



## The Citizen Lab

### Middle East and North Africa CyberWatch: February 2013

A monthly 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: Government bans YouTube**

In February, Egyptian authorities [banned](#) YouTube for one month in response to its hosting of the Innocence of Muslims video. The [US State Department](#), along with [activists in Egypt](#), have condemned the ban. As [previously reported](#), YouTube had temporarily blocked access to the video in Egypt despite there being [no formal request](#) made to Google, YouTube's owner. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology had [said](#) that a site-wide ban would be impractical,

although the National Telecommunication Regulatory Authority (NTRA) said they would uphold it given a court order to do so.

### **ISEAEL: “Gag orders” on press prove ineffective in digital age**

This month, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), published a [story](#) identifying the name, identity, and nationality of a prisoner, dubbed Prisoner X, who had been held in Israel’s Ayalon Prison. The Israeli press was forbidden from covering the story due to a court order citing a possible threat to state security. The prisoner, Australian-born Benjamin Zygier, [committed suicide](#) in December 2010 while incarcerated. To date, the Israeli government has refused to reveal the charge Zygier was accused of. [Commentators](#) in Israel have cited this case as an example of the irrelevancy of security-inspired press limitations in a digital age, as bloggers and social media users have circulated information regarding this incident in cyberspace.

### **SAUDI ARABIA: Minister for media and culture admits Twitter censorship**

Abdel Aziz Khoga, Saudi Arabia’s Minister for Media and Culture, has [admitted](#) that censorship of Twitter does occur in the country, though he admitted that the state is [incapable of censoring all information](#) exchanged over the site. Saudi authorities have made several arrests due to offending tweets in the past, such as the [detention](#) of prominent author Turki al-Hamad over allegedly un-Islamic commentary.

### **IRAN: Judges authorized to shut down websites**

On January 27, news site Tabnak was filtered by authorities. This decision, as announced by the Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Contents (CDICC) was done following the order of the Prosecutor of Tehran, [without the involvement](#) [Farsi] of the Commission itself. Usually, the CDICC would make decisions to filter websites and the Ministry of Information and Communications Technology (MICT) implements them. However, as [explained](#) by the general secretary of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, judges and prosecutors can also determine the filtering of websites. The Supreme Council of Cyberspace has suggested that a special judge or court be in charge of filtering cases from now on.

### **IRAN: Content filtering instead of URL filtering**

According to General Secretary of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace Mehdi Akhavan Behabadi, the [current filtering system](#) [Farsi] in Iran, where the Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Contents filters entire websites instead of specific pages, is problematic. At present, if the system determines that a banner advertisement on a Web page contains "criminal" content, the entire website is then filtered. Iranian authorities plan to use smarter methods in which only unauthorized content is filtered. Behabadi also stated that the Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, who is in charge of implementing filtering decisions, has been working to develop selective content filtering system in the past, but has not yet been successful in doing so.

## **IRAN: Hizbullah Cyber website launched**

(Note: Cross posted from [iranmediaresearch.org](http://iranmediaresearch.org) [Farsi])

A website called [Hizbullah Cyber](#), which claims to have no affiliation with the Islamist group Hizbullah, was [launched](#) [Farsi] on February 4, to monitor and confront Hizbullah's opponents. As the June 2013 presidential elections in Iran approach, security officials appear concerned about the recurrence of civil unrest and are planning to expand their monitoring tools in cyberspace. Hizbullah Cyber bears resemblance to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' ([Gerdab](#)) [Farsi] website, which was launched after the disputed presidential election in 2009 to track and identify members of the opposition online. Reports and photos on Gerdab show that security and military officials have already started to identify and confront protesters in cyberspace under a security project known as the "Soft War."

## **LEGAL NORMS**

### **IRAQ: Cyber Crime Law in Iraq revoked**

After being placed "[on hold](#)" in December 2012, the Iraqi Speaker of the House has [requested](#) that the country's draft Information Crimes Law be [revoked](#). The document was drafted in 2007, claiming to "provide legal protection for the legitimate use of computers and information networks, and punish those who commit acts that constitute encroachment on the rights of their users." The bill was widely condemned by human rights organizations, including [Human Rights Watch](#), the [Committee to Protect Journalists](#), and [Access](#), for vague language and harsh punishments on those who engage in "prohibited activities" that undermine "the independence, unity, or safety of the country, or its supreme economic, political, military, or security interests."

### **IRAN: Ahmadinejad nominates a military official for Minister of ICT**

Mohammad Hasan Nami has been nominated as the new [candidate](#) [Farsi] for the position of the Minister of Information and Communications Technology. Nami was formerly deputy defense minister and deputy to the Joint Chiefs of Staff of the Army. He oversaw several key infrastructure projects, such as Iran's national Internet called the [National Information Network](#) (NIN) and Basir, Iran's version of Google Earth. Nami has three doctorate degrees, including one in state management from Kim Il-Sung University in North Korea. Nami's background shows that his nomination accords with government plans to implement the NIN and impose more restrictions on Iranian Internet users.

### **IRAN: New list of cyber crimes related to the presidential election**

(Note: Cross posted at [iranmediaresearch.org](http://iranmediaresearch.org) [Farsi])

Abdolsamad Khorramabadi, secretary of the Commission to Determine the Instances of Criminal Contents (CDICC), [announced](#) [Farsi] a new list of cyber crimes related to the presidential election, which are included in both the Presidential Election Law and the Islamic Criminal Law. This includes publishing content that encourages the public to boycott the election, hold protest gatherings without special permits, strike, interrupt the normal process of election, or conduct any independent and un-

approved media activity. In addition, disturbing public opinion, spreading blasphemous material, publishing materials that are against the national interest, causing conflict between people over racial and ethnic matters, and publishing the results of polls related to the election are among the list of crimes. A similar list of [cyber crimes](#) [Farsi] was prepared last year prior to the parliamentary election.

## BLOGGER AND NETIZEN ARRESTS

### **KUWAIT: Supreme Court confirms 10-year jail sentence for Twitter insult**

On February 5, Kuwait's Supreme Court approved a 10-year jail [sentence](#) for activist Orance al-Rasheedi for insulting the emir and calling for regime change on Twitter. Just [last month](#), a Kuwaiti court sentenced blogger [Ayyad al-Harbi](#) and opposition activist [Rashed al-Enezi](#) to jail terms for criticizing and insulting the Kuwaiti government on Twitter. Human Rights Watch has recently [drawn attention](#) to deteriorating human rights conditions in Kuwait, especially for online activists.

### **WEST BANK and the GAZA STRIP: Netizen sentenced to a year in jail for cursing President on Facebook**

On February 7, a court in Nablus [sentenced](#) Anas Awwad to a year in jail for “cursing” President Mahmoud Abbas on Facebook. Awwad's family [clarified](#) that he had commented on a picture of Abbas at the Barcelona Football Club in 2011, saying that he was “the new striker in Real Madrid.” The Palestinian Authority has been known to target Facebook users for critical comments in the past, including Alquds TV correspondent [Mamdouh Hamamreh](#) in 2010.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

### **LEBANON: Citizens launched website to combat corruption in Lebanon**

A 35-year old Lebanese man has created a website allowing citizens to voice the challenges they have faced with [corruption](#) in the country. The [website](#) allows users to make named or anonymous claims of corruption, asking contributors to detail the government sector, amount demanded, and the reason for the bribe asked. While the site has had a number of visitors, only [47 claims](#) have been made to date.

### **JORDAN: King Abdullah defeats Muslim Brotherhood using social media**

A February report issued by the Institute for National Security Studies, an Israeli think tank, [argues](#) that the Jordanian monarch marginalized the Muslim Brotherhood in the most recent parliamentary elections by successfully leveraging social media. The [report details](#) how King Abdullah engaged liberal young people by publishing a “roadmap” for Jordan's future on his website and social networking platforms. His plan emphasized “the need for political pluralism” and encouraged “an internal debate about the major issues facing the country and Jordan's progress toward democratic development.” The King's wife, Queen Rania, has been an active user and [vocal proponent of Twitter](#), arguing that the website provides a means of engendering positive social change.

## TECHNOLOGY

### **IRAN: Legal VPN project is in progress**

Although using circumvention tools for bypassing filtering, and accessing blocked contents is illegal, some organizations in Iran, such as financial institutions, banks, and embassies, [use](#) [Farsi] VPNs for security reasons. Some universities also use circumvention tools to access international academic databases that are no longer accessible in Iran. According to the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace Mehdi Akhavan Behabadi, these organizations [are eligible](#) [Farsi] to register for legal VPNs by providing information about their organizations and their IP addresses. The Supreme Council plans to block the ports after the eligible applicants register for legal circumvention services. Behabadi believes that this new approach will stop the illegal trade of VPNs and result in more websites being hosted from inside Iran.

[Read previous editions](#) of the Middle East and North Africa Cyber Watch.