

Administration Promotes Internet Freedom in Iran with Smarter Sanctions

June 5, 2013

U.S. trade sanctions are meant to put economic and political pressure on regimes that are considered rogue or repressive, especially those that are suspected of sponsoring terrorism. Unfortunately, such sanctions can also [stifle](#) [1] the important work of the people inside of those countries who are working to resist oppression, reform their governments, or simply communicate with each other and the outside world. That's why CDT applauds last week's move by the Obama Administration to issue targeted exceptions to U.S. trade sanctions against Iran in order to foster Iranian citizens' use of the Internet and other modern communications tools, and why we hope to see this smarter approach to sanctions soon applied to other countries like Syria, Cuba and Sudan.

Specifically, the U.S. Treasury Department last Thursday [announced](#) [2] that it was issuing a new "[General License](#)" [3]—effective immediately—authorizing export to non-government Iranian consumers a variety of software and hardware products and services, from laptops and mobile phones to VPN and web hosting services to critical software updates and anti-virus programs. The new license, premised on the idea that "the people of Iran should be able to communicate and access information without being subject to reprisals by their government" and aimed at "help[ing] to facilitate the free flow information in Iran and with Iranians", comes at a critical time. Iran is less than two weeks away from its first presidential election since the highly contested election of 2009 that led to [Green Revolution protests](#) [4], and the Iranian government's online censorship and surveillance efforts have been stepped up to prevent similar protests this time around. The new license closely follows the recommendations made in a [joint letter](#) [5] to the State and Treasury Departments late last year that was signed by organizations such as the International [Campaign for Human Rights in Iran](#) [6], the [National Iranian American Council](#) [7], and CDT; the work of other organizations such as the [Open Technology Institute](#) [8], the [Global Network Initiative](#) [9] and [Access](#) [10] has also been critical to making this new license a reality.

Of course, we all know that the Internet isn't "[magic freedom juice](#) [11]". But the Arab Spring and even this past week's protests in Turkey have demonstrated how the availability of Internet technology, and especially the ability to organize using [social media](#) [12], can be critical to enabling the growth of opposition political movements and popular political protests, while secure communications services and fully-updated security patches and anti-virus software are also critical defenses against overreaching government surveillance via network monitoring or malware. Therefore we are deeply thankful to the U.S. officials in the Treasury Department, State Department and elsewhere who made last week's license possible. We hope that U.S. companies will move quickly to provide products and services to Iranian citizens as their election approaches, and we look forward to continuing our work with a broad coalition of organizations to ensure that this smarter approach to sanctions is applied more broadly in the future.

We're especially pleased that news of this license follows on the heels of a [similar move](#) [13] by the Canadian government to create new sanctions exemptions "for technologies that protect Iranians online and help them break through the regime's curtain of propaganda." Taken together, we hope that these shifts in policy by the U.S. and Canada represent a [new norm](#) [14]: that the tools necessary for people to freely, safely and securely access the global Internet shall not be the subject of sanctions.

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- [1] <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/05/09/iran-sanctions-stifling-irans-freedom-movement/>
- [2] <http://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/Pages/jl1961.aspx>
- [3] http://www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/iran_gld.pdf
- [4] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009%E2%80%93Iranian_election_protests
- [5] <https://www.cdt.org/files/pdfs/CDT-ITRSHRA-Internet-Report-Letter.pdf>
- [6] http://www.iranhumanrights.org/2013/06/tech_sanctions/>
- [7] http://www.niacouncil.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=9263&security=1&news_iv_ctrl=1261
- [8] http://www.newamerica.net/pressroom/2013/statement_oti_applauds_obama_administration_s_move_to_improve_access_to_tech_for_iran
- [9] <http://www.globalnetworkinitiative.org/news/global-network-initiative-welcomes-us-and-canadian-actions-enable-access-communications>
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- [11] <https://www.cdt.org/blogs/erica-newland/2903internet-bill-internet-not-magic-freedom-juice>
- [12] <http://technosociology.org/?p=1255>
- [13] <http://www.international.gc.ca/wet30-1/aff/news-communiqués/2013/05/29b.aspx?lang=eng>
- [14] <https://twitter.com/CDA/status/339903585712214019>