

# Getting the Message Across:

## Better Broadcasting to Iran

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

**P**ersian-language radio and television broadcasts are among the main tools of U.S. public diplomacy toward Iran. Yet both of Washington's primary outlets for such broadcasting -- Radio Farda (RF) and the Persian News Network (PNN), an arm of Voice of America (VOA) television -- have been harshly criticized since their inception.

The most recent criticism surfaced last month, in a letter from Rep. Trent Franks (R-AZ) to President Obama. Signed by sixty-nine other congressmen, the letter accused PNN of "anti-American rhetoric" and an "apparent lack of oversight regarding the context of VOA-Persian broadcasting." Subsequently, an April 14 Washington Times editorial described VOA as "Voice of the Mullahs," stating "if VOA is telling Iranians struggling for freedom that resistance is futile, we hope Tehran keeps jamming it." As evidence of VOA's anti-American stance, the editorial noted that PNN had interviewed two "pro-regime" figures, Houshang Amir Ahmadi and Trita Parsi. Five days later, VOA director Danforth Austin responded to the allegations by defending VOA's objectivity, asking, "[W]ould the government of Iran waste time and money jamming VOA's PNN if it didn't find the content objectionable?"

### Modernization after Years of Stagnation

VOA began its Persian-language work with a team that consisted mostly of Iranian monarchists, many with broadcasting experience in Iranian state television under the shah. This fact deeply affected the network's journalistic standards and professionalism in ways that are still being felt today.

When the monarchist broadcasters left Iran, more than 70 percent of the country's current population had not yet been born. Until recently, then, much of their work with VOA was stuck in the past and disconnected from today's Iran and its culture. Even in broadcasting style, the VOA Persian service resembled 1960s-era television under the shah, lacking features common in modern television such as extensive picture archives, fashionable editing, and fast-paced and interactive programs. And the network's Persian content revealed a very obvious bias toward monarchist points of view on Iranian politics and U.S. foreign policy. Consequently, monarchist political figures have pointed to this bias as evidence that they are the only Iranian faction favored by the U.S. government -- a development that has negatively affected Iranian democrats and dissidents.

In late 2008, Alex Belida, an experienced broadcaster, became acting director of VOA Persian (which had been rechristened as PNN) and sought to restructure and modernize its programming and staff. He faced difficult hurdles, however. The numerous network employees, whose experience dated from the shah's era, lacked appropriate skills, and their highly politicized nature threatened to make management very difficult. Nevertheless, Belida -- who was recently confirmed as director -- succeeded in making PNN a more professional news outlet by remodeling its programs, enriching its visuals, shortening interviews and program runtimes, and hiring a younger generation of Iranian editors and broadcasters.

#### Preventing Politicization

The new PNN's influence over Iranian society and politics is undeniable. Tehran constantly condemns VOA and jams its signal, as it does with other popular Persian-language media broadcast from outside Iran. In the regime's view, PNN was one of the main entities responsible for the mass protest movement that emerged after the 2009 presidential election. Along with Radio Farda, it is regarded as the central component in the West's soft war against Iran.

Even so, the most significant threat to PNN and RF comes not from the Islamic Republic, but rather from Iranian and American political groups who seek to politicize both outlets. Some Iranian political activists hope to promote their own agenda through VOA, claiming that if the network were under their control, they could help the United States bring down the Iranian government in short order.

#### Maintaining Radio Farda's Momentum

Launched in late 2002, Radio Farda has gradually gained an exclusive place among Persian media broadcast from outside Iran. Under its current management by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), RF has hired a number of young, skilled Iranian journalists who have helped make the network more responsive to the needs of Iran's young society. Both its radio programming and website are now among the country's highest-rated foreign news sources. RF has succeeded in depoliticizing its content, developing more attractive radio formats, and establishing a platform for new voices in Iran. As a result, more Iranian journalists are willing to work with the network, and more Iranian democrats and human rights activists are looking to contribute to its programs.

#### Next Steps

VOA and RFE/RL's efforts to raise their journalistic standards Persian-language coverage are good first steps. They should be encouraged to continue this process. Much work is needed on several fronts:

- \* More formal and on-the-job journalism training. Both networks need ongoing training programs for their employees, many of whom have little background in journalism. They also need clearer and more formal documentation of their standards and procedures, with regular review by editors to ensure those standards are being applied in PNN and RF's daily work.
- \* Deeper expertise. PNN and RF need stronger research teams that can provide proper background material and suggest tough questions to ask on air. The role of producers and editors should be reinforced so that they can solicit interviewees who are the most respected experts in their field, not simply names known to the news team.
- \* More timely coverage. During last year's presidential election in Iran, the BBC Persian service shifted to extended hours to ensure adequate coverage, but VOA continued its regular programming until three days into the postelection crisis. Too often, BBC and Iranian television cover stories long before they appear on PNN. And many PNN stories seem more relevant to American viewers than to Iranians.
- \* Continued modernization. Despite Belida's efforts to revamp PNN's programming, too many segments still show anchors reading long texts without visuals. And when visuals are offered, they are frequently of little relevance or

interest. Similarly, much of the network's camerawork uses dated techniques. PNN talk shows in particular tend to drag as a result of such problems.

\* New forms of distribution and journalism. PNN and RF must increase their use of peer-to-peer distribution and many-to-many forms of communication, making their Persian-language programming more interactive.

The further VOA and RFE/RL can advance their agenda of presenting reliable news, the more impact they can have on the Iranian political scene. Iranians suffer from heavily censored media; what they need is accurate reporting. Many of them are fed up with their own state's propaganda and are quick to recognize and reject propaganda from other states. Therefore, the best way to ensure strong and effective public diplomacy toward Iran is first to depoliticize U.S. government-funded Persian-language media, and second to continue raising standards, making the news organizations more professional, objective, balanced, and technologically savvy.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Iranian politics and the politics of Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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