



ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

The Role of Star Link Mission on Degrading Authoritarian Government's Power Across the Middle East

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Abstract— This article seeks to represent the role of Star Link mission about the internet which leads to access without any surveillance by authoritarian governments in the region. The Space X Company launches its mission under the name Star Link. Its mission is to send satellites to space in order to crumble many borders and limitations of accessing to the internet across the world. The question of this article is that how did authoritarian governments control the media? And what can they do after the completion of the Star Link mission? This study is qualitative in nature. Author relied on secondary sources such as journal articles, periodicals, books and websites for data retrieval. The analysis highlights that Star Link strives to establish a new platform of the internet which is based on satellite signals from outside the globe which no more government can put any surveillance on it and no limitation will be in front of its users. Current study establishes that if this mission accomplishes its goals, it would be a huge danger for the authoritarian governments which may even lead to the overthrow of governments via shutting down the internet or interfering in it. The findings could be useful for governments to manage their rules and regulations and manage due control on their resources.

Index Terms— Star link, Space X, Internet, Surveillance, Middle East, Authoritarian governments.

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Introduction

During history, lands of the Middle East passed by many barbarians, warriors to achieve more resources and destroy their enemies. Many empires had risen who were kind to their people and many empires decided to make violence and war against other people and territories. Media started with printing from 1452 by Johannes Gutenberg made very significant developments about how to sponsor their propaganda without taking any violent action.

Around the globe, some crises and events indicated that the media had an effective role within nations. In Iran in the 1970s, the statements of the leader of the revolution published in papers and recorded into cassettes asking for obedience and unity and make propagation against the Shah of Iran. Such endeavors eventually prevailed in the Shah's main media (radio, television and government-sponsored newspapers) and led to the Islamic revolution in 1979 in Iran. Afghan resistance imitated this strategy in the war against the Soviet Union (Sreberny & Mohammadi, 1994).

In Egypt, the other part of the Middle East located in the Africa continent, in the April revolution in 2011, the social network, encouraged the young people against the Hosni Mubarak government and led to the removal of him from power. Then, the parliament elected Mohamed Morsi as the president-elect (Lim, 2012). After above events, the attempts to make non-authoritarian governments have failed and those countries came back

to the previous situation and made a new government but authoritarian one so we can follow that probable there's an obstacle within the movement or media to encourage people to form the government which won't control the media and censor (or maybe shut down) internet.

Therefore, we can recommend that media has an effective role to spread a thought or make propagation against enemies. But the question is that we have faced with many authoritarian governments across the Middle East that they dictate many regulations and rules on their people. This is what we will continue in this article and suggest a way to overcome this situation and explain how the new technology of the internet can be a great danger for such governments.

Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. Data for current study is retrieved from secondary sources such as journal articles, periodicals, books and websites. At first, the characteristics of an authoritarian government are discussed in detail. Later, the censorship and reactions of such governments against violations of censorship regulations are discussed. After that, the aims and objectives of Star Link, its implications for current government systems are discussed. At last, it is explained that how the new technology of the internet can be a great danger for such governments and suggestions are made to overcome this situation.

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Literature Review

Authoritarian government

In the age that we live in, the concept of authoritarian government has some tiny differences with the concepts like totalitarian governments or non-democratic ones (Miller, 2017). This concept that we want to explain has some additional features so the political scientists have chosen another name for this concept instead of totalitarian or non-democratic concepts.

Linz & Linz (2000), a political scientist who was the best known for his theories about totalitarian and authoritarian government suggests that authoritarian governments are political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader of occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones.

According to this definition of authoritarian government, we can show some key features of such governments:

1. Limited, not responsible, political pluralism
2. Without elaborate and guiding ideology
3. With distinctive mentalities
4. Without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development
5. Sharing power within a small group or a core power which is called a leader (we can predict the people who have the power)

Such governments tend to contain the political expression of the society and limit political pluralism by abandoning the participation of political parties (especially the independent ones) and try to make one voice over other beliefs in the aspects of religion, politics, etc. (Hellmeier & Weidmann, 2020)

Also, we have to explain the difference between ideology and mentality. As we can understand quickly, ideology has a written book or paper which we have seen before in the communist regimes, but mentality which the authoritarian governments have is not like this and we cannot pursue a method of a formal written thing so such governments can change their warfare whenever and wherever they prefer (Stuart, 1986; Tarchi, 2016). Distinctive mentality helps the government to differentiate its loyal followers from other people in a country and make "us and them" term. "Us" would be the good people who are loyal to the government and "Them" would be the people who oppose the government and its basic rules so they should be limited in their actions against authoritarian power. As Linz & Linz (2000) mentioned, such governments mobilize their supporters (not all the people) sometimes to do something about their development, otherwise, they don't need that kind of support from their supporters, for example, if we imagine an election structure in a country, this kind of government needs to persuade its people as a democratic one to benefit the advantages of democracy but after that, it can ignore all the values of democracy.

Eventually, the people who have the power to enforce their wishes among their nation, share power between somebody who they trust nevertheless that man/woman has his/her expertise or not because the most important thing is the values of that kind of mentality that we mentioned above. You can predict who will be replaced sometimes and who cannot (Linz & Linz, 2000).

Censorship in authoritarian governments

Along with history, many governments around the Middle East put pressure on the press and contain their freedom. From the age of printing press and newspaper which we faced many government-sponsored

newspapers around the region. Such governments not only sponsored their newspapers and magazines but also in competition with private ones, enforced severe regulations. Nowadays we also face mass media that are sponsored and supported by their own belief and finance and their sovereign.

So it is clear that they prefer to publish their idea instead of allowing the flow of information and make it free. For example, as we see the 2019 World press freedom index in the Middle East, we can understand that most of the countries across the region have a really bad situation in terms of freedom of press like Syria (174 out of 180), Saudi Arabia (172 out of 180), Egypt (163 out of 180), Iran (170 out of 180) and so on. Whenever we look at the style of governance among these countries we can see one important thing: most of the countries are authoritarian. These governments seek to censor the media across their nation so as we explained before, the media which approve the strategies of powerful presidents, it can be published and be free and if the media decide to make a new voice among its nation, it cannot publish their idea and it should be under control and maybe stop its work across the country.

Where is Middle-East?

It is generally accepted that the earliest reference to the "Middle East" occurs in Alfred Thayer Mahan's article in September 1902. The popularization of the new usage is credited to Valentine Chirol, Tehran correspondent for The Times who, in the title of the first in a series of articles, "The Middle Eastern Question" in October 1902, retrieved the term from Mahan's text.

An additional factor in its popularization was the shifting balance of power from mainland Europe to the American side of the Atlantic. From an American point of view, everything on the European side of the Atlantic is, geographically, east. Today "the Middle East" encompasses the lands that stretch from Egypt to Turkey and Iraq, including the Arabian Peninsula, usually Iran, and, somewhat less frequently, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Sudan (Mattar, 2004).

Social media and political awareness in the Middle East The new media which stands for social media and the internet, in the new era of communication tools, can provide people some ways which are most difficult for the governments to ban or control them to speed up the process of democratic rallies which are named in the Middle East as a revolution. For example, Arab spring in countries like Egypt, Yemen and Syria spread by the protesters who were on the street to bring democracy instead of having an authoritarian regime. But what did happen next?

In these countries, people faced a strong resistance of the government to take part other parties in the elections so we can expect and predict who will be the next president of the country. For instance, in Syria, Bashar al-Assad is the president since 2000 and in Egypt, Hosni Mubarak was the president for at least 30 years and after these presidents, we can also expect who will be the next one because there are many obstacles which the authoritarian government make to prevent other parties or candidates to participate effectively so we can see many boycotts in the elections of these areas (Buttorff, 2018).

After the rise of social media across the region, many people could access the news which they couldn't before. According to the Egyptian revolution in 2011, data shows that YouTube and Facebook had a very deep role to bring protesters on the street which leads to Hosni Mubarak exit from power. If this revolution happened five years earlier, it would have remained an isolated incident but with the social media, people especially young ones could spread out the videos and new materials to attract other people to stay on the streets (Mansour, 2012).

Reactions to Protests by the Authoritarian Governments

As we suggested, history shows many censorships across the Middle Eastern countries on their old media (like magazines and newspapers) and mass media. There is no doubt that this kind of strategy to limit opposition's power continues forward and spread the new media like social media and generally internet. As statistics since 1995 indicates, authoritarian governments along with other kinds of governments like democracy and emerging democracy has a bigger share to ban, control or limit access to the internet. They have also three kinds of disconnection and interference of internet:

- Complete network shutdown
- Specific site-oriented shutdowns
- Banning individual users

Based on the data, authoritarian governments since 1995, shut down the internet totally 30 times however, the democracies did it 13 and emerging democracy did it 3 times. Authoritarian governments shut down specific site-oriented 210 times meanwhile democracies 140 and emerging democracies did it 25 times. Authoritarian governments banned specific individual users 125 times when this number is about 82 for democracies and 16 times for emerging democracies (Azhar, 2015; Howard et al., 2011).

The most extreme choice is to shut down the access to the internet completely as we can see during the Egyptian revolution for at least three days by Egyptian authoritarian government (Mansour, 2012). When the whole access to the internet shuts down, there's no hope to have any democratic rally or a revolution against corruption, therefore, there won't be any hope for a better government or prosperity among Middle Eastern nations. The Iranian government also shut down the internet amid the unrests of December 2019 against rising fuel prices. The internet across the countries shut down for about one week to prevent citizens from organizing protests on the streets.

The Role of Space X's Star Link Mission

The current system of the internet can put under severe control from the governments around the world and some countries can enforce great surveillance on the users of the internet and break their privacies. Space X Company is a private company which leads by Elon Musk in the United States. His thought is that he can establish a new platform of the internet which is based on satellite signals from outside the globe which no more government can put any surveillance on it and no limitation will be in front of its users (Foust, 2018).

Star Link's mission started on May 23, 2019, when Falcon 9 rocket sent to space to put sixty satellites into space. The future of this mission is to send 12000 satellites until the mid-2020s which help people from anywhere in the world - from the climax of mountains to poor areas - to access the free internet. Space X plans to offer speeds of 10 Gbps to every human and undercut land-based networks. It means that no land-based network will be open to the users and this new access to the internet will cover all the areas around the world without any government interference.

Star link mission, covers all the areas which didn't have any access to the internet. This kind of satellite internet can cover the globe without any interference because every 12000 satellites can switch to one another in the case of emergency (interference, colliding with the atmosphere, and so on) so the people face a kind of satellite internet which cannot down by any power. It can also bring a new Virtual Private Network (VPN) for all areas in the world. It also prepares mobile services for many areas of new kinds of the internet like Internet of Vehicles (IoV), Internet of things (IoT), Vehicle-to-vehicle (V2V), and Vehicle-to-Infrastructure (V2I). By applying these satellite communications, accidents and fatalities can contain by the governors and consequently saving many lives (Lin et al., 2020).

Besides, this feature of the new internet can be used all over the world and nobody can censor or interfere with that. Accordingly, all users will be online and no power can overcome this kind of access to the internet to limit access. The technology of this mission is a peer-to-peer and end-to-end encryption of messages and calls and the whole access to the internet which no country or company can put it under surveillance and interfere in during political tensions and revolutions.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

The current study possess some limitations. Due to dearth of time and resources, data was retrieved from secondary sources only. In future, scholars are encouraged to add different point of views i.e., interviews of government personnels and policy makers could be added to get deep insights into the problem studies here. This would also help to draw a bigger picture and aid in making the situation better.

Conclusion

Besides the benefits of Star link mission for IoV, IoT, V2V, V2I, internet for farming (McKinion et al., 2004) and to bring new opportunities for the poor people to learn and educate like other people around the globe (Abdous & Yen, 2010), the new internet can access all areas which didn't access to the internet in the past.

By creating a new VPN which governments won't be able to track the resource, people can participate in the revolutions and schedule many rallies without any feelings which they afraid of it before. People all around the world can trace the news of legislation process in the Middle East countries and no more government can cheat people about political matters. Consequently, if this mission accomplishes its goals, it would be a huge danger for the authoritarian governments which maybe leads to the overthrow of governments which for example we saw in the Arab Spring which cracked down by the regimes via shutting down the internet or interfering in it. This is one of the future challenges in front of the authoritarian governments across the Middle East.

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