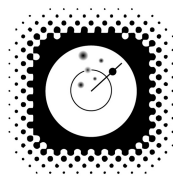


## Internet Filtering in

# Tunisia



## OpenNet Initiative

### Overview

Although Tunisia has actively sought to develop its information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure, the government continues to pervasively block a range of Web content and has used nontechnical means to impede journalists and human rights activists from doing their work. The filtering of political content and restrictions on online activity has prompted frequent criticism from foreign governments and human rights organizations, and online protest campaigns from Tunisian Internet users.

### Background

The Tunisian constitution guarantees freedom of the press under “conditions laid down by law,” but the government closely controls the media. Additionally, the Press Law criminalizes defamation, and those who violate it can be imprisoned and fined.<sup>1</sup> Tunisia is considered by media watchdog Reporters Without Borders to be “the region’s most authoritarian regime” in regard to civil liberties. Journalists and human rights activists have been banned from leaving

the country and often face arrest and imprisonment. Most of the country’s newspapers are supportive of the government, and opposition newspapers have been seized.<sup>2</sup> The Internet is heavily regulated and perceived as a potential threat to stability and security of the country.<sup>3</sup> There are also instances of banning foreign publications for publishing content that is deemed prejudicial to Islam.<sup>4</sup>

### Internet in Tunisia

Tunisia has one of the most developed telecommunications infrastructures in North Africa with a high mobile penetration rate and one of the lowest broadband prices in Africa.<sup>5</sup> As of October 2008, the number of GSM subscribers had reached 9 million, while the number of Internet users was 1.7 million, 114,000 of whom have broadband subscriptions.<sup>6</sup> Out of a population of 10.2 million inhabitants, nine out of ten Tunisians own a cell phone.<sup>7</sup> Of these users, 84 percent access the Internet at home, 75.8 percent use Internet at work, and 24 percent use public Internet cafés.<sup>8</sup>

### RESULTS AT A GLANCE

Filtering	No evidence of filtering	Suspected filtering	Selective filtering	Substantial filtering	Pervasive filtering
Political					●
Social					●
Conflict/security			●		
Internet tools					●

Other factors	Low	Medium	High	Not applicable
Transparency	●			
Consistency			●	

**KEY INDICATORS**

		worst	best
GNI per capita, PPP (current international \$).....	8371		
Life expectancy at birth (years).....	73.5		
Literacy rate (% of people age 15+).....	74.3		
Human development index (out of 177).....	91		
Rule of law (percentile).....	60		
Voice and accountability (percentile).....	13		
Digital opportunity index (out of 181).....	87		
Internet users (% of population).....	26.8		

The Tunisian Ministry of Communications established the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) to regulate the country's Internet and domain name system (DNS) services, which had formerly fallen under the Regional Institute for Computer Sciences and Telecommunications (IRSIT)'s purview.<sup>9</sup> The ATI is also the gateway from which all of Tunisia's eleven Internet service providers (ISPs) lease their bandwidth.<sup>10</sup> Six of these ISPs are public (ATI, INBMI, CCK, CIMSP, IRESA and Defense's ISP); the other five—Planet Tunisie, 3S Global Net, HEXABYTE, TopNet, and TUNET—are private.<sup>11</sup>

The government has energetically sought to spread Internet access. The ATI reports connectivity of 100 percent for the education section (universities, research laboratories, secondary schools, and primary schools).<sup>12</sup> Government-brokered "free Internet" programs that provide Web access for the price of a local telephone call and increase competition among ISPs have significantly reduced the economic barriers to Internet access. Those Tunisians for whom personal computers remain prohibitively expensive may also access the Internet from more than 300 cybercafés set up by the authorities.<sup>13</sup>

**Legal and regulatory framework**

In addition to filtering Web content, the government of Tunisia utilizes laws,

regulations, and surveillance to achieve strict control over the Internet. For example, journalists have been prosecuted by Tunisia's press code, which bans offending the president, disturbing order, and publishing what the government perceives as false news.<sup>14</sup> The government also restricts the media by controlling the registration of print media and licensing of broadcasters, refusing permission to critical outlets, and controlling the distribution public sector advertisement.<sup>15</sup> Journalists are also charged in courts with vague violations of the penal code.<sup>16</sup>

Online dissidents face severe punishment. For example, human rights lawyer Mohamed Abbou was sentenced to three and a half years in prison in 2005 publishing on a banned Web site a report in which he accusing the government of torturing Tunisian prisoners.<sup>17</sup>

In a landmark legal case that challenged the Web filtering regime in the country, journalist and blogger Ziad El Hendi filed a legal suit against the Tunisian Internet Agency (ATI) for censoring social networking site Facebook.<sup>18</sup> The Tunisian Union of Free Radio Stations and the Unionist Freedoms and Rights Observatory joined El Heni in the lawsuit and called Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to testify.<sup>19</sup> Facebook was blocked on August 18,

2008, then unblocked on September 2 at the Tunisian President's request.<sup>20</sup> The Third District Court of Tunisia, however, dismissed the case, in November 2008 without providing any explanation.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to being blocked in Tunisia, many opposition and dissident Web sites and blogs have been victims of hacking attempts and in some cases, successful content removal and shutting down of servers.<sup>22</sup> Even though it is not clear who is behind these cyber attacks, many Tunisian opposition leaders believe it to be the government.<sup>23</sup> For example, the independent news site *Kalima* was hacked into and shut down in October 2008. The eight-year Arabic and French archives were completely destroyed. The site has been blocked since it was launched in 2000. The administrator of the site accused the government of being under the attack because, as she told the Committee to Protect Journalists, "The only ones who benefit from this attack are the authorities."<sup>24</sup> She also said, "I would not rule out the possibility that this act was committed by the secret services, with the aid of hackers or pirates based in Tunisia or abroad." The Web-based newsletter Tunis News (<http://www.tunisnews.net>) and a blog run by a judge (<http://tunisiawatch.rsfblog.org>) have been subject to similar attacks.<sup>25</sup>

Tunisia does not have specific laws that regulate online broadcasting. As a result, a group of journalists exploited the lack of legal obstacles to broadcast on the Internet by launching Tunisia's first Internet radio station, Radio 6, on December 10, 2007, to mark the 59<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>26</sup>

Web filtering in Tunisia is achieved through the use of a commercial software program, SmartFilter, sold by U.S.-based company Secure Computing. Because all

fixed-line Internet traffic passes through facilities controlled by ATI, the government is able to load the software onto its servers and filter content consistently across Tunisia's eleven ISPs. Tunisia purposefully hides its filtering from Internet users. SmartFilter is designed to display a 403 "Forbidden" error message when a user attempts to access a blocked site; the Tunisian government has replaced this message with a standard 404 "File Not Found" error message, which gives no hint that the requested site is actively blocked.<sup>27</sup>

### Surveillance

The Tunisian authorities practice different sorts of Internet surveillance and requests that service providers such as Internet cafés be partners in controlling Internet use. For example, the authorities monitor Internet cafés, request that Internet users show ID before they can use the Internet in some regions, and hold Internet cafés operators responsible by law for their clients' online activities.

There is also technical surveillance, whereby downloading or adding attachment to an email must go through a central server. Under the pretext of protecting public order and national security, a 1998 post and telecommunications law enables the authorities to intercept and check the content of email messages,<sup>28</sup> and instances of electronic surveillance, such as filtering of email messages of government opponents, have been reported.<sup>29</sup> Global Voices Advocacy Director and Tunisia Activist Sami Ben Gharbia conducted a test from the Netherlands with two Tunisia-based activists and confirmed by logging to their email accounts from the Netherlands that what he sees is not what they receive when they log in from Tunisia, and that

they cannot access some of the messages they receive.<sup>30</sup>

### Testing results

ONI carried out tests in Tunisia using the ISPs Planet Tunisie and TopNet. Similar to 2006-2007 test results, 2008-2009 testing revealed pervasive filtering of Web sites of political opposition groups such as the Democratic Forum for Labor and Liberty (<http://www.fdtl.org>), Al-Nadha Movement ([www.nahdha.info](http://www.nahdha.info)) and Tunisian Workers' Communist Party ([www.albadil.org](http://www.albadil.org)), and the Democratic Progressive Party ([pdpinfo.org](http://www.pdpinfo.org)).

Also blocked were Web sites run by opposition figures such as activist Moncef Marzouki (<http://www.moncefmarzouki.net>) and Web sites that contain oppositional news and politics such as [www.nawaat.org](http://www.nawaat.org), [www.perspectivestunisiennes.net](http://www.perspectivestunisiennes.net), [www.tunisnews.com](http://www.tunisnews.com), and [www.tunezine.com](http://www.tunezine.com).

Web sites that publish oppositional articles by Tunisian journalists were also blocked. For example, ONI verified the blocking of the French daily *Libération* Web site in February 2007 because articles by Tunisian journalist Taoufik Ben Brik critical of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali appeared on the site.<sup>31</sup>

Also blocked are Web sites that criticize Tunisia's human rights records. These include the Web sites of Amnesty International ([www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)), Freedom House ([www.freedomhouse.org](http://www.freedomhouse.org)), Reporters Without Borders ([www.rsf.org](http://www.rsf.org) and [www.rsf.fr](http://www.rsf.fr)), the International Freedom of Expression eXchange ([www.ifex.org](http://www.ifex.org)), the Islamic Human Rights Commission (<http://www.ihrc.org/>), and the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information ([www.hrinfo.org](http://www.hrinfo.org)). Although the home page of Human Rights Watch (HRW) was accessible, the Arabic and French-language versions of an HRW report on

Internet repression in Tunisia were blocked.

The prominent video sharing Web sites [youtube.com](http://youtube.com) and [www.dailymotion.com](http://www.dailymotion.com) were found blocked, apparently because Tunisian activists used them to disseminate content critical of the regime's human rights practices. Interestingly, the Web site of the OpenNet Initiative ([opennet.net](http://opennet.net)), which researches and documents state filtering and censorship practices, was blocked. Also blocked was the Web site of Global Voices ([www.globalvoicesonline.org](http://www.globalvoicesonline.org)), a non-profit global citizens' media project. Most of the tested sites in the anonymizers and circumvention tools category were blocked. These include Psiphon (<http://psiphon.civisec.org>), TOR ([tor.eff.org](http://tor.eff.org)) Anonymizer ([www.anonymizer.com](http://www.anonymizer.com)), email privacy service provider Steal the Message ([www.stealthmessage.com](http://www.stealthmessage.com)), Guardster ([www.guardster.com/](http://www.guardster.com/)), and JAP ([anon.inf.tu-dresden.de](http://anon.inf.tu-dresden.de)).

The filtering regime pervasively filters pornographic content, several gay and lesbian information or dating pages, provocative attire, and several online translation services. Also blocked were a few Web sites that criticize the Quran (<http://www.thequran.com>) and Islam (<http://www.islameyat.com>), though their small number points to limited filtering of religious content in Tunisia.

### Conclusion

Tunisia's government continues to suppress critical speech and oppositional activity, both in real space and in cyberspace. Unlike other states that employ filtering software, Tunisia endeavors to conceal instances of filtering by supplying a fake error page when a blocked site is requested. This makes filtering more opaque and clouds users' understanding of the boundaries of

permissible content. Tunisia maintains a focused, effective system of Internet control that blends content filtering with harsh laws to censor objectionable and politically threatening information.

## NOTES

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