



Spotlight on Iran



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Between blocking and joining: Supreme Leader's Facebook page draws considerable interest from Iranian media, social networks

The launch of a Facebook page for Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei continues to draw considerable interest from the Iranian media and social networks. The page has received more than 20 thousand 'likes' since December 13, when it was first created.

The conservative media's reaction to the launch of the Facebook page was one of profound embarrassment, considering the strong criticism that the use of the social network received in the past from top regime officials, who defined it as one of the most important means used by the West as part of the "soft war" waged against Iran.

Some conservative news websites questioned the authenticity of the Facebook page, saying that it was unofficial and was not created on behalf of the Supreme Leader's office. Other websites noted that there are a number of pages supposedly connected to the Supreme Leader even though they are not run by his office. The Raja News website said that the large number of Facebook pages devoted to Khamenei is a mark of his popularity among web users across the globe.

A number of conservative websites stressed that, in the past, the Supreme Leader ruled that there are no prohibitions against using the network as long as it is not used for disseminating immoral content. The daily Khorasan expressed its support for launching the Facebook page and called on the Iranian authorities to take advantage of this event to reexamine the policy of blocking the social network.

The reformist media expressed its surprise at the launch of the Facebook page, given the fact that the authorities continue to block the network and—particularly in the last several months—suppress the Facebook activity of regime opponents. The reformist website Jaras, analyzing the comments posted by web users on the page after it was launched, said that they are indicative of

the Iranian people's need for a direct connection with the Supreme Leader. The website reported that the social network users' comments touched on a variety of subjects, including the nuclear program and the economic crisis.

The launch of the Facebook page also sparked considerable interest on social networks. Some social network users demanded that Khamenei's page be removed, while others posted comments mocking it.

Overview

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The reaction of Mehr News Agency

Mehr News Agency reported on the launch of the Facebook page in an article titled “Who runs the Supreme Leader’s Facebook pages?” The report, which was subsequently republished on several other conservative websites, questioned the authenticity of the new page and denied reports by some Western media that it was Khamenei’s own initiative—or that of his office—to create the Facebook page. The news agency reported that there are at least five pages on Facebook supposedly connected to the Supreme Leader. For instance, a Facebook page titled Ayatullah Sayyid Ali Khamenei, launched in 2008, is active in several languages and has received approximately 68,000 ‘likes’ so far. Another page, opened in 2009, is titled Grand Ayatullah Khamenei, and has approximately 28,000 likes. Other pages, titled “People who Love Ayatullah Khamenei” and “Supporters of Ayatullah Imam Khamenei” have been active for nearly a year and have received thousands of ‘likes’. There are also Facebook pages devoted to Khamenei in other languages, such as Urdu and Azeri. According to Mehr, there are at least 100 accounts and Facebook pages connected to Khamenei operating online, five of which even use the name khamenei.ir, the domain of the Supreme Leader’s official website.



The Mehr report went on to say that the logo featured on the new Facebook page is the one used by the Office for the Preservation and Publication of the Writings of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, which shows that it is not directly connected to the Supreme Leader’s office. The claim heard from some Western media about the Iranian authorities’ supposedly hesitant approach to the Facebook social network is not correct

either, Mehr said. In this context, the news agency mentioned the fatwa issued by Khamenei on using the social network, which implies that he does not object to the use of Facebook as long as it is not used inappropriately (Mehr, December 19).

The ruling was issued when Khamenei was asked to comment on the subject from the standpoint of Islamic law last year. The Supreme Leader said there is nothing to prohibit the use of Facebook as long as it is not used for such improper ends as spreading moral corruption or publishing lies and content that may encourage sinful behavior or encourage the enemies of Islam. After the ruling was issued, the Supreme Leader was asked to clarify whether it is permissible to visit the Facebook website for the sole purpose of interacting with friends, without performing any activities that may undermine Iran's national interests, given the fact that the website was blocked by the authorities. The Supreme Leader's reply was that his ruling is one of principle and is not a statement of opinion on the terms of use of Facebook. Khamenei noted that social networks are essentially tools for gathering information that may strengthen the enemies of the Muslims. He asserted, however, that his ruling neither flatly prohibits nor authorizes the use of Facebook, representing instead a "middle-ground approach" where the use is not completely prohibited nor permitted under Islamic religious law (www.598.ir, October 8, 2011).

The reaction of the Raja News website

Raja News, a website affiliated with the right wing of the conservative camp, also questioned the authenticity of the new Facebook page, as well as that of the Twitter and Instagram accounts used by Khamenei. But that didn't stop Raja News from saying that the large number of Facebook pages connected to the leader, including the most recent page, is a mark of his immense popularity among social network users both in Iran and elsewhere in the world. A report titled "Social network users' welcome for Supreme Leader's page has Western media concerned" emphasized that the Facebook page received 10,000 'likes' in the first 24 hours after its creation. According to the website, the censorship imposed in the West on reports about the Islamic revolution has made many of the world's "freedom lovers" hungry for information on the opinions and directions of the Supreme Leader.

According to Raja News, Khamenei's immense popularity with social network users is cause for serious concern in the West. After many years in which the internet was one of the main tools used by the West to wage its psychological warfare campaign against Iran, the revolutionary web users have been able to defeat the "internet imperialism"

through their web presence. What has Western media leaders concerned is not the Facebook page or Facebook account, Raja News said, but rather the strengthening of the ties between the people of the world—particularly Muslims—and the people of Iran, and the direct, unmediated transfer of Islamic revolutionary thought to web users across the globe (Raja News, December 18).

The Supreme Leader's office refused to confirm or deny the reports on the launch of the Facebook page. On her personal blog, reformist journalist and blogger Masih Alinejad said that a source in the Supreme Leader's office with whom she discussed the issue refused to confirm or deny whether Khamenei's new Facebook page is actually run by his office (<http://masihalinejad.com>, December 19). The Supreme Leader's two official websites (www.leader.ir and www.khamenei.ir) did not address the launch of the Facebook page either.

The reaction of the Khorasan daily newspaper

The daily conservative Khorasan expressed its support for launching the Supreme Leader's Facebook page and called on the Iranian authorities to take advantage of this event to reexamine the policy of blocking the social network. An editorial titled "Why don't you unblock Facebook?" said that the Supreme Leader's new page makes it possible to spread his opinions and views to hundreds of millions of web users across the globe. The daily even advised the Supreme Leader's office to create a similar Facebook page in Persian to give young Iranians an opportunity to learn more about their leader.

According to Khorasan, using Facebook is not the same as using satellite TV networks. The networks themselves decide what kind of content they want to show on their satellite TV channels, leaving viewers with no option to prevent themselves or their family members from watching certain channels that air immoral content. On Facebook, on the other hand, the users have the ability to decide for themselves which content they do or do not want to see.

The daily noted that certain occasions, such as riots like the ones that broke out after the 2009 presidential elections, justify blocking websites, including Facebook. However, barring any special security or political circumstances, there is no reason to continue blocking the social network. The launch of the Supreme Leader's Facebook page is a wise move, the daily concluded. It is a reason to reexamine the authorities'

policy of blocking websites and, at the same time, to continue filtering immoral websites (Khorasan, December 20).

The reaction of the Khorasan daily newspaper

The reformist media expressed its surprise at the launch of the Facebook page, given the fact that the authorities continue to block the network and suppress the Facebook activity of regime opponents. The legal battle against regime opponents operating online has even escalated these past several months. In October, the prosecutor general in the city of Sirjan, Kerman Province, reported that four citizens were arrested by the Ministry of Intelligence on charges of incitement against the regime and posting offensive material against top regime officials on Facebook. At the same time, Iraj Mohammad Khani, chief of the cyber police in Gilan Province, said that Facebook is considered one of the most prominent manifestations of the “soft war” waged by the enemies of Iran. He warned that activity on social networks and the exposure of information in such networks may be exploited for committing computer crimes.



Opposition to Facebook at a military parade in Esfahan (source: http://www.mborjian.com/2012/04/blog-post_18.html)

This weekend the reformist website Jaras analyzed the numerous comments posted by web users on the Facebook page after it was launched, including comments that were removed shortly after being posted. According to Jaras, the comments—made by the Supreme Leader’s supporters and opponents alike—are indicative of the Iranian people’s need for a direct, unmediated connection with the Supreme Leader.

The website reported that some of the web users, including those who identified themselves as supporters of Khamenei, asked him to unblock Facebook and

strengthen his relationship with the young people of Iran through the social network. Other comments posted on the page dealt with political issues, including Iran's nuclear policy. One web user asked the Supreme Leader to issue an order to speed up the direct talks with the United States and agree to a compromise that will make it possible to solve the nuclear issue and lift the economic sanctions. A compromise on the nuclear issue would not be drinking from the poisoned chalice, the web user wrote, referring to Islamic revolution leader Ayatollah Khomeini's agreement to a ceasefire with Iraq in 1988, but rather "the chalice of compassion and reason". Other web users took issue with the economic situation and the performance of President Ahmadinejad, demanding that he be removed from office. Other yet criticized Iran Broadcasting, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, and the education system. Some web surfers said they feel desperate about the severe situation in the country. One of them said that he is a young man who has found himself in a state of despair about the revolution, and that the Supreme Leader should know that the people are well aware of the economic and political situation in Iran.

Jaras expressed its hope that the authorities will not censor the comments posted on the new Facebook page, which, for the first time in over two decades of Khamenei's rule, will allow for a more open atmosphere where both his supporters and opponents can express their opinions. The website said, however, that it is doubtful that the voices and opinions of the Iranian people as they appear on the Facebook page will eventually come to the attention of the Supreme Leader (Jaras, December 20).

Reactions in the social networks

The launch of the Facebook page also sparked considerable interest on social networks. Many web users were angry at Khamenei for opening a Facebook account while the people of Iran are prohibited from accessing the social network. Others posted mocking comments. On Twitter, many users tweeted, "Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of oppression and filtering, has become a member of Facebook". An Iranian anti-regime blogger posted a report on his personal blog titled "The Supreme Leader does not spare his opponents on Facebook either", claiming that whenever a comment that criticizes the Supreme Leader is posted on the Facebook page, it is removed within several minutes. The page is apparently monitored 24 hours a day, the blogger said, and the Supreme Leader's supporters allow only his followers to post comments on the page (http://zareh-bin.blogspot.ca/2012/12/blog-post_19.html, December 19).



Source: <http://arashnarimanzadeh.wordpress.com>, December 19

A number of social network users said that the Facebook page should be reported as being offensive, to have it removed. One blogger even posted screenshots to help his readers report the page as containing offensive content:



Meanwhile, a new Facebook page titled “No to Khamenei’s Presence on Facebook” has been launched in recent days to campaign against Khamenei’s presence on Facebook:



<https://www.facebook.com/Na.Be.Hozore.Khamenei>