

## US Internet Aid Cuts Threaten Iranians' Access to Uncensored Information

July 3, 2025

— Categories: Human Rights



In the aftermath of Israeli strikes on Iran's nuclear and military sites last month, Iranian citizens were plunged into widespread internet blackouts. At a time when many struggled to connect with loved ones or access independent news, a critical lifeline, the US-backed internet freedom programs have come under threat.

The non-profit organization NetFreedom Pioneers (NFP), which has worked for years to deliver Elon Musk's Starlink satellite internet kits into Iran, urgently appealed to the US State Department to reinstate its funding. However, weeks later, the group still had no answer.

NFP isn't alone in this uncertainty. The White House's Office of Management and Budget has proposed slashing nearly all funding for pro-democracy and internet access programs within the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. These cuts would impact projects providing virtual private networks (VPNs) and tools like Psiphon, an app millions of Iranians rely on to bypass government censorship.

Evan Firoozi, executive director of NFP, explained the high stakes: "Iran is at a critical juncture, and millions depend on tools like VPNs, Starlink, and satellite file-casting to access uncensored information." He warned that eliminating funding could sever this vital connection and leave people inside Iran trapped within the regime's propaganda.

The proposed cuts came after the Trump administration had frozen assistance funding in January. The freeze left groups like NFP without the resources needed to maintain internet access for Iranians. As a result, only about half of the Starlink kits smuggled into the country are still operational.

During protests sparked by the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in 2022, the Iranian government throttled internet service to silence dissent. The US government actively supported efforts to keep Iranians connected at the time. Today, many former officials see the proposed funding cuts as a betrayal of those commitments.

Christopher Le Mon, a deputy assistant in the bureau under the Obama administration, called the cuts "a moral travesty" and said they run counter to the administration's stated policy toward Iran.

Meanwhile, other organizations like Psiphon say their funding is also running out. Without new grants, their app, which surged in use during the 2022 protests, could vanish from Iranians' phones.

Ali Tehrani, Psiphon's director of Washington, D.C., operations, summed up the frustration: "It's so ironic that when people need it, you just do not have access. That is exactly when the Islamic Republic feeds its propaganda to them."

While the State Department has not publicly committed to reversing the funding freeze or rejecting proposed cuts, many activists warn that the window to act is closing. For countless Iranians, access to the open internet is not just a convenience; it's a crucial tool for truth, safety, and hope.