

A Study of USG Broadcasting into Iran
Prepared for the Iran Steering Group

I. Executive Summary

A six-month study of the main instruments of USG broadcasting into Iran – Voice of America (VOA) Persian TV and Radio Farda – has revealed that while the two taxpayer-funded stations enjoy some degree of professionalism and popularity among the Iranian people, both fall short of realizing their stated mission and mandate.

While VOA's news has a sharp professional look, the content does not fulfill VOA mandates. Radio Farda falls short of meeting the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL) mission of serving as a surrogate radio model for successful democratic transformations, which Radio Free Europe was famous for during the Cold War.

Neither station is a primary source of news for Iranians. Radio Farda frequently uses Islamic Republic news sources -- official or those affiliated with the regime.

While VOA Persian TV routinely invites guests who defend the Islamic Republic's version of issues, the station fails to maintain a balance by inviting informed guests who represent another perspective on the same issue. Even when a State Department official is given a 3-minute segment to explain US policy in the same time slot when a person is on the show that represents the Islamic Republic viewpoint, often the two individuals are not on the same panel and/or no counter-view to that of the Islamic Republic is presented.

Given that VOA Persian TV and Radio Farda have become the main means of disseminating US policy and views into Iran, a critical review of VOA and Farda's operations is a necessary first step to improve these entities' performance. The most important need is *content* that better fulfills both entities' mandates. There are also management and staffing problems. Oversight is also an essential aspect of ensuring that VOA and Radio Farda are following their mandates and fulfilling their missions. BBG is hampered by the Board's inability to monitor Persian content of the programs (no one on the Board knows Persian), and by the fact that BBG's only oversight comes from the VOA station directors who run the very programs whose contents need to be monitored. An outside advisory board, made up of Persian-speakers and those who follow events in Iran, might be advisable.

II. Background

Purpose and Scope of Study

This paper was tasked by the NSC staff and the Iran (interagency) Steering Group to provide a concise, independent look at USG broadcasting into Iran as seen through the eyes and ears of native Persian speakers. Due to the lack of an American diplomatic presence in Iran, tax payer-funded VOA Persian TV and Radio Farda are in a unique position to influence public opinion within Iran in furtherance of US goals. This paper examines whether these entities are fulfilling their mandates and whether the USG should be relying on these entities for this purpose.

The author has interviewed VOA and Radio Farda staff, visited the VOA Persian TV studios, interviewed various Iranian-Americans, and viewed/listened to over 50 hours of VOA TV and Farda programming. The VOA Persian TV study was conducted from January through June 2006. The Radio Farda study was conducted from November 2005 through June 2006. However, the view presented herein provides only an initial look at the issues and concerns. A more in-depth independent study may be required and would require a staff of at least three native Persian speakers to devote enough time to the painstaking process of collecting, translating and transcribing broadcasts. In addition, a visit to the Prague offices of Radio Farda would help in assessing the operations of Radio Farda and its management.

USG Broadcasting into Iran

Currently, VOA Persian TV and Radio Farda are the main instruments of US broadcasting into Iran. Immediately following the Islamic Revolution in Iran (in 1979) VOA attracted quite a few famous (to Iranian ears) radio personalities who helped the station broadcast a more robust program into Iran. However, in the past few years, the VOA radio broadcasting has been reduced to three hours a day of programming. Only one of these hours of VOA radio broadcasting has original programming. The rest is a simulcast of VOA Persian TV daily programs such as *News and Views*.¹

Therefore, this study will focus on analysis of original VOA News and Radio Farda content.

¹ Please note that a radio simulcast of a television program entails audio-only portions of video clips and visual references to news.

III. Findings

Review of Radio Farda Content (See Appendix 2 for an overview of Radio Farda programming):

Radio Farda is operated under joint VOA and RFE/RL management. The management is disjointed, and production of news segments along with the one news magazine based in Washington DC does not appear to be coordinated with or receive input from the radio station in Prague. However, Radio Farda was modeled after RFE/RL.

The mission of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is to promote democratic values and institutions by disseminating factual information and ideas...

- 1. RFE/RL provides objective news, analysis, and discussion of domestic and regional issues crucial to successful democratic and free-market transformations.*
- 2. RFE/RL strengthens civil societies by projecting democratic values.*
- 3. RFE/RL combats ethnic and religious intolerance and promotes mutual understanding among peoples.*
- 4. RFE/RL provides a model for local media, assists in training to enhance media professionalism and independence, and develops partnerships with local media outlets.*
- 5. RFE/RL fosters closer ties between the countries of the region and the world's established democracies.*

When asked about the famous "surrogate radio" mission of RFE/RL and whether Radio Farda was following that model, the Washington, DC manager of Radio Farda, Mr. Nikzad said, "what does 'surrogate radio' mean?" He went on to explain that it is difficult to follow the RFE/RL model in Iran's case due to a lack of on-the-ground coverage by local staffers. This is one of the key shortcomings of Radio Farda, one which cannot be overcome in the short term. Radio Farda does have some local stringers that it works with and has held telephone interviews with those in some ministries and activists and others inside Iran. But the problem is deeper than the issue of local stringers.

One example of the problem is Radio Farda's effort to cover local news in Iran. Possibly attempting to take on a familiar tone and fulfilling one part of becoming a

surrogate radio, Radio Farda does try to include local coverage of news in its broadcast. However, the majority of the news read on Radio Farda is actually from the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), the official news agency of the Iranian regime. Farda also uses the newspaper Baztab, which is run by Mr. Mohsen Rezai, once the head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and close to Supreme Leader Khamenei. He is also one of the hardliners of the regime. The rest of the news is from other sources such as BBC.* While IRNA or Baztab news can be thought of as news from inside Iran, they are hardly unbiased. Residents of Iran do not need to turn to Radio Farda to receive IRNA news. This is probably one reason why Iranians do not turn to Radio Farda as a source of fresh news.

While there have been many instances in which Farda is reflecting the global sentiment against Ahmadinejad and his anti-Semitic tirades, most of the time Radio Farda rarely takes a stance that could risk antagonizing the Islamic Republic. As an activist and famous member of the opposition said in an (off-line) interview, while Radio Farda sporadically provides news about opposition in Iran, it almost never gives any analysis of the opposition or anti-regime elements' stance. While coverage of Ahmadinejad's invectives is an important exception, the radio's normal coverage of views inside Iran seems to vary between sympathetic and neutral with respect to the regime.

Thus, Radio Farda falls short on fulfilling all five elements of the RFE/RL mission. Very little "analysis and discussion of domestic and regional issues crucial to successful democratic and free-market transformations" – that is, the first item in the RFE/RL mission – is ever made on Radio Farda. Discussions of democratic values – as outlined in the second part of the mission statement – are only found in occasional segments of the Washington-produced news magazine called *Human Rights and Democracy*. This news magazine covers some news on the subject of human rights and democracy in its limited weekly time slot of 10 minutes per week. However, lengthy and in-depth analysis of these issues rarely happens. Radio Farda has ample coverage of Shi'ite Muslim events and holidays, but rarely any analysis of ethnic issues or problems afflicting religious minorities.

In general, Radio Farda has very little analysis of any events or news items, especially any that might risk the displeasure of the ruling regime. During the 2005 Iranian Presidential elections, much of the coverage consisted of daily reporting. No coverage was presented of the losing candidates' protestations and charges of voter fraud and manipulation, the open letter from one of the candidates (Karrubi) to Khamenei describing his charges, or of the movement to boycott the elections. While RFE/RL's English website had an excellent analysis of these issues by their expert Iran analyst, Dr. Bill Samii, this kind of analysis is not reflected in Farda's broadcasting.

Anyone familiar with the famous Radio Free Europe broadcasts at the time of the uprising of Gdansk shipyards and Solidarity protests in Poland would not recognize Radio Farda as a prototype of the same RFE/RL model, or as providing the same crucial service to its Iranian listeners.

Review of VOA Persian TV Content (See Appendix 1 for an overview of VOA programming.): This report focuses mostly on *News and Views*, since it is the main daily news show and has been for years, and also due to the stated content of the other programs that are not the focus of this study.

The VOA Charter states the following:

- 1. VOA will serve as a consistently reliable and authoritative source of news. VOA news will be accurate, objective, and comprehensive.*
- 2. VOA will represent America, not any single segment of American society, and will therefore present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions.*
- 3. VOA will present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies.*

Any VOA program should be judged by its adherence to its mission as stated above.

"...A reliable and authoritative source of news... :"

VOA News has few journalists reporting from Iran. While VOA does have more coverage of Iranian news than other US-based international news outlets such as CNN International, it is not relied upon by Iranians as a primary source of news. At its best, VOA's news is a repeat of what CNN and other news channels have broadcast, thus subject to the weaknesses of those media. Most Iranians rely on BBC Persian and Radio Israel to obtain ground-breaking news. VOA news, on the other hand, is not considered by most Iranians to be an authoritative or reliable source of groundbreaking news.

"...accurate, objective and comprehensive.. ":

Even though VOA News accurately reflects its news sources, it lacks comprehensiveness and balance. While VOA Persian TV often invites guests who defend the Islamic Republic's version of issues, it consistently fails to maintain a

balance by inviting informed guests who represent another perspective on the same issue. In a period when there is a glaring imbalance in world media coverage tilting against the U.S. point of view, VOA does not function in a way that helps correct that imbalance.

Example: In a special program aired on April 18, 2006 that dealt with Iran's nuclear issue, there were reporters with coverage from Moscow, New York, and Europe, and some guests who attended the show via satellite feed from Boston and other cities. Two so-called nuclear "experts" were summoned to discuss Iran's nuclear program. One was a Mr. Nakhai. VOA News did not describe his academic and/or professional affiliations. As it turns out, Mr. Nakhai was an advisor to the Iranian regime and a defender of its nuclear policy. During the interview he expressed the view that Iran had experienced and passed more than its share of IAEA inspections. He said he found it difficult to accept that the "five countries [*i.e.* the P5] who have broken every rule of the NPT is sitting upon judgment of one country who has obeyed every rule." Mr. Nakhai's claims went unchallenged.

This segment was followed by another program with two guests. First was another "nuclear expert", a Dr. Behzad Maleki, identified as a professor at Iran's Sharif University spending a year conducting research at Harvard (no affiliation to any specific school at Harvard was given). The other guest was Mr. Bijan Kian, an Iranian-American Republican who appears from time to time on *News and Views* to explain and defend US policy on Iran. He does not, however, have any expertise on nuclear energy. The discussion got heated when Dr. Maleki accused Mr. Kian of using political slogans, only because Mr. Kian said that with Iran's current levels of poverty, prostitution, and youth addiction, Iran's huge allocation of resources toward nano-technology as well as nuclear energy seemed an interesting choice. Dr. Maleki charged that the US had poverty issues also, and still chose to devote resources to technology. When the anchor, Ms. Derakhshesh, tried to explain that the levels of poverty were much lower in the US than Iran, Dr. Maleki told her not to opine but to mediate only. He did not offer any facts, only opinions. As is often the case, within this program no nuclear experts from the IAEA itself or another UN agency or anyone from the US Government was interviewed to at least explain the statistics and "facts" presented by Messrs. Nakhai and Maleki.

"...present a balanced and comprehensive projection of significant American thought and institutions.":

In viewing over 50 hours of News and Views from January through June, 2006, in an average week, News and Views invited 2-3 guests who oppose US policy and are favorable toward the Iranian regime, and only one neutral and/or pro-democracy guest.

VOA's *News and Views* fails to invite a variety of guests with various views. Moreover, the time allotted to the pro-regime guests was more than that given to pro-US or pro-democracy guests.

Example 2: News and Views, March 26, 2006; part of interview with Dr. Yaghmaian, Professor at Ramapo College.

Dr. Yaghmaian: ... We have to see the West and the US, what kind of confrontations they have had with personal liberties in Iran. Up until now, the West has not paid any attention to civil liberties in Iran. All the hostilities of the US toward Iran has been based on US interests and not the interests of the Iranian people. Maybe this is a beginning...

VOA: Dr. Yaghmaian, you don't think that in all these years USG has not paid any attention to the problems of human rights in Iran?

Dr. Y: Never, never. I believe that all the confrontation with Iran was its meeting its own interests, its strategic interests in the region and its economic interests. Nothing to do with Iranian people's human rights or their aspirations.

VOA: For example, how to you describe Akbar Ganji's freedom (from prison)?

Dr. Y: Now, there has been an issue created about this. Probably because of all the noise that has been created about this (Ganji's imprisonment), GOI is bribing [the U.S.] to further these talks and negotiations. I mean, the possibility exists that the West and the US, point their fingers at civil liberties in Iran, and say that we will negotiate based on that. But so far this has not been the case. Either the U.S. or Western Europe. They have always based it on their economic and political interests.

"VOA will present the policies of the United States clearly and effectively, and will also present responsible discussions and opinion on these policies"

While there have been a plethora of articles written on Iran and US policy in a variety of newspapers, *News and Views* chose to devote one whole program and a segment of another to Karl Vick's article entitled: "U.S. Push for Democracy Could Backfire Inside Iran," which appeared on March 14, 2006 in the Washington Post. The article itself was a critique of the Administration's just-announced policy to promote democratic civil society in Iran; inter alia it quoted newly freed political prisoners (whose reasons to fear regime retribution are still evident) as denouncing President Bush. VOA News devoted much of its airtime to essentially espousing the article's debunking of US policy. One after another, guests criticized US policy in Iran. One guest, Mr. Nourizadeh, defended the policy, but had to hold his own under constant questioning of his stance by the interviewer. Here is a section from another segment of that show. It is an interview with Professor Abbas Milani, professor of Iranian Studies at Stanford University, on March 15, 2006:

VOA: Dr. Milani, how can a country that violates human rights be a defender of international human rights?

AM: I think that what you are saying is 100% correct, that is why the US is in a problematic position because of this. An America that has the Guantanamo Bay jail in it, an America in which minorities, blacks, have suffered from legal deprivations, without a doubt has international issues with regards to this. However, the reality is that with all these violations, America has other advantages. Throughout Iran's history, even though there were the likes of [the coup in] 1953, there are tens of other examples where America has tried to establish democracy... But in total, we have to analyze the sum total of all of this, despite these shortcomings, and despite what I think is *America's shameful record of violation of human rights laws*, despite all that, I think America's interests lie in establishing democracy in the region. Ms. Rice spoke about this, I think.

VOA: Thank you very much, Professor Milani. Of course, the country I was referring to as the violator of human rights which cannot be a defender of international human rights was the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Pattern of guests on VOA's *News and Views*: Since January 2006, a Monday-to-Friday sampling of the show revealed the following:

Guests who have taken anti-American and/or pro-Islamic Republic stances on the show have made 23 appearances – most with multiple appearances – during this

time period. This figure includes personalities such as Hooshang Amirahmadi, who is one of the few candidates vetted and accepted by the Guardian Council for the 2005 Iranian presidential race and consistently lobbies for the Islamic Republic. Mr. Amirahmadi has appeared four times on the show and on a few more occasions was linked via telephone.

During the same time period, there have been only ten guests who advocate structural changes to the Islamic Republic and have not made consistent adversarial or pejorative statements about United States policy.

There have been only three guests who cannot, for political or survival reasons, take sides in any issue during the same time period.

State Department personnel typically appear alone and are usually provided the opportunity to make a statement and answer, at most, two questions to explain the Administration's position. They are not invited as guests countering other guests with opposing views, nor are they asked to respond to a charge made during a segment of the show, such as the one noted above.

Strengths of VOA TV and Radio Farda

Radio Farda is quite popular in Iran, as most Iranians do not have access to a 24/7 music radio station. Reportedly,² one can hear Radio Farda playing in taxicabs and stores in Tehran, all the time.

VOA Persian TV is expertly produced, has professional graphics, has professional anchors who speak crude Persian and is generally a well-presented station. VOA TV is also popular in Iran, but is not as ubiquitous as Radio Farda, since fewer Iranians have access to Satellite TV. In fact, it is illegal to own satellite dishes in Iran.

N.B. If thought is being given to eliminating VOA Radio altogether, the high-quality radio programs that are the hallmark of VOA Radio should be transferred to Radio Farda.

² I am basing this on interviews with Iranian-Americans who had recently visited Iran, Iranians visiting the US, and telephone conversations with Iranians in Iran.

IV. Issues

Management and Staffing

I would say that one of the biggest issues affecting the mission and mandates of both VOA Persian TV and Radio Farda are management and staffing issues. An example of this is the manager of Radio Farda in Prague, Ms. Joyce Davis. Davis's views on religion and politics are evident in her book entitled Martyrs, which takes what I would consider a sympathetic view of Islamic fundamentalists. She had asked the staff to broadcast times of fast-breaking during Ramadhan, which is hardly necessary for anyone living in Iran. Staff reported that Ms. Davis had asked them to cover a fundamentalist Shi'a conference held at a London mosque known to be founded by Khamenei. Since her arrival, there has been an exodus of some of the more experienced and independent broadcasters from Prague, who had hoped for a journalistic experience more akin to the Radio Free Europe of the early '90s. Ms. Davis does not speak or understand Farsi.

Recently, and despite the abundance of qualified Iranians who are fluent in Persian, Radio Farda has hired broadcasters whose most recent journalistic experience was in IRNA or the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). The staff in Washington, while under VOA support, is housed in RFE/RL facilities downtown. They consider themselves to be to a great extent independent from the Prague office, according to Mr. Behrouz Nikzat, supervisor of Radio Farda in Washington. While some of the programming in Washington is superior to Prague in terms of coverage, it fails to provide the kind of content and programming that would fulfill the RFE/RL mandate. Their coverage of the US Policy perspective is also weak. As one example, Under Secretaries of State Nicholas Burns and Robert Joseph's news conference on April 21, 2006 covering their trip to Moscow to discuss the Iran nuclear issue was not covered by Radio Farda at all.

Meanwhile, similar morale and management problems are evident at VOA Persian TV. Under Ms. Sheila Ganji, VOA Persian TV's Division Chief, long-time supervisor, Mr. Akbar Nazemi, took early retirement. When asked about the day-to-day running of the programs, Ms. Ganji is not able to answer to questions regarding scheduling or guests on the show.

Executive producers have recently been hired because of their previous employment at MSNBC or other broadcasters, often without regard to what their previous duties were (usually not editorial or production). In addition, these persons speak no Persian and have not had any exposure to Iran. Seasoned journalists who have been working on Iran now have to justify their choices of

programming to someone who is unfamiliar with Iran and/or does not speak Persian.

No reliable procedures exist for vetting potential guests to ensure quality and balance. There is staff specifically charged with scheduling guests and the approval process, but anchors and other staff often bypass it to ensure preferred guests appear on their shows.

Oversight

The Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG) bears the responsibility of providing oversight of the content and quality of Radio Farda and VOA Persian TV broadcasting. Since none of the BBG board members speaks Persian, the only input the Board receives is from VOA program directors, who run the programs that are to be monitored. Given the critical importance of US broadcasting into Iran in this period, ways should be found to strengthen this oversight in order to ensure better performance in accordance with the stations' mandate. An outside advisory board of Persian-speakers is one option.

[Earlier drafts of this report included a paragraph referring to a contractor. Because of a contract dispute between this contractor and the BBG, not related to the subject matter of this report, that paragraph has been deleted.]

APPENDIX 1

• VOA Persian TV programming (for the reporting period January-July 2006)

VOA Persian TV broadcasts the following original programs:

- *News and Views*: 1 hour/day news program with interviews and live programming. Aired daily at 12:30 pm EST (equivalent to 8 pm or 9 pm Tehran time, depending on daylight savings time).
- *Roundtable With You*: Currently, 1 hour/day roundtable interview and discussion program in a talk show format. Aired daily at 1:30 pm EST (equivalent to 9 or 10 pm Tehran time, depending on daylight savings time). As of June 3, 2006 this program is a daily program; while prior to this date, it was a weekly program. The bulk of the coverage period for this report occurred prior to this event.
- *New Chapter*: ½ hour/week, youth variety program, featuring music videos and interviews. Aired every Wednesday at 2:30 pm EST.
- *Looking Ahead*: 1 hour/month, political discussion program and talk show. Aired monthly. This is the only program that discusses US Policy, features interviews with Iranian opposition leaders, and has live (telephonic) coverage of events such as the Women's Day demonstrations inside Iran. While this program is unique in insofar as it completes VOA's charter and mission, it is only a monthly program and there are no plans for its expansion nor to use it as a model for other programs.

Daily programs start with *News and Views*, followed by *Roundtable with you*. The weekly *New Chapter* is repeated (when not aired live) during the 3 hours of broadcasting, as is *Looking Ahead*. In addition, the station uses fillers such as CNN's Larry King Live. During an interview with Ms. Sheila Ganji, VOA Persian TV manager, and subsequent questioning of the station, no set broadcast schedule was given. The reason why CNN and programming is used as a filler is still unknown.

APPENDIX 2

Radio Farda programming (*through June 2006*)

Radio Farda airs a 65%/35% mixture of music/news 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Radio Farda airs a variety of Iranian as well as Western music, and airs news on top of the hour as well as a 5 minute segment at the half-hour. In addition, Radio Farda airs the following weekly programs:

- *Fresh Look*: 6 to 10 minutes/week: a program looking at various social and cultural issues, such as Iranian immigrants to Europe and US, soccer, nutrition etc.
- *Music 21*: 5 to 6 minutes/week: a 'deeper' look at pop Iranian and Western music.
- *Beyond the Agenda*: 5 to 6 minutes, weekly humor program.
- *Friday to Friday*: 6 to 8 minutes, weekly wrap-up of important news of the week and some analysis.
- *Democracy and Human Rights*: 25 minutes weekly report on human rights and democracy in Iran.

Sixteen of the 24 hours of Farda programming – from 7pm to 11am EST – is produced in Prague, in the offices of RFE/RL. The rest is produced in Washington, DC in the DC offices of RFE/RL, but under VOA management and staff. Of the weekly programs above, the last (*Democracy and Human Rights*) is produced in Washington. The rest are produced in Prague.