

Iran Restricts Communication in Response to Protests

January 17, 2018

In the News

"How's dad?" "What's happening?" These messages were sent via the WhatsApp message service by Ben Abdi, a 45-year-old Iranian who runs a Persian restaurant in north London. He sent the messages to his sister in Iran on Tuesday, January 2, and had not received a response by the weekend. He wondered, "Was she okay? Why hadn't she read them? Where was she?"

Demonstrations began in the city of Mashhad on December 28, and then spread quickly and spontaneously across Iran. Many of the protesters are working-class young people, rallying against high youth unemployment, poor wages and rising prices. *The Washington Post* reports that for many Iranians living in exile, recent days "have been a mix of emotions -- fear, foreboding, hope -- as they intently watch, as best they can, the deadly unrest unfolding in their native land."

According to *CNN*, the protests "have become the most powerful challenge to the Iranian government's authority since mass demonstrations in 2009." Authorities have detained at least 450 people, and 21 have been killed in the unrest.

Iranians living abroad have struggled to stay in touch with loved ones because of restrictions placed on communication tools. According to some analysts, Iranian authorities are trying to control the unrest by restricting access to the internet and trying to manipulate social media. Within days of the start of the protests, authorities started restricting social media tools including Telegram, which is popular in Iran and had been used frequently by Ben Abdi's sister. Now, her account is strangely inactive.

Sanam Vakil, an Iran expert at a London-based think tank, says to *The Washington Post* that the Iranian government has been sophisticated in using social media to manage the country's communication systems, including "sending messages using social media to warn people not to join protests." They have also restricted internet access in some areas -- restrictions that have been "patchy," she says, rather than a total blackout. Iranians in Britain report that they are still getting social media messages from Iran, but they are fewer and are arriving less frequently than before.

According to *The New York Times*, Telegram's chief executive confirmed that the app had been blocked by Iranian authorities after the Telegram company refused to shut down channels of peaceful Iranian protesters. "We consider freedom of speech an undeniable human right," he said, "and would rather get blocked in a country by its authorities than limit peaceful expression of alternative opinions."

Many Iranians living abroad are afraid to talk openly with people inside Iran about the demonstrations, because they fear the brutality of the Iranian regime. One woman chose to stop using Telegram because, she tells *The Washington Post*, "it's too dangerous. It's too controlled." A man says that when he talks with his mother in Iran about the demonstrations, he uses "coded" language. "In any contact from Iran to another country," he says, "we assume they are listening to everything." The Iranian government is like the "mafia," he says, and he hopes the current protests will change things.

Mojtaba, a 33-year-old Iranian, tells *CNN* that a lot of young people want the same lifestyles they see people having in wealthier parts of Iran as well as abroad. "A lot of the kids in the smaller

cities have gotten a taste for a better life through social media," he says. "They look at what they see on Instagram or Telegram and compare that to their prospects, and naturally they get angry."

While most of the anti-government protesters are young men, a pro-government movement has arisen made up of mostly middle-age and older men. On January 3, government supporters marched through the capital city of Tehran, with some chanting "Death to America" and waving national flags. Iranian officials had blamed the United States and its allies for provoking the anti-government rallies.

President Trump tweeted that the Iranian government was repressive, "brutal and corrupt" and that it was "TIME FOR CHANGE!" French President Emmanuel Macron spoke with the Iranian president, expressed concern over the violence and deaths, and called for restraint.

More on this story can be found at these links:

Applying the News Story

Words are powerful and creative, so much so that Rabbi Abraham Heschel once said, "words create worlds." Recent restrictions on communication in Iran give us an opportunity to reflect on the power of words -- both human and divine -- to influence individuals, events and the shape of the world around us.

The Big Questions

Here are some of the questions we will discuss in class:

1. What words have had the biggest influence on you? Words spoken by a family member, a friend, a colleague, a mentor, a politician or a religious leader? Describe.
2. Words play a significant role in protests, political campaigns, reform movements and religious revivals. When have you seen the world shaped by the power of words?
3. When a person says, "I forgive you," a new reality is created. In similar fashion, words such as "I love you" or "I hate you" have a profound impact. What words have changed your personal life, for good or for ill?
4. The chief executive of the Telegram app said, "We consider freedom of speech an undeniable human right." What limits, if any, should be put on speech? On speech that incites violence? On speech that promotes hate?
5. In your experience, where have you experienced the power of the Word of God? What effect did it have on you?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

We will look at selected verses from these Scripture texts. You may wish to read these in advance for background:

[Genesis 1:1-13](#)

[Proverbs 25:11](#)

[John 1:1-14](#)

[Ephesians 4:25--5:2](#)

[James 3:1-12](#)