

# U.S. Public Diplomacy in Iran: Cutting Costs, Improving Impact

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Brief Analysis

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**A more effective (and cost-effective) approach would give Iranians the tools they need to bypass regime monitoring, pare down low-impact television programming, and emphasize popular mobile apps.**

**A**s the nuclear negotiations with Iran reportedly draw to a close, the U.S. government has a strong interest in explaining to Persian-speaking audiences what is happening and what Washington's stances mean. To date, however, U.S. public diplomacy in Persian has been unimpressive. A different approach would cost less and have more impact.

## VOA's Poor Viewership

**V**oice of America is the U.S. government's largest international broadcasting agency, and Persian programming constitutes a hefty share of its output. Yet this programming is overshadowed in terms of budget, reach, and ratings by many competing outlets, including several nominally private services and publicly funded networks run by other governments—including Iran's.

The U.S. Agency for Global Media has stated that VOA reached nearly 16 percent of Iranian adults in 2020, yet information from nongovernmental sources does not support this estimate. Analyzing data harvested by artificial intelligence tools (e.g., during research projects conducted by the firm MetroStar) indicates a dismal penetration rate among audiences inside Iran. When one combines all sources, including social media accounts on Twitter,

Facebook, and Instagram, VOA Persian reaches just 1 to 10 percent as many people as other foreign broadcasters—from publicly owned national outlets like BBC and Deutsche Welle to networks that reportedly receive unofficial government funding (e.g., Iran International and Manoto). A recent study of the VOA Facebook page indicated that more than 50 percent of the Persian service’s active users do not appear to reside in Iran, based on their profiles and geotracking data.

Part of the problem is that the network does little to no online promotion for its upcoming shows, making it difficult for audiences to plan how they will watch their favorite programs or follow their favorite reporters. Moreover, the Iranian regime frequently jams satellite television services that carry VOA signals, spurring the private companies that run these services to unofficially boycott VOA. As a result, the network is available on only a few satellite services, forcing users to purchase special dishes if they want to continue receiving it. For the average Iranian household, spending money on additional systems just to watch VOA is a luxury most will forgo when they can access hundreds of other Persian channels on their existing satellite services.

VOA offers programming online as well, but these efforts are not particularly sophisticated. The online branch would need more training and other assistance to meet its most basic goals, from targeting desirable audiences to maximizing online exposure, fighting misinformation, and conducting audience and data analysis. Most of VOA’s online user accounts are not authenticated and thus can easily be faked by Tehran’s “cyber army.” U.S. government rules have impeded the network from developing its own VPN and online filtering tools and distributing them among its audiences. Without addressing these technical problems, efforts to adjust the network’s journalistic content would matter little.

VOA Persian’s poor viewership is particularly disappointing given Washington’s inherent advantages in reaching Iranian audiences. For example, English is essentially the second language in various parts of Iran, mainly because open-source scientific courses and other educational materials available to residents in these areas are in English. In addition, many educated Iranians desire to migrate to English-speaking countries, making them even more receptive to broadcasts about and from the United States.

## **Other U.S.-Funded Programs**

**T**he American network Radio Farda has attracted audiences inside Iran looking for an independent news source, in part because surveys show relatively few of them realize it is funded by the U.S. government as part of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Analyzing the network’s Facebook and Twitter feeds with artificial intelligence tools indicates that 50-70 percent of its audience consists of Iranians residing inside the Islamic Republic. Radio Farda’s location in Prague, where the time difference with Iran is only two-and-a-half hours, gives it an edge in reacting to breaking news compared to VOA, whose Washington studio must contend with an eight-and-a-half-hour time difference.

At the State Department, efforts to engage the Iranian people have been a mixed bag. Its Persian-language Virtual Embassy website has very informative sections on visas, studying in the United States, and similar subjects. Yet the material on U.S.-Iran relations is sparse, limited to occasional Persian versions of U.S. government statements—some of them not particularly important, and some translated badly.

From 2011 to 2016, diplomat Alan Eyre served as the department’s Persian-language spokesperson, and his tenure was highly successful. Fluent in the language and deeply immersed in Persian culture and literature, Eyre made apt use of Persian poetry when responding to questions from a skeptical Iranian press. He eventually garnered so much respect and fame that Iranian newspapers often printed photos of him on top of and much larger than photos of Iranian presidents on the same page. The State Department would do well to either bring Eyre back or cultivate another spokesperson well-versed in Persian culture.

The efforts of the State Department’s Global Engagement Center have been more problematic. Its declared mission is “to direct, lead, synchronize, integrate, and coordinate efforts of the Federal Government to recognize, understand, expose, and counter foreign state and non-state propaganda and disinformation.” Yet the center’s first initiative to counter Iranian regime propaganda—the Trump administration’s “IranDisinfo” program—was disastrous. After human rights activists and journalists (many of them U.S. citizens) accused it of trolling and other online harassment, the program was suspended and never re-funded.

## Khamenei’s Cyber Cultural War

**T**he Iranian regime is highly attuned to the strategic significance of soft power, psychological warfare, and public diplomacy. Top officials regard most of the free world as their “enemy,” and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei expanded on what this mindset means for public diplomacy during [his 2021 speech](https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=47637)

(<https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=47637>) confirming President Ebrahim Raisi’s electoral victory:

“Beyond security and economic initiatives, most enemy initiatives against us today are propagandist initiatives, soft war and media publicity. In order to dominate public opinion—and more than any other country, public opinion in our country is the target of malicious intent by the great powers—they spend huge sums, run many projects, and hire many brains in the related think tanks.”

At first glance, the regime’s recent budget cuts for government-run foreign broadcasting would appear to contradict Khamenei’s view. Last year, the foreign services budget was reduced by a third, and networks such as Dari Radio, Press TV, al-Alam, and HispanTV were pared back or closed, unable to pay their debts to satellite companies such as Nilesat and Arabsat. Yet the substantial reach of other regime outlets likely offsets these losses.

At home, Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) disseminates regime propaganda and other programming via nine national television channels and more than sixty local channels. Their broadcasts are often supplemented with material from “private” production companies that appear to be linked to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. These companies issue hundreds of movies and television series that boast high production values and are accessible from anywhere, including popular video sharing sites such as Aparat. Some of these programs appear to draw a significant audience of Iranian Americans, including second- and third-generation immigrants. For instance, one popular television show is the spy thriller *Gando*, which depicts intelligence officers hunting spies out to sabotage Iran’s nuclear program.

In addition, Khamenei has used his vast control over national budgets to invest more funds in cyberspace than foreign broadcasting. His past comments on the subject reveal a militant view of Iranian efforts in this sector: “Today, power in cyberspace is vital; today, cyberspace rules the life of human beings in the world...The enemy is drawn up in battle array in terms of cyberspace, and in the face of this enemy...the Iranian nation should be in a proper order, preparing itself in all sectors.” Based on this mindset, he has directed the government “to engineer cyberspace in favor of the nation,” which in practical terms has meant allocating hefty budgets for multiple, sometimes overlapping bureaus, offices, and organizations charged with waging “cyber war” against internal and external enemies.

## Reforming U.S. Public Diplomacy

**P**ast efforts to reform VOA Persian have had unimpressive results—directly competing with the Iranian regime’s propaganda efforts would require much more money than Congress is inclined to provide, as well as more creative and effective management. The U.S. government needs a more cost-effective approach, one that builds on the strengths of U.S. soft power. Iranians are already watching vast amounts of American television shows and online content—just not from the U.S. government. Officials should therefore concentrate on providing safe tools that Iranians can use to ensure their anonymity online and circumvent the regime’s robust internet filtering and

monitoring efforts. Such an approach would boost both private American programming and government services such as VOA Persian, an outlet that has yet to address this vital necessity.

An even more important area of emphasis should be mobile applications with high rates of Iranian participation, such as Instagram, Telegram, and Clubhouse—with perhaps less focus on Twitter and Facebook. And as new media applications and platforms come to the fore in the future, U.S. government efforts should be prepared to adapt quickly.

Finally, given current budgetary realities, Washington should reduce and refocus its Persian television component. Rather than trying to be all things to all people, this programming should be exclusively about the United States, U.S. policy, and policy debates. Any cultural content should focus on emphasizing the differences between America's open society and the strict limits imposed by the Islamic Republic.

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