



May 16, 2022

Secretary of State Antony Blinken
U.S. Department of State
2201 C St NW
Washington, DC 20520

Secretary of Treasury Janet Yellen
U.S. Department of Treasury
1500 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, DC 20220

Dear Secretary Blinken and Secretary Yellen,

The National Iranian American Council is deeply concerned by the forceful suppression of protests in Iran and the Iranian government's increasing usage of internet shutdowns to stifle its peoples' ability to communicate online and document abuses of the government in real time.

The Iranian government's decision to slash subsidies on basic foods last week, thus dramatically raising their prices, has triggered protests in several Iranian cities that continued through the weekend. Reports indicate that Iranian authorities cracked down, dispersing protests with force and arresting some protesters, with as many as four citizens killed. At the same time, and as has become a repeating pattern, NetBlocks has documented internet outages coinciding with the outbreak of these protests.

This raises fears in Iran, and throughout the Iranian diaspora, of a reprisal of the November 2019 crackdown on protesters which left hundreds of Iranians dead amid a nationwide internet blackout.

The Biden administration has rightfully condemned the violation of Iranian citizens' rights and supported "their rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of expression online and offline." However, the Biden administration should follow up this rhetoric with concrete action to ensure U.S. policy is not unintentionally helping subvert the right of Iranians to communicate freely.



In response to the November 2019 crackdown, we [petitioned](#) the U.S. Treasury Department to update General License D-1 to support Iranians' access to the worldwide web. Regrettably, under the Trump administration, major internet providers like Google and Amazon Web Services increasingly blocked Iranians from accessing services - like cloud software - that are vital for circumventing state censorship and surveillance.

In a state with heavy surveillance and where free expression can lead to a prison sentence, it is vital that Iranians have tools available to circumvent filters. However, given that General License D-1 was published in 2014 and did not keep up with the pace of technology, sanctions have blocked Iranians from having the tools they need - like global cloud infrastructure - to run virtual private networks safely. Moreover, sanctions have facilitated the Iranian government's national internet project by leaving Iranian internet users and businesses little choice but to use domestic platforms and data centers, which decreases the economic cost of imposing internet blockages. As we noted in a [report](#) last summer, "The sanctions have played right into the hands of Iran's government, which has heavily invested in a 'national internet' project to tightly control internet communications and cut off access to the global internet at its discretion and at a relatively lower cost for the country's economy."

Regrettably, the Trump administration did not revise GLD-1, though it did offer a license allowing the developer platform Github to restore many of its services to Iranian users in January 2021. And, thus far, the Biden administration has not taken action either despite a [bipartisan call](#) from Members of Congress to revise GLD-1 last October. However, the Biden administration still has an opportunity to course correct and should prioritize this long-overdue update as soon as possible in light of the continued internet outages that have corresponded with Iranians voicing their rightful grievances.

It is important that, as the U.S. government condemns violence against peaceful protesters and voices support for their rights to voice their grievances, it considers practical steps it can take to make it easier for Iranians to communicate freely and document any human rights abuses. Revising GLD-1 must be an urgent priority for the administration and we look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Javad Akbari

President, National Iranian American Council