



1-2015

# Chaos & Control: The Competing Tensions of Internet Governance in Iran

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# Chaos & Control: The Competing Tensions of Internet Governance in Iran

## **Abstract**

This report offers a comprehensive overview of Iran's engagements with internet governance issues by tracking Iran's public statements at internet governance forums, studying its delegations to international events, and comparing its international policy stances against its domestic practices.

The report also examines the Iranian public's engagement with internet governance issues, and the state of multistakeholderism in Iran. It achieves this by monitoring Iranian press coverage of internet governance debates and appraising Iran's emerging domestic multistakeholder initiatives.

## **Disciplines**

Communication

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THE COMPETING TENSIONS OF  
INTERNET GOVERNANCE IN IRAN

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# INTRODUCTION

“The state, as political scientists insist, is still the predominant supplier of effective public governance and is still an immensely powerful institution. But there is a strong and persistent tension between state sovereignty, which is territorially bounded, and the non-territorial space for social interaction created by computer networks.”

*Milton Mueller, Networks And States*

In recent years, much has been written about the forces of globalisation eclipsing the authority of the nation-state. Examples include supranational institutions such as the European Union, as well as transnational networks of activists mobilised around various global issues such as inequality and climate change. One of the primary factors usually credited with enabling this trend is the proliferation of the internet, which is inherently transnational and decentralised.

While the networked architecture of the internet may have undermined the significance of national borders, this is not to say that states have found themselves sidelined on the issue of internet governance. On the contrary, debates over how the internet should be governed have frequently centered on questions regarding the appropriate role of the state.

Broadly speaking, two primary factions in these debates have coalesced around competing visions of the appropriate governance model for internet administration. Those in favour of a minimal role for the state tend to embrace a multistakeholder approach, which enjoins national governments to participate in regulatory forums on equal footing with both civil society and the private sector. Those who seek a robust role for the state in internet governance often support multilateral or intergovernmental arrangements, in which states are the primary interlocutors in policy discussions administered by the UN.

Since the first major global internet governance conference in 2003, debates over the proper role of the state in determining global internet policy have continued to dominate the agenda. This report explores the role of the Islamic Republic of Iran within the global conversation on internet governance, and the manner in which its domestic policies of internet control inform, and are in turn informed by, its engagements with global internet governance forums.

The report begins by providing an overview of the history of internet governance, ranging from the 1969 birth of ARPANET up to the present day.<sup>1</sup> This historical and contextual study forms the central component of Chapter I.

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**1** Those familiar with the history of internet governance may wish to skip directly to Chapter II: Iran and Internet Governance.

After identifying the primary points of contention within the global internet governance debate, Chapter II moves to provide an outline of Iran's domestic objectives and methods of internet control. This chapter demonstrates the confluences and incongruities between Iran's domestic and international policy objectives in the areas of content filtering, internet control, and infrastructural development. This is achieved through an interrogation of Iran's contributions to internet governance conferences, as well as publicly recorded statements from leading figures in the field of Iranian ICT policy.

Chapter III is concerned with the manner in which Iran formulates and executes internet governance policy. It examines the institutional context and bureaucratic practices of Iran, and shows how they have shaped the country's domestic and international policy-making processes and global alliances at internet governance events. This final chapter concludes with an examination of the role of non-state actors in the Iranian internet governance debate. In part, this is achieved by interrogating the narrative patterns of the Iranian media on issues of internet governance, in order to ascertain the current status of public discourse on internet governance issues. Finally, the chapter turns to a study of the 2014 Persian IGF, and discusses the extent to which it signals a government pivot towards multistakeholderism, at least in a domestic context.

This study is based on a number of interviews with leading experts in the internet governance field, media analysis, and the study of available documents released by the Islamic Republic of Iran and numerous international internet governance organisations. It is worth noting at this point that the lack of transparency practiced by the Iranian government and international organisations, and the security concerns of Iranian internet activists have made some sources inaccessible, and some potential contributors unwilling to speak on the record, or at all. We acknowledge that this study does not necessarily provide a comprehensive account of Iran's engagements in the internet governance sphere, but believe that this report makes a worthwhile contribution to the fields of internet governance and Iranian studies.

# 1.

## CONTEMPORARY DEBATES IN INTERNET GOVERNANCE

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Before delving into the ongoing debates around the role of the state in the regulation of the global internet, it is first important to chart the history of the internet's development, and to develop an understanding of the roles and responsibilities of the various bodies that have been established to oversee, manage, and facilitate its growth.

This short history of internet governance will prove essential in contextualising Iran's role within contemporary systems of internet governance, its objectives, and its activities.

### I. A BRIEF(ISH) HISTORY OF INTERNET GOVERNANCE

The technical origins of today's internet lie in a project funded by the United States Department of Defence, known as the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET). First deployed in October 1969, ARPANET was one of the world's first packet-switching computer networks, run by the academics and engineers who created it. By 1984, the development of these networks prompted ARPA - by this point renamed DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) - to create the Internet Activities Board, comprised of a number of task forces. One of the resulting organisations became known as the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), created in 1986 to manage the development of technical standards for the internet.

In terms of governance, the early internet endured little formal regulation. As Castells explains, "decisions made by the IETF were made by consensus, and involved a wide variety of individuals and institutions. By and large, the internet emerged in a legal vacuum with little supervision from regulatory agencies... The agencies that were created developed on an ad hoc basis to solve the needs of the users of the network" (2009: 103). One of the most important regulatory functions concerned overseeing the coordination of domain names with IP addresses, root zone management and the allocation of country code top-level domains (ccTLDs).

Throughout the mid 1980s and early 90s, these tasks were mostly performed by one man, University of Southern California engineering professor Jon Postel, under contract with DARPA. The organisation resulting from this arrangement became known as the Internet Assigned Names Authority (IANA).

In 1993, management of the internet's Domain Name System (DNS) was delegated to a private American company, Network Solutions Inc., which signed a five year contract with the U.S. government's National Science Foundation (NSF). The expiration of Network Solutions' contract in 1998 roughly coincided with Postel's death, creating an administrative vacuum which needed to be quickly filled in order to preserve the internet's functionality. As Castells explains, "at the expiration of the NSI's contract with the NSF in 1998, and without Postel present to function as the trusted guarantor of the assignment of IP addresses, pressure increased to formalise the institutional management of the internet." (*Ibid*: 104).

## ICANN // 'ONE WORLD. ONE INTERNET.'

The size and commercial value of the burgeoning market in information services constituted an additional factor which prompted intensified calls for management of the internet's infrastructure (especially domain names and IP address numbers) to be delegated to official institutions. Indeed, Castells points out that "[a]s the internet became a hugely profitable opportunity for business investments, President Clinton directed the Secretary of Commerce to privatize the DNS on July 1, 1997, in a way that increased competition and facilitated international participation in its management. The US Department of Commerce implemented the directive and established ICANN [the non-profit Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers] in November 1998" (2009: 104).

The creation of ICANN to manage the internet's domain names and IP addresses proved a pivotal event in the history of internet governance, and remains a hotly debated issue to this day. Mueller (2010: 61) identifies four structural features of ICANN that have attracted the ire of large parts of the global community:

1. It is necessarily transnational, as a global internet requires global coordination of names and addresses;
2. It is one of the few globally centralised points of control over the internet;
3. It is dominated by private and non-state actors;
4. It is overseen by a single sovereign nation, and "the world's only remaining superpower, the United States".

These ICANN-related grievances bring us back to the question of the proper role for the nation state in global internet governance. As we have seen, the proliferation of the global internet in the 1990s was enabled in large part by agreements between private firms, independent of government regulation.

Yet this arrangement resulted in the creation of a non-profit organisation to manage names and addresses which not only constituted a centralised point of control over the internet, but also was managed exclusively by the United States, handing the government significant influence. As Mueller explains, "at the very top ICANN was in fact beholden - contractually and politically - to the U.S. government" (*Ibid*: 62).

At subsequent internet governance events, it is precisely this form of American oversight of ICANN that many other national governments, especially those from developing countries, have most strenuously objected to.

# EVENTS TIMELINE

## How to Read



**A**  
12/2003  
**World Summit on Information Society I, Geneva**  
Arising out of the ITU's 1998 Plenipotentiary Conference, the first WSIS event was framed as an opportunity to "formulate a common vision and understanding of the global information society" and "harness the potential of knowledge and technology to promote the development goals of the Millennium Declaration."

The primary accomplishment of the first phase was the declaration of a range of broad principles related to internet governance, known as the 'Geneva Principles'. This document affirmed that "The international management of the internet should be multilateral, transparent and democratic, with the full involvement of governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations."

**B**  
11/2005  
**World Summit on Information Society II, Tunis**  
In September 2005, just a few months before the second phase of WSIS, the American position suffered a major setback when the European Union broke ranks and began publicly calling for changes in the way ICANN was managed.

Debates in Tunis centred on American control of ICANN and the appropriate role of nation-states in internet governance. After several days of tough negotiations, the summit concluded with the production of a document known as the "Tunis Agenda", which paved the way for future reforms to ICANN by challenging certain aspects of the existing ICANN regime, and legitimising the role of government in determining internet governance policies. It also established the IGF, an annual multi-stakeholder venue for dialogues on internet governance issues.

**C**  
10,11/2005 - 10,11/2016 (Annually)  
**Internet Governance Forum**  
The IGF was established as a non-binding, multi-stakeholder forum in which internet governance issues could be discussed. The IGF introduced a procedural approach that deviated from the state-centric model of WSIS, adopting a multi-stakeholder model in which states agreed to participate on an equal footing with civil society groups and private sector contributors.

While the IGF was a multi-stakeholder forum - in contrast to the state-centric WSIS - the question of the proper role of the nation state remained the primary bone of contention.

**D**  
12/2012  
**World Conference on International Communications**  
Unlike the IGF and WSIS, the WCIT is a treaty-level conference hosted by the International Telecommunications Union. This means that the event was fundamentally intergovernmental, with representatives of various nation-states coming together to discuss global telecommunications policy.

In terms of procedure, ITU events operate by consensus rather than majority vote; member states negotiate over potential resolutions until a final agreement is reached, to which participating states consent to be bound. Once a treaty is adopted, its provisions become international law. However after several days of protracted and often contentious debate, no consensus was reached, and the conference concluded with about half of the nations present refusing to sign the final treaty.

**E**  
4/2014  
**E.NETmundial: Global Multistakeholder Meeting on the Future of Internet Governance**

In the wake of the diplomatic fallout prompted by the NSA surveillance scandal, the government of Brazil convened NETmundial. The event, attended by over 850 government officials, campaigners, technical experts and academics, served as a venue for the continuation of the long-running debate over the role of the state in internet governance.

The primary accomplishment of the event was the production of a non-binding resolution registering the preference of most stakeholder groups to see control of the internet's names and addressing system shifted from ICANN to a multi-stakeholder body.

## II. CONTEMPORARY INTERNET GOVERNANCE // EVENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

The 1998 establishment of ICANN overshadowed a coterminous event which would portend profound implications for global internet governance. At the 1998 Plenipotentiary Conference of the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the UN agency responsible for information and communication technologies, a resolution was adopted calling for ‘a world summit on the information society’. The purpose of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) was “to formulate a common vision and understanding of the global information society” and to “harness the potential of knowledge and technology to promote the development goals of the Millennium Declaration” (*Ibid*: 58).

The summit was held in two phases: the first in Geneva in 2003, and the second in Tunis in 2005. While originally intended to cover a range of issues associated with the ‘information society,’ WSIS was dominated by contentious debates over ICANN and its relationship with the U.S. government (*Ibid*: 60).

### WSIS I // 2003 // GENEVA

During the Geneva phase of WSIS in 2003, the government of Brazil led the broad coalition of countries critical of the ICANN status quo. Contesting the dominant role of both the United States and the private sector, they argued that “the internet is a public resource that should be managed by national governments and, at an international level, by an intergovernmental body such as the International Telecommunications Union” (*Ibid*: 64).

At the same time, the European Commission pushed for a new model of internet governance based on inter-state cooperation in policy making; a position supported publicly by Iran and Saudi Arabia, and criticised harshly by former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt on the basis that it threatened the future of the internet (Wray, 2005). The challenges raised by these “state sovereignty hawks” were too formidable to be resolved at Geneva phase, and were taken up again in Tunis in 2005.

The primary accomplishment of the first phase was the declaration of a range of broad principles related to internet governance. These principles (which became known as the “Geneva Principles”) affirmed, *inter alia*, that “the international management of the internet should be multilateral, transparent and democratic, with the full involvement of governments, the private sector, civil society and international organizations” (ITU, 2003a).

With these principles duly affirmed, and the debate over the U.S. government’s relationship with ICANN left unresolved, the stage was set for a showdown at the second phase of WSIS in Tunis.

## WSIS II // 2005 // TUNIS

In preparation for the Tunis Phase, the Geneva declaration asked the UN Secretary General to establish a working group on internet governance (WGIG) to develop a definition of internet governance, identify relevant policy issues, and delineate respective roles and responsibilities to various stakeholder groups.

In the summer of 2005, two weeks before the scheduled release of the WGIG report, the U.S. Commerce Department's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) released a short statement announcing: "The United States Government intends to preserve the security and stability of the internet's Domain Name and Addressing System." This commitment to "security and stability" underpinned the U.S. government's intention "to maintain its historic role in authorizing changes or modifications to the authoritative root zone file" (NTIA, 2005). The timing and blunt language of the statement exacerbated an already fractious rift between those aiming to preserve the ICANN status quo and those seeking a greater role for national governments and intergovernmental institutions.

In September 2005, just a few months before the Tunis phase, the American position suffered a major setback when the European Union broke ranks and began publicly calling for the reform of ICANN. From the American perspective, this move was surprising, as opposition to the ICANN status quo tended to be concentrated among the governments of developing countries (Mueller, 2010: 74). With the Global South and EU aligning against the US's position, the battle lines for the Tunis Phase were clearly drawn.

As with the first phase of the WSIS, debates in Tunis centred on American control of ICANN and the appropriate role of (other) nation-states in internet governance. After several days of tough negotiations, the summit concluded with the production of a document known as 'The Tunis Agenda for the Information Society.' One of the main results of the Tunis Agenda was that it paved the way for future changes to ICANN. In Mueller's phrasing, it did this "first, by incorporating challenges to specific aspects of the current ICANN regime in its text, and second, by insisting on the authority of governments to define 'public policy' for the internet" (*Ibid*: 77). In addition, the Tunis Agenda authorized the creation of an Internet Governance Forum (IGF).

## IGF // 2006-2016

The IGF was established as a non-binding, multistakeholder forum in which internet governance issues could be discussed. "The creation of the IGF," argues Mueller, "was widely understood to be the kind of agreement that could get the WSIS out of its impasse; it allowed the critics to continue raising their issues in an official forum but, as a non-binding discussion arena, could not do much harm to those interested in preserving the status quo" (*Ibid*).

Importantly, the IGF introduced a procedural approach that deviated from the state-centric model of WSIS. As Masters explains, “the establishment of the IGF was noteworthy for its embrace of a multistakeholder model (a model also utilized by ICANN), where states—including many authoritarian governments—agreed to participate in policy discussions on an equal footing with private sector and civil society groups” (Masters, 2014).

Despite the structural differences between the IGF and WSIS, the question of the proper role of the nation state remained the primary bone of contention. Debate on this issue has continued to rage over the past ten years, reaching a fever pitch at the 2012 World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT) in Dubai.

## WCIT // 2012 // DUBAI

Unlike the IGF and WSIS, the WCIT is a treaty-level conference hosted by the International Telecommunications Union. This means that the event was fundamentally intergovernmental, with representatives of various nation-states coming together to discuss global telecommunications policy. In particular, the WCIT was convened to review the International Telecommunications Regulations (ITRs), the binding global treaty (adopted in 1988) which aims to ensure the availability, efficiency and interoperability of a broad range of information and communication services (ITU, 2012a).

In terms of procedure, ITU events operate by consensus rather than majority vote; member states negotiate over potential resolutions until a final agreement is reached, to which participating states consent to be bound. Once a treaty is adopted, its provisions become international law. However after several days of protracted and often contentious debate, no consensus was reached, and the conference concluded with about half of the nations present refusing to sign the final treaty (ITU, 2012b). At issue was the familiar question of the extent to which national governments should exert control over the institutional management of the internet.

Signs of trouble surfaced early on, with a dispute breaking out over language in the preamble to the new treaty. The new preamble asserted that ITU members “recognize the right of access of Member States to international telecommunication services” (ITU, 2013: 1). This wording was adopted by vote rather than consensus, marking a deviation from standard ITU protocol.

As the conference progressed, these initial quibbles devolved into entrenched antagonisms. One of the clearest illustrations of growing rift between factions can be seen in the dispute over Resolution 3, which was adopted under controversial circumstances including allegations of procedural irregularities (Fidler, 2013). In addition to emphasizing the important role the ITU should play in internet governance, the resolution went on to state that “all governments should have an equal role and responsibility for international internet governance” (*Ibid*).

Fundamentally, disputes at WCIT were anchored in competing views on whether or not the principles, norms and regulations of internet governance should be enshrined in international law. Those opposed to this position aimed to preserve the ICANN status quo, and questioned whether the ITU should be involved in the business of internet governance at all. The question of the proper role of the state in internet governance was left unresolved, with the end of the conference bringing no solutions to this intractable problem.

The case made by those in favour of the ICANN status quo rested on the belief that the United States could be trusted not to abuse its privileged position as the sole overseer of critical internet resources. This argument was dealt a significant blow in June 2013, when whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed that the National Security Agency (NSA) had been running a secret and pervasive internet surveillance programme. Global protests were swift and widespread (Gabbatt, 2014), and while NSA spying had little to do with ICANN (Masters, 2014), the revelations severely undermined global trust in the U.S. government to oversee critical internet resources impartially.

In a move widely viewed as an attempt to placate growing anger over the surveillance scandal, the U.S. government announced in March 2014 its intention to transition control over key aspects of the internet's domain name functions to the global multistakeholder community (NTIA, 2014). It wouldn't be long until the forum hawks seeking ICANN reforms seized on this opportunity.

## NETMUNDIAL // 2014 // SAO PAOLO

In the wake of the diplomatic fallout prompted by the NSA surveillance scandal, the government of Brazil convened NETmundial, a two-day internet governance event held in Sao Paulo on April 23-24, 2014. The event, attended by over 850 government officials, campaigners, technical experts and academics (Kelion, 2014), served as a venue for the continuation of the long-running debate over the role of the state in internet governance.

The primary accomplishment of the event was the production of a non-binding resolution registering the preference of most stakeholder groups to see control of the internet's names and addressing system shifted from ICANN to a multistakeholder body (*Business Standard, 2014*). The resolution also favoured "open, participative, consensus-based governance" (NETmundial, 2014a). Yet consensus proved difficult to reach. An influential minority of countries, including Russia, China, India and Iran, refused to sign the resolution because they preferred a multilateral (i.e. inter-governmental) approach to internet governance (*Business Standard, 2014*).

As with all the other governance events discussed above, the primary bone of contention at NetMundial hinged on the role of national governments in internet regulation.

## THE DEBATE TODAY

While the various internet governance fora discussed above vary in terms of structure, participation and authority, the issue of the proper role for the nation-state in internet governance permeated them all. It is against this contentious backdrop that the present study is situated. Using the case study of Iran, we will unpack the tensions surrounding American control of ICANN, and the broader question of the relationship between national governments and internet governance. By taking a detailed look at the statements and positions Iran takes at global internet governance fora, and looking at how these topics are discussed in domestic Iranian media, we aim to offer a unique and nuanced overview of Iran's contributions to the global internet governance debate.

## **2. IRAN AND INTERNET GOVERNANCE**

The Islamic Republic of Iran has a great many interests in engaging with the issue of global internet governance, and has been an active participant in governance events since the foundational 2003 WSIS forum in Geneva.

Although Iran has worked to legitimise and reinforce its internet surveillance and control apparatus at international forums, it cannot be directly inferred that Iran simply participates in these events in order to perpetuate or reinforce its own domestic internet policies.

Iran has been a consistent critic of existing structures of internet governance, and of the distribution of power in the international system. Iran is not alone in its criticisms, however; the Islamic Republic has found itself a member of the broad coalition of state sovereignty ‘hawks’ that first coalesced in Geneva. These hawks have consistently sought to shift the balance of power in the internet governance sphere away from the hegemony of the United States, and towards a model in which other states hold more influence over the formulation and development of global internet governance policy, through multilateral engagement in empowered international organisations.

Although unified broadly by its opposition to the status quo, the hawk coalition is a politically diverse one made up of countries ranging from the liberal democracies of Brazil, Argentina, and South Africa, to the authoritarian states of Syria, China, and Saudi Arabia. To call this a coalition, however, is a slight over-reach; it does not agree on every issue, and there is little in the way of policy coordination between many of these state actors; various ‘hawk’ nations pursue divergent objectives.

One additional point: as is the case for most states, domestic political factors and policy initiatives influence Iran’s global practices and its role in this ‘hawkish’ coalition. Therefore, it is important to establish Iran’s domestic policy goals, and determine how they help to inform the state’s objectives and activities at international internet governance forums. This segment of the report will discuss and contextualise Iran’s domestic and international policy objectives, describe the manner in which internet governance policy is formulated, and explain why the Iranian authorities pursue this course.

### **I. ‘ENEMY OF THE INTERNET’ // IRAN’S DOMESTIC ICT POLICY**

In order to place Iran’s internet governance policies in the proper context, this following segment offers a brief overview of the ICT issues that have dominated the country’s domestic policy agenda, including content filtering, the development of a state-regulated ‘National Internet’, alongside a number of ambitious infrastructure development initiatives. Although this overview is not comprehensive, it illustrates a number of instances where there has been an interplay between Iran’s domestic and international internet policy goals.

On the whole, Iran's domestic internet policy objectives are illiberal in nature, and have attracted criticism from international NGOs. Iran has one of the worst internet freedom records in the world, to the extent that Iran's extensive history of online censorship has seen it branded one of the "twelve enemies of the internet" by Reporters Without Borders (2012). Its domestic policies are primarily focused around maintaining, empowering, and legitimising its efforts to monitor and control internet access. Iran has pursued these objectives aggressively on the home front, filtering vast quantities of online content and investing in the development of new technologies and infrastructure to facilitate state surveillance on a massive scale.

But parallel to these authoritarian policy initiatives, Iran has been an energetic developer of internal and international internet infrastructure. Domestically, Iran has extended internet access to tens of thousands of isolated towns and villages, and encouraged internet 'literacy' amongst the wider population. On the international front, economic imperatives have led to Iran to push for the development of significant new international infrastructure networks to transfer data between Europe, South Asia, and the Middle East.

## ACCESS IS FORBIDDEN! // CONTENT FILTERING

Iran practices online content filtering on a massive scale, restricting access to around half of the 500 top-ranked sites on Alexa through a combination of keyword filtering, connection throttling, and DNS hijacking methods (Aryan et al., 2013). Pages relating to cultural, political and sexual themes are blocked extensively,

One of the most powerful technologies Iran uses to monitor and control internet traffic is 'Deep Packet Inspection' (DPI), a technology that was standardised by the ITU in 2012. DPI enables authorities to monitor data packets as they pass through a network, and enabling them to be filtered on the basis of pre-determined criteria.

In 2012, the circumvention tool Tor identified DPI as one of the main filtering techniques impacting upon Iranians' ability to connect with their service (Tor Project, 2012). The encrypted chat tool Cryptocat reported similar problems stemming from DPI content filtering in 2013 (Franceschi-Bicchierai, 2013).

The 2013 election of President Rouhani held the promise of a shift in Iran's position on content filtering. In 2014, the president stated his opposition to the current filtering programme: "Some people think we can fix these problems by building walls, but when you create filters, they create proxies... this [current policy] does not work. Force does not produce results" (The National, 2014).

So far, these words haven't been accompanied by tangible policy shifts. In November 2014, the page of the popular online game 'Clash of Clans' was blocked, along with a number of Instagram images hosted by Facebook, and (bizarrely) the website of long-deceased revolutionary leader Seyyed Mohammad Hosseini Beheshti (Small Media, 2014a). It appears that Iran's filtering system is set to remain a cornerstone of its ICT policy programme for some time to come.

## ...AND STAY OUT! // NATIONAL INTERNET (SHOMA)

Iran has worked to assert state sovereignty over the internet in an even more overt manner than simple content filtering. Since 2006, Iran has been working to develop its own 'National Internet', in a project commonly referred to in Iran as 'SHOMA'. The planned structure of the SHOMA network was described in-depth by President Rouhani's ICT Minister Mahmood Vaezi in August 2013, when he described it as 'A private and secure internal network... an aggregation of private, local and national networks.' (Small Media, 2014b)

According to the ICT Ministry, the development of the SHOMA network is being conducted in four phases:

1. The construction of a network capable of separating local and international traffic. SHOMA will be an independent high-speed network that connects all government organisations.
2. The hosting and registration of Iranian websites on local servers and .ir domains respectively.
3. The provision of domestically developed applications and services including an OS, email service, search engine, and communication apps
4. The production and promotion of online content (Small Media, 2014b: 7)

Numerous critics from international media have warned that its development marks a stepping stone towards the ultimate objective of cutting Iran off from the global network entirely. The replication of such measures on a global scale would constitute a 'balkanisation' of the internet into national spheres. Vaezi contests the assertion that this is Iran's ultimate objective, asserting instead that:

*"SHOMA is not in competition with the internet; Iran is not cutting Iranian users' access to the 'global' internet. If users cannot find the data that they are looking for on SHOMA, then they will be able to access the internet to search for it, instead"* (in Small Media 2014b: 7).

It remains to be seen how far these promises hold up, as SHOMA continues to be trapped in development purgatory. Originally slated for release in late 2006 (Fars News, 2006), SHOMA's launch has been delayed numerous times, and it remains unclear exactly when the fully-functional network will be set for unveiling.

Although Iran has forged ahead with the project independently of the decisions made at international internet governance events, the whole notion of a 'National Internet' cannot be separated from Iran's expressed interests in empowering national governments and securing rights of 'national sovereignty' over domestic networks.

## NETWORKING SKILLS // INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

Over the past decade, Iran has prioritised the development of new infrastructure, both for the purposes of extending domestic internet access, and facilitating large-scale (and immensely profitable) international data routing through the country.

The expansion of internet infrastructure has been a priority for the government ever since the pioneering Shahkooh village development project of 2002, which saw the tiny village in the Alborz mountains connected to the world wide web. Since then, development has continued at a rapid pace: in 2014 Iran's ICT Minister Mahmood Vaezi claimed that Iran had extended internet access to 4300 'rural areas', constructing over 10,000 'rural ICT centers' in the process (Vaezi, 2014).

Iran has also sought to position itself as a regional information hub, with its central geographic location offering a pathway to transfer data between Europe and Asia. As Mahmoud Khosravi, managing director of Iran's Telecommunication Infrastructure Company (TIC), puts it:

*"The exceptional geographical position of Iran locating between two strategic telecommunications regions of Middle East and Europe as well as its international connections in twenty border points brings about a vast telecom potential for traffic transmission" (EPEG, 2015).*

Iran's involvement with the Europe-Persia Express Gateway (EPEG) fiber-optic cable system<sup>2</sup> is one high-profile example of the work the country has been undertaking to support global internet infrastructure development at the same time as it has been pushing for the national segmentation of the internet.

## II. INTERNET GOVERNANCE FORUMS AND IRANIAN DOMESTIC POLICY

Ultimately, international internet governance forums are limited in their ability to influence the development of internet policy in Iran, or any other participating states. Iran has developed its own comprehensive set of internet regulations and control mechanisms completely independently of international telecommunications regulations and internet governance treaties; at no point has the development of SHOMA, or the country's filtering programme been threatened by the outcomes of internet governance forums like the IGF or WCIT.

.....

<sup>2</sup> EPEG's website explains that "the EPEG allows a telecommunication transit route alternative to the Red Sea, Suez Canal, Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea regions and plays an important role for traffic re-routing in case of earthquakes and disasters, which have been known to affect multiple systems at once" (EPEG, 2015).

As Mahmood Enayat, Director of the London-based NGO Small Media states:

*“They don’t need any global initiatives to control their networks inside Iran... what they’re advocating externally, they already do internally.”* (Personal interview, 2014)

Nonetheless, international internet governance forums have played an important role in legitimising the use of state power to regulate and control communications networks. The flexible wording and lack of explicit human rights language in many internet governance documents have enabled authoritarian governments such as Iran’s to legitimise their efforts to strangle off internet access and engage in mass online surveillance of its citizens.

## CHASING LEGITIMACY // FILTERING AND INTERNET GOVERNANCE

### *THE ITU CONSTITUTION // LICENSE TO THROTTLE*

The constitution of the ITU itself is one such document offering authoritarian governments breathing space to engage in draconian measures of internet control. Article 34 permits states to sever communications networks on the basis of perceived security threats, ‘illegal’ activities, and nebulously-defined threats to ‘public order or decency’.

#### **ARTICLE 34 - STOPPAGE OF TELECOMMUNICATIONS**

- 1. Member States reserve the right to stop, in accordance with their national law, the transmission of any private telegram which may appear dangerous to the security of the State or contrary to its laws, to public order or to decency, provided that they immediately notify the office of origin of the stoppage of any such telegram or any part thereof, except when such notification may appear dangerous to the security of the State.*
- 2. Member States also reserve the right to cut off, in accordance with their national law, any other private telecommunications which may appear dangerous to the security of the State or contrary to its laws, to public order or to decency.*

At WCIT-12, the ITU’s Secretary-General Dr. Hamadoun Touré reiterated the inviolability of Article 34, stating that any new International Telecoms Regulations (ITRs) ‘cannot contradict that provision’. In this manner, the legitimacy of ‘emergency’ state censorship is entrenched in the international system of internet governance (ITU, 2012). As a result, it becomes difficult for the international community to legitimately criticise Iran for its methods of strangling off the internet in times of political unrest.

Iranian authorities seemingly feel little embarrassment about their actions, either; internet speeds were throttled extensively in the immediate run-up to the 2013 presidential elections, with former ICT Minister Mohammad Hassan Nami admitting that the state ordered the restriction of internet speeds in order to “preserve calm” during a period of high political tension (Esfandiari, 2013). The inviolability of Article 34 strips the ITU of the ability to criticise authoritarian state practices, thereby tacitly encouraging their perpetuation.

WCIT-12 // FILTER FREELY

The rapid uptake of DPI technology over the past few years has been facilitated in part by the outcomes of global internet governance forums, with WCIT-12 playing an important part in the development and standardisation of the technology. Prior to WCIT-12, there were no industry standards for the development and implementation of DPI technology, meaning that compatibility between different manufacturers' models was not guaranteed.

Technical document Y.2770 resolved this issue. Entitled '*Requirements for deep packet inspection in Next Generation Networks*', Y.2770 sets out recommendations for DPI technical standards. It was adopted in November 2012 by a special group within the ITU, known as the World Telecommunication Standardization Assembly (WTSA-12), which met in the run-up to WCIT-12 (Horten, 2012).

By itself, Y.2770 is a non-binding technical guideline calling for the widespread implementation of DPI technology into next-generation (IPv6) networks, but it provides no guidelines as to how states should (or shouldn't) utilise the technology. However, two amendments to the International Telecoms Regulations (ITRs), accepted by a majority of states at WCIT-12, may effectively mandate the implementation and usage of the technology by states. At the very least, allows them the space to legitimise their use of DPI technology to monitor and regulate citizens' internet usage in the eyes of the international community.

The ITRs in question are:

#### **ARTICLE 5A**

Security and robustness of networks

**41B** *Member States shall individually and collectively endeavour to ensure the security and robustness of international telecommunication networks in order to achieve effective use thereof and avoidance of technical harm thereto, as well as the harmonious development of international telecommunication services offered to the public.*

#### **ARTICLE 5B**

Unsolicited bulk electronic communications

**41C** *Member States should endeavour to take necessary measures to prevent the propagation of unsolicited bulk electronic communications and minimize its impact on international telecommunication services. Member States are encouraged to cooperate in that sense (ITU, 2013: 6).*

The potential implications of Y.2770 and the WCIT-12 ITR amendments have been hotly disputed by internet governance experts. Olivier Crepin-Leblond, a UK-based non-governmental WCIT-12 delegate for the Internet Society argued that the ITR amendments were problematic, and in conjunction with Y.2770 could have serious negative impacts upon global internet freedom:

*“Several parts of the ITRs were deeply flawed. [Article] 5A needs to be read along with ITU Standard Y.2770, which makes it mandatory to implement deep packet inspection (and not even a mild case of DPI) to all ‘next generation networks’ which could be easily interpreted as the IPv6 network.*

*“As a standard it is far from mandatory. But 5A and 5B bring this much closer to [making] it mandatory – and you’ll notice that the language in Y.2770 is very close to the language of 5A and 5B” (Crepin-Leblond, in Mueller, 2012).*

Iran voted to approve the final WCIT-12 treaty, including these contentious articles. The extent to which Iran will lean on these ITRs as a means of justifying its existing filtering policies is as yet unknown, as the WCIT treaty only entered into force in Iran on 15 January 2015.

## STATES’ RIGHTS! // SHOMA, NATIONAL SOVEREIGNTY AND INTERNET GOVERNANCE

As a member of the ‘sovereignty hawk’ coalition of developing states, Iran has been a particularly vociferous opponent of the status quo in which the relationship between ICANN and the US Department of Commerce grants the American government influence over the global DNS root zone, gTLDs, and ccTLDs.<sup>3</sup>

The ability of the US government to unilaterally oversee the body responsible for coordinating the global internet’s identifier system has remained a point of contention with the international community ever since WSIS-03. Since then, developing countries have worked tirelessly to wrest these powers from the US, and articulate an alternative system of internet governance in which the international community plays an active role in determining global internet governance policies.

### *DIALOGUE AMONG CIVILISATIONS // WSIS-03*

WSIS-03 saw President Khatami and his government lead Iran’s first real foray into the realm of internet governance. Given that subsequent major forums took place during the conservative Ahmadinejad presidency, the country’s 2003 contributions offer the best window into reformist politicians’ internet governance objectives.

.....

**3** In addition to its contract with ICANN, the US Government’s influence is underpinned by an assertion of ‘policy authority’ over any modifications to the DNS root zone file, which the Department of Commerce has been making since 1998. For a discussion, see Mueller (2010: 62-63).

The former Iranian MP and reformist activist Aliakbar Mousavi Khomeini contends that the Khatami government was much more open to engagement with other countries on a variety of issues:

“The reformists’ government... prioritised the development of Iran’s international presence on the issue [of internet governance], despite a number of criticisms from inside the country” (Interview, e-mail correspondence, 2014).

Indeed, the documents submitted by Iran to WSIS-03’s Preparatory Committee 3 demonstrate that Iran was an active contributor to debates on a number of internet governance issues in the run-up to the Geneva conference, and was not focused on the matter of state sovereignty alone.

Khatami’s delegation was particularly concerned with using WSIS-03 to advance an agenda predicated on the protection of ‘national culture’. Iran proposed that progress towards the ‘information society’ should be partly predicated on the UNESCO Constitution (Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2003a: 1). Iran went on to restate the Khatami-era mantra of ‘Dialogue Among Civilisations’, suggesting that the objective “to promote dialogue among cultures and civilizations” be added to the paragraph 1 of the Draft Declaration of Principles (*Ibid*). Although this phrase did not make paragraph 1 of the Declaration of Principles, it was inserted, word-for-word, in paragraphs 9 and 52 (ITU, 2003a).

In a similar manner, in paragraph 10, Iran suggested that the information society should be predicated on “The building of an environment that inspires respect for fundamental values of all cultures” (*Ibid*: 2).

Iran also called for the inclusion of specific anti-pornography language in paragraph 52, its amendment seeming to embrace ‘multistakeholderism’ in the practice of combating sexual abuse of children online:

*“The fight against pedophilia and pornography on the internet requires a coalition of forces, involving children, industry, policy makers, educators and parents to ensure that users are aware of potential dangers” (Ibid: 3)*

Although it expressed some willingness to collaborate with non-governmental groups in pursuing secondary policy aims, Iran stopped short of advocating multistakeholderism as the fundamental principle of global internet governance. As with the Ahmadinejad government that followed, Khatami’s delegation insisted upon the recognition of the “national sovereignty of all states” in managing the internet (*Ibid*: 2).

Despite these varied contributions to the early phase of internet governance activity, Khatami’s government ultimately failed to make a significant impact on the state sovereignty debate. This set the stage for Ahmadinejad’s government to make more aggressive, and less collaborative efforts to further Iran’s agenda on this point.

*THROWING STONES // WSIS-05*

Iran's participation at WSIS-05 in Tunis saw a change in tone and strategy. With Khatami's conciliatory foreign policy abandoned in favour of a confrontational and openly anti-Western stance, Iran dropped all language relating to the "promotion of a dialogue between cultures and civilizations", along with all engagement on governance issues unrelated to internet sovereignty.

At the 2005 WSIS Preparatory Meeting, Iran made an unprecedentedly assertive move, setting out a detailed proposal for the development of a multilateral, UN-rooted and state-driven internet governance council with authority over an 'internationalised' ICANN and IANA, and substantive powers over poorly defined 'international public policy issues' (Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2005).

*We decide to establish an intergovernmental Council for Global Public Policy and Oversight based on the principles of transparency and democracy with the involvement, in an advisory capacity, of the private sector, civil society and the relevant intergovernmental and international organizations. The Council shall be anchored in the United Nations and have, inter alia, the following functions:*

- Setting of international internet public policy and providing the necessary oversight relating to internet resource management, especially the related to ICANN/IANA competence in the areas such as additions or deletions to the root zone file, management of IP addresses, introduction of Global Top level Domains (gTLDs), delegation and redelegation of Country Code Top Level Domains (ccTLDs). The relationship between the Council and technical and operational internet institutions, such as the reformed and internationalized ICANN/IANA, should be formalized. In this model, the reformed ICANN/IANA will be accountable to the Council. This internationalization should be accompanied by an adequate United Nations like host-country agreement for reformed ICANN/IANA.
- In addition, its functions might include international public policy issues relating to internet resource management and international public policy issues that do not fall within the scope of other existing intergovernmental organizations.
- Facilitating negotiation of treaties, conventions and agreements on internet-related public policies.
- Fostering and providing guidance on certain developmental issues in the broader internet agenda, including but not limited to capacity-building, multilingualism, equitable and cost-based international interconnection costs, and equitable access for all.
- Approving rules and procedures for dispute resolution mechanisms and conduct arbitration, as required. (Ibid)

Although statements such as these were effective at clearly staking out Iran's position, the proposals ultimately failed to gain meaningful support from other sovereignty 'hawks' at WSIS-05. As all major decisions had to be made on the basis of consensus, Iran failed to make a real splash in sovereignty debates until 2012, when its opportunistic contributions to WCIT-12 shattered the conference and cleft open the existing fault lines in the international community.

#### *DROPPING BOMBSHELLS // THE CONTROVERSY AT WCIT-12*

WCIT-12 saw a breakdown in international consensus over the question of internet sovereignty, as developing countries worked together in a concerted effort to challenge the US's perceived hegemony over internet regulation organisations such as ICANN. Inês Nolasco described the process by which state actor 'hawks' worked to insert a direct challenge to the status quo into the revised ITRs, in the non-binding Resolution 3:

*"The African States proposed to add text, immediately after the preamble statement on the protection of human rights, recognising the right of access of member states to international telecommunications services, i.e. to safeguard non-discriminatory access to the internet, a proposal which had previously been left out of the draft.*

*"China, Cuba, Iran, the African states and several Middle East countries supported the proposal, arguing that there is a connection between human rights and member states' rights, and that some member states are currently deprived of access to international telecommunications services and to the internet" (Nolasco, 2013: 6).*

#### **RESOLUTION PLEN/3**

To foster an enabling environment for the greater growth of the internet

- a. "...all governments should have an equal role and responsibility for international internet governance and for ensuring the stability, security and continuity of the existing internet and its future development and of the future internet, and that the need for development of public policy by governments in consultation with all stakeholders is also recognized."

David P. Fidler commented that the language utilised by the African States' contribution was not dissimilar to that of a Russian proposal that was aborted earlier in proceedings:

*"Substantively, Resolution 3 echoed language in the Russian proposal on internet governance, stating that "all governments should have an equal role and responsibility for international internet governance[.]" Resolution 3 also emphasized that the ITU should remain engaged on internet governance questions" (Fidler, 2013).*

Although it was initially proposed by the African States group, Resolution 3's fate owes its eventual inclusion in the Final Acts to a dramatic intervention by the Iranian delegation, which played a central role in pushing the proposals through WCIT in the face of sustained US and EU opposition. Iran achieved this by calling for a majority vote on the passage of

Resolution 3, in clear violation of existing consensus-based institutional procedures. The subsequent vote was won 77-33 (with 6 abstentions) by the African-Russian-Iranian-Chinese voting bloc. Inês Nolasco described the proceedings:

*“The chairman attempted to set the new proposal aside due to a lack of consensus but Iran raised a point of order and a formal vote was called. On a show of hands, the proposal was accepted, now standing as the third paragraph of the preamble” (Nolasco, 2013: 6).*

Crepin-Leblond’s account corroborates that of Nolasco, insofar as it describes Iran’s role in shutting down the debate over the introduction of internet sovereignty language into Resolution 3:

*“[Some states] insisted on the right of states to telecommunication services and put it on a par basis with human rights. They argued the rights of states [were] the same as the rights of individuals. One of the most balanced countries, Switzerland, expressed its outrage. Tension was rising fast. We got lectured by some countries that oppress their people about human rights.*

*“And then Iran called for an abrupt end to the discussion, after having intervened more than any country in the past 2 weeks, and called for a vote — when... on many, many occasions Dr. Touré and the Chair [had] assured us there would be no vote” (Mueller, 2012).*

Although it had no significant input into the drafting of Resolution 3, Iran was instrumental in its eventual inclusion in the final treaty. Its decision to call for a direct vote on the resolution was a politically astute move; in recognising the numerical strength of the sovereignty ‘hawks’, and taking advantage of their frustration at the slow pace of proceedings, Iran was able to propel the resolution forward despite entrenched opposition from the US and European states.

In sum, WCIT-12 was a success for Iran. It was able to play a key role in advancing the agenda of the state sovereignty ‘hawks’, and bloodied the noses of the US and its European allies in the process. However, despite delivering some shallow political victories for Iran, the forum was a disaster in terms of actually resolving the issues at hand. The outcome did little more than exacerbate existing rifts in the international community, with the ‘no’ voters refusing to adopt the Final Acts on the basis that they were not determined by consensus.

#### *UNFINISHED BUSINESS // NETMUNDIAL 2014*

The failure of WCIT-12 to build a consensus on the matter of internet governance model meant that the issue has continued to crop up at successive international forums since then. The most significant forum of 2014 was Sao Paolo’s NETmundial multistakeholder conference, which set out to elaborate a set of globally-accepted principles of internet governance.

As the first major internet governance event to be held since the 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani, the NETmundial conference also offers an excellent window into the shifts in policy and rhetoric that have taken place since the departure of Ahmadinejad.

Interestingly, Iran's sole contributor to the NETmundial conference is the same man that was responsible for Iran's 'successes' driving through sovereignty-focused language at WCIT-12, Kavous Arasteh. Whereas Arasteh was previously publicly associated with the ICT Ministry and the CRA, in official NETmundial documentation he is listed as a representative of Iran's state-affiliated National Council of Cyberspace (NCC).

Despite Arasteh's previously disruptive role at WCIT-12, and the small size of Iran's delegation, Iran's contributions to NETmundial were generally constructive. Prior to the event, the NCC published a summary document describing its objectives and policy priorities at the forum.

For the most part, these points focused on the future of ICANN and the formulation of new governance structures that would facilitate a greater level of multilateral involvement in its management. With the March 2014 announcement that IANA intends to transfer a number of its core DNS powers to the global multistakeholder community (NTIA, 2014), the international community has entered a new phase of debate as to the shape of its successor.

Although the NCC report talks positively about the value of a 'multistakeholder approach' in internet governance, a great deal of space is devoted to promoting greater authority for states, with no mention of civil society or private sector involvement. On this point, Iran advocates the cession of ICANN authority over ccTLDs to national governments, as well as the strengthening of ICANN's Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC), which grants state actors a voice in the organisation.

This policy advocacy comes in spite of the NTIA's assertion that it "will not accept a proposal that replaces the NTIA role with a government-led or an intergovernmental organization solution." (Ibid)

The NCC recommendation document reads:

*ICANN's status as a public, global governance agency could be accepted and recognized. There should be lawful constraints on its mission and adequate checks on the potential for abuse of its authority. These should come from a formal international agreement... Governments should be involved not as "oversight" authorities but as main and principal backers of a shared legal framework that maintains accountability in an appropriate Multistakeholder Model in a Multistakeholder Approach in which all involved constituencies participate on an equal footing to carry out their role.*

*An international agreement along these lines should have the following elements:*

- The Multistakeholder Approach with an appropriate Model, yet to be defined;
- The sovereignty of national governments over ccTLDs should be formally recognized, and authority over their delegation ceded from ICANN to national governments using a formal, secure and verifiable process. The e-IANA concept, which allows recognized ccTLD managers to update their root zone entries directly, should be implemented;

- There should be a prohibition on using ICANN for content regulation; the instrument should also create a right of all parties to initiate legal challenges to ICANN actions on these grounds;
- The GAC, together with current function[s] need to be re-thought to examine their future role in the above-mentioned Multistakeholder Approach;
- Similarly IANA and its function, if needed, should also be reviewed.  
(Iran's National Council of Cyberspace, 2014: 21-22)

Once again, however, Iran and the 'hawks' were unable to build international consensus around their position, and NETmundial ended without resolving the question of state sovereignty in internet governance. Klée Aiken and David Lang stated that the conference was another demonstration that: "Efforts for consensus in net governance have been shown to be at once fraught and dull. For those who hope to enact change in the system, whether fundamental or otherwise, simply wishing that a consensus might yet emerge isn't a viable option" (Aiken and Lang, 2014).

#### *SEIZABLE ASSETS // IRAN AND THE 2014 ICANN JUDGEMENT*

Events in 2014 went some way towards validating Iran's fear of a US-dominated ICANN. A lawsuit brought forward by four private citizens in 2014 demanded compensation from Iran for injuries suffered in a Hezbollah attack in Israel. In an effort to identify seizable US-based Iranian assets, the Berkman Law Office and the Shurat HaDin Israeli Law Center served ICANN with writs of attachments and subpoenas in June 2014, to determine whether the organization had any control over Iran's ccTLD. The plaintiffs aimed to seize the .ir and ایران ccTLDs, and sell them to the highest bidder (McKnight, 2014).

Although a Washington D.C.-based federal judge ruled against the plaintiffs in November 2014 (Farivar, 2014), the controversy has been problematic for ongoing internet governance debates owing to the fact that ICANN, being subject to US jurisdiction, could feasibly be compelled to hand over existing ccTLD registries.

The intellectual property lawyer Phil Corwin spoke about the potential implications of an unfavourable judgement for ICANN & Iran, stating that if .ir and other ccTLDs were surrendered:

*"It would allow Iran and any other country to say, 'See, we can't trust ICANN. We've put the control of our own country code TLDs in the hands of an entity subject to U.S. law'"* (McKnight, 2014).

Iran openly appeared rather dismissive of the threat posed to Iran's TLDs, with Alireza Saleh, the Director of the .ir domain-holder IRNIC reacting to the June 26 court order against ICANN by stating that he doubted the feasibility of transferring ownership of TLD names to US terror victims (Small Media, 2014c).

## BUILDING BRIDGES // INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNET GOVERNANCE

International development has proven to be a repeated focus of Iran's presentations at internet governance forums since 2003. To promote issues of development, Iran has repeatedly emphasised the importance of the Millennium Development Goals,<sup>4</sup> and of other internationally-recognised development treaties and agreements.

The Millennium Development Goals have been the lynchpin, however. In its proposal to the WSIS-03 Draft Action Plan, Iran suggested that WSIS "Promote further research programmes on issues related to the goals approved by the United Nations Millennium Assembly, especially in... developing countries" (Government Of The Islamic Republic Of Iran, 2003b). More recently, at the WSIS+10 event in June 2014, ICT Minister Mahmood Vaezi spoke of the need to continue to work towards the Millennium Development Goals (Vaezi, 2014).

Even Ahmadinejad-era delegations to major internet governance events were advocates for developmental concerns. Although WCIT-12 was dominated by issues surrounding ICANN and state sovereignty, during WSIS-05 Iran proposed an amendment of Article 1 of the Political Chapeau to include a reference to the 1986 Declaration on the Right to Development, elevating it to the same position as the UN Declaration on Human Rights:

*"...respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, **and the Declaration on the Right to Development...**"* (ITU, 2005a)

Iran's preoccupation with development should not necessarily be viewed as incongruous with the other aspects of its internet governance policy. Rather, Iran's concern with development should be understood in the context of its opposition to multistakeholderism. As Julia Pohle of Vrije Universiteit Brussel explains, "in several instances, multistakeholder processes actually tend to increase the overrepresentation of actors from the highly developed Western world, whereas they neglect developing countries, which often lack independent civil society networks and strong business players that could meaningfully engage in the existing structures" (2015). As a middling-developed country undergoing rapid processes of modernisation, Iran's positions on development and multistakeholderism are not necessarily unusual.

Given the exhaustive efforts that Iran has gone to to extend internet access domestically, it is perhaps unsurprising that it has placed infrastructural development at the core of its internet governance strategy. Its successes in the field of infrastructural development allow it to boast of its tangible accomplishments at internet governance forums, and portray itself as a responsible executor of internationally-recognised internet governance objectives.

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<sup>4</sup> Millennium Development Goal 8.F calls for the expansion of ICT infrastructure: "In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications. Success is measured on the basis of the number of telephone landlines, cellular phone subscribers, and internet users per 100 people (UNICEF, 2008).

This narrative has received the public backing of international organisations, as well; UNESCO has awarded Iran with a special certificate for significantly expanding telecommunications coverage to tens of thousands of rural villages (UNCTAD, 2010).

## SMALL GAINS // INTERNET GOVERNANCE POLICY OVERVIEW

Although it has been involved in internet governance debates for the past ten years, Iran's political positions and priorities have shifted remarkably little. It has consistently advocated for the advancement of state sovereignty principles into the global system of internet governance, in an effort to secure greater powers for the state over the internet in Iran. Although the consensus-based format of internet governance conferences has precluded Iran and its sovereignty hawk allies from radically reforming the international system, it has achieved some notable political (if intangible) victories.

It has also passively supported efforts to mandate the implementation of surveillance tools such as DPI into the international system, by supporting the WCIT-12 Final Acts including ITRs 5A and 5B. Such ITRs may allow Iran to legitimise its policy of filtering internet content via DPI methods, both internationally and at home. As the ITRs only entered into force in January 2015, we are yet to see how far Iran leans on the outcome of WCIT-12, but it will be interesting to see if such regulations form a component of Iran's self-justifications in the future.

At the same time as it has supported authoritarian internet filtering measures, Iran has been one of the loudest proponents of international development targets, and the expansion of global internet access. Part of Iran's enthusiasm for development may stem from a desire to portray itself as a responsible actor in the field of global internet governance, and legitimise its other positions. But less cynically, Iran has been genuinely radical in its efforts to expand internet access, and reap the economic and social benefits of the internet.

The general stability of its internet governance objectives over the past decade begs the question as to why changes in government did not result in more dramatic changes in Iran's policy outlook. Is Iran's policy stability a result of elected governments' powerlessness in the face of top-down direction from the Office of the Supreme Leader? Institutional paralysis? Or have Iran's previous administrations simply maintained similar conceptions of the national interest?

### 3. IRANIAN POLICY-MAKING AND COORDINATION

Having established a number of linkages between Iran's domestic internet policies and its engagements on the issue of international internet governance, the final chapter of this report will explore the manner in which Iranian internet policy is formulated.

This discussion will open with a segment exploring the complex—some might say chaotic and illogical—web of organisations and institutions responsible for overseeing the formation and execution of internet management and governance policies in the Islamic Republic of Iran. After presenting a visualisation of the most influential organisations involved in internet governance events since WSIS-03, the chapter will ascertain the causes and significance of Iran's international alliances at these conferences.

Finally, the report will conclude with a discussion around the role of non-state actors in the formulation of Iranian internet governance policy, firstly by tracking the evolution of media narratives around internet policy to gain an idea of existing public discourses, and secondly by evaluating the purpose, outcomes, and significance of the tech sector-led Persian IGF initiative. The chapter will conclude that although public discourse remains fairly limited in its depth and scope, there appears to be some space opening up for independent experts and non-state actors to make greater contributions to the internet governance debate.

#### I. A TANGLED WEB // WHO SETS INTERNET GOVERNANCE POLICY?

Iran's domestic policy-making processes are byzantine in their complexity, with a number of competing bodies vying for authority over issues of internet censorship and infrastructural development. Whereas Rouhani and his cabinet have expressed some outwardly permissive attitudes regarding online expression,<sup>5</sup> appointed bodies such as the Committee to Determine Incidences of Criminal Content (CDICC) have consistently opposed the easing of internet censorship practices.<sup>6</sup>

Iranian processes for internet governance policy formulation are (unfortunately) no less baffling. Numerous bodies now appear to be involved in the process of internet governance policy-making, each with overlapping powers, and shared personnel, making it difficult to ascertain where policies and strategic planning actually originate.<sup>7</sup>

.....  
**5** In September 2014, Rouhani stated publicly that internet censorship policies were ineffective (The National, 2014). Rouhani, Zarif, and a number of other ministers have themselves been active users of social networks (Kamali Dehghan, 2013)

**6** In September 2014 the head of the CDICC Abdolsamad Khorramabadi threatened to outmaneuver the ICT Ministry if it refused to enforce a block on communication apps including Viber and WhatsApp. For more information, see (Small Media, 2014d)

**7** Iran Media Program has produced an infographic mapping out the various actors involved in creating and enforcing domestic internet policies. See (Iran Media Program, 2013)

This complicated state of affairs has only emerged very recently. Prior to 2012, elected governments formulated domestic and internet governance policies through the ICT Ministry. Consequently, Iranian delegates to internet governance forums were entirely sourced from the ICT Ministry itself, or its subsidiary the Communications Regulatory Authority of Iran (CRA). In this way, the elected president retained a degree of influence over the direction of ICT policy, which was conducted through ministerial appointees.

During the reformist government of President Mohammad Khatami, the Presidential Office was involved at a particularly active level, and participated directly in the global internet governance debate. President Khatami was in personal attendance at the 2003 WSIS event in Geneva, along with a number of his aides and high-level advisors.

No Iranian administration has played such an active role in internet governance processes since this time. The subsequent WSIS event, held in Tunis in 2005 was snubbed by Ahmadinejad, who chose instead to send a rather paltry number of presidential advisors to Tunis to accompany the ICT Ministry's delegates. In total, five members of Ahmadinejad's Presidential Office attended WSIS-05, down from the ten members of Khatami's Presidential Office that attended WSIS-03 (the President among them).

Former Iranian MP Aliakbar Mousavi Khoeini commented that international engagement on internet governance lost its importance during the Ahmadinejad administration, as ICT policy turned inward to focus on issues of domestic surveillance and control:

*"Unlike the case of the reformist government, when Khatami and the Iranian delegation attended the Geneva summit, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was not present at the 2005 Tunisia summit... As the government was actively seeking policies to restrict the internet domestically, there was little space for participating actively in these international arenas" (Mousavi Khoeini, 2014).*

Although engagement at international events dried up somewhat between 2005-13, a number of new ICT policy-making bodies flourished towards the end of Ahmadinejad's term. The 2012 creation of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace (SCC), and the 2013 formation of its subsidiary the National Centre for Cyberspace (NCC) saw these groups moving into the field of internet governance.

The SCC is comprised of 20 members, 13 of whom are drawn from government ministries and affiliated organisations, with the remaining 7 appointed directly by the Supreme Leader (Small Media, 2014e). The SCC's decisions are therefore informed by the political positions of both the elected government and the unelected Supreme Leader. Although the majority of the SCC's responsibilities relate to domestic policy formulation, the organisation's official 2012 mission statement includes one goal with direct relevance for internet governance:

*Increase [Iran's] international engagement and influence on internet issues (Ibid)*

Meanwhile the NCC, established in 2013 to execute SCC policy, has a number of responsibilities relevant to international internet governance policy formation. These include:

- Preparation for a cultural war between Iran and its enemies
- Protecting the country against cyber attacks
- Collaborating with other nations and governments to decrease the influence of superpower nations over the internet, and to protect the international rights of Iranian users (*ibid*)

This final provision suggests that the NCC plays a significant role in determining internet governance policy. In fact, since 2013, the organisation has had some presence at international internet governance events. Although ITU events have continued to see participation from ICT Ministry delegates, the sole Iranian attendee of the 2014 NETmundial conference was Mr. Kavous Arasteh, who was listed as a member of the NCC (NETmundial, 2014b).

Confusingly, Arasteh has previously been listed as a member of the ICT Ministry's own delegation at internet governance events, and as an ICT Ministry representative he was *the* influential player within the Iranian delegation at WCIT-12, orchestrating the contentious vote that plunged the forum into chaos (Centr, 2012: 3). He continues to be listed as a Senior Advisor to the ICT Ministry, and a member of the Communications Regulatory Authority in ITU documents dating from early 2014.

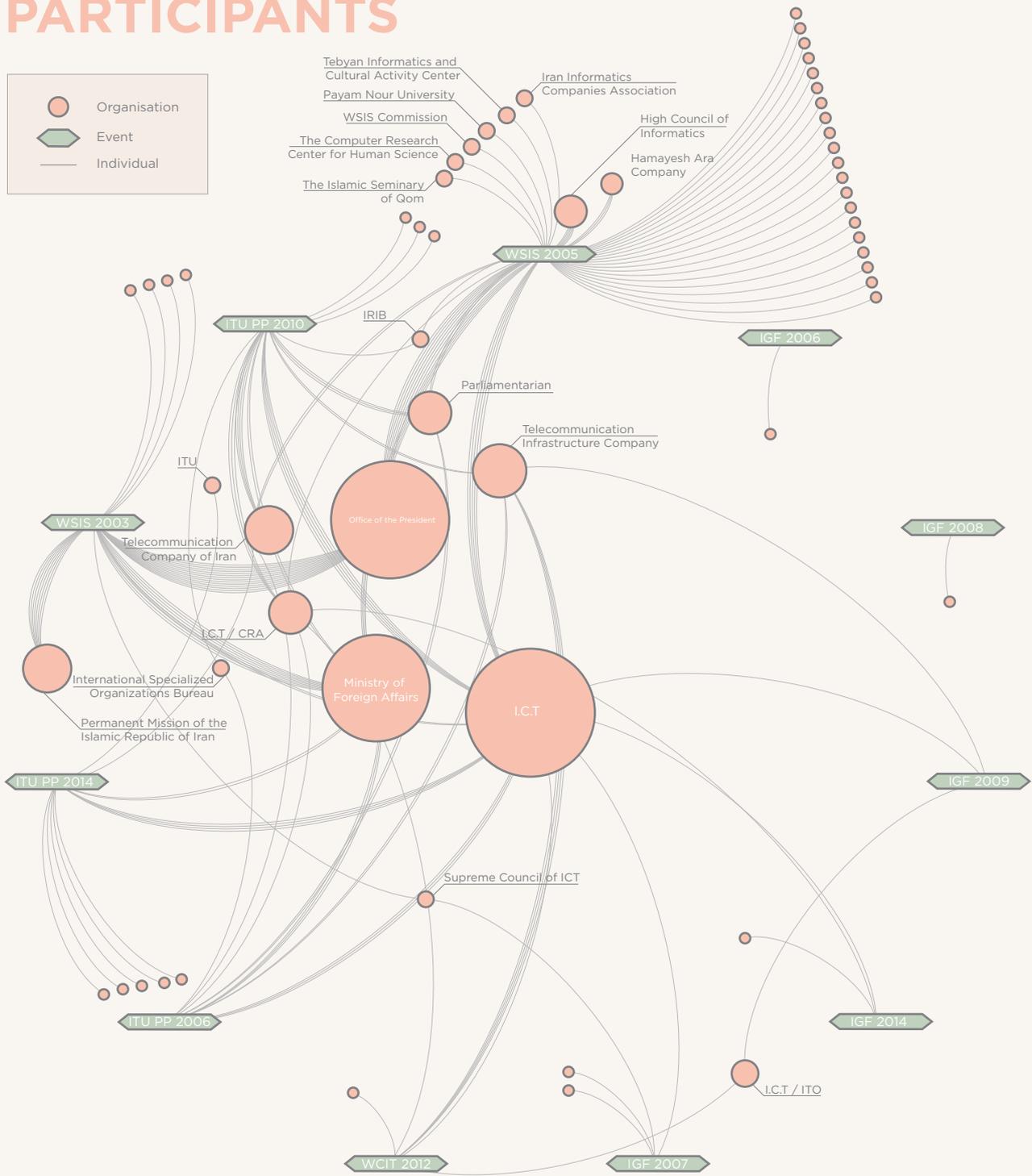
Such peculiarities suggest that there is a broad overlap between the personnel and powers of the ICT Ministry, SCC and NCC, to the extent that delineating each organisation's precise role and responsibilities becomes essentially impossible. What can be said is that despite the apparent division of responsibilities, the ICT Ministry appears to retain the largest profile amongst Iranian organisations participating at internet governance events.

Also notable is the complete lack of Iranian civil society or private sector engagement in internet governance forums in recent years; all participants since WSIS-05 have been from state bodies, reflecting the Iranian government's public stance in support of a multilateral, but not necessarily multistakeholder model of internet governance.

Even at WSIS-05, when the Ahmadinejad administration sent a not-insubstantial 'Cultural and Scientific Delegation' composed of academics and private sector representatives, there is no evidence to suggest that the non-governmental delegates played a significant role in devising or advancing Iranian policy objectives.

The following visualisation shows the organisations that have participated in major internet governance events since WSIS-03. It demonstrates how the composition of Iranian delegations has changed dramatically over the past 12 years, with various levels of presidential interest, and a shifting array of official and semi-official organisations taking the lead in engaging with international internet governance events.

# MAPPING PARTICIPANTS



## Other Organisations

### IGF 2006

Iranian Youth ICT NGO

### IGF 2007

Computer Research Center of Islamic Sciences; Informatics Science and Research Center-Qom

### IGF 2008

Institute for Research in Fundamental Sciences

### IGF 2014

National Centre of Cyberspace

### ITU PP 2010

AmirKabir University; Fars News Agency; Iranian Space Agency

### ITU PP 2014

Center for Strategic Research; Economic Cooperation Organization; Naftiran Oil Company; Oil Industries Engineering and Construction; Tarbiat Modares University

### WCIT 2012

Iran Post Company

### WSIS 2003

Deputy Permanent Representative (Geneva); Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance; Ministry of Post Telegraph and Telephone; Planning and Budget Organization

### WSIS 2005

Cultural Heritage Organization; Education Planning and Research Organization; Electronic Publishers Association; Embassy of the Islamic Republic Of Iran In Tunis; International Library of Shiraz; Iran Free/Open Source Project; Iran Internet Companies Association; Iran University of Science and Industry; Isfahan Science and Technology Center; Management and Planning Organization; Ministry of Education; Ministry of Welfare and Social Security; National Iranian Oil Company; National Organization of Youths; Rooyesh Information and Communication Technology Incubator; Shiraz Research Center; Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution; Tehran Municipality; WSIS National Committee

## II. INFLUENCING PEOPLE // INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES

Having offered a comprehensive overview of Iran's policy-making bodies and processes, and their delegations to internet governance forums, this report now considers the nature and efficacy of Iran's strategic alliances with other countries at these events.

Despite having found itself increasingly isolated in recent years, Iran has managed to position itself as an influential player in the global faction of 'sovereignty hawks' pushing for radical reform of the internet governance system.

This segment of the report describes how Iran has integrated itself into this network of hawks, while teasing open the policy differences it has with its allies. This analysis is presented through the prism of Iran's proposals and amendments to internet governance documents, along with its statements in support of other countries' proposals.

Iran's alliances at internet governance forums frequently deviate from its geopolitical alignments. Although Iran has endured crippling isolation from the international community over the past decade, and has maintained a stance of open antagonism with the US and Europe, it has been remarkably flexible in its willingness to negotiate and ally with its geopolitical adversaries, whether from the West, or elsewhere in the MENA region.

The difficulty of securing a comprehensive collection of conference transcripts, or detailed records of Iran's comments at preparatory meetings and forums means that we are unable to provide a complete overview of Iran's diplomatic wrangling.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, this section uses available sources to illustrate the diverse array of alliances and policy alignments that Iran has participated in over the past decade.

### LOOKING WESTWARD // UNLIKELY PARTNERS AT WSIS-03

The Iranian delegation at WSIS-03 was the most conciliatory of any of the delegations covered in this study, and demonstrated some of the most striking openness towards its traditional opponents.

One of the most notable developments at WSIS-03 was the European Commission's surprising intervention criticising the existing US-dominated model of internet governance, and proposing the establishment of a 'new cooperation model' that would assume responsibility over a number of key areas of internet governance policy. Its proposal read:

The new cooperation model should include the development and application of globally applicable public policy principles and provide an international government involvement at the level of principles over the following naming, numbering and addressing-related matters:

.....

<sup>8</sup> The Iranian government and the ITU share reservations about the concept of transparency, and consequently documents can be difficult to acquire.

- a. Provision for a global allocation system of IP number blocks, which is equitable and efficient;
- b. Procedures for changing the root zone file, specifically for the insertion of new top level domains in the root system and changes of ccTLD managers;
- c. Establishment of contingency plans to ensure the continuity of crucial DNS functions;
- d. Establishment of an arbitration and dispute resolution mechanism based on international law in case of disputes;
- e. Rules applicable to DNS system (European Union, 2003).

Iran enthusiastically supported the proposals (alongside Saudi Arabia and China). This enthusiastic support brought the wrath of former Swedish prime minister Carl Bildt, who expressed his concern about the EC proposals being 'hijacked' by authoritarian countries (Wray, 2005).

Europe would reverse its outright opposition to the status quo at future events, and take a position more in line with that of the United States. Nonetheless, the events at WSIS-03 demonstrated that Iran's positions at internet governance forums were not fuelled purely by an ideologically-rooted antagonism with the West; if the policies of Western powers aligned with Iran's interests, there was the potential for positive engagement and consensus.

## KNOWING YOUR FRIENDS // ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, INTERNET FREEDOM, AND POLICY ALIGNMENT

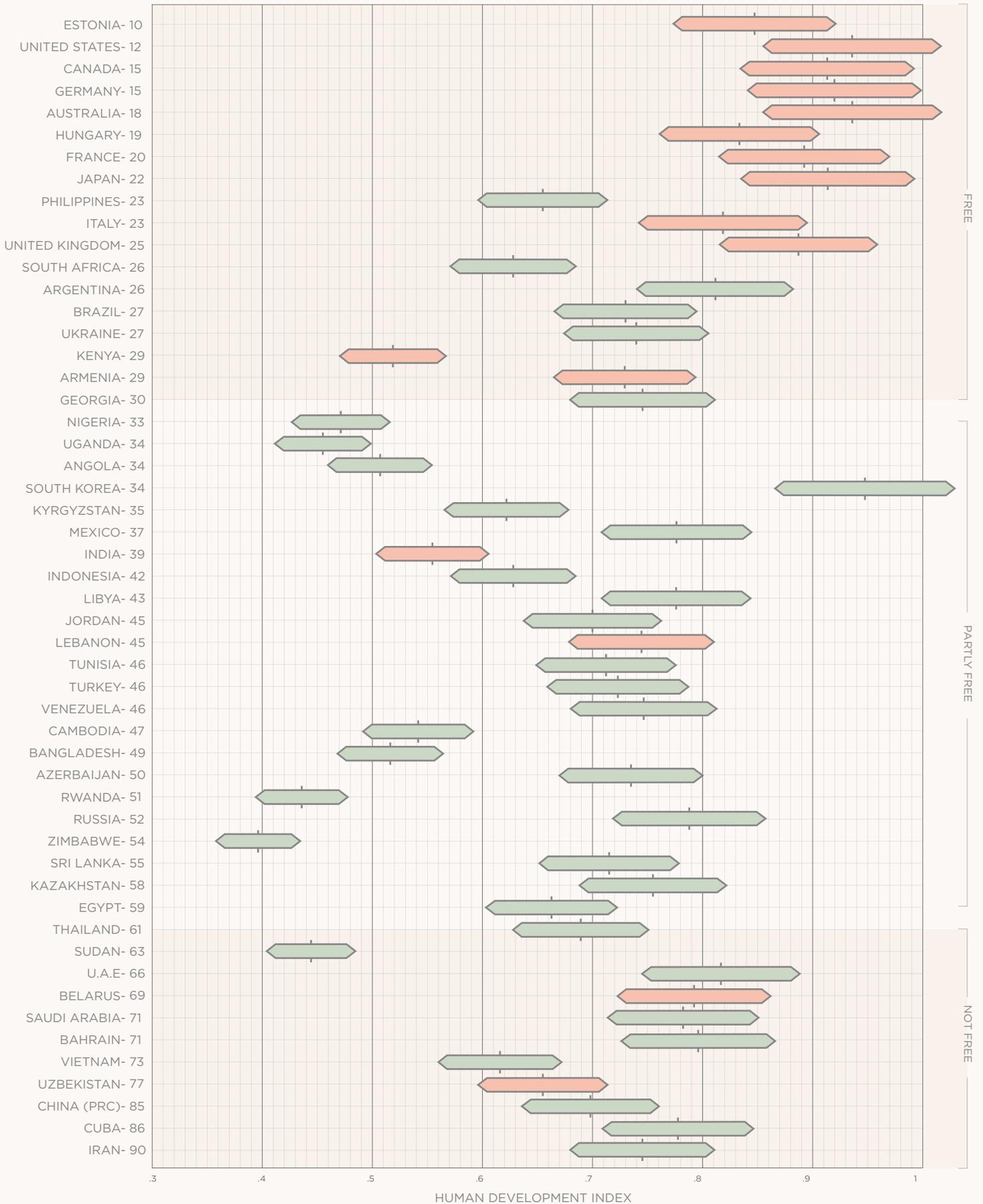
It is worth reiterating that a preoccupation with the issue of state sovereignty in internet governance is not unique to Iran; it is certainly no 'rogue state'. The WCIT-12 vote illustrated this explicitly, dividing the international community into two camps correlating with their economic development, and internet freedom scores.

The following visualisation plots WCIT-12 votes, Human Development Index scores, and Internet Freedom rankings. In doing so, it demonstrates how the dissenters at WCIT-12 were not only those countries with high levels of internet freedom, but were also almost exclusively highly-developed and based in the Global North. Authoritarianism is not the only rationale for advocating ICANN reform; there seems to be general agreement amongst the nations of the Global South that the existing system is deeply inequitable.

# VOTE ON THE WCIT-12 FINAL ACTS BY COUNTRY

COUNTRY NAME-  
INTERNET  
FREEDOM RATING

Position on the Human Development Index  
Green= Voted Yes  
Pink= Voted No  
Length= Human Development Index



Although at WCIT-12 Iran was a member of a coalition of developing and moderately developed states from the Global South, it should be emphasised that this was a very loose alliance-of-convenience united by vague desires to reform ICANN. Whereas Iran was joined by democratic nations such as Brazil and South Africa in the vote, there is no evidence that Iran has ever engaged in any degree of bilateral policy coordination with these states.

On the contrary, there is evidence that the internet governance policies of Iran and the democratic hawks have diverged to a large degree since their united display at WCIT-12. Mueller describes how the primary coordinator of Brazilian internet governance policy is the corporatist Brazilian Internet Steering Committee (CGI), which is made up of members from civil society, government, academia, and the private sector (Mueller and Wagner, 2014: 14). Such a multistakeholder approach has encouraged Brazilian policy to become more sympathetic to ICANN, paving the way for Brazil's coordination of the NETmundial conference in conjunction with the organisation (*Ibid*, 1-2).

Up to the present, Iran's relationship with ICANN has not experienced a comparable shift towards multistakeholderism. Although there is evidence that Iran is beginning to experiment with multistakeholder initiatives at the domestic level,<sup>9</sup> its policy objectives continue to be rooted in an intergovernmental conception of internet governance. Such divergence suggests that the notion of a broad 'Global South' coalition is essentially baseless.

## NATURAL PARTNERS? // AUTHORITARIANISM AND INTERNATIONAL ALLIANCES

Although Iran has found temporary allies in the Global South, the most frequent incidences of policy alignment have been with countries that have pushed to extend state authority over domestic networks. These partners have included geopolitical allies such as Russia, Syria, or China, but also bitter rivals like Saudi Arabia.

The confluence of Iran and Saudi Arabia's policy objectives are evident at WSIS-05, when both countries' delegations advocated for the introduction of state sovereignty language into the WGIG proposals. Saudi Arabia's proposal read:

*"[The Arab Group] would propose rewording of the present text to reflect respect for sovereignty of States and leaving the selection of mechanisms to States to decide what is suitable for their respective circumstances"* (Saudi Arabia/Arab Group, 2005).

In a similar manner, Iran called for:

*"[the establishment of] an intergovernmental Council for Global Public Policy and Oversight"* (Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2005).

.....

<sup>9</sup> Chapter III.iv offers a detailed account of the objectives, outcomes and implications of the Persian IGF.

While the objectives of Iran and Saudi Arabia are closely aligned, there is no real evidence of direct policy coordination between the two states. Although they have broadly pursued the same objectives, the two geopolitical rivals have done so in an independent manner, rather than as intimate allies.

Russia has been a somewhat closer partner for Iran. At WSIS-05, their policy alignments were evident at the Preparatory Stage, and were synchronised by way of some collaborative activities. Iran's proposed amendment to include the phrase 'national sovereignty' in the first article of the Political Chapeau was directly co-sponsored by Russia and Azerbaijan (ITU, 2005a).

Iran's alignment with Russia has continued well into 2014. The Centre for Internet and Society grouped the countries together in its analysis of countries' proposals to the NETmundial conference, in that they both advocate the transfer of IANA's functions to a multilateral body (2014). Iran's insistence that NETmundial resolve to facilitate an "Agreement on the need to Internationalize... Internet Governance" (National Centre of Cyberspace, 2014: 33) is directly comparable to Russia's contribution, which argues that "it is necessary to define what should be regulated at the international level" (State Duma of the Russian Federation, 2014).

Although such proposals point towards a high degree of policy alignment between Iran and Russia, as with the case of Saudi Arabia, there is limited evidence to suggest that state authorities are in direct contact to coordinate their contributions to internet governance events. For instance, in the aforementioned Political Chapeau of WSIS-05, Iran and Russia's proposal to include the phrase 'national sovereignty' is the *only* one on which their contributions are mutually-supportive.

Only one of Iran's other contributions is supported by another state, where Iran and Algeria agree to 'remove square brackets' in Article 14. The authoritarian 'coalition' of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, China and Cuba each made their own suggestions as to how the Political Chapeau should be modified, suggesting that—at the Preparatory Stages at least—the level of direct policy coordination between authoritarian states is low, and that Iran is essentially an autonomous actor when devising and advancing internet governance policies.

### **III. BLACKOUT // INTERNET GOVERNANCE IN THE IRANIAN MEDIA**

Considering the efforts made by the Iranian government to loudly advocate for the dramatic transformation of the global internet governance system, it is surprising how little coverage its efforts receive in the domestic press. Until recently, articles concerning Iran's activities at internet governance events were nearly non-existent. Small Media was unable to find evidence of any Persian-language articles containing the term 'internet governance' prior to December 2004, and only six dating from 2004-2011.

In 2012, the number of articles concerning 'internet governance' spiked, although coverage remained exceedingly scarce on major news outlets. Four articles were published in 2012 alone, with three following in 2013 and 2014. The following segment shall demonstrate how the Iranian press has provided support to the Iranian government's position on internet governance issues, whilst offering generally favourable coverage of the state's halting attempts to cultivate domestic engagement.

But first, we present the following visualisation showing the evolution of press narratives relating to internet governance events. Extracts have been taken from all relevant Persian-language news articles from the Iranian press, and overlaid on the 'Events Timeline' visualisation seen earlier in the report.

The visualisation also demonstrates that press discussions about internet governance issues have only 'boomed' in the past year, and that such articles are still confined to the 'specialist' IT press.

# PRESS TIMELINE

## How to Read



Event

### Descriptive // Introductions to Internet Governance

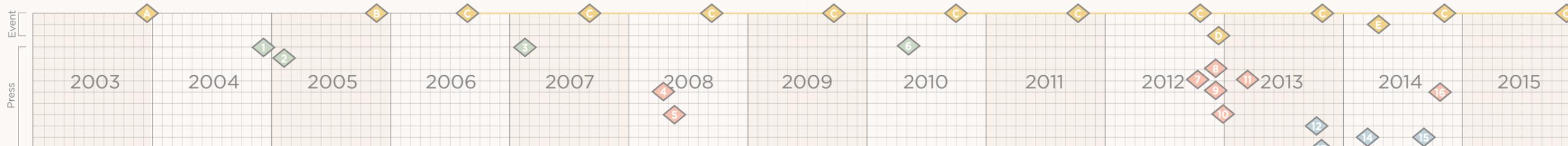
These articles introduced readers to internet governance issues in a descriptive, and mostly even-handed manner. Some are more detailed than others, but all are generally disengaged from the more emotive questions of state involvement in internet governance.

### State-focused // Critical of US

Reflecting the state's increasing hostility to US internet governance policy under Ahmadinejad, the press grew more critical of the US's position from 2008 onwards. Many of the most hostile articles were written in 2012, in the same year that Iran led the charge against the US position at the WCIT-12 conference. Critiques of the US position have continued into 2014, though their frequency has declined.

### Civil society-focused // Promoting Civil Society Involvement

In 2013-14 the press switched its focus to the Persian IGF, an Iran-based event that promised to involve tech and internet governance experts more substantively in the policy-making process.



**A**  
12/2003  
**World Summit on Information Society I, Geneva**

**1**  
10/12/2004  
**Tebyan: What is 'internet governance'?**  
The debate emerging from the World Summit on the Information Society Forum 2013 in Geneva could be, in one sense, seen as a debate over control or the freedom of ideas and in another sense a debate over equal access. In the area of control and freedom one can trace civil groups, freedom seekers, supporters of the promotion of human rights and radical groups but in the area of equality of access, there are issues related to the potential risks of access based on wealth and power. (Tebyan)

**2**  
5/2/2005  
**ITAnalyse: The objectives of WSIS-05**  
The information society is a revolution which is comparable with the revolution of the alphabet, or the printing press. This new culture is a phenomenon based on symbols, codes, models, programmes, formal languages, algorithms and new ideas which require 'information literacy'. (ITAnalyse)

**B**  
11/2005  
**World Summit on Information Society II, Tunis**

**C**  
10,11/2005 - 10,11/2016 (Annually)  
**Internet Governance Forum**

**3**  
2/2/2007  
**Hamshahr: Another introduction to WSIS**  
It seems that one of the difficulties between now and 2015 will be how to effectively make a distinction between these three currents... the government sector seeking authority, the private sector seeking profit, and the civil sector seeking independence. (Hamshahr)

**4**  
19/4/2008  
**Aftab: US role in managing ICANN**  
Even though the US has not yet used ICANN to limit internet access, it has the capability to do so, and the very existence of this capability has been a cause of concern for many world politicians

**5**  
10/5/2008  
**Vista: An 'overview' of internet governance, with harsh critiques of the US**  
It can be generally concluded that the internet is guided by a centralised US-based system, and this is the source of a heated global debate over the management of the internet. When the US faced signs of resistance against the monopoly of the ICANN from the EU, the US lost its biggest ally.

**6**  
3/5/2010  
**Jam-e Jam: What's the role of the IGF?**  
One of the most important outcomes of the World Summit on Information Society was the creation of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), which does not have any executive power and acts merely in a passive leadership capacity... This forum does not issue any resolutions or orders, and merely provides suggestions and recommendations for global society.

**7**  
4/10/2012  
**Mashregh News: US hypocrisy on mass surveillance**  
The US Senate is seeking to oppose any supervision or monitoring of the internet at the same time as the US manages various internet surveillance bodies, spies on its own people and the people of the world

**D**  
12/2012  
**World Conference on International Communications**

**8**  
8/12/2012  
**Fars News: US and EU guard status quo against global opposition**  
The US, the EU and other Western countries strive to defend the chaotic conditions of today while Russia, China and many African and Arabic countries claim that the internet is undermining their national laws while benefiting American corporations.

**9**  
8/12/2012  
**Amin-e Jameeh: The EU and Russia unite against US on internet sovereignty**  
Countries like Russia and the EU deeply believe that the laws and regulations of internet governance should be under the leadership of the International Telecommunication Union. One of the reasons that members of the EU have suggested is of course the issue of censorship and freedom of online speech that they have underlined"

**10**  
11/12/2012  
**ISNA: The US and EU form a united front**  
The US and Western countries are now seeking to form alliances and a unified front to exploit some of the existing weaknesses of the ITU, so that they can once again defend against efforts to challenge their undisputed governance of the internet.

**11**  
9/3/2013  
**Ghatreh: US and allies blocked reform at WCIT-12**  
The ITU has long been a facilitator in the regulation of telecommunications. But now, it has begun to hold a series of summits, forums and meetings to update its commitments to include internet regulation, too. Last December's supposed failure of a summit, WCIT-12, produced a 30-page document that was signed by 89 countries, but opposed by the US its allies, including the EU and Canada.

**12**  
13/10/2013  
**YJC: The Persian IGF is an opportunity for experts and civil society**  
Given the country's ongoing isolation in issues of global internet governance, it seems that establishing a Persian-speaking body called the "Persian IGF" can contribute to the development of the country's international communications, and open up new pathways for consultants and experts to contribute to internet governance decision-making processes.

**13**  
28/10/2013  
**Fars News: Iran involving experts in preparations for WSIS-14**  
Ali Asghar Ansari, at the Development and Administration Office of the National Information Network, said: 'by holding professional workshops and preparing a national report we aim to have an effective presence in the WSIS 2014 forum. We aim to have a seminar in the country before the beginning of this forum in which we will examine how to achieve our goals and objectives.'

**14**  
10/3/2014  
**ANA: Persian IGF will allow Iranians to make bigger impact on internet governance debates**  
The Persian IGF is one of the regional fora for internet governance and seeks to prepare the grounds for the participation of Iranians in global internet policy decision-making processes, with the support of the Nasr Organisation of Tehran.

This is a regional forum for debate and discussion about the future of internet governance, which seeks to expand the role of Iranian users in important decision-making processes. cyberspace and the access of Iranians to information about internet governance issues.

**E**  
4/2014  
**E.NETmundial: Global Multistakeholder Meeting on the Future of Internet Governance**

**15**  
6/9/2014  
**ITNA: Persian IGF/Persian ICT Week was messy, and achieved little**  
The obscurity of the objectives of the conference led the speakers to just express their own concerns and their individual concerns. Therefore, the topics discussed in the conference ranged from the First Vice President's emphasis on increasing internet speeds, to speeches about potential applications of the internet.

**16**  
27/10/2014  
**Taamol News: There's a global consensus around ending US internet hegemony**  
At the moment, the internet is entirely dependent on the US, which poses economic and security threats for the rest of the world. It seems that in the current circumstances, internet governance should move towards establishing 'a sustainable, decentralised, and coherent network, accessible to all.

## GENERAL IGNORANCE // MEDIA AND INTERNET GOVERNANCE AWARENESS

Aliakbar Mousavi Khoeini has criticised the scant coverage that has been offered by the Iranian press on the topic of internet governance, suggesting that it lacks in detail, and offers weak analysis of the major contemporary issues in the field:

*“Inside the country, the participation of an authority or a delegation from Iran is covered very broadly and details are usually left out. Therefore, in this sense there has been little tangible change.”*

Khoeini attributes the lack of coverage to a potent cocktail of censorship and widespread ignorance about the key issues in contemporary internet governance debates:

*“Unfortunately these issues are censored in the news of Persian media inside Iran. Even international Persian media outside the country have given little coverage to such issues. Therefore, sometimes there is little knowledge or awareness of the functions of these institutions or organisations in society” (Mousavi Khoeini, 2014).*

Mahmood Enayat agrees that general ignorance about the role of internet governance organisations is proving to be one of the biggest barriers to wider engagement on internet governance issues:

*“There’s coverage in niche areas of the tech press, definitely; at least for those people who are interested. But in terms of the conversation in the wider sector, I don’t think that many people actually know—even in the IT sector—what the IGF is” (Enayat, 2014).*

Although the press has been fairly poor at covering international internet governance events, there has been a marked increase in the number of articles on the topic since 2012. However, the majority of articles written since then have been concerned primarily with criticisms of the US’s position on internet governance issues rather than providing in-depth introductions to the topic.

## LOOKING INWARD // MEDIA AND DOMESTIC INITIATIVES

Domestic internet governance events began to receive greater attention from 2013 onwards. In October 2013, state-affiliated media promoted the then-upcoming Persian IGF as an important event that would foster internet governance dialogues within Iran, and enable civil society and specialists to contribute to policy formation. A 2013 post from the state broadcaster IRIB-affiliated Young Journalists’ Club (YJC, 2013) reads:

*“Given the country’s ongoing isolation in issues of global internet governance, it seems that establishing a Persian-speaking body called the “Persian IGF” can contribute to the development of the country’s international communications, and open up new pathways for consultants and experts to contribute to internet governance decision-making processes.”*

In the immediate run-up to the event, the Azad Free University-affiliated news site Azad Free News (2014) was upbeat about the potential impact of the Persian IGF on public awareness of internet governance issues, writing:

*“The Persian IGF is one of the regional fora for internet governance and seeks to prepare the grounds for the participation of Iranians in global internet policy decision-making processes, with the support of the Nasr Organisation of Tehran.*

*This is a regional forum for debate and discussion about the future of internet governance, which seeks to expand the role of Iranian users in important decision-making processes, cyberspace and the access of Iranians to information about internet governance issues.”*

The press’ preoccupation with the Persian IGF in 2013-14 marks a departure from its previous record of covering internet governance issues, where it focused almost exclusively on criticising the United States’ position vis-à-vis ICANN and IANA. The press narrative appears to have evolved somewhat in recent years, with the objective of promoting domestic dialogue around internet governance issues, and emphasising the importance of involving experts and the tech community in decision-making processes. It will be interesting to see how these trends develop in the wake of the first Persian IGF event, to which this report now turns.

#### **IV. SHOWING INITIATIVE // THE PERSIAN IGF**

Since its launch in 2006, the popularity of the IGF has led to the creation of several regional events, in which the IGF’s approach and procedures are replicated on a smaller scale. In 2014, Iran followed the trend by convening the Persian IGF, an internet governance event aimed at the Persian-speaking community, including stakeholders in Iran, Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

The origins of the Persian IGF lie in an online training session covering internet governance processes convened in preparation for the 2013 IGF meeting in Bali. The session was organised by an informal working group and supported by Iran’s Top Level Domain registry (IRNIC) and the Tehran ICT Guild (TIG) (Persian IGF, 2014a). At the 2013 IGF meeting, the working group held a pre-event conference to announce the formation of the Persian IGF. Organisers describe how this announcement was met with great excitement from the global internet governance community (*ibid*).

In a February 2014 letter to the (global) Internet Governance Forum Secretariat, organisers outlined the objectives of the Persian IGF: “[the] Persian Internet Governance Forum (Persian IGF) is purposed to provide a multistakeholder venue where different stakeholder groups discuss and exchange knowledge, viewpoints and ideas about current and emerging internet governance issues” (*ibid*). Originally planned to focus exclusively on Iran, the event broadened its scope to include the entire Persian-speaking community, with members in Afghanistan, Tajikistan and the Iranian diaspora (*ibid*). With support from the Lebanese ICT

industry organisation IJMA3 and the Tehran ICT Guild (TIG) (IJMA3, 2014), the stage was set for the first Persian IGF conference to be convened in Tehran in August 2014.

Beyond the general overview sketched above, very little information is available in English on the Persian IGF. However, Small Media has located a publicly available, Persian-language Persian IGF mailing list, in which various organisers and participants discussed the goals, processes, and obstacles involved in convening this forum. We have analysed a number of documents from this mailing list, and verified their contents with an array of external experts in order to piece together an overview of the Persian IGF's objectives and outcomes. This segment presents our findings.<sup>10</sup>

The aim of this chapter is not to extrapolate any definitive conclusions from a discussion of the Persian IGF; rather, this chapter seeks to shed some light on an opaque and under-reported event by presenting accounts from the organisers themselves (Persian IGF, 2014b).<sup>11</sup> The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the possible implications of the Persian IGF, and considers whether it may signal the beginning of a shift in Tehran's position on multistakeholderism, and internet governance policy more generally.

## HUMBLE BEGINNINGS // PLANNING AND INITIAL DEVELOPMENTS

According to the online Persian IGF group, the idea for a Persian IGF grew out of the observation that Persian-speaking stakeholders were relatively absent from global internet governance events. The plan was to create a venue in which the Persian-speaking community could discuss internet governance issues of concern. The launch of the Persian IGF was first announced by a group of Iranian internet governance experts at the 8th annual IGF conference in Bali.

The next step for organisers was to return to Iran and search for an organisation to host and sponsor the event. Organisers eventually settled on IJMA3, a Lebanese NGO specialising in ICT4D. The event was co-hosted by the Tehran ICT Guild, an organisation that facilitates relationships between the government and private sector tech companies in Iran (IJMA3, 2014).

After signing a contract with IJMA3, the organisers announced the formation of a Multistakeholder Advisory Group (MAG) and solicited applications. There were some concerns because the number of applicants was quite small, but given the arcane and technical nature of internet governance policy, it is understandable that few people would be both interested and qualified.

.....

**10** We reached out to a the Lebanon-based partner organisation IJMA3, and governmental conference attendees, but received no response. The insights that can be drawn from the following discussion are therefore necessarily limited.

**11** Unless otherwise noted, all of the information in this section was obtained via the Persian IGF mailing list (available at <https://groups.google.com/forum/#!forum/persian-igf>)

After much wrangling, a MAG was formed, meetings were convened (Persian ICT Week, 2014), and it seemed that everything was in place for the launch of the Persian IGF. But despite all this preparation, the event never got off the ground. Before venturing into an exploration of the potential implications of the Persian IGF, this chapter will first revisit the event's organising processes, in order to build a picture of the various challengers the organisers faced.

## ORGANISED CHAOS // LOGISTICAL CHALLENGES

Organising any large-scale event comes with its fair share of logistical challenges, and the Persian IGF was no exception. Yet standard organisational issues were compounded by the sensitive and often chaotic nature of internet issues in Iran. Problems first began to arise early on, when some Iranian stakeholders were not happy that the event was being hosted by a foreign organisation. However, the justification for allowing an outside group to host the event was based on the notion of neutrality: organisers reasoned that as a non-Iranian organisation, IJMA3 could serve as an unbiased administrator capable of speaking freely and acting impartially.

Another contentious issue concerned the lack of transparency in the MAG selection process. The opacity of the process enabled various organisations with vested interests to try to push the conference in a direction that would be favourable to them. Moreover, applications from the Iranian diaspora prompted anxiety among some of the organisers, who worried that these expatriates might raise human rights concerns that would not sit well with the Iranian government.

Conflicts over the MAG selection process, the opacity of the meetings, and the dissatisfaction of some individuals and stakeholder groups led to an urgent meeting between various stakeholders, which featured the active participation of the government, technical community and private sector.

Participants decided, *through a multistakeholder process*, that the best course of action was to change the composition of the MAG, take measures to increase its transparency, and recruit supporting organizations.

While this decision ultimately failed to resolve the problems facing the Persian IGF, the process by which it was reached—coupled with the active participation of the government in that process—may portend intimations of a departure from Iran's general tendency to emphasize state sovereignty in internet governance debates.

## TAKING AN INTEREST // THE GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

In the early planning stages of the Persian IGF, there was a general perception among stakeholders that the Iranian government would not be particularly interested in participating. Yet as the process went on, the event began to pique the government's interest. ICT Ministry employees and affiliates began to show up to preparatory meetings, and became involved with the process of drafting a multistakeholder memorandum of understanding (MOU).

This is not to suggest that the Iranian government exerted excessive influence over the event; available evidence suggests that the government participated on equal footing with other stakeholder groups. The central point is that the forum was spearheaded by civil society, the private sector and the technical community; it attracted the government's attention only *after* it became more active.

It is difficult to say authoritatively what prompted the government's interest in the Persian IGF. One possible explanation concerns soft power. Given the warm reception that the idea of convening a Persian IGF received at the global IGF in Bali, the Iranian government may have wanted its name associated with such a favourably viewed initiative.

It is also possible that Iran's government saw in the Persian IGF a potential venue for domestic policy formulation, and wanted to ensure it had a seat at the table. Whatever attracted the government's attention, the fact remains that the development of the Persian IGF was led by the Iranian tech sector, rather than being an initiative organised by the state in a top-down manner.

Given that the event has so far failed to get off the ground, any discussions around the significance of the forum and potential motivations for government involvement remain somewhat speculative. Yet the leading role played by civil society and other non-governmental stakeholder groups in organising the Persian IGF, coupled with the government's participation in a multistakeholder format, represent an interesting contrast to Iran's generally state-centric approach to internet governance events.

While the Persian IGF was ultimately unsuccessful, the process suggests that there is space for non-governmental stakeholders in Iran's internet governance debates. Whether or not Iranian civil society groups, internet experts, and private sector organisations will be able to assume a greater role at global governance forums is an interesting question for further research to address.

## CONCLUSIONS

This report has established a number of key features of Iran's engagements with the international debate around internet governance, along with some insights into the evolving processes of policy formation and implementation in the Islamic Republic under President Rouhani.

Below, we present a number of our main conclusions, along with some suggestions as to future research questions.

- **Iran's primary objective has been to challenge existing internet governance structures, most notably the United States' privileged position vis-à-vis IANA and ICANN**

Iran has achieved some notable political victories in its campaign against the status quo, delivering a bloody nose to the US and its allies at WCIT-12. But these victories have ultimately proven hollow, and Iran has ultimately failed to secure widespread international backing for its position.

- **Secondary objectives have included international development and expansion of filtering capabilities**

Iran has very consistently stressed its dedication to the pursuit of the Millennium Development Goals, with the Khatami, Ahmadinejad and Rouhani administrations each clearly advocating for the expansion of internet access in Iran, including ambitious initiatives in rural regions.

This position is rooted in a few key concerns: firstly, a sincere desire to harness the economic and social potential of the internet. Secondly, by presenting itself as a mature and responsible executor of globally accepted development standards, Iran is able to boost its credibility on a wider range of internet governance issues and thereby accrue greater political capital.

- **It is too simplistic to say that Iran allies only with authoritarian countries on internet governance issues**

Although Iran's most consistent partners have been authoritarian nations (Russia seemingly the most reliable), it has participated in loose coalitions with democratic developing nations like Brazil, although the nature of their opposition to the existing ICANN regime differs substantively.

Iran does not always support the proposals of other authoritarian nations, nor do its own proposals always receive their support. A lack of mutually-reinforcing proposals at preparatory events suggest that policy is only very loosely co-ordinated at the inter-state level.

- **Public discourse around internet governance issues in Iran remains generally underdeveloped, and the quantity and quality of media coverage is lacking**

Press coverage of core internet governance issues and events remains scarce, and is generally relegated to niche outlets targeted at the tech community. When internet governance topics do infiltrate the mainstream media, coverage is frequently politicised, and framed entirely around the perceived hegemony of the United States.

- **Internet governance is essentially a government-monopolised initiative in Iran, with civil society generally excluded from decision-making processes, however, recent events have suggested that the government may be willing to engage with domestic multistakeholder processes at some level**

Historically, the state has played a dominant role in debating, making, and executing internet governance policy in Iran. Civil society groups have been broadly excluded from Iran's delegations to internet governance forums since the beginning of the Ahmadinejad administration.

However, there are some hints that the Rouhani administration may be willing to engage with the issue of internet governance in a more open manner than that of his predecessor. Although domestic internet governance initiatives such as the Persian IGF have so far been poorly attended, and lacking in tangible achievements, the government's willingness to allow tech experts to take the lead in its organisation may pave the way for greater state engagement with multistakeholder initiatives.

As stated previously, there are limits to the accessibility of documents, owing to a dearth of transparency in both the Islamic Republic of Iran and the ITU. While this report cannot present a comprehensive record of Iran's engagements with the internet governance debate, it has provided a unique and insightful overview of Iran's past and present engagements with key questions in the field of internet governance, and serves as a jumping off point, posing a number of useful questions that we urge other researchers to take forward in future investigations.

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**A SMALL MEDIA REPORT**

This research has been undertaken with the support of the **INTERNET POLICY OBSERVATORY**