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U.S. funding tech firms that help Mideast dissidents evade government censors

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The Obama administration may not be lending arms to dissidents in the Middle East, but it is offering aid in another critical way: helping them surf the Web anonymously as they seek to overthrow their governments.

Federal agencies - such as the State Department, the Defense Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors - have been funding a handful of technology firms that allow people to get online without being tracked or to visit news or social media sites that governments have blocked. Many of these little-known organizations - such as the Tor Project and UltraReach- are unabashedly supportive of the activists in the Middle East.

[But the United States' backing of these firms has the potential to put the government in an awkward diplomatic position](#), not only with the countries where uprisings are active, but also with economic partners such as Saudi Arabia and China, which are known to block Web sites they deem dangerous.

The technology comes with its own perils: Some of the tools may not always conceal the users' identities. Autocratic foreign governments are constantly updating their censorship and monitoring technology. And, of course, the software can be handy for terrorists seeking to communicate in clandestine ways.

In Egypt, Mohammad Hamama, a 24-year-old computer programmer, said he learned about the Tor Project's software in January through chatter on Twitter. He downloaded the software and checked on friends protesting in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Still, he worries about the technology's safety.

"I wanted to make sure my Twitter friends were okay during the protests," he said in a phone interview. "But I didn't feel safe at all. I don't know what the government was using to track us down. I was just hoping the Tor browser would be good for me to tweet some things, but I managed to get away without being tracked."

The technology that is now taking off in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya through word of mouth began as tools of digital disobedience elsewhere. In general, these programs work by redirecting users' Web traffic to servers outside their country. That makes it more difficult to identify the users while giving them access to blocked sites.

"What began as an effort to tear down firewalls in China has become something with extraordinary potential throughout the world," said Michael Horowitz, a Reagan administration official who serves as an adviser to UltraReach. "When UltraReach started getting hits in Egypt, the company had no idea how the people there found out about it. But they feel like they can't cut them off now - the company feels like it has a responsibility. But for every dollar that gets spent by companies like UltraReach, there's \$10,000 spent by the governments to protect the firewalls."

Federal agencies have funded these companies through grants and contracts. By late spring, the State Department is expected to begin doling out even more money - about \$30 million - to technology firms and human rights groups to help and train people to shatter firewalls and surf the Web without being tracked.

Daniel B. Baer, deputy assistant secretary in the State Department, said his bureau is moving as quickly as possible to appropriate the money. More than 60 nonprofit groups and other organizations have applied for awards, which range from \$500,000 to \$8 million.

The department, he said, is unequivocal in its support of a free Internet and the rights of protesters in the Middle East as well as other regions where governments restrict Web use or monitor dissident movements. The department supports about a dozen Web circumvention technologies; the top three attract nearly 2 million unique users a month.

"Right now, there's a healthy focus on the Middle East," Baer said, adding that the United States' support for these organizations - laid out in prominent speeches by Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton - should come as no surprise to other nations. "I am sure there are certain folks in the governments of these places that would prefer we didn't fund these technologies - just as they would prefer we don't advocate for human rights in general - but it's our long-standing policy to advocate for Internet freedom."

[Recently, some members of Congress have accused the State Department of being too slow in giving out the money.](#) They have also argued that the department should transfer a large chunk of the funds to the Broadcasting Board of Governors and give it more say in who gets the money. The BBG oversees the Voice of America news service and works closely with several firms that specialize in Web circumvention tools.

Many of these U.S.-backed technology organizations are reporting huge increases in the number of people using their tools in Arab states undergoing political upheaval.

[The Tor Project](#), a nonprofit organization that gets money from the State and Defense departments, has seen far more people use its product during the Middle East uprisings. The number of daily sessions jumped from 250 in December to about 2500 in February in Egypt, from 500 to about 900 in Tunisia and from 25 to nearly 300 in Libya.

Andrew Lewman, the organization's executive director, said he helps U.S. and European governments understand how to use Tor for intelligence gathering, and human rights and

journalism organizations for free speech. But, he said, he is less generous with restrictive regimes.

"We will always side with people who support access to information. We've helped protesters, journalists, law enforcement and intelligence agencies," Lewman said. He added that he had turned down requests from Middle East governments that wanted to conduct surveillance on their citizens.

[UltraReach](#), which last month began receiving portions of an \$800,000 federal grant, has seen the use of its product UltraSurf explode in the Middle East. Horowitz, the company's adviser, said there were nearly 8 million page views from Egyptians using UltraSurf in January, right before Internet access was shut down. In Libya, 4 million Web pages were viewed using UltraSurf in March, he said.

Some of the most popular Web sites that dissidents are visiting with UltraSurf: Gravatar.com, which gives Web users avatars or images that identify them when they post comments on Web sites; Megaupload.com; Yahoo; Facebook; and MSN.com.

[A Canadian company, Psiphon](#), which has a contract with the BBG to help disseminate Voice of America and other U.S. news services in Iran, China and the former Soviet Union, said it also has seen traffic upticks in the Middle East, although its focus is elsewhere in the world.

"We have about 8,000 log-ins in Egypt, and we weren't even promoting in that region. That's compared to about 40,000 to 50,000 log-ins in Iran," said Rafal Rohozinski, Psiphon's chief executive. He cautioned that it is difficult to know how many individuals used his service and that no technology is completely safe.

The products, he added, "may protect your privacy, but they aren't invisible on the Internet." So dissidents, he said, "could be making themselves more detectable effectively sending a signature that can be seen by regimes."

Meanwhile, in Silicon Valley, [AnchorFree](#), which makes money by splashing banner ads atop every Web page accessed through its Hotspot Shield application, says it steers clear of choosing political sides, even though it has contracted with the BBG in the past.

The company reports that each month, 9 million people worldwide use the tool to visit about 2 billion Web pages. The firm, founded by two 20-somethings and co-owned by a former MCI chairman, says that it also has been a main artery for millions of users in the Middle East to get onto Facebook, Google and Twitter.

"We didn't start this company to go against any government," said David Gorodyansky, AnchorFree's chief executive and co-founder. "We're a typical Silicon Valley company, a bunch of young guys with a lot of crazy ideas, and here we are impacting millions of people in the Middle East and helping revolutions in Tunisia and Libya. We didn't set out to do this, but we really think it's cool we're doing this."

Staff writer Mary Beth Sheridan contributed to this report.

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