"Pokemon Go" is no longer a go in Iran
By Saeed Kamali Dehghan, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff
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Citing security concerns about the use of location-based virtual reality technology in "Pokemon Go," Iran has banned the mobile game. It is the first country to do so.

"Any game that wants to operate nationwide in Iran needs to obtain permission from the ministry of culture and Islamic guidance, and the 'Pokemon Go' app has not yet requested such a permission," said Abolhasan Firouzabadi. He is the head of Iran's supreme council of virtual space. This government body monitors Internet usage in Iran.

Says "Pokemon Go" Poses Security Problems

A senior judicial official, Abdolsamad Khorramabadi, said last week that the augmented reality game posed a security problem. He added that the country's intelligence agency approved of the ban.

"There are many problems with the game and security-wise, it can create problems for the country and our people," a news agency quoted Khorramabadi as saying.

Iran's tech-savvy young people quickly embraced the game, which has become a global phenomenon since its release last month.

Officials had previously hinted that they may allow the game to function in Iran if its data servers are transferred inside the country and if certain locations are excluded. Those requests have not been acknowledged by the makers of "Pokemon Go."

Users Sidestep Internet Filtering

Internet filtering, the practice of blocking citizens' access to certain websites and content, is common in Iran. However, this practice has not stopped millions of users from accessing blocked apps and websites. Iranians use anti-filtering software to bypass state restrictions. They have been able to adapt quickly to setbacks, often migrating in huge numbers from one platform to another when a block is introduced. The success of the messaging app Telegram, which is used by 1 in 4 Iranians, is proof of that.

Millions of Iranians are also on Facebook and Twitter, despite access to both social media sites being blocked by the Iranian government. In recent years, authorities have resorted to smart filtering. Through this practice, the government can censor certain types of content without entirely blocking the websites where it appears. Smart filtering seems to be replacing the traditional blocking of online services in Iran. For example, the photo-sharing app Instagram and messaging app Telegram remain accessible, but officials say that content deemed inappropriate has been blocked.

Using anti-filtering software affects connectivity speeds, and it is not clear if its use would be possible when playing "Pokemon Go."

The decision on filtering, however, does not rest solely in the government's hands. Other institutions that act independently of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's administration, such as the judiciary, also carry a great deal of weight.

The Ban Is Mocked

Mana Neyestani is a prominent Iranian cartoonist. He reacted to the ban by drawing a cartoon depicting a "Pokemon Go" character fleeing from the Iranian morality police. These undercover officers patrol the streets of Iran to make sure that people are following conservative codes of behavior.

One Iranian user joked on Twitter that it was difficult to focus while walking on the streets in Iran. "You have to both look around to hunt Pokemon and also watch not being hunted yourself by the morality police," the user said.