

Statement on Disrupting Secure Network Services and Connections in Egypt September 2016

What happened?

- On August 18th, some software developers in Egypt discovered that they were not able to establish SSH connections with servers that reside outside the country. It took them a little while to figure out workarounds to be able to access their servers. Meanwhile, they also realized that some HTTPS connections were blocked.
- The problem seemed to persist via both fixed (DSL) and mobile (3G) networks, and had lasted for 4 days until it was resolved on August 22nd without any explanation given by the ISPs.
- During the 4 days, folks in the software community communicated with the hosting companies abroad and the local ISPs to understand what was going on. At the same time, discussions on social media started to emerge as community members flagged the issue and began to share experiences.
- Hosting companies abroad confirmed that the problem was not on their side since the same servers were accessible from everywhere else. On the other hand, local ISPs, through their first line support denied there was a problem and refused to take responsibility for the operation (or the lack thereof) of such services.
- On August 22nd, and as SSH and HTTPS connections started to come back, some VPN services became inaccessible. The random blocking or throttling of VPN services in Egypt is another phenomena that started to emerge in the past few months, and there seems to be a link between the two incidents (the SSH/HTTPS and the VPNs).

What does this tell us?

- Between 18 and 22 August, part of Egypt's outbound SSH and HTTPS traffic was disrupted.
- Lack of information on what exactly was going on.
- The lack of transparency was evidenced by the reaction of the ISPs and the absence of any statement issued by them and/or by any government authority.
- All the evidences indicate that this incident or something similar can happen again in the future, and yet neither the ISPs nor the government are to provide any explanation.

Why does this matter?

- Internet Masr is concerned with the development and use of the Internet in Egypt, and believes that any attempts to block or throttle online services are likely to have an adverse impact on the growth of the Internet in the country and on the overall economy.
- Tampering with network configurations can cause major service outages, harm businesses, and create further job losses.

What does Internet Masr recommend?

- Encourage the technical community to continue to investigate these and similar incidents and reveal them to the public.
- Urge ISPs to adopt transparent policies with regard to Internet services and applications carried over their networks, and to refrain from blocking or filtering any service without court orders.
- Urge government authorities to refrain from requiring ISPs to block or filter any online service or content without court orders.
- Ask NTRA to adopt a process for investigating matters of service disruption that are brought to its attention, work with relevant service providers to resolve them and share the results with the community.