



Joe Biden's Secret Weapon For Resetting Iran Policy

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On Inauguration Day, Michael Pack, the controversial CEO of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), became the very first personnel casualty of the Joe Biden administration. In the days that followed, Pack-appointed leaders at the USAGM-managed Voice of America (VOA) and other USAGM entities, including Radio Free Europe and Radio Free Asia, were also summarily axed.

Pack's short tenure at the helm of the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM)—which he headed from his Senate confirmation in June 2020 until Inauguration Day—was rife with controversy over political overreach and skewed priorities. It's not surprising, then, that critics have hailed Pack's departure, and the personnel reshuffle that followed, as an overdue course correction that has brought back normalcy to a well-functioning bureaucracy.

But the problems at USAGM go much deeper than a controversial CEO. In fact, some of Pack's initiatives—such as trying to impose accountability among unruly government entities and to rectify security clearance irregularities among employees and contractors—were aimed at fixing problems that ailed U.S. broadcasting before he ever arrived at USAGM's headquarters on Independence Avenue. And it's more crucial now than ever to fix some of these deep-rooted problems, as the Biden administration attempts to reshape U.S. foreign policy.

There is one place in particular where USAGM has a crucial role to play in U.S. foreign policy: Iran. While many aspects of the Biden administration's approach to foreign affairs remain unclear, it's already evident that its Iran policy will be a major departure from that of the Trump administration. Whereas the "maximum pressure" of the Trump era saw Iran face growing political and economic isolation, the new Biden White House has made clear that it is planning a broad diplomatic push to reengage with the Islamic Republic.

In its current state, VOA's Persian service can't be of much use in that mission. It ranks as one of the most out-of-date, inefficient and scandal-ridden broadcast services administered by USAGM, plagued by everything from poor management to lackluster content. Such deficiencies have hindered successive administrations from fulfilling the agency's broader mission of bringing reliable information to unfree societies. And they have prevented Washington from effectively communicating with the most important constituency inside Iran: the Iranian people themselves.

That represents a critical shortcoming. Fundamentally, the long game in Iran has always been about the Iranian public square, and not the country's aging and exceedingly unpopular clerical regime. It is the people of Iran who will help determine the geopolitical trajectory of the country over the long term. The United States has every interest in helping to shape that trajectory in a more pluralistic and free political direction. Doing so requires meaningful engagement with the Iranian people, together with an upgrading of the essential tools—such as VOA Persian—to make that priority possible.

Perhaps the most basic problem relating to U.S. government broadcasting toward Iran is that it represents something of a black box. While it has become commonplace for officials to claim that U.S. programming is influential among Iranian people, there is in fact little empirical data that this is actually the case. Credible, independent third-party assessments of the true reach and appeal of VOA within the Islamic Republic are conspicuously absent from the public sphere. At the same time, extensive interviews with longtime observers of Persian-language media carried out in recent months suggest that U.S. outreach is increasingly marginal and irrelevant to most Iranians, eclipsed by more compelling and dynamic private sector alternatives, such as Manoto, a London-based Persian-language general entertainment channel, and the Saudi-linked Iran International channel.

That amounts to a major blind spot. Credibly gauging the true level of VOA's popularity among Iranian audiences (via social media metrics, direct telephonic surveys, and assorted other means) is an essential prerequisite to determining the true worth of the current U.S. investment in broadcasting toward Iran. Simply put, American lawmakers need to know exactly how many Iranians are tuning in to VOA's Persian-language broadcasts in order to gauge whether the service still remains a "good bet" and a prudent use of taxpayer dollars. Simply taking the word of government employees who rely on those same funds for their paychecks just won't do.

The second problem plaguing VOA Persian relates to content. The service today suffers from what might be called "content confusion," with programming encompassing a scattered and ineffective mix of news, analysis and culture and entertainment programming such as reruns of CNN's once-popular Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown. By contrast, VOA's contemporary market competitors have far more clear-cut and well-defined roles. Manoto, for instance, is sought after by Iranian audiences for its cultural and entertainment content, like cooking and music shows, while Iran International is widely watched for breaking news and analysis.

This state of affairs, moreover, has been made worse in recent years by the cancellation of popular VOA political satire and cultural commentary shows like *Parasit* and *Ofogh*, which had previously succeeded in effectively bridging these categories. U.S. officials should reassess the VOA "mission" vis-à-vis Iran—what it is, exactly, that they are trying to say to Iranian audiences—and then reformulate programming to better match those objectives.

Third, U.S. programming toward Iran currently lags woefully in its reaction time. VOA Persian has persistently failed to respond to foreign-policy developments in a timely, impactful manner—much to the detriment of its credibility, and that of the United States as a whole. A particularly egregious example took place following the January 2020 killing of notorious IRGC General Qassem Soleimani, a major event with profound implications for Iran's regional position and U.S.-Iranian strategic competition. According to former broadcasting officials, it took nearly a full day for VOA to cover the event—a lag that allowed the Iranian regime to monopolize and shape the narrative surrounding Soleimani's death.

Such a state of affairs is simply unacceptable. The United States needs to be able to credibly, rapidly and effectively tell its side of the story relating to breaking developments in relations between the U.S. and Iran. Developing this sort of capability is essential to debunking regime falsehoods and mischaracterizations about America, as well as explaining to Iranian audiences the strategic rationale behind the latest U.S. diplomatic decision or foreign policy action. Reorganizing programming, as well as altering administrative functions, such as expanding hours of operation, will enhance VOA Persian's ability to rapidly respond to events.

This ability to respond quickly is important for cultural programming, too. Among VOA's most influential programs of the recent past is the short documentary and discussion show known as *Tablet*. Run by prominent women's rights activist Masih Alinejad, *Tablet* focuses on the struggle for social and gender equality within Iran, and is—by all available metrics—one of the service's most successful programs, garnering millions of viewers and ongoing engagement on social media. Yet *Tablet* is currently undervalued and limited to just one 30-minute weekly program which is subsequently rebroadcast at later dates. Such a structure makes it difficult for U.S. coverage to keep pace with the rapidly changing socio-cultural conversation within the Islamic Republic, and gives the appearance of the United States being out of touch with the Iranian public.

The situation surrounding *Tablet* is a microcosm of the larger problem. Meaningful programs—those that tap into the trends and attitudes that prevail among Iran's citizenry—do indeed exist. But because they are built around an existing (and rigid) schedule of programming, they tend to be unresponsive to the rapidly changing human terrain within Iran. Ramping up a more aggressive production schedule for *Tablet* and other meaningful shows, such as the newer *Chess*, a political discussion roundtable program, would allow VOA to better reflect the latent dynamism of Iranian society.

Finally, and perhaps most profoundly from an audience standpoint, current U.S. outreach to Iran is simply not aesthetically appealing. Low production values and amateurish appearance contribute greatly to VOA's failure to win "hearts and minds" among Iranians, notwithstanding the service's inherent credibility as the authoritative "voice" of the United States. This becomes especially glaring when VOA programming is compared to its market competitors in the Persian media space—all of which (even Iranian regime broadcasts) offer more dynamic visuals and content than U.S. efforts currently do. In order to make VOA programs distinguishable from, and superior to, their competitors, the U.S. government needs to invest in significant upgrades to the appearance, professionalism and content of the service. In particular, the service could benefit from the creation of new, original programming geared specifically toward greater engagement of Iranian youth, who represent a significant segment of Iran's 85-million-person population.

By their nature, instituting the reforms and upgrades outlined above will be a long-term endeavor—one that is likely to stretch across multiple presidential administrations. Even so, there are a number of near-term actions that the Biden administration can take now that would jump-start the process, with immediate results.

The first is to institute personnel changes. Over the years, many VOA Persian employees have come to be regarded in a deeply negative light by Iranian-American activists and regime critics alike, who have chafed at their overt political biases and their failure to properly communicate U.S. policy. In order for it to be taken seriously by outside observers, any reform effort—which can be driven by a new USAGM CEO with input from the White House—will require meaningful changes at both the reporter/editor and senior management levels. Moreover, such personnel changes will need to be publicized and promoted as a way of clearly communicating to outside critics that the U.S. government has heard their complaints about staffing and is serious about responding to them.

Another key priority for the new White House must be to encourage VOA to better leverage its inherent advantage: access. VOA's close geographic proximity to the U.S. Congress and assorted executive branch agencies in Washington remains woefully underutilized by its Persian service. Little effort is currently made by VOA reporters and management to seek out interviews, commentary and insights from officials and subject matter experts as a means of giving the proper context to U.S. policy.

That is a grave error. As numerous studies have borne out, Iran's population is young, dynamic and vibrant. It's also westward-looking, and keenly attuned to America as a symbol of everything that their current, repressive government isn't. VOA outreach presently doesn't dwell on the institutions, processes and values that makes the United States so different from Iran's clerical regime.

It needs to. In order to shed greater light on official U.S. decisions, more sustained engagement with officials by VOA Persian journalists and reporters is essential. Such a focus would also help correct disinformation about the U.S. government promoted by the Iranian regime. It would also give relevant U.S. lawmakers more confidence that American outreach toward Iran is properly capturing their views and is representative of U.S. policy—a state of affairs which, sadly, does not currently exist.

VOA Persian has an important role to play in the current administration's mission of re-engaging with the Islamic Republic, and Biden would be wise to use it. But first, the service needs to be fixed, top to bottom. Whether or not the president delivers on that goal will be a key test of how serious he is about restarting a real dialogue not just with the Iranian regime, but with the Iranian people as well.