

Middle East censors wield Western software: report

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Photo illustration shows people using the Internet at a web cafe in the Middle East. Even as Western leaders call for democratic freedom in the Middle East, software from US and Canadian firms is being wielded by censors in oppressive regimes, a report has said.

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Programs crafted to keep children from getting to porn websites or other material deemed off-limits by parents can readily be modified for mass political censorship, according to OpenNet Initiative (ONI) findings.

"Western companies are playing a role in the national politics of many countries around the world," concluded the ONI report authored by Helmi Noman and Jillian York.

"By making their software available to the regimes, they are potentially taking sides against citizens and activists who are prevented from accessing and disseminating content thanks in part to [filtering software](#)."

The study looked at Internet filtering programs made by US and Canadian companies.

Censors in at least nine Middle Eastern and North African countries used US or Canadian software to limit what citizens could access on the Internet, according to the report.

Internet service providers in Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Yemen, Sudan, Tunisia, and the [United Arab Emirates](#) (UAE) used Western-built filtering tools to prevent block certain online material, ONI said.

Taboo topics included sex, dating services, homosexuality, skeptical views of Islam, and secular and atheist discourse.

Censors also blocked information about ways to remain anonymous on the Internet or circumvent online filters by using "proxy" servers.

"By relying upon out-of-the-box filtering systems, states have outsourced the task of deciding what is or is not acceptable speech," the report's authors said.

The report gave an example of Internet service providers in Qatar, Yemen, and the UAE using filtering [software](#) made by Canada-based Netsweeper, which reportedly acknowledged working with [telecom operators](#) in those countries.

"Western government leaders have advocated for human rights and the free flow of information in heavily censored countries," the report stated.

"But, we have yet to see concrete initiatives from these governments to address how Western companies are directly collaborating with -- and perhaps profiting from -- the government [censors](#)."

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