



It's Time To Let America's Iran Outreach Be All It Can Be

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What's the current state of America's engagement with the Iranian people?

When the Trump administration came into office in early 2017, the answer to that question was decidedly negative. The U.S. government's dedicated public diplomacy agency, then known as the Broadcasting Board of Governors (and subsequently as the U.S. Agency for Global Media, or USAGM) was rife with problems, ranging from personnel irregularities to poor security practices. And the Voice of America's (VOA) Farsi service, beset by poor management, low morale, and instances of blatant political favoritism, ranked among the Agency's worst performing channels. That year, I chaired an in-depth study at the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC), which documented major issues with both the form and substance of U.S. messaging to the Iranian people.

Fast forward some seven years, and things appear to have changed for the better.

Now under new management, VOA Farsi has received a major facelift in terms of both content and dynamism. A follow-up AFPC study conducted last fall (once again by me) found VOA Farsi now performing substantially better along multiple indices—including how it covers Iranian domestic politics and protests, as well as how it explains U.S. foreign policy to Iranian viewers.

Iranians themselves appear to have noticed. Over the past three years, VOA Farsi accounts across social media platforms such as Twitter/X, Facebook, and Telegram have cumulatively added nearly 2.5 million new followers, and charted major increases in content views and "interactions"—both key metrics of increased audience engagement. (Notably, VOA Farsi still trails its private sector competitors in terms of popularity.)

Yet these improvements in content and market share haven't resulted in greater governmental attention or funding, at least not yet. Rather, according to current and former VOA Farsi employees, the U.S. government has adopted a "minimalist" approach to broadcasting toward Iran, one in which the service is forced to scrounge for scant resources. In the decade between 2012 and 2022, for example, the VOA Farsi workforce shrank from more than 170 to just 113 professionals. And while its budget has now risen to more than \$18.5 million annually, the U.S. government has yet to make the kind of serious investments that would allow it to break through the clutter of Iranian state media and truly compete with its comparatively well-funded competition.

The mismatch is all the more glaring when VOA Farsi is compared to its main market rival, the privately-funded Iran International. According to former employees, the London-based opposition outlet enjoys what is basically an unlimited budget for programming and coverage.

All of which makes a real difference where it matters: on the ground in Iran itself.

Last month, with considerable fanfare, Iran's clerical regime commemorated its 45th anniversary. At rallies and public speeches, President Ebrahim Raisi and other top officials struck a triumphalist tone, extolling the virtues and persistence of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's radical, anti-Western Islamic Revolution.

Millions of Iranians, however, don't agree. When Kurdish-Iranian activist Mahsa "Jina" Amini was killed by regime forces in September of 2022 over the improper wearing of her headscarf, it set off a wave of protests throughout the Islamic Republic. More than a year on, the "women, life, freedom" movement appears to have petered out, in no small measure because of Western inattention and widespread regime repression.

Yet, as the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), a prominent Washington think tank, has helpfully mapped out, popular outpourings of opposition to the regime are both persistent and resilient, driven by things like repressive clerical edicts, harsh economic conditions, and widespread resource mismanagement. Simply put, a large percentage of Iran's captive population has a fundamentally different vision of the country's future, and is making itself heard.

The United States should have a vested interest in directly engaging with this constituency—both to discredit official regime propaganda, which still depicts America as an enemy of the Iranian people, and to lay out its vision for a different, more prosperous Iranian future. Devoting greater official attention, and added resources, to its dedicated channel for communicating with Iranians seems like a very good place to start.

