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MONDAY, JUNE 10, 2013

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# Iran's Hidden Cyberjihad

Taking a cue from the Soviets, the regime is creating a new Iron Curtain -- online.

BY ABBAS MILANI | JULY/AUGUST 2010



To the untrained eye or the rushed glance of a tourist, there is an eerie calm in Iran right now. And Iran's brutal rulers have done everything imaginable to turn us all into tourists -- at best -- when it comes to reading the events of the country's tumultuous last year.

In this and so many other ways, Iran's mullahcracy inevitably recalls the latter days of the Soviet Union. But -- at least until the very end -- the Soviet censors could clamp down with brute force on the spread of information so that foreign journalists simply didn't know what was happening behind the Iron Curtain. They had it easy: no Internet. The journalism-hunters in President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Iran must cope with a world in which information spreads freely, where satellite dishes are everywhere and more than 22 million Iranians use the Internet. To keep up, the embattled government has done everything in its power over the last year first to stanch the flow of stories and then to make the stories that inevitably leak out impossible for outsiders to verify. It has managed to erect, if not a sturdy, leak-proof wall like its Soviet forebears, at least a confusing and ever-adapting smokescreen.

Iran employs a vast and sometimes invisible army of paid minions and ideological myrmidons to help frame every question in the public domain -- and even manufacture convenient "facts" to fit its claims. A major element of this is a massive and largely unreported initiative, which the government -- increasingly obsessed with fighting what the political organ of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), *Sobhe Sadeq*, calls America's "soft power" -- refers to as the "Cyberjihad." The Iranian government has reportedly deployed 10,000 members of the Basij, its thuggish militia, in

service of this "jihad." Western companies like Nokia Siemens have been selling Iran the technologies and the know-how needed to censor and control the Internet. The government's allies have carried out successful hacks on sites close to the opposition, including opposition leader Mir Hossein Mousavi's site **Kaleme**, the site linked to reformist cleric Mehdi Karroubi, and dozens belonging to key dissidents in exile.

The Iranian government trains its cyberjihadists in everything from how to influence chat rooms to the "semiotics of cyberspace," according to a curriculum sent to me by a disgruntled regime member. The IRGC site **Gerdab.ir** features photos of demonstrators, seeking in effect to crowd-source surveillance. Since September, the IRGC has owned the telecommunications giant that controls all Internet access, cell phones, and social networking sites in Iran. But the story of Iran's cyberjihad has gone almost entirely unremarked in the Western media, despite its massive scale and relative effectiveness.

American journalists have also missed more mundane stories about the sordid state of Iranian society. Of course, there's always a risk in picking up unverified reports from inside a closed country, but the perils of completely ignoring those reports are great as well. Since last year, already draconian censorship laws have become even stricter. Book authors who had received their "permission to print" are now forced to reapply. There are increasingly egregious tales in the Persian-language media about Ahmadinejad's system of patronage, wherein millions of dollars are given away by his office to buy political support. Reports by an opposition site of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's decision to stop an investigation of corruption charges against a top Ahmadinejad aide apparently never penetrated the U.S. media, nor did claims on the government's official site, **Kayhan News**, of at least \$8 billion sent to foreign banks by masterminds of different Ponzi schemes during the last year. A travel ban on Simin Behbahani -- Iran's most eminent poet and a fearless fighter for the cause of democracy and human rights -- received scant attention. The gradual but inexorable destruction of the private sector by Ahmadinejad's harebrained economic policies has been all but ignored.

There is also strong evidence pointing to the continued vibrancy of the country's democratic movement that goes almost completely unnoted. Consider the culture war -- very much connected to the democratic opposition -- over the government's attempt to restrict music instruction and public performances. It has only led to a musical renaissance, a thriving underground scene that is producing fascinating -- and often explicitly political -- work in rap, pop, and a new hybrid folk-rock genre created by **Mohsen Namjoo**, called "Iran's Bob Dylan."

When *New York Times* reporter Nazila Fathi was based in Tehran, she **reported on** Namjoo's powerful music. Now with her and every other seasoned American journalist out of Iran, and with entry visas parceled out carefully to those least likely to file damaging reports, these cultural clashes -- and the broader political struggle they signal -- stay invisible. Which is just how Ahmadinejad wants them.

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