

## Broadcasting to Iraq and Iran: Reaching Out by Radio

Oct 15, 1999



### Brief Analysis

**R**adio Free Iraq was established through legislation last October and operates in conjunction with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) as a nongovernmental organization funded wholly by the U.S. government. The goal of Radio Free Iraq is to broadcast accurate and balanced information focusing on human rights, democratization, free expression, and Iraqi culture. Radio Free Iraq was not established to be the opposition mouthpiece against Iraqi president Saddam Husayn, but rather as a vehicle to provide information to politically aware Iraqi citizens.

Radio Free Iraq allows the Iraqi people to receive news about Iraq that has not been altered by government censorship. A wide spectrum of opinion, covering all political angles, is presented. Radio Free Iraq's reputation for neutrality is important for facilitating its access to a wide spectrum of Iraqis of all political backgrounds and orientations. Radio Free Iraq gathers its information through correspondents, including two in the Kurdish areas of northern Iraq (one of whom reports on the Assyrian Christian community) and stringers in Jordan, Turkey, Kuwait, Cairo, Jerusalem, Beirut, London, Washington, and Moscow.

In addition to political programming, Radio Free Iraq airs cultural programs three times weekly. In Iraqi government media, propaganda has replaced indigenous Iraqi culture. Radio Free Iraq's cultural programs are produced out of Jerusalem, London, and Prague, drawing on the traditional Iraqi culture preserved by the Iraqi Jewish community.

Currently, the broadcasts air twice daily for two-hour blocks at 6 a.m. and 8 p.m.; they are soon to expand to three hours twice daily and will include broadcasts in Kurdish. The broadcasts are only on shortwave radio. Shortwave radios are widespread throughout Iraq, though there is no precise information on who possesses them. Baghdad does not appear to be jamming the broadcasts, though of course Iraqi government officials refuse to have anything to do with Radio Free Iraq. Active attempts are being made to secure a medium-wave (AM) transmitter to reach a wider audience.

The audience of Radio Free Iraq has not been factually established. A survey of Iraqi exiles in Amman was attempted, but it had to be dropped because of threats against those participating. There is anecdotal evidence about members of the regime listening; after all, they too want reliable information about what is going on in Iraq, which they cannot get from the official media. There are also many reports of politically educated Iraqis throughout urban centers listening to the broadcasts. Radio Free Iraq actively seeks out reaction from its audience in a variety of ways, including a post office box in Amman to which listeners can write.

STEPHEN FAIRBANKS

The Persian service of RFE/RL began one year ago in the face of great hostility from Tehran. Upon its establishment, the Iranian government complained to the Czech government and withdrew the Iranian ambassador from Prague, where RFE/RL is based. Despite the negative reaction by the Iranian government, among the citizenry the reaction to the radio service has been positive.

With the emergence of Iranian president Muhammad Khatami and his proposed liberalism, many were uncertain about the purpose of RFE/RL broadcasts to Iran. The present backlash in Iran against democracy and free expression has changed that situation. The RFE/RL Persian service has become all the more important because of the crackdown on the press and the assertion of authority by the conservative Council of Guardians.

RFE/RL has designed its Iranian programming as the type of programming that Iranians would have if there were no government censorship. RFE/RL takes no sides in the factional battles among various groups in Iran; it does not advocate the viewpoint of reformers, nor does it project open support for Khatami. And, of course, it does not advocate the positions of the U.S. government; RFE/RL is not the Voice of America, which broadcasts editorials giving U.S. policy. In fact, when reporting on U.S. policy, the Persian service makes a special effort to present information obtained from French and German media, to avoid broadcasting only the American perspective. For instance, in the recent broadcasts regarding state-sponsored terrorism and the arrests of Jewish Iranians for alleged spying, RFE/RL presented European analyses to show that the concern over Iran's actions was not confined to the United States.

The programming includes both political and cultural broadcasts. In-depth coverage on democratization, specifically focusing on Turkey, has been a major aspect of recent broadcasts. Much of the programming focuses on Iranian cinema, Iranian music, and Iranian literature with a political message. Social issues are often discussed during broadcasts; international experts provide assistance that cannot be received in Iran on a wide variety of social issues, such as how to deal with conflict among family members.

A prominent official, Ayatollah Ahmad Janatti, condemned all those who have been or would be interviewed by RFE/RL, stating that those who agree to be interviewed are nothing more than foreign lackeys. The minister of culture has banned all journalists from quoting from the broadcasts, which is ironic because reports suggest that many government employees within the Ministry of Culture listen to RFE/RL broadcasts from the Internet on a daily basis. Despite these bans, various Iranian academics, members of parliament, and even clergy members have been willing to join in debates aired on the radio and many have even conceded to use their given names. Exiled Iranians in Washington, London, Paris, and throughout Germany also serve as excellent interview sources for RFE/RL and range in viewpoint from moderates to leftists. These participants are often denounced in the Iranian press and, to avoid punishment, they concoct tales saying that they have never talked to RFE/RL or that they believed that they were speaking to someone else. Iranian government officials have thus far refused to give interviews or participate in debates, but Tajikistan officials have granted interviews to the RFE/RL Tajik service, and those interviews have then been used by the Persian service.

The broadcasts are currently aired two hours a day, but they are expected to increase to three hours in the near future. Currently the broadcasts are aired only on shortwave radio. Although medium-wave would be desirable, it seems unlikely at this point that any nearby government will grant RFE/RL permission to establish a transmitter. There is no solid data about the audience, but a survey among Iranian university students in Turkey gave some evidence about who in Iran listens to the broadcasts.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Erika Reff.

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**RECOMMENDED**

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