



# Through the Veil

## The Role of Broadcasting in U.S. Public Diplomacy toward Iranians

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Front cover: Images from Voice of America's Persian-language broadcasting arm, one of several government-funded initiatives aimed at reaching Iranians. Copyright 2007 Voice of America.

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# Introduction

THE PAST DECADE of American involvement in the Middle East has highlighted the invaluable role of public diplomacy, especially toward Iran. The objective of public diplomacy is primarily to explain U.S. regional policies, diplomatic initiatives, and imperatives and, in turn, to justify those actions for the target audience, whether it is the average Iranian citizen or the Iranian elite. The most visible and important part of U.S. public diplomacy occurs through radio and television broadcasts; however, not all U.S. broadcasting has a public diplomacy mission. Whereas the Voice of America (VOA), for example, has historically carried out a direct public diplomacy mission, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) has served as a “surrogate broadcaster,” giving audiences in target countries the kind of information that their own domestic media should have provided if they were free to do so. In the case of Iran, while the VOA has a long history of broadcasting to Iran as a public diplomacy outlet, RFE/RL’s Radio Farda (which means “tomorrow”) was established in 2002 to act primarily as a surrogate broadcaster. After concerted public diplomacy and broadcasting efforts toward Iran, an assessment of their success in communicating the desired message to the Iranian public is well warranted.

This study scrutinizes the problems that the United States faces in its public diplomacy with Iran by looking at various aspects of communication. What motivates the study is that an improvement in public diplomacy and broadcasting for Iranians would help the United States play a more important role in influencing trends and events not only in Iran but also throughout the region.

The paper first examines two initiatives that took place during the last decade: Radio Farda and VOA’s Persian Television. Second, it examines European public diplomacy initiatives toward Iran—more specifically, three radio stations: the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) Persian service in London, Persian Radio France Internationale (RFI) in Paris, and Persian Deutsche Welle (DW) in Bonn. Analyzing different European broadcasting efforts toward Iran provides a better picture of the foreign information sources available to the Iranian audience. With a clearer understanding of the Iranian media market, the peculiarities and weaknesses of American broadcasting to the Islamic Republic can more easily be appraised. Finally, this study briefly explores the Iranian radio and television channels run by Iranian-origin private citizens who reside in the United States, mainly in Los Angeles.

# Media in the Islamic Republic

SINCE THE ESTABLISHMENT of the Islamic Republic, the Iranian regime has tried to eliminate the plurality of information sources available by controlling the media within the country. It has also done its best to stop the flow of information from foreign Persian sources into the country. Initially, this strategy was based on the uncompromising revolutionary Islamic stance. However, the emergence of a new generation after the Iraq-Iran War has forced the Iranian government to consider a change in its media policy. This new generation did not experience an atmosphere ripe with revolutionary fervor and idealistic promises of an Islamic utopia. Younger Iranians could not connect with those notions and were looking for a way to meet their needs, never considered in the first decade or so after the revolution. The world of the new Iranian generation can now be understood through its weblogs as well as the dynamism of a developed underground culture in Iran. The new generation's perception of notions such as religion, politics, freedom, justice, and progress is fundamentally different from that of their parents' older, idealistic, and revolutionary generation.

As a result, in the 1990s the government needed to partially address the concerns of the younger generation, even if that meant compromising some of its founding ideals. *Hamshahri*, affiliated with Tehran authorities under the supervision of Qolam Reza Karbaschi, and *Iran*, associated with the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), were two newspapers created to respond to those new needs. After the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei immediately overhauled the regime's media policy by appointing Ali Larijani as the head of Islamic Republic Radio and Television (Seda va Sima-ye Jomhuri-e Eslami), increasing the budget of the organization and politically supporting it. During his tenure of almost ten years, Larijani tremendously expanded radio and television channels and added a twenty-four-hour

news service. The new variety of entertainment programs—such as films, television serials, and sports programs aimed at making state radio and television a little more attractive for Iranian audiences—was a response to the new generation's needs and tastes.

With the exception of *Salam* newspaper, which was mildly critical of the government's economic and political policies, the majority of the regime's efforts in terms of media development were within the bounds of the Islamic Republic's ideological framework. Most media outlets tended to focus on social and cultural issues rather than political ones. But even the treatment of social and cultural problems or youth-focused entertainment by these new media remained ideologically acceptable by not challenging the basic principles of the Islamic Republic's constitution, the Supreme Leader, or Islamic law as interpreted by the dominant Shiite clergy.

The reform movement that led to the ascendancy of Muhammad Khatami also released newfound energy, which had been confined in Iranian society since 1980. The press flourished, and dozens of previously restricted newspapers and magazines filled the newsstands. But less than two years after Khatami's 1997 election as president, by direct order of the Supreme Leader, Iranian judiciary officials started to close more than 100 independent or proreformist newspapers and periodicals. When Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad was elected president in 2005, the regime's attempts to shut down the "contaminated" cultural environment intensified. While increasing the pressure on journalists, it began to apply more severe censorship of cultural outlets and manifestations, including the press.<sup>1</sup> Ahmadinezhad's administration extended censorship into cyberspace, mandating that each website obtain governmental permission before beginning operation. Consequently, Iranian internet users are denied access to thousands of websites, including news websites designed specifically for their consumption, such

1. Reporters without Borders and other international institutions have issued numerous reports regarding regime censorship of, and attacks on, journalists.

as BBC Persian and Radio Farda websites. In addition, Radio Farda's broadcasts have been jammed, Soviet style, almost from their inception.

In such a context, launching foreign-based media for Iran—whether in the form of websites or radio and television—is a difficult endeavor. Under such rigid government control, unfiltered information reaches the market only with difficulty. Given that Iranian journalists are not allowed to report for foreign Persian-language media, the foreign media either are confined to state sources, which are often unreliable, or must rely on clandestine reports of a few journalists inside Iran. At the same time, the foreign media have to fight technical problems caused by the government's deliberate interference with and disruption of both terrestrial transmissions and websites. Periodic attempts have been made to block even satellite transmissions, both with the help of Cuba, which can disrupt signals emanating from the United States, and on the ground in Iran, using technology hazardous to the health of the urban population.

An additional challenge facing foreign media in Iran is the prevalence of “the discourse of independence or sovereignty,” which presumes that the Iranian failure to achieve a democratic regime stems from the interventions and machinations of foreign powers. This colo-

rial-era belief has strongly influenced Iranian politics and foreign relations for more than a century. Some historical events helped reinforce the “independence” discourse in the aftermath of World War II, including the U.S. role in the coup against Muhammad Mossadeq in 1953 that brought the shah back to power. This discourse, which for the most part is understood within a Marxist conceptual framework, still predominates in Iranian political thought, causing difficulties, misunderstandings, and mistrust of the West.<sup>2</sup> The combination of the Marxist notion of independence with Islamic ideological ambitions and hostility toward the West has exacerbated the Iranian people's mistrust of everything that comes from, or is associated with, a Western ideological package.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, some marginal Iranian intellectuals have started to criticize the prevailing independence discourse as a cliché that is neither pragmatic nor realistic.

In Iran, the media are often perceived as a means of propaganda effectively controlled by the government. This skeptical attitude applies also to foreign Persian-language media, especially those run by countries heavily involved in the Middle East. Hence, not only ordinary Iranian people but also Iranian elites have always perceived U.S. Persian-language media as a potential propaganda tool for reinforcing U.S. policies toward Iran.<sup>4</sup>

2. On March 17, 2000, Madeleine Albright, former secretary of state, apologized for the role of the United States in the coup. Full text of her speech available online (<http://secretary.state.gov/www/statements/200/000317.html>).

3. Among critics of “national sovereignty” in its old perception, two Iranian scholars and writers were influential: Mousa Ghaninezhad, professor of economics at the University of Tehran, and Morteza Mardiha, a sociologist who was expelled from the university by President Ahmadinezhad's administration and is not allowed to teach.

4. In fact, some Americans look at government-supported Persian-language media as a means of propaganda. In February 8, 2007, in a letter to President George Bush, Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) criticized VOA for some statements made on it by its hosts and anchors that were based on a research paper, “A Study of USG Broadcasting into Iran,” written by a Persian-speaking U.S. government employee at the request of the National Security Council and Iran (Interagency Steering Group).

Although it makes some good points about shortcomings in U.S.-funded Persian-language broadcasting, the study does not appear sympathetic to the idea that the media should be impartial and objective. Many points mentioned in this report seem to be factually correct, including lack of professionalism, but the report's criticism of Radio Farda for using IRNA or other Iranian news agencies and newspapers does not match with journalistic criteria. Instead of suggesting that Radio Farda's broadcaster use a selective approach to Iranian state sources, the report implies that any use of these sources is wrong. For some news, such as statements of Iranian officials, the main sources used by most Western media are Iranian state sources. Therefore, professional instruction should be given about how to use each news agency, because completely ignoring state news agencies is not acceptable in journalism. The report also complains that Radio Farda's normal coverage of the views inside Iran “seems to vary between sympathetic and neutral with respect to the regime.” This judgment is unfair. Many opposition groups and individuals with different agendas have the opportunity to express their views on Radio Farda. Nevertheless, a professional radio station has to try to be neutral with respect to any country. It has to use neutral language and balanced analysis and reflect different viewpoints. Professional journalism spreads democracy and proves how media work in a democratic country. The problem with Radio Farda is that lack of efficient editorial supervision has permitted some programs to seem loyal to the Iranian government, others to support American neoconservatives, and others to be impartial. In Radio Farda as well as VOA, this lack of professionalism has created massive confusion about whether these media are new conservative propaganda against Iran or American media that support the Iranian regime.

In brief, the report gathered cases that show some guests on VOA shows or Radio Farda programs criticized the human rights situation in the United States or President Bush's policy, but it completely ignored the cases that demonstrate the balanced news segments or programs aimed at supporting the position of the U.S. government, but not in a journalistic style.

This perception does not distinguish between major, hard news and analysis and simple nonpolitical stories and features. Everything is viewed as part of Washington's propaganda strategy. Even though an editorial team of Iranian broadcasters trying to abide by Western standards of journalism makes routine daily planning decisions for production, recipients of the message assume that U.S. officials decide on and observe every detail of all programs. This kind of perception, which both the Iranian broadcasters working for U.S.-financed Persian media and American officials often ignore, is a major hindrance to increasing the effectiveness of broadcasting to Iran. And because decisions made by the media are, rightly or wrongly, regarded as a part of the U.S. diplomatic strategy, the image of the U.S. government itself is at stake.

Moreover, the diplomatic break between Iran and the United States and the restrictive political environment in Iran have hindered America's ability to conduct a precise analysis or closely watch the effect of its public diplomacy on Iranians. Because of the lack of open and direct access to Iranians, American researchers, officials, media producers, and even journalists in the U.S. Persian-language media are unable to see with full clarity the effects of their labors or to know whether their efforts are benefiting both the conveyer and recipient. At times, the conveyer may feel that the message is lost after transmission. In comparison with the Cold War era, the effect of broadcasts to Iran is now easier to assess, but it is still much more difficult to do there than in other parts of the world.

# U.S.-Sponsored Persian-Language Media

THE U.S. GOVERNMENT-SPONSORED Persian-language media consist of Radio Farda, the Persian section of Voice of America, and the State Department's Persian-language website. Whereas VOA is a government organization, Radio Farda is considered a government-sponsored broadcasting organization as its annual budget is allocated by the U.S. Congress.<sup>1</sup>

## Radio Farda: Background

Radio Farda is a radio station that broadcasts news and music to Iranian audiences through medium-wave (AM), short-wave, satellite, and internet transmissions. As a joint project between Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and VOA, Radio Farda was launched in December 2002. It broadcasts more than nine hours of information programs, news, and features, and the rest is Iranian and Western pop music. The RFE/RL team based in Prague, Czech Republic, manages the information blocks for sixteen hours of the twenty-four-hour cycle, and the VOA team based in Washington, D.C., manages the other eight hours.

Radio Farda is a project similar to Radio Sawa, an Arabic-language radio station funded by the U.S. government. Both stations' goal is to provide what they claim is balanced news and information, along with popular music for young people between fifteen and thirty years of age. Both are controlled by the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which is the independent federal agency responsible for all U.S. government and government-sponsored, non-military international broadcasting. Voice of America, al-Hurra Television, Radio Sawa, Radio Farda, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty are among the media that work under BBG supervision. To launch Radio Farda, the BBG decided to end the previous

Persian-language radio programs of RFE/RL, using their staff members to form two-thirds of the Radio Farda team. Radio Azadi, the Persian section of RFE/RL, was launched in 1998 and had been broadcasting three hours of news and analysis programs daily for an elite Iranian audience. Radio Azadi's old-fashioned broadcasting style, including long interviews or long monologues on Persian classical literature, kept it from attracting a large audience, especially among young Iranians. Critics accused Radio Azadi of being tremendously influenced by the reform movement in Iran, namely, Muhammad Khatami and his followers within the government. As a result of being called pro-Khatami in its news and political features, Radio Azadi was unable to bring a strong, new independent professional voice to Persian-language media or to gain the professional credibility attained by some other foreign-operated radio stations.

The Radio Farda initiative took place when few news/music radio or television stations were broadcasting in Persian. One state-operated FM radio station inside Iran—Radio Payam (which means “message”), launched many years before Radio Farda began broadcasting—carries hourly newscasts and government-vetted Iranian pop and classic music. Both music and news meet the existing censorship rules. Therefore, launching a censorship-free and professional news/music radio station seemed to be a great idea with no real competition. But after a few years, other news/music radio stations were created outside Iran, and their programs were transmitted either through the internet, by short-wave signal, or both. In addition, satellite broadcasts emerged from outlets such as Amsterdam-based Radio Zamaneh, which is sponsored by the Dutch government. The only advantage Radio Farda

1. On February 16, 2006, the administration requested \$75 million for democracy promotion in Iran as part of a supplemental fiscal year (FY) 2006 appropriation. From this amount, \$36.1 million has been allocated for Voice of America-Television and Radio Farda broadcasting (\$13.9 million less than requested). Of these funds, Radio Farda will receive \$14.7 million. According to a Congressional Research Service (CRS) report, Radio Farda costs about \$7 million per year. VOA Persian-language services (radio and television) also operate to Iran at a combined cost of about \$10 million per year. The administration requested another \$75 million in democracy promotion funds for FY 2008. For more detail, see Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses*, CRS Report for Congress, updated March 13, 2007. Available online (<http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/82494.pdf>).

still has its medium-wave transmissions, which are often jammed by the regime but have some reach in certain regions of the country.

Radio Farda's situation cannot be realistically examined without having a picture of the current crisis in RFE/RL itself.

### **RFE/RL's Crisis: Strategy and Management**

Although RFE/RL's mission is still important, especially in connection with the long battle against religious extremism and its root causes, the organization has been falling behind in executing its mission because of a crisis of leadership and gradually diminishing resources. RFE/RL still has a unique human talent pool and an unparalleled network of bureaus and journalists in its broadcast target region that can be extremely useful in helping democratization and U.S. public diplomacy. But the current crisis will inevitably weaken these hard-accumulated resources, which even now are underused in many ways.

RFE/RL has been unable to effectively meet two important challenges that have arisen in the region. First, a series of political crises in the Middle East—including Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories—and religious extremism have added a critical dimension to its mission of providing objective and comprehensive news and analysis and thus helping the establishment of democratic institutions. Second, local media, especially television, have advanced in the target region in terms of providing varied entertainment programs (although not much objective news). This trend has made radio—especially foreign broadcasts—less important, particularly where the means of delivering the signal is limited to short wave.

These challenges complicate the task of the BBG. Until recent years, the role of the BBG and its predecessor the Board for International Broadcasting had always been to provide general guidance and to secure the resources necessary for U.S. international broadcasters to carry out their missions. However, some of the American broadcasting directors now complain that since 2001, the BBG has done more micromanaging than providing proper overall guidance and reasonable resources. Many

critics compare the BBG today to a parent-teacher association that, instead of raising funds for the school, tries to act as the principal and head teacher.

The BBG has failed to convince the administration and Congress to increase its funding sufficiently, to the point where it has even fallen behind inflation. The current RFE/RL budget has remained constant at about \$70 million for the past twelve years, while numerous new projects have been added to the overstretched organization. Thus, today the budget is half of what it was in 1996, considering inflation and the decreased value of U.S. currency.

Politics appears to have been part of the problems facing the BBG. From 2001 to 2005 the president of RFE/RL was a Democrat, and did not receive much support from the Republican chairman of the BBG. This situation was contrary to the accepted practice of replacing the president after a change of administration in Washington. Moreover, RFE/RL remained without a president from mid-2005 until February 2007, which is a remarkable indicator of the BBG's dysfunction.

The political crisis in the region and tougher competition from local media are independent factors that the BBG and RFE/RL management must deal with. They require more resources and expertise on the issues and countries involved, as well as strategic management. Both the BBG and RFE/RL leadership seem to be weak in providing these essential tools.

U.S. international broadcasting entities have always aimed to have the strongest possible effect in their target countries, often through a strategy of influencing the opinion makers of their target countries—not so much the masses. After the Cold War, numerous former dissidents and post-Communist leaders testified that their countries' elites were deeply influenced by RFE/RL broadcasts. The need to have a strong impact became even more important in the post-Cold War era; as societies opened up, competition began and the need increased to show relevance in the new market conditions. By the 1990s, annual surveys were conducted in most target countries, and a clear picture of weaknesses and strengths emerged. The first efforts to recalibrate the products to meet market demands began. Nevertheless, a clear dictum existed at RFE/

RL: “We can never be a fully commercial broadcaster, and it is not our mission to just sell entertainment. We must remain the best news provider.”

By 2001, the BBG was much influenced by a new member, Norm Pattiz, who brought his private-sector experience to bear. By 2002, the BBG was saying loud and clear, “We want to see numbers ... we do not care if you have a strong impact on the elites of a country; we want the masses.” The slogan became “marrying the mission to the market.” It sounded nice and challenging, but the following issues were not fully addressed:

- Unlike popular music stations, informative news/talk radio programs always have a more limited audience. Making audience numbers the overwhelming criteria casts a shadow over other important measures of success, such as the less tangible effect of RFE/RL on local elites and the local media.
- Audience numbers depend as much on program delivery as on the quality of the programs made. If the best program is only on short wave, then it can never gain double-digit ratings. As the pressure increased to show numbers, however, rebroadcast funds remained essentially frozen.
- The emphasis on audience numbers and its link to possible budgetary rewards led to false strategies of gaining name recognition by simply being on a local television station for ten minutes a day even if no meaningful content was delivered. Thus, the VOA resorted to short daily television programs carried by local stations, which helped increase visibility and audience numbers, but these programs were more like advertising spots than serious news and analysis. As discussed later in this chapter, production of a short news segment is often more difficult than producing a longer one. If the decision is made to emphasize short news segments, then preparing the news will require more resources, more professional training, and especially more careful editorial supervision. It is by no means apparent that these implications of the shift to shorter segments were thought through.

- With dwindling resources, micromanagement by the BBG, and a weakened leadership, RFE/RL began improvising. In the meantime, the BBG gave contradictory signals about priorities. The answer to the ultimate question—What is the mission?—remains unclear. Is the mission to get a little bit of news to the largest possible audience or to bring serious news programs to the attentive public?

In sum, the commercial approach to public diplomacy and emphasis on quantity rather than quality create a serious challenge for efforts to simultaneously attract political elites and the politically attentive public in target countries. Fulfilling the dual mission requires particularly close attention to the quality of the news broadcasts, especially when faced with increased competition from the internet and other news sources.

### Radio Farda’s Organizational Weakness

As Radio Farda was launched, the Iranian people showed two visible reactions. First, the programming format of the new station, continuous pop music and news, was seen as a novelty and created a lot of interest and curiosity among Iranians. Second, this initiative was seen by many as part of a more assertive U.S. policy in the region. The coming Iraq war was obvious, and Iranians saw Radio Farda as the beginning of a U.S. push against Iran.

Radio Farda succeeded in gaining a larger audience than its predecessor, Radio Azadi. To be sure, according to surveys, many more people listen to Radio Farda for its music than its news. The station has had a net gain of news listeners compared with Radio Azadi—Farda has close to three times the audience of its predecessor—but the difference in numbers is not very big. Radio Farda’s medium-band broadcasting is one of the factors that has created a larger audience compared with Radio Azadi. A medium-wave signal, when not jammed, is much clearer than a short-wave signal. In Radio Farda’s case, a powerful transmitter from the Persian Gulf reaches all the regions of southern Iran during the day and even penetrates 200–250 kilometers inland—longer at night when the signal carries farther. Moreover, a medium-

band frequency stays constant throughout the day, so listeners know where to find the station on the dial. Short-wave transmissions have to change frequencies every few hours because of the nature of short-wave physics, causing listeners difficulty in tuning in regularly.

Just at the time when the quality of news reporting needed to improve, RFE/RL was undergoing management problems and facing a reduction in its budget (after adjustment for inflation). This complicated efforts to attract the necessary talent. The newly appointed president of RFE/RL faces some real challenges in these areas.

Radio Farda's audience has not grown since 2004, when it reached 15 percent of the adult population fifteen years of age and older on a weekly basis. Although the regime's jamming of its signal may play a role in this stagnation, the fact is that Radio Farda today has more competition and has changed very little since its inception. Little innovation has taken place as its format has lost its initial novelty. Despite substantial resources invested in the operation, Radio Farda's impact is not strengthening, and stagnation carries the clear danger of decline over time. Why has its initial rate of success not continued?

Some of the reasons behind this failure stem from its dual management. Radio Farda is not one body that runs under a single centralized and harmonized management. Two-thirds of its team is employed by RFE/RL in Prague, and one-third is employed by VOA in Washington, D.C. Radio Farda has two news directors, and the coordination between its two parts, which are based on different continents, was from the very beginning one of the station's toughest organizational challenges. Although the BBG tried to fill the gap by designating a coordinator, experience has shown that the coordinator does not have effective executive authority or real responsibility; he is unable to make the radio work as a unified and coordinated operation. The coordinators have always been employees of RFE/RL; as such, they have never had effective authority over the VOA staff members or the ability to address important journalistic and policy issues.

A second major problem for Radio Farda, from the very beginning, has been recruiting qualified pro-

fessional broadcasters, or at least capable bilingual journalists. The accelerated launch of Radio Farda—about one month in duration—left no time for serious recruitment; therefore, former staff members of Radio Azadi constituted the bulk of its initial team. But the problem was that Radio Azadi's staff included few experienced journalists and broadcasters. The best Iranian broadcasters outside the country were working for the BBC, and they would hardly opt to join Radio Azadi, partly because they would not leave London for Prague back in 1998 when Azadi was being launched. Moreover, many were suspicious that the new radio station would have a propagandist agenda and did not want to be associated with it. Worries that the U.S. goal was "regime change" played a role in keeping some qualified candidates away from both Radio Azadi and later Radio Farda.

Journalists who left Iran many years ago and were disconnected from Iranian society generated problems for Radio Azadi as well as Radio Farda. To be sure, Radio Azadi and then Radio Farda in Prague tried to gradually increase their employee base by hiring younger journalists, particularly after the Iranian government shut down most reformist newspapers and caused many of their reporters to migrate to Europe. However, some of these people were not well trained as journalists in the Western meaning of the word.

The Radio Farda VOA team in Washington, D.C., had more problems in hiring qualified journalists, especially at the beginning, when only a month's time was available to form a team from scratch. Most of the people hired had no experience in journalism or broadcasting. Some of the young recruits spoke Persian with an American accent, which seemed odd to the Iranian audience.

RFE/RL tried to address the issue of journalistic competence through training, but the training system seemed to be ineffective. Many of Radio Farda's employees, whether in Prague or in Washington, could not effectively communicate in Persian and seemed unable to write a news or feature piece without making grammatical or literary mistakes, or using pre-revolutionary or vulgar rhetoric and vocabulary. In addition, many had scant knowledge of world affairs

and limited knowledge of English, which complicated reporting on political and international issues. This difficulty was gradually addressed by English-language instruction, but training in English still did not help the Persian writing. Moreover, because of a lack of journalistic experience, many Radio Farda broadcasters were unable to make practical use of what they learned in training.

This is not to say that Radio Farda has no professional journalists or broadcasters on its staff. However, the majority of its staff members suffered from serious professional shortcomings. These limitations are highlighted by the fact that Radio Farda's news is simply not as respected as that of the BBC.

Last but not least, Radio Farda suffers from constant micromanagement by RFE/RL managers, who really know very little about Iran or the region and do not speak the language, yet routinely intervene in the station's day-to-day management. This micromanagement has been applied to other broadcast departments, where it caused discontent among staff members and directors and led to the departure of the directors of the Afghan section in 2004, the Persian and Uzbek sections in 2005, and the Tajik section in 2006. All these directors were successful and experienced in their jobs.

These organizational problems have resulted in a drop in program quality, daily errors in news coverage, and a lack of focus on the main mission, which is coverage of events and developments in Iran. All these factors have recently led to much discussion and criticism by experts and active members of the American Iranian community.

Despite the difficulty of doing any survey inside Iran, some experts criticize the way that RFE/RL tries to obtain knowledge about the effects of Radio Farda on the Iranian audience through Inter Media. Inter Media, a polling organization, does not use effective mechanisms for covering all kinds of feedback on Radio Farda's programs. Inter Media conducts its research on Iran through telephone surveys from abroad, which is the only possible way to do opinion research in Iran, but is not very reliable. Iranian citizens would hardly trust a caller claiming to be from

abroad who asks political and potentially dangerous questions. Therefore, many would provide answers that they think are politically safe—just in case the caller is not who he says he is. Furthermore, no information has been released from surveys to show what listeners think about the content of programs: Do they regard Radio Farda as an important source of news? How do they rate the news on Radio Farda compared with that on the BBC or Iranian government radio? Has listening to Radio Farda improved their opinion of the United States? If this information has been collected, it has not been made public. These are certainly among the important questions that need to be addressed and assessed.

### **Production and Content of Programs**

Radio Farda achieved notable success in the beginning, but then stagnated and, in terms of program quality and coverage of Iran, even regressed. The concept of offering entertainment programs together with news and analysis has its advantages. However, Radio Farda suffers from a number of shortcomings; if they are prioritized, its effectiveness can reach a higher level. But these shortcomings cannot be resolved as long as unified, knowledgeable, and effective leadership is lacking.

**Entertainment programs.** The importance of Radio Farda's entertainment programs cannot be underestimated. First, Iran needs a constant news and entertainment radio station without censorship. Uncensored entertainment is in itself a threat to fundamentalist regimes. Second, twenty-four-hour news/talk programming would not appeal to a wide cross-section of the population, especially younger adults, who constitute a great majority of Iran's adult population. So far, Radio Farda has treated entertainment programs more as fillers than real entertainment. Instead, improvements and innovations should be made in these programs to respond to the fast-changing generational tastes and needs of the Iranian population.

At its inception, Radio Farda was a copy of Radio Sawa, but a more successful one. Although many Arab countries do not restrict popular music and have many

FM music radio stations, Iran has only one state radio network. The modern style, tone, and popular music of Farda were a real novelty for the Iranian people.

According to RFE/RL officials, in the first six months of Radio Farda broadcasts, e-mails received daily from hundreds of listeners showed that they overwhelmingly wanted a wide selection of Iranian music rather than Western popular music. The Radio Farda music operation was very slow to respond to this demand, however, and even then made only a partial response. For example, in 2003, some Prague staff members proposed establishing a special program to air underground Iranian music with a very modest budget. With only \$10,000–\$15,000 annually, Radio Farda could sponsor young underground bands in Iran to record original, unpublished music for the station, which would air on special weekly programs. This program not only could have been a professional success for Radio Farda but also would seriously subvert the restrictive policies of the government.

The proposal was submitted to higher RFE/RL management, but apparently no decisions were made. Today, a new radio station set up by the Dutch parliament is implementing the same project, and last year the station sponsored and aired a unique concert of ten Iranian underground bands in Europe. Thousands of students in Iran followed the concert online. The management of Radio Farda's music operation likely opposed this proposal because it went against most of their established ideas about entertainment format.

Another desire of listeners was to *not* have automated music all day, but instead to have a live host who could communicate with them. This format would also provide the opportunity for including useful sociopolitical information and discussions within the entertainment blocks—an effective tool for influencing public opinion in Iran. This suggestion was repeatedly brought to the attention of all higher management, with no results. In 2003–2005, budgetary reasons were cited, saying that hiring quality hosts to manage a live program would be expensive. However, now that Radio Farda is receiving new funds (from the \$75 million set aside for democracy promotion in Iran), focusing on this change should be a top priority.

Radio Farda's uniqueness as a station broadcasting popular music is also being eroded. In the past year, a number of new satellite television stations have begun broadcasting and are competing as Iranian MTVs. Some of them have their own online and satellite radio programs. These stations are based abroad, and their apolitical programming may even be able to build bridges with Iran, which could give them access to people and performers inside the country. In addition, the previously mentioned new Dutch station transmits music all day via short wave, satellite, and the internet, while the BBC is planning to launch television for Iran in 2008.

To face these challenges, some argue that Radio Farda must innovate and improve its entertainment segments. Continuing to broadcast automated music, which is not even fully representative of current Iranian musical tastes, will lead to Farda's gradual decline and loss of audience share. Yet, Radio Farda's management seemingly has not taken advantage of new funding to propose and implement necessary changes. The strict monopoly on decision making maintained by Farda's current music director—who largely opposes change—and lack of overall leadership prevent these long overdue improvements from happening.

**News and analysis programs.** The news segments on Radio Farda are produced by about six different teams during twenty-four hours with different styles in writing, approaches to events, and, most importantly, different degrees of respect for the professional standards of news broadcasting—such as objectivity, balance, and impartiality. Some of Radio Farda's Prague team members are noticeably anti-American, which can be discerned from their language and the news they choose to produce. Some Washington team members are well known for their anti-Islamic stance, their opposition to the Iranian regime, and their sympathy for Mujahedine Khalq, an Iranian opposition group, and they reflect their own political views in news production as well as feature segments.

Effective supervision of news at Radio Farda is not evident. A professional Iranian news expert who followed Radio Farda's news for two weeks could compile

a long list of sloppy errors. According to Farda, Kim Jong Il met with Ahmadinezhad at the Havana gathering of the nonaligned nations, when in fact Kim Jong Il did not go to Havana to attend the meeting.

Furthermore, understanding the priority of events or news, their importance, and the reliability of news sources are problematic at Radio Farda. In 2006, for instance, twenty-eight hours after CNN aired an interview with a shadowy insurgent group in Iraq, Radio Farda used it as its headline. No other news agency, including RFE/RL's newsroom, had bothered to write a story based on that interview. In contrast, Radio Farda never tried to interview Anousheh Ansari, the first woman space tourist in September 2006. Mrs. Ansari's space suit bore two flags, Iranian and American—a symbolic representative of the friendship between the two nations. Radio Farda could have easily sent a reporter to Kazakhstan to cover her historic space trip.

Iranian experts and journalists agree that many Iranian radio listeners do not consider Radio Farda to be a reliable news radio station—anecdotal evidence to be sure, but no information is available from Radio Farda's surveys about what they have found on this point. Reason exists to believe that many Iranians prefer to listen to the BBC Persian programs for information about current affairs. Some in Iran see the news programs of Radio Farda as an odd mixture of shallow American propaganda, anti-Islamic positions, and even anti-Americanism.

Critics of Radio Farda argue, "Mostly gone is the 'ideas' menu—history, culture, religion, economics, law, human rights, labor, business, critical thinking—employed to great effect during the Cold War by its parent organization, Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, whose intended listeners were critical elites and the populations that supported them."<sup>2</sup> Under the pressure of critics, Radio Farda has introduced some programs to analyze the news in depth and explain the various crises that the Islamic Republic of Iran faces, but those

programs rarely attract a large audience. Part of the problem is that most of Farda's broadcasters are unable to conduct roundtables or create feature segments or investigative series on what really matters to Iranian audiences. To have such programs, the station needs to form a research unit that gathers information and becomes knowledgeable about the subject matter. Farda's current programs are not backed by research, and hosts are forced to choose topics and contributors in very limited time. Thus, the host is unable to conduct in-depth discussions with professional and provocative questions that challenge the participants. The fact that Radio Farda relies on short news segments means that adequate research is all the more important: the host needs to know the key questions to ask in the short time available and how to follow up if the answers are evasive or misleading. Furthermore, because every second counts in these short segments, careful review by editors is essential to ensure that the right topics are being covered and that high professional standards are met. In short, the format Radio Farda uses means that its news programs need more resources and more supervision than did the old Radio Azadi, whereas in fact less has been available.

A review of Radio Farda's programming on the nuclear crisis shows to what extent this station has failed to go beyond the news and produce enlightening feature segments with deep and nuanced explanatory analysis.<sup>3</sup> Also, the failure to make an effort to study the subject and ascertain appropriate contributors to the programs makes them very weak. Although many interviews and roundtables have been broadcast, most of them suffer from a lack of professional conduct, depth, and thoughtfulness. Sometimes Radio Farda has superficial or shallow programs that come through more as ideological propaganda rather than professional journalism. For instance, in a weekly roundtable on democracy and human rights conducted by the Washington team, Iranian listeners are subject to sweeping, broad-based propagandist discourse about the Iranian regime's violations

2. S. Enders Wimbush, "Down with Music. Up with Ideas," *Weekly Standard* 12, no. 14, December 12, 2006.

3. See Mehdi Khalaji, "Miscommunication between Iranian Society and the West on Iran's Nuclear Program," *Policy Watch* no. 1078 (Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 10, 2006).

of human rights rather than specific information about those violations. The absence of profound knowledge about human rights, Islam, regional affairs, and political science prevents some programs from influencing serious listeners—problems made all the worse when hosts lack impartiality.

**New website.** In November 2006, Radio Farda launched its new website. The old website was mainly a place where a user could find the full or summarized versions of the radio programs and the audio archive of programs. Of course, it also offered live streaming or online radio.

The new website, with a completely new design, new staff, and a new editor, is trying to be an independent medium that is more a partner of the radio station than its reflection. Therefore, the new website's broadcasting of live radio uses some program segments and audio clips from the radio but mostly attempts to edit the text, expand the news, and produce its own programs and segments that generate additional value.

The old website suffered from unattractive design, at times lacked editorial judgment, and faced distortion of what was broadcast on the radio by readjusting the prominence given to certain news in a way that was not intended by the radio piece's editor. The propagandist approach of the old website was often visible.

The concept of the new website is inspired by the Persian website of the BBC. Massih-Addin Sadr, presumably a web planner, published an article criticizing the design of Farda's new website and described it as "an evident imitation of the BBC Persian website," saying the differences between them are very few.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, a visitor to the website can immediately find the amazing similarity of Farda's website to the most popular news website in Iran, BBC Persian. This similarity is not only confined to the design but also goes further to the titles of different sections or, more importantly, journalistic style. In terms of journalism, the new website is more professional and less propagandist, but lack of creativity in various aspects has tarnished its reputa-

tion and damaged its credibility. Nevertheless, the new website is a positive step toward improvement compared with the old one. According to its new editor, the number of visitors to Farda's website has increased.

In sum, with a fivefold increase in its budget and a newly hired web team, more was expected from Farda's uninspired web product, which can hardly compete with the BBC website it has tried to emulate. However, Farda's website has made good progress in a short time in terms of producing some feature segments as well as news updates.

### Voice of America

Interviewing a dozen Iranian journalists as well as many ordinary citizens in Iran creates the impression that the Persian television arm of Voice of America is the most popular foreign Persian news television in Iran. In recent months, VOA Persian Television increased its broadcasting to four hours a day. By reducing the hours of VOA's Persian radio to one hour, VOA transferred part of its radio personnel to television. Increasing the budget for television has also allowed VOA to hire new employees. In the period of a few years, VOA succeeded in transforming an old-fashioned radio station that did not have the ability to compete with other Persian stations into a television station that professionally broadcasts news, political, and cultural features. VOA Persian Television is still developing some of its programs and recruiting more broadcasters.

Compared to Radio Farda, VOA benefits from organizational consistency and efficiency that have tangible effects on its production. In terms of program content, however, some important issues need attention. In 2008, BBC will launch its own Persian television network and certainly become a strong competitor of VOA Persian Television. Improvement in planning would enable VOA to remain attractive to Iranian audiences around the world and maintain its current advantage.

In general, the broadcasting staff of VOA television seems to be much more professional than Radio Farda's

4. Massih-Addin Sadr, "Ghalamandaz darbare-ye site-e jaded-e Radio Farda" (Notes on the new website of Radio Farda), Radio Zamaneh. Available online ([www.radiozamaneh.com/morenews/2006/12/post\\_341.html](http://www.radiozamaneh.com/morenews/2006/12/post_341.html)).

staff. Yet it suffers from some old symptoms that an ordinary audience can easily notice. Too many of VOA Persian's staff left Iran just after the revolution and never experienced the fundamental social and cultural changes that have since occurred in Iranian society. They are in some ways disconnected from the country and unable to understand the generational developments and shifts. They also use a great deal of outdated, pre-revolutionary Persian-language expressions and sometimes ignore the very important nuances of words in the news and features programs. For instance, in mentioning the Islamic Republic of Iran, they frequently use the term "Islamic regime," which has a pejorative connotation in Persian and evinces the hostility of the speaker toward the Iranian government. This problem is a hindrance to smooth communication with viewers who are the recipients of America's message. Some older staff members who were employees of the pre-revolutionary Iranian state television and radio are used to an older school of broadcast journalism. Long interviews, verbosity, slowness in speech, use of archaic words, and excessively complimentary language to those being interviewed are some of the features of old-fashioned journalism. Unfortunately, VOA is still recruiting such broadcasters. In addition, some younger journalists have lived in the United States for a long time and lack Persian literature and writing skills; however, there are some who do use vocabulary appropriate for communication with Iranian youth.

Another crucial problem for VOA is the lack of objectivity and impartiality in some news programs. Some VOA employees have clear political affiliations to Iranian royalist opposition groups or others. They do not hesitate to reflect upon their political views, which can put the station at risk of appearing similar to the unprofessional opposition television stations in Los Angeles. These journalists do not seem to be able to distinguish between journalism and propaganda. They try to use VOA as a tool for sending specific political messages to the audience, which can lead to their repulsion.

This problem manifests itself in many ways. VOA's news programs, including *7 o'clock*, *News Talk*, *News and Views*, and *Roundtable With You*, regularly host

people who instead of being experts are members of opposition groups. Instead of using experts to speak objectively to the media in appropriate, polished, political language, VOA programs use many activists who co-opt the television or radio program as a medium for publicizing ideologies to Iranians—to provoke, invite, mobilize, or organize them in their favor. Not only does the VOA television station play host to them as knowledgeable guests, but rarely do the anchors or presenters challenge their views or statements. This format may erroneously suggest to the audience that the U.S. administration is advocating certain political tendencies. Compounding the problem of VOA's reliance on poorly informed political activists as experts, VOA turns frequently to the same people for their comments on many issues about which their knowledge sometimes seems superficial. By contrast, VOA does not use many of the best-informed and best-known Persian-speaking experts on Iranian affairs or international issues.

One example of its disrespect for the professional standards of journalism was VOA's interview with Abdul-Malik Riggi, head of the Jondollah armed group in Sistan, a southeastern Iranian province. According to its leader, this group smuggles opium and other illicit drugs from Pakistan and Afghanistan, as well as lays claim to countless hostage abductions and terrorist attacks on police officers and civilians. On April 1, VOA Persian Television interviewed him graciously and treated him as a political activist, showing his picture on the screen and introducing him as "the leader for the movement of the Iranian people's resistance"—the name the group recently adopted but which is largely unknown to Iranians, leading to numerous Iranian media reports that this title had been bestowed upon him by VOA. Additionally, on a show that would ideally offer contrasting opinions to debate, the other guest, Manouchehr Ganji, a member of the pre-revolutionary regime, addressed Riggi by saying, "we feel solidarity with you."

Meanwhile, ABC News reported that the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) hired a Pakistani gang to carry out terrorist operations inside Iran. The ABC report described the gang as being formerly

called Jondollah, including members of Baluch tribes and being led by Abdul-Malik Riggi. In the context of the ABC News report, the VOA's interview with Riggi could easily suggest U.S. political and military support for the Jondollah group. In the wake of the interview, VOA Persian Television received a great deal of negative feedback from an outraged Iranian audience. Persian blogs, websites, and Iranian newspapers gave much publicity to the interview, which was bitterly condemned. The Iranian foreign ministry was able to take advantage of the interview to denounce VOA.

Additional evidence of VOA's lack of impartiality can be found in the station's numerous interviews with Farah Pahlavi, former queen of Iran, and her son Reza Pahlavi. Farah, for example, often criticized the current regime in her frequent VOA interviews, but she was never challenged regarding issues that precipitated the shah's ouster, particularly his regime's treatment of human rights and democratic principles. The station's numerous interviews with Reza have shown similar problems. In Iran, like many European countries, at the beginning of every year (Nowrooz) high-ranking officials send greetings to the public that contain political statements. On the first day of the Iranian New Year, Iranian television has traditionally hosted the country's leader, who presents his New Year's message, similar to what is done in many continental European countries. On March 21, 2007 (the first day of the Iranian calendar), VOA hosted Reza Pahlavi on its one-hour program *7 o'clock*. This program is designed to host three guests and conduct a debate between them. Reza Pahlavi, however, appeared without any other guests, while the interviewer frequently asked him about his message for the New Year and treated him like an official, not a political activist. Referring to him as "prince," the interviewer did not contest any of his ideas or statements. This kind of interview in such a context may suggest to Iranian audiences that the U.S. government is promoting a return of the monarchy in Iran. In fact, many programs on VOA Persian Televi-

sion could lead its Iranian audience to believe that the United States officially supports the pre-revolutionary royal family and grants it a privileged platform for its promotion.

Examples of the inappropriate use of experts include Amin Movahhedi, an unknown figure who was interviewed by VOA twice on the same day on two different subjects.<sup>5</sup> VOA introduced him as a journalist and human rights activist who recently left Iran, but did not mention for which media or human rights organizations he worked. Nor did he offer objective analysis or reliable information. To promote democracy and human rights in Iran, VOA has to enhance the voice of Iranian democrats and human rights activists, whether as part of opposition groups or as individuals, but these presentations should respect journalistic principles and professional criteria as well as the Iranian political context.

By increasing program time, VOA recently attempted to produce segments deserving of commendation that provided in-depth news analysis and helped the audience better understand the battle of ideas behind current affairs. These segments need special supervision to make sure that they use impartial, objective, and contemporary language and host a diverse group of experts. The techniques of conducting interviews and roundtables also need improvement.

*Shabahang* is a one-hour program devoted mostly to cultural issues, with some entertainment segments. The program claims to be very successful in attracting a young audience; however, compared with Iranian state television, it is less colorful. The state television offers a variety of voices and treats more diverse cultural subjects that cover most of the audience's concerns and interests. Having a very small group for production as well as lack of correspondents in different places along with a poor archive are the main obstacles preventing *Shabahang* from becoming a professional entertainment segment. In addition to its brilliant young anchor, this program needs a research team consisting of experts and journalists.

5. Available online ([www.voanews.com/persian/2007-02-01-voa23.cfm](http://www.voanews.com/persian/2007-02-01-voa23.cfm) and [www.voanews.com/persian/2007-02-01-voa22.cfm](http://www.voanews.com/persian/2007-02-01-voa22.cfm)).

Lastly, what an observer finds encouraging in VOA are some changes in management and the injection of new blood by recruiting some journalists who only recently left Iran. Continuing this policy may lead to more desirable adjustment and improvement.

### State Department's Persian Website

The State Department has added a Persian-language site to the websites it provides in world languages.<sup>6</sup> Colin Powell, the former secretary of state, hoped in his inaugural message to the Iranian people that they would “look upon this website as a gesture of [the U.S.] friendship [to Iranian people]” and “find this website to be a useful source of information about the United States and about U.S. policy toward Iran.”<sup>7</sup> Most visitors to this website seem to be seeking information about visas and other practical matters; only a few of them are looking at it as a source of information about U.S. policy. The absence of any link to it in Iranian Persian news and political websites reduces its usefulness for Iranian internet users.

The news pieces on the State Department's Persian website are not produced in Persian but are translated from the department's English website. While this can-

not be considered a negative point in itself, the deeply regretful reality is that the translators lack basic knowledge of the Persian language. An ordinary Iranian reviewing the website can hardly believe that it is run by the State Department of the United States because the translated pieces are very rarely correct, understandable, or in accordance with the contemporary vocabulary and taste of Persian-language speakers. Giving an example may show the level of negligence and ignorance of the editors and translators of the website. On January 26, 2007, Iranian visitors of the website faced the “Persian” translation of the equivalent of this headline: “Mass murder of the Turkish editor is read as raping the freedom of expression.”<sup>8</sup> The original English headline read: “Killing of Turkish Editor Termed Assault on Free Expression.” One among many extremely embarrassing incorrect translations, this and other translated pieces do not make any sense in Persian.

This problem seems to be the easiest to fix. If the Persian website of the State Department wants to confine itself to the translation of English pieces without adding any value by producing pieces in Persian, it should at least hire professional translators who know the contemporary Persian language.

6. <http://persian.usinfo.state.gov/>.

7. Available on ([www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/20562.htm](http://www.state.gov/secretary/former/powell/remarks/2003/20562.htm)).

8. [http://persian.usinfo.state.gov/index/topics/topic\\_listing\\_dhr/020507\\_tr\\_Killing\\_of\\_Turkish\\_Journalist\\_Termed\\_Assault\\_on\\_Free\\_Expression.html](http://persian.usinfo.state.gov/index/topics/topic_listing_dhr/020507_tr_Killing_of_Turkish_Journalist_Termed_Assault_on_Free_Expression.html).

# European Public Diplomacy toward Iran

EUROPEANS HAVE A LONG history of conducting public diplomacy toward Iran and maintaining Persian-language broadcasts.<sup>1</sup> Persian DW in Germany is acclaimed as the oldest Persian radio station outside Iran, in existence since the first half of the twentieth century. BBC Persian radio began broadcasting more than six decades ago. The Persian section of Radio France Internationale was launched about fourteen years ago.

The most popular foreign Persian radio station is still Radio BBC. Many scholars of the contemporary history of Iran believe that the BBC Persian service played a substantial role during the 1979 revolution as a bridge of ideas between the revolutionaries and the people of Iran. In terms of journalistic style, BBC is considered a pioneer. Especially after the revolution, it started to expand its team and change its program from mere translations of English reports and news prepared by the BBC World Service to creative production in Persian on topics of interest and relevance to audiences in Iran.

In recent years, particularly due to political pressures by Iranian authorities on journalists, the BBC Persian section has hired a relatively large number of those journalists and expanded both its radio and online teams. The BBC Persian radio station produces six daily hours of programs with about fifty staff members (Radio Farda's Prague team is less than thirty broadcasters, and the Washington team is about ten). The BBC Persian online site, which is the most popular Persian news website, has about thirty staff members (Farda's new website staff numbers six journalists). BBC Persian is trying to expand its programming and launch a television station in 2008.

The budget of BBC foreign broadcasts is government provided, but, as BBC officials insist, the British

government does not intervene in the content of programs or impose a specific mission for it. This policy leaves the broadcasting corporation almost independent. BBC's highly respected journalistic standards are applied in the Persian service as part of a larger organizational and professional framework, but the Persian service is not necessarily journalistically equal to some of the other language services or the BBC World Service. In theory, BBC Persian is required to meet BBC's rules, but in practice, due to lack of experience and competence among some Iranian journalists, the Persian service sometimes fails to meet the journalistic standards that BBC expects. Quick expansion of programming and concomitant new hiring in large numbers are the main reasons behind this failure. Compared with ten years ago, more than half of the new generation of journalists in the Persian service significantly lack journalistic professionalism and have a very weak background in communication skills and political knowledge of Iran or international affairs. For those reasons, despite the expansion of programming, BBC Persian cannot claim the same reputation it had earlier. In terms of news programs, however, it is still regarded as the most reliable, objective, and least partial source among foreign Persian media that is still able to attract Iranian elite and mass audiences, although in recent years its audience has decreased markedly. Emergence of new media accounts for some of the audience loss.

Persian RFI and Persian DW both suffer from old-fashioned journalism. Most of the staff members of both radio stations left Iran many years ago, and many of them have become disconnected from contemporary Iranian culture, language, and some aspects of fast-changing political and social realities. In general, the Persian broadcasts of Radio France Internatio-

1. Unlike Americans, Europeans benefit from a very old tradition of Orientalism. For instance, Iranian studies as an academic major started in Europe as early as the nineteenth century. The tradition of Orientalism had certain determining effects on the European vision of the Middle East, including Iran, that were reflected in European diplomacy in the region. Unfortunately, the effects of European Orientalism on specific European public diplomacy toward Iran has not yet been studied.

nale, with a daily one-hour program and about ten staff members, do not even try to compete with other media in news programming. French Persian radio is considered to be the second-most popular station outside Iran that addresses Iranian elites through its political analysis, discussions, and cultural programs. RFI has a Persian website that is professionally weak and does not contain significant content. Persian DW in Bonn, with two hours of programming daily, is trying both to expand its radio programs and to launch a new website. Unlike Persian RFI, in recent years Persian DW has become more flexible; it is trying to produce more original programming and reduce its dependence on translation of German materials. Along with news programs, Persian DW is trying to focus on human rights and civil society aspects of Iranian affairs. It is also trying also to rejuvenate its personnel and inject new blood by hiring new journalists.

One feature shared by RFI, DW, and BBC is that all three try to be as independent from the current policy of their own governments as possible and reflect the different aspects of politics in their countries. They also attempt to introduce the culture of their countries to Iranians and act as a cultural bridge between Iran and Europe.

Several other governments broadcast to Iran, including: Russia, for two hours per day;<sup>2</sup> China, for

one and a half hours per day;<sup>3</sup> Israel, for one hour and twenty-five minutes five days a week and one hour on Fridays and Saturdays;<sup>4</sup> and Japan, for twenty minutes per day.<sup>5</sup> But lack of professionalism and the limits of what they invest in these stations make them unable to reach Iranian audiences in any significant numbers. Most of these radio stations attempt to promote their own culture through language training for the Iranian audience and by broadcasting feature segments on literature, art, social customs, and events. On most of these radio stations, the news programs mainly focus on their own countries and their relations with Iran.

Among foreign state-sponsored Persian radio stations, Radio Israel is perhaps one of the journalistically poorer examples, using biased subjective language in news segments, analytically weak commentaries, and an old-fashioned journalistic tone and style. In addition, its entertainment programming fails to satisfy the taste of Iran's young generation; it is mostly nostalgic, pleasing Iranians who left the country long ago. The target audience of Israeli Persian radio seems to be Iranian Jews inside Israel who want to keep their connection to Iran and Persian language rather than Iranians who live in Iran. Furthermore, a lack of well-researched programs and professional cultural segments prevent this station from reaching educated Iranians and intellectuals in Iran.

2. Available online ([www.ruvr.ru/index.php?lng=per](http://www.ruvr.ru/index.php?lng=per)).

3. Available online (<http://persian.cri.cn/>).

4. Available online ([www.radis.org/](http://www.radis.org/)).

5. Available online ([www.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/persian/index.html](http://www.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/persian/index.html)).

## Private Persian Media outside Iran

SINCE THE BEGINNING of Iran's Islamic Revolution, many opposition groups, such as the Mujahedin-e Khalq and royalists, as well as other individuals with or without affiliation to specific political parties have launched television and radio stations. In the United States alone (mostly in Los Angeles), more than twenty Persian television and radio stations now broadcast programs for Iran through satellite. Even in Europe, a few Persian television and radio stations target Iranian audiences within and outside Iran.

Private radio stations are mostly political, but private television stations have mostly devoted themselves to entertainment, like the Tapesh and Rangarang channels. News programs and non-entertainment features on those stations are usually very unprofessional. Overall, none of them respect journalistic standards in news broadcasting and reporting. Most managers of these stations seem to have a different concept of media than what is accepted in modern journalism. Most of them use harsh language and an aggressive style, resembling emotional personal attacks against the Iranian regime. Some of these television stations are run by a single host, like Hakha (a nickname that he has chosen for himself), who is widely mocked by Iranian political activists and journalists for his prophecy about the

fall of the Iranian government, giving exact dates many times. Some people like Behrooz Soor Eshrafi or Reza Fazeli, who run political shows on Pars television, are well known for their inappropriate language and lack of knowledge about Iranian and international affairs.

Moreover, political programs on those radio and television stations can sometimes go on for hours non-stop as one-man shows attracting only a small minority of the Iranian audience. Their targets in Iran consist mostly of elements of the monarchical regime that still like pre-revolutionary media figures or find some consolation in hearing harsh and non-journalistic criticism of the current Iranian regime. Obviously, each station has its own way of attracting its target audience. For instance, the Mujahedin's radio and television are attractive to people who sympathize with the organization. Some journalists in Iran claim that the Iranian government does not bother to jam the Los Angeles-based television and radio stations, arguing that their journalistic style does not harm the government but instead helps it support its claim that government opposition abroad fails to understand the facts of Iranian society. Almost all of these stations use pre-revolutionary language and cannot attract Iranian youth with their political shows.

# Conclusion

THE UNITED STATES must become more effective at reaching Iranians if it hopes to spread its founding political values, promote democracy and human rights, seriously combat terrorism and violence, and, finally, repair its image and defeat grassroots anti-Americanism. Doing so will require Washington to fundamentally review—and urgently reconstruct—its public diplomacy toward Iran. Many motivations and reasons for misunderstanding exist between America and Iran. The U.S. government can prevent its public diplomacy from being added to the list of those reasons by ensuring that it serves American interests rather than those of fundamentalists in the region.

While the mechanisms for improving public diplomacy are not sophisticated in theory, they may seem hard in practice because they require making fundamental decisions, overcoming political differences over domestic issues, and respecting the national interest of America as well as the goal of democracy in the region.

Besides the problems in the BBG, the main needs of both Radio Farda and VOA are strengthening management—including editorial control and training—and providing adequate research units for their political news segments. Only more careful attention to these problems will allow the stations to live up to their potential to influence the Iranian people by offering accurate information and knowledgeable debates. If the American government wants to avoid the accusation of propaganda in its public diplomacy, it has to expect Radio Farda's and VOA's Persian television to meet journalism's highest professional standards. Much of the problem of inappropriate political content seems to stem from poor training and poor supervision rather than a political agenda imposed by the top management. That said, the BBG should avoid micro-managing program content, which can give the appearance that the broadcasters are being asked to support the specific foreign policy of a particular administration. The BBG has an important role in insisting on better management; that is where it should concentrate its efforts.

Another priority should be to increase news coverage and analysis of issues related to human rights, democracy,

civil society, and nongovernmental organizations—all elements that justify U.S. government spending of national capital on television and radio programming for foreign audiences. U.S. Persian media would benefit by covering issues that are usually censored by the Iranian government rather than items such as Radio Farda's daily sports program—unlike most subjects, sports programming is subject to only minimal censorship.

If Radio Farda aims to increase its audience and influence on the Iranian people, a unified management is required; that is, one that is not split between Prague and Washington. Thereafter, a stringent evaluation of its broadcasters should take place. Many of its staff may need to be replaced. That step, along with effective journalism training, can help Radio Farda repair itself and fulfill its potential to become the first twenty-four-hour news/music foreign Persian station with a broad audience in Iran. Furthermore, the financial support for FM transmission would be a revolutionary achievement that would do much to help gain a larger Iranian audience.

VOA Persian Television is a reasonable organization in terms of unified management, but it needs a fresh, knowledgeable editor who can devote his or her efforts to reconstructing the body of the organization by hiring professional broadcasters and retiring superannuated staff. VOA also vitally needs to train its staff to respect journalistic standards and to distinguish between propaganda and independent, objective television that serves American interests.

Finally, the United States will undermine its standing with the Iranian people were it to financially support private Iranian media of the sort now broadcasting from Los Angeles. Besides the fact that existing nongovernmental Persian radio and television stations outside Iran do not meet minimum standards of journalism, they have their own agendas which do not necessarily match U.S. interests. Almost all of them are against the Iranian regime, but they do not necessarily support a democratic alternative. Offering money to support them will damage the image of the United States without serving its interests.

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\*resigned upon entry to government service, 2001



