



How America's Iran outreach is missing in action

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This summer witnessed a rare moment of unity from the notoriously fractious Iranian opposition. In mid-July, dozens of activists of various ideological stripes gathered in Washington, D.C., to publicly protest a group they all view as a common foe — the National Iranian American Council (NIAC).

The demonstration was the culmination of growing outrage on the part of the Iranian diaspora with the activities of NIAC, which in recent years has unilaterally appointed itself the advocate for America's nearly 1 million-person Iranian expatriate community — and used that perch to advance policies overwhelmingly favorable to Iran's clerical regime.

Indeed, although ostensibly a “nonpartisan, nonprofit organization,” NIAC was a key member of the “echo chamber” created by the Obama administration to sell its 2015 nuclear deal with Iran to a skeptical American public. Since then, further revelations regarding the group's close, ongoing coordination with the Iranian regime — in particular its wily foreign minister, Javad Zarif — have put to rest any lingering doubts that NIAC was and remains an ardent advocate for the Islamic Republic.

The July rally was intended as a public condemnation of this activism, and it naturally drew significant media attention from a bevy of media outlets, ranging from the BBC to RT. Yet, one was conspicuously absent. The Voice of America's Persian News Network, which serves as the U.S. government's principal Persian-language broadcaster, opted not to cover the protests. In the process, it re-ignited a long-simmering debate over the state of American outreach toward Iran and its people.

For years, VOA has been the target of scathing criticism from Iran-watchers and opposition activists alike for its failure to properly explain U.S. policy, its perceived bias in favor of the Iranian regime, and widespread internal mismanagement and corruption. VOA's credibility has suffered greatly as a result, with the service becoming overshadowed by foreign counterparts like BBC Persian and Manoto, which are uniformly viewed as being both more credible and more dynamic.

All of that, however, was supposed to be a thing of the past. Over the past year, in response to widespread criticism (including a 2017 study chaired by this author), the government agency overseeing U.S. international broadcasting, now known as the U.S. Agency for Global Media, launched an overhaul of its Persian-language outreach. The effort was intended to create a more nimble, responsive and politically engaged service, and resulted in the launch this spring of a 24/7 television and digital channel dubbed VOA 365.

But while these upgrades do indeed boast some improvements to programming and content, many problematic practices (including the arbitrary censorship of influential opposition voices) still persist. Perhaps more significantly, VOA's outreach to Iran still seems to be missing a crucial ingredient — a real strategy to better explain U.S. policy, deliver improved coverage of Iranian domestic politics and provide a more representative picture of conditions within the Islamic Republic.

All of which should matter a great deal to the White House. Over the past year, the Trump administration's campaign of “maximum pressure” has succeeded in significantly impacting prosperity and stability within the Islamic Republic. In the process, it has given a much-needed shot in the arm to the Iranian opposition, which — for perhaps the first time in four decades — now senses that a collapse of Iran's repressive regime could be an actual possibility.

Yet, in order to engage this critical constituency, America's Iran policy needs to be coupled with a robust messaging capability — one that engages Iran's captive population, signals U.S. support for meaningful change within the country and explains exactly how Washington is working to make such change happen.

So far, the U.S. government's official Persian-language outreach has fallen far short of that mark. And as a result, it remains at best a peripheral part of America's approach to Iran. At worst, it serves as a clear detriment to it.

The White House should make it a priority to change this sorry state of affairs, and do so without delay. The long-term success of its Iran strategy could very well depend on it.

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