TRANSCRIPT
Babel: Translating the Middle East

“Protest, Social Media, and Censorship in Iran”

DATE
Tuesday, October 18, 2022

FEATURING
Mahsa Alimardani
DPhil Candidate, University of Oxford; Senior Researcher, Article 19

CSIS EXPERTS
Jon B. Alterman
Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Director, Middle East Program, CSIS

Transcript By
Rev Transcript
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Jon Alterman: Mahsa Alimardani is a scholar at the University of Oxford and senior researcher on freedom of expression online with Article 19, a human rights organization based in London. Mahsa, welcome to Babel.

Mahsa Alimardani: Thank you for having me. I’m excited for this conversation.

Jon Alterman: We’ve been seeing protests in Iran for more than a month. What is the role that social media is playing, shaping the protests or amplifying the protests? Where does social media fit into the protests?

Mahsa Alimardani: Social media has an incredibly powerful role. In fact, the internet has an incredibly powerful role in Iran, and that’s part and parcel of the fact that media is very severely controlled. Access for international journalists to be on the ground reporting when any crises or protest occurs is severely limited, so if you are looking for independent sources on what’s actually going on outside of the control and censorship of the state, you really have to turn to what’s on the internet and what’s on social media. What we’re seeing unfold, as we speak, is that over four weeks of protests have been going on in Iran, and the documentation and the news we’ve been getting from these protests has been solely dependent on digital evidence that we see through footage posted on social media or through sources of citizens actually being able to get footage to outside sources via the internet, and those sources are able to report and share it.

Jon Alterman: That’s for us, but in terms of organization, famously the Iranian Revolution, 1979, was partly fomented by cassette tapes that were passed from hand to hand. We have seen more uses of the internet over time. How does the internet affect the way the protesters themselves communicate, network, amplify, and mobilize? What tools are they using inside the country, and how have those tools changed over the last 10 years? We saw protests in Iran in 2009, but there have been other times of protest with some engagement on social media. How is it changing?

Mahsa Alimardani: To answer this, we have to zoom out to over a decade ago—back to 2009 with the Green Movement in Iran, and then during the Arab Spring within the rest of the Middle East region. You have to really look at what role social media played. There is a term that came out of the frameworks created for technology and social media—“techno utopianism,” this kind of misguided framing of technology as the tool that would foment democracy, and freedom, and change. Much scholarship has been written and much has been thought about how that was really misplaced. You cannot really place that much agency within technology. Technology didn’t even have a central role during 2009 with the Green Movement protests in Iran, but it did really get framed within, Western discourses as “the Twitter revolution.” What I do
see right now in terms of the role of social media is that it’s not necessarily the tool that is going to bring change. It’s not necessarily the tool that is mobilizing people. The role I see that social media taking is very multi-faceted. It has the role of documentation for accountability. The digital evidence that it’s able to produce for us is very substantial. Being able to say that technology is playing a role in getting hundreds of people out on the streets and getting over 100 different cities to break out into protests over the past four weeks in Iran—that’s a bit of a harder statement to make. We can’t necessarily say that Twitter is the reason why 200 people made it out onto Keshavarz Boulevard after Mahsa Amini’s death. We certainly say that it is helping. It is spreading awareness and solidarity, not just internationally, but inside Iran. The ability to witness your fellow citizens and your fellow women taking a stand has a very significant role in mobilizing—maybe not in terms of directly telling you exactly where to go on the street but incentivizing you to actually walk out and discover where the protests are happening in your neighborhood. How I would really define it is that technology has this ability to create this opportunity to witness and kind of incentivize solidarity—to incentivize mobilization rather than determining the exact shape and form of protest, movements, or the eventual movement to democracy.

Jon Alterman: One of the things that social media can do is it can give advantages to governments with pervasive surveillance apparatuses to understand how networks work, how people are communicating, and to understand who your ring leaders are. How sophisticated is the Iranian government, both in controlling the internet and also in monitoring the internet in order to crack down on dissent?

Mahsa Alimardani: The Islamic Republic of Iran has been doing this since the introduction of the internet. From the beginning, it has been developing very well thought out and sophisticated means to try to control this new space where the regime really could not dominate the discourse or the free flow of information the way that they previously had through traditional media, like newspapers, broadcasting, and radio. There were times where satellite television has played a significant role, and there has been a lot of attempts to jam satellite connections in Iran, but nothing has been quite as powerful as the internet or the free flow of information that it has produced. There have been different stages of the regime creating systems. After 200, the state really began to strengthen the institutions and the laws and infrastructure to control the internet through different layers and systems.

Jon Alterman: And this was after the so-called Green Revolution in 2009?

Mahsa Alimardani: Yes. Following the 2009 Green Revolution, the Iranian parliament ratified a computer crimes law, which criminalized a whole host of online activities. It even criminalized the use of encryption, which is a law that really defines a
lot of the technology and services that are developed inside of Iran. What is most interesting is the way that internet infrastructure has really become centralized towards the state. In Iran, there is the Telecommunication Infrastructure Company of Iran, and basically all international gateways—those are the connection points, the actual infrastructure, the submarine cables that connect the international internet into Iran—are heavily controlled by a central regulatory authority which is under the Telecommunications Infrastructure Company of Iran. They give permission and licenses to different internet service providers (ISPs) to maintain these connections. Part of those deals is for the ISP to actually embed technologies of censorship and surveillance in their services, so the users of ISPs would be monitored and have their internet heavily controlled through these technologies. These mechanisms and tools have become severely sophisticated over the years—in terms of both the monitoring and the censorship that has been occurring. During the protests in November 2019, there was quite a blunt reaction to the power of the international internet. The government actually enforced a weeklong near total internet shutdown, where eventually only national internet services were available during that period and subsequent times of unrest. That had severe repercussions on the economy—billions of dollars were lost because of those shutdowns. After those crises, a lot of resources and a lot of thinking have gone into what went wrong and what could be improved. Just how 2009 became a major point for the development of new laws and infrastructure, November 2019 was another key point where new laws and thinking developed. One of the major changes that came from that was a new bill called “The User Protection Bill.” It’s supposed to be a new law to govern the internet in Iran, and it’s quite draconian in the way that it really wants to eliminate all connection to any kind of foreign service platform that refuses to cooperate with the Iranian authorities. It also seeks to criminalize and completely disconnect virtual private networks (VPNs) from being used in Iran. There is censorship of key internet services and platforms in Iran. Up until the recent protests, Instagram and WhatsApp were the only foreign platforms that hadn’t yet been blocked by Iranian authorities, but the use of VPNs or other circumvention tools has become near ubiquitous within Iran. The majority of Iranians have a whole host of different VPNs, so if one stops working, you have another one, or you go and download another one. This new bill has really tried to eliminate the use of VPNs and to the criminalize them, and the regime has been developing the technologies to be able to disconnect and eliminate the use of VPNs on the particular network. We’ve noticed VPNs becoming destabilized over the past couple of years after the introduction of this bill. We’ve been noticing a quiet implementation of the basic policies of this bill, regardless of the fact that it hasn’t had political will to be ratified—even within a majority conservative parliament. So, the government has been developing very sophisticated and automated ways to do this that have been deployed very intensely during the Mahsa Amini protests. During very intense periods of the protests, we’ve seen no VPNs were working.
been a very sophisticated form of censorship—attacking virtual private networks—which has had massive repercussions for Iranians without even needing to shut down the internet or rely entirely on the national information network.

Jon Alterman: We've gone from radio to television, newspapers, to satellite television, to social media. Where does this go? Do you see a continuing battle for the heart and soul of Arabic speaking publics? I don't think there is any reason to think that social media is going to be the final word any more than satellite television was the final word. It won't go away, but where do you see communication and political communication going in the region?

Mahsa Alimardani: Certainly, there has been a lot of that. We've been seeing different Twitter accounts and Telegram accounts that are associated directly or indirectly with the state try to open source the identification of protestors. There certainly is monitoring of all the major protest documentation pages, and I know that a lot of them are being targeted—either inside or outside of Iran. There's an enormous amount of pressure on them, and the open source intelligence potential of social media is being used in full force by the authorities. They also have disinformation campaigns and certain campaigns to thwart narratives or create counter narratives during the protests. We have been seeing evidence of that, even for the Mahsa Amini hashtag. We've been seeing accounts or troll forms associated with the regime trying to promote the wrong hashtags to divert the narrative. There have been a lot of these counter efforts through different technology platforms. Where we have seen the most harm however, has been, through technology that the state can control. With foreign services like WhatsApp, there is no evidence that the Iranian state has been able to really crack the encryption or any of the protocols. There hasn't been much evidence for them being able to do that, so in terms of private messaging, if you are using foreign platforms, there is a layer of security and protection. However, when we do see users being identified and targeted, it's really through the technologies that are controlled by the state—you're your internet service provider or your mobile data company. We've been seeing people targeted if they've been attending protests and their cell phone has been on. Their telecommunications provider has been able to kind of like geo-locate them, and they've received text messages to say that the authorities know they had attended the protest in X area in Iran. We've also been seeing this through even more benign technologies. For example, there's been multiple reports of protestors and activists or human rights defenders who've become active recently and have had to go into hiding and try to avoid authorities, or that have been arrested, interrogated, or harassed. The authorities have actually geo-located them to the exact position they are based on food delivery data from the Iranian Uber, Snapp's data on their users. Things like this have been actively cooperating with the state. Again, there's no data encryption in Iranian technology, so there is no levels of encryption for any kind of these
local technologies. We have been seeing how they have been actively integrated within security apparatuses.

Jon Alterman: I’m surprised when I’ve seen you describe the role that Instagram is playing in these protests. We don’t think of Instagram as a platform of political protest. Can you describe what’s going on with Iranian Instagram?

Mahsa Alimardani: The role that Instagram has in Iran really is part and parcel of the history of censorship in Iran. Going all the way back to 2015, we really saw the rise of the use of Telegram in Iran, and Telegram had a lot of features and abilities that were very key for information and communication in Iran. It offered, messaging services, even an encrypted messaging option. Then, it also started developing Telegram channels, and Telegram channels became very central for sharing information and news. All the major news sources that have blocked websites had Telegram channels. BBC Persian had millions of followers on a Telegram channel and can drop actual content and broadcasts for people to easily download and consume on their Telegram channel. So, it became very central for all kinds of news and communication, even e-commerce. By time that we got to the protests that broke out during December 2017 and went to January 2018, Telegram became the main tool that was associated with those protests. The government decided to temporarily block Telegram during those protests, but it eventually permanently blocked Telegram by May 2018. Telegram is cut in 2018 and then Instagram really took its place as the main social media channel, and Instagram has become quite central—all the way from e-commerce to even providing platforms for regime officials and of course, activists’ pages and protest documentation pages. Instagram has a very wide range of purposes within Iran, and there are wide followings for regime officials and wide followings for regime-friendly celebrities who might even be verified on Instagram. A statistic from a research institute in Iran came out that said that there was somewhere between $700 million to $1 billion dollars of revenue being created off of Instagram and various marketplaces inside of Iran, so Instagram has a significant contribution to the Iranian economy and Iranian employment. Once again, as there were with other platforms, there were debates about, “Should we censor Instagram? What should the internet policy be on Instagram and what it does?” So, right now, there is a temporary ban on Instagram as the protests are taking place, but a few days ago, the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, the body responsible for controlling internet infrastructure in Iran, convened and decided it was too soon to take a vote on whether or not the ban would become permanent. They again referred to the benefits that Instagram has to the Iranian economy and the opportunities that it has provided. They decided that until they can see if there is a viable, legitimate local national alternative to Instagram, they would not deliberate on whether or not to make the ban permanent. So, Iranian authorities have this complicated relationship with Instagram. While Instagram is playing a very integral role in terms of communicating and
documenting what’s going on in Iran, there is a hesitancy by the authorities to crack down on it.

Jon Alterman: You’ve also written about the ways in which the moderation efforts of some of these Western social media platforms end up hurting protestors who are trying to move against a repressive government. Could you describe how moderation needs moderating?

Mahsa Alimardani: The topic of content moderation across platforms is a very important and sometimes controversial debate, and Iran is not the only context where there is a lot of concern over how platforms are governed. There are many different contexts, especially outside of Western language contexts. We have seen lots of struggles, especially with platforms like Meta—formerly known as Facebook—in terms of how they do content moderation. Do they have enough resources? Do they have enough qualified moderators? Do they have enough qualified technology to be able to understand cultural and linguistic nuances about conflicts? This was a big deal in Myanmar, obviously, when a genocide was taking place and Facebook was having a very harmful role fermenting that kind of hate. Generally, there has been a tendency for content moderation in different languages to be lacking, depending on how the policies kind of fit within U.S. foreign policy. When it has come to protest, there is one Meta policy that has had a large effect—the policy of incitement to violence. Meta’s policy of incitement to violence means that you cannot call for the death of anyone. This is controversial in Iran, given the way that protests are characterized and often result in certain chants. Of course, one of the most notable chants in Iran is a variation of “Death to the dictator” or “Death to Khamenei,” who is the current dictator. These effects started a year ago. Back in 2021, there were protests that broke out in Khuzestan, and there were a number of take downs related to removing content that said, "Death to Khamenei." And there was a temporary exception that Facebook created at the time to allow those posts. They stopped creating that exception after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. There was a leak that Facebook had created an exception where Ukrainians could call for the death to Russian soldiers or call for the death of any number of Russian leaders in the context of their role in the Russian invasion. This was leaked, and there was a massive controversy. There was a lot of outrage because these exceptions were not given in other contexts where there were conflicts or invasions that occurred. One of the biggest examples was about the situation of Palestine and Israel. Palestinians never had that kind of exception when Israel started bombing Gaza. content moderation policies never had those sorts of exceptions for Palestinian users. So there was that question of, “Why are the exceptions that Meta gives so selective and really based on the interests of U.S. foreign policy, rather than equitable distribution across all kind of contexts in regions?” Following this, we naturally had more protests in Iran, and Meta decided that they would no longer be giving the death to Khamenei exception in the Iranian context, given the backlash that was
created, following the Ukraine exception. This policy is being actively reviewed. Meta's oversight board is at the moment currently deliberating over the fact that perhaps there should be an exception on “Death to Khamenei” chants. There are many different arguments for why this exception should be made. Facebook is impartial of protests in Iran, so there should not be any kind of censorship of expressions related to protests—especially given the many different layers and hurdles there already are to posting or sharing information, and accessing the internet in Iran.

Jon Alterman: As a final question, as we think about the role technology is playing in these protests, what should companies be doing differently and what should Western governments be doing differently? You could argue it’s partly to support, but also partly not to harm Iranians who are protesting for a more representative government.

Mahsa Alimardani: One of the things that I mentioned would be ensuring that the policy is in line with the context and the needs of the information and communication environment in such a precarious internet environment like Iran. That is an important factor. Another factor is the resources and time that these companies are putting into things like rapid response teams. What kind of support they are able to provide to users inside the country. That’s been a big gap that I’ve also been seeing throughout these protests. There really should be more robust mechanisms, especially across platforms, to work with each other to ensure that information is being shared and that vulnerable populations and users are being protected. There is also a rule now allowing certain technologies to be accessed in Iran. We had the U.S. Treasury Department’s General License D-2 that was updated to allow for a host of services that were previously blocked by sanctions from being accessed in Iran. They were given a general exception by the U.S. government. That has included things like cloud hosting services—Google Cloud platforms, Google App Engine, or AWS from Amazon. These are important services giving tools and resources to technologists and developers to rely on and use safe and secure internet services outside of the services being provided and controlled by the state. It’s not as crucial for immediate help to what’s happening during massive internet disruptions and issues with access to the internet, but the cooperation of companies like Google making their services available to Iranians is important to build a more safe and secure internet in Iran longer term and to avoid complimenting the Iranian regime’s efforts to really nationalize and localize all internet services and use.

Jon Alterman: Mahsa Alimardani, thank you very much for joining us on Babel.

Mahsa Alimardani: Yeah. Thank you for having me.