

Give Iran Good Television

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

In its present form, VOA's Persian service is a waste of U.S. tax dollars.

Whatever policy the United States adopts toward Iran, it will need to communicate it to the Iranian people. This will not be easy. Iranians are subject to heavy anti-American propaganda from the Islamic government. Not only are there no diplomatic relations, Tehran even creates many problems for people-to-people exchanges like student scholarship programs. The main tool of U.S. public diplomacy toward Iran is generous government funding of Voice of America's Persian TV (Persian News Network, or PNN) and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Persian program (Radio Farda). While radio is a useful complement, TV is the best medium to reach ordinary people in Iran, so PNN is the more important of the two.

Along with a few Iran experts with backgrounds in journalism, I monitored PNN for a year. We found that PNN was consistently ignoring the professional rules of TV production. Its programs are generally poor both in format and content. The problem is that PNN is run like a government agency, not like a news organization.

America has successful models for how to run public broadcasting: the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, National Public Radio, and the many public TV stations. These are not run as government agencies.

It is no accident that the most successful foreign television news broadcasts to Iran are produced by an independent government-supported entity, the BBC. While the BBC's foreign services are funded by the British government, the BBC is not a government agency. The majority of those who have satellite in Iran indisputably watch BBC Persian TV. According to the most recent surveys, BBC Persian has at least twice as many viewers as PNN. BBC Persian was launched in 2008, years after PNN started broadcasting to Iran. BBC Persian has almost the same annual budget as PNN (more than \$20 million). BBC uses the money to gather news, with many more correspondents around the world than PNN. By contrast, PNN has a much larger staff at headquarters than BBC Persian -- just what you would expect from a government agency.

PNN uses formats that are out-of-date and boring. Rarely are there outside shots of correspondents -- for instance, in

front of Congress or the White House -- much less reporting by PNN foreign correspondents. Just on presentation alone, PNN cannot capture the attention of Iranian youth. The content is also editorially incoherent. The selection of topics covered is weak. BBC Persian, not PNN, often has special coverage of top stories from the United States, such as Obama's inaugural. PNN rarely interviews the experts about Iran who appear on U.S. television networks. There are few, if any, editorial guidelines.

PNN has to compete with the Iranian regime's dozens of TV stations. Although Iranian state media is highly ideological and shamelessly spreads lies, its propaganda machinery is professionally run. It is exciting to watch; PNN is not. The regime's TV stations have an impact on a large portion of Iranian society.

For entertainment, millions of Iranian who have access to satellite TV watch private broadcasts from abroad, especially Manoto and Farsi One. But these are largely or entirely entertainment networks, with little if any news. They shy away from socio-political entertainment. To its credit, PNN has put on an excellent satirical show, *Parazit*, which gets many more viewers than other PNN shows. As you would expect from a government agency, rather than build on *Parazit*'s success by developing other entertaining shows, PNN has not put into *Parazit* the resources necessary to hire good writers, develop a strong support team, or to encourage continuing innovations. In other words, whatever extra funds devoted to *Parazit*, it has not been targeted at professionalizing it. As a result, *Parazit* viewership has dropped significantly.

PNN is run like a government agency. The PNN director is required to have a security clearance, so selection of the director is heavily influenced by factors other than experience in journalism. Poorly qualified TV producers were recruited at high salaries and now in practice cannot be dismissed. While the average age of VOA employees is 64, the age of average Iranians is 32.

In order to solve the problem, it seems that the only option is to convert PNN from a government agency, transforming it to a public media that follows the most successful examples in American public broadcasting like National Public Radio. A public PNN would be able to receive funds from the government and also from non-government sources and advertising. Without government bureaucratic impediments, an independent public TV or radio station would be in a much stronger position to hire the most qualified journalists, producers and editors. In its present structure, PNN is unable to communicate effectively with Iranians and a waste of American tax payers' money.

In September 2010, when President Barack Obama wanted to talk with Iranians, he chose BBC Persian over its own Voice of America Farsi station. Policymakers should think about how they can make Voice of America so credible and trustworthy that when American officials want to communicate with other nations they would not have to resort to the media of another country.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He previously worked as a producer and broadcaster at BBC and Radio Free Europe. ❖

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