

US Boosts Funding of Tech Companies to Help Anti-Tehran Protests

US-backed companies record rise in use of circumvention apps in recent weeks

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US government-funded technology companies have recorded an increase in the use of circumvention software in Iran in recent weeks after boosting efforts to help Iranian anti-regime protesters thwart internet censorship and use secure mobile messaging.

The outreach is part of a US government programme dedicated to internet freedom that supports dissident pressure inside Iran and complements America's policy of "maximum pressure" over the regime.

A US state department official told the Financial Times that since protests in Iran in 2018 — at the time the largest in almost a decade — Washington had accelerated efforts to provide Iranians more options on how they communicate with each other and the outside world.

The US-supported measures include providing apps, servers and other technology to help people communicate, visit banned websites, install anti-tracking software and navigate data shutdowns. Many Iranians rely on virtual private networks (VPNs) that receive US funding or are beamed in with US support, not knowing they are relying on Washington-backed tools.

"We work with technological companies to help free flow of information and provide circumvention tools that helped in [last week's] protest," a second US state department official told the FT. "We are able to sponsor VPNs — and that allows Iranians to use the internet."

The US Treasury department has issued waivers for such software and services, despite the Trump administration's imposition of swingeing sanctions when it withdrew from the 2015 international nuclear accord.

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