Manipulating Access to Communication Technology: Government Repression or Counterterrorism?

By Fatima Mustafa
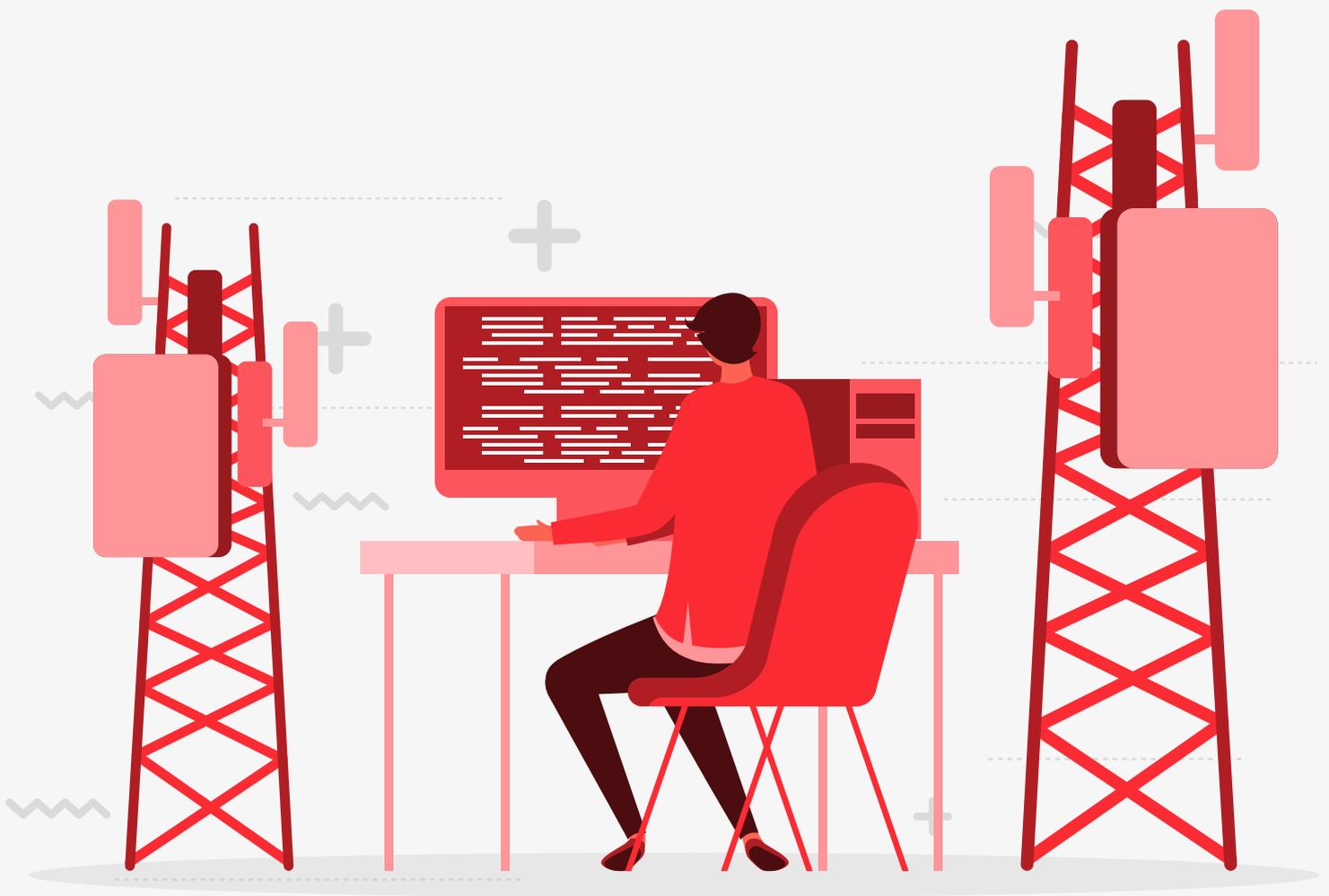
With increasing frequency, governments around the world – including both democracies and autocracies – have relied on Internet and cell phone disruptions to limit violence, tackle protests, hinder opposition and control the spread of information.

This report offers a preliminary analysis of the effectiveness of network disruptions in achieving one specific outcome: tackling terrorist violence. It analyses the relationship between network disruptions and deaths and injuries from terrorist attacks to determine whether there is support for the commonly made argument that network disruptions are an important counterterrorism tactic.

Using a panel dataset of daily incidents of national-level network disruptions and terrorist attacks globally between 2016 and 2019, a fixed effects regression model shows that national-level network disruptions are not correlated with the number of people killed or injured in terrorist attacks. In addition, there is no correlation between a ban on social media platforms – specifically Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp – and deaths or injuries from terrorist violence.

Given the limitations of the analysis, due to the fact that network disruptions are not random, it is difficult to make causal claims about the relationship between network disruptions and terrorist violence. However, this analysis provides a preliminary look at the impact of network disruptions on terrorism, paving the way for further research.