,000 ADSL ports have been set up in Tehran, and that the high-speed broadband penetration rate in the city is 25.8%.. (Source)

• **April 21**: Reza Bagheri Asl, the e-Government Deputy at the Information Technology Organisation of Iran (ITO), announced that SHOMA has been launched, and was used by 2-4 million people during their registration for the government welfare application site Hadafmandi. Small Media believes that this is the first example of SHOMA having been fully and successfully deployed since its announcement in 2006. (Source)

• **April 22**: Mohseni-Eje'i was appointed to the SCC by the Supreme Leader. (Source)

• **April 22**: Mehr News published an article about Mobile Communication of Iran (MCI). Key information from the interview included:
> • 8.5 million people joined MCI in the last year, meaning that the total MCI membership has hit 64.1 million people.
> • 69% of total SIM cards are active, meaning that MCI's penetration rate is 74%.
> • MCI has international roaming contracts with 271 operators in 112 countries.
> • MCI has expanded coverage to 70,000 km of Iran's roads, 100% of cities, 86.7% of villages and all of Iran's inhabited islands in the Persian Gulf. This means that 96.3 of Iran's population has been covered by MCI.
> • MCI is ranked 1st in the Middle East, 8th in South Asia and 25th in the world amongst operators, ranked by the number of customers. (Source)

• **April 22**: The number of landlines in Tehran Province was increased to 7,563,000 by the end of 1392 (March 2014). The landline penetration in Tehran Province is 50.12%, whilst in Tehran City it is 62.87%. (Source)

• **April 22**: Hassan Najafi Solari, Head of the Digital Media and Information Technology Center (SARAMAD) spoke on a number of topics:
> • He claimed that 80% of Iranian students and 50% of Iranian people have been using smartphones.
> • Solari also said that Iran could export 4,000 million IRR (156,000 USD) of software per annum.
> • He announced that social networks will be monitored on three levels: Security, Support and Content. The intelligence services will responsible for the maintaining security, whilst SARMAD will provide financial and logistical support to Iranian social network users, whilst encouraging them to produce and share pro-Revolutionary content. (Source I, Source II)

• **April 23**: Hojjatoleslam Hossein Rouhaninejad, the Deputy Director of the IDO, announced that his organisation would like to establish cyber activist centers around the country. According to Rouhaninejad, these centers will work to promote Revolutionary ideology in cyberspace, and encourage social media users to share such content. (Source)

• **April 24**: Morteza Barari, Legal Deputy of Government and Parliamentary Affairs at the ICT Ministry, announced that the Internet bandwidth of Iran will be expanded to 1,000 Gbps by end of the Iranian year. According to Barari, the current Internet bandwidth sits at 140 Gbps. (Source)

• **April 24**: Abbas Ghaeed, and MP and member of the Parliamentary Social Committee said that most social networks have been created to work against the Islamic Republic's interests, and that Parliament must engage with this matter. (Source)

• **April 27**: Hojjatoleslam Nasrollah Pejmanfar, Head of the Parliamentary Committee for Art, Media and Tourism, said that the ICT Minister cannot issue a permission for Rightel's video call feature, and that it would remain completely illegal for anyone to make a video call using the Rightel SIM Card. The video calling feature of Rightel has been disabled since 2013 due to 'cultural issues'. (Source)

• **April 28**: Vaezi said that Rouhani's government did not block Facebook, stating that the block came about as a result of the previous government's policies. Vaezi also claimed that on the whole, the Internet is clean, however there are small segments of immorality. (Source)

• **April 30**: Mohamad Ali Esfanani, a member of CDICC, announced that Iran has been working on an intelligent censorship method for online content. He stated that when this system is launched, Facebook will be unblocked, although any criminal content on Facebook will be censored. (Source)

CIVIL SOCIETY, PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATION STATEMENTS

• **April 4**: Mohammad Reza Doosti, Head of the Science and Technology Park in South Khorasan Province, claimed that the Park has developed an anti-hacking system to protect sensitive data centers such as insurance companies. According to Doosti, the anti-hacking system produces a special code that can control the level of users' access to such data. It is not clear exactly when this system will be deployed to the market. (Source)

• **April 15**: Pooyan Afzali, an IT expert, said that many governmental systems, as well as most cash machines in Iran are at risk from running outdated versions of Windows XP. According to Afzali, the most effective solution to these security concerns would be for Iran to switch from Windows to an open source OS. (Source)

• **April 22**: Afsaneh Nik Rad, a commentator on family affairs and women's' issues, claimed that new communication technologies such as Viber, Line, and Tango pose a threat to Iranian families, arguing that Iranian authorities should produce educational films about their dangers. (Source)

• **April 23**: Hossein Baher, an Iranian sociologist, said that the activities of Iranian authorities on Facebook are offering mixed messages to Iranian social media users. He stated that if the Rouhani administration is aiming to encourage social media usage, then his cabinet is doing a good job of normalising it. However, if the government is earnest about maintaining the filtering system, then ministers are setting a bad example for citizens. According to Baher, people require further education about the advantage and disadvantages of social media usage. (Source)

• **April 24**: Esmaeil Radkani, Head of the Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT), announced that no Iranian websites have reported any problems relating to the Heartbleed bug, noting that all sensitive infrastructure has been secured. (Source)

RUMOURS

• CDICC has sent a request to ISPs for technical reports about communication mobile apps such as WhatsApp. According to the letter, CDICC would like to know more details about their servers, active IPs and possible methods of monitoring their traffic.

• The SCC has been exploring a range of potential app developers to design and launch an Iranian chat app that could replace blocked apps such as Viber or WhatsApp.

• The SCC ordered all sellers of Virtual Private Servers (VPS) to check their VPN ports, to make sure that there are not any VPNs holding Iranian IPs on their server. This is likely a measure to prevent foreigners from testing and analysing the SHOMA network, as well as to ensure more general Internet security. It seems that at least 41 servers have been found on Shatel, AsiaTech and Afranet's servers that held Iranian VPNs.