Web monitor: 'Syria has largely disappeared from the Internet'

By Max Fisher, Updated: May 7, 2013

Both Google and a Web security company called Umbrella Security Labs are indicating that the entire country of Syria may have been severed from the Internet.

The outage appears to have begun at 2:45 p.m. Eastern time, or 9:45 p.m. in Syria. According to a blog post by Umbrella's chief technology officer Dan Hubbard, "On closer inspection it seems Syria has largely disappeared from the Internet."

Google's transparency data, which shows traffic to Google services, shows all Web traffic from Syria plummeting to about zero at the same time. A disruption report lists all Google services as inaccessible in Syria. A screenshot of Google's traffic report is embedded above. (Hat tip to the Wall Street Journal's Tom Gara for the link.)

Umbrella also charts its traffic to and from Syria. "The drop in both inbound and outbound traffic from Syria is clearly visible," Hubbard explains. "The small amount of outbound traffic depicted by the chart [on the top half] indicates our DNS servers trying to reach DNS servers in Syria." Here's the chart:

Syria also experience a nation-wide Internet blackout for three days in November 2012; Web security firms said that the nature of the shut-down meant the Syrian government had almost certainly switched off Web access deliberately. As we noted at the time, Syrian authorities had likely tweaked routing tables, essentially re-mapping where Internet addresses lead and thereby blocking the transference of information.

Many Syria-watchers feared that the Web shutdown was a precursor to some sort of coordinated regime counterattack or campaign; that President Bashar al-Assad had not wanted the world to see what he was about to do. No such campaign ever appeared to come, however. Later, many Syria analysts concluded that the regime may have been seeking to hamper rebel communication; fighting near the Damascus airport at the time had potentially threatened one of Assad's key links to the outside.

Both Egypt and Libya, during their own crises, also cut Web access but did so sooner and kept it offline longer. The Syrian regime,

though, has been seemed more comfortable and assertive with the Internet, using it as a tool for tracking dissidents and rebels, and sometimes even tricking them into handing the government personal data using phishing scams. Assad himself has a background in computers, unlike the much older Hosni Mubarak and Moammar Gaddafi, and once even directly mentioned his "electronic army." Assad's regime may see opportunity as well as risk on the Web. Today, it seems, they felt they were better off without it.