

CABLE NEWS

We've been discussing this in comments for several days, but I wanted to pull news together on the now-four breaks of communications fiber optic cables to the Middle East. Much thanks to Hmmm and klynn, who tracked down many of these links.

The first two cables—just off Alexandria, Egypt—went down on Wednesday. Initially, news reports assumed the two cables had been cut by a ship's anchor, but yesterday Egypt announced that that's not the case: the cables went down in a restricted area, and no ships were present.

No ships were present when two marine cables carrying much of the Middle East's internet traffic were severed, Egypt's Ministry of Communications has said, contrary to earlier speculation about the causes of the cut.

[snip]

The ministry added that the location, 5 miles from the port of Alexandria, was in a restricted area so ships would not have been allowed there to begin with.

Then, on Friday, a third cable off of Dubai went down. Significantly, this cable doesn't carry India specific traffic. Then, finally, a fourth cable, between Qatar and UAE, went down yesterday. Five days, four cables, and no ships near the first two in Egypt.

Much of the press on this pertains to India because of the impact the outages had, briefly, on India's call centers. But India has managed to shift much of its traffic to cables going east, through Singapore and Japan. As a result, much of its big business traffic recuperated quickly. Which means the people suffering diminished or no access (this pertains to India, I'm not sure whether the same is true throughout the Middle East and South Asia) are the

individual users.

The real sufferers during cable breaks are the individual internet users. Their connectivity is low priority for many ISPs who derive much of their profits from companies. The benefits of dynamic rerouting don't come free. Large users pay a premium fee to make sure cable cuts don't stop their traffic. For the small guy, a cable break could lead to disconnection or sluggish download speeds. Despite ISP claims, the small guy took a big knock during last week's problems.

As for the traffic that relies on these cables and has no alternative—it will probably take 10 days to two weeks to get them fixed. For an excellent depiction of the cables involved, see [this post](#).

So assuming these four outages in different parts of the Middle East are no coinkydink? What would be the point?

I'm obviously just guessing (and working with the possibility these outages were no accident). But it's clear that Iran retains most of its telecomm access, so this was not an attempt to darken Iran to set up an attack. Further, I don't think this was an attempt to insert new splitters into the Toobz so as to better spy on the Middle East or to force a shift of more traffic onto US carriers or through the US. That's because a number of (presumably NSA-friendly) US carriers have lost a great deal of their traffic, with Verizon losing a big chunk of its Pakistani traffic (and some of its Kuwaiti and Egyptian traffic), and AT&T and Sprint losing a significant chunk of their Saudi traffic. From a wiretapping perspective, it wouldn't make sense to take out Verizon's traffic to Pakistan so as to replace it with a potentially non-American service provider.

What I find most interesting, though, are the

countries most affected by these outages: Egypt and Pakistan, with both losing around 70% of their telecom traffic on Wednesday. Early on, I had wondered whether the cable outage might be an attempt to stop the communication abilities of US opponents that had somehow escaped the notice of Israel or the US. Israel had apparently been ignorant of the Gazan jail break, and Hamas had clearly coordinated the jail break with the Muslim Brotherhood and others around the Middle East. Also, the US is preparing to insert special forces into Pakistan's tribal areas (more about that in the next post). In other words, I wondered whether this outage was an attempt to cut off Hamas' ability to communicate with its allies, particularly given the potentially dramatic implications of the jail break. Or whether this was an attempt to cut off Al Qaeda's ability to communicate within the Middle East. And of course, if the bigger users are able to retain communications access and individual users are not, it might be more likely to affect these groups for some time.

This is, of course, outtamyarse rambling. And there's always the possibility that these four closely timed breaks were really just an accident.