

United States Senate

January 28, 2026

The Honorable Marco Rubio
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Rubio,

We write today in defense of America's long-standing and bipartisan commitment to support programs that enable internet freedom for the people of Iran, which is more important than ever as the people of Iran protest against the regime in record numbers. In light of the current events in Iran, we urge the administration to surge resources to quickly enable critical internet freedom support to the largest pro-American population in the Muslim Middle East.

For over two decades, administrations from both parties have consistently invested in virtual private networks (VPNs) and anti-censorship technology programs to support the Iranian people. Specifically, U.S. funded programs like the Near East Regional Democracy (NERD) program, the Open Technology Fund (OTF), and other efforts by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) have all supported unrestricted access to the internet in Iran for its civilians. In recognition of Congressional support for these efforts, Congress passed the bipartisan *Iran Internet Freedom Act*¹, which authorized \$15 million for the Open Technology Fund for each of Fiscal Years 2025 and 2026² to overcome hurdles to internet freedom in Iran. Without U.S. leadership, an entire generation of Iranians would have remained in the dark — and the most powerful source of pressure against the Islamic Republic, the Iranian people themselves, would have been neutralized.

During the recent Iran-Israel conflict, the regime sought to impose a near-total digital blackout by shutting down mobile networks and throttling bandwidth. Only a limited number of Iranians managed to stay online through U.S.-supported VPNs and circumvention tools. That limited access proved decisive, as videos from inside the country exposed regime disinformation and showed that many Iranians viewed the conflict as an attack on the Regime rather than on the Iranian people³. Since the end of the war, increased internet freedom in Iran would put a spotlight on the increasingly securitized atmosphere that is cracking down on dissent⁴. And these efforts are more important than ever, as the Iranian regime initiated a complete internet blackout on January 8th to prevent information sharing between Iranian protestors.

¹ <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/senate-bill/5076>

² See section 5124 of NDAA for FY 2025: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/5009/text>

³ <https://nypost.com/2025/06/17/opinion/we-dance-iranians-damn-the-regime-amid-israeli-strikes/>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/06/28/world/middleeast/iran-israel-conflict-spies.html>

Today, many of the NGOs and technology providers that maintain these tools are facing closure due to funding cuts⁵ and more importantly, fewer Iranian citizens can share their videos and messages with the world and each other. Without the continuous operation of internet freedom programming carried out by the State Department and Open Technology Fund, millions of Iranians will lose their last secure window and voice to the outside world. The vacuum will be filled by IRGC-controlled apps, surveillance software, and state media, giving the regime near-total control over the digital space and putting users at far greater risk.

As we watch brave Iranians take to the streets, it is clear that supporting the Iranian people's access to information is not a partisan issue but a matter of national security, as well as meeting legislative requirements for a strategy for promoting internet freedom in Iran⁶. In a world where the Islamic Republic talks of bolstering its nuclear and missile programs, threatens U.S. interests, and supplies drones to Russia to be used against U.S. partners in Europe, America cannot rely solely on military tools. The United States must pair its maximum pressure on the regime with maximum support for the Iranian people.

Sincerely,



James Lankford
United States Senator



Jacky Rosen
United States Senator



Lindsey O. Graham
United States Senator



Cory Booker
United States Senator

⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2025/08/25/state-department-iran-censorship-internet/>

⁶ See section 5124 of NDAA for FY 2025: <https://www.congress.gov/bill/118th-congress/house-bill/5009/text>