After the 2026 Internet Blackout: Human Security, Digital Repression, and Emotional Life in Iran

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Abstract

Between January and May 2026, Iran experienced extensive internet shutdowns, platform restrictions, and communication disruptions amid heightened political tension and wartime insecurity. As connectivity gradually returned, social media platforms became spaces where Iranian users expressed exhaustion, grief, alienation, interrupted normalcy, and longing for ordinary life alongside more overt forms of political expression. While internet shutdowns are often analyzed primarily as tools of censorship and protest suppression, less attention has been paid to their emotional and social consequences or to how digital expression re-emerges after prolonged periods of enforced silence. This paper examines how Iranian social media users articulated freedom, normalcy, and emotional recovery following the restoration of connectivity after the 2026 internet blackout. Drawing on qualitative digital ethnography, the study analyzes 513 posts collected from Iranian users on X and Threads and employs an interdisciplinary framework combining human security, digital authoritarianism, and affective politics. The findings reveal that users remembered the blackout less as a technological disruption than as a multidimensional human security crisis affecting emotional well-being, livelihoods, family relationships, and social belonging. Collective trauma, grief, emotional exhaustion, resilience, hope, and attachment to homeland appeared repeatedly in the posts, suggesting that suffering and perseverance frequently coexisted. Memory preservation and uncertainty also emerged as significant themes, reflecting concerns about forgetting, future insecurity, and the fragility of normal life. The study argues that internet shutdowns reshape political participation, collective memory, emotional recovery, and everyday experiences of security long after connectivity is restored.

Keywords: Internet shutdowns, human security, digital authoritarianism, collective trauma, Iran

Después del apagón de Internet de 2026: seguridad humana, represión digital y vida emocional en Irán

Resumen

Entre enero y mayo de 2026, Irán sufrió cortes generalizados de internet, restricciones en las plataformas y disrupciones en las comunicaciones en medio de una creciente tensión política e inseguridad bélica. A medida que la conectividad se restableció gradualmente, las redes sociales se convirtieron en espacios donde los usuarios iraníes expresaron agotamiento, dolor, alienación, la interrupción de la normalidad y la añoranza de la vida cotidiana, junto con formas más explícitas de expresión política. Si bien los cortes de internet suelen analizarse principalmente como herramientas de censura y represión de protestas, se ha prestado menos atención a sus consecuencias emocionales y sociales, o a cómo resurge la expresión digital tras largos periodos de silencio forzado. Este artículo examina cómo los usuarios iraníes de redes sociales articularon la libertad, la normalidad y la recuperación emocional tras el restablecimiento de la conectividad después del apagón de internet de 2026. A partir de una etnografía digital cualitativa, el estudio analiza 513 publicaciones recopiladas de usuarios iraníes en X y Threads, y emplea un marco interdisciplinario que combina la seguridad humana, el autoritarismo digital y la política afectiva. Los hallazgos revelan que los usuarios recordaron el apagón no tanto como una interrupción tecnológica, sino como una crisis de seguridad humana multidimensional que afectó el bienestar emocional, los medios de subsistencia, las relaciones familiares y el sentido de pertenencia social. El trauma colectivo, el duelo, el agotamiento emocional, la resiliencia, la esperanza y el apego a la patria aparecieron repetidamente en las publicaciones, lo que sugiere que el sufrimiento y la perseverancia coexistieron con frecuencia. La preservación de la memoria y la incertidumbre también surgieron como temas significativos, reflejando la preocupación por el olvido, la inseguridad futura y la fragilidad de la vida cotidiana. El estudio sostiene que los cortes de internet transforman la participación política, la memoria colectiva, la recuperación emocional y las experiencias cotidianas de seguridad mucho después de que se restablezca la conectividad.

Palabras clave: Cortes de internet, seguridad humana, autoritarismo digital, trauma colectivo, Irán

2026年互联网中断之后：伊朗的人类安全、数字压制与情感生活

摘要

2026年1月至5月期间，在政治局势高度紧张和战时动荡不安的背景下，伊朗经历了大规模的网络中断、平台限制及通信受阻。随着网络连接逐渐恢复，社交媒体平台成为了伊朗用户表达情感与诉求的空间；除了更为直接的政治表达外，用户还在此抒发了疲惫、悲伤、疏离感、对正常生活被打断的无奈以及对平稳日常的渴望。尽管以往对网络中断的分析多侧重于其作为审查与镇压抗议手段的功能，但对其引发的情感与社会后果，以及在长期强制性“静默”之后数字表达如何重现等方面的关注却相对较少。本文探讨了2026年网络中断结束后，伊朗社交媒体用户如何表达对自由、常态生活及情感复原的诉求。本研究采用定性数字民族志方法，分析了从X（原Twitter）和Threads平台上收集的513条伊朗用户发布的帖子，并运用了结合人类安全、数字威权主义及情感政治的跨学科分析框架。研究发现，用户对此次网络中断的记忆，更多地将其视为一场多维度的人类安全危机——即一场影响情感福祉、生计、家庭关系及社会归属感的危机——而非仅仅是一次技术层面的中断。帖子中反复出现集体创伤、悲伤、情感耗竭、韧性、希望以及对故土的眷恋等主题，表明苦难与坚韧往往并存。此外，记忆的留存与不确定性也是重要议题，反映了用户对于遗忘、未来不安全感以及正常生活脆弱性的担忧。研究认为，即便在网络连接恢复许久之后，网络中断事件仍在重塑着政治参与、集体记忆、情感复原以及日常安全体验。

关键词：网络中断，人类安全，数字威权主义，集体创伤，伊朗

I. Introduction

Internet shutdowns have become an increasingly common tool of state control during periods of political unrest, armed conflict, and social instability (Grinko et al. 2022; Roberts and Oosterom 2025). Governments frequently justify communication restrictions as necessary for national security, public order, or crisis management. However, for populations living through these disruptions, the consequences extend far beyond temporary limits on access to information. Internet shutdowns interrupt communication with family members, disrupt livelihoods, restrict access to news and

services, and alter the social and emotional routines through which people navigate everyday life.

Between January and May 2026, Iran experienced extensive internet disruptions, platform restrictions, and communication blackouts amid heightened political tensions, armed conflict, and widespread uncertainty (Aceto, Persico, and Pescapè 2026). During this period, millions of people experienced varying degrees of digital isolation, often with limited access to information about unfolding events, loved ones' safety, or the broader political situation. As connectivity gradually returned, social media platforms such as X and Threads became important spaces where users reflected on their experiences and attempted to make sense of the months that had preceded reconnection.

Existing scholarship on internet shutdowns has primarily focused on censorship, protest suppression, surveillance, and the political objectives of digital control (Michaelsen 2018; Kapsokoli 2024). Research on Iran similarly emphasizes state censorship, digital authoritarianism, online resistance, and protest mobilization. While these studies provide important insights into how communication restrictions are imposed and contested, less attention has been paid to what occurs after communication is restored. Limited research has examined how users articulate grief, uncertainty, emotional recovery, collective memory, and everyday life following prolonged periods of enforced digital silence. This is especially important because communication infrastructures increasingly function as more than technical systems. They are embedded in social relationships, economic activity, emotional support networks, and everyday routines (Tabatabaei et al. 2024; Awwad and Toyama 2026). Their disruption affects political expression and broader dimensions of human security, including dignity, belonging, emotional well-being, and social continuity.

This study examines how Iranian social media users experienced and interpreted the aftermath of the 2026 internet blackout. Drawing on qualitative digital ethnography and an analysis of 513 posts collected from Iranian users on X and Threads, the paper examines how Iranian social media users articulate freedom, normalcy, and emotional recovery following periods of internet shutdowns and digital repression. The findings suggest that the restoration of connectivity did not simply reopen channels of communication. It also created space for the expression of collective trauma, grief, uncertainty, resilience, and efforts to preserve memory. While internet shutdowns are often analyzed as instruments of censorship and political control, users frequently frame them as disruptions affecting livelihoods, family relationships, emotional well-being, and everyday life. The study argues that internet shutdowns should be understood both as mechanisms of digital authoritarianism and as multidimensional human security crises whose consequences persist long after connectivity returns.

II. Literature Review and Analytical Framework

Digital communication in Iran exists within a political environment characterized by censorship, surveillance, and recurring internet disruptions. Despite these restrictions, Iranian users continue to employ social media platforms as spaces for political expression, social connection, and everyday resistance. Research on Iranian social media reveals that digital platforms facilitate public discussion of political and social issues despite extensive state controls (Marchant et al. 2016; Hashemi et al. 2022). More recent scholarship argues that online spaces have become important arenas for what Imani (2026) describes as "everyday resistance," allowing users to negotiate visibility, identity, and ordinary life under authoritarian conditions.

Broader literature situates these dynamics within the framework of digital authoritarianism. Digital authoritarianism refers to the use of digital technologies and communication infrastructures to monitor, regulate, and suppress political expression (Roberts and Oosterom 2025). Iran has frequently been identified as a prominent example of this model, relying on censorship, filtering, surveillance, and internet shutdowns to manage information flows and political dissent (Kapsokoli 2024; Michaelsen 2018). Studies of previous Iranian shutdowns reveal that internet restrictions function as technical disruptions and as mechanisms of infrastructural control that reshape communication, visibility, and access to information (Grinko et al. 2022).

Recent scholarship increasingly discusses the broader social consequences of communication disruption. Internet shutdowns affect both political participation and economic activity, social relationships, emotional well-being, and everyday life (Jonas 2026). Research from conflict settings further reveals that communication infrastructures often function as emotional and social lifelines, enabling individuals to maintain family connections, social support networks, and a sense of continuity during periods of crisis (Awwad and Toyama 2026).

Theoretical work on affective politics likewise argues for the importance of emotions in shaping political experience and expression. Emotions such as grief, fear, exhaustion, hope, and longing are increasingly recognized as central components of political life (Neuman 2008; Ward, Crowhurst, and Sauer 2019). Digital platforms function as spaces for information exchange and as arenas where users negotiate belonging, memory, identity, and emotional recovery.

While existing scholarship has examined censorship, protest mobilization, and internet shutdowns in Iran, less attention has been paid to what occurs after communication is restored. Limited research has explored how users articulate emotional recovery, collective memory, uncertainty, and everyday life following prolonged periods of enforced digital silence. This study addresses that gap by examining

how Iranian social media users experienced and interpreted the aftermath of the 2026 internet blackout through the lenses of human security, digital authoritarianism, and affective politics.

Internet shutdowns are increasingly understood as more than technical disruptions or instruments of political control. Existing scholarship suggests that they may affect economic livelihoods, family relationships, emotional wellbeing, collective memory, and perceptions of future security. To interpret these experiences, this study employs three complementary analytical frameworks: human security, digital authoritarianism, and affective politics. Human security serves as the primary framework for interpreting the findings, while digital authoritarianism and affective politics provide additional insight into the mechanisms and lived experiences of communication disruption.

Unlike traditional security approaches that focus on states and military threats, human security focuses on protecting individuals and communities, as well as the conditions necessary for human well-being, dignity, and everyday life (UNDP 1994). Security extends beyond physical safety to include economic stability, social belonging, communication, emotional well-being, and access to essential resources. This perspective is highly relevant in digitally connected societies, where communication infrastructure increasingly shapes social relationships, family contact, economic activity, and access to information. Internet shutdowns represent more than technical disruptions. They can undermine livelihoods, isolate individuals from support networks, restrict visibility, and disrupt everyday routines that contribute to a sense of stability and belonging. Research on Iran reveals that digital platforms have become important spaces for communication, identity formation, and social participation (Tabatabaei et al. 2024). Studies further show that internet restrictions affect both political expression and perceptions of vulnerability, dignity, and social connectedness (Honari 2018; Hashemi 2020). Recent accounts of communication blackouts in Iran likewise argue how internet disruptions affect family relationships, emotional stability, and economic survival (Payande and Charkameh 2025). This study conceptualizes internet shutdowns as disruptions to human security that affect both material and emotional dimensions of everyday life.

Digital authoritarianism provides a framework for understanding how internet shutdowns, censorship, surveillance, and information controls function as mechanisms of governance. Contemporary authoritarian regimes increasingly regulate communication by managing digital infrastructures and information flows. Iran has frequently been identified as a prominent example of digital authoritarianism, employing filtering systems, surveillance technologies, throttling, and internet shutdowns to regulate online communication (Aryan, Aryan, and Halderman 2013; Michaelsen 2018). Internet disruptions function as political tools that shape visibility, access to information, and public discourse. Digital authoritarian-

ism serves as an explanatory framework for understanding the mechanisms through which communication disruptions are produced. While human security focuses on their consequences, digital authoritarianism helps explain the political and technological systems that enable internet shutdowns, censorship, and information control.

The third framework focuses on the emotional dimensions of communication disruption. Affective politics focuses on the role of emotions in shaping political experience, while ontological security reveals the importance of continuity, predictability, and stability in everyday life. Digital communication has become embedded in daily routines of social interaction, emotional support, and family contact. As a result, internet shutdowns disrupt more than access to information. They interrupt routines, create uncertainty, weaken social connections, and generate feelings of isolation and insecurity. Research on Iranian digital activism reveals that emotions such as grief, fear, anger, hope, and solidarity are central components of online political expression (Tafakori 2021). Studies of digital mourning further suggest that communication disruptions can create emotional ruptures that affect both individual well-being and collective memory (Hjorth, Borovica, and Gerber 2025).

Viewed through these frameworks, internet shutdowns emerge as more than technical disruptions. They affect economic security, emotional well-being, social relationships, collective memory, and everyday experiences of uncertainty, while simultaneously serving as instruments of political control. Examining these interconnected effects provides a foundation for understanding how Iranian users experienced, interpreted, and responded to the aftermath of the 2026 internet blackout.

III. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative digital ethnographic approach to examine how Iranian social media users articulated experiences of internet shutdowns, emotional recovery, collective memory, and everyday life following the restoration of connectivity after the 2026 internet blackout. Digital ethnography is particularly useful for examining how individuals construct meaning, express emotions, and negotiate social realities within online environments. The approach views digital platforms as spaces where users interpret, narrate, and make sense of lived experiences.

The dataset consisted of 513 publicly accessible posts originating in Iran, collected from the social media platforms X and Threads in May 2026, during internet restoration. Posts were identified through keyword searches in Persian and English related to internet shutdowns, communication disruptions, censorship, war, uncertainty, grief, memory, daily life, and reconnection following the restoration of internet access. Only publicly available posts were included in the dataset. Private accounts, direct messages, and content requiring platform authoriza-

tion beyond normal public access were excluded. To focus on lived experiences of the blackout and its aftermath, posts were selected when they contained personal reflections, emotional responses, descriptions of everyday experiences, or discussions of internet disruptions and their consequences. Duplicate posts, spam content, commercial advertisements, and posts unrelated to the research questions were excluded. Because many posts were originally written in Persian, they were translated into English for analysis. Translations prioritized semantic accuracy while preserving the tone and meaning of the original text.

Although all analyzed posts were publicly available, ethical precautions were taken to protect user privacy. Usernames, profile identifiers, photographs, and other potentially identifying information were removed from the dataset. Posts cited within the paper are identified only by numerical post identifiers assigned during analysis. The study focuses on patterns of discourse and follows established ethical guidelines for internet-mediated research involving publicly accessible social media content.

The study employed a two-stage qualitative analysis consisting of reflexive thematic analysis and qualitative content analysis. First, reflexive thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). Posts were read repeatedly to become familiar with the dataset and then coded inductively for recurring ideas, emotions, experiences, and patterns of meaning. Initial codes were grouped into broader themes through an iterative process of review and refinement. The analysis focused on how users described internet shutdowns, emotional recovery, collective memory, uncertainty, resilience, and everyday life following the restoration of connectivity. The thematic analysis identified five major themes: (1) internet shutdowns as a multidimensional human security crisis, (2) collective trauma, grief, and emotional exhaustion, (3) memory preservation as resistance, (4) uncertainty and anticipatory insecurity, and (5) resilience, hope, and attachment to homeland.

To complement the thematic analysis, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to examine the frequency and distribution of major themes across the dataset. Each post was coded for the presence or absence of key themes, enabling calculation of frequencies and percentages. The content analysis did not replace thematic interpretation but provided a systematic assessment of the relative prominence of themes identified through reflexive thematic analysis.

The analysis was guided by three complementary analytical frameworks: human security, digital authoritarianism, and affective politics. Human security served as the primary interpretive lens, emphasizing how communication disruptions affected everyday well-being, dignity, social relationships, and emotional security. Digital authoritarianism provided a framework for understanding internet shutdowns as mechanisms of governance and information

control. Affective politics informed the analysis of grief, hope, uncertainty, memory, and emotional recovery as central dimensions of political and social life.

IV. Results

Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify recurring themes, emotional expressions, and patterns of meaning within 513 social media posts collected from Iranian users on Threads and X following the restoration of internet access after the 2026 internet blackout. The analysis revealed four overarching analytical frameworks: Human Security (46.4%, n = 238), Affective Politics (38.8%, n = 199), Digital Authoritarianism (9.7%, n = 50), and Emergent Themes (5.1%, n = 26) (Table 1). Human Security and Affective Politics accounted for 85.2% of all coded posts, indicating that users primarily framed their experiences in terms of everyday insecurity, emotional suffering, grief, resilience, and survival.

Table 1

Dominant Framework	**Number of Posts**	**Percentage**
Human Security	238	46.4%
Affective Politics	199	38.8%
Digital Authoritarianism	50	9.7%
Emergent Themes	26	5.1%
Total	513	100.0%

Dominant Framework Distribution (N = 513)

Social media posts reveal a population attempting to make sense of overlapping crises, including internet shutdowns, war, economic hardship, political repression, uncertainty, and collective loss. While many users discussed political developments, the dominant concerns were deeply personal. Participants repeatedly described the consequences of disconnection from loved ones, unemployment caused by internet restrictions, anxiety during periods of uncertainty, fear of renewed violence, and the emotional burden of mourning those perceived to have been lost during the crisis. The analysis suggests that internet shutdowns were experienced primarily as events that intensified existing forms of human insecurity.

Five major themes emerged from the dataset: (1) internet shutdowns as a multidimensional human security cri-

sis, (2) collective trauma and emotional exhaustion, (3) memory preservation as resistance, (4) uncertainty and anticipatory insecurity, and (5) resilience, hope, and attachment to homeland. These themes frequently overlapped, reflecting the interconnected nature of digital repression, emotional wellbeing, and everyday survival.

4.1 Internet Shutdowns as a Human Security Crisis

Internet shutdowns emerged as one of the most significant themes in the dataset. Of the 513 posts analyzed, 105 (20.5%) contained explicit references to internet disruptions, censorship, communication loss, reconnection, visibility, or related forms of digital restriction. Although internet shutdowns are often examined through the lens of censorship and information control, participants rarely discussed them solely as technological or political issues. Users consistently described internet access as essential to maintaining livelihoods, family relationships, emotional wellbeing, personal security, and social participation. As a result, many posts referencing internet restrictions were coded within the Human Security framework.

Participants repeatedly described the blackout as a period of isolation, uncertainty, and vulnerability. Several users compared reconnection to emerging from imprisonment or exile, emphasizing the emotional significance of being able to communicate with friends, family members, and online communities again. One participant described the restoration of internet access as an opportunity to realize "how valuable being together is," while another referred to the blackout as a period in which "something inside us stayed offline forever." These expressions suggest that internet access served as a means of maintaining emotional continuity, a sense of belonging, and social connection.

The centrality of internet access to human security was particularly evident in Post 212, which described internet access as a basic necessity comparable to water, electricity, and gas. The author directly linked internet throttling and filtering to unemployment, hunger, financial hardship, and social exclusion, illustrating how digital restrictions were experienced as threats to livelihood security. This finding was reinforced by Post 91, where prolonged internet restrictions and political repression were associated with profound hopelessness, loss of dignity, and suicidal ideation. These posts reveal that participants viewed internet access not as a luxury or convenience but as an essential component of economic survival, social connection, and psychological well-being.

Economic consequences were also frequently discussed. Users described losing employment, clients, business opportunities, and income during the shutdown. One participant explicitly stated, "I lost my job because of 80 days of internet blackout" (Post 201), while others described business closures, unemployment, declining tourism activity, and increasing financial precarity. In these accounts, digital disconnection directly translated into material insecurity. The shutdown



Figure 1. Example of internet shutdown framed as a human security crisis (Post 212). The author has anonymized user identifiers. The text reads: "I do not understand all these comments saying, 'Why was the internet restored?' or 'I wish it had not come back.' The fact that the internet is back is something people should be happy about. The internet, like water, electricity, and gas, is a basic and essential need for every person. The events of Dey and the lives that the Islamic Republic took from us will never be forgotten. They will not be forgiven either. But many of us became unemployed. We went hungry. We became broke because of this useless, heavily filtered, slow internet. Instead, write about what happened. Post about it. Remind people of what we endured and what was done to us."

disrupted information flows and individuals' ability to earn a livelihood and maintain economic stability.

The inability to communicate with loved ones during periods of conflict emerged as another recurring concern. Several participants described spending days or weeks without information about relatives living in other cities. Others recounted the distress of being unable to verify whether family members were alive, injured, or safe during military attacks. The internet served as a source of emotional and relational security. Its absence intensified fear, uncertainty, and helplessness during an already volatile period.

Participants also mentioned how information deprivation amplified uncertainty. Many posts described relying on rumors, fragmented reports, indirect communication channels, and

speculation to understand unfolding events. Significantly, users often distinguished uncertainty from fear. As one participant explained, "It is not only fear. The uncertainty wears a person down." Throughout the dataset, uncertainty emerged as a major source of psychological distress, suggesting that the effects of shutdowns extended beyond communication loss into the realm of emotional wellbeing.

The data further reveal perceptions of unequal access to connectivity. Multiple participants criticized what they described as "class-based internet," contrasting the experiences of ordinary citizens with those of those who retained access through Starlink connections, premium services, or government-approved networks. Users repeatedly framed this unequal access as a form of social stratification, arguing that restrictions applied primarily to ordinary people while politically connected groups remained connected. Such perceptions transformed internet access from a technical issue into a visible marker of inequality and exclusion.

Finally, internet shutdowns became normalized as an anticipated feature of everyday life. In later posts, users routinely warned one another that the internet might be cut again, shared VPN recommendations, discussed contingency plans, and prepared emotionally for renewed disconnection. Participants increasingly described living under the constant possibility of future digital isolation. This anticipatory insecurity demonstrates how digital repression can become embedded within everyday life and shape perceptions of safety, stability, and control.

These findings suggest that internet shutdowns during the 2026 crisis functioned as a multidimensional human security threat. Participants experienced digital disconnection both as censorship and as a source of economic hardship, emotional distress, social isolation, informational uncertainty, and unequal access to essential resources. The blackout operated simultaneously as an instrument of digital authoritarianism and as a mechanism that deepened human insecurity across multiple domains of everyday life.

4.2 Collective Trauma, Grief, and Emotional Exhaustion

Collective trauma, grief, and emotional exhaustion emerged as one of the most prominent themes in the dataset. Of the 513 posts analyzed, 232 posts (45.2%) contained references to grief, mourning, emotional rupture, depression, sadness, trauma, or broader psychological distress. This suggests that the restoration of internet access reopened channels through which accumulated emotional suffering, unresolved grief, and collective memories of violence could be expressed. Many posts reflected a shared emotional landscape shaped by months of uncertainty, repression, war, economic hardship, and social isolation. Users frequently referenced exhaustion, hopelessness, anxiety, depression, and emotional numbness. Several described difficulties concentrating, loss of motivation, disrupted life plans, and an inability to return to

normal routines after the blackout and subsequent conflict. Others discussed chronic stress stemming from unemployment, economic instability, family separation, and the ongoing fear of renewed internet shutdowns.

Some of the clearest manifestations of collective trauma appeared in Posts 191 and 293. Post 191 described recurring dreams of having a gun pointed at the author and an inability to erase memories of witnessing death, reflecting symptoms commonly associated with intrusive recollections and traumatic stress. Post 293 extended these patterns further, describing sleeplessness, nightmares, emotional numbness, disorientation, and profound existential questioning. Many users were not simply expressing sadness or frustration but articulating experiences consistent with prolonged psychological trauma and moral injury.



Figure 2. Example of collective trauma and emotional exhaustion (Post 293). The author has anonymized user identifiers. The text reads: "I am not okay. We are not okay. I am not getting better. We are not getting better. For days I have been in shock. For nights I have not slept. For weeks I have understood nothing about life. Where is this place? Who are these people? Where in history are we? What is happening? Am I awake or asleep? Am I unconscious or aware? I feel as though I am trapped in a nightmare from hell, watching vile and merciless demons descend upon innocent people and do things to human beings that no animal would do to another animal, let alone to a person. I am struggling in a state of shock, anger, and hatred, and I keep asking myself: Was there no God? Did God not see?"

The data also reveal patterns consistent with collective mourning. Users repeatedly referenced individuals killed during protests, remembered victims by name, visited gravesites, commemorated anniversaries of deaths, and expressed concern that public memory of these losses might fade over time. Memory preservation emerged as an important social function of online communication, with many users emphasizing the need to document events, archive videos, record personal experiences, and ensure that future generations would understand what had occurred. As such, social media functioned both as a communication platform and as a space of collective remembrance.

Many posts reflected symptoms commonly associated with prolonged exposure to insecurity and traumatic events. Users described hypervigilance toward loud noises, fear triggered by sounds resembling explosions, sleep disruption, emotional numbness, persistent anxiety, and a sense of living in a state of continuous anticipation of future danger. For example, Post 398 described waking suddenly at 3 a.m. and instinctively trying to determine whether a loud sound was caused by fighter aircraft or thunder, revealing how traumatic experiences continued to shape everyday perception long after the immediate crisis had passed. Several individuals also discussed depression, emotional breakdown, and the feeling that years of crisis had permanently altered their outlook on life. Others described a profound transformation of personal identity, suggesting that repeated exposure to violence, repression, economic hardship, and uncertainty had changed how they understood themselves and their future.

Trauma narratives were frequently accompanied by efforts to find meaning, resilience, and emotional endurance. Users encouraged one another to continue exercising, walking, studying, helping others, preserving relationships, and maintaining hope despite difficult circumstances. These efforts suggest that emotional recovery and resilience were not separate from the experience of trauma but were often articulated alongside it. The coexistence of grief and perseverance demonstrates how individuals attempted to navigate ongoing insecurity while preserving a sense of purpose and collective identity.

Viewed through a human security lens, these findings reveal that the consequences of internet shutdowns, political violence, and armed conflict extend well beyond physical safety. They shape emotional well-being, social relationships, collective memory, and personal identity. The prevalence of trauma-related content across nearly half of the dataset highlights the extent to which psychological insecurity became a defining feature of everyday life in post-blackout Iran.

4.3 Memory Preservation as Resistance

Memory preservation emerged as a significant theme within the dataset, appearing in 139 of the 513 posts analyzed (27.1%). Within the reflexive thematic analysis, memory functioned as recollection and as a form of resis-

tance against perceived erasure, forgetting, and official silence. Participants repeatedly discussed the importance of documenting events, preserving names, maintaining archives, and ensuring that those who had been killed, imprisoned, or otherwise affected would not disappear from public memory.

A recurring pattern involved efforts to keep alive the names and stories of individuals associated with the events of Dey (the 10th month of the Iranian calendar, which roughly runs from late December to late January; Dey 1404 in the Iranian calendar corresponds to January 2026) and the subsequent conflict. Many users described the preservation of memory as a moral obligation, framing remembrance as a collective responsibility shared by survivors, families, and the broader online community. Participants frequently treated social media as a repository of testimony, evidence, and historical record.

The theme was particularly visible in discussions surrounding photographs, videos, personal testimonies, and digital archives. Users expressed concern that evidence might disappear, be removed, or become inaccessible due to censorship, account suspensions, reporting campaigns, or future internet shutdowns. As a result, documentation itself became an act of resistance. Recording events, preserving footage, sharing names, and maintaining online memorial spaces were presented as ways to challenge attempts to suppress or rewrite collective experiences.

The analysis also revealed the emergence of a digital commemorative culture centered on remembrance, documentation, and public memorialization. Participants repeatedly returned to anniversaries, lists of victims, memorial pages, and acts of symbolic remembrance. These practices served important social functions beyond mourning alone. They reinforced collective identity, sustained political commitment, and transformed personal grief into shared memory. Through these activities, memory became intertwined with resistance, justice, and the preservation of collective narratives.

Post 359 provided perhaps the clearest articulation of memorialization as resistance. The author distinguished between "living normally" and "normalizing" past violence, arguing that ordinary life must continue while collective memory remains intact. This distinction captures a broader pattern across the dataset in which preserving memory was framed as a moral responsibility and forgetting was portrayed as a form of complicity. Across many posts, participants expressed concern that public attention would fade, that victims would be forgotten, or that the events of Dey would be reduced to a temporary crisis.

This commitment to remembrance was also evident in calls to preserve digital evidence. Post 498 argued that "everything that happened should be written down" and that videos should be preserved for future generations without editing or alteration. Such statements reveal how documentation itself became a form of resistance, intended to preserve collective memory



Figure 3. Example of memory preservation as resistance (Post 359). The author has anonymized user identifiers. The text reads: "I have no problem with people living normal lives. In fact, I deeply believe that people must keep living. They must go to work, study, fall in love, laugh, and even make plans for tomorrow, because no nation has ever succeeded by stopping life itself. But there is a difference between living normally and normalizing. Living normally means continuing your path despite your wounds. Normalization means acting as if the wounds never existed. I am deeply upset and angry about the behavior of some of my fellow Iranians, especially on Instagram. I still cannot process those carefree displays of happiness in front of the camera. The dancing, the performances, the jokes, as if nothing had happened to this society just a few months ago. Believe me, what weighs on me more heavily these days than the tragedy itself is not happiness, but forgetting. The feeling that many people are still mourning, many still go to sleep every night with the absence of loved ones, yet for some it seems as if nothing happened and the only inconvenience was that the internet was unavailable for a while. No matter how much I think about it, I cannot understand how society moved from mourning to entertainment so quickly. More than anything else, it is the speed of that transition that pains me."

and prevent future denial, erasure, or revision of events.

From a human security perspective, these findings point to how communities experiencing prolonged insecurity often rely on memory practices to maintain social cohesion, preserve dignity, and protect collective identity in the aftermath of violence and repression. In this dataset, remembrance served as a mechanism by which participants sought to preserve dignity, resist symbolic erasure, and ensure that experiences of violence, repression, and loss remained visible in the public sphere.

4.4 Uncertainty and Anticipatory Insecurity

Uncertainty and anticipatory insecurity emerged in 101 of the 513 posts analyzed (19.7%), making it one of the most prominent themes identified through the reflexive thematic analysis. Several participants expressed persistent concern about future threats, including renewed internet shutdowns, escalating conflict, economic deterioration, arrests, surveillance, and additional restrictions on everyday life.

A defining characteristic of this theme was the constant anticipation of disruption. This pattern was particularly evident in Posts 429, 451, 454, and 513, where users repeatedly warned one another that internet access might be cut again, advised followers to prepare for disconnection, and left messages intended to be read in the event of another blackout. These posts suggest that uncertainty was not limited to future possibilities but had become incorporated into everyday routines and expectations. Users frequently discussed preparing for future internet blackouts, worrying about losing communication channels, downloading alternative communication tools, preserving contact information, and leaving messages for followers in case they disappeared from online platforms. These posts reflected a broader sense that connectivity could be withdrawn at any moment and that uncertainty had become a permanent feature of daily life.

The analysis also revealed heightened vigilance regarding security conditions. Participants closely monitored rumors, political developments, military activity, internet performance, and changes in state behavior. Many posts conveyed a sense of living in a prolonged state of alertness, where ordinary activities were continually interrupted by concerns about what might happen next. This uncertainty extended beyond physical security to include employment, education, housing, family relationships, and future opportunities. Importantly, anticipatory insecurity often accompanied references to past experiences of shutdowns, conflict, and repression. Earlier disruptions appeared to shape expectations about future events, leading many participants to assume that restrictions, violence, or communication interruptions could return without warning. As a result, uncertainty became embedded in everyday decision-making and future planning.

The findings suggest that the consequences of internet shutdowns

extend beyond the period of disconnection itself. Even after connectivity was restored, participants continued to experience insecurity rooted in the possibility of renewed disruption. The restoration of internet access, therefore, did not eliminate uncertainty, but it often intensified awareness of its fragility. From a human security perspective, these patterns reveal how recurring disruptions create enduring psychological and social effects that persist long after the immediate crisis has passed.

4.5 Resilience, Hope, and Attachment to Homeland

Resilience, hope, and attachment to homeland emerged as major themes in the dataset, appearing in 223 of the 513 posts analyzed (43.5%). Through the reflexive thematic analysis, participants consistently demonstrated efforts to maintain meaning, purpose, and social connection despite prolonged exposure to insecurity, economic hardship, internet disruptions, political repression, and armed conflict. A central feature of this theme was the persistence of hope under conditions that many participants described as extremely difficult. Hope often appeared as a form of endurance. Participants discussed the importance of maintaining daily routines, pursuing education, maintaining employment, exercising, caring for family members, helping others, and preserving social relationships, even as they expressed profound uncertainty about the future. Hope was frequently framed not so much as a prediction that circumstances would improve, but more as a necessary practice that enabled survival.

The analysis also revealed repeated references to resilience through everyday actions. Participants described efforts to continue working, studying, walking, exercising, learning new skills, reconnecting with friends, supporting vulnerable individuals, and assisting family members. Post 487 provides a particularly illustrative example. Although the author described personal exhaustion and discouragement, the post focused on helping a blind stranger navigate difficult streets. It concluded with a reflection that others may carry burdens equal to or greater than one's own. Such posts demonstrate how resilience is often expressed through acts of care, empathy, and social responsibility. These activities served as mechanisms for coping with prolonged insecurity and restoring a sense of personal agency. Many posts presented it as the ongoing effort to preserve ordinary life under extraordinary circumstances.

Social connection represented another important component of resilience. Participants frequently expressed appreciation for friends, family members, online communities, and individuals who provided emotional support during periods of conflict and communication disruption. Reconnection after internet restoration was often described as emotionally significant, reflecting the importance of social belonging and collective support networks during times of crisis. These interactions helped reinforce a sense of community and reduced feelings of isolation.

A particularly distinctive aspect of this theme was the strong attachment many users expressed toward Iran despite simultaneously describing profound suffering, disappointment, and hardship. Participants repeatedly articulated emotional bonds to homeland, place, language, culture, and national identity. Even among those discussing emigration, economic difficulties, or the desire to leave the country, attachment to Iran remained a recurring source of meaning. The data suggest that criticism of political conditions frequently coexisted with expressions of affection for the country itself.

The findings indicate that resilience was not expressed through denial of hardship. Resilience emerged alongside grief, trauma, and insecurity. Many participants acknowledged emotional exhaustion while simultaneously emphasizing the need to continue living, supporting others, and imagining a better future. This coexistence of suffering and perseverance highlights the complex ways individuals navigate prolonged crises.

From a human security perspective, these findings reveal that resilience extends beyond physical survival. It includes the preservation of hope, identity, dignity, social relationships, and attachment to place. Even under conditions of uncertainty, loss, and insecurity, participants continued to construct narratives of endurance that linked personal well-being to broader visions of community, belonging, and national continuity.

4.6 Intersecting Dimensions of Human Insecurity

While the themes identified above are presented separately for analytical clarity, participants rarely experienced these forms of insecurity as distinct phenomena. Economic hardship, digital repression, political violence, psychological distress, displacement, and uncertainty frequently appeared together within individual posts. Post 323 provides one of the clearest examples of this convergence. In a single post, the author referenced economic collapse, prolonged war, internet shutdowns, displacement, uncertainty, propaganda, and the loss of loved ones. The post reveals how users experienced these conditions as interconnected dimensions of a broader human security crisis.

This pattern was evident throughout the dataset. Internet shutdowns were linked to unemployment and social isolation. Economic insecurity intensified psychological distress. Grief and trauma reinforced efforts at memory preservation. Fear of future violence contributed to anticipatory insecurity, while resilience emerged as a response to continuing hardship. The findings suggest that participants did not experience digital repression, armed conflict, economic decline, and emotional suffering in isolation. They understood them as overlapping and mutually reinforcing threats affecting multiple dimensions of everyday life. This points to the importance of examining insecurity as a multidimensional and interconnected phenomenon. The experiences described by participants

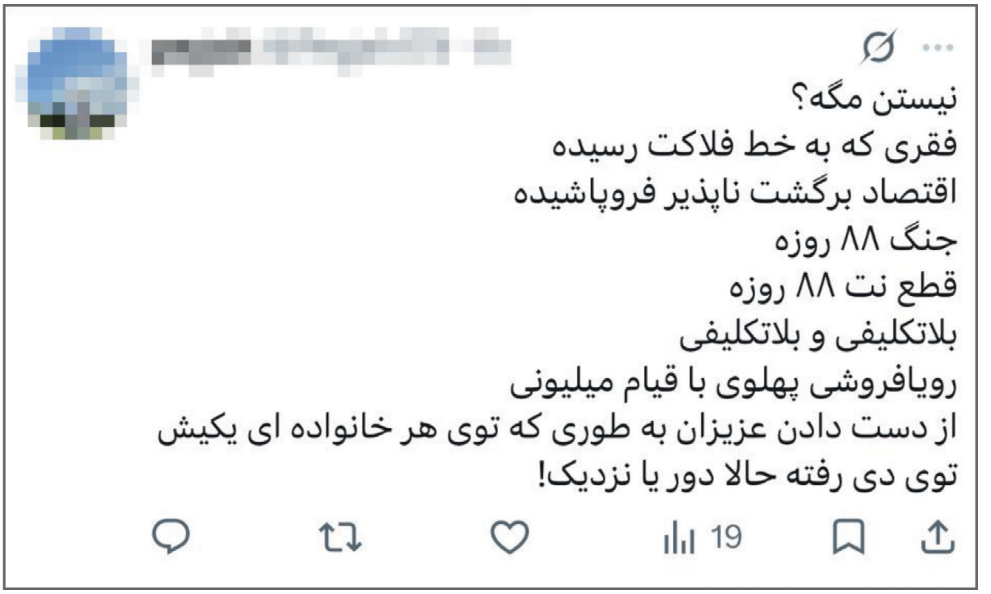

Figure 4. Example of insecurity convergence (Post 323). The author has anonymized user identifiers. The text reads: "Isn't that the case? Poverty has reached a catastrophic level. The economy has suffered an irreversible collapse. Eighty-eight days of war. Eighty-eight days of internet shutdown. Constant uncertainty and instability. Monarchist fantasies of a popular uprising involving millions. The loss of loved ones, to the point that every family has someone, near or distant, who died in Dey."

reveal how disruptions in communication, livelihood, personal safety, emotional wellbeing, and collective identity can converge to produce a pervasive sense of vulnerability that extends far beyond any single event or policy. The frequent overlap between these themes suggests that participants understood the 2026 blackout and its aftermath as a prolonged, interconnected crisis affecting multiple dimensions of human security simultaneously.

V. Qualitative Content Analysis

To complement the reflexive thematic analysis, a qualitative content analysis was conducted to examine how users connected different forms of insecurity within their narratives. This stage of analysis explored recurring patterns across the dataset and how economic, emotional, political, and communicative concerns co-occurred in the same posts. A notable pattern was the convergence of multiple forms of insecurity within individual narratives. Users rarely discussed internet access, economic hardship, grief, political repression, or uncertainty as separate issues. These experiences were typically presented as interconnected dimensions of everyday life. Post 323 illustrates this convergence particularly clearly:

"Poverty has reached a catastrophic level. The economy has suffered an irreversible collapse. Eighty-

eight days of war. Eighty-eight days of internet shutdown. Constant uncertainty and instability... The loss of loved ones, to the point that every family has someone, near or distant, who died in Dey" (Post 323).

The author presents economic collapse, communication disruption, uncertainty, and bereavement as components of a single lived reality. Similar patterns appeared throughout the dataset, suggesting that participants experienced insecurity in cumulative and mutually reinforcing ways.

The analysis further reveals that internet access was frequently framed as an essential component of everyday security. Discussions of connectivity often centered on employment, family contact, access to information, and social participation. One participant wrote:

"I lost my job (kind of) because of 80 days of internet blackout. I live in Iran. And I have to move out of my apartment and cannot afford V-Bucks" (Post 201).

Others discussed the emotional consequences of disconnection. As one user explained, "For twenty days I went crazy because the internet was cut off and I had no news from my brother" (Post 260). These statements suggest that users experienced the blackout not simply as a restriction on information but as a disruption to livelihoods, relationships, and emotional stability.

Several posts also reflected perceptions of unequal access to communication. Internet restrictions were often discussed alongside concerns about surveillance, censorship, and privilege. One participant argued that "the regime, with its class-based internet, has built a wall between people and split society into two completely separate groups. It has created a kind of Berlin Wall with the world" (Post 297). Here, internet access was framed as a technological issue and as a question of social inequality and political exclusion.

The emotional intensity of the dataset was striking. Many users described experiences of grief, exhaustion, confusion, and psychological disorientation that extended well beyond the period of the blackout itself. Post 293 captures this sense of emotional rupture:

"I am not okay. We are not okay. I am not getting better. We are not getting better. For days I have been in shock. For nights I have not slept. For weeks I have understood nothing about life." (Post 293)

Another participant described waking suddenly in the middle of the night and instinctively trying to determine whether a loud sound came from fighter aircraft or thunder (Post 398). Such narratives suggest that uncertainty and fear continued to shape everyday perception long after immediate events had passed.

Alongside grief, the analysis revealed persistent efforts to preserve memory. Users repeatedly mentioned the importance of documentation, testimony, and remembrance. One participant insisted that "everything that happened should be written down and those videos should be preserved with-

out music or editing for future generations" (Post 498). The desire to document events was often accompanied by concerns that public attention would fade or that collective suffering would be forgotten.

Post 359 offered one of the clearest examples of this sentiment. Distinguishing between "living normally" and "normalizing," the author argued that people must continue with everyday life while refusing to forget those who had been lost. Throughout the dataset, remembrance was frequently portrayed as a moral responsibility and forgetting as a form of abandonment.

Expressions of hope and resilience frequently appeared alongside grief and uncertainty. Rather than being replaced by suffering, resilience often emerged from it. One participant wrote, "People are dying, but we still have to keep fighting for life" (Post 433), while another stated, "I love this soil so much that even at the height of suffering and grief, I cannot bring myself to say: I wish I were not Iranian" (Post 509). These statements suggest that attachment to community, memory, and homeland remained important sources of meaning despite ongoing hardship.

The content analysis indicates that users understood the aftermath of the blackout through overlapping experiences of loss, uncertainty, remembrance, and perseverance. The posts rarely reflected a single emotional state. Grief often appeared alongside hope, memory alongside resilience, and fear alongside determination. These patterns suggest that the consequences of internet shutdowns extend beyond communication itself, shaping how individuals experience belonging, security, identity, and the possibility of recovery.

VI. Discussion

One of the most striking findings concerns the relationship between trauma and resilience. Although collective trauma, grief, and emotional exhaustion appeared in 232 posts (45.2%), expressions of resilience, hope, and attachment to homeland appeared in nearly the same proportion of posts (223; 43.5%) (Table 2). This suggests that participants were documenting suffering and simultaneously constructing narratives of endurance, recovery, and collective survival. The coexistence of trauma and resilience indicates that emotional suffering and hope operated together.

Internet shutdowns appeared in 105 posts (20.5%), yet their psychological, social, and emotional consequences appeared far more frequently across the dataset. Participants remembered the blackout less as a technological disruption and more as a human security crisis affecting emotional wellbeing, social connection, livelihoods, and collective identity.

These findings provide strong support for the argument that internet shutdowns are experienced as more than technological disruptions or censorship measures. While internet shutdowns appeared explicitly in only 20.5% of posts, themes associated with their broader consequences, including

Table 2

Theme	Posts	%
Collective Trauma	232	45.2%
Resilience/Hope	223	43.5%
Memory Preservation	139	27.1%
Internet Shutdowns	105	20.5%
Uncertainty	101	19.7%

trauma, uncertainty, memory preservation, and resilience, appeared far more frequently. This pattern suggests that participants understood the blackout primarily through its effects on everyday life. The findings support recent scholarship arguing that communication infrastructures function as social, emotional, and economic lifelines (Awwad and Toyama 2026; Jonas 2026).

Viewed through the lens of human security, the results reveal how internet shutdowns affect multiple dimensions of well-being simultaneously. Participants repeatedly linked communication disruptions to unemployment, financial hardship, family separation, emotional distress, uncertainty, and social isolation. These findings align with UNDP's (1994) broader conception of security, which encompasses dignity, social participation, and freedom from chronic insecurity. Several users described it as essential to maintaining livelihoods, relationships, and emotional stability. The prominence of themes related to trauma, uncertainty, and resilience suggests that the consequences of digital repression extended well beyond information control and became embedded within everyday experiences of security and insecurity.

The findings also reinforce existing scholarship on digital authoritarianism. Previous research has suggested that Iran employs filtering, surveillance, throttling, and communication restrictions to regulate information flows and public discourse (Aryan, Aryan, and Halderman 2013; Michaelsen 2018; Kapsokoli 2024). However, participants rarely discussed censorship as an abstract political issue. Digital authoritarianism appeared as a lived experience that shaped employment opportunities, social relationships, emotional well-being, and access to information. In this sense, the study extends existing research by demonstrating how mechanisms of digital control become meaningful primarily through their human consequences. The blackout was expe-

rienced more as a disruption of ordinary life itself than as state regulation of communication.

The coexistence of collective trauma (45.2%) and resilience (43.5%) represents one of the most significant findings of the study. Suffering and hope frequently coexisted within the same posts. Participants mourned losses, described exhaustion and uncertainty, yet simultaneously emphasized perseverance, mutual support, attachment to homeland, and the importance of continuing everyday life. These findings support scholarship on affective politics that conceptualizes emotions as central components of political experience (Neuman 2008; Ward, Crowhurst, and Sauer 2019). The emotional landscape of the dataset suggests that grief, hope, anger, resilience, and attachment operated simultaneously as ways of interpreting and responding to prolonged insecurity.

The prominence of memory preservation further contributes to existing literature on emotional and digital life under authoritarian conditions. Participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of documenting events, preserving evidence, remembering victims, and resisting the urge to forget. These findings echo Hashemi's (2020) argument that visibility and presence carry political significance under conditions of repression. They also resonate with Hjorth, Borovica, and Gerber's (2025) discussion of digital mourning, suggesting that social media platforms serve as spaces for communication and sites of remembrance, testimony, and collective memory. In the aftermath of the blackout, memory preservation emerged as a form of resistance against both political erasure and social forgetting.

Finally, the findings support Imani's (2026) argument that contemporary forms of resistance in Iran often emerge through the defense of ordinary life. Many participants framed freedom less as regime change or political transformation and more as the ability to communicate, maintain relationships, preserve dignity, plan for the future, and live without constant uncertainty. The desire for normalcy appeared throughout the dataset as a deeply political aspiration shaped by prolonged insecurity and disruption.

The findings suggest that internet shutdowns should be understood as multidimensional human security crises. While digital authoritarianism explains the mechanisms through which communication restrictions are imposed, human security and affective politics provide a more comprehensive understanding of how those restrictions are experienced. The aftermath of the 2026 blackout reveals that communication disruptions reshape not only access to information but also emotional well-being, collective memory, social relationships, and perceptions of future security. These effects persist long after connectivity is restored.

VII. Conclusion

This study examined how Iranian social media users experienced and interpreted the aftermath

of the 2026 internet blackout. Drawing on qualitative digital ethnography and the analysis of 513 posts from X and Threads, it explored how users articulated emotional recovery, collective memory, uncertainty, and everyday life following a prolonged period of communication disruption.

The findings reveal that internet shutdowns are experienced as far more than technical interruptions or instruments of censorship. Participants consistently framed the blackout in terms of its effects on livelihoods, family relationships, emotional well-being, social connection, and collective identity. References to internet shutdowns appeared in 20.5% of posts, yet themes related to trauma, grief, uncertainty, resilience, and memory preservation appeared far more frequently. Although internet shutdowns appeared in only 20.5% of posts, themes related to trauma, resilience, memory, and uncertainty appeared far more frequently, suggesting that participants understood the blackout primarily through its consequences.

One of the most significant findings concerns the close relationship between trauma and resilience. Collective trauma, grief, and emotional exhaustion appeared in 45.2% of posts, while resilience, hope, and attachment to homeland appeared in 43.5% of posts. Suffering and perseverance frequently coexisted within the same narratives. Participants mourned losses and expressed uncertainty about the future while simultaneously emphasizing endurance, social support, remembrance, and the importance of continuing everyday life. These findings point to the complexity of emotional life following prolonged periods of insecurity and disruption.

The study also contributes to existing scholarship on internet shutdowns by shifting attention from the period of disconnection itself to the aftermath of reconnection. While previous research has primarily examined censorship, surveillance, and protest suppression, the findings reveal that the consequences of communication disruptions continue long after connectivity is restored. The restoration of internet access reopened channels of communication and spaces for grief, remembrance, recovery, and the renegotiation of collective identity.

Viewed through the lenses of human security, digital authoritarianism, and affective politics, the findings suggest that internet shutdowns should be understood as multidimensional human security crises. They disrupt access to information and the social, emotional, and economic foundations of everyday life. As governments increasingly employ communication restrictions during periods of crisis and conflict, understanding these broader human consequences becomes essential. The Iranian case demonstrates that the effects of digital repression extend beyond the duration of a shutdown itself, shaping memory, emotional well-being, social relationships, and perceptions of security long after connectivity returns.

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