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Reforming U.S. Persian Language Media: A Preliminary Assessment



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In the Spring of 2017, the management of the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), the U.S. government's official coordinating body for international media, approached the American Foreign Policy Council with a request. In response to persistent criticism from lawmakers on Capitol Hill, as well as mounting pressure from the newly-inaugurated Trump administration, the agency sought to commission an independent review of the content of its Persian-language media outreach. Such a process, BBG professionals explained, would help the agency to identify and rectify significant deficiencies at a time when the role of U.S. broadcasting toward the Islamic Republic was a topic of growing scrutiny (and skepticism) among those formulating the country's strategy toward Iran.

The resulting study undertaken by the American Foreign Policy Council (AFPC) was delivered in the Fall of 2017, and formally published by the BBG that October.¹ In it, the reviewers – a quartet of experts drawn from AFPC, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the Hudson Institute and the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace – made six core recommendations regarding how the U.S. government could best optimize its Persian-language broadcasting.

First, the study recommended the BBG carry out a comprehensive review of all aspects of radio and television

broadcasting toward Iran (including evaluating such issues as production values and staffing, which were not addressed comprehensively as part of the analysis in question). Second, it suggested that the agency appoint a dedicated ombudsman for Persian media, who would be tasked with systematically investigating charges of institutional impropriety and bias and providing the results to Congress and the general public.

Third, the AFPC report counseled the BBG to increase its monitoring of guest diversity on Persian-language programs, so as to ensure that a full range of political viewpoints and ideological perspectives were represented in all broadcasts. Fourth, and related, it indicated the need to better balance guest seniority in BBG reporting, so as to avoid the appearance of institutional bias when covering sensitive issues (such as the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 powers).

Fifth, the AFPC study suggested improving the quality of broadcast content by having official coverage provide more relevant political context and analysis, comprehensively discuss U.S. positions and arguments, and debunk misleading assertions made by the Iranian regime. Finally, it assessed that the agency needed to improve the competitiveness of U.S. broadcasting by upgrading its visual appeal and content to distinguish it from both regime

media sources and foreign competitors (such as the British government’s *BBC Persian* service and the privately-owned *Manoto* television channel).

These recommendations were accepted by the BBG, and used to inform internal deliberations over the subsequent months. The results were announced in May 2018, when BBG CEO John Lansing formally unveiled plans for the Voice of America’s Persian News Network to transition to a new 24/7 television and digital channel known as *VOA 365* in early 2019.² *VOA 365* was formally launched by the agency (now rebranded the U.S. Agency for Global Media, or USAGM), on March 5th, 2019.

INCREMENTAL REFORM

Just how effective and far-reaching are the changes that have been instituted to date by the USAGM to its Persian-language outreach? A detailed, albeit early, examination suggests that the track record of Iran media reform undertaken by the agency is mixed – at least so far.

The USAGM’s new broadcast vehicle, *VOA 365*, does indeed incorporate a number of noteworthy programmatic and operational modifications to official Persian-language broadcasting on the part of the U.S. government. These include:

Expanded Programming. Previously, the Voice of America’s Persian News Network provided six hours of original content and programming to Iran per day. With the launch of *VOA 365*, the

USAGM has expanded its coverage into a 24/7 format – a transition that by its nature necessitates a vastly greater amount of original and acquired content in order to fill airtime. To satisfy this need, the USAGM has partnered on a limited basis with outside media outlets such as *ABC News*, *CNN* and the *Smithsonian Channel*, as a result of which it is now able to air episodes of *Nightline*, *National Geographic*, and other select programs, and will acquire access to still more (including the popular *Anthony Bourdain Parts Unknown*) in the future.³ Additionally, four new original shows focusing on politics, culture, and society – *Chess*, *Citizen Watch*, *Max Wheel* and *VOA Tek* – are now being produced as a supplement to the network’s preexisting news and documentary programs.⁴ However, this expansion falls far short of providing the network with full 24-hour coverage, and the channel is forced to regularly rebroadcast content, both original and acquired. Additionally, the rollout of both newly acquired and preexisting revamped content is a gradual process, which as of this writing is still ongoing.⁵

Upgraded Coverage. According to USAGM professionals, the network’s expansion of programming is undergirded by a new content strategy to better explain U.S. policy, improve coverage of Iranian domestic politics, and broaden the diversity of topics covered by U.S. government broadcasts.⁶ As part of this process, the channel’s professionals have reportedly been “retrained” to be more sensitive and attuned to those issues. They have also been instructed to avoid using footage from official Iranian media

2. John F. Lansing, “A Challenging Crossroad: Media and Politics in Iran,” Remarks before the Hudson Institute, May 29, 2018, <https://www.hudson.org/events/1564-a-challenging-crossroad-media-and-politics-in-iran52018>.

3. “Voice of America Launches VOA 365, a 24/7 Persian Language Network,” *Inside VOA*, March 5, 2019, <https://www.insidevoa.com/a/voice-of-america-launches-voa-365-a-24-7-persian-language-network/4814792.html>.

4. Author’s interviews with USAGM management and professionals, April 2019.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Author’s interviews with USAGM management and professionals, March 2019.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibidem.

9. Author's interviews with USAGM management and professionals, April 2019.

10. Ibid.

11. Author's interviews with USAGM management and professionals, March 2019.

12. Author's interviews with USAGM management and professionals, April 2019.

sources, such as the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA) and the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) – a practice that had apparently been prevalent before. Several journalists are said to have been fired as part of this transition.⁷

Increased Public Outreach. Over the next several months, USAGM professionals plan to interface more closely with the Iranian diaspora in the United States through “roll out” events and publicity forums designed to raise awareness of the new structure and content of U.S. broadcasting.⁸ It is not as yet clear, however, whether the channel will seriously pursue content distribution via media channels and outlets that are privately owned by Iranian-Americans. By contrast, plans for outreach to the Persian diaspora in Europe appear more advanced. Preliminary research is currently being conducted by USAGM staff to find suitable overseas partners for VOA 365 content distribution, with the expectation that the U.S. will eventually be able to “push” content to select international audiences via these channels.⁹

However, a number of necessary changes remain unimplemented or unexplored. To wit, the USAGM has thus far failed to hire a dedicated ombudsman to provide greater transparency and accountability to the agency’s Farsi broadcasts, and there do not currently appear to be any plans to create such a post.¹⁰ Nor has the agency carried out a thorough “market” analysis to systematically identify which areas of broadcasting (from production to distribution to content) remain in

need of additional improvements.¹¹ Additionally, there is currently no supervisory managing editor for VOA 365 to assist in screening content and maintaining quality control – although, according to USAGM management, the agency’s intention is to eventually hire one.¹²

NEXT STEPS

The launch of VOA 365 is unquestionably a milestone, insofar as it reflects a concerted attempt by the USAGM to respond to official criticism and enhance the quality and relevance of its broadcasting toward the Islamic Republic. Yet there is a clear temptation on the part of agency management to view the changes it has made as the culmination of a reform effort – rather than as part of a dynamic, ongoing process. Such a perception is deeply detrimental; Persian-language broadcasting represents an integral part of the U.S. government’s “soft power” strategy toward the Islamic Republic, and it is thus imperative that it continue to evolve and improve. In the near term, four priorities deserve particular attention:

Demand Greater Agency Accountability. Even with the reforms carried out to date, the USAGM’s Persian-language outreach remains far too opaque and unaccountable. Neither Congress nor the Executive Branch currently has routine access to – or receives regular updates about – the functioning of the new Farsi-language channel, as

well as its alignment with (or deviation from) official policy toward Iran. The appointment of a responsible, impartial auditor is essential in order for Congress and the Administration to have confidence that the USAGM is performing its duties competently and in line with U.S. policy. Policymakers should therefore insist that the USAGM make such an appointment at the earliest possible opportunity, and clearly delineate the expectations associated with this role (from regular reports to Congress, to public briefings, to testimony before relevant committees in the House and Senate).

Expanding Original Content Further. The expansion of U.S. Persian language broadcasting to a 24/7 format has created a pressing need for the USAGM to fill airtime – a need that the agency is currently unable to do via original programming. As a result, it has gravitated toward partnerships with outside networks and the acquisition of their content. This approach carries an inherent risk; although unquestionably popular, such programs are designed to be commercial and broadly appealing in nature. As a result, they cannot be expected to “move the needle” on popular attitudes toward the United States among a specific constituency, or do so in a meaningful way. At the end of the day, there is simply no substitute for mission-driven content. The USAGM should be directed to devote more attention and resources to the creation of meaningful original programming that focuses on issues relevant to the Iranian people, and better helps to explain U.S. policy and the Beltway policymaking process to that

audience. Here, a good working model can be found in *al-Hurra’s* successful new weekly television program, “Decision Capital,” which brings long-form expert analysis and policy debate to Arabic-speaking audiences in a cutting-edge U.S. news network style format.

Content Sharing Should Be A Two-Way Street. Currently, U.S. Persian-language broadcasting serves exclusively as a *consumer* of content, relying on the acquisition of programs from outside partners to fill a significant portion of its schedule. However, the USAGM also has the potential to be a significant *producer* of content for those same broadcasters. Specifically, the channel is currently one of the very few news outlets consistently covering and reporting on the ongoing protests taking place within Iran, and the footage it generates is of enormous value in raising awareness of, and generating discussion about, conditions inside the Islamic Republic. Significant efforts must be made to make this footage available to prominent U.S. and international media outlets as a way of encouraging those broadcasters to devote greater attention to internal conditions and developments within Iran.

Accurately Gauging Effectiveness. At the core of policy discussions about the future of U.S. broadcasting toward the Islamic Republic is the question of impact. According to the USAGM, American outlets collectively occupy an influential position in the Iranian media space. The agency has asserted that its programming commands an audience of roughly one-quarter of all adult Iranians every week.¹³ Critics, however, have called this claim

13. See, for example, U.S. Agency for Global Media, “FACT SHEET: Iran,” September 2018, <https://www.usagm.gov/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Iran-fact-sheet.pdf>.

14. See, for example, Kim Andrew Elliott, “Twitter Poll: VOA and Radio Farda USAGM Audience Claims are False,” *BBG-USAGM Watch*, March 27, 2019, <http://bbgwatch.com/bbgwatch/twitter-poll-voa-and-radio-farda-usagm-iran-audience-claims-are-false/>.

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into question, and suggested that the USAGM boasts a far more modest share of the Iranian media market – one that is eclipsed by both *BBC Persian* and *Manoto*.¹⁴ The true level of popularity of U.S. broadcasting is of profound importance to American policymakers, insofar as it will determine whether allocating additional resources to further optimize and expand outreach is warranted. To inform this judgement, however, it will be necessary for responsible agencies to commission a credible, thorough third-party assessment of the reach and impact of U.S. messaging to the Iranian public.

LOOKING AHEAD

After years of policy drift, the bureaucracy of U.S. outreach has begun the arduous process of adapting to effectively communicate American policy and values to foreign audiences in today's more competitive international media environment. The USAGM's reform of its Persian-language outreach, embodied by the launch of VOA 365, represents one of the most visible early steps in this process. But it is only a first step. Much more must be done in order for our outreach to the Islamic Republic to truly make a significant impact on the advancement of American ideas and principles among the Iranian people – and for Persian-language media to assume its proper role as a force multiplier for U.S. policy. ♦♦