



**SITUATION BRIEF**

# **INVISIBLE CASUALTIES: LGBTQI+ LIVES IN IRAN'S CONFLICT**

The Overlooked Impact of Conflict and Digital  
Repression on LGBTQI+ Iranians

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HOMA (Alliance for Iranian LGBTQI+ Justice)

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# Invisible Casualties: LGBTQI+ Lives in Iran's Conflict

## The Overlooked Impact of Conflict and Digital Repression on LGBTQI+ Iranians

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## Introduction

In recent months, the convergence of war, economic instability, and the escalating state control over digital spaces has profoundly reshaped everyday life in Iran. For many, these overlapping crises have meant increased insecurity, restricted access to information, and growing uncertainty about the future. For LGBTQI+ individuals, who already face criminalization, systemic discrimination, and heightened digital surveillance, these conditions are not only restrictive but existential, intensifying pre-existing vulnerabilities and exposing them to disproportionate risks.

Building on the findings of *Under the Digital Veil*, this situation brief examines how recent developments, including widespread internet shutdowns, the expansion of surveillance practices such as checkpoint phone inspections, and deepening economic hardship, have compounded the vulnerabilities of LGBTQI+ communities across Iran.

In a context where sexual orientation and gender identity remain heavily stigmatized and criminalized in practice, access to secure communication, reliable information, and digital community spaces is not a luxury but a necessity. The erosion of these lifelines, through censorship, digital inequality, and the proliferation of insecure tools, has intensified isolation and risk.

At the same time, broader structural pressures, including unemployment, displacement, and the destruction of livelihoods, are forcing many LGBTQI+ individuals into conditions that heighten their exposure to violence, coercion, and family-based control. For those who had previously achieved a degree of independence, these setbacks represent not only economic loss but a reversal of hard-won personal autonomy.

This brief draws on testimonies from LGBTQI+ individuals across multiple provinces in Iran to document how these intersecting crises are experienced on the ground. Their accounts reveal a pattern of compounded vulnerability, where digital repression, economic precarity, and physical insecurity reinforce one another, leaving LGBTQI+ individuals with fewer resources, fewer safe spaces, and fewer possibilities for self-determination.

In doing so, this brief seeks to highlight not only the immediate impacts of these developments but also their longer-term implications for the safety, dignity, and fundamental rights of LGBTQI+ people in Iran.

## Privacy and Checkpoints

Due to wartime conditions, checkpoints have been established across cities where citizens' cars and, most importantly, their mobile phones are inspected. These practices pose serious privacy threats. LGBTQI+ individuals are at heightened risk, as such inspections may expose their identities.

A 36-year-old gay man from Tehran province told HOMA:

“I am terrified when I see these checkpoints. I am constantly deleting my chats and images from my phone. I'm afraid something might remain and expose my

identity. Even my family does not know that I am gay, and these checkpoints have only added extra fear to my life, in addition to the fear of airstrikes.”

It should be kept in mind that disclosure of gender identity can lead to risks ranging from domestic violence to even death, not only from the police, security forces, and legal authorities, but also from family members, as well as risks such as restriction of freedom, detention, harassment, and other forms of abuse.

## **From Circumventing Filtering to Buying Internet Access**

In our previous report, *Under the Digital Veil*, published prior to the internet shutdown during the January 2026 protests and again following the attacks by the United States of America and Israel on Iran, HOMA highlighted how deeply the lives of LGBTQI+ individuals in Iran depend on internet access.

“While internet filtering (state-imposed restrictions on access to specific websites and online services) deprives everyone of access to knowledge, for the members of the LGBTQI+ community, it can be a matter of survival...”<sup>1</sup>

The report emphasizes that due to the lack of public education on gender identity and sexual orientation, combined with state-sponsored discrimination and the blocking of related online content, LGBTQI+ individuals, especially adolescents, are denied access to essential information for self-discovery and self-acceptance. This enforced isolation increases psychological distress, anxiety, and risks of depression.

The report also highlights that access to VPNs and high-speed internet in Iran is shaped by socioeconomic status and geographic inequalities. As a result, many LGBTQI+ individuals face compounded barriers to accessing life-saving information related to SOGIESC (sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics)

They are not only forced to bypass censorship but must also rely on insecure VPN services, many of which have unclear ownership and may collect sensitive personal data. This creates additional risks of surveillance and targeting, deepening digital inequality and vulnerability.

With the recent internet shutdowns, the market for circumventing filtering has effectively turned into a market for basic internet access. Configuration services (“configs”)<sup>2</sup> are now being sold at high prices, are not accessible to everyone, and often lack stability.

A 32-year-old lesbian woman from Isfahan province told HOMA:

“Many people simply cannot afford these configs. Prices vary widely, from 350,000 tomans per gigabyte to 500,000, and even up to one million tomans.”

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<sup>1</sup> HOMA Organization, *Under the Digital Veil* (2025), accessed December 1, 2025, [https://homa.lgbt/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/homa\\_underthedigitalveil\\_report\\_2025.pdf](https://homa.lgbt/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/homa_underthedigitalveil_report_2025.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>“Configs” (configuration files) are technical settings used in censorship circumvention tools (such as Shadowsocks or V2Ray) that allow users to connect to external proxy servers and access the open internet. They function as access credentials; however, since many providers are unverified, their use may expose users to surveillance and data security risks.

At an exchange rate of 157,500 tomans per US dollar, this corresponds to approximately \$2.22–\$3.17 per gigabyte, reaching up to about \$6.35 per gigabyte at the upper end.

The current minimum monthly wage in Iran is about 16.6 million tomans, which is approximately \$105 USD. One GB of data is roughly enough for around 20–80 hours of light activities such as checking emails, writing messages, and reading news, depending on how data-heavy the websites are.

## **Economic Pressures and Compounded Vulnerabilities**

At the same time, economic pressures have intensified. Some workplaces have been destroyed due to airstrikes, leaving people unemployed. Others face layoffs due to worsening economic conditions, already strained by structural corruption, sanctions, and now war.

These impacts are disproportionately severe for LGBTQI+ individuals.

Some who had previously left their families to live independently are now forced to return home after losing their jobs, placing them back under pressure or even forcing separation from their partners.

A 38-year-old gay man from Alborz province, working in Tehran, told HOMA:

“Pro-war voices cannot claim to be building a future for the Iranian queer community with hopes of the fall of the Islamic Republic. The war has taken away even the minimum we had. My workplace is downsizing, and I might be next. Everything we worked for to become independent could collapse, and there is no clear future.”

## **Fears of digital exclusion under Iran’s tiered internet system**

Internet shutdowns and the looming threat of a tiered internet system have revived fears of a return to the conditions of the past decades, for LGBTQI+ individuals in Iran. At a time when there was no internet, there was no way to express oneself as an LGBTQI+ person, but also no access for adolescents to find their identities or obtain basic information about themselves.

Some describe it simply as:

“No internet means going back to the 80s for the LGBTQI+ community in Iran.”

A 23-year-old non-binary lesbian from Fars province told HOMA:

“It may sound ridiculous to think about this during a war or even a ceasefire, but I am worried about my future and the queer community’s dating life. Do we have any space other than this already filtered and limited online environment to meet each other?”

The fear of implementing a tiered internet system is increasingly becoming a serious concern. This is separate from what is currently being introduced under the name “Pro

Internet.”<sup>3</sup> It is said that users of this type of internet will have a more stable connection during periods of disruption or internet shutdowns. This means that during times when internet outages occur, holders of “Pro Internet,” along with those on the “white list,” will still have access to international internet, while ordinary users are forced back to the restricted domestic network.

“Pro Internet,” also referred to as business-grade stable internet, has recently entered Iran’s communications discourse as a new access model. Rather than focusing on speed, it emphasizes connection stability and relatively less restricted access to certain international services.

This service is mainly designed for specific groups such as businesses, tech companies, traders, and certain professional institutions. Access requires employment verification and administrative procedures. According to domestic reports, the cost is also high, around 2,780,000 tomans (about \$17–\$18 USD) for activation, effectively turning internet access from a right into a privilege.

However, the Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Sattar Hashemi, has stated that “tiered internet and white-list systems have no basis and will not have a place in policy-making.”

## **Security Concerns and Increased Vulnerability**

Alongside these challenges, some point to concerns about public safety. Airstrikes targeting police stations have heightened fears of insecurity. While checkpoints may be justified as measures to maintain security, they have themselves become a source of anxiety and harm.

There is an ongoing concern that increased insecurity will disproportionately affect women and other vulnerable groups, including LGBTQI+ individuals, particularly those with diverse or non-conforming gender expressions.

Cutting off access to the global internet leads to the isolation of LGBTQI+ communities from support systems outside Iran and the lack of safe communication channels with support systems inside the country. For example, even communication with their partners may no longer be possible without censorship through domestic applications or SMS.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Conclusions**

This brief demonstrates that the intersection of war, internet shutdowns, and economic crisis has significantly intensified the vulnerability of LGBTQI+ individuals in Iran. Measures such as checkpoint phone inspections, widespread censorship, and restricted access to secure internet have not only limited fundamental freedoms but also exposed individuals to serious risks, including identity disclosure, surveillance, and violence.

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<sup>3</sup> Asr Iran, “Internet Pro, or charging people for a natural right,” 21 April 2026, <https://asriran.com/004r5l>

The findings further show that digital repression and economic hardship reinforce one another. Limited access to safe and affordable internet tools, combined with job loss and financial instability, has forced many LGBTQI+ individuals into more precarious living conditions, including returning to family environments where they may face discrimination or abuse.

Ultimately, the restriction of digital spaces, often the only accessible environments for connection, information, and support, has deepened isolation and negatively impacted the mental health, safety, and dignity of LGBTQI+ individuals across the country.

## **Recommendations**

### **To the Government of the Islamic Republic of Iran**

- Review and amend the laws, including the Islamic Penal Code, that criminalize consensual same-sex conduct and subject them to the death penalty and punishments constituting torture, and review and amend all vague provisions that could justify the arbitrary arrest, detention, or harassment of people due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.
- Repeal or amend, with a view to bringing into conformity with international law, vague and overbroad provisions in the Islamic Penal Code and other laws used to criminalize the exercise of human rights, including freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, and association
- Immediately cease unlawful and arbitrary internet shutdowns and ensure consistent access to a free and open internet
- Halt invasive surveillance practices, including arbitrary phone searches at checkpoints, and condition any such searches and checks to clear, transparent, and accountable legal processes;
- Refrain from policies that further marginalize LGBTQI+ individuals, including discriminatory filtering and censorship
- Ensure the protection of privacy and personal data for all citizens

### **To the International Community and UN Member States**

- Strongly condemn and take clear action against violations of international humanitarian law, including attacks that impact civilians and civilian infrastructure, and ensure accountability for all parties involved in the conflict
- Increase pressure on Iranian authorities to uphold digital rights and freedom of expression, and to ensure that human rights are systematically integrated into all negotiations, including trade and bilateral agreements;
- Support the development and ensure accessibility of secure communication tools for LGBTQI+ individuals and other at-risk communities.

### **To Technology Providers and Civil Society**

- Provide clear information about data protection and risks associated with VPNs and proxy services, as well as guidance on how to assess the safety of such services and secure service providers.
- Strengthen digital security education tailored to high-risk groups, including LGBTQI+ communities and ethnic and language minorities.
- Engage meaningfully with organisations defending LGBTQI+ and digital rights in Iran and the wider SWANA region throughout the development, design, and implementation of policies and digital products. This includes consultation on content moderation, privacy protections, and trust and safety frameworks that prioritise the needs, safety, and lived experiences of LGBTQI+ users.

**Cross-cutting recommendation for international stakeholders, donors, technology providers, and civil society**

- Efforts to promote internet freedom, digital security training, and secure communications must be grounded in the specific realities of marginalized communities in Iran; without a targeted, harm-aware, and community-informed framework, such initiatives risk being ineffective or further exposing already vulnerable groups to harm.