

# Miscommunication between Iranian Society and the West on Iran's Nuclear Program

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Feb 10, 2006

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.

---



## Brief Analysis

In recent months, the growing controversy surrounding the Iranian nuclear program and Western suspicions about the military intentions of the Iranian regime has reached a crucial phase. A serious problem for the Western campaign to press the Islamic Republic about its nuclear program is that Iranian society has been indifferent or hostile to the West's efforts. The United States in particular needs to find ways to reenergize its outreach to Iranian society.

### Tehran Keeps People in the Dark

Iranian state censorship on the nuclear program has strengthened in the past two years, ever since the Iranian National Security Council issued a circular banning publication of any news or analysis regarding the nuclear program outside the official media and state news agencies as a threat to national security. The Iranian people not only have no opportunity to hear or read critiques of Iranian nuclear activities, they also have no opportunity to learn accurate news about the nuclear crisis and its development in Iran, in the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), or the American and European negotiations. In the absence of an independent media, state propaganda can provoke a sense of national patriotism by claiming that the West wants to push Iran backwards to the dark ages and fights with any Islamic country, such as Iran, that attempt to access advanced technology.

In the course of applying strict censorship on media, the Islamic Republic is forced to filter political and news websites. Filtering policies are stricter under President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad than ever before, and even some websites like the Persian BBC have been blocked. Every time the nuclear crisis reaches a new crescendo, Iranian censorship becomes more radical.

As part of its efforts to control the news Iranians receive, the Iranian government acts against foreign broadcasting. The annual government budget includes an item of nearly \$2 million titled, Protection against Cultural Invasion. According to an annual report published every year in the government's official newspaper, most of that money goes to the technical cost for producing "parasites" against foreign radio and television -- that is, to efforts of various sorts to block the broadcasts.

Unfortunately, the censorship has had an effect. Despite escalating tensions with the world community about the

nuclear program, ordinary people, independent political parties, and civil institutions are barely reacting to the dangers. A foreign observer traveling the streets of Tehran would be amazed by the social indifference toward such a critical threat. At this point, one may safely say that state propaganda on the nuclear program has been mostly successful. The crisis is headline news everywhere in the world except for Iran.

#### State of Emergency?

The policy of the Iranian media toward its nuclear program has a paradoxical aim. On the one hand, the government wants to diminish the importance of the issue and to pretend that the crisis will be resolved in Tehran's favor. On the other hand, it attempts to keep the populace in a state of panic in order to squelch political and social protests over internal or external policies. For this reason, the government highlights the foreign threat against Iran, especially the peril of military action.

Despite repeated statements by the U.S. government that it has no intentions of forcing regime change in Iran, the Iranian official media repeats daily allegations that the United States wants to change the Iranian regime by financially supporting the opposition, imposing economic sanctions, and isolating Iran in the international arena. They implicitly say that if Iran deprives itself of nuclear technology then they will have no effective weapons if the United States decides to attack Iran. Iran has chosen a policy of confrontation, the state media says, because America and its allies have decided to take a similar approach. The Jomhuri-e Islami newspaper, officially under the supreme leader's control, claimed in a January 30, 2006, editorial titled, "The U.S. Getting More Isolated," that President Bush called for regime change in Iran and for reforms "favored by the White House." The hardline newspaper wrote that Bush said that the United States will support all the Iranian opposition financially and politically.

This propaganda focuses on confrontation in order to force the country into a state of popular alarm and to distract from the government's incapability to realize its economic promises, its mismanagement, and its lack of legitimacy, as well as to postpone internal debate about and efforts to advance democracy and human rights. Iran's leaders believe that keeping the people in a state of panic will diminish their political and economic demands.

#### But No Need to Worry: The West is Weak, says Tehran

Iranian state media frequently repeats that the United States and Europe cannot disregard the strategic importance of Iran in the region and that they have certain economic and security interests that bar them from taking harsh action against Tehran. For instance, Mohammad Jafar Behdad argued in a February 6 editorial in the Kayhan newspaper, which is officially controlled by the supreme leader, titled, "Our Immortality and the West's Disability," that putting economic sanction on Islamic Republic only hurts Western economies and does no serious harm to Iran.

State radio, television, and print media emphasize the impact of high oil prices should sanctions be brought against Tehran, and insist that the first loser would be West, not Iran. Many progovernment analysts argue that Western countries know that Iran is not pursuing a nuclear bomb but that they use every means possible to prevent Iran from having access to nuclear energy, only because of their desire to monopolize energy in their own hands and hinder an economically powerful Iran.

The state media also makes the case that the United States and its allies are incapable of launching any military action against Iran, because they are deeply engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan and because of strong Iranian ties with Syria and with Palestinian armed groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Ahmadinezhad met Islamic Jihad and Hamas leaders on his January trip to Damascus. Also in January, one of Hamas's leaders, Khalid Mashal, declared in Tehran that in the case of any military action against Iran, Hamas would immediately attack American and Israeli interests in the region. Also, Muqtada al-Sadr, a radical Iraqi Shiite cleric, said after a meeting with the Iranian foreign minister and other officials in Tehran that he and his militia will stand for Iran in case of any military action against it.

## U.S. Outreach to the Iranian People

The U.S. government allocates substantial resources to broadcasting into Iran. Such broadcasting can be a truly effective means for reaching the people of Iran. Breaking the walls of censorship by professional broadcasting is certainly much more effective than financially supporting Iranian opposition groups. Are U.S. international broadcasters ready to take up this tough challenge?

The Voice of America's (VOA) Persian radio is not ready for this task. With low ratings (below 5 percent of those who listen to foreign radio broadcasts, which most Iranians do), an aging staff, and an image of being the official voice of the U.S. government, it can have at best only a modest impact. In the budget for fiscal year 2007 Bush unveiled last week, VOA proposed ending its Persian radio service, which is now three hours a day. Instead, the radio will simulcast four hours a day of VOA's Persian television. This is a wise use of resources.

Increasing the Voice of America's Persian television from one hour at present to four hours, as proposed in the president's budget, is an excellent move. Satellite television is widely watched in Iran. And the VOA's Persian television has become the most serious foreign Persian-language broadcast -- it is much better than programs sponsored by any other government or by private satellite stations. That said, VOA Persian television does not have as much strategic vision and journalistic professionalism as it might. The plan to increase its programming, particularly its news and analysis, will be a serious challenge to its management and its journalistic capability.

Radio Farda, the twenty-four-hour news and music station jointly staffed by the VOA and Radio Free Europe, has the potential to have a substantial impact. However, as currently run, Radio Farda suffers from management problems recently made worse by management turnover. Its production has dropped both in quantity and quality. A major overhaul is needed to make it a more effective means of public diplomacy with Iran.

In addition, Radio Farda needs to boost significantly its means of program delivery. Besides shortwave transmissions (which do not have a wide audience), Radio Farda currently has a strong medium-wave (MW) transmitter in the Persian Gulf, which the Iranian government jams around the clock with its state-of-the-art jamming technology. From past experience, however, it appears that Tehran can only jam one strong MW transmitter at a time. If Radio Farda adds a second transmitter in the region, the signal might get through and the current total audience of six to seven million people will increase substantially. Adding a second regional transmitter would cost about \$3 million. It is not realistic to expect that those resources can be found by cutting other U.S. international broadcasting, which is stretched to the limit. For instance, VOA has announced plans to end English-language radio broadcasts except for a few specialized programs -- an interesting situation: the Voice of America will not be heard in English.

If a MW transmitter is not available, then a few strategically placed FM transmitters along Iran's borders could also have a major impact. Transmitters on the Iraq-Iran border, near Basra and in the Kurdish areas, can reach some significant population centers and will be harder to jam. For instance, a ten kilowatt FM transmitter near Basra could cover a significant part of Iran's oil producing region. This region has historically been very important in propelling movements of internal dissent and industrial strikes.

Another means the U.S. government uses to reach Iranians is the Department of State's Persian-language website. This website is an effective way to build a bridge between U.S. diplomacy and Iranian society. However, the translations on the website leave much to be desired. The terms used are more typical of prerevolutionary Iran; the language lacks the dynamism and standards of contemporary Persian as spoken in Iran. There is considerable difference between the language on the website and that of the Iranian press. It would be useful to find journalists and translators better in touch with modern Iran.

## Conclusion

One of the most important components of the American efforts to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons is professional, accurate broadcasting to the Iranian people, which can break through the walls of censorship and inform Iranian society of Iran's real status in the international community and Western concerns. Here, public diplomacy can play a crucial role by telling the truth about the impending danger to Iran's stability in general and the dangers of sanctions to its economic welfare in particular.

The Iranian government has successfully played on the nuclear issue to garner the support of its populace, which is otherwise generally dissatisfied with the regime. Popular support is important for Tehran if it intends to continue its tough stand. Therefore, the United States has a major task of explaining to the Iranian public why it is against Iran's decision to resume uranium conversion and enrichment. Without the sympathy of Iranian society toward Western policies in respect to nuclear development, the United States and its partners will encounter serious obstacles and may negatively affect Iranian opposition efforts to promote democracy.

Mehdi Khalaji is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

Policy #1078

---

## RECOMMENDED

---



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## [Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

### TOPICS

[Proliferation \(/policy-analysis/proliferation\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)

### REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Iran \(/policy-analysis/iran\)](#)