



The Citizen Lab

Middle East and North Africa CyberWatch: November 3-16, 2012

A biweekly report on trends in online censorship, information operations,
and Internet use in the Middle East and North Africa

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CENSORSHIP AND FILTERING

EGYPT: Court prosecutor orders ban on pornography

The Prosecutor General has [ordered](#) government ministries to enforce a ban on pornography in the country. The prosecutor, Abdel Maguid Mahmoud, [stated](#) that the order was based on a 2009 court decision to block pornographic sites. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology (MCIT) [claimed](#) that the ban is unfeasible for many reasons, including the difficulty of maintaining an inventory of millions of sites to be blacklisted. The MCIT also stated that the government has worked with service providers in the past to promote options for families to block inappropriate sites at home.

IRAN: Filtering of pro-Ahmadinejad blogs continues

As previously [reported](#), the Iranian government has embarked on a new wave of censorship and filtering, specifically targeting pro-Ahmadinejad blogs. According to the pro-Ahmadinejad blog [Armanshahr](#) [Farsi], seven blogging sites that support Ahmadinejad have recently been filtered and two have been completely removed.

SYRIA: Backlash against Facebook over controversial photo ban

Facebook has removed photos from a group called "[The uprising of women in the Arab world](#)" after reports that the pictures were in violation of Facebook's community standards. The photos [depict](#) Syrian group member Dana Bakdounes with her hair uncovered while she holds up her passport containing a picture of her with a headscarf. Underneath the passport is a written message stating, "I'm with the uprising of women in the Arab world because for 20 years I wasn't allowed to feel the wind in my hair and my body." Facebook initially [stated](#) that the suspension was an error. They later banned the photograph again, maintaining that the photo was in violation of their community standards while giving no further details. The group has [criticized](#) the decision as a form of censorship, possibly [motivated](#) by repeated complaints from those they describe as "fundamentalists and misogynists" who are upset with the nature of the photos.

UAE: Concerns voiced over Emirati Cybercrime Law

Freedom House has voiced its [concerns](#) over new revisions to the United Arab Emirate's (UAE) 2006 "Cybercrime Law," which it says will further curtail free expression in the country. The revisions include penalizing online comments deemed insulting to Islam and other religions, criticism of the country's leaders, and activity seen as threatening to state security. The amendments also [provide](#) punishments for illegal privacy violations and unwarranted online surveillance. The UAE has faced criticism in the past for [widespread](#) online censorship.

BLOGGER AND NETIZEN ARRESTS

IRAN: Criticisms of the government by low profile blogger results in his death

Sattar Beheshti, a young blogger and Facebook activist, was [arrested](#) [Farsi] on October 30 by Iran's Cyber and Information Exchange Police (FETA), who charged him with "actions against national security on social networks". He was reported dead a few days later. A number of opposition websites, such as Kaleme, [quoted](#) [Farsi] Beheshti's fellow prisoners, who alleged that he was physically tortured during interrogations. Beheshti's death not only raises [concerns](#) over the treatment of prisoners in the Islamic Republic, but also demonstrates increased scrutiny and attention toward the online activities of Iranian users.

INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA USE

GAZA STRIP: Social media plays key role in Israel-Gaza conflict

On November 14, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) [announced](#) on Twitter ([@IDFSpokersperson](#)) that they had begun a “widespread campaign on terror sites & operatives in the #Gaza Strip, chief among them # Hamas & Islamic Jihad targets.” Just before the announcement, an Israeli missile strike in Gaza [killed](#) Ahmed al-Jabari, chief of Hamas’ Al-Qassam Brigade. Hamas’ military wing subsequently took to Twitter ([@AlqassamBrigade](#)) and confirmed the assassination of al-Jabari. Both sides of the conflict have since used Twitter as a platform to publish [propaganda](#), [threats](#), and live updates on the conflict. Israel also [posted a video](#) [video] of the air strike against al-Jabari on its YouTube page.

KUWAIT: Twitter users call for protests against

Last month, 150,000 Kuwaitis [took to the streets](#) in response to a call for “A Nation’s Dignity” march by the Twitter account [@KarametWatan](#) [Arabic]. The protest, which sought to oppose a [change in the electoral law](#) that would reduce the number of parliamentary candidates for which a citizen can vote for [from four to one](#), was considered the largest in the nation’s history. On November 4, Kuwaitis once again took to the streets, prompting the government to respond by using tear gas and detaining demonstrators. The handlers of [@KarametWatan](#) have remained anonymous throughout both protests. Despite social unrest, the Kuwaiti emir has continued to support the amendment.

MAURITANIA: Bloggers protest foreign mining companies online

Several Mauritanian bloggers have [launched](#) an online campaign aimed at criticizing foreign mining companies for exploiting the country’s natural resource endowments. [Blog posts](#) [Arabic] have criticized foreign companies for legal violations, environmental destruction, discriminatory employment practices, and for giving as little as [four percent](#) [Arabic] of mineral profits to Mauritania. In addition to whistle-blowing blog posts, the campaigners took to Facebook and Twitter, using the hashtag “#ضد_نهب_معادننا” ([against mining our minerals](#).)” According to [Freedom House](#), Mauritania’s legislation has no specific provisions for online journalism.

TECHNOLOGY

IRAN: Launch of a national search engine

The pilot phase of [the Parsijoo](#) [Farsi] search engine has recently [begun](#) [Farsi], with the project estimated to be operational by March 2013. The project currently [covers](#) [Farsi] 120 million web pages, and aims to gradually increase the number of web pages in its index to 300 million. According to Reza Taqipour, Iran’s Minister of Information and Communications Technology, the Ministry fully supports Parsijoo and other national search engine projects.

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