



Iranians aren't listening to America

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Just how influential is America's outreach to the Iranian people? Over the years, Congressional lawmakers have repeatedly tried to probe that question in order to determine whether the U.S. government's broadcasting toward the Islamic Republic remains a "good bet," in fiscal terms. However, their efforts have been consistently frustrated by the opaque nature in which the Voice of America and its parent agency, now known as the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM), functions. Without clear answers, Congress has had to settle for reassurances from USAGM officials themselves, who — unsurprisingly — have been quick to claim that our official outreach to Iran is both effective and influential.

But is this really the case? The data suggests otherwise.

For instance, in a recent survey of Iranian attitudes toward broadcast media by GAMAAN, a Netherlands-based polling institute, the principal organ of U.S. outreach to Iran, the Voice of America's Persian service, ranked dead last in popularity, garnering just 11 percent of all total daily viewers. By contrast, private sector alternatives like Iran International and Manoto together claimed nearly two-thirds (63 percent), while outlets like the UK's official BBC Persian and the private Gem TV channel came in at around 17 percent audience share apiece. Even the regime's official Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), at 16 percent, had a better showing.

The causes for this poor performance aren't all that difficult to discern. For years, the VOA Persian, as it is colloquially known, has ranked as one of the U.S. government's most flawed, inefficient and scandal-ridden broadcast arms, plagued by everything from controversial management to lackluster content. Over time, these problems have led the service to lose its luster among Iran's young and media-savvy population.

Even so, the service has had some bright spots of late — thanks largely to the leadership of its new director, Leili Soltani. Recent successes include this year's Nowruz (Persian New Year) programming, which won wide acclaim among viewers, as well as the comprehensive coverage given to the mid-April rollout of the Maximum Pressure Act, a conservative Congressional effort to push back against the Biden administration's diplomatic reengagement with Tehran. In those instances, the service functioned as it should, highlighting a diversity of voices and showcasing the tug-and-pull of competing ideas within the American political sphere. But in all too many others in the past, it has fallen short of that standard — and Iranians have progressively tuned out.

The trend should be instructive to the Biden administration as it seeks a higher profile for American outreach to foreign publics. Part of the reason U.S. broadcasting was so potent and compelling during the decades of the Cold War was that it pulled back the veil on the often-messy processes and debates that make American democracy unique. In doing so, it showed the captive populations behind the Iron Curtain precisely the vibrant official debate that they were missing in their own authoritarian political systems.

That same formula still makes sense today in our outreach to unfree societies. The inherent appeal of the Voice of America is that it is precisely that: an official, authoritative account of "America's story." When U.S. broadcasting meets that standard, it provides a potent (and subversive) counterpoint to rigid, state-controlled authoritarian media in places like Iran. When it doesn't, it becomes merely another channel in an increasingly saturated media sphere — and not a particularly compelling one at that.

If the GAMAAN survey contains any good news, it is that the current decline of American broadcasting is reversible, in the context of Iran at least. Among its other findings, the study found that — even after years of lackluster performance — 40 percent of respondents still saw VOA, as well as its radio counterpart, Radio Farda, as "trustworthy." (By contrast, two-thirds of those polled expressed no faith at all in official Iranian media.)

That's a statistic the U.S. government can improve upon through in-depth, nuanced reporting that showcases something that the Iranian regime simply can't: the vibrancy of democratic principles and debate. If it does, America can start rebuilding its credibility with the single most important constituency within Iran today — not its aging, unpopular regime, but its youthful and Westward-looking population.