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US set to hike aid aimed at Iranians

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Funding for cyber resistance

By Farah Stockman, Globe Staff | July 26, 2009

WASHINGTON - The Obama administration is poised to dramatically increase funding aimed at helping Iranian activists circumvent government controls on the Internet, according to Congressional aides, marking a new wave of US support for Web-based dissent at a time when the Iranian regime has clamped down on street protests.

The funding, which is set to double from $15 million in 2009 to $30 million next year for Iran and other countries that block free speech on the Internet, puts the US government in an unlikely alliance with counterculture computer activists - some of them in the Boston area - who have launched spirited volunteer efforts to help Iranian reformers.

"You are engaging in cyberwarfare, on the side of the good guys," said Rob Faris of Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, which received State Department funds in 2007 to study the Internet's impact on democracy and currently has a grant to look into what kinds of people are trying to get around government Internet filters.

The new funds, part of a budget proposal that Congress is slated to approve, could be a windfall for nonprofit organizations that provide Iranians with ways to view websites blocked by the regime, for software developers who train dissidents on how to e-mail in ways that cannot be traced, and for Iranian activists living outside the country who have launched Web-based forums on strategic protests, democracy, and human-rights violations.

But the funding increase has raised eyebrows on Capitol Hill, where some in Congress question whether the effort is consistent with Obama's stated goals of engaging, rather than antagonizing, the Iranian regime. Iran, which has repeatedly accused the United States of trying to engineer a revolution inside its borders, cracked down on street demonstrators protesting the results of a June 12 election that kept President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in power. The proposal for additional US money for Internet activities predated the unrest.

Senate staffers who received a classified briefing on the initiative about six weeks ago declined to comment in detail, but said senators who had raised questions felt more comfortable with the program after the briefing. The staffers requested anonymity because the briefing was classified, and elements of the program are secret.

The funding could also become controversial, since the Internet tools developed to protect the identities of democracy organizers in Iran can also be used to hide networks of Internet criminals and terrorists. Another concern is that the US funding will spur repressive regimes to step up their own efforts to censor and spy on the Internet, sparking an arms race of sorts in cyberspace.

Still, the Internet initiatives have attracted more support from policy makers and academics than President Bush's controversial effort to directly fund dissidents in Iran, which some said increased the risks of arrest for all democracy activists inside the country. The Internet initiatives, on the other hand, are relatively low-risk, and could be used by huge numbers of individuals, who can decide what to do

with the information.

The funding increase for "Internet freedom, " as it is called on Capitol Hill, is part of a State Department budget line item labeled Near East Regional Democracy, but details are secret. A Senate budget committee supported the increase, but recommended that $30 million of the funds be devoted to the expanded Internet effort, according to a draft of the Senate appropriation bill. Congressional aides said they expect the funds to be approved, and that Obama supports the Internet effort.

Obama has faced criticism since the June election by conservatives and prodemocracy advocates who believe he should have given more vocal support to the Iranian protesters. But State Department officials and Congressional staffers who have been shepherding his funding requests say his administration has simply taken a quieter approach than Bush.

"Because [the fund] doesn't say Iran, they assumed President Obama doesn't care about this," said a Senate aide. "That's not the case. Trumpeting it would not be helpful. The Iranian government would like nothing more than a reason to accuse the US government of trying to overthrow it, which is not what this is about. It's about the right of people everywhere to have access to information."

The White House declined to comment. A State Department spokesman said officials were still deciding how to distribute the money and would not provide details, but said, "This regional pot of money will support democratic initiatives and promote mutual understanding in the Near East."

Iran has blocked opposition websites and reformist blogs, as well as Voice of America and BBC. It also uses sophisticated technology, sometimes supplied by Western companies, to spy on activists who use the Web.

So Iranian activists rely on circumvention software to get around filters to view blocked websites, and use programs known as "anonymizers" to hide their identities.

Because of the nature of the Internet, this cyberwarfare can take place anywhere, including suburban Boston: One of the most popular anonymizers in Iran is a software program known as Tor, run by a nonprofit group headquartered in the Dedham home of its executive director, Andrew Lewman.

A user in Iran who downloads Tor can surf the Web through a vast network of interconnected computers around the world, with Iranian authorities unable to trace which computer they are operating from.

Invented by an MIT graduate student based on a protocol developed by the US Navy, Tor began as a volunteer effort, Lewman said. In recent years it has gotten funding from the Department of Defense and the State Department, channeled through the Broadcasting Board of Governors, aimed at improving access to Voice of America in places where it has been blocked. Last year, about half of the group's $500,000 budget came from the US government, allowing the group to maintain a staff of eight people, set up more servers, and do research faster, he said.

But the group remains fiercely independent of the US government and insists that all of its research, even studies for the military, is publicly released.

The Iranian government shut down the Internet for three days at the height of the protests. But after it came back on, about 2,000 new Iranians clients a day signed up for Tor in the weeks of unrest after the election. Tor continues to have an estimated 8,000 users at any given time in Iran.

"People were coming up and telling us, 'I have held training sessions in Iran,' " Lewman said.

But some cyberactivists oppose government help, seeing it as counterproductive.

"We do not want people to think we are an arm of the Great Satan," said Eric Raymond, a self-described anarchist, who began helping Iranian activists in June, when one wrote his blog asking for help in the wake of the postelection crackdown.

Raymond, a leader of the open source software movement, helped found NedaNet, a group of underground "hackivists" named after Neda Agha-Soltan, a protester who was shot and killed in Iran. The group sends software to Iranian activists to help them communicate with one another covertly.

"The cyberwar has been quite active without any government money," he said, expressing his personal view and not the policy of the group.

The move to fund Internet activists is not entirely new. Although the Bush administration never funded a special Internet initiative, it spent 25 to 40 percent of its Iran democracy promotion money on Internet-related activities, according to David Denehy, who headed the State Department's Iran grants from 2005 to 2007.

"We did a lot of what we would consider cutting-edge, first-generation development [of tools]," said Denehy, now a consultant based in Nashua. "A lot of it is venture capital stuff where people are building stuff from the ground."

Under Denehy's tenure, the State Department gave funds to Freedom House, which translated and disseminated a manual called "Everybody's Guide to Bypassing Internet Censorship," and another on how to do peaceful protests.

"Tor is used for many, many evil things as well as many, many good things," said Faris. Still, he said, he believes increased funding to make these tools more effective and widely available can have a positive impact around the world.

"Six days out of seven, I think it is a really good idea," he said. "There's a feeling that, 'Hey, here's something you can do. It is not that expensive. It's worth a shot.' " ■